Our Lives Are Stories
Jennifer Morag Henderson rejoices on the art of memoir

Poems, Short Stories, Essays and Reviews including Tom Pow, Merryn Glover, Angus Martin, George Gunn and Fearghas MacFhionnlagain
The art of telling stories and making poems is very old and very new. In this issue Jennifer Henderson describes the popularity and sheer durability of memoir and how so called ‘ordinary’ lives shine so brightly for being lived outside (as well as sometimes inside) the celebrity limelight. The real world turns out to be a pretty amazing place, which may be not quite so surprising when the real world turns out to be the Highlands of Scotland.

Roseanne Watt’s article looks at a newer way of getting into the nooks and crannies of life, the filmpoem, where word and image blend and merge to renew our sense of people and place.

It feels good to know that both the pen and the camera, the page and the screen, are there to record our memories and desires, our passions and dreams. The technology may change but we are, in the end, story-making animals, and all the better for it.

Chris Powici, Editor

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At The Northwords Now Website:
www.northwordsnow.co.uk

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To submit your work online, go to our website: northwordsnow.co.uk

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‘Three Generations, Isle of Harris’ by Monica Weller FRPS copperknobbingwordpress.com

Submissions to the magazine are welcome. They can be in Gaelic, English, Scots and any local variants. Please submit no more than three short stories or six poems. Contact details – an email address or an SAE – should be included. We cannot return work that has no SAE. Copyright remains with the author. Payment is made for all successful submissions.

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To submit your work online, go to our website: northwordsnow.co.uk
Jennifer Morag Henderson delves into some Highland memoirs

“...the inherently likeable Frere, and the reader wills him to succeed and sympathises with his wife Joan when, after various ultimatums are finally met, she forgives him and they forge a life together. A different type of memoir focuses on the places of the Highlands: the mountain memoir. Nan Shepherd’s The Living Mountain is the classic meditation on why hillwalking holds such an attraction for so many, a masterpiece of nature-writing that goes deeply into the Cairngorms. Others prefer the thrill of a set challenge: The Blind Man of Hoy is by Red Szilál, a writer whose climbing career was cut short when he discovered, at the age of 19, that he was going blind. However, with the help of friends and instructors, he realised he could continue, in some fashion, with the sport he loved. Beginning again on indoor climbing walls, Szilál gradually built up his confidence, and began to dream again of a challenge that he had always wanted to tackle: climbing the Old Man of Hoy, the sea stack that stands off Orkney. His eventual extraordinary ascent of the stack was filmed for the BBC, and Szilál’s book captures the same nail-biting tension that the swooping scenery of the film induced – the slow inching upwards, the elation of a wave of enthusiasm away from the city, the slow inching upwards, the elation of a wave of enthusiasm away from the city...”

“...people who have travelled far and wide from their original homes. The jobs they have done vary from the traditionally Highland to the more exotic, from whaler-turned-London-policeman Jock Murray in The Whaler of Scotland Yard to Norman Macleod, the Mod gold-medal-winner in The Leather Bell who plays the pipes for Brigitte Bardot, as well as a whole lot more besides that no one could do justice to in print except himself. Dolina Macleman is one of the many islanders who tells her story of leaving home in An Island Girl’s Journey, an autobiography which was composed using recordings of conversations as a starting-point. Best known as a singer and actress, Dolina Macleman became involved in the folk music scene when she moved to Edinburgh, becoming friends and sharing the bill with many of the best-known names in Scottish culture, such as Norman MacCuin, Hugh MacDiarmid and Billy Connolly. Many people ended up at informal ceilidhs at her house after poetry-reading sessions as part of the group known as The Heretics. The Heretics evenings, recently revived as part of the 2015 Edinburgh Festival, combined performance poetry with the Highland idea of a traditional ceilidh, and one of the performers at the original nights was the author of two of the most extraordinary memoirs of recent Scottish writing. Ada F Kay, otherwise known as A.J. Stewart, Ada, with her dramatic red hair, believed that she was the reincarnation of King James IV of Scotland, and she used to be a familiar sight walking in her black, fifteenth-century-style leggings and cloak through the Old Town in Edinburgh. Her book, Falcon, was the memoir of James IV, written in the first person. An astonishing piece of work, it does contain some new insights into James’ life, and climaxes in a heartbreaking ending. Falcon’s companion book is Died 1513 – Born 1929: an extraordinarily lucid and disturbing description of the disintegration of an intelligent mind...”
Road takes her mother’s relationship with her Nigerian father as only one part of Kay’s own journey as an adopted child. Meanwhile, the internet and the growth in self-publishing and small publishing make it easier for everyone to share their stories. Bloggers are perhaps too aware now of just what their potential reach might be to write as unselfconsciously as they used to, but people still do write versions of their life story online. Simon Varwell, Inverness-based travel writer and author of the now defunct satirical website Inversnecky, blogs occasionally at www.simonvarwell.co.uk and is also involved with twitter project @ Hi_Voices, or Highlands and Islands Voices, a rotational account where different individuals take over for a week at a time to tell their stories – a new form of super-short, image-linked immediate, unreflective memoir for a digital age.

There is an extraordinary range of biographical / memoir experiences from the Highlands, and certainly not enough room to mention them all in a short article – without even going on to those who explicitly base their fiction on real life (Jessie Kesson’s *The White Bird Passes*, for example, or the social commentary of Jane Duncan’s *My Friends* series).

It is relatively easy for everyone to record something of their life in one way or another, and, handled carefully, it is something that can bring a lot of happiness and value not only to the person telling their story, but also to their wider family – and, in the case of a published memoir, to a much bigger audience as well.

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**Tricks of light**

Tariq Latif

I sprinkle refined flavours of the sea,
over slices of okra, ginger and garlic.
Add a measure of turmeric-powdered sunlight and a handful of small red chillies to the generous melt of butter.
I inhale the rich sizzling scents.

For days now the hills have been frozen under dense layers of snow. For days now the cold has set in the pores of my bones.
The bare wiry tree is smeared with water droplets that refract the low light creating a multitude of glimmering fruit;
glistened snipey smiths, opaque plums, tangerines and sapphire berries.
This is not the tree of life or of knowledge but of hidden components of light revealed.
I love the tingling warmth of the sun on my brow. If our bodies were prisms then our actions and words would refract the true colours of our hearts.
I nourish my body with generous splurts of spiced okra and nan bread.
I sip milky tea and watch the tree become bare black under a raven blue sky.

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**Westray Wifie**

Jean Atkin

Cock-eyed, hunched on cracked flags, she’s blowy among the stones, the bones, the midden left by cattle tied indoors through the long-nights, their bellies swollen, udders shrinking, ribs sharp as groynes at slack, the lack of fodder.

Propped so long on a throughstone, she leans over the tether-posts, over the hungry, sweltered cows.

She is her belly, brought to bear.

She – the line of her brow, her wide scratched eyes, her claw of ancient hair, her two high breasts, her broad haunch – she’ll see them through the dark to drop their calves at Noltland’s inching door of daylight.

to draw blood, to draw spring, bring milk, be
the quickening

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Poetry
O'h, isn't he marvellous!' Sian cried, as she lifted layers of tissue up to his hairline. 'A real beauty,' said Hector, the museum's Director of Antiquities, pushing his glasses up his nose. They were always greasy and speckled, and for three weeks now had been joined in the middle with a wad of sticky tape. Sian wondered if he had any intention of getting them replaced, or even repaired. They looked old enough to be one of his exhibits.

'We're very lucky to have him,' Hector went on and grinned at her, bits of lunch clanging to his teeth. 'Amazing, isn't she? She cooed, not addressing him but the figurine, whom she lifted in her gloved hands like a baby. 'What a priceless little monster you are.'

It scowled at her. 12 centimetres high, the man had big muscles, stout legs and a thick rounded beard. He wore a bone-coloured skirt with eyes to match, but the rest of him was greenish black and covered in scales.

'Careful!' Hector said, reaching out to his own gloved hands, but failing to prise the thing from her grip. 'He's probably at least 4000 years old!'

'I know. I paid for him.' Well, not her personally, of course, but in her recent and much-celebrated position as Museum Director. Her latest triumph was to commission this exhibition of ancient Central Asian art and to secure little reptile man as centre piece. For an eye-watering sum, she would have Asian art and to secure little reptile man as the centre piece. For an eye-watering sum, she would have the richest people in the world to an extent to a manoeuvre that she had announced, but worth it. She was establishing an international reputation for this place and had persuaded donors, investors and the Culture Secretary that serious money was required. She was good at persuasion, good at directing, good at money. Frankly, the Museum was lucky to have her.

'Yes, of course,' Hector stammered. 'Bronze Age, from the Oxus civilisation.'

'Indeed.'

'Lived in Northern Afghanistan, southern Uzbekistan and western Tajikistan.' He moved his hands in little circles, mapping the territory. 'With his white gloves and long bone-ragged nose, he put Sian in mind of a clown.'

'You know about these incisions?' he asked, stroking a gloved fingertip down a gash that ran diagonally across his face, narrowly missing one eye.

'No, no! That's The Scar.' Hector looked at her with eyes wide, bushy brows pushing up for the morning's labour! 'You're a star."

Downstairs, Josie — who had a history first from Cambridge and was doing a Masters in Museum Curating at Edinburgh University — pushed through the main doors of the Museum and down the street to Starbucks. The Education Secretary merely wanted tea, which she could have whipped up in the staff kitchen in seconds, but Sian wanted a Skinny Latte, which, seemingly, could only be procured from the multi-national café giant that Josie despised. There were a lot of things she despised at the moment, not least the fact that her summer-long, twenty-hour-a-week internship with Sian was unpaid. Only suffered it for the museum experience, the tick on her CV and dear Hector, who was a boring old windbag but also kind and passionate and, in truth, had taught her more about treating the past than anything else in her education. Josie had moved from joining the staff jokes about him and trying to evade his spontaneous lectures to affectionate respect and actually paying attention. And just as Hector ascended in her esteem, like a constellation growing bigger and brighter in the night sky, Sian had did the other way. Initially awed by her intelligence, her ability and her flawless style, Josie had become increasingly sick of being little more than a PA, running errands, tidying the office, filing things, and — most demeaning of all — scuttling out for drinks and salads armed with Sian’s extensive instructions on banned foods. 'I have horrific allergies,' she had said, handing over a printed list. 'No anaphylactic reactions, thank god, but can’t touch these flavourings or fragrances or I'll turn into a reptile.'

By the end of the day, Hector and Josie had arranged all the pieces of Ancient Central Asian Art into their glass cabinets, angled the spot lights and cleared away the boxes, tissue and bubble wrap. Hector was triple-checking his inventory as Josie secured the last extensive instructions on banned foods. ‘Aren’t we, darling?' she asked, red-faced. 'Oh, I meant the texts for the weeks ago - detailed and meticulous — and protested at Sian’s red pen slashing through his drafts, re-written them, suffered more slashes, and finally arrived at a series of impassioned sentences that he felt were more like tweets from London Fashion Week than illuminations on these priceless antiquities.

'People don’t want to read long-winded essays,' Hector, had insisted. 'All that’s in the companion book. Short and sharp for the gallery walls.' It felt like a travesty to him, but he had to admit (grudgingly and never out loud) that Sian’s changes had boosted the museum’s numbers, funding and reputation beyond measure. If not for her, they could never have afforded Dragon Man and the rest. But he still couldn’t decide if she was good for the place or running it. His one comfort had been his custom here for nearly thirty years. From a life-time of learning. And she was — pushed through the main doors of the gallery walls. ‘It felt like a travesty to him, but he had to admit (grudgingly and never out loud) that Sian’s changes had boosted the museum’s numbers, funding and reputation beyond measure. If not for her, they could never have afforded Dragon Man and the rest.

By 9.45 the next morning, all the dignitaries had been seen since her coffee was delivered at 8.30. Josie’s phone went off.

‘Sian! How’s things?’ she said brightly. ‘We’re busy; busy here, of course — great turnout. You on your way? Then her brows shot up and her mouth formed a little circle of surprise. ‘Oh dear… Oh that’s terrible. Sian! Oh!’

‘No, I definitely ordered… Perhaps they — heaven forbid — do you think they gave me the wrong coffee?? Oh, nightmare! Can I help? What shall we…?’ She listened for a while, sighing and shaking her head, then said, finally: ‘Of course, don’t you worry, Sian. We’ll manage. We’ll manage just fine. You just look after yourself.’

She clicked her phone off and turned to Hector.

‘You’ll never believe,’ she said. ‘Sian’s had an allergic reaction and can’t come out.’

‘No!’ Sian had a manicured hand at her. ‘If you pop out this afternoon, tour? Oh and Josie,’ she pointed over her shoulder. ‘Made my job easy. Why don’t you do the hello’s and official opening bit and I’ll handle the hellos and official opening bit and you do the tour for TV?’

Hector agreed at once, of course, and was super impressed by how well Josie stepped up to the mark with a witty little speech and charming welcomes, knowing all the names. Anyone would think she’d practiced.

Later, on his tour, as the cameras rolled and the VIPs smiled, he swelled into his full stature. Regaling his little audience with the story of each object, his eyebrows leapt, his eyes shone and his hands created in the air the empires, battles, rituals and ruins of the ancient world. As children’s faces fell open in wonder and adults stood entranced (and Josie gave a manicured thumbs-up from the back of the room) his voice reeled them in like a magician, a powerful wizard, a high priest at the holy altar.

‘And this astonishing figure,’ he concluded, unfurling his fingers before the scale-covered statuette,'is called Scarface. These dragon-men of Central Asian mythology represented the violently malevolent forces of the underworld — they were feared and hated. But they could not be destroyed. Oh no! This is what you had to do.’ And here he held up a finger, his audience dangling like fish on a hook. ‘You must make a slash across the right cheek and insert nails in the tiny holes above and below the lips — see here? — to prevent the Scarface from speaking. For you see, the only way to have power over the dragon-men was not to kill them, but to silence them.'
The story of Jolanta Bledaite — nothing good in it, you’ll see.
A child from the fag-end
of history. Her teenage parents unbuckled. Drink drove her mother on the road.

* Early years with Grandmother — ten houses, one track, the forest all around. The old woman wouldn’t light a fire till night, no matter how cold. The small rooms smelled of earth and ash. It was this for Jolanta, or else the drab Soviet tower block, in which her father tended his cancer.

Like someone in a fairy tale, she said, Papa, don’t worry, I’ll get enough to buy a house.

* She took a few English words and, with humility, set off for a land where the only rung clear to her was the last one. No, it’s not a news story yet. (But it doesn’t turn out well.)

* The fruit fields of Angus don’t grow money, nor is Brechin quite Shangri-La, but Jolanta came, picking daffodils in spring, berries in the summer. A van picked the migrant workers up.

* early mornings and they put in twelve hour shifts each day. People who knew her then say she was a good worker — Aye never any bother - but she was shy and kept herself to herself.

* In the last month of her life, she was spotted begging on the edge of town — a plastic cup held out — to add to her wages.

* One of those she lodged with in a dump house in Brechin was a young Pole — blue-eyed, baby-faced. She confessed to him how much she’d saved. He told another, more experienced man.

Experienced in the snake-pit of life. Soon the pair of them had a plan.

Early one morning, when no one was around, the two entered the room where Jolanta lay reading. They taped her wrists and ankles. They taped over her mouth. They found her card, but not the pin. They would kill her if she would not tell. At first, she gave a wrong number. (What she couldn’t know is that nothing would save her. Disposal bags had been bought.) The youngster smoked a cigarette. Her eyes must have been on him, pleading. The smoke drifted to the ceiling. Silence. Till they heard the other on the stairs, his cold intent.

He sat astride her and let her feel the end of his knife. Marks consistent with the prodding of a knife were found, also bruising. The dividend: £200.

* The youngster held her legs, while the other snuffed her with a pillow. ‘I felt bad after,’ the youngster said.

‘I smoked a couple of cigarettes.’ Jolanta was laid in the bath and, with kitchen knives, the other hacked off her head and her hands while the youngster held the bag.

Blood bloomed in the water. There are times in this story you want to look away. Her broken body, they crammed in a wheeled suitcase.

* They took the bus to Arbroath with the bag of head and hands. There are also times when this story presses on your senses. Did the other take pity here? Or did he sit on the aisle seat, as the youngster stares out over a countryside nosing itself with spring, a chill east coast day, but bright, the sea edged everywhere white, as the weight of the head — a weight only the cursed will know — bounces slightly on his lap, the edge of a finger pressing on his inner thigh.

They weighted the bag and threw it in the sea, as if already it was beyond memory. The next day, the same with the suitcase in the harbour.

The Ballad of Jolanta Bledaite
by Tom Pow
Culloden Moor

By Marion McCready

Our blood is still our fathers
And ours the valour of their hearts
(Inscription at the entrance to Culloden Moor)

I
When we came back to Culloden, it was early evening, not another soul was there. The moor came alive around us - no ginnicks this time, no satellite tracking headphones explaining each battle action as you walked across the moor, no echo of the wall-to-wall cinematic screening of the battle in the tourist centre. Just the land itself stretching for miles, the heather-thick ground pulsing with insect life, empty of the clamber of tourists wandering the maze of paths.

Odd shapes of jutting rocks, memorial stones, mark mounds of the dead - some buried where they fell. The bodies of the Jacobites, those who could be recognised, were buried in mass graves together with members of their own Clan. The moor hills glower on the skyline, the clouds change colours like the bubbles my children love to blow around our own Clan. The moor hills glower on the skyline, the clouds change colours like the bubbles my children love to blow around our

We sent you one of our children and this is how you send her back. Or perhaps they simply stand, as the wind moves through the trees, and think of the berries waiting to be picked beside a distant sea.

Creatures of Habit

Short Story by Rebecca Wright

I found this shed snake skin the summer I turned thirteen. The summer we moved to the new house. It lay abandoned and spent on the pile of woodchips, basking in the sun. The fine hair on my bare legs tingle with danger. I poked it with a long stick, and then, when I was sure it was just the crisp shell of a snake, I carried it home at arm's length.

We put the thin skin on the bookcase in the hallway, in the shape of the adder it would have been, stretched from Austen to Du Maurier. Dad explained over roast chicken and Yorkshire puddings how snakes yawn to shed their skins.

The summer I turned sixteen, I lay on the grass by the beck thinking of a boy's voice, his hands, his smile. I heard a splash. I watched an adder twist in the shallow beck, its diamond markings darker in the cool water. I wondered if it was the same snake whose skin I had carried back to the house. I remembered Dad's words - they can have up to twenty babies. A family of baby snakes, I thought. They'd grow up. Fall in love. Shed their skins.

The summer I came home from my first year at university was the hottest in forty years. I was taking Media studies, English lit. I bought my first ever broadsheet newspaper in the local post office and felt a thousand miles tall. I opened it on the grass by the beck and fought with the strange paper. It crumbled between my nail bitten fingers. I didn't understand the articles. Even the headlines were written in code. A different language. I lay back to listen for snakes and think about a man's voice, his hands, his smile.

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D a says as how things’ll be different and we’ll have to get used to it and we’ll need to help out. That’s what being a family’s all about, he says. Then his voice shrinks small as a hiss-sput-whisper and he says we is to tell no one. On no account, says he. If anyone asks, we’re to say she’s been sick and now she’s better and nothing more than that.

Only, I’ve already told Mrs Parks and she works in the shop and I know she’ll tell the whole town. Like she told about Mr Harrow and what he did with Miss Linda Martin behind the church one Saturday night and him a married man; it was a sin and should’ve been a killing. But Mrs Parks told it to everyone buying a morning newspaper, telling it like it was something that had slipped out of the pages of those papers and was missing. And didn’t she tell everyone and his dog what the school teacher did with Emma Barr and it wasn’t nothing more than kissing, but Emma Barr was short of a few years and so it was all wrong. And I told Mrs Parks about our Mam, and then Da saying we was on no account to tell no one, but everyone would know by now.

There’s a car pulls up outside the house and it is old Tom’s taxi and it’s clean as a whistle or a new penny, except there’s mud on the tyres now and I can see by his face that old Tom isn’t pleased and he steps on tip-toe shining shoes to open the back door because he prides himself on being a gentleman. In the back of the taxi is our Mam. Da goes out to help and he slips old Tom a little extra to make things right.

Mam, home from the hospital, and when she steps into the house it’s like she’s a stranger or a guest, and we make a fuss over her as we do the minister in his black frock when he calls twice a year. And we tell her as how we’ve missed her, just like Da told us to say, which isn’t a lie because we have missed her. And Prune offers to make a cup of tea for her, and she’s heard what he’s said and so Da don’t say to our thin as paper Mam, only I don’t put much store in ‘em. And I’m praying then. Da says prayers can do no harm, but it’s not really like mam’s smile. Something is missing.

She smiles, our Mam, and she says a cup of tea would be just the ticket, and she sits in her chair and she smiles again; but it’s not really like mam’s smile. Something is missing.

She smiles, our Mam, and she says a cup of tea would be just the ticket, and she sits in her chair and she smiles again; but it’s not really like mam’s smile. Something is missing.

Our Mam, But Not All Of Her There

SHORT STORY BY DOUGLAS BRUTON

She smiles, our Mam, and she says a cup of tea would be just the ticket, and she sits in her chair and she smiles again; but it’s not really like mam’s smile. Something is missing.
Dàin le Fearghas MacFhionnlach

Reifreann 2014

1) Coire a’ Bhrceacain

Sgiobh Seòras Orwell 1984 air Eilean Dùnra. Chumnan m’ piòs mu a dhiùtheann air an t-òc chòunn gress. Thachair tuathast bìta ris aig Coire a’ Bhrceacain.
E hfein, a mhac òg tri bhàidhna dh’aois, agus dh’fhìobh dhàoinne eile san eadar a bh a chaidh a ghabhachd le sturth-seanadhidh ùidir ’s a tharrasg a dh’umais sa chuairtadh-ghluin mhòir. Bhì ris an cùl-mhòraith dèith agus an t-saistin a modh.
Ach rinn iad a’ chuin a’r iomran gu reac leathan far air deach an eadar fotha. Lais iad teine an sin.

2) Baga Dòrnaireachd

B’ ann dì mhiot às dèidh a hreifin a bh a an co-là-brith agam.
Chéanneach m’ mhac baga dòrnaireachd mòr dh’fhormh.

Bha e dhubh, dearg, agus geal,
Chòrd e rium glan.

Lean mi orm
g a’ leadraideadh fad seachdanean.

Air a’ cheann thall
bha mo ghàirdean goirt.

3) Cò mheud itelan?

(Airson m’ eògha Callan, 18 mìosan)

Cò mheud itelan a chumnasinn ann an diugh a’ dol tuath air mean trid-a’ stèir eabair, ’s a cuid moradh air a shealladh a-mach às.

Thair crìbhail boidhhe an fhoghair
fot a thogas tu le eile
nach do thoilte an bhàgh air.

4) Ròbot air an Oir

Sios leathaids breac gleannadh ann an beinn, saod seann ròbot fuamhaireidh mòrgeach a’ tuileadhadh le sturth is le gleàdir braich tro iomairdean lann clèil is sìnepean.

Crùite am broinn rachanoimh longreach mar leòchar bain air bhòil ’s an àirde ann agus nuair a spùidh le h-amhran reagach nuair a m’ uisg a mhùir thu fhaoil dhomhan.

Teaghlach

1) Mànas an Lagaídh

An t-àsach a leum an-dìugh sa thrù, na òmar triòil-sheolair fho fhèinn.

2) Do Ghàire

Gad chluinninn
ri lachan gàire
Gad chluinninn
ri lachan gàire

3) Do Ghàire

Gad chluinninn
ri lachan gàire
Gad chluinninn
ri lachan gàire

Sàidh-Fàide

1) Gàidhlig Ghalàgtaga

Stiùladh gleannach tòtmamach is m’ eile nam lagh ne bhronn.

2) Inneal-èisteachd

Nam stad sa choille-seamhradh a’ rùrachadh ann an pócaid lèine airson m’ inneal-èisteachd ann air son a’ mhì-choltach.

3) Mòran òir-dhuilleag

A a’ dòthain do mhanfarihaidh air a’ mhiadh fhionn beagan.

Aois

1) Eagal Ron Tinneas Alzheimer

Bhradair.
A’ stùbal mòntich leam mhàoai.
Thàirs air talamh rìogh.

Mise a’ gabhaich ceuma ceàrr
’s a dol fotha suas dàmh dhàreach ann an làthach a thòiseach.

2) Inneal-èisteachd

Nàs a’ chìlchair mar rìth-sùbhalaichd în.
Ach an dùnadh seacaid a’ chàin in?
Agus mur eil an eòpin dhà-ribh an làthair

Pàipear Maidne

leagh
le ugh

Northwords Now Issue 32, Autumn 2016
Cloud Inversion

SHORT STORY BY PAUL BROWSEY

After two hours there is no sign of the man. Gary is aware of himself solely as an object of suspicion hanging around in a lane where big houses with cupolas and porticos lie in the silence of wealth beyond high hedges and serious gates. His awareness is given sudden voice: ‘Are you trying to make up your mind which house to burglar?’ The growly voice has enough joking tone to avoid rudeness but not enough to eliminate a warning that she isn’t joking. She glares out from behind high spiked gates. She taps the gate with a garden trowel, as though belatedly to attract his attention.

‘Oh, just waiting for someone.’
‘Waiting for your accomplice?’ Her face has the wrinkles of sweet-old-ladyhood; her eyes are a border guard’s greeting someone of the wrong race.

‘No, no, for a man who walks a dog here. Well, he did yesterday.’
‘Her silence informs Gary that this won’t do.

‘A spaniel sort of dog, brown and white, on a retractable lead. We got talking because I caught up with it. The lead. I couldn’t make out whether he called it Molly or Milly. He was quite elderly, but his hair was still fair. He was the only one on the village school here, then away to Glenalmond. Not thin. Wearing—is it called a camel overcoat? It looked very good quality.’

So the man was rich and it would be easy for Gary to mug him in a discreet lane of overhanging boughs.

‘Very friendly and easy to talk to. That was true, as people ordinarily speak. Yet it wasn’t true, it tubed too much away behind a conventional phrase. ’What he said was ordinary enough, about how strict things were when he was a boy, the belt at school or church twice on Sundays, but—and he realises as he says this that it is not an acceptable justification for his being discovered in the lane—’how he talked was different, somehow, not like I was a passing stranger.’

Yes, that was what it was not like. But what was it like? Twenty-four hours haven’t produced a clear idea. No wonder he failed to seize an opportunity that is now, in retrospect, precious.

‘He is not a friend of yours, then.’
‘Oh, not a friend, we’d not met before.’ And anyway, can an old man like that be a friend of a guy like himself? ‘We didn’t exactly arrange to meet today but he sort of suggested it.’

‘Explain, says the silence.

‘See, I was out here on a walk, a hike, down the lane here and along the Highland Trail, a bit of it. You couldn’t see the loch to the turn-off for the Highland Trail, Gary had been halted—had even for one confused moment thought it was there because of the old man—by something hanging by a piece of green twine: an audio cassette, not in its box, slowly rotating.

‘It’s like—do you know Deon Hill at Aberfoyle?’ Gary had asked. ‘The trees at the top have hundreds of things tied to them—stripes of cloth, mainly—with messages attached, prayers: that someone will find a job or get money or someone will love them. Someone will get better. Some association with fairies and magic. All a bit silly.’

‘Magic is invoked here, too, by the dangling cassette. Milly or Molly had swerved away from it with a whimper. Dogs are renowned for sensing things that humans usually can’t. Perhaps a prayer is recorded on it, perhaps music as an offering. How touching to expect the occult powers to have equipment to access an obsolete medium.

‘I expect someone found it in the undergrowth and strung it up so that whoever lost it would find it easily if they came back to look for it. The old man’s words had been the sensible explanation, but something was transmitted through his speaking them for which the puzzling word grace keeps suggesting itself.

‘You can’t, though, knock on a door and say you’re looking for someone whose words transmit grace. Gary transfers two £20 notes into a pocket, handy to flourish in support of a lie. He retracts his steps and chooses a single-storeyed house that appears to have been built on a corner of land sliced off by leyland from a bigger demesne. Between visible metal girders, its walls seem made of rocks and glass fragments compounded together. The front door is concealed within an angle.

‘There’s an instant smile and a cool-edged tang of vanilla from the blonde young woman in tight denims who opens the door to his ring of the bell. Nipples press their outline though her shiny slinky mallard-green top.

‘Sorry to bother you.’ No cancer behind these nipples. Probably. Unlike Alison’s. ‘I wonder if you can help me find someone who could be one of your neighbours.’

‘We don’t know the neighbours.’ Her laugh invites him to find it funny, too. ‘We’ve just moved in. My husband’s out.’

‘Well, you might have seen him walking his dog, this man, a spaniel sort of thing, brown and white, called Molly or Milly. He’s quite old, but he’s got a young face and a full head of hair, a big cloud of fair hair like a little boy’s. He looks like life hasn’t damaged him.’ He waves the £40. ‘I want to return some money he dropped walking his dog in the lane yesterday.’

‘Oh, that’s so sweet!’ She leans a shoulder against the door jamb, thumbs in belt loops, nipples leading the conversation. ‘You’re from up in the village?’

‘No, Glasgow. I was just out here hiking yesterday.’

‘And you came back today just to return his money?’ Her smile goes all over him, apparent.

‘But from the eyes of the old man had come neither approval nor disapproval, only attention so selfcented that conventional responses and promptings had no power to chirvify you.

‘Behind her in the hall a large wall mirror gives back Gary’s earnest eyes, his full head of hair still almost entirely black, his puppy-fat cheeks with the expression of designer stubble, his unsunning zip-up jacket and cargo trousers: Alison had loved that person.

‘I just took another day’s leave.’

‘To let someone have some money they dropped? Oh my God! That is amazing. What do you do? You are a good person.’ The arms are fervent but the embrace is over before he realises what is happening. The press of her body against his was as quick as though they had known each other.

‘Yes, but for only one hour. Why you didn’t do it then?’

‘I was just, like, hoping to see him again.’

‘Well, I didn’t notice him dropping it—’

‘No, I’m not hiding it. The ribbed sweater with leather patches at elbows and shoulders confirms a military impression, though avant garde architecture does not seem a colonel’s natural habitat. ‘Garage hasn’t got the part.’

‘Well, not sure, but, well, no-one took up your offer when I walked back the money was lying just where he’d stopped to take out his hankie.’

‘You’d better go,’ the man says. He goes indoors without looking at the woman, then turns to say softly, ‘My wife does not want to be bothered by your tuppenny-ha’penny stories about lost money.’ As he vanishes she smiles and shrugs.

‘He is gaunt, older than she, but straight- backed as a soldier. The angle in the wall reflected as an object of suspicion on his body against his was as quick as though they had known each other.

‘Oh, Darling. Hi. Hello. Couldn’t the garage—?’ She holds her arms over her nipples.

‘Yes, I wondered that, too. Why you didn’t do it at once?’

‘You are a soldier, then. You can’t, though, knock on a door and say you’re looking for someone whose words transmit grace. Oh, my God! That is amazing. What do you do? You are a good person.’ The arms are fervent but the embrace is over before he realises what is happening. The press of her body against his was as quick as though they had known each other.

‘Who could this be? Alison has something about lost money.’ As he vanishes she smiles and shrugs.

‘Right, let’s meet tomorrow and walk along the clouds?’

But suppose Gary’s lie had paid off and she’d said something like, ‘Oh, that sounds like Len McMeeken at Dumfry House at the top of the lane, it’s got, like, a parapet, he’s wonderful for 80, used to own a big firm that hired out excavating equipment, branches all over the country, his wife died last year, said.’

‘Mightn’t it have been self-defeating? Whatever the old man had conveyed—offered?—it was like something glimpsed in the background of a photograph, not what we were supposed to be looking at: A name, an address, a history giving rise to expectations—these would stack up in the foreground, diminishing what could be detected in the margins…’

‘…But here, where the lane meets the main road through Killarney, is a man walking a dog. No, it’s not him, and the dog is a white- footed boxer, but it is suddenly obvious that Gary should have asked a dog-walker for information, for there is a freemasonry of dog-walkers. No lie this time.

‘Excuse me.’

The man is quite young, but this is disguised by a flat cap and a large pear-shaped body. He’d halfed before Gary spoke, apparently to allow his eyes to follow a schoolgirl in a skinny black skirt that she repeatedly pulled down with a coarse comedy functional tug that has nothing to do with the posed allure you might think she’d been aiming at. When he turned to Gary he widened his eyes and pursed his lips and nodded towards the girl, inviting a shared appreciation.

‘I’m looking for a man—’

‘Each to his choice. Can’t help feeling you miss an awful lot, though.’

‘Not, not like that.’

‘It wasn’t that with the old man, surely.

‘No, someone who dropped some money. He walks a dog in the lane there, a brown and white spaniel called Molly or Milly! He waves the money. ‘I wanted to return it to him. Very tall and upright, rather imposing. A big bright white dog, far hair, like an—’ He’d been about to say angel’s. ‘A nice old boy.’

‘A brown and white spaniel called Molly?’
No, I don’t think I recognise him. The disavowal in that line embraces anyone who knew him. Perhaps someone from Craigholm. Come along, Shamba. The boxer licks Gary’s shoe with delicate reverence, then stares up at him, the savagery of her boxer jaw eclipsed because through her eyes comes pure patient compassion from another world.

‘Uh—Craigholm?’

‘The Doolally Dump. The rest home, whatever it is.’

‘I’m not from Killarlin.’

‘Ah! Well, we didn’t want it here, I can tell you. But these old houses are so large...’ After Archie Lindsay died it was sold for some sort of—well, not the really serious cases, but, you know, people too fond of the sauce or life gets a bit too much for them, stress, that sort of thing. Not the sort of place you want in a village like this. Children....

‘They got planning permission, though. They go in for pet therapy.’ Irony lies heavy on the phrase. ‘A bloody great pack of dogs and the inmates put them and look after them and take them for walks. Your man could have been one of them. They don’t pick the dogshit up, either.’

I couldn’t make out whether he called it Molly or Milly. Or he switched between Molly and Milly because he wasn’t sure what was the name of a dog that was one of the common stock of the Doolally Dump.

‘But would a patient from there have £40 in his pocket? A last attempt to save the day. ‘Don’t see why not. Place costs a packet to stay.’

The look that neither approved nor disapproved nor freed you was nothing but gaga vacuity. How could he have been taken in by the babble of someone in a home?—He’d been on the brink of saying, Right, let’s meet tomorrow walk and above the clouds; he’d trapped out here again today, using up holiday leave, to look for an imaginary once-in-a-life-time opportunity. Someone whose job is clamping down on scams to save the public from their fantasies falls for fantasies himself!

And actually, cloud inversions are very rare: that’s what the internet said last night.

‘Well, thanks anyway.’ Gary pockets the notes with a decisive air of that’s-that-cleared-up. The girl walks haltingly, engrossed in her mobile, still pulling her skirt down every few steps. If Alison had lived they might have had a daughter. She might have had the shrewd mean eyes of this girl. Gary mimes a glance at her and gives the flat-capped dog-walker a man-to-man smirk in farewell. He says, ‘Goodbye, Shamba,’ but now the boxer refuses eye contact, lowering her head as if sad about something.

He hurries to his car. He drives fast. No-one in any of the cars he approaches or passes, drivers of sensible vehicles on ordinary sensible errands, would ever lurk in a secluded lane on the off-chance of something pure, something real—what the fuck does that even mean?—from a stranger they had a mundane chat with the day before. He’s been as daft as the time he made his secret journey out to Doon Hill and fastened to a tree a beautiful black and silver tie, a gift from Alison, with a useless message that was neither a prayer nor the mere expression of a wish: ‘Let Alison’s cancer go into remission.’ He does not notice that for the second day in a row there is a cloud inversion over the loch to the north.
The Swimming Lesson

SHORT STORY BY NICK HOLDSTOCK

Here are some interesting smells:
Chlorine
Nutmeg
Perfume
Fear

The temple of someone you love.

Which of these does not belong? You will probably say ‘fear’, that it is not a smell.

But most of us know little of fear— we often confuse it with worry: our choice of shoes, the state of our hair, where we parked the car.

There is nothing everyday about fear: it heralds catastrophe. You breathe it in, through your nose, through your mouth. Its odour is bitter and tight. Like pencils crushed into shards. Like chalk dust in the nose. But it is not these other smells. It is only itself.

So yes, fear is a smell. I know this, and so does Tariq, standing in front of my office and saying he has forgotten his swimming trunks.

For the third time this term.

He looks at my white face. I look at his brown face. He says, ‘I thought they were in my bag.’

‘Did you?’ I ask, then breathe in sharply. I consider his desperation. The quick glances he throws at the pool already containing his class.

And because I have taken a deeper breath, or because he has distracted me, my resident smell shifts. Instead of fear, there is chlorine. I am walking miles of hospital floor while surgeons cut into Susan. After four hours, I was sure she had died; there could be nothing near enough.

I force the air from my nose. This is not chlorine. What we call ‘chlorine’ is something else besides. It is the odour of things from the body reacting with chlorine. Urine, skin, shampoo, sweat, deodorant, hormones and blood: these combine with chlorine to form chloramine. This is that fabled swimming pool smell. There is nothing clean about it.

When the water brings tears to your eyes, the smell is so bad. The light would help to break things down. The air would move the smell.

Instead it is hidden, shut away, in many ways, denied.

I check my watch. The lesson—which will be water polo—is due to start in five minutes. In the pool, the faces are waiting. They can see the goals, the ball. The caps with numbers on them, the arms outstretched.

‘Do you?’ I say, because I have to:

To think away the fear.

Last night, there was the odour of nutmeg. The temple of someone you love. The smell of it means nothing until it is worn. Then what we smell is no longer what we should say. It would be far easier than keeping an eye on him in the pool.

Myristica fragrans. An evergreen tree. Indigenous to the Banda Islands of Indonesia. It is the only tropical fruit that produces two different spices. Mace, the covering of the seed, and nutmeg, the seed itself. It is said to be a tree that bruises easily.

Whereas they can hold him under. Punch him in the balls. ‘You’re going in’, I say. This time he does not say ‘wait’ when I go in my office. I look at the folders, letters, the photo on the desk. I and Susan just before her surgery. She is pale, smiling bravely. Her head is on my shoulder. She probably thought it her last picture; I’m sure we both did. I am kissing her long brown hair. Burying my nose.

And what you smell is never just perfume. No matter how expensive, how evocative its name, the scent of it means nothing until it is worn. Then what we smell is no longer Calvin Klein or Chanel, not these oils and solvents pumped into stupid bottles. These are just a medium, a way of drawing something out. An essence. Some quality of hers that cannot, should not change.

I open the cupboard. Take the shorts. Go back out to him. He is standing where I left him, arms folded, hunched over, as if he were cold. Although his lips are moving I can hear no sounds. His eyes are closed. He seems to be praying.

This is what I would say to him if I thought that it would help; if I still believed in whatever I felt as I sat on that hospital chair:

Do not ask for the wrong things. Make sure you ask for enough.

I asked for her to survive, for the cancer to be gone.

I did not ask for her to be the way she was. So that at night, when she is sleeping, when I bring my face to hers, I do not smell my fear, my nutmeg. Just the temple of someone I love.

And however bad school is for Tariq, however much he bleeds, or is bruised, he will get over it. Perhaps when he’s at university, or later, when he has a job, there’ll be a morning when he sees school uniforms, hears the bay of boys laughing, and does not flinch, is not afraid; just slowly inhales. After disbelief, and a flicker of memory, he will realise the fear is gone.

I hold out the swimming trunks. Say, ‘Now put these on.’

For a moment the pool goes quiet. Then his classmates cheer.

The question then is how this nutmeg got onto her hands. A simple matter that only required a simple, mundane answer.

For her getting rid of her fleeces (the new tops do look better); for her drinking more (well, why not?). For why, when I kissed her palm last night, there was the odour of nutmeg.

‘Do you want to see the nurse?’ is what I should say. It would be far easier than keeping an eye on him in the pool.

The question then is how this nutmeg got onto her hands. A simple matter that only required a simple, mundane answer.

Eulogy to Barefoot Fathers
DONALD S MURRAY

The old ones marvelled at our footwear,
the shoes and boots worn out each day
en route from primary school,
envying the way our feet were never rinsed in mud or peat
the way theirs were at that age,
recalling too how skin was often brown as tan-hide
the way they stepped within cow-pats eased out on the village road.

Yet later on, they mocked us as they watched us go rocking past on platform soles, stilettos heading out to dance-halls, following the path they walked down en route to growing old.

Washed Up
Olive Ritch

Sent from the sea, a porcelain doll – headless, handless, and footless – a reminder of the *Lessing* and its cargo, driven onto rocks at Klavers Geo, Fair Isle in a storm in eighteen-sixty-eight.

After years on the seabed, the doll was washed up at a beachcomber’s feet on Papay, broken (but beautiful), and the beachcomber picked the doll up, and put it in her pocket, knowing the doll’s hope of salvation.

Pantoum to the Swinging Sixties, Anstruther
JAMES ANDREW

We often visited the fair and hung around; young men who hankered for horizons, our legs like sticks in dead-tight trousers; our half-grown sideburns only half-concealing acne.

We did a lot of brooding on horizons as speakers blared out ‘Yellow Submarine’, and yet more acne sneaked from sideburns as music lifted well above its lyrics that found more joy in silly submarines beside the dodgem cars that bashed and crashed as music danced away from lyrics.

Girls giggled in short skirts, with pampered hair, and dodgem cars bashed on beside the harbour with its washed-out mud and half-turned boats and giggles girlèd beneath their bleached-out hair beside the pier that pointed to the sea’s horizon beyond the mud and stranded boats and youth that bashed from car to car beside the harbour wall that hid horizons past which we found these seats, watched films about the sixties.

We youths crashed on from car to here, dreamed on of fun we longed for, then found our way to this settee, this DVD about the fun we knew the rest had.

The fun for which we longed so much, gauche boys on legs like sticks in such tight trousers, was always had by someone else.

We hung around, then hung around.

The Shins
INGRID LEONARD

Wet tarmac and an outside toilet, sticky plant pods in the school garden, a-raking over fresh earth. The only tree trunks for miles are the tibiae of boys and girls, though ours don’t count in the apportioning of justice, long and fine though they are. These shanks carry the weight of a human being in the washing machine of the world, set to rinse and full of tumbles – the grass is wet, the rain dull and old.

We watch as they line up, smooth or scrape-kneed, to receive a kick from the boy with bent head and trainer swinging, who doesn’t want to think, as hills look on through drizzle and a child with a bell in hand tolls an afternoon of guitar and fiddle.

Grace Notes
KIRSTEEN SCOTT

When I watched you drown the kittens in the old zinc pail, I was curious about death curious about the blob of blood on the nose of the mouse in the trap we had set in the cupboard under the stairs

still curious when we drew the curtains for the hearse to pass and I keeked to see.

Then stories came of the laying-out, the shoveling of the mirrors and how they coffined him quick for the days were warm.

There were bigger, deeper deaths when boundaries were lost in hair and I had to trust the ground beneath my feet

trusting to hear again, like wind in the wires, the grace notes in an old lament.

Rains January 2016
MARIE-THÉRÈSE TAYLOR

These once were fields. Now small tides lap soft over land sunk beneath an unmapped lake

Cattle float comically upended a mare and foal – piebald balloons a ewe, her lambs at once defended and condemned inside a fleece clogged useless as a twisted umbrella in this rain

Roads are mocked navigable only by boat. Rivers disregard their boundaries, breaching walls of homes that no one wants to leave.

What, you ask, is left to save save paper memories soiled in the creeping sludge, and soft furnishings caught in the slick?

In churches and halls they gather and pray

*Cleanse me from my sin*  
*Oh wash me, I shall be whiter than snow*
She stood on the doorstep, feeling the chill of the north-westerly and waited, though she had keys somewhere in a pocket of her backpack. The door opened and her mother stood there, saying nothing, looking her up and down. Then her mother’s hand reached out and briefly clasped her forearm.

‘You didn’t need to….’, she said as Sarah passed her on her way into the house. ‘Well, but who else?’ Sarah said.

The house was just as it always was, with its walls forever painted and repainted the same colour, its smell so familiar and at once comforting and disheartening. It held a damp in its walls that no amount of heat or light seemed able to shift.

‘You’ll need to use the sofa bed,’ her mother said. ‘He’s in your room. They moved him…it’s colder.’

‘He’s in….’ she began to say, but instead turned and moved towards the door that was so familiar, put her hand on the brass handle, the shape of it, like an egg, the cool solid heat on the stairs. In the kitchen she saw her mother on her knees, loading towels in to the washing machine, one of them folded and on the floor to act as a cushion. She didn’t turn to speak but nodded her head to one side to indicate the pan on the hob.

‘And bread,’ she added, closing the door of the washing machine.

‘Thanks.’ Sarah went into the kitchen and took a bowl from the cupboard. She stood by the hob, turning the bowl in her hands as if unsure what to do next.

‘Could you hang those out when they’re done? Next door are popping round this afternoon,’ said her mother.

Sarah nodded, still turning the bowl. ‘Where did you find him?’ she asked.

‘In his room. I made him breakfast but he didn’t come down,’ her mother said.

‘He’s gone now,’ she added, a few moments later.

The warmth inside surprised her, a feeling of condolences being offered through the door of the living room as she put her foot on the first step of the stairs. She began to climb, each foot placed carefully in the centre of each step like a child trying to be quiet, her hand trailing on the bannister, her fingers roving along the grooves of it. At the top she looked, again the pegs and the towels, until they are all there, on the line, the first ones already dripping.

Only then does she remember that she has only one clothes pole, that its slotted end grasps the lines where they meet at the diagonal, that this way she can lift two lines of towels higher into the air with just the one pole.

It had almost been as if he had waited. The summer had been long and hot but now the first of the winter was blowing in from the northwest and the horsetail waves chasing the gulls from the sand seemingly a long way from inviting.

‘I’ll come,’ she’d told her mother on the phone two days before. She’d been at her desk in the hall of residence trying to start an essay when there was a knock at the door and someone shouting through it ‘phone for you.’

‘Grandpa’s dead’ her mother had said, after she’d said ‘hello?’ and just as she was about to say it again.

‘Oh,’ was all she could think to say, then ‘what happened?’ when it was clear her mother wasn’t going to fill the silence.

‘Just old, I guess.’ You could hear the shrug in her voice.

Two days had passed before there was a train to take her back home. She stood on the doorstep feeling the chill of the north-westerly and waited, though she had keys somewhere in of it, so known to her hand it was like the tread of a parent’s footstep on the loose board of the hall floor. She could no more disguise the memory than dislodge the hand itself.

The door opened and he stood there, Stillness spilled like liquid from the room, like the sunlight that poured through the window and glittered from the walls, from the desk and the chair, from the china doll and the jewellery box, from the motes that hung like stars and from the white dead skin of her Grandfather.

In the hall she waited, listening for familiar sounds, the ticking of the clock, the window that shuttered. And for sounds she knew would not come.

‘There’s soup if you want it,’ her mother called.

Sarah had a hand on the bannister, a foot next door had come while she was hanging the towels. She could hear the hushed tone of condolences being offered through the door of the living room as she put her foot on the first step of the stairs. She began to climb, each foot placed carefully in the centre of each step like a child trying to be quiet, her hand trailing on the bannister, her fingers gliding along the grooves of it. At the top she moved to the door straight in front of her and placed her hand flat on the centre of it, the other hesitating on the handle.

The warmth inside surprised her, a feeling underlined by the sparseness of the furnishing, the bare walls, the cool blue of the sky in the window. She walked over to it and saw for the first time the view he’d had, of the washing hanging unmoving, the long sweep of the bay and the sea and the sky almost the same. On the bed there was only the mattress, the bedding already gone, the thin wooden frame left looking oddly insubstantial. She could see where he had lain and where the world of him had left its mark over the years, his shape.

She lay down in the hollow and smoothed her clothes out and folded her arms over her chest. From there she could see the salt streaks on the window and the way the sun played through them. Looking up she saw the chaos of clouds gathering in the evening and the wind shifted in the shafts of light.

She watched and she waited for something of him to emerge from it. Downstairs she knew he would be being remembered and glasses raised to his name. Here only the silence spoke and the weight of it pressed down on her, kept her still. After a while she closed her eyes and was soon asleep.

When she wakes it is to a half lit room, to brightness and shade together. She hears the first spots of rain tap against the window, unhurried fat drops that fall with the last rays of sun before the gloom that will come with the squall.

The towels are flapping when she reaches them, tugging at the line like birds in a snare. Next door she sees the Allinson’s sheets still out, billowing now; their corners cracking like lines in the wind. Out to sea she sees the rain coming, shimmering curtains that are touched with red by the setting sun. The sea drives to shore, furious, relentless, its surface heaving and strewed with rain.

It hits her before she can take the first towel down; in just a few seconds the water is streaming down her face and into her eyes, her mouth, the back of her neck. So fast she has to swallow to keep from feeling like she is drowning. Her clothes are stuck to her with a wet so cold it is difficult to move, to lift her arms high enough to take the pegs off.

‘Hurry up!’ he had shouted from the back door, his frame in silhouette, his anger all the worse because she couldn’t see it but knew it was there. A dark and sudden squall had come then too and Sarah had frantically grasped at the pegs holding the shirts to the line, her fingers frozen, the strength in them gone. She had pulled at the pegs with her teeth.

‘For Christ’s sake get a move on, they’ll be soaked’ he’d said. He didn’t swear, was careful never to swear. Not in front of a woman, she’d once heard him say. Or a child.

Sarah worked faster then, the fear driving her, she had found her method. She pulled the pegs in her teeth, clasped the shirt with the palms of her hands and pulled it into the basket. By the time she had done the third one they were all sodden.

She turns her face away from the sea now just for the relief of it, just so that she can peel the clothes from her front and catch her breath without fighting the wind for it, just so that she can see. She can hear only the roaring. She squeezes the water from her eyes and opens them to see her mother slapping her hands hard against the window then beckoning her, beckoning her in.

Her mother says nothing to her, as she did then. She had seen Sarah kneeling by the shirts, the water pooling by them, the fury one they were all sodden.

The warmth inside surprised her, a feeling of reality and rain and she recognises fear in both of them.
Poetry

the time it takes to boil an egg
Ali Whitelock

the last taste
in your mouth would
have been that of terror
as strangers in white coats and non-slip shoes
punched you hard in the fucking
chest while i wandered the house of Fraser
smearing creamy tracks of hot plum and shocking
coral on the thin underside of my forearm
at the counter with the French sounding
name and when my phone rang i heard the words
alright—as though florence nightingale herself
had said them and i raced like some kind
of lipstick coated crazy fuckwit from the house
of Fraser to the car i cannot find in the car park
i am sure i have parked in and i queued
the excruciating twelve seconds
for the man in front to pay i smash my credit
card in the slot insert my ticket at the boom
am urged by electronic ticker tape to please drive
carefully and have a nice day please—fucking—spare
me the clichés as i race down the antiseptic hall
past the hand sanitiser cover your mouth when coughing
and have you had your flu shot this year i hurtle
out watched his adam’s apple rise and fall
and for every beat in the metronome of his slowing
died kevin forty seven minutes after i arrived

Banaíns Gháidhealach
Pádraig MacAoidh

agus an eaglais ro bheag
rinne am pioire lambo a-staigh ro bhean-na-bainse
an dos mór mar amhach chrom na h-eala
tron t-seirbheis
tha bean-na-bainse a’ toirt seachad iomradh
dhan a brathar, a mhunstar

mu chuid ris, dha a’ chionn bhàr fhiodh
gus mòrach ghlaidh seòmar
na bainse a shearadh
tha na fir ruadh a’ co-thionail a bhàr fhiodh
thuirt fear rium Tha thu ceàrr
agam riamh, tha thu toirt orm ‘Raglan Road’

Gul a’ ghuilibnich
Maggie Rabatski

I found the cheap urn,
In the stubbly heather
I found the cheap urn,
left as if they could just
abandon death on the top
of a high hill and it
would simply stay there.

Am feur a-staigh
Maggie Rabatski

Nuair thug mi iomradh
air gloidh cianail a’ ghuilibnich
thuirr fear rium Tha thu ceàrr,
cluinnidh mise ciùin.

Leig mi seachad e ’s fhiosam
urge fear-e a bhunadh
nuair thug mi iomradh
agam riamh, tha thu toirt orm ‘Raglan Road’

i.m. Sandy Hutchison
Pádraic MacAoidh

Tha e seachad air meadan-oidheach an Olomouc
agus thu sinn nar capraid radar Ponorka
agus Hotel God, ’s ged nach robh guth-seinn
again riadh, thu tuirt oirm ‘Raglan Road’
a ghabhal leis an dá nòta a th’ annam.

Ach far am bu chòir dhà bhith
‘Och Greffon St in November’ tha thu sa bhall
ghabhal thairis le ‘On a quiet street…’
agus thu sinn a’ seinn cómhla, na rannan
air gairdhn an ann eisit robach – tripped
ligtely along the ledge… away from me
so hurriedly – guis chà mhòr g’ eil sinn seinn
leis a’ ghàire.

Ach, Sandy, thu air mo char a’ rian.
Tog a-rithist thu thein e on tús.

Dumyat
Richie McCaffery

On the way up Dumyat
I saw a huddled group
on the peak scatter ashes.

They made a toast
and began their descent
just as i reached them.

In the stubbly heather
I found the cheap urn,
left as if they could just
abandon death on the top
of a high hill and it
would simply stay there.

Poetry

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**Solladh**

It’s a ghost-word this solladh
and once or twice I’ve heard it echo
off an evening cliff or in a cave
or just in my own lonesome head
with its accumulated remembrances
like rolls of storm wrack set for decay

It came from old Calum a shepherd who fished
that coast with rod and a tied-on line
and solladh to him was limpets
chopped up and chewed then spat
into a limp sea at dusk from a rock
to gather in lythe and stenlock

So here it is down on paper now
solladh returned from the ocean air
of this brain that’s always casting for
a catch to exhibit in literature
but the word will go down in its own way
through tangles and boulders to a dark bottom

**Shieling Children**

From bright unhurried waters
looping bays of old pasture
undisturbed in dreams of butter
the many voices of the mimic stream
summon back the shieling children
from the moors and hills they wander
in death’s dissolving after-dream
saying nothing is impossible
in the mythic times you budded in
be as the celandines that come
to catch the warming of the sun
and strew my banks in golden constellations

**One-Horned Ewe, 18 July 2013**

There was the afternoon beneath the cliff
I was sitting pretending to relax
but waiting for a big event to arrive
from the immensity of all around me

say an eagle gliding low
to greet me on my arid perch:
‘Hello and goodbye you daft shite’

or the biggest whale I’d ever seen
travelling a sparkling road of tide
out with a spout and back below: ‘Cheerio’

but all I saw was a one-horned ewe
from a distant outcrop staring through me:
‘Are these bones yours?’

**Evasion: 6 August 2013**

Months afterwards he stopped me in town
and apologised for ignoring me
a confession which totally threw me
until he mentioned an evening at Largiebaan
and an incident I struggled to understand
at the time and barely understood
when he chose to explain it

I was leaving, and somewhere between
cliff top and forest I noticed a man
carrying a rucksack and dressed in green
coming towards me along the track
so that it seemed we’d meet and talk
and I’d find out who he was and why
the cliffs had drawn him so late in the day
but he suddenly turned and angled away
withholding even a glance or a greeting
and crushing my comradely expectation

One year on and he was dead from cancer
which turned the meeting that never happened
from rude avoidance to a missed opportunity
of fixing the living man in the landscape
by an invisible monument built of his words

**Flora MacMath**

What’s left of her is doubtless
still underfoot and out of sight
in Kilcolmkill where her grieving parents
John and Helen buried her
in 1818 when at age 32
she was borne on the backs of homespun men
the seven rough miles from ‘Leargybaan’
the spelling carved in her stone
which spelled her out as ‘Flora McMath’

which ought to suffice for an idle browser
or even, since I know the type too well,
a convert to the cult of genealogy
grateful for even a name and date
but not for me who sees the woman
in probable beauty a Gaelic captive
of cliff and sea and sky and mountain
and poor little fields of corn and barley
which drank her earthy sweat in harvest
and then in a winter’s sleep forgot her

Was there ‘romance’ in any of this –
a sunet's blush, a lover's kiss –
or mere insufferable poverty
material and emotional both
locked in a deadly embrace?

There is no answer but the one
I’ll keep to myself by intuition
in a secret bog-hole of imagination
the very one she sank a keg of butter in
to keep it cool and then forgot the place
or died before she could return for it

---

Bog-Eye

Bog-eye with its idle lid
of bubbled green slime
conserves in its peaty sediment
the history of diverse skies
the passage of a million birds
and the dart and dance of insect multitudes
but in its archive none of my kind
to which it is vengefully blind
has yet been found
and I’ve heard moor grass complain
in a weary whisper all its own
when wind assails the pool’s wet margins:
“You with your dangerous brain
and creed of taking
desecrate my ground”

---

I Won’t Get There

A time is coming when I won’t get there
when the west with its open skies and ocean
will close at the back of infirmity
leaving me only dregs of memory
but I hold these gloomy thoughts in check
as an animal exposed in time of threat
might stand stock-still mistaking
arrested motion for invisibility

Thus I refuse a track that narrows
into a landscape of imagination
soon to distort and darken
with menacing figures and features
half-seen and wholly unrecognisable
impeding my way which, anyway,
will conduct me towards a nowhere
something the same as death
The Brothers Gunn
Meg MacLeod

Their fishermen’s hands turned towards the winters crafting of creels.
I followed unofficial apprentice over the short cut to the faithful willow a rare find in this sparse land.
it was the younger man of seventy who cut the willow withies from the trees’ summer harvest.
the elder walked only the path to the boat relying on instinct to guide his feet.
it was a strong partnership querulous complacent acquiescent.
their first language, one of gesture, mute and expressive between themselves.
their second was Gaelic that was how they spoke to me.
their third a slow translation into English.
I learnt the craft of netting a meditative orchestration of twine and fingers without sound.
only the smell of pipe smoke and peat and the slurp of tea or whisky.
the elder died that winter their language already silent diminished further.
the younger became the elder he only walked the path to the boat the willow grew and was not harvested.
and lifted the last of the creels drifting on the tide my trust was their trust.
the cui no longer a word unknown inspired fear.
with the boat piled with creels we rowed against the swell the narrow harbour entrance no bigger than a needle.
the elder waited for the thrust of the wave to carry us.
we got our soaking the boat was pulled to winter in the hayfield alongside the cows.
I found my place at the oars the elder just there for a last look before the winter closed the door.
we headed out for the cuil.
the younger read the edges of the foam for signs of danger for the green light to go we set the small prow forward into the dark paragraph of the cuil.
my eyes averted from the cliffs my heart rising with the huge swell we plunged downhill into calmer waters.

My Mother Ate Crab Claws
Yowann Byghan

My mother ate crab claws like there was no tomorrow; smashing the rose and ivory ridges with their tiny, stiff, black hairs like angular boxers’ knuckles with a steel-handled knife.
She purchased crabs straight from the boat, plucked from the tarry baskets, paid for in quick, shiny coins to the smiling, shifty fisherman with the red woollen hat and red hands, looking over his shoulder for the skipper.
She boiled them red as Billy’s hat, not hearing any screams, but sharp with the one-two blade to flip a scallop from its shell, or lop the head and scrape the guts from a brace of mackerel.
The crabs steamed as they cooked, filling the kitchen with their stink of dark, sea-floor scuttling, resenting their imminent dismemberment, brick-red, sullen, savage as pirates in a stifling hold under battened hatches.
She thumbed open the body shell, like opening a russet envelope, flicking out the inedible brown mush, rinsing the innards quickly under the tap, pulling the legs and body apart, laying them like sterile trophies on the clean, white dish.
When she cutlassed the chalky shell, the whole kitchen filled with sweetness, and she schoonered to her harbour mouth the mild, salt, wet, white, exquisite meat in a ritual of dedication as ancient as the heaving seas themselves, in such heavenly abandonment that the little flecks sweet and small clung to her chin and fingers like sailors to wreckage, like grains of white sand to the pull and suck of the dark, green weed gratting on a wild and desolate shore.
Poetry

Wedding gift
Kenny Taylor

Below a hunter's moon
By the grey rocks, Beneath a hunter's moon Beneath streaked snow shards and The round-backed ridge, I will follow the hill fox trail For you.

Where the burn spills silver and The rowan crooks, dark Over drooling falls, Where his prints pock mud I will trace his path, And pause.

And when one shot has Brought him low, Down by boulder and bog I will bring him, Then, when his pelt is peeled and Picked and cleaned, Then you will feel his softness Across you.

And when the vixen barks, Wild beneath the weeping screes, I will feel you bite my skin In half light, See the dog fox grin In the fire's last glow.

(In 1913, when the Maclennans became first tenants of a bothy at Coire Fionnaraich, Achnashellach, they were pictured with Mrs Maclennan wearing the fur of a fox killed by her husband shortly before their marriage)

In a Dwaam
Edith Harper

Gin Ah'd little tae dae, Ah stare oot the windae, past the yella curtain an a bowl o broon eggs laid on the stane windae-ledge.
Past two-three sarks hingin far pega on a washin-line stretchet attween the hedge, fu o squabblin spurgies, an the aul rodan tree.
Past the park fu o ripenin barley an on doon the strath till Ah come tae the sea whaur the guills ca on me tae come oot tae play. Ah see mussel dancin on diamonds that drap far the sun, like steppin-stanes, on the waves.

Crossing the Strand
Catherine Eunson

After we die and because we have been there we will stand looking out through the waves knowing it approaches first a speck then the hull pulling nearer let us walk on the strand then where life still disrobes near to the edge now where its cloths are left then let's forget go back inland oh the shade the scented leaves architecture autumn the warmth surface water flowing through the streets drainage renewal familiar faces everything lit up.

Mary Queen of Scots Doesn’t Get Her Head Chopped Off
Maggie Mackay

She’s our new librarian, this Ms Stuart. A natural redhead, she sweeps towards us in her vintage gown, like a barge on the River Seine. She claims she is a true Scot. Doesn’t sound at all like us. Who let her in? She’s lost her way to the French class. She whispers prayers each study period and bans our dog-leaved young adult fiction. The spines split like walnuts as they hit the floor. She spins a sacré bleu. We offer her Google.

We nigger at a Virgin and Child poster. She plays a lute, a lute, who’s heard of that? Her embroidery sessions drive Miss Murdoch to breaking needles on the Singer Scholaristic.

We sit at her knee, like ladies in waiting. She tells fairy-tales, family stories of book collections, of a Europe once upon a time. We learn about harps and Latin, a Dauphin, and plots. She’d make a wicked history teacher.

Almost to the Sea
Joan Lennon

The currents are complicated here. The river’s single-minded journey is hijacked by the tides.

Shove you back the way you came - Swoop you up and fling you forward - Fight you to a standstill that is all undertow and white horses -

Just now, the long brown sand bank in the middle is lined with sleeping seals.

Twenty Twenty
Jane Swan Fuller

One day I noticed I had a peregrine’s eye. I had to hide it from my other eye with a darkened lens.

My peregrine’s eye could weigh up my neighbour’s heart as he walked his dog on the far shore.

It took in a tiny swift, sprinting across the Galloway sky, a silent sister sitting above it, summoning up the stoop.

My other eye realised and said, ‘who do you think you are, Horus the distant one?’

My peregrine’s eye knew it was as jealous as the fickle moon when it looks on the sun’s brightness.

My other eye began to bleed. To get attention. The blood was an oozy blanket to keep things soft and fuzzy.

Spiteful as ever, it made me move my peregrine’s eye into a special box marked, ‘use with extreme caution.’
When it comes to the integration of film and poetry, you will soon find yourself entering a world muddy with neologisms: poetry film and film poetry, filmpoems and poemfilms, cin(E)-poetry, kinetic poetry, digital poetry, videopoems… the list goes on. It is certainly revealing that such a variety of terminology should exist for this particular hybrid art, for the marriage of film and poetry seems an obvious and relatively simple one. Indeed, Orcadian filmmaker and poet Margaret Tait spoke of the film format as ‘essentially a poetic medium, and although it can be put to all sorts of other – creditable and discreditable – uses, these are secondary’. Perhaps it is precisely because of this that the form resists an all-encompassing term, signposting instead the complexities and ambiguities surrounding the definition of what we consider the ‘poetic’ to be.

The need for a succinct term for this form is something of a necessary evil. When I must use one, my preferred coinage is ‘filmpoem’: the lack of hyphens or spaces between the two words captures for me the essential aspiration for fusion, a wish to create something in which neither visuals or words (in whatever form they take) are ever subordinate to the other, but are instead at once independent and interdependent of each other. By this means, a filmpoem should unlock a vital dialogue through exploiting the synergies, rhythms and tensions inherent within and between the languages of literature and cinema. As you will soon discover, this remains a fairly inadequate definition.

Filmpoetry has a significant presence in Scotland’s film tradition, perhaps most crucially in the work of the aforementioned Margaret Tait. Kirkwall-born, Tait spent most of her lifetime living between her home islands and Edinburgh, though from 1950 to 1952 she was enrolled at the Centro Sperimentale di Photographia in Rome. She made over 30 experimental short films and the feature length *Blue Black Permanent*, yet despite the scope and evident quality of Tait’s work she has remained, until quite recently, something of an underrated figure. Whilst it’s important to acknowledge that women have long been omitted from film histories, Tait’s relative obscurity is also partly down to the (quite admirable) manner in which she made and distributed her films. These were usually self-funded, entirely-independent ventures, going against the grain of perceived ‘correct filmmaking methods’ of the time. She shirked the grittier edges of the then neo-realist movement (though she embraced its use of authentic locations), favouring instead a closer, observational style focussed on so-called ‘smaller subjects’.

Tait’s refusal to compromise on her vision allowed her to create a body of work that is intimate, heartfelt and deeply engaged with poetic technique. Her films use a variety of different styles, from animations and drawings both hand painted or scratched directly onto film, to 16mm film poems, observational pieces and portraiture. Though they don’t always facilitate traditional poetry, it is poetic language in which her films always speak. She spoke of frames becoming ‘the equivalent of notes, or words, (or letters might be nearer it) or blobs of paint’, and their editing ‘a matter of composition’. We learn then, to take notice of certain resonances in her work: how red flowers reference back to a shot of a red scarf, or how a languid take of a smoking chimney pot is soon juxtaposed by a brief shot of a bare, lit lightbulb. It is the same sort of ‘crystallising of a moment’ that a written poem achieves, but with an added intensity about it, with something else moving beneath the surface of the film-grain. Tait described her technique as ‘breathing with the camera’, and this is certainly an apt description. Her films never feel constrained by any limiting parameters, but instead give the viewer a certain amount of breathing room within them, reflecting something integral of the white space in which a written poem rests.

In her time, Tait struggled to find a platform from which to exhibit her films to the kind of audiences she perceived would like them, and even went so far as to throw her own film festival from her Ancona...
Filmmakers; his work displays a deep concern for what that means on a technical level, the resonances of loss become part of his work, whilst also belying tensions between Jamieson’s familiarity and strangeness within his work, and as the split-screen fades into unified image of the loch reflecting the above clouds, Jamie concludes: ‘Whom do you belong to loch? The sky, and the sky to me’.

Filmpoetry in Scotland still remains something of an obscure art, though it is certainly growing in popularity, particularly as a collaborative practice between poet and filmmaker. This obscurity seems relatively surprising, considering the fraught climate of heightened identity politics and the explosion in popularity of the spoken-word scene across Scotland’s cities, both of which seem ripe subjects for filmpoetry to engage with. That’s not to say, however, this rich source will remain untapped for much longer – filmpoem workshops are cropping up across Scotland, and Rachel McCrum (of the recently disbanded spoken-word duo ‘Rally & Broad’) has just started a new project called ‘Cinopoems’, an international collaboration between ‘Scotland, Quebec, and everywhere’.

In the year before her death, Margarait Tait said that ‘a Scottish Cinema can only come from what is welling up in people to make’. In the wake of two hugely emotive referendums, with questions of identity and nationality now at the fore of the national psyche, it is going to be extremely interesting to see just what it is that is ‘welling up’ beneath this surface, and what filmpoetry’s position will be within it.

**Resources:**

Sarah Neely, *Stalking the Image: Margaret Tait and Intimate Filmmaking Practice*, Screen 49:2 Summer 2008


Margaret Tait’s films can be viewed via the *Scottish Moving Image Archive* website

Alistair Cook’s films can be viewed at filmpoems.com

Susan Kemp’s documentary can be viewed at nortatlantikdrift.com

Kathleen Jamie’s and Kyra Clegg’s Lochmill in *Two Weathers* can viewed on the Bella Caledonia website

Information about Roseanne Watt’s filmpoems can be found at www.documentingbritain.com/roseannewatt/
Nine Worlds

By George Gunn

1
The silence left behind by the geese is drunk by the Pentland Firth it fills the air with a feathered emptiness

2
The brief savage Spring ice storm batters the daffodils yellow bells & unlike the voices on TV will not give up on this rugged ancient country & moves out horizontally across the bay lambs shiver in the eighteenth century fields & rows of turnips roll like severed heads in scattered untidy rows to compensate the ewes for the lack of grass the sea is the colour of thin green milk as thristy as grass & as insatiable as the sea the humans move through Atomic City like shoals of fish on the flow tide or stand in dark melancholy like scarecrows on a moonless night they tie their lives like flags to a pole & begin to fray in the relentless wind

3
Poking a stick at nothingness the ghost of Rob Donn Mackay watches the bombing of An Garbh-eilean sees the NATO fighter jets & warships reduce a piece of Cape Wrath to rubble he is without cattle or community & the pusbroch of his voice is frozen in the Spring snow on Beinn Laghail hailstones fall through the mist of his hair & out of the dust of An Garbh-eilean Rob Donn forms a poem & gives it the necessary hard stone music of the violent age he finds himself in so that it can be heard as far as Atomic City where the war workers live in boxes of time

4
“Soon” he says “on a chosen day the people will rise up & fly like the fulmars out over the cliffs & out out across the open sea to the fishing grounds where dreams shoo in the clear landless ocean & the people will feed yes fearless & free on sustaining ideas of their own potential safe from the predatory lies of the night-crammed land grabbers who speak of a good life in the prison of theft in the land of illusion & slaughter”

5
The shochads have been back a full four weeks now they have brought us the light from North Africa & in the Voar everything is a matter of light it grows like hay in the thirsty fields the shochads open the heart of Spring with their piping their wings mark an X on the blue paper of the Dunnet sky the rhythm of their flight stays in the demes of the day music lives in the hearts core of the shochads through perpetual movement they become immovable they are the constant moment of light a drama of feathers above the rough theatre of the newly ploughed brown orchestras of the barleys parks the Sun so loves the shochads she leaves the sea naked to petal-ast their sky dome a fragrant flight of sea pinks & tulips all the descent & upsurge of a tide in the air the birds speak with their wings as along a road beside a cliff an old man walks composing speeches from their songs people will gather like seals to listen on the rocks

6
The coming & going of Sunlight & snow turns Caithness into a blur yellow & black butterflies the size of Stroma flat across Dunnet Head the firth is the colour of indigo the streets of Atomic City smell of the sea ozone sails across the flagstones like fog the dreams of haddock cod herring mackerel all turn to music & sticks to the boots of the shift-workers as they board their early buses & to the stubble
unlike the heron you cannot go back
aroused the primrose promise of your lips
now that the hailstones have awoken this moment
it is not for you to surrender hope
& the swept essentials of Atlantic beaches

nothing can be said to add to the wisdom of the heron
hanging over the empty firth
the heron’s head is bent back like a question mark
this ancient bird beats back in time
flies out across the naked water
a heron launches from a flagstone ledge
in the cold air above the low cloud
the mavis finds her measure
she has the taste of the storm in her song

7
The hailstones pummel the eager grass
they harral the skeletons of the birch trees
yellow eyed primroses at the edges cluster
they harral the skeletons of the birch trees
& I call to you from the lonely deep
as we go now
pressing into the wind

embrace this small storm & the longer storm
that no birdsong can perfume clean
that no paper-boned birch tree can embrace
the salty battered grass is waiting for your footsteps
go now wanderer
to meet the coming passion

8
Our meaning has been eaten away by argument
& Scotland for once has no contention
we have been resolved & like an exposed rock
at high tide are reborn as an island
& yet we have been wounded
we wear a Summer shirt as red as blood
our dreams limp to a forgetful place
a province where short shadows fall
on nuclear waste disposal slos
& nitrogen swathed lager
cools the hot thrusts shouting
about empty straths full of wind turbines
where dog-foxes are nailed by their tails to strainer posts
as young girls vomit in the back of four by fours
in the long Summer Dinm

the boor tree in the garden has turned
into a flowing organ of mad flutes
a tanker heading East off Hoy
is bilge-full of angry American crayfish
who will put light & meaning
into the green baskets of Spring?

Tell me a hundred times tell me
it is the fulmars who drink the wind
the hissing blue sea on the black & yellow rocks
is the hungry name I call myself
when I am lost in shadows
tell me that the argument has drowned
that the tide will never go out
& that this cold I feel
is the world standing alone in her petticoats
her wound healing

9
The abecedary of the stars
is carved in light & time
above Dunnet Head
with the impossible alphabet
shining down on the specific anonymity of a self
I no longer know
I celebrate & cross the sea
of the heart’s desire
forming words out of Death’s illusion
the night tells me I no longer know
what I thought I once knew
& that the stars will reveal everything now
they tell me Dunnet Head
is a fallen standing stone
a runic inscription in the sea
reading itself between the shallow
& sudden North Sea
& the deep & slow Atlantic

those salty vedas refine my tongue
so I can speak of the stars
& read the night like a book of dreams
so that nothing can be denied
to those who sail to the obvious freedoms
humanity has constructed for itself
a creation nebula both ancient & new
it is the coloured dust of knowledge
the endlessly forming letters in the vocabulary of desire

the rain falls from the furthest star
into the restless sea of syllables
the Sun burns into my eye
the lambs grow warm & eloquent
knowing exactly who made them
the lambs are clothed in golden words
they dance & skip through the sentences of Sunlight
the rain falls in Andromeda
where millions of Suns conspire to shine

time passes in decades of delirium
& in frightened glances at passing cavalades
as the heads go down & rise up again
it took a long time but it is burning
they see & feel it in the South
in the headlines on the TV flashing
in the orders from the light snatchers
which feed down into the marketeers of silence
& the red rury nail is still driven into the abandoned gable
in the North we have become radically identical
to the air that surrounds us & breathes us in
as the smoke pours over Benn Graim
in the Springtime fires of touch & memory
in the uncertain mornong hours of reason
that changes the step of the running deer
the smoke rolling over The Ord & The Scarabens
paints the sand black in the blocked harbour mouths
that empties the space it instructs us to fill

how can anyone hate the wind
even if it blows the flames closer
to the shame of our leaving
with our names scratched on the outside of the window
a signature of oatmeal in the margins
of the printed orthodoxy of flesh
& visions of stones & begattings
beyond the far sandstone mountains
in the depths of the sea-parting sea
a gale blows in suddenly from Faroë
everything is flushed into an invisible corner
the moist coupling of Scottish & Southern Energy
with the Countess of Sutherland
so it is that Death slouches out of the Dunbar Hospital
clutching a mobile phone
such is the loyal dictionary of the mind
full of hill fires owls & cod roe
the last tenderness of the peatlands

Time the actor concludes his performance on Dunnet Beach
he buries his contract in the sand
review by review & letter by letter
the North wind feeds liberty to the surf
this is my liquid learning stone
from the cold time to the white war
to this public reckoning of history & words
for in the year of the poet every season is Spring
as the Northern sky tears itself apart over Thurso
Widow Kharms's Guesthouse
SHORT STORY BY GABRIELLE BARNY

She liked having people to stay; they could be so interesting. She imagined them in the big European cities with busy streets, full of energetic modern living. She doubted anybody lived like she and Daniil used to, sharing toilets with a single tap outside.

‘What was your life like with Daniil?’

‘Our life? Well, we had our quarrels like anybody else,’ said Helena.

There was a ‘Hmmm,’ from the telephone earpiece.

Through the faint crackle of the long-distance line Helena imagined the man on the other end. He probably had a pen in his hand, or maybe he was sitting at some sort of computer ready to type what she was going to say. He would be wearing an open-necked shirt and creased trousers. There would be a window glowing grey-white by his desk.

It wasn’t too late in the year for snow in Leningrad.

His patient silence bore down the line, like a car heading toward a pedestrian on a street crossing – she had seen that once. How absurd it had been! An old woman, barely able to see above her steering wheel, forcing her car like an arrow towards a middle-aged man slouching across the black and white stripes. You would have thought that it was some extraordinary act of revenge or the culmination of a family feud. But no, Helena found out there was no connection between the two. It was simply absurd, a random act.

Daniil had clapped his hands and laughed when she’d related the story to him. He’d taken the steak she’d been saving for dinner with their friend Alexander out of the larder and thrown it slap against the wall. Then he’d sat at his desk, every few minutes turning to look over his shoulder at the mark of the raw beef on the wall, grinning broadly.

‘He could have a temper,’ she said breaking the silence. ‘Not violent, but sudden.’

‘I see,’ replied the researcher.

‘There were times we lived very happily,’ she said.

There had been joyous periods where Daniil’s delight in the most insignificant things would send him into poetic raptures. It could be the knots in the floorboards and the particular way they yawned like little mouths or peered like a hundred eyes up her skirts. He’d say, ‘I wish I were a plank of wood, then I’d really see what the world was like.’

Her husband’s obsession with the body and bodily products did not in general disturb Helena. She was in this respect a realist and prepared for the work of motherhood by unfussily tidying and sanitizing objects regardless of their condition, but she never became pregnant. She should have done; but she didn’t.

There was a cough from the other end of the telephone line. Helena imagined herself on the road crossing with a car fast approaching.

‘How did you cope with his writer’s block?’ said the voice.

‘There was one thing I didn’t like,’ she said. ‘Vomit. Vomit for me is worse than anything. Daniil said it was my weakness that I could not leave behind my bourgeois roots. Bourgeois! He said he could leave me and I could not leave behind my bourgeois roots. Anything. Daniil said it was my weakness that I…’

‘…there are scenes from a play,’ but the manuscript is incomplete.’

‘He didn’t really write much.’

‘But the little we do have indicates an important development in Russian literary…’

‘Helena let him talk. At least she had a garden now; she could grow onions and potatoes. Drought was the main problem in the shadow of the mountains – she assiduously copied her neighbours who were artists in the channelling and preservation of water. She had onions hanging on the wall, rosy brown, glowing like peas faces strung up in a line, their heads shaved. She would slice them thickly, fry them in chicken fat then mix in rice and chopped greens, and finally she would add pork sausage.

‘Above Helena’s head the dribble of water began – the last of the backpackers. It was his bad luck being so lazy, the girls had used all the hot water. She’d once been like they were; nice clean skin, white teeth. But Helena could tell they were afraid of the dog, or if not afraid there was something about the dog that made them very nervous.

‘…if you have any of his personal effects or can remember anyone who might have had a typed manuscript I’d be very grateful.’

‘If you have any of his personal effects or can remember anyone who might have had a typed manuscript I’d be very grateful.’

‘If he expected it do you think he would have gone out that morning? You really are a stupid man at times. No, he just went out. He didn’t come back. That was that. It was a failure at the time.’

‘I understand the political repression of dissident…’

‘The man was beginning to try her patience. Was that how Russian was spoken now? Where had all the distinction and elegance gone? She thought about the morning Daniil disappeared. There had been cherry blossom, black tea and dumplings stuffed with strawberries. They had been laughing at the look on her mother’s face when she saw the smashed crockery from their evening spent trying to nail it to the wall. Daniil had pulled out chairs from the table for people to sit on, laughing like a drain.

‘She was glad that he’d not taken Kasha because then she would have had nobody. But then if he’d taken the dog perhaps he would not have disappeared, or perhaps he would have disappeared and the dog found its way home. Perhaps all these events did happen, and at each moment with each passing second an alternative reality diverged from what she was experiencing now; an infinity of different lives sent spiralling in different directions.

‘Daniil was always trying to subvert reality; to stop, to kink; to insert something so utterly unexpected that Time and Space would have to sit up straight in their chairs and say to each other, “It’s not meant to happen like that.”

‘I don’t have a protocol for this.’

‘What will happen next?’

‘Anything could happen.’

‘But this is a disaster.’

‘What about our spirals?’

‘Who is it that dares break the pattern?’

‘Daniil Kharms, again!’

Helena narrowed her eyes. The onions became dull glowing spots. It was a crime to break the pattern. But she had the dog and she was glad of it, even if young female backpackers were nervous of the way it twirled when the breeze caught in its fur.

‘…if you have any of his personal effects or can remember anyone who might have had a typed manuscript I’d be very grateful.’

Helena yawned. She lifted a foot from the floor and held her leg out straight. The ankle was thick. Her slipper had tufts of thread poking out around her big toe. The Spanish words for slipper and cotton ran through her head. She spoke Spanish badly, but well enough for South America. She also spoke English and Italian; and of course she’d learned French as a girl.

‘I can call back another time,’ said the interviewer.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I have to start preparing food.’

‘If there is anything else you remember about visitors to the flat or manuscripts it

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Finally, she lay down and took her rest.

The sound of water stopped above. There were heavy footsteps across the ceiling. She liked having people to stay; they could be so interesting. She imagined them in the big European cities with busy streets, all of energetic modern living. She doubted anybody lived like she and Danial used to, sharing toilets with a single tap outside.

Her guests had higher standards – she supposed they believed she lived crudely. She couldn’t charge as much as other accommodation, although at least her place was clean and she did have hot water.

If travellers ever inspected the shared bathroom facilities they would stay. The shower room on the third floor had grand views over the dry plains to the foothills of the Andes where the rabbit pelt-toned dust warmed the walls, making the red geraniums bright.

Above the bathroom was her roof terrace. This was a place where the sun loved to linger, warming the marrow of her bones.

She hoped this would be where her spiral ended. Of course, in the end Time and Space would be satisfied.

‘Did he manage to cheat them?’ she asked.

‘I’m sorry, cheat who?’ said the voice.

‘Time and Space,’ she said. ‘They were always there at the table, leaning on his desk. He never got rid of them some days.’

‘I see…’

‘No, you don’t. They tormented him. Laughter was his only escape.’

He never got rid of them some days.

In her mind’s eye Helena saw the car hitting the man on the crossing. This time she had missed. The dog had run in front of the car. Helena turned away and walked stiffly to the terrace, her slipper on the first tread.

Seeing the dog always made her smile. It had been.

She laughed all the way up to the top,

‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘It’s too funny, too absurd.’

Helena hung up, got to her feet and walked into the reception area where the tables for guests were arranged. A handful of flies flew around the colour of wheat to the same shade as the ceiling tiles.

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She wondered how much she could charge. She couldn’t charge as much as other accommodation, although at least her place was clean and she did have hot water.

The sound of water stopped above. There were heavy footsteps across the ceiling. She liked having people to stay; they could be so interesting. She imagined them in the big European cities with busy streets, all of energetic modern living. She doubted anybody lived like she and Danial used to, sharing toilets with a single tap outside.

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If travellers ever inspected the shared bathroom facilities they would stay. The shower room on the third floor had grand views over the dry plains to the foothills of the Andes where the rabbit pelt-toned dust warmed the walls, making the red geraniums bright.

Able was the old lady driving. She stood over the fragile paper skins of the onions. She didn’t take one. Instead she walked into the shower room on the third floor and turned on the hot water. She hoped this would be where her spiral ended.

Of course, in the end Time and Space would be satisfied.

‘Did he manage to cheat them?’ she asked.

‘I’m sorry, cheat who?’ she asked.

‘Time and Space,’ she said. ‘They were always there at the table, leaning on his desk. He never got rid of them some days.’

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She laughed all the way up to the top,
The Mirror

SHORT STORY BY LILY GREENALL

I glanced over my shoulder at the woman as we went. She smiled after us, nodding, then noticed a man approaching, who was digging in his pockets for change. She turned and shuffled towards him; a dense wobbling shape in her mantle of shawls.

I knew how everyone said it felt, how she gasped, how her teeth chattered with the shop assistant. The woman behind the counter was studying her hands, beneath my armpits and trying to stretch them out a little. I jumped up and down clutching back of the stool and spilled onto the floor in a pearly gush. Sandra's shoulders were bare and creamy under the lights. She floated in the centre of the mirrored, hexagonal room like a dancer nestled in the heart of a music box. Her black hair shone and I could see her like a dancer nestled in the heart of a music box. Her black hair shone and I could see her

I was sweating in the dress that Sandra had picked out for me. The fabric was stiff and unyielding, an ugly muted gold. I dug my thumbs into the seams that were pinching beneath my armpits and tried to stretch them out a little. I jumped up and down clutching

I glanced over my shoulder at the woman as we went. She smiled after us, nodding, then noticed a man approaching, who was digging in his pockets for change. She turned and shuffled towards him; a dense wobbling shape in her mantle of shawls.

We stopped at a small bistro for lunch. Sandra said she would put the bill on John's card so I ordered two courses; a rich lobster bisque followed by chicken linguine, then topped it off with a large slice of raspberry lemon pie. Sandra sipped a fruit smoothie. She was on a pre-wedding diet and had sworn off solid food. I looked up every now and then, thinking that I had caught her glance longingly at my plate, but she always glanced off again just at that moment, talking in a loud cheerful voice all the way through the meal. I ordered a large coffee with whipped cream after my dessert. Sandra pulled out her phone and sat it on the table, scrolling through her messages. I began to notice how tired she looked. Her eyes had rings around them, not just underneath but nudging into the corners, and her usually smooth complexion was rough beneath a coat of foundation.

'Any word from John?' I asked.

'No,' she chirped, 'Shall we go?'

I never liked John, I thought, as we wandered between the shelves in Waterstones. Sandra had wandered off ahead and was staring at a shelf lined with albums covered in chiffon. I never liked the colour of chiffon and the wedding dresses. Usually, I liked picking up a packet of pink and gold envelopes. They were all too vague and pastel. I glanced down the aisle at Sandra and tried to imagine her on the big day, festooned in lace; a mound of tulle on top of her head. I tried to imagine John standing opposite her, clannied in his suit and stuttering through his vows. Another picture floated into my mind and eclipsed this brief vision. I remembered the last Christmas party at John and Sandra's house; the bite of cranberry vodka at the back of my throat and John very drunk on laptop and champagne. The living room had been stuffy. Sandra was celebrating the new wood fire by baking it up with logs. I had chewed the ice from my drink as I sat on the sofa, wedged between John and another man, and felt, with all the hairs raising on the back of my neck, the weight of John's hand on my thigh. I dropped the envelopes back into their slot and closed the distance with Sandra, coming up behind her just as she plucked an album down from the shelf.

'This is the one,' she grinned, as we made our way to the checkout, 'I can just picture it now. I'm getting excited.'

She beamed at the shop assistant as she set
The Bully’s Aim
KAREN SLATER

He pulls a face and
threws
the stone
as far as he can.

He is trying to
hit
the ferry
trying with all his might
to reach its coal rear end.

But what if he did
punch
a hole
and then again
out
the other side.

What face would he pull?
Would he think he had won?
Or turn his back and
shout
I DIDN’T MEAN IT
for hurting something
bigger
than him.

The Backroads
HOWARD WRIGHT

Skyline nicked and stripped by every weather
known to woman. And then some.

A flinty river, wind-chipped, air-scalloped,
wriggles back through the origins of its name
to a splash of gables on bushy hillsides
that get no nearer,
a destination that means you and your friends
are lost again, and the grey star
will drain all colour
from the backroads when dawn has bitten
into the telegraph poles and dipping bends,

the ankles of schoolgirls weaving through
your mirrors to the shores of the lough
hinged open like a catcher’s mitt.

Cento
(After Sappho, Fragment 58)
JOSEPHINE BROGAN

Oh, but once, once, we were
like young deer,
in the wild wood,
like the hare, pumped up
to the tips of his ears,
leaping
the furrows,
or the lark,
oblivious, hunting
the sun,
burusting with joy.

Oh, young we were, young
beyond all – but on the horizon,
the bugle-call,
clearsounding.

Were my knowing then, my knowing
now; what bliss in the drift of
the wildwood,
what wild in the wooing.

Requiescat for Angus Dunn
RHODA MICHAEL

Grief visits me, lurs
behind the curtains of the window,
finds me in the corners of the room,
on the treads of the turning staircase.

No more playing
No more laughing,
No more sliding down the banisters.
No more verses tripping off the tongue.

I call but he doesn’t answer.
He turns but he doesn’t see.
What remains is a memory of gladness,
Just a quiver in the air.

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Telling Tales  
by Jane Yeadon  
Black and White Publishing  
Review by Cynthia Rogerson

This is a memoir of growing up on a Highland farm in the 1950s. It doesn’t claim to be a prequel to Yeadon’s three popular midwife books, but it is – so fans of those books will be delighted at this chance to fill in some of the missing blanks.

There is an art to good life writing, and Yeadon has it. She is able to detach from her own life enough to present it without sentimentality or self-consciousness, knowing instinctively which moments to frame and which to omit. Her memories are not told; instead, they are largely shown in lively dialogue and short quick-paced chapters. The prose is unpretentious, yet the language is lyrical to the point of poetry.

_Telling Tales_ is an apt title, for this is a book of confidences, narrated in a natural and confidential tone. One feels as if Yeadon is whispering in one’s ear. An honest account of a life of hardship that is not recognised as such, but simply got on with. Her father is tragically absent, her sister is annoying, and her mother is always ploughing ahead with plans in a kind of frenzy of determination.

There is drama in this book – but it is not melodrama, and at no point does it ask for pity, for Yeadon’s chief gift is light-heartedness. Humour abounds, and she applies this not just to her own life, but to the life of the rural highlands in the 1950s. Hence, this is an important record of social and agricultural history. As a child, she loved the natural world, and it is apparent the adult Yeadon still does, for she describes it with exquisite ease.

Park this book near the first aid kit. It is a tonic for jadedness.

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**Maritime: New and Selected Poems**  
Ian Stephen  
Saraband  
Review by Riche McCaffery

I have quietly followed and admired Ian Stephen’s poetry for a number of years now, but with the arrival of the beautifully produced _Maritime: New and Selected Poems_, I feel like I should raise my voice. For me, Stephen’s work is inseverably connected to me: his voice is like a lighthouse on the horizon, guiding me through the storms of life.

Stephen is as much a gifted love as a sailor, his poetry is also a voyage of discovery. He is a poet who worked for a time as a coastguard and knew his stuff about boats and sailing.

_Or take Stephen’s memory of a reading by a presumably drunken W. S. Graham (another poet who worked for a time as a coastguard and knew his stuff about boats and sailing):_ He lost his plot but swayed on. I couldn’t grasp a theme but I got his drift.

_Or take_ ‘A night-fishing’:

> Some congregation  
> either went adrift  
> or further ashore.  
> _from ‘Baptist church (abandoned)’_

_Or take_ ‘Thrush by water’:

> behind them. In the poem ‘Thrush by water’ the speaker listens to a thrush breaking shells on the edge of the water and hears no ‘discord’, ‘no jarring changes / come to sound’. ‘Sound’ here resonates because of its double meaning – both sonic and littoral and it shows you very early on that Stephen is a poet who knows exactly what he is doing. At other points he talks of ‘katabatic’ and ‘anabatic’ winds which, although they have a specific meteorological meaning here, also bring to my mind the vast ancient Greek journeys from sea to inland and vice versa. Stephen plays up the tension or interstices between ‘dry land’ and the sea very well throughout this book. At one point there is talk of two lovers being ‘off the page’ and in ‘Mooring’ the speaker is almost wary at being on terra firma:

> [... ] we’re not moored to anything I’ve seen  
> sink or rise on a tested line.  
> We’ll hold together tonight.

This also shows that these poems are not simply about the mechanics of boats and sailing – they take in a spectrum of emotions, underscored by the fact that his poetry is also often one of collaboration with visual and musical artists. Stephen is as much a gifted love as lyric poet as he is an aesthete. I noticed the collection is dedicated to both the late Angus Dunn and late Sandy Hutchison. While I am not too familiar with Dunn’s work, I certainly detected here the big-heartedness that is a key characteristic of Hutchison’s poetry. Stephen, like Hutchison, plays with light and the elements in startling ways. In _‘Chile coast’_ we see the image of a man on the ‘twice-missed Rotherhay ferry’ ‘combing’ ‘the hair of a woman’ and the speaker declares: ‘They stand in borrowed light. / They shine’. The poem _‘Albertas’_ compares the flash of a camera to ‘the gut of herring’, coming up with the exquisite conclusion: ‘So light is like milk’.

I’m aware I’ve neglected to mention at any length the sailing and boating that occupies most of these poems, but that is far from a dilettantish hobby for Stephen and more an essential way of life. It can clearly offer leisurely escape but we see at all times his respect for the sea and awareness of its dangers:

> This is a place  
> where you know that everything we know  
> can snap.  
> _from ‘Long Seas’_

**Castles in the Mist: The Victorian transformation of the Highlands**  
by Robin Noble  
Saraband  
Review by Jim Miller

During the latter decades of the Victorian era, readers of local papers in the Highlands were often treated in the autumn months to long lists of the toffs who had come north, like migratory birds, for the season. Dressed in tartan and tweed, equipped with guns and fishing tackle, supported by a small army of servants, the influx moved into the big houses to enjoy a vogue for what was dubbed sport, a euphemism for slaughtering wildlife.

The cover of Robin Noble’s book, with its image of a stag in front of a many Glaucus Castle, and its subtitle _‘The Victorian transformation of the Highlands’_ suggest that we may be in for a social history, an amusing or angry venture into the world of John Buchan’s John MacNab. We are not.

Noble himself states, modestly, that his text is not an academic treatise but ‘far more an introduction to a big topic with wide ramifications.’ The reader soon discovers that more than that is on offer. With an easy grace, it displays on the part of its author a lifetime’s thought about the Highland environment.

As a boy, Noble got to know the Glenelg area in Assynt where his family had a holiday cottage (’none of us did any shooting’). Taking us on a walk through the territory, he reminds us that two hundred years ago it was home to a community of some ninety folk before they were cleared to make room for one shepherd. On the walk we pass a souterrain, sign of long human habitation, and learn that now the sheep too are gone. Noble seems to be saying that nothing is permanent except perhaps the land itself.

The book is a fascinating blend of history and natural history, an account of a landscape and how it came to be the way it is, there are several walks – in Assynt, Strathpey, Torridon and Coigach, and on Skye – where we enjoy
Noble's thoughtful, informed companionship. There are also passages devoted to the consequences of the period of the 'big hoose', passages written without a conventional political or environmentalist agenda and all the more refreshing for that. 

Noble appeals for more research into ‘historical ecology’ and cites the work in this field of Professor T.C. Smout. 

The writer has something to say about many controversial topics – muirburn, acid rain, timber production, re-wilding, overgrazing by deer – but with them all he displays an open-minded approach rather than a narrow ideological mindset. 

Beneath the Ice
By Kenneth Steven

Hammerfest is a thirty-hour bus journey north from Oslo. Fans of Bill Bryson will remember it as ‘agreeable enough in a thank-you-God-for-not-making-me-live-here sort of way’, and if you thought Bryson always overdoes it for effect, Kenneth Steven describes it today simply as ‘nothing more than the stink of dead fish’. It is a place ‘a few degrees north of sanity’, a place where everyone is drinking of whisky and tobacco, and where darker abuses lie just beneath the ice. So much for the Norwegian model. 

But Steven is a man with a passion, an ‘over-enthusiasm’, for all things Sami. If passion alone keeps you page-turning, you’re in for a rewarding, charming, humane and occasionally poetic read, if not quite a cogently argumentative one. What makes Hammerfest so resonant is that it is set in a place that sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits uneasily in this book and where Steven’s otherwise agreeable temperament which sits 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60 Degrees North – Around the World in Search of Home
By Malachy Tallack
Polygyn Books

Review by Mandy Haggith

From the opening phrase of this book, ‘I can remember the day: silver-skied and heavy with rain...’, we are clearly in the hands of a writer of unique gifts. Malachy Tallack is from Shetland, and the book relates his boral circumnavigation, westwards along the line of latitude at sixty degrees north, through Greenland, Canada, Alaska, Russia, Finland, Sweden, Norway and back home. 

The writing is as well-knit as you would expect from a Shetlander, deftly stitched with strong, if somewhat paradoxical images. ‘...travelling through the Russian Far East, is a record of a much earlier visit, displaced in time by several years. This is followed by a chapter on St Petersburg in what I believe was a few days before the 1991 coup. In the light of the events which took place in the Soviet Union in the nineties, the story seems to have been an omen of what was to come...’ 

The writer has something to say about many controversial topics – muirburn, acid rain, timber production, re-wilding, overgrazing by deer – but with them all he displays an open-minded approach rather than a narrow ideological mindset. 

Unfortunately in Russia, he rather loses his way. His chapter on Kamchatka, in the Russian Far East, is a record of a much earlier visit, misplaced in time by several years. This is followed by a chapter on St Petersburg in what I believe was a few days before the 1991 coup. In the light of the events which took place in the Soviet Union in the nineties, the story seems to have been an omen of what was to come...”

Querabashing
By Tim Morrison

ThunderPoint Publishing Ltd

Review by Alison Napier

Growing up and coming out as gay is at best confusing, even now in this allegedly halcyon days of equal marriage and homophobic Christian B&B prosecutions. Being gay in the far northern reaches of Scotland is particularly hazardous and in the fabulously unnecessarily titled Queerabashing, Tim Morrison offers up a brutally honest account of McGillivray’s optimistic expedition through school, university, acquisition and subsequent loss of faith, relocation to the Deep South, the eponymous violent assault and his brusque return home to the Orkney Islands.

The novel is not an easy read (in a good way) as the writing is often dense and at times impenetrable and tangled as a brambles thicket on a highland hike. But the prose is also beautiful, and frequently funny, as in this catty batting scene in a London bar. ‘Gee, you are Scottish? I have Scottish ancestry!’ Todd or Marc – spelled with a ‘c’ – would enthuse as the bait took and the process of reeling in began. ‘Yes’, McGllivray replied, ‘From the Islands in the North. I was born in the Western Isles and grew up on the mainland of Orkney. I have dual nationality!’

Aiming for a triple, he leaves London and heads North to Yorkshire where the principal events take place, both good and horrific. The clue is in the title. The politics of poverty and fear are finally examined and are found deeply wanting. I ought to declare an interest here. I grew up gay in the Scottish Highlands, fled, and later returned in a calmer frame of mind. The descriptions of a first tentative visit to Aberdeen University’s gaysoc, and of Danny’s (Aberdeen’s only gay ‘nightclub’ in the early 1980’s) are so accurate I found myself humming ‘It’s Raining Men’ and craving a pint of tepid black and tan. The vast and liberating significance of Boomtown Books on King Street is similarly acknowledged. This sadly long-gone sanctuary provided for many of us the first terrifying glimpse of the words ‘Gay’ and ‘lesbian’ in a shop window that were not hidden in a brown paper bag or spit as an insult. 

That peculiarly Scottish brand of hypocritical Christianitry that can be imposed by its imposition on an island inhabited is skewered and roasted, and made all the more credible by being critiqued by an insider, as both the main character McGllivray and author Morrison studied Divinity in Aberdeen. They also both went on to work in social care and this raises intriguing questions about the Rizla-thin divide between fiction, fact and autobiography, and indeed ‘What is a Novel’.

Others may wish to engage with this minor dilemma but Morrison can define his work as he chooses. Whatever it is, it is a glorious outpouring of emotion, of which I am deeply thankful. 

The final twenty or so pages take us to the Rainbow Grotto, Steinerin of the world, as the prose soared into a whole new and not necessarily better stratosphere. My double patte upper slid from my lap as if laced with a hallucinogenic drug found only in the ditches of the Northern Isles, inducing dreamscapes and purple haze worthy of a Jimi Hendrix lysergic experience. The prose is too beautiful, but nothing that ultimately destroys from this very fine ‘novel’.

Northwords Now Issue 32, Autumn 2016 29
Poetry Reviews

Second Wind, new poems Douglas Dunn, Vicki Feather, Diana Hendry, Saltaire Society Scotland/Scottish Poetry Library

Paragons at the End of the World, Graham Fulton, Penriss Press

Airstream, poems Audrey Henderson, Homebound Publications

Against the Light, Stewart Conn, Mariscat Press

At the Well of Love, poems Tom Pow, Mariscat Press

This Changes Things, Claire Askew, Bloodaxe Books

An Ember from the Fire, Jane Bonnyman, poetry Salzburg

Redmonoes and Eye to the Future, Alan MacGillivray, Kenneth & Boyd

Mountains and Rivers, Brian Lawrie, Mallfranteaux

Who by Hate, Kate Adston, Shearsman Books

Stanim Ma Lane, Chinese verse in Scots and English, translated by Brian Holton, Shearsman

A Night of Islands, Selected Poems, Angus Martin

REVIEWS BY IAN STEPHEN

A pack of contrasting collections, all sent to Northwords. Now, reveals a wide range of styles in contemporary poetry, all linked somehow to Scotland. The contents dance on a pendulum from expressive free verse, none more energetic than that of Graham Fulton, to the well-made formality adopted by some younger poets as well as veterans of the trade, but perhaps most prominent as a device in new work from Douglas Dunn. Glossy or matt, serif or no in the typography, it's all a matter of taste in the end and it has to be the same in one reviewer's selection of what can be usefully discussed in limited space. Let's start by celebrating the commitment of the poets who continue to make a thing from their individual stock of language and the publishers who demonstrate their belief in its worth. I regret not being able to share more fully from the bundle of books which have arrived on my travels.

Responses to ageing form a thread through most of these diverse books but the theme is explicit in Second Wind — new poems from three poets commissioned by the Saltaire Society in association with the Scottish Poetry Library. Just when you think the exercise of proven craft will be falling there is Douglas Dunn's direct, near-brutal, depiction of objects which were hidden within the glove compartment of a car owned by a person who will never be usefully discussed in limited space. Let's start by celebrating the commitment of the poets who continue to make a thing from their individual stock of language and the publishers who demonstrate their belief in its worth. I regret not being able to share more fully from the bundle of books which have arrived on my travels.

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CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Chris Agee is Editor of Irish Pages (www.irishpages.org). His third collection Next is Nothing was shortlisted for the 2009 Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry.

James Andrew has had two books of poetry published and a third is due to be published by Dionysia Press.

Jean Atkin’s first collection Not Last Star Last is due to be published by Oversteps Books. Her recent work has been published in magazines including Envoi, The Clearing, The North, Earthlines, and also by commissioned and performed on Radio 4 www.jeanatkin.com

Gabrielle Barnby lives in Oxford and works in a variety of genres including short stories and poetry. Her first novel will be released by Thunderpoint next year.

Henry Bell is a writer and editor from Brind, working on poetry and theatre. He lives on the Southside of Glasgow and edits Gutter Magazine.

Josephine Brogan is the pen-name of Olivia Pootes. She lives in Edinburgh and finds poetry a satisfying way of enjoying life.

Jenny Bradley is a poet who lives in Glasgow and edits Gutter Magazine.


Rhoda Brown was shortlisted for the Callum MacAoidh Award.

Lily Greenall lives in the Highlands of Scotland. In 1994 she moved from London to the Isle of Islay where she still lives. She has published a pamphlet of poems published by Happenstance Press and has written a novel. Her first collection of poems is to be published in 2017. She is currently working on a second collection of poems, The Clearing and other forms of storytelling.

Pam Brownsey lectured in philosophy at Glasgow University. She has published five short stories, and also a pamphlet of poems published by Shockout Press.

Merryn Glover was born in Kilmarnock. Her fiction and drama have been broadcast on Radio Scotland and Radio 4. A Horse Called Astra is her first novel. Having returned to work and live in Nepal for four years she now lives in the Highlands of Scotland. Lily Greenall is a writer from the Isle of Lewis. She is currently studying a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Aberdeen.

George Gunn’s last book of poems is A Northern Land: A prose book about Caithness, The Province of the Cat was published in 2015 and his play Rabba (Water), was given a positive review at the Fringe. In 2016 he was the recipient of the Macarthur Foundation’s Grant for Creative Writing.

Ingrid Leonard comes from Oban, which inspired much of her poetry. She is currently working on an MA in Writing Poetry from the University of Newcastle.


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

Tom Pow’s most recent collection of poems is The Hill and the Tree, published by Mariscat.

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CONTRIBUTORS’ BIOGRAPHIES

Glasgow:
Central Scotland and writes short stories.

Rebecca Smith grew up in the middle of nowhere in Camber. She now lives in Central Scotland and writes short fiction. She tweets @becksxsmith.

Ian Stephenson’s most recent novel, A Book of Dead Fish, is published by Sandbank, as is Marion’s, their latest collection of poems.

Northern Europe is a Canadian Scot, is currently looking for a publisher.

Maggie MacLeay lives in the Isle of Lewis and is a recipient of a New Writing student at Manchester Metropolitan University.

MacLeod was born in 1945 in Scotland. She moved to Canada and is a recipient of a New Writing Scotland Award and is currently completing Northwords Now Issue 32, Autumn 2016 31

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Where to find a FREE Northwords North

Meg Macleod is an Orcadian poet, published by Shoestring Press. A Night of Islands: Selected Poems, is his first published short story.

MacGillivray has appeared in various journals and anthologies and his first novel, Take-Away People, was launched at Sydney’s Waterfront Writers’ Festival & published by Polygon 2009 & Wakefield Press 2008. Her first collection, Back Home, is almost complete.

Maggie MacRae is a poet, editor and memoirist, ‘Eating the Island’ (theislandreview.com)

Peter Gilmour is a Cornish speaker. He lives on the north shore of Loch Fyne, with a fine view of the silvery Tay.

Kirsteen Scott lives in Edinburgh near the coast, and writes short stories.

Kirsteen Scott is a recipient of a New Writing Scotland Award and has two pamphlets of poems published by Scottish Book Trust New Writing Award and is currently preparing her first collection of poems.

Meg was launched at Sydney’s Waterfront Writers’ Festival & published by Polygon 2009 & Wakefield Press 2008. Her first collection, Back Home, is almost complete.

Marine Tea, dedicated to a Woman’s Year, and developed into a Woman’s Work novel. Her latest novel is If I Touch the Earth (Black and White). She is a Royal Literary Fellow at the University of Dundee.

Kirsteen Scott lives in Edinburgh near the coast, and writes short stories. The 2011 Scottish Novel of the Year, Year, and developed into a Woman’s Work novel. Her latest novel is If I Touch the Earth (Black and White). She is a Royal Literary Fellow at the University of Dundee.

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A new Gaelic supplement to Northwords Now entitled Tuath will appear once annually from the issue in spring 2017 onwards, with support from Bòrd na Gàidhlig and Creative Scotland. Up to now, for reasons of space, the emphasis has been on poetry as Gaelic material in the magazine but with more space now it is hoped to expand this considerably. Whilst we continue to look for and publish new poetry of course, we’re looking for other forms of writing as well now. We would very much welcome submissions in the form of short fiction including extracts from longer works, translations to and from Gaelic, reviews and articles in and about Gaelic. The deadline for submissions to the magazine (northwordsnow.co.uk) is 27 January 2017.

Rody Gorman
Gaelic Editor

Thèid leasachadh ùr Gàidhlig air Northwords Now air a bheil Tuath fhoilseachadh aon turas an comhair na bliadhna bho àireamh an earraich 2017 a-mach le taic bho Bhòrd na Gàidhlig agus Alba Chruthachail. Gu ruige seo, le cion aite, thathar air cuideam a chur air bàrdachd mar stuth Gàidhlig anns an iris ach le barrachd farsaingeachd a-nis, thathar an dòchas cur ri seo gu mòr. Ged a bhios aìte ann an-còmhnaidh airson na bàrdachd gun teagamh, thathar ag iarraidh riochdan eile sgrìobhaidh a-nis cuideachd. Ma tha ficsèan goirid aqaibh no earrannan a ficsèan nas hfaide nach cuir sibh dhan iris iad? Thèid fàilte a chur cuideachd air tìonnaidhean gu Gàidhlig is bhon Ghàidhlig, obair-bhreithneachaidh agus ailt sa Ghàidhlig agus mu ghnothaichean Gàidhealach.

’S e an ceann-latha mu dheireadh gus stuth a chur a-steach gu lìon na h-irise (northwordsnow.co.uk) 27 Faoilleach 2017. Siuthadaibh!

Rody Gorman
Deasaiche Gàidhlig