



The FREE literary magazine of the North

Northwords **Now**

Issue 29, Spring 2015

What Do We Think We Are?

**Robert Davidson on Writing,
Territory and Identity**

**New fiction and poetry
including Robin Fulton Macpherson,
Regi Claire, Pàdraig MacAoidh,
Lesley Harrison and Hugh McMillan**

**Interviews and Reviews including
Christopher Brookmyre, Ian Stephen
and Michel Faber**

EDITORIAL

Changing Times

THIS IS THE last issue of *Northwords Now* in its current form. At the time of writing this editorial I am waiting to hear from our principal financial partners, Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, about applications for funding for 2015/16. I am confident the news will be good but even if our applications are successful some changes need to be made.

Northwords Now will now be published just twice a year – in March and September. This means that, at a time of acute financial pressure, we can save money on printing and distribution costs. However the impact on writers and readers will not, I hope, be felt too keenly. The magazine will grow in size from 24 to 32 pages per issue. In other words we will publish almost the same amount of fiction, poetry, articles and reviews. Importantly, *Northwords Now*, will also remain *free* to its readers, whether online or on good, old fashioned paper. That we are able to do this owes much to the continuing support of Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, and to Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Our thanks go out to them.

I've also decided to bring in submission deadlines so that writers will have a better idea of how soon they can expect a decision on their submission. The submission deadline for Issue 30 is 31st July 2015.

One thing, I'm happy to say, that does not seem to change with the times, at least not for the worse, is the amount of fine new writing that comes our way. Long may it continue. ■

– CHRIS POWICI
Editor

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Podcast of Pàdraig MacAoidh

Gaelic Poetry in translation

Reviews Extra

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Northwords Now is a twice yearly literary magazine published by Northwords, a not-for-profit company, registered in February 2005.

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Subscriptions

The magazine is FREE and can be picked up at locations across Scotland. See list on P23
The fee for individual 'home-delivery' is £6 for 2 issues, cheques payable to 'Northwords'.

Front cover image

Front Cover Image: Photograph of poet
Magi McGlyn by Dominique Carton
www.alba-photography.com

Submissions to the magazine are welcome.

They can be in Gaelic, English, Scots and any local variants. They should be sent to the postal address. Unsolicited e-mail attachments will not be opened. The material should be typed on A4 paper. Please submit no more than three short stories or six poems. Contact details – an email address or an 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 September 2015. The deadline for submissions is 31st July 2015. You will hear about your submission by 31st August 2015.

The Board and Editor of Northwords Now acknowledge support from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig.
ISSN 1750-7928



Good Guys and Bad Guys

An Interview with Christopher Brookmyre

By STEPHEN KEELER

CHRISTOPHER BROOKMYRE is the best-selling author of eighteen action novels which are strong on plot and blend social comment, occasional satire and, increasingly, character development. The early novels, written under the name *Christopher Brookmyre*, have a rich comic, almost absurdist seam; later novels, by *Chris Brookmyre*, are somewhat darker. Stephen Keeler talked to the author before a reading from his latest novel, *Dead Girl Walking*, at Waterstone's in Inverness.

SK *Could we start with the name? Are you Christopher Brookmyre or Chris Brookmyre? And does it matter?*

CB It's one of those questions I wish I could make some sort of public statement about. It was really my publisher doing something that would signal a change of tone. I can understand why they were doing it but I think they were hamstrung by the fact that it was the wrong way round: if I'd always been *Chris Brookmyre* writing these informal books it would have made perfect sense...as a publisher they'd been very successful distinguishing between Iain Banks and Iain M Banks and I think they were thinking they could maybe show different sides to my writing but I'm not sure those sides were quite so distinct...and now, just to confuse matters, there's a Jack Parlabane novel published under the name Chris Brookmyre.

SK *How do you feel about the description of your early books as comic thrillers? And to what extent have you made a conscious decision to move away from the comic?*

CB I don't object to that at all. I think publishers don't much like it though. It makes the books harder to sell. People don't always respond well to that. Hard-core crime readers seem to shy away from it. It's not 'proper' crime. I set out in *Quite Ugly One Morning*, which was directly influenced by Carl Hiaasen – his characters are larger than life and fun to be around – to create a tribute to the Carl Hiaasen lumbering hitman who gets increasingly debilitated as the story goes on. And I didn't consciously decide to move away from that. It was a very gradual evolution away from the comedy although I'm not sure there's always a clear line.

SK *It's not that you've become a more serious person yourself?*

CB No. Well, I think that more recently I've been less overtly satirical in my writing. Partly it's the fact I'm not in my twenties any more and partly I think other things have engaged me as a writer. The type of story I want to write about doesn't lend itself to that knockabout tone.

SK *You take a fair swipe at the Daily Mail and the Leveson Inquiry in Dead Girl Walking, though?*



Photograph of Christopher Brookmyre by Stephen Keeler

CB Yeah, I'm able to engage with that sort of thing in a tone that's in keeping with the rest of the story, whereas in the past there was an almost cartoonish element to my writing and I don't think that would sit so well with the more character-driven type of story that I'm writing at the moment. *Dead Girl Walking* is very much a character piece, so it wouldn't really do if you suddenly had some whacky set piece as you might have found in my previous books. But it wasn't as though I reached a stage where I thought right I won't do that any more. For me it's always been about the story.

SK *How do you feel about the 'tartan noir' tag?*

CB I don't object to it. I think it was first used about me with my second book. It was a handy thing to band together a number of writers. I never had any problem with the 'tartan'. The problem I had was with the 'noir'. Most of my early writing was fairly colourful and upbeat. It wasn't mean streets. I think that 'noir' ends up being misunderstood: it ends up being a shorthand term for crime fiction. Admittedly some of the stuff I've written recently is far more 'noir', but you couldn't describe a book like *One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night* as 'noir'. It's very cartoonish, it's over-the-top, it's very redemptive. It's characters exorcising their personal demons...and it's fun, it should be energetic and knockabout. It's about as far from 'noir' as crime fiction can get.

SK *To what extent do your novels set out to make social comment?*

CB Every novel I've written has had some sort of ideological agenda, sometimes more transparent than others...I don't feel engaged with a novel if I don't feel that it's telling me something about the society around it. But I don't think I chose crime fiction because I

wanted to write social commentary. I chose it because it's the kind of writing I like: stories that have good guys and bad guys and complicated and convoluted plots, and surprises and twists...I'd never have written anything else.

When I grew up there was no real fiction for older kids so I went straight from Asterix to Ian Fleming and Robert Ludlum. So my sense of what a grown-up novel was was a story that had that sort of plot, evil machinations, highly complex ruses going on: to me that was the kind of story I was always going to write.

SK *Where did the character of Jack Parlabane come from?*

CB He has evolved over a long period of time. Initially I was conscious that I didn't want to write about a police officer. Other people know more about that and can do it better. I'd worked in newspapers so I was a bit more familiar with journalism and also it's not required of the journalist the way it is of the police to follow logical lines of enquiry. So that was part of it, and there was also an element of Ford Prefect from *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* about him. That character stuck with me. And I like the idea that someone can break in and breach security – not realising that this was actually standard journalistic practice!

SK *He says, at one point in Dead Girl Walking, "I've got a habit of finding dangerous situations and effortlessly making them worse".*

CB Yes, that creates an impression...readers are going to know that he's not a conventional kind of journalist. I didn't know that I would be writing about him again. In the early books I made him a bit too sure of himself and had to treat him really badly after that, to humble him a little. And the post-Leveson landscape

is so much more interesting for a journalist character, especially one who's guilty of all these things that were revealed in the Inquiry itself. You see he was probably one of the characters I was least interested in as a writer. I would bring him into it so that I could concentrate on the issues in the book. To me he wasn't that deep or complex. And then in *Dead Girl Walking* I kind of rediscovered the character and suddenly he was far more complex and far more interesting to me because he's someone in a state of crisis at that point. He's not so interesting when he's cocksure, which he was before. I've taken ownership of him again.

SK *Crime fiction seems to be alive and well and living in Scotland. Can you account for that?*

CB Geographers call it a conglomerate economy: the more there is of something there more it groups together and the more likely it is that there'll be more of it. You can see how the strength of Scottish crime fiction will engender more of it.

SK *You don't think there's something particular about the landscape, the mood, the culture, the history..?*

CB I think Scottish writing in general does tend to want to examine our society quite unflinchingly, and I think therefore you're not going to get an Aga-saga written in Scotland. I think there's a certain unflinching harshness and honesty that we look for in writing and that lends itself to crime fiction.

SK *Like most best-selling writers today you are in demand at book launches, readings and festivals. Does it get increasingly difficult to set aside time for writing?*

CB Not at all. I say yes to everything that's offered. As much as I possibly can. I enjoy speaking in front of an audience. I'm practised at writing on trains, on the road, in hotel rooms. I actually feel pretty good if I've travelled somewhere and I've written 1500 words during that day and done a reading in the evening: I feel like that was a damn good day.

SK *You're headlining the Ullapool Book Festival in May. Is there anything you're particularly looking forward to about that?*

CB Seeing my pals! I think Louise (Welch) will be there and Val (McDermid)'s going to be there. It'll be good to catch up. And also I've got a short story I'll be reading and it'll be great to have a chance to read it in front of an audience.

Christopher Brookmyre will read from his work at this year's Ullapool Book Festival. ■

Poetry

Touchstone

EILEEN CARNEY HULME

We enter the restaurant
complain to each other
about the cigarette smoke,
can't decide if a corner table
or one by the closed door
can claim a breathing space.

You talk about your working day
and I tell you of my waiting –
that Almir is preparing the ground
for planting next year's raspberries
and he plants them close
to the fence of an adjacent garden
where white gravestones chill the landscape

I also tell you some workmen
appeared to be testing the gas meter
at the half-house next door,
the one scarred with bullet and mortar holes
and that Almir's daughter ran past me
whispering a shy *hello*.

Later we walk back to your rented flat
through the town's night life,
the cracked pavements,
roads with no street lights or names.
Almir, standing by his door
last cigarette of the day in hand,
calls us to wait,
returns with a bowl of pears
from my trees, he offers,
we thank him
and I look to a smog-filled sky,
the Igman mountain nestled underneath,
the North Star nowhere to be seen.

Late

Grež-sur-Loing, November 2014
STUART A. PATERSON

It's long after midnight, cold, damp,
French fog slinking up from the Loing
with shrugged wet shoulders
& I have cheap red wine, an old baguette,
stringy Dutch tobacco & the internet.

The lights in the other rooms are out.
Their inhabitants aren't Scottish,
they're sensible & wouldn't stay up late
to muse on evocative fog, nibble gingerly
on back-fridge Brie & how the ducks
sound on the river at half past 3.

They aren't Scottish, wouldn't understand
that awful need to be awake when
everyone & everything the world
over's far beyond the pale of history
& late.

Dà Rathad

ANNA DANSKIN

Dh'iomsgair dà rathad ann an coille bhuidhe.
Brònach nach b' urrainn dhomh siubhal na dha,
Sheas mi ùine, a' coimhead sìos fear
Cho fad's a ghabhadh gu lùib san doire.

'S an uair sin thug mi 'm fear eile, a cheart
cho grinn, 's dòcha le tagairt na b' fheàrr,
feurach 's gun uabhas caitheamh.
gidheadh, bha 'm fear eile cha mhòr na leth-aon.
'S bha an dithis a mhadainn sin a' laighe
an duilleagan air nach robh duine air coiseachd.
O, chùm mi a' chiad fhear airson là eile,
ach le fios mar a leanas slighe air slighe,
le amharas nach tilleadh mi tuilleadh.
Bidh mi ag innseadh seo le osna, an àiteigin,
ri linn is linn ri tighinn: Dh'iomsgair dà rathad
an coille bhuidhe, Ghabh mi 'm fear neo-àbhaisteach.
'S le sin dh'atharraich mòran.

(às dèidh Robert Frost)

Where is that girl?

CATHERINE WYLIE

Seek her outside swinging on the gate,
telling the time with a dandelion clock
or high in the copper beech.

You may glimpse her waving legs
in torn, sky-blue tights.
She is swaying with the wind,
her blown hair full of feather and twig.
Cupped in her hands are sparrows, a wren.
She throws them for the wind to catch.
She has spiders for yoyos
and stretches, sticky, web-bound, fingertip to toe.

Call her by name and she will come to table
trailing earth, leaves, burrs.
Her perfume is of wild petal
– dog-rose, speedwell, daisy –
and leaf in a jam-jar.
With berry stained lips
she gobbles and gulps and is gone.

At night, find her lying awake
listening to the last rustlings of the day.
Opening her mouth to yawn, or *Ahh* at the stars,
an owl emerges, flies round the room
and, by an open window, leaves to hunt in the dark.

Permission

KATE HENDRY

I'm running late for work. The baby needs
a nappy change. In the still-dark morning
I lay her on the bed. You sit up,
as if it's your birthday and you've been waiting
for this one present, which I place on your lap.

You and our daughter. I watch you loving her
like you're allowed. For this short time
of her babyhood you can baste her with love.
No talking to work out, no fighting over food
or bed times. She lies there for you

as you dangle your fingers over her tummy
and kiss her feet. 'You're in love with her,'
I say. 'Who?' you say – it's your game.
I'm not to catch you loving her. It's done
in private, in dark rooms, when I'm rushing out.

MacDiarmid on Whalsay

WILLIAM BONAR

Black oan white cries this böd
Grieve House. Fenced n nettled
thaive pit yer ocean, Chris,
in a mutchkin n stawed
the key. Laid yer path
wi crusht rid granite forby.
Oan this Sysiphean hill
thaive pegged ye, trig n snod.

Fegs, Chris, whaes tae blame thaim!
Unskeely yersel, ye admired
thaim at the peats, the fishin.
Bit thai cottoned tae yer gemme:
kid-oan wurd's hid ye rise
frae yer bunk luik a sillock.
Thai kent ye fur a *pör bein*
whae dune nae work thai cud name

bit gaed aboot in a kilt
n hobbled wi nob's at
Symbister Hoose raither thain
swash wi fishers n lilt
wi crofters. Lingered
oan Linga twinty meenits
n imagined three days o desert —
no juist Christ tae the hilt!

Yet ye hung oan in this hain.
Nine year ye wur hovelled
in the lee o yon quarry,
yirdit frae history n pain,
whiles ye fell n rose
reenged oot ayont the leemits
o earth, sea n lift,
hammerin sang frae stanes.

Note: In Shetlandic, a böd is originally a fisherman's hut,
now used as basic hostel-type accommodation, which
Grieve House, as it has been named, now functions as.
This is the tiny, rudimentary cottage where Christopher Murray
Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) lived from 3rd May 1933 until 13th
January 1942.
Linga is a small, uninhabited island off Whalsay.

Marta's Last Wish

SHORT STORY BY REGI CLAIRE

THE COP COCKS his gun and begins to swivel-walk into the suspect's lockup. As he advances, the music rises to a discord of shrieks that signals the showdown. The old man holds his breath, leans closer to the screen. Just then there's a loud crash in the kitchen.

'Oh no, what a mess,' his wife cries. 'Sebastian, quick, get me the bucket from the cellar, I've dropped a pan.'

'The film's almost finished, Marta, just a couple more minutes.'

'I'll have to get it myself then, will I?' Her voice has an edge to it that Sebastian knows only too well.

And so it goes. Every time Sebastian watches an episode of his favourite crime series or an action film, Marta asks him to fetch her something from the cellar: walnuts or chestnuts, onions, a bottle of vinegar, a tin of peas or asparagus, anything at all, really, and he invariably misses the ending.

Her death from a stroke comes as a bit of a relief. After the funeral, once his in-laws have driven off, Sebastian celebrates with two bottles of Felschlösschen bought specially for the occasion. There's a thriller on TV and his slippers are warming by the fire. Snow has begun to fall outside, a jostle of wild, whirling flakes that makes him feel reckless and young again. He grins, holds up his glass in a wordless toast.

Just as the film's climax approaches, he realises the fire is about to go out. It needs more wood. Now. 'Damn,' he says, allowing himself to swear under his breath. 'Might as well not have buried her.' He leaves his slippers where they are; no one to tell him to put them on before he hurries downstairs. He smiles to himself, then laughs out loud when he finds himself swaying slightly. In his head he can hear Marta complain: 'I've married a drunk, a good-for-nothing drunk.' To drown out her voice, he whistles 'Yellow submarine'.

He switches on the cellar lights, starts to descend, his right hand on the banisters.

Then he remembers the wood basket; it's still upstairs, beside his slippers. 'Damn, damn, damn.' Swearing quite openly now, he turns on his heel.

A few days before she died, Marta, ever house-proud, had waxed the stairs. But this evening Sebastian doesn't have time to admire their glossy sheen. He slips, slides, then bump-bump-bumps all the way down, his stocking soles, corduroys, flannel shirt and finally his shock of thick grey hair giving each step a very last polish. Immaculate.

As the stairs settle back into their sleek, worn shape, the wood creaks a little. A current of air whispers above the still figure stretched out on the floor, and a loose flap of wallpaper nods in the draught. In the room upstairs, the film music swells to a crescendo. Outside, the snow keeps falling, more calmly now and with more determination. Already only the tips of the grass blades are showing. Soon the lawn will be an unmarked white sheet, waiting for the hieroglyphics of bird feet and the orderly paw prints of the occasional cat. ■

Poems by Stephen Keeler

Still Life (2)

In memory of Mary Fedden, RA

The small Portmeirion vase I never liked
Until you died, and suddenly it was
The last thing that you ever bought for me,
Is stuffed with bright immodest daffodils,
And next to it, the lizard bought in France
The summer that you learned to drink *pastis*;
Dried lavender, a Russian porcelain doll,
A snapshot in a coffee shop in Prague
Of you because the light, reflected in
The chandeliers and mirrors, seemed to draw
The very pulse of you, and I, compelled
To take the photo, inarticulate
Except to make a picture, understood
For time that could not be defined, the life
Of you – the livingness – against the glare
And clatter and the muzak and the smoke:
A photograph of you that would in time
Be slipped into a wallet, moulded to
The shape of a back pocket, flattened by
The florid banknotes of an alien
Republic as indifferent to us
As torpid oceans rinsing tidewrack shells
Cathartically, on a foreign shore.

Untitled

For Elsie Chapman and Elizabeth Lane

January was a lonely month to die.
The clouded baubles had been taken down
and loosely wrapped again in mildewed cloths,
the little lights unstrung, re-boxed and shut away
as though like rare and fabled plants
they need neglect and feed on necessary dark
to crop again somewhere that's changed meanwhile.
January was a lonely month to die,
unfollowed even by the light.

October

Looking up from my tea-cup
through the kitchen window,
small against the razoring gale
beyond the rain-rippled glass,
I caught on an inference of movement
high up, above the cliff-top,
and took it for another power cable
loosed and flailing at the shuddering turmoil out there,
and waited for the lights to fail.

Looking again, I saw the skein of geese
unravel from the foreground stave of
power lines, and wondered whether 'skein'
is Scandinavian, Old Norse, perhaps,
– the geese were flying south –
but found it is of English origin,
to do with yarn or ribbon maybe,
wavering; twisting
like a silent line given out in thick uneven ink
by the ancient poet.

What do we think we are?

Identity and the author in Scotland

ESSAY BY ROBERT DAVIDSON

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT experience of my writing life, the one that changed me most as a person, that produced a significant book, and that altered everything we do at Sandstone Press has everything to do with 'identity' at its most fundamental, at the level of life and death.

In 2006 we were publishing the Sandstone Vista series of novellas for adult learners*, when a series of meetings led me to a highly gifted and impressive woman, Remzije Sherifi, Development Officer for the Maryhill Integration Network, the most advanced such network in Britain.

In 2007 Sandstone Press published her book, *Shadow Behind the Sun*. It was shortlisted for both the Saltire and Scottish Arts Council Awards as well as receiving two page coverage almost uniformly across the Scottish press. Remzije is an Albanian Kosovar, formerly an engineer and broadcast journalist, whose family and people suffered years of persecution at the hands of Kosovar Serbs and was later expelled by, we would better say 'escaped from', Serbian military and para-military forces to a concentration camp in Macedonia and, from there, in the first flight of refugees to Scotland, to my home city of Glasgow.

With its reception of the refugees Glasgow showed its best side, welcoming and generous to the stranger who arrives with nothing. Unknowingly, it also gave me, working with Remzije Sherifi, the challenge of my life, a challenge that required the rapid reading of a dozen or more books on the subjects of Kosova, former Yugoslavia, and the wider Balkans.

Through all this reading and since, I have noted the unwillingness of commentators to ascribe the events of the 1990s within former Yugoslavia to such concepts as 'ancient hatreds', rather putting them down to the ambitions of a powerful criminal class, or residual tyranny. This is to be blind to the obvious. One of Remzije's repeated sayings was that 'every generation in Kosova gets its visit from the Serbs'.

'Civilisation' has both noun and verb forms. 'Culture' is as big a contributor to atrocity as it is to art. 'Civilisation' the process, requires peace and time. It also requires hard physical work, a notion that contributed to the ending of another book, *Site Works*, beside my belief that the labourer engaged on, say, the construction of a sewer is as much a contributor as the thinker in the University.

The moment also underscored the lethal relationship between identity and territory. There can come a time, and it can repeat over the centuries, that peoples cannot share a territory, even when they have been neighbours for years, and this on the basis of what they think they are, of their identity, of their loyalties and traditions. It goes down to the very naming of things, such as Kosovo and Kosova, and when blood is spilled the differences harden, often into obsession.



Remzije Sherifi, Author of *Shadow Behind the Sun*

I found myself reflecting, as I really had to when reading and talking and describing Yugoslavia and former Yugoslavia, indeed considering the deeper history of the region, on why people kill each other. The conclusion I reached is that we kill each other over what I now think of as 'bottom line identity': religion, nationalism, and ideology. Those are what all else come down to. Mix any one with territory and the effect can be lethal. Mix two or three and it can be hopeless. I put them in that order because that is how I see them coming to us as a species. Imagine a lone creature howling at the moon, that's religion begun. Imagine a pack or other group hunting and gathering across a territory, there's tribalism and the beginnings of nationalism. Settle them and invent the storage of wealth, eventually money, and have them wonder about governance and planning and reward and ideology appears.

From this thought a question formed: 'What do you think you are?' which has a larger significance than the more common: 'Who do you think you are?' What would you kill for? Religion? It's happening today in the Muslim world. Nationalism? It is happening in Russian enclaves all around the Motherland, in Georgia and Ukraine. Soon, if you want my opinion, it will start again in Estonia. Ideology? In Germany and Italy in

the Seventies and Eighties, and I remember that the Baader-Meinhof Gang, or Red Army Faction, received at least moral support from many people I knew.

Do you think it could *not* be you doing, or inciting, the killing? What do you think you are?

This leads me to the idea of territory. This place, meaning the area around the Inner Moray Firth, felt like it was waiting for me. From discovery at the age of fourteen Argyll, Mull and Iona, an astonishingly beautiful region, was where I really wanted to live, so this part of the Highlands in some ways felt like second best.

Discovery of this area though, in which I have now lived more than half of my life and which is so much my home I can imagine no other, came in the late 1960s, when I participated in a traffic survey for my employer, a consultant traffic engineer. I should explain that my background is not in publishing. In my teens I stumbled, somehow, into civil engineering and remained there for more than thirty years.

At that time there was a certain amount of talk, or prediction if you like, among the town planners and traffic engineers I was working with, that the towns around the Inner Moray Firth would someday join and become one place, a new city. There is nothing new or

unusual in this process. It is how all cities, other than those that have been planned and built from scratch are formed. Readers of Charles Dickens will remember how Bill Sykes, in *Oliver Twist*, walked from village to village in desperation after the murder of Nancy, a walk that Dickens himself had done repeatedly. All those villages have since joined to become what we now know as 'London', of which the City of London is a relatively small part.

More time passed and when a job opportunity came up in Dingwall I duly arrived on the 4th May 1980. Since then Inverness has grown exponentially and been formally recognised as a city, the Kessock Bridge has been built to complete the line of the A9 across the region, joining the Cromarty Bridge. Sewerage is now immensely improved, as are roads; broadband has arrived; the airport has become international; and for a time we had the fastest growing population in Europe which is now highly plural. Eden Court Theatre has been opened and since developed; we have a great rugby club; two football clubs operating in the top division; a superb literary magazine in Northwords Now and an international publishing house.

Raigmore Hospital has been transformed into a crack institution serving the wider

Highlands and Islands and, in addition, we have the University of the Highlands and Islands whose new campus is presently under construction.

What we don't have, yet, is a unified sense of identity. Asked where they come from, people who live in this region are highly unlikely to say 'Inner Moray Firth' or 'Highland Scotland'. They are much more likely to identify as from Invergordon or Nairn, or possibly 'The Highlands', but it will come, albeit with subdivisions for internal use. The point I want to make is that the infrastructure arrived first. In the same way, eventually, there will be a recognition of writers as being from this place because the experience of living here is so very different. It already is.

So, writers? Boy, do we have writers. The Highlands, whether here around the Inner Moray Firth, or in the wider area generally known as the Highlands and Islands, have produced or hosted a great many authors. Historically: Duncan Ban MacIntyre and Alexander MacDonald, more recently Norman McCaig and George Mackay Brown. Hugh MacDiarmid lived at Kildermorie in Ross-shire, where he assembled *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, long before his extended stay in Whalsay with Valda and Michael.

Neil Gunn is one of my most important authors and *Highland River* one of my most important books. Neil was born in Caithness but lived in Inverness before moving to Dingwall to write most of his great books, later Strath Glass and North Kessock. The first thing I wrote when I left the water industry in 2000 was the libretto for an oratorio titled *Dunbeath Water*, a sort of combination of *Highland River* and *The Atom of Delight* but different in form and extended. William Gilmour scored the piece, brilliantly, and it was performed three times during Highland Festival 2003.

Jessie Kesson is from the wider area if we include Moray, and last year we lost Katherine Stewart, who was beloved across the world, at the age of 97. Iain Crichton Smith lived and worked for many years in Taynuilt and produced what, to my mind, is our finest poetry. He was also a great encourager and example to aspiring writers.

Still active in the wider area are Angus Peter Campbell on Skye; Ian Stephen whose novel *A Book of Death and Fish* has just been published by Saraband; Andrew Greig and Lesley Glaister spend time on Orkney; Ali Smith, this year shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, was born and raised in Inverness; her poet and novelist sister Anne Macleod lives on the Black Isle. Another novelist and poet, Moira Forsyth, lives in Ross-shire and is editorial director of Sandstone Press. Moira's fourth novel, *The Treacle Well*, will be published in 2015. Most famous at the present time is Michel Faber, whose latest novel from Canongate, *The Book of Strange New Things*, is already being tipped as a Man Booker candidate for 2015.

Our three writers in residence, Angus MacNicol, Thom Nairn and Brian McCabe, did enormous, unseen, good work, in the late Eighties and early Nineties, especially with what became a legendary group, the Dingwall Writers, when Brian wrote us up in the Sunday Herald.

We also have a great literary magazine, Northwords Now (formerly Northwords), successively edited by Tom Bryan, Angus

Dunn, me, Rhoda Michael and now Chris Powici, and I like to think that we have a fine publishing house which has the potential to become great.

What you will struggle to find though, is any common theme to the work beyond, frequently but not always, the landscape. The only territory shared, as far as I can discern, is the geographical. That may be why we have never been seen as a school in the way that socialist writers in Glasgow have, or those following the strong lead provided by Irvine Welsh, or those of the agricultural North East.

So we have it that, like so much about the Inner Moray Firth in particular, but also the wider Highlands, great things are happening without the rest of the country realising. In this case, a vast body of literary work united by habitation of, or interest in, this particular territory, which is nonetheless contemporary and relevant everywhere. A new 'Us' is forming, and actually whether they wish to or not authors are building its infrastructure. Some will see this as a danger as it might imply a loss of individuality. They might also note the creation of a new 'Others', by definition, and not wish to be seen as in any way oppositional. Maybe so, but it has other dangers.

Let me read from Edward Said here, from *Culture and Imperialism*. Here he is, writing in 1993, in a chapter titled 'Freedom from Domination in the Future': 'One of the great achievements of the early post-War Arab nationalist

governments was mass literacy: in Egypt the results were dramatically beneficial almost beyond imagining.'

If and when we eventually get round to properly addressing our own national literacy problem we should look at the positive Egyptian experience. It can be done, and it can be done in times of economic strictures. He goes on: 'Yet the mixture of dramatically accelerated literacy and tub-thumping ideology exactly bears out [Franz] Fanon's fears. My impression is that more effort is spent in sustaining the connection, bolstering the idea that to be Syrian, Iraqi, Egyptian or Saudi is a sufficient end, rather than in thinking critically, even audaciously about the national programme itself.'

While following those post-War Arab Nationalist governments' example we should also heed Said's warning. If Church, State or Party money is being used, they will surely want their share of indoctrination and we, the writers, will be our readers' first and last line of defence. He closes the passage thus: 'Identity, always identity, over and above knowing about others.'

This leads directly to my second quotation. It's from an essay titled 'On Nationalism' but, says Orwell (writing in May 1945): 'Nationalism, in the extended sense in which I am using the word, includes such movements and tendencies as Communism, political Catholicism, Zionism, Anti-Semitism, Trotskyism and Pacifism'.

More specifically, he means: '...the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit,

placing it beyond good and evil, and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests.'

There are territories on the ground and there are emotional and intellectual territories. I can only say for myself that the identity of 'writer', with its commitment to daily discipline and the hope of an afterlife in books, will do for religion; 'editor' with its symbiotic commitment to the ambitions and wellbeing of my fellow writers, will do for a nationalism; and 'publisher' will pass for ideology because no publisher worth his or her salt cannot but be committed to freedom of expression and put that freedom above all others.

By this time I hope I have aired some fresh ideas on the matter of identity, while also sounding a warning or two, but let me sound another. Through the Eighties and into the Nineties there probably was a need to assert ourselves as Scottish authors, to say that, yes, we exist and here is our culture. I feel though, that the sixteen years of enhanced democracy since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament has rendered a repetition unnecessary. Without making any attempt to read the future, or to predict further change in what seems to be a dynamic constitutional environment, I'd say enough has already been done in this area. The world now knows that we exist, and with Scottish culture no longer a clapperless bell we do not have to strain to ring it.

After that, there is just one more territory I wish to visit with you, the most private and creative territory of all where the writer and editor work alone. Auden had it as the Cave of Making and it is our place of work. Even there, if we provide 'light you could mend a watch by' and the 'best dictionaries money can buy', as he ascribed to Louis MacNeice, a fully furnished, permanent, internal environment still only serves as an entrance to yet another place that exists even more deeply within us. If we have answered that question of ourselves, 'what do you think you are', we will have a better idea of our own mental and spiritual infrastructure. With the wealth of our lived and observed experience at fingertip length, along with all our remembered reading, and all tradition and loyalty disregarded we can listen to our own ThirdVoice, which is neither wholly our own or our subject's and which only speaks the truth. DH Lawrence's dictum, 'Never trust the teller, trust the tale', was repeated often by Iain Crichton Smith. On the other side of all this a narrative is waiting, and it will tell itself if we let it.


Better not to be a propagandist. Better to be neither a prosecutor nor an advocate. Better to avoid the two great obsessions of grievance and pain, and, if they cannot be avoided, better to be like James Joyce and Samuel Becket and get away. Best to arrive at the borderland of memory and imagination like our friends the asylum seekers, as a stranger carrying nothing. ■

Note: an extended version of this essay appears on the *Northwords Now* website – www.northwordsnow.co.uk

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SHORT STORY BY MAIRI SUTHERLAND



THIS TIME IT'S my turn to go. To fly the nest. I wake to the sound of Mum scrabbling around in the dark with a mug of coffee. She places it on my bedside cabinet, moves the pile of paperbacks over. It's the mug I like, with Durness in black letters etched across it and flying puffins dotted around the rim. It's the right thickness of china. Not delicate like Gran's bone china which shatters like snapping a wishbone or your wrist when you slip on the ice because Dad has forgotten to salt the path.

I've got a set of six matching mugs from Auntie Viv as a *good luck with university* present. They are stashed in my *kitchen* box. Dad has marked each cardboard box with indelible pen and sealed them with brown parcel tape. My clothes have been washed, ironed and folded. They smell of outside on the wash line and a faint whiff of lemon from the Summer Meadow fabric conditioner. When I am in my new room I can burrow my face into my sleeves and the folds of my matching towels and breathe in that homey smell you only smell at other people's houses.

'You awake Rhona?' Mum nudges my shoulder. I taste her perfume *Je Reviens*. I will return. You never did. We waited five years. That's one thousand seven hundred and twenty five days. Your face was plastered on thousands of milk cartons. I chose the photo. Mum and I spread out our favourite ones on the sunroom floor. We narrowed it down to two. In the end it was my decision. Mum wanted the serious one. I didn't want your pursed lips on breakfast tables, as people reached for the carton to pour over their cereal and peered at your grainy image. If you were joining families for breakfast, I wanted to see you happy. I chose the one I took with my Polaroid instamatic on our caravan holiday to Pease Bay. You jiggled from foot to foot as we counted twenty elephants waiting for the fixer to set and we peeled back the flimsy cover. You thought you looked Chinese. Mum announced that if you were happy your smile reached your eyes.

'You okay honey?'

I sip my coffee; pat my bed to let Mum slip in beside me. 'Mmm. Just thinking.'

She nods 'I know.'

Dad doesn't say your name now. He has built a wall around him. That's what my counsellor told me. A fortress made of the strongest stone slabs, shipped in from Greece, flecked with sparkly bits, like the fossils we found on Fossil Beach. You and I raced down the hill, pelt melt to get to the shore. Dad had his Swiss Army penknife, which he carved into the soft shale to reveal, imprints of spiralling shells, like a row of sixes chalked on the blackboard by Miss Williamson, to copy in our handwriting jotters. Dad had a tiny brush, which he swept over the flaking bits. We peered over his shoulder, our bodies pressed together, like two peas in a pod.

'Girls you're in my light.'

Arms looped through each other we staggered back and lay on the soft sand. You swept your arms in wide arcs above your head, *sand angels*, we called them. Your mark in the sand. The imprint of you.

For months afterwards your room stayed the same: head dunt in your pillow; the quilt cover rolled back; an inside out jumper on the floor; a half eaten Kit-Kat on your walnut dressing table with the three way mirror; a clogged up mascara wand; Mum's borrowed

lipstick, *Fox-glove mauve*; a mug of milky coffee with a skin forming. Mum forbade us to touch anything. It was like a shrine to you. She didn't even Hoover. I tiptoed in, lay on your floor and rolled fat sausages of dust in my fingers. We watched a programme once about wee beasties crawling in the warp and weft. How if you dropped a sandwich it was better to eat it off the pavement than the carpet. We wore slippers for weeks and balanced plates of buttered toast on our knees. Your fossils were lined up on your windowsill. Waiting. Watching. Guarding.

Mum shifts beside me. I turn to glimpse her profile. Thick strands of dark hair, peppered with grey, hang loose around her face.

'So, what's still to do?'

I shrug, glance at my boxed up belongings. Clothes, books, posters, kitchen utensils. Eighteen years worth of clutter packed away into cardboard boxes Dad collected from his office. My room has been stripped bare.

We repainted your room, Jen. After your third Christmas away, Dad announced he was to be decorating. My counsellor reassured me that this was a good thing that he was *moving on*. It took him three coats of white paint to blot out the purple walls. The colour seeped through like bloodstains. You were in a purple phase when you left us. You wore your mauve skinny rib polo neck and fringed, violet flares with black platform boots. You took Dad's rucksack from his youth hostelling days. Dad had the police force combing the Pennines convinced you were using the dog-eared map of the Pennine Way he had climbed two weekends before. He was relieved that his waterproof trousers were rolled at the bottom, with a half nibbled bar of Kendall Mint cake. He painted the walls *Sun Kissed Yellow* like the sunflowers we plant in the back garden each year. Gran came over, cooked us lamb stew and helped Mum scoop up your trinkets, perfumes and diaries, which they

lowered into Gran's hatboxes and placed on top of your walnut wardrobe. Gran gave the room a deep clean, with her floral pinny with the zigzag stitching and her yellow Marigold gloves which she snapped on and off with efficiency. I went to see her yesterday. Dad dropped me off, his golf clubs in the boot. He leant into me. I breathed in his Palmolive soapy skin.

'She just wants to say goodbye properly. Try not to get upset.'

I nodded, bit my lip.

I nearly didn't go. Because of you. It was Gran who persuaded me, told me that I had to lead my own life. I chose Edinburgh. I wanted to: live in a Georgian flat with high ceilings; breathe in the yeasty smell piped out from the brewery and trail down the cobble lanes for a bowl of soup in boutique restaurants. I studied hard at school and did well in my exams. I was a loner. You were the chatty one. The life and soul. I listened. The police lady with the shaggy fringe and shaking hands quizzed me. Where were you going? Did you mention any boyfriend? They read your diaries. You got up that day, rolled up your school uniform, and stepped out in your purple garb, with Dad's rucksack and your passport. Vamoosh. You were gone.

Gran with her banana and walnut loaves, her clicking denture plate, urged us all to stop looking. Dad worked long hours at the office, Mum took on voluntary work and Gran knitted. She started a knitting club at our primary school. Pasty faced West Coast of Scotland children with a sing-songy accent casting on multi-coloured squares in three-ply wool for Malawian children. It was strange to think that these skinny, shiny brown skinned children the colour of conkers lay huddled beneath covers Granny had stitched together.

I watch her stir the soup.

'Set the table will you Rhona?'

I slide open the kitchen drawer, fumble

for the cork tablemats. We sup our leek and potato soup in silence. I notice Gran's fingers gnarled with arthritis, hooked around her spoon. I wait for her to offer me pearls of wisdom on flying the nest. She spoons out apple and bramble crumble and eyes me as I wolf it down.

I run my tongue over the roof of my mouth and feel the blisters forming. Tiny, wee blood blisters from the heat of the crumble. You and I picked brambles from the railway line and watched as Mum poured bag after bag of Tate and Lyle granulated sugar over the berries, which bubbled for hours on a low gas. We helped write the labels and placed the greaseproof paper covers on with elastic bands. We got to lick the wooden spoon once it was cooled.

There is a rap at the door. Mum and I smile.

Dad sticks his face round the door. 'How's my angel girl? All set for your big day?'

He's completely bald. You'd walk right past him in the street. Maybe you have.

'Ta ra!' he hovers by my bed, with a bottle of fizzy and three champagne flutes Gran gave them for their twentieth wedding anniversary. I blush beetroot red.

He hands Mum and me a glass and clears his throat. I hear him say how proud they are of me. I swallow the fizz; the bubbles rise inside my nose. I feel giggly.

He hands me an envelope 'There's some money to get your books and a few drinks or cocktails. Or whatever it is you girls like to drink nowadays.'

They had given me a leather satchel for my lecture notes, a cartridge pen and a pair of silver earrings. Gran gave me writing paper, a butterfly paperweight and a gilt photo frame with a picture of you and me.

We finish our champagne. Mum gathers up the flutes whilst Dad starts to lug the boxes down the stairs to the car. I peer out the window to glimpse him hoist the boxes into the boot. My head feels cotton wool-dizzy. He glances up, waves. I raise my hand.

The house was noisy when you left with phone calls day and night. Neighbours ringing the doorbell to leave casseroles and soups in Tupperware tubs. Prayers were said in church and I was let off homework. Teachers whispered my name at registration and patted me on the arm. I wanted to be shouted at, told off for missing tests and made to run round the playing fields in the pouring rain in my maroon mini kilt until my teeth chattered and lips turned blue. Other neighbours crossed the road incase we had some disease, which we would pass onto to their precious sons and daughters. Some even sent flowers, as if you were dead. Gran had to rush out to the charity shop to find more vases. I wanted the fuss to die down and when it did, I wanted it back.

The police have looked after us. We even get a Christmas card from Detective Inspector Ron. He's retired now but will still follow up any leads. He doesn't like to leave loose ends. Funny that. You being a loose end.

I tiptoe into your room. It doesn't smell like yours any more. Its polish, new carpet and paint. On the window ledge the fossils remain. I finger the grooves in your favourite one and peer at the row of sixes. I scoop it up, pop it into my dressing gown pocket and creep out. ■



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Poetry

Khrushchev Days

FRANCES ROBSON

Our matchbox homes are mansions
made of thin walls to defend us from solitude;
our bellies rumble because we have eaten
every sausage laid out on the table.
We need no painkillers:
there is no more pain to kill.

We know what we need to know;
and this we are told: all our enemies
will be defeated by iron curtains.

The air we breathe is thick with promise;
tomorrow we fly to the moon.

Rebirth

GRAHAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG

Even with Facebook
can this become a trend,

people with sad ashes blown back
into their faces?

When it was you
we were high on a safe rock,

but half of what was meant for sea
ended disappointingly in grass.

Now I no longer mind:
your cockle-shell, rococo with casts,

sits magically on my desk
waiting for a dry Venus to rise:

earth and water confer
different immortalities.

Aig Uaigh M’ Athar

COINNEACH LINDSAY

Ann an dòigh b’ e tiodhlacadh m’ athar
Aon de na làithean as fheàrr nam bheatha.
Bha mi duilich fhaicinn a’ falbh
Ach, bha a’ ghrian, aig deireadh a’ Ghiblean,
A’ losgadh na smùid bho uachdar Loch Èite
Far an robh an seann mhilidh air a shuidheachadh
Mar laoch bho aon dhe na sgeulachdan aige fhèin.
Thàinig oiteag ghorm bhon taobh an ear
Nuair a chaidh a thiodhlac chur dhan talamh
Agus thuit am smùr air a’ chiste-laighe.
Sheinn na pìoban ‘Flùraichean na Coille’ thar an loch
Agus smaoinich mi gun robh an conasg na bu bhuidhe
Na conasg sam bith bha mi riamh air fhaicinn.
Mar sin, chùm mi m’ inntinn dheth na bha tachairt.

Journey to the Post-Box

ANDY ALLAN

The world dissolves.
I lumber forward,
distracted by simmering rage.
Bouncing sparrows
frolic in my path.
Yellow mats of pine-pollen
drift on breeze-rippled puddles.
A sudden ice-cold shock jolts
from foot to brain and the
road-slap of my wet slipper
starts a ginger cat across my path.
At lane’s end,
excited bird-song
re-ignites the day.
Hungry hedge-fingers
clutch at warm sunlight
as I post my letter of complaint.
On the bones of a naked elm
a crow cocks her head
and seems to know.

Catcher

HUGH McMILLAN

(In his log, D.A. Mowat, keeper
at Killantringan Lighthouse, Wigtownshire,
records counting 293 moths near his lamp
on the night of 19th September 1913.)

I imagine sailors
watching the lamp’s eye,
envious as they creep
along the breast of the sea

like shadows.
From this high place
they are a plank’s width
from death,

all questions
drowned on their lips.
I know:
I’ve seen it.

I am beyond marrying,
watch moths instead of time,
beating on the glass. At night
I sit in the watchroom,

throw my beam of light
like a rope
across the back of the ocean,
and reel in hope after hope after hope.

Caroline Herschel’s Christmas

HUGH McMILLAN

They pitied Caroline Herschel,
marked by typhus,
but while other girls picked goose bones,
dreamed of kissing-boughs,
she was in the garden
with a 2.2 Newtonian Telescope
pointing at the northern part of Monoceros
on the midpoint of a line
from Procyon to Betelgeuse,
where the ionised hydrogen forms
a haze of stars
that emerge from leaves of sky
like pearls.
When they wondered if she might
be tempted inside
for pudding, some society,
she demurred,
preferring instead
to watch the birth of light.

Fairies

HUGH McMILLAN

The moon is a dull blade
and everything beyond
the pond of street lamp
is gone except two blue lights
swimming: maybe a house in the hills
or a 737 coming home to Glasgow,
or then again fairies.
It doesn’t look more
than half a mile,
worth the soaking
when I burst into the circle
and they slowly turn
their hard little faces to me
white and beautiful
in the light,
like dolls.

THE FIRST TIME I was so small that it took both hands to lift my mam's glass of white wine, cupping round it the way a baby holds its own bottle. And it took both hands to press against my mouth, fight off the sting of how bad it was. Her and my da laughed and said, 'See Gemma? Told ye!'

When I was a teenager I told the parents I was staying over at my friend Angie's house. They'd no idea that Angie's mam disappeared to England the week before. We pitched her brother's tent in the park across the road. Her da was in the living room crying and drinking something black. We sneaked by a few times, taking things out the kitchen, first food, then a box of cider from the fridge. The glass clinked inside but he kept staring out the window.

After we finished the last bottle, Angie unzipped the flap and stuck her head outside the tent. She screamed as loud as she could, and I tried to pull her back in but was laughing too much. She wanted to see if the noise would wake people up. But she said no lights came on in any of the houses. We told stories and rolled about in the sleeping-bags till she fell asleep, and the sun came up.

The next day I had to go to my cousin's wedding, and sat in the church telling myself I never, ever wanted to feel this again.

But I was young then. Everybody has their stories. I'm really talking about why things are different now.

The next door neighbour. When we moved to that scheme, Ronnie worked as an electrician. He lived there with his wife. She was a fat, red-haired woman who would never say hello to me. They had four wee sons who all looked the same, even though they were different ages and sizes. They stayed next to us for years. One night I sat bolt upright in the bed because it sounded like a full football team was coming up our stairs. Before I got to the door, mam kicked it open and in came Ronnie's laddies. They were crying – all of them were.

'You get up', mam said, 'Put a film on for the boys. And give them the bed, you sit there'. She stamped her slipper on the carpet. I didn't look at them, just raked through my videos and found one I thought would be ok. I put it in the VHS, then crept out to the landing and looked over. My da was putting his working boots on. He knelt down to do the laces, and she stood against the radiator, arms folded. I breathed out. Mam's face turned upwards, 'GET INTO THAT ROOM MISSUS AND DON'T DARE OPEN THAT DOOR'. I did as she said, and tried to not hear the four of them snivelling away under my covers.

Ronnie had got so drunk he punched his wife in the head, and she fell down on the bathroom floor. Mam told me my da went round and beat him black and blue. I was warned not to mention it in front of the sons. I never got the chance. Irene (the wife's name) took them to her parents and they never came back.

Ronnie was good pals with my ma and da after a while. He banged our kitchen window whenever he came back from seeing Scotland play at Hampden, and they'd invite him to sit at the dinner table and have a can.

Sometimes I'd come down the stairs to see her standing in the bathroom in her dressing gown, one ear to the wall. When she saw me she'd say, 'That Ronnie's been spewing for

an hour straight!' Then laugh, and shake her head.

It was like Ronnie infected the family. My uncle Robert it was the next year. I'd thought of him as my da's cool younger brother. He smoked joints, and would show me sketches from when he was a teenager, charcoal drawings of tigers hiding in tall grass. After a few drinks he'd tell me stories about what my da was like growing up. Robert was married to my auntie Paula, who wasn't much older than me and wore her platinum hair rolled up on her head. Mam always said Paula's problem was she thought she was a somebody, but she wasn't.

I noticed mam getting twitchy in the evenings, jumping up to answer the phone before anybody else could get there. She knew when something would make him lose it. Of course, da picked it up one time and it was Paula. I sat halfway down the stairs – it was the closest I could get without being seen through the glass in the living-room door. My da was shouting that my uncle was nothing but a waster, that he'd ruined that lassie's life and our door was fucking closed to him. It didn't stop mam waiting till he went for a

Vodka Tonic

SHORT STORY BY BRIAN HAMILL



sleep, then scraping all our leftovers onto one plate and making me take it up to Robert. The burgh had given him a shitty wee flat in the highrisers after Paula kicked him out. He had a new woman right away, her name was Margo. Her hair was red and very short.

I never wanted to tell mam he wasn't eating it. Most times I went he'd have on a pair of jeans and a vest, Bowie or Fleetwood Mac blaring from the ghetto-blaster that was sat on the floor. Margo sprawled out on the couch in her leggings, smoking.

'Thanks hen, thanks,' he'd shout. 'Sit yerself down, just having a wee bit of fun eh?'

'I canny the night Uncle Robert, I'll stick this in the kitchen for ye.'

And when I went through, last week's food would be lying in the wee wastepaper basket he used for a kitchen bin. When I got up the road she would ask, 'How was he?'

'Fine. Ok.'

'Aye', she'd say, 'He's better off. Happier.'

I'd go to bed wishing I didn't like the same music he did.

It came to my house gradually, in the months following my first ever staff night out. I was fifteen and had been working at the

big Esso garage for two months. The other counter lassies talked me into going, saying they would go to the bar for me. I sloped in behind them and stood choosing every Madonna song I knew at the jukebox, hoping the barmaid wouldn't notice me. The pub filled up and I sat, drinking wine after wine, while they talked about how badly the garage was doing, how it might close down, and if our manageress would ever get caught in the back room with Jason, the delivery man's son. The conversations went on a long time. The night became a blur, but I mind June, the oldest woman that worked with us, taking me outside because an older girl was screaming she was going to kick my fucking cunt in. I ran and stumbled all the way home, and never found out what I'd done.

The next morning I woke with mam shouting, WHIT THE BLOODY HELL'S THIS? I was wearing just a T-shirt. The sheet and the mattress and the cover were wet and very cold. The smell was horrible. She screamed and screamed at me till I burst out crying and begged her to clean it up because I couldn't. Our wee terrier Jimmy got his nose in about the quilt, sniffing and wagging his tail. Mam stared at me, LOOK WHAT YOU'RE MAKING THAT POOR DOG DO! I went down the stair and got in the shower. When I came back in she was scrubbing the bare mattress with bleach. 'You are some mess lady. Some mess', she said.

Late that night I went to get a glass of milk. She was sitting in her chair with the telly off. There was a glass on the sideboard, nothing in it but melting icecubes. She looked at me but her eyes were out of focus. She lifted up her arms and I went over and gave her a cuddle.

Her and my da started to alternate weeks. Half the time I'd go upstairs and find him surrounded by empty cider tins, listening to Queen and laughing at nothing. When I came down she'd say, 'I'm sick of that bastard, so sick, I could run away. Just piss off and never come back.'

If she knew. Da got a satellite hook-up to the bedroom. I stopped in to get a video off his shelf and he'd fell asleep with the TV still on. This was why he was paying the extra tenner a month. I turned it off for him, but found myself watching his eyes every time we were in the car and a good-looking girl walked past.

Other times it'd be her, swaying around the living room and shouting, 'That bastard, that fucking bastard'. She'd phone her sisters and say the same thing down the line until she was hoarse and ready for sleep.

I met Victor at a houseparty where people were racing tequilas off the kitchen windowsill. We smiled at each other while everybody cheered the winners. Then I beat him at trying to down a full pint. Victor said it didn't count because I spilled some on my top, and he pointed out the soaked patches.

I'd been with him two years when his granda died of heart failure. We went in to the Southern General in his car, sat with his family. It took hours. They spoke well of the granda, and there was a lot of tears. I felt down. He came to Scotland from Nigeria in the late 1930s with nothing to his name, and in a couple of years had built a reputation as the best carpenter in Glasgow. He'd stand out the back of the local furniture shop in the freezing cold for hours and hours at a time, carving

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and sawing away, making beautiful wardrobes and tables and chests of drawers.Victor’s mum told him to show me the photos of his work, the great one of the dresser he built for the Balmoral Hotel, or the doll’s house he made for a millionaire collector.At one time he was as well-known and respected in the city as a politician or a footballer,Victor’s dad said, but it’s all changed now hen, changed days indeed.

On the way home Victor told me how his granda had spat in his gran’s face one Christmas, and another time he grabbed their cat by the neck and shoved it out the upstairs window.Victor was the joke of the school because of him. Old man kept turning up after a day on the cheap rum, most days hardly able to stand. Once the janitor made him wait on the football pitch, away from the playground.When he saw Victor he smiled so hard his eyes closed over and he fell back on the grass laughing.The weans were all running round him, pissing themselves and calling him Uncle Ben.

It was an open casket at the funeral, and his skin had gone a dark, dark yellow. I couldn’t

understand how he was so much smaller since the hospital. I heard a gasp come out of my mouth. Victor’s hand was squeezing mine. I trapped my tongue in between my back teeth, and bit it.

On the third anniversary of Victor and me getting our own flat, he packed up all his stuff. I can’t remember much of that day – just following him from room to room with a glass in my hand, bottle of red held against my body with the other arm. The way I held it when he tried to get it off me.

I can imagine the things I was saying. The sorts of things I’d said before. My friend Zoe told me some of it later. Victor must have phoned her. What I called him when he tried to give me his front door key. But there’s no point getting in touch to say sorry. He knows. It wasn’t really me. It’s the alcohol attacking me, my brain. A fuse blows somewhere and it stops working.

I never have a memory. He couldn’t live with it and I didn’t expect anything else. He forgave me before.The time he looked for me at a party, went into a room and I was smiling

and saying hi with a guy on top of me. I was looking over his shoulder. Victor said that I had no idea.

The time I took my shoe off and hit it against his face, his cheek, outside the pub when his friends were there, and then I screamed, screamed till the police were running to help.And more times, worse ones. Or just as bad.

The next day I opened my eyes and knew I wouldn’t see him again.The wine was finished but there was gin. I had gin and soda till the soda ran out,so I moved to gin and tap water. Then the gin on its own.And I was sick. And I cried for Victor. But mostly for myself.

My mam picked up the phone and she knew too.They came in the car. I stood at the front window and had some bad thoughts. Really bad, thoughts I never had before. I watched them getting out, the two of them down below,hurrying up the stairs.The buzzer rang and it took me a minute to answer it and let them in.

I was calm again, and I told them they had enough of their own problems and couldn’t handle mine. We talked. It was dark outside

and I was looking at the reflection of us on the inside of the window. My da said he had work in the morning and could they take me home. Mam put clothes in my suitcase while I was in the toilet.Then we got in the car and I never went back to that flat. My da picked up the rest,sorted things out.

We still slip up sometimes, the three of us. We all have it. My mam hides whisky bottles down the side of her chair, in against the wall. He has packs of cans under piles of clothes in the loft. But they saved me. And I’m happy. I’m thirty and in my old room.

All that’s behind me.Victor going. Nothing is changing in my life now. I worry when I wake up and feel like a drink of something. But I do know that after work on Friday, I’ll be at the pub with the rest. I need the job more than ever, and things have a way of going bad if you turn down an invite from our boss. He’ll look me in the eyes and say ‘Gemma, what’s your poison?’ And I’ll say back, ‘Just a wee vodka tonic thanks. I’ll get the next ones’.

This is why I’m writing. ■

Poetry

Oedipa Snaps

AMY McCAULEY

God help me the boys love it.
A blind girl on the pier
with a Polaroid.

Click. Say camembert.
Click. Say baby bel.
Click. Say any fucking thing at all.

The camera loves you I say.
Somebody needs you I say.
It will all be over soon I say.

What’s the truth but a camera?
What’s a camera but an eye?
What’s an eye but a world getting born?

What’s a world but a mirror?
What’s a mirror but a face?
What’s a face but a million masks?

What’s a mask but an image?
What’s an image but a dream?
What’s a dream but a funny kind of camera?

Marcas Mac an Tuairneir

Chaidh mi a chrochadh eadar aimsir is soillse,
Os cionn bràighean bàna Tìr nan Òg
Is dùintean-sith, snaidhte bho sgòthan.

Shiubhail mi tro shìth slàn.
Is tron na beàrnan beaga san smùid,
Chunnaic mi an fhairge na laighe fodham;

Cal-Mac mòr is bàt’ an iasgaire,
Na solasan-biorach ‘s na teine-sionnachain
Is drochaid a cheangail eilean gu tìr,
Mar iarna shìoda bhrisg a’ bhrandubhain.

Chunnaic mi bogha-fhrois cuarsgach,
Is tro phrism an treas shùil,
Faileas ghobhlan-gaoithe na meadhan.

Thuig mi sin mar aisling mo mhiann;
Dualachd chothruim ùir, dèanta fìor,
Crìoch don obair, don ailbhe, don iasadachd.
Beatha; sgiath mar iomall na fighe.

Chaidh mi a chuir mun cuairt, le lùb;
Caisteal Leòdhais romham mar chlach
Lego gleansach, a’ piorradh na faire,

Sràid Chrombail cùrsach is lannrach,
Mar earball radain, no riadhain bithe
Peantaichte ri taobh a’ chladaich.

Pneuma

ANNE HAY

I watch the pink-bronze of an acer
rise and fall on the wind
rise and fall like a diaphragm.
Branches fan like bronchioles.

A whole day’s plans
abandoned.
Sometimes the world
has too many voices.
An ache as familiar
as a favourite necklace.

Wind drops
the acer stills.
A soft outbreath.

Poems by Robin Fulton Macpherson

Caithness Inheritance

Pentland Firth breakers are still
doing damage to themselves and
to the edge of the flat earth
where Macphersons and Shearers
entered and left my boyhood –

cliff-nightmares from Holborn Head
and The Clett Rock, moor nightmares
from The Causewaymire, also

sky so much wider than land
there's no need to fear an edge,
and one harebell with the whole
sky as its private domain
with no need of worlds beyond.

Moor

It's those wiry roots
that hold me in place.
Nothing exotic
tints my life-story
with a somewhere-else.

One heather blossom
seems a widow's mite.
To eyes that pause, it
defies horizons
and is abundant

Sailing Past Cliffs

Rock-face cracks take centuries to
widen.
Ledges have time
to cultivate humble generations,
underdeveloped birches, backward
pines,
low life, but life.
The wind is unseen but never empty.

Pause

Summer's increase now a residue,
jagged leaves no longer leaf-shaped,
one
of which – suddenly a vanished bird
too black and small and quick to be
named.
The twig shook. The universe moved
again.

Unseasonal

Someone with a grudge
against September
has dimmed the light.
Lapis lazuli
horizons are bleached.
The moon's so thin
it's now transparent.

Someone has opened
invisible doors
so wide no-one
could ever close them.

Snowfall At Sea

As if left for a moment
alone between two moments
I watch snowflakes on the Skagerrak –

masters of hesitation,
no branches to balance on,
no landscapes to unsettle and blind.

Are they what souls would look like
finding out there's "no more sea,"
clouding the air of an after-life?

By Krakower See

I fabulate about a half-moon
above ox-eye daisies and cornflowers
that once belonged to the DDR.

It uses the vision I give it:
I can say then it probably saw
Samuel Palmer and his friends in Kent.

It was certainly the moon I watched
one August in the 1950s
lifting over Sutherland hill-tops.

That ochre warmth has refused to cool.



The Standing Stones of Get.
Photograph by Chris Sinclair,
The Caithness Broch Project
www.thebrochproject.co.uk

Dimensions

Some days, we're traditional, divide Him
into three:
trinities help us to keep our balance.

Other days, we give up, His dimensions
too many:
we're like flies running across book-titles.

Most days, we settle for two and hang Him
on bare walls:
our walls glow like peat fires all the night.



From An April Window

A distant ash half ready for spring
shines against black clouds with the boldness
of ancient reliefs.

Lacking the persistence of Dante,
the pilgrim who could make things gleam just
by glaring at them,

the sun is easily distracted
by the fullness ofYorkshire. The tree
fades, the clouds whiten.

Leafage

The badly pruned plane-tree has at last
turned green.
In an evening breeze that is not quite
a breeze
the new leaves seem to take it in turn
to stir
as if they were taking it in turn
to talk
in a commonwealth without conflict
and not
knowing anything of the hacked limbs
they hide.

Harebell

Not enough to be just a ”pale flowerett”
in a trackless and boundless universe?
We worry for it, provide it with names
(Latin and vernacular) to help it
against loneliness. It will never know
we marked out space with tracks and boundaries
and scared ourselves by taking them away.

The waif is tough, will follow a calm road
far ahead of us through its universe.

Spring Noise

Bare copses roar like planes coming in low.
The branches are spiky, have leprous fists.
Along the fjord boulders have done nothing
ever. Their edges catch too in the wind.

Far inside the spring noise there’s a music
as close to silence as music can reach:
fragile and stubborn, it follows me home to stay.

Night Time in Ninewells

POEMS BY DEREK RAMSAY

Night Time in Ninewells

She has the size of a child;
Has become Jessie and
Thomas Reid's wee lass again.

Tonight there are geese flying overhead
On their way to the lochs in Fife

And as Ward five seems to have
The only open windows in the entire hospital

The room is full of their noise.
Mum puts her hands over her ears,
Makes 'honk honk' with her empty mouth.

The Tay Estuary near Dundee

Maybe it's just too simple;
The seal lying on the black mud of

My Lord's Bank every time I visit -
The bile dripping soundlessly

Into the bag; her tumour
Feeding; full of itself now.

Soft Fruit

I lied about the strawberries -
Said there were none;
Pulped and mushed as they grew -
When I'd given the whole crop to a girl.

Mum mentioned them again in her
Morphine driven stoner talk -
No strawberries this year.

No mum, none; too much rain.
Maybe not next year either;
I'll have to put new plants in.

Aye, they'll take a while.
You'll just have to find
Someone else to give them to.

The window of her side room
Looked onto a cement courtyard.
A crow landed, rose into the air,
Changed its mind, thought
Something better.

Her new best friend

Another rushed move
To another ward;
Another bundling.

You'll have to look for teddy.
He'll be in a plastic bag; everything
Just gets shoved in plastic bags.

Teddy sits at the other end of the bed.
I tell her this and she drags her one
Hundred tonne little bird's head
From the pillow -
Och, so he is.

Visiting Hours

A hard frost last night,
Then heavy rain first thing.

From bank to bank
Bay to bay the swollen

River slurs, the colour
Of stewed, milky tea.

No sandbanks
No seal.

Flight

I thought I might read to her.
Something from a Scottish fairy tale;
When The King of the Faeries
Flies in the company of shadows
Through sapphire lit glens.

But she would have none of it -
Wanted only for coffee;
Shouted for it, sucked it cold
From one of those eight-sided,
Sponge-headed, lollipop things.

And now we run

It was during the hour when her eyes
Began to dry out then blacken over -

While all the others were at the shop,
The seal on the sandbank finally made sense.

Me and teddy have her between us now,
Running down Ninewells Brae
Towards the river.

Lair 17, Area the East, Row 4

A boy and his teddy, four months late;
Grave robbers waiting on the swings
In the play park until the last
Lights in the maisonettes go out.

Only, they're returning a stolen thing,
The ring which was slipped from
Their mother's wedding finger.

As with sailors, if you must pay
To end your travels someplace fine
Then I am certain there are those who know the
True worth of gold to be in its thinness;

Can tell by the burnish, that given time
Less shall always mean much more.

Copies of the Annabel and My Weekly lie
On the sewing box at the
Side of her chair by the fire;
A cup of black tea on the
Smallest shelf of the mantelpiece.
A Town Called Alice starts in half an hour.

Fad na bliadhna, gach latha, s'am feasgar a'ciaradh

all year, each day and in the evening dusk

fo neamh nan speur

under the starry skies

chunnaic mi an lion fhalamh
a h-uile latha

I saw the empty net every day

an gob na tuinne

at the water's edge

b'e sin do sgrios

that would be your ruination

's mi'g eisdeachd ris
an t-samhachd falamh

listening to the empty silence

dh'iasgaich thu
'san doimhneachd

you fished in the deep water

le an sal mar deoir

with the brine like tears

chaidh thu g'do
mharbhadh

an aghaidh an

tonnan eagalach

*you went to your death
against fearful waves*

's an deoir
gam'dhallachd

and the tears blinding me

an uirreann duine

innseadh dhomh

can anyone tell me

chan eil agamsa ach
cuimhne a d'aodann
aluinn,

*I have only a memory of
your handsome face,*

de bha e cosg?

what did it cost?

agus d'fhalt ruadh boidheach

and your beautiful red hair

...An robh e ro dhaor?

...was it too dear?

is daor a'cheannaich iad an t'iasgach

dearly have they bought the fish

Poems

O leabhar-latha MhicGriogair

PÀDRAIG MACÀOIDH

Agus bha am fear ann mu Shaorsa,
eapasod *Friends* far an deach Joey a thàladh
gu Ioslam radaigeach – an dèidh ionnsaighean
nan US air Iraq ann an ’98 – agus dh’iompaich e
Rachel, Chandler, Monica, Phoebe,
a h-uile duine ach Ross, coma leat Ross,
a bhith na dlùth-chealla ceannarceach,
agus thàinig an eapasod gu crìch le flat falamh
gu cearbach faoin na dhòchais dhearg,
agus còignear air an t-slighe gus Ìomhaigh
na Saorsa a spreadhadh.
Nuair a thoisich sreath ùr
cha robh guth air. Ach uair sam bith
a rinn Joey magadh air Ross,
bha an ceòl-gàire tuilleadh is brèige.

O Fhèin-eachdraidh

MhicGriogair

PÀDRAIG MACÀOIDH

agus an là a bha sin
dh’fheuch mi ri Probhadh Phrìosan Stanford
a ruith a-rithist air mo chroit
ann an Cille Mhoire, agus sgar
mi mo chaoraich – an dèidh crannchur –
aon air aon, eadar ‘caoraich’ is ‘mhic-thìre’.

Nuair a thadhail mi air an fhaing an ath là
cha robh ann ach torr fuilteach clòimhe gun fheum,
closaichean sgriosta leth-chuid mo ghreigh,
madaidhean-allaidh a’ leum
thar mullaichean an sgarpa
agus aon chollaidh gu foirfe calla ’s sorchà.

Dhòmhsa, b’ e adhartas a bha seo.

Middle Ice

LESLEY HARRISON

From *The journal of the Arctic Fox*.
Captain Francis L. McClintock, 1857-59

*Salt ice - young ice - black ice - wind ice -
Floe ice - - plate ice - drift ice - middle ice -
Sound ice - land ice - red ice - old ice -
Field ice - loose ice - water ice - clear ice -*

★

All birds are scarce
the few retreating southward.

A raven was shot today two eagles
at Bellot, a brace of willow grouse

our little auks the only birds remaining
in twos and ones obscure, barely visible.

I was fortunate to shoot a snowy owl;
the flesh is tender white, but tasteless.

★

Our harmonium is on the lower deck.
The men enjoy its pleasing tones.

While Christian turns its handle,
stellar crystals fall:

they have six points
and in the sun or moonlight

glisten brilliantly;
our masts and rigging

a lace crust, brittle as glass
gorgeous, with no disruption.

★

a ship
a brother in our trade
a joy in these barren regions.

★

and seams of coal
and feldspar, and zeolite
and orange flowers in a cleft

and sandstones, and bivalves
and thin, dry corral beds
and garnets, rose and transparent

★

dark figures glide singly about:
wolfish dogs the red flash of rifles

a bear, thin and light
running fast to open water.

★

We are drifting freely from the shore
further and further, on fresh growths of ice

and are now in that free space
unloosed and weightless

leaning over maps in silence
withdrawn from the world

absolved, like isolates
the last black outcrop removed.

★

We march at night, towards
the dark of southern latitudes

and take our meals by lamplight
in silence, drunk with sleep.

Yesterday, the aurora loured above us
burning salt green, electrical

windless and flickering
cloaking the horizon till dawn

then hovering, hoarse and silvery
like low fog, freezing our instruments

our compasses now useless.
Without them we are blind as kittens.

★

waves
have carved miracles into the ice

calving
on threaded rings

glass hulls
transparent in the air

a sea lens
solid, like porcelain

★

Already the long bay swell lifts five feet above
above the hollow of the sea;

loose pieces dash and crush,
with pleasant violence.

The rotting pack now has all the functions
of the ocean

the afternoon air tepid with the breath
and flux beneath.

★

and there, at the sudden run
from glassy blue to mud

the white whales hide
obscured, like lumps in milk

★

a cold wind
falling off the glacier

a streaming –
a keening of wind melt

a high note dying off,
level with the water

our long wake
sinking curling over.

HE DROPPED OFF his bags and immediately took another taxi. They drove, the windscreen wipers dryly scraping insects from the glass.

‘So it’s not my first time,’ Robert said to the driver. ‘I used to live here when I was a boy, with my family. My father still does, he never left.’

He had to repeat himself until he could be understood.

‘And where about?’ the driver asked. ‘When you lived?’

‘St Andrew’s Court. Although I couldn’t tell you where that is, I just remember the name.’

‘A smart part of town!’

‘I’ve not been back since, not for years. Years and years and years and – ‘

‘So it’s a homecoming then?’

‘Not really.’

‘It means Trinity,’ the taxi driver said. ‘Trinidad. Did you know that? I bet you did. Like in the Bible? God, the Son and the Holy Spirit, yes.’

‘I know the Bible,’ Robert said. He leaned back in the seat. I know it like you can’t believe.

The drink sloshed pleasantly in his belly. He muttered, *The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me.*

Ahead of them, along the highway to Diego Martin, verdant hills of bush and rainforest rose like breakers in a tide of mist.

‘Ah, it must be a blessed place, I think,’ the driver said. ‘Trinny.’

There’d been news of drug murders. Curfews, police corruption. So he’d been told. His mother had always said it was a dangerous place. He put up his sunglasses.

When he woke the driver was tapping his shoulder, looming over from the front seat.

‘But this is your stop fella?’ he said.

Robert paid the twenty dollars and paused a moment to scour his face with his palms, and it was only as he stood out in the fine humid haze, watching the car descend into the valley, that he realised his wallet was still inside it, along with his jacket, phone and passport.

‘Off you go,’ he said, waving, ‘all the way back to Port of Spain. And with you goes the hope that your driver is an honest man!’

There was a path ahead of him, curving through a bower of trees, where hidden insects played their monotonous *guiros* and fell silent as he passed. Something rippled with a whip of leaves off into the brush behind him.

Each memory of this place had an animal attached to it, some gross familiar. There were rats behind the cooker one year, scratching at night. He could remember a tide of red ants engulfing his bare leg once, when he stamped down on their nest. Moths as big as birds, birds as small as moths. There were those dogs that time beneath the veranda, when he had joined his father on his rounds, slaving from their chains. All the poorest places, and he had gone in there armed with nothing but a medical bag.

But most of those were not real memories, they were just the stories his mother had told him when he was older. When he stopped to focus, to sink back into the past of himself, those moments were no more than an amber glow and the idea of profound heat, perhaps the luminous flash of a detail that missed entirely the larger picture. Sometimes he felt he had never really lived here at all.

Trinidad

SHORT STORY BY RICHARD W. STRACHAN



At the end of the cinder path there was a cluster of houses with lopsided gutters, the paint flaking from their walls. Scaling through the layers of bush back down in the valley were shack roofs and strips of corrugated iron, tin huts, tumbledown villas. Robert recognised his father’s house at the top of the track. He had seen photographs. The yard was silver with dead grass, and as he readied himself to knock he saw the note pinned behind the screen door.

CALLED ON URGENT BUSINESS. ROBERT, MAKE SELF AT HOME!

The door was unlocked and the house was empty. Uneasy in an unfamiliar space, he switched on the air conditioning and sat down on one of the vinyl sofas. Every surface held a layer of dust. There were old magazines on the floor, paperbacks splayed open at

onto his leg. There were pictures of them all lying on the grass in the Savannah, and dozens of photos from Carnival, the faded colours of the old emulsion taking nothing away from its splendour and crazed flamboyance. A man with a fibreglass rhinoceros head, and in the background the strut of the Spider Queen’s procession. Robert sipped his sherry and studied it. She stoops now to eat her suitors, and as a child, with a child’s wilful acceptance of all that’s most horrific, he had thought every moment of it was true. So he had been told anyway, told by the woman who stared at him from the captured past, on white West Indian sands, and who was dead now these last few months, utterly dead. Robert touched his thumb to her face. That you were ever this young.

He found them eventually, separated, folded

He was walking out into the night, sultry and calm and black. The forecourt was lined with palms, each bladed leaf scraping against its brother, a sound like somebody snoring in a room at the end of a long corridor. He didn’t remember any of this. It was all so different. It probably wasn’t even the same hotel.

unread pages. A line of ants marched across the windowsill. His shirt started to dry against his skin.

Even if his house was robbed to the last pin he would trust the people round him rather than lock it.

There was no beer in the fridge, no wine or whisky in any of the accustomed places, but in a cupboard above the sink he found a bottle of sweet sherry. He poured out and drank off half a pint, and carried his refilled glass through the house.

It was all on one level, a bungalow, and it went back further than you would think. His father’s office was at the rear, next to his bedroom. Robert looked through the drawers and cabinets but couldn’t find anything. They would be here somewhere. Then, in a bedroom that smelled of stale deodorant, the sheets half crumpled on the floor, he found a shoebox full of them at the bottom of the wardrobe, buried under towels and plastic bags. He sat down on the floor and got to work.

There was his mother, no more than twenty-five, standing thigh-deep in a crystal sea and dressed in a black bikini. There was his father, square-jawed and handsome as he faced down the sun, with Robert hanging

inside a yellowing sheet of paper. There he was, a baby, with Robert as a toddler looking over him. Then him as a toddler, walking, and grinning his gums at the camera. Robert’s mother had not kept any of those pictures. He put them to one side. He knew the child only from what he had been told. He had never seen a picture of him before, and his memories were dim, the dimmest.

There were other photos in the shoebox, ones of the swimming pool at the hotel, New Year’s Eve 1980, everyone decked out, drunk, wielding their glasses at the lens. Had it happened that day? He could remember the water erupting, the delayed plunging *thunk* of displaced air as he went in, but not much else. It was hot, without a doubt, air you could spread with a butter knife. No kicking or flailing, just the surface of the pool wobbling once or twice, settling to a flat sheet. But it couldn’t have been New Year’s Eve, because that morning it had been his birthday, and his birthday was in March. From his father’s poorer patients there had been presents, toys woven from palm leaves, he could remember that, paper aeroplanes too, decorated in crayon colours. You tore them as you took the wrapping off.

His mother in there, maybe, skirt billowing

out like a great balloon around her waist. Screaming. Did that happen? He looked again at her face on the page of the photograph. Every detail of her was inside him, as every detail of his brother was not, but he thought about his brother more. Not a day had gone by without a visit from that ghost. They live more vividly inside you the longer they are gone.

He sipped at his drink and took the photos back through to the main room. He stretched out on the vinyl sofa. Drinking, sweating, he stared deeply into the past.

The phone woke him, and he answered it without thinking. It was still light outside, but the light was diffuse and green, and trembled like the surface of the hotel pool. There was sherry spilled all over the carpet.

‘Yes?’

‘Robert, it’s me. Your father.’ The line was bad. ‘Are you still there?’

‘Yes,’ Robert said carefully.

‘I hoped you would be. You saw my message then? I’m out in the sticks. Bad labour,’ he said, ‘and I’m worried about the baby. What could I do? Complications, there are always complications.’

‘Will you be long?’

‘Long enough. I’ve got to wait for an ambulance and – Listen, why don’t you head back to your hotel and I’ll call you when I’m done, let you know what’s what?’

‘Okay.’

‘How are things anyway? How was the flight?’

‘It was fine, no problems at all.’

‘You got the time off okay?’

‘Yes.’

‘And where are you working now, I lose track of all these jobs you’ve had!’

‘Same place as last time.’

‘Well that’s good. And everything else is fine?’

‘Yes.’

‘What about the programme?’ he said in time. ‘Still sticking with it?’

‘Yes,’ Robert said.

‘Well that’s good.’

‘Wait,’ Robert said, before he could hang up. ‘I don’t, I don’t have any money on me. I left my wallet in the taxi.’

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘that’s tricky.’

‘I know. I’d be the first to admit it.’

‘You probably shouldn’t have done that.’

‘No. Should I just stay here, or – ‘

‘Tell you what,’ his father said, rallying. ‘There should be some cash in the sock drawer in my dresser, take what you need. There’s the local firm’s number in the book. Maybe you’ll strike lucky and it’ll be the same chap who brought you out!’ He paused and said, ‘Only don’t think about walking back to save the money. It’s a dangerous place if you don’t know what you’re doing.’

When he got back to the hotel Robert checked at the desk to see if anything had been handed in. Just the passport would have made him happy. He thanked the receptionist and collected his key, and stood in the centre of the atrium squeezing the back of his neck with one hand and pinching the bridge of his nose with the fingers of the other. He tried to think what to do. The photographs of his brother were in his pocket.

He went up to his room. In the bars of light that fell in through the blinds he stood

and drank the rest of the duty free. He looked out at the pool, but it was closed for the evening. The trees shook in a great waft of air, the leaves in a languorous shuffle.

When the whisky was finished he went down to the bar and spent the rest of the money he'd taken

from his father's room. More whisky, ice in the whisky.

'They don't really drink rum in the Caribbean,' he said to a young white couple, Americans, as they stood at the bar. He held up the glass. 'They drink whisky. With ice. I know, I used to live here. You see that pool out there? My brother died right out there, right in that pool.'

Later he said to someone, 'Holidays, right? I used to live here, when I was a boy. Carnival, the Spider Queen, all that. Every year. You know, when I was young I thought it was all real, that someone always got killed at the end. Listen, you know they don't really drink rum in the Caribbean? Whisky. Whisky and ice.' He held up his glass.

At one point he was in the gents, having a dribbling piss. Cockroaches, horrible brown things, greasy things, droned in through the open window. His mother had hated them. Every memory has an animal attached to it. Once, an iguana in the garden, turning its leathery green head towards him, seeing with an opalescent eye. It knew. It had a long perspective. It knew what he had done.

He sat at the bar and looked again at the pictures, staring into the blur of white and red

and pink, the green sea, the pale sky. He put the pictures back in his pocket.

'They live inside you,' he said to someone, or maybe to no one, maybe to the memory of his brother which had grown and swollen inside him all these years, to the new memories he was shoring up against the loss of his mother and the long estrangement from his father, 'They live on inside you, right? That's where they go when they die. Not heaven. They live forever in there.'

He called his father's house, paying coins into the phone in the lobby. He remembered then about the bad labour out in the bush, but the phone was answered.

'Dad? It's me, it's Robert. Is that you?'
'Yes? Yes! So ... what are you going to do tonight then? Why don't you have yourself a nice dinner somewhere, go into town, enjoy yourself.' He pronounced town 'tong', like the locals.

'What?'
'And tomorrow - '
'No, I told you, I lost my wallet. I don't have any money.'
'But you took the money from my dresser?'
'That's right,' Robert said. 'I'd forgotten. I can use that.'
'Grand,' he said. 'So, how long are you here for again?'

'A week. I could really afford - '
'I would have invited you here,' he said at once, 'to stay at the bungalow, but with space being what it is ... And I thought you'd

want maybe a little more luxury than I could provide!'

'Don't worry about it.'
After the silence his father said, 'It's the same hotel, isn't it? It's the one you said.' There was a pause, then, 'I haven't been there in such a while.'

'I think so.' Robert was perfectly sure.
The next silence was so long that Robert fed more coins to the slot to break it.
'You know,' his father said, and over the poverty of the line his voice become mere suggestion, 'she never blamed you for what happened. Don't even think that for a minute. She never loved you any the less for it.'
'I know,' he said. 'Did you?'
'Of course not. God, you were just a child. It was an accident. It was just one of those things.'

He said, 'She blamed me, Robert, not you. She always blamed me.'

He was walking out into the night, sultry and calm and black. The forecourt was lined with palms, each bladed leaf scraping against its brother, a sound like somebody snoring in a room at the end of a long corridor. He didn't remember any of this. It was all so different. It probably wasn't even the same hotel.

He fell, steadied himself, hauled upwards against the branch of stars.
At the back he found the swimming pool, the tarpaulin drawn down across the water. Chlorine spiked the air. He knelt down at the shallow end and patted the tarpaulin's hide. Not the same water of course, and the pool itself no doubt renovated many times over the years. Like the broom in the riddle, with its new shaft, its new head of bristles.

He unhooked the twine and peeled the cover back halfway. There were two white ovals rippling on the water, reflections from the hotel lights. He undressed and flopped into the pool, and was enveloped then in a new skin cool against the night. Gliding through the water, ducking under into darkness and with held breath feeling his way along, patting the cover with his hands from underneath, the cover stretched so taut at this end of the pool that his hands couldn't even break the surface of the water, thinking of the photographs, of them, the way he had taken them both inside himself.

The dead settle on the land inside you. They till their gifted acre and give back the tithe.

As he swam he thought, This is what it would have been like, exactly, just black panic and the safe air a mile above you, unreachable. Maybe he would have looked up and seen me at the side, looking down. The picture of me shattered into a kaleidoscope by the movement of him passing through, backlit by sun. And then that would have been it. He died, and she died.

He looped and skimmed back along the surface of the pool's floor, and when at last he retched up into the air he saw two porters running across the grass, one already prepping to take the plunge, and behind them a manager in a black suit with his tie flapping over his shoulder. The stars were magnificent.

It's alright, Robert tried to shout. I'm fine, I'm fine.

He hauled himself out of the water, the porters' hands under his arms, saying, 'You know my brother died in this pool? He died. ■

Nan Robh

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Nan robh a h-uile chànan
agus fhacal san t-saoghal
air mo theanga, is e toiseach
tòiseachaidh a bhiodh ann
's chan e crìoch.

Nad shuidhe
Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Bha thu nad shuidhe an taic an dorais.
Thill mi ach bha thu air falbh.
Chuir thu às dhut fhèin.
Cha do rinn m' fhaclan feum.
Carson a shaoilinn gun dèanadh?

Ciamar

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Ciamar a ghabhas
bàrdachd thùrsach
aithris gun ghul?

Ciamar a chluinneas
an luchd-èisteachd
ma ghuileas am bàrd?

An e firinn mar sin
no breug a th' ann am
pearfòrmans?

Mealladh-sùla

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Tro ghlainne an dorais chùil
chaidh m' aire a ghlacadh
le poit-ghàrraidh làn ùir.

Shaoil mi car greis
gun robh lann uaine
air seòtadh.

Ach nuair a choimhead mi
na bu dlùithe cha robh ann
ach stob plastaig.

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Poetry

Vernal

PAULA JENNINGS

The tall scarlet of crested hens
fanfares through hawthorn,
struts among verdant twigs

plump with the infant year.
April is freeing story upon story
from a frosted jar.

Now that winter's gales are spent
the air repairs itself, breathes
jonquil scent, drenched loam.

At moonrise star particles glint
in the bent horns of trees,
barks of foxes charge the night.

Tulips have darkened their cups
and the grass blazes silver
as the storyteller begins:

*Perhaps she came from beyond the ice
where colours pour down the night sky.
We only know that one day she was here...*

Deshabille

IAN MCFADYEN

Up North, I'm told,
birches are stunted by the Arctic cold.
But unlike other trees,
they don't grow cowed by the wind:
they are so loosely, delicately feather-limbed,
so pliable, they offer no resistance;
they bend before the gale,
then back they spring.
They winter laden with a weight of ice,
but come the thaw they rise up
lithe and lissom as before.

Down here, they're elegantly tall,
more willowy than willows,
that yellow coinage against a thin blue sky
a wonder when the sun shines, every fall.
The birch in the garden there
has wrestled three whole days
with a vicious equinoctial wind,
and not a leaf spent.
Last night the frost blew softly
in its arborescent ear,
and this still morning it is quite undone,
for all its foliage lies carelessly
about its feet, a pale gold ring,
the sunrise glowing on its silver skin.

It was

MARK EDWARDS

that long eared cat sprayed the shed roof felt
torn in last month's storm,
I was up there patching yesterday
before dark skies reformed.

My bad foot stung on each rung of the ladder
fearing a neighbour might record any fall
for the village to witness my shame.

All hands but mine lost. I cant believe true,
all went their separate ways.
New owners painted the vessel
a black sheen that'll outlive you.

Still the jukey will butcher your finest tunes
preferring the blander version,
could always limp past, see some auld cove
chat fitba, a bit on the weather
avoid the hard talk, dont run, walk
mind fit yer grandfather telt ye:

*bairns greeting like gows their Ma gone pleading
end up the poor huis if we remain breathing.*

This aint Iraq.You aint Saddam.You're nay up in court
dereliction of duty. 3 things I hate, it's plain to say
tornadoes air noise pollution.

Bin

PHILIP MILLER

Putting trash out in the rain
behind our flat, into the windy lane,
I clear out the mulch at the bottom
of the lidless bin: a slippery ball of soaked paper,
an inch of soupy sewerage,
bent birthday cards and , horrible –
a burst nappy,
writhing with maggots, with a sudden stench like two
decayed thumbs pressed into my nose.

Our baby boy made this.
Excrement and fluid, noxious refuse.
Perishable.
I fish out the haggared stinking rag,
which moves with life,
a swollen dressing wet with wounds,
and put it in a new clean bag,
for a hygienic departure.

I have to kneel, in the frame
of the door into the lane,
suddenly bent sick, and retching.
My son's bright face is at the window, held by his
mother.
I can hear him laughing and calling:
Da-da Da-da.
I smile back, like the survivor of something
indescribable.

Schwetzingen

DESMOND GRAHAM

'among features in the remarkable gardens is a
'Perspective' generally called 'the end of the world'
from a *trompe l'oeil* painting at the end of it'

where the lake is a lake
and the clouds are clouds
but not those clouds
floating towards you

and the carp are carp
gathering in the shallows
as you see them change to powder
smokescreen of mud around them

and the heron is a heron
posed over its own reflection
in perfect symmetry
and not a jot concerned with us

and the end of the world
is the end of the world
down a corridor of arched
trellis covered in green

the end of our looking
past the last of perspective
where nature and art exchange
their different looks

if you came close you would see
only a picture
if you could reach it you 'd find
no way through

Haiku

KATRINA SHEPHERD

wind and rain darkness
a hedgehog unrolls
into a trot

copper beech leaves
the truth
in robin song

A Book of Death and Fish

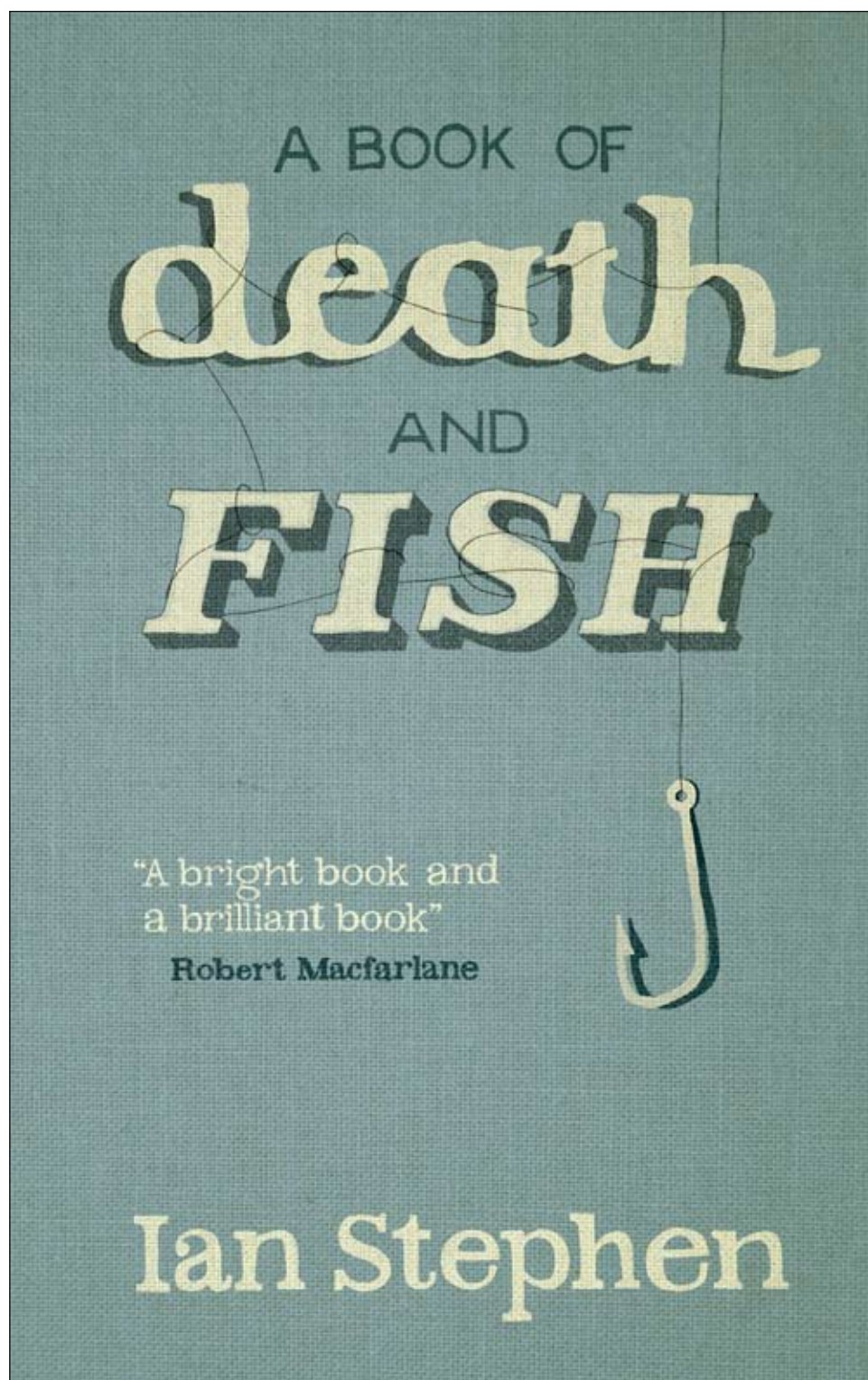
By Ian Stephen
Saraband

REVIEW MY MEGHAN MCAVOY

Ian Stephen's account of a life shaped by the culture of the fishing communities in Scotland's Western Isles is both detailed and sensitive. A lengthy first novel, *A Book of Death and Fish* provides both a celebration of, and a eulogy for, a declined Scottish industry and the centuries-old culture which it has created. Infused with Gaelic and an intriguingly fresh take on linguistic specificity — Stephen's protagonist, Peter MacAulay, refers to his parents as 'olaid' and 'olman' throughout the novel — this work provides a distinctive, 'island' take on the dialect literature which has become so popular in Scotland and further afield in recent decades. At the same time, it neatly side-steps the literary inheritance of the 'urban kailyard' of Irvine Welsh's junkies and James Kelman's figures of existential crisis, eschewing these writers' sense of desolate individuality in favour of an 'island' sense of community and connectedness, which also contrasts with Iain Crichton Smith's celebrated explorations of the stultifying, claustrophobic effects of growing up within an island community.

However, Stephen's work never romanticises the fishing culture it portrays, and its memoir tone does not fall prey to nostalgia or idealisation. Instead it is alive with the sights, smells and hardships of a life closely connected the sea and its inhabitants, dealing with death, exile, poverty, and the volatile relationships between different fishing communities, gender roles, and classes, against a backdrop of treacherous conditions and generational shifts. This highly 'regional' novel of island experience is alert to the context of oral tradition and traditional storytelling, embodying an intertextuality that is woven through with recollections, tales, letters, documents, emails and other memoirs from various members of the community of Lewis fishermen, and several generations of the protagonist's family. However, the novel does not confine island experience to established, expected motifs, dealing with subject matter as diverse as the role of Scotland's fishermen in the second world war, an encounter with a drunk paedophile, and a Scottish experience of the globalisation of eastern religions in the mid-twentieth century.

Each of Stephen's short chapters is a finely-detailed snapshot of an episode in the life of a protagonist who has inherited both the fishing culture of Lewis and the industry and modernity of Glasgow, demonstrating at every turn a crucial sense of connectedness to the past, informed and interrogated by the changes inherent in growing up, moving from Lewis to Glasgow, and cultural shifts between decades and generations. A lengthy first novel which is dictated more by a finely-detailed, episodic account of the protagonist's life than by any driven sense of plot, *A Book of Death and Fish* will be appreciated for its negotiations and reconciliations between past and present, local and international, island communities and city communities, regionalism and globalisation, and life and death. It is a fine, far-reaching and sensitive book. ■



The Book of Strange New Things

by Michel Faber
Hogarth

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

This is a genre-confused novel. A big dose of science fiction, as the main character Peter is sent to a distant planet where he meets a lot of beings who speak without mouths and see without eyes. A rather large smattering of religion, because Peter is a missionary and he thinks about God a lot. There is an apocalyptic aroma, because as soon as Peter leaves, society on Earth begins a rapid descent into anarchy. And it is a love story too, without cynicism, and yet without sentimentality either. So, a sci-fi, end-of-the-world, religious love story. Who could ask for more?

Peter is a missionary sent to appease the natives, but it's not a tall order. There is a colony of humans already settled very comfortably

there, and the natives do not need converting — they miss their previous minister and wish for another. Peter is welcomed warmly by natives and humans alike.

Set in the very near future (next week?), the story is credible on every level, despite there being no scientific explanation for the mode of interplanetary travel, or indeed, any of the futuristic phenomena. *And nothing scary happens*. So, none of the usual aspects of the sci fi genre, yet I don't think this novel would disappoint a sci fi fan, or indeed any reader.

Much is intriguing, but it is Peter's relationship with the wife he left on Earth, that kept me turning the pages. Bea in London emailing Peter, and Peter answering in between bouts of preaching to his alien flock. There are plot lines pertaining to life on another planet, as well as a thread of Christian philosophy that manages to be both intellectually and spiritually engaging.

And there are the tentatively romantic relationships between Peter and two other women — a colleague and a native who he assumes is female.

Michel has written about love before, but not like this. This is love of the domestic variety, with misunderstanding, resentment and insecurity. Yes, the story takes place in outer space, but remains an entirely recognisable tale of married love. And something very interesting happens to Peter's capacity for love, from the cold distance of another planet.

Much is made of Michel Faber's diversity — that he creates entirely different books each time. Victorian prostitutes who plot to thwart men, man-eating aliens who pick up hitchhikers, etc. But I disagree. I think each of these books are recognisably his, both in tone and story line. The protagonists (usually female and disfigured in some way) are often unhappy outsiders who struggle in an indifferent world. Loneliness and alienation are often central themes. Beautifully written in Michel's unique simple style, the stories are nevertheless complex and often brooding. *The Book of Strange New Things* is all these things as well, but there is something achingly tender and wistful about this story. And this tenderness is new.

It's a long book (almost 500 pages), but a quick read. Stop whatever you are doing for a few days and read it. It adds something strange, new and good to the world. ■

Infidelities

by Kirsty Gunn
Faber & Faber

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

The title alone is enough to make a reader perk up — a title that doesn't pull punches or try to act coy or intellectual. It puts its cards on the table. Short stories about infidelities, in all their various subtle, and not so subtle, permutations.

Gunn has long been established as one of Scotland's finest literary authors, since her debut in 1994. Her accolades include winning Scottish Book of the Year, with *The Boy and the Sea*. Like Michel Faber, she is a Scottish writer who was born and raised somewhere else — New Zealand, in her case. Perhaps due to this unusual mixture of linguistic influences, as well as the ex-pat perspective, her style is distinctively her own. The Gunn narrative voice is seemingly informal, casual and confiding — and yet, one always senses a deep intelligent reserve, often a darkness and tension, under the lightness and accessibility.

Like her other work, the stories in *Infidelities* concern the complex way in which people connect, or not, with each other. Sexual infidelity is just one of the ways in which humans betray each other, and Gunn's stories explore the inner workings of hearts belonging to a wide variety of people. Adolescents, mothers, husbands, fathers, wives, children, siblings. Maori and Scots and English and New Zealanders. In all their cases, there is one common thread — the awareness that wrong has been done, either by themselves or to themselves — and more, that a choice of response is their responsibility.

These are brief, bright, shining stories, in

Gunn's minimalist trademark style of truncated sentences, repeated phrases, and an almost Virginia Woolf stream of consciousness. They are easy to read, compelling even, but don't be misled and read too quickly. Take your time, savour each one. Pause at each ending before beginning the next. They are all rich and will reward your full attention.

This is a gift of a book, tightly packed with glimpses into those intense, intimate moments on which lives turn and relationships burn. Either to ashes, or into splendid life. Enjoy ■

The Literature of Shetland

By Mark Ryan Smith

The Shetland Times

REVIEW BY ROSEANNE WATT

Mark Ryan Smith's book, *The Literature of Shetland*, is the first substantial work to critically examine the literary tradition of Scotland's northernmost archipelago. In his introduction, Smith provides a brief historical overview to his subject, wherein he highlights a startling fact: Shetland's literature is still incredibly young, barely two centuries old (compare this to Orkney's millennium of literary history and you grasp something of the discrepancy here). What is most curious, however, is that Shetland's literary identity seems to begin with the loss of its native language.

In the fifteenth century, Norn fell into a slow, irrevocable decline; by the end of the eighteenth century it had ceased to exist as a living language. This, combined with low literacy rates, crucially incurred the loss of orally-preserved poetry and prose. Whilst little of this oral tradition has survived, the fragmentary examples Smith provides in his introduction are striking enough to remind us of the depth of this loss. Consider, for instance, 'The Unst Lay', which features a genuinely captivating conglomeration of Christian and Odinic theology, suggesting the original verse had ancient roots: 'Nine days he hang pa da rötless tree,/For ill was da fök an göd was he;/A blöddy met was in his side,/Made wi a lance at widna hide;/Nine lang nichts i da nippin rime/Hang he dere wi his naked limb,/Some dey leuch/Bit idders grett.'

The introduction's historical crash-course is a useful and necessary overview of the book's subject; however, in the following chapters (each a dedicated case-study, chronologically ordered) Smith eschews a methodology where the work of individual writers is assumed to be inherently informed by the 'bedrock' of an historic, linear narrative. Instead, Smith determines to be perceptive of the individuality and diversity of the various writers he engages with; if common themes or tropes emerge (and they certainly do, particularly in the traditional figure of the crofter), they stem from a context that has not been forced to conform to imagined historical substrata.

This is a highly successful approach, and paints a comprehensive and fascinating picture of Shetland's literature through the ages: from the earliest writers (Margaret Chalmers and Dorothea Primrose Campbell) navigating the absence of a literary tradition, to Walter Scott's reimagining of an enduring Norse identity

in his Shetland-based novel *The Pirate*, and onward to the creation of Shetland's first literary magazine, *The New Shetlander*, and the subsequent establishing of a Shetlandic literary scene predominantly writing in the local vernacular. Though Smith maintains a high standard of objective and balanced analysis throughout much of the book, his analysis is particularly excellent during passages dedicated to Hugh MacDiarmid, Billy Tait and Stella Sutherland.

However, Smith does lose a little of his critical finesse in the penultimate chapter, dedicated to contemporary Shetland writers. Whilst he himself acknowledges that it is difficult to appraise the work of living writers when 'any judgements we make are provisional', the chapter does still feel slightly underdeveloped, as well as missing some vital names, such as the late Fair Isle poet, Lise Sinclair, and award-winning poet and prose writer, Sheenagh Pugh. That said, Smith has cleared much of the groundwork for future scholars of this field, as well as future scope for a second-edition of his book with perhaps a more thorough penultimate chapter. In any case, there is no denying that Smith has contributed a commendable and important body of work in the field of Scottish Literary Studies. ■

Cala Bendita 's a Bheannachdan

Màrtainn Mac an t-Saoir

Acair (Aiteal series)

REVIEW BY MORAY WATSON

Màrtainn Mac an t-Saoir's recent novel *Cala Bendita 's a Bheannachdan* (2014) begins with what initially feels a clichéd and banal set-up. The point-of-view character in the first chapter is a Gael called Gilleasbaig. Gilleasbaig feels himself to be out of place among the Lowlander characters. His 'otherness' is imaged through his very different use of English and in the difference in his manner and *manners* compared with the characters he interacts with. At this point, the reader might be concerned that *Cala Bendita* will serve up predictable and stale fare. However, the initial chapter is by no means indicative of the sort of novel that *Cala Bendita* is, and the reader should indulge Mac an t-Saoir's teasing opening, which prepares the way for a much more interesting and diverse main course. Indeed, Gilleasbaig himself immediately gives way to a range of fascinating and intriguing characters. The cast is an ensemble one, with only the slightest connections between some of them. The significance, indeed, of Bendita (in Mallorca), is that it is the main point of commonality between several of the families in the novel: they have noticed each other while on holiday there.

In complete contrast with Mac an t-Saoir's 2011 novel, *An Latha as Fhaide*, linear plotting is avoided here. Instead, the reader is invited to tease out the threads of a story by piecing together the tantalising strands that the book offers us. Sometimes, the significance of a scene is not at all clear until much later in the novel, and the reader may even have to go back and re-read certain scenes for a reminder of what the relationships of particular characters seemed to be at other points in the narrative.

The narrative itself is highly experimental, shifting between – and sometimes within – chapters, from first-person to third-person points of view. Occasionally, there are even changes of time, moving from historic-past narrative to immediate present or even future tense. This changeable narrative pattern blends with the deliberately-fragmented structure of the novel and creates an overall effect of disjuncture, challenging the concept of linearity and the attractive illusion of the teleological through-line.

As has so often been the case in Gaelic novels, language catches the reader's attention. *Cala Bendita* has significant amounts of English, used extensively in dialogue but also frequently in the narrative. Appropriately, given the international settings and cast of characters, other languages appear or are referenced, notably Spanish. One entire chapter is in Cockney English, mirroring the usage of its viewpoint character.

Cala Bendita is, in many ways, a challenging read. The novel leaves the reader with a strong sense that its writer has made every effort to employ a wide variety of techniques, the effect of this being rather like listening to the fruits of a creative writing course on the final day. Coupled with the lack of a strong plot and the disconnection between chapters, this tends to make *Cala Bendita* read like a short story cycle at times. However, irrespective of this, the book rewards a reader's patience and marks another positive development in our recent prose fiction renaissance. ■

An Island Girl's Journey.

Dolina MacIannan, In Conversation with Jim Gilchrist and Stuart Lydmann

The Islands Book Trust

REVIEW BY SALLY EVANS

Cultural icon, Gaelic broadcaster, singer, actress, friend of poets, Perthshire hostess and latterly campaigner for independence – a BBC manager once told her, "Your place is not behind the scenes" – Dolina MacIannan has quietly and diversely become one of the most famous women in Scotland.

Written ably by herself, despite the title page's hesitant "in conversation," the book opens with vivid reminiscences of her upbringing on a Lewis croft, Gaelic speaking and where she acquired her knowledge of Gaelic song. This background reminds me of that of another highland woman – "Jane Duncan" the novelist from the Black Isle. In the same way, Dolina MacIannan was drawn away from the highland crofting culture by an English language education. Both women are modest to a fault, yet fiercely proud of their highland roots. Despite major achievements neither woman seems to consider herself immensely gifted or important.

Yet it was no accident that Dolina was at the centre of Scottish culture for so long, in Lewis and Stornoway, in Edinburgh and Glasgow and latterly Perthshire. She had so much to give to the poets, musicians, play companies, broadcasters, academics and intellectuals, especially through the 70s, 80s and 90s, when the folk scene was fizzing, the great Scottish poets were so active, Gaelic broadcasting was

developing and important Scottish plays were touring the country.

Dolina could think in Gaelic and she was vitally important to the other Scots, whether they wrote in Gaelic, Scots or English, as she sang at their events, presented their poetry, interviewed them on radio, or fed them in her Edinburgh homes as they incessantly discussed Scottish affairs.

Much of this part of her story is literary history which will be corroborated by accounts of the other personalities, MacCaig, Henderson, Maclean, and all the rest. But there is also a moving personal story running through the book, of Dolina's private life, two marriages, children and grandchildren, and then of her bed and breakfast establishment in Blair Atholl, her subsequent illness and return to Edinburgh. All is told or hinted at without a single ill word being spoken against anybody, and with unerring dignity.

Not least of her achievements was writing 54 episodes of the Gaelic TV soap *Na Moireasdanaich* (The Morrisons), a project she herself had suggested to BBC producers. This was hard-headed professional writing in Gaelic, which makes it all the more remarkable that this book is so self-effacing. "I've also written bits and pieces of verse over the years, but have never considered myself a poet."

Dolina MacIannan seems to have invented her own gender role over a key period in the development of Scottish culture. In the Gaelic world, the world of Lewis, gender roles were well defined. With her gift of song, her ability to write and imagine in Gaelic, her work as an actor, her contributions to all that was going on, she created her own role at the centre of the cultural upheaval that has so affected Scotland in our time. ■

The Book of Ways

by Colin Will

Red Squirrel Press

The Road North

by Alec Finlay and Ken Cockburn

Shearsman Books

REVIEW BY STEPHEN KEELER

I was grateful for the introduction in *The Book of Ways*. *Haibun* are one of those genres so accessible to Japanese, from where they originate, so elusive in English which does not always willingly accommodate the form. The so-called classic definitions, 'writing in the style of haiku' and 'sketching in words', may only cloud the issue further for Western readers. Are *haibun* prose or poetry, or both? And to what extent does it matter? Colin Wills is unequivocal: 'this is poetry'. Yet he is comfortable acknowledging that, 'Most commentators agree...they contain prose written in the spirit of haiku'. Among others, this raises the question of what we understand 'the spirit of haiku' to be.

Haibun, we are told, contain at least one haiku, often at the end, and the prose of the *haibun* is often, 'but not always', an account of a (literal) journey. Will recognises that this has led some to characterise the *haibun* as a waybook (hence the title of his book). So are *haibun* a literary form or a collection of pieces ►►

► in one volume? Either way, Will acknowledges the risk that ‘a *haibun* collection becomes a series of travel notes’ and is at pains to assert that this is not his intention. This is poetry.

So the reader of this eclectic collection of pieces (prose poems?) might be best advised to suspend prejudice awhile, set aside questions of form and genre, and let the evident strength and delicacy of Will’s thesis emerge through the unobstructed writing, for these are, for the most part, calming meditations on the human condition; part memoir, part manifesto and yes, part travelogue, much of it celebratory in intent and effect. A delightful collection to dip into for observations on the Moscow State Circus, in Moscow, on climbing Suilven; on the torpedo testing station nearby the Ta’er Lamasery, or on new shoes. Often serene, always thoughtful; a joy, simply. Much of what I struggled to find in *The Road North*.

Where Wills offered an explanation if not a justification of *haibun*, Finlay and Cockburn hit the road running. Their “journey around Scotland guided by Bashō’s *Oku-no-Hosomichi*” is a collection of poems in the form of a more or less continuous poetic narrative. It is often exquisite in its simplicity,

what is a glen?
air where once there was ice
heather where once there were trees
wind where once there was breath

but its elusiveness seems, to this reader, to verge on the opaque, sometimes on the inconsequential, even the obscure. A page of notes at the back of the book explains a little of the Japanese poet Bashō (1644-1694) and of the intent behind *The Road North* but leaves the no doubt ill-informed Western reader unsure of the connections or of the motivation behind the device.

There are occasional bursts of sunshine recognisable to anyone who has walked in Scotland, as on ‘a squeaking walk on the singing sands of Moidart, Arisaig and Morar’:

...another day to sip dark tea from the mussel’s flared rim...
...another day of salt water without storm, light shattering glinting fragments...

and the poetry is always considered. It is an ambitious undertaking which, for this reader, fell just short of its intentions. ■

Poetry Reviews

By RICHIE McCAFFERY

Mario Relich’s *Frisky Ducks & Other Poems* (Grace Note Publications) collects together decades of poems. Tom Hubbard’s effusive introduction states that these poems are

characterised by a ‘generous wariness’ and he is exactly right. Relich’s work shares a kinship with that of Robert Garioch’s, funny, wary but with hidden depths. Like the title suggests, there are many bird poems here with Relich acting as an auspex reading patterns and predictions into the day from the habits of the birds he sees. Above all, it is Relich’s family poems about his mother, displacement and belonging which move the reader most: ‘What’s an opera/house?,’ I wondered,// having no inkling/that Montreal//was not home to her,/and never would be.’ (‘Caruso’).

Jim C. Wilson is another poet whose poems deftly mingle both darker and lighter shades. Many of the earlier poems in *Come Close and Listen* (Greenwich Exchange) are metapoetic, talking about waiting for inspiration to strike or the business of writing. Inspiration certainly comes in the latter stages of the book where poems can go from witty to nightmarish with just the turn of a page. Wilson is a craftsman above all and I found myself drawn to his graver poems, such as his poem for Lorca: ‘when the men held you down/in their terrible passion...could you taste a sailor’s kiss/in that black grove of olives?//Before the last explosion of blood,/did you remember love?’ (‘1936’)

I just read an interview with Susan Sontag where she claimed that praise was not an effective force in creative writing. Reading Lurna Robertson’s *Praise Song* (HappenStance Press) I feel she was probably quite wrong. Here are poems in celebration of place, birth, language and family. Not only does Robertson write about her Shetlandic heritage, concepts of the ‘North’ and folklore, she also writes in such a longing and crystalline way about things closest to her heart. Here is the memory of a swimming lesson by her father in the sea: ‘My father taught me how to swim...Years earlier, seeing a toddler tumble/from the harbour wall, he had leapt into the water,/forgetting the day’s takings in his pockets/and that he could not swim at all. (‘Life Class’).

The title of Valerie Gillies’ new volume *The Cream of the Well* (Luath Press) relates to the first sip from the well at sunrise, when the healing properties of the water are believed to be at their most potent. Here we have the cream, or more accurately the choicest, most limpid draughts from Gillies’ collections, beginning with 1977’s *Each Bright Eye* and ending with a sequence of poems occasioned by a recent associateship at Harvard University. A strong water-table lies underneath all of these poems, giving them a refreshing flow and fluidity, there are homages paid to wells, rivers, lochs but more than this I was struck by how this collection shows Gillies’ movement from a strongly narrative type of poem, informed by family history, towards a more lyrical poem directed either at herself or the elements. Both work brilliantly well, but like some collections where a poet settles into a style, Gillies’ has avoided this sense of stasis. This is from the ‘Golden Breast’: ‘Say goodbye to your breast,’ she said,/‘for tomorrow it will be gone.’//So I walked far into the hills./I opened my shirt,/the sun set on my breast.

Ian McDonough’s *A Witch Among the Gooseberries* (Mariscat Press) deals largely with both memory and childhood imagination and the attempts of the adult poet to recapture such moments of wonderment and otherworldliness. While there is a secret commonwealth of fairies and other creature here, it is the much starker, more existential poems which genuinely haunt and impress the reader. Here is a spell to summon your shade: ‘Snare the shade in light,/bind it on an oath,/ask it when the thing/we once were promised/will arrive.’ (‘Summoning’)

Jim Carruth’s *Prodigal* (Mariscat Press) adds another instalment to the on-going poetic chronicling of his agrarian life and background. This moving pamphlet is all about returns, homecomings both auspicious and ominous. At the heart of this pamphlet lies a sense of familial drama, of old ways dying out or perhaps being preserved and the imaginative wanderlust of Carruth as a poet, who is always simultaneously apart from and with the farm in his mind. Besides the hilarious tour-de-force of ‘Vade Mecum’ with its recommended come-hither chat-up lines for farmers, acceptance of Carruth’s craft by his father comes in ‘Old Collie’:

While working together my father shouts across the parlour an idea for my next poem
How about a working collie – one that’s on its last legs. I tell him it has been done before.

McGuire’s *As I sit quietly, I begin to smell burning* (Red Squirrel Press) is a very different kettle of fish from anything else here. His work straddles both poetry for performance and the printed page and ‘Reductio ad Absurdum’ dramatizes the often elitist way in which these two styles are discussed by critics, so I am on parlous ground. ‘Lackey: The Useless Poet’ shows a certain antagonism to such critics who fail to ‘sit down’, take their jacket off and ‘just chat’. Full of spleen and seaminess, the obvious comparison would be with Bukowski, but I think McGuire’s work reads more satisfactorily as a 21st century version of Glasgow’s James BV Thomson and his *City of Dreadful Night*: ‘Glasgow. We do not tend to it,/but watch it blacken like a burst eye,/blacken like a coal pit,/blacken like a dead flower.’ (‘The Glasgae Boys’)

Another collection with a Glaswegian air is Chris Young’s pamphlet *Greetings from Glasgow* (Red Squirrel Press). Like McGuire, Young is also a performance poet, but his work does not translate as well onto the page. These poems are bright and often uplifting but they are often a lot safer and more flip than McGuire’s. At times, in some of the more humorous poems, I felt like I was reading the work of a Glasgow Betjeman, in poems like ‘Umbrellas’ about Glasgow’s rain and ‘Ode to a Vegetarian Haggis’. That said, I like Young’s work most when he is not trying too hard to perform and entertain. Here is ‘Underground’: ‘His leg against mine,/we sit in bristling silence, packed tightly below./My stop. I part with a smile/as bright as the unseen sun.’

Also from the Red Squirrel’s drey is Matthew Macdonald’s *Cò às a tha thu? / Who Are Your People?* (Red Squirrel Press). As might be gleaned from the title, this collection is a sensitive and resonant return of the Edinburgh born Macdonald to his family roots on Harris and Lewis. These poems are at all times lyrical, humane and warm but I often found them lacking fire and drama, but perhaps that says more about me. In fact, I liked most of all his poems from Edinburgh such as ‘Afternoon’ where I can see he is still finding his bearings and mapping the landscape: ‘I find out later that the loch is not big enough/to warrant the activity of naming/which seems appropriate, somehow/for a country with so much wilderness/woven into its bones.’

Although Arc Publications are perhaps best known for their translations of major European writers, here they add Ian Crockatt’s translations of 12th Century skaldic poetry in *Crimsoning the Eagle’s Claw* (Arc Publications). From the scholarly introduction onwards, it is very clear that Crockatt’s enjoyment and sense of importance of this task is central and it makes for a fascinating reading experience. Here are poems on the whole cycle of life and we discover that Rognvaldr, the poet, was both a lover and a fighter, as Crockatt writes: ‘your mind engaged with minds / before opening men’s veins’. Above all, Crockatt’s translations have made me appreciate anew the skaldic technique of kenning, which makes such vivid and euphemistic images (‘fleshed ravens’ meaning leaving dead men for carrion):

I was with the rouser of war-winds in Orkney; he’d fleshed ravens before, fought and won that winter. Now, his shield-rim shouldered, the sure-footed jarl tackles Acre’s gates. It’s a rain-flayed Friday morn. We storm on.
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It has certainly been a prolific year for Sheena Blackhall. Not only has 2014 seen the publication of the Aberdeen University Press hardback *The Space Between: New and Selected Poems*, Blackhall has also published with Lochlands a new pamphlet of poetry for nearly every month of the year. Here we have October’s and November’s – *An Inside Job* and *Mr Charon’s Ferry* (Lochlands). As the respective titles suggest, the former deals more with phrenic matters, of MRI scans of the poet’s brain and Thematic Apperception Tests, while the latter deals more with mortality and elegy. That said, Blackhall’s poetry is never far from breaking into song or being enlivened by gallows humour, making these two pamphlets mixed bags of the serious and the silly: ‘The airt far poems cam frae/Is like the traivellin tide/Wi treisurs, joys an nichtmares/World-gaithered in its side.’ (‘An Inside Job (2)’) ■

CONTRIBUTORS’ BIOGRAPHIES

Andy Allan, a native of Strathspey, has been published in a number of magazines and anthologies. His first pamphlet, *Breath of Dragons*, will be published by Indigo Dreams in 2015.

Grahaeme Barrasford Young’s first full collection, *Routes of uncertainty* (Original Plus), was published in 2014.

Ann Bowes is from Drumnadrochit and lives on Skye, having worked as a museums designer & exhibitions curator. She is a poetry and kindle writer, mixed medium artist.

William Bonar was shortlisted for the 2015 New Writers Award. His pamphlet collection *Offering* will be published by Red Squirrel Press on 23rd April 2015.

Eileen Carney Hulme’s third collection, *The Stone Messenger*, will be published by Indigo Dreams Publishing in 2015. Her poems appear in magazines and occasionally surface in competitions.

Regi Claire has twice shortlisted for a Saltire Book of the Year award. Her writing has been anthologised in *Best British Short Stories 2013*. She is a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and a lover of crows and dark tales.

Anna Danskin À Bhatairnis an Eilein Sgitheanaich bho thùs. Dàin leatha ann an irisean leithid An Guth is Gairm. Ag obair air a’ chiad chruinneachadh aice aig aois thairis air ceithir fichead.

Robert Davidson is a writer, editor and publisher located in Highland Scotland. He founded Sandstone Press in 2002. Books written by Robert Davidson have been short listed for the Saltire Society, Scottish Arts Council, and Boardman Tasker Awards.

Mark Edwards lives in Lossie. His first book, *Clearout Sale*, was published in 2008.

Sally Evans’ most recent collection is *Poetic Adventures in Scotland with Seventy Selected Poems*. She edits *Poetry Scotland*.

Robin Fulton Macpherson was born in Arran in 1937 and now lives in Norway. He edited *Lines Review* and has translated the Nobel Prize-winning poet Tomas Tranströmer. A collected edition of Robin’s poems, *A Northern Habitat*, was published by Marick Press in 2013.

Desmond Graham has recently published, in Polish translation, *Nowe wiersze* (Gdansk); nearer home *Unaccompanied* (Villa Vic Press Newcastle) and *The Scale of Change* (Flambard).

Brian Hamill lives in Glasgow. He serves as Submissions Editor for *thi uurd* magazine. Brian has had stories published in various books and magazines. He was a winner of the Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award in 2013.

Lesley Harrison lives in Angus. Her most recent poetry pamphlet is *Beyond the Map*, published by Mariscat.

Anne Hay grew up in Perth, lives in Edinburgh. She has written short fiction and comedy for radio.

Kate Hendry is a writer and tutor, living in Edinburgh. Her first collection of poems will be published by Happenstance Press next year.

Paula Jennings is published in magazines (*Stand*, *Rialto*, *Gutter*, the *SHOp* etc), has two poetry collections and a third on the way (*HappenStance*). She lives in Fife.

Stephen Keeler is a writer, poet and teacher. He has lived and worked in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and the Far East for, among others, the British Council, the United Nations Development Program and the BBC. He lives in Ullapool and is a Scottish Book Trust New Writing Award winner 2015.

Coinneach Lindsay Dàin leis ann *an Sandstone Review* etc. Na Fhilidh air Mhuinntearas aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig an-dràsta.

Pàdraig MacAoidh – À Leòdhas. Na fhear-teagaisg aig Oilthigh Chille Rìmhinn. Cruinneachadh Gu Leòr 2013.

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

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.

Richie McCaffery’s first full length collection of poems, *Cairn*, was published in 2014.

Amy McCauley’s poetry has appeared widely in UK magazines and anthologies. Her current project is a collection of poems (*Auto-Oedipa*) which re-imagines the Oedipus myth.

Ian McFadyen is a retired English teacher, life now divided – weather permitting – between Sutherland and the Borders. Poems and occasional short stories in Scots and English.

Hugh McMillan is a poet from Penpont. His *Selected Poems*, and *Galloway: An Unreliable Tour* are due out this year from Luath.

Philip Miller is a journalist, writer and poet who lives and works in Glasgow. His short stories and poems have been published in *Gutter* magazine, the *Fish Anthology 2014*, *The Island Review*, *The Herald* and other places. His debut novel *The Blue Horse* is being published by Freight Books in March 2015.

Stuart A Paterson lives by the Solway Coast, received a Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship in 2014 and has a collection of Galloway poems, *Border Lines*, published by IDP in 2015.

Derek Ramsey listened to his best of Albert Ayler L.P. last night instead of writing; it was good.

Frances Robson’s writing has appeared in various publications. In 2014 she published the first Scots translation of Lermontov’s ‘Demon’. She lives in Edinburgh.

Cynthia Rogerson has published four novels and a collection of stories. Her novel *I Love You, Goodbye* was shortlisted for the 2011 Scottish Novel of the Year, and developed into a Woman’s Hour serial. Her latest novel is *If I Touched the Earth* (Black and White).

Katrina Shepherd’s haiku are published widely with one in The Haiku Calendar 2015, www.snapshotpress.co.uk ‘In the stillness’, music by Sally Beamish, is available from www.gonzagamusic.co.uk

Richard W. Strachan won a New Writer’s Award from the Scottish Book Trust in 2012, and has written for *New Writing Scotland*, *Gutter*, *The Herald* and the *Scottish Review of Books*.

Mairi Sutherland’s move to Nairn in 2000 kick-started her writing. She eavesdrops on public transport for characters’ voices. Her first novel is gradually emerging.

Moray Watson is a lecturer in Gaelic Studies within the School of Language and Literature at the University of Aberdeen.

Roseanne Watt is from Shetland. She graduated from the University of Stirling with a BA (Hons) in English and Film Studies and has now successfully completed the university’s MLitt programme in Creative Writing.

Catherine Wylie taught English in the Stirling area. Her work has been published in various magazines. In 2014 she participated in the Orkney Writers’ Course.

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