

The FREE literary magazine of the North

Northwords Now

Issue 37, Spring 2019



ELIZABETH SUTHERLAND celebrated by **CYNTHIA ROGERSON**,
IAN STEPHEN on Lewis painter - **DONALD SMITH**, raptors enrapture
CHRIS ARTHUR, major collections by **TOM BRYAN** and **GEORGE**
GUNN reviewed by **ANNE MACLEOD**, **BOB PEGG** crafts songs,
KIRSTY GUNN on the art of the essay, **STEWART SANDERSON** lights
the Neidfire, **LYDIA HARRIS** gets into Orcadian grooves

PLUS Tuath supplement of new Gaelic writing, poetry in many forms
and voices and stories short and longer

EDITORIAL

I'M ALWAYS AMAZED at the ways that art can make connections between disparate objects, ideas, places and sensations, then shape new meaning from them. How a poet can distil a concentrated drop of experience from a single observation and a small mix of words. How one sentence within a story can make you sense that something – but you don't know what – is going to shift in the tale, but not yet. Or how an essayist can begin in one place, then wander, pleasingly, to somewhere unexpected.

Work that does all that is held in abundance within the pages of this issue. But it's also been good to make links across very different forms. Ian Stephen's overview of the Lewis painter, Donald Smith, does this. You can see Donald's work at *An Lanntair* this summer, and later in Aberdeen.

The same applies to the piece by veteran songwriter, storyteller and musician, Bob Pegg. There's a song file online at our website to illustrate this article, together with audio of some of the poets from this issue reading their work.

Finally, it's good to welcome a new publication to the northern arts scene: Art North, edited in Tongue. The scope of its visual arts coverage extends across the changing hemisphere, as I described in *Northwords Now* 35, to range across what the editor describes as the 'Far North'. Here's to new connections. ■

KENNY TAYLOR, EDITOR

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

Additional fiction

Bob Pegg song

A chat in the kitchen at Moniack Mhor

Some poetry from the current issue



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And Twitter @NorthwordsNow

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

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Subscriptions

The magazine is FREE and can be picked up at locations across Scotland. See list on P32. The fee for individual 'home-delivery' is £6 for 2 issues, cheques payable to 'Northwords'.

Front cover image:

Salmon netting at Rosemarkie, Summer 1988
photograph by Stephanie Macdonald

Submissions to the magazine, preferably through our on-line system on the Northwords Now website, are welcome. They can be in Gaelic, English, Scots and any local variants. Please submit no more than three short stories or six poems, in MS Word format (not .pdf). All work must be previously unpublished in print or on-line. 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 October 2019. The deadline for submissions is **2nd August 2019**. If accepted, you will hear about your submission by **30th September 2019**.

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



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

Rosemarkie Scribe: Elizabeth Sutherland

BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON



Elizabeth Sutherland at Fortrose.
Photograph by James Brough.

WE TEND TO take writers like Elizabeth Sutherland for granted, perhaps because she is local, accessible and prolific. Perhaps because she is that rare thing – a gifted writer who is also modest. She’s certainly never asked for attention, but it’s a pity not to honour this *grand dame* of letters in our midst; so I invited myself to her house for a chat.

Elizabeth Sutherland – now Betty Marshall – was born in Fife in 1926 and raised in Dundee. One of three sisters, her father was a Scottish Episcopalian priest. Two of her great grandfathers were also clergymen, one of them a theologian and published novelist. She was surrounded by literature and God and a doting family. At a very early age Elizabeth understood two things: *I knew I would be a writer, and I also wanted to be a minister.* Her writing commenced at about age four, and by ten she was published. At age twelve, she went to boarding school where she was in great demand because she wrote stories tailor-made for her classmates. These were about infatuations between girls and boys, and – more interestingly – between girls and girls. That practise run at adult love, the adolescent pash. Imagine the treat she offered: to read a romance, starring an idealised version of oneself and the object of one’s desire.

Her gender prevented a career in the ministry, but...*I did the next best thing.* Having arrived a week earlier to study

social work at university in Edinburgh, she started exploring churches to join. *In Old St Pauls, I spotted a tall young Episcopalian curate. I whispered to my friend: I am going to marry that man.* By the time she was 21 she was a minister’s wife. This life took her many places, five parishes, beginning with an army chaplaincy in Kenya for three years.

One of their longest stints was in Baillieston in Glasgow, where Elizabeth worked as a diocese social worker, as well as raising her three children, running the minister’s household, and – let’s not forget – getting up every day at 5am to write for three hours. Picture this: a cold dark house full of sleeping children and husband. She tiptoes to the kitchen to make a cup of tea, pulls a thick cardigan around her, then uncaps her pen to pick up where she left off yesterday. Every single day, for her entire adult life. In the beginning, she had no contract, no guarantee anyone would ever read her novels – in fact, the first five were rejected (*though I later plagiarised them for other novels*, she says, giggling). And yet she persevered. The pleasure she took in the act of writing was more than sufficient.



But her work, of course, did attract attention. One of her earliest successes was a novel called *Lent Term* about a minister’s wife. This book caught the attention of the *Sunday People*, who ran an article titled

Disestablishment in Ross 1660–1700. All highly readable, these histories contribute much to Scottish identity and stock of historical fact. Her personal favourite? *In Search of the Picts*, she answers quickly.



How many books have you written? *How many? I have no idea*, she says, laughing as if it is a silly question. This is not coyness. When a writer is primarily interested in writing, she is not counting. Her guess is over thirty published books of non-fiction, fiction and memoir. She’s just published *Church Street*, a novel about a village very like Rosemarkie, where she first moved in 1965 as a minister’s wife and subsequently retired to in 1982. *Church Street* weaves second sight into religion – both Christian and otherwise. Her current work-in-progress is a requested history of Fortrose Cathedral for children, illustrated by local artist Rachel Bevan-Baker. While the quality of her work remains high, she has stepped away from the world of commercial publishing, and works with For the Right Reasons, an Inverness charity supporting recovering addicts and a publishing house.

I ask her about writers she admires. *So many! Muriel Spark, Marilyn Robinson, Alice Hoffman, Elizabeth Strout. I re-read Middlemarch on a regular basis.*

When she writes, what do she hope for? *I hope my books – both fiction and non-fiction – entertain readers, of course. But primarily I write to explore a theme, for my own benefit.*

How does she begin? *I often start with a theme in mind. A theme that interests me, and includes morality somehow. Then I create characters and plot.*

Tips for new writers: Write! Enjoy the writing. And once you’ve submitted, begin something else right away in case a rejection paralyses you at the starting post. Hope is the thing.

Talking to Elizabeth is like taking a brisk walk on the beach. Her eyes sparkle, and her posture suggests she is about to spring somewhere fascinating. After seven decades of writing, she still feels energised by people and ideas. Her intellect is rock hard, her store of knowledge staggering, but the most engaging aspect to this interesting author is her warmth. Here is a writer who doesn’t flinch from presenting reality, but always manages to imbue it with compassion. For the daughter, granddaughter and widow of clergymen, she is also surprisingly open-minded. She accepts and embraces mystery, and the right of people to their own beliefs and values. And she still writes every day, regardless of outcome, because that is what proper writers do. They write. ■

‘My Naughty Book, says Vicar’s Wife.’ She was pleased for the commercial acclaim, but worried about the kind of attention it drew to her husband’s parish. Though the quite innocuous novel brought two new families to the congregation, she decided to take the pen name Sutherland to prevent future embarrassment.

Respected publishers like Constable began to accept her work, and her writing career was well established by the late 1980s. Her best known early works include *The Seer of Kintail* and *Ravens and Black Rain*, both focusing on the Brahan Seer and second sight in the Highlands.

Does she believe in second sight? She replies: *I believe there are things that defy explanation.*

Another theme that recurs in her work is the role of unrecorded women in Highland history. Her refreshing biography (*Lydia*) of the wife of the geologist Hugh Miller, explores Cromarty’s social structure and values from a woman’s point of view. *The Five Euphemias* focuses on Scottish women in medieval times. Of course this was challenging to write – so little exists in records about these women – but this was exactly why Elizabeth felt compelled to tell their stories. *In a mysterious way, I felt they wanted their stories told.* Other books of note that focus on the past include the popular Pictish Guide, *In Search of the Picts*, and the enigmatically titled *Piskies, Presbies and MacKenzies: Restoration and*

Grooved Ware

Poems by Lydia Harris

Tracing the Lines Exhibition Tankerness House

Cover your face against my stare,
I can't get my fill. Too late
to return through water and flame,
you're trapped in your frown.
Your eyes half-formed
you stiffen in flames
- little martyrs you stay,
however much you want to be unmade.

How I know you (after Alisanka)

you shrink
disintegrate
blackened lung
ooze-clogged

scored and scorched
Noah's face
formed by flood
dried by the sun

The Words of the Pot to the Swallow

My body is hollow as sky.
I glint grains like your eye.
I'm courted by flame.
Hear me ring.

Your wings fold my rim.
Your song echoes my belly.

You step onto my skin
write oval and lozenge.

As Prayer

Broken pots do multiply by land and by water.

Replenish them, restore them to our dwelling,
cloke them, let them clap their hands,
let them rest in quietness,
neither confounding nor dividing.
Deliver them from whirlwind and tempest.
Suddenly turn their dearth into plenty.

She that will have a pot out of the clay

(after 'Troilus and Cressida' Act 1 Scene 1)

She tarries the puddling, the pounding, the
kneading,
she tarries the mixing with grog and dung,
the smoothing, the moulding, the squeezing.
She tarries the stabbing, the dragging,
the gouging, the firing and the cooling.
She stays for the settling, the fusing, the slaking.

Pots Still

Some are thumb-sized
tempered with shell,
buried close to the dead.
Others a baby might bathe in.

Zig-zagged pots,
pots with cavetto zones,
cordons applied,
herringbone incised.

Some have lugs and rims.

All are fired,
fusing the particles
almost waterproof.

3000 years ago they were clay.

Folk Tapped Pots

and the pots sang back.
Folk whooped into the hollow
bellies of pots.
The whoops whirled into gales,
clotted into pebbles.

The pebbles skidded
and rolled like planets
breathing gases and vapours.

'Energy is an attribute of objects'

(Aja Couchois Duncan from 'Fictive')

at the instant when coils overlap,
and finger-tips dint the skin,
when orange ochre and red ochre swirl in a
palette pot,
when cordons converge, slash straight lines,
when the antler tip in my hand gouges the clay.

HESTER DRAGGED HER case unopened along the floor and when it stuck in a groove made by broken tiles, she hadn't the energy to lift it. Barely taking in the details of the hotel room, she noted that there was a bathroom and its location, then lay on the bed without undressing. She was almost asleep, when abruptly the room's other occupant arose with a "Harrumph" of annoyance, flat-footed bare feet slapped across the floor, switched off the room light and slip-slopped back to bed.

There followed a full, trumpet, fart. Hester opened her eyes to check that what she suspected might be true. The room-mate was male, angular back of a shorn head towards her. Mole-covered skin on his exposed, naked back, sun-damaged by years in the tropics with no regard for dermal protection. White bum cleft exposed by the inadequate cover of 'Minions' boxers. Those shorts looked bizarrely familiar! That vulture of a photographer Otis? Unprincipled git, elbows everyone out of the way to get first dibs of starved-to-sticks people or first gawp at a mass grave. Human garbage that picks over the garbage life of other humans. She was too knackered from travelling to be properly annoyed; she would save that for breakfast. Plink! Hester's lights went out.

Morning, he was one step ahead of her. She showered in lukewarm water smelling the residue of his pine-scented man-wash. She breakfasted alone on local grains and fruit mixed with fruit juice, surrounded by the debris of his consumption on uncleared plates and a half-finished cafetière. She ordered fresh coffee that never came, eventually consigning herself to his used cup, which she rubbed on a corner of the tablecloth, and the remains of his insipid brew.

Of course, he was in the lead Land Rover. He was already matey-mates with the driver. Bottles of water, sparkling blue in the dawn-light, were passed through the windows from some supplier he had charmed. Hester glowered in the back of the third car. Already the heat and the fuss over her uncovered hair and immodest dress was getting to her. She knew she shouldn't have put on shorts and a vest top; it was a rooky mistake unworthy of a seasoned journalist such as herself. Giving in to the hiss of the local woman reporter and the stern face of the driver, she headed back to her room. When she returned dressed in Salwar Kameez, the first two vehicles had gone ahead. Even the woman she was meant to be sharing with had disappeared. She must have squeezed herself into one of the other two cars.

The journey was a jolt down a rocky wadi that would be a river in the rainy season. At first, she clung to the frame handles and seat belt, trying to grab some stability. Then she wedged her feet under the armrest till she lost the feeling in her toes. When the driver stopped for a smoke and a piss, she did the same, then boldly braved his disapproval and sat in

the front seat. Here, at least, her teeth might not clip her tongue.

She could smell the camp before she saw it. They wound up the windows and put on the AC but the stink penetrated the air filter system. Flies filled the air like black hail. They coated the wipers and windshield. The driver used the wash and wipe but it was futile; he was reduced to peering, changing the angle he looked through until his vision blacked out and he came to an abrupt halt.

"This it!" He said. No further explanation required. Hester, gave him 40 US brand cigarettes. That would at least keep him keen to take her back.

The refugee centre was the typical grey-tented village. There was a chaotic swirl of people moving around the outside of the tents. Very quickly Hester adjusted to the fact she could not see them as individuals, only as a many armed and legged homogenous mass that she had to pass through in order to get into the main arena. Again, Otis had gone ahead of her. No doubt his arrival had been met by a security crew who would have parted the waves of humanity for him and allowed him safe passage without the grabbing and pinching, the plaintive appeals and menacing demands of these desperate people.

She took a moment to prepare. Her long plait she tucked down the inside of her shirt. She wrapped her head tight in the scarf, tying it under her occiput.

Snowdrops in a Storm

By ANNE ELIZABETH EDWARDS



Snowdrops in a storm

*Poor broken flower, in this vile tempest whirled,
What prompteth thee to such untimely birth,
To be so soon down-trodden in the earth?
Before thy pearly petals are uncurled
The bells that ring in springtime to the world,
Thou wouldst have brought us welcome, and with mirth
Led all our thoughts away from winter's dearth
Had fate but left thy beauty unimperiled.
In this sad world thine is a common fate
A world in which the gentlest heart fares worst,
Borne down by the intolerable weight
Of kindness unregarded, or accurst
Its labour spurned; its love disconsolate
As thine, fair flower! The purest suffer first.*

JB Selkirk (1832-1904)

Everything loose went into the satchel, which was zipped and buckled. She tightened the strap to armpit length. Holding it tight to her chest she began her egress from the car. Immediately there were hands upon her, fluttering, pressing, tweaking. Voices: 'Hey Madame! Please Madame. Please Miss. See baby. See baby boy.' Voices: all pleading, all needing, all wanting.

Hester tried not to engage with anyone, not meet anyone's gaze. There was a surge of movement, the crowd protested. She tried to move forward but felt she only got a few steps. She turned her head to look back to see if she could return to the car. She couldn't see it. Surge again and a rough hand grabbed her arm. She protested, then felt her feet lifted as she was hustled to the right. Instinctively she felt this was the wrong direction. She pushed against the arm only to be moved faster still. Then, weirdly, a pop of air as she appeared like Alice through the rabbit hole into the tent.

Of course, it would have to have been Otis, her rescuer, the hero of the hour. There was a chorus of 'Well done!' from the assembled journalists. Mortified, Hester stood, still shaking from the ordeal. A trickle of sweat trailed from her hairline to the small of her back. Someone passed her a water bottle. She gulped gratefully, the plastic neck banging her teeth.

There was a massive television showing a film of all that had been achieved

so far. The ordered clinics dispensing vaccines, the singing school children in camp uniform, the refectory feeding a happy throng. It was all in contrast to the seething want of humanity outside.

The venerable head of the relief organisation took her place on the platform as the film credits rolled. She spoke first in the local dialect, then in English; thanking them for coming, encouraging them to be positive about all that had been achieved. She answered questions. Yes, there would be opportunities to meet the refugees. Yes, the aftermath of the war was hard on civilians. Yes, they were a host country with a conscience.

There was a kerfuffle at the door. Someone had crept in from outside. Large eyes in the gloom. The reality from outside of the tent had contaminated the sanctity of the inside. A security officer began shouting, his immediate aggression incongruous after the soothing tones of the venerable lady.

Otis and Hester moved forward, their instinct for a story leading a breakaway of the journalists from the assembly of dignitaries. A child of maybe six or seven years old had come in carrying a doll. The doll must have been heavy for her, as she was near to dropping it. Round the back of her legs peeked another little face, a child of two or three years old. The tableaux broke as the doll mewed. Second glance from Hester; she realised that the supposed doll was a new-born. She took her head covering and wrapped the baby. Close up, she could see the umbilical cord was still soft grey; this baby was born today. She looked up to see if Otis was recording this encounter. He winked and gave her an encouraging nod. Life through a lens.

Two official-looking suits spoke to the security officer. They threw covert glances over and spoke into their mobile phones. The venerable lady's team approached. One made a hand motion towards the children, like shooing away hens. Somehow, that motion of equating the children with the nuisance of poultry awoke compassion in her soul. Hester, aware of Otis and his clicking, whirring camera, crossed the journalistic Rubicon. She continued to hold the infant close and bound the two children to her by encompassing them in her arms. Promising them safety, working out in her head how it could be done, as others had done it before to the inevitable detriment of their careers. These individuals would not be relinquished, not let out of her sight until she could bring them home to her parents in Stornoway.

She was weary of the burden of impartiality; that duty lauded by journalists; that golden rule to observe, not interfere. Something else too, the thought that her days of chasing stories were over. This was the last time she would fly out to the arse end of the globe and watch men fight while women and children became the snowdrops in the storm. ■

Poetry

Stac Pollaidh

ALISON SELLAR

I count my age
in starlight: years
measured by the millions.
I stand
with Suilven and Quinag,
my sister-guardians of this land.
My frost-shattered fortress has
resisted the crucible of fire and
survived the stranglehold of ice.
From desert river bed to
island mountain in the mist
I have endured.

My feet are slippered
in Lewisian Gneiss
and with my cape of quartzite, I
shoulder the sky.
Weathered and worn by
wind and storm,
I have watched as
lochs mirror the curlews
and sundews dazzle.

Named by Norsemen and
claimed by Gaels, I belong
only to myself.
You may think you know me,
but your kind are troubled
to see beyond yourselves.
You have tried
to stitch your time
onto a mirage. But
my time is woven into
Earth's own fabric.
I have little time for you.

we are full of star-fall

ALISON SELLAR

atoms imprinted with the
blaze of our birth
pull our gaze homeward into
black sequinned night

the memory of galaxies
spiralling life's helix
dances the universe
encrypted within us

we are newborn
to contemplate the world
to learn the sweet rhythm of the
heart's kindness

when time compels
the engines of our sun
fire will flare
consuming the earth

and when the final fossils
incandesce
the only trace we'll leave
is everything

Trasana

SETH CROOK

(Coll McLean was the ferryman
from Mull to Iona for 52 years)

I'm local, yes.
Not native,
not descending from Somerled,
not marching with the pipe band at Hogmanay:

but I can tell you the name of a beach
not used on any map.
I can tell you where
the rusty farming machines rot,

almost every one.
Blessed are the hay rakes,
blessed are the potato spinners,
blessed are the hiding places

of the Spring-declaring adders.
I know where you can cross the bog.
I know the quick way back from the pub.
I know where the old tin school was.

And where the old tin roof still is.
I didn't cross to Iona
on the row boat of Coll McLean.
But I can tell you there was a Coll McLean.

I can tell you
where the hen harrier nests,
though I won't tell you
where the hen harrier nests.

Ineffable

SETH CROOK

One day I ran into the limit of my language.
How are you?, I asked.

"Fine. I suppose you want to stand on me
and have a look?"

"Now you mention it."

"Go ahead."

I gently stood on the limit and looked,
as if surveying,
from the lighthouse signal point on Erraid,
all the islets stretching out to the Corran Rocks.

"How is it?", the limit asked.

"Amazing"

"What is there?"

"I just don't have the words to say."

"Try."

"Er, well, there was, er, well, interesting stuff."

I heard laughter from below.

"Is that a description? Because if it is,

I am not your limit and you should try my brother
further along."

"It's not a very revealing description", I insisted.

"I don't make the rules, mate. Move along."

Storm Petrel

Mousa, Shetland

MARTIN MALONE

Come back in Summer,
be here at nightfall,
put your ear to the
broch and listen as
the twittering mis-
fires of a thousand
tiny engines ig-
nite the wall with tales
of the ocean and
a life on the wing
flitting home to its
solitary egg.
In eight weeks they're gone:
birds of bad omen,
souls of lost sailors,
Mother Carey's Chicken.
Come, put your ear to
the broch and listen.

The Loony Dook

SETH CROOK

Don't ask about the temperature.
Some rush in,
some calmly stroll like surfers,
or leap from the jetty like vikings
(chasing the last ferry for Valhalla).
Some flap

about the need for goose fat.
Everyone regrets agreeing,
but no-one wants the label "nesh".
The Collective Will
overturns
The Individual Won't.

And nobody regrets after.
The looneys are the ones who don't dook.
Some calmly stroll out, some rush out,
some make-a-showboat-out.
Some of us won't look this healthy again
until we do it next year.

Poetry

Pictish

STEWART SANDERSON

Listen to the wind
where this language was –
the whisper as it passes
through the long
grass at St.Vigeans;
the leaves at Aberlemno.

Read on past the pause
where its king list
ebbs away into the waters
of a new tongue: so the river
Ewe runs downhill
towards its sea loch.

Reach out and touch
the topsoil to which
its syllables remain
attached: an anchor
lodged in sand long after
the ship has rotted.

Throw one last log onto
the fire as you pronounce
their names – *Nechtán* and *Brude*,
Drostan and *Drest* – then let
them blend like smoke does
with the midnight air.

Neidfire

STEWART SANDERSON

“Flame is the intoxication of inert matter.”
Ivo Andrić, *Omer Pasha Latos*

For an hour now I have watched wood getting drunk
on what waits within it – cold as a bottle
of brandy hurled out of a speeding horse-sleigh
into a snowdrift

till the first hot smirch of paper smouldering
through a nest of twigs and desiccated moss
wakens the little god which had lain sleeping
in the frozen logs.

Imprisoned all winter in the leafless chips
of maple, into which no light now reaches
to renew the hungry cells, I watch the fire
flare up, attempting

to fly whatever shackles of compulsion
kept it hidden in the cool heart of the tree
while the summers dwindled. Letting themselves go
like hardened drinkers –

hill farmers on Hogmanay or oilmen come
to shore after a month out in the middle
of some northern sea – the logs begin to blur
forgetting their forms

in a binge of energy, whose hangover
is ashes; a soft grey insubstantialness
the wind will scatter, tomorrow, on the still
stone-sober country.

Unland

STEWART SANDERSON

I know a word
for the weather-beaten places

a word for where nothing
will grow but what
we cannot eat

for where the land
is worn at and washed

away by waters
which erode
soil as the stillness

does this word for where
no nation matters

for where the little
lochans lap
up ever so lightly

at the louring sky
and hidden

drove roads wind
downhill towards
infinity

Alclud

STEWART SANDERSON

No one wakes in the country
where they closed their eyes.

Nor does any river ever
cross the same kingdom twice.

I, who was born here after
the shipyards and the other

heavy industries died
their un-inevitable deaths

will never know their like
for all I can imagine

well enough what it might
have meant to see the Clyde

crowded with cranes; the city
filled with foreign purpose

as the great hulls formed
rivet by rivet high above

the steel grey waters
in the eddies of their endless

change. Just so, I can
look past the Govan

rooftops, shifting very
slightly in the winter

sunlight and pretend
to myself that all this

is no more than a mirage
and that any moment

now I'll find my eyelids
slipping open onto

the Cymric sunrise, hidden
under all my mornings.

Meeting Po Chu-i

(Chinese Poet 772-846)

IAN AITKEN

Never having been to China
I walked to the lake
to see if a heron was there.
Finding none, I returned
by the other path.
There I met a friend.
Po Chu-i had been thirteen months travelling.
I invited him to continue with me.
At my kitchen table
the coffee was quickly brewed,
and we faced each other
like the chess players
I'd hoped we be.

Tapping

MARY ANNE SPENCE

Today I am rekindling the past:
Performing alchemy
On stubborn Scottish soil.

Plainly, your handwriting says
Pink Poppies on an envelope
As light as gold Godrevy sand.

But to begin, I must recite an
Incantation of sorts: I search for words,
As if rummaging in an untidy kitchen drawer

For exactly the right thing
And uncover honed, wooden homilies
As smooth as old spoon handles.

For easy peeling
Tap the shell of a hard-boiled egg all over

For easy opening
Tap the lid of a jar with a big spoon

For easy storing
Tap the dry seed head into a small paper bag

Now, one year after your passing
The earth is stoked.
I tap out sooty seeds as fine as ash

And will them to blaze.

Sparrowhawk Theology

An essay by Chris Arthur

IS WHAT INTERESTS US an indelible part of our personality, something that will find expression pretty much regardless of circumstances? Or is it something which might or might not develop, depending on outside influences? I have no way of knowing for certain, but I suspect I was predisposed to be interested in natural history, especially birds, but that it was through a special friendship that this inborn interest flowered in the particular way it did. Without Jab, sparrowhawks might never have meant much to me.

Jab was J. Arnold Benington (1903–1982), one of Northern Ireland’s best known naturalists. I count myself fortunate to have had him as a friend and teacher. A striking, white-haired man with a weather-beaten face and something of the fierce air of an Old Testament prophet, he taught biology at Friends’ School in Lisburn, the Quaker school I attended from age five until I was fourteen, when I left to continue my education in Belfast. Leaving made it easier for Jab – as he was universally known to pupils – to make the transition from teacher to friend. Our friendship was built on the strong foundation of a shared passion for the natural world. But despite our common interest in the plants and creatures around us, I came to understand them in a way that was radically at odds with his.

At weekends and in the holidays we spent hours together “in the field,” as Jab put it, bird-watching, photographing butterflies, on the track offoxes, hedgehogs, badgers, otters, or looking for rare orchids. The years of our friendship coincided with Northern Ireland’s Troubles, so our activities sometimes aroused suspicion. Looking for marsh fritillary caterpillars in the hills above Belfast, near a locale where, soon afterwards, a cache of explosives was discovered, we attracted the attention of an army patrol. We were questioned at gunpoint, searched, asked for identification, and given looks of disbelief when caterpillars were mentioned. But eventually our unlikely eccentricity satisfied the burly sergeant. He ordered his men back to their vehicle and even wished us good luck with our hunting. Checking out a long-eared owl’s roost at dusk nearly ended in tragedy. In a lonely stretch of woodland we strayed into the grounds of what turned out to be a judge’s house. His police bodyguards thought we were assassins, shouted out a challenge and almost opened fire. And on an expedition to the Mourne mountains to look for peregrines, we found multiple bullet cases ejected among the rocks in a

remote gully, at whose head was a gnarled holly tree whose trunk was pocked and chipped by gunfire. It was chilling to realize that we’d stumbled on the spoor of terrorist training.

Jab’s natural history interests were wide-ranging. He designed and built a butterfly garden on some disused land; led ornithological expeditions to Iceland to study gyrfalcons; carried out wildflower surveys; was heavily involved in setting up the Copeland Island bird observatory; broadcast nature programmes for the BBC. He encouraged everything from taking bark rubbings to mapping the incidence of different types of fungi in a forest, to setting up moth light-traps and watching bats. He was also an accomplished wildlife artist and photographer. But of all the many things that fired his interest, Jab reserved a special place for sparrowhawks.

What was it about these birds that so fascinated him?

Thinking about it now, all these years later, I see sparrowhawks as a kind of contour line shimmering through the landscape of his life, a glowing nerve spooled through the maze of his personality that led him away from the flatlands of the commonplace towards the tantalizing altitudes of a never-quite-reached but always desired summit. Sparrowhawks drew him as helplessly as moths are drawn to a lighted window; they constituted a naturally occurring compass, pulling his attention to the enigma of a True North that was less a direction than an alluring sense of fleeting, fugitive presence that set his blood aflame. Sparrowhawks spoke in – were syllables of – a secret, sacred language; they sounded nature’s Om, reverberating with the promise of revelation.

I know I make it sound as if, for Jab, sparrowhawks sparked a kind of worship or idolatry. The picture that I’ve drawn suggests he was a slave to their magnetism. I’m presenting his hawk-watching more as obeisance than ornithology, a devotee’s response to a power that pulled him helplessly into orbit around it. Jab would have objected to such terms. He’d accuse me, perhaps with justification, of transference, of writing a pagan palimpsest of my own heresies across the orthodoxies of his faith. And yet I stand by what I’ve written. For him, sparrowhawks offered a portal leading from this world to another. Our days “in the field” seemed somewhere between pilgrimage and possession. However much he would have insisted

that we were acting according to the scientific imperatives of biology, I felt as much acolyte as ornithologist whenever we were climbing to hawks’ nests, or examining the feathers strewn around plucking posts.

Jab was concerned that the use of organochloride pesticides threatened to decimate sparrowhawk numbers. His “The Decline of the Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter Nisus*, in Northern Ireland,” a paper contributed to the *Irish Naturalists’ Journal* in 1971, to cite just one of his many publications, records an alarming drop in numbers from the situation when he first began to take an interest in hawks as a sixteen-year-old schoolboy. His analysis of infertile eggs showed residues of dieldrin, DDT and other agricultural poisons then in widespread use. As well as poisoning the birds, these chemicals also affected shell-thickness, so that some eggs simply broke in the nest. Sparrowhawks were not the only raptors affected. At the start of *The Peregrine*, J.A. Baker writes:

For ten years I followed the peregrine. I was possessed by it. It was a grail to me. Now it has gone. The long pursuit is over. Few peregrines are left, there will be fewer, they may not survive. Many die on their backs, clutching insanely at the sky in their last convulsions, withered and burnt away by the filthy, insidious pollen of farm chemicals. Before it is too late, I have tried to recapture the extraordinary beauty of this bird and to convey the wonder of the land he lived in, a land to me as profuse and glorious as Africa. It is a dying world, like Mars, but glowing still.

Jab likewise viewed his chosen grail as being in grave peril. He would have echoed Baker’s elegiac pessimism; his assessment of extraordinary beauty and wonder. To him, County Antrim was a land “as profuse and glorious as Africa.” Jab’s fears mirrored Baker’s about the birds he loved being marooned in a despoiled world, at risk of being lost forever.

Thankfully, the situation has improved. Peregrines and sparrowhawks have both increased their numbers since the parlous days when Jab and J.A. Baker were writing. But though they may have come back from the brink, sparrowhawks are still not common. Even when they do inhabit a locality, their talent for invisibility makes them seem scarce. A sighting is always something rare and special. As James Macdonald Lockhart puts it (in

Raptor), the birds “rely on concealment,” so “the sparrowhawk must always be just out of sight; that is where you will find them.” “Just out of sight” seems a suitable territory for a grail to inhabit.

I have a black and white photograph on the wall beside my desk. It shows a newly hatched sparrowhawk chick crouched in a nest alongside three eggs, one of which, judging by the chip that holes the smooth arc of its beautifully mottled orb, is poised to hatch. I can picture the colours that the photo doesn’t show, the eggs’ rich background of creamy-white patterned with reddish brown. A feather from an adult hawk is visible among the untidy nest twigs. I took this photo years ago when I climbed with Jab to a hawk’s nest high in a spruce tree in Hillsborough forest. We needed climbing irons to reach it. (Jab was, of course, a licensed ringer.)

Looking at the photo reminds me of this wonderful passage in *The Peregrine*:

Sparrowhawks were always near me in the dusk, like something I meant to say but could never quite remember. Their narrow heads glared blindly through my sleep. I pursued them for many summers, but they were hard to find and harder to see, being so few and so wary. They lived a fugitive, guerilla life. In all the overgrown neglected places the frail bones of generations of sparrowhawks are sifting down now into the deep humus of the woods. They were a banished race of beautiful barbarians, and when they died they could not be replaced.

I like the idea of a secret ossuary of sparrowhawk bones, a wooded sepulchre in some wild neglected place where the relics of the hawks are slowly absorbed into the ground, the ashes of their fire returning to the earth. The bones of the hawk chick I photographed all those years ago would have completed this metamorphosis by now, its elements dismantled and dispersed into other structures. Perhaps if we could trace its constituent molecules we’d find that some have been incorporated into tree branches – branches which, every now and then, support the weight of one of its descendants, their yellow talons clutching the wood as they scan the forest for prey.

Thinking of that chick and the eggs that would have hatched into its siblings makes me think of what came before them and what followed – the bloodline of hawks stretching back into history and prehistory and on into the future, and I wonder how to read the signature mark they leave upon the world; how to understand the fact of their existence

across time. What meanings do these birds purvey? How should we read the text they write on the world's pages with their violent presence?



The speed and manoeuvrability of sparrowhawks, their ability to jink and turn on the wing, to gain height as rapidly as they can plummet, the single-mindedness with which they pursue their prey, their mastery of the art of ambush, and the breathtaking acceleration they can summon – all combine to make them formidable predators. Their principal prey consists of small birds. Woodpigeons are pretty much the largest species they'll attempt. The kill can be so quick that it's over before you've realized what's happening. But sometimes, whether because of relative weights and sizes, or a hawk's inexperience, it's a brutally prolonged business. I've seen a pigeon only stunned by the impact of the attack being plucked and eaten alive, its desperate movements lessening as the hawk – standing on its victim's breast – stripped the meat from its still fluttering body. And yet whatever ugliness attends the kill, for me it casts no pall upon the beauty of these birds. I'm puzzled by this. The ferocity of their predation, the sheer bloodiness of the butchery they mete out, would make it easy to see them as anything but beautiful.

What do hawks suggest about the nature of the world?

For me, these beautiful raptors tore to shreds the old, simplistic concepts of deity that were propagated with such aggressive naivety when I was growing up in Northern Ireland. Jab was one of the propagators. Before every biology lesson at school, he wrote up on the blackboard a verse from the Bible. He gave me a book of inspirational readings, chosen from a range of devotional texts, and urged me to read it every day. When we were "in the field" he insisted on saying grace before any picnic meal. He was a deeply religious man who believed in a traditionally conceived Christian God – all powerful, omniscient, and loving. He saw sparrowhawks, like every other element of the natural world, as evidence of God's creation. His reading of nature somehow managed to take an "All things bright and beautiful" approach. How he squared the nature of hawks with this outlook is something I've never understood. To me, a hawk's perfectly attuned lethality stands shoulder-to-shoulder with parasites, famine, earthquake, war, disease – part of the unassailable army of objections to the kind of deity Jab believed in.

I never voiced such doubts to Jab. It would have pained him to know that what he saw as a magnificent part of God's design was, in my eyes, a torpedo fired into the certainties he cherished. Of course it's hard to distinguish between the alphabet the world offers and the letters we add when we try to spell out meanings we can grasp, but however much we were reacting to what was



Sparrowhawks. Ink drawing by Vawdrey Taylor

there, or to what we imagined, Jab's worldview and mine were irreconcilably different in their reading of the evidence. What causes individuals to reach such different verdicts? I'm as unsure about this as I am about what sets the register of our interest in nature. Why should one person be amazed and delighted to see a sparrowhawk and another be left unmoved by the experience? I have no answer; only know I'm pleased to belong to the former tribe.

Our sparrowhawk theologies may have led us to profoundly different conclusions, yet Jab and I shared a lot of common ground and I'm grateful for what flourished on it under the tutelage of his friendship. Of course at the time, many people dismissed our interest as eccentric, even childish. I was excused because of my age, but for a grown man like Jab to be climbing trees to reach birds' nests – this was something frowned on by most adults. We found it hard to counter such negative assessments. It was difficult to convey how much sparrowhawks meant to us. The significance they possessed wasn't something that could be

easily explained to others; we had trouble understanding it ourselves. How can you articulate, without sounding absurd, the fact of being awestruck by a bird?

In the years since then, I've discovered a small selection of titles imbued with the poetry of birds of prey – books whose lyricism touches the nerve of what drew me and Jab to sparrowhawks. The focus in this literature is often on other raptors. But even where sparrowhawks aren't included, or are only given passing mention, these beautiful prose litanies probe deep into the territory of engagement with birds that have become totemic; they hymn and map such obsession with more nuance and precision than our rough efforts ever managed, putting into words what it was that moved us. I wish when I'd been "in the field" with Jab I'd read J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*, T.H. White's *The Goshawk*, Jonathan Maslow's *The Owl Papers*, Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*, and James Macdonald Lockhart's *Raptor*. When I did, I felt not unlike a member of a tiny persecuted sect discovering the existence of coreligionists.



At one point in his astonishing paean to the peregrine, J.A. Baker describes being in a wood when suddenly a sparrowhawk appears:

There was a faint panting of wings. A small cloud of dusk flickered across the barred sunlight, like the shadow of something higher. Thirty yards away from me, across the thickness of the wood, it swooped up to perch on the branch of an oak. It was a sparrowhawk. The joy of such a moment can be relished for life, though the colour and memory will slowly fade, like the plumage of a stuffed bird in a glass case.

I can remember every time I've seen a sparrowhawk. Dotted through the years there's a line of craters that they've left. These snake unpredictably through my life, still smoldering with what they once contained. And yes, there is joy in these sightings – though it's far from the only emotion that they spark. And yes the memory, like all memories, fades. But whenever a new sighting occurs it's as if a shockwave is sent through this cratered contour of remembrance, reawakening the fire that made it. Even sightings from my boyhood are only dormant, not extinct. A hawk kill in my garden today doesn't just make an immediate impact. Its little tsunami reaches back through the years so that my mind is flooded again with memories of watching hawks with Jab. I don't know how many more times I'll see this bird before I die. It's impossible to predict the when and the where of its presence. I only know that without the fire and water that it brings, I'd feel a chill; a thirst that's hard to rationalize. If this "shadow of something higher" disappeared there would somehow be an absence at the heart of things.



Sometimes I think of sparrowhawks as a kind of living potassium; rare life-metal that has to be stored in the oil of words to keep it from bursting into flame. Damped down by the vocabulary we use to hold them, they may seem ordinary enough, controllable, something we can classify and handle. Our descriptions give the illusion that we can label and categorize them; treat them as if they're as safely inert as the other things we talk about. But an encounter with the birds themselves, the live element of their sudden, shocking presence, soon shrugs off even the most artful verbal containment. They are explosively reactive. Whenever I think of them now, the image that first comes into mind isn't of a feathered body, a hooked beak, wings, or talons, but of something burning with a white-hot intensity. Their incandescence left the worldview I was given as a boy in ashes. I'm still not sure what, if anything, the light of sparrowhawks illuminates beyond its own savagely beautiful lucidity. ■

DONALD SITS BY the fire, sharpening his lambsfoot knife. The blade slides smoothly across the carborundum stone, shaving a grey skin of oil from the surface. For the task ahead it has to be razor sharp.

He leans back for a moment to rest his fingers, twisted and scarred by three score years of herding and handling sheep. Snow is blowing past the window, thick white flakes in the dark. The sheep at the head of the glen are drawing together as the snow covers the ground. They will move in slowly towards the oak woods, the wet snow forming blocks of ice on their fleece-ends; some of them, unable to bear the weight, will perish in the drifts. Still, he has done all that he can.

The light is fading. He shifts his feet so that the stone lies level on his knee and once again rubs the knife along the surface, following the hollow worn by the blades of his shears. He tests the edge of the blade with his thumb, spits on his arm and runs the blade over the skin. It shaves off the hair cleanly.

He replaces the stone in its oak box, stained crimson with oil, and, snapping the knife shut, crosses to the sink. His hands are washed thoroughly, removing all traces of oil, and dried on a length of sacking behind the door. He lifts a bucket from the space beneath the sink to catch the blood and leaves the room.

The old dog lying under the table, suddenly alert, watches him go. As the sound of his nailed boots fades, it rises slowly and climbs into the warm chair. An ember slips in the fire and, for a moment, the room moves with shadows. The dog curls up in the chair and closes its eyes. A hen's feather blows across the bare concrete floor.

In the barn outside he lights the oil lamp and hangs it on a wire hook near the door. Lifting a hemp rope, he throws it over one of the rafters and slides it from side to side to remove the dust from the beam. Removing his jacket, he rolls up his shirt sleeves. Fine snow blows in over the half door and the wind blows chaff and hay seed across the cobbles. Once again he tests the edge of his knife.

A small blade – no more than the length of his middle finger. Small but sweet. A tiny hole in the right place and life will just flow away. No noise, no pain, no torn flesh.

He does not see the figure watching him from the shadows. He has forgotten that he let Sligo spend the night there. The tramp had arrived at the back door begging for a night's sleep in the barn. His gnarled face, pitted like pine bark and bruised by the weather, could not crease into a smile. The woollen hat, tugged down to his brows, glittered with snow. Donald had studied the rheumy eyes and blue lips for signs of drink.

They all know the rules, these solitary travelling men. No drink. They can sleep in the barn as long as they are sober for there is a bond between these outcasts and the hill shepherd – the shared quicksands of solitude, the ache of loneliness and the

chasm between them and other men. Sligo, though, had sneaked in a bottle and so he lies half asleep on the hay bales near the roof, his button-hole eyes barely open and his greatcoat pulled up to his ears.

Donald ties a short hazel stick to one end of the rope and, lifting a shearing stool from its place behind the hay bales, places it beneath the hanging rope.

He sits for a while. The visions return. He fights to dismiss them, to drive them back, to crush them like vermin but they are indestructible. Memories of his friends dying in the war – their jaws wide,

*He sits for a while.
The visions return.
He fights to dismiss
them, to drive them
back, to crush them
like vermin but they
are indestructible.*

straining to expel the uncontainable agony in a scream, though never wide enough for, in the cradle of their jaws, he had seen their pain crushed like a monstrous, still-born calf lodged in the pin-bones of a beast too small to give it birth. He sees his cousin lying on the deck, his leg blown off at the knee, trying to run. He hears the sound of the shattered bone scraping on the steel deck and see the boy's face as white as a gull's breast and his blood splashed over the twisted metal of the gangway.

They had all been killed – all his friends – and, when he returned to the island in his ill-fitting civilian clothes, there had been no-one to talk to, no-one to share the memories, no-one to calm the terrors of the long nights.

He had lived alone in the croft house above the ocean – the last house on the track leading to the point – and, like his father, had herded the township sheep. But, all the time, the sea cast up the memories like flotsam at his door. In the thunder of the surf at night gunfire shook his bed and the room flashed and howled with shells.

Sometimes he leapt from his bed and crashed against the wall, his fingers groping for the rungs of a ladder that was not there. When the sea lay sick and still in

the summer heat the eider drake's moan echoed in the room and, beside him, lay a carcass with no face, the round mouth of its severed windpipe spasmodically sucking in air. He had dreaded the nights and, most of all, the bedlam of sleep. He sat by the fire, listening to the nasal voices of trawlermen on his radio till the dawn seeped into the sky. Anything but sleep. Sleep – the plunge into terror, the lurch into chaos, the fall off the edge of the earth. When he had left the island, haggard and pale, his neighbours had not been surprised.

He has never known a woman. Once, when the hair had just started to grow on his body, he had entered the kitchen when his sister was bathing by the fire. She had not turned away and, in the amber light of the oil lamp, he had watched beads of water slide down her breasts and glisten in the shadows of her thighs. Tempted to approach her, his hands started to tremble but he had turned and fled from the house. Staggering in the dark, he leaned against the the midden dyke and beat his fists on the stones, chastising himself for the moment of temptation.

"God forgive me," he had sobbed.

But the god of his people was not a forgiving god and, for years afterwards, he had lived with the fear of punishment. His guilt had borne down on him, grinding his confused emotions between its mill-stones till they had blown away like chaff. Since then he had not spoken to a woman – not in that way. Frightened of them, he had lived alone in remote cottages most of his life, living for his work.

His work. Years of rising before dawn and working till dusk. Walking till his thighs ached and his heels seemed to splinter like shells. Whistling the dogs in a lashing wind till his lips bled. Staggering through soft snow topped with a skin of ice so that each footstep held for a moment then plunged deep into the powder beneath. Bending over lean ewes at the shearing with a monstrous pain gnawing at his back. Never complaining. No, not a word. Out to the lambs in the spring when other men slept – back for breakfast as they woke. All for nothing.

Sligo closed his eyes and slept, too tired and befuddled to speak. He had walked the railway that day, sleeper after sleeper, bone after bone till each joint screamed, hunger gnawing at his gut. He had found a fellow traveller asleep in a railway hut, sneaked in, stolen the man's wine and walked on, trying to reach the farm before dark.

Donald rises from the stool, shaking off the snow that gathered on his trousers and the memories that troubled his mind.

Crossing to one of the pens, he pulls out a young wedder, ties three of its legs together with a length of twine and lifts it on to the shearing stool so that it lies on its back with its head over the edge..

With the point of his knife he makes a small incision in its neck. Blood streams into the bucket, steaming in the cold air. The animal barely moves, seemingly unaware of its fate. He sits beside it, holding its head so that the blood flows cleanly into the bucket.

He remembers when it was born. High in the corrie on a morning hung with larks and vibrant with the drumming of snipes' wings, it had been stretched out at the mouth of an old badger hole. He had watched it grow and had searched the flocks for it at every gathering. He was fit then and could reach the summit cairn before the sun.

The memories are broken by a movement beneath him. The beast is breathing quickly and he can feel the tension in its muscles. He speaks to it in Gaelic. He knows that it will not hear. He speaks inside his head as he used to pray, sending the words of comfort into the darkness like young dogs into the mist, like petrels over the Minch. He remembers the moss on the pillars of the ancient church and the skin of salt on the lancet windows. He can hear the whine of the precentor and smells the scent of peat on his mother's coat. A long time ago. But he remembers.

The wedder kicks twice, sighs, stiffens and then lies still. He touches the surface of its eye with his finger. It doesn't blink. It is dead.

He cuts the twine which binds its legs and, starting at its knees, begins to skin the carcass, sliding his fist between the warm flesh and the skin. Within minutes it lies pale and naked on the smooth surface of its own hide. He removes the stomach and entrails and pulling down the rope, fits the short hazel stick through the tendons of the back legs. He hauls on the rope and raises the carcass off its skin into the air.

Sligo wakes with a gasp, furiously beating out imaginary flames on his legs, re-living the night in the woods when, semi-conscious with wine, he had rolled into the glowing embers and his plastic leggings had caught fire, the molten material clinging to his legs like boiling tar. No-one there to help. Always on his own. He hated the others. One of them had kicked his face while he slept. No reason. Just let go of his spite at the world.

Donald does not hear. His task is almost complete. He severs the head from the neck, cutting through between the spine bone and the skull. Then, as one unit, he plucks out the heart, lungs and wind-pipe. A perfect operation. No blood spilled and the meat not marked. He spins the carcass round, admiring his handiwork.

The colonel will be pleased. He frowns. No, the meat is not for the colonel. It must be for the new shepherd. But he is

on holiday. It must have been killed for someone. Who is it ? He can't remember. Can't remember. In the vast, tranquil acres of his mind a storm gathers on the horizon and a wind moves menacingly across the fields, bending the corn and lifting the crows into the air.

He looks up at the carcass. In the ribcage the membranes shine silver and scarlet in the lamplight. The waist and flanks are smooth and unblemished, smooth like a girl's flesh. For a moment he wants to reach out and touch the flesh but he crushes the impulse in his fist, his lips twisted with distaste. A memory, buried securely for years, has slipped out into the light. The resurrection of the dead.

"All that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth; they

that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done

evil, unto the resurrection of damnation...."

He punches the flesh with his fist. "It's a sheep !" he shouts, "A sheep." Sligo, asleep again, jerks instinctively under his greatcoat but does not waken, hearing only his child whimpering and it's mother's fury as she shut the door on him forty years before. The night of the storm. He had walked through the rain till the dawn greyed the sky and he found shelter under an upturned tree-root in the forest, the fresh, warm soil on his cheek.

"A sheep," Donald murmurs. And killed perfectly. A perfect job. They always said that.

"A grand job, Donald." He hears them, voices echoing endlessly in his head.

"Grand job. Grand job." "Damn them !" he snarls and plunges his knife into the soft rump flesh of the wedder, tearing it across the back. The carcass rocks violently and the rafters creak. In a frenzy he stabs the beast again and again, cursing with each blow.

"Damn you, damn you, damn you," he repeats, tearing at the carcass till it dances crazily in the gloom, long slivers of flesh, like macabre feathers, trembling as it spins. He stabs till his arm aches and he staggers back exhausted to collapse on a hay-bale, his cloth cap tilted over one ear. A film of froth glistened at the corner of his lips.

Sligo wakes in the dawn. The oil lamp is still burning. He slides down off the hay bales and sees the shredded carcass hanging in the gloom, the knife stuck in its haunch. Behind it, Donald lies sprawled across against a railing, his jaw wide open and his eyes staring at the roof. His cap has fallen on the ground and his silver hair falls across his bloodless face. Sligo plucks out the knife, slices off a sliver of meat and stuffs it in his pocket. He scuttles away, his bleary eyes streaming in the harsh wind. Fresh snow covers his tracks. ■

Skitin oan Thin Ice

By Gillian Shearer

YOUNG RUARAI DH McIVER hid been sittin that lang his dowp hid gaed numb. He keekit up aat the pulpit. The meenister's in fu throttle the day, he thocht. Nae that Ruariaidh hid a thing aboot the meenister; he wis likely a fine eneuch cheil ootbye the kirk... bit inside? This wis his realm. Ruariaidh shiftit in his seat an felt a sliver o sun kittle his face. It wis sic a fine day he thocht yon his mind drifted awa. He saw the loch aa happit wi ice an the sna birlin roonabout an himsel skitin ower the ice...birlin... birlin...

Ow! Ruariaidh let oot an almighty yelp as his mither's haun cam fleein doon across his lug. The meenister keekit oot ower his pulpit, his een blazin wi fury aat the sudden interruption. Ruariaidh's mither shooglit in her seat; the congregation turnt aroon an a ripple o shame fell ower the kirk.

Back hame his mither's wirds cam stuttin doon lik rain. 'Ye feel loon!' she cried, 'Yon meenister maun think we're a puckle o gypes!' Ruariaidh cooried doon, his hauns ower his lugs. 'Awa tae yer bed!'

his mither shouted, 'aire'll be nae supper fur ye!'

Later yon e'en, Ruariaidh stared up aat the ceilin. His lugs wur still dirlin fae his mither's haun. It's nae fair he thocht rising fae his bed. The sun wis nearly settin an the lift wis aa reed an bonny. Ruariaidh felt lik greetin. He luikit oot ower the yard, oot bye the fields aa smoorit wi sna, oot bye the loch skinklin lik glitter. Fit a waste he thocht keekin ower aat the loch aa bonny an pink in the sunset. He wis yon upset he felt his hert melt.

Bit whit wis yon skitin aboon the ice? A figure aa riggit oot in black, the arms crossed ower their chest as if in prayer, ae leg thrust back lik a craa taakin flight. Ruariaidh cuid nae believe his een.

■

Uninvited

LIZ MCKIBBEN

Wild bees are just that, not hive-trained.
They don't go easy on the pollen.
They get high, zigzag home,
too spaced out for a bee-line.
The gap between your doorstep and the ground,
the one you never really knew you had before,
becomes a squat where they hang out,
come and go like Heathrow.
They can't be given an ASBO.
Their legs are too small for a tag.
Annoy them and they'll buzz their mates
to flash mob your front door.
For pity's sake, don't let them in.

A Puzzle

DEREK CROOK

After the snow this year
there came no larks.

The lambs came.
The coming of the lambs
we can control.
but there came no larks.

There came
no insubstantial emanation
of exhilaration.
Just timid bleating
to assure us
we were in control.

We were in control
But where were the larks?

This year the lambs
were fat and many.
but there were no larks.

Fox

ANNA MACFIE

spate water clears from mist
flooding the grass
light pours from every surface

stags bellow out the old year
and a new year roars in
no beginning no end

inside the sound of the rain
is like a mantra
outside it's just rain on the roof

in the morning
yellow leaves in blue sky
behind the boundary ride
a fox shucks rain from his coat
and returns to dry earth

dreams of another land
memories of belonging

Hill Chasing

ALISDAIR HODGSON

I had never chased a hill like that
before the stepped peaks of Cruach nam Fiadh.

Each summit sought and claimed
gave rise to another, that little bit higher,
invisible from below.

It was not till I stood atop the tump's topmost boulder,
bold enough to balance upon its edge,
sighting the recumbent giant of Jura asleep amongst the waves,
weathering the lash of the winds
blown in from the Atlantic like Gulf Stream sailors;
and it was not till I paused and saw
the lines of straw-coloured coast hugging this hooked segment of sea,
and horizons beyond the bronzed, yet-to-spring, heather-tufted hills
that I knew I had reached the crest —
the crest I sought but could not have known
until the few feet before it was found.

The modest precipice of this hill huddled me in silence and,
for a few lingering moments, I was taller than mountains:
I was the summit.

HE REMOVES HIS vinyl records from the shelf and puts them into a cardboard box. ‘Living room’ is written across the side in black marker pen. He slides open a drawer in the sideboard, and takes out ‘his’ things.

“Coffee?” I say.

No reply. He’s standing with his back to me. I can see that several drawers are now open. God, that bloody annoys me. Why can’t he just shut one drawer before opening the next. I sigh, but he doesn’t react.

His shoulders slump forward, and I see that he is holding the little pink, velvet, chest. I pray that he won’t open it, but like Pandora, he can’t help himself. A rush of memories come tumbling out. I don’t need this. Our eyes meet, a message transmitted. He lifts the white baby booties from the bed of silk they lie upon. I can’t look, so I get up and walk into the kitchen.

The kettle bubbles and clicks off. I pour boiling water over the instant granules, taking my time to stir. I rinse

the teaspoon. When I turn around, with both mugs in my hands, he steps in front of the doorway.

“James, please, I’m not in the mood for games!”

“What about these?” he asks, as he holds up the booties.

“What about them?”

“I thought we could keep one each,” he murmured.

“I don’t want it.”

“So, you don’t mind if I…”

“Do what you want, you always do anyway.”

He takes a step back, as if I’ve slapped him. I bang the coffee cups down, and brown liquid spills down the sides.

A film forms on the surface of the

untouched coffee, as he continues to pack. I eye the boxes, and hope that he didn’t take the booties: they’re all I have left now.

He takes a suitcase out to his car. As the front door closes behind him, I rush over to the sideboard, pulling the drawer open. I open and shut the other drawers too.

“He’s taken them,” I say, closing my hand over my mouth.

The car door slams. I dash to the chair, curling my legs beneath me as I sit. Reaching forward, I grab my book from the table and open it.

He comes back in and lifts a box. Please don’t let the booties be in that box!

“Your book is upside down,” he says.

My cheeks flame, and he lays his hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t,” I tell him, shrugging him off.

He leaves again. I’m on my feet again, pushing my hand into the nearest box, feeling about for the small chest. The door opens, and I pull my hand back, tearing the cardboard. If he has seen, he doesn’t let on and continues to take boxes and suitcases out to the car.

“Okay, that’s me. I think I have everything.”

I keep my eyes on the book. His keys jangle, and I hear the clink of metal being placed on the table by the door. He stays there for a moment and then he is gone. I go to the window, being careful to stand back so he won’t see me. Tears dribble down my cheeks, dripping off my chin. I don’t wipe them. The car starts. Several minutes pass before he pulls away. I watch him until he disappears at the end of the road. On the table, a solitary bootie lies beside his door key. ■

Pandora’s Box

BY AMANDA GILMOUR



SHE HAD THREE dreams and everything is different now.

The first one was a nightmare. She was in the bath, hoist hanging from the ceiling, strip-light straight above her head, nurses passing with the drugs-trolley outside. Someone had put easy-listening music on her phone: not her first choice, but she was used to that – not-choosing, only waiting, breathing, flexing toes and fingers on the right, looking about. She valued the few choices she had left, but in the nightmare, even they were taken from her.

First of all, it was her sight. The strip-light shrank along its length, receding from her, concentrating all its luminescence into just one point. That point became a dot and even that began to fade. She felt herself starting to fall. The sides of the bath appeared like sea-cliffs. She fought for breath and everything went cold. She was surprised to feel so little stress, or, to be more precise – she recognized the panic with a cool detachment. To her, it didn’t matter anymore that she was choking on ice-water, that her lungs were filling up with fluid, that the light had disappeared. The horror was that no-one had dropped in to say goodbye.

The nurses brought her back. She tried to tell them what had happened, without much success. After admitting her to High-Dependency, a junior doctor scribbled in her notes: patient appears to have had a nightmare in the bath. (That much was true.) Said doctor added that the patient’s neurological condition often gave her a sensation of impending doom. ‘The nightmare’ he stressed ‘would have preceded the choking episode.’

Her period of respiratory compromise, ensuing from near-drowning, was a lot shorter than predicted by her chest X-rays. Even so, that feeling of falling away from the light would not leave her alone. It felt as if the walls were closing

in and pillows were just waiting there to smother her. The gap between reality and perception widened more and more. She breathed just through her mouth; there was a nasty smell, like acrid sweat; she couldn’t tell if it was from the ward or something in her nose. She stayed awake for a week – alert, immobile, terrified to let go of her consciousness.

But when she couldn’t fight it any more, she slipped under the surface. At the bottom of the sea, she came to rest. It seemed familiar. Everything pitch-black. This time, though, she had no need to breathe. She smiled. And then she saw the faintest glimmer, miles above. Slowly, it brightened and expanded. Delicate creatures came and went, their lights of different colours flickering. Far, far above, the surface of the ocean rippled. It was getting closer, though. She passed through shoals of fish before they had the time to scatter and she felt their tiny bodies like the sting of hailstones on her skin.

Like a kiss, but in reverse, she broke the surface. In the orb of milky light that she was hurtling towards, she saw a melancholy smile. She felt the ebb and flow of many tides.

When she awoke, she was laughing. Someone had put freesias in a vase beside her bed. She inhaled a draught of their delicious fragrance and then laughed again.



The first dream had been all-too real; the second was a fantasy. And this, of

Falling

BY IAN TALLACH



from the ward, but she came back to visit, fearfully at first. She brought along a pencil and a pad, collecting stories from the others. Some described a desperate loneliness. The sense of falling was a common theme. One man was keen to speak but couldn’t; an invisible thread would pull his mouth to one side when he opened it. She vowed to understand him. He would try his best and she’d try hers, to no avail. One day, the speech therapist was at his bedside, working with his new communication aid. There was a message on the screen; it read – ‘btm of th sea…’

And it was then she had her third dream – one which she now lives to make reality – a dream of finding silent voices, making record of their words, however difficult to understand, however few: words from the ocean floor. ■

course, she knew, but somehow everything had changed – not her condition, not the drudgery of day-to-day, not her profound fatigue – just an awareness of not falling anymore. She resolved to share that feeling with the others on the ward, although she couldn’t, for the life of her, imagine how.

Not long thereafter, her mobility improved. She found she could articulate her thoughts. It was her first remission. A month after that she was discharged

Funky toothpicker

PHIL BAARDA

I can see Rodriguez
standing the other side of the glass door

shuffling his groovy feet
in syncopation with his left hand
that’s moving behind the
palm of his right

which is outstretched
and shielding his mouth
whilst his head sways
from side to side

like he’s playing a harmonica
that only he can hear.

Poetry

Plot and Bash

LYDIA POPOWICH

Tackle it when thrust through the window.
Look difficult when leaving the control area,
keeping right. Drive gentle up the road.
There may be more than you.
It will contain the time and distance you.
Get to the first junction as somebody else
and set off again. Beware of blindly following.
He may know where he is going or he may not.
Keep trying to make the fit and keep an eye on.
You may end up lost off route, being baffled
on route! Alternatively: pull up, obstruct and try
the hand better than clutter. With practise
you will plot the move keeping at least two.
If you are baffled it may be your opinion
-miracles do happen and he may see. Do it
or provide the clue, as a last resort-guess.
Don't stumble on a code, use a magnifier.
Don't discard handouts, keep them safe.
Engineer the maps alphabetically
to easily locate you in the night.

On Visiting John O'Groats

LYDIA POPOWICH

It can take most of your life to see
the large car park at the end of the line.
There are no instructions on arrival.
You circulate widdershins and search

the large car park at the end of the line
for a space that suits your personality.
You circulate widdershins and search
a familiar face in the day-glow crowds

for a space that suits your personality.
Some of them are smiling and holding
a familiar face in the day-glow crowds.
How many coffee beans in the jar?

Some of them are smiling and holding
hands. It's important to guess
how many coffee beans in the jar.
Green sunglasses are optional, reflective

hands. It's important to guess
how many miles to Land's End?
Green sunglasses are optional, reflective
blisters on the soles of your feet.

How many miles to Land's End?
You might travel naked and grateful for
blisters on the soles of your feet.
It can take most of your life to see.

Familiar

(To my Cat)

LYDIA POPOWICH

Satin smooth, a dashing tuxedo doodles
in the dark. Coiling, recoiling, she sparks
twin moons centre stage, chartreuse chanteuse,
all that jazz with twinkles. Scrumptious svelte.
The rasp of velvet, the descent and scorch
of needle claw. Bipolar and molar, the healer
of bones. Her silent hum, vibrations thrill
- a mean chill pill. Stubborn as a willow
in the wind, she bends and does not break.
Not shades of grey but endless grace. Elastic,
fantastic, shape-shifting dreamer, she weaves
a fandango, a spellbinding tangle of chains.

Winter untying

CATHERINE EUNSON

Perhaps we'll protest, say the ferry isn't due
yet, when we hear a wooden knock, feel
the neat keel bump against our ropes.
We may become convinced when the timbers
start to float, perceive we overestimated
home, undervalued the persistence of tides.
Maybe the boat will be enormous, us together
lurching in the hold, losing air, who knows?
However bad the crossing is, we'll all make it.
After you went: when we were the winter sheep,
huddling together with no more knowledge of knots,
just skeins of absence unfurling in the fields;
we would have willed whatever wings you had on
and on. But you had already gone.

From the Lealt Shales at Elgol

CATHERINE EUNSON

Yes, the fossils here are proper relics;
unlike cluttering plastics littering
the whole earth, they're powerful, changed creatures.
These fossils are choruses fixed in stone,
are transformational, call for response,
are yet mouthfuls of undigested God.
We could venerate them primitively,
invoke disappearing constellations
of stars. But show me only one clean day
in the future, when streams run clear and fresh,
when horses turn in a patchwork of crops,
and a new culture grows us what we need:
then we can ignore these native omens,
let the rocks echo back to their witness.

Hebridean Geology

Ulva, Staffa, Treshnish

SHARON BLACK

Giants carried on the wind become
gods with wings of rock:
granite, basalt, gabbro, tuff.

They travel down the centuries,
drop their wing-parts into ocean, into ice,
smash islands into life, spawn

mountains, rivers, pillars and cathedrals
from which music boils and serpents,
echoes in the world's

most brilliant minds, chords sailing out
to catch the falling gods,
their wings now broken nubs. Shrinking

to the size of geese or sheep,
they walk among us
as the guidebooks turn to dust.

Bohemian

SONYA MACDONALD

Once I saw an angel standing
with my dead father
in an upstairs doorway,

both had disapproving eyes.
I told them
transcendence comes through art
not death

but he never liked to listen much,
even in those early days
when life required so much less.

Argyll

SONYA MACDONALD

I watched him, often.
How he stood in the open doorway
with the garden and the sea beyond,
always somewhere else

faraway.

Little bird
migrates home to the same branch
each year
near the tidal loch.

Poetry

Madge

RICHARD MYERS

Three fleece Madge taught her daughter where to challenge fences,
evade dogs and hunker in the corries where the tarns lay,
water clear as air, cold as a tyrant's heart, high above the treeline.

Here, breezes coil in the cwm, foiling clouds of midges, cooling
in the midday heat where sun-blessed rocks tick, shedding shards
on frosty nights.

Madge lived a long and man-free life, was claimed by unsheeply age,
and now her daughter curls to sleep beside the bones the hill fox left.
Never named since never seen she roams the high hills yet.

Cold War Nostalgia

STEPHEN BARNABY

The memory
Of a group of ordinary ten year old boys
At Thurso swimming pool
Some of us from the Atomic Authority estate
Some from the council houses towards Scrabster
Some from private houses
Some from rural villages
Discussing Armageddon
And the matter of fact assertion
That none of us would live to see twenty one

Ah, but those were simpler days

50 Words from Thurso Cinema, Late 1970s

STEPHEN BARNABY

Mind drifting from who knows which film
Foot swinging back and forth, with a child's obliviousness to others' discomfort
The tobacco-drenched middle-aged woman turning slowly, eyes hooded

'Kick my seat again, sonny, and I'll kick you.'

The film's child-friendliness could usually be guaranteed
The audience's less so

Aliens

STEPHEN BARNABY

There was, briefly, an American girl in my class.
She can be called Casey Watts.
She must have been from the Naval Base.
Why she wasn't at their school I don't know.
She was always trying to kiss the boys, to their terror and the girls' bafflement.

The Mormons at Thurso Swimming Pool must have been from the Base too.
They unnerved us with their short hair, smart suits and unshakeable politeness.
They would strip completely, astonishingly naked, use the showers, then, without going near the pool, dress and leave.

My father worked at the bleached, bulbous fast reactor that, as a child, I thought was the moon.

But I knew that Casey and The Mormons were

LOSING MY CONTROL

SIMON BERRY

There seemed no further hope after several searches
Of finding the remote. Despite all those weird
Buttons with strange promises of Setup and Mode
Providing at least a notional offer of choice:
With it I could have just the world I needed.
Without full control over those uncanny forces
In the airwaves now just what kind of life awaits me?

Later I headed outside intent on stress-busting
Up by the Cat's Back with the view of the tower
Two red kites vie for the attention of the hen bird:
Russet underwing catching sunlight
Tumbling out of the vast pale blueness
Missing by a screaming wingtip
Each embraces the uncontrollable.

CHANCE TAKEN

SIMON BERRY

It must have been the smooth
Green surface that made her chance
The crossing from one side
Of this glass fruit dish to the other
Containing no ripples on a balmy night
After a day of rain

Next morning this mouse floats
Dead centre on a sparkling disc
That now is quite transparent
But in the dark crouched on its rim
Below my kitchen window
She would have seen it solid
Distracted with her hunt for scraps

Now by her tail end
I airlift her from a watery grave
Our first and last encounter
A minor miscalculation
Has cut short one life at least
Her mousekins too will surely perish
What could she have been thinking

I've discovered a name for it
A way of explaining our delusions
When reason declines hope offers
And still we take our chances
Cognitive dissonance it's called
We accentuate the positive
Until finally we accept futility

What thoughts had this mouse mother then
As frantic paddling fails to find her foothold
(*My tribe will remember me for this feat
Or Some good must come of this*)?
Then she rolls over tiny hands pawing the air
That's how I encountered her
Still grasping for the best in the circumstances

GO AWAY. I was here first. It took me ages to find the perfect spot. All right, you can stay for a minute, but don't get comfortable. Out here in the open, it's not like I'm planning to offer you a cup of tea or anything.

I get a great view over the wall, all the way to the sea. That's the main road down there. That green bit up at the back, that's the edge of the zoo. I saw three bears the other day. Funny how things come in threes, isn't it? Yesterday I saw three ships come sailing in. Then just this morning, I saw three guys wearing kilts and Prince Charlie jackets, off to a wedding or something. The next thing, this sailor popped up out of nowhere, must have come off one of the ships that

came sailing in. Grabbed one of the guys by the arm.

Okay, sit down on that stone and listen. He wouldn't let the guy go, and the guy's mates just walked off without him. You know what I thought? I thought the sailor had come back to find his girlfriend had gone off with the guy and was going to give him a good kicking. I was quite excited. But no such luck. He was only talking. I was too far away to hear what

he was saying, so I crawled over to the wall and hid at the foot of it.

He had one of these really boring, monotonous voices, and I could only make out the occasional word. I say word, but it was mostly nonsense.

"Uprist," he said.

"Gossameres."

"Clomb."

I don't know, I must have snorted or something, because the next thing the

guy he'd grabbed was looking over the wall at me.

"Listen," he said to the sailor, "I'm sorry, but I've really got to go. What about this lady here, why don't you tell her what happened?"

And the sailor jumped over the wall and grabbed me and started on about his uprist and his gossameres and his clomb while the other guy legged it. I told him this was my spot and he had to leave, but he wouldn't let go of my arm. He just kept wittering on and on and on.

It took a while for me to sort things out. No, you just stay where you are. I'm going to tell you exactly what happened. ■

Nor Any Drop To Drink

BY OLGA WOJTAS



Lady of the Lake

BY BRENDA McHALE



THIS IS A true story. By which I mean I may not know if it was real, but my telling of it is truthful. It happened three weeks ago. Three weeks from when I'm writing, so that could be six weeks, or nine months or five years or two lifetimes ago, depending when you're reading it. If I was writing it in real time it would take maybe thirty seconds to jot it all from start to finish. The impression it made though means I need to record it, so that when I look back and wonder I'll know it was no dream, whatever it was.

It happened in a small town called Mora, on the shores of Lake Siljan, in the centre of Sweden. Lake Siljan is formed on the edge of a crater from a meteorite that impacted a long time ago: I'm not going to pretend I know how long ago. A long time. That violence created true beauty: low hills curving around a big, deep, lake, surrounded by trees, with clearings for villages of red wooden houses, scattered as if handfuls of houses of all sizes were thrown in the air and left where they landed.

Edging the lake at Mora is a wide light-coloured footpath, lovely for walking any day, and especially on that early October day: the sun glistening off the sky-blue lake, the leaves on silver birches all around every shade of orange, yellow, copper, their numbers doubled by reflection; birds coming down like paper planes onto the glassy lake surface; the air still, so still. People were cycling the path, on their "sit up and beg" bikes: men in suits and women in skirts and a teen in torn jeans wearing a t-shirt that said "I'm an anarchist". Other people were walking, enjoying the day, or maybe not, it's not always easy to tell and I shouldn't assume. But the woman – the woman of my story – did seem to be enjoying the day. She appeared from nowhere, maybe just because I was looking elsewhere, I don't know. She was walking tall and straight, head high and shoulders back, on good terms with the world, with a tiny but perceptible rise and fall with each step. To call it a bounce, though, would be clumsy, it was too elegant for

that. But it was as if it might at any second break into something more than a rise and fall – a skip maybe. She was swinging a small black bag, almost throwing it out ahead of her with each step. She was eye catching, but I was the only one whose eye she seemed to have caught.

We were walking across the car park when I saw her, she was directly in my line of sight, between me and the lake. She had on a skirt, a long, very full skirt, down to the ground, brushing the floor. She brushed a hand down it as I looked, to straighten a fold perhaps. It was tweed, a smoke grey colour overlaid with a check of russet brown – just the colour of some of the birch leaves falling with whispers around us. It was a soft tweed,

not with the hardness or rough texture of a sheep's wool Harris tweed, but softer and more pliable, like a wool mixed with angora perhaps. And I'm not sure how I could know that from such a distance, but while I'm writing my hands tingle with the memory of the touch, it's embedded in the nerves under the skin, as if for a moment, lost to me now, there was no separation of time and place, of her and me, and I had touched the skirt, smoothing my own hands over it and folding the soft fabric into my palm, feeling every thread of the weave. I know that can't be, and yet it was, and it is the strangest part of all this strangeness. Over the skirt the woman wore a coat, again a russet colour, but of a harder, coarser tweed. It was longer at

the back, rounded at the edge and down past where I imagine her knees would be. Like the tailcoat of a morning suit worn by a bridegroom, or by a funeral director. As she walked and her skirt brushed the floor and caught with each step, it made a triangle shape behind her, so that she looked like the figurehead of a ship, or like Kate Winslet in Titanic.

I've no real impression of her face, except that it was a smiling, open face, not young but not old, maybe in her thirties, if I had to guess. Her hair was deep-water black, a thick rope of a plait that fell down over one shoulder to sit at the front, down halfway to her waist, skimming the gold military style buttons of her coat.

As I watched her – though it was hardly long enough to be called watching – she slowed her walk and turned her head to two men that were standing close to her as she passed on the path, and she said something and I think laughed. But I didn't see any acknowledgement from them, not with words, or changing their poses at all, or turning as she passed, which is how I imagine two men would behave if spoken to by a lovely woman, especially one in a long heavy tweed skirt and coat, on a sunny, happy, Autumn day.

And then I was distracted by a car passing in front of us, and when it moved aside, just a second later, she was gone. I wished I'd taken a photo, but you can't just take photos of people for no reason, and now I wonder what the picture would show, if anything, and I wonder if I would want to know. I didn't mention it to my partner then, though I wanted to, but it was on my mind and I asked him later that day, casually, tentatively, if he had seen her. He said no. Even though we had been walking holding hands, close together, looking in the same direction, he saw nothing but a sky-blue lake with birds landing like paper planes on its glassy surface.

Now I wonder about the whole thing, but I do know it happened, because it left an impact crater on my mind, the way that memories do. ■



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Netmenders

Ian Stephen on Donald Smith, subject of an exhibition at An Lanntair this summer and a new book from Acair

COY DOESN'T GIVE up easily. You see him out on the pier, all weathers, leading the netmenders. Yellow needles, loaded up with green twine, are going like the hammers as the hail is slicing across. The high bow of the Wave Crest, SY 3, is bobbing like bilio behind the squad. You used to hear Gaelic and English, all mixtie maxtie. You might get some Romanian or Bulgarian in there now. Ukranian too. Wouldn't be the first time a Baltic language was spoken by this tideway. Sometimes there's a big boulder, hoisted up on to the concrete. That would be the one that did the damage, lifted right from the sea-bed somewhere out the North Minch. Sometimes a trawler has to get a tow in, with its unwanted catch, to get sorted when they're tied up. It's a bit easier now, with power-blocks, to haul the trawl aboard. It used to be just a big steel block on the gantry, each side. The wires ran forward to the main winch.

This day, the needle was in Coy's hand and a section of green trawl in the other. He was in full yarning mode but we weren't standing on the hoil. We were in a sitting room up at Blaire Buithe – a care-home. Most of the people were pretty withdrawn but some were livelier than others. It had been quiet at first. For the first couple of minutes I wondered if the visit would be worthwhile. It wasn't my idea, not Coy's either. The artist Pat Law had noticed the way the rhythms of netmending and the associated yarning went together. She set up a whole project, with an exhibition of her own mixed-media responses, her daughter Mhairi's medium-format photographs and a performance in the fish-market. It was packed. That was the most life I'd seen in that mortuary for nehrops since the old days when the auctions marched, box to box. It's all sold on the phone now, before it gets here. We were at the care-home as part of the exhibition outreach, a link to the art centre's project to engage with sufferers of dementia and their families.

Coy stopped in front of one guy and performed his netmending action, talking all the time, joking away. I knew from Coy's tone that here was a man he still looked up to even though the old cove was stooped in a chair. Then I recognised him too. This was Jackie, skipper of some of the top earners in the town's dwindling fleet of trawlers. Countless tons of pink shells had come over his gunnels. Fish too, when there was enough of a bycatch to justify a fleet of artics making the trip to Aberdeen, dripping the bree of monks and haddies. Jackie brought my mate Sam Maynard out on the Annandale to take his classy black and white photos of trawling in the bouncy North Minch. One time

Jackie joined the crew of an Sulaire, a recreation of our open, north Lewis open craft, powered by a single dipping lugsail. Her build was the subject of a film, an Sgoth, proposed by Sam and directed by him. Jackie helped us navigate the sgoth from Port of Ness to the town. I remember him commenting on the excessive weather-helm. We'd have to do something about her trim. Seamanship counts, whether you're used to working under sail or not.

Now Coy was placing that section of net in the man's limp hand. Fingers tightened. Next he put the needle into the older man's other hand. It was a bit like putting a wire to a battery with a not very good connection. There was a flicker. That was enough for Coy. Still speaking away all the time, he took over the net, made a few stitches, then passed it and the needle back again. Jackie made the netmending movement, the knot that would form part of the repair to the mesh. Coy explained to everyone how a bigger hole might need a new section of net, as an insert. If the fishing was there and the market was there and the weather with it, you just had to get out again. There were plenty of days when you had no choice but to stay tied up.

My own part was to lead from Coy's easygoing blethers to the family stories I'd grown up with. I gave my pedigree first because the nicknames would mean

something to most of the folk in this room. More than one nod registered across the gap. A neat woman put her hand on my arm. 'Your uncle was Donald, the artist. He sat next to me in school, at the Nicolson. A lovely boy.' She sat beside me and went along with the tales of Dohmnall Caimbeul, the cove in the long coat who could get out of trouble with the speed of his wit. My mother passed many of those to me but her brother, Donald Smith and other brothers and sisters chipped in parts and variations.

Donald took me to task once when I showed him my first attempts to write them down. The main issue was the move from Gaelic to English but it was more complex than that. There was also the shift from spoken to written and the need to be equally scrupulous, whatever the medium. Even if it was a laughing matter. Only a matter of months back, I could have tried to tell my last surviving uncle that his former classmate had recognised me from the family resemblance and the name 'Safety.' That had been coined for one football-playing brother then applied to all the family. It would have been hard work. Donald was very withdrawn himself for the last few years of his life. He was cared for by his wife, Jewel, an accomplished artist and designer in her own right.

Still at Blaire Buidhe, with the room

warmed up and carers, relations, residents and visitors united in a proper ceilidh now, I was thinking back to one of my last visits with Donald. Jewel was showing her fellow-artist, my wife Christine, a few of her own works, after persuasion, as well as some of the vast collection of Donald's sketches, studies and finished paintings, amassed over a lifetime of compulsive work. We were left together. Donald looked me in the eye, then said 'Are you still writing?' He was picking up on a conversation from many years before. This was a secular version of the parable of the talents. Donald was not a believer in any religious faith. He did not flaunt that but he made no secret of it either. When it came to political beliefs, I think he was too firm a socialist to be a member of any available political party.

If Donald had a faith, it was healthy scepticism and he wouldn't have been the only one from Lewis in that camp, even though we were always known as the 'last bastion' of Presbyterianism. Our too few conversations were under the colourist shadows of large scale paintings from a man whose palette seemed to me to be getting more and more bold as he got older. It seemed to me that the netmenders became more and more of a feature, but a realistic observation rather than an idealised motif or a symbol.

He'd always haunted harbours and shores, as well as doing his share of work



Netsmen, Donald Smith, Oil on Canvas, 1969.

'Islander, the paintings of Donald Smith' will be at An Lanntair, Stornoway from 6th July - 17th August, with 'Donald Smith, the paintings of an islander' published by Acair in July

Tuath

Àireamh 3, Earrach 2019

Is treasa tuath na tighearna



Photo: Rachel Schmidt

Sgrìobhadh ùr le Meg Bateman, Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul, Maoilios Caimbeul, Dàibhidh Eyre, Màrtainn Mac an t-Saoir, Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh, Aonghas MacNeacail, Greg MacThòmais, Deborah Moffatt, Maggie Rabatski agus Julian Ronay

To my mother in old age

(August 2018, Connemara)

MEG BATEMAN

It’s a premonition of a time without you
to be standing on the shore of Connemara
looking at the Burren in County Clare
whose grey hills hold a memory of you
crouching down in the sunny grass
enthralled by the bright flowers of the grikes.

The stones on the beach are like white eggs,
the pale sand shifts with the tide ...
I laugh out loud at a perching rock.
There’s still time, it seems to say,
despite Moher’s plunging cliffs
despite the islands floating off to the west.

Laden brambles grab at my legs
in some bitter-sweet sign
as I cross the fields up from the sea
on a rough path through browning ferns.
I struggle to find a breach in the winding dikes
back to the road where the cars roar by.

Do mo mháthair ina seanaois

Is tuar na heasnamhachta atá le teacht
a bheith i mo sheasamh ar chladach Chonamara
ag féachaint uaim ar an mBoireann
agus cuimhne ag a cnoic liatha ort
agus tú ar do ghogaide ar an bhféar grianmhar
faoi dhraíocht ag bláthanna líoga na ngríog.

Is cosúil le huibheacha na clocha ar an trá,
bogann an gaineamh leis an taoide ...
Baineann carraig luascach gáire asam
mar a bheadh sí ag rá, Níl an t-am caite fós,
in ainneoin géire Aille an Mhothair,
in ainneoin na n-oileán ar snámh siar.
Beireann na driseoga greim sméarach ar mo chosa
ina gcomhartha atá idir shearbh is mhilis
mar a thrasnaím na páirceanna thuas ón bhfarraige
ar chosán garbh trí raithneach dhonn.
Streachlaím le bealach a fháil trí na claíocha casta
go dtí an bóthar le carranna ag sciúrdadh thart.

Na Pharasaich

AONGHAS PÀDRAIG CAIMBEUL

Rannsaich agus faic,
thuirt iad;
oir à Galilee
cha d’èirich fàidh

agus e an sin
air am beulaibh,
grian na Càisg’
a’ dannsa.

Agus dh’imich
gach aon da thaigh fhèin,
far an robh *Love Island*
air an telebhisean.

Teann a-nall ’s thoir dhomh do làmh

AONGHAS PÀDRAIG CAIMBEUL

Nuair a chì thu bodach,
cuimhnich gu bheil e fhathast
deich bliadhna dh’aois
agus a’ seòladh bàta-seileastair
sìos an abhainn gu Afraga.

Agus nuair a chì thu cailleach,
seall oirre leum tarsainn an ròpa
le firum-faram hò-rò-gheallaidh
’s i (fhathast)
a’ buain na rainich taobh Loch Èite.

Tha mi air bus
nan seann daoine
a’ dèanamh air Uibhist
chùbhraidh ùr nan gailleann,
far a bheil (fhathast) amfeasgar ciùin ‘s na siantan blàth...

Gràs nan Dathan

MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL

Nuair a rinn an Tì Naomh gràs
iongantach nan dathan, gealltanais
an earraich, na craoibhe, na bogha-froise,
faodaidh tu a bhith cinnteach, cinnteach
nach tàinig e à inntinn mhic an duine
no à mèinnearan dall, bodhar
na tràighe ’s nan creag.

Nuair a spreadh an cruthachadh na dhiog
bha inntinn an duine is dathan mar ghealladh
do dh’àm ri teachd, fada, fada
san tìmh dhomhainn a bha ri thighinn.
Dh’fheumadh gach nì bhith dìreach
ceart aig an toiseach ud, a h-uile feart
air a thomhas gu leud na sròine
agus nas lugha. Cha thachradh sin
ach le inntinn agus cumhachd air a chùlaibh
a tha cho fada os cionn ar bith
’s a tha na reul-chriosan cian cho fada
os cionn an ataim as lugha a tha sa chrèadh.
Èist rium Athair Naoimh, Athair
nan uile dhath, is soillsich orm
led inntinn thùsail, gur tusa
màthair-uisge nan uile bhith.

Nuair a dhùisg mothachadh gu ciall
aig na tràth athraichean is mhàthraichean
chunnaic iad am feur gun robh e maiseach,
caoin, a’ ghrian a’ soillseadh air gu rèidh
air gach taobh, gun robh anns an uaine
sàbhailteachd is sìth, ’s ann an craobhan
na coille gun robh na h-eòin a’ seinn,
gathan buidhe, aitealan òir.

Agus chunnaic iad dearg, gun do rinn
an Tì Naomh dearg, àm èirigh na grèine
’s aig a dol fodha, ròsan nan speur,
’s an fhuil nuair a lot an saighead,
’s anns an teine nuair a loisg an cunnart,
’s anns an aiseid nuair a dhùisg a’ bheatha,
’s anns an duilleach nuair a shìolas beatha
chunnaic iad dearg, ’s chuir e eagal orra.

Ach bha sìth sa bhogha-frois, bogha
os an cionn a’ toirt cofhurtachd, Spèis
a’ tighinn às na speuran, thuirt iad,
na dathan uile a’ deàrrsadh, dearg,
orains, buidhe, uaine, gorm,
purpaidh is bàn-phurpaidh an co-sheirm,
ceòl dathan an fhlaithis a’ dèanamh
gàirdeachas ri frasan ùrar a bheir fàs.

2.
Ach cuideachd bidh am bogha-frois na thàmh,
Am feur seargte, na beathaichean seasg,
An diabhlaidh ag adhbharachadh tart is pràmh.

A Dhè thoir dhuinn an sealladh sìorraidh,
Teasraig sinn bhon stoirm ’s bhon tuil.

Cloc gun Chlì

MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR

Thìmh.
Thus’ an trustar,
Thus’ an diog-diabhail.

Thusa dròbhair,
nan cabhag-dhàn
nan garbh-ghràdhach
nam bloigh-shealladh
nan deann-dìcheallach-dèirceach,
ar crìche,
ar sàr-chrìche cianda craicte.

Thìmh, o a Thìmh!

Uair, is chan fhad’, ach o chianaibh
chailleadh sùrdag, latha samhraidh,
thu
no coibhneas obann nàmhad
no plaide dòchais san anmoch.

Cha b’ uabhasach idir,
B’ fhurasta do chur am màileid
B’ ait gach braoisgeil nuadh thar faire

Thusa, a Thìmh
Thus’ am blaignead,
Thu fhèin an garbh-dhiog
Thu fhèin an crìon-dhàn, thu fhè...

Sannt, bu leatsa, air an-earar, fòs.
Leat, sealbh am-feast air an dearg-dhiugh.

Aig ochd bliadhn’ deug

MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR

Aig ochd bliadhn’ deug
'S e an-diugh is chan e a-màireach no an-dè do chùis.

Aig ochd bliadhn’ deug
Fanaidh cuid de rionnagan laiste air feadh an latha
Tha blàths ùr anns gach gealach mu seach.

Aig ochd bliadhn’ deug
Na can ‘cha dèan mi sin a–chaidh’
Ach freagair: ‘Seadh, innis dhomh tuilleadh.

Aig ochd bliadhn’ deug
Na cogair do shunnd
Nuair a ghabhas sin seinn.

Aig ochd bliadhn’ deug
Seòl do bhàta le sgòdan glisce slaodte
Ach le dùil ri soirbheas ceart cothromach

Agus aig *cocktail-party* ochd bliadhn’ deug:

Ged a nochdas *jazz* no–chòrdte is *hip-hop* aig an aon àm; strainnsear
le ukeleli is pac chairtean le feadhainn ga dhìth; an nàbadh shìos an rathad, ris nach
do bhruidhinn thu riamh, an tòir air rud a chàraicheas a bhaidhsagal; taibhs’ bàrd
cliùiteach na Gàidhlig is an dàn aige nach do thuig thu ceart; bruidhinn bho chd; brot
ro shailte agus an tè ud (tha fhios agad cò) a bha daonnan caran fad’ às leat.

'S i an aon cheist a dh’fheumar a chur orra uile:
bheil sibh ga h-iarraidh crathte (*shaken?*) no air a cur mun cuairt (*stirred?*)

At Eighteen

MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR

At eighteen:
it is today rather than tomorrow or yesterday that matters.

At eighteen:
some of the stars show their light in the day time
there is new warmth in each successive moon.

At eighteen:
Don’t say ‘I’ll never do that!’
Rather, answer, ‘Mmm, tell me a little more.’

At eighteen:
don’t whisper your glee when it can be sung.

At eighteen:
Sail your boat with deftly trimmed sheets
But with the expectation of a fair, favourable, wind.

And at eighteen’s cocktail-party
Should discordant jazz and hip-hop appear at the same time;
a random with a ukulele and an incomplete pack of cards;
your neighbour down the road – whom you’ve never spoken to – in search of a
puncture-repair kit;
the ghost of a Gaelic Bàrd bearing the poem you never quite got; poor chat; over-
salty soup and her (you know who I mean) that was always a bit distant.

The only question that needs to be asked of them all is this:
‘How would you like it: shaken or stirred?’

Nollaig san Eighealaich

MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR

Null
mu thrì uairean
air gainmhich
nach gabh, nach gèill
suathaidh solas lag:
grian is gealach,
air an cur air chothrom.

Cò aca, ma–thà, leis is leis am biùg?
An gabh coiseachd fodha?
Agus an rud as motha nach fhaicear,
o nach aiteamh conair,
mun neartaich an liath, a–nochd tuilleadh,
san lomnochd làn?

Tha a’ bhò chonadail ud fhathast a’ siubhal a criomain
agus cus a chaoraich nach do chronaich iad fhèin far nan càs–chreagan.
Ach ‘s e sgal cruaidh nan con as miosa, ‘‘S e, ’s e, nach eil fhios gur e!’
Ged as fhad’ às tùs am bòlaich – cha chiùin, cha charthanach, cha cheart.

Air a ghlùinean,
thèid leth–bhodach
air beulaibh bogsa nach bior fearg no faothachadh
fhad ’s a bheir a bhean bhalbhaicht’ cluas do shrann anmoch
an ogha bhig.

“Is macan àlainn ceutach, Thu!”

Is dè as reusan dhi dhol ga dhùsgadh,
gun iad sin roimhe a–rithist, an–diugh?

Rùn, a thoirt beò
is a bheathachadh
is a thabhachd gu fialaidh
air fuath an t–saoghail,
do–ruigsinn, claon.
An aimsir cho buan.
A chall–san cho cinnteach.
A h–ùrnaigh na deigh mu a cridh’.

Gun idir a shireadh

MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR

Àite, can
ged nach dèan ‘àite’, no ‘staid’, no ‘creag chas’ ach na h–uimhir aithris.

Nach eil thus’ ann, chan eil teagamh,
thusa – thu fhèin, chan ann leat fhèin – ro fhada.

Oir, nochdaidh feareigin, ri ùine bhig – tiota de thim shaoghalta,
Beiridh e – (cha bheir) – togaidh e, gu sìobhalta, do làmh na làimh–san
Sìoda a shìneas tusa, dhad dheòin, cuimhnich, dha fhèin, ged nach fhada.

‘Bu ro–bhog an grèim–geallaidh’ thuirt thu.
Cha bu mhò lean trusgan an fhèinealtais.

An iar air? Thug, feumaidh.
Ghabh thusa rathad an ear.

Chìthear ur faileasan ge–tà;
air ais a–sin – nan laighe: ball–fo–alt–fo–bhall
a’ sìor chànrán – cion ciùineis, dìth uaisleachd
gun aidich iad, ri ùine mhòir fhathast, le cràdh do–labhairt,
gur e an dubhar fhèin an aon fhìor chipean –
ach cho beag, ’s a tha ris dheth,
os cionn na talmhainn.

Claisneachd Ri Cluais

MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR

Ri spàirn gun farchluais air a’ chòmhradh cailleachan is iad cruinn, mum bòrd-san! ’n dèidh bhith snàmh, is làn am beòil ac’ de naidheachd iargalt’ air càirdean leònte:

a thuit air deigh no leis an staidhridh,
no bhàsaich mun Bhliadhn’ Ùir gun taic ann,
’s nach robh math gu dannsa ruidhle
latha a b’ fheàrr ’ad, no idir fialaidh
nan gnìomhannan, nan smaointean spìocach,
no air dèiligeadh ri caochladh tìme,
is mur a b ’e ’s gun deach an cùmhnadh
le dìomaineachd an cèile ghaolaich
’s fhad’ o bha iad air saoghal a thrèigsinn –
aghaidh a chur air uabhar èige,
is nach b’ airidh air aon bhliadhna shàbhailt’
dhe na choisinn iad gun ghean, gun tàmailt
Dia nan Gràsan (’n Tì tha gòrach!’),
iad-siud sìor-mhiannachadh a thròcair
is...

Theab mi leum ’s an clab a mhùchadh,
bròg a shradadh, no le glaoth om bhrù-sa,
ach dh’iarr mo dhàn mi dhèanamh èisteachd:
briathran fhaotainn – gun fhios nach m’ fheum iad.

Òran Eile do Joilìn★

MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR

*Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn,
’S tusa, a luaidh, an tè
nach toigh leam fhìn.*

Oh ’s e do bhòidhchead is do shnuadh
dualan lasrach is gruag ruadh
a bhuair mi is a leòn mo chridh’ Joilìn.

*Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn,
’S tusa, a luaidh, an tè
nach toigh leam fhìn.*

Anail earraich na do ghàir
guth cho maoth ri samhradh blàth:
tàlantan fìor ainneamh measg nam beò.

Nuair bha mi ann am meadhan gaoil
lem òg-bhean chaoimh is sinn mar aon
’s ann thàini’ tusa eadrainn Joilìn

*Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn,
’S tusa, a luaidh, an tè
nach toigh leam fhìn.*

Is ged gheibheadh tu do ragha-cèil’
thug thu a’ chreids’ gur leam do spèis
is mheall thu mi le sùilean uain’ làn foill.

Is chaidh mo ribeadh fo do chumhachd
mar luch aig spuir an fhithich luaith
is theann mi ri mo chiall a chall Joilìn.

*Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn,
’S tusa, a luaidh, an tè
nach toigh leam fhìn.*

Ge b’ oil leam thug thu orm buaidh
’s ann ort a bhruidhninn na mo shuain,
is dh’fhuiling i gach lid’ air clusaig-chinn.

Is ghuidh i ort na h-òran binn
gun mis’ a thàladh is leigeil leinn,
ach dhiùlt thu bhith gun mhì-ghean dhuinn Joilìn.

*Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn,
’S tusa, a luaidh, an tè
nach toigh leam fhìn.*

Is lean mi thu mar ghloic gun tùr
a dh’ionnsaigh olc do bhrìodail chiùin
is cha do dhùisg mi, gus an deach mo chnàmh.
Ach mhothaich mi lem shùilean fhìn
an dèidh dhuinn greis air suirghe
nach ionnan miann air feòil’ is gaol, Joilìn.

*Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn,
’S tusa, a luaidh, an tè
nach toigh leam fhìn.*

Is nuair rinn mi tilleadh gu mo ghràdh
cha b’ urrainn dhi bhith a’ cleith a cràidh:
’s ann sheall i dhomhsa deòir a soraidh slàn

Is b’ fheàrr leam nach do thachair riamh
gun deach mo tharraing às ar sìth
is gun d’ chaill mi na bha prìseil dhomh, Joilìn.

*Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn,
’S tusa, a luaidh, an tè
nach toigh leam fhìn.*

Is nam faicinn thu a’ gabhail ceum
air cabhsair cruaidh no sràid leat fhèin
chan iarrainns’ bhith nad àrainn no nad chòir.

Ach uair is uair is mi seo leam fhìn
air eilean m’ fhàsaich fad od thìr
bidh d’ ìomhaigh ruith mo bhruadaran, Joilìn!

*Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn,
’S tusa, a luaidh, an tè
nach toigh leam fhìn.*

*Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn, Joilìn,
’S tusa an tè a luaidh
nach toigh leam fhìn.*

★ A rèir beul-aithris cuid is fathannan feadhainn eile
’s ann às fear de dh’eileanan na h-Alba a bha an duine
a dh’ fhàg a leannan airson Joilìn. Some say that the
guy who left his woman for Joleen was a Hebridean –
others don’t.

Guth air a’ Ghaoith

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Mac-talla saighdeir òig
fo fhòid Chùil Lodair:

*“Abair na mìltean
de ghedidh ghlòrach
a sgeith thairis
air na leònte
an là redìte ud
a fhuair mi am bàs.”*

Cathair Naomh Pheadair

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Cathair Pheadair na Ruise am bliadhna.
Stèisean fo thalamh cho domhainn ri cumha.

Easgaileutair Sòibheadach neo-chrìochnach
na shìor shruthadh mar dhubh-liosta Stàilinn.

A’ chlisge ruitheam threunairean de dheugair
a’ snìomh seachad air na dromannan croma

na ruith suas gu sunndach dhan t-solas
air Nevskiy Prospekt eadar-nàiseanta

far a bheil Tolstoi is Soilsinìtsin air an dòigh
nan suidhe còmhla ri càch ann am McDonalds

ag ithe diathaid deagh-shaillte “фиш & чипс”★
am bogadh ann am fìon-geur Cirilise.

(★Faclan Beurla “Fish & Chips” sgrìobhte ann an
litrìchean Rùisis. Air postair-uinneige Macdonalds)

Port-adhair Ghlaschu

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Nam shuidhe
taobh thall
an raoin-laighe.

Mo smaointean
a’ tadhal
air saoghal eile.

A’ gabhail miann
air Reykjavík
seach Lunnainn.

Cladh Iùdhach Ghlaschu

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

*“Ma thèid sionnach suas,
brìsidh e sìos am balla cloiche.”* (Nehemiah 4:3)

Ciaradh feasgar Ghlaschu an Ear.
Balla-cladha air an leathad thall.
Fon graifiti, madadh-ruadh mar thaibhse.
A cuileanan sgiamhail ri falach-fead
am measg nan seann leacan fiara.

Dà là às dèidh a chèile,
thàinig luchd-tuiridh Iùdhach
air an èideadh gu dorch,
ach cuideigin ann le còta dearg,
mar shealladh à ‘Liosta Schindler’.

A h-uile clach sa bhalla ud
le a sgeul briste fhèin.
Na h-aonar sgapte ‘s air call,
ach còmhla ri chèile nan seasamh,
graifiti ann no sionnaich às.

Lomaire-feòir

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Chuala mi lomaire-feòir
gu h-àrd anns an adhar
a’ gearradh tron ghuirme.

Chunnaic mi air oidhche fhuair
fras reòthte uaine mar dheòir
a’ deàrrsadh fon ghealaich.

Am Baton-brèige

(*Às dèidh Reifrin*n 2014)
FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Cnuic Loch Nis fo shneachd’ an-diugh.
Cuirm-chiùil àm-lòin Radio 3.

Denis Kozhukhin air piàno.
Mussorgsky: ‘Deilbh aig Taisbeanadh’.

Cha tàinig e. Ar saorsa.
Tha sinn air fàs ceòl-bhodhar a-rithist.

Bha Geata Mòr Kiev an siud
a’ fosgladh fa ar comhair le glòir

ach chaidh slabhraidhean ceilte
a shlaodadh agus dhùin e le dìosgan.

Saoil cò thug an àithne chealgach ud
los eòin cheòlmhor na maidne a mhùchadh?

Cò an dearg-bhrùid a bhris meòir ar luchd-ciùil?
Am fear-brath a bheartaich glas-ghuib air a’ chòisir?

Cò leis an làmh shliom a dh’iomair am baton-brèige,
slacan-draoidh sliogach co-fheall na tostachd?

Chuir mi mo cheann

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Chuir mi mo cheann
sa mheuraig
ach bha i ro theann

Chuir mi mo cheann
sa phìoba
ach bha mac-talla ann

Chuir mi mo cheann
sa fridse
ach bha e fada ro fhuar

Chuir mi mo cheann
sa phreasa
ach bha cus chòtaichean ann

Chuir mi mo cheann
sa challaid
ach fhuair mi sgròb ghoirt

Chuir mi mo cheann
sa mhuir ach bhìd
crùbag chrost’ mo shròn

Chuir mi mo cheann
sa ghainmheach
ach rinn mi casadaich

Chuir mi mo cheann
sa chidsin
ach chaidh trod rium

Chuir mi mo cheann
sna sgothan
‘s bha mi air mo dhòigh ghlan.

Air Ais

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

A’ sìor ghabhail ceum
air ais air ais air ais
ach am faic mi an sealladh slàn.

Air ais dhan
t-siorraidheachd
mas robh mi ann.

Carson is cuimhne leam a-nis
an t-àm ri teachd
nas mò na an t-àm a chaidh?

Eunlaith

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Ghoid starrag
marag.

Rinn lachan
lachan-gàire.

Bha geòidh
air an dòigh.

Plaosg gàire
air naosg.

B’ annsa le buthaid
dannsa.

Cheil breacan-beithe
fo mheacan-slèibhe.

Chaidh lon-dubh
fo lionn-dubh.

Bha fraoch feirge
air coileach-fraoich.

Bha corra chorra
air corra-biod.

Chaoin traoin
gu gearradh-goirt.

Chriom clamhan coma
cnàmhan sgapte.

B’ fheàrr leis an iolair
biolair.

Bha an eala bhàn
loma-làn.
Laigh sàmhchair bhalbh
air an sgarbh mharbh.

air an latha seo

AONGHAS MACNEACAIL

air an latha seo,
faicinn gach morair is triath
(aig ìre nan earrann is bonn
a bhi teann ‘s a phòcaid) ‘s iad
a’ snàmh ann an linntean suilt
is, fom brògan, dromanan
lùbte a chòrr na cabhsair beò
air an deachadh iad a’ spailpeadh
an uaill ann an ceumannan coma,
thar sgeòil fhada nam muinntir
a chuir iomradh, dàn is òran
an eachdraidh fhèin ma sgaoil
le dòchas gun geallar saorsa –
chan iarr sinn ach ionann, ars’
iad, *eadar bòrd agus beul*, is
gun coisich sinn far an togair,
leis an dùil gu bheil biathadh,
chuirp agus eanchainn, gu bhith
ceart còireil dìreach, gun mhaille
romhainn ‘s gun iorghail – thoir
dhuinn an ionann, thoir dhuinn
an ionann le toil, mus gabh sinn
an ionann dhuinn fhìn, le toil

on this day

on this day,
seeing every laird and clan chief
(at the level of shares and coins
being tight in the pocket) as they
swim in the firths of paunch
and, under their shoes the bent
backs of the others a living pavement
on which they would strut
their pride in regardless steps,
over the long stories of peoples
who set the narrative, poem and song,
of their own history at liberty
with the hope that freedom is promised –
all we ask is equality, they
say, *between table and mouth*, and
that we can walk where we choose,
expecting there to be food
for body and mind, to be
right proper direct, with no delay
before us and no strife – give
us equality, give us
equality at will, lest we take
equality for ourselves, at will

plastic time
AONGHAS MACNEACAIL

living in the plastic time
you learn to view
 what's around you
as a synthesis of all
the wrappings which
have bound each day
into a package
 of frustrations
from which
 there might
be no release

=====

on a train
passing the coal pit
 mechanicals,
i recall an escorted visit,
the caged drop
 into
those
unlit bowels,
dark dust underfoot,
being taken to view
an active face
(it being saturday, no-
one was hacking coal) -
 to be required
to crouch was not
a working choice
 i'd wish to make

=====

i wish i'd agreed
a bright summer plan to be
writing ha-i-ku

=====

a slum is not the house
or those who live within,
but absent wallets, drawing
coin and comfort
from plough, hammer, pen, or
pulsing hungry heart

=====

to go fishing
in the bay beyond
where we had hoped to shelter
from an enemy we'd rather
keep at tidal distance demands
overcoming certain contradictions
so we must come to recognise suing
for peace may be the wisest option

there should not be any
edge of madness to the table
round which we are asked
to gather so that deliberations

may commence regarding
whether there is enough
attention being given to
the management of this -

unspoken arguments do
not enhance (ever) the flow
of what we hope to be
enabling thought

=====

i want your curiosity,
though accepting it is not
for sale or to be bargained
into any kind of game
where you are asked to buy
whatever is on offer -
you enquire (or cross
an ocean to inquire),
the question never fully
given enough grammar
to make clear

=====

where poppies grow
they take no sides,
the memories they wear
are in their hue
and what it represents
is such shed blood
that carried vows
to not repeat
to not repeat

=====

shipwreck may provide
rich shelter
for the weaving
shoals and soloists
seeking provender
among its twisted decks
but the passing swimmer
knows, below, there will be
bare rickles of bones

=====

man pushing tractor tyre
from where to where - in
passing, one may speculate

what is remembered is
the way he keeps it
balanced, as he goes

there being traffic,
he must be
attentive at all times

nor can he tire of
pushing this great tyre -
an end is to be gained

=====

when the wind decides
to breathe in, let calm
return, there is an urge
to listen for an absence
of disquiet among drier
leaves: are all branches
holding firmly to a hope
they can remain at ease,
unstretched, allowed to
stay alive, until they fall

=====

gull glides overhead, as
directly above, beyond
grey cloud, plane growls

=====

every singer reaches out to
those (it's hoped) will understand
the tenor of the song, will let
its pith fold in their hearts
and grow, as buds of grief or joy

=====

that time i phoned you
said you could not be
available to perform
the chore i wished to
have deployed, though
it was no burden, had
you taken time to read
the abstract i'd every
hope was the essence
of metaphoric clarity

=====

such structured echoes
live in how we count
each lifting of the pen
by which our narrative
is given fugitive shape

on the road
AONGHAS MACNEACAIL

on the road we took yesterday
there was no ditch between track
and the broad fields of grass
where the township's cattle
grazed - there were cows, but
we didn't know each other, for
i was only visiting those
shadows that uttered not one
word about the days we had had
and no familiar bellow came
from cold stone - wasn't that how

Ruith na searbhaige

DÀIBHIDH EYRE

Tha i annam, annainn uile, searbhag na broinn –
a’ tionndadh ar n-arain làitheil a bhith na lionnach làn
phròtainean, is mèinnearan, na tha deatamach ‘son a bhith slàn –
a’ faighinn cuideachaidh bho na fèithean, a’ gluasad ann an tonn.
Searbhag cho cumhachdach gun sgùradh e stàilinn, donn
le meirg, gus a bhiodh i a-rithist, drilseach, gleansach, glan;
cho cumhachdach gum feum a’ bhodhaig a cumail a-mhàin
san stamaig, gus na buill eile a dhìon bho losgadh teann.

Ach gu tric, dhomhsa, chan ann mar sin a bhios cùisean a’ ruith,
is searbhag ag èirigh nam sgòrnan, nam amhaich, nam bheul;
a’ grodadh m’ fhiaclan, a’ tighinn thar na teangaidh anns mo chlab,
a’ tighinn thar mo bhilean agus gam fhàgail ann an cnap mòr,
is mi a’ dìobhairt – mar gu bheil mi a’ call mo chiall;
a’ cur às le pian searbh na rudan bunaiteach nam bhroinn.

Na Geòidh

(bhon Bheurla aig Mary Oliver)

GREG MACTHÒMAIS

Cha ruig thu a leas a bhith math
Cha ruig thu a leas màgarsaich nas motha,
fad ceud mìle tron fhàsach, aithreach.
Chan fheum thu ach leigeil le beathach bog na bodhaige
a ghràdh fhèin a ghràdhachadh.
Nach innis thu dhomh mun eu-dòchas,
do sgeul fhèin, is innsidh mise mo sgeul-sa,
fhad ‘s a chuireas a’ chruinne car,
fhad ‘s a shiùbhlas grian is dòrnagan glan an fhrois thar àrainnean,
thar mhachraichean, thar chraobhan domhain,
thar bheanntan is aibhnichean,
fhad ‘s a thilleas na geòidh,
shuas san iarmailt ghlan, ghorm dhachaigh a-rithist.
Às bith cò thu, às bith cho aonaranach ‘s a tha thu,
tha an saoghal ga thairgsinn fhèin do do mhac-meanmna,
gad ghairm mar na geòidh, cruaidh agus dùsgach
– gad fhoillseachadh a-rithist is a-rithist,
is tu ann an co-chomann leis a h-uile nì.

Stiùbhart ann an Nua-Eabhrac

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Chòrd Nua-Eabhrac ris glan.
Naoidheamh làr Taigh-òsta Shelburne.
Sàr-shealladh dhen Togalach Stàit Ìmpireachd.

Ach dhùisg seo gu dona an tuaineil-àirde aige.
Bha an taigh-òsta trang, ach air a’ cheann thall fhuair e
rùm le sealladh nas miosa shìos air an dàrna ùrlar.

Tha duilgheadas aige fiù ’s le drochaidean àrda.
Agus thàinig iad tarsainn tè àrd dha-riribh air an t-slighe –
Drochaid Queensboro.

“Carson a tha feagal ort ro dhrochaidean
nuair nach eil dragh ort a thaobh itealain?”
, dh’fhaighnich mi.
“Och tha sgiathan orrasan”, thuirt e.

Mar a b’ fhaisg’ a thàinig crìoch a làithean-saora,
is ann a bu mhò a ghabh e sgàth. Oir b’ ann taobh thall
Drochaid Queensboro a bha port-adhair JFK.

Thòisich e ag òl mus do dh’fhalbh e.
Ann am bàr traidiseanta faisg air an taigh-òsta.
Pinnt lagar. Is beag feum a rinn seo, gu nàdarra.

Mhìnich e a’ chùis gu nighinn a’ bhàir.
“Feumaidh mi dol tarsainn Drochaid Queensboro
air an rathad dhan phort-adhair. Tha iomagain mhòr orm.”

Lagar eile. Cha do rinn seo cobhair na bu mhò.
Glainne fion. Glainne fion eile.
Cha robh an stuth seo a’ dèanamh a’ ghnothaich.

“Carson nach do shluig thu tè mhòr no dhà
de uisge-beatha?”, dh’fhaighnich mi dheth.
“Och cha toigh leam spioradan”, fhreagair e.

Air a’ cheann thall siod e a-nis air a’ bhus
air an t-slighe iomagaineach dhan phort-adhair,
an drochaid a’ sìor fhàs na b’ eagalaiche na inntinn.

Drochaid àrd Queensboro a’ sìor dhlùthachadh ris.
Drochaid ag èirigh na amharc a-nis. Cridhe ag èirigh na uchd.
Ach gun dùil nach deach am bus a-steach tunail fon abhainn...

Tuaineil-àirde gu tunail-ìsle!

Meg Bateman Tha Meg Bateman, a rugadh an Dùn Èideann an 1959, na h-ollamh aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig san Eilean Sgitheanach. Tha i air trì leabhraichean den bhàrdachd aice fhèin a thoirt a-mach, agus tha i cuideachd air trì cruinneachaidhean de bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig eadar-theangachadh is a cho-dheasachadh. Chaidh dà leabhar aice, *Aotromachd* (1997) agus *Soirbheas* (2007) a chur air adhart do dhuais “leabhar Albannach na bliadhna”.

Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul ‘S ann bhon An Leth Mheadhanach an ceann a deas Uibhist a Deas a tha Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul. Tha e air grunn leabhraichean fhoillseachadh, nam meag ‘An Oidhche Mus Do Sheòl Sinn’, ‘Aibisidh’ agus ‘Memory and Straw’ a ghlèidh duaisean thaobh ficsean is bàrdachd na h-Alba.

Maoilios Caimbeul Bàrd agus sgrìobhaiche às an Eilean Sgitheanach. An leabhar mu dheireadh a thàinig bhuaithe `s e *An Dà Anam / In Two Minds*, conaltradh bàrdail Gàidhlig / Gaeilge air a cho-

sgrìobhadh le Diarmuid Johnson.

Dàibhidh Eyre Rugadh Daibhidh Eyre ann an Siorrachd Lannraig a Tuath ann an 1972. Thòisich e ag ionnsachadh na Gàidhlig aig Oilthigh Dhùn Èideann ann an 1990. Airson a’ mhòr-chuid de bheatha, bha e a’ fuireach ann an Glaschu, ag obair sna meadhanan – ach tha e a-nist san Leargaidh Ghallda. Tha dàin aige air nochdadh ann an irisean leithid *Na Guths*, *Gutter*, *Irish Pages*, *Tuath / Northwords Now*, *Poetry Scotland* agus *Poblachd nam Bàrd*. Bha e na bhàrd air mhuinntireas aig Fèis Bàrdachd StAnza ann an 2018.

Màrtainn Mac an t-Saoir Rugadh Màrtainn Mac an t-Saoir ann an 1965 agus thogadh ann an Lèanaidh e. Ghlèidh *Ath-Aithne*, cruinneachadh de sgeulachdan goirid, Duais na Saltire Society airson Ciad Leabhair ann an 2003. Choisinn na nobhailean *Gymnippers Dìciadain* agus *An Latha As Fhaide* a bhith air a’ gheàrr-liosta airson Leabhar na Bliadhna ann an 2005 is an 2008. San Dàmhair 2006, chaidh *Dannsam led Fhaileas*,

cruinneachadh de a bhàrdachd, fhoillseachadh le Luath Press. Nochd an treas nobhail aig Màrtainn, *Air A Thòir*, ann an 2011 is bhuannaich *A’ Challaig Seo Challò* – nobhail do dheugairean – Duais Dhòmhnaill Meek 2013. Chaidh na sgeulachdan *Cala Bendita `s a Bheannachdan* fhoillseachadh le Acair ann an 2014 is fhuair an leabhar sin àite air geàrr-liosta Dhuais Dhòmhnaill Meek agus Leabhar Litreachais na Bliadhna aig an Saltire Society. Chuireadh *Tiuth Air A’ Bhealach* – novella dhen t-sreath Lasag – ann an clò le Sandstone Press ann an 2015. Anns an Iuchar 2018 chaidh an nobhail ùr aige *Samhradh `78* fhoillseachadh le Luath Press.

Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh Tidsear ealain air chluainidh ann an Inbhir Nis.

Aonghas MacNeacail Poet in three languages, songwriter, journalist, broadcaster, translator, scriptwriter. A Borders-based Skyman, poetry has taken him to North America, Japan, Rome, Jerusalem, Berlin, Vienna, Warsaw, St Petersburg, the Arctic Circle,

Ireland and other destinations. Has held various literary fellowships, gaining many awards for his writing. Fellow of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, with an honorary Doctorate of Literature from Glasgow University.

Greg MacThòmais Rugadh is thogadh Greg MacThòmais ann an Siorrachd Dhùn Breatainn. Chaidh e a Shlèite anns an Eilean Sgitheanach ann an 2000 airson ceum Gàidhlig agus tha e air a bhith ag obair ann an Leabharlann na Colaiste agus a’ fuireach san sgìre bhon a cheumnaich e. Bidh e a’ sgrìobhadh bàrdachd, sgeulachdan, dràma agus òran. Bidh beatha is bòidhchead an Eilein Sgitheanaich, saoghal a shinnsearan, cùisean poilitigeach agus na ceanglaichean, sean is ùr, eadar Alba is Èirinn a’ nochdadh gu tric na chuid sgrìobhaidh. Ghlèidh e Duais nan Sgrìobhadairean Ùra aig Comhairle nan Leabhraichean agus Urras Leabhraichean na h-Alba ann an 2015. Chaidh a chuid sgrìobhaidh fhoillseachadh ann an

New Writing Scotland, Northwords Now, Cabhsair/Causeway, agus Aiblins – New Scottish Political Poetry.

Deborah Moffatt À Vermont (USA), a' fuireach ann am Fìobha a-nis. Bidh dà cho-chruinneachadh aice air fhoillseachadh ann an 2019, “Eating Thistles,” (Smokestack Books), agus fear ann an Gàidhlig.

Maggie Rabatski Ag obair an-dràsta còmhla ri A.C. Clarke is Sheila Templeton air leabhran de bhàrdachd ùr Gàidhlig, Albais is Beurla, a’ leantainn air ar co-obrachadh san leabhran ‘Owersettin’ (Tapsalteerie) a chaidh fhoillseachadh an 2016.

Julian Ronay A’ fuireach anns an Aghaidh Mhòir. Dàin leis anns an duanaire *An Tiul*.

on the land, taking part in collective sheep-gatherings (fanks) and peat-cutting with extended family. His own father had been a fisherman before herring markets tumbled and he became a road labourer. This is confirmed on my own stamped personal documents as well as in yarns. After National Service and studies at Gray's School of Art, leading on to becoming head of art at Summerhill Academy, Aberdeen, Donald returned with his family to Lewis to work as an itinerant art teacher. Even before that, when the family lived in the tall and fine Orrok House, up the hill from Balmedie beach, he seemed drawn to the tidal stake-nets, harvested from wide, blunt-sterned cobsles. He told me the fishermen would put aside some flounders for him, their own bycatch amongst the running salmon they'd intercepted. One painting from that period reveals the whiteish seaboots, as part of a composition of workers, shifting gear by tractor. For a man who was an admirer of Rembrandt and best known in his own early career for portraiture, the figures are faceless. The composition has a convincing harmony but the whole work does not veer into socialist realism or caricature.

By chance, right now, just a few year's after this, my last uncle's death, I've been catching up on some missed books which have cast my mind back to a few remembered conversations. I veered off-course, as a student to read *USA* by John Dos Passos, after a mature student celebrated it, at a seminar. This summer (2017) I brought *Manhattan Transfer* to sea with me, to use the hours spent waiting for tide or weather. First published in 1925, the 1986 Penguin edition has a reproduction of *Silver Dollar Bar* by Edward Burra on its cover. This is a more cartoon-like painting than Donald's work but there are strong similarities. A large group of individual figures are all caught, fixed in a moment, as if an aperture had opened for the correct exposure. There is no blur but posters, shelves, bottles, cutlery and foreground ashtray are all there too and simplified like the figures caught in line and colour. Despite countless sketches showing the most detailed depictions of faces, crofts and harboursides, Donald's paintings often eschew that detail and arrange, even distort, individual elements, especially in the boat and netmending arrangements.

I'm looking now at a painting given to me by my uncle, in memory of his late younger son, Finlay. To me, there are recognisable elements of Stornoway harbour environs. A gable-end could be that of lobht nan seol – the old sail loft or netmending loft. A section of this building, when renovated, was to become my own home for about ten years, but neither of us knew that when the present was made. A mizzen sail, more orange than tan, curves across that weathered wall. It is supported by a spar. The lashings, like the chimney pots above them, seem accurate but when you look



Window to the West, Donald Smith

closely both are done in the swiftest of squiggles. A curved board is suggested by one line. It seems decorative but I can recognise it as the 'crutch' which would support the boom, when not in use for swinging baskets or boxes ashore. The block or hauler is more of a blur as are the faint buoys which would raise the top edge of the trawl. The painter has more freedom than the photographer when it comes to deciding which parts of the whole will be detailed and which can be thrown out of focus.

Archive film footage of Donald at work reveals an astonishing fluency. This is the confidence gained by a lifetime of driven sketching. This is a ballad of a painting. The drama is gained by omission as well as by including these most telling details. It is signed but there is no title and none on the back though the dedication is there and the studio address is Orrok House first and a later addition of the number of the house, built in Bragar, Isle of Lewis.

It only occurs to me now that the painting could as easily be set in Aberdeenshire though Donald would visit Lewis, with his family, for parts of the summer holidays and no doubt would be sketching. If you are accurate in your depiction of the significant detail, then the work is both specific to place and somewhere beyond any place. Amongst the countless, coloured sketches are several harbourside sketches where the background architecture is unmistakably that of lobht nan seol. Perhaps the intention is different from that of the more free paintings. Maybe it's similar to the way a jazz drummer is steeped in the rhythms that he will not be afraid to disrupt.

Donald's elder son Jonathan proposed the title 'a lost modernist' for a gathering of selected works by his father. This seems to me, a valuable way of looking at the huge legacy. I don't think I leaned as far

in the modernist direction as my uncle but how could the period not be an influence on both generations? I was hit hard by Eliot's *The Wasteland* but it's *The Four Quartets*, I return to. I was so under the spell of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist...* and *Dubliners* that I failed to venture further into *Ulysses*. I often saw the thick paperback version by his armchair. But when I tried to open the conversation, looking for a way in, Donald would grunt that he was spending far too much bloody time reading instead of getting into the studio. He was still teaching then but probably spent more time in the studio than most full-time artists and would stop his car, on the way to and fro his work, to sketch. This was probably his socialist work ethic. I do remember though saying how I enjoyed wordplay in small doses, as poetry but the extended stuff like *Finnegan's Wake* was not my cup of tea and Donald saying he had it out of the library for the third time.

My own approach to his art is coloured by our shared fascination with the changing maritime culture of Scotland. In the early 1980s, not long after the family's return to Lewis, Donald showed several larger and more bold canvases in the annual 'Open' Grinneas nan Eilean exhibition. I sensed that here was an artist on the cusp of letting go to the more expressive part of his urge to draw and paint. That was not a new departure. *Gannet Over Ness* (1968) went even further in presenting a re-composition of buildings, jetty, road, sea, land and sky as bodies of colour, bleeding into each other. The central part is a gannet beak and eye but the whole painting could be a gannet's eye view. If there is a development, from there, it could be that the body of work produced, since returning to live and work on Lewis, seems more peopled.

I've seldom met anyone with such heartfelt respect for the earning of a living

in difficult environments. The kindred spirit who comes to mind is Murchadh MacPhàrlain (Murdo MacFarlane), the internationalist Melbost Bard who was a great friend of Donald's father, Murchadh Iain Fionnlagh. The bard and the artist both spoke out and marched in public against the planned expansion of Stornoway airport into a Nato base, in the early 1980s. Both men saw the issue in a world-wide context and both also portrayed the intimacy of the village in their respective art. People with first hand memories of the effects of both World Wars walked with supporters of Sith, a youth peace group. Protesters had to counter the argument, 'But we need every job we can get.'

Visitors to the Outer Hebrides often ask, 'What do you live on?' Bare moor has only the narrowest strips of more fertile machair, in coastal strands. The shores of Bragar, Shawbost, Arnol, Barvas, Ballantrushal and Borge, on our west side, a main subject of Donald's later drawings and gouache works, must be amongst the most difficult for launch and recovery of a fishing craft. My mother told me that one strand of the family had been cleared from the more fertile Valtos peninsula to this more harsh territory to the north of Loch Roag. Their father Murchadh Iain, home from World War 1, unlike another family member lost on the Iolaire, had no claim to his own land, to build a permanent home.

Small wonder that everyone in this family seemed outspoken on matters of social justice. I'd guess that the tension between tradition and change was part of the driving force, across the various elements in the work of Donald Smith.

He celebrated the changes in the hull-colours used by Scottish fishing vessels. At first, standard black or flag-blue would be broken by a line of daffodil yellow, ending in an etched arrow. Then there would be reds, some more maroon, but others bold, with more orange in them, as if required for International Rescue. Nothing heritage about it. He celebrated purple when it dared to appear in the Stornoway fleet. He reported on the shades now available on the Teamac or International colour charts.

The vast majority of his exhibited paintings were essentially scenes of work, crofting and fishing, then the two visible strands which supported existence in the Western Isles. Beaches are broken by piers and beached boats. Landscape is crossed by fences and telegraph poles. It seems that landscape or seascape with no visible human intervention or trace is rare. Maybe Donald Smith could be called a humanist though I doubt he'd have put up with a label of any kind. When he seemed to be letting go to his art, without too much thought of his likely audience, I would agree with Jonathan that this man was mainly a modernist. Maybe one with a leaning to show working people with the respect he always felt and maybe sometimes one with a fearsome boldness ready to emerge. ■

Poetry

13th November; Air 3.5°, Water 6.3°

BETH McDONOUGH

In grey's unmoving bruise a horizon sears,
to breakfast on flames.

Water registers two degrees dropped
in as many days.

Thermometers lie in frost-whip air.

Angler-style, I cast again
underfoot the sensor's wire.

Still. Those digits fall.

Swim now. Before more numbers shrivel.

Surprised, I skin how little all this costs,
fish quickly in, head deep with ease. But
skin begins to glitter soon,
whites in ground glass cuts.
Every surface sores.

Hands and feet turn only bone.
Limbs thicken up, weigh a thousand pounds
to clunk reluctant at adverse currents.

Snell. Snell.

Somewhere uphill, whitemelt gives.
Every tributary's weekend slices in,
scalpels open this firth's waters.

Still thumbing finger to finger, I sole
ice sand's bedded nails, fierce
back up the long beach
into winds which now sleet snow.

Stung

BETH McDONOUGH

Off-season presents barbs
from cold-toed morning
to the arse. It shoots up spite
from any death-ready wasp.

Beginning winter's ocean chills
with still swollen jellyfish,
swills in tentacles spread,
a swimmer-zapping trap.

To everything its season,
yet her stung message
burns, without reason or rhyme
or any real promise of balm.

Taking Risks

ANDY ALLAN

Subdued excitement at the table,
heads nod in hushed agreement,
One says, *It's bound to be edible*
or it wouldn't be on the menu.

Another pleads,

Aw, come-on you-guys,
this is why we're here!

Smiles all-round reveal their decision.

What's it cost in real money?

It's okay, don't worry, I got it.

The animated conversation moves on,
accompanied by smiles nods
and the occasional, *Sure!*

Interruption arrives with a soft voice,
Fower neeps, mince an' tatties?

Yeah!

Some tentative tasting is followed by,
Wow!

And it's only about five dollars each!

Peterhead In Winter

(Inspired by Burns Singer)

ALISTAIR LAWRIE

"Imagine elephants here.
They'd settle, clumsily sure
Of themselves"

Nae doot the drifters dunced aroon
that May, my granda's boat a shape
among the shiftin clinkin forms
that linkit at it, heelin bows
neist starns that joukit in a reel
o ropes like haudin hands. Their dark
against the deeper oily black
o water treadin wi the lichts.

An files the lichthoos like as nae
wid cast its sober watchfu ee
owre aa they did like elders nicht
tae mak clean sure nae drink was teen
nor ony orra silken queans
had breeched the toun's clear sense
o fit was richt for folk tae dae,
in public onywy. That mist
still haps it peaceful like at times
but loomin through its mirror glare
are thae imagined elephants.

Great clumsy brutes, they squat ootowre
the harbour maistly in the bay
in hungry smug self certainty.
They purse their lips like settled nets,
significant o somethin come
that's emptied nae just seas o fish
but herts o hope. I mind ae time
my granda's twa gweed brithers
baith pokin fun at his aal drifter,
him speirin fit their sons wid dee.

At Inverness

ERIN MCGREGOR

At Inverness I laid for hours
listening to the night grind
through sirens and the whine of tires on pavement
until the screaming gulls
ripped the morning from her muddy banks

I shut the window
and sliced my finger on its track

later, at Culloden
walked the moor bewildered
trying to remember
the way a pilgrim ought to

in the gift shop my finger
bled through, left a rusty trail
on all those delicate soaps and
cashmere scarves

out at the lonely bus-stop
behind the government lines
I peeled back the bandage
sucked the cut, squinting
against the sun to see the far blue flags
flapping, flapping

The Ink Machine

DAVID MARK WILLIAMS

What keeps him up here drifting on darkness
at the lit window, awake in the small hours,
his shadow rolled over the ceiling,

scratching words into wax coated paper,
the scent of mulberry on his hands?

Will it work, his bright idea, his flatbed?
No thought now for tomorrow's hullabaloo,
its froth and frenzy, a floor unsteady as an ice floe
littered with paper slips,
the day's compounded errors.

He's got something else to prove.
Ink gleams through the cut letters
and with each sweep, copy after copy will hold true.

He's cranking up a revolution no one
will feel inclined to throw their hat into the air for,
his name a machine recognised everywhere,

once only a spark, a gleam from the time
he stood on street corners selling kites
for children to tie their hearts to.

AN ESSENTIAL PART of any new construction is to make sure that the work isn't harming any of the local wildlife, particularly protected species. This was Canna's job today: to sit and watch an historical golden eagle nest, two hundred metres across the glen from the work site. There had been vigorous pre-construction surveys completed in advance of the works starting and there had been no signs of any eagles using the area. However, the fact it was there and had the potential to be used by eagles again meant she had to do these watches, a minimum of once a week and with a constant presence during any explosive works. So far, the only eagle she'd seen had been lazily riding the thermals about a kilometre away, in the wrong direction. Still, she watched.

It was March, the air was cold and there had been a yellow warning for snow on the radio that morning. Spring still seemed a very long way off. It was cold work, sitting, watching, trying to keep the blood flowing and the cold-ache had started to get into her bones. There was nothing happening, though the sun was spearing the hill yonder with shards of light and the pale blue sky shone in patches through tall clouds heavy with anticipation.

Canna stood and stamped, trying to get the blood flowing back into her feet and shaking her arms at the same time to shift the deadening cold. Movement may not be ideal, but the worst threat to surveying was inattention and here she was on the brink of falling asleep. A raven overhead croaked once, twice, and flew on to the north. She sat and followed it with her binoculars, revelling in the surety of flight. Ravens were just so joyful. Despised and reviled by people that had no reason to feel that way, Canna always tried to show them extra respect to make up for the bad attitude they received elsewhere.

It was while watching the raven that she first saw activity. Not like shy-quick-bird movement, but a slower, steadier flicker of shadows and life on the ground between the rock fall and crevice, on the other side of the corrie to the cliff she'd been watching. Abandoning the raven,

Canna focussed her telescope instead on the hillside as the quick glimpse reminded her of something that it most certainly could not be.

She was in the depths of Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve, an area popular with walkers and designated for the wonderful geology as well as the native woodland that adorned Loch Maree to the north. The site was a hydro-scheme.

*It was a while
before she saw
anything again.
It was different
and yet the same,
and heading to
the south now
where it was lost
behind other rocks
before she even
really knew it was
happening.*

These near-ubiquitous renewable energy schemes were popping up left, right and centre, even where the land was wild and the water clean. It was a beautiful place to get to work, and despite mixed feelings about the construction, Canna delighted in spending time in such a place.

Watching

BY HEATHER BEATON



There had been many visits in the past. Although her company had not carried out the pre-construction surveys, she'd been visiting on a weekly basis since the project had started, four months previously. It was far from home and necessitated an overnight stay each week, but the area was lovely and the watch usually passed quickly. Now, however, her attention was drawn sharply forwards.

It was a while before she saw anything again. It was different and yet the same, and heading to the south now where it was lost behind other rocks before she even really knew it was happening. With that second, brief sighting also came reassurance: there was an animal moving over there. She felt her gut feeling about what it was, but her logical brain knew it couldn't be that. It was only when the animal reappeared for the third time that both parts of her agreed and she finally breathed the word that had been forming in her sub-conscious: wolf.

Canna knew immediately that it was no feral dog: the languid, stretched limbs and weightless stride could only be wolf. The shaggy grey coat and the low, swinging head only served to confirm her thoughts. It carried a dead grouse in its mouth, and wove along a path between boulders. Canna followed it with her telescope, six hundred metres away, hardly daring to breathe. The wolf moved quickly and was so camouflaged that she thought she'd lost it several times but it always reappeared. She was still watching as the wolf dropped its prey and disappeared into nothing. What looking like an overlap in the rocks swallowed the wolf without even a change in its pace: it must have been a hidden cave inside, for when the wolf reappeared, there were more. Another adult and two, three cubs, tumbling and playing in the shadow of the rocks.

They were wolves. On the hills of Beinn Eighe was a species that had been extinct in Scotland for over 250 years. Wolf.

A sudden noise disturbed them and made Canna jump. As she watched, the wolves disappeared like they were mere shadows and the hillside was still as though they'd never even existed. Canna answered her phone reluctantly: it was her boss in Edinburgh.

"Are you nearly done? Any eagles? How's the weather?" The signal wasn't great, but Julia's voice came through clearly enough.

"No eagles or snow, and yes, I only have a half hour left."

"Nothing else of interest?"

Here, Canna paused. Should she say? Would she be believed if she told? And if she did, what impact on the wolves? The animals that looked as though their birth right was wildness, as though the mountains were an internal part of them. What about them? Would the family be caught, caged and made to disappear? Ending up as a footnote to the story of wolves in Scotland, before the species reverted again to nothingness.

"No, nothing else of interest."

Phone call over, Canna settled back down and lifted her binoculars to see if the wolves reappeared. The more she thought, the more she realised the consequences of the decision she'd made. She would be secret keeper and defender of these wolves. She would give them a chance to right an ancient wrong and allow them to re-establish in Scotland. She knew that nothing would be truly simple again for she'd have an ear constantly to the ground, listening for word of the wolves, and speaking up, trying to adjust the human perspective. Changing the big-bad-wolf of the fairy tales to revive the fortunes of a species. So that after their eventual discovery maybe, just maybe, they'd be allowed to stay. ■

IT WAS THE first time he had gone to their familiar holiday spot in Port Manec'h since his wife's death and his moods instantly went on a roller coaster ride matching the inconstant weather that blew in from the Atlantic. Brittany was changeable at the best of times, but this year seemed more so than usual. Or perhaps, he thought, it was he that was more unsettled.

Wednesday had started grey and drizzly as his grandsons set off on their sailing lesson. Grey suited him. Grey was how he felt a lot of the time: halfway between the sunny elation of remembering a treasured memory that he and she had shared and the black despair of the realisation that there could be no new shared memories.

In future, his memories would be his alone.

At noon, the sun came out and he had lunch with his daughter and grandsons on the patio of La Châtaigneraie. The blue sky with white clouds and the blue-green sea dotted with small boats with colourful sails made him think of the Mediterranean. His wife had said just that a year ago as they finished a bottle of wine

and watched their grand-sons building sand castles and flinging themselves off the diving platform.

Thursday started out dreary as well and his grand-sons got drenched when a sudden squall caught them unaware in their tiny boat. But the sailing had gone well and they returned for lunch with enthusiastic tales of how they had almost capsized, disaster averted only by

the skill and strength of the eight year-old, a version enthusiastically disputed by the six-year old. It rained throughout lunch and the sea, the sky, the clouds, and even the hills took on a sullen, leaden greyness. Little by little, the far side of the cove disappeared into the grey mist. The yellow jib-sails of three small catamarans provided solitary splashes of colour, as if an artist, refusing to yield to the unrelenting grey, could not resist three bold, defiant brushstrokes.

He sat on the patio until all the other diners had left, finished his wine and set off for their holiday cottage, the blue and white of his umbrella underscoring his own determination to refuse to settle for grey. She would never have allowed that. ■

Loss, Moods, Weather

BY PETER LESLIE WATSON



Poetry

Dormitory

JON MILLER

Once again I lie down between earth and sky,
smothered in the underfurl of leaf and drifting mist,
sunk like some blastula in winter's diminishing.

Birches glisten. Fine hairs and fingers of roots
wicker my skin till I am hung under a hill of slow months,
tuned to bats' flickering chitterclicks.

A slowworm curls me a wedding ring.
Cave spiders unravel a maze across my brow,
my hair a nest for glowworms.

Moths land, lift, hover over me; and from the forest
a ghost of antlers breaches the shadows,
turns into itself and vanishes.

Come the thaw and softening earth, I'll unbuckle
grass and bracken, exhale the moor's black clog
to loom up out of ooze and trance

and, as the sun writes a yellow line on the ridge,
step down from the hill, illuminated, articulate.

Edith

*Upon learning of the death of Foula crofter,
Edith Gray 1918 – 2015*

JONATHAN DREW

Edith, always about her croft in blue coat, is no longer
Chasing us with a shake of her rake shouting,
“Keep aff m’ ay!”
Edith with a glint in her ee for a man, is no longer
After me.

A little old lady to look at –
But she was sheep upon shoulders;
Peats cut and stacked;
Herring strung to dry
And a chimney kept smoking.

She was Foula of old;
A sentinel in her little sea of hay.
Like the Kame, a steadfast
Cliff of content towering
Above the frenetic and Atlantic surges.

Like her scythe, it cut me clean,
When I read she had died.

Edith, always about her croft in blue coat, is no longer.
But I see her there still, standing proudly;
The last of her stacks
Neatly netted and weighted with stones –
Winter stock.

The guid Scots wather

HAMISH SCOTT

Nae mair this muith that gars me swither,
gie us the guid Scots caller wather
that steers ma bouk an maks gleg ma mynd,
gie us the wather richt for ma kynd

The Snail's Ongae

HAMISH SCOTT

Tae git whar it wants, the snail maun oot its buckie,
whit danger tae chance an howp it's no unluckie –
nocht ither tae dae but in its buckie bide in,
no ainlie the warld but fae itsel tae hide in

Bracelet

GREG MICHAELSON

We walk along the beach at Golspie,
young Finn and I.
Finn is flying my ladybird kite,
a fiftieth birthday present.

The wind drops.
The kite drops.

Finn rescues the kite from the waves.
I reel up the string
and wrap it in the sails,
and cram the kite
into the orange draw-string nylon bag.

We head back down the beach,
gathering limpet shells with holes
into my green woolly hat.
Finn scours the strand,
whooping with each new find.

On a table in the front bedroom,
of our main door tenement flat,
I array the shells in order,
from largest to smallest,
and string them
onto a length of leather cord.

In the museum basement,
in a glass fronted box,
on the left forearm of a man of brass,
is a bracelet:
each bead whittled from sea bleached bone,
in a northern island village of stone
some five thousand year ago.

Who made the bracelet?

Migration

HAMISH MYERS

I came back to you this year
I'd been away- seeing other seas
Who have all of your power
But less of your charm.

Your face has gone soft
It's so long without a flood
Like it should have been you
That they called Pacific.

You let eels float by
To the places they go
That only eels and mystical
Storybooks know.

While I lie with the salmon
Stuffed in the pools
Trying to leave you
But waiting for rain.

Morgan's Declaration

RUTH GILCHRIST

I look out the window
torrents of brown water spewing
out of gutters, surging over
the pavement. And he's standing
looking up at me, sea grey
eyes doing all the shouting.

The rain; dowsing his sandpaper face,
relentless on shoulders heavy
in his oil skin, slowing in
the creases of orange waders
falling away in runnels over
boots of lifeboat yellow.

Both hands hold the gulping fish
today's offering;
a red, red Gurnard.

I stifle a giggle
imagine him singing but
this is no Shakespeare play
just Morgan from next door

just this boy drowning in a man's body
floundering in emotions he doesn't
understand, expressing them in
the only way he knows how.

New

SARAH JESSEN

Skin as translucent as morning dew,
arteries as delicate as gossamer.
A cry as shrill as an injured selkie.

Unused eyes clouded with haar,
searching for nourishment,
that alabaster nectar

The air burns.
So alien to that liquid enclosure.
A familiar sound.

Swept up and placed on bosom,
two hearts together like moth and flame.
Home.

HIS LEG STILL hurt. He tried placing his stick down earlier as a cushion and rounded the high walled corner at the top of Mid Street only to stumble into the back of a boy his own age who had stepped out into the pavement, arms waving and giggling as he told some story.

“Mind oot for the cripple,” said the bigger boy behind him and Billy’s heart sank as he realised it was Big Tocher and that the sallow pock-marked face turning towards him was Powser Bruce. Another bulkier figure, an older boy, lounged against the Wee School wall looking down the hill and out to sea. His well worn black leather jacket gleamed in the cold Spring sunshine.

“Watch far the fuck you’re gaan,” said Powser.

Billy put his leg down hard to keep from falling and winced.

“Aah, the poor wee lamb. Is’t sair?” said Tocher.

“A bittie.”

Powser laughed and made as if to kick Billy.

“At’s richt, Powser. Show’s fit a hard bastard ye are. See if it’s jist a bittie sair or nae.”

“If at slimy bastard kicks me I’ll tak iss stick aff his heid.” Billy had said it before he could even think about it. The silence that followed was broken by another voice.

“Fit if I did it, loon?”

The heavy set older boy, no, man, was looking round, greasy black hair flopping down over his eyes. He flicked it back with a shake of his head and carried on staring at Billy, a cool icy stare where the faded blue of his eyes both seemed to contain and be contemplating some distant sea. Billy recognised him – Jimmer Watt – and met his eyes. Said, shakily.

“I’d try til.”

Jimmer’s eyes narrowed momentarily then returned to their usual cool blue gaze that looked right through him as he said, “Ye’re a Towie, are ye?”

“Aye.”

Powser burst in squeaky with excitement. “Fit does it maitter fa he is, Jimmer? He’s naebody. Let’s sort him oot, you an Tocher an me an we’ll ...” And only gradually realised his mistake as Jimmer turned with lizard like slowness to say, “Tocher, I dinna ken fit wye ye pit up wi that wee shite but iffen he opens his moo again I’ll brak baith his legs, an yours.”

He turned to Billy.

“Your dydie crewed wi mine fin he was a loon. On the Persever? Am I richt?”

“Fit if he did?”

He continued to look hard into Billy’s eyes until it started to become uncomfortable. Then said, “Aye, and nodded sharply, looking back out to sea as he added, “If ye’re half the man he is ye’ll dae aaricht.”

Billy stood for a minute watching Jimmer’s back, his long deep black hair catching on the collar of his leather

jacket then, realising he was dismissed, stepped carefully round the outside of the group and set off down Mid Street to his granda’s house. Painfully conscious of three sets of eyes behind him he tried very hard not to hobble.

As he stepped back on to the flat granite kerb, he stumbled as he heard Jimmer say softly, “Fit’s your name, loon?”

“Billy.”

He didn’t break his step nor look around despite the pause that lengthened behind him. Kept on hobbling. Silence continued. And then.

“Weel, loon. Nae doot I’ll be seein ye aron. See ye later ... Bittie.”

Even then he didn’t stop walking, although the name hung heavily in the heat around his shoulders. A challenge or an insult or what? He knew the potential significance of the naming. Was it good or bad? He might have it for life.

Still puzzling over what had just happened, he went straight in.

The old man looked up at Billy as he came slowly into the room carefully trying not to limp. As he eased himself on to an armchair the pressure on his forearms spasmed a muscle across his bruised ribs, causing him to wince momentarily at the pain. Billy looked up into the steady grey eyes that seemed as always to be appraising him. When the old man spoke it was quietly.

“Is it sair, loon?”

Billy shrugged dismissively. “A bittie.” And then felt acutely conscious of a pair of icily grey eyes gazing levelly at him, scrutinising, contemplating. He met the gaze briefly then dropped his eyes to stare inconsequentially at his hands, the floor, the dusty guddle of cardboard boxes and old hessian bags in the dark alcove under the sink. At the point when they seemed to be gaining a significance that was beyond their ability to sustain, and wondering what the deepening silence meant, Billy raised his eyes and returned the stare. It was still some time before the old man finally spoke and, when he did, it was in a slow half whispering voice that commanded attention. “I min eence fan we were near a day’s sail aff Peterheid and aa o a sudden we were in a storm...” As he spoke, his tones rose in intensity and his manner became animated as if he were addressing a hall full of listeners and, as usual, Billy was caught up in the narrative’s surge and flow like the fishing boat itself, rocked and tossed and rolling on the bulging spraying swells only to fall crashing into the cavernous mouth of the next trough. And the next. And the next. He could feel the strain on the boat’s timbers as the jaws of each successive

wave clamped wetly round and over and through the boat, spume flying wildly everywhere, the timbers creaking and crackling and screeching at the strain. His hands seemed to be holding fast to ice cold rails, taking the strain too. He felt, could even taste, the water running down his face, combing through his hair; even his gansey under its waxed cotton cape was soaking. He could hear the wind’s howl even as he felt it seize and tug his clothing with a mindlessly brutal, uncalculatingly lethal ferocity. But even in the midst of all that tugging, through the old man’s almost incantatory words, he could hear another tearing rasping shrieking noise as if the boat was splitting in two as the mast uprooted itself and fell in a spray of bent nails, great jagged wood splinters, a darker shadow in the storm’s darkness, down upon him down straight through his arm put up to shield him down to roll across his side and disappear into the cold grey sea spume.

For a time, everything seemed still. At peace. And then, just as the sea’s backwash insinuated itself under the cape and made to float his peaceful body off the deck, a hand grasped his and hauled. The pain that racked through his ribs, his leg, his arm, even his jaw, floated him into a dimly conscious painless state from where he heard and saw but didn’t feel, as if he were some kind of disembodied observer of events. He knew the voices somehow but couldn’t have said how or who they were.

“Gweed be here. Iss man’s half deid.”

“We canna leave him here. Can we move him intil the wheelhoos?”

“Naa. Nae chance o that. Look at his leg. There’s nae doot at’s broken and see far i mast’s catcht him. Er’ll be broken ribs or waur in er. Naa, we canna move him.”

“Tak some o at line and we’ll tie him tae the rail and tae yon winch. At’ll hae tae dee tae get him haim.”

And so Billy listened as the old man’s sibilant voice drew him through the whole of the tale. Through twenty four hours of storm and slopping seawater, foul and salty in his mouth, each lurch and roll of the boat sending spasms of agony shooting throughout his legs, his chest, his face, until he became submerged in a kind of distant semi consciousness of constant pain. All the way to harbour where further discussion of the height of the pier resulted in him being tied to a hoist and board and agonisingly raised to

the harbour’s edge where a fish barrow was rattled bumping with him in it over the cobblestones to the Cottage Hospital and oblivion at last.

Billy was so caught up in the rattling and bumping pain of the story that he sat on staring long after the old man had finished speaking. Open mouthed, he looked up to where the old man sat, perched forward on his chair, still there himself in that storm of years ago. “An wis’t sair?” he asked.

The old man’s eyes glinted suddenly at him as he raised his head. “Aye. A bittie,” he said. ■

On The Roadside Before Glen Strathfarrar

BY LEONIE CHARLTON



THE BIRDER’S HANDS touch and overlap like a moth’s wings. They hold utterly still for a second then open out, angled wide to take in this whole canopy of silver birch trees. Head bowed, a single finger points upwards, ‘wood warbler, there, can you hear it?’ Another finger points behind him, ‘a snatch of Robin...and that’s the wood warbler again, descending octave.’ My eyes follow the direction of his fingers, my ears are lost. ‘Dew dew,’ he mimics, ‘siskin’. I walk away, overcome by this whelm of song, this wealth of expertise.

The gean’s girth is massive. Wind and centuries have taken down branches, wounds leak resin like wells of iron-water. Reaching out from the trunk’s hulk fine branches dangle caterpillar-plump catkins by my face. There are leaves too, covered in the softest down, elegant as swans’ tongues. This ancient tree has an ancient companion. The goat willow holds myth in its clambering geometries, its branches balance lungwort and mosses. One limb coories in close to me, from it an alder seedling takes off pin-straight and perfect from a bangle of moss.

The willow gropes the circumference of a pond, excavates the dank damp earth, takes just enough to keep going, to ease into territories of patience. The willow’s and gean’s roots must be touching, right here below where my feet stay still between wood anemones and violets. I lean close to the trunk, breathe in the scent of it, and I swear it smells of sex. I place my hands over the dry warmth of the bark, move them slowly until they overlap at the thumb joint, soft as moth wings. ■

SO I HEARD about it, the Monarch of the Glen, bought and sold for lots of our gold and to be taken from place to place to meet and greet the great unwashed. Culture was to be presented to me, brought right to me for my benefit. Now I like to think I know my Picasso from my Pissarro and, at least, I know what I like. So I thought I would have me a wee keek at the King and marched off for an audience.

Along Church Street I was brought round from my thoughts by an altercation only a few steps ahead. Two men in ill fitting clothes with ill begotten looks were arguing in grunts. A girl flitted around them like a drowsy moth, this one was pure heroin chic, you know the type; skinny, really skinny, sallow, shuffling gait, few teeth, lifeless hair, mismatched clothes, unlaced trainers and mumbling words through a slack mouth.

The more savy of us on the street tensed for the inevitable. A grunt became a push, a push a shove and all of a sudden

An Audience with the Monarch

SHORT STORY BY CHRIS MADEJ



we have a rammy, a right proper movie fight. The sound of a crack and a slap and a thump and a splatter of blood on the floor as one man sprawls across a car hood while the other flaps wildly at the girl.

A coach, a deluxe sixty seater complete with curtains and air conditioning and a cargo of tourists boaked out onto shore from some cruise ship dredged up the Firth of wherever, lay stranded at the traffic lights perfectly perpendicular to the fight, the horrified tourists flinching with every blow. At front the tour guide stands ready with microphone in hand. A local lad, grown up and out and wise, looking very dapper in his kilt and

sporran quickly says (his voice a forced whisper of suspense) 'Here we see a very old clan feud. For I know the pair; one a MacFiercin and the other MacHarder. This is a feud harking back to the dark days of Culloiden. Who knows what misfortune and ill luck brought these two together at this hour but honour demands blood be spilt'. Suddenly curtains are eagerly peeled back and cameras wheeled around clicking furiously as the lights change and the coach snakes away around the castle that's not a castle, not really a proper castle.

The polis arrive and the pair are cuffed and thrown in the wagon. Two boys on

BMXs shrug and smirk and glide off. Shop keepers lower their eyebrows and move back behind their counters. An old couple, really old, the sort that were kids in WWII head off complaining that you didn't get that sort of thing when they were young. The girl picks up a trainer that's come off in the scuffle, cradling it she shuffles off like a zombie whilst blood is left laying uselessly on the pavement. I march unto the Monarch.

I arrive to find a troop have surrounded Him in some social media selfie scrum. They each in turn stand stiff as though facing a firing squad, the shots dwindle their number and finally I can approach. I peer, I step back, step forward, stand on tiptoe, crouch down. When I blink the Monarch is branded in my eye like the Sun on a bright day but it slowly fades as I make my way home. On the street there is no sign of the fight, the blood has been washed away and a new crowd, oblivious to the drama, hug the scene. ■

Daft Wullie

Loch Leven, Kinross
PETER BURROWS

As a boy there was no escaping the local tale. His ancestor, Daft Wullie, the keeper of Castle Island boats was the one they said gullible enough to be coaxed to smuggle the key, to row her across the loch at night setting her free to her fate. An undeserved title bequeathed by hearsay, perhaps; four centuries' mist obscuring the 'bastard orphan'. 16 years old,

'Wee Willie Douglas', love-smit, hawked; a fool for her cause. The failed attempts. Banished twice. Yet too much the knave to be doubted again - Lost in the lore of an unforgiving view. Behind the masque, he plays the part of courtly page to the drunken Master. He drops the napkin, swapping keys, rushing from hall to gaol. The disguised Queen fleeing to his readied skiff. Locking

all behind, with their sunken boats. Halfway across, she rises. Lifts her veil to her followers ashore. By her side, William Douglas throws the keys into the loch. From the castle her watching captor, captive, incensed, attempts to stab himself with his dagger. The oars ripple out their moment in history. The keys lost, until dredged centuries later.

On the Streets of Montréal

BRIAN GOURLEY

The last day of October and the first breath of snow:
I was grateful for the fire-red scarf as the gusts blew

And the bitter streets turned their backs,
their trenches and insurmountable peaks

were too full of depth and height
to overcome. In the cold fading of the light

That sea-blue Irish Harrington
of mine could never offer protection

from the cutting teeth of the North wind.
A vision of lost souls haunted the mind

As I drifted downhill on the Rue Ste-Catherine.
I imagined them following me as if in intercession,

Pleading, entreating, demanding some second chance
at life, some release from the futility of circumstance.

In St Patrick's Basilica I sat in empty pews
without thought or prayer in the shadows:

A desperate seeker after some imagined real vision.
To gaze into the dark was a Sisyphean ardour; no revelation

And I was halved, quartered, scavenged out to the hollow core
of barest existence and the heart knew this too much to bear.

TAM WAS ALWAYS afraid of ghosts, but he didn't want to hide from them.

He felt safe if he was with his Granny in front of the T.V. The first time he saw a film that scared him, it wasn't about ghosts, it was about a werewolf. It was an American T.V.-movie called *The Moon of the Wolf*, shown in Scotland a couple years after it was made in the early 1970s. Tam was seven. He and his Granny watched it on the black and white T.V. in the kitchen of their tenement flat, sitting on the couch under the pulley where the laundry hung drying.

Afterward, Tam and his Granny slept together in the bed in an alcove in the kitchen. You could see the T.V. from the bed, but Tam only watched it from the bed when he was ill. As he lay next to his sleeping Granny, Tam thought about the film he'd seen. He imagined a werewolf in the midden in the back of the tenement, pushing the bins over, howling, then climbing the stairs to the flat and pounding on the door until it collapsed. Unlike the woman in the film, Tam's Granny didn't have a gun or silver bullets, but he knew the werewolf would have to get past her before it could touch him. Since Tam always went to bed first, he lay on the side that was against the wall, and his granny lay between him and the room and the world.

He lived with his Granny and Granda, but his Granda didn't sleep with his Granny, and Tam had never known them to share a bed. Even before Tam moved in with them when he was five, his Granda slept in the bedroom and his Granny slept in the kitchen.

They had one child, Tam's Mum, who lived in another flat in the same building with Tam's Dad and Tam's younger brothers. Every flat in the building only had one bedroom and a kitchen, so when the third boy was born Tam's Granny had told his Mum she'd take the eldest.

Tam didn't see his Granda much. During the day he'd be at work, and at night he'd be in the pub or at his Masonic Lodge. In between, he'd eat the meal Tam's Granny cooked. There was no table, so he'd eat sitting in his armchair in the kitchen, with his plate on his lap, and he'd read the *Glasgow Evening Times* while he ate. Then he'd go out, and Tam and his Granny would watch T.V. She liked comedy programmes like *The Goodies* and *The Dick Emery Show*, and music programmes like *The Black and White Minstrel Show* and *Cilla*. She'd put Tam to bed before his Granda got home. Tam would fall asleep listening to their voices as they talked quietly, smelling the cigarettes they were smoking. He could tell which smoke was his Granny's and which was his Granda's.

After Tam saw the werewolf film, he wanted to see more like that. Werewolves, vampires, and, especially, ghosts. He never knew if his Granny liked them, but she always watched them with him because he was scared to watch them alone. They were on late, but his Granny would let

him stay up. His Granda would come home and find the two of them watching a Hammer film, and he'd tell his wife that she shouldn't be letting the boy watch that rubbish, and she'd answer that it was nothing to worry about. He'd get a cup of tea and go to his room for the night.

Tam's Granny got ill. The doctor told her to stop smoking, but she couldn't, and then the doctor told Tam's Granda that it didn't matter if she stopped smoking or not because there was nothing that could be done for her. He told Tam's Mum and Dad, but he didn't tell Tam's Granny.

She was too sick to share the bed anymore, so Tam got moved back to his Mum and Dad's flat two floors up. He slept in the bed in the kitchen with his brothers, and his Mum and Dad slept in the bedroom.

He still spent as much time as he was allowed with his Granny. She was in bed most of the time now, and she'd watch T.V. from the bed, and Tam would sit on a chair or on the edge of the bed and watch it with her until she got too tired, and then he'd go back to his Mum and Dad's. It would take a long time for him to get to sleep there, because his Mum and Dad would shout at each other for hours every night. Often his Mum would smash cups and glasses against the wall.

His Dad worked Monday till Friday, eight till five. Friday was payday, and all that day Tam's Mum would worry if her husband was going to come home and give her money for food and cigarettes and booze, or if he would disappear into the pubs and other people's flats until Sunday afternoon or evening. Tam liked it when he did that, because there would be no shouting, and his Mum wouldn't have enough money to get drunk, and his Granny and Granda would give them food. His Granda would say his Dad was

"a no-use-er." His Granny was now too weak to say anything.

Tam's Granny had just breathed out, and it hurt, and now she was trying to breathe in again, but she couldn't and she never did.

They didn't let Tam's Mum go to the funeral, because she was so drunk she wet the chair she was sitting on. Tam was glad, because he saw her watching a film in which a crying relative jumped into the grave, on top of the coffin, and he knew his Mum was thinking about doing that

so people would look at her.

After the funeral, Tam's Granda told him he would be moving back into his flat. "That's what your Granny would have wanted."

He slept in his Granny's bed that night. The sheets hadn't been changed since she'd died, and not for a long time before. At first the smell made his eyes water. As he lay there, he heard his Granda come into the kitchen. He pretended to be asleep, but he knew his Granda knew he was pretending. His Granda got down on his knees and clasped his hands and prayed. Tam knew he wanted him to see him doing that so he would tell people.

His Granda got up off his knees and went to his room.

The sheets didn't get changed. Tam didn't watch horror films anymore, because nobody would watch them with him. His Mum would come in the evenings and cook for his Granda, and then they'd drink and smoke and watch T.V. while Tam read comics. Tam would go to bed, and sometimes he'd still be awake when his Granda said, "Well, you better get home to that no-use-er." His Granda would walk out to the hallway with his Mum, and they'd talk in

low voices for a while before she left.

At school, Tam's teacher made fun of him for being dirty and smelly, and she encouraged the other kids to make fun of him too. Some of them already did, but others felt sorry for him because they knew his Granny had died. The teacher, Mrs. Strachan, told him to wash himself at the sink in the classroom, and the whole class laughed while he did.

"They're all laughing at you, Thomas," Mrs. Strachan said with a big, bright smile. That made them laugh louder and longer.

At lunchtime, Tam climbed over the school gate. As he did, he said, "Up, up and away!" like he'd heard Superman say on T.V., but he couldn't fly.

A week later, the truant officer knocked on the door of Tam's Mum and Dad's flat, but his Dad was at work and his Mum was drunk, so she didn't come to the door. It was a few more days before a letter arrived letting them know that he hadn't been going to school, and threatening to make them bring him to a Children's Panel.

He stood in the kitchen that night while his Mum and his Granda shouted at him. He didn't say anything and he didn't look at them.

"Look at us when we're talking to you," his Granda said.

Tam looked at him, but he didn't say anything.

"I'll tell you something," his Granda said. "Do you know what'll happen if you don't start behaving yourself?"

Tam looked at him.

"Your Granny'll come back from Heaven and visit you. That'll sort you out."

Tam started to cry.

"Aye, you're scared now, eh?" his Granda said. "You better be. She's watching, and she'll come back."

"She already has," Tam sobbed.

"What was that?"

"Granny already came back to see me. She knows what you and Mum are doing. She wants me to tell everybody. Granny sees what you do to Mum in the hall at night before she goes home, when Mum says, 'Noooo, dooon't,' and you do it anyway. Granny sees that, and she tells me."

His Granda just stood there. His Mum screamed.

Tam's Granda went into the shop to get the *Evening Times*, as he always did after work.

"The Times, and 10 Embassy Plain," he said to the man behind the counter, who ignored him. He said it again, and the man looked right through him.

He walked out of the shop. Nobody spoke to him as he walked along the street.

In his kitchen, he found Tam watching T.V.

"Nobody'll look at me, Tam. It's like I'm a bloody ghost."

"You are," Tam said. "Granny came and got you." ■

TAM'S GRANNY

SHORT STORY BY BARRY GRAHAM



Since Tam always went to bed first, he lay on the side that was against the wall, and his granny lay between him and the room and the world.

Shared Stories: A Year in the Cairngorms

By Merryn Glover

I HAVE A folder on my kitchen bookshelf labelled 'Nature Journal'. Organised by month, it contains observations from my wanderings, usually on half-hour runs and dog-walks, but also from longer expeditions up hill or down glen. I've been adding to it in a random way for years, but it's full of gaps with some months very scant indeed. Then there are the field guides on birds, trees, flowers, fungi and even stars, with a few annotations, but mostly underused. And most of my copious writing notebooks, folders and files – littered across my house and laptop – contain further notes on landscape and wildlife, but never with any great consistency. Clearly, despite a life-long love of the natural world, I am no expert.

But I am a writer, and a writer for whom a sense of place has always been vital. Perhaps that's because my own place has kept changing. I was born in Kathmandu and followed my parents' work across Nepal, India and Pakistan till attending university in Australia. Twenty-five years ago, I followed my heart and a handsome man to Scotland. Together we moved around a bit, including back to Nepal, and finally put down roots in the village of Kincraig in the Cairngorms National Park. At nearly 13 years, it is the longest I have lived anywhere. It is now home.

And so I look around me and want to get to know the place, to learn the names of the neighbours, human and animal, to get acquainted with the trees. But life raising two boys is busy and the months and years fly by and though we are often out revelling in this remarkable place, my Nature Journal is still sketchy, my unknowing vast. And then one midsummer's night at 4am I start writing a novel. I still have those first notes: 'A story. A land. A people. This place of beauty and history, of loss and hope.' It is a novel set here in Badenoch and because it is so connected with the land it makes me pay attention. I go out with shepherds, bird watchers and wildlife guides and the pages of notes grow. The story grows. I grow. It is a creative current flowing from experience and observation to recording and story making that propels me back out to experience more. What exactly does the moss smell like on a warm day? How does the beating of wings sound when geese rise from the loch? And then you experience it more deeply because all the senses are tuned and you are trying to capture this moment, that a reader may be captured by it.

The novel is finished now and waiting for a publisher, but it left me hungry to stay in this place – this place of alert



Merryn Glover among the pinewoods and mountains of the Cairngorms National Park

immersion and creative response. I read an article in The Society of Authors' magazine about writers' residencies and a light went on. What if I could do that? Here. I wrote to Grant Moir, Chief Executive of the Cairngorms National Park proposing the idea and he welcomed me in to discuss it. Enthusiastic, he linked me with the Outdoor Learning team to develop a project plan and apply for funding. Writers' residencies can take many forms from purely writing time to full-on implementation of a project and can last anything from a day to several years, but what's important is that both writer and host organisation are enriched by the experience.

The idea that emerged with the Park, funded by them, the Woodland Trust and Creative Scotland, is this project running across 2019 – Shared Stories: A Year in the Cairngorms. Knowing that people thrive best with access to the outdoors, and that the environment thrives best if we care about it, the aim of the project is to foster a deeper relationship with nature by encouraging people to write about it. At its heart is a call to anyone to add their voice. Shared Stories is not the preserve of naturalists, outdoor

experts or professional writers, although they, too, are welcome. This is a project targeting people who do not normally have a forum, or the confidence, to share their writing. This includes Health Walk groups, Park volunteers and land-based workers such as game-keepers, stalkers, ghillies, farmers, foresters, outdoor instructors and rangers. There will also be workshops in five high schools and CPD offered through Outdoor & Woodland Learning Scotland. Finally, there will be plenty of opportunities for members of the public to attend workshops – see web link below.

Key to the project, as it says on the tin, is the sharing of stories, and we'll be doing this in several ways. Firstly, people will be encouraged to read their writing in the workshops and their local context, be that a school assembly or open mic night. Secondly, we are inviting submissions of poetry and prose from anyone, anywhere in the world, who would like to share an experience of nature in the Park. These may be featured on the Park website, on banners at visitor centres and/or in an anthology. Full submission guidelines and information are on the website.

Finally, the third way in which we

hope these stories will be shared is... everywhere! We encourage people, whether they attend workshops or submit to us or not, to draw from the project themes to write and share their experiences of the Cairngorms. Perfect places to send your work include The Neil Gunn Writing Competition and, of course, *Northwords Now*. When sharing online, do use the hashtags #SharedStories #AYearintheCairngorms to link with the growing conversation.

Meanwhile, for me, as well as leading workshops, I have been given 30 days for writing around project themes. The brief is completely open, which is exciting and a bit scary, but so far I've started a blog about my own encounters with people and nature called Writing the Way (on www.merryn Glover.com). And, of course, I have dreams of filling that Nature Journal. ■

<https:// Cairngorms.co.uk/caring-future/education-learning/shared-stories/>

Poetry

Age, doing its best to wither

GRAHAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG

After twenty years
if my fingers have forgotten,
why do my dreams recall the texture of flesh,
and cotton underwear, often sexier than lace
(which tries too hard)
or silk, which loses out to thighs?

Memory tricking me, or synesthesia.

★

I think, aging alone,
no one will ever complain about stubble,
demand I bathe after a compost day,
no naked breast ever kiss my lips.
Fears that have lessened as years mellow,
pills absolved, still unwelcome.

I remember you, in your virgin study, pontificating
that evolution must bring a welcome lessening of lust.
So sad, even then, your not knowing
that even if you make it to your million years
some animal lusts will bring their own reward.

★

Surely, you said, if you were immortal,
fleshly things would be first to go?

Being young and bursting, I disagreed,
but changed my mind after another futile chase,

settled to thinking ‘might’ in my single bed.
Now, in later years, and out of any hunt,

fond memory suggests a millions years on
my rhyme will not be ‘don’t’ but ‘can’t’.

★

Afterwards, as you cupped her breast,
did you wonder why you adored a cone of flesh?

At breakfast, as you rose to welcome her
in silk, you would have remembered.

Rowing a St. Ayles Skiff

Portsoy Coastal Rowing Club, 14.05.2018

IAN CROCKATT

‘Quine’ wings it through waves, and us
hauling her oars through headstrong squalls,
mimicking the ancient mechanism of flight.

Pivot of hips, lower backs swaying
as synchronised blades rise, arms straight
for the pull till the last ten per cent

as we skim the dark surface, flight-feathers
red-tipped, the strong quills
of them gleaming with varnish. We

are the muscle and mind of her, our quine
that wings over horizons and back again,
delight behind every rowers’ taut lips

as her prow enters that strait in the brain
where joy is digested, and life-pain.

Pat Nevin at the Job Centre

JULIAN COLTON

Pat Nevin is working at the Job Centre.
Honest to God, it’s him.

Not the young Guardian reading Pat
Who wore long black postmodern coats and liked the Cocteau Twins

The existential King’s Road Chelsea Pat
Mullet hair slipped shyly over his eyes Pat

This is post-Motherwell management bitterness Pat
More like Werther’s Original sucking Pat

Natty grey wool cardigan and silver rimmed spectacles
Bald patch hair now slightly combed over Pat

Sitting at a desk his hand on reddened face
Considering his next disillusioned analysis:

What an absolutely shocking application
Is he having a laugh?
Diabolical spelling. Such weak references.
He’ll need to buck his ideas up
Marshall his supporting arguments better than that
Or be shipped out. Mark my words

The job market is nothing like it was in the eighties
You can’t wear those tight wee shorts
Tackle from behind during an interview these days
Or sit at home with your finger up your arse
This is the job seeking Premier League.

It’s
A
Totally
Different
Ball game
Entirely.

Songwriting

By Bob Pegg

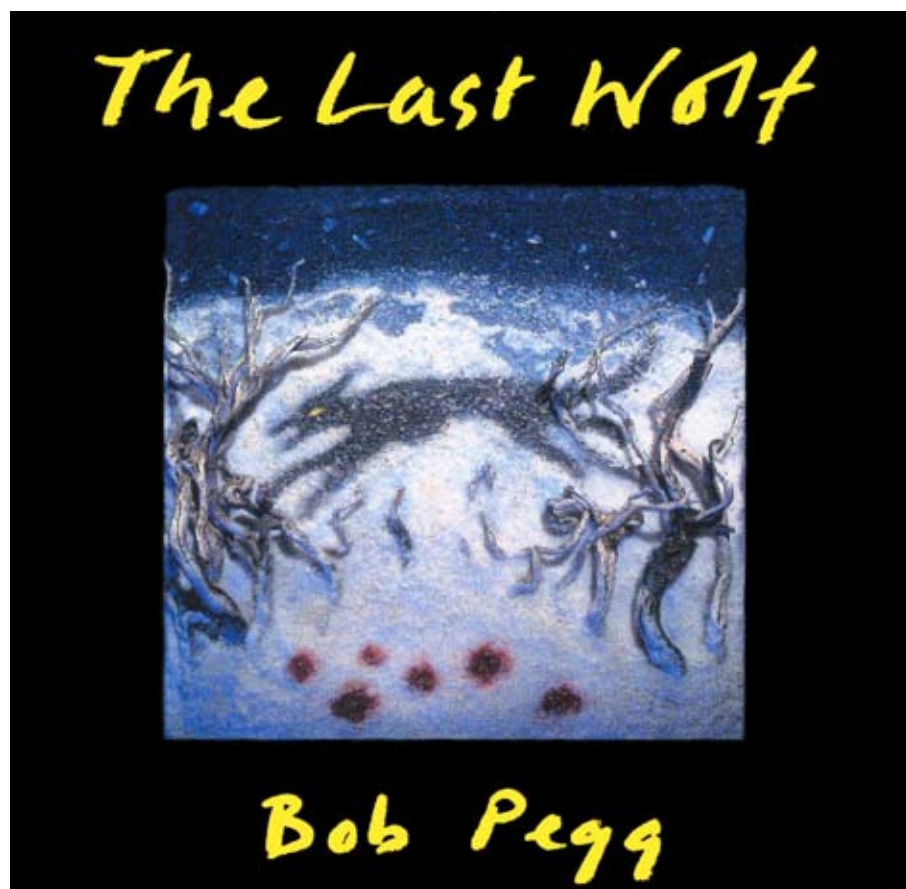
"Songs are unlike literature - they're meant to be sung, not read." Bob Dylan, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

THERE'S A NOTION abroad that, in the timescale of human culture, song came first and poetry grew out of it. It's an appealing idea, but who knows? Song and verse are certainly happy to help each other out. Burns and Scott re-jigged old songs for the page. Poets as diverse as Kipling, Auden, Charles Causley and Violet Jacob have used traditional ballad forms to frame original verses (and musicians have responded by putting tunes to their work). But Dylan's point sticks. Shorn of its melody, the naked song lyric tends to shrivel on the page; but a seemingly banal set of words, when sung, can shake the heart. I've been writing songs for half a century and still find the form entrancing and mysterious, both to work in and to witness.

I came up through the British folk scene. My first visit to the Nottingham Folk Workshop was in 1960, when I was still at school. Skiffle and Rock and Roll (remember where you were when you first heard Heartbreak Hotel?) offered possibilities for the kind of music making that didn't demand years of study and practice; and the informal, intimate atmosphere of the folk clubs was the perfect space for young performers to develop their talents. We bought cheap guitars, and taught ourselves the basic chords by trial and error and from instruction manuals - Bert Weedon's *Play in a Day* is often spoken of with reverence by old folkies.

Songs with strong melodies and good stories made up the sturdy backbone of our repertoire. We already knew some English folk material from Singing Together sessions in primary school, when we gathered in the hall to bellow out old ballads like *The Raggle Taggle Gypsies*, and *The Golden Vanity* - bold tunes, and tales of adventure, bravery, passion, betrayal. Other material came from books, the radio, gramophone records; the Kingston Trio's American murder ballad *Tom Dooley* was a great favourite, not least because you only needed two chords to accompany it.

The *Tonight* magazine programme, which went out on BBC TV early on weekday evenings, was a great source of material. It nearly always ended on a musical item; Robin Hall and Jimmy MacGregor maybe, with a Traveller song from North East Scotland, or Cy Grant singing a sweet Bahamian love lament. I would wait with the microphone from a little Grundig reel to reel tape machine held in front of the TV set's



Listen to a sound file of the song 'The Last Wolf' (from the eponymous album) on the Northwords Now website northwordsnow.co.uk

speaker, to record whatever was on offer. Then me and my mate Richard Jones would learn the songs from the tapes and perform them in the folk club the next Sunday evening.

Most folk clubs met once a week, usually in the smoky bar or function room of a pub. They nurtured artists as disparate as Billy Connolly, Barbara Dixon and Martin Carthy. During a typical evening you might hear blues, sea shanties, American Old Timey music, Durham miners' songs, and a comic monologue or two. There was a solid core of original material as well, by writers like Matt McGinn and Ewan MacColl, and by the end of the sixties the idea of the singer songwriter was well established. Jake Thackray, influenced by the chansonnier Georges Brassens, was never off the TV. Sydney Carter had huge success with *The Lord of the Dance*. On the radio John Peel was championing Joni Mitchell and Bridget St John. Writing, performing and even recording your own material had become an exciting possibility.

In 1970, together with Carole Pegg, I put together the folk rock band Mr Fox,

with an instrumental line-up inspired by the old Yorkshire Dales dance bands. We were heralded in *The Guardian*, shot at in Manchester; our first gig was the Royal Festival Hall, and our finest the Lakeland Lounge in Accrington. We had a contract with Transatlantic Records and we needed material, so I started to write.

The songs came easily. Subjects ranged through depopulation in the Yorkshire Dales, a hiker hanged by his rucksack, and the story of Mr Fox himself, a serial killer in an English folk tale which Shakespeare once heard. The years of singing in folk clubs (and of reading the Romantic poets) stood me in good stead, leaving the imprint of song forms that were easy to slip into: traditional ballads, waltzes, a proto-rap, with straightforward rhyme schemes and plain diction.

Now, it takes me much longer to write a song. I've learned that words or melody can arise together or independently, often just in fragments that may take years to flesh out, if they're ever fleshed at all. A theme can sneak up and preoccupy you and you don't know why. Then, when you have your story worked out (I'm keen on

stories) and you begin to write, the song grabs the reins, gallops off, and you can land in quite a different destination from the one you had intended. That's when you know that the Muse has smiled and the magic is working.

Kenny Taylor, *Northwords Now* editor, suggested I choose one of my songs and talk about how it was written, with an option for readers to download a recording. I've picked *The Last Wolf*, from the 1996 album of the same name.

A long-standing fascination with wolves took me to the places in the Highlands where the last survivors in Britain were slaughtered: Glen Loth, Cannich, the banks of the river Findhorn. Early on in the writing, images started to materialise: a pack of wolves running through shafts of sunlight in the primeval Caledonian forest; blood staining the snow on a winter hillside. Then came the phrase "I remember..." and with it the first suggestion that the voice of the song would be the voice of the last wolf itself, remembering for all wolves.

Quite quickly a melody began to coalesce around the words, circling an A minor chord on the guitar, with just a whiff of flamenco. With hindsight I think the shade of Lorca had slipped in, the lone wolf dying by the gun, body never found.

Words and melody emerged entwined, helped along by exploratory strumming. Verses started to come together, and each verse had four long lines, each with the same rhyme ending. Great columns of rhyming words began to stack up on the page, together with phrases and whole lines - crossed out, shuffled around, reinstated, crossed out again. In the end there were four verses. They follow a chronological sequence: the Edenic woodlands of Caledon; paradise lost to the arrow of a hunter; confusion, as a whole landscape is transformed; memories of the good times, and resignation to the inevitable.

Looking back on *The Last Wolf*, more than twenty years after it was recorded, it seems clear that it's as much about human concerns - old age, security, nostalgia - as it is about wolves. That didn't occur to me when I was writing it, but that's not so surprising. One of my top songwriting tips, which I happily pass on to anyone thinking of writing their own song: just tell the story, and let the metaphors take care of themselves. ■

Mr Fox's two albums, 'Mr Fox' and 'The Gypsy', are both on the CD 'Mr Fox: Join Us In Our Game' (Castle Music - CMRCD1049). 'The Last Wolf' was re-issued in 2018 (Talking Elephant - TECD401). You can hear both recordings on Spotify and purchase the CDs online..

Time Taking Flight: the art of essays

Hummingbirds Between the Pages

Chris Arthur (Mad Creek Books)

REVIEW BY KIRSTY GUNN

WHAT IS IT like to feel oneself alive in the world – now, in this moment – before being tipped forever into the vast oblivion of eternity? This is the question essayist Chris Arthur is interested in: Mortal time and its constraints – whether experienced in reality, as fleeting moments of sensation and experience and understanding, or on the page, as pieces of writing that are themselves attempts to hold back time and make permanent the dancing transience of thought.

About halfway through *Hummingbirds Between the Pages*, his latest collection of reflections, projections, autobiography and rivetingly precise observations about the natural world, human behaviour and the touch and sight and smell of lived life, he comes right out with it. In an essay called ‘Butterfly Smoke Signals’ we read, in a section about butterflies hatching, “The fact that many of the people who came to meet the butterflies that evening were elderly...made the proximity to these flawless life-gems... particularly poignant. The contrast between newly minted morphos and old men and women who were as worn and tattered as butterflies nearing the end of their lives gave added luster to the sheen the butterflies possessed as mirrors of mortality.”

It’s a perfect summing up of this writer’s sensibility and method, a thinking out loud around the big mysteries of life that come harnessed to observations about ordinary life that have been lit up by small event or other, contained in a literary form he has made his own and

crafted to be within “a hair’s breath”, as he writes, between the words and the reality being described. Who else writing in Britain at the moment is so at ease with the very genre of essay, I wonder, that can be both abstract and highly personal? The sort of non-fiction writing that is not only an essay or attempt – a leap of an idea into the unknown, first championed by the French essayist Michel de Montaigne in the 16thC – but is also completely at home with the worlds of facts and figures, science and maths and history, empirical certainties once held by clergymen and philosophers alike as “proof” of their own orthodoxies.

Essays may be more widely read now than they were even ten years ago (thanks to dedicated essay publishing houses and competitions, and prominent novelists such as Ali Smith involving them in her fiction) but here in Scotland we are still slow to celebrate a genre that was once such a vigorous, robust aspect of our culture – forged within the coffee houses of the Edinburgh Enlightenment and expressed all over the highland and islands in local publications and journals that are the stuff of Scottish historians’ research.

Chris Arthur has always only ever written essays – this is his eighth collection – and has won prizes and accolades in America, where his work has been anthologised in prestigious collections such as Pushcart’s Best American Essay, celebrated for the sheer fineness of his prose, its attention to detail, the way he allows the texture of his thoughts to create spaces and depth within the subjects he addresses, whether it’s the woodpigeon on his lawn or the sight of an empty hearse followed by that teenage girl dressed in the colours of Spring, two very

different kinds of “body” in mind. The voice that speaks in all his work is quiet, yet lyrical, both self effacing and slyly self conscious – “Encountering Julie’s erotic charisma only minutes after passing the empty hearse occasioned a collision of electricities” he writes, acutely aware of how the form of her young womanliness will “dissolve into what preceded it, and what will come next.”

Why is this writer not better known here in Scotland, in Britain, where we should “own” him as a leading practitioner of form of writing now slowly being adopted on university reading lists and creative writing programmes? It seems crazy that the new volume is published, as are others, by an American publishing house, with its American spellings, and an introduction by an American editor, when most of the pieces here are set in places that will be familiar to Scottish readers – St Andrews and Dundee and Edinburgh, along with Belfast and London – and describe situations that are known more directly on this side of the Atlantic – the Irish Troubles, British animals and flowers and weather – before they turn their attention to more universal themes.

Certainly, what marks *Hummingbirds Between the Pages* as being both a development of and a departure from this writer’s earlier work – collections such as *Irish Nocturnes* and *On the Shoreline of Knowledge*, and the more recent *Reading Life* – is the sure slow tick of time we hear sounding through its pages. A universal certainty for sure. Though his subject matter, as always, ranges freely, Arthur’s underlying subject here, drawing all the essays together and grounding them with a deep seriousness, is the inexorable march of the human

individual towards the end. That phrase “even in the midst of life we are in death” has surely never seemed more apt than in the wry, tender, intelligently probing set of essays we have here. “Contained in the moment thus simplified there is so much more than meets the eye” he writes in ‘Watchwords’, an essay about coming upon his father’s old watch. “Questions about time and memory, identity and absence, God and purpose get lodged in the shafts that words create” he finishes, “glimpsing something of the disparity in scale between language and what it tries to speak of... silence.”

For a while I wondered why the collection hadn’t been named after an essay like that one, or *The Archaeology of Days*, his meditation upon rituals, journal keeping and memory. That essay in particular seems to lay out his project so completely, after all. But finishing reading and closing the book I’ve come to understand, I think, why the essayist wanted his volume to have about it the sense of a contained holding within its pages the forms of once living creatures now dead and kept as keepsakes. For though what I think of as a genre is more open ended and shifting than that expressed by the fixed certainties suggested by the title of these essays, I see that what Chris Arthur has done here is show us, in the pressing of his thoughts to paper, how the individual life takes flight each time we snatch it from the air and stamp it to the page. Each thought “stopped me in my tracks, glinting with the suggestion of meanings beyond the commonplace.” ■

Contrasting Anthologies

Scotia Extremis

Edited by Andy Jackson and Brian Johnstone
Luath, 2019

Conversations in Stone

A celebration of Hugh Miller’s Legacy
Edited by Larissa Reid and Elsa Panciroli
Biddles Books, 2019

REVIEW BY KENNY TAYLOR

IN THIS TIME of political polarisation, an anthology subtitled ‘Poems from the extremes of Scotland’s psyche’ might not seem the most diverting of reading

choices. But *Scotia Extremis* is a kist of riches – a book to dip into and then smile at the diversity of voices it holds.

Editors Andy Jackson (an experienced shaper of other anthologies) and Brian Johnstone (founder and former director of StAnza) – both widely published – must have had fun with this project. Developed from an online version of the idea, commissioned poets and writers were asked to provide a new take on a given topic’s place in the national psyche. Each topic was then paired with another commissioned piece to highlight both commonalities and extremes.

Those pairings alone can coax many ideas: Hamish Henderson sharing a page spread with Frankie Boyle; Ivor Cutler looking across to William Topaz McGonagall; St Kilda followed by Gruinard Island. Add the inventiveness of what reads like a roll call of many of Scotland’s finest contemporary poets and this book is both a keeper and – at £9.99 – a bargain.

Conversations in Stone is an anthology of a different kind, drawn largely from winning entries in the first two Hugh Miller Writing Competitions. As James Robertson writes in the introduction,

19th century ‘knowledge geek’ Hugh Miller did not separate science and the arts. Accordingly, much of the poetry and prose included melds these. And as Martin Gostwick of the Friends of Hugh Miller says, new writing still inspired by Hugh Miller ‘will go some way towards bringing more people to appreciate this giant of Scottish science and literature.’ ■

Tom Bryan and George Gunn – Collected and Selected

Collected Poems Volume One 1984–2010; Collected Poems Volume Two 2011–2019

by Tom Bryan (Littoral Press) 2019

REVIEW BY ANNE MACLEOD

Northwords Now and its predecessor *Northwords* have been blessed with editors of generosity and ability. Over the decades since its inception, writers such as Angus Dunn, Chris Powici and Rhoda Michael lent their poetic flair and infinite humanity to the magazine: Tom Bryan holds an early place in that hall of fame. Born in Manitoba of Irish-Canadian and Scottish parents, he has lived in Scotland all his writing life – for some years in Strathcannaird, Wester Ross, from where he co-edited *Northwords* from 1992–97.

Later, living and working in the Borders, Bryan founded *The Eildon Tree* magazine, which still flourishes. Librarian by training, over the years he has tackled such diverse occupations as steeple-jack, salmon farmer, journalist, pottery worker and now acts as full time carer for his wife Lis. He was the sixth Brownsbank Writing Fellow in Biggar, South Lanarkshire, has held literary residency posts throughout Scotland and acted as Royal Literary Fellow in York and Newcastle universities. His published work includes seven poetry collections as well as non-fiction, short stories and a novel *The Wolfelaw Chronicles*.

This busy life is reflected with elegance and economy in the work. Bryan's clarity of vision and exact and beguiling use of language situate the reader in the strength, beauty or anxiety of any chosen moment. His poems are a deeply satisfying read.

A musician, he knows the weight of a vowel. A sure-footed editor, he orders the poems in such a way as to draw the reader unerringly forward. Not every poetry collection could be offered the description page-turner. Bryan's could: in the first of these volumes Poetry on the Shelves 'Whole lives between thin covers' is followed by *Planting Potatoes During Chernobyl* 'Death and potatoes/go a long way back in my family', *A Prairie Life* 'What colour for flight, for hope?' and *Swallow* 'Staccato zigzag is no party trick'.

The language rich, spare, the lines dense with imagery, sweeps you right to the heart of each and every chosen matter. His poems demonstrate considerable expertise in free verse and the lyric form. In Bryan's hand, even the smallest poem will stop you in your tracks, strike universal resonances. In *Pioneer Graveyard* 'I've seen how rain works on limestone./How it forms letter grooves./How pools will form./How words melt together./Goldfinches perch on thistles,/sassafras and maple roots roll stones/out, into the sun./Tiny yellow butterflies pause here/on the way to dying.'

A man of the land, he delights in landscape, in the animals there encountered, in the necessary work, as in *Fuaran* 'I carry a hoe through the hailstorm/to clean our copper filter.' An emigrant, of emigrant parentage, he meets in Diaspora Kurds, Shasta Indians, a giant Kerryman at Wimbledon 'an Irish Moses parting a Saxon sea' and 'Two Lewismen choke on a dusty highway,/night is falling on the way to Medicine Hat./Chan' eil ceilidh air a' phreiridh.../(there' is no ceilidh on the prairie)'

Even in his earliest work, he interrogates the world and his place in it, questioning the personal and political in any situation. In *Haymaking*, he describes himself a teen 'too sullen to be a farmer's favourite... ..Truculent defender of rabbits before the baler...'. He records the fate of snakes rolled into the hay, 'knew their shape and names,/ringneck, fox and corn,/blue racers.' Those bales were 'branded with broken rattles/in search of fangs.'

Scotland is his home, but his Canadian roots are always clear. The later poems amplify this sense of the international to include Russia, Catalonia, Asturias, and the last speaker of Bo on the Andaman Islands. 'She died, the last speaker of Bo... ..an old woman who could only/speak to herself, answer her own/questions'.

He writes a poem beside Tolstoy's grave. He reimagines the meetings at Brownsbank between Hugh MacDiarmid and Allan Ginsberg. He ventures into what Susan Sontag called the kingdom of the sick, examining the effects of dementia and ageing, and re-considering his father's life and death.

One of the most beautiful and moving poems in the collection, *First Signs*, opens on a day of 'Freckled daisy and buttercup lanes./Fritillaries, dragonflies. Cobalt sky,/trout lying deep, cool.' and goes on to share the first warning symptoms of his wife's Multiple Sclerosis. She falls and finds she is unable to rise again '... so/human and small, my love, under that/great blue unblinking sky.'

In *Things I've Made*, Bryan declares that, among other things, he has produced 'a canoe of canvas' and 'a perfect ceramic bowl/ which will last a long time/ and hundreds of poems which won't.' On the evidence of these two volumes, that last statement is wrong. His vivid, eloquent lines have too much life – and truth – in them. ■

After the Rain: New and Selected Poems 1991–2016

by George Gunn (Kennedy and Boyd) 2018

REVIEW BY ANNE MACLEOD

George Gunn, prolific poet, playwright and journalist, hails from Caithness, where he still lives. In the 1970s and 80s he worked in deep-sea fishing and in the

North Sea oil industry. *Roughneck*, his first play, was performed at the Traverse Theatre in 1984. His work for stage and radio – over 50 productions – is well known. He co-founded Grey Coast Theatre, acting as Artistic Director for the company from 1992 till 2010. He has published seven poetry collections. His book about Caithness, *The Province of the Cat*, appeared in 2015, and in 2017 a novel, *The Great Edge*.

Reading George Gunn's poetry is an adventure in breathlessness. In *After the Rain, New and Selected Poems*, he sweeps us through a quarter century of lyrical observation and intensity sparked by Caithness, its people, the land and the surrounding sea.

The first poem in the collection, *On Dwarick Head* confronts us with the 'stinging radiance' of the strafing North wind and its urgent question 'are we only what we say and do?' No. Gunn assures us in *Trinity*, we are more than that: he, for example, is 'Gallaibh, Norse & Celt/Caithness shapes my trinity/my grand linking sisters/your power sends me ranting for justice//your people in my voice like a christening'.

And ranting for justice is something this poet is not afraid to do, whether as a 'mucky-shoed' youngster with a bow and arrow trained on a decorous cavalcade as *The Queen Mother Drives through Dunnet 1968*, or the heart-broken oil-worker in *Piper* berating in disbelief the loss and aftermath of the Piper Alpha tragedy – 'the dead are always with us/we remember the dead' – shock and grief in every line.

Gunn is a poet whose voice chimes with recent Gaelic tradition, with Sorley MacLean and Iain Crichton Smith. The dancing rivers of his verse encompass traditional form, free verse and poetry as song. He navigates with skill the wide and stormy oceans of cultural and political debate. For Gunn, the bedrock is always the land – the land – the land. While his undoubted mastery of music and speech rhythms may perhaps be expected of such an accomplished playwright, his deep knowledge of and engagement in divers cultures and mythologies – classical, Viking, Asian – lend layer upon layer of interest and richness to a political poetry of Scotland in the here and now. At times incantatory, at times almost formal in his lyricism, a salt-tinged realism drives his questing. In the novena-like *Rune Stations* he declares 'to lift the flagstone of memory/& count the missing fossils/that is a stone cut runeto fish for meaning/in the sea of the air... ..to do all of this/& still leave room for wonder/that is a stone-cut rune'.

He can be whimsical 'I dream of flying/through the spicy/ itchy air of medieval bird wings' (*The King of the Herring*). He can be wistful 'the family leaves/the hill is empty/except for expectation' (*Seeking Angels*). He can

be a modern berserker with a sense of humour 'I would run headless then from steading/to steading... my headless head full of the sweet smells of growth/and silage, ah sweet temptress life' (*Caithness*). But even the Vikings in Caithness have softened 'They slip under the eiderdown of their bodies/the young boys in the bar... .. "Be strong & then be gentle"/I wanted to cry out to them/"like those warriors when your country/was young' (*In Thurso One Night*).

Gunn appreciates the political and ideological complexities of our time. 'Beneath our feet the littered shells... .. random and unsettled like ideas... ..we walked, weaving ourselves into meaning' and wishes never to become 'a symptom/of the problem we mean to solve'. (*The Solution*). He worries about climate change. 'So it comes, the grey blue sea/is torn to towering ribbons... .. Out beyond the headland/a volcano of angry promise/threatens the firth the cliffs the fields/the breath of Loki has blown/& the beach is gone' (*The Breath of Loki*). In the same poem he warns 'all the sacrificial lambs have risen up/the seekers of eternal youth have settled /for the worm-eyed apples of their own/camera-less demise'.

His long poem *The Rowan of Life* proves a vivid set of songlines for the North where 'silence can give birth to song/& darkness pass on to light its liberty/all this must rise & fall & sing the dust into life.' In *Bees* – a historiosophic ode for Osip Mandelstam he addresses Persephone who as in Mandelstam's poem will 'sift the Sunlit song of the bees/the truth-tellers... ..so that you can always hear the whispering/of the poor man on the Siberian train.' Persephone 'pushes up the dark earth of Time' and her bees, who traverse the worlds of the living and the dead 'kiss the wild song of their yellow language/turning honey into sunlight'.

Vernal opens with Walcott's line 'The sea is history.' Gunn declares 'the absence of light/is not darkness/it is a picture of the invisible/a map of all we know' while 'in this vast world/we are pebbles/& yet we shine/when the tide moves us'.

The last three poems *Nine Worlds*, *After the Rain* and *High Ormlie* are a substantial and troubling read. In *Nine Worlds*, the ghost of the Sutherland poet Rob Donn Mackay makes an appearance, outraged by Atomic City and the bombing of An Garbh Eilean; a poet stumbling from a harbour pub is torn to pieces by wild dogs, and the boor tree has turned into a flowering organ of mad flutes 'Time the actor concludes his performance on Dunnet Beach/he buries his contract in the sand... .. as the Northern sky tears itself apart over Thurso'. In *After the Rain (with music)* a poem to be read to improvised piano, the agraphon – what is not written – emerges. And in *High Ormlie* a Committee for Human

Improvement insists 'information is not knowledge... ... knowledgeability consists of the capacity/to understand... ... no-one in *High Ormlie* qualifies/ instead we listen to how Odetta sings/ or what Woody Guthrie sings and speaks...'. Meanwhile the old skald 'slouches/ through the overgrown planting paths... ... turning birch leaves into pennies/he spends them in the hungry forest of his life'.

Yet Gunn is not without hope. In *Two Otters*, the Sun sits behind the Summer Isles, shining 'into the dark places of hesitation... ... tomorrow will be different/ but not impossible & we know/that the light will return'. As John Glenday has said, 'Gunn reminds us that we are a part of this frail, cold, vicious, beautiful world.' We are all the better for it. ■

Hell: Dante's Divine Trilogy Part One: Decorated and Englished in prosaic verse by Alasdair Gray.

Canongate Books 2018

REVIEW BY SALLY EVANZ

This is not a review of a poetry book. It is a review of another eccentricity by the Scottish artist and writer most loved for his eccentricity. And this, like his habit of painting murals which then get demolished (sometimes); along with the legends that abound of his refusing prizes then going back to his wife Morag, sadly no longer with us, and being told in words of one syllable to go back and accept the prize because they were almost penniless; of plots and pamphleteering, political statements and disarming self-deprecation, rounds out a figure, primarily a painter of murals and churches, and writer of several successful self-illustrated novels, having a book illustration style that's instantly recognisable, in which the portraits of Scottish personalities and friends, whether of Angus Calder, Joe Murray, Joy Hendry, of various politicians or of vaguer, essentially Scottish personalities, always seem to resemble the painter himself.

Alasdair Gray is better known as an artist, novelist, playwright and illustrator than as a poet, although he has published several collections and pamphlets, most recently *Guts* minced with oatmeal (reviewed in *Northwords Now* 36). No, Alasdair is, typically, on record as saying he was astonished that anybody would publish this book at all: the major third of Dante's great cycle of Heaven, Purgatory and Hell. Dante's *Inferno*.

Of course it is the *Inferno*, not Heaven or Hell. This is the fifteenth century master epic of Dante and Beatrice that cost Dante himself so dearly and is without doubt the greatest Catholic poem in the world.

There are more than 100 recorded English translations of this work.

Among them, Dorothy Sayers' rendering (Hell, Penguin, 1949) probably has the best pedigree and enjoyed the most lasting influence in its day and beyond. Translators have spent years immersed in the language and the poem. Critics have swooned over it. Nearer a thousand years after Vergil than our two thousand, and in the same language, by then morphed from Latin to Italian, Dante brought the Latin (and Greek) poetic traditions on board his great poem and sailed it triumphantly into posterity.

Dante's poem is very funny (the *Divine Comedy*), as well as being sensitive, moving, emotional and immaculately crafted.

Alasdair Gray seems to want us to look at the poem as a less poetically sacred object. This is what it says, he seems to say, attacking Terza Rima as being "easy" in Italian, and dashing off any old easy rhymes, or none, throughout, in a deadpan metre that has more in common with English hymns than Italian lyricism. Like Bede translating the Gospel, it is a case of, get down the English for the natives' enlightenment, and of course there's a parallel in Bede completing a translation (hastily) in the later part of his life.

I'm not reviewing this as a poem, and I don't think Canongate, despite their history of specialist poetry publishing, are publishing it as one. It's more like an appreciation of his fearless nerve, his dependable debunking, of the mischievous fun which Alasdair Gray has brought into the Arts in Scotland, his deliberate ignoring of rules and sidestepping of idols. Painter of the Oran Mor interior, inventor of Lanark and perpetrator of yet another Englishing of Dante... who would be churlish enough to be ungrateful? ■

Three Kinds of Kissing

By Helen Lamb

Vagabond Voices 2018

REVIEW BY MAGGIE WALLIS

Helen Lamb died in April 2017, just weeks after bringing her first novel, *Three Kinds of Kissing*, to completion. Those close to her made it their aim to bring this well-crafted book to publication. Helen had already made a name for herself writing poetry and short stories, and her concise and vivid use of words in this novel are testimony to that.

The book is set in the late sixties/early seventies in small town Central Scotland with delightful detail about the era: - candlewick bedspreads, Doctor Scholl exercise sandals, Tom and Jerry on the telly, smoke-filled railway carriages.

There is a lot of humour, which is just as well, because the storyline is not funny. It is unsettling and viscerally human. There is compassion and depth of understanding around each character, even those who play a peripheral role – like Jimmy, who frequents the train

station and can reel off each local's name, address and date of birth.

'... She wants an answer, and I squint at the board. I don't have a clue...

"Make an attempt"

I look at her blankly and she glares back.

The true answer, as opposed to the right one, is I DON'T CARE. The trouble with maths is there can only be one answer. Not like real life.'

Three Kind of Kissing is about the inexact science of moving from childhood to adulthood. Grace, the main character, observes her parents, neighbours, teachers and peers with an astute, sullen eye, meanwhile trying to navigate an authentic way through to the other side for herself, with all the contradictions that entails.

'... She nods, gives me a weak but grateful smile. And I smile back like the decent daughter she wishes I was...

I know I shouldn't encourage her to go to work tonight. I should be trying to stop her. She's not fit to be looking after other people, but the house is still jangling and it won't stop until she goes, and I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to help her out the door.'

There is a secret, which the whole novel pivots around and is ominously present throughout. The focus of the book (narrated by Grace) is the friendship between Grace and Olive. It toggles between events four years apart, allowing our field of vision to expand gradually. Even though the secret is finally revealed to us, it continues to be buried in the lives of those we get to know in the book. It becomes our hidden secret also.

Helen has written an important book. An honest book. Not just for teenagers. I challenge you to read it and go unscathed. ■

Effie's War

by Philip Paris

(Black & White) 2018

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

War stories often feed the reader's appetite for familiar dramas of trenches, concentration camps and spies. This novel is not like that. *Effie's War* adds something new and important to our stock of knowledge, for it explores events which have almost been forgotten. Events, indeed, which were almost buried during their own time. For this we can thank Philip Paris, who discovered his quiet nook of rural idyll was not always so.

From Dec 1943 to May 1944, all residents of Inver, Tarbet and Fearn were evacuated in order for British soldiers to practise for D-Day landing. They had almost no warning, and had to remove all livestock as well as leave their homes. These individuals are honoured by an

obscure plaque and their sacrifices might seem minor compared to the Londoners cowering in underground shelters, or to pilots heading across the channel knowing a return trip was unlikely. Nevertheless, these farming families were victims of the war, albeit mostly unsung. Their lives were changed profoundly, and some never regained what they surrendered. And unlike the Londoners, they were not prepared practically or emotionally for this.

Paris explores the repercussions of the evacuation and the prisoners-of-war on the community. Spouses, siblings, parents, employers and workers had to adjust their attitudes and values. The heroine, young Effie, falls in love with Toni, an Italian prisoner of war. She is spirited, bright and attractive of course, but Paris manages to keep her from stereotype. Effie is a convincing girl, fraught with doubt and impulses she hardly understands. They love each other but there are complications, and the thread of this thwarted romance is one of the things that keep the reader engaged.

Paris has written about the war before – a novel titled *The Italian Chapel* and a non-fiction book on the same theme, *Orkney's Italian Chapel*. These are fine books, well-reviewed, but with *Effie's War*, he achieves more in terms of cohesion and impact. Simply put, it's a solid good read. I look forward to the next publication from Paris. ■

Start

by Graham Morgan

(Fledgling Press Ltd)

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

Start is about life while being sectioned under the Mental Health Act. This is not something we have all experienced, but which perhaps we should all understand. *Start* is an excellent place to start. In his straightforward and fearlessly personal way, Graham Morgan reports from the cliff face of depression and schizophrenia. At times, the reading is hard going – but it should be. Mental illness is not a some kind of life option. The text itself is never obscure or long-winded. In fact, it is a joy to read. Morgan captures complex emotions with a light touch. Highly readable, *Start* is also a literary work with original imagery, profound insights, and above all compassion.

The structure follows a timescale. After a preface, there is a chapter called *Life at the Links Café*, a gentle piece which touches on the dramatic events in his recent life. This is followed by twelve sections titled by months (Jan to Jan), with each of these sections full of short chapters. It is, in essence, a collection of short sequential pieces. Some are like diary entries about the breakdown of his marriage and alienation from his son. Some are informative, and describe what happens when you feel you should

not be alive anymore, and you become sectioned. Interwoven through all this, are (for instance) whimsical musings while taking a walk on the beach.

It bodes well to remember that Morgan not only has an MBE for services to mental health organisations, he has also been consulted by the United Nations in Geneva. He is a well-respected advocate for mental health service users on an international scale. Unlike most books on this subject, *Start* is written by someone with the inside scoop from personal experience. It is not a case of us and them, but of we.

What, in reality, does he hope this book achieves? Not much. He is aware there is no magic wand, no easy answers to mental ill health. However, he hopes to raise awareness and shrink the stigma. Unlike mental illness, feeling isolated is a problem which can be addressed.

Morgan has been described by the medical profession as a high-functioning individual with schizophrenia. He hates this description. It does not come close to conveying the actual experience of the disorder, and it seems to look down on others. What must it be like to be labelled low-functioning? And yet, there is no denying that Morgan speaks eloquently for the millions who probably find speaking about their illness difficult, if not impossible.

Finally, this book succeeds in two other functions – just as important as describing being sectioned. It is a love letter to his

partner Wendy, and an apology to his first wife and son, and to his parents and siblings. It is not easy being a schizophrenic. It is also, admits Morgan, not easy loving a schizophrenic. ■

Yarnin

By James Sinclair
Bluemull Books, 2018

An Unbolted Door

By Lydia Harris
Maquette, 2018

An Offering

By Stewart Sanderson
Tapsalteerie, 2018

In February

By Larissa Reid, 2018

Within the Slide of Wind

By Andy Allan
Indigo Dreams, 2018

The Incubus

By Sheena Blackhall
Malfranteaux Concepts, 2018

REVIEW BY KENNY TAYLOR

Among the many poetry collections published in recent months, it's been encouraging to see several from poets also featured recently in *Northwords Now*. Two of these bring different facets of the North Isles to their pages, in very different voices.

James Sinclair works as an engineering storeman in Shetland. His new collection is all in dialect, with line after line just prodding you to read it aloud: 'Wi no a pirr o wind/nedder a clood I da lift/a

yellow sun braks da hills o Brass'. As Kevin MacNeil has said of his work: "the poems resonate in heart and mind long after reading." You can hear James reading his sequence 'Da Shipwrecked Forester' on the *Northwords Now* website.

Lydia Harris' new 'slim volume' is full of details of people, artefacts, tales and scenes from her home isle of Westray. With deft phrasing, she can morph the commonplace into the extraordinary, make lines sing like incantations: 'He keeps spare bulbs in the fridge/cattle in the byre next door'.

Stewart Sanderson was a recent visiting poet at Moniack Mhor, not long after publication of his second pamphlet *An Offering*. His skilfully crafted poems hold images and rhythms that repay repeated reading: 'Between two nations in a parlous state/the fracture yawns: a faded watermark/my eyes can't follow through these desolate/high pastures – thread unspooling in the dark'. A young Scottish poet to watch.

Larissa Reid's poetry was first published here in 2017, so it's a pleasure to welcome her first pamphlet *In February*. This draws entirely on responses to Robert MacFarlane's 'Word of the Day' tweets, but in ways that eschew the obvious and relish the power of words to transport imagination. So 'ombrifuge' takes her to Eigg, 'sfumato' to Leonardo da Vinci.

Andy Allan's collection majors on landscape, seascape and nature in the north of Scotland, in poems that should

also be read aloud: 'The rush of waves sounds strange/in calm illusion's hush' almost makes me want to swim, despite the temperature, off his 'Cold Winter Beach'. Poetry that takes you there and refreshes with its cadences.

Sheena Blackhall's prodigious output continues apace, with *The Incubus* being one of several pamphlets she has produced since last spring, all of which show her fluency with verse in both Scots and English. Particularly poignant in this collection is her appreciation of Falkirk dialect trailblazer, the novelist, poet and playwright Janet Paisley, who passed away last November. 'Her voice lives on in the darg she leaves ahin', as Sheena says.

And just a quick nod to the fiction work of two other regulars in these pages: Donald S Murray and Mandy Haggith, both published by Saraband, both longlisted for the 2019 Highland Book Prize and both enjoying other excellent responses to their current books. Donald's *As the Women Lay Dreaming*, a novel based on the Iolaire disaster, has now been shortlisted for the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award, to be announced in late May. Mandy's *The Amber Seeker*, sequel to *The Walrus Mutterer*, adds fascinating twists to her tale of 'loss, longing and revenge in 320 BC.' Look for the tumbling bears on its cover – a design sure to make you smile, as the writing reels you in – and for a review here in the autumn. ■

Coffee, cake and adrenaline

The inside story of the Highland Book Prize

KENNY TAYLOR

Now in its second year, the Highland Book Prize has already generated great interest among writers, publishers and readers. To find out more in the lead-up to the 2019 award, I visited Moniack Mhor to speak to some of the staff who have helped to shape and steer the prize. Rachel Humphries, Rich Clements and Eilidh Smith gave me the low-down. From now on in, most of the words are theirs. Some cake and coffee was consumed in the making of this article.

RACHEL: IT ALL started with Alex Ogilvie, treasurer of the Highland Society of London, who had previously spoken with Joan Michael of the Ullapool Book Festival (UBF) and a number of others, including the literary agent, Jenny Brown, to get their input. Very kindly, Jenny, Joan and the Scottish Book Trust suggested that Moniack Mhor be involved in the prize, because of our location and our connections with the Highland writing community. That was in April 2017.

The Highland Society of London (founded in 1778) has a long history of supporting Highland-linked art forms and traditions. So expanding its charitable

giving to further raise the profile of literature with a Highland connection was a logical move.

Eilidh: Quite simply, books produced by UK-based publishers and inspired by the Highlands are eligible. The criteria are broad, including books concerned with Highland culture, heritage or landscape or have a significant amount of activity set in the Highlands; authors born or brought up here; or writers who have lived in the Highlands for six years or more.

Rich: Our expectations were modest. I thought we might get 15 books or so; Rachel reckoned 'Oh – let's be optimistic: 20!' But in year one, we got 56 titles submitted, with 52 eligible. That blew our

minds; we realised that we were dealing with something that not only was much needed, but also was much bigger than we'd anticipated.

Rachel: There are two rounds of judging. The first is by a panel of readers. We had 64 readers in total in the first year, including people with associations with Moniack, industry professionals, members of the UBF and Highland Society of London committees and avid readers.

Eilidh: Assessments from our panel of lead judges came after detailed scoring of different aspects of books had been completed by readers to produce the long- and short-lists. The 2018 panel was Kevin MacNeil, Jenny Niven from Creative Scotland, Alex Ogilvie and Chris Dolan, honorary president of UBF.

Rachel: The 2018 winner was Kapka Kassabova, for her remarkable book *Border*. Kapka, who was in New Zealand at the time, appeared on video. She also gave half her prize money to the Scottish Refugee Council. Now, when she talks about the book, she mentions the prize.

None of *Border* is set in the Highlands, but the argument from both readers and lead judges was that borders are incredibly important, as is displacement of people, irrespective of where you live. Kapka also says that if she hadn't been living and working in the Highlands, the book would have been very different.

For the 2019 prize, there's been an increase in the range of publishers submitting their books and in fiction entries. The team has aspirations to expand how they bring new titles to readers, including through events, and is looking to appoint a part-time co-ordinator for next year's prize.

Come Saturday night in Ullapool this May, the tension in the hall will be worthy of the Ullapool Oscars. You can see the shortlist on the back page. But the buzz will be shared more widely – among the large team of readers, across UK publishers and (not least) the staff at Moniack Mhor: "We've all had so much fun so far. I think we've run on coffee, cake and adrenaline." ■

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Ian Aitken is previously unpublished and writes poetry for fun and relaxation. He lives in Aberdeen with his wife, three teenagers and dog.

Andy Allan lives in Moray beside Culbin Forest. His latest collection, *Within the Slide of Wind* was published by Indigo Dreams in November 2018.

Chris Arthur lives in St Andrews. He has published several essay collections, most recently *Hummingbirds Between the Pages*. For details of his work see www.chrisarthur.org.

Phil Baarda is a writer based in the Highlands. He's the creative director of Mangonel Theatre company, and also runs the Inverness Playwrights – a group of drama writers of all kinds.

Stephen Barnaby was born in St. Annes, Lancashire, grew up in Thurso, Caithness and lives in Musselburgh, East Lothian with his partner and two daughters.

Heather Beaton lives on South Uist and is inspired by the changing seasons, wild weather and connecting with the hidden wild. Read more at www.heatherybean.blogspot.com.

Simon Berry a former editor of *The Scotsman* book pages, president of Scottish PEN and a board member of 7:84 Scotland, has a poetry collection *A Mask for Grieving* and biography of Victorian poet, Alexander Smith published by FTRR Press.

Sharon Black is from Glasgow and lives in the Cévennes mountains in France, the subject of her fourth collection. www.sharonblack.co.uk

Peter Burrows, a librarian, grew up in Kinross and is training to be a counsellor. His work has appeared widely, including most recently in *Southlight*, *Coast to Coast* and *Marble Poetry*.

Leonie Charlton (Bonniwell) lives in Glen Lonan in Argyll. She recently completed an MLitt in Creative Writing at Stirling University and writes fiction, non-fiction and poetry www.leoniebonniwell.co.uk

Julian Colton lives in Selkirk, edits *The Eildon Tree* literary magazine and contributes articles and reviews. His five collections of poetry include, most recently, *Two Che Guevaras* (Scottish Borders Council) and *Everyman Street* (Smokestack Publishing).

Ian Crockett is a widely published poet and poetry translator. He's reading his acclaimed translations of Viking poetry at Orkney's St. Magnus festival in June.

Derek Crook lives on Mull. He has published in *Northwords Now*, *Poetry Scotland* and in such anthologies as *Watch The Birdie*, *Poetree* and *The Bee's Breakfast*.

Dr Seth Crook is transitioning into a seal. He lives on Mull. His poems have appeared in many different publications, such as *Antiphon*, *Magma*, *Envoi* and *The Glasgow Review of Books*.

Jonathan Drew lives in Perthshire. He's inspired by the natural world and our place within it. His poetry has featured in several magazines and anthologies.

Anne Elizabeth Edwards from Lewis reckons that after a long career as a midwife helping women birth their babies, it's time for a new creative energy; coming 'Home' is the first step.

Catherine Eunson was a joint winner of the 2018 McCash prize, had poems featured StAnza 2019 and lives in Glasgow. She also composes music for poetry.

Sally Evanz from Callander has been publishing poems and books of poems for many years. She is celebrating her retirement by studying for a PhD in Creative Writing at Lancaster University.

Matthew Gallivan is a Canadian living

in Belfast. His poetry and short stories have been published in numerous journals

Amanda Gilmour is a creative writing student at the University of the Highlands and Islands. She lives in Inverness with her husband and three children.

Ruth Gilchrist is an award-winning, East Lothian poet who can be found in various media. Her first joint pamphlet *The Weather Looks Promising* is published by Black Agnes Press.

Merryn Glover writes fiction, drama and poetry. For 2019, she is Writer in Residence for the Cairngorms National Park, which is turning out to be her dream job.

Brian Gourley from Co. Tyrone has most recently published poems in *Acumen*, *Southlight* and *The Eildon Tree* and is currently working on debut collection and novel.

Barry Graham is what Foucault called an Author Function. More than a dozen books. www.dogozen.co.uk

Kirsty Gunn directs the Writing Practice and Study Programme at the University of Dundee. Her latest book is *Caroline's Bikini* ('An Arrangement of a Novel', Faber & Faber).

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.

Alisdair Hodgson is a poet, writer, freelance editor and joint editor-in-chief of Bandit Fiction, who has thus far divided his life between Wick, Haddington, Stow and Stirling.

Sarah Jessen writes poetry and fiction inspired by the landscape of her home, motherhood and folklore. She is based in the beautiful islands of Orkney.

Alistair Lawrie born in Peterhead, lives now in Stonehaven; co-edited *Glimmer Of Cold Brine*; leads Mearns Writers; published in *The Interpreter's House* and "Poets' Republic"; winner of the William Soutar Prize 2016.

Sonya Macdonald is a Scottish writer currently working on a first collection of poems. Her nomadic upbringing and years spent in the Hebrides remain a source of inspiration.

Anna Macfie was born in Glasgow and lives in the Highlands. She writes about experience of place.

Anne MacLeod has published two novels and two poetry collections. Her *Standing by Thistles* collection was shortlisted for a Saltire First Book Award and her first novel, *The Dark Ship*, was nominated for Saltire and Impac awards.

Chris Madej lives and works in Inverness. He somehow finds time to write while being a husband and a father of two boys.

Beth McDonough's poetry appears in *Causeway*, *Gutter* and elsewhere; she reviews in *DURA*. *Handfast* (with Ruth Aylett) explores dementia and autism. A pamphlet is coming...

Liz McKibben lives in Edinburgh, writes in English and Scots, enjoys translating poetry and has been published in *New Writing Scotland*.

Erin McGregor lives and writes in Alberta, Canada, and flies to Scotland every few years to go for long walks in the Highlands.

Brenda McHale lives in Perthshire and is coming to the end of Dundee's MLitt Writing Practice. She's had short stories and non-fiction published.

Martin Malone lives in north-east Scotland. He has published two poetry collections: *The Waiting Hillside* and *Cur*. He's an Associate Teaching Fellow in Creative Writing at Aberdeen University.

Greg Michaelson lives in Edinburgh. He mostly likes to write about how things aren't and how they might be.

Jon Miller has had poetry published in various literary magazines as well as book and exhibition reviews and literary journalism. He has also collaborated with Scottish artists on projects linking poetry, visual art and music.

Hamish Myers lives in the Highlands and enjoys writing poems mainly inspired by the history, landscape and natural rhythms of the area.

Richard Myers is retired and owns a croft near Glen Affric.

Willie Orr is a former hill shepherd, teacher and counsellor. Now retired and living in Argyll, his new novel *Mick* (Thunderpoint) will be launched this autumn.

Bob Pegg lives in Strathpeffer in Ross-shire. He is a songwriter, musician, author, and occasional storyteller.

Lydia Popowich dreams, writes and paints by the sea in Caithness. Her first pamphlet, *The Jellyfish Society* was published in 2016 by Paper Swans Press.

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. His second pamphlet, *An Offering*, is published by Tapsalteerie.

Hamish Scott's fourth, and latest, poetry collection is *Tuk-tuks*, published under the Laverock's Nest imprint.

Alison Sellar is a former teacher who lives in Cromarty. She writes poetry and monologues and enjoys singing, drama and cloud-gazing.

Gillian Shearer lives in Alford. Published in *Causeway*, *Southlight* and *The Leopard*. She is a creative writing therapist for Clan cancer charity.

Mary Anne Spence A teacher and prize-winning poet, Mary Anne Spence resides in Ardersier. She is often inspired by a need to record the past and fix memories.

Ian Stephen's selected poems *maritime* is published by Saraband as is his novel *A Book of Death and Fish*. *Waypoints* (Bloomsbury) was shortlisted for the Saltire non-fiction book of the year award, 2017.

Ian Tallach was raised in Taiwan and Hong Kong, worked in Botswana and retired from paediatrics with progressive M.S. He and his family now live in Glenurquhart.

Peter Watson started writing seriously in retirement after courses at Oxford Continuing Education. Inspiration comes from the wild Sutherland landscape where he mostly writes.

David Mark Williams writes poetry and short fiction. He has two collections of poetry published: *The Odd Sock Exchange* (Cinnamon, 2015) and *Papaya Fantasia* (Hedgehog, 2018). www.davidmarkwilliams.co.uk

Vawdrey Taylor is an artist and writer from the Black Isle with an interest in etching and illustration.

Olga Wojtas won a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award in 2015. Her debut novel, *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar*, is published by Contraband.

Grahaeme Barrisford Young is widely published. His most recent collection is *Routes of Uncertainty* (Original Plus).



The Highland Book Prize Duais Leabhair na Gàidhealtachd

Presented by the Highland Society of London

Moniack Mhor Writers' Centre, the Highland Society of London and the Ullapool Book Festival congratulate the shortlisted authors for the 2018 Highland Book Prize, to be awarded at the Ullapool Book Festival on Saturday 11th May 2019.



The Last Wilderness by Neil Ansell (Tinder Press)

Quote from the judges: "Holding an elegiac quality, charting the last months before the author loses his hearing, and with its calmness and specificity, reading *The Last Wilderness* almost becomes an act of mindfulness in itself – a precious, graceful book."

Now We Shall Be Entirely Free by Andrew Miller (Sceptre)

"Beautifully written fiction that is bold, challenging and indelible - from the creation of character to its at times heady and dreamlike tone, this is as novel that holds your attention taut from beginning to end."



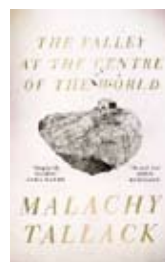
The Assynt Crofter by Judith Ross Napier (Acair)

"An engaging and surprising account of a figure who loomed large both in the local and national spheres. Amassing a wealth of detail on crofting and its characters at a particular juncture in the recent history of the Highlands, *The Assynt Crofter* is a richly valuable historical document."



The Valley at the Centre of the World by Malachy Tallack (Canongate)

"A fine first novel, building on the technical achievements of the author's previous non-fiction work. The use of authentic dialogue in particular gives credibility to a story rooted in the day-to-day of ordinary, contemporary island life."





2019 Programme available now.

www.moniackmhor.org.uk

email: info@moniackmhor.org.uk



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 October 2019. The deadline for submissions is 2nd August 2019. You will hear about your submission by 30th September 2019. Please do not submit elsewhere before this, but feel free to do so if we have not contacted you by then.

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/ and on Twitter @NorthwordsNow.

Where to find a FREE Northwords Now

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Eden Court Theatre, Bishop's Road
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Leakeys Bookshop, Greyfriars Hall, Church St
Moniak Mhor Writing Centre, 4 Teaverran, Kiltarlity
Highland Wholefoods, Unit 6, 13 Harbour Road
Museum & Art Gallery, Castle Wynd
Waterstone's, 69 Eastgate Centre
Visit Scotland, High St
Bogbain Farm, Drumossie
Simpsons Garden Centre
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Highlands (plus Moray and Perthshire)

Highland Libraries
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Picaresque Books, High St, Dingwall
High Flight Bookshop, High St, Dingwall
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Timespan, Dunrobin Street, Helmsdale
Dornoch Bookshop, High St, Dornoch
The Nairn Bookshop, 94 High St, Nairn
Moray Libraries
The Ceilidh Place, 14 West Argyll St, Ullapool
Ullapool Bookshop, Quay St., Ullapool
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Achins Bookshop, Inverkirkaig, Lochinver
Caithness Horizons, Old Town Hall, High St, Thurso
VisitScotland, High St, Aviemore
Birnarn Arts Centre
Anderson Restaurant, Union St, Fortrose
John Muir Trust, Station Road, Pitlochry
The Bakehouse, Findhorn (village)
The Blue Cafe, Findhorn Foundation
Moray Arts Centre, Findhorn Foundation
Sutor Creek, Bank St, Cromarty
Cromarty Arts, Church St, Cromarty
Spa Pavilion, Strathpeffer
Waterstone's, Elgin
Yeadons of Elgin

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Dornoch T.I.C
Neil Gunn Centre, Dunbeath Heritage Centre
The Pier, Lairg
Abriachan Forest Trust
Torridon Visitor Centre
Loch Ness Clayworks and Cafe, Drumnadrochit
Tain Service Point
The Hub, Muir of Ord
Loch Torridon Community Centre
The Bookmark, Grantown on Spey
The Highland Bookshop, 60 High St, Fort William
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Aberdeen City Libraries
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Yeadons of Banchory, 20 Dee St, Banchory
Aberdeenshire Libraries
Hammerton Store, 336 Gt Western Rd, Aberdeen
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Kesley's Bookshop, 29 Market St, Haddington, East Lothian
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The Bucleuch Centre, Langholm

Edinburgh

The Fruitmarket Gallery, 45 Market Street
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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
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An Leanag, 22 Mansefield St
Glasgow Concert Halls

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