The FREE literary magazine of the North

Northwords Now

Issue 35, Spring 2018

Land, water and northern skies

DONALD S MURRAY digs light from dark peat, LYDIA HARRIS sees moons over Westray, ANNA LEVIN goes with the flow, STEPHEN KEELER learns Swedish

Plus Tuath supplement of new Gaelic writing, Short Stories, Poems, Articles and Reviews

EDITORIAL

As befits its links to the magnetism of the whole planet, 'north' is a word with powerful attractions. Whether for those who feel they live distant from it, or people who consider themselves northern, there's a sense of something wider and further; beyond immediate grasp, but worth striving to approach. Journeys can follow, in person or in mind; writing and wider art result.

That's part of why I was both inspired and challenged by some of the ideas shared in Edinburgh last autumn, when the Scottish Government hosted a meeting of the Arctic Circle Forum. Scotland – Arctic? At first, the connection seems tenuous. But as delegates from across much of the upper part of the hemisphere – from Alaska, Canada, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Scandinavia and Scotland – shared information, the linkage began to make more sense.

For in both geopolitical and environmental terms, the northern world is changing very fast. Melting of ice means that the Northwest Passage will soon readily be navigable by large vessels for much of the year. Goods will ship faster from China to Europe by this route. Norway and Finland are already cooperating on major infrastructure projects to receive Chinese containers. In just a handful of years, Iceland has become a global communications hub. From the growing disaster of global warming, entrepreneurs across the wider north are plucking business opportunities.

It's an uneasy combination. But like it or loathe it, this is the reality of the new north. For writers whose work draws on northern energies, that's important, both through increased scope for international collaboration and through the tensions of changing environments, economies and cultures. The magnetism of 'north' has just become stronger to many people, including some who might surprise you. It's scarier than ever, and just as inspirational. ■

Kenny Taylor, Editor

At the Northwords Now Website soon:
northwordsnow.co.uk

Podcasts
A chat in the kitchen at Moniack Mhor
Some poetry from the current issue

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Contents

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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Subscriptions
The magazine is FREE and can be picked up at locations across Scotland. See list on page 31. The fee for individual 'home delivery' is £6 for 2 issues, cheques payable to 'Northwords'.

Front cover image
Beach at Mellon Udrigle, Wester Ross, as seen from a powered paraglider piloted by Highland photographer Gary Williamson, www.garywilliamson.co.uk

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

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To submit your work online, go to our website: northwordsnow.co.uk
The next issue is planned for September 2018. The deadline for submissions is 27th July 2018. You will hear about your submission by 30th September 2018.

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

BÒRD NA GÀIDHLIG

CREATIVE SCOTLAND
ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

Silver in the hills, gold in the hearth fire

Moniack Mhor turns twenty-five

By Kenny Taylor

The track to Moniack Mhor is crunchy with snow, as squalls of sleet whirl in from the east. Fast-moving clouds smudge charcoal across the sky, over nearby fields and a forest half-obscured in the glen below. Blue-grey smoke rises from a glint of stove pipe poking from a cluster of small buildings. Thank goodness they've a fire lit, I think, as I knock at the door.

Minutes later, there's also warmth from mugs of coffee shared at the kitchen table with Rachel Humphries, Director of the writing centre and Richmond Clements, Moniack's resident 'Cyber-Wizard'. The glow widens as we chat, through tales of what once was here, what it became and what is yet to be.

People have worked the land and lived on this hilltop for centuries, says Rachel. So there's a long tradition of meeting and sharing stories here, she reckons, going back much further than the start of Moniack Mhor as a residential centre in the early 1990s. Inspiration for that development came from a dynamic brother-and-sister duo, Kit and Sophia Fraser.

"Kit had connections with the Arvon Foundation," Rachel tells me. He brought Arvon founder Ted Hughes up here and suggested that this spot, with its inspirational hilltop views, would be a good place to run an Arvon course.

"Ted agreed. He thought the place was fantastic and said that Kit should do it, but that Arvon didn't have the money for it at that time. So Kit and Sophia arranged a 'Poethon' – a big, UK-wide, 24-hour, fundraising poetry reading. They had readings on Arthur's Seat, in London, in the Highlands."

The Poethon raised enough money to contribute to the purchase and renovation of the property. Support also came from The Highland Council and the Scottish Arts Council. Moniack Mhor became an Arvon centre at that point, and ran 14 or 15 courses during the summer. In winter, everything closed.

Facilities were basic back then. "When Ted Hughes came to look around, this kitchen didn't exist. The long building beside us was a cow byre – knee-high in manure – and the cottage was derelict. It hadn't been inhabited since the 1960s."

But although there was a gap between that last resident and the opening of Moniack as 'Scotland's Creative Writing Centre' in May 1993, there's a sense of previous occupants giving the place a 'long thread' of oral tradition, says Rachel.

"When I first came here (this is now my eigtht year) it felt like there were voices in the walls."

There's also been a remarkable link between past and present quite recently. The mother of Jamie MacRae, a young participant in a songwriting course in 2017, used to deliver milk to the last person to live in the cottage. Jamie performed his song 'Wolves' at Abriachan Hall, just down the single-track road from here towards Loch Ness, as part of that course. It was the first time he'd sung in public. The work impressed course tutors, Kathryn Williams and Roddy Woomble, so much that they helped Jamie to record it.

"He's now on his way to becoming a recording artist," says Rich, "and has performed at the Iona Music Festival and Belladrum since then."

A participant in another songwriting course, Heather Fyson, has just released her first album 'Shift in Time' this year, thanks to advice at Moniack from tutors Karine Polwart, Findlay Napier and Mike Vass. Now That's What I Call Mentoring (2018…).

Further strengthening of local connections to Highland writers and the Abriachan community comes through both the Jessie Kesson residential fellowship and the new Katharine Stewart Award. Jessie lived at Abriachan for a while, early in the 20th century. When I visited, the 2018 Jessie Kesson Fellow, Ryan Van Winkle (whose work featured in Northwords Now 34) was ensconced at his writing desk in Moniack's cottage, staying snug as the snow kept falling.

Katharine Stewart, best known for her books based on her running 'A Post in the Hills' and working with her family at 'A Croft in the Hills' at Abriachan, was also an astonishingly prolific writer of further non-fiction titles in her nineties, including her last book 'Cattle on a Thousand Hills', published just three years before her death in 2013, aged 98. Much loved, both locally and as a figure in the Scottish literary scene, I know she'd smile with pleasure (as she often did at things she liked) at how the award in her name will provide a place for a Highland-based writer on a nature writing or historical non-fiction course at Moniack this year.

✭

But what were the courses like in the earliest days here? The very first was led by Liz Lochhead and Roger McGough, says Rachel.

"We've a lovely photo montage of people involved in Year One. There was Jim Kelman, Iain Crichton Smith and Edwin Morgan among them – so, huge support. This year, we've got some of our original tutors, including Liz, Tom Pow, A. L. Kennedy and Janice Galloway, coming back. If it wasn't for the support of writers of that calibre back then, I don't think we'd still be in existence.

"Support from the Arvon Foundation was also huge. We worked in partnership for 21 years; and the Scottish Arts Council also helped a great deal.

Coming to Moniack in those early years must have been a bit like visiting a hill bothy, I suggest. Rachel and Rich agree, but reckon that, in some ways, it's still rather like that.

"Even though you're only twenty minutes from town, it feels isolated here," says Rich.

"And everyone still cooks together", adds Rachel. "People cook in teams of four, so that they can get to know each other. It's a great formula, so we've been careful not to change it too much.

"Writing can be quite a solitary process. So being able to connect with like-minded people is worth its weight in gold, really."

✭

The major change in the centre's recent history was in 2014, when it decided to go it alone, independent of Arvon. A strong driving factor for that move was that Moniack wanted to further strengthen its connections to both the local Highland community and the wider community of Scottish writers. Despite sleepless nights leading to independence – "It's the most stressful thing I've done in my life", laughs Rachel, it's paid dividends.

In some ways, the move to independence seemed to make no business sense, she says. "We reduced our prices, reduced the number of people we could get on courses.

"Then we appealed to all the writing clubs in Scotland and Scottish literary organisations, everyone we could, to get behind us. And it was incredible, because they did! When we started marketing Moniack in Scotland and tapping on those doors, they opened, and we were welcomed with open arms.

"Thanks to Creative Scotland, it was a measured risk. They gave us funding to take us through the transition. Now they've given us a three-year funding commitment until 2021, which will allow us to experiment more with courses and try new ventures."

Although the first year of independence was 'emotionally, physically and mentally tiring' some of the statistics since then show the success of the move, including a steady rise in occupancy of courses, with 96 per cent of places filled last year.

"So, no pressure!" quips Rich.

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Among new work, three-year funding from the Life Changes Trust from this year will support programmes of activity for young people between 14 and 26, from anywhere in Scotland, who've had experience of the care system. That will include taster writing sessions and working with individuals to discover what kinds of writing most appeal to them. The young people will also play a key part in how the work is steered.

"Another exciting thing that's happening is that we're going to launch a small programme of Gaelic arts activity. This year, Bòrd na Gàidhlig are supporting us to deliver immersive courses in Gaelic songwriting and poetry, which will include all participants coming together for a public performance in Abriachan Hall. Heather Clyne, our administrator, is a fluent Gaelic speaker and she'll be doing the delivery."

Then there's the inaugural Highland Book Prize, launched last year with support from the Highland Society of London, for a writer resident or once resident in the Highlands or whose book is set in the Highlands. More than 70 readers volunteered to read the 56 titles submitted.

"We'll announce the winner at the Ullapool Book Festival in May,' says Rachel. "It's great to be working in partnership with them, as we're also now doing with the Scottish Poetry Library and the Scottish Book Trust."

Meanwhile, interest in Moniack from some very notable literary figures, evident from the outset in 1993, continues to be strong. "The beauty of Highland community is that we can welcome famous and very successful writers here simply as human beings," says Rachel, "who can join in with life at Moniack, including through cooking or unloading the dishwasher.

"Whether you're a participant or a teacher, there's a connection through a common goal. It brings us down to earth."

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And back to the tales around the fire. That's where the magic can happen, as it always has done and will continue to do, while havens like this thrive. Happy 25th, Moniack Mhor. Lang may yir lum reek. ■

Magnie's Boat – Chapter 1

By Hannah Nicholson

Magnie disappeared on a bright sunny afternoon in May, with only the lightest breeze in the air that had rustled the fresh green grass that made up the family's land near Gutcher, in the north end of the island of Yell. His sister, Merran, who had only been nine, remembered the sky had been a brilliant shade of blue, with only the occasional white cloud, and the sun's rays glittering on the surface of Colgrave Sound, the long stretch of sea water between Yell and the neighbouring island of Fetlar. Merran had never been there before, but on such a clear day she could see it from the front door of her family's but-and-ben. She could also see Linga, the island that Magnie had told her about when she'd been younger. It was said that a man called Jan Tait had fought a bear in Norway as punishment for not paying his taxes, and when he'd beaten it, he had been pardoned and allowed to take it home. He'd left it on that island, tied to a post. Magnie had told her there were still circles in the ground in the place where the bear had once been. Merran had been enthralled. Maybe she would get him to take her to the island next time he was off and he could show them to her.

Since the weather was so beautiful, Magnie had declared his intention to head out in his little rowing boat and fish for mackerel for the family's tea. He would only be on Bluemull Sound, the sheltered strait between Yell and Unst–another island nearby. He'd been in ownership of his vessel for around a year, having bought it with some of his Merchant Navy wages, and he revelled in his newfound freedom.

"Kin I come aff wi' de?" Merran asked Magnie.

Magnie looked out of the window, then back at Merran, frowning.

"I doot no' da day, peerie wife," he replied, ruffling his hand through his youngest sister's long brown hair. "Anidder day, mebbe."

"Oh, a'right," Merran sighed. Magnie smiled.

"Al come back wi' a guid haal," he assured her.

"Will it be lik' yun Galilee at we learned aboot in Sundee skule?" Merran wondered.

"Better as yun," Magnie said, winking at her.

The two exchanged smiles. Magnie may have been nineteen, and the oldest of the five, but he had always had a strong bond with his youngest sibling. This hadn't changed even when he had been in charge of the croft during the Great War years, when their father, Ertie, was a prisoner of war in Holland. Merran hoped Magnie would manage all those fish on his own.

"Nixt time du's aff," she asked him, "will du tak' me tae da bear's island as weel?"

"Yea, I likely could," Magnie said. "Canna be sure at da bear'll be yundir, though."

Merran giggled.

"Tak' guid care oot yundir, Magnie," Ruby admonished him as he left. "Da watters oot yundir at Bluemull kin cheenge ithoot ony prior keenin'."

"Dinna du worry aboot me, Midder," Magnie assured her. "Am been fishin yun watters fae I wis owld anoff tae hadd a pole. If am no' back be tae time, send oot a search pairty."

With that, he set off out the front gate and down the hill, and onwards to the pier. Since it was May, a lot was going on at the Williamson family's croft, most notably the lambing. Ruby warmed up a bottle of milk, and sent Merran with it to the byre to feed the three orphan lambs being kept in there – she was the only one that did this job without complaint, as Ertie and the boys all considered the orphans to be a nuisance. When she had finished feeding them, she went back into the house and got to her knitting, which was her and Ruby's way of contributing to the household income – and that of her sister, Betty, when she had still been living at home. Betty now lived in Lerwick and made a comfortable wage gutting fish down at the docks, a job which left her with little time to knit. Merran wasn't jealous – she didn't want to spend the rest of her life knitting clothes or gutting fish in order to earn money. She preferred to read, and hoped to become a teacher. She read as often as she could, but Ruby told her off for doing so when she should be knitting. Outwardly Merran was obedient, but secretly she decided that if she had a daughter, she would never discourage her from reading.

Magnie still hadn't come back by the time Ruby was due to start making the family's evening meal. The day remained calm and bright blue. Ertie came in for his tea, along with Lowrie and Peter, Merran's other two brothers.

"Whan time did he say he wid be back, Ruby?" Ertie asked. "No lik' him tae be dis laet."

"He said tae time," Ruby replied, as she gazed out of the ben end window towards Bluemull Sound, her brow furrowed. "Dir somethin' no' juist aafil right wi' dis, Ertie. We'll need tae geng an' look fir him."

So Ertie and his two younger sons made their way down to Breckon beach in order to see if there was any sign of Magnie or his boat. After an hour the three of them returned. This time Ertie was frowning, and his face was paler than usual.

"Tak' guid care oot yundir, Magnie," Ruby admonished him as he left. "Da watters oot yundir at Bluemull kin cheenge ithoot ony prior keenin'."

"Dir nae sign o' him, or da boat," he said, his voice heavy with worry.

Merran felt her chest tighten. She looked up at her mother. Ruby looked even more anxious than she had before.

When the family went to bed that night, none of them got a great deal of sleep. The following morning, the search parties were sent out to dredge Bluemull Sound. Lowrie, Peter and Merran went to school as normal, but Merran found she couldn't concentrate on her work – she often found herself looking out the window at nothing in particular. The teacher caught her and moved her to a different seat, but this wasn't much help to her.

When she and her brothers got home, they found that Ruby had done little around the house. She had spent the day pacing the floor of the but-end of the house and looking anxiously out of the window, frowning at the sea.

"I dinna understand it," she fretted. "Da waddir wis da boannie yisterdee, a beautiful fishin' day, an da soond wis flat calm. Dey wir nae sign o' da watters turnin'. Whit could be come at him?"

"I dinna keen, my lass," Ertie replied, going to her and placing his hands on her shoulders in a half-hearted attempt to console her. "A'less dir been a whaal gotten separated fae its pod an' laandit up here."

"Wid it o' gone fir him?" Ruby asked.

"No' on purpose," Ertie explained. "Yun kin worry dem, an dey sweem aboot in a blind panic."

Ruby's pained expression didn't change at this. Merran and her brothers looked uneasily at each other

There had still been no news when they went to bed that night either. Then, the following day, their neighbour Bertie Fraser came striding up the hill and shouted to Ertie. Ertie called on the family and they all made their way down to Breckon beach. As they walked, none of them looked at one another, although Merran slipped her hand into Ruby's.

Upon their arrival, they were greeted by the sight of an upturned little boat being dragged ashore by some of their neighbours. Merran recognised it immediately; it was finished with cream-coloured paint and had a blue trim. When it had been pulled up on to dry land, she let go of her mother's hand and ran towards it. As she did, tears spilled down her cheeks, leaving salty tracks as they did. When she reached the boat, she threw herself upon it and the sobs engulfed her. She was so shrouded in her own sorrow she didn't notice her mother collapse and have to be carried back up the hill to the croft. Finally, she felt a hand on her shoulder and peered up. Bertie's kind face peered back at her.

"Come alang noo, my bairn," he said softly. "Du canna lay here aa' day."

"Laeve me," she choked through her sobs. "Juist laeve me."

"Nah, Merran," Bertie soothed, "come du, lass. Come hame tae de fokk, dey need de wi' dem."

He gathered her up in his arms and carried her back up the hill. Weak from sobbing, all she could do was lean helplessly over Bertie's shoulder and allow him to take her away from the scene.

Merran didn't remember much about the days that immediately followed. Ruby spent most of them lying in bed, swallowed by grief. Upon hearing the news of her brother's apparent death, Betty returned from Lerwick. It was left mostly to her and Merran to keep the house in order and to cook the evening meal although they themselves were grieving. Meanwhile, Ertie, Lowrie and Peter kept the croft going as best they could. Since there was no body to bury, a memorial service was held in the kirk. Magnie had made many friends during his time in the Merchant Navy, and the presence of those who weren't still away kept the turnout large. Still there was no

good reason that this had come to pass, for how could Magnie have possibly got into difficulty when there was no obvious sign of trouble on the water? Ertie's suggestion about the upset stray whale was the only explanation anyone came up with.

Some days after the memorial service, Ruby took all the photographs of Magnie down and put them away in a box, which she then placed in a drawer in the living room. When her mother wasn't looking, Merran found the box and went through the photographs. Her lost brother gazed steadily out at her from them. Merran could picture the blue of his eyes and the black of his hair even through the sepia tinge of the pictures. She could also envision his smile, mischievous and warm, even though he was straight-faced in many of the photos. Her favourite was one of him at the peat hill from the previous summer, taken shortly after his return from sea. He was wearing the same outfit he'd had on the day he vanished–his blue flat cap, a knitted Fair Isle jumper, dark blue trousers and a pair of rubber boots. He was smoking his father's pipe and smirking as he did so. Merran compared it to another photo of him in his Merchant Navy uniform. In that one he was neatly turned out and had a serious expression, and Merran could see his resemblance to their father – although Magnie was much more gentle and laid back than Ertie could ever be. She took her favourite photo and kept it in her bed, under her pillow. Magnie might have been dead, but she didn't want his presence to disappear from the house, like those of her grandparents when they had passed.

Of course, despite everything, life for the Williamsons had to go on. Betty stayed at home for a few months until she was certain that Ruby could manage without her, then she returned to Lerwick. Lowrie left school that summer and also remained on the croft to help out his father. Merran and Peter both went back to school. Merran continued to do well, both with words and numbers, but when she was eleven – at the age when she would have been sent on to Lerwick to further this plan – her father was less keen.

"Dinna be sae stupeet, lass," he scoffed at her. "De, a teacher?"

"Oh, but Faedir," she protested, "I wid love tae…"

"Oh, of coorse," Ertie sneered, "I sood send de awa' tae hae an education, an' den du'll mairry an' hae bairns an gie it aa' up, an hit'll o' been a total waste. Du'll do as du's telt!"

Merran pleaded and begged, but her father wasn't for backing down. Her teacher didn't get much further with trying to convince him, and so Merran, too, was destined to leave school at fourteen like her siblings before her. She had to settle for the brief chances she got to read her books when there wasn't much to do, although between helping on the croft, keeping the house in order, and having to knit clothes to sell it was safe to say her parents managed to keep her busy.

During this time, Magnie's boat remained upturned on the spot where it had come to rest on Breckon beach. Steadily the paint peeled and the wood mouldered, and so the little vessel that had served to feed the family so many times fell into disrepair. Merran often thought how heartbroken Magnie would have been by this – the boat had been his pride and joy for the last year of his life. He'd bought it with his hard-earned Merchant Navy wages, and he had been enormously enjoying the freedom it had brought him. He and his brothers had hoped to eventually save to buy a proper fishing boat together so they never had to go back to the whaling or Merchant Navy, and, in honour of their brother, Lowrie and Peter still planned to do this when they found others willing to jointly buy a suitable vessel.

Even as the years passed, Merran never walked by Breckon beach without acknowledging her brother's boat – without a grave it was all they had to remember him by. Sometimes while on the beach she would go and stand with it, and she would feel his presence. Merran sometimes couldn't help but think of what Magnie would have made of himself, had he lived. He had been a handsome and cheerful young man, and had caught the eye of many a lass on the island. Perhaps he would have married one of them, and they would have had lots of children.

One particularly ordinary day, five years after Magnie's accident, Merran was walking home from an uneventful day at school when she felt the wind begin to pick up. She shivered, and swept her long brown hair out of her face as best she could, then tightly pulled her shawl around her shoulders. She quickened her step, but as she passed by Breckon beach a figure standing next to Magnie's boat caught her eye. She squinted. From that distance it looked like a woman, and judging by how she was looking around she seemed to be lost. Despite having never seen her before, Merran felt drawn to the woman, and decided to descend down the hill to the beach to speak to her.

The whole time that Merran made her way down, the woman never took her eyes from the rotting corpse of Magnie's boat. She certainly didn't seem to register Merran's presence, no matter how close she got. When she was only a couple of feet away, Merran spoke up.

"Hello?" she called. ■

rio abaho rio

Maggie Wallis

spawned in stillness
flanked by hill-top pines
glassy-eyed
she moistens her lips
and murmurs into being

one clear call another
falling back
to silence

and she gathers each rivulet
braiding wet strands
into a single plait
of twists
and tumbles

such eager babble but
you've only just met…

this hand sweeping away debris
from her path
needles of gold
sticks and silt
and the timbre of her talk
lightens
and quickens

do you remember?
listen!
here is your voice
before this channel got choked
and you found
a different way to wander

hear now your eagerness
the onward flow
and this dried-up streambed
yesterday's single option

on a bed of soft sand
languorous
she ripples like silk
combing through long rushes

from slow sleep
she wakens
open trembling

the wide river beckons

she skelters
down
the final slope
and joins the Orrin

they crosshatch
a web of voices intermingling

beneath Aultgowrie bridge
the rowdy river
jostling for space

her voices
drowned in the multitude
still
in the underflow she
the river beneath the river

Poems by D James Ross

Carnyx

[Dedicated to John Purser and John Kenny]

They had gouged its eyes out
And torn out its brash tongue,
So when earth-mother parted wet lips
To receive their gift, all was silence.

Centuries passed, then in silence
The circle witnessed its rebirth,
Its bristled head, bog-swaddled,
Wide-eyed, mutely gasping for air.

In a mixture of awe and disgust,
The minister recorded its form,
Wondered about its heathen roots,
Before in silence they bore it away.

But now in a cave, dark as wet peat,
It fills its ancient lungs once more
And resumes roaring, snorting,
Bogling its primordial song.

GMB's Rocking Chair

In a corner of the museum,
Marginalised by an exhibition
On the explorer Dr John Rae -
George Mackay Brown's rocker.

Absurdly domestic beside
Harpoons, fish-spears, compass
And inflatable sealskin raft,
Quaintly mundane, homely even.

But between its spindle arms
George too has journeyed far,
Has cast off and gone exploring
On insistent iambs of its rocking,

Has traversed blank wastes
Under shifting northern lights,
Has risked all to confront and
Interrogate that final silence.

Sir James Sinclair's Rant

[Linksness, Orkney, 1536]

Alone at last in his pomp and vainglory,
Sir James has unwrapped the Royal writ,
And at once everything has fallen away.
Thus late into this his last night
He has sat on in his hollow finery
While the candles spluttered and died.

Then at first frantic light, with no-one
Around, all at once he erupts from his
Bedroom, jigging like some mad thing
Through gutters thick as gossip
He dances past the peat stack,
Scattering peats like accusations.

Capering, he hurls high his fancy bonnet!
Cavorting, he flings off his fine clothes!
Prancing pale as a skinned rabbit, he goes
Haring headlong up the headland,
Skipping, skirling his head off,
Skirting the gloup's curled lip.
And now darkness has reached up
And seized him under the oxters,
Sucking him into the sea's sinkhole.
Still jigging, if in ever-slowing motion,
He is sliding over the event horizon,
Swirling into oblivion, into unbeing.

Later that morning, his waking widow
Will find, and not find, his bed unslept.
And slipped, or not, under her pillow,
In a gesture so meaningless
And so poignant, his signet ring
And his tarnished name.

Editor's note: Sir James Sinclair, Governor of Kirkwall Castle, was given a feudal grant of the islands of Sanday and Eday in 1535, having wrongly described them, it is said, as infertile places. The following year, when he heard that King James V was intending to visit Orkney, he 'sought refuge in death', says one source, by throwing himself into the Gloup of Linksness.

The Braeland Women

At the scraich of dawn see the Braeland Women,
Gathering eggs in their arms like gammons,
Swinging their milk-pails, lipping full, frothing,
Bustling round the range baking mountains of bannocks.

And now see the Women carrying the men-folk,
Booted and oil-skinned, to yole and dinghy,
One on each shoulder, broad as a heifer's,
Striding through the tang with their feet like flounders.

Then clearing boulders from off the moorland,
See them pile them neatly in drystane dyking,
Then tearing out the hill with their horny fingers,
Scarifying the heath-land with their toes like boat hooks.

In the still of the evening see them standing like *Moai*
Brooding and silent, high on the headland,
Watching for the men bringing harbans and halibut,
Blocking out the sunset with their legs like fence posts.

Now sitting in a ring round a spluttering crusie,
Hear them spinning skeins of yarn and saga,
Supping black brew from a battered old bride's cog,
Chewing dried cuithe with their teeth like clothes pegs.

And as night draws in, to the rasping of corncrakes,
See under acres of patchwork covers
The Braeland Women, dead to the world,
Each in her box bed, snoring like a grampus.

Note: moai – Easter Island statues

Knitters

For five minutes
They stood together intently reading
The Fair Isle jumper in the window,
Learning up between them
The narrative twists and
Turns of its moorit saga.

For the rest of the day
It lay in secret ciphers
In the archives of their heads.

For quarter of an hour,
Back at home, they plotted together
With conspiratorial pencil
And squared paper,

And in two weeks
Of wool-weaving and needle-nattering,
They had conjured up
Its vivid identical twin.

Poetry

Georgina Seatter's 'Specimen Needlework Book'

Lydia Harris

Georgina slashes the opening, overcasts the edge.
She threads moonskin to linen, a wee strip in the sky.
Knits around the thumb hole of a mitten,
cuts a cuff from white cotton, appliqués
moons to swatches, one the colour
of Colin's field, another the surface of Swartmill.

Her stitches tilt into the wind
made with a point of sharp steel.
She teases threads from the warp, wraps the weft
into lines of flags at the field's edge, bastes reeds
from the Burness shore to the moon,
tracks across the wastes.

She turns a heel, folds and oversews
the sheet's worn centre, patches a blanket,
eases strands from unbleached linen.
Her stitches are creeping steps,
tiny as grubs, seed pearls in cotton,
crumbs of new bunno in the kirn milk.

On the wrong side of her darn,
the stitches dip and swim the two-ply swatch,
roots feeling the earth for water veins.
Right side up, her darn is almost unbroken,
just a light song in silvery blue,
a hint of a moon stitched to a day-lit sky.

The Bride's Boots

Jeannie Inkster, Rousay 1915

Lydia Harris

How rivets and brads find their home,
laces criss-cross the tongue,
18 eyelets climb to the cuff.

Her ankles are keys in silk locks.
She shifts on the fan of tacks
tapped in on the old man's triple last.

The whiff of the crust of wax
left in the tin, in her nose.
Carbon black.

Buffed to a shine.
They're those rocks on the Taing
when the tide's pulled back.

New Moons over Westray

Lydia Harris

Moon in the Forge
The men fill their pipes, their faces wax in the glow. Teemo unbends a maul plough, hammers the buckled bolt flat. Moon is a face in the doorway.

Moon of the Well
Between Clifton and the mill Teemo *demmles* the tin pail in the rock wall. The cows in the byre *glippit it up*, every drop. Moon trembles at the thrust of their tongues.

Moon of the Maul Plough
She comes when the clay gets all *packit solid* and Teemo chucks the muck on the top of the ditch brae. Moon slinks through the clumsy shadows.

Moon of the Drift Block
Where the anvil sits held fast by nails. Sea-steeped. The tide long-gone that once oozed between its grains.

Boat Moon
'The Thrift' passes between Eday's Red Heads. *Look,* calls Marcus, *light open!* The arch in cliff slides like a door to let the day in. The first page of *'The Moon Almanac'*. This is where the fish must lie.

Groundwater Moon
Enters the seams under the house, steeps the rock, floats single grains of sand
between the footings. It means no harm. Smoothes the slow stone. Knows the lines.

Moon of the Buckled Bolt
Forced out of true when the gate slammed shut. Teemo sets it on the anvil, swings the hammer with the flowing tide under the Scaun in his arm.

Diviner's Moon
When he speaks to the wires they jerk. He begs them to judder at the stir of secret water. Other days, he takes the pain out of folks.

Pulley Moon
Teemo ropes it to the *cupples*. The endless chain swings through the roof space.
The wheel sprouts spokes thick as rowans, the cog squats like a weatherman inside his metal house. It lifts the engine. Catches the frame in its hook, hoists the car on its side. Moon coats the brake casing.

Sale Day Moon
Teemo drags the anvil to the cart. It's the size of the bull's head, horn at one end. Face and shoulders, no eyes but a Pritchel hole, no mouth but a Hardie hole.

Moon of the Deck Cargo
The tide's flowing. *Twenty batons with a strap round them lie some piece, sodden and weet with sea geese.*

Moon of the Byre
Teemo says to the kye, 'Don't forget her, she hangs behind the day, waiting'.

The Kinswoman

Ingrid Leonard

i.
In the morning, she laid a fire
of wood-scuffs and newspaper
which she rolled and folded
in luciferan twists

Industry of the hearth,
she knew the measure of grain
by the cup of her palm,
the stove time for its boiling

The bellies of children
were filled with bread,
butter at room temperature
and freckled eggs

She served tea by the gallon
at dances, cut bread
into rounds for fêtes
and the neighbour's funeral

Her house was the antidote
to the muck of the farm,
the corners of rooms scunnered
at her sweep, the unmistakeable

kinswoman, you know her.
Scourer of dirt and more
in the calm that hovers between
folds of pressed cloth.

ii.
On a dresser in a room
in Skara Brae a pebble rests,
virgin oblation on flagstone
to the hearth-toil of women,
their swept cupboards and skulls
of fresh water a resolve
to the equation of stars.

I am no kinswoman.
I seek her perfume in the words
I write. Truly, I bid her step down
from the stars each night
to stream language, a liquid
that spills and cradles,
the skim and dreg of stones
glancing in the scullery.

Thinkan o' Skare Brae (after Robert Rendall)

Ingrid Leonard

At Bay o' Skaill there lies a toon
set upon the sand as if by a stone wave
struck aboot, haeved by hand. Covered walls
thick as veins o' a whale line flint-cut sett
that link each cell whaur families bloomed
in labyrinthine shade, kent fae outside
by tufted domes ower thick-laid slab,
an' a deuless curl o' smok.

Or mibbe they were more learned folk,
scalan Orion, gaugan thur worth,
makan sense o' thur place in the star-
clustered firth. The ring on Brodgar's slope
shares its breadth wi' sooth circles –
wis this a geometrist's bower for those
who stopped in by for numbers, but an' ben
in the New Stone Age? Whar wid ken.

An Excursion

Short Story by David Carson

"Hello Mrs. McCafferty. This is, um, a nice surprise."

She stands on his doorstep, a plastic carrier bag in one hand. Vincent stares and frowns, and thinks, how small and dumpy she is. And untidy looking. He looks down at her. Then he remembers. Poor thing, she probably can't help it, under the circumstances.

"Hope Ah'm no' disturbin' ye, Mr.V."

Vincent winces. He dislikes the use of a letter in place of his name.

"Aye, Ah'd hae cam' tae yer factory but, seein' it's Seturday, Ah didna' think ye'd be warkin'. Andra allus said ye were like a' the ither bosses – a five day a week chiel."

Vincent takes a step back. He thinks, what a nerve talking to me like that.

"Oh, yes, of course, Andrew. It was very sudden, wasn't it? The whole thing. Sorry I didn't make the funeral, I was still away on holiday."

"Disna matter noo. At least yer office printit the deid sheet." Vincent is puzzled. Mrs. McCaffert explains, with a hint of impatience, "Ye ken, the thing ye gie tae the mourners when they arrive, wi'Andra's details. Got Andra's dates wrang, mind. Naebody noticed until the meenister startit oan the tribute, began wi' his date o' birth. Michty me, ah thocht , surely he's naw gaun tae gie' us the hale life story caboodle. But naw, he skipped a' thae borin' bits, then went oan aboot Andra's family an' a ' that shite. Ye'd hae thocht he didna' hae a wifie."

Vincent is shocked. He smiles. "Andrew did talk about you from time to time, said you were…" Vincent searches for a word "…direct."

"Oh aye. Weel, Ah need a wee favour fae ye, Mr V. That is, Andra does."

Vincent is perplexed. He looks enquiringly at Mrs. McCafferty.

"Andra needs tae feenish his journey. Ah've goat him here."

With a flourish she pulls out from her carrier bag what looks to Vincent like a tin can.

"It's whit's left o' him, ye ken. Ashes. There his tae be a scatterin'."

Vincent has a sinking feeling. He hates being put upon. He says:

"Anything I can do to help, you're very welcome Mrs. McCafferty."

"That's braw. Weel noo, ye ken Andra enjoyed the fishin'. He had this favourite place, used tae spend hours there, went on his own, couldnae wait tae get awa' oot the hoose. Ah tell ye, Mr.V., Ah aince jaloused he hid a hizzie. Then Ah thocht, naw, thon's nae possible, he's goat me, an' richt enough, it wis a' jonick."

Vincent is incredulous. He can barely follow this tirade. He wants to laugh out loud. He says, comfortingly:

"Mrs. McCafferty, please don't get upset. What would you like me to do?"

"Ah thocht ye'd nivver ask. Ah need tae get his ashes intae the river. Ah ken his spot. He described it aftimes tae me. It's at the bend, whaur thon big rock sticks oot o' the watter. We'll can gae in your car."

Vincent is angry now. How dare she impose, assume. He puts a hand on her shoulder.

"Of course Mrs. McCafferty, I'll be delighted to help."

"Ah kennt ye wid. Ah nivver believed Andra when he said ye wir too meeserable tae gie' a crumlick tae a birdie."

Vincent is close to losing his temper.

"It will be a pleasure. When would you like to make the trip?"

"The noo. In that." Her finger is pointing at Vincent's car.

"Well, I'm a bit busy just now."

"Ach, it'll nae tak lang."

Vincent is now resentful.

"Right-o, Mrs. McCafferty. No time like the present. I'll fetch my keys."

He returns and opens the car door. He hears Mrs. McCafferty chuckling and muttering.

"Och Andra, whit ye said is richt true. The only smairt bit aboot Mr. V. is his motor!"

Vincent is incensed. How dare she mock him like that. He says:

"Make yourself comfortable Mrs. McCafferty. Which way?"

"Oot the toon, up the brae, alang by the river. It's no' ower far."

She picks up the tin. "Dinna fash Andra." She shakes the tin vigorously "Ye'll soon be at peace." She turns to face Vincent. "He wisna a bad chappie, ma Andra. Mind you, he wisna altimes bonny, if ye get ma meanin'. Ye see, tae begin wi', it wis houghmagandie a' the time. Ah wis fair fauchinless come the morn. Wis it like thon wi' you an' Mrs V., Mr.V?"

Vincent has no idea what Mrs. McCafferty is talking about.

"Absolutely, just as you describe it."

"Dearie me. A' Ah'm sayin', Mr.V., is that Andra went at it like a stag in the rut, ye ken. Aye, but then he stairts tae lose interest. Ah couldn'a fathom it. Even when ah pit oan ma gaudy knickers. They're braw aren't they, Mr.V?"

Vincent is aghast.

"Perhaps you should pull down your dress, Mrs. McCafferty."

"Aye, Andra's words tae, though he wisna allus sae polite. Ah jist couldn'a comprise it."

"How far now, Mrs. McCafferty?"

"Jist roon the corner. That's it, see, doon by the picnic table."

Vincent stops the car

"We'll can walk fae here. That's guid. See, there's thon big rock. A' ye hae tae do noo is tak yer shoon aff an'wade oot tae it. Then ye jist unscrew the tin an' haud it tapsalteerie, an'awa' he'll fly."

Vincent has had enough.

"Mrs. McCafferty, you come to my house, interrupt my Saturday afternoon, make me drive you to God knows where, and then you expect me to wade into an icy river with a tin full of ashes!"

"Ach, yer nae sic a daft gowk efter a', Mr.V. Here, Ah'll haud yer things an' you'll can haud his ashes." She takes the tin from her carrier bag and throws it to Vincent.

Vincent catches it and walks towards the water's edge. Gingerly he pokes a toe beneath the surface. He wades out towards the rock.

"That'll dae, Mr.V. Ye can do the deed the noo."

Vincent tries to turn the lid of the tin.

"I can't manage it Mrs, McCafferty. The top has stuck."

"Michty me. Jist bang it oan the rock. That'll fix it."

Vincent hits the tin off the rock. The lid stays where it is. He tries again, with increased force. He is losing control.

"Jesus bloody Christ. Open up for god's sake!"

He smashes the tin downwards again. It bounces up, and Vincent loses his grip on it. The tin soars into the air and falls back into the water. The current begins to carry it away.

Vincent starts to chase it, loses his footing and falls head first under the water. He staggers upright and sees Mrs. McCafferty lift her skirts and plunge after him.

"Andra bluidy McCafferty, ye were a thrawn bugger when ye wir alive, can ye no behave yersel noo yer deid!"

She brandishes the carrier bag like a net and yanks up the tin.

"Come here ye bastart. It's a' richt Mr. V., Ah've goat him".

Vincent is soaked and shivering. Mrs. McCafferty wrenches the lid from the top of the tin, and prepares to throw the contents to the four winds. Then she stops.

"Naw, it canna' be true." She peers into the tin.

"Ye'll no' believe this, Mr.V. We'll jist hae'tae'come back the morn an'dae it a' again. Whit's the matter, Mr.V.?"

Vincent is sitting on the rock, shivering, head in hands. He is near to tears. "Please let this not be happening, Mrs. McC. What's the matter?"

"Ah,ve picked up the wrang tin, Mr.V. This is the feckin' tea caddy." ■

Undoing

Short Story by Barry Graham

She packs boxes. He sits in a chair. She has her back to him as she works. She occasionally turns to face him as she searches for another item to pack. Each time she turns in his direction, he looks away from her, pretending he is not watching her.

He gets up and goes over to a table on which there is a pot of coffee and some cups. He pours coffee into two cups, then picks up the cups and extends one toward her. She takes it.

He goes back to his chair and sits, drinking his coffee and not looking at her. She stands looking at him, holding her cup. She takes one sip from it, then puts it back on the table.

She resumes packing, and he resumes watching her.

She sorts through CDs and cassettes, putting them in a box. She looks at one CD, ponders, and then turns around to face him. He looks away as she turns.

"This is yours," she says.

"It's yours too. You really like it, I thought."

"You like it more. I can get another."

"So can I."

"It's okay. You can have it."

He does not answer. She goes the table and puts the CD on it. Then she looks at the packed boxes and says, "I'll come over with a van on Saturday."

"Okay."

"Okay. I'll see you then, if you're here."

She picks up her bag, and leaves.

He sits there, drinking coffee. He stands up and goes to the table. He puts his cup on the table and picks up the cup she left. He drinks from it. He picks up the CD. He goes back to his chair with the CD in one hand and her cup in the other. He drinks coffee and looks at the CD. ■

Poetry

deer talk
Gerrie Fellows

shout-louts
clod-footing through mud
odd body bright things
not ear-lifting
to wind body tree
squash underfoot
bark crisp tasty gills

watch little body
the wind
does not enter
with nose talk
hoof tapping
you are ear up
and shifting
wait

lift nose slow
only their light and dark
their out-of-place
not going between the trees
only in clear space
the hind-hoofers
strange ones under birch roof
wait

ear snap
eye gone
odd bodies
take their spell away

fast little body
into ferny place
soft under hooves
through leaf net
into tree shade
frond flitter
ear-lift to leaf shift
nose to body reek

hidden
in sweet nodding cud
under stipple grass

in myriad

Seaton Cliffs, lowest water
Beth Mcdonough

Ancient, Arbroath's *flairs* rise, rock seabeds
paddling pool chain all the way to the tide,
strange as Pamukkale's pockets.

Now this calm invites bathers, depletes
squally congregations of birds
shit-pewed at the Mermaid's Kirk cleft.

Even the Deil's Heid suns, grins
his so-benign side. Norway
seems only a tough swim away. But soon
little apple trees bend their crabbed
fishwives' backs, thrawn as they claw
into cliff, crumbling out to Auchmithie.

No fools. Their bark remembers
sea's harsher moods. They turn, face
brown-red fields, furrowing opened Angus.

Spirits of the Lavvu
Paula Jennings

Uksakka is beside the door
where people come and go.
She cares for your life
in the shelter of the lavvu
and your being in the world.
She shapes the foetus
in the mother's womb
and is a midwife at the birth.

On the opposite side
is the 'wrong door'. Food
is carried in through here
and the dead taken out.
The tundra's harsh beauty
lays bare the life cycle.
Juksakka protects children
and guards this second door.

On the hearth of five stones
sits Sarakka. A kindling
of aromatic mushrooms
culled from birch trees
fills the room with scent.
Wood embers begin to glow.
The guardian of love and sex
holds the fire in her lap.

Wolf
Paula Jennings

This is the story told by the shaman:

A man is sitting alone by the fire.
Reindeer skins are thick
on the birch-branch floor,
the smoke is rising through
the pointed roof of the lavvu.
A panting shape appears,
has slipped through the door,
a lone wolf seeking refuge
from a hunting pack,
a wolf with tundra in its eyes,
wild stink filling the lavvu,
and the man choosing to be calm,
sitting all night, absorbing wolf
through eyes, nose, skin;
Sarakka between them,
holding the flames.

Years later the man says to his son
  You have the eyes of that wolf, Ande.
And the son says,
  Because you gave me protection
  I chose you to be my father.

This is the story of the shaman,
who is also a professor of law,
who is also that son.

The Song
Paula Jennings
'You can burn my drum but you can never,
ever burn the song that is inside me.' (Sami saying)

His mother taught him to yoik

in the days when it was still hidden,
the songs banned, the drums burned.

She showed him how to sing the wind,
the creak of ice, crunch and slush of snow,
songs that growl and whine and roar,
that slide between pitches, that have
no symmetry, no beginning, no end.
When the singer stops the song remains,
uncontained as shifting silences of winter
in the naked tundra, raucous as birds
returning in the Arctic spring.

He says,
  You have to become what you yoik…
  when you yoik a wolf you are also a wolf,
  you have to meet the wolf that is inside you
  and also meet the wolves inside those who listen.

Notes to poems by Paula Jennings: A Lavvu is a temporary dwelling used by the Sami people of northern Norway. The yoik is the traditional song of the Sami people who live in the northern part of the Nordic countries and the far northwest peninsula of Russia. Ande Somby is a traditional Sami yoik artist and an associate professor at the Faculty of Law at the University of Tromsø, specializing in Indigenous Rights Law.

Illustration by Vawdrey Taylor

Poetry

The Gift
By Kenneth Steven

That night they knew the foal would be born
they went down, she and he, with all the day done –
the summer in heat and the night skies still,
a blue like the shallows of a white shell cove
and the bats about them with pattering wings.
They went down, the quiet easy between them,
till suddenly the whole moon broke from the hilltop –
scarred and shining. They stopped to watch, faces filled
as the moon rose up like some balloon and held
there in the silent skies. Only then they went on
to the hollow where the pear trees grew, and the scent
rose sweet. There before them the mare and foal:
he staggered to his feet, the strangeness of those stilts
and she mothering him, tender and slow, her eyes
full of him, giving and giving her tongue
to bring him complete to this world, to this life.
And the girl and the man knelt down, for this
was bigger than they understood.

Coll
By Kenneth Steven

I got up long before the dawn;
opened an unlocked door
into a landscape made of moor and loch.
Twelve years old: the only danger barbed wire fences.
I ran until the hillside turned to sand,
and under me the whole Atlantic
softening the white rim of the island
like a sigh. I chased down all the dunes,
barefooting sand so white it might have been
a kind of snow. Sea breathed
in ledges and descents, in many blues
that melded into one. I dared undress
to tread out deep until I lifted
held and unafraid, breath
caught and stolen by the cold.
I entered another world;
melted into something else.
I came out strange and shining, new
and wandered slowly home, the same
yet never quite the same again.

Donald Angus, Harris
By Kenneth Steven

Three days beyond his death
they carried him to Luskentyre;
the graves that lie against the sea,
the blue-green breathing of that tide.
The threads in him all left intact;
the woven pattern of the eighty years
to make this place called home –
the love that brought the three strong sons,
that spoke and laughed his Gaelic;
the knowledge of the rise and fall of psalms –
the sung wave that underheld the hand,
carried high the sureness of the heart.
All this they brought that day and buried there
beside the vastness of the inblown sea,
to sleep against the light of Luskentyre.

Olrig
Stewart Sanderson

"A fine corn country, two miles and a half in length, and a mile broad, or thereabouts. Nothing memorable in it."

'Brother.' The word cut
into silence like a tushkar
through black layers of peat.

'Do you remember
Olrig? *A bheil cuimhne agad*
air sin, a bhrathair?

The old tongue sounded
strange to both of us by then
as snow fell outside

our tiny cabin
on the Hudson Bay; yet I
had not forgotten

what it was to be
at Olrig, an age ago
and neither had he.

In Iroquois I said so.

Naiad
Jane Picton Smith

I should have guessed you were here,
since a jet stream of swans
barely cleared the treeline
(you counted sixteen).
This startled *corps de ballet*
and the intrusion of coots
signalled your presence,
by the mouth of the pow.
The clinging tangle of roots
on the cusp of riparian woods
and riverbank;
the green lustre of a kingfisher's wing,
like the filter of a half-remembered dream.

Your chosen craft: a paddleboard,
no less at one with its surroundings,
as it forms a second skin
on the water.
Emerging from a screen of reeds
near Carthagena Bank,
by turns culled and reborn
with each indecisive tide,
you are part pre-Raphaelite muse,
part able barge woman,
framed against a wintery waterway.

In your hands
a single oar,
momentarily still.

The Day the Clocks Restarted

Short Story by Ian Tallach

At the school where Larkey should have been that day, the pupils didn't know his name. They called him 'Larkey', yes, but his real name was lost - most likely taken by the mists of time.

'What is your name, laddie?' The man over by the café window must have been almost a hundred.

Larkey blinked and cleared his throat. This was his first time skipping school and he'd begun to wander, in his mind, to more exotic places than Inverluib. 'Ehm… Larkey?' His voice came out all shaky, like he wasn't sure. At times like this, he simply wished to disappear.

'You feel'n guilty, son?' The old man's face was hidden, for the most part, by a generous white beard.

'G - guilty?' Larkey stammered. He sat up straight and did his best to look defiant. 'Why would you think that?' His banana split was long-since finished, but the dregs of ice-cream at the bottom suddenly became of interest.

'Man gives his name like it's a question is most likely feel'n guilty; so says a hundred years' experience. Besides, Larkey's not your real name… is it?'

The boy, making to leave, let out a nervous chortle, but the other's eyes had such a warmth and humour in them that he changed his mind. The old man laughed and Larky laughed again and then they laughed together. There was something comforting and timeless in the old man's smile – that and the smell of coffee and the sounds of chinking cutlery and crockery and chatter from the other customers. Larkey relaxed.

The old man closed his eyes. He nodded by degrees and gradually his beard descended to the table and spread out. It began to engulf the remains of his breakfast – half a muffin and a slice of toast. Larkey smiled; he'd seen something similar on David Attenborough – starfish on time-lapse hoovering up clams and mussels.

When he'd slipped into the café he had chosen a rustic orange sofa, perfect for slouching. But now he seemed to sink a little further. The cushions slowly enveloped him. He found himself under the shadow of the padded armrest and, feeling he was being swallowed, he began to grasp about until, with all the desperation he could muster, he got out.

He lies there on the floor, catching his breath.

The old man is staring at the clock.

'HEY, MISTER!' Larkey shouts. 'Did you SEE that? I almost disappeared!'

The old man doesn't move. And there is something else a little strange – absolute silence; nothing from the kitchen; no more conversation; no cars passing outside; not even that hissing sound that waves make on the beach beyond the promenade. The other customers sit motionless, holding their mugs. Some look a bit like gargoyles, with their mouths wide open.

'Larkey.' The old man's voice is sonorous and deep; it seems to come from far away.

'Wh – what's happening?' Larkey blurts.

'Nothing. Precisely nothing. Time… is elsewhere. We find ourselves… outwith the times. Poised, like a wave about to break… a dewdrop in the brittle air… an isolated incident… of calm.' There is something hypnotic about the old man's voice: the ebb and flow of tides.

'Will I go back?'

'Aye. You will. You are back… and you have gone back.'

'I - I'm scared! My friends will never BELIEVE this.'

'Your friends don't know.'

'Y - yes. But they WILL... when I tell them.'

'No. The future has no purchase here. There is no memory of this in time. This… is a moment.'

'Tears well up in Larkey's eyes. 'Are we trapped… in a moment?

'On the contrary, my son. There's much more in a moment than you think. Let me take you outside.'

'B - but, how can we MOVE? … when everyone else is… is frozen… coffee cups and all? Look… even the crumbs - stuck in the air.'

'They're not frozen,' the old man laughs. 'We're just taking a break from them. Be careful where you put your feet.' And with that, he leaps up and makes his way towards the door.

Larkey runs after him. 'Fff - for how long will we be… like THIS?'

The old man doesn't answer. On the promenade he turns and says 'Now, Larkie. Let me show you things. Things… that can change your life.'

'How is that POSSIBLE if… if what you say is true – about there being no memory of this?' The tears are on his cheeks, but dry. He feels anger, terror and curiosity, all mixed together.

The old man swivels like a dancer, touches his nose and winks. 'Just follow me. Careful! The grass is sharp! You see that bird in flight? Let's go and see its yellow feathers.

In the café, Larkey watched the old man staring at the clock.

'Mister,' he ventured timidly. 'Why are you staring at the clock?'

'Because, my son, it stopped. Most curious. It's started though… again.'

Larkey thought the old man might have lost his marbles. But then he thought some more. 'Maybe not,' he decided. 'Perhaps he knows more than he's letting on.' Then, digging deep into the pockets of his dungarees, he found just enough change to pay for his banana split.

Larkey often goes back to the café. They expect him now – mostly at weekends and during the holidays. He likes to sit on that old rustic orange couch and close his eyes. And when he does, he thinks of giant waves, dewdrops and fleeting things – not very boyish things – like hummingbirds and butterflies and Golden Orioles. ■

A Fishy Tail

Short Story by Selena Hardisty

Beautiful day – lightest of breezes, sun, walking the beach is a pleasure. Tide's just dropping, plenty of time, easy walking on the sand. A scatter of seaweed, a few shells – and, oho, a sea bean! Gleaming dark red, lovely unblemished rounded seed, a lucky find all the way from Central or South America. Nice feel to it, too.

On to the tidal island, just getting across to it and working round the rocky shore to the ocean side. Scrambling round a rocky outcrop, glimpse of a fish tail ahead – a BIG fish tail. Wasn't a tuna washed up a few years ago? On round – and it is, a big fish tail – lovely scales, shining bluey-green, very fresh looking. No smell. Just beyond – looks like hair, too fine to be that seaweed – part of a bare back! Someone hugging the fish?

Hmm, let's climb up a bit – someone lying starkers on the shore hugging a fish could be dangerous. View from higher up and - Oh, no, not someone hugging the fish – someone joined to the fish around the hips – skin and then the scales start.

Handy rock here to sit on. Is it asleep? Or pretending, hoping not to be noticed? Stuck here now until the tide comes in. But there's no movement in the back that I can see. It's not breathing. No gills visible, so it must breathe.

Back down again and make my way round a bit and peer from the side – not too close. The human part is female and looks full grown, though perhaps a little on the small side. Long dark hair, only on the head, but spread to cover quite a lot of the body.

How do they keep warm? No fur, doesn't look as though there's much fat on it – no insulation to speak of. Could they have a lower temperature than we do? The fish part must be cold blooded. Two different systems like birds'legs and feet?

Anyhow, not breathing.

I move closer, touch an arm, tentatively. Cold, no movement.

Is it a hallucination? I've never had one before - can one touch a hallucination?

So, here we are. Dead mermaid, apparently, in an unfrequented nook on a tidal island. Not so easy to get to, can't get word to anyone before the tide comes in.

So, who do I tell? The marine animal people in Inverness? But is this an animal? The front half – er, the top half? is human and the other half is fish – Dunstaffnage do fish. Suppose I sent them a photo of the fish bit – so fresh – and they'd say "What's the head end like?" – then what do I do? And they wouldn't believe me anyway. Amazing what you can do with photoshop – well, not me, but some can. Anyway, could you just post mortem a part person? Could be tricky – there can't be any legal protocol. Or she'd be cast, or stuffed, or pickled. That hair, floating over that face in a tank full of spirit. Ha! Damien Hirst, eat your heart out! But too disrespectful, utterly inappropriate (though it would be interesting to know . . . oh, so much!)

Should I go for a minister? Or a priest? They're all a bit thin on the ground these days. Aren't mermaids supposed not to have souls? In fact, are they supposed to be immortal? Who would believe it and scramble out here? And that would still mean formal burial. Would the council take half a fish – even if she were ever allowed to have a burial without someone interfering and making off with her for science or display? No rights for the fey.

I sit down and think it all through again. I should take photographs – but that doesn't seem right, snapping a corpse. I could try a sketch, though; somehow that's different, not disrespectful. And it leaves time to see if perhaps with a different metabolism, she's not dead after all.

So I sit a while. A gull hovers close by and I wave it away. And think – there is another option. I leave my sea bean beside her, cover her gently with fresh seaweed and make my way back, before the tide comes in ■.

Monument

Short Story by Richard W. Strachan

It came at night, a whisper in the blood, but like most men it took him months to slip his indolence and see a doctor. He had bared his teeth to the mystery of those pains for weeks; a narrative in a language he couldn't understand, speaking of some disturbance in his core. In the darkness he would listen to the hollow midnight sea across the street, the shore abraded another inch or two. Turning his head to the pillow he'd press both hands nervously to his ribcage, the softening grid of his abdominals.

When his name was called in the waiting room he strolled on unexpectedly weak legs through to the doctor's surgery; this young woman who glowed with hard work and health, a stranger to sickness. He gave her his story, reluctant to emphasise any of the details and trying to make it all sound as innocuous as it probably was.

'It's this pain,' he said. He patted his stomach, as if torpidly satisfied at the end of a huge meal. 'Not just a pain, but this sense of … I feel almost that there's more of me now.' He gave up. He couldn't explain this sense of mass and density, like he was displacing more of the world. As the doctor nodded and tapped the end of her pen against the gleam of her bottom lip, he seemed to drift from the warm room to the sun-struck car park outside; the vacant street, the crisp fringes of the autumn leaves on the oak tree across the road.

Then he was finished and the tests began. Before long, he knew exactly when he was going to die.

He surprised himself with a brief flurry of industry, administrating his final months to deflect attention from the savage eclipse that was going to overwhelm him. He got his affairs in order and took great satisfaction in thinking of them in those terms; as 'affairs', weighty matters that had real-world consequence. Sometimes he would pause as he rifled through his bank or mortgage statements and feel as if here, in his petty savings and property accounts, were the unquenchable relics of an empire. This, he thought, holding up an annual interest payment form, is my Machu Picchu. This draft will and testament is my Great Pyramid of Giza.

At other times though, when the pain would tilt its lance against him, he would scatter the documents from the desk and press his burning forehead to the window. Out there was his garden, the blue grass dying in the dusk; there, his garden shed, his apple tree that he would never see in bloom again. The inscrutable facts of his body disturbed him. In that humid chamber, what were those organs doing? He couldn't picture them at all. He had only the sketchiest idea of how each fitted to each, and now they were in open rebellion, insurrectionists against his lifetime indifference.

When he started the treatment, he found it helpful to fall into the direction in which the language seemed to be guiding him; his 'battle' with the disease, the 'war' against it, the fight. Hooked up to the chemical feed, he would sit and sketch his ideas of the organs' rebellion. He drew strategic maps of his jungly interior, plotting the attacks and counterattacks, the spleen's feint against his lines while the liver swung around his left flank, the heart's artillery raining blood and fire on his positions from the rear. It was a swift, well-organised offensive, but they hadn't taken into account the heavy cavalry of his chemotherapy, which swept in to smash the organs' formation and scatter it to the winds. Incendiary cocktails of industrial drugs rained down on the conscript forces of his lower intestine, while the shock troops of his support group literature mopped up the stunned survivors. He chuckled to himself, the field marshall drawing arrows of advance and barbed wire defences, fleshing out a campaign that could surely end only in his comprehensive victory.

It will be over soon, he thought. They never stood a chance.

When the chemotherapy didn't work he was switched to radiation. Near-comotose with drugs, he was strapped to the gantry under the rotating lens of the linear accelerator machine, which, like the eye of God, saw right to his secret core and pared him down to atoms. Conventional warfare had proved impossible, and only the most radical solution was left to him - the nuclear option.

As he lay there though, half-deafened by the clattering violence of the treatment, he wondered what on earth would be left of him if he was forced to take such measures? What was the world going to look like after the war? It felt like this path would lead to nothing but utter devastation, and he would become in the end just a shattered landscape of carbonised ruins, host to grim survivors scrabbling in the muck for human flesh. When those are the ends, he thought, how can the means ever be justified? Hooked over the toilet bowl, spewing out a radioactive stream, he knew it couldn't go on like this. All wars must end, and from either defeat or victory must come peace. Peace is all that really matters.

The language had to change for a start. No more of the struggle, no longer the fight, the words turning his body into a contested space, his interior no more than a scorched no-man's land where the embattled 'I' of his self fought bitterly against the invader. The conferences with his doctors broke down, the Yaltas and Casablancas, and he couldn't measure the relief he felt as he finally demobilised his troops.

For long periods after he gave up the treatment, he would sit and meditate on the changes inside him, trying to imagine what his organs looked like now, those vital sacs that he'd never given more than a moment's thought to in all the years he'd been using them. Deep in the heightened slumber of his thought, he tried to send benevolent waves towards the disease, welcoming gestures of forgiveness and reconciliation. There is more than enough space here for all of us, he said. We can live together, happy and free.

In his mind the lashing tendrils of his sickness became hands reaching out in fellowship and those burgeoning clusters that were distending the walls of his stomach were just the first homesteads of a frontier people, joyfully sharing in a mutual prosperity. The dislocating frenzy of war was over; now was the time to rebuild.

It should be more than just accommodation though. He had been touched in some way by this presence inside him, marked out and distinguished, and he began to feel that this great power was worthy of more than just an amiable arrangement. Reverence was due to the master of change, this swelling incubation, and like an alchemist or a Rosicrucian of old he felt that what bubbled away inside must have its outside correspondence. He wanted to feel them with his hands, to understand their forms in the only way he knew how.

He spoke to his doctors. They put him in touch with research schools, consultants who had been thinking along the same lines. What he had in mind would be an invaluable teaching tool for the next generation of practitioners, they said.

'If you've no interest in helping yourself,' the consultant told him, without recrimination, 'then at least you'll be doing something to help others.'

He nodded in eager agreement; a martyr, a pioneer.

The process was almost the same as the radiotherapy. Back into the imaging unit he went, lying prone while the invisible pen mapped out that wild country inside him. When it was over he was invited to see the results, the gridlines smoothed out on-screen into rotating three-dimensional shapes; the cluttered chamber of his stomach, the web of intestine jewelled with tumours. They showed him the 3D printer and he stood by it for hours as the thin stream spooled out in glistening polylactic acid a perfect representation of his former enemies; those organs given outward shape, brought into the light, unveiled and lessened in some way of their disturbing power.

He took his gifted copies home, his ravaged organs, and in the long nights that followed he cradled those ruptured globes, embracing the world inside him even as it broke apart and fell to ruin. He placed the models on the mantelpiece and considered them in the mornings, when the light fell in slant beams through half-open curtains. In the afternoons, fatigue like a coat around his shoulders, he would run his fingers over the lesions of the disease, feeling the corresponding parts of his own body and matching the great bubbling froth of one model tumour with the tender lump that swelled beneath his ribs, wondering if the shortening of his breath had anything to do with all those malformed studs and buttons that he could see on his plastic lungs.

He built up rituals for their use. Every day he was weaker, but he would still make his way downstairs in the morning and arrange them on the living room floor into some rough approximation of their inner order. Crouching down, chanting the name of each organ in turn, polishing them and gilding them with metallic acryllics, he laboured in the last fits of his illness to appease the thing that was consuming him, even if at the same time he felt that this still wasn't enough; somehow the scale was wrong. Mundane, too anchored to the human level, when all this was so much bigger than him; it was a universe in there, a depthless ocean.

This is monumental, he thought. Whoever looks on this should feel like nothing, or like the mere shell of something vast and incomprehensible.

He retched, patted fingertips to lips now frothed in blood.

He sourced the materials online and contracted the job, emptying his bank account of his savings. He forwarded the image files that the research centre had given him, and with grim perseverance clung on to the last of his life so he could see it through. When the truck came he staggered out on his crutches to oversee their transport, directing the delivery men to the back garden where the scaffolding was ready.

Some of the more complex pieces had been cast and printed on gigantic sprues, an intricate, Cyclopaean model kit, but it was easy enough for him to cut and strip the mould lines on each section and apply industrial glue. There was a pleasing magic in seeing four or five abstract shapes slot neatly together to form a perfect image of his failing gut, or the wreckage of a kidney that was bloated with metastasising tumours; testament to the skill of the AutoCAD-technicians who had produced them. As he worked, modelling away from dawn to as long as the light lasted, he often thought back to carefree times of lost childhood, his bedroom and toy soldiers, those games of rulers and dice; death on the tabletop in

the days when the forms of death were always cinematic. Every morning he swept the pain of his advancing illness aside and crawled out onto the gantries with buckets of paint and varnish, and as he worked it was like all the fronds and tendrils of the real disease were quivering in response. To sweep the brush in one leisurely stroke across the crab-like pincer of a plastic tumour was to feel the real thing tense and relax inside him, and as he worked in this reciprocal scale all his organs thrummed and muttered with a complementary music.

On the last day of his labours, he woke with a stone crushing his chest and broken glass grinding in his lungs. He was almost finished, and although it took him the best part of an hour to fall from bed, he still managed to stagger out into the garden and mount the scaffolding, where he crowned his structure with a final dab of gold. Then, he unlocked the curved section that formed the hollow right ventricle of his monumental heart and slowly dragged himself inside, breaking through the web of his pain and kicking back to cast the scaffolding to the ground. He pasted a thick line of glue onto the connecting plane of the moulded plastic, and with great care drew it back in place before him, until he was sealed in a darkness that was lit only by the faint and bloody glow of the setting sun. He closed his eyes to a deeper darkness, fastened inside himself at last, and as he vanished from the sight and memory of all who knew him, at peace, he listened to the sea's fading shout as it shattered into a line of glinting fractals, alive with light and breaking ever closer to the mumbled shore.

Long after he had disappeared, presumed dead, the monument he had built remained. When the house was sold it stayed where he had planted it in the garden, an outsider art selling-point in the estate agent's catalogue. When the sea finally came for the street and the bluff's last crenellated edge sheared off to tip all the empty houses into the water, the monument went with them. A tall column of weather-beaten gilt and crimson, it toppled and fell gracefully into the ocean, drifting through the effervescent green until it came to rest on the sea bed at the base of the cliff; where, in time, many centuries from now, after all the land had been pared away another mile or more, future archaeologists dredging the water for the artefacts of this lost civilisation would snag their tools on the monument's hidden marvels and bring it back up to the surface; and there, wide-eyed, they would look on the salt-rimed jewels of his construction, the coils and segments he had with awe put into their proper order, and they would run their fingers across the bumps and protrusions he had rendered in such careful detail. As the central chamber was finally opened to reveal its mysteries, everyone who looked on his sheltered bones and the preserved assemblage of his grave goods would drift into a puzzled revery about the long-lost world where such things had been made, all of them wondering if perhaps those unimaginably distant people had raised such lurid icons on their crumbling shores as no more than a superstitious gesture to ward off the invading seas; mad totems of a last and undefeated disorder. ■

Poetry

Fareweel

Michael Stephenson

a version in Scots of a poem by Yü Hsüan Chi, Tang dynasty

Aw thae tender nichts we spent thegither
up the stair in oor auld city flat
content tae lose oursels in ane anither -
I niver thocht the love o ma hert wid leave.

Nou, I lie masel, doverin an wakenin
while clouds drift whaur they will.
The lamp is lowed yet. A blind-bat
flichters roon the flame, again an again.

Variations on a form (a tinker with a triolet)
Looking back

Vance Roberts

Perhaps my vision is a little blurred.
(No, please do not adjust your set.)
Your face less clear, your voice half-heard:
Perhaps my vision is a little blurred,
While somehow I remember ev'ry word
As if you lay beside me yet.
Perhaps my memory's a little blurred
(But pleas cannot adjust heart's set.)

Soft Spot

Aoife Lyall

It is early. The cereal boxes are still
clustered together on the kitchen table
patchworked with leaflets and leftovers.

I sit and watch your daily habit-
trousers, shirtsleeves carefully rolled back-
peeling potatoes at the morning sink.

You guide the knife under the soil-soaked
potato skin as gentle as the first time
you held her sleeping:

thumbing the smell from her new-born
head, easing around the knots,
the soft spot, humming.

The universe as demonstrated by birds

Bridget Khursheed

The pampas grass is full of sparrows harvesting
last year's seedheads - they are the children of the
children of the children since I have been here

trying to control weeds.

They vector it and make an astrolabe
demonstrating all the planets, asteroids
and circling orbits;

the flutter of their wings like the sound my ears hear
sometimes when waking from the dream
of meadow when I shrink below the grass

an atom - rerum - everything growing out of me
and contains itself and the seedheads chatter
like old friends; perhaps death.

deericide (noun): the killing or killer of deer

Short Story by Liam Murray Bell

After the last exam, Gemma sat with her father in the pebbled garden and looked up at the pine trees on the hillside. The last of the sun squinted through. Her father sipped on a beer, but she shook her head when he offered it.

'I know the last year's been tough,' he said. 'At school.'

'Not just the last year.'

'All of it,' he nodded. 'I know.'

Gemma tried a smile; no-one could ever make her go back.

'I'm proud of you,' her father said. 'Your mum would have been too. For making the effort. Those kids… life isn't like that. You'll find friends, there'll be folk who'll share your interests.'

'My interests?' Gemma frowned.

'Not all of them. But board games or history books…'

'Ah, the normal ones.'

Her father took a drink of beer. 'You remember that hideous deer-thing you found when we first moved in. Grotesque bloody thing.'

'Darren.'

'Yes, you called it Darren.'

Gemma had found Darren on the shelf in the cluttered shed. He must have been left by the previous owner. He was a tiny fallow deer, the size of a kitten, curled inside a sealed bell-jar and preserved in some greenish liquid. You could see the outline of the muscles, of the jawbone, beneath orange and white fur. The ears were exquisite. And his eyes were closed, as if in sleep.

'What made you think of him?' Gemma asked.

'I worried… for a spell… about the attachment you had to it.'

She had trundled Darren around the garden in the wheelbarrow and taken him down to the burn. There they used sticks to build a raft that wouldn't float and then a pyre that wouldn't burn. At night, she placed him on the windowsill so that he could see the stars; if he ever opened his eyes. Gemma lay in bed wondering what the greenish liquid would smell like, if she opened the jar, or if, once it drained away, the deer would shake itself and rise unsteadily on stick-thin legs. Like Bambi finding his feet on the ice.

'That was the summer after your mother,' her father said. 'And I worried that you might want to take it to school – you took it everywhere. Things were bad enough, I'm not sure anyone could have protected you if they'd found a taxidermied deer in your schoolbag.'

'I don't think Darren was taxidermied.'

'Sorry?'

'He wasn't stuffed, he was preserved. He was whole.'

'Embalmed then.'

Gemma nodded, accepting the word. She took a twist of her hair and set it between her teeth. Then she let it fall, because her father hated that habit. She looked across; he hadn't noticed.

'We got through it,' he said. 'All of it. And now you can go off and find something you want to do. With decent people, folk who'll just leave you be.'

'Like what?'

'Sorry?'

'What can I do?'

'Well, what would you like to do?'

Gemma had once thought of working with animals. Not as a vet, but in a cat shelter or a pet store. Darren had been supportive, but he wanted her to aim higher. Maybe History at university, if she could avoid group-work and presentations.

She'd taken Darren on the bus, in her schoolbag, to Glasgow and found the building where they taught it. She didn't speak to anyone, but she got a leaflet. Then they'd wandered in the Hunterian Museum, where Darren's brethren stared down from the shelves; dozens of bell-jars with all kinds of different animals, both taxidermied and embalmed.

Gemma had found Darren on the shelf in the cluttered shed. He must have been left by the previous owner.

'He wasn't grotesque,' she said, to her father.

'Who wasn't?'

'Darren.'

'It was a tiny deer in a jar, Gemma.'

'If he had been a doll, though, or a cuddly toy…'

'Then I'd have accepted you taking it to bed with you, or setting it on the table while you ate. A cuddly toy in your bike basket is normal, a dead deer is not.'

'There's that word again.'

'What word?'

'Normal.'

Gemma placed some strands of hair in her mouth. Just a few. This time, her father saw. He gave her a look, so she let them fall. The look softened.

'Listen honey,' he said. 'I was genuinely worried about that deer. And there was enough… I thought it was worth your being upset for a few days if it spared you some torment at school.'

'What do you mean?'

Her father sipped his beer. The sun had gone. Gemma felt it not as a single shiver, but as a spreading chill. She remembered the morning she'd lost Darren; the search starting as frantic, switching to methodical, and then reverting to frantic.

'What did you do with Darren?' she hissed.

'I took it up into the woods. The idea was to empty the jar, so the thing could rot naturally. But the seal was tight. And when I tried to smash it, the jar just bounced up off the pine needles.'

'So…?'

'So I buried it. In the jar.'

'You know where he is?'

'We'd never find it now.'

Gemma waited until her father met her eye. 'You're sick,' she said.

Her father raised himself from the seat, lifted the empty beer bottle. Before he turned his back, Gemma took a fistful of hair and stuffed it into her mouth. He passed no comment on that.

'It was for the best,' he said, instead.

Gemma shook her head, kept her stare focused on the silhouetted trees on the hillside. She heard her father's sigh, the crunch of his shoes on the pebbles.

Tomorrow was the first day. She wouldn't spend it typing up a CV or searching online for college courses. Instead, she would go into their neatly-ordered shed and look out a spade. Then she would go up to the woods and start digging. Hole after hole. And when she found him, she'd tell him all the things she'd saved up over the years. Things that would finally open his eyes. ■

Reincarnation

Short Story by Lucy Macrae

1. The rebirth of a soul in another body. 2. A person or animal in whom a particular soul is believed to have been reborn. 3. A new version of something from the past.

It was August and, once again, I was leaving Donnie MacArthur for the last time.

I winnowed my few possessions in a whirlwind of resolve before stacking them and the children into my rust-rimmed Ford Fiesta. Michael, my eldest, didn't need to be asked twice. He sat squashing midges against the window with his fingers as I bundled the twins into the back. A tricky task as they refused to let go of each other, as usual.

A light rain was falling. When was it ever bloody not, I thought, swatting at my neck. Midges, eating me alive.

I turned before I got in behind the wheel but Donnie, my anti-hero, was not standing in the doorway, was not chasing the car with waving arms. So I let the handbrake off and bumped the Fiesta down the track. At the main road I turned right, heading for my mum's semi and another fresh start.

In the rear-view mirror I saw the twins stretch small sticky hands across the carrier bag mountain between them.

The tyres hummed on the gleaming road. My seven league boots, each turn taking me further away from the mobile home of broken dreams. I'd get that perm. I'd get that job. I flicked the wipers on and sang along to the Johnny Cash tape that had been stuck in the stereo since February.

Perhaps I may become a highwayman again
Or I may simply be a single drop of rain
But I will remain
And I'll be back again,
and again
and again

The tape was so overplayed that the sound swelled and faded, as if borne aloft on a high wind.

I'd be back in three weeks. ■

Da Shipwrecked Forester

James Sinclair

1.

Weel yun's yun, dat's him planted.
He has nae fock o his ain buried here.
William Macdonald wis his name at birth.
But if du akses onyeen fae aroond here
wi kent him as Willie Wid ur Gaelic Willie.
He washed up here monies da year fae syne.
A forester fae sum big estate doon da wast coast.
Yun simple widden cross wis his idea.
A lok o years ago wi wir oot walkin da banks
whin wi cam across a tree stump i da back o a geo.
Fur aa his kennin o wid he'd niver seen dis afore.
He laekit ta tink dat hit micht a floated
doon wan o da tributaries o da michty Amazon
ur waashed oot ta sea fae da Congo in rainy saeson.

2.

Da boy dat laekit trees. Sum fock
even said he could spaek wi dem.
He kent whit eens dug dir röts in deep,
whedder dey need a lang draa o waater
an whit wans grippit ta rocky hillsides
wi muckle haands an strong fingers. He wid
ken by da smell o da saap an colour o da bark
whiteens wir mad livin ur if dey wir filt wi rot.
An dan dis man, his loard an maister
aksed him ta traivil oot ower lang ocean,
bring him da best cuttings an finest saplins
o aa yun unken trees dey said grew dere. Dir wis
wird dat da graetest tree o dem aa grew dere,
an his vanity demanded da muckle redwid.

3.

Fur sic a fine day at da back o da hairst
Dey sailed doon da wide an smooth river Clyde.
Oot inta da muckle Atlantic swell dey med
fur da pilgrim faiders an da shalter o Boston Harbour
Da howld filt ta da brim wi oaken casks bound in iron
Willie stood apon da larch deckin in his warm cot
an wi da first haevins o da sea spewed his mugie.
His senses no able ta maister da motion an emptiness.
Da wind, he cam up fae da Sooth Wast, fur sic
a roar hit med drivin dem afore brakin spinrift.
Da hiecht masts bent laek stalks o corn, wind
rivin da sails ta shreds, dem blawin aff, laeves i da
storm.
Fairt, Willie lashed hisel wi ropp ta da mast. Dan in
ee muckle flan hit uprooted an snappit inta matchwid.

4.

A sodden lump wuppit up in tang.
Da men oot lookin ower dir sheep
cam apon da krangs, no uncommon dan a days.
Tinkin da worst dey rolled him apo his back,
his een blinkit open an he mumbled unken wirds.
Dey kerried him ta hoose whaur an owld wife bed
herlane.
Shu gaused dem lift him itill da box bed.
Dan shu climbed in ahint an baled da blankets ower.
haddin him close ta her fur a day an a nicht
Liza held him in her boasie, shu'd niver hed a bairn o
her ain
an little by little he cam at. Shu gaused him
sip blaand den some brö, a bowl o soup an bannocks
dan a plate foo o saat fish an taaties. An afore
lang he wis able ta set him afore da fire.

5.

Willie cam at, he kuckered up,
but da pooer geed fae his leegs
whin he steppit outside da door
an saw as far as his ee could see
dir wis nothin, nedder bush nor tree.
His line o sicht med nae idder
as twartree bare hills wi mooskit waves
streetchin ta far horizon an da lift
dat reached richt ta da heavens.
Owld Arthur took him wi him ee day
ta cast der bank. Dey flaaed aff da turf
dan cut, liftin da blue clods ower der shooders.
Willie pickit up a paet an spotted an ancient
tree röt, an wi dat sat him doon i da greff an grett.

6.

Davy Smith's boatyaard i da toon,
dey wir short-haanded, wi a full orderbook.
Willie cam ta wirk fur dem i da spring
an afore lang dey could aa see dat
dis een wis a haandy extra pair o hands.
Fur he could aesy tell wi wan rub o da grain
an da very smell o da saap whedder
da wid wis any use avaa. An he could tell
whit wey ta cut hit ta keep strengt an suppleness.
Hit wis herd wark but he laekit hit. He swapit his
exe fur saw an chisel an da smell o fresh sawn timber
med his heart feel gled an as he wroucht
wi da tools o his new trade he fan a
fresh wey ta appreciate da glory o trees.

7.

He watched her takin da simmer air on da Sabbath,
her bible tuckit innanunder her okster,
strampin alang itill her best Sunday finery.
Her skein da colour o mylk an blue een
dat sparkled brichter dan ony gem stones an vari-orm.
He wis smitten, riggin hisel up as best he could
Willie med fur da kirk, staandin i da pew ahint.
Gadderin da courage up fae some idder wyes,
He aksed if he could walk her hame.
An as da knots in his stamach lowsened, hit
lowsened his tongue an dey yarned aboot
dis, dat an da nixt thing. Dey fan hit
aesy ta spaek ta een annider, laek dey'd
kent wan annider aa dir days.

8.

Willie an Margaret held a spring weddin
an settled in twartree rooms i da lanes.
Hit gied him an her a sense o comfort
closed in wi buildins, itill a forest
o saandstone an granite wi laeves o slate.
Da wind swieed aroond da concrete trunks
stone waas lookit ta sway afore da gale.
Trowe closs an coortyaard an nuek an crannie
shadows shortened as da flicker o da sun blinkit trowe.
A life lived oot abune da come an go o ships,
da rise an faa o da tide, as owld Jamaica
clamb oot o da back o Bressa an fell ahint da Hillhied.
If he felt da caa o hame, nair a wird wis braethed.

A Lighter Look at the Dark Stuff

By Donald S Murray

Charity tractor run in Ness. Photo courtesy of Fios Nis

Notorious for his grumpiness, the Irish writer Patrick Kavanagh once edited a magazine which used to create mock competitions for its miniscule number of readers. Imitating the Sunday newspapers of his native country, he invited them to suggest goods and commodities that could be made for export to America. These, he continued, had to be 'outlandish enough to deserve a Government subsidy' with the winner obtaining the prize of becoming the 'managing director of the new State-subsidised factory' – one which was, presumably, based on their product. The following week the winning suggestions were announced. They included:

> 'Recordings of the Irish Constitution, Brogues and Clogs, Compressed Turf Smoke and Mushroom Complete With Leprechaun'.

There is, perhaps, one of these 'products' that Scots can recognise. We may, perhaps, be short of brogues, clogs and mushroom-perched leprechauns, but we have had no shortage of 'compressed turf or peat smoke' in our folk and cultural history. There were elements of this in our romantic songs. They included such declarations as Sir Harry Lauder's vow of love for 'a bonnie, bonnie lassie' who was 'as sweet as the heather, the bonnie, blooming heather' or the singer, Calum Kennedy's ardent desire to go 'rolling in the heather, no matter what the weather when a Heilan' laddie falls in love'. Given the rigour and toughness of that plant's stalks and blooms, one would have thought that the only proper response from any young woman to this particular invitation was – to use again the words of Sir Harry – to 'stop your tickling, Jock'.

There are, however, many Scottish products in which 'turf' or 'peat-smoke' is clearly compressed. Consider Harris Tweed which, according to one advertiser, is imbued with 'the expanses of the heathered moor and endless sky, … the intimacy of the croft-house and peat-smoked fireside'. Dangle a thin slice of peat-smoked salmon or haddock from a fork and breathe in the essence of the Highlands, the wild and empty acres of its landscape. Swallow it and be aware of the hidden depths of the moorland, its dark and timeless layers melting away in your mouth. And, of course, raise a west coast whisky – Talisker, Bowmore or Laphroaig, perhaps - to your lips and see its peat-brown tincture, roll the fiery liquid round your tongue and sense how 'the summer time has come' and how, too, the 'wild mountain thyme grows around the blooming heather'. There is romance, it appears, in every throatful, each drop that tantalises taste-buds.

And so it is with that powerful drug, the peat-fire itself. For generations, both writers and musicians have required no more than a quick whiff and puff to settle down and compose literary and musical masterpieces, all given – by sheer coincidence! – a title inspired by the proximity of the peat-fire flame. For the average accordionist, each spark and glow, each whoosh up the chimney is the musical equivalent of Mozart's starling, both echoing and transforming the Highland and Hebridean version of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. *(Murchadh Dubh! Murchadh Dubh! Can you do the Barn dance?)* For the writer, the smoke coils and embraces him, Aladdin-like, its power passing on the magic of its talent, its ability to inspire, think, provoke, produce works of real flair and content that are the northern equivalents of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, a blaze of genius illuminating each word.

Yet beneath the cliché is concealed a little truth. Even the cynical Kavanagh recognised this in his own poem, the unromantically titled Kerr's Ass, when he wrote of the way in which:

> '…a world comes to life -
> Morning, the silent bog,
> And the God of imagination waking
> In a Mucker fog.'

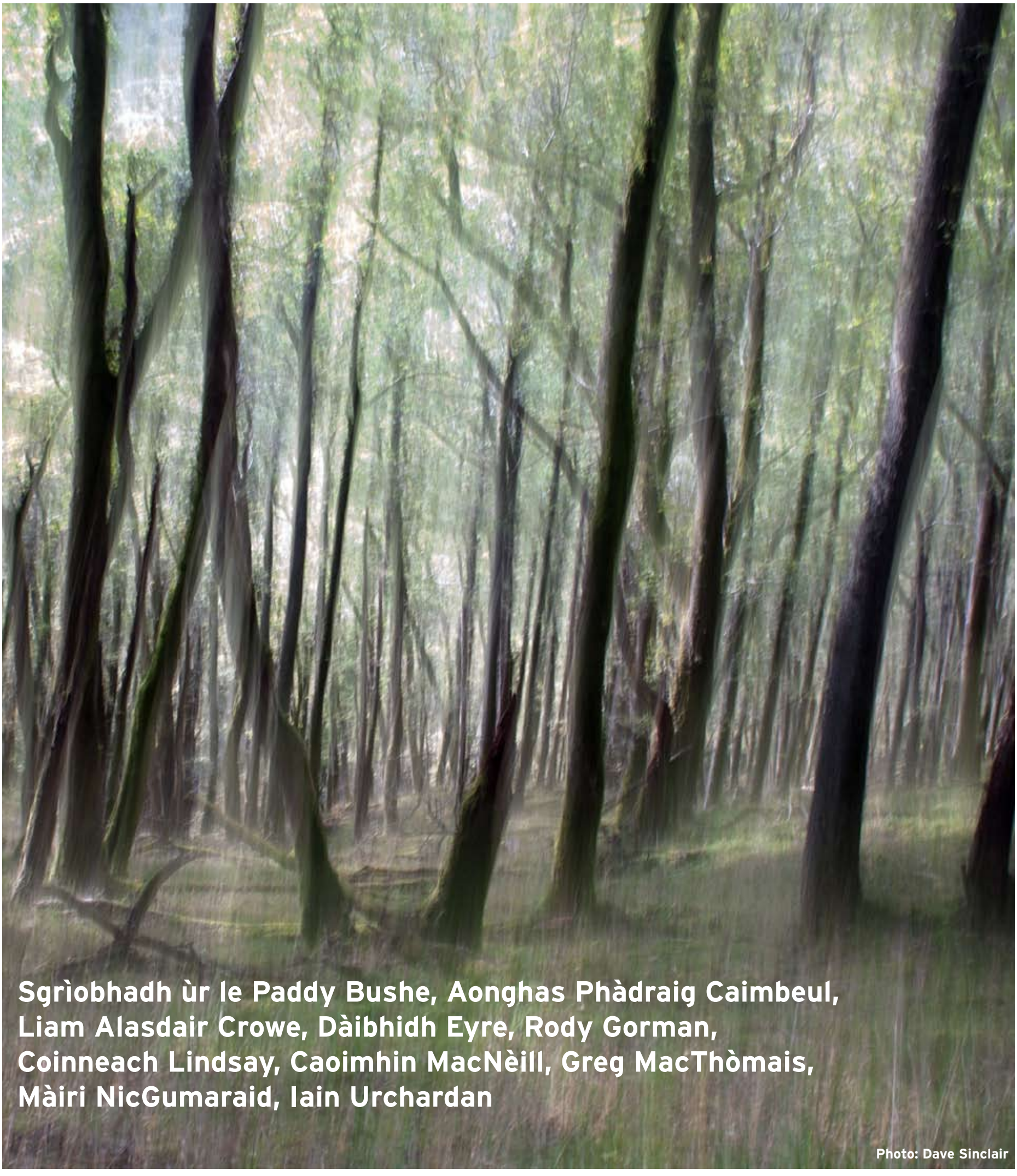
Whether or not its magic can be 'compressed' into its smell or savour, there is something about its emptiness that wakes up the 'God of imagination' in the human mind. One can see its effect in the novel – from Hardy's *The Return Of The Native'* to Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Hogg's *Confessions of A Justified Sinner* to Sir Arthur Conon Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. It is present, too, in poetry – from Seamus Heaney to Ted Hughes, Gerald Manley Hopkins' Inversnaid to the work of Sorley Maclean, Norman MacCaig, R.S. Thomas. In this, the way we are compelled to fill its blankness, it is similar to much of the writing about St Kilda, which I attempted to satirise in my earlier book *The Guga Stone: Lies, Legends and Lunacies of St Kilda*. (Luath 2013). In the case of the moor, it is frequently horror that stalks there – as in the dead of the Moors Murders, killed by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, and still lying in Saddleworth Moor, or the 'Disappeared', those killed by the IRA and Loyalist terror gangs, their remains stretched out somewhere within the moorlands of Ireland with little chance of ever being discovered.

There are a number of similar stories I write about in my new book, *The Dark Stuff* (Bloomsbury 2018), mainly – in its initial chapters - those that belong to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. They include, among others, accounts of the Gunnister Man, found in Shetland and the peat-embalmed bodies discovered in Cladh Hallan on the western coast of South Uist in the Western Isles. There are also ghost stories and accounts of murders, often involving wild, untamed figures not unlike the Heathcliff that both Kate Bush and Emily Bronte conjured

Tuath

Àireamh 2, Earrach 2018

Is treasa tuath na tighearna



Sgrìobhadh ùr le Paddy Bushe, Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul, Liam Alasdair Crowe, Dàibhidh Eyre, Rody Gorman, Coinneach Lindsay, Caoimhin MacNèill, Greg MacThòmais, Màiri NicGumaraid, Iain Urchardan

Photo: Dave Sinclair

Dàin le Paddy Bushe, Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul, Liam Alasdair Crowe, Dàibhidh Eyre, Coinneach Lindsay

Sciurd faoi Screapadal

Paddy Bushe

do Meg Bateman

Bhí fiolar ar thóir creiche dar dtionlacan,
Ar foluain os cionn na bhfothrach ciúin,

An lá niamhrach earraigh sin gur shiúlamar
Fad le Screapadal, ar lorg dán Shomhairle

Agus scáileanna Tharmaid is Eachainn Mhòir
Ag breathnú anonn ar Chomraich Ma Ruibhe.

Ach níor ardaigh aon tuiréad sleamhain dubh
É féin go bagarthach trí chrothloinnir na farraige,

Is níor bhodhraigh sianaíl aon scaird-bhuamaire
Méiligh na n-uan agus portaireacht na n-éan

Fad a dheineamar dán Shomhairle a reic,
Gàidhlig agus Gaeilge, os ard i measc tithe bánaithe.

I bhfianaise an tseanchaisleáin a thit le faill,
Agus Carraig na hEaglaise Bréige scoite ón dtalamh;

In ainneoin na gceannlínte ós na ceithre harda,
Sotal rachmasóirí agus slad an mhargaidh;

I bhfianaise na gcaorach caidéiseach ar fhallaí
Agus féile na gréine ar fhiailí is ar fhásach;

In ainneoin bhréaginsint na scéalaithe
A scaipeann scéalta de réir toil na máistrí;

Ba bheag ná go gcreidfeá go raibh deireadh i ndán
Don tsaint, don chos-ar-bholg agus don gcreach.

Am Maraiche

Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul

Sheòl e na seachd cuantan
a' faicinn na grèine
ag èirigh os cionn Beinn Fujiyama
air madainn shamhraidh.

Na sheann aois,
shuidh e air bogsa fiodha
aig ceann an taighe,
a shùilean air fàire.

Nuair bhruidhneadh e
bha cianalas na ghuth,
mar gun robh e cluinntinn dualchainnt Apainn
a-rithist, na dhùthaich fhèin.

The Mariner

He'd sailed the seven seas
seeing the sun rising
over Mount Fujiyiama
on a June morning.

In his old age,
he sat on a wooden box
at the end of the house,
his eyes on the horizon.

When he spoke
there was homesickness in his voice,
as if he was hearing the Appin dialect
once more, in his native land.

Anns an dachaigh-chùraim

Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul

Tha dà chailleach a' fighe,
cluich hopscotch
taobh muigh na sgoile.

'Seall – chaill thu stiods'
mar gun robh a' chaileag eile
air leum a-mach às a' bhogsa,
's cha robh aig Seònaid a-nis
ach danns, gu cinnteach, gu ceann na cleas.

In the nursing home

Two old women are knitting,
playing hopscotch
in the school playground.

'Look – you've dropped a stitch'
as if the other lassie
had hopped out of the box
and all Jessie had to do now
was to dance, perfectly, to the cat's cradle.

Foghar

Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul

Thig Foghar mar a thig i,
òr eadar uain' is geal.

Na strì 'son ràith eile
ach creid an t-seann fhìrinn

gun suidh gach mìos sìos mar chearc-ghuir,
gus am bris an là.

Autumn

Take Autumn as she comes,
gold between green and white.

Do not strive for another season
but believe the old truth

that every month will nestle down like a roosting-hen,
until the day breaks.

Sgoth

Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul

Turas rinn mi sgoth
a-mach à pìos maide agus luideag.

Sheòl i sìos an t-sruth
gus an do ràinig i Canada.

Boat

I once made a boat
out of a stick of wood and a rag.

She sailed down the stream
till she arrived in Canada.

An Saighdear

Nuair a thill
an saighdear Gàidhealach
air ais dhachaigh on chogadh
bha dùil aig a h-uile duine
gun robh e fada marbh.

Thàinig e air a shocair fhèin,
gun ghuth,
tarsainn na mòintich,
suas seachad air Ceapal Bhrianain
agus a-null taobh
Loch an Dùin Mhòir
far an robh na bric cho pailt

agus na sheasamh àrd
air Creag na Cuthaige
chunnaic e am baile sgaoilte fodha,
ceò às na similearan
agus cuideigin a' feadaireachd
fad' às le cù mu shàilean.

Bha bhean
aig doras an taighe
le triùir chloinne mu casan
agus fear le bonaid ruadh
agus speal thairis a' ghuailne
a' coiseachd dhachaigh thuice

agus thionndaidh e air a shàilean
's tha iad ag ràdh nach do thill e riamh
à Canada.

The Soldier

When the
Highland soldier
returned from the war
everyone believed
him to be long dead.

He came quietly,
unannounced,
walking across the moor,

up past Brianan's Chapel
and over by
the Loch of the Big Fort
where the trout were plentiful

and standing high
on Cuckoo Rock
he saw the village spread below,
smoke from the chimneys
and someone whistling far off
with a dog at his heel.

His wife
was in the doorway
with three children about her feet
and a man with a brown bonnet
and a scythe over his shoulder
walking home towards her

so he turned on his heels
and they say he never came back
from Canada.

Duan na Fèinne

Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul

Ge brith dè cho aosta 's a tha an sgeul,
chan innis tìm fhèin i.

Bha mi eòlach air fear aig an robh sgeul
cho sean 's gun creideadh tu
gun innseadh na cnuic fhèin
an duan.

Ach bha iad nan tost.

Dh'innis iad dìreach
mu chaoraich 's mu fheur, 's mun uisge

's b' fheudar dhan bhodach a sgeul innse
dha na h-ainmhidhean 's dha na h-eòin

's nuair nach do dh'èist iadsan,
dha na creagan fhèin.

B' e sgeul na Fèinne a bh' aige,
's chan eil na thachair gu diofar.

B' e na ruitheaman a b' fhiach,
a bhiodh e caoin, a-muigh leis fhèin

gu socair air an t-sliabh. Ma dh'èisteas
tu gu faiceallach saoilidh tu gun cluinn thu fhathast

an duan. Ach cha chluinn, oir 's e tha siud
ach crònan na gaoithe tron mhòintich.

Tha an seanchaidh
air falbh, 's chan eil air fhàgail ach fear

a chuala an sgeul air leth-chluais
fad' às, mar ghlòr nan eun.

The Fingalian Chant

No matter how old the tale,
time itself cannot tell it.

I knew a man whose story
was so old you could believe
the hills themselves
would speak it.

But they were silent.

They only told
of sheep and grass, and rain,

so the man told his story
to the beasts and to the birds

and when they didn't listen,
to the rocks themselves.

The tale was a Fingalian one
and the narrative was irrelevant.

What mattered were the rhythms
which he sang, out there on his own

silently on the moor. If you listen
carefully you think you can still hear

the song. But you don't, for what
you hear is the wind murmuring through the bog.

The master story-teller
has gone, and all that's left is someone

who half-heard the story in the air
far off, like the speech of birds.

Poca

Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul

Nuair dh'fhaighnicheadh tu
do Iain Sheonaidh
an robh an sgeul seo aige
chanadh e
"O, cha tug mi leam idir i",
mar gun robh poca air a dhruim
làn mòna
'son losgadh air oidhche geamhraidh.

Sack

When you'd ask
Iain Sheonaidh
if he had a particular story
he'd say
"O, I didn't carry it with me"
as if he had a sack on his back
full of peat
for burning on a winter's night.

Uncail Dòmhnall

Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul

Bhiodh e seinn na chadal:
'An t-urram thar gach beinn aig Beinn Dòbhrain',
's nuair ghabhadh e smùid mhùineadh e a bhriogais
gus an èireadh ceò mar sgòth air Beinn a' Cheathaich.

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

Agus air latha a' phòsaidh,
na sheann dheise clòimh' agus na lèine gheal
ghabh e tè mhòr

is leum na cnuic is dhanns na creagan
is dhòirt na h-aibhnichean nan tuil le bròn.

Uncle Donald

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

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

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

and the hills skipped and the rocks danced
and the rivers flowed in floods of grief.

An Runnach

Liam Alasdair Crowe

Ciamar a dh'ionnsaichinn dhut am facal runnach
Gun a chomharrachadh aig oir Loch Chill Donnain,
Far an do dh'ionnsaich mi fhìn i
Agus mo nàbaidh ag innse sgeulachd a h-òige
Mu a màthair a' toirt rabhadh an Smeircleit
'na tig faisg air an runnaich'?

Ciamar a dh'ionnsaichinn dhut sùil-chruthaich
Às aonais mìneachadh Iain Iòsaiph
Gur e th' ann ach sùil dhan chruthaidheachd
A chì thu fhèin ma thig thu na comhair?

Nan ionnsaichinn dhut làthach,
An e ciall an taobh siar a dh'aisigeas mi –
Greim gainmheach a shluigeas tu sìos;
No ciall an taobh sear de pholl
Làn feamad, dhuilleag is eabar?

Agus ciamar a dh'ionnsaicheas mi dhut
Mar a thàinig am Prionnsa air tìr
Gun sealltainn dhut cuach a shàile air a' Choilleag,
Agus a' seinn 'moch sa mhadainn 's mi dùsgadh'
Ann an Dùthaich Chlann Raghnaill?

Ciamar a dh'ionnsaicheas mi dhut do dhìleab
daonnda
Agus Gàidhlig nan Gàidheal,
Agus tu am baile mòr air Ghalltachd?

Gaol ròmach
Dàibhidh Eyre

Tha e cunnartach an seo
ann an doimhneachd na mara
far am bi mi a' snàmh,
a' sealg d' àilleachd.
Ach tha e doirbh a shealg
ann am fuachd an uisge
agus tha m' fhalt a' tionndadh gu feamainn.

Is neamhnaid thusa,
paisgte ann an slige
a tha tiugh air m' fhiaclan,
garbh air mo theanga,
slige nach gabh a bristeadh
le fiacail neo facal,
agus, le sin, tha thu sàbhailte bhuam.

Is tha sin mar bu chòir -
thig d' fhosgladh leat fhèin,
air tràigh bhlàth làn solais
air latha socair ciùin,
latha nuair a chì iad
na chunnaic mise o chionn fhada,
iongantas àillidh do chumadh.

Agus chì iad mo cheann
air uachdar na mara,
falt a-nist na bian,
mo shùilean mòr' dubha,
agus chì iad an corp agam
na laighe air an uisge,
's e reamhar. Cho reamhar ri ròn.

An t-eilean is an tìr
Dàibhidh Eyre

Thug am bàt'-aiseig mi air falbh bhon eilean
a dh'ionnsaigh beanntan mòra na tìr'
agus thòisich mi a' coiseachd, le pian.

Agus chunnaic mi bho sgùrr, air bhioran,
nach robh san tìr mhòr ach eilean ciar.
Thug bàt'-aiseig eile mi air falbh bhon eilean.

Air an taobh thall, ann an dùthaich chèin,
thòisich mo thuigse a' tighinn gu ìre,
agus thòisich mi a' coiseachd, le pian.

Chan eil cuimhne a'm na h-uimhir de mhìltean
a dh'innis dhomh firinneachd na mòr-thìr' -
thug bàta mi air falbh, oir bha i na h-eilean.
Seòladh gun sgur air na h-uimhir de bhàtaichean
agus a' siubhal air mòr-thìrean eile, mas fhìor -
eileanan far an robh mi a' coiseachd, le pian.

Le ùine dh'fhàs mi sgìth is seann -
thill mi gu far an do thòisich mo bhuille-cridh'.
Thug an t-aiseag mi air ais dhan eilean
agus choisich mi dhachaigh, le pian.

Reifreann

Saobh-chràbhadh
Coinneach Lindsay

Soirbhichidh gaol air saobh-chràbhadh,
Gabhaidh an t-àbhaisteach mìneachadh ùr
A thogas dùil bho gach rud làitheil
Sealltainn dàn an gach nì fo shùil.

Chan e eòin a tha sna h-eòin, no clach sa chlach:
Nach e manaidhean a th' annta, tighinn beò?
'S iad a' toirt eòlas dhuinn air na rudan ri teachd,
Dall 's a tha sinn gu comharraidhean dubh-bhròin.

Oir dè an fhios a th' againne ach creideas
Agus mac-meanmna air an àm ri teachd?
Is sinn a tha ath-chruthachadh, eadhon,
ar n-eachdraidh fhèin a rèir ar beachd.

Manaidhean, 's iad a tha nar tròcair,
Gar glasadh air fad an aintighearnas an dòchais

Cath nam Bàrd
Coinneach Lindsay

ESAN: Thoir dhomh bàrdachd a tha soilleir is dìoghrasach;
Thoir dhomh ealain a tha so-thuigse ach innleachdach.
Bruidhinn rinn uile ann an dòigh a tha pongail.
Innis dhuinn an fhìrinn is leig fios dhuinn gur e sin a th' ann.

ISE. Thoir dhomhsa bàrdachd làn fhuaim is chruadal,
Le spionnadh gun chiall a bhios caithte air na h-aineolaich.
Oir tha sinn uile beò ann an saoghal a tha faoin;
Ma nì thu ciall dhith, dh'innseadh tu breug.

Dlighe
Coinneach Lindsay

A' chiad thuras a thug thu gaol dhomh,
Às dèidh dhomh coiseachd dhad ionnsaigh
Ann an spiorad;

Fosgailte, so-leònte, deiseil 'son creideamh
A' tuiteam nam dheann-ruith tro do shùilean
Dha do chridhe.

Cha do dh'fhidir mi am bacadh a bh' ann:
Carson a bhithinn-sa dligheach ort,
'S mi gun airgead?

Ag Òl Cofaidh anns a' Chathadh
Caoimhin MacNèill

Tha mi nam sheasamh anns a' chathadh,
's na bleideagan a' plumadh sìos dha mo chofaidh.
Bha mi saobh, uaireigin, saobh-sgeulach,
saobh-mhiannach. Bha mi a' gabhail cofaidh
le siùcar, le ruma. Soraidh leis a' mhìlseachd;
soraidh leis a' phuinnsean. Chan iarr mi air
a' bheatha seo ach maitheanas a thoirt dhomh
's mi nam sheasamh an seo sa chathadh àlainn.

The Blizzard
Caoimhin MacNèill

I stand in the blizzard.
Snowflakes whirl into my coffee.
I was once mad, false tongued,
craving vain things. I drank coffee
with sugar, with rum. Farewell, sweetness.
Farewell, poison. I ask only forgiveness.
I stand in the lovely blizzard.

nuair a bhios mi aonaranach
(le misuzu kaneko)
Caoimhin MacNèill

nuair a bhios mi aonaranach
cha bhi fios aig coigrich

nuair a bhios mi aonaranach
bidh mo chàirdean ri gàireachdaich

nuair a bhios mi aonaranach
bidh mo mhàthair coibhneil

nuair a bhios mi aonaranach
bidh am Buddha Mòr aonaranach

Thèid a' Chuibhle mun Cuairt

Sgeulachd le Greg MacThòmais

"Bidh bàs ann agus bidh breith ann." Cha tuirt i ach sin agus a guth fann a' briseadh air ceann eile a' fòn. Thug seanchas mo mhàthar orm stad. Cha robh ach beagan is trì seachdainean air a dhol seachad bhon a chaill sinn m' athair. Ciamar nach bitheadh i a' beachdachadh air a' bhreith gu feallsanachail? Bha comas aice a ràdh ann am beagan na bha air a bhith a' goil nam inntinn-sa fad mìos bhon a chaidh a thoirt a-nall gu h-obann on eilean don ospadal cheudna, gun dòchas sam bith gum fàgadh e an t-àite.

Is iomadh uair a bhios breith agus bàs a' tighinn le chèile. Thachair e iomadh turas sa bhaile againne, nar teaghlach fhèin turas no dhà, mas math mo chuimhne. A rèir mar a dh'innseadh mo sheanmhair dhomh, rugadh m' athair-sa agus a chàraid, Seonaidh Ailean, air an dearbh latha a dh'eug an seanair. Cha robh ann ach co-thuiteamasan ach aig a' cheart àm bha e iongantach mar a bhiodh an dà cheann de bheatha a' feuchainn ri greimeachadh air càch a chèile.

Bha mi nam sheasamh leis am fòn-làimhe faisg air casad is ceò nan smocairean taobh a-muigh an dorais-aghaidh. Bha a' mhadainn puinnseanta fuar. Thug mi sùil air ais thar mo ghuailne. 'S ann shuas an sin air an t-seachdamh làr a dh'fhàg an deò m' athair, mac mo sheanmhar, seanair mo mhic-sa a bha dìreach air ùr-bhreith. Shaoil mi fad diog car faoin an robh beagan de a spiorad-san air a bhith a' feitheamh mun àite seo gus an cuireadh a shinnsearan fàilte air an leanaban ach cha robh an sin ach buaidh mo mhàthar a bha dualtach a bhith a' tarraing air creideamh os-nàdarrach mar sin. Bha leth-chas aice-se a-riamh ann an saoghal eile nach fhaca mise o làithean m' òige. Bha cus reusain agam a-nis airson a leithid a chreidsinn an da-rìribh. 'S ann bho thaobh m' athar a fhuair mi sin gu cinnteach.

Theab mi a ràdh rithe gum biodh Dad air a bhith toilichte air mo shon ach chuir mi stad orm fhèin is shaoil mi nach b' e mo chuid-sa innse dhi-se na bhiodh a cèile dà fhichead bliadhna a' faireachdainn. "Tha thu ceart, Mam," arsa mi fhèin. Sin uile a bh' annam, sin uile a b' urrainn dhomh canail rithe. Dè eile a bha ri ràdh? Bha mise air m' athair-sa a chall ach bha beatha ùr agam fhèin agus aig Donna ri àrach a-nis. Bha bàs m' athar air a bhith cràiteach gu dearbh, gu h-àraid aig àm nuair a bha iomadh seòrsa faireachdainn air am fighe an lùib a chèile ach bha dleastanasan ùra agam airson mo shlaodadh-sa tron phian. Bha ise na h-aonar a-nis, a ceathrar chloinne air tìr-mòr no thall thairis, a duine air bàsachadh is i air a cuairteachadh le croitean bàna is taighean-samhraidh, cuimhneachain is coigrich.

Bha mo phàrantan cho diofraichte nan cuid ùidhean is chreideamhan. Bha m' athair na chomhairliche agus na èildear is rachadh e air a h-uile comataidh is buidheann a bha a' dol. Bha cliù aige agus urram ga shealltainn dha sa choimhearsnachd, cha b' ann air sàillibh a chuid dhleastanasan ach air sgàth mar sam bith airson cuideigin a bh' ann an staing a chuideachadh.

B' i mo mhàthair an croitear bho is cuimhne leamsa. B' ise a rachadh a-mach don mhòintich a thrusadh nan caorach, b' ise a spothadh nan uan, b' ise a bheireadh tacsa do na bà-laoigh nuair a bhiodh iad a' breith agus b' ise a thiodhlaiceadh iad nuair a gheibheadh iad bàs. Cha robh cothrom air, bhiodh m' athair anns an oifis no ann an coinneamhan o mhoch gu dubh agus cò eile a dhèanadh an obair chroitearachd? Sheas i a-mach o bhoireannaich eile a' bhaile air sgàth sin, ged a bha buntanas aice a shìn air ais na linntean mòra. Rachadh i don eaglais ceart gu leòr gach Sàbaid ach cha robh ùine aice airson nan coinneamhan ùrnaigh a bhiodh ann a h-uile oidhche. Bhiodh i air a h-uabhasachadh nan abradh tu a leithid ach bha mi a-riamh a' smaoineachadh gum faca i an eaglais mar dhleastanas, gun robh creideamh na bu shine aice, na bu nàdarra, na bu shaoire nach robh air a cheangal le ginealaichean is linntean de riaghailtean agus deas-ghnàthan.

Bhruidhneadh Mam gun sgur nan leiginn leatha, ach lean an tosd seo eadarainn air a' fòn fad diogan fada a dh'fhairich annasach. 'S iomadh uair a shuidheadh an dithis againn sa chidsin aca air ais san eilean nuair a thillinn as t-samhradh is sinn a' ceartachadh cùisean mòra an t-saoghail fhad 's a chluinneamaid Dad a' brunndail air ar cùlaibh ag easaontachadh, mar bu dual dha. Cha robh e na chleachdadh dhi a bhith cho sàmhach, trom-inntinneach.

Mu dheireadh thall bhris mi fhèin an sàmhchair. "Ruairidh Ailean a bheir sinn air." Bha Donna den aon bheachd 's a bha mi fhèin gun robh e cudromach gun cumadh sinn ainmean nan teaghlaichean againn a' dol agus chuir sinn romhainn nuair a fhuair sinn a-mach gur e gille a bhiodh againn gun cuireamaid ainmean m' athar agus mo sheanar air.

"Tha sin snog," fhreagair mo mhàthair gu sèimh. Cha tuirt i gu robh i toilichte air ar son. Airson an fhìrinn innse chan eil fhios agam an robh. "Chòrdadh sin ri Seanair." Cha b' urrainn dhi fiù 's Dad ainmeachadh. Bha i briste.

"Ok, Mam," arsa mise agus blàths m' anail-sa a' measgachadh le toit an luchd-smocaidh. "Feumaidh mi a dhol a-steach a-rithist. Thoir an aire a-nis. Thig sinn a-null cho luath 's as urrainn dhuinn."

Chuir mi dheth am fòn is air ais nam phòcaid. Leig na dorsan dealanach leam mo chùl a chur ri fuachd na maidne.

'S e faireachdainn neònach a bh' ann nuair a bh' agam ri tilleadh do uàrd nan leanabhan, na màthraichean claoidhte, na h-athraichean moiteil, balùnaichean pinc is gorm, an t-àite sin làn sonais is dòchais an dèidh còmhradh stadach, pianail le boireannach is a saoghal air a thighinn gu crìch.

Cha robh Ruairidh Ailean ach bliadhna gu leth a dh'aois agus Donna dìreach air faighinn a-mach gun robh i trom leis an dàrna leanabh againn nuair a fhuair sinn fios gun do lorg nàbaidh mo mhàthair na suidhe na tosd anns a' ghàrradh, ann an cathair m' athar, a' coimhead a-mach air an loch. Bha a cridhe air a briseadh aig a' cheann-thall ach bha i còmhla ris a-rithist. Cumaidh a' chuibhle oirre, a' cur nan caran. Bidh bàs ann agus bidh breith ann. ■

Dàin le Greg MacThòmais

Dà Chraoibh-chaorainn air Monadh Chamas Chros

Craobh-chaorainn lom
A dh'fhàg fichead geamhradh cam, lùbte
Crodh Dhonnchaidh
Ag ionaltradh mu na feannagan
A bha torrach uair
An dèidh saothair iomadh glùn
An cuid todhair, an cuid feamad
A bhris cnàmh agus spiorad
Air an giùlan on tràigh
Agus a-nis tha an t-sùil-chruthaich
Gan coimhead le sannt
A' sùghadh uidh air n-uidh

Dh'fhàg mi spaid uair sa pholl-mhòna ud thall
Faisg air a' chrodh
Ach chùm i a gleus
Dh'fhàg tìm craobh eile sa bhoglaich sìnte
Reòtht' mar a thuit fad mìle bliadhna is còrr
Agus gheàrr mi tro fhàd a' chaorain
Agus troimhpe-se
Le gleus sìth-bheò.

Haiku

Earrach Baoghlach,
Curracag air a' mhachair -
Raon rocaid air fàire.

Chaochail neach-dàimh.
Rùchdail mu Allt Dhuisdeil,
Uisg' nan seachd sìan.

Caorann de dheirge
Nach fhacas o linn nan laoch:
Tha las na bilean.

Sultain Shlèiteach.
Làmhan dubha làn sùgh,
Toradh driseach air a gnùis.

Lon-dubh is liath-truisg
Am boile a' goid dhearcan:
Dh'fhalbh i an-dè.

Caorann seasgach air
Cnoc na Buaile Càrnaich –
Sannt air an rùda.

Thill a' chearc-choille -
Liath-reothadh mun bhruaich
Air a' bhrat chrìon.

Sgread na cailliche
On bhad feàrna mun allt:
Bhèineas a' brath falbh.

Bonn Cruinn Òr

An dèidh tilleadh às Èirinn thug mi m' iomlaid às mo phòca
Am measg ìomhaighean dar ban-mhòrachd rìoghail
Bha bonn cruinn òr nach do thaitinn leis a' chòrr
Buailte air dealbh na h-Eòrpa
An latha a chuir sinn cùl rithe
Air ceann thall a' bhuinn cruit nam filidh
A' chlàrsach Èireannach dèante an Ceann Tìre
Samhlaidhean nan slighe eadar dà sheann tìr
Gach ceangal snìomhte nar fèithean nar ceòl
A dh'aindeoin cò theireadh e
Cha bhris inntinnean dùinte bannan buan

Gaelic Offcuts

Mary Montgomery

Nàbaidhean

Unfortunately, I don't possess a copy of MacAlpine's Pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary which Dwelly, under his listing for "nàbaidh" (plural "nàbaidhean") draws upon to state that *nàbaidh* is "a neighbour" in the *North*, and "a *North Highlander*" in the West".

I expect that the Western Isles might, at the time Mr MacAlpine was collating his Dictionary, have leaned towards the '*Western*' meaning. But, then, the stretch of water known as the Minch might have had some socio-geographic bearing on the meaning of the term, if adopted in the Western Isles. Perhaps *nàbaidh* in the *North Highlander* sense was not a neighbour if a stretch of water like the Minch lay between you and the North Highlands!

Dwelly doesn't dwell (forgive the sense of pun) a great deal on the word "nàbaidh" – whilst in other instances he expands and expounds on meanings and examples and connotations, taking the trouble to provide much enlightenment, enjoyment, and sometimes even entertainment.

He does, however, provide a related, or derived, adjective: *nàbachail*; he indicates *nàbachas* (like *nàbaidh* itself) is in Number singular, and in masculine noun form. He gives the possessive of the noun, or genitive case, ending in –ais, and provides no plural for *nàbaidheachd*.

As well as 'neighbourhood', he offers up 'vicinity' and 'neighbourliness' as alternative translations. He states nàbachd is a provincial form of *nàbaidheachd* which is an indeclinable (meaning that the word doesn't change form in different grammatical tenses) feminine noun (where the adjective following, for example "mòr", would remain in that same "mòr" form for *nàbachd*, but would alter its leading consonant sound with feminine Noun *nàbaidheachd*, becoming "mhòr").

Again, the English forms for *nàbachd*, are the same as those given for *nàbaidheachd*: 'neighbourhood', 'vicinity', also 'neighbourliness'. One alternative he does give is the *–uidh* ending, in place of *–aidh*, which in my view is fairly inconsequential.

In our 'pre-Gaelic-exclusion' days, we had one very significant element in our immediate neighbourhood, our immediate vicinity : that was the local village school, so, naturally, it seemed to me, the children grew to look forward, and anticipate quite eagerly, the time when they would be able to attend the school, which happened to be not just in the vicinity of our home, but in close proximity to it.

Their father even built a safe access route for them to go to and from the school in order to avoid what we, as their parents, perceived as dangers on the busy main road, situated just outside our home.

Sadly, even despite the fact that Donald and John were not permitted to remain in Balallan School, in its role as a school, a place of education – which I naturally assumed my children would be entitled to receive – the building itself no longer functions as a school.

It may have other functions, I expect it does.

Mar sin, tha Sgoil Bhaile Ailein, sgoil na nàbaidheachd/an nàbachais, air a dhol à bith mar sgoil oideachaidh. Mar a tha sgoiltean iomadaidh baile eile feadh nan eileanan siar, agus air am beàrnan fhèin fhàgail gu tric, thairis air dìreach trusadh thogalaichean, anns gach nàbaidheachd dom buineadh iad aig aon àm.

Na mo bheachd sa, se call tha sin air gach nàbaidheachd, oir bha ciall is ceangal de sheòrsa shònraichte an cois brìgh, bith, is beatha sgoil, agus taigh-sgoile, ann am baile.

Co-dhiù, dh'fhalbh 's cha till.

Dè eile air am faodar suathadh a thoirt an cois cùisean nàbaidheachd?

Againne tha talla baile cuideachd – agus tha sin fhathast air a chumail a' dol.

Agus na togalaichean taighe a tha gun teagamh nam pàirt den nàbaidheachd.

Na nàbaidhean fhèin cuideachd – gu sònraichte an fheadhainn dhiubh aig a bheil an seòrsa suim do nàbaidheachd ('neighbourhood', if I may) agus nàbachas ('neighbourliness', if I may) a tha faisg, thaobh tuigse is ciall, eadhon ged a bhiodh beachdan, mar bhlasan cainnt is eile aig amannan eadar-dhealaichte, agus fada, bho chèile.

Chleachd taighean-coinneimh a bhi san nàbaidheachd againn cuideachd – àiteachan don tigeadh sluagh a' bhaile còmhladh gu adhradh Dhè.

Dwelly's provides the same spelling as *Thomson* in "adhradh", but provides the alternative, "aoradh" also, and lists "Ag aoradh dha" as 'worshipping him' [sic]. Interestingly, he also lists "aoradh fèin-thoileil" and gives English 'will-worship' as an equivalent, though I haven't yet been able to locate 'will-worship' in an English dictionary. Elsewhere, Dwelly lists "fèin-thoil" as a noun, singular, feminine, and provides 'arbitrament' as a translation, along with 'self-will' which he drew from Armstrong's Gaelic Dictionary (of the region Mid Perthshire). MacAlpine's, I should have said, locates chiefly in Islay and neighbourhood.

Islay and neighbourhood.

Clearly, then, Islay's island status encompassed 'a neighbourhood'.

Perhaps the Western Isles might yet too.

Speech and Drama (1)

I can scarcely envisage a time when the full range of what Gaelic has to offer would be used in language arts, such as Speech and Drama.

Still, I guess there is no harm in exploring some, at least, of the less used possibilities which might be re-cycled for what has, in my view, become virtually an art form in its own right i.e. the language itself : a' Ghàidhlig i fèin mar eigse-cainnt, na fìor-ealain.

Gaelic absorbs features of other art forms, of course, as I mentioned, for instance, Speech and Drama.

Facets of Speech which have been defined and preserved in aspects of language no longer used in functional everyday life, but which are concerned with areas of human interchange and experience can still, in my view, be available to explore within a range of different disciplines e.g. etymologically, and in relation to etymology, literally, and in relation to literature, historically, and in relation to history; in terms of evolving classical language status; in artistic application.

It was with the latter in mind, and in anticipation of drawing upon these in seeking to establish what I've suspected for some time – that Gaelic suffers no dearth of possibility as regards catering for alternative perceptions of ways of learning – that I compiled the following.

Tha grunnan mhodhan-cainnte san taghadh.
Mar eisimpleir:

bith-chainnt : babblement, senseless ill-timed prate
cainnt bhallsgach : burlesque
cainnt gun sgòd : language without affectation
cainnt sgaiteach : cutting language
cros-chainnt : antithesis
cùl-chainnt : backbiting, slandering
deagh-chainnt ; eloquence
dual-chainnt : dialect, branch of a language
fachainnt ; scoffing, derision, ridicule
sìth-chainnt : words of peace, peaceful language
tàir-chaint : reproachful speech

Tha grunnan shuidheachaidhean ann.
Mar eisimpleir:

ais-innseadh *: telling, rehearsing, repeating*
aisneis *: rehearsing, tattle, very exaggerated account of an incident*
alla-ghlòir *: gibberish, jargon*
badhsgaireachd *: nonsensical talking, blustering*
bith-labhairt *: perpetual talking*
blagaireachd *; boasting*
borbhan *; murmuring*
faoin-chòmhradh *: vain talk, babbling*
cas-bhàrdachd *: satire, invective*
cron-seanchais *: anachronism, error in words*
daitheasg *: eloquence, remonstrance*
deas-labhairt *: fluency of speech*
duailbhearta *: dialect*
duibhearach *: vernacular*
dùrdan *: murmuring*
fad-labhairt *: loquacity*
taidheam *: meaning, import*
taisg-ghuthachd *: mellowness of voice*
taitheasg *: repartee*
tapag *: blunder in speech, slip of the tongue*

A grammatical mix consisting of some nouns, some present participles of verbs, also verbal nouns, and adjectives, refers to Speech and begins to suggest possible connections with Drama:

briodal *: language and manner of lovers*
car fhaclach *: quibbling*
coimheachas *: sourness of disposition*
coimheachas *an teanga : the strangeness of their tongue*
eallach *: gregarious*
ag earaileach *: urging*
faclach *: wordy, full of words*
sgeilmeil *: tattling, impudently garrulous*
sgeultach *: female gossip*
sgiorr-fhaclach *: using random expression, committing errors of speech*
siubhlach *: fluent*
a' tagradh *: pleading*

Speech and Drama (2)

Gaelic provides a number of key words which lead one towards visual activity and stage drama.

Cleasaiche, or ***dealbh-chluicheadair***, is familiar as stage player or actor, of course; ***cuirmear*** less familiar as entertainer. ***Cuirm*** itself may be taken as entertainment.

Less used Drama-related terms are perhaps :

cidhis *: mask, disguise*
luchd-cidhis *: masqueraders*
cidhisearachd *: masquerade*

Play we know as ***dealbh-chluich***, of course; *dàn-chluich* is a dramatic poem. *Poet* we know most commonly, I think as ***bàrd***, but also ***cliar***. The ***Cliar Sheanachai***n was a mythic bardic company which travelled around. ***Cuanal***, however, is also a company, or a band of singers, or a choir.

The act of (im)*personating* is ***a' taisealbhadh*** and ***taisealbh*** is to *personate* or *represent*.

Basdalachd is *showiness* or *gaiety*, and ***maise sgèimh an caoin-shruth*** : *the exquisite beauty of their fair forms*.

Ròghalachd is a *romantic disposition*, ***mèinn*** *an expression of countenance*, ***sgeilmear*** *a neatly-dressed person*, whilst *bonnie rather than graceful* is ***bòidheachd 's chan ann dàicheil.*** *Walking with a stately step* would be ***le ceum dàicheil***. However, of *someone with a lady's gait*, ***tha gluasad mnà uaisle aice*** would be said. *Ruggedness of manner*, on the other hand, would be ***bodachas***.

Long-limbed striding would be ***sith-fhad***, but *walking unsteadily* would be ***coiseachd creubhach***. *Exotic* is ***deòranta*** and *amorous* is ***deothasach***.

Cronadair is reprover, critic, one who finds fault and it may be accurate to suggest ***"Is fheàrr an cumadair na 'n cronadair"*** (*the maker is better than the critic*); it might also be true to say, 'premier-wise' "***is e do chliù do cheud alladh***" (*the estimate of you goes according to the first report of you*). Certainly, ***chuir e sgriotal (sgriothail) dheth*** : *he spoke a great many words with little substance to them*, and ***Cha tug mi taidheam as a chaint*** (*I did not comprehend his meaning*) would be unfavourable judgements. With ***deasachd*** (*aptitude*), more positive in tone would be ***'S ann is làidir a gheibhear thu*** : *you act surprisingly well*, and better than ***Tha e cho daoidh (daobhaidh) 's ged bu phàiste*** : *he is as difficult to coax as a child would be*.

Whilst for a keen performer it might be said ***Is e sgìos a' chosnaich a bhith na thàmh*** : *it fatigues the good worker to be idle*, the word ***easaraich*** might best suit the critic, referring to *the state of requiring much attendance and service without moving from your seat*!

A number of other states, or character insights, are conveyed as follows:

biorsadh *: eager impatience*
earbsadh *: confiding, trusting*
dalbachd *: impudence, pertness, forwardness*
làn-bheachdail *: confident*
làn-fhiosrach *: fully assured or certain*
sigeanta *: cheerful*
sìth-aigneach *: peaceful, conciliatory*

Agus mu dheireadh, trusadh fhaclan lùib coltas is gluasad a dh'fhaodte nochdadh an cois dràma is cleasaireachd:

ag aithneadh *: commanding, ordering*
briosg *: start, leap, jerk or move suddenlyt*
brùilligeachd *: clumsiness, awkwardness of gait or movement*
a' deasachadh *: act of preparing or dressing*
deas-ghluasad *: proper gestures*
dul-chaoin *: wailing*
easgaidheachd *: nimbleness*
gu faite *: timidly*
falbhan *: moving about, easy walking*
fannadh *: fainting*
meanbh-chrith *: trembling from fear or cowardice*
rolaiseach *: slip-shod*
rongach *: lounging idly*
ròpach: *slovenly*
sgàthadh *: act of hurting or injuring*
sgeunach *: skittish, easily frightened*
sgiab *: start or move suddenly*
gun *sgiorradh gun thubaist : without slip or mishap*
sgrub *: act in a niggardly manner*
sgudachd *: sweeping gait, nimble motion*
siolp *: dè tha thu a' siolpadh? what are you sneaking off with?*
spailpeadh *: strutting, act of strutting*
stalcadh *: stiffening*

A thaobh nan cleasairean, bhithte an dòchas gum biodh iad ag iomairt an làmhan a chèile (that they understand each other, that there is collusion between them) 's an dùil gun clodhaich (draw close together) iad fo shaothair a tha dealbh-inntinneach (ideal) agus air aon sgeul (united). ■

Mar Aon

Màiri NicGumaraid

Mar aon neo 'n uile sgapte
Nar leantainneachd nam buadh
On thug ar leasachadh a rac
Gun èireamaid nar stuadh

Bu dàn do dh'ionnsaigh teachdaire
Chaidh feallsanachd nan nàmh
On dh'fhidreadh dhaibh a bhuile neirt
Leag rèisimeid na tàmh

Mar aon neo 'n uile sgapte
Nar comhlaireachd gun dhìth
On fhuair ar n-aideachadh a lèir
Bu cheadaicht' bràth dhuinn sìth

Inuksuk 's Innunguaq

Iain Urchardan

Sheas *Inuksuk*,
mar fhianais dhuinne,
cho cruaidh ri creag
san fhuachd ghuineach.

Cairt-iùil cloiche
a' comharrachadh càite;
toiseach slighe,
a' sònrachadh àite:

àite seilg,
àite iasgaich,
àite còmhnaidh,
àite biadhaidh,

àite adhraidh,
àite seòlaidh;
is taigh-spadaidh
charibou feòla.

Càrn nan daoine:
Inupiat is *Inuit*,
Crìoch-àit' tro ùine
Yupik is *Kalaallit*.

Sheas *innunguaq*
"an coltas duine"
cho cruaidh ri creag
san fhuachd ghuineach ...

Dà fhacal a bhuineas do thùsanaich Chanada a tuath:
Inuksuk = comharra cloiche a tha dèanta de dhiofar chlachan.
Innunguaq = fear dhiubh a tha na "dhuine mas fhìor": le ceann, gàirdeanan is casan.

Sreath le Rody Gorman

Là Buidhe Bealltainn

Là Buidhe Bealltainn ‘s an t-sòbhrag a’ fàs
anns a’ bhruaich air Bruach Sheumais,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

on May day the primroses are wildernessgrowing in the bank at Bruach Sheumais whether there’s a Scotland and Great Britain or not

Là Fèill Brìghde ‘s a’ ghealag-làir a’ fàs
air a’ Chruard san t-sneachda fo mo chois,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

on the first day of spring the snowdrops are wildernessgrowing in Cruard in the snow beneath my feet whether there’s a Scotland and Great Britain or not

lus an aisig air ais a’ fàs
madainn as t-earrach air a’ Chreig Ghlais,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

daffodils wildernessgrowing a morning in spring on the rock at Creag Ghlas whether there’s a Scotland and Great Britain or not

creamh-na-muice-fiadhaich a’ fàs
air feadh an làir an Tobhta Sheumais,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

wild garlic wildernessgrowing on the centreground in the ruins of Tobhta Sheumais whether there’s a Scotland and Great Britain or not

och, bròg-na-cuthaig’ a’ dol bàs
air a’ Chruard ach nach tig i air ais,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às?

och blubells dying in Cruard but won’t they come back whether there’s a Scotland and Great Britain or not?

na neòineanan air a’ Chruard a’ fàs
mas mall mu dheireadh thall ‘s a-bhos,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

the common daisies in Cruard wildernessgrowing however late at long last whether there’s a Scotland and Great Britain or not

tonn-a’-chladaich shìos bhuam a’ fàs
air mo shiubhal dhomh ‘n Òb Chamas Chros,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

sea pink down there wildernessgrowing as I deathseekwalk in Camuscross Bay whether there’s a Scotland and Great Britain or not

an t-seileastair-bhuidhe bhuam a’ fàs,
an cois na Clachaig Chlachaig ann am fras,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

the yellow iris wildernessgrowing legbeside the shore at Clachaig in a drizzle whther there’s a Scotland or Great Britain, or not

an raineach-ruadh a’ cinntinn ‘s a’ dol bàs
air a’ Chruard taobh ris a’ chlais,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

the bracken growing and dying in Cruard beside the ditch whether there’s a Scotland and Great Britain or not

anns a’ bhruaich an luachair-bhog a’ fàs
agus Allt Tarsainn a’ ruith seachad gu bras,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

*on the bank the common rush wildernessgrows and the burn of Allt Tarsainn flows on past fast whether there’s a Scotland and Great Britain or no*t

an claisean an Camas Chros, othaisg an sàs –
thig i às no thèid i bàs,
Alba ‘s a’ Bhreatann Mhòr ann no às

in a wee draingutterfurrowditch in Camuscross a simpletoneweteg distress-stuckfast – she’ll come out of or she’ll die whether there’s a Scotland or a Great Britain or not

Paddy Bushe A’ fuireach ann an Ciarraighe. Na bhall de Aos Dána.

Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul À Uibhist a Deas. An sàs ann an iomadh seòrsa sgrìobhaidh.

Liam Alastair Crowe A’ fuireach ann an Uibhist a Deas. An sàs anns an iris *Dàna*.

Dàibhidh Eyre À Siorrachd Lannraig a Tuath. Bàrd na Fèise aig Fèis Stanza am-bliadhna. Nobhail *Glainne*.

Coinneach Lindsay A’ fuireach ann an Slèite. Cleasaiche. Nobhail *A’ Choille Fhiadhaich* 2017.

Rugadh is thogadh **Caoimhin MacNèill** ann an Leòdhas. Tha e na òraidiche aig Oilthigh Shruighlea. Tha e air bàrdachd, nobhailean, dealbhan-cluiche agus fiolmaichean a sgrìobhadh. Am measg nan leabhraichean aige tha ‘The Brilliant & Forever’ agus ‘The Diary of Archie the Alpaca’.

Greg MacThòmais A’ fuireach ann an Slèite. Fhuair e Duais bho Urras Leabhraichean na h-Alba bliadhna no dhà air ais. Stuth leis ann an *Cabhsair, Gutter* agus an leithid.

Màiri Nic Gumaraid / Mary Montgomery Às na Lochan. Cruinneachaidhean leithid *Eadar Mi ‘s a’ Bhreug*.

Iain Urchardan Às na Hearadh. Thug e a-mach nobhail *Breab Breab Breab* ann an 2017.

in song and story, full of 'a half-civilised ferocity' that 'lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of dark fire'. When one reads of him and his gaze like 'devil's spies', it is not hard to think of him as the West Yorkshire equivalent of Mac an t-Sronaich, the legendary murderer who was said to stalk my native isle of Lewis at one time.

What I more rarely obtained in literature was that sense of the anarchic we found in the Lewis moors while growing up, particularly in our early years. (It is – rather oddly – found in Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* books where the children are continually escaping there to find adventure.) As young boys in Ness, we were like that largely Irish phenomenon, will-of-the wisps, burning off our abundant energy away from adult eyes. At one moment, we'd be impersonating our distant ancestors, the Morrisons and MacAulays, brandishing broadswords in battle as we chased one another down the slope glen. The next, we'd be exploring *rathad an stail* – the 'still road' - near the Dell River, trying to work out where exactly illegal hooch had bubbled and been distilled at one time.

It is this sense of the anarchic that often distinguished the Irish and Hebridean view of the moor from, say, the way it is portrayed in English literature or, indeed, the Dutch and German outlook that it is also examined in *The Dark Stuff*. It is found, for instance, not only in the work of Patrick Kavanagh but also in the writings of Flann O'Brien or, indeed, those of Patrick McCabe, the creator of 'The Butcher Boy' and 'Breakfast On Pluto', in his novels featuring the small towns of the Irish Midlands, each one surrounded by an ocean of turf. Calum Kennedy's rollicking and rocking 'Rolling In The Heather', for instance, may have had its beginnings in Gaelic songs and stories, all featuring life around the *'airighean'* or sheilings of Lewis. One example of this is *Oidhche dhomh 's mi suirghe s mi na bhalachan og*, a tale of woe and romance composed by Murchadh 'An Domhnall Bhig (Murdo Macleod) from South Shawbost. It ends with the cynical advice that instead of acting in the manner the writer apparently did, if you meet a beautiful, young lady from Lewis, you should:

'thoir tairgs is airgead posaidh dhith 'bith comhla rithe gu brath'.

(provide her a vow and a dowry and be with her always'.)

Sometimes, too, these very peatlands enable the writer to cast a wry glance at the outside world and all its eccentricities. Typical of these is a work by Murchadh Iain Tharmoid Dhomhnuill Bhig, a nephew of the previous gentleman from South Shawbost. His eye focussed on Dr Barbara Moore, a Russian born motorcycle champion and exile from the constraints of the Soviet Union. A vegetarian and breatharian who believed that food was not essential for human survival, she walked from John O'Groats to Land's End – as well as San Francisco to New York – in 1960, eating only nuts and vegetable juice along the way. Noting her surname's connections to the landscape that stretched out from his village, Murdo noted that;

' 's truagh nach robh thu 'n Eilean Leodhas',

(it's a shame you weren't on the isle of Lewis)

where she would prove incredibly useful both for carrying a creel and working in the peats more generally.

Even for the majority of people, however, the sense of the anarchic that bubbles below Murdo's words clung on till early adulthood – and even well beyond. It would be found in the tales we sometimes heard when we shared a flask of tea while out cutting peats on the moor, the grind and sweat of manual labour occasionally loosening mouth and tongue. It was especially discovered these moments when a tractor's wheels sank below the surface of the moor, digging through the turf and tiers of 'dark stuff' that lay below, grinding and spinning until – it seemed sometimes – that in true Jules Verne style, the centre of the earth might be revealed. Old enmities would be forgotten in the rush to tug the trapped vehicle from the moor. There were moments when it seemed a new form of traffic jam would occur where no wheels – or roads – had ever gone before, three or four tractors sinking slowly downward in their efforts to get the first one out.

Paradoxically, there were a large number of positives to be gained from such experiences. Each drowning, sinking tractor caused the community to come together; each skidding, sliding wheel becoming the stuff of legend, transmitted in either story or song from lip to lip whenever or wherever villagers gathered. The same was true of these moments during the cutting, gathering and harvesting of peat when matters went incredibly wrong. One of the most remarkable of these was composed by my fellow Nessman, Murdo John Morrison from the village of Fivepenny. He tells of a day in the mid-seventies when the young men from the district assembled to take home peats for his uncle, a man nicknamed *an Righ* or the 'King'. It was an experience which involved lashings of liquid, both tumbling from the sky and poured down the throats of the workforce who were involved. The tractor driver – apparently – required windscreen wipers for his glasses. Several of the more sober members of the workforce were confused by the white foam that mingled with the raindrops, continually gushing from the many cans of lager that were being opened while they worked. He rounds off his song with a couple of verses summing up the entire affair.

'Tha cruach an Righ 'nis dùint' againn,
Chan eil a samhail ann an àite,
Tha de dh"empties" anns an stèidheadh aic'
'S nach mòr gum faic thu fàd innt'
O mòine 'n Righ bha i sàraicht'

Gu dearbh b'e 'n sealladh àlainn i,
Nuair bhitheas a' ghrian na h-àirde,
Chi thu lasradh man na' daoimein aist,
'S i mar an òr ri deàlradh,
O mòine 'n Righ bha i sàraicht'…'

'The King's peat-stack is closed now,
Its likes not anywhere,
The empties giving it such support
That to find a turf is rare.
O the King's peats were such a strain

There's no doubt that it's a lovely sight
When the sun's high in the sky.
It sparkles bright like diamonds
Or gold when you pass by.
O the King's peats were such a strain…'

The anarchy of a day like this would be rarely found in the Netherlands or Germany. In these places, the peats were regarded not as an occasion for a social gathering or even revelry on a Saturday morning and afternoon, when people were free from the constraints of everyday employment like Murdo John and his companions. Instead, it was the basis for heavy industry. Without any large seams of coal, the Dutch relied on it on the production of both beer and pottery, even distilling for all that many in the Netherlands – like my and Murdo John's community – preached and prayed against it. This was also true of Germany, a nation which until the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 possessed very little coal within its borders. One could even argue that it was the lack of this fuel that partly caused the outbreak of World War One with both France and Germany reliant on it for their heavy industry and desperate to gain control of the coal mines found in regions like Alsace.

And this led to an entirely different habit of mind from the one found among the crofters and fishermen of the Highlands and Islands. Peat-cutting and gathering became – in itself - an industry, highly disciplined, organised and unionised. It is not by accident that the first Socialist representative in the Dutch Parliament, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, emerged from the peat industry. It is also the case that, hard though it might be for those working in the 'King's peats' to imagine, many industrial disputes and strikes occurred among those employed on the peat-banks. Finally, too, the effects of harvesting peat as a fuel created a great deal of ecological damage in both the German and Dutch countryside, causing flooding because their landscape now lacked the moors that sucked and held the rain-water within its depths, allowing, too, the sea to encroach upon more and more of its acres when a dyke was broken or breached.

There is much else about this that is contained within *The Dark Stuff*. Among the 'Stories from the Peatland' found within the book are stories that involve punishment and imprisonment, the attempt to reform the individual and society in a similar manner to the way in which the landscape was 'improved', even the early beginnings of the Nazi regime; (all these three are undoubtedly linked). Reflecting on this, I can only look back to how different these peatlands were for the likes of me growing up in a place where the moorland in itself helped to engender a sense of community and when moments like the following were valued and became possible. ■

Charity Tractor Run, Ness, Isle Of Lewis

(April 2015)

There are tailbacks all the way from Dell to Port,
congestion in a crofting district, snarl-ups, traffic jams
and tangles as tractors puff and cough to show support
for one whose days might be slammed
short by illness. Men come from throughout the island,
all these ghosts clearing smoke from exhausts,
giving it full throttle. They fix their rear-view mirrors, scan
those behind them that they've already lost.
Aonghas Mor steaming down the Aird Road to collect
his pension. Dolaidh taking home peats.
Dad heading out in winter to correct
some fault in the engine, his feet
leaving prints in mud or snow. And then there is that train
travelling out the peat-road, seeking to haul
and take the strain off some tractor stuck in that terrain,
tyres skidding through its surface as it halts and stalls
deep within that morass, sinking further down
till it's engulfed by darkness like these souls
who never - these days - wheel their way around …

Unravelling

Short Story by Christine Grant

The old lady was quiet today, gazing out the kitchen window. She smelt faintly of fresh urine. Several packs of incontinence pads sat in the back porch beside the potatoes and the tumbler drier. They hadn't been there the last time Neil was home.

The machair, the flat, sandy ground leading down to the sea was grey-green, under a cloudy sky. The ferry had docked after two days of gales, and Neil's mother had driven out to stock up on food for the New Year's dinner. He was minding his grandmother; someone had to be with her all the time now.

Granny was prone to wandering. Most of the time, she tottered around the house, in and out of rooms, as if she was looking for something she had lost, but now and then she managed to slip out and walk down the road to the house where she lived most of her life. After she moved in with them, Neil's parents refurbished Granny's house for holiday lets. From time to time, Granny shuffled into the living room of the old house, *spaideil* now with a leather sofa and a wood-burning stove, and startled the tourists. Sometimes, she went further, walking down the single- track road in her slippers and cardigan. There wasn't much traffic, but the young guys liked to step on the accelerator when they reached the straight stretch near the house.

Granny's mind was unravelling like a piece of knitting. It was hard to say when it started. A few years ago, she became quieter, forgetting arrangements, surprised to find that Sunday was Monday or Saturday Sunday. She stopped cooking, and bought only tins of soup and packs of biscuits and cakes. Neil's mother began bringing in fresh food and cooked meals.

After finishing his degree in Edinburgh, Neil had gone back to the island, helping his father on the croft, earning a bit of money doing jobs here and there, while he tried to find a job. He was eventually offered work with a marketing firm in London. The day before he left, he walked down to Granny's house to say good-bye. A painting she had started months ago sat half-finished on an easel in the back porch, and a thin layer of dust covered the surfaces in the living room.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm off to London. Remember?"

She shook her head and gazed through the window with eyes that were a shade darker than the thin blue line of sea. "Why?"

"I've got a job. A good one."

She grasped his hand. "Can you not work here?" Her rings dug into his palm and her skin felt dry and papery.

"There's no jobs here. You know that." The opportunities were all away. If you got an education, you had to leave. Neil's Uncle, Donny, had become an engineer and travelled the world, living in Africa and the far east. He'd always planned to come back when he retired, and was working in England, a few months away from retirement, when he died of a heart attack. He had come back alright, to the cemetery on the machair.

She let Neil go, pushing his hand away with a slight smile. He rubbed his fingers where the rings had gouged into them and bent to kiss her lightly on the cheek before setting off, the future ahead of him.

The graduate wage which had looked so good on paper, barely covered a room in a shared house in Islington. Neil's mother phoned weekly, and unburdened her worries about her Granny. At first, she took over weekly chores like shopping and washing and hoovering, but eventually she went in every day to help Granny with the cooking and washing up. On Sunday morning, Neil's brother Angus popped in to remind her that it was *Didomhnaich* and time for Mass.

On his first visit home, Neil walked down to Granny's house, eager to see her again. She was sitting by the window, looking out towards the sea. The whites of her eyes were parchment yellow, the pupils filmed and blotchy like a stagnant pool. He made tea and conversation for the two of them. Granny nodded occasionally, but said almost nothing. He wondered if she was even listening. After half an hour, she seemed tired, and he got up to leave. She clutched him so tightly that he felt her nails through his sweatshirt. Things weren't what they had been, and she knew.

As a child, Neil had always been in and out of the old croft house down the road where his grandmother lived. She sang while she baked oatcakes, or scrubbed potatoes, or tried to capture the changing landscape and weather in thick smears of paint, and he learnt the tunes too. Her own grandfather had composed some of these songs when he was away at sea.

Neil was a teenager before he saw his grandmother's wedding photo. She brought it out from the back of the sideboard where it was wrapped in tissue paper, and when he asked why she didn't put it up, she said that it made her feel too sad. They sat together on the sofa looking at the serious young woman with dark hair curling over her shoulders. She stood beside a lanky young man who would never age in photos or memories; he had died in a fishing accident, leaving four young children. Neil felt emotion blocking his throat and stinging his eyes. He asked his grandmother how she had managed to keep going, and she said, "Cha robh doigh eile ann." There was no other way.

She taught Neil his name, and his place in the long chain of people stretching back through the generations. He was *Niall 'ic Iain 'ic Alasdair 'ic Dhòmhnaill*: Neil, son of John, son of Alastair, son of Donald. She knew which seaweeds and lichens could be used for dyes and jellies as well as the use of plants for healing.

During his first visit back from London, he tried to hold onto every moment with his grandmother, and store it up for the time when he would be rattling to work on a crowded train full of strangers. However, Granny seemed fuzzy at the edges, as if she was travelling away and becoming smaller and more blurred as she disappeared into the distance.

Five months passed, almost six, before Neil returned for Christmas and New Year. He was shocked by the change in his grandmother although the others seemed to have accepted her reduced capacities and adjusted. Conversations were difficult, like channel hopping on the television. Sometimes she latched on to a word like London and began a long, rambling anecdote which might have something to do with a distant cousin who had gone to live in London, mixed up with a story about ordering a dress from a company in London when she was very young. Complete memories were now only broken mixed-up shards.

Granny stayed with them so that she wouldn't be on her own at New Year. She helped with the dishes, wiping one or two dry and then wandering into other rooms, leaving a cup on the piano and a tea towel neatly folded over the back of the sofa. In the original plan, Granny was going to return to her own house after a few day's rest, but she never went back. It was clear that she was no longer able to cope.

After Neil returned to London, his mother took Granny to the doctor for a problem with her eyes. They came back with a bottle of eye ointment and confirmation of what they already knew: a diagnosis of dementia.

Neil's grandmother was dozing now with her mouth open and her cheek resting against the winged armchair in the kitchen. He wished that he had asked her more while her mind was still intact. The essence of her was still there, locked deep down. However, she was increasingly unable to interact with the world, as if she was looking out through a grimy window which became dirtier all the time.

Gulls wheeled over the machair. The clouds moved slowly in the lull between the gales. The ragged edges of one seemed to form into the crinkled face of an old lady.

The kitchen door opened, and Neil's mother bustled in, bringing bags and a draught of cold air, rousing him out of the dreamy, quiet state he had reached sitting beside his grandmother.

"An do thill thu, a Dhòmhnaill?" His grandmother woke up and looked at him. She thought that he was her brother, his long-dead uncle Donny, back from his travels across the world.

"'S mise Niall," Neil affirmed his identity, letting her lean on his arm as she steadied herself.

"'S fada bhon a chunnaic sinn thu, a Dhòmhnaill?" Granny shakily pushed herself up from the chair and reached out a hand to greet her long-lost brother.

"Seo Niall, am mac agam." Neil's mother shouted that he was her son even though she was only on the other side of the kitchen table. She opened a bag of pasta, shook the contents into a glass container, and dropped her voice to ask how Granny had been. *"Ciamar a bha i?"*

"Ceart gu leor," Neil said. *"Bha i direach a' cadail."* She had been peacefully sleeping most of the time.

He helped his mother put away the shopping, while she kept up a non-stop commentary on the people she had met in the supermarket. She had bumped into Alec Donn's mother. Alec Donn worked on the fishing and had a reputation as a roving bachelor. He'd been pinned down by an Irish girl who was working for the environment agency, and trying to learn Gaelic. Nice-looking girl, red hair. Alec's mother was delighted. The wedding was set for the following summer, and they were going to live in a caravan while they built a house on the croft.

Behind the words, Neil heard what his mother didn't say. She would like one of her younger sons to settle down, so that she, too, could go to the local shop and announce an engagement. It was unlikely. Angus was almost thirty, still living at home and showing no sign of acquiring a girlfriend, whilst Neil was in London, trying out women she would never meet.

Neil stowed away a packet of crackers and looked around. The wing chair was empty. He found his grandmother in the hall cupboard, arranging cans of food beside the shoes. That was where she had kept the tinned food in her own house. He led her back to the kitchen, glad that his mother had moved onto another topic, a friend who needed to go to the mainland for an operation.

A smile faded on Granny's lips as she settled back against the side of the chair and closed her eyes. She was weary. Neil looked out the window to the fence which sheltered the potato patch. Beyond were the fields, exposed to the relentless wind from the sea.

He thought about all the people who had struggled to cultivate this piece of land on the edge of the sea so that the cycle would go on, each generation subtly different from the last. They had laboured so that he would have the choice to leave, jostle his way to work through crowded city streets, sit in front of a screen breathing recycled office air and eat microwave-ready meals off plastic trays.

It was all unravelling, and he was the weak link in the chain. ■

Poetry

Ae Day I
Hamish Scott

The sun cums oot the kirk o nicht
an brings the kennin o the licht
til ilka thing ootwith the kirk,
it brings the licht ti redd the mirk

Ae Day II
Hamish Scott

The sun cums oot the kirk o nicht
a virgin day its wyfe
an daw, the twasum's hinnie month,
the stert o thair new life

An cums the mornin, sun an day
gets yokit ti thair wark:
ti fend aathings wi licht an heat
an redd awa the mirk

The sun gets hie an day auld-yung:
thai win til efternuin;
the time thair licht an heat maist strang,
thair gretest wark is duin

For sun an day the eenin cums
an thus retirement sterts;
thai skair the lave o mairrit life
until wi daith diverts

An faas the nicht, the day is deid;
the sun's back ti the kirk
ti see the wyfe i nicht's kirk-yaird
intir'd intil its mirk

At the leibrarie
Hamish Scott

A wale twa beuks tae hae a read
an tae an oot-the-gate wee neuk
A like tae think ma ain wee bit,
A like tae gae wi twa-three beuks

Tae whar a windae sits abuin
a widden table an a seat,
an whar a radiator nar
on days lik this fair ootpits heat

A win the table, on it pit
the beuks A'm gaun tae gie a deek,
pou back the seat, plunk doun, sit in,
an by the radiator beek

A than leuk ower the windae whar
a scaffie soops deid leafs in heaps;
syne, pits thaim in his scaffie-cairt
whar kiver'd unner lids he keeps

A mynd again thon auld newsreel
o Bergen-Belsen efter freed:
parteiclar whar the fillum shaws
the umwhile gairds gart redd the deid

Thaim liftin ilk deid rickle thare
an on thair hurlie-barraes pile;
syne, pittin in a muckle graff
an kiverin thaim aa wi sile

An syne A turn ma een awa,
tae that at fills this biggin leuks,
an sees deid leafs furthsetter fowk
haes hudged thegither intae beuks

The muckle feck's bi fowk that's deid,
the lave is near the same forby
In here thair lifes haes fan an en:
as ilka stane-dum beuk thai ly

Thaim pat in here bi leibrie fowk,
athin thir waas, ablo this ruif:
A'm in a graff, a muckle graff,
wi aa this deid - an me that nuif

Carpe Diem
Hamish Scott

This is the day, the ainlie day,
the ainlie day ye can hae

Gin
Hamish Scott

Gin Dostoyevsky shot thon day,
malaria MacDiarmid fell'd,
whit wark wad no been made

Gin Burns pass'd thertie seeven year,
an flu no teuk Apollinaire,
whit things thai wad a say'd

Haed Virgil's Aeneid been destroy'd,
novelles o Kafka brunt an aa,
whit wark wad no abade

Gin Ovid's Medea no tint,
nor maist the plays Aeschylus wrate,
whit wark we wad a haed

Sae far as makars mak wir warld,
thair warks we hae's the warld we hae,
thair kittle weird display'd

Luvin life, luvin daith
Hamish Scott

It's aye that easy luvin life,
A niver want it en;
but luvin daith, A canna yit,
its luve A'm still tae ken

Rowan
John Young

Full fifty years since she moved off the croft
she's back again, with me in tow,
to oystercatchers wheeping by the lochan
and skies as wide as your imagination.

Strange territory for me, an urban dweller
Brought up where streetlights were our stars
And dockland hooters wailed out
The divisions of the day – and Hollywood
Via Saturday morning movies
Gave us an off-the-shelf mythology.

That rowan standing sentinel by the gate, I say,
it blocks the view, I'd better cut it down.
You can't do that, she answers,
my father planted it when first he came here
to welcome strangers and ward off evil spirits.

I'm not sure what to do; I've often upset her
with my uncouth townie ways,
but leaving that aside, why should I take on board
the superstitions of a long gone age?
A rational atheist, I - or so I'd like to think,
blood red berries and pentagrams
hold no mystique for me;
and yet an awkward need for reverence gnaws
insistently.

My mind's made up,
I'll not take metal to the rowan's flesh.

The Remains
Molly Donachie

After all, a small room,
with its finger on its cracked lips:
a chair, well-couched, an ashtray of ash,
photographs on an upper shelf -
this inventory
not what you'd expect.

A wreck yes, a mynah bird squawking
perhaps,
the debris from his heart attacks.
Even, sometimes the case, a drawer brimful
of loose change.

Not this
neat life - folded sheets, a few
bottles of beer, St. Theresa of Carmel hung over
the kitchen bin.
Not the picture that would spring immediately to
mind,
if you knew him.

Poetry

A Wairnin Tae the Ayeweys Aff an On

Sara Clark

It's awfy dreich tae leeve
Wi a man ye divna luve.
The haurd pairt is deekin it,

No likin the guy
Ye bide wi,
No kennin why,

Wirrit ye micht come aff rude
Ye stairt tae cleck up excuises,
(PMT / bad muid)

If yer list o raisons tae stey
Has "weans," or "weddin" in it,
Or the wirds "thi boy micht chynge"

Get the hell oot.
If ye ken deep doun
He's no whit yer aboot,

Or the sicht o him eatin,
Smilin or watchin the TV
Maks ye want tae scream

It's time tae leave.
If he niver seems
To unnerstaund whit ye mean,

An ye ayeweys imagine
Bein wi anither man
Or like tae daunder doon

The stair at midnicht,
Fer a skaur o peace,
It means he isnae richt.

You willnae believe this,
But, efter the tears
An the stooshies,

He'll aw at ance appear
Relieved. Ye see ma dear,
He doesnae luve you either.

A Lane Girl's Howps

Sara Clark

Howpfu, as tho ma hairt wis kirnin fire,
Howpfu, wi ma dreams presst in the cauld paum o snaw,
Howpfu, tho ma greetin's the soond o a blowsterie windae,
Howpfu, gowerin up at the muin's bleart edges
The doorstane cheeps, a hairtbeat flees awa,
Howpfu suin again, courin in the lamplit close,
Howpfu, joys tae tottie tae howd are tovin skyward,
Howpfu, for the staurns leam bonnie bricht abuin the gairden,
Howpfu, awtho deith strides mirksome roond its waws,
Howpfu for the honour o a leear
Howpfu as a jakie at a clased door
Howpfu for a deek at a gowden shore
Still hopefu, terrifee'd e'en nou o heiven.
Hopefu, ma buitless feet aw droukelt up wi gress
Hopefu, an daikin oot a wee grave for ma hert
Hopefu, an kneelin, an pitten it in.

While Workin At Subway

Sara Clark

The shaidae on the wall wis sae beautifu -
Licht gowden neuks wi ebony leafs a-flauchter,
Sae bonnie, as ah passt, ah nearlins gasped.
Ah let it daidle a seicont in ma mynd -
Gan doun the stair tae fesh the dough,
Hauntit bi the cantie tints o gowd,
An widdie-wands o black that birlt sae merrily.
Fae a stymie, ah'd stuid in feudal Japan,
Govin intae a glowin paper screen,
As empie-free as they daurk brainches.
When ah clammert back, nae sign o sun bade oan
An the wall wis dour an flat - a thing to claucht us in.

Eggbox

Seth Crook

Eggs for sale:
beside a farm gate,
beside a daubed sign.
Please Put Your Money in the Box.

Every Thursday I pull up,
select my half a dozen. Large.
Drop in my cash. Exact.

Until there's little room for coins.
Fresh eggs keep arriving,
No money goes.
Metal climbs on metal.

I start a tower of fifty pences.
I bring a cardboard sign,
"Dear crofter, pick up your cash".
But no pick up.

Eggs keep arriving.
The tower topples.
The board turns soggy,
sags.

One morning: I've had enough.
Time to swing the gate;
follow the ruts.

Nothing much.
I pass a fallen byre full of bracken;
outlines of lazy beds,
no sheep, no cattle, a clan
of pert marsh orchids.

Until I reach a ruined croft house.
No car, no council bin, no caravan.
Only a rusty spud spinner,
the reel still hanging.

So I enter, where the door should be,
see small bags lying about.
Inside: more coins and notes.
"Hey, here's your money."

"You need to start picking it up, man."
"Good eggs, but your box is full."
"Dear Sir/Madam, for many weeks..."

Draw pouches, canvas sacks,
wren-sided farthings,
embossed envelopes from the 1950s,

threepenny bits, sixpences,
Edwardian pennies,
the ageing faces of Queen Victoria.

Signs of Pre-Spring

Seth Crook

A new fence-post rammer
banged with authority; a stob gavel.
The crofter re-stating his field.

Leaky hopes, leakier doubts. Sun out,
but ice rings still in puddles at 2.00,
even reformed crunch by 3.00.

And the bald farmer from Barra,
who always turns up at the garage,
a January Jim, with his 4 by 4,

his broken springs, brakes gone,
alternator packing up; who,
like the season, always says, I'll wait.

Eden in the Morning

Short Story by Roddy Murray

'There's someone coming' I said, 'there's a car on the machair'. I looked at Morry and said 'It'll be him. It'll be him. I told you I fucking told you he'd check'. Morry said 'Shut up. Where? No way. He never checks.' She looked through the narrow split in the drawn curtains in the caravan window. A dark blue Volvo estate was slowly undulating its way over the shimmering grass and flowers towards us.

It was a Saturday morning in July, early enough for the machair to be still damp with dew. We'd only been there a night. I'd been in the bunk-bed when I first heard the engine. I noticed because it didn't recede, it got louder.

Morry was already up. She wasn't paying attention. Rummaging in her bag. Hadn't yet bothered getting dressed. Well, she had better get her kit on pretty damn quick. Then I thought, oh Christ, I hope the caravan wasn't rocking when he turned off the main road towards us.

There was no doubt. It was him. Doctor Grieve. Our landlord for the weekend. Morry knew him through being a patient in his practice the couple of years she lived over in Valtos. She'd cleaned house for him. Still knew him just well enough to ask if she could stay in his caravan sometime. By herself, obviously, otherwise there would have been no point in asking. Not without a wedding ring on her finger.

'Remember Lot's wife' he had said when he took his family from their enclave in the Midlands to head for Lewis all these years ago. To a place where there was still some decency left to protect and conserve. Like a theological national park. A kind of Eden unscathed by moral collapse. And where better?

What the fuck did he want?

There was less than a minute to react. Morry was already dressed. I'd never seen her do it so fast. Still haven't. The situation hadn't so much unfolded as fallen on us like a collapsed roof. I had two options. Get dressed and try to act normal, or hide under the duvet, flatten out, throw some stuff on top and hope he wouldn't spot me.

No chance. Not with all my gear lying about. It was bloody obvious she wasn't alone. I could see him pulling the duvet off. Me underneath. Naked. Mortified. It didn't even bear thinking about. What a fucking farce. Christ, I was thirty eight years old. And Morry wasn't his daughter or his wife.

But she wasn't my wife either.

I jumped into last night's shorts, scrambled a t-shirt, grabbed my paperback of The Crow Road and desperately threw myself into a sprawling, casual, been-up-for-a-while pose along the bench-seating at the other end of the caravan.

As a pre-emptive measure, Morry had already gone out and I could now hear them talking. Sounded amicable enough. Couldn't make it out. Pleasantries. Maybe it would be ok. Maybe he wouldn't look in.

But he did. The door opened. Morry said "Donnie, this is Dr Grieve." I raised my eyes lazily from the book and said "Morning. It looks like it's going to be a nice day". It really was as lame and phoney as that. My voice sounded like it was coming out of an old transistor radio.

There was eye contact for a frozen fraction of a second. The moment expanded. And petrified.

Later when replaying the encounter, we were unable to recall anything that was said or happened within that blank space. It was like we'd had a spontaneous black-out. I think he wore a khaki waistcoat. With pockets. But I'm not sure.

The next thing I did remember was Morry's voice coming through the open door. She was saying "I'm sorry Dr Grieve, please don't misunderstand …" He said something about being disappointed, that he was an old-fashioned sort and how he felt let down and expected better. And then, just when I thought he was going to leave it at that, the cheerless incantation went on. How he'd misjudged her. A betrayal of trust.

It brought to mind a Victorian dad thrashing his kids. More in sorrow than in anger. For your own good. One day you'll thank me. This hurts me more than it hurts you.

It sure was old school. And it took me right back to it.

He didn't even have to say we had to leave.

When the car door shut and the engine faded-off, Morry came back in. She looked wrecked, drained, beaten. She said "we have to go". I said "I know". She slumped down beside me on the bench-seat and we sat with our backs against the end-window. Didn't say anything else. It felt like we'd been ambushed, ransacked.

I had glazed-over. I was looking vacantly towards the other end of the caravan where barely five minutes earlier I had lain in a woolly-headed, semi-conscious cocoon.

I became aware that I was staring at something under the bed. Last night's bed. An object. No. "Jesus, Morry" I said "There's a dead bird under there." A glimpse of iridescence. "It's … a starling. How come we didn't notice it till now?" I stood up, walked over and crouched down to investigate when, with another start, I saw that it was breathing. "It's alive" I said, turning round "How is it alive? Did it come in during the night? The window wasn't open. Was the window open? How come we didn't hear it?"

But when I looked again I saw that it wasn't alive. It was still moving though. Its entire chest cavity was crammed with a seething, heaving colony of maggots.

For a second I was sure I was going to retch.

I thought about leaving it where it was. Just ship out. Lock the windows, shut the door. Bottle it up. Let the larvae consume the host and ripen into a dense, black swarm of flies. So that when Grieve returned the following weekend, he would find Beelzebub in residence.

But I didn't. I swallowed my disgust. I gripped a wingtip between thumb and forefinger, whipped the bird out and flicked it through the open door onto the lush, verdant machair.

Then I sat down again. And breathed. And put my head in my hands.

Soon the sun would grow and gather in brightness and heat. I went outside, shaded my eyes and looked across the brightly-speckled grass towards the dazzling white sands, the turquoise water and the islands beyond. It was a rare, perfect day for the beach. That had been the plan.

Instead, I stuffed our gear into bags and put them in the car boot with our box of food and bottles of wine while Morry freneticaly wrote out a letter of apology to Grieve in her sketchbook. It ran to three long pages and there wasn't much punctuation. When we drove through the village on the way back, I stopped at his house and she leapt out of the car and shoved it under the front door.

We headed back to Stornoway in silence.

Forty miles later we sat opposite each other at the window in her first-floor flat overlooking Church Street watching the traffic and the usual Saturday people. More silence. Morry said "I'm going to make some coffee."

I looked at my watch. It was 8.57am. ■

Henry's Playtime

Short Story by Marka Rifat

Henry sat on the edge of the hard, slate-grey sofa. His little legs swung over the polished ash wood floor. He wanted badly to play, but that meant washing his hands before he could open his toy box, a bright white chest with a sliding top, because handles and finger marks were not allowed in this house.

Then he'd have to carry the toys up two flights of pale floating steps. The staircase still frightened him, although he considered himself a big boy now. You could see daylight between each tread, while the bannisters and balustrade (Grandma taught him those words) were not like his grandparents' stairs, all warm, dark brown wood, but were taut wire cords fastened to cold steel poles. The wires were sore to hold and he did not dare support himself by pressing on the wall because, somehow, even his clean hands left a mark.

And when he did reach the top floor, he had to whisper with his toys because the double height atrium (Daddy's word) carried sounds down as well as up and then Daddy would come and check that Henry was not being conflict-orientated or gender-biased.

Henry decided it would be easier to just stay put. Gradually, the rhythm of his swinging legs became faster and his hands became fists. Then he smiled.

Kneeling on the sofa, he angled a machine gun at the white porcelain on the dining table. He strafed the whole room, silently mouthing the exciting noises. With two fingers of each hand, he shot out the recessed lights and splintered all the handle-less kitchen cupboards. He levelled his aim at the orchids in the meditation alcove and watched the dark soil explode from its cream bowl and settle onto the white carpet below. Finally, he hauled a rocket launcher, from his extensive armoury, into position. He braced himself for the recoil. The staircase took a direct hit. The planks fractured and flew up, some crashing through the triple-glazed windows, some embeddng themselves into the bone white walls, and one smashed into the kitchen sink with its sharp taps, and water gushed out and splattered over the floor, and best of all, the wire bannisters were caught in the blast and they leapt and twisted, screeching in the air like a mad dragon.

Henry rocked back on his heels, panting with exhilaration.

"Henry," his father called from the upstairs studio. Henry quickly resumed his original seated position and looked up. His father's head appeared from the first floor gallery.

"You can't sit there doing nothing. Come up and we'll do some yoga. Ashtanga or Hatha – you get to choose!"

Henry put a grenade in each pocket and marched towards the stairs. ■

Flowing

Short Story by Anna Levin

The way he's looking at me, he knows she was at mine. He's two ahead of me in the checkout queue at the Coop, hackles raised, puffed up and bristling like an angry cat. He stares ahead then glances back, glowering, but he looks kind of wobbly, and I'm not sure if he's going to thump me or burst into tears. I don't know what the hell to say or how to explain. The truth is I never touched her, despite what they're all saying, and the rest of the band all smirking and giggling like schoolgirls. Not that I didn't want to. Jesus I did, but it wasn't like that. I mean I didn't, we didn't… it wasn't… nothing happened.

Nothing happened? Yet something did.

This is what happened.

I was down by the harbour last Saturday afternoon, just coming out of the hardware store, when I heard this tune – no, I felt this tune, it stopped me in my tracks like a physical force, right there in the shop doorway. It seemed to be coming from all around, a mesmerising, lilting melody, lifted up by a strong rhythm and spiralling sweet and high. Now I've been playing music as long as I can remember, but I've never heard a tune like this before – so strange, but immensely satisfying, it would get to exactly where you wanted it to go, but by all sorts of twists and turns along an unexpected route.

I was enchanted, first by the tune, and then by the girl playing it. She was sitting on the steps of the harbour wall, and the music was coming from the accordion in her arms. Not a piano accordion like you'd normally see here, but rows and rows of buttons on each side. She played with her whole body – her foot beating a rhythm on the quayside, her head moving gently from side to side, her arms strong and steady while her fingers leapt and danced in intricate steps across all those buttons.

She played, and I listened, until clouds coming in from the bay brought the first splashes of rain. Bigger, darker clouds were muscling up behind them. She glanced skywards, scooped up the coins from her case and packed up to go.

Dazed, I returned to my shopping, the tune still rippling and rolling in my head as the rain came lashing down. I ran in and out of shops, forgetting in each what I was looking for, then dashed home to light the fire and make something to eat, but found I wasn't hungry, my stomach was tense.

By the time I got to the pub that night, the session at the Anchor was in full swing. It was packed, the musicians all squashed into a corner and the tunes pouring out and swirling above the chatter of the foot-tapping crowd. They were rocking through a set of reels, the fiddlers going full throttle and the music surging and rushing forward like a river in full flood. There she was at the heart of it all, playing with grace and guts, those strong arms pushing and pulling away. I squeezed alongside Martin, who was having trouble already accommodating his double bass and his elbows in the crowded corner, reached for my fiddle, tightened the bow and plunged straight into the racing current.

It's become customary for the session to drift round to my place when the pub eventually closes at some random hour of the night. The flats above and below are now holiday homes, only used a few weeks a year so there are no neighbours to disturb. I didn't dare ask her to join us, but then I've never asked anyone, they all just drift along. I was walking ahead with Martin and glanced back, pretending to check that Matt had remembered his banjo, and I saw that she was coming with us. My heart did a strange, fluttery dance.

Back at the flat we chucked some logs on the fire and it was soon blazing away nicely. Someone had brought a bottle of whisky and Martin's cousin had brought her clarsach. Sometimes the session just carries on rolling at mine, all blasting away, but other times there's a different quality to it, and we listen more and learn tunes from each other. That Martin's cousin played a lot, gorgeous rippling airs. We joined in a bit, but mostly just basked in the warmth of the fire, the whisky and the music.

Gradually people drifted away and somehow it happened that everyone else had gone. Of course I found out after that they'd slipped away deliberately – 'You didn't take your bloody eyes off her all night, thought we'd better leave you to it,' Matt said later – but at the time I thought it was just amazing synchronicity that, miraculously, there were only the two of us left there.

She was looking down into the accordion, her face bright with the firelight, figuring out some of the tunes the harpist had played, experimenting with different chord sequences.

'The tune you were playing on the harbour steps,' I said. 'Will you teach it me?'

We sat together by the fire and she played the tune slowly, phrase by phrase. I found it hard to learn, all those twists and turns, unfamiliar keys and accidental notes.

'Put down the fiddle and sing it,' she suggested.

'Sing it?'

'Yeah.'

Embarrassed, I hummed and diddle-dummed along, she kept me at it until I could diddle-dum it with conviction. Then I picked up the fiddle again, and suddenly I had it. Something clicked, my fingers grasped the dance, they knew exactly where to go and the bow flowed smooth and easy. The fiddle blends so well with the sound of the accordion that I could hardly hear myself, just became part of her big, complete sound. The end of the tune lifts and swirls into the beginning and so it circles on and on. As we turned into yet another repeat, she caught my eye and we both laughed out loud.

The next time she held back, playing only chords and checking I was secure with the tune, then she slipped away into an exquisite harmony. I stared at her, delighted and exhilarated, hanging on tight to my melody as the tunes looped and twisted around each other like otters at play.

'Now you,' she said.

'Me?'

'Be brave,' she commanded. 'Relax. Make it up.'

I panicked then, I didn't know how to make it up, didn't want to screw it up now. But somehow my bow came down across the strings and music came out, flowing and weaving its own meandering way around the tune.

We played on and on, relentless, like children wanting endless repeats of a bedtime story: again, again, again. We drank in the melody like thirsty creatures sucking at some vital nutrient. Circling round and round, and round again, on our enchanted carousel.

I think it was me who broke the spell when I finally stopped to go for a pee.

She glanced at her watch.

'Oh shit!' She looked genuinely horrified.

'What's wrong?'

'It's nearly half four! Oh god, I've got to get back, Ruaridh will be worried sick'.

'Ruaridh?'

'My boyfriend.'

Shit!

'I've been living in London, I'm staying up here for the summer with him…' she started telling me hurriedly, packing up her accordion as she was speaking, as if she'd suddenly realised we haven't had a single conversation all night. I don't even know her name. 'He works late in the restaurant up on West Brae, but he'll have been back for hours now and wondering where the hell I am…' 'Ruaridh Anderson?' I asked. She nodded. Big guy, a few years ahead of me when we were at school.

I walked her back, through the dark streets, past the docks and down towards the harbour. There was a wild wind coming off the sea, the fishing boats all tucked in snug against the harbour wall, but the yachts tethered out in the bay were tugging at their anchors like wild animals trying to bolt, their white masts swaying as they reared and rocked in the swell. I hunched into my jacket, my hands deep in the pockets and she slipped her

arm through mine, leaning slightly with the weight of the accordion on the other shoulder.

On the corner of the street she wriggled her arm free and said goodbye. I moved towards her, as if to kiss her, what was I thinking? She stepped back slightly, deftly avoiding me, but she smiled.

'I'd better go,' she said quietly.

And she went.

So that was it. As I said, nothing happened, but something happened. But how to explain all that to a glowering boyfriend in the Coop queue? We didn't so much lose track of time as transcend it altogether, time lost track of us and set us free in an altogether different space. We're through the checkout now but he's still there, pretending to read the notice board so I can't go out without passing him. 'Err…sorry it got late the other night,' I mutter simply, stupidly, as I pass. Better to say nothing. 'We were just playing music,' I continue, against my better judgement.

'Till four in the fucking morning?'

He looks bewildered but I can't think of anything else to say. At least he doesn't thump me or burst into tears, just frowns and walks away.

Nothing happened, everything happened. That night changed me. Like I'm still here, the same person doing the same things, but looking at it all from a completely different angle. Am I in love? I'm dazzled by her, excited by her and her music, but also by something in me, the way I played when she was with me.

Fortunately there's not much time to ponder whether or not I'm in love with someone else's girlfriend. My changed perspective focuses all my energy on an urgent matter: my band have got a support gig at the Town Hall in a few weeks. It's by far the biggest venue we've ever played. It's the first time my own songs will ever be performed in public. And the band are shite. Not impossibly, irredeemably shite, we're all competent enough musicians, but we're not holding together well. Something is kind of sagging. I know what I have to do.

Now I've never pinched anyone's girlfriend, and, come to think of it, I've never dumped anyone either, but now I have to ditch our bodhran player and steal a drummer from my brother's band. My brother's band really are shite, irredeemably so, and they play crap covers of crap songs. And they're totally, utterly outclassed by Simon, their shining jewel of a drummer.

Simon hangs around after school with my wee brother, so he's often round at our parent's house. When I call in, he's there – sitting at the kitchen table, floppy hair and blue school blazer, holding a pen loosely like a bodhran beater and drumming away as he chats. He's always beating out a rhythm with whatever's in his hands – a pen or cutlery or the remote control for the TV – and if there's nothing in his hands, his feet tap away or his fingers dance on the table, adding incredible rhythms to whatever's on the radio, or ads on the telly, or dad playing the odd tune on the banjo – anything.

My parents think the world of him. I remember one time we were all in the kitchen making pancakes, and Simon picked up the mixing bowl and whisk and began to beat a rhythm, moving the whisk back and forward through the mixture and against the side of the bowl. Dad fetched the banjo and played a jig and Simon kept on beating, keeping perfectly in time as the mixture thickened. At the end of the tune he had a bowl of perfect, creamy pancake mix and handed it back to my delighted mum.

Despite my brother's indignant scowl, Simon's keen to join my band. He turns up for rehearsal after school on Friday with a bodhran and a strange percussion contraption that seems to be composed of bar stools strapped together with bits attached. Another guy comes with him, presumably to help him carry it all, but he turns out to be a flute player called Mike, who joins us as well. Simon takes charge, this floppy-haired 17-year-old in his trainers and baggy jeans, a boy too young to buy a pint, he sorts out the running order and even who stands where on stage.

'You need to lighten up,' he informs me half way through.

'But I thought you said we needed to be tighter?'

'Yeah, lighten up, tighten up.' He likes that, he's found another rhythm: 'lighten up tighten up lighten up tighten up', and he beats it out on his barstool drums.

Now I can pick up a bodhran and join in a session, playing along with any reel or jig, but that's just the thing, I'm playing along, keeping the beat – when Simon plays, whether he's tapping away with a ball point pen or pelting a drum kit, he's creating the beat and everyone else plays along. In rehearsals he picks us all up with his crazy rhythms, takes us wherever he wants to go, but carries the whole band with him and never drops anyone.

A week to go, and things are good. We're a tight, five-piece band now: Simon and Mike, then me on fiddle, Martin with his double bass and Matt on guitar, mando, banjo, occasional bouzouki and anything else going. I teach them the tune, her tune, and it works. The flute and fiddle swoop and soar, and the guitar meets us with a rocking accompaniment and sprinkles of delicate notes. They're all grinning, loving it too. We're going to start the set with it. I feel elated, triumphant. We've got something solid here, it won't let us down.

After the rehearsal I head down to the chip van on the pier. I eat my chips hungrily, three at a time, staring at the sea and feeling full of hope. Then I feel someone's watching me. It's her. She peels away from two other girls who are heading for the chip van and comes towards me. My mouth is full of chips.

'Mmmh. Oh. Hi!' I manage eventually, swallowing and rummaging clumsily in my pockets for something to wipe my hands on. She smiles, says hi, and: 'still got that tune?' 'Yes!' I say, too emphatically. 'We're going to play it… my band! … next Saturday at the Town Hall…' 'You've got a band?' 'Yes!' I answer too loud, and all the bum notes we've ever played and the corny lines I've written rear up around me as I say it. 'Will you come?' 'Hope so,' she smiles and walks away to joins the other girls at the chip van.

The week slips by and now it's Saturday. The Saturday. Memories come rolling out to meet me like waves as I enter the Town Hall: of drunken teenage nights, of visiting bands, discovering music, wondering what it's like to be on the stage. Now this is me. Here. Doing this. Now. Tuning up, plugging in, taping set lists to amps. We've got a nice mix of tunes and songs, but I'm nervous about playing my own stuff, feeling exposed and vulnerable. Will she like them? Will she be here?

The hall is filling up now, packed tight around the bar. I feel strangely sick. I pace and glance nervously around, scanning the crowd, praying she'll be here, then almost hoping she won't be. But imagining her not here, I feel a sudden stab of emptiness. No, I want her to hear this. I want to play for her.

Shit this is it. We're on. I knock back a whisky and take to the stage. I'm weirdly disconnected from everyone and everything, watching past versions of myself out there in the hall and wondering what am I doing up here? I'm talking, but I can't make any sense of what I'm saying, words are coming out of my mouth in strange hieroglyphics. I look to Martin, panic stricken, and he offers me a reassuring smile and some stirring notes on the double bass. The tune – her tune – has begun and the others join in one by one, building up the music in soft, sweet layers. Then my bow moves to my fiddle and I'm playing too. It's going to be OK. With the lights on us now I can't see the faces in the crowd anymore, but I play for her anyway, just in case she's here, or sending the tune out towards her wherever she is.

The music circles up and on, and I'm back on our carousel again. But Matt is looking at me, trying to catch my eye, raising his eyebrows with a quizzical look. Something is happening out there in the crowd. A movement, a muttering, a prickle of electricity. Is it the tune – are we creating this? Can they feel what I feel when we play it? But hang on, the hall is emptying from the back, layers of our crowd peeling away. They're leaving! There's no panic, just a pulse of excitement, something being communicated. The tune carries on, and carries us along, but they're all looking to me, asking should we stop? But I don't know, don't know where to stop, what to do, I can't remember how to stop, I'm trapped on the roundabout and keep on circling until there's hardly anyone left in the hall, just a few guys slumped over their pints around the bar.

It's Matt who finally breaks it, he doesn't even finish the phrase, just stops dead, puts down his guitar and says: "What the fuck is going on?"

We put down our instruments on stage and follow the crowd out of the hall and on to the quayside. It's raining gently, a soft drizzle, and there are loads of people out here. Kids as well, though it's late at night. Everyone's packed against the railings, staring into the dark water. We squeeze into the crowd and look where everyone else is looking. The water's surface is quite still, gilded with splashes of orange from the streetlights and lightly pockmarked with raindrops.

Something is moving in the water, I can see pale flashes and an enormous dark bulk rising fast towards the surface.

"It's a fucking submarine," whispers Matt beside me.

A thin black triangle slices through the water, and someone screams "Shark!" But there's a soft explosion of sound, 'phteweeee', and a burst of spray catching the streetlights. The black fin is getting taller and taller, and a huge gleaming shape rises up. Jeesusfuckingchrist it's a whale! And another looms beside it, this one with a curved fin, smaller but still enormous. Pale streaks behind the black fins. Killer whales. They curve back in to the water again, then reappear, breathing out, 'phteweee' and the assembled crowd breathes in with a collective gasp.

Everyone's standing completely still, watching, waiting, mesmerised, but I'm full of restless energy, still rushing with adrenalin. I slip away from Matt and pace through the crowd, hearing snatches of whispered conversation.

'Aye you see them sometimes, they pass by the islands in the spring, heading North'… 'loads of them up there, they chase the seals right up on to the beaches'…'They're called orcas or killer whales and that's called a dorsal fin' …'Mummy do they eat people?'

Then I see her. She's standing by the harbour wall, slightly apart from the crowd, holding on to the railings as if to steady herself. There's rain in her hair. Her mouth is slightly open. She's gazing at the whales, and her eyes are shining. ■

Poems from 'Learning Swedish' Collection (In Progress)

By Stephen Keeler

Late Summer

I M Kate Mulvey

I drove to Furudal today through flashing forests,
reckless as the boy I was, on well-remembered roads,
to learn that you had died.

We sat, my grown-up child and I, and each
called up our different ghosts through air
as thick as uncut meadow grass.

And Sweden lay before us, a postcard of itself,
infused with pine-wood and with dill and sun-baked stone
and Maj-Britt's apple paj.

The afternoon was drugged on drifting thistledown:
a child's sky – high and blue and yellow as the flag
that day the village men set up the trestles

and the aproned women brought their plates and bowls
of crayfish, and there was hardbread and wooden knives
and jugs of beer and chilled brännvin under the trees.

You cycled like an actress in the sun:
a hat, of course, pale legs, your freckles soft
as birch seeds blown on end-of-summer winds.

Scandinavian Noir

Fornby, Siljansnäs

It's not an act of spontaneity
or merely ill-advised romance, to carve
four hearts each meeting at their points to form
a four-leaf clover branded on a tree
as lovely as the birch at Midsommar.
My first response would otherwise have been
a smile of fond recall that once upon
a time a day had been so perfect that
a proclamation, lightly etched with flint,
became compulsion, celebratory.
The longer that I looked, this cut declared
premeditation; an atrocity
required to disturb, unnerving in
the sharpened chill approaching through the leaves

Midsommarafton

Dalarna, Sweden

Unwilling as a child to leave
the grown-ups to the revels,
the light dragged colour with it
like a blanket, towards the forest.

Far enough away to be ignored,
and seen, if anyone should chance to look,
as though through painted gauze,
the imprint of the day stood watching at the edge:

the fiddlers in embroidered coats;
the girls in linen stockings;
the solemn toddlers, overlooked;
the red-faced same-old-story-tellers,

and those who came differently compelled.

A clumsy boat is shoved onto the lake
and dips through reeds, becoming lighter;
a pair of rusting bikes propped beyond the sagging barn;
the road, fenced blue on either side with Gaudi lupins.

The fiddlers bow and scrape
as though afraid to let us go;
the old folk smile, and fade
like family photos in the sun.

Mosquitoes too are drunk, on blood that's up,
and only widows sleep:
the night's as ragged as the tree-tops,
inflamed with fever.

Seven flowers placed with care under an unvisited pillow.

Listening to Jan Johansson

'En Gång i min Ungdom'
[Once Upon A Time in My Youth]

There must be mornings
when you too begin to wake
in foetal sunlight

and before a half-thought
has become a history
and an outstretched arm
has stopped at pain;

and having felt your way downstairs
put on the coffee
sliced the cheese
and placed the napkin on the tray

you too stand
in the porcelain silence
and weep.

Stockholm

for Robert Crawford

I love how it has softly sat to face
the Baltic sun, and spread its boxes all
around, and etched a pencilled arc to touch
the clefted places in the shadowed rock.

At Lake Hornborga Watching Cranes

Were there three of us or four,
our backs to which of us it was
had held the camera?
Me with borrowed field-glasses
and zipped-up leather jacket
still trying out other people's
personalities for size,
watching each blowsy crane landing
light as a waterboatman on a pond,
an archduke's hat, with pins,
on loosely ploughed-up earth
in a Swedish vodka field
in spring.

Poetry

How should we dare?
Grahaeme Barrasford Young

A long climb over brittle rock.
A mid-point lost in weather.

We stop to brew, chocolate bars,
still but for out drinking hands,
companionably quiet.

Mist oozes round us.

Six feet left, cloud eddies,
twin suns appear.
Excitedly alerting you,
I bruise your ribs.

Briefly perplexed,
golden eyes consider, dismiss,
amused by our presumption.

Feathers flex in a shiver of mist.

Wings spread nearly to touch,
a god slides out of reach.
Whorled droplets caress it
as we follow it out of sight.

It takes spirit with it,
leaves awe.
Forever distant
we are inextricably linked.

Under Grizzled Skies
Robert Leach

Under grizzled skies the dark North Sea
Thumps and thumps the listless sands.

Gulls squat and paddle in the rushing shallows,
A handful of plovers peck a bit,
Skip a step, run a yard or two
Through the dreary skeins of seaweed
Yawing at the water's edge, and a heron
Lands lazily, stands
Gravestone still, grey and black.

It's barely a breath
In the lungs of eternity.
Then –

A man with a dog – the dog,
Frisky with freedom, trot-lollops
To the tide-line. The birds
Bridle, reluctantly retreat. The dog,
Desolate as abandoned love, leaves

And there's only the surf-topped swell
And fall, swell and fall – time's nocturne
Like a dull hammer on a dull anvil –
Till sulkily, the birds return.

Lipstick
Carolyn Yates

A swipe in teenage years,
tangerine dreams, shell pink, white pearl.
Mirrored, plump lips kiss glass,
the back of a hand, a sealed envelope.
traced lines impress the clown's garish gash.
A slap for delving in my mother's draw.

My stepmother wore scarlet geranium.
Coty applied fast and furious,
Clothed in Jaeger, her mouth never still,
she forged a finely chiselled nub,
used to its last creamy smear.
Strength perfumed, powdered and glossed.
Second wife of a vicar.
Aunty Wynn's lipstick darker,
more rose red. Sliding round her lips,
redefining outer edges, a fairy-tale pout.
Spinster of this parish.

Lips mirror that secret place,
the labia, pink and lush,
juicy, young. Paint them brazen red,
arch brows in dark and careful lines,
rework the magic, resurrect the siren call,
pucker, pout, draw and fill.
Open and close,
a goldfish gasping for air.

Wood Anemones
Donald Goodbrand Saunders

So easily ravelled
in a child's mouth
to 'wooden enemies.'
An innocence not
so easily disarmed.
Woods were dreams then
of refuge and dread
where shadows crept,
and how the forests trembled
when the stick men marched!
The road out of memory
was a rutted timber track.
In time we learned
of boundless forests to the East,
Poland and Belarus,
how beyond Minsk these little flowers
are so numerous the woods
are named for them– Kurapaty,
how they carpet the springtime
forest floor so densely,
the walks and picnic sites
and the five hundred grave pits
of the fifty, one hundred, two hundred thousand –
(they guess, but who could number them?
Who would kneel
to count wood anemones?)
Flowers of the shaded places, nemorosa,
the wooden enemies
have their poppies now and the murdered
your bone-white constellations.

Scunnered frae Skara Brae
Finola Scott

Ower excited, he waaks at crack o dawn,
grabs farls fresh frae the fire, an awa til moon-rise.
His beardie rasps my cheek and he's oot-loupin.
No a glance back, no a thocht o me.
The bairns? Thay're foo o the stanes as weel.
Huv ye heard the like? Heavin bloody great rocks.
Fir whit? A new hoose? Naw. He'll haul them
tae the Siller Loch tae staun in a bloody circle.
Ye'd think the sun rises an sets oan them.

He says he's bin chosen, it's an honour.
Says Ah've no tae girn but be prood. Some chance.
But mibbe, he'll bring back anither necklace.
Ah mind whan he draped yin roon ma neck, aw
gleamin.
Ah sweer the nicht wis caught up in the chuckies,
dark as his een.
Och him an his stanes.

A Kiss
Sue Pepper

He and she
sit side by side on the bus;
gnarled, worn, bent
like two old apple trees
frosted white.

You can hear the clack of their bones
as they get to their feet
and set off between the seats,
clutching at bars and helping hands
in a soft shoe shuffle,
a slow sideways two step
to the door.

They make a moon landing
to the safety of the pavement
on the unreliable hinges of their knees,

where he lifts her hand to his cheek,
kisses her fingers,
gently.

They walk on,
leaning together,
her hand under his arm.

Tiramisu

Short Story by Maureen Cullen

Dolly unlocked the borstal kitchen door, hung her coat on the scullery peg, smoothed the papers in her apron pocket and got on wi the stew. She sliced onions and added them tae the pot wi carrot and turnip, left them tae sweat while she slapped a flank of beef ontae the marble slab, inched her knife under the tarp, chopped the flesh intae chunks and rolled them in flour, her palms padded white. She flung the clumps of beef intae the pot wi two pints of stock and left the lot tae simmer on the gas. At half past ten she poured a cup of coffee tae steady her nerves.

Two and a half hours tae go.

She took her usual seat at the front of the empty canteen, plucked oot the envelope, laid it on the table and took a sip of strong, black coffee, a habit handed doon through the generations on her papa's side. He drank it black fae a bone white cup, fragrance coiling through the air like a ballerina. He'd take the handle between finger and thumb, tilt it tae his lips, moustache dipping behind the rim and, efter a sigh of contentment, tell her stories aboot Italy. Her childish enthusiasm pressed for mair on Grandma Dolores's café in Roma, Grandma's bosom held aloft like a battering ram, black hair rising magically intae its bun, Grandma weaving aroon wrought iron tables wi her silver coffee pot lifted high.

Two hours and twenty minutes tae the interview.

She put doon her cup, unfolded the notice fae The Mail.

Tenders invited from suitable interested parties for the café at the pavilion in the park. Summer months only: April to September. Apply to Council Chief… Mr Connor Begg.

She wis tae attend the cooncil offices at one o'clock. But she didnae want tae run intae a relative of Archie Begg. This fella wis new tae the town, she'd no been able tae get any gab on him. Anyhow, there'd be bigwigs efter the place, unlikely they'd gie it tae a woman. Dolly rubbed at the age spots splashed across her hand. Whit would a suitable party be for such an establishment? Aye, it'd be a young local in a dark suit.

Well, she wouldnae gie up before she started. She wis prepared.

Stock? She knew a man for that.

Furnishings? She knew a man for that.

Help? She'd only trust a woman for that.

Papa had lost his trust. He'd been a vanilla stick in that hospital bed. 'Oh Dolores, never the trustin those people. Preten you one of them, then…' He sliced his throat wi an imaginary blade.

The pungency of onions drew her tae stir the stew.

Couldnae be a son of Archie Begg, could it? No son of his would be so high-up in the cooncil. Begg standing in the road, the smirk before he spat on Papa's shoes.

When she wis a girl it wis her job tae polish they shoes. A dollop of wax ontae a cloth, rubbed intae leather, circled ower seams and inlets, her wrist aching. Papa picked up each shoe, turned it aroon and aroon. 'Magnifico, Dolores,' he said, placing it on newspaper tae dry, before leaning doon tae where she knelt, his lips soft on her forehead, his moustache prickly. He slipped sideways tae the door, pinched finger and thumb intae his waistcoat pocket and tossed her a silver thruppence. It hung in mid-air, spinning light before her palms slapped thegither.

'Always be catching the rainbow, Dolores.'

Eleven o'clock. Two hours tae go.

When the afternoon shift arrived at twelve, she went tae the toilet, sprayed another layer of lacquer, and turned in the mirror. Her hair wis still black and her figure trim. Aye, she'd dae, except for the crow's feet aroon her eyes and the wee craters on her chin. Normally this didnae bother her but today? Och, it didnae matter. They'd never gie the daughter of an enemy alien a tender for the café, no the one in the park owned by the Cooncil. But even if there wis the smallest chance, she must grab it. She'd done her sums. Wi her widow's pension and savings she could afford tae take the risk. Besides, the war wis a long time ago. Nearly twenty years.

Connor Begg. No necessarily a relative of Archie Begg. Anyhow, this man wis the boss, he wouldnae be seeing the likes of her, she'd be interviewed by a lackey. Nae point in getting worked up. She put on her coat and checked her watch.

At quarter tae one she wis alone in the waiting room. A lass, hardly oot of school, skirt up her backside, came in and took her name.

Dolly tried no tae look at the shire insignia on the wall. She knew some said she wisnae a true Scot, even though in her top drawer lay Papa's letters tae Ma, sent fae the Somme, telling how proud he wis tae be fighting wi his pals. She couldnae read the words withoot seeing him being dragged away fae his ain front door intae the polis van, neighbours pelting stones at her ma's windae, shouting, 'Dirty Tally.'

She rummaged in her bag for her compact, slipped it oot and pressed some dark tan on her cheeks. Scots-Italian, Papa said, acid and sassy rolled intae one.

As she clicked her handbag shut, the door opened and she of the chicken thighs said, 'Mrs Deighan. Mr Begg will see you now.'

'No, ah thought he wis the boss.'

'He's the Head of Department but he does actually meet with … townspeople.'

The girl sniggered. Any of her boys tried that, their ears would smart for a week, but Dolly allowed a lifted eyebrow tae dae its work. The bizzum had the sense tae step back, clattering intae the bin behind her.

Dolly stepped intae a large office dominated by a mahogany, leather topped desk.

A brass clock on the wall chimed one o'clock.

When she recognised the man behind the desk she stalled. A relative for sure.

'Mrs Deighan?' He got up, extended his hand. A young fella, maybe late-twenties, guid head of sandy hair. Soft, a pencil pusher. She stared at the hand. 'Pleased to meet you,' he said, taking it back, patting his pocket as though suddenly looking for something.

'Right,' wis aw she could manage.

Papa's protests. 'You make mistake, I no a Mussolini man. I a Scot now.' Ma gripping him by the shirtsleeve, Dolly held back by her pregnancy, two toddlers at her skirts.

Sandy-hair sat doon, nearly missed the chair. 'Please sit down. I'm Connor Begg.' He scratched his heid, placed his palm on his tie, though it wis awready straight as a plank: green tartan, white shirt, clean collar, married.

She pursed her lips. Might be a son. Maybe jist il nipote, a nephew.

He cleared his throat. 'Your tender, Mrs Deighan?'

She closed her eyes. Archie Begg grinning at the scene in the street: the man wi a grudge, the man her father sacked the year before. He never had time for wastrels as a gaffer.

Might as well be sure. She cut across sandy-hair's mumbles. 'Yer Da wouldnae be Archie Begg who worked as a welder at the shipyard, oh, jist before the war?'

His face darkened. 'I believe he did work there in the thirties. A lot of folk from around here worked there then, still do.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Did you know my father, Mrs Deighan?'

'Ma father knew him.'

'And your father is…?'

'Dead. Gabriele Lombardi.'

'I don't recall…'

The clock ticked half a lifetime away.

'Are you alright, Mrs Deighan?'

'Ma papa wis never the same efter a year detained in Barlinnie Gaol. An enemy alien.' The pressure of the day rose in her chest and threatened tae bubble ower.

'That's terrible, I'm so sorry.'

'He said he wis lucky no tae have been sent on the Arandora Star.'

'Oh yes, all those Italian men killed.'

She moved forward, her chest skimming the desk. 'Scots, Welsh, English Italians. Many lived in Britain aw their adult lives. Some had sons who were fightin the Germans. Ma father fought for Britain in the great war.'

'Of course, I didn't mean…' His face wis the colour of cherryade. He fiddled wi his papers.

The eejit wis confused by her line of talk. She'd set him right. And she wis aboot tae dae jist that, when he moved forward and said, 'I'm very sorry. That was foolish of me.'

He looked at her full square. God, he hadnae a clue. Of course he didnae. A young man. Whit did he remember of war? She wanted tae bolt fae the room.

'War makes enemies. It's hard tae forget,' she said, brought up sharp by her ain words.

Begg looked doon, shuffled his papers, cleared his throat. 'Mrs Deighan, your application for the tearooms at the pavilion…'

'Vandals were egged on by clipes and bagotails.' She couldnae shut up.

He looked a wee bit tapioca aboot the gills. 'I'm sorry if coming here has upset you…'

'Ah'm no upset, Son.'

'Your application?'

'Ah know, dinnae bother yersel, ye'll have gied it tae someone else. Must be plenty…' She pulled herself oot of the chair.

'The Committee has approved your application,' he said.

'Whit wis that?' She sank back.

'Yes, it's already been approved.'

'But ah thought ah wis here tae be interviewed.'

'No.'

'But there must've been local businessmen…'

He chuckled, swallowed it back double-quick. 'Aye, a few.'

'How come me?'

'You're the most qualified and experienced applicant. Your references are excellent and you're a trained cook. I have to ask you to sign the contract.'

He turned papers aroon and inched them forward wi a pen. She splayed her fingers tae steady them, wrote oot her name, Dolores Lombardi Deighan, and slid the ice white sheets back.

She had tae know. 'Yer Da moved away fae the town efter the war, if ah remember right?' Despite a slight squeak, she managed tae speak civil, as if asking efter an auld acquaintance.

He seemed tae take it as such. 'Aye, we moved to Corby, for work. I came back here after I married.'

'And yer Da?'

'Passed away, Mrs Deighan.' He shook his head. 'Mum left him when I was a boy. He had problems… She rarely spoke

of him. But in the end, it was the cancer in the lungs that took him.'

Dolly buffed her mother's wedding ring wi her thumb.

He continued, 'She remarried. I didn't get to see him after that.'

Aye, that wis a turn for the best.

He shifted in his seat. 'I didn't get the chance to know him well. There was always something… You said your father knew him, but did you know him, yourself?'

She had her ain café. Bone china teacups, macaroons, tablet, Edinburgh Rock, coffee beans spilling fae hessian sacks, ice cream rippling through stemmed glasses. Oh, the tinkle of the door as clientele arrived, the tinkle of the till as clientele left. Soon she'd be at the counter in her black dress, the one presently in The Co-op windae, serving cones bright wi hundreds-and-thousands.

He wis waiting.

Maybe he had a right tae know. But it wis hard tae live wi hate. Hard tae die wi it. Och, he wis jist a boy asking efter his father. Whit tae say?

Papa answered. 'Dolores, mia bella. You might be half-Scot, but you no a clipe.' ■

Poetry

Kick-Ass Coatbridge

Miriam Solhunt

Late one afternoon of rain, the train
slunk into so-called Sunnyside
and stopped beside the engine works.

I saw a rust-fretted skeleton.
Sundry broken window panes attracted gloom.
Water slicked the platform. No-one came.

It was a place of extreme vacancy
Dismal streets, once jam-packed, red-lit
night and day - were grey.

Down the track a signal switched to green.
Congested clouds slid sideways
and glorious sun blazed above the heart of Scotland.

Wrong is a difficult word*

Irene Evans

Tricky to spell. (The silent letter
Left over from an older language.)

And the heavy certainty of it
When set against right's lightness.

Wrong road, wrong name, wrong man.
Somewhere a bell tolling.

*Quotation from Neil Gunn's 'Young Art and Old Hector'

Alex Cluness

Born 7th February 1969. Died 20th January 2018
An appreciation

By Donald S Murray

Alex Cluness. Shetland News

Sometimes real friendships emerge from surreal times.

Alex Cluness and I first spent time together when I was working in - what was beyond doubt - the most bizarre school in which I was ever employed. Among its many absurdities were posters illustrating the work of Edward de Bono blu-tacked to the corridor walls in the Learning Support Department.

It was this I recall fulminating about one night in his home - how I was struggling to take seriously the 'educational philosophy' this involved, how it was impossible to contemplate for a moment a crackerjack theory in which people were instructed to put on (and remove) caps that illustrated their thinking skills, whether these were imaginative, organisational or motivational. It was during one of these diatribes, that Alex disappeared into the toilet. He emerged speaking a cod-Hebridean accent a few moments later, a towel tightly wrapped around his head.

'Do you not think this improves my imaginative thinking, Tonald?'

There were many such moments in Alex's company, hours when we struggled to stifle schoolboy giggles before going onto more serious discussions. I was not alone in experiencing this. There was the occasion at a conference when a Faroese Government representative announced that there were grants of money available to both travel and study the dialect of that island group. These words provided the cue for an earnest academic to leap to his feet. Providing a roll-call of his qualifications, he declared himself the ideal person for the task. He possessed a degree in this field, a doctorate in another, a Masters in some obscure but clearly closely related discipline. A lifetime or so later, his litany was interrupted by Alex leaping to his feet.

'But I've got a suitcase,' he announced.

Yet Alex's humour never quite concealed his sense of dedication. This was especially true of his passion for literature. This came through in all his labours. In his working life, he was employed firstly as an English teacher in Anderson High School in Lerwick before moving on to become Literature Development Officer for Shetland Arts. His time there was followed by two spells at Literature Works in South-West England and a period at Taigh Chearsabhagh in North Uist. When he died just before his 49th birthday, he was staying in Carnoustie, while working - at a distance - for the Poetry Archive.

There were constants in all of this. The first was in his encouragement of both others and their talents, being blessed with a real ability in both recognising this in people and enabling it to shine. He was also a gifted writer; his poetry in short collections such as 'Mend' and 'Disguise' is both individual and unusual, as Kevin Macneil recognised in his selection of island verse, 'These Islands We Sing'. Thirdly, and most importantly, he had a rare capacity to love and inspire that same affection in others. This ability was mirrored by the fondness of his many friends and the strength of love and affection of his family.

It is the last whom we think of today - his father Sandy and mother Elizabeth; sister Honor; his wife Leona; his children, Sandy, Robert and Eva. While he is absent from all our lives, they are the ones who will miss him most. ■

This obituary by Donald S Murray also appears online this spring in the Scottish Review

Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar
by Olga Wojtas
Contraband
Review by Stephen Keeler

There is so much to pack into a first sentence about this book: alright, a second sentence – deep breath, here goes!

From "Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland" where she "had the finest education in the world" at the Marcia Blaine School for Girls, comes our multi-lingual, Doc Marten's-wearing heroine, Shona Aurora Fergusovna McMonagle, one-time class prefect and former captain of the gold-medal-winning Scottish country dancing team, whose recording of the Sibelius violin concerto at the annual prize-giving "still raises considerable sums for the fund-raising appeal" but who is "equally adept at traditional music, particularly on the mouth organ", *and* at left-, right- and double-handed knife throwing, a skill taught her by her understanding father – "I'm fine, it's only a flesh wound" – and who, by her own declaration and the endorsement of the founder of her alma mater, is the crème de la crème.

Breathless? You will be. For not only is the pace of the outrageous narrative unrelenting to the final paragraph but the premise on which it is constructed is enough to have the reader reaching for the bottle marked Smelling Salts of the Suspension of Disbelief.

And here is just the first of Wojtas's many accomplishments in this novel: *this* reader at least, had no difficulty with the concept of the sainted Marcia Blaine herself appearing, albeit briefly, as a Time Lord with a mission, should she choose to accept it, for our heroine, the erstwhile custodian of books, and confiscator of every copy of That Book (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, yes, *that* book) at the Morningside Public Library.

Shona might have had a notion about the possibility or otherwise of her mission, if only she'd known quite what it was – the hooded apparition of Miss Blaine was somewhat vague if at the same time reassuring on the details. Sufficient here to say that Shona, whom I began to visualise as a cross between an über-smart Calamity Jane and a girl without a dragon tattoo, with a bit of Jane Austen chucked in there somewhere, finds herself transported unfussily (for this is nothing if definitely *not* science fiction) to Imperial Russia in a year which she spends much of the novel trying to determine as she careens off to save the wrong man.

This is a novel stuffed with the most implausible of plausible absurdities, of wise-cracking dialogue and brisk idiom which themselves become if not entirely sub-plots then very effective running gags. Wojtas offers the knowledgeable reader a scintillating array of reference and cross-reference, and not only to the novels of Muriel Spark. The book is a carefully and delightfully constructed romp in the tradition of Gogol and of Wodehouse. There is something of Russian surrealism, of European *hauteur*, of English farce and of nose-tapping Scottish wryness in this fine writing. And lest the casual reader of reviews departs with the notion that *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar* is little more that a clever, joyous and slightly wild intellectual indulgence, it should be noted that Wojtas's feminist credentials are strung through this adventure like fairy-lights. She never makes the mistake of bludgeoning her readers but she never lets them forget, either. Another rare accomplishment in a book which is set to be the first, I hope, of many more adventures of Shona Aurora Fergus(ovna?) McMonagle. ■

The Growing Season
by Helen Sedgwick
Harvill Secker
Review by Cynthia Rogerson

This is a literary science fiction novel, set in a not too distant future. Sedgwick takes the essential battle between the genders, grabs it by the scruff of the neck and gives it a good shake. Think of The Handmaid's Tale, without the violence. What results is a highly original and credible scenario, in which pregnancy is no longer a uniquely female occupation. Babies can be conceived the traditional way or IVF, but now they can also be carried in gestation by anyone at all. Father, mother, friend, paid help. Science has developed a synthetic womb, called a pouch, which can be tailor-made to suit the family taste and income. The foetus is transferred to the pouch soon after conception, which is worn on the front of the body. In addition, when the parents want a night off, or every night off, they simply sling the pouch on to a mechanical pouch-babysitter till morning. No more stretch marks, no morning sickness, no labour pains, no risky deliveries, no still births. No giving up careers while pregnant, no giving up parenthood if you are gay or sterile.

So, what's the problem? (Of course there's a problem. Otherwise there would be no story.)

Some believe the pouch is yet another male attempt to steal power from women. Others believe it is fundamentally unethical. The plot thickens when a much-anticipated delivery does not go well.

Because Sedgwick is an insightful writer, there are other reasons to keep turning the pages. The main characters used to be romantic partners, and in a way, their path back to each other is the stronger plot. The tension between them (which proves they still love each other) is handled with subtlety. It seems very credible, and this in turn helps the reader believe in the pouch-pregnancy scenario.

I read this book quickly and with pleasure. An easy read, which nevertheless packs a punch. ■

Turning Over In A Strange Bed
by James McGonigal (Mariscat) 2017
It Was And It Wasn't
by Gina Wilson (Mariscat) 2017
Review by Chris Powici

Poetry is a wonderfully mobile and adaptable form of literature. It can make itself at home in a YouTube video or a prayer book, in a dusty anthology or the poster on a tube train, but, if these two collections are anything go by, the pamphlet remains an especially fertile habitat. Publishers (Mariscat), designer (Gerry Cambridge) and the poets themselves have forged collections that are both modest and, in their different ways, rather precious.

The back page note to James McGonigal's *Turning Over In a Strange Bed* explains that many of the poems in this collection were 'written for translation into an abandoned language' and that their tone derives from 'translatorese' – the marginalia one finds in anthologies of Scottish and Irish Gaelic poetry. It's and enlightening description. These poems explore themes of translation and transformation, of moving between worlds, between modes of thinking and expression, as if language is not just a vehicle for communication but also for transportation.

The poems themselves have a winning clarity of image and expression. In 'Amateurs' travel is not so much a physical activity but an inescapable fact of life: 'I sit still – life casts off from the shore/and I'm still watching it grow smaller like any other/amateur painter of the time of day.' A sense of loss – of indeed abandonment – suffuses other poems but this is often accompanied by a welcome touch of humour. The poet even addresses his shirt: 'Old friend who knows my body more intimately than most/I will add no codicil asking to be buried or burnt in you.' ('Shirt'). But it's a sense of adventure that lingers, whether this involves a journey through the Gobi – 'Cart-wheels revolve with constellations/all night through.' ('The Desert Mothers) – or a more intimate journey into the heart and into language itself:

> I'm told I have a tendency
> to avoid expressing my emotions
> except in this abandoned language
>
> to me it is like entering
> someone else's cottage
> to shelter from rain

There's also a deep sense of intimacy about Gina Wilson's *It Was And It Wasn't*, not just because of the subject matter – houses, holidays, music practice, family life in general (and in particular) – but also because Gina Wilson understands the power of 'ordinary' language to talk about extraordinary things. Her phrasing caches the ear, feels at the same time familiar and striking. She trusts us to understand what goes on under the skin of life and we trust her to tell us well. In 'Treasure' she talks about necessity and the impossibility of ever really letting go: 'Funny how people/can't quite bury a treasure. My brother/dug up our dead rabbit by torchlight/to see if it was safe./ It was and it wasn't.'

It's a collection brimming with these small moments of revelation but the voice is always attentive, patient and nuanced; never hectoring or didactic. Again and again, I had the privileged sense of stumbling across a truth with the poet. In 'I Haven't Seen This Boy Before' Gina Wilson describes saying goodbye to a loved one being wheelchaired into hospital: 'He turns at the end and waves./ He looks like somebody being wheeled/ up the gangway of a cruise-ship./I hope he has a nice time.' It takes insight and skill to talk so delicately, so truly, about loss and hope and the way some goodbyes taste so unmistakeably of death. It also takes a really sure feel for how the 'small stuff' of life – somebody waving – can, if we look and listen well enough, teach us about the 'big stuff'. *It Was And It Wasn't* is fine poetry – articulate, generous and open-hearted. ■

Tree standing small
By Helen Allison
Clochoderick Press
Review by Lesley Harrison

When was the last time a book of poems actually made you cry?
I read my review copy; then had to wait a week or so until I'd pulled myself together before going back to it to write this review. *Tree Standing Small* is a collection of poems that grew out of the deaths of Helen Allison's parents. It concerns not just the actual matter of death, and the way your childhood rushes towards you when your parents start to die; but the unsettling way they start to relive parts of their lives from before you were even born.

But this is not a maudlin book. These things have presence; they are set in the very midst of life. Nor is this a sentimentalised hagiography: the account of her father proposing to her mother as she pees in a building site is hysterical - a great story for a funeral.

Allison is a master of the metaphor that paints a thousand words. Her parents flitted north to Moray, and "Glasgow shrank to a buttonhole". "The book of grief turns its own pages", she writes of

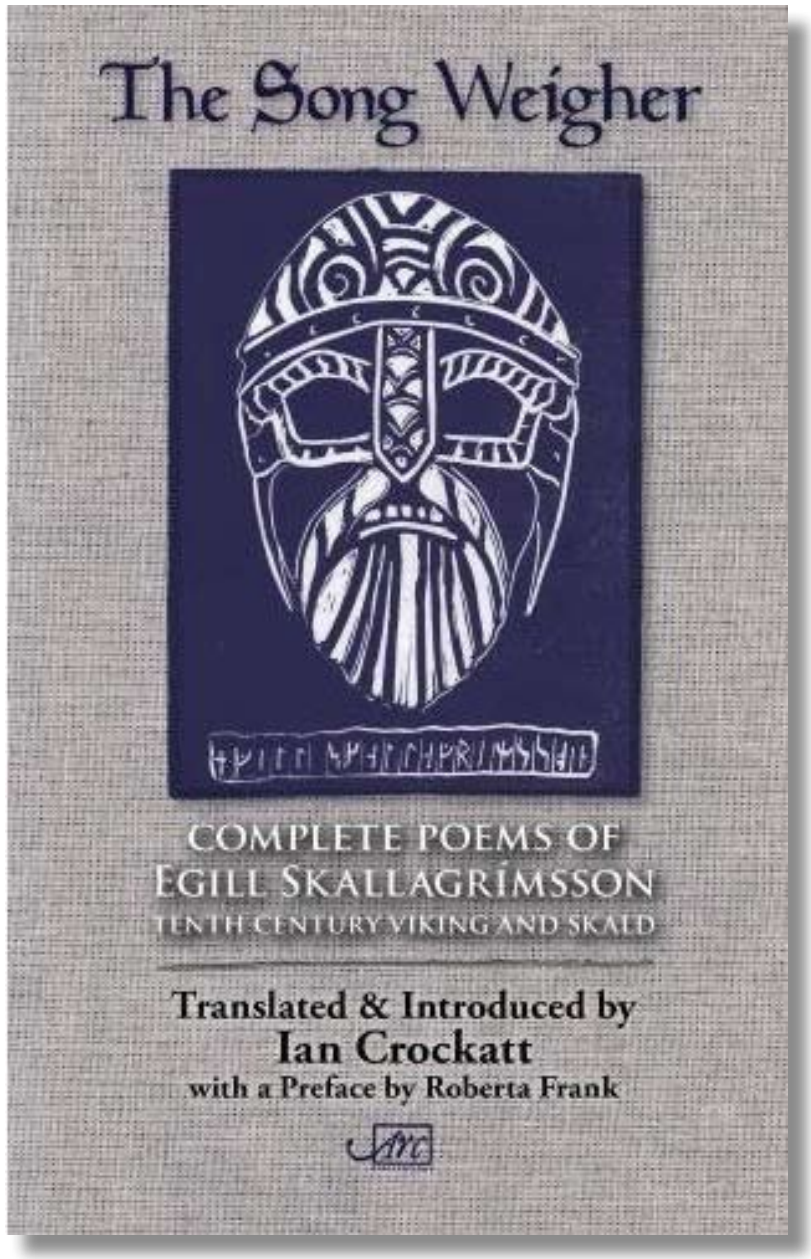
her widowed mum, "her sleeves full of doves … a sea of blankets / waiting to be crossed". A tree, hacked down, leaves "his songs hung in the throats of birds". Her trick of replacing "it" with "he" or "she" signals to us how she sees the whole process as one with the life forces of the world.

All through, nature gives us our place in the universe. A barn owl hits a motorcyclist, who then continues its flight through the forest. Grief is movement. When her parents come back (as they do) in dreams, they are passing through on a day trip without her; or are black holes in the cosmos which are just about to draw her in. All these themes are summed up beautifully in the first poem The Gooseberry Tree, which I found I had to return to after reading the final one, Last Light. The order of these poems recreates the trajectory of bereavement: the swirl of sense and memory and bare grief, and astonishment at the new - the sea rain at Scourie, "the jetty's red lifebelt like lipstick / on a saint".

All credit to Clochoderick Press for publishing these sad, poignant, uncomfortable and joyous poems.

…

Special mention for readers with a liking for Haiku and fluency in Gaelic should be made of the recently published collection *Trìtheamhan* by our Gaelic editor, Rody Gorman (Diehard, 2017). This elegantly designed slim volume should be easy to spot, thanks to the splash of Hokusai's 'The Great Wave at Kanagawa' on its cover. ■



Walking with Cattle: In search of the last drovers of Uist
By Terry J Williams (Birlinn) 2017
The Whisky Dictionary
By Iain Hector Ross (Sandstone Press) 2017
The Hebrides
By Paul Murton (Birlinn) 2017
Review by Kenny Taylor

Nowadays, it can be hard to imagine how noisy some straths and glens would have been a couple of centuries ago, as drovers and their herds passed by. Cattle by the thousands, bellowing and snorting; herders' dogs barking to chivvy any beasts that strayed off the track or paused too long to grab a mouthful of grass; shouts from the drovers and the click and spark of iron-shod cattle hooves: those would all have been part of it.

Droving of cattle to 'trysts' – former livestock markets in Perthshire and Stirlingshire and then onward as far south as London - was an important part of the Highland economy until expansion of railways and improved shipping made the activity shrink in the late 1800s and fade to near extinction early in the 20th century. In common with many people, I'd assumed that was the end of the story. Not so, as Terry Williams shows in her lively account of the later years of droving.

In this, she describes how island cattle continued to be bought at small sales in the Uists, walked to ferries and taken onward to markets in Dingwall and Oban as late as the 1960s. Part of her story is a personal narrative of journeys by campervan to old market stances and drove routes, taking with her as talisman an old cattle shoe gifted by another droving expert, Janey Clarke. Part uses extensive quotes from interviews with former drovers and people still involved in the sale and transport of cattle in the islands and mainland.

'Places and people lose their purpose and eventually disappear and are forgotten,' says Terry, 'unless they are somehow recorded.'

This farmer's daughter from Cumbria, long resident in the Highlands, is to be congratulated on providing such a readable record of an aspect of Hebridean history recalled by some still alive to share their stories.

…

If you love the roll and timbre of words, dictionaries can often beguile. The surface rhythm of syllables fascinates even before you read the definition. And if the meaning refers to something arcane or finely nuanced, so much the better.

Couple those universals of dictionary pleasure with Uisge bheatha and the combination can be heady as a sherry-casked malt. That's how *The Whisky Dictionary* reads if you've an eye and ear for sometimes obscure words and phrases and a friendly acquaintance with the cratur.

A few examples to savour include 'gysen' (dried out, as in the wood of a barrel that is parched, warped and leaky); cauld straik (a dram of raw, cask-strength spirit); miroculous (very drunk); and 'tosie' (a cheery glow on the cheeks). With witty pencil sketches by Ben Averis, this is a book to keep and uncork from time to time for the pleasures of its words and facts.

…

From Gigha to North Rona and St Kilda to Lismore, the Inner and Outer Hebrides hold Atlantic-washed riches by the score. Both as a former resident of Mull and now a multi-seasoned presenter of TV documentaries, Paul Murton has been lucky to visit more Hebrides than most.

This book draws on Paul's decades of experience to inform accounts of recent visits to more than 60 different islands, from populated and easily accessed to the downright challenging to reach. Meetings with contemporary islanders enliven the text, which is realistic about present day island politics and aspects of local scene, giving the book value as both a good read and for future reference. There's a fine range of photographs that should please both island-dwellers and would-be travellers alike, and although I'd have preferred slightly fewer of these with the author centre stage, perhaps that's just me letting my island-goer's envy show. ■

In search of diamond clarity

The Song Weigher
Ian Crockatt
Arc Publications, 2017
A Troubling Woman
A C Clarke
Oversteps Books, 2017
Shaping the Water Path
Morelle Smith
Diehard, 2017
A Burrell Tapestry
Sally Evans
Diehard, 2017
Whit Grace
Anne Shivas
Word Poetry, 2017
Rawahi
Briar Wood, Anahera Press, 2017
Waiting for Guzlowski
Martin Stepek and John Guzlowski
Fleming Publications, 2017.
Poetry Review by Mandy Haggith

What can a poem do that prose can't? It's an intriguing question and last season's crop of new poetry books demonstrates some possible answers.

The old Nordic bards, or 'skalds', knew fine well that one thing they could do with poetry was to make music with words, in order to help legends and tales of valour to be held in memory. Ian Crockatt has translated the complete poems of tenth century Viking and skald, Egill Skallagrimsson, and, most impressively, yielded them up in *The Song Weigher* with a transfixing display of sound patterning and word play. If this is how the poems sounded a millennium ago, no wonder they haven't been forgotten.

> I'll harness the sea-horse
> - harbour mead-dwarves word-hoard –
> with a tight rein, entertain
> ears tuned to skald-speak. Hear!

Reading this rhythmical (and thoroughly blood-thirsty!) poetry, your ears are guaranteed to 'tune to skald-speak'. The poems of Egill cover a huge range of topics – from battle-boasts to praise-poems, from love-lines to satire – and use many different forms. These are all helpfully explained in an appendix, along with a fascinating glossary of the

'kennings' (metaphorical phrases), which so enrich the poems. The title itself is one of these: a kenning for the poet himself. It comes from an elegy for his drowned son and deceased parents, in which he says: 'the song-weigher's/ sorrow bound':

A wave cut
this cruel breach,
broke my father's
family's ranks;
careless seas
cancelled my sons,
left this gaping
wave-gouged gap.

You can hear the sea rocking the poet's boat throughout this book. It certainly floated mine.

Another fascinating use of poetry to cast a light into the depths of history is achieved by A C Clarke in her mesmerising collection, *A Troubling Woman*, which relates the life and death of a fourteenth century mystic called Margery Kempe. The poems alternate between four different points of view: Margery herself, a trusting priest called Robert Spryngolde who is her confessor, a much less sympathetic cleric who acts as a scribe for her story, and finally a modern woman called 'A' who is on her own spiritual journey from codified religion to atheism. The distance between the worlds and beliefs of these four poetic voices gives us space to reflect on questions thrown up by the life-story of Margery and by the quotations from historical texts used as epigraphs throughout the book. What is faith? Is love a spiritual force? How can we see beyond our culturally-defined limits? Who should be trusted as authoritative? These are deep philosophical and psychological questions, as relevant today as in the fourteenth century, and raised with subtlety and grace by A C Clarke's finely-worked poetry: 'Sometimes a brain flash lights up the shadowed room / in which our choices stumble.'

As well as being thoroughly holy, Margery is delightfully sensual, allowing plenty of scope for vivid, even erotic, writing. Here is Margery on dress.

How much I loved

the slub of wool thick-woven, the slink of silk,
brocades stiff with gilt thread. Look at me
cried the slashes in my cloak, the lining

peeping through like the scarlet mouth
of a wound…

It's impossible to overpraise this multi-voiced, insightful and readable book. If only all history books were so compelling.

Another history-poetry book, also telling the life story of a woman misunderstood in her time, is Sally Evans' collection about Marion Burrell and her family, who were responsible for the collection of art housed in Pollock Park in Glasgow. *A Burrell Tapestry* begins with a helpful introduction and outline of the story which is then told through a sequence of poems. The book is in two halves. The first works in chronological order from 1775, when Marion's ancestor George Burrell sets out from Northumberland, to 1993, when a new lifeboat is launched in Govan harbour, paid for by Marion. In between, a family fortune is made from shipping and mostly spent by Marion's father William Burrell, who clearly loved beautiful things, particularly tapestries, more than the people who shared his life.

"Burrell" itself may mean "red cloth"
and gorgeous crimsons, gold and blacks,
fiery titans, blues and silver,
flaming russets, browns and green,
blood-reds, greys and cream –
of all the items I've acquired
my first preference is the tapestries.

The second part of the collection is a long poem sequence, 'A Marion Burrell Sampler', which embroiders the life of William's daughter through a thwarted marriage, estrangement from family and reinvention of a self. Marion Burrell was clearly more than just the beautiful thing her father wished her to be, and she comes to life in these poems. It's an intriguing story, deftly told.

One of the wonderful things about poems is that they don't need length for impact. This is perfectly shown by *Waiting for Guzlowski,* jointly authored by Martin Stepek, a Polish-Scots poet, and John Guzlowski, who is Polish-American. They share an interest in Buddhist thought and both have harrowing family histories of survival against the odds in concentration camps during the horrors of war in Poland in the last century. They have explored this shared heritage through a trans-Atlantic exchange of short poems on Twitter. The social media platform requires each message, or tweet, to be limited in size, which lends itself to the highly compressed form of haiku or tanka. This collection is the collaborative result of that exchange. Sometimes it has the tone of a stylised debate between Buddhist monks, exploring zen paradoxes and aphorisms:

G (Guzlowski): Monk Ikkyu stands alone
before the forest
It's dark but that doesn't frighten him
Everything is dark at night
and it's always night

S (Stepek): Monk Ikkyu sits still in the forest
It's light but that doesn't faze him
Everything is made of light
always light

At other times it reaches deep into the terrifying heart of the holocaust.

G: The bodies
in the ovens
of Auschwitz
are still burning

S: The hearts
of the bodies burned
in Auschwitz
are still beating
The ovens ashen-faced
in shame

A role that poetry can play much better than prose is to revel in the expansive possibilities of language, playing with old or obscure words or phrases and thereby keeping them in currency. In our globalised world, it can also act as a linguistic exchange, and two new collections bring to bear North American and Antipodean perspectives, blending their lexicons with words from Scottish languages. *Whit Grace*, by Anne Shivas, weaves (well-glossed) Doric into musings from Israel and the USA, including translations into the east coast dialect of poets as diverse as Galway Kinnell and Yehuda Amichai. She plays cheerfully with words and forms, finding language everywhere:

the field a slate of runes
written on the run –
deer, snowshoe rabbit
coyote, fox,
parallel tracks –
hieroglyphs
of faa and faar we are.

Briar Wood, from New Zealand, has found the language that interests her further west in Britain, and blends Gaelic and Cornish with Maori in *Rawahi*, sadly with no glossary. Perhaps the poet's intention is that we should simply let ourselves be washed by the music of the words, of which there is plenty:

On the border between
birch and larch –
lifecraft light

craobh-theaghlaich.
A sag of wood
in each cremation stack.

So the lifeboat floats
on wordflows
skittering skiff scud

scooting skathweyth
skewed into the tide
riding and gliding…

There's less wordplay in Morelle Smith's book, *Shaping the Water Path*, but plenty of reflections on land and time, and wonderings from wanderings. The final section, called 'Liminal', is a stand-alone piece with which to face the edge of the world, pondering the big questions that poetry is best at:

Is it what we feel the most, that's the measure
of reality?
Or is it how opaque or clear
the inner vision and the senses are,
their diamond clarity?

Equal Night
Graham Fulton
Salmon Poetry, 2017
The Year of the Crab
Gordon Meade
Cultured Llama, 2017
Review by KT

We musn't ever talk about it,
Or write about it, or face up to it.
The king of taboo, don't mention that word.

So writes Graham Fulton in D***h, part of a remarkable sequence of poems where he faces the taboo through the terminal illness and death of his mother, Jessie. There's an unflinching honesty in the way he documents the everyday details of her decline, each poem inching towards and then beyond the inevitable.

The effect is both unsettling and very moving, as page by page, a feeling of warmth grows; a sense of love, rendered through small details, such as the way he spoon-feeds her:

This is all I can do for you.
Facing death with half-price desserts,
a Kleenex bib to catch all the drips.
This is what you did for me.
Hazy time-filled years, a breath.
It all comes back to where it begins.

Gordon Meade's collection also tackles the taboo, but more through another uncomfortable word, describing feelings and events in a year following his diagnosis with cancer. Some poems look at aspects of the coastal scene in Fife – a dead seal washed up on rocks, a pair of woodpeckers across the park. But these take their resonance, in part, from the context of the illness: the seal, for example, may be headless, but the poet isn't quite sure.

Most are more direct meditations on his state of mind at different times through treatment, including his frustrations, fears and delight in small pleasures, such as biting into a fresh apricot. Even irritation at what the cancer has brought him holds a wider energy:

How long before I leave behind
the saline drips and Fybogel to replace them
with the sounds of breaking waves and thunder?

By looking death in the eye and not blinking, the work of both these poets enriches life. ■

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Liam Murray Bell lives in Stirling and teaches at the university. He is author of two novels: *So It Is* (2012) and *The Busker* (2014).

David Carson is enjoying retirement after teaching in Glasgow, Perth and Forfar. He is a member of Nethergate Writers Dundee.

Sara Clark is an award-winning poet and novelist from the Scottish Borders. She is currently an editor of the literary magazine *The Eildon Tree*.

Seth Crook lives on Mull, loves puffins and has taught philosophy at various universities. His poems have recently appeared in *The Rialto, Magma, Envoi, The Interpreter's House, Causeway, Poetry Scotland*.

Maureen Cullen writes poetry and short fiction and lives in Argyll and Bute. Her work has been published in a variety of magazines and anthologies.

Molly Donachie won the Sentinel Publications Poetry Book Competition 2017 and will shortly be publishing her first collection.

Irene Evans lives and writes in Muthill, Perthshire.

Gerrie Fellows, born in New Zealand, has lived and worked in Scotland for thirty years, as a creative writing tutor, writer-in-residence and most recently as a mentor to new poets.

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.

Christine Grant lives in the West of Scotland with her family. She has recently finished a novel about two islanders who meet in London.

Mandy Haggith writes from a croft in Assynt and teaches at the University of the Highlands and Islands. Her latest novel is *The Walrus Mutterer*. www.mandyhaggith.net

Selena Hardisty was raised in North London, has visited North Scotland over many years and absorbed its traditions. She is a keen beachcomber.

Lydia Harris has made her home in the Orkney island of Westray. In 2017 she held a Scottish Book Trust New Writers' Award for poetry.

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

Paula Jennings' most recent poetry collection is *Under a Spell Place,* published by HappenStance. She facilitates poetry writing workshops in Fife and Edinburgh.

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Robert Leach is a theatre director, academic and writer. He has published five collections of poetry, including the epic *The Journey to Mount Kailash* in 2010.

Ingrid Leonard comes from Orkney, which inspires much of her work. She recently graduated from Newcastle University with an MA in Writing Poetry.

Anna Levin is a writer and editor specialising in wildlife journalism. She is currently writing a book *Incandescent*, to be published by Saraband in 2019. www.annalevinwriting.co.uk

Aoife Lyall Shortlisted twice for the Hennessy New Writers Award, Lyall's work has appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review, The Stinging Fly* and others. She lives in Inverness.

Lucy MacRae lectures in Scottish Ethnology at Edinburgh University. She is writing a novel called *Nettles* which features folklore collectors, replica swords and a missing grandmother.

Beth McDonough is published in *Agenda, Causeway* and elsewhere, her reviews in *DURA*. In *Handfast* (with Ruth Aylett) her poems explore familial experience of autism.

Donald S Murray is from Ness in the Isle of Lewis and now lives in Shetland. His latest book *The Dark Stuff, Stories from the Peatlands* was published by Bloomsbury this year.

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Sue Pepper lives in Edinburgh and has written poetry over a long lifetime of teaching and travel. Curly Snake published some of her work in 2015.

Chris Powici is a former editor of *Northwords Now* who teaches English and Creative Writing and whose collection *The Weight of Light* is published by Red Squirrel Press.

Marka Rifat is a member of Mearns Writers who recently began writing poetry, short stories, and plays, after careers in journalism and corporate communications.

David James Ross lives in Culloden Moor, Inverness and has published four poetry collections. He divides his time between music performance, poetry and stand-up comedy.

Jane Picton Smith is a mum of 'two wonderful girls'. She was longlisted in the 2018 National Poetry Competition and has a PhD in Contemporary Scottish Poetry

Vance Roberts After twenty years of teaching, Skye-based Vance now spends his time silently singing, walking and playing various whistles in remote locations.

Cynthia Rogerson's latest novel *Wait for Me Jack* (written under the pseudonym Addison Jones) is published by Sandstone.

Stewart Sanderson is a poet from Glasgow. A second pamphlet is forthcoming from Tapsalteerie later in 2018.

Donald Goodbrand Saunders has been writing poems, in English and Scots, for almost half a century. He lives in Gartmore, in the Trossachs.

Finola Scott's work is widely published in zines, mags & anthologies. A seasoned performance poet, she is proud to be a slam-winning granny.

Hamish Scott's fourth, and latest, poetry collection is *Tuk-tuks*, published under the Laverock's Nest Press imprint.

James Sinclair's work has featured in several literary magazines and anthologies. He is a committee member of the *New Shetlander* and *Shetland Forwards*.

Kenneth Steven is now living in Argyll. His latest sequence of poems is *Deirdre of the Sorrows* from Birlinn; his novel *2020* was published last year by Saraband.

Michael Stephenson Michael's first pamphlet is forthcoming from Mariscat in 2019. Recent poems are in *The Herald, Glasgow Review of Books* and 404 ink's *F Word*.

Richard W. Strachan lives in Edinburgh. He won a New Writer's Award from the Scottish Book Trust in 2012.

Miriam Sulhunt lives in Edinburgh and writes in both English and Scots. Her poetry and haiku have been published in various magazines.

Ian Tallach was raised in Taiwan and Hong Kong, worked in Botswana and retired from paediatrics with progressive M.S. He now lives in Glenurquhart with his wife, daughter and son.

Vawdrey Taylor is an artist and writer from the Black Isle with an interest in etching and illustration.

Maggie Wallis has lived in the Highlands for twenty years. She is interested in the natural world and how she interacts with it, especially how it informs her way of living within it.

Gary Williamson is a Highland-based landscape and sports photographer who uses his paramotor (a powered paraglider) to access unique positions to show the beauty of the area www.garywilliamson.co.uk

Carolyn Yates is a poet and playwright inspired by feminism and science. She lives in Dumfries and Galloway and runs a youth theatre in Stranraer.

Grahaeme Barrasford Young Widely published, Grahaeme Barrasford Young's most recent collection is *Routes of uncertainty* (Original Plus).

John Young recently retired from a career in education. He writes short pieces as a preferred means of exploring societal issues.

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Scottish Poetry Library, *5 Crichtons Close*
Elephant House Café, *21 George IV Bridge*
The Village, *16 S. Fort Street*
Filmhouse, *88 Lothian Road*
MacNaughtons Bookshop, *3-3a Haddington Place*
St Margaret's House, *151 London Road*
Summerhall, *1 Summerhall*
Amnesty Bookshop, *12 Roseneath St, Marchmont*
Word Power, *4-5 Nicolson St*
Out of the Blue, *36 Dalmeny St, Edinburgh*
Edinburgh Bookshop, *219 Bruntsfield Pl*
Golden Hare Books, *68 St Stephen St., Stockbridge*

Glasgow
Centre for Contemporary Arts, *350 Sauchiehall Street*
Òran Mòr, *731 Gt. Western Road*
The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, *100 Renfrew St.*
The Piping Centre, *30 McPhater Street*
Caledonia Books, *483 Gt Western Road*
Tchai Ovna Teahouses, *42 Otago Lane*
Mono, King's Court, *10 King Street*
Gallery of Modern Art, *Royal Exchange Square.*
Tell it Slant, *134 Renfrew St*
WASPS Studio, *The Briggait, 141 The Bridge Gate*
Oxfam Books, *330 Byres Rd*
An Leanag, *22 Mansefield St, Glasgow*

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

Welcome to our New Board Members

Northwords Now is helped by the expertise of its board, which includes people with a wide range of experience in different kinds of writing and of Scottish culture, not least the arts community in the Highlands and Islands. So it's great to be able to welcome two new members, who joined in the last few months.

Peter Whiteley is a retired secondary school teacher who was born in Yorkshire, moved to Glasgow in 1963 and to the Highlands in 1985. He has written numerous plays for both adult and youth theatre groups and had plays performed by both professional and community theatre companies. Peter has also had poetry published in various publications and anthologies, including the very first edition of Northwords. He now teaches a weekly Creative Writing course at Eden Court Theatre, Inverness.

Lesley Harrison lives on the Angus coast. In her poetry and prose she explores what she describes as our instinctive responses to our 'home' environment – physical, material, linguistic, psychological. One of Lesley's recent projects was to work with scientists and visual artists to produce a multimedia 'deep map' of the Icelandic fishing village of Skagaströnd. Her most recent pamphlet is *Blue Pearl* (New Directions, 2017) and a collection will be published later this year.

Peter and Lesley join Valerie Beattie, Anne Macleod and Kristin Pedroja, under the able chairmanship of Adrian Clark (who has also worked wonders of distribution magic in recent years to ensure that the magazine can be found in outlets from the Borders and south to Shetland and the Hebrides). ■

Lesley Harrison

Peter Whiteley

Submissions for the magazine

The best way to submit work for consideration (In Gaelic, English, Scots and any local variants) is online through the website at www.northwordsnow.co.uk. Send the file as an MSWord document (please don't send it as a .pdf). The next issue is planned for September 2018. The deadline for submissions is 27th July 2018. You will hear about your submission by 30th September 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/

Northwords Now Seeks Person or Persons

to undertake the effective distribution of Northwords Now throughout Scotland (9,500 copies to over 250 locations, twice a year) also to seek advertising and to pay (online) contributors and suppliers and keep the books.

Requirements include: loading and dry storage space, large table, own transport, computer, availability especially end March to mid April, end September to mid October.

Position available on an annual basis for a modest fee, subject to funding.

For information please contact:

info@northwordsnow.co.uk Informal chat 01349 830517