

The FREE literary magazine of the North

Northwords Now

Issue 31, Spring 2016

To Honour Everything That Is Alive

New poems by Angus Peter Campbell

**Poems for Angus Dunn, Short Stories, Poetry, Essays, Reviews
including John Glenday, Pàdraig MacAoidh, Jennifer Morag
Henderson and Donald S. Murray**



EDITORIAL

Makar Matters

WE WARMLY WELCOME Jackie Kay to the job of Scotland's Makar and wish her all the best. Jackie is a fine poet, willing to speak her mind and possessing the gift of being able to touch people from different walks of life. No doubt she'll find plenty to celebrate during her term of office, and, if the occasion demands, feel free to ruffle a few feathers. Indeed let's hope that Jackie's tenure firmly cements the role of Makar in the life of the nation so that, in due course, we will greet the day when a poet skilled in Gaelic, as well as English and Scots, can speak up for Scotland. ■

CHRIS POWICI, EDITOR

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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

Festival Fever

Chris Powici talks to Kevin MacNeil



Kevin MacNeil and friends

YOU ONLY HAVE to read a few pages of Kevin MacNeil's new novel *The Brilliant & Forever* and your head starts to fizz and boil with questions – questions like *what's the relationship between fishing and writing?*, *is it better to believe in a book than God?* and, crucially, *why alpacas?* Very soon you'll start to wonder if the brain can take any more stimulation but it's a tribute to the clarity and energy of the prose that you keep turning the pages, keep asking the questions. Set on a kind of alternative Hebridean island the narrative centres on the annual book festival and the efforts of its main characters (human and alpaca) to make some money, make their names, elevate their species and generally solve the many riddles of existence by writing the perfect short story. Such is the power of the spell cast by the novel you begin to wonder if all those questions that keep jazzing up the brain cells aren't also part of the action. I spoke to Kevin MacNeil ahead of this year's Ullapool Book Festival to see if *The Brilliant & Forever* was as much a literary joyride for the author as it is for the reader.

CP The title of your first chapter – 'If on a Summer's Night an Alpaca' – is a reference to Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveller?* Do you think of *The Brilliant & Forever* as a kind of hymn to storytelling?

KM Yes, *The Brilliant & Forever* can be read as a novel about stories – what they can achieve, why they're important and how fascinating most people's inner lives really are.

CP One of your main characters is an alpaca. Why alpacas?

KM There's a long history of narratives with talking animals – from *Aesop's Fables* to *Animal Farm* and many others, but I'm not aware of a novel which features a talking alpaca as a central character. Also, they're very

characterful-looking beings and are fun to write about.

CP There's a whole lot of fishing going on in the novel. There's the epigraph from Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* and a chapter entitled 'Born Surreal, Think Like a Boat'. Is there a relationship between fishing and writing? Do you fish for stories or make them up from scratch?

KM I admire the Norman Maclean novella (and subsequent film) *A River Runs Through It*. It is witty, sad and sublime. Maclean's quotation says something about how the intangible and the physical, the ineffable and the tangible, correspond.

We can discern invisible patterns in life through practicing deep awareness. One of the characters has a fishing boat – the novel is set on an island, after all – and sushi plays a rule in the haiku-kery concept I invented. But the novel isn't about fishing.

CP Is it too easy to feel 'elegiac' about island life? Do you consciously try to avoid this or at least re-think the forms elegy can take?

KM I think overly romanticising the past is dangerous. We have to live in the present. In *The Brilliant & Forever*, Peter Projector-Head is a character who has a projector on his forehead which is constantly flashing images of his thoughts showing he's always living in imagined futures and regretted pasts – any time and place but here and now. In the same way, when it comes to islands, non-islanders can romanticise them and islanders themselves sometimes have nostalgia for a place that never really existed.

CP Your characters in *The Brilliant & Forever* feel as if they're trying to tap into 'something larger' than themselves as well as write their own very particular story. Do you believe in 'unified sentence' outwith the pages of the book or is any kind of attachment to a creed a problem for a writer?

KM I practise Buddhism, a faith of non-attachment. But yes, unified sentence is key.

CP Just about everybody in the novel is a writer. Is this true of 'real' people – we're all storytellers? What distinguishes the writer from the 'ordinary' teller of stories?

KM As Iain Crichton Smith said in a poem once, 'There are no ordinary people'. We are all storytellers – communicating by day, exercising the imagination daily or at least nightly. The main difference between writing

and storytelling is a writer makes the time to rework their words, polish and craft, and get the best humour, conflict and meaning out of a situation.

CP You live in London now so do you miss the sea? Is London just a different kind of island? Is *The Brilliant & Forever* a love song for the sea?

KM I have one character who considers London to be an island. London is certainly very different to the rest of England, so in that sense, I suppose it is, in some senses, island-like. Yes, I do miss the sea very much.

CP One of your characters claims 'We live in an age of narcissism and entitlement' – what kind of age would you like to live in? When, if ever, has it existed?

KM You can only live in the present. But I'd like to have been alive to hear the Buddha deliver a talk. Or, and I appreciate this is a bit of a contrast, I'd like to have been in a late-night club in New York during the jazz age.

CP One of the many bold and original aspects of the novel is that so much of it is composed of short stories. Was this something you had in mind from the outset or did this come about as the narrative developed?

KM I always intended to incorporate the stories into the novel. It's a novel, a short story collection and a book festival. The stories can stand alone (I tested this by publishing some of them in various books and magazines, yours included!) but they are also part of the overarching narrative. One of the novel's themes is that people's inner lives are inherently more fascinating than we might assume, but if someone shares a story with you it's as though they give you an intimate insight into their own mind. So, in fact the characters came first, then their short stories.

CP Having read the story 'Aliens that Weren't and a Spaceship that Was' I feel a need to ask if there are stories 'in the air' that worry you? Has writing the book been a way of countering stories you see as destructive? I recall the poet Les Murray once said that 'only a poem can combat a poem'. Does the same principle apply to stories?

KM All is narrative; it's how we make sense of the world.

CP Could you say something about how you've divided island society into blackhousers, whitehousers and alpacas. I have to admit the term 'whitehouser' now feels laden with meaning given Donald Trump's presidential ambitions and the way he's made play of his Hebridean ancestry.

KM There's no connection with Trump (whom many Hebridean friends regard as a

bad joke taken too far). The blackhousers and whitehousers are emblematic of a divided society. The alpacas, too, (plus they have factions and infighting as minorities often do). An early, perceptive review interpreted the alpacas as being convincingly representative of any oppressed person/people/species.

CP The climax of *The Brilliant & Forever* involves a coming together of the cult of celebrity and the cult of death. Is this a big concern to you outwith the pages of the book?

KM It seems unfathomable to me to experience life without asking the big questions regarding what death is and why it happens to every sentient being. The cult of celebrity is a potentially dangerous absurdity in that it often promotes materialism, vacuousness, egotism.

CP All artistic endeavours worth their salt entail a risk. What do think is your biggest risk with the new novel – artistically, intellectually or emotionally?

KM I found myself enjoying writing this novel. I made a huge artistic, intellectual and emotional investment in it but already I've had the best reviews of my life. So what risk there was is paying off.

CP There's a lot at stake in the story competition in *The Brilliant & Forever*. What do you think of literary competitions and prizes? Do they get taken too seriously by readers and writers?

KM Competitions have their place – I've judged a few. But it's important to remember that for every winner there are countless writers who don't win. Really, it's all about doing your very best.

CP *The Brilliant & Forever* turns out to be a very entertaining but very scary kind of festival. Are book festivals good things on the whole? What's the value of a book festival like Ullapool for the writer? Is it more than just a way of shifting books?

KM I love book festivals. They have given me many of my best, most life-affirming memories. I love meeting fellow readers and writers.

And so the interview came to an end. Catch Kevin at this year's Ullapool Book Festival (www.ullapoolbookfestival.co.uk) if you can, but if you can't, buy a copy of *The Brilliant & Forever* anyway. It's full of craziness and dark fun and some spellbinding and lyrical moments. I'm also struck by how much a love of stories comes across – like a fresh sea breeze or maybe the sweet, grassy breath of an alpaca. ■

KENNETH FELT MORE weedlike than ever, as if he were a blur of green and blue about to be chopped by these giant sickles looming above his head. The shade of his face had much in common with the flags that seemed to hang everywhere too. His nervousness grew even greater as a dancing girl – the one introduced to him earlier as Nuriya – approached him behind the stage, her smile wide and gleaming.

‘Can I touch?’ she whispered, stretching out her hand.

‘Uh ... Of course.’

‘This is beautiful.’ She fingered his plaid. ‘Tell me. Is everything in the West as beautiful as this?’

He trembled, only too aware that the girl suited that particular adjective far more than his MacKenzie tartan. There was her long dark hair, high cheekbones, wide brown eyes, bright and exotic clothes. Dressed in what he had been told was a Tatar dancing costume, she wore a black pillar box hat studded with pearls, a veil draping down her back, a tight crimson bodice emphasising the curve of her breasts.

‘Not everything,’ he muttered.

‘No?’

‘But the place I come from is,’ he said, thinking of the hills, bays and beaches near his home. His memory of their presence seemed unreal as he stood waiting to sing in the Gorky Theatre in Leningrad with its huge banner of Khrushchev’s face hanging from the ceiling, the words, ‘*Life has become better, life is more joyful*’ printed – or so he had been told – below.

‘And where is that?’

‘Harris. It’s an island off the coast.’

But he never had the chance to tell her exactly where it was. He was interrupted by Dmitri, a broad, burly man with a dark moustache and a Marx pin in the lapel of his jacket.

‘It is nearly your turn, Kenneth.’

Kenneth nodded, his mouth drying as it always did before a performance. He was listening to the Master of Ceremonies talk in English, speaking of how much their former leader, Comrade Lenin had loved music. In his younger days, apparently, he used to sing ‘The Internationale’ while his sister, Olga, played piano. During the dark days of the civil war, he had always asked ‘What are the young people singing? Let me know what songs they are choosing.’

‘It is clear from all this that Comrade Lenin knew the importance of music, how it is a touchstone for us all. It is for this reason that we, the Central Soviet of this fine city bearing his name, decided to initiate the Lenin People’s Award for Music. One of its first winners is a young man from the islands off the coast of Scotland, a singer of a language – Scottish Gaelic – that the reactionary bourgeois elements in that country have long attempted to repress and silence. My fellow comrades, I present to you Kenneth MacKenzie.’

He flexed his fingers before stepping on stage. Pausing at its centre, he was still as he gazed into the lights, silent until the applause died away. When he spoke, his voice faded to a whisper.

‘This is a song about something that is a long way from you here in Leningrad. The power of the sea. Ladies and gentlemen, ‘An Ataicheachd Ard’.

It was only after the music entered nerve and muscle that he began to sing.

Leningrad 1960

SHORT STORY BY DONALD S. MURRAY



*‘An ataicheachd bhuan,
Cluinn fuaime na h-ataicheachd ard ...’*

His eyes scanned the audience as the notes eased out, loud and strong. He had watched them since his arrival at the theatre – those men with dark suits, soft felt hats; their wives red-cheeked and overweight. Wrapped in thick coats, their clothes offered no crack or crevice for the Russian winter to peek its way through. With the exception of a few members of the military, an Astrakhan hat or two, it was easy to pretend they were a congregation of the Free Church back home – except that their like would never have stepped into a hall, not to listen to Kenneth and his devil’s gift of song. Such a notion would have been unthinkable to them.

The Russians, however, took to him with enthusiasm. This was no threatening agent of the West, but instead, a pale, fragile youth with tortoise-shell glasses, a tight knot of fair curls. He looked more angel than capitalist demon with that wing of tartan on his shoulder, white knees braving the theatre’s cold.

‘Now my first song was about the ocean. My next is about one of the vessels that travel on it. Called ‘Bratach Bana’, it tells a simple

story, of the sighting of a tall, white-sailed ship on the horizon...’

He heard their hands and feet beat to the rhythm of the music, the entire hall sailing on its flow. The words of Antonio, his music teacher during his year in Glasgow, came into his head. Quoting Goethe, he had declared, ‘Such is the price the gods exact for song, to become what we sing’. He knew exactly what that meant. He had become purely a voice, escaping the awkwardness that plagued the rest of him whenever a pretty girl came near, made speechless even by her mere existence.

‘My last song is about a dark period in our history. It tells of how the people of the islands were cleared from their land and taken on tall ships – just like the ‘Bratach Bana’ – into exile in Canada. It was a place they hated. They called it the ‘choille gruamach’ – the gloomy forest, a land where snow and ice made the soil hard and impenetrable for much of the year. One of our Gaelic poets, Iain MacGhille-eathain composed this song about his years there, his longing for the land he had left.’

*‘Gu bheil mi am onrachd ‘sa choille ghruamaich
Mo smaointean luaineach, cha tog mi fonn ...’*

‘Perfection is our only duty,’ one of the Russians had told him, ‘It is what we all must aim for.’ And he touched it with his voice that night, knowing that his audience was with him, aware, too, of the ovation they would reward him with at the song’s end. When that came, he would leave the stage reluctantly, returning a short while later for the inevitable encore ...

‘Well done, Kenneth.’ A man from Finland shook his hand almost as vigorously as he had pumped his accordion earlier that evening. ‘That was excellent.’

‘Congratulations. Our ambassador was right. You have an excellent voice.’

‘Well done.’

‘It is good to know that the thaw has finally come. Even at this time of year. Your voice heralds a new Russian spring. A new time of peace between our countries.’

‘Wonderful. Wonderful. Wonderful.’

Even the policeman who stood near the stage doorway joined in, slapping his shoulder. Kenneth smiled thinly in response, aware that such words were usually meat and food to him. Praise. Pats on the back. The clasp of fingers. They allowed him to escape his shyness, his sense of being lost within the world. Yet that night, he felt more awkward and clumsy than ever. Looking round for Nuriya, he discovered that she was one of those performing on stage. A Tatar dance. With others around her, she twirled and reeled to the music, moving under bridges shaped by the arms and smiles of young men and women, all dressed in similar clothes. They sank to their knees and then rose, shouted and clapped their hands before dropping to their knees once more. One girl crossed her legs and kicked ...

And then just as Kenneth thought they were finished, Nuriya stepped out. Her hands were placed firmly on her hips, thumbs tucked at her back. She moved towards the floor. Squatting, her legs kicked out again and again, shifting in time to the speed of the rhythm.

‘Yyyyyyyyyyaaaaa!’

He admired her grace and energy, how in her own way she had done what Goethe had spoken about, becoming one with song. For once, he felt he had come across someone who was very much like him. The spirit of his islands merging with the spirit of the steppes or Volga or wherever on earth she came from. She had become the dance, her breasts, legs, thighs as much part of the flow of music as the musicians who played behind her.

He waited until she finished, wrapping his arms around her, rejoicing in her applause.

‘Nuriya. That was wonderful.’

‘No. No. Not good. You were excellent, Kenneth. I was ...’

‘Nuriya. That isn’t true. You were amazing.’

‘No. No. That song you sung. It was wonderful. So true. So sad.’

He allowed her to escape his hold, sensing that she wanted to talk. He saw once again her dark brown eyes, scarlet lips, her breasts heaving.

‘That song you sang. It told about my people, the Tatars. How they were taken by Stalin from their homes in the Crimea. How they were scattered all over, sent to our – how you say? – gloomy forests in the east. And many were killed. Many. Many.’

He drew away, alarmed by her words.

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‘Sorry?’
‘Your words. They spoke to me about my people. The Tatars. How they were treated. How they were killed.’
His head felt dizzy. Empty. Ignorant.
‘But it’s just a song,’ he muttered. ‘A song. About something that happened a hundred years ago.’
‘No. No. I was young when this happened. Not so long ago. I can remember how we were forced into lorries, taken away. My father murdered. Shot. Thrown into a ditch.’ She stammered even more than he sometimes did, frightened and scared. ‘Kenneth... I shall come to your room tonight. Tell you more about it. Sleep with you.’
‘Sorry?’
‘Yes. Yes. I will let you sleep with me. Perhaps if I please you, you will take me away with you. To the west. Maybe? Maybe?’
He was aware of her breasts against him, how her closeness was making him giddy – his body hot and sweating for all that the building

was chilled and icy, snowflakes reeling through the dark street outside. He was conscious, too, of how little her words were making sense to him. They seemed remote and distant, having no connection with his understanding of the world.
‘If that is too much to ask, perhaps, you will take a note and some photos with you. To tell the west about the things happening to my people. For all that, I will sleep with you. Just for that.’
Again, he could not speak, aware only of his own lack of knowledge, how little he knew of this place with its pictures of Marx and Lenin, its letters as sharp and angular as barbed wire. And now there was this woman offering herself to him, acting in a way he had never seen a girl behave before.
‘Kenneth?’
He looked up to see Dmitri coming towards him, his guide’s face dark and troubled. He spoke the same word as Nuriya had used just a moment before.

‘Kenneth.’
Nuriya’s arms withdrew. He felt the tautness of her body loosen and give way.
‘Kenneth. Is there anything the matter?’
‘N-n-no.’ He shook his head.
Dmitri knew he was lying. The Russian pulled Nuriya away. Words barbed his lips, almost as rough and fierce as the hand that pushed her across the floor, tunic bunched inside his fist.
‘Sorry, Kenneth. Sorry.’ she kept saying, her eyes wide and frightened. ‘Sorry for the trouble I have caused you.’
‘No more,’ Dmitri said in English. ‘No more talk.’
He bundled Nuriya towards the policeman who had congratulated Kenneth a short time before. The singer watched as the girl was grabbed and thrust out of the back door he was guarding – into the Leningrad streets or the back of a police van. For a moment, he saw the whirl of snowflakes, a flickering lamp outside. Then the door slammed behind her.

The noise stilled and stifled conversation for a long time before voices dared to speak once again.
‘You are Scotsman. With kilt. You are magnificent singer. Comprenez?’ a stranger said.
‘My wife and I. We love your music. We love your music.’
Finally, words began to form. He spat his questions at Dmitri’s back, spluttering in the darkness of the theatre.
‘Where did he take her? What the hell’s going to happen to her?’
When Dmitri finally turned round to answer him, he was smiling once again – his grin as bright and intimidating as the gleam of his Marx pin.
‘No questions. It was nothing,’ he said. ‘Nothing that need concern a singer. Nothing that need trouble him at all.’ ■

Poetry

Sang at Hinnerend

SHEILA TEMPLETON

It wis a coorse day, an orra day
icy girse sypit unnerneath oor feet.

Twelve o us, the lair opened, cooncil mannie hoverin
Anything at all you want to do or say is just fine...
your ash in a plastic urn, inside a Tesco bag
aabody lookin at the grun.

A poem seemed a gweed thocht.
Hamewith – the road that’s never dreary
back where his heart is aa the time.
But it wisna richt for you.

An a meenit’s silence. *Onybody got a watch?*
says sumbody, tryin tae lichten the load.

Sae monie things unsaid. Sae monie sangs
we hud nae hert tae sing.

We cud hae telt o Sunday walks, winnin up that hinmaist mile
lik pilgrims – tae marvel at *the elephants* scored in stane
these Pictish beasties, safe ahint their iron bars. Or tales o bogles
roon the watcher hut, saicret windaes maakin siccar the deid bade safe.
Ootbye the farrest dyke, liftin tatties for bigsie Howard, sniggerin at his posh weys.

Lang-geen days jinkin in an oot these freenly stanes,
their story o screeven names in lichen-gowd – faimly
– yet a warld awa fae us. Distant, then
as the wheelin peesies aboon oor heids.

An aye aneth the kirk-yaird
the lang sang, the sheughin siller
o the clair tumblin Don.

Reading a Poem at My Brother’s Grave

ENGLISH VERSION BY A.C. CLARKE

A chilly day in spring, a grey day,
a wind off the Channel tears at our hair.

Four of us by the new-dug grave,
no-one close by.

We look at the ground, at each other.
Someone says a prayer.

We could have talked about the days
we came to this coast on holiday
wading the fine sand of dunes
spiked with marram, tumbling castles
out of our plastic buckets.

Or that day
– it seems years ago – when you stood with us
at this very spot as our mother’s coffin
was lowered. Her stone already
shows signs of weather and the rose
we planted straggles round the once clearcut
inscription. You’ll be her neighbour now.

I start to read the poem I’ve written.
A sudden squall dowses my voice, batters
the ground. It’s over in a minute.
Above us gulls are crying; in the distance
the long-drawn sigh of the sea.

Fonn a’ Cho-dhùnaidh

GAELIC VERSION BY MAGGIE RABATSKI

Latha gruamach a bh’ ann, latha robach,
gaoth nimheil a’ tighinn bhon ear.

Sinn nar fichead a’ seasamh mun cuairt sa chladh,
cuid a’ cagair ri chèile, cuid nan tost,
cuid a’ coimhead o dhuine gu duine
ach cò bha ’n ceann na cùise.

Mu dheireadh thall sheas fear gu taobh
is theann e air dàn a leughadh...

Romhainn ach an t-slighe chaol,
an t-slighe chorrach. An rathad dhachaigh.

Ach cha robh do sheirm-sa innt’.

Rinn cuideigin an uair sin ùrnaigh,
an dàrna leth dhith caillte
ann an trod feannaig’.

A liuthad sgeul a dh’fhaodadh aithris,
a liuthad fonn gun chridh’ an seinn.

Làithean cian a’ coiseachd rathad a’ mhonaidh
null a Bhorghasdal, spòrs a’ mhullaich
bhith tomhas air ainm gach eilean beag sa Chaolas–
Gilasaigh, Gròdhaigh, Sgarabhaigh, Langaigh.

No falbh sgrìob air feasgair Sàbaid
gu eaglais àrsaidh Chliamain, a choimhead
air Alasdair Crotach ’s an tuam faoin-ghlòireach
a dhealbhaich e dha fhèin;
esan is am bàs san ràith ud
fada bhuainne.

Ach dlùth fad na h-ùin’ oirnn,
is an tuireadh a lùiginn dhut
san àite lom seo,
òran mathasach mòr a’ Chuain Shiair.

THE DEAD SHEEP is on my mind, the lamb half born, stuck out at an angle, unfurled and tiny; the sea, the gulls, oblivious.

‘A good Highland Image, a dead sheep,’ D remarks.

‘Ach, but the tourists will no be wanting it on the postcards, an creutair bochd.’ L turns away.

‘We’d better away up and tell R.’

And what has it to do with the round of the bay, the rocks turning red in the rust from the pipe, the oystercatchers, stupid and agile? Can all this be reconciled? Recognised as the shadow of something else? The gulls diving into their own reflections without mercy, the suck of the salt water through the pebbles, as the two men walk up past the sheep to the derelict place. Sheep stand in cattle pens, feeding troughs, on silage bales, huddled; they’re not oblivious.

They’re going into the house now, R opens the door for them, and they’re away in.

What had it to do with it that R drank away his wife and his children, or that L denies he has a father, or that M is off with the Jehovahs now, or that D is come up from Rodel to try and talk some sense into the man? What has all this to do with the sheep? Everything out here is thrown into sharp relief, people cast shadows and stories far longer than themselves.

Away through the gorse, seldom flowering this far west, a skeleton lies beneath a skeletal branch, I come up on to the hill and beyond the herd I see the pale of the Mainland, a print on the horizon, shimmering.

Down in the cove the rocks are hot, the tide out. A place for thinking. Aye, this is the place.

And still the sheep is on my mind.

The soft glimmer of the mossy seaweed beneath the slick ripples, the dulse in ecstasy, the water purple and murmuring. Tiny violet swirls between the stones, husks of wee crabs, bottles, jetsam, smoothed wood, a boot (and the other?) and myself.

And perhaps the sheep is important after all. Part of the whole, grim, angular circle of life, unavoidable, mundane and devastating. And I’m part of it too. Part of a story with edges familiar and sharp, retraced, resteped, relived out here generation after generation.

I squelch back over the soggy meadow, the sheep disperse; down through the gorse, my eyes avoiding the skeleton. As I walk into the muddy yard old Cherry lifts her head and with a faint wag, she sighs. She remembers me at least.

The yard is older, caked in browns, everywhere machinery rusts, almost visibly, tools and straw lie scattered, the miscellaneous savings of a lifetime.

Why am I here? What has this place to do with me now?

Clenched into a numb panic I push open the door.

I’m away in. ■

Poetry

Three States of Melancholia

A.P PULLAN

1. Comb Jelly Fish, Isle of Kerrera

Puncturing cautiously the skin
between its universe and mine;
a box frame of air.

I think of my lungs inside me.
I think of my heart inside me;
its valves, a tick, a life.

I kid myself that being could be so simple
as there is still the struggle: the tide taking it
from where it may wish to be.

2. Tower shell (Turritella communis), Loch Nevis.

It lay in my hand for you to inspect;
a gift instead of the tweed.
But it was lost, ill at ease
in the white of the bathroom,
the kitchen’s quiet words.

3. Common Bottle Nose Dolphin, North Minch.

I worry too much. Like this train
could leave its tracks, sled to a halt.
Or the teenage dad with three weans
one straddling his knee, sharing an Irn–Bru;
what tracks are laid for these?
In between the landscape of goods shed and
industrial flotsam, I share the video; a super–pod
and there in the smile of father and son
that unconformity between the real world
and the one that we hope for.

Scotland’s Hidden Gems

HUGH McMILLAN

In the hotel here there’s a painting
of Eilean Donan Castle,
as if that merciless piece of tourism
had been transported to the Rain Forest.
Huge spoons of leaves loll round the eyes
as they peer through lush and savage trees.
Though by an amateur it is a work of genius,
and how I long to see her other work:
the Scott Monument in the Marianas Trench,
furred by barnacles and occasionally
illuminated by electric fish;
Balmoral on the surface of the sun;
the Duke of Sutherland’s statue
inverted down some giant toilet bowl.
I’m not the artist, but I’d call the series
Scotland’s Hidden Gems.

Girl on the shore

JON PLUNKETT

She’d left for the shore,
exploring the sea–washed bones,
frayed nets, faded bouys,
her own independence.

Now I’m tilting a telescope,
and find her, a small figure
making her way inland,
The Minch wild behind her.

I twiddle the focus,
see how she jumps
a ditch, climbs a fence,
wind–blown, elegant and free.

I can find no adjustment
on the scope,
to still the vibrations
from a quickened heart.

Mrs Bavelaw’s Bothy

(after a painting by Daniel Campbell)

EILEEN CARNEY HULME

He likes to leave the windows
open in all weathers, the bothy
trapping dust motes of each
season. Cape of snow, blue–black
clouds, flirty sun, drifting scent
of fresh cut grass or evening
honeysuckle. Habit plays the radio
spider–threads glint by the lintel.
The door ajar, ghosts fly in
as though they always belonged.

The Sanday Child

ELIZABETH ANGUS

Nothing but a boulder in the banking.
A stone coloured half dome,
sheltered by a slipped wig of overhanging
turf. Then the eye catches on
little stratified layers,
resolving into ochreous ribs.

Your peace is gone.

With every painterly sweep of the brush
the very bones of you are discovered
from the sand. The boulder becomes
the back of a skull, face still buried
in its earthly bed. Sleepyhead,
reluctant to awake.

Exposed from grainy cover, you lie
tucked up tight, back to the sea
and blind to the life you have left.

These curled legs don’t run any more
over windbent grass to the strand, and your ear,
once filled with the song of the lark in the soft air,
is deaf against your hand.

But now it’s time to get up.

We look carefully into your fragile face
and you stare grittily back,
teeth bared, head overflowing
with four thousand years of the
sandman’s sleep.

The Hidden Place

POEMS BY LINDSAY MACGREGOR

Whaup

Her plumage is old fashioned,
patented by 1950s Beaker People
decorating collared urns in colours of the River Styx.
Or else
she's camouflaged for travel to the underworld.

Her beak might make a decent awl.
Its curvature can probe the mud of intertidal saltflats
for hermit crabs and ragworms after winter inundations.
Or,
in the breeding season, it could stitch a hero legend to
red earth.

Her expertise in dolefulness is signalled in the
semaphore
of measured flight, as though she's flagging down
a fallen angel summoning a storm. Or
thirty years' monogamy is twenty-nine too many.

Her call is liquid
sifted from pale moonlight on the machair,
an omen for the seafarers and peat-cutters
and compass-bearers. Weather's on its way.

Peewits

You arrived like Puritan preachers
in snowfall at night to feed
by the last of the light
in the field of the Covenant.
Did you read from Leviticus,
chapter and verse, before
your sudden conversion?

Next season you rose
in a chorus of zithers
and swanee slide whistles,
born-again Cavaliers, frock-coats
by Prada, male fascinators,
Mannerist acrobats falling
for pleasure to answer the call.

Creag a' Ghobhair

You could tell from the look in her eye
it was only a matter of time
before she went feral.

While the rest of the herd nibbled
harebells and woodrush on slopes
north of Rogart

she made a bolt for the buckthorn that grew
like a glut by the ocean, sick
of the seasonal sex.

Bizzart

Ya cockeyed eejit.
Am naw an aigle.
Thon's a glaikit
bawheid o a teuchter,

fleen aroon the bens an cleuchs
aa in a dwam.
Me, ah hing
abune the haughs an leas

o muirit yowes fae keek o day
tae thole ill wather,
wheep, an practise
sel control, a happit

shaman's shaman in ma yoke
o banes. Efter, on a stob tap
in sittin meditation, ah cultivate
the wull.

Ballachly, October 8th

When Nechtan sent a henchman,
adders tattooed on his heart,
to tell her how he'd fallen
for the beauty of her eyes,

she eased them from their sockets
and presented them like emeralds
on a platter carved from alder
by the floods of Dunbeath Water.

As if that could staunch her
want. With regret, she'll cure
the vision of anyone who asks.
St. Triduana's an example to us all.

Frigga

These days, I overwinter
where nobody knows
the meaning of money,
splitting the difference
with women called Lilith,
leaving the Corpse Eaters,
zealots and preachers
to battlefield tours and tin
tabernacles, a cardinal sin
on the tip of my tongue
as I head for the hills
with arrows of mistletoe,
bringing the darkness to light.

Mackay Country

Beyond the piles of fire-cracked
stone, the butchered bones,
the goldfield years and Adder's
Tongue; beneath the Merry Dancers,
cup-marked rocks west of Brora,
dates of the drowned men
scratched on slate,
Scots Lovage by the River Naver,
the weight of slag from the tidal cave,
the hidden place, the cradled grave.

Seepage

Only nymphs remember
when the jawless fish grew
limbs and ventured into Easter Ross

to live like rabbits there, hidden
from the Hammermen and Cat People
who creep around on blanket bog,

trapping other relics of an early-onset
Ice Age, heading for a breakdown
now they've reached the outer limit

of their range with nothing
to hold on to but the words of charismatics,
resuscitating mosses as they pray for saturation.

Sweet Gale

I know when I'm nearly half-way home –
the scent of resin on late summer air
pierced by the peewit's risen call,
a small catechism, like the point of a spear
into innocent skin, as if Frigg had crushed
a torn piece of dusk between finger and thumb,
a reminder of nothing or lingering love.

What the Wind Dragged In

A replica of days gone by
A gimlet eye

A flapper dead before her time
A salt-spray rhyme

A clutch of pink-faced underlings
A missing diver's missing ring

Digressions from a fuselage
A trailer-load of velvet crabs

Seaworn glass from the muster-station
Blackbacks' trite recriminations

A township turning in its grave
Their all-night rave.

Blood in the Heather

Josephine Tey and Highland crime writing

By JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON

THE GOLDEN AGE of crime writing in Britain was the inter-war period, and Inverness had one of the finest exponents of the genre in Josephine Tey. Josephine Tey's eight mystery novels have been in print since the publication of *The Man in the Queue* in 1929, and she has been hugely influential – yet, until recently, she was considered something of an enigma: the mystery writer who was a mystery herself.

The key to Tey's mystery is the Highlands. Her real name was Beth MacKintosh, and she was born, bred, and resident for almost all her life in Inverness. In the early part of her writing career, she was the author of the play *Richard of Bordeaux*, which was a smash hit in the West End of London, making a star out of its lead actor and director, a young John Gielgud. Journalists clamoured to interview the new playwright, but couldn't, because Beth had got the train back to Inverness.

Family responsibilities kept her in the north, and her audience – both in her lifetime and more recently – struggled to reconcile their mental image of a Highland woman with the wide-ranging novels that she produced.

The first and the last of Josephine Tey's crime novels are the most overtly 'Highland' in theme. In *The Man in the Queue* detective Alan Grant is faced with the puzzle of a man who has been stabbed to death in the midst of a busy crowd in London. The action moves north as Grant follows his suspect into the Highlands. Tey was a frequent traveller on the train from Inverness to London as she pursued her double life of Highland domesticity and London culture, and she described the journey vividly, transitioning between the bustling city and the stark Highland landscape as Grant studies maps of the area. She drew on her knowledge of her father's home in Applecross to write Grant's Buchan-esque chase through hills and by lochs.

In her final, posthumously-published book *The Singing Sands* Tey takes Grant on another journey in the sleeper train from Euston, and also, this time, further west on a plane to the islands. The landscape in this book is as vividly described, but Tey's strength was always as a writer of character, and Grant's journeys are motivated partly by his struggle to understand himself: he is suffering from nervous exhaustion. Along the way, he engages with the Highlands in a different manner, as he comes across 'Wee Archie', an ardent Scottish Nationalist. *The Singing Sands* was published in 1952, but Tey was remarkably prescient in seeing how important the rise of Scottish nationalism would be, and had some sharp remarks to make on the Highlands' role in this. She strongly disliked any over-romanticisation of the Highland landscape or of the Gaelic language, and was very clear on the differences between the Highlands and Lowlands.

The Singing Sands is a fascinating book for many reasons, including its place in relation to other books in the Scottish literary canon.



Photograph of Josephine Tey by kind permission of the Paterson Collection
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It is startling to realise that Josephine Tey is almost an exact contemporary of Neil Gunn. They lived and worked in the same place at the same time, and read and responded to each other's work, yet Tey, although she is revered within crime fiction circles, is almost never cited as the major twentieth-century Scottish and Highland author that she is. As I explain in my biography of Tey, *The Singing Sands* is, in part, a response to Neil Gunn's one attempt at something like crime fiction in *The Lost Chart*. Both Gunn and Tey had begun their careers by writing literary fiction, but Josephine Tey's career had expanded as she wrote plays, short stories, poetry, and even Hollywood scripts. She eventually found in crime fiction "a medium as disciplined as any sonnet", and pushed the genre to new heights with her astounding run of novels published after the Second World War, including titles such as *Brat Farrar*, *The Franchise Affair* and *The Daughter of Time*. The latter, which treats the historical mystery of Richard III, was voted the best ever crime fiction novel by the Crime Writer's Association in 1990. *The*

Franchise Affair came in eleventh place in the same poll: two novels by the same Highland crime writer judged to be among the best in the genre. Tey's novels have been adapted for radio, film and television, most notably by Alfred Hitchcock, and continue to be popular and influential today.

During the Golden Age of crime fiction, when Tey started writing, the classic setting for a crime novel was an Agatha Christie-esque English village. In this world, Scotland and the Highlands were mainly seen as an exotic holiday destination. As the British Library's excellent current series of classic crime reprints shows, writers such as Anthony Wynne, in one of 2015's Christmas bestsellers *Murder of a Lady*, used Highland backdrops as exotic locales, complete with scary castles, traditional kilted pipers and simple locals. John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* was much imitated in its use of a chase through the moors – though, of course, in the original novel Richard Hannay gets the train from St Pancras to the Borders. It is only in the Hitchcock film adaptation, with its

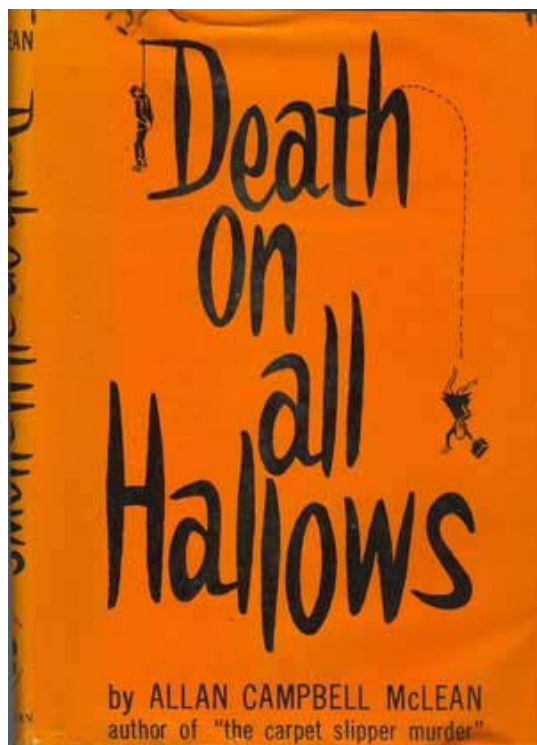
memorable scene on the Forth Rail Bridge, that Hannay boards the train from London to the Highlands. The journey from the centre to the outskirts, however, is one of the most repeated plots in Highland crime fiction. John Buchan was also referenced directly in Andrew Greig's *The Return of John Macnab*, and its sequel *Romanno Bridge*, which starts in Rothiemurchus forest, though returns to the Borders.

The Thirty-Nine Steps celebrated a hundred years since publication in 2015, and last year also saw the anniversary of a Highland novel which drew on some of Buchan's imagery. *The Hill of the Red Fox* by Allan Campbell McLean was first published in 1965 by Collins, and its 60th anniversary was celebrated by current publisher Floris with a competition to redesign its cover, with a spec to make this Cold War children's mystery relevant to a modern audience. It is a superb book by a writer who excelled at capturing the rhythm of speech and life in his adopted home of Skye. Duncan Mòr is one the great heroes of Scottish children's literature. The book has been adapted for radio and television, while a 2007 documentary on McLean, broadcast on the BBC, described how the author lived, with total commitment, in a rugged croft in the world he described in his children's books.

Although McLean is, deservedly, best remembered these days for his work for children, he was also a writer of what he called 'Entertainments': adult crime fiction very much in the thriller vein. Titles include *Death on All Hallows*, which, with its lurid cover, tells the story of a Hallowe'en mystery solved on Skye by Detective Inspector Neil MacLeod. McLean has a lot to say in this story of an incomer laird who appears to be being intimidated by crofters as he tries to push through unwanted improvements to his estate. A political activist with a particular interest in prison reform, McLean's other book for adults was *The Glass-House*, a description, drawn partly from personal experience, of life in a military prison at the end of the Second World War. In its unflinching detail, it makes for uncomfortable reading.

Crime fiction during the inter-war period and just after was often written by people who had experienced war and its aftermath, yet the Golden Age of crime fiction is marked by the analytical nature of its puzzles, with violence glossed over as the reader heads towards a tidy conclusion. Post-war, the genre embraced deeper development of character, while the overriding tendency of more modern crime fiction is towards forensic and gruesome description of the act of murder and its scientific solution. Many of the 'Tartan Noir' writers are based in the Central Belt, but their detectives regularly journey to the Highlands. Lin Anderson has connections with Grantown, and her forensic scientist Rhona Macleod ranges widely round Scotland, from Glasgow to Orkney, for example in *Paths of*

the Dead. Christopher Brookmyre lived for a time in Inverness, and *One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night* uses the original setting of a decommissioned oil rig turned into a floating hotel, while his new Jack Parlabane book *Black Widow* is also set in the Highlands.. Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus has developed his connections with the north as Rankin himself has come to know his second home



of Cromarty, but it would be difficult to argue that Ian Rankin is anything other than an Edinburgh writer, no matter how much time he spends in the north. There are plenty of other writers, though, who write about the Highlands whilst living elsewhere, and their image of the north of Scotland is often the one that people remember.

Hamish MacBeth is one of the most familiar modern Highland crime solvers, mainly through the television adaptations of M.C. Beaton's books, but the series continues to proliferate. Written to an enjoyable formula, Beaton relishes the clichés of the red-headed Highlander. Her local descriptions, when not wholly imagined, can sometimes sound a little like a guide-book, but there is also the odd line that strikes true, such as in 2013's *Death of a Kingfisher*: 'Dingwall, perhaps the cleanest town in the Highlands, is blessed with many car parks.'

A good night out in Dingwall might stop one of the other recurring problems of non-Highland writers who set their work in the north: the constant depiction of Highland women as innocent, sweet and gentle beings, probably with long flowing hair and a touch of the Second Sight. It is possible for mothers in the Highlands not to be beautiful, cheerful and dead in childbirth; for church ministers in the north to be nice people who have the interest of their community at heart; and for people to live in rural communities in a state other than ignorance or sullen misery. These stereotypes are less jarring – though, with a bit of thought, still obviously wrong – in historical crime fiction, but some repeated tropes are still occasionally annoyingly visible even in modern crime novels. However they're dressed, Peter May's women do tend, in moments of stress, to become those typically silent, inscrutable Highland women who have some sort of knowing power, though

his hugely-popular modern Lewis-set trilogy of crime novels is excellent at describing and exploiting the landscape his characters range over, such as the disappearing loch at the start of *Chessmen*.

Two award-winning women writing about the Highlands give a different perspective. Black Isle-based S. G. MacLean won 2015's Crime Writers' Association award for historical fiction with her novel *The Seeker*. Her sense of time and place is terrific, and the smell of the coffee-houses of Cromwell's London percolates through the pages. MacLean has a PhD in Scottish History, and her books – particularly her first novel, the north-east set *The Redemption of Alexander Seaton* – capture the flavour of their times perfectly. Historical novels set in the Highlands are a popular sub-genre of crime fiction, and Alanna Knight's Rose McQuinn (*The Balmoral Incident*) is amongst the many detectives taken for holidays in the Highlands.

The second award-winner is Catherine Aird, given last year's CWA Diamond Dagger award. She treats her historical settings more lightly, and shows that the puzzle-based mystery has not gone completely out of fashion, with her slightly whimsical short stories set on the 16th-century Black Isle (as in *Last Writes*). Like all genres, 'crime fiction' can cover a huge range of work, from coldly analytical forensic noir to cosy crime to romantic fiction where the detective also gets the girl: the massive popularity of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* series shows that the image of the Highlands has a particular draw abroad, especially in the US, and there is a lot of well-imagined, well-researched writing about the Highlands going on in some unexpected places.

Josephine Tey's novels were issued at one point in Penguin's classic green covers, that sign of a publisher who produced quality crime fiction. As a Highland publisher, Sandstone have a diverse list, yet still maintain a distinct identity: Janice Brown's enjoyable crime thriller *Through Every Human Heart* is typical in having a certain generosity of character that seems to me to be Highland – as well as another chase north. And the Highlands can stake some sort of claim over the coolest Man from U.N.C.L.E. (and N.C.I.S.) David McCallum, whose fun debut crime novel *Once A Crooked Man* was published by Sandstone in January 2016.

Highland by birth, upbringing, residence, inclination or publisher: there are plenty of crime novelists to choose from in this area. At its best, Highland crime fiction, like Josephine Tey's work, uses the special setting of the north, the landscape and character, to push action and person forward. The Highlands and Islands, though, can be many things, from Ann Cleeves' *Shetland*, over to Peter May's Western Isles, Allan Campbell McLean's Skye or Chris Brookmyre's Inverness. Theoretically, now Inverness is a city, it would be possible to write an urban Highland crime novel – but generally, what links the crime fiction of the north is the landscape. As Tey's detective Alan Grant said in *The Man in the Queue*, the Highlands are 'very like the rest of Britain, only more beautiful.' ■

Poetry

Yellow raspberries

BETH McDONOUGH

High, you hide behind spent
camellias, lost amongst shot
knock-over artichokes. Damp
in this sage-bruise air, hung
under yellow wilt
ready weary for winter. You have
no sense, no damned business here.
Creamy, gilded. Almost iridescent
whiffed through whisper no light. Berried
November. This month, loose
grasps everything fallen, everything gone.
I kick over garden rot
clamber; pull
your possibilities
quick to my mouth.

Snow Bear

FLORA SINCLAIR

For six weeks that winter
it snowed through every night.
The oldest of my neighbours
said they'd never seen such weather.

It made me nervous
and I would wake often
in the hours when the spirit thins,
go to the window and watch
the snow's relentless frenzy
eddy round the streetlights.

It was in my dreams too,
pressing close laced with portent
like a voice in the wilderness calling.

Sometimes I'd glimpse far-off
through flickering shrouds,
a great white bear treading silently in the mirk
on some path of her own.
With a rolling slouch of shoulders or rump
she raised each vast paw, then let it fall
hopelessly burdened by the awkward claws.

I expect she was going about her hunting.
I expect she thought she was alone
those nights in the swirling snow.

Poetry

February

A walk round Montrose Basin, Angus
LESLEY HARRISON

Usan

the sea leads through a gap in the dyke,
down to a beach
where land begins to rise and fall.

Rossie Moor

gradually, in listening, you empty
into the turf.
at last, here are the birds.

Boddin

a curved boat
a curved, grey ocean.
the ocean, its continents of dark.

Mound

stones ring
with the thump of cloud.
a blackbird, dead in flight.

Dun

among twenty snowy mountains,
the only moving thing
a windmill, blinking.

Street

a phone is ringing:
birds whistle overhead,
whole trees full of words.

Slacks

and three swans,
dropping out of the current,
muffling their wings.

Ferryden

an icebreaker is moored
between the houses.
a huge effort in this silence.

Mill Pool

stirring with high clouds,
grey and silver white
like a hole in the sky

Scurdie Ness

a north wind blanches the ocean.
here, at its farthest edge
a yellow rose, a red sparrow.

Dyke

a civil twilight.
the sun now below the hill,
the first stars just visible

Sticks Burn

a string of yellow lamps.
a hill burn, gulping down.
a deer lifting into the forest

Mid Life Crisis

JANE FRANK

All the good men have gone.
They cycle in an arc under the moon,
their lycra ablaze in starlight.
They know where they are going.
They don't look down.
Below, women and children
crane their necks and jab fingers
but this time they're not
taking a Sunday ride to Nudgee Beach
or up Mount Coot-tha,
or meeting for coffee to compare
carbon composite shoes.
The Cycling God is piping them
across the mouth of sky
and soon the clouds will open
and take them in their
finest pink and yellow
DayGlo glory.

Life & Death in a Northern Climate

STUART A. PATERSON

It's all downhill from the Aultnamain Inn
on a Friday afternoon in 1995,
the Dornoch Firth a sluggish curclieue
lazing under snow-shaved braes,
a sky of purest Highland winter blue.

A wind with gold-capped teeth
snaps at my face as down the hill
I slalom into Edderton, awash with
dodgy 12 year-old Auchenlosh,
defying record wind chill
& a temperature of -23, gravity
today a well-met friend for me.

Folk have died in these conditions
they'll tell you, been found rigid
under trees, in roadside sheughs
contorted into Dali-esque positions
by such cold. But I am tough,
hewn from countless generations
of a breed well used to out-staggering
death with every lurch on days
like these, every hard-won breath
a white refusal to be brought
to creaking knees by something altogether
as banal as freakish weather.

Back home later, heated by
a wood fire, Talisker, pickled fish,
I dwell upon the myth of Scottish bravery,
close eyes that have only just stopped running,
stretch out legs still galloping away
from what the news reports as
Wester Ross's worst storm in a century,
pump the air with spectral fists.
Being dead doesn't get any better than this.

Broadside

(The Anarcho-Oneiric-Quietist Manifesto)

The sublime is now - Barnett Newman

BY SEÁN MARTIN

OLD MAP: NEW territory. Its folds,
names in dialect obscured by creases,
its trap roads: doors leading out,
under coping stone and lintel. Listen to the
colour of your dreams. Live in the hallway, the
radio on in another room, between rooms,
between breaths, between one life and the
next. Your true face is the one you wear while
sleeping. In mirrors, fix your eyes on the

unfamiliar room over your shoulder, the new
room that appears in dreams. The traveller
journeys from dreaming to waking and rises
from your bed. Read aloud: the act of a bard.
Declaim, honour the forgotten and lost. Join
the mad, local prophets; people street corners.
Announce your own old testament wrath. Rail
against the confused god, idiot-maker. We have
fallen into fact. Announce the arrival of its

opposite. Paint your own masterpiece. Refuse
your fifteen minutes of fame: child be secret,
child be strange; cherish the flame. Cultivate
a garden none see. Denounce the unlettered
critic, the self-serving court pundit, the coffee-
house wit. The blind at a crossroads. Sound
but no fury, signifying nothing. All Cretans are
liars. Study the yet-to-be-remembered. Use
memory like super-8: a few scratchy frames.
Shoot on a stock more subtle. Jean Rouch
filmed African shamans, calling up spirits,
dancing their rhythms, raising hands to the
skies. Collect old wives' tales. Visit the upside-
down land of Gotham and talk to wise men
in the village of fools. Pass over the judgement
of the sane for the way of the cunning and the
moonraker. Inhabit the dark woods of fairy
tale. Learn the old seasons. Deck the halls,

dress the wells, traffic with the dead. Frequent
liminal places – bridges, beaches, fogs. Arrive
unexpectedly on an autumn day. Rise early in
spring. Celebrate the sudden rain, the black
cat crossing your path, four-leafed clovers
drifting like snow on the eider down. Hold
the solstice and the equinox, observe obscured
saints' days. Measure time by the moon's face.
Roads determine experience. Find the other
way, that old drovers' path, past the watermill,
the little chapel made of tin, a stand of beeches
like the wing of a cathedral. Follow the ghost
road, the spirit path, the track seen from the
corner of the eye. Travel by divination, by
chance. Arrival is over-rated; there is nowhere
to go. You are already here. There is another
world, and it is in this one. ■

‘Come on out for a walk.’

‘I don’t feel like it.’

‘It’ll do you good, a bit of fresh air.’

She sits there on the couch, hair slumped around her face. Why should she go out? She’s comfortable here. It’s warm, she has a good book to lose herself in and she doesn’t have to face anyone, anything. The living room is littered with debris from her day. Open books half read, empty crisp packets, smeared plates. The laptop beside her is on standby, one amber light blinking, its cable snaking into a shadowed corner.

He stands waiting at the door. ‘It’ll make me feel better. I’m a bit worried about you.’

‘I told you, I’m fine. I’ll be fine. I just need a little peace and quiet.’ She looks at him looking at her, undaunted. His eyes are lost in shadow, dark from sleepless nights. She sighs and pushes herself up from the indentation she’s made on the couch.

‘I’ll just splash some water on my face and put my hair up.’

When she reaches the bathroom, she looks for a moment in the mirror before opening it up. She’s pale. Thinner than before. Her dark hair forms a straggling frame around the harsh lines of her face. She leans in and pulls down one eyelid. Sticks out her tongue. Winces. Maybe she should brush her teeth as well before going out. She pulls her hair back into a ponytail. The bristles leave furrows in the lankness. When was the last time she washed it? Yesterday? The day before?

She looks at her reflection again.

Her joints ache by the time she’s descended the stairs to her husband holding her jacket open. Too long sitting around. Maybe, though she hates to admit it, he’s right. A stretch of the limbs wouldn’t be a bad thing.

They stand at the fork in the path. Upriver or down?

‘Which way do you want to go?’ he asks.

She tugs at his hand silently and he follows. Downriver.

She wonders straight away if she made a mistake. They’re face on into the wind. It’s March but winter is still clinging on, nipping at the air. Harsh currents snatch at her hair, pulling it out of its binding. Her cheeks begin to tingle and her breath catches. The clouds above them roll on by, quicker than you’d expect.

They walk hand in hand, following the river. Here, the path is bone dry, stripped of moisture by the wind. It drags across the Forth, ripping the water up into little jagged peaks.

The path dips down a little and follows the curve of the flowing water around a bend. There’s a trampled down patch of earth there with a couple of benches. In a few weeks, fishermen will start to use them. Maybe families too on picnics. They sit down on one and look around, still holding hands. Above them pussy willows are sprouting, their soft protective fur disrupted by yellow tendrils reaching up towards the sun. The wind gusts. Rough winds do shake...

The long grass lies flat to the ground and branches and sticks are strewn across the earth. The ground here is still wet and muddy from recent flooding. That’s life for you, she thinks. Ebb and flow, flood and drought.

Full and empty.

They stand again and walk on around the corner and the wind’s at their back now, pushing them along. She pulls her jacket

down against a sneaking eddy of cold air and her husband puts his hand there, holding it place. The abiding chill at the hollow of her back is warmed by his hand. She huddles in closer to him.

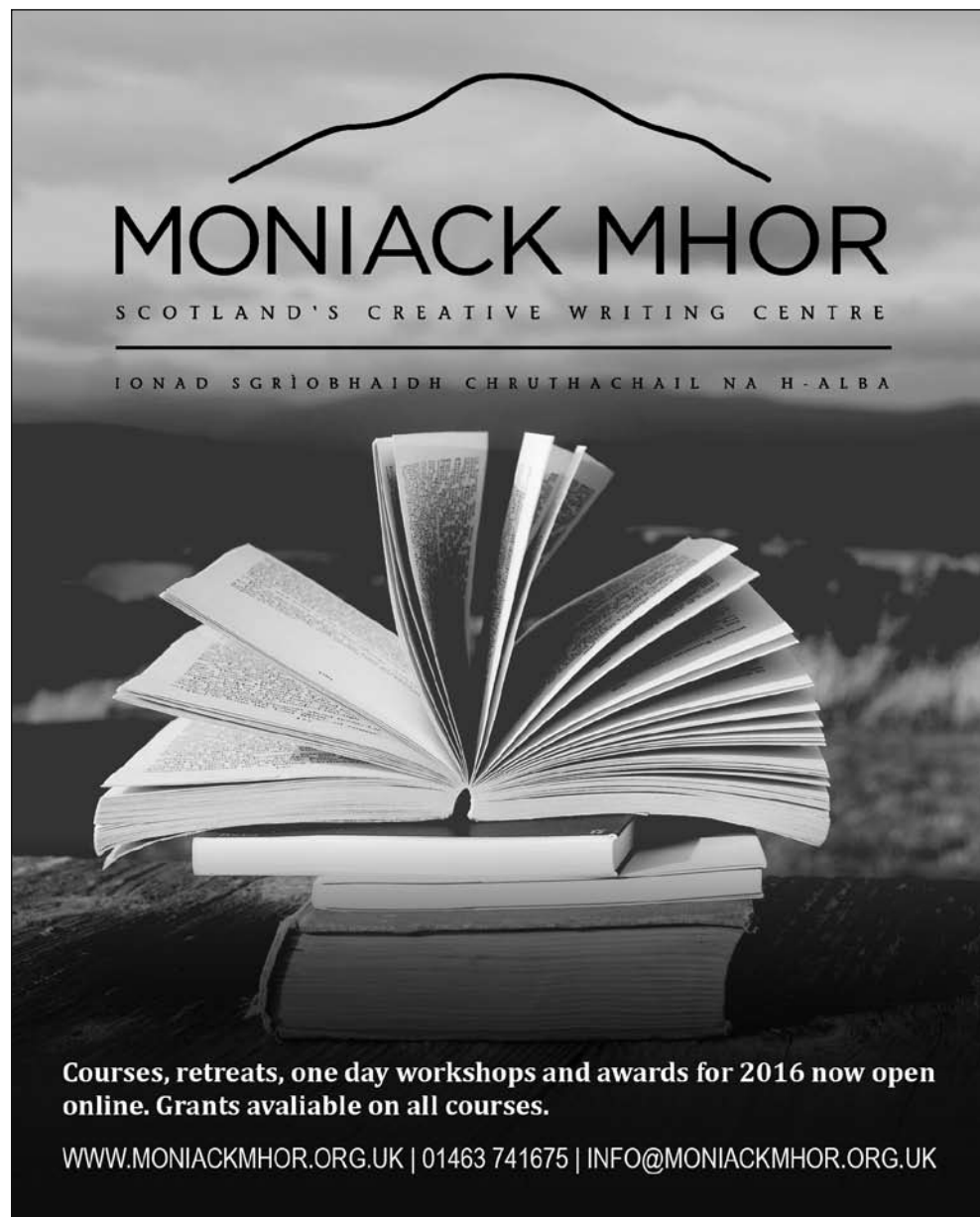
The tall reeds of grass look like autumn

wheat from a distance, golden yellow, their blades like full sheaves of corn. But in the clarity of the harsh early spring sunlight, close up, she can see their bareness. They’re not golden, just yellowed. Dry and lifeless.

Something black ripples up from the grass

As the River Flows

SHORT STORY BY LAURA TURNBULL FYFE



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in the distance. Just a quick flash. Either a black bag or a crow's wing. As they turn the corner, they see a few crows waddle to and fro conversing in a low, green curve of land.

‘Know what the collective noun is for a group of crows?’ she asks him.

‘Nope.’

‘A murder.’

‘A murder of crows?’

‘Yip.’

‘Jesus.’ He sighs.

She knows she’s being hard work.

‘And a group of starlings?’

‘No idea.’

‘A murmuration.’

‘Murmuration...’ He tries out the sound of it. ‘I think I like that one better.’

The river flows beside them.

An ice cream van, plinks and plunks from across the river.

‘Fancy an ice-cream?’ he asks.

‘You going to swim across the river to get me one?’

He watches as children run up to the van, jump up and down in the queue, stand on tiptoe to see what they’ll choose. Squeals drift over the river, caught up and distorted in the wind. ‘I would, you know.’ He bumps her shoulder gently with his.

‘I know.’ She smiles. She tiptoes around a muddy patch. ‘Go on then.’

‘What – now?’

‘You said you would.’

He stops and looks at the water. His mouth twists a little to the side as he thinks about it. ‘Hmm... got a wetsuit on you?’

‘Hold on, I’ll check my pockets.’

They smile. She offers her cheek and he kisses it before they continue. She leans down and snatches up a few blades of flattened grass. At their base, hidden by the weather-stripped yellow stalks, are tiny shoots of green. She draws them along the ground after them for a few steps before letting them float off in the drift of air around them.

‘Glass of wine when we get in?’ he asks her.

‘Could do, I think there’s a wee glass left in the bottle?’

‘Don’t know why you didn’t finish it last night.’

‘I got sleepy. It’s been a while since I’ve had a drink.’

‘Want me to go get another bottle for you?’

‘No, it’s okay. Best not.’

‘Why not take a rest for a while? Give yourself a chance to recover.’

‘Maybe.’

They round the last bend and return to the main road that leads back home. They walk down straight streets and past neat gardens.

He opens the door for her and pulls off her jacket. He holds his hands to her reddened face. ‘Toasty?’ he asks.

‘Toasty,’ she nods, and smiles.

‘Glass of wine?’

‘No, I’m fine. I’ll just go up and have a bath.’

He kisses her forehead and takes their jackets to hang up. Alone, she pulls one shoe off, then the other and walks up the stairs. She pauses by the door of one bedroom and looks in at the furniture laid out there, half made and abandoned.

Framed in the bedroom window, beyond the tree-lined path, the river flows on. ■

Urram dha gach nì tha beò

DÀIN LE AONGHAS PÀDRAIG CAIMBEUL

TO HONOUR EVERYTHING THAT IS ALIVE, POEMS BY ANGUS PETER CAMPBELL

Bodach na Gealaich

Bhiodh cànan eile aige. Caint
nach tuigeadh ar pàrantan,
làn rionnagan is dhealanaich,
‘s dh’atharraicheadh e cumadh:
rachadh e na choineanach.

Cha robh for aig air aifreann,
neo feum air briogais–ghoirid,
‘s chitheadh e chuile sion,
eadhan cìochan Chatriona ‘s rudan.

Na chadal fad an latha
agus sinne san sgoil. ‘S nuair
thigeadh an oidhche bhiodh esan air chois
a’ cluich tig eadar na sgòthan,
‘s mura b’ e gun do shuath sinn e,
bhiodh e air cluich gu sìorraidh.

The Man on the Moon

He’d speak differently. A language
that our parents had never heard,
that would be all stars and lightning,
and he could change shape: become
a rabbit.

Bet he never went to Mass
or had to wear short trousers,
and bets he could see everything,
even Catriona’s tits and things.

He slept all day,
while we were at school. And
when night came he stayed up,
playing tig between the clouds,
and if we hadn’t touched him,
he’d have played there forever.

–ina

Bha sinn air ar n-ainmeachadh
Aonghas is Dòmhnall ‘s Murchadh
às dèidh ar n-athraichean agus ar seanairean
neo bràithrean neo athraichean ar màthraichean
agus ma rugar thu boireann bha –ina air a cheangail riut
mar snaidhm mnatha, Angusina neo Donaldina neo Murdina
gus an àm an deach ar n-ainmeachadh uile mar Iàson neo Kylie
aon uair ‘s gun d’fhuair sinn lorg air a’ chlàimh òir taobh thall a’ chaolais.

–ina

We were named
Angus and Donald and Murdo
after our fathers or our grandfathers
or our mothers’ brothers or uncles or fathers
and if you were born a woman –ina was attached
like an umbilical cord, Angusina or Donaldina or Murdina,
until the time came when we were all called Jason or Kylie
once we found the golden fleece on the other side of the narrows.

A’ falbh

Tha an t-aiseag aig a’ chidhe
‘s nuair a sheòlas i
bheir i mi fad air falbh.

Dhan Òban,
far a bheil tràan
a Ghlaschu. ‘S aon uair an sin,
nì mi air Parkhead,
far a bheil aislingean air an coilionadh,

agus beachdaichidh mi ortsa
laigheadh sìos air a’ mhachaire rim thaobh,
gun sìon eadar
sinn agus pàrras.

Leaving

The ferry is at the pier
and when it sails
it will take me far away.

To Oban,
where there is a train
to Glasgow. And once there,
I will go to Parkhead,
where dreams are made,

and think of
you lying down on the machair beside me,
with nothing
between us and paradise.

Julia Herrier, aois 93

Air sràid chumhang
ann an Ieper
bhruidhinn mi ri Julia.

Chuir i nam chuimhne cailleadh
a chunna mi turas
an doras taigh an Ceann Phàdraig
na seasamh a’ coimhead a-mach
air ceò a Chuan a Tuath,

Fhad’ s a bha i coimhead
thog an ceò,
a’ foillseachadh muir gràin–ghorm
a’ las suas a h-aodann
mar leanabh.

Julia Herrier, aged 93

On a narrow street
in Ypres
I talked to Julia.

She reminded me of an old woman
I once saw in the doorway
of a house in Peterhead
standing looking out over
the haar enveloping the North Sea.

As she watched,
the fog lifted,
revealing a granite–blue sea
that lit up her face
like a child.

Bràigh Throsaraidh

Aon latha
coltach ri gach latha eile,
phut m’ athair mi
suas an cnoc air a’ bhaidhseagal,
mar bu dual.

Aon làmh mhòr a’ stiùireadh na diollaid,
an tè eile air a’ chrann. Thionndaich sinn,
a’ coimhead sìos a’ bhràigh, ‘s ruith e,
gach làmh a–nis air an diollaid
‘s tughadh taigh bean Lionsaidh a’ seòladh seachad

‘s an ath rud cha chluinninn brag a bhrògan
leis a’ ghaoith a’ sèideadh ‘nam cheann
‘s mi ‘g itealaich sìos, saor,
le sùil bheag gum chùl far an robh esan

mìltean is mìltean air ais
aig mullach a’ chnuic,
a’ smèideadh.

Trosaraidh Brae

One day
no different from any other day,
my father pushed me
up the hill on the bike,
as usual.

One enormous hand guiding the saddle,
the other balancing the handle-bar. We turned,
looking down the brae, and he began to run,
both hands now on the saddle
as Bean Lionsaidh’s thatched house flew by

and the next thing I couldn’t hear
his feet for the wind rushing through my head
as I flew down, freewheeling,
glancing back to see him

miles and miles away
at the top of the hill,
waving.

Mart Loch nam Madadh

Bha mi ann
an latha dh’fhosgail
a’ bhan-dia fhèin e, Diana.

A Dhia, bha i àlainn:
a falt ban a’ sèideadh sa ghaoith
agus a casan fada seang a strì ri stòtachd.

Bha i coimhead a cheart cho mach a àite
‘s a bhiodh an caochladh:
mart Ghàidhealach ann an Ceàrnag Sloane.

Smaoinich air àmhghar
a’ bheathaich air na cabhsairean coimheach,
a’ geumnaich airson feur a’ mhonaidh.

Bhiodh iad air na Bobbies a ghairm a-mach
agus air a buachailleachd air ais air ròpa
gu cluainean glas le sìth.

Bu choir dhìse cuideachd,
na bòidhchead,
a bhith fòs ri taobh nan aibhnichean.

The Lochmaddy Cattle Mart

I was there
the day it was opened
by the goddess herself, Diana.

My God, she was beautiful:
her blonde hair blowing in the wind
and her long slim legs striving to stay still.

She looked as out of place
as the reverse would look:
a Highland cow in Sloane Square.

Think of the distress
of the beast on the strange pavements,
mooing for its native heath.

They would have called the Bobbies out
and shepherded it back on a rope
to pastures green.

She too,
in all her beauty,
should only have been beside still waters.

Shuas an Staidhre

Chuala mi guthan shìos an staidhre
fhad’ s a bha mi ‘g èisteachd ri Luxembourg.
Inbhich a’ bruidhinn,
an guthan ìseal do-thuigsinneach,
‘s bha gliogadaich ghlainneachan ann
‘s gàireachdainn, is òrain Ghàidhlig,
‘s ghabh mi aithreachas gun robh dà àite ann.

Upstairs

I heard voices downstairs
while I listened to Luxembourg.
Adults talking,
their voices low and indistinct,
and there was the clnk of glasses
and laughter, and Gaelic songs,
and I regretted that there were two places.

Uncail Dòmhnall

Bhiodh e seinn na chadal:
‘An t-urram thar gach beinn aig Beinn Dòbhrain’,
‘s nuair ghabhadh e smùid mhùineadh e a bhriogais
gus am biodh sgòth ag èirigh air Beinn a’ Cheathaich.

Nuair phòs Maighread am balach à Lunnainn
thug iad cead do dha tighinn chun na bainnse
fhad ‘s a chumadh e sòbaire, sàmhach agus glan.

Agus air latha a’ phòsaidh,
na sheann dheise clòimh agus na lèine gheal
ghabh e tè mhòr
is leum na cnuic is dhanns na creagan
is sheinn na h-aibhnichean nan tuil le bròn.

Uncle Donald

He’d sing in his sleep:
‘An t-urram thar gach beinn aig Beinn Dòrain’
and when drunk he’d piss his trousers
till the steam rose like the clouds on Beinn a’ Cheathaich.

When Mairead married the boy from London
he was allowed to come to the wedding
on condition he remained sober, quiet, and clean.

And on the day of the marriage
in his old woolen suit and white shirt
he went on the spree

and the hills skipped and the rocks danced
and the rivers sang in floods of tears.

Aig Cladh Hallain

Tha mi tadhal air m’ athair ‘s mo mhàthair,
‘s tha iad a’ cur fàilt’ orm,
ged nach robh dùil aca rium
‘s ged nach eil sìon deiseil.

Tha aparan oirre-se ‘s i fuinne
‘s a’ mhin a’ còmhdachadh a gàirdein,
‘s tha e fhèin na sheasamh aig a’ bheinge
a’ locradh pìos fiodh: uinneag.

Tha an doras fosgailte agus troimhe
cluinnidh mi an ceòl: piobaireachd
a’ tighinn a-nuas an cnoc, agus saoil
nach e siud Fear a’ Chòta Ruaidh?

Bu mhath leam a bhith sàmhach,
ach tha m’ athair ag ràdh nach e seo
an t-àm. Seo an t-àm, tha e ag ràdh,
urram a thoirt dha gach nì tha beò.

Mar an t-eun beag ud thall air a’ bhalla.
Tha e falbh, ‘s mar as àirde dh’èireas
e ‘s ann is soilleire an ceòl. Dùisgidh
na mairbh nuair a dh’èireas na beò.

Tha sinn gar call fhèin a’ còmhradh.
Tha iad ag iarraidh orm fuireach, oir
tha an tì gu bhith dèanta, ‘s an leabaidh
uile deiseil, le cuibhrigean ùra blàth

ach tha mi ag ràdh gum feum mi falbh
is gun tadhail mi latha eile. Tha iad
a’ seasamh aig an doras ‘s a’ smèideadh,
fhad ‘s tha mi dùnadh a’ gheat’ às mo dhèidh.

At Hallan Cemetery

I call by to see my mother and father
and they welcome me in,
though they weren’t expecting me
and nothing’s ready.

She’s wearing an apron and is baking,
the flour covering her arms,
and he’s standing at the work-bench
planing a piece of wood: a window.

The door is wide open and through it
I hear music: piping coming
down hill, and isn’t that someone
singing Fear a’ Chòta Ruaidh?

I’d like to be silent,
but my father says this is not
the time. This is the time, he says,
to honour everything that is alive.

Like that little bird over on the wall.
It flies, and the higher it ascends,
the clearer the song. The dead shall
awaken when the living arise.

We lose ourselves talking.
They want me to stay, for
the tea is about ready, and the bed
all made, with new warm covers

but I tell them I must go away,
and will call back some other day.
They stand at the door, waving,
as I close the gate behind me.

Poetry

Suburban Gardens

JEAN TAYLOR

I love the clutter of suburban gardens.
Stray gnomes and wandering meerkats sniff
the city air; stone angels spread their laps
to catch old autumn's leavings, while crocuses
push up through scrubs of lawn, and quiltings
of fresh shoots threaten a burst of bluebells.

New leaves like pale green toffee wrappers rustle
and regimented flowerpots stand on guard
against ground elder's creep, the wild advance of garlic.
Beside the plastic wheels, stretched pink with weathering,
beside the leaking bag of forest bark, on the old chippings,
lies a perfect sparrow, waiting for the crows.

Beggar

After an etching by Pieter Kikkert, 1798
MARK O. GOODWIN

Bare headed, silver strands of hair hang
slack over his ears, his hunched shoulders
hinge forward. His knees bend and straighten

as his arms rise to his waist. A cap, like a shell,
is held in his left hand, the other grips a stick
that etches a cross on the ground, and the cloth

of his ragged shirt fills with a gift of wind.
We say nothing. And coins of sunlight spill
in the paper thin space between us.

Cùis-ghaoil

MEG BATEMAN

Mas cùis-airtneil mi,
cuiridh sin tàir' orm.

Mas cùis-aighir mi,
cuiridh sin tnuh' orm.

Mas aotrom an t-uallach mi,
nach eil annam ach dèideag?

Ma thèid an sùgradh an dèinead,
càit an tèid an gràdh?

Murdo Pipe

RODDY SHIPPIN

We pause
over scones:

your grace
muttered in Gaelic

drifts over
cups and plates

clasped hands
which once stacked

hay, sheared sheep,
helped dig

the road from
Urgha to Rhenigidale

will soon bunch
tobacco, like peat

into the pipe
which no other

pipe can match
and set it ablaze.

Under the wisps
you'll hunch

deaf to most
around you

eyes briefly twinkling
when you offer

my sister a puff
and intone *Ah well*,

she'll be expensive
to keep to dad

with mock solemnity
from your wheelchair.

Behind sits Cousin Norman
your son

face weather-beaten
and midgie-bitten

from chasing sheep
to the fank;

laconic features
and soft island vowels

showing nothing of
the miraculous morning

two months ago
when, against all prognosis,

he woke
with kidneys beginning to function.

Sunday Morning

JOANNA RAMSEY

Slow hymns sung in uneven rhythm
without joy. The prayers were brisk
but very acceptable – oh, and add
an intelligent sermon
well delivered from notes.

Then coffee and cakes dispensed
in the hall by hatted ladies. Where,
oh where, my God, were you?
Escaping down the steps I saw
you in the sky's shining glance,
the wedge of sea between chimney gables.

Ràithean a' carachadh.

MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR

Air latha 'Solas a' Gheamhraidh' –
air a chumadh,
is cuirt' am frèam fiodha aotram,
le caraid,
nochd an t-earrach.

mar:
espresso mhilis a' leaghadh air teangaidh ghlain;
cabadaich, gun strì, ris an fhear
bu leis an gailearaidh ùr soilleir;
glusad le saorsa àlainn air a feadh;
coimhead timcheall, gu mion,
fad deagh ghreis.

Mus deach caibideil de chlasaig Albannaich a ghlamhadh,
air waffles, le pailteas dhuilleagan Asaim,
an cafaidh car beag Frangach,
gun cus cabhaig,
is, gu h-obann, mothachadh air athair teann (theirinn)
a' putadh notaichean co-là-breith air nighinn, shomalta,
gan diùltadh.

'Dè an uimhir?' dh'iarr a deugaire fhèin, na èisteachd-san,
agus, gu dearbha, chan ann air cunntas a' bhìdh a bha a rùn.

Is, neo-ar-thaing cuairt dhan bhaile, air a deagh bheannachadh,
le blàths anmoch is smaointean measail Bharraigh,
ged a bhiodh glainne fion, gun dùil rithe, le companach gast'
air a' chùis fhàgail foirfe,
ach 's e la vie.

Air deireadh,
a bha am bus,
dinnte – sgàth thramaichean,
luma-làn,
is bhrùth is phronn
is leum is chrom
e
air ais is air aghaidh
le greann
ach
shuidh an dealbh, gu snog, dìonte,
air a chumail faisg, builg-chniadaichte,
àraid.

Is leig osna an sàmhchaire
na sineadh air a làthaireachd.

MY HEART SINKS when she tells me she can see angels, even though the autumn sunbeams are giving her a halo of her own as she gazes out across the sound – we’ve managed to get two of the window seats in this new place.

‘Have you always been able to?’ I ask, immediately hating myself. What am I, a journalist feigning innocent fascination to tease out a juicy answer from some barmy cult member? I feel fake and hostile, but it’s her that’s put me in this position. I mean why would you tell someone with a condition like mine that you can see heavenly beings but in your case it’s a special power? Only because you’re insensitive and arrogant, right? Either that or you’ve got an undiagnosed psychosis of your own; but I would doubt that in her case – her life seems too organised.

She tells me she’s had to develop the knack of spotting them over a long period. The other day she glimpsed one on the roof of the Legion as she was going past on the bus. I say how sorry I feel for it to have landed such a dull pitch. She says it’s not like being a Big Issue vendor; that same angel could have been in Shanghai minutes later.

She’s probably got a personality disorder, but fair’s fair, haven’t we all? I once had a nurse I really believed in, that she had it all down, completely sane. I was aware it could be transference, my admiration of her, but then she started hitting me with this stuff about spirit guides – I kid you not. So there’s a lot of it about.

This woman reckons she’s a druid, some sort of earth mother. She’s got an amazing poly tunnel. She also has a nice arse; I clocked it when she went to the bathroom. And I like her habit of sitting with one corduroyed knee clasped up near her chest and the sole of her sandshoe on the edge of the chair – girlish. Her hair flows down over her home-made jumper. There is a point when you are too old for really long hair and another when you are too old to colour it without looking grotesque, but she’s got a few years yet on both counts. I can think of her as a young woman because she is in early middle age and I am middle middle aged. Her last bloke was advanced middle aged and just as crazy as anyone, but well hard – macho, compared to me anyway. I’ve seen him out in the voe fishing from his kayak with a long line. The story is he got ‘early retirement’ after threatening someone with a heavy implement. She’s already told me she didn’t like his mood swings.

‘Are you like a white witch?’

‘I think I am more of a garden spirit... a fairy, a sprite. Yes, a fairy,’ she decides with a smile. Evidently fairies are more of a laughing matter than angels. ‘Actually I’m a water baby – I love the sea.’

‘Like a mermaid?’

‘No no,’ she frowns. ‘Don’t they lure men to their doom?’

‘You tell me.’

I imagine her on her tiny outer island, clambering over rocks and staring into pools. The locals will be watching through their binoculars, thinking here is another eccentric posh bint. Generally they don’t like incomers. They don’t like the rich bossy ones who take up crofting as a low impact lifestyle but spend the summer afternoons water skiing past their bemused sheep and resentful neighbours. And they don’t like the poor ones who come to escape dodgy pasts and hog all the social

housing they will need themselves when their marriages break down or they want to farm their teenage kids out to the council. This woman qualifies as rich, sort of; middle class but too damaged to have stayed at her proper level. I was at uni once but now work in a factory off and on, depending on the season and how many fish have been landed. So here we are, two misfits in a swanky bar with its sparkling view and she’s telling me all about hydroponics. If anything I would prefer to get us back onto higher entities but am not sure how to do it delicately so I offer to get another round in – a J20 for her and a soda and lime for me.

It’s unusual for two recovering alcoholics

Her last bloke was advanced middle aged and just as crazy as anyone, but well hard - macho, compared to me anyway. I’ve seen him out in the voe fishing from his kayak with a long line. The story is he got ‘early retirement’ after threatening someone with a heavy implement. She’s already told me she didn’t like his mood swings.

to arrange to meet in a boozer, but this is more like a café bar, so there are people eating and others drinking. For a second I am surrounded by a choir of angels, beautiful harmonies. They seem to have wafted in on the afternoon sun, all white satin and blonde hair, but on closer inspection it’s a crowd of girls dressed up as Abba, a henny bus bursting into song. They will stop at every pub on the main island. It’s quite a tuneful racket they’re making, but in a self-contained way, unlike the old style hen crowds who would rattle chanties and demand money of every man in the pub. I can feel them looking me up and down and sneering, which isn’t a good sign. I try to remember if I am up to date with my meds. I sometimes forget.

When I return with the drinks she asks if I think she is mad and I say yes, probably. She is watching as a ferry churns across to the neighbouring sliver of land with its lighthouse and old gun emplacements. There is a disappointment about us. She is on the hunt for a soul mate. In a city, that would be like looking for a needle in a haystack; up here it is like looking for the perfect partner in a haystack – equally unlikely, but at least you can call the search off a lot earlier.

‘Okay what would you say if I said I don’t see angels but I see demons?’ I ask her.

‘Do you?’

‘When I hallucinate it’s on the theme of evil...’ At this point I raise my voice to compete with screeches from the party

of girls. ‘Evil creatures laughing at me, so yes I suppose I see demons or devils. That’s a psychosis, though, not second sight or whatever you would call it.’

‘But apart from your illness – do you believe in evil?’ she asks, politely ignoring my insinuation that she is deluded.

‘You must do, if you believe in good. Angels are good, right?’

‘My angels could fend off your demons,’ she says, suddenly changing to a much softer tone.

‘That’s what clozapine is for,’ I say, but equally gently, apologetic because she’s trying to be nice and I would like to believe it. I want to connect but there is a familiar darkness

starting to come in at the edge of things. It’s not good timing. I already can’t recall her name. I’ve been open about my problems but that’s different from exhibiting symptoms.

One of the henny girls is approaching our table with the light at her back. She now looks like an alien emerging from a spaceship. I am putting a hand up to shield my eyes and hoping she is not going to address me directly, but thankfully she speaks to her. She is asking after an animal – I can tell it’s a kind of pet’s name. Apparently it is fine. They talk about its coat and personality for a bit and the girl goes away.

‘Her family sold me Misty.’ She is really happy on this subject, an old horse, a gray, which breaks into dressage routines at random moments.

‘You ride about that rock on a white horse?’

‘Is that weird?’

‘It’s quite an image.’ I am chuffed at myself for keeping the conversation going like this, but have no idea how I’m coming across. Does it sound like I’m taking the piss? I don’t mean to. It’s impressive, the thought of this knightess on a white charger. Unexpected competence does wonders for a oddbod’s aura. I remember coming across a guy from the ward out busking in a big shopping centre. I watched from a distance. It was ‘Hey Jude’, but classical style, delicate finger picking. I couldn’t believe it was the same person.

‘Do you wear a helmet?’ I ask. ‘I mean

blinkers. No, that’s the horse isn’t it?’ I’m playing a blinder here.

‘Neither of us wears any headgear. Suppose we should, eh?’

‘Don’t,’ I say. ‘More like Boadicea – the hair flowing back.’ The locals will defo be sure she is off her head.

‘You should come over for a ride,’ she says.

I raise an eyebrow, trying to detect irony, some crinkling of the laughter lines, but there is none. The fact that I can even do this, though, means I am coming through the wobbly moment, maintaining normal(ish) social functioning, appropriate effect etc. I’ve got her name back too, but it might be an idea to scribble it down somewhere discreet the next time she leaves the table.

‘That would be taken as a suggestive remark in some circles,’ I say.

She laughs. ‘Take it any way you want, but you’re very welcome to come back. My bus goes in ten minutes.’

I wasn’t expecting this. From social awkwardness farce to full scale tampon advert going on in my head: me and her galloping along a beach into a golden sunset.

‘Eh, I didn’t bring my toothbrush.’

‘Tesco’s is next door.’

I am also thinking, what if I miss my meds for another twenty-four hours? I don’t want to be freaking out on a remote island with no ferry for days in the equinoctial gales. Anything could happen.

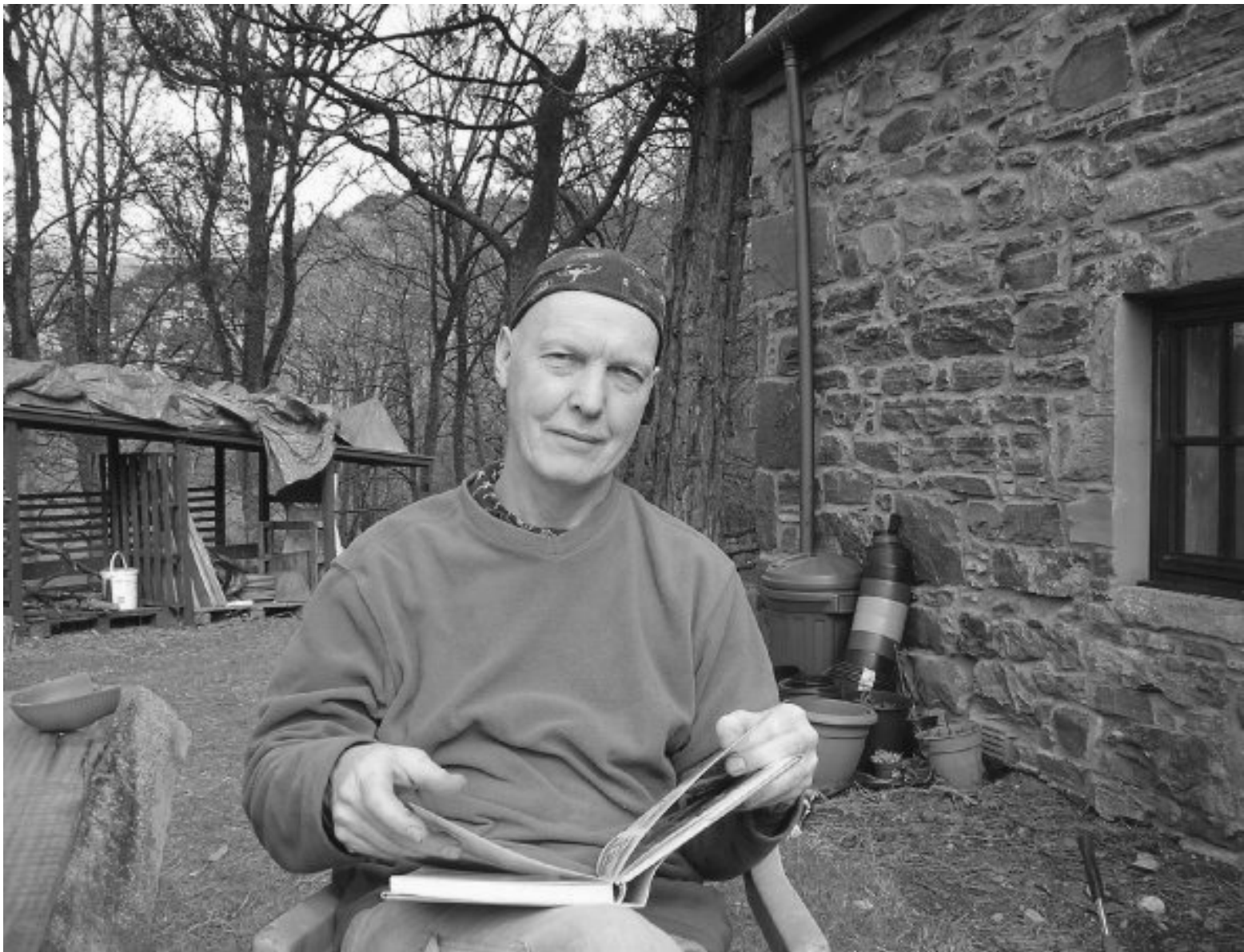
‘Okay,’ I say. ‘I’ll see you at the bus stop. Do we need anything else?’

‘Just ourselves,’ she says, putting on her jacket.

I feel for my wallet. I’ve not long been paid. So toothbrush, deodorant, maybe some decent pants. It’s chilly outside and just starting to get dark. She takes my hand – it’s a bit unannounced, clumsy, and sort of confirms my feeling that this is just not going to work, but I return the pressure. The Abba mob are climbing onto their bus. The one who spoke about Misty looks back. She is talking to another girl and laughing. They don’t like us. Maybe the white horse is a symbol of hate, like a white feather for a coward. It has a curse on it reserved for unwelcome strangers and mad people. But your woman knows nothing of that. She’s like an Indian squaw, strange and proud.

The words of a song go through my mind. ‘Did you think I would leave you lying, when there’s room on my horse for two...’ but I don’t say them aloud because I don’t wish to be associated with sexual deviance, the singer having eventually been imprisoned for such.

‘Hurry up, then,’ she says, squeezing my hand before letting go. It’s like we should give each other a peck, but, to my relief, we don’t. She walks along the pavement and I trot into Tesco, which is heaving. I am a bit wobbly and can feel my heart pounding. I need to keep the heid. I get my bits and bobs and stand in line, breathing deep. I can see her at the bus stop, yellow rain jacket gleaming in the dusk. She is looking towards me and then up the road towards where the bus will appear. It’s one of those moments in life when I know I am about to do the wrong thing. I get through checkout and jog over to her. It’s all good. We link hands again and I rest my cheek on the top of her head. The bus is coming. ■



Shoshin

DAVID CONNEARN

checking my attitude
toward a piece of wood

the weight of the plane
the effort given against
the leg braced round
the handle of the workmate

the sharpness of the point
of the pencil of the knife
the precise location here
in the universe

the balance of will
against desire to change
this into that without
obduracy impatience

each surface each
dimension finished

Note: The poem is a bit rough-hewn, but in the scheme of things that's alright. Having read High Country I've a feeling that it's the kind of liberty Angus allowed himself, a breather from the consummate craftsmanship of his prose. Shoshin is a concept in Zen Buddhism meaning 'beginner's mind'.

Homecoming

MAGGIE WALLIS

leaning in to the warm flanks of the oven
mum stirring the gravy

crouched inside boot polish dark
in the cupboard under the stairs
quieting to the heartbeat hum of the meter

crook'd in the branches of the yew
gazing out beyond my world

sailing in a boat of armchairs
across a floral sea, the green rug
a shelter from storms

tucked tight tight under my bed clothes
soaring in to the fresh darkness of a night sky

under this tree, rain pattering
drinking sweet tea from a thermos
and you nestled close to my belly

Note: I gave this poem to Angus for his birthday, quite a few years ago. We'd gone for a walk in the rain just after his father had died. It tries to capture the kind of ageless quality to time spent with him.

The Sha

Poems for Angus Du

As well as a superb writer of fiction with the original Northwords magazine, Angus Dunn would not exist without his energy and passion for the world of poetry. These poems have been collected by a friend of creative people throughout the world.

Everything in the Garden i

i.m. Angus Dunn

MOIRA FORSYTH

Everything in the garden is frozen
Frost has whitened walls and grass and trees

Everything in the garden is dead
the brown detritus of summer growth
stiff under the glitter of ice

We've had a year burdened by death
harrowed by the dispossessed
and the grieving, stunned by loss.

With a silent rush, the birds arrive:
beneath the apple tree, on branches, at the feet
the darting to and fro of chaffinch, robin, dove
a clutter of sparrows, and a pair of crows
I've not the heart to chase away –
all hungry, after all, in the freezing air

The garden is alive yet, with birds
coming down to feed, to reassure that
still within this frozen world
blood pulses, warmth persists.

the shape of a river

ANNE MACLEOD

he would have had ideas
about the shape a river offers
defining every rivulet
from source to sea
he would have held its pebbles
replacing each one gravely
with full recourse to chance
and history
he would have noted fish and fowl
the tumbling scum
each mussel in the gravel, each
fresh-formed pearl
he would have read the river
the rocks, the pools, the scouring flood:
he would have known
its name

pe of a River nn

n and poetry, Angus Dunn held editorial and management roles
azine and its successor, Northwords Now. Put simply, this magazine
y and passion. Angus died in September 2015 from Motor Neuron
ontributed to celebrate his many qualities as writer, editor and
ut the north.

is Frozen

Lagarostrobos Franklinii

IAN STEPHEN

From a cable or two
over water
the range of foliage
is like that in the tufts
on our own archipelago
up in the Hebrides
– colour in the soft tops
on old rock.

The graduations
within a general shade
we might call green.
A roll of swatches
as the wraithes pass.

Here, the myrtles don't lie low
but stretch.
Whatever the hemisphere
you see what you see
and imagine the rest.
Sometimes you get help.

I'm standing by a sawmiller.
He points to the shoots
– a portbottle green
in fallen Huon Pine.
But who can judge the extent
of birdseye speckling
in oiled yellow timber
built tight
from slow years?
Who can know
the decorative blackness
in burring sassafras
till the carcass is split

any more than we
can put our own fingers
to the scruples of
the ones who seeded us.

Note: I still have a board cut for me by Angus Dunn, from spalted beech. I use it to place breads and cheeses, to share. In Tasmania, I met Randall Morrison, a craftsman sawmiller who also writes verse. He took me on a boat trip up the Gordon River and showed me how he identified fallen Huon Pine. It was not only the shared interest in materials and language that made me think I would like to share this, with Angus, if I could. He had the gift of seeing things in this hemisphere as if they were in the other, new to him.

Angus

CYNTHIA ROGERSON

For a man who conjured up floating breasts the size of space ships,
And bike-riding ministers who became haddocks
And once titled a story about crabs: The Partin of the Red Sea
Angus had curiously little time for low brow fools.

He would roll his eyes if he heard me say:
It feels like you're still here.
Like an effervescent Vitamin C dispersed
In a glass of water, fresh from that high country source.

If I squint my eyes at the horizon,
Yes, there is still the pale giant breast,
And there also is his wide open face,
Amused and bemused as ever by the world.

Writers

PETER WHITELEY

Around this table we would gather,
stories, poems, plays, all straining at the bit.

He would fly in with his incense eyes
and lilting voice – precise and measured.

With his khaki bag and cardboard folder
with the date of every meeting written on its cover.

We would bring our offerings to this table
and read them loud, read them proud.

Then silence – measured silence, his head resting on pulpit hands,
he would give us his opinion.

What if he hadn't gathered us back then?
That poem, that story, that play would remain unwritten.

With his fading voice and dimming eyes,
He flew from us far too soon.

A Monk's Grave

Pluscarden Abbey, Elgin

JOHN GLENDAY

Most of all, it's the impermanence
stays with me: a grave staked
with a wooden cross

is intended not to last.
Even now the patient lichens
and the cushion moss

have started their good work,
erasing the first date and the last,
softening his name.

Life will always grow
from its opposite. In this country,
when the living is done

finely enough, even the cut
branch will promise fruit.

Poetry

Green Themes

from the Finnish of Pekka Kytömäki;
TRANSLATED BY DONALD ADAMSON

With arms wide open
the forest hears the uproar
in the cities.
It's always willing to accept
asylum seekers.

Flat calm covered in greyness,
silence wrapped up in cotton.
Someone rows a boat into empty space.
CLICK!

A pen goes off.

From the berry bushes
rich pickings
of rusty cans left by folk
with teflon for brains.

Close the borders!
Earth for the dinosaurs!
Mammals out!

The birds can see
what we bequeath –
plastic. It's a wonder
that they still
sing to us.

When I'm gone, and the wind
blows very softly –
listen, listen.

Uisken Beach in Spring

SETH CROOK

I declare: *this is Spring*. To those who say,
But this is January, in the Hebrides,
I say, *this is Spring*. To those who say,
You announced it in February last year

or, *You announced in March the year before*,
I say, nothing. Instead I lead by example,
wrapped up on the beach, gloves, flask,
wind-proofed coat, welcoming the change of season.

Melchior, am Farchluaisiche

(cuibhreann à dàn)
MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL

1
Tha seòrsa de thuigse a' tighinn air cò E,
Mar gum bithinn ann an ceò air mullach beinne
Agus an ceò ag èirigh beag air bheag
Agus slios bheag de sholas a' tighinn
Tro na sgòthan, ach fhathast tha e fada ro dhùmhail,
Slocan de dhìomhaireachdan gun ghrunnnd.
Tha e neònach a bhith an seo ann an Ierusalem
Às dèidh na thachair; tha e gam chur tuathal
A' smaoinichadh air a h-uile càil. Latha na Caingeis
Agus sinn an siud a' feitheamh ri dè? Cha robh fhios
Againn, ach an uair sin toirm gaoithe a' sèideadh,
Teangannan teine air cinn, a' tuigsinn
A chèile, air an lìonadh leis an Spiorad. Cò às?
Às a h-uile àite: Capadocia, Pontas, Àsia,
An Èiphit, Aràbia, Libia 's an Ròimh
Agus iad uile a' tuigsinn nan abstol, na Galilèich
Nan cainnt fhèin. Air mhisg? Cha robh idir,
Chan fhaca mi duine le buideal fiona,
Ach bha iad air mhisg ceart gu leòr
Agus mise mi fhìn, Melchior, cha mhòr
Gun creidinn na bha tachairt. Stad, smaoinich,
Agus gabh beachd. Carson a thàinig mi air ais
Às dèidh trithead bliadhna? Dh'fhaodainn
A bhith air fuireach ann an Saba, ach bha rudeigin
Gam tharraing air ais, rudeigin ag ràdh rium
'S e rìgh a th' ann, feumaidh tu tilleadh
Agus thu fhèin a rìoghachd fhaicinn, agus
Nam sheann aois shiubhail mi air ais
A dh'Ierusalem. H-abair turas, a Dhè,
Tha mi a' dol às mo chiall le seo!
Ach dh'fheumainn a dhol air ais, dh'fheumainn,
Feumaidh mi smaoinichadh air na thachair,
a' chiad agus an dàrna turas, oir bha dà thuras ann
agus 's ann mar seo a chrìochnaich e, no an ann?

2
Cuimhnichidh mi mar a thòisich e uile,
Mar a chaidh sinn nar triùir air a' chiad turas:
Bha siud iongantach mar a chunnaic sinn an reul
Agus mar a shiubhail sinn, turas fada
Air na càmhail tron fhàsach gu Damascus
Agus deas gu Ierusalem, a' leantainn na rèil,
Far am faca sinn Herod, an rìgh, na ghlòir
Mas fhìor. Ach 's iad na sagairtean is sgrìobhaichean
A dh'innis dhuinn far am biodh fàth ar turais,
Mac Dhaibhaidh, mar a thuirt am fàidh, Uachdaran,
Ann am Betlehem thèid a bhreith, rìgh nan Iudhach.
Thug sinn tiodhlacan dha, mar bha cubhaidh,
Caspar òg, thug esan òr, a' samhlachadh
Neo-bhàsmhorachd is fìorghlaine is fhuair
E dhuais, cridhe a' charthannais agus
Òr spioradail. Balthasar, thabhainn
Esan tùis, a' samhlachadh ùrnaigh
Is ìobairt, 's gu cinnteach fhuair e a dhuais,
creideamh làidir. 'S mu dheireadh mise,
Thàinig mi le mirr a' samhlachadh bàsmhorachd
Is fhuair mi mo dhuais, tha iad ag ràdh,
An fhìrinn ghlan is irioslachd – gum b' fhìor!

Broken Hearted

LAURA DONALD

I came home today
to find my
sister had shattered.
From what I could
discern, she'd been
dropped from a great
height, and smashed
on impact.

Her porcelain pieces
were everywhere,
fragments strewn across
the kitchen floor,
radiating out from
the breakfast bar
where I supposed
she'd been sitting.

I found bits
of her all over
the place.
Jagged shards I
gathered up gingerly,
careful not to
slice myself on
razor sharp edges.

Broken fingers in the sink,
a toe lodged behind
the microwave.
On my bent knee I
extracted hers from
underneath the stove,
flicking ooze off of
the delicate glazed ware.

Half a bright blue eye
I plucked out
of the sugar bowl,
the last sizeable chunk
I could salvage.
The rest, white specks,
I swept up with a
dustpan and brush.

A hollow hand
I found intact, lying
on the counter
next to her laptop.
Leaning in, I skimmed
the open email from
Brian, ominously entitled,
'We need to talk...'

Classy, I thought,
adding the name to
my list of enemies
as I yanked open
the nearest drawer
with a clattering clank,
beginning the rummage
for superglue.

The View from Lowrie's Burn

Essay by Ian McKechnie

'Vive l'Écosse Libre! Écosse oui!' We see a lot of strange graffiti in Montreal but these which started appearing in early September 2014 in our *quartier* of *Le Plateau* were a surprise. We were used to the occasional balcony sign for the 'Oui' left over from the 1995 referendum on separation, but French Quebecers supporting the colonizers? After all, it was kilted soldiers who scaled the cliffs at Quebec in 1759 and defeated Montcalm turning New France into British North America. It was Scots immigrants who monopolized the railways, the banks, the breweries and the tobacco factories to such an extent that Ken McGoogan (author of *How the Scots Invented Canada*) was able to proclaim with some justification that without the Scots there would be no Canada. In fact there was actual fervent support here for Scottish independence in the editorials of the French newspapers and in the letters to the editor. Several nabobs from the *Parti Québécois* (the equivalent of the SNP), including Premier Pauline Maurois, made royal visits to Scotland expecting to be hailed as fellow sovereignists but they were politely ignored. Scotland was seen here as a fellow victim of the Anglo yoke, and that view was shared by many of the Scottish diaspora across Canada as well. In fact it is probably this view of Scotland brought over by cleared Highlanders which allowed Scottish influence to pervade our culture as an acceptable influence because it was not the culture of the colonizer. Alistair MacLeod's well-received novel *No Great Mischief* trades on this anti-English sentiment in the very title of his book which is taken from the alleged words of General Wolfe before Quebec when recommending the use of Highland troops at the forefront of his army because there was 'no great mischief should they fall.'

Last October I was visiting Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Arts when a copy of *Northwords Now* caught my eye. A sucker for anything literary and free I picked it up and walked down Sauchiehall to the nearest Costa coffee shop and sank into a comfortable fake leather chair to read about the world of Scottish writing safe from the cold wet weather that I had learned to call dreich. Opening to page three I read Ian Stephen's review of Michael Crummey's latest book and came upon the line 'Sometimes we need a reminder of who our neighbours are.' Yes, I thought, we are neighbours, Canada and Scotland, and not just because there is only a bit of salty water between us. In many ways Canada is a clone of Scotland whose vital material was shipped out to our shores and replanted. Beside the merchant class which came to dominate commerce throughout the country, thousands of Highland immigrants settled in rural enclaves throughout the country and Glasgow clerks infiltrated the cities. Up until the middle of the nineteenth century Gaelic was the number three language in Canada after English and French even in Quebec. These immigrants were probably the only immigrants who found our landscape familiar and could make it hospitable. They



Robert Burns in Montreal, photograph by Ian McKechnie

brought with them Scottish values, a thirst for education, a rejection of class distinctions, a respect for the beauty of nature and a rich poetic narrative. Almost every school system from primary to university throughout the land was set up by Scots, the major exception being the French Catholic system in Quebec which was only secularized in the 1960s as part of the Quiet Revolution.

Scottish immigrants, whether merchant, clerk or crofter brought only a couple of books with them. Invariably the poems of Robbie Burns and the novels of Walter Scott. In 1827 when the leading figures of York (now Toronto) wanted to set up a subscription library the list of books they proposed only included one writer of fiction or poetry, the 'author of *Waverley*'. Scott and Burns set the standard for Canadian literature right up until the end of the Second World War

according to Elizabeth Waterston, author of *Rapt in Plaid: Canadian Literature and Scottish Tradition*. Waterston traces the influence from Burns, Scott and John Galt through the 19th century Canadian writers and poets who were largely Scots, right up to Milton Acorn, Alistair MacLeod, Alice Munro and even Leonard Cohen whose 'Suzanne' she relates to Burns' 'Flow gently sweet Afton'. It was a Scot Canadian novelist, Hugh MacLennan, who called for an end to the Scottish influence and the creation of a distinctive Canadian literature in the 1950s, but a national literature is not created on demand, rather it evolves and the writing in both our countries has evolved almost in a parallel fashion built upon our common northern experience and the traditional Scottish values of individualism, curiosity, a level society, and humour. The sense of irony in Burns infected

and distinguished Canadian letters including an English born writer, Stephen Leacock.

In the early 90s my wife and I purchased an 1840 red brick farmhouse in the Eastern Ontario township of Caledonia, right next to Glengarry County. Within minutes of taking possession we were visited by one of our elderly neighbours whose family had lived in the same log house down the road since 1820. Stanley was of Irish protestant descent but he was saturated in the culture of his Highland neighbours. Every time he visited he had another story to tell of the doings of the MacLeods or the MacDonalds of the area. It was confusing trying to keep straight all the Willy Billy MacLeods, the just plain Billy MacLeods, the Big Donalds and the black Donalds and I gradually realized that the events he was describing were not recent ones but from the 19th century which had remained current important legends of the region. There was the MacLeod who was up before the court on some minor charge and the judge offered him the choice between thirty days in jail or five dollars. 'Oh I'll take the money Your Worship, I'm a little short at the moment!' This story contained echoes of the ad vice given by Lord Birkenhead to a fellow judge who asked how much he should give a fellow who allowed himself to be bugged.

Another story involved Alexander (Sandy) MacDonnell who had a farm in the 'back of Kenyon'. Sandy had a dispute with a neighbour over some livestock and the matter went to court in the main town of Cornwall, Upper Canada (now Ontario). The court there decided against Sandy and ordered him to pay compensation of some small amount to his neighbour, a MacLeod. Sandy stood on his principles and refused and after the court addressed his default he was sentenced to prison until the amount was paid. A jail had not yet been built in the county but the land for it had been marked out. So a post was placed in one corner and Sandy was told that he was not to go north of that post. His farm was way to the north, and immediately to the south was the St-Lawrence River (called Lowrie's Burn by Robbie Burns in his poem 'When Guilford good our pilot stood'). Sandy was given a tent and his family brought his meals. One day his wife didn't come and he learned that she was desperately ill. He was aching to get home but paying what was owed was out of the question; nor was he prepared to breach his parole. So Sandy went to the corner of his prison, pulled the post out of the ground (Highland men have a way with long chunks of wood) and making sure he kept to the south of the pole he carried it the twenty miles back to his farm where it remained firmly planted on the north side of his property.

One of the great evils of literature, we are told, is colonialism. Young writers struggle to avoid the infection and demand that every trace of the imperial masters be eradicated to achieve 'authenticity'. Throughout the English speaking world post-colonial writing has been *de rigueur* and nowhere more so than

here in Quebec where we are told that we are colonisés (the colonized) without even knowing it. (This is the thesis of a recent book by retired Laval law professor J. Maurice Arbour, *Cessons d’être des colonisés*) But a Scottish influence can be seen even in French novels although that would be strenuously denied by their authors. In the 19th century French and Scots came in contact in the canoes of the fur traders and in the lumber camps. Their tales and their fiddle music mingled. What is considered the first novel in French in Quebec by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé *Les anciens Candiens* (1863) had as its hero a Scot, Arché Cameron de Lochiell, and was modelled on the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Those novels usually involved a lonely protagonist, often a marginal or outcast, searching for something and making his own path in the world. In the Quebec novels of today that model is followed by writers like Jacques Poulin whose novels feature Jack Waterman, a francisized anglo and despite his name he is a fervent Quebec nationalist and mildly anti-English. Poulin’s Volkswagen Blues, a road novel where Jack goes in search of his brother who disappeared to follow the trail of the 1803 Lewis and Clark expedition to the west coast, is a more sedate and thoughtful version of Kerouac’s On the Road (and of course Kerouac’s roots were Québécois).

So the links between Canadian and Scottish writing are not based on a colonial imposition but on a commonality of experience, a sharing of models and a sympathy of aims. Both countries are overshadowed by a domineering southern neighbour. Both countries share a harsh landscape and climate to which they have adjusted to the point where they find it hospitable. They share in part a common language and a history. I suspect those stories of my old neighbour actually came from the old country and were absorbed into the local mythology, but they reveal an attitude to society and a sense of humour that is now common to both Canada and Scotland.

There is a difference between a ‘national literature’ and a ‘nationalist literature’. The first is a natural outgrowth of the existential fact of experience; the second is manipulated out of myths. Hugh MacLennan decried the fixation of Scots-Canadians on tartans, bagpipes, marching bands and Burns dinners. (Haggis never made it across the ocean and turnips we feed to livestock.) The literature of our two countries is a literature of the North which reflects the unique pleasures and challenges of living in the north. The expression *Northwords* is apt for such a literature. It is also the name of an annual writing festival in Yellowknife. It is a definition of our common literature.

In 1995 David McFadden, one of Canada’s best poets and the descendant of Glasgow immigrants (like myself) made a tour of Scotland alone and wrote about it in *An Innocent in Scotland*. It is an unvarnished view that says a lot about Canada in its description of Scotland. But the genius of our cultures is summed up in the story he tells of Glasgow at the end of his trip.

”It’s night and I’m standing on the sidewalk craning my neck to look up at the domed roof of the Custom House, faintly illuminated by a small green light. Somebody goes by and says, “Drop something?” I start laughing, we look at each other, he starts laughing and continues on his way chuckling to himself.” ■

Poetry

Edith at Skogarfoss

KNOTBROOK TAYLOR

she’s had a tough year
though that’s not clear from the photo

smiles as if to say
I’m a little bit scared but mostly ecstatic

but it wasn’t easy this time last July
when we buried her mother

she washed the body in nothing but water
cleansed it: said it was a comfort

I think for the first time her joy is back
right there in that picture

welcome home it’s good to see you
living in the present

raising your arms; getting drenched by the spray
all that melt-water thundering by...

Braille

MICHAEL MCGILL

1.
There was a room
in my Grandmother’s house
I went into only once.
A book of blank pages

lay open on a table;
I traced my fingers
over Braille, but found
only a silent touch;

I found only the ghosts
of words, rather than words
themselves. I closed the door
and never entered that room again.

2.
And Granny always said
the blind boys’ voices rose
when they thought no-one else
was in the room.

She said they’d swear loudly,
recklessly, as if God
had arranged the human race
into some pecking order

of sight and sound; as if God
couldn’t be so cruel
as to let sighted ones
hear the cries of the blind.

Dàin ùra le Pàdraig MacAoidh

An dèidh dàin ghaoil a sgrìobhadh dha cuideigin nach bi a’ leughadh bàrdachd

Gabh mo leisgeul, mo ghaoil: nuair a thuirt mi gun robh a’ coimhead nad shùilean mar dhùr-bheachdachadh air ana-cuimse Bhogha Chlann Uisnich a’ toinneadh air falbh, b’ e meatafar a bh’ ann, agus th’ agam ri aideachadh nach eil ach glè bheag de dh’ eòlais agam air fiosaigs na cruinne–cè agus cumhachd na h-iom-thàrainge, agus gun robh e uile stèidhichte nas motha na tha mi airson ràdh air mar a bha ruitheam agus comhardadh gam stiùireadh, agus cho lag sa bha mi a’ gabhail smachd orra. Cha bhi thu a’ toirt dhomh vertigo. Chan eil thu air do dhèanamh le stuth dorch. Cha bhi thu a’ teicheadh air cùl suip cumulo-nimbus air neo cumhachd mìle lampa sòidium Low Pressure a’ tighinn còmhla.

Agus ma chanas mi san àm ri teachd gu bheil do ghuth coltach ri òran na muice–mara, cha bhi sin, geallaidh mi seo dhut an dràsta, beachd air cho mòr sa tha thu, air neo cà bheil an dithis againn san t-sreath–bìdh, ach mi fhìn a’ feuchainn ann an dòigh chlisgeadaich ri ràdh ge air bith cà’ bheil thu san t-saoghal, smaoinichidh mi ort, agus èistidh mi riut. Chan eil seo, tuigidh tu, a’ stad aig crìochan dlùths fuaim’ a’ bhaleen. Leis an fhìrinn innse, ’s beag a dh’ fhios agam mar a tha òran na muice–mara coltach, bha mi dìreach airson puing nas fharsaing’ a dhèanamh: bha feum agam dol gu google airson na genus fhaighinn, agus air Uikipedia lorg mi nach eil fios fiù ’s aig na h-eòlaichean air mar a bhios iad a’ dèanamh nan òran. Tha guthlag na muice–mara na mhiorbhail dhaibh. Tha i na mhiorbhail dhomh.

Comunn

Tha mo mhàthair air falbh ann an hpzz,
's feum aice fònadh air ais air a’ mhobile:
tha an dealain dheth air cuid mhòr de Leòdhais,
agus ged a bha i innsidh dhomh mu bhuill

a’ Chomuinn Eachdraidh ’s an lòn tìodhlacaidh,
a-nis chan eil i idir toirt feart dhomh, ’s cha mhòr
gu bheil mi ga faicinn aig an uinneag
a’ coimhead air na dorch–snàthan a’ tòrradh

sa bhaile, a’ breacadh dubhghorm an t-slaod dhan traigh,
agus i na tost, seach hum is haugh,
's na toirdsichean ’s lòchrain a’ lannraich – dhà no trì –
thar Baile an Truiseal ’s Mullach an t-Sabhail.

Nàire

Airson a’ chiad trup, an samhradh ud,
nuair a chaidh mi sìos dhan tràigh
cha robh mi nam aonar. Rì taobh an fheans’,
saltraichte agus gun fheum dha na clachan,
bha Capri liath, gu slaodadh a’ lìonadh le smùid.

Chuir tìde stad air cuibhlichean a’ bhaidhg –
baidhg a fhuair mi air iasad agus, a-nis,
ann an slo–mo, a bha ro mhòr dhomh
's m’ òrdagan a’ lobairt os cionn na tarmaic –
mìorbhail!, rinn mi 90° dha na cuilcean.

Phreas dithis iad fhèin às a’ chàr,
dearg mar sgàthan, gun chinnt
cò a bh’ ann a chunnaic dè,
gun chinnt co air a bha an nàire.

Dàn bhon 18mh linn

agus cuideachd bha snàmh ann
a’ dol mun cuairt ’s mun cuairt
cas a’ bhùird,
sgleò geal air brat ruadh,
na cearcaill neo-choileanta nan rud ginteil,
cunbhalachan reul–chriosach,
buillsgean air choreigin neo toll geal,
agus gun sgeul idir air an t-seilcheig

‘Operation Cauldron’

I
'52 agus tha ceò na shnìomhanan mun Bhràighe
às a’ phontoon a–muigh sa bhàigh,
milis le blàths muncaidh dòite agus gearra–mhuc
blasad a’ phlàigh dhuibh, brucellosis, tularaemia.

Deicheadan an dèidh sin, an luchd–saidheans air ais
ann am Porton Down, bha barrachd tuiteamais
na bhiodh dùil ann de dh’aillse air feadh an eilein:
aillse–fàireige ’s stamaige ’s sgamhain.

II
Cha b’e luchd–saidheans an MOD
a sgaoil aillsean fàireige ’s stamaige ’s sgamhain
– co–dhiu air na h-eileanan–sa – ach dust Chernobyl
a laighe – lèir no fàillidh – air gach duilleag labhrais,
air a’ chostaig fhillte, air a’ lus–leighis.

Pre-title sequence for the film ‘vltra quam habitacia non est’

It’s the Quirang, the border of night,
a Mustang rolls darkly up the road.
The world’s the deepest dumb of woad,
and the car engine’s silent, it has no lights,
it’s filled with brine – oh filial reverence! –
to the brim, and a blue man’s
lashed to the steering wheel
to stop him slipping out of his skin.

A Magic Tree sways kelp-like in the tide
of the car rolling silently up the hill,
never coming nearer. The blue man hunched
within an inch can’t close his barnacle eyes.
Something thuds in the boot of the car:
a stone–like creature scrabbling for air
against the bounds of law and his merits.
Doors that have opened now can’t close

the nothing of those tide-filled eyes.
Something thuds – thuds – in the boot of the car.
There’s nothing so horrific as repetition,
that crablike scrabbling for more. Nothing
is hidden well knows. In the jibbing tide,
a sea–scoured Mustang meshed to a man
rolls for a lifetime through the Quirang,
never coming nearer.

IT HAS BEEN so long since I've had time to write to you, but please know that you are always in my thoughts. Missing you over here is no more than I expected to bear, although the force of it comes near to breaking my heart at times. I will see you and our boy soon. I know it will not be long now.

He set the volume on his desk amongst his papers – there it was again for God's sake; some flat, metallic hammering, a faint and troubling double-thump – the child and his inscrutable games. He looked at the book's green cloth cover and thought of steel rain, the air crackling with gunfire, that zip of cooling metal shooting past your head. All his transcriptions had been blurred by the heel of his passing hand.

From the study window he could see the mild ground of the fields where the trees blustered and the hedgerows were thick with brambles. It was autumn out there, crisp in a maddening wind. Let the books go unread, he thought. All these soldiers' letters telling me nothing I don't already know. I'll go out there and pick my fill.

He looked out on the tufted grass, the quivering oak that held the corner of the crossroads up towards the village. Sam was calling out again, some raucous demand, and then a crash somewhere deeper in the house broke the rest of his concentration; the hammering cry as the boy bruised his knee, Ailsa shouting to him for silence. There were archives out there, he wistfully remembered, that were as quiet as cathedrals.

He told his wife he was going out, and took from the shelf by the back door an old wicker basket that they used for washing-pegs.

You could take Sam with you? Ailsa said. He shook his head. The boy came to stand in the open door between the kitchen and the dark hallway, in his hands the frayed model soldiers that he had played with himself when he was young.

I need an hour by myself. The book, I need to think it through. I need to get it finished.

Sam called out, Dad! as he left, but he pretended he hadn't heard, the word cancelled by the sharp report of the closing door. The sound smacked flatly across the open field and lingered back from the far and sparkling hedgerows. A mist had risen; there was a grain of moisture in the air.

Empty at this hour, he hooked over the stile into the top field from the village, the uncut grass in tough little thickets making him watch where he placed his feet. The falling sun had pasted onto the field a thin silhouette of the church tower, and it shimmered in the crushed violet light until it seemed no more a shadow than a smear of darker growth. He walked along the length of it. The sight of a field like this, or the huddling autumn cold, always made him thank some abstract idea of History for the good fortune that had seen him born into a less demanding age. Imagine all this instead with a rifle in your hand ... The perfect traverse of flat country, the Maxim anchored to its pivot, its relentless chatter.

Bramble bushes lurched out of the hedgerow at the field's far end, stippled with berries. It was early in the season; not all of them had turned, and although there were many green and yellow studs still buttoned to their branches there were enough here to make the walk worthwhile. He moved

leisurely along the line of the field, reaching no further than he needed to, taking each plump cluster between forefinger and thumb and gently pinching it from the stem. The prickles scratched at his sleeves. Sometimes one of the cells would burst against the pressure, beading a drop of purple blood on his fingertips. The lulling pace of picking, the action of the arm reaching out and dropping down into the basket, and yet you couldn't just relax into it; always the mind must be alert, noticing, looking, and doubly so in this dim light. He kept his eyes open for the banded flash of the sparrowhawk he had seen patrolling these fields, his ears tuned to the near-silent glide of the tawny owls that roosted in the oak trees. The hedge burred with noises that fell dormant as he passed, and what came into his mind as he worked was the thought of men separated from their families, struck numb by the anxiety of killing. He dwelled on his research. The fretting dangers of the trenches, all that brutal hail against you. Missing those you'd left behind. How did these things fit together? Well, it would sort itself out, it always did. You stepped away and the jungle was cut into a clearer pathway, without you even noticing. It had been a long time since he had felt so sure in his work. All this rest had done him good, she had been right about that at least. She had his best interests at heart.

The echo came to him of Sam's voice calling Dad! He brushed mites from a bud and dropped another berry into the basket.

Louping the stile, he was going to head back when he saw a decent group of them lurking under their leaves just where the path turned off towards the open ground; a spray of bushes, and deep in the maze of thorns a few real handfuls glistening with dew, near ready to drop from their weight alone. He put the basket on the ground and tried to reach in, the berries just skimming the tips of his fingers. He stepped further into the bush, turning his head away from the thorns, reaching, but the grass was dark and wet and as he stretched along the limit of his grasp he slipped and fell, and the arms of the bush seemed to spread out and gather him in.

A thorn drew a line of blood against his cheek. He threw his hands up, kicked out with one foot to reach a step that wasn't there, and tried to twist his shoulder around to break a fall that never came. The great coils of the bramble bush just eased him further in, until he was suspended there, half-kneeling in the leaf-litter, arms held and pinned back and his face a latticework of cuts and scratches. He had shut his eyes as he fell, and now, opening them, the skin stinging on his face, he looked deeply into the black tangle of the bush. He wriggled and thrashed, but struggling only swallowed him further down.

The sky was turning. Drifts in the mist peeled back briefly to demonstrate a scattering of stars. It was already dark, the quick shifts of autumn.

He couldn't move, shocked at how quickly

Blackberries

SHORT STORY BY RICHARD W. STRACHAN



his strength had left him. He tried again to pull his arms free but the hooks of the brambles were too tightly grounded – he thought of a fish haggling against the barb in its mouth, the inexorable drawing-in to the bankside. There was a needle in his scalp, and behind it the prickling of rain. Twisting his head around he could still see a line of purple and red in the sky, but even as he looked it seemed to pulse and fade away. He stared down into the dark. Turning, he stared up into the dark. He jerked his arms and legs, tried to find a foothold to force himself up out of the tangle. After ten minutes of this, or five, he fell into it and allowed himself to be held there while he gathered in and smoothed out his thoughts. His own wet breath beat back against his skin, the warmer exhalation of that rotting earth beneath. When he called out his voice disappeared into the thicket.

Ailsa and Sam, they would look for him. Without a doubt, when he didn't come back they would set out to find him. He laughed at his folly. He could see them sitting there in the kitchen expecting him, Sam calmer now, more pliable, Ailsa almost freshened by her worry – he could see it all. She always worried so much about him, thought him a fragile thing, but she wouldn't know how much she really missed him until this moment. Sam too, he could see the dew in Sam's eyes, could imagine what it would be like for the boy to hold him. It was like he saw emerging from the darkness inside the bush, from the heavy, mulchy sweet smell of rot, the faces of his wife and child. A picture of their relief when they saw him coming in through the kitchen door, his fingers stained, the basket of blackberries in his hand.

This is absurd! he shouted. His voice dropped into the razorwire of the bush and no echo answered him, the words planted in the damp skeletal leaves. The worms that quickened the soil cocked their stump-like heads to hear him.

There was a moment where he thought he must have slept. The long hours at the desk, he thought, conspiring against him – all that reading – and then the walk through the field's rough ground. He was exhausted. He jerked his head up. Had he slept?

There was a popping sound off in the distance. He couldn't match it exactly. The farmer, his shotgun. He called, Help! but there was no answer. That popping sound, and here and there a brief strobe of white above him. The woolly mist remained against the field, he could feel it, although the sky must have cleared for a moment because there came around him a pale green and wavering light that flickered once and dimmed.

Trying to turn again, less forcefully this time, he moved his right leg up and under and used the thick wires of the bush against it. Slowly moving his left arm, as if trying to scratch his back, he felt the give in the needles. The thorns tore at his clothes, and there was more blood on his face. He could feel it trickle

down from scalp to chin, freezing there. The crackle again of what must be fireworks in the distance, again and again, from far over the fields. It was near enough to Guy Fawkes, he supposed. To take the image of a man, and burn him ... The strength in him flowed away.

He stumbled into darkness, some drifting half-sleep, and when he wrenched his head up there were voices coming near. Two men talking quietly, the soft utterance of a laugh. He could hear the sound of their feet walking carefully over the grass, and above that the clink of metal against metal. There was the smell of burning in the air, sharp and dry, although the mist still lingered. Burning, an effigy on a bonfire.

He wanted to shout out, to call on them to help him, but his throat was dry and the tongue in his mouth felt like a slab of leather. They came closer, they could only be on the other side of the hedgerow, or even down at the corner of the path near the gate. They were not five feet from him.

When did I last have a drink of water? How long have I been here, oh God ...

He croaked, trying to force the words out, but then he found in the tones of those voices, their rigid rhythms, something that made him stop. His mouth hanging open, the dry tongue lolling against his teeth, he listened. He could hear the words only in their broken parts.

‘ ... vermisste ... natürlich ... und dieser Wahnsinn ... ‘

‘Hast du Feuer?’

The fizz of a match-head and its note of sulphur. A gulp of smoke breathed out in a long, satisfied sigh.

‘Vorsichtig, ja?’

‘Warum?’

The other made a sound in the back of his throat like a gunshot, a trailing little cry at the end of it. Both laughed, one coughing against his cigarette, the other seeming to slap at his back. They moved on. The footsteps faded across the grass, the voices just a mumble in the dark.

There was silence for a while, a tense and dripping quiet. The night was lit only by that same flickering pale glow that rose and fell like a spent firework descending on the other side of the field. Thunder grumbled in the distance. His heart was mad in his chest. He was breathing through his mouth, a silent steam rising up and fading into the mist.

Sure that the voices were gone (tourists? farm workers?) he tried again to heave himself out of the grip of the bramble. He drew his left arm as far back as he could and scrabbled for some purchase on the ground so he could twist his body forward, the barbs still nipping at his flesh, pulling at his hair like a lover, and despite the sharp autumn air he could feel a mask of sweat on his face. There was some give, a tearing sound from the collar of his shirt, but it wasn't enough. He gave up, there was nothing left in him, not a single measure of strength left in his body, and he felt almost glad now for the branches that cradled him there above the dead leaves, lying on his side, his left arm drawn back. As he lay there he started to cry.

He couldn't believe the grief that fell on him, and how quickly. The hot hand around his heart, the bitterness in his mouth a kind of surrender to the moment, to the steel weight of the bramble bush that gripped him. Behind his closed eyes he saw the contours of his wife's

body, Ailsa, nestled under the sheets with her mouth sliding against his collarbone, the soft hand searching out his skin, the scent of her, her fingers in his hair. Her clasped hands, the hard and worried look in her eye. He wept, for her and for his boy. He was spent. He had nothing left to give.

When his eyes had cooled and the heart stuttered less fitfully in his chest, he raised his head and saw just off to the side that ripe cluster of berries. His throat was burning. The tears had made a stone of him. He tried to stretch, craning out his neck in a way which made him think of the pedantically cautious bite of a tortoise, the wavering beak and the flat snap on the dandelion. He could just fit his lips to the nearest berry, and slowly, with tender attention, hooking his tongue up, he mumbled it from its woody stem. The berry burst behind his teeth, a shock of colour that had him closing his eyes. The taste of it was like a knife down into his gullet. Reaching out he managed to nip another from the branch, and another, but the fourth and final berry was too far away, and when he stretched for it a wire quivered in the muscle of his neck. He satisfied himself with a drop of dew that hung glassy and pendulous from the tip of a leaf.

The sky, which he could see more of from this new angle, this hard-won position, seemed to be clearing. The mist had feathered off, and

there were buds of lilac breaking between the clouds above the hedgerow. He could see a precise line of salmon-pink up there. He closed his eyes, he opened them. Sleep was gathering. He could drop down into it and never wake up, and the prospect now was one he'd welcome. He just wanted to sleep. She was right, he was tired, he was very tired ... Morning bore near, and when the day was up someone would surely find him. He could go home, and get the rest he needed. And so he began to drift, the eyes rolling in his head, the weight of his body melting quietly away ...

It came like an avalanche, like the other side of thunder – what thunder sounds like from the heart of the storm cloud. Great flashes of burning light tore him out of sleep and flung him into the earthquake, the shattering noise ramping up so quickly it became something more than noise, more like a fierce shuddering fit inside his bones that shook his bowels and set a blaze crackling in his head. He screamed and could hear nothing of it above that roar, and without knowing how he managed to tear his arms free and clamp his hands over his ears as the waves of sound and motion buffeted him like a wind-lashed rag, the thorns ripping from his skin. Shards of smoke stabbed up into the sky, vast columns lit in the centre by flickering bursts of yellow and red, strange fire that lanced out from the altar of the earth and shot back down to cover it

in ashes. The bramble bush disintegrated in a fast, chopping rhythm, lashed with steel. The ground heaved under him – and he thought in the middle of this not of Ailsa and Sam but of the two men he had heard out smoking in the night, two young men stealing out for their shared cigarette and plunged now into the centre of this without a hope of survival. He screwed his eyes into black little pits. With his hands still forced up against his ears he shook his head and screamed again. Nothing in the world had ever happened before this, and nothing would continue after. It would never end, a ferocity of perpetual creation; gout of smoke and fire, and steel rain that tore the sky apart and blotted out every inch of blue.

He screamed.

Look mummy! Sam called. She rushed over, but it was just a dead mole lying on its back, the great paddle-hands outstretched and the velvet striped with mud.

Leave it, she said. She drew him away. We must find daddy. We must find him.

All night they had been out looking, all through the rain and the cold. In the mud of the fields they searched for him under grey moonlight, in drab blankets of mist.

Ailsa, with the scarf drawn under her chin, cap pressed down on her head and hair tucked under, looked to where the

church steeple emerged from the night, the spire catching at the first glints of dawn. The cockerel of the weather vane swivelled in the breeze. She caught the scent of a wood fire and saw a ribbon of smoke rise up from a distant chimney, curling into a question mark that punctuated the village.

They walked on. Ailsa stooped to look into the black spaces beneath the hedgerows. She gazed out on the fields where the mist was paring off from the grass, expecting to see on each gentle convexity a slumped dark mass, the shape of him. Her fingers were like shards of bone, and her feet lurked in her boots, damp and cold. She watched her breath plume out and hang there for a moment before it was torn up in the hands of the breeze. Sam scurried on up the path, a stick in his hand, slashing at the leaves and the grass on either side. He chattered away to himself, singing, but then he was calling for her, pointing, the stick dropped in the dirt, Daddy! he called.

She ran to the where the paths crossed, the sweep of open ground that fell down to the river on her left, and there, from far across the field, she saw him stumble in the mud; his bloody face up, weeping. In his hand he had a basket full of blackberries. ■

Poems by Niall Campbell

The Well Found Dry

Part wailed – part walked off, as though shamed to be seen in so much want;

part licked the walls that lowered to the drop;
part slack-jawed by the loss, chewed mud

from the well bed with a happy face;
part broke the bucket – then part sucked

the grainy panels – for the moisture left;
part blamed and called; for part there was relief;

part looked on; part looked on confused
having never cared or known of thirst.

The Rules

Oh matador, the bull is not the world,
no matter what the masters say; and if
you bring it to your cape, and through, it's just
another blown shape moving through the air.

Where were you before – where will you go
when the stamped ring has cooled and cleared? Go home,
and maybe call *come at me, come at me*
to something that hasn't come to you before.

One Day, Too Hot, I Swam to the Middle of the Stream

The alternative was to be the man,
ashore, who says *no, this will do*: the bulrush
and timothy, the reeds and the long braced life
of firm and flowered land;

or the alternative was to be a burning type,
and set a fire, adding one more degree
of brightness, one more degree of heat,
hoping the hours were glad of this;

or the alternative was to be the tired traveller,
my head put down on a curled-up shirt,
my hours given over, my name given up,
and not to even hear the stream;

or the alternative was not to be the swimmer,
but just the swimmer's hand, his driving on;
or just to be the swimmer's lung, filled and spent,
and not to care to where I'm calling.

The Aisle

Who stands in white? *Yes, her* – and the beekeeper,
one who, in their long field, has seen the proof
that a day can be turned into clear honey,
that there's a sweetness that can be held in hand.

Who holds the rings? *Yes, him* – and then the gymnast
watched by the crowd. Our tense man raised between
two high rings – learning of the balance there,
holding to them for more than steadiness.

Who stands and waits? *Yes, them* – and the glassblower,
before the furnace, their mouth about to make
a fragile thing; and yes, too, the ready artist,
colours set, brush just touching the fresh water.

Coupons

SHORT STORY BY JO BELL



IT'S GOING TO be a disaster, Julie thought, tepid water trickling down the side of her face and into her ear. Soggy puffs of foam were just visible above her eyelids. Her gold earrings would be rusting. Rigid fingers prodded at her skull, languishing in slow strokes down the side of her head. Her neck was tilted painfully back on the ceramic rim, like a half-snapped branch.

'Is that ok for you?' an adolescent voice prompted, out of Julie's eye-line.

'It's fine.' she replied to the garish blue ceiling, an ingrained politeness adding 'Thanks.'

This, she thought, is what you get for coming somewhere with a coupon.

Each time Julie went to a new salon she'd judge them on differing intricacies: the smell of the conditioner; how hot the water was; the colour of the walls; music on the radio and if they had a jar of mints or sweets at the till. As a habit it could have developed from her mum, who nudged her from a young age into judging a restaurant on the quality of its napkins. So far today had been sloppy.

The girl urged her up from the sink, binding her hair in a half-stiff baby blue towel. It felt as if it might fall open at any moment and she anticipated the surprise, the unwelcome spring of fabric and wet hair on her face and neck. Her black cloak, the kind they always slink over you to catch falling hair, shuddered as she landed in the almost comfortable salon chair, the black of it becoming less black under the spot-lit station. The girl who shampooed her hair had a hot pink streak in her own short, dark bob, shaved at one side. She asked if Julie wanted a cup of tea and Julie nodded, softening her face and smoothing her palms down under her blacked-out knees. Julie hated the girl's hair. Annoyingly she was awed by her trendiness, a bold and purposeful aesthetic. It made her feel shabby – slatternly – by comparison. The girl was also vexingly young. What did it matter to her if she splashed a little water on someone's face, or left gloopy conditioner on their ears? Few people would say anything at all.

Facing the mirror meant there was nothing to look at but her own face, no hair floundering around the edges. Instead a white landing strip of skin stuck out awkwardly at the top. Beneath it her chin was too pointed. Her lips were thin and dry, a colour closer to beige than red. She thought it was how a child would draw a face on a paper plate – two run-of-the-mill eyes, one nose and one mouth – all of them floating in the middle of nothing. Sexless, alien and naked.

Two seats away a girl with a hedgehog stack of tin foils on her head was talking quietly on her phone. Next to her a blonde lady in her fifties was having her sleek new hairdo blow-dried. Julie caught the blonde lady's eye in the mirror, flushed and immediately looked away. Then she sat, still, simmering in discomfort. There were no magazines. The thrum of a hairdryer sent sporadic bursts of hot air on to her shoulder. It made her black cloak flutter like a murky, half-moving, puddle.

When the girl with the pink streak returned her clumsy hand, painted with neon pink nails, bore Julie's cup of tea, complete with a half-melted chocolate digestive on the side. She smiled, putting the saucer on a glass shelf beside the mirror. It lingered there, an inch too far away for Julie to reach it.

Twenty minutes earlier Julie had been

greeted by her stylist, a chubby girl called Chloe in her mid-twenties, wearing a loose black tunic over red tights. She had a smooth air of authority and a pretty face: smoky eyes; deep red lipstick and blusher that plumped out her skin. Her hair shocked Julie, it was platinum blonde with at least a month's worth of dark brown roots at the top. It had been pulled into a loose knot, high on her head, strands poking out like water from a sprinkler.

'So what we doing today?' Chloe had asked in her thick and local accent. It sounded like the Jeremy Kyle types Julie had seen having aggressive domestics in front of the discount supermarket. She kept her reply vague, something about layers and a trim. She never knew how to describe her fairly nondescript

haircut. Plus it was good to appear trusting: Water Sprinkler Hair had the scissors.

'Sweet. So I'll take about this much off?' Chloe concluded, her fingers showing a space the size of the hook on a hanger.

'Great.' she nodded. 'Great.'

Julie angled forward for her cup of tea just as Chloe came back, munching on something. Her palms fell dejectedly into her lap again, although she smiled. The cheap black satin on top of her felt comforting; a thin curtain obscuring her movements.

'Going out tonight?' Chloe asked breezily as she tugged out the matted ends of Julie's hair.

'Yeah. Not sure where though. It'll just be in town somewhere. A few drinks, maybe go dancing later.'

'Better get you looking good then!'

'How about yourself?'

'Nah, I'm just going to stay in. My pals are all going out but I'm tired of it – the same people, same boring places. Everyone knows everyone, it drives me mental.'

'This place can be like that.' Julie murmured back, mildly stunned by her stylist's forthrightness.

Chloe told a story about her last client, who used permanent dye to turn her hair a deep blue colour and wanted it magically blonde again. Julie listened, eyes fixed on the hands moving through her hair and the haphazard glint of scissors.

'It's like she had no idea that permanent

dye was permanent and it's not exactly easy to go from dark to light. The other way's grand, I can make you as dark as you like. I was worried I'd need so much bleach her hair would fall out.'

Julie gave a slight laugh. In that second it felt almost wonderful to her, the freedom of smiling.

They kept chatting and Chloe worked on at her hair: measuring lengths by eye; squeezing wet sections; slashing their ends.

'You from Edinburgh yourself?' Chloe asked, breaking a peaceful lull.

'No, I came here for uni.' The words were reluctant, like an uncomfortable fact you have to admit to the doctor. 'But you went to school here. Is your family still here?'

'Yeah almost all of them. I stay with my

Da. My ma's on about moving to Spain with her bloke and most of the time I wish she'd just get off and leave us. She does everything for my brothers and their kids though. They're way older than me and rely on her to do their washing – it's ridiculous.'

'You have nieces and nephews then?'

'Yeah. Seventeen.'

'Bloody hell!'

Chloe laughed. A soft warmth spread across her face.

'Yup, big family. I think they all expected me tae be preggers before I left school but I've got a brain. Too young. Such a stupid thing to do.'

'Hard to get out of once you're in that. Your life isn't your own.'

'Tell me about it. Half of my friends have babies now – all that feeding and changing and no having any money to yourself. No thanks.' She paused, scooping the top layer of Julie's hair up and securing it with a clip. 'What do you do?'

'I'm a buyer for a retail chain.'

'Ooooooh very glam.'

'Not really. It's sitting at a desk all day. How long have you been a hairdresser?'

'Seven years.'

Underneath her cloak Julie's shoulders softened.

Then conversation somehow became easier. They chatted about school and how they had both loved English. Chloe told her she unexpectedly achieved an A in her exam

and Julie felt something twinge in her chest. It was a day she remembered clearly, the thin, white letter and the disappointment, her mum telling her it was ok, that all the best people failed a little. At times Chloe stopped cutting to finish a diatribe on the slow bus route; or her friends; or the girl in a night club who stood on her foot. Stationary, she reminded Julie of a glass figurine of a dancer her mum had kept in her living room cabinet. It was white and pink with a tiny flower painted at the base. There was a small crack on the back of her left arm, which they tried to hide by turning her sideways.

Soon, Chloe went back to talking about how much she disliked the people and places around her. Julie asked if she might live somewhere new.

'I dunno. My friend Courtney is going to Australia in January, she's wanting me to go with her but it's so expensive. And I don't wanna go there and be a hairdresser. I'm tired of it.'

Julie looked at her as she talked. Discontentment fell out of her like dust.

Chloe told her she'd thought about becoming a mechanic and watched Julie's face crinkle in surprise.

'Aye the guy in careers said I should go and do something like beauty. At least there's no grease on my hands.'

Julie grinned at the thought of this girl lying on her back underneath a car, face covered in oil. Her hands fidgeted playfully under the thin black material. Precisely cut sheaths of hair scattered to the floor like feathers. The crinkle of foils, fake-posh phone voice of the girl who washed her hair and abrasive hum of hairdryers went on.

'See? So much better.' Chloe stated, pulling out a strand of hair and showing Julie clean ends.

'It feels great' Julie agreed, realising she had no idea if that was true; her hands were still bound under the cooling material on her knees, darkened further by the appearance of her own shadow.

She wanted it to be true. Her hair was being blown dry with professional brush, taken seriously. Why shouldn't it be? But her heart was beating quickly again. She looked only ahead, thinking about what would happen if she hated it, what this girl has done to her. The tired and fed up girl full of opinions. The girl who didn't want to do her hair. The girl who might talk about her too when she left. This is what you get for coming somewhere with a coupon. Don't expect too much for too little.

Julie thought about the lie. She wasn't going out later. She had no plans at all. Lately she'd been crying a lot. Looking in the mirror, or at the half-closed boxes in her kitchen, or at the photograph on her windowsill brought a winding kind of pain. When she got home from work she usually filled a hot water bottle and lay with it on her couch, listening to the old jazz records. Her Mum's favourite was Stardust by Nat King Cole. Or What a Wonderful World, the song they'd played at her Auntie's 60th birthday party. Her mum wore a blue silk dress that night, the one she'd told Julie about on the phone. It was daring. It made her look younger, fabric splaying out beneath her hips like long, slim flower petals. Julie thought she looked beautiful. Her skin was soft and healthy. The gold band on her finger shone as she moved, speaking, laughing,

dancing. They’d taken it off her, after, saying it was a stroke of luck to have kept it in one piece. The balding man behind the desk held it up with a dirty thumb and finger, offering it to Julie like some kind of prize.

The two records came from the house, after. Those, the jewellery and twenty seven old photographs, bound together with an elastic band. She had left all the ornaments, including the figurine. Susie might have taken them she supposed. Not that it mattered. Even the smell of floral washing powder and sweet talc, her smell, even it was already gone.

Half of her hair was dry now. It looked frizzy. Julie’s eyes shimmered red. The back of her throat clogged and burnt with unwept tears. It is just hair she thought: just hair, just hair, just hair. This girl has done what I asked of her and she’s not getting paid well for it. I’m sitting here like the queen. Judging her. Who am I to do that? Why do I have to think like this?

But I hate it. It’s thick and frizzy like a bush and my fringe looks like it hasn’t been changed at all. One side might be longer than the other. This is hopeless.

Her fingers formed fists underneath the cloak. Her mum would have told her to breathe. Her mum wasn’t here. She’d tried to wear the ring once, on her hand. It looked old and tarnished and squeezed her flesh uncomfortably. The last time Julie had her hair cut was four days before they found her, twelve days before the funeral. It felt like a different, lighter kind of life.

‘So I’ve just got to do your fringe now’ Chloe said, ‘I’ll take a little off and if you want more just let me know.’

Julie released her hands, letting hot blood circulate. Chloe was in front of her, skilfully defining the front of her face. Her movements were neat and professional.

‘There. What do you think?’
‘It’s great.’
‘I’ll just let you see the back’ she waved a mirror slowly around the back of Julie’s head. Her hair shone, straight and sleek.

‘It looks lovely. So much healthier. Thank you.’

Chloe flushed, smiling. ‘You’ve got lovely hair you know. Beautiful colour, lovely and thick. We’re doing this deal again. I’ll write down my name on a card for you.’

Julie nodded. Chloe helped her shed her black cloak; it slipped from her limbs like skin from fish. Her old red–dark hair floated to the floor.

The purple coat felt good as she put it on, cosy. It had been warmed by the radiator. The comfort reminded her. Julie felt herself hot, pressure pushing again from the inside out. Everything prickled: memories pulled half open.

Chloe gave her the card.
Julie thanked her and added a weak ‘Have a nice day.’

‘You too – enjoy your night out! Oh and hey, I really like your earrings. Angels right?’
Julie fingered the golden studs and nodded. ‘Yeah. They were my mum’s. I love them.’
Chloe nodded, smiling.
The small bell above the door jingled as she walked out. ■

Hirta by Mary Robinson

Lady Grange’s cleit

Like a hollow stone skull-capped
with hairy lichen and turf

wheatears and wrens nest in her sockets
and across the angry sea – Flora’s birthplace.

1812 Acland’s painting of the old houses

A ragged huddle of thatch.
Pick up
a stone,
don’t put it down
until you have found
its place.
Thicken the walls,
pack them
with sand,
shelter the doors
from winter storms.

1860 Sharbau’s map

On Sharbau’s map of the new houses
everything is in order:
the curvature of the village street,
the croft strips planned and ruled.

Doors open onto the bay,
corncrakes rasp in the spring,
wind slips over the steps, and damp
crawls into the stones.

In the school room

Ask: how many pairs of hands for how many hours
did it take to build so many cleits?

but the children are hiding and seeking
in their stone play-houses.

Ordnance Survey map 2008

Not in their right place of course,
but framed in a neat white box on
a spare patch of sea – brown blots
on blue paper. How careless they
look, as if children had dipped their
nibs and flicked ink across the sea.

The flitting

29 August 1930: HMS Harebell, HMS Dunara Castle

A Gaelic Bible left in every house
and in the church the page open
at the Book of Exodus –
if it were not true we would want it so.

It was for them an emptying –
not of the place, for what was worth taking
for jobs in forestry with no fulmars?
But they felt in their hearts as if sweet water
had trickled from a bowl
while the islands faded to flecks
on a line between sea and sky.

When did a five year old child, watching
the women who felt the aching
pull as they waved farewell,
notice they had dropped their arms?

teapot tin trunk lino china jars lacy mantle-shelf cover
kettle cooking pot enamel basin framed picture of Edwardian
lady in feathered hat and lacy sleeves reading a book mirror text
The Lord is My Shepherd medicine bottles barrels oil lamp
sheep the bones of the dead cats dogs chains rope oar
trawl-bobbin Stac Lee Stac an Armin Stac Biorach Borreray
Soay Dun Hirta home

Poetry

Plotting a Life Through a Box Room

JASON MONIOS

The unexamined life is not worth living.
- Socrates

Socrates came round my flat today,
said my life was worth examining.

I've read *Symposium*; I know how much
he drinks. So I said that I wasn't in.

Hiding in my room, alone, I listened.
Heard his sandals slap my parquet floor.

His shuffle paused outside the box room door.
He had me there; there's nothing I could do

without the shame of making myself known.
I heard him move the ironing board and chairs,

reveal my horde of hobbies gone awry.
Some juggling clubs, a pipe, a baggy cap.

Two guitars and some old uni books,
the ones I couldn't throw away but don't

impress enough to keep out on the bookcase
in the hall. Bikes, helmets, fancy

gloves and racing cap. Sleeping bags,
ice axe hanging by its worried loop,

compass and unused theodolite,
a head torch and a one-man tent.

The door squeaked shut, his sandals scraped away.
I roused myself, anticipating fate,

screwed courage to its sticking point, followed
his hemlock-scented trail along the hall.

An awkward confrontation. "Well?" I asked.
"Well, what?" he croaked. I blinked. "Well, did I pass?"

"I was looking for the wine, you fool!"

Eggs

JIM C WILSON

The perfect egg goes rolling
down the hill towards the sea.

I chase it through the springing
grass and seem to take a lifetime.

I know the egg will crack apart;
I'll gnaw through solid white and yolk,

vivid as snow and an Easter sun:
winter followed again by spring.

The purple shell is veined with cracks;
the green hill rises to the sky.

Beneath a tree I peel the shell
with fingers that are stiffening.

Shell sticks to white which falls apart;
the yolk is pale and sterile.

I add some salt; I take a bite;
I spit out bits of broken shell

and realize the perfect egg
is rolling yet towards the sea.

Effric

SUSAN GRANT

The day that I met linen was the day my grandmother closed her eyes
and the two large brown pennies were laid in place.
It was me they sent to skirt, fleet foot, round the yellow irised bay
to the Post Office which was also the village shop and the gossip station
where Angus, the owner before the owner before the famous Seumas
was all things to all islanders.
Breathless I was when I uncurled my tight fingers and held out
the hot half crown sticking safely on my sweaty palm.
And the Gaelic burred from his tobacco stained lips
"Your grandmother?"
Still gasping, I nodded.
So he took the old wooden ladder and leaned it over
the Brasso and Blue shelf, the beans and the biscuit shelf
and climbed high, higher than ever I'd seen him climb,
to the topmost shelf in the roofly shadow of the shop.
Then backwards, backwards, feet feeling each worn rung
in the arch of his boot, he brought down
a large and dark and dusty box.
Unlidding it, the tissue paper whispered as if to say
"Who is it this time?"
When his sea- fishing, log- splitting hands parted the paper
he took out a shroud – such as was beyond my ken until then –
and it was purest white and cool and yes, it was beautiful.
"Best linen this, finest woven, plain, as decreed."
I stretched out a finger to feel the best.
Reverently he parcelled it up and tied it with hairy string,
then took the half crown and put it in the ting box of the till.
As he handed me the tidy bundle he warned me,
in the Gaelic that I can only vaguely remember today,
not to drop it in the rising tide on my way home
or my grandmother would haunt me for evermore.

Cemetery by the Sea

Remembering Tessa Ransford, 1938–2015
GORDON JARVIE

When Gavin circulated the news
I shed a tear or two that early autumn day.
What else was there to say?

Like all my true friends
Tessa was good for me,
made me raise my game,
take my draft poems more seriously,
encouraged me not to chuck stuff away
before examining it properly, critically.

Our hinterlands were not dissimilar.
Fife and Edinburgh were common ground.
Tessa had German, I had French.
She had India, I had Africa.
The Second War had marked us both.
We'd both been subjected to boarding schools
where isolation had hardened us, made us private.
Latterly, even while fending off decline
we'd managed to publish each other's work.
But we knew we were living history.

Once at St Monans
in an empty churchyard by an ebbing sea
we sat in the heat of an afternoon sun,
Ted Ruddock, Tessa, and me,
listening to larks and the shingle's song.

Tessa, you went ahead and shone a torch
for all of us. Thank you for your example,
for forgiving my many feeble lapses,
and for all the little courtesies of friends.

Reviews

The Province of the Cat

George Gunn

Islands Book Trust

REVIEW BY ALAN HENDRY

“We are all characters in the dramas of our own lives,” George Gunn declares in *The Province of the Cat* – an impassioned, lyrical account of Caithness and his relationship with it.

The poet and playwright strides across the centuries on a journey through the landscape, legends, history and culture of the far north, with a fair bit of soul-searching along the way.

For me, the key scene comes near the end as Gunn takes a long and reflective early-morning walk around the frozen streets of Thurso. It is the time of Imbolg, between midwinter and spring. Snow flurries are swirling in the artificial illumination of lamp posts and shop fronts as Gunn drifts almost ghost-like through the town of his birth – a place where Norse and Celtic cultures come together, where the River Thurso meets the Pentland Firth: Thor’s river and the firth of the Picts.

He watches an otter near the river mouth catching a trout and munching on a crab. Gunn appears to have more empathy with this wild creature, doing what comes naturally, than he does with the yellow-jacketed, sleepy-headed shift workers making their way by bus from ‘Atomic City’ to Dounreay. Gunn can see them, but you get the feeling he is invisible to them.

This sense of being a lone figure – acutely aware of how past events have shaped his place in the world, and one step removed from the unquestioning, heads-down majority – is evident throughout the book. It’s raw, it’s from the heart, and it’s suffused with a radical energy as old assumptions are confronted and denounced.

He rails against the agricultural ‘improvements’ of 200 years ago and their legacy of evictions, homelessness and squatter camps. He rejects the cosy notion that Wick’s herring boom was some kind of golden age (the town, he says, was ‘built for human exploitation and for the exploitation of nature’). The dawn of the nuclear industry was “the beginning of a nightmare”, and he blames its ‘culture of state secrecy’ for creating an unnaturally passive population.

Gunn seems embittered by the memory of his secondary education in Thurso, having been uprooted from the relative idyll of his village primary at Dunnet. He claims to have learned nothing in high school (although plenty of others managed perfectly well, it has to be said): ‘Everything local was looked down upon... To be educated meant being educated out of your locality and into the amorphous soup of the nuclear world.’

He doesn’t hold back either in condemning what he calls anti-Gaelic prejudice, branding it a ‘calculated sectarian attempt to rewrite history and cultivate stupidity’.

The perceived injustices mount up – at times it’s like listening to a barroom orator whose glass of Pictish ale is forever half-empty. However, the mood is lifted in an instant by Gunn’s magical turn of phrase. Thurso, he says



at one point, ‘grew out of the sea like a stone flower’.

He is fond of sweeping, elemental metaphors – the ‘wave of history’, the ‘storm of progress’, the ‘sea of time and space’ – although he can get carried away with his epic descriptions. Caithness, he asserts, is a rock plateau ‘upon which people struggle to live’. Come on, it’s not that bad!

Gunn’s text would have benefited from closer attention to detail at the editing stage, as there are some distracting errors (on successive pages, for instance, he misnames the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and puts Thurso’s Comm Bar in the wrong street). Nevertheless, *The Province of the Cat* stands as a powerful and deeply personal exploration of Gunn’s native land, lit up by flashes of exquisite beauty. It is essential reading for anyone who cares about Caithness.

And the next time I walk out to the Stacks of Duncansby I will remember, and recite, Gunn’s inspiring words: ‘On Duncansby Head, on a good day, you can feel that you can see to the other side of tomorrow.’ ■

A Stag From Rum

Robert Atkinson

The Islands Book Trust

REVIEW BY STEPHEN KEELER

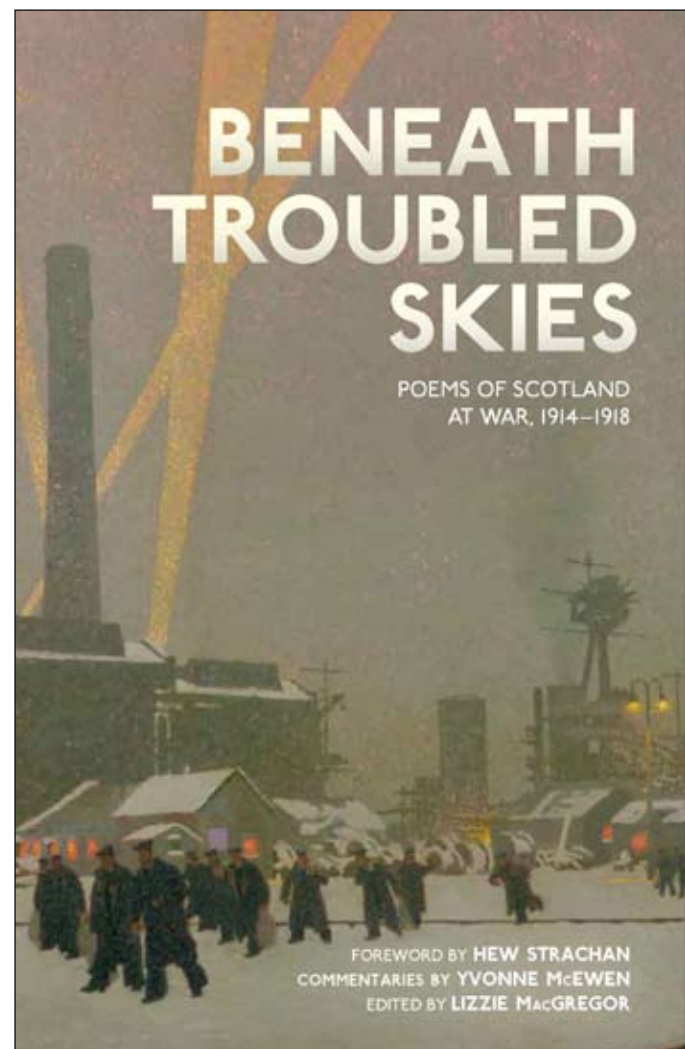
If first lines are what pull you into a narrative then, ‘Mallaig is not quite what you would expect...’, is as alluring an opening as any. It establishes Atkinson’s crisp, well-paced and

perhaps unexpectedly modern prose style at the outset.

This is Mallaig when station platforms were still furnished with trollies with ‘loose iron wheels’, ‘unlikely posters’ and chocolate machines. Outside it is usually raining but MacBrayne’s ferries, ‘warned by wireless’, can still be asked to stop off especially for anyone who needs to use them, at a cost of five shillings extra – ‘a pleasing tariff’, in 1938.

The subtitle, *An Essay in Poaching*, is suggestive of Atkinson’s occasional but brief meditations on the morality of land ownership, social injustice, exclusion, theft and, by default, of the John Macnab-inspired adventure – ‘lightly-conceived, illegal and suggestively kith to an undergraduate frolic’ – at the heart of *A Stag From Rum*: the decision to take a mature stag from the then most inhospitable of all the Western Isles.

Uninvited visitors were firmly discouraged from Rum at that time. Travellers could buy a ferry ticket but not disembark on arrival. Shipwrecked crews were said to have been turned away. The island’s entire raison d’être was as a private and lucrative deer-hunting ground – too much a provocation by far for Robert Atkinson (‘damned cheek!’) and his former Cambridge friends, city banker Hugh LeLachleur and medic John Naish who set about, like something out of Arthur Ransome (‘our early plans were elaborate and story book’), certainly like something out of John Buchan, hiring a gun in London (‘a beautiful little thing’), no questions asked, driving



for 24 hours to the West Coast of Scotland, finding a boat and buying provisions.

Five ten-page chapters lead to the set piece account of the journey: a tale of derring-do and extreme sailing with faint echoes of Robert Louis Stevenson and Geoffrey Household in the physical descriptions and the pace of the writing. There is nothing overtly, nothing intentionally romantic; nothing sentimental about the sudden moving solemnity of the story’s denouement. No room for triumphalism but no time for regret: they have to get out of there, against the odds, in ten final pages.

This is a book to slip into the back pocket of your walking trousers and take up a West Coast hillside in late summer, to lie with in the bracken while the sun slips lower in the sky. Its uplifting, lucid prose might encourage readers to seek out the earlier companion volumes, *Island Going* (Collins, 1949) and *Shillay and the Seals* (Collins and Harvill Press, 1980). *A Stag From Rum* is another small gem from the excellent Islands Book Trust. ■

An Dosan

Norma NicLeòid

Acair

REVIEW BY LISA NICHÒMHNAILL

“Ged a bha an Dosan beag, cha robh e bog.” Mar sin, thèid ar tadhal a-steach do bheatha agus do shaoghal Dhòmhnaill Seumas Iain dìreach às dèidh dha a bhith ga chur às an taigh le mhàthair. A dh’aindeoin dhuilgheadasan ►►

dhen a h-uile seòrsa tha e follaiseach gu bheil e comasach beatha ùr bhrìoghmhor a chruthachadh dha fhèin ann am baile beag taobh eile Leòdhais, agus saoghal eadar e fhèin agus an taigh far an do rugadh agus an do thogadh e.

An ceann greis bidh sinn a’ mothachadh gu bheil cuisle dhorch’ a’ ruith tron leabhar agus tro inntinn an Dosain agus e a’ feuchainn ri smachd fhaighinn oirre ann an iomadh dòigh, ge b’ e le bhith a’ slugadh philichean beaga no fiù ‘s le bhith a’ sgrìobhadh leabhar dha fhèin.

‘S ann anns an leabhar am broinn an leabhair sin a bhios sinn ag ionnsachadh mu anam agus mu fhaireachdainnean an duin’ òig mar coinneamh. Bidh coire, ciont agus cianalas a’ sruthadh air ais is air adhart eadar an dà phìos sgrìobhaidh, a’ cur caran air inntinn an leughadair agus, o àm gu àm, agus nas trice mar a ruitheas an sgeulachd, air inntinn an Dosain fhìn. Tha an dà sgeul a’ leantainn orra ann an dòigh shiùbhlach ‘s iad co-shìnte taobh ri taobh aig toiseach na sgeòil; ach thèid am fighe còmhla ann an innse gus nach bi duine beò cinnteach an e an Dosan a tha air a chiall a chall no an leughadair fhèin.

Tha an dà sgrìobhadair, Norma NicLeòid agus an Dosan fhèin, tha mi a’ smaoineachadh, ag aontachadh mun fheallsanachd sgrìobhaidh aca, agus aon dhe na caractaran air rabhadh a thoirt dhan an dithis aca: “Ge b’ e gu dè a nì thu dhìomsa, cha bhith do sgrìobhadh ach mall, mura leig thu dhomh nam dhòigh fhèin.” Agus ‘s e sin an dearbh rud a rinn iad, an dithis aca, leis na caractaran beothail làidir sin. Ge b’ e dàna no dùinte, feòil is fuil no fiodh, tha iad airidh air meas is spèis ged a bhiodh an sgrìobhadair ag aideachadh gu bheil “cuid de dhaoine ann air nach fhaigh thu eòlas ceart ann am bith.” Chòrdadh e rium barrachd fhios a bhith agam air cuid dhe na sgeulachdan daoine ach tha mi, aig an aon àm, a’ tuigsinn carson a th’ ann na th’ ann.?

‘S e nobhail maiseach ealanta a tha sin seo?, air a chur ri chèile ann an dòigh èasgaidh choileanta agus làn bhrìathrachais is abairtean a tha mar stòras iongantach iùntasach – dè tha seo? dhuinn.

Is fìor dheagh thoil leam na th’ ann a bharrachd air sgeulachdan nan daoine san leabhar; feallsanachd dhomhainn agus fharsaing mu bheatha a h-uile duine. “Gheibh siostam grèim ort ged nach biodh iad a’ stobadh càil sìos nad amhaich dheth. Sùgaidh e steach na dhòigh sheòlta fhèin.” Nach ann an sin a tha an fhirinn!

Faisg air deireadh an leabhair leughaidh sinn gum bi “atach – de tha seo? nan nithean fad beatha an-còmhnaidh nad chois.”

Gu dearbha, bidh attach na sgeòil sin nam chois airson greis fhathast, co-dhiù. ■

Beneath Troubled Skies: Poems of Scotland at War, 1914-1918
Edited by Lizzie MacGregor
Polygon
REVIEW BY RICHIE MCCAFFERY

There is certainly no paucity of World War One poetry anthologies. There is, however, something of a lack of coverage of the poetry produced in Scotland and by Scots in both of the World Wars. The last specifically Scottish anthology for World War One was Trevor

Royle’s *In Flanders Fields* (1991) but even this anthology also collected prose. Fast-forward to 2014 we had David Goldie’s and Roderick Watson’s *From the Line*, an anthology of Scottish war poetry from both conflicts. Therefore, *Beneath Troubled Skies* seems to be the first exclusively poetry-based anthology to deal with Scottish World War One poetry. MacGregor is to be praised for capturing a sense of the wide-spread messiness of the conflict, the much lauded ‘trench lyric’ is not allowed to predominate here, although we have fine, much anthologised examples such as Charles Hamilton Sorley’s ‘When you see millions of the mouthless dead’. We hear from voices in Salonika, Gallipoli, the home-front as well as Europe’s notorious ‘killing fields’. The selection is also a rather democratic one, allowing us to hear from well-known war poets as well as making new discoveries and re-appraisals. I, for one, was particularly impressed by W D Cocker’s work, having previously unfairly dismissed his poetry as crambo-clink:

O God! That men could love as they hate!
There is a gospel that is sane and pure,
And we must learn its message soon or late;
Love is the only law that shall endure.
From ‘Sonnets in Captivity’

The book itself is an elegant hardback production, considering the horrors and slaughter it contains, and is made particularly effective for being laid out chronologically so we encounter poems from all years of the conflict as well as poems written in its aftermath. This also allows us to see the sea-change in public attitudes to the war, from gung-ho patriotism through to horror and futility and then finally to attempts at recovery. Each year is also introduced with historical commentaries by Yvonne McEwen, which greatly aid the reader in helping them map their way through such a vast conflict. Gaelic, Doric, Scots and English-language poets are all equally represented and women poets and home-front voices are given prominence. I was worried when reading Hew Strachan’s introduction that the view of women poets in the conflict would be reduced to that of mourners and mothers, but the anthology expands that narrow view of women in the war. Of particular value are Naomi Mitchison’s early poems, such as ‘Green Boughs’ which is a tribute to her lost generation but also the work of May Wedderburn Cannan, who criticises the land that will forever have the woman working in the shadow of men, as the war displaces men from their civilian positions and gives women only the illusion of change:

You’ll win a world I’ll never know,
Who rode the barriers down;
And my life’s bounded by a desk
And the grey streets of a town.
‘To a Clerk, Now at the Wars’

The major voice of this selection must surely belong to Dundonian Joseph Lee, who wrote little poetry after World War One, but the poetry he did write has a piercing immediacy, such as ‘The Bullet’:

Every bullet has its billet;
Many bullets more than one:
God! Perhaps I killed a mother
When I killed a mother’s son.

The anthology ends with Charles Murray’s ambivalent ‘Gin I was God’ where the poet considers the tremendous cost and the seemingly negligible gains and declares that if he was God, he would start all over again with humanity. Depending on the way in which you read this anthology, this may either strike a misanthropic or a deeply humane note. ■

Argyll Folk Tales
by Bob Pegg
The History Press
REVIEW BY ALISON NAPIER

They say that there is nothing new under the sun. But then they say a lot of things, including for example the existence of only seven basic storylines in the world. At least four of these alleged plots appear in *Argyll Folk Tales* (overcoming a monster, a quest, a return-ticket voyage, rags to riches) and the very informative introduction notes the vast international repertoire from which these stories have emerged.

The folk tales offered here have been collected and presented under a series of headings spanning ‘Not Long After the Beginning’ to ‘Bannocks and Banquets’, with several tales per category, and each preceded by a brief but fascinating placing of each tale in its historical context. I really want to believe that Loch Awe was formed from the stream of water pouring down Ben Cruachan when the Cailleach’s magic well was inadvertently left open, and that the Western Isles are the rocks that fell from her pannier when the strap broke as she strode across the ocean. But I worry that the old woman was a little accident prone.

I particularly enjoyed ‘The Big Young Hero’ – it is utterly illogical but strangely compelling. Why, if he had a gang of wise-cracking superheroes already at his disposal did Hero seek out Finn McCool to solve his (not overly complex) problem of his Three Missing Children and the Giant Hand Down the Chimney? It matters not a jot. There are fabulous details such as the castle thatched with eel skins, and the ‘magic tooth of knowledge’ that when touched with his thumb revealed secret knowledge. The best line surely goes to the Good Thief who states in his oral CV, “I can steal the egg from under a heron, even if she is looking at me.”

The world of folk tales is also one of mind-boggling coincidences but this doesn’t matter either. Peter the Gold is kidnapped by a big sailing ship when out fishing off Eirraid and is stranded in America. First person he meets? Why, the owner of the sailing ship who gives him lots of gold and returns him safely home. Result.

Folk tales, even those from Argyll, have not yet embraced equal opportunities and this is certainly not a feminist manifesto (personifesto) despite the stories included within the ‘Bold Girls’ chapter. A typical encounter runs as follows: Man sees woman. Decides she is his. She says ‘Back off sunshine

– not a good idea.’ He ignores her and when things go horribly wrong he tries to get rid of her. All gets messy. Woman is banished with the aid of the fairies and magic. Ah well. And I did wonder what happened to the unnamed Irish slave girl, rescued by St Columba from a Pictish magician called Briochan, in Inverness. Did she get a new identity? The boat fare home? Trauma counselling? We are not told.

These are the rom coms and chick lits of the old days, and unlike current ephemeral virtual digital froth, the oral tradition is alive and well and has nothing to do with dental hygienists and daily flossing. So gather some pals together, throw a log on the fire, light a few candles, pour a dram and settle in for a night of reading aloud. It beats EastEnders hands down for overblown unbelievable drama and soon you too will be away with the faeries. ■

Para Handy: The Complete Collected Stories
Neil Munro
Edited by Brian D. Osbourne & Ronald Armstrong
Birlinn
REVIEW BY IAN STEPHEN

The story of Neil Munro is easier for a biographer than a novelist. It seems a bit far-fetched to make good fiction. Take the illegitimate son of an Argyll kitchen maid. He was born in 1863 to a native Gaelic speaker. A stepfather, more like a step-grandfather, came much later. Shove him through a much sought-after post as a clerk in a solicitor’s office and a swift rise through the offices of journalism to become a proper ‘man of letters’. He might not have been able to call the queen his auntie but it’s quite possible that a Duke of Argyll was his father. In a world that valued reviews and essays and dispatches from foreign fronts, he not only dined with Conrad but was invited to write the introduction to some of his books. His own historical novels were never out of print, in his lifetime and important enough for a/ judgement by many to be the heir of Robert Louis Stevenson and b/ to be firstly condemned by C M Grieve (McDiarmid) and then grudgingly re-judged by him to be the best historical romance produced since, (ahem), Robert Louis Stevenson.

Munro had already published novels (with Blackwoods) by the time the maybe master-mariner Peter Macfarlane strode onto the scene in *The Glasgow Evening News*. Unlike most of the more ‘literary’ work, the adventures of the puffer-skipper and his crew have remained popular and the foreword and introductory notes in a new omnibus hardback, from Birlinn Books attempt to explain why. Brian D Osbourne and Ronald Armstrong have also gathered some previously uncollected stories and so this handsome publication can claim to be definitive. The editors make a convincing claim for the characterisation to have some affinity with that of Dickens – where traits are boldly drawn to define individuals but do not go to caricature.

That would help explain three succeeding TV adaptations and the undoubted inspiration behind the wry portraiture in Ealing’s enduring *The Maggie*. The tales kept

me laughing, when I lived in a bothy in Mull as a labourer for The Forestry Commission. The settings of many of the stories were in sight, which helped. And I can't visit Bowling Basin without thinking of The Vital Spark. To my surprise, as a student teacher, I found that city kids in Aberdeen also laughed out loud at the exchanges between the skipper and his engineer. Re-reading them now, I'm engrossed again and not at all offended, as a coast-wester.

It's beyond the scope of this review to make comparisons with the 'serious' novels but Alan Radcliffe did choose *The New Road* as one of the best 100 Scottish books (The List, 1 Jan 2005). I would also like to recommend the biography written by a granddaughter of Munro, Lesley Lendrum (*House of Lochar*). The detailed diaries of Munro's son Hugh, killed in an unnecessary act of bravado in the First World War, are poignant and may give a clue as to why the bereaved father found it easier to take on a huge variety of disparate commissions rather than continue with the novels his publisher was appealing for. But this volume proves once more that the Para Handy stories were not simply distractions. ■

Review of His Steadfast Love & Other Stories

Paul Brownsey

Lethe Press

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

Like most of us, I am prey to a kind of literary snobism. If the book is by someone I have not heard of and the publisher is extremely obscure, my hopes are low already. Shame on me! Because this is one of the best collections I have read. Ever.

Everything about it exceeded my expectations. And there are surprises. Published by a small press 3,000 miles away in New Jersey, the writer is Scottish and lives in a suburb of Glasgow. The cover depicts what initially looks like an enlargement from daVinci's The Creation, with the hands just touching. But when you look closer, there is a tartan background, and the hands are superimposed on each other – not actually touching – which turns a conventional image into something far more intriguing and ghostly. The title itself is misleading, but in the ironic and meaningful way the whole book is written. Yes, *His Steadfast Love* refers to a line in the Bible, but this is not about the Bible. Yes, a minister plays a recurring role, but there is nothing remotely spiritual about this character.

The main characters and narrators are gay men, and in principle, gay men will probably find it excellent reading. But Brownsey is not what I would call a gay writer, any more than Updike was a heterosexual writer, because their main subjects are not sexual preferences but the much larger and more interesting subject of human beings trying to stay connected to each other, in one way or another. Brownsey's stories affirm that relationships are the same heaven and hell for everyone, for the obvious reason that people, of course, are people.

These stories are romantic in an unromantic way, which is the most romantic way of all. Hilarious, irreverent, wise, fast paced, they

range from tales of domestic rows about whether or not to accept a party invitation (and therefore whether or not to divorce), to stories narrated by a jaded God, maliciously hoping for a human's weakness to override his capacity for kindness and forgiveness. There is not a single story that feels like a weak link. Every one, a gem. Perhaps this is because they seem to be telling simple universal truths, while still allowing love to win.

Brownsey's stories have been appearing in various literary magazines in North America and the UK for years, but this is his first collection. I sincerely hope it is not his last. ■

The Last Treasure Hunt

Jane Alexander

Saraband

REVIEWED BY ALISON NAPIER

As a child I had many holidays in Glenelg. I tasted my first ice-cold milk (the holiday accommodation had a fridge – we didn't) and believed it to be a loathsome and foul product. It always rained and my poor mother, for whom these holidays were simply the same old same old in a far-flung and ill-equipped address, bravely stamped about in wellies and a head-square round the brochs and the barracks muttering darkly and teaching us all the verses of 'We're a Couple of Swells'. A quick google of the words makes it more poignant than I realised at the time.

The Last Treasure Hunt features Glasgow and London but it was the starring role of Glenelg that made me sit up and realise that I am weary to my soul of reading fiction that only features the major metropolises. So a big shout out for Glenelg.

This mature and insightful book holds a mirror to our obsessions; some are ugly and too many are predictably familiar. We pore over the fantasy lives of people we do not know (but are encouraged to believe we do) who are fleetingly famous for something they sang, or won, or said, and we believe that it matters. We flick through facebooks, instagrams, reddit and twitters, and the smart tap of a screen moves us on without time for an independent thought. (Well, not us obviously. But the others.)

Campbell is a man whose life is at risk of banality. He is a barman, bored and broke. His friends have moved on and away. He wants something to happen but be careful what you wish for, Campbell, because suddenly he stumbles on a means to fix his disappointed broken life and is suddenly famous. Just like that. Fame and fortune and a glittering future, or at least the fickle flash-fiction version, are his for the taking. Truth is only the first of many casualties when he meets Eve, a childhood friend who has escaped to become a bona fide actor. The ambiguity of their earlier friendship makes it all too easy for a whole new narrative to emerge from a tragedy and Campbell gives himself the starring role this time round with catastrophic consequences as fame morphs seamlessly into notoriety and deleting lies proves vastly more complex than spinning them.

Celebrity (fame's shallow and sleazy cousin) and the tabloid press with its kiss and tell agenda are waiting to bite Campbell, who is not quite cynical or worldly enough

to recognise a bad thing when he sees it, and to chew him up and spit him all the way from London to Glenelg. And they do. For Campbell the rush of the high, then the crash and burn, means that what he finally craves most is what he wanted to escape in the first place – the isolation and anonymity of his real life.

Jane Alexander has written an intelligent and wise novel and she writes movingly of the power of friendship. The final wintery scenes in Glenelg are beautifully captured in spare poetical language, and are far too close to my summer holiday memories circa 1970 than I care to admit. 'We'll walk up the avenue til we're there,' sang Judy Garland channelled by my late stoical mother, and it's a fair, if tenuous, soundtrack to Campbell's eventual recovery and rediscovery of his own real life. In a world where the most unreal things are termed 'reality' and fame has the longevity of a Malteser, it is a delight to discover a writer more than happy to burst the bubbles in such an accomplished manner. ■

The House with Blue Shutters

Gabrielle Barnby

Thunderpoint

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

Reading this collection of stories is a little like being the cameraman on a reality television show. You swoop into the private lives of individuals on the verge of a crisis or change, view them dispassionately, perhaps even with some embarrassment, and then swoop out again and into other lives. The author is adept at slipping into the skins of others, which gives the reader an uncanny sense of fluidity, but also some discomfort – because these characters have such rawness, such pathos.

The stories are all set in a small square in a small village in France. The house with the blue shutters has a view of the square, including the café and the roads leading into and out of the village. It also has a pivotal role in some of the characters' lives. The collection opens with an intriguing story of how an Englishwoman came to be living there alone. There are all the traditional reasons for becoming an expat, as well as a disappointing man and financial woes. Subsequent stories flow from this one, as all the village inhabitants – like village inhabitants everywhere – affect each other's lives. There are lonely old men, shy girls who topple into love, naughty men who feel guiltless.

The book reminds me a little of Maeve Binchy's *The Wayward Bus*, and Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, and James Joyce's *The Dubliners*. In their very different ways, they all use a place as a linking device to tell self-contained stories. Individually, the stories all have something precious embedded in them – a nugget of experience or a poetic turn of phrase, which makes them worth reading regardless of their place in the collection. The stories told in the first person seem to work the best because the narrative tone is natural. The character confides in us; they are convincing and we are sympathetic. The third person point of view in other stories is also interesting, because it offers a much more objective slant. The final story is dialogue only, like a radio play script.

I respect the way each character is worthy

of our sympathy, while none of them actually ask for it. This is not a sentimental version of people, this is the real thing. A mirror held up to a village somewhere in France, but which is entirely recognisable from the Highlands of Scotland. ■

Poetry Reviews

The Weepers by Lindsay Macgregor
Calder Wood Press

In the Margin by AC Clarke
Cinnamon Press

Kitsune by Jane McKie
Cinnamon Press

Dialogue On the Dark by Nuala Watt
Calder Wood Press

The Territory of Rain by Elizabeth Rimmer
Red Squirrel Press

A Good Cause by Tessa Ransford
Luath Press

REVIEWED BY STUART B CAMPBELL

Readers familiar with superhero comics will recognise 'WHAM! POW! ZAP!' as signifying action. Poetry reviews don't usually allow such shorthand, but if we suspend convention for now, WOW! PHEW! BRILL! is the sort of response Lindsay Macgregor's *The Weepers* generates. The poems in this collection are a real eye-opener, taking the reader into places and situations that are rarely explored. The imagery is striking, as much in how Macgregor combines references as in their variety. It is both an emotionally affective collection and intellectually stimulating. The poems have their own logic, yet they confound any attempt to give an account of them in prose; read them and you feel you know what is being said, but that 'something' cannot be otherwise stated. No doubt these poems could be analysed, some of the images ('giant centipedes in seams / of limestone six foot thick') are accessible enough, but MacGregor brings us many that are altogether unfamiliar ('Long-tailed / birds with human heads'), yet their strangeness works effortlessly and the inclination to consciously understand is over-ridden by accepting their gestalt affect. *The Weepers* offers us poetry that is absolutely refreshing; it compares well with (if not better than) some of the current contenders for the major poetry awards. This might be the one 'must read' collection of the year.

The title of AC Clarke's collection, *In the Margin*, conjures up notions of hand written notes in books, the outer reaches of society and of experience. The task Clarke sets herself: to explore if what is considered central in life should occupy the place it does and if those things regarded as more peripheral should not be given more attention, is something of a challenge; certainly for her as a poet tackling the subject, but also for the reader. It is, nonetheless, an engrossing challenge and one that becomes more attractive and intriguing the further you read into the collection. At the core of the collection is a series of poems ►►

about a relationship. There is nothing overly dramatic about what has happened between the two lovers; it is an affair that is recounted through images like ‘the stone cottage, its door / open on sooty walls ... the reek of peat and oak ... amber kippers flattened from the spine’. All ordinary enough, but each poem is preceded by a line of text, that runs like a rolling news story, such as ‘October 9 a bomb explosion outside the Green Park tube station ... kills 1 and injures 20’. It is the contrast of the two texts that poses the questions. This shifting of focus occurs throughout the collection to great effect; for example, a poem titled ‘Haddock and Chips’ is followed two pages later by ‘Homunculus’. This is very strong work.

Anybody whose attention isn’t caught by titles like ‘Scottish Voodoo’ or ‘The Underground Observatory’ must surely lack a sense of curiosity. Right from the first poem, which modulates seamlessly from the proposition ‘we might propagate herbs’ to the possibility of ‘benign buds / inside the brain preparing for their time’, Jane McKie’s *Kitsune* is a compelling read. The reader’s interest is stimulated partly by a vocabulary that is precise and which rejuvenates certain words or phrases through their context and source. Many of these poems are sensual; they are concerned with the textures, tastes and smells of life. They explore not just what the world ‘out there’ is, but how we perceive it. McKie is not the first poet to appropriate the language of neuro-psychology, but in her hands it is both metaphor and reality. In ‘The Inland Lighthouse’ (and elsewhere) she is concerned not only with perception as a phenomena, but also as a physical mechanism: ‘A neuron ... lassos of dendrites spread / lithe ropes into darkness’. It takes a certain confidence to adopt scientific terminology, but McKie’s rare talent is in merging technical language with more familiar images, giving a sense of how we are in the world. Many of her poems evolve through two line stanzas, or short phrases; reading them is a bit like being involved in a slow and contemplative conversation. Her combination of images constantly surprises, ‘We find calligraphy / collapsed / into Aramaic’; ‘the embryos of chalk horses’, and from this emerges novel poetry of great sensitivity.

In *Dialogue On the Dark*, Nuala Watt lays out her proposition, her perspective, in the first poem. As a poet who perceives a ‘sixth of working light’, she does not consider ‘sight as a lost paradise’; she wants to ‘invent a new account’ and inverts the usual assumption to talk of ‘the beauty of blind life’. Issue-based poetry can be tedious to read (no matter how well intentioned) and at worst be just bad poetry. This is very far from the case here. This is bold poetry that, yes, challenges our suppositions about sight, but offers unique insights. If we agree that much poetry is concerned with how we view the world, then Watt’s poetic world-view is shaped by the limits of what is literally seen; but this is not poetry about being partially sighted, it is poetry that, arising from this poet’s particular circumstances, gives us an alternative experience to consider. Watt’s poetry brings

to mind Kurt Hann’s dictum: ‘Your disability is your opportunity’ and *Dialogue On the Dark* is an opportunity for us to enter into a world that is so well defined, tangible and essential; it transcends ‘seeing’, raising the question of what it really is: ‘Vision is still a draft’ and why this sense dominates our language so much. After reading this collection you might ponder if the world would be a different sort of place if we, too, were ‘following a map / that echoes the right way: sound as street plan’.

At times it seems that some of those writing poems about ‘nature’ or ‘the environment’ have scant knowledge of their subject; a sort of day-tripper, passing experience that results in overly sentimental ideas. None of that can be said of Elizabeth Rimmer or her collection *The Territory Of Rain*. Here are poems that reflect an acute observation of the natural world; poems written with an authority derived from being immersed in the subject. When she says ‘Moss grows over my knees ... Beneath my buried feet, the push and flow / of water draws me inward’, it is believable. These poems suggest that Rimmer has taken a good deal of patience, has adopted a position of stillness; she has not obtruded into the landscape and has been able to listen carefully when ‘The land speaks to the crawlers / of frost and sun, soft going and dry / in the bleached grass, and the cracked seed-case’. Rimmer has the rare gift of being able to accurately observe the details of her environment (the paradox is that she does so almost dispassionately, but expresses it with feeling) but at the same time places that activity, and us, into a wider context; and does so through pointing out hard realities with an a good deal of compassion. She speaks of death as ‘this timely passing away, / the long slow compost’, but there’s something reassuring in her observation that it is also ‘the quiet repayment of debt ... life to the living’. In poems such as ‘She Sleeps’; ‘Northern Stones’ and particularly the slowly unfolding sequence ‘River Calendar’, Rimmer places human activity within the great expanse of ‘earth-time’; and that provides a perspective within which to meditate upon these poems.

This review of Tessa Ransford’s *A Good Cause* could begin with the words ‘it is with regret...’, but that wouldn’t be right. There is sadness when we lose one of our distinguished poets, but to ‘regret’ being given their latest (preferable to ‘last’) collection would be to approach the poetry with the wrong mind-set. Perhaps, too, ever since Van Gogh painted those crows, we’ve become conditioned to look for the harbingers of the death of an artist in their work. Bringing that sort of ‘reading’ to this new collection would only close down the possibilities it offers. No, this is not a self-conscious swan-song. For one thing, some of the poems date back to 2002, but it is the vitality, the urgency; the boldness and empathy with which these poems ring that gives them their essential character. Ransford doesn’t pull punches or mince her words when she feels something needs to be said about injustice or power: Donald Trump’s ‘retinue were greed, arrogance and vanity’; for her it’s, ‘the arms trade that enslaves the world / manufactures war for the tools of war’; a whale, apparently

disorientated, ‘far up the Thames’ has come ‘to warn / that the planet is ailing and that / it is we who have lost our way’. Elsewhere there are poems that might make us laugh at ourselves (‘Religion in Scotland’), or are affirmative (‘Mornings at Insh’), but it is not just the scope of the subject matter that provides variety, the mix of forms, styles and references enliven this collection. ■

Fugitives

Donald Campbell.

Grace Note Publications

REVIEW BY CHARLIE GRACIE

Fugitives is the first collection of Donald Campbell’s poems for many years and is an eclectic mix. The range of subject matter is broad and impressive, from the streets of Edinburgh to his relationships with other writers to the voices of Native American and Russian poets.

The book is divided into three main sections: New Poems, Uncollected Poems and Translations and many of the pieces speak to Campbell’s concern for and admiration of the human beings he writes about: in ‘Jenny Clow’, for a young Edinburgh woman lifted and laid by an earlier bard.

The lass that kissed the poet’s brow
Lies cold and lifeless in the grave.
There are no songs for Jenny Clow.

The first section on Edinburgh has high and low points, but there is very much to like indeed in the group of poems about and to other poets. In particular, ‘Clear Fire’, a poem to Hugh MacDiarmid on his eightieth birthday, is brimming with meaning and poetic punch.

Licht. There has aye to be licht
but at the hinner end
there has aye tae be fire tae create it.

There are some limitations to this collection, as you might imagine in such a

mix. Campbell is well known for his poems in Scots, and these shine brighter more consistently than those in English.

In his ‘Note on influences, tastes and methods’ at the start of the book, he asserts ‘I believe that the use of a set form expands and enhances the meaning of a poem.’ This is often true, but, while I admired and enjoyed the set format poems (most bubble with energy when read aloud, and I would recommend you do this), some of them suffer the very limitations that are often found in too structured a poem. In addition, he really does tap into something very strong when he loosens the strings.

My favourite section is the final one: Translations. Like the others before them, the poems here share a sense of control and beauty. Two stand out, and they sum up for me the strength of Donald Campbell’s poetry.

‘Aw, you!’ (from the Russian of Vladimir Mayakovsky) is a tight drum of a poem, beating out hard.

Ye limmer!
Ye looked stracult
intil the ee
o my hurricane
saw
what nane ither
had seen afore...

And ‘The Ways of Wonder’ (after the Gaelic poem ‘Sligh Nan Seann Seun’ of Donald Campbell), the penultimate poem in the collection (I’d have readily left the final one out in its favour), resounds with passion. It has the elements of set structure that Donald Campbell pushes in his early remarks, and it is a beautiful example.

No wonder this fertile land lies fallow.
No wonder the hills are haunted with hunger.
No wonder our songs are soaked with sorrow.
No wonder our words are wasted with anger!

Donald Campbell’s words are, of course, not wasted. ■



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Donald Adamson is a poet and translator living in Dalbeattie, Scotland, and Tampere, Finland. His most recent collection is *Glamourie* (Indigo Dreams 2015).

Elizabeth Angus lives by Loch Lomond and is a compulsive wanderer: by foot, campervan, and through other folk's words. Her work has turned up in a few places, including *Octavius*, *The Dawntreader*, and *A Stillness Of Mind*. Everything fascinates her.

Meg Bateman has brought out three collections of Gaelic poetry with English translations and has co-edited and translated three anthologies of medieval, 17th century and religious verse.

Jo Bell grew up in Inverness, moving to Edinburgh in 2001 to study English Literature. She now works as an English Teacher and prose writer.

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

Angus Peter Campbell (Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul) was born on the island of South Uist. He has four collections of poetry: *Aibisidh* was published by Polygon in 2011, and his novels in Gaelic have won critical acclaim.

Niall Campbell is from the island of South Uist. His first collection, *Moontide*, was published by Bloodaxe in 2014.

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

Eileen Carney Hulme's third collection *The Stone Messenger* was published in 2015 and she won The Federation of Writer's Scotland poetry competition 2015.

A C Clarke's fourth collection was published last year. A pamphlet with Sheila Templeton and Maggie Rabatski is due out from Tapsalteerie later this year.

David Connearn is an artist. He makes drawings when he can avoid the distraction of tools or pens in his hands. He lives in London.

Seth Crook rarely leaves Mull. But his poems have appeared in such places as *Gutter*, *New Writing Scotland*, *The Rialto*, *Magma*, *Envoi*, *Best Scottish Poems of 2014*.

Laura Donald lives in Dingwall, Ross-shire. She works in website/social media admin, is editing her third fantasy novel and hopes to be published soon.

Moira Forsyth has published four novels, most recently *The Treacle Well*. She is Editorial Director of Sandstone Press and lives in the Highlands.

Jane Frank lives and writes in Brisbane, Australia. Her poems have appeared in Australian Poetry *Journal*, *Westerly*, *Writ* and elsewhere. She lived in Scotdand for most of the 1990s but now teaches in Humanities at Griffith University.

John Glenday lives in Drumnadrochit. His most recent collection of poetry is *The Golden Mean*, published by Picador.

Mark O. Goodwin lives on the Isle of Skye. Five of his poems were chosen for the current issue of the Canadian magazine *Event 44.2*.

Susan Grant has always enjoyed writing and is a member of the Edinburgh group Words on Canvas and Fife group, Poetry Share.

Lesley Harrison lives on the north-east coast. Her pamphlets include *Eistatias* (Brae Editions) and *Beyond the Map* (Mariscat). A new collection is due later this year.

Jennifer Morag Henderson is from Inverness. Her book *Josephine Tey: A*

Life (Sandstone Press) was listed by the Observer in the best biographies of 2015.

Alan Hendry is an editor and feature writer dividing his time between Wick and Inverness. He edited the two Caithness weekly newspapers for 20 years.

Gordon Jarvie's latest collection is *A Man Passing Through: Memoir with Poems Selected and New* (Greenwich Exchange, 2014). Reviewers describe it as “amusing and insightful”; also “intriguing . . . crisp as a winter morning”.

Stephen Keeler is a recipient of a Scottish Book Trust New Writing Award and is currently completing work on his first collection of poems. He lives in Ullapool where he teaches creative writing.

Pekka Kytömäki is a translator and poet living in Tampere, Finland. He enjoys forest walks and libraries. His first poetry collection was published in 2015.

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

Màrtainn Mac An Tsaoir/Martin MacIntyre grew up in Lenzie, near Glasgow, his father being originally from South Uist. Martin is an acclaimed author, bàrd and storyteller.

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.

Anne Macleod lives on the Black Isle with her faithful collie, Skye. Her poetry and novels have been widely published.

Seán Martin is a writer and filmmaker based in Edinburgh. His films include documentaries about boatbuilding and storytelling in the Hebrides, and the filmmaker Bill Douglas. He won the 2011 Wigtown Poetry Competition.

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

Beth McDonough is DCA's Writer in Residence, writes of Tay swimming, foraging and a maternal experience of disability. *Handfast* (with Ruth Aylett) is published this May.

Michael McGill has had poetry published in *New Walk*, *RAUM* and *HQ Magazine*. He has also appeared on The Verb on BBC Radio 3.

Lindsay Macgregor co-hosts Platform, a regular poetry and music night, at Ladybank Station. Her pamphlet, *The Weepers*, is published by Calder Wood Press.

Ian McKechnie, great-grandson of a Glasgow clerk, is a Montreal writer and former criminal barrister.

Hugh McMillan lives in Penpont. He has been published and anthologised widely. His selected poems *Not Actually Being in Dumfries* was recently published by Luath.

Jason Monios lives in Edinburgh. His poetry has been published widely, including *Magma*, *The North*, *Acumen*, *Poetry Scotland*, *New Writing Scotland*, *Gutter*, *Southbank Poetry*, *Envoi*, *Northwords Now*, *The SHOp*, *The Warwick Review* and *The Guardian*.

Donald S. Murray is from Ness in the Isle of Lewis. He now lives in Shetland. His latest book is *Herring Tales* (Bloomsbury).

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

Stuart A. Paterson is a former recipient of an EC Gregory Award & RLS Fellowship. Paterson lives by the Solway coast & works at

a coastal selkie rescue centre.

Catriona Patience is an ever aspiring Renaissance-girl seeking ways to sidle up on truth, happiness and the other big ones by writing, photographing, singing, creating and messing.

Jon Plunkett's poetry has appeared in many UK magazines and journals. As well as writing, he is leading the development of The Corbenic Poetry Path.

A.P. Pullan is originally from Yorkshire now residing in Ayrshire. Feels that sailing around the West coast of Scotland is the best way to see it.

Maggie Rabatski has two poetry pamphlet collections, *Down from The Dance/An Dèidh An Dannsa* and *Holding*, both published by New Voices Press.

Joanna Ramsey's memoir of her friendship with George Mackay Brown, *The Seed Beneath the Snow*, was published by Sandstone Press (2015). She lives in Orkney.

Mary Robinson's work includes *The Art of Gardening* (Flambard) and pamphlets *Uist Waulking Song* and *Out of Time*. She wrote 'Hirta' after visiting St Kilda.

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.

Roddy Shippin is an Edinburgh-based writer. He helps to run *Valve Journal*, *Blind Poetis* and *Poets Against Humanity*. He, foolishly, doesn't have a website.

Flora Sinclair was born in Glasgow and currently lives in North Berwick. She retired from practising as a psychiatrist in 2015 and completed a Creative Writing MSc at Edinburgh University.

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

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

Jean Taylor lives in Edinburgh. Her poems have been published in *Poetry Scotland* and other Scottish Journals. She is working on her first pamphlet.

Jim Taylor has published a number of short stories set in Shetland, a few set in Glasgow and one or two in Australia.

Knotbrook Taylor is an Angus based poet. Winner 2014 Erbacce Prize for his collection *Ping-Pong In The Rain*. Other books include *Scottish Lighthouse Poems* (2011) and *Beatitudes* 2007. www.knotbrook.co.uk

Sheila Templeton's writing in Scots has twice won the McCash Scots Language Poetry Competition. Her next collection by Red Squirrel Press is due September 2016.

Laura Turnbull Fyfe writes in spare moments between her time as a student, creative writing tutor, English teacher and mother. She also tweets: @FigmentLaura

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

Jim C Wilson's newest poetry collection is *Come Close and Listen* (Greenwich Exchange). More information at www.jimcwilson.com and jimcwilson.blogspot.co.uk

Peter Whiteley tutors creative writing classes and has had poems published in magazines and anthologies. His plays have been staged by professional and amateur companies.

Where to find a FREE Northwords Now

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Inverness

- Waterstones, 69 Eastgate Centre
- Eden Court Theatre, Bishop's Road
- Inverness College UHI
- Leakeys Bookshop, Greyfriars Hall, Church St
- Moniack Mhor Writing Centre, 4 Teaverran, Kiltarlity
- Highland Wholefoods, Unit 6, 13 Harbour Road
- Museum & Art Gallery, Castle Wynd
- Waterstone's, 69 Eastgate Centre
- HICA, Dalcrombie, Loch Ruthven, by Does
- Visit Scotland, Castle Wynd
- Bogbain Farm, Drumossie, Inverness
- WEA, 57 Church St, Inverness
- Inchmore Gallery, Inverness

Highlands (plus Moray and Perthshire)

- Highland Libraries
- The Green Kite, The Station, Strathpeffer
- The Community Centre, Tilloch St, Dingwall
- Picaresque Books, High St, Dingwall
- Kilmorack Gallery, by Beauly
- Timespan, Dunrobin Street, Helmsdale
- Dornoch Bookshop, High St, Dornoch
- The Nairn Bookshop, 97 High St, Nairn
- Moray Libraries
- The Ceilidh Place, 14 West Argyll St, Ullapool
- Ullapool Bookshop, Quay St., Ullapool
- Storehouse of Foulis, Foulis Ferry
- Achins Bookshop, Inverkirkaig, Lochinver
- Caithness Horizons, Old Town Hall, High St, Thurso
- VisitScotland, High St, Aviemore

- Birnarn Arts Centre
- Anderson Restaurant, Union St, Fortrose
- John Muir Trust, Station Road, Pitlochry
- The Bakehouse, Findhorn (village)
- The Blue Cafe, Findhorn Foundation
- Moray Arts Centre, Findhorn Foundation
- Sutor Creek, Bank St, Cromarty
- Cromarty Arts, Church St, Cromarty
- Spa Pavilion, Strathpeffer
- Waterstone's, Elgin
- The Loft Bistro and Venue, E. Grange Farm

Islands, West & North

- Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Slèite, Isle of Skye
- Blue Shed Cafe, Torrin, Isle of Skye
- Cafe Arriba, Portree, Isle of Skye
- MacIntosh's Bookshop, Portree, Isle of Skye
- Carmina Gadelica, Portree, Isle of Skye
- An Buth Beag, Skeabost, Isle of Skye
- Mor Books, Struan, Isle of Skye
- Ravenspoint, Kershader, Lochs, Isle of Lewis
- An Lanntair, Kenneth St, Stornoway
- Hebridean Jewellery & Bookshop, 63 Cromwell St, Stornoway
- Taigh Chearsabagh, North Uist
- Shetland Arts Trust, Tollclock Centre, 26 North Rd, Lerwick
- Shetland and Orkney Libraries
- Western Isles libraries
- Carraig Mhor, Isle of Islay
- An Buth Bheag, Ferry Rd, Kyle
- An Tobar, Tobermory, Mull

Aberdeenshire

- Oxfam Bookshop, 5 Back Wynd, Aberdeen
- Books & Beans, 12 Belmont St, Aberdeen
- Lemon Tree, 5 West North St, Aberdeen
- Newton Dee Cafe, Newton Dee Village, Bielside, Aberdeen
- Blackwell's, Old Aberdeen, Aberdeen
- Aberdeen City Libraries
- Woodend Barn, Burn o'Bennie, Banchory
- Yeadons of Banchory, 20 Dee St, Banchory
- Aberdeenshire Libraries
- Hammerton Store, 336 Gt Western Rd, Aberdeen
- Spindrift Studio, The Marina, Banff

South

- Stirling Libraries
- Midlothian and East Lothian Libraries
- Kings Bookshop, Callander, 91 Main St, Callander
- Dundee Contemporary Arts, 52 Nethergate, Dundee
- Clementine, Gray Street, Broughty Ferry
- Jessie's Kitchen, Albert Street, Broughty Ferry
- Broughty Ferry Library, Queen St, Broughty Ferry
- The Byre Theatre, St Andrews
- The Forest Bookstore, 26 Market Pl, Selkirk
- Kesley's Bookshop, 29 Market St, Haddington, East Lothian
- Prestongrange Museum, Morrison's Haven, Prestonpans
- Montrose Library, 214 High St, Montrose, Angus
- Su Casa, Lorne Arcade, 115 High St, Ayr
- Moffat Bookshop, 5 Well St, Moffat
- Giraffe Cafe, 51 South St, Perth
- Ewart Library, Dumfries

Edinburgh

- The Fruitmarket Gallery, 45 Market Street
- Blackwells Bookshop, 53-9 South Bridge
- Scottish Poetry Library, 5 Crichtons Close
- Elephant House Cafe, 21 George IV Bridge
- The Village, 16 S. Fort Street
- Filmhouse, 88 Lothian Road
- Peter Green & Co, Warrender Park Road
- MacNaughtons Bookshop, 3-3a Haddington Place
- St Margaret's House, 151 London Road
- Summerhall, 1 Summerhall

Glasgow

- Centre for Contemporary Arts, 350 Sauchiehall Street
- Òran Mòr, 731 Gt. Western Road
- The Piping Centre, 30 McPhater Street
- Caledonia Books, 483 Gt Western Road
- Tchai Ovna Teahouses, 42 Otago Lane
- Mono, King's Court, 10 King Street
- Gallery of Modern Art, Royal Exchange Square.
- Tell it Slant, 134 Renfrew St
- WASPS Studio, The Briggait, 141 The Bridge Gate
- Oxfam Books, 330 Byres Rd

Invitation to readers to suggest additional locations - contact editor@northwordsnow.co.uk We will also send packs of 12 or 25 or 50 to individuals who are keen to distribute locally.



NORTHWORDS NOW AT UHI

This issue of Northwords Now will be officially launched upon the world at The University of Highlands & Islands Beechwood campus on Monday 18th April at 6.30 pm.

Readers include Ian Stephen, Cynthia Rogerson, Moira Forsyth and Anne Macleod

Check our Facebook page for more details.