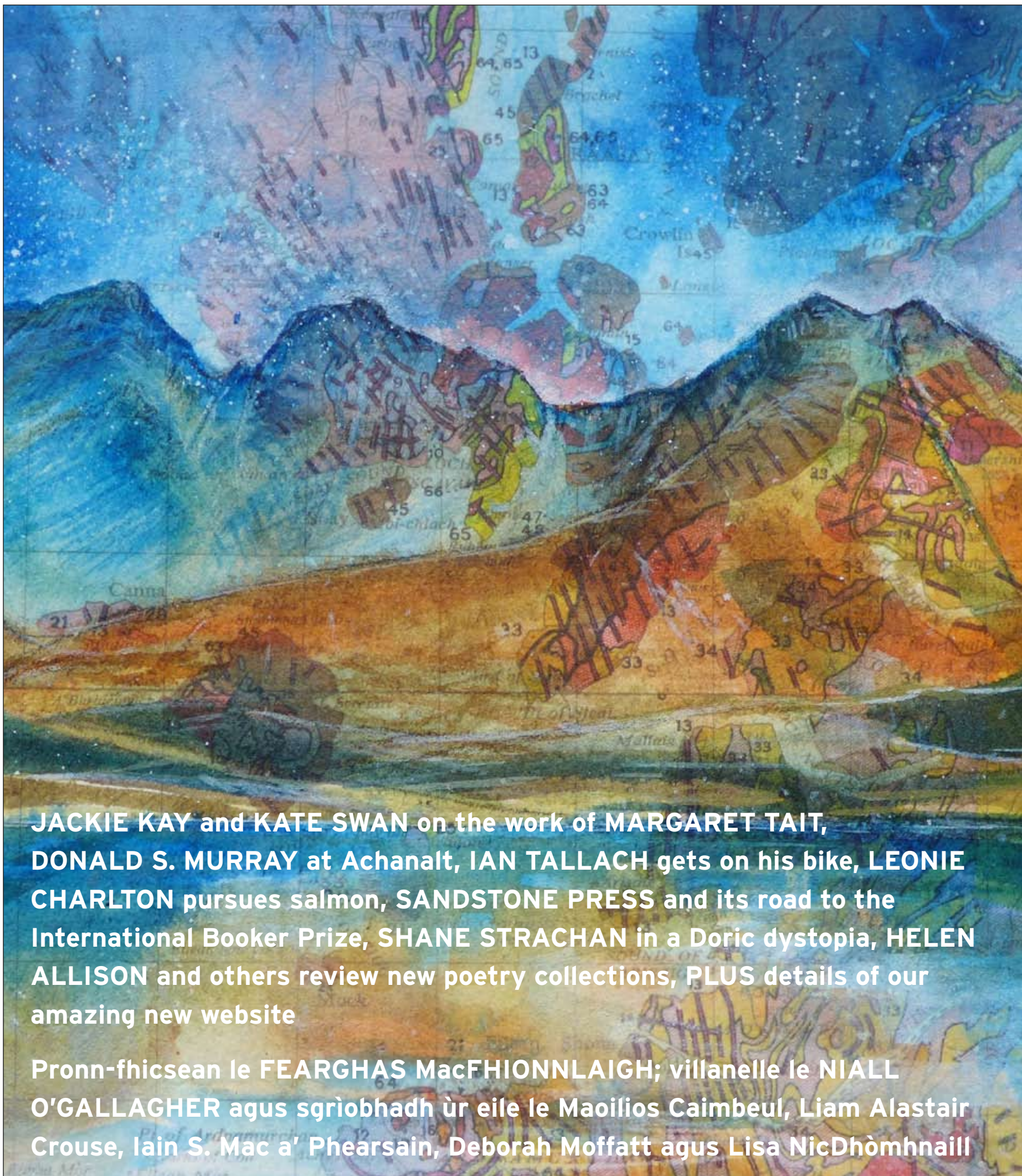


The FREE literary magazine of the North

# Northwords Now

Issue 38, Autumn-Winter 2019



**JACKIE KAY and KATE SWAN on the work of MARGARET TAIT, DONALD S. MURRAY at Achanalt, IAN TALLACH gets on his bike, LEONIE CHARLTON pursues salmon, SANDSTONE PRESS and its road to the International Booker Prize, SHANE STRACHAN in a Doric dystopia, HELEN ALLISON and others review new poetry collections, PLUS details of our amazing new website**

**Pronn-fhicsean le FEARGHAS MacFHIONNLAIGH; villanelle le NIALL O'GALLAGHER agus sgrìobhadh ùr eile le Maoilios Caimbeul, Liam Alastair Crouse, Iain S. Mac a' Phearsain, Deborah Moffatt agus Lisa NicDhòmhnaill**

## EDITORIAL

I'LL ADMIT IT: I'm hooked on the look, smell and feel of newsprint. It's been that way since I was a boy, taken by my father – a journalist at Glasgow's *Evening Times* – to visit the old Mitchell Lane offices at night. The film-noir lighting seemed to heighten the senses, make the mystery of words made print even greater.

I hope that's part of the pleasure of *Northwords Now* for readers: the heft of a new edition. But I'm also aware of the power of online presence and the usefulness of digital archives. That's why, with the backing of the *Northwords* board and extra support from Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, we're launching a new-look website. Constructed by the tech wizards of Plexus in deepest Cromarty (thank you, in particular, Garve, Dave and Colin) this – as before – has the current issue online, but with a much-expanded back catalogue of back issues as .pdfs.

For the contents of recent issues, you can now search on author name to point you to all the *Northwords Now* work by that person in the last few years. We'll also expand online audio-visual content as resources allow. As we continue to add to this archive, we hope it will become an increasingly useful resource for readers, writers, teachers and researchers interested in contemporary writing in all of Scotland's languages. All this – and newsprint too. Enjoy. ■

KENNY TAYLOR, EDITOR

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Visit the Northwords Now Website: [northwordsnow.co.uk](http://northwordsnow.co.uk) for archive resources and to submit work



[www.facebook.com/groups/northwordsnow/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/northwordsnow/)

*Erratum*, Northwords Now 37 – page 6 Alison Seller's name was mis-spelled as Sellar

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**Front cover image:** Detail from Blaven and Loch Slapin by Jenny McLaren, painted in acrylic ink and watercolour on an old Geological Survey map. Currently on display at the Castle Gallery, Inverness, which will host an exhibition of new work by Jenny in May 2020. [www.castlegallery.co.uk](http://www.castlegallery.co.uk) [www.jennymclarenstudio.com](http://www.jennymclarenstudio.com)

**Submissions** to the magazine, 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.

Postal submissions of potential review books should be sent to:

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To submit your work online, go to our website: [northwordsnow.co.uk](http://northwordsnow.co.uk) The next issue is planned for April 2020. The deadline for submissions is 31st January 2020. If accepted for publication, you will hear about your submission by 31st March 2020, so feel free to submit elsewhere if we have not contacted you by then.

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# Nothing else is ever anything unless lit by it

## Jackie Kay and Kate Swan on the work of Margaret Tait

**D**URING THE PAST year, events, screenings and a new website have helped to celebrate the work of pioneering film poet, Margaret Tait. Born on Armistice Day in 1918 and active as a film-maker and writer from the 1950s until the late 1990s, when she died in Kirkwall, her work is still fresh, surprising and worthy of repeated viewing and reading.

Around the start of the year-long celebrations, the Scots Makar, Jackie Kay, introduced some of Margaret's short films at a session chaired by Nicola White at the Cromarty Film Festival. What follows is drawn from what she said in her introduction and in answers to questions from Nicola and the audience. Further observations are from Kate Swan (also in the audience), who worked for several months with Margaret on Orkney, as executive producer and co-producer of her only feature film 'Blue Black Permanent' (1992).



*Jackie Kay:* I first came across the wonderful work of Margaret Tait through my friend, Ali Smith, whose sister – Anne Macleod – is here with us. I hadn't heard of her before, hadn't seen her work. And I was amazed that this woman, who was born the day the First World War ended, was a person who almost declares peace in her work.

Her work is so innovative and inspirational, because it always does more than one thing at once. It looks straight at her subjects; doesn't shy away from anything and gives the most surprising close-ups of people, such as in her astonishing film on Hugh MacDiarmid.

There was MacDiarmid – a famously quite vain man (especially about his hair). She gives us a portrait which gives a sense of him as a boy, as well as a man. It gives you a real sense that writers keep their childishness: if you notice, an awful lot of writers are quite childish! Because you're always in touch with your imaginative self, with your girl self or your boy self, the thing that made you make things up when you were young. And that portrait, of Hugh walking along the edge of things, captures that. It also captures how he was on the edge of things politically, and on the edge of what 'Scottishness' was: 'I'll hae nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur/Extremes meet.'. I think it's fascinating that you get that in her short film portrait.

Then her films give you an idea of how a person can be brought to life in a way that is very different from how we see documentaries today. She was ahead of her time. Her film of her mother Portrait of Ga (1952) is tender and touching,



Margaret Tait, photo by Gunnie Moberg © Estate of Gunnie Moberg

because Margaret Tait was doing things that nobody else was doing then, such as taking time to show a sweetie being unwrapped. I love the slow-motion-ness of that.

She understood that time is a poem, in a sense. Time is a poem and the land is a poem and the land makes a poem happen. And she understands the relationship between stories and heather and sea and people and land. In the world of Margaret Tait, all of these things are quite utterly, beautifully connected – to such an extent that you're riveted by it.

Strangely enough, her film work reminds me of the film work of Zora Neale Hurston, an African-American writer who wrote 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' and a number of other extraordinary works. But she also made films, which most people don't know about. I saw them at the Library of Congress. She also takes people – ordinary people – and the moments we don't usually get to see in films. When she shows African-American kids playing games, she records those games, but she's also part of what she's filming. Zora Neale Hurston's films and Margaret Tait's – I'd love somebody to come along and do a study of the two of them. You also get a sense when you're watching one of Margaret's films that she's in it, but also distant from it; part of it and also not. That vantage point was very unusual then.



*Kate Swan:* I met her in about 1989, so worked with her closely for about three years until 'Blue Black Permanent' was released. Then we stayed in touch until she died.

She was quiet, focussed and absolutely clear about what she wanted. She worked in a wonderful little church on Orkney – about ten miles from where she lived – a de-commissioned church where she kept everything, all her boxes of film, a little office on the side where she'd write – freezing cold! I spent days and weeks up

there with her. If you needed a pee you had to use a bucket on the lawn outside.

*JK:* Hard core!

*KS:* She handled all the correspondence that went back and forth with funders, such as the British Film Institute and Channel 4, very well. But she was determined to get her way, her view. I think one of the amazing things about 'Blue Black Permanent', now available to watch on the BFI player and on MUBI, is that Margaret kept hold of the film she wanted to make. All the shorts were made just by her – she filmed and cut them herself. On a feature film, she had to work with a huge crew and others, such as financiers and costume people. But she kept hold of it, because she made what she needed to make. She was a pure artist that way.

*JK:* And 'pure artist' is what you think when you're seeing these films, because there's something pure and clear and clarifying about them – as fresh as the bubbling water that they show. I really admire people that have a vision and know what they want to do. She didn't make money from her short films – she lost money. And when she was offered the chance to work with Grierson [the most influential documentary film maker and producer in Scotland and Canada through several decades from 1929, Ed.] but only if she did so in the way he wanted – she refused, as if saying: 'This is my vision. This is what I want to do.'

*KS:* I think that she understood that not everyone 'got' what she was trying to do. But for 'Blue Black Permanent' she needed all these people to help her to make it. It was like being a solo player and suddenly having an orchestra to conduct, and she was superb.



*JK:* A film is a poem and a poem is a film in the world of Margaret Tait. These films work very much like poems do, because of the way you are looking at things in complete detail. Poems have a love of language and metaphor. In the films, the language is the film itself, but the vantage point is that everything is seen with the poet's eye. So the poem is the land and the land is the poem for her. Everything is connected.

In the film portrait of her mother, she looks at all the materials that her mother is wearing, all those clothes, close-up. You get a sense of the clothes and their textures being like the land itself. Just after that, she jumps to the land and juxtaposes things – in the way that poets do, often to

allow you to understand things in sharp relief.

I find that extraordinary, because it's very intimate and it's also got a kind of distance; it does both at once. Her mother is *her* mother, and it's personal. But she could be any number of mothers or grandmothers that we all know and identify with.

She's got that ability, that poets have as well, to make something particular and universal at the same time. I think it's a really interesting use of film too. It feels so fresh, like something you haven't really seen, these particular angles and ways of looking. 'Portrait of Ga' is an unusual portrait of an old woman. Almost like a 'day in the life of', she goes through things in her life – her wee rollie, to her boiled sweet, to the different clothes that she wears, to running along. And she gives us these moments in time, for all time, really.

It's the same with her Hugh MacDiarmid film. We have that portrait now of him, showing an utterly different side than the one we usually get in Scottish literature, which is quite macho. It gives an almost feminine side to him.

In Margaret Tait, you get someone who's a poet and a film-maker, and the two things are completely intertwined. If I write a poem and it's made into a film, I'm not actually making the film, although I find the whole medium of film very exciting to work with as a poet, because of the many ways in which there's an affinity between the language and the camera.

In the closing lines of her poem 'Light' she says:

The movement that light is  
Comes out of the sun  
And it's so gorgeous a thing  
That nothing else is ever anything unless lit by it.

It's like her films. I love the closeness of her poetry to her films. I think if you sat down and read her poems without ever knowing her films, you'd have a much less rich experience. They're almost in conversation with each other, her poetry and the film.

KT

For a trove of Margaret Tait archive material, the Margaret Tait 100 website [www.margarettait100.com](http://www.margarettait100.com) compiled and curated by Sarah Neely, is superb. You can also watch several of Margaret's films on the National Library of Scotland site <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film>, the British Film Institute site and on MUBI. ■

# Poetry

## Freud's Couch in February

MARION MCCREADY

1

A couch is for resting on or sleeping.  
Whoever lay here did not sleep  
but ran with the peacocks and the deer  
in a red land. The red land is a Persian rug  
which is also a river of blood.  
There is no crossing the river  
but a mercy drowning  
without wails or waving of arms.

So many arms have rested on this couch;  
one arm reaches out to me now  
like the underside of a tree - bare,  
dark, every little branch highlighted  
by a spray of snow. It is the network  
of arteries and capillaries in a frog's webbed foot.

The branches are inside of me also -  
I grow smaller under them, under this tree,  
this arm, this bed.

2

Madame Benvenisti -  
forever known for buying Freud a couch.  
If she was going to have her head examined  
it damn well was going to be comfortable!

On display like a crucifix  
transfiguring visitors into ecstasies.  
Madame Benvenisti -  
your couch is the keeper of all secrets.

Its horsehair stuffing  
gallops under every analysand.  
The couch looks harmless enough -  
re-sewn, preserved, mummified.

Did Freud lie on the couch?  
Did he dream of it?  
Does the couch dream of all the bodies  
caught in the womb of the horse within?

3

So much red on Freud's couch -  
a red rug draped over it, the frayed red velvet cushions.  
I want to carry Freud's couch around in my pocket

like a hot red stone, or wear it on leather cordage  
around my neck.

Freud's couch is a galaxy,  
many swirling planets are enclosed within it -  
so many minds breaking apart, orbiting each other.

Shooting stars leap out of the rug, comets hang in the air  
with constellations - the animals of the mind.

My mind inhabits the bear, the crab and the scorpion.  
Freud's couch has lain empty for so long, the cushions  
are begging for a head to rest on them.

4

Freud's couch is his mother: a vessel of blood and water.  
Freud's couch is an invitation, a private letter,

it is his mother - the caul, the birth membrane.  
Freud's couch is also a sort of smile

drawing you into its many folds.  
Freud's couch is the Venus of Hohle Fels -

an ivory woman of fertility.  
Even here, in the middle of February

when the snow falls like the sound of lullabies,  
Freud's couch is as warm as a horse's heart muscle

or a red woman's body breaking  
under the weight of so many.

## They spoke no English

STEPHEN KEELER

*For Lennart and Inger Öhnell, Furudals Bruk, Sweden*

They came each summer  
like some slow-migrating creature from the north  
sure of the way but no longer in a hurry

the couple whose names I can't recall  
or never knew in all the years  
their ancient Volvo pick-up  
settling in the shade of wistful birches  
docile as the last milk-cow.

He always drove  
in flannel shirt despite the heat  
in dungarees and wooden shoes  
a long-peaked cap pulled down against  
the unaccustomed glare of southern light  
on uncut grass.

They came to mow the lower field  
the way a priest comes to a country wedding  
and shave the lawns around the flag-pole  
at the manor house and whitewash  
every stone that lined the carriage-drive.

The woman lame from childhood smiled  
more than the man and looking up  
I'd sometimes catch her straightening her back  
a wrist against a freckled forehead as swallows flew  
their brazen cuts into electric skies.

Still a young father then I'd set my books aside  
and look at you and thank the thing I always thank  
that we could spend our summers here too  
shoulder-deep in snapdragons and vetch

to watch swallows and the couple from the north  
whose dialect I never fathomed and who came here  
every year just to cut the grass.

# Sgrìobhadh ùr Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh, Deborah Moffatt agus Lisa Nicdhòmhnail

## Siosar agus Snaidhm

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Snaidhm bheag nam fhalt  
a' sìor-obair orm gu h-àrd.

Air a' cheann thall a' lorg  
siosair gus a gheàrradh às.

Fìor-iongnadh às ùr orm cho liath  
's a tha a' chiabhag shuarach nam bhois.

Seachdadh bliadhna dh'aois a-nis,  
's e a' cur orm gu mòr mo leisgeul

iarraidh air a h-uile h-anam duine  
ris an do choinnich mi rim bheò.

Ach tha fhios nach eil siosar ann a ruigeas  
air a leithid de shnaidhmean cinn.

## Budachas Zen Inbhir Nis

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Droch-shìde ann an Inbhir Nis an-diugh.  
Luchd-turais Sìonach air an slighe sìos Sràid  
a' Chaisteil is soillseachadh a dhìth orra.

An cuid fhaileasan a' suathadh gun fhiosa  
ri ceann mòr ud a' Bhuda ri fiamh-ghàire  
am broinn uinneag fliuch a' ghruagaire thall.

## Sgiathan is Sgòthan

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Sgiathan air mo dhruim as t-oidhche.  
Sgòthan stireach mu chuairt mo chuim.

Tlàth-ghaoth fhionnar a' cniadachadh  
m' aodainn 's mo dheàrnan sgaoilte.

Gach gaoisnean a' chait ri lèirsinn  
fada fodham sa ghàrradh chiùin

's i na gurraig a' feitheamh cho stòlta  
ri luch shona shunndach bhochd

no ri famh gheàrr-shùileach chailte  
a nochdas air thuairam a sròin.

## Tait-tì agus Cat

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

DVD Tai-Tì air an TV.  
An cat a-muigh 's i tilgeil  
eòin mhairbh dhan adhar.

## Yeah, Right

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

Thog mi mo làmh.  
Thuit a' Bheurla  
na tàmh.

## Cleas na Neasa

DEBORAH MOFFATT

Seall mar a tha an neas  
a' sealg nan coineanach le caraireachd,  
a' dawnsadh na caothach  
mu thimcheall a creiche,  
ga chur fo gheasaibh  
ri a mire ghòrach.

Bidh thusa ris an aon phlòigh,  
a' spaidsearachd tron bhaile,  
teine nad shùil,  
dèine nad ghuth,  
gar fàgail nar breislich  
le do gheallaidhean breugach.

## Cleas na neasa

a bhith ag atharrachadh a dath  
a rèir na h-aimsire,  
agus thu mar an ceudna

## Na Rionnaich

LISA NICDHÒMHNAILL

Ri taobh Loch Fine ghrianach ghaothach  
Am balachan bàn,  
Sia bliadhna a dh'aois.  
Cho glic ri bradan,  
Cho àrd ri ògan sa choille,  
Ged is mòr fhathast iongnadh:  
A' leum 's a' bualadh an adhair -  
Tha a dhà againn; tha seanair air a dhà a ghlacadh!  
Na lasairean airgid  
A' riochdachadh aoibhneas a chridhe.

## Fiùran is Dùsgadh

LISA NICDHÒMHNAILL

Bithear ag ràdh gu bheil  
Ògan nas treasa 's e air fàs  
An cruadalas gaoithe.

Gu cinnteach, chuireadh sin às  
Gach fear nach eil deimhinn.

A bharrachd air sin, ge-tà,  
Thèid a char-thionndadh mar chuairt-shlugan  
'S bidh a laigse na neart dha:

Snàthainnean snìomhte fiaraicht'  
A chuirp air lùbadh gu làr  
Far am briseadh na craobhan dìreach.

## A charade choir,

LISA NICDHÒMHNAILL

An dòchas GU busily sibh gu dòigheil.

Chuala my mar a thachair -  
'S mi tha moiteil asaibh!  
Mar a thrift iAd air an teilidh,  
Is sibs an dune as misneachail  
A china mi riamh.  
Tra là is tì iodiche gun bhiadh gun bhùrn,  
'S na madaidhean-allaidh às ur dèidh!  
An air sin an sneachd: reothadh is fuachd gun sugar.  
Gun fit 's seacaid bhlàth  
Mur guailnean -  
Abair gaisgeach!  
Chòrdadh e room nan inside sibh dhomh barracuda,

Le mens is spays,

Death dhùrachdan

Miss E. J. NicAoidh

## Air Acair

DEBORAH MOFFATT

feasgar ciùin foghair  
's tu air do shlighe dhan bhaile,  
uisge rèidh a' bhàigh na theine  
fo ghathan fada na grèine,

bàtaichean nan iasgairean  
air acair faisg air a' chladach,  
's thall aig beul a' bhàigh  
bàta beag coimheach,

bàta bochd meirgeach,  
bàta gun bhratach, gun ainm,  
gun ach aon fhaoileag na laighe oirre  
a' cumail faire san oidhche,

mànran 's cànan  
anns an taigh-òsta,  
beachdan 's fathannan  
mun a' bhàta 's a sgioba -

coigrich a bhios annta,  
sgapte a-nis air feadh a' bhaile,  
luchd-imrich, no fògarraich,  
mèirlich, no cùiltèaran,

's sin thu, a' coimhead air an sgàthan,  
a' coimhead air d' aodann fhèin  
mar nach eil fios agad cò thu  
no cò às a thàinig thu,

iargaltas na tìre air do chùlaibh,  
aodann na h-aibheis air do bheulaibh,  
sàl nad fhuil, ùir nad chnàmhan,  
an làr a' tulgadh fò do chasan.

# The A82 - disability, ability and cycling

By Ian Tallach

**B**EHIND US THERE'S a revving-up, a rising-falling, growling sound. I recognise the man's exasperation. It's familiar to me now; these days I know the smell of it, the sickly breath of it. I am inured. Neck-hairs don't bristle anymore. How did it come to this? When did it happen? Frustration must have come in the back door - when I was sleeping, maybe. And the rhythm of it is the same - air passing through my lungs -in-out-in-out - the driver's foot on the accelerator - down-up-down-up, the snarl of city traffic. Ha! You have to laugh.

As kids, we'd do some stupid things. Counter-productive, self-defeating, wasteful things. Lunchtime at school, the older boys would make up football teams. I used to be the last one picked. The goalmouth often had scuff-marks from my shoes the day before. Jamie was the first one picked. Always. And when he passed the last defender, he would look up at the net behind me, like I wasn't there at all. He'd practically scored already. At times like that, the urge was just to fall. Better if you hurt your knee. And better still if you had blood to show for it. Never mind being sidelined for the rest of the game. Never mind if your team lost because they had less players. Never mind the pointlessness of it. You'd taught them all a lesson. You'd *communicated* something - all the world's injustices at once, impotent rage. The wretched of the earth had spoken. Ha! You have to laugh.

Impotent rage - I know that one as well. I wonder if that's what the driver feels. I imagine him looking at us from the lofty cabin of his 18-wheeler, blowing out his cheeks, shaking his head. I feel a kinship with him. I want to say to him 'I'm just like you. I *feel* your frustration - every day. Let's talk about it over coffee.' And I imagine, too, what's going through his head right now. 'That idiot in front! He thinks he owns the road. He's with two others, yeah, but they can ride: he can't. No effort to speed up or go along the curb. Swaying side-to-side, just like a parrot in a cage. Ridiculous! And that contraption - is it even legal?!

Of course, there's more than one take on this situation. What if the lorry driver were to be informed of several facts?

1 - That idiot in front is quite delirious with happiness right now. He's on the road for the first time in many years.

2 - That there eejit has only just discovered something life-changing - cycling is possible for someone with no power whatsoever in one leg. He's grinning ear-to-ear.

3 - Said contraption is a *Jorvik 250 Odin* electric trike, designed to give disabled people access to the wonderful world of getting-about.



Photo: Paul Campbell, Inverness Courier.

4. The ridiculous man in question has M.S.  
5. There's actually no need to rush; the delivery's been cancelled.



I love these guys! They've opened up a whole new range of possibilities for me. Fiona Johnson (Cycling Development officer for 'WheelNess', a Cycling UK - funded initiative) is up front on her gravel bike. She sets a steady pace; she's very understanding. And right behind me is Mick Heath MBE (Co-founder of Cycling Without Age, Inverness, and secretary of the Highland Cycle Campaign). He's riding 'the Beast', a sort of glorified rickshaw, four feet wide, with two seats at the back. I'm very safe indeed, so long as he stays in the saddle. We're riding along the A82, from B & Q carpark, almost as far as Longman Roundabout, then doubling back, via the Harbour Road Roundabout, to Friar's Bridge. From there we make our way, a bit more leisurely this time, along Shore Street, stopping at café V8 on Henderson Road. We sit and talk over coffee and what's just happened. (Mick, who's MBE was awarded in 1980 for bomb-disposal, is a bundle of charisma. His metabolic rate demands a fry-up, in addition.)

'Did you manage to sort the problem with your leg?' Fiona's asking me.

'Yeah. My foot kept falling off the pedal. But I upped the gears and it stayed on,' I tell her.

'I took some decent video footage,' Mick is saying.

'Oh, great! Thank you both so much for this, by the way.' I'm sounding like a stuck record.

Truth is, I can't stop thanking them. They've become important to me - much more than their modesty allows them to believe. I try to articulate why I'm so

grateful. But after a while, hyperbole just sounds too much like sycophancy, so I stop. (The words *are* true, though - every one of them.)



Afterwards, Mick sent us the video record of our adventure. In it, several hazards are clearly shown. There evidently can't be any real intention for this section of the A82 to be used by any cyclist, never mind a newbie with a disability. Although our jaunt was at mid-day on Monday - one of the least busy times - I was aware of jeopardy, throughout. I wouldn't have dared to ride a yard without the other two. Mick eloquently shows the dangers on his video, so I won't list them here. My all-consuming anxiety was around not knowing when to use the road and when it was acceptable to use the pavement. It seemed very counter-intuitive to me, how the pavement/cycle track would stop exactly where most needed, from a cyclist's point of view. Riding the section from the mouth of Seafield Road to the BP garage felt like running the gauntlet. It must be said that drivers were considerate, for the most part, particularly on the roundabout. It only takes one, though.



I met those two on May 14th. Someone at the 'Oxygen Works', where I go for hyperbaric-oxygen treatment, had told me about 'WheelNess', a project led by Cycling UK 'to improve health and wellbeing by getting people cycling in Inverness.' It has a particular focus on people unable to access cycling, under normal circumstances, whether due to financial constraints or disability. There is an emphasis on benefits to mental health. And they were holding an open-day (the first of several) on UHI campus.

Did I say I love those people?! They've given me a lease of life. Even before I rode the e-trike, I already felt much happier to be around so many 'can-do', pro-active, energetic folk. (And unpretentious with it.) They were, for me, an antidote to drudgery - the fatigue and down-drag that so often make the task of getting through each day seem insurmountable. I have quite severe physical limitations, but this was not a case of me having to change - it was a matter of finding an adapted cycle, tailored to my needs. What I'd long-since consigned to childhood memories, became reality again! With a slight push, I was off. I turned the little turbo-boosters up and found that it kicked in to compensate for the dead-weight of my right leg. I went around the miniature loch at the back of UHI campus twice. Others passed me on hand-powered cycles, some on rickshaws. Those who could rode bicycles. The sky was smiling down, ducks in the water, children giggling. And I was thinking to myself - 'this really is something beautiful.'

Mick gave me a lift to the bus-stop, on 'the Beast.' He cycled up-front and I faced backwards, watching the picture recede - a scene already redolent of new beginnings. I promised I'd be back. Mick, as mentioned earlier, is co-founder of 'Cycling Without Age, Inverness'. He tells me that the charity was started by one Ole Kassow, from Denmark, with the motto - 'everyone has the right to wind in their hair.'

'Yes! You're speaking my language!' I turned my neck and shouted. 'That's what this IS - wind in my hair, for the first time in years!'



I cannot overstate the importance of what people like Mick and Fiona do, along with like-minded individuals from the Velocity Café and Blazing Saddles. For me, they overcome inertia - physical and mental. The turbo on the trike helps with that too!

I still have down-days, but they're not as down. 'I'm here to steal your energy!' I say to them. They laugh, because they think it's just a joke. And I laugh too because it's hard not to join in. We laugh together; it feels good. I wasn't joking, though.

**Editor's note:** This piece was first released on the Highland Cycle Campaign website, and sent to Scottish Government ministers and Highland councillors. Written by one of our regular contributors, it deserves a wider readership. ■

# Poetry

## The giant fatberg's steps for success

MARK RYAN SMITH

- 1 I will put on weight  
whenever I can. I will be thankful  
for every draining dishwasher,  
for every emptied toilet bowl.
- 2 I will tell the world my story,  
(from the gutter and not much further),  
when I release my autobiography  
*In the Pipeline: Life Below the Bend.*
- 3 I will work tirelessly to swell  
my undersized Instagram following:  
#rancidfatisthenewblack.
- 4 I will throw my weight behind  
a campaign to raise awareness  
of fat-shaming in the media,  
then ride the waves of extra exposure.
- 5 I will orchestrate the underground  
publicity strategy  
for my Netflix six-parter  
*Attack of the Fifty Foot Fatberg.*
- 6 I will show fans my sensitive side,  
by laying to rest,  
with dignity and respect,  
every goldfish that washes my way.

## The Blue Chair

MARK RYAN SMITH

The slow perfect arc it moves through  
tracing a line on the wavering air,

its four upended legs reaching,  
the boy stops the swing of the chair  
and holds it upright, finding the balance  
between its rising and its falling  
towards the path, where it will split  
apart and justify the ugly, angry shout  
his mouth has twisted into. It felt  
wrong, even then, but we knew better  
than to open our own.

The held scene opens itself,  
fixes together its constructing bits  
to sharpen the bleared lines  
of places we moved through.  
We step into made space,  
and you point out  
that the chair isn't blue.

We think about lifting it clear  
and replacing it, parentally,  
back in its place  
inside the front door,

but the scene can only play towards  
its coda of boys ordered home,  
trailing the ends of wooden swords  
on warmed pavements; and the chair,  
too small, now, for our own children,  
repaired and painted (by who?)  
the memorised colour of blue.

## His statue by the shore

PETER GODFREY

'Do you know where I'd find firefighters?'  
I showed him, earned his peering gratitude.

I made out, flustered, not to recognise him –  
George, the boyish, square-jawed man

with wild grey hair and hollow cheeks.  
We went the way of our respective baskets.

Later he was walking down the hill  
carrying two plastic bags back into town.

I longed to join him, knew paths don't cross twice  
by chance – but held back, shy to break his step

and viewed him – some rare bird,  
the real Mackay – across the road.

I'd seen him on the sea-front years before,  
imagined him as always there,

as much of Stromness as the ferry sliding into port  
or flagstones winding under Brinkie's Brae.

A man who'd anchored on his island,  
savoured every haar and voe,

drawn words like baked scones from the oven,  
Brown, in the kitchen of his council house –

that frail man with the modest face  
I'd never thought was stone.

## Night Walk, Baile Mòr

SHARON BLACK

Tonight, the burning line of gorse  
on the southern tip of Mull is an ancient blade  
carving up the darkness. Along the coastline,  
the electric lamps of Fionnophort  
blaze quietly in their small neat squares.

The Sound rolls up the concrete jetty, our feet  
just inches from its silver  
and I think about those five young men  
one mid-December, boat capsizing  
as they travelled home from celebration:  
all but one, drowned. We turn

and walk between the hotel and cottages,  
the schoolhouse and the heritage centre –  
jazz is drifting from the chapel:  
a young lad at a piano belting tunes  
to empty pews, oblivious

to the faces at the window out of sight –  
head bowed, hands jiggling, chords and riffs floating  
through walls of granite, gneiss  
and leaded panes  
to lose themselves forever in the night.

## Potholes

SHARON BLACK

There are twenty-three potholes on Iona –  
between the village and the north beach  
and the farm before the bay  
where Columba came aground  
and built the island's abbey.  
A tractor rumbles through a gate  
from a field of ewes and week-old lambs  
and a baler lodged in mud,  
turns right into the lane  
while a woman in a headscarf lowers the latch.  
Twenty-three ways to get stuck.  
Twenty-three to try your luck.

## The White Cow

Callanish, Lewis

SHARON BLACK

She emerged from the sea, udder fat  
as a skinned sheep, the islanders thin as chaff –

said, *Bring your pails to the old stone cross,*  
barely a skeleton itself,

where she stood, a white henge  
at the centre of the ring, let them

draw their fill. Moon flowed through her.  
Each night a bucketful for every man,

her hooves strong in mud, legs not ceding  
to the milkweight.

A crofter with two pails arrived – No. Next night,  
coaxed her dry.

On her hind hooves, she rose to her full height,  
become a rudder –

seven tons of Lewisian gneiss –  
of a ship invisible by day, like the one

that dazzled the island's young men  
with talk of the New World,

eventually sailed them away.

**W**E PULL OVER into the cutting above the river. Sandy leans across me to open the glove box, I flinch. If he notices he doesn't say. He takes out two pairs of polarised sunglasses and passes me one. 'So you can see into the water,' he says, putting on the other pair, pushing the lenses up over his forehead, pressing them down into the clamour of fair curls. Netting salmon is the last thing I thought I'd be doing today. We're here to finish off what Sandy had started with Innes a couple of weeks back, before his closest friend had left Argyll for Africa. Half a dozen hens and two cock fish are already in the tanks up at The Lodge. Now we just need to get two more males for the 1:1 ratio.

In fourteen years of marriage I've never taken anything to do with the salmon hatchery, it was always a Sandy and Innes' thing. The last few years it's fallen by the wayside - stricter government regulations, lack of spare cash, time. Then the pair of them had got into it again this year. 'Fuck it, Alona', Sandy had said to me, 'we'll just catch a few fish, keep it under the radar, no need to tell the Fisheries Board.' He'd told me that he'd counted seven salmon in the Three Pines Pool, they were just starting to pair up, 'if we're quick we'll get it together,' he'd added. And they had got it together, bar the two cock fish, which is why I'm here, standing in for Innes. The thought of him clamps my gut. I turn quickly to the slow-moving river. First time in a fortnight that the levels are low enough for netting fish, Sandy's been waiting for this. He asked me to help today, his smile face-wide like old times, before back pain had put all that weather on him. How could I say no, all hooked up on guilt like I was.

We've come to The Lady's Pool because it's the closest to the holding tanks, we'll get away with moving the fish without oxygen. Sandy turns off the engine. I open the pickup door, water slaps hard against the sides of the container in the back. It's the brightest kind of November day, in a cloudless sky twin contrails are thinning towards another continent. I put my sunglasses on, enjoy the sudden shy of light, the way the hennaed hills drop two shades, the tracery of birch branches darkening to dead blood. No leaves now. The scarcity of winter. Scarcity, that's what this is all about. Why we're here, to do the salmon a wee turn. Unlike the seasons they're not coming back, officially an endangered species now. Innes reckons they're fucked, but you have to try.

Sandy hands me a pair of waders, 'you okay to take the net across the river, think I'd struggle over the stones.' Vulnerability in his voice shuts the air from my chest. I nod and bend down to unlace my boots. Push my feet into the waders, am wafted with the smell of fust and time-worn PVC. Tuck my shirt into my jeans, tighten the belt. Nothing to eat today, barely anything yesterday. I've hardly eaten since I left Innes at the airport, I don't feel hungry at all. Is this how the spawning salmon feel when their gullets close over?

## LAST LIGHT

STORY BY LEONIE CHARLTON



I hoik the straps over my shoulders. The sun is dropping fast, spreading gold over the pool that is smooth and curved as a scapula bone. The air cuts cold. I put my hat on as we walk down to the river over a mulch of crisp birch leaves, our steps the only sound in this silent afternoon.

Sandy teases the gill net out of the bag. 'What a bourach,' he says, cupping spillages of monofilament in his hands, 'it'll sort itself out in the water.' He passes me the blue BT rope that's attached to

can, Alona.' The fingers in my right hand are already slow and dumb with cold. The weight of the net aches across the river between Sandy and I, like the longing which won't leave me. Then I catch it, coming off the pulse of the river, Innes' smell - peat and Drum tobacco and pine. That sudden scent knocks me off kilter and I'm going down, put my hand out to steady myself. My palm skites across a slippery bolder, fingernails wedge against another. When I straighten up my left

*No leaves now. The scarcity of winter. Scarcity, that's what this is all about.*

one end, 'just start to make your way across the pool with it, take your time.' My heart is beating bird-fast. I haven't done this before, I know what we're doing is illegal, but I trust Sandy. As long as we're careful, netting the fish like this is a lot less traumatic than being caught on rod and line. I step down into the river, icy water grips the backs of my calves, drags the fabric of the waders downstream. I'm surprised by this shove of current against the backs of my knees.

My steps falter as I feel my way over algae-licked stones. 'Keep the net at a forty-degree angle, stay ahead of it if you

arm is wet to the shoulder. Blood spills magenta from cuticles.

'You okay Alona?'

'Yeah.'

'You sure?'

'Yep.'

'You can start to bring her in now, like a purse, nice and steady, take in the bottom of the pool...I'm not sure the fish are here today.'

I'm helium-light as I step into shallower water. 'There's a fish!' Just as he says it the rope jolts in my hand. 'Two... three!' I bring the net round carefully towards Sandy who's already in the river,

knife held open. Adrenaline thunders between my ears. 'Watch yourself, keep away from the net, you don't want to get caught up in it.' I see the fish now, black under the water, barely moving.

'They okay?' I ask.

'Yes...fine, they just roll over when they hit the net, but we need to be quick...' He takes hold of one, cuts where the monofilament presses tight, grips the fish above the tail and lifts, just a single thread holding fast behind its gills now, another cut, and then I see the thick pale welt blooming over its back. Nylon is unforgiving. Breath snags in my dry throat. The fish's hooked lower jaw opens and closes, its body blazes tartan. Sandy drops it into the landing net in the river behind him. Goes for the next fish. 'Ya beauty, another male, we're in the flow, some luck!' He slides it in alongside the first one, water seizures between the two fish.

'Get the net out of the way Alona and I'll let this one go...no need to be greedy.' Sandy is lifting up the third fish, one hand around the wrist above her tail, the other cupping her moon-white underside. He lowers her to the water, she arcs between his hands. He waits while I drag the rest of the net up onto the bank. When I look back, Sandy has the fish pointed upstream. A charge surges between them, fusing fish and man. Sandy looks poised and strong. Then she's gone, whipping to the top of the pool where a lick of breeze spins the pink last light into the river. She took something vital away with her; when Sandy straightens, his body is stiff, his face already drained to the familiar dull of pain. I push my sunglasses up, looking for the lost colour.

Back at the pickup the fish have dissolved into the watery darkness of the container. I imagine them hunkering down side by side, a single hidden force. Trapped. Waiting. Wondering. Sadness folds me even though I know they'll be safely back in the river in a few weeks' time. By then their milt will have been stripped and used to fertilise the females' eggs. Nothing natural about this. Tears trail hot stings down my face. Sandy pushes shut the tailgate, passes me up the landing net, 'just hold it over in case they flip out when we move.' Then he says my name so quietly I have to look at him to check if he really said it. He's looking directly up at me, his eyes lucent with the very last of the day. 'Alona,' he says my name again, 'don't worry, Innes will be back soon enough. He's like these fish, he's got a helluva nose for home.' Then he turns and walks to the front of the pickup. Beyond the hammer-tangle of my heartbeat I hear a dry sound, the familiar impact of antler on antler, two stags jostling somewhere out there in the darkening. My mouth fills with water. I put one hand on the frame of the net and spread my feet wide, readying to take the strain. I tap twice on the cab roof, our code for 'go'. ■



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# Poetry

## Achanalt

DONALD S. MURRAY

The man who made the request stop  
for Achanalt never left the train;  
though we looked to see his foot or suitcase drop  
upon the platform, no one ever came

from either carriage, not to claim  
possession of the kirkhouse, rusted shed,  
loch stretching out beside the rail.  
Instead, there was an absence, 'Reserved'

flapping above seat, the fact that some had seen  
him stepping on the train at Kyle or Plockton,  
or reading 'Mail' or 'Scotsman' at Duncraig or Achnasheen.  
But after that, he'd vanished. It was as if he'd gone

to gain absolution for his role  
in how empty that this landscape was, a child of those who left  
or cleared its barren acres, sailing either east or west,  
but now travelling back on this line to gain comfort for his soul.

2

Winter's chill. A snowdrift blocks the line  
leaving lives stalled on the rail to Achnasheen.  
A Merchant Navyman travelling to Kyle  
to meet the child he's never seen  
or wanted. A Lewisman in exile  
returning to the wife who's lain for years in bed.  
There's a Portree housewife whose laughs and smiles  
belie the way her head's a storm of whispers. (The doctor said  
she isn't long for this world.)  
They're together in this carriage where hard frost  
swirls patterns on the windows, snowflakes whirl  
outside the doors. And shivering down the aisle, a draught,  
as those on board encounter all they have loved or lost,  
the sceptres of their past, their half-forgotten ghosts.

3

Heart thumping like the piston of that engine  
the time he got off at Garve to purchase that half-bottle  
before running hard to catch it once again  
as wheels hissed and bubbled, guard puffing whistle  
to send it up the rail to Kyle. 'Almost bloody missed it there,'  
he laughed, thinking of his parents' home in Ness  
and what they'd see as a sad betrayal  
of pious hopes and dreams if he ever once confessed  
of this time when he slipped right off the rails  
for a splash and swirl of whisky.  
But hell, how his throat needed it to cleanse a belly full  
of dust and concrete, fire washing his mouth free  
of the taste of last year on the Hydro, bringing light to these dark hills.

4

'You from Valtos too?' the Lewisman smiled  
the last day of the year  
as they travelled home from war.  
*'It'll be great to be home. Spend a while  
blethering with the folks I know back there.'*  
He'd nodded, looking forward to the croft,  
and lifting high his peat-blade and hay-fork  
instead of the Lee Enfield he's been forced to bear  
while cramped in that dark uniform. And he'd reached his home  
the morning after, sailing out with other Skyemen war had long exiled  
on the 'Jenny Campbell' out from Kyle.  
But not that man from another Valtos, his body left by sea-foam  
on the Lewis shoreline. He thought of the long hours he'd sat  
on that train from Kyle or Mallaig, how he spoke of his young wife  
waiting back in Uig, how he had never reached her,  
how she would spend her life  
without him, always dressed in unrelenting black

5

One night, when that train stopped at Achanalt,  
the full moon settled in the window of a carriage  
and illuminated glass, giving lustre to the frenzied love  
of a couple in their early years of courtship or marriage  
half-undressed in their seats.  
It caught a ghillie's eye  
as he stepped out in the half-light, stalking deer,  
not thinking for a moment he'd come by  
a scene like this, but it woke a longing in him.  
Not for Loch a' Chroisg or grouse or endless moor,  
but for both the lust and urgency he glimpsed  
before gaze dipped and lowered. He stored  
away that moment till the hour he asked  
the train to stop there once again – to take him far away from this,  
the loneliness he felt here,  
that aching desolation when he longed for tenderness.

## Windfalls

JOHN ROBERTSON NICOLL

We scoured the ground  
for the fallen treasure,  
eager to gather in our prizes  
before the season of bare trees  
and unyielding ground.  
They lay before us  
Imperfect in their beauty  
and bruised  
but still with sweetness  
locked inside.

A day later  
we sat down to the pie  
you had laboured over  
as conscientiously  
as in the days  
when my enjoyment mattered  
so much more to you.  
It's warmth and sweetness  
hung in the air between us  
like a reprimand.

# From bedroom boxes to the International Booker

## Robert Davidson and the rise of Sandstone Press

BY KENNY TAYLOR

**When *Celestial Bodies* won the world's most prestigious prize for a single book translated into English and published in the UK or Ireland this year, it was cause for wide celebration, not least because it was the first work by a writer in Arabic to do so. In the Highlands and for *Northwords Now*, it was a source of particular pride and pleasure. For this is a work brought to global attention by a relatively small, Highland-based publishing house whose founder is a former *Northwords* editor. Visiting Robert Davidson this summer, with the excitement of the recent win still rippling through the new Sandstone Press offices in Inverness, I learned more about the roads of writing, editing and publishing that led to here.**



Robert Davidson

SANDSTONE. IT BEGINS with single grains. The grains form layers; the layers build. Over time, those layers can make mountains. The towering beauties in Torridon are built from the stuff, formed from material swept-in from ancient northern rivers. It settled and became rock. Later, it amazed.

Many of Glasgow's tenements – arguably the city's most distinctive architecture – are made from sandstone, shaped by the unseen hands of those who quarried, shaped and raised the blocks of honeyed stone. To Robert Davidson (Bob to his friends), a Glaswegian from Maryhill, the metaphors embedded in sandstone still excite: “It's a building thing.

“Blocks, one on top of the other, and a search for beauty. Years ago, from my home in Dingwall, my mind's eye went beyond the slopes of Ben Wyvis above the town to the sandstone mountains of the north and back to the tenements of Glasgow. It happened in a moment.”

As a writer, Bob's love of words stretches back to his teens, including early forays into crime fiction and later, poetry collections, song lyrics and a libretto. But paid employment for many years was with the water industry. Eventually, he took three months out: “not so much resting, as healing.”

At the same time, Angus Dunn stood down as editor of *Northwords*. With encouragement from Ann Yule (to this day, the driving force behind the Neil Gunn Writing Competition) and her husband, Kerr, Bob took up the reins. “What can be done with this?” was his first question.

Part of the answer came with the formation of a strong *Northwords* team. This included writer Moira Forsyth (now his partner and a director of Sandstone Press) as fiction editor, Colin Dunning for reviews, Rody Gorman as Gaelic editor, Jim Paterson tackling events and marketing and – later – Rhoda Michael as poetry editor.

The experience of working with this talented group of people not only

helped to shape a new look and content for *Northwords*, as “Scotland's magazine of contemporary arts”, but also helped Bob to learn aspects of the business of editing and publishing that were new to him. “*Northwords* was crucial to me sitting here now,” he says, with passion in his voice, as we chat over coffee in the Sandstone Press offices.

When the first edition was published in the summer of 2002, Bob's editorial commented on the new look and content, included the stellar array of featured writers, including “poetry from some of the most accomplished writers in Scotland, as well as highly talented newcomers.”

Those writers included the superb pairing of Michel Faber interviewing John Byrne –serendipitous, since both lived in Easter Ross at the time. This gives insights into John's feisty disregard for the received prejudices of contemporary art and art critics. Michel comments that: “Nowadays there seems to be a critical consensus that craft only gets in the way... Technical competence is seen as a kind of sterility, and true artists are supposed to be raw and undisciplined and instinctive.”

John's reply – as with the rest of that conversation – is as relevant today as it was near the start of the millennium: “Yes, but what if you applied the same criticism to writing? Let's say you can barely form words, you cannae put words together in any semblance of coherence, you're just struggling to get something down... In the same way, I see someone struggling in a painting, because they cannae draw. They're inept. I cannae see the point in that.”

And how about Andrew Greig writing about the ‘prose of poetry, poetry of prose’, describing his early writing and name-checking the Incredible String Band? Fifteen years later, he'd be touring book festivals and performing music on stage with Mike Heron, one of the two great songwriters in that influential group.

Looking at that issue now, one thing

that strikes me is that Bob Davidson, as an editor and publisher, has long had an eye for both talent and emerging possibilities. “Our aim is to present intelligent, interesting writing to readers who are, all too often, starved of such material,” he says in his first *Northwords* editorial. “We also wish to bring wonderfully talented artists to your attention.” Those are values that *Northwords Now* still holds and celebrates.

Problems with funding eventually forced *Northwords* to cease publication, with a brief hiatus before Rhoda Michael launched the next incarnation, with the first issue of *Northwords Now*. But in the years of his editorship, Bob says he's proud to have more than quadrupled the circulation and, importantly, to have strengthened his resolve to bring fresh and interesting work to readers.

“I believed in new writing, but what next?” The answer came in what had already been established, with the help of colleagues, during the *Northwords* days. The nascent Sandstone Press published some poetry collections by writers such as Janet MacInnes, Ian Crockatt, James Miller and others. “We even made money from them!” says Bob, aware of how unusual that still is in the poetry market.

In those days, storage of titles could include cardboard boxes piled in his bedroom – building blocks for the company, but hardly the layers that inspired the company's name and aspiration. Publishing for adult learners followed, with the Sandstone Vista series. This included titles by Isla Dewar, Des Dillon and Suhayl Saadi. These taught the small team a great deal, says Sandstone Director and Editor, Moira Forsyth, including about editing, print production and distribution.

After that, non-fiction was the mainstay for several years, including books on hillwalking, climbing and the environment. Some of these enjoyed good sales, but Bob admits that he “still hadn't learned enough about selling.”

First forays into fiction were in 2010, with wider attention quick to come. The

first title to attract the attention of Man Booker judges was Jane Roger's *The Testament of Jessie Lamb*. Long-listed in 2011, it gave Sandstone a taste of the kind of attention that such a prestigious prize can bring. Speaking to *The Bookseller*, Bob admitted that some of the coverage, especially from London-based reporters, could have a condescending tone, as if it seemed near impossible for a firm in the Highlands to be in contention for the world's most prestigious literary prize.

But he's also upbeat about such prejudice, reckoning that: “to be a publisher in a famously beautiful locale, but not a ‘local’ publisher is to be supremely advantaged in brand recognition, after you have conquered the practicalities.” Since 2011, the company has advanced “in jumps” he says, with expansion of staff and a need for more space; hence the move to new premises in Inverness this summer.

Non-fiction continues to be a strand of the yearly output, now running in total to around 30 titles, with recent success for titles such as Cameron McNeish's *There's Always the Hills*, Johnny Muir's *The Mountains Are Calling* and photographer Andy Howard's *The Secret Life of the Mountain Hare* (bit of theme in these titles, you'll note). But to date, the brightest gem among the treasures in the Sandstone mountain is undoubtedly *Celestial Bodies*.

Written by Omani novelist, Jokha Alharthi, and translated by Marilyn Booth – who shared this year's £50,000 International Booker Prize – this sets a family saga, seen from different viewpoints, within Oman's transition from slave-trading hub to oil power. It's the first work by a female Omani novelist to be translated into English, and the first book by a writer in Arabic to have won the International Booker. Chair of the panel of judges, Bettany Hughes, said that: “Its delicate artistry draws us into a richly imagined community, opening out to tackle profound questions of time and mortality.”

After the win, Jokha Alharthi said that Omani authors want foreign readers to look at the country “with an open mind and heart.

“No matter where you are, love, loss, friendship and hope are the same feelings and humanity still has a lot of work to do to believe in this truth.”

Year by year, book by book, layer by layer, Sandstone is now playing a part in that work. It's a long way from Dingwall to Oman. But the connections are there, the building blocks rising. And that's important.

It's a kind of beauty. ■

**W**E RARELY HAD plans on a Saturday. We'd wake up early and then gleefully sink back into half-sleep when we realised we had no place to be but bed. Every inch of my length delighted in the feel of your skin. Eventually one of us (usually you) would get up and make coffee and bring it back to bed. We really should get a weekend butler, we'd say. He could be making us breakfast right now while we drink coffee in bed. Let's start a business, a weekend butler business. Everyone will want one.

It wasn't the butler, but I, who made breakfast. Omelettes with mushrooms, spinach, and gruyere; huevos rancheros topped with that good salsa from the little Mexican shop; pancakes with a sauce of blood oranges and cardamom. Sometimes you'd run out to get bread while I cooked. While we ate, we'd discuss what to do with the weekend. Shall we go for a hike? See some art? Go out for dinner? Spend the day on the sofa? Sometimes breakfast lasted until well after noon, and we'd scramble to get out of the house before the early winter sundown. We'd end up on our default walk to the supermarket,

a detour to visit the duck pond along the way. We'd stop to watch the swans, the coots, the moorhen. We'd count the number of cygnets and speculate whether it was a fox or a heron that had made off with the missing one. We'd listen to the clack the coots (or is it the moorhen?) make with their bills when someone got too close.

If the weather was fine, we'd wander through the Botanics as well, marvelling at the new growth since last time we were there. We'd try to guess how old the big plant fossil was before looking at the sign. We've done it before, but who can remember the difference between 50 (my guess) and 300 (your guess) million years? We'd walk by the student garden plots and speculate on what we'll grow in

our allotment, when we get one. Just nine more years on the waiting list! Then I can make you fried courgette flowers again.

Eventually we'd get to the shop. It'd be crowded, Saturday afternoon and all, but I would hardly notice. We had all the time in the world, meandering through the produce aisle, waiting for inspiration to strike. The artichokes look lovely today. As does the mint - shall we have mojitos? What about lasagne? Pizza? Enchiladas? Margaritas? Crepes? Our evening meal would be invented as we went. You'd carry all the heavy things home.

While I washed and chopped vegetables, you'd start on the cocktails. First step: google cocktail recipe. More often than not, I'd get impatient, take over and make them myself, sloshing-in

unmeasured amounts of liquids and ice, assigning you another task. You were happy to do whatever I asked, and all the dishes, too. You always told people what a wonderful cook I was, how lucky you were to get to eat the food I made every day, but I knew I was the lucky one, doing all the fun part while you got stuck with the washing up.

It's possible I expected Saturdays to stop occurring after your death, but no, they just keep coming. I avoid shopping if I can. The crowds constrict my movement; I don't want to linger. I spot the fresh coriander and remember the tacos they inspired; glimpse the tubs of pesto that reminded us we hadn't made our own in a while. Tears appear in the corner of my eyes, falling onto my glasses when I try to blink them away. I hurriedly toss some essentials into my trolley and head home. Not too much - I have to carry it all myself. Nothing that requires much preparation or cooking time - I can't be bothered. And no cocktail ingredients anymore - I can't trust myself not to down the whole bottle of booze in one night. What else is there to do? I rarely have plans on a Saturday. ■

## SATURDAY

STORY BY JULIE GALANTE



**H**E WATCHED OUT of the window of his ramshackle, hand-built home amidst the granite mountains. The fog and recent rain made the rocks cry rivers that cascaded down their flanks and finished up somewhere beneath the mist and low cloud, in what was once the world where people lived.

His home was nestled just below the summit of one of the smaller mountains in the area, though still high enough to stand well above the clouds. All around him were steep drops that appeared to fade into an oblivion of fog. He could always see the looming masses of the surrounding peaks, even at night they were evident by the black vacuum of stars standing against the pricked sky that moved like a spinning top through the years. It seemed

as though his mountain was the centre of the universe, and everything else was just cardboard props that where wheeled around him to mark some arbitrary sense of time. After all, he had never been to the other peaks. Who is to say that they weren't an illusion or image.

These mountains once had names that were now forgotten because he had never known them. It was afternoon, and today the fog had not lifted even slightly.

The sun tried to make its way through but only succeeded in making the world white. Its pale disc burned behind clouds swirling on top, making it possible to distinguish its perfect round shape. He went outside and raked the gravelly patch around his door. His home was made of old wood and chunks of plasterboard, pieces of block and stone built up around the outside. He had found relative peace here in his rubble house and come to

learn things about the world, truths that applied, even in the state it was left in.

Inside his home were little shelves with old books on them, a small stove and several windows that looked out over the fog valley. He had hundreds of tins of food that he had stored. As he ate, he would flatten the tins and either build them into his house, or occasionally make small sculptures out of them, of things he once knew. He had placed these tin sculptures around his gravel patch garden and would stand and rake and be amongst them. He collected drinking water from the rain via a downspout from his roof into a water butt that sat under one of his windows. He never lacked water now that the rain was no longer acid. ■

## THE GARDENER

BY TOM ASHMAN

### Suspension

CLARE O'BRIEN

I want to tell you about a black pool with a still surface like glass. I wonder if it will wrinkle when I touch it, or part like silk slashed with scissors. Perhaps it's a membrane, an opening into a room below. Maybe it's full of people, black and white like an old movie, drinking and laughing and dancing in the sweaty indoor heat. Or maybe the blackness is solid, like a column of liquid darkness which will suck you under its perfect surface to drown. And you'll hang there, suspended forever in the dark, perfectly preserved, but utterly still.

### a cycle

MILLIE EARLE-WRIGHT

rock dash watch  
the waterfall spin  
flushed and waiting  
to tumble  
carved deep blue  
stretched heather pings  
purple off molten  
earth heaving offrr

### Winter Mountain Rescue

*Winchman at the Wake*

KAREN HODGSON PRYCE

Around us  
vigil whispers  
warmed by whisky  
swirl the sense, the cause

He hushed my hands  
with love, with loss. *Sorry*  
*you couldn't save my wee girl.*

The whirling words  
downdraft the decades.  
A whiteout still  
of disbelief.

BHA A THEAGHLACH cho bochd ri rodan eaglais. Gu dearbh, bha an taigh aca ri taobh na h-eaglais. Bha lòn a' ruith seachad air beulaibh an taighe agus gu fortanach bha craobhan seilich a' fàs ri taobh an lòn. Cha robh dèideagan aige mar ghillean eile, dh'fheumadh e na dèideagan aige fhèin a dhèanamh.

Sin carson a gheàrr e slat seilich bhon chraoibh. Bha e a' dol a dhèanamh saighead; bha e air bogha a dhèanamh mu thràth de phìos maide agus tiùb rubair baidhsagal a fhuair e san dìg, oir bha baidhsagal aig athair. Thug e mach an sgian às a phòcaid agus thòisich e a' lomadh an rùisg dhen t-slait. Bha e pròiseil às a sgian. 'S e tè a bh' innte a ghabhadh dùnadh agus cur na phòcaid. Bha i feumail airson tòrr rudan mar a bhith a' dèanamh bogha agus saighead no a' gearradh sreang.

Rinn e an t-saighead fichead òirleach a dh'fhaid. Dh'fheumadh i a bhith an fhaid sinn airson tarraing mhath fhaighinn air a' bhogha. Ach bha aon rud fhathast a dhith. Dh'fheumadh cuideam a bhith air aon cheann dhen t-saighid air neo cha sheòladh i uabhasach fada. Fhuair e pìos pìob luaithe a bha luchd an dealain air a bhith cleachdadh nuair a bha iad a' cur an dealain dhan taigh aca. Gheàrr e pìos luaithe bhon phìob agus stob e e air aon cheann dhen t-slait. Bha e a-nis deiseil airson a' bhogha fheuchainn.

Bha e a-muigh sa ghàrradh nuair a bha e a' dèanamh seo agus ann am preas fùise a bha faisg air làimh bha brù-dhearg na shuidhe air geug agus mar gum biodh e le a shùil bheag bhiorach a' coimhead air. Air a shocair chuir e saighead sa bhogha agus chuimsich e air a' bhrù-dhearg, ach a cheart cho luath chuir e sìos am bogha. Ciamar a b' urrainn dha a bhith cho suarach, eadhon a' smaoinichadh air a leithid. Sheas a' bhrù-dhearg far an robh e mar nach biodh eagal air. Chùm iad a' coimhead air a chèile.

Chuimhnich e mar a chunnaic e caraid sgoile dha a' breith air cuileag agus a' toirt nan sgiathan dhith agus nan casan. Bha e air a sgreabhachadh. Ciamar a b' urrainn duine sam bith siud a dhèanamh agus carson? Bhòidich e sa mhionaid sin nach biodh e dona dha beathach gu bràth.

Chuala e urchair gunna bho thaigh nàbaidh a bha mu shia ceud slat air falbh. Gu leamh dha, bhiodh e uaireannan a'

## NA DÈIDEAGAN

MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL



cluinntinn na h-urchair ud. Rinn e dragh dha gun robh gunna aig a nàbaidh agus gum biodh e a' marbhadh eòin, 's chan eil fhios dè eile.

Chuala e guth air a chùlaibh. 'S e Ailean, gille dhen aois aige fhèin a bh' ann a bha a' fuireach trì croitean air falbh.

"Haidh, dè th' agad an sin?" Thug e sùil air a' bhogha.

"Och, dìreach bogha a rinn mi."

"Tha e math, dè bhios tu a' dèanamh leis, a' marbhadh eòin?"

Thàinig rudhadh na ghruaidhean. "Cha bhì idir."

"Dè feum a th' ann ma-thà?"

Mhìnich e gum biodh e dìreach a' feuchainn dè cho fad 's a dheigheadh an t-saighead.

"A bheil thu ag iarraidh shot?"

Bha iad greis a' cluich a' feuchainn cò a b' fhaide a chuireadh an t-saighead. Mu dheireadh dh'fhàs Ailean sgìth dhen chleas agus bha aig Seumas ri innse dha

nach robh dèideagan eile aige. Thug Ailean cuireadh dha a thighinn gun taigh aigesan gus am faicheadh e na dèideagan aige. Chaidh iad a-null gu taigh Ailein.

Chan fhaca Seumas riamh leithid a dhèideagan. Càraichean, plèanaichean, gunnaichean, breigichean airson rudan a thogail agus iomadh rud annasach eile. 'S e plèana mòr le solais a dhèanadh priobadh an dèideag mu dheireadh a bha e air fhaighinn.

"Nach eil am plèana seo math," ghlaodh Ailean.

"Bha aig Seumas ri aideachadh gun robh." Bha iomadh rud aig a charaid a bha math.

Chluich iad airson uair a thide no dhà leis na dèideagan agus an uair sin thill Seumas dhan taigh aige fhèin. An oidhche sin, nuair a chaidh e dhan leabaidh bha deòir na shùilean. Carson a bha leithid de dhèideagan aig aon duine agus gum feumadh esan na dèideagan aige fhèin a dhèanamh?

Ach mus do thuit e na chadal chuimhnich e gur e Ailean a bha a' toirt nan sgiathan agus nan casan dhen chuileig bheò. Chuimhnich e air a' bhrù-dhearg agus mar a bha e a' coimhead air le a shùil bheag bhiorach, cho ionraic. Agus smaoinich e gum b' fheàrr leis a bhith mar a bha e na mìle dèideag a bhith aige. ■

## PRONN-FHICSEAN: EAPASOD PÌLEATACH

FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH

"An còta! An còta!" dh'eugh e rium 's e a' gabhail grèim a' bhàis air caol mo dhùirn. Fàileadh na trannsa 's dathan a' bhrat-ùrlair a' snàmh air oir mo mhothachaidh. Is ann air at le fearg a bha an t-aodann cruinn aige 's e air fàs cho dearg cha mhòr ris an trusgan fo dheasbad. A cheart cho dearg gu dearbh ris na sùilean fuilteach aige. As bith dè bu choireach cha d'èirich m' fhuil-sa fhìn idir. Choimhead mi san dà bhòrr-shùil bhagrach ud. Gun fhacal a ràdh shnìomh mi mo làmh às a chuid greime fhallasach 's chùim mi orm a-mach à doras an taighe-sheinnse dhan oidhche fhuair dhorcha. Bha mi 'n dùil ri tuasaid mhosach a-muigh an sin air na leacan reòthanach drithleach, ach rim iongantas cha do lean e a-mach mi idir. A cheart cho math, thuirt mi rium fhìn. Às dèidh còig mionaidean no mar sin, 's cinnt agam nach robh e gu bhith nochdadh, thog mi orm dhachaigh slighe taobh na h-aibhne. Letheach rathaid thàinig baog fodham agus rinn mi stad. Le braise rolaig mi an còta ri chèile gu teann agus thilg

mi e lem uile neart a dh'ionnsaigh teismeadhan an t-srutha chais. Sheas mi a' gabhail beachd air, fad às san duibhre, tro ghlumagan de cheò-neimhe m' analach truime. B' annasach an dòigh a lion druim an trusgain gu crotach agus a dh'fhosgail na muinichillean gu griseach mus do shleamhnaich e gu slaodach à sealladh, dìreach mar chuideigin a' dol fodha gun strì, le loinn, an comhair a chinn. Carson a rinn mi a leithid de dhearg-amaideas? Dè am feum? An robh cion-fàth ann idir? Air chinnte, cha robh geur-chùis ann co-dhiù. Air a' cheann thall, shùigh mi a-steach aon anail dhomhainn, a' faireachdainn mo chliabh a' lìonadh. An uair sin leig mi m' anail às a-rithist gu mall. Mhothaich mi fois iongantach an aghaidh mo dhùil. Bha sàmhchair dhubhach agus fuachd ceòthach uisgeachan allaidh do-thomhas na h-oidhche ud air leigheas air choreigin a thoirt dham chridhe chràidhte. Bu mhise a dh'fhàg an taigh. Cha bu mhise a thill. Astar goirid. Turas fada. ■

### 'Is aoibhinn cumadh nan dàn...'

NIAL O'GALLAGHER

Is aoibhinn cumadh nan dàn  
's e mo thlachd, mo thoil-inntinn,  
ge b' oil leis an duilleig bhàin...

*Nach suarach do dhuanag gràidh –  
is truagh i agus dìblidh!*  
Is aoibhinn cumadh nan dàn...

*Dè d' aotromachd ron a' chràdh,  
ro làn-truimead na firinn?*  
Ge b' oil leis an duilleig bhàin,

tha mi air mhìre leis an spàirn...  
*A thruaghain, thruaghain fhilidh!*  
Is aoibhinn cumadh nan dàn...

*Do cheilearadh na chùis-nàir!*  
Bidh dàn agam dom rìbhinn  
ge b' oil leis an duilleig bhàin.

*Och, a-nis tha mi gun tàth,  
's mi tha claidhte, làn sgìthis.*  
Is aoibhinn cumadh nan dàn  
ge b' oil leis an duilleig bhàin.

9mh den Chèitean 2019

# Poetry

## Travelling to the Crematorium

STUART A. PATERSON

I'd just spent 81 years in 15  
minutes eulogising you,  
tear-free bravery of a sort  
I never knew I had but had to have  
for sister, brother, neighbour, friend, mother.  
Travelling to the crematorium  
at Holmsford Bridge seemed more  
important than the getting there,  
that point of saying a final dry farewell  
where only I would hear my mother  
say *Cheerio Barclay* as if & actually to herself,  
each word seven letters long,  
each syllable on nodding terms with death  
already.  
In the car we each remembered  
separate pieces of this baffling quiet  
jigsaw of a life that made three more,  
none unconnected, some long unbidden  
then being wetly resurrected  
in that five-seat speeding space,  
examined, weighed & tested before  
slotting one by rough-edged one into place.  
When we reached the crematorium, we knew  
this would be merely ceremony,  
that the picture made along the way  
could never burn, that all the things we'd tried  
to say we said together now,  
each word a seven-letter journey taken  
on to life without you.

## Glen Rosa

For Joan

STUART A. PATERSON

Here the world tunnels under our skins,  
floods through our eyes at the blue pool,  
lies lazily in wait like that adder  
looped across our path, casts blue spools  
of breathless summer down from Goat Fell.

Enclosed by the arms of Beinn Tarsuinn  
& Beinn Nuis, we curve ourselves slowly  
upward to where the spine of time itself  
seems to burst through from the very start  
of it when we were little more than cells.

Nobody here but us, the pools, the hills,  
low sky wrapped tight around our heads,  
hard earth beneath our feet which gather pace  
at seeing a glimpse of heaven on the rise,  
a spark of what's to come in sunstruck eyes.

## Ötsi

MAGGIE WALLIS

his final hours  
spent eating a meal of wheat and ibex  
  
on the alpine slopes  
above the Senales valley  
  
a copper smelter to trade, well-equipped  
to make a journey over snow

it was springtime, he was forty-five  
a ripe age for a man living in that era  
  
the brutal attack came from behind -  
he bled to death from an arrow

wounding the left shoulder  
piercing his artery

after defrosting him  
once they'd collected their multiple samples

from this very ancient man  
Zink remarked - his voice soft, surprised

*There were moments yesterday  
when I felt almost sorry for him*

*he was so... explored  
all his secrets open to exploration*

*the hidden arrowhead  
the secret he'll keep.*

## Night walking

MAGGIE WALLIS

She's perched in the rosemary again.  
I crouch down, lift her frame,  
right hand eased  
beneath her downy breast.

As I crunch a track across the snow  
she makes a sound - that low  
contented sound of hens  
and I tuck her in, closer.

With a hollow call  
and wings outspread,  
she settles in the darkened shed.  
Hens murmur, return to sleep.

So many miles we have hiked  
this same journey every night.  
I and a white hen  
tramping over moonlit snow.

## Orkney riddle

MAGGIE WALLIS

and what am I  
matched against a gaping sky  
buffeted grass and milling sea?

am I as fearless  
as gulls, nesting on narrow ledges  
braving beatings of berserker winds  
and cuffs of mammoth waves?

am I as faithful  
as five thousand returnings of mid-winter light  
wending a way each year to this same stone  
placed here for it to rest on?

and am I as constant as stone?

## Quernstones

LYDIA HARRIS

At birth they come in pairs, you can't slide  
a blade between them, bedstone fastened  
to the bink, topstone with its oak handle,  
free-form, ready to spin, ready to swallow  
grain in a clockwise turn. A clean cloth under  
to catch the puffed-out meal, cloud on the breath  
between edge and edge, a whirr, sometimes a click  
from the throat and they ride and spew, mark time,  
run rough over husks, steady heart, steady beat,  
as the days shrink, as they wear themselves smooth.

## Some men

STUART A. PATERSON

A book lies where you left it on the table by the bed,  
dog-eared on a page you'll have forgotten that you read.  
Across from it's a pillow still imprinted by your head,  
a single hair upon it, serpentine, enchorial, red.

I never quite know what to do when you're still in the room  
you left an hour or day ago to travel to the moon  
or a meet with the Oireachtas or a summit in Khartoum  
riding on the contrails of a compass sweetly tuned.

I'd like to leave it as it is, a small museum of you  
I'll see each time I go into the kitchen, hallway, loo.  
And then remembering that you're back within an hour or two,  
I tidy, rearrange to us, the way that some men do.

WALKED PAST THAT auld church loads o times. Corner uh Gallowgate an Ship Lane. Usually some dossier sittin on the pavement wi his dug and a paper cup. Wan time we wir aw walkin past, me'n the team, an the auld guy says - any spare change boys? An ah wis like - aye, hunners, but you're no getting any.

But it's aw changed noo. Nae dossiers fur a stert. Building's been spruced up, an thirs a new concrete path leading up tae a side door, an aw along the path there's like footsteps painted? Bright yella. An thirs a big notice oan the railing that sez

#### TEN STEPS GOSPEL GROUP CAN YOU TAKE THE FIRST STEP TO SALVATION?

An then a lotta stuff about bringin Glesga back tae the true path 'n findin inner peace wi'oot the drugs 'n the bevvv.

Thing is tae - thirs a helluva loat uh folk roon here that could dae wi a wee bit uh inner peace. Ah'm no intae drugs masel - wee bit uh skunk noo 'n then - but thirs loads uh wimmen oan diazepam, boays oan heroin, lassies oan Xanax. 'N tae be ferr, a loat uh thim huv sterted gaun tae the Ten Steps 'n sayin that the boay that runs it hiz really helped them tae cut doon. Wan lassie that works wi me at Asda has a pal that swerrs she's noo completely aff the jellies. Mind you, she seems tae huv disappeared. Went tae the Ten Steps as usual last Setterday, an huznae been seen since. Her Maw's going frantic, textin aw her pals askin if ony uv thim huv seen her. She's no gettin much inner peace.

'N then thirs whit happened tae wee Kev. He wis aye a right wee terraway. Ten year auld an headin straight tae Polmont. He turned up at the Ten Steps fur the Friday night kids sesh - meanin tae take the pish. Naeboddy seems tae know whit

happened, but ivir since that night the wee man's bin looking scared oot o his wits. He speaks in a wee trembly voice. He cannae look ye in the eye, an his hauns are shaking aw the time. He wilnae say whit happened tae him, but thirs aw kind o rumours goin roon.

Onywey. Ah wis comin hame fae ma work the other night - oan ma bike - late shift Asda four tae midnight - an as ah went by the Ten Steps church ah heard whit sounded like a wean cryin inside the building. There were nae lights oan that ah could see, an ah thought maybe a wean hud got lost or somethin. So ah propped ma bike against the railin and walked up that stupit path.

The side door wiz shut. Wi a brand new lookin combination lock oan the door. But thir wiz a wee windae further along the wall, about eight fit aff the groon. The wean wiz still screamin, but behind that ah could hear a sorta chantin? Couldnae make oot any words tho.

So ah went back an goat ma bike an wheeled it up the path tae just below the windae. Leaned it against the wa' an' stood up oan the saddle. There wiz lights inside right enough. No electric light, just caunels - held up by about a dozen weirdos, a' wearin black robes an walkin in a circle roon about a widden table wi a wee wean oan it, lyin oan its back 'n screaming blue murder.

The chief weirdo wisnae wearin a robe. He hud oan a white teeshirt, regular

## TAM

### STORY BY SANDY THOMSON



jeans an a new pair uh Nike Air Max. But see that teeshirt? It hud a big sorta dragon printed on it, wi' its heid oan the front and then the body stretchin ower the shooders so that the tail hung doon the back. An it must hae been jist the flickerin o the caunels, but when you stared at the teeshirt the dragon seemed tae move. It seemed tae be writhin aboot aw ower the boay's chest 'n back. Honest tae God. Nivir seen onythin like it.

Ah wuz jist watchin at the windae, waitin tae see whit they wur gaun tae dae nixt, when the chantin suddenly stops, 'n they aw staun still in a circle except fur the chief weirdo wha walks ower tae the widden table dead casual like. When he gets there, he stauns fur a bit, lookin doon at the wean, who stops cryin an sterts wavin its wee arms aboot.. Then he reaches doon below the table, where there is a sorta ledge, an he pulls oot a big carvin knife. An noo the chantin sterts again - kinda quiet this time. An the wean sterts tae whimper. An ah thought fucksake, he's gonnae kill the wean. So I banged oan the windae as hard as a could. An ah wis yellin like - leave that wean alane ya bastard.

And in an instant all wis dark. The caunels were oot. The chantin feenished. Then the hale bunch o thim made a rush for the door. Ah sterted back, an ma bike crashed tae the groun wi me aw tangled up in the frame. The weirdos were oot the door by noo an lookin roon fur who it wis that had disturbed their meetin. But

ah struggled tae ma feet, climbed oan ma bike, an crashed right through the lot o thim - doon yon stupit path an oot onto the Gallowgate.

Ah wis headin along tae the Cross, meanin tae sprint doon the Briggait tae the bridge ower the Clyde. Ah stae in wan o thae flats in the New Gorbals, wi my Ma an ma wee brither, an ah thought I cud mak it hame in about five meenits. But a' thae mad bastards were efter me. Maist o them hud dumped the robes, and they hud a fair turn a speed. An in the lead wis the heid weirdo - him wi the Air Max - an he jist seemed tae flee along the road. At the Cross he wis jist aboot ten yerds behind me - ah cud hear his breathin. There wis naeboddy aroon oan the Briggait. If someone wis looking oot uv a windae, aw they wid hae seen wis a boay oan a mountain bike bein chased by a mad-lookin guy wi lang hair.

An jist when ah goat tae the bridge he laid his haun oan the back o ma mudguard. Ah gave an almighty push doon oan the pedals - the bike leapt forward, an ma rear light snapped aff in the boay's haun. Ah wis up an ower the river leavin him staunin there.

When ah made it tae the ither side I hud a quick look back. The hale skwad o weirdos hud caught up by noo an they were aw jist staunin there, at the ither side o the bridge. Mibbe the Briggait's like the limit o thir territory like. Or mibbe they were scared o watter or sumthin. Or mibbe they jist decided ah wiz too fast for them! They dinna ca' me Speedy Tam fur nuthin.

When I got hame ah told ma Ma whit ah'd seen, an ah wantit tae phone the polis but she widnae let me. She didnae believe me - says ah'm always makin up stories. But ah'm gonnae tell the boays the morra. An we're gonnae go up tae that Ten Steps place the morra night - tooled up - 'n sort thae bastards oot. ■

WHEN MIST CAME weaving its way through the shallow coastal hills and kissed the mossy creeks of old Harmster, the children fled its bitter chill, its hollow damp caress, and huddled by the peaty glow of a homely hearth. But on another morning, when the wind was light and from the west, the great outdoors might truly deliver what a highland spring promised and adventure might be a footstep away.

In the joy of such a cool April morning Angela swept round the deserted croft at Milngower and down the hill to Inveraber, past the glorious ice cream parlour, not yet open for the season, in search of that adventure.

The dark and miserable tenure of winter was a testing time for crofters in

that bleak and feral place, but, though winters were hard, they were never quite as harsh as the winter of her heart. For loneliness is a winter landscape. Now, however, that spring had sprung and the long glen would fill with tourists, the pleasure palaces, as the minister called them, would be opening for sinful business. Peddling tea and blueberry muffins, crab cakes and pickled herrings,

even on a Sunday! And another spring would come creeping upon her, thrilling and unexpected, that would change her life forever.

Logan Nicol was heading out of the village as she arrived. His shotgun was heavy with expectation.

'Still efter yon sleekit Tod?' she teased. 'Ah'll get im yet,' said Logan, 'this time ah'm loadit fur Bear.'

## LOADED FOR BEAR

### STORY BY HILTON SHANDWICK



She smiled at his optimism and admired his determination. He'd been chasing that cunning old fox for two years, but never yet succeeded. They both knew that sometimes, with a cunning adversary, going loaded for bear was the only option.

She thought of a poem her mother was fond of about a hunter home from the hill. It was her mother's 'guilty pleasure', the love of books. But, though she tried, Angela could not remember the words.

At Carsemore she met Nancy Wilson. Red headed and on the verge of adulthood, she stretched the cotton of her blouse in a way that Angela did not, yet, and Angela felt a pang of envy.

'Ah've jist been howkin cockles an ah'm fer bait,' she dropped her bucket at her feet.

'Its a brow haul,' said Angela, as she noted a few razor shells in the bucket too, 'im aff doon tae the herber fur fresh partans, if they hiv ony.'

They discussed the merits of frying cockles over boiling them and making crab cakes with cream cracker, and they let the morning turn to afternoon as the teuchat and the whaup sang their chorus. But a catch of cockles couldn't lie in a bucket forever and eventually Nancy took her leave.

Along a sheep track, past the old kirk, the breeze whispered the sedition of an early summer, as Angela watched crab boats cruise past the breakwater.

At the harbour Evan McKay, broad shouldered and rough chinned, hauled trays of succulent crabs off the Siller Crest. He smelled of fresh labour and old habits and had a smile that could melt butter, and big rough hands that looked like they could tear a sheep apart.

'Aye,' he said.

'Aye.'

'Twa partans is it?'

'Aye.'

He picked out the best looking two for her and put them in her bag. She lingered, coyly making small talk. She couldn't find a smile to match his and turned the conversation to the catch. Crabs and lobster were the usual haul and though they'd had lean seasons recently, things were looking up.

On days like that you could believe that the world turned so slowly that time might stand still. Forever seemed to be a place, not a wish, and the landscape of the heart was populated with possibilities. And though she had no idea what those possibilities were, she understood that they existed. Then he spoke the words that brought an urgency that shattered the enchantment. He'd seen her father at the Bay Inn the night before 'birling fur Scotland,' and she almost let her purchase drop.

Now she thought of the lonely mother waiting at the croft for her return. He'd be heading back with distemper, if he was out of money, and there was always safety in numbers on such mornings. She said her farewells and hastened home.

As he watched her leave Evan thought that this time next year, if she wasn't careful, she'd pushing a pram. The boys round those parts took no hostages when their sap was rising. Such were the ways of sinful boys and lonely girls, and the summers in the highlands are short.

Before Angela, the river came creeping through the wooded strath, swept past the sloping croft lands, and spilled its burden into the little harbour. She retraced part of this passage on her way home.

Despite her obvious urgency, she was stopped beneath the hill they called the Raven's Crag by the school teacher. She was prim and proper and godly and irate in a way Angela had never seen before. She had just been propositioned by Angela's father, and was disgusted enough to say so, even to a pupil, even to his daughter, such was her distress.

Angela sympathised with that and felt some of her own. He'd certainly be home before her now. But the teacher had more to say than Angela had time to listen to and, having tackled the issue as delicately as she could, Angela said goodbye and, once the teacher was out of view, ran helter skelter for home.

At the Loon Pool she ran straight into Conor MacLean.

'Wow, easy Tiger,' he said, helping her up and gathering her spilled crabs. His proper English always sounding incongruous, but charming, to Angela's ears.

'If ye find ony teeth, they're mine,' she said looking past him.

He chuckled and asked, 'What's the rush? Don't you have time to speak to an old friend?' and though Angela had never thought the day would come when she didn't have time for Conor, that was the day.

'Its ma da, he's on ae o his binges,' she said.

Conor understood the situation, they'd been to school together and everyone had heard the stories of the father's excesses. On the beach at Balinholm she had told him of the night her father had thrown kitchen knives at her mother's feet and told her to dance. She danced.

'Ah best git back,' said Angela, 'or he'll be giein her dule.'

The landscape that had been full of possibilities a few minutes before, seemed suddenly barren and bleak, and filled with an isolation that no heart could bear.

'We'll go together,' said Conor, smiling. They took the short cut over the Doonie Brae.

He helped her over a wooden stile with secret glances, unconscious and yet lingering, at her newly shapely legs, and teased her for her severe expression till they passes the cruck-roofed barn onto the rise beside the Croft house. And there they saw Angela's father standing ten yards from the front door rubbing his chin.

It was one moment in time when, though they didn't know what, they understood that something had changed. It was a moment they felt they could not intrude on. They were rooted to the spot.

Presently her father turned and walked away with a resignation that Angela had never seen in him. The two old friends ran to the house to find Angela's mother and the policeman's wife sitting by the front door on old driftwood Caithness chairs. Her mother was holding a court order in her hands. No one was smiling.

The father turned east at the gate and headed back toward the pub.

Conor looked at the sombre mother and said, 'I see you're loaded for bear.'

'Fit happened?' Angela asked.

Her mother quoted, somewhat cryptically, 'In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.'

And though she was never quite so fond of music as her books, and misery always casts a long shadow, in the days that remained to her, she danced. ■

## Elegy for a Lost Brother

SHEILA LOCKHART

### I. In the Old Ship

The Old Ship's where I find him, having lunch, slumped in his corner seat beside the fire, a pint of best bitter and two sausage rolls set up before him on the beer-stained teak, 'Gastro grub, wild boar, not cheap. All I can eat these days', he says.

He's looking rather thin and none too clean; I test the waters with some gentle talk, my trip abroad, his health, that sort of thing; he's staring at the lettuce on my plate and asks if he can finish what I've left, 'I'm really starved you know', he says,

then, to my astonishment, recites from memory a poem by Betjeman, the one about the red electric train – a flash of former jauntness perhaps, or was it a hint at how he'd end his pain? 'It's all changed these days,' he says.

I suggest a stroll but he declines; I watch him bear his loneliness back home, shoulders sagging underneath its weight. A cloud of bitter helplessness descends – I find an empty seat on Richmond Green, and feel the cold rain wet upon my face.

### II. Catching the Fast Train

You wait at the platform edge in the empty station; steel glints in the morning sun after early rain. A late commuter scans his phone with concentration, not seeing as you climb down on the track to face the train.

It wasn't a scheduled stop, but it stopped for you, the 10.13 through-train to Waterloo. They brought me your shattered glasses and your watch, dropped in your haste to reach your destination.

### III. East Neuk

We named a stone for him in Sallies Quad, a graven flagstone for a broken heart where he stole other hearts in happier days.

Peering through drifting haar on West Sands I see him in his red gown, smiling, but now the mist has lifted and he's gone.

I'll stop awhile, remembering...fish and chips on a harbour wall, those winding East Neuk roads with their snatched glimpses of the North Sea.

I THINK THIS'LL be the last summer I'll see oot, and it's been one o the worst to thole. Maist days there's a thick grey haar that veils onything past the end o ma road. But on the few clear days there's been, I can see past ma land to the abandoned fields at the bottom o Mormond Hill, fields that eence fed the Bothy loons and lassies, and the industrial fairmers that followed them. Further oot, ye can see the ruins o Cairnbulg Castle through the bare dying trees, and the sands o the Broch beach, as ghostly as the aul toon itsel – the last o the folk left aifter the floods back in the twenty fifties, packed themsels on rusty fishing boats and heided aff to fiver country would hae them. I hope for their sake they're better treated than incomers ever were fan I bid in the Broch.

The only folk I see nooadays are wee specks high up in the sky, floating about on their helicopters as they chuck packages doon onto my land – usually twice a year, either side o winter. They're filled wie new clythes, medication, food flavouring, and tinned meat that's been grown in test tubes, meat that canna compare wie the few beasts I managed to shoot noo and then: rabbits, deer and pheasants, although there's less and less o them each year.

The phone rings, a walkie-talkie kinda thing that's linked up to one o the last few satellites that still hurtle roon oor planet.

'Hello?'

'Hi, is that Mr Buchan?'

'Yes. Speaking.'

'Your winter package will be delivered in three hours. Do you have any special requests that we may be able to fulfil?'

'Eh... I'm needing an extra solar panel or two if that's okay? My house battery still hasn't fully charged for winter and I think it's the panels that are playing up.'

'It's likely the smog that's been causing issues Mr Buchan, but we're happy to provide extras on this occasion. What do you wish to offer in exchange for this item?'

'Just whatever's left in my account.'

'I'm afraid your account has insufficient funds. Do you have anything you can exchange on your property? One of our officers can descend for the exchange.'

'I... I'll think o something... I must hae summin that'll dee.'

'Pardon, Mr Buchan? Was that affirmative?'

'Yes. Yes, sorry. Yes. I'll exchange one of my toolboxes. Will that do?'

'A packed toolbox will be of much use to us Mr Buchan. Our E.T.A. is three-forty-three p.m. Goodbye.'

'Bye.'

I put the phone back doon on the charger. My toolbox has nothing in it, but I kent that would get them to agree to bringing the panels here.

So that's the last o my money gone. I only stopped working for the satellite company a year or so ago, maintaining

the aul NATO and BT dishes on the hill that the Company used fae time to time. Fan they fell to bits, so did the last source o income in this corner o the world. They offered me a relocation package, but fit wye would I tak at? Fit does a man in his seventies get oot o leaving ahin the only land he's ever kent and starting aa owre again?

I heid oot wie ma metal detector and shovel and wyde through the boggy grun till I get to the aul road. I say road, but it's maistly pot-holes noo. The best place to go hunting is aboot quarter o a mile doon the hill, ootby far Bill's fairm used to be afore it was covered owre in the sandy sludge that shifted up fae the coast. I could feel bad about sic a fate for the fairm, but it's just the wye o the land up here – sands have ay shifted, burying abandoned toons ablow it. If folk arna there to fight it, the land will claim itsel back, will bury every last trace o us until we're fossils o the future.

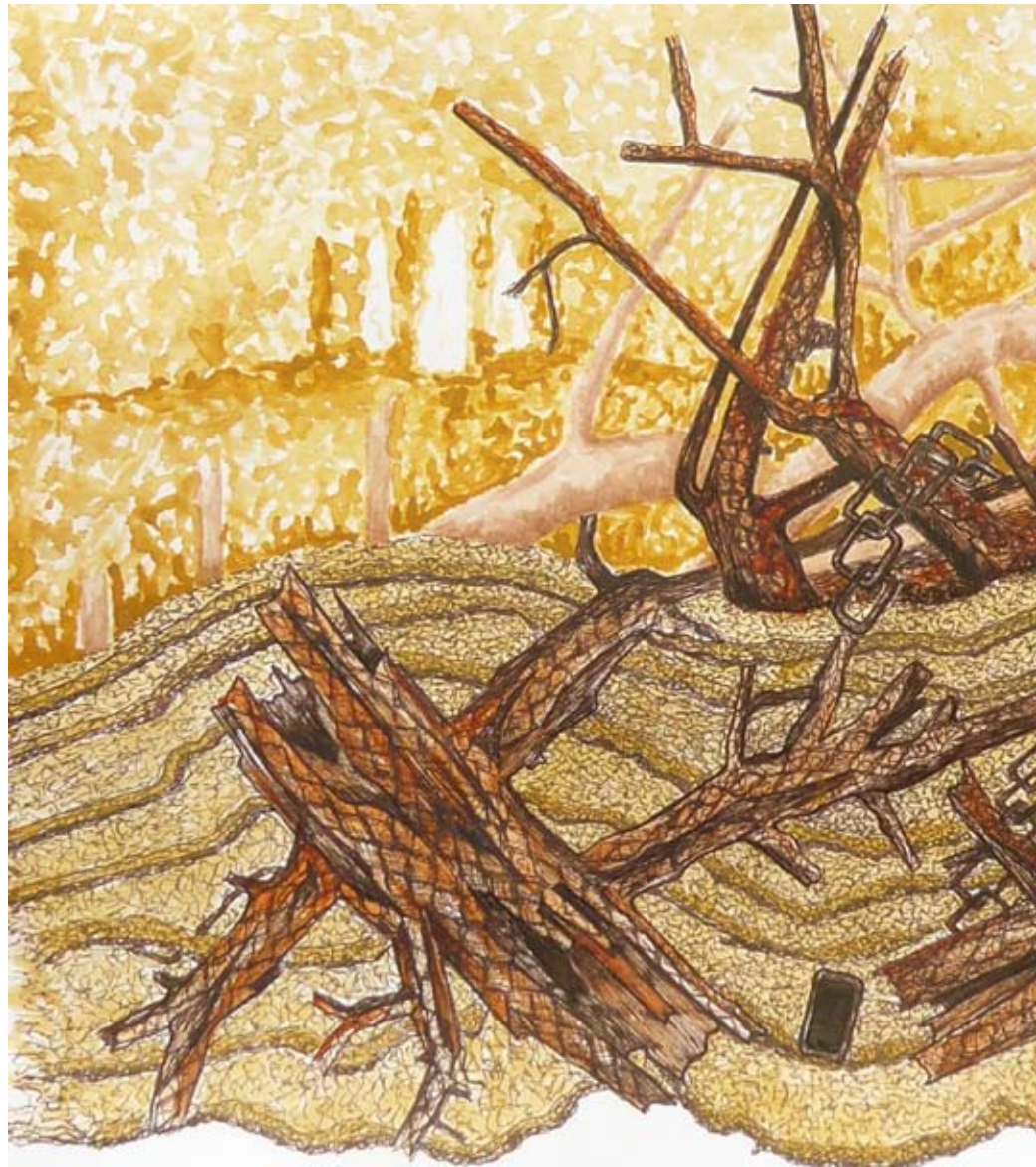
It's nae lang afore the detector's beeping fast. I howk at the grun, uprooting the earth and flinging it ahin ma until ma shooders ache and my back knots up in the same places as at ay does. I strike on my treasure and bend doon to fummle in amongst the dirt wie ma hands. I pull up the thin black object – I see fae the apple logo on the back that it's een o them iPhones aabdy had back in the day, back before the Company won the tech waar. That's fan they took full control o aathing, control o the information folk were granted access to and the languages folk spoke. It wisna lang before I was a complete ootsider, a relic. And to think I was born on this side o the millennium...

But there's summin about this iPhone, wie its cracked screen and battered corners, that minds ma on ma childhood, on Facetimeing ma pals late at night, the loons that bid jist up the road fae ma. It's nae easy to mind on their names, but their faces are clearer than ivver, their voices and their laughs echoing through ma mind as clear as if they were coming oot the phone.

I get back to digging and end up aboot half buried fan I strike on ma next treasure. It's a bittie harder to get this een oot the grun: a hand trowel tangled up in a lang iron chain. Wie one big haul at them, I manage to get baith oot. They're hivvy kind, especially the chain – it'll help weigh doon this packed toolbox I've promised them.

Fan I pull masel back up oot the three-fit hole I've made for masel, I'm knackered. I lie doon on the grun for a mintie, ma heid spinning. There's a fair gale blaing noo, the kind that'll seen turn into a sandstorm at this time o year. I have to force masel up onto ma feet and gaither fit little energy I hae left to trudge back up to the hoose.

Right enough, fae ma living room winda I can see sand twirling up aff the Broch beach, dancing across the land until it thins oot to nothing. I'll be lucky to receive ma parcel the day wie coorse



# Standing Stone

By Shane Strachan

conditions like this. I go ben to my bed and lie doon wie the curtains shut. Even though I canna see it, I can hear grains o sand tinkling against the winda panes as I wyt for sleep to come.



There's a whumping noise that vibrates through the hale hoose. I lowp oot ma bed and look through a gap in the curtains. A black helicopter is circling high up abeen ma back gairden, trying to steady itsel in the high winds.

I run ben into the lobby and pick up the toolbox. I quickly check that the glue I've stuck on the clasp is sealed ticht so they canna open it easily. I heid oot the back door and watch as a rope ladder unfurls fae the helicopter doon into my backie. An Officer starts descending. His lang grey hair blaas aa owre the place

wie the force o the rotary blades and the strong gale. He has a bag on his back stappit ticht wie a box. He stops half wye doon and clings ontill the rope as the wind swings him like a pendulum. Eence he gets the hang o the rhythm, he clambers doon the rest o the ladder and his feet mak contact wie the grun.

As he starts heiding doon towards ma, the wind howls the loudest it has yet and the Officer's thrown up into the air, his aims and legs spinning. High up above us, the helicopter maks a whining noise as it's flung oot o sight, awa owre the tap o ma hoose. And then the wind hits me. Ma ears pop as I'm lifted up into the air and thrown across ma lobby. I land hard on the widden floor.

For a minute or two I'm laid oot flat on ma back, ma heid dirling. The wind howls through ma hoose. Even though ma vision's blurry, I slowly manage to pick myself up and heid back oot, up





Artwork by Vawdrey Taylor

ne

towards the man. He's lying on his front, completely passed out. The box that was strapped to his back has broken apart – across ma backie, there's clythes, burst pill bottles and bashed cans lying about the place. I look up and across as much o the sky as I can see. The helicopter's nae wye in sight.

The Officer seen starts stirring on the grun – he looks up at ma in confusion, as though he's nae clue fit's just happened. I help him into the hoose, trying to nae to hud his battered body too ticht as I prop him up.

I get him suttin doon at my table and pour him a glaiss o watter. He chugs it doon and splooshes the last dreeps ontill his face.

'What happened?' he finally manages to say.

'The winds got too rough. They blew you over, and your helicopter.'

'Christ,' is aa he can say. He looks

doonwards wie his grey-blue een and stares at the widden table.

'How many others were there?'

'Two of them. Two young things', he says. 'I told them it was too much of a risk coming out to this god-forsaken –'

He starts coughing. His body heaves with each hoast and he winces in pain. I slap him on the back a couple o times until he quietens doon.

'I'm sure they'll be fine,' I say. 'I don't think they crashed. Or at least I didn't hear anything.'

'They better be okay. Or we'll both be in trouble.'

I ging and get the hoose phone, kennin fine he'll be speiring for it seen enough. I play wie the dials for a while, listening to the changes in the static noise. It never comes clear – there's nae signal and probably winna be until the winds die richt doon.

I ging back ben to the Officer. He looks like he's just sat back doon fan I enter the room and I can see summin shift in his face, like he's trying to mask summin.

'So you're the man on Mormond Hill,' he says.

'That would be me.' He disna say onymair, and I'm nae sure exactly fit else to add. I ging and busy myself in the kitchen: I rinse cups, put awa dishes and fold up towels until I realise hoo odd it must seem aifter fit's just happened. I return to ma seat.

'The man on Mormond Hill,' I say. 'It sounds like I live on the moon.'

'You might as well live on the moon.' He sniffs a laugh. 'It's madness to still be out here, where nothing grows, and this climate... it's unreal.'

'It's my land and it's all I know.' I can feel ma face turn reid – I didna realise hoo pathetic I'd soond.

'You could have something a damn sight better further south in a city,' the Officer says, sitting up.

'I've never lived in a city. I get by fine up here.'

'For how much longer? The Company won't take toolboxes full of junk as payment.'

I look owre to far I left the toolbox. The clasp's been broken open, the contents exposed.

'And now look at the danger we've been put in because of you. This place is a no man's land. They won't take pity on you forever.'

'I nivver asked for their peety! I could've survived fine without the useless muck they've sent owre the years. I dinna need ony o ye!' I'm up oot ma seat and I'm breathing fast. Ma haert's sair kind, beating hard wie a dull ache.

'Oh, calm down' the Officer says. 'I'm just worried about my colleagues.' His expression softens. I sit back doon and watch him as he stares into space – there's something in his een that seems familiar.

'Do I ken you?' I ask. 'Fae afore? Fae up this wye?'

'I don't think so.'

'Bit...weel, far did you grow up?'

'Peterhead,' he sighs. 'But I never really came up this way.'

Even though he denies it, there's summin that maks ma sure I've seen his face afore, some time far I would have seen him lang enough for him to imprint on ma memory. But then again, this sense o recognition is maybe just fae being this close to another human for the first time in years – maybe aa I recognise is my ain species.

'Do ye nae miss biding up this wye? Yer toon? Being by the sea?' I ask.

'I would if there was something to miss. I watched my hometown disappear in front of me. Watched the sea rise up and swallow it whole. There's nothing up here now. You live in a wasteland.'

'Ye'r wrang,' I say. I get up and leave the room. I rake in ma lobby press and pull oot ma aul anorak. Fae ma bedroom

## *I see fae the apple logo on the back that it's een o them iPhones aabdy had back in the day*

winda, I can see that the skies have cleared a fair bit and the sun's starting to brak through the cloud – it's safe enough to go back outside. I heid back ben to the kitchen.

'Follow me...' I say to the Officer, nae sure fit to caa him.

'Andrew. My name's Andrew.'

'Follow me Andrew. I've got summin to show ye in this wasteland o mine.'

'The Company will be here soon. Somehow or another,' he says.

'It winna tik lang.'

He taks his time getting up oot the seat, and winces wie pain again. I can hear him hobbling ahin ma as we heid through the lobby and oot the front door. There's a thin layer o sand on ma doorstep and a few trees have blaen owre onto ma road – nithing I hivna dealt wie afore. Andrew trails ahin ma is I lead us doon into the wids. Maist o the trees here are deid: brittle tombsteens that dinna mak for good fuel. The grun is dubby and sucks at oor boots as we trudge through it. At one point, the squelching noises fae Andrew's feet stop – I dinna bother turning roon. He seen rushes to catch up wie ma.

The grun starts to turn drier and safter wie patches o grass, and the branches above oor heids become fuller and greener. Andrew starts walking by my side – I glance roon at him and can tell fae his een that he's noticed the shift in the land, that he can sense we're heiding towards somewye special.

'God,' Andrew says. He's spied the standing steens through the trees. They glister in the thin rays o sunlight that shine through the tree branches aroon us. The air grows waarmer as we approach the monument.

'Life still endures up this wye,' I say.

Andrew disna say onything as he walks

ahid o ma and steps into the circle. I sit doon on the one steen that lies on its side – the recumbent steen. I look up at Andrew: the light is streaming across his face as he leans against an upright steen nearhand. He closes his eyes and smiles. Slowly, the light fades aroon us as a cloud covers owre the sun. Andrew opens his een and shaks his heid at the sight o ma.

'If you want to survive, you're going to have to leave this place.'

'But it's aa I ken,' I say, my vyce shakkin.

Fae somewye in the distance, I can hear a chirring soond – either Andrew's helicopter's returning or they've sent oot anither.

'This place was never fit for humans. The land was full of clay from day one. A few years without constant upkeep, and look at the state of it.'

'But, that's because o the floods, and the flood's werna oor fault.'

'No, your right,' he says. 'This is the state the world left us in, and now we've got to make the most of the best of it. But none of the best is here. You've got to stop living among the wreckage of the past.'

The noise fae the helicopter grows to a loud thumping. I stand up and look ahin ma. It's the same helicopter Andrew came in. He waves and shouts up at them.

They start hovering directly abeen us. The rope ladder is flung oot eence mair, and unfurls doon into the steen circle.

'Come with me,' Andrew says. He grabs onto the rope ladder and starts clambering up. 'You can live a decent life where people will help you get by. You're getting old. You won't survive much longer in a place like this on your own,' he says as the ladder swings back and fore.

I dinna move.

'Come on!' he shouts as the rope starts to ascend, lifting him up wie it. 'This might be your last chance.'

I step back fae him and near enough trip owre the recumbent steen. I plant masel back doon on it – ma body grows hivvy, as though it's anchoring itsel to the spot.

Andrew shaks his heid and turns awa. I watch as he's pulled up high abeen ma, past the very tap o the trees. He clammers up the rest o the rope and disappears inside, and then the helicopter flees onwards, oot o sight. I look back doon at the grey pillars aroon ma, then lie on ma side and feel the caul steen against ma skin. I close ma een and listen as the chirring fae the helicopter fades awa and aa I'm left wie is a caul, dark silence. ■

# Poetry

## At the end of the day

CHRIS FOXALL

If you'd never been to the island  
you would never know  
how the ancient volcanic rock  
thrusts vertical through the earth  
at the head of the peninsula,  
how the houses that stand  
on this knuckle end of land  
between the open moor and the sea,  
lean their white-washed stones into winds  
that can whip the colour from your hair,  
how March storms will tumble lambs  
into corners of fields  
heaping cotton wool leaves  
into drifts against the walls.  
How the high moor beyond Beinn Halistra  
is always silent.  
If you'd never slept on the island  
you would never know how  
on a winter's morning,  
the sea will nudge through open windows  
coating your pillow in a breathing of salt,  
how across Loch Snizort  
dawn drops into the hollows between the hills  
with a fullness of molten silver,  
how the early morning ferry from Innse Gall  
ripples out from the mist  
trailing an arc of wake  
that breaches Rubha Bhatairnis.  
How, on days of fair winds and blue skies  
your shadow is somehow lighter.  
If you'd never embraced the island  
you would never know how  
on a summer's evening,  
the Ascribs hang in the twilight  
suspended above the ocean, strung out  
like ebony beads over a mirror  
and how, at the end of the day, the ocean bleeds  
into the bay below Trumpan  
scattering bleached bones of remembrance  
along the shore.  
All these things you would never know  
if you'd never been to the island.

## Oldshoremore

PETER MACLAREN

Beyond the lochan the strong colour  
a low sun warming the alders –  
so clear a light so late in the day.

And the fierce cry of the guillemot  
arching beyond the headland,  
No land till Lewis, back into the wind.

Sand kicks its grains into my face;  
along the beach your tiny figure  
turns again, footprints smoothed by the seeping sea.

My skin seems tougher now, calloused by living,  
but the hand is there, the arm steady.  
Before the light fades and the sound dies  
leaving our figures cold in the air  
climb with me through the dunes  
for one last sweep of the great bay.

## Eriboll

*i.m. Hughie Fox and Reay Clarke*  
SATYAPADA CAMPBELL

What were we looking for,  
we townies, travelling up so far  
to the wild north coast?

We'd never seen how,  
on a moonless cloudy winter night  
a hand at arm's length's lost to sight.

We heard how years ago  
they'd cross the trackless hill by lantern light  
heading for dancing in a shepherd's house

They'd shear the sheep by hand  
or scythe the grass lawn smooth  
the way a spider spins, or so it seemed:

we hadn't seen the million steps  
they'd walked to here: an ankle broken in the war  
and now the stiffening limbs.

Out on the hill we saw the low remains of walls –  
we knew the history of that land  
from books

'They're singing Malloch nan Tura'  
Hughie said, of a ceilidh in Durness,  
'and the duchess will be there.'

A hole in the hillside led  
to a souterrain – dead sheep were dumped there –  
and on the back road down to Lairg the Dornaigil  
broch.

The sea in May, smooth and blue  
softly billowing in the swell.  
Beside the road we drove the ewes and lambs along  
a white lily opened in a peat dark pool.

Why that dream that came so long after?  
The zombie hogs with stinking pus streaked heads  
dancing along so lightly with the rest?

I looked at Hughie: "Head fly" he said  
and drew his knife to cut their throats  
(it is the usual business of a farm –  
a severed head nailed to the doorpost in the byre  
was no surprise)

The knife could not undo the flesh  
and drew across the shoulder blade of one man sitting there  
opening a congealed pool, dark red.

There is no going back as I was then.  
Just as the sea swell, different from the tide,  
floods the boulders  
then it's gone.  
It's there, and then it's gone.

## The Greatest Gift

ROBIN LEIPER

When you are grown-up, it's easy to be happy.  
I knew this when I was ten: you just needed resolution.  
You felt some creeping, cloud of discontent –  
you'd make a change. By simply being open  
then to what you wanted, you'd start becoming  
cheerful, in control again – you were the master

of your fate: there would always be some master  
–switch to throw, some options or some happy  
circumstance in reach. To choose this meant becoming  
different – as easy as a New Year's resolution.  
Your life's a blank white page, an open  
book, yet to be written. One stroke erases discontent.

Is life like this? No – it seems not. Discontent  
is like some mangy cur without a master  
roaming your hungry streets, licking open  
wounds, lifting its leg at every happy  
anniversary, dogging your heels with the resolution  
of a hired assassin, set on becoming

your dread Nemesis. No face now seems becoming.  
No dalliance or sport but leaves you discontent  
and bored. Your resolution  
falters. A malign fate squats there as your master  
and you sneer at any date with being happy.  
Look at yourself: your life's an open

sewer. No longer can you open  
up your heart to anyone. You are becoming  
dead inside. You'd be happy  
just to end this hell of discontent.  
You eye the knife, the pills – you'd be master  
of your destiny. But then your resolution

fails you once again. You can see no resolution  
to this problem on your own. No act of will can open  
up your life. So you accept you're not the master  
here: you find your little self's becoming  
smaller and less interesting, your discontent  
merely a fact of life. This makes you strangely happy.

The true master-key to your becoming  
grown-up may be the resolution to stay calmly open  
to your discontent. Then, yes, it's easy to be happy.

# Poetry

## Threading Time

AMANDA GILMOUR

Entombed in musty folds:  
dust enriched Banaras silk  
embroidered with golden yarn,  
forever echoing colonial rule  
for a century, a western charm.

Wrapped in Mother's cherish,  
dressing up death in opulent threads:  
tobacco-stained, dyed caviar-black,  
easing primal pain in cancerous dark.

A homecoming gift, laden in rupees,  
sailing seas below winking skies as  
moonlight waltzes on jhallar edges  
caressing shining eastern essence.

Intricate piercing of twilight material  
crafting flawless Mughal patterns  
with fine threads, trellis bound,  
snaring the weaver's soul.

## Moon

AMANDA GILMOUR

Twilight blinks  
upon the road  
a lifeless deer:

pearl balled in mirrored eye.

## Amber

AMANDA GILMOUR

Oriental lily  
stains the wings  
of a white butterfly,  
amber.

## Woman in a field of Autumn

### Crocus

KIRSTEEN BELL

She stands, testing the cramped curve of her spine,  
purple-stained fingers  
cupped around the crimson flush;  
a glowing filament harboured  
within a purple heart.

## Arachne

DAVID GOLDIE

Let the story unravel as it will,  
the strands twist in the wind;  
in the early hours;  
in the morning sun.

Glitches of colour and light on mist  
resolve themselves as an old woman,  
breathless, leaning on a stick of gnarled olive.

Sprung from her disguise,  
threading through thin air  
between grids of washed gold  
pulled taught by loom weights.

Skilful fingers work;  
teasing out the knots and tangles  
with a touch as deft and swift as light.

Under curlicues of knuckle  
the shuttle speeds back and forth.  
The ridges and depressions of weft and woof  
present their different versions.

Angles of air and light take up the slack between  
contested perspectives. Dogtooth and herringbone  
in glinting chevrons.

Light catches the cloud  
pierced by rain  
as a volley of arrows  
falling obliquely.

Clothed in heavenly light  
the marbled sky looms.  
Colour dissolves.  
A single crane rises.

Black pinions cleave the sky,  
recede into the distance.  
To a shimmering pinhead.  
To a full stop.

## Before Winter

LIZ MCKIBBEN

The wind fights our faces, promising rain.  
We leave the path. I trip over tufts of turf,  
rabbit holes, stones. You can't steady me.

You're clutching Dougal tight like he hugged the  
world  
after a dram. 'Onwards and upwards,' you shout,  
as a gust from the Minch sweeps the sound of your  
voice  
over Edrachilles Bay. Scourie is a sullen shadow.  
Handa huddles its birds. We bid our farewells,  
scatter the white dust where Dougal moored his  
boat  
in the lee of the bay. Holding hands, we hurry  
home.  
Night falls early here.

## Waiting for the 495

JULIET ANTILL

Leaning my head out of this world  
for a moment,  
following the iridescence of an insect

I find fifty tethered suns  
in a ragwort-hogweed-vetch  
back-of-the-bus-shelter cosmos.

I find meadowsweet –  
the bees, the hoverflies, the darting bugs  
all loved up and drowning –

I find meadowsweet, her voice something like  
Miss Dietrich's, thick with sex.  
I can't help it, she says,  
and pops another pinhead bud into flower.

## A Glasgow Fox

JULIET ANTILL

This fox is not Hughes' fox.  
There is no night, no forest, no thought of fox.  
No clock ticks.  
There's only the animal herself  
waiting on a sunlit embankment.  
A storybook fox with a lustrous coat  
and hen-coop stare.

She, of course, has no idea of fox.  
She is scent, breath, trails.  
She's the vetch tickling her belly  
and the sharp hot stink of train.  
After we pass she'll drop down  
through the long grass and cross the rails,  
enter the dark hole of the head.

SHE KNOCKED ON the door but already knew he wasn't coming to answer. Five minutes passed. She exhaled another vapour cloud through her scarf into the morning mist as she waited, forcing it out like dragon's breath while she stomped on the flagstone path, each kick a shockwave prickling through frozen feet. She banged on the frame of the porch door until white paint splinters tangled with the bobbed wool of her glove. The morning captured her sounds and muted them; the village was asleep, and it was not for her to wake it.

The old man waited at his open door every morning and she often wondered how long he stood there before her arrival, leaning his weight on the ledge, the door ajar, peering down the street. Only once before had he not been visible when she turned the corner onto his path, but the door was at least open on that occasion; he had been waiting but gone back inside, most probably the bathroom had beckoned. He never said. Mostly he relayed his remembrances of village life though this held equally little interest for her. Still, she learned that his house had once been the general store and post office for the village, and he the postmaster; that his wife was an organiser of community gatherings, with ceilidhs in the hall each month and coffee mornings on Saturdays; that children played football in the street and bathed in the burn on hot days. Often he grumbled too. He said people were ungrateful and troubled him, but she heard others speak of him growing cantankerous after the death of his wife. The village she knew had no shops and

nobody organised dances; the stream had been diverted by developers many years earlier. There remained only a post-box on a pole, installed in lieu of a post office but doubling as a drop-off point for the white van which raced through rural villages each morning leaving bundles of newspapers for delivery.

And so the whole village was nobody's but hers and his in the morning. The tarmac sparkled and slid underfoot as her steps marked the frost afresh each day, zig-zagging from house to house, lugging a luminous sack of newspapers. Occasional cars would plummet down the hill behind her, but each passing roar created only the briefest of disturbances; a mere snore for the sleeping village. His house was half-way through her round. The first she delivered to was home to the local nurse and her policeman husband; the last was lived in by a family with three young children ready to boost the school roll. Each house in between was different. Original stone cottages sat alongside ugly squat houses with flat roofs built in the sixties. Bungalows had squeezed in between, working themselves into the fabric of the village until there was not an inch left. Conservatories battled with driveways to claim the last of the garden space while parked cars littered the

road that pre-dated their existence. The neighbourhood had also extended up the hill in more recent years; past the war memorial and up the brae. New roads were added in one at a time, standing apart from the old village in both geography and community spirit. The further up the brae you go, he told her, the bigger the newcomers' houses become and the less they care.

She waited at the gatepost next to the final house, watching for her mother's headlights, still clutching the undelivered newspaper and carrying the burden of the closed door. It was probably nothing, she was told, as she was driven home to get dressed for school. Nevertheless, the policeman from the first house was summoned to force entry to the house that sat half-way and she heard over breakfast that the old man never got up that morning. She had already been quite sure of that.

There were no visitors that she knew of apart from herself. Someone must have brought food, and she recollected some vague knowledge of a social care company delivering once each week. There was only one son, spoken of but never seen. Ten minutes of her thirty-minute paper round were spent at the open porch door each morning. The house had an unkempt

stench that could overpower the freshness of the morning air and some days she felt the guilt of wishing she could hurry on her way. He would often ask her about school, delighting in the news of small achievements and class trips, and once gave her a vintage leather football from his home that matched the team on her scarf. Some days she wished she could stay longer. When she started weekend work at a tearoom in a neighbouring town, she would call in to him with the leftover scones and sandwiches for tea. He never liked the intrusion, but he always ate the food.

She requested the afternoon off from school to attend his funeral despite fearing she would find herself there alone. The entrance to the church lay opposite and along slightly from his house, down a driveway lined by dry stone dykes, stained from the water that never dried out in the winter months. As she stepped inside, a momentary panic rose within her that the day was wrong and this was a service for someone else. The church was full to capacity. The only seat left was on a pew at the very back, from which she strained forward to hear a minister that never visited him talk about his life. The minister spoke of community and togetherness and one of their own. Afterwards, the people of the old village enjoyed the excuse to eat cake and drink tea in the hall, and though they shared many stories that afternoon, none were about the old man.

The girl did not stay. She went home instead, to her house at the top of the brae. ■

## DEATH OF A VILLAGE

STORY BY HANNAH WHALEY



AND SO, IN 1912 they went north! North from their winter firesides where they huddled and exchanged ghost stories about their encounters with their dead ancestors on that long rocky climb from Aquafondata to Viticuso; where they laughed about their lore and their dreams and the foibles of their neighbours; where they planned their feast days, fired their pizzas, laid out their dead; where they delivered and conceived their babies. They told stories about snakes and their cunning ways and their bold men that killed them with their bare hands; they laughed at the mysteries of sex - those who wouldn't or couldn't or just lacked the know-how. Those winter firesides where children were prepared for adult hood and girls learned about making bread and menstruation.

They went north to Scotland from their small home where the sheep came in in the mountains of Cassino; where they were in awe of the priest and the teacher and the strange language they spoke; where they castrated their pig, the family pet, to fatten it for their sausages and hams; where they created sugos to draw the best from their hens; where toothless old men drink wine and play cards and moustached middle aged women, strong hearted and sturdy limbed, make airy pasta and soothing ricottas and offer garlicked

water for erratic bowels; where everyone has both a name and a nickname; where the young go to Mass to find mates; where men ate bread and onions on their hillsides digging up their fine potatoes. North they went, my grandparents, in an uncertain marriage, leaving resentful cousins and deserted old flames. And at the toss of a coin they came to Scotland. They settled in Leith.

Their history is a brave but not a romantic one. In fact, my handed down account of life in the Apennines is far from a world of sunshine or song or a Michelangelo fresco and in my late adolescence I learned these things and their language like a new way of life. The insatiable appetites among the adventurous middle classes in Scotland for accounts of an Italian way of life, their knowing looks at a Massaccio fresco or a Boccherini guitar quintet, their awe at a pesto - what is it but crushed available raw ingredients softened with olive oil to make a clinging sauce for goodness sake! - astounds me.

The reality of our race, mine, is a stark one, a source of embarrassment to the Italian northerners, unsettling for the cultured establishment of any society; and founded on earthy things; things which are unspeakable and basic to the survival on any remote mountain community.

My grandmother was unable to read or to write; her fantasy to be a lawyer; her dream for me a teacher; the source of what was not available to her, an illiterate woman, an education. She left Italy pregnant and in order to keep her hands free to mind her other child during the journey, she had a piece of material which she had sown herself, with a compartment at each end for her belongings, thrown over her shoulder. Her money was stitched into her underwear. She - and many like her - was an entrepreneur. Many Italians then and since found work and settled, she found a barrel organ which she paraded around the streets to attract people and sell her ice cream. My mother and her brother and sister slept in orange boxes

at the back of their first shop; during the war years, they entertained and fed the British and American soldiers with Glenn Miller records and peas and vinegar in a second shop that was the centre of social life in "the walk".

Leith Walk the first settlement for newcomers to Edinburgh and today the rich cosmopolitan heart of the city, where Polish, Chinese and food shops with soft, folding breads from the Levant, discs crusted with sesame, thin papery sheets to wrap your olives and smoked aubergines in and dip into yoghurts perfumed with fresh mint leaves, now share pavement space with opulent glass fronted pizzerias and curry places. For every shop front tells a story and marks the stages of integration of ethnicities and families. And Leith where creatives blend and bond in white walled co-working spaces to offset mainstream culture in a rich city's theatres and opera house.

Leith the teeming lava flow of Scotland's capital, its underside, and where immigrants like my Italian family, both learn the ways of a new country and aspire; and where their ways give fresh perspectives for artists; where new made Scots themselves, can add another voice and layer of human experience: community, common endeavour and the making of a new country. ■

## NEW COUNTRY

BY ANNE PIA



# Poetry

## Sneckstasy Nightmares

DAVID JAMES ROSS

King Brude is partying on Craig Phadrig –  
The sky's aflame. On St Michael's Mount  
The monks are singing sweet sacred songs.

Along Ness Walk, by the river, the ghosts  
Of genteel Invernesians still promenade  
Politely conversing, arm in long-dead arm.

There's a committee of neo-Goths meeting  
In the Town House – windows spill anarchy  
Down Bridge Street, along the High Street.

Baron Taylor's Street is one pulsing throng  
Of gibbering imps and loud, drunken demons,  
And angels are dancing down Rainings Stairs.

In Tomnachurich Street, Bonnie Prince Charlie  
Gingerly side-steps neat regimented ranks  
Of the blood-stained, tartan-shrouded dead.

A witches' coven on Castle Hill is cooking up  
A rare brew – alone in his cold, dark castle  
Deceived, demented Macbeth sits brooding.

And out of the River Ness, before St Columba's  
Very eyes, rears a huge beast of hideous aspect –  
To his horror, it kneels to receive his blessing.

## A Meeting

DAVID JAMES ROSS

It was when they decided to dig up  
The floor of their Papay croft house  
To install new radiant heating –  
No mere luxury in this  
Northerly, wind-swept isle –  
That they found him lying there  
Just as he had been laid to rest,  
Arms crossed on his chest,  
Underneath his shield.

He had been lying there all along,  
Their constant guardian Jarl,  
Their own under-floor Viking,  
An unsuspected silent witness  
To long centuries of habitation,  
To the generations' ebb and flow,  
To each current and cross-current.

And now at last they meet up,  
As the penannular centuries  
Converge, close, and connect.

*I'm the witchdoctor of Hillbrow  
And I can sleep just like the dead  
Though I will always live forever  
Ramsay Mackay*

## The Sleeping Giant

*i.m. Ramsay Mackay, 1945-2018*

ROSS WILSON

There can't have been many who knew  
The Zulu Dance of Death in Kelty.  
Ramsay Mackay did.  
He didn't just know it: he did it in the pub.  
A big man with a Walt Whitman beard,  
Ramsay looked like he'd blown in  
from the nineteenth century  
via the sixties counterculture.

Everyone was Ramsay's brother.  
When someone objected, "Ah'm no yir brithir,"  
he was corrected, "We're all brothers, brother."  
Introduced as "Ramsay, The Poet,"  
I must have been a midge around his beer,  
nipping his head about Rimbaud and Baudelaire.  
A legendary bass player and singer,  
I'd no idea how much he'd done.

Years later, YouTubing his name,  
I came upon song after song after song  
scrawled by his hand, sung in his unique  
Scots-born, South African tongue.  
Ramsay carried a notebook like a wallet.  
It had no market value, but  
if words were gold, Ramsay was rich.  
"He lives up Benarty," I was told.

The Sleeping Giant to locals,  
Benarty hills outline against the skyline  
is a Gulliver tied down in Lilliput,  
much like Ramsay in Kelty. Well over six foot,  
I remember him kicking snow off his big boots  
in a bar where the clientele rolled joints on tables.  
Back then I kept my interest in literature so close  
to my chest it made an impression on my heart.

Ramsay blew in like permission to be myself.  
A true gentleman, his individualism  
didn't conflict with the community:  
he stood out and blended in  
like a sore thumb warm in the village glove.  
Though he sleeps now like the dead,  
when you press play he wakes  
and makes a dance of life out of death.

## Flag

JULIAN COLTON

In the distance across garden fences  
Up a pole a flag is flying

Flutters in the wind like a Hawaiian shirt  
Slightly ragged and worse for wear.

From my high kitchen screw sleepy eyes to see  
more clearly  
Is it a Saltire or Tricolour?

Then from grey the red of it emerges  
And I realise it's the Union Jack

Conclude they must be diehard Rangers fans  
Claiming Crown, Union and Ibrox in revival.

You have to laugh, if slightly nervous.  
In Scotland old rivalries simmer.

Here in the Borders there's room for banter  
In the West knives and bad blood will be drawn.

## Clay

LAUREN IVERS

Heavenly father,  
I am fourteen  
and I am lonely.

I am in the belly  
of some great fish,  
or down in the Babylonian den  
among closed-mouth lions  
purring in a circle.

Lord, let me out.

I'm going to kiss Euan  
in the murk  
of the youth club smoke machines  
down by the Citadel Quay,  
with or without  
your help.

When I get bored of him  
you can make me  
into someone better,  
or hand me that clay.  
I'll do it myself.

**A**N HONEST MAN's the noblest work of God, said the poet, but here at Pastry Pleasures we dare to disagree. Rather, we would suggest that our Heavenly Father's finest moment came when He inspired the invention of the meat pie, and introduced an ineffable joy to the world.

I'm Geoff Bridie and I edit the football pages of Pastry Pleasures, the most popular weekly publication devoted to the contemplation of the pie. My section of the mag has become highly influential; I cannot name the club involved, but after we described their pie fare as 'cold, with leathery pastry and a tasteless interior' their crowds plummeted and they entered administration. Legal action against us continues. After we ran a feature on Carlisle United's excellent meat and potato pie, the club's home crowds doubled. Since we praised the mutton pies at Kirkintilloch Rob Roy FC, the club secretary has contacted us to say that more people come now to experience the pies than to watch the game. I feel very proud, but also strangely humbled, to work in a branch of journalism where I can actually make a difference.

The strange story I'm about to relate started when a reader's letter urged us to investigate the mutton pies at Nairn County FC of the Highland League. I needed little excuse to visit again the land of my parents' birth, so I checked the fixture lists for a suitable date and called the Trainline to book tickets north for Sally, our photographer, and myself. In mid-transaction I was interrupted by our office junior, Jason. 'Nairn?' he asked, 'you're going to Nairn?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Can I come? Please?'

Now, let me make this clear; I deplore any lazy stereotyping of my fellow human beings. But how else can I describe Jason? He wears little round glasses, is tall and thin and has spots. He has the complete boxset of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Deep Space Nine. He collects Star Wars figurines. Much of his spare time (and too much of his work time) is spent on conspiracy theory web forums. As a result, he believes that JFK was shot by small, human-like creatures from another dimension that the authorities Don't Want Us To Know About. Jason doesn't have a girlfriend.

'Why are you so keen to go to Nairn?'

'The NP, of course?'

'The NP?'

'The NP. The Nairn Parallelogram. It's, like, an area with a high concentration of UFO sightings. It's so cool.'

I sighed. Still, there seemed no harm in giving him some career development. Sally disliked going too far out of London, anyway, and she was happy to give Jason some basic tuition with one of the office cameras, showing him how to take match action pictures and portraits of fresh, hot, steaming pies.

The journey north was long and we had to change at Edinburgh and Perth before dumping our stuff at a hotel in

## THE NP

STORY BY DAVID McVEY



Inverness. On the morning of match day we boarded a train for Nairn. At the end of the short run, we stepped out on to the platform and I hailed a rail employee who was standing nearby, gazing up in a peculiar manner at the sky. 'Excuse me - can you direct us to the Nairn County football ground?'

He didn't look at me - didn't look away from the sky. He just stretched out his left arm and pointed to the train. It obligingly pulled away and there, beyond the far platform, was Station Park, home of Nairn County FC.

Just inside the entrance to the ground stood a middle-aged man, with small, quick eyes that darted about, wearing a trench coat. He eyed us suspiciously. We introduced ourselves as the visitors from Pastry Pleasures.

'That'll be Jessie you want,' he said, beckoning to an elderly lady who was standing pitchside, staring into the sky, 'She's the Pie Manager.'

'And you are?'

'My name's MacKenzie. I'm the Stadium Detective.'

As we shook hands with MacKenzie and Jessie, I reflected that I had been to some explosive Old Firm derbies. I'd been to the Maracana, the Nou Camp, the San Siro. I'd been to a Cumnock - Auchinleck Talbot cup tie. But I'd never heard of a Stadium Detective before.

'Why do Nairn County need a Stadium Detective?'

Jessie and MacKenzie in unison each pointed a finger to the sky

'I blame the Sputniks,' said Jessie, 'it only started after them things went up.'

Later, just before the match, I sat in a small room with MacKenzie and Jessie, sampling some splendid pies while Jason took pictures of a particularly fine specimen that had been sprinkled with chopped parsley and drizzled with a redcurrant jus. 'You see,' explained MacKenzie, 'apparently, the extra-terrestrials never used to bother with Earth. Nothing here they needed. Then when one got accidentally grounded, it ended up trying a meat pie and that changed its life. It went home to wherever it came from, told all its pals, and back they all came. Eventually the word got around that the Nairn County pies were the best. Now, they're friendly enough, these aliens, and they always pay their way, but they like to buy in bulk. We can't cope with that. Imagine a big crowd at a cup tie with Forres Mechanics, all of them hungry, and every pie already hoovered up by the extraterrestrials.'

The camera shutter clicked again as Jason immortalised the garnished pie; I could sense his disillusion. He had grown up imagining that galaxies of superintelligent beings were stalking the Earth, bent on conquest, domination of the universe and grisly experiments carried out on abducted humans. And now he knew that they were only after our pies.

'So how do you discourage them?' I asked MacKenzie.

'Yellow,' he said, mysteriously, starting on a fresh pie, 'there's something about the biology of their eyes. Yellow gives them headaches. That's why County play in yellow, and why we've painted the

stand that colour. Even the floodlight pylons are yellow - that stops the aliens landing on the pitch.'

The match was a routine 6-0 demolition of Fort William with no alien interruptions. Afterwards, MacKenzie offered to show us around the town centre where there were local shops that also offered celebrated pies. Indeed, we quaffed and photographed two very acceptable examples and were standing outside a deli that specialised in pastry delights when there was a chorus of shrieks and screams accompanied by fingers pointing to the sky. We looked up and, high above the main street, a small alien craft cleaved the darkening sky.

It was a red Austin Mini.

'It's a Mini!' I said, 'Just a car. Flying.'

'Aye, they're cunning,' said MacKenzie, 'They morph their ships into shapes that will blend in if they have to land. Awesome technology.'

Several shopkeepers had emerged into the street, and as the Mini swooped low over the buildings, they each held aloft, in a practised manoeuvre, a large sheet of stiff yellow plastic. The effect was startling; the Mini seemed to stall in mid-air and then it hurtled away out of control. It careered over the river and, with an explosive rumble of collapsing stonework, it crashed into a building and became embedded, its rear half protruding above an outdoor clothing shop.

The vehicle appeared to be undamaged - that superior technology again - but stuck fast. Two sheepish and hungry aliens emerged, looking like small hairless humans with only a single eye, mumbling about being in big trouble when they got back home.

Afterwards, the insurance assessor told the shopkeeper that there was no point in trying to remove the alien craft. 'It's stuck there and, whatever it's made of, it's holding the building up now. Just leave it as a quirky feature.' Until another spaceship - this time disguised as an ice cream van - could retrieve them several weeks later, the aliens worked as assistants in the outdoor clothing shop for wages of three pies a day each. Of course, they've gone, now, but the alien Mini remains. No, really. Go and see it if you don't believe me.\*

During the incident, Jason had snapped away with the camera like a photographer demented and days after we got back he resigned and started a new job at Encounters with Aliens magazine. His first article, 'My Escape from Death in the Nairn Parallelogram!' led their next issue.

I was in the Press Bar, alone, reflecting on an unusual week, when a hack I vaguely knew (he worked on *What Lawnmower?*) wandered in. He asked what I'd been up to, and I told him I was just back from a job in Nairn.

'Nairn?' he answered, brightly, 'Aunt of mine retired there. Sometimes go up, visit, and play a few rounds.' He thought for a while before adding, 'Nice place. Quiet.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'Quiet place.' ■



# Sgrìobhadh ùr Iain S. Mac A' Phearsain agus Liam Alasdair Crouse

## seann chleòc

IAIN S. MAC A' PHEARSAIN

's e seann chleòc  
a th' anns a' phian  
mhòir a shiùbhlas leinn  
bho chian nan cian

briogais theann a chuireas  
a' chas bheag oirnn uile  
nuair a shioftas sinn  
gu togail oirnn, lath' buidhe

's e searbh-lèine a th' ann  
gar tachdadh bho chùl  
na h-amhaich' sìos gu  
bonn na broinn', tha mi an dùil

## smodal bhreug

IAIN S. MAC A' PHEARSAIN

Pàdraig Òg –  
coltas athar fhèin  
an tac an teine  
na eanchainn threun

a' tarraing asam  
mar bu nòs  
dha Mac 'Ain Cholla  
am fear nach maireann fòs

'S an toll ga lionadh  
beag air bheag  
le faclan biorach  
is smodal bhreug

gus am brist an latha,  
a-rithist  
's a-rithist  
's a-rithist

## An t-Seann Taigh

LIAM ALASTAIR CROUSE

Tha taigh aig an teaghlach  
A thogadh nuair a dh'fhosgladh am baile  
An dèidh dhan tac a bhristeadh aig toiseach na linne.  
Taigh beag snog a th' ann,  
An cois cruic de thalamh dubh;  
Fo chaoraich an-diugh seach crodh-bainne mo sheanar-sa.  
An t-uisge ga ghoil leis an t-seann rayburn  
A dh'itheadh mòine na buana 'n-uiridh,  
'S an teas ga bheannachadh air feasgar mosach geamhraidh  
Le teine fosgail' san t-seòmar-suidhe.

Ach bha an taigh air tighinn gu ìre,  
'S gu dearbha seachad air ìre chanadh cuid.  
Bha an dampachd ann 's cha robh ann de dh'insulation a chumadh am blàths a-staigh.

Chuir sinn air falbh a dh'iarraidh grant bhon riaghaltas,  
Ach bha a bheachd fhèin aca air dè bha còir againn dèanamh;  
Bha an taigh cho aosta, cho sean-fhasanta,  
's nach robh sgàinean air nochdadh sna bunaitean?

Co-dhiù thuirt iad, bha sgeama ann son taighean ùra snasail  
A thogail sa bhaile-mhòr.

Thug iad fiathachadh dhuinn a dhol a choimhead orra –  
Na flataichean de mheatailt ghleasach  
'S gun am peant fiù 's air tiormachadh;  
Heat recovery na bhroinn – 's cha bhiodh guth air an dampachd!

Cha bhiodh romhainn ach an t-imprig.

Ach, a m' eudail, nach sinne bhiodh ag ionndrainn ùtraid a' mhachaire,  
'S fàileadh na mòine,  
'S blàths craosach an teine  
An dubhar na dùdlachd.

## An Geansaidh Èirisgeach

LIAM ALASTAIR CROUSE

Bha i siud a' sgrìobhadh duan dhomh –  
duanag gaol.  
Na suidhe gun a bheagan gluasaid  
Socair is suaimhneach, a' call a suim anns na snàithleanan,  
Ach a làmh a bha sìor-obrachadh,  
's a h-eanchainn gheur aig làn a neirt 's a h-innleachdais,  
A' cumadh 's a' dealbhachadh  
A' beartachadh na lìn a ghlacadh,  
'S an acair a stèidheadh,  
Aig cala le 'staidhre,  
Crosgag cuilidh Moire gu h-iseal,  
Is craobh-beatha an teis-meadhan ar saoghail.

Seadh, bha i ri bàrdachd an siud  
Ann an cànan a dh'ionnsaich i  
Aig clasaichean oidhche am measg nam ban Uibhisteach,  
Gach aon a' toirt comhairle bheag dhi  
Air geasan na h-obrach.  
Gach aon lùb is toinneamh mìn,  
Gach aon sreath is sreang –  
Nan ròpannan maotha maiseach  
Cho mìn ri sìoda 's cho geal ri badan fraoich,  
A dhèanadh mo chlàmhadh  
Ri cala.

Eadar mallachd a' gheansaidh 's a chuid gheasan,  
Bhithinn an siudach gu suthainn sìor,  
Air m' acrachadh aig acarsaid  
Fo cheangal na habhsair blàth cofhurtachd  
Gam chumail o dhoimhneachd mara

# HER KIND

STORY BY ANNE ELIZABETH EDWARDS



AT DUSK, THERE was a large group of villagers gathered at the bridge to her crannog. They waited quietly rather than shouting traditional greetings. Through the woven willow screen, Huna peered at them; against the fading light recognition of individuals was uncertain. It was only as the group parted to allow one to come forward that she realised Elder Watten was there. He carried a long staff high in his left hand across his chest. This was a serious delegation indeed. She became conscious of all her bodies betrayal of nervous tension; clenched fists, hunched stance, bitten lip and racing heart. This would show weakness, she must contrive to appear bold, brazen this out. Huna had learned the hard way that pleading or bargaining achieved nothing.

Earlier she had been using a pot of smouldering sage for cleansing, the therapeutic smell filled the air. The ash was smudged on the infant's forehead and on the mothers. They lay together on a raised wooden pallet filled with fresh straw. It was likely the burning of the soiled straw bedding had provoked the villagers into action. Why had she not waited till nightfall when an outside fire would be less noticeable among all the other rubbish fires? Expediency. There was always the worry that the blood-stained bedding would attract bad spirits. Jealous of mother and baby they might bring sickness and steal the new-born soul away, take the mother down to the spirit world.

Mey had been brought to her only when other actions had failed. The tumultuous journey of her labour had lasted three days already. Blood and water and slime had come. Then the bucking and stretching of heat. Mothers had walked her through the wombs rushes and the twists in her back. She had clutched on a knotted rope thrown over a beam. Squatted over warmed oil. A barrel had been rolled in and she had sat inside it, doused by water and milk. All this Mey had endured. The charms she clutched imprinted on her hands as her teeth clenched on wet rags.

Later her journey seemed over before reaching its destination. Grey and silent, Mey had lain alone at the back of her family house. Her mother's mother laid her out in the attitude of a child, head bowed to chest, knees bent. A red blanket was placed over her, there was no expectation that she would live. The women sat around the fire, exchanging stories, what trials in travail. What anecdotes of near death! This one considered at the brink then recovered. That one all but extinguished then revival. Joy at being met again at the hearth by those who had been at the threshold between earth and sky.

Huna had watched and waited. They would not always come to her in time. Sometimes they would wait and wait and not consult. Then when there was no hope have her come and do her business and when it failed, something within them was satisfied. They had done

everything they could, *why they had even consulted Huna*, but it was all to no avail. All was lost.

She would be shunned. All the small steps towards acceptance would be rescinded. Eyes averted when walking past her. Children pulled close when she came into the common grazing. More time spent alone. Fishing at the back of her crannog where none could see her. Collecting fodder when the others had gone. No-one would mix with Her Kind.

Then in time a maid would come in the night. sometimes alone, sometimes with a mother. The maid would be fearful and tearful. Some tale of betrayal. Huna would barely listen. Same tales her mothers had been told. She would brew ergot, add something sweet to ensure it was drunk to the last grains. Say prayers over it, ask forgiveness. Before the maid drank it, Huna would ask questions about quickening, clutch the maid's

belly to ensure an answer. Watch for a sly look between women. If she didn't like what she heard then she spilled the tea and brewed something else. Something to loosen the bowel, it would be a pale imitator of what should have been. Thus, the spell would fail but Huna would have a clear conscience.

It was Dawn light when they brought Mey to her; as the cock crowed and the kids bleated for their mothers. Huna had prepared a bed in anticipation; the honeyed beer she had kept all night was in a pot warmed by hot stones. Using a rag wetted with the mixture she put it between Mey's lips; in a moment, she was sucking greedily. She gave this duty to one of the mothers who crouched watching her; then wordlessly she felt the belly under the blanket. The baby lay against the mothers back like two spoons in a drawer. That was the reason known for the delay but not the solution obtained. She rubbed oil on her left hand

and touched within the sanctum uttering the guidance prayer. The womb door was opened so a good omen. With one hand on the belly and one hand on the infants head she pushed the head away from the opening then deftly turned the skull Earthwise.

The women crowded round, sensing a change. They looked at Huna with wide open eyes, fighting fatigue. Their breath smelled of sour milk. She had them kneel and support Mey, straightening her back in a squat with wide knees.

If this was to work, she must bring back the labour pains but with a ferocity that if she had miscalculated the angle of the infant skull, would break both infant and mother.

Prayerfully she placed drops of ergot brew into the honeyed beer. There were so many variables. The strength of the brew was difficult to calculate and each grain would as nature dictated have its own level of potency. The delivery of the draught was variable as to how Mey would consume it, all or nothing. And then would her body react as it should or would it have a quarrelsome spirit and reject the liquor.

Mey awoke from her trance with a shudder and a forlorn groan as of a cow stuck in a bog. Her mothers shushed and soothed. Huna gave one attendant a compress to hold steaming to Mey's lower back. Quietness. The fire cracked and spat with a sappy green log. Impatience was the enemy here. The temptation to give more brew, before the efficacy of the dose had been proved. In recognition of this Huna took time over placing reed stocks and other wetland herbage over the hearth stones. As they dried, she flicked them into the flames, they burned with greens and blues releasing queer scents. Mey stirred again. A groan of strain and effort came from her then a soft pop and sharp stink as her bowels loosened. Now there was a fullness for all to see. The ready pouting of her body. The outline of the baby's head could be traced within the mother. Huna slapped back the hand of a mother that reached to touch. Well intended though her action might be it would cause the pouting to be drawn back. Another groan and the head appeared. Elongated skull bruised where it had sat against the portal. The infant face cleared. The baby turned to look at its mother's thigh. Patience again. a pause. Then palms pressed against the infant's ears Huna eased one shoulder then the other negotiating the mother's bones with long practice.

There was no cry.

The infant body flopped grey with blue limbs. She quickly tied and snipped the cord. No time for the severing ritual—would that have repercussions later? Huna missed her own mother now; times past they would have split their duties one to the infant one to the mother. She looked around the group of women. Who could she trust to follow her instructions? Who was humble enough to act without argument?

## Uighurs

RICHARD MYERS

We are a dry people  
beyond the Taklamakan.  
Winds from every airt squeeze out,  
freeze out, the Earth's water before  
they lift dust and swirl smoke  
around the old men sharing coffee.

East lie desert and mountains  
and godless people who jostle  
for space in smoggy cities  
that spread faster  
than heaps of dry sand  
and demand that all must speak  
alike lest jostle turn to  
turbulence.

We, young and old, man and woman,  
are strong in our opinions  
and worship a single god,  
a desert god.

As the East overspills  
like a mountain belching magma,  
they crush and burn the old life,  
re-educate in camps cramped as cities.

Who needs, we ask, to learn the ways  
of God and Nature?



One young woman, barely thirteen, locked eyes with her. Her light eyes bright in contrast to the exhausted sisters.

'Skirza, take the infant. Rub dry with the blanket like you would a lamb. Use the reeds to suck snot from the nose.' Skirza was the weaver's daughter. She had nimble fingers.

Huna must concentrate on Mey. If she was to live. Her right hand on the arch, her left she used to bunch the chord and draw down towards the earth then up towards the sky. She felt the bulk released. The mass gathered together in a bowl. She could inspect it later. See what omens were there, why this journey had taken this route.

Now there was great danger for Mey. The body and soul could so easily separate at this time. One to earth and one to sky. Huna felt the womb bulk, drawing in to itself. Tightening hardening, under her massage. Briefly aware of Skirza's activity, she noted the blush of life on the infant's

pale face, still no cry though, that meant the blush could fade away. She pummelled the womb into shape, cursing its laxity. She spoke harshly to it commanding it to stay firm using words from the old tongue. The supporters lay Mey on her back on the wool sack, raising her briefly as they replaced the soiled bedding.

Huna sat close beside her charge. Hand resting on her belly, ready to intervene if the womb softened. Skirza brought the infant close to her.

'I've sooked out the nose. I've rubbed the body. There's breath there but very quiet.' Skirza looked from Huna back to the infant, waiting for more instruction.

'The baby is at the threshold. We must call the wee one's soul in. Promise good milk and warmth. Clean rags and warm oil rubs. Always to be in someone's arms.'

Skirza nodded. 'We need an inviting name.'

Two women came forward. Mey's mother and Aunt. 'Lyth' the mother said.

It's a name in our line and all called it have lived long.

Huna called the name Lyth, flicking the baby's feet with her still bloodied hands.

Lyth cried out at the discomfort. The lurking spirits that had filled the room fled out the door. All the women felt their malevolent presence depart. The air sweetened.

Slowly the women excused themselves. They had the days chores to see to. They might catch sleep in the afternoon. No chance of that for Huna, crouching vigilant over Mey and Lyth. Skirza showed no sign of departing. She fussed about the room tiding and sorting and folding. Glancing often at mother and child. Perhaps this was the apprentice she had prayed for?

Now as she peered through the reed screen watching those gathered Huna knew by bitter experience that success does not always bring reward. It can

bring out jealousies and long nursed wrath. Elder Watten and his supporters; which way would the staff fall? Would she be paraded stripped through the village, cursed by mouth and hand to be purged by fire at the forest edge?

The old man took the stout staff he was carrying and stamped it down at the threshold to Huna's crannog. Keiss the rope maker fastened it to the bridge rail. Nybster the Orator began a tale of tribute and gratitude. Long on sentiment and short on detail he rambled along merrily for a few stanzas till the light faded altogether and those gathered retired to their own firesides.

Huna and Skirza inspected the staff. The top was carved into a fat bellied woman. An adult sized baby came from her so that the figure appeared to have two heads. Thrumster the wood carver had got one thing exactly right, both mouths were wide open. ■

“HOW LONG HAS she been here?” Jack asked, looking along the tow path towards the bridge, where three narrowboats were moored.

“Hard to say for sure,” replied the pathologist, looking up at him from where she crouched beside the body.

“Hazard a guess, Liz, go on, just for me,” Jack said, turning his jacket collar up against the chill and running a hand through his thick grey hair.

“Three, maybe four days. But don't quote me on that. It's always more difficult to tell time of death when they've been in the water.”

“Cause of death?” Jack asked, feeling in his pocket and fishing out his phone.

“Now you're just playing silly buggers,” Liz straightened, smiling. They had worked together for eight years now and she knew Jack's impatience well. “I'll tell you after I've done the post mortem.”

“Ok, see you later,” Jack said, tapping a number into his phone.

“Louise? I need you to check out the owners of three canal boats for me. Yes, Canal boats. They're “Peggy”, “Mary-Jane” and “Anna-Louise”. Yes, the last two are hyphenated. Does that matter? Ok, thanks.”

Jack started walking back along the tow path to where he had parked the blue Mondeo by the old furniture warehouse.

“What do we know about her?” asked Jack, opening the driver's door and sliding into the seat. He slotted his phone in the holder and switched to hands free.

“She's Gail Munro, twenty-three years old, reported missing by her boyfriend last week,” Louise replied.

“How do we know that?”

“From the call log at the station.”

“Yes, yes, but how do we know that it's her?”

“Liz said there was a driving licence in the back pocket of her jeans.”

## VALENTINE

STORY BY JENNIFER WATSON



“OK. Next of kin?”

“Don't know that yet. I'm on it.”

“Right, I'll be back in about half an hour. I need to go somewhere on the way.”

He drove in silence through the gathering darkness. It had started drizzling. Streetlights came on as the car wove its way through the empty streets, up the hill at the back of the town to the graveyard. Jack parked the car and got out. He shut the car door quietly, went to the boot and took out a bunch of yellow roses. He walked quickly, hands dug deep into his pockets, the blooms tucked down the front of his donkey jacket. The cellophane crinkled as he walked. Approaching the far corner of the graveyard, his pace slowed and then stopped. The gravestone was still shiny and new-looking. Dark grey granite with flecks of silver and blue. Like her eyes. He read the inscription.

“Anna Jane Hudson. Dearly beloved. Gone too soon. 10/8/92 – 14/2/16”

He stood for a moment, head bowed, still. He leaned forward, kissed his finger tips and placed them on the carved-out name. Slid them across each letter, slowly, gently. He pulled the flowers out from his jacket and laid them on the ground, wishing he'd brought a vase. But they would last a while in this February chill. There were still patches of snow on the grass, etchings of ice on the dried-out puddles.

He walked more slowly back towards the car, reading the inscriptions. And the ages. Some twice his age, some half. Infants born a hundred years ago who never made it into childhood. Never made it onto their feet, let alone out into the world. “Isabella MacArthur, 97 years, dearly beloved Mum, grandma and great grandmother.” Anna could have been all those things.

Jack slammed the car door shut. He sighed deeply, ran a hand down over his forehead and rested it over his eyes. He turned on the radio. “Bye Bye Baby” came on, the volume too loud. He pressed the knob again quickly to kill it.

Back at the station, he settled at his desk, carryout coffee to hand. Over in the corner, someone was eating fish and chips. The smell wafted across the office, the tang of vinegar making Jack's mouth water.

“Let's call it a night, Louise. I'm starving and we can't do much more until the PM is in from Liz.” He took his jacket from the back of his chair and made his way to the door.

“Jack? You might want to look at this. It's just in from Liz...” Louise called, looking up from her screen.

He joined her. Looked at the screen. Tapped his fingers on the desk.

“Right, come with me. We're going to visit the boyfriend.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“I thought you were starving?”

“Not any more I'm not.”

Jamie hadn't been keen to let them in. The sitting room was strewn with empty beer cans, plastic carryout trays and pizza boxes. A clothes rack stood in the corner by the window. Black tights and purple knickers hung beside greying tee-shirts. The ashtray on the coffee table had been recently emptied. Five dirty mugs sat on the floor, at the corner of the black leather sofa.

“I'd make you some tea, but there's no milk,” Jamie said.

“We're not wanting tea. We'd just like to ask you a few questions.”

“I answered loads of questions before. Have you found Gail? Is she ok?”

“We've found Gail, yes. I'm afraid she is not ok, no. She's dead.”

“What? But how? Where did you find her? What happened?”

“We're hoping you might be able to help us with that, Jamie. Where were you on the night Gail went missing? Last Thursday. 14th February. Valentine's Day?”

“I was here. With Gail. We were going to go out...”

“And did you? Go out?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because we argued.”

“What did you argue about, Jamie?”

“It was nothing, just a silly misunderstanding...”

“Was it to do with her seeing someone else, perhaps?”

“No! She wasn't, she wouldn't... No!”

“Or was it that you didn't want to hear what she was telling you? Just like you didn't want to hear what Anna told you two years ago? I'll ask you again, Jamie, where were you that evening between 10pm and midnight?” asked Jack, leaning forward, hands clasped, knuckles white. ■

# Poetry

## **Shark**

SAMUEL TONGUE

Anti-cancer books are blooming all over the house  
like those massive moon jellyfish blooms that block  
water filtration systems in nuclear power plants:  
*Eat to Beat...How to Live with...How to Survive...How to Swim against the Tide* –  
and you're telling me about the NHS massage session you've just had,  
where the lass asked you to close your eyes and imagine a warm  
sunny beach and you're walking into the warm, clear water,  
each step taking you in, deeper and deeper, warm around your ankles now,  
your legs, your thighs, you're up to your waist, sun on your back, deeper and deeper –  
and I want to scream, "Shark! Shark! Look out! Shark! Get out! Get out! GET OUT!"

## **Companion Species**

SAMUEL TONGUE

The field is an ocean of cotton-sedge. Magpies backcomb the sows' bristlebacks, picking out lice with pinpeck precision. All bib and tucker, all captain's table, they shrug off sorrow and joy, girls and boys, secrets and kisses. Keep the silver and gold, keep the wishes.

One stands straight as a mast, then punches right through the pigskin:

< Oh! Hot unction of rich rose-red gush, life's delicious stream and salvation! >

and now they're laughing in their fifty-a-day throats –

< Oh! Unsealed seams of uncoagulated wonder, life's red-smiling sun trap! >

They stilt-strut across the sows' pink decks, thick elephant-boats tacking in the wet field.

The pigs roll pebbles in their boot-puncture mouths, lining their bellies with ballast.

Rattle-bags wrapped in sausage-skins, they understand there is a price to pay

for such glossy parliaments. They must sacrifice a little blood in this social contract.

But there is space for rebellion. Wilfully pig-headed, weighed down in the pitching mud, they wallow titanically. Self-scuttled.

The magpies bolt with clean cuffs and diamond-cut tails. The new sun burns them purple. They fill the lifeboat trees heavy and wait.

## **Not a mountain**

ANNA FLEMING

I am not a mountain

I am lichen and stone,  
water and ice, eagles and  
sphagnum; hares, birch,  
ptarmigan, lynx.

Without salmon  
and deer, rowan and heather;  
plover, wolf, wind,  
pine

I am not a mountain.

Tall and jagged, vast and wild,  
I may look like a mountain –

but my skin is stretched thin

flanks turn  
deathly green.

You who feast on simplicity  
worship a shadow

I am not a mountain

Come gorge on our loss.

## **Unexpected Change**

JANIS CLARK

Inside the barn  
a horse waits for the crunch of boots  
on snowy cobbles,  
listens for the scrape  
of metal doors across runners,  
grown stiff with rust and time.

Breath freezes in still air.  
Ice has covered the water buckets  
and the lights are still off in the farmhouse.  
The horse is expectant, mindful of routine  
that hasn't changed for fifteen years  
but will today.

## **Lost**

CATRIONA MCNEILL COURTIER

I remember Port Mor,  
the reddish brown cattle among the rocks,  
the sun on the water,  
the sea lice, sharp as glass,  
raising spots of bright blood on my ankles.

After darkness fell  
we would sit by the fire,  
while the great light on Du Hirteach,  
patrolled the night waves to the west,

## **Morning has broken**

SAMUEL TONGUE

Unsleeping, I hear the morning chorus start  
with what could be sparrow or chaffinch  
cleaning the bedroom window with a squeegee,  
squealing through last night's rain streaks, shining  
it off with its beak. You, my snoring beauty,  
sleep on, regular as an idling tractor.  
Morning has broken, but you'll help haul it  
out of its muddy ditch and set it right. Together,  
we'll give it a push, get it going, sputtering  
like a kettle, then watch it warm into a buttery day.

and I would beg my father,  
"Tell me a story  
of when you were a boy  
on Colonsay."

He told me, once,  
that the islanders,  
out at sea,  
fishing for saithe or lobsters,  
could sense where the island was,  
when mist came down,  
and make safely for the shore.

But strangers, without a compass,  
could row out to sea  
and when the mist lifted  
find themselves lost  
On a vast, featureless ocean.

Now it is the Colbhasach  
who have rowed away from the island,  
into the sea of the past,  
Taking with them their language and their stories.

I am adrift.

And strangers sit by the hearth.

WE'VE BEEN INVITED to a party, you said, by Ann Marie, do you want to go? It's her fortieth, she wants us both to come. I wasn't sure. We'd only recently split up. Should we be going out together? It might confuse people. Come on, you said, so I said okay.

It's in this hall in the country, at Cawdor, you told me. But there will be a bus to take us there. It goes from some hotel in town. I said I'd meet you there, once you could remember the name of the hotel. You were looking forward to it. I was too, although I managed to feel my usual degree of anxiety.

On the night, you wore that lovely dress patterned with red roses. I said you looked great, and that was the truth. You said I looked smart, and that I'd obviously made an effort. I had.

We had a drink at the hotel and chatted to some friends of Ann Marie. Everybody seemed to know her, which, I guess they would. We all said what a laugh she was, and what a trooper. Then a double-decker bus drew up. We took our seats on the top deck and soon had plastic goblets of bubbly fizz in our hands. As the bus rocked about, drinking it wasn't easy, but we persevered. I could get used to this, you said. You seemed to be in the party mood.

We arrived at the hall, me feeling slightly seedy and you positively radiating. You said you had ants in your pants and you had to dance. I told you I had to sing Ann Marie's song first. It wasn't the best song or the finest performance in the world, but Ann Marie took it in the right spirit. You were fine, you told me,

## ANN MARIE'S PARTY

STORY BY MARTIN RUSSELL



rhyiming Ann Marie with bain-marie was brilliant.

You were having a blast. You hit the whiskey and kept dragging me onto the dance floor for Jive Bunny jiving, Gay-Gordoning, and eightsome-reeling. My usual aversion to dancing had been overrun. You seemed so happy and carefree, but, armed with foreknowledge, I was wondering how long this could last.

*I could get used to this, you said. You seemed to be in the party mood.*

I'm feeling sick, you said, where's the toilet? I waited while you chundered. I want to go home now, you said. I told you I'd ring for a taxi. Wait, you said, walk with me outside. I put my arm round

your shoulder while we breathed in the pollen scented country air, and felt as close to you as I have ever felt. I'm okay now, you said, let's get our coats.

The two of us in the back of the taxi somehow reminded me of the two of us in our powder blue wedding Roller, when the driver insisted on having the football results on the radio. He got the news he had been dreading; Kilmarnock had been relegated. This man just had

the two way radio on with crackling Invernessian voices: 'Party of four at Mr G's going to Kinmylies.' There were at least three Christmas tree shaped air fresheners hanging from his rear view mirror. I was

hoping the acrid scent didn't make you feel sick again. Past talking, you leaned on my shoulder and closed your eyes.

When we reached what used to be our bedroom, you'd gone all unarticulated like a rag doll. I got you to stand with your arms in the air while I unbuttoned your dress. You flopped onto the bed and I wondered what to do. After wondering, I got into the bed beside you, to protect you against the demons of the night, and to nurse you if you needed nursing.

I woke at some point in the wee small hours, and heard you making soft noises. I sensed you were dreaming about fairies and elves. I felt your breath against my skin, and thought; we've been here before, but why are we here now? The bed, you, the room; everything was so familiar.

In the morning, I wondered how far this might go, but settled for a wee cuddle. I made some tea and brought you a glass of water and a Panadol. It was strange being there in the house with no children. They'd be back around ten, you said. I felt a bit guilty about being there, and said I'd need to be making tracks. Thanks for looking after me, you said.

Afterwards I wondered what had happened. It seemed that you had been the damsel in the rose print dress, and I had been your knight in tarnished armour. A while later you asked me if I thought that night might have been the start of something. I said I thought that it was neither the start nor the finish, but more like a kind of Christmas truce in our little war of attrition. Like singing 'Silent Night,' and playing thirty-two a side football in no man's land. You just looked puzzled. ■

THE SUN SEARS the flesh on his back. It is mid-day. The flowers droop, aching for water, but Gary will not be beaten. The grass is turning to rust, coarse and prickly under foot and he does not want his daughter to jab her bare feet. His fingers ruffle the back of his closely shaven hair. He looks at the spiky lawn and sighs. Sweat is clinging to the back of his neck. The tops of his shoulders are beginning to redden. He stops the lawnmower and marches across the garden.

"Millie, let's get something to drink." The little girl is filling a cracked bucket with sand and looks up at him with a look of disdain.

"I'm playing, Daddy."

"I know, but it's hot. Let's get a drink and then you can play after."

"I don't want to."

"I'm going in then and I'll bring you some water. Did you put some cream on your shoulders?"

"Yes!"

In the kitchen, he pours himself water from the jug and pulls out a chair from the wooden table scraping the leg along the tiled floor. The garden is beginning to consume him. Every day he winces at the dry soil and the gladioli that refuse

to budge from it. What would Emily be thinking? Sometimes when he's out there he can sense her beside him, prodding him on. Watching Millie. How would she ever grow without a mother? He sighs and hauls himself up from the chair. He can't leave the garden to abandonment.

Outside the sun beats down. He strides over to the sand pit. The bucket is upside down and his daughter is gone. He shouts "Millie!" as loud as he can but the garden remains silent. He starts to scour under the shrubs at the side of the house. He shouts again. Louder. Silence envelops him. He hunts in the old cupboard at the back of the shed and behind the bikes in the garage, yelling in each spot. He searches in the dirty outhouse buildings and down the lane. He can hardly breathe.

He turns and starts to walk back the way he came. He doesn't know why. It is an action without thought. His feet no

longer belong to his body. Everything is disconnected. It occurs to him that he is drenched in sweat and oddly the heat is no longer an enemy.

He passes a few cottages, shouting "Millie!" though his voice is getting hoarse. The sweat drips from his forehead. The sun continues to beat down but the rage in it has died.

As he walks past the Moir's house, a man bent over in the garden, suddenly springs up and waves. He shouts a greeting then continues to tend to his border of pansies. Gary is already on his way. He neither sees Rob Moir or acknowledges him. He thinks he will have to turn back and fetch the car. He can cover more ground that way. Realising it's the most positive thought he's had, he heads back, almost at a sprint. Trees arch themselves overhead and cars start to pass him.

A hand emerges from a passenger

window in a passing vehicle. For a minute he swears he has heard Emily's voice. That high-pitched ring of warmth. It stops him. He stands in the road and surveys the landscape, 360 degrees of countryside. His mind flits. He is at the side of a road. A ford fiesta is being towed on to the back of a recovery vehicle: its front a mashed-up bonnet with holes where the headlights had been. A child seat just visible. They'd been on their way back from the garden centre, grains of sand still hidden in the creases of the back cushions.

He shakes himself. He has to get back to the house in case she's there. The sun begins to weaken. He continues to shout her name as loudly as he can.

He expects her to be in the garden when he reaches the driveway. He imagines her saying "daddy, I was bored so I went on an adventure but I'm back now" but she isn't there. He looks closer now and realises there isn't a sandpit.

The front door is slightly open and he walks in as though he has never lived in his own house. On the mantelpiece, he reaches for a piece of card that is propped up by a clock which has stopped. In the middle of the card is a photo of a woman and child. One word written in script font at the top: Remembered. ■

**The Amber Seeker**

Mandy Haggith

Saraband (2019)

REVIEW BY HELEN SEDGWICK

The *Amber Seeker* is the second novel in Mandy Haggith's remarkable *Stone Stories* trilogy, set in Iron Age Britain and Northern Europe in 320 BC. The first instalment, *The Walrus Mutterer*, introduced Rian, a young woman living in the Scottish Highlands who is enslaved and taken to sea by her brutal captor, Ussa, and Ussa's unlikely traveling companion, Pytheas of Massalia. *The Amber Seeker* changes point of view to show us these events, along with what happened before and after, as they appear to Pytheas – a real historical figure and Greek explorer who comes to life in this deeply convincing portrait of a complex, flawed, infuriating, fascinating man.

Pytheas's story begins before he meets Rian – a meeting that will have lifelong consequences for them both – at a time when he has left his home in Massalia (modern day Marseille) to journey north in search of the sources of tin, amber and northern ivory. He describes himself as seeking knowledge above all else, though this, and many other things besides, highlights the extent to which he is unreliable as our narrator. He is prone to make excuses for himself, but he also meets people from new cultures with an open mind and a genuine desire to learn what they might have to teach him, and in this way he is a thoughtful guide as he leads us through Iron Age Britain and beyond.

In one particularly striking scene he travels underground to a cave where tin is mined, capturing magnificently the darkness, claustrophobia and fear of being trapped under the earth. Later, having travelled east across northern Europe and found himself abandoned and captive, there's a scene I found similarly terrifying, this time set in the open air, the cave's darkness replaced by the violence human beings are capable of.

The story feels immaculately researched, though the lightness of touch ensures the events and characters are never weighed down with detail. One of the joys of reading was coming across snippets of information about the characters we met in *The Walrus Mutterer* and their Iron Age world. Haggith has written two books that succeed in feeling totally different but inescapably intertwined, and it has left me eagerly anticipating the third in the trilogy.

But what I keep coming back to is the character of Pytheas himself; the way at times I felt a furious disgust towards him while at others a deep sympathy, even an uncomfortable kinship. His interest in science, in learning, is so all consuming he sometimes forgets about the human beings around him. His journey is undoubtedly brave but his behaviour can

be cowardly. He listens to other people and always tries to avoid violence, yet he is capable of treating slaves and women as though they are less than human. This he excuses with the knowledge that other men would have done the same. It would be easy, then, to dismiss him as a man of his time, but for the fact that he was so extraordinary for his time. In taking what he wants with such arrogance he perhaps behaves like other men of his time, but he also has the ability to see – tragically too late – how profoundly wrong it was to do so. His is the story of an explorer who does the unforgivable, but deep within it is a powerfully feminist core. ■

**Precious Vanishings**

**Down to the Sea**

Sue Lawrence

Contraband (2018)

**Runaway**

Claire MacLeary

Contraband (2019)

REVIEW BY VALERIE BEATTIE

Two recent Contraband publications – Sue Lawrence's novel *Down To The Sea* and Claire MacLeary's *Runaway* – aim to thrill readers with a focus on, respectively, a modern-day gothic tale of treachery and Aberdeen's answer to Cagney and Lacey.

*Down To The Sea's* cover page précis – “When secrets from the past won't stay hidden” – signals its focus on unsettling information waiting in the wings, and Lawrence follows through with secrets aplenty linked to guarded and secluded homes and lives, and an ill-gotten, highly valuable diamond. A key structural feature of the novel is the use of the emotions of fear and terror intrinsic to dark revelations, and its gothic dynamic is heralded by the Prologue's setting in a timeless, placeless world of ghostly body parts operating with murderous intent. Deferring the Prologue's action by a knock on the door (one senses echoes of *Macbeth* and De La Mere's *The Traveller*), Lawrence postpones readers' access to the fate and identity of both the slight figure in the bed and the holder of the blade as we are transported to 1981. Here, a young couple's purchase of an old mansion in Newhaven for the purpose of transforming it into a care home ignites a series of coincidences, tensions and historical synergies between Wardie House and Wardie House Lodge in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Already laden with enough “past” of their own, the irony of taking on so much of it in relation to Wardie House and its prospective inhabitants is lost on Rona and Craig. Moreover, their preoccupations and lack of time enable the mysterious Martha to inveigle her way into their lives and home with sinister repercussions. As Lawrence positions the 19th and 20th century narratives sequentially, readers' comprehension

of the full import of events in an old poorhouse and – to borrow Freud – the return of the repressed, is managed with suspenseful precision as the novel moves through the uncanny ebb and flow of history's erosion into the present.

Lawrence's character construction is detailed and sympathetic in relation to her key 19th century characters: the young, innocent, kindly Jessie, labelled a “Winzie” and said to bring a curse with her; Effie, traumatised by the death of her baby; and Bella, Effie's brutal sister, whose determination to find the diamond taints all around her. Similarly in the 20th century, the depiction of Rona and Craig's relationship grows in time with each challenge they face, and the contrast between their dearth of historical information and the care home's inhabitants' interest in it brings them closer together, nourishing an atmosphere of mutual help and understanding in Wardie House.

The denouement is deftly managed, and justice plays its part in surprising ways. Overall, *Down To The Sea* is a gripping tale that brings its historical strands together with satisfying narrative twists and turns right to the end.

Claire MacLeary's *Runaway* focuses on the apparently motiveless disappearance of a wife and mother. Whilst given a name – Debbie Milne – her invisibility as an individual extends through her roles as wife and mother to her perplexing disappearance. Labelled a “misper”, MacLeary's representation of the case serves in part as a vehicle to highlight police prejudice and incompetence, with Debbie's disappearance seeming more an inconvenience than a tragedy.

Enter “Big” Wilma Harcus and Maggie Laird, neighbours, wives and co-partners in a failing detective agency. *Runaway* is MacLeary's third novel featuring the Harcus and Laird pairing, and the focus on the challenges and complexities of the women's lives along with their (sometimes dubious) talent for crime-solving has affinities with the spirit of the iconic Cagney and Lacey television series of the 1980s. Just as its shining light was the way the 14th Precinct in Manhattan was a vehicle for the show's focus on the women themselves, *Runaway's* strength resides in its characterisation of Maggie and Wilma battling life in Aberdeen during the major downturn in the oil industry whilst searching for the ghostly Debbie. As they extend their search, Aberdeen's bleakness is heightened by the pair's discovery of people trafficking and money laundering. However, rather than allow such discoveries to phase or deter them, they meet increasing dangers head on, remaining believable as characters all the while. The novel is convincing in its depiction of the underbelly of modern cities, particularly during times of lean

economic productivity, and the search for Debbie is action-packed and believable.

*Runaway's* depiction of the Milne marriage and its consequences – perfect from the outside, decidedly less so as lived on a day-to-day basis in line with predominant, ideologically-sanctioned values – reveals a form of institution too difficult for some to bear. And, with Maggie and Wilma toasting their continued partnership, readers can look forward to more spirited involvements in the darker side of Scottish life determinedly driven by two independent-minded women. ■

**Rattleskin**

Martin Russell

Available from

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REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

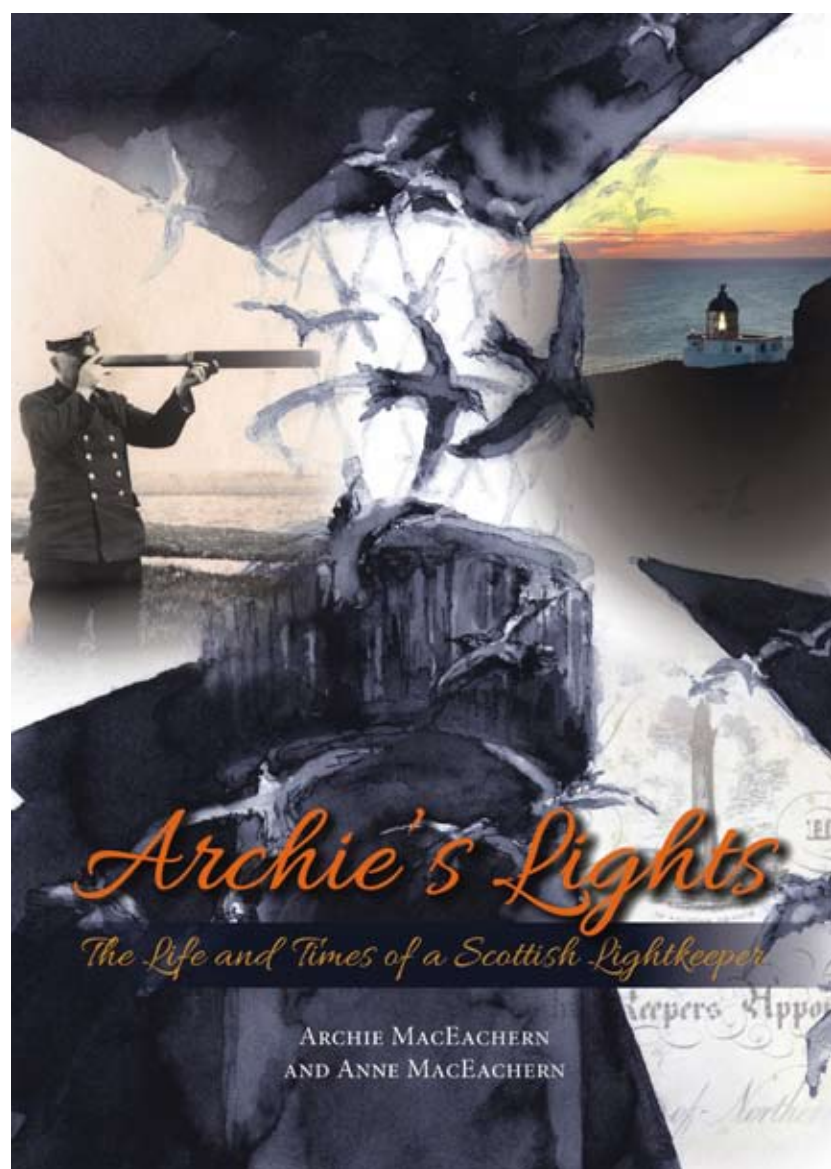
It's not easy to tell the truth about life, especially those moments when people feel truly rattled inside their own skin. And if you can tell it, it's not easy to be convincing or humble, much less funny. Russell manages all these things in his collection of stories. In addition, he does what few writers dare. In the introduction he lays his cards on the table and invites the reader to let him know what they think. All writing is about connecting with readers, and almost all writers are thrilled when a reader contacts them – yet no books to my knowledge openly solicit correspondence.

This kind of courage and willingness to be vulnerable is reflected in the stories. Some are drawn from life, others are not, all focus on the way we negotiate tricky times in life.

Poignant and understated, these are sad stories, in a good way. Overall, the thread running from the first page to the last, is one of dry humour and warmth. There is a lot of mocking, but all of it affectionate. So, black humour with heart, delivered in very short deadpan bursts. It's a bit like eating a box of Cadbury Milktray, blindfolded. You don't know what will be inside each, but they all taste very good.

Russell is a fine satirist, but his best work is heartfelt and serious. *Ann Marie's Party* follows a recently separated couple, who have not quite managed it. The narrator and his wife go to a party together, and on the surface have a good time. It's as if they are still together. She wears a lovely dress, he notes. They dance and drink and laugh. When he takes her home, she is drunk and he puts her gently to bed. But what is this phase of a marriage? Resembling a good patch, it is neither the beginning nor does it look like an ending. The tenderness seems to stem from awareness of transience. With uncanny authorial judgment, this is the single scene Russell chooses to tell the story of a whole marriage.

In *The Day the Rain Came Down*, the narrator is a child living with his mother – his sole parent. His mother looks after the



nice old Mrs Garibaldi, and they all live together in what seems a life of security, if not material ease. The story focuses on the physical details of a pivotal day in the narrator's life. His mother attempts suicide, but there is no drama in the telling of that – no exclamation marks or tears. What remains – in the descriptions of the street, the house and the narrator's impressions – is a very heightened sense of isolation and bewilderment. It is a story worth several reads. And then perhaps one more.

The fact Russell is not an established and acclaimed author seems proof that accolades are not always the inevitable result of talent. These stories deserve a wider audience and serious attention, for they bring something important to the world. Compassion. ■

### **The Shepherd and the Morning Star**

Willie Orr

Birlinn (2019)

REVIEW BY DAVID ALSTON

This is a double biography in one volume. The author's own life story (so far) is framed by that of his father, Captain 'Billy' Orr, who moved from his student

enthrallment to Dublin's Gate Theatre, the plays of J M Synge, and Celtic Revivalism to become a Unionist MP and Grand Master of the Orange Order. In a political career which ended in the disgrace of attempted bigamy, he was succeeded as MP for South Down by Enoch Powell. Willie Orr approaches with compassion and clear sightedness the challenge of coming to terms with his father's life. And there is much here of which it is important that we are reminded from time to time: lest we forget the origins of the Troubles in the systematic oppression of the Catholic population of Northern Ireland, the brutalities of the sectarian 'B Special' police force, and the first bombing campaigns organised by the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1966. His son brings a unique perspective to this part of our history and there is even a strange hopefulness in the thought that Captain Orr was not the inevitable product of his background, that he made bad choices, and that at the end he was perhaps more himself with a fishing rod than in an Orange Lodge.

Within this frame is Willie Orr's portrayal of his own life – by any standard a remarkable one. He has been among other things a shipyard electrician,

actor, stage manager, shepherd, teacher, journalist, poet, politician, husband, and father. Perhaps because he sought to escape the influence of his own father, Willie Orr's account is very much one of other influences – of individuals who shaped his life and who shaped, or tried to shape, events in Scotland. And as with his father's life story, there is much of which it is good to be reminded and perspectives which this reader valued: for example, on Tom Buchan as 'sadly underrated as a literary figure' and Orr's belief that Robin Hall and Jimmy Macgregor 'rarely get enough credit for the stimulus they gave to the Scottish folk revival'.

Orr has lived a restless life, in what he calls 'a pattern of vagrancy', and it is this which brought him into contact with so many who contributed to Scottish culture and left-wing politics of the past half century. This strength, when joined with the author's interest in so many other places and events, is also the book's weakness. Parts of it can seem a magpie collection of bright or fascinating things: an appreciation of the Hermitage in St Petersburg; opinion on Germany's failure to recognise Croatia Republic in October 1991; and, closer to home, just over a paragraph on the allegations of ritual sexual abuse in Orkney, with Orr's conclusion that he has 'no doubt about the veracity' of one child's account of abuse. These, especially the last, deserve either much more – or silence. Perhaps this is just too short book in which to deal with two fascinating lives and so many influences.

### **Archie's Lights**

By Anne MacEachern

Whittles Publishing (2019)

### **Oor Big Braw Cosmos**

By John C Brown & Rab Wilson (2019)

Luath Press

### **The Missing Lynx**

By Ross Barnett

Bloomsbury (2019)

REVIEWED BY KENNY TAYLOR

Lighthouses can fire the imagination. Beyond the beauty of their structures, there's a symbolism that shines. Light beams sweeping the darkness; stability atop raging seas and remote headlands; tales of wrecks and rescues and bravery and endurance; unsolved mysteries. Think of the Flannan Isles, where the lightkeepers vanished four days before Christmas in 1900, or Sule Skerry, with its shape-shifting seals. Then there's the allure of the link between Robert Louis Stevenson and the family that designed most of Scotland's lighthouses over more than 150 years. But that's another story.

Since 1998, when the last keepers left Fair Isle South, all of Scotland's lighthouses have been automated – controlled from afar and visited mostly by maintenance engineers. For over two centuries until then, those lights and their associated

foghorns were tended by live-in keepers; all men (though many women gave support as wives and mothers at stations where families lived). Those statistics book-end a now-vanished profession and sub-culture. So testimony from keepers can be both fascinating and historically invaluable.

*Archie's Lights* is a superb memoir of a lightkeeper's life, written from transcribed conversations between Archie MacEachern and his second wife, Anne, who compiled the book. Born into a lighthouse family in 1910, Archie's professional connection to the Northern Lighthouse Board began in the 1920s and continued through the rest of the century. So his recollections are legion, his perspective on lighthouses, their keepers and locations superb. For anyone drawn by the allure of the lights, this book is a must-read classic.

Shifting from earth lights to the shine of countless stars, 'Oor Big Braw Cosmos' is one of the year's most surprising non-fiction collaborations. In it, John Brown, Scotland's Astronomer Royal, combines with Rab Wilson, Screiver in Residence at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, to give their contrasting takes on the universe. The results are both surprising and intellectually challenging.

This is a book to use both for reference (the astronomer's summaries of many subjects, from the Big Bang to solar physics and exoplanets, are models of clarity) and sheer fun. Think of moving at one page turn from details of star clusters to a poem that describes them as 'Sequins shewn oan 'Strictly'/That blinter oan TV' and you get some of the picture. But the illustrations throughout the book are also braw – a clever mix of images and art selected from recent sources. It's a book that rewards both concentrated reading and random toe-dipping in its seas of stars and universal energies.

Back on earth, 'rewilding' is a term now much used and perhaps less-well understood, in our part of the planet. So *The Missing Lynx* by Highland-based writer, Ross Barnett, is a welcome deep dive by a scientist into the lives of now-extinct species and the future potential for reintroduction of others. Ross's specialization is the analysis and interpretation of ancient DNA. But as befits a prize-winner in the most recent Hugh Miller Writing Competition, this is no dry, academic text. There's zing in the ways he describes creatures such as sabre-toothed cats and cave hyaenas and fun – with serious purpose – in how he tackles species such as beaver.

"There is no cut-off point, no box where the spectre of human-caused extinction can be confined" he notes. So we need to find ways of avoiding such mistakes. This is a book to inform future thinking through its skilful accounts of both the distant and recent past. ■

**Skin Can Hold**

Vahni Capildeo  
Carcenet (2019)

REVIEW BY LYDIA HARRIS

*Skin Can Hold* is an encyclopedia; a portable manual for all of us bound into language. It invites us to new ways of reading, new possibilities for writing. For this reader, it has been a voyage to unfamiliar and exciting territories.

We aim to deliver a fully anachronistic incorporation experience on the brown bag service

declares the playful opening ‘The Brown Bag Service’.

‘Four Ablutions’, which immediately follows the ‘Prologue’, is a text for performance. The reader is transformed to performer as she reads. Already we are reaching beyond the page, taking on new risks and trusting ourselves to the language.

Is this a ritual of freeing or a ritual of realisation?

The poems teach us to embody words, to move into Carnival, to re-enunciate ‘Antony and Cleopatra’, re-live Spark. Capildeo gives us words with which to explore colonisation, gender, race. The world of the poems is a world of dance, travel, conversion. Her text is full of movement and we are moved by the experience of reading.

Green in judgement, she heard no screams.  
Cold in blood, she gave no scream; burnt on the water.

*Futurist Cleopatra: after ‘The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie’.*

The poems expose individual words, present us with an array of languages. *Skin Can Hold* is a book of tongues, a book of songs with actions, an invitation to write ourselves into a new world.

Ishq:love ish:halfway misunderstanding  
assent accented into ascent  
*Response for Compass: Response to Zaffar Kunial “Us”*

The collection is dedicated to Martin Carter and in memory of The Shadow, Winston McGarland Bailey. It is a carnival on the page, a calypso for the reader’s voice.

‘The Syntax Poems’, which stem from Capildeo’s admiration for Carter’s ‘I am No Soldier’ are a physical, bodily transreading. They immerse us in an imagined live performance of Carter’s poem. We participate in the call and response of the language.

there are galaxies of happiness  
(in darkness)

(in my hand’s revolving wheel)  
‘Syntax Poems’

The experience feels like an enactment of the process of reading a poem. Carter’s lines are sent back by a different route, re-expressed, entering and transforming our world. Here in the book, the texts are ours to read in any order or voice. We too experience the poems bodily. Through repetition and pause, through broken lines, we are transreaders too.

Explaining her ideas about transreading, Capildeo, in the introduction to ‘The Syntax Poems’ writes, “we concentrated on features of the language where activity happens”.

‘Shame’ also explores performance and script. The notes about the performer’s costume show us that it is Carnival or script for a concert with the Shadow. It consists of calls and response and powerful declamations. It is personal, subversive and engaging. The poem is visceral and also has the beautiful detachment of liturgy.

‘When was I ashamed?...  
‘I was not ashamed when the powerful editor-poet-translator...’

The section from ‘The End of the Poem’ voices the process of making a poem.

It tails  
off. And on. And on.

It is Biblical in tone, apocalyptic in content.

I said take the seventh word down...

It shifts into a colloquial register and back again to the ouroboros, the beginning of the poem in the end of the poem.

‘The End of the Poem’ faces us with poetry’s place in the public gaze. Does poetry withstand capitalism, colonisation? Do they withstand the gaze of poetry? Her poems show they do not.

‘Midnight Robber Monologue’ ends ‘The Blackbox Clearout’ section. It evokes the surreal world of carnival where Midnight Robber with condor wings becomes an aeroplane and is revealed as fear itself, embodies the forces of destruction and oppression with which the poems have been concerned. The tables are turned on us when we learn that this ageless robber douen cannot be bought, cannot forgive. Anger with the cracked, flawed world, the self destructive environmental, political and economic fissures, is the energy of the monologue and of the book.

When Columbus men landed holding their  
bright weapons up,

I was waiting for them in the form of dew  
and rust.  
‘Midnight Robber Monologue’

Capildeo brings together the things we have barely noticed. She makes us aware of what we hardly believe language can do, which the book shows is far more than we thought it could. ■

**Islander**

Lynn Davidson  
Shearsman (2019)

REVIEW BY LYDIA HARRIS

In Lynn Davidson’s ‘Leaving Bass Rock Gannet Colony’ the birds rise and orbit the rock as the poet takes her own flight from the place. The couplets dive with images of falling, disintegration and recreation.

blowing  
Bass Rock into feathery pieces

The poems in this collection are spare and meditative with surges of tenderness. Fathers, mothers, sons and daughters are present as part of the fabric of deep time, deep connection. Islands to mainland, north to south. Lynn Davidson makes deft use of white space. Her poems grow out of silence and return there, resonating like solemn bells. Her images are poised and arresting. ‘Standing Places’ describes uses for sticking plasters.

One for my father who is worn out  
and misses my mother.

The poems offer us a whole globe, as the poet moves between islands and between hemispheres. They offer us the exposed human heart in its many habitations. The opening poem ‘My Stair’ moves between father and daughter. The stair and the buses, close to the daughter’s home, are transformed into luminous images of loss and grief.

a lodger here where buses lightly lumber  
into the yellow depot

‘Pearls’ combines the world of the physicist with the intimate world of the human ear. The intimate world of the poet’s son’s ear. It is a beautiful metaphysical meditation on kinship and time. The pearls in the child’s ear are nestled at the heart of the collection. ■

**Uncommon Place**

Gerrie Fellows  
Shearsman (2019)

REVIEW BY JEAN LANGHORNE

In *Uncommon Place*, her fifth collection of poems, Gerrie Fellows explores the diverse landscapes of Scotland, from the Borders to the Cuillin Ridge on Skye, with fields, rivers, Botanic Gardens and mountains in between. Her main focus

is on the experience of the walker with place; how the changing nature of place is revealed at a walking pace and the interactive relationship of the poet with place.

These finely crafted poems represent layers of knowledge and experience, developed by Gerrie over years of walking in a variety of Scottish landscapes and of close observation of the natural world.

Several of them take us with her on a journey and, through her acute observational skills and vivid imagery of the natural world, she allows us to share her experience of how the land slowly unfolds at a pedestrian pace. They demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of the geology, natural history and human history of Scotland and the interplay between them. They also include many instances of enchanting moments of beauty:

“in the strings of the wind the river’s music  
peregrine’s solitary mew dragonflies  
a coupled zither  
tumble rings of gold through air”

In addition to her lucid and intelligent writing, Gerrie’s trademark as a poet is her objectivity; an effective stance from which to comment on nature-culture interaction. Often, what draws her to write about a landscape is its human presence and she frequently draws our attention to the tension between or juxtaposition of man-made structures and elements of wildness:

“the rusted fence, fallen wall  
intense green of moss and bilberry”

This collection of poems about Scotland’s hills, moors, rivers and enclosures conjures up a vivid sense of place and of season. They weave-in themes of geology, ecology and human history, expressing Gerrie’s understanding of the ecological and cultural nuances of a landscape and illustrating her deep literacy of place:

“the whole island  
done over with boulders  
clearance cairns  
fields gone to rough ground”

For me, the poems in *Uncommon Place* are simply a joy to read. I feel they demonstrate the poet’s skills of acute perception; her focussed attention producing a depth of awareness of the natural world and details of place.

As a whole, this collection beautifully expresses her preoccupation with walking as a means of bodily and sensory engagement. The poet’s relationship to place is revealed as a dynamic and interactive process; a kind of relational dialogue, integral to our perception of the environment. ■

## CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

**Helen Allison** lives in Forres. Her first poetry collection, *Tree standing small*, was published in 2018 by Clochoderick Press. Second collection in seed stage. Find her on Twitter @h\_allison\_poet

**David Alston** is a historian with a background in many different occupations, including museum curator, councillor and NHS chair (Highlands). He researches Highland Scots' involvement with slavery: [www.spanglefish.com/slavesandhighlanders/](http://www.spanglefish.com/slavesandhighlanders/) – the subject of his next book.

**Juliet Antill** lives on the Isle of Mull. Her poems have featured in *Magma*, *New Writing Scotland* and the ezine *Antiphon*.

**Tom Ashman** is a writer and musician from the Orkney Islands. He is particularly drawn to the short story form and enjoys writing about people.

**Valerie Beattie** is a *Northwords* board member and a published academic with a specialism in gothic and women's writing. She is currently working on her first novel.

**Kirsteen Bell** is a writer, poet, copywriter and crofter. She lives and works on a croft on the shore of Loch Eil in Lochaber.

**Sharon Black** is from Glasgow and lives in the Cévennes mountains in France, the subject of her fourth collection. [www.sharonblack.co.uk](http://www.sharonblack.co.uk)

**Clare O'Brien** lives in Wester Ross, writing her first novel, *Light Switch*. Recent publication includes *Mslaxia*, *Spelk* and anthologies from Hedgehog Poetry Press and The Emma Press.

**Maoilios Caimbeul** Bàrd agus sgrìobhaiche às an Eilean Sgitheanach. Chaidh leabhraichean bàrdachd leis, *Gràs / Grace*, (bho Hansel Press) fhoillseachadh aig a' Mhòd Rìoghail Nàiseanta ann an Glaschu am-bliadhna.

**Satyapada Campbell** from Inverness lived previously in Sutherland, Skye, Glasgow and London. Beyond an Arvon course at the start of the millennium, Inverness Playwrights now gets her writing.

**Leonie Charlton's** travel memoir *Marram* – compassing her journey with Highland ponies through the Outer Hebrides – will be published by Sandstone Press in March 2020. [www.leoniecharlton.co.uk](http://www.leoniecharlton.co.uk)

**Janis Clark** has lived in Drumadrochit for 26 years. Since her retirement, her poems have been published in a variety of magazines and anthologies.

**Julian Colton** lives in Selkirk, edits *The Eildon Tree* literary magazine and contributes articles and reviews. His five collections of poetry include, most recently, *Tivo Che Guevaras* (Scottish Borders Council) and *Everyman Street* (Smokestack Publishing).

Tha **Liam Alastair Crouse** a' fuireach ann an Uibhist a Deas far a bheil e ag obair do Cheòlas. Fhuair e duais na bliadhna airson bàrdachd an cois sgeama nan Sgrìobhadairean Ùra aig Urras Leabhraichean na h-Alba agus Comhairle nan Leabhraichean.

**Anne Elizabeth Edwards** from Lewis had a long career as a midwife and often uses poems or dense, word-rich prose as inspiration. 'Her Kind' was inspired by Anne Sexton's eponymous poem.

**Chris Foxall** divides her time between Yorkshire and the Isle of Skye, taking inspiration from the land, the sea and unexpected encounters along the way.

**Anna Fleming** writes on environment, ecology and adventure. She is editing an anthology of creative writing for the Cairngorms National Park. You can follow her thoughts on [thegrانيتsea.wordpress.com](http://thegrانيتsea.wordpress.com)

**Julie Galante** is a writer and visual artist

based in Edinburgh. She won the inaugural Janet Coats Black Prize for Fiction in 2019.

**Amanda Gilmour** is a creative writing undergraduate at The University of the Highlands and Islands. She lives in Inverness with her husband and three children.

**Peter Godfrey** lives in the Hebrides, works as a reluctant journalist and is currently trying to escape by putting together a first poetry collection.

**David Goldie** lives and works in the Highlands and has recently returned to writing poetry after a long period of admiring it from a distance.

**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.

**Lauren Ivers** is a Glasgow-based writer, originally from East Ayrshire.

**Jackie Kay** is a poet, novelist, The Scots Makar and Chancellor of the University of Salford.

**Stephen Keeler** is an Ullapool-based poet and creative writing teacher. His debut chapbook, 'While You Were Away' is published by Maquette Press

**Jean Langhorne** tries to spend as much time as possible in the Highlands, walking in the hills. She recently completed an MLitt in Environment Culture and Communication from Glasgow University.

**Robin Leiper** is a psychotherapist living between Scotland and South Africa and trying to write in the spaces that open up between them.

**Sheila Lockhart** is retired and lives on the Black Isle. She started writing poetry two years ago following a bereavement and now finds she can't stop.

**Marion McCready** lives in Dunoon, Argyll. She is the author of two poetry collections, most recently *Madame Eosse* (Eyewear Publishing, 2017).

**Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh** Tidsair ealain air chluainidh ann an Inbhir Nis.

**Liz McKibben** lives in Edinburgh, writes in English and Scots, enjoys translating poetry and has been published in *New Writing Scotland*.

**Peter Maclaren** lives in Glasgow. His poems have appeared in *Akros*, *Lines Review* and *New Writing Scotland*.

**Jenny McLaren** is a graduate of Moray School of Art who moved from the Cairngorms to the Lake District in 2015. She often draws and paints outdoors. [www.jennymclaren.co.uk](http://www.jennymclaren.co.uk)

Rugadh 's thogadh **Iain S. Mac A' Phearsain** air prèiridh Chanada ann an teaghlach a bhuineas dha Ìle, dha Muile 's dhan Eilean Sgitheanach. Tha e nis air ais ag obair dha SMO/UHI ach air astar bhon dachaigh ann an Èirinn a Tuath.

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

**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.

**Donald S. Murray's** complete sequence of Achanalt poems will be published by Roncadora Press early next year as part of a collaboration with the artist Hugh Bryden.

**Richard Myers** is retired and has a small farm in Inverness-shire.

**Lisa NicDhòmhnaill** A' fuireach ann an Ach' Ìlle Bhuidhe sa Chòigich ach 's ann do Cheann Tìre a bhuineas i. Bidh i a' sgrìobhadh bàrdachd agus sgeulachdan goirid a chaidh fhoillseachadh ann an iomadach àite, cho math ri aistidhean sa Bheurla sa Phàipear Bheag.

Rugadh **Niall O'Gallagher** ann an 1981. Is e ùghdar dà leabhar bàrdachd, *Beatha Ùr* (Clàr 2013) agus *Suain nan Tì Latha* (2016). Tha dùil ri treas leabhar as t-fhoghar 2020. Is e deasaiche bàrdachd na h-irise Gàidhliche *STEALL*. Ann an 2019 chaidh ainmeachadh mar chiad Bhàrd Baile Ghlaschu.

**John Robertson Nicoll** is from Broughty Ferry. His book *The Balloon Man* in Edinburgh (Blue Ocean Publishing) was published in 2013.

**Clare O'Brien** lives in Wester Ross, writing her first novel, 'Light Switch'. Recent publication includes *Mslaxia*, *Spelk* and anthologies from *Hedgehog Poetry Press* and *The Emma Press*.

**Stuart A. Paterson** A former BBC Scotland Poet in Residence & Robert Louis Stevenson Fellow, Paterson writes in both English & Scots. He lives by the Solway Firth.

**Anne Pia** is an Edinburgh-based Italian Scot, author and poet. Her *Language of my Choosing* was

shortlisted for the Saltire First Book Award (2017) and won the Premio Flaiano Linguistica in 2018.

**Karen Hodgson Pryce** lives in Aviemore. Her poetry has been published in several literary magazines and one of her short stories was Commended in the Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2017.

**Cynthia Rogerson's** latest novel **Wait for me Jack** (written under the pseudonym Addison Jones) is published by Sandstone.

**David James Ross** lives in Culloden Moor, Inverness and has published four poetry collections. He divides his time between music performance, poetry and stand-up comedy.

**Martin Russell** has had several short stories and poems published, including his own short story collection, *Rattleskin*. He lives in Inverness and supports Queen's Park FC.

**Helen Sedgwick** is writing a crime trilogy and is the author of *The Comet Seekers* and *The Growing Season* (both Harvill Secker) which was shortlisted for the Saltire Society's 2018 Fiction Book of the Year.

**Mark Ryan Smith** lives in Shetland. His poems have appeared in various places, including *New Writing Scotland*, *Gutter*, *Ink Sweat and Tears* and *Snakeskin*.

**Hilton Shandwick** is the pseudonym of a writer based in Easter Ross.

**Shane Strachan** is an Aberdeen-based writer and performer who has worked with the National Theatre of Scotland and Paines Plough. He was awarded a 2018 Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship (SBT) to develop a book on Bill Gibb [www.shanestrachan.com](http://www.shanestrachan.com)

**Kate Swan** is a film producer and production manager whose films include Margaret Tait's *Blue Black Permanent*, Tim Neat's *Play Me Something* and Eric Steel's *Kiss the Water*.

**Ian Tallach** Having previously worked as a paediatric doctor, Ian is now medically retired with MS. He lives in Glenurquhart, as do his young family.

**Samuel Tongue** has published two pamphlets and a collection – *Sacrifice Zones* – is forthcoming with Red Squirrel (Feb 2020). He is Project Coordinator at the Scottish Poetry Library. [www.samueltongue.com](http://www.samueltongue.com)

**Vawdrey Taylor** is an artist and writer from the Black Isle with an interest in etching and illustration.

**Sandy Thomson** is a retired university lecturer from Glasgow who has been based in Cromarty for the past 22 years.

**Maggie Wallis** lives in Strathpeffer. She keeps hens, enjoys knitting socks, climbing trees...and writing.

**Hannah Whaley** is a writer and children's author based in Angus, and past winner of Writing Magazine's Self-Published Book of the Year. @hannahwhaley

**Ross Wilson's** first full collection, *Line Drawing*, was published by Smokestack Books in 2018. A pamphlet of poems will be published by Tapsalteerie in 2020.

**Millie Earle-Wright** from the north-east edge of the Cairngorms, writes poetry, and has been published by *The Dangerous Women Project*, *Adjacent Pineapple* and in the anthology *Under*, amongst others.

**Catriona Yule** works as an English tutor in Aberdeenshire. Her poetry has recently been published in *Southlight 26*, launched at Wigtown Book Festival.

As part of Dingwall's 2019 Word on the Street (now in its 4th year), several writers whose work often appears in *Northwords Now* will be joining the editor in Highflight Books, High Street, from 10 -11.30 am on Saturday 19th October to launch this edition. Tea, coffee and cake (Thanks Bill!) will combine with readings and conviviality. [word-on-the-street.weebly.com](http://word-on-the-street.weebly.com)

For online submission guidelines see page 2 and visit [northwordsnow.co.uk](http://northwordsnow.co.uk)

## Keep in touch

With occasional news about *Northwords Now* and other aspects of the literary scene in the north through following us on Twitter @NorthwordsNow and Facebook [www.facebook.com/NorthwordsNow/](http://www.facebook.com/NorthwordsNow/)

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## Where to find a FREE Northwords Now

Northwords thanks all the locations below for their support in distributing Northwords Now. Special thanks go to all the librarians who put us on display.

### Inverness

Waterstones, 69 Eastgate Centre  
Eden Court Theatre, Bishop's Road  
Inverness College, UHI Millennium Campus  
Leakeys Bookshop, Greyfriars Hall, Church St  
Moniack 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  
Hootananny, Church St  
Culloden Battlefield Visitor Centre,  
Raigmore Hospital  
Wasps Studios, Midmills Building, Inverness

### Highlands (plus Moray and Perthshire)

Highland Libraries  
The Community Centre, Tulloch St, Dingwall.  
Picaresque Books, High St, Dingwall  
High Flight Bookshop, High St, Dingwall  
Kilmorack Gallery, by Beaully  
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  
Storehouse of Foulis, Foulis Ferry  
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

The Loft Bistro and Venue, E. Grange Farm

History Links, Dornoch  
Dornoch T.I.C  
Neil Gunn Centre, Dunbeath Heritage Centre  
The Pier, Laig  
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  
Cocoa Mountain, Balnakiel Craft Village, Durness  
The Emporium Bookshop, 11 High St, Cromarty  
Visit Scotland, Riverside Drive, Thurso  
Horizon, Forbes Business Park  
The Watermill, Mill St, Aberfeldy

### Islands, West & North

Isle of Eigg Craftshop, Isle of Eigg  
Colonsay Bookshop, Isle of Colonsay  
Caledonian MacBrayne Ferry Terminals  
Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Sléite, Isle of Skye  
Blue Shed Cafe, Torrinn, Isle of Skye  
Cafe Arriba, Portree, Isle of Skye  
Carmina Gadelica, Portree, Isle of Skye  
An Buth Beag, Skeabost, Isle of Skye  
Mor Books, Struan, Isle of Skye  
Ceol na Mara, Dunvegan, Isle of Skye  
An Crubh, Camuscross, Isle of Skye  
Staffin Stores, Isle of Skye  
Sligachan Hotel/Seumas's Bar, Sligachan, Skye  
Ravenspoint, Kershader, Lochs, Isle of Lewis  
An Lanntair, Kenneth St, Stornoway  
Acair Ltd, Stornoway  
Hebridean Jewellery & Bookshop, 63 Cromwell St, Stornoway  
Taigh Chearsabagh, North Uist  
Shetland Arts Trust, Mareel, Lerwick  
Shetland and Orkney Libraries  
Western Isles libraries  
Carraig Mhor, Isle of Islay  
An Buth Bheag, Ferry Rd, Kyle

An Tobar, Tobermory, Mull  
Isle of Harris Distillers, Tarbat, Isle of Harris  
Visit Scotland, 20 Cromwell St, Stornoway  
Visit Scotland, W. Castle St, Kirkwall  
Visit Scotland, Bayfield House, Bayfield Rd, Portree

### Aberdeenshire

Aberdeen City Libraries  
Aberdeenshire Libraries  
Aberdeen Arts Centre, 33 King St  
Books & Beans, 12 Belmont St, Aberdeen  
Lemon Tree, 5 West North St, Aberdeen  
Newton Dee Cafe, Newton Dee Village, Bielside, Aberdeen  
Blackwell's, Old Aberdeen, Aberdeen  
Woodend Barn, Burn o' Bennie, Banchory  
Yeadons of Banchory, 20 Dee St, Banchory  
Hammerton Store, 336 Gt Western Rd, Aberdeen  
Spindrift Studio, The Marina, Banff  
Better Read Books, Ellon  
Banff Castle and Community Arts Centre  
Orbs Bookshop, 33A Deveron St, Huntly

### South

Stirling Libraries  
Midlothian and East Lothian Libraries  
Kings Bookshop, Callander, 91 Main St, Callander  
Dundee Contemporary Arts, 52 Nethergate, Dundee  
Clementine, Gray Street, Broughty Ferry  
Jessie's Kitchen, Albert Street, Broughty Ferry  
Broughty Ferry Library, Queen St, Broughty Ferry  
The Byre Theatre, St Andrews  
J & G Innes Bookshop, St. Andrews  
Topping & Co. Bookstore, 7 Greyfriars Garden, St. Andrews  
The Forest Bookstore, 26 Market Pl, Selkirk  
Kesley's Bookshop, 29 Market St, Haddington, East Lothian  
Prestongrange Museum, Morrison's Haven, Prestonpans  
Montrose Library, 214 High St, Montrose, Angus  
Su Casa, Lorne Arcade, 115 High St, Ayr  
Moffat Bookshop, 5 Well St, Moffat  
Giraffe Cafe, 51 South St, Perth  
Ewart Library, Dumfries

Gracefield Arts Centre, 28 Edinburgh Rd, Dumfries  
The Tolbooth and Albert Halls, Stirling  
The Bucleuch Centre, Langholm  
Mainstreet Trading, St Boswells, Roxburghshire  
Far From the Madding Crowd, 20 High St, Linlithgow  
Atkinson-Pryce Books, 27 High St, Biggar

### Edinburgh

The Fruitmarket Gallery, 45 Market Street  
Blackwells Bookshop, 53-9 South Bridge  
Scottish Poetry Library, 5 Crichtons Close  
Elephant House Cafe, 21 George IV Bridge  
The Village, 16 S. Fort Street  
Filmhouse, 88 Lothian Road  
MacNaughtons Bookshop, 3-3a Haddington Place  
St Margaret's House, 151 London Road  
Summerhall, 1 Summerhall  
Amnesty Bookshop, 12 Roseneath St, Marchmont  
Word Power, 4-5 Nicolson St  
Out of the Blue, 36 Dalmeny St, Edinburgh  
Edinburgh Bookshop, 219 Bruntsfield Pl  
Golden Hare Books, 68 St Stephen St., Stockbridge  
City Arts Centre, 2 Market St  
Edinburgh University Library, 30 George Sq.  
The Forest, 141 Lauriston Place  
Oxfam Bookshop, 210 Morningside Road  
Oxfam Bookshop, 25 Raeburn Place, Stockbridge

### Glasgow

Centre for Contemporary Arts, 350 Sauchiehall Street  
Òran Mòr, 731 Gt. Western Road  
The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, 100 Renfrew St.  
The Piping Centre, 30 McPhater Street  
Caledonia Books, 483 Gt Western Road  
Tchai Ovna Teahouses, 42 Otago Lane  
Mono, King's Court, 10 King Street  
Gallery of Modern Art, Royal Exchange Square.  
Tell it Slant, 134 Renfrew St  
WASPS Studio, The Briggait, 141 The Bridge Gate  
Oxfam Books, 330 Byres Rd  
An Leanag, 22 Mansefield St  
Glasgow Concert Halls