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Northwords Now

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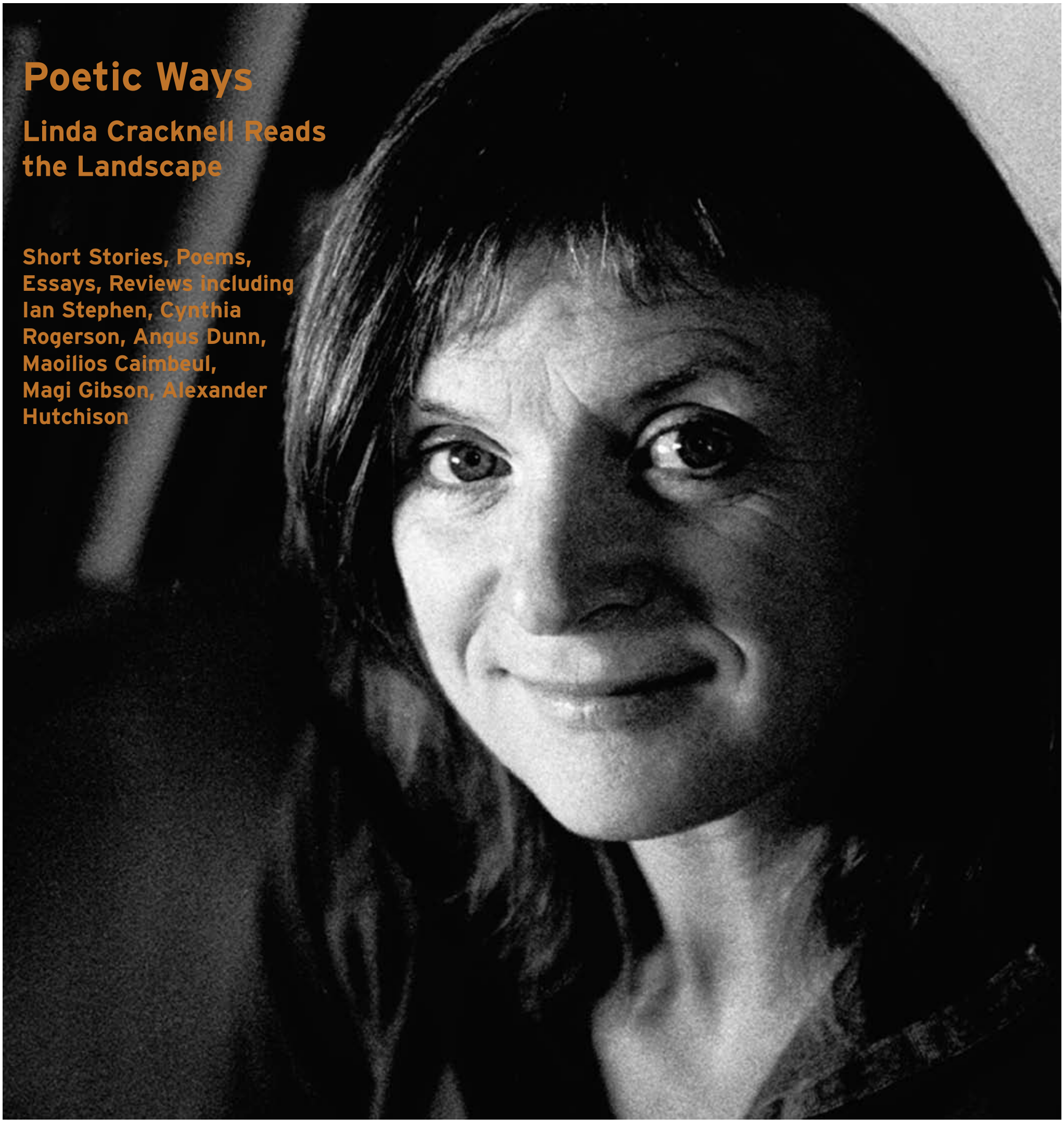

Poetic Ways

Linda Cracknell Reads the Landscape

Short Stories, Poems, Essays, Reviews including Ian Stephen, Cynthia Rogerson, Angus Dunn, Maoilios Caimbeul, Magi Gibson, Alexander Hutchison

EDITORIAL

Angus Dunn, one of the founding lights of *Northwords* (as editor) and later, *Northwords Now* (as manager), has died. Angus had been seriously ill for some time but the news still comes as a shock, even if it is not a surprise. My heart goes out to his family and friends and to his partner Nikki.

At the time of writing, there has barely been time to take in the news, let alone arrange for the writing of an obituary, but I am immensely thankful and glad that, earlier this summer, Angus sent such fine poems to the magazine (page 15). The fact that Angus wrote poetry at all may come as a surprise to those who know his work though his short fiction and his novel, *Writing in the Sand*. To my mind these poems show the spirit of Angus Dunn at work. They are passionate, generous poems distinguished by a richness of vision and a craftsman's love for the shapes that language can take. They take the reader by surprise and show them the world anew.

It is some comfort that latterly I played a small part in bringing together Angus' poetry in a book, *High Country,* to be published by Sandstone in September 2015. I'm looking forward to holding a printed copy in my hands but, for the moment, I cannot help but think that a world without Angus Dunn's creative, enthusiastic and entirely loveable presence feels like a world diminished. ■

– Chris Powici
Editor

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Photograph of Linda Cracknell by Phil Horey

Submissions to the magazine are welcome. They can be in Gaelic, English, Scots and any local variants. 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.

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New Found Lands Revisited

Michael Crummey's Island Lives

Essay by Ian Stephen

One night, when high pressure prevailed, Stornoway Coastguard had a two-way radio conversation with St John's Coastguard Radio. Our medium frequency aerial, on the west of the Hebrides allowed us to communicate with the Newfoundland station. Sometimes we need a reminder of who our neighbours are.

Ullapool Book Festival has maintained a link with our Canadian neighbours, enticing some of the huge country's top authors across the pond. I recall Lynton McIntyre discuss the moment when the bridge was opened and Cape Breton ceased to be an island. His memoire *Causeways* meditates on the implications of this connection.

This year's Canadian guest, Michael Crummey is also from the maritimes – but the grey and drizzly Harris-like landscape of Newfoundland. As a fellow guest, I was privileged to be able to continue the conversation, moving from the festival to present our recent novels together at Highland Literary Salon. Crummey's generosity of spirit brought the essence of the work and the man to both audiences. At Ullapool there was a discussion on how effective low-key writing can be, as opposed to a perceived need for a more obvious drama. We were brought, as a community or congregation, together into the most intimate deathbed scene by Michael Crummey's reading from *Sweetland*.

This is the most recent of four novels from a writer who was first known for his poetry and short stories. The literature of both Scotland and Canada seems to have continued a focus on the short fiction form along with ambitious novels which negotiate the lives of individuals and their place in the sweep of a country's history. I'm thinking of James Robertson's plotting of a generation recovering from the Second World War and enduring the Thatcher years and the break-up of communities in *And The Land lay Still*. Yet the same author has a proven mastery of short forms. The historical setting ranges further back in time in both Mackay Brown's *Magnus* and in Canadian Joseph Boyden's split narrative technique (courtesy of Stevenson's *Treasure Island*) recreating the terrible clash of cultures in his revenge tragedy *The Orenda*.

In a sensitive interview by Dave Robinson, Michael Crummey had to be reminded that the subject of his first novel was the pertinent answer to a question, from the floor, on the remaining signs of a former indigenous population in Newfoundland. I too felt that the author was too quick to dismiss *The River Thieves*– a wide-ranging historical adventure. He said this was because he felt its characters did not reveal the dry and dogged humour which is an essential part of the culture of the Newfoundlan's new inhabitants.

That first novel contains one of the most powerful female characters I have yet met in contemporary fiction. An heir to Scott's Jeannie Deans in *Heart of Midlothian*, a fictional character whose admirers included Balzac and Tolstoy, Michael Crummey's Cassie endures and fights and survives but never seems like a symbolic figure. The terrible story of why she is who she is unfolds, as thrawn settlers and morally ambiguous administrators, make one last attempt to make contact with the shadowy Beothuk people who have been driven to the island's inhospitable edges. This time it is Colm Toibin who comes to mind, in comparison, as a man who can somehow convincingly enter the minds of women.

Michael Crummey

The storyline in *The River Thieves* has twists of misunderstandings or lies but this is character-based storytelling. True, there may not be much space for humour, but you never feel that the characters are being marshaled to march out a pre-arranged plot.

Michael's ability to connect with people was clear at the Ullapool festival. A young Canadian woman on the Ceilidh Place staff was flustered, in awe of a writer both she and her mother had long admired, as a poet as well as fiction writer. There was no fuss but the author made sure there was space for a cup of coffee and a signed copy of one of his poetry collections. A story to bring back home. He also knew what he was going to read, in this Scottish visit.

He explained that *Sweetland* is based on an idea prompted by a government scheme to encourage the last residents of outlying settlements on Newfoundland (the outports) to move closer to services, now that the fishing industry which prompted their building has failed. The cod stocks are unlikely to return. They have been fished out beyond recovery. The offer is generous enough to allow evacuees the choice of a very substantial house and a partial income in a more peopled area. The writer's thesis is that there is just one man who says no and that counts as a veto. All must agree to leave.

Michael outlined this scenario, the landscape and the economic forces, in just a few sentences in his clear, careful voice. Then he read from a scene where the government man visits the only owner who has said no to the re-settlement. This is where the dialogue showed the writer's point about his first novel. The scene could well have been set in the Hebrides or in the Northern Isles. The ironic voices are a little more dry than gin but not cutting, not fast. These duelists want to understand each other or at least want to make their positions clear as they can be.

In interview, the author outlined his own upbringing in a former mining town, the only Newfoundland settlement set apart from the sea. When I asked him where, in writing, he wanted to go next, after four successful novels, his answer was 'non-fiction'. He wishes to write more on his father and mother's lives but does not see a need to fictionalise them. The subject evoked other discussions during Ullapool Book Festival, confirming the eclectic vision of its director Joan Michael. I recall Linda Cracknell, a contemplative walker as well as a writer of short and long fiction, suggest that storytelling was even more important in non-fiction, to construct the essay from the observations and hold the reader.

I came away with a signed copy of Michael Crummey's third novel *Galore* (and a feeling that I will not be content without progressing on to *Sweetland*). *Galore* falls naturally into two sections and I have now completed the first of these, savouring the dream-like imagery as well as the driving narrative and graveyard humour. There is a large host of characters but they are boldly sketched as strong individuals. Again, the females are powerful personalities. One young woman pleads with the newly arrived physician and dentist to pull all her teeth as well as the two which are giving her trouble. If he does not they will bother her later, when there may not be help around.

Her story unfolds as the narrative goes easily back and forth in time. We discover she is already pregnant during this scene. Even as a teenager, she has proved herself capable of seeing off unwanted admirers in a society where the available women are seriously outnumbered by lonely men. One man charmingly suggests he'd like to get into the same pair of pants as she is wearing. She asks him why the hell anyone would want to do that – there's one arsehole in them already.

A survivor, washed up naked, cold but breathing is wed by another bold woman to save him from becoming the scapegoat for an unfortunate death. Judah is remembered for his thin pale body, the stink of innards and a tiny penis. When his new wife reaches for him in the dark she catches hold of what she thinks is his wrist.

But I would suggest that the shift from *The River Thieves* to *Galore* has other elements than the tone of wit. Michael makes no secret of his admiration for the magical realists, particularly Marquez. *Galore* opens with that survivor being cut from the gut of a stranded humpback whale. The name Jonah is mis-remembered and so he becomes Judah to the community. His offspring will betray their origins by the stink when they are made anxious. This is a fable which has inexplicable elements and a backcloth of hard realism. The human psychology though, always rings true and recognisable, even when the story enters a world of dreams.

There is a line of sight between northern Scotland and Newfoundland but it's a long line. There are strong similarities of landscapes but contrasts of weather. Our climate is still mitigated by the vestiges of the Gulf Stream. The savagery of the Arctic climate sweeps down to Newfoundland on the Labrador current. The Hebrides still hold to their own indigenous language and its associated culture. But Michael Crummey was being honest in not attempting to enter the minds of the shadowy Beothuk people in *The River Thieves.* He explained why that would seem presumptious.

The shift from traditional industries, both sides of the Atlantic and the tenacious strength of artistic communities also suggest grounds why an exchange of writers between the Highlands and Canada could be a good investment of limited arts funds. Perhaps such an exchange could represent the Hebrides one year, mainland Highlands another and move to Orkney and Shetland. And perhaps a Canadian host organization for a Highland writer could begin with Newfoundland but also look to other maritime islands or former-islands and consider Québec or even the inland-island states of Saskatchewan and Alberta for future exchanges. ■

Birds, Beasts and Flowers

Another Empty Afternoon
Peter Maclaren

The fig tree
unfolds its green hand;
from the whitethorn hedge
a swivelling plate-faced owl
surveys the world;
there's a yellow haze of buttercups
levitating above a field;
caterpillar catkins glow
as a biplane dragonfly flits by.

The farmyard dog opens a lazy eye
– too hot to stir, too tired to bark.
I tiptoe past.

Amang Puddocks
Edith Harper

I mind ae day,
a fine day, a lichtsome day,
in the faur west o Donegal,
on the wa abeen the pond
hunnerts o froglets -
no muckle, galumphing puddocks
o the kind yer used tae,
the ane's that pleiter amang the dubs
an loup at ye fae under stanes -
naw, these were wee bit things,
nae bigger nor the nail
oan ma pinkie,
an oh, they were brave an bonnie
as they tried oot their new-grown legs,
tried tae fin their feet, as ye micht say,
I doot na the maist o them,
wad be etten by heron or pike,
  (fur I nivver heard that the place
   wis o'errun wi hunnerts o puddocks)
but I aye hope that ane, at least,
grew tae be a prince
amang puddocks.

Sheep Sink
Janis Clark

That old white sink lay in Duncan's field for decades,
set at ground level, it quenched the thirst of many
passing beast

except that poor sad ewe last winter, trapped hours
in its icy water, her bleating silenced by snow.

When lifted out, the fleece formed a frozen cuboid,
only the dead head stared up towards the sky.

A Dead Lamb in Polbain
Jane Aldous

How long the lamb had lived,
how long its fleece sodden by the rain,
lent covering for its body lying by the wall,

while other sheep and lambs
ranged over the steep hillside,
opposite Tanera Mor,

only its mother knew.
And as she moved away to feed,
the farmer in his camouflage boiler suit,

stepped over the low stone wall
and kneeling beside the lamb,
tied its back legs together with twine.

As the lifeless animal was pulled gently
over stones, grass and reeds,
its mother followed in slow procession

across the fields, her lamb's only chance
to be with the flock.
When I next caught sight of the farmer

the lamb was gone,
its body to the sea-rocks, the crow-gods,
its skin to clothe a foundling.

Direct Rule
Howard Wright

What is the garden and above is ours now,
from yellow frogs
to the last of the cabbage whites,
the Zhivago trees with the sun trembling
in their throats.

They sing one unrestrained note
for the Siberian summer sky,
a shiver down the spine like the screen-smile
of Julie Christie.
The houses put on a militaristic front,

and phonebooks fall like death notices
at every door. Camellias have never been better,
and the red roses, with the cabriolets,
have their tops down
like resplendent old women.

Telling the Bees
Alison Barr

He wears his Sunday best,
she a simple dress.
A gift of wedding cake
is left by the skeps,
petal-decorated.

They dance the dance of love,
bees dance the dance of flowers.

The couple set up home.
Skeps are placed in bee boles
in the south facing orchard wall.
New queens and swarms
lay claim to plaited domes.

Wax comb cells, nectar-crammed,
are fanned, transformed, capped.

A cradle is carved
to hold their son.
They tap tap the hive
with the house key
to announce his birth.

Yellow catkins, pollen loaded,
dust the swarm, honey flows.

Years pass, she passes,
it is time to talk to the bees.
Black mourning cloths
are draped over skeps.

White-cloaked hawthorns
hunched twilight ghosts.

The old man summons his son.
"When I am gone you must
tell the bees, if not they will die
and there'll be no more honey."

Mist shrouds the coffin trail
from Loweswater to Saint Bees.

His son visits the hive,
tells them that father has gone.
They are the first to know.
Ice, wind, snow. Bees
murmur through stone walls.

Two guests from each farmstead
are bidden to honour Ambrose.

Hives are lifted,
carefully put back down.
The beekeeper's coffin
is lowered into the earth.
Arval ale and biscuits are offered.

Frozen silence of the grave,
warm stillness of the hive.

Birds, Beasts and Flowers

Arctic Ocean Meets Caribbean on Kinshaldy Beach in Winter

Susan Haigh

For Lou, the dog who sailed to Scotland from the French West Indies and the seal who swam from the Arctic Ocean

we are alone. except, of course,
for miles of frosted shore;
and cormorants on distant banks,
a benediction of wings
wedding sea and pearl-domed sky;
and oystercatchers at the edge
bobbing in prayer
for a thousand sailors, lost
beneath the crash of waves;
and Lou, his wild exuberance
etched in frozen sand.

an hour out we reach the fence
and the wind comes hard about,
hauls in sheets of rain
to soak our seaward side.
watching, as if for us,
a shimmering form rises
from the sea, stares
his marble stare at Lou,
opens his silken jaw.
his mer-man song of long lament
drifts on drenched grey air;
yep - yep, yep – yep, yep-yep.

Lou turns a dog-ear,
folds legs beneath him
echoes the call,

'yep-yep, yep-yep, yep-yep.
blessings, Man, abu ye!
how was the journey, brother?
where's your other shore?'

'a thousand bone-chill miles away,
as the fish flies. And yours?'

'Man, a hundred thousand more,
from Sainte-Marie Galente,
by Guadeloupe and Amsterdam.
and then a thousand yet.
well-met, Man, well-met!'

Lobster man

Andy Hunter

Imagine it:
a living creature that's never
seen the sun.

Not till the day it's caught
hauled to the surface from the spit
of the sea and dropped
into that white
plastic box.

We keep the lobsters hidden through the day
  under a sack-cloth soaked in salt water;
  it separates them out, for
they'll only end up fighting with themselves.

They're kept in cellular cages out in the bay
  sunk back into the current
  at the end of each day:

  it keeps their meat
  fresh.
It's amazing how long
they last.

  On stormy days
we repair our creels together,
chatting in the smokey half-light
of the shed.
  We lost

my brother last year. He
was out for prawns
way beyond the grey skerries,

where the waves and the clouds and the rain
  are a bitter pay.

Kenny Campbell found the body.

The slight orange flair
of the oil-skin in the sea
a marker - of sorts,
  buoyed up by the swell, but
face down,
as they always are, head
bowed to the tide;

the lungs trap the last gasp of air
they say.

His blue eyes.
A watery stare

I think of him
every day.

Cutting

Connie MacDonald

The roses in the backyard,
planted by your mother,
pink and heady,
old-fashioned blooms.
Remnants from another time.
You sit patiently among the petals,
waiting for me to trim your beard,
a ritual these past few months,
your body too tired
to make the trip to town.
Your fine white hair,
gossamer in my fingers,
sprouts in all directions
like a baby chaffinch
sitting on the nest.
Sculpting your beard,
I favour the Don Quixote
Look - jaunty and smart.
As I take the razor
to your neck,
you look me
straight in the eye.
All
done
now.

Albatross Caught on Camera

Olivia McMahon

Great bird on cliff edge
scouring the sky,
her eye has the worried look
of any street corner lover waiting
for her mate last seen
a thousand miles away.

What rubbing of beaks there'll be
when he comes in to land
what teasing, what snuggling up,
what cries, what clacking of bills,
what flaunting of ritual,
what commotion of tenderness.

I think of you when I see that albatross
waiting on the cliff edge. Your loss.

The Circumstances Are Such

A Triptych of Stories by Lisa MacDonald

The Cliff

He shifts his weight to the other foot and glances again at the sky where the gathering dark is leaking purple and blue-black into the space above him, or what little he can see of it, anyway. He is aware of the sound of the waves rolling and crashing onto the foot of the cliffs, way down below, but not far enough away to be comforting or scenic. He's not the sort of person who would normally notice things like that: glittering waves tumbling to white, clicking of pebbles and shells, distant cries of seagulls on summer breeze.

But this is not normally. He's had time, lately, to notice all kinds of things. Not so much the first few hours, true. But as the booze wore off he gradually became more aware of his surroundings. Not pleasant. The evening dew drawing the chill, for a start. Wasn't so bad during the day once the sun came out; at first, anyway. His forehead and cheeks are tight and sore and he can feel the burnt skin peeling off. But the night had been brutal. He doesn't think he's ever felt cold like it. The deep scrapes on his exposed arms and legs sting and make him restless and irritable.

The fading light reminds him uncomfortably of the evening before. His shoulders tense and he feels slightly sick as he recalls the dizzying panic that rose in him and kept on rising until the sound of his pulse became a rushing in his ears and he wanted nothing more than to climb out of his skin and get away, far away from this place. But no luck, sonny Jim. No luck.

As darkness began to fall he had thought of all kinds of schemes to try and get out. If he got in then he must be able to get out. Surely. Thing is, it was all a wee bittie hazy. They had been drinking a bit. A fair bit. A lot. How exactly it had all happened wasn't quite as clear in his mind's eye as he might have wished. Still, if there's a way in, there's a way out. Must be. But the slope was steep and the ground uneven, and it was really very dark. No moon at all last night, and the crashing of those waves not so far away. The cliffs here were treacherous, he knew that. One false move and curtains. They'd never even find him. He shudders now, thinking about it.

He desperately wishes he hadn't gone off alone. If only his pals had agreed to stay an extra day. If only he had gone with them. If only someone was expecting him. But the boys were with their mum and it would be two more weekends before he'd see them again. Could anyone last that long without food, he wondered? They'd been taking the mickey out of his beer belly, his man-boobs. But a whole fortnight – he wasn't sure.

He shifts again and curses softly as the vicious thorns dig into his soft flesh. To begin with, the pain nearly drove him demented. Not being able to lie down was hard and every time he dozed off on his feet and tipped gently into the bushes he would be jolted awake with sharp stabs and a shrill yelp. It was only really after he gave up feeling the pain that he found he could adopt a stiff sitting position with his legs half tucked under him and his back leaning into the most densely grown bit of the bush. He had to keep standing up just to get some feeling back into his feet.

He had become more and more tired; had gone from drowsy to despairing, delirious, tearful, fearful, furious. The second panic attack had been the worst. The first time he had been able to suppress it, had found something practical to do. But by the time the second wave hit he had tried everything and the darkness meant he was trapped, completely and utterly. Without stars or any light at all there had been no points of reference and there were moments when he couldn't even tell which way was up. He really did think it was all over then, that he would die of fright; he had never thought you could but yes: definitely.

Somehow the night had passed and with the early morning light his bearings and his mood had steadied. It would be a matter of minutes now. Hours, at worst. Someone would be out walking their dog. Wasn't it always the morning dog walkers who found things that others never saw? Limbs on a beach, he had once read in a paper. Anyway, here he'd be, top of the morning to ya, couldn't give us a hand out of here, could ya?

It occurred to him near lunchtime – not that he had any lunch, obviously, the twist in his stomach a constant reminder, but the painfully blistering sun shone straight down on him so he could at least roughly guess the time – that the folk around here tended to be older folk. Old folk have slow dogs. Old folk walk their slow dogs on paths. Not through the middle of friggin' nowhere. Specially not through the middle of this nightmareish, steep gorse jungle. Nobody local, he now felt sure, would ever be stupid enough to think this would make a good shortcut. Nobody sober would think that. He hadn't known the stuff could grow this high. Stretched up to his full height of 5'11" he couldn't even begin to see over the tops. He had struggled this way and that, sure he could find his way out easy enough if he just tried but he just seemed to be even more stuck than before and all the time the pain and that crashing, smashing of waves. With the hollow, thudding echo it was impossible to say where exactly the sound was coming from and that was one thing he knew, that you don't want to get too close to that crumbly edge.

So he had stayed put. At least he was safe. And by the time he realised nobody was going to find him, the second night was creeping towards him and here he is. He swallows hard and bites back the fear. He whacks and kicks at the bushes to make more space so he can at least lie down if he curls up tight. He shivers in the chill air and feels more lost and more alone than he has ever felt in his life. The stillness around him tips slowly towards the dark and he slips along with it. He concentrates on breathing in and out, avoiding all thought in case another panic boils up. The fear of it is almost worse than the panic itself. Only almost.

Time stops and at first he does not hear it. But it keeps on going: the breeze keeps blowing, gently at first and then more determined, sweeping through the branches, sighing the taller grasses in between. Moving with nimble fingers through his hair, on his skin and over his clothing. He is insanely grateful for this distraction, this presence, this aliveness, this focus. And then – he moans aloud with joy – it tears the shroud above his head, revealing the stars in their millions and at last he has something to do. He shuffles clumsily onto his back and gazes in childlike wonder, seeing – actually, really, as far as he can remember, never having been much of a boy scout – for the first time the unbelievable number and variety of them. It makes him feel small but also, curiously, safe; he is at home with being a tiny dot in a crowd of other tiny dots.

It is this strange sense of insignificance and grateful belonging he will remember when the wifey out hanging her early washing will appear on the dew-soaked, steep slope high above and almost out of earshot. When she will, at first, not hear him but will then – relief without measure - turn back and call out and he will yell, loudly, for all he is worth, Yes, me, I was shouting, I'm shouting!

The feeling of smallness and wonder and perspective and a new dimension – upwards never having been a significant feature in his life; why should he look up when all he would see would be roofs and pigeons and grey skies and when anything of value to him came from eye-level, over a bar counter preferably – this feeling will not leave him even as the winchman clips him into the heavy harness and he is hoisted unsteadily towards the thunderous whirr of the rotor blades.

For days afterwards, he will lie in his bed afraid to stretch out and he will feel the smooth sheets with his scratched fingers and he will try not to think.

He will, from now on, notice above him things he never knew existed.

The Chute

With the sound of the approaching sirens her groan turns to a sob so painful it's more of a snort. She knows they can hear her above and below and she so desperately wants to save face and yet how can you, like this.

If you spend time around the beautiful and the thin you think it rubs off. You think you're one of them, that you look like they do, can do what they can do. When she's with her mother, her aunts, her family, she is round like them. But in the office, she looks at the others and a feeling steals upon her that she might be like those girls; could be. Should be. They wear skinny jeans, so she wears skinny jeans and imagines a similar effect. They think

it'd be a laugh to slide down the mail chute and she thinks, Sure, what could go wrong.

The party had been starting to hollow by this time. Santa Claus had shed most of his suit and his beard was hanging off to one side. He was spilling his beer while talking earnestly to the breasts leaning in the doorway to the office kitchen. By morning he'd be the unlocker of doors and sweeper of floors once more but for tonight he was Casanova, the greatest lover there ever was. Such are the delusions of late nights and punch consumed standing up.

When the first of the giggles and shrieks reached the staff kitchen everybody rolled their eyes and continued debating or berating or, in some, a few, more constructive instances, consoling each other on the subject of useless, self-absorbed boyfriends. Her interest, however, was piqued right away and she longed to be part of whatever celebratory high-jinks the Beautiful People were up to.

When her turn came how could she refuse? You only get one chance. The postman never knocks twice. As she climbed onto the narrow ledge she could see the mail crates on the Admin Floor down below. To anyone who worked down there the only way was up; many of the younger staff had started out in the dusty, windowless frenzy of the company's internal workings. She had been to college and was spared this initiation which made the Beautiful even less inclined to view her with kindness.

For a brief but vicious moment she had feared she might not be able to hoist herself up onto the ledge but she did, somehow, by sheer willpower. It would be impossible to ask for help; unthinkable. As she felt the aluminium edge of the chute dig into her flesh she knew for certain that this was unlikely to end well.

She was right, of course, and after almost an hour, as the tops of her thighs begin to feel numb, she wonders, briefly, if the situation could not have been resolved quickly and effortlessly with a friendly, helping hand and some wholehearted tugging. The fire brigade, it had been decided – though not by her – would be better placed to assist. They would bring ropes, ladders, procedures. So she waits. She can no longer feel the sharp pain where the rivets are digging into her legs and the gash on her arm has stopped bleeding. There was never any chance of her being able to climb back up when things first felt tight and it was silly even to try. Still, trying is what it was all about, the whole thing, she can see that now. She shivers, cold, exhaustion and humiliation combining in an unearthly sense of clarity.

Of course, a pact will be made that this will not be spoken of; a pact that will be undone as surely as day follows night and wake follows dream. It will be quiet confidences, swear you won't tell, and they will swear, and they will tell. By the end of the week there will only be two people left untold and she knows who they will be. She also knows that if it hadn't been her it happened to, there would be three.

Whiteout

It was cold, he remembers that clearly. The kind of clean, clear cold you hardly ever got in Middlesbrough. And dark. Again, not like home. You could see the stars above and all that snow below and not much else. Their second day away, schoolboys on a skiing trip. Away on a bus, away to the mountains of northern Italy. And though they all worked hard to maintain that air of aloofness and cool they were, in fact, all of them, completely blown away by the experience.

The medieval monastery building high up on the hill, with all its dark echo cloisters and lofty vaulted ceilings, held them in its spell from the moment they arrived. Stepping from the bus after winding, twisting roads first into sunshine and then dark, they sensed the long-ago inhabitants of these hallowed halls as if they were standing beside them right there and quite a few of them lay awake a long time that first night, listening into the darkness. None of them let on, of course.

The first day's skiing had been fine, a fine thing indeed. So fine they forgot to be aloof and turned back into giggling children throwing snowballs at each other and thrashing, rendered helpless by the gangly, cumbersome, impossible boards strapped to their feet.

That night, he remembers, they were hungry, happy, exhilarated. Even on their long walk down to dinner in the village through the dark, fizzing bubbles of joy would rise up in them unbidden and cause them to abandon their usual, studied, cool-guy walk and turn instead into gimmers and bull-calves, gambolling, shoving, trying to find release for their effervescence.

He couldn't say now, in all honesty, how it was they first came to notice. Or who noticed first. Truth be told, there were a few (there always are) whose absence would have made itself felt more quickly. Or right away. Not William; he wasn't one of those. He was quiet because he had to be. The ones whose absence you'd have noticed gave him to understand what was expected. Neither his size and roundness nor his jam-jar glasses were his fault, they all knew that. And yet it had been decided that those attributes would define him, would be his markers. Some were clever, some were witty, some were strong. He had his glasses and his girth. They were relentless.

He's embarrassed now, looking back, by quite how long it took them all to realise.

They had counted, in the end, to work out who was missing. Established where he'd last been seen; they were sure, they said, they'd had the right number setting out. In the end, there was nothing for it but to retrace their steps. Not just the teachers, as it might have been. No, they'd all go and look, snaking their way back between the steep banks of snow where the plough and shovellers had made a walled walk six feet high. And there, at the fork in the road, they found him. Where they had gone left and downwards to the village, William had veered right. Had walked into the snow bank and had stopped. Couldn't see, zero visibility, whiteout. Seemed the right thing to do, he said, to stop and await assistance. His glasses all steamed up, he really couldn't see a thing and he hadn't his cloth. What cloth, they asked. The special one, the only thing to wipe these brand-new glasses. His mum had said so, had made him promise not to wipe with anything else. And he was a man of his word, they could see that.

They pulled him back two steps, shivering and damp, out of the snow and turned him by the shoulders; a teacher found a cloth to substitute and they walked him down to tea.

Fully forty years later, we laugh until we cry re-telling this but when we come to the part of the story where he recalls how they, approaching, heard him in the darkness, softly repeating 'Help me,' to himself, with no-one there to hear him, our voices still and we imagine how we were. ■

Five Prose Poems

By Cheryl Follon

Couch

The couch came in around the seventeenth century, along with that era's French or maybe Spanish writers. They wanted something they could lie on, eat on, work from, even die on. Something they could give orders from, conduct any business from. You might think this is more about the writers, but it is not. This is one hundred percent living-breathing couch.

Addiction

They say things like, 'who's the one in the reeking housecoat?' and, 'what creep's got to climb over the 20,000 fag douts scattered up outside this front door?' But neither of these is me. I'm actually as clear as a polished empty glass bottle, and I don't even drink.

Memory

So I woke up and you gave me a good idea: taken off the side of a rock, cobbled together from two random dreams – who can say? Then I went back to sleep and you took it away again – stuck it back on the side of the rock; tucked it back into the dreams – your weird playfellows.

Iceland

Twenty-nine cool-air radio channels and a deer on a hill that is just a minuscule speck of red. A horse on a hill, too, that's just a tiny dot of black, and then all the houses – tiny specks of white – in the backdraft of cold-air radio channel, fish breath, the little airport's tiny black speckle, the rock pools.

Sultan

A square mile of petting zoo, date palms, glass fountains, lions, peacocks, and still the sultan wanders around smacking a stick through the dead leaves in a fountain and wishing he could just have lunch in the Ol' Kitchenette with the girl from Scotland with the funny accent and the ring of paper flowers in her hair... Be the boy with the scooter who slouches around the pet shop hitting a stick at the magic popcorn fountain.

Poetry

Camping
Ian McDonough

A fly died in my wine,
perhaps happily,
perhaps not.
The tent sweltered
under a late but virile heat
and we lay inside,
pole-axed after swimming.

Edinburgh's cool streets
were a hundred light years off.
When the darkness closed
the Evening Star
hung so near
you could reach up and kiss it.

Kim's Game at Kelvingrove
Jan Sutch Pickard

A single shoe, a crusie lamp,
postcards and a pair of knitted socks,
broken china, a gannet's breastbone
put to use as a sugar scoop;
photographs of faded folk
without a smile between them;
Gaelic Bible, wooden mail-boat,
blown eggs of the St Kilda wren.

Take this length of tweed –
dusky brown wool of the Soay sheep,
spun and woven on a narrow loom
by the hearth at midwinter – take it
to cover up these random things.

Then try to remember them,
to replace them on an island
separated by sea-miles from the city,
from this museum, this gallery,
these glass cases that have frozen time;
try to place each thing
in a way that still makes sense.

But how to remember what we never forgot,
or ever know what's to forgive?
Can such lost things remake a way of life?
Can these bones live?

Magdalene
John 20: 10-18
George T. MacIntyre

You saw him in the hodden of morning
afore it was fully licht
and strave wi odd threids of memory
gin the rough wools wound ticht.

'Caw cannie ma hinnie, ca cannie
fur A hinna been synd wi bliss
and A wud hae thee gang tae them
that could not bide like this.

Braw Peter and ma bonnie John
hae snuck awa on fear
but the geid new day is in yer mooth
and the hail warld with thee here.'

The Same Hand
Brian Johnstone

Be it on the conscience of anyone who reads
this splendid little book that they say a prayer
for the soul of the wretch who wrote it.
Colophon, The Book of Deer, 10th century

The pen laid aside, quill trimmed
for the next to use it, inks stopped
with a rag, dampened against decay,

and the book is closed. His fingers
tremble with the thought of it,
arms aching from the effort

the last day's verses have cost him,
wretch that he is, allowed him
to finish the task. Leaf upon leaf

it is taken from him, his prayer,
his curse. A burden is lifted, laid by.

for Richard Ingham

Stony Stare
Colin Will

There's a grey boulder sitting on the grass,
like a permanent sheep surprised into immobility.
Her gaze, if she had one, would focus
just below the top of the little rise
before the drop to the wind-ruffled lochan.
To me, the lochan and the mountain
are the reasons to be here;
to her it's the grass. Who's to say
whose vision is more relevant?

Tomorrow I'll be away,
taking my flippant comparisons
to new pastures; she'll still be here,
mutton turned stone, concentrating
on what matter matters to her,
the universal truth of edible green.

Spoor
(for Ian Abbot 1947-1989)
Richie McCaffery

The people who were best
at telling me ghost stories
as a child, are long dead,
the teller now the tolled.

All the children I knew
including the one I once was
have been murdered, their
bodies have not been found.

In the field a white dog runs
on the trail of some scent
fast as old newspapers
whipped up by the wind.

No-one is calling its name –
perhaps no-one knows it to say.

Còn
Maoilios Caimbeul

Dh'fheuch e ri innse dhaibh cò ris a bha e coltach
Nuair a tha thu sean 's nuair a tha thu òg,
Oir bha cuimhne aige nuair a bha e òg
's sheall e dealbhan dhaibh dhe na seann làithean
Le cù 's cat air a' ghlùin, 's e na shuidh air baidhsagal,
Ach cha robh e cinnteach an robh iad a' tuigsinn.

Thuirt e, smaoinich air reòiteag agus an còn
As a bheil e tighinn, cumhang aig aon cheann
Agus a' sìor fhàs nas leithne agus nas leithne;
's ann mar sin tha cuimhne a' bhodaich, cumhang an seo,
An dràsta, ach beò, 's farsaing, mar as fhaide air ais,
Ach cha robh e cinnteach an robh iad a' tuigsinn.

Thuirt e, smaoinich ort fhèin, 's gun thu ach dusan,
Tha an còn nas giorra, 's tu cuimhneachadh air ais:
Ach tha còn eile agadsa a' sìneadh air thoiseach ort,
Còn prìseil do bheatha 's gun fhios agad dè an t-uachdar
Reòthte iongantach a bhios tu ag imleachadh,
Ach cha robh e cinnteach an robh iad a' tuigsinn.

Còn na cuimhne air do chùlaibh 's còn air do bheulaibh,
Còn iongantach dìomhair do bheatha,
Agus smaoinich ormsa, an seann duine 's an t-uachdar
Reòthte air leaghadh 's an còn toisich fada nas giorra,
Fuachd an uachdair air mo theangaidh a' fàs nas fhuaire,
Ach cha robh e cinnteach an robh iad a' tuigsinn.

Even The Stars Are Lonely

Short Story by Magi Gibson

As she locked her car door she saw him, watching from an upstairs window. At least, she thought it was him. In the early evening sunlight she'd only seen a movement, a shape. Maybe it wasn't him at all, but his wife. One of his kids, even?

When Douglas had stopped by her desk at work, asked if she fancied coming to his place for a home-cooked dinner, Jenny had been pleasantly surprised. Travelling round the branch offices from Orkney to Dumfries, arriving unannounced to inspect the accounts, she was constantly aware of her inspector, her pariah status. A friendly dinner invite from a branch accountant was the last thing she expected.

At the garden gate she paused for a moment to survey the sunlit garden. The house sat on its own, a few miles outside a village so picturesque Jenny was sure she recognised it from the shortbread tin her mother had given her last new year. (The tin was pretty, the shortbread a soggy disappointment.)

The garden was surprisingly well-tended. She found it difficult to think of Douglas, always so neat in his business suit, weeding and planting. But someone obviously looked after this broad lawn, bordered with clumps of Scotch geraniums, purple and gold pansies, drooping lilac bushes. There was a sprinkling of kiddy toys; a brightly coloured chute, a red trike upended near the wall, a black and white football under a rhododendron. This was what she'd once thought her life would be like. The good-looking husband, the cute kids. She got a pang of… what? envy?... as she imagined a proud Aga in Douglas's kitchen, a solid oak table with a vase of sweetpeas picked from the pretty trellis over by the drystane dyke.

A noise on the other side of the door prompted her to prepare a smile. She wondered if perhaps his wife would open it. Claira? Clara? Cara?

'Jenny!' Douglas beamed at her, taking the bunch of garage-bought flowers she held out. 'Come on through. Dinner's almost ready.'

As she stepped inside the hallway, her eyes struggled to adjust. It seemed suddenly gloomy after the bright sunshine outside.

'Careful you don't trip on the shoes,' Douglas called over his shoulder. Too late. In her high heels she'd already stumbled. Laughing, he switched a light on, carelessly kicked tiny sequinned sandals and green frog-faced wellies into an untidy pile under the family of coats lining the wall.

She limped into the kitchen. 'My fault,' she said, indicating her high heels. 'A bit daft wearing these.'

'I rather like them.' His eyes lingered on her ankles, her legs. 'You bring a touch of glamour to our dull old office.' She felt her colour rise. Was he flirting?

A sudden beeping from the cooker snatched his attention. Turning, he grabbed a folded towel, flung open the oven door, and pulled out a sizzling casserole. Gratefully, Jenny sank onto a wooden chair, tucked her offending legs beneath the table.

It was strange seeing the Inverness branch accountant in domestic mode. On the drive here Jenny had imagined his wife fussing in the kitchen, intent on making a good impression on the mystery woman from the Edinburgh office, the one who turned up twice a year to stress her husband. Jenny wondered if Douglas was doing the food while his wife was bathing the children upstairs, getting them into their cutie pyjamas. Or prettying herself up maybe.

She forced a smile as he lifted the casserole lid with a TV-chef-flourish. Maybe, she thought with an inward sigh, she should have refused the invite, family dinners weren't really her thing. She could see the whole evening yawning in front of her, all polite talk, her admiring photos of the kids, laughing at the cute stories Douglas and his wife would no doubt tell. Trying to pretend that it didn't hurt that this wasn't her life, that she didn't have her own cute little kiddie stories to tell. And yet… the thought of another scampi and chips in a depressed bar was even worse.

As he sampled the steaming contents with a wooden spoon, Douglas grinned at her like a gravy-drunk Bisto kid. 'Venison,' he said, replacing the lid with a noisy clatter and quickly pushing the still-sizzling dish back in the oven. 'Braised in a red wine jus, with a dash of whisky and a splash of mustard. I hope you're not vegetarian?'

'God, no!' she exclaimed. 'Venison sounds delicious.' She could hear the falseness in her own voice, hoped he couldn't hear it too. Truth was, she wasn't keen on eating game, preferred lighter coloured meats, chicken, say, or pork.

'So what can I get you to drink?'

She was about to say, whatever you're having, her stock answer in these situations, when he pulled a bottle of Cava from the fridge. 'Something sparkly and frothy after a hard day at the office, eh?' And even as she was saying perhaps she shouldn't, after all she was driving, his fingers were ripping off the gold foil, unwinding the wire from the cork.

As she took the elegant stemmed glass, their hands touched. He smiled palyfully. Yes, he was flirting! She pulled back quickly, clumsily, almost splashing prosecco on her dress.

She was relieved when he went back to fussing over the steaming pans on the hob. Snapshots of family life, attached by whimsical magnets, decorated the doors of the huge fridge; two pink-faced, tousle-haired kids, a slim, blonde woman, pretty and laughing.

'So how's the guesthouse?' he asked as he chopped fresh parsley and piled it into a small white bowl.

'The landlady collects pictures of cats. The place is covered in them,' she answered, while silently wondering when his wife, the lovely Ciara, Cheris - or was it Claire? - would appear; wondered if the kids were already in bed sound asleep, if perhaps it was going to be dîner à trois; wondered at people like Douglas, confident and comfortable in their own skins, living picture-book family lives in picturesque cottages. Wondering why this wasn't her life.

He was filling her glass again, suggesting he show her the back garden, his vegetable plot, of which he was very proud. His new potatoes. So small and sweet. In fact, they'd be eating the first crop later.

Outside, in the cool evening air, she felt suddenly light-headed. The sun sat low on the ridge of a distant mountain range, setting the sky aflame. He pointed out his rows of sprouting broccoli, his carrots with their cheery green heads of delicately fringed leaves. He even pulled one up, shaking the dirt from it. It was bright orange, tiny as a child's finger. He snapped it in two, offered her the thinner end, the sweetest, he said. She was about to protest it was dirty, unhygienic, then thought what-the-heck, and crunched it energetically, rinsing it down with a mouthful of Cava.

It was when he set the two places at the table that she thought that maybe, just maybe, she'd made some mistake; that it never was going to be dinner en famille, or even dinner with his lovely wife while the kids slept off their sunny-day exertions. She should have asked straight out, of course, when she first arrived, but she'd expected his wife to appear at any moment, and now it felt awkward to admit her foolishness.

As she watched him scooping steaming venison stew onto a plate alongside those tiny homewgrown new potatoes, a heap of delicious-looking asparagus, her mind was racing. Why had he asked her for dinner?

He was talking music now. 'So what are you into?' he asked, pulling a bottle of red from the wine rack and starting to uncork it.

'Classical,' she replied quickly. 'And jazz. Yes. Jazz too. Not that I know a thing about either.' She giggled, a high-pitched, girlish, Cava-fuelled giggle that embarrassed her.

'Let me choose then.' He lifted a remote control and aimed it at a small music system. A few clicks later a mellow sound flowed out. She looked at the dark red wine in the glass he'd placed in front of her. If she drank it, she'd be too drunk to drive, she'd need to stay over. And if she stayed, who knew what might happen? Jenny lifted the glass and took a sip.

Looking back, she never could recall all the details of that evening – or how she'd got drunk so quickly. She knew they talked about travel, he recounting gap year tales of hitching rides in juggernauts and washing dishes in greasy spoon dives, she entertaining him with her dream trip to Peru, the one she'd saved for a whole year to take, only for it to turn into a nightmare when she got a bug and had to stay for two days in the hotel toilet when she should have been scaling Maachu Pichu. She didn't mention the fellow tourist she'd fallen in love with, how back in the UK her holiday romance had fallen apart. She liked that Douglas laughed at her story-telling, was fascinated by how attractive she found the small lines that crinkled at the edges of his eyes. Wondered - when it seemed obvious that his wife and kids were not in fact there - whether, should he ask her to stay the night, she was brave and foolish and desperate enough to say yes.

Then, somewhere between the tiramisu and the cheese board he asked about her personal life. 'Boyfriend? Partner?'

'Nothing to report,' she answered in a way she hoped sounded enigmatic, rather than sad. 'And you?' She'd had this conversation so many times, with so many men, it was nothing less than a Pavlovian response. He hesitated before answering, his knife hovering over the Brie. Her eye caught on his fat gold wedding band and she felt foolish for asking.

'One wife. Two kids. One girl, one boy.' He cut a creamy slice and offered it on the blade of his knife. 'Not here at the moment, as you no doubt will have noticed.'

'So… where are they?' she asked as she licked the Brie from her fingers.

'She left. Went to her mother's. Three weeks ago.' The track that had been playing finished abruptly, the room filling with a tense silence. 'Took the kids.'

For a moment she felt disoriented. As if she'd been at a party in full swing and someone had unplugged the music, switched the lights on. Her brain raced, trying to rationalise the tiny coats and sandals and wellies in the hallway, the photos beaming from the fridge door.

'No one at the office knows yet.' His voice trembled, and she wanted it to be the tremble of desire. Desire for her, but she knew it wasn't. 'I couldn't stand another night alone.'

She stood up, hurriedly, clumsily pushing her feet into her high-heeled shoes. She couldn't wait to step outside and feel the cool night air on her cheeks, to get away from this airless kitchen, to be driving back to the twee tartan guesthouse with its countless cats by the river in Inverness.

The room swam as she headed for the door.

She was in the gloomy hallway, fumbling

for her car keys, when he caught up with her.

'Don't go. Please.' There was a whine in his voice, a pleading whine. What did he think it would make her do? Throw her maternal switch, make her turn and hug and comfort him? He caught her shoulder, spun her round. Off-balance in her too-high shoes, she fell back against the wall, slid to the floor, landed amongst the tiny shoes and wellies, her ankle throbbing.

He was above her now. Looming. She cursed inwardly, feeling at once angry and vulnerable with her skirt tugged up so her knickers were on show. How the fuck had she got herself into this stupid situation? On her own with a man – something she had ached for for so long – who only wanted her there as some kind of fucking comfort blanket.

She struggled to her feet, but in the narrow hallway he blocked her path to the door. She pushed him away forcefully.

'I just want you to stay,' he said, his voice reedy with alcohol and emotion. 'I don't want to be alone. I won't… do… anything. I promise.' She wrenched the door open, tensed herself for the tight grip on her arm, the slap, the punch, the fight. Yes, she would fight! When it didn't come, and she found herself in the driving seat of her car, alone, she was confused.

She drove too fast on her way back to Inverness, her lights slashing the darkness up ahead, insects splatting her windscreen, the car spilling dangerously onto the wrong side of the road as she took the country bends at speed, tyres spitting gravel as she threw the wheel too tight to correct herself.

She stabbed the on button on the radio, hoping that some chat-show small-talk would calm her, but it was no use, the anger was inside her, travelling with her, as sure and as real as the throbbing in her twisted ankle. Anger, because he'd made her see what she didn't want to - that those lines around his eyes weren't laughter lines, but ordinary, miserable wrinkles; the house she'd thought was a perfect family home, was nothing but an empty lie. Anger, because she'd not only seen, she'd felt his loneliness. And she'd known it for what it was, could almost taste it, because she too was lonely.

As she aproached the Kessock bridge she took a deep breath and slowed to a law-abiding forty. Soon she was crossing the dark, shimmering expanse of the Firth, entering the city, stopping obediently at traffic lights.

Loneliness was a terrible thing, a deformity, she thought as she pulled up in front of the guesthouse; something you should keep private, hidden. Like a raw stump where a leg should be, an empty eye socket, an ulcerating wound. Douglas would learn soon enough; no one will love you if you let the loneliness show.

As she hobbled her way up the gravel path she stopped for a moment to gaze at the midnight sky, filled with countless stars, so cold and beautiful, spinning forever through the dark emptiness of space. In Edinburgh, with all the city lights, you just didn't see the stars. You knew they were there, but you never saw just how many there were, just how lonely they looked. She stood perfectly still, listening to her own breathing.

When the shivering stopped, she gave up and limped inside. ■

Dàin ùra le Lisa NicDhòmhnaill

Trom-laighe

Mo shùilean a' fosgladh
'S mi faicinn an tùir
Air a bheil mi
Nam sheasamh -
Caol, àrd, rèidh.
Siolandair cruaidh gleansach.
Cho farsaing
Ri mo chasan
'S nas àirde na duine,
Na sheasamh gu cugallach air fear eile
Rud beag nas motha
Agus fear eile
Nas motha a-rithist.
Air an làr, san fheur, an dithis ri cluiche,
Ceithir is seachd bliadhna a dh'aois,
Mo phàistean mìn, maoth, mùirneach,
Is cèidsichean stàillinn mun timcheall.
Leòmhainn is madaidhean-allaidh air fàileadh fhaighinn dhiubh,
An t-acras gan geuradh:
A' gluasad, ag èalaidh, a' cumail sùil eudaich air an fheadhainn òg.
Mise shuas gu h-àrd
Agus deagh fhios 'am
Gur ann fo mo chasan fhìn
A tha an suidse
A chumas dorsan nan cèidsichean
Dùinte.
Eagal, vertigo is aonarachd
Gus mo chur às mo rian.

An Tìodhlac

Dà dhèideag bheag
Airson mo chraobh Nollaig
Gun tug thu dhomh
Ann am baga beag pàipeir.

Na do shùilean,
Na do ghuth,
Na do làmhan,
Sìth agus fois
Gun tug thu dhomh,
Tìodhlac blàth gaolach on a thàinig thu.

Dòchas sa Ghainmheach

An latha a' dùnadh,
Na dathan a' tionndadh gu dorch'.
Sgòthan a' teicheadh bho
Chruadalas na gaoithe gairbhe.

Dà bhàta
Solais orra
Air a' mhuir dhubh-ghorm.
Fuaim einnsean a' bhàta bhig chargo
Faisg air a' chladach
Eadar Eilean Shanndaigh 's mi fhìn.
A-muigh sa chiaradh
Cruise-liner mòr a' sguabadh às a' Chluaidh
A' dèanamh air Muir Èireann
Làn sgeòil bhainnse, bhacaiche, bhàidsireachd.

Air a' bhrùchd, air am fàgail leis an lìonadh,
Faochagan, feusganan, feumainn,
Glainne na mara a thogas mise,
A ghliongadaicheas nam phoca.
Nam measg, pìos beag
Dhen truinnsear as fheàrr a bh' aig bodach,
Seann-phàtran gorm cha mhòr air suathadh às
Leis gun robh e ga chleachdadh gach uile là.

Mullaich bhotalan bainne,
Ròpannan dathach,
Sgudal neònach na mara.
'S an siud, stiogadh a-mach às a' ghainmheach
Bioran beag plastaig,
Fada, geal, rèidh
Agus uinneag bheag ghorm air.
Nach mi tha eòlach air seo,
Ga aithneachadh sa bhad:
Nochdaidh loidhne eile
No cha nochd
Agus sìorraidheachd sa mhionad dhen eadar-àm.

Poetry

Photo of a Girl on the Rafah to Gaza Road

Neil Young

Twelve years on, her face keeps shuffling
Up from a pile of old letters and scraps,
Unnamed, but forever happy and five
Like someone photographed on a school trip
In sandals, T-shirt and khaki shorts
And looking a bit like my girl, could be
Just back from the beach, a birthday party,
Smiling, coy for the camera. But she
Looks out from where the sand is a border
And later, hushed, unreported, I heard
A tank shell struck a water butt here, killed
Two schoolgirls at the roadside where they played;
And I wonder still – what chances this child
Lives now, or lived to another snapped smile?

Glimpse

Mary Wight

I dreamt about my father again,
nothing very dramatic – him
turning to look at me, smiling
that lop-sided way, almost
shy, giving a glimpse of
a boy I recognise
from snaps taken on some hillside
or garden, places I can never name
and he was stretching out a hand –
patient, waiting.

Near Gretna Green

Julian Colton

I glimpse it now from this train
Passing through, the station after Gretna Green –
That ice-crusted short cut lane I ran down in the snow
One star-filled December night before Christmas.
We were moving house again, you had gone ahead
The way you did, still do, unpacking planning.
I took a wrong turn country lane, was lost in the dark
But somehow made my way through to you.
And then, as now, in my stomach and heart
A big fat sadness knot for the way things were, are
Another life, another station bypassed
Always moving on, looking back into the past
Forward to the future, never standing level crossing still
The constant dressing, undressing of a Christmas tree.
Brittle panes cracked beneath my feet.

Favourite Book

Sally Evans

Driving home in the country from Stirling
is like reading a favourite book
as the road greets tree after tree after tree,
turns and sways by hedges and fields,
with sub-plots of glen or track.
A cloth-covered book, well made.
It does not become tatty when the words
and the sentences are known:
the turns, the forks, the continuing river,
road-signs from some old grammar.
Peace is the time it takes to read
a well-loved, fingered, moving story,
the frisson when your village is reached
after ridges and downhill twists,
the gate, the right ending
that somebody wrote long ago.

Returning to Assynt, Thinking of Arizona

John Bolland

Dryness. A vision of Sidona in the winter.
Turning leaves and red rock magnetised. I tingled
purposeful, relieved, alone. A father.
Here.
Nothing in the state of Arizona moves with so much
expeditious joy as Ullapool this summer Sunday
afternoon – the hurried dispensation of strong drink,
the waitresses' legs, the record of a squeezebox,
seagulls, sea.
High desert, late November cold -
a fallen forest petrified to jasper. Grey caliche.

The green hills melt to smoke above Loch Broom.
The road ahead's past Inchnadamph, the Moine Thrust,
towards the basement rock and stillness. Depth.
Grand Canyon
on the coldest day for years – 15 below and snow
dusting the reds and mauves – the goldens – greens of time's
whimsy – neither grey nor brown – just always
grey and brown – yet in the vision golden, red
or mauve. Above the rim the same runs on forever
now. Rocks of a moment.
I proceed
towards a twist of green-grey gneiss – the music
of a fiddle and hard liquor in a glass.

Shoreline

James Andrew

These waves have had it in for this shore
for some time. After that Atlantic Ocean
of a run up they've hammered it.

The hills sit quietly, pretending to darn clouds.
A small, brown bird chatters
about the problem of being a small, brown bird.

It could be a peaceful place if it weren't for
wind sending sand packing, and waves
wearing more pebbles down.

Last Moorings

John Killick

This one's past is told
by the tilt of its resting-place –-
important, as if poised
for a mercy-dash, the light
still winking at the masthead;

That one's scabbily scarred,
crestfallen at such indignity,
like a beached beast,
out of its element;

This one was crushed by a sea:
cracked timbers, a cast-off spar,
the paint patchily peeled by salt;

That one's been cannibalized
for parts: it lacks a rudder,
and the wheelhouse has lost
its wheel:
– all at sea
in every sense but the real.

Poetry

Five Seasons
Lesley Glaister

Autumn

Your bristles scratched, you smelled
of dog, you shook and laughed and rolled
a fag, you crammed my car with boxes
banjo, booze, a wooden clock

you centred on my mantelpiece

to race my own
ticking faster, always reaching
midnight first, ticking like a tutting
tongue each time you left the room.

Winter

Nightly you knelt before the hearth
ripping old news and making twists
rattling coals and snapping twigs.

Kindling, more kindling
you always needed more.

You kindled me, me you
your fingers calloused from the strings
skin smudged and eyes alive with sparks.

Spring

My eyes are tired tonight
you hum
I lay my head against the glass
cold cloud out there
in here, draughts stir my hair
you hum and smile at something I can't see.

Beyond the glass, trees stir the thickening blue
spring disappoints
it's not night yet - and yet -
how tired my eyes, how
late it feels, how you tap that pen against your teeth
how long before you look at me?

Summer

Almost midnight and still the sky is blue
though light's been sucked from everything below.
We prop the window open with a book
and skin to skin we stick and sweat and roll
away
to feel the smooth of sheet
to breathe
the cool relief of dew.

Autumn

When you left there was something you forgot
 - your clock. I took the batteries out
and it sits dumb beside my own. Twice a day they agree.

In the end that was more than you and me.

Losing It in the Inner Hebrides
Karla Linn Merrifield

So, JoJo the Poet? wherefore art thou now, sista?
You still traipsing around Scotland with Brigit's
crowd, sucking at the goddess tit on Iona?
Got your Celtic inspirational kicks? Fine.
But, really, JoJo, a friggin' crucifix-fixated
nunnery-abbey-cemetery combo?
A bit o'er the top IMO. And what's
this about Hail Marys for the kinky island bard
who sang of cloister ferns errant in granite chinks?
Get a grip, girl. Your sanctuary's one ferry boat too far.

for Seth Crook

60° North
Maxine Rose Munro

60° North, but with a gulf stream
that warms like a peat fire - both local specialities.
Anywhere else on that latitude, we would be
living like Eskimos, fishing through bore holes
and catching whales for our tea.
We do not need to snuggle in furs
or wait till spring to start a stopped car.
Instead we live in a land of legless sheep
that float bizarrely through knee-high clouds,
soaring birds, squalling birds, lots of birds,
flowers that love the damp and all things soggy,
and horizons as close as your nose.
60° North, for us a meaty broth
that lines our metaphorical stomachs,
a tangible truth wrapped in smug conceit.
In this line around the world we are Unique.
I have never seen the merrie dancers, or an otter,
or the mareel on the ocean's waves.
My life has been altogether prosaic,
but my people are a miracle of nature.

Merrie Dancers - the northern lights
Mareel - phosphorescence on the ocean

Lost Geometry
James Gordon

Mulcahy
his wife dead
does not dare
disturb the house
yet he must
His hands everywhere
hover above her absent body
the inexorable
congregation of dust
his touch
the imprisoned ghost

above Inver
Mary McDougall

a length of pipe
held by a stone
to guide the water
cleanly
from the burn
will give the game away,
a thread of
woodsmoke,
blue, unmistakable,
like love.

Skara Brae
Tariq Latif

Now that Keith and Scott have the kite
zig-zagging in the grainy light
Billy walks across the bay to the eight homes;
midden-encased, made of stones with grassy domes.

The excited cries of his children make him
think of the Neolithic kids running
along the winding path in the dim
dusk. Dried sea-weed would be burning

in the centre of each home. He imagines the men,
exhausted from harvesting wheat, facing the fire
and talking in tired tones as women shoo the hen
away from the hearth. His body aches with a desire

to lean against those ancient stones;
to feel that enclosed damp warm air
and taste the smoked fish – those tender bones
flaking from the meaty flesh. The villagers share

his wish for a mild winter and his fear
of death. Disturbed by a commotion outside
they run and those faint figures disappear
as he sees the kite adrift in the rising tide.

Nightfall

Short Story by Clare O'Brien

Eilidh awoke with a cry, a blinding pain in her temple, every sinew screaming. Her heart was racing, her body was an agony of cramp. She pushed back the covers and swung her legs slowly over the side of the bed, her nightdress clinging to the cold sweat that ran down her back. She reached for the bedside lamp, remembering too late that she'd forgotten to put a new bulb in the thing. Instead, she reached for the bottle of Talisker she kept on the table, pouring some into the water tumbler and taking a slow mouthful. It tastes of him, she thought, the taste of seaweed in his hair.

She was dreaming of this more and more these days, of death stalking the loch. Death in the shape of the each uisge, the murderous, shapeshifting water-horse who took the shape of a fine-looking young man and ensnared you. Her mother had told her that tale, long ago. But oh, on the shore the eyes of the each uisge had been so fatally beautiful, his hair as soft and as lustrous as silk when he lay down on the stones and put his head in her lap.

Eilidh looked down at her arthritic hands, the skin as thin as paper, loose and age-spotted over the frame of her bones. Who knows when a man will change and bite, she thought. When he'll carry you to the deepest part of the loch and swallow you whole. Eilidh drained the last of her whisky and walked to the window, watched the loch heaving its way out to sea under a gentle south-westerly. No horses here, no faithless young men. Just her own windblown land, a croft she could no longer tend, and the loch and the changeless mountains behind. She sighed and drew the blind.

Other dreams troubled her as she slept fitfully until morning. Lately dreams were never very far from the surface. Asleep, she tossed restlessly, adrift on a sea of imagery that faded with consciousness. Awake, she seemed to sleepwalk through the day, looking at the world through a kind of memory filter. Walking on familiar roads, looking at the trees, rocks and hillsides she'd known all her life, the past was more real than the present. Walking with Christie along the beach, barefoot in the warm summer shallows, wearing the bracelet he'd brought back from the Middle East. Wandering in the woods, waiting for him to return from the long tours of duty, singing his songs to bring him nearer. Singing his songs in the silent house at night, picking out his tunes on the piano.

Christie's songs, deep, rich, magnificent. He had been writing them since he was a little boy, though his dreams of success as a musician had never come to pass. Making his music was like wearing his clothes, picking a shirt out of the laundry basket because it still smelled of him, not washing the sheets after he'd left. Imagining the warmth of his body in the empty place where he'd slept. Never really knowing why the soldier in him had won out over the musician, over the husband, why he'd left her alone for so long, why in the end his voice had been snuffed out in the worthlessness of war.

Forty years was a long time to be alone and childless, she thought as she dragged her body through the morning's chores, ate a bite of lunch in the thin autumn sunshine. Nothing much ever changed here.

She needed to keep active. Every instinct told her that. If she sat quiet for too long, the voices would start to fill her head. Random voices talking disconnected nonsense, isolated from each other and from her. She was a broken satellite dish, sucking scraps of other people's lives out of the air. None of it was for her, none of it was any use. She started to walk, as briskly as her stiffened joints would allow, to the mouth of the loch where the water poured out into the open sea and the long horizon spoke of nothing but the Pole. The old defences from World War Two were still standing, the crumbling gun emplacements, the lookout posts scanning the sea wastes for German invaders. She skirted the deep sea cleft where the black water roared into the underground caves and the cormorants roosted on the rock ledges like schoolboys sharing a cigarette.

It was then that she felt the tingling at the back of her neck. The air was thin here, the spaces between its molecules wide enough to let a blade of some other reality slide between. For a moment there was confusion, a crackling inside her head like fire taking hold, and then she turned her head and saw them; a line of men along the ridge, still, waiting, watching for something, their bodies held in readiness for combat. Fighting men.

She froze, as she always did; she had never got used to this. They seemed indistinct, so that she couldn't tell if they were modern soldiers or something else, some warrior echo from further back in the place's history. Suddenly, a man near the end of the line seemed to see her, pointed and shouted something that was carried away from Eilidh by the wind. Several of the men seemed to tense, turn toward her, one of them raising what looked like a gun. On an impulse she whipped off the scarf that covered her head, letting her white hair tumble down around her ears, and continued to pick her way over the rough ground. She felt as well as saw the men relax, and one of them started to laugh. Och, it's just some old woman. And when she turned back to the ridge, there was nothing but the bare gorse and the uneven ground pockmarked by rabbit holes.

As she wandered homewards, she tried to remember Christie's face and failed. Lately there were so many faces jumbled together in her mind, and like the voices, most of them didn't seem to belong there. But there was one face she could remember with the crystal clarity of youth, the face of the gille dubh, the strange dark boy who kept women safe on the hill, looked after them until the mists lifted and the morning came. He was just a local legend, something for the tourists; everyone knew that. There was even a café named after him in the village.

But that hadn't stopped her meeting him on the mountainside just before her twentieth birthday. "What's your name?" she had asked, but he had never properly answered. "I look after people," he'd told her. "Lasses like you, who lose themselves up here alone. I make you safe again." He'd always been there, he said, and what had passed between them – what she thought had passed between them, because the recollection of that night seemed more like one of her dreams than the steady accretion of ordinary memory – had altered the course of her life.

Real or not, the gille dubh had saved her. After that, she hadn't been afraid to take what she wanted. Fight for a life, believe in her own right to happiness. She'd gone out and got herself an education, seen something of the world before returning to become a schoolteacher here, where she'd been needed, where the land and the loch called her. And when Christie had blown in on the wind, bright and beautiful and only in the village for a weekend house party, she'd given it everything she'd got. Gone home with him that first night, both of them slightly drunk as they'd wandered along the glen road in the dark, giving in to desire before they'd even reached his cousin's cottage. Both of them careless of the mud and the insects and the rustle of nameless night creatures in the reeds. They'd been married by Christmas. And then the shadow of the war had come to block out the sun.

Eilidh took a deep breath and reached back into her mind, calling the ghost of her young husband, but all she could find in her memory was a green cave with a great fire burning, the scent of peat mingling with the earthy smell of moss and heather. The place the dark boy had brought her when she'd been wandering exhausted on the hill in the mists, the darkness descending. Suddenly she was there, her body lithe and young again, the remains of a trout supper on the rough wooden table. And in her ears was a high, insistent note that gently resolved into music, into words, the soft Gaelic of her childhood overlaid by the English she'd spoken for years. The voice of the gille dubh, of the dark boy in his home in the hill. *I am a tear the sun lets fall, I am a hawk above the cliff, I am a thorn beneath the nail, I am a wonder among flowers.* In her mind she moved around the cave, looking for him, remembering his touch, the boy who kept you safe, who was always there if you were lost, if you were lonely. *I am a salmon in a pool, I am a lure from paradise, I am a hill where poets walk.* The note grew higher, a string drawn tighter and tighter. *I am a spear that roars for blood, I am a boar, ruthless and red.* Eilidh started to cry. Why wasn't he here? He had told her he was always here. That she could always find him if she looked, if she waited. She grew desperate. *I am a breaker threatening doom, I am a tide that drags to death.* Why were her legs so cold?

She opened her eyes and saw that she was standing up to her knees in the burn, fast-flowing down the side of the creag on its way to the loch. The cave had gone, the music was silenced, and there was only the sun dipping quietly behind the hill as the midges gathered in the shadows. You senile old bitch, Eilidh cursed herself as she stumbled up onto the bank. She still had more than a mile to go to her fireside, and she'd be feeling these bruises in the morning for sure.

She began to shiver as she stumbled down the road in the gathering twilight. The nights are drawing in, she thought. She picked up her pace, feeling unaccountably afraid. Hoofbeats, galloping on the road behind, a wild cry. No, no. Eilidh pressed her hands to her ears, did not dare turn around. The sounds in her head faded. She needed a brew, some hot tea, a piece of toast.

She pushed open her front door and for a moment she thought she saw a swift feathered shadow pass across the window, flitting like a black wisp of cloud over the deepening blue of the sky. She shook her head and put the kettle on, warmed her mother's blue-and-white china teapot and spooned the tea into its comfortably stained interior. Her hands were clumsy and she nearly dropped the tray. The fire she'd lit that afternoon was almost out, a few embers blooming half-heartedly through the grey wood-ash. Damn, there were no more logs in the basket. She'd have to drag out a heater. The central heating system hadn't worked for years.

God, she was cold. Her hands were cold. Like his hands, the last time she saw him, felt him. His hands cold as silver. Whose hands? Whose? Ice gripped at the base of Eilidh's brain as she tried to catch the memory. Whose hands were they? What's your name?

Christie had held her close at the airport ▸▸

gate, that last leavetaking. Warm, he was, warm and comforting, though a bitter resolve dazzled her in his bright, determined eyes. No, no. It was the boy, the gille dubh. His hands had been ice cold from the water where he'd bathed. He had held her naked in his two hands and kissed her. One final kiss, and then he'd been gone. And she'd walked back down the mountain in the morning sunshine, away from old stories, away into her life.

She sat in the window and sipped her tea as the moon came up blood-red over the mountain. Fire on the water. She should go outside, bathe in the cold flame. She looked at the photograph of Christie, handsome and self-possessed, wearing his uniform, his hair and moustache closely trimmed, his summer-blue eyes bright and confident. What had she done wrong? Why had he stopped singing, stopped writing songs? Had she asked too many questions, tried to come too close? What took him? What silenced him, what blocked out the sun, like a flitting feathered shadow?

The television reproached her with its blank grey face; she'd never bothered to get that repaired. She preferred the pictures in her head. She shivered again, reached over to turn on the radio. White noise. She twitched the tuner, looking for warmth. Something which spoke of heat, of dry relentless sun, somewhere far from here and the gathering winter cold and damp. Something which spoke of earth baked by the sun to a harsh desert crust. But there was nothing.

Eilidh's tea had grown cold. It was dark. With a slow sigh, she turned off the radio and climbed the stairs to her bed.

Dappled light scattered itself across the forest floor as she ran, following the dark grey shape still just in sight. Branches caught at her clothes, roughness bit into her bare feet and her breathing was uneven, the cold air rasping at her throat as she forced her muscles to work harder. Her heart hammered at her chest under the thin nightgown. Why was she wearing her nightgown? Her long red hair streamed out behind her like a flag in the wind. With her hands tightened into fists she made herself run faster, make more effort, gain on the great beast that loped on ahead, his long stride easy and effortless, his breath leaving plumes of vapour on the frosty air. She was gaining on him now, getting closer; she could almost touch the rough grey back, hear the rhythmic panting as he moved. The trees were a blur, the scattered moonlight nothing but a smudged milky glow as she reached forward, made one last effort, throwing herself down hard on the path. Her hands closed on the animal's rough pelt and she held on tight, letting herself be dragged along a few paces, then colliding with a stump and crying out in pain as he twisted, growling, out of her hands and was gone. Face down in the fungus and the leaf mould, the rotten stumps of last year's fallen trees, her body feebly convulsed as great racking sobs tore through her bruised chest, her right hand closed tight over a single handful of coarse grey wolf's fur.

Her eyes opened. The sheets were tangled, the covers half on the floor. Her nightgown was soaked in sweat. This can't go on, she thought as she fought for breath against the gale of weeping. These dreams. These visions. Overheated and bedraggled as she was, she climbed from her bed and went downstairs to the front porch, stuck her bare feet into Wellington boots.

Opening the door, she walked out into the night's chill, past the pine wood, down the track and through the meadow to the loch beyond. She walked to the water's edge and the still surface was like glass, a dark mirror reflecting a world of thirst, of dreadful thirst amidst plenty.

The moon watched silently from its gallery, as if waiting for a performance to begin. An imperceptible wind seemed barely to ruffle the surface of the blackness, but as she stumbled forward into the shallows the strange foreign voices began again, chattering, murmuring, overlaying each other, jostling for airspace, names, histories, scraps of untold story. Eilidh's mind felt as though its walls were collapsing. The water was reflecting the moonlight like a prism, sending shards of brightness in all directions, like a meteor shower that knew no gravity. So many directions, so many names he had. Or could have had. For a brief moment the water seemed full of them, stories darting through the shallows like tiny fish, little sparks setting off great white-hot conflagrations that made the very loch blaze, fired up with possibility. Eilidh waded deeper, and the ripples rose over the tops of her boots and made the hem of her nightgown trail behind her as it soaked up the salt water. Burn me. Burn me away.

The bright fire faded. Suddenly she felt so tired, so heavy. Christie was long gone. The gille dubh was gone too from his green cave; she was old, he could not help her now. The voices babbled out of the past, or the future, or the unchosen. She wanted to sink into the water, let herself dissolve back into the sea of what was as yet undecided.

The voices tailed off and the water's gentle lapping lapsed into noiselessness. The moment hung in the air, unhinged.

For pity's sake come for me, she screamed at last, waist deep in the icy water, her voice cracking, her old eyes scanning the black water to the pale horizon. Whoever, whatever you are, for god's sake, come back for me now.

For a long moment there was nothing but the gentle wisps of the night breeze across her face. I'm waiting. I've been waiting so long. Why don't you come? Her heart began to wither into despair.

Then she felt the night stir like a beast waking from a long slumber. And at its heart was an invisible thing, an impossible thing; a monstrous creature made of dark matter, awakening, glistening with black light. Eilidh felt its face turning towards her, slowly, implacably, as though the mechanism that drove it was rusty, as though it hadn't turned for a million years. Inside her mind she saw its eyes focus and glitter like shards of broken jet. Its huge hands tightened into fists, the dull silver of its rings glinting in the answering moonlight cascading down through the loch.

No-one had called him for so long, no-one had wanted him like this for millennia. Only a little of him ever came to shore, only a taste of what lay hidden ever inflamed the senses of the world to overcome its fear. His mind struggled into focus as his eyes opened, and the force of his black gaze shook the water. As he roused himself and moved towards the shore, Eilidh felt the sea swell in response. He was coming.

And she wasn't afraid. Crouching on the shore, her nightgown soaked, her hair bedraggled, her boots lost in the sand and stones, she waited.

His beasts came first. Up through the loch's surface came a bird, vast and feathered, its huge wings scything the air as it climbed and wheeled on the gathering wind. And out of the first breaking wave came a huge grey wolf, shaking its pelt free of the salt water, its yellow eyes bright as it loped to her side and sat quiet. And the loch boiled as the sea-snake lashed and writhed, its great tail slashing the swell. Eilidh waited, shivering, as wave after wave surged and broke on the stones.

And then he walked out of the sea naked, impossible, like a story in an unknown language. Immense he seemed, carved out of the rocks of the mountain, his limbs strong as the branches of trees, his hair wet and curling like black waterweed under the dull silver crown, his skin dark as the sea-depths and yet shining, throwing light towards the shore. A cry escaped Eilidh's throat as she saw Christie in the lineaments of his face. And there was more; a face she had once seen shivering in silver on the surface of a pool, caught in the jagged geometry of the rock face just before the man had become a horse, and the each uisge had turned vision to nightmare. The gille dubh smiled through his crystalline eyes. There was music in his blood and the grace of the warrior in his bearing. They were all here.

Yet as the god of this place drew close to Eilidh she saw that he was only a man, just a little taller than she. And she smiled as she took his outstretched hand, cold and heavy, so heavy it seemed. Your hands, heavy with silver. And she did not protest as he lay down beside her, drowning her in the chill of his body, the scent of the sea; engulfing her until all the empty spaces were filled with him for ever.

Heavy, so heavy he seemed, his hands on her body so heavy, the weight of him crushing the air from her lungs as he sang softly in his wordless tongue, stroking her, soothing her like a baby as he fed her, quietened her, completed her.

There was only a brief moment of panic before she knew she didn't need the air any more; the water slaked her terrible thirst at last, and the night took her and held her safe.■

The Fox

Deborah Moffatt

Caught in the beam of the headlamps, eyes gleaming
jewel-bright, the fox waits nearly a second too long;
a squealing of brakes and he's gone, over the dyke, into the night.

The blue-green of aquamarines, those sly eyes,
floating through the dark, bright as the jewels you carry,
a present for your wife, a gift given for every journey taken.

She passes the days in the garden, stroking the silky back
of a purring cat, rubbing a fingertip over the petals of a rose,
dreaming of blue-green eyes gleaming in a darkened room.

Through the night, the local lads have been at it again,
slashing tyres, smashing windows, the shattered glass
glittering with false splendour in the morning light.

They stand in the square, eyes on the ground as she passes.
Everyone knows. The man in the shop looks her right in the eye.
They found a fox, he says. Dead, on the road.

We Will Breathe Each Other

Poems by Angus Dunn

Moon Return

The moon is full tonight
as it was full
when last we spoke,
before our castle walls
collapsed to formless dunes.
  I was a child then,
  I did not know
  what substance would cement
  those golden shifting sands -
  if anything will hold
  the structures that we make
  with heart and hands.

The moon is full tonight.
Tides are rising
in New Zealand, Capetown
and in Tobermory Bay.
Beneath the shining sea
marine crustaceans
clack their limbs:
their courtly dance
makes hieroglyphics
on the silty ocean floor.
  I turn and see moon-shadows
  in the footsteps I have left
  along the shore.

The moon is full tonight,
drawing us beyond ourselves.
I am a man now
at least in this –
I know the moves
our species makes
responding to the chemicals
of life, the energies
we swim through.
I know that this will pass.
  I try to read the meaning
  of these markings in the sand:
  they will not last.

The moon will fill again,
and all will change.
This life too will fill
and fade, but when it's gone
something of me and you will carry on.
The voice of moon and tide
will call us through:
I will look into a different face
and know it's you.

Kernel

The taste of mango
as the sun goes down over Eoligarry,
the flavours in the clouds
complicated
by the acid orange streetlights,
delicious, somehow,
strung across the water,
across the sunset.
What is it, after all,
but the taste of my life?
Unable to swallow it all,
I blame the tightness in my throat

Cabrach Lover

for Nikki

Rings of tiny mushrooms grow
      where my love lays
            her fairy feet.
Scarves of tattered rain
      fall down upon
            her cool white shoulders.

Where the calf presses
      against its mother
hiding from the sleet
or where the hare lies,
      in its sodden covert –
she is there.

The sharny dubs that edge the road,
the mossy banks of swollen streams –
      they feel her tread.
She is not absent from the soil.

Blood flows, or sap flows,
where skin or bark
      are broken –
they do not break
they do not heal
      without my love is there.

I will lay me down
      across those fields
where rushes hide the grass,
      where ice clings on through half the year,
and little nourishment is there,
      for sheep still giving succour to their lambs.

And I will lay me down
where shadows of the birch
      give meagre shelter to the deer –
for though the soil is thin
      and sunshine scarcely more
            than memories,

                  I know my love is there.

Boundaries

Here, where the tree stops being a tree,
here I will build a fence of twigs
to hold the cuckoo's song
or keep the wind away.

Here, where the road edge
breaks down into tarry gravel,
here I will draw my line
and trim the toenails
of the world.

Here, where the breath that is inside me
becomes the air that we breathe,
here I will declare myself,
and as we come close
we will breathe each other.

Shaman

The clouds are not disturbed by your passing
but it is certain that you go from here
to where your desire takes you.

The earth does not tremble when you arrive
though it is sure that everyone and everything
knows you are there, at last.

Not one current of air, not the butterfly's wings
not one cell in the body nor an electron in its spin
records the fact that you are gone,
but we know when you leave
and keep the drums beating
until you return.

It is Not

It is not that I expect to see
the unfolding of my plans.

It is not that I want the world
to shape itself around me.
It is not that I believe
the future is made
by my desire, by my intention.

It is this:
I want the texture of my life
to be smooth and rough
to be patterned and plain,

the taste to be salt
with tears, and
bitter with agonies
and sweet with reconciliation,

the heart to be broken
and mended, the face
to be stricken and peaceful

the lines of my mouth and eyes
to tell a story
worth the telling

and the hands, though broken,
to hold the shadows
of objects made,
of dragons wrestled
of skin caressed.

‘Today I stand in a field and shout’

Essay by Linda Cracknell

It’s one of those damp, chill November days in July. The cycle twelve miles south from Aberfeldy to Corbenic Camphill Community is half taken up with the winding climb to cross the hills between the two valleys. As I puff upwards I mentally take my hat off to Jon Plunkett, poet and founder of the Corbenic Poetry Path, who cycles this journey to work every day (albeit with a little battery assistance). After the summit at Loch na Creige, I soar through grouse moor, spruce plantations, windfarms, freewheeling down into Strath Braan and along the green and glittering ribbon it sashays between scratchy hills, running east towards Dunkeld. Down here woodland rolls into hollows and contented cows munch. Because it is actually July, the verges explode in great, wet heads of cow parsley and meadowsweet, splashes of foxglove colour, willow herb. The corridor is scented by sappy bracken.

I set out on Corbenic’s poetry path enjoying the sense that I am ‘beating the bounds’ of the 50 acre estate. Without intruding on those who live here, I look over my left shoulder onto varied cameos of Perthshire countryside – pasture, open hillside, native woodland and wild river – whilst on my right, I glimpse a tractor at work, chickens pecking in a field, a pony-riding lesson going on, and amidst fresh sawdust, beehive-shaped piles of chopped logs waiting to warm a hearth. Voices mark the criss-crossing of ways between home and work.

Corbenic is a community for adults with learning disabilities where creative activity is prioritised through music, stories and the crafting of things; loaves of bread, pottery, furniture and candles, all sold in their shop and café in Dunkeld, four miles away. There is also a small farm, the land and animals tended in a way that shows the many hands at work and low levels of mechanisation.

Opened in June 2015 following development over three years or so, the poetry path was a new way for residents to help create something, and to enjoy their home on foot. Up to 50 volunteers a day also gave their time, including staff at Scottish and Southern Energy through a company volunteering scheme. It follows that many people are now proud of the result.

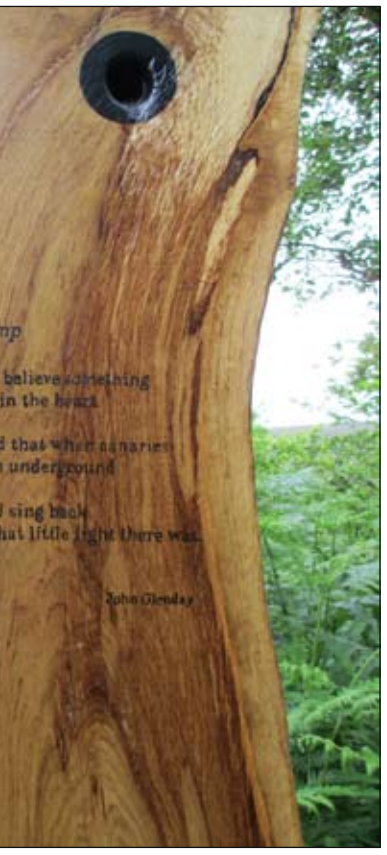
I set off into midgey drizzle on the three km walk. ‘It is good to stand in a field and shout’, Jim Carruth’s poem soon declares from its beautifully carved sandstone slab, the word ‘shout’ repeated three large times so I am not in doubt. This joyous, raucous, rhythmic poem invites me back to childhood. It seems to define this place where residents can enjoy being in the landscape, secure within boundaries and an expectation of sharing, yet free to express themselves.

With renewed energy I bound on. The path is well-made, lined sometimes with birch logs, sometimes with stone. Sometimes decking is suspended over a bog. I might expect more slabs of stone, carved as Jim Carruth’s by artisan stone carver and staff member Martin Reilly. They do come, but it’s more playful than that. Ron Butlin’s poem ‘Before the Program Starts’ appears under gel on the top of his blue marker post. Nearby a television screen is fixed into a dry stone dyke and a remote control left handily on a stump. I know now not to expect uniformity.

The path jinks on between birch trees, inviting me onwards around a far bend into what looks like a pool of light. What will be next? It’s nineteen words from Kenneth Steven laid out in reverse order along the path. The final word ‘island’ is met first, but to read the whole line I walk to the top and then return nine paces. It’s about the hurry in our lives, so dwelling here makes sense. And there it is at the end: ‘…find an island’ – a discovery made for the second time.

In the dark of a conifer plantation, knee deep in grass, there’s a small thrill between spotting a blue post and finding the poem it marks. At the forest edge a pile of logs three-deep is silhouetted against the growing brightness of the fields and hills beyond. When my eyes adjust I see words carved into slate slicing through the middle layer. ‘Time has taught the uses of silence’: a line from a Sally Evans poem. As well as the surprise of the physical discovery, ‘silence’ makes a nice reply, ten minutes on, to ‘shout’. But it also resonates with what I’m looking at: the high hills and cleft of Glen Quaich to our west, where in the 19th century repeated clearances silenced the valley.

Patricia Ace’s poem responding to the mossy gable ends of a ruined croft is etched on a sheet of glass, its horizon a jagged mountain range. It’s suspended high so that as you walk, the words appear and vanish,



appear and vanish depending on the light and landscape behind. Sometimes the words hang in the clouds, sometimes against stone walls. Glimpsed singly or in small groups they make sense of the context: 'etched', 'work and weather', 'distant lives'.

Nature and the elements edit the pieces. Wind has drifted twigs across some of Kenneth Steven's words. Rain-wet stone is sometimes harder to read. Or easier. Next to the water-lily lochan at the highest point of the walk, and under the crag where the hill ground is starting to purple with ling, Morgan Downie's poem 'Casting' invokes geese, buzzards, wagtails, grouse. Its fine timber 'page' has been amended. Two long white lines of bird shit run down across the words.

At present the walk comprises 32 poems by 19 poets, some locally-based, most known Scotland-wide, and many of them poets of the rural with an affinity to the land. Some of the poems or lines were selected by Jon Plunkett for particular locations. Some poets visited the site and responded to a chosen corner. The creativity that's gone into the installations themselves, and into their positioning, adds to the playful nature of the whole experience.

A poem by Tim Turnbull looks east across a dyke to fields sloping steeply towards Craig Laggan, and refers to a 'gateway to another world'. A few paces on, with that line still echoing, I find it incarnate in a cast-iron gate opening onto the same view.

'When I said you should/grab the bull by the horns/I thought you would understand'. A snort and scuffle interrupt this reading of Jon Plunkett's poem 'Lost in Translation'. A bullock stands just beyond the wall ahead, nose raised towards me.

Dropping down on a winding path between mature birch trees, thickets of bracken and foxglove, I'm wondering what will come next, when Margaret Gillies Brown's 'The Inner Citadel' arrives in the centre of the path, with its journey 'into the dark interior/ down, down, down'.

An iteration begins; poem with poem, poem against setting; chimes and rhymes. I'm now aware of walking a three-dimensional anthology.

Down through a mossy corridor between rhododendron; down to the river, with the rain on again, closed in by dark and drip, fern and moss, and the river's gurgle, there's a place to sit and have a fire and a feeling of an end approaching. It's here that John Glenday's poem 'The River' provides the emotional crux of this anthology for me, with its resistance to endings, and a possibility of 'the river never quite reaching the sea'. The Braan swings around a bend making a deep pool that's prickled by rain, then slicked by brief sun. It tumbles away over stone towards the Tay and thus to the sea, as if in contradiction. I stand there for some time, shake off a shiver not only brought about by the chill, then climb back towards the start of the walk, closing the circle.

After a sandwich the sun comes out and I can't help starting the walk again, the same impulse as returning to the first pages of a book after a satisfying resolution. I discover a poem I missed the first time and things look slightly different. Under sunlight the patchwork of grouse moor on the hills is revealed more starkly, the purpling spread of ling is more pronounced.

This slow walk syncopated with poem 'stations' will be different and bring a new pleasure each time I visit. I'm going to enjoy the editing style of different seasons: Autumn's cut determined by the fall of leaves; winter's by snow; spring's by the distracting scent of wild garlic down on the flood-eaten river banks. Or I'll come at different times of day; creep up on Sally Evans' log pile at dawn when the words will be lit from the east. Sometimes there'll be shouting, sometimes silence.

I leave Corbenic with a spring in my step (or on my pedals) as if now, with my poetry-expanded heart and lungs full of fresh air, I feel gloriously free to stand in a field and shout. ■

Visitors are welcome. The path starts from a small car-park near the village of Trochry on the A822 Dunkeld - Crieff Road. Satnav users: PH8 0DY
www.corbenicpoetrypath.com/

Poetry

An Aghaidh Mhòr a-rithist

Calum MacLeòid

An taiseachd is an sneachda
an ceò is na neòil,
geal thar gile
nar n-aghaidh ag obair
's a fealla-dhà, a-mach air saoghal
nach deach a ghealltainn dhuinn.
Chuireadh faire cho falamh
an t-eagal taitneach oirnn
mura robh e breacte
bho àm gu achadh
le caoraich bhuidhe iongar.

`S ann anns a' mheadhan a bha e,
a' tilleadh gun teagamh
tro a dhùthaich,
tro a cheò
tro a ghilead
chun Dingwall aigesan
na shuidhe à sealladh
a chasaid a' lìonadh carbad na trèana
a-mach air na sanasan ùra,
ar sleaghan Spartannach,
a' soilleireachadh a chompanach,
a bhlas, a ghuth,
a chainnt, a chànan,
làn cinnt an aithriseir

agus m' fhuil a' gairm iorraim
trom
tromham.
tro thunailean is fhèithean
ri ruitheam a thuaileis.
òrain gràine.
òrain nàire.

shuidh mi air an trèana.

's fhada on a ràinig sinn
ar dùthaich cèine is cinn-uidhe
's mise fhathast ag èisteachd riutha
's fhada on a leagh m' headphones.

Bràistean dùr

Calum MacLeòid

Caithidh mi fhathast,
Ged is aithne dhomh
Mar as aithne do chàch
Nach deach an latha leinn,
Mo bhràist bheag dhùr.

Cha b' e tosgairean a' bh' annta
A' bruidhinn às leth sluaigh
Cha robh iad nan miseanaraidhean
Ag amas air dùthaich dhubh dhùinte
A bharrachd. Cha robh annta ach
Sluagh-ghairm,
Teachdaireachd cho tìtheach ri peilear.

Tha fios gun deach mìltean dhiubh a sgaoileadh
Is barrachd air cus dhiubh
Ri lorg an-diugh aig bonn tiona no biona.
Chan eil ach aon air fhàgail agam fhìn.
Ach tha tighinn fodham geall a' chumail ri
Mo bhràist bheag dhùr,
Lasan beag dòchais
Air coilear cagoule.

Eilean nan Cuileagan

Calum MacLeòid

Bratan tana agus tì bhog a' bhlas iarainn
An t-àile blàth is tiugh
le tàirneanach nam bagaichean dubha

agus is lìonmhor na cuileagan odhar.

Bilean tioram a' seinn
's a' searmonachadh air droch-chliù
sìos gach ghinealach goirid
mar a thachair 's mar a thachras
mar athair 's mar athair-sa
bainne blàth a' ghoileim

agus is lìonmhor na cuileagan odhar.

Tugainn.

Air leathad, bidh sean shlige itealain
Ga spìonadh fhèin le lùths a' Gheamhraidh
a' sleamhnachadh conair shìos an t-sliosa

a' sireadh taigh-losgaidh baile na tràghad

Ceum

Calum MacLeòid

cùm ceum dlùth rium thuirt mi riut
a' tilleadh bhon uaimh
far an do dh'fhàg sinn ar mic-talla
is beagan duslaich
a' rèiteachadh mo bhriogais
an dithist againn a-mach air Iain Garbh
agus JFK

Air ais 'ille
Air ais do Ratharsair
Air ais chun taobh tuath

oiteag a' crathadh muran a' mhachaire
air cùlaibh Shuidheachain
faidhle a' tuiteam à uinneag àrd

's ann an Eachdraidh a bha mi
a' cluinntinn mu Khristallnacht
nuair a thuit na tùir

chan eil cuimhne agam air an sgeul agad
ach gun tàinig tidsear àrd a-steach
is stad sibh an clas

lean sinn oirnn gun fhiosta

chrath mi beagan a bharrachd ghainmhich bhuam,
beagan, is thuirt mi riut
bha an t-eagal orm air ais an sin
chuir mi mo chas air clach chealgach
is dh'fhalbh i
agus rinn tìm an rud ud
fhios agad
nuair a bhios tu tuiteam
beagan
bha an ath chlach ceart gu leòr
cha chreid mi gun do mhothaich thu

às aonais facail
ach le sùil ri fàire sear
leig thu osnadh uat.

Forgetting How to Pray

Christie Williamson

Doesna hae tae be fur ay.
Da deep end's gien naewye

an drier lips as dine
haes intoned tae da divine.

Choost bekis hit slipped dy mind
doesna mean dir ony less or mair

oot dere as ivvir wis. Here. Noo.
Aa hit takks. Aa du haes.

Naebody's gjaain ta listen
if du winna.

Tales from the Bog

Lydia Popowich

The house Fred built for her
sprang scarlet from mud
like a poppy on the battlefield unfurling
hope amongst dismembered men.
The bog land wavered between mountains
and a cold sea and the sky hung
white flags of surrender.
In the year seven, her house fell.

The house Gerry made for her
curled pearl from mud.
Like a salamander it grew,
tail renewed, warmed by winter sun.
The bog land quavered between mountains
and a cold sea and the sky hung
grey shrouds of decay.
In the year ten, her house fell.

The house Jack saved for her
sang hallelujahs from mud.
Like Jesus it rose
again, hope alive.
The bog land shimmered between mountains
and a cold sea and the sky hung
pink streamers of bliss.
In the year two zero one five, her house… thrived.

Abdi was a Man

Short Story by Cynthia Rogerson

Abdi was a man and therefore in big trouble. Most people in this affluent part of the world were old white women, and they did not have male carers. They had silent, dark eyed Filipino or Hispanic women, or girls from Fiji who knew how to cook fish. No one considered hiring an American woman, and in any case, hardly any Americans applied for the jobs. The few that did were suspected of being junkies or worse.

Abdi sat and sat, thought and thought about this dilemma of being a poor African man in Santa Barbara. He was hungry, always. Of course he wasn't literally starving – he ate with his huge extended family every night, but this didn't prevent a nauseating hollowness in his belly the rest of the time. He spent too much time alone, and he was not allowed to eat any food from the kitchen till evening. He slept on the floor of his cousin's apartment, wrapped in an old blanket. He couldn't complain. The sofa belonged to his niece, no question, and all the beds were taken. The house was not a bad place, but it had no space for him.

How he had arrived in this land of lush gardens and wasted fruit, was now almost a blur. His old life was like someone else's dream. When he recounted it, it seemed so unlikely to have happened to himself. So odd, that that boy had become this man. Had there really been that massacre, that flight into the jungle, those white men with red crosses on their trucks? The facts were these: Abdi was a 58 year old man, and he slept on the floor in a town of rich dying women.

The mornings were long, and the afternoons even longer. He sat and he thought and sometimes he talked out loud, making plans. Sometimes he phoned home and argued with his brother.

'I am not so stupid!'

'Yes you are,' said his brother. 'You should have stayed home where you belonged.'

'You are jealous, man!' Abdi replied. 'I am here in the land of honey, while you rot in the slums in a cardboard house.'

One day, while his only clothes were hanging to dry, he wrapped himself in a skirt his niece had left in a heap on the sofa. (She had four skirts – three for working, and one for church.) He was a tall man, and now so thin the skirt wrapped round him three times. This flattened the man-ness of him, and when he looked down, it reminded him of a sarong he used to wear. And then, because it was an American skirt and not a sarong, he thought to himself: this must be what it's like to be a woman. To be honest, he'd not found a use for his man-ness for a long time, and didn't mourn this. He'd been a husband twice and that was enough for any man. He felt almost naked, in a nice way. Did he wish he was a woman? What was he? There was no sex in him at all, he decided. Bottom line – he was a human being who was getting old.

His jeans dried quickly, but his niece was not due back till evening, so he left the skirt on. He put on one of her blouses and frowned at himself in the mirror. The blouse was a little wrinkled, so he ironed it and put it on again. Tucked it in this time, but still frowned. Rummaged in his niece's suitcase till he found a yellowed bra and put it on. Stuffed scrunched-up toilet paper in the cups, then spent five minutes adjusting his bosom. He noticed his face was actually quite feminine. His cheek bones were delicate, and his lips were soft and full. He ran a hand over his chin. He'd shaved that morning so it was smooth. (He only had to shave once a week, so the first day his face was always smooth.) He took a faded red scarf that had been hanging from a hook on the door since his arrival, and wrapped it round his head. Round and round, covering his ears, and framing his face in loops. A dab of lipstick, and the job was done. By god, he was a woman! The only thing missing was shoes; he had to wear his old tennis shoes because his feet were too big for any of his niece's shoes. Never mind. People didn't look at feet first, did they? He practised walking like a woman around the apartment. Small steps, slight wiggle in his butt. He tried sitting, crossing his legs in various ways. He couldn't stop smiling. He hadn't smiled, not like this, in a long time.

How he had arrived in this land of lush gardens and wasted fruit, was now almost a blur. His old life was like someone else's dream. When he recounted it, it seemed so unlikely to have happened to himself.

Later that night, when the apartment was full of people again and Abdi was in his jeans, he announced he was leaving tomorrow. He had a good job up in Oakland, and was going to make a lot of money. They opened some beers and toasted him.

'Good luck man,' they all said. 'Come back when you have a Cadillac and can take us for a ride to Las Vegas.'

Then they all laughed as if that was funny.

Mr Logan hired Abda to care for his wife, as a live-in job. He was an old man with a sense of humour, but not much kindness or patience. Abda soon learned that Mrs Logan – Mary Ann – had become a burden to her husband. She was about the same age, but couldn't walk very well, smelled of pee, and asked the same questions over and over. All this drove her husband crazy. Abda understood right away she had dementia, and gave her the same answer each time, in the same tone of voice. But Mr Logan got very angry, as if she was doing it on purpose.

'I just told you! I told you three times! What's the matter with you?'

Abda encouraged Mr Logan to go out on his own, and she stayed in with Mary Ann. Or she would push her wheelchair along the boardwalk. She found it peaceful because when Mary Ann wasn't asking the same question, she was silent. There was a slackness to her features and sometimes a child-like wonder in her eyes. Every time she saw the sea, her face would light up and she'd clap her hands. When they got the end of the boardwalk, Abda would face her chair inland for a minute before turning her around, and she'd clap her hands again at the sight of the sea. This always made Abda want to kiss her, but she didn't.

One night Mr Logan crawled into Abda's bed. He was very drunk and naked, and not capable of much. After the first shock, Abda simply turned Mr Logan on to his side away from her, reached over and masturbated him. It felt just like a kind of chore – and she did it like she did all chores. Methodically and competently. Unemotionally. She sensed exactly how long to go on. Later she held him while he snored for an hour or so. Then she nudged him gently and whispered:

'Back to your own bed now, Mr Logan.'

And he shuffled off good naturedly, his caved-in buttocks winking at her.

About two months after this began, Mr Logan woke up feeling strange, and asked Abda:

'Am I dying?'

'I don't know. Are you ready to die?' She'd never seen someone out before and wasn't sure how it went.

He thought a few minutes. He looked very pale, and his breathing was laboured.

'I'd rather go out for a drink to that new place by the beach,' he wheezed, and clutched his left arm.

'Ah. Well, you should do that then instead.'

But Mr Logan died anyway.

After that, life was easier for Abda and Mary Ann. They settled into a pattern that bordered on decadence. Their favourite television soaps and old films. Sound of Music. The Waltons. Their favourite food, when they wanted it instead of set meal times. French toast five days running, with the most expensive butter and maple syrup. Some days they stayed in their pyjamas, cuddled up on the sofa, and snoozed the afternoon away. They had no visitors. There were two adult children, but they lived in New York and had not been back since the funeral. All the household bills were paid automatically, and money went into Abda's account every month. Occasionally the phone rang and they would look at each other, startled.

'Should I answer that?' Abda would ask, scratching her head, pretending to consider it.

Mary Ann would always shrug, and smile a silly little smile.

'Nah, I don't think I'll bother,' Abda would announce, and they would listen to the phone keep ringing till it stopped. That always made Mary Ann giggle so hard, tears rolled down her face. Sometimes, Abda would phone the house from her cell phone, just to get Mary Ann to giggle.

Once Abda had a very bad back from helping Mary Ann on and off the toilet. It lasted days. She took pain killers and lay flat on the living room floor and whimpered.

'Get on the sofa,' commanded Mary Ann uncharacteristically.

She made Abda roll on her stomach, and she massaged her back till Abda thought she'd gone to heaven.

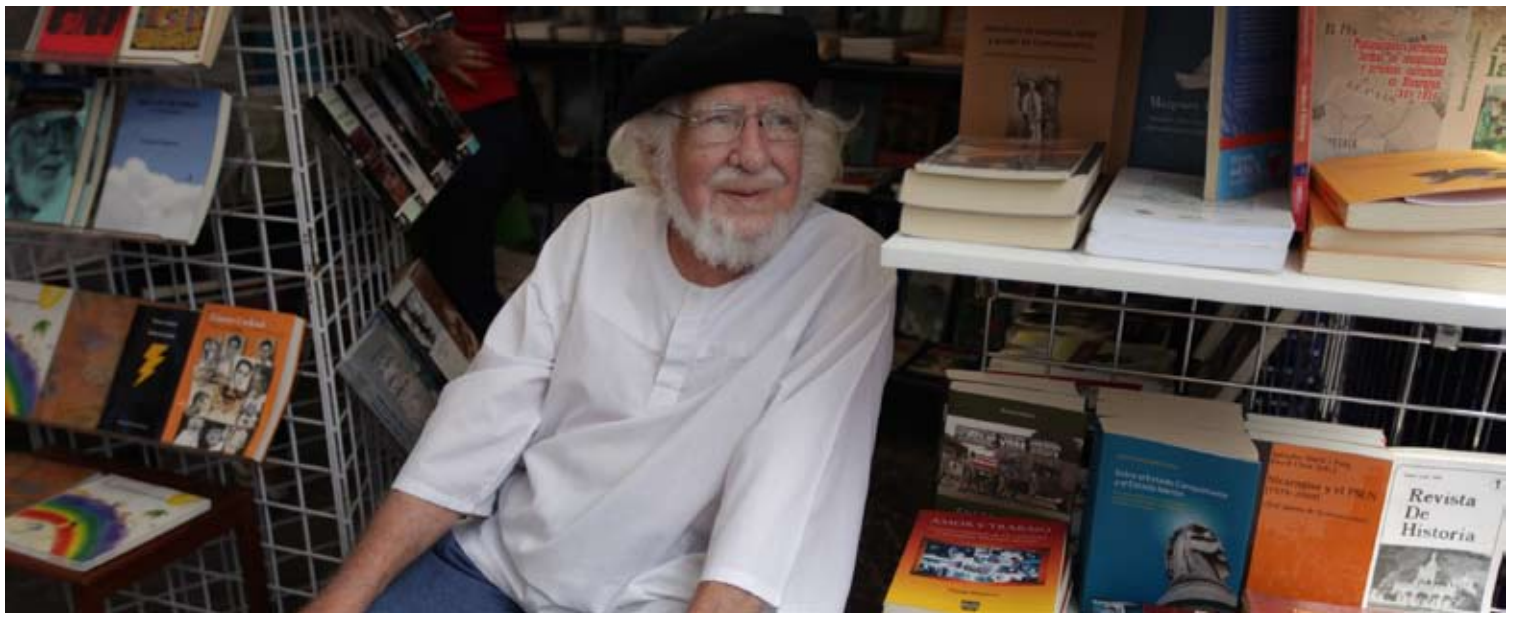
Now and then Mary Ann shouted out for Mr Logan, and had to be reminded she was a widow. She always made a sad face then, but it was a comical face. As if she was aping sadness. At any rate, a second later she would look her placid self again.

Two years passed. Abda gained weight, but mysteriously her breasts completely disappeared. Her stomach protruded over her waistband, and she walked with long strides to the supermarket in her wraparound skirt. Mary Ann seemed to shrink, but that was just because she was so old. She was as healthy as it was possible to be given her age and condition, and as happy. After awhile it made sense for them to sleep in the same bed, and the space her husband had left in her life no longer existed.

Abda was still lonely sometimes, of course, even though Mary Ann loved her. No one on the surface of the entire earth knew who Abda was. No one else was like her. Not really. That made her feel sad and odd and a little frightened. Then Mary Ann would clap her hands at the sight of the sea again, and nothing else would matter but that. No one else was really like Mary Ann either. Maybe no one was like anyone else anyway, and this life was as good as life could be. ■

A Poet in the House of Mercy

Alexander Hutchison visits Nicaragua



A poet among books - photograph of Ernesto Cardenal by Diana Ulloa, www.dianaulloa.com/

My friend Tsead Bruinja, a Frisian poet living in Amsterdam, must have put in a good word (he had been there before), because an invitation came for me to read at the *Festival Internacional de Poesía de Granada* in Nicaragua in February this year. After a little while I learned there were some other established links between the festival and Scotland, and was happy to follow these through; which meant that on my way back home, as part of an 'Arching Bridge' project, initially connected to StAnza, I also featured as a guest poet at a range of venues in New York and New England.

Somewhat out of the usual for me, I was a bit apprehensive about the trip; communication between me and the organisers hovered between Spanish and English, and though I had answers to some necessary questions, others were still missing when it was time to take off. As it turned out, a couple of the most awkward possibilities happened to other poets, but I managed to dodge them. I had worried I would not be met at the airport at Managua, and also was concerned that it might be difficult to arrange transport to Granada (and my as-yet-unidentified hotel). I might get stuck. It turned out my last stage transfer flight from Atlanta was delayed two hours – for 'cleaning' apparently. 'Chrissake', I said, 'we'll travel dirty'! – and was ignored. I was very uneasy, since it meant we wouldn't be landing in Managua until about 10 that night.

Anyway, when I piled out the other end in the first half dozen, there, bless 'em, were two young women with my name on a sign at the top of a stairs leading down to immigration. We didn't go down the stairs. I was stood briefly under a full body, heat detection device (presumably to pick up fevers or other anomalies) then whisked past *everything* – immigration, customs and so on – to a VIP lounge, full of a dozen other poets who had been held up in their progress to Granada, waiting for my delayed arrival! No hard feelings, and we were soon whipped along the road to our various destinations: in my case a huge room in a beautiful old town house converted to a hotel: *Casa la Merced* – the House of Mercy.

That was the way things worked out at the start – and pretty well the way they went as the festival continued. There were readings and events all through the week and filling each day. The main activities were in the evening, especially in the main plaza, with twenty or so poets performing in short bursts to hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people as the square filled up, with crowds gathering not only for the poetry but for concerts of music and dance that followed.

My first reading was on Monday evening. I had about five minutes to speak to a throng of folk in the lee of a large, baroque, central church – *Iglesia la Merced*! – lit up like a set from a futuristic movie. Since time was short, I had dispensed with a translator, and made a collage version of my poem 'Everything' – with Spanish elements woven in from Juana Adcock's version, '*Todo*'. I did a short introduction: '*Hola. amigos*! – honour and pleasure – *soy un poeta escocés* – *gracias por invitarme a leer* – best wishes from poets and artists in Scotland – *me gustan los volcanes* ('I like volcanoes') and so on – all brief but necessary. Then, to finish up, I said: '*Deacachimba*!' – which pretty well brought the house (or church) down.

After my arrival in the town I had been scattering remarks like *tranquilo* and *pura vida* – for 'cool' or 'great' – but one waiter eventually pointed out: 'They say *pura vida* in Costa Rica; we don't really use it here.' 'What do you say, then?' 'Oh, *deacca* – or *deacachimba*! So I was tipped off. But I still didn't really know what it meant, and never *did* find out, though I got a few ideas along the way. It's deep slang, that much was clear. All I'll say is: they have another expression *hasta la verga* – involving the penis, and applying in various situations, ironic or otherwise. *Deacachimba* is more on the other side of the gender break, but certainly positive, and though I never had a negative response to its use, there was clearly an element of excess and even outrageousness to it.

So I followed that up with the poem, which was fine, and then afterwards everyone piled on top of me – arms round the shoulders, commendations, laughter – and I realised, whatever the actual content, the word had been a key, admitting me to conviviality and some recognition – if not notoriety. I'll also confess that later in the week, I was given the chance because of the earlier episode to appear live on the equivalent of the Oprah Winfrey TV show, Managua-style. I did my diplomatic stuff, and rolled out my main poem, and it looked like we were winding down, so I made a request to the hostess, Imelda, if I could say 'one more thing' – *una cosa más*! She agreed and, well, you can guess what followed. The cameraman in centre foreground clapped his hands to his ears and burst out laughing. Whether they kept it in or snuffed it quick I didn't find out. But the reaction was fine, at the time and after.

One of the big features in Granada was the carnival on Thursday, with a huge range of traditional musicians, dancers and performers, lively and lovely, as well as mock-menacing and ghoulish. It was led by a big hearse with two black horses, and the theme was 'Death to Male Violence Against Women'. At each stopping point poets clambered up to a high vantage point on one of the floats and read a poem. The route was from the centre of town right down to the lake, which each day we were there (except one) offered a cooling breeze to keep us in good spirits.

A couple of days before the carnival six or seven of us had walked down to the lake on the same route to check it out. On the way back we chose a street just a block away. There, for a long stretch of the road, people and families were living in breeze block and rubble, or lean-to shacks, with next to nothing in the way of furniture or amenities. Eventally we reached a small shop and one of the women went in to buy a drink. We all trooped in after, and were served by a stocky, short man in a pressed shirt and slacks, trim haircut. He wasn't all that used to the prices, and had to check with a younger woman who came through from the back. Monica got her 7-up and was heading out with it, but was asked to drink it up in the shop. I took it they wanted the bottle. Anyway, we all sat down while she drank it, and the man started to tell us about his family, pointing to photographs decorating one of the walls.

He said he had fathered 28 children: the first to the maid when he was fourteen. He mentioned he had been a boxer. He chatted perfectly freely. At one point he said, '*Me gusta mandar*' – or, roughly, 'I like telling people what to do'. I sat up a bit at that, and looked at him more closely. Then he made reference to something I didn't quite catch – though it threw me – so I checked with the others when we were back outside. Yes, he *had* claimed he had been a chief of police for Somoza. We all then considered that piece of information as we tracked up the rest of the road into town.

On our last night in Granada, a similar group of us were having a drink and a snack in a bar we hadn't been in before – which was a bit odd, because it was right next to the *Plaza de la Independencia*, where much of the festival performances took place. At one point I turned round and saw a friend Luis, who beckoned me over. He was sitting with a man and wife in their forties maybe, and introduced them as the owners of the bar. Then he added that the man was a grandson of Sandino, the Niacaraguan national hero. 'I'm very glad to shake your hand,' I said, and meant it, thinking back to the stocky, wee shop-keeper I had bought ten Pall Mall off a few days before.

The mention of national heroes brings me to Ernesto Cardenal, one of whose poems is featured here. When I knew I was going to Nicaragua, I did a bit of work in hope of meeting him. I got the opportunity one lunchtime in Granada: he was through in good time before his reading early in the evening. He had a couple of assistants with him, one called *Luz* – Light – and I had pressed Katherine who worked with the festival to help me out with the exchanges. In addition to paying tribute I wanted to get Cardenal's permission for my two translations of his work into Scots. He semed fine about this, but at one point he turned to Luz and asked in effect: 'What is this Scots like? Is it as good as English?' I tapped his wrist lightly and, when he turned his face to me, said smilingly and with emphasis: 'Better. *Better*!" He grinned, and we shook on it for agreement. We organised a small party on the Friday to explore Mombacho Volcan; but climbing the volcano didn't quite have the same spark for me as meeting Cardenal. ■

La Mañanita (1979)

Ernesto Cardenal

Translated into Scots by Alexander Hutchison

Hermano, amaneció. Mirá.
Ahora podemos ver ya el volcán Masaya
y su humo
saliendo del cráter, y la laguna, verde, de Masaya,
más allá la laguna de Apoyo, muy azul,
las Sierras, y serranías de color cielo
hasta la lejanía, la verdad es
que nuestra tierra es de color de cielo,
más lejos, ¿lo ves? el Pacífico,
casi puro cielo bajo el cielo,
la verdad es que estamos en el cielo y no lo sabemos,
mirá, del otro lado el lago de Managua y el Momotombo
junto al agua como
un triángulo de lago levantado o
una pirámide de cielo.
Todo esto desde antes estaba allí
pero una oscura noche lo cubría,
y no se veía. La noche de las tentaciones.
Cada uno tenía su tentación.
La tentación del falso amanecer que aún no podía ser.
El yacer en una cama en plena noche soñando que es el amanecer.
Ahora sí fue el amanecer, Pancho Nicaragua,
todo está iluminado
alrededor de este rancho.
La tierra y el agua. Lo podés ver.
Y en aquella casita oigo cantar:
"Qué alegre y fresca
la mañanita."

La Mañanita/The Dawnin

Brither, it's the keekin o day. Tak a look.
Noo, we can see richt throwe t Masaya Volcán
an its reek
risin fae the crater, syne the lagoon, emerant, o Masaya,
ahint yon the lagoon o Apoyo, bricht bew,
the Sierra mountain-taps, an the sky-blue heilans an heuchs
hyne awa, in troth
oor laun is the colour o the lift,
hyne an hyne awa – see til't? the Pacific,
gey near pure azure aneth the sky,
in troth we're in hivven, an dinna ken't,
look ower, on the ither shore o Managua loch an Momotombo
richt doon t the watter
lik a wadge o loch heistet up
or a pyramid o the lift.
Aa this wis here lang afore noo
bit smoorit by mirk o nicht
so ye quidna mak it oot. The nicht o enteecements.
Ilk ane o's his haen oor enteecement.
The temptation o a fause dawn that quidna be jist yit.
Streckit in bed in deid o nicht dreamin it's the dawn.
It's here noo, Pancho Nicaragua,
aathin's ableeze wi licht
richt roon this bothy.
The yird an watter. See til't.
Syne in yon chaumer I herk t them sing:
'Hoo blythe an caller
the new day's dawnin'.

Brither – brother; keekin o day – daybreak; tak – take; richt throwe – right through; reek – smoke, vapour; syne – then, after that; emerant – emerald, deep green; ahint yon – behind that; bricht bew – bright blue; heilans and heuchs – highlands and crags; hyne awa – far away, distant; troth – truth; laun – land; lift – sky; see til't – there it is (see to it); gey – very; aneth – beneath; hivven – heaven; dinna ken't – don't know it; loch – lake; wadge – wedge; heistet – hoisted, lifted; aa – all; wis – was; lang afore – long before; quidna – could not; enteecement – enticement, temptation; ilk ane o's – each one of us; his haen – has had; oor- our; fause – false; jist yit – just yet; streckit – stretched; deid – dead; aathin's ableeze – everything's ablaze; bothy – lodging; yird – earth; chaumer – chamber, small room or dwelling; herk – hark; blythe – glad, happy; caller – fresh.

Ernesto Cardenal

By Alexander Hutchison

Augusto Nicolás Sandino (1895 -1934), also known as Augusto César Sandino, was a Nicaraguan revolutionary between 1927 and 1933 against the U.S. military occupation of Nicaragua. He was referred to as a 'bandit' by the United States government. His exploits made him a hero throughout much of Latin America, where he became a symbol of resistance to United States' domination. Sandino is revered in Nicaragua, and in 2010 was unanimously named a "national hero" by the nation's congress.

Sandino was assassinated in 1934 by National Guard forces of Gen. Anastasio Somoza Garcia, who went on to seize power in a coup d'état two years later. After being elected by an overwhelming vote as president in 1936, Somoza Garcia resumed control of the National Guard and established a dictatorship and family dynasty that would rule Nicaragua for more than 40 years. Sandino's political legacy was claimed by the Sandanista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which finally overthrew the Somoza government in 1979.

Ernesto Cardenal, one of the fiercest critics of the Somoza regime, is a poet and priest, who acted as Minister of Culture when the Sandanistas first toppled Somoza and formed a government. When Pope John Paul II visited Nicaragua in 1983 Cardenal knelt before him on the airport tarmac – but the Pope, unhappy that the priest had not resigned from political office, told him: 'Sort out your relations with the Church'. ('Usted tiene que arreglar sus asuntos con la Iglesia!') Didn't happen. Cardenal, having long since ovecome his qualms about the use of violence to overthrow a vile dictator, 'wasn't that kind of priest'.

Nowadays he continues to speak out against the government of the day – ironically that of President Daniel Ortega and the FSLN, still claiming socialist, Sandanista affiliation – especially its action to sell out the meagre resources of the country in allowing a 50 year concession to Wang Jing a Chinese billionaire to build (with next to no liability) a second Central American canal. This is to go coast to coast, right through Lake Nicaragua, Central America's largest fresh water reservoir.

It's worth remembering that among Sandino's principal demands in the late 1920's were the resignation of then President Díaz, withdrawal of U.S. troops, new elections to be supervised by Latin American countries, and the abrogation of the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, which gave the U.S. the exclusive right to build a canal across Nicaragua. The treaty was eventually abolished in 1970.

The company involved in the new canal, Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Investment (HKND) will pay the government of Nicaragua US$10m annually for 10 years, and thereafter a portion of the revenue starting at 1% and increasing later. The fact that (as I write) Manchester United's goalie is rumoured to have been offered a salary in excess of that annual sum, gives a clue to the extent of the rip-off.

Before he read at this year's Festival Internacional de Poesía de Granada, Cardenal unfolded a poster of protest against this decision and its likely devastating environmental and economic impact – not least the risk of pollution and the displacement of communities along its path. ■

Suilven

Essay by Alison Roe

Alison Roe Walks High

Suilven was tiny when we first saw it, a distant dome rising on the far side of the Minch as we sailed to Lochinver from the Shiants. It was a slow sail. After a fresh start the wind became light and fickle then dwindled away completely, and we sat for hours on a calm glassy sea, watching the faint blue silhouettes of the mainland mountains bob up and down on the horizon as our boat rocked gently in the swell. Eventually a soft breeze arose, enough to nudge our sails at least, and as we rounded Rubha Coigeach and ghosted into Enard Bay, all the mountains of Assynt arrayed themselves around us - a glorious panorama, with Suilven looming ever-closer in the centre.

Looking up at Suilven from Lochinver harbour, it's hard to imagine it ever looked small. With its steep sides and rounded top, it dominates the view - Sula Bheinn, Pillar Mountain - a rock hard phallus of pure vertical ascent. Even its closest mountain, Canisp, seems to shrink from it, leaning back at an improbable angle from its ominous bulk. "A few thousand years ago we would have been worshipping that," someone had commented to me as I stood gazing at it one afternoon. I wonder if we still are. Certainly we need to climb it.

What makes a climb intriguing is the different layers of life which exist at different heights, and even in an open landscape like the north west, each zone of ascent is distinct.

On the long stalker's path that carries you in towards Suilven, you're in the summer profusion - the green and yellow glory of the gorse, the tumult of bracken and bluebells - and you're in the tame and rosy company of each other and it's easy walking. Out on the moor it's suddenly sparse - just bog and bog-cotton and desperate lunges for higher ground. As you approach Suilven, the ground hardens and small red sand-rimmed lochans appear, arranged around its base. At Suilven's foot the trail goes up. The flora gets smaller. Wee violets (and frogs) appear amidst the stream-run rubble. Human companionship falls away here - you're each alone in your world of footholds and handholds, rivulets and rocks - yet you're amongst hills, in the company of mountains. Even along the precarious spine of the bealach, winding up its huge bouldered steps, you're in the Highlands.

On the summit though, you're in a new realm.

It is green and mossy and we stand barefoot in warm sunshine. A red admiral is fluttering on the warm rocks and a raven struts around policing the place, black and glossy and suddenly light on its feathered fingers, plucking at the air.

Around us other peaks rise and subside. Surprisingly round lochs circle and bubble between them, sinuous-looped and smooth-shored. And ahead the blue silk of the Minch extends: to Skye, stretching out pale blue in the south; to Harris and Lewis, drawn out in a long grey line ahead; and to the dark blue shape hovering like flattened wings in front of them - the Shiants, the Enchanted Isles.

We stand at the threshold. The sea spreads. The islands shimmer. The sky surrounds.

Seen from sea-level, the hills of Assynt are all solitaires, rising in their separate thrones. Looking from above, however, you see they undulate together, giving in to each other, twisting and curving as they push their way up to assert their separate pinnacles and peaks. They seem to move as one landmass. Only Suilven grows straight up, pillar-like on its sea-face, a scored rampart of a wall side-on.

And this is why it gathers. Because, if Suilven does nothing else, it gathers: the cloud that crawls round its summit in otherwise clear skies, the goretex-clad pilgrims who file along its bealach, the eyes that try to capture it in lens, brush, words. But more than that, Suilven gathers this landscape, this swathe of Sutherland, condensing and concentrating it; and while we're upon it, it condenses and concentrates us.

As we carefully pick our way up its strata, finer and subtler elements of ourselves emerge. Perhaps, getting ourselves up there, we sweat out some of our toxicities and the pureness of the air infiltrates our pores. And when we reach the top, greeted by the fluted fingers of the raven, we are released. We fly out along our sightlines, taking great gulps of mountain, of sea. We do this deliberately too. We pay our attention out into the blue distance. We breathe in. We flow out. Until suddenly we are snapped back, focused, here.

Suilven gathers the elemental power of verticality and lift and extends to us the elemental threshold of breadth. But it also holds the delicate details of intricacy, and this is the unspoken beauty of the mountain - the worlds in miniature which exist upon its massive bulk. The bright lichen, spattered and spreading like myriad minuscule Pollocks over its boulders, the small deep velvet petals of the milkwort and violets, the pointing starry stonecrop, and the tiny cupped hands of dwarf cornel.

In each of its aspects, Suilven offers a different scale of size and also of time. Indeed, Suilven has a way of telescoping time. The grinding geological ages it has taken to become itself, the year-by-year blooming of small lives upon it, and the intermittent scratching and scrambling of ourselves up and down its sides - momentarily these collapse together and here we all are, together yet distinct.

Climbing Suilven, you almost feel that it's giving you time. Time to be yourself perhaps. The time you're given depends on the time you take though, and there are so many ways to take it, judging by the others we met the day we were there.

There were the camera-pilgrims ("the views are spectacular" / "could you see the Hebrides?" / "I don't know, we were so busy taking pictures"). There were the family climbers, man and son making companions of each other. There were the boy-racers, young, lean, keen and rapid. There were the foreign enthusiasts, blonde and straight-backed, briskly gliding up and down the mountain with their ski-style poles. There were the slackers, taking frequent tea-breaks and chancy precipitous kisses.

And there was one old man, slowly making his way up. We passed him on our steep scramble up the side, with his wide-brimmed hat and walking poles, placing his steps methodically. We passed him again on our way down, as we were leaving the summit, and he let us pass, pale-faced and sweating and joking about taking a nap at the top. He looked relieved to be assured he was almost there. Yet, picking our way down that precarious trail, I wondered often how he would manage to make a safe descent. With gravity tumbling loose rock and ankles, even at our relatively youthful ages, we found ourselves slipping and had to stop several times to rest our knees.

Yet he had time. It was only mid-afternoon and with the sunset so late there was no real night. But he also had time because he had taken time. He had walked the long many-miled track in and he had climbed the mountain meticulously. He had taken the mountain in his time, with his slow-paced and slow-placed steps. (I had seen intermittent clusters of holes in the clay of the trail going up and it was only coming down that I realised they were made by his walking poles, which had been painstakingly poked several times in each place before the best grip was settled on, and I felt a curious feeling of intimacy, as if I were looking behind the scenes of his mind.) Suilven to him wasn't a series of energetic strides but a full day's careful progress, up - and down.

I admired him. Even in my own attempt to be watchful and observant as I walked, I had not taken the care by simply not taking the time. And as the rest of us overtook and returned back past him, he had the day and the mountain: Suilven, the solitaire. ■

Wintering

Poems by George Gunn

Borealis

(*An Apologia for John Donne*)

Twice through the night I heard the skeins
of the wild geese returning from Iceland
how do they know when the Moon is black
& that the light swims
in an equal sea of night?

So they come the geese wave after wave
across the green Atlantic
lifting my battered heart
from the abandoned quarry of its disappointment
my eyes lighthouses searching the sky
my ears harbours for their feathered creel boats

the gods of Borealis land in the barley stubble fields
the beating wings of their Winter beauty
pull my sleep behind them like a plough

Fusion

The North wind blows
the darkness quickens
November opens up the door of the sky
& the stars dance in
wearing Andromeda's shoes
here on the edge of this flagstone sea
we tether our dreams
to the chaos of the future
our ambition is vague but deadly
like a child playing with the Sun
staggering from the heat
a burned & beautiful illusion
of the Sunlight burning in the night
we read our lives on the pages of the wind

Wintering

Winter bites the fallen leaf
voices chase the howling wind
grey figures walk the bleak roads down
to the high-waved angry sea

I take my time to find the light
that starves in the slate Eastern sky
& wonder at the sending of the thin grey clouds
which pass as ghosts before a lamp

& then the yellow Sun bursts through
& brushes the low landscape with a yellow glaze
which hailstones bullet with a sudden white
& burns my face to welcome life

the bare trees signal to the grounded birds
the barkless beauty of this Wintering

Cement

(for PD)

1

The morning Sunlight turns you pink
as you lie in bed reading
it is early January
in the time of emptiness

off The Skerries a Cypriot cement boat is sinking
seven Poles & a Filipino still on-board
the bow of their ship points to the sky
the Pentland Firth rolls around them
like the Sunlight through the sea-tangle of your hair

here in this moment
is the legend of the World
all tragedy is beautiful
like this Sunday morning beside the sea
where death searches with orange fingers

2

The sea is calm now
the ship sank East of Stroma
a Westerly gale & an ebb tide did for her
the crew were storm-door'd into
a coffin of steel & cement
on the radio the owners rep said she "submerged"
each day the Northern sky grows lighter

on the rocks below the cliff where I sit
two figures are bent over like safety-pins
filling black plastic buckets with wilks
in such a fashion everything from the sea
is taken & sold into abstraction

you are back at work
I watch yet another ship steam West

Falling

The North Atlantic fog
hung over the idea of Easter

I could not move
because my throat was on fire

the bare wet trees
were full of robins

this my empty country

outside of it
I do not exist

even if I am falling
at a slight angle
to the headland

Rising

A low forest of pearls
the grass greets
the Eastern Sun

birds chitter in the budding trees
a suddenness of starlings
occupy a birch

to the North the surf
draws itself upon the beach
the tideline is always thin & hungry

beneath the sand
Doanal Dhu & his infernal legions
build a bridge to Orkney

my footprints lead up over a dune
& disappear
like the last skein of geese flying to Iceland

The Author

Short Story by Thomas Clark

"Ah cannae believe it," Ally said, finally, "Ah jist cannae believe it."

The author smiled at him kindly and stared into his whisky glass. It looked as if he was listening, but it was hard to tell. He had still not taken off his coat, and his purple scarf dangled round his neck like a papal stole. Ally caught a deep whiff of something like amber. Boot polish, or cough drops, things a chemist might sell in flat cylindrical tins.

"Ye ken how many times ah've read this?" he said, tapping the paperback on the table, "Hunners, must be. Thoosands. It's as if ye've channelled straight into the truth of the working class, ye know? Ah jist dunno how ye did it."

"Me neither," the author said.

Ally nodded meaningfully and sat back in his chair. Silently, the author turned the tumbler round in his slender hand, then let it settle on the glass-topped table with a low rumble. His fingers had taken on an autumnal hue with age and tobacco, and they blended with the whisky and the ring on his hand. Ally stared at him.

"It's such an honour tae meet ye," he said, "Tae shake yer haun. Ye don't know how much it means tae me."

The author nodded and looked past him at something else. Ally, who had paid very little attention to his surroundings, vaguely intuited it was the bar. He jabbed at it with his thumb.

"Can ah get you something?"

The author swirled his drink around its ice and shook his head. Ally frowned.

"Something to eat, then? Some chips or that."

"No, no…"

"It's nae bother. Haud on and ah'll see what they've got."

Ally pushed his chair away from the table and got up. The lunch rush was past, and the place was nearly empty. He crossed over to the bar. It was long and slick and ran the entire length of the room, up to where a black piano stood raised on a display. Ally had never been here before, or anywhere else like it, and could not tell if it was genuinely upmarket or just pretending to be. The furnishings were informed by a jazz motif which seemed very slightly off-kilter in a way he could not quite put his finger on, like an Eighties movie set in the Twenties, and the two-tone colour scheme looked cheap rather than classy. But it was what the author had chosen. As he rested both his elbows on the shiny onyx-coloured bar, Ally stared into the giant mirror behind the barman.

"Some chips for ma pal over there, eh."

He winked and gestured behind him with his head. Wordlessly, the barman passed through a long art deco door and emerged a minute later with a small bowl.

"Cheers bud," Ally said, throwing a fiver down, "Sorry ah've no got anything smaller."

"Five-fifty," the barman said. Ally rummaged around in his pockets for the extra fifty pence, placed it down on the surface with a click. He took the bowl back to the table.

"Here you go," he said, setting it down between them, "Wire in."

The author smiled with pained appreciation.

"Thanks, but I'm really not hungry."

"Nah, me neither," Ally said, grabbing a couple of chips, "Here, does this no remind you of that bit in The Other Side of the Clyde?"

The author raised his eyes. They were a disarming shade of alert and icy blue, but the face around them looked tired.

"What bit?"

"That bit where the fella goes into the chip shop in Stonehaven. Remember?"

The author did not say anything. Ally chewed ruminatively as he looked around.

"After his dad dies. He buys some chips an eats them on the pier. Cracking wee bit of writing, that. Ye ever been to Stonehaven?"

The author shifted himself slightly in his seat and placed his hands upon the table, raised up onto their fingertips like a pianist's.

"That pleasure has been denied me," he said.

"Ah have," Ally said, "Ye really captured the spirit of the place, like. Ah grew up there."

"Oh aye," the author said, "Maybe you should write about it."

Ally pulled a face and took another handful of chips.

"Ach, ah couldnae beat you," he said, "You'd got the place down pat. Ah mainly write science-fiction, me. Martians and that, ye know."

"Is that right."

"Aye. Ah'm no really interested in the real world. Place is a joke. Take Stonehaven, for instance."

"I've never been."

"No much there but misery. Miserable folk living miserable lives. Ah'd love to write like you, but ah've never been the places you've been."

"Neither have I. But you've been to Mars, have you?"

Ally shook his head and swallowed.

"Naw, ah mean ah've never seen the places you've seen. No with your eyes. You see things the way they really are. Ah look at Stonehaven an all ah see is a dump."

Ally followed the author's gaze as he stared out of the window. The bar was placed down a couple of side-alleys, and looked onto nothing more interesting than a short and battered wall. Rain-coats were passing by, but there was no rain.

"Well, I grew up in Girvan," the author said, "It's a wee seaside town too, probably not that different from Stonehaven."

"Everywhere's different from Stonehaven," Ally said, and fell silent.

The room continued to empty. Sighing, Ally leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. It was tiled in black and white, smeared with light fluorescence. A bell rang, and a clear high note sounded from the piano, but when Ally turned to look there was no-one there. The afternoon sun dipped below the window frame, and their empty glasses filled with light.

"Ma da hated the place," Ally said, eventually, "He was from Falkirk. Moved back when ah was wee. Ah've never seen him since."

"Would you want to?" the author asked.

"Once, mebbe," Ally said, eating again, "S'a funny thing, growing up withoot a da. You get used to it, sort of. Forget anybody else has got one, or is one, even. Ye know. Men with moustaches and baccy tins, watching the racing in your pal's front room. Half the time he wisnae their dad either. But he was near enough."

The author half-smiled.

"I think I know what you mean."

Ally glanced up absently for a moment, then lowered his eyes back to the chip bowl. He slowly rotated it on the table by its rim.

"My ma, she never really had any boyfriends. It was just the two of us. She did her best, but… Well, you try being a man withoot having met one. It's like trying to do a see-saw by yourself. You go too far. You don't go far enough. There's naebody tae help you keep your balance."

The author drew his hand along his chin. Though his hair was grey, his stubble was still dark, and it rasped audibly against his thumb.

"People of my generation, when we were growing up, our fathers weren't always around. They were at work in the factories, or in the pub at the end of the road. Being men, in other words. That shadowy business. But we knew, when the time came, we would be initiated into it. It was all the inheritance our fathers had."

Ally nodded and hunched eagerly forward, his clasped hands hanging down between his knees.

"That's it. That's what your books were like tae me. They were crash courses – manifestoes in how to be a man."

"Really? I'd never thought of them that way."

"Well. That's just how it is."

They fell silent.

Elsewhere in the bar, nothing much was happening. Some old ladies gossiped in the window seats, and there was a man in glasses, bald, at the table next to theirs. He had been nursing a gin and tonic for quite some time. Ally had been vaguely aware of his presence, but had paid him no mind. Now, though, he was leaning over their table into the silence between them, and addressing himself to the author.

"Excuse me," he said, "I'm very sorry to interrupt, but my wife and I saw you at Brighton this year, and I just wanted to let you know we thought you were superb."

The author smiled wryly.

"It's a long way to go. I hope you weren't too disappointed."

Ally winced as the man pulled his chair round with a clatter.

"Well, actually, you said something very interesting about Baudelaire that I'd like to pick you up on."

"Oh aye?"

As the two of them fell into conversation, Ally sat there listening for a chance to chip in. Before long, he found himself staring at the faces of the jazz musicians on the wall, pretending to read their biographies. The chips were almost gone, and just for something to do he ran his finger around the edge of the bowl and licked away the salt. It was the other man who was doing most of the talking, but the author had shifted his position very slightly, and was smiling with something like amusement. Without looking at Ally, the bald man got up and picked up both their glasses.

"I'll get you another one," he said, "Glenmorangie, is it?"

The author nodded, and the man went off to the bar. Ally sat there, staring at the empty bowl, then started to rise.

"Well. I'll need to head."

The author looked up at him with very faint surprise.

"So soon? Well, it's a pleasure to have met you."

Ally nodded and pulled on his denim jacket. He thought about offering a handshake, but the author's gold-coloured hands were at such perfect rest on the table that to break their stillness would have been an act of violence. From the bar, the bald man returned with two glasses, one brimming with a nauseous nearly-green liquid, the other containing just a few golden drops. He did not say goodbye as Ally turned to go, but the author lifted his fingertips very slightly from the table, and nodded in farewell.

"Safe journey. Give my regards to Stonehaven."

Outside the double doors of the bar the labyrinthine streets of Glasgow were much as they had been, only he was not quite so sure of where he was. It felt like it was going to rain. Behind him, in the bar, the chattering resumed. As he held the door open he thought about going back, though he didn't know why. He listened for a moment to the chink of cutlery, the inaudible chime of the cash register, someone playing the piano, badly; then the heavy brass handle pulled free from his hand, and the big glass door was shutting, had shut. ■

Poetry

Demeter Reads the Scotch Encyclopaedia

Judith Taylor

It is not to be imagined
that all the stars

glimmerin bricht as diamant
on the black silk o a winter nicht

are placed in one
concave surface equally distant from us

set oot like the dawin's reid gowd
the relict warld's inheritance

a braw lowe, an comfortless
as a girnal stowed wi sand an yella stane

but that they are scattered

as the simmer burds are scattert
the flourish an aa the sma fruct o the trees

an aa the luves we kent
in oor life afore the nicht
scattert

at immense distances
from one another…

aa we possest, iver, o
hopefu', young: tint
in the maisterie o the deid poo'ers

no limit can be set
either to their number or their distance.

(Lines in italics taken from the entry for Astronomy
in the first edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica,
published Edinburgh 1768-71)

Split Open

A Ghazal

Dawn Wood

Burn the branch – what would have been – split open.
What is – grows joyous and green – split open.

Sleep – his muscles twitching to high heaven –
my companion, his dreamtime split open.

Solid as a rock? Struck now, and a husk.
What flows, now the shell's gone, split open?

For proof, I'm the one who made this boat rest;
the floodgates of logic as rain – split, open.

That this dustbowl might blossom – the springtide
for lovers – dry as we drown, split open.

Let the moon suppose the silver lining –
either cloud's the other's sun, split open.

There was evening, there was morning – Day One.
Every day begins alien, split, open.

Highland Games

Kenneth Steven

The hills, depressed by centuries of history,
Hang their heads in thick cloud.

The glen below is a green bottle
Glassy and shining with bright rain.

A man wrings notes from bedraggled bagpipes
That wail like a lost cat.

Huddles of people stand under canvas,
Nipping whisky, blethering about weather.

Bones

Pauline Prior-Pitt

You might think about

archeologists, sweeping with tiny brushes,
uncovering skeletons
intact after thousands of years,

ancient artefacts in glass cases,
carved brooches,
fine needles, combs,

the words we choose:
strong, dense, hard,
enduring, dependable, proud,

how their presence at our core
is taken for granted, prepared
for every move we make.

Or you might think about

the scan, and yours
silently losing their identity,
their insides crumbling,

looking more like lace,
how useless now
for carving brooches.

Station

Juliet Antill

The soft-faced boy at Queen Street
– jacket of phosphorescence,
beard an algal red –
stands solemn at the barriers.
Through the ones marked green for go
rush-hour girls pour past him.
His lips purse, his hands twitch at his sides.
He longs to follow, to leap into them,
swim upstream and spawn.

Old Woman

Catriona Yule

The creel reeks of
silver and limpets

a trade with Bessie,

a supper of egg,
a wee bit cheese.

Her toes ache
from the boots,

cool on the muck
floor as she perches
on the armchair.

Her fingers seek
the hairy root
of dried peat

as one might
ruffle the hair of
an old friend.

She pokes the stacks,
summons the ruttle
and hiss,

fog rising.

Leaving Camustianavaig

(from Portree Cemetery)

John Beaton

Today we leave the croft and you
and, though the rain-mist makes it vague,
we see your chosen gravesite view
ploughing the clouds—Ben Tianavaig.

We see its bracken patches spring
by dykes you built, where bogs of peat
lie spaded out for winter heat,
how sheep-paths terrace slopes of ling,

and how the freshet gravitates
to where, as tykes, you fished the burns
and played by byres and butter-churns,
on Sundays ate from heirloom plates.

You left us that bespoken land
but cloud has claimed the graveyard's view—
the mighty plough is buried and
your offspring leave the croft to you.

The Wrong Side of the Fence

Poems by Helen Addy

The Snake

Great Aunt Lily turned day into night,
tried to buy bread at the pub in her slippers,
and gave all her jewellery to strangers.
My father searched for her serpent ring
in pawn shops, jewellers' windows,
and on the hands of silent neighbours.
Forty years on,
I pursue the snake I have never seen.
She is coiled around air or finger,
her tongue licking her golden tail.
Though her eyes have faded,
she will know my father's emerald gaze,
deep-set in the bezel of my face.

The Black Hole

Parents dying in June two years apart,
the month forms a black hole
in the centre of the calendar.
From the car behind,
the sun glints off my father's hearse,
each bend a small chance
to practise never seeing him again,
my mother patting my hand,
her rings sparking against mine.

At her cremation, the month repeated
its legacy of blue sky and empty heat,
every summer a burning season.
Years later, it's discovered that black holes spin,
swallowing gas and stars indiscriminately,
and the friction-heated matter falling in
become the brightest objects in space,
catalysts for the evolution of new galaxies.
I touch June's page, and wait for her pull.

The Second-hand Book of Loss

From a chapter on letting go,
two children land on the table.
Squares cut from one photograph,
a boy and girl with auburn hair,
smiling for the camera.

A man's checked shirt
framing their heads,
his hand circling her arm,
the deer on the girl's chest
leaps amongst flowers,
the boy's blue stripes
trickle down his shoulder.

With no names on their backs,
they have no history,
just the garden they stand in,
sunlight discarding their faces,
the grass sharpening its blades.

Ardeonaig

for Julie Lawson

Finding a dead sheep in the burn,
no WiFi and death turns us giddy,
not YouTube, but ewe's tubes
doubling us over in the grass.
Stomach bloated like a pillow,
legs loosely crossed like
a sleeping woman's arms,
we crave a stick to move her,
but there are no trees, her wool
sodden with rain, her head
hard gone against the rocks.

The Rainbow

Nebuliser whirring,
my father's beard jewelled
with saline drops, the man
in the next bed flailing his arms
again, hitting the switch,
both men choking on quiet air.
My father's good arm lifting a jug,
flinging water skywards, the glittering
arc shot through with colour,
the splash crowning the man's head,
blue and white nurses gathering,
my father's breath jagged
as lightning, one last strike
before the sky goes out.

The Wrong Side of the Fence

Turn a corner and you lose the loch,
but the split tree holds water like a gourd,
a rusted pipe among the roots,
white lichen delicate as flowers,
cow hair spun through the bark,
the bracken so brown it's purple,
and the only shine a flue
on the last white house, the smoke
meeting you coming back,
each slip a fall into something else.

When I Die, Don't Make Me into an Egg-timer

Her eyes glassy, my mother's face
sand-shifts, sunken hours
slipping through her
fingers,
the world without her
hard-boiled, a shell without
a centre, a crack in everything.

Quercus

This god threatened cars,
overhung tender houses,
his roots cracking the pavement.
Branded with a cross,
chainsaws cut through his limbs,
his bark falling like ash.

Denuded of life,
even the moon recoils,
but his black trunk is a totem,
the mouths of his white stumps
repeating the old myths,
his songs hung in the throats of birds.

The Heart of the Poem

Striking the motorcyclist below the knee,
a barn owl explodes like a burst pillow,
the biker's boot filled with shit and feathers.

Braking hard beside the bridge,
he wipes the leather black,
breathes the air outside his helmet.

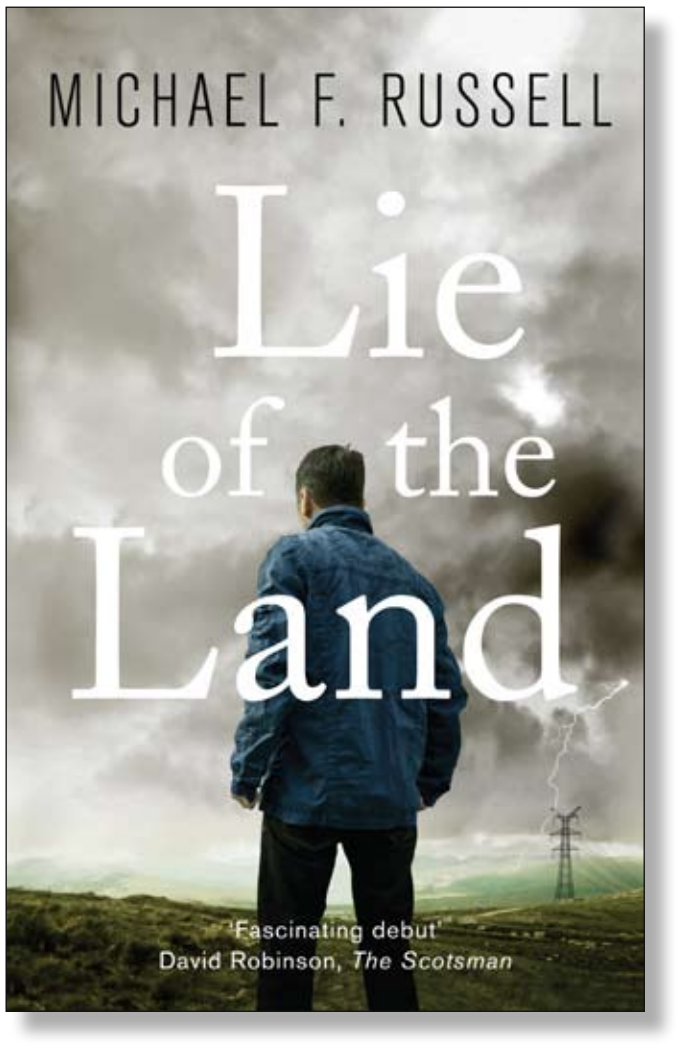
Lying outstretched on the road,
one wing covers the owl's heart,
a red purse emptying.

Bleeding miles into the forest,
the rider spends what remains,
wavering beauty, definite flight.

Cathay

Butting your wheel, head heavy
with tumours, a blind rabbit
stops your red bicycle. At twelve,
with neither weapon nor will,
you watch the wind stroke its fur,
the same hushed wind that
twenty five years on settles
what you never won,
scampering over the fields
like childhood, air tasted
and then sprung.

Lie of the Land
Michael F Russell
Polygon
Reviewed by Mandy Haggith



Anyone who lives in or visits the rural Highlands and Islands knows that the lack of a reliable mobile phone signal is a regular nuisance. If you have ever felt exasperation at being in a communications 'not spot', the debut novel by Michael F Russell is the perfect antidote.

Iain Banks said that the best science fiction is set in a world identical to the one we live in except for one small, but significant, detail. Lie of the Land is a compelling example of the genre. In a not-so-distant future, the latest emergency communications system, SCOPE, will use pulsed microwaves operating from the network of mobile phone masts. Unfortunately, on going live, an imperfection in the system sets up a standing harmonic electromagnetic wave that puts anyone within the signal into a deep sleep. Only people in places with no mobile coverage are unaffected.

Our protagonist, Carl Shewan, is a Glasgow-based journalist who has an assignment in Inverlair, a remote north Highland coastal village. There's no phone signal there, but nor is there SCOPE. So when it starts up he finds himself marooned in one of the few places where human life has not been shut down. It is, on the one hand, a lucky escape, and on the other, the beginning of a nightmare. He has a car with a tank of biodiesel, but he can't go anywhere. Nobody can leave.

Michael Russell's day job is as a journalist for the West Highland Free Press. He therefore writes about both the mind of a journalist and the wonders and pressures of small Highland communities from first hand experience. Inverlair is a fictional village, but it is true to life in its uneasy mix of people making their livings from the land, sea and services, and in the dynamics of local politics.

When the people of Inverlair find out that they are now completely isolated and must survive alone, they set up an emergency committee and, inevitably, this means there are those with power over the finite resources available to the village, and those without. As a total outsider and a cynic by profession, Carl Shewan watches as conflict grows, and he falls in with others on the community's margins.

The narrative steps backwards and forwards in time. Each step back fills in some background to the SCOPE system and gradually reveals why Carl has ended up in this freak oasis from it. In each step forwards, the isolation scenario unfolds. It's a sophisticated unravelling, with a satisfying climax.

The book provokes contemplation of the role of food production in Highland life. Not so long ago, garnering sufficient food to survive the year was the preoccupation of most inhabitants of Highland communities, but these days only a minority fish, hunt, grow vegetables or keep livestock. *Lie of the Land* propels those people into central importance, creating an imbalance of power between those who can provide food and those who simply need to eat it. The result is ugly, but transformative for the main character.

By the end of the novel, a cup of tea and a slice of bread are no longer things to be taken for granted. And there's a reason to pause before complaining about the lack of a mobile signal in these parts. ■

Jellyfish
Janice Galloway
Freight Books
Reviewed by Carol McKay

There are some utterly outstanding stories in this new collection from Janice Galloway, which has parenthood, and mostly motherhood, as its central theme. Having long been a fan of her writing, I embraced this collection eagerly. Her language and observational skills are sublime.

The first story which lingered in my mind long after I'd finished reading it is 'fine day', a story that explores the intensity of relationship – and communication – breakdown and fears over how the small child which is a product of the union will be affected. The main character's emotions are conducted against the musical backdrop of Puccini's Mme Butterfly.

Two of the stories are set on the Isle of Jura, and Galloway's breathtaking prose and eye for descriptive detail show the island translucent, bathing the reader in the luminescence of its colours, its rugged, bracken-covered hilliness, its odours, and its sea and bird life sound track. One of the Jura stories fictionalises an incident from Eric Blair's life on the island in 1948, when he was racked by tuberculosis, had lost his wife and was all too aware he'd soon be leaving his small son doubly orphaned. This is one of the few times in the collection that Galloway tells a story about parenthood from a man's perspective. Blair – the writer George Orwell – looks to the future with sour pessimism, and fights the molly-coddling influence of his sister, with whom he and his son live, as he seeks to toughen his son to face and survive a 1984 type of future without him.

Galloway returns to Jura in the final story, but this time to a female character who has willingly estranged herself from her small son believing he will live a happier life without her dark moods and obsessive over-protectiveness. This is the mother's story, rather than the boy's; we never find out how he matures, but we do learn that, for her, the need to nurture cannot be repressed. As well as mirroring the Eric Blair / George Orwell story, 'distance' reflects back to the title story of the collection, in which a mother tentatively negotiates her relationship with her growing son on one last day-trip before he starts school. And it's this tentative negotiation between the genders and generations which is the theme running right through *Jellyfish*.

Awkward phrasing does sometimes leave meaning opaque, and requires passages to be re-read for clarity, and this is a bit of an issue here and there in some of the stories. An absence of conventional formatting of dialogue makes it difficult to distinguish from narrative description, and that tripped this reader up, too. Yet at her best – and there is an abundance of 'best' in this collection – Galloway's writing achieves a state of perfect communication in which the words disappear and the place, characters and emotional journey possess the reader's consciousness in its entirety.

Overall, this collection lifted me up. I felt I'd accompanied characters who were precious and vulnerable through watery emotional light and dark, and surfaced richer and stronger, supremely conscious of that balance between our strengths and our frailties as parents, and as individuals. ■

Tro Chloich na Sùla
Maoilios Caimbeul
Clar
Reviewed by Lisa NicDhòmhnaill

A dh'aindeoin gainnead sgilean ball-coise air mo chùl tha mi làn iongnaidh a' coimhead chluicheadairean ealanta lùthmhor, am ball fon casan mar gum biodh e na phàirt dhen glhuasad nàdarra aca 's iad ga chur a-null 's a-nall cho aotrom ri ite.

A' leughadh a' chruinneachaidh seo, 's e na sgilean sin a thàinig a-steach orm, a bhith a' cluiche le faclan is cànan ann an dòigh a tha siùbhlach aotrom àghmhor agus sàr-chomasach aig an aon àm. Is fìor thoil leam loidhnichean mar '(…)fàsaidh rud ùr às an ùir/ rud ris nach robh dùil/ rud ris nach robh idir sùil.' (A' Ghealach Ùr)

Tha bardachd dhen a h-uile seòrsa san leabhar seo; pìosan san t-seann mheadrachd, dàn dìreach, pìosan ann an stoidhle nuadh-bhàrdail agus pìosan a tha gu tur iongantach, m. e. Mesostic dha Somhairle MacGill-Eain: 'Amas na Bàrdachd: Gnìomh dian, gaisgeiL, gleusta – Euchd a rInn MacGill-Eain'.

Tha na dàin a cheart cho comhfhurtail thall thairis 's a tha iad air a' Ghàidhealtachd. Dh'aithnicheadh a h-uile duine 'na taighean sgapte tarsainn a' bhàigh/ faoileagan geala a' sgriachail/…/ a h-uile taigh le a eòlas fhèin/ na sheasamh air croit lom/…/ ag ràdh, 'Tha sinn fhathast beò'. (Nàbaidhean)

Cluinnear cuideachd mu 'sheann bhaile Phràg le a thoglaichean àrsaidh' (Kotva-Acair) agus 'fear an tagsaidh càirdeil (aig nach) robh cuimhne air Earrach Phràg:/ rugadh e bliadhna/ mus do dh'fhàg na Ruiseanaich.' (An Sealladh à Praha)

Air an làimh eile chìthear gum faodadh seòmar-cadail an taigh-òsta 'bhith an àite sam bith/ ann an dùthaich sam bith/…/ teilidh far am faighte CNN/ mar a gheibhear ann am Flòdaigearraidh/ mar a gheibhear an àite sam bith/ sa chruinne bheag fharsaing againn/…/ ann an daorsa na saorsa.' (Taigh-òsta)

Tha na notaichean aig deireadh an leabhair cuideachail don fheadhainn nach eil a-cheart cho fiosrachail mu eachdraidh no creideamh no luchd-ealain na h-Eòrpa (mar nach robh mise) agus mar sin chìthear Odilon Redon, Caspar David Friedrich, Edvard Munch, Uilleam Blake, Gaugin, Chagall, da Vinci, Whistler, Van Gogh agus Edward Hopper uile còmhla, taobh ri taobh nan suain sna duilleagan.

Tha sgeulachdan ann a chualas roimhe agus tha iad an seo air an innse às ùr làn fhaireachdainnean is blàths: fear nach deach air an Iolaire agus Eimhir a' freagairt. Tha dàin gu math pearsanta ann mar Aodann Eubha – agus i Mìos a dh'Aois, aon dhe na dàin as fheàrr leamsa 's mo phàistean fhìn gun a bhith ach òg.

Ged a tha a' mhòr-chuid dhe na cuspairean domhainn is trom gheibhear loidnhichean maiseach brèagha mar (…)dh'fhàgadh na sligean/ seann làraichean air feadh an àite/ iad mar aisligean sa chuimhne/ cuir thugam pòg am broinn slige/ 's nuair a chluinneas mi an uiseag/ cuiridh mi i rim chluais. (Cuith-raing)

Gheibhear cuideachd pìosan feallsanachail mar Shamhla agus Mothachadh agus Soillse Ùr air Seanfhaclan: 'Ge b' e ghoideadh an t-ugh,

ghoideadh e a' chearc nam faodadh e: ach ma tha àite an Taigh nam Morairean, dhèanadh sin an gnothaich.' Sean-fheallsanachd agus beatha làitheil poileataigeach an latha an-diugh ann an aon seantans – nam bheachd-sa chan fhaighear nas fheàrr. ■

Oo an Feddirs
Christie Williamson
Luath Press
Reviewed by Richie McCaffery

Williamson's first collection has been over a decade in the making and by his own admission he has been writing poetry 'most of his conscious life'. This gives the book a deeply biographical feel, with talk of hurdles overcome, journeys travelled and milestones reached. Therefore it is not surprising that this book, so long coming and anticipated, contains well over 60 poems that alternate between English and Shetlandic. The title *Oo an Feddirs* ('Wool and Feathers') suggests that Williamson is a poet with both an earthy and aerial presence, and many of these poems begin on land but take to the air. Take, for instance 'Gaet' which begins with a sombre, shut-down world that the poet makes utterly habitable:

As ee doors awpinned
da blinds come doon
apö anidder day
o pittin ee fit
afore aniddir, takkin
mair steps forrird
as backlins
an gjittin back up
as aften
as du faas.
(…)
It's whaar you aim
at makks a man,
an fu you win.
Whaar wi end up
is neddir here nor dere.

Many poems talk about journeys taken, of rough seas and passages and the collection captures a dramatic sense of growing up, adulthood and parenthood. Suffering or sadness is often at risk of having the freehold on poetry – for example, not many poets would feel domestic/ family contentment conducive to writing, but this is a territory Williamson fruitfully occupies, often with a mood of loving wistfulness:

I juggle boats
for my eldest son.
He throws them
from his bath.
I catch them,
use their gunwales
as meridia,
send them sailing
through the air.
(…)
Olive laughs.
I remember
when someone else
was the clown
wishing he
was the child again. ('Arc')

One of the major facets of this collection is the sense of luckiness and happiness it conveys. Certain poems work better than others, for instance well-meaning poems to a 'muse' and comparing his love to a bottle of Chateau Latour 1964, in 'Lovely Drap', come across as a little forced. That said, the book achieves a feeling of deep commitment to a family and love life against all the odds that is often both touching and powerful: 'Oot by da point/o nae return/a boat flotts on.//Nawtheen ahint it/bit rocks an brackirs./Natheen afore hit/bit love.' ('Horizon')

There is often a sense here too that fatherhood and marriage has added an extra dimension to the poet's raison d'être: 'As land as it takks/ta live da ony life/wi'll see in dis lifetime/at started wi a heid/pokkin oot laek da sun/far anunder a clood' ('Revolution')

That said, the mood of the book grows a shade darker half-way through as professional lives encroach on the poet's territories of home, family and belonging. There is a satirical bite to Williamson's poems about city/professional life, such as 'Parasites', that remind me of Robert Garioch taking on the 'high heid-yins' of city corporations. The spirit of Garioch is certainly conjured up in the final poem 'Sandcastles' where the speaker 'biggits' sandcastles ('pieds-a-mer') and memories, knowing that everything is a process of losing and rebuilding: '…Syne we win back/wi'll big agien, a agien til wir taen//ayont da wattir's aedge, keengs/an queens o slippin had//o whit we canna keep.'

It is this awareness of losses and the cost of writing that makes these poems feel earned, in poems like 'Half and Half' we get a sense of almost MacCaig-ian cosmic balance:

I am the man/who takes a half/knowing it's nothing/without another.'

There's a lust for life and experience there, but also a sense of balance and keeping an emotional even-keel. It's the one foot on land and one taking off that make Williamson's poems stand out. ■

The Treacle Well
Moira Forsyth
Sandstone Press
Reviewed by Cynthia Rogerson

This novel is not a rollicking romance, or a roller coaster thriller – there is no sex or violence, no aggression or friction. Actually, I can't recall a passage where one character was even rude to another. Nevertheless, this is a page turner – the highest compliment. In her modest way, Forsyth has captured something very true and powerful with this book. It is not overstating to compare her with the Brontës and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, because like those authors, she succeeds in accurately conveying a specific place and era in social history.

The *Treacle Well* is a gentle tale of gentle social manners and explores the complexity that exists in every family. Place is very key, as is class with all the attendant restrictions and unwritten taboos. To truly understand and describe the subtleties of an Aberdeenshire middle class family living rurally, takes proper thinking and proper writing skill. It could so easily have been boring or superficial. Or worse, the author could have chosen to pump it up with something melodramatic. Forsyth shows confident restraint in simply and slowly telling us what it's like to live in a particular place, as part of a particular family. Sounds so simple, but of course it is not. That is why we still read *Pride and Prejudice.* And such tales are needed. They record the lives that are so often left out of social memory because they do not seem sufficiently tragic or thrilling. They are not Irvine Welsh enough. Well, that is because they are Brontës.

The novel covers the period between 1958 and 2012. Fifty four years of what happens to one family. Yes, there is a secret buried at the heart of this story – one of a crime that was not really a crime, yet seared a family and altered the course of all in it – but that is not what kept me turning the pages. I cared about these people, and it was soothing to lose myself in a world that was not mine, but which was eminently recognisable.

I've read all Forsyth's novels. I've considered her a solid writer of solid stories. Unpretentious, with careful attention to which details matter. Now I need to add that she is also a writer of complex subtlety and great emotional insight. There is something timeless and elemental about this novel, echoing the brief allusions to fairy tales and Lewis Carol extracts she introduces chapters with. This is something new. This is a classic. ■

Finishing the Picture
Ian Abbot
ed. Richie McCaffery
Kennedy & Boyd
Reviewed by John Glenday

Turn to the Select Bibliography on page 169 of this book and you'll find encapsulated the triumph and tragedy of Ian Abbot's life: one collection Avoiding the Gods (well received, shortlisted for Saltire Prize for best first book) in a career. In 1989, one year after publication of that only collection, Abbot was killed in a tragic car accident not far from his home at Whitebridge, above Loch Ness.

Despite his brief career, Abbot was undoubtedly one of the great poets of his time, so this new, comprehensive collection of Abbot's poems, both published and unpublished is very welcome. It not only draws together all his published and unpublished work, but also presents a wealth of information on Abbot's life and work including a moving reminiscence by Sandy Hutchison. It also details archival references and links to articles and interviews with Abbot.

So here we have it, a life's work: 70 poems from a highly admired first collection; some 34 other poems published either before or after his death, and 33 unpublished and unfinished pieces. A woefully scant amount for such a talented writer. But the worth of poems is not measured out in pounds, or by the cubic metre, but by something more akin to their atomic weight - the interplay of invisible particles and forces that drives the poem and generates its energy. In great poetry, where friction is minimal, this force is not perceptibly diminished by the passage of time.

Abbot's is a visceral, earthy poetry. Although raised in the city (Perth) he lived for the last years of his life in a starkly rural setting where topography, isolation and weather impinged not just on actions, but also on social interactions. It isn't surprising, then, that Abbot's imagery focuses on snow, rock, water, deer, hunting dogs, and iron. He frequently makes direct reference to the difficulties of communication and the creation act, envisaging it as a tick feeding, marshlands, a weapon, a fish, or a semi-precious stone:

The language lies in the road like stone
pitted and ordinary;
kicked by every passer-by
and crammed in dykes…

…Only pick it up and split it, polish it
over and again
with dust and finer dust and patience,
and hold it up at length against the light.
(from 'Agates')

Abbot's concerns are frequently dark, gritty and forbidding. There is an armoured history which inhabits his work, and relates much to the unforgiving remoteness of the Highlands where he lived. It also calls to mind his many occupations: silversmith, tractor/ orraman, fence erector, farm hand, lorry driver. Although his worldview can be dark and certainly bloody and cold, the best poems always draw us out of the particular, towards universal issues and concerns. This in part is the secret of his poetry's enduring power. In his introduction McCaffery quotes Abbot describing the subversive power of poetry: 'I think you owe it to yourself to undermine as far as possible the things that people are trying to make you think, trying to make you feel…'

Abbot's work often challenges us to re-examine our relationship with the world and other people – he was above all a deeply humane writer. Among all those wintery shadows, it's obvious he holds a persisting love and respect for the landscape, yet he's constantly asking us not to take it for granted, not to idealise, not to wear those rose tinted tourist glasses:

You thought to print the earth indelibly.
But now let down, and burdened
with the bare fields' sullen weight,
you must lie still and be content…

…Your footprints are already blowing shut.
In time the earth accepts from you
the price of everything you borrowed from it.
(from 'A crofter buried')

Finishing the Picture is a record of a life too briefly lived – a promising writer whose contribution to Scottish literature was immediate and important and though he was short-lived his writing is not. That's what makes this book so welcome – it's publication is an act of recognition, bringing the wealth of Abbot's talent to a wider and younger readership.

Abbot often seemed to anticipate his own end and in 'Exile' there are resonances of Juan Rulfo's 'Pedro Paramo' where the dead speak whenever it rains. It reads almost as an epitaph for Abbot himself, for his tragic death, for the persisting brilliance of his life:

But wait. Only wait.
For as each drop of water comes
through years of effort trickling down
to my dry lips, so words
go welling upwards through the earth
brimming at last into a lake of poems.

Mercy Seat
Wayne Price
Freight Books
Reviewed by Liam Murray Bell

I wasn't alone, I think, in eagerly anticipating Wayne Price's debut novel, *Mercy Seat*. Anyone who read his short story collection, *Furnace* – shortlisted for the Saltire Scottish First Book of the Year 2012 – would be keen to see if he could manage the same lucid phrasing, brooding tension and sharp sense of place across the longer form. And, boy, does he manage it.

Mercy Seat is a novel that is, at heart, about vulnerability. Or vulnerabilities. Both individual and collective. The first person narrator, Luke, tells us right from the off that he was in an uncertain situation for the events of the novel. In retrospect, he notes, he had the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood too soon. Because he's also part of a shared period of vulnerability, along with his partner Jenny, in those months after their first child, Michael, is born. They are insecure, they are tired, they are the embodiment of those two clichés: in one another's pockets and at one another's throats. It is an easily relatable situation for any parent. Into that maelstrom, then, comes Jenny's estranged sister, Christine, who is a damaged woman as the result of her dependant relationship on their recently deceased father. She confirms Luke's insecurities, exposes the fissures in his relationship with Jenny, and lays claim to a kinship with him:

"Yes, Jenny's a different species too, I half-expected Christine to say. And Michael too. They don't belong with you. You must hand them back."

There's one figure – within this small, carefully controlled and artfully characterised cast – who should be the most vulnerable; the newly arrived baby, Michael. He's a stabilising presence, though, the thing that binds the new parents together, even as Christine's actions towards him become more and more unsettling. She has an air of malice, throughout, that comes to be directed at the child and the masterful way in which Price ratchets up the tension between the three main characters – as they drift towards a devastating love triangle – leaves the reader shouting at the page, as if to warn Luke, even whilst understanding his missteps. This all makes it sound like a Gothic novel, full of hauntings and creaking floorboards, and it's to the author's credit that the atmosphere of the book has that same quality, with the craggy coast of the western part of Wales providing an ideal backdrop, the boarding house they stay in – the Bethesda – filling the role of decrepit house that seems to be falling down around them, and Christine flitting in and out of their lives as the spectre; at once menacing and enticing to Luke.

Price, then, shows himself to be master of the novel form as well as the short story. He has carried over the same taut phrasing and evocative sense of place, whilst crafting a plot that grips and a pace that builds. It is a dark, compelling book to be read, cover to cover, at a feverish speed and then to be set down with a wee shiver. ■

The Midnight Letterbox: The Selected Correspondence of Edwin Morgan 1950 - 2010
Edited by James McGonigal and John Coyle
Carcanet
Reviewed by Jon Miller

There are instances in this collection of letters that show how far we have travelled in a very short time. Morgan started writing seriously at the dawn of mass technology - the TV, the tape recorder - so with his fascination for the new and being so promiscuously inventive, what would he have made of our modern moment: smartphones, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp, robots and the thousands of other technological creatures that now inhabit the planet like a new species?

This collection of letters are selected only from Morgan's correspondence in his Papers held at the Department of Special Collections in the Library of Glasgow University. The editors selected from these and the final selection was by Carcanet Press as 'the realism of price and production came into play'. Grouped into decades, they follow his extensive range of interests from the late 1940s until the last 'letter' - a dictated email -somewhat appositely, to the LBGT Age Group some six weeks before his death in 2010.

Throughout the letters Morgan's generosity, tact and diplomacy in his criticism and in his advocacy of the work of others is ever-present. In the 1960s, his championing of writers from Europe, Russia, Brazil and America (at the time The Beats were not known in Britain), attest to his determinedly looking beyond Scotland for inspiration. He fulminates over the conservative mindset of 1960s' Scottish, and British, publishing, referring to the 'dead hand or polite smile of literary England' in relation to TS Eliot's rejection of his translations of Salvatore Quasimodo's poetry. Negative reviews make him feel 'depressed' and isolated' and that there is too much 'sheer malicious shooting down in Scotland, with no attempts to understand anything new or unfamiliar'. This seems to be confirmed when Jonathan Cape requested he submit a collection, eventually turning it down on the grounds that it was 'not homogeneous' thereby missing the very basis of Morgan's poetics.

Morgan undertook a bewildering amount of work - translations in a wide variety of languages, lectures, TV and radio programmes, reviews, contributions to magazines, proposals for anthologies, all alongside his job as Professor of Literature at Glasgow University. And, all the while, there is the running thread of well-mannered frustration at the endless routine of marking undergraduate essays getting in the way of writing poetry. In various letters he clarifies his definition and use of concrete poetry and enthuses in his admiration for the acrobatics that could be achieved with typewriter keys when creating new sound patterns or ways of constructing and de-constructing the page. Some of his clearest statements come in his many letters to schoolchildren and undergraduates as his developing success ushered in requests for comment and explication (which, as ever, he politely denied while still offering them something to think about).

One difficulty with this collection is its concern, particularly in the central sections, with the minutiae of publication e.g. the difference between a dash and a hyphen, the sequencing of poems, catalogues and lists of references or changes. While these are undoubtedly important to literary scholars, there are only a few anecdotes of life beyond his literary interests. There are glimpses of rowdy conversations with MacDiarmid in hotel corridors, the three day week of the 1970s, the power cuts (Morgan has to write by candlelight in his flat in Whittingehame Court) and these vignettes bring welcome colour among the undergrowth of discussions with publishers.

However, as the final decades of Morgan's life are reached this changes and there is a greater expansiveness about his personal life, politics, culture and the wider debates in society - the Iraq War and, particularly, gay life and culture. This expansiveness perhaps comes about due the ease and confidence he gained through his enduring success and, more personally, after his 'coming out' at the age of 70. We have his outbursts of late passion for new lovers - for instance, Mark Smith, a young heterosexual which whom Morgan fell deeply in love and who perhaps acted as a muse in his later life, a not uncommon occurrence in the lives of older artists and writers. There are also poignant reminders of what he calls the 'slow but inexorable decline of the body' and his diagnosis of prostate cancer. Late in his life, being virtually confined to a chair, his imagination became riotous as it inhabited the lives and minds of Boethius, Oscar Wilde, the Emperor Hirohito and Gilgamesh, as if being confined allowed him space to wander unfettered through his imagination. This is the final image of Morgan that endures - the vital, experimental protean poet - even to the end. A letter from 1982 reveals that Morgan had paid a deposit of $5,000 to Project Space Voyage as passenger 102 on Flight 6 planned for November 1992: he would have been an astronaut at 72. Another letter closes with - 'Love to all, and on we go -' the simplest possible summation of his vigorously alert multidimensional life. ■

Killochries
Jim Carruth
Freight Books
Reviewed by Ian Stephen

Does there always have to be innovation in art? After flows of consciousness and alternative endings we have novels which are a sort of forgery, like *Gould's Book of Fish*, by Richard Flannagan and others which not only imitate a musical form but become it, like Kirsty Gunn's *The Big Music*. The Australian poet Les A Murray took his belief in the power of the vernacular voice to the form of a verse novel. Arguably *The Odyssey* is a novel in verse, with its central character revealing the weaknesses he is not conscious of, as well as the triumphs and disasters of his adventures.

Jim Carruth's first full collection of poetry is certainly a novel. There are two main characters and their developing relationship is the subject of the work. It has a story but it is told mainly between the lines. The young man from the city has a problem and the environment of the bare sheep-farm and his dour, religious relative do indeed combine to bring about his redemption song.

The story is told by closely observed details. The text is daringly spare, denying the pleasure of wordplay in the same way as the bottle is kept in the cupboard except for that well-judged moment. But there are devices that pass through this beautifully constructed work, like shadows. The fox is glimpsed and a refrain of such quiet epiphanies gives structure as well as balance and a hint of music to the verse.

You sense that Carruth denies himself the expression of the skills at his disposal so that the hint of them has all the greater effect: 'Fox, I've almost lost sight of you:/your presence is musk,/a severed feather,/a hedgehog skin,'

This is a poet with a strong reputation, so far based on a small body of published work. The book holds you in its strong, consistent narrative voice. I was gripped by the unfolding development of character and scene, all the way through. It was only afterwards, I wondered at the author's confidence in holding back so much. Gritty observations amass to a larger picture like charcoal sketches of farm buildings, and there are detailed studies of the domestic and wild-roaming creatures which share the landscape. Linguistic vibrancy would not serve this poet's purpose but heightened language is there when it is needed.

The power of that effect may owe as much to Jim Carruth's powers of focused observation as much as to his hard won and restrained craft. Again it is a creature from a world outwith dykes and fences which lifts the spirit. A hen harrier is tracked

rolling over
in mid air

to catch
in her talons
a small rabbit
dropped slow

from a partner
above her:
manna
of prey.'

The publisher Freight Books, should be congratulated on making their own decisions on what their customers might read. Production and cover-design are simple and in keeping with the material. ■

50 Shades of Hillwalking
Baffies' Easy Munro Guide, Volume 3: The Cairngorms
by Ralph Storer
Luath
Reviewed by Alison Roe

Like its namesake, *50 Shades of Hillwalking* is a book about the awakening of desire. From ▸▸

Storer's first teenage experience on snow-sodden Snowden, he knows he is hooked on hills, and his book proceeds as a catalogue of upward encounters. From "the fledgling's frisson of excitement" to the veteran walker's "fond familiarity," Storer relates a variety of mountain flings and dalliances, centring on his ongoing affair with the Scottish Highlands and radiating out.

It's a simple book - short stories and viewpoints of one man's experiences on the hills - but it's a generous collection, and a varied one. All 'shades' of hillwalking are included here since Storer goes on all kinds of walks on all kinds of terrain in all kinds of places and conditions: walking, climbing and mountain-biking in the Scottish Highlands, snow-wading in the Alps, canyoneering and dune-scaling in the hot American West, trail-picking around the misty peaks of Reunion island in the Indian Ocean...

Each of these episodes is a journey in itself. However, *50 Shades of Hillwalking* also gives a flavour of the human history and culture of hills. This includes glimpses into the realm of mountaineering through the years, as well as a few provocative chapters on the politics and practices around mountains and their climbers (and lately their managers) - topical stuff in Scotland. All this makes *50 Shades* a wide-ranging book and an informative read.

It's also a very enjoyable read. Storer's style is brisk-paced, like his walks, with a robust turn of phrase and sharp self-deprecating wit. At first glance, it seemed a bit too breezy, and - I have to admit - had I seen it on a bookshelf, I would probably have overlooked it in favour of a more obviously reflective take on the hills. I would have missed out though, because Storer is not only good company but also an excellent guide. His approach is direct, yet deftly descriptive and evocative, allowing us to vicariously experience all these adventures along with him. This, for me, is the gift of the book - the opportunity to imagine what it's like to stand on top of the world's highest Ben Lomond and look out over the salt flats of Utah, or squeeze your way into a new cave in deepest Argyll, or enjoy the sheer spectacle of scaling a high rockface in Poland to find nuns in flip-flops there before you.

Ralph Storer is a man with a big spirit going for big trips in big lands - for all his comedic self-deprecation, these are ambitious treks - and his experiences make exhilarating reading. However, *50 Shades* isn't just a book about Storer's desire to climb hills, but a book to renew or awaken our own. So I recommend *50 Shades of Hillwalking* as a tonic - a few chapters a day taken as an antidote for sedentary sluggishness and that walled-in feeling that comes from too much time indoors. The world is large and high - and walkable!

This is where the Baffies' guide comes in useful. "Baffies" is Ralph Storer's alter ego, a "sensitive soul" who "almost choked on his triple chocolate layer cake" at the prospect of writing a guidebook on Munros. A bit whimsical maybe, but the book is a rock solid, highly detailed guide to 25 of the easiest routes up various Munros in the Cairngorms. I haven't been to the Cairngorms nor have I ever consulted a guidebook before going for a walk, but this book inspires me to do both. The routes are so clearly described, with words, photographs and maps, and each one sounds so appealing, that once again Storer makes the hills hard to resist. All this in a small, well-designed inexpensive book - another excellent hillwalking companion. ■

Da Mirrie Dancers

Poetry Reviews by Stephen Keeler

There are a dozen or so pamphlets and slim volumes laid out on the table in front of me. Collectively, they seem to be daring me not to be intimidated by them. Singly, they are – most of them – almost flimsy, almost insubstantial: something suggested by the word pamphlet itself.

Until I joined the over-subscribed club of poets with a first collection, scrambling indecorously for a publisher, I had been pretty sniffy about pamphlets. Having 'a pamphlet out' was somehow not at all the same as 'being published'. And the word does itself no favours. Defined variously as 'thin', 'very thin', 'with only a few pages' and a 'paper cover', pamphlet suggests limited content if not limited scope, limited ambition, perhaps even limited talent. Ouch!

Having read each of the small books currently set out in front of me I can testify to the swell of their ambition, to the occasionally experimental originality of their explorations of words and form, to the ingenuity and dexterity in the use of language, the exploration of ideas, of theme and variation, and of the tenacity with which their authors grapple with the complexities and wonders of the human condition. Buy pamphlets! Flick through them first but buy pamphlets.

In *Burning Orange* (Controlled Explosion Press) Margaret Fulton-Cook (ladylossoth@yahoo.co.uk) offers not much more than a handful of ostensibly whimsical but often dark, lilting half-ballads stuffed with melodic internal rhyme and a wink here, a nod there. Dublin, the pub, the Catholic Church, tenements in Glasgow, Paisley, the A82 – are all backdrops for Fulton-Cook's small cast of characters – 'he' or 'she': an Irish horse-trader, farm-child grown up, a woman destroyed by school, a man by soldiering: seventeen poignant and sometimes sparkling elegies for our times.

The old-school magazine format of *Piano Lesson*, *The Wound Man* and *The Poetry Hat,* three collections of 'poems and tales in Scots and English' by Sheena Blackhall (Lochlands) is too often a distraction from occasional poetic semi-precious stones such as The Gruffalo: A Doric Version or A Buddhist Valentine or Flodden Field. Some gentle pieces here, and an occasional quirk. Some source material for school teachers, too, but this reviewer wanted more rigour, more cohesion, more graphic clarity, too. All of Blackhall's poems in Scots and English are now uploaded on www.poemhunter.com.

A Scarlet Thread by Elizabeth Burns (Wayleave, www.wayleavepress.co.uk) is a sequence of ten short poems in memory of the Scottish painter Anne Redpath (1895-1965). The ultimate slender volume, then: ten well-spaced poems on stiff white pages each calm and calming, shot through with bold painterly colour and with reverence, textured with anecdote, interwoven with homage, always avoiding the saccharine and the nostalgic. A fine sequence of poems. I'd have loved twenty more just like them.

Gerry Cambridge designs some very fine pamphlets for the Mariscat Press (www.mariscatpress.com). Set in elegant fonts, printed on creamy papers, in rich covers, and attractively formatted, they are a delight to hold and read from. Eveline Pye's *Smoke That Thunders* (Mariscat Press) is no exception. Her twenty-six African poems are as unflinching as the Zambian sun which bred them. October is so hot they call it the suicide month. There are lizards; insects crawl across the scalp, and there are elderly servants still addressed as 'boy'. There is violence, institutional and domestic, and the stench of sweat and blood and corruption. There is outrage but there is love too, a deepening love, a little homesickness for the Glasgow tenements perhaps, and a lovely 'Lunar Rainbow'; whales that walk, and a peeling off of years, 'Leaving Africa'. A very accomplished collection of vivid, well-crafted writing.

The twenty-two poems collected in Flout by Stephanie Green (HappenStance, www.happenstancepress.com) come out of the landscapes and culture of the Shetland Islands. Written in English (Green is not a Shetlandic speaker) these gentle, sometimes lilting, sometimes musical poems call on enough Shetlantic vocabulary and references to Shetland folklore to make the Glossary and Notes at the back of the pamphlet both essential for comprehension (for this reader, at least) and informative. The 'flout' of the title poem, for example, is a square of wool prepared for spinning ('If too dry,/a little oil is allowed.'). Probably you knew that, and that 'Da Mirrie Dancers' are the Northern Lights. There are poems about water dragons ('stoor worms') and water horses (the 'Njuggle'), about chickweed ('mouse ear') and trolls ('trowie') and 'Paganini's Fiddle in a Shetland Barn', and, taken as a whole, this collection so readily evokes Shetland as to make it recommended companion reading to take with you on any visit there.

Graham Fulton's *11 Poems About the First World War* (Controlled Explosion Press) doesn't quite do what it says on the tin. The eleven poems, from 'Beaumont Hamel' to 'Box', by way of 'Mons', 'Verdun', 'Vimy Ridge' and 'Ypres', are each printed as continuous prose in a single stanza, or paragraph: a form which still bothers some readers and raises questions as to the definitions of poetry. Setting aside those considerations here, the content of this tiny collection (little more than a short sequence) has memorial, documentary, reportage, not to say occasionally voyeuristic qualities which both demand and repay thoughtful reading. Vimy Ridge – 'You pass it on the way to the duty free…'. At La Boiselle, 'A coachload circles the rim of the Lochnagar Crater. The largest hole ever made in anger.' And the 'Box' was 'bought on eBay…'. This is a collection which asserts that it is still possible to have a fresh voice on the First World War even if 'All that can be done is to walk the silence, the scar tissue, save the digital pictures, think of them every now and then.'

Having lived in Scotland for a number of years, Tim E. G. Bartel returned to his native United States leaving behind *Arroyos* (Mariscat Press) a collection of seventeen long-line poems (hence the landscape format of the pamphlet), most in the sijo form which originated in Korea in the fourteenth century. Despite the over-complicated syllabic forms (which sit a little uncomfortably in English and on the page) and printed formats and the references, of questionable necessity and value, to 'zones of concentrated geomorphic activity', these are essentially brief meditations on the changing seasons – 'On the sidewalk a chunk of moss sits as if fresh-ripped from rock./ A patch of new-rolled asphalt steams like a Clydesdale's flank.' – of city life – 'Your torso will steam like an Edinburgh roof.' (quite a lot of steaming) – and of the interplay of nature and the constructed environment – 'Out from the charcoal angles of a close cherry branches peek…'. Readers who can ignore the fussiness and overcome the different formats' prescriptiveness may discover a light palette of delightful images and occasional wordplay to divert and entertain awhile. As ever with Mariscat Press, Arroyos is a masterclass in pamphlet design.

Lindy Barbour's poems, in *Where You Start From* (Mariscat Press) point up the significance of otherwise everyday objects. A chair bought at a junk shop becomes her father's, 'Its scalloped high Victorian back/ was dented by his head and always carried threads/of tobacco and strands of his silver hair'; the last book read by a loved one, a paper bag, 'a picture cut from a calendar and framed'. These are unsentimental memoir poems about children's parties and the Small Town, about the secret summer places children colonise, and although written with an obvious fondness, suggest both regret and acceptance, maybe a little pride. These are simply beautiful poems. Sharply-observed and uncomplicated they have a clarity which barely conceals profound emotion.

There is still something over-restrained, unimaginative, stuffy even about the appearance of too many poetry pamphlets and slim volumes. There are notable exceptions: Faber put out very stylish pamphlets; Eyewear has a snappy house style, and small presses such as HappenStance and Mariscat are wonderfully meticulous about the quality of the paper and about design and typesetting inside. Put plainly though, there is still too much of the church hall book bazaar about poetry pamphlets which is especially strange in this brave new digital age of the book-as-a-beautiful-object. The dozen or more pamphlets and slim volumes set out on the table in front of me hold scintillating wonders and solemn contemplations. They offer poems both bright and funny; thoughtful, well-crafted and charming. Poems which console and disturb, which offer up insights and which affirm and question. If they represent the state-of-the-art of Scottish poetry now I think we can say that it is in good hands. Perhaps a little more originality, if not exactly sparkle needs to go into their packaging, however, if publishers are to get them into the hands of many more readers. ■

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Helen Addy, 37, lives in Forres with her two daughters, and is currently working on a first pamphlet. She can be found on Twitter @addy_Helen

Jane Aldous is working on her first poetry pamphlet and occasionally blogs about poetry, bumble bees and related topics at www.kitchenpoetry.blogspot.com and @Jette611

James Andrew has had two poetry books published, one by Dionysia Press, and one by KT Publishing. Dionysia Press have accepted another: *The City That Moved*.

Juliet Antill lives on the Isle of Mull with her two daughters.

Alison Barr lives in Cumbria and is inspired by landscape and culture. Her first collection will be published in 2016. Keswick Theatre will include her poems in a forthcoming performance.

John Beaton is a retired actuary whose poetry has been widely published. He grew up in the Highlands and now lives on Vancouver Island, Canada.

Liam Murray Bell is the author of two novels: *The Busker* and *So It Is*. He lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Stirling.

John Bolland is a novelist and poet. His work has appeared in *Pushing Out the Boat,* the *London Magazine* and various anthologies.

Maoilios Caimbeul - Bàrd agus sgrìobhaiche às an Eilean Sgitheanach. Tha cruinneachadh ùr bàrdachd leis, Tro Chloich na Sùla, a' tighinn a-mach bho Clàr san dàmhair 2014.

Janis Clark is a retired teacher living in Drumnadrochit who fills her days with film, novels, music, dogs, horses and indulging her love of poetry.

Thomas Clark is a Glaswegian writer and poet. His first collection, *Intae the Snaw*, is forthcoming from Gatehouse Press. He blogs about writing at www.thomasjclark.co.uk

Julian Colton has had four collections of poetry published including *Cold Light of Morning* (Cultured Llama, 2015) and *Everyman Street* (Smokestack Publishing, 2009). He teaches poetry all over Scotland.

Linda Cracknell's most recent books (with Freight) are a novel, *Call of the Undertow* (2013) and *Doubling Back: Ten paths trodden in memory* (2014), out in paperback September 2015.

Angus Dunn has published a novel, *Writing in the Sand* and a short story collection, *The Perfect Loaf*. A book of his poems, *High Country* is due to be published in 2015.

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

Cheryl Follon has published two poetry collections - both with Bloodaxe - and a third is forthcoming. Her work has appeared in many places including *the Scotsman*, *The Dark Horse* and on Radio 4.

Magi Gibson is a poet, short story writer and author of the *Seriously Sassy* novels. She is also the founder of the Wild Women Writing Workshops (www.wildwomenwriting.co.uk) and Reader in Residence with Glasgow Women's Library.

Lesley Glaister is the author of thirteen novels. Her first poetry pamphlet will be published by Mariscat later this year. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of St Andrews.

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

James Gordon was born in Dumfries in 1954 and is still there wandering aimlessly about.

George Gunn's last book of poems was *A Northerly Land*. A prose book about Caithness, *The Province of the Cat* was published in 2015 and his play *Badbea*, was given a moved reading at the Tron. He has recently collaborated with the fiddler Gordon Gunn to produce a CD, *A Musical Map of Caithness*.

Susan Haigh recently completed an MLitt in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in numerous publications. She lives with husband and dog in Fife and France.

Edith Harper lives in Edinburgh but was born and educated in Aberdeen and finds that some poems work best in the Doric. She is grateful that early retirement has given her time to write.

Andy Hunter lives and works in Glasgow, though his roots are across the north of Scotland. His work has appeared in *Envoi* and on *Open Mouse* and he is a member of Donny O'Rourke's writing group.

Alexander Hutchison, born in Buckie, lives now in Glasgow. His collection *Bones & Breath* (Salt) won the inaugural Saltire Award for Best Poetry Book late last year.

Brian Johnstone was a founder of StAnza. His work appears on *The Poetry Archive* website. His most recent collection is *Dry Stone Work* (Arc, 2014). www.brianjohnstonepoet.co.uk

Stephen Keeler won the Highland Literary Salon poetry competition in 2012, and in 2015 he was given a Scottish Book Trust New Writer Award. He lives in Ullapool and is currently working on several poetry pamphlet projects and a creative writing workbook.

John Killick has had two books of his own poems published and has co-written two creative writing texts. He also writes criticism.

Tariq Latif has three poetry collections all published by Arc. His pamphlet entitled: *Smithereens* also published by Arc is due mid August 2015.

Karla Linn Merrifield has eleven books to her credit; the newest is *Bunchberries, More Poems of Canada* (FootHills Publishing). Visit her blog at karlalinn.blogspot.com.

Connie MacDonald lives beside Loch Ness and writes poetry inspired by her Highland roots. She has just completed the Open University's Advanced Creative Writing module.

Lisa MacDonald lives in Ullapool with her children. She is a teacher and a Gaelic toddler group facilitator; she also works for the local community arts organisation.

George T. MacIntyre was born in Glasgow. He studied art at Winchester, where Jeremy Hooker encouraged his poetry. He has been a nurse in Exeter, and moved to S. Ayrshire in May 2015.

Peter Maclaren's poems have appeared in various magazines and journals, including *Lines Review* and *New Writing Scotland*. He lives in Glasgow.

Calum MacLeòid À Inbhir Nis bho thùs agus a' fuireach ann an Glaschu. Choisinn e Duais nan Sgrìobhadairean Ùra ann an 2014.

Richie McCaffery recently moved from Scotland to Belgium. His latest poetry collection is *Cairn* (Nine Arches Press) and he is the editor of *Finishing the Picture: Collected Poems of Ian Abbot* (Kennedy and Boyd).

Ian McDonough is a Brora Rangers supporter. His work has recently appeared in the *Poetry Review, Scotsman, Herald* and *New Writing Scotland*.

Mary McDougall is part of a small but prolific writing group in Highland Perthshire. She has published work in *Poetry Scotland, Northwords Now*, two community anthologies and the Corbenic Poetry Path.

Carol McKay's fiction has won her a Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship. She teaches creative writing through the OU and reviews for UK book charity Booktrust. Her collected short stories, *Ordinary Domestic*, is published in a Kindle edition by The Pothole Press.

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

Deborah Moffatt lives in Fife. Her poems, in English and Gaelic, have been widely published, and have won prizes in Galway, Wigtown, and Skye.

Maxine Rose Munro was born and bred in Shetland. Much of her writing is about struggles to assimilate with the world and feeling somewhat different.

Clare O'Brien lives beside Loch Ewe in Wester Ross. She writes fiction and poetry while working as a digital media manager for clients worldwide.

Lydia Popowich is a writer and artist based in Caithness. Her work has appeared in magazines and recent anthologies, A *Darker Side of Love* and *Schooldays*.

Pauline Prior-Pitt lives on North Uist. She has published six poetry collections and four poetry pamphlets. She won the 2006 Callum Macdonald Award.

Alison Roe lives (mostly) on a sailboat in the north-west highlands. More of her comings and goings are at solanoire.com.

Cynthia Rogerson's 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). She is a Royal Literary Fellow at the University of Dundee.

Ian Stephen's most recent novel, *A Book of Death and Fish*, is published by Saraband.

Kenneth Steven is currently working on a book for Saraband, on the story of the Sami people. *A Wee Book of Iona Poems* is out from Wild Goose.

Jan Sutch Pickard, poet and storyteller living in the Isle of Mull, draws on down-to-earth experience of Hebridean islands, seas and people. St Kilda's a new challenge.

Judith Taylor is the author of two pamphlet collections, *Earthlight* (Koo) and *Local Colour* (Calder Wood), and was a runner-up in the McCash Poetry Competition 2013.

Mary Wight grew up in the Borders and lives by the sea, near Edinburgh. Her poems have appeared in various magazines.

Colin Will is an Edinburgh-born poet with a background in botany and geology. He has many collections to his name including *The Book of Ways* published by Red Squirrel.

Christie Williamson is originally from Yell, and now lives in Glasgow. His first collection, *Oo an Feddirs*, was published in 2015 by Luath Press

Dawn Wood lives in Longforgan, working as a hypnotherapist and artist. Her poetry publications include *Quarry*, 2008, *Ingathering*, 2013 and *Declaration*, forthcoming, 2016 (*Templar Poetry*).

Howard Wright lectures at the Belfast School of Art, and will be reading at the John Hewitt Summer School in Armagh later this month. Recent poems have appeared in *Agenda* and *The Cannon's Mouth*, with some others soon to appear in *The North* and *The Fiddlehead*.

Neil Young hails from Belfast and now lives in Stonehaven. Described by Brian Patten as a "socialist poet par excellence," Neil's first collection, *Lagan Voices*, was published by Scryfa in 2009. A booklet of sonnets, *The Parting Glass*, is due out from Tapsalteerie later this year.

Catriona Yule is an Aberdeenshire poet and playwright. In 2014, she collaborated with composer, Joe Stollery, to produce an outdoor opera performed on Bennachie.

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