

The FREE literary magazine of the North

Northwords **Now**

Issue 26, Spring 2014

Home Songs

Prize Winning Poems and Stories

'Just Telling Stories' Interview with A.L. Kennedy

States of Mind - new books about Scotland

Fiction and poetry from the North

EDITORIAL

Homelands

An old song. A rickle of stones. A name on a map.
(Norman MacCaig)

THE LITERARY CRITIC Raymond Williams once remarked that 'nature' is the most complex word in the English language. He may have a point but for my money 'home' runs it pretty close. To write about home is to explore somewhere familiar, personal, intimate – a sense of place that takes root in the heart. But home can also be a site of fear, regret and trepidation or an impossible dream, somewhere yearned for but never attained.

The entries for The Skye Reading Room's Baker Prize and the Highland Literary Salon writing competition evoke the complexity of home and I'm pleased to publish some of the best of these entries in this issue of *Northwords Now*. They explore 'the strangeness' of home, the longing and regret that suffuses our need to belong, and the pain of exile.

Of course, in this referendum year, a sense of a 'homeland' is central to the political debate. One way or another, the question of Scotland what was, what it is now and what it may look in the future is exercising the intellects and imaginations of poets, novelists and essay writers. In this issue you'll find our reviewers getting to grips with these various visions of Scotland. Thinking about home has rarely seemed so necessary. The upcoming vote may settle a crucial political question about the constitutional status of Scotland but you can be sure that its writers will continue to explore the nature of the country, and its peoples, for many, many years to come. It's no less than we deserve. Over the years *Northwords Now* has proved itself a welcoming home for various visions of Scotland, from the laugh-out loud funny to the sombre and serious. I'm looking forward to continuing that tradition.

CHRIS POWICI, EDITOR

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'The Harp' by Stephen McLaren
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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. The next issue is planned for July 2014

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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL



Just Telling Stories

Stephen Keeler talks to A. L. Kennedy



Photo of A. L. Kennedy courtesy of Random House

THE ULLAPOOL BOOK Festival is about to celebrate its tenth anniversary, in some style. Novelist and stand-up A. L. Kennedy who has described it as having ‘the listeningest audiences I’ve ever met’ is high on the impressive list of literary heavyweights spending the weekend of 9-11 May on the shores of Loch Broom. Stephen Keeler asked her about book festivals, her writing and the ‘i’ question.

The Ullapool Book Festival (UBF), more than any other I know, is a writers’ festival. It’s not that the audience is taken for granted but in Ullapool the writers are at the heart of the matter. You feel they’d still manage to make a festival out of just being together, even if no one else turned up.

A. L. Kennedy wrote of UBF that it provides the ‘kind of environment (where) writers can really get to know each other...and exchange ideas. There follows the characteristic undercutting observation that ‘most of us were too old or too married to exchange anything else’. Which, serendipitously perhaps, sets up her appearance at this year’s event with a new batch of stories.

In *On Writing* (Jonathan Cape, 2013) Kennedy has written of the necessity of joy in the writing process and of how writers – ‘a fretting and puzzling fellowship of imperfect

perfectionists’ – can at best only gently be guided towards their writer’s voice, and famously if a touch disingenuously refers to herself (and by extension all writers) as a ‘typist’. She is uncomfortable with writers’ groups, claiming ‘they are about groups, not about writing’, and she is particular about creative writing courses and workshops which, she has asserted, can infantilise writers.

Her latest book, *All the Rage* (Jonathan Cape, 2014) is a collection of a dozen short stories of love closely-observed at its various extremes – in a sex shop, functional yet profoundly poignant as sexual transaction, brooding and contemplative, and reminiscent in a Christmas carol service – and always with such a sharpness of perception that the prose often becomes indistinguishable from poetry.

Kennedy’s literary writing, as well as the comic work, is characterised by its economy; she nails the sharpest observations with a single pin, and often with the kind of ‘joke’ more earnest than a treatise.

SK You’ve written fondly of your previous appearance at the UBF, in your Guardian blog: does it still have particular appeal or are book festivals beginning to lose some of their gloss?

ALK Book festivals are something very

special in a culture which doesn’t value books or readers, or listening, or real communication. As coverage of books in the media declined and access to books was reduced in the last few decades, people who love books and love what they do, and think they are important, began to found more and more festivals. They’re a place where people who value imagination, communication and human potential can go and be sane – at best. At worst, a few are simply media playground and opportunities for networking. But there simply aren’t that many toxic book festivals. And the UBF has a fantastic atmosphere and is coming out of a culture that involves listening to each other. What’s not to like?

SK They give you an hour to play with at Ullapool – although a defining characteristic there is that the writers stay for the entire festival, attend all the sessions and mingle between times: so what is your idea of the perfect book festival session, and are you ever tempted to break into your stand-up routine?

ALK The perfect gig always depends on the audience and the time and place... Ideally, you’re always aiming to provide the best possible hour for the people there and the material you have to hand at that time. And in Ullapool, because most of the

writers and audience members have had a communal experience of many sessions, that’s an element, too – and a rare one. And yes, I’ve done basically stand-up for some events when that seemed necessary. It’s all just telling stories one way or another.

SK *All the Rage*, your latest book, is a collection of (may I call them quirky?) love stories, isn’t it? Why these stories? Why now? And do short stories sell?

ALK Short stories sell if you sell them. My publishers have been selling my short stories for decades. Why these stories? These are the ones I have. Why now? Because I had them at the time I put them together, and it took them about a year to come out.

SK *On Writing* has become something of a handbook for tutors and students on some creative writing courses: how much, if any, patience (sympathy?) do you have with those who say, “I read it but it didn’t tell me how to write.”?

ALK Probably none. But I would have compassion because they’re lost people, and you can’t get anywhere with writing (which is hard) if you’re that lost. No one does this for you. If they could, they would be robbing you of everything you could be. Which would be a bad thing. It would be like someone having sex with your husband for you...

SK Less than six months after this year’s UBF, Scottish residents will be able to vote on separation from the Union: the ‘i’ word is in the air, and the UBF has clearly not been programmed politely or diplomatically to avoid the issue. You’ll no doubt be asked...

ALK I can’t vote. I live in England, so it’s right that I can’t vote, although sad. It’s also sad – and wonderful – that all the voters can get enthused by is a potential new start, a virtual country, an idea of public servants who would serve the public...it chimes with the None Of The Above vote down South, and the Left Unity Party’s inauguration. I wish we had better politicians; I wish they had more imagination. And I wish Scotland well and know it will make the right decision.

SK I’ve read your website (www.a-l-kennedy.co.uk) so I’m pretty clear about the horrors you dread – and work hard to avoid – at stand-up gigs and book festivals, so what, if anything, do you most look forward to about Ullapool this year?

ALK I don’t know...I liked the chat last time. I liked the walking about. The sessions were great; the atmosphere also. I look forward to being surprised. I hope there will be no more dying gannet problems, though. That was a bit heart-breaking, and sore on the arms.

The last time A. L. Kennedy was at the UBF she ‘made an ultimately unsuccessful attempt’ to save a dying gannet she’d found on the beach there. Such encounters are little blessings to writers for whom no death is ever a complete waste, and as she wrote at the time ‘the idea of a gannet-bearing novelist catches the imagination, somehow’. ■

Poems by Stewart Sanderson

Hare

Although no Dürer, I can draw a hare
from memory.

First the lines on which the fur
depends like sailcloth,

woven wicker-like. Where scars
on tender skin should be

and where the ears
will stiffen at danger, soften down or flop

disconsolate. No creature like a hare
for melancholy.

Second have the colours stir
from base coat up

to a grizzled, finite curve
of sudden brushstrokes

bristling. Eyes which bore
to the quick of you.

Pathetic, empathetic slurs
on your conviction.

There is nothing like a hare
to contemplate you,

bound away as flesh,
stop *there*.

Border Christmas

24.12.2013

Hailstones caught on cobwebs
spiderless and tattered in the wind
stiffen and wax the whiter.

So the strands of draggled wool
laced intermittently on hedgerows
and barbed wire
turn murkier and ragged
as the dyer's hand
consumed by what it works in.

So the turning year
falling away behind us
like a snow-flecked slope
grows indistinct;
an arbitrary imposition in our minds
upon the wind
funnelled through clogged gutters
and the muddy flux
impending in the spotless whiteness
of the coming year.

Island Widow

Bright coins from a mermaid's purse
dissolving in the sea;

an evening made of orange light;
a single apple tree

out of the wind, behind a drystone wall
on which a cup of tea

sits cooling, waiting for a man
who no one else can see.

Similes

The white hills
balanced
like pebbles
on the windowsill.

The stopped watch
crouched
like a lizard
on the old man's wrist.

Stone Axehead

At twenty one I borrowed it from the shadows
of an uncle's palm;
now I keep it on my bedside table
to ward off the dead
and sometimes lure them closer.

It is very smooth:
a wedge-shaped lozenge of discoloured stone
green as a serpent's eye.

It came out of a field
far to the north, in Caithness
where the shadows end
and where the slate walls break
my heart with dreams of Orkney.

Pears Soap

A pre-war scent;
cracked dryness, sweetening
and going airborne
to the touch of water;

lavender and balsamum
and chords of palm oil, drifting
through the bathrooms of
a hundred fallen houses.

The Confession of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin

– Jan van Eyck, c.1435

The man is insignificant; merely
a crocodile in human form
kneeling before a young girl and her child
whose chubby hands rough nails must soon deform.
He stares irresolutely at the wee
boy's face, unsettled by a thing so mild.
The baby looks ahead, to Calvary.

His mother is a triangle of red
fabric, erupting from the floor
to shock the praying chancellor: the blood
of Christ, supposedly, and so a door
into another world, in which the dead
confront their lives. A tousled flood
of auburn cascades downwards from her head.

The infant in her arms is very old.
His scalp is visible through wisps
of thistledown; a dandelion clock
meeting a breath. His painted flesh is crisp.
A hundred hairline cracks distort its folds
like ice under a foot. He is a rock;
the symbol of an undivided world.

Over that tiny brow an angel waves
a golden crown. The chancellor's thin eyes
dart upward for a second, while van Eyck
swaps brushes. Jan is unsurprised
and lets his subject settle. Soon the grave
will swallow all of this. Each word now strikes
a sin. Rolin speaks quickly: 'Lord, forgive –

A BAILEYS. JUST a wee one – nuns aren't supposed to drink. But it's been a bit of a day.

I'm not sure if you can have renegade nuns, but if so, such are we. There are four of us here at Achadh Clachan, misfits, but each devout in her own way: Nun-the-Wiser, Nun-of-the-Kind, and Nun-too-Clever; and myself: Nun-of-the-Above. Rejects from the internal politics and centuries-oiled glidings of the convent. Coming to this Field of Stones was the best thing we ever did. Seven years now we've lived here, and there's been scarcely even a 'tut' in all that time. Until today.

From my room in the attic, I can hear the Sisters going about their end-of-day business down below, fastening the door of the outhouse, clattering about in the kitchen, scuffing the washing basket along the path, bringing the clothes in before the frost settles. The days are lengthening, but it is winter yet, despite the daffodils partying beside the old pink bath in the yard. Six o'clock and the light is fading, the pale blue sky leaching to a thin yellow behind the Sgurr; it will be cold tonight.

With hindsight, it was Grigor who first spotted that we were heading for trouble. Red Grigor, who blew in on the west wind last May, when the new leaves on the silver birches were dancing, green sharp enough to pierce your eyes and make you forget that winter ever was. Slept in our shed for a week, and then was gone, leaving a sense of disturbance in the dust. And gifts. A bottle of Baileys, an elder-twig penny-whistle, and a battered copy of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. All given with Good Intent, so we were unable to refuse.

It was Nun-of-the-Kind that Grigor gave the Baileys to. Nun-of-the-Kind is our peacemaker and herbalist. God told us to love one another, so we must look after each other: she makes sure we live Kindly. She stored the Baileys in her cupboard under the stairs, along with the drying bunches of leaves and flowers; camomile, mint, nettle, sage. We pass the cupboard each night as we go to bed, breathing in the comfortings of well-being and summer days, and are blessed.

The Rubaiyat he gave to Nun-the-Wiser, our grower of crops and tender of animals. God made the Earth, so care we must for the Earth: she makes sure we live Wisely. We may not have Persian roses, but she sees the summer come stumbling up the glen, and all too soon retreat, as if ashamed at the poor fist it has made of the season; the autumn pepper-dust falling on the birches, a little yellow, then a little more; until the first frost, the first good blow. We watch the turning of the year and are grateful.

Nun-too-Clever was working on one of her inventions, in the outhouse, last May. She burns with a ceaseless curiosity, a constant fire in her eyes as she sees ways that we could do things better. God is the Creator, so to honour Him we must be inventive: she makes sure we live Cleverly. We raise our eyebrows at her clonks and bangs and mutterings, and hope that it will be something good, and Nun-of-the-Kind keeps the witch-hazel jar topped up. Sometimes, strange-smelling smoke fumbles its way out of the outhouse chimney, carrying with it Nun-too-Clever's thin and creaking voice, singing 'If I Had a Hammer'. Grigor gave her the elder-whistle; we remain thankful.

Grigor's Gifts

SHORT STORY BY LIZ GRAFTON



Of course, I should have seen this coming. It is my job to keep an eye on all that is happening, which is why my room is at the top of the house, so that I have an overview. But it is easy to become content, complacent; to stop noticing, and neglect to look at what might be on the horizon. A bit like the daffodils.

It was Nun-the-Wiser coming up the stairs this morning, heavy footed, her, 'Oh my, oh my,' floating up ahead of her, who woke me from my somnolence. The floorboards creaked as she shifted from foot to foot outside my door; I could hear her breathing and fidgeting.

'Are you coming in Sister?' I called.

'No, it's ok.'

'Sister, it's not ok. I can hear you fidgeting. Come in.'

'No, really. It's nothing. I'll, um, I'll go back down now. Sorry to have bothered you.'

I got up and opened the door. Nun-the-Wiser was standing there, cradling a small bundle wrapped in a blanket, her eyes staring, wide.

'Merciful heavens! Sister!'

'No, no! It's not what you think,' she said, 'No, it's just a wee fox.' She let me peer into the folds of the blanket; red fur, a small, sharp nose, closed eyes; the smell of damp dog, under lain with musk.

'He was lying outside in the yard.' Nun-the-Wiser stepped into my room. 'I can't put him in the outhouse because the chickens will go off laying; and anyway, I've put the rabbits in the outhouse; because you said we weren't to use the shed.' She looked at me questioningly, and when I didn't elucidate she went on, 'So I wondered, could he, could he maybe go in your laundry basket?' She shifted the bundle higher on her copious chest. 'He needs to be quiet and warm.'

I emptied the basket and moved it over to the fire. The fox was indeed ill, limp as a rag doll. He made no protest as Nun-the-Wiser lowered him down, tucking the blanket in round him and stroking his head. His eyes remained closed and he did not move.

'Poisoned,' Nun-the-Wiser said softly, not looking at me. 'Poor wee thing.' She fished a brown bottle from her apron pocket. 'Nun-of-the-Kind made this up for the rabbits, but we don't know whether it'll work on foxes. They're that bit bigger.'

'Rabbits?'

'Yes, for a couple of weeks now. We thought it was myxi to begin with, but their eyes looked ok, and no lumps. Nun-of-the-Kind tried everything she could think of, and fortunately came up with this. But she's running out of stuff. There's been a badger as well.'

'How did they get poisoned?' Here we were, in this beautiful glen, no factories, no people, no nothing for miles around.

'Um. I don't know.' Nun-the-Wiser's eyes were fixed on my bookshelf. 'I don't want to cause any trouble.' And it was clear that that was all I was going to get.

We'd had no visitors. No deliveries. I cast my mind back, pictured the snow melting in the yard, pallid tufts of broken-elbowed grasses poking through in the fields, until my mind's eye lighted on the outhouse, smoke and singing coming from the chimney. And a strange odour. It had been eight months, and we still didn't know what Nun-too-Clever was up to.

It took them a little while to find me in the morning. They didn't expect me to be in the shed. I asked for water and they hurried to bring it, and fresh-baked rolls with blackcurrant jam, and an apple.

Downstairs I strode, out into the cold and across to the outhouse. The hens perched along the end wall burred their rising 'here's someone coming' caution to each other, but stayed put. Below them was a cobbled-together pen, containing about a dozen rabbits, some stretched out, looking half dead, others sitting hunched in the straw. The now familiar strange smell was stronger in here, and stung the back of my nose. I looked around. Shelves holding jars and demijohns, tubing, metal clamps; over in the corner, a pile of tyres. And on the table a large old paint tin. I found a spoon in one of the jars and levered the lid. Inside was a greasy, treacherous substance, like black Vaseline, the source of the smell.

'DON'T!' Nun-too-Clever rushed in. 'Don't touch it Sister. It's nasty stuff.'

'Goodness, Sister, what a fright you gave me.'

'I'm sorry Sister.' Nun-too-Clever put the lid firmly back on the tin. 'It's to mend the stone with. The buildings. All the cracks. If we don't do something, the place will fall down around our ears.' And she told me what she'd

been doing, and what she'd done with her failed attempts. It hadn't mattered to begin with, the old bath was large and could hold a lot. And then the snow had come, covering it all up. But with the thaw and the rains, the bath had filled and the water spilled over. It seemed the animals had been drinking at the puddles.

The light dimmed and I looked up to see Nun-the-Wiser outlined in the doorway, with Nun-of-the-Kind at her shoulder. They glowered at Nun-too-Clever, who glared back.

'Look what you've done.' Nun-the-Wiser indicated the rabbit pen. 'Poison, Sister. Think about it.'

'Yes. And finding a cure uses up all my herbs, not to mention my time, Sister. Think about it.' Nun-too-Clever waved her arms in exasperation; 'But, if we don't secure the buildings, it'll be immaterial whether there are animals or not, or whether you can cure anyone, because we won't survive. Sisters. Think about it.' Strong words, plainly spoken.

All three looked at me expectantly. If we didn't mend the walls, we'd be homeless. If we did mend the walls, animals got poisoned. Curing the animals depleted our resources; if we didn't cure the animals we would end up with an unhealthy heap, not to mention the suffering and the morality issues. Making the medicines needed buildings with a roof. Selling the wall fixer could bring in money to buy more supplies. The thoughts chased each other round and round my head and I could see no way out. Who would have thought our strengths would turn out to be our undoing?

I said I would give them an answer in the morning and retreated to my room. I must have looked weary, because later, Nun-of-the-Kind popped up with the Baileys and a mug; and after her came Nun-the-Wiser, with her Rubaiyat in case it might help. And Nun-too-Clever was playing one of Grigor's tunes on the elder whistle earlier. A kind thought, but it brought back memories I'd sooner not face. And I don't want even to look at that dratted fox. So I am having a wee drink, filling the Cup before Life's Liquor in its Cup be dry, and hoping it will ease the pain in my back, and the tightening in my stomach.

It took them a little while to find me in the morning. They didn't expect me to be in the shed. I asked for water and they hurried to bring it, and fresh-baked rolls with blackcurrant jam, and an apple. I let them each hold the bundle, which smelled not of fox but of warm hazelnuts and salt.

Through the open door of the shed I can see across to the birches on the slopes of the Sgurr, white-trunked and purple-branched in the sunlight, their daintiness belying their strength. If an answer to all this is to be found, if there is a way forward for our ideas that ought to have worked but didn't quite line up, it will need to be like the birches, I think; having something of flexibility and tenacity, able to find purchase in this field of stones and grow; if we are to steer a course between the Wise, the Clever and the Kind, that somehow accommodates us all. I look down at my beautiful daughter, wonder at how tiny she is, and feel the beginnings of hope. Because Grigor's gift to me, to all of us, is Nun-the-Less. ■

Poetry

At Ceos

ALISON SCOTT

The lochan rose pink last night
around the boat, hull
reflected perfectly in shaft
of navy blue. Later the half-moon
cast a shrouded light over
Loch Erisort. This morning

at the window, a painted lady
fluttered to get in, and, later,
the wind has risen, the water
a shifting glitter, ripples
as clouds are driven softly
across the sun. Still the boat

moored between us and
the little islet does not move.
Earlier, a fishing boat left
quietly, and you left too
to fish inshore. So I can sit alone
and look and let the dull brown dragonfly

settle on the rock beside me, twitching
transparent wings, long tail rising
as cloud and sun come and go and
she casts her own light shadow onto
the grey rock, as the trees move
in the wind, each with its own sound.

Chairm Agin Watter-Elf Disease

THOMAS CLARK

Gif ye be stricken bi the watter-elf's disease –

bi the fingernails will ye ken it, fur thay will be haw;
an bi the een will ye ken it, fur thay will be watshod;
an bi the stare will ye ken it, fur it will be down.

Remeed is this; thair's pennyroyal,
Thistle an risp grass an lupin an lily,
Yerb o marshmallow an strawberry leaf,
Betonica, comfrey, an alacampine,
Smeddum o eller, bunewand o docken,
Wormit an yewberry, horehound an dill.
Kirn it aw in wae some sauntifeed watter,
Grind up wae wattermint, draigle wae beer,
Than ower the pheesic this chairm cry three times:

*This wound-written werriour Ah will make fere;
Lat his hurt naither birn nor burst wae bluid,
Nor spreid tae his fower quarters, nor atter fill.
Lat this skaithe growe no, an thrab no,
An be ludge tae nae thing quick; but heal itsel hail,
An leave nae mair merk than the swaw agin the shore.*

Sing this mony times syne, an the yird in aw her nicht
will beir aff yer blaud. This chairm men's kin mey sing
oan ony wound.

Bait Bucket

JAN SUTCH PICKARD

In an abandoned bait bucket,
goose barnacles have set up home
among traces of the original owners –
wavering wraiths of maggots.

This bucket rolling on the tide-line
is boiling with busyness, with creatures
to raise goosebumps or make you gag –
what are they like, goose-barnacles?

Pale bivalve shells, like birds' heads
attached to stretching necks of livid flesh
(necks that are really feet) that wag
and grope blindly and squirm,

while the shell-heads turn as though curious,
or gossiping, gape like beaks; greedy,
they compete for the last few maggots:
a tight little colony feeding off each other:

a gaggle of goose-barnacles,
a shellfish village, a can of worms.

Attic Sound Track

JOAN LENNON

rain on the roof
gentle static

the mysterious scuffle of
... something

the tiny ping that stars make
coming out in the blue dusk

the shush of snow
sliding down the slates

first birds, tentative in the dark,
“Is it morning? Is it? Is it?”

The Language of Parrots

KATHERINE LOCKTON

Winter, and we don't even kiss.
Instead our tongues hide

from each other, in indifference.
You suggest counselling, but we know

only magic will do so we call
the local magus

who prescribes Parrot droppings
each night, before sunset.

At first we take them religiously,
setting alarms

up everywhere around the house
but when nada happens

we double our dosage of droppings.
After the fourth day we start coughing

up feathers, first green, then red, then blue ones.
Our magus tells us to stop

the treatment but you insist he's wrong.
On the fifth day we

both sense otherness. Our tongues
coated in coloured feathers,

it's hard to talk now so we use signs
only to forget

what each sign means. I think you're asking
for bread, but you're angry

when I pass a slice. We forget
what it is to speak.

On the sixth day you start to say
something when I do.

We open our mouths, and watch
as parrots fly out.

We sit back, clutching our throats, our tongues
flown from their nests.

‘Thorkell. Where’s Hildir?’

They could be very persistent, these drawn-faced women who minded everybody’s business but their own, so I had to be brusque.

‘She’s gone,’ I’d say. ‘Now leave me alone.’

‘But where Thorkell, where’s she gone?’

‘Away. Somewhere. I don’t know. To another – or perhaps to Hell for all I know or care.’

They would twitter like birds and cry that they felt aggrieved for me.

‘Surely she’ll come back soon?’ they would whine.

And then there were the sly women; the older ones. The ones who come to the door with raven’s eyes, black, glinting, suspicious. Offering assistance; trying to look over my shoulder into the house.

‘Your place needs a woman Thorkell; to cook, to clean. Are you looking after yourself?’

I would hold up my hand and say, ‘Go away. I have no need of your help,’ and close the door against their intrusive beaks, and return to sit by the window to nurse my anger, my unhappiness and pain.

I was relieved when at last I could go to the village and they avoided me; these creatures that went by in silence, glancing warily sideways, drawing their shawls tightly to their throats and hurrying on.

Likewise the men in the inn kept their distance.

Their company was no loss.

It was a long time that passed before there was any chance of fishing. The island suffered from windstorms that would last for days, sometimes for weeks. There were black winter skies and violence in the sea. And this selfsame wind, this howling devil, this moaning fiend, could perversely sleep at night; nights when moonrise crawled across the ice forming at the edges of sea-lochs and where sleet would sparkle against the heavens like falling stars. But the great expanse of heather and rough grazing that stretched inland would absorb the pale moonlight throughout these hours of darkness except where the bog water pools glistened like fallen tears.

Still she didn’t return; my Hildir, the daughter of Arling of Pow. Hildir, one who was so full of grace, full of kindness, with golden hair and amber eyes. She was a rare thing; as beautiful as a pale yellow flower in meadow grass.

What man wouldn’t have wanted her to be his? What woman wouldn’t have been jealous?

But she chose me; fled from her home and family disapproval.

‘She is a daughter of the earth,’ her father railed. ‘A princess. Of what use is a worthless fisherman in this world? How can a troublemaker and ill-bred boor like you provide and care for her? Hildir knows nothing of hunger, pain and disappointment but she will unless you bring her home.’

I clenched my fists. Stood my ground in silence. Old as he was, Arling of Pow was a man to be reckoned with.

‘Don’t threaten me with your stance,’ he said. ‘I should strike you and your brazen insolence down.’

‘You are to be a grandfather,’ I said.

He staggered backwards, as if my words had struck him physically, and all fight, all anger, and all hope drained from his face.

‘Then it is decided,’ he said. ‘She is no longer a daughter of mine.’

The child never came and Hildir changed.

Air

Spring. Not that an outsider would know. They see little change between the seasons on this island; the signs are imperceptible to them, but one morning there was a streak of bone coloured light between sky and water. The ocean heaved a sigh beneath the clouds, the wind stopped its yowl and the prospect of fishing returned.

From my doorway I looked towards the shore and to the small stone building where my skiff had sheltered throughout the winter. It would be good to go to the fishing banks at last, to have my boat dance across the waves, experience the breeze on my face, and to feel alive again.

But just then, without warning, a draught of shining black-blue flashed past my head. I ducked and instinctively raised an arm in protection. A crow had flown into the cottage and settled on the kitchen table. It was stabbing the wooden surface aggressively with its bill, taking no notice of me, apparently entranced by the form of a dark knot in the timber. I also saw sinister shapes of cloud shadow sweeping across the grasslands; tasted brine in my mouth, and heard the single screech of a dying vole.

The fishing would have to wait for another day.

At first light the following morning Svienn Olafsson came to see me. A simple lad from the village, (there were those that said he was three-quarters daft), who I hadn’t seen since Hildir had vanished and presumed that the others had poisoned his mind of me. He offered work in return for a share of any catch. I agreed if for nothing else but to ease my loneliness and, although no fisherman, he was strong, smiling and not one for idle chat or questioning. I remembered how his help had been welcomed when Hildir and I first started. She had wanted a small plot beside the cottage for vegetables, herbs and even flowers. These things were new to me; things to do with the land; digging, sowing, weeding, reaping. Tasks I couldn’t do when my priority was the sea.

With Hildir’s guidance Svienn proved to be a good worker. She was happy then and at the end of a day walking homewards from the shore I could hear her singing melodies that were as clear and sweet in the air as from any songbird.

But I had to send Svienn away when we lost the child.

A few days later, when the signs were more favourable, Svienn and I dragged the skiff across rattling pebbles into the surf and

jumped aboard. I raised the sail. It cracked and flapped loudly until the wind filled the canvas and the boat leaped forward. I saw fear on Svienn’s face as he cowered in the prow; holding onto the gunwhales with limpet hands as the skiff rose and fell against the incoming surf. But then, as the craft settled on its course, Svienn’s broad smile reappeared and he stood up, turned fore and like a child he began shouting and hollering with whoops and roars.

Then I thought – perhaps a fisherman could be made of him after all.

Fire

Our summer was exceptionally hot with an absence of rain. Growth was slow and the ground so parched that bog and mud shrank and cracked. In places the grass was dying; pale yellow patches appeared where the soil was thin above the rock. It crunched underfoot; dusty, with the aroma of dry hay. Water sources and other springs disappeared, burns became trickles.

Svienn told me that those with farms were fearful of failing crops. There was talk of bad omens; that the timing of the planting was wrong and the moon had been the wrong colour.

I allowed myself a smile and thought that perhaps even a worthless fisherman like me might be of some use after all.

Our fishing days were long and we flourished. The villagers were not so shy of me then when their need was greater than their opinions. As autumn approached it became clear that the harvest would fail. The farmers looked for reasons. There was talk of witchery and the Devil’s work or that it was the malevolent trows that lived underground that were the cause of the disaster. Svienn said that there had been whispers in the village. That the loss of the child and the disappearance of Hildir were the origins and that the trows had taken them into the hill on the moor. I couldn’t believe the villagers were as foolish to think such nonsense.

Then, late summer, and seemingly without reason, the heather on the moor burst into flame. If the wind hadn’t been westerly the village may have been lost. But this was not seen as good fortune. It was taken as another example of the blight that had settled over the community.

In the days that followed the superstitious old crones and their equally brainless men-folk were on the hill; those ones, the followers of the old ways that blamed the trows more than most. Trows loved fire they argued, trows left sickly changelings in place of stolen children, trows abducted new brides. What more evidence was needed? These misguided fools kept me awake for six nights as they wandered over the moorland banging pots and pails with wooden spoons in an effort to drive the imagined sprites away.

But on the seventh night, at twilight, doubt was put in my mind. All was silent for a change, the drummers hadn’t yet started their cacophony, and as I looked across the moorland towards the rise I imagined I saw a figure that suddenly crouched and scurried into a place where I knew a number of large rocks and boulders lay scattered in the heather. No one knew how long that ancient circle had been there but it was not to my surprise when trows were mentioned in connection to it or that it was said to be an entrance to another world.

Then I heard something, like a type of singing or a chant but then clearly and incredibly the moan became words.

Tae hi dal doodle, an’

tae hiddle doo-dee.

Nonsense really but it was familiar.

‘Of course,’ I whispered in recognition. ‘It’s the chorus of a trow’s song from a story my mother used to tell us.’

But, as I said, I didn’t believe in trows so I made a torch and carrying a stout stick went to investigate.

Water

At first I couldn’t really see anything apart from what was in my imagination. In the light of flickering flame and shadow the rocks constantly changed shape. I could hear strange rustlings and scrapings coming out of the darkness and still smell the strong reek of burnt heather and ash that lingered in the breeze. There was something else, a sensed presence that disturbed my reason; a feeling that something wicked was nearby.

I entered the circle of stones, into a vacuum of silence. And something else seemed odd, the ground remained untouched by the fire and the carpet of moss underfoot was still wet and soft. There was even a deep pool of peat-stained water to my left.

But then there was that noise again; like the scuff of a rat in a roof or the rub of a razor on a strop. I swept the torch through the air in an arc of roaring flame and raised my cudgel.

‘Who’s there,’ I challenged. ‘I’m no’ feart o’ ye.’

But I was.

I saw a flash of metal at the edge of the pool and drew closer. A piece of partially buried silver chain was lying on the moss. I pulled it free and on its pendant was the figure of St Andrew, the fisher of men and I realised it was the selfsame necklace I had given to my Hildir.

I fell to my knees in shock and looked blankly into the pool. In its depths I saw her.

Hildir. She lay naked, as if asleep.

The trow must have struck me from behind. I felt a weight on my chest and I couldn’t move.

I opened my eyes. The stars were racing across the vast darkness of the sky as if the universe was spinning at an astonishing speed. Then I realised I was underwater and saw the trow looking down at me, grinning, pointing to the dangling necklace.

But it wasn’t a trow.

It was Svienn.

I felt Hildir’s hand in mine as the first spots of autumn rain blurred the surface of the pool. I turned to look at her.

‘I’ve returned,’ she said.

‘At last,’ I said. ■

Poetry

Sisters

MAGGIE WALLIS

A wall intersects our city,
I barely think of you.
Sometimes I do
try to imagine
life on the other side.
Come up with a brick wall.

If there were a loose brick
I could ease it out
create a chink
glimpse your peering eye, whisper.
We could touch fingertips
get an inkling.

Near Inchnadamph

IAN MCFADYEN

A full day's journey taking us
into the long highland twilight,
all the mountains of Assynt
backlit in gold or red -
the frayed summit of Stac Pollaidh,
and Suilven from Elphin,
the other side of the sugar-loaf
a great serrated blade.

Near Inchnadamph,
a sudden white house
with a stand of the only trees for miles,
rough grazing, a desultory fence...
and within it two horses,
tough, solid little highlanders,
a dappled grey, a brown.
We know them,
milestones on the journey
we are always quietly
satisfied to see.

But today they are three,
a tight, companionable trinity,
heads down, absorbed in their grazing,
and in the centre
a red deer stag, full antlers exaggerating
each movement of his princely head
as he tugs the coarse grass.

We press on, the image sinking in,
not sure just what it is
that leaves us wondering.

Andromeda on All Hallows Eve

JANE ALDOUS

Leaving the light of the caravan,
I was half expecting the creels
emptying out the crows and jackdaws,
the tidal fields of gulls and geese,
pyres of buckthorn, hawthorn, rowan,
waves of storm-lobbed clouds
but when night bolted the door
I saw stars unravel,
constellations snap into place.
Then east of Cassiopeia
a tight-knit galaxy, a luminous coven,
concealed in a cloak of its own brilliance,
moving through the thin end of the year,
almost silent.

Sù Marbh

PÀDRAIG MACAOIDH

Nuair a mhothaicheas tu
gu bheil ur 5 bliadhna còmhla a' tighinn gu crìch
rachaibh dhan t-sù

an teas-meadhan Bhaile Àtha Cliath:
a dh'fhaicinn a' pheileagain neo-thorrach air a h-ugh,
an tigeir tàmhach na chliabh

an orang-utan a' crochadh le beag an ùidh
on spiris, agus an giraffè
rag na stùic.

Chan e seo an sù marbh
le fuigheall na h-Ìmpireachd: cotan-pasgaidh,
sùilean-glainne, 's grùthan 's àra

's sgamhan 's cridhe
ann am brochan de formaldehyde;
creutairean nach robh riamh ann 's nach deach à bith –

skvader, jackalope, griffin, mermaid
seasmhach le leth-tunna de ghainmheach,
craiceann nathrach agus neas (hey presto, haidra!) –

ar mac-meanmna tar-chinealach
a' cruthachadh dreach ùr: piseag le plocan na làmh,
coineanaich ann an sgoil sglèatach.

Tha an sù seo, leth-mharbh, na chnàmh.
Seall an càraid balbh ron a' ghnu!
An seo cha thèid càil a ghleidheadh. Chan eil càil ri ràdh.

Babel

BY JAMES SINCLAIR

1. Da Wife

Had dee horses!
A'm no feenished wi dee yet.
How could du, joost how could du?

Wi yun harlot, du dirty lipper
an dee makkin laek du's innocent
does du no tink dat I hae eyes in me heid.

Does du no tink I canna see da guilty look i dy een.
Does du no tink I couldn'a smell her scent
hit wis laekin oot o dy skein laek pooshin.

Me an midder A'll no be able ta hadd
wir heids's up i da kirk on Sunday.
An whit about dy peerie lass, Jessie.

Du's no geen her muckle o a start in life, has du?
Du's fur nae use, me midder ay said dat.
I joost hoop naebody saw dee oagin aboot up yunder.

Dey'll be some sport i da shop on seterday if dey have.
Dey'll be beside demsels wi da excitement o hit aa.
I blame da minister, he has nae backbone dat man

if he'd hed ony ony avaa, he wid a shaested her
oot o here a lang time fae syne. Aach, I canna bear
ta look at dee, get oot o my sicht du venom!

2. Da Husband

Whit have I done, joost whit have I done?
A'm laid open Pandora's box
A'm set free a pit o serpents.
Christ shu's mad, A'm niver seen her laek yun afore.

Mind you, wan look at her midder
sood a geen me some kind o a clue.
Shu sits i da corner aa cled in black
gless beads fur een an da beak o a corbie.

Ina staands afore me wi her haands on her hips
yalderin aa kinds o abuse at me.
Does shu no tink dat I feel bad enoch
Does shu no tink dat if I could o undone dis mess, I wid
have.

Weel maybe if shu'd been a bit mair willin
I widn'a hed ta mak fur da hoose at Hillside.
A'm no gotten a sniff at her, fae shu fell pregnant
an yun's wir Jessie tree come her birthday.

A man can ony tak sae muckle, da boys
telling me foo good hit wis an wi twartree drams
aa da peerie bit o wit I hed, fled wi da wind.
Charlotte wis willin, pliable an waarm.

Shu certainly kens foo ta mak a man blyde.
I doubt my days aroond here are numbered.
A'll hae ta see if I can get a berth
get back ta sea an get da hell oot o here.

3. Da Gossip

Listen up fok, you ken fine weel
A'm no een fur sheeksin.

But whit Bella saw dis past Sunday
A'll mak your lugs pirk up, I wid warrant.

Shu aye keeps a close watch
on da comin's an goin's at Hillside.

Yea, I tow't you micht want ta hear mair.
Wha did shu see, but Ertie fae da hooses

creepin trowe dir kale yard i da early oors.
He wisn'a takkin his usual gaet

By dir front door an dat maks you winder
but oagin laek a drookit rat among da tattie shös.

Fur a second shu tow't da scarecrow
wis comin ta get her, fur sic a gluff as shu got.

I winder if Ina kens, I winder if shu's suspecious
dat is da kind o fok her an her midder ir.

An yun hoor sittin pretty in her brothel
up da hill, laek shu's da Queen.

Göd fok dunna deserve yun kind o behaviour.
Da minister sood a said something lang fae syne.

I mean ta say, you mind da time
Chaarlie o Brake lost aa dir rent money.

He cam hame foo as an eeg, a smeeg aa ower his face
an no a penny in his pocket. Dey nearly ended up i da
poor hoose dat time.

4 Da Harlot

So A'm da een ta blame fur aa o dis.
Dir maybe furyat dat hit taks twa ta birl.
If dey wir gettin hit at hame
dey michtn'a be sae keen ta mak da visit.

Dunna get me wrang A'm no adverse ta
some male company, hae a bit o a laugh
an if dey come wi a gless o gin dan aa da better.
So if I liberate twartree shillings fae dir back pocket

I see dat as ony fair, wha will dey tell onywee.
I hae hungry bairns ta feed an cled
wha's fedders tak little ur no interest i dir upbringing.
Da women wid o shaested me oot o here years fae syne.

If dey hed dir wey, dey micht even a done worse.
Dey blame da minister fur no makkin a staand.
A'm seen da look in his een, da look dat aa men
get whin dat need dey hae starts da temperature risin.

Dey come trowe my door, lambs ta da slauchter
bulderin hill rams, dir dander up
an wance dir spent, dey geng hame laek
a cast hug, dir tails atween dir leegs.

Me fedder maks sure we'll no starve
But fur aa dat, he'll no look me i da ee
ur utter a single wurd ta me ur da bairns.
He's dat busy balin his money at da Kirk.

I da vain hoop da göd man taks notice
an welcomes him wi open airms at da pearly gates.
Weel A'll tell you aa something.
Dir ir mair sins i da world as mine alone.

Poetry

An Teàrmann

CRÌSDEAN MACILLEBHÀIN

I

...denn mit der Mutter, die uns verläßt, fällt aller Schutz...

RAINER MARIA RILKE

Cha robh an teàrtaicheadh na h-eileamaid
dhe na dh'ionnsaich mise bhuat. Chan abrainn
gur teàrmann e a nochd mi na do phears'.
An àite sin, thig gu mo chuimhne turas
a rinn sin còmhla anns a' char, is tus'
a' dràibhigeadh, a' dèanamh feadarsaich

gach uair a bhitheadh tu ag ullachadh
seòil ladarna, no dìreach cunnartaich,
mar a chaidh innse le do chàirdean uile.
Bha 'chuibhle cho mòr, agus tu cho biodach
's gun robh e doirbh do neach a thuigsinn dè
b' urrainn dhut fhaicinn air an rathad romhad,

a dh'aindeoin raig' a' ghrèim a rinn thu oirre.
A bharrachd air sin, b' annsa leat an luas,
bhiodh toitean laist' eadar do bhilean daonnan,
is tusa sireadh, smaoinichidh mi 'n-dràsta,
cuidhteachaidh 'son eucoir air choreigin
a dh'fhuing thu, is tu nad chaileig òig.

Cha b' àbhaist dhut aire àraidh a thoirt
do na dh'fhoillsicheadh na soidhnichean
mu dheidhinn crìochan stèidhichte an luais.
Ach bha thu faicilleach, is fortanach,
is seòlt' air dòigh 's nach deach do ghilacadh riamh.
Dh'fhan gach cleas is danarrachd gun pheanas.

Na dh'aithnicheadh leam tromhad, b' e an fhearg i,
a' cheannairc 's an t-seirbhe, gach tè dhiubh mùchte,
ceilte fo mhasg na cluaine is na h-ùmhachd.
Bu thràilleachd e an creideamh air do shon-sa
mar an tombaca, ged nach tug iad dhut
teàrmann, air neo faothachadh, no sìth.

Math dh'fhaodte gun robh sin na adhbhar buan
air an eagal a dh'ionnsaich mise bhuat,
an creidsinn nach robh 'n t-ath-dhioladh ach ceum
no dhà air falbh bhuainn, 's nuair a bhiodh a bheum
gar ruighinn, chan eutrom, neo-sheòlt' a bhitheadh.
Thug siud spreigeadh is breisleach do ar bith.

II

...dafür geht nun die Macht des Schützens in Sie über...

RAINER MARIA RILKE

Uime sin, neart na teàrtaicheadh 's an dìona,
na bu chòir gun robh neach 'g aithneachadh
's e faisg air broinn a mhàthar (nuair nach bi
an aon fhuil cheart nas mò na sitheadh garg
tron cuislean, no 'n aon àil a' beathachadh
am bith, ach iad fhathast cho dlùth ri chèile

mar bheatha bh' ann 's a' chuimhne air a' bheath' ud),
b' fheudar dhomh a chruthachadh gu mall
leis na h-eileamaidean sgapt' a thachair
riumsa, mar a nì fear foighidneach
mosaic nach do dh'fhan ach bloighean dheth
ath-chruthachadh, na ceart-cheàrnagan meanbha,

gus an seas e boillsgeach air cùl altair,
an dealbh nach fhaca duine bhon a thàinig
na h-allmharaich len eachraidh gus a mhilleadh.
Chan eil sin fhathast air soirbheachadh leam,
ach stadaidh mi bho àm gu àm dhem dhìcheall
's ar leam gum faic mi, critheanach os cionn

nam breicean aosta, loma, ìomhaigh chaoimh
na màthar crùnta is, na h-uchd, am mac
aig a bheil meud thar meud nan leanabh daoine,
'g amharc a-mach gu stòlta air an t-saoghal,
aon làmh togta gus beannachadh, is dòcha.
Cha b' ionnan na bh' againn 's aig a' phaidhir ud,

a bhean, ach cha bu chòir dhut mo mhì-thuisginn.
Cha bhi mi cur am meud mo dhìblidheachd
bhochd fhìn, no do chiont 's do chunntachalachd.
Ma fhreagras sinn mu dheireadh thall airson
na rinneadh leinn sna pàirtean seo a bh' againn
car sealain, 's tu nad mhàthair, mi nam mhac,

nochdar nach robh iad ach nan criomaig bhig
de dhràma chaidh tharraing a-mach fad linntean,
de dhanns' a phàirtean, eucoirean is rèitean,
's cha bhi na b' urrainn dhutsa ràdh mar leisgeul
ach mar na theireadh actair ris an actair
a b' fhaig' air, eadar tuiteam 's togail cùrtair.

In defence of the Crane Fly

JON PLUNKETT

The adult is known
as Whopper, Gollywhomper
or Daddy Longlegs.
It is a weak insect,
a poor flyer

(easily snatched from the air).

It is drawn to light,
rests with wings outspread.
The slender abdomen
has no scales
or sting

(is soft and defenceless).

It has small antenna,
and gyroscopic
flight controls
behind each wing.
The six long legs are thin,

(can be pulled off one by one).

Its purpose
is to find a mate,
to procreate, then die.
They have no mouth
with which to bite

(or scream).

No carbon footprint, or Home grown

GORDON JARVIE

Strawberry plants: a gift to my son
from someone at work, then gifted from him
to me. "Maybe strawberries for tea
in a year or three," he quipped. For a while

they lay there dunked in a bucket of water.
Then I stuck them among gravel
beside the back door, unceremoniously.
Their first year saw them stretch tentacle runners

into the sun. I fought these runners, cut them off.
This year it seems I've won. They've flowered like fury,
berries formed, swelled, reddened in hot sun. Daily
I nipped slugs and bugs, chased off blackbirds. Finally

I picked ripe fruit – more and more of it
taking the place of earlier trusses. It was magical.
The Sorcerer's Apprentice had nothing on our strawberries.
They were magnificent, best in Fife, best in my life.

Poems from The Highland Literary Salon Poetry Competition

The theme for this year's competition was 'Roots'

First Prize

Fuadach 1492

MARCAS MAC AN TUAIRNEIR

Air oidhche ar fuadaich,
Chuir mo mhàthair am menorah
Aosta am màla carrach,
Paisgte am filleag sìoda
A shiubhail lem athair
O na h-Innseachan.

Chuir i cùl
Ri bhaile Girona,
Far an dèanadh ar cinneadh
Ar àrach,
An sgoiltean-mhaighstir,
Len snàthaid a' leantainn
Litrichean maisichte
Ar làmh-sgrìobhainnean.

Far a-nis a sgrìobhadh
Sgeulachd eilthireachd ùr
Nan lùdhach, a
Phaisgich am màilleid
Fo chabhag sìtheil
Is fuachd an eagail san smior.

Bho mhullach an teampaill,
Leis a dh'uinneagan is
Dorsan dùinte,
Chuala gach acarsaid Iberia
An aon ghuth fo èislean
Ri sheinn
Shama Yisrael.

Chuir iad ceithir mìosan seachad,
Gach lorg ar muinntire
A spionadh à bun.

Thionndaidh i thugam,
A' togail mo làmh is ag ràdh:
"Thig a m'eudail
Is eilthrich an àite seo.
Cuir sùil ris an Ear.
Cuir fàilte air
Gairm a' chuain."

Clearance 1492

MARCAS MAC AN TUAIRNEIR

On the night of our clearance,
My mother placed the old menorah
In a scratchy sack,
Wrapped in a silken scarf
That journeyed with my father
From India.

She turned her back
On the city of Girona,
Where our kindred
Sprung forth
In the rabbinic schools
With the stylus tracing
The gilded letters
Of our manuscripts.

Where, now, would be writ
A new tale of emigration
For the Jews
In hasty peace
And the chill of terror to the marrow.

From the vault of the synagogue
With its casements
And doorways boarded,
Every anchorage in Iberia
Heard the same grieving voice
Chanting
Shama Yisrael.

In a mere four months,
They eradicated
Every trace of our people.

She turned to me,
Taking my hand and she said
"Come, my love
And leave this place.
Keep your eye to the East,
And embrace
The call of the waves."

Runner Up

Done Up

JARED CARNIE

She'd been meaning to have it done for years.
Every time a guest went in the upstairs bathroom
She felt the need to apologise.
She hated the rusty taps.
She hated the sickly green of the walls.
She hated the way the carpet
Reminded her of an old people's home.
She hated anyone seeing it.
That is, until the storm came
And blew a willow
Straight through the front wall of the house
Exposing the bathroom
For the whole town to see.
After that she realised
Maybe it wasn't such a big deal.

Homecomings

Prize

First Prize

He Has Written to the Council Asking for Stars

JULIET ANTILL

*He slips the painter of his brother's boat
and rows it out across the loch
sunk in Lyra, Pegasus, Aquila.*

A night's worth of dreams condenses on the window
where the curtains don't quite meet. In the kitchen
he crackles the radio, butters toast.

A hungry mountain pierces the mist. It seems,
since she went, there is always a frost.

He takes the letter and reads it over
through the narrow shaft of his vision;
holds it high before him like the minister.

It was Angus who started it. Angus wrote
asking for lights, said it wasn't right
their end of the street should be un-lit, and besides,
lights are what the visitors expect.
Angus has no interest in the stars.
Angus gets lost on his way to the shop.

For himself, he'll be glad when the visitors stop.
They stay later every year.
Only last week on the ferry he was surrounded,
ladies in lilac shuffling the deck, saying
It's not cold, is it? It's not cold at all.
He only went out for a smoke.

When he was young the darkness never troubled him.
The dark was never truly dark.
He could cross a mile of bog on a moonless
night, no bother.
Not now of course.
Not with this mist.
He aches for the small sun of her breath.

He leaves the letter, unposted, on the side
and heads down to the loch, where the bareknuckle
rowan rattles her beautiful fruit.
He takes his brother's boat and rows it out, out, out.
The water itself has caught the frost.

Runner Up

Coming Home

GILL TERRY

Familiar postcard images fragment
into loose watercolours, wet in wet
between each pass of wiper blades.
The metronome beats on a muffled drum.

I turn at the township road.
Braids of pitiless rain, grey as ashes,
become the corrugations of crofters' roofs.
The line between earth and sky is lost.

Silence in church:
faces to the front, no eye contact
I am led in like a prisoner
cursing my smart shoes for their heels
raucous on the wooden floor.
The shock of the coffin close enough to touch.

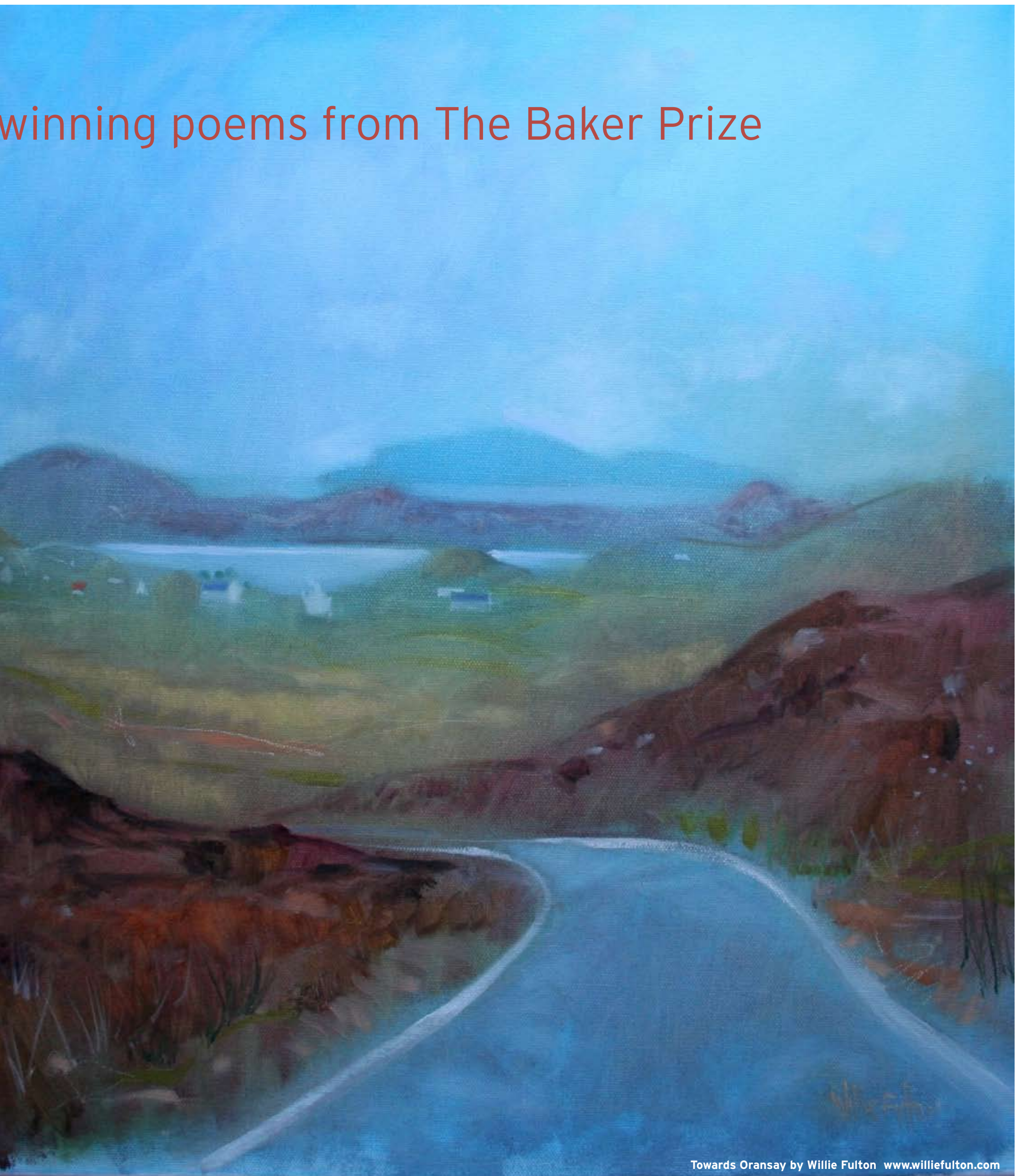
The minister in his crow's nest speaks of sin.
I want to argue that she wasn't that bad really.
I am sorry now if I suggested otherwise.
A long line of hands to shake in the lobby
and surely some are going round twice it takes so long.
I smother the giggle with a sob.

In the graveyard at the bealach
Council boys in yellow jackets
frantically pump out the water.
I follow the hearse up the hill road.
We drive at snail's pace to give them time.
The compassion of bracken fronds layered over mud.

Finally, the performance of the carry.
The sodden sheet of paper
from which the names are read:
Caley MacIvor, Blondie MacLeod, Black Bob
like characters from a gangster movie.
I cough away another snicker.

For what is funny about so many good suits spoiling in the rain
a coffin lowered on eight black cords like seaside crabbing lines
and the Council boys, jumping from their truck
before the last car has started back along the road
to tuck her in before the swaddling soil
is washed away.

winning poems from The Baker Prize



Towards Oransay by Willie Fulton www.williefulton.com

‘YOU’RE NOT GOING to die. Your mother’s not going to die. I’m not going to die. At least not any time soon. Now stop worrying, turn off the television and go and do something constructive. Worrying is not constructive.’

My parents never let me watch the news. They say there is no point. Mom says I take things too much to heart; I’m just too sensitive. Dad says I have morbid curiosity; I dwell on horror. They say the news has nothing to do with me. What do I care if there is an earthquake in Turkey, a flood in China? These things are far away, and no amount of feeling bad can help the people involved. And knowing lots of details is just sick.

Mom says childhood should be a happy time. When I was little, and used to dream about the bombers coming, I’d call out in my sleep. I’d see my bedroom in flames, bricks and rubble scattered everywhere. Mom would take me into their bed, telling me to keep quiet so I wouldn’t wake Dad. Once, when I started crying and woke him, he said to Mom, ‘What now?’

Mom explained that I had had a nightmare about the house being bombed. He said to me, ‘Don’t you worry, Ruth. John Wayne will come and save you. And then he said to Mom, ‘No more war movies for her.’ And he turned over and was snoring in about two minutes.

Three years ago, when I was about eight, we had the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was really scary. Everyone was talking about it. The boys in my class said the Russians were going to bomb us all. They said they were going to join the Army as soon as they were eighteen, and were going to save the U.S.A., and all of us girls, if there was anyone alive left to save. They didn’t sound scared at all. They sounded really excited, and spent a lot of time acting out battles in the playground.

I did a sort of survey. I asked every teacher I knew if there was going to be a war. Almost all of them said things like ‘I hope not,’ or ‘Whatever happens, I’m sure we’ll be safe here in Cleveland.’ Mr Franks, the gym teacher said, ‘It doesn’t look good.’ Only Mr Talcott, the sixth grade teacher, said ‘No. It will all blow over. You’ll see.’

And when it did, I decided that he was the smartest man I knew. When he would see me in the hall after that he used to wink at me. Even now, when I see someone wink, I feel like they must have some special knowledge to make them feel so confident about things.

Now the Vietnam War is a different thing all together. It’s all still about Communism, but I don’t understand much more than that.

When I visit Grandma we watch the news, and she lets me read the newspapers. I wish I understood how it started, and why young men go to the other side of the world to fight. I wonder if it makes it easier to kill someone if he is a different race, and doesn’t even speak the same language. Grandma says the military teaches you to hate, so it makes it easier to fight and kill. She says it’s necessary, to keep the world safe from Communism.

Up until a month ago, talking to Grandma was as close as I’d come to the war in Vietnam. Then something really terrible happened.

There’s a boy who lives across the road from us. His name is Robert Duffin. I didn’t notice him until two years ago, when he was sixteen, and got his first car. It was old and very noisy,

Watching Robert Duffin

BAKER PRIZE SHORT STORY COMPETITION
WINNER

BY CONNIE RAMSAY BOTT



I started watching him from my bedroom window. He parked the car in the driveway, and was always washing it and polishing it. Then he painted red and yellow flames along the sides. I thought it looked really amazing. When my dad saw it he laughed and laughed. He started calling him ‘Hot Rod’ – not so that Robert heard him. We live in the kind of neighbourhood where no one but the kids get to know each other. The grown-ups keep themselves to themselves.

Robert had lots of friends, boys and girls. People were always dropping by at his house when his parents and mine were at work. And they had lots of barbecues and parties in their back yard all summer.

That all stopped about the time I went back to school after summer vacation. I didn’t see Robert or his friends for a couple of months. Then I saw him in an Army uniform. He was home for about a week, and all his old friends came to see him in their cars. Dad had stopped calling him ‘Hot Rod,’ and he didn’t mutter about the noise of the cars, either.

When Robert went away again the street returned to being peaceful. Two months ago I overheard Mom talking on the phone to Aunt Toni. She said she had heard that our neighbour’s son had been hurt in Vietnam – ‘injured badly’ she said. I started imagining all sorts of horrible things, like him being burned, and having no hair or eyebrows, or paralysed, in a wheelchair. He wouldn’t be able to get up the steps to his house.

Then he came home. I saw his parent’s car drive up, and watched him get out of the back

seat. He wasn’t wearing a uniform any more. He had a little bandage on his forehead, and one covering his right hand, but other than that he looked fine.

His mother stayed home from work for a few days, to look after him, I guess. Some of his friends came to visit in their cars, but none of them stayed for very long.

When he had been home for just over a week, and I had stopped thinking about him so much, Donald Hopper stopped me in the hall at school.

‘Hey, Ruth. Don’t you live on the same street as Robert Duffin?’

‘Yes. He lives across the street from me. He’s home from Vietnam. He was injured, but he’s better now.’

‘Better? How do you get better from having your hand blown off?’

Donald Hopper is one of those boys that tells you something to shock you, and then likes to see the look on your face. I don’t remember saying anything to him after that. I was just seeing Robert Duffin in my mind, getting out of his dad’s car, or standing at his front door saying goodbye to one of his friends, not even stepping out onto the porch.

When I got home from school I got a book, an apple, and a kitchen chair, and went out and sat on my front porch. I was pretending to read the book, but I just kept reading the same paragraph over and over. I was watching Robert’s house. I was trying to work out if it was his left or right hand that was gone. I didn’t see him at all that day.

The next day I did the same thing. Robert’s car had been backed out of the garage, and was sitting in the driveway. After a while he came out and went to sit in his car. I was there with my apple and my book. I was trying to read my book only using one hand. That meant I had to put it down to in my lap to take a bite of my apple. Then I put the apple down on the floor next to the chair, and my book slid out of my lap. I picked it up and tried to open it with just one hand. I looked across the street to Robert in his car. I could tell by the way his head was tilted that he was watching me in his rear view mirror. He got out of his car and walked to the curb. He called to me in a really nasty voice.

‘You want to come over and get a really good look?’

I could feel my face, just burning. I got up and walked slowly toward him. I had to apologise, to tell him I just felt bad for him. I told myself I wouldn’t look where the bandage was. I wouldn’t let myself, no matter what. I was standing just a few feet in front of him. His eyes were so angry I couldn’t bear to look at them, either. Then I heard a car horn, and kind of felt a car coming towards me. Robert reached out with both arms, and yanked me by my sweater right out of the road. The car swerved around where I had been standing.

‘Are you crazy?’ he shouted, but he didn’t sound angry – he sounded scared.

I said, ‘I’m sorry.’ I think I said it a couple of times. Then I was looking at the bandage. My brain kept saying, ‘look at his face,’ but I couldn’t stop myself. My eyes kept going back to his hand, or where his hand used to be. There was a silence – the kind that feels so big because everyone thinks there aren’t words good enough to fill the emptiness. I heard myself say, ‘Does it hurt?’

‘Yeah, it hurts. It hurts like Hell. It feels like my whole hand hurts – every finger – every fingernail. And they’re not even there. How can that be?’

He looked at me, as if I really might have the answer. What could I say? I’m just a kid – a stupid ignorant kid. I don’t know anything.

‘I don’t know. It isn’t fair. It just isn’t fair.’

‘That’s how I feel. Why me? Everyone acts like, “Oh well, bad luck. It just happened.” I wasn’t any less brave, any less careful than anyone else. It just isn’t fair.’

He started to cry – big loud scary sobs. I’d never heard anyone cry with a man’s voice. They never cried in the movies. I stroked his arm, near the elbow, where I thought it wouldn’t hurt. Then I took him by the other hand and walked him up the steps into his house. I steered him to the couch and he sat down. He was taking big gulps of air, like he was trying hard to get in control. I went to the kitchen and got a glass, went to the fridge and took the milk out. I decided it would seem more normal if both of us had a drink, so I got another glass and poured us milk. I carried them into the living room, where Robert was blowing his nose. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve, and took one of the glasses from me.

We didn’t talk while we drank. He drank his more slowly than me, and when he finished he said, ‘Thanks. Want to watch some T.V.?’

I nodded, and we settled down to watch. We sat together like two old friends, watching Tom and Jerry smash each other to smithereens. ■

Ross-shire Writers

Ross-shire Writers is a group of published and aspiring writers who meet regularly in Dingwall. If you would like more information about Ross-shire Writers, or would like to buy an anthology of writing by members of the group, please contact the Secretary, Louise James. (clouisejames@btinternet.com)

WHEN I CHAPPED the door, it opened at once. It felt like he'd been expecting me and standing there waiting. Our eyes locked. He said, 'Welcome home.'

The words *Welcome home* gave me a feeling of safety. Feeling safe isn't the same as actually being safe, but the feelings you get from situations take you to places you can't get to if you pay too much attention to how things actually are. I also knew that sometimes when two bodies hold together as closely as can be, skin to skin, they are enclosed in a mysterious space invisible to the eye, and this space is at the core of things and the two bodies are safe in it.

I said, 'I'm here to bring you exciting news for people who like to eat in the best restaurants, and isn't that all of us?'

When I tried to hand him a leaflet, he hugged me. I caught a sigh which seemed to turn into the name *Alastair*, forced out by overwhelming relief. The leaflet was crushed between us. The hug went on for a long time. The home scents flooding out from the flat reached deep into me like the scents of my own home.

'Not Alastair,' I said. 'David.'

'At last you're here,' he said. His tone made me think of someone saying again what they'd said before so as to correct the other person's mishearing. 'Alastair, David ... What does it matter, now, what you call yourself?'

He was patting my back, driving into me the feeling of all being well again.

'See, the six number one restaurants in your area,' I said while he patted, 'have joined forces to create Finedine Gourmet Vouchers. Eat at one of these six number one restaurants and get vouchers you can save up to use when you eat at any of these six number one restaurants, saving you up to 30% of your dining-out costs!'

He drew back and looked at me through his heavy dark-framed glasses. 'Just delivering leaflets brought you here.' It could have been a question; it could have been a wondering comment about what life delivers.

By now you may be thinking that this is going to be about some mad Miss Havisham figure whose lover ran off ages ago. He's never moved on, which we're all supposed to do from things. Every day he deludes himself into thinking the boyfriend is coming back that very day. He was disappointed the day before and the day before that and so on, but still he keeps champagne in the fridge and stations himself by the door all day and seizes upon any male caller as the long-lost boyfriend returned. And I'm a stranger who's going to exploit him by colluding in this...

But inside me, it didn't feel like I was in that scenario, and that's what matters, because too many facts can get in the way of what's real.

And he didn't look weird and ravaged like Miss Havisham. Anyone would say he looked perfectly normal. From the touch—just a touch—of grey in his black hair, you'd probably place him in his early forties. His body had the grown-man maturity that promises safety like the walls of a house, while still recalling—especially around the thighs—the litheness and daring of a younger man. In everything he said and did there was certainty that made you feel he had special authority laid upon him.

Kindred Spirits

BAKER PRIZE SHORT STORY COMPETITION RUNNER UP

BY PAUL BROWNSEY



When he released me from the hug, he kept an arm around my shoulders as I went through the front door and down the wide hall and through the second door on the left into the sitting room. I didn't feel I was being steered. Once again I was astonished that hidden behind the grimy stonework and bleak stairwell of a Glasgow tenement can lie a fully-functioning home breathing warmth and security.

I sat down in an armchair that felt contoured to my body. I waved the leaflet he'd crumpled by hugging me. 'All you have to do is sign here and then you're a Finedine Gourmet and right away I give you six vouchers, worth £30, to start you on this exciting adventure, regular dining in six number one restaurants.'

He said, 'The longer I kept faith that I'd find you at the door one day, the more I knew that just the fact of my keeping faith would bring a return. I'll get champagne. It's been chilling.'

I said, 'There's the Lotus Bloom, voted one of the three best Chinese restaurants in Glasgow.'

If this didn't feel like the Miss Havisham scenario, could it be a version of the *Sexy Stranger At The Door* scenario? Someone—it could be a woman or a man—answers the door and on the doorstep is this compellingly attractive stranger; a plumber or electrician, say. Perhaps even a Mormon. Or a guy—not bad-looking, by the way, despite all the knocks—who's reduced to delivering leaflets for some crackpot dining-out scheme. Maybe the stranger peels off his tee-shirt at once, insolently, a challenge, a risk, and he has a body to die for that turns vulnerable while his head's lost in the tee-shirt he's removing. No words have to be spoken, eyes lock, there's instant awareness of irresistible mutual attraction, etcetera, and it's straight to the bedroom for wild sex.

Up to a point, I liked feeling I was in that scenario, because when the past and future seep in, as they do when you're not strangers, all the real revelations get dulled over.

But that scenario doesn't allow for kindred spirits.

I could hear him in the kitchen as I studied

the picture above the mantelpiece, a large oil painting, not a print. It showed tenement roofs in snow. I had a fanciful idea about it that felt very familiar and comforting: the fat stately well-wrapped-up woman foreshortened down on the pavement was fetching medicine from the chemist for a sick neighbour across the landing, and later there would be a moment of happiness between them like the touch of something eternal only recognised when looking back.

He returned with a bottle and two glasses on a tray, poured champagne for both of us, and sat down in the facing armchair. 'To us.'

'To us,' I said back. I thought of another time when I'd said this to a guy whose body and mind had the authority to turn the life I already possessed into someone else's past.

He said, 'So it didn't work out as you imagined.'

One sign that the person in the facing chair is your kindred spirit is the feeling he's reading the direction of your thoughts.

I said, 'Where your kindred spirit is concerned, things often don't work out as you imagined and you walk away.'

I should point out that the phrase *kindred spirit* has become debased. People just use it to mean someone you have something in common with—you both like football or share political views. But emphasise *kindred* and you can see a deeper meaning: two people who are kin beneath the skin and always have been and always will be, no matter how different they are and how different their lives, and no matter what things they say and do to each other that cause stumbles and separations and get in the way. They know each other always, and that's true even when they doubt that they're kindred spirits.

I said, 'When I was twenty-something I was obsessed by this idea that I'd meet him in totally ordinary circumstances like popping out late at night to buy milk.'

I related my story of how one night around eleven I went out for milk to a corner shop in Maryhill Road and then hung around outside in the darkness and drizzle waiting for Him, capital aitch, to turn up on the same errand.

'Our eyes would lock and the feeling would hit us that we were fated for each other, etcetera. We'd walk back to my flat together like we had no alternative, and that would be it for evermore. And I waited and waited, trying to make eye contact with guys who came to the shop, strangers, trying to radio them the message: Here I am: we've been waiting for each other all our lives.'

He kept nodding impatiently, as though hurrying me to get to the punchline of a joke that was familiar, which was a bit irritating.

'During lulls I'd look in the shop window and there were tins of pink salmon and a card of girls' combs with glittery bits in the plastic and pipe cleaners and boxes of oats and boxes of washing powder and batteries and bubble-blowing kits, so many things that told you what people were like because they might buy these things.'

'And then the police came. The shopkeeper had called them because I was hanging around and peering in like I was choosing my moment for a robbery. I couldn't have been a very convincing robber and they went off when I told them I was waiting to catch another student who did shopping there. That was before everyone had mobiles. You can't explain to the police that you're looking ►►



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► for your kindred spirit. But people are, more often than they think.'

He said, 'Even when they've already found him.'

I showed 100% agreement by nodding vigorously. 'Finding him makes you walk away to look for him. Oh, and I mustn't forget the Delhi Deli, where the real Indians dine out and buy their delicacies to take home.'

'We won't eat out tonight,' he said. 'It'll be good just to be quietly at home together. There's a lamb casserole heating—you like lamb casserole, don't you?' The words, considered just as words, could have been used by an anxious host worried that his dinner-party meal wouldn't be to his guest's liking, but the way he said them, it felt like someone remembering something and just then I knew that his lamb casserole would be just how I liked it, with the meatiness overlaid by sweetness.

I said, 'And Family Fare, a really family-friendly restaurant where kids have their own menu and are really, really welcome.'

'You want to adopt?'

'And Beefed Up, started by three girls who used to work in a burger chain, you know which one, and wanted to show the world what real burgers could be like. Joanna Blythman gave it 10 out of 10 in—'

'Put down your leaflets.' He made this sound like a cutting-through-the-crap moment and made me realise I'd been clutching my stack all the time we'd been talking.

I got up and crossed the room and went through to the kitchen, where the smell of lamb casserole conjured up the certainty of a past in which it had become my favourite meal, and put them in a bin. He just watched me as I left the room and watched again as I returned to the seat that bore my imprint.

'We're not young. Is the past going to get in the way?' he said.

I replied, 'Have we got a past?'

He stared.

I said, 'Sure, we all have these stories clamped to our heads that we call memories and we tell them like they're who we are. But sometimes they can feel like they never happened, like they're spider's webs that just got stuck to us by accident. Or they've been artificially programmed into us by whatever made us.'

'That night waiting outside the shop: sometimes it burns me up with shame, so I have to think: *That was me*. Though I don't know what there was to be ashamed of. But—here's the thing—sometimes when I think of it, it doesn't feel like a memory at all. It's no longer a fact, weighing me down. It floats away and I'm not the person who did that thing. It's like a dressing-gown that slips to the floor and I walk away from it naked as the day I was born.'

'Born again,' he said. 'A beautiful idea for those burdened with crimes. Those old, old men who once upon a time rounded up the extermination victims... So much walking away.'

I wanted to look meaningfully at him and say, 'I expect there are some things you can never really walk away from,' but it seemed so naff and clichéd. Instead, I decided to have my own cutting-through-the-crap moment.

I sat up straight and took off my shirt and pulled my tee-shirt over my head.

He watched me without moving a muscle,

and when I'd finished and still sat there, still he didn't move.

One moment I felt totally empowered and flooded with authority, having submerged myself in an irresistible male body that would be totally game-changing, and the next moment I felt a complete lulu who'd lost himself in a stupid fantasy and stripped for no purpose at all and was a bit overweight and flabby, my nipples tipped with shame.

I fluctuated between these two feelings, and still he sat there without moving, and the second one was getting stronger, gripping me like an incontrovertible fact. I'd have to put my clothes back on and leave, totally ridiculous, shamed forever.

Until he said, 'Perhaps there are some things you can never really walk away from.'

I said, 'And Secrets, the nightclub restaurant where top performers entertain you while you dine and dance the night away.'

He got up and walked across and embraced me, though it was awkward because I was in the armchair and he had to lean over to do it, which meant he couldn't press me to him in token of safety. But afterwards I was able to put my clothes back on without feeling foolish at all, and I said, 'And last but not least, Luigi's, the Italian restaurant where they make all their own pasta just like Luigi's grandmother did in the hills above Naples.' And the lamb casserole was exactly as I'd expected, and when, later, decorously, without hurrying the moment, knowing each other, we undressed and got into bed, that mysterious invisible skin-to-skin space I talked about at the start opened up and we were safe in it and that space is my eternal home. ■

Hogmanay On Culbin

SHORT STORY BY MARTIN RUSSELL



'WHAT ABOUT A walk in Culbin Forest?' you said, 'we could build a fire.' I like the way you say 'fyer', and heard it in my head though your invitation was by text. I replied that it might be nice. You texted back to say it might not be nice, but cold and wet and that we were almost certain to get lost. You were not exactly selling it to me. I wasn't sure, but eventually I decided that adventures are usually memorable for one reason or another. Then I saw that the stars were out.

Under their quilted tapestry, we picked our way through the forest trails. 'Put out your torch,' you said, so I did. 'There's a shooting star,' you said. I missed it. 'That's The Plough,' I said. 'That's Orion', you answered, 'there's his belt.' There was also a planet, Jupiter, you thought, but we couldn't find the pole star and there was no moon. I hadn't realised that the moon completely disappears once a month. Some trick.

Walking in complete darkness was quite good fun until I suddenly lost my bearings and landed in a hole. You had hysterics, I didn't. It was pretty black because stars don't actually provide much illumination. They are however quite good road maps and we generally kept the Plough to our right, it seemed to make

good navigational sense. 'We're still going north,' you told me. 'There's another shooting star,' I said. You missed it.

We heard nothing, except for the honking of some invisible passing geese, and then, quite suddenly, there was a rumble of waves, and a twinkling of lights on far away shores. You decided one set of lights was Burghead, while I decided another was Tain. Straight ahead, a lighthouse blinked as if conserving energy. Then we reached the sea and remembered just in time to stop walking as the water was reaching a high tide. There was no one else around.

You took some stones from the beach and built a circular hearth. I started getting bits of wood, though you had a clearer idea what was needed, and you'd brought some paper and kindling. Soon the fire burst into life, though I complained you had the smoke going the wrong way. We opened two bottles of beer. I wasn't partial to your chilli oatcakes. I wanted to cook a sausage, but didn't know how. My sausage fell in the fire. You showed me how to do it and I'm not sure if it's an art or a science, but it's one of them. The first sausage had a wee hernia, and looked a bit suspect but was edible. The next one was better.

We clinked bottles to see the New Year in. We lay down and snogged, for the first time this year. It was good. Eventually we got back to yours, cuddled some more and dispensed with our clothes. We each explored parts of the other, and our passion spilled out. When it receded, like the tide going out on the beach, you slept while I lay singing songs in my head. You came to and we kissed deep kisses, followed by Darjeeling tea and marmalade, and a parting. The celebration was over.

Back in my flat, I opened my rucksack and found a piece of dune grass. My clothes smelled of wood smoke. ■

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a' coiseachd air grunn na mara

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thug na mairbh dhuinn ar mac-meanmna
's tha mis' a' toirt ìomhaighean àraid air ais
ged a tha mi nam thaibhs' dhaibh
tha mi a' coiseachd còmhla riutha air grunn na mara

tha tìm na drochaid cho fann is cho briste
's cinnteach gu bheil cinnt mar sin cuideachd
tha sinn a' coiseachd air grunn na mara
chun tràigh ud thall far nach eil tràigh eile ann

tha iad ag ràdh gun do dh' iarr am muir
a thadhal ach mar a tha sinne ga fhaicinn
dh' iarr an tadhal am muir, mar a dh' iarr
iarraidh iarraidh 's mar a tha gaol aig gaol air gaol

tha tìm na drochaid cho fann is cho briste
's cinnteach gu bheil cinnt mar sin cuideachd
tha sinn a' coiseachd air grunn na mara
chun tràigh ud thall far nach eil tràigh eile ann

tha a' ghealach mar reul na maidne
tha sinn uile air a bhith marbh bho thus
tha solas na h-oidhche a' sruthadh tron duine
mar uisge nuair a ni sinn strì air grunn na mara

*tha tìm na drochaid cho fann is cho briste
's cinnteach gu bheil cinnt mar sin cuideachd
tha sinn a' coiseachd air grunn na mara
chun tràigh ud thall far nach eil tràigh eile ann*

Galtymore Dew

JOHN QUINN

Cue a greyhound track in post bellum Scotland.
Galtymore Dew has just romped home refulgent.
The miners in this somewhere don't like it much,
grim grins like once adjacent piano keys.

They spy strangers in the house in no spa town
and trust the result the way they would trust gas,
sift through lists of coal dusted moot responses,
form a liver salts crowd, tart, fizzing, angry.

The strangers send out a slim dark haired woman
to garner impossibly well gotten gains
as miners form a curt guard of dishonour,
let the lady through to man handled pound notes.

Anon the strangers exit stage anywhere.
Family in flight their Egypt is northwards.
Like the three wise men they take a different route.
There were many mansions in my mother's house.

Dorcha

MAGGIE RABATSKI

Oidhche reòthta meadhan na Dùbhlachd:
sinn air an t-slighe dhachaigh,
gabhail tarsainn air an Drochaid Chàm,

mo charaid rim thaobh a' bruidhinn
mun chàrdagan uaine àlainn
a cheannaich i an-diugh dha nighean,

ach tha m' aire-sa air solais gheanail
baile Ghlaschu, a' sìneadh astar mhiltean
fo iarmailt gheur a' gheamhraidh—

nuair a chuimhnicheas mi
mar bhuille dham bhodhaig
nach eil thusa rid lorg
an aon oisean dhen bhaile mhòr seo
a-nochd.

Is gu h-obann
thig dubharachd air an àit',
na sràidean a-nise cho uaigneach
ri raointean sgaoilte Shraith Nabhair,
far an tèid sinn a dh' aithghearr
gus do leigeil dhachaigh ris a' ghaoith.

Beathachadh

MAGGIE RABATSKI

Tha ghrian a' teàrnadh gu iar
nuair a theannas Màiri-Anna dhan phàirc,
basgaid air a gàirdean.

Tha na fir, gun fhacal
mar is àbhaist,
a' dalladh air còcadh.
Togaidh iad ceann
ach cha sguir iad buileach —
gun fhios nach tig sileadh
a-màireach —
gus a bheil an tubhailte geal,
na sgonaichean 's an gruth,
an teatha dhubh làidir
càirichte sìos air an talamh.

Tha obair gu leòr roimpe fhèin
mas tig an oidhche,
ach air chor 's gu bheil i suairce,
air chor 's gur math a thuigeas i
nach e tart na teatha
a bhios orra a-mhàin,
bheir i treiseag na suidhe cuide riuth',
a còmhradh cho finealta sunndach
na bheathachadh dhaibh,
fhad 's tha iad ri ithe 's ri òl.

Pith

JON PLUNKETT

In the dell-thickened quiet
every breath was a fug
of stillness and spore
splicing through my lungs.

I do not remember
the slow germination
of the inner forest.
I was only aware

of the division of cells
in the soles of my feet,
the bootied pressure,
burst and pleasure

as new meristem tips
rooted through leather
and the leaf-mould surface,
growing, deep as longing,

through the mist-damp earth.
I sucked up moisture,
feeling the draw of nutrients
beneath my hardening skin.

From fingers, new fingers
reaching and pointing
to every dapple
of dancing light.

The nights were peaceful,
rodents nosing round me,
the quiet flurry of owls
like breath upon me.

I learned not to speak,
but to stretch and splay
in the moonlight, listening
through every surface

as the whole earth hummed.
My knuckles broadened
to drink pure energy.
I was intoxicated by it,

standing here for centuries
absorbing life, rain-cleansed,
dried by sun-warmth,
wing beats and wind.

Only a thin seam
of some old self remains,
ringed in by years,
hidden in my pith.

Burnsiana

by Calum Colvin and Rab Wilson
Luath Press

REVIEW BY JON MILLER

'*Scotland's a construct*' – Calum Colvin ; '*What are we looking at?*' – Rab Wilson: so state the artist and poet respectively in this new collection produced as part of Calum Colvin's new exhibition *Burnsiana*. Rab Wilson's poems respond, in a range of forms in Scots and English, to Colvin's re-constructions of Burns and create an intriguing conversation between the various Burns-es of the schoolroom, Burns' Societies veneration, Visit Scotland's kitsch gee-gaws and the more honest re-examination of the man as a flawed and hugely gifted human being.

Colvin's images – part sculpture, part painting, part photography – are about 'transformation and metamorphoses' – about how an image is created and subsequently transmuted into 'fact'. It is these constructions that Colvin and Wilson seek to de-construct. There are references to James Currie's damaging biography – 'Currie's hatchet joab fair dinged ye down' – which fixed Burns as dissolute drunk despite attempts to restore his reputation by others; how schools and the heritage industry (the 'invented' Scotland) have created the Burns the Brand; even Henry Mackenzie's well-worn epithet of the 'heaven-taught ploughman' is dismissed by Wilson.

The underlying value of Colvin's work is that he challenges perception and questions the reality of what is in front of you while simultaneously pointing out the precarious fluidity in his (and your own) construction of meaning. His painting/sculpture/photography mixes the actual and the invented in ambiguous spatial dimensions that question the truth of objects and posits their re-interpretation depending on the context and associations that surround them. An image becomes multi-faceted, multi-facted, its meaning altered and undermined depending on its context. There is the constant use of visual puns – literary, historical and contemporary – which evoke the tricks that time and memory, both historical and personal, play on us. Colvin's images are ironic in their juxtapositions while Wilson's poetry provides a voice – angry, jocular, elegaic, tender – that creates a strong dynamic between the passion of the poetry and the silent, abstract/physical interpretations generated by Colvin's work.

The value of this short collection of art and poetry is the richness of their reference and allusion. Macpherson's *Ossian* makes an appearance, its fictiveness being accepted as reality and even inspiration by Napoleon – 'The little book you clasped...fuelled your visions/Of worlds left to conquer' – raising the question at what point a myth (fiction? lie?) invades the world to become entangled in the facts of history subsequently generating a whole new 'truth'. And then there's Walter Scott, that great forger (in both senses of the word) of Scottish identity who nonetheless in Wilson's poem, as Malachi Malagrowther, preserved the Scottish banknote. Viewed from the slightly different angle each time, the picture changes.

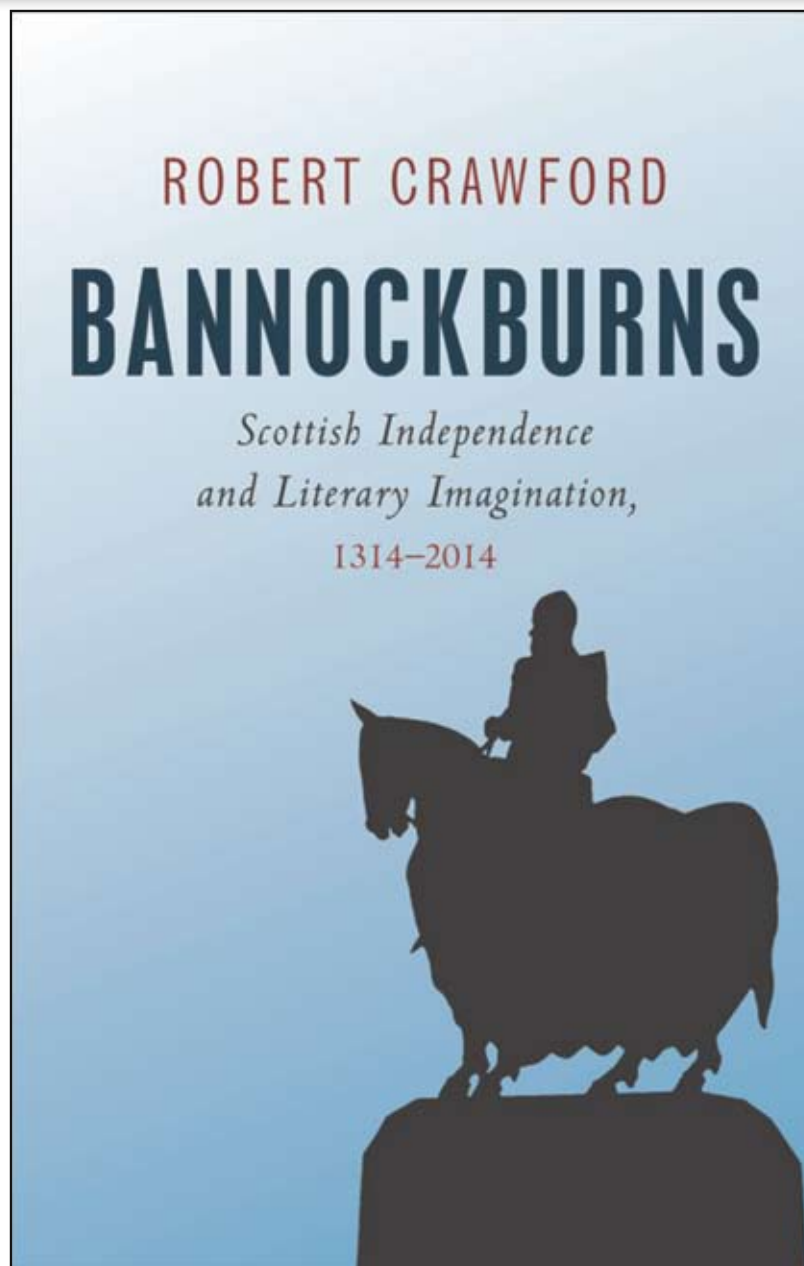
This insistence on ambiguities, layers of



BURNSIANA

Artworks and Poems
Inspired by the Life and Legacy of Robert Burns

CALUM COLVIN and RAB WILSON
With a foreword by Janice Galloway



ROBERT CRAWFORD

BANNOCKBURNS

Scottish Independence
and Literary Imagination,

1314–2014

meaning and complex narratives places the reader/viewer at the heart of interpreting what is real. There is no settled history...and in this crucial year of referendum, and the questioning of 'Scotland' and 'Scottishness', there are few acts more important. ■

Bannockburns: Scottish Independence and Literary Imagination, 1314–2014

By Robert Crawford
Edinburgh University Press

REVIEW BY FIONA WATSON

Every nation needs its high-flyers, those who soar above the mundane to provide the rest of us with stimulation and inspiration. And in this referendum year, Scotland surely needs its novelists, playwrights and poets to imagine the future, not least to enthuse, one way or the other, the third of the electorate who remain undecided. Quite rightly sensing an opportunity, Robert Crawford explores how much independence has mattered to Scotland's writers from the very moment of Robert Bruce's iconic victory 700 years ago. One might presume, therefore, that the point of the exercise is to show that the results have shaped Scotland's sense of identity and its place in the world ever since.

In the earlier chapters/period, where one can be reasonably comprehensive in analysing the role of independence and freedom in the nation's psyche, this is indeed the clear intention. In the Declaration of Arbroath, Barbour's *Bruce* and Hary's *Wallace*, as well as Scotland's early historians, it is clear that they are something of a national obsession, at least among the educated elite. In the immediate aftermath of the Union of 1707 when the benefits of colonial trade were only trickling, rather than flooding, north, these questions remained (indeed, Scotland's nobles, the very ones still accused here of being bought and sold for English gold, tried very hard and only narrowly failed to break the Union in 1713).

However, most Scots were soon enjoying the benefits of Union and here I found the plot beginning to unravel. It is one thing to explore Robert Burns' sympathies towards Jacobitism, but quite another to claim that, in evoking Bannockburn directly or indirectly, he 'performs the greatest service both to the ideals of modern democracy and [my italics] to the cause of Scottish independence.' Firstly, if the latter is true, then clearly the national Bard had little or no impact on the national psyche and to argue that he was merely ahead of his time is determinist in a way that his democratic aspirations, with the example of the French and American revolutions before him, is not. Secondly, Jacobitism cannot be equated with Scottish independence; it merely sought to replace one monarchical dynasty with another. As acknowledged on p.87, what concerned the Scots was not the Union per se, but England's domination of it. This, though not fitting in with Professor Crawford's overtly nationalist agenda, has profound resonances for today, when many Scots would like to see a properly federal UK, with each nation largely governing itself but joining together far more equally on issues of mutual interest.

I could go on, for much of the second half of the book seems skewed to fit, without

much analysis of the extent to which the chosen authors have proved influential. But where this book really captured my imagination was right at the very end, with a beautiful and insightful analysis of the poetry commissioned to commemorate the 700th anniversary of Bannockburn. Here Professor Crawford leaps off his soap box and soars, showing, rather than insistently telling, that Bannockburn and ideals of independence and freedom are still thrillingly resonant in the twenty-first century. But what they mean, to both writer and reader, is hugely more complicated and interesting than we mostly find in the rest of this book. ■

Scotland: A Creative Past, an Independent Future

by Paul Henderson Scott
Luath Press

REVIEW BY JIM MILLER

My most depressing moment so far in the Referendum campaign came last September when I saw in *The Scotsman* how voters had stated in a poll that they would vote for independence if it ensured a rise in their incomes of £500. Was this truly a reflection of the state of the debate? The tone of discussion has risen since then, I am glad to sense, and in this book Paul Scott fuels the upward trend.

The Referendum should not be about just economics and salaries but about the vision we have for the future of our country. At the same time, I can see why Alex and his SNP chums present the case for a Yes vote in a manner similar to a party manifesto before an election. Heart versus head, and it is safer and more fitting to the desired image of Scotland as a modern European nation to appeal to the head.

Paul Scott has for long, if not all his life, been a patriot and nationalist. He is not swayed to appeal to the heart but at the same time eschews narrow-minded waving of the Saltire. After a long career in the military and then in the diplomatic service, he has the wherewithal to bring an international perspective to his opinions.

The book is a collection of essays, reviews, talks and articles that have been published in various outlets over the last decade or so. He returns regularly to favourite themes, such as the need for a writers' museum, the antipathy of the erstwhile Scottish Arts Council to a national theatre, the neglect of Scots language and history in our schools, the lack of control of broadcasting north of the Border, and the bribery surrounding the Treaty of Union in 1707.

As to the writers' museum, there is a very good one in Dublin that presents the story of Irish literature. Something similar in Scotland would be a welcome addition to our list of national institutions.

The book contains plenty of ideas to feed discussion and argument. Was Sir Walter Scott, as Paul Scott maintains on the basis of the neglected work *The Letters of Malachi Malagrouther*, really opposed to the Union?

An accessible, readable collection, albeit a repetitive one that could have benefited from some editing, the book supplies a little of what has been lacking in the Referendum debate. Not arguments about pensions, currencies,

child care and bus passes (important though all such things are) but discussion of our cultural identity and how it has survived over the last 300 years.

Indeed it is a discussion of much of what is implied in the little word 'should' in the Referendum question. ■

Calton Hill; Journeys And Evocations

by Stuart McHardy and Donald Smith
Luath Press

REVIEW BY PAUL F COCKBURN

There is a strangeness to Calton Hill. The volcanic fragment is neither the tallest nor largest of Edinburgh's numerous hills—indeed, at just 103 metres (338 feet) it's dwarfed by Arthur's Seat barely half a mile to the south—but it has a unique sense of separateness from the Scottish capital, "stubbornly enduring as an untamed space encircled by the city". Though one of the world's earliest public parks, it retains an air of being distinct; after all, the most iconic views of Edinburgh, looking west towards the Castle and the New Town, are those seen from Calton Hill—which at best will include only some of the monuments on the hill itself.

This compact new volume by historian and writer Stuart McHardy and the Director of the Scottish Storytelling Centre, Donald Smith, gathers together stories and histories about Calton Hill, some told in prose, a few in poetry, along with a range of journalistic images which, alas, do little to progress the art of monochrome photography. A Robert Louis Stevenson extract not withstanding, this is a book of two parts: McHardy's "A Radical Tour" is a relatively straightforward recounting of the histories behind the various buildings and monuments on and around the hill; in contrast, Smith's "Pillars of Folly and Wisdom" is an altogether more colloquial, expressive unearthing of the hill's wider political and cultural archaeology. (The Nelson Monument, for example, "is a salient reminder of Scotland's active involvement in the British Empire's first global conflict".)

For readers who think of Calton Hill as little more than a useful viewpoint or the venue for modern-day Beltane celebrations, this volume is an interesting reminder that it's so much more. Not least the idea that it's "a scientific landscape", both in the sense of it being geologically "the outcome of a long natural evolution" and the location of buildings that celebrate "many of those who have investigated and explained the evolution of life as well as the physical sciences". Calton Hill, don't forget, was the original location of the city's Observatory—though the tales of family squabbles and "Edinburgh's near fatal predilection for architectural dispute" will surely raise a wry smile with most of the city's current inhabitants.

In these pre-Referendum days, there's also a strong political thread through the book; understandable, given that the old Royal High School on Calton Hill had been earmarked as the intended home for a Scottish Parliament in 1979. Certainly this book helps explain why Calton Hill has a radical heritage going back, at the very least, to 1554 when it was the location for performances of the medieval drama *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*.

Fittingly, the book ends with a reprinting of the "Declaration of Calton Hill", a document approved on the 100th night of what would become a 1,980 day vigil for the creation of a Scottish Parliament. "Sovereignty rests with the People of Scotland, and as such, we demand a referendum, to determine the will of the People of Scotland." Well, we have now! ■

Neil Gunn Circle: Nation and Nationalism

ed. Alistair McCleery
Whittles

REVIEW BY MEGHAN MCAVOY

The release of this collection of essays on novelist Neil Gunn is a timely one, intended to appeal to current widespread interest in questions of nationhood and Scotland's future. The book has the noble aim of reconciling academic discussion of Gunn with the interested general reader. It is a collection of essays from scholars, politicians and intellectuals, including Gunn's own short essay, 'Why are Writers Nationalists?' The selection of this piece plainly states Gunn's commitment to Scottish independence—even if it doesn't quite answer the question it posits in the title. Through the essay, Gunn hopes to have 'at least suggested' the necessity of political independence in order to sustain and continue the tradition which he sees as vitally necessary for a writer.

Much of this collection is biographical and the tone is eulogistic in places. Gunn's literature is not the focus here, rather, his role in the political scene of his day takes precedence. Alistair McCleery's introduction succinctly introduces Gunn as a political thinker, within the context of the wider Scottish Literary Renaissance, and the concerns of its various figures with class, social justice, nation, and the relationships between those. Michael Russell's essay—the longest in the collection—provides an accessible overview of the nation's cultural politics, along with a spirited case for the benefits of teaching Scottish writing in schools. McCleery's essay provides an erudite account of events in Inverness focussed on the National Party of Scotland campaign during the General Election of 1931, where Gunn's role in supporting candidate John MacCormick was necessarily a covert one, due to his job in the civil service. This essay evokes some questions as to the relationship between Scotland's writers and the nation's political narrative, both then and now—even if it does not go so far as to fully map those out for the reader. Ewan Cameron's contribution is an autobiographical account of his own experiences with Gunn's work as a schoolboy and an historian. Diarmid Gunn and Neil MacCormick (son of aforementioned NPS candidate John MacCormick) both contribute biographical memoirs, one oriented towards Gunn's novels, the other towards his politics. Christopher Stokoe's Bibliography is useful for those seeking further knowledge of Gunn's politics, and the short article introducing it helpfully problematizes Gunn's thesis, explaining that his nationalism was supplemented and qualified by a commitment to individualism. Also included in this collection is Gunn's 'Salute to a Miracle': an

allegorical story whose message of change and exploration of reactions to pending change seems to resonate with a particular poignancy in the lead-up to the referendum.

Overall, this collection takes a particularly focussed approach to Gunn's politics. It offers the reader already familiar with Gunn's literary work a refreshingly new perspective on the writer as political and historical figure, and may serve as a helpful—if extremely detailed and specific—introduction to Gunn for the less-familiar reader. ■

The Mile

By Craig A Smith
Standfirst.

REVIEW BY PAUL F COCKBURN

Three Scotsmen walk into a bar...

It could be the set up for a joke. To an extent it is—a humorous conceit transposing personal, metaphorical journeys onto a physical, geographical stagger down the length of Edinburgh's Royal Mile, from the historic Castle at the top via its most prominent public houses to outside the Scottish Parliament.

This is a novel, primarily, about three men, friends since university who are now on the edge of their 40s, no longer young. Ian, though happily married, is ground down by daily financial strains and fears that the impending arrival of a third child will be too much of a strain on his family. Euan is consumed by the crumbling reality of a failed marriage, clinging to the last vestiges of his life as a computer programmer. And then there's Stuart; handsome, tanned yet withdrawn, he's the travel writer who can't face flying, back in the old country for this reunion, but considering moving permanently into his self-renovated home in France.

Fine dramatic kindling, you might think; but debut novelist Craig A Smith chooses to spark *The Mile* into comedic life with 95-year-old Jock, a brightly-trousered army veteran who has unofficially slipped out of his Bruntsfield care home for the day and invites himself onto the three men's pub crawl. Jock is the heart of the novel even though we generally see him only through the eyes of others: most obviously Ian, Euan and Stuart (between whom the authorial point of view flies with often dizzying and—at times—genuinely confusing speed) and Rosie, who works in the care home where Jock lives and, while searching for him, embarks on a personal path of her own.

For the majority of the novel, we alternate between these two journeys—Rosie for the most part, being an hour or so behind them. Unfortunately, this is a structural device which, like most pub crawls, quickly becomes repetitive, especially as the men's activities are necessarily retold for Rosie's (rather than the readers') benefit. Rosie too, lacks the depth of personality given to the men; even though we often get to sit inside her head, there's the real sense that Smith literary wheels are spinning with little traction.

A somewhat Panglossian conclusion notwithstanding, there's much to praise about *The Mile*; not least the fact that it's often really funny. Smith's smooth, easily-read prose successfully invokes the atmosphere ►►

► of the Scottish capital's oldest street—from the tourists mingling in its historic pubs to the bizarre street performers you find there during the Festival—and he clearly has a good ear for dialect and voice. Yet this engaging exploration of modern Scottish manhood is unbalanced by one all-too-obvious “issue”—what with the action being set a week before the Referendum on Scottish Independence. With a clear authorial bias towards the Yes campaign, it can't help but feel at times preachy, with Ian in particular undercut as a living character independent of the author. ■

Byssus

by Jen Hadfield
Picador

REVIEW BY CHRIS POWICI

It's clear from the title of Jen Hadfield's latest collection – a byssus is the beard of a mussel – that here is a poet who cherishes words, but not just for their communicative power, for the way they can embody a thought or a feeling and come together in phrases and sentences; Jen Hadfield also loves words as objects, as ‘things’ of shape and sound that occupy a place in the world alongside the ideas and the objects they describe.

This fascination with the ‘texture’ of words is no surprise given Jen Hadfield's eye (and ear) for the ‘things’ of the world, and especially that nook of the planet that is her adopted Shetland. Her poetry is marvellously alert to the interplay between sound and meaning, as in the opening lines of ‘Lichen’: ‘Who listens/ Like lichen listens.’ It is also a poem which contains that splendidly pithy word ‘prunk’ (to make pretty). The word may be ‘rare’ (or relatively so) but then rarity goes to the heart of Hadfield's approach to her world and to her art; it is not that something is common or uncommon, but that our experience of any given ‘thing’ or situation is singular, dependent on time, place, memory. Thus vocabulary and diction need to be as nuanced as experience itself. Indeed, Jen Hadfield's appetite for the rare and the particular word is not confined to Shetlandic. Among her more unusual choices and coinings are ‘metalflower’ (to describe how objects ‘transmute’ into other objects), ‘quodlibet’ (a topic for theological discussion), ‘moue’ (a pout) and ‘moolah’ (money). At times the sheer boldness of her diction, along with a bravura handling of grammar and syntax, can leave the reader somewhat breathless, but there's no denying the thrill of the ride, nor the generous spirit at work in *Byssus*. I could sense the spirits of Gerald Manley Hopkins, Ian Hamilton Finlay, even e.e. cummings echoing through these poems.

But *Byssus* is certainly no cabinet of interesting but redundant curiosities, though it does, at times, resemble a pantry. Food crops up a lot in this book and Jen Hadfield uses words as a chef uses ingredients. There is even a fridge-shaped poem, ‘The White Goods’ where a relish for the taste of foods, and the names they bear, is unmistakable: ‘Using up the/wonton skins, the last of the pitlocks,/the mackerel fillets in their oily lamé/the salmon-heads and galangal.’ Elsewhere she even brings the moon into her kitchen by describing it as a ‘bashed swede’.

A willingness to come at reality from new and illuminating angles is evident from the shapes and contours of other poems. In ‘The Wedding Road, with Free Bar’ the lines teeter and stagger their way across and down the page, breaking in unexpected places to reveal odd, alternative meanings and ways of looking – thus ‘themselves’ becomes, rather charmingly, ‘thems elves’. In ‘Smiles learnt in the cockle-beds’ words cling haphazardly to the white space surrounding them so that the reader becomes a sort of cockle picker, scanning the page for meanings rather than having the sense of poem delivered in the expected, cumulative manner.

Although Hadfield's natural mode is one of affirmation and celebration, she also understands that we are, all of us, fragile creatures of time: a cat stares into ‘the black hole’ of a dead blackbird; a moth alighting on a man's finger ‘shivered the eloquent/flakes of its wings.’ Elsewhere she even addresses the ‘unspeakability’ of death: ‘a poem or riddle collies no particle/of it for us to fank/in mouths and minds.’ But life and death are so much more than, as the cliché would have it, two sides of the same coin. In ‘The March Springs’ she writes ‘It's impossible to think of any one thing’. From the Atlantic Ocean to the back of a fridge, Jen Hadfield is a superbly attentive and eloquent witness to how her world – our own world – brims with variety and meaning. ■

The Girl on the Ferryboat

by Angus Peter Campbell
Luath Press

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

The Girl on the Ferryboat begins: ‘It was a long hot summer.’ Great title, great first line. And within pages, we are promised proper romance. What is more romantic than being haunted by a glimpse, a moment, a blurry un-edged slice of possibility? The protagonist, Alasdair, confides that he has had a good life, and has been loved by a loyal wife, and yet upon widowhood in his sixties, suddenly pines for the girl he passed on the ferry walkway, decades ago. A stranger, a pretty face with no history. Even her name is pretty but neutral: Helen.

Surely, the reader thinks, Alasdair has passed many strangers since then, and good percent of them must have been pretty young women – why this one? He has not even had a conversation with her. Their orbits have intersected less than a minute, and they exchanged the most mundane of pleasantries.

‘Sorry,’ he said as he passed her.

‘Oh, don't worry – I'll get by,’ she replied with a smile.

Two lines that, in retrospect, pretty much sum up their permanent situation.

So, what was the big deal? The big deal is the narrator thinks like a poet. He does not write poetry, but he is a poet temperamentally. He imagines how his life might have been, if only...if only he and the ferryboat girl had somehow connected that day. He hankers after something out of reach, and so is free to fill in the gaps with idealistic perfection. (Perhaps most individuals, if they are honest, will admit to a similar inclination. Grass is always greener, etc)

I was reminded of the Gael poet William Ross, who in 1680 fell in love with a girl he saw in Stornaway. Marion was dancing with her little brother; she had lots of freckles, and was one of those girls who always seemed to be laughing. He declared his love, and she kindly said it was only friendship she was offering. Did this gentle rejection discourage William? Oh no – he was a poet, and it was not a tangible union he was after. To simply feel the emotion of love was enough. Requited love was the only danger, and he commenced to write poetry inspired by Marion that is still read today. It was the perfect sadness. To never acquire one's desire. In fact, when Marion eventually offered her heart, he conveniently caught a cold and expired.

Of course, this is a familiar pattern. Think of Yeats' lifelong yearning for Maude Gonne who continually eluded him, and Thomas Hardy writing reams of his best poetry to the wife he couldn't love till she died. It appears to be an emotional condition that poets are prone to, and very bad luck to the women they actually marry!

But this novel cannot be quite summed up so cynically, because the narrator, Alasdair, has the self awareness to ponder his own obsession in an intelligent way. And then, by odd coincidence, Helen and Alasdair have a brief opportunity to get to know each other, as middle aged people. The quiet flame flares into a bonfire! But when sudden tragedy enters his life again, he experiences a strange disinclination to study Helen's journals and letters. All along, the story he has told us about Helen has been his own imaginings based on the few scraps of information she told him later. He understands that he needed the gaps of ignorance in order to feel close to her. Knowing too much would be the kiss of death. As Somerset Maugham said: Love is what happens to a man and woman who do not know each other. And as Alasdair proves (perhaps unconsciously), it is safer to love what doesn't really exist anyway – no risk of disillusion or loss.

Because it seems so unlikely that they would each remember each other after the briefest of encounters forty years ago, I was left wondering if the novel was (at least on one level) the story of a widower so lost to his own self, so lonely, he fabricated a perfect relationship, then invented an accident which precluded a proper test run of the relationship. A kind of survival mechanism. But it hardly matters if the older Helen is real or not. The girl Helen existed. He fell in a kind of love with her, and that spark sustained him all his life.

So, it turns out this story is not just a romance after all.

First of all, is a philosophy book; how a man can be infected with nostalgia, and live somewhere in between lived life and imagined life. For Alasdair, there is the world and all its wonders, but there is also a more seductive kind of truth residing in omissions, subtleties and shadows.

Secondly, it is a linguistic treat. Line after line of delicious words are joined up in aesthetically pleasing order, an intoxicating rhythm. Norman Maccaig said Angus Peter Campbell ‘had a very considerable gift indeed.’ I agree.

Thirdly, there is the story through which Helen weaves, a tantalising muse. Alasdair's boyhood, his grandparent's lives, the boat building days, his eclectic career, the losses he suffers, the moments of beauty he draws from. Foreign city streets and rivers slip between west coast island seas and beaches, as randomly as a pack of playing cards shuffled carelessly. The trajectory of his life is not chronological – back and forth, Alasdair pulls the reader lightly through a prism of memories and dreams.

Fourthly, this novel is a song of love to Gaeldom, past and present. Not of some sentimental place and time, but from an eye witness who has the intelligence to spot the flaws and accept the whole reality. I recommend this book to anyone who has become jaded with the definition of Scotland.

And finally, and most interestingly, this is a story about how we tell ourselves the story of our own life, and of our families. Alasdair is a man in his sixties, full to the brim with love – and no one to pour it into but the reader. I liked his story very much indeed. ■

Blackthorn

By Aimée Chalmers
The Lumphanan Press

REVIEW BY HELEN ADDY

Aimée Chalmers' *Blackthorn*, explores the life of the North-east poet Marion Angus (1865-1946). In her introduction, Chalmers describes her book as, ‘less of a fictional biography, more of a novel.’ I would add that it is an extraordinarily rich one at that. Before reading *Blackthorn*, I was familiar with Angus' poetry, but had only a vague impression of her often thwarted life. The novel gives a powerful, and multi-faceted portrait of a woman at odds with the world, and the people surrounding her.

The first five chapters are written in Scots, and chart the romance between Marion and Wull, a traveller. Interestingly, and I believe, unusually, the viewpoint is Wull's. His hopes, anxieties and dreams are evocatively described, and are interspersed and represented by stirring descriptions of the landscape. I was immediately drawn into his earthy yet poetic existence: ‘Nae moon, nae stars: fire and smoke and mist. He spat in the fire and listened tae the gob sizzle.’

The circumstances of Marion and Wull's first encounter, is gripping, and the dialogue crackles with drama and romance. The significance of the novel's title, and the couple's fate, is beautifully implied in their conversation about the blackthorn's flourishing buds, and cruel thorns.

“Pearls, that's what they're like...”

...

“...Watch yersel, and mind that branch, it'll rip ye tae bits...A black hert, it has, yon bush.”

The first mention that Angus is a poet, come in Chapter Three, in the context of Marion and Wull discussing how they will remain together. Couched in purely practical terms, her work is offered as an answer to the question of their future.

Later sees a shift to a first person narrative in English, with the reader's first glimpse of

Marion's inner life. We see her grappling with a poem about the blackthorn, and she makes a thrilling statement about the poet's use of imagery: '...the missionaries said that native people make images of goddesses to protect their villages, little statues of their enemies in order to control and destroy them. Isn't that something like what a poet does?'

Part II opens thirty years on, and we see Marion attending an event on the poetry circuit. She is self-effacing and uncertain, and we get an impression that the years have weighed heavily upon her. This is explored in more depth as the reader learns of Marion's role as carer to her sister, Ethel. Again, the dialogue here is masterful. Marion's feelings of responsibility, fear, and resentment are beautifully handled.

"You didn't have to do that, dear."

"I don't expect you'd have done it:" the jocular tone that isn't.

I don't need to get into an argument, not so soon, not after yesterday.

With Marion nearing the end of her life, the exposing of secrets and a sense of hard-won peace dominate Part III. We see a woman surrendering to the dark pull of her past and acknowledging its currents. Chalmers has given us an original, unique novel about an enduring poet and a fascinating woman. ■

Crumbs

by Miha Mazzini
Freight Books

REVIEW BY ALISON NAPIER

Crumbs. This is one of the most category-defying novels I have read for a long time. It could have been a straight-forwardly grim manifesto for independence from a soviet-style authoritarianism, but it isn't. Our narrator-guide is Egon and we follow him around a city in Yugoslavia before it imploded into the Bosnian War. The author is Slovenian so perhaps it is set in Slovenia but we are not told. It doesn't matter. Like the Slovenians we are kept in the dark. We meet Karla living in a down-at-heel apartment, and the workers housed in wretched unsanitary dormitories attached to the infernal Foundry that dominates the city. Egon's friend Noodle lives and hides in a disused half-buried bunker in the woods. It should be bleak bleak bleak but it isn't.

Egon does not work in the Foundry although he knows many who do, and often slips over the wire to get a cheap lunch. He is a writer but he dare not publish his work, and he conceals and destroys it as required. Instead he writes romantic fiction under an assumed name and this is his modest income. He has experienced incarceration from both the psychiatric profession and the military. He is usually drunk, and frequently stoned. He has lots of sex with prostitutes and with random women. He also ponders the personality theories of Eduard Spranger and he reads the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud.

Not surprisingly this is a novel of contrasts and contradictions. There is darkness and anomie, the very air feels pale and anaemic, and the only colour mentioned, so frequently that it zings like a strobe of hope, is red. Red dust, red book cover, red leather armchair, Noodle's wounds. (Noodle slices wafer-thing

strips off his arm. Hence his name.) There is also humour. Egon visits a dentist and realises that she is an ex-girlfriend that he treated badly. Ouch.

But mostly this is a book about identity, individuality and obsession. Egon and his friends, some lifelong travellers, others made and lost in a day, often wrecked and adrift, want only the opportunity to be themselves without censure. Sheriff wears a Stetson and a badge. Egon devises complex plans to obtain his expensive French perfume. Selim is obsessed with a film star nymphette. His dorm-mate is obsessed with a girl he dare not speak to. The Poet is obsessed with his unpublishable poems.

And yet. For all its monochrome exteriors, muted howls and numb desolation, the grimness of this pre-dissolution Eastern bloc city cannot diminish the wit, the hope and unquenchable spirit of the sheer bloody humanity of, well, humans.

'Life is the farce we are all forced to endure,' wrote Rimbaud on a bad day. But then he also said, 'A thousand dreams within me softly burn.' These dreams shimmer and smoulder beneath the grey surface of *Crumbs*, tiny embers for all who struggle for a voice and a life worth living. Hell is more bearable than nothingness.

It is stretching credulity to imply, as its publisher does, that the novel might mirror the separatist movement here in Scotland. Yes, we too yearn for independence, but we are not routinely rounded up and beaten for holding dissenting views. So do not read this book as an adjunct to a referendum. Read it because it is a Slovenian triumph. ■

Ingathering

By Dawn Wood
Templar Poetry

REVIEW BY RICHIE MCCAFFERY

The title and overall mood of this collection seem to have been inspired by a remark by Geoffrey Hill that poetry is not a sort of confessional 'spilling out' but an 'ingathering'. Wood's poems gather in the experience of the years to produce a poetry marked by its fascination with language and with the meditative 'in-scape' poems can offer. Like Hill, Wood's poems grapple with religion, its aesthetics and language (Wood often also shares Hill's interest in lexical esoterica such as 'thurible' and 'cantillations') in a thoughtful and often syncretic way – for instance birdsong is often referred to in terms of religious rites or songs in these poems, sometimes going as far as to read deeply into the patterns or behaviour of birds:

My pet blackbird at home isn't mine.
He sits on the telegraph pole
where the wires for neighbours are tied
and he pours out and holds forth.

Birds get people talking.
He's the *Samuel*, *Samuel* in my ear at 4pm,
he's our nunc dimitis these clear nights.
truly, I'd be lost without him.

It's the way, in dreams, a person you know
means whatever you associate with them.
In that way – that bird – my bird –

talking above all else.
(‘Hall of the Heavenly King’)

'Variation' is a poem worthy of mention for its almost Belgian style of surrealism which brings to mind Bosch and Magritte and deserves to be quoted in full for it seems to subtly undermine the self-aggrandising tone poetry can sometimes take on:

A Pisci Tukki and a Wee Lamb
were impaled on a thorn.
Said the lamb – *I'm a ram*
from the Great Death Pit at Ur;
said the Tukki – from the Tamil
or Malayalam, I am,
and it's Peahen and Episcopalian
on special occasions
when I employ my charms,
such are here, in this thicket,
before the pyre of The Patriarch's lit;
so they upped sticks and rose to the flame.

The poem 'Pavilion of Ancient Wisdom' also supports the notion that the poems are a step away from the lyrical ego of a poet into a new and often defamiliarising terrain where the natural world exerts itself. The speaker of the poem seems almost incidental after a thrush flies into her while out dog walking. In the dusk, this thrush lies on the ground like 'a nipples / umber toad' and:

The ancient pavilion
of *I am*
draws taut
the thought of woman
dog, toad, bird.

For all of the adventurousness of the vocabulary in these poems (sometimes a line left me scratching my head), they possess a winning pared-down quality – a sharpness of image and a bareness of tone combined with an almost elliptical writing style. For instance a lump of beech is brought home for a chopping block:

... to save the axed flagstone –
reader, stagger by the fire,
better than no flame.
(‘That Things Are Not
As They Seem’)

One of the most enduring effects of this collection is its celebration of life, of double-vision (an awareness that the poet fictionalises the world and can obscure it by writing about self) and a contentment found in the most barren of settings. I remember first reading Wood's poem 'Gimel' in an issue of *Northwords Now* (Issue 25) and was struck by how much it seemed to express in a small poem. The speaker seems to find pleasure in noting how the poet tries to read things into the behaviour of the animal world and how her poetry then becomes a celebration not only of belonging or dwelling, but of the gulf between poetic interpretations of the world and their actuality:

Days, as a caravan of camels
bearing little tags of grace;
I'm a rich man if I thread
my needles into here, this place.

Poetic Adventures in Scotland with Seventy Selected Poems

by Sally Evans

Diehard Publishers

REVIEW BY RICHIE MCCAFFERY

The cover of Sally Evans' selected poems cum poetic travelogue has already generated much internet interest. It shows Sally in her bookshop in Callander, holding 'Finlay' the quasi-wild cat. Sheena Blackhall has been quick to point out, and pen a poem on the subject, that here is Sally Evans' life in Scotland handed to the reader 'and the cat gets the review'. So, now Finlay's out of the way, we'll carry on – for carrying on through opposition and bad luck and despite perhaps indifferent and male or university dominated poetry cliques of the 1980s is one of the great hallmarks of this book; the poetry keeps flowing and responding to twists and turns in Sally's life.

While this book is foremost a selected poems covering over thirty years of writing, it is the 'inter'-amble between these poems that makes the book one of double interest. All of these poems are woven together by biographical stands of optimistically silver thread and anecdote which is tactfully presented to the reader. There is much first-hand writing about poetry and literature in Scotland from just about every decade of the last century, but there is little on the 80s and 90s, so I was fascinated to read about the early days of the Scottish Poetry Library and in particular the troubled but brilliant poets Rayne MacKinnon and Sandie Craigie.

It seems selfless of Sally to use her own poetic adventures as a means to discuss other poets who arguably worked on the fringes of poetry. One of the un-self-conscious motives behind this seems to be to show the emergence of a thriving community. Early in the book she talks of the influence of Edwin Muir on her early poetry, but Muir argued that communities were dead and all that existed was a 'public' – Sally's book shows that poetry-centred communities can be possible, away from the well-meaning but ultimately patronising 'head-patting' gestures of male poets and publishers like Duncan Glen.

Of the poems in this book I was struck by how many dealt with the imagery of journeys, discoveries and debateable lands of language, poetry and society as well as notions of hard work, harvesting and gardening. Towards the end of the book, there is a sudden grouping of elegies for poets such as Kathleen Raine and Adrian Mitchell. I worried for a moment that the book would end on a sombre note but we are taken through Sally's most recent work and given a few sample poems from one of her most ambitious sequences *Anderson's Piano* – based on an old railway signalling system which alerted trains to rocks falling on the tracks. In these poems we are given a sense of the value of life and of people living in difficult rocky places, which can be seen as emblematic of the position of a poet arriving in Scotland and making themselves at home whilst also honing their craft in such landscapes.

Here is an extract from a poem based on a dream where Sally envisages a community of women poets brought together out of ▶▶

► isolation and made to sit in silence on a bus to an unclear destination. What is striking is that their poetry remains hidden yet their clothes are all bright outward expressions. The poem is a disturbing one that ends in ambiguity, but it serves to dramatise one of the central struggles of the book and Sally's poetry – to voice the secret travelogue and give a sense of the ongoing drive to be heard, valued and to belong:

...we would sit, trundling through areas
each with our secret store of poetry
and unexplained or borrowed lyric,
quotations running in invisible minds

as if each had a separate travelogue,
a private loop beyond that crowded pen
of accidental passengers. We'd sit
in gaily coloured clothing, as the fashion

appealed to each woman in isolation,
each poet their own personality,
a bustling ant-town a sardonic god
could devise. A way to monitor

and say, Look, they are all doing
the same thing. Social instinct. It's the world
that adds the rainbow of their coats and scarves,
their sensed eternity, their strings of words.

Poetry Reviews

By JOHN GLENDAY

Pamphlet presses are the bedrock of poetry: they're maybe small in output but never small in ambition or importance, nor are they simply stepping stones towards a full collection, but works of art in their own right with a far greater diversity of voice, language and subject matter than could ever be achieved by the major houses.

It's good to see national awards such as the Michael Marks and Callum Macdonald recognise and reward this essential service.

today today today is published by PlaySpace Publications, an imprint of Lapidus Scotland and brings together a selection of Alec Finlay's poems centred on the theme of illness – a marvellously bright and optimistic collection, produced as part of a commission from the Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre. The poems, as we have come to expect from Finlay, are spare, beautiful and moving. The collection begins by including all of us, well and ill, in the world of the moment, and ends with a circular poem which both affirms and denies the centrality of illness. It's designed and typeset by Luke Allen, whose journal of formal and concrete poetry 'Quait' is attracting considerable interest.

Every country needs their Graham Fulton. He's a prolific, angry, humane, funny, accessible poet and in *The Universe is a Silly Place* (ControlledExplosion press) we can enjoy every aspect of his writing: a hilarious amalgam of spam email titles; a dialogue between Daleks in Tesco or MacGonagall's take on tennis. But it is poignant too – in poems such as 'George Square Thatcher Death Horse', he shows how well he can observe and delineate the inequalities that divide and define us.

Red Squirrel Press of Northumberland has a strong track record of publishing Scottish poets and running at 154 pages Eddie

Gibbons *A Twist of Lime Street* is an impressive, substantial selection. Although his punning titles 'The Electrode less travelled'; Pantoum of the Opera'; 'Death Shall have no Dim Onion' were at times in danger of stealing the thunder, it is the scattered sequence of short elegies in memory of his father that remained with me longest.

It's about time they proclaimed Lesley Harrison the Auchmithie Makar. She's been quietly and painstakingly mapping the landscape of Scotland and Beyond for some years now, from Eday to Ulaanbaatar. *Upstream* (available through www.makingspaceforwater.wordpress.com) is a pamphlet and poemcards commissioned as part of the Making Space for Water project, which aimed to highlight the interplay of artist and landscape – in this case the landscape and specifically the rivers of Angus. Some are patterns of place names, list-litanies, lyrical definitions, but whatever form the poems take, they illuminate the natural world in a simple and dazzling way: 'faintly rocked/like an old sea bell//our axis, our stone rim/a slow wheel//of thin rain, and red blink/and silence.' Harrison is a clear-sighted, original poet, and this is a hugely impressive addition to her work.

Douglas Kynoch's *Simmer Ootin* is a fine addition to Doric literature – his original poems and prose are written with a natural ease, and he includes some translations and versions – I thought his Doric versions of Frost and Edward Thomas leaned too heavily on the genius of the originals, but his excerpt from 'Lettres de Mon Moulin' was executed with such careful gusto I couldn't help being carried along: '...au lointain, nous voyons le troupeau s'avancer dans une gloire de poussière.' rendered by 'hine awa, we twig the hirsil birsin forrit in a glory o stoor.' I bet Daudin wishes he wrote that!

Also celebrating the Doric –this time the Banffshire genus, is Bill Thom's *The Quait Chiel* (Tapsalteerie), a funny, rollicking, 'flyting' in which two cannie pals best the Devil.

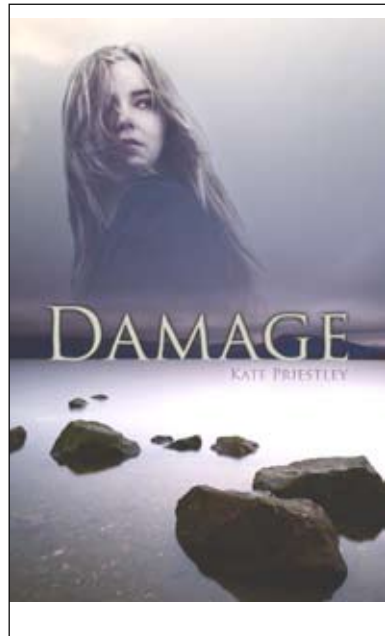
One of the most original, challenging and adventurous collections in my pile comes from Pighog Press. *The Last Wolf of Scotland* by MacGillivray is a hair-raising, bloodthirsty, bizarre conflation of Scottish and 'Wild West' identity. At first I reckoned Pighog were trying their best to put me off with the over-the-top blurb: 'MacGillivray has walked in a straight line with a dead wolf on her shoulders... eaten broken chandelier glass in a derelict East Berlin shopping mall... breast-fed a Highland swan in Oxford...' But I persisted. And this is a collection which demands persistence – MacGillivray herself describes it as a 'pidgin-mix' of appropriated Scots, esoterica and archaisms. I have no problem with this. Poetry should appropriate; it should push the envelope to remind us how lively and alive Scots is. These are poems to be read aloud, poems that will grow richly in the air.

Ballast Flint (Cromarty Arts Trust) is the product of Richie McCaffrey's Residency with Cromarty Arts Trust in 2011. A high quality pamphlet, thanks to Gerry Cambridge's exceptional design and the stunning collagraphs of Hannah Rye which perfectly capture the landscape and architecture of Cromarty. I've been a chronic admirer of McCaffrey's work since

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discovering and enjoying his first pamphlet *Spinning Plates* (HappenStance Press). These poems are gemstones, formed by persistent and careful attention. He's a consistently fine writer, destined to go far.

New from HappenStance is *Hannah, are You Listening* by Hamish Whyte, another in Helena Nelson's fine stable of writers. The blurb describes the poems as 'like windows... You can hear through the glass perfectly,' and indeed they are: unadorned, deceptively simple, insightful poems which take us exactly where we need to go: 'Keeping watch outside and in/is the difficult thing/poets do, trying/

not to, like falling/asleep with your eyes open.' Ah yes, that hits the spot!

Michèle Roberts' *The Hunter's House* published by Mariscat Press, is a year of poems describing the twelve weathers of a love affair, guiding us through from summer, of course, to spring. After all, does every affair not have winter at its heart? I hadn't known her poetry before (she's a Booker Prize shortlisted novelist) but I was hugely impressed by the way she weaves together time, imagery and narrative. The persisting metaphor of growth and seasonal change make this a memorable sequence with a powerful conclusion retelling the myth of Persephone. ■

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Jane Aldous has had poems published in *Northwords Now*, *Southlight* and *poetandgeek*. She is currently involved in a collaboration with other members of her poetry group on rural and urban dereliction. Jane blogs at www.kitchenpoetry.blogspot.com

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Connie Ramsay Bott grew up in Michigan, where many of her stories and poems take place. She has lived in the Midlands for many years.

Paul Brownsey has been a journalist on a local newspaper and a philosophy lecturer at Glasgow University. He has had about 60 short stories published in the UK and North America. He lives in Bearsden.

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

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

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Gordon Jarvie used to work in publishing, retiring in 2006. He lives in the East Neuk of Fife, nicely

placed for checking nearby poly tunnels for fruit. He enjoys walking the dog, birdwatching, and beachcombing along the Fife Coastal Path.

Stephen Keeler is a volunteer member of the Organising Committee of the Ullapool Book Festival.

Joan Lennon says 'The Kingdom of Fife is said to be shaped like a dog's head. If this is so, I live on the ear, which explains a lot.'

Katherine Lockton is co-editor of *South Bank Poetry*. Her work has been published in numerous magazines such as *Magma*, *Brittle Star* and *The Dark Horse*.

Marcas Mac an Tuairneir's first collection of poetry was *Deò*, published by Grace Note Publications. He is now working on a second collection of poetry – *Guirmean* – and his debut novel, for Acair. www.marcasmac.co.uk

Pàdraig MacAoidh – À Leòdhas. Na fhear-teagaisg aig Oilthigh Chille Rìmhinn. Cruinneachadh ùr bho Acair am-bliadhna.

Crisdean MacIlleBhàin – Bàrd, nobhailiche, fear-teagaisg agus fear-breithneachaidh a' fuireach anns an Ungair an-dràsta.

Caoimhin MacNèill – À Steòrnabhagh. Cruinneachadh *Love and Zen in the Outer Hebrides* (1998).

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).

Meghan McAvoy is a PhD student at Stirling

University, working in contemporary Scottish writing. Her other interests include fiddle music, Scots song, and left-wing politics.

Ian McFadyen is a retired teacher (English), life now divided between Sutherland and the Borders. You will find him next to William McGonnagall on the SPL website...

Donald McKenzie lives in Inverness. He is a visual artist, sculptor and writer whose inspiration is drawn mainly from his connections to the Outer Hebrides.

Jim Miller has recently published *Europe, the Highlands and Me*, a collection of essays based on his travels in northern Europe. It is available through Amazon Kindle.

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.

Jon Plunkett lives in Aberfeldy, runs 'Loose Tongues, Live Poetry!', is widely published in UK poetry journals, and is leading the development of The Corbenic Poetry Path.

John Quinn is a former English teacher from Dundee and now a Tour Guide in Verdant Works. Also a 'perspiring poet' and a before and after dinner speaker.

Maggie Rabatski – Às na Hearadh. Cruinneachaidhean An Dèidh An Dannsa agus

Holding bho New Voices Press.

Martin Russell specialises in short fiction, often autobiographical, occasionally from other perspectives. He has also completed an as yet unpublished novel. He lives in Inverness.

Stewart Sanderson is a PhD student in Scottish Literature at Glasgow University. His poems have appeared in various magazines, including *Gutter*, *Magma*, *Poetry Wales*, *Poetry Review* and *Irish Pages*.

Alison Scott lives in Aberdeen. She spent her early childhood in the Isle of Lewis and its landscape, history and people remain a source of inspiration.

James Sinclair began writing in his forties, publishing a pamphlet, *Gulf Stream Blues*, through North Idea in 2007. He is on the editorial committee of *The New Shetlander*.

Jan Sutch Pickard is a poet and storyteller living on the Ross of Mull. A member of the Iona Community, Jan worked for six years on Iona, was Warden of the Abbey. As a volunteer with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, she wrote about life in a West Bank village.

Gill Terry studied Creative Writing with the Open University and attempts to write narrative poetry that is accessible without being slight. She lives on Skye.

Maggie Wallis is learning to integrate the practice of focusing with poetry.

Fiona Watson is a writer, historian and broadcaster. Author of a number of medieval history books, she is currently working on her first novel.

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