

The FREE literary magazine of the North

# Northwords Now

Issue 34, Autumn 2017



## Making tracks

**HARRY GILES** finds Orkney in Ontario, **KIRSTY GUNN** goes off the map, **MANDY HAGGITH** sails with an ancient mariner, **MARTIN LEE MUELLER** swims with salmon

**Plus Short Stories, Poems, Articles, Reviews and new Gaelic writing**

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## EDITORIAL

IT'S GREAT TO get pleasant surprises. That's been part of the fun of editing *Northwords Now* in the last few months. I can seldom predict just what stories or poetry will be pinging across to my inbox or what new collections, novels and more will be landing in the mailbox.

Several of the submissions published in this issue are by writers whose work was previously unknown to me, but whose skill with words caught my attention and made me smile at the ways they could stretch imagination. That's part of the function of this magazine, of course: to showcase new work and encourage fresh talent from across the north.

But it's also been great to get much support from weel-kent figures in the Scottish literary scene, keen to say how much they value *Northwords Now*. Some of these writers have provided new work for this issue.

I hope the mix of names, styles of writing and subjects printed here will give others both food for thought, enjoyment – and perhaps an urge to submit their own work for possible publication in a future issue. Writing from people living in or inspired by the Highlands and Islands is given prominence, but I'm also keen to see material linked to the wider north. That includes both other parts of Scotland and places around the northern world.

With that geographical sweep in mind, I'm pleased that this issue includes writing drawn from experiences in northern Japan and Canada and by writers based in Norway and Finland. I hope you enjoy the mix. ■

KENNY TAYLOR, EDITOR

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**Northwords Now** is a twice yearly literary magazine published by Northwords, a not-for-profit company, registered in February 2005. Company number SC280553.

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The magazine is FREE and can be picked up at locations across Scotland. See list on P31  
The fee for individual 'home-delivery' is £6 for 2 issues, cheques payable to 'Northwords'.

#### Front cover image

Fyrish monument in snow. By Black Isle-based photographer, Jamie MacPherson  
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#### 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. Submission should be sent to:  
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To submit your work online, go to our website: [northwordsnow.co.uk](http://northwordsnow.co.uk)

The next issue is planned for March 2018. The deadline for submissions is **26th January 2018**. You will hear about your submission by 30th March 2018.

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



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

# Art and Conflict

Many recent books highlight the current vibrancy of Scottish-linked writing. A fine sheaf of such titles is reviewed in the closing pages of this issue. To give a taster of some rewarding and sometimes challenging reading, this page presents a trio in very different styles and genres.

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## **I'm Coming With You**

Pennings from Home, Away, and In-between

Scottish Pen

REVIEW BY ANNE MACLEOD

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In her thoughtful introduction to *I'm Coming With You*, an anthology published to celebrate ninety years of Scottish PEN, Makar Jackie Kay declares 'Ninety years of supporting and defending the rights of writers, the world over.... could not feel more important now.'

A hundred pages of poetry and prose, *I'm Coming With You*, is a selection from PENnings magazine, the online journal published twice yearly by Scottish PEN with contributions from refugees, asylum seekers, writers with English as a second language and Scottish PEN members. Here, work from international writers, such as Goran Simic, Kishwar Naheed, Eeva Kilpi and Ali Cobby Eckermann runs with poems and prose from such established Scottish names as Tessa Ransford, James Robertson, Liz Niven and many more. These, interwoven with the freshness of new and lesser known voices, contribute to an illuminating, sometimes heart-breaking, mix.

The necessity of meaningful communication, the sharing of lived experience in words – and thus its transcendence – blossoms in these pages. AC Clarke's 'The Poem' confesses 'I carried a poem in my pocket as cash/ for those who won't take plastic'. In 'Alienation', Najat Abdullah, in luminous English, shares both love for her native land and her distress in exile. 'My hope is my country to return as beautiful as before.' In 'Unruly Night', translated by Bouzekri Ettaouchi, Iyad Hayatleh's longing for home becomes a bird fluttering off his chest and heading south to 'a corner/where I used to play as a child'. His grief is clear in '...the onset of my anguish/and the soul I deserted/and left behind.'

Kusay Hussein's 'The Consequences of Freedom', describing a tragedy in Baghdad in 2006, begins under a huge, bent old mulberry tree beside the Tigris, as Sunni neighbours note 'a human wave, all in black, heading to the holy shrine of Al Khadthim.' What starts a stampede in the Shi-ite procession is unclear, but the ensuing carnage, as desperate pilgrims struggle to avoid death by crushing or drowning, stimulates the Sunni watchers to attempt a rescue – the bravest and strongest of them, Uthman returning to the river waters time and again till he himself is lost. '...we're all poor,' the storyteller acknowledges, 'looking or

**Studio portrait from around 1863 of Alexander Gardner, pioneering Scots photographer, courtesy of Keith Steiner.**



pretending that we're different, but in fact we embrace each other.'

The refugee experience is harrowing, as the Scottish writers represented here understand. They walk with their fellow writers. In 'Rhythms and Aromas', (for Iyad and Lamees,) Jim Aitken writes of his friend '...tears can fill his eyes and not just/for his wife but for the lands within him.' Catherine Czerkawska, in 'Aliens', rides on her father's shoulders. 'My father's papers proclaim him alien/ which makes me half alien too' and Morelle Smith, in 'Walking in Tirana', admits 'I don't know who I am, as I walk through these streets.... I whisper to the sauntering streets, tell me who I am.'

This thought-provoking volume should be required reading for our times. Its contributors and editors are to be congratulated on their achievement.

'How does one mend dreams?' pleads Kishwar Naheed in 'Commonplace Miracles'. 'How does one cross rivers made out of storms?' AC Clarke may perhaps have an answer – 'Don't fret,' the poem said. 'I'm coming with you.' ■

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## **Unspeakable**

by Dilys Rose

Freight Books

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

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There are principles at the heart of this novel which are chillingly relevant to today's world news. Historically, times of economic recession have often led to an upsurge of religious fanaticism. In 1697, it led to the public hanging of a 19-year-old Divinity student for the crime of...not

very much at all. An innocent sacrificed, presumably as a scapegoat to keep the potentially rebellious congregations in line.

This is not a spoiler. The novel opens with the teenager Thomas Aikenhead recalling his childhood as he is being escorted to the gallows. This is followed by all the events which led to this day: family disintegration, poverty, the fortuitousness of a generous guardian. This is not a daunting journey because Rose takes the reader gently by the hand from the first page, and leads him into the darkest wynds and lanes. Not only is it dark, but it smells strongly of such a variety of foulness and sweetness, it is difficult to think clearly. There are sounds too – mysterious and threatening – but Rose is still guiding, so there is also a sense of safety. And of course, because (like life) no quality fictional reality is made up of purely dark things, Rose also leads us into days of wonder and magic. There's the day by the loch, when the sun is shining and the God-fearing folk take a day off God for more ancient pastimes. And those painfully poignant moments when Thomas thinks a girl finds him handsome.

The city of Edinburgh itself is, perhaps, as large a character as Thomas. Many of the buildings and places described, still exist. That other Edinburgh lies just beneath the city we all think we know. Yes, no one thinks the past was an easy or safe place, but it is one thing to know this, and another to really believe it. This novel makes superficial awareness impossible.

As a prize-winning writer of eleven

books, it is not surprising Rose is always in control of this narrative. The Edinburgh she describes is credible and fascinating, her characters are beautifully flawed and mostly likable. The story itself, though gently told, plays out with a brutal inevitability, which begins to seem cruel to fulfil. Despite knowing how it would end, such is the power of her fictional tension, I was deeply shocked when the ending came.

Why does fiction often affect us more than nonfiction? In the case of *Unspeakable*, it might be because while we are happily escaping into the reality Rose has created, our guard is lowered – we forget that most of the story is not made up. There really was a 19-year-old boy called Thomas Aikenhead, who was incredibly lucky – but ultimately very unlucky. Rose has paid honour to him with such dignity and clarity and sympathy, it will break readers' hearts. Which is the most any reader can ask for, right? ■

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## **Alexander Gardner**

Visionary Photographer of the American Civil War

By Keith Steiner

Troubador Books & Amazon

REVIEW BY KT

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It can seem strange when a notable figure from the not-so-distant past is largely overlooked in the present. But it's often surprising when some old leaves are turned over to bring such a person back to light.

That's how it is with Keith Steiner's efforts to highlight the work of Alexander Gardner. Born in Paisley in 1821, Gardner took up photography in his early thirties. After emigrating to America soon after, he worked with Mathew Brady – one of the very earliest American photographers – helping him with portraiture and also running a gallery in Washington DC.

It's here that the story gets intriguing. Gardener became a staff photographer for the Union army during the American Civil War of the 1860s, recording the aftermath of many infamously bloody conflicts. He photographed Abraham Lincoln several times in this period and also the conspirators convicted of Lincoln's assassination, being the only photographer allowed at their execution.

Steiner's book shows how Gardner honed a style of war reportage where images come from close to the heart of conflict. Its pages make uncomfortable viewing, but should help to restore the contemporary reputation of a pioneering Scottish photographer. ■

THE WINDOWS OF her apartment always seemed to be steamed up. Light broke through the morning, and was lent a silver aspect that seemed to make everything glow fragile.

We woke that morning with less urgency than was her habit. I let my hand linger a while upon her thigh, though we both understood by then that this was no more than the gesture implied. It was my last morning in Scotland, the leaving of which was always hard. All the more as we had already determined that the next time we would meet would be far from there.

"Come on you, get up!" she said, thrusting a cup of coffee in my direction. "There's still a lot to see!"

"You're right. There's always stuff to see. But can't we stay in bed just a bit longer, it's good and warm and sweet. Please."

"Okay. Just the time to finish that muck, mind you."

As much out of remorse as anything else, I sat nursing it until well after it went cold. Finally I downed it in one go, bitter and all though it was, and let myself be dragged out into Edinburgh's streets.

During the summer, we had dreamt deeply, as children and as lovers. I would bargain that she still does not know what good that slumber gave me. I suppose it was out of affection that we allowed inertia bring us that far, though I still don't know what I did to deserve hers.

Our flights were long, and of course, they were separate. In Tokyo we met for the last time as lovers, but this time we did not linger. In Edo, the snow fell softly, but turned to ash or water upon touching the ground.

We boarded a bullet headed north, and the snow piled on thicker and faster and thicker still. When we arrived at the northern tip of Honshu all was frozen around us. Without wasting time, we took off and darted under the sea, coming finally to Sapporo. There was a great weariness in me then, and the ice all around felt like it penetrated my heart. Still, she took my hand and put up with my petulance a while longer, to try and show me some beauty.

Sapporo, on the northern isle of Hokkaido is host to a festival of snow sculptures that must be seen to be believed. Castles, dragons, villages, steam engines, and mountains along-side manga characters, fearful monsters, and more pack the street; teams come from all over the world to labour through the winter to make them. Combined with the darkness, the snow, and the light, they lend a character of complete otherworldliness to the city. One night, we stood together and watched a team put the finishing touches on a replica of Himeji Castle that took up the width of the city's broadest street. I was enraptured, in awe, but it didn't prevent the cold from reaching all the way inside me, extinguishing something. Trudging back to bed that night, I absently wondered if

it would ever return to me, or if the cold would be there for good.

The next day, we continued deeper into that island that felt like a continent; this sense of enormity was perhaps a consequence of the difficulty with which one moves in the cold. We were in winter's home. My beard froze at night and in the daytime my heart never melted.

On our second night, my companion plied me with Sapporo brand beer that came in enormous cans meant for sharing, and prevailed upon me to accompany her to the bathhouse. Not for any erotic purposes, you understand. We still shared a bed, but more out of fiscal prudence than anything else, a gesture to her Calvinist side. No, maybe she was afraid, though I can't imagine what of. The more likely answer is that she sensed the cold that had gotten into me, and was searching more thoroughly than I for a means to knock it out of me.

We were the only ones in the changing room. Naked, we looked out through the glass window at the bath. Snowflakes floated down and the steaming pool looked inviting. I thought it best to seem brave, so I pushed the door open. Padding carefully outside, our fingers and hands stuck stubbornly to whatever we touched, twenty degrees beyond bloody cold.

Sinking into the hot water was less of a shock than I had anticipated. I later learned that water heated by volcanic activity was reputed to be softer, such that one doesn't feel burned, even at extremely high temperatures. These were some of the elements which described the contradictory magic of this place.

# Of Snow, And Ice Sculpted

SHORT STORY BY RÓNÁN MACDUBHGHAILL



But like any decent contradiction, or worthy magic, It seemed that there was something missing, just beyond the scope of my perception — some subtle layer beneath the water.

When I lifted my head from the pool, my scalp clenched involuntarily, a feeling as if it were being tugged at by a tiny child. It had frozen solid; I reached up and was surprised to feel it hard and cold. The night was still and the snow fell thick and soft, but the water was good and hot. I looked across the length of the pool into my companion's eyes, which were animated by that same contradiction.

I plunged into the pool to defrost my head, and of course within a moment or two of emerging it froze over again in the cold, but this time incompletely. When I smiled sincerely, broadly, it felt like it was the first time it had happened since that winter began. The waters, it seemed, of that spa village actually seemed to do what they promised: there was again a flame kindled within me. And to hell with it, I could feel again!

Ruefully, she smiled at me and said, "It froze again, right?"

"Aye, not straight away, but still. Incredible. I'm so glad we came here. It's done me good."

"Yeah, better than sitting inside reading depressing Portuguese writers anyway, you mouldy auld shite!" she said, splashing water at me.

Above us, the snow continued to float through the sky: but it fell no more. Our scalps thawed. Our hands moved more freely than before. The ground outside the bath was still stiff, but we no longer feared its step. We brought some of the

water's warmth back to our room with us. I cupped her breasts in my hands, tenderly, she draped her arms around my shoulders, and pressed her lips onto the nape of my neck, for old times' sake.

The next morning, it was I who was first to rise from bed, for a change. Walking to the end of the village, we arrived at the ski-lift, which doubled as a gift-shop for all ten skiers that were to be found. With borrowed snowshoes in hand and blind optimism, we made our way toward the mountaintop. I told her that I knew the way back down: someone had scribbled a map for me on the back of a train ticket. The snow was thick and getting thicker, but not for the first time she said she believed me. From the top of the first mountain from which we could see our target, Asahidake herself, some five hundred metres overhead. Taking off uphill, we disturbed the zen of the skiers, who had set themselves up at the top of the slope like some well-trained troupe of kabuki-ka waiting to perform their parts in an elaborate spectacle scripted long ago.

Of course, we had been warned about volcanoes, and knew that Asahidake herself was such a hill. In this endless season, though, in this unmoving place, these great mounds seemed little more than a reminder of the violence which lay reposing beneath the surface. Ultimately, it was a reminder that somewhere else, things were still moving. But at least here, we thought we could contradict Galileo: we thought to keep things still a while. Here, we supposed, the tigers were all asleep, and besides, everyone in those reaches knew that their purple stripes were attributable to their diet of lichen, and of ivy.

We were only halfway up the mountain when the smell of sulphur and of melting ice came, terrifying and exciting us. We sensed that the mountain had come back to life. She gripped my hand tightly and looked at me with something like trust in her eyes. Madly, I said I thought that it would be safe to continue up the mountain all the way to the top. For a time, we trudged on through the snow, but soon the sulphur was too thick for us to keep our eyes properly open. It was only when we saw the rock flow red down the hillside that we started to panic.

Turning, I wanted to take off down hill. "Come on!" I said. But she held me by the shoulder, and shook me. "No! Just a little further; I saw a hut through the trees there, we'll find help, or a way out of this yet."

It was always I that pretended knowledge of mountains, but now I allowed myself be led up the hill instead. She led us to a small hut, the hide-out of someone gone too far off piste. We didn't have time to contemplate it though, with the smoke gathering around us and the growling of the mountain growing thick. Inside, we found a sled.

"Sure I've no notion how to ride one of those," I said, panic in my voice.



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“Maybe we’re better just to wait it out here in the hut?”

“Are you mad, would you look at it out there? We have to go. Now!” She managed, to her merit, not to blame me for having taken us there, as she might have.

We took off downhill, through the smoke and the snow. It wasn’t long until we passed the kabuki-ka still practicing kata in the snow, nearly ready to depart themselves. With the sulphur and sense of danger itself behind us, we could again see clearly. We were relieved and when the land started to even out, and when we caught sight of the valley we loosened our grip on the sledge. Slowly, it came to a stop amidst a frozen forest. We knew more or less the way we had to go, and fixing our snowshoes once more we took off.

Near the edge of the village, we came to a large pool of water. At first, we were amazed to see that not only was it not frozen, but that it steamed, and that around it for several metres, green grass still grew, gold apples clung to the trees. When I think back to it, it is almost strange how normal it was for us in that moment to strip and step into the water, wading all the way until it came up to our chests. There, well deep into the pool, we turned to face one another. As we did, I saw one of the tigers move at the far end of the pool, his purple stripes vivid between the snow and the grass. Whether it had come for heat or to feed, I did not know: but genuinely, I was not afraid.

Some time later, we returned to our ryokan, where we were presented with bowls of steaming soup and saké. Weary from our ordeal, though, we soon retired to our room. The next day we returned to Sapporo, and from there to Tokyo. Gazing out the window, we were warmed watching the retreat of snow.

Back in Tokyo, once more we felt like ants surrounded by the enormity of this city that seems to go on forever. One might say that it is a composite city, a metaphor for the urge to seek comfort in numbers. This time around we revelled in this fact, we celebrated it. She indulged herself in Japanese art, and I gorged on sashimi. On our last night we drank in piss alley, and sang karaoke in Shibuya. Somewhere along the way we picked up midnight friends whose names I don’t remember; together we found a tiny jazz concert in Ebisu, where a Japanese John Coltrane redeemed us.

It was only when we eventually got back to our room, towards daybreak, that I understood what had happened. Looking across from my bed to hers, I knew that something had changed.

Reaching out her hand, she strained to place a finger on my chest. “The distance from my hand to your heart does not differ.”

Clasping her finger in my hand, I grasped the change that had come over us. ■

# Poems by Larissa Reid

## Herringbone

Late summer  
The gull lands to twist the neck from the body  
And picks at gaping gills,  
While mother-of-pearl scales  
Cling to its stark yellow beak.  
Slick, sleek silver, slapped hard against black rock  
Back broken, bones splayed out  
Picked clean  
And left to bleach.  
Recharged, the gull lurches forward and leaves  
For another steal at the fishing boat.

Late autumn  
The land is herringboned to the sea  
Nipped, tucked and structured,  
Laid to rest  
Ready for sowing in spring.  
Rainwater runs in the ruckles  
Shimmering the earth under thick-set skies  
Shaved curls overlap  
Like the crest of a lapwing’s crown  
They will return with their dance  
When the warmer winds blow.

Late winter  
Wool blanket, herringbone weave  
Wrapped up against the wind  
That rattles the old worn window-frames  
And sends a familiar whistle through the hole in the oak tree,  
Down by the gate.  
The house martin’s nest a smear against the wall  
Erased by water running in invisible trails  
From roof to path to land to burn to stream to river to sea  
It rarely snows, here,  
On the blurred boundary line between soil and salt.

Late spring  
The hares have spent time enough  
Berating one another for a chance at love  
Chasing down the runs of the fields  
Before stopping to listen, alert and wild-eyed.  
The swallows return  
And cut the air into ribbons  
In their quest for insects  
While the lapwings flip, wing over tail,  
In their own bizarre ritual  
Under this evening’s herringbone sky.

## The Crow Road

You’re awa’ the crow road  
Or the crow track, perhaps,  
To be more exact.  
You’re awa’  
While the mountains remain,  
stoic,  
conquered,  
defied,  
Until now.  
You’re awa’  
As the crow flies  
Drawn lines across maps  
Desks strewn with plans for past, present and future  
Treks out of paper onto rock,  
Pencil lines to endless, stretching contours.

Outside the window, dawn breaks,  
And the rooks peel away from their roosts  
Like you did from us on many a dawn.  
But will do no more.  
May they take care of you  
From on high  
As they follow their set paths  
Out across the sky.

## Skye-light

*“You know that place between sleep and awake, that place where you still remember dreaming? That’s where I’ll always love you. That’s where I’ll be waiting.”*  
J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

The white houses that hug the hillside by day  
Are set adrift in an inverted world by night,  
Floating, tilted on the lip of the sea.  
Black curved waves lick the edges of silvered clouds,  
While single stars swim ashore.  
We could be anywhere;  
Hidden away in a dream.  
Your fingers are cold  
As you reach out, searching a landscape  
For me.  
Dawn breaks to a mist  
That coats the pockets of the land in salt-edged dew.  
Your fingers are cold  
As you tilt my chin to a kiss  
That tastes of the sea.

# Songs for a Tsar

BY DONALD S MURRAY

*(i.m Catherine Mackinnon, born Uisken, Isle of Mull, c. 1778, Died Florence, Italy, 1858. Buried St Petersburg, 1859)*

Winter's Palace, St Petersburg. The moon is full  
as Catherine seeks to lull  
the child to sleep with a song learned long ago in Mull.

Both years and miles have swelled  
since then, but she is conscious that the roll  
and pitch of tides are in that lullaby – and for all that different squalls

may stir and rock his life, its rhythms will come back  
to wrap around him – in these moments he wears mourning black,  
that instant he is startled by the crack

of gunshot, those hours when weight of robe and crown  
bestowed upon him will bend both neck and head down.  
He'll recall then the words with which she gifted him,

and all the flow and cadence of its foreign sounds.

2

Sometimes she would smell the reek of peat  
and think this is where I come from,  
these houses where blown ash sweeps  
earthen floors like snow stacked deep  
upon the tundra, where hunger keeps  
stalking souls whose only sustenance is prayer,

and she'd note the presence of a hush  
rarely in attendance when tides crushed  
rock and sand at Uisken; the only sounds  
the distant howling of a wolf,  
the crackling of ice and frost  
taking solid grip of ground and air,

and she missed the meagre meals,  
richness of song her people shared.

3

The bright lights of a chandelier  
could not hold a candle's gleam  
to fir chlis or foxfire  
which she on winter's nights had seen

pirouetting above Moscow,  
waltzing over the Ross of Mull,  
its splendour putting in the shade  
the Romanovs and nobles at those balls

swirling round the Kremlin,  
with Princes in pressed uniforms, Princesses in gowns,  
each one only a frail shadow  
of the aurora's vivid crown.

4

Florence 1858. A sudden chill  
afflicts Catherine, as she is conscious that there will  
come a day when Uisken will be only full

of memories and ghosts. And the child whose cries  
were soothed and quietened by that lullaby  
she learned years before in Mull will lie

near the canal that bears her forename, his body enmeshed  
in snow and tattered greatcoats, broken swords, ripped epaulettes,  
entrails of guard and emperor, the torn confusion of the flesh.

5

But before then, the song on Alexander's tongue  
granted him by Catherine while he wept when young  
resounds across both stone and this iron-fisted ground  
they lay the stranger in ...

'Nuair thèid mac mo righ-sa  
fo làn èideadh  
gu robh neart na cruinne leat  
's neart na grèine  
neart an tairbh dhuibh  
's àirde leumas ...'

When the son of my king  
steps out in full robes,  
may he have strength of the globe  
and force of the sun shining,  
the power of the dark bull  
that leaps most high ...

Those Gaelic words are left  
to travel across taiga and the steppes  
and wash up near Fionnphort, Bunessan,  
the cleared townships of the Ross of Mull  
to tell the few natives who remain there  
that this exile's heart is quiet and still.

SKYE MOUNTAIN RESCUE Team retrieved the body with the help of the Stornoway coastguard helicopter, about two hours after the alarm was raised. The right leg was tenuously joined to the torso, like a loose first tooth attached by a sliver of stringy fibre to the gum. The facial features were rearranged like a cubist painting. For Murdo, one of the aspirant team members, it resulted in disrupted sleep for the next two weeks.

The crematorium car park was packed. The grey sky, pregnant with rain, mirrored the mood of the occasion. The room filled up and then the family entered, clutching each other like the walking wounded from a theatre of war. You didn't have to be religious to be moved by the swelling emotion in the voices of the choir despite it being an old recording piped over a second-rate PA system. Reminiscences and tributes were wide ranging.

"Money was really tight when they had their first mortgage and Katie was a baby. Grant even did the housework so Suzy could go out to do an evening bar job." Laughter. A student friend said that despite the tragedy there were very few fortunate enough to end their days in a place they adored and in the company of the person they treasured and loved most of all. It was a perfect idea for the ashes to be scattered at Tarskavaig Bay in sight of the black, saw-tooth Cuillin. (Affirmative nods). The coffin moved on the rollers, the curtains opened and closed, people lined up to pass their respects to the family then hurried to their cars to escape the now steady downpour.

Three months earlier Grant McKinlay had run through the arrangements for his wife's funeral. The floral display would include carnations, the music a selection from the Glasgow Orpheus choir. The eulogy would be given by a lifelong friend and donations would go to a breast cancer charity. There was one problem: Suzy was still living and had no terminal illness. Her death by his hand would require rigorous planning and precise execution.

As physical intimacy lessened, insidious cracks had appeared in the relationship. He could remember the last time they'd had sex but not when they'd last made love. He was worn down by the criticisms, the belittling, the glacial stares. Recently they had both been manipulating their flexi time to minimise the amount of time spent together. At weekends, they escaped to different mountains. He suspected she was seeing someone else; she was visiting the hairdresser more. He was cautious about embarking on an affair which he knew he could have with a regular hill walking companion. If Clare had been more Lady Macbeth-like he might have been planning Suzy's end much earlier. As it was, their silver wedding anniversary was fast approaching, a good smokescreen to hide his intentions.

Divorce was not an attractive option for Grant. Bang goes the early retirement plan and she'd get a sizeable cut of the

pension too. He imagined her gloating over the legal settlement; she'd contest everything, his mountaineering first editions, film poster originals, the lot. There would also be her interpretation of the break-up which would do the gossip rounds. Women, he'd noticed, get far more sympathy following a split. No, there was a neater alternative.

The place and method provided a considerable challenge for Grant. With their joint interest in the hills, the setting of a mountain for her demise was not implausible.

There were always suspicions following a fatality to one of a married couple together on the same mountain. But accidents do happen... a simple slip, a head smashed. He couldn't be the first to have such thoughts and others must have been successful. Police questioning would be intense but, after all, they'd kept their domestic problems private. He'd checked the insurance policy and with the pay-out he could resign his job and take on consultancy work when he chose. He needn't be lonely either... there was Clare for a start. He felt twenty years younger in an instant.

Suzy was not a climber but she was comfortable with scrambling. As well as her own interest in photography, she'd always been happy to pose for shots and it would be no problem luring her to the edge of a void. Take some general scenery shots first, get Suzy near the brink as foreground interest. There was a certain beauty in a falling body thought Grant, even the ones who'd been captured mid-air in desperate leaps from the Twin Towers.

But which mountain? Suzy had been completing her Munros in friendly competition with her best friend Alison. Grant skimmed her *Munro's Table* book to consider the possibilities. There were some interesting options... Liathach, An Teallach, The Saddle, Am Basteir. Choose a midweek day but not during a school or bank holiday, no prying eyes. A scramble ridge, with a big unbroken drop below it should do just fine. Am Basteir in the Cuillin fitted the bill perfectly.

Skye held a special significance for Grant and Suzy; it was where they'd first been introduced on a student meet thirty years ago. He'd been attracted by her shyness and the fact she didn't hide her femininity in the mountains, applying discreet make-up even before a wild day out. A charge had coursed through his body the first time they'd held hands during a walk down Glen Sligachan, but

it would take guile to coax her back there with him now.

In the subsequent weeks, Grant became excited but edgy. It was the same tingling combination he usually experienced before any big climbing route. He felt he was on board a runaway train with only one outcome and alcohol had become the only reliable means of achieving a decent night's sleep.

To distract himself, he spent several evenings trawling through old slide boxes seeking out suitable photos for a guidebook a friend was producing on the Scottish islands. He found one of the Harris mountains from Horgabost beach: flawless vanilla sand leading into coruscating turquoise water. He remembered how on that Sunday he and Suzy had skinny-dipped in an area deliberately visible from a nearby Free Church and laughed at their effrontery. Two young boys had an epiphany as they emerged from Sunday school, their squeals of delight swiftly silenced by an austere father dressed in bible black. Suzy fell pregnant during that holiday; in retrospect, the relationship had already passed its zenith.

His colleagues found him unusually distant and taciturn. "Dreaming of hills again Grant or perhaps the big event next Saturday night?" teased his PA Sandra.

Their anniversary party had been organised by the kids; for the parents, it was another game of keeping up appearances. They had the first dance and Grant was just as inept as on their wedding day, but it didn't matter and everyone said what a great couple they still were. In Grant's speech, he made references to their first meeting on Skye and student pals from that era basked in the nostalgia. He paused several times to look directly at his wife. "I'm looking forward to another 30 years of trips there with Suzy." Hearty applause.

"Twenty-five years!" exclaimed the taxi driver, "I didn't make it to five." Grant and Suzy laughed in unison, but under the surface things were far from right and Grant felt the tension growing inside him. He began to drink more heavily.

His boss advised him to take some time off. It had got to the stage where he had to double check all Grant's decisions anyway. "I'll oversee the Stirling job.... you're worn out.....take a holiday with Suzy.... we'll talk about things when you get back. By the way great party the other night. You've got a great missus. And go

and see your doctor. Then it doesn't have to come off your annual leave."

"... This place isn't helping at all. Let's have a break to somewhere that holds good memories for us. Talk about things..."

She was struck by the fact that he'd taken the initiative. She'd waited a long time for this. She knew that work load wasn't the only reason for his sick leave and had noticed his drinking too.

But don't make things too easy for him she thought.

"This thing's eating into everything, isn't it?" her voice started to break up. "I've not exactly been an angel in all of this."

"Nor me but we can build on tonight ... Let's go to Skye ... We could stay at The Sligachan Hotel? No tent, no midges, no smoked sausage and boil in the bag rice. You could finish off your Skye Munros too." Suzy smiled, tears lurking behind her eyes.

The last time Grant had been kept so anxiously waiting for an answer was the day he'd proposed to her. When she eventually spoke, what she said surprised him.

"What does Am Basteir mean Grant?"

No eye contact but she'd used his name.

"Some books say the executioner, some the baptiser."

"I wish I'd never asked. It's not too difficult, is it? I'm alright going up but not so keen coming down. You know me."

"But I'll be there to help you. The east ridge isn't too bad."

Oh, you'll be fine on Am Basteir, he thought. You'll be down in no time.

At the Fatal Accident Enquiry, the Sheriff's dry tones rolled on and on: ... The witness who'd just arrived at the summit of Am Basteir corroborated the description of the deceased's fall. I'm recording death by misadventure," he concluded. "I cannot over emphasise the danger of taking photographs near the edge of steep cliffs. I'd like to thank Mrs. McKinlay for her cooperation during this difficult time for both her and her family. I'd also like to thank Mr. Shand, the witness, who helped Mrs. McKinlay down the upper ridge of Am Basteir where they were met by the Skye Mountain Rescue Team, who as usual did a magnificent job."

Outside the hearing, Suzy thanked everyone who'd attended. The rescue team leader acknowledged the generous donation from Grant's family and friends. Mr. Shand was the last person she went over to.

"Don't say too much here," she whispered. "We've only supposed to have met once before."

She winked at him, before turning around to dab her eyes and face the others. ■

# The Executioner

## SHORT STORY BY MIKE DIXON



THAT WAS THE night Granny came back. I remember that it was calm and muggy, unusually warm for autumn, and a thick layer of murky cloud covered the sky, cutting us off from any trace of moonlight or starlight. We were surrounded by utter darkness except for a solitary light coming from our nearest neighbour's home, more than a mile away along the rough track that crossed the moor.

I didn't see her arrive. I just became gradually aware that she was there, sitting in her usual place in the corner of the kitchen as though she'd never gone away. She was wearing an old blue coat and one of those flowery headscarves.

I find it hard to believe that we carried on talking, but that's what happened. What else were we to do?

"I remember every last detail," said Mother, picking up where she had left off, though now her voice swayed and staggered, and her face was as white as the sea-foam. "As soon as we reached the shore that day we started running around on the sand like mad things, Peggy and Anna and me. Your grandmother and Auntie Johanna sat on a flat rock and talked in quiet voices, thinking we were oblivious."

She glanced briefly in Granny's direction. "I knew, of course. Because the war was over, I knew that Auntie Johanna would take Peggy and Anna with her to America and then there would just be two of us left. What I didn't know is that the tickets were already booked and my aunt had come to say goodbye."

Mother took a handkerchief from somewhere to dab her eyes. "That was the last time I saw any of them. After we got news of the train crash, I couldn't stop thinking about them and how far

they were from home when they died. What Peggy and Anna could have done with their lives, what they would have experienced, if it hadn't been for the accident..."

Sneaking a glance in Granny's direction, I thought I saw a tear roll down her cheek. Her eyes, though, were hidden by the firelight reflecting off the jam-jar lenses of her spectacles. For the first time, I noticed her hands, like two bundles of dried heather lying across each other in her lap.

"I still see them in my mind's eye as young girls," continued Mother. "I can hardly believe that it's twenty-five years to the day since we lost them. A quarter of a century! Where did the time go?"

She lowered her voice, as though to address me and Kirsty alone. "It must have been even worse for your granny, losing her only sister and her nieces so soon after her husband. I didn't understand at first, though: I was young and I couldn't see beyond my own pain. She used to say that she would always be there to remember them with me."

She came to an abrupt halt then. I could read the thought as clearly as if she had said it: Is this why she's come back?

There was silence except for the hissing of the peats on the fire, our only source of heat, and the ticking of the old clock, which seemed to grow louder with

every second that passed. I saw that the others, like me, were looking sidelong at Granny. I suppose we were all wondering whether she would say something.

Suddenly Kirsty piped up. "It's Colin," she said, as though someone had just asked her what was worrying her. "He wants to take me away camping for the weekend. Just me and him."

What on earth made her choose that as a subject, I wondered. She must have blurted out the first thing that came into her head, just because she couldn't endure the dragging silence any longer. But there was a whole mind-map of topics to avoid in Granny's presence, and while going camping with a boyfriend was not right at the heart of the map, where explicit references to sex and drunkenness might belong, it wasn't too close to the edge either. Kirsty must have realised this because her hand went up and covered her mouth, and she turned bright red. I saw that she was shaking.

We were all used to the way Granny's face would change at the merest hint of impropriety: how her mouth would become a flat hard line like a crack in rock. Not this time, though. Although I didn't have the courage to look at her directly, I thought I detected a smile on her face.

Mother was at a loss. "I don't know," she said. "You're only sixteen. And I know

Colin is a good boy and everything, but still..."

For the first time, she was looking straight at Granny, and she must have seen something in her expression because her tone of voice changed. "I suppose that if you promise to behave yourself, you could go for a night or two. That's as long as the weather doesn't change, of course."

Kirsty sat there gawping like a fish. I think she'd automatically assumed the answer would be no, even though Mother was less strict than Granny had been. Kirsty had probably never even stopped to think about whether, if she were free to decide for herself, she would choose to go.

Then Granny spoke. Her voice was thin and insubstantial, and her pronouncement didn't seem to be directed at anyone in particular. "Make the most of the time you have."

Was she talking about Kirsty's camping weekend, or something else? I looked to Mother for guidance, but her expression revealed nothing.

Granny cleared her throat awkwardly, as though it was an effort to speak. "You don't know what's waiting for you out there. You can't even begin to imagine."

With that she looked long and hard at the fire in the hearth before rising to her feet, clutching at the arms of the chair for support as she did so. Slowly and painfully she shuffled towards the door, one small step at a time. When she reached the threshold, she hesitated and stood still for a moment. Then, without turning around, she opened the door and went out into the night. ■

## Granny

SHORT STORY BY TRISTAN AP RHEINALLT



THE SCOTTISH LITERATURE Department at the University of Cumbernauld had occupied a temporary, two-storey building for nearly twenty years. Long after six o'clock, with darkness enfolding the campus, Malcolm Kennedy worked on; he had marking to do, a conference to organise, oh, and that paper on Burns to finish. He was alone on the first floor of a portakabin.

A sound came from behind him. He turned and saw a burst of light clearing to reveal two men; one tall, athletic and black, the other older, white and craggy. Both wore black suits, black ties and dark sunglasses.

"Droothy neebors, neebors meet," said the older one.

"How did you get in here?" said Kennedy. The outer door should have been locked.

"Professor Kennedy?" said the younger man.

"Let's just call him 'Mr Kennedy'," said the older one. "The rank is but the guinea stamp. A man's a man for aa that."

"I said - who are you?" repeated Kennedy.

"We're MoB," said the younger man.

"Men of Burns," said the older one.

"You're writing a paper about Burns," said the younger man.

"How did you know that?" said Kennedy. He'd been trying to keep it quiet. He knew the reputation of specialist Burns scholars.

"It's our business to know," said the older man.

"People sometimes write stuff about Burns we don't like," said the younger man.

"Bad stuff," said the older one, "and stuff that's different from the stuff everyone knows and loves about Burns."

"What's that got to do with me?" said Kennedy.

"You happy in your work, Mr Kennedy?" asked the younger man.

"Enjoy working here?" said the older one.

"What? Yes, I suppose I do..."

"Hear that?" said the younger Man of Burns. "He enjoys his work."

"Yeah, but Mr Kennedy," the older man interrupted, "pleasures are like poppies spread."

"You seize the flower," continued the younger man, "its bloom is shed. Or like the snowfall in the river..."

"A moment white," concluded the older man, "then lost forever."

"You be careful with that paper," said the younger man.

"We'll know what's in it," said the older one.

## MoB

SHORT STORY BY DAVID McVEY



"So, don't make us mad." The younger man produced a small device, like a mobile phone, pressed a button, summoning a brief blaze of colour and blinding light that lingered for several seconds.

And then, in an instant, all was dark. The two men had gone.

Kennedy sat on in the faint gleam of his desktop lamp. He felt, you might say, cowering and timorous. He reread the opening paragraphs of his Burns paper. He decided to scrap it and write one about Sir Walter Scott instead. No one cared what you said about him. ■



# Dàn le Alasdair Caimbeul

## Dàin ùra le Maoilios Caimbeul

### Dìblidheachd Mhic an Duine★

ALASDAIR CAIMBEUL

O! Cò e mac an duine, dè a nàdar?  
Tuigidh boiteag dhall na talmhainn;  
Chì clamhan ruadh na h-iarmailt shuas  
A làrach thruaillte breac le dì-meas.

Sruthan coma, pròiseil smuain,  
A’ crìochnachadh is a’ cruthachadh,  
A’ crìochnachadh is a’ cruthachadh,  
Nan tèarmainn dhaingeann, dhùrachdach fhèin.

Gach cinneadh is treubh air caochladh  
Dhòigh a’ sireadh is a’ crìonadh linn  
Thar linn fo shoillse grèine is magadh aoise,  
’S mìrean cumte, crèadha iad air fad.

Am fianais gnìomhachd threun a làimhe  
Èiridh muir phràmhach, ruaimleach, fhàs;  
Thig Faoilteach aognaidh, fada, cruaidh  
Mar thoradh air àrdan, faoin nan sonn.

Ma thuiteas deur o shùil a’ churaidh,  
Reothaidh e mus ruig e talamh;  
Èiridh na cuantan uile mar aon  
Glusadan na cruinne nach èist ri a rùn.

Nàdar fhèin mar sgàthan gun fhiaradh  
A sheallas dha fireantachd a bheusan;  
Reusan, gràdh is teagamh nam pìosan,  
Gathan guineach, a thàirnean ceusaidh.

Dlùth ri neoni tha gach nì,  
Ar ceann-uidhe, crìoch gach uile sligh’;  
Crìochnaichte aig àm a bhreith  
A neonitheachd nach tig gu bith.

Ri dealbhadh is ri cruthachadh  
Ri togail chàrn air slèibhtean bruadair;  
A shaothair mar mhaoim a thig na mol  
Air a chnàmh le buillean buan na mara.

A dhìleab: fàsach glas gun chomharra  
Air a choibhneas is a chùram; gun ach  
Balbhachd is breòiteachd is carraighean  
De ghainmhich nach fhuirich nan aon

A dh’fhalbhas tro a chorragean nan sgaoileadh.  
Neo-bhuan is sleamhainn a ghrèim  
Air gach nì a dhealbhas is a thogas e;  
Mu dheireadh tuitidh e: air a ghlùinean.

Cò chuireas làmh air a ghualainn?  
Cò bheir taic dha na chàs sìorraidh?  
Cò thig thar balla reusain?  
Cò nì beatha dha à uisge is gainmhich?

Air oir a’ chuain air Latha Luain  
Thig monmhar, thig bàirlinn, thig  
Garg stoirm is gailleann gar gairm.  
Air oidhirpean dhaoine cha bhi cuimhne.

Ann am meadhan brùideil na doinninn  
Thig soillseachadh à neonitheachd ar cridhe:  
Sàl na mara le frasadh fuar a’ cur deòir  
Nar sùilean agus dòchas fionnar nar beòil.

Thig grian a loisgeas dubhar nan sgòth  
A sheallas neo-bhrìgh ar n-uile ghnìomh;  
Ann an taisbeanadh do-labhairt naomh  
Thig teachdaireachd air clàr na tràghad.

Na feuch ri boinnean neo-chrìochnach a’ chuain  
A chunntadh no a chur nad lion.  
Dearc air iomlanachd an taibh  
Nach tig fo rian do chèille no do smuain.

Chan eil cainnt ann a bheir freagairt dhut,  
Chan eil ann ach sealladh air a’ chuan.  
À doimhne ghorm an uisge  
Thig gràdh is gràs nach tig gu crìch.

★Mar fhreagairt air ‘Mòrachd Dhè’ le Dùghall  
Bochanan

### Seachain am beò

MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL

Seachain an nì a tha beò  
nuair a tha an rathad fliuch  
air latha sgarach foghair  
’s a’ ghrian air a h-uilinn  
’s an latha a’ dùnadh a sgeòil.

Seachain na muileacha-màgag  
a tha ri an gnothach fhèin  
gun aon chùram ann am meadhan ur rathaid.

Seachain a’ ghràineag chruinn, bhiorach  
’s i a’ dèanamh a rathaid dhachaigh;  
cuimhnich air na nithean beò,  
iriosal nan slighe, nach do rinn cron  
ortsa riamh, a tha naomh nan dòigh fhèin.

Seachain an coineanach ’s e na chlisgeadh  
fon t-solas; seachain an geàrr le a leum èasgaidh,  
’s cùm bhon fhiadh a leumas le sùrd.

Air do shlighe dhachaigh nad shlige iarainn  
ann am meadhan do bhàidh  
seachain am beò.

### A’ fònadh

MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL

Feuch gun cuimhnich  
thu d’ anam, thuirt  
i ’s gun fhios a’ m  
dè a chanainn

a’ smaoinachadh  
le m’ anam mi  
ag adhradh ann  
gun sgur agus

feuch gun tèid thu  
dhan eaglais mi  
anns an eaglais  
an seo a-nis

faigh Crìosda dha  
d’ anam agus  
thuirt mi (rium fhìn)  
na can an còrr.

### A’ cuimhneachadh

MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL

A’ cuimhneachadh air a’ ghille  
a bha smaoinachadh gur e smaoin  
mothachadh, ach bha an saoghal  
a’ dol timcheall agus fhuair  
e a-mach mu dheireadh nach e  
smaoin a tha idir a’ riaghladh  
beatha no deireadh làithichean.

### Am fàidh

MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL

Làn labhairt;  
thug e turas fada  
faicinn:  
a-nise làn lèirsinn,  
chan eil guth a’ tighinn às.

### Air m’ aineol

MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL

Ann an seo tha fios agad, co-dhiù, cò cò,  
na craitean fhathast ann an cuimhne a’ bhaile:  
air an taobh thall  
ged a bhiodh tu ann gu bràth  
bidh ceist ort fa chomhair nan aodann,  
mar leanabh air chall ann an coille  
’s nach eil a’ faithneachadh nan craobhan.

# The Sea Is a Time-Machine

ESSAY BY MANDY HAGGITH



**Pytheas of Massalia: Ancient Greek navigator, explorer of the north and geographer. Gouache by Vawdrey Taylor.**

FOR THE PAST five years I have been, imaginatively, in the Iron Age, researching and writing a historical novel trilogy set around 320 BC. I have learned that the sea is the easiest place to let my mind wander without interference from the pesky present. Out on the waves, I have found a time machine.

320 BC is not an arbitrary date: it is when a Mediterranean explorer, Pytheas of Massalia (from modern day Marseilles, back then a Greek colony), probably set foot in Assynt, where I live, on the northwest coast of Scotland. He visited during an amazing voyage that included circumnavigating Britain, venturing as far north as Iceland and the pack ice and across the North Sea to the Baltic. A few years ago, I was working for an archaeological dig that was excavating a broch, a tall, Iron Age cooling-tower-shaped building, which may well have been standing when Pytheas sailed in. As I read Barry Cunliffe's brilliant account

in *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek* I began to imagine the people that Pytheas would have encountered here. What sort of culture clash, I wondered, would have existed between a Greek scientist and his Celtic hosts? The seed of a novel was sown.

Pytheas was also a writer and wrote a book about his voyage, *On the Ocean*. One copy burned in the library at Alexandria and all the others seem to have had similar fates. We live in hope that the full manuscript will materialise somewhere but, so far, it seems that the book is lost. All we have are fragments from Greek and Roman geographers and historians who quoted Pytheas: some refer to him with admiration and respect for his scientific rigour and fascinating discoveries; others deride him as a fantasist. It seems that many of his adventures were, literally, incredible.

Most of the fragments are accounts of his ocean passages that were so outrageous

and new to his Mediterranean readers that many took him to be making them up. He was mocked for his tales of great creatures rising out of the sea spouting fumes, islands where the land flows, smoking and burning, into the water, a place where the ocean becomes slushy and semi-frozen, not to mention locations with tidal ranges of many metres. To us, these details point not to a fabulist but to someone undertaking an extraordinary voyage for his time – daunting even to a modern sailor – up beyond the tidal islands of Britain to Iceland and the southern edge of the polar ice pack, encountering great whales along the way. I can vouch for the humbling strangeness of the blow of a bow-head whale among ice floes. I just hope the awe and thrill he experienced compensated for the lack of credulity of his readers.

Yet from a modern perspective, Pytheas seems like a pretty hard-headed person. While he travelled, he took

sun declination measurements with a measuring stick, called a gnomon. He would have had to make landfall to carry these out, and needed a light-enough day, at noon, for his gnomon to cast a shadow. Fortunately, we have access to his records from one of the quoted fragments of his book and we can use this data to deduce latitudes. This is how we know he came to Assynt on his way up the Scottish west coast.

As well as exploring parts of the world previously unknown to Mediterraneans, Pytheas had specific missions: to identify sources of tin, amber and, probably, walrus ivory. After finding tin in Cornwall, and before his search for amber took him to the Baltic, he travelled way up beyond the northernmost reaches of Scotland. We don't quite know why, but I like to think he was searching for walrus.

It didn't take me long to realise that to write about Pytheas I needed to understand better where he travelled. I



began with a trip on an ice-breaker up into the Arctic, including time spent in the vast Greenland pack ice and a couple of weeks sailing around Svalbard. That got my partner Bill and I hooked on sailing and, on our return, we bought our first sailing boat and set about qualifying as skippers. We were soon completely addicted and upgraded from our tiny boat to a more ocean-worthy yacht, though still small by most sailors' standards, and renamed her Each Mara (Gaelic for walrus). This is how I discovered the time machine.

Sitting here in the cockpit of Each Mara, the sea stretches off into space, dissolving into sky at the horizon. Here, if time is meaningful at all, it is cyclical, following the twice-daily, moon-honouring rhythm of the tides. Water eddies and flows in its dance with wind and swell. The ballet of terns, gannets and guillemots, moves to annual patterns. We tend to think of time passing from the past behind us through the present, here, and out to the future ahead, but such a simple, linear model seems inadequate in this vast, three-dimensional space. The sea, paradoxically, appears to be on the one hand in perpetual change yet, on the other hand, exactly the same as it has always been.

What out here shows that this is the twenty-first century? There are things on the boat that give it away: our ropes are mostly nylon, not heather or nettle or hemp; the stanchions are steel and the mast aluminium, not wood. Yet the process of sailing is basically just as it would have been in Pytheas' day: the winds are still Iron Age winds, the waves and the tides are as varied and as reliable as they always have been and always will be. Surely this uneasy mix of regularity and unpredictability enthralled and frustrated Pytheas just as much as it does me.

This morning it is calm, the sea a glassy shimmer. The rocky Shiant's jut from the sheen like teeth of a rearing sea-giant. The surface is dotted with sea birds and sliced open by rolling sickles of porpoises and curving fin-lifts of dolphins rising to breathe. We trickle northwards with the tide, at one knot.

For Pytheas and the hunters, fishers, traders and travellers of his time, indeed for all of human time until the last century, the only options on such a day would be to row or drift. On a beautiful morning like this, it doesn't seem so bad, but when there's a big swell left by a wind that tempted you out then dropped away, it can seem very different. The tidal streams can be strong in these waters, rocks can approach with alarming speed and rowing against a tide in a big swell is at best hard and at worst impossible.

Conversely when the wind becomes too strong, the sea shows no mercy to those who have failed to make their way to shelter. It is not surprising that our shores are littered with shipwrecks.

These days of course we have the advantage of an engine, although it is a mixed blessing – noisy and polluting

although sometimes admittedly helpful. Bill and I take turn about as skipper. Whoever's turn it is has the power to choose if or when the engine goes on or off. Sometimes, for safety's sake, it simply must be fired up, but I am always reluctant to use it just for convenience, because Pytheas never had that option. Not using the 'iron sail' is part of experiencing the sea as it would have been. It's also quieter. Many a day I have bribed my crew into acquiescence with a ginger (or even chocolate) biscuit when the wind does what the forecast describes as 'becoming variable 3 or less'. We joke that this means 'becalming', not 'becoming'. 'Variable 3 or less' can seem to be a Met Office euphemism for 'not a zephyr'. The boat speed drops to zero. The Iron Age looms into the present.

The weather forecast is a moot point, of course. On board we have VHF radio with four new forecasts every 24 hours, electronic gadgets that tell us exactly where we are to within 3 metres accuracy, a depth sounder, a log that tracks our every move, a plotter and a coastguard on call in case of distress. I'm not a luddite, exactly, but despite all the gadgetry, I never sail without a paper chart. I take bearings off headlands, inscribe marks in pencil to show our progress, and when we are planning to anchor I sound the depths with a lump of lead on a string, especially when I want to forget the present.

Using these old ways, I long for what there would have been in abundance in Pytheas' time but which has been almost entirely eradicated by modern fossil-fuel-powered, electronically-navigated marine traffic: sea lore. The old sailors would have known so much more than we do about how to read the sea, what the behaviour of birds and other sea-life could reveal, ways of recognising coastal and island features to stay safe without recourse to charts or compasses, let alone radar and GPS. In my own way, I've sought the wisdom of elders; friends with lifetimes' experience of the sea have been generous in sharing advice with rookie sailors, and there are books galore. But I imagine songs to sing to guide a boat across shoal ground, cautionary tales of tides and storms, rhymes and jokes to make key facts unforgettable. So much of this, like Pytheas' book, is lost.

As I pore over charts and pilotage books, planning our voyage, I wonder how Pytheas carried the information he had and what notes he took towards *On the Ocean*. I scribble with my fountain pen in my notebook, imagining him scratching on vellum or parchment with a quill dipped in oak gall ink, or simply memorising huge amounts of what he learned. Would he have written down his gnomon measurements in his equivalent of my log book? There were documents that he must have had access to, such as the periplus\* of navigational directions for the Mediterranean, and I wonder if he planned to author a similar guidebook to the Atlantic shores and islands he visited.

Perhaps his book contained much of this; we may never know.

How did Pytheas make his voyage? It is highly unlikely that a Mediterranean vessel could cope with the sea conditions of the northern ocean and much more probable that Pytheas was a passenger on local boats. There can be no doubt that he would have encountered a sophisticated maritime society. There are more than 1,000 brochs and roundhouses located around the Iron Age Scottish coastline and on the Western and Northern isles, and the archaeological finds from these testify to people who travelled and traded by sea, sharing a seafaring culture. Most likely they sent hunting expeditions up north, for walrus ivory perhaps. They certainly traded across to the Baltic, and would have been able to help Pytheas with his search for the source of amber. So I posit that he would have voyaged on trading boats plying the islands and coasts, possibly carrying itinerant metal smiths or other skilled passengers, swapping and bartering commodities like gems, precious metals, skins and probably also slaves.

The Iron Age seems to be a period when individuals began to have significant wealth and status, and conspicuous consumption, fuelled by greed, soon became an important theme of my book. I'm intrigued by our compulsion for ever more stuff and have been exploring in the novel how this, perhaps, began. The sea is a place where it seems possible to feel no greed – there is a joy in surviving for weeks on the minimalist contents of a boat – yet in another of those fascinating paradoxes, it is also the venue of almost unbelievably greedy exploitation of whales, fish, oil and other marine resources.

I have spent considerable time afloat pondering how things become commodities. It seems to me that if an object is valued for its own sake, then it is, in a way, sacred. The process of swapping one such entity for another requires a kind of ritual exchange. For a piece of engraved ivory to be used to buy a sword, or a slave, the significance of the tusk and the bronze or person must be deemed equivalent. If you know the people who made something, or if you made it yourself, it has an inherent sentimental value greater than that of something made by a stranger. For trade to be able to happen on any scale, it is necessary for this sacred value to be removed, or ignored, so that objects can become interchangeable. This was the job of the Iron Age traders with whom Pytheas was travelling.

Pondering such issues, and in particular how they apply to the trading of slaves, leads to thoughts of the value of a life: each of which is a unique flame, with all of its particular richness and experience. And yet, out on the vast and incomparably powerful ocean, older than the oldest rocks on earth, containing 99% of the living habitat of the planet, an individual human life is a mere spark,

trivially extinguishable. It is almost impossible, and certainly foolish, to feel arrogant at sea. Any human is just a little fleeting, inconsequential thing. And yet, as self-importance fades away, the sea offers us such vivid sensuous moments that it can seem that life has never felt so vital.

While at sea, I have also been grieving; my mother died last year and never got to read the book that would have interested her so much. The ocean, I discover, is a good place to mourn a loved one, and this is partly because grief requires a kind of time travel. You have to allow yourself to reinhabit your past, to experience again those significant moments shared with the person you have lost, and a seascape is a better place than any for such time-skipping. Perhaps it is the waves, or the salty tear-taste, or the weeping and keening of the sea creatures. Whatever the cause, the effect is an ease in sliding between past and present. Then and now are easily accommodated in the vastness of the ocean.

So it should be no surprise that the future is also lurking out there, offshore, and that the ocean time machine goes onwards as well as back. At a recent conference, called Expressing the Earth, I led a workshop in which the participants used the sea's help to grope their way back in time. Some went back a generation or so, some several hundreds or thousands of years. The past rippled out. Then I asked each person to let the sea hurl them forwards by the same period, as if riding a wave of time from its trough to its crest, allowing the tide of time to echo its ebb into history with a forward-looking flood. The result was extraordinary: voices from the future spoke of catastrophic change and of hope, of poison and of cleansing, of greed-driven destruction and of communities rebuilt. All the visions had one thing in common: life continuing on.

And of this we can be certain: just as the sea was where we came from, whatever we do, the sea will continue on, long, long after we are gone. ■

*The Walrus Mutterer*, the first volume of The Stone Stories trilogy will be published by Saraband in early 2018.

\*A periplus is a hand-written document listing ports and coastal landmarks, in order and with approximate distances between them, that a ship's captain could expect to find along a shore

# Poetry

## The Attic Calls

RYAN VAN WINKLE

There is hope in every attic  
that one blonde day we will rise  
to all we have clipped and taped,

to all we have boxed and hid.  
We will kneel before the something borrowed,  
the obvious blue. The things I had to put away

but could not throw.

So, Tom Petty  
the Wildflower,  
so a yellow trunk  
of Rolling Stone,  
and beer bottles  
green, brown, black  
that raised to our lips  
that Pete, Helen,  
Max and Mary raised.  
So, the red phone  
held like a shell  
against my ear  
so I can still hear

her voice a changing whisper. The first woman  
I loathed because I loved. And there is hope  
right up till the moment of our deaths

that we will take love and all that  
made us. We will march straight  
up the bone cold rafters, read to our son

the VCR manual. Will take our history  
like men, bring it out into the garden,  
bleach the boxes with light.

And you don't need to tell me  
I am old enough to know. I see  
mother struggle the stairs

it is inevitable.  
I will be called  
to the attic –  
mayonnaise skin,  
sponges of apple  
sauce, flowers  
and cheap frames  
of who she was,  
who she held.  
I will rise  
to where she stored what might have been  
before she became a noun. I will rise  
to the attic and kiss her first name.

And when it is cleared  
I will rise again  
and sit in the true dust

of it all. And I hope  
by then I will comprehend  
why we saved all we could.

## The Sound

HOWARD WRIGHT

Watched all the way across, closer, the ferry comes in  
Hard and fast, top speed, nose lifting as it touches base.  
It believes in traffic and takes it to heart,  
The coach and pristine 4X4s heard but not seen.

We reverse, once the gangplank has been hauled aboard  
And stowed, turn on half a sixpence,

And swing out past ghost islands looming to port –  
The wasted years – while we as we are today – content,  
Looking no further than this –  
Retrace the wake, the swooning crags and clouds,

The white grains of huddled houses, a new world  
Reminiscent, unrefutable; the family

At the stern photographing the dissolving thread,  
The Yorkshire tour up front, head first, zoom lenses  
Speeding their arrival  
Over the Sound of Sleat in the hurry of their lives.

## The Speed of Light

BARRY GRAHAM

She is getting in bed when she realises she is out  
of the half-and-half she takes in her morning coffee.  
He is still dressed. He tells her he'll walk to the market  
and get some for her.

The market is two blocks from their apartment.  
As he walks, he looks up and sees stars  
that have not existed since before he was born.  
They did not know their light would travel so far.

He finds the half-and-half, selects two cartons,  
stands in line at the checkout. Light of dead  
stars, her asleep now in their home. Coffee  
she will drink when she wakes. A journey

of two blocks in the universe.

## She only Came to Dance

IAN TALLACH

I'm not saying it was  
unnecessary  
–just that when I heard  
the music in her head

I noticed something wonderful

There was an elegance  
about her movements  
when we dragged her  
down the corridor

–a kind of effortless

Arms jacketed behind  
her like a rudder  
gently weathering  
the storm, responding

to another rhythm

She smiled; the tempest  
would not give her leave  
to ponder terrifying  
heights of ecstasy

or times of bottomlessness

Do you remember when,  
just for a laugh, she burst  
into the meeting room  
to ask – Is this the dance?!

The joke became her

I'm not saying it would  
have worked out differently  
or that we could have  
stopped it happening

–just that we should have



LAST NIGHT SHE came to him again, the lovely fetch winding round him as he slept.

The room where they used to meet, thirty years ago, was above the newsagent on the Promenade. It must have originally been a store. You got up a fire-escape at the back. There was a bay window overlooking the Firth of Forth where it runs out to the North Sea. An old cast iron stove sat on the lime-washed floorboards and there was a sink with a cold-water tap. That was all. He could use the newsagent's toilet when it was open, but it was understood that the arrangement was not official. At night when trying to sleep, he could hear the sonorous cries of the ships' horns out at sea.

He was grateful for the room as he needed somewhere to bring the kids. Some months after he left his job, his marriage also ended. As he was falling asleep one night, he murmured to his wife, 'Now, when we fuck, it feels like you're being unfaithful to someone.' In the morning, he woke to find her crying. She was having an affair with her boss, who reminded her of her father.

The division of spoils led to him getting the chaise-longue, which improved the look of the room, until he sold it to pay for a set of bagpipes. A couple of years previously, on a trip to Ireland, he had watched an old man playing the uilleann pipes, the expression on his face ardent and spry. The honeyed tones of the pipes rose through the room like the thrum of bees in summer. By then his low spirits had exhausted the sympathy of even his kindest friends, and previously that of his wife. When finally he emerged from the bog of depression, all he wanted to do was play like that old man. He began to practice first thing in the morning before the newsagents opened, and at night after it closed.

The kids were great. On their way round to see him, they scavenged along the beach collecting driftwood for the stove. To them, Daddy seemed to be on a camping trip without end. They brought round a TV-with-video that their granny had bought for their bedroom. Their mother had finished with her boss, but the freedom from marital ties had opened up a world of potentiality, and she was, after all, quite beautiful.

By now he had found a couple of discarded pallets to form a base for a bed, and blew one week's unemployment benefit on a mattress. They sat on it wrapped in blankets and watched old Doctor Who episodes. The tiny cracks in the stove glowed red in the darkness.

To give his days some structure he attended college, on a back-to-work scheme. Not caring what he did, he picked IT. On the first day, a girl entered the lecture room with the swagger of a young thug. She was tall with short red hair and a wicked smile. She scanned the room until her eyes met his and then she grinned.

A week later they met in a queue for

the toilet at a student party. By the time they hit the street, he had revealed his age, his kids and his impending divorce, and then he left her at the corner so he could piss behind a wall. He was surprised, when he came back, to find her still waiting.

When they got to the room, there was no wood for the stove that wintry night. She pushed him back onto the bed, and they climbed in without having kissed. Their bodies folded into one another almost by accident, and a little while afterwards she got up to be sick. She left in the early hours of the morning and he lay on in happy disbelief. Each time they met thereafter, he noticed their first touch relieved some previously unrecognised pain.

All that year, they got away from lectures as soon as they could, to race through the leaf-strewn streets at dusk, their shoes ringing out like iron, guided by the small orange blossoms of the lamps in the fog. For years afterwards, he would associate the grey skies and soft breezes of autumn with her.

She was a former hairdresser from

Paisley who had become allergic to the chemicals used in her work. Since that alteration, she usually dressed in jeans, an old pullover, converse sneakers. It was the first time he had slept with a woman who wore her femininity so casually. One day she wanted to cut his hair, which she did without allowing him a mirror, all the while in silence. He wondered if he had caused offence. In the middle of cutting she put down the scissors, put her head against his, kissed him, and then carried on. Another time they were in bed and he was inside her, when she began to cry. He withdrew in alarm and looked at her face. 'I'm so happy' she said.

He tried talking about the kids to her, but she just changed the subject. When they came at the weekend, she stayed away, and he and the kids took a bus out to the hills, trying to climb a different one each time. Once when they were leaving the room, he started to cry. The boy turned away but the youngest was affected and wrote about it in a 'what I did at the weekend' essay at school.

One morning they met before the first lecture, caught a bus back to the room,

and spent the rest of the day in bed. In the evening, he got up to fry bacon on the stove, and they took sandwiches down to the sea wall, where they sat as the moon emerged from the clouds, to throw a gleaming path across the water. Usually she did not stay all night, but that evening they fell asleep and did not wake until dawn. Later on, she caught the bus home, and at the stop outside the flat she shared with her boyfriend, the doors opened to reveal him waiting to go to work. He passed her by without comment.

She was the kind of girl that men talked to without predatory intent. They chose not to banter with her and she did not flirt. They might talk about motor-bikes, which she knew about. They might talk about music, which she saw as a vast city, whose main thoroughfares were to be avoided, while in the backstreets treasures were to be exchanged. The folk tunes he played were nice, but museum pieces. She thought the world had produced too many people, that time was impossible to measure, and that the planet was doomed. Sometimes after she had smoked weed, which she did often, she seemed to inhabit a separate domain and could not be reached.

There were times when she was absent for long periods. One day when he was expecting her, she didn't show up, nor was she at college the next two days. It seemed her pal's boyfriend had been holding some crack cocaine for a dealer, and she and her pal thought they would give it a try when the boyfriend was out. They only stopped when it was finished. When the boyfriend returned and discovered the loss, he started beating her pal up, until she intervened with a baseball bat and put him in hospital.

In her absence, he would retreat to the pipes. He hung onto each note, feeling the two slips of Spanish cane in the chanter vibrating against each other; the resonance filling the room. He loved especially the playing of a slow air, the melody yearning for what is lost or what cannot be. It was during these times she began to come to him, his night visitor, the haunt continuing through the waking day.

In the end the absences simply got longer, until finally the course was over. They both passed and she got a distinction.

One last Sunday afternoon, long after their exams were over, she appeared on the fire-escape. He was surprised that his feelings were as acute as ever. As usual, she only wanted to fuck, but on leaving she turned at the door, and looked long and hard at him. 'Ye take care of yerself, see? For I'll no be back.' Then she vanished through to the West forever.

It took a long time to get over her leaving, but as much as he missed her, he felt she had left him with more than when they began, and that was himself really, and the moon and the sea and the pipes and the room. ■

# The Night Visitor

SHORT STORY BY D.B. MACINNES



## REEL TO RATTLING REEL WRITING COMPETITION

Win £500! Open call for submissions

The Major Minor Cinema Project requests submissions to an open creative writing competition on the theme of memories of cinema-going. Fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry will all be accepted. Broad interpretations of the theme are welcome and submissions can include memories of particular films or any of a wide variety of experiences associated with watching films or going to the cinema.

Shortlisted entries will be selected for publication in a new anthology of creative writing (to be published as an ebook by Freight Books).

PRIZE FOR WINNING ENTRY: £500

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS: MIDNIGHT, NOVEMBER 15, 2017

For details on how to enter and competition guidelines please visit <http://tinyurl.com/yd2874p4>

Videos of the commissioned writers reading their works can be viewed at [www.hifilmguild.gla.ac.uk](http://www.hifilmguild.gla.ac.uk)



# Poetry

## Lumi – Snow

GERRY STEWART

*Nirskua, narskua, kirskaa* –  
the squeak, crunch and sparkle of the dawdle to school.  
No snow days, the country is built to push on.

*Nietos* – unfettered hard piles sliding  
onto street and pavements with childish enthusiasm.  
We use a sledge for the nursery run.

Pristine drifts formed by wind – *kinos*,  
too difficult for him to resist dipping a hand or diving hip-deep.  
He falls every two steps, an early clue.  
I haul him up by his snowsuit,  
thinking we're all still adjusting.

Awaiting the snowstorm – *lumimyrsky*  
the promise of white-lead skies falling behind glass for hours.  
They wake to the excitement of more and more.

I wake to the frustration of slush – *sohjo*  
frozen to ice by roller coaster temperatures  
and the nightmare of pushing a buggy over rutted paths.

*Jää* – ice bite on exposed flesh  
through thin cheap layers, the dry hush of my skin.  
We are not prepared.

Counting the points of each snowflake – *viti*  
the frothy powder as it lands on my glove,  
I try to reignite my joy in the silence dropping over the city.

The unfamiliar shovel's slide over *iljanne* –  
the thin layer of snow atop the hard-caked icy path.  
Biting out steps to our door,  
reaching the end and starting again.

The neighbours' fire pits and ice candles, illuminating our way,  
the promise of *valo* – light, bringing warmth and home.

## Castlebay

HELEN BODEN

In the church of Our Lady, Star of the Sea,  
two pictorial windows: fishing scene, South;  
North, angelic hosts instrumental –  
iconography customised; and conventional.

This doesn't overwhelm with style and scale –  
what's gained here through stained glass  
is a clarity that knowledge of theology  
or the history of art can start to obscure.

I'm less moved than expected by  
craftsmanship depicting local custom,  
more affected by how these angels,  
undistinguished of their kind,

make lucid an over-familiar aesthetic,  
one that made me crave vernacular  
bespoke for the island culture  
I'd been more minded to embrace.

## Kinlochbervie

After John Bellany

HELEN BODEN

i  
Here is land's last stand against the Atlantic.  
The defiance of the limb it flexes out!  
– muscular, as animate  
as those human forms reluctant  
who reappear to prophesy  
their sons' returning to the element:  
kin, locked in genetic concatenation  
between gneiss and shore, in a frieze  
of lives lived short and hard on the edge  
of the channel's slim refuge from the ocean,  
before Wrath turns gentle, prosperous, Orcadian.

ii  
Unsung now the fishing's gone  
thirty years after John Bellany  
painted the port's biblical stasis

everything's empty: ice-factory,  
warehouses. Carpark's empty of  
the people-carriers that bussed across

fishers from the east to work  
the KLB boats in the nineties –  
where, pinned against the Mission  
by a force eight, we  
witnessed the northern lights.

## Flanders Moss

DAVID STAKES

I saw her walk towards me with the dawn  
She moved through the plantation along the old railway line  
Purpose and promise  
It took her about ten minutes from emergence to greeting

In the clearing, face to face  
She spoke to me with the familiarity of a Minister  
She enquired about my journey, my hometown and my day

I told her I was going to walk the Forth  
To Easter Offerance  
She told me I was terribly wet and should tread carefully  
She was worthy and uncomplicated  
Like a pilgrim, like a holiday

The lady on the Moss  
Had taken the new bridge from Aberfoyle  
She had brought blessings and fresh bread

The clouds were clearing  
And hope was in spate  
She said the river was the source of everything

We wished each other well  
Parted  
And went our ways



# Six Poems on the Leaving of St Kilda

BY STEPHANIE GREEN

## Walking on Air in Gannet Slippers

My lover slits the neck,  
clears out the innards

and empties the head, except  
for the crown, now a heel.

Turned inside out,  
it's cosy as a womb.

Their crowns crack  
as I shuffle along.

At night,  
I have flying dreams

## Euphemia MacCrimmond (Eibhrig NiCruimein)

*(On 22nd May, 1865, Alexander Carmichael, collector of Gaelic folklore, songs and poetry, travelled to St Kilda to meet their bard, Euphemia, aged 84.)*

The world grows dark. Winds howl  
round my *Taigh Dhu* as I tend  
my lamp, filling it with fulmar oil.

Exiled in my own house. Mocked by the minister:  
*Give up your foolishness. At your age,  
you should be thinking of your eternal home.*

A stranger sought me out, led  
by an excited crowd of villagers,  
curious, enthralled – visitors so rare.

He begged for the gift of my voice.  
I sang, straining over the hubbub,  
the shouting children, barking dogs,

while he scribbled down what he could.  
He promised to return but he never did.  
I have so much more: hymns to the old gods,

the sun and moon, stars and waters,  
love songs and laments for those gone over,  
keening like smoke turning in the air.

## The Boat Cold

Even before their flit boats reach us, we smell them.  
Fishy – from the *giben*, or fulmar grease,  
they pour on the flesh and eggs of the birds they eat.

Bird-people indeed: their cries are raucous  
as gulls, no doubt to make themselves heard  
over the thunderous surf of this savage rock.

If you try to photograph the women, they scowl  
but offer them a shilling and they'll scamper indoors,  
fetch their spinning wheels, smile and pose.

For sale, they have tweed – rough but serviceable,  
or quaint souvenirs: fulmar and gannet wings,  
blown eggs and brooches from oystercatcher beaks.

They need cash for luxuries from the mainland:  
whisky, for medicinal use they say, and tobacco –  
their silverweed smoke no longer to their taste.

Spoilt by charity, they demand coal  
and paraffin as if it was their right – too idle  
to dig for peats, or milk the fulmars for oil.

The men lounge about, all talking at once.  
I'm told it's a Parliament. They do no work  
unless you bribe them to put on a flying display –

as good as the circus: abseiling the beetling cliffs,  
swinging out to avoid overhangs –  
it's enough to take your breath away.

*(It was said that the St Kildans fell 'a-coughing' with 'flu-like symptoms a week or so after a tourist steamer called.)*

## I tell my husband I am pregnant and he sets out to make a tiny coffin (1891)

I choose a name: Mhairi or Callum.  
He searches the tide-wrack daily for driftwood.

He forbids me to make clothes  
But I make sheets for the coffin-crib.

There will be clean linen until the last  
while I will rock and croon to my babe

for the few blessed days of its life.  
It is God's will. I shut out imaginings:

the fourth or fifth night,  
when the babe gives up sucking;

the seventh, clenched gums,  
even for my finger dipped in water.

I am knitting a shawl of such intricacy,  
nothing so beautiful will have been seen before.

## I might as well be a widow (1900)

I weave horse-hair into a rope,  
the strands tight as my lover's grip  
pulling me to his lips.

Born for the crags. Big toes.  
Abseiling, he'd lean out  
and swing like a pendulum.

On Stac Dhona, the Wicked Stack,  
he balanced on that ledge the size  
of a thumb with his own thumb.

The impossible leap proved possible.  
A legend. But he was snared by tales of taller,  
man-made cliffs in a place called Glasgow.

Every day I'm like the fowlers  
who play the rope out over  
the cliffs bearing the weight of a man.

They talk of a sudden slack,  
how they listen for shouts but hearing  
none, do not give up at once,

but play out more rope, straining  
against the roar of wind and waves  
to catch a voice, waiting for a tug.

## The Leaving of St Kilda (1930)

A fire in the hearth, oats on the table,  
the Bible open at Exodus.  
We locked the door.

We leave behind our fowling rods  
and snares, our looms, spinning wheels,  
and ploughs: our old way of life.

On board *The Harebell*, we sail  
past the jagged humps of Dun which sheltered  
our people for centuries from Atlantic gales.

How sheer are the cliffs from the sea.  
Will anyone ever again lower  
men on ropes to capture fulmars?

Hours to row, but no time by steamer –  
the stacks, Lee and Armin are a maelstrom  
of cries, glints, waves and wings.

Boreray appears to loom then sink.  
Past Levenish, once our horizon,  
the islands shrink, become a smudge

you would miss unless you knew where to look.  
As we head for the open sea, the fulmars  
haunting our bows, veer away.



# Returning to the Bay

BY HARRY GILES

I'M IN A cemetery just outside of Mantayo Seepee (Churchill), Manitoba, on the edge of Kihcikanîy (Hudson Bay), in Ininiwak (Cree) traditional territory. The snow has drifted several feet deep in places, covering many of the stones and wooden crosses, but it's packed and frozen enough that I can walk across. I try to step lightly. Just north, beyond the fence, across the snow-drifted rocks, are hundreds of miles of frozen ocean. It's -15 degrees out, minus a few more for wind chill. Every body surface I can cover is covered, most with four layers, and my cheeks are stinging with cold. There's a track of something leaving over the drifts — maybe an arctic fox, maybe a rabbit or hare. There are bird tracks too: snow bunting, I think, and maybe some from one of the big, human-sounding ravens that's been flying overhead. I look down at the gravestones: the surnames are Flett, Oman, Sinclair, Spence. Names from home.

I've travelled here as part of Outriders, an Edinburgh International Book Festival project, supported by the Scottish Government, which has sent 5 Scottish

writers on journeys across the Americas, partnering with local writers to explore history and present. I'm tracing the role of Orkney-born settlers in Canada, particularly in Manitoba, in the centre of the country. We came over at first largely with the Hudson's Bay Company, the vast imperial trading organisation whose practices heavily shaped the early years of Canadian colonisation. HBC ships would dock in Stromness, Orkney, as their last port before crossing the Atlantic, and there they took on men (and in the famous case of Isobel Gunn, a woman living as a man) to work the company's outposts in the Canadian north. Some worked their years and came home to Orkney; some stayed on as English-speaking settlers; and some married with First Nations people, their children becoming First Nations (particularly Cree, but also Dene and Inuit), Métis (the indigenous nation which also shares European ancestry), or British settlers, depending on which communities they lived with.

And so there are Orkney people threaded throughout Manitoba's settler-colonial history, and our names are

everywhere. I read about John Norquay, once Premier of Manitoba, and Métis with an Orcadian grandfather. There was once a Birsay Village outside of Winnipeg, also called Orkneytown, which failed due to famine and was taken over by Francophone Métis who renamed it Saint François Xavier; and there is still a town nearby called Binscarth. In Winnipeg, I found a vegan burger restaurant on Bannatyne St, named after a South Ronaldsay-born Bannatyne who served in Riel's Provisional Government — in fact, the Red River Resistance, led by the Francophone Métis Louis Riel, a defining political moment in the creation of the Canadian state, had numerous Orkneymen and Métis with Orkney ancestry involved. Most strikingly of all, I learned about a creole called Bungi that was spoken in Manitoba until the mid 20th century. Drawing on Cree, English, Orcadian and Gaelic, it very clearly preserved words and grammatical features that came direct from Orcadian: folk who would "slockit the light", and who would use "to be" as an auxiliary verb where English would use "to have".

When I learned that Bungi was now extinct my eyes pricked: Orkney words and forms made it all the way to Manitoba, and became part of a distinctive Métis culture, before losing ground to English, just as I'm worried Orcadian could.

So here in Churchill, in the deep cold before spring thaw, I stand, grinning, beneath a street sign reading "Orcade Bay". We've been here for three days, towards the end of the long freeze, well in the off-season, after the best polar bear watching and before the best beluga watching. The national parks are closed, and only a couple of guides are still available. It's a bad time for tourism and a good time for social history: it's easier to find folk with time to chat about themselves. We've visited the Itsanitaq Museum, which has an extraordinary collection of Inuit art collected by the Catholic church, and the Arctic Trading Company, which still serves as a traditional trading post for furs and artwork, and where we were shown the beadwork, tufting and slipper-making workshop, but which also sells cuddly polar bears and t-shirts. We ate at Gypsy's, which does pretty spectacular fried chicken and apple fritters. We drove out to the Northern Studies Centre, past shipwreck, plane crash, and abandoned rocket testing site. We visited the oldest prefabricated building in Canada, an Anglican church with ornate stained glass. I rode around the boreal forest, right against the tree





line, in a dog sled. We've hiked out through the snow to the very point of Cape Merry, where the frozen Churchill River meets the frozen bay, and where we can just see the snowed-in buildings of Prince of Wales Fort across the ice. If we had the energy, the gear and the company, we could walk there straight across the river.

Alongside our historical link, there are many other connections. The arctic terns that come here in the snow-free summer are in Orkney, especially Papa Westray, in spring: at home they are pickiternos, and here one of their names is iniquutailaq. Both are small communities on the edge of their country; both are now tourism-dominated economies, with the public sector the other major employer, plus folk working in traditional economic activity and a bit of larger industrial work. Both were once a major naval base. Both have a government allowance for distant living. There are only two main roads. Everyone has a car. Folk have multiple jobs: you keep seeing the same faces in different places; some shops and businesses just operate out of people's homes. There are locally-organised cultural events that bring everyone together

As I think about this, I realise what I'm sounding most like, with my too-big smile and my eagerness to talk about my project: the Americans and Canadians who would visit Westray, where I grew up, to look through the kirkyards and

local history archives in search of their ancestors. I'm doing it the wrong way round, but it's just as strange a pursuit, and my preconceptions are just as misguided. I start to feel embarrassed, and spend more time looking at the snow. And there's a deeper shame too: my excitement in the connections, close sometimes to pride, is inextricable from the genocide and cultural extermination that is the past and present of settler-colonisation, the extent of which is rarely understood, let alone talked about, in contemporary Scotland. Across the Americas, settler-colonisation is the most extensive genocide in world history, and the land theft, racist inequality, and deprivation of rights is still ongoing, still defended. Every Orcadian placename has taken the place of a name in a local language.

These legacies are also, however, double. As I talk to people in Churchill, a majority indigenous population, about the project, there is interest in history and pride in ancestry. People can face the truths of colonialism and take pride in their present selves. One of the most interesting places I find for conversation is the Churchill Online Bulletin Board, where folk post local events, lost and found items, and general news. At the encouragement of a couple of locals I met, I post there about my project, and soon the comments are filled with people descended from Orkney folk, amused to hear about their namesakes in Scotland.

Patricia Sinclair Kandurin wants her Sinclair castle back and to know what her tartan is; for once, I think, yes, go you, please take the castle, I'll help.

And, of course, there are stories of agency and resistance through colonialism. Pam Eyland told me about Alexander Kennedy Isbister, currently being celebrated during the 140th anniversary of the University of Manitoba. The Métis son of an Orkneyman, he was born on the Bay, but was sent to Orkney in the 1820s, to the school in St Margaret's Hope, for a few years of education. He eventually worked for the HBC himself, but ended up quitting due to the racial discrimination he faced. He travelled back to Scotland for study at the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh, becoming a very successful lawyer working mostly in England. He was also an outspoken advocate for progressive causes, particularly Métis rights. And the reason for the University's celebration is that he left a major bequest for scholarships for students that was explicitly regardless of gender, race or creed: an early mission to diversify the student population and make education accessible to all.

The stories, then, are not one-dimensional. Though I'm part of it, how the story continues to be told is mostly not for me to say. Why am I writing, then? I'm well aware that my own project has its own colonial layers: five Scottish writers exploring the Americas and bringing

back tales. I have my own issues to work through and my own learning to do, but I don't want to take up more space than I should. I do think it's vital for Scottish folk (for all folk from colonising nations) to be free from denial about how they have profited and how they continue to profit from ongoing colonial processes, and that involves doing some of this work. I want Scotland to recognise its part in this, and to know that colonialism is a huge and ongoing process (and one that's different and more extensive, though related, to what the Gàidhealtachd went through), and to understand the extent of the damage and the necessity of reparation. The settler story should not be central to this, but nor can it be ignored; indigenous voices must be highlighted, and should not be spoken for by others. I want to find a place of acknowledging these connections that recognises my place in them. I'm not trying to hunt out guilt, but I am trying to understand these names and words in a way that – in a term spoken by the poet Layli Long Soldier – is free from denial. ■

*The Outriders project culminated in a book and events at the Edinburgh International Book Festival 2017. More information, blogs from the Canada trip, credits, and a free poetry publication are available at [harrygiles.org/categories/outriders](http://harrygiles.org/categories/outriders).*

# Dàin Ùra le Pàdraig MacAoidh, Iain S. Mac a' Phearsai

## Sìoda

PÀDRAIG MACAOIDH

Nuair a dh'fhuadaicheadh na Mùraich  
à Alpujarra, dh'fhàg iad dà theaghlach  
anns gach baile, gus innse mu uisgeachadh  
agus oideachadh cnuimhean-sìoda:

mar a bhios iad fàs air craobh nan smeur  
nuair a tha an teòthachd dìreach mar  
bu chòir, mar a thig bàs cho fearasta  
le caochladh teas le fàileadh caca le fuaim;

mar a bhios tu a' dèanamh brag 's sgleog  
nuair a tha tàirneanaich ann, gus nach bi  
iad a' mothachdainn; mar a bhios tu gan sadail  
beò ann an uisge goileach 'son sìoda mìn.

'S thug iad am fiosrachadh dhaibh  
a dh'aindeoin gach sgleog 's creach 's guidhe.

## Nàdar de

PÀDRAIG MACAOIDH

Chan eil ùidh agam ann am faclan, thuirte e, ach  
gnìomhan ath-aithriseil a-mhàin, an dòigh sam bi na  
tha sinn a' dèanamh trup 's a-rithist gar cruthachadh 's  
dealbhadh. Fad bhliadhnaichean bha mi beò-ghlacte  
le bhan-dia Mhinoan, ban-dia nan nathraichean,  
mar a chùim i a gairdeanan crom, ceart-cheàrnach, a'  
tomadh suas. Bhithinn ag atharraibh air a' ghiùlan fad  
ioma uair a thìde, cinnteach gum faighinn nàdar de  
lèirsinn às, iuchair fiù's no tàimh-neul. Nuair a dhùin  
mi mo shùilean, co-mhisg mo chumadh rùisgte le  
cumadh na ban-dia, dh'fhàs mo chraiceann a bhith na  
chriadh gloinichte, gach cearb san fhaience sgaoilte  
trom chnàmhan. Cha robh riamh agam leis an canadh  
tu soirbheas. Ach bha mi glacte leis a' phròiseas.

Thàinig e air ais thugam aig cur-air-bhog  
taisbeanaidh aig Colaiste Ealain Dhùn Èideann  
nuair a chuir fear, gu soilleir air mhisg, a bheul ris an  
uinneag gus a ghlainne a dh'imlich, mar gum b'e  
alembic a bh' ann, no praiseach, agus an clàbar co-  
thàthadh criostalaichte deuchainne, firinn an robh e  
air chall agus a-nis air lorg.

## Na Cumhaichean as Fheàrr airson an Dàn seo a Leughadh

PÀDRAIG MACAOIDH

Bidh thu ann an cuisle, air do chòmhdach gu tur  
ann an geal suaicheanta, a' siubhal le corra mhìle  
de do luchd-eòlais as fhaisge

gu rudeigin coltach ri solas,  
seagh, adhbhar, math coitcheann.  
Bha thu trup nad fhàireag, nad chnàimh,

agus a dh'aithghearr bidh thu, ann an extremis dàilte,  
nad aonar. 'S math dh'fhaodte gur h-e seo do bhrìgh.  
Cha tèid a chur an céill nad fhaclan fhèin.

## Bàgh na Pàirce Bàine

IAIN S. MAC A' PHEARSAIN

far chosta Aondraim  
còrr is fichead mìle  
thar a' chuain  
chì thu Ìle  
mo shluaigh sgapte  
bhuan fhìn...

is bristidh na tonnan  
le mòr-fhuaim  
na mara cèin,  
a' sluaisreadh mo chuimhne  
aighear, threun...

's nan gabhadh a ruigsinn  
ann am prioba na sùla  
no ann an tionndadh drèin

cha b' e ruith ach leum,  
rùisgte,  
a-staigh leam  
gu Sruth na Maoile  
gus an tiginn a-mach beò  
mu Mhaol na h-Obha

gus an snàmhainn  
gu rèidh  
gu Loch an Dàil  
gus an snàiginn a-null  
gu feòlmhorach  
gu Cille Chomain  
gus mo dhruim 's mo chom  
a thiomachadh  
air tràigh na machrach buain...

is mo chasan-sa  
stobte, frionasach  
sa ghaimhnich  
shìaraich, theth

## dà phoit bhig

IAIN S. MAC A' PHEARSAIN

dh'fhàg iad dà phoit bhig air bhàrr  
a' phreas ud:  
preas ann an taigh 'ùr' air màl nach fhac' an leithid roimhe.

a' chlann agam fhìn air iasad, cha mhòr,  
a' siubhal a-mach 's a-staigh on taigh sa:  
mar dithis chluicheadair iomain air streang fhada mhòr.

is air an oidhche, 's mi leam fhìn is àsan air ais aig an taigh mhòr,  
crùbaidh mi sìos mu choinneamh an dà phoit chrèadha a rinn 'ad fhèin:  
is mi gan adhradh mar phàganach air beulaibh altar a shinnsearan  
chèin.

## fo sgòd

IAIN S. MAC A' PHEARSAIN

am bàta-seòlaidh  
daolag gheal is dhubh  
a' snàigeadh a-null  
gu tìr-mòr  
mar deur a' leantail a shlighe  
tarsainn clais sa ghruaidh

gus an ruig e 'm port thall  
goirid bhuainn  
ait' a chì thu  
air èiginn  
bho bhos a seo  
caillte sa cheò an-diugh

mar chrìoch àraidh  
cràidh

mar bhuille  
nad bhroilleach

's tu cumail d' anail  
fo sgòd 's do dhùil

## Beachd-àite

IAIN S. MAC A' PHEARSAIN

Tha an luchd-fianais  
cho pailt air na sràidean  
a' treigsinn nam bhanaichean-imrich  
's glanadh nan uinneagan  
airson firinn bhualte, theann  
a sgaoileadh tro bhileagan  
làn dhathan is bhagairtean  
a' gabhail brath  
air iomagain nam faoin  
's doras neo-ghlaiste nan truaghan.  
chan fhaic mi fianais  
anns na sùilean lìomhta sin  
ach an cràdh a dh'fhàg  
fear den àireamh mheallt' ud  
ann an cridhe na neamhnaid  
a ghlèidhinn na bu phrìseile  
na firinn no glòir no rìgh.



# Poetry

## Ram

GRAHAM TURNER

Only Kenny knows  
whose ram it was,  
a four-horned Heb that  
upped and tuppied  
and signed off out  
up atop the croft  
and out of sight:  
until, weeks after,  
they're calling me to  
'get the gate, man!'  
but I've got nowt –  
I'm naked, no horns  
no hook nor crook:  
I cannot help.  
I'm rattled but  
the ram's wrestled  
to the threshold  
and the rest  
is swiftly settled.

## Upkeep

GRAHAM TURNER

See for yourself – contingency  
at each man's door here  
takes the form of boats:

to each his ark, his Ararat,  
a landing safe above the tides  
and culls of centuries

but standing ready for the call,  
maintained as chronicle, a hold  
on entropy, in preparation

for the better flood to come.  
That first spring, I had no idea  
what marked the day to turn his boat –

not forty nights but certainly  
a week of rain pulsed down the burn  
like blood returning to the heart;

such sunlight glints as showed sang  
up the way from earth, from loosestrife,  
marigold and gorse – he felt it

right, and so it was, to roll the hull  
in readiness for this year's light;  
to do what will be done.

## Attendant

NANCY GRAHAM

### 1. *Society News, 1907*

*'There are a great many fashionable people still at Strathpeffer  
Spa. The scene at the pump-room at high noon is very animated  
and gay indeed.'*

Behind the wooden counter, waiting  
white-aproned to dispense the tarry water  
is a man so stern-faced,  
so rigid in demeanour I am frightened  
to accept his service.  
I cannot call it insolence  
but I do believe  
a dissident urge is burning in his breast.

### 2. We Recommend the Peat Bath

Submerged,  
all men are the same in the gloomy murk.  
Some joke; others glare as he helps them  
into the bath, defying him to look  
at their ordinary flesh. He concentrates on  
the earthy scent percolating the air,  
his labour. Tearing fibrous bricks of peat  
into deep tubs; stirring the boiling mass  
hard, like mixing winter feed for cattle:  
hides steaming as they wait  
at the empty trough, huddled together,  
dumb to the louring clouds at their backs.  
He rattles the pail, advances.

### 3. Day's End

There's Venus, glinting at him out of lilac sky  
if he cared to notice.  
Skirting puddled ruts to save his trousers,  
Roderick tramps home over a darkening hill,  
guided by the black thicket  
of gorse and bramble tangled along the path.

And lifts the latch to find light:  
haze rising from hot pans;  
the women moving deftly round,  
bringing bread and good butter to the table.  
His daughter, his wife.  
Say grace now, Father.

He bows his head from their bright gaze.

## Flora, Rising

NANCY GRAHAM

They call her lass, still.  
Sometimes in mid-summer she tugs her heavy skirt up  
to lie on the basalt slab  
tumbled at the hillfoot, beside the crooning hens.  
Arms and legs spread wide,  
she surrenders herself to the heat,  
idly waving a curled fringe of bracken;  
imagining the cross of her body

as it looks from the sky,  
how the buzzard gliding on banks of warm air  
might turn its hooked head, snagged by her  
dark stillness in a green expanse  
shifting with small life. Eyes closed,  
breath slowing, she lets sound recede:  
buzz of insects, sheep bleating in the far field,  
the encompassing chirrup of sparrows.

Above and beyond herself  
she roams with the pierce-eyed bird of prey,  
circling the bony ridge of the hill, seeing  
everything below: her spindly shape on stone;  
the bracken crowding, rutted track,  
the byre, beasts clustered at the water barrel.  
All points diminish. Clouds feather her feet;  
the earth curves blue: she is unreachable.

## Ewes

GRAHAM TURNER

Every time we reach the gate,  
the ewes, all black as pitch,  
jogtrot to form a flock  
and she laughs, a freefall peal,  
and raps, "I've got my batches  
and cookies" – making no sense  
at all, up and down the glen,  
but wholly finding congruence  
with gorse and grass and glee.



# Outsider Walking

By KIRSTY GUNN



THERE ARE WAYS of doing things, and other ways. There are ways of going somewhere, having a plan about it, discussing in advance how long it might take to walk a path, the kind of route we might follow, how we might manage certain passages... And there are other ways. These other ways are never planned. They rise up around us. They come upon us and all at once and often in the midst of weather. They take us beyond the known, always, and set us loose there; make of us people who are strange to ourselves; they are rogue, unpredictable and dangerous. We swear, each time of our going out into this kind of walking that we'll never do it again. "That was close" we say afterwards, when we are home again and safe. "That was really close."

For sure, the sentence, in Sutherland: "Let's go for a walk", can mean a number of different kinds of walks. As I am writing, when we say that we are going for a walk we mean that we are planning to stay out for several days. That's how long we think it will take. This is because we want to follow the river at the bottom of our hill, a tributary of the famous Brora, all the way up to its source somewhere in the hills over to the west. Quite often a Sutherland walk is like this – a day out to a hut we know where we can stay over at Loch Choire, or to the stables on the Ben Armine estate, or to an inn up towards Strath Naver where they have rooms for the night. But always these walks come

with a discussion and expectation. Even when we are organising a walk that's no more than going out to a picnic spot we've discovered, with great flat rocks for sunbathing and a miniature mighty waterfall that acts like a sort of spa – is how we describe it to friends – still, we plan, we know.

These walks then are not "close" – to that other sort. The other kind, that outsider way, is of another order.

Such a walk occurred earlier this year, in Spring, when our second daughter had friends staying, girls who did not know the Highlands, though one had come for a visit the year before who had forgotten her boots and said that those we had didn't fit or were uncomfortable... Either way, then there had been very little in the way of going out, but this time the weather was benign – a high, pale blue sky most days and though the light wind was chill, minted with the snow that lay on the high hills, the sun was warm.

We'd decided on a walk two nights before, my husband and I going over the map that hangs on the sitting room wall, a dram in our hands, to plan it – and then looking closer at the area on the ordnance survey. It would take about eight hours or so, we figured, starting with a route we knew well, up through the hills of the Balnacail estate, mercifully saved, due to action on the part of a protest group we have established, from yet another of the wind turbine developments that have been allowed to proliferate across Sutherland and Caithness. The way we'd planned was

straightforward: an estate track would take us alongside the Blackwater, a river that begins in the north, near the Caithness Sutherland border and splits in two, a couple of miles north of the Balnacail gates, leading into the Blackwater and Brora. Then we would veer off to the left, crossing the water and coming up through an abandoned strath – there was an old schoolhouse there we had long wanted to visit – and after that we would be connecting up to and returning home for the last couple of miles down the Sciberscross to Rogart road. The whole gorgeous day, but for the awful gigantic tips of turbine arms showing over the edges of the hills from the Kilbraur industry at the last phase, when we joined the road, free of any spoil.\*

So the morning began and all was well, wet weather gear packed away with the picnic; we were in shirtsleeves by the time we were up on the hill at Balnacail. In the clear, still air it was easy to hear the rush of the water in the ravine below us, and to mark out, after a couple of hours of walking, by the sound of the water alone, another favourite swimming pool, deep and black and edged with slabs of boulders that slant into it like trays.... And sure enough, Katherine had told her friends about it and they decided they would take a break in the walk for a quick plunge and down the hill they went, leaving us, sitting in the sunshine. We lay back on the heather and dozed.

Some time later we woke and the weather had changed, overcast, and no

sign of the girls – but then here they came, up through the straggly birch and hazel that clings to the hillside there, and all of them chattering with cold. One had got stuck on the other side of the river, they said, had lost her nerve and not been able to swim back – and it had taken them a while to "rescue her" was my daughter's phrase... Whatever, they'd all been in the water too long for a day that early in Spring.

That is not the part I want to write about though – though in a sense one might say that the walk began to change at that point, in the sense that the character of the walk changed, its intent. For at that point, the party split, just as the same river we were walking along had split from itself, and where we had started out as one, we were now two. The girls had done no more than head down the hill for a swim but by the time we reached the place later in the woods where they would leave us, the walk had changed, danger set in place like a stone dropped in a deep pool. I gave them juice and chocolate and made sure they had plenty of extra clothes on, and we started up on our way again, going down the other side of the hill and along the river's edge for some time before finding a place we could cross. Once over the other side, we made towards a stand of trees and stopped there for lunch. By now we'd been out for about six hours.

The weather had returned fine, but patchy. There was no longer the glorious still open sky of Spring that we'd started



with; the sun came and went with squalls of rain, patches of blue shadowed quickly with grey. Lunch was a hasty affair in these conditions; the girls still felt cold, they said, and one – the one who had come with no boots the year before – said she wanted to turn back. “Oh, no” we replied. “That’s not the way of things at all. It will be fun, you’ll see”, and my daughter comforted her with the idea that this walk would make the Duke of Edinburgh expedition that their school had organised for the following term, “like nothing”. On we went.

The route took us into woods soon after, and we started to climb – all was as marked on the survey map until there was a split in the path – that word again, split – division, confusion, change – and we hovered for a while, not sure which way to go. Robert Frost’s poem always comes out at a time like this – “And sorry I could not travel both and be one traveller” – though strangely no one felt like speaking it out now, and we decided on a track and carried on up. According to our instructions we should have been coming out on the edge of the abandoned settlement any moment, the schoolhouse and a scattering of crofts – there were the little squares marked on the paper alongside the cross hatching that stood for the trees – but there was no sign of them. Then just when we had crested the path and were coming down the other side we saw a roof across through the tops of the trees.

We stopped. There was still no path taking us out there, to where the houses were. We weren’t out of the woods yet, so to speak – though the girls were excited to think we might be. Coming to the edge of the strath meant the beginning of the walk turning homewards as far as they were concerned and I felt their turning, though I kept telling them there was nothing marked on the map, no way of knowing, still there was something about that ill-timed swim that had chilled them, in ways I couldn’t yet define.

“But there is no path there” I said again. Though the roof looked very close, there was no way of getting to the house itself. The woodland was dense. Broken trees and great branches cluttered the forest floor and the ground we could see was dark and wet looking. Clearly we had taken the wrong turn further back, when the path divided. “We’ll have to go back the way we came and connect up to it that way” my husband said.

It was then that the division that I’d sensed earlier became palpable, it sounded in the girls’ reaction. “Oh no!” they cried out. “Please, no!” One of them looked as though she might cry. Then they started whispering amongst themselves, a terrible thing to have happen on a walk, urgent, unpleasant whispering behind others’ backs, and my daughter knew better but she had to be loyal to her friends. “Please can’t we just cut through right here?” she said to me. “It’s easy. Look. It’s close.” But no, I said, we said. We were adamant. That we must find the path, that going

off route was a bad idea. Adamant, we were insistent – but the girls continued talking amongst themselves and I heard one mutter “Adults are always like that” and another “I say we just do it” and at that point something in me, this time, split, like all the other splittings of that day only this time it was my will, my own intention, and I felt myself divided. Why shouldn’t they just cut through the woods? I thought, one part of me. I heard myself say it, heard it coming up quietly to nag gently at me below the reasoned surface of my sense, why not? It would take no more than a couple of minutes for the girls to make their way there to the house and rest. For look, I thought, surely, there was the red roof of the abandoned house right in front of us – we could practically touch it. So why not? What harm? “Why shouldn’t they?” I said to my husband then.

That word, you see: split. Division. An opening up in a second to another route alongside the one you are walking – seductive, easy-looking perhaps – but letting darkness in. My husband shook his head, but by now the girls were cheering “Yay!”, “Thanks, Kirsty!” and starting down into the trees. “The minute you get there, stay by the house. Don’t move” I cautioned. “We’ll go back and come round and meet you.”

Of course, you don’t need to read it, we never saw them there. They never arrived at the house. They never even got near. And from that second of our parting, the lurking feeling that had been there since the time of their swim rose up and devoured me in a river of cold. For as we started back down the path, I knew, I was responsible for, the terrible thing we had done; it was as certain as the sound of the water charging in the ravine below us in which the girls had been swimming while we, my husband and I and I had slept. But there was nothing for it now. No going back. The girls had disappeared out of our sight the second we had watched them dive down into the trees.

What I should have known and said – what anyone would have known – is that a roof looked down at through trees from a height is a landmark clear enough that one might see but that the moment one has descended that same roof is no longer in view. By the time David and I had retraced our steps, gone all the way back down to the path, come out at the edge of the wood and walked around its perimeter, what felt like hours and hours and hours had passed, and when we finally saw the little settlement in the distance and approached it, the girls were nowhere to be seen.

By then we were fully outside our walk. Everything about every second slowed down and became full of dread, quiet and still, even in the midst of a wind that had started. Up and down the treeline we went. Calling and calling – “Are you there?” “Are you there?” – but there was no sound of their voices. Everywhere we wanted the girls to be, was nothing. Time

passed, the light darkened. It was getting colder. Once, a bird cried that we thought was a girl calling – but again, there was nothing. What’s more, in the midst of all their absence, we knew, too, that to go into the woods after them would be to be lost ourselves and then never able to find them, and we were starting to gauge by then how long it would take to get out to some kind of road, get a signal for a phone, so that we could call for help.

Minutes went into hours, is how it seemed. Hours into evening, spring into autumn, and the wind by now was very cold, that cold river of fear running along beside us as we went, two people, specks on the ground in wide open country under a sky going dark. It would be night soon and the children in our care lost somewhere in deep woods and out of sight, out of hearing. What had I allowed myself in all this, what had I done? I still ask myself that question – though we found them in the end, or they found us. After having walked up and down, calling and yelling and screaming until my voice was hoarse and David and I had stopped speaking to each other, stopped asking, should we do this, do that, and were existing only in the heart-sick silence of the present tense, there was the fantastical, wondrous moment when they emerged out of the dark to the edge of treeline, at the deer fence, all four of them dazed looking, confused – then their voices erupting into a chatter of relief and celebration. “What an adventure!” “We couldn’t see the house anywhere!” “Look, mum, we made a film of how terrified we were!” and showing me their phones. “We thought we were going to have to spend the night in the woods!” “We had nothing to eat!” and so on and so on, and we adults called it an adventure, too, for in many ways it was, it might have been...

But I ask myself still, what I had let take place that afternoon. When really what had happened was outside adventure, outside anything that could be so easily named. Mountaineers talk about the feeling of it all the time, and know what it is, this occurrence of the incoming event, the unplanned and the shock of it, and yet how it is also something willingly invited. And those in small boats at sea know it, and those who work with tracking animals, and miners who go down into the earth, and explorers... But we who go out in the morning to be home for tea, or take a walk in the afternoon and decide on another path home, or set out in advance of a party with small children to avoid the weather... We don’t expect danger to come then. Yet I have found myself to be an outsider at these times, perverted by my own decisions and so turned out upon that other path that is always there. Finding myself crossing a river at spate by a wire – two thin lines stretched from one bank to another – one to walk on, one to hold onto – with babies strapped to my back. Going back, one by one, to bring them across to the other side and

back to a lodge in blinding wind and rain, and only after getting them into baths, with hot orange juice and biscuits, feel myself begin to tremble and be racked by the relief of the shocking thing I had done, leaving the party in the way I had, to be so foolhardy as to take the children with me. I have come down an unknown path through woods to the house where we were living at the time, further south now, in Perthshire this was, and to have been so disoriented by how lost I was that I did not recognise our own home. I have been up, too, on the high western rise of Sutherland, looking down on an eagle’s nest and the flats and flow country all spread below me, and with the setting sun at my back have not known the way to where I left the others, and it was only the keen eyesight of my eldest daughter who was able to see the smudge that was an Argocat moving across the landscape way off in the distance that meant we were able to make our way to the track that our family had gone down hours ago.

The girls I have been writing about in this essay came back, we found them. We return. We come back upon our way. Yet this event that has occurred in our walking – a kind of catabasis that willfully encourages us to go down down deep into something terrible – changes us. The walk has changed us. We will go back there sometime, I know, and finish the route we started that day – and we will take the right turn this time, find the way out that will bring us to the schoolhouse and explore that little lost settlement as we had intended. And we will talk, too, then, of that other day, no doubt, and remember it, the feeling of it, the new walk shadowed by the past. So, we say to ourselves, we will take more care. Our daughter won’t leave us, is what we hope. Her friends, the friends she brought with her on the walk that day, are not the friends she sees now. ■

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\*Author’s note: “The Eastern and Northern Highlands are becoming spoiled by the terrible multiplication and activity of wind turbine development in the region, encouraged by the wealth of big multinational conglomerates who stand to make billions in tax incentives and income from energy charges and rebates. These turbines threaten to permanently deform some of the most wild and beautiful places in the British Isles – land deemed ‘empty’ and ‘with no other usefulness’ by bureaucrats and politicians and absent landlords who do not live there but own vast tracts of land, a situation that affects north east Sutherland and Caithness in particular.”

CHARLENE VISSER DIDN'T have time for prayers. Never had. So while the other women hid below deck, pleading with a god none of them believed in to guide their trawler safely out of the harbour, Charlene knew the only way to ensure it was to get up into the wheelhouse, get a grip on the wooden wheel and push down the throttle.

Word had been going round the town for a couple of days that a group of quines were heading out to sea, and folk were up in arms that these besoms had the nerve to be taking boats from men that had struggled so long to keep them. While they claimed that the boat would be used as a mobile brothel, for smuggling drugs and for picking up immigrants overseas and sneaking them back to the Broch, Charlene was confident that none of them had yet worked out which boat and which quines given what she'd heard in the harbour pub the day before.

She'd managed to sidle the bright red trawler a few metres away from the concrete quayside before anyone realised that they had chosen this cold, overcast summer morning to leave, but a crowd soon appeared at the sight of a woman on board the Alexandria and were quick to line themselves along most of the Faithlie Basin.

As the vessel slowly crawled across the murky water, Charlene looked out at the townsfolk she was leaving behind. From the few faces she could pick out, it seemed they were all willing the boat to capsize there and then, their eyes screwed up, teeth bared. More cars and vans kept appearing, and folk streamed down from Kirk Brae and Commerce Street onto the quayside to get a closer look. Charlene had to block them all out and focus on the task at hand: navigating the boat out past the storm gates and into the harbour's entrance channel.

—Ye'll never survive! a man bawled at the top of his voice somewhere in the crowd. Charlene didn't dare look round to see who it was amongst the long line of folk sliding past.

There was a loud clanking noise as she slowed the engine right down and turned the wheel sharply. The crowd cheered, believing the trawler had broken down, but Charlene was quick to get the engine thrumming once more and the boat began to pass through the basin's narrow exit.

Ever growing, the bulk of the crowd had migrated to this spot knowing that the Alexandria would have to come close to the pier again. As the trawler snailed through the bottleneck, a couple of loons pushed through the mob, carrying something dark and round between them. They swung it back and forth, building up momentum as the crowd cheered them on until it was up in the air. Charlene realised what it was as it flew towards her: a dead pig. It landed with a heavy thud on the starboard deck next to the wheelhouse. She peered out of the window at the small lifeless lump

of dark, hairy flesh as the crowd pointed and laughed.

—Fit was that? she heard Denise squeak below.

—Nae nithing to worry aboot, Charlene shouted down the hatch. She looked up above the jeering crowd and caught sight of two men up in the harbour's control tower. They were waving their arms, signalling for her to stop, but the Alexandria continued on through to the Balaclava breakwater, the final stretch of concrete that led up to the harbour mouth.

There were two sharp knocks, one after the other, on the roof of the wheelhouse.

*From the few faces she could pick out, it seemed they were all willing the boat to capsize there and then, their eyes screwed up, teeth bared.*

She looked over to her left and saw a pack of younger loons hurling stones from the breakwater. Taking notice of them had only egged them on, and there was soon a drumming across the side of the boat as more and more stones pelted against it. One smashed through the wheelhouse window on her left – triangles of glass scattered across the floor. A sharp blast of wind whipped round the small cabin as she leant her head through the frame of glass shards.

—You little buggers! she screamed, her black hair flichtering in the cold breeze. She was quick to lean back from the window as more stones were cast. They pinged off the gunwale and bounced along the deck; Charlene refused to shelter herself and kept a firm grip on

the wheel. The boat crept onwards, the stones hitting further and further from the wheelhouse until there was only a faint rattling against the stern.

Focusing back up ahead, Charlene spotted another trawler approaching the harbour mouth at an equal distance from the outside as the Alexandria was inside. It was a bright blue trawler around the same size; another vessel that would have slept eight men in its prime.

Charlene slammed the throttle forward. The engine groaned below and the needle on the speed-dial slowly crept up to the right.

The boat in front continued to cut

through the waves towards the harbour mouth, showing no signs of slowing. Within a couple of minutes, it would block the exit and the Alexandria would never make it out of the harbour.

Charlene grabbed the radio and switched it on. She turned the dial to Channel 12 and the harbourmaster's voice crackled through the speaker.

—Repeat... Ye have to stop! There'll be a heid-on collision at this rate! Please, I repeat: ye must stop! Over...

Charlene pushed the button on the side of the radio.

—We're nae stopping for naebody, she said calmly before releasing the button.

—Fit are ye playing at? Stop, for Christ's sake! the voice begged.

—No, you tell them lot in front o ma to get oot ma road.

She switched the radio back off. With one hand steady on the wheel and the other pushing the throttle fully down, she finally caved and closed her eyes.

—Please god, get us oot o here, she whispered.

She stayed in the darkness of her own head as the boat ploughed onwards. She could hear the crowd shouting behind her in the distance, and voices ahead getting louder and louder. Their calls were suddenly drowned out by the blast of a horn. She managed to fight the instinct to let go of the controls and cover her ears, but she couldn't keep her eyes closed any longer: the other trawler was only a few metres in front of hers – they were seconds away from crashing into one another.

Charlene pulled the throttle back and quickly spun the wheel to the left; her wedding ring clacked against its wood. Now more than any other time she'd sailed the trawler, she was aware of how different a vehicle it was to anything else she'd ever controlled: she turned the wheel as far as she could, but the boat barely curved to the left. She was thrown backwards as the trawlers' starboard bows collided. A bang rumbled through the Alexandria. The quines shrieked below as the world tipped on its side. Charlene near fell over as the floor quickly seesawed back the other way. Driven on by the last of their momentum, both trawlers scraped alongside each other. A high-pitched whine cut through the air and made Charlene wince. She could see the blue paint of the other trawler's hull being stripped off, exposing the red rust beneath.

The boats came to a standstill halfway past one another. The men ran out onto their deck and swore blind at Charlene. The two nearest looked tired and crazed, their matted hair flailing wildly in the breeze – this was clearly the last thing they needed after a trip at sea. She gave them a little wave before slamming the throttle back down. One of the men stepped forward, swung his legs over the side of his trawler and positioned himself to jump aboard the Alexandria, just as it started to pull away.

—Dinna you dare! a hoarse voice shouted from behind the wheelhouse. Charlene pressed up against the intact window on her right – Sandra was out on deck. At six foot tall and in a black velour tracksuit that clung to her bulk, Sandra was an even match for the man threatening to board their boat. Jump over here and I'll fucking droon ye.

The man froze, seemingly too scared to make the jump towards Sandra, and too scared to admit defeat in front of his crew. Sandra stayed put, laughing her gruff smoker's laugh, until the boats' sterns were well clear of each other and the Alexandria was finally free to make its grand return to the North Sea.

—We did it! Charlene shouted down

## Quines at Sea

57.69°N 2.01°W

BY SHANE STRACHAN



*Editor's note: this is the opening chapter of a novel currently being submitted to publishers. It tells the story of a group of women escaping small-town Scotland on a fishing trawler to travel around Europe.*



the hatch to the other quines. We bloody did it!

—Ye beauty! Sandra shouted just outside the intact window, her big bust filling half the frame. Wisps of her bleach-blonde hair danced in the wind.

There was a muffled cheering below as Charlene slumped down on the skipper's chair, sighing with relief. The cheering became clearer and closer as the other four quines streamed out onto the front of the deck.

Charlene turned to watch her mam Isobel. Unsteady on her little feet, she paced the deck, staring out at the sea in disbelief as her lank grey perm flapped in the breeze. She still had her black leather handbag slung over her shoulder as though she had only meant to pop onto the boat for a minute and had now found herself stuck out at sea.

Rachel and Denise were the first to notice the dead pig; Charlene lip-read the swear words that fell out their mouths at the sight. Ever the butcher, Rachel knelt down to inspect the beast. She tucked her thick auburn hair under her fleece before prodding and poking at the pig's dark, hairy flesh. Charlene stepped over to the broken window to hear them better.

—Peer thing! Rachel said. It's nae even fully grown. It'll have been that pair o teuchter twats that did this. They were right pissed aff fan I cancelled aa my orders at the butcher the other day. She looked back down at the pig and smiled. Onybody fancy a hog roast?

—As lang as you prepare it, Denise said, standing well back in her pink trainers. Her bruised eye stood out more in the cold summer light than it had in the shadows below deck. I'm nae touching that thing!

As Denise scurried over to Isobel, she pegged her small button nose to block out the reek of diesel she'd whined about when they set foot on the boat that morning.

—But why a pig? Sandra asked as she helped Rachel start to drag the beast down the starboard deck.

—Because it's bad luck aboard a boat! Charlene said loud enough to be heard through the window.

—Aye, that's right, her mam said. Pigs, salmon... rabbits, ministers... and, worst of aa, women.

—We're well and truly fucked then, Sandra said before she disappeared down towards the stern with Rachel.

Isobel started making her way down the other side but stopped at the broken wheelhouse window. She looked at Charlene in disbelief, shards of glass framing her.

—Fit are we deeing?

—Fitiver we want mam, Charlene replied. She looked over at the wide grey expanse of the North Sea. Its horizon rose and sank in the distance as the boat rocked onwards. ■

# Poetry

## Eight

KARIN SLATER

This Christmas I received  
a typewriter, Bible, personal stereo  
and a Cliff Richard cassette  
on behalf of my mother,  
who then told me  
Santa did not exist.

I said, I Know,  
turned away horrified,  
and began learning the words  
to both sides A and B.

Shielded by my headphones,  
bemused by the meanings,  
but finding comfort  
in 'Visions of You,'  
unsure  
who to believe in.

## Announcement

KARIN SLATER

The half three plane's left  
for a mainland city,  
while God plays islanders  
like puppets in wet hands.

If I was in the city  
I'd meet friends at Donald Dewar,  
have an early dinner,  
walk without an umbrella

trance through GoMA  
and watch lovers kiss  
on Buchanan Street  
in the rain.

His hands on her waist,  
her hands on his face,  
a right angle  
a heeled red shoe.

And public affection  
is present and far-off  
from home's notice of a death  
typed in shop windows.

AGNES MACKAY  
nee MACLEOD  
AGED 81.  
And everybody knows.

## Nest

JULIET ANTILL

I'm slow to realise about the bees.  
Slow, in the slow buzz of afternoon,  
to see that their waverings – low to the ground  
by the side of the shed – are anything but casual.  
Now I see as well as comings there are goings;  
these are quick and easy to miss. I imagine  
a nest behind the stacks of cut larch.

Two summers ago I was host to wasps.  
They built their nest against the shed door  
and every time I went in for a fork or a pot  
I exposed them. One day I opened the door  
and they were gone, fed up with the intrusions,  
the sudden rushes of light and air. They left  
their grand design in paper and spit.

## I Am The Wind Stilling

JULIET ANTILL

I am the wind stilling  
I am the day burning  
I am the ground hardening  
I am the moon darkening  
I am the sap sinking  
I am the fruit dropping  
I am the flower curling  
I am the leaf falling  
I am the blood cooling  
I am the eye closing  
I am the breath leaving

I am the breath coming  
I am the eye opening  
I am the blood quickening  
I am the leaf greening  
I am the flower unfolding  
I am the fruit swelling  
I am the sap rising  
I am the moon rounding  
I am the ground yielding  
I am the day broadening  
I am the wind flying

# The Salmon Within

BY MARTIN LEE MUELLER

HER JOURNEY BEGAN several moons before she made it downriver to the brackish waters of the estuary. There was a night she knew the time had come. The year's spring floods had passed, and the water was beginning to warm. It was the night of the new moon, and the sky dome was black, the first seamless darkness after a stretch of moonlit and starlit nights. Three summers and winters had passed since she first emerged from the gravel. Three summers and winters, and never in those gyrating seasonal turns had she strayed very far. She and all the others had staked out their tiny river bottom territory, and they had defended their small home ranges jealously. But now the rising temperatures and the heavy grey sky beckoned. They struggled to make contact with her. It is time, they said, each in their peculiar tongue. And though she had not heard these utterances spoken before, her body understood. She abandoned her plot, watched the current wash away earlier rivalries, and joined the tight school that was beginning to crowd together. More and more of them arrived, and her body diffused, mingled, dispersed among the others, until they all had morphed into a larger, mutable shape. They were a single, collective will with a multiplicity of watchful eyes, sensing an urgency pulse within, a certain rush. Spring was here, and after that night, nothing would ever be the same.

A cloud shadow passed overhead. Perfect darkness spilled through her gills, her breathing canals, her eyes. This was it. The many-finned, pliable body seeped into the fast-moving torrent, tails down current, heads facing upriver to breathe the water while the river carried them. She did not struggle to keep abreast of the current, or to move against it. The larger body she had become diffused further outward and into the larger body of the water itself, becoming its current, its resolve. She abandoned herself entirely to its guidance, breathing it, letting its drift become the measure of her imagination.

The days came and went, and she drifted, mostly under the cover of darkness. Smaller passageways joined the central river vein, water that tasted almost familiar. Scent ribbons bled through the turbulences, not unlike northern lights that bleed into a winter night. She smelled and smelled, and somehow, it seemed that the world was deepening, growing larger, there in the margins of her awareness. The scent ribbons wound upriver, all the way back to where she first had left.

Changes were adrift deep inside the veins of the watershed, and deep inside the fabric of her flesh. She intuited the



Salmon-shaped human shadow in a Highland river pool. K. Taylor

changes. Her body, growing longer and slimmer. Her steady impulse to flow, to move and be moved. Her fin edges darkening, turning shadow-black, the fins themselves growing more and more translucent. Her very skin changing, turning silver, looking ever less like the turbid river and ever more like . . . well, she was not exactly sure like what.

She had noticed the signs much earlier, even before this journey began: the vain attempts by some to form schools when most were not yet interested. The occasional flash of premature silver skin among them, when all the rest were still river-shaded. The larger and more slender body that so clearly stood out amongst the rest—the last thing any of them wanted, now that this school of duplicate bodies was their only refuge. Each of them had been on their own trajectory. Each of them had intuited an imminent metamorphosis, but no one was quite able to make the loose ends flow together. They knew changes were adrift, but they were slightly out of sync with one another, out of phase. Isolated in their own skin. Until the new moon and the warmer water incited in them a common pace and purpose. They knew better than to resist submitting to these eloquent powers. And so, she and the others drifted, and they felt for the clues. They laboured to become fluent in the subtle tongue of synchronicity.

The anthropologist James V. Wertsch has described humans as “storytelling animals.” If we wish to discuss such questions as “What shall we do with our lives?” or “Where are we headed as a society?”, we must first ask, “What stories are we a part of?” The philosopher

Neil Evernden has further suggested that our freedom lies first and foremost in the choosing of our story, rather than our actions within that story. The story I have looked at most closely in my work is that of anthropocentrism – or the story that humans are separate from the more-than-human world, the world's centre and main attraction. I've come to understand that the story not only reflects a certain arrogance but also a deep loneliness. The first modern philosopher, René Descartes, viewed all phenomena except for his own thinking as mechanistic, machine-like. He encouraged his students to open up living animals with scalpels, so as to study their inner workings. The students were to ignore the animals' writhing and kicking and screaming. They were also to actively deny their own empathy. Why? Because neither our own body's spontaneous suffering with other creatures, nor those creature's desperate attempts to appeal to our feelings (and thereby, to communicate meaningfully with us), were said to be true. Both our bodies and all other animals were complicated machines, and thus subordinate to humans. This was the very opening chapter of the age of modernity. To this day, we struggle to overcome the consequences.

In her doctoral dissertation, the anthropologist Anna Magnusson has documented a deep ontological shift in relation to what it means to be salmon in the context of industrial fish farming. She shows that the industry is built around an inherent imperative to reinterpret these living, sensing, intelligent, cold-blooded beings into “biomass”, or mass-produced life. She shows that the imperative overshadows practically all claims to animal welfare and sustainability. And do

not we humans, too, become re-defined in this lonely story – from participating, wondering, sensing, fellow creatures at home inside this biosphere to, well, consumers? Perhaps the old story of humans as separate from the living world is alienating both to the salmon and to ourselves?

To think like the ocean. To be the ocean thinking itself within her. Perhaps this is precisely what it means to reach maturity. She is called into being within the fluid depth of water, which is at once elder, womb, blood. How long has her kin voyaged the arching globe? Six million years – thirty times longer than my species, wise humans, has existed. The steady stream of ancestral journeys reaches back into time immemorial, and their shapes are slowly morphing, changing, reworking themselves across this vast curvature of time. She lives inside an imagination that has been molded by glacial advances, by the patient force of trickling water carving deep flanks into flatlands, by a trillion raindrops eroding the mountains. Her sentient body bears within itself the promise for metamorphosis, a creative adaptability within a world that never rests. As she grows, the distant echo of a particular watershed takes shape within—its velocity, its seasonal temperaments, the power of its autumn swells, the complex topography of its arteries. Each quality of the river adds its subtle claim to this body that is her, refining her. Born into a shapeshifting world, it is what she is: a shapeshifter. Swelling rivers, marching glaciers, dwindling mountains, currents that flow on and on, the very ocean: Each remembers itself within her flesh. Each calls itself into being through her flesh, again and again. She is the world birthing itself.

She knows nothing of the furnace deep within the core of the world, of pressure so immense that molten iron will crystalize into a solid. Nor of the liquid iron that flows in a rotational pattern around that innermost core, following the planet's rotation. And yet she can sense the delicate magnetic bands that weave themselves from these frictions and outward, around the spinning axis of the globe, fluctuating most forcefully near either pole and weaving smaller, far subtler bands between there and herself. Earth's bipolar magnetic lure flickers continually within her. This globe's composition and its massive shape rebound throughout her flesh. That far larger body throbs in her head, all along her lateral line, throughout the varied topography of her flesh. To align herself



with true north is to sense a faint, subtle shudder of recognition rush through her. A chill of embodiment. Iron crystals within her, iron crystals within the core of Earth's larger body: beckoning, striving to hear, calling, responding, gesturing, learning to react, aligning themselves, seeking congruence. Ever since she left the river, she has been negotiating the fluctuating semiotics of field navigation. As she has matured from a smolt into an adult, her sense for the larger body has grown keener. Each local variation in the blue expanse—its own field quality. Each region in the ocean—its own magnetic tension. With sustained attention, and if she engages the full range of her corporeal intelligence, she can distinguish the unique feel of the magnetic field where she first encountered the ocean as a juvenile. No other place sets her nerves on edge quite like that one.

Her intelligence is as ancient as her journey, and inseparable from it. But it is also, and in equal measure, utterly fresh: It calibrates itself constantly and fluidly as she and her kind slip from one life cycle to the next. Navigation becomes a creative dance between perception, the memory of her breathing flesh, and the larger bodies that compose her. It becomes a continuous improvisation with the upsurge of the present moment, in a complex field of interaction.

How do we break with a 400-year-old story of ourselves as separate from the world, and others as our subordinates, slaves? If the question is difficult to ask, I suppose answers will not come easily either. I do what I often do in such moments; I take a walk to my nearest salmon river, Akerselva, which runs right through the heart of Oslo. Salmon still hold so many lessons in store. Just now they are migrating upriver once again, past old factories and kindergartens and karaoke bars, ready to spawn a new generation. Every autumn a new generation reenacts their ancient, existential drama. When it's done, most of them will die and rot by the river banks, or be consumed by birds or foxes or insects. I see a handful of them standing down there in the fast-moving current, just beneath the bridge. I take a deep breath; a look around. And I understand that the deconstruction of the old story is already well underway: science is piecing together a richer picture of the fishes' inner lives than ever before. Philosophers have in earnest re-discovered the world of the senses and of feelings. The double-split between humans and animals, and between body and mind, is well underway to being mended. It's like my mentor, David Abram, once said: we are many sets of eyes staring out at each other from the same, living body. ■

Martin Lee Mueller's book *Being Salmon, Being Human - Encountering the Wild in Us and Us in the Wild* was published this autumn by Chelsea Green Publishing.

# Poetry

## Gynack Spate

SCOTT FRASER

The hills shrug off their winter coats,  
grey clouds wring their ballast.  
Curtain rains sweep the glen  
and Newton's laws are true.

Liquid forces thrust their way.

Bridges tremble,  
golf greens shimmer  
Roaring caramel gouges,  
strains to plough a furrow.

Washing and wearing.

Rolling rocks thud,  
travelling gravel growl  
echoes in the gorge  
sounding the descent

to the Duke of Gordon's town.

Pine tree bystanders.  
Abducted, stripped and bruised,  
bridge the polished bedrock.  
Wedge carcasses.

Until the grips release.

Life within the river!  
It's geomorphic design.  
Compelled by murky forces.  
Erosion over time.

The river writhes,  
claws for freedom,  
shaking off stone constraints.

And then

Spent, the flow upon the flats,  
our lake land Dell is spilling.  
The austere barracks overlook  
an emerging world of water.

Mirroring banks and ridges,  
reflecting ice and snow.  
A unity of nature,  
a seamless symmetry.

Travelling geese huddle on island tufts.  
A Whooper Swan flotilla.  
Monarchs declaring  
dry land will return.

## Light blue day, deep blue dream

MORELLE SMITH

In this coastal town, the clouds shift  
and blue sidles through.  
The surface of the Moray Firth rocks just a little,  
lying close against the sky.  
Distant hills smudge the horizon  
like approaching rain.

I think of the possessions that you left me –  
assorted mugs and jugs and bowls  
in shades of blue  
so deep, they could have been  
brought up from the ocean floor –  
these blue-dyed memories of you.

Here, the colour of the sea is limpid blue,  
slow waves wet the shore with light –  
sand trickles out when I take off my shoes.

## Lapwing Central

LEONIE TEAL CHARLTON

Between Balevullin and Balinoe, by shallow ponds and fallen stones, lapwings lift into the air, taking me with them on each beatific beat, scooping me clean with rounded wings, giggling me silly with rubber-soled squeaks, taking my breath away with somersaults and spins 'til I'm high, high amongst the torn clouds, amongst falling feathers, catching their drift and kinks 'til I'm down on all fours by the lying-down standing stone, palms pressed against the close-cropped turf, fingers pointing to feathers lying askance, each one glanced by lines splitting loam-brown from sea-spray white, each one folding my vertebrae bit by bit 'til my eyes are level with the daisies and buttercups and tiny balls of sheep dung, and then I'm spooning with the stone, pressing my rounded back into its lichen-lipped embrace, breathing in the lanolin-and-clover scent of summer at its zenith and feeling as ready as I ever will for the 18:55 Calmac to take me away.

## Sighting

JAY WHITTAKER

Once you've seen dolphins in Iona Sound  
every wave's crest might be one  
nosing the air, twisting white belly  
diving with a delicious flourish of tail.  
That's the thing about possibility.  
You have to know it's there.

THE ORANGES ROCKED gently in the back of the car. Wind was getting up again and a small wave smacked the rear bumper. Bright fruits, obedient to the rising water, followed each other between the front seats, shouldered floating petrol receipts, empty crisp packets. Ricocheted silently off the dashboard.

They seem happy, I thought. They're like unconfined breasts, freed to roam. The laws governing the proper behaviour of marmalade oranges have been washed away. Nullified. My proper behaviour would have been to stay home, not to embark on some crazy hunt for a second-hand desk in the worst storms since the Muckle Spate o' Achteen-Twenty-Nine.

Turning from the window ten feet above a flooded farm yard, I looked at the red-haired woman wrapped in her duvet.

'It was weird.' She cleaned the nails of one hand with her teeth, with precision. 'I didn't finger knives in the kitchen drawer, or think about how much blood there would be. Or ever, even, reach real despair and want to end it all. But when I was exhausted and on my own, which was most of the time, I just saw this knife hanging in the air in front of me. I liked

it. It made me feel safe. As if there was still a choice I could make.'

Come, let me clutch thee.

'Was the handle towards your hand?' Stupid. No thought, no restraint. And this girl is saying something true, now. It's taken all day, but we've gone somewhere, she's prised the lid off Pandora's jar, dared the darkness.

'No,' she said. 'That's how I knew it was for me, not for the baby. It meant I was still in control.'

When the light goes, we'll curl up again on her bed, rolled in separate duvets, facing opposite walls to imitate privacy. Wide-eyed in the pitch-black, I know we'll both be seeing mud-water lapping the kitchen ceiling. She'll be thinking of her son, safe, but restive in a child-minder's spare room. I'll be praying she's a strong swimmer. We'll finger our phones,

wondering if by an error on the part of the universe there is after all a squeeze of juice left and we can call someone.

In the morning, the alder tops were simply a swirl at the surface of a leaden loch extending half a mile across the glen. The rain hesitated, then got going again.

'I'm sorry about the desk,' she said. 'It'll be ruined.'

'Autres temps, autres desks.' It seemed a minor issue. 'If it dries out I might still buy it. Look. It's as if this were the real thing, not how it was before. Your land was a dream of a pre-diluvian world.'

Poor bees. No crocuses or snowdrops to get them started this year. All the things under the turf in their larval state, waiting to be surprised by spring. Pinky-blue, bloated worms. Mice uncurling from mossy cocoons, trekking to higher ground.

'I never told my husband about the knife.' Both hands twisted in her hair, tugged. 'What could he do? He couldn't help me here, on my own. It was as if my self had leaked away. There was no space for me in the world. I felt ashamed. If no-one wanted to be friendly, it must have been because I was without value.'

'Listen,' I said. 'The landscape doesn't find you wanting. In fact, it finds you acceptable. Does that make any sense? When you reach a physical accommodation with where you are. Trust the land, and the people will come.'

She's bright, I thought. Watching the water as it leaves she'll see a new earth emerge. It'll shape itself around her. Highs and lows, the heichs and the howes. The river will show first, then the field walls will come back and before she knows it, stinking mud will be green grass. Deer will be among the alders, birds just waiting for their chance. Then this will be her place and people will come.

I glanced down at my car, lurching slowly below me now. The oranges were bobbing back again. A little, sheepish flock of drowning suns.

'I'll have to buy more sugar,' I said. ■

# Of Loneliness, and Oranges

SHORT STORY BY ALISON BELL



THE BRIDGE; TWENTY-FIVE thousand tons of iron and steel held proud of the sea by vast columns. Two by two by two, tracing a crescent moon curve. It spans the estuary mouth, and has married this Scottish city to the south for more than a century. The minds that thought it, the hands that welded and pieced it together, are gone. They look out from sepia prints, men with handle-bar moustaches, dwarfed by concrete arches and metal lattice.

Tonight, perched on a tie-bar, she is there, waiting. Below, two hundred feet of space, open between her and the firth. The tracks keen an ultrasonic hum. A wall of air is pushed up ahead, metal on metal sparks and the monster she knows frees her. It casts her out across the water. Fan wings outstretched, the feathers across her pigeon chest ruffle, a slate grey melting into purple. Her small head shifts, her auburn eyes swivel, her body tilts to feel the transformation to warm land air on her skin. Warm air is rising from cafe ovens, bus exhausts, from human breath.

Below her, the heart of the city pulses, this body breathing, a ceaseless expanding and subsiding. Inside the hard edges of concrete and stone, behind the metal and glass are lives, soft and fluid. The blood of the city, pumping. Jealousy, love, yearning and hunger. Thousands of minds are sparking, those of the lost, the wanted, the coupling and the dying. Amongst the sounds of clocks ticking and taps pouring, babies crying, and televisions blaring. Hear the silent voices, the unspoken mind sounds, sensed but not said.

The bird turns from the firth to fly

# Unspoken

RACHEL HORSBURGH



the street-map west. Flanked by street lights, the Perth Road below is a vena cava pumping buses, bearing students, cleaners, the homeless.

Heading east a woman carrying a cello is walking, the thin heels of her shoes grazing the street. Her skin radiates lime and vanilla. She turns her head to loosen the muscles of her neck, tight from the effort of carrying. The lace on

her white stockings is rubbing the black lining of her dress. She sidesteps to avoid Saturn reflected in a pool of water. Drive, fire and Bartok fill her head on the night street. Preparing to perform, she sees her hands grasp the bow and press the thick strings down on the wooden neck. Muscle memory. Drawing the bow back to begin.

Through the backdoor of a restaurant,

his eyes closed, a man leans against cool geometric tiles. Spices; sumac, chilli and cumin flow, their aromas are a hot mist around his head. As perfect as a gazelle, exposed, out in the city forest, his eyelashes are two black crescents on an almond face. He raises his head to the sky and feels the city's cool night kiss. He sees another kitchen; his mother with her back to him is sieving rice in a big blue colander. The window beyond her is open to the warm Tehrani night. He hears his father in the back room, a newspaper hiding his face. He is scanning the print, stories of the wars, of the missing, and calling to his wife in Farsi. Two older brothers, together, on a different continent are engineers in LA. His heart beats a yearning for them, his family, far and so scattered. He is alone. Sweat holds the white cotton shirt to his back. His back; bearing a weight, hidden and smooth.

Above the inn door a golden phoenix rises up from a fire. Below its wings are carved the words 'drink and be whole again beyond confusion'. Inside he sits in a stained-glass window booth and rubs a week's blonde stubble on his chin. To no one he mouths the Dutch words he hears in his head. All around him, close, people in the haze, sweat and talk. He feels a cold helplessness; in the draw of nicotine, in the whisky that wets his tired lips. Before his mind's eye a reel of movie scenes flickers, replaying the past. His muscles respond in secret, as a dancer to their movement. He is searching the visions for meaning, a clue to now. ■

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**Grammar of Wavelength Exhibition****- Stephen | Morrison**

An Talla Solais Art Centre, Ullapool.

**Waypoints**

Ian Stephen

Adlard Coles Nautical/Bloomsbury

REVIEW BY JON MILLER

The fused artist personage of Ian Stephen and Christine Morrison – Stephen | Morrison – presented the latest of their sea-faring collaborations in their recent Grammar of Wavelength exhibition at the impressive gallery An Talla Solais in Ullapool (and by the time you read this, An Lanntair in Stornoway). Many of the works are based on sailing their sloop *El Vigo* from their home port of Stornoway to islands around the Scottish north-west coast – from nearby Shiant and Hirta or further afield to Orkney and Shetland – and also include projects in Canada and Tasmania. The exhibition is accompanied by *Waypoints*, Stephen's memoir of his growth and maturity as a coastguard and sailor, and *Maritime*, the new collection of Stephen's poetry.

The exhibition contains works ranging from Christine Morrison's paintings and pen and ink illustrations to Stephen's writing, poetry, traditional tales and artefacts associated with navigation. There is a great deal about fixing your position in a constantly moving world – whether at sea, on land or in history. For instance, an old lead depth gauge and set of compasses lie on a chart of Lochs Erisort, Leurbost and Grimshader; in the next exhibit along are a range of navigation devices – a Decca navigator, a hand-held compass and radio direction finder among others – now supplanted by GPS devices. This isn't merely nautical history – it details a shift in how we read nature, how we use technology to mediate between it and ourselves – we now navigate by the false stars of satellites rather than the constellations. As a counterpoint, a pair of glasses are casually left on the old chart as if having just plotted a course – the human and personal entering into the abstract world of mathematical and astronomical calculation.

As a contrast to all this aqueousness, Christine Morrison's paintings emerged from the Stephen | Morrison residency in Tasmania. Containing hand ground earth pigment, these, in their rough ochres and reds, evoke the blood running in the earth and the brutalities visited on the Aboriginal people further echoed in Stephen's accompanying poem *Ash* in the figure of the spiny anteater, the echidna.

There are images of grain silos in Saskatchewan taken whilst driving: huge structures acting as landmarks that become lighthouses or waypoints by which someone might navigate across the flat immensities of the Canadian prairie landscape. Others – grainy washed-out, photogravure images of Sule Skerry, Fair Isle, Boreray, Sula Sgeir, all taken at



**A South Coast One Design (Charles Nicholson). Artwork by: Christine Morrison**

sea level – give the land forms an eerie otherworldliness, like mythical lands, Ultima Thule or those encountered by wandering Celtic monks in the Voyage of St Brendan and are accompanied by a traditional tale particular to that island.

Something of an artistic aesthetic appears in *Waypoints*, as Stephen describes how boats go through their various incarnations and restorations, (often individualised by the tastes of their different owners) and how the essential shape (which will also have minor variations depending on location and function) is re-formed and re-fashioned just as tales are with their localised variations thus becoming a 'living thing'. In this constant re-forming and re-telling, individuals and communities become bound together, a common culture to be handed on to yet more change. So larch boards intended for a boat become a three-dimensional poem which later becomes a tiller when the art work is no longer viable and this tiller guides Stephen and his crew, in perhaps the most dramatic chapter in *Waypoints*,

to Orkney for an art exhibition at the Pier Art Gallery in Stromness. This kind of flow is achieved in both *Waypoints* and *Wavelength of Grammar*, each time being overlaid with a history that lends them additional significance and – a common habit of Stephen's – the chance for more stories – 'yarns' – over tea or whisky. The works negotiate the space between the practical and the poetic, the maritime and the metaphysical, in that while there have to be the life-preserving practicalities of sailing techniques and skills, poems and stories take us into the 'other world' of dream or vision, a shared sense of memory and culture contained in the tales in *Waypoints* – tales of revenge, lost sons, ghostly returns, murders – and provide the deep background to Stephen's contemporary accounts of island communities.

In *Waypoints*, along with Christine Morrison's pen and ink illustrations of the various craft Ian Stephen refers to, there is a host of detail about sailing, boat construction and technology which will intrigue and engross the sailing

community and also demonstrates Stephen's and Morrison's considerable skill and knowledge. However, I kept feeling there was another more expansive book lurking in the shadows. The title *Waypoints*, suggesting a particular navigation point on a journey, provides an opportunity for a ruminative and reflective examination of its subject. Stephen cites Gavin Francis and Adam Nicolson as influences and their approach of referencing a wide range of historical, philosophical and literary sources to extend their subject into unfamiliar areas and make unexpected connections would have made for an invigorating read. There are elements of that approach and it was not Stephen's full intention here, but there is surely a place for a book that uses the islands and sea routes of the West Coast of Scotland to examine the huge and important cultural and historical legacy of our islands. If Nicolson can do it for Homer and Francis for the human body, I'm sure someone (Stephen | Morrison?) could produce a similar epic for Scotland. ■

**You Know What You Could Be**

by Mike Heron & Andrew Greig  
riverun

REVIEWED BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

**D**ID YOU KNOW what you could be, back in the sixties? We all did, at least we did for an optimistic moment or two. This book is made up of two memoirs of those days, written by two men whose lives were linked by music. The link itself almost didn't happen – Andrew Greig happened to hear Mike Heron on an Incredible String Band album at a crucial time of growing up, when listening to new albums carefully enough might reveal the secrets of the universe. He then set out to see this band and meet his heroes. Heron, meanwhile, was in his own universe of parallel naiveté – just a bit older, and just a bit further down the road of musical sophistication. Time rolled on, and they wrote this book about those times which, uncannily, does not make them sound like brain-dead old hippies.

It is not likely they could have known how their different accounts would play off each other – and this illustrates an important point: The Incredible String Band was not contrived. They certainly didn't know they'd have a cult following all their lives. Like these memoirs, the music seemed to be a direct response to the audience and the times. Intuitive and quirky, brave and honest. It worked, but almost by accident.

I'd yet to read a musician's memoir that did not disappoint, but Heron bucked this trend with splendid storytelling and poetic language. Despite the cliché ('If you remember the sixties, you weren't there'), he does remember those days, and relates them with a kind of soft wonder and new insight. Each chapter is packed with such telling details, the whole of sixties' Edinburgh leaps off the page in audible and dope-scented technicolour. The velvet clothes, the absurd hats, the waistcoats, the hitching, the squats, and the girls – don't forget the girls! And Temple Cottage! But through all the memories, runs the music and the sense that for Heron, the music was what mattered more than all the rest. Music made sense of the rest. His memories make such aesthetically pleasing stories, if he'd chosen literature instead of music, Heron would be a great author like Greig.

Greig, on the other hand, wanted to be a famous singer songwriter, but instead grew up into a prizewinning novelist, poet and essayist, well established in the Scottish literary scene. But I've listened to him play guitar and harmonica; I've listened to him sing, and Greig is a gifted musician. You know what you could be – and Greig chose writing, because life is too short to seriously be both. He has a way of lifting a memory up with language, spinning it around and seeing

where the patterns lie. Seeing what they might explain, from this distance. The magic trick his memoir pulls off, is that I found myself doing the same with my own past. Look, he seems to say. Here are those times – now look at them this way, just for a minute. Aha!

And the anecdotes of those times? Those are the juiciest bits, because Greig and Heron belonged to the musical equivalent of the Bloomsbury group, more than fifty years ago.

Seems like yesterday, reading this book. Because writing this good is as close to time travel as you can get. ■

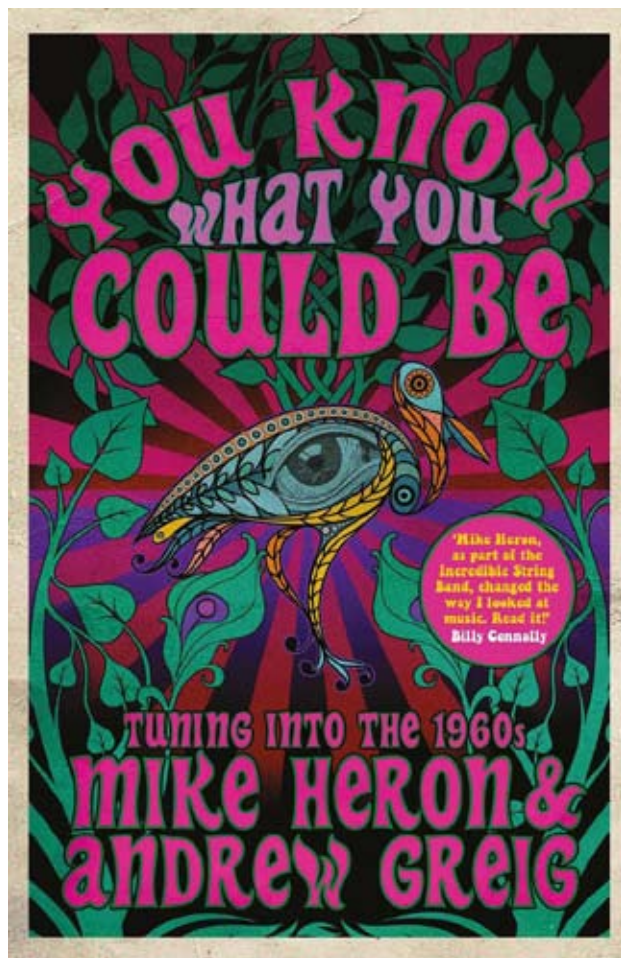
**Border**

By Kapka Kassabova  
Granta

REVIEWED BY STEPHEN KEELER

Let us begin with naming of parts. A preface is often little more than the unconsidered fulfilment of a careless expectation, a kind of packaging; at best maybe a labelling, at worst a grab for celebrity endorsement, however misguided.

Kapka Kassabova will have none of that. Her preface to *Border* is exemplary in its philosophical and psychological scene-setting. Perhaps mind-setting is a better term.



**Mike Heron will be talking about his writing in conversation with Kenny Taylor at The Croft, Dingwall on the evening of Thursday 12 October as part of the Word on the Street festival.**  
<http://word-on-the-street.weebly.com/>

The border – specifically the remote borderlands of Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece – is 'aggressive', 'prickly'; it hums 'with the frequencies of the unconscious', and it is an invitation, perhaps a dare. It is another country. They do things differently there.

Thus alerted, and after a brief postcard from Soviet-era Bulgaria, we return with her after a thirty-year absence to Burgas airport with a plane-load of 'consumer tourists'. And if even the least susceptible reader hasn't by now been enchanted by Kassabova's prose, this is where resistance becomes futile: every paragraph is embedded with a poem. At the airport, 'vineyards lined the landing strip and the air smelled of petrol and imminent sex'; the excited Russians and other pale northerners are 'packed off like canned meat to the pulsing resorts', and there is the smell of 'ripening figs, of dusty, lusting Nivea cream summer' where 'everything tasted like tears', and wild horses canter along the road: 'They separated to let my car through and closed behind me like a silent film.'

Kassabova has talked privately of losing interest in her own poetry but she couldn't write an unpoetic line if her life depended on it, and if the poetic charge of the prose occasionally threatens to blur the thesis, the delight in the imagery or

the pitch of the metaphor more than compensates. This is a beautiful book to read.

The narrative is occasionally (and appropriately, given the nature of these borders) fragmentary. It can be insightful to choose to see this as the writer singing for her supper, or Scheherazade-like rationing her stories in the interests of self-preservation. There is too an occasional whiff of the Buchanesque in devices which tease like a thriller with the promise of more ('We'll return to the gold'; 'Knowing these facts about Strandja felt like a good start – until I arrived in the Village in the Valley').

There are exotic and possibly mythical place-names; there are women with the evil eye, and there are old men who sit motionless and insubstantial as ash. And there are the sudden horror-movie thrills of disarming unease – 'in the forest you are never alone'.

There is the anticipated but never clichéd rustic wisdom of women – 'a life of books and hills is the only meaningful life' – and there is the heartbreak of the mayor who 'loved his village so much that he had built a playground for the absent children'. For this is also a ghost story or a story of ghosts: ghosts from ancient times, from the Ottomans, the Balkan Wars, the Soviet and even post-Soviet eras. And much of the text reads as though in sepia with Kassabova distinguished from it in a kind of muted colour, as though shot on already-fading East German ORWO.

*Border* is a timely contemplation in these uncontentative times. Kassabova's tales illuminate universal absurdities: revolutions that aren't, segregations that fail to separate, borders to hold us in as much as to keep 'strangers' out. It is a parable for today, and probably, alas, for tomorrow too. We are reminded, at the outset, by a 'Gypsy singer' that 'we are only guests on this earth...we come on to it naked and depart with empty hands.' We might do well, therefore, (Kassabova doesn't quite exhort us) to remember the enigmatic and perhaps ambiguous stone inscription from the second century BC, in Greek: 'Stranger, you who come here, be well!' ■

**My Father as an Ant & Other Stories**

by Diana Hendry  
Postbox Press

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

U.A. Fanthorpe claims that 'Diana Hendry has a remarkable eye for the truth and an ability to see the otherness of the very ordinary.' I am in full agreement. Her collection contains such a variety of subject and mood, it cannot be reduced to a theme or trendy category – and yet, there is a commonality to everything she writes. A quirky wryness, which never strays far from compassion, and saves her work from any kind of sentimentality.



And if her characters are flawed – as in the philandering husband in ‘Trio’ – they are also forgiven with a rounded and detached description. To tell the unflattering truth about the emotional minutia that make up daily life – the daily dramas which are microcosms of all our large ones – and yet endear the characters to the reader: this is her triumph.

The key might be in the language itself. First and foremost, Hendry is a poet, with six collections under her belt. She is incapable of careless writing, and yet her work never appears over-worked or obtuse. She hits that blissful middle ground most readers crave: an alternate state of mind and heart, as easy to slip into as a hot bath after a hard day.

There is also the key ingredient of deceptive simplicity. These stories do not shy from small subjects, and do not feel the need to bury meaning under complex plots. It is unsurprising that Hendry is a prolific children’s author (over forty books). *The Seeing* was shortlisted by Costa, and for Scottish Book of the Year. Her talent for accessibility and credibility, always with an acknowledgement that (of course!) life is complex and messy – is remarkable one. Like all classic children’s authors and all literary novelists, Hendry never patronises.

I read this collection five months ago, and these stories are still with me – vividly. I find myself re-telling some of the stories to friends, and I can think of no stronger recommendation than this power to linger in a reader’s mind and heart. Intellectual books may be critically respected, but there is something much more magical about any book that can affect a reader emotionally and memorably. Quite simply, Hendry knows this trick. ■

### The Finest Road in the World

by James Miller  
Birlinn

REVIEWED BY ROY PEDERSEN

Historian James Miller has written on a number of topics concerning his native Highlands and Islands. Among them are: *Scapa*, *The Dam Builders* and *the Foresters*; each a seminal work in its own right. His latest book – *The Finest Road in the World, The Story of Travel and Transport in the Scottish Highlands* – is no less groundbreaking.

While the number of books written about Highland railways and shipping services would fill a considerable library, the story of the area’s roads has largely been neglected. This is strange, bearing in mind that our roads nowadays carry by far the bulk of the freight and personal traffic to, from and within the Highlands. It is timely, therefore, that James Miller’s new book goes a long way to bringing to our notice, the dramatic saga of how roads have come to penetrate our mountainous land, from the days of the first pioneers

in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the builders of the asphalt highways of today.

The story is indeed full of drama. Of the early road builders, General George Wade and Thomas Telford are well known. James Miller, however, brings to our notice Wade’s subordinate, William Caulfield, who in fact: “oversaw the construction of more road miles than Wade, some 700 to his predecessor’s 250, and made more impact at least in Inverness, where he is remembered in the name of Caulfield Road”.

The challenges of construction and maintenance of these early roads and the bridging of fast flowing rivers are well described by Miller, but perhaps the real drama in those early days was the experience of individuals who actually used the Highland road network. Here the author really comes into his own with his descriptions of journeys by coach. Typical is the experience of the Grant family of Rothiemurchus, who in the first years of the nineteenth century, took three days to bring their carriage from Perth to their house. Their coach had “leather curtains that failed to keep out the heavy rain, and four horses, one of which had a habit of lying down in the shafts and refusing to get up until it was cured of the trick by having lit straw placed under its belly”. Clearly, there was no SSPCA in those days.

Within a decade coach travel had improved greatly, with regular stage coach services on the main Highland roads and the Caledonian Coaching Company covering the distance between Edinburgh and Inverness five times a week in a mere two days.

To provide context, James Miller describes the evolution of coastal shipping and the role of the railways and air services in the opening up of the Highlands to the wider world. It is the road system, however, that is the book’s central theme which the author brings up to date with the revolutionary advent of the motor vehicle and the eventual creation of the rebuilt (and now rebuilding) A9 and the bridging of the Inverness, Cromarty and Dornoch Firths.

Another valuable addition to Miller’s growing corpus on Highland history. ■

### All The Prayers In The House

By Miriam Nash  
Bloodaxe Books, Hexham  
REVIEW BY IAN STEPHEN

Miriam Nash, born in Inverness, had an upbringing which included living for a time on Erraid, that near-island of quarrymen’s cottages and Northern Lighthouse Board jetties, in from the tideway from jagged Torran rocks. Her career as a poet includes an MFA in New York as well as winning an Eric Gregory Award and coming runner-up in the Edwin Morgan prize for young

poets with Scottish links. Her connection with the Stevenson family of lighthouse engineers and one wayward writer continued with her residence in Grez sur Loing as recipient of an RLS Award.

It is Robert Louis who comes first to mind in this crafted but dynamic work which ranges tirelessly through several poetic forms and at times breaks free of any obvious one to risk a more naked expression. In fact, she risks an imagined literary dialogue with Louis, the cove himself. But then the reader is taken straight from that entertainment to a ballad-like maritime poem which is sinister and sensitive at the same time: ‘The seabed is full of fathers.’ It is no surprise to meet the Selkie legend later but the language is fresh.

It is clear that both education and performance are central to the working practice of this poet. ‘Ladies of Valhalla’ is explicit in its reference to her ‘time’ working at a County Jail in New York. But a poem which must work well, out loud, also entertains, on the page as in the intonation of names of colours of nail-varnish: ‘...Today I’m feeling pale/and duck egg blue.’

But for me it is the poems of disrupted family life which are most haunting. This poet can be wry and dry but she also lets go to a surreal tendency, well-caught in the choice of cover image in this Bloodaxe publication. A title like ‘The Father’s Caesarean’ warns you but does not diminish the power of the imagery;

‘and all his body is a voice that calls and calls  
until they lift

each of his children out of him, not babies,  
but small,  
bundled in hats and scarves. The street is full  
of foxes’ yells.’

Miriam Nash may have virtuoso tendencies but she already knows when to hold back display of skill. The poem ‘Her Place’ seems, to me, simple, personal, humane but intense as a Bergman film:

‘No headstone marks her place,  
only a mess of wild Swedish strawberries,’

From all the forms and guises, a voice  
emerges. ■

### Slavonic Dances: Mrs Makarowski, The Kilt, The Carrying Stream

by Tom Hubbard  
Grace Notes Publications

REVIEWED BY JANE VERBURG

This sequence of three connected novellas addresses historical and cultural threads between Scotland and Poland, Czechoslovakia and Russia. *Mrs Makarowski* features a Fife woman who marries a Polish soldier stationed in the area during the war. The story moves between the 1940s and the present-day.

*The Kilt* introduces us to a Scottish student visiting Czechoslovakia just prior to the Prague Spring. Love-struck Angus’ life is disrupted and it takes many years for him to discover some of the personal stories behind that event. *The Carrying Stream* (what a beautiful name) focuses on the memories of a Glaswegian poet, Martin Meikle, who fell in love with the music of the Russian composer, Mussorgsky.

Tom Hubbard is an experienced writer, researcher and editor with an encyclopaedic knowledge of European cultures and languages. He was the first Librarian of the Scottish Poetry Library and has worked as a visiting university professor in France, Hungary and the USA. It is with this understanding that we read these novellas, knowing we are in the hands of a “polyglot and a polymath” (as he is described in the Preface by David Betteridge).

Each story delves deep into the histories of these two-way relationships and their apparent impact on the personal. There are many literary references and many quotations. Race, class, war, music, poetry and the connect-ness of cultures are touched on. Maybe too much is touched on and too many characters drawn. Dialogue is skilfully handled and a glossary helps out when required.

Reading these novellas I felt as if I were being taught and educated. I felt tasked to go and Google all those things I did not know about. I felt as if my role as a reader were taken from me and that I had become a pupil. The stories were more about the writer teaching me about his knowledge and the historic settings than about the characters within them. For me there was too much exposition. I found myself wondering if all that ‘polyness’ gets in the way of simple, character-driven fiction writing. I did not find the heart of *Mrs Makarowski*. I did not stare into the soul of Angus or Martin. There are many types of landscapes to explore – historical, geographical, cultural. The interior, secret landscape is where the best short story writing settles and this was missing for these characters.

Hubbard did make me want to learn more about some of the references listed in Slavonic Dances and to this effect he may have achieved his own real goal. ■

### The resonance of surroundings

POETRY REVIEW BY LESLEY HARRISON

Early in July I spent a week in North Uist. Among its many fabulous, storybook views was the sudden appearance of St Kilda on the horizon – blue and transparent, but distinct and completely unmistakable; and, for an island that is almost more myth than real, somehow much closer than I thought it could be. And then, as if just for me, the next day on the radio there was a repeat broadcast of Kenneth Steven’s wonderful programme A Requiem for St Kilda. Steven’s poetry

has a vivid, tactile quality and a keen sensitivity to the spiritual quality of a landscape which he feels almost as another form of weather.

This really shines out in *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (Polygon), a sequence written in long, lyrical sentences and stanzas rather than what he calls “short, lyric bursts”. This form gives Steven room both to conjure a world through beautiful descriptive phrases carefully placed and to control how we linger on the poetic truth of the tale. In his poetic retelling, the story of Deirdre and Naoise becomes urgent and heartfelt, as real as the landscapes of Argyll that hold their story: “Not an island, just a ghost of a rock – / a bare tooth in the gaping mouth of the sea”.

The poems in Alyson Hallett’s collection *Toots* (Mariscat) derive from her time working as a volunteer on Iona – “a joyous, riotous affair with an island and a wild Glasgow girl”. This is a real roller coaster – fresh, funny, painful, utterly sincere, joyous and hysterically inappropriate. Witness in thief Toots joyriding up a hill in an electric wheelchair; or, in love like this:

“the first time ... we trembled so much the  
radiator  
pipes rattled and we had to inch  
the bed away from the wall

it was bliss it was all the deer  
and vines and doves and honey  
all the songs of solomon”.

The collection is perfectly put together – we live through this friendship in the trajectory of the poems. Hallett’s style is deliberately simple, enhancing the poems’ authenticity and energy to the very last.

There is a neatness and a quiet, everyday watchfulness in Keith Murray’s work. Many of the poems in *Stork Skeleton* (Rain Poetry Books) are written as one long sentence, or as sentences run together. This allows us to glide between thoughts, keeping a separateness as we observe the international snow-person the children build, the beauty of Chinese script in the take-away order, the snowboots in the hospital locker. Pain and beauty are balanced in this collection, the poet “rhyming tragedy with fortune, / growing into the air”. In between there are some striking images: the “fish waiting like sleeping bishops” in the closed fishmonger’s shop; or the poet looking forward to bedtime and “that quiet village of the mind”.

Elegy and acceptance is the tone of Meg Macleod’s *Raven Songs* (meggitypublishing), an autobiographical journey in which the poet, responding to an advert in the *Sunday Times*, finds her spiritual home in the far north of Scotland. In these poems, written in the first person, the landscape becomes a



**Few writers have the verve and longevity to produce a volume of work drawn from nigh-on sixty years of creativity. One such veteran is Neil Oram, an artist, jazz musician, playwright and poet who has lived for decades near Loch Ness. An interview with Neil, recorded at his home in his eightieth year, will appear soon on the Northwords Now website. His collection *The Rain Stands Tall - Selected Poems 1959-2015* is published by Bannock Press.**

projection of herself and of her longing for older, purer meanings. In the trilogy ‘This Land, This Town, This House’, she tells us “this town has a river / an entrance and an exit / the river pours out its heart”. In ‘I Remember’ she describes her husband’s grave in a storm that rages along the north coast:

“its vibrations will pass  
through your bones where now you lie

I envy the ground which surrounds you  
the rain that reaches down into you  
as if to quench your thirst”.

There is a similar concentration on the matter of the senses in John Duffy’s collection *The Edge of Seeing* (The High Window). Duffy is alert and attentive to the phenomenology of place, and captures that immediacy in poems such as Luce Bay: “the sun floats, / spills in to the tilting Bay. / I look up to sweet impacts.” His section headings, such as ‘The sound of light’ and ‘Particles that froth and vanish’, underline this focus. These poems are contextualised among more autobiographical pieces; however these are not confessional in tone, but rather subtly demonstrate how our experience of place, even at our most disengaged, is always personal.

The landscape of Alan Young’s poems is the domestic, so familiar as to be almost strange again:

“It is 2.30 on a January morning  
And outside my bedroom window  
A bird is singing a sweet melodic song,

They say this day  
Will bring snow to our skies  
But outside my bedroom window  
A bird is singing a summer song”

In *Looking for the Line* (Rain Poetry Books) Young notices and celebrates ritual, and senses the uncertainty and anxiety that ritual contains, or suppresses. He often uses rhyme, though the sentiment sometimes struggles inside its straightjacket.

A heightened focus on everyday things is the theme and raison d’être of Cheryl Follon’s flash fiction collection *Santiago*. Or are these prose poems? In each, an object is given a voice and a narrative context – loneliness is a discrete substance, Henry Moore takes inspiration from mashed potato, a pretzel contemplates two grey-faced billionaires who might or might not eat it. Follon’s easy departure into almost whimsical association reminded me of Selima Hill, whose manic ‘free associations’ lead and then abandon us in strange, anxious territory. Follon provides condensed pictorial studies of “the nature of things” – how fame is a hanging between bluff and obscurity, sugar’s laborious task, the hard brilliance of magnesium.

In contrast are Alan Riach’s full, long poems, in which ideas are given copious time and space to grow and assume their shape. *The Winter Book* (Luath Press) contains storytellings which leave us with an aftertaste of oddness. Lulled along by his prose-like style, we become aware of something having shifted without our

noticing, as in ‘The Strange Play’, where the theatre audience is transformed by the process of watching a play which doesn’t actually exist. In ‘The First House’ the “archipelagic habitats” of the his grandparents’ house are mapped out carefully. In ‘Lion’s Milk’, he describes nightfall in Istanbul and the vertiginous sense of depth that grows amongst restaurant guests above the Bosphorous. This is a collection of surfaces and depths, and of how remembering and memory, as a layer in the present, are things that must be negotiated: “I guess we did just as you would do, / sharing a meal at the table in the restaurant ... that kind of / courteous curiosity ... the vision would be nothing without that depth”.

This process of orientation and reorientation towards our surroundings is perhaps the very business of poetry, and both Alan Riach and Magi Gibson engage with it directly in tackling the issues of our day. Both have poems lamenting the outcome of the Independence referendum, and both link our downfall to tartanalia and embedded cliché. “Step we gaily, on we go / Some said yes and most said no” says Alan Riach in *After the Day: a Jolly Song*; “wee Scotia, you displayed / the split that always haunts your psyche” says Magi Gibson in ‘Och, Scotland!’. Gibson’s collection *Washing Hugh MacDiarmid’s Socks* is a forward-looking exploration of Scotland as aftermath. Her Scotland is urban and densely social. Here Valda Grieve craves and finds intimacy in her absent husband’s laundry; dead parents give blessings and depart again. And, as always, Gibson’s poems burst at the seams with both frustration and joy at, for example, the graffiti artist who only sprays on biodegradable surfaces, and the impossibly erotic eehs and ahs of the word ‘vagina’.

Sheena Blackhall has published novellas and short story collections as well as over one hundred and twenty poetry pamphlets. In 2014, Alan Spence achieved the monumental task of distilling her creative output into a single volume of new and selected works; her two pamphlets (so far) this year are vintage Blackhall – solid celebrations of the Doric, poems and stories to be read aloud, chanted or sung. But, as before, just as we begin to get complacent before the volume of her output, we are brought up by a sudden stab of real pathos, as in ‘Elegy for a Son’ – “my little black pearl”; or by a vivid, knife-sharp metaphor – a child’s mouth “gone melon happy”. This is my favourite Blackhall – where she leaves the everyday and slips into the surreal. For the rest of the holidays I have set myself to memorise her wheen o limericks, such as:

“A towrist fa flew tae the meen  
Far nane of his family had been  
Said ‘Keep Tenerife, an the Great Barrier Reef  
The meen’s braw an I’m comin again”. ■



CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

**Juliet Antill** lives on the Isle of Mull. Her poems have most recently appeared in *The North* and been heard in a collaboration with The Scottish Ensemble.

**Alison Bell's** poetry and short fiction emerges from her domestic landscape in Aberdeenshire. She has an M. Litt. in Creative Writing from Dundee University.

**Helen Boden** is an Edinburgh-based writer, educator, all-weather walker and fair-weather cyclist. She is widely published in literary magazines and collaborates with visual artists.

**Alasdair Caimbeul** 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.

**Maoilios Caimbeul** A' fuireach san Eilean Sgitheanach, agus 's e an leabhar mu dheireadh aige *An Dà Anam / In Two Minds*, còmhradh bàrdachail air a sgrìobhadh còmhla ri Diarmuid Johnson.

**Leonie Charlton** lives in Glen Lonan in Argyll. She recently completed the MLitt in Creative Writing at Stirling University and writes fiction, non-fiction and poetry.

**Mike Dixon** lives in Inverness. When not travelling, he is writing the biography of famous Scottish climber and Ullapool GP, Tom Patey.

**Scott R Fraser** lives in Kingussie. He is a project manager, pilgrim and poet currently working on a short

collection of poems titled *Big Steps*.

**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.

**Dogo Barry Graham** is a novelist, poet, journalist and Zen Buddhist monk. After 22 years in the US, he recently returned to his native Glasgow.

**Nancy Graham** lives in Belfast, working in the women's sector. Her poetry is inspired by her Highland family history, as well as Northern Irish life.

**Stephanie Green** is English-Irish. Her pamphlet *Flout* was published by HappenStance, 2015. She lives in Edinburgh where she reviews theatre and dance. <http://sites.google.com/site/stephgreen1/home>

**Kirsty Gunn** directs the Writing Practice and Study Programme at the University of Dundee and is at work on her next novel.

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**Lesley Harrison's** new pamphlet *Blue Pearl* was published by New Directions in 2017. A collection is due out in 2018.

**Rachel Horsburgh** grew up in Dundee and then 'emigrated' to the Highlands. She works in

wildlife conservation, writes and grows food for her family.

**Stephen Keeler** is an award-winning poet. He lives in Ullapool where he teaches creative writing workshops and courses.

**Pàdraig MacAoidh** Bha an cruinneacxhadh leis, *Gù Leòr*, air a' gheàrr-liosta airson Leabhar Bàrdachd na h-Alba le Comann Crann na h-Alba ann an 2016.

**Iain S. Mac a' Phearsain** Rugadh Iain air prèiridh Chanada is e air a bhith ag obair mar òraidiche ann an Gàidhlig is Gaeilge air gach taobh Sruth na Maoile còrr is fichead bliadhna.

**D.B. MacInnes** writes and plays uilleann pipes on the Skye croft held by his family since 1860. He is currently working on a novel called *Highland*.

**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 her first novel, *The Dark Ship*, was nominated for Saltire and Impac awards.

**Rónán MacDubhghaill** is a writer, essayist and post-doctoral scholar of narrative and memory based at the Sorbonne, Paris (generally), and the mountains of Slovenia (presently).

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**David McVey** has published over 120 short stories and also writes non-fiction articles. He lectures in Communication at New College Lanarkshire.

**Jon Miller** lives near Ullapool and has had poetry published in a variety of Scottish magazines, including *New Writing Scotland*, *The Dark Horse* and *Chapman*.

**Christine Morrison** is an artist based in Stornoway whose work spans many media, including sculpture, drawing, video and photography. She and Ian Stephen collaborate as Stephen | Morrison.

**Martin Lee Mueller** is an ecophilosopher, writer and storyteller who lives in Oslo. He is working to create the Circumpolar Salmon Forum, a network organization for salmon cultures from around the Arctic.

**Donald S. Murray** is from Ness in the Isle of Lewis and now lives in Shetland. His next book *The Dark Stuff, Stories from the Peatlands* will be published by Bloomsbury early in 2018.

**Roy Pedersen** is an Inverness-based author and transport consultant, now semi-retired from a career in Highland economic and social development. He serves on the Scottish Government's Expert Ferry Group.

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night sky and the beauty of language.

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**Karin Slater** is a creative writing graduate from Lewis with a love of all things poetry. Her work has appeared in a number of publications.

**David Stakes** is a social worker and writer who lives in Glasgow. He writes about locality, identity and the human heart.

**Ian Stephen's** most recent book *Waypoints* is published by Adlard Coles Nautical/Bloomsbury and his most recent novel *A Book of Death and Fish* and poetry collection *Maritime* by Saraband.

**Gerry Stewart** is a poet living in Finland. Her collection *Post-Holiday Blues* was published by Flambard Press, UK. Her blog is <http://thistlewren.blogspot.fi>.

**Eòghan Stiùbhart** Choisinn Eòghan Duais nan Sgrìobhadairean Ùra ann an 2016. Tha e a' fuireach ann an Inbhir Nis agus ag obair air a' chiad chruinneachadh aige.

**Shane Strachan** holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Aberdeen. His writing has been widely published, and also performed on stage in Aberdeen's The Lemon Tree and His Majesty's Theatre. [www.shanestrachan.com](http://www.shanestrachan.com)

**Ian Tallach** was raised in Taiwan and Hong Kong and worked

in Botswana. Retired from paediatrics with progressive M.S., he now lives in Glenurquhart with his wife and children.

**Vawdrey Taylor** is an artist and writer with an interest in etching and illustration who lives on the Black Isle and is a member of the Highland Printmakers Workshop.

**Graham Turner** stays in North Harris and Edinburgh. His work has appeared at *StAnza* and on the *Poetry Map of Scotland*.

**Jane Verburg** makes silver jewellery and lives in Cromarty. Local history, nature and landscapes inspire her own writing. She is presently working on a biography.

**Jay Whittaker** lives and works in Edinburgh. Her debut poetry collection Wristwatch was published by the Cinnamon Press in autumn 2017. [www.jaywhittaker.uk](http://www.jaywhittaker.uk)

**Ryan Van Winkle** lives in Edinburgh. His second collection, *The Good Dark*, won the Saltire Society's 2015 Poetry Book of the Year award. His poems have appeared in *New Writing Scotland*, *The Prairie Schooner* and *The American Poetry Review*.

**Howard Wright** lectures at the Belfast School of Art. Blackstaff Press published *King of Country* in 2010. He was Highly Commended in the 2017 Ver Poets Prize and Commended in the recent Torbay Open.

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# Dàin Ùra le Eòghan Stiùbhart

## Canada I: a' cur fòn gu Dòmhnall o Thràigh an t-Sìthein

Chan eil Seann Dùthaich  
no Alba Nuadh ann  
ach aon Alba a-mhàin  
eadar nan cuantan

## Canada II: 92:10

Parag Mòr Hogamaigh  
MacIlleathain Ùigeach  
le lasair Dhè na bhroilleach  
aghaidh ris an fhuachd  
's seiche bhuabhaill air a dhruim  
thar deighean siùbhlach Bras d'Or

## Canada III: Fon Choill'

Thug Eòin Filip am brùid mi  
's gheàrr sin tron Choille Ghruamaich  
gu trèalair Amag  
far an tàinig na Ceapaich beò  
uair eile air an teangaidhean

## Canada IV: Libheadain

Chunna mi earball muc-mhara  
ag èirigh às a' chuan  
a' bualadh tro na stuaghan  
ann am brúadar na h-òige;

chan eil mi a' sireadh  
ach tha mi a' lorg  
's tha gach greann na mhadadh-cuain  
gach tonn na bhiast Iònah.

## Canada V:

A' togail càrn am measg nan inukshuk

Còbh na Feòla  
an àird mu thuath  
òb is geòdha  
ri aghaidh a' gharbh-chuain

Eilean Phòil glas  
a chreagan na chladh  
air a chladhach  
leis a' Chuan Shear

Beatha ga snaigheadh  
air na lic chorrach  
le Clann Ghille Fhaolain  
ach e fhathast fuadain

's tha na siùil gheala  
a' sìor-ghluasad air faire  
feadh nan uisgeachan srùthach  
o sheo agus gu siorraidh.

## Northwords Now At Dingwall's Word On The Street

To launch this autumn 2017 edition of Northwords Now, several writers whose work often appears in the magazine will be joining the editor, Kenny Taylor, for readings in Highlight Books. Come along from 1030am on Saturday 14th October for some morning tea and coffee, convivial company and inspiration. Kenny will also be in conversation with author and world-renowned songwriter Mike Heron at The Croft at 7.30pm on Thursday 12th October.

[www.word-on-the-street.weebly.com](http://www.word-on-the-street.weebly.com)

## Submissions for the magazine

The best way to submit work for consideration (in Gaelic, English, Scots and any local variants) is online through the revamped website at [www.northwordsnow.co.uk](http://www.northwordsnow.co.uk) Send the file as an MSWord document if possible (not a .pdf). The next issue is planned for March 2018. The deadline for submissions is 26th January 2017. You will hear about your submission by 30th March 2018.

## Keep in touch

With occasional news about Northwords Now and other aspects of the literary scene in the north through following our Facebook page [www.facebook.com/NorthwordsNow/](https://www.facebook.com/NorthwordsNow/)