

The FREE literary magazine of the North

# Northwords **Now**

Issue 33, Spring 2017



## **Northern Waters**

**Kenny Taylor follows Neil Gunn's River, Lesley Harrison listens to the Iceland Winds, Catriona Patience falls in love with Inchcolm**

**Plus Short Stories, Poems, Articles, Reviews and the very first issue of Tuath - the best new Gaelic writing**

## EDITORIAL

**T**HIS IS THE last issue of *Northwords Now* I shall edit. It's been a great seven years and there are plenty of folk to thank. Firstly I want express my gratitude to you, the readers, for supporting the magazine and being so receptive to new writing. I also want to say a big thank you to the folk whose names appear in the small print on this page – the members of the Northwords Board, as well as our Gaelic Editor and Designer. So take a bow, Adrian Clark, Ann Yule, Valerie Beattie, Stewart Lackie, Kristin Pedroja, Anne Macleod, Rody Gorman, Gustaf Eriksson. *Northwords* is also saying goodbye to Tony Ross, our web supremo. He's been brilliant and will be missed.

Of course, a ton of thanks need to go the way of the writers who've sent their poems and stories my way – their passionate dedication to the written word, their capacity to shock, inspire, entertain, provoke and move has made editing *Northwords Now* a challenge, a pleasure and a privilege.

I leave the editing of *Northwords Now* in the very skilled and capable hands of Kenny Taylor. You can tell from pages 16 and 17 of this issue that he knows all about good writing, and possesses a keen sense of, and love for, 'the North'. He has a fine and rewarding time ahead of him. ■

CHRIS POWICI, EDITOR

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# Contents

- 3 A Novel about Crime – Paul F Cockburn talks with Graeme Macrae Burnet
- 4 Firsts – Short Story by Colin Will
- 5 Very Short Stories by Regi Claire and Megan Crosbie  
Poems by Robin Fulton Macpherson, Sara Khorasani and Taylor Strickland
- 6 Poems by Sally Evans, Derek Crook, Paul Jeffcutt, William Bonar, Deborah Moffatt & Patricia Ace
- 7 The Future Will Happen Here, Too – Essay by Michael F. Russell
- 8 Leftovers – Short Story by Iain Maloney
- 9 Poems by Lydia May Harris, Neil Young, Maurice Franceschi, Alex McMillan, Nancy Graham & Katherine Lockton
- 10 Inchcolm – A memoir by Catriona Patience
- 12 A Broken Drey Won't Save Them – Short Story by James Clarke
- 13 Poems by Helen Moore, Deborah Livingstone and Stuart A. Paterson
- 14 Like Flying, Like Falling – Stories by Eric Jones
- 15 Women of the North – Poems by Gerda Stevenson
- 16 A Leap in the Highland River – Essay by Kenny Taylor
- 18 Somewhere Else – Short Story by Isabel Miles
- 19 Poems by Lydia Popowich, Stuart McCarthy & Graham Fulton
- 20 I Was Your Daughter – Essay by Jean Rafferty
- 21 Your Name Will Glow – Poems by Harry Giles
- 22 Poems by Flora Sinclair, Judith Taylor, Siún Carden, Donald MacArthur Ker & Stewart Sanderson
- 23 The Immortal Jellyfish – Short Story by Richard W. Strachan
- 24 Poems by Chris Boyland & Kate Hendry
- 25 The Music of Weather – Essay by Lesley Harrison
- 26 Poems by Mark Ryan Smith, Fiona Rintoul, Aoife Lyall, Sophie Kirtley, Kevin Cahill, Seth Crook & Ian Murray
- 27 Reviews
- 31 Contributors' Biographies, Where to Find *Northwords Now*

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'The Pull of the Moon' by Izzy Thomson  
[vau.org.uk/izzy-thomson](http://vau.org.uk/izzy-thomson)

#### 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.

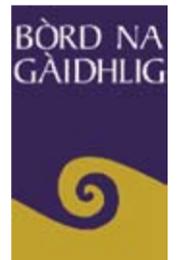
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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

# A Novel About Crime

Paul F Cockburn talks with Graeme Macrae Burnet.

WHAT A DIFFERENCE a year can make. In December 2015, little attention was paid to the arrival of *His Bloody Project*. Published by small independent Glasgow company Saraband, this second novel by Graeme Macrae Burnet related the crimes and punishment of a triple-murderer in late 19th century Ross-shire—as told through a collection of supposedly ‘found documents’.

What changed the book’s fortunes was the attention of what Burnet calls ‘the world’s most important book group,’ otherwise known as the judges of the Man Booker Prize. Long-listed and later short-listed for the iconic award, the world suddenly started paying attention, and Burnet found himself in demand. Appropriately enough, however, his first Scottish festival appearance will be in Ross-shire, at this year’s Ullapool Book Festival.

“I had no idea how massive it would be,” he says, given the ongoing sales and the foreign rights deals that followed his novel’s first appearance on the Man Booker long-list. “The book found an audience because of the Man Booker Prize; it allowed people to discover the book. It was transformational for somebody in my position.”

Of course, press interest was helped by the ‘David and Goliath’ aspect of a book from a two-person publisher taking on titles from some of the world’s biggest media companies. Burnet’s story could also be spun in terms of *His Bloody Project* being a genre crime novel—albeit an unusually structured one—that had managed to somehow get onto the Man Booker shortlist.

“The idea for *His Bloody Project* really came from two things,” Burnet says. “Firstly, the case of a French peasant who murdered three people in his village in the early 19th century and then wrote an elegant memoir about what he’d done. That was very much the inspiration—the idea of someone who committed this really violent act and then wrote something ‘surprisingly’ eloquent about it, contrary to your expectation. Then I came across, during the course of my research later on, a couple of other instances from the Highlands of Scotland where people—crofters—had written eloquent letters and records. The idea of writing a novel in such ‘found documents’ was always completely central to the concept.”

The final element was the location. “My mum’s from Wester Ross,” he adds. “Three times a year, we went up there as a family, as my granny still lived there. But I didn’t really know anything about the history of the Highlands. I’d never made any effort to learn, and people never talked about it up there, at least not to me. So I did three or four months of general research on the Highlands, trying to get an idea of the way of life rather than the historical events; later, there was also research into the psychiatric side, which I find really



Photograph of Graeme Macrae Burnett by Willie Urquhart

fascinating, and the Scottish legal system of the time.”

Arguably the biggest strength of *His Bloody Project* is its recreation of the culture and communities that once existed in the Scottish Highlands during the late 19th century. “That crofting way of life is completely gone,” he accepts. “Although there may be people who still have crofts, it’s not the dominant culture. It was a feudal system back then, with no rights of tenure. A key document I came across in my research was a list of regulations; they’re actually from Skye or Lewis, but it’s a list of 25 regulations, under which the crofters existed on that particular estate. It may be that a lot of these regulations weren’t enforced by the factor or the constable, but they were still there, and it makes shocking reading—everything was regulated. That inspired an incident in the book where the character Roddy and his father, both crofters, are told to put back the seaweed they’ve collected from the shore because they haven’t sought the permission from the Laird to take it!”

It’s the kind of ‘by the book’ pedantry that leads to murder, but does that make *His Bloody Project* “tartan noir”?

“When I’m writing the book, I’m not thinking about the genre it’s in,” Burnet says. “I’ve often said *His Bloody Project* is ‘a novel about a crime’, which I think is a more accurate description, but I have no problem whatsoever with it being described as a

‘crime novel’. To me crime fiction runs from Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* to Ian Rankin’s Rebus novels. I’m not saying one’s better than the other; it’s a broad church. You have novels that follow the detective solving the crime, and you have novels which focus more on the psychology of the criminal, which is where I’d place *His Bloody Project*.

“I was at a session at the *Bloody Scotland* festival last year—I wasn’t participating, I was just watching it—and four writers on the panel, when asked whether they thought they were writing Tartan Noir, to a man and woman said: ‘Of course not, we’re just writing novels, and these labels get put on it afterwards.’ Is it a crime novel? Is it a historical novel? To me, it’s a novel.”

Some might describe Burnet, now 48, as a literary late bloomer, given that his interest in writing was first encouraged as early as his schooldays, and he was writing short stories by the time he started studying English Literature at Glasgow University. “There was a writer in residence there at the time called Hunter Steele, who suggested that I might try and get them published,” he explains. “That had never crossed my mind before, so I started sending stories out, with no success whatsoever.”

After university, Burnet spent more than a decade teaching English as a Foreign Language while living around Europe, before eventually coming back to Glasgow where he ended up

working as a TV documentary researcher for eight years. “I was still writing on and off while I was doing these things, but it was only when I finished working in TV—by which I mean, when I ‘got made redundant’!—that I thought: ‘Right, it’s time to get your finger out.’ Writing was what I’d always wanted to do, and I wasn’t getting any younger. So it was time to focus on the project, which was quite a tough thing to do.”

Does he now look back on this extended period as when he “found his voice”? “Well, I learned the craft of writing,” he agrees. “I believe strongly that writing is a craft and you learn how to do it. But I’m a wee bit suspicious of the term ‘finding your voice’; it’s not something I particularly buy into. I think there’s a tendency to look back on any sort of series of events and make it seem very logical. I’d written at least three novels to the point of, say, 30,000 words, and abandoned them; it may have been that, at another point in my life, I would have continued with them and focused on them, and it wouldn’t have been *The Disappearance of Adèle Bedeau* that got published first.

“Anyway, about six-seven years ago I decided to get a bit more serious about the writing, and I wrote *Adèle Bedeau*,” he says. “As you probably know, all the advice is that you must get an agent—most publishers won’t look at anything that doesn’t come through an agent. So, eventually, I did get an agent who were very supportive on the editorial side. I did a big rewrite for them, but they weren’t able to find a publisher for the book, so we parted company. I then signed to Saraband in Glasgow who took the book up pretty swiftly, and that was that. In all it took me about three years from the point of sending *The Disappearance of Adèle Bedeau* out to the book actually appearing on the shelves.”

Around the same time as getting his first agent, Burnet received a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award. “I’m a big fan,” he says. “You need that sort of sign from the outside world that you’re doing something that’s kind of OK; at that stage, outside appreciation is massively important to your confidence. The Scottish Book Trust is a very nurturing body, and I also met a bunch of people at the same career stage as me. I’m still very much in touch with the other writers: Lucy Ribchester, who has published a couple of books; Martin MacInnes, who was the year after me; and my friend Sam Tongue, a poet who has just published his first pamphlet. Just to have people you can talk about dealing with agents, dealing with publishers, their experiences, your experiences, is really, really valuable.”

Understandably, Burnet’s reluctant to talk about his next book, in part thanks to Man Booker. “There’s no getting away from the fact that it will get more attention,” he says, “but that’s not useful to me in the writing process, so I’m putting it out of my mind as much as possible.” ■

## Firsts

SHORT STORY BY COLIN WILL



### *The voice I'd heard behind me was that of Chico, the homicidal hobbit.*

YOU NEVER FORGET your first time – first school, first time you got paid, first kiss, first drink, first time you had sex, first marriage, first time you acted on stage, first divorce – you know how it goes. And people talk, well some people talk, as if a first time is a loss, a negative thing, like losing your innocence or your virginity. From where I stand, almost all first times are pluses; they're pure gains, in experience, in development, in growing up or growing older.

Stealing the car was an absolute blast. It was the combination of fear and excitement that hooked me, so high on adrenaline it felt like my eyes were spinning in their sockets. Chico and Raz were excited too, but they had broken into cars before. I was the one with the legs long enough to reach the pedals. I was the one with the father who lived at home, who had demonstrated driving to his teenage son, who never beat him, but showed him what being a father was all about. I was the designated driver. For real.

We didn't do anything stupid, like wreck the car, or set fire to it, or steal the radio. I just drove it round the estate a few times, driving faster and more confidently each circuit. Then we stopped it among the flats on the far side, where we didn't know anybody, and walked calmly away. I didn't park it properly – didn't know how to. I just stopped it by the kerb and put the handbrake on. Chico had his football, so we dribbled and passed to each other all the way across the park. We split up when we got to our side of the park, and I walked home. I liked Raz, but Chico was dangerous; even half-pint size, and three years younger than me. I knew he was a troubled boy, and I decided to distance myself from him.

Two years later, and after a summer night at the pictures with school friends, I got off the bus at the shops, just for the sake of doing something different, and walked home in the half dark. Halfway there I sensed that I was being followed, and began walking faster. I heard running footsteps behind me and a shout I couldn't quite make out, and I immediately accelerated, just before I heard something hit the road behind me. A half-brick, quite a substantial missile, even for that neighbourhood. I made the last 200 metres in a time that Alan Wells might have envied. The voice I'd heard behind me was that of Chico, the homicidal hobbit.

It was a class thing with him, I think; he was aggressively working-class. Me?... I just don't give a fuck for the whole idea of class differences. I am socially mobile. Anyone with speech talent and an ear for nuance can move between social environments like a salmon through the shallows. Class is a philosophico-socio-economic construct. It means fuck all.

So I can act in Joe Orton or Noel Coward plays with equal facility, and the audience can make of them what they like. I've been in the Players for five years, and I can do them all darling. My preference? American. Redneck? Blue-collar? Ivy League? Done them all, bro.

The one I'm doing now is *The Last of the Red-Hot Lovers*, a Neil Simon vehicle. It's a modern morality play, a bit of hokum to reinforce fidelity in any guy thinking of doing what most gals think about getting away with all the time. I, Barney Cashman, am the owner of a shellfish restaurant, shucking three dozen oysters a day for the lunch-time trade, and worrying about my smelly fingers.

I figure this must have been before the days of disposable vinyl gloves, because it's not difficult to avoid the stench of the sea on your fingers these days if you take precautions.

It's a three-acter, with one failed seduction in each act – sorry if that's a spoiler for you darling. The women in the first two acts are pretty two-dimensional, but there are some funny lines. I was banging Lydia at the time, the Act 2 prospect, which added a little frisson to our onstage action. It was after my marriage had broken up, but before the D.I.V.O.R.C.E. was final. I suppose technically I was free, but Lydia wasn't. She was a person of low cunning and loose morals, and I liked her a lot. Her husband had one of those made-up jobs; PR or marketing or some such bullshit, and he was so up himself that he had no idea what was going on. And Lydia and I had so many opportunities, the way it is in am dram, that we had loads of chances to do the naughty thing. She was rather good at it, keeping me distracted from the legal shenanigans that dominated my life at the time.

Anyway, the real meat of the play is in the third act, with the neurotic best friend of Barney's never-seen wife. There's a bit of an acting challenge during Barney's 2½ page *cri de coeur*, not that learning the lines was an issue, but getting the light and shade in to keep the audience interested took a bit of doing. Betty was brilliant in her part. I always give credit where credit's due, and Betty's a trouper. I've never had to worry about her drying, or missing entrances, or bumping into the furniture. I would never fuck about with her onstage, no wheezes, no pranks, no cruel little amusements like I have with newbie

actors. Sorry, I am a bastard, but the Players love me; I'm so fucking reliable.

So the play ends happily ever after, with fish-smelling Barney staying faithful to his no doubt anosmic wife, and the other women never getting to experience any loving, red hot or otherwise. My soon-to-be-ex-wife came to one of the performances, and we did the civilised chat afterwards, sniffing around each other like dogs, trying to find out if she was getting any, or if I was getting any. Thank God we had no children, just property and money, but that's what marriage is all about really, isn't it? I mean, we can be honest with each other, can't we? Property and money, property and money, go together like a horse and carriage.

Ten years. Ten years when we both could have been doing something more fulfilling or rewarding with our lives. But as Dylan sings it, *Don't Think Twice, It's All Right*. Some couples I've known manage to stay friends after divorce, a few even good friends. That was never on Brenda's agenda, and it certainly was never on mine. Just rhymed Brenda and agenda there, did you notice? Quite clever, but I won't take any credit; it was unintentional.

I think a lot of my life has been unintentional, come to think of it. There never was a burning ambition, an overarching life strategy, a five-year plan. I meandered through uni, doing economics, because it's basically just reading half-baked waffle and regurgitating same. I gave good regurgitation, picked up an easy First, then sleepwalked into a Civil Service job in economic planning, absorbing jargon and barfing out reports which kept the First Division top guns happy. I wasn't really on full burner when I married Brenda, just a steady

simmer while I explored hotter options. And I found a lot of those when I joined the Players. Somewhere along the long and winding road Brenda had enough, and along about then Mr Right popped into her life. I don't know if there had been other Mr Might Be's before then, but he seemed the real deal. He was a banker, solid gold, widower, two kids, a name in the City, a fair-minded man, member of the New Club, and as dull as white paint. I met him a few times before Brenda and I finally made up our minds to sever our ties. As divorces go, it was civilised, with no shouting, no substantive disagreements. I think the lawyers were disappointed that there were no money-making opportunities from either of us, but we had both drawn up lists of what we wanted, and we worked out our terms before anything came to Lawyerland.

I wanted to stay in my city centre flat, which was mine before we married; Mr Right had a big house in the right part of town, so that was sorted. Brenda earned more than me in a good year, so she didn't need support. It was clean and fast. And I went back to my life of setting up boring meetings, drafting PQ answers, writing reports which were 'incisive, clear and well-reasoned' as my Annual Reviews usually said, but which I knew were total crap. The social side of my life was sorted too; the Players got me out and about, I dined out with companions of my choice, and I sometimes slipped out for drinkies to my local in Nelson Street. It's a nice pub, a bit of a walk from my flat, but I prefer it to the Oxford Bar, which would have been a lot closer. The staff are less surly, for one thing.

But I digress. So, the show finished its week-long run in Morningside, and the after-show party was in a Greenbank flat, the home of one of my lesser colleagues. I knew almost everyone there, so I didn't expect any action later on. But there was one person I didn't recognise. He was tall, dark-eyed, with sandy hair, the colour it's fashionable to call dirty blonde nowadays. His eyes seemed a little close-set, but very intense. For the sake of something new to do, I strolled over to his corner and introduced myself. He seemed amused by something.

'So, Frank,' he said. 'Long time no see. I'm Charlie, remember me?'

'I'm sorry,' I stammered. 'We've met before?'

'A long, long time ago, Frank, on a Council estate in a different galaxy.'

'You've got me Charlie, I don't remember you at all.'

'You knew me as Chico.'

'Fuck. Chico?'

'It's Charlie now. You know, if I'd meant to hit you with that brick I would have. My aim was always pretty good.'

'Jesus, you did frighten me though. I nearly soiled myself.'

'That's what I intended. I think I can still frighten you, Frankie-boy.'

'How?'

He took my arm and led me into the hall, then slammed me into the wall of one of the bedrooms, where the coats were piled on the bed. He grabbed my jaw and kissed me forcefully. I was too surprised to even think about resisting.

'Let's go back to your place, Frankie-boy. I'll let you call me Chico.'

So we did. He's been there ever since. ■



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# Poetry

## November Dusk

ROBIN FULTON MACPHERSON

The day still has eight hours to go  
but already it seems finished.

As the evening darkens it spills  
more and more light and the light pours  
from compass points we've never seen:  
they emerge behind the old ones.

Like an Emil Nolde landscape,  
so much indigo and scarlet  
swirling and leaving no room for  
everyday light, everyday dark.

There's more space to get lost in now  
that the universe is even bigger.

## Rooks, And Others

ROBIN FULTON MACPHERSON

Rook-voices full of today,  
each young generation loud  
with the words of ancestors –  
do rooks think, if they do think,  
everything they say is new?

Not as when  
day after day father parks  
his Austin Cambridge between  
garden shed and manse back-porch  
letting me hear the door thud  
clear across six decades. And

not as when  
the drifting tobacco smells  
of wartime adults still drifts  
through today's hawthorn blossom  
giving it a moment's scent  
of an acrid concentrate.

## Dream-Door

ROBIN FULTON MACPHERSON

In my dream the door had no lock  
no handle.  
"You're pushing at an open door"  
voices said.  
But the door was intractable.

I asked my dream what was beyond  
the closed door.  
"Cotton-grass by Loch an Ruathair  
or perhaps  
a harebell by The Pentland Firth."

## After Someone's Death

ROBIN FULTON MACPHERSON

They can hold out against September gales,  
all those leaves not ready to be scattered.  
Each tree has its own voice in the fierce air.

Calendulae, cornflowers and nasturtiums  
have followed me for all of my decades.  
They wonder if I am ephemeral.

I wonder if the wall we imagine,  
the one beyond which we have no knowledge,  
is not a wall but a net, filaments,  
and the forest wind, its many voices,  
without hindrance sweeps to and fro between  
a world we can't begin to imagine  
and a world we can't imagine forgetting.

## Passengers

TAYLOR STRICKLAND

The winter moon is ripening.  
We bellyache of cold,  
huddled outside the cèilidh  
like penguins.  
Everyone has holidayed home  
with eyes as bright as Christmas lights,  
but will ferry away tomorrow  
determined  
to hop on/hop off each year and each island  
and to stay ahead of home,  
us included.

Our bus arrives.  
A star across midnight dives

then vanishes. Passengers,  
all of us, talk of how the dark is  
marvelous, how it has  
a counterbalance of moon and stars  
some nights.  
Some nights it doesn't.

## Struggle

SARA KHORASANI

Stand still. Let it be known that you are laying down your struggle.  
Feel into and out of yourself, the broken boundaries where truth slips through.  
Let each breath unfold you, unwind the endless time within you.  
The circle of the sun, the drifting clouds, the pink-flushed moon  
Let them all inside you.  
The crisp fold of the horizon, the green hum of the trees, the sticky feet  
Of a thousand-million miniscule beings –  
Let them all inside you, where they have always been.  
Lay yourself down.

## The Wall

SHORT STORY BY REGI CLAIRE

HERE SHE IS in the crisp frozen  
afternoon, the sun barely touching  
her white hair as she steps it out  
down the walled-in lane, smiling to herself  
and the world because it's such a lovely day, as  
far as frost and crispness go. She's just turned  
a corner and before her lies the downward  
sweep of the path, not more than three feet  
wide.

A blonde woman is approaching, her head  
lowered. Mrs Primrose beams at her as she  
always does when passing someone (unless, of  
course, it's a man – men, these days, can't be  
trusted, not if the papers are to be believed: all  
those muggings and murders).

The beaming isn't reciprocated. In fact, the  
blonde woman doesn't even lift her head on  
drawing level with Mrs Primrose, doesn't at  
all acknowledge the kindly old lady.

And kindly old Mrs Primrose suddenly  
recalls the hole at the bottom of the drystone  
wall, the hole she's just passed, and how sad  
it looked, as if the missing stone had had  
enough and rolled itself off downhill, hoping  
perhaps to find a better resting place, a bigger  
hole, one that wouldn't constrain it too much.  
Or maybe it had simply been prised out by a  
vandal?

A surge of wickedness goes through Mrs  
Primrose. 'Hello!' she finds herself calling, far  
too loudly.

The woman makes no reply.

Mrs Primrose stops, turns and shouts,  
'Hello? Hello?'

When the woman quickens her pace, Mrs  
Primrose feels herself grow very hot, and very  
still. For a moment she simply is. Then she  
sways slowly backwards, against the wall.

As the rough contours of the stones begin  
to press in upon her, she pushes closer. Pushes  
and pushes so that at last she might fit into  
a gap – the gap that, she knows now, has all  
along been waiting for her. ■

## Sunbeams for Breakfast

SHORT STORY BY MEGAN CROSBIE

FOR BREAKFAST SHE drinks in fresh  
sunbeams. She stands eyes wide and  
arms open to the rising yolk, bare  
toes rooted in the grass, wakening. They say  
it might blind her, burn retinas or rods, but  
in the end nothing's good for you really. She  
loves how it fills her, warms her mind, pulses  
along her veins. For little while, she thinks she  
understands what it is to be eternal.

But by the time the sun has ebbed away,  
her insides are an empty hollow. She crawls  
under blankets, to hide from the night, and  
cradle the darkness inside her. She doesn't feel  
the debris, the tiniest speckles of light that  
linger, scattered through her black abyss. She  
doesn't know that inside, she's full of stars. ■

# Poetry

## 11 am Casterton

SALLY EVANS

Nearly the fullest chimes  
sung by the bells  
from the clock  
of the church in the trees,

As though the larch and the pine  
struck eleven  
this sunny morning,  
as though the great maple  
and ancient hawthorns  
took a part  
in our narratives,

As though variegated holly  
and berried yew  
and gold on falling leaves  
affected our lives,  
as they do.

## Driving from Home to Kintra and Other Places

DEREK CROOK

All days are days I'll never see again  
So it's worth watching where  
Goat willow bulges from the bracken,  
Where low white cottages  
Seep from the earth  
Under a blue dome  
Marked by one white comma of a cloud.

Northwards the sea is twitching  
Silver in the sun.  
One small mote,  
A far-off fishing boat,  
Only hints its purpose.  
Further north dark Staffa  
Lists. Its slow leak  
Has got no worse.

Some things I'd like see anew again  
But won't.  
Rollers of mobile marble  
Slabbing into Sandwood Bay,  
Flamingoes stuttering through  
Windfingered water in the Camargue,  
Bent trees near Applecross  
Pointing to where the wind went,  
The stubby thumb of Suilven  
Signalling approbation of Lochinver,  
Andalucia's trees holding down  
A pink explosion of their almond blossom.

So I'll drive slowly now  
And reach Kintra via  
This day's green bulges,  
Houses that belong today  
And the today sparkle of the sea  
Around dark Staffa.  
These too I shall never see again  
Even when I come again tomorrow.

## Hermit

PAUL JEFFCUTT

The tide rises twice  
like Sun and Moon  
it gives and takes away  
slack along the strand  
pebbles swirled into brows  
glaucous weed to chew.

Walk the bounds of this isle  
day upon day  
storms buffet and ease  
seafowl beat their wings  
thin land stumbles  
from hill to bouldered shore.

Used to steep calfskin in dung  
scraped and stretched  
for the dainty scribe  
my illumination perished  
last winter with my boat  
it kept the fire.

Rock cleft for shelter  
draw water from a tarn  
set snares and till the earth  
no cattle milked  
no cider brewed  
no Lauds sung.

I swallow my spittle  
howl into the wind  
torn fleece gathered about me  
the whin creaks  
my furrows are bare  
let thistles grow instead of wheat.

## Iatrogenesis\*

WILLIAM BONAR

I try keeping my head  
above water but forget,  
slip under. Death closes in —  
a chattering pack of jackdaws.

There's always one gets too close,  
it's burbling syllables,  
resolving into clear threat,  
startle me back to the surface.

My t-shirt chokes me.  
The weight on my chest  
is my own heart.

\*The process of being made ill by medical treatment.

## Losing Time

DEBORAH MOFFATT

There were clocks everywhere —  
on the walls, in the closets, in drawers,  
their pale impassive faces grey with mildew,  
their thin hands stuttering uselessly through time.

Once he rushed across entire continents in days,  
never stayed long in any one place, broke barriers,  
hearts, limbs, charged recklessly though life  
and returned, always, to you, here,

where he would find yet another ticking clock,  
another grey moon-face impassively marking time,  
the rusting hands juddering with unspoken reproach,  
all that time going spare, and you, left alone,

in a cold house, an entire forest felled and burnt  
to keep you warm, while he squandered decades  
living in the heat of the moment, his brain on fire,  
chasing after the illusory flame of a shooting star,

and learned, eventually, that nothing can last forever.  
Now he sits shivering on the floor, staring at the skyline  
while you rake the ashes, hoping to find one last ember  
of whatever it is that has kept you together all this time.

## Estate Management

PATRICIA ACE

First to go,  
the old boathouse.

Planks blackened  
by rot, its roof

crowned the water  
like a paper hat.

The jetties, untended,  
not to be trusted,

succumbed to rushes  
and were drowned.

The wood was felled.

Without its buffer  
the wind upended

six Scots pines;  
their splayed roots

the lifted skirts  
of can-can dancers

parading on the verges  
of six shallow graves;

our picnic spot flensed  
by storms from the North,

the osprey nest  
spilled in the loch.

# 'The future will happen here, too'

Michael F Russell explores the many worlds of Scottish Science Fiction

NOEL CHIDWICK AND Mark Toner had a dream, and the dream became reality. A week after the Scottish independence referendum they dusted off an old idea: creating a Scottish science fiction magazine. Its name is *Shoreline of Infinity*, and issue number six was published last December, and issue number seven was published in March.

"We realised that that was where we were standing – on the shoreline, looking out at the infinite possibilities," says editor-in-chief Noel, who moved to Edinburgh from the Midlands in 1981. The referendum result left him despondent but, along with art director Mark, he used the experience to create.

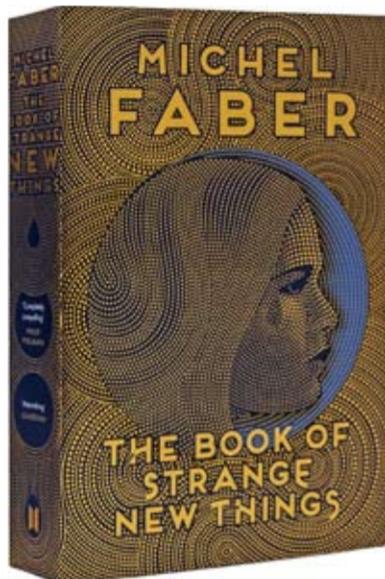
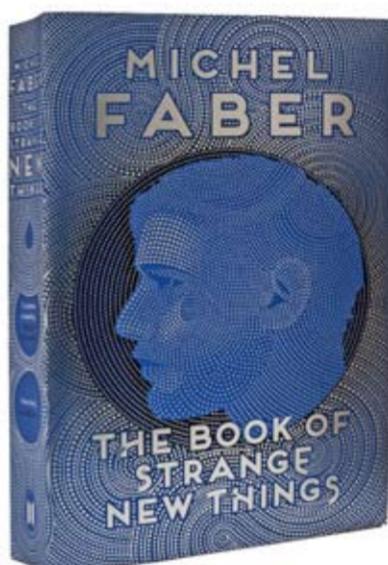
*Shoreline...* is the spirit of change made solid, just one by-product of the energy directed at the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2014. Matter condensed, and is now a handy-sized quarterly containing a satisfying blend of fiction, reviews, interviews and poems.

That it took the inflection point of national upheaval to generate Scotland's only dedicated science fiction magazine perhaps says something profound, though I'm not sure what. It might have something to do with looking forward, as well as back. However you choose to define science fiction, depicting a vision of the future will probably figure prominently in any description of what the genre, and its myriad subgenres, is all about. Of course it's possible to imagine an unsettling future, just as it's possible to curse the past, but positivity about both also exists. How a person feels about the future or the past ultimately depends on the individual, whether he or she is a supporter of Scottish independence or not. *Shoreline of Infinity*, like science fiction in general, embraces all viewpoints. Along the way, it gives an insight into the history of the genre in Scotland, which goes back a lot further than you might think. Sometimes, it's good to dwell on the past.

One of the things I love about the magazine is how it unearths lost gems. In the first issue there was a short story by John Buchan, entitled *Space* and published in *The Moon Endureth – Tales and Fancies* in 1912. Yes, the author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* wrote science fiction. That came as a shock to me if to no-one else. In issue six, the most recent, we had an excerpt from *Annals of the Twenty-Ninth Century*, published in 1874 and written by Andrew Blair, a 25-year-old doctor from Fife. If not exactly a gem it is a curio, and remarkably prophetic, by the looks of it. Even obsessive science fiction fans, however, can be forgiven for never having heard of this novel. As it contains "chapters and chapters of info-dumping", to quote assistant editor Monica Burns, it is, perhaps, one for the serious connoisseur.

In the main, the eclecticism on show in *Shoreline* covers new writers and big hitters.

Special guest at the magazine's 'Event Horizon' showcase in Edinburgh's 'The Banshee Labyrinth' last month was Charles Stross, there to launch his new novel



*Empire Games*. He is one-third of what is widely regarded as a triumvirate of national excellence, the other members being Iain M Banks and Ken Macleod. Stross and Macleod have both been interviewed by the magazine; Banks, alas, died before *Shoreline* was born, but will surely be remembered as one of the finest writers of speculative fiction the British Isles have ever produced.

So...big hitters. And then there's brand new short fiction from the likes of Iain Maloney from Aberdeen, Ian Hunter from Glasgow, and me from Skye. And Hannah Lackoff from Colorado, Guy T Martland from Bournemouth, Bo Balder from Amsterdam, and many others from all points on the globe. *Shoreline* contains us all.

The poetry section is edited by Russell Jones whose PhD was on Edwin Morgan. Now *there* was a man who knew a thing or two about harnessing the genre's imaginative idioms. As Russell puts it: "Morgan's experiments in breaking from linguistic, formal and thematic poetic traditions are indicative of his insistence on progress and change within the arts, societies and as a species."

Nowhere is this belief more evident than in Morgan's *From Glasgow to Saturn*, where Earthlings are sent packing by Mercurians who want nothing to do with our colonial fervour (The First Men on Mercury) and the story of a lunar mission gone wrong (Spacepoem 3: Off course) is told through noun phrases and recycled adjectives.

Morgan is the most important figure in science fiction poetry. Russell agrees, but attests to the health of the current crop by naming John Sexton, Harry Giles (Forward Prize nominated) and Jane Yolen. There are plenty of others in the anthology *Where Rockets Burn Through*, which was edited by Russell himself.

"Often poets don't really 'classify' their poems as SF so they think they haven't got any, but usually they have a few squirreled away," he adds. It sounds like a guilty secret, and maybe indicates a certain contemptuous attitude towards speculative fiction that still abides in some quarters. Science fiction in particular is often trashed when it is not being ignored: there remains a barrier between

this multifaceted genre and acceptance as a 'serious' art form, however that is defined. Whereas crime fiction seems to have breached this barrier to some extent (few would argue against Scotland's finest falling short as socially-aware adepts) only a small band of writers of SF, Iain Banks, Naomi Mitchison, Alasdair Gray and Michel Faber among them, have crossed over and are recognised simply as great writers. Read *The Bridge* or *The Book of Strange New Things* or *A History Maker* (Lanark!) or *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* and then tell me speculative fiction isn't a many splendored thing. Other names to be reckoned with are Kate Atkinson, Jenni Fagan, Gary Gibson, Angus Dunn, Duncan Lunan, Kevin MacNeil, Louise Welsh and Rob Ewing. Are catastrophic climate change or an end-of-the-world plague science fiction or science fact? Certainly, the fear of both is now.

What about talking alpacas? Hey, let's not bother with reinforcing genre barriers: alternative realities were good enough for the likes of Philip K Dick and Jeff Noon. After all, SF *can* also stand for speculative fiction.

A recognisable near-future somehow out of kilter is often the setting for what can be regarded as the closest SF (in both senses) comes to 'proper' literature. It's certainly closer to breaking the genre barrier. But there's nothing like Michael Cobley's *Humanity's Fire* tetralogy or Iain M's *Culture* series for far future visions of technological extravagance. Although both writers do a lot more than build intricate worlds, sometimes only a generous slice of space opera hits the spot.

Across genre and subgenres, Scotland is well represented. That was true in the past and it's true in the present. *Shoreline of Infinity* is packed with the proof.

In 1926, Hugo Gernsback founded the first science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*. Does the Scotland of now share some of the dynamism of America in the 1920s? If so, does that have any bearing on Noel's and Mark's post-referendum act of creation?

Maybe that's stretching matters too far. You might say: what dynamism?

Hardly a day goes by without a newspaper headline heralding a new breakthrough that promises to revolutionise some aspect of human life or our understanding of the

cosmos. From gene therapy to habitable exoplanets, the parade of bold claims and insights is unceasing. The fact that epochal technological shifts in the real world are thin on the ground these days does nothing to blunt our appetite for hyperbole. Curing cancer seems as remote as the stars, and it is now over 44 years since humans last walked on the surface of another world and longer since the first microchip. Consumer-driven iterations of information technology aside, no revolutionary innovation, apart from the internet, has made it past beta testing since Apollo 17. Zero-hours contracts and permanent regime-change don't count.

Our cars still run on hydrocarbons and fusion power is still a dream.

The next big leap is yet to happen. Assuming we are not wiped out by a nanobot grey-goo apocalypse or genocidal Artificial Intelligence, happen it will. It might be the EM drive, a law-breaking propulsion system verified by NASA last November. Or perhaps aspiring gurus like Ray Kurzweil are correct, and the post-human singularity of man-machine is upon us. There's a lot to think about, and SF is the grandest canvas on which to explore our hopes and fears for the future. These days, dystopian scenarios seem to have the upper hand, though writers from Arthur C Clarke to Alastair Reynolds have taken a more optimistic view.

Scotland is good at imagining and reimagining a past that seems just as turbulent as any alarming future. But when you look back, you see how many Scottish writers looked forward, and how many more are doing so now. The appearance in 2013 of the first Gaelic SF novel *Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach*, written by Tim Armstrong, is certainly a milestone for the language and could also be a sign that SF is moving out of the literary ghetto.

I don't know what the statistics are, but I'd guess that if a new magazine makes it to a seventh issue, delivered on time and within budget, then it's got a pretty good shot at a long-term future. The appearance in 2015 of Scotland's first dedicated science fiction magazine could be another sign that the genre has tunnelled into an alien demographic and is flourishing.

SF is also Scotland's Future.

Both Noel Chidwick and Mark Toner are now part of that, for however long *Shoreline* lasts, if not beyond. As they will always have established Scotland's first dedicated science fiction magazine, in this timeline at least, their roles are secure.

They looked to the future. Inspired by glorious defeat they took a risk, and imagined something into being. Such acts of creation are lighted candles in a darkness you've stopped cursing; far better to look out, and try to understand what might lie ahead, and maybe even try to change it, a little. Imagining the future is something people, including Scots, have always done. In any case, there's no escaping it. As Ken Macleod said: "The future will happen here, too." ■

# Leftovers

SHORT STORY BY IAIN MALONEY



IT TOOK HIM most of the morning to haul everything outside. He started in the bedroom, waking up a few minutes before five when the bird choir rose sonorous and lilting from the forest that surrounded their cottage. Through the loose weave of the curtains sunlight danced as if on rippling water. Dashes of light caught the screen of her phone on the bedside cabinet. The dust had collected on it, like everything else, glinting like sand in the dawn. He watched it for a moment, as if he expected it to ring, to vibrate, shaking the dust into a cloud. Behind the phone two paperbacks sat stacked, the cover of the top one curling slightly where the damp air had stroked it. Bookmarks stuck like tongues at roughly mid-point in both. Her phone, her books. She'd chosen the curtains. Everything was a reminder. It was time.

In the shed there was a long white plastic box that had served as a tank for the pet turtles Naotaka got when they first moved here. They'd each been no bigger than a five hundred yen coin when they took them back from the pet shop, shyly peeking out from their shells on the moist tissue in the open plastic bag she held on her lap as he drove down the dirt track to their new home. She'd always wanted a pond full of turtles in her garden but with that tabby cat lurking and the greedy hawks around, it had been safer to keep them inside until they were old enough to look after themselves. The box now held plant pots, canes, twine and a trowel. He dumped them on the ground and returned to the bedroom, a strand of sticky willow trailing from his slipper.

He jerked the curtains back and stood for a moment looking at the view. On either side taller mountains rose before dipping into the valley. The river lay like a tentacle, fat and heavy in the midst of ancient evergreens. They'd loved this place since the first moment they stood here, gazing out, his arm around her, cheek on her head. They'd found their paradise, their retreat from the world, their last home.

The books and the phone went into the box, then the contents of the bedside drawer: the steroid cream from her ear infection three winters ago; the spiral notebook with the pencil slid through the spirals; a packet of tissues; the watch he'd given her on their tenth anniversary, back in its box since the funeral. He worked methodically from one corner to the other. Behind the unit her phone charger was still plugged in. He yanked it out and added it to the pile. Socks, pants and bras followed. A coat hanger full of scarves. Her manky slippers half under the bed. When the box was full he manoeuvred it through the narrow cottage doors and carried it down the path between the vegetables, by the pond where the now full-size turtles basked in the sun, legs stretched out like they were tanning.

The cottage had been built as a holiday home by some rich Tokyo doctor but he'd got sick, his kids had shown little interest in roughing it in the mountains, so they'd sold it. Naotaka and Atsuko had long dreamed of escaping the city and valued peace above convenience. Over the years they had resculpted the surrounding land to suit their needs, growing enough rice and vegetables to make themselves all but self-sufficient. He caught wild boar and deer, fished in the river, and they kidded themselves they could grow

old in their idyll. Heaven only exists for a moment. A diagnosis ended the dream.

As they had cleared the overgrown land, frequent bonfires had left a permanently charred circle and they'd turned it into an official fireplace marked by a line of red bricks that had been stacked in the shed when they moved in. Atsuko had fashioned a series of barbecue grills so they could bake potatoes, roast marshmallows or broil fish above smouldering branches. In the centre of this circle he poured the contents of the box and returned to the house.

When she died he'd had to collect her things from the hospital. He'd taken her pyjamas and gowns home and, not knowing what else to do, washed and dried them, put them away. Now he pulled them back out, dropping them in the box. Each item had some part of her personality, some story from her history stitched into it. The sleeves of her jumpers were creased into bands from her habit of folding them while she worked. The hood of her rain coat still hadn't been mended after she'd caught it on a branch the last time she'd hiked up the mountain to the shrine before the illness made it too difficult. Her trousers, all too long, turned up at the

bottom. Everything went into the box. It all went onto the pile. The pyre grew.

When he'd cleared everything of hers from the bedroom, he stripped the bed, added her pillows to the mound, threw the bed clothes in the machine. He beat the futons, dusted every surface, opened all the windows and doors in the cottage to let the stiff mountain wind batter through the rooms. He vacuumed up every morsel of her.

He worked all day clearing each room, cleaning as he went, erasing with a damp cloth and a duster. Records, books, box after box of paper, pens, paper clips, her bags and suitcase, her university mug, her travel guides and hiking maps, her toothbrush and floss, her flannel and towel, he smashed the bookcase she bought from the second hand shop and the chair she painted and by the time the sun was at its peak above the mountain, every possession of hers, every scrap of her life, every skin cell had been cleared from the cottage.

On the doorstep he sipped a cup of tea, warming his frigid core, the bitter, brackeny taste comforting, like an old friend. They had two rows of tea plants up the mountain behind the house, enough for their own use, enough to sell through the local market shop.

That had been her idea as well. She'd grown up in Shizuoka, the steps of tea a familiar sight on the hills as she cycled to school. He pictured her, satchel stuffed carelessly into the basket, a charm from a local shrine jangling from the bike lock, smiling at some secret thought, some idea or story she'd sketch later. Atsuko as she was, before Kanazawa, before him, before coming here, before cancer had spread through their memories, turning everything.

The cup shattered against the cedar, shards spraying like hail.

He returned to the bedroom and from the doorway surveyed the room, his shirts hanging in the cupboard. His underwear in the drawer. His t-shirts folded like they did in the shops, something he'd never mastered.

They all contained traces of her.

They all contained memories.

He got the box and started again. Anything she'd touched. Anything she'd interacted with.

He dragged it all out. Plates, pictures, lamps. Everything went on the fire.

As the sun set, singeing the tops of the trees on the mountain behind the house small landslides sent frames and pans and belts tumbling outside the brick circle.

He took an axe to the kitchen table, threw it on.

He dragged the futons out, threw them on.

The TV.

The full-length mirror.

The sun lounge and the watering can.

He emptied the house, room by room, from light fittings to door mat, the bedroom, the bathroom, living room, kitchen and utility room. He emptied the shed and the car, even rolling the spare tire into the stack.

He couldn't get the washing machine outside. He didn't have enough strength to move the fridge-freezer more than a few metres towards the door. The house, empty but for appliances and carpets, still wasn't silent. It hummed and murmured, her voice seeped into the wood, her scent imbibed by the foundations. By the pond he sat, sweat musty under his arms, down his back. She was still there, her ghost over his shoulder. He wanted to stop. Wanted to forget. But everything reminded him of their life together, reminded him that it had ended but he still had to go on.

The car, she'd chosen the colour.

The cottage, she'd found the advert.

He got the bucket and hose, went to the car, syphoned the tank. Fumes cold and harsh, he trailed petrol through the rooms, drizzling it like dressing over the white goods, the carpets, the walls. He tramped down the path and pulled a T-shirt from the pyre, the striped polo neck she'd got on sale at Shimamura. He circled the stack, pouring petrol over his life, her life, the accumulation of existence. He trailed petrol up the path, connected the thin stream with the house, snaked it to the car, soaked the T-shirt and stuffed into the open petrol tank. With the dregs he spun a final thread, a fuse that ended at his feet.

The match sparked to life, hung in the air for a second after he released it. The turtles dived from their rocks into the chilling water as the explosion shivered down the mountain, thick black smoke pluming into the soft June sky, memories breaking as the wind caught them over the pines. ■

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# Poetry

## He\*

LYDIA MAY HARRIS

He buffs the sea to a lens, nests in the lungs,  
freezes the blood in my womb,  
drips through the gypsum under the flags,  
plops into the skillet I keep by the range.

*As a rattle in the latch, as a sneak between gaps,  
as a tongue of green, as a gobbet of spray,  
as a warp in the door, as rust on the axe.*

He forces the boat to crouch in the noust,  
the lamp in the window to burn at noon,  
hangs thrips in the well, turns my boots to stone,  
makes the dry ditch crack and my feet swell.

*As a rattle in the latch, as a sneak between gaps,  
as a tongue of green, as a gobbet of spray,  
as a warp in the door, as rust on the axe.*

\*Weather in the Orkney language.

## The Next Big Hill

NEIL YOUNG

Ask why he went, it was half for the thrill:  
“To see what was over the next big hill.”

That’s what he would tell you. He volunteered.  
“I wanted to keep my wee brother-boy near.”

Though hungry wee children he had at home,  
“It’s what was expected where we came from.”

And whisper it: when there were threats to desert:  
“The wife made it plain, how our names would be dirt;

“There’d be nowhere to live, and forget about work –  
Well, she didn’t see it, that shit at Dunkirk.”

And nobody mentioned blood-splash on his coat  
when battlefields later he stepped off the boat

Nor ask why he pissed every shilling away  
of V.E. money then demob pay

And nobody told of your mother’s despair,  
the begging, backdoors, when the cupboards went bare

Nor how you would cry, bite your knuckles to stop  
and dread the war hero who’d taken a drop

Nor after what seemed such a struggle to live  
how it would take half of your life to forgive

But you’d never quite get there. My daddy, I know,  
the stories don’t tell it. Old photos don’t show

those dirty details. Nor how it is still  
for those who live under the next big hill.

## Emigrant

MAURICE FRANCESCHI

Nowadays she’d be bit with a microchip,  
rifle-butted far from Dover  
but back then  
my mother simply left her peasant village  
caught her first train  
that hoisted her up through France  
boarded her first boat  
and upwards to London  
a handkerchief of sterling in her pocket  
and a few pennies of English  
no education to speak of  
no useful skills  
no points  
a quiet courage  
that failed her  
when she faced her first escalator  
all a sudden unsure of her next step  
as paws of metal clunked and clawed at her  
challenging her ascent.

## Trainspotting

ALEX McMILLAN

Lena was the first real person I ever shared a  
Poem with after she’d taken me through Roald  
Dahl Narnia and Adrian Mole and when she  
Handed me this book and I read the opening line I read  
It again and couldn’t believe it. I sat in West  
Lothian college, Bathgate, skipped a day of classes and  
Read, then took it to the factory and read it on break  
and took it home and  
Read in the bedroom and the bathroom and told  
Everyone this was  
The world,  
The word,  
The truth outside the window and  
Within that college and those factories too, this was  
People like me, people with words like  
Hibs and shoplifting, my words,  
Arguments over nothing and friends with brothers who  
Took Heroin and looked like ghosts and all those  
Stories of another world not shown to me  
In Thomas Hardy or Shakespeare (yet) or in anything I  
Was told was about me. I thanked  
Irvine Welsh who didn’t know  
Me but most of all  
Lena,  
Who did.

## Blaeberries on Cnoc Mor

NANCY GRAHAM

You had to kneel on hands and knees  
to win the dusky, blue-black pearls.  
Tender-skinned, too soft to carry home,

the pleasure was in finding them  
and then to burst a tiny sphere on your tongue,  
sweet-sharp taste of seed and pulp

swallowed while your fingers sought another  
scrabbling in the peaty earth below  
its tangled mat of green-ribbed purple heather:

these aching days of summer, never sated.

## What Love Really Is

KATHERINE LOCKTON

Here I am by the ledge.  
The window has not opened itself yet.

The crowd beneath not formed.  
I have a fever and lie in bed dreaming.

The swan that will fly beneath me  
and break my fall is waiting.

He tries to curl his tongue around the words *niña, caer*  
and call out. But all the passersby hear is his chafing voice.

Our front door slams. Startled I call *mamita*,  
lean out. I wake to find my whole world changed:

the floor, the walls, even my sheets, the mute  
colour of earth. My swan buries his head.

This is what love really is. To catch someone  
who doesn’t even know they are falling.

# Inchcolm

## A memoir

CATRIONA PATIENCE

**Inchcolm is a small island off the Fife coast in the Firth of Forth, and is a 45 minute boat journey from South Queensferry. The island is home to an Augustinian Abbey, numerous WW1 and WW2 fortifications, and thousands of birds. From April to November 2016 I lived and worked there as a residential custodian, first on my own, and later with G.**

**1<sup>st</sup> April** In time I'll be wondering what it was like. The first night on the island.

The greys are the ones with the roman noses. Mingled, tangled and grounded here; history, stone, life, memory, madness, gulls, two minute dreams. Forget the city across the water and the oil flowing down the river, out to sea.

"Who lives here?"

"No wifi?! I couldn't do it."

"You're so lucky. You have a private beach. A whole island."

There are things I will not write. I don't know this place yet. I don't have a sense of it.

**2<sup>nd</sup> April** And on the second day? There was a wee red headed girl who wanted to stay on the island but couldn't speak, and eventually only waved goodbye, and an ageing ageless family who saw good in everything, and a lady who heard monks singing in the cloister, and the boat crew, flippant and capable, and the older man learning to throw ropes, and the wee children climbing, tentatively, falling, running, stumbling on the walkway, amazed. 'If only if only if only', incessantly, the gulls call.

**3<sup>rd</sup> April** The mist has come down and the city is hidden. The sycamores are silhouetted against the intense blue-grey of the sky, strong and waiting. Who planted them? And the Abbey? What does it mean? Why have we kept it, what is it for, now? After lifetimes of contemplation and suffering in prayer, of lives lived sparsely or hypocritically is it now for an hour or two of dreaming?

Perhaps in islands it is that sense of them being knowable, being walkable, of the land still meaning something, of its contours and boundaries defined.

Later the same day; brushing green gunk from the pier, filling up the rusty bucket at the bottom of the barnacled steps, the water, for the first time, inviting. The children out here, we always ask them if they caught any fish; they catch shells and hope. The sun is breaking through the mist, everyone is gone, T and I are alone calling for seals and messing and balancing and singing and pondering. Out on the rocky shoreline the gulls frenetically take to the sky, oystercatchers gather against the pale pink sea and the flock, like a dog, turns once before settling down, Edinburgh is framed in light, the stone an intense, present grey, distorting space. Dead birds, the tide way out, considering the brambles, playfighting on the beach once the children go home.

**4<sup>th</sup> April** Torrents of rain, still vertical, vent across the middle bay, the city and the line of hills beyond are left again to the imagination. Bare branches shake in the wind, for the once

the gulls are peaceful, I don't think many people are coming today.

**7<sup>th</sup> April** I can feel the exhaustion curled up in my limbs. The saga with the ropes, on my own now, wondering about tides and tidal currents, and canons, and remembering the New York subway driver ("Goodbye Irish!") and the wee girl who promised to bring me milk if I ran out. The sound of a tug and tanker going by, and the gulls cantankerous, ravens in the tree by the north wall, a cormorant (or shag) flying into the sun on the sea, high and low tides and the gnomes under water, after the deluge the Abbey in pink.

**9<sup>th</sup> April** Beach combing in the pink light, the sun setting over Braefoot terminal. The spring tides are still in full flow, combing I find wood and fishing crates, there's a dead bird and a sanitary towel and plastic on plastic on plastic. An oil tanker towers passed, impossibly massive.

Earlier I was dancing in front of the Abbey when a huge tanker chugged passed and I stopped and laughed. Probably the crew laughed too.

Remembering the South African fellow who asked "If ye can't catch lobsters out here then what are the perks?"

**11<sup>th</sup> April** The wind was up and the tide was low. No one came.

**14<sup>th</sup> April** Here we are again. Four thousand seagulls circling above us, hundreds of oystercatchers swerving in the bay, a grey-lag goose, neck stretched low, hiding conspicuously, the bridges sparkling in the muffled orange light. A tumult of life out here. Four old ladies from Portobello, their first time to the island, reminiscing about when they were wee and their mother took them down to Portie strand to watch the German planes bombing the Forth, everyone else was away into the Bomb shelter.

**15<sup>th</sup> April** Last night we were singing in the Abbey.

**16<sup>th</sup> April** The menace of despair. A despair that you feel walking right behind you, creeping up and down your back like a silken shadow, with you always. He has cancer. Jesus fucking Christ.

**17<sup>th</sup> April** I'm too tired to speak. It's like I'm surrounded by shaking, sickening crystal, like the air itself might crack open, or the intensity in my palms might become visible. Numbed, stupefied, too much unknown to say anything but the normal things.

**1<sup>st</sup> May** Adapting to normality, I live on the island. So what have I seen? The woman who made herself a Jane Austen wedding dress and clothed her teddies in medieval attire and whose husband was not forgiven for leaving lunch in the car. Twitchers, two tiny pirates, dashing kayakers, a couple who got married here 25 years ago, she used to get the boat from Aberdour as a child. Always the sea, watching the tide, spring, neap, high, low, river, sea, current, whirl, the gull entangled in net, the crushed eggs, an eider and her chicks waddling in the Abbots Quarters, a nest of grey-lay eggs by the Nissan hut, watching out for shellducks. Living each day, bare-minded, dazed, windswept.

**5<sup>th</sup> May** All along the west wall of the Hermit's Garden eiders are quietly nesting, fragile, serene and terrified. A man tells me he is doing up a house from 1771, they live on a boat, he is rebuilding a chimney. Triplets are crying on the boat, exploring the rocks, one says "Now listen brothers...". I see the greylags flying, but still cannot find the other nest.

**12<sup>th</sup> May** Mormons on the island, I ask them to send on my greetings. A plethora of oldies' feet, watching them stride and hesitate, anticipating the fall. Only a few more nights of solitude on the island before G comes.

**5<sup>th</sup> June** Flakes of seaweed and plastic and gold, caught swirling in the current lapping out, swimming into shallow water, feeling for courage, seaweed looming and flowing.

The stones in the Abbey are soaking up the sun, radiating the heat like they come from somewhere else.

**11<sup>th</sup> June** A baby gull fell out of the sky and G caught him and we looked after him, feeding him tuna in a little glass plate, keeping him in the 'damaged' box, tilting a bottle lid full of water for him, holding him while he nodded to sleep in my hands. Now he lives outside the window and we keep an eye on him.

Sycamores cut-out black against three blues, the gulls diving relentlessly, a young teenage boy tells me about how cool he thinks Pi is, a couple lament living in flat low Lincolnshire, a girl with Down's Syndrome in wonderfully garish leggings, a blind old lady and her friend going up the steps from the pier. The boat men and boat lads coming and going, do we know them or not?

A couple who owned a sweet shop (she said she used to cut up 3 tons of fudge a year) the lighthouse man (he said he used to camp on Inchkeith and lighthouses all up the East coast, sometimes you'd hear a knock on the door in the middle of the night, a curious fisherman who'd seen the light on) The monk bringing me a postcard, T coming and going, dreaming of danger and love, watching B's boat rock and judder in the bay, a cruiser the size of the island sidles passed.

**16<sup>th</sup> June** Let time roll. Stilted. A black girl, a composer, too scared to walk into the blackness of the Abbey alone, sits on a bench facing south into the drizzle and thinks of the rush of London. A family of four commemorate the woman they love and miss, we lend them a corkscrew and the Granddad says; "You must be a writer." Miserable children and gleeful children explore in the rain, one boy shouts: "I love this day". Another is sad because he has lost his pennies, their hands held, lunches packed, two by two they leave again.

(The baby gull is gone. He died in the night.)

**17<sup>th</sup> June** R is writing poetry, C is smoking a pipe, the visitors (Germany, Doncaster, Bathgate) are bedraggled and determined. G's jacket is dripping on the floor, a small puddle on the laminate. This evening for the first time I heard the seals singing and grunting in the bay - for love, or chat, or birth, or death I don't know. The seagulls are swooping lower, I am considering the light yellow and molten above the gas terminal, and the sounds - one gull and a thousand, an aeroplane, the Maid of the Forth going passed, five female eider ducks gurgling, seals barking on the rocks, the Abbey heavy and sodden, the stones gleaming in their true colours.

**7<sup>th</sup> July** The seals have been singing all day, the gulls are cackling, the babies edging into crooked flight.

**22<sup>nd</sup> July** On the rocks the seals are whooping and groaning. The rock yellow, then brown, becoming weed, becoming water, becoming light. Gulls soaring, outraged, strewn in decay, viciously alive, unwelcoming, reassuring, vital.

T's gone North.

I am on edge.

The ripples and patterns on the water are its substance.

The moon reflects a path of rippled light splayed across the river.

**12<sup>th</sup> August** The gravity of the Abbey pulls waves in rippled curves into the bay, the moon, waxing through the sycamore, Perseids falling above a tanker glinting. The stragglers squawk in the dark, a curlew (the first?) takes flight, a family from Saudi Arabia enjoys the squall, a stoic lady from Kirriemuir demurely battles the downpour.

Cancer. Fear. Cancer. Fuck. Fuck.

Fireworks! Just now! Tiny, magical and whimsical, above the castle lit in yellow and purple, G and I looking at Corstorphine hill - a giant red-eyed frog, or an Aztec temple with a glowing mouth.

Learning new words. Dear Dr L, dear S, dear anyone, someone, please help.

**13<sup>th</sup> August** They've told me all kinds of stories.



Photograph of Inchcolm Abbey by Catriona Patience

About the lobster wars. Thinking of all the plastic swirling in the sea, and tankers top heavy, of mackerel seasons and herring taking a fancy, not to come this far south. Sorry sir, I'm afraid the 'poofins' are gone.

Playing the flute into the flight of the gull, drifting and dropping against the swollen pink-orange reflected clouds, the tune echoed in its flight. On the slippery edge with the tide coming in, the sense of the water continuously moving, lapping into the earth and in beneath it. Playing into the seals singing, fat and safe on the faraway rocks, playing into the crackle of the fire and the gurgle and chirp of the birds, the hum of the generators, the sense of unknown angles, playing into the island.

**10<sup>th</sup> September** The wind is blowing cold now, tiny apples and pears on the trees, their seeds pale, brambles popping up, the young gulls away, the seals jumping, and diving, and shouting and groaning, out on the rocks, getting closer.

Coming off the boat and up the stairs from the low pier, like an old desperado, a cowboy prepared for rain, he looks at me, and then the island, and then back to me, and says

"You've tidied it up!"

He tells me a story: "I used to have a boat over at Crammond, when I was in my twenties, and I came out here a lot, it was covered in sheep then, this would be oh, forty, fifty years ago. I used to come out and stay for four or five nights, there was still lots of copper and things lying about from WW2, so you could just help yourself. Sometimes, I'd take a lamb and roast it, I don't think anyone noticed! I remember one morning I was out here, and I had had a few too many the night before, and I woke up in this gorse bush down by the beach, and I heard angels singing, I thought I must have died and gone to heaven. But then I got up and turned around to see a whole congregation behind me, all singing, and the minister shouting at me 'you heathen, you're going to hell!' No no, it wasn't a dream.

"I used to moor up at a wee jetty down a

gully, no one would see me coming in that way, no one would know I was there.

"I bought and renovated an old hotel in Kinsale and we had it as a real folky pub. I miss Ireland, I'd like to go back, but I know it'd be changed, the old ways are changing, the music, there's not the same music anymore."

We go into the Chapter House, I play McGivney's Fancy, From Galway to Dublin. He rummages in his pocket, and gives me £3, "If we were on the Mainland I would buy you a drink, but you'll just have to buy yourself one." He shakes my hand, and smiles and says "I'll remember this for the rest of my life."

**11<sup>th</sup> September** S was here. In the morning I came into the living room, the birds raucous outside, the sun was channelled through a gap in the curtains, falling on his face. I asked him if the birds hadn't kept him awake, 'No', he said, 'it's beautiful.'

**16<sup>th</sup> September** Sitting in the gun battery, the bridges illuminated in pink and gold from the west, the snuffle of seal rising for breath and the sweet plip of him diving seamlessly below, the shoooooch of air under herring gull, the sudden flight and plummet of pigeon, waiting for the eclipse.

**23<sup>rd</sup> September** I want to start again. I want a blank mind. A new start. Fuck.

Just make it go away.

We are all waiting. For words from the big man.

**13<sup>th</sup> October** Coming back after the whirl of wind and swell and pain, white, extracted, "You look tired". I am.

From the top of the Bell Tower the trees look dusty, losing colour, covered nonetheless: from beneath they're bare. Slanted grey lines over the darker grey of Inchkeith, purple golden warm grey moving rapidly West.

The plunge of the boat into the frothy grey-blue solid-liquid waves, ploughing

against the swell, 4 or 5 knots, roller-coasting in the Forth.

There still no good news.

Wind is blowing the winter in. A cheery waterproof couple, concerned for the left-behind gulls, are astounded and leave.

It's our last day, just R and I. We ponder holes in the wall, searching for the dragon, and climb over the railings at the top. It's cold and windy. We look down and wonder why it isn't square, and he says he remembers the beginning, but I don't really.

We go down, I lock the door.

On the pier he walks off into the pelting rain, B hurriedly reverses the boat as the swell rises, a pale family, with a tiny toddler huddled in pink, watch the boat turning and we head east for home.

They've joined up the middle section of the bridge, we sail underneath the tiny gap.

**20<sup>th</sup> October** There are hardly any leaves left on the sycamores. Instead they're piled high and crisp on the steps to the cottage. Shimmers in sea-pools, the grunting and snorting of the seals and the anguished rising shrieks of the oystercatchers. I go to the old church and look east to see if the new oil rig is lit up at night, and it is, like a miss-shapen Christmas tree, brash and ungainly.

**23<sup>rd</sup> October** I love everything about this island.

I love the patterns the fallen leaves form on the grass under the sycamore. I love the rocks and seaweed in and out of the water.

I love the stones, red, grey, black, beige, terracotta, cream. I love the arches and windows. I love the rising dust, and the shafts of light filing through it.

I love the light, on the island and the mainland. I love the grey-light and sheets of purple rain moving east. I love the yellows of the setting sun on the river. I love the orange and olive green of the sea buckthorn, I love the coming-bareness of autumn.

I love the pointed ships, constantly on the move. I love the birds; gull, oystercatcher,

grey-lag, eider, wren, robin, finch, cormorant, heron, shag, wood pigeon, curlew.

I love everything about this island.

I love the steps hidden in leaves, I love the ground sodden with rain, I love the wind and real waves on the beach, I love the smoothed glass and the tattered remains of a red flag propped upright in drift wood.

I love everything about this island.

I love singing in the Chapter House. I love the seals groaning day and night and bobbing and watching.

I love swimming by the piers, I love exploring the forgot and not-forgotten corners, I love balancing on rocks and throwing tiny apples into the sea. I love picking elderberries and brambles on the island, I love everything about this island. Everything.

I love the island at night and in closeness of the dark.

I love seeing the Inchcolm light and the Oxcar flashing from Edinburgh. I love learning the names of the rocks and the birds.

I will hold this island in my mind.

(I went out to see the last of the light, pale pink-orange to the west. Tumults of grey coming in from the east, there are still apples on the trees, fat drops of rain spatter onto the dead leaves everywhere, a curlew and an oystercatcher fly synchronised around the shore line, the waves keep coming in, I've only just realised that some of them don't break.)

**28<sup>th</sup> October** It's autumn, and it's nearly the end. And it might be the end of the uncertainty.

There's a sparrow-hawk on the island, dissecting the pigeons. I went down to the South East shore and clambered on the rocks. I jumped at the pigeons, wobbling on the yellow coated stone ringing the island. The usual, smoothed twisted wood, metal silvered and rusted, bottles, rope, crates, relics. Shafts of evening light bright over the three bridges.

I have been watching for seal pups through the binoculars, only reflected pools of water and the big Mammals groaning.

**The last night** (Written by hand - to be written here, lost in transit.)

**The last day** It feels like another world, the last time wandering the island. It's cold, and pink streaks of cloud glisten across the sky. I walk right to the west end, and watch two geese flying overhead, right around the island. I watch a tanker moving east, displacing whole worlds of water in its wake, just as the clouds crisp into burnished, crackled gold, and the sun rises. The light moves around the island from west to east, as the sun comes up over the eastern hill. The Abbey is illuminated, warm, golden stone, for the last time.

We all leave together, with B, and watch the island from the back of the boat. Nobody says much.

**Later that day** I walked to Cramond and saw the Abbey, impossibly small, across miles of water. I felt like I had a secret. I walked passed people walking their dogs and wanted to point and shout; "I used to live out there! Can you believe that? I used to live on that tiny island!" I knew something impossible. Maybe, even amongst all this, I still do. I will hold this island in my mind. ■

THE SKY HAD been glowing coals when Molly went to fetch the fuel that morning, and that meant rain. He could see the murky distance of it now through his work glasses, the grumpy light through splots of old resin. He checked his strop, safe and pole-slung, and one and two, adjusted his spikes. Up a tree with a chainsaw dangling on a rope clipped onto a harness, and below him a groundsman, Nick, whose young throat gaped open like a yawning mouth.

Molly brought the saw up to himself, his name emblazoned in scruffy capitals down the handle with a Sharpie. Then flicked the choke and squeezed the throttle. He loved that first application, the cutting chain pushing into the wood. The first incision was easy and he watched the finger of brash tumble. Watched it narrowly miss Nick by a couple of feet.

Soon a prolonged series of stumps laddered up to the tree's crown. Above that, the thwarted sun looked like a blob of melted tallow over the Rossendale scrub. Nick skipped back from the latest branch and stuck his tongue out to catch flakes of sawdust, swirling mist the colour of egg yolk that fell on everything: the cones, the needles, the truck. Caught one and spat it out. When the brash pile got big enough, he dragged some of the unwieldy branches to the chipper atop the bank, where dirty yellow, the machine looked almost self-aware.

After severing the lower brash, Molly shimmied up to do the tree's crown. After that and on the ground, there'd be the gorge cut into the uncarved totem pole he'd reduce the tree to. Push it over and divide it into logs of descending size.

But look at that pumped-up bumpkin. Molly had a fantasy where the pole caught Nick's sternum. Another where the crown wedged into that Judas' skull. He didn't know how he'd break the news to Nick's father, but he would be unsparing. And oh the angle the weight would catch, the twitch of those tattoo-sleeved arms, Nick's fingers, the vestige of life's current flickering free of him as if his corpse was casting a final spell.

Nick watched the bright plume erupt from the saw's impact point and diffuse everywhere. The scent of ruptured pine reminded him of the builder's merchants where he was taken as a kid, lumber, fresh char of cut planks, him and Dad. By then Mum was ancient doodles in the margins of his exercise books. She was dead hair in the tines of the hairbrush he would find down the sofa after she'd left. But he was a man now, and what would she think to that? If she could see how perfect his BMI was; if he took her out in his new car, what then?

That wasn't the half of it. And not that'd he'd actually tell his mum this, but how would she feel, *hypothetically*, if she knew he'd lost his virginity the other week to Molly's daughter, Louise. After all, the experience had been something to savour as much as fear, and she'd always taught Nick that pursuing what scares you was worth the effort if not always the reward. Because you learnt to push yourself, which was at least something.

A harrowing crack.

The tree's crown was tipping, falling.

Thump.

When it had stilled, Molly picked his descent, slicing the pole into sections and shoving them onto the floor as he went.

## A Broken Drey Won't Save Them

SHORT STORY BY JAMES CLARKE



*The baby had golden balls in its ears and blue shadow around each eye. 'She's yours, pal,' Sally said. 'Her name's Louise.'*

Everything was taking place through the grill attached to his Hard Hat, which protected him from the gore of sap and woodchip. The mufflers played their part too, covering his ears and blocking the noise. The old man had started the business after returning from the Gulf War. "The helmet takes us back," he used to say, meaning, *in a sense*, and while Molly had never fought for anyone but himself and never would, he understood what the old man meant. You can lose yourself handsomely amid racket and mess.

Nick itched his bare arms. They were torn by the branch spines and irritated by the sap. Hungover, he'd forgotten to wear a long-sleeved shirt, and after vainly searching for his work boots, had settled for wellingtons instead. Climbing from the truck that morning, Molly said he'd have to make do then given him jobs that only accentuated his mistakes.

*Clear fucking brambles. Clear fucking van then stomp branches while I set fucking chipper up.*

As another line was scratched up Nick's wrist, as a nail went through his rubber sole, piercing the space between two toes, he resisted telling Molly about bumping into Louise on her way home from college, resisted telling him about her skin tone that nearly matched his bedsheets, the miserly clank of her earrings, the apologetic way she smoothed her psychology coursework out after he'd trodden on it. He was terrified of his boss so kept his mouth shut.

The final log tumbling, Molly descended the remaining feet of pole. The carabiners, his loops and the gaffs on his spikes sounded like

spurs. He cut the crown in two on the ground with the big saw, raised his arm and smirked as Nick obeyed the instruction like he was supposed to.

Talk about heavy. Nick dragged the enormous section as best he could up the bank. Louise had been waiting at the bus stop the other week with a local boy named Cribbins who lived around the corner from her. Cribbins was a loner with white blonde hair and a strange tick that caused him to blink in sequence, shutting both eyes at the same time, left then right, always in that order. He and Louise were travelling together because a man had been exposing himself to local schoolgirls, which wasn't surprising, Nick thought, given how some of them dressed. Louise for one rolled her skirt at the waist to make it shorter at the hem. She wore pop socks rather than tights, which Nick had ogled that day, only for her to catch him at it.

'You work wi' my dad,' she said. He'd a plastic bag with some beers and a frozen pizza in it and there was a puddle at Louise's feet that had the complexion of a rainbow.

'Keeping you busy?' she asked.

'Hard at it,' he replied.

'Hardly at it,' muttered Cribbins.

Nick pretended not to hear. 'Where you off to?' he said.

Louise didn't answer. Bit her bottom lip.

'What's so funny?'

Really laughing. 'We seen you coming out shops and Cribbins here said he reckons you look soft.'

Cribbins nearly tripped into the road. 'I don't!' he said.

'You what?'

'I didn't say that!'

'He went; 'them muscles aren't real,' laughed Louise. 'Said you're on the 'roids.'

Nick shoved Cribbins and said, 'These feel fake to you, you little prick?' then held his arm out, waiting for Cribbins to respond. The traffic made a rash sound as the ashamed Cribbins consented. Then Nick insisted on his firmness to Louise too.

'Feel these an' fuckin' tell us they're not real,' he said, trying not to blush as she threw her fag into the puddle and gripped his deltoid. The dog-end caused a light flame to pass the puddle's surface. Red nails dug muscle as Cribbins kicked the fire out. Soon Nick was driving Louise home via his.

The next bit of the memory was the good part, but a strange sound had broken through the chug of chainsaw that Molly had set to standby. Nick tried to see, couldn't see. The noise had come from his right, but the chainsaw had started again and was drowning everything out.

He stared until he was rewarded by a shift in the pine a few foot off. A drizzle fell as he crossed the padded layer of dust covering the sward and grass. He scrunched sappy hands and swallowed. There was definitely something lying there amid the brash.

Molly caught it happening. Seeing his groundsman prodding at something with his wellington, he killed the saw and lifted his visor.

'Oi!' he shouted, and strode over.

Nick flinched as Molly lifted his arm to remove his helmet. Satisfied, Molly said nothing. He knew people often wondered what the pale light in his eyes was for when they failed at something or betrayed a weakness in his presence, he'd never admit a thing. Quiet victories were the kind to be prized above all others.

Nick tried to act like he hadn't just abased himself. He even stuck his chest out as he said, 'There,' and pointed at the branches. 'Something in there.'

Molly lifted the topmost limb. Nick was right. At their feet were three translucent pink sausages with membranes over their eyes and scrawny tails dragging limply behind, three baby squirrels lying in the mess of a ruined drey. They must have fallen some twenty-five feet.

He looked up at the kid's dumb, ruddy face, that pierced eyebrow, and said, 'Tree rats.'

Nick just goggled. 'What do we do?' he said.

Molly licked a cold sore he could feel coming, scratched his head and pointed in the direction of the chipper.

Nick stared. There was the bank, the abundant wet of trampled grass and at the top of that, the chipper with its carbon and mud-flecked panels. He looked back at Molly, who cocked his head. Gestures were all Molly needed to make himself understood. This was what it was to be the boss.

'Maybe we could hide them. Till the mum gets back.'

Blots of rain began to beat a tempo on everything, making the forest hiss.

'Fetch the shovel,' Molly said. 'Hurry up.'

Nick jittered to the truck. Molly crouched to examine the kits. They had blind raisin eyes. They writhed and cried. He'd always

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# Poetry

thought squirrels mute; he spat on one, bubbles slipping down its body, the cobalt tinge of organs visible beneath paper skin. There are few returns in life and no point wishing otherwise. 'Lot of fuss,' fuss', he said. 'A lot of fuss.'

Nick returned. The idiot had left his gloves and helmet by the chipper. Molly took a final look at the kits. Baby birds, mammals and a few larger things too, he'd euthanised it all. If it wasn't him it would be a cat or fox, something else and not as quick. He accepted the shovel and speared it in the ground. This would be the penultimate act before the pub and then home, where waiting for him would be Sal. He wasn't sure how he'd even met his wife. He'd KO'd on a night out and woken up at hers, a bedsit in Stacksteads with a fish-tank, a wall of DVD's and a kitchen behind the couch. In her bed he faced a mirrored wardrobe that reflected his groaning expression back at him. Sal had acne scars and a partially infected dolphin tattoo. 'Not to worry,' she went, 'We didn't do it,' saying it in a way that ashamed Molly. He made up for the failure then dressed with unease, caught the bus, didn't even tell the lads. Sal found him at The Crown twelve months later. The baby had golden balls in its ears and blue shadow around each eye. 'She's yours, pal,' Sally said. 'Her name's Louise.'

Nick watched his boss clear the area around the squirrels. It would be easier to gather them on the shovel this way. They mewled in the wet; he'd a mind to take them home. He dreaded to think what would have become of them if he hadn't been here, to think how many animals had been slung into the cuboid gears of Molly's chipper in the past, gripped by tail, claw or wing, bodies fired scattered in the mulch. It made him well up, actually, made him retreat to old embraces by way of solace, childhood games, the slop-thud of Louise and his mother's baked bean stained t-shirt that had a picture of Goofy on it. He still kept it on a hanger in his wardrobe.

Then the shovel was being passed to him and Molly's dark visor had been lowered and the mufflers were down. Nick's mouth opened. Look at him, puppy tough, thought Molly. The gel in the kid's hair was being rained in creamy tracks down his forehead and face.

'Take it,' he said, smiling broadly behind his grill. 'Said take it, lad.'

Nick did as he was told. The shovel looked like a beach toy in his hand. He went to scoop the kits, only Molly grabbed him – God, those climbing spikes looked like orthopaedic braces – and lifted one of his mufflers. 'Fuck you playing at?' he said.

'Scooping 'em,' Nick replied. 'Putting 'em somewhere safe.'

The kits were still, having crawled from the drey. Molly said nothing and again that was enough.

'You're not serious?'

'Am I not?'

'But what if she comes back? The mum.'

'She won't. They never do.'

Down went the mufflers. Nick closed his eyes and raised the shovel. The rain had slowed and in a few minutes, sawdust would be blowing again. There would be a din amid the trees and their bark runnels, and beyond all that would be a silence, a silence that is in its own way to be reached. ■

## Black House, Great Berneray, Western Isles

HELEN MOORE

*"s na h-igheanan nam 'badan samhach/a' dol a Clachan mar o thus"*

July, 2016

Squat dwelling of the old ways, stone buttock bared to the grey Sound of Harris; roof timbers exposed; thatch a scalp with alopecia. From the roof-tree (sea-salvaged beams, white & crooked as the shins of old men), sway handmade ropes – doll's hair ragged by Atlantic winds.

Driech hole for shelter. Mud floor tramped by Sheep, who stamp in at a door jilted on hinges. Here, the walls' depth measures roughly a woman's length when knocked down, arms out, resisting eviction.

Modernity's groomed the place in other ways too. But the panel-clad interior has been reduced to a jumble of tongue & groove littering rooms – its greens, pinks & creams bruised by the elements. Tangle of rot & weather.

A stove made the warm bosom of this house; now it's a rusting hulk slumped by which the sole settee is a broken defiance of springs, stuffing of horse-hair plucked out for nests. One culprit Wren flees through a window's jagged teeth, where Nettles jostle like aggrieved kin barred from re-entering.

Proud, bristling emblem of Scotland, Thistles guard these ruins &, a stone's throw back across the cropped machair, other homes that formed the clachan. Two have been restored for tourists exploring the island, their walls fresh white. And like the lead-hemmed gowns of Victoria & entourage (who cruised within sight of the famine-blighted isles in 1847), their thatch is weighted against gales.

Secured with blue polyprop onto the coarse skirts of each, perhaps three dozen flat, pendulous stones. And do the visitors see them, these petrified livers & kidneys? Hung out to dry here, so many dull livers & lungs, and countless grey, grey hearts of the emigrants – the vital Gaelic cut away.

**Note: Black House, Great Berneray, Western Isles** – *"s na h-igheanan nam 'badan samhach/a' dol a Clachan mar o thus"* are lines from Sorley MacLean's poem 'Hallaig'. He translates them from the Gaelic as: "and the girls in silent bands/go to Clachan as in the beginning."

## Hope tied to a hook

DEBORAH LIVINGSTONE

Yesterdays taste of fish paste  
and chilli. Smell of betel nut spit

dodged on Yangon streets. Slide like skin  
sweating on a taxi's plastic seats.

They are the Buddhist monks  
chanting at 5am. The woman

cooking offal in the gutter. The scabbed  
stray dogs that own the night-time streets.

Today is the Ness heaving  
through the city. Snatch and unleash,

hope tied to a hook. Doubt  
darting in the shallows.

The half-drowned birch, blushing,  
still in the surge and flow.

Tomorrow, stretched out like a yawn,  
saying nothing.

## The Road to Southernness

STUART A. PATERSON

The road to Southernness was always rocky, but today  
it's like approaching a tired island  
over an almost-lost causeway.  
At this rate the horses of Loaningfoot  
will have webbed hooves by February,  
Houstons' 372 bus a ferry service  
from Silloth on alternate Fridays,  
part of the lost timetables, the village histories  
shrugged off casually by a coast  
well versed in making widows, islands, ghosts.  
Soon there will be seals on Criffel,  
an unmanned lifeboat station at  
New Abbey, entire generations  
of water babies in the bubbling brooks of Beeswing.  
Happily, singing like fat pink selkies,  
they will swim the drowned roads to Southernness  
in summer, dive for abandoned gantry relics  
in the pub, smile at the irony  
of a fast-receding England.

SOME DAYS A man gets on the bus I use to go into town. I've spoken to him out walking once or twice. He lives in the sheltered housing by the park. He told me children in his area call him Daft John and how they abuse him. On the bus he sits towards the front, behind the driver, on these seats which face the aisle.

The bus no sooner moves off than the man begins an extraordinary performance of facial expressions. To begin with, I thought he's unaware of the rest of the passengers, all facing forward with little else to look at; but then, somewhat later, I wondered if what he does was brought on by a kind of heightened self-consciousness.

Whichever, he pulls his face this way and that, distending and contracting it - pulling his mouth to the limits of extension - pushing out his tongue, snapping shut his jaws - his nostrils flaring - his eyes opening wide and closing tightly - and lines over his face like the intensest calligraphy - and his head thrown back and forward, you'd think it must fall off.

Gurning, you might call it, except, I suppose, that gurning might be considered funny or entertaining. This is neither of these. Much more, sad and painful.

Those 'uglies' of Leonardo come to mind. But they seem in some way, self-sufficiently ugly, only as if to stand in contradistinction to what is. I mean, you don't look at these grotesques and think "poor souls". In fact, you might think there is a kind, that is a different kind, of beauty about them.

(What's closer, though you don't see these very often, are those heads by the sculptor, Messerschmitt.) But I was thinking more of that simple mask device, Comedy and Tragedy, associated with the theatre. Nothing in that of the extremity of John's performance, the violence of it, or depth, you might say. But rather, there is the suspicion I have watching him, of his being 'directed', motivated or inwardly prompted towards what I take to be representations of pain or shame or fear. At the same time there's never any sense of his acting in any artificial way, but only of something real and natural and felt.

Eventually his face begins to change again, to settle, and find its place in the world where the rest of us are. Finally, you might think, he's like a White Clown, exhausted, smiling sadly.

And it crosses my mind, he's suffering for us all, he's carrying it all. You might think that's going too far. But it what what I was left with, between his getting off at the Post Office and the rest of us, at the Eastgate Centre. ■

### In the Queue

I WAS TYING Mungo to a drainpipe outside the baker's on the High Street. Two women I'd seen before, always together, around the town, came along and started making a fuss of him. They said the kind of things 'doggie' people say to dogs.

In the Sermon on the Mount, I always wonder who are the 'meek'. What is 'meek'. Does it mean anything these days? I am standing on the pavement, smiling, and I'm thinking, are these women for example meek. Is meek something like simple or innocent or poor. To my mind, it has nothing to do with

## Like Flying, Like Falling

STORIES BY ERIC JONE



*In the Sermon on the Mount, I always wonder who are the 'meek'. What is 'meek'. Does it mean anything these days?*

money or the lack of it, but rather with fear. And so on.

Meek or not, my two women end up in front of me going through the door into the shop. And I take my place behind them, listening in. What they said was difficult to make out, they whispered so. I think it went like this, their conversation.

- You should get a dog.
- Oh no
- Why not?
- I couldn't. It would break my heart. I mean if it died. When it died. It would be like with Alec all over again. I couldn't go through that again.

- People have to move on. (Something like that, but less like "off the telly".)

- I know. Oh no, I couldn't...

At this point our part of the little queue reached the counter. The two women went off with the last of the Empire Biscuits. And I was left thinking, 'Alec' doesn't sound like much of a dog's name to me. ■

### Then

MATHEW PARKED ACROSS the road from the school. A small group of Mums and Dads stood talking, waiting. It wasn't cold. Before long, the coach came round the corner and pulled up in front of the gates. I stayed in the car with the dog.

The children were returning from a day trip to Edinburgh, to visit the Scottish Parliament building and the nearby Dynamic Earth Centre. They'd been up since 6am and there was school next morning.

I watched Mathew crossing the road and disappear behind the coach. The lights in the coach came on. From where I was I could see the kids getting to their feet. Then, obviously at a word from a teacher, they began clapping, a round of applause for the driver. (After a while the driver staggered round the front of the coach, stiff from the journey, and lit a cigarette). I couldn't see the boys yet; I sat and waited.

And I recalled a conversation I'd had with them recently. We were talking about Science. I told them about that idea, image, or whatever you would call it, where you imagine an athlete approaching the tape in a

race and how, described in a certain way, he can never cross the finishing line.

At some point you could say the runner is one inch from the tape, and then half an inch from it, and then a quarter of an inch, an eighth of an inch, a sixteenth, a thirty-second, and so on. How then, the riddle goes, does he ever cross the finishing line. If that fraction can be endlessly halved, there's always, however small, some space between him and it.

The boys came round the front of the bus with Mathew. The three of them were holding hands. Emlyn was saying something. Sammie was wearing his baseball cap. Mathew leant forwards a little to hear what was being said. They were up to his shoulders these days. I thought, how handsome they are, so cool, as they headed towards the car.

I thought, next year they will be going to the Big School. And I wanted them to take for ever crossing that road. As they walked towards me, nearer and nearer, they seemed somehow perfect, even complete. I wanted them never to arrive.

Today, it had been Edinburgh. Soon it would be Christmas and New Year. Next year they'd be twelve. They'd go to school camp. Summer holidays and then, the big school. And then, year by inexorable year, who would they become? What would they be made to become?

Stop, I wanted to say, stop. Stay there, on the pavement, under the streetlight, Emlyn saying something, Sammy with his baseball cap,

The three of them holding hands. Don't change. Don't have to go forward into the world and the future I see.

(A yard away, a foot away, an inch, half an inch). But then of course, them breaking through, their faces smiling at the side window of the car. And their hands reaching out.

### Like Flying, Like Falling

AFTER ALL, WHAT else did she have. A room, a job. A little money to send home each month. She missed her family, her friends, so much. She seemed to work all night and sleep all day.

She supposed that what she was was nothing more than a cleaner. The difference

was the place she worked in. Without really knowing what went on there, in terms of purpose or end product, she took it to be a kind of laboratory, an ultra modern building on the edge of town, a place obsessively hygienic and secure. By any other name a cleaner, for all she wore a white uniform, hair covering, a face mask, and all these incinerated at the end of each shift.

Her only other duty was checking the rooms of incubators in her section, at intervals through the night. This involved making sure that temperatures were steady, and that certain lights and dials and switches accorded to the instructions she received from her Supervisor. Apart from this brief meeting when she came on duty, she saw nobody the rest of the night. All other communication was by coded sequence of numbers. 'Nothing to report' and so on.

It was all terribly boring. Most nights she wished something would go wrong, just to liven things up. It didn't of course; it all went on with a kind of disheartening technological efficiency.

The only part of the work which interested her was the eggs themselves. The different kinds of whites there were, the blues, and the ones speckled like camouflage. Some of the incubators held as many as a hundred small eggs. Others, ten, according to size, or even just one.

She wasn't sure that working in this place was good for her at all. She understood about depression and melatonin deficiency associated with the hours she worked, sleeping in the daytime. But, increasingly since she'd worked there, her periods were all over the place, sometimes never happening at all. And her breasts were heavy and sensitive. The idea that she was broody, surrounded by so many eggs, amused her more than anything else, but certainly she would admit to being curious, and protective of the eggs in some way she didn't understand. One night this might have happened:

She'd gone to work, perhaps even more tired and reluctant than usual. At three o'clock, she'd do a round and had come finally to a long narrow room and a row of single egg incubators - not unlike domestic micro-wave ovens - identical and numbered.

Before one she paused. Something about it caught her eye. The egg was revolving on its rack of course, but it seemed also to be moving of itself, in some way agitated.

She put her face up to the glass. And as she did so, a tiny human fist punched its way through the shell. At this, the shell split open into two jagged halves revealing a pink baby, fighting its way out of the sac of protective membrane.

The girl watched unbelievably. Then, she noticed that the child, lusty as it was, was not as perfect as it seemed at first. Its left arm was missing to the shoulder, and in its place a small downy wing flapped pathetically. She opened the door, reached in with both hands and lifted out the tiny slippery child...

...the door bursts open silently. She sits up in bed. A beautiful young man stands before her, as naked as she is, the edges of him shimmering with light, one pure white wing tapering to the floor.

Her body is fire. She throws back the covers and goes towards him. The enormous wing reaches out across the room, and she is drawn into its obliterating whiteness. ■

# Women of the North

POEMS BY GERDA STEVENSON

## Mairi Anndra Gives Thanks to Margaret Fay Shaw

*(Margaret Fay Shaw, born Pennsylvania 1903, died Isle of Canna, 2004, folklorist and musician, collector of The Folklore and Folksongs of South Uist.)*

She blew in like a wind with a dance in it,  
a load on her back – an Irish harp from New York,  
and a box with an eye, a *Graflex* she called it, that stretched  
out at you from its folds, black and heavy as a *sgarbh*.  
She learned our land, the sea, the sky, our names  
for different clouds, how to cut seaweed with a *corran*,  
to turn a *ploc* of peat with a spade, the time of year  
for every chore; and she listened to our words  
that we'd lost the writing and the reading of –  
the patience of her, to learn our tongue – wrote down  
our tales and prayers, the one I gave her  
for the Smoothing of the Fire, when Mary and her Son  
and a white angel will watch all night at the door;  
she took our songs to her ear and made them skip  
from her fingers in lines along the page, the sound of our days  
she placed there, with all her care, the look of us too, caught  
in that eye, for ourselves and the world to see.

And when she came with those pages made into a book,  
not one word wrong in the four corners of it,  
a golden ship sailing on that blue cover, bright as a summer sea,  
we cried to hold our lives in our hands.

## Orkney Recalls Gunnie

*(Gunnie Moberg, photographer, born Gothenburg, Sweden, 1941, lived most of her life in Orkney, where she died, 2007. She described herself as a Swedish Orcadian. One of twenty prominent Scottish artists commissioned to produce work for display in the Scottish Parliament.)*

It was love at first sight, even though  
I warned her with spindrift, then threw  
the whole Beaufort Scale at her, lashed  
those Viking cheekbones, thrashed  
her wheatfield hair into mayhem  
and stung her lazulite eyes  
with ice pellets, rain and spray –  
took her breath away –  
but she only laughed and claimed  
that every nook and granite cranny,  
each sandstone cleft and salt wave,  
all the sky and seascapes I can conjure in a day,  
the totality of me, was her very element.

Her brightness won me every time –  
beguiled me into the perfect light  
for my geometry to shine. No-one  
had seen me this way before,  
from five hundred feet, her lens poised  
at the pilot's shoulder, coaxing me  
to give my best side; or close up,  
at our most intimate trysts,  
when she roamed my shoreline geology,  
finding the woman in me;  
and I laid myself bare for her, always.

## 'Admiral of the Bering' Recalls Alaska

*(Isobel Wylie Hutchison – born and died in Edinburgh 1889–1982, botanist, film-maker, writer, artist and Arctic explorer)*

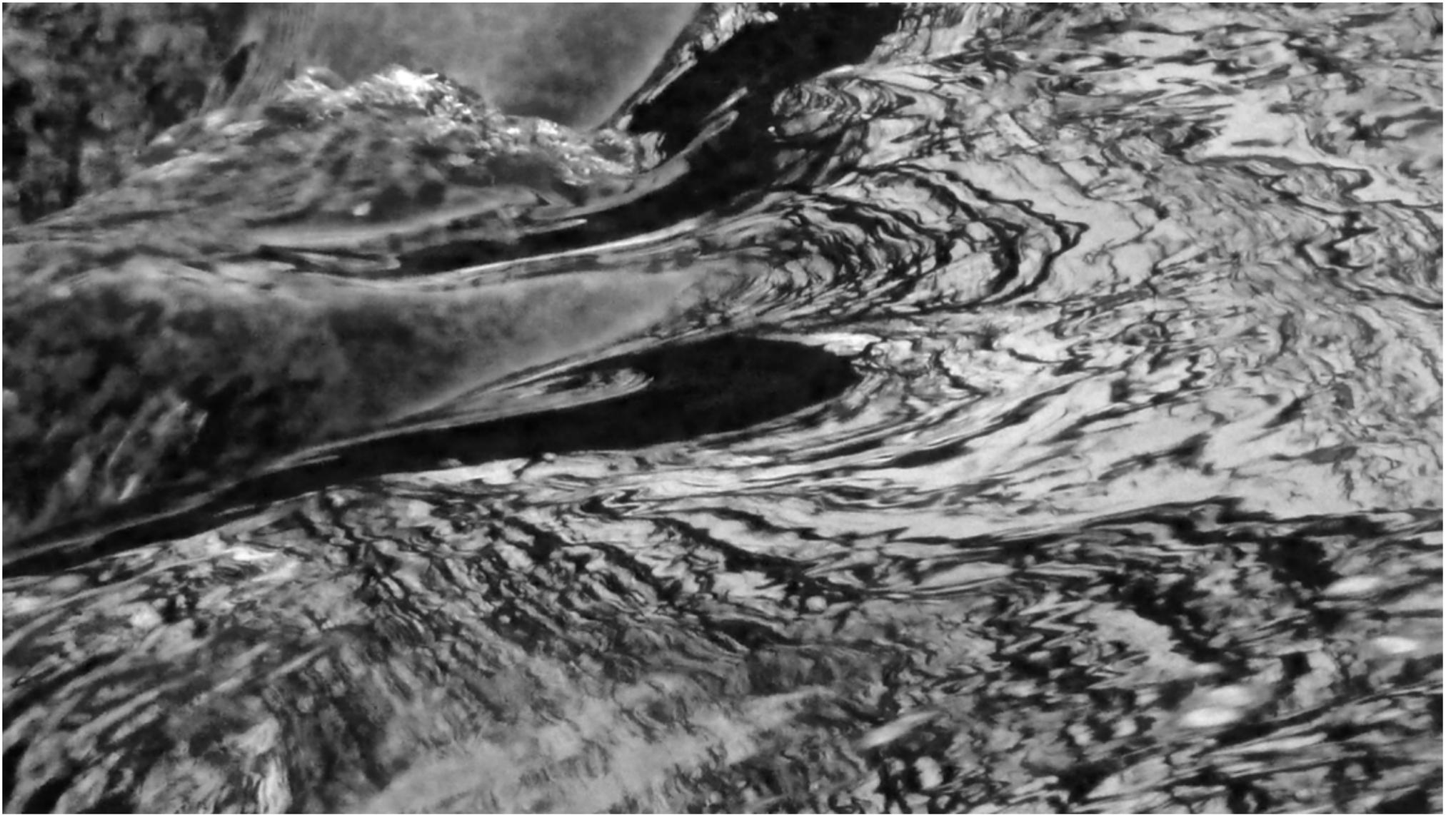
I sold my ball gown to a chambermaid at Nome –  
after all, 'when in Rome'! What use could tulle  
and jewels be to me, cadging a lift on the gallant  
ten-ton *Trader*, hunkered on my bunk,  
as she sliced through ice to Point Hope?  
Gone for me the foutering fuss of women's frills:  
free just to be, to roam the rim of the Arctic sheet,  
at ease among men.

I'd gained Anvil's summit before we sailed,  
and from her tundra slopes plucked gold –  
not the diggers' kind – specimens to be pressed  
between paper leaves: snow-white *boykinia*,  
*primula eximia*, and golden *potentil*,  
a farewell blaze before winter set in.

At Wainwright I looted with Inuit  
the ribs of a drifting ghost – who knows  
if her rusted hull still rides the floes?  
I froze my finger on the shutter-release  
in minus 63, painted the glittering Endicott peaks,  
and got snowed up for weeks with Bolshevik Gus  
in his driftwood hut on a sandspit; "I'll treat you,"  
he pledged, "like a lady," and true to his word,  
rigged up a screen for my modesty;  
outside at night the dog team's breath  
rose crystalline on the freezing air,  
while, happed in parkas and eiderdown,  
we'd debate without rancour the existence of God,  
though proof – as if needed – was pulsing above,  
in the sky's green harp.

My old bones must be rime-ringed now,  
and full of snow, crumpled in this wheelchair,  
hooked fingers leafing through memory's maps.  
"The first white woman, no doubt," Gus said,  
"to reach Demarcation Point on dog sled,"  
clicking my camera on the laughing length of me,  
two nations straddled by my long, lean legs!

**Note:** These poems are from Gerda Stevenson's forthcoming collection on the theme of Scottish women (from all over Scotland), who contributed to the nation's culture including those from abroad, who made Scotland their home. Gerda is grateful to Creative Scotland for its support with this research-intensive project.



# A Leap in the Highland River

Essay by Kenny Taylor

**T**HIS IS THE end. Where Dunbeath Water channels in a long curve between a blockwork breakwater and the honeyed stone of old harbour walls, river outflow butts tidal inrush, fretting the surface in shifting nets of ripple.

A cold wind keens from the sea on this winter day of gentian-blue sky and dazzling light. Too early, perhaps, for the first salmon to be returning. Homing from Greenland deeps they'll come, after a year or more in the ocean, past Pentland Firth overfalls and Caithness cliffs to gulp the water that can lead them upstream from here to the spawning beds of their birth.

Gusts flick spray, catching motes of sun and stinging my skin until I turn to look west. Across the river mouth from the harbour entrance, brown seaweeds glisten on rounded beach stones. A title glints into thought: *Morning Tide*.

It's the book whose opening pages astonished me on first encounter decades ago, as I read how the boy at the heart of the story gathered tangles of kelp and other seaweed along this very shore. What grabbed my attention was the way the author, Neil Gunn, described the details of rock and weed and ebb and flow. In so doing, he brought the look and feel of them alive in mind, then somehow transformed them.

This was a writer, I realized, who knew the sea's edge in some ways as a naturalist would, but who could make from it a tale that seemed

both real and epic. "When I wrote that part of the beginning of *Morning Tide*," he said in an interview in the year before he died, "I was describing a fact.

"But after, the whole scene in the ebb gathered a symbolism. I saw life itself coming from the sea....*Morning Tide* was a decisive event in my writing."

Today I'll turn my steps westward, away from the glittering coastlands of that book to follow part of another bright strand in Neil Gunn's writing: *Highland River*. This river.

Published eighty years ago, it was the book whose success made him take the jump to become a full-time writer. For nearly two decades, many more books followed. His last – the quirky and insightful autobiography *The Atom of Delight* – was published in 1956. It also draws deep on retelling and pondering some of the action in *Highland River*, especially through assessment of its central character, Kenn. Science, history and a sense of the roots and abiding worth of Highland culture and community pervade it. So does an interest in Zen Buddhism, although that enthusiasm for eastern thought came long after *Highland River* was written.

The best-known sequence in the novel is its opening, when Kenn wrestles and lands a huge salmon from the Well Pool using only his hands and river stones. It's an epic struggle and powerful writing, celebrated beside this very harbour in a bronze statue of the boy

bent beneath the massive salmon. He's striding forward, towards the houses that line part of the low ground near the river. Sculpted by Alex Main, whose heads of George Mackay Brown and Norman MacCaig are in the Scottish National Gallery's permanent collection, it was unveiled on 8th November 1991, the precise centenary of Neil Gunn's birth.

It's an obvious focus for visitors. Some may simply be curious; others could have journeyed far to pay homage to a writer whose work contributed much to the renaissance of Scottish literature in the first half of the twentieth century.

Close by, I meet an elderly man, Ian Mackay, walking slowly to his house in the village. He had one season at the low shore herring, he tells me, in '52, just after leaving school. But the shoals had long been dwindling, the local fleet declining, and he soon took up an apprenticeship as an electrician. Now the harbour is quiet, though a son still works lobster creels from here, and a daughter travels to Dounreay, helping de-commission the nuclear plant.

Old trades, new science, the strangeness of atomic physics. Neil Gunn would have nodded and smiled at the conversation, I reckon.

Ian's connections to this place go back through many generations of Mackays. Some of my own forebearers came from just north of here, I tell him, from Papigoe, Staxigoe

and Pulteneytown. One, Donald Gunn, was a fisherman. But I envy Ian's unbroken line of connection to Dunbeath, where he knows the history, sees long-gone buildings and people in his mind that are invisible to me.

After we part, I wonder what motivates me to be here. Am I some kind of literary stalker, following traces in Neil Gunn's words and boyhood haunts in hopes of finding something more than his published works reveal? Am I hankering after a sense of my own ancestry, where a play of light on Caithness flagstone or water will help me glimpse a figure I carry within; a feeling formed from some wisp of DNA?

I don't yet know. But words in the short letter which prefaces *Highland River* give me heart. Written to his brother, John, who Neil said was the basis for the character Kenn, he says of the book that: "I cannot explain this odd behaviour – apart from the old desire to be in on the hunt in any disguise."

The hunt. There's no escaping its primal power in both this book and several other of his novels. The thrill of seeking and capturing, especially on a poaching foray, when there could be a risk of being apprehended by a gamekeeper, bringing retribution on the individual and shame and penury to the family. And yet still the allure of capturing something from the river pools and landing it, against the odds. The idea made flesh; the imagined real.

# Tuath

Àireamh 1, Earrach 2017

Is treasa tuath na tighearna

**Sgrìobhadh ùr le Alasdair Caimbeul, Maoilios  
Caimbeul, Mòrag Law, Coinneach Lindsay,  
Pàdraig MacAoidh, Alasdair MacRath,  
Mòrag NicGumaraid**

# Facal-toisich

**S**EO AGAIBH A' chiad àireamh de leasachan ùr, air a bheil Tuath, ri Northwords Now, a chuir a taic ri sgrìobhadh Gàidhlig riamh. San iris seo bidh barrachd àite do sgrìobhadh nach do nochd cho cunbhalach ann an NN roimhe seo agus tha eisimpleirean dòigheil den t-seòrsa sin saothrach an seo le earrann à nobhail le Mòrag Law agus aiste Bheurla le Alasdair MacRath (bidh àite ann cuideachd do rudan Beurla a bhios a' bualadh air Gàidhlig, obair-bhreithneachaidh gu sònraichte). Ceud taing do Bhòrd na Gàidhlig a chuir taic ris an fhoillseachadh seo.

Fhuair saoghal na Gàidhlig buille mhòr o chionn ghoirid nuair a chaochail am bàrd Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, a rinn uimhir don chànan na linn. Seo fear de na dàin mu dheireadh leis:

## Do Chuilean dhan Ainm Oscar

'S mi nam leth shìneadh air an t-sèis  
a' leughadh Lermentov,  
thàinig thu chèilidh.  
Sheas thu gam choimhead  
's do cheann air oir.  
Chrath thu d' earball dà uair,  
phut thu do shròn fòm achlais,  
a' spadadh an leabhair às mo làimh  
is leum thu an-àirde air mo mhuin.  
Rinn thu cuairteilean beag  
a' socrachadh àite, is laigh thu.  
Thug thu sùil fhiata orm,  
shìn thu thu fhèin, rinn thu osann  
agus chaidil thu.

Gaisgeach thu gun teagamh –  
de ghaisgich ar latha.

Seadh, cha bu bheag a' ghaisge a rinn thu fhèin, a Dhòmhnail chòir, a ghaisgich a tha thu ann. Bu mhath beò thu agus seasaidh do shaothair is do chliù fhad 's a bhios cainnt aig clann-daoine. ■

RODY GORMAN, DEASAICHE TUATH

**H**ERE IS THE first edition of a new Gaelic supplement, entitled Tuath, to Northwords Now, which has always supported writing in Gaelic. In this supplement there will be room for types of writing which have not featured quite so regularly in NN before now and there are fine examples here with an extract from a novel by Morag Law and an essay by Alasdair MacRae in English (material in English relating to Gaelic matters is very welcome, particularly with reference to critical work). Many thanks to Bòrd na Gàidhlig for supporting this publication.

Gaeldom received a heavy blow recently with the death of the poet Donald MacAulay, whose work is such an important part of the language. Here is one of his last poems:

## To a Dog Called Oscar

As I was half stretched out on the couch  
reading Lermentov,  
you came to visit.  
You stood watching me  
with your head to one side.  
You wagged your tail twice,  
you pressed your nose under my armpit,  
knocking the book out of my hand  
and you jumped up on my back.  
You made a little circuit  
settling a place for yourself, and you lay down.  
You gave me a shy watchful look,  
you stretched yourself out, you gave a sigh  
and you slept.

You're a hero for sure –  
one of the heroes of our time.

You were a hero of our time, and any time, Donald, and your work and reputation will live as long as human speech does. ■

RODY GORMAN, EDITOR, TUATH

## Poems by Coinneach Lindsay

### Fèin

Tha am fèin agam gam chumail beò, dìreach,  
Ach tha am fèin agad gad ithe  
'S a' dìon an neonitheachd aig an eitean,  
Oir dè th' anns na h-ealain uile agad  
An aghaidh do neo-chomasachd gaol a thoirt  
Ach dhut fhèin?  
Agus dè am fèin, gun ghaol, gun chiall,  
Is tu nad aonar, nad ghucag dhìona,  
A chumas tu beò is e gad mharbhadh?

### Uallach

Tha mo ghaol na uallach  
A dh'fheumas mi ghiùlan  
Nam stamag mar luaidh  
Agus blas an t-saoghail ùir,  
Na dhìobhairt nam bheul.

### Bàrr-mhanadh

Agus thusa tilleadh dhachaigh gu àite  
far nach robh thu riamh, ged a tha do shluagh  
air an sgaoileadh air feadh an t-saoghail.  
Tha sinne nar fògarraich nar dùthaich fhèin,  
a' trèigsinn ar beathannan  
gu obraichean dàin,  
Is tusa a' sireadh ciall  
uiread 's a tha mise,  
Fhad 's a bhios a' bhrù-dhearg gam mhagadh  
is a' chorra-ghritheach a' sgreuchail.

### Dubhradh

Nam b' e dubhradh slàn a bh' ann,  
Bhithinn sàsaichte,  
Ach, priobadh tro sgòthan troma-  
Solas na grèine,  
Neo-chiosnaichte ris a' ghealaich;  
Sliseag de dhòchas,  
Dòchas a ghoideas mo bheatha bhuam.  
Ban-fhiosaiche

Bha fios fithich aice 's i na suidhe nar measg  
Anns an taigh-seinnse dhripeil, oidhche Shathairne a bha seo.

Bha i dubh-fhaltach, ciùin, 's i a' leughadh ar basan  
'S a' cur iongnadh oirnn le uimhir a fios.

Chaidh a sùilean mun cuairt oirnn  
Gus an do ràinig 'ad mis', is dhiùlt i mo làmh,

Ag ràdh, 'Chan urrainn dhomh, bhon a tha e cho goirt',  
Is mise a' gàireachdainn, mo chreuchdan am falach.

Ach chunnaic i nam shùilean rud a bha fìor:  
An cridhe deireasach a' toirt teanga dha fhèin.

**S**HUIDH DÒMHNALL AILIG air ais as an t-sèithear. Bha a' cheist a chuir Ling air doirbh a freagairt, ma bha e ga tuigsinn ceart. Gun teagamh 's ann mu ghaol a bha a' cheist. An robh a' cheist doirbh seach gur e Sionach a bh' ann a' Ling, no an e nach robh e 'g iarraidh a cur ceàrr, le bhith toirt freagairt ceàrr dhi. Cha robh i ach gu math òg, dà bhliadhna air fhichead mar a thuirt i fhèin. An robh i a' smaoinichadh gun robh gliocas a' dol a thighinn às na ciabhagan liath aigesan. Bha a caraid Changchang ag èisteachd gu dùrachdach. 'S ann aice a bha an trioblaid le gaol. Smaoinich e air mar a fhuair e e fhèin san t-suidheachadh seo. Daoine bho air feadh an t-saoghail a' sruthadh a-steach dhan taigh aca. A' chiad daoine a thàinig 's e Sionaich a bh' anna.

Nuair a thuirt Annag ris aon latha, 'Nach biodh e math nam biodh leabaidh is bracaist againn?' 's e thuirt e rithe, 'A bheil thu air am beagan ciall a th' agad a chall?' Càit eil daoine dol a chadal? As a' bhàthaich?

'Chan ann, ach ans an t-seòmar-chùil,' thuirt i fhèin gu h-aighearach, agus sgòth de notaichean a' tuirling mu a ceann.

'Air an làr no air an làir?' (bha seann rocking horse agus trealaidh eile anns an rùm) thuirt e le gàire agus fhios aige nach robh fiù 's leabaidh anns an rùm.

'Cha toir mise fada ga chur ceart,' thuirt i fhèin gu sunndach.

'Nach eil thu beagan sean airson toiseachadh air rud mar sin?'

Cho luath 's a thuirt e e bha fhios aige gur e an rud ceàrr a thuirt e.

'S dòcha gur e seann bhodach gun fheum a th' annadsa', arsa Annag, agus rudhadh a' tighinn na gruaidh, 'ach tha mise cho fiot, fallain ri fiadh.'

Dh'fhàg Dòmhnall Ailig aig sin e. Bha e cinnteach gur e dìreach aisling a bh' aice agus nach cluinneadh e an còrr mu dheidhinn. Dh'fhalbh e a Dhùn Èideann airson dhà no trì làithean a thadhail air a bhràthair. Nuair a thill e thug e an aire do chàr spaideil glas na shuidhe taobh a-muigh an darais. Ach cò fo ghrian tha seo? Thuirt e ris fhèin.

Choinnich a bhean san trannsa e agus plionas oirre a shracadh a beul. Thug i fàsgadh

## A' Cheist a bh' aig Ling

### SGEULACHD GHOIRID LE MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL



air agus pòg dha mar gun robh iad air ùr phòsadh. 'Tha iad air tighinn,' ghlaodh i, 'a' chiad aoighean.'

Chuir e a chorragan na chluasan mar gun robh e ma b' fhìor gan glanadh. 'An cuala mi ceart thu? Uighean an tuirt thu? Cò thug dhut na h-uighean?'

Bha i uile air bhioran, 'Ò, tha thu cho èibhinn!' Aoighean, guests, a ghràidh, tha fhios agad glè mhath, tha iad anns an rùm-shuidhe, Changchang agus Ling. 'S ann a Siona a tha iad. Ò, tha iad cho laghach.'

Bha sruthan a' tighinn aiste agus i air a beò-ghlacadh leis na bh' air tachairt. Mar làir fhiadhaich air faighinn saor on cheapan no mar iolaire àrd anns an adhar a' seòladh air soirbheas a saorsa.

Choinnich Dòmhnall Ailig oirre le iongnadh. Cha b' urrainn dha bruidhinn airson mionaid. Bha e cluinntinn còmhraidh coimheach a' tighinn bhon rùm-suidhe. Cha robh e a' tuigsinn facal. Mu dheireadh thuirt e gu stadach, 'Seadh, ach càit an caidil iad?'

'Na gabh thusa dragh, trobhad!' agus rug i air ghàirdean air. Threòraich i e chun an rùm-chùil. Sheas e san daras agus a bheul fosgailte. 'A dhuine bhochd! Tha thu air a bhith trang', thuirt e mu dheireadh. Bha leabaidh ùr dhùbailte san rùm. Cha robh sgeul air an làir-bhreabaidh. Bha a h-uile càil cho glan ri prìne agus cho sgiobalta ri seòmar na banrigh.

Bha gàire oirre bho chluais gu cluais. 'Seo a-nis, a bhodaich, bha thu ag ràdh nach dèanainn e.' Bha i air bhioran. 'Trobhad a-nis, feumaidh tu coinneachadh riutha. Tha iad cho còir 's cho nàdarach, mar chuideigin às an Rubha. Thàinig iad le ultach de mheasan, eil fhios agad, agus nigh iad na soithichean. Tha iad a' ruith mar na fèidh air feadh an taighe. Chan fhaca tu càil riamh coltach ris.'

Cha tuirt Dòmhnall Ailig guth. Chùm e a

chomhairle. Cha b' urrainn dha ach a bhith sàmhach agus dithis a Siona a' feitheamh ris.

Bha Changchang agus Ling na' suidhe air an t-sòfa cho sona ri dà bhròig. Bha Beurla gu leòr aca. Mhìnich iad gun d' fhuair iad Beurla san sgoil ann a' Siona. Ged nach robh dùil aige, 's ann a chòrd an oidhche ri Dòmhnall Ailig. Fhuair e a-mach tòrr mu dheidhinn Siona. Fuirich ort, thuirt e ris fhèin, cha bhi seo cho dona 's a bha mi smaoinichadh. Cha leig mi leas falbh bhon an lot 's thig an saoghal gu Cnoc Uaine, 's ma tha iad uile cho laghach ri seo, bidh sinn ceart gu leòr. Bha Annag toilichte. Bha i a' faicinn gun robh an gnothach a' còrdadh ris a' bhodach.

'S e oileanaich a bh' anna ann am Breatainn airson bliadhna 's iad ag ionnsachadh mu eaconamas eadar-nàiseanta. Bha Changchang 30 agus an tèile mar a thuirt i 22. Bha an dithis nam buill den phartaich Chomannach.

'S e urram a th' ann,' arsa Ling. Ghnog Changchang a ceann ag aontachadh.

Thionndaidh an còmhraidh gu teaghlach. Cha robh cho fada ann 's nach fhaodadh ach aon leanabh a bhith aig teaghlach. Ach bha sin air atharrachadh, 's dh'fhaodadh a-nis dithis a bhith aca.

'Nam bithinn-sa pòsta agus ag iarraidh teaghlach chan fhaodainn ach aon leanabh a bhith agam,' arsa Ling.

Chuir sin iongnadh air a caraid. 'Ò, carson?'

Mhìnich Ling gun do bhris a pàrantan na riaghailtean agus gun robh bràthair aice. Dithis anns an teaghlach, an àite aon duine. Bha e ciallachadh gun robh aig a pàrantan ri pàigheadh airson foghlam a bràthar agus a h-uile càil eile. Agus bha ise air a peanasachadh cuideachd. Chan fhaodadh ach aon leanabh a bhith aice, an àite dithis.

'Och, tha sin suarach, chan eil sin fèir idir,' ghlaodh Annag.

Dh'aontaich a h-uile duine nach robh.

Thàinig an còmhraidh gu bràmairean. Bha bràmair air a bhith aig Changchang airson seachd bliadhna ach cha robh an teaghlach aice uabhasach toilichte leis. Bha aice ri faighinn air falbh bhon t-suidheachadh. Sin carson a thàinig i a Bhreatann airson bliadhna, airson faighinn air falbh.

Chuir seo iongnadh air Dòmhnall Ailig. 'Nach eil daoine òga anns an latha an-diugh a' dèanamh na thoilicheas iad fhèin. Ma tha gaol agaibh air a chèile ...'

'Chan ann mar sin a tha e ag obair againne,' arsa Changchang. 'Ma tha thu a' pòsadh, tha ceanglaichean dlùth ann eadar na teaghlach. Feumaidh tu aire a thoirt do fhaireachdainnean do phàrantan.'

Smaoinich Dòmhnall Ailig air mar a bha cùisean o chionn fhada air a' Ghàidhealtachd. Cho cudromach 's a bha teaghlach agus pòsadh. 'S ann an uair sin a thàinig a' cheist bho Ling.

'An e gaol an rud a tha cudromach no an e gu bheil sibh a' freagairt air a chèile ann an diofar dhòighean?'

Chuir a' cheist stad air. Bha fhios aige nach robh aon fhreagairt cheart ann. Dè bh' ann an gaol co-dhiù? Bha tòrr sheòrsaichean gaol ann, earotach, romansach, spioradail ... Agus bha tòrr dhòighean am faodar an gaol a mhilleadh mura biodh giùlan aon duine a' freagairt air an duine eile. 'S e ceist gu math toinnte a bh' innte. Cha robh aon fhreagairt cheart ann dhan a h-uile duine. Bha a h-uile càraid eadar-dhealaichte.

Bha iad a' coimhead air gu dùrachdach, a' feitheamh ri freagairt.

'Gabhaidh mo leisgeul mionaid,' thuirt e. Chaidh e dhan taigh-bheag.

Nuair a thàinig e air ais, bha an còmhraidh air gluasad gu cuspair eile, cuspair na bu fhreagarraiche airson aoighean. Dè 'n seòrsa bracaist a bha iad ag iarraidh làrna-mhàireach. Cha deach an còrr a ràdh mu ghaol.

Ghluais iad airson a dhol a laighe. Dh'fhalbh iad gu h-aotrom mar dhithis eilid, no mar dà eun làn toileachais agus beatha.

Choinnich sùilean Annaig agus Dhòmhnall Ailig. Rinn iad snodha-gàire ri chèile. Bha an òige agus an saoghal agus an gaol a' dol mar bu ghnàth leis. ■

**B**HA PEARSA CAOL, èasgaidh aig Màiri agus choisich i le ceumannan dìongmhalta, clis agus druim dìreach.

Thòisich i air ais tron a' bhaile, seachad air Sutherland's Garage agus an uair sin sios an rathad beag ri taobh taigh-òsta An Dunollie dhan Dolphin Grill – an café a bha dìreach air ùr-fhosgladh aig toiseach an t-sèisain seo. Bha uinneagan mòra gleansach air agus stòlaichean àrda air beulaibh chunntair fada a bha còmhdaichte le Formica. Bha bùird Formica ann cuideachd agus bha Màiri den bheachd gun robh seòrsa de riochdalachd air an àite nach robh ri fhaighinn àite sam bith eile ach, 's dòcha ann am Port Rìgh – far an robh an café as spaideil air an eilein – an "Caley" air Sràid Wentworth.

Nuair a chaidh i a-steach bha an t-àite falamh is i an aon chustamair. Shuidh i sios aig a' chunntair air aon de na stòlaichean àrda agus leig i sios am бага ri a casan. Thug i an sporan beag leathair a-mach as a pòcaid agus nuair a thàinig fear le aparann mòr geal a-mach às a' chidsin dh'iarri i air airson truinnsair tsiops agus glainne Cream Soda. Chunnt i an t-airgead a-mach gu cùramach air a' chunntair

## Caibideil a h-aon (earrann) - "Tsiops aig an Dolphin Grill"

### EARRANN À NOBHAILE LE MÒRAG LAW



agus dhòirt am fear glainne mòr àrd Cream Soda dhi. An uair sin chaidh e air ais dhan a' chidsin far an cuala Màiri spreadhadh fhuaim nuair a chaidh na tsiops a-steach dhan ola theth. 'S an uair sin thàinig am fàileadh math, blasta, blàth agus thàinig e a-steach dhi gun robh acras mòr, mòr oirre agus nach robh i air mìr ithe bhon a fhuair i dinneir-sgoile aig meadhan-là. Dh'òl i an Cream Soda beag air bheag, a' feuchainn ri deur beag a' cumail air ais gus an tàinig na tsiops. Mu dheireadh thall thàinig am fear a-mach às a' chidsin le cnap mòr de tsiops òr-dhonn air truinnsair geal.

'Sal' an' vinegar, hen?'

Bha blas làidir Ghlaschu aige.

'Yes, please,' thuirt i is fadachd oirre gan ithe.

Sgaoil am fear còmhach math de shalann is vinegar orra.

'No' in school the day?'

Dh'innis i dha mun dleastanas chudromach a bh' aice, ciamar a fhuair i dhan Àth Leathann agus ciamar a bha i a' faighinn dhachaigh.

'That's quite a walk for you, hen – all the way tae the Sleat road-end fae the hospital! I hope yiv left plenty o' time tae catch yer bus! Right then, you just get yer chips eaten up...'

..... agus chaidh e a-steach dhan a' chidsin a-rithist.

Thòisich Màiri air na tsiops agus dh'ith i iad gun stad. Oh, nach iad bha math....cho teth, cho criospaidh, le blas geur vinegar orra. Nuair a chuir i am fear mu dheireadh na beul, chuir i sùil a-rithist air a h-uairadair agus cha robh a-nis ach trì cairteal na h-uarach air fhàgail dhi airson bus Chaol Acainn fhaighinn. B' fheudar dhith cabhag a dhèanamh.

Leum i sios bhon stòl, thog i am бага bhon ùrlar agus chaidh i a-mach às an Dolphin Grill is suas dhan rathad-mhòr a-rithist.

Choisich i na bu luaithe sios tron a' bhaile fhada, sgapte. Seachad air a' Cho-op, na Taighean Suaineach, bùth a' bhùidseir. Seachad air Sgoil an Àth Leathann, Harrapul agus bùth Iain Chrisdein. Seachad air ceann-an-rathaid Waterloo agus an uair sin bha a ceann-uidhe na sealladh, is fhathast còig mionaidean mus tàinig am bus.

Na seasamh aig a' chrois-rathad 's i a' gabhail anail, chuala i srann a' bhus a' tighinn suas an rathad bho Chaol Acainn. Nuair a thàinig e gu stad air a beulaibh chaidh i air bòrd gu taingeil oir bha i a' faireachdainn gu math sgìth a-nis. ■

# Gaelic Offcuts

By Mary Montgomery

## Beachdan

I WONDER IF there isn't something inveterately skilful, if not wholly dishonourable, in the ability to feaze, or freeze, out one's own intellectual heritage – in order to blend in with the opinions, and the values placed upon the opinions, of someone else. If there is, I'd say that in some respects the native Gael probably has it down to a fine art.

The “I kent his faither” syndrome which so long plagued the arts and airts of mainland Scots and Scotland for decades, if not centuries, has had its equivalent in the ‘offshore islands’ in the form of “Who do they think they are?!” Always a difficult question. Who indeed.

The comment “Am beachd a th' ac' orra fhèin!” might not amount to very much when set against the low opinion the commentator might harbour towards the subject, and may dwindle even further if it transpires that it originates from, or is based upon, local or parochial tastes or trends. For, in ‘offshore island’ terms, local, and especially parochial, just doesn't, on its own, any more, do.

Opinions, sometimes before they are even properly formed need, it seems, to be shared and compared with others from other sources, people, sites, places, parties, which are not originally local or parochial, before they may be safely established.

Is it all about political correctness? Or is there something else going on?

The fact that, in my ignorance (no, in fact, it would have been innocence) I needed to have the Gaelic phrase “Beachd a' choin” expanded and explained to me in fairly lucid terminology might speak to the verbal restraint of Gaeldom. Its content might also illustrate something more than verballity. Gaelic déclassé.

‘Gidheadh, cha b' e gun robh mi dorch' gun bheachd. Nevertheless, it wasn't that I was so ignorant I was devoid of perception.’ (Dwelly's).

“Dè do bheachd?” is a nice opener for discussion. It's also useful in quiet proposition. But if you add “sa” and ask “Dè do bheachd-sa?”, look out. You're going to get an opinion, and it may be a case by then of whether you like it or not because there is something of importance implied in the emphatic form “sa”. It suggests the respondent, and the response, matter.

Gaelic has its equivalent to ‘out of his head’. It's “às a bheachd”, meaning out of his senses. I haven't found an equivalent for ‘off’, or out of, his face’. In your/my face is “nad/nam aodann”.

I cannot quite decipher Dwelly's Dictionary's “chuir na bàird am beachd air na triath”. He translates as ‘the bards fixed their notice on the chiefs’. Oh well, let's hope the chiefs sat up and took notice because I expect the bards would probably have had opinions worthy of note.

“Mòr na beachd” (‘conceited in her ideas’), again in Dwelly's, might equate with



previously alluded to masculine notions of worthiness, while “geur shaighdean laoich as cinntiche beachd” (‘the arrows of the hero of surest aim’) reflects, in Gaelic, admiration for being sharp and adroit. It would indicate that there was no linguistic restriction, at least, to expressions of being specific and on target. Where, then, one wonders, did the sharpness and adroitness disappear to when that skill, which physically and fundamentally separates mankind from beast, i.e. language, began to be permitted to fade from Gaelic ‘skilldom’?

There is no barrier, as defined linguistically, logically, logistically, legally, as far as I'm aware, to Gaelic speakers primarily formulating and articulating opinions representative of their own intellectual heritage and culture in a manner which transcends a secondary, even a stronger secondary, heritage and culture.

There may be psychological barriers. I suspect there are. And possibly other kinds.

“Am bheil beachd agad far an d'fhàg thu e?” (‘Have you any recollection where you left it? Dwelly's) That thinking principle, of native intellect, that mind (in reference to its rational powers).

If asked, I suspect some people might, on reflection, reply, not entirely disingenuously, “Taobh a-muigh na sgoile.”

## Blasan

AS INFANTS, DONALD and John spoke Gaelic with an identical accent, as you would expect with twins growing up together – an accent typical of the area they belong to, Lochs, more specifically Kinloch.

Buinidh na balaich do Cheann-a-Loch agus bhuineadh blas an cuid cainnt gu nàdarra do Cheann-a-Loch. Nan clann òga.

An-diugh, ge-tà, tha blas tur eadar-dhealaicht' o chèile air an cainnt.

Why this is I can only assume relates to the fact that whilst John, in his attempts to self-teach self-learn Gaelic afresh has, over a period, exposed himself to a variety of accents (some, I would venture to say, native to nowhere). His brother has exposed himself to none – other than the one he learned from birth. This has left Donald, irrespective of the fact that he has encountered less Gaelic, with a stronger native speaker accent, though with a weaker vocabulary, than John. It has also left him with more of what I would describe as ‘have a go’ confidence, John being somewhat more cautious and self-conscious, and keener to ‘say it right’.

I might these days boldly call this sort of pain-staking attempt to get Gaelic things right no more than stuff and nonsense, but I recall being in a similar position as a tutor to Adult Gaelic Learners and feeling less than comfortable when, as happened not infrequently in some classes I have to say, my apparently ‘strong’ Lewis accent, and my native speaking dialect, were queried – not for their authenticity I may say, but for their acceptability!

And those doing the querying? Those learning. Though not all. Or not all the time. Thankfully.

I wonder if any of those querysome Learners I taught went on to work in Gaelic television and media. I also wonder (though I didn't ask at the time) if any among them had inherited, possibly through other channels of education and/or exposure to some elocutionary devices, notions of value attached to an English RP (Received Pronunciation) accent as, at a period not too distant from that moment in time, an RP

accent was considered to be a prerequisite to, for instance, a successful newsreading career in broadcasting in the UK.

If that were the case, I'm afraid they may have been disappointed by what they might have regarded (and perhaps ‘received’) as Received Pronunciation for Gaelic broadcasting – and newsreading in particular. I have heard some News bulletins read in Gaelic in accents which were, to me, virtually impossible to understand, at least with any ease and clarity. “Cia milis leam blas do bhriathran!” (‘How sweet are thy words to my taste!’) Dwelly. Not.

An English RP accent is, if nothing else, clear and comprehensible. And even English broadcast media has in recent times loosened its linguistic corsetry to permit more regional flavour to their newsreading tones.

Native Gaelic accents remain, in my view, the most understandable and appealing in terms of broadcast media. To me, Lewis accents, particularly, convey sterling credibility and stability in news coverage and reporting.

‘Blas’, of course, though used to translate linguistic accent or to relate dialect, has other meanings in Gaelic. For example taste, savour, flavour as I said, relish. It draws on the romantic: “tha blas na meal' air do phògan” (‘thy kisses taste of honey’); “do bheil air blas an t-siùcair” (‘thy lips are as sweet as sugar’). It's used in food and cooking contexts: “Am bheil blas air gealagan uibhe?” (‘Is there any taste in the white of an egg?’); “Is fheàrr blas an teine na blas na gainne” (‘better the taste of fire than the taste of want’ – said when food is served very hot).

Artistic taste, differentiated it would seem, and possibly with good reason, from linguistic taste, is not ‘blas’ but ‘ciall’, or ‘tuigse’ (Thomson).

So, crossing back to Dwelly's, we find him broadly in agreement e.g. “is e 'n ciall ceannaichte as fèarr” (‘wisdom bought, by experience, is best’). One would scarcely imagine acquired taste being acquired other than by experience, though there may be room for considering naturally, innately, acquired ‘blas’ also.

“Coimhead ciall” seems to be Verbal Imperative in mood, though Dwelly doesn't specify, and translates as ‘regard discretion’. Indeed.

As Native Gaelic Speakers are often asked if they might be willing to assist Gaelic Learners in their efforts to learn the language, a ‘regard for discretion’, referring ‘ciall’, must indeed be a useful borrowing on from the more strident connotations which might be associated with ‘blas’, where, as I think I've shown, there may be more attention paid to accent and stress.

Dwelly's tells us “mo chiall” may be translated as ‘my darling’ and goes on to say of ‘ciall’: “Very generally used as an expression of fondness or term of endearment, also to express desire, as, “a chiall” (‘I would, I wish’), “a chiall nach mise bh' ann” (‘I wish I had been there’)

“A chiall nach mise bh' ann” nuair a

chuirteadh romhpa, luchd-foghlaim fein, mo chuid chloinne-sa a' cur a-mach às an cuid foghlaim cànan nàdarra.

Still, “às dèidh na h-uile blas(ad)” (‘after all’s said and done’ Dwelly’s) it may appear we are not so atypical . . . after all.

## Dachaighean (1)

**A** FRIEND OF A FRIEND OF A FRIEND apparently told somebody who knew someone who knew a bit about it that their cousin, who lives somewhere on the Scottish mainland, wasn’t happy that the old family croft and croft house which had, apparently, belonged to their same great grandparents, had ended up sold and in the hands of what they called “outsiders”. “Outsiders”, mark you, not even “incomers”. And this far-flung source of unhappiness centred, it seemed, on the fact that the said mainland-dwelling relatives felt a part of them had, as a result of the sale, been wrenched asunder in a cruel act of psychological dispossession – from the likes of which, it seemed, they might find themselves never able to recover!

The fact that they could now no longer enjoy annual, if even annual, unofficial, unpaid, summer holiday time-share status, as their parents and grandparents had, they said, enjoyed before them in the old same great grandparent now-badly-in-need-of-repair home was, it was to be understood, apparently, neither here nor there!

Well, it must have been enlightening to all concerned to have got all that cleared up.

The additional fact that the locally many times told over (until, eventually, it became no more than mere hearsay) report of the sale, by the official legally tenancy-holding relative by means of an internet website, only reached the ears of the unhappy mainland-

dwelling cousin via another, also unofficial holiday time-sharing, also mainland-dwelling, cousin simply added, it seemed, gross insult to grave injury and, it was declared, from that moment forth, even rare telephone-speaking terms were dissolved, Christmas card communications were ceased, blood, being still, unfortunately perhaps, thicker than water (even that of the Minch) metaphorically curdled, and everyone stopped sending ‘the ones away’ the occasionally soul-stirring Stornoway Gazette and the regular monthly, nicely contemplative, Back in the Day.

Family trees were in danger of shedding leaves and forever losing branches, if not actually facing the chop. It seems, on one level, like a typical ‘tough luck’ tale. ‘Hard lines’ on the holidaymakers; ‘just the way it goes’ for the luckier great grandchild who just happened to have been born in the right place at the right time to sell – if what was eventually received was indeed ‘the right sum for the right lum!’, and the sale was deemed to have been ‘for the best’.

On another level, the sale might have been simply deemed necessary if, for example, costs of upkeep and repair weren’t being distributed or met fairly among relatives receiving some benefit, at least, from the property.

Whilst on another level, it might have been that the change of possession of the croft and croft house would mend and flourish under new ownership.

Then, again, there is the issue of levels of family emotional attachment. It’s at this grouping level I’d like to think Gaelic might throw up some illustrations, though their existence may have no bearing whatsoever on the scenario I’ve described.

Cianalas jumps to mind. Sorrow or sadness. And, of course, homesickness.

Dh’fhaodte gun tàinig cianalas air na càirdean a tha a’ còmhnaidh fad air falbh on t-seann dachaigh. Agus chan e a-mhàin, ‘s dòch’, an cianalas tha dlùth riutha pèin, ach an t-àmhghar cianalais a dh’fhaireas iad, neo shaoileas iad gum fairich iad, às leth an cuid phàrantan, am peathraichean no am bràithrean, no eadhon an cuid sinnsirean dham buineadh an dachaigh o shean. Dè idir, faighnichidh iad dhiubh pèin, a chanadh iad? Nam faiceadh iad an dachaigh a thog ‘s a thiasgail iad an-diugh an làmhan dhaoin’ eile, daoine nach buin fiù ‘s dhan àit’?

Chanadh iad, ‘s dòch’, “thainig smal oirnn le cianalas” (‘we are darkened with sadness’); neo “Is cianail m’ aigne” (‘my thoughts are sad’). Dwelly.

As well as sorrowful, sad, home-sick, cianail can also mean solitary, and the motif of family trees might re-appear : dà chraoibh chianail (two solitary trees). Dwelly.

To examine Dwelly’s “A’ cur dhinn ar cianalais” (‘banishing our dreariness’) might require a different approach. Religious connotations, such as meas na craoibhe (‘the fruit of the tree’) and “Fhuil a’ craobhadh mu thalamh” (‘his blood gushing forth and ramifying’) seem to offer symbolic remedy. “An t-sleagh chraobhach” (‘the tree-like spear’) seems symbolic of struggle – of possibly not a peaceful kind. Sleahadair is spearman or lancer.

Sleahadair is also, however, lazy busybody, one given to frequenting homes. (Dwelly). An eavesdropper perhaps. ■

## Air an Fhionnairidh

MÀIRI NICGUMARAID

Aig ciaradh an latha  
Mus tig fathann dhen oidhch’  
Togam ceum tron sheann bhaile  
‘S sinn an cuideachd nan taibhs’  
A chanas rinn gu bheil beàrn-chridh’  
Ann an dealbhadh ar suim  
Tha gar fàgail fo dhall-bhrat  
Bhon tì tha ‘m buntanas dhuinn

Ri beul na h-oidhche  
Mus tog fathann tro ghaoith  
Seasam tiot’ an oir rathaid  
Dh’èisteachd torranach caoidh  
A dh’innseas dhuinn mar a thachair  
Gun do dh’fhalbh uimhir a bh’ ann  
Tha fàgail dachaighean falamh  
‘S meud luchd-còmhnaidh cho gann

An cois dol sìos grèine  
Mus nochd ball airgead nan reult’  
Fanam taic an cùl geata  
Tha mar shlabhraidh do sgeul  
A ghlacas cho bitheant’ ‘s a bha coiseachd  
Bho sheòmar gu sràid  
‘S beatha làitheil dol thairis  
Gun dhùil atharraichidh dh’ait’

Ro earball an dubhaidh  
Eadar gealach is grian  
Chitheam taighean nan càirn uaihe  
Ri mac-meanmna do-riant’  
A lasas boillsgeil do sholais  
Aon uair eile a-mhàin  
Gu faiceam soilleir fo ghloine  
A liuthad sealladh bu chàin.

## Heaney and ‘Hallaig’: a footnote

Alasdair MacRae

**I**N 2011, THE centenary of Sorley MacLean’s birth, the Sorley MacLean Trust published with The Scottish Poetry Library a pamphlet of commemorative poems. In his contribution, Seamus Heaney questions whose poetic work will survive, ‘Who will stay young in the end?’ When he won the Nobel Prize in 1995, he expressed a regret that the Nobel Committee had not acknowledged the achievement of the Scottish poet.

Heaney was in his twenties when he first met some of the contemporary Scottish poets, MacDiarmid, MacLean and Mackay Brown. In 1973 he made his first visit to Scotland and had lunch in the Abbotsford bar with Norman MacCaig and Edwin Muir’s son Gavin. In the same year, Claddach records launched in Dublin a recording of some of MacLean’s poems, including ‘Hallaig’. At the launch, Heaney read out MacLean’s own translation of the poem and years later he described his reaction to MacLean’s reading in Gaelic:

This had the force of a revelation: the mesmeric, heightened tone; the weathered voice coming in close from a far place...the surrender to the otherness of the poem; above all a sense of bardic dignity and calling that

was without self-parade and was instead the effect of a proud self-abnegation, as much a submission to heritage as a laying claim to it.

This quotation is from his *Introduction to Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, edited by Raymond R. Ross and Joy Hendry (1986), and it was perhaps Joy Hendry who urged him to attempt his own translation.

‘Hallaig’ was first published in 1954 and gradually it came to be seen (and heard) as MacLean’s special poem, a poem of historical compass, of heritage and political analysis, of collective memory and emotional involvement, with an elegiac awareness that its Gaelic language may become unspoken but a desperate defiance must be asserted. The poem is located in Hallaig, a small community on the east side of the island of Raasay from which the people were cleared in the mid-nineteenth century. MacLean’s death in 1996 may have allowed Heaney a space to explore the poem in his own translation, and in the period between then and 2002, he worked on the translation. Sometime around 1999 he sent a version to MacLean’s widow and in 2001 he generously agreed to allow the Sorley MacLean Trust to devise a pamphlet of his translation as a way of bringing MacLean’s

work to a wider audience and raising money for the work of the Trust. The following year, a limited edition of the pamphlet was launched at the Edinburgh International Book Festival and Heaney delivered a lecture on how his translation came into being. He confessed his lack of Scottish Gaelic and conceded that his Irish was schoolboyish and not fluent but he declared that when he heard MacLean reading the poem in Gaelic ‘the aural and emotional force were indistinguishable’ to him. He heard the poem as an expression of ‘duchas’, a concept he had lost as ‘connection, affinity or attachment [to a place] due to descent or long-standing; inherited instinct or natural tendency’. ‘Hallaig’, he went on to say, arises ‘out of a sense of place that is also a sense of displacement, out of a double sensation of presence and absence. What distinguishes it as a poem is its feeling of absolute given-ness. It is neither a topographical description nor an exercise in personal nostalgia’. It was characteristic of Heaney’s large-mindedness that his translation in the pamphlet incorporated various suggestions and amendments made by members of the Trust and Professor W. Gillies, particularly on the place-names in the poem.

In 2004, the fiftieth anniversary of ‘Hallaig’ and the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the final clearance of the people from Hallaig, he travelled to Skye to give a talk and reading at the Gaelic College, Sabhal Mor Ostaig, and to walk to the cairn marking what little remains of Hallaig on Raasay. The occasion had a solemnity and inspirational lift in keeping with the poem. Heaney read MacLean’s translation and Angus Peter Campbell read the Gaelic original.

After the death of Sorley MacLean in 1996, Heaney expressed his sense of loss in a translation of ‘The School of Poetry Closes’ by Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (died 1448), including the lines:

Poetry is daunted.  
A stave of the barrel is smashed  
And the wall of learning broken.

An era had indeed come to an end but the assertion at the end of ‘Hallaig’ and the baton-exchange from MacLean to Heaney allow us to believe that poetry is a force insisting on continuity and human significance. ■

# Dàin le Pàdraig MacAoidh

## Saorsainneachd

*Come up and see me later*, chagair mi, a' caogadh le mìogan,  
a' cur *business card* na balgan,  
seòmar 83 sgrìobhte air a chùl.  
Cha b' ann gus an ath mhadainn nuair a dhubh  
mi a-staigh dhan t-saoghal a-rithist nam aonar  
ann an 44  
a mhothaich mi gun tàinig an cairt à co-labhairt  
eile far an do dh'fheuch mi ri fèin-mhalairt.  
Cha tug mi aire sam bith aig bracaist  
nuair nach do nochd i ann an *Café Marrakesh*  
ach an ceann là nuair a chaidh na puist-d timcheall  
ag ràdh gun do chaill i a h-iteal,  
agus nach d'fhuair i idir dhachaigh  
an oidhche ud no oidhche sam bith  
eile, thòisich mi a' beachdachadh air dè dìreach a lorg i  
ann an 83,  
dè 'n seòrsa bleigeard, slaightear, troc a bha feitheamh an sin

agus sin –  
a' gabhail rathad aithghearr  
nuair a bhiodh rathad fada na b' fheàrr  
gu cnag na cùise – an t-adhbhar  
a tha mi a' dol gu tuath thar Drochaid-rathaid Fhoirthe  
a' dèanamh 90 mìle san uair,  
Transit dubh air mo chùl,  
peilearan a' dèanamh kaleidoscop dem uinneig  
agus ann am mìrean mo thuig-  
se tha mi air impis mothachadh

nach bu chòir bàrdachd  
a bhith mar seo, bu chòir dha barrachd  
a dhèanamh le faclan: bu chòir caogadh  
sa chiad loidhne a bhith *caochladh* no *aogaidh*  
gus sealltainn gun do rinn mi mearachd,  
gun deach mi air chall nam mheadarachd.  
Agus cha bu chòir dha a bhith cho bragail  
's làn de mhuir 's *meths* 's briodail,  
's cho coma co-dhiù mu bheatha 's bhàs

mar gun  
do shlaod mi mo chorp air ais a-steach  
dhan bhalla mheatailt, agus choisich mi a-mach  
às a mharbh-lann dhan a' phàirc tarsainn an rathaid,  
agus san àite bhàrdail sin  
le 's-dòcha-iseanan mì-dheònach sna geugan  
thòisich mi a' smaoinichadh gun robh leithid a rud  
ri saorsainneachd ann mu dheireadh thall

## Redemption

*Come up and see me later* I husked, winked and schlocked  
a business card into her pocket  
(room 83 written on its back).  
And it was only the next morning when I'd blacked  
out then in and woke alone in number 44  
I realised the card was from another conference sometime before  
in which I'd tried to have a 'casual encounter'. I didn't think twice  
when she didn't make it to the *Café Nice*  
for breakfast, or when we delegates returned to our daily grounds,  
but when the emails started going round  
that she had not checked out, had missed her flight,  
and never made it home that or any other night,  
I started wondering what it was she found  
in 83, what smuggler, meth-head, scoundrel  
lurked in there.

And that, to cut  
a story shorter than I ought,  
is why I'm now doing 90 north  
across the Forth  
Road Bridge, a black anonymous  
Transit right on my tail. Bullets kaleidoscope my windaes,  
and as the wheels spin into smithereens  
I realise

this is not how poetry should be.  
Poetry should do more with words.  
*Husked* in the first line should be unhusked to show I'd erred,  
I'd given myself away, let something slip.  
No way should there be all this plot and lip  
(I need to lose the guns, the sex and meths  
and be less casual with life and death).

As if  
sliding my corpse back into the metal wall,  
I walk out of the morgue into the park  
across the road, and in that place of poetry,  
with maybe-birds reluctant on the boughs,  
think there might be redemption after all

## Tìotalan Deireannach

I

Tha an crann air oir Phàirc Holyrood  
cho trang ri cidhe, na suidheachaidhean  
ann an sreath air sreath mar bhogsaichean luingeis  
ann an cruach shealach, ann an trasnadh;  
laiste air beulaibh croit dhorch' an t-Suidhe  
tha iad nan loidhne sgàthanan air cùl an àrd-ùrlair  
far an cuireadh sèist crìoch air an cuid  
rìomhachais ro cheum a ghabhail a-mach  
dha na solais-choise. Tha gach neach-naidheachd  
san spot as fheàrr, gun ach sia troighean eatarra,  
a' phàrlamaid air an cùlaibh, a' fàs ciar  
agus glòmach. 'S e 7 uairean feasgar a th' ann.  
Tha mi a' cluinntinn, tha mi den bheachd,  
Seacais, Spàinntis, trì seòrsachan Beurla.

## II

Tha mi ann gus bruidhinn air Raidió na Gaeltachta, gus 'eòlas' a thoirt seachad ann an nàdar-de-Ghaeilge, agus beagan saorsa agam dè chanas mi: tha gach taobh aca mu thràth o BPA no seann-BhPA (Làbarach agus Nàiseantach); tha fear-naidheachd a' BhBC ann airson neo-chlaonachd. Obair freelance, beachd le saorsa na lannsa. Ach dè tha ri ràdh? Cuin' a bhios reifreann eile ann? Chan eil ann ach a bhith gàire. 'Och, ri mo linn-sa. Chan eil aon dhiubh gu leòr airson beatha sam bith.' Air an t-slighe dhachaigh, a' dol seachad air baidean bheaga fhathast ann an teismeadhan deasbaid, air an suaineadh ann am iomadh bratach, seachad air Teàrlach II, Smith, Ferguson, Alexander, Hume, chan eil mi cho cinnteach.

## III

An dèidh corra seachdain, tha an Lang Rig na òmair' loisgte 's sienna ann an dol fodha na grèine. B' urrainn seo a bhith an àite sam bith, ach chan eil. Tha na cùrsairean-gearra air ais air Suidhe Artair, a' spleuchdadh sìos air Boglach an t-Sealgair, far a bheil – am measg a' chnò-lèana agus bioran nan lusan gann – strìochan donn nan lannir a' fighe air falbh cho luath ri earb, dà bheathach cha mhòr le aon rùn. 'S dòcha gum b' urrainn dhut an t-seisg ud a bhannadh ri chèile mar shàbh no fhreagairt. Às an amharc tha na mialchoin, ann an sunnd no fearg, a' dèanamh ulfhairt.

## End Credits

### I

The rigging on the edge of Holyrood Park is busy as a dock, the positions row on row like shipping containers stacked, temporary, in transit. Lit up against the dark hump of the Seat they are a line of backstage mirrors, where a gigantic chorus line would finish applying their make-up before stepping out into the footlights. Each reporter is barely six foot apart, each in a prime spot, the parliament huddling behind them, growing dusky and indistinct. It is 7 pm. I can hear what I think is Czech, Spanish, three types of English.

### II

I'm here to talk on Radio na Gaeltachta, to give expert opinion sort of as Gaeilge, and have some freedom to what I can say: both sides are covered by MSPs or ex-MSPs (Labour and SNP); there is a BBC journalist for impartiality. A strictly freelance basis, freedom like a lanza. But what is there to say? When will there be another referendum? There's nothing for it but to laugh. 'Och, in my lifetime. One is never enough for any lifetime.' Walking home, I overhear conversations deep in huddles, still wrapped in various flags; I pass Charles II, Ferguson, Smith, Alexander, Hume on my way, and I'm not so sure.

## III

Weeks later and the Lang Rig's burnt umber and sienna as the sun sets. This could be anywhere, but isn't. The hare-courers are back on Arthur's Seat: men standing alone, shifty, squinting down on Hunter's Bog as – in amongst the marsh cinquefoil and the fewflower spikerush – brown streaks glimmer and weave off at breakneck speed, two animals almost with one thought. Perhaps one could take that sedge and bind it into a salve or answer. Somewhere in the bushes, out of sight, whippets gowl, in joy or anger.

## Un futuro en camino

An cual' thu riamh mun tè nach b' urrainn coiseachd eadar Siadar 's Borgh gun fhios aic' ainm gach glumag 's lochan 's sruthag 's eòin 's lus

Tha i fhathast air an t-slighe ach nuair a ruigeas i o nach bi againn an là dheth: lionmhorachd de bharramislein, fochann-Innseanach 's liath-truisg.

## Un futuro en camino

Have you heard tell of the girl who couldn't walk between Shader and Borge without knowing the name of each stream and ditch and bird and insect and weed

she is still on her way but when she comes oh that will be the day of plenty, of bird's foot trefoil, montbretia and fieldfares.

## Fodha

Cha mhòr g' eil cuimhn' agam dol fodha san amar-snàimh ann am Port Rìgh, air mo thàladh dhan domhainn le fleòdragain ioma-dhathte ceangailte mar phontoon, far am biodh tu a' ruith cho fad 's 's urrainn dhut: ruith 's slaighdeadh 's tuiteam.

Amar-snàimh na coimhearsnachd a bh' ann agus slaodan do-mhillte dearg, gorm 's buidhe nan strì mar phleataichean teactonaig ann an crith-thalmhainn shuarach. Cha do ruig mi an ceann thall. Mu letheach slighe a' tuiteam ann an tuaineil. Air mo tharraing on uain' uain' uain'.

Sguir.

Chan eil mi ag iarraidh na cuimhne seo. Chan eil mi ag iarraidh fleòdragain glan an donais. Tarraing suas an drochaid-thogail. Cuir ailigeutairean ann an staing na flò. Cùm aon bhàta-aigeil an-còmhnaidh fad' fad' a-mach aig mhuir.

## Under

I almost remember drowning in the pool in Portree, running in at the deep end where multi-coloured floats were laid out like a pontoon for you to brave the run, the slip, the stumble.

It was the municipal pool; red blue and yellow unsinkables, struggling like tectonic plates in an insignificant earthquake. I never made it. Tumbling off, dizzy, half way through. Being dragged out of the pale pale blue.

Stop.

I do not want this memory. I do not want these bright damn floats. Pull up the drawbridge. Put alligators in the bewildered moat. Keep one sub always far far out at sea.

'S ann à Muile a tha **Alasdair Caimbeul** bho thùs. Tha e a-nis a' fuireach ann an Slèite san Eilean Sgitheanach far a bheil e ag obair mar eadar-theangair. Bidh e cuideachd a' sgrìobhadh sgeulachdan naidheachd dhan Albannach ann an Gàidhlig.

**Alasdair Campbell** is originally from Mull. He now lives in Sleat on the Isle of Skye and works as a translator. He also contributes Gaelic news copy on a regular basis for the Scotsman.

**Maoilios Caimbeul** – Tha buinteanas aige ris an Eilean Sgitheanach agus ri Leòdhas agus tha e a' fuireach san Eilean Sgitheanach. An leabhar mu dheireadh a thàinig bhuaithe 's e nobhail airson daoine òga leis an tiotal *An Triùir agus Lùbag* (Acair, 2016) agus an cruinneachadh bàrdachd mu dheireadh Tro Chloich na Sùla (Clàr, 2014).

**Myles Campbell** has Skye and Lewis connections and lives in Skye. His latest publication is a novel for young people titled *An Triùir agus Lùbag* (Acair, 2016) and his most recent poetry collection is Tro Chloich na Sùla (Clàr, 2014).

'S ann à Eilean Chòlbhasa a tha **Mòrag Law** bho thùs ach chaidh a togail anns an Eilean Sgitheanach agus ann an Dùn Òmhain. Dheasaich agus dh'eadar-theangaich i cruinneachadh de sgrìobhaidhean a màthar anns an leabhar *Dileab Chòlbhasach/A Colonsay Legacy* (Acair, 2013) agus nochd sgeulachd ghoirid aice anns an iris ùir Ghàidhlig "Steall" o chionn ghoirid. Tha i a' fuireach ann an Siorrachd Rinn Friù.

Originally from Colonsay, **Morag Law** was brought up on Skye and in Dunoon. She has edited and translated a collection of her late mother's writings (*Dileab Chòlbhasach/A Colonsay Legacy*, Acair 2013) and has recently contributed to the new Gaelic magazine, "Steall". She lives in Renfrewshire.

'S ann às an Òban a tha **Coinneach Lindsay**. Chaidh a nobhail ghoirid do dh'inbhich òga, A' Choille Fhiadhaich, fhoillseachadh le Sandstone Press ann an 2017 agus chaidh an dealbh-chluich dà-chànanach aige, The Names of Sorrow, leughadh aig an Citizens' Theatre, Glaschu, san Dùbhlachd, 2016. Tha Coinneach ag obair aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig san Eilean Sgitheanach.

**Kenny Lindsay** is from Oban. His Gaelic novella for young adults, A' Choille Fhiadhaich, is published by Sandstone Press in 2017 and his bilingual play, The Names of Sorrow, was given a rehearsed reading at Glasgow Citizens' Theatre in December 2016. He works at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Isle of Skye.

'S ann à Leòdhas a tha **Pàdraig MacAoidh**, agus tha e a-nis a' fuireach ann an Dun Èideann, agus ag obair na òraidiche aig Oilthigh Chill Rìmhinn. Tha e air na leabhraichean *Gu Leòr / Galore* (Acair 2015) agus *Sorley MacLean* (RIISS 2010) a sgrìobhadh.

**Peter Mackay** is from Lewis originally, and now lives in Edinburgh. He is a lecturer at the University of St Andrews and is the author of *Gu Leòr / Galore* (Acair 2015) and *Sorley MacLean* (RIISS 2010).

**Alasdair Macrae** - Born in Lochcarron, taught in the Universities of Khartoum and Stirling, written widely on modern poetry including books on Yeats, MacCaig and Heaney.

**Mary Montgomery** was born in 1955 in Arivruaich, Isle of Lewis, Scotland. She has written three poetry books : *Eadar Mi 's a' Bhreug* published Coiscéim, Dublin 1988; *Ruithmean 's Neo-Rannan* published Coiscéim, Dublin 1997; *Fo Stiùir A Faire* published Coiscéim, Dublin 2012, and two Gaelic novels : *Am Baile Beag Annasach*, for children, published Acair, Stornoway 1990 and *Clann Iseabail*, for adults, published Acair, Stornoway 1993.

**Rugadh Màiri NicGumaraid** ann an 1955 ann an Àirigh a' Bhruthaich, Eilean Leòdhais. Tha i air trì leabhraichean bàrdachd a sgrìobhadh: *Eadar Mi 's a' Bhreug* foillsichte Coiscéim, Baile Àtha Cliath 1988; *Ruithmean 's Neo-Rannan* foillsichte Coiscéim, Baile Àtha Cliath 1997; *Fo Stiùir A Faire* foillsichte Coiscéim, Baile Àtha Cliath 2012, agus dà nobhail Gàidhlig: *Am Baile Beag Annasach*, do chloinn, foillsichte Acair, Steòrnabhagh 1990 agus *Clann Iseabail*, do inbhich, foillsichte Acair, Steòrnabhagh 1993.

## Dàin le Alasdair Caimbeul

### A' Chuairt

Thòisich i le sùil aighearach is cheasnachail  
Le ceum socair a dhèanadh dannsa,  
Thàinig làmhnan le chèile  
A rinn cearcall maoth is maireannach.

Air slighe chorrach, dhìreach  
Rinn sinn dìreadh is teàrnadh,  
A' siubhal nam mìltean  
Dà anam nan aonadh.

Do bhòidhchead mar reul dhomh  
A' stiùireadh mo chùrsa,  
Fo bhraighdeanas gaoil  
Thàinig tuisge is sìth dhomh.

Air dhuinn tilleadh bhon chuairt  
Thòisich turas nach crìochnaich,  
Eadar gealach is grian  
Tha ar sgeulachd ri innse.

'S tu mo bhunait is m' iùl  
A bheir ciall is ceòl dhomh,  
Tha thu suainte nam chridhe  
Ann am buillean mo chuisle.

Gach smaoin a th' agam  
Air a dathadh le iongnadh,  
Gach mìr dhìom daonnan  
Gad shireadh le miann.

'S tu rùn mo shaoghail-sa  
Tùs is tobar mo dhàin,  
Cha triall mi às d' aonais  
Cha b' fhiach e le cridhe sgàint'.

### Cearcall

Cruinn, coileanta agus gun chrìoch  
Gar ceangal is gar cuairteachadh:  
Bann dealrach ar gaoil,  
Na ghealach is na ghrian  
Thar miann is thar cèille  
Gar suaineadh nar caran as buaine.  
Gach lùb is cuairteag nam mìorbhail  
Ann an cuairt ar beatha.

Bhrìst an loidhne, cho dìreach is daingeann,  
'S chaidh a cumadh na fàinne dhrithleannaich,  
A nì iolach bho a meadhan is a shadas sradagan lasrach gach taobh  
A chuireas turlach nar broinn ann an dubh na h-oidhche.

Mun iadh oirnn,  
Timcheall is timcheall:  
Beò-luinneag a' dannsa is a' dol  
Mar chiad phòig nach crìon  
Na chròilean gar dìon.  
An cearcall.

### Dealán-dè san Dàmhair

Air sgèith fo ghrian an fhoghair  
Do sgiathan dorcha dubh san t-soilleireachd  
Siùbhlaiche an t-samhraidh a' dannsa os cionn raineach crìon  
A' cur car san iarmailt is ri mire neo-rianail is grinn  
A' snìomh is a' lùbadh, a' cur ràithean is reachd bun-os-cionn

Do fhùraichean air seargadh is brat dhuilleagan a' feitheamh riut  
Saoghal blàth ach marbh a' toirt dachaigh dhan t-seachranach  
A sheòlas tron adhar a' sireadh companach is càirdeas  
Àrainneachd nach mùth is nach crom fo thruailleachd is sannt

Mar fhaileas san uaimh tha thu nad shanas air solas  
Grian a thig san Dàmhair le luimneachd fo a rian  
'S e a gathan a dhùisg thu ann am beul a' gheamhraidh  
Do bhòidhchead air a caitheamh mar ìobairt gun fheum  
Aig àm cadail is dùbhlachd, 's ann a dh'èirich thu fhèin

And so I move on, to dip a toe up the strath in these far-famed waters.

...

In the Broch Pool, flecks of white froth whirl over peat-brown and treacle-brown and near-black water. Slabs of dun-coloured stone reflect ripples beneath the flow. There's a shadow on one that seems shaped, incredibly, like a salmon, nose upstream, body ruffled with the onrush.

....

A single dipper dives down from a stone in midstream to pluck a morsel from the river bed; a caddis fly larva, perhaps, now held briefly aloft as the bird bobs back on the boulder.

...

Above where a main tributary runs in to meet the left bank of Dunbeath Water, the footings of a broch Neil Gunn describes overlook the river. Its remaining grey drystone was built in the Iron Age, maybe two millennia ago. In the inner chamber, Kenn felt that 'time's fingers' could touch him in an instant, sensed something of those who had come before. Today, I marvel at the masonry and ponder my own Caithness ancestry, but feel nothing but the wind.

...

On a low cliff beneath the broch, wafered layers of rock rise above the riverside path. They're crumbling at the edges; a stone book seen end-on, pages locked in tight crenellations. Part of the Berriedale Sandstone Formation, says my geology app. So from the middle of the Devonian, I realize as I walk on: 'The Age of Fish' when the ancestors of all backboned creatures began to walk on land. More than 360 million years ago. Time's fingers made superhuman.

...

Beneath a slope grizzled with winter branches of hazels and birches, a buzzard glides over abandoned farm buildings. Each dyke, each enclosure here is covered in grey and white and charcoal tones of lichens. One lichen is a hand's-span across. It could be centuries old. I reach out and feel the roughness of plant on rock. I'd expected it to be cold to the touch. It's not. There's a warmth, like the feel of wrinkled skin.

...

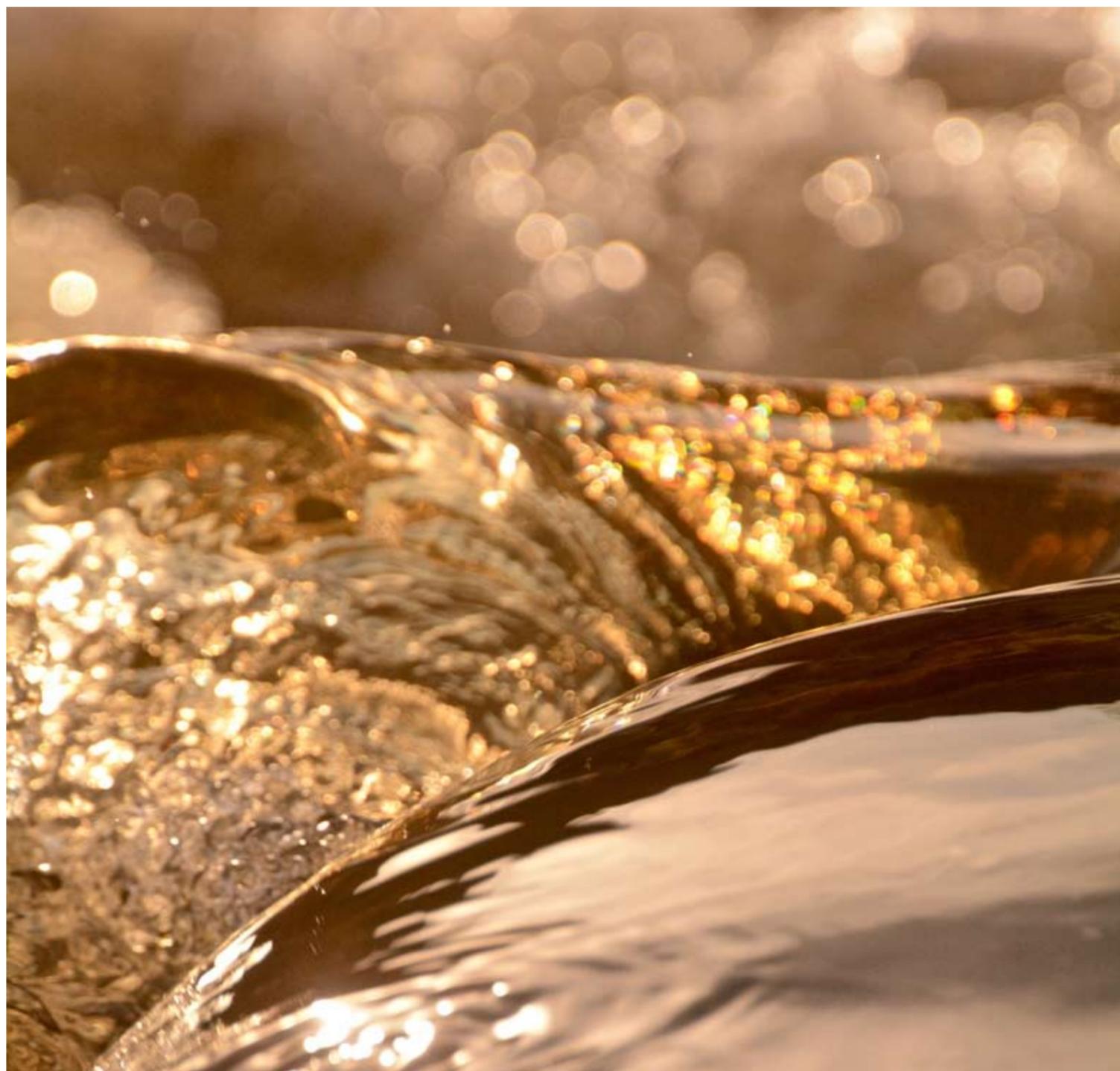
The gorge beyond a narrow bridge is a surprise, its walls rising like a giant portal. It marks the divide between the intimacy of the strath and the uplands beyond, where Neolithic stones point skyward from the crest of a low hill. The Prisoner's Leap, this place is called, named for an Ian MacCormack Gunn, who was offered freedom by his captors if he could jump the divide. He did so, empowered - says the story - by a diet of hind's milk as an infant.

....

A tall tale, but with mythic resonance. A Gunn who jumped, and in that leap, found life. I look down, far down, to where the waters are now dark in dusk light, then over to the moors and boglands where the river is said to have its source. Sleet is slanting in from the sea and I need to retreat.

I'll come back some other day, maybe when the salmon have returned. Read more. Go further. Plunge in.

This is the beginning.



SCOURED BY THE prevailing easterly, the house and outbuildings huddle together, conserving what little warmth they possess. Westwards, land farmed by six generations of Elricks stretches to bleak hills that cower before the wind's merciless erosion. Towards the coast, identical fields end abruptly where a line of sullen grey is distinguished from the sky by a solitary cargo ship. In an inland field, a man whistles and a collie joins her sister, who is facing down a cow that refuses to be led to water. Black as the devil's Sunday-suit, the short-horned beast dwarves its harassers but, once outnumbered, capitulates and heads for the treeless burn side where the pasture peters out into marsh to join the rest of the herd.

A lapwing calls from the end of the field but the man sees its mate rise and walks over, ignoring the parents' frantic screams. Like fragile arrow-heads, four curiously-pointed eggs lie in a hollow, scraped in the drier vegetation beyond the wild-cotton. Their buff shells, speckled with burnet, are unmistakable, but you could tread within inches of a nest without noticing. Years ago, when great flocks nested here, his mother had fried the eggs for supper. The gelatinous transparency of their whites had made his gorge rise but he'd been made to eat them and had ended relishing them. Now he almost stoops, almost scoops them into his pocket, but they've hens' eggs enough. He whistles his dogs into the next field and the birds' cries grow calmer. They think their diversion has worked. The man looks back as one lands, not too close to the nest, and stalks over to its eggs, imagining itself unseen.

In the kitchen, Elsa scrubs the stone flags as she does every morning, like Ma before her. These days they seem to become muddied again before they've dried. Elsa thinks Da used to take his boots off when he came in for his bit snap. She can't be sure for that life has faded. It's a story she tells herself: that Ma had something tasty waiting for her when she got off the school bus, that Da asked about her lessons, that a cuddle was commonplace. Once she asked him to wipe his feet on the way in and he skelped her and told her she'd get worse if she ever back-jawed him again. Maybe she's too old to skelp now, at twenty-seven.

At half-past-eleven, just as the battered aluminium kettle whistles, he comes in, clarting muck over her clean floor. He sits by the stove and waits while she fetches the tea, cheese and girdle-scones. 'Nothing hot?' he says. 'It's pleutered wi' rain a' morning.'

But if she gives him anything else he asks if she thinks money grows on kale stalks. 'I could toast them,' she says.

He slurps a mouthful of hot tea. That throaty gurgle is his way of cooling it down. 'No,' he says. 'You've enough to do.' Fragments of food cascade down his overalls onto the floor and a scone disappears in two bites. It's been four hours since the breakfast porridge and two hours before that he was seeing to the beasts. At sixty-three he shouldn't be running the farm on his own but he has no son and the days when the price of barley let you hire a man are long gone. Still the Elricks have always been long-lived, scrawny but strong, and if you keep moving you don't rust. Unconsciously he straightens up, looking around as if he's just noticed the room. 'No,' he says, 'You'll never keep a house like yer

mother.' The brasses on the dresser are still polished weekly but when the vase broke it was never replaced. So, though Elsa keeps up Ma's border by the front path, there are never flowers in the house. Still, the table is scrubbed daily and the stove is always on by the time he comes in for breakfast. Years ago, the first time Elsa baked, he'd said her scones were better than Ma's, grinning at his wife as he smacked his lips. And Ma had flicked the tea-towel at him and they'd all laughed. Now he just eats them.

When he's gone Elsa has her mid-day meal. It's the same as his but she enjoys it more with her book. This is her favourite part of the day and, before it's time to see to the hens, she takes her walk. When the barley's ripe it's like a sea of gold whose tide is always coming in, but today claggy mud grasps at her feet. The rain is in her face as she heads for where the burn makes its way between cliffs to the narrow shore. Up along the fields the air blows empty and clean but, as she scrambles down, the metallic tang of seaweed and crumbling sandstone strengthens with each breath. At high tide the flat, slanted, rocks are submerged and even now there are pools studded with red and brown sea anemones. Her hair is in a french-plait that her fingers know so well that when the mirror broke it didn't matter. That was two years ago and Elsa's almost forgotten what she looks like. Now, as she leans over to watch a tiny green crab scabbling for cover, the heavy dark-brown end of the plait skims the water, reminding her. She runs long, sensitive fingers over her forehead, gauging the depth of those fine lines, wondering if they have deepened. Her skin is fair and fragile, like her mother's, and today, in this wind, the end of her nose will have reddened. She squints and sees it,

# Somewhere Else

SHORT STORY BY ISABEL MILES



bluish-white, tipped with rose, like her thin fingers.

Next morning as she and Da sit opposite each other, at the stove end of the long table, he pauses with his spoon half-raised. 'You'd best bake an extra bit bannock this morning,' he says. She tilts her head to one side and her eyebrows rise, reminding him of her dead mother. In a softer voice than usual he explains. 'A man's coming. To mend the byre. He'll be here for the rest of the week.'

'I thought we'd no money,' she says.

There's an edge of suspicion in her voice, and his usual tone returns, 'We've no choice. I've too much money invested in the beasts.' She nods, refilling his bowl before carrying the pot and her own bowl to the sink.

The wind is relentless but the day is dry when she goes out to lift a shaw of tatties for the dinner. The sound of singing trickles from the other side of the battered white van beside the byre, rising and falling in her ears with the pattern of the wind. She can't make out the words but the voice is deep and rounded. It stops then starts again, and she recognises it. 'Moonlight becomes you. It goes with your hair.' Ma loved Bing Crosby and the workman has a good voice, worthy of the song.

'What are you gawping at?' Her father's voice recalls her to the present and she pushes her fork into the crumbly loam. It's like magic the way potatoes appear in the ground, out of nothing. As she brushes soil from the tubers and breathes in their earthy fragrance, the unaccustomed sound of light-hearted ease continues. Walking to the compost bin with the spent shaw she sees its source. He's around her own age, but she doesn't recognise him so he must be an incomer. His round face is open and ruddy. With no break in his song, he

nods a greeting to her and continues to place the granite blocks, hard as her father's eyes watching them from the yard. She nods back and hurries round the corner, keeping close to the wall. At snap-time he refuses her bannock but comes inside to eat his sandwiches and accepts a cup of tea. Da engages him in conversation about football and Elsa wonders how Da knows that Buckie Thistle beat Elgin City last Saturday. She thinks her father likes the stranger, whose name is Ian Machar, but that night, over the skirlie and tatties, Da informs her that Machar's a left-wing layabout, and a boozier.

Next day the builder greets her cheerily as she goes past the byre to the henhouse. She learns that he lives in Portsoy with his mum, who runs the pub down by the harbour. Elsa's school bus used to pick up at Portsoy but she can't remember the pub. 'You should pop in sometime,' he says. 'I'll get you a drink on the house.' But she doesn't drink and she never goes to Portsoy. He and his mother moved down from Nairn three years ago, after his dad ran off with the district nurse. 'He had a fall at work,' he tells her. 'Only he was holding a saw at the time and his leg got caught. She came in to dress his wound. Except it turns out her speciality was undressing.' He smiles and Elsa hurries away, hoping Da isn't listening.

On the third day he tries a scone. 'Wish my mum could bake,' he says. 'All I ever get is shop-bought.'

'Lucky you can afford them,' says Da.

Ian Machar takes another bite. 'Lovely,' he says. 'Home made jam?'

'Our own rhubarb, from the garden,' she says.

'All we can afford with the price of things these days,' says Da. 'Think you'll have that roof finished this afternoon?'

'Nearly,' he says. 'A couple of hours tomorrow should do it. But I'm nearly out of slates. I've got to pick up a few extra so I won't get here till nine. Might manage a last scone before I go.' He grins at Elsa who looks away.

'Time you got a move on, our Elsa,' says Da. 'The dishes won't wash themselves.'

When Elsa comes round from the henhouse next morning he's already there, working on the roof, singing like a lintie. It's *Annie Laurie* this time. She's baked extra bannocks but he leaves before snap-time, whistling as he packs his tools away. Da inspects every edge and corner of the byre then counts notes, a bigger pile than Elsa has ever seen, into Ian Machar's hand. He crumples them into a ball and stuffs them into his back pocket like they're nothing. 'Any time you need a job doing you know where to come,' he calls, climbing into the van. Da has already turned away and Elsa hurries back inside. She peers through the pantry window as the van turns into the lane. She can't hear anything, but his lips are pursed up. She wonders what he's whistling.

After Da has eaten she makes her own meal, toasting the bannock and melting the cheese onto it. Just this once, she has an extra sugar in her tea. In the distance she can hear her father starting up the tractor. He's working in the top field this afternoon and won't be back till dinnertime. After she's swallowed the last sugary dregs she makes a bit of rumbledumps that can fry up later, with an egg, for Da's dinner. Then she clears the table and wipes down the flagstones one last time before she goes upstairs and pulls the small

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# Poetry

suitcase from under Da's bed. Ma bought that suitcase the year they went to Banff, the year the barley prices were high enough that they could afford to pay George Milnes to look after the beasts for a whole week. For years it's been full of papers and old photos and now she rakes through them till she finds the one she wants. She's standing between Ma and Da at the Aberchirder Show and they're smiling at each other over her head, each with a hand on her shoulder. She's in her kilt, for they've come to see her compete in the dancing, and they're all holding ice-creams.

While she's stacking the papers and the other photos neatly on Da's chest of drawers she notices her own birth certificate. Packing doesn't take very long: three cardigans, underwear and pyjamas, two skirts, her Sunday shoes, four blouses, one dress. On second thoughts, she'll pack her jacket too for her winter coat is too big to go in the case and she doesn't want to carry it. The photograph and birth-certificate go in her coat pocket along with her post-office savings book and what's left of that week's housekeeping. From her bedroom window she can see the top field with its fringe of gorse bushes and for a while she watches her father working away, willing a living out of the ground he grew up on, the ground he'll die on. Before catching the bus she wraps a bannock and some cheese in an old bit of newspaper and puts that in her case too. She writes a quick note, trying not to read what it says, and puts it on the table next to the rumbledumps. The dresser is looking at her accusingly and the clock's tick is reproachful.

The bus is on time. Luckily it's the dour driver who never speaks. Unluckily, Mrs Blakeney is sitting at the back. 'Fit like, Elsa?' she shouts down the bus. 'Fahr ye gane wi' that big baggie?'

'I'm fine, Mrs Blakeney,' she calls back. 'Hope your knee's a bit better?' She ignores the second question, for she doesn't know herself where she's going, and she sits at the front, well away from her neighbour. At Portsoy the bus pulls up near the harbour and she looks at the wee pub with the van parked beside it. Mrs Blakeney gets out but Elsa stays put. A girl Elsa knows from school walks past with a dog pulling her forward and two bairns taigling behind her but she doesn't glance into the bus. When it moves on Elsa is its only passenger and she moves her case to the seat opposite.

The sky has cleared and small clouds are racing westward across a sea that is the forgotten colour of her own eyes. On the edge of the waves, a flock of oyster-catchers has settled and she watches them, some stabbing at the sand with their long red beaks others poking among the rocks. One tugs out a lugworm but a bigger bird steals it. She expects the victor to gobble the prize, but the bird drops the worm in a puddle and uses its beak to swoosh the creature around before picking it up, repeating the wash cycle three times. Satisfied, it gulps the worm down. Elsa hadn't realised oyster-catchers were so pernickety and she laughs aloud. The bus driver doesn't turn round and there's no one else to hear her. All at once she is hungry and she takes out her newspaper parcel and munches soft, crumbly bannock as the road behind her lengthens. At Banff she changes buses. She is going somewhere else. ■

## The Runner

LYDIA POPOWICH

rose from the sea at dawn as sun  
funnelled across Burrigill Bay.

Her long black hair trailed a seine net  
slack from her fisherman's cap.

In the shadows of the stacks  
she bore down on the eastern shore

casting off wrack and bilge water.  
Her feet, bloodless as starfish, spiked the shingle.

The life of the sea spilled  
from her oilskins. She ran dead

ahead up the hill through meadows  
glazed with dew and sheep,

passing the busted creel boat  
aslant and hulled with bog myrtle.

Clouds frothed on the horizon  
in a herringbone breeze as she ran

to the crest  
where an old hen waited by the gate

and one wall of a ruined croft pointed  
skywards like a prayer.

## as though the sea is more

STUART MCCARTHY

as though the sea is more than just a heap  
of salt and water, it leaves us stuff.

Look here,  
there's orphaned urchins by this soleless shoe  
and a gap-toothed comb.

Also, note the assumption of Houdini's sleight of tone  
with this driftwood  
manacled to seaweed and old bunched rope.

And I love the loose stave of tideline,  
its salt-bleached, water-blunt ink staining everything,  
not so unlike a child's momentum of make-up.

So perhaps not sea bewilderment, as such,  
but lines of sea voice briefly struck on sand  
like a flint, like its flare,

the way leaf fall is tree voice  
and rockfall is stone call  
and rainfall and nightfall and footfall  
and what they leave on the floor,

rehearsed and rehearsed so it's rote,

is more than the sound of their falling

## Metamorphosis

GRAHAM FULTON

In the bleak block where I once worked,  
or pretended to work,  
the cleaning lady thought my name was Michael.  
*Good Morning Michael* she would say with a smile  
when I went to the toilet to fill a kettle  
or take a dump. Sometimes  
there was a tone of reproach  
in her voice as if she'd heard something  
about me. A rumour. A disappointment. I didn't  
have the heart to tell her  
my proper name as she patrolled  
the floor with her mop and overall.  
Her mystical clanky bucket  
like the upturned helmet of a grail-seeking knight. So,  
for a few minutes each day, I became Michael.  
The same name  
as a dead white ethnic-bending negro pop star.  
The same name as the man who plays Frank Spencer  
on BBC television.  
The bucket and the mop.  
I don't know where she got this  
erroneous information from. Maybe  
it came in a vision  
like one from a bible.  
Immaculate deception.  
I was happy to be Michael if it made her happy.  
Happy to be a better person. No need to tell the truth.  
The truth is a party trick. Lesley also said  
*Good Morning Michael* after she'd stopped  
laughing her head off, said I can be whoever I want  
to be. Michael, Graham, Graham, Michael. I could  
be a real boy. There's nothing to stop me  
if I really believe. Take this wonderful life  
by the scruff of the neck. The same name  
as an archangel. The same name as one of  
The Monkees. The one whose mother invented  
Liquid Paper. The slop of the mop.  
Monkeys and angels, identical twins.  
The angles of dangle. Hanging from branches,  
twanging harps.

# I Was Your Daughter

Jean Rafferty explores the secret poetry of Afghan Women

*My body belongs to me;  
to others its mastery.*

A CARAVAN PICKS its way slowly across the vertiginous peaks and rushing rivers of the Kabul valley. The journey is arduous and progress slow and after a while someone starts up with a chant. The lilting verse is taken up by the next person in the long straggling line, then the next, till finally it reaches the front and a new song starts to come back through the line. Perhaps the women are travelling at the back and their chant passes from one to another amidst much covert giggling. A snatch of it tantalises the last man ahead of them and he turns suspiciously, mistrusting their laughter. He knows their words might be about him or other men in the caravan. They lower their eyes, knowing if he hears their mocking words they will be beaten.

This antiphonal type of singing is, it is thought, the origin of the landays, two-line poems written by Pashtun women and shared secretly where women gather on their own. They're sung, usually to the accompaniment of a hand drum, and are mostly anonymous, because to claim authorship is to invite punishment. Many are about men, either as lovers or sons or fathers, who sell their daughters in marriage to old men or cruel men, not to the men they love.

*You sold me to an old man, father.  
May God destroy your home; I was your  
daughter.*

The tradition stretches back over thousands of years to the times when the Pashtun ethnic group came from Persia to the borderlands of what are now Afghanistan and Pakistan. The journey was dangerous and no doubt exhausting, but at least the caravans then faced no border checks, passed no deserted farms on the banks of the river, no minefields. No roadside cemeteries filled with war dead.

Penetrating the secret world of the landays at a time of war was a challenge for Eliza Griswold, the most recent collector of these poems, whose book, *I Am the Beggar of the World*, explores just a few of the tens of thousands of landays in existence. It wasn't just the practical difficulties of negotiating rugged mountainous terrain and the area she had to cover – 80 percent of the population live in rural and often remote places, many directly in war zones – but the women's fear of being seen talking to her. She often had to wear a burqa when visiting women's houses as they were scared of others seeing a Western visitor and reporting back to their husbands or the local mullahs. Gathering the landays took Griswold and photographer Seamus

Murphy into 'camps of startled nomads, rural barnyards to private homes, a muddy one-horse farm, a stark refugee wedding, and a glitzy one in a neon-lit Kabul hall.'

In a country ravaged by decades of war and turbulence, women's rights have remained in a mediaeval time warp. It is the second worst place in the world to be a woman, outdone in the horror of its misogyny and danger only by Chad. Even Iran's women, suffering under strict Islamic rule, are many times better off. In a 2011 study by Newsweek and the Daily Beast, conditions for Iranian women were scored at 50.1 out of a hundred. Those for Afghan women were scored at two.

*When sisters sit together, they always praise  
their brothers,  
When brothers sit together, they sell their sisters  
to others.*

Imprisoned physically in their blue burqas and mentally by the strictures of the Muslim religion, the women must obey their fathers, their husbands, their brothers, their sons. They're not even allowed outside the house without a male accompanying them. Less than half attend primary school and more than half are engaged or married by the age of twelve. Afghanistan has the worst maternal death rate in the world.

Given these repressive circumstances, Pashtun women's landays are a weapon of subversion, enabling them to poke fun at men, to condemn their actions, and to oppose their philosophy, all things women in the West take for granted but which are denied to women in Afghanistan.

There are twenty million Pashtun women, many of whom may be illiterate – but they're not stupid. Often they use humour, sometimes to mock men, sometimes to give a kind of ironic shrug at the contrast between their own lives and popular notions of romance. Griswold tells the story of visiting Khushai Khan squatters' village in Kabul, seeking landays. Village may perhaps be an exaggeration. The squatters' dirt structures, the ritziest of which had plastic sheeting for windows, were tucked in between ordinary homes, not a situation you can imagine being permitted in the leafy suburbs of our own capital. At first Griswold met with resistance when she asked if anyone knew any landays, but eventually an eleven year old girl came up with this teasing one:

*Come, let's leave these village idiots  
And marry Kabul men with Bollywood haircuts.*

Unlikely as it may seem, the current heartthrob in the camp was a Bollywood actor whose hair was styled into an oiled bob.

What comes across in Griswold's book is that the patterns of relationships between men and women endure no matter what cultural palimpsest is stamped upon them. Despite the arranged marriages, the forced marriages, the early marriages, Pashtun women still flirt with men and even fall in love with them. One passionate landay reads:

*Your eyes aren't eyes. They're bees.  
I can find no cure for their sting,*

while some of the very oldest poems, which have been sung for centuries, have been adapted to contemporary life.

*Slide your hand inside my bra  
Stroke a red and ripening pomegranate of  
Kandahar.*

Originally the saucy invitation was for the hand to slide inside a sleeve. The bra indicates modernity, though the comparison of a woman's breasts with fruit has remained unchanged through the centuries and across cultures, as many current websites featuring melons in the title and displaying large-breasted women attest. (It may not escape the reader's notice that the women's cultural reference is to a more realistically sized fruit than the men's.)

That realism is what strikes you about the landays. They're direct in approach, too short to allow the indulgence of flowery or overtly poetic language. Basically they're literary tweets containing only twenty-two syllables, nine in the first line and thirteen in the second. Their subjects range from love and loss to war, death, grief. These women rage at the conflict that has devastated their homes and families, at the Americans' continuing presence in their country. Although the Taliban have inflicted a cruel and punitive culture on them, they see them as the only ones willing to stand up to the US.

*When drones come, only the Taliban's sons  
are brave enough to answer them.*

The ubiquitous presence of drones in the Afghan skies, the relentless buzzing that invades the brain, drives the people of the borderlands mad and makes their response to the Americans deeply personal. Chadana, the mother of a Taliban fighter killed by a drone in the south-eastern province of Paktia in 2011, sang the following song about her son at a family wedding, where it was recorded on a mobile phone.

*My Nabi was shot down by a drone.  
May God destroy your sons, America, you  
murdered my own.*

In a country where it's estimated that

seventeen million of the twenty-five million population have mobile phones, it will be impossible to suppress women forever, no matter how rudimentary the educational system currently is. The Taliban currently control seventy provinces, their harsh regime incurring the Pashtun poets' wrath, even as many applaud them for opposing foreign forces.

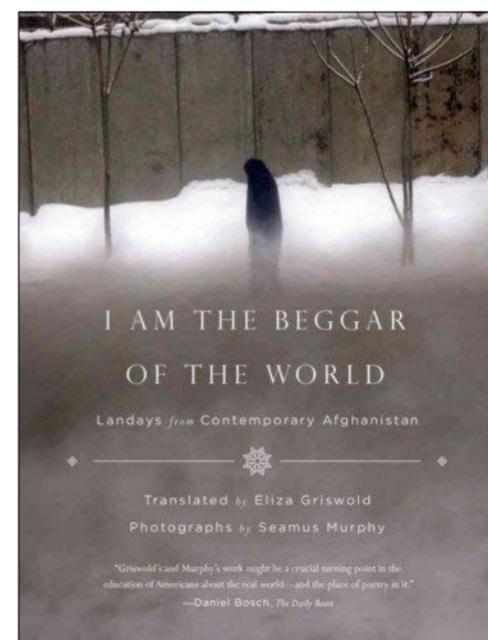
*May God destroy the Taliban and end their  
wars.  
They've made Afghan women into widows and  
whores.*

One of the Taliban's main prohibitions is, of course, against women singing. Or indeed laughing, both of which are integral to the way the women share their poems. But most of the country is ruled by the government and its allies and the most famous Pashtun woman in the world is, after all, Malala Yousafzai, shot in the head on her school bus for daring to advocate education for girls.

Malala, who won the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize and a string of other awards including the Simone de Beauvoir prize, the Anne Frank Award for Moral Courage and a place on Time's list of the 100 Most Influential People in the World, was not alone. Two other young girls were shot alongside her. Although wounded, they bravely gave information about the attackers.

*Who will you be but a brave warrior,  
you who've drunk the milk of a Pashtun  
mother?*

It is that fighting spirit that runs through the landays. The women who write them have very few forms of expression at their disposal. They have very little of anything. But they have their rage and their wit, their honesty and their sensuality. It may be possible to master their bodies but no-one can master their minds. ■



# Your Name Will Glow

POEMS BY HARRY GILES

## Vouels

*anent Rimbaud*

AA yird, EY pa, II chaak, OA gress, EU sea:  
no a chantan o atoms bit a sang o shaeds.  
AA, braad broun, poud ower weys, ower braes;  
deid haither an sharn; ploud field an soldier heid;

the muild, o coorse, the muild whaar shaeds mey thrive.  
EY, primula scotica, kent an huntid,  
ee tae grund: whan spied, celebratid.  
II, shell white, harr white, egg white, aff white:

cloud an grottie buckie, currency  
an common weal. OA, weet brae, mossy  
yowe, but nivver a tree, ach, nivver a tree.

EU, last o aa, aald surroond,  
dusty tide, in yin airt, an yin, tae Bergen  
an ferivver. An ee. Muscle o een.

## Twa Bodies Spaek on the Geological Record

aneath the standin stane  
anent the strand

a polyhedron  
o plastiglomerate

lang work  
worn light

## Armoury

She scores a line along the center of the page,  
and, careful, titles one side “reasons to stay  
alive” and then, more careful, the other “reasons  
not to die”.

She scowls at her uneven  
shelf of self-help books: there, a snake  
writhing, tail in mouth, but there, a rack  
of cudgels, shock-traps, crossbows, pretty knives,  
whittled stakes, silver, phasers, light  
sabers, and there again a case of tools,  
say ladder, wrench, valve, pump.

The salt  
and the ghou, the garlic and the vampire,  
the spear and the eyeball, bound together,  
the ghost and the priest, the handkerchief  
and the tear.

Deep breath, warm bath,  
hand, book, box-set, page, there,  
line, letter, and another, another.  
The lists grow, each entry only as empty  
as the next, and as full, the study  
half like giving up and half like winning.  
She puts her pencil down and sets it spinning

## How They Saw the City and What They Did

They imagine the city as a forest,  
sap rising rich up elevator shafts,  
secret roads in the air, something  
red and serious in the undergrowth.

The imagine the city as a raincloud,  
ready to loose grey sheets to the map  
beneath, to relax over the mountain,  
to empty itself into non-existence.

They imagine the city as a cage,  
exit routes ringing back as sure  
as any bars, citizens pacing out  
the dirt as certain as a vote.

They imagine the city as a metaphor,  
hand-picked and finely balanced,  
revealing its aptitude only at  
the rhyme of the final accounting.

They imagine the city as an army,  
growing from the dirt, squabbling  
deadly over a dull pebble, they imagine,  
and then they sow teeth.

## Take Your Partners Please

Ower mony girls, which means they dance thegither, wan tae laed  
an wan tae follae, but Miss caas the meuves to men an ladies ower  
pechan tapes, faalded airms like rulers. An the beuys haad  
thir pairtners like a pistol or a jobby, aa aswither, aa

atterie at the grace o girls wi girls. Vince likes rugby; Darren  
likes a haand on Vince's back in a clarty scrum. Darren  
birls Isla ower lowse, an Jane yokes Vince a bittie ticht,  
an Vince forgets his steps fer he's aa in a dwam cheust picturan

a cheenge: imagine if incomers cam, cam wi a clutch o beuys,  
sextuplets ages wi hissel an Darren, beuy beuy, that  
wad sweetch the ratio, richt enof, an than thay'd dance thegither,  
an aye mind on tae loodly, clearly complaen. Beuys, whit a moan.

Thir een nivver meet in the cheengan reum: no stowen  
keeks, no seelent unnerstandeen. Thay scance ilk ither's  
caafs, sclent aroon in the shouer whan the ither's turned,  
in permanent terror o bein catcht. An hou wad it feel tae be catcht?

## Dear Witches, A Charm for When You Need It

Take a burning memory, and tear  
into as many pieces as your years.  
Mix with strands of weed, pulled  
from broken pavement. Soften  
into paste with spit, piss  
or greeting: whichever is on hand.  
And with the potion write  
your true name in the place  
where you need shelter: a wall,  
a window, or, more likely, your heart.  
I cannot promise you it will work.  
I can promise your name will glow.

# Poetry

## Mormond Braes

JUDITH TAYLOR

*I'm anely aince forsaken*  
Song: "Mormond Braes"

Brucken hert:  
aabody nicht ha telt ye  
it wid come tae this

but confrontit wi a quire  
singin *I ken*  
*hou this sang ends*

ye'd hae raised yir ain tune:  
*No this ane.*  
*This is different.*

Till it wisna. Ach,  
whit wye dae we keep the auld sangs?  
They're a' the same

yaiseless  
as a warnin.  
Ye kin walla in them

mebbe, eftir the fac'.  
Ye can cry *I telt ye.*  
Fat lot o guid that iver dis.

For whit it's worth, I wish ye  
the insouciance o the ae lass  
in aa thae ballads

pittin on her goon o green  
(a forsaken token)  
no tae gae down the watterside

whaur saughs echo  
the droonin sangs  
o thir sorrofu grey reflections

but tae mak shair  
when she gangs tae toun the morn  
aa the young men know  
there's an openin in her hert.

## Paradise

SIÚN CARDEN

The old man says it's paradise,  
if only he could get this car to start.  
He's lost the name of the next town  
but knows the way the sun will set  
to the minute. It's gilding windows,  
preparing for the full 1980s cartoon  
show. There's a low fence,  
fish spines hurled across the field,  
running water, the scrape of an aeroplane.  
A gull lugs carrion towards the crash barrier  
and I climb through brittle frozen bog  
to watch wind brush the nape of the voe  
as young men throw aerosol cans  
into a small fire.

## The Hedgehog

STEWART SANDERSON

A hedgehog's eye glints briefly under ferns  
across which a detective shines his torch.  
Inside the house, a hob's blue ring still burns.  
Forensics have just started on the porch.  
Prickling, the little creature backs away  
into the deeper dark. Soon uniform  
close off the road. Before the break of day  
the hedgehog sleeps in compost, safe and warm.

That morning the police make their appeal.  
Meanwhile, the only witness slumbers on  
snug in her nest of leaves and apple peel.  
Untroubled by the things she has seen done  
the hedgehog doesn't even wonder how  
she's going to find a bowl of cat food now.

## A9: October 27th: 2016.

DONALD MACARTHUR KER

I killed a Deer on Saturday night:  
She seemed to fall down from the sky.  
Just before my windscreen smashed apart  
we looked into each other's living eyes.

Twenty yards back from my wrecked van,  
her eyes were clouded, empty, dead:  
Plastic, glass, blood, darkness, rain:  
The road I would have travelled still ahead.

1966: A London railway platform:  
I left you, said: I'll be back soon.  
I know nothing of you since I broke that promise:  
Whether you've lived fifty years, or none.

## Hunting for pebbles in a time of sickness

FLORA SINCLAIR

Today, it seemed by chance,  
I went looking for the whitest,

boot heels slithering on a scree  
of sea-polished duns, rusts, greys.

The first was almost heart-shaped,  
porous as bleached sand

but turned in my palm  
it became triangular.

Then a rough plug, like chewed gum  
filigreed with ancient trails

of creatures that once nosed blindly  
through their glut of chalky ooze.

The palest of all was glacial,  
a fleck of packed ice chiselled out

and tumbled onto that western shore  
among the matted weed .

I carried the largest home,  
two handfuls, like split bone.

On the path, a young guillemot  
in crucifixion pose.

Its breast, never white,  
leathering on the stones,

beak glued tight and slow flies  
dizzying round the slack belly.

You said the rock was calcite,  
but I think you didn't know,

it's weight and random angles  
unwelcome.

HE SHOULD HAVE been out there. Instead, he lay on the sand and listened, a hat splayed over his face. Every few minutes the cry went up along the strip of beach, all the children plunging eagerly into their terror.

Jellyfish!

The thrash of water, a dozen kids crashing out of the shallows. The sun was a sleeve of heat.

He could hear Billy slapping at the wet sand with his spade, his castle doused in carried water. Muriel was keeping him occupied, and over and above the sound of the screaming children was the sound of his son's laughter. He rolled onto his front and gazed at the white day, the beach stacked from promenade to tide with bodies, all the families and couples spread out amongst their towels and coolers by the slack purple sails of windbreaks. At the water's edge there was a group of young men, all taking turns with a foot pump to inflate a two-person kayak. He heard the hollow pop of a struck volleyball, the percussive hiss of an opened beer can. A day like this, the children thinning out the ranks of the creatures in the tide, could make you forget who you were.

They wouldn't sting. Blues, or moons maybe - a swatch of thread unravelling, a blister and a stream of lace. He dozed along a narrow line of sleep and thought of all the creatures in the sea, the hard properties of waves.

Later, his curiosity took him to the water. He stood with two cold rings of steel around his ankles while Billy gambolled with his bucket, waist-deep, and further up the beach the other children were stalking and shovelling up the jellyfish, slinging them out to sea or in great sweeping arcs into the faces of each other. He watched the light catch at the petrol-iridescence, a sheen of blue and purple, and behind the translucent domes those clustered gonads palely glowing like handfuls of peeled grapes. One whipped through the air ahead of him and shattered in a wheel of tentacle and brain.

Like brains themselves, he thought, disembodied, ganglia trailing down to tangle with the nerves of spine. They didn't have the strength to fight the tide. He could see now that they were being dragged in to shore. Some were beached already, prey to all the boys with spades and rakes. He looked carefully at the ones still in water, still held and made whole, the rumours of their organs, those whispers of heart and lungs and nervous systems. There was no hint of their colour in there, they faded into the liquid that surrounded them. He was hypnotised by that pulse and flex, the strings of their stingers drawn out behind them, soft white threads.

Lion's Mane. By the Wind Sailor. Portuguese Man-o-War ...

He stared at the spread of water, the vast shelf of sea ever trundling in towards them, feeling something like the echo of a panic. The kayak was further out to sea now, circling gracefully the orange distance buoy a hundred yards offshore.

Muriel was standing by him, arms folded. She swayed against the soft tug of the tide and watched their son.

Why don't you go in with him, show him a couple of lengths. Breast stroke, crawl ...

Lengths? Of the whole beach?

# The Immortal Jellyfish

SHORT STORY BY RICHARD W. STRACHAN



I didn't mean it literally.

He pointed to the jellyfish, massing beyond the hump of wave.

Something woven about them, she said. Like lace doilies. But they wouldn't sting, would they?

He went to go back to his towel. Muriel said:

If you're just going to lie there you may as well do something useful. Take the boy for an ice cream, at least.

Behind him came again the cry of - Jellyfish! The inevitable stampede.

Outwardly such solid things. Inside, nothing.

With Billy he picked his way through the bodies up to the promenade. He could smell grease and cooking oil, the sharp snap of candy-floss. Billy's hand was small and moist in his own. Tables on the pavement, people sitting drinking beer, the cold water trickling down the sides of their glasses.

You don't go in the water daddy, the boy said.

No, he said.

Can't you swim?

I can swim.

Then why don't you swim?

There was an accident, he said. And now I don't swim.

The sun was fierce; he had been motionless in it for too long. He felt half asleep. He took Billy up past the arcades and the cafés, searching for the outsized, head-high model of an ice cream cone he was sure they had passed on their way down to the sand. The boy was telling him about his castles. He pictured him shovelling sand into the right positions. He looked down and saw Muriel's face looking back at him, her eyes, some shadow of his own bemused reflection when he confronted it in the mirror every morning.

They walked on and Billy asked if he could go back into the water when they returned. Earlier, he had pointed with amazement at the semi-pro swimmers sporting in their wetsuits, like seals cutting effortlessly through the deeper water. He said, No, although the boy could swim. He had made sure. Then he said he would get his mother to go in with him, and they'd see.

The ice cream cone was on the corner, taller than him. He rattled the change in his pocket. The queue was long but moved quickly. He gazed without seeing at the spread of beach, the patchwork of towels and bodies,

young men strutting past all the half-naked girls, diving for the frisbee's spinning disc. To be fearless in all things ...

Then the picture of the world had a black border and he was bracing himself against the wall, shaking his head. He reeled round to find the boy, although he was still holding his hand. Billy was looking up at him. They were at the front of the queue, inside the café now. He hadn't noticed. His vision cleared, and he stared blankly at the display, at the sweating woman behind the counter with the red strands of her hair drifting like bloody webs across her forehead, moving in the fan's slow current.

Two, he said, nodding to her prompts, handing over the money and collecting the cones.

As he turned to go, his elbow, as slowly and emphatically as if he had meant it, knocked the blob of ice cream from the cone of the little girl who had just been served before him. She started crying. He said something like, For God's sake ... , but more at his own clumsiness, and then the girl's father was standing in front of him. He couldn't think of the words, how to apologise. It was like a different language. He smiled and tried to push past with Billy, but the other man was shouting now and when they were outside on the promenade he distinctly heard someone say, with great disdain:

Drunk ...

He handed both cones to Billy, who took them and leaned against the wall with a red face, the plastic gleam of water in his eyes, then he was sitting down on the pavement with all the breath knocked from him, hollow as a cardboard tube.

The other man, the girl's father, was standing over him glazed with anger. Billy was crying. He felt almost as if he was going to start crying too. He needed air. He seemed to see the whole beach as nothing but an empty strip of sand, all the people gone from it and only him remaining to walk the burned dead length of it, forever.

When he tried to get up he found that he had sat down on a moist pat of chewing gum, a thin string of it still connecting him to the ground, infinitely elastic, wavering in the lightness of the breeze like the feelers of those teeming jellyfish inside the sea.

Muriel was lying down on the towel, sunglasses on. Half the ice cream had melted before they'd had the chance to eat it. Billy scampered off to wash his sticky hands in the waves.

The tide had crept in closer while they'd been away. It rustled at Muriel's feet, but would come no closer now. He could hear the cry of all the children.

He wants to swim later, he said. Proper swimming.

You could take him?

I can't, he said.

He couldn't tell if her eyes were open or closed behind the sunglasses.

I can't, he said again, and with such finality that she didn't press the point. Maybe next year, he said. I promise. It'll be different next year.

Billy looked happy in the shallows. He could see the group of lads with the inflatable kayak further down the shore. They had dragged it in from the water and were now attending to the beer in their ice-box.



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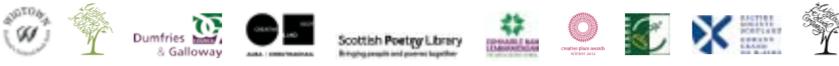
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He stood near Billy, the coldness of the seawater clearing his head. Just beyond him he could see a pair of moons buckling in the tide. They could barely move through it. Survive or die on a whim of the waves.

He knew that they would be spawning further off shore, that weird science-fictional process of fission. Everything that goes on under the surface, invisible, you'd never dream the half of it. Some of them could split like cells, or would jettison a little polyp, genetically exact. Hard to have sympathy for such things, too exposed, too weird, an affront to our blood. He looked at the ones nearest him, their bells billowing and contracting. And did they feel diminished by it, that process? Or enhanced, doubled? There wasn't enough there to feel. Not even cursed with the knowledge that they live at all.

He put his hand to his face. He could feel the muscle of the water gently testing its strength beneath the skin of the waves. The sensation of being in the grip of something, implacable, remorseless. He thought of the man pushing him to the ground, how, even if he had felt himself in the right, he couldn't have fought back. He had crawled away, saying nothing. And that chewing gum. Ridiculous, absurd ...

He turned and walked down to the young men and their ice box, kicking his way through the shallows. They looked up as he came near.

How does it handle? he said. He pointed at the kayak.

They all looked at each other, grinning. He thought they were making fun of him and felt the sweat prickle on his forehead, but then he realised that they didn't fully understand, that they didn't speak the language. One of them, lean and black-haired, and still pale even under this sun, spoke enough English to get the message.

Good, yes, he said. Easier than you think! And quick.

Could I borrow it? He pointed down the beach. For my son, and me. Come on, he said. Where else would I go?

The dark-haired one showed a clean row of teeth, and after a rapid consultation with his friends took him over to the kayak. He dragged the weightless thing down to the water and handed over the double-bladed paddle, military grade in khaki plastic.

He went back along through the shallows, not meeting anyone's eye, pulling the kayak behind him. No one was watching. No one cared.

Billy stood up as he approached. The kayak was so light he had to check he was still holding it. He looked at the sea and seemed to feel again the last time he had done this, the great outcrop of water collapsing on top of him, an avalanche that came from nowhere and tumbled him to the deep, then gave him

up as if he was not worth even a fraction of the effort. Such unruly indifference.

Muriel was asleep. He picked Billy up and tried to place him in the back seat of the kayak, but the thing scooted away ahead of him. He put the boy back down and waded in after it, dragging it back, holding it steady so Billy could climb inside. He took up the paddle and clambered in the front. Well, this was it.

It was more difficult with the paddle than he thought it would be, and it took him a few exploratory swings before he got the rhythm right. Then they picked up speed; it was remarkable how quickly they reached the deeper waters.

What are we doing daddy? came the helium voice behind him.

Sailing, he said. Rowing, I mean. Isn't it fun?

No more than half an inch of plastic beneath them, if that, and at the side of the boat little licks of water swimming up to wet his legs. The swells moved in contradictory ways, arguing with each other.

He hammered on with the paddle until the sweat was running down his face, alert now to the sensation of paralysis, deadlocked on the tide, as if he was expending all his energy just to stay in the same place. But then the orange buoy was there in front of them, bobbing and chucking on the water, bright and luminous and fringed with a ragged ruff

of seaweed. He slapped it with his hand as he circled round. Billy laughed behind him. The boy was shrieking, delighted with his fear.

As he manoeuvred round the buoy, trying to take the circuit without the boat overturning, he glanced down into the water and there they were beneath them, wobbling in the interplay of light, refracted almost by the swinging geometry of the water, hundreds, thousands of jellyfish. They skimmed along, insubstantial things that looked projected on a screen, so limpid and glassy were their bodies' silk structures, the white domes and hanging webs beneath them. No more than a foot between each, stacked in rows, spread in columns, all pushed and pulled towards the rumoured land that would destroy them, not even conscious enough to know the weight of their trouble. He reached down and passed his hand through them. A sudden stab in his fingers.

Ahead was the long water, broad and deep. He looked back to sand, the dotted shelf of beach, static, and with all those bodies laid across it like the aftermath of a failed invasion. The distance buoy clipped the boat's tail. He lifted the paddle from the water and listened, and from the shallows thought he could hear the raised cry of all the children crashing from the sea, laughing, running from those animal tides. ■

## I want a viking funeral

CHRIS BOYLAND

I want a viking funeral. Dress me in my Sunday best and lay me out in a longboat, with a dragon prow and crimson sail - not a full-size longboat, you understand (I'm realistic about these things), but something bigger than a rowing boat and smaller than a yacht.

I want a viking funeral, I want you - you who used to be my lover, you who were my friends, you who are strangers and not quite sure what you're doing here but, what the hell? - I want you to lay firewood beneath me and plenty of paper, the books I loved, the poems I wrote, crumple them up and stuff them beneath and between the planks and lengths of two by four and douse the lot in paraffin so it's sure to burn.

I want a viking funeral. Do it how you want, just light the fire and launch the boat and let the river catch me, carry me, while the flames leap and laugh and my pyre blazes up a rope of angry smoke into the sky. I don't want ceremony or words, words, words - some Minister I've never met muttering the grace over my coffin, while wondering what he'll have for tea - I want this to be my eulogy.

I want a viking funeral. I have never spilled my guts, I am not Mishima, I have never lit up rooms, or blazed with righteous love or passionate anger or truth so evident you can see it for miles, like the refinery at Grangemouth, spewing oily fire into the sky. I want to die like I have never lived in candescences of dancing flames, in one wholly selfish holy act. In my end, I want to be what I have never been in life - rebellious, spontaneous, a little mad and wholly free.

## The Story of Plants

KATE HENDRY

Walking by Loch Dughaill, the summer the bridge is swept away,  
Dad teaches me three heathers; bell, cross-leaved, ling.

He tells the silent dramas of plants: Sundew eats insects.  
Cotton grass heals the wounds of war. Moss turns to peat.

After stories, he walks ahead, jangling his pocket change,  
stopping only at the sheep fank's rusty gate to talk to the crofter.

I walk through bracken. Where the hill starts, I find bilberries  
hiding under ling. Juice stains my fingertips, lips and tongue.

I take home a holiday scrapbook of Sellotaped stems of heather.  
Flowers crumble, settle where the pages join. My train rattles south.

# The Music of Weather

Lesley Harrison reflects on her time at The Nes Artists' Residency, Skagaströnd, Iceland. December 2016

THE BAY AT Skagaströnd is around two miles from end to end, and tilted slightly south, which saves it from the worst of the weather coming off the Greenland Sea. Around the harbour and the flat curve of the bay are small piles of discarded metal – local collections of cars, pipes, gates, chains, corrugated roofs, antennas, steel mesh, trailers, all rusting into the ground. The wind thrums and siffles through them, setting up odd drones and whines that alter in pitch as the wind swings round.

The effect is of walking through an orchestra where the players sit out of earshot of each other; or very far apart, responding to each other in a slow back and forth, or following on, like a Gaelic psalm. Chords are fragmented and delayed or entirely deconstructed, so that each note exists on its own, and is held as long as each long breath of wind. Through this runs the white noise of air over water, or air over grass, an acoustic friction that binds the whole together. When the wind drops, the resonance lingers, like the pause when an orchestra stops playing, or the charged attentiveness just before it begins.

This is a landscape where silences are textured. All surfaces are tactile, often porous, distorting the movement of air. The profound scale of weather systems coming in off the Greenland sea – the giant, hysterical storms and the days of multidirectional water flow ('rain' is too weak a word) – all wear the landscape down to its bare matter.

Scotland is a heavily 'written' country. Our bookshelves are stuffed with Samuel Boswell, Nan Shepherd, Erik Linklater and so on, all of whom create the place that we then go off to 'discover' for ourselves. The Northlink ferry to Stromness has phrases from *Greenvoe* etched in glass partitions in the lounge, preparing travellers for disembarkation into the world of the story. As a booky type, this is something I relish – I imagine myself as an extra character in the plot. But it is hard to get a feel for a place when your pre-reading is in translation, so that single authors appear to have multiple voices, and when key parts of the narrative are missing.

This is one of the themes of the Halldór Laxness novel *Under the Glacier* (translated/retold by Magnus Magnusson), a novel which in many ways matches the themes and trajectory of *Greenvoe*. Here the male inhabitants of a small town anticipate the advent of Úrsula, a woman with whom each is in love, who is/has been married to at least one of them, and whom they hope to resurrect from a corpse on the glacier. When she at last arrives, now aged fifty-two and 'comely', she is marvellous in their eyes. 'You know I am hunted for my skin,' she says.

'There is an incongruity of people from remote islands', says Embi the narrator, 'which consists of being unequal in size and shape to all objects around them'. Like all small, isolated communities, the town of Glacier seems to exist in a timeless state, and



Photo by Lesley Harrison

the outward projections of each character's imagination become more real than reality itself. The delusion (or power) of wish-fulfilment provides the humour of the novel, along with its fabulous resolution.

This is also a novel about time. The town of Glacier, like *Greenvoe*, is timeless and weatherless – perpetually sunny in a northern cool/warm kind of way. There are the cycles of day and night, and of seasonal migration. There is geological time in the building and weathering of landscape. There is human aging – are we the same person as we were thirty years ago? And there is the narrative time of the story, where no-ones ages and nothing changes unless the story requires it. 'I'm simply here,' says Hallþóra the housekeeper.

Read in situ, the novel becomes strangely multisensory – not just in the vivid moments of recognition, but in what it leaves out. In Glacier it is eternally bright and chilly, but not uncomfortably so. But the Icelandic landscape is porous: you are not just walking 'in', but walking 'through'. It is also a conscious process. To walk is to constantly be reminded of the fact that you are walking – by the rivers of cold air streaming off the mountain, by the shock of sudden, concentrated colours and smells, by the huge raindrops landing seconds apart like spoonfuls of water.

For me, this hyper-consciousness was further complicated by the brief December twilight. Days passed in drowsy suspension. Fishing boats came and went with the weather. The town itself, largely low, wind-tight kit houses and prefabricated fish sheds, is dwarfed

into nothing by the planet-sized weather systems and the slow/sudden erosion of the mountains behind. All metaphors seemed inadequate; I became intensely conscious of how my own frames of reference, the structures and vocabulary of my own speech, belonged to a more temperate, more heavily-trodden world. The simple language of the fable and the direct, unvarnished speech of the Icelanders matched the bareness of the place. Any adornment is quickly worn off by the erosive power of landscape and weather. There is a sense of our having only slight purchase on the ground, of our systems of thinking being laid over the surface, like the lime-green moss on a lava field.

As writer-in-residence at the Nes Artists Residency, you have access to the library of the Icelandic historian who bequeathed his wide, eclectic collection to the community. The library is beautifully installed on the top floor of the Biopol offices. Biopol is a marine research station whose scientists investigate North Atlantic fish stocks, such as the lumpfish, which vanishes to inaccessible depths for much of the year, returning in Spring to make love in the shallows.

The way home from the library is past the fish market. At 1 o'clock, the catch is auctioned. By 1.30, the cod, halibut, haddock, skate, mackerel, gurnard and redfish have been sorted into big open tubs which are moved around the hangar at breakneck speed by two young guys in forklift trucks.

In the middle of the hanger, in a large

plastic crate, was a Greenland shark – a magical object, around seven feet long, a sleek unmarred creature, almost adult, its grey velvet flanks as plush as a mole. Its head was propped on the rim; its eyes had popped out in the drag to the surface and, with its eyelids closed, tail under chin, it looked strangely asleep. The driver estimated it was about 250 years old. It was impossible to tell.

What are you imposing when you 'language' a place? How do you (literally) word your thinking? There is a theory that accent matches habitat, that the subliminal, textural sounds we have absorbed over generations become the music of our speech, the sticks and stones of our language. This is the auditory imagination of Eliot and Heaney, which Heaney describes as 'the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word ... the relationship between the word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history'. How do you talk about a landscape which doesn't match your tongue?

My own writing about Iceland became experiments in articulation of sound and texture, avoiding the first person, looking for forms which precluded a narrative structure. (Even line breaks became political.) But to use any symbolic gesture, such as language, is to communicate, which takes place along a line from me to you. You always bring yourself to the party. 'Sometimes I feel it is too early to use words until the world has been created,' says the village priest. 'It's a pity we don't whistle to each other, like birds'.

At the end of *Under the Glacier*, in a beautiful fairy-tale reversal, the love-struck narrator is seduced and driven away by Úrsula in her sleek fast car to 'the end of the world', where she vanishes – if she ever existed at all.

Is it possible to step out of your world? In a bare north landscape, can we get any closer to shedding our projections, our expectations? Does it provide metaphor and context to excavate something deeper; or does it just throw into sharper relief those patterns of thought we brought with us?

Two days before the journey back to Reykjavík, it began to snow. By the time I left, there were drifts two or three feet deep, and gusts of up to 40 mph. For four hours, the driver was constantly steering into skids as the back end of the coach slid off the camber. As he aimed between the snow poles at either side of the road, the radio kept up a steady stream of old Christmas hits, all re-sung in Icelandic. It was a fittingly traumatic, surreal transition back into the world of industrial estates and queuing traffic. At last, with the amber glow of Reykjavík just visible behind the hills, we pulled over and sat in silence. Then the north-bound bus pulled up alongside, the drivers swapped over, and our old driver took the new bus back into the dark. ■

# Poetry

## Lamplighter

MARK RYAN SMITH

There were matches in the film  
last week. Matches struck in films  
often light cigarettes  
held between red lips.

Our matches didn't light a cigarette:  
they flared, lit candles  
and were blown to rumour.  
I breathe in their smoke.

Now they're on the draining board,  
one burned, one half-burned,  
their blackened stems crumbling  
into dishwater spills.

On the table your candles  
spread their warm corona.  
There are keyboard sounds in your room.  
The fire waits its turn.

## Ruantallain

FIONA RINTOUL

by day he finds things  
on this spit of rock  
shells, skulls, antlers

sits in the sea spray  
rock arch looming behind  
takes photographs  
the wind whipping his hair

★

at dusk he builds a fire  
of sun-bleached driftwood  
cooks his tea on the Trangia  
measures out his nightly dram

the sky is blue-black  
infested with stars  
he sees satellites revolving  
and the milky way

★

at dawn an oyster catcher shrieks  
he peers out the tent door  
the hills are a sooty smudge  
the sky is violet and pink

like the fragile sea shells  
he collected on the beach  
and placed in a jam jar to take home

## First Scan

AOIFE LYALL

Sketched on black craft paper,  
your landscape portrait skin  
nothing more than brushed chalk

textured by the twists  
and coils of future thoughts  
and butterflies. The brightest

marks reflect your makers' marks:  
a strong backbone, stubborn heels,  
the occasional cold shoulder.

## The Sisters and the Blowhole

SOPHIE KIRTLEY

Our land is coast, the edge,  
and the raw sea roars  
our rocks into the forms of fingers  
and broken glass  
and lightning.  
We scramble up our cliff  
and cling to the tufts of wind-matted grass  
to peer into the blowhole.

We wait loud hearted

til the sudden foam leaps  
and slaps our cheeks  
with salt water  
and we yell  
and we laugh  
and the wild wind, screeching across the white sea,  
steals the bellowed words from our  
mouths and feeds them to the waves  
and the scree and the gulls.

## Spring Being

SETH CROOK

A still adder is curled by a black rock,  
warming. She may have noticed me,  
a stilled sexton of an empty bed of beans.

We're villagers of the sun's waking manor,  
long winter, the first dry day of March:  
if I had a hat, madam, I would doff it.

## The Spring Equinox

KEVIN CAHILL

Yes, but I cannot recall  
if I am out of bed  
at my table

writing this,  
or reaching out of bed  
to the bedside paper,

and writing it down.  
Equinoctial storms:  
rain wallows in

sun wallows in  
but nothing  
makes the decision. I have

decided  
to turn in my bed.  
This way – to the year dot –

this way – to God.  
For our call in life  
is to be no one;

to not think, to not feel,  
to not desire,  
but this naught

heals as unpredictably  
as dice...and dies off.  
An unpredictable age,

face,  
rage,  
as day half-hands us its offer.

## The Coffie Houss

IAN MURRAY

Intimmers brocht out, plenishins ahint stoups  
Sterk buskin wi bauks an flet white screed that  
Spuls owre the brick an briestane waas.  
Prees o historie pourt out an sukkert,  
Abuin the saicont strippin o the fluir,  
Coursent ilk day wi the roch nip o buits.  
The houss's rote o dicht an swype that  
Maun furst be ackit out ey leys  
A scruf o cheirs along the rands.  
The furst customer skreichs thaim owre  
The skinklin sea o the tuim fluir  
As foregangers sweir ti be transportit.

Luglatchin on smaa conventiouns gies  
Swatches an plats o tartan noir, louance plans,  
Owreseers fae the office merkin aa the drauchts.  
Speik sneekin inti thochts as fingers on windaes  
Dae the same wi the social seip o braith  
As hauf-thocht scantlins ar scrattit throw.

The lave pairt-tak o pixels an trifles,  
Wi een douncuist owre howie spangs o tyme.  
An owrehing o stannart snecks o girnle breid  
Is ticht-grippit in a synthetic rowe refleckit.  
Pieces sortit wi fruit fousten as thai ee  
The gruns, sowtherins an settlins o the day.

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**Island Journeys**
**The Un-Discovered Islands**

by Malachy Tallack, illustrated Katie Scott  
Birlinn

**Love of Country, A Hebridean Journey**

by Madeleine Bunting  
Granta

**The Book of Iona, An Anthology**

edited Robert Crawford  
Birlinn

**Island on the Edge, A Life on Soay**

by Anne Cholawo  
Birlinn

**Voices Galore**

by Janice K Ross  
Twinlaw, Kirkcaldy

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 REVIEWED BY IAN STEPHEN
 

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After setting out from the Shetland of his formative upbringing, Malachy Tallack (a founding editor of the international online journal, *The Island Review*) stopped over on points of land, also traversed by the conceptual 60th parallel. That quest was well described by Mandy Haggith in this journal. Now in *Un-Discovered Islands*, he recounts a different form of travel. The hyphen in the title is everything because this study is a compendium of Islands once thought to exist and even plotted and named on charts. One or two are still to be found on Google Earth. Some have been discounted only very recently. The writer is systematic in his approach, making such groupings as 'islands' which seem to have been errors in navigation, deliberate frauds and those which might have jutted into the air for a year or two before further volcanic action caused them to slide from 'real' to 'unreal' status. New islands were good for financing expeditions. Sponsors were motivated by their names being placed on a 'discovered' landmass.

This is a completely different type of book to *60 Degrees North* which is intensely personal in its motivation. It is an objective and finely written history of human errors or deceptions. The writing is also only a part of the work, in the same way as the same writer is a singer-songwriter and deliverer of works where the melody and the lyric have to share the load. In this case the coloured illustrations by Katie Scott are essential to the conceit of travelogue with a difference. This artist is best known for her part in the gorgeous children's book *Animalium*. The bold nature of her lines and colour, as well as the typography, further the pleasure of following undiscoveries with the same interest as if you were a child again, reading of what might lie over your own horizons. I have had the pleasure of seeing Mr Tallack lecture on his sequence of undiscoveries at *Faflan* book festival. It was informative, engaging and methodical as well as disarmingly impersonal.

Somehow the tone of the writing is similar to the deliberately flat and effective narration in both Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and the

homage paid to it by Angus Peter Campbell in *Invisible Islands* (also published by Birlinn). Strangely, the passion of the personal response to islands came, in *Faflan*, from Madeleine Bunting, in a travelogue which focuses on the social history of her selected Hebridean islands. Her study of the culture linked to these islands is often a summary and comparison of the responses of other literary travellers. Judicious quotes from the poetry of the great Lewis expressionist, Iain Crichton Smith are a welcome exception.

This is not a criticism but an attempt to describe the chosen scope of a well-written book which is also a very handsome presentation. Granta have commissioned the Guardian's native Lewis photographer, Murdo Macleod, who has provided a painterly cover-photo which is both contemporary in style and an echo of the Scottish colourist painters who were also addicted to Island-going. The writing of Ms Bunting, who has been driven to return many times, itself reveals her commitment. It has a narrative drive which sweeps you from the bizarre interior of the castle on Rum to a brisk and effective summary and comparison of the 'benefactors' Matheson and Leverhulme who both resided in a similar 'castle' overlooking Stornoway harbour.

I felt she was especially strong on her summary of Matheson and analytical on Leverhulme (*The Soap Man* of Roger

Hutchison's book with Birlinn). I also felt she was a bit light on the 'psychic researcher', Ada Goodrich-Freer in her chapter on Eriskay. That author borrowed freely from the research of Father Allan MacDonald as described in detail by a committed folklorist of the next generation, John Lorne Campbell. I felt Ms Bunting also let Charles Edward Stewart off the hook though she does describe the disastrous and brutal consequences of the 'uprising' for many of the Gaelic speaking island population. She writes wittily on how the Hanoverian and future alternatives to the Stewarts proved pretty shabby despite all the flash.

This traveller does not pretend to be an adventurer. She drives and catches ferries. She visits St Kilda by the fast, crash-bang-wallop speedboats. Her description of Village Bay is one of the most accurate I've read, in its refusal to edit out the Cold War portacabins and the concrete road. She diverts her attention to Flannan Isles when that opportunity opens up. But it is not only this book's realism which makes it so different from the unreal islands of past history or near-contemporary fiction. The book opens with an evocation of looking out to the Hebrides on childhood holidays (much like Jackie Kay's outline of her relationship with Mull). Her response remains intensely personal but she is never starry eyed. Take this description of driving the Barvas moor:

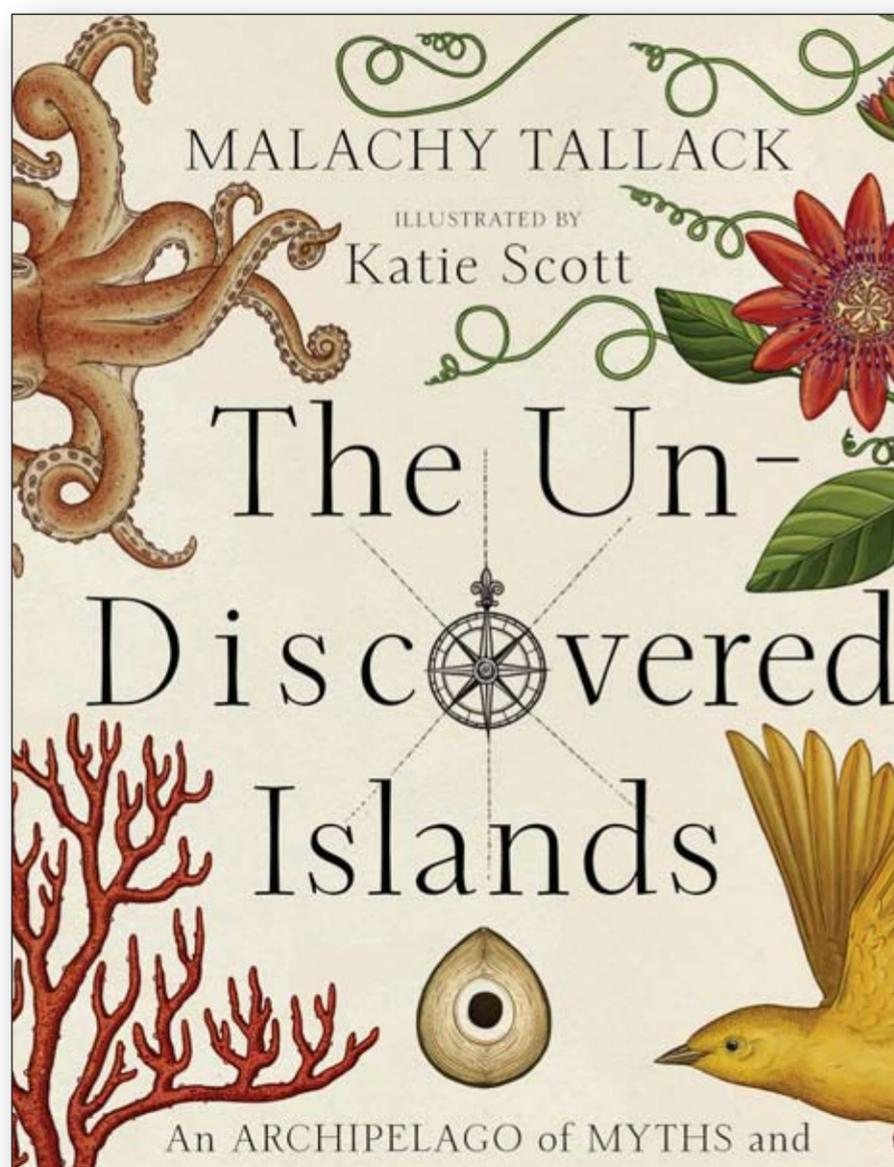
*'...on some days, grey cloud and smirr drain all contrast from the land, leaving an unmerciful bleakness.'*

And she also defers to the language of visiting poet Louis MacNeice:

*'the colour of grizzly bears or burnt toast.'*

The perspective is of a writer who sees the Hebrides as an integral part of the British Isles. She demonstrates her own respect for her subject by consistent use of Gaelic versions of place names. She grieves at the possibility of the Islands departing, with the rest of Scotland from the United Kingdom. It's an honest view, well expressed and there's feeling behind it. I did sense, here and there, that much of the author's research and conversations were within a 'bubble' of like-minded intellectual peers. But some conversations, such as those with the publisher Agnes Rennie (Director of *Acair*) did bring her into the heart of present day economic and social issues in rural communities.

Ms Bunting uses the word 'Nationalist' several times and refers to the Scottish independence debate with reference to the islands under study. I thought of writers as diverse as Neil Ascherson and James Kelman (who has family background on Lewis) outlining the distinction between 'Nationalism' and Independence'. Maybe it's



unfair but I looked in vain for the taste of chance conversation.

The scholar and poet Robert Crawford is wide in his selection of literary responses to the single landmass of Iona – maybe a wee bit too wide in including a certain Victoria’s impressions of the separate island of Staffa, even though she was Queen for a while. The book opens with Candia McWilliam’s fiction, set on the right island this time. Her writing includes a meditation on the use of the heated girdle, not just for scones but for the ‘sea-strawberry’ of squid. Poetry from both David Kinloch and Meg Bateman evoke the Colourists, strongly associated with Iona and the Ross. Though in English Ms Bateman’s verse uses refrain which evokes both monastic chants and Gaelic layers of culture. The monastic strand is strong in the book and parallel translation is used to give fair due for both Latin and Gaelic originals.

This is a handsome work, eclectic in its range of selections but of course the title is a shade provocative. It is one to dip into and return to but could only ever be ‘A book...’ of the vast range of written responses to that powerful island, as indeed the subtitle implies.

The island of Soay, in the shade of the black Cuilin ridge, is less visited. It is probably best known now for the exploits of Messrs Maxwell and Geddes in their attempt to establish a stark factory, for processing slain basking sharks, in that once-populated place. Anne Cholawo is a graphic artist by trade. She left the stresses of deadlines to live in a leaking house on an island with access only by arrangement. This is a simple, honest and detailed account of becoming one of the very few humans to remain on an island which once was home to many.

A series of programmes, ‘Barra Island Discs’, has resulted in a collection of oral accounts, edited by a schoolteacher turned volunteer radio-journalist who wisely keeps comment to the minimum. The subjects range from the reminiscence of one of the many Barra Able Seamen who became a master mariner, to those of the literary celebrity, Chris Brookmyre. It’s an entertaining collection which thankfully conveys the voices of inhabitants as well as visitors. ■

**Step by Slow Step**

By Rhoda Michael, illustrations by Julie Wyness  
Leopard Press

REVIEWED BY ANNE MACLEOD

There is a worldwide Medical Humanities movement which celebrates the work produced by those active in medical care in all its divers inter-disciplinarity; which assesses the medical interaction and its implications for empathy, ethics and understanding across the raft of social sciences; and which encourages practitioners to reflect on medicine and life with creative and scientific rigour. There have, of course, been many celebrated medical writers. William Carlos Williams and Keats are among the more pre-eminent but more recent Scottish examples of writers from the caring

professions would include Suhayl Saadi, John Glenday and Gavin Francis. Rhoda Michael, retired educational psychologist, may be seen as a worthy addition to this spectrum.

The British Psychological Society advertised a poetry competition in 2015, printing a poem ‘Language’ by one of its judges, David Sutton. The first stanza declares ‘Its maps, they say, are in our minds already:/ How else could we adventure in that country/ So sure of paths we never walked upon?’

In *Step by Slow Step* Michael maps a world multi-voiced and variegated. Its imagined inhabitants are generally unsure of direction and – most tellingly – of their own strength. She paints this world incrementally, through the stories her protagonists offer in individual and often muscular free verse. Though many of the poems are written in first person, and though the underlying question is often, as George Gunn comments on the flyleaf, one of love, it is not only in the eight-poem series ‘Songs of Ishmael’ that love will trip, confound or scar. Michael examines love and life in all its guises. At times playful, as in ‘Something Leather’, (‘Her message said she would be/wearing something leather’), or tender, as in ‘Little Girl’ (‘Little tumbling girl, tumbled into sleep/before you could wash her’) she does not shrink from the difficulties of human existence. In ‘Piano’, ‘His feet shuffle. His lungs seize in the frozen air./ He’s foraged nothing. Nothing that will burn.’; in ‘Girl Inside’, ‘Listen to her, grinding her teeth and moaning,/like the wind in an empty drain.’ And for Ishmael, at the centre of the biblical poem sequence that brings this volume to a close, there is nothing but heartbreak. ‘Abraham’s voice rejoices./ Behold him whose name is Isaac,/who shall be my first-born son.’

A natural editor – she was for many years the much-loved Poetry editor of *Northwords*, and first editor of its new phase *Northwords Now* – Rhoda Michael is clearly beguiled by the sound and sensuality of language. In ‘Snap’ she celebrates ‘Snap of ice from the tray./ Snap again in the glass./ Ice-sharp sliver of sound.’. Stop for a moment. Read that aloud. Luxuriate in the feel of each word, as Michael clearly does.

These poems are not an easy or superficial read. The precision of the language; the strength of each narrative; the crowding, distinctive voices demand time for assimilation, for thought. This handsome collection, effectively illustrated by Julie Wyness and edited by Janet Macinnes, will amply repay such effort. ■

**Crash Land**

by Doug Johnstone  
Faber & Faber

REVIEWED BY PAUL F COCKBURN

An iconic character seen in much Western literature, but especially crime noir fiction, is the femme fatale—‘the beautiful, sophisticated, seductive woman who walks into the hero’s life and turns it upside down. It’s not an archetype Doug Johnstone has used before—many of his novels have helped map out the edges of ‘domestic noir’, their focus on all-too-ordinary people whose lives are forever changed by one single, criminal act.

Nevertheless, his approach to this potential cliché is both effective and intelligent.

The ‘femme’ in question is Maddie—full name, Mrs Madeline Pierce—who steps into the life of jewellery student Finn in the departure lounge of Orkney airport. ‘Sometimes life is dramatic,’ she tells him, although neither anticipate the horrendous plane crash that leaves seven dead, three—including Finn—injured and Maddie initially unaccounted for.

Johnstone is never an author who wastes time or energy with literary throat-clearing; it’s clear from the start (to the reader, if not to the increasingly gin-addled Finn, who is our one and only point of view character throughout the novel) that Maddie is fleeing more than just the lecherous interest of some oil terminal workers. Quite quickly we realise that Finn is a somewhat self-centred character (not least shown by his lethargic lack of enthusiasm for his supposed girl-friend back at home in Dundee); Johnstone’s skill as a writer is to ensure that, even if we might not even initially like him, there is enough to hold out interest and we come to sympathise with ‘in extremis’—even though, ultimately, many of his problems could’ve been avoided by him simply thinking with his brain rather than what’s in his pants.

*Crash Land* is just as assured and sharply written as anyone familiar with Johnstone’s work would expect, though it is nevertheless something of a gear-change, given that his last few novels have been decidedly set in Scotland’s urban central belt. Here, we are once again among the kind of unforgiving rural landscapes which featured in his earlier novels, with the added isolation and sense of claustrophobia of the Northern Isles. As is his way, Johnstone drip feeds details of the Orkney landscape, and the elements which shape it, building up a disturbingly all-too-real sense of the beautiful rawness of the place and its people.

Not that Johnstone isn’t above a little literary play, by referencing arguably Orkney’s most famous author, George Mackay Brown. This isn’t just with an apposite epigraph, however, but by the delightful conceit of having Finn named by his own, now-deceased mother after one of Mackay Brown’s main characters, with Finn concerned by what that might actually mean about himself and his life. It’s neither showy nor pretentious; nevertheless, as a way of gently anchoring his novel onto the literary heritage of the island on which it is set, it simply confirms Johnstone’s lightness of touch. Johnstone has produced a gripping read which thankfully never underestimates his readers’ intelligence. ■

**Immortal Memory: Burns and the Scottish People**

By Christopher A Whatley  
John Donald, Birlinn

REVIEWED BY KIRSTY GUNN

Writing and A’That

Historians have a special way of making literature speak. By putting poetry and novels into an historical context, not only do they make those works seem more pressing and relevant to the societies they reflect, they

can show them to be prescient, too, of a sort of future national ‘self’. We need only look, for example, at recent publications around the centenary of the First World War with their examination of the lives and work of poets of that era to understand better the effect upon the psyche of wars now, from PTSD to jihadism. And any account of social change – from the outcome of the suffragette movement to the dismantling of municipal Britain – illustrated with a novel by Virginia Woolf, say, or our contemporary James Kelman, shows us much more clearly the kind of Britain we inhabit today: as gender-riven and economically divided as before the introduction of the welfare state.

So then to this timely and rousing *Immortal Memory: Burns and the Scottish People* in which one of our most important historians takes on what may be described as the ‘afterlife’ of a poet who seems to speak for the nation as fulsomely now as then. ‘Living in Scotland, it is virtually impossible to be unaware of Robert Burns’ writes Christopher Whatley in his opening pages, setting the tone for the project. The past is in the present indeed.

That word ‘seems’ holds the key, though. For this sophisticated record of a writer whose work was at all times managed by the authorities and overriding politics of the age is at once imaginative and inspirational in the way it shows how poetry and culture are in flux, with mixed motives and beginnings, and not to be tied to fixed national aims. ‘The point in relation to Burns is this’ writes Whatley, ‘He represented certain fundamental principles and ideals that had...stirred tens of thousands of his countrymen (and women). But his was a quest for liberty and a vision of greater social equality, not a party political manifesto.’

So the historian goes on to show the influence of the poet – across society engendering reading groups, self publishing initiatives, workers’ politicisation and more – a story as fractured and various as Burns’ own output. ‘If, after 1707, the grand narrative of Scottish history was harder to tell as it had been enmeshed with England’s’ writes the author of *The Scots and the Union*, republished just prior to the 2014 Referendum, ‘it was in the localities that Scotland’s history was found, recorded and resumed.’

In finely graded and textured prose, Whatley follows that local story as much as a larger one as he grafts the poet’s legacy onto a country riven by disagreement, massive industrial and economic change, along with growing awareness of its nationhood – showing how Burns was used to shore up one belief system or other in turn. There are the autodidacts, the law lords and businessmen who together and individually, in Scotland as well as South of the Border, furnished their own ambitions at Burns Supper tables. There are the councils and town planners planning extravaganzas to raise money for the great spate of Burns statue building to promote their own corners of the kingdom; there, the editors and writers, the churchmen, who created intellectual contexts in which their own interests could shine. And there too, Whatley shows us, are the weaver poets – in particular a whole group of women writers and thinkers – who would make Burns the basis of their own creative practice: First

learning poems by heart that could be sung and recited to illiterate communities around them, then going on to write their own richly engaged and emotive verse. For writers, as well as readers and scholars, learning about poets like Jeannie Paterson and Janet Hamilton, Isobel Pagan and Janet Little in a narrative of a poet all too often thought of as a man's man, belonging to another time and sensibility, is another way of bringing the Burns of 'Auld Lang Syne' bang up to date.

In all, this complex and fascinating history that 'looks' and 'listens', as its writer says, more than it ever just records and researches, asks us: 'What messages would the statues' silent voices convey?' and suggests there might be a range of answers. As we search our national psyche for signs of identity and meaning the publication of *Immortal Memory* could not be more timely. Beware the simple cries of 'Scots Wha Hae' that have been commandeered by the politicians and the nationalists, Whatley seems to be reminding us. Literature and its legacies – our imagination, after all – is far more sophisticated and multifaceted than can be summed up in the simple cry of 'Yes'. ■

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### Wait For Me, Jack

by Addison Jones  
Sandstone Press

REVIEWED BY ALISON NAPIER

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It is a while since I have encountered 'reverse chronology' in a new novel despite it having been utilised by luminaries such as Martin Amis, Iain Banks and Virgil. Hence my surprise when having read the first chapter of Addison Jones' fine new novel to find that after the initial chapter the narrative leapt immediately to the end of the tale with the two main protagonists within a whisker of death.

Each subsequent chapter then leads the reader back in time until the opening chapter is finally reached and repeated once more at the end of the book. I do hope this makes sense.

In less assured hands this could seem an annoying and unnecessary writerly gimmick. The anticipation of 'what will happen now?' is removed as we always know what has happened. What we don't know however is why and how it happened and the effect of reading is transformed into one of an anxious awareness of the future such as the loss of a child, an injury, an abrupt change of job, and waiting to learn the circumstances that led to such momentous events. So the reading becomes an exercise in patience. More than once did I resist the temptation to start the book at the end and work forwards in time.

But staying with the process and the idiosyncrasy is rewarded for we are immediately drawn into the American West Coast of the 1950s where Jacko and Billie are respectively a copy writer and a typist in Perkins Petroleum Products, San Francisco. In different ways they are each reinventing themselves and pursuing their own individualised American Dreams but as the years pass we watch the glossy sheen gradually wear thin on these dreams and the self-deceptions that are required to create the glue that might hold them in place grow ever more urgent.

Jack and Millie (even the name changes are poignant attempts at new identities) live out their long lives in a groove parallel to the lives they were sure they were destined for. Millie longs for an education and Jack is always almost writing a novel. Their children are over the years a delight, a disappointment, a mystery and, finally, their primary support system.

The novel spans the years between 1950 and 2014 and references all the major events of these 64 years. The assassinations and the brands, the television programmes and the popular music, the meal plans, the social movements (beatniks, hippies) and the slang, all are meticulously placed in their decades with a precision that avoids the self-conscious shoe-horn.

But regardless of the dodgy fashion choices and uncomfortable soft furnishings what we have here is the story of a marriage that survived, rightly or wrongly, all the turbulences of these years. It begins with cigarettes and flirting and rapidly arrives at hints of disappointment that the dream is not all it promised. Yet the loyalty that each has to the other, and to the shared history of their heroic battles and tiny triumphs, creates a bond that survives temptations, infidelities and these uniquely American decades, a period that offered so many illusions and aspirations yet held them fractionally out of reach of the 'just about managing' majority. Plus ça change.

So be assured that this, right from the finish to the very start, is a darned fine novel indeed. ■

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### Double Exposure: A Memoir

by Brian Johnstone  
Saraband

REVIEWED BY JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON

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*Double Exposure* is a memoir that focuses on two family secrets, revealed twenty years apart. After the sheltered upbringing of a private schoolboy in 1950s Edinburgh, Brian Johnstone's sense of self was challenged when he discovered that not only his father but also his mother had previous 'lives' before marriage, and that both of them had daughters: he has two half-sisters that he only finds out about in adulthood. Johnstone goes back into his own memories, as well as speaking to other relatives and researching in archives to find out more about his parents' youth. *Double Exposure* captures the slow and lasting damage that family secrets can cause. The revelations themselves are not the point of this book, and instead it is about coming to terms – or not – with the things that are revealed. This is not a linear, easy process, and it is depicted extremely well.

Johnstone is a poet, with several collections to his credit, and has been involved in organising poetry events for many years: current project *Scotia Extremis* has been featured online over the last year. His memoir reflects this literary background, and several of his previously published poems are featured in the narrative, the context adding to the meaning of the poems, while the poems enhance the memoir itself. He also makes reference to many other books and essays about memory, family, and about understanding the impetus to write

memoir, which he looked at in his own quest to understand his mother and father.

Thinking of himself as coming from 'the very model of a 50s nuclear family' which was 'perfect – in the perfect world that was settled, post-war, suburban, middle-class Scotland', Johnstone struggles with the realisation that things were not as they had seemed. He hopes for psychological understanding of his parents' choices, but has difficulty, in particular, with accepting his mother's choices. He quotes sociological studies which he has read in his attempt to understand her belief in the stigma attached to having an illegitimate child, but cannot reconcile this completely with his own attitudes, formed in the social upheaval of the 60s and 70s. This is one of the sadnesses of this book: that it is a coming-to-terms with things that cannot be altered, which are fixed in the past.

Johnstone says that he has changed some names, but it seems that at least one of the people intimately involved in this story may be unaware that this memoir has been published. There is a feeling that it is a story that is still, and may always be, incomplete, and that the exposure of these secrets has not been a cleansing experience. The heartfelt conclusion, however, is both a justification for the book and an affirmation of love's strength: 'All I want to be able to do,' Brian Johnstone says, 'is to tell both my parents how much I loved them – and how I would have loved them no less had I known what I know now.' ■

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### My Katherine Mansfield Project

by Kirsty Gunn  
Nottingham Editions

REVIEWED BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

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If you have an allergy to gushing, close your eyes now. I can think of nothing but praise for this original and exciting work. First of all, the book itself is an exquisite object. A small hard back with a grey canvas cover, there is no picture – merely some text in red and white. MY KATHERINE MANSFIELD PROJECT. Under this title: 'One has left a version of oneself at the PLACE OF DEPARTURE and it waits for us at the POINT OF RETURN – but she is not me when I get there.'

So, already, before you have even opened up the book, you are drawn into this other world with prose alone. Gunn has a distinctive style, always recognizable. She fully admits her obsession with (and therefore influence by) Mansfield – but her style is not mimicry. Gunn is herself, entirely – honest, questioning, humble, with an incisive intelligence that streaks through her sometimes meandering prose. There is composure and coherence, but there is also a compelling naturalness. And a sense that Gunn (like Mansfield) is very interested in exploring new ways to tell stories.

Also like Mansfield, Gunn is from Wellington, New Zealand, and has spent her adult life in the UK (London, Dundee and Caithness). In 2009 she was awarded a Randell Fellowship, and the opportunity to live for a season in Randell Cottage in Thorndon, very near the childhood home of Mansfield. Gunn was already an established Mansfield authority,

and intended to spend this period immersing herself further in Mansfield's world – and to respond to it with her own writing. And of course, there was the chance to experience a homecoming that Mansfield yearned for but never attained.

Rather like Mansfield's story 'Dollhouse', then, this tiny book contains realities inside realities. It is the memoir of an writer ex-pat returning to her home and recording her various ideas, feelings and epiphanies about this. It is a smattering of information about Mansfield's childhood and adolescence, told through extracts of her stories and biographical details. It is a small collection of Gunn's own stories inspired by Mansfield's stories – snippets and sketches which will not lie still on the page, and thrill the senses each time. And finally, and perhaps most vitally, with all these snippets and memories and stories taken together – it is a work concerned with the meaning of home. Not just for exiles, but for everyone. In addition to Mansfield, Gunn draws on writers such as James Woods and Said and VS Pritchett. What the concept of home means to us, and what happens to us when we move away from it. Because of course, we all move from home – even if we die in the house we were born in.

Yes, one of the reasons I am gushing is because of the obvious parallels with my own life – I am American, and increasingly find myself fascinated with the home I casually left behind. It has a strange power, and I read Gunn's book looking for light to shed on my own mysteries. I found light aplenty, and more. If Gunn had not already won Scottish Book of the Year in 2007 with *The Boy and the Sea*, I would bet on this book winning that same award in 2017. For Gunn is a master, and this book – this discourse of dislocation – is a masterpiece. ■

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### Waves

by Jared A Carnie  
Urbane Publications

REVIEWED BY GABRIELLE BARNBY

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There are many aspects of island life that will strike newcomers as unusual. There is the horizon, long and low, there are the turbulent interstitial spaces where water moves. For a visitor, all these things are moderated by state of mind and purpose.

In Carnie's novel the central character Alex has arrived at a moment in his life when the world seems utterly closed; he feels like an island. His best friend James' purpose as they travel to Lewis is to help him discover a more positive perspective.

The reader is introduced to the landscape of the Hebrides from the point of view of a naïve visitor. As Alex passes through a series of social events and experiences in the new environment his perspective does indeed begin to change. However, there were occasions when I found myself wanting more precision in Carnie's descriptions, more of the writer's interpretive eye.

The narrative itself is firmly grounded in everyday life – music and popular culture references abound. The novel exudes a sense of comfort throughout – although at times this undercuts the tension of Alex's underlying emotional state, the reader is well furnished

with musings on familiar preoccupations to carry them along.

Carnie also gives the reader a determinedly sober protagonist, strikingly opposite to many dramas exploring the same topic for a similar age group, where drinking and its consequences can frequently be used as a short-cut to emotional accessibility.

The journey of Alex's emotional change is soothed, aided and mid-wifed by the Hebridean landscape and some exceptional hospitality. Carnie's prose is fluent and well-paced, he handles social gatherings with ease and the Ceilidh is certainly a well-observed set piece. As a first time novelist he shows much promise and is sure to offer us more in the future. ■

**The Long Haul Towards Lucidity**

POETRY REVIEW BY MANDY HAGGITH

When Norman MacCaig published his second book, an Assynt friend responded with 'When are you publishing the answers?' which the poet described as 'the only critical remark that was ever any use to me', saying it started him on 'the long haul towards lucidity'. Avoidance of being 'wilfully obscure', and giving the reader the respect of clarity, seems to have become established as a key value in Scottish poetry, if a stack of eighteen recent poetry collections is anything to go by. Only one of the poets (MacGillivray) fails to go along with it – her title, *The Nine of Diamonds - Surroial Mordentless* (Bloodaxe), is indicative of the difficulty of her content, a self-consciously surreal dazzle of wordplay.

Fortunately, there are many other approachable new poetry collections. Among the best is William Letford's *Dirt* (Carcenet). The poems are experimental, virtuosic in language and texture, yet also full of heart. Love, for family and friends, is pervasive. In a prayer, addressed to 'Da', he says, 'I try to be vulnerable, so I can let that love in. I look/ for beauty in small things. Let the night sky make me/feel small.' There are laugh-out-loud funny poems, like 'The Proverbial Morning', when his lover wishes to be a panda but fears being a skunk, and tender moments, such as when his fingers trace words on a lover's skin:

If you're lucky you'll find someone whose skin  
is a canvas for the story of your life.  
Write well. Take care of the heartbeat behind it.

Hamish Whyte (*Things We Never Knew*, Shoestring Press) is another poet at the lucid summit. Watching a wasp at a keyhole, he is characteristically wry.

If this were another kind of poem  
it might be about entrances  
and exits, transience and the sting  
of life. I can't make much of it,  
except to say that probably  
the wasp didn't fit.

He doesn't write those kind of poems, yet he does catch enlightening glimpses of the world out of train windows and presents us with instants of great emotional depth (like a grandfather and child burying a pet mouse)

in a manner that seems beguilingly simple. If you too have a collection of stones gathered at significant moments, but now you've 'no idea where most of them/ are from,' this collection of poems is for you.

The most lucid of all is the much lamented Elizabeth Burns, whose exquisite pamphlet *Clay* (Wayleave) demonstrates perfectly an aesthetic of elegance and understated wisdom. This slim volume is surely the pinnacle of pottery poetry: poems about birth, life and death, treasuring and mourning. Her brief, delicate verses are encircled by the metaphor of life as a pot filled with experiences. In 'Gift' she expresses it thus.

'the bowl a small circle of sun  
which will become  
spring-light –'

Some other pamphlets demonstrate that this format is still used for some of the best poetry being published, and we don't need to look only for full, perfect bound, collections for the cream of current poetry. The loveliest to handle and most pleasurable to read from are the pamphlets made by Mariscat Press. With a bright pink cover covered in extraordinary bat faces – it sounds lurid, but it isn't at all – Jane McKie's extraordinarily titled *From The Wonder Book of Would You Believe It?* is full of wondrous contents, a menagerie of bats, insects, fish, fungi and jelly fish. This is poetry at its most playful and full of inquiry. Her descriptions are crystal sharp, fresh as hail, gorgeous as a rainbow. Spiders are 'prodigious minor saints'. A puff-ball explodes 'like a marvellous expletive'. And here is insect radio, which surely Edwin Morgan would have loved:

...your songs are the moonlight  
behind sunlight, invisible  
but bright, like words scratched  
  
in lemon juice – thrum  
of mosquito, rattle of butterfly,  
scrape of ant. The frequencies  
  
of earth, your mother  
tongue – boon boon zzzz  
zoum zoum summ summ.

Playful in a different way are Kate Tough's found and concrete poems in *tilt-shift* (Tapsalteerie). They are concocted of phrases pilfered from an eclectic mix of sources: an index of first lines of William Carlos Williams poems, American railway stations, knitting magazines, an eighteenth century lady's diary and Google auto-complete, just as examples. This is a poet who looks at the world as if down the wrong end of a telescope and finds poems in all manner of unlikely places. Many of the results are very funny.

*The Leonids*, another from Mariscat, is Isobel Dixon's nasturtium orange pamphlet, which is full of South African warmth and sunshine. The nasturtiums feature, as a symbol of the poet's mother's life, their colour echoing in a favourite tangerine dress. This is an elegiac book, both parents brought close and vivid. We are shown, with great

compassion, her mother's 'sad pharaoh face' on Skype, worrying about the cost of the call, frightened that she can't afford to hear music. This is raw and honest writing about the adult experience of becoming an orphan.

Memories of and mourning for family members is, perhaps not surprisingly, the theme of several other pamphlets. These include three from the amazingly prolific Sheena Blackhall (*The Seely Howe, Cleikum and Crossing the Bridge*, all published by Lochlands, although with distractingly poor editorial attention). One of the most successful is *Owersettin* (Tapsalteerie) authored by three poets, Maggie Rabatski, Sheila Templeton and A C Clarke, writing in response to each other's work in Gaelic, Scots and English respectively. It is interesting to observe how some seem like close translations, others varying more widely in their versions, and to wonder why.

Full collections give most poets the space to broaden their concerns beyond one theme, but sometimes a single strand can have compelling results. In *Jacob* (Shoestring Press), Carole Coates has written a verse novel from the perspective of a boy growing up in a dysfunctional post-second-world-war English family. We follow Jacob chronologically from his earliest experiences living with his extended family, to his reflections as an old man after his mother has died. Throughout his young life she is a disturbed and disturbing influence, and as he finds comfort in the park, in books and from other family members, it is impossible not to read incessantly between the lines that irrevocable emotional damage is being inflicted upon him:

he's beginning to know that  
things happen and happen again  
and become his life every day  
  
but some happen and full of terror  
remain like black rooms  
with doors opening

Three more collections deserve a mention: Vicki Husband's *This Far Back Everything Shimmers* (Vagabond Voices) brings an astronomical theme and a quirky eye to her lovely debut collection. Margaret Gillies Brown's *Ilka Spring* (diehard) follows the seasons in poems, the best of which are formally tight and elegiac. Em Strang, in *Bird-Woman* (Shearsman) includes a hilarious Brown Bear in the voice of Walt Whitman in a collection full of horses, birds and dark moments, which sometimes, to borrow one of her words, 'unwing' me.

Turning finally to anthologies, where treasures can usually be found, I am not disappointed by the triad at the bottom of my heap. *The Voyage Out* is 'An international anthology of writing, art and science' produced at the University of Dundee. Given the breadth of its remit, it hangs together surprisingly well and includes some interesting pieces by non-writers on their life journeys, the best of which is by molecular biologist Ron Hay about a life-time's study of arsenic. The stand out is Chris Arthur's spellbinding

essay 'Footnotes', beautifully written and philosophically far-reaching from its starting point of his daughter's feet. Peter Davidson's prose poems on exile and return are also gorgeous.

I was delighted to be introduced to some new names by an *Anthology of Scottish Poets* (Editura Pim) produced in Romania! Alongside well-kent writers like AC Clarke, Sally Evans, Eleanor Livingstone and Graham Fulton, there are lesser-known writers with links either to Romania or other international poetry scenes. Donald Adamson's reflections on damaged trees, which when they fall are 'noticed by their absence, sudden blue/ astonishment of sky', will send me in search of more of his poems. I liked Douglas Lipton's gorse, which 'censors the Scottish air/ with a South Sea island essence', and Angus MacMillan's remembrance of his brother dropping pan drops in church, 'midway between the fire and the brimstone' ... one of which rolled 'all the way from Mount Ararat to Gethsemane'.

The book to get before it's too late is *Whatever the Sea – Scottish Poems for Growing Older* (Polygon), a beautifully produced and uplifting selection of poems that almost makes ageing something to look forward to. Death is looked in the eye without flinching and with humour and wisdom, a few grumbles and considerable elegance of phrase, line, rhythm and rhyme. Here are some unforgettable voices from beyond the grave plus a busload of Scottish poets with free passes, none of them past it yet, and all lucid! ■

**A Message from the Board of Northwords Now**

THE BOARD WISHES to place on record our thanks to Dr. Chris Powici for the exemplary fashion in which he has edited *Northwords Now* over the past 7 years. We wish him all the best with his future projects and hope he will have more time for his own writing in follow up to his excellent *This Weight of Light*, Red Squirrel Press, 2015.

We are fortunate to have found a writer of considerable experience to take up the reins, in the shape of Dr. Kenny Taylor (www.kennytaylor.info).

We go forward with the generous support of Creative Scotland and Bord na Gaidhlig to whom we continue to be very grateful. ■

ADRIAN CLARK (CHAIR)

## CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

**Patricia Ace** is the author of *Fabulous Beast* (Freight Books). Recent work appears in *Umbrellas of Edinburgh* (Freight Books, 2016) and *Writing Motherhood* (Seren, 2017).

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

**William Bonar** was shortlisted in 2015 for a New Writers Award. His award winning pamphlet, *Offering*, is available at [www.redsqirrelpress.com](http://www.redsqirrelpress.com)

**Chris Boyland** lives in Central Scotland. He is a published poet – most recently in, *Aiblins: New Scottish Political Poetry*, available from Luath Press.

**Kevin Cahill** is from Cork City. His poems have previously appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*. He is seeking a publisher for his first full collection.

**Siún Carden** comes from County Down and lives in Shetland, where she is a research fellow in UHI's Centre for Rural Creativity.

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

**James Clarke** is a Lancashire writer. He is a recent graduate of the Manchester Writing School, where he wrote his first novel.

**Paul F Cockburn** is a freelance magazine journalist and web copywriter based in Edinburgh. He works with clients across Scotland and the rest of the UK.

**Derek Crook** has lived on Mull for a long time. His work has been published in *Northwords Now*, *Poetry*

*Scotland* and *The Bee's Breakfast*.

**Seth Crook** rarely leaves the Isle of Mull. His poems travel for him. They have appeared in such places as *Gutter*, *New Writing Scotland*, *The Rialto*, *Magma*, *Envoi*.

**Megan Crosbie** is a queer writer and occasional performer. She particularly loves crafting fractured fairy-tales and often writes in the boundary between flash-fiction and poetry.

**Sally Evans** lives in Callander and edits *Poetry Scotland*. Her poetry is widely published, in Scotland and elsewhere.

**Maurice Franceschi** lives and works full-time in Edinburgh, where he struggles to find time to write. A few of his poems have been published.

**Graham Fulton's** latest book is *Panagraphs at the End of the World* (Penniless Press). *Equal Night* is due from Irish publisher Salmon Poetry in 2017.

**Robin Fulton Macpherson** has spent much of his life in Norway, and has been active in the translation of Scandinavian poets into English. Marick Press, Michigan, has brought out *A Northern Habitat: Collected Poems* 1960–2010.

**Harry Giles** lives in Edinburgh and is studying for a Creative Writing PhD at Stirling. His collection *Tonguit* (Freight, 2015) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection.

**Nancy Graham** lives in Belfast, working in the women's sector. Her poetry's inspired by her Highland family history, as well as the Northern Irish life.

**Kirsty Gunn** directs the Writing Practice and Study Programme at the University of Dundee and is at work on her next novel.

**Mandy Haggith** lives in Assynt and writes in a shed with a tree-top view. Her latest novel is *Bear Witness*,

published by Saraband . Mandy can be contacted at [www.mandyhaggith.net](http://www.mandyhaggith.net)

**Lydia Harris** published her first pamphlet with Smiths Knoll in 2012. She is a recipient of a Scottish Book Trust New Writers' Award , Poetry, 2017.

**Jennifer Morag Henderson** is from Inverness. Her book *Josephine Tey: A Life* (Sandstone Press) was listed by the Observer in the best biographies of 2015.

**Lesley Harrison** has worked and travelled in some of the world's most remote places, and through her poems explores how it is to live in these environments.

**Kate Hendry** is a writer and teacher living in Edinburgh. Her first collection of poems, *The Lost Original*, was published by Happenstance in 2016.

**Paul Jeffcutt** has won prizes for poetry in England, Scotland, Ireland and the USA.

**Eric Jones** lives in Inverness and is a member of Wasps studios in Nairn where he is currently working on a collection of short stories when he's not eating bacon rolls in the Classroom.

**Donald Ker** was born in Lethen, Nairnshire, in 1944. He's been making Pottery since 1967 and, lately, writing lyrics for friends in Folk/Country bands.

**Sophie Kirtley** is from Northern Ireland. Her poetry has appeared in *Mslxia* and *Orbis*. Sophie is currently completing an MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University.

**Deborah Livingstone** lives and writes in Inverness after 15 years working in East Africa and South East Asia.

**Katherine Lockton** is co-editor and publisher of *South Bank Poetry* magazine. Katherine studied at Edinburgh University and loves

Scotland and its literature.

**Aoife Lyall** lives in Inverness and was shortlisted for the Hennessy New Writers Awards 2016. She is currently writing her first collection.

**Anne Macleod** has published two novels and two poetry collections. Her first collection, *Standing by Thistles*, was shortlisted for the Saltire First Book Award and *The Dark Ship*, her first novel, was nominated for Saltire and Impac awards.

**Iain Maloney** is from Aberdeen. He is the author of three novels, *The Waves Burn Bright*, about the Piper Alpha disaster, *Silma Hill* and *First Time Solo* and a poetry collection, *Fractures*. He is an editor and journalist living in Japan.

**Stuart McCarthy** lives with his family on the Isle of Eigg, mostly running Laig Bay Brewing Co while dreaming of writing.

**Alex McMillan** grew up in Livingston, and now lives in Lima, Peru. When not working he reads and writes poetry.

**Isabel Miles** is from Ayrshire and lived in North East Scotland for seven years. She now lives, walks and writes in the North Yorkshire Moors.

**Deborah Moffatt** lives in Fife. She has won the Wigtown Prize twice (Gaelic section) and prizes in Galway and Skye for poems in English.

**Helen Moore** lives in Moray. Her most recent collection, *ECOZOA* (Permanent Publications, 2015), is acclaimed by John Kinsella as “a milestone in the journey of ecopoetics”. [www.natures-words.co.uk](http://www.natures-words.co.uk)

**Ian Murray** is a former archivist and librarian based in Stirling. He has previously published books on local history as well as articles on aspects of Scottish history.

**Stuart A Paterson** lives by the Solway Coast. ‘The Road to Southerness’ will be in his latest collection of Galloway poems *Looking South*, from Indigo Dreams in summer 2017.

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

**Catriona Patience** worked for a season as a Residential Steward on Inchcolm in the Firth of Forth. She is still seeking truth.

**Lydia Popowich** is based in Caithness. Her first poetry pamphlet, *The Jellyfish Society*, was published by Paper Swans Press in 2016 after winning a competition.

**Jean Rafferty** is the author of *The Four Marys*, published by Saraband Books. She is the chair of Scottish PEN's Writers at Risk committee.

**Fiona Rintoul** is a writer and translator. She is the author of *The Leipzig Affair* and *Whisky Island*, and translator of *Outside Verdun* by Arnold Zweig.

**Cynthia Rogerson's** latest novel *Wait for Me Jack* (written under the pseudonym Addison Jones) is published by Sandstone.

**Michael F Russell** is deputy editor of the West Highland Free Press newspaper. His debut novel *Lie of the Land* was short-listed for the Saltire Society's First Book Award in 2015.

**Stewart Sanderson** is a Glasgow-based poet. In 2015 he received an Eric Gregory Award. In 2016 he was awarded a Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship.

**Flora Sinclair** lives in North Berwick, is originally from the west of Scotland, but feels a connection to many places across the country. She completed an MSC in Creative Writing at Edinburgh University in 2015.

**Mark Ryan** Smith lives in Shetland. His writing has appeared in various places, and he is the author of *The Literature of Shetland*.

**Ian Stephen's** latest book is *Waypoints* (Bloomsbury), an account of his sea journeys from Scotland's west coast.

**Gerda Stevenson** is an actor/writer/director/singer-songwriter. She has worked on stage, television, radio and film throughout Britain and abroad. In 2014 she was nominated as one the Saltire Society's Outstanding Women of Scotland.

**Richard W. Strachan** won a New Writer's Award from the Scottish Book Trust in 2012 and has had stories in magazines like *Interzone*, *The Lonely Crowd* and *Gutter*, amongst others.

**Taylor Strickland** is an apprentice brewer in Tarpon Springs, Florida, where he resides with his partner Lauren and dog Bean. This is his first publication.

**Judith Taylor** lives in Aberdeen. Her poetry has been published widely in magazines, and in two pamphlet collections – *Earthlight* and *Local Colour*. Her first full-length collection will be published in Autumn 2017 by Red Squirrel Press.

**Kenny Taylor** lives on the Black Isle, works mostly in non-fiction features and books drawn from nature and science, but also relishes other forms of storytelling

**Colin Will** is a poet and short story writer who lives in Dunbar. His first story collection – *Getting On* – was published by Postbox Press in 2016.

**Neil Young** hails from Belfast and now lives in Aberdeenshire. His publications include *Lagan Voices* (Scryfa), *The Parting Glass* (Tapsalteerie), and the forthcoming *Jimmy Cagney's Long-Lost Kid Half-Brother* (Black Light Engine Room).

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WASPS Studio, The Briggait, 141 The Bridge Gate  
Oxfam Books, 330 Byres Rd  
An Leanag, 22 Mansefield St, Glasgow

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