The **FREE** literary magazine of the North

Northwords Now

Issue 24, Summer 2013

Greetings from Iraq – John Glenday Takes a Poetic Journey

Kathleen Jamie Interview

New Poetry and Fiction including Kevin MacNeil, Lesley Harrison, Paddy Bushe

EDITORIAL

I had no difficulty is deciding what to feature in my editorial for this issue. At the end of June 2013 Hi-Arts, the body charged with supporting organisations and individuals working in the arts and heritage, across the Highlands and Islands, was formally dissolved. This isn't the time and the place to debate the rights and wrongs of arts funding in Scotland, and how it is administered, but I do want to shout out loud that the support that *Northwords Now* has received from the Hi-Arts team, especially Karen Ray, Laura Martin and Robert Livingston, has been exemplary. Not only have they provided very sound advice and vital admin support but they've done this with a real sense of enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the cultural life of the Highlands & Islands. They will be missed.

The passing of Hi-Arts has meant some changes at *Northwords Now* and I'm very pleased to welcome Vicki Miller to the team. Among other things Vicki will be responsible for handling advertising, so if you'd like to use our pages to let over ten thousand readers know about your business, do get in touch. vicki@northwordsnow.co.uk.

This edition of *Northwords Now* follows previous issues in highlighting the international connections of writing from the north. John Glenday's article on page 3 not only provides fascinating insights into the art of translation, it also portrays a face of Iraq we don't come across too often in the mainstream media – something I've been happy to reflect on the cover of the magazine with the photograph of poet and translator Hoshang Waziri. ■

Chris Powici, Editor

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Front cover image
Photograph of Hoshang Waziri courtesy of Reel Festivals www.reelfestivals.org

Submissions to the magazine are welcome. They can be in Gaelic, English, Scots and any local variants. They should be sent to the postal address. Unsolicited e-mail attachments will not be opened. The material should be typed on A4 paper. Contact details and SAE should be included. We cannot return work that has no SAE. Copyright remains with the author. Payment is made for all successful submissions.
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Reel Iraq 2013 - Everything is Translation

Essay by John Glenday

Poets at Work: John Glenday and Sabreem Kadheem
Photograph courtesy of Reel Festivals www.reelfestivals.org.

We were standing out on the forecourt of Erbil International Airport, waiting for our minibus. It was pleasantly mild – about twelve degrees in the ochre light of a late January afternoon. Apart from the cluttered, dusty outline of Erbil in the near foreground, nothing much stretched out on all sides and as far as the eye could peer. Later, from the darkness, the muezzin would sing. This is what translation is all about, I thought – we visit somewhere utterly amazing, but what can we ever bring home?

Four of us — Krystelle Bamford, Jen Hadfield, Billy Letford and myself had been invited over to Iraq by Reel Festivals to take part in a series of translation workshops and performances with Kurdish and Iraqi poets in Erbil and Shaqlawa, on the edge of the Safeen Mountains. Afterwards we would take part in the British Council-sponsored Erbil Literature Festival. I can remember when I was first invited feeling slightly anxious about going. Then when the British Council Risk Assessment arrived, even more anxious:

The 'Potential threats' listed included 'Kidnap', 'Untargeted Suicide Attack or Bomb', and 'Human Wave Attack'. It didn't matter that the likelihood of these sat at the lowest level, the mere words were enough. But as with Budapest, or Dagenham, Detroit or Bathgate, the greatest danger we would encounter in Kurdistan would be the road traffic. Fairly soon, we began to realise we were not the ones at risk, it was the people who lived there all their lives – the local folk and our Iraqi fellow poets, who had to survive the routine dangers of life in Baghdad, Kirkuk or Mosul.

We worked with four Iraqi poets: Ghareeb Iskander – currently living in London, author of *Gilgamesh's Snake* and *A Chariot of Illusion*; Sabreen Kadhim, a television reporter for Al Hurra TV and prize-winning poet; Zaher Mousa, who works as an Arabic language teacher in Baghdad and has won many prizes for his poetry; and finally, Awezan Nouri — a poet and novelist writing in Kurdish and Director of a Women's Refuge in Kirkuk. Three 'bridge' translators also took part: Lauren Pyott, Dina Mousawi and Hoshang Waziri – their essential role was to provide literal translations, but just as importantly they acted as interpreters, allowing translators to discuss the intricacies and nuances of their chosen poems. There were so many layers of meaning and interpretation in the Iraqi poems that they resembled a Tardis built from words – compact and portable on the outside, but huge, cathedral-like structures on the inside. A simple word, such as 'wash' or 'cup' contained a freight of allusion and reference which made translation immediately daunting. It reminded me of how Simon Watson Taylor, when he set out to translate Pere Ubu into English, faltered at the very first word. But there was an incredible energy and deep sense of responsibility in the work. Poetry in Iraq is an essential tool for survival: it addresses war, the deaths of children, fundamentals of human dignity and salvation. How can we look into the poet's eyes and translate any of these adequately?

The acid test of our translations were the readings we gave, first in Iraq, and then the UK, where we toured Dumfries, London, Edinburgh and Stirling reading our Iraqi and English translations. We gave two readings during our time in Kurdistan — at the bizarre Shanadar Caves Theme Park, (someone commented that it looked like an abandoned set for a *Batman* movie). Each poem read out was accompanied by instrumental music played by a three piece folk band on clarinet, piano and fiddle. This close juxtaposition of music and poetry is not unusual in Arabic poetry — which is commonly written and delivered in a more formal register, and is seen as a close relative of song. But Adam Foulds found it somewhat challenging reading with Lionel Richie's 'Hello' playing in the background, and I had to wade through the theme music to *Titanic* during my set. Our second reading was at Salahaddin University, where we read our own poems and English translations in tandem with our Iraqi colleagues. Because our visit was in part sponsored by the British Council, we read alongside other UK writers attending the Erbil Literature Festival – George Szirtes, Adam Foulds, Lucy Caldwell and Rachel Holmes.

The UK leg involved a very hairy minibus ride through a blizzard in Dumfries - the first snow one of our Iraqi poets had ever seen - then at breakneck speed, visits to London, Edinburgh and Stirling. It was ironic that Sabreen Kadhim, thanks to the vagaries of the UK immigration system, was not granted a visa to attend the UK leg of the tour. Whatever the reason, it was Sabreen herself who was lost in translation this time. Luckily, she will be able to come over for another reading, in Edinburgh later this year.

There are so many pitfalls and pratfalls involved in translating that poets often fall back on that wonderful euphemism 'version' when describing what they're doing.

But look, isn't translation inherent in all aspects of writing poetry? It is for me. First of all I translate an initial impetus/feeling/notion into words (note I don't mention anything about 'ideas' here). In many ways this stage is similar to the 'bridge' translations we used in Iraq – literal translations, essential but inadequate, often because they cover everything that needs said and by doing so, they say too much. Secondly, I translate those initial drafts into a final version of the poem. This roughly equates to the act of turning a literal into a finished translation, and involves frequent returns to the original to check for accuracy, meaning, tone, ambiguity etc. Everything we write is translation.

Two forces act on the translator: the desire to maintain a scrupulous attention to the meaning and tone of the original poem, however impossible this might be, and the need to honour her or his drive to create something new from this stimulus – to turn the poem into another poem, rather than a translation of a poem. At each stage some sort of sacrifice is necessary. We were fortunate to have both poet and bridge translator physically present. This allowed us to engage in lengthy discussions around phrasing, meaning and allusion - utterly critical in avoiding too many glaring mistakes. Lauren, Dina and

Hoshang were brilliant in this respect – they went back and forth between poets with their freight of ambiguity, bewilderment and compromise until everyone was satisfied with the outcome. But opportunity comes in strange guises: when he misunderstood one word in Awezan's sunflower poem, Billy Letford found a version which worked brilliantly in English. Zaher Mousa couldn't bring himself to translate Krystelle's word 'fuck' into Arabic, but instead rendered it perfectly with a single, silent gesture. I tended to use the Murrayfield technique, which involved grabbing the literal translation and running as fast as I could towards the touchline of English.

But which translation is the more faithful – the 'literal' which sticks closely to the original, or the 'version' which takes the tone, the drift, the essentials of the original and uses them to construct a new poem in English? There probably isn't any right answer. In his Afterward to *The Eyes*, his versions of Machado, Don Paterson states that 'the only defensible fidelity is to the entirely subjective quality of 'spirit' or 'vision', rather than to literal meaning.' The first thing a translation must be is a poem, and not a representation of a poem, or a map to a poem. Put another way, the best outcome, in my view, is that one poem becomes two poems – an original and the resonance it makes in another language.

Translation is a tricky border to cross. But what impressed me most, being so ignorant of the mechanics, was how when we sat down with the poet in their context and talked about their work, it didn't just draw us closer to the poem, but also to the poet and their country. So now, rather than being a vague landscape of danger and conflict, I look on Iraq is a country whose destiny is important to me, populated by a people I care about, inhabited by friends. ■

Awezan Nouri – Two Poems in English

Translations by Billy Letford, from literal translations by Lauren Pyott

I am descended from sunflowers

When I face you I bloom
Please
Don't sit on me

Fading

When a flower dies
Where is the passion of rain

When a leaf dies
Where is the embrace of the wind

When a woman is killed for honour
Where is the dignity of man

When a flag is burned
Where is the conscience of a country

Travelling Light

In spring the An Talla Solais Gallery in Ullapool (www.antallasolais.org/travelling-light) invited a group of six artists from seafaring Scotland to create work based on the ditty box and its contemporary relevance. Here, Jon Miller's words respond to Peter White's images.

This box is the case,
it seems, that lends
a shape to what
it tends as if each
momentary lapse
threatens to collapse
some imminent
Troy or tesseract.
Lock it tight or
you might find
objects of some
other mind muttering
from their fearsome lips:
the key you hold
does not exist.

The Hostel

By Gabrielle Barnby

It is in the kitchen, as he is preparing food, that Stuart arrives and strikes up conversation. They've exchanged names the day before and today eat at the same table.

'For god's sake I was wearing two sets of clothes, and still freezing!' says Stuart.

'Ah bet you were.'

'Bet they thought, "look at this old codger, how are we going to get him up the mountain." But I made it up without much trouble, better than the German lassies anyway.'

'What about the altitude? I've had a bad turn of it myself.'

'Not much you can do about it. Never had any problems up there. Were the cold stopped me getting a decent sleep.'

Murray leans forward and trickles Highland Park into the two glasses before them. There's no need, they weren't even close to dry - but it'll see them through the next half hour. He's enjoying talking. Like the whisky, it's not a frequent occurrence. They'd never met before yesterday, although already they've found out plenty in common.

'How 'bout here? Keep it warm don't they,' says Stuart.

'Oh, I'm comfortable enough,' Murray says, and leaves it at that.

'Worst was Peru.'

'Oh aye?'

'Could not get to sleep, cold, high up and you would not believe - they're rinsing down the stairs with petrol.'

'I'd believe it and more. Everything cooked in chicken fat too. Couldn't stomach it myself.'

'Prefer getting my own.'

'Aye, it's no bother at all, place like this.'

Murray gestures towards the emptying tables. A young man, not much more than a boy, blond haired with a cluster of spots around the nostril is clearing away his plate. It had been difficult to watch him eat after seeing the ingredients he'd laid out in the kitchen: a tin of sardines in oil, dried pasta and a container of curry powder. He sounded English from his accent, but they never spoke together.

Usually Murray's not much of a talker. He's sure people see him as a grandfatherly type. Right enough he's getting to that age now, so is the man sitting opposite. Although he has a more modern sartorial look.

'D'you see the Nazca lines?' asks Stuart.

'Oh aye, impressive I'm sure, if the pilot weren't set on makin' me bring my guts up. Look here it's a monkey, look here a spaceman, could've been anything.'

'Flying not yer strong point?'

'Take it or leave it. Prefer to be makin' tracks, but a pal said you can't go all that way and not see the lines.'

Murray shakes his head. Out of habit he reaches forward to tidy his loaf of sliced white. He squeezes out the air, twists and tucks the end of the bag underneath. His knife and fork lie side by side on the wiped-clean empty plate. They'll not be many dishes to do later.

'You see more walking,' says Stuart.

'You do, you meet more folk.'

They both take a sip of malt.

A girl in pyjamas runs through the dining room, she's followed by a thickset woman with shoulder length dark hair. Murray's picked up she's eastern European, but can't say from exactly where. He's not a linguist, can't speak a word of another language despite all his travels, and there's a fair few who would say his English isn't up to much.

He's not had children, but can see straight off the child is spoiled. Her eyes, half hidden by a thick fringe, look at every object possessively.

There's a pause in their conversation. From the kitchen area comes the repeated refrain of pan lids being dropped onto the hard floor, then being picked up and deliberately dropped again.

Across the table Stuart raises an eyebrow and lifts his glass. They're pretty much alone really. The odd person passes through to fetch and carry things back to their rooms or into the games room – where strictly speaking no food or drink is allowed.

'Where d'you get to today?' asks Stuart.

'Took the hike over to Ryvoan Bothy.'

'The mist lifted a while.'

'So it did.'

There's more privacy here than the games room, not that they need it, but the tube lights don't cast a good light. Everything looks older, sadder, by tube light. It reminds Murray of his kitchen at home.

'How long did it take?'

'Not so long. Four and a bit hours, mind I stopped to eat and take in the view.'

Stuart can't be more than five, well definitely no more than ten years younger than him. He's wearing a modern replacement for the vest. The 'base layer' is bright blue and by the look of it made of rubber. Although it's only early autumn the frosts have already come to the highlands. It's chilly enough for Murray to be in his warmer gear: vest, brushed cotton shirt, corduroy trousers, woollen socks. He feels the cold more now - still the whisky warms the heart.

'D'you see buzzards?'

'A few. Thought there might have been a falcon amongst them but I couldn't be sure.'

'Can't be your first time staying here though?'

'Oh no, no. I've had a few stays, but it's been a while.'

'Taking too many foreign trips?'

Murray nearly says, 'I'm not getting any younger,' but he stops himself. He's wished he were younger enough times today; when the sky was a square blue sheet high above, when the mist lifted slowly out of the valley, caressing the spruce as it dissolved into the warming air. Not because he wanted to see it all again. He wanted to see it with somebody; to breathe the peaty air from the loch, then feel the pause in everything, and keep quite still until the quacking ducks disturb the silence - with somebody.

'D'you see the condors in Peru?'

'Colca Canyon? Aye. Came as close to me as that table.' Murray gestures towards the window overlooking the red squirrel feeding area.

'What about the roads!'

'Nearly as bad as the driving. I swear at one point I was the only one not passed out on a minibus, including the man behind the wheel.'

'I can well believe it,' Stuart laughs.

He looks over his glass before taking another sip.

The spoilt girl appears from the kitchen, dragging a metal teapot in one hand, holding a crumbling chocolate digestive in the other. The teapot clatters as she swings it against the table legs. Her mother follows a few paces behind. She's carrying a cup of tea, gingerly balancing it with the tips of her fingers. The woman bows slightly as she passes acknowledging their presence.

Murray leans over the table slightly and extends his left leg to ease the tight tendon at the back of his knee. The stretch feels good. His trouser brushes against Stuart's shin. The fabric crumples against the hairs on his leg; the contact is enough to set the nerves at their base tingling, like the brush of a nettle before the bloom of welts. There is a moment where the soft flesh of his calf and firm edge of Stuart's shin are together, where heat exchanges from flesh to fabric to flesh.

Murray doesn't apologise. There's no need, no offence or injury was caused. They're still just two men sitting having a drink. Stuart's glass pauses in the air. The automatic close of the fire door silences the retreat of the girl and her mother. They have the place to themselves again.

There's a short break in conversation. They sit in silence beneath the landscape photograph of Lock Morlich, mounted in cream and framed in pale wood. The effort at decoration is spoiled by the sturdy screws that hold the picture securely against the wall - a reminder of the institutional nature of the accommodation. Murray's lost the thread of what they were talking about. Stuart provides a new starter.

'Nearly lost the sight in this eye in South America.'

'Is that right?'

'Bolivia.'

'Bolivia?'

'Should have seen the place I stayed.'

They're off again; tales of injuries and accidents. It provides more laughs than anything else they've covered.

Later, the girl who works on reception comes through. She looks sideways at them as she walks by. Murray thinks for the first time that perhaps they're making a bit of noise. She goes into the kitchen and he hears the click, tick of the tea urn. They keep talking. She returns a moment later with a steaming mug.

'I had to walk five miles to get off the mountain, back to the village and then get a taxi to the hospital. See here's the scar.'

Stuart rolls bright blue Lycra away from his swarthy forearm. There's a white line three inches long with puckered indentations at the wrist.

'Worst thing was having the pins out. I wouldn't trouble to do that again.'

As the door swings shut behind the receptionist Murray overhears her say, '…issed as old farts,' presumably to the kiwi fella who sets out the breakfast. Stuart doesn't seem to notice.

Murray's seen her, knees up at the computer, clicking away, twirling her hair, fussing with the make up around her eyes. She'll have a beaky nose in a few years time, and, if she keeps drinking coke all day she'll have bad teeth to boot. Not that his were any good. All of them gone by the time he was fifty-nine. Good riddance.

Stuart rolls down his sleeve. He starts another tale about a bus journey in northern Thailand.

Murray thinks of the scar by his navel, smaller than Stuart's showpiece, only about an inch wide, but the wound, which bled copiously, could have been fatal. He'd not known what he was doing back then. He'd been mistaken about somebody and paid for it. Even if he wasn't entirely mistaken, it had been a misjudgement about the right time and place to be open. It had taught him a lesson, made him 'stay-at-home', and if he did go out, well it was much further afield, much, much further.

'So we get out of the bus again and locals start appearing from the forest with shovels…'

'Key survival item,' Murray interjects.

'…you shoulda' seen them, barefooted trying to move a mountain of clay…'

'And you've got no choice but to get back on the bus.'

'No choice at all.'

The talk is good and steady now. Stuart is leaning back with one arm over the back of the chair next to him. Murray takes off his glasses and wipes them. He catches Stuart looking at him while they are removed, more than a casual glance. What? Why? Does he look so much older without them?

An hour later, they've had a few more refills and it's getting on. Stuart's gone out to reception. Murray looks around and thinks how much he likes the hostel. Sure, the odd chair needs replacing, the cutlery's wafer thin, and the drying up towels – it won't be long before they disintegrate, but it's not about all that.

His gaze rests on a scattering of breadcrumbs dropped by the family with four kids who came in and ate noisily earlier in the evening. The white crumbs stand out against the red lino.

'Here we go,' says Stuart as he re-enters the room, 'she found one in the end.'

He hands Murray a piece of paper and a pen.

Murray presses the ballpoint to the surface. He stares for a second at the torn edge of the page considering what to do.

'Seems daft not to be in touch,' says Stuart.

'Aye, when you're practically down the road.'

Murray starts to write.

'I'd been planning to go up to Rothiemurchus from Whitewell tomorrow,' says Stuart, 'say we stroll up together?'

Murray feels the brush of a toe against the side of his ankle. He pauses halfway through the postcode. He's never been good at any of this stuff.

'D'you think I'll keep up?' he says.

'Miles ahead,' smiles Stuart, 'you'll do fine.

▸▸

I was once behind a pair of priests walking around the Snowdon horseshoe …'

He's off again. A great talker, sees the funny side of things, but not without good judgement too. When the story's done Murray slides the paper across the table. Stuart swivels it around and reads.

'Perfect.' He takes the pen, 'I'll get rid of this and be back for washing up.'

Murray washes while Stuart dries; handing him the soapy plates, the wet knives and forks.

'Shall we say ten o'clock in the car park?'

'No bother,' Murray replies.

He replaces his loaf in the cubbyhole for room number eight. The scotch is making everything sway, forward then back, shifting perspective, making everything more black and white. Murray leans against the worn out 'PUSH' painted on the door. He feels an impulse, so familiar it doesn't surprise him, so frequently suppressed that he suppresses it again without consideration.

'Til tomorrow,' he says.

Stuart holds his gaze and folds an unused drying-up cloth precisely in half and half again. He has that quality of meticulousness Murray admires, carefulness…but he's already committed to opening the door and leaving the room.

Murray heads back through the green corridors, shuffling away the five-litre carton of fabric softener that jams open the door separating the 'quiet area' from the rest of the dormitories. He doesn't shower, just removes his clothes, dons his pyjamas, and lays his watch and glasses down on the floor by the side of the bed. He doesn't close his eyes.

He waits.

The next day, before breakfast is even laid out, everything has changed. ■

Poetry

At Knocknairshill Cemetery, Greenock

Raymond Friel

My father lies here -
ever since that morning

of sleet and blessings
when we bumped his casket

down into a gaping wound
in the brown clay.

At peace
we settled on as epitaph

since for so long his beating mind
removed him from any semblance

of that state -
perhaps even his pomp

of slicked hair
and Catholic youth clubs

was not unhaunted
by that shadow.

At peace,
as we are now

from the dogmatic obsessions
ex cathedra

from the armchair
under the standard lamp

(cigarette smoke hanging
In a tent of light).

At peace are all
who lie on this shelf

tilted at the distant
Atlantic breakers,

whether they live on
or not, or only

in our maudlin reflections
find an after-life.

This much I do know –
I have stopped fighting you.

Dad, rest in peace
and let me sing

of a life improvised,
failure and grace,

in the high cathedrals of air.

X Mining Village, Xmas Day

Ross Wilson

The flat at the end of the street
looks like an advent calendar,
though I doubt anything sweet
would be found on the other
side of its boarded windows.

On a day to give gifts, someone
has bricked and egged a neighbour.
Yolk slimes the pebbledash
like glue holding the words
JUNKI SCUM together.

Snowdrops

Beth McDonough

Bulbs needle green through frost-stiff folds.
A brushed resilience of balm
lemons the cold, and the hooded rhubarb
pushes for spring.
No snowdrops. Not one in the usual place,
cooried by roots, under arms of beech.

I open the house to early spring.
A warm biscuitsmell
escapes his unmade bed.

Reachd

Sandy Jones

Dithis dhaoine ciallach
aig meadhan am beatha
agus air dùil a thrèigsinn -
ma dh'fhaodte -
mean air mhean,
a bhith am feast
nan ceist-ri-ceist.

Ach thuit sinn
ann an gràdh domhainn,
agus le roileasg
dhòchasach
shiubhail sinn
fo iùl fuil-taisgealaiche
gu àilean sàsaichte,
air ar glacadh
le reachd.

Mise fo fhasgadh d' achlais
dìon draoidheil orm
do chùram gam thàladh
is sinne fo sheun
fiughair foirfe.

Nach iongantach
nach eil sinn
air dol gu tur seacharan
air dol às ar rian sean-reachdail
le reachd
ar gaoil ùir?

Zebra Day

By Rhoda Michael

His side of the bed is empty. It is space. She stretches into it, turning onto her stomach. She pushes forward, pushing off his pillows, draws her own pillows to the centre of the bed. Hers are filled with goose down. His are too but it's her own she wants, not his shape but hers. Her right arm reaches to his edge of the bed, pushing his warmth out, drawing hers over into the space. The bones of her pelvis press down into the yield of the mattress.

The curtains have been opened two or three inches. He does that every morning, looks out in his cautious way. Once, in their early days together, she asked, 'Why do you do it like that, why don't you pull them wide?' And he'd said, 'If you're still asleep I don't want to startle you.'

'How thoughtful,' she remembers saying. Now the weight of his thoughtfulness drags at her. It's himself he doesn't want to startle. Like the things he chooses, the plain black lace-ups that he wears. And polishes. Every single morning.

Even his boots, his weekend so-called leisure boots, they're flat and square and grey; though he likes hers, smiles gladly at their colour and their style. And he doesn't mind when she tells him what she spends on them. So thoughtful, his smile, the way it changes things that she has chosen into things that he approves.

She stretches deeper into the mattress, the pillows springing firmly for her neck, her muscles tensing to a fine sharp point, then flowing loose again. He likes her to stretch out like that, likes her to stretch out against him, likes to tangle his hand in her hair. Sometimes she wants to arch and spit and scratch.

She stretches now to please herself. She has the day off, a day 'in lieu'. She could have saved it, tacked it onto the holiday leave they take together. But a day all to herself, a lovely shapeless day . . . she did mention it last night, the subject did come up, and he'd answered, 'yes, a day in lieu.' That's all they'd said.

She listens to the sounds from the street. She likes the morning sounds. It's a busy street, a main thoroughfare into the centre of the city, buses revving, cars drawing away from the traffic lights. She likes the night sounds too, taxi doors, voices calling goodnight, street doors banging.

She can hear voices now, pitched across a space, from a door to the street, from one neighbour to another, car doors shutting, engines firing, the thrust of changing gears. But not the sparrowy chat of schoolchildren yet. It's probably coming up to eight o'clock, at most a few minutes after it.

The light coming through the gap in the curtains is monotone. Flat grey daylight, not the fresher grey of dawn. It could be grey like this all day.

She doesn't look at the clock. The alarm should have gone by now. He must have cancelled it. It feels as though he is still in the flat, not shower sounds or the clatter of things in the kitchen. More like shifts in the air, tiny accommodations to the movement of his breath, to the rhythm of his pulse. To the edge of his thoughtfulness.

He's usually gone by now, usually she's getting ready. Her office is nearer and she starts an hour later. Actually, they start at the same time, but he likes to be there early, get an hour in before the phones start to ring. She can sense his footsteps, crossing the carpet of the hall from the kitchen to their bedroom door.

He brings in tea in a pot and toast in toast rack, on a tray. She wants to stretch again, push him right back out of the room. He's wearing the square flat boots, his weekend out-of-doors denims and his grey marled sweater. Why's he dressed like this today?

'My day in lieu,' he says.

'Your day in lieu? But it's me . . .oh,' she remembers the way they'd left it last night.

He says, 'I mentioned it last night. When you asked . . . oh, I see, we've both . . .' and he laughs as he puts down the tray.

'Have it anyway,' he says, 'while it's fresh.'

She wants to kick the tray away, doesn't want to sit up and eat, make a ceremony of consuming and saying thanks. Doesn't want his shape intruding on her space. It's too fragile yet, she doesn't know what shape she wants, doesn't want to be asked. But he does ask, 'so what's your plan?'

What she might have wanted, it's gone; flitted out among the voices in the street. Even if he went now, immediately, it would still be gone.

'Drink your tea,' he pours it out, 'while you think about it.'

These gestures, she should be grateful. But she feels closed in, an indulged domestic pet, a chosen animal in the zoo, longing for another country, aching to breathe the smells of other grass.

'It's strange,' he says, 'weekends, we can manage. We get tickets for things, meet our friends and go to restaurants, read the Sunday papers with the coffee and the croissants. But a day like this, I don't know how we'll manage, I don't know if we can.'

He picks up a piece of toast and butters it. She thinks it is for her but he starts crunching it. She can see the crumbs, when he bites it, falling on his sweater.

'Oh,' she sits up, 'that's my toast you're eating.' He just crunches on.

She gets out of bed. 'Your pillows,' she says, have fallen on the floor.'

He deserves it if she scratches. How dare he be so sure they will not manage.

'Where are we going then?' he asks as she pulls on the rose and turquoise stripes of her jersey and the golden suede of her boots.

'The zoo, of course, where else would people go on a grey spring day?'

'But you don't like the idea of the zoo. Caged animals, you've said, aching for colour, desperate for space.'

'That's why I want to go, to see how they manage, locked up together on a grey day like this.'

The man in the kiosk at the entrance to the zoo is occupied. He is scanning the racing pages of his newspaper and writing with one of those short bookie's biros on a betting slip. He holds the slip steady with the thumb and the ring and little fingers of his left hand. Between the fore and middle fingers he holds the smoking butt-end of a cigarette. A polystyrene coffee cup stands on the keyboard of the ticket machine.

So he has several things to do before he can give them any tickets. He drains the last mouthful from the cup and drops it into some container out of sight. He puts the cigarette, still smoking, on a metal edge but it rolls and he has to stop it. He stands it upright on its filter tip. He tries to fold the newspaper back on itself so that the page he has been working from is turned out but it blouses as he tries to press it flat.

At last he is ready. He puts on his flat zoo keeper's hat with the dark shiny peak on the forehead. He feels with his hands to straighten it, then re-arranges his hands to operate the ticket machine.

They watch the man as he does these things and then they glance at one another. She can see that he wants to smile to her about it; but he hesitates.

As they climb up the path with their tickets in their pockets she says, ' When he put on that hat he became a different person. The man with the betting slips and the smoking butt-end disappeared – I couldn't see him.'

'Camouflage,' he says, 'like the animals, disappearing into backgrounds. He'll have learned the trick of it from them.'

'You know everything,' she says. She wonders why he doesn't feel the scratch.

The air hangs low beneath the trees in a grey cotton silence. Somewhere out of sight shoes crunch on gravel then fade into pathless distance. An echo hangs, quiet as a reflection in a mirror. Voices ask the way to the penguins. The words are sharp and light like pebbles pinking over scree slopes. A gull glides white into view, stays one wing and curves away again.

Then, up ahead of them, something seems to be happening. It's the uniforms they see, green jerseys with shoulder and elbow patches, and the flat green peaked hats. Keepers, five, six of them, hands casually in pockets or flat-palmed against a high-wired fence; faces focussing in like fathers at a junior school football match.

She has to peer, she has to stand on tiptoe and peer between their shoulders to see what is so absorbing them. The keepers' shoulders shift, they shift their weight from one foot to another and this makes the gaps to peer through shift so she can't see a thing. He manoeuvres a space and draws her in front of him.

It's a zebra, rolling in the sparse grey grass. Grit and dust rise as it rolls from one bright flank to the other. The keepers shift again, edging them out.

'Why are they trying to stop us seeing it properly?' she whispers.

'I think they don't want us to startle it.'

His voice is soft against her head. He slides his hand into hers and she accepts it. They catch more glimpses, quite wide glimpses as the keepers get used to them being there.

'It's a she,' she says, 'she has a dark brown udder and I think she is in milk.'

He firms his hold of her hand. As the zebra rolls the hooves, on stocky striped legs, make running movements in the air.

'She's galloping,' he says, 'across a shimmering plain, she's racing through hot white shadows.'

She presses in against his shoulder. He rearranges his grasp of her hand, threading her fingers into his, very tight for a moment, then relaxed.

The zebra, heavy muscled in the thighs, clambers onto her hooves. The fly-flick of her tail protects the long dark curve of the cleft in her haunches. Her neck arches down to a folded handful of stripes that she nudges onto legs, nudges into movement till it finds her flank and mumbles at the taut dark udder.

'I know the foal must be there,' he says, 'but I can't quite see it.'

'I can't see it either. It must be the way their camouflage works.'

They regard each other's faces as they speak.

'It's strange,' he says, 'how you think you've lost something good, and then you find that it's coming back again.'

As the zebra feeds her foal the keepers push their peaked hats up off their foreheads. They scratch at thinning hair. A blink of sunshine stripes their shy faces. They put their hands in their pockets and rustle loose change, and they shuffle their boots on the grey cement slabs of the path around the fence.

At last she says, 'I'll race you to the gate.' And she laughs and pummels him when he doesn't let her win.

At night, before they sleep, they open the curtains of their window wide and the lights of late cars stripe across their bedroom ceiling. She stretches out against him and asks him what he sees. And in his sleep he murmurs, 'black and white striped hooves galloping, herds of them galloping, across a shimmering plain.' ■

Poetry by Rody Gorman

FROM SWEENEY: AN INTERTONGUING

Stand

Christ the King is my darling
In heaven. Here in Dromiskin
Between the Lagan and Fane,
Between the old pagan sacred and profane,
I've dedicated my life to my flock of men
As their sublunary father

Giving them, as I must, the Roman line
Predicated on the new order
Of not just agapeistic love
And devotion but geopolitical power.
Here where I've marked the border
On this rock I'll build my round tower

Like Apollo Eight or Nine
With stone and masonry from Darver
And high crosses like bird stands,
The handiwork of a master woodcarver
But If I could choose I'd rather
Stand alone here and not move an inch

For a yolkyyellowwhingoldennibblackbird or bramble-finch,
A common sparrow or starling,
A nuthatch or a siskin
Or a dunnock or a wren
Or a robin or collared dove
To land in my outstretched orant hands.

Roosts

I could live my life over on Mainland
With all the Arctic bonxies and tysties,
Among the Reids and Muirs and Cocks
And Brocks and Lairds and Cairds.
There they might well call me
Swanney Malcolmson the First, High King of Sweyn Holm.

Among the big skies and gales, I could be Viking Sveinn,
A troglodyte in a trowie knowe
Or a cairn in Maeshowe or Cuween.
And when I read the runic ogham
Engraved on Buckquoy spindle-whorl,
There's a language I know, I say to myself, I understand.

Or a ferry-louper at home in the Brough of Deerness
Or the Cuilags and Glens of Kinnaird on Hoy, treeless,
Bare and alien, watching the roosts cross
The Ayre and the North Sound and Wide Firth,
Far out from Loch of Swannay and Abune-the-Hill
And Ireland and the place of my father's birth.

Stone on the Cairn

Here I am following a track
Above the tree line
Over the bogs

As old as Homer
In the highlands of Cumbria,
On a tour de force,

An offcomer in a carr,
Beside a currick
Or down a clough.

I cross over Loughrigg
And Carron Crag and pass
Dunmallet and Portinscale

And rest in a secret cave
With an eye
Open all the time in Langstrath.

Following the sunrise,
I go up and I drop
A stone on the cairn on the top

Of Dunmail Raise, looking
Out over the continuous glen
To the Southern Uplands past Carlisle

And Strathclyde and cross the Irish Sea,
Talking to myself (or no one)
There in the language of men.

Cock of the Walk

A year ago I was talk of the town,
Cock of the walk, every night out late
With, like, Lady Gaga, Cheryl Cole,
Amy Winehouse or Gary Barlow.

Now I'm squatting in a ghost estate
On my tod in a godforsaken hole
Out on the edge of Knockdown
In the wilds of County Carlow.

⋆

I'd lord it up in my Gormenghast,
My Rock of Dunamase above Slieve Bloom
But we knew that it wouldn't last.
Now I haven't got even a single room.

I just want to be back in Rasharkin,
Flanning about with Erin my wife
And to be played by Alan Arkin
In the blockbuster of my life.

From *The Life of St. Kentigern*

Just as when your man Ronan
Cursed you to a life of walking and no rest,
I was damned in *The Life of St. Kentigern*.

On Ben Lomond and in Glen Lonan
And the Great Caledonian Ur-Forest
At first I was an Irish elk, then an auroch

And a tarpan grazing by the ur-loch
But I was hunted and now I'm just, like, a tern
Or an auk or a capercaillie

Waiting to be shot and dished up in far Wigan
And Widnes as Japanese quail pie
Or baked Alaskan ptarmigan.

Oracle

Exiled by warlords
With his apostles, he left from Derry
In a stone coracle,

The story goes, and made land
On the island at Portawherry.
Here from a small hill

Looking like one of their anchorite cells,
Round and spartan,
Back in Swords

Or the oratory in Kells
Or Drumhome,
Skryne or Boyle,

He thinks of home
In Gartan,
Tory, Glencolumbkille and the Rosses

And delivers the oracle
About not crossing the Strait of Moyle
To go into battle with Donald MacKay

With his men in Moira that day
And then going insane
At never again seeing Ireland

And the death of Conall McScanlon from Clane
As one of the twelve, according to the Glosses,
Writes in an insular Hybrid minuscule hand

Something like *Jesus, I could kill*
A Big Mac right now down in the sand.

Dàin le Paddy Bushe

Calbharaí
(Ó Ghàidhlig Shomhairle MhicGill-Eain)

Níl mo shúil ar Chalbharaí
nó ar Bheitleatham na ngrás
ach ar chúl bréan i nGlascú
mar a bhfuil an lobhadh fáis,
agus ar sheomra i nDún Éideann,
seomra bochtanais is crá,
mar a bhfuil an naoinán créachtach
ag iomlascadh go bás.

Abhainn Àrois
(*Ó Ghàidhlig Shomhairle MhicGill-Eain)*

Ní cuimhin liom do bhréithre
go fiú aon rud a dúirt tú,
ach Abhainn Àrois i gcumhracht féithlinne
is cumhracht raideoige ar Shuidhisnis.

An Bád Dubh
(Ó Ghàidhlig Shomhairle MhicGill-Eain)

A bháid dhuibh, a fhoirfeacht Ghréagaigh,
taca seoil, bolg seoil geal agus lán,
is tú féin go healaíonta, críochnaithe,
ciúin, uaibhreach, gan locht gan cháim;
níor longa aon phioc ba ealíonta iad siúd
a sheol Oidéisis anall as Itaca
nó Mac Mhic Ailein anall as Uidhist,
iad seo mhuir fhíon-dhorcha,
iad siúd ar sháile ghlasuaithne.

Rabharta
(Ó Ghàidhlig Shomhairle MhicGill-Eain)

Arís agus arís is mé briste
smaoiním ortsa is tú óg,
agus líonann an fharraige dothuigthe
ina lán mara le míle seol.

Folaítear cladach na fulaingte
a chuid sceireanna is bruth an bhróin
agus buaileann an tonn gan bhriseadh
thart timpeall mo chosa mar shról.

Conas nár mhair an rabharta
ba órdha dom ná dosna heoin,
agus gur chailleas a chuid faoisimh
a thráigh ina braonta bróin?

Creagan Beaga
(Ó Ghàidhlig Shomhairle MhicGill-Eain)

Tá mé ag dul trí Chreagan Beaga
insan dorchadas liom féin
is an bruth ar Chamas Alba
ina shian ar dhuirling réidh.

Tá an chrotach is an fheadóg
ag éamh thíos faoin Chúil,
is soir ó dheas ó Sgurr nan Gillean,
Blàbheinn, is an ghealach gan smúid.

An solas ag bualadh ar chlár na mara
ó Rubha na Fainge sínte ó thuaidh,
agus an sruth i gCaol na hAirde
ag rith ó dheas le loinnir luath.

Photosynthesis
Ian McDonough

Clouds banked up, darkening my step,
and the Assynt hills
became a backdrop
for a far-fetched, ill-considered play.

The air thinned to almost nothing,
until the whole of Stoer
began to wheeze and hyperventilate
gasping for an atmospheric change.

Then you snared a little sunlight
in your gaze, cracked the very atoms
of the day, spreading oxygen
like lifebelts in your wake.

The Boatyard
Raymond Friel

Around the point
from the white marina

(where rigging chatters
in a river breeze)

a slipway dips
into choppy waters,

a boathouse stands in dilapidation
and around it, painted boats

up on stocks –
the pride of the former shipyard workers.

Five in a car,
they come on a weekday

to this place of men
to thoughtlessly dab

at every nook
of their river-shy craft

named for grown-up daughters
(or secret loves).

It is here my brother and I
have come (only one looked up)

to perch on a grassy rock
and talk of our dead father –

lover of ships and theology,
never happier

than when dabbing away
at the nooks and crannies of the Godhead.

Land Talk

Mandy Haggith interviews Kathleen Jamie

Photograph of Kathleen Jamie by Freya Butler

I meet Kathleen Jamie in the Ceilidh Place in Ullapool, where she is staying with the other writers taking part in the Ullapool Book Festival. She looks comfortable there, curled up on a sofa, and she admits that she is enjoying the chance to be 'hiding away'. I get the impression of a very private person. She is economical with words, thinks hard before answering questions and apologises for being less-than forthcoming in response to them. But gushing exhuberance isn't exactly what we would expect from a writer who has mastered, as she has, pared-down clarity of expression.

We talk a fair bit about land, because when she answered questions after her reading from her new poetry collection, *The Overhaul*, and book of essays, *Sightlines*, she admitted to some strong opinions on the issue. Although her own upbringing was 'urban proletariat', she traced her mother's family back because, she says, 'I was interested to find where they came off the land – I found a couple of ancestors from rural Ireland who moved to work in mines in Ayrshire'. She now lives in semi-rural Tayside, and her writing is densely packed with her keen observations of the detail of land and water there, and elsewhere in Scotland. Although she is fully aware of how her local land is being used, ('It always astonishes me the number of machines it takes to till a field', she says), she doesn't have a perception of being part of a farming community. 'I've never knowingly spoken to a farmer', she says, 'I just don't meet them socially.'

She describes the current situation of most people in Scotland living urban lives and having little or no connection to rural land as 'disastrous'. 'It's politically disastrous', she says, 'and there's nothing we're going to be able to do about it until we get the issue of land ownership sorted out.'

I wonder if this sense that many people in Scotland are alienated from the land, and therefore have very limited experiences of other species, is a motivation for her writing. In a Guardian interview last year she said, 'On the scandalous business of land and land ownership, especially in Scotland, where 80% of the land is owned by 10% of the people, I feel I might be striking a tiny blow: by getting out into these places, and developing a language and a way of seeing which is not theirs but ours.'

Is she trying to engage people to become more interested in nature or land issues? 'No. It's not my intention,' she says. 'I can't think of anything worse than acting as a missionary or trying to proselytise or change people's minds. I get very uncomfortable when people try to rally me to a cause. It makes me want to run a mile. As a Scottish citizen I think we have political problems and one of them is land ownership, but as a writer, no, that's a different person altogether. I'm not an activist.'

So she wouldn't use her writing skills to, for example, to respond to the current review of land reform that the Scottish government is carrying out? 'No, no, God no, I wouldn't dream of it! What I think as a completely uninformed person is neither here nor there,' she says, laughing. This seems an overly modest response from someone who has specialised in writing about the natural world, who has spent time in intent observation of so many different corners of the country, and whose deeply perceptive essays question how we as individuals, and as wider society, live and share this land with other species. 'I keep being told I'm modest but I'm not,' she says. 'I'm just aware of what I can and can't do, and I know what's fruitless.'

The state of Scotland's land ownership does, nevertheless indirectly influence her writing. 'It may condition where I go, the things I can do, for example, I was thinking of going to Colonsay, which is all owned by one family, so I thought, no. And if I am somewhere then part of my mind is thinking who owns this place and what are they doing with it? But I don't write about that. My writing is not political. It is not taking a political stance. Of course, the very fact that a woman of my background is doing it is a political act that I'm aware of, but I don't flag it up.'

She says that a much more direct and significant impact on her writing is her life as a working mother, which influences its form, content and practice. Most significantly it limits her opportunities for getting away to the remote places, where she can hide away, to a week or so each year. The intensity with which she grabs these opportunities is all too evident in her essays, which capture with heightened brilliance the moments of wonder that she experiences in these rare periods, and draw us in to be with her, another lucky bystander.

One of the features of her essays, in particular, is the range of people who she hangs out with in these places, from archaeologists to ornithologists, and she uses what she learns from them to provide the details that make her writing so enthralling, whether it is whales or swifts or cancer cells she is describing. She both enjoys being with experts in wild places and then follows up by questioning them as she is writing. 'They enable me to be more precise, which is a form of respect', she says.

She is employed as Professor of Creative Writing at Stirling University so teaching 'in so far as it's possible to teach it', is now an important part of her life. Unfortunately this doesn't mean extended field trips to remote islands. 'I plead with the students to go out and pay attention. If I could, I would take them out and get them to sit under a tree for days.'

Some of techniques of poetry writing are more amenable to the classroom or workshop. She clearly has a lot of fun with language ('I love similes', she says, 'and making connections') and she is playful with point of view. Her essays shift from her own first person descriptions to more general passages where she addresses us all, as 'we'. 'I suppose I want to allow a reader the option of being included', she says.

'I'm fascinated by voice and point of view,' she says. 'I spend a lot of time and effort on this.' Look how she uses the first person, for example in The Spider, which opens with 'When I appear to you / by dark ... and you shriek, you shriek / so prettily, I'm reminded of the birds', and ends:

'You, staring in horror
- had you never considered
how the world sustains?
The ants by day
clearing, clearing,
the spiders mending endlessly - '

Without anthropomorphising animals, she manages with deft use of 'I' and 'you' to draw us into the world of another species, and then she leaves us there, thinking.

I am interested in how the process of writing works for her, whether she goes looking for poems, for example, or whether they find her. 'You can look for days then something grabs you,' she says, 'like a plastic bag snagged in a tree, and you have to pay attention to it.' In *Findings*, she memorably described her note-taking as akin to an artist making sketches. The travel essays are not actually written in their locations, but back at home, with references to books and her expert friends. And all of the writing happens in the cracks between the duties of work and motherhood. 'I'll circle around an idea,' she says, 'and sometimes it comes to nothing. Other times...' she shrugs. I'll finish the sentence for her: other times she ends up with disarmingly beautiful poems and sparkling essays. If you haven't read them yet, you really must. ■

Poetry

Riverside
Judith Taylor

We thought the hydro-electric scheme
had tamed the river
and Grandpa's tales of having to go to school by boat
were just that – tales –

until the night the river brought that heavy snowfall,
and the heavy rain that scoured it off the hills, down
like an armed raid
to steal the streets from under us.

For days, houses rocked
on their own reflections,
moored uncertainly. The trees
filled their arms with our lost property.

Gulls remembered their old ways
and mocked the pigeons
huddled under railway bridges.
It was a different world

and when our own was given back to us
it was thick with things
we couldn't say.
It hasn't happened again

yet, but now we believe
it will: we are no more ready
but we are waiting.
And all I can think is

Grandpa must be disappointed
not to have lived to see it all come back again.
He liked us paying attention.
It worried him when he saw

his prosperous offspring
getting comfortable. He knew different.
Thrawn-hearted, long in memory: we believe
he sympathised with the river.

Auld Mortalitie in Picardie
Hamish Scott

I France ae day i Picardie
in sum dule sodgers' seemetrie
the Gret Weir gart tae Europe gie
A see sum Auld Mortalitie

Inscrivin new on sum heidstane
abuin a sodger turnt tae bane
while me athin tae mak a mane
for aa thae residenters taen

A raik aboot an daein quell
in seilence mair thaim in thair cell
the anelie soun an aulden spell
the mason's mell an chisell tell

Clachan
Christie Williamson

Pit de haund doon
an whit's dere? Stons.
Stons i da aest, stons
i da wast, stons
as faur as du kin see
an whit's dis? Here
i da haert o aa dis stons
me an de, a drummin
laek clods bein shovelled
atil a Frytol bucket
athin wir kjists, stuck
wi dis ston a mine
as saft as da moss
at's growin a ower
at'll turn intae paet
an burn.

Bonfire People
Ian McDonough

Like chains of paper cut-out families,
extremities stropped razor sharp,
captured in silhouette
between the blaze and the unencompassed dark
we lap our drinks like wolves.

Alasdair lifts his pipes,
blows hordes of triplets wild and west
They pierce the wood smoke, taking rest
among the purple rockets, pinhole stars.

A careful Scottish buzz of conversation
dodges round the weighty atoms of our being,
insinuating, spiked with sly conjectures,
sharp with angled reprimands.

Here is where we stand, the bonfire people,
huddled up like oxen in a frostbound field,
fussing at our offspring
patiently enduring the cold wisdom of the sky.

Slowly the evening swarthes itself in shrouds,
our kids heap green wood on a failing fire -
we older ones retire
to fall upon the coward's sword of sleep.

The morning grass will reek of tales,
soot-smudged, a little scorched, still warm.

Lucozade
Dàibhidh Eyre

Tinneas
na laighe ri taobh botal
còmhdaichte ann am fiolm orainds

dath
a ghabhas a thogail
gu faiceallach bhon ghlainne

fuar air do làmh
agus sràcan ann
a bhios a' lughdachadh

meud an t-saoghail ùir
neònach
a chì thu tron phlastaig

ciaradh an t-samhraidh
a' nochdadh gu h-obann
air latha liath an earraich

agus blas an deoch
nad bheul
fhathast

milis
searbh
maireannach.

Fàisneachdan
Dàibhidh Eyre

Fo chluasagan mo sheanmhar
bha polomints
agus smuig-aodaich

agus os cionn nan cluasagan
air mullach casan na leaba
bha cnapan metailt

ann an cruth
lòtasan
dùinte.

Bhiomaid gan togail
mi fhìn 's mo bhràthair
agus a' cur rudan sna beàrnan fodhpa

pìosan beaga pàipeir
fàisneachdan dìomhair
ann an làmh-sgrìobhaidh neo-chiontach.

Nuair a bhàsaich i
chaidh an leabaidh a ghluasad
agus rùraich mi son meòrachan ar n-òige.

Agus cha robh sgeul orra idir.

Blue Pearl: Poems From Icela

REYKJANES

Beneath the tarmac
is a gravel shore
a bay of black sand

a hundred white gulls
transparent, seeded like pearls
along the sea edge.

Close the city door. Listen :
and the wind becomes words
worked smooth, like the handle of an axe

a language rough and dry as sticks
green vowels
lining the mouth with lichen

or the soft grey blanket
that comes mid-morning
muffling sea birds

or the moan from a red hole
sinking in the turf
of dull, soft hills

loaded with warm stone,
breathing quietly.

SANDOY

A cult of light
a calm, white sea
a garden behind the wind.

An old man, lean as a hare
plays mouth music to a foal
dancing on a slope

his falcons tethered to the roof ;
their clean, brown shins
cut the air like water.

Here, long hills lie
like neighbours,
quiet in their houses

blue and black,
the sea slicing pebbles,
the horse kicking time.

GRENSÁS

In a temple of trees :
a woman standing in a stream
dragging eels out of the current
a lip of water round her ankles

its silver ounces gathered in bowls;
mirrors of light and dark
lines furling, unfurling,
the cool air thickening their spines.

EYRI

Winter.
Hunting by quartz light

white birds nesting
in a blue sleeve

low in their hollow,
still as stone

each tiny throat
a hole in the wind.

HÆLL

dry light
earth light
ash light
storm light

blue pearl, touching the horizon.

EIÐAR

A man came walking from the north
lifting his head at Eiðar :

a clear wind cool as water.
He raised his roof in the river's elbow

through the cloud light of summer
folded peat out of the ground

soft grass growing up his back
the rain washing colour from his eyes

the slow erosion of his skin
like scree slipping from a ledge

until he was transparent as the mountain -
a green wind flattening the water

a stain seeping from a rock
a door hidden in a field.

GJOGUR

A farmer is peering at the light.
He catches the wind in his mouth

green rollers curl above his head
the sea exhaling like an old horse

and dogs scutter on the shale,
sliding into waves as the bay tilts

like an old ship, straining as it heels,
pulled by a needle pointing north.

VÍK

In a garden of floats and shale
a rose from Lerwick

carried in a box of heads
planted among the nets

a warm hollow
rimmed with soft words

its thin earth
salted by starlight

red heart
blooming in the dark.

HÓLA

He dragge
and walke
above the
the hard s

he opene
an old vel
so that it
the words

and the gr
cloud curl
the air gro
and the w

and

AR

ed his boat high onto the turf
ed out on a flat rock
still surface of the water,
ky a burnished blue;

d the calf's skin to the sun
lum worn thin
glowed an amber light
lifting from the page

rass stirred and settled
ling over the brim of hills
owing white and thick
ords blew through him out to sea.

Blue Mountain by Tolli Morthens, www.tolli.is

Trust Scotland

By Kevin MacNeil

A greyish version of Scotland is sliding past the window by your side. A book you've been looking forward to reading lies with an early broken spine on the pull-down table in front of you. Your small First Class segment, doored off from the rest of the train carriage, has recently been invaded by a party of hens. The hens are inebriated. It is a grey, softly drizzling, very Scottish, morning.

You had been staring out the window, concentrating on that immersive greyness as the hen party women opened up bottles and mindnumbing conversations. Why are they so interested in minor celebrities, whose personalities are cultivated (or hidden) by image consultants? You declined to look any of the women in the eye. You refused to participate.

So they've started chatting with a man sitting nearby. He's quite the character.

'Where I specialise is murder,' he says. 'I did a big murder last year.'

The hens shriek and pour him a drink. He accepts a plastic cup of wine. They beg him to tell them about it.

'Maybe later. Actually, I'm a bit of a wine snob,' he says. 'But what the heck give me some more cheap plonk.' They begin to dripfeed him plastic cups of a urinous paintstrippy wine.

'This is hardly the standard I expected. After all, this is not the riff-raff carriage,' he declares. The hens scream, delighted at his bluntness. They do not have First Class tickets but the train is crowded. They feel rebellious and privileged. They have not realised the difference in classes on this train is largely nominal. First Class is no different to Standard except that a beleagured young ScotRail employee sometimes pops his head in and asks if anyone fancies a cup of tea or coffee and a biscuit (and there is no charge). The drunken hens make him blush. 'Ah dinnae fancy a free biscuit right now son, but Ah do fancy you!'

As the ScotRail teenager scuttles away with his trolley trembling with miniature glass bottles, the man helps himself to more plastic wine. 'You'd eat him for breakfast. You can gobble me up any time you like. I'm as lush as a tart when it comes to women. I will sing, I will dance...' His voice is louder now, his honed Edinburgh New Town vowels are slurring into something more working class, more genuine.

You try and read for a while, but there is too much merriment in the air. You can't settle. You read the same sentence half a dozen times and still don't take it in. The man holds court and the women listen and encourage him to drink. They are drunk and he is getting very drunk and it is only eleven o'clock and you have just left Aviemore.

The blur of washed-out countryside to your left suggests weariness and dull hangovers; the villages at which the train calls have an air of inertia and grinding routine. You idly wonder if it is possible for an actual village to have agoraphobia. Trust Scotland.

'Did I say lawyer, I mean liar,' he quips. All these pithy lines sound well practised, like his accent.

A lawyer, you think. Makes sense.

As you leave Pitlochry he talks about how he and his wife illegally download books and music. 'Everyone does.'

He has a wife?

The lawyer boasts about the jewellery he buys her. She once refused a ring. 'Made me take it right back to Jenners. "Stone's too small", she says. "I don't do small, I do bling."'

The drink goes down, the volume goes up. You stare at your book. The words have turned grey and impenetrable. Scotland slides north, the train south. His spoken sentences have defeated the written ones. Such, you think, is all too often the way of things.

He says, 'Lawyers in Edinburgh would chop their arm off to work for my firm.' Prompted by one of the women, he even names his company. You write it down. Just in case.

'Upstairs, I've got four bedrooms. I've got a maid's room,' he says.

'Do you know, I love feet,' he exclaims at one point. The women, coarse and excitable, roar with laughter and clap their hands and encourage him.

Later, one of the women complains that her breasts are too big, they give her a sore back.

'I have to say - women's breasts - if they're properly formed - absolutely beautiful,' he pronounces.

A large woman puffs out her chest, agrees and mentions how hard it is to get a bra that fits.

'Oh wow, look at the nipples.' He says this very loudly. No one speaks for a while. Perth station arrives at the train. One of the women finds a bottle of gin.

'Okay, hush, everyone,' says the man. 'I've just got a text, I've been told to phone my wife. So could we all be quiet, please.'

After a few moments of drunken pantomime hilarity, the women settle and sip at their drinks, listening in to the lawyer.

He jabs at his phone. Then: 'Hi baby, how you doing? I hope you've got some nice cakes because I've got about seven tarts here...No, I'm not in cattle class. No...No. Honestly. Don't be daft, woman. I'm a lawyer not a lover, a liar not a lawy, no - a lover, never mind...No, I'll be in at the office but I'll be home early... Remember, I'm the man who saw Mud in 1973 when they were at their height...Aye. You just wait. You'll get a surprise...I know. Love ya. Bye. Bye. Bye.'

At the same moment the women, as if of one mind, burst out laughing. You like their camaraderie, how natural they are with each other. You forgive them their headnipping noises.

The lawyer, who earlier described a famous someone as 'the most reptilious man I ever met', intrigues you more than the characters did in the book you couldn't read.

You twist and stretch, do a fake-yawn which turns into a real yawn and surreptitiously angle your head to look at him. He is a silver-haired man with, frustratingly, a face that is handsome, or was. His eyes are watery grey and sad-looking.

And right then you see into his mind. You know his life. You know everything about him. You have sympathy for him. He is one of those people whose pillow speaks at night.

Yes, you know it. Know how, at night, his very pillow talks to him.

(You resolve to write one day about the things your pillow says to you.)

But what does his pillow say?

Regret, his pillow sadly whispers. Shame. Pity. Regret.

You get off the train at Edinburgh Haymarket even though you meant to continue to Edinburgh Waverley. As the train pulls away, you can still hear the women shrieking. You left your book on the train. The gin fumes were getting to you. If you jumped a bus to Waverley you could probably still get the novel back. You feel dismayed, and will experience a deflation, an actual physical ennui, for the rest of the day. You will never again try to read the DeLillo book because it will always remind you of the strange despondent feeling that came over you that day in Edinburgh when you got off the train one stop early, at great personal inconvenience, and you suddenly felt you understood what synesthetes mean when they describe the emotional meaning of colours because that day you understood that grey has a meaning, you knew what greyness really means, and greyness has had that tinge and meaning ever since.

And the man? You might put him in a story. It would end like this:

Later that night the man rolls into bed and the pillow starts up with its talk of regret and pity and insecurity and shame and he slams his hand down on it repeatedly and a babyish tear trickles down his cheek and he vows, finally, to take that fucking bastard pillow to court. ■

Those Faces You Pass In The Street

Interview with Karen Campbell by Tanera Bryden

Karen Campbell will be appearing at Nairn Book and Arts Festival to read from her recently published book, *This is Where I Am*, the story of a Somalian refugee coming to terms with a new life in Glasgow with his young, traumatised daughter. Recently featured on BBC Radio 4's Book at Bedtime, the new novel may appear to be a departure from her previous work, which drew on Karen's experiences in the Glaswegian police force, but as Karen herself says, this isn't quite the case.

Karen Campbell

Tanera Bryden: *Reviewers have referred to that fact that you have 'broken away' from what is regularly though not necessarily accurately characterised as crime fiction, for your latest novel* This is Where I am. *How true is this?*

Karen Campbell: To me, there's very little difference with this new book and my others. They're all about social issues, all set in Glasgow. I've always said that, with my first four books, I was writing about people who just happened to be cops, but the thrust was always about lives behind closed doors, behind facades, behind the uniform – and my new books is a variation on that. Those faces you pass in the street everyday – who are they? Where are they from? What do they go home to at night? I find all of that fascinating.

Can you explain a little about the challenges of a move from writing about police work which you knew from first hand experience, to portraying the experience of being an immigrant in an alien land? Given that you know Glasgow so well, how difficult did you find it to view the city as an outsider?

It was a joy to view Glasgow as an outsider – everyone should try viewing their home as a tourist would! It really makes you see stuff you might otherwise have taken for granted. For example, in *This Is Where I Am*, the two characters meet in a different part of the city each month, as a way of helping to integrate Abdi, the refugee in my book. Thinking about where they might go, all the usual places you'd take visitors made me think: somewhere like Kelvingrove Museum. It's imposing, stunning. But – if you didn't know it was free & you didn't know you were 'allowed' inside – would you even go up the steps?

As for moving from the world of the police – with each police book I wrote, I was pushing myself further and further away from what I knew. For example in *After the Fire,* I write about what happens when a police firearms incident goes wrong. I've never been a firearms cop, never even held a gun. So all of that required a huge amount of research. With my new book, I spent time speaking to refugees and people that work with refugees, to try to build up a picture that went beyond what I might imagine it must feel like to be a refugee.

Your novels are all set in Glasgow, a city you obviously love and know intimately, and you capture the essence of the city in your books. Is there another author who uses a particular city as an evocative setting for their books in a way you admire?

Not one author, but I love books set in Italy – anywhere in Italy basically! So much so that I'm thinking of setting my next book there. Which may involve an onerous research trip to Tuscany…

Have you always written? Did you keep a diary when you were younger?

Yes. I used to make wee books when I was 5 or 6, drawing pictures, stapling the pages. Making my family listen to me reading them…but I didn't really keep a diary, it was always made-up stories.

What is your day to day routine as a writer? Do you write in short bursts, burn the midnight oil, or work an ordinary eight hour day?

I'm definitely not a midnight oil person. I first started writing seriously when my kids were at school, and I've tended to stick to that pattern: get up, walk the dog, write till lunch, then do a bit more in the afternoon. But I find it really hard to write in the evenings or at night. I find I'm at my best first thing in the morning, when I'm still a bit dopey and my brain hasn't started getting cluttered up with the day.

Do you think of yourself as a Scottish writer? How do you think Independence might affect the Scottish literary scene?

Absolutely I'm a Scottish writer. It's really important to me that I'm able to write in the language that I think and speak in, and about the subjects that are relevant to me. We've already got a really vibrant Scottish literary culture, so I don't know if Independence would change that, but what I hope it would do is lead to more recognition and pride in all aspects of our distinctive culture – here and on the world stage.

Sadly, female writers still struggle when it comes to sales in comparison to male authors - particularly in genres which are more popular with male readers such as crime and horror - with the result that many choose to use their initial rather than their full name, or to use a pseudonym. Have you ever felt pressured into disguising your gender to sell more books?

Never. I think that, so much effort goes into writing a book, that you want your actual name to appear on the front! Research has shown that women (and girls) are much more amenable to reading books by men and women, whereas men tend to read other men. But, you know, for me, part of the joy of reading is learning about new worlds, new ways of thinking – so it makes sense to read perspectives from writers of different ages, nationalities – and both sexes. Plus, I've never thought that women – or men– think or act in 'one-size-fits-all' way, so why would we make assumptions that the strength or subject of the books they write would all be the same either? I'd hope that someone would pick up my book because they're interested in the story – not who wrote it.

In This is Who I am, *Deborah secretly fears she might be turning into 'one of those women who… screeches profanities at passing dog-walkers and cars. ' Is this a secret fear of yours too?*

Hmm…my kids will tell you I probably already do that – when I'm driving at least! I'm not a patient person, me! ■

This is Where I Am is published by Bloomsbury Circus. Karen Campbell is appearing at the Nairn Book and Arts Festival, which runs from 3rd –8th September 2013. Other writers appearing at Nairn include James Naughtie, Edinburgh Makar Ron Butlin, Andrew Greig, Eve Harris and Norwegian crime writer Vidar Sundstøl. For more information about the programme and booking information, visit **www.nairnfestival.co.uk**

Poetry

A Moment of Intimacy on the Phone to my Mother

Lydia Harris

I say kilts are an affectation.
She recalls her first from the tailor in Kirkwynd
and mine from Mrs MacNab at number 30.
She blames George the Third for the dress kilt.
Explains how how he stood on a dais
while sheriffs presented their wives,
how he followed custom, wore nothing underneath,
how the women had to look the other way.
Two weeks ago my mother says, yes,
she'd opposed my marriage.
We've never talked about the way
she couldn't bear his voice,
the way she wouldn't speak
the night I rang to say,
We're back from honeymoon.
Tonight she says the women had to look
intently at the Meissen punchbowl by the screen.
She doesn't add, because the monarch's cock
stirred behind the fine wool of his kilt.
We both know it's what she means.

Lacrimosa

Seonaid Francis

Smoke drifts in the rainlight,
rising like damp
in an empty house.

Where once the scent
of peat smoke,
a rabbit boiling in the pot,
potatoes on the stove -

now silence
and green bracken.

We Afa Cool

After Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool"
Anne Shivas

We afa cool. We
skive school. We

lirk late. We
nip neat. We

lo'e lust. We
bet bust. We

jag June. We
deid soon.

Musée du Luxembourg

Olivia McMahon

Paintings owned by collectors at Le Havre
at the turn of the 20th century
of boats,
of harbours,
of fields in evening light.

And then a small room
of pictures of almost life-sized naked women.
Among them a circus artist
taking a rest alone back stage,
still in her second, tattooed, skin.
She's sprawled on a bed,
legs wide apart, eyes closed,
her genitals exposed.
You can almost hear her snoring.

The following rooms, more paintings
of boats
of harbours
of fields in evening light.

Sunday Afternoon

Jared Carnie

She was trying a roast
Twenty years before she got sick of them
And I was writing
Ten years before I realised I couldn't
And we were listening to Ray Charles
However many years after he went
And just for a moment
We escaped the discomfort of days gone
And forgot the crush of days going
And lived as ourselves
Inside it all
With our puppy barking madly at our feet.

Iona

David Seddon

Dawn yawns across the bay,
seal-strung rocks
slip their black
in the light of a rippling sun.

Faith like a stained-glass
sand-blast.
Birds pass
in a sail-cloth sky.

Stillness
silence.
Is this what the heart is for?
I cannot speak the ghost of it.

River and Child

Jennifer Morag Henderson

There is no problem the river can't solve.
It's something about the way it flows fat,
wide, spilling up lazy onto the bank
lumping over roots, swelling up with love –

I began to tell you this in winter,
watching snow fall to flow down to the sea
I kept warm from the heat of your body
pregnant, learning how to be a mother.

The rush of water doesn't start or end
it doesn't play between the lines but runs
up over the emerging spring flowers.

We walk together now, child and parent,
your small problems have already begun -
Stop the pram: see how the river is now.

storm

Juliet Antill

On Morvern, a turbine scythes
the wind,
and a flat-backed rainbow

shoots low
into a crow-black sky.

A gull, wide-winged wide-eyed,
flung up out of the bay
like a sheet ripped off a line,

clears by a thread
the witch-fingered rowans.

At night we are raided by squalls.
Black-bellied blimps
roll over Rubha-nan-Gall

whose stern unblinking
light blanks
the swollen Sound;

choke point
where the moon is wrecked
and stars are drowned.

man on the ferry

Juliet Antill

Turning from the till with my tea
just past Lismore, you were there
sideways to me like a soft-shell crab,

tendering my scarf – all silvers
and greens – and looking as pleased
as if you'd fished me a piece of the sea.

–You dropped this, you said
your voice muffled with gaelic
your face like a creased moon.

‘Ferns like poems’

The Poetry of Ian Abbot

By Richie McCaffery

It is nearly a quarter of a century since Chapman Publishing brought out Ian Abbot’s first and only collection *Avoiding the Gods*. Tragically, only months after publication, Abbot died when he crashed his Ford Fiesta near his home in Whitebridge, on the south east side of Loch Ness, after attending a funeral. He was 42. In the small report on his death, *The Glasgow Herald* claimed that at the time Abbot had been working ‘on his second book’. The the poems that follow this article are taken from Abbot’s archive in the National Library of Scotland and might well have been destined for this second collection.

Ian Robert Hamilton Abbot was born in Perth in 1947. Abbot had both a checkered educational and occupational background, having studied medicine and psychology at the universities of Edinburgh and Stirling respectively. To support his writing he worked a succession of odd, often seasonal jobs such as a fence-builder, a barman, a psychiatric nurse and even a short-lived stint as a silversmith. In 1974 he moved to the Highlands where he focused on his short-story and poetry writing. His first published poem appeared in the American magazine *Kayak* in 1967, but it wasn’t until 1988 that his first and only poetry collection Avoiding the Gods was published by Chapman, Edinburgh. Abbot won a Scottish Arts Council Bursary in 1987 and was working on his second collection at the time of his early death in 1989. He left a widow and a son as well as a body of unpublished material.

The criticism, appreciation and even readership of Abbot’s poetry has been more or less stuck in the era of his death. The poet, and editor of Lines Review, William Montgomerie was a vocal supporter of Abbot’s work. Montgomerie considered Abbot to be a ‘brilliant student’ who produced poems like hatching ‘butterflies’. A fine example that lives up to such praise is Abbot’s poem ‘Mechanisms of the Gin’. Here is the closing stanza:

You tend it with utmost care. Intimately prime as your father did
its double jagged sickles and its tight-sprung mouth, arrange
its hidden ribbon of links. Then turn for home, moving
heavily downward into sleep.
Only to dream of iron laughter shouting in the wood
and the spare, insatiable gaze
that will see your own flesh folded in the earth
and then will sit back patient, waiting;
grinning till the wandered, bone-white stars begin to fall.

In ‘A Cancelled Poetry Lesson’ we see that the poet, working from home as a private creative writing teacher, feels trapped indoors and looks outside, to the weather for portents:

There are some days
when great clouds build up in the mind. Gorged with dark
and faintly lit about their rims with lurid pastels, they presage
the advent of a dreadful, pressing weight of snow.
Into impenetrable thickets, go down deep
and huddle there in silence.
On other days I might have sent
my wicked, private terriers tunnelling
to flush them out, and rip them to the surface.

Abbot’s landscapes then are sublime in the original sense of the word: they inspire both fear and wonder. Abbot’s view of language and poetry is one that is elementally linked to the land and man’s, often bootless, attempts to manage, abuse or change it. Abbot was by birth ‘urban’ and Professor Colin Nicholson has suggested that his move to Whitebridge ‘amounted, almost, to learning a new language, acquiring, in his words ‘the voices of the various kinds of landscape’.

This urge to see the act of poetic creation in everything in the wilderness can be both powerful and repetitive, and, it has to be said, at times overly simplistic. However, there are other occasions where Abbot works much more on the level of the seer, divining some sort of deep truth from patterns in the natural world. Alexander Hutchison, in his recollection of Ian Abbot, recalls Abbot as the only poet at a literary gathering in Edinburgh who was sure of the origins of the word ‘auspices’ as a method of divination based upon ‘interpreting the pattern of (bird’s) flight’. In this light Abbot can be seen as a modern ‘auspex’, reading signs in the wild as if they formed an elemental poem in themselves. In ‘Spoor’ Abbot follows his own tracks to become both the hunter and hunted, in an existential and linguistic chase:

And one day I will catch him on the skyline,
relaxed and unaware, until I raise
the long rifle of language to my shoulder
and hold my breath, and squeeze
and squeeze.
and watch the words like bullets home in for the kill,
and hear
the echoes roll away around the world.

Without the recurrent motifs and metaphors of hunting that explore the troubled relationship between man and the natural world, Abbot’s poems would be too abstract. The ‘wilderness’ not only serves to give him an earthly presence but is also a means of dramatising the frustrations of trying to write poetry. Abbot’s setting is both a fertile place for poems and an unforgiving landscape of mental hunting and blood-shed, where ideas are gralloched:

My language is a deer dismembered under pines,
bloody and netted with shadows.
An intricate labyrinth of entrails,
lit from within
and patiently transfigured to the lightning grin of bones.

Abbot admires people who have tried to eke out a bare existence where all human effort will ultimately become void. In ‘A Crofter Buried’, Abbot ends his elegy:

Your footprints are already blowing shut.
In time the earth accepts from you
the price of everything you borrowed from it.

These are haunting and troubling poems, but they are not necessarily meant to be. The poet is trying to show us how we can move away from a fear of death and the ‘ancient repetitions in the dark’ with ‘money spinning on the table’ and ‘the body’s bitter vinegar to drink’. Abbot is throwing away the old order of religion and material wealth to show us that, indeed, the natural world is indifferent to our strivings and sufferings, but by trying to work with it and developing an aesthetic sense of it, by confronting it in all of its ugliness and wonder, we can really live.

There is another, more redemptive strain to be found in Abbot’s work that helps to relieve some of his darker poems. For instance, Abbot uses simile sparingly but in his poem ‘Last Dip of the Year’ he witnesses a young woman preparing to go swimming in a river. The image we get of this woman is one couched in the natural world, with a ‘body shy as berries’, ‘stepping neatly as a hind’ out of the bush where she had undressed. There is more happening here than merely a vignette of a bathing naked woman caught in the male gaze. She is casting off the clothes of a material world and finds herself going back into nature, caught on the cusp of a significant rite of passage, of imminent motherhood. But even here danger is entwined with beauty:

Her tiny, berry-crimson breasts flared out
like signals from the cool depths, warning
of another season’s turning and the spates to come.

There is a baptismal quality to these poems; a shrugging off of the old to embrace a new season. For all of the gravity that these poems carry, Abbot does not want us to despair, for the poem that can make you feel is written, according to Abbot, in the language of ‘salvation’.

Colin Nicholson predicted that Abbot’s poem ‘Avoiding the Gods’ would become the title of his first collection, for speaking ‘to the strengths in human self-sufficiency which Abbot’s writing promotes’. By listening to ‘the muscular cadences of his own writing’ we as readers find a ‘kind of release’:

And let us look for our salvation
In the language we have come to teach ourselves.

In *Avoiding the Gods* there are glimpses of a bracingly original if marginalised voice. It is the recurrent mention of blood in these poems that keeps them alive and linked to us, the readers, who must undergo, if not a full conversion, at least a testing of whatever beliefs we hold. In ‘Chalybeate Spring’ we see just how far the poet has come and how his old self and ego are now infinitesimal:

Feeling that clear liquid running in me,
surging in my blood
until I felt that I could reach, and pluck
the little yellow lights of home
and cradle them like glowing insects in my palm.

Here the poet’s personal history means little, a past he can hold in his palm and we are simply left with his eerily calm voice. It feels like catching a brief glimpse of something alive surfacing in a river.

As it stands, the bulk of Abbot’s work is only available in the original Chapman first edition. This is a hard to find and fragile production. Given its scarcity and the lack of criticism on Abbot’s work, it is perhaps fitting that he has gone the way of the buried crofter, his footprints and spoors all but erased. However, Abbot’s is a startling and stand-alone voice in Scottish poetry and it seems inconceivable that his achievement could be forgotten. ■

Poems by Ian Abbot

Climbing though ammonites

Little spirals, scattered on the hills.
A litter of signatures, fastened
on the very soul of stones.

Let you and I move among them
casually, as if we did not hear
their curved, eternal voices
singing in the small bones of our ears.

As if, when we arrange them on the shelves
they will not speak to us
of what we think we have,
of what we think we hold forever.

Of how the sea bed of one age
rears into the mountains of another.

On that day

On that day
I shall unlock my linens
and unfold my heavy gowns.

When bulls and soldiers loll about the steps
and tear the lawns, make ruins of the groves
and of the dove-house,

when salamanders sink their fires
in shallow ponds,
I shall retire to this patient room
and close the door across its oiled and silent hinge.

And shall not hang my body
from any balcony of gold and laurel-leaves

Passing through September

Sky cools. The earth
begins imperfectly to whiten
and the first uncertain skeins go wavering south.

Under the distant horns
a man in his solitary shell
is walking among the multiplied hills.
The slopes
have sloughed off summer imperceptibly: so from himself
the veils of another year
are peeling slowly like abandoned skin. Dry grass,
the empty bones of heather,
lies down finally beneath his feet.

His shadow in the low sun
leans backwards from his heels
under a sky of scribbled chevrons, flying
into the bright, receding season,
while step by step he moves
toward his patient, white horizon.

He is walking
into the thin line of the future;
into the numberless rising voices
and the terrible vistas of ice.

Poetry

An Apology to Slugs
Gilly Hainsworth

I've tried to embrace slugs
To see the wonder in their opalescent slime
To acknowledge their sentience,
Tiny eyes on fleshy stalks

But this is a feotid, damp summer
and they've come as a plague
brown, black,and tiger striped,
small as pips and huge as sausages.

They leave brazen silver paths on my windows
sneak in the cat flap.
leave ragged stumps where once were
deep blue irises,
vivid,crumpled poppy petals
abandon all hope.

I feel persecuted,
under siege.
I start a futile fightback
I jump on them
crush them horribly
pour liquifying salt over them

Tabloid phrases bounce round my skull,unbidden
"Frenzied killing"
"An orgy of violence"
"Psycho murder"

Shamed by my sadism
I avert my eyes from the mucoul mess.

My Karma lies broken.
I am grimly certain that I will be reincarnated as a slug.

Tìr nan Dàn
Màiri NicGumaraid

Itean sgòth
ribeagan ceò
crathadh de thaighean
's lònagan uisg'
lota fo luachar
staranan còinnich
amar na òcrach
's caladh na chlachadh.

O well iongantach
a' coimhead a-mach à plèine!

O well iongantach
's ceòl Ceilteach air ipod!

Abair thusa àlainn
gach chalet air lot,
gach flùrachadh iodhlainn
is leprechaun lios;
àlainn
na h-iolairean
an companach starrag -
is da fhichead not gun fhàs
an cois gach bàs
de leanaibh uain.
Beag iongnadh a' chuthag bhith fadalach
moth' iongnaidh gun bhuadraig i idir
a guth a chuthadh an connspaid nan gèadh.

Mìorbhaileach
na thàinig de dhaoine a dh'fhuireach.

Inntinneach
de dhaoine
a thilleas a ghearain.

Samhradh àrd nan cèilidhean turasachd
làithean mòr' nan amhran
fàilte bhlàth coigrich siubhail a-steach
cha b' iad a bu choireach
cho mòr 's dha bu mhiann falbh a-mach.

Cailleach-oidhche Fhroboist
Sandy Jones

Chaidh mi a-mach air oidhche chiùin bhòidhich Uibhist
airson deò agus sealladh
air gealach an abachaidh àlainn.
Gairm gheur
creutair a' leum bhon t-similear
is a' dìreadh san adhar dhubh,
sgiathan spracail a' bualadh an dorchadais.
Cailleach-oidhche air feagal fhaighinn
far an do shir i tearmainn.
eun mòrail gam theicheadh
air sgiathan farsaing,
sgiathan draoidheil airgid le boillsgeadh na gealaich orra
faileas flathail a' seòladh as fhianais thar achaidhean
Fhroboist.
Agus mise ann an uireasbhaidh duilich
mise fo bhròn gun do dh'fhuadaich mi thu.
Gabh m' aithreachas, eun òirdheirc;
lem uile chridhe cha bhithinn
airson d' fhois a ghoid.

Woman Through Binoculars
Hilary Stobbs

I watch you scutter in and out,
upping roots like some strange pet;
and nose around your loneliness.

Rain needles in and ghosts my sight;
I carry you in my cupped hands
under a flat and blackened sky.

Smudged and still against a door,
you watch the boat; its pitch and cut
slips silver fish towards the gulls.

You choose to scream: I cannot hear,
but only see your head thrown back
mouth wide, but nothing coming out.

Dealbhan
Alasdair Caimbeul

An tig an latha nuair nach bi againn ach dealbhan?

Fear beag crìon is teann, le siantan is seanairean snaighte air a chlàr;
Lotaichean is acfhainn air a dhol a dholaidh is a dhearmad fo shùil aineolach;
Maistreadh mara is garbhlach tìre a' spùtadh feirge air stacan balbha;
Fiamh fiadhaich, diongmhalta a' feitheamh na h-ùine no drèin is gàire togte ann an clisgeadh an tiotain;
Mìneachadh fodha no inneas air a chùl.

Ìomhaigh thar ìomhaigh le mìle buadhair is boillsgeadh a' cur car der cuimhne le soillse is duibhre.
Ach nan tuiteadh na dealbhan bho ar làmhan an-diugh, dè dh'fhàgadh sin againn air an toireadh sinn cruth?

Bear Witness
By Mandy Haggith
Published by Saraband
Review by Jane Verburg

The other day, out walking alone in some fairly rough terrain, for a split second my eye catches the shape of a bear. The arch of its back etched against the winter-yellow juncus grass. The very roundedness of its body. Of course, I've lost the plot: it isn't a bear. What a ridiculous thing to think; as if a bear could be wild in Scotland. Mind you, I did rather like the frisson.

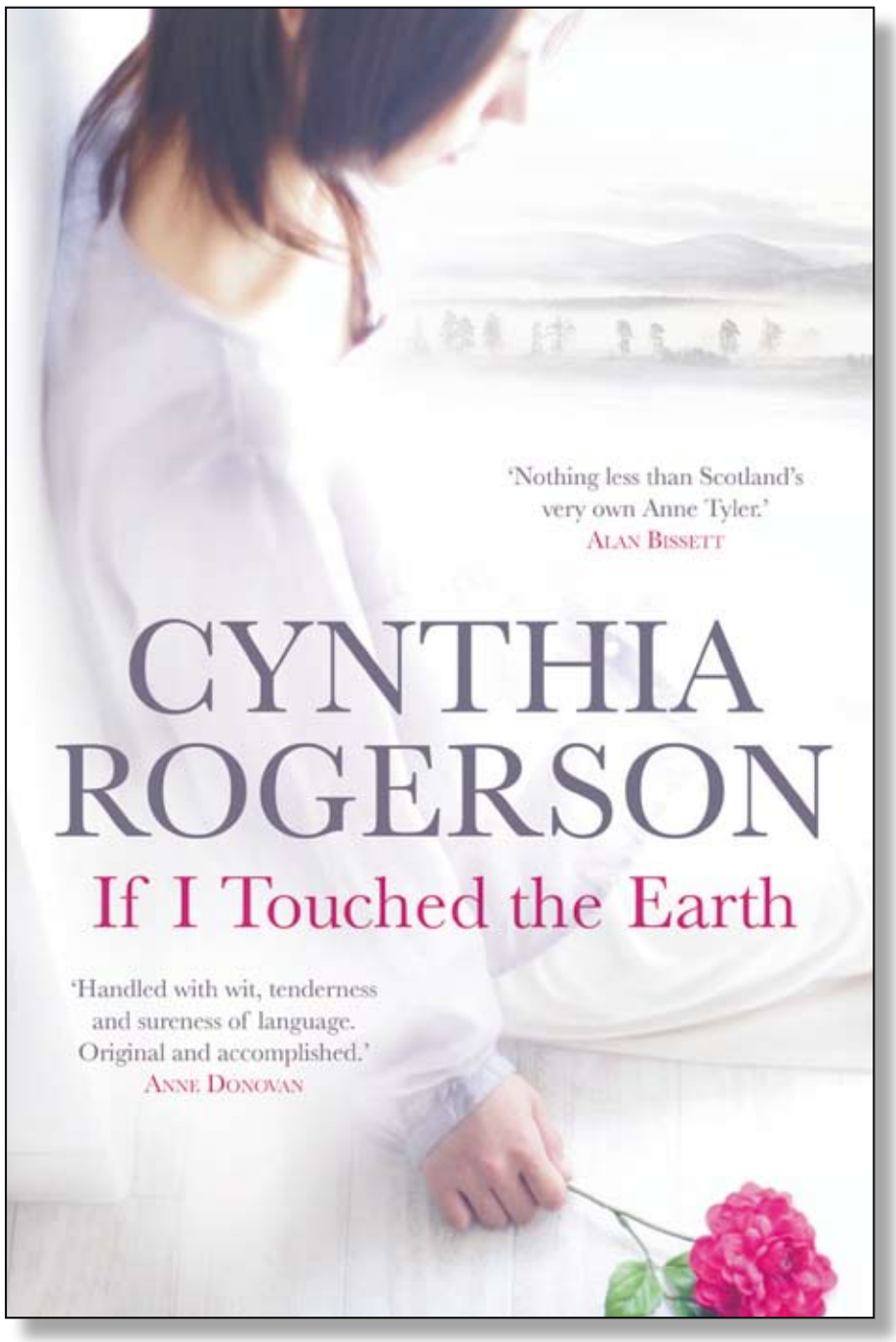
Unless I had read Mandy Haggith's *Bear Witness* I doubt such a thought would have floated through my mind. Since reading it, however, I see lynx tracks along the forest paths, hear wolves in the distance and catch glimpses of bear cubs whenever I am out in the hills. It is a fine thing for a novel to change your perception, especially your physical perception of the natural world.

The novel is set shortly after the Independence Referendum has been won by the 'Yes' vote. Scotland is on the rise, on the lookout for symbols that indicate its regeneration and separateness. The main character, Callis MacArthur, decides that Scotland needs wild bears. In the aftermath of her mother's death, Callis, a pollen grain counting scientist, becomes passionate about the ecological debate regarding the reintroduction of these great mammals. She is driven by a personal encounter with a mother bear and cub. After rather a lot of plot she becomes involved with an, at times, farcical and illegal scheme to bring the species back to the Highlands (a thousand years or so after they became extinct here).

There are lots of symbolic parallels in this novel; lots of ministerial and committee meetings; lots of office and environmental politics and quite a few scientific careers on the line. There are feminist friends who cut Callis out of their circle and men who could have been less bear-like and a bit more bewildering and contoured. The novel spans across Europe; across third and first person; across activism and sentimentalism; across misplaced love and misplaced lust. Too many elements distract.

I did a silly thing: before reading *Bear Witness* I imagined what it would be. I imagined that it would entrance me and teach me all the arguments for and against the reintroduction of bears. I thought I would come away believing that wild bears should share this land. I wanted an ode to bears, a poet's and an expert's account of why I should seriously consider their reintroduction. I wanted to come away from the novel convinced.

I did learn a fair bit about bears. I would have liked to have learnt even more. Mandy Haggith's poetic voice is heard in the descriptions of these awesome creatures and the landscapes in which they roam. But I didn't hear enough of that beautiful voice. ■



If I Touched the Earth
By Cynthia Rogerson
Black and White Publishing
Review by Richard Neath

Alison Ross loses her son in a car crash. There doesn't seem to be any particular reason, it's just one of those things that happens to someone, somewhere, every day. With Calum gone, Alison sets about getting on with the rest of her life, in any way that she can.

There's nothing particularly unusual about the situation and the ensuing plot could easily become tired and predictable, however Cynthia chooses to take us on a journey that is nothing of the sort. Instead, the story takes an entirely unpredictable and fascinating path when, on a moment's whim, Alison changes her life entirely.

The subject is obviously an emotional one, something to tug at the heartstrings and yet the book never feels overly sentimental or mushy in any way. Instead, I found myself rooting for Alison whilst feeling deep sympathy for her situation. I wanted to shake her by the hand, slap her on the shoulder and give her a hug, all at the same time. Not wanting to give away too much of the plot, it's safe to say that her reactions to her loss are varied and would generally be considered extreme.

What really impressed me was Cynthia's handling of complex emotions and not simply on one level, but through the eyes of various characters, both major and minor. The intricate responses of each one in their own distinct way makes the book an interesting read and keeps up the momentum throughout. I never once felt the story lag – quite an achievement in a two hundred and sixty page novel – and, more to the point, the plot constantly varies its pace, with each character adding a new layer to the novel, easily and without complication. I became involved with each person and, in entirely different ways, felt sympathy for their individual loss. Cynthia has a way of tapping into a situation and describing the thoughts, feelings and emotions involved with warmth and compassion. Whilst not entirely unusual, what was unexpected was how she maintained an extremely refreshing, powerful, gritty realism throughout. I found passages of utterly captivating prose, in fact many passages, and often with enough emotionally charged drama to make me gasp. And surely such personal involvement is one of the marks of a good work of fiction? When the reader not only feels for the character emotionally but can't help the odd physical reaction too, becoming involved, to all intents and purposes on a visceral level, the author is due much praise.

Some readers may find the sections of overly sparse writing annoying – they grated on me a little until around page seventy when I made the decision to ignore what many will see as incorrectly structured sentences. Will see them as non-sentences. (Like that last one, in fact.) One chapter in particular is written with such utter beauty and sensitivity that I was literally moved to tears, only for it to be spoilt (in my opinion) by a finishing paragraph in an entirely different style that simply didn't work.

Despite this one niggle I felt that *If I Touched the Earth* is a novel that addresses a tragedy and the huge changes to the lives involved, with both compassion and wit. It's a fine, praise-worthy piece of work that deserves to be read. ■

The Woman Who Walked Into The Sea
by Mark Douglas-Home
Sandstone Press
Review by Mandy Haggith

This is the second crime novel by Mark Douglas-Home. Cal McGill, the protagonist of *The Sea Detective* is back to solve another marine mystery. The woman of the title, who walked into the sea, was the mother of Violet Wells, the central figure in the novel, who was adopted and has always wondered about her parentage. When she discovers that she was abandoned as a baby at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness and the following day her mother apparently drowned, she sets off to her mother's home village to try to unravel the story of what happened. Conveniently, Cal McGill is there, waiting to be bumped into.

Those who read the previous book know Cal to be, in true detective fiction form, a flawed and complex character. His specialism is movement at sea, and he uses his doctorate in oceanography and a suite of tide-tables and ocean current models to work out where objects washed up on beaches may have come from, or where bodies lost or found in the sea may be expected to turn up. Some of Violet's mother's possessions were found washed up on a beach and Cal carries out an experiment with a bag of half-rotten oranges to demonstrate that the official explanation of the woman's drowning cannot possibly be true. The plot thickens.

Other than this piece of maritime deduction, the bulk of the detective work is actually done by Violet, as she exposes the secrets of the people of Poltown, a coastal community described as within an hour or so of Ullapool in the north-west Highlands. As I live in such a place it is impossible to avoid trying to guess which village Poltown is 'in reality' or at least where the author did his research. But unlike for example, Zoe Strachan's *Ever Fallen In*

Love, which is clearly set in a place geographically and socially modelled on Achiltibuie, *The Woman Who Walked Into The Sea* does seem to be set in a truly fictional place.

Poltown is rough. Its centre is a housing estate built in the 1960s by the military to house the workforce of a NATO refuelling depot, and since used as social housing. It is populated by desperados, run by a mafia-style gang leader and surrounded by all the cliches of Highland life - the big house owned by the rich QC whose embittered old servant still lives in the Gardener's cottage, a home-farm running to ruin, a crofter with a field of buried sheep carcases, an itinerant doctor, plus a controversy over a large windfarm development that is dividing the community. Add a lone house on a tidal island and the scene is set for the plot to unfold.

Reading this book made me realise just how much the setting of a story matters. Ian Rankin's locations for Rebus are all real Edinburgh venues, and this undoubtedly adds to the success of his stories. Mark Douglas-Home states in his introduction that he has invented Poltown 'to avoid imposing a fictional story on an existing Highland community which has a rich and interesting history of its own'. Given some of Poltown's unsavoury occupants it is understandable that the author would be reluctant to attribute them to a specific village, particularly as readers do have a tendency to speculate whether any fictional character is 'really' such-and-such a real person. Yet a plausible setting is a vital element in enabling readers to suspend disbelief, so there is risk in making a location up. The lack of a real place puts an extra burden on the characters to appear believable.

Some of *The Sea Detective* was also set in a fictional Sutherland village, but that book was helped by a mass of real world detail about the detective's home in Edinburgh and the marine currents and oceanography that formed a much more central strand of the story than in the current book. It is undoubtedly the marine context of the mystery, hiding, shifting and revealing evidence, that is the most original aspect of Mark Douglas-Home's work, and there is a lot of mileage here. Next time the sea detective sets to work it will be interesting to see which ocean currents will be at play. ■

Charlie, Meg and Me
By Gregor Ewing
Published by Luath Press
Review by Stephen Keeler

With fortuitous serendipity my copy of *Charlie, Meg and Me* arrived just as I was getting into Rachel Joyce's bestseller, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* (Doubleday 2012). Reading these books in tandem was a new and satisfyingly insightful experience, the one informing the other in a neat if improbable concomitance.

Rachel Joyce's story is fiction. Recently-retired Harold Fry receives a letter from a former colleague with whom he lost touch twenty years ago, informing him she is dying of cancer in a hospice in Berwick-upon-Tweed. In an entirely unplanned and implausible gesture of defiance and escape from a moribund marriage and stultifying suburban humdrum, Fry sets off spontaneously to walk the length of England from his home in Devon under the growing conviction that by doing so he will somehow save his former colleague. Harold Fry's unlikely pilgrimage of 627 miles is spangled with incident and insight, and despite my initial resistance to what I at first characterised as schmaltz it was not long before I, too, had been inveigled by its charms.

So too – more or less – with Gregor Ewing, although in a generally unconvincing introduction he baldly declares his intention, without explanation or analysis, to "… escape…to shake off the modern world."This is where fiction has the edge for in a few carefully-placed adjectives, a sheaf of lightly-sketched portraits, and leaving as much unsaid as said, Joyce suggests her protagonist's motives in a way which a clunky introduction to non-fiction – to a real walk with necessary family arrangements (what to do with one's other dog, how to get a fish supper), and decisions about the route and maps and kit – simply cannot.

A central theme of Ewing's book is the tragic aftermath of Culloden, as he sets out on a six-week walk, with his dog, Meg, to retrace Bonnie Prince Charlie's footsteps across north-west Scotland and the Western Isles in his retreat from the battlefield to eventual exile in France. In classic, and accomplished, travel-writing style, Ewing nourishes the reader (the armchair walker) all along the way with titbits of history and hearsay, of lore and legend, of introspection and insight. We learn why the Dark Mile is so called, and how the Witches' Cauldron got its name. Between Eriskay and South Uist Ewing re-tells the story of Whisky Galore, and at Loch Boisdale he discovers the secret of perfect porridge (soak the oats overnight!).

Despite his occasional fatigue and personal doubts Ewing, like Harold Fry, keeps a rattling good pace. The non-historian, the non-walker and even the not-especially-interested will find something to keep them reading: Flora MacDonald's concise cv – four sentences which manage to cover The Tower of London, marriage to a highland chief, her ten children and emigration to North Carolina! – the Clanranald Stone, the Bad Step and, always visible just beneath the surface, Ewing's personal misgivings and emotional wobbles.

He spends a lot of time getting wet and trying to get dry again, losing things and finding them, and in truth some of his anecdotes are somewhat inconsequential. There are countless retreats when boulder falls block the only route or when 'the only route' simply isn't there. The stresses of loneliness and self-reliance are apparent, but Ewing never descends into self-pity or sentiment. I wept like a baby towards the end of Harold Fry and was appalled at my inability to resist the sentimentality. In real life, and therefore in non-fiction, there is rarely a convenient twist of the plot with which to end one's narrative. Ewing simply arrives at his final destination, Loch nan Uamh, gives us a half paragraph of mild introspection, meets his family and sets off home.

The style is conversational and easy, liberally sprinkled with idiom and cliché, but it is at once personal and endearing and falls well short of sentimental. Ewing has a quirky way with personal pronouns, is not over-respectful of syntax and isn't fond of the apostrophe. It seems churlish to mention it, but this reader found it a constant if low-level irritation. By way of balance, the frequent photographs were of exactly what I wanted to see, and the route maps were invaluable and easy to follow. I suspect this will rapidly become the companion volume of choice for the growing number of walkers setting out to follow in Gregor Ewing's footsteps. ■

Omnesia (Remix) and Omnesia (Alternative Text)
By W.N Herbert
Published by Bloodaxe Books
Review by John Glenday

It's not often that the author apologises to the reviewer in his Preface, but that's what Herbert does, for presenting us with the double-trouble task of reviewing two twinned, parallel, contrasting, descanting texts, sharing an uncommon title. But these are heterozygous twins - like that title itself, (a portmanteau of 'omniscience' and 'amnesia') the volumes are a coming-together of poems that mirror or refute each other. The one book opens with the poem which closes the other; section titles complement (El Sur/The South; The Messages/The Daftness); or echo (Metanorth; Somalilalia) each other, and through the centre of both books spirals the DNA of 'Pilgrim Street'. This poem is Herbert's own genome sequence, beginning as it does in the Herbert heartland of Corso Street, Dundee, and ending in Pilgrim Street itself, where 'the Silk Road and the Low Road meet'. The Silk Road, of course, was the commercial artery that joined Europe, North Africa, India and the Far East, and the Low Road, the common fate that in its own way also brings them together. Of the 49 stanzas that make up Pilgrim Street he writes:

What is it that these caravans convey
but choral commentary? That 'tell not show'
the orthodox can't bring themselves to say
Nor radicals allow themselves to know.

He doesn't hesitate to poke fun at Omnesia and himself either:

At forty-nine, Dunce Scotus Gyrovagus,
why still attempt books doubled as the labrys
too troubled to read half of, thrown away as
OCD-meets-whim?

These lines tell us a lot about the strengths of Herbert, and this book – his incredible breadth of knowledge; the rich vein of humour which runs through so much of his work, that unblinking eye he turns so frequently on himself and the scope of his allusion and reference. Not to mention those killer end-rhymes.

In the next stanza, he turns himself into the wandering pedlar/poet:

Why did you, Dustie-Fute, compose in Scots –
a language no one's taught they need to read,
that's filled with forty synonyms for snot
and spoken mainly by the rural deid?

The poems in Scots, mostly gathered in the two sections 'The Messages' and 'The Daftness' rank with the best in *Omnesia*. It's seldom I laugh out loud while reading poetry, but 'To A Moussaka' had me in giggles by the end of line two, and 'Lines on the New Makar' - dedicated of course to Liz Lochhead - is genuinely inspirational. The mock-historic sequence 'A Myth of Scotland' in four short pages encompasses: a Standard Habbie Burnsian tribute to the llama (the 'eel-neckit sheep', not the other one); a salute to Whitman that outMcGonagall's McGonagall ('The Queen of New Jersey'); a Dundee-pisshead version of MacDiarmid's 'The Watergaw' and Lena Martell singing a patriotic verse on an Alternative Scotland's oil reserves to the tune of 'One Day at A Time'. But there are also poems of astonishing lyrical beauty here too – 'Sonnet' and 'The Bat' particularly stood out. In the later, Herbert suggest the bat is

…a figure of omnesia,
the way the world desires to be the past.

One of the remarkable qualities of *Omnesia* is how laden and travelled the books are - they follow their own Silk Road, from Russia to Crete (if you have ever sat in the back of a taxi here, read 'The Palikari Scale of Cretan Driving Scales'), the Balkans, the Middle East, China, the Taklamakan, and finally, in both versions, to Somalia. And there may be a hint in the text of why, apart from Herbert's obvious admiration for the country and its poets, the book ends here. In 'Pilgrim Street' he reminds us of the wanderings of the 'proto-Herbert men':

Yes, long before the reed became the pen
we all went walk-n-wadeabout who crossed
to Yemen when the Red Sea was a fen,
spread from Djibouti to points north…

So everything began, and ends in the Horn of Africa.

Omnesia (Remix) and Omnesia *(Alternative Text)* – note how there's no original – are a rich, rewarding collection, or pair of collections –books that could become their own bookends.

Both 'versions' are dedicated to the Somali poet Maxamed Xaashi Dhamac 'Gaariye', whose work has been translated both by Herbert and David Harsent. I think it's appropriate that a review of this brace of remarkable books should end with a quote from Herbert's translation of 'Seer' by Gaariye that could be said of Herbert himself:

Dear God, don't seal this man's lips –
may the truth he speaks continue
as though it burst from my own mouth.

What Long Miles
By Kona MacPhee
Published by Bloodaxe Books
Review by John Glenday

Occasionally, when I'm running poetry workshops, I remind students that poetry is ▶▶

a science rather than an art –archaeology, for example. And like scientists, poets need to be good observers, scrupulous with their language, clear and unambiguous and ruthlessly logical in their argument.

Why archaeology? Well Poetry works to unearth things the Past has broken and subsumed, but not because it's particularly interested in potsherds, or bone fragments, or post-holes or knapped flint tools, but because the contextual examination of these can tell us a little of how people once lived. That's what good poetry should do - uncover the archaeology of the living before History can claim them. So it's no surprise that Kona MacPhee's new collection takes such care with the lives it describes, and covers such a wealth of ground: Antarctic exploration, black holes, physiology, animals, science fiction. And style and form are correspondingly wide-ranging– from that surprisingly expensive commodity, free verse, to highly polished haiku, sonnets and rhymed couplets. But for me the chief delight in MacPhee's new collection lies in another of those scientific skills: the penetration and accuracy of her vision. She has an uncanny ability to glimpse the importance in even the smallest of events and use it to show us how that importance relates to our own lives. You can usually tell from the title what a poem is not about: 'Pheasant, Waverley Station' is a short lyric addressing the conflict between natural and man-made worlds and it's too-predictable outcome:

In diesel stour so thick I'm loath
to bare my packaged sandwiches, he lies:
one red-ringed eye is signalling the sky,
the other pegs a sleeper.

Notice how artfully she can bring together formal and highly informal registers in one short poem. And this theme of world abrading and consuming world continues through the collection, and, in my opinion, is one reason the book is so powerful and memorable. When people and things come together, she tells us, someone gets hurt:

and where, each night, some creeping Samaritan
delivers an egg – a jug of milk – some bread –
but never lingers, knowing the equal harms
a stray kind touch, a stir of breath might do.
(Shunned)

and the clash between the world of childhood and the adult world:

O little one, slow down, stop there, don't tell;
we know already how it ends –
with pictures shelving dust on haunted walls
and heroine transformed to bride, to queen, to stone,
but one way or another, always gone.
(Milestone)

I was most impressed, however, by how obviously she delights in the beauty of the words; the sheer music of the way they do their work on the page and in the air; and how skilfully she handles the task of building them into poems that will endure.

MacPhee's pervious collection, *Perfect Blue*, won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize in 2010. What Long Miles is a worthy successor, and however perilous the journey, it will go far. ■

Stepping Out
By Cynthia Rogerson
Salt Publishing
Review by Tracey Emerson

Stepping Out is the first short story collection by Cynthia Rogerson, author of four novels. The stories, set in America and Scotland, include several formerly shortlisted for major writing awards, as well as 'A Dangerous Place', winner of the 2008 V.S. Pritchett Prize.

Rogerson's work is often deservedly compared to that of Alice Munro and Anne Tyler, two writers renowned for delving beneath the surface of so-called ordinary lives. The relationship between the ordinary and extraordinary is essential to this collection but not because the author reveals the extraordinary nature of ordinary people, or that she shows ordinary people living through extraordinary events. Rather, Rogerson reminds us that the challenges faced by the ordinary people in *Stepping Out* — illness, death, loneliness, the highs and lows of love, the awkwardness of growing up and growing old — are themselves ordinary and often inevitable. These stories suggest it is our fear of confronting the reality of life, our attachment to artifice and denial that is extraordinary.

The collection is structured into sections, with stories grouped either thematically, under titles such as Love and Accident, or according to character name, such as Jack and Mildred. True Stories is the exception to this rule, demonstrating within its five disparate tales Rogerson's flair for the supernatural and surreal. The exclusion of these pieces may have improved the overall coherence of the collection but they are nontheless an entertaining, poignant and enriching read.

Each section adds up to more than the sum of its parts. Accident provides us with differing viewpoints on the topic, including those of Sheila, a mother waiting to discover if her teenage son will survive a car crash and Izzy, a teenage girl confused by ambivalent feelings towards her recently deceased mother. The stories combine to leave a lingering awareness of the fragility and unpredictability of life. In Jack and Mildred, we follow the titular married couple from their first meeting to the moment, many years later, when death parts them. In just four short episodes, the author creates an entire relationship.

Rogerson's warm, humorous yet economical prose drains any potential melodrama and sentimentality from the situations she creates. Her imagery is often an apt blend of the emotional and domestic. The narrator of 'Rubbish Day', a father waiting for news of his missing son tells us: 'If onlys taste like coffee after toothpaste. The only solution is just don't do it.'

These stories offer us both echoes of our own lived experience and the vicarious experience of situations we may yet encounter. Rogerson's characters reassure us we will find ourselves confused, imperfect, wrestling with paradoxes. Like the bereaved Izzy, who, thinking of her mother 'wonders for a second if you can be homesick for someone you hate.' These characters also show us that we can survive, adapt and accept.

Stepping Out is an invitation to step into the reality of life, to connect with what is significant and to embrace the joy and pain of being human. ■

Poetry Reviews
By Stuart B Campbell

In Anna Crowe's poetry sequence *Finding My Grandparents In the Peloponnese* (Mariscat), each of the twelve poems are self-contained entities, each comprised of three stanzas of three lines. This controlled form provides them exceptionally clear focus. Crowe finds her 'Cornish Grandparents / were here before me; laid-out // in the tomb at Kazarma'. There are no similes in these poems; a less adventurous writer would merely have remarked on one thing being like another, but Crowe makes the past and present one and the same; objects exist simultaneously in both realms: 'His shaving mirror and razor have turned to bronze". When Crowe rediscovers her own "Milk Tray box of shells' she'd given as a child to her grandmother, there is the potential of a history in the makings of our present – a future artefact. This sort of poetry is future-proof.

Linda Anderson's *Greenhouse* (Mariscat) is also poetry as memoir, where 'a door is flung open, a sudden change / of tense' bringing back the past in flashes, history illuminated in 'that crease / in time'. Her poems speak of 'a time of transition'; a period where 'Our edges dissolve.' and a 'creature flutters through / the veils of darkness, / leaving its perch of centuries.' If there is something slightly Gothic in these images, then it reminds us of our psychological vulnerability. That sense of unspecified threat is part of the poet's world; it is difficult to obtain a sure foothold in 'this precipitate world'; there is 'No safety.' Anderson has a gift for providing imagery. In 'Florida', 'a heron, balanced on its own reflection, / weighs the meaning of transparency'. A more substantial collection of this poet's work would be welcome.

Charles Bennett's collection *Evenlode* (Oversteps Books) widens horizons and presents the world anew; not to be missed. In Bennett's re-presentation of familiar things they seem to acquire extra dimensions: 'Here is a space where a song / might grow like a leaf could fly / down summer to the fruit'; qualities that are not at odds with the object, but an extension of it. There is a coherent but gravity-defying logic. Music and plants are often Bennett's concern, but he imbues them with a kind of shape-shifting. In 'Blackberries at Cwmtydu' there is both: 'Heavy with music ripened in sweet juice / the bushes / are a dark song'. In 'Sweeney's Songs to Eorann' Bennett says 'If a feather is also a pen / then words are a form of wings / and flight-paths on paper' – this collection takes us soaring.

Jean Atkin's main concern *Not Lost Since Last Time* (Oversteps Books) is rural landscape. Yet her engagement with is not sentimental and, as 'Coppice' and 'Species Lost' remind us, a lot of what we see is the result of humanity's management of the land. We can sense Atkin's affinity with the past and passing generation of rural folk, a need to find some necessary sense of continuity: 'I used to listen with my fingers, flatten my palms, / cajole deep memories out of walls: / calls, cries and prayers soaked into stone.' In 'The Lunkie Hole, Atkin's science is accurate, but only the experience of being on the hills can lead to an observation like, 'I tried to keep to the path, but it was a part-time burn' – this is a poet who's got her hands mucky.

In *Child's Eye* (Biscuit Publishing) Anita John shows she has the ability to move between two forms of writing. Her short fiction is well constructed and absorbing, her poetry is not just cut up prose. 'Making Mince Pies' is a story that is technically so well constructed its telling doesn't obscure, but multiplies, its emotional impact; this is powerful writing. 'Child's Play', 'The Language Game' and 'After Sledging', are poems written with a light touch, all recount small episodes in a mother and child's life. Whether or not these are autobiographical, they speak volumes about the the universality of the pleasures of parenthood. These poems and stories are, like 'the blackberries, strawberries, damsons' in 'The Legacy', 'a gift' – and one that will be warmly received.

Some poems in Maggie Rabatski's *Holdings* (New Voices Press) are in Gaelic and English; more dual presentations might be welcomed by some readers. That she has her roots in Hebridean life is apparent in her subject-matter. The Lewis Chess-men feature in 'The Promise', but they are not the principle focus. The poem is in the voice of an islander from an earlier time and in telling her story, the chess pieces are given a human context, making them far more than museum artefacts. This is partly how Rabatski's poetry works: it doesn't tackle issues head-on. Although she sees, for instance, 'the land altered' or a 'slow salt-scoured fading / of identity', it's the persistence of things, 'the man with the dog / has our name', that argues, quietly but clearly, for not letting go. This is a poet who lets 'words ripen inside / before offering them up'; these poems deserve an unhurried contemplation.

Peter Urpeth's collection, *Overlapping* (mouth Music Publishing – download only) as a whole resembles a intricate, richly coloured, textured tapestry; the sort that might be found is some great hall. It is work that cannot be taken in at a glance; it needs to be lived with, browsed over, the detail allowed to emerge. Readers will delight in the newness and antiquity of the vocabulary. Urpeth has given us poems that are not made for deconstruction, for logical appraisal; they seep in with their differences, giving an insight and a breadth of view that doesn't accord with accepted categories. There is also a strong ecological theme that runs through the poems. In ' Plover' he has a conversation with the bird who asks him 'why I live in a house / when the land is open / and the sky is as free / as burn water'. These are powerful poems. ■

An extended version of Stuart Campbell's review is on our website:
northwordsnow.co.uk

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Juliet Antill lives on Mull. She studied Creative Writing through the Open University. A love of acting led her into writing plays and monologues for community theatre.

Gabrielle Barnby lives on Orkney. She is putting the finishing touches on her first novel and stays sane by writing short stories.

Tanera Bryden is a freelance arts PR consultant and writer. She recently moved back to the Highlands from London where she worked for national fundraising charity, the Art Fund.

Paddy Bushe A' fuireach ann an Uíbh Ráthach. Tionndaidhean Gaeilge bho shaothair Shomhairle MhicGill-Eain Ó Choill go Barr Ghéaráin (Coiscéim, Baile Àtha Cliath 2013) am foillseachadh as ùire leis.

Alasdair Caimbeul Fear-naidheachd às an Eilean Mhuileach bho thùs a tha a' fuireach anns an Eilean Sgitheanach a-nis. Dàin leis ann an An Guth etc.

Stuart B. Campbell lives in Portsoy on the Moray Firth. His latest collection of poetry is *In Defence of Protozoans*.

Jared A. Carnie is a writer in his twenties currently enjoying the freedom of the Outer Hebrides.

Tracey Emerson has a PhD in Creative Writing from Edinburgh University. She is a published short story writer and is currently working on her first novel. She lives in Highland Perthshire.

Dàibhidh Eyre À Drochaid a' Chòta. Dàin leis ann an irisean leithid An Guth, Irish Pages agus P*oetry Scotland*.

Seonaid Francis lives in the Western Isles with her family. Her inspiration comes from the landscape of the Hebrides and the complexities of life there.

Raymond Friel's collections inlcude S*eeing the River* and *Stations of the Heart*. He lives in Somerset with his wife and three sons. He is a headteacher in a secondary school.

John Glenday lives in Drumnadrochit. His most recent collection, *Grain*, was shortlisted for both the Ted Hughes Award and the Griffin Poetry Prize.

Rody Gorman lives in Skye, edits annual Gaelic anthology *An Guth* and is *Northwords Now's* Gaelic editor.

Mandy Haggith lives in Assynt and writes in a shed with a tree-top view. Her latest novel is *Bear Witness*, published by Saraband. Mandy can be contacted at hag@worldforests.org

Gilly Hainsworth lives near Edinburgh and currently works as a relationship counsellor. She has enjoyed writing since she was a child, but started writing poetry when semi-retired about two years ago.

Lydia Harris has had poems in many magazines and her first pamphlet, *Glad Not to be the Corpse* was published in 2012 by Smiths Knoll.

Lesley Harrison lives in Angus and works in Sutherland. Her most recent poetry pamphlet, *Ecstatics: a Language of Birds* is published by Brae Editions, Orkney.

Jennifer Morag Henderson is from Inverness. Her work has been published by the BBC, the *Inverness Courier,* the *Dalhousie Review* (Canada), *Gutter* and others. hendersonjenni@yahoo.fr.

Sandy Jones Ceòladair a bhios a' fuireach ann an Uibhist a Deas. Duais Sgrìobhadairean Ùra bho Chomhairle nan Leabhraichean 2010.

Stephen Keeler is a former BBC World Service website columnist. He writes non-fiction diary and travel pieces, haikus and poems and is currently working on a first collection of poetry while teaching occasional literature and creative writing courses in Ullapool.

Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh – Bàrd a tha air an dreuchd aige mar fhear-teagaisg ealain ann an Inbhis Nis a leigeil dheth o chionn ghoirid.

Kevin MacNeil is an award-winning, internationally acclaimed writer from the Outer Hebrides. His next novel will be called *Good Grief, Death*. MacNeil is an Honorary Writer in Residence at Kingston University. www.KevinMacNeil.com

Richie McCaffery is a Carnegie scholar at the University of Glasgow, researching the Scottish poets of WW2. His first poetry pamphlet is *Spinning Plates* from HappenStance Press (2012).

Beth McDonough studied Silversmithing at Glasgow School of Art and is now working towards an M.Litt at Dundee University, inspired by her husband and son.

Ian McDonough is originally from Sutherland. His first full collection Clan MacHine was shortlisted for Scottish First Book of the Year in 2004. His most recent collection is *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* published by Mariscat.

Olivia McMahon lives in Aberdeen, writes novels about love, language, hairdressing and remorse; and poetry, at the moment about paintings, for a forthcoming collection.

Rhoda Michael began writing after she retired. She was editor of *Northwords Now* up to 2010, and is poetry judge for this year's Neil Gunn competition.

Jon Miller's poetry has been published widely. He also collaborates with artists and musicians in new ways of presenting poetry. He recently worked with artist Peter White for the Travelling Light and Echo exhibitions.

Alison Napier lives in Perthshire. She has an MA in Creative Writing, her fiction has appeared in various journals and anthologies and her first novel, *Take-Away People,* is currently seeking a publisher.

Màiri NicGumaraid Às na Lochan ann an Leòdhas. 'S e an cuinneachadh as ùire leatha Fo Stiùir A Faire (Coiscéim, 2012).

Hamish Scott's poetry has been published variously, including *Lallans*, *Poetry Scotland*, *Ullans,* and *Anon*. His first collection *Kennins* was published in 2013, available from www.scottish-pamphlet-poetry.com.

David Seddon is from Liverpool and works as a counsellor in Congleton. His work's appeared in many magazines and anthologies. He's submitting for a first collection.

Anne Shivas divides her life between North Berwick, East Lothian and Vermont, USA where she recently completed an MFA in poetry at Drew University, New Jersey.

Hilary Stobbs has recently completed an MA in Creative Writing at Aberdeen University. English by birth, she has a particular affinity with the Shetland Islands.

Judith Taylor - from Perthshire, based in Aberdeen - has published two pamphlet collections: *Earthlight,* (Koo Press, 2006), and *Local Colour* (Calder Wood Press, 2010).

Jane Verburg is a teacher who lives in Cromarty. Local history, nature and landscape inspire her short stories and poems.

Peter White is a painter who lives in Ullapool. For a number of years his work has been focusing on the exploration of simple, archetypal forms.

Christie Williamson once called Yell home. Now it's Partick. He loves poetry.

Ross Wilson's first pamphlet, *The Heavy Bag*, is available from Calder Wood Press. He was involved as a writer and actor in *The Happy Lands*.

Where to find a FREE Northwords Now

Northwords thanks all the locations below for their support in distributing Northwords Now. Special thanks go to all the librarians who put us on display.

Inverness
W H Smith, High St.
Costa Coffee, Waterstone's, Eastgate Centre
Blythswood Bookmark, Academy St.
Eden Court Theatre
Leakeys Bookshop, Church St
Inverness College, Longman Road & Midmills
Hootananny, Church St
Visit Scotland, Castle Wynd
Inverness Museum & Art Gallery
Waterstones, Eastgate Centre

Highland Area
Highland Libraries & Communiity Centres
Dornoch Bookshop
Highland Folk Museums: Kingussie & Newtonmore
The Nairn Bookshop, High St, Nairn
Findhorn Foundation, by Forres
Moray Libraries
The Ceilidh Place, Ullapool
Ullapool Bookshop, Quay St.
Loch Croispol Bookshop, Balnakeil, Durness
Achins Bookshop, Lochinver
Village Green, Lochinver
Swanson Gallery, Thurso Library
Cornerstone, Gairloch
Solas Gallery, Gairloch
Greenhouse, High St, Dingwall

Islands, West & North
Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Slèite, Isle of Skye
Café Arriba, Portree, Skye
Portree Learning Centre
An Lanntair, Kenneth St, Stornoway
Western Isles Libraries, Stornoway
Hebridean Jewellery & Bookshop, Stornoway
The Islands Book Trust, Isle of Lewis
Shetland Libraries
Orkney Libraries
Shetland Arts Trust, Lerwick
Blue Shed Cafe, Torrin, Isle of Skye

Aberdeenshire
Aberdeenshire Libraries
Aberdeen City Libraries
Books & Beans, Belmont St, Abdn.
The Lemon Tree, West North St, Abdn.
Blackwell's, Old Aberdeen
Woodend Barn, Banchory
Yeadons of Banchory
Newton Dee Café, Bieldside

South
Diehard Books, Callander
Dundee Contemporary Arts, Nethergate, Dundee
Kesley's Bookshop, Haddington, East Lothian
Midlothian Council Libraries
Stirling Libraries
East Lothian Libraries
Ewart Libraries, Dumfries
Gracefield Arts Centre, Dumfries
Byre Theatre, St Andrews
The Forest Bookstore, Selkirk
Prestongrange Museum, Prestonpans, East Lothian

Edinburgh
Blackwells Bookshop, South Bridge
Scottish Poetry Library, Crichtons Close
Bongo Club, Holyrood Rd.
Oxfam Bookshop, Raeburn Place
Elephant House Café, George IV Bridge
The Village, S. Fort Street, Leith
Filmhouse, Lothian Road
The Fruitmarket Gallery, 45 Market Street

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

COMPETITION NEWS

THE BAKER PRIZE 2013

The Skye Reading Room/Seomar Leughaidh is delighted to announce the Baker Prize Writing 2013 competition is open for entries from 1 August until 30 November 2013.
This year's theme is Homecoming

COMPETITION SECTIONS: OPEN TO EVERYONE OVER AGE 16:
English Prose - maximum of 2500 words
English Poetry – maximum of 50 lines
Gaelic Prose – maximum of 2500 words
Gaelic Poetry – maximum of 50 lines
And announcing a new section this year for 16 – 18 year olds still in secondary education – English & Gaelic prose and poetry – word/line limits as for the other sections.

PRIZES:
Northwords Now Prizes:
English Prose up to 2,500 words: 1st - £100, 2nd - £50
English Poetry up to 50 lines: 1st - £50, 2nd - £25
Bord na Gaidhlig Prize:
Gaelic Prose up to 2500 words: 1st - £100, 2nd - £50
Gaelic Poetry Prize: 1st - £50 and 2nd - £25

16-18 year old Schools Section Prize: – Moniack Mhor will award a free place on the Highlands Schools course to the winner. This prize will be judged by Catriona Lexy Campbell.

(Further prizes will be announced on the Reading Room Website over the coming weeks)

Northwords Now will also publish the winning entries from the English prose and English And Gaelic poetry sections. The winning entry from the 16-18 competition will be published on the Northwords Now website
Moniack Mor are sponsoring a prize of £300 reduction in the cost of an Arvon* course place for the outstanding competition entry by an unpublished writer. In addition Moniack Mhor of the 16 –18 year old section.

There is the opportunity for winners to read their work at the Skye Reading Room and to be interviewed and broadcast on The Reading Room Radio Show on CuillinFM – the local station for Skye & Lochalsh.
All entries to the Baker Prize will be eligible for inclusion in the Reading Room Anthology (to be published November 2014) – copyright remains with the author.

The panel of judges are:
Gaelic poetry: Meg Bateman and Aonghas MacNeacail
Gaelic Prose: Morag Stewart
English Prose: Roger Hutchinson & Angus Dunn
English poetry: Kevin MacNeil & Chris Powici

ENTRY FEES:
£5 for a first entry and £3 for additional entries
Payment of entry fees can be made via Paypal at the Reading Room website:
theskyereadingroom.wordpress.com
Full information and competition guidelines can be found at
theskyereadingroom.wordpress.com
Please send submissions (with appropriate cover sheet) to:
bakerprize3@yahoo.co.uk

We regret we cannot offer any travel expenses to attend the Reading Room awards event, nor return any submissions.

* Please note: The Moniack Mhor Award for Outstanding Entry from an unpublished writer/poet is not transferable to another Arvon Centre or to another person. The Reading Room cannot offer any expenses associated with attending either of the Moniack Mhor courses.

WEE STORIES

Twitter Fiction competition launched by Nairn Book and Arts Festival

Nairn Book and Arts Festival - now in its tenth year – is inviting entries for its new Twitter fiction competition. Twitter fiction has become an increasingly popular form of microfiction, using the format of a Tweet (message on Twitter) which is a maximum of 140 characters long.

"I think we may be the first literary festival in Scotland to run a competition like this," says Elizabeth Findlay, Chair of the Festival. "Twitter fiction presents an interesting challenge for writers, who have to convey a great deal in a very precise way. We hope to attract a broad range of entries - from new, unpublished writers and young people who are considering a writing career, to established authors who want to experiment with this very concise narrative form."

Entries are invited in both English and Gaelic. English language entries will be judged by *Northwords Now* Editor Chris Powici and author and Literary Editor of *The List* Kirsty Logan, while author Donald Murray will judge entries in Gaelic.

To find out more and to enter, visit www.nairnfestival.co.uk.
The deadline for entries is 9th August 2013 .