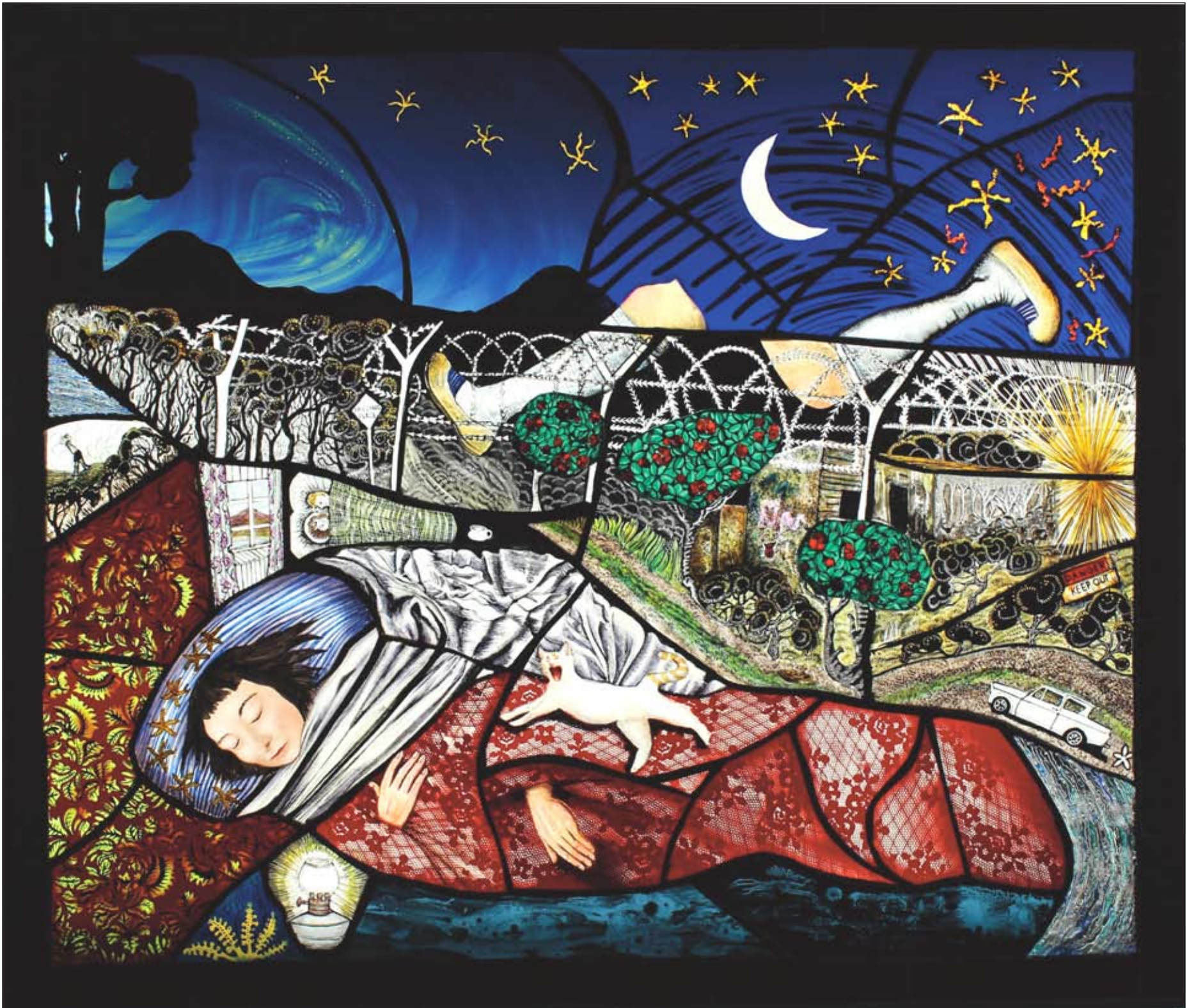


The FREE literary magazine of the North

# Northwords Now

Issue 39, Spring–Summer 2020



**KAPKA KASSABOVA** talks place and mind with **NICK MAJOR**, **JAMES SINCLAIR** sails to the Greenland ice, **CHRIS ARTHUR** chases feathered Zen, **JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON** celebrates crime-writing women, **ROBIN FULTON MACPHERSON** and many others unveil new poems **PLUS** stories aplenty and some of our plans at a time of crisis.

**Saothair ùr Ghàidhlig ann an Tuath le Caoimhin MacNèill, Lisa NicDhòmhnaill, Babs NicGriogair, Maggie Rabatski, Eòghan Stiùbhart agus sgrìobhadairean eile. New work in Gaelic by Meg Bateman, Angus Peter Campbell, Myles Campbell, Peter Mackay and others.**



## EDITORIAL

**I**N THESE TIMES of pandemic, the Northwords Board has decided to delay main publication of the current issue in print until we can be confident of a modest level of distribution. At present, all our regular outlets are closed.

However (at the risk of stating the obvious to all of you now reading this on a screen), a full version of this issue (No.39) is now online. This includes a .pdf of the whole publication, and – as begun last year – archiving of each work under writer name.

There's exciting content within these virtual pages. This includes new work from internationally renowned poet and translator, Robin Fulton Macpherson, an in-depth interview with Kapka Kassabova, and a major new poem sequence in Shetlandic by James Sinclair. As you'll have come to expect if you're a regular reader of *Northwords Now*, there's also a wealth of other new prose, poetry and non-fiction.

The principal contribution we can make, as global sands shift around us, is to give both readers and writers a boost. We hope to do this by continuing to cultivate and expand our online presence as resources permit. To begin, this is our largest issue yet, with 40 pages, rather than the previous 32, plus the annual 'Tuath' supplement of new Gaelic writing. Over the next few months, we'll also be exploring ways, including with advice from our funders – Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig – to further enhance our online presence in ways that will make *Northwords Now* even more enjoyable and useful to writers and readers across the north.

Thanks for visiting us, and so being part of the unfolding *Northwords Now* project. ■

KENNY TAYLOR, EDITOR

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**Front cover image:** Self-portrait Dreaming of Portavogie by Pinkie Maclure (2019) Stained Glass Light Box 23" x 27". This work has recently been purchased by the National Museum of Scotland. For the artist's story of the inspiration for the art and the way it was created, see Pinkie's description on page 40. www.pinkiemaclure.net

**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

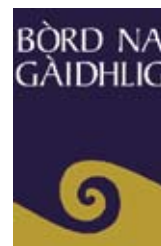
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**To submit your work online**, go to our website: **northwordsnow.co.uk** The next issue is planned for October 2020. The deadline for submissions is **31st July 2020**. If accepted for publication, you will hear about your submission by **30th September 2020**, so feel free to submit elsewhere if we have not contacted you by then.

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# When The Dead Come Calling

Jennifer Morag Henderson views the sweep of contemporary Highland crime writing

ON 9TH JANUARY 2020, Tain-based author Helen Sedgwick launched her new book *When The Dead Come Calling* in Inverness with a rather unusual event. Helen began by reading a short extract from her crime novel to celebrate its publication day, but she then introduced four other writers she had invited to join her for a discussion on 'Highland crime writing'.

The five authors represented the wide variety and vibrancy of crime writing coming from the Highlands today, with Helen herself presenting a book that mixes crime fiction with the supernatural, S.G. MacLean showcasing historical crime fiction, Margaret Kirk giving a sneak preview from the unpublished manuscript of her third DI Lukas Mahler novel, Barbara Henderson representing the burgeoning 'children's crime' scene, and me, as biographer of 'Golden Age' Highland crime novelist, Josephine Tey, providing some historical context.

In Helen Sedgwick's new book, DI Strachan, an incomer in a small village, investigates the murder of a psychotherapist against the simmering resentment of the locals, and the undertows of the older, haunted history of the land. Mixed-race Georgie Strachan's background in North Carolina is lightly sketched-in, with the personal focus on her marriage with Scottish husband, Fergus, but Helen talked about the constant background of contemporary discussions around racism, homophobia, misogyny and Brexit. Originally from London, Helen has set her book in the north of England, but said that the location was made up from a patchwork of places, with the book full of the sort of racing, wind-swept, changeable skies we see on the beaches around the Highlands.

The Highlands is a place, but there are also the people who live here: the physical landscape interacts with the need to move away from small places to find work, influences the type of people who then move in, the ideas of newcomers and returnees – and a sense of belonging. These are abstract themes to discuss, but they also bring up practicalities, and the other writers on the panel immediately started to draw out parallels with their own work, and bring their own knowledge to the discussion: Margaret Kirk pointed out that setting a crime novel in the north of England instantly made more research material available for a writer wanting to make the details of the legal system believable. There are big differences between the Scottish and English legal systems, and Margaret herself benefitted from discussions with a friend in the police force. Helen explained that her editor would pick her



(L-R) Margaret Kirk, Barbara Henderson, Helen Sedgwick, Jennifer Morag Henderson and S.G. MacLean at the Inverness Waterstone's launch of 'When the Dead Come Calling' earlier this year.

up if she strayed too far away from reality in the policework – but that she would then add extra supernatural details.

Talking about her forthcoming book, Margaret Kirk revealed that it is to be set between Orkney and Inverness: a reminder that the Highlands and Islands are diverse. The northern landscape is often used as a dramatic backdrop, particularly in classic Golden Age crime fiction, for a chase or hiding sequence – but nowadays Margaret can also write about some very urban crimes in Inverness.

While Margaret's DI Mahler has his fair share of family problems (including a sick mother), Helen said that she wanted her DI Georgie Strachan to have a happy marriage and fewer personal problems than the average fictional detective. Georgie's Scottish husband struggles with moving to a small English village, however, particularly as he can't find work there. There are some very modern scenes from their marriage as Fergus debates taking money out of their joint account, while Georgie worries that Fergus' unemployment – and increasing attraction to the mysterious standing stones – will stop the locals taking her seriously. The insider / outsider clash sets up some nice tensions for the policework side of the story, but this is very much a story from the incomers' perspective. Helen's book is the first in a planned trilogy, and there is scope to explore

the themes, and the importance of the mash-up of Celtic myths, further in the following books.

Research seems to be a constant theme for crime writers now: the trend towards increasing forensic detail means writers have often done very specialised reading. Everyone approached it differently: although Helen liked to make up a composite setting, S.G. MacLean talked about visiting the places where her books are set. As a historical writer, this often meant a visit to a nice tea-shop at a castle – but the imagination came in thinking herself back to the past. With a PhD in 17th-century Scottish history, for S.G. MacLean the time period and the place came first, and the crime element of the books second. S.G. MacLean currently has two crime series, set in different locations, with schoolmaster Alexander Seaton in the north-east, while Cromwell's agent Damian Seeker works mainly in London. S.G. MacLean said the move south was partly at the suggestion of her publisher, but that she always particularly enjoyed writing about Banff, where she had lived.

S.G. Maclean's latest novel *The Bear Pit* features a gruesome scene with a hungry bear. Much of the action happens off-stage, but the visceral physical reality of early modern life, not only the violent crime but also as a time before modern medicine, is conveyed through

her descriptions. An audience member asked if the authors at the event ever felt squeamish when writing, but Helen Sedgwick remarked that writing *When The Dead Come Calling* – despite semi-supernatural birds pecking out people's eyes – was some of the most fun she had ever had as a writer. Others were less sure, with Barbara Henderson pointing out that in her field, children's fiction, there were limits to the sort of violence that could be shown.

Barbara's children's novella, *Black Water*, is also historical, based on an incident in the life of Robert Burns, and specifically written for schools doing projects in the lead-up to Burns Night. Burns appears not primarily as a poet, but in his day job as an exciseman, solving a smuggling mystery alongside a child protagonist. The genre of children's adventure and mystery is not new of course, but it has been a growing field over the last few years, with a new wave of children's crime fiction led by Robin Stevens and her Murder Most Unladylike series set in a girls' school and riffing off the Golden Age.

Robin Stevens is a Tey fan, and it would be strange to talk about Highland crime without mentioning Josephine Tey, the subject of my own biography. One of the original Golden Age crime novelists, Tey was and continues to be both critically-acclaimed and bestselling, and her work has been hugely influential, not only for Scottish writers such as Ian Rankin and Val McDermid, but further afield to American Stephen King or Japanese mystery writer Akimitsu Takagi. Many of the themes that were discussed in the panel are things that Tey started to talk about in the late 1920s. Tey was writing almost a hundred years ago, but all the ingredients are already there: what the Highlands and Scotland are; who lives here and what it means to come back here after going away; the way the people and the landscape interact; the way that times are changing. Tey was always very sharp on the negative aspects of Scotland and the Highlands – though she was quick to disagree when others criticised her home. A crucial part of Highland identity can be the need or desire to travel and live elsewhere, the tension between an independent life and family ties, and the contrast between home and away. All of these provide a rich seam for stories.

The event was a confident start to the new decade for Highland crime writing, showcasing the current strength of the writing scene in Inverness, with five women writers coming together to discuss their myriad interests. Hopefully, some of our enthusiasm was conveyed to the audience. Our conversations continued long after we left the stage...■

## Six poems by Robin Fulton Macpherson

### A Day in my Life

Early in the day  
I met myself in 1939.  
He stood in the driveway and his left hand  
was resting on a Cocker Spaniel's head.  
He looked up but I couldn't say for sure  
if he noticed me.

Later in the day  
I arrived home and struggled with the door  
In a North Sea gale. The words I said were  
«White horses on the fjord. The door blew shut.»  
but the voice that spoke the words was father's  
not mine.

### Still Loch

The midges and the sucking peat-holes,  
the shrinking of the remote parked car –  
did the water-colouring lady  
joke about suffering for her art?

The waves she painted haven't moved since.  
The Loch Arichlinie she painted  
a life-time ago is dead nature.  
The waves she painted are still moving.

The paper oblong with dried colours  
has followed my life, living its own,  
from wall to wall, decade to decade,  
a private passport checked only by me.

### Kjell Espmark reaches ninety

His poems can see a long way off,  
reading remote hills like small print,  
and a long way back, listening to  
words fresher than *Genesis* breathed  
from lips centuries gone – as when

we look south from Achavanich  
today, and four thousand years  
ago, hearing ruffled hazels  
just as Ava must have heard them  
while catching sight of the distant  
pyramid outline of Morven.

### Apple-tree leaves

He looks thinner than last time.  
In his dense garden there are now spaces  
soon wide enough for winter to move in.

There are apples to reach for,  
to twist off, ripe bitter Discoveries.  
Each nudge sends down still green apple-tree leaves.

There's plenty of space between them in the air,  
plenty between on the ground.

### Hawthorn

I pause in front of the hawthorn tree.  
The hawthorn pauses in front of me.  
Each of us seems to be on the way  
somewhere.

The last time I saw the hawthorn tree  
he looked more than old. I was seven.  
He never got round to telling me  
his age.

We seem to pause beside each other  
as if one of us were still alive  
and one dead. We have so much to say  
but don't

say anything. We have time enough.  
The wind in his leaves and in my hair  
seems unlikely to tell us to hurry  
ever.

### North Train

Bogies no longer dismantled  
are as new rolling quick and dead  
over Drumochter, over Slochd.

Pines by the Tummel, left behind  
but not. Gorse by the Shin, also  
to be left behind but won't be.

Manse walls never tire of waiting.  
They were passed on decades ago.  
The Raeburn is and it isn't.

A bad dream will come and tell me  
how round that kitchen table I  
am the only one left alive.

A good dream will come and tell me  
how spruce, birch and hazel still flow  
past train windows.

### Equate

IAIN TWIDDY

February day, a day like the way  
no one ever says February fully,  
a dusting of snow in the gravel garden  
so it's hard to tell the snow from the stones,

and the heaters smacking heat at the head  
in the empty-chaired living area,  
where the fire would be snapping if it was real;  
and there's no click by which she might recognise

me; I may be just as much a mess of ice  
as a man she sculpted, I mean nourished, washed,  
taught to read and speak, and let exhausted sleep;  
she doesn't know my name, doesn't know she has sons,

doesn't know what the sun is, why it sheets  
so widely in the late afternoon, as it slips,  
doesn't know it will slide up again to light  
icily the shelves with the never-read books,

the bowl cerealed with marbles, as the earth  
rolls like the slowest ever polished marble  
it wasn't enough just to touch, you had to own;  
and in turn, I don't know, if dementia

is a shrinking, a sour, why it should seem  
like the wildest desertification,  
the brain deciding to have its machine-gun  
shootout in the moony bunker of the skull;

I've lifted that from a book I read once,  
as a kid, an accidental German pistol;  
so I have no idea if it happens,  
if bullets keep on ricocheting forever,

no idea how, flown in from far east Japan,  
how we two can be in the same room –  
I who was once lodged cosmically in her womb,  
drinking her in – and still be nowhere near,

and yet so approaching her condition,  
twenty years from here, when I will know this  
inside-out, though every trace, every fibre,  
every atom of her will have perished;

almost as if the catty nib at the pad  
writing late on a hard February night  
were at the same time shredding it into snow.



MY BONES, MY aching bones.  
All the way home from the inn, I wanted to do nothing else but fall into my chair by the fireside. As I eased into my seat, I gave the wife a cheeky wink as I watched her scowl out from our wedding frame. I sank into the headrest, determined to enjoy the last of my whisky glow, and took pleasure in the simplicity of warming my socks by the hot coals. Peggie would have had a fit if she'd seen the holes in them.

I still miss her, even her tuts and her finger-wagging. Especially her barley broth in the winter.

'Archie, what in the name?' she'd cry whenever I stoated in worse for wear.

I closed my eyes to try and remember her voice. I heard nothing but the creak of the cottage as it shuddered against the Atlantic wind. It seemed like the whole house was being uprooted from the cliffside and blown out to sea.

The sea. My true home.

I still tasted the salt air on my lips from the long walk home tonight. I imagined the house swaying with such violence that it left the land and joined the ocean. It was as if the house bobbed and rolled with the power of the waves. It made me feel like a proper skipper again. There I

was ruggan afore the mast, pressing my back into it as I navigated safe passage through the swell. In those few heartbeats, I found my sea legs again and it gave me a sense of purpose. The air I breathed felt right again; good, fresh salt air; not the stale breath of a landloper, corralled by stone walls. I don't want to be that person I became when my son, that fair-haired stranger, passed away.

With the boy gone, the wife needed me home and so I held Peggie's thin hands while she wept over that little boy who never danced, or laughed, or really loved us. Soon after, Peggie's heart gave out and she left me here alone to bear our losses.

I gripped the armrest as a few rogue tears escaped. As waves lashed the cottage

windows, all the hard memories started to return.

You see, they told us that only a fey child – a demonic, blood-driven beast – could swallow brose like a whale and still dwine in health. So, after much discussion and lamenting, choices were made about the skinny child with the pale, wrinkled face and the limp arms, the one born with two front teeth. Peggie was adamant that she'd heard the child say he wasn't ours, and who was I to argue?

Old Dunbar said to fill eggshells with rainwater and that this would somehow expose the evil that had infiltrated our home. It was thought the curious being would follow the line of shells onto the hearth, and then, with a little parental help, straight into the fire. But the stories – and the storytellers – lied to us. The fey

boy did not fly up the chimney like they promised. Neither was our real boy, our blood child, returned to us from some lonely otherworld. By morning, the mound of charred 'fairy flesh' had stopped screaming at us from the iron grate. From that day to this, I have felt cursed.

Every time I take a dram, I dream myself back afore the mast. I long to sail into the mountainous, black waters and be baptised by the salt spray. Only at sea can I escape the noise and the guilt.

But Peggie was resolute; her, the midwife, and the herring girls. Their way was the only way. Well, I'll never see them or my boy again. No Maker can hold me to account. He doesn't need to for I already live in my own private gaol. But now I am ready to speak out, to confess my wrongdoings.

So, leave me to steer the cottage for a while longer. Allow me to imagine one last lift and crash of the waves, feel one last gouter of salt air on my face. Then, tomorrow I will scatter my son's ashes. I will finally do right by him and tell his story to the authorities.

My heart. My aching heart.

(Story inspired by Robert Rendall's poem, 'Saut i' the bluid'). ■

## Afore the Mast

STORY BY SUZY A. KELLY



## Rising

STORY BY AMANDA GILMOUR



MUFFLED MUSIC DRIFTS from an all-night party across the road. Beneath me, the mattress sags, pressing my bones hard against the peeling wall. A slice of moon provides a night-light as I cradle my suckling newborn, Anna, whilst my fingertips trace the pattern on the old shawl she's wrapped in. The repetitive movement soothes me, as it did when I was a child, until I brush the edge of the cigarette burn and my hand recoils. Outside, the party noise is amplified as a door opens. Glass shatters against tarmac and the door slams shut. Beside us, my husband, Innes, groans. He's shaking already and it won't stop until he's had two or three whiskies. Sometimes, like today, he needs alcohol as early as five am.

'I need a drink, Isla.'

'But, it's Christmas morning. Can't you—'

'Don't start, OK, I'm ill!'

I unlatch Anna and push back the duvet, lowering my feet to the bare floorboards, wincing as my post-birth stitches tug. My heel catches the edge of my sewing box, toppling it. Scissors land with a thud and needles tinkle onto the floor. Anna lets out a mewling whimper.

'Are you getting me a drink?'

'I'm seeing to Anna.' I unwrap her from the shawl, leaving it on the bed. Lowering my head, I inhale her milky scent then lay her in the Moses basket. My hands move at speed, swapping nappies, despite my aching wrist.

'You're always fussing over that bloody baby.' He throws off the duvet, spilling the shawl onto the floor.

'Please, the shawl...'

'I'm sick of hearing about the shawl! I said I'd fix it, didn't I?'

My mouth opens to respond, but a flash of red followed by tapping on glass stops me. A robin hops around on the outer sill before taking off again.

'What sort of mother leaves needles all over the place?' he asks, staring at me, unblinking. I lower my eyes, focusing on the pinch-grab pattern that circles my wrist. Then kneeling, I pick up scattered contents from the sewing box, but I can't find the sciss—

A ferrous slicing fills the space. Innes has the shawl and his shaking hand guides the scissors around the charred circle. My mouth falls open.

'Fixed!' he says, discarding the shawl on the floor and stomping out of the room.

'Where's my whisky?' he shouts a

few seconds later. I freeze. Will he know I poured it down the sink? Retrieving the shawl, I spread it over my knees ready to receive Anna. After swaddling her in generations of warmth, I fit her into the crook of my arm. We both start as the front door slams. Anna screws her face but I shush and rock her as I move towards the window, looking out onto rows of dank terraced houses.

Across the road, Innes passes a flat-

tyred car that has been static for weeks, and disappears into the party house. Sliding my hand into my pocket, I pull out a card for the women's refuge. Outside, two discarded crisp packets waltz with the wind before blowing along the street. I tap the refuge number into my phone and as I wait for an answer, my gaze rises above the estate, resting on a sprinkling of stars. ■

## SEEKING NEW BOARD MEMBERS FOR NORTHWORDS NOW

Northwords is looking for two additional board members to join a small group of dedicated unpaid directors.

This is an opportunity for someone with enthusiasm, interested in helping to shape and govern the magazine. Those with an interest or experience in financial management would be a bonus for our Treasurer role.

Meetings normally take place 3 times a year; they are traditionally held in Inverness but we are currently using online methods. Normal expenses are paid.

For further details or a discussion about roles and responsibilities, please contact or Adrian Clark (Sec.) on 01349 830517 or Valerie Beattie (board member) [valerie.beattie.phd@gmail.com](mailto:valerie.beattie.phd@gmail.com)

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# Zen and the Art of Catching birds in Words

By Chris Arthur

“How many words do you need to describe a woodpigeon?”

This is the title of one of the essays in my last collection, *Hummingbirds Between the Pages*. Like most of what I write, it’s concerned with the extraordinary nature of the ordinary; it points to the astonishing dimensions that lie cheek-by-jowl beside the commonplace. In this particular piece, I was looking for a way of conveying on the page the incredible cargo carried by something that seems straightforward, even uninteresting: a pigeon pecking its way across my garden. Unusually, because I’m better at posing questions than answering them, the essay concluded that “I could exhaust my word-store completely without ever catching more than a fraction of what’s there.”

From the point of view of commonsense, this may sound ridiculous. Surely a woodpigeon can be described in a couple of sentences. But it’s a conclusion that becomes unsurprising – indeed inevitable – once we start to look beyond the routine simplifications we rely on and see what’s really there. Beneath the vocabulary with which ordinary diction labels, limits and dismisses things, there are chasms of time, mazes of connection, richly complex intricacies of structure and function.

One of my as-yet-unrealized literary ambitions is to take all the bird-related essays out of my eight published collections and present them together in a single volume. Such a book would include essays where gyrfalcons, waxwings, sparrowhawks, kingfishers, oystercatchers, corncrakes, woodpigeons and other species feature prominently. But despite the avian theme, it wouldn’t be an ornithology book; I doubt it would appeal to birdwatchers. Although the essays crystallize around birds and are to some extent about them, they’re more about what they point to and suggest; what an encounter with them brings to mind. The birds act as portals into mazes of meaning, time, and association beyond the mundane world of appearances. So my boyhood sighting of a flock of waxwings feeding on cotoneaster berries occasions a meditation on the complications attending memory; kingfishers become symbols that cast light on synchronicity and loss; oystercatchers prompt an investigation into the nature of a moment; a corncrake provides the vocabulary to lament environmental degradation; a blue tit becomes an unlikely icon for death and the question of when we should introduce children to the fact of our – and their – mortality.

As well as writing about them in my essays, I’m interested in trying to catch birds using a very different kind of word-trap, namely haiku. I’m not sure why I find this minimalist verse form so appealing.

Perhaps it’s the contrast it offers with essays. Instead of having several thousand words to play with and enormous freedom about how to craft them, haiku demand the discipline of a precisely defined formal structure of exacting concision: three lines of five, seven, and five syllables. No more. No less. “How many words do you need to describe a woodpigeon?” As an essayist, I can use as many as I want. But for a haiku the challenge is to operate within the tight constraints of seventeen syllables.

According to Kenneth Yasuda, “the number of syllables that can be uttered in a breath makes the natural length of haiku”. Traditionally, seventeen syllables in Japanese are reckoned to fill one breath. Whether the same holds true in English remains a matter of debate. Whilst I’m open to allowing as haiku verses written in English that contravene the strict rule of three lines with 5-7-5 syllables, I prefer to impose this discipline on my own efforts. In rendering haiku from the original Japanese into English most translators – thankfully – give primacy to conveying the spirit rather than forcing it into the seventeen syllables of an alien language.

There’s something about the poised austerity of haiku, their rejection of embroidery, the economy of their few lines, their self-sufficiency and lack of anything elaborate, that makes me think of them as a peculiarly northern form – no matter how easterly the direction of their origin. And of course, this northern resonance is reinforced by Basho’s classic travel sketch *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, written in a style known as *haibun*, which combines haiku and prose. Haiku seem to offer a way of travelling to a far north of expression. Their pared-down simplicity can carry sparks of meaning far more intense than their modest scale might suggest. In a way, haiku are like a verbal equivalent of the *inuksuit* that dot the arctic and act as what Norman Hallendy dubs “silent messengers”. *Inuksuit* are signs left in the landscape by a deliberate arrangement of balanced stones. In *The Idea of North*, Peter Davidson calls them “minimal interventions” involving the “slight but moving rearrangement of what is already there.” They act like elemental signatures, inked in the very substance of the earth, that indicate places or perspectives of significance. They potently convey meaning from those who made them to whoever passes the same way and comes face to face with their haunting presences.

Here, then, are some of my experiments with verbal *inuksuit*, haiku that are minimal interventions in my encounters with birds. They use just a few shards from what’s already there to leave a marker of the moment:

Runs up, down, around  
Treecreeper on pale ash trunk  
More bark-mouse than bird

Snail shell confetti  
Around the thrush’s anvil  
Slaughter prettified

Blackbird sentinels  
Their calls at first light and dusk  
Punctuating time

Three ancient scarecrows  
Cormorants standing on rocks  
Wings held out to dry

Hospital garden  
Two magpies scolding loudly  
The last sound you hear

Suddenly the swans  
Dirty canal made regal  
White epiphany

Stretched like elastic  
Defies gravity then – snap! –  
Kestrel’s hover drops

Unheard for so long  
Its call sounds unreal at first  
Cuckoo are you back?

How far it’s fallen  
From high above the carpark  
This red kite’s feather

Resplendent goldfinch  
Beyond words’ dreary plumage  
Its bright perfection

Two ravens flying  
Listen! Their vibrant croaking  
Unzips the silence

Curlew’s sad piping  
Tunes my sense of loneliness  
This desolate place

Signature wing-clap  
As if applauding themselves  
Woodpigeons take off

Look! Gannets diving  
Spearing the sea with themselves  
Deadly projectiles

In among the ducks  
A solitary moorhen  
Welcome difference!

Plum-soft collared dove  
Hit – as if by a missile –  
Death by sparrowhawk

A leaf-breath movement  
Eye-stripe, stump-tail, blended browns:  
Wren – completely there

Here in the garden  
Meeting of different worlds  
Robin on my hand

Who could guess how blue  
The hedge accentor’s egg is  
From its dull plumage?

A single jackdaw  
As bedraggled as I am  
Caught in the downpour

Standing on pondweed  
As if walking on water  
A drinking goldcrest

Seems only a speck  
Skylark, suspended so high –  
Huge downpour of sound

Startled morning walk  
Almost at my feet the snipe  
Explodes into flight

Cliff-nesting fulmars  
Land on a ledge, launch again  
Perfect manoeuvres

A heron flying  
Prehistoric, angular  
Grey crick in the sky

Sudden low contrail  
Glimpsed just above the water  
Dipper flies upstream

Over mute black rocks  
A bead of sound and colour  
Lone oystercatcher

Wagtails on the grass,  
Their name fits them perfectly  
Nothing more needed

Almost out of sight  
Sky-buoys marking the thermals  
Three buzzards circling

Sure sign of summer  
Scythe-dark shapes harvest the sky  
The day the swifts came

Heard more than it’s seen  
The name alone a haiku  
Listen – a chiffchaff

A yellowhammer  
Beside me as I cycle  
Flits along the hedge





Haiku demand a flensing away of what's unnecessary. As R.H. Blyth puts it in his influential (and highly eccentric) *Haiku in Four Volumes*, they "take away as many words as possible between the thing and the reader." I'm drawn to such radical abstraction and the distillation that it seems to offer, the burning off of extraneous matter to get to essentials. In origin, haiku are infused with the Zen sensibilities of Japanese culture, particularly as these found expression in the form's great founding figure, Matsuo Basho (1644-1694). The Zen aesthetic is one I find appealing. Its emphasis on direct experience, immediacy, paying close attention to the present, getting to what's beating at the heart of a moment, seems close kin to the qualities needed for effective essay writing. There's surely more than a hint of such an aesthetic in Graham Good's statement that "Anyone who can look attentively, think freely and write clearly can be an essayist;

no other qualifications are needed." To some extent essays and haiku offer different ways of doing the same thing; they sing the same song – but in different registers. Leaving their marks upon the page they act like verbal seismographs, tracing out the pulse of what moves and intrigues us.

Of course, there are many ways to try to catch birds in words, essays and haiku are by no means the only options. Some people prefer a scientific approach and opt for the kind of language and highly specialized focus that's found in journals like *Current Ornithology* and *Avian Biology*. Others adopt a more wide-ranging perspective, like Frank Gill's magisterial textbook, *Ornithology*. There are popular descriptive field guides to help with identification (such as R.S.R. Fitter & R.A. Richardson's ever popular *Pocket Guide to British Birds*), and monographs that focus on single species, like Ian Newton's *The Sparrowhawk*. Poets offer some memorable cameos: Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", Ted Hughes' "Hawk Roosting", George Macbeth's "Owl" for example. And there are those idiosyncratic works of brilliance that

combine luminous literary lyricism with a rare depth of first-hand experience and considerable ornithological knowledge – J.A. Baker's incomparable *The Peregrine*, or Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*, or James Macdonald Lockhart's *Raptor: A Journey Through Birds*. I admire many of these approaches and often draw on them in my own efforts.

But I know that neither my essays and haiku nor any of these other modes of catching birds in words can offer more than a few fugitive glimpses of what's there. It's what escapes the words on the page that keeps me writing rather than any deluded sense of being able to catch it. But I like to think that, every now and then, whether in a haiku's seventeen syllables or in the thousands of words of an essay, there's a hint of the astonishing realities that fascinate me with their bounty of meaning. Though of course they fail to catch what's there, I hope my words at least point in the right direction, manage to convey a sense of a few stray feathers floating in the empty space of an electrified absence, testimony to what was so astonishingly present, dense with the mysterious gravity of its being. ■

## Taklamakan - Prologue

BY IAN TALLACH

A HUMAN FIGURE emerges from the morning half-light. Less than a kilometre away, it struggles up a dune. White linen billows. Some of the brightest stars can still be seen, but the sky has begun to shimmer with the anticipation of day. To the east, an orange glow on the horizon. Above it, a swathe of indigo.

In an instant, sand is ablaze. A scimitar of light is followed by a wedge of sun. The camels look west.

The figure re-appears on the next ridge, then descends again from view. After another fifteen minutes, it can be seen again, but its edges are blurred, lost in haze.

On the third dune's crest it stops. A gold flash from a nose-ring – female. Her outline flickers, then becomes clearer, more substantial. But reaching for her seems to snuff her out.

A flutter in the chest, the taste of sweat, the urge to follow. This is no place to just sit.

A space between places. They say this desert's name translates as 'you can enter, but there is no way out'.

Of course, there is an infinity of ways out. But who can bear an infinity?

The thought you must remember to forget is that your chosen route might lead you further in – the thought that can terrify.

The desert can break out, engulf and bury. Whole villages obliterated overnight. Yes, a perfectly sane person might be unfortunate enough to find themselves adrift. But the most compelling reason for venturing in of one's own accord is not rational. For some, looking out over that ocean of dunes there is the Pull. And for a few others, the lure of nothingness.

★

Higher up is steeper. With the determination to press on, a ridiculous notion takes hold: climbing this dune is pursuing destiny. At the top, the view is breathtaking. But straight ahead, there is another, higher dune.

It's a wonderful feeling, running, sliding, tumbling down the concave side. The next one is easy to begin with. Silence, but for the lisp of feet. Before long, though, it becomes a struggle. This would be a good place to turn back. But turning back doesn't feel right: one could almost be persuaded that the promised land lies over the ridge.

Cruelly, the experience soon changes – from having lost oneself, to a realisation of lostness. Abandon to abandonment. Fine sand falls from an angry fist. To think that poetic words are used for such a sky. Ha! For this extremity of blue indifference, there should be other words.

★

Who can live with their own insignificance? When the lights are off and all distractions are removed, it can be hard to bear. The desert offers no relief. It is a wasteland and it speaks of waste.

Still, there is a paradox. From the earliest times, those fortunate enough to stumble out again have told of facing their insignificance and finding it wanting. They claim to have found God. ■

## Horse Loch

(After Child Ballad 233)

MARION McCREADY

### Prologue

*I am moving beside the loch  
yet sitting still.  
While rare powan breed; artie charr, trout  
and salmon swim within. The continental drift  
drifts beneath us all.*

*Loch Eck crackles in the morning sun... No –  
Loch Eck straddles the morning sun.*

*Loch Eck is a woman with a corkscrew head.  
Loch Eck is a double bed, covers pulled up to her neck.*

*Loch Eck is a couple embracing in a bath,  
lichen skin thickening around them  
like blue crystals.*

*The late spring wind grows tough hands  
on the back of the water.  
The pale sky makes a girl cry,  
makes another sparkle  
in spite of herself.*

### 1

#### Loch Eck

My hands are sleepy cats wakening into life.  
Loch Eck, I peep at you between the trees.  
You peep at me. Little gatherings of stones mark your shore.

Purple rhododendrons mark your shore.  
I am so close to you I am sinking.  
The jetty enters you the way he entered my mind unasked for.

One look, and Loch Eck, all seven miles of you  
collate an image of me.  
You preserve it on the bed of your drowned glen.

Today your lapping waves are a series of serene smiles.  
The whitened tree branch, the glower of Beinn Mhor  
welcomes me. Watching you is like watching the world's

first motion picture – Le Prince's *Roundhay Garden Scene*.  
As you pass by with your jagged movements  
I think of Sarah – Le Prince's mother-in-law,

dancing in her garden, 1888.  
Two seconds of her turning, a solitary waltz preserved on film.  
Ten days later she was dead.

### 2

#### Fairy Queen

He entered my mind like a loch.  
A few seconds of his movements (like Le Prince's mother-in-law)  
plays on repeat.

The way he said hello then moved sharply past me.  
The way his eyes mirrored me  
in a million silver halide crystals held together

by electrical attraction.  
In my dreams he is a cat I'm chasing in the dark  
forever keeping one step ahead of me.

I dream also of the loch, fish floating to the surface.  
Their white bellies glittering mica schist.  
Across the loch, hills slope like the backs of whales.

I emerge in the morning, uncurling as from a snail shell.  
A dead tree is a headless snake rising up next to me.  
There is a fire burning inside of me,

small flames lick my wooden body into a blaze.  
My hair is smoke entrails. Invisible sparks shoot off around me.  
I have become a strange object to myself.

I bite my lip to know that it is mine.  
Loch Eck, your body is the body of a muscular horse.  
In the blue hour

I stand among jetty ruins and summon  
the *Fairy Queen* steamer back to your shore.

### 3

#### I, Tifty's Annie

I, Tifty's Annie, met him by fresh water.  
My skin became as the leaves fluttering under the cool breeze  
of his touch. Is this love?

No one can answer but every day now I see him  
in stolen pieces of water between trees.  
When he touched me, the loch moved inside of me.

My head is heavy, it floats on my body  
the way the stone and tree crannog float on Loch Eck.  
Police ribbon caught in the shallows speak of accidents.

Tonight the loch has turned purple.  
My body is oil spilling, snaking into the water.  
My arms move among the reeds. I make waves

where logs dream and rocks sing.  
The darkness at the heart of Loch Eck is the black  
pumping heart muscle of a strong horse.

The crannog is an island in the air, an unlit funeral pyre,  
ink blot on the water. I look into the purple face  
of a rhododendron. I see his face everywhere –

in the hanging valleys, the Paper Caves,  
even in the slick body of a cormorant.  
I come to the loch to summon his full lips, his soft hair.

### 4

#### Welcoming Spirits

I am a boulder on the shore of your narrow water.  
I am visited by stones.  
Black shadows make flat statues on the bottom of you.

I name him, I conjure him by the light of water on wet stone  
and twisted tree. The mouths of the reeds draw in  
deep breaths of lit air. My arms ache, he is not here.

I want to gather up the loch in my skirts,  
let the fish encircle me. He has been sent away from me.  
My father, Tifty, he beat me; my sisters scorn me.

my brother is coming for me.  
I came to the loch to explore my scars.  
My bruises bloom in the shape of common birds.



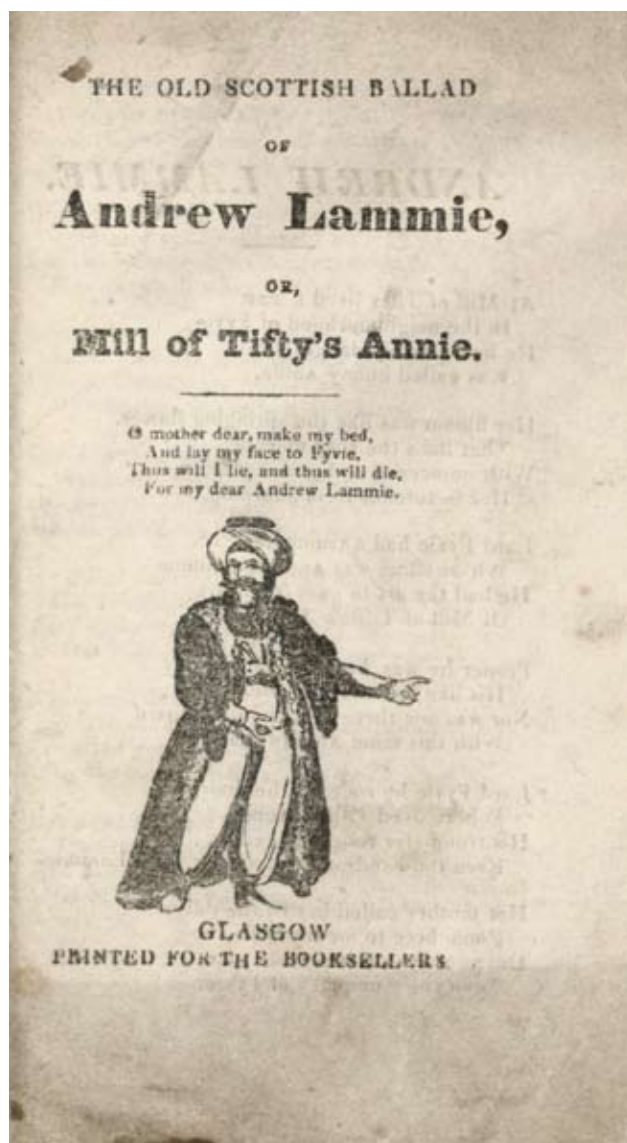
The chill of the fresh water is in my bones.  
Purple harebells ring in the hills...they ring for me.  
The loch is unbreakable in the hard sunshine,

in the still air. I am not unbreakable.  
My brother has broken me across your rocks.  
Loch Eck, I have travelled the length of you.

My last sight of you is between the fragile branches of a birch.  
I fold you up in my mind, a gift to myself,  
and smile as the wind moves

across your quivering haunches.  
I think of Le Princes's mother-in-law,  
turning and turning forever on film.

Then I'm thinking of him, arriving before me  
over and over. The hills are smoking, the morning mist  
drifts towards me like welcoming spirits.



## At Hallgrimskirkja

LYNN VALENTINE

I'm there again under a cool stone roof, my  
doppelganger *Hildasdottir* sipping kaffi after  
service, saying hallo to replicas of herself -  
faces of blue eyes, upward-slanted cheeks.  
I imagine myself tied to Magnus, Jon or Margret,  
a belly drumming under my best woollen jumper,  
the flush of newly-wed love snug inside.  
Later we'll stroll down shuttered streets,  
snigger at tourists as they stagger from boats -  
sick after eating shark, watching whales.

We'll head home in the jeep, over ice-fields  
and lava, past lagoons that shine too bright a blue.  
We'll tend to the horses, eat cinnamon buns,  
pretend that this island is real.

## Nina

LYNN VALENTINE

The first time I met her she slipped  
from how are you? To yarnin lik dat,  
the shape of 60 degrees imprinted, hard-wired.

My head had to bend, ears pricked,  
a lean into northern keening,  
the harsh vowels, the ringing of wind and sand.

## Landscaper

LYNN VALENTINE

This is his work, the slow heaping  
of soil into a grave.  
He digs the shape of a life,  
stands well back while mourners  
seed the ground with tears.  
Afterwards, a nod to his mate,  
the push of earth against wood and air,  
the filling in, the flattening.  
In summer he tends the flower beds,  
talks to roses, watches  
each pale petal fall.

## Omissions

KAREN HODGSON PRYCE

In this photo  
my eyes dissemble  
the lived moment.  
Our words die on my lids.  
Reveals little but

a prickly *always*,  
a barbed *and*. No smell  
of wood-smoked wool  
or poached-pear bake  
on tongue. No votive touch.

It does not say I looked  
everywhere but your face  
that day. Everywhere. It omits  
utterly to mention  
last chances.

I AM ALMOST certainly the only person to know anything about Spud, at least outwith the bothy and climbing setting where he was landed with that moniker. Potatoes and a certain island malt began the connection.

Spud was already at the bothy – our bothy – so much our bothy that most other gangrels gave it a wide berth. I'm not talking about Jacksonville, though there were similarities. I have to choose my words carefully or I'll be in trouble with my clannish mates, even though, these days, we are all on life's long downclimb and bothy nights are rare. I arrived first that Friday night. *Iacta alea est*.

The top half-door was open, so I expected one of the gang was already in, and was surprised, on entering, to find a stranger. He stood up and nodded. Over six foot I reckoned, thin as a broom handle, fine features, tidy hair. Only much later, when we were all having a dook in the loch, did we see why he so easily outstrode (and outclimbed) us all. He seemed to have no torso; he was all legs. As Jimmy quipped: "his legs sterted at his oxters".

I could hardly order the man to shove off, but certainly remained unsociable and silent. This seemed acceptable; he was not a talker, it seemed. There was something of a smile about his lips, his eyes sharp, a man at ease, in control. In our bothy! Hell! Jimmy arrived an hour later and then Willie and others of the crowd. All were equally put out at the presence of a stranger, though they tried hard not to convey their ill-will. The stranger, I may say, was dressed every bit as down-market as we were. Not a new-gear ninny! He had a wee primus on the table, a Dixie, and not much more than a bag of tatties. We were six in number that night and Graham, our nominated cook, was soon onto supper preparations: his wife's home-made soup (still half frozen), Turkish merquez sausages and couscous, and a tart (Tesco's). Our days of humping-in tins of baked beans to bothies were long in the past, you'll have gathered. We aye grumbled at heavy rucksacks, but still carried coal to the howf. Rewards have to be earned. Once we'd cleared up a bit, we watched the man start his culinary proceedings.

The golden-coloured spuds were all of a small size, as if graded. They went into the Dixie to boil, while he chopped up a wee – purple – onion with the rapid strokes of practice and added that to the Dixie. Over succeeding minutes, as the spuds boiled, he then added goodness-knows what; the only thing I recognised was a big dollop of butter. We were all mesmerised by the surreal performance. ("I thought he was an effin chef" Graham said later.) Some of the spuds, with what was now a sauce, were tipped into the Dixie lid used as a plate, and eaten with obvious content. We could have applauded – we certainly had our saliva glands activated – and then he held out the pan to us and gestured for us to

finish off the spuds.

"I aye thocht a spud wis jist a spud," Jimmy said to me as we were watering the rushes by the east gable before turning in. "Yon wis a revelation" – which just about summed up our satisfied feelings, feelings which had been well complemented by the mannie passing round a hip flask which contained a certain island malt. In the whole evening, I doubt if the man had spoken more than six words.

In the morning (gold as a Turner watercolour) the man was up and away while we still lay cosily in our sleeping bags on the bedshelf we'd built the year before. We watched every move. He had muesli, something which you only saw in a delicatessen at that time, and into this he chopped a banana and an apple, and yogurt, another new-fangled foreign gimmick; (we had porridge soaking overnight.) He packed-up efficiently and, after snubbing the bottom door, gave us a smile and a wave over the top and was off.

Jimmy called out, "Come again – Spud!"

So that was how he received his name, which he accepted with a laugh next time, for he did come again. And again. Spud became one of the gang.

# Spuds

STORY BY HAMISH BROWN



Weirdly, we thought, he always brought potatoes, so the nickname was apposite. To most of us, as Jimmy had put it, "a spud is a spud" but "yon mannie mun be creatin the things" for, indeed, there was a range of textures and tastes and even colours, some not very appealing. We were highly suspicious of purple tatties, and that experience had me calling-in to the library on George IV Bridge to find out more about the potato. There were all sorts. They came from the Americas originally. Our wives thought us daft when we started to make demands about the humble spud back home.

We were never to learn much more about spuds, or Spud, who remained as monosyllabic as ever. He was a benign, if mysterious, presence in the bothy and, once he'd done all the Munros within a day's hike from the bothy, soon became as hooked on climbing as we were. With his spider's legs and arms, he was a natural, and before long was far the ablest of us. If I mentioned the names of routes he was to put up on 'our' mountain, I'd be giving away secrets – so I won't. It's our hill – our bothy – our Spud.

Bright readers will no doubt be looking at the guide book for that particular hill, thinking they'd get his name from the

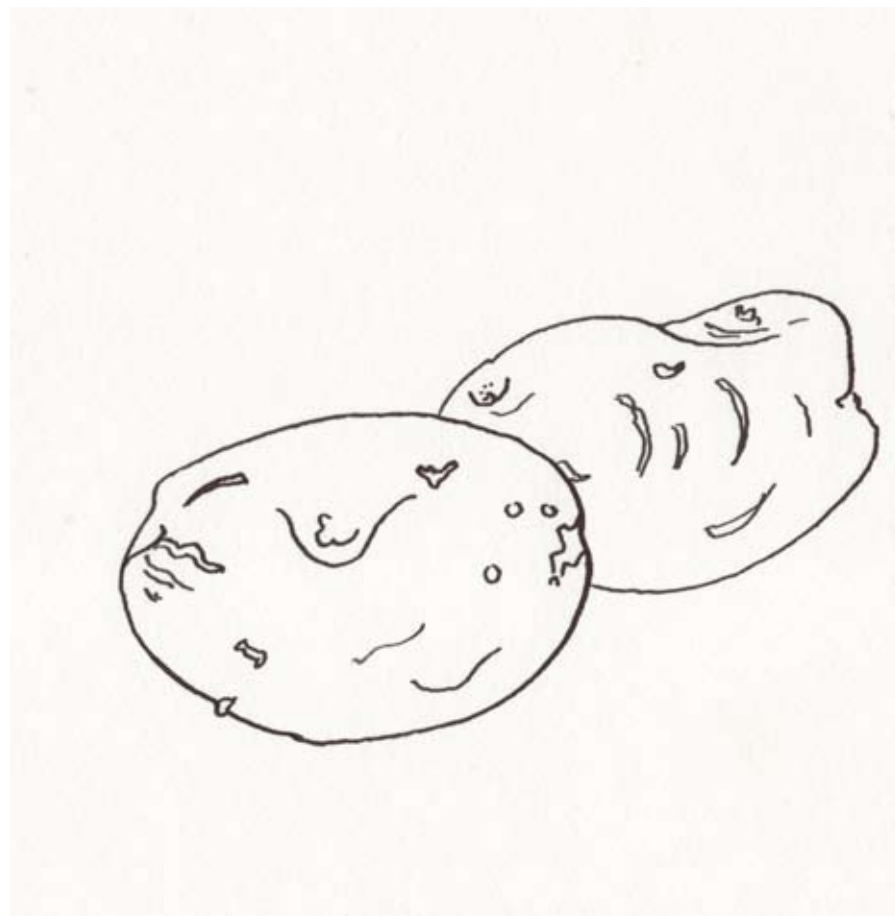
details of first ascents – except, we were all convinced that the name Spud allowed us to record for firsts was fictitious. (It was!) Those knowing eyes, that ready wee smile...he gave nothing away, toyed with us, dominated us in a strange way. We all accepted each other after all, and you don't rope-up with someone you didn't feel happy to trust your life with. Two or three years passed before I discovered the true Spud, and was sworn never to pass on what I knew to the rest of the bothy boys. They thought me a bit of an intellectual anyway. I taught Latin at what they called "a posh school".

Jimmy was a painter, Graham a postie, Willie and Joss (Joseph) ran a garage, Colin ('Red', from his hair, not politics) and Ian ('Fidel', for his politics) worked for the Council, others I've forgotten. The bothy had united us, climbing inspired us; who we were was of no importance. If Spud was a "secretive bugger", so what? The bugger could climb! And provided potatoes irregularly regularly all through those years and, as inevitably, a taste of another island malt. Twinned memories, now.

Spud always arrived at the bothy early and went 'home', however late, on the Saturday night. We assumed he had a Sunday commitment – maybe church – though not appearing a holy Willie. In that, we were more or less correct, I found out.

I'd gone to a performance of The Messiah at the Usher Hall and, being a bit hard of hearing, sat near the front (bloody expensive seats!) and there, singing his heart out among the tenors, was Spud. The incongruity almost made me laugh. I had one heck of a time at the weekend not to give away what I'd learned. (He had not spotted me in the Usher Hall – I think.) Later, I knew Spud sang in a cathedral choir, hence there were Sunday obligations. I was also to find out what he did on Sunday afternoons.

At half term, I visited the National Gallery on the Mound, that exquisite collection of which one never tires, having something by everyone it seemed and, of course, firm favourites. I'd been paying my respects to the Velasquez (so different a work to ones like Las Meniñas) when I heard someone talking to a group in front of a Flemish painting in the next room. Always happy to learn, I joined the group – and found myself face to face with the speaker: Spud! I knew I grinned, mightily, but he, apart from a brief raising of eyebrows, never paused in his – fascinating – talk about the Flemish-Dutch realist flower-painters of the period. Session concluded, the group began to disperse. There were many 'thank-you's', some hand-shakes, and an American tried to put a note into his suit's breast pocket – and then we were left there, together. Mine was not the only grin. Keeping the secret from the bothy gang was an intolerable imposition thereafter. So often I wanted to ask questions about Art, about lots of things.





We crossed Princes Street and went up the stairs to the Brown Derby Tea Rooms (now a Costa) and more words followed than we'd spoken in the years since the first bothy meeting. "Why so silent?" I naturally wanted to know. He just smiled that he wanted one part of his life to be more solitary, undemanding, and without always explaining, discussing, become involved. As I'd seemingly not bothered about his silence on meeting, he just continued the pose. "You've no idea how refreshing it is to be free for those precious, stolen days away from the thrum of life."; (as a teacher, I had a fair notion myself). "I'm so heavily involved with people, so often such fatuous twits, that my escapes are absolutely vital." We then lost ourselves in talking about paintings, with as much enthusiasm as Jimmy and

Graham would, at the bothy, be talking about football.

Professor So-and-So (Spud) and I met periodically after that in Edinburgh (you could hardly not) and later he admitted what a strain our friendship was when keeping up his bothy- weekend Trappist pose. He might once have slipped up. We had completed a new route in darkness, well – sort of darkness – for a full moon flooded the landscape and the etched peaks rose strangely lit and black-shadowed. "Caspar Friedrich, eh?" he grinned at me, and quickly looked round; but we were alone.

We were all sorry when he, briefly, said he was having to move to London. "I'll miss the bothy. And you lot" was quite a speech, for the bothy. (He was heading for a top job at the Tate.) I recall the same quiet smile when he left that Saturday

night, the last big paw-shake from Jimmy, with "We'll miss your spuds, Spud" then, turning to us with: "Noo we'll nivver find oot about aw they tatties". Well, I did, but I couldn't be telling them now, could I? But it's a nice wee coda to the story of Spud.

One period a week at school, I took a class for what the head called "Audible Essays" and the Timetable marked 'Free Speech', where boys (we were not co-ed then) had to spout on some topic that interested them. I'm amazed at the facts that an enthusiastic lad can acquire and absorb about anything, never mind sport. On this particular Friday afternoon, one boy began to hold forth on the subject of potatoes. You can imagine how I sat up and listened. He gave an excellent spiel, about their Andes origins, the story of Walter Raleigh supposedly introducing

them to England, and on through to modern cultivars. As the class was leaving, I complimented the boy on his talk and asked how he knew so much on such a recondite topic. The answer: his father ran the Potato Research Centre at Longniddry in East Lothian and he often went there on Sunday afternoons. "I found it sort of interesting, Sir."

"Mm; and was there by any chance a Professor So-and-So there?" I asked.

"Oh yes, Sir, he's one of the volunteers and a real research expert. He makes new kinds. You've no idea Sir..." (he paused for breath) "It's him told me everything and, Sir, because I was keen, he gave me a nickname" (he looked at me). "You won't tell, will you Sir?" (I shook my head.) "He called me Spud."

I think they were rather proud of their nicknames. ■

**Beginnings**  
GRAHAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG

Eight swallows wavering on wires  
quaver the *Fifth* against a clear sky.

All that's left, such accident?

– only so many muses in one life;  
wine too soon stops what it begins;  
poverty is only available to the poor;  
divine ecstasy no longer fuses,  
smoke-free hell has lost its threat.  
A bit of smoulder, no flair –

Bring on decline – except

eight swallows imitating art  
two-finger decline far into touch,  
six-hit it out of stadiums;  
dropped by startled passers-by,  
it breaks.

**Beginning late, finishing later**  
GRAHAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG

Thirty years, or more; a year of light  
(some days of night) to get this far.

Walking in, walking out, never time enough  
along the slices of the ridges' fetch.

These hills are brown, or bright with winter.  
From where I look, distant ranges

I might not walk are insubstantial,  
never pale or blue. All that is real

is the sea-washed summit pebble  
I found for you.

**Descending Schiehallion**  
GRAHAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG

Where peace begins,

down from the slice and din  
of frozen gale, stumbling  
never-to-be trusted drift,  
as tumbled ptarmigan flirt with us,  
a dance troupe off their beat,  
that last mile of slither,

all movement stops.

Amber-shackled by late sun  
a still hawk haunts dusk.

**Coal delivery**  
PETRA VERGUNST

Still, frost hangs on this morning  
but at your front gate daffodils  
have already raised their heads  
you snap one, warm spring in your hands

The coal delivery should have called in yesterday  
but failed to turn up  
and when you phoned  
the sheds had been empty

You plant the daffodil in a vase  
and watch how the strengthening sun  
blows its trumpet

Your chair against the east facing wall  
shadow wraps  
as a dark ghost around you

You can't shrug off your lack of coal  
and can but watch and wait  
the sun brightens  
spring cuts still

**Lyrical**  
GILLIAN DAWSON

I'm raked from sleep by the rough  
music of the rookery

this ragged orchestra tuning  
to corvid concert pitch

brusque airs and strains  
joyous excoriations

their euphony  
my unbelonging

**Pastoral**  
GILLIAN DAWSON

If I squint, the towering trees  
are transformed  
back into pylons,  
all angular branches.

Low sun slanting  
through briars becomes  
a warehouse security light  
grazed by wire thorns.

Crows' black crosses  
sky reverberating  
with jet noise. A flock

gathers in the shadows.  
The shepherd will sleep lightly,  
listening for the crisp clip

of falling leaves  
startling

into breaking glass.

# Back Fae Da Edge

By JAMES SINCLAIR

A sequence of Shetland dialect poems as an interpretation of the ill-fated voyage of the Hull whaleship *Diana*, trapped in the Greenland ice over winter 1866–1867. We hope to soon add an audio file of James reading this sequence, from an interview he gave to BBC Radio Shetland before publication.

*Aa rodde head Nort  
da laand o da skraelin  
a pinnishin o frost.*

## Back Fae Da Edge

An iron blue ocean, mooskit lift  
an laand med oot o sharny broon an sabbit strae  
drifted intae view trowe da haar.

Low haerts, neebit, sprang fae dir lang sleep.  
Wir we in a dwaam or wis dis da mieds o hame,  
or did da mellishon hae ee mair trick up his sleeve?

Wir we laek da phantom crew o da fleein Dutchman,  
a feyness set ta drift apo da oceans o da wirld,  
wi hit's rancid currents an foul bitin winds aa wir days?

Yet da hills an high banks grew i wir ee,  
an wha wis able, riggit a jib ta steer wis bye  
atween Galti Stack an Ketilgill head

inta da boasie o dat muckle Ronas Hill  
an in trowe da raem-calm waater o da voe.  
Someen said, “ Dere's Heylor boys, wir med hit. “

Da local men rowed aff ta wis an clamb aboard.  
We hed damn all ta say an coored fae dir luiks.  
Dir een said aa dat hed ta be said. ( Da fricht, da fricht, )

fur we wir nae idder as rag bags o banes.  
Wir skien sookit ticht ta wir skulls.  
We most a lookit laek demented wraiths.

Da fock, dey wir kindness hitsel, comin wi  
waarm blankets ta hap aboot wis, an maet.  
Some o wir eans fell apo dis da sam as baess.

Stappin as muckle i dir mooths as dey could,  
dan curlin up itil a baa whin da cramps grippit,  
faain asound, niver ta waaken more, athin da sicht o hame

*Wi nae guid itill his haert  
da corbie tore at ribcage  
da krang o da lamb spret*

## Laevin Hame

My name is Jeemie Androo,  
sam as me fedder an his faider afore him.  
Wir fock ir bidden i da sam twa hooses apo da hill at Setter  
fur as lang as ony een has da mindin.  
Da hairst o 1865 wis wan o poor paekins  
an a starvation dat held fae afore Yule  
till da second week o March. Aabody wis black-fantin.

Me, I tow't dey wir nae idder  
for hit but ta mak fur da toon o Lerook  
an try me luck wi da Davis Strait whalers,  
see if I could fill wir empty purse wi siller.  
staap wir stengted bellies wi maet, I nicht  
even hae a shillin ur twa ta mak an honest woman o Annie o da Daeks  
an as shu held me haand I felt her haet pass trowe me.  
So wi strict warnins ta come back hame in ee piece,  
I haeved me kist apo me back an med wey on fit  
by vye an by voder ta da steep lanes o da toon.

We hed kin dat pat me up fur ee week dan annider.  
Ivery moarnin till mirk I wid staand at da hiecht o da Knab,  
i da hoop o catchin a tall ship makkin for port.  
Dan ee day laek hit or no, risin piece by piece  
abune far horizon, a skeleton o masts an spars.  
Thick coal black clouds o reek wir spewin fae da stented belly o da baess,  
an I wis da first een rowin oot ta meet  
dat fine riggit whaleship, da Diana, as shu drappit anchor.

*Set atap da gaet post  
he leaned his black sails i da breeze  
an birl'd up itill da clouds*

## Mellishon

We cam fast i da ee o da baess,  
caught up i da spiral spoolin wis doon.  
Da gless as low as he'd seen,  
wir skipper wrestled da spokes o dat wheel,  
a man fechtin lonabrak an spondrift.  
Muckle lumps brook apo aa fower quarters,  
dingin wis aboot laek a cork.  
Masts bucklin afore da gale, fit ta snap,  
wi da sails reefed ticht ta da spars,  
da Jib an a sma sail aft ta steer wis bye.  
We pitched hiedicraa in ta a waa o waater,  
dat A'm sure guid richt trowe wis  
We ran fae port ta starboard,  
checkin dat aathing wis lashed ticht  
an mannin da pumps fae first licht ta mirk,  
day eftir day hammered dis wey an dat.  
I listened ta wir Anne whisper itill me lug  
“ Hadd dee course my boy, du'll be fine. “  
An at last apo da moarnin o da fourth day  
a watery sun brook trowe,  
an da dark ean ran oot o breath.

*Don't du shakk dee knave  
A'll joost bide me time  
fur du'll fade, du'll waeken*





James H. Wheldon (1830-1895). Oil on canvas. Whaling Ships Diana and Anne in the Arctic

## Shaestin wir Prey

Ower da side wi guid, settin wir erses apo da taft.  
A weel practiced shiv wi da boathuek  
an wir aff, slidin da aers i da waater.

Shetlan men weel wint wi da pull an pech,  
baetin wir fit apo da tilfers ta keep time  
as we slippit an grippit da waater time an time again,

laek feet skippin ta da fiddle player's tune –  
first ta two step, back step dan da Foula reel  
makkin grund aa da time wi a swing an a lift.

Dan wir lugs could mak oot da brak o air, da spoot o wind.  
Da killer, stood stock still i da focsle  
slippin go his harpoon wi wan practised swing.

Da barb wis gone, coils o ropp jimpit  
oot o da locker amidships. A yell “Wir fast”.  
Da skipper in wan aesy move turned a bite apo da cleat,

an sat back at da tiller, haddin ticht.  
Da ropp geed a snyirk, takkin a dunt, I tow  
dat da boat wid brak in twa as hit spanged bar ticht.

We med full tilt as we wir towed flat oot  
skeetin oot o control across da waater. Dan wi ee roar  
we aa dug wir aers i da waater, slammin on da brakes,

an though we heard not a peep  
I shivered wi dat silent skirl,  
minded a sail fild wi a gale o sufferin.

*Lang an curved gunmetal  
clackin scimitar blades  
rive, dey taer at carrion*

## Honest Graft

Wi ten men apo da capstan  
an wan aesy swing o da derrick,  
wir catch laanded wi a dunt apo da daek.  
Dan hit began, da slash an cut  
o da flensin knife as weel wint haands flayed  
blubber laek muckle slivers o butter.

We gaddered hit itil wir scurts  
an fild da boilin pot ta lipperin.  
Gurr melted doon itil a stinkin brö.  
Da cooper plied his trade, knockin  
taggider barrel staves, afore he slippit  
da iron baands around an shappit dem doon.

We fild barrel eftir barrel as day kerried on  
trowe nicht. Da sun wis niver laek ta slip oot o sicht,  
an whin wir labours wir bye wi, an aathing stowed,  
da maister opened da rum ration  
an geed wis a double tot ta celebrate.

A accordion appeared an a tin whistle.  
Johnny fae Nestin layed da bow across his fiddle.  
We sang sea shanty an ballad alaek.  
Someens performed a jig airms i da air as dey jimpit fae side ta side.  
I girded me loins an back-steppit ta Johnny's Shetlan reel  
me haands apo me hips an me heels clickin,  
as da sun climmed ower da yard airm.

*Beady een, black pearls  
surveyed aa afore dem  
empty as far as da ee wid reck.*

## Shaestin a Feyness

Trowe hiecht o simmer inta hairst,  
we most o sailed a million miles  
fae da Southermost point o Prins Christiansund.  
Dan up da coast fae da fjords o Sisimiut  
ta Nuuk an on ta da far Nort o Narsaq  
an da laand o da skraelin.

Wird fae da sudert, wis dat fock wir haerd  
o groups o fish wirkin dir wey aroond da coast.  
Da skraelin held his tongue. He wis keeping stuum.  
We sowt da baess here, dere an aa wey –  
ta da Aestard o first Devon dan Baffin island  
Runnin wi da trade winds, we shaested mirlin tides.  
Een stared oot da craa's nest fur ony late wird  
in ivery voe an geo, a spoot o wind, da swirl  
o fin an tail. Hit med you winder dat dey'd  
laerned ta braeth under da waater  
Ur wis hit a fact dat da last graet Nordert whaal  
lay packit in barrels itil da howld o da Diana.

*I can sniff dee oot  
da smell o da eart  
da stink o fust an rot*

## Lost Sows

We aedged closs in ta da floe  
an fur sic a sicht as hit med.  
Hit lookit laek dey'd joost set dem doon  
fae dir moarnin's wark, teen a braether.

Dey wir twa lifeboats kummeled heidicraa,  
aers riggit in craa's taes,  
wuppit roond wi canvas sails,  
kists an barrels an packin cases.

Aathin laid oot dere, apairt  
Fae da ship hersel. An whin you lookit  
dat bit closer ,you could see dir blackened sken  
da fankled shaeps o dir airms an leegs

laek da graet puppet maister  
hed cut da strings, hed gotten fed up  
wi da game he'd been playin  
an waandered aff i da ice, laevin his toys ahint.

*Me neb preenks an preens  
fedders wi boot polish sheen  
da neb dat'll takk dee een*

## Makkin a Run Fur Hit

We waakened i da moarnin ta clear waater aa roond,  
free fae da grip o ice. Da skipper shouted his orders.  
We unfurled ivery inch o canvas as we med guid speed  
ta da Suderd, sailin herd afore a Norderly breeze.  
We covered mile apo mile, dodgin ta port an dan ta starboard  
roond aboot icy-blue bergs an snowy-white flats.

Lookin on past da boo da ice wis gadderin fast afore wis..  
Da order wis geen ta licht da boiler. We clambered below  
an owsed da last o da coal shivel by shivel in trowe da boiler door.  
Bricht yellow lowe jimpit an sparkit afore wir een.  
In nae time avaa we wir cled itil wir bare backs, swaet an coal dust  
runnin doon da valley o wir riggy bane ta da crack o wir erses.  
An whin da coal cam finished wi balled in  
shappit up aers an new sawed spars.

Pistons shot back an fore, drivin a muckle flywheel  
roond an roond an roond. Da shaft below wir feet  
spun in a blur as hit forced da blades o da propellor  
roond an roond an roond. Wir faces glowed redd  
i da glöd o da fire. I'd niver felt dis haet in aa me days.

An whin we did hit da ice, I tow't da Diana wid spleet in twa.  
Astarn we guid at graet pace, dan cam ahead at full speed  
duntin wis clean aff wir feet. Back an fore we guid  
joost ee muckle batterin ram, tryin da hammer wir wey trowe.

Da mate cam doon da trap his face trippin him  
an telt wis aa ta whet. We wir stuck fur da winter.  
He left wis ta sit, wir heids in wir haands an tak  
in da last haet as da embers brunt doon ta ess.

*Da Corbie raise his heid  
streetchin wings wide an hiecht  
he blackit oot da sun*

## Trappit

Grippit apo aa sides ticht,  
muckle clumps o icicles fastened.  
Ony minute nicht be wir last,  
as we wait fur da spleet an splinter  
o boards an da on rush o waater,  
makkin ta sook wis straicht ta da boddam,  
as invisible currents push an shiv  
whaariver da notion taks dem.

An as da sun maks ta finally  
slip away ower a Suderd horizon,  
we still get a day back an fore  
whin da lift is a clear an royal blue  
as far as da sicht o da ee nicht streech –  
dat bricht, hit maks you glinder.  
i da distance icebergs shimmer  
laek da golden spires o a ceety  
dir biggins close enoch ta reach in an oor or twa.  
da fock weel wint an welcoming,  
layin graet plates o maet apo da table  
fur wis aa ta fill wir rumblin bellies.  
On a day sic as dis, dir canna  
be ony idder place apo dis aert sae boannie.

*Wi da lift drawn doon  
du has naewhaur ta geng  
wi da herd grip o frost*



## Mirrie Dancers

Man, I canna mind da sicht o da sun.  
You loss aa track o da time o day.  
Is hit been weeks, months ur years?  
An dan da clawin cowld turns you numb,  
maks you want ta close your een an niver waaken.  
I dunna ken hoo, I feel dee lvin dere Annie  
an I swear da haet o dy skien is apo me back.

But ivery noo an dan da lift pits on a fjanna,  
a licht show, a hansel fae da nordern gods.  
Or micht hit be da ill-natured ean playin wis fur fòls.  
Sae mony shades fae green ta aquamarine  
glitrn siller starn, boannie vari-orm  
flicker an dance, jig an reel, trowe a winter's lift.

Hit maks you winder if hit's aa bye wi  
an you're passed ower ta da idder side.

*Blue-finned is joost my style  
reekin o daeth  
A'll shun clean up eftir dee*

## Loss

Da Skipper took ta his bed  
wi da lurgy an he niver lifted him more.  
Lvin dere, gettin waeker an waeker  
by da day, his life blòd ebbit awa.  
Wir faith slidin in ta da mirk wi him.

Whit fate wid come ta wis aa? Dir wis nae hoop  
an whit peerie coarn o charity, lost aboard wir floatin kist.  
Ony, dat hed a peerie bit, gairded hit  
laek a wild baess, ill-vynded an cornered.

An if someen sood pass ta da idder side,  
da rest wid descend apo dir belangins  
laek corbies apo da cast oot lamb,  
dey could barely wait fur da braeth ta laeve dem.

An eftir da doctor hed read fae da guid book,  
we sang da hollow wirds o a hymn inta da emptiness.

*A'll pack oot dee een  
an dloor trowe dee leeg  
I can feel me belly rumble*

## Starvation

I tink A'm losin me mind. Da ony wye  
ta tak me towts fae starvation an cowld,  
is ta mak da finest denner itill me hied.  
An whit denners A'm hed, graet plates o maet,  
fried haddocks an livers wi floury taaties,  
plate eftir plate o reestit mutton tattie soup  
fresh baked bannocks clerted in kirn butter,  
lumps o fried saucermaet an deukes eegs,  
poorin da fat oot da pan ower da leftower tatties,  
clooty dumplins foo o raisins an spice an cinnamon,  
hame med hufsi washed doon wi cup eftir cup o sugary tae.

An dan me towts 'll tak a darker turn,  
da boadies itil da howld, prime frozen an maet apo dir banes.  
Da lang pig, dey say hit tastes o saat pork.  
Could we raelly hae a feed aff o dem? A roastit leeg  
or a braised rack o ribs, kidneys, liver an heart.

*I spy flesh tow't he  
wi da scraepe o taes on rock  
sharpened his claws*

## Lang Lippeded

Slippit at last,  
wis dat wir left, waakend  
ta grey waater an shattered ice.  
An da lift drawin doon wi dark clood.  
A Norderly breeze shivved wis clear.  
Da cowld wis slippin hits grip.  
We moved aroond da daek in slow rikkity steps.  
Nane o wis fit ta oag up da riggin.  
So we raised whit sail we could,  
wir feet planted apo da daek, strent spent.  
An as da Diana brook clear  
fae her anchor howld apo da ice  
an cast aff da chains o imprisonment  
we left da Davis Straights in wir wake  
an ran fae da very jaws o Hell.

*Don't du dare turn dee back  
hit'll be da last thing du does  
croaked da corbie*

## Slippin Awa

Der's me set afore da fire i da Nort Hoose o Setter  
lang lived an spent, baerd streetchin ta me belt.  
Dir's been mony a turnin o da tide  
fae we set wir fit apo dry laand at Heylor.  
Da owldest boy, first mate apo da clippers,  
wir Mary bidin in Weathersta wi a screed o bairns  
an Jeemsie still wirkin sheep i da Setter hill,  
his Ina keepin hoose an hame,  
an me boannie Annie lang since geen ta her maker.

Neebin here, I feel da cowld climbin up me leegs  
an da points o me fingers loss aa feelin.  
I shout on Ina ta stoke da fire,  
to bank up da grate wi paet eftir paet.  
Fur aa hits lowe, I canna shak da starvation.

Fitful I slip in an oot o sleep, draemin  
A'm stood dere apo da daek o da "Diana."  
Her masts riggit laek new, yarnin awa wi da skipper  
an da bosun, sayin hit's a fine sudderly breeze,  
guid sailin wadder an da sails abune blatter i da wind.  
Wi dat sam me boannie Annie comes oot o da focsle  
as fine a smile as A'm seen lichtin up her face  
an her blue een sheenin, sayin...  
"Come du Jeemie, hit's time du slippit da ropes."

THE SINGLE-TRACK ROAD had got narrower and more rutted, then crossed a cattle grid and became a gravel track before the car splashed through a dark puddle and into the farmyard. When Armstrong parked, she flicked on the wipers, which scraped, smearing the window before cleaning it and revealing the view. In the foreground, a field of sheep and young lambs, some feeding, some gambolling – that was the word – the hills sloping down to the village below – the kirk steeple, the sun glinting on the river, traffic on the road; in the background the blue of distant hills. Maybe she shouldn't be here, but she wouldn't be long. Better than being stuck in the office.

She reached into the back seat to grab a shopping bag from which she pulled a pair of wellies. It was important to be prepared. She always kept them in the car, because she never knew where she'd be sent. Usually, when she arrived somewhere like this, it was for a more typical rural crime – stolen machinery mostly – and once a stolen bull that turned up two months later in Wales.

Her boots were spattered in mud from the last time she came here. The time they found the dead body of George (Dod) Rutherford, lying on his back beside the overturned quad bike, blood trickling out of his ear. Today she could tell Mrs Rutherford that the coroner had released the body. Accidental death.

She unbuckled her shoes and replaced them with the wellies, then put the shoes on the back seat. It was hard to keep the car clean – she used it for work, getting the shopping, dropping Archie here and there. Maybe on Tuesday, on her day off, she could give it a clean.

She got out and walked to the house, lifting the heavy door knocker and banging it down three times, then stepping back to wait. No answer.

Armstrong walked around the side of the house, following the bleating of sheep and the mewling of young lambs.

In front of the shed was a quad bike with a small trailer. Brian Rutherford was steering a sheep into the trailer with a crop. Son of the deceased. Armstrong watched him – competent, focused. He tapped its arse, then used the crop to push the sheep onto the low ramp. The sheep stumbled over a tiny lamb at its feet, almost falling forward into the trailer which Brian shut closed. Brian wiped his brow with the back of his hand then wiped his hands on his olive waterproof trousers. Ruddy cheeks, close-cropped brown hair, nearly six feet tall but still a laddie in the way he moved, the nervous smile on his face when he looked across.

'Hello.' His voice trailed off, unsure how to address Armstrong.

'Hi Brian.' She closed the distance between them. 'How are you doing?'

Brian wiped his hands on the front of his jacket. 'You know. Busy.'

'Yeah.'

Brian tipped his head back, indicating the shed. 'She's in there.'

He paused for a moment, as if waiting to be excused, but then climbed onto the quad bike and started the engine. A collie dog jumped up behind him, perching behind his seat. As he turned to drive away, he lifted one hand slightly in an awkward farewell. Mud sprayed from the tyres.

She walked into the shed, feeling the warmth captured by the corrugated roof, picking her way through the stalls, until she found Jenny Rutherford, sitting on a small stool, head bent over a dead lamb.

Armstrong cleared her throat. 'Mrs Rutherford?'

'Just a second,' she said and flicked open a blade.

As Armstrong watched she made a slit through the skin along the side of the back legs then set her knife aside. She wiped her hands on the thigh of her trousers. Then she stood, took hold of the lambskin and tugged at it, until the skin caught at the head and front legs. She took up the knife again and cut around the neck and front legs until a small woollen coat came free. Then she pushed the blade of the knife into a handle that looked like it was made of a ram's horn. She laid the skin to the side, lifted the lamb's pink carcass and dropped it into a hessian sack.

She lifted her head to face Armstrong. 'Now. What can I do for you?'

'Mrs Rutherford. I'm DS Armstrong.'

'Aye. I mind.'

Mrs Rutherford bent to tie the sack that contained the dead lamb; Armstrong watched. Ten days ago, a day of clay-

grey skies. No lambs born on the farm. Armstrong making sugary tea in the farmhouse kitchen. Brian looking at the mug in his hand as if wondering what it was. Mrs Rutherford saying the lambing'll no dae itsel. Her husband dead under a sheet.

Now, in the pens, lambs suckled at ewes. Mrs Rutherford stood up, wiping her hands on the front of a wax jacket already covered in brown streaks. 'There's never a good time.'

'You're very busy.'

'I am.' She lifted her head so that Armstrong could see the lines around her eyes, the wisps of red-grey hair that came from under a faded John Deere cap. She

forced a tired smile. 'But you've your job to do as well.'

'Thanks. We can talk here. If you like.'

'If you could give me a hand. That would help.'

She looked at the skin in Mrs Rutherford's hands. 'Of course.'

'Grand. It'll just take a second,' Mrs Rutherford said. She stood, picked up the little three-legged stool then walked away.

Armstrong followed her to another of the pens where a ewe lay on its side, breathing heavily. Two lambs slept on the hay. Mrs Rutherford put down the stool and unlatched the gate. With one hand, she lifted one of the sleeping lambs, turning it over and looking at it, then nodding. The ewe lifted its head weakly, then dropped it again. The lamb whimpered a little.

Mrs Rutherford sat on the stool then

looked down at her hands – lamb in one, skin in the other. After a moment, she reached out the hand holding the lamb. 'Take this,' she said.

Armstrong bent down and took the lamb in two hands. Mrs Rutherford placed the skin on her knees.

'Hold it. Here,' she said.

Armstrong held the squirming lamb while Mrs Rutherford pulled the skin over its head and lifted its legs inside so that it fitted like a jacket. Then she took the lamb from Armstrong and walked away, lifting it into a closed pen and laying it on its feet, the jacket fitted tightly over most of its body, only hanging a little loose over its rear. The lamb wobbled a bit and let out a little whine. In response, the ewe in the pen came towards the lamb, looking from it to Mrs Rutherford, then back to the lamb. Mrs Rutherford leaned on the fence of the pen, watching. The ewe got closer to the lamb and dropped its head, while the lamb nuzzled in underneath towards the sheep's dugs. The ewe shuffled, then pushed its nose towards the lamb's rear.

'Come on,' said Mrs Rutherford. 'We can talk for a wee while. Then I'll come back and see how these two are getting on.'

Mrs Rutherford led the way out of the shed and into the yard. Walking behind her, Armstrong took her phone from her pocket to check for messages. After five o'clock. Mike would have collected Archie from childcare. She should pick up something nice for dinner on the way home. A bottle of wine maybe.

Mrs Rutherford leaned against a gate and looked into a field of grazing sheep and lambs. Armstrong stood beside her.

'Just a few questions Mrs Rutherford. Formalities. You know.'

'Aye.'

There was the noise of an engine and Armstrong looked up to see Brian's quad bike on the crest of the hill.

'It was your son that found the body.'

'He did.'

Armstrong waited, watching the young man dismount to open a gate.

'I was in the shed, helping deliver a lamb that had got itself the wrong way round. David was in the top field.'

'How did Brian find him?'

There was a pause, a clearing of the throat. 'I told them this. The other one, the man.'

'I know.'

'He hadn't come back for dinner. It was getting cold. He never wore a watch, but he knew when it was time to eat. I sent Brian to find him. He'd probably lain there for a while.'

'And he brought him down.'

'Aye. Brian righted the quad bike and lifted him onto the back. He thought we could revive him. It was too late.'

A silence came between them. In the field two lambs leapt, springing into the air. A woodpigeon gave a throaty call.

Armstrong turned to face Mrs Rutherford. 'How is Brian?'

'Fine. Coping. It's a busy time, the

Setting On

STORY BY CRAIG AITCHISON

★

*'It seems strange though.' Armstrong pushed back a lock of hair that had blown across her face. She'd started now, she had to push on. 'The quad bike tipping, him hitting his head like that.'*



lambling. We just have to get on with things. He's a good lad.'

Armstrong put her foot on the gate, making the chain that held it closed rattle a little.

'I think they'll be releasing the body soon.'

'So there'll be a funeral to organise,' said Mrs Rutherford.

'There will. I saw the autopsy report. Blow to the head, consistent with a fall.' A crow landed on a fence post nearby, sunlight picking out a purple sheen in its black feathers.

'It seems strange though,' Armstrong pushed back a lock of hair that had blown across her face. She'd started now, she had to push on. 'The quad bike tipping, him hitting his head like that.'

They both stood watching the crow turn its head left and then right.

'Aye.'

Armstrong thought that was it, end of conversation. The crow flew off, across the field, out of sight. Then Mrs Rutherford stepped back from the gate. 'Bad luck. The weather last year, all that snow and February, the beasts we lost. That lamb in there, stillborn. It's part of life.'

Armstrong turned to face Mrs Rutherford. 'And death.'

Mrs Rutherford nodded. Armstrong felt as if she was being appraised, sized up. 'Let's go in, see if that lamb's set on.'

She turned to walk away; Armstrong followed her back into the shed.

Mrs Rutherford stopped by the pen where the lamb was suckling at the teat of the sheep.

'Good girl,' Mrs Rutherford said, nodding.

'Success?'

'Aye. Better for all concerned. The lamb will get fed and that sheep'll be happier

now. The other one would struggle with two. Just a gimmer.'

'Gimmer?'

'Sorry. Two-year-old. First lambing.'

'I see.'

'Sheep toughen with age. Like the rest of us.'

'I see.'

They watched the lamb feeding, its throat welling with milk, the skin it wore hanging a little loose. Armstrong heard a hum that got louder, a buzzing sound that became the noise of an engine coming closer.

'Have you got children, Inspector?' Mrs Rutherford looked beyond Armstrong to the entrance of the shed.

Armstrong put her hand in her pocket, clutching her phone. 'One. A boy. He's three.'

'And you'd do anything for him. If you thought it was the right thing. Anything. To protect him.'

Armstrong thought of Archie. She should have picked him up from childcare - it was her turn, but she'd phoned Mike, asking him to go so that she could be here. Archie would be at home, drawing a picture in big colourful swirls while chatting about his day.

'I would.'

'He wasn't David's you know. Brian.'

The rattling of a gate outside. 'I didn't know.'

'I had him young. His father left. Well, he still lives in the village. But he left me.'

Armstrong looked to the door, making out Brian, collie dog trotting at his heel.

'I never thought of him as having a father. Not David. Not... Not anyone. Just mine. I fed him and looked after him and comforted him when David lost his temper. I was there when he was ill or

scared or when the other boys at school called him names. I taught him how to tend the sheep and I encouraged him to do something else. To get away.' She gestured with her hand to the entrance of the shed and the hills beyond.

'Away from the farm?'

'Mrs Rutherford lifted the cap from her head again, looking into its grimy rim, turning it in her hands.

'It's a hard life. And his father...'

'Didn't they get on?'

Mrs Rutherford pushed her hand into the pocket of her jacket. The knife. Armstrong stepped back a little, thinking of the way she flicked it, slit the skin, smoothly, no fuss. 'Ach, you know. Fathers and their sons.'

She pushed the cap back onto her head and turned to a noise - Brian coming into the shed, slowing at each pen to look in.

'He's a good lad. But he still needs looked after.' Mrs Rutherford's voice was almost a whisper. 'I'd better get his dinner on.'

She brushed past Armstrong, walking towards her son, taking his arm and steering him out of the shed and back into the yard.

Armstrong followed, shielding her eyes from the sun when she stepped outside.

Mrs Rutherford turned. 'Would you like to come in? A cup of tea?'

'No. I'll need to go.'

The three of them stood for a moment as if each waiting for the other to say something more. The sheepdog nudged at Armstrong's calf and she reached down to stroke its head.

'Yours, Brian?'

'Aye. Not much of a sheepdog. More of a pet.'

'Sometimes they don't take to it,' said

Mrs Rutherford. 'Even if they're born to sheepdog stock. You never know.'

A look passed between Mrs Rutherford and her son. Armstrong tried to understand what was in that look. A pact of silence? Her desire for Brian to leave? The work that needed done?

'Thank you, both,' said Armstrong. 'For your time.'

Mrs Rutherford just nodded, and she and her son turned towards the house.

Armstrong went to her car. She took her phone from her pocket, opening her contacts and scrolled down to the direct line to the station. She should phone, speak to DI McPherson about what Mrs Rutherford had told her, the doubts she had. Her thumb hovered over the number.

She'd better let Mike know. If she phoned McPherson she'd need to go into the station and that would mean getting home late. She opened his contact, the profile picture a photo of Archie, holding up blue paint-covered hands beside his blue paint covered face. The paint was in his hair too. That boy.

McPherson was probably at home by now. Even if he was still at work, what would she say? What did she really think? What was the point?

Better to go home, make dinner, give Archie a bath, read him a story. The case was closed, the day was over. She put the phone back in her pocket.

After a moment looking down the valley, listening to the gentle bleat of lambs, she turned the ignition and reversed the car, looking down at her wellies as she changed gear. There was already a streak of muck or shit on the black car mat. She'd book it in for a valet on her day off, let someone else deal with it. Too late now. ■

I SHALL COME closer for this. To the bell weight of its coldness and the mirk of its planet. To the soft scalloped clouds, the creases of skies and its marble thick walls. I see dust from galloping horses with light balanced on top. Then smoke from high school experiments billowing from small fingers and faces disappeared. Even closer to the veins of the parchment, the beryl of its skin.

I used to own one. A friend turned up with it one day, something about a customer paying for spectacles with gold-crested canes and oils, and he hoisted it into my cupped hands. It stood proud on its balustrades in my living room. The eye of the wizard. My boiler broke that year, then my shower, then my washing machine. In the darkness, doors slammed shut, radiators swallowed their hesitations, tears dripped from the taps with no comforting hands.

I didn't take any money for it. In front of a yawned open boot and its mouthful of treasures. Caution-filled eyes in exchange for stroking hands and the mouth of a child.

But what is it about them that enchants so many of us? Is the now not enough? Time without illusion? Perhaps not, when today we spend so much of our time peering into glass screens. I think back in time, to when Druids consulted with clues and messages morphing from the marbles of the throats made of glass. The very essence of prayer.

In the music fantasy film *Labyrinth*, David Bowie twists orbs through his fingers like a magician rolling coins. What the viewer does not see are the arms of juggler, Michael Moschen, who is standing behind Bowie, manipulating the objects. Camera trickery provides the deception.

## Scrying

STORY BY NICOLA MADILL



When I was a child, I used to lie on the old brown carpet in the living room, bathing in a warm parallelogram of sun. Hair brushes becoming centipedes, chairs becoming ladders.

And sometimes now, I feel as though I am a multi-souled person living in one being; turned down pages, my keys become hidden, fresh cups of tea. It sends me spinning, returning to moments I thought were understood to find deeper truths. Continuing to learn that my life is not one straight line, but a serendipitous curve back to memory and people: an eternal return.

When I was younger, I visited a fortune-teller. I waited patiently to be

told if I would be pretty or if I would be rich, as her head hovered above my hands, eyes peering into my palms and creases. The grey roots on her head became a phantasmagoria of trails of wanderlust footsteps or best-selling records or gigs packed by the hundreds or tent-skinned villages of ancestors waiting to meet me at a ruby-red sundown. Instead she told me: You will be married... You will mother... You will make your own destiny, while my money piled up in fast smoke.

As I look into my reflection during a bedtime now ritualised, a blurred body of post-it notes floats in my peripheral vision, each furled like ruffled feathers carrying messages from my younger self. I can see the moon in my window, veiled by ribboned skies. I come a little closer to the mirror and sweep the cotton over the skin, around my right eye, tightening my face. When I take my hand away, the skin falls and a hairline mountain stream is captured, glistening silently in the dimly lit room. ■

## How I take a new mother

LYDIA HARRIS

You know most of it already.  
I wash my hands, lay down my gifts,  
open the curtain.

But walking on Boxing day  
she enters my field of vision.

She is Theotokos.  
She wears new gloves for different kinds of grief.  
Her toes snout moss.

Her gift is a small stone vessel for crushing grapes.  
She recites the blessing to be said  
when going on a journey.

We meet my own father in the garden.  
He carries a warm loaf, his feet are bare.  
On the table he has laid two dishes.

He jumps a stream, running.  
My new mother scoops a handful of water,  
blows into the surface,  
one bubble swallows her.

## Charm to re-assemble a jam jug, from fragments of beach leam

LYDIA HARRIS

*(stoneware jam jugs: too commonplace  
to be in need of description...  
...made of lame or earthenware. A Fenton)*

By the ring,  
by the sticky ring,  
the jelly-fied ruby ring,  
the raised ring on the shelf  
in the Hammers passage.

By the ring on the shelf of the passage between  
stove heat and beast heat, between lamplight and  
moonlight.

By the ring on the shelf made of sea drift,  
the ring on the shelf made from the side  
of a fish box from the Starry Maria, stranded  
at Berstness the night fieldfares drowned.

By this ring I summon  
these pieces of leam  
to click-clack  
one to the other,  
to rub edge against edge,  
to nudge point into gap,  
to soften, to yield this scrap to that one.

By the nick-notch grooves scrambling  
the sides, by the sneaked-out drool,  
the dribble, the trickle from the spoon,  
runs to the wood of the shelf.

By this ring,  
curl lip to shoulder  
and the elegant groove of your neck.  
Stand and be filled, spill sweet jam  
down your sides, form a ring.  
By this ring...

## Salon

LYDIA POPOWICH

Asymmetric is the new black, she purred  
into the forest of mirrors, a rainbow  
Janus, her two faces receding into infinity.  
Kate was so blown away by herself, it hurt

in the forest of mirrors. A rainbow  
beyond the rain-tumbled glass arched  
a January sky, the crumbling walls and  
For Sale boards of a deserted Main Street.

Beyond the rain-tumbled glass arched  
a customer, bobble-hatted and doubled  
against the wind like tumble weed rolling  
towards a make-over with 15 percent off.

A customer, bobble-hatted and doubled  
in need of a break-fix miracle-treat curl  
please height-riser mega-sleek moisture  
me rich airy-builder with no yellow matrix.

In need of a break-fix miracle-treat curl  
Kate unholstered her scissors, quivered  
her combs and twizzled her natural bristles.  
On hearing of Sue's new marble jacuzzi

Kate unholstered her scissors, quivered,  
chopped, snipped and razored Sue's golden  
locks to the floor and with a chameleon smile  
"Asymmetric is the new black", she purred.

## Testament

LYDIA POPOWICH

God is the fizz/pop of a failing light bulb.  
God is Wagner's Götterdämmerung.  
God is a warning sign on a sharp bend.  
God is a shoe salesman in a designer shop  
or an invisible splinter in the sole of your foot.  
God is the knot in your umbilical cord.

God is one segment of a chocolate orange  
or an ice cube in a shaken not stirred.  
God is a teaspoon of honey in your hot toddy.  
God is butter melting on toasted crumpet  
or an onion on the chopping board.  
God is a sandwich cut into tiny squares.  
God is the steady drip of a leaking tap  
or a pair of curtains that gape in the middle.  
God is an old phone in the back of a drawer  
or a set of cookie cutters in fancy shapes.

God is a dandelion clock on a windy day,  
the scent of wet earth in a forest.  
God is a daub of yellow paint on blank canvas.  
God is a game of truth or dare.  
God is a broken windscreen in the fast lane  
or a hit and run on a dark street.  
God is the black rain of Chernobyl,  
a lone wolf in the Carpathian Mountains.  
God is a white feather on your path,  
the gardener who prunes hard every winter.

## Structure 8 (the workshop)

INGRID LEONARD

Chert, flint and flagstone,  
cobble-flaked tang,

knives smashed from beach-pebble,  
traded wolf fang,

scrapers, mace and arrow-heads,  
soot, ash, bone

egg-white, haematite,  
chippers, carvers, sanders

cutters, buffers, polishers,  
axe-haft and adze

mallet, spade, needle,  
gut-cord, strip-leather

bone-pin, hide, clay, shell –  
tooth, rusk, rain, fire.

## The Early Dead

INGRID LEONARD

Two-year-old twin boys, darting  
between tables at a bring-and-buy sale like lambs.  
Their mother had dressed them in velvet suits  
that matched their hair, dark and close-cropped.  
Days later, hers was singed at the temples  
along with her skin, she'd fled a burning caravan  
with her boys still in.

Jackie Skinner at 60, borrowing a book  
from my mother, fresh as the June evening  
he'd cycled in on, like a student home  
from college, a fleck of summer light  
turning out on his bike from Tormiston.  
My Dad saw blue lights as his own father  
wheezed,  
how could any of us know that death comes in  
threes?

I dreamed of my new-dead Da on the faces of  
trolls  
that jumped out from the roadside, leering;  
their ears were gnarly and peach-coloured,  
in their mouths, his smile turned mocking.  
There was the country crossroads, the clean  
stone path to home, but the dial was fixed:  
in wake or sleep, I'd be afraid of the ditch.



## Timefolds

GAIL LOW

*Reading the archive is one thing; finding a way to hold on to it is quite another.  
(Arlette Farge, The Allure of the Archives)*

Yesterday, an email invitation came  
to look at Dundee's history in archival scraps –  
logbooks, letters, jottings, photographs.  
Come and see...

MS 418, a black-paged album  
mounted pictures by Valentine of Dundee,  
photographic studio.

Under protective tissue, curious images:  
high beams, railway sleepers  
and iron girders, a city of labouring men,  
bolting piece by piece, Meccano-like,  
grey columned piers.

Near the album's end, cheeky boys gathered  
chins pressed against stone, agog-  
viaduct magic, a supple arc  
making landfall,  
all toil and industry disappeared.

An adjacent box held odds and sods;  
MS 254, a floating factory  
in black and white,  
sales receipts, a sailing diary.

In 1836, careless of life,  
seventy men on two ships died,  
'one hundred fatherless children' left behind.  
Hazardous winters, penal labour for profit,  
acts too of will and skill; ships-  
'Narwhal', 'Victor', 'Dee'-  
with hard muscle men and whaling talk:  
'specioneer', 'skeeman', 'harpooner'  
'baleen', 'flense' and 'kreng'.

From masts

pendulous fruits hung,

bodies turned inside out.

Right whales were so called because  
they were the right ones to hunt.

Sea-going leviathans  
barrelling through oceans with easy grace,  
with a blowhole memory of land,

breaching

acrobatically,

hitting water

gloriously,

(with a thunderous clap to no applause),  
or hanging suspended

in deep sleep.

A cold smirry Tay morning,  
wet seeping into clothes, soaking skin.

A St Ayles skiff heads upstream,  
oars slap water, each rower stretches  
to catch and pull,

catch and pull,

driving backwards in time,

shearing an air ribbon wake.

This tear in grey silk once healed  
is traceless.

Still lives, distant voices;

nothing to see now,

only old brick stumps.



Skiff photograph by Ruth Morrison of the Catalina Rowing Club

# Places in the Mind: An Interview with Kapka Kassabova

By Nick Major

“**N**AN SHEPHERD HAS a lovely line in *The Living Mountain*: ‘Place and mind may interpenetrate till the nature of both is altered. I cannot tell what this movement is except by recounting it.’ I guess – ultimately – that is what drives me too, this fascination with how place and human beings interpenetrate each other.” Kapka Kassabova is sitting cross-legged on the floor of her study, talking not – as you might think – about The Cairngorms, but about Europe’s two oldest lakes. Lakes Ohrid and Prespa are “embedded diamond-like in the mountain folds of western Macedonia and eastern Albania,” and seen from above, “the pair look like eyes in an ancient face.” The description is an apt one. There is no scientific consensus on their precise age, but they could be three million years old.

Ohrid and Prespa’s natural and human ecology are the subject of Kassabova’s new travel book, *To the Lake: A Balkan Journey of War and Peace*. Lake Ohrid has been a presence in Kassabova’s life since childhood. As she writes in her sparky and insightful 2008 book *Street Without a Name*, about her childhood growing up in communist Bulgaria, Macedonia was her “first real encounter with the outside world” when she was nine years old. Ohrid, the lake’s main town and namesake, was the birthplace of her grandmother, Anastassia. She is a central figure in *To the Lake*, which examines “how families digest big historio-geographies, [and] and how these sculpt our inner landscape.”

I last met Kassabova two years ago in this very study, which is split between two rooms, one designed for reflection, one for hard graft. The study is adjacent to her cottage near the Beaulieu river, in rural Inverness-shire. Born in 1973, she arrived in Scotland when she was 30 years old and felt immediately and “inexplicably” at home here. She lived in Edinburgh for seven years, but this has been her base for the last eight. Her study sits atop a garage, and looking up at the dark wooden panelling on the outside, I was reminded of a description in *To the Lake* of the enchanting “handsome wood-clad houses that hoard their secrets in towering stacked-up floors” along the streets of Ohrid’s old town.

Back in 2018, we met to discuss her book *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe* (2017). *Border* was about another frontier, a tripartite border zone between Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece. During the Cold War, it was a militarized, forbidden area. Hundreds of people lost their lives trying to cross it, looking for a long way round to the west. For that book, Kassabova travelled around this region collecting human stories, some of which spanned centuries. Along the way, she

met fire-worshippers, border guards and dancing priests. She weaves these into a kind of folk history and a meditation on borderlands and their affect on the human psyche. It won her a host of prizes, including The Saltire Scottish Book of the Year, The Highland Book Prize and the Stanford-Dolman Travel Book of the Year.

One of most intriguing aspects of *Border* was Kassabova’s near-insatiable hunger for stories. At one point she was warned by a mountain ranger “not to get addicted to story-hunting, because it is like climbing. It only takes once...” From this perspective, it is useful to understand her in the folklorist tradition of song and story collectors. In Scotland, one thinks of Walter Scott and Robert Burns. In America, Alan Lomax, the wandering ethnomusicologist. In the Balkans, it’s the Miladinov brothers, born in Struga, a town on the shores of Ohrid. The pair travelled throughout the Balkans in the 19th century and “gathered an epic collection of folk songs.” Many are still sung today.

Every age needs writers like these, those prepared to collect and preserve what otherwise might be lost. Thought about this way, *Street Without a Name*,



Kapka Kassabova. From the writer’s collection.

*Border* and *To the Lake* form a neat Balkan triptych of captured stories, ripe for preservation. But, in another way, her story-addiction is simply part of her *modus operandi*. Andrew O’Hagan once wrote that it was important for him to leave the desk behind, venture outside and “test the weatherproof nature of one’s style.” And so, with Kassabova, *To the Lake* moves from the deeply personal to encompass big political changes in Balkan history (the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of nation states, for instance). A glance at the bibliography reveals the amount of desk-work, reading and research it took. Yet, Kassabova says, “it would have never been ok for me, being the writer that I am, to sit here in my study and theorise about all of this. For me, it had to be once again an experiential journey. It’s a kind of reckoning on the internal level, but on the external level of encounters with people it was a very peaceful experience, which I think has something to do with the lakes and their particular character.”

That “internal reckoning” concerns an “unnamed menace” – “a malaise” or “indefinable sorrow” – that has dogged the maternal line in her family. “I think this is a book I have been – in a way – assembling all my life, because

these women are a part of me and I’m a part of them.” Her grandmother was a remarkable person. Anastassia was a poet, a journalist and a scriptwriter for Bulgarian national radio. Kassabova compares her to Demeter, the goddess of harvests. “In times of poverty and tyranny, she [her mother] and my grandmother had passed on extraordinary gifts to me: a love of language and literature, people and places, emotion and expression, independent thought and anti-conformity.” But what motivated Kassabova to write *To the Lake* was a desire to understand why “the two women I had loved and who had so much going for them (including caring husbands) had become tragic Furies; why we were martyrs to an unknown cause.”

Much of Kapka’s early life was unsettled, in place and mind. Even in the womb she “revolved ceaselessly, and emerged from my mother nearly suffocated by the umbilical cord which I had tied into a knot.” She is the “fourth generation in a female line to emigrate.” Near the end of the Cold War, her family upped-sticks and moved to New Zealand, and later, Kassabova emigrated from New Zealand to Scotland. In her books, she is a peripatetic presence. *Twelve Minutes of Love* (2012), about Tango dancing, crosses continents, from New Zealand to Buenos Aires. She has moved through the literary forms as well: novels, poetry and the essay. An early poetry collection is even titled *Geography for the Lost*. But it is narrative non-fiction that best suits her style and writerly temperament. A certain restlessness, of course, can be good for a writer, but it has a dark side.

In *To the Lake*, Ohrid and Prespa come to represent the uncanny doubling and paradox of the human psyche. Ohrid is the lake of light. “Prespa is dark, and located on the fringe of Aegean Macedonia, where the traditional colour for women has been black. When I saw those black costumes, and photographs of peoples’ mothers and grandmothers always wearing black – even as children, but only the women – [they seemed] born in mourning. I feel that a lot of women born in the Balkans are already in mourning. I was interested in teasing out those themes, which have been central to my life, but I wanted to do it with a light touch, precisely because it felt so heavy. I didn’t want this book to be a burden on the reader. Ultimately, I wanted to understand the burden, and ideally, to shed it. And a lake is a good place to do that.”

In the hands of a lesser writer, *To the Lake* might have become an exercise in self-pity. But this is no misery memoir. Far from it. She does eventually locate the source of the “unnamed menace,” but only through an outward-looking

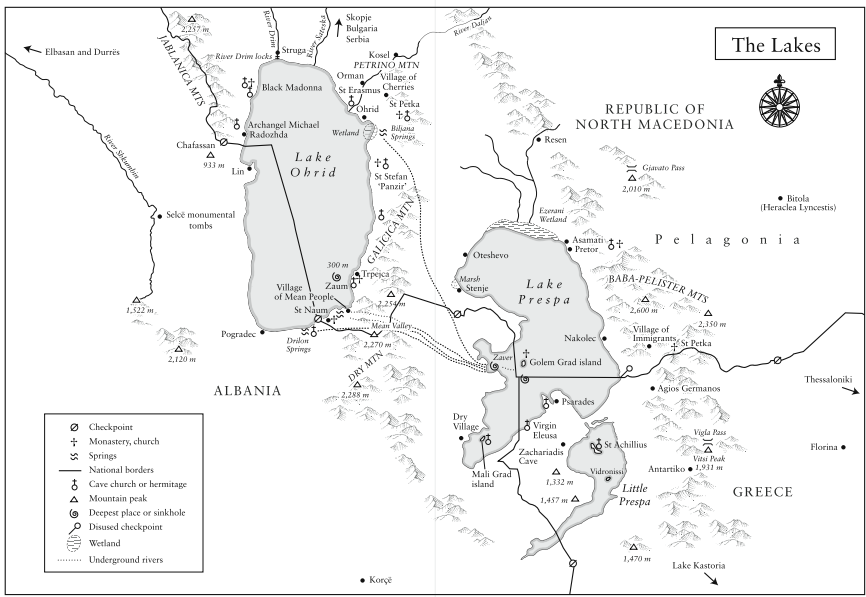


voyage of discovery. The Balkans are often misunderstood in various political and geographical ways. Ask someone where the Balkans are and many will point to Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo, those states at the centre of the wars and ethnic conflict that dogged former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. But the Balkans extends much further south and east, and the actual Balkan mountain range which gave the peninsula its name spreads fan-like across Bulgaria. As for the two lakes, their existence is hardly common knowledge.

Kapka has spoken to people who've travelled to Ohrid, but did not know Prespa even existed, let alone its twin, Little Prespa. "I didn't know anything about the natural or environmental aspects of the lakes. I didn't know they were connected through underground rivers. I hadn't explored Prespa before, which is Ohrid's hidden twin. It's higher (850m), but oddly enough it has a warmer water temperature, which is why all the birds migrate there. It is one of Europe's major birdlife sanctuaries, especially for the Pelican. But Ohrid has this incredible story of the Ohrid eel, which travelled all the way from the Sargasso Sea. Then, in the early years of Tito's Yugoslavia, they dammed The River Drim, during an era of grand industrial communist projects."

Of course, the region is not *terra incognita*. Many well-known writers have travelled through and written about the beauty of the lakes and their polyglot peoples, writers like Edith Durham, Henry Brailsford, and Rebecca West, who documented her trip in the well-known Balkan travelogue *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. The Bulgarian novelist, Dimitar Talev, created a famous literary matriarch called Sultana who is closely associated with the lakes. She is central to his quartet of novels set in the national revival period. The 19th century illustrator and poet Edward Lear travelled on horseback through the region as a landscape painter. He wrote a diary of his travels and produced a wealth of exquisite drawings and paintings. The landscape, with its mountainous peaks and troughs, its wild cherry and apple gardens, caves and monasteries, seems like an artist's ideal dreamscape. "In his Ohrid watercolours men loiter at corners, dressed in long woollen capes, fezzes, baggy Turkish shalvar trousers, or traditional white Macedonian or Albanian kilt-like fustanellas over trousers."

Lear found the lakes surrounded by a colourful blend of civilisations. The area has a rich classical history. Since the Medieval Bulgarian and Byzantine era it has been known as "the Balkan Jerusalem." A melting pot, it has always been a multi-lingual place. At one time, there were allegedly 365 churches on the shores of Ohrid. The Egnatian Way, a major Roman road, runs past the lakes on its way from "Dyrrachium on the Adriatic to Constantinople on the Bosphorus. Later, Orthodox hermitages and churches were hewn into the limestone, later



still, Islamic caravanserais and dervish monasteries appeared."

Despite the erasure of much of this cultural tapestry, Lake Ohrid "is a repository of everything that has gone on, and so with the collective psyche. It holds and conserves, but it also hides. It is glittery on the surface, but if you go deeper there is this black water of depth and secrets, illusion and nightmares and pain." Kassabova visited the last remaining Dervish tekke, or lodge house, of Ohrid town. The caretaker, "Slavche, one of the local matriarchs, immediately not only remembered Tatjana – my dead aunt – but entire scenes from her funeral and from her life and her mother's life emerged and shared them with me on the spot, almost as if she had been expecting me. I think that is a quality of the lake. The lake affects people's psyches." Slavche relates her conversion to Islam after falling in love and the consequences this had for her family life, and through this we learn about the Balkan Sufi tradition and its wider unorthodox history in the story of Islam.

Like concentric circles, the stories Kassabova collects spread out over wider and wider historical waters. But each storyteller who has brought their voice to the region, has also brought their own prejudices to bear on it. Only Edward Lear, concerned as he was with imagery and landscape, is the possible exception. Writers like West, Durham and Brailsford "had one thing in common: the knowledge that they were from the ruling race...that their people ran half the world, that the governments in their great capitals called the shots even here." I mention the Scottish travel writer John Foster Fraser, who travelled to the lakes at the turn of the twentieth century for his book *Pictures from The Balkans* (1906). He compared the Albanian mountains to those of Scotland, which Kassabova thinks was "a Byronic projection on his part." Nevertheless, does Kassabova see any parallels between the region and her home?

"He [Foster Fraser] actually travelled along the same road that I travelled with my cousin into Albania...For me, there are no straightforward parallels. But I have

always felt there is something Balkan about the Scottish Highlands, and perhaps that's one of the reasons why I love living here so much. I'm not just talking about the physical similarity and wilderness. But also, marginality and the relationship between the centre of power and what's perceived as a political or cultural periphery. I think the Highlands obviously at one point were a romanticised topos and are now – culturally – getting away from that. I feel that very few who don't live in the Highlands actually understand the place. There is a lot of projection going on. Projection is one of the themes of my book. The old project on to the young all their neuroses and fears. The great powers project on to the smaller ones."

This all circles back to Kassabova's central quest at the start of *To the Lake*: to find the source of that "identifiable sorrow" in her matrilineal line. As it turns out, it concerns the subtle interplay of the personal and political. After World War One, the "great powers" parcelled up – Balkanised – the Balkans into mutually hostile territories. A region of no borders was suddenly full of sharp dividing lines and nation states with populations claiming a unique identity and language, then came the Cold War and Communism, and with each new reality, "the psyche of the people had taken a hit...the cumulative loss ran so deep that the prospect of any further loss, no matter how small, had become intolerable."

"We were colonised rather than colonisers. I think that puts you in a very different paradigm. You are forever trying to recover from having been the colonised, at least in your own mind. This is one of the complexes of the Balkans. Its people think themselves victims long after they are no longer anything of the sort. The victim mentality, this competition of suffering, remains. I ended up calling it a cult of suffering. A cult of war." Of course, the post-war construction of nations also saw the rise of a strange form of nativism – ethno-nationalism – which infected all the Balkans. It is still alive today and is a reminder that dangerous forms of nationalism are on the rise throughout Europe. No country is immune: a vapid form of nationalism precipitated Britain's

exit from the European Union, for example.

Yet, there is hope that through art we can maintain a true understanding of European life and identity. One way to look at Kassabova's book is that its very structure – a matrix of stories – resists the idea that one overarching narrative of history can take precedence over another. Does she agree with this perspective? "Yeah, again, this happened organically. As with *Border*, the structure, the form and the different registers of the book had to reflect aspects of the place as I experienced them. I was aware of the balance I wanted to keep between the family story – which is a portal into the wider story – and the polyphonic reality of the lakes and their true history. Their true history and present are polyphonic. Even when you are wading through miles and miles of subsidised beans in northern Greece, it is never truly a monoculture. There are always other species. The other is coming through, woven among the bean plantations, and among an ethnically devastated population there are still remnants of the old tapestry."

The Naum Springs, which Kassabova visits at the end of the book, are an example of one of these remnants: a site of worship from early paganism to the present day. "Communion with clean water is humanity's precious link with eternity – even when all else is lost." Back in Scotland, Kassabova has been surprised "to discover how many healing wells there used to be in Britain. It is about what survives. There is no question that water worship was practised across Europe, it was just part of how people lived. In Scotland, in the Highlands, a lot of it has been erased. The healing springs have closed up; they have retracted back into the earth because there is no human story any more. The lakes and mountains of my book have been through the devastation of war, but many of these beliefs and the interactions between human and non-human still go on, and there's something rich and precious about that."

Since I first read *Border*, two years ago, one line in particular has stayed with me; it seems to capture something of Kassabova's writing. "Perhaps the story of all our lives is the story of what's lost and how we go about looking for it." What's lost can be a healing well, a monastery, a landscape, a memory, an idea, a people, a way of life. With *Border*, *To the Lake* and her other books of narrative non-fiction that are her preferred form, Kassabova has found a perfect way to search for what is lost, and to unearth the real stories of history, in all their multifariousness. ■

*To the Lake: A Balkan Journey of War and Peace* is published by Granta Books, £14.99, and was a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week in February this year.

## Cliff at Noss

IMOGEN FORSTER

They say this wet rock reaches  
as far down into the sea  
as the cliff stands dry above.

Staring into the drowning dark,  
under the glassy slip and swell  
of its elastic skin, I see what  
could be plankton, ocean-drifters,  
name-kin of the wandering planets.  
Or might this be no more  
than a fine land-dust, endlessly  
falling through unbordered black?

Does the cliff drop sheer, a mirror  
picture of its twin in upper air?  
Or is it loose, stepped and slabbed,  
bottoming in a shifting rubble field,  
tide-stirred, worked smooth by storms?

Gannets, saffron-smudged,  
their tails as stiff as whittled wood,  
bank on ink-dipped wings, hang  
as if strung on wires, plunge  
in arrow-showers, seeing what  
I cannot see: the silver-flashing  
shoals, rock-anchored urchins  
and soft incurled anemones.

Each bird rises from its narrow  
ledge, dives, a sea-forager,  
returns and dives again,  
water and air its single element.

## Leveret

IMOGEN FORSTER

Walking up the lane I almost tread on it,  
lying on one side in a patch of crusted  
mud, grey, hairless. The eyes are shut,  
the visible ear folded back into a pink  
petal, the soft underside motionless.

The legs lie straight, feet the size of pigs'  
trotters made for a dolls' house kitchen.  
I stare, sure that it's dead. I daren't touch,  
not fearing it will be cold, but that intact,  
immaculate, it may still be blood-warm.

A pinhead belly-button tells me  
it breathed through this soft nostril,  
sucked milk with this blunt snout.  
I hear a tractor, and so that it's not  
burst open under the high roaring wheel  
I shoe it into long grass, seeing it now  
as itself, this hare, five inches long.

## Night-drive, Deer

JAMES ANDREW

Headlights peel back black  
to show more road ahead  
as trees stand, bright.

A pair of eyes scintillates  
from a spindly statue  
with ears pricked upwards  
before the quick turn  
and change into darkness.

Beyond this passing light,  
there is only that.

## Before the Play at Uig Hall

CLAIR TIERNEY

Before the play at Uig Hall  
two flowery lasses create wakes in puddles  
backwards skipping by the Echaig

Silt sides where wellies sink  
Rapids under the bridge  
Leaves to let fall, switch, and watch  
for on the other side

It is a conversation the river speaks  
babblings and sputterings.  
That I could swim in that river  
next season when the rain's been  
that trout brown bend  
'neath peaty clears,  
a pale belly glimpsed.

Before the play at Uig Hall  
two flowery lasses create wakes in puddles  
backwards skipping

## Minor Comedy Unit

MARKA RIFAT

And who would expect to essay  
a variety routine  
to prove one's marbles intact?

Rushed from the accident, I have no ID,  
no one in uniform believes the age I give,  
they suspect my wrinkle-free insistence  
smacks of concussion,  
so my audition begins while official verification starts  
offstage.

The germ-free curtain opens with a spotlight  
to make my pupils dance  
I pass with an entrechat.  
There is no applause.  
On to the clowning and my tongue  
must produce a pomp rock leer.  
A quick nod, then we progress to Groucho Marx.  
I waggle roguishly, even alternating left and right –  
nurse ticks, non-committal. A tough gig this.  
Now inflate the cheeks and hold.  
I am Dizzy Gillespie, becoming dizzy,  
as, in audience participation mode,  
she tries to push my jazz bulges in.  
The audit reaches its finale.  
“Now smile.” I produce an Otto Dix rictus  
and win the coveted part of  
the un-concussed.  
Exit minor injuries unit, stage right,  
Chastened, bruised, feeling so much older than I look.

## Dad Dancing

MARKA RIFAT

Beer bellies bouncing  
elbows jabbing and flapping,  
thick-soled shoes hitting the floor  
to random rhythms,  
hefty hips swinging,  
sweat flying off broad brows,  
then he steps out,  
takes his rightful place in the maelstrom,  
and holds out his strong hand.

I battle through and, fingertips locked,  
we smile. This is our time,  
our silent dialogue begun once I could stand  
and nurtured across the years,  
grown into elaborate displays  
for our pleasure.

His lightest push and I spin,  
dip, move in and back,  
curl into his protecting arms  
and twirl out into space  
to be caught once more  
and a new set of moves begins.  
He is a boy in the dance hall,  
A young man at his wedding,  
a father with his daughter,  
all in one beat.



# A Whole Lamb and a Cigar

SHORT STORY BY RACHEL CARMICHAEL



SHE HEARS THE phone ring, and her husband stumbling out of the bedroom and down the stairs to answer it. She drifts off again for a minute or two, then he is back in the room, dressing in the dark, knocking something over.

What's happening? she asks him.

Called out. A wee girl.

She wishes he hadn't told her. She falls asleep again anyway.

When the alarm clock goes, she has forgotten that he's gone until she turns on the light and sees a pile of clothes and the collapsed stack of football programmes on his side of the bed. That's more for her to tidy up today. She goes to the next room to wake the girls. The room is cold, the storage heaters are useless. Maggie next door is getting central heating in time for Christmas, but Maggie works. There's no job that she can do, with the girls to look after, with his shifts and the call-outs in the middle of the night.

She watches them each morning as they walk along the pavement and disappear round the corner, the little one stopping to pull up her socks, then running to catch up with her big sister. They haven't really noticed. Sometimes the older one asks if Daddy's still at work.

She thinks about what they'll eat tonight. In the freezer she sees the three dinners that she's made for him this week,

then stuck in some Tupperware so that she wouldn't eat them herself. They got the freezer after the last big case, nearly two weeks' overtime from that one. Maggie says you can get a whole lamb, butchered, for £11. Maybe she'll speak to him about that when he's back.

It's still early. There was little on the morning news: searches continue, concern is mounting. She turns off the radio, too cheerful and trivial.

The house is tidy and clean without him in it. She used to laugh at this, his disorderly conduct. She sits for a while with a cup of tea and her library book, but a romance feels wrong in the circumstances, and she thinks she might have read this one before. The street outside is quiet, children at school or kept indoors. She writes a list to take to the shops and thinks about phoning her mother. She puts her finger in the zero, turns and releases it. By the time it has clicked back to the bottom of the dial she has imagined her mother's voice asking questions she can't answer, and changed her mind.

A key turns in the front door and footsteps thud up the stairs. Water runs in the bathroom. He comes into the kitchen in jeans and a jumper and sits down without a word. He looks tired, older. He smells different. She doesn't know what to say to him.

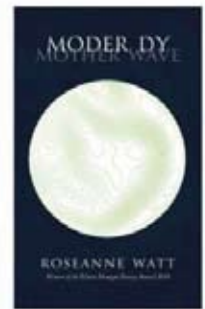
Where are the girls? he says.



## The Highland Book Prize Duais Leabhair na Gàidhealtachd

Presented by the Highland Society of London

Moniack Mhor Writers' Centre, the Highland Society of London and the Ullapool Book Festival congratulate the shortlisted authors for the 2019 Highland Book Prize. Unfortunately, in response to COVID19, our event at the 2020 Ullapool Book Festival has been cancelled. The result of the 2019 Highland Book Prize will be announced online on Saturday 9th May. Please follow us on social media for updates. Details of the 2020 Highland Book Prize will follow in May 2020.



***The Frayed Atlantic Edge: A Historian's Journey from Shetland to the Channel* by David Gange (William Collins)**

***Surfacing* by Kathleen Jamie (Sort of Books)**

***Spring* by Ali Smith (Penguin Random House)**

***Moder Dy* by Roseanne Watt (Polygon)**

**READER COMPETITION:** Would you like to win a copy of all eleven books on the 2019 Highland Book Prize longlist? Can you help us to read for the 2020 longlist? Recommend a friend for our Volunteer Reading Panel for your chance to win at [www.highlandbookprize.org.uk/call-for-readers/](http://www.highlandbookprize.org.uk/call-for-readers/)



@highlandbook1

Supported by the William Grant Foundation

'THE DOG'S A bitch,' I said. Derek, I think, heard me. The windows of his pick-up probably wouldn't open more than the inch at which they already sat. If the well-used exterior was an indication of a well-used electrical system then I knew that the wiring looms within the vehicle would be in a similar state to the door handles, bodywork, lights and bumpers—tied up and stuck up with twine and tape. Roadworthiness in these parts is a subjective assessment. Roseanne, his wife, waved cheerily from the passenger seat, probably flushed with world domination from within the industrial tent. Her world. Derek himself mouthed words that were probably meant to indicate that he couldn't stop now, but really he wasn't running away, just hastily exiting a showground ready to head home. North and then east.

I pondered my own imminent departure. I had studied with interest the Blackface sheep judging, briefly taken in the suckler cow and calf competition and neatly sidestepped the bar. An afternoon of

slow and unsteadily increasing inebriation had been an attractive proposition. But only if the immediate euphoria of the loosened inhibitions, entwined with the camaraderie and bonhomie of newfound intimacies and confessions, could outweigh the dark, painful, morbidity and paralysis of being, that would surely unfold over the ensuing 24 hours. Once it could have. Yesterday it might have. But today it didn't.

That's the blessing of being on one's own. I could deliberate on my own departure, or otherwise. No friend or partner to ask, or consider. No-one to negotiate with over meals or mealtimes. No human partner that is, because I had the dog who is a bitch to consider, as

## Pup

SHORT STORY BY CAREY COOMBS



It's Thursday. School. Right.

He picks up the newspaper, glances at the back page.

Anything to eat?

It's all frozen. I can thaw something for you.

I'll be outside for a few minutes, he says.

He takes a cigar from a drawer, grimaces at her as he wiggles it in front of his mouth.

It's the only thing that takes away the mortuary smell. She'll have to take his suit to the cleaners. ■

mind a five-year-old blackie tup. So the pup got dropped off at my house. Partly then, my own fault. I wouldn't swap her now anyway. Part of the family. I can't imagine me saying that!

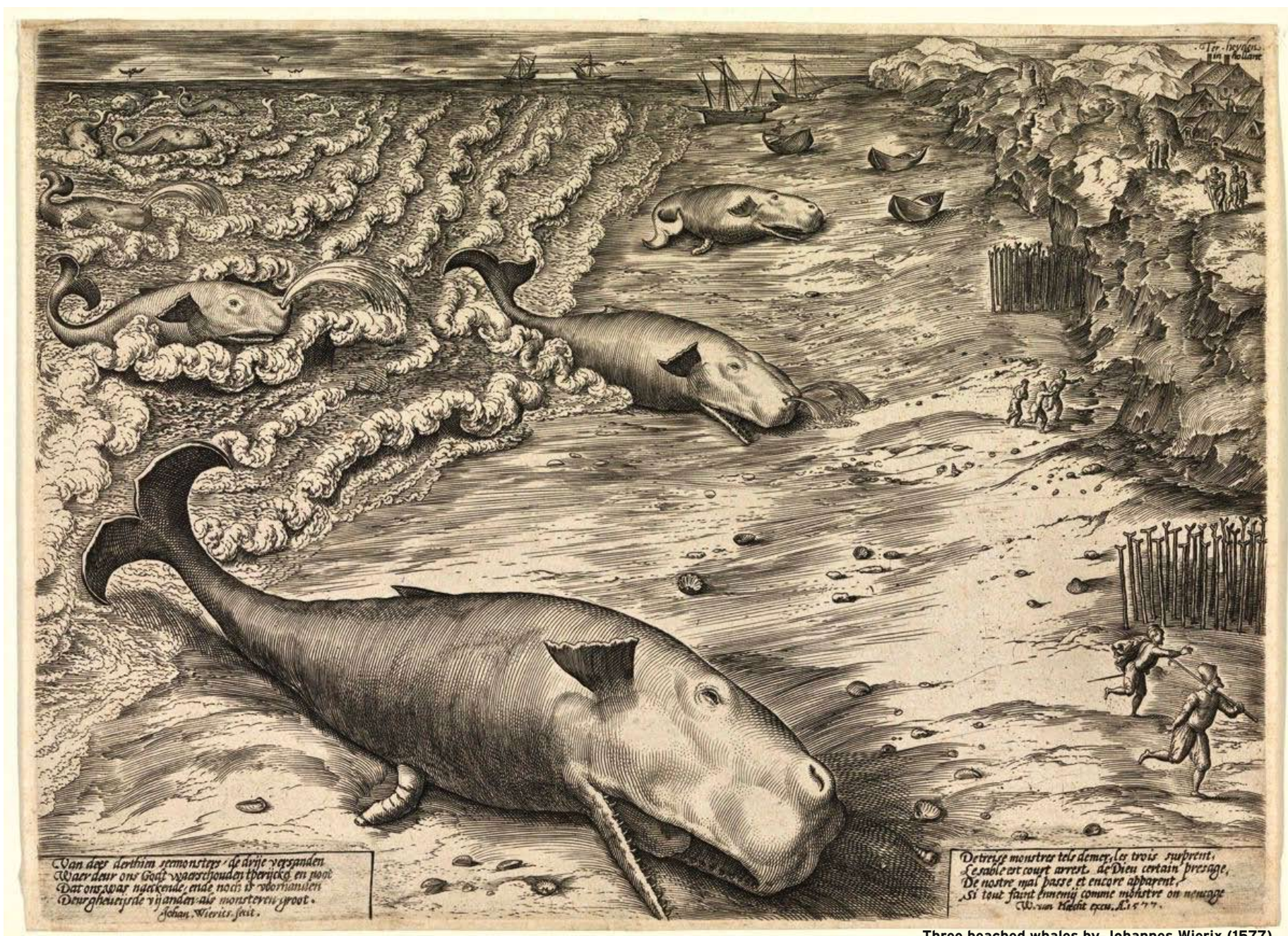
I like it up here. I like the solitude. I like the wind. I like the rain. I like the cold. I like that spring's a bastard. I like the grass not growing when it should because it's too bloody cold. I like that my ewes want to die, and if I'm not on their case day after day after day, they do die. I like it because I have to deal with it and I like that I have to swim against the tide. I like the fight here better than the fights I have won and lost that have banged me up for weeks or months. Coke highs and petty theft, temper-driven fists, drink and drive. I like a clean fight.

The dog and the bitch and the dog who is a bitch greet me. Great to be greeted.

We'll watch the mist roll in, the rain beat across the glen, clouds scud, the sun break through, night fall, dawn break, mist rise, sun shimmer, snow turn to slush.

"One life," I say to the pup. ■





Three beached whales by Johannes Wierix (1577)

KELLY DANCED ACROSS the sand, singing under her breath as she made her way towards the shore. The whale didn't move, but she was used to that: whales beached here regularly and this one looked like just any other. A deposit from the sea that didn't mean much, but this one was recent and fresh, and it was these she liked best, before they got smelly and rotted onto the sand.

Once upon a time the beachings would have been a rare occurrence. Kelly knew that from the mutterings of her mum and dad, above her head, about there being another one down on the shore, and it wouldn't be long before there was none left in the sea if it kept going at this rate. Kelly wasn't sure what it was, and didn't really mind: life was an adventure, and the beach was a playground, and the whales were just another treasure that became part of a game where the carcasses acted as supporting characters that regained life as a prop for her imagination.

Wrapped up warm in her pink unicorn jacket, woolly gloves and wellies that cast a red light onto the wet sand as she walked, Kelly was ready for adventure. She'd brought her bucket and spade, just in case digging was required, and her parents wouldn't expect her home until tea time. It was early winter, though, so

the sun would be setting before she got hungry. The long walk back across the sand wasn't a nice experience in the dark, and her parents, in their worry, would make even her homecoming unpleasant. She'd not been caught out by the darkness yet this winter, but this was the first whale for a couple of months and there was a lot to explore.

As she danced light-footed across the sand she tried not to look too closely at the whale. Her imagination had already started piecing together the story that she'd enact out, and too many distractions were no good: it needed to be right in front of her before she could commit to the whale and to the story. An only child, Kelly was used to spending lots of time by herself. This was changing though, her mum was heavy and slow with a full belly: a 'surprise', she'd heard her parents describe it as. She had no idea if

they meant a good surprise, or a bad one. Adults, sometimes, were hard to read.

Once she reached the whale she completed the obligatory walk round clockwise, eyes averted to not ruin the surprise of examination while entering into her latest adventure. Someone had once told her that to walk clockwise around something for the first time was good luck, and she'd made sure to walk clockwise ever since then, especially with the whales. Using the time to complete the story, once the walk was complete she would be ready for her imagination to take over. This time, however, was different: the whale was still alive.

As she'd approached she'd thought she'd seen movement out of the corner of her eye. A gull, possibly, making early investigations into the carrion. But without even having looked directly at it, Kelly knew that the movements came

from the whale itself. She'd never seen a live one before, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to now. But here she was, kneeling next to the great animal's eye, looking into something that was looking back at her.

"Hello?" she whispered, "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I just wanted to see."

"Yes," came a whisper back at her, "I understand. I am glad though, for I think I need some help."

The whale was lying slightly tilted towards its left-hand side, mouth ajar. It was a sperm whale: Kelly knew that much. They had the big heavy head, and the teeth like bowling pins. She had a tooth sitting on her bedroom windowsill alongside other treasures. Her dad had told her that they used to cost a lot of money. They don't any more, most people have one or two as the beached whales have become more frequent.

"What should I do?" Kelly asked, her voice only slightly louder than her breathing, her heart stopping with fright. When telling her about whales, no one had ever told her they talked back.

The whale's voice seemed to come from somewhere deep inside Kelly herself. The vibrations came through the sand, as the deep voice whispered through her. The whisper was a soft, melodious cry,

## Kelly and the Whale

STORY BY HEATHER BEATON





aching through millennia, a last call of a species heading towards extinction.

“There’s something inside me, right down deep and I am slowly starving to death. Remove it, and I think I’ll be able to get off the sand. The tide has turned, it won’t be long before it reaches us. If you are quick, there might be time.”

The whale lay in place and continued to slowly breathe through its still wet blowhole, moving as little as possible. It watched Kelly through its blood speckled eye, the weight of the world seeming to get heavier and heavier with every breath.

“Please.” It begged, and Kelly, kind-hearted and young enough to not have learnt the word ‘can’t’, couldn’t bear seeing the animal in pain and nodded her assent.

“Now I think this is how it’ll have to be,” the whale whispered, as Kelly crouched next to its one visible eye: “can you climb in my mouth, and reach down my throat, and take out all the stuff that’s stuck in me?”

The cold winter sun looked down and watched with interest as the wee girl worked away to save an unknown creature’s life. The sand shifted, eager to have the weight off its back, and the water worked on creating a channel through which the whale could extricate itself. The mountains cried with the wrongness of the whale on the land, and the particles in the air fizzed with intention, keeping

the whale damp, trying desperately to lift the deadening weight off its heavy, water-requiring bones.

Half of Kelly’s life was lived in a daydream, and now her reality was equal to the wildest of her dreams. Perhaps that was what enabled her to remain calm as she walked towards the gaping mouth, and crouched down to see in. Then, apologising for being clumsy, and heavy, and weird-tasting, Kelly climbed past the teeth into the whale’s large mouth, and lay along the tongue. The tonsils were larger than her head, the oesophagus huge and gaping. The smell of fish, of digestion and of something sourer and wilder than both of those things rose from inside the whale. She covered her nose as well she could, burying it into the collar of her jacket and shifted forward so that she could reach down, before slipping she fell into the whale.

“Whoops,” she heard the voice from somewhere outside where she was, “You might need to climb out now, but grab something and bring it with you, please.”

Kelly looked at where she’d fallen. Everything was almost dark, and she must be on the way to the whale’s stomach, but there was something there, stuck, and as she looked below her feet, she could see it was plastic fishing net, tied and twisted and tangled. Easing a corner free, Kelly tied it around her waist, and clambered back up through the whale, using the ridges within the oesophagus for her

hands and feet, while trailing a line of netting behind her.

The whale burped, and malodorous fumes followed Kelly out of the whale’s mouth.

“There’s a wee bit more, would you mind?” asked the whale, and kindly opened its mouth for Kelly to climb back in. Kelly this time slid down without hesitation, and carefully prodded and pulled at the remaining blockage to remove everything that remained. She had to climb in and out four more times before getting the last of it, tying a line around her waist each time and climbing up and walking straight out the mouth to release the foreign materials onto the sand. On her last visit, she took an almost intact plastic bag and picked up the wee bits of debris that stuck to the walls of the oesophagus: the crisp packets, the balloons, the cotton buds, the cigarette ends and the straws. The whale waited until Kelly was out safely, before coughing, then coughed thrice more, relishing the release from plastic and feeling instantly brighter and healthier.

The water was almost finished working on the channel, which was now the depth and width of a canal, and just right for a whale stranded on the sand. The sun continued to beam down, trying desperately not to set, and hoping to make the events below as pleasant as possible for both girl and whale, and the west wind died right down to prevent drying

the whale out. The sand parted where the whale rested, allowing the whale to access the canal and knowing now was the time to leave, the whale exhaled its thanks as the sea pulled it home.

“A million times, thank you,” the whale sang in its deep, melodious voice, “I was near to death, and you, dear girl, have saved me. I will be eternally grateful, thank you, thank you.”

“Glad to have helped,” said Kelly brightly, waving her plastic spade in farewell. “I’ll take this plastic with me and put it in the bin for you. Please don’t eat any more.”

“I’ll do my best not to, thank you again!” and with final words of gratitude, the whale sank into the water of the canal and made the short journey to sea. Kelly watched as the whale swam out to the deeper waters beyond the rocks and waved frantically as it blew, and then with a dramatic pause, breached, landing back on the deep water with a splash that could be heard back at Kelly’s home.

Her parents looked out the window and saw the wee figure of their daughter marching about on the beach, still wearing her pink unicorn jacket, tying a large pile of plastic – which in the end consisted of one fishing net, three lengths of rope, one length of strapping, numerous plastic bags, plastic coffee cups, gloves and myriad other small pieces – together. Bemused, they looked at one another, shrugged, and went back to their respective tasks. ■

**Canticle on the Wild  
Atlantic Way**

NIKKI ROBSON

Holy Mary, Mother of God, she’s in the Rockery.

Sandstone gleams gold at the feet of the Virgin,  
upright in a coffin with Snow White glass front,  
nailed in from wind sweep and horizontal squall.

Blue-cloaked and resplendent, she’s eager for flounder,  
craves lobster, wild salmon and pollock and trout;  
interned mediatrix, she faces a wall.

She yearns to be bedded instead in the Chancel,  
to nose past the gable to the foot of Sliabh Liag  
so her wide eyes can pilgrim immeasurable seas.

Entombed in the garden, her gaze on a sparrow,  
she twitches for feathers or sticky petunia,  
a sand-scratch or salt-sniff from coves far below.

Ave Maria, Our Lady of Sorrows.  
Her half-smile strains stony,  
indignity shrouding beatified bliss.

**Rockpool**

NIKKI ROBSON

She’s a swig of tranquil ocean,  
cupped between her capture and the rescue she implores.

In her temporary state of tamed and stormless,  
bids you kneel with needle whelk and hare  
and laps your ear as if it were a shell,

murmurs calmly, then wheedles with magnetic pull.  
The tide comes in and numbs your legs  
so you can’t feel the graze and gash  
of basalt scraping skin.

When you realise her whispers gale  
to wild Atlantic roar you’re in too far.  
The current’s strong, you can’t break back  
all cries are froth –  
there is no salvage now.

**Border Hills**

JULIAN COLTON

Now I have more space  
These lines of pencil grey hills  
Come into focus.

And given more time  
It will be the same for you  
You will realise

The places we walked  
All the loving words we talked  
Had real meaning

A significance  
Beyond mere idle dreaming  
And bricks and mortar.

When walls fall to ground  
What lasts and surely remains –  
These lines of green hills

In all seeing eyes  
Reflected by your soft hand  
This love and these hills.



## Gardener

SHARON BLACK

A young man in a greenhouse  
brushes down a shelf, a cloud of soil settling  
at his feet. Seedlings wait in small black pots.  
A tall shrub stands in terracotta.  
He wears a blue hat, blue overalls  
and a tidy calm expression.

I used to want to be a gardener –  
to spend my days pressing life down into soil  
and tugging life out of it. Once,  
I harvested potatoes, sank my hands  
to find the nesting clumps  
and raise them to the surface,

each one a brimming golden fontanelle –  
we laid them out in rows: they looked like infants  
in a nursery, curled and sleeping.  
I used to want to love like that. These days  
my hands are clean. They busy themselves  
knocking on a keyboard: see the rows

of inky shoots and tendrils pushing up  
from some mysterious gloom. The gardener's face  
is creased in concentration  
as he stacks his trowels and markers, forks and shears,  
carries a potted shrub  
across the lawn, out of sight.

## The Inner Isles

SHARON BLACK

Someone withdraws a flaring match  
from the stout red candle  
and slides it, pink-tipped, into its box.

I gather the gifts I brought  
and tuck them into my case; swing the door  
closed on a freshly made-up room.

I feel suddenly at home,  
blow salt air and chip fat over Baile Mór, stride  
backwards onto the ferry

and stand upstairs to watch the island  
receding, my first sight of the abbey  
swimming from view.

I hand a prawn-stuffed sandwich  
and a bag of garlic mussels to the girl  
behind the counter. My broken

suitcase wheel rights itself  
on Oban station platform  
and I tip the book I've just finished onto a table,

hurtling towards Glasgow, a week of R&R  
like an unread letter at my back.  
I miss the island, miss my friends,

miss the stout red candle, the scallops  
I didn't eat, the rest of the wine,  
the huddle at Columba's Bay, the time,

the time I'm running out of, cooling  
like the air vent at my feet.

## FISH

AMELIA GRAHAM

Last night I dreamed I was a fish,  
slipped a knot twice around my wrist and let myself  
slide, toe first, into the silver, rocked  
and overgrown water where  
I eventually shrank to a scaled and slippery size.

Like salmon in a river's belly, waiting to flash  
back against the peaty gold flow,  
I found  
in my river  
to my surprise  
that same want to fill  
to return  
and satisfy that overwhelming-  
to go home.

So I pushed against the stream's awesome load,  
weighted against me  
full of stones and spawn  
and charging thick foam  
to find the place where it all started long ago,  
back when I let the river stream me  
down towards the sea and out into the world.

Salmon travel out to sea and return  
again by instinct, need.  
We return, when we are worn,  
to some old family home  
'a pool of one's own'

This morning I book the 11:00 am train from  
Kings Cross to Inverness,  
and call my mother on the phone.

Thoughts of my returning surface as a smile.

## Butterflies

AMELIA GRAHAM

I had never seen so many of them before.

It was as if they had all come home and settled  
after some great migration, but then  
of course, they couldn't settle;  
they were newly born.  
There were so many that they began to burst through  
the cracks of the house  
and filter through our rooms,

As if freedom was an interior thing,  
Searching for the next cocoon.

So often, within each of those panelled rooms, they became  
crushed and dusted by my cat's paws,  
Her hot mouth expectant for them,  
For one to come through a window's seam and flutter  
towards that bulbed light in the hallway  
I left on after dark.  
Blindly batting against a false heat.

In those summered nights, I would listen to their fumbings,  
Until I couldn't hear them moving anymore;  
and I would know that she had got them all, one  
by one,  
Their small bodies arching for one last bit of sun,  
As I let them die amongst the dark.

## Jack's Shires

DEREK CROOK

Such elegance they had,  
those massive horses.  
I marvelled on the frosty morning  
when I first turned up for work.

Together they calmly galleoned into the light  
from the black shed that held their mooring,  
Jack between them,  
his hands high  
to hook his fingers in their bridles.

They minced across the frosty cobbles,  
pale feathers tossing over  
delicate and heavy hooves  
that struck metallic thuds  
on the uneven stones.

Four enormous haunches,  
two black, two brown,  
gleamed richly in the rigid light  
as side by side they sipped  
icy water from the rusty trough.  
Both tilted one rear hoof  
like dancers asking for a pump to be inspected.

They raised their heads together,  
muzzles dripping and moved with dignity  
towards the craft they'd mastered.

## Jessie

DEREK CROOK

Jessie clumped down her steps,  
her body heavy with flesh,  
her mind with drugs.

Her doctors could not help  
her body lose its flesh  
but they could help her  
keep some imitation of a mind.

The shy smile came quickly  
but was not focussed on my eyes.  
Something pharmaceutical  
was greeting me.

She did not see the day was nice  
but peacefully agreed with me  
that it was nice. Somehow  
the niceness of the day  
wasn't with me any more.

## Bute and Beyond

ROBIN MUNRO

This way  
the genes insist  
this hefted Island way

a 'Brandane'  
planted in that 'loveliest of Mays'  
to navigate this crazy life

branded with the Brendan flaw: wanting  
for all our wandering, Bute and beyond,  
those journeys never made.

## St Blane

ROBIN MUNRO

Ertha had a son.  
They blamed a spirit from a well  
but blame was not her feeling  
as the life force grew.

She named him Blane.  
We hear tell of them cast adrift,  
a coracle, a well turned boat  
a rounded myth.

Seven years of course  
then 'home' to the care of Catan.  
Catan and his nephew Blane,  
the South end named for them.

Bute or beyond, we are all  
adrift in a frail craft  
directed by wind  
informed by the spirit of a spring.

## Legend

ROBIN MUNRO

I thought I heard  
over the Kerry Kyle  
a dead dog bark  
from the other shore

a shepherd's dog  
who swam the Narrows  
to his man's Kilmichael grave  
in a tale  
I like to believe

love over water  
over death.

My own dead Ben  
barks sometimes in the night for me.  
I let him be

## My Final Inverkeithing

PAULA JENNINGS

Travelling backwards on the Edinburgh train,  
soft foldings of fields south of Dairsie  
rise through steep woodland to Blebo Craigs.  
Then broad beaches at Burntisland and Kinghorn,  
sand-ruched and silvered with pools,  
give way to modest birches gilding the edge  
of the diesel-blasted track. Nearing Aberdour

I look out for seals that bask on rocks at low tide,  
their fat packed tightly into dappled skins.  
Then trees too fast to be anything but generic  
become alders, their roots in a murky burn  
as the train slows on the approach to Inverkeithing  
where the platform is shorter than the train  
and we are warned to take care when alighting.

And I'm looking back down my familiar tracks,  
thinking of that short platform and my shortening years  
and what's ahead, that final Inverkeithing, and  
I can see myself stumbling through a darkening train  
from quiet coach B, through the vestibule to coach C  
where the platform is neatly aligned and a voice,  
that has been waiting all my life, orders me to alight.

## Looking Out

PAULA JENNINGS

Every day more words elude her.  
They march ahead like giants  
with far-off piccolo voices.  
Sometimes she can barely catch up.

'You...listen...and...  
you...have the pleasure...  
to go out...'

She wants to go out.

I explain about safety, about seizures,  
about not being a nurse, not being allowed.  
She picks up a teddy bear, shakes it.

'You are not...going out.  
You are... staying here.  
Who are you?'

She laughs bitterly, stands it on its head.

I list the advantages  
of this benevolent detention:  
meals cooked,  
laundry done,  
art classes in the morning,  
the fiddle player from Edinburgh.

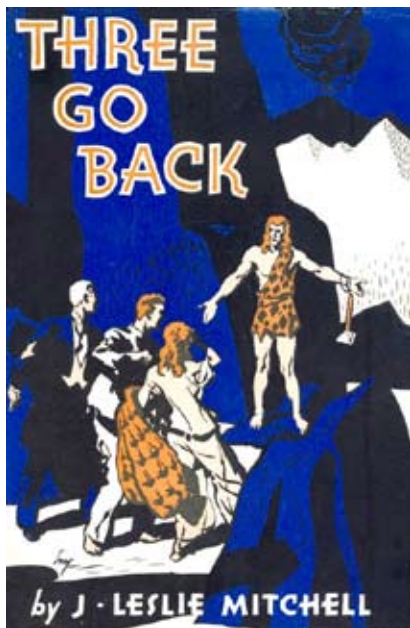
'Is it enough to keep you going?' I ask  
foolishly.

'No'.

Her veined hand gestures the length of the outside world,  
which measures the same as the conservatory windows.

# Scotland in Space

Paul F Cockburn explores Scotland's often overlooked Science Fiction legacy



“MOST OF SCOTLAND is ‘rural’, yes, but a sizeable swathe of it is very definitely urban; and over the past two and a half centuries the contributions of Scots to science, engineering and industrialisation have been enormous.” So wrote David Pringle, in his introduction to the 2005 anthology *Nova Scotia: New Scottish Speculative Fiction*, published by Mercat Press.

However, one thing puzzled the former editor of *Interzone*, the UK’s longest-running new Science Fiction and Fantasy magazine: “It has always seemed to me that there should have been more Scottish SF writers, especially in the light of the recurrent ‘modernising’ tendencies in Scottish history [...] when Scotland has shaken off the dead weight of its past and bounded ahead in certain vital respects.”

Until the explosive literary arrival of Iain M. Banks, and then Ken MacLeod, however, Pringle suggested that notable Scottish writers of Science Fiction simply didn’t exist; this, despite the country’s immense contribution to Britain’s industrial revolution. ‘Clyde-built’, for example, had long become a globally recognised indicator of quality technology and engineering. And yet: “so much of the culture of Scotland, especially the literary culture, does seem backward-looking and anti-urban, mired in Celtic mists,” he suggested.

So where did they go, all those ‘missing’ Scottish SF writers? Pringle had his own theory—Scotland’s SF writers had always existed, but their antecedents had been part of the country’s long history of emigration. As a result, the country’s ‘first wave’ of SF writers appeared not in Scotland, but America. As proof, he noted that the four leading proponents of ‘Space Opera’ were “probably all of

Scottish ancestry”. John W. Campbell and Edmond Hamilton, of course, had clearly Scottish surnames, while E E ‘Doc’ Smith and Jack Williamson came, respectively, from decidedly Scottish-sounding Presbyterian and Southern US State backgrounds.

There’s an attractive simplicity to Pringle’s theory, except that – of course – it fails to recognise just how many Scottish writers, from the late 19th century onwards, did at least occasionally write what we would now term Science Fiction. Curiously, Pringle in his introduction, dismissed claims for Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which he felt was “more horror fantasy” than science fiction. Yet surely the same could equally be said of that other alleged founding text of Science Fiction, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*?

Such literary definitions are problematic, of course, given that the likes of Shelley, Stevenson and his Scottish peers (such as J M Barrie and Arthur Conan Doyle) were largely writing before current genre categories had become entrenched in both our bookshops and our minds. Yet it’s fair to ask why James Leslie Mitchell, arguably Scotland’s nearest rival to H G Wells, isn’t remembered now for his two fascinating (if somewhat naive) Science Fiction works – *Three Go Back*, and *Gay Hunter* – but rather for his *A Scots Quair* trilogy of novels, written under the pseudonym Lewis Grassic Gibbon?

Snobbery? Or is it simply because, particularly during the 20th century, Scottish literature’s genuine struggle to be taken seriously in contrast to British – English – culture, had encouraged an innate association between literary ‘relevance’ and social realism? After all, while English SF writers, from

Christopher Priest to Jeff Noon and Robert Rankin, show little difficulty setting their work in England, relatively few Scottish SF or fantasy writers have actively chosen to set their stories in a recognisable Scotland. Interestingly, when they do – for example, Andrew Crumey’s *Mobius Dick* and *Sputnik Caledonia* – they receive significantly more mainstream literary attention than their supposed Science Fiction peers.

Nevertheless, the “visionary thread woven through Scottish story-telling” noted by Neil Williamson and Andrew J Wilson – the editors of that 2005 *Nova Scotia* anthology – has frequently expressed itself “in a sense of the otherworldly”.

Admittedly, authors such as James Hogg and George MacDonald drew their inspiration chiefly from Celtic myth and Border ballads—the latter’s *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (published in 1858) in turn influencing English fantasy writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S Lewis. In more recent times, this strand of Scottish literature could be said to have peaked with Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark*; yet, like Jekyll and Hyde, *Lanark*’s status as a modern literary classic also means that we often fail to recognise that its sections set in the dystopian Unthank are undeniably Science Fiction.

While no overtly Scotland-based writers in the early 20th century could be said to have wholly embraced the rise of ‘scientifiction’, there were definite exceptions—David Lindsay’s 1920 debut novel, *A Voyage to Arcturus*, with its vision of a man seeking physical and psychological transformation on an alien world, remains influential, not least (again) on Tolkien and Lewis.

Nevertheless, some critics were still surprised when Naomi Mitchison, who had used SF tropes for great allegorical affect in many of her short stories, finally produced an overtly Science Fiction novel (in 1962) with *Memories of a Spacewoman*. Yet, while many 20th century Scottish writers at least dabbled in Science Fiction – several of John Buchan’s supernatural tales are arguably SF (not least *Space*—in which a mathematician trains himself to perceive higher dimensions) – they remain either isolated within the context of the writers’ wider careers or, as with Jekyll and Hyde, so successful that their influence upon, or debt to, SF is obscured.

Science Fiction, despite what Pringle might have thought, has long been Scottish literature’s Hyde: shadowy, glimpsed, often reviled, yet devilishly hard to separate from its accepted face. And, just as in Stevenson’s novel, Scottish literature’s Hyde side would appear to

be on the ascendant. Which is surely apt; might not the SF novel be a better vehicle for exploring a world where our lives are increasingly enveloped by science and technology?

It’s impossible, of course, to speak of Scottish Science Fiction without mentioning the late, much-missed Iain Banks who, for many years, alternated between writing equally successful ‘mainstream’ and Science Fiction novels, the latter supposedly (but not always) distinguished by the additional middle initial ‘M’ (for Menzies).

Having an author of Banks’ commercial success and standing undoubtedly encouraged a generation of authors – many linked through Science Fiction fandom and long-running writers’ groups – to focus on the genre exclusively rather than flirt with it like their predecessors. The result is that many of the most notable English-language Science Fiction writers of recent years – such as Gary Gibson, Leeds-born Charles Stross, Finnish-born Hannu Rajaniemi – are based in – or have strong connections with – Scotland.

Last year, Ken MacLeod – arguably Scotland’s leading SF writer – contributed an introduction to the recently-published anthology *Scotland in Space: Creative Visions and Critical Reflections on Scotland’s Space Futures (Shoreline of Infinity)*. The book brings together new Science Fiction short stories and science fact responses, all created in deliberately-nurtured dialogues between authors, scientists and humanists.

At a basic level, this collaborative process simply highlighted how, as the astronomer Alastair Bruce pointed out, there’s “no reason your imagination can’t get some of the physics right”. More importantly, though, it contributed to imaginative explorations of how Space – and, in particular, the planet Mars – were actually of genuinely ‘Scottish’ interest. A new take on ‘Clyde-built’, you might say.

As MacLeod points out in his introduction: “We really are now building spaceships on the Clyde. Scotland’s space industry is booming, and sites from Machrihanish to Sutherland are boosted as future spaceport sites.” If nothing else, the stories published in *Scotland in Space* at least conceive of Scotland as a place where the cosmic can genuinely happen. ■

*Scotland in Space – Creative Visions and Critical Reflections on Scotland’s Space Futures*, edited by Deborah Scott & Simon Malpas, is published by Shoreline of Infinity/The New Curiosity Shop (2019).



## Seven Haiku

BARRY GRAHAM

winter morning —  
daylight arrives  
without a story

snow plunges  
from tower block ledges  
like falling bodies

duckling left behind  
paddles to catch up  
with mother and siblings

children playing in ruins of mill  
me 40 summers ago  
walking by today

young woman pushing pram  
bruise beneath her eye  
morning rain

zazen together, one breath  
4000 miles but  
no distance between us

winter street —  
dog turd on pavement  
shape and colour of autumn leaf

## The Butterfly Effect

EVELYN PYE

In the flower power sixties, a flutter  
of butterflies flashed black-rimmed wings  
— tiny stained glass windows

grabbing sunlight, a kaleidoscope  
of peacocks, adonis blues, red admirals,  
purple hairstreaks, orange tips.

This abundance is no trick of memory  
airbrushing childhood summers  
— its decimation recorded

for half a century by volunteers  
who squatted in damp grass  
counting absence on clipboards.

Sensitive to changes in climate  
in our warmer winters, the adults emerge  
from chrysalides too soon, cling on

unable to flap their frosted wings  
or suck nectar through straw tongues  
die rigid as sugar confections.

We decide to order a cup of caterpillars  
and three weeks later, release  
five painted ladies. In chaos theory,

one butterfly can flap its wings,  
turn a tornado in Texas —  
who knows what five will achieve.

## Rodden Tree

EDITH HARPER

Fan Ah wis a quine there wis a rodden tree  
cooried in the lee o the auld grey wa.  
A swing wis made o strang raip an timmer  
an hung fae a thick, stracht beuch.  
Aside the tree blumed a laylock bush.  
The touch o ma bairnheid wis roch sisal  
an laylock wis the scent.  
An the sang o ma bairnheid wis the raips  
craik oan the beuch, an the sciff  
o ma feet oan the grund.

An in a dwam Ah swung the days awa  
an dreamed mony dreams, till they a became ane  
wi the touch an the scent an the sang.  
That quine's lang awa but the dreams  
are aye there, swingin an swingin  
aneath the rodden tree.

## Wishbone

GRAHAM TURNER

*"Perhaps grief, which destroys all patterns,  
destroys even more: the belief that any  
pattern exists. But we cannot, I think,  
survive without such belief."*— Julian Barnes

Do like the Etruscans: stroke  
don't break she says  
to preserve and share  
not pit the hopes  
of each against another  
honouring the mystery of  
this elastic clamping  
of the clavicles  
that alone permits  
the awe of flight —  
flesh and blood  
feather and branch  
sinew and soil  
wormgift and windlift —  
as we hear you at  
the kitchen sink share  
Gaelic psalms  
that calmed the Minch  
and believing in bones  
believing in up  
we hold again  
again  
in the wishful clinch.

## The Amazon Woman

PIP OSMOND-WILLIAMS

There is silence on these islands now,  
save for the skua call. Brief are the days  
and still I miss the parliament, harsh  
soil taunted by the lore of trees, blood  
yolk of the gannet's bed, salt spill  
from the puffin kill, the rancid stench  
of flesh in cleits. All the blind and  
gut reminders of a life, lives,  
what it is to be still living.

In purple mornings  
with earth's funeral smoke  
curling up the crags of Boreray,  
I picture barefoot circles of blackhouse girls,  
their linen dresses stitched with blood,  
running from the moon-mouthed boys,  
split lips licked in mustard and salt.  
Sometimes I follow them,  
try to tuck their splintered skin  
into the curves and folds of Gleann Mor,  
try to warn them of the smaller wars,  
of love lodged under the scalloped edge,  
mother tongues in the mouths of caves,  
loss breathing life into different shapes:  
the bell curve of a diving bird,  
the space of the wave between.  
There are places that I will never know.  
They left with backs and shoulders  
of flint and stone on the Harebell  
away from Oiseval.

I use my time wisely now.  
I pluck honeysuckle from rocks  
to learn about exposure. I have  
found new ways to tolerate salt.  
I think of them often, often.  
Some nights I wake, believing that I  
have only dreamed the mountain still.  
Skuas take flight, diving in ribbons  
through the sky's white line,  
the scavenge for wreckage of  
forgotten life, some small secular  
devotion to the day, another day.

## The Birks o' Aberfeldy

HEATHER BEATON

Here's the place where the world ends  
Here's the rock where the water falls  
Here's the hole where the otter sleeps.  
Hear the roar, the cries and  
the tumult  
Hear the sigh of pleasure deserved  
Molecule, molecule, angel after angel,  
tumbling and twisting  
It's only pleasure and pleasurable pain.  
The water, teasing, tickling, gently  
the rocks  
And the rocks, exulting in the agonies,  
And the otter, the spirit, awakens,  
stretches,  
And becomes water again.

“Thanks for the lift!”

Alan swings his rucksack onto his shoulder, and slams the boot shut. Not fast enough to block out his father’s habitual farewell, thrown out of his mouth as he moves the gear stick into first and pulls down hard on the steering wheel.

Tyres veer away, car disappears.

Alan stands on the platform, his father’s words echoing like the cold call of a curlew.

Train lights appear through the dimness of a November morning. The train creaks to a halt, the yellow button lights up, the doors open. Alan stands aside as two cyclists ease their bikes off.

The carriage is busy. He rearranges the suitcases to make space for his rucksack. With a smaller pack and guitar in hand, he squeezes down the aisle, trying to make sense of the seat numbering.

23F. Where the hell is 23? Already he’s had to apologise for messing up someone’s hair with the neck of his guitar.

Ahead of him, two elderly people sitting opposite each other. The window seat adjacent to the woman is empty. He reaches over and pulls out the white tab.

Yes. His seat: 23F Carrbridge – Edinburgh.

The woman’s face tilts up. She grins.

“Excuse me. May I get into my seat?” Alan asks.

Her long fringe sweeps over the rim of her glasses. She wipes it away with her index finger, smiling in his direction.

“That’s my seat at the window. Could you let me in?”

In one agile move, she leaves her own seat and settles into the one beside the window, still grinning. As he opens his mouth to object, he catches the look of the man in the seat facing. The woman is now patting the place she has vacated.

“Make yourself comfortable, young man.”

Someone behind him is getting impatient. He wedges his guitar in the luggage rack overhead, and sits in the seat nearest, his backpack on the table. Over the top of it, he notices the expression of the man has relaxed.

Alan is irritated. He wanted a window seat. From his backpack, he produces the novel he is reading, its cover dog-eared.

His mobile phone vibrates from his jeans pocket. A text from his mum:

Just found your packed lunch in the fridge. Mum 🍌

He hates it when his mother uses emoticons. He hates it when she sends him a sad face. He hates it that he hates it when she sends him a sad face. He puts his phone back in his pocket, shuts his eyes.

What the hell? It’s that bloody woman next to him, patting his arm.

He opens his book at the page where the bus ticket sticks out. A page gets scanned without taking anything in.

She is now tapping a quiet rhythm with her palms – elegant fingers, nails ungroomed. He is not surprised when he hears her voice in his left ear.

“That’s a big book you’re reading.”

# Belongings

STORY BY MAGS WALLIS



Shutting his book, he settles back in his seat. Her face is turned towards him. A big open smile. He finds himself reciprocating. Opposite, the man has his head down, as if reading his paper intensely.

“Yes – it is a big book. Third time I’ve read it.”

“Can I see?” she asks. She turns it over.

“Ah, The Lord of the Rings.” She beams back.

The smile disappears. Her hand shoots across the table.

“Duncan!” she says. “Duncan!”

She’s leaning out of her seat and grabbing his arm.

“My suitcase! Where is my suitcase? I don’t have my suitcase!”

read it to my son. And of course, before that I read it myself.

The Road goes ever on and on

Down from the door where it began...”

She recites the whole verse in a dramatic voice.

“That’s impressive,” he says. “How come you remember all of that?”

“Ah well,” she replies, “that’s one of my fortes – remembering verse. Don’t ask me to remember anything else though.”

She looks over to Duncan, and they hold each other’s glance for a moment.

Duncan takes the role of spokesman. “We’re travelling down to Perth. Just a small holiday. We both need a break.”

Isobel leans out of her seat and grabs hold of Duncan’s arm.

*He hates it when his mother uses emoticons. He hates it when she sends him a sad face. He hates it that he hates it when she sends him a sad face.*

Duncan’s hand settles on top of hers. “It’s in the luggage rack, dear. Just over there. Perfectly safe.”

Her hand relaxes and she slides back into her seat.

“Well! That’s a relief,” she says, and beams in Alan’s direction, flicking her fringe away from her eyes. She lets out a big sigh.

Alan waits for her to ask him about the book, but she is looking out of the window. He clears his throat.

“Hmm. So... the Lord of the Rings. Is that one of your favourites?”

She continues to look out the window. The man opposite intervenes.

“Isobel! The young man next to you is asking a question.”

She swivels her head round, her chin leaning into the cup of her hand.

“Yes, young man. What can I do for you?” Again, that delightful smile.

“You were asking about my book.”

“And what book is that?” she asks.

“You know. This book here. Have you read it?”

She lifts it up, scrutinizing the front cover.

“The Lord of the Rings. Why yes! I

“My suitcase, Duncan! I’ve forgotten my suitcase! We must stop the train. I can’t go without my suitcase.”

“Isobel!” the man says with an edge to his voice. He sighs, then resumes speaking in a gentler tone.

“Remember, Isobel, how we had such difficulty fitting your case into the rack, and a kind man offered to remove his case, so you could put yours in the lower shelf?”

Isobel is suspended over the table, fringe almost concealing her face.

At length, she responds in a quiet voice. “I want to see my suitcase.”

Duncan clears his throat. “Young man... actually... what is your name?”

“Alan.”

“Alan, would you mind letting my wife out for a moment? Then, perhaps, you’ll get to sit in your own seat.”

Alan gets up to let Isobel out. She’s looking out of the window again, whooping with delight, pointing to a skein of geese against the pale sky. The man cocks his head and looks at Alan. Alan leans over and taps Isobel on the shoulder.

“Eh, excuse me.”

She turns around. “Have we arrived?

No, we can’t have arrived, silly. The train’s still moving!”

“You wanted to check your suitcase.”

She looks afraid. “Oh dear. I am being a nuisance again. Just coming.”

She bounds out of the seat, grinning her head off again. Duncan shakes his head.

“That smile,” he says. “If it weren’t for that smile!”

They navigate the corridor – she in front, Duncan shuffling behind and holding on to the hem of her cardigan. Alan slides over to his seat and pulls out a magazine from his bag.

Twenty minutes later, they return with tea in lidded cups. Alan is left undisturbed as they chat about their bed and breakfast, and their plan to meet Isobel’s sister.

The conversation tails away, and Alan is aware of Isobel’s fingers edging over on to his side of the table.

He leans his head against the cold of the window, and squints at her.

“You must have got on at the last stop,” she comments.

Alan has no ready answer, but she is unperturbed.

“That’s an elf!” she exclaims. “Isn’t it?”

Pictured in his magazine is a wood elf – dressed in warrior clothing, a golden cape round his shoulders, a spray of blonde hair cascading down his back.

“I used to paint elves,” she said.

“You used to paint elves,” Alan repeats slowly.

Her eyes are fierce. “You paint elves, don’t you? I can tell.”

He turns away. That old fear churns in his stomach. What if he finds out? What if he does? Then another voice. Alan! This is an old lady! She’s not going to tell on you. And anyway, what does it matter if he knows, you big wuss.

He looks round. She is waiting. He smiles.

“You’re right! I do paint elves,” he confesses.

She starts to bounce on her seat. “I knew it! I knew it! Duncan! This young man paints elves!”

Her husband looks up. “How wonderful, my darling. You’ve found a kindred spirit!”

She turns to Alan. “Where we lived – down in Devon, that was – we had a long rambling garden with lots of old trees. The elves played close to the small pool that was part of the stream.”

Alan looks down.

“They got used to me being there. First time I saw them, I thought I was seeing things. But no! I would sit for hours on end, and nearly always, at least one or two would emerge from beneath the tree roots, and come down to the water’s edge.”

Alan wills her to stop talking.

“Then I started to paint them from memory, catching their balletic movements, their fine features.”

Her head flops forward. “There are no elves where we live now.” Her voice catches.

Duncan looks over at Alan.

“So, Alan, tell us about your painting,” he says in a voice that commands an answer.

Alan looks round the carriage to make sure no one else is lugging in.

“Well... I don’t do paintings. It’s ... you know ... little metal figures that I paint – elves, trolls, dwarves. Sometimes I paint the same one twenty times until it is just the way I want it. It’s my passion. My dad doesn’t approve. He thinks it’s weird, and a waste of time; says I’m too old to be playing with toys. He’s banned me from getting any more.”

“So you’ve had to give up your passion! What a great pity! How unbearable!”

Isobel is clutching on to his arm, her eyes wide behind her specs.

Alan reassures her. “Oh no! I haven’t given up! I do it secretly. At night time.”

“Secretly! Secretly!” Isobel seems delighted. She speaks in a deep husky voice. “Duncan! He does it secretly!”

People are looking over. Alan clutches her wrist. “Please! Keep your voice down.”

She covers her mouth, her eyes dancing behind her big specs. Then leaning in, “Have you any with you?” she whispers, her eyes on his sack.

“Eh... maybe a few.”

“Go on, show them to me!” Her hand flashes out to the zipper of his bag.

His hand on top of hers, Alan looks over to Duncan, who intervenes. “Isobel!”

She pulls back, folding her arms, hands tucked under her armpits. Her head droops. There is silence. A few minutes later, she is snoring.

Alan gazes out of the window. Fields chase away behind them, a faint early winter glimmer over paling stubble. His hand disappears into his bag, feels around for the cloth tie bag, cushioned inside with wool to protect the three figures inside. He opens it, and fingers each one, knowing them.

He imagines himself in his bedroom. The loose floorboards at the back of the walk-in cupboard. The oblong tin where he stores his figures. The box where he keeps his paints and brushes. His night-time forays into his paint station. His stepping-stone walk across the creaking floor. His fierce heart beating, as if it were going to meet its lover.

The train slows, and the tannoy announces: “We are now approaching Perth. Change here for stations to Glasgow Queen Street. Please make sure you take all personal belongings with you.”

She is sitting quietly, her hands flat on the table. He clasps her left one in order to pass it on. She does not pull away. For a moment the figure nestles, cool and hidden, between their palms.

She closes her hand round it, brings it to her mouth. She looks into his eyes. No smile. An ancient stare.

And she is gone, her husband ushering from behind.

Her wide stride. His flustering steps. ■

waney-edged wood  
ISABEL THOMPSON

I wish I could meander like these waney edges  
the edges of the shelf my father made  
so that his fathers’ books could look down on us with dignity  
above  
the fray.

I wish I could meander like these waney edges  
making fun of movement and disto  
rting  
line;  
and be the bridge that crosses between solid and air:  
deviation from what norm?

If I could meander like these waney edges,  
a hop and a jump and a ripple  
of skating palm I’d chart a course away  
from all these crannies and  
closed pages.

I wish I could meander like these waney edges  
drape myself like contour lines across a map  
move in currents of the air and water,  
anywhere the drift takes me –

my father, a craftsman  
his finest work  
sitting  
in a house  
that she’s finally  
buying him out of

as fast  
as the banks  
will allow.

Annie Morrison’s hat  
PETER GODFREY

My father wore it just before he died –  
we rowed out to spot seals off Blakeney Point.  
It’s been with me in Pyrenean ice,  
on Biscay and where southern oceans join.

You were the best known knitter in the isles  
and told me over tea and girdle scones  
of girlhood spent barefoot walking in gales  
when only candles flickered, lanterns shone.

You wove warm strands of Hebridean wool –  
your last years saw our strand of friendship forged.  
How often I’ve mislaid it, felt a fool  
till someone comes up: ‘Is this blue hat yours?’

and I retrieve that fabric of the few.  
I know the benediction comes from you.



IT'S THREE IN the morning, Jen should be fast asleep dreaming of Tom Hardy. Instead, she's plotting the demise of her cheating husband.

Today was one of those rare Sundays where she cleaned every inch of the house. She found it under the bed—the perfume. Perhaps her subconscious knew of the secret hiding, waiting to bring her life crashing down around her. She thought nothing of it. Gave it a quick wipe, then sat it on her dressing table and carried on cleaning.

It wasn't till five minutes ago, almost drifting off to sleep, the name on the bottle flashed, like a cheap neon sign advertising pleasures of the flesh for half-price. Clinique Happy—she's never owned Clinique Happy. In fact, she's been asking for Clinique-effing-Happy for the past two years and he's never bought it for her.

Jen shoots out of bed at the speed of a circus cannonball act, grabs the bottle masquerading as her own and glares at it. No question – this is not her perfume. Where the hell is Dan? He's been coming home late for months now. She reasoned it was down to overtime, saving money for their holiday to Mexico

## Shattered Dreams

STORY BY HAZEL URQUHART



*..the name on the bottle  
flashed, like a cheap  
neon sign advertising  
pleasures of the flesh for  
half-price.*

in November. It's now obvious where he's been.

Her brain goes into overdrive. Rifling through every memory of not knowing where he was. There have been many—too many. Last week, when he came home after midnight. She'd waited up, dressed in her leaving-nothing-to-the-imagination nightdress—his favourite. He'd brushed her off, saying he was too tired; hard day at work. Now it made sense.

Now, worked into a frenzy of emotion, one minute she's howling, snot running down her upper lip, and the next laughing, face contorted like a moon-crazed psycho. Connecting with the mantelpiece across the room, the bottle shatters, like her hopes for the future. The expected subtle notes ravage her senses, smelling nothing like the upbeat emotion suggested. Jen

staggers towards the window, opening it wide and gasping for air.

Jen realises, it's not perfume, it's petrol—chemical, flammable petrol. She swings round, hearing a noise behind her. Dan stands in the doorway, a smug smile on his face.

"You bastard," she spits, curling her hands into fists.

He doesn't respond. It takes longer than it should to register what's happening. By

the time he's let go of the match all she can do is watch it fall, in slow motion, to the floor. A look of shock flutters across her face and she collapses. Her screams pierce the night air as she braces for the violent flames to strip the flesh from her bones.

The lack of pain soon filters through the fog in her brain. Jerking upright, a strangled scream still held in her throat, Jen realises she's still in bed. She's not on fire. She's still alive. Panting, she stands on shaking legs and staggers to the dressing table. The perfume that consumed her nightmare is still there. Taking the bottle, she inhales, relieved to smell its delicate, floral scent.

Still, she can't ignore such a vivid dream. Jen grabs handfuls of clothes from Dan's wardrobe and throws them out the window. Jeans, t-shirts, the dated suit he wore to their wedding, the expensive jumper she bought him last year that still has the tags on. The last thing she discards is the perfume. It shatters spectacularly on the patio, shards sparkling in the moonlight. She'll buy herself a bottle of Happy tomorrow, Jen thinks. She owes it her life, after all. ■

YOU SEE, LITTLE One, we've come a long way from when you were an unspoken promise, deep inside of me. When I dream, I still dream of the fine, white sands of childhood beaches. But I dream in English now.

You know, English isn't my first language. I was a star pupil at school, though, and picked it up no bother – *Chan eil dragh sam bith ann!*

I had to do well in class, really. Your grandfather was a truant officer. Among other things – he held down three jobs! He had to. I was the youngest of ten. Life was hard for everyone, then. People were leaving the island. By choice, mostly. But then Christina left and things changed. The icy wind whipping across the beaches became a flagellation to the family.

'But William told me he loved me!' my beautiful big sister had wailed in my arms.

## The Lamp

RICKY MONAHAN BROWN



But penance did Christina no good. Mortification of the flesh wasn't sufficient, the evidence of the baby enough for condemnation. The elders had seen, by her acts, that my sister remained enslaved to her sinful nature. There was no place for her among hard-working crofters and fishermen and truant officers. So she left, taking my hope for the future with her. She burned that hope in a lamp three thousand miles away and sang to me across the oceans every night and the lamp burned every night and I worked

hard every day to get that immigration visa and fifty dollars to stuff in my sock.

When the quotas were reduced, I thought that what was left of my hope had finally been extinguished. But I was saved by the Great Depression! Imagine, Little One! Suddenly, foreign streets were no longer paved with gold. But I didn't need golden streets. I just wanted a new life. Even the cramped dormitories of steerage class were a promise to the youngest of ten. Working as a maid was a glimpse into a different future.

Christina got me that job. There were

lots of us over here, and we all looked out for each other. Sins from the old days were forgotten, expunged.

'I'll speak to Dorothy,' Christina had said. 'She might not be able to get you into the kitchen, but she'll find you a space. People are finding it hard. Going home.'

So I worked hard, and when I had a few spare pennies I went to the dance hall. Your father was the same as me. The son of an immigrant and a hard worker, he started his first business when he was still in school. In me he saw – yes, deep round eyes and a knowing smile – but someone who'd work hard at work, at life, with a faith in its rewards.

So here you are, Little One. Keep my story and tell it to your children and light a lamp for them. Light a lamp for the people you meet, the people you touch.

Do that for me, won't you? ■

THE ENTIRE NOVEL had been written in the dust. It began in an unfashionable way, with a description of the weather and the pastoral setting for the drama. This gave its writer over a year of pleasure. Nothing changed in the environment, only the markings on the small clear space between the makeshift bed and the makeshift stove. Both had been thrown together from cheap materials after the exodus over the mountains, both were already a decade old.

The next section of the fiction dealt with the background histories of the principal actors. Each took between four and six months to compose, depending on their importance to the arc of the

narrative. The rains came and went, broiling sun beat on canvas and flies came through the tent flap, making the place as cosy as hell.

The passage between this section and the meat of the story was awkward. A doldrums. The finger stayed poised an inch above the dirt for days at a time, unable to score a single mark, and when a

word or phrase did come, it was scratched deep and ugly into the ground.

With winter, respite came. Fluency returned and the writer worked with energy and inspiration. For the first time, there was impatience at the materials available, which limited the speed of progress.

The waterfall of thoughts slowed to a

gentle rhythm and the river of creativity flowed, but there were gunshots in the hills and cholera in the camp.

A pair of years passed and the centrepiece was reached, a complex interweaving of plot and character. The foliage of climate and setting so painstakingly grown from the very beginning brought the story into full flower.

The makeshift bed sank lower to the ground, the makeshift stove was greasy and cracked. The floor was daily swept clean by an illiterate child and the story was so great it would have changed a civilisation. It was all written in the dust, and finished the day before the careful hands became forever still. ■

HE WAS ON the phone, speakin to een o his pals, fan I decided to hae a look at fit he was deein. The paper took up maist o the dining table, weighed doon wi books on either end so it wis laid oot flat. There was ither fat rolls wi elastic bands roon them, as weel as some new eens aye in their cardboard tubes, ahin a chair. I hid been telt nae to touch onythin, but aa that pencils wi sharp nibs an a fancy double ruler, an a straight edged stick, an coloured pens same as the teacher used, wis too much for ma to leave be.

I listened, makin sure he was aye clakin wi the ither skipper. He soounded scunnert fin he mentioned they hid been tied up langer than they thought for a paint an a re-fit, but I wis chuft to hae ma dad hame. It wis the same on a Sunday nicht fan the holiday programme was on TV promising sunshine in Majorca, an the win was fusslin makin the rafters rattle and he wid phone roon the ither skippers to see fit they were deein. And I wid hae a sare belly cos I'd school the next day an I didna want him to go. I wid wish and hope, and even pray sometimes, that he wid phone roon the crew and tell them he hid put it aff and they hid anither nicht in their ain beds. Then I wid cuddle next him on the cooch. Naebidy wanted their dad gan oot in that kind of wither.

An fan the wither improved he took the boat's van, the same een he let me and ma breather play in – driving its wide steering wheel, climbing a ower the plastic seats wi their funny smell, sticking muckle tapes in the clunky cassette player – and dee the hour's drive to Peterheid, then sail the boat under the brig, past the ice factory, oot the hairbor to the Ling

Bank or the Swatch Way. The bit o paper in front of ma made up o a criss-cross o straight lines in green an purple and reid, aa at odd angles, telt him far to go. Bit I couldna understand it, nae pavements, nae signs, nae cat's ein, only caul, hard black sea aye movin aboot.

My dad wisna een for books or writing, I canna mine him iver colourin in, but his charts were een on the neatest things I'd ever seen. They were dotted wi wee triangles he'd drawn in faint pencil using the fancy slide ruler that slipped ower the paper as he plotted. I kent they were his readings. Markins far he'd shot awa an hault an found chippers an pingers, an different sized green – Robbie coddlin, babies, big smaa, sprags. Some good hauls, ithers jist a pucklie to keep yi gan. There were dark crosses to mark fasteners. Things like big rocks, anchors, bits of wreckage, concrete sinkers left ower fae the war, wire hausers sharp enough to cut rope drappit when the oil first started – places far he'd maybe lost a net or got into a thrap. Or maybe anither boat got into a thrap and he'd hid to tow them in. There were words like the Bressay and the Skate Hole. Place names that were different from the words used in the shipping forecast with its Viking, North Utsire, South Utsire, when ma mam telt ma to wisht so she could hear if the wither hid missed far he was dodgin, waitin for a gale to blaw through.

## Chartin his wye hame

STORY BY ISOBEL RUTLAND



The parallel ruler, the compass that didna hae a roon face like a watch but hid twa legs and wis a brass pinted thingy that loons at playtime wid try an stab yi wi, it was aa too much. I fingert them first, listenin to mak sure he wis aye yappin.

I took the ruler and moved it aboot, a ower the thick paper. Fan the charts did their job he would steam back into Peterheid trying to be at the heid o a smaa market, een that wisna ower fuul. And my mam would bake scones and an iced sponge for him coming hame. And there would be a toot-toot as the van drew awa, an in he would come dumping his baggie wi its soor guff o fool drawers at the back door. And he would rip aff his toorie and grin and sometimes gie ma a beardie. Me screamin and wrigglin as he rubbed his stubbly chin up and doon ma smooth cheek – but lovin it aa the same. Then he'd get into the bath and wash aff the diesel-y smell, relaxin. And mam would mak our supper wi the fry he'd geen her; maybe a creamy fish pie, or wid hae battered haddock wi real chips that made the fat bubble and spit. But then sometimes he'd ging to his bed early cos he hid ti get up in the smaa hours to go back to Peterheid to land; hard, heavy work withoot the help o lumpers like they hid in Aberdeen.

I picked up a reid pen. The tangelt net o lines in front of ma helped him find fish

an, as wee as I wis, I kent that the mair fish he found the quicker he came hame.

Still, it wis a shame our hoose wisna on the chart. I wanted to draw it. Wi its glass front door and the wide livin room windae and ma pink bedroom curtains, so he would mine far wi bade.

He hadna said onythin aboot nae drawin on the back o the chart.

I shifted the books, moving aside the boorach o pens, hoping he widna hear the flap o paper as I turned it ower. The blank sheet fult the table, lookin naikit. Bit far should I pit the hoosie? In a corner? In the middle? I took the double ruler, movin it aboot until it settled at the tapmaist edge. I set doon the nib o ma pen, pressin hard, fleggit fan the ink fanned oot thick an dark ower the page. The ruler skitted a bittie as I drew the post o a door an fan I stood back the hoose looked gye squint.

Oot in the hall, ma dad wis sayin his cherrios and there was a click as he pit doon the receiver. I'd to hing in finishin ma bedroom curtains, so he wid ken the hoose wis oors.

He sighed as he rose fae the phone stool, as I flipped the paper the richt wye up an stepped awa fae the fancy ruler an clutter o pens. Twa dark lines o ma hoosie hid seeped through to the ither side. I drappit onto the cooch an stuck ma heid in ma library book so he widna see ma lookin guilty. Nae that it bathered ma if I got a row. Now fan the wither deit doon an he packed his baggie, drivin awa wi the crew in the boat's van, fan he got to Peterheid an loupit aboard, ma hoosie wid be wi him. He wid ayewis find his wye hame. ■

### Lost in Translation

CLARE O'BRIEN

Barrel rolling through currents and tides, you ventured too close to the edge of the world. The ocean swell delivered you, a parcel spilling helpless mystery. Out of your element, you toiled in our alien gravity, Your lustre drying in the sun. I came upon you in the evening. You were quite dead by then, your stilled frilled limbs like soft blown glass. Your bell, with its grey fishmonger slab sheen, had settled like a parachute in the sand. Beneath your skirts you were the ancient oyster pink of corsetry.

If I wade into the shallows, let the water lap around my soft white legs, will I make sense? Will the world you came from be my life support if I lie down and let my body float out to sea? Or will my muscles slacken, robbed of resistance, my bones slowly softening in the salt? Your sea would dissolve me like a slug. I'd drift, defenceless, silent, stingless, until all that was left was a shadow and a sigh, my voice whispered in a wave's breadth. Fading like these jellyfish, whose dehydrated pink rosettes are shadow printed on the sand.

### Magic Lantern

CLARE O'BRIEN

Freeze-framed you're caught on camera, Flat-packed for home assembly. I power up, Load up the mirrored disc and watch Your pixels search for their old voice.

When I look away you change your shape A hide to wrap a story in. Your lungs Are full of weather. When the tide turns, The sea will rush into your eyes.

Your stealthy bone blades guide Slow muscle mounted on the swell. Your sweat shines silver; treading water, Your shadow slices sand beneath my feet.

Whose photons these? My dry eyes burn, I cannot change the channel. Your breath is salt. Our long prehistory Fades the screen to black.

# Mary Queen of Scots 1542-1587

BY ANNE PIA

## Les Dernières Heures: The Last Hours

Nails in your head  
at the hammering that went on for days,  
as if you didn't know about the scaffold,  
about the blade,  
and its journey, and the horseman,  
and the call that finally came.

But it was the vivid silence that announced it  
the warm skank and stillness of air  
crowding creep of the walls  
the sugared sweetness of your sweat..  
that primed you..  
assemble your mourners,  
etch them on parchment  
rouse priests and absolutions  
cling tight  
to your warm wooden cross  
as you lie at last  
listening...

Resplendent, unaided,  
you walked  
short steps to Golgotha,  
two axemen,  
your final fumbling grooms.

## Seton

In solid air and brittle sunshine  
we skirted the castle low on the landscape  
glimpsed grey walls and peeping turrets;  
a sudden, whirling North Coast gust  
loosened long-limbed branches  
spread them high and wide  
and set them free,  
their leaves a light footfall on the meadow;  
brought sea-mist too  
and a trace of full-skirted girls at play  
rings and handstands and daisy chains,  
a whiff of love  
lingering still,  
trailing across the fields  
“bittersweet”.

*Seton Palace, now Seton Castle, a refurbished private dwelling, is where Mary retreated to as the guest of George Seton, friend and Master of the Royal Household. She danced here, held court, played golf and archery in the company of Darnley and subsequently, Bothwell. It was at Seton that they spent their last night before the surrender at Carberry Hill....*



## Carberry's Ghost

Again and again I come back  
and there's a clearing above Carberry's easy rise  
where the trees come close  
those keepers of secrets,  
their breath's bloom on my shadow.  
I gather a scatter of words spoken over hours  
that passed slow,  
solemn vows finally dropping like stones;  
and I send my lover south to England and away;  
in rough red petticoats  
disarmed, still proud,  
I stand stout before the axe.

*On the 15th June 1567, Bothwell and Mary rode to Carberry with an army to do battle with the soldiers of the Scottish Lords who objected to her marriage with Bothwell. There was a lengthy stand-off and Mary, the Queen of Scots, finally surrendered on an undertaking of safe passage to Bothwell.*

## James' Bible

Let me seek witches  
see only my mother,  
in the windrush of burnings  
the foul breath of harlots.  
Let me make bushfires on moorland,  
hear the crackle of bones,  
fiery hiss,  
pater nosters and confessions.

Yet in every river and loch  
the same water-lily breaking the surface,  
a single reed  
unbending,  
standing always tall  
on the shore,  
watching.

*James the Sixth of Scotland and First of England was the only son of Mary Queen of Scots. He was the most notorious witch hunter in history. Over 4,000 (mainly women) were consigned to the flames in Scotland. So obsessed was he, that he personally involved himself in many of the proceedings. He was responsible for the famous James Bible.*

## J'ai Promis Pour Vous: Last Words

Tell me about a country that's silent  
where old religions linger  
and like a hard frost  
crisp words and skin to paper  
make gods from history  
and in bronze and stone  
statues that never crumble  
through flags and petty fame,  
prolong a discourse fit only for tombstones  
and the mouths of men whose teeth have long decayed  
in unholy ground.

And I will show you that country's glory  
its castles once loud with song  
a chorus across its glens  
a rain of fine words flowering their great halls;  
I will show you a palace too,  
once graced with the turn of her waist,  
the twist and bounce of her curls and toes  
as she danced her Gaillardes,  
a city exuberant with proud livery  
afire with French finery,  
colouring every stone and paving;  
gardens regal to match our Mary  
for here once walked a Queen.

And I will show you now  
a city,  
where in all its rhetoric for independence  
and the freedom to speak,  
her name is no more than whispered,  
an inglorious imprint on a street corner  
and the church walls that fêted an imposter  
witness to her final and bold arrival  
in rough red skirts,  
huddle close by, dumb.

While from the block a quiet oath,  
“J'ai promis pour vous”  
an uncharted echo,  
her last legacy  
to an unworthy people.

*In manus tuas, Domine*



# Blasted Things

Lesley Glaister

Sandstone Press (2020)

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

For established Glaister fans, it will come as no surprise that she's produced another cracker. Though her consistency is rather incredible. Helen Dunmore and Louisa Young are the only other writers that come to mind, in this respect. How does she do it? Perhaps her magic is in creating psychologically credible characters who are both interesting and engaging. Never simple, never predictable. There is often someone sinister, but that character is never evil. They have reasons for their wicked intent, and the reader's sympathy can lie with both victim and persecutor. In fact, the line between the two is never clear, and the point of the stories is never to tie loose ends, though loose ends are often tied up. Her stories are dark and riveting, but they still reflect life artfully. Which makes Glaister's novels literature.

*Blasted Things* opens with a deceptively cliché scene. It's World War One, and beautiful upper class Clementine has become a nurse at the front. Mourning her brother's death by saving other soldier's lives, she meets and quickly falls in love with a tall handsome Canadian doctor. The novice Glaister reader might be lulled into thinking this will be a traditional war novel, with lovers separated and then later re-united, perhaps with a baby or two thrown in. Familiar romantic territory. But Glaister fans will not be fooled, for she is never a formulaic writer. By page 50, Clementine is back in London and regarding her new son with chilling indifference. We are inside her head, also wondering why people like babies. Then we slip into her housekeeper's head and her husband's head, and we are anxious about the baby. Soon we are worried about a stranger with a painted eye, another war victim, then we are afraid of him. Terrified. Then very uneasy because we've identified with someone who now clearly shows a potential for cruelty. Is he a psychopath or simply a survivor? These switches of empathy are uncannily swift, almost dizzying. And we still don't know what this novel is about, if not war, if not tragic love, if not PTSD or depression. Uncertainty propels the story, makes it original. We are interested because the flawed characters are so real and so dear, and we want them to be alright.

I'm a slow reader, but I can read a Glaister novel in two days, gleefully jettisoning things like eating and sleeping. Yes, her novels are easy to read, but not because they're dumbed-down or uncomplicated. They are easy to read because they are exquisitely crafted, never drawing attention to the author. The pleasure they give is like learning your favourite comfort food is also, coincidentally, the most nourishing food on the planet. It's simply not true, that

reading literature always means working hard.

She's written fifteen novels. Obviously, this is not enough. ■

## Let there be light

### The Crown Agent

Stephen O'Rourke

Sandstone Press (2020)

### Miss Blaine's Prefect and the

### Vampire Menace

Olga Wojtas

Saraband (2020)

REVIEWS BY VALERIE BEATTIE

With an ethos of keeping "the home fire burning" ingrained in their history, lighthouses brandish a humanitarian intent to guide sailors safely ashore, a function dating from the Pharos of Alexandria in the third century BC. Over time, a fissure emerged between the lighthouse as a humanitarian symbol – a beacon of hope and salvation to industrious sailors – and its role in imperial and commercial gain. Stephen O'Rourke's *The Crown Agent* sails into the turbid waters of this tension, beginning in January 1829 in the Firth of Clyde.

Since the hardback publication in November 2019, O'Rourke's debut novel has received positive reviews, and rightly so. Its settings, pace and plot lines have drawn comparisons with Buchan's *The 39 Steps* and Stevenson's *Kidnapped*. The protagonist, Dr Mungo Lyon, has captivated readers' imaginations to the point of hoping to see more of him.

O'Rourke executes dialogue and description well, and the picture drawn of nineteenth-century Glasgow is rich in sensory detail. Regular utilisation of cliffhangers and mystery signposting keep readers' curiosity piqued while Mungo establishes himself as a character as keen on drama as it is on him. And O'Rourke intends to start as he means to go on with respect to these generic elements as Dr Lyon delivers the foreword to his recollections of a life of secrets and missions in true theatrical manner. Now more than 50 years older, *The Crown Agent* takes place when he is 27.

The narrative's inaugural event depicts a schooner floundering in the Firth of Clyde. Sandy, the lighthouse keeper, rushes out into the midnight storm, frantic to light the beacon but, before he can fulfil his duty, his head meets with the fatal blow of an axe. His murder and the failure to save the *Julietta* ignite the stick of dynamite that will start the intrepid Mungo blasting through assorted protocols and courtesies as he takes on his new role as the Crown's secret agent, unwavering in his quest to expose Sandy's killer and the reason for the loss of the *Julietta*.

Mungo's narrative occurs during the height of the East India Company's rule. He is a curious protagonist yet more interesting for it. For example, one of

his eccentric skills is that he builds his sister's wheelchairs. Born in India, he and Margaret are sent as children to live with their grandfather in Edinburgh. At some point their father returns, only to disappear in 1826. With this background it is perhaps unsurprising that Mungo has a flair for the dramatic. Yet, what is notable for a man of science (he is a surgeon) is the way he contradicts himself on matters connected to establishing his reliability. For example, he purports to respect his profession yet secretly wishes to abandon it as it bores him; and, although presenting himself as competent, he quickly reveals that one of his patients died at his hands. His expressions regarding immigrants reveal a number of prejudices around nationality and class, and he is the student and friend of the disgraced anatomist, Dr Robert Knox.

Hence, there is scant surprise when Mungo abruptly departs his profession (and sister) without a backward glance. Thereafter, the narrative progresses with Bugatti-like speed propelling readers through the many mazes of his new role, and O'Rourke does well illustrating the trials and shocks experienced by this newly-employed spy. Of greater interest are those points when the narrative touches on the dark side of Scotland's imperial prosperity, on the politics of the trade routes and the significant abuses of power in this time of global expansion in Britain. These provide glimpses of more penetrating content, something which, perhaps, may develop in future adventures.

The pace of Mungo's unrelenting quest for the traitor/s never slackens, and one of the most electrifying elements in his story is his brother-in-arms on the mission, and the man who saved his life. A little like the complexity inherent in the symbol of the lighthouse as a beacon of rescue, the darkness and light surrounding this character illuminates how pliant moral codes become when matters of commerce are the true beacons for governments.

In place of adventures in imperialist Scotland we have, in Olga Wojtas' *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Vampire Menace*, a tale of gothic adventure in nineteenth-century France. This is the second in the Miss Blaine series but this reviewer's introduction to Shona MacMonagle, the 50-something prefect and graduate of Marcia Blaine's School for Girls (famed by *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*). While vampires time travel by virtue of their endless lives, Shona's century hopping occurs in response to missions identified by the ghostly Miss Blaine. Despite the novel's title Shona's mission is revealed only in chapter 12, by which time the "cisgender" heroine has arrived in a coffin, attacked the mayor, been arrested, imprisoned and displayed pedagogic and artistic talents enough to put the village to shame.

As the name intimates, Sans-Soleil is an ideal location for vampires. It contains a forbidden forest through which the fearless Shona treks in order to reach the plainly Gothic castle of Lord Erroll. Despite his red eyes, toothache, revulsion for both garlic and the merest hint of light, our crème de la crème heroine has more interesting things on her mind than thoughts of the undead. Indeed, their encounter could be said to encapsulate the book's tone in that, instead of being in a state of horror, fear and awe, Shona's focus is on milk for her tea. Seeing the lord's penurious offer, she recalls a joke: "... Chic Murray in a guesthouse, picking up one of those wee jars of honey and saying to the landlady, 'I see you keep a bee.'"

The objective of her quest is revealed two chapters before the novel's denouement and, with little time to spare, Shona focuses on putting the world of Sans-Soleil to rights. Thus, readers' journey through a comic interpretation of the Gothic that is definitely idiosyncratic draws to a close. With order – and light – restored to the village, Shona finds herself transported back to her workplace and, once again, slips effortlessly into her unassuming life as a librarian. But one senses that, as night follows day, Marcia Blaine will activate her prefect again when only her eccentric views and means will suffice to tackle situations one would have thought unimaginable. ■

## Mick

by Willie Orr

ThunderPoint Publishing (2019)

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

This is a story of survival despite horrendous hardship. Well into the 1950's in Scotland, children were removed from family homes deemed to be unsafe, and parents forced to sign agreements allowing their children to be sent anywhere in the world. Parents – some of whom were simply on hard times – lost the right to protect their children or to be in contact with them. Loving their children was not sufficient to give them rights. For some children, this led to situations of exploitation and abuse in foster care. Mick was such a child.

At times this book is difficult to read, but at no time do the descriptions of abuse feel gratuitous or melodramatic. Orr writes with the needed degree of both detachment and compassion. There are many reasons to feel sorry for the main character, but nothing in Orr's depiction asks for pity, just respect and understanding.

Orr is primarily a non-fiction writer specialising in Scottish subjects, and he brings some of that sense of authority to *Mick* in the character of George, the Child Protection Officer. Roughly every other chapter is in third person, from George's point of view. We learn about



Mick's circumstances through George, mostly things Mick himself may not be aware of, and which in any case do not concern him enough to be a natural part of his direct narration to us. In contrast to the calm coherence of the George sections, Mick's chapters are a torrent of prose from an excited – often frightened, always determined – boy struggling to keep his head above chaos. His dialect is authentic Glaswegian, naturally written yet always comprehensible. The most upsetting abuses are reported in an appropriately deadpan voice, for that is what a psyche does to protect itself – withdraws and detaches.

Orr is from Ireland, and while he's been settled in Scotland far longer than he lived in Ireland, perhaps there's still something fundamentally Irish about his writing. The dialogue and Mick's monologues are nuanced, lyrical, every word effortlessly working to bring the scenes to life. And my goodness, the ending is well worth the reading. ■

#### A Telling of Stones

Neil Rackham (illustrated by Alisdair Wiseman)

Acair, 2019

REVIEW BY IAN STEPHEN

Faclan has evolved into an annual event of great variety. It has been a combined film and book festival, as Wordplay was in Shetland. Faclan 2019 seemed not so much a book festival as a cocktail of events, some related to actual books,

some not really so. Why not? An Lanntair is a venue for all the arts and the loosely themed Faclan provides an opportunity for events outside the solid, regular events programming. In that context, annual book launches from Stornoway based publisher Acair have been a steadying factor, where a new publication is revealed by author interview, discussion or performance.

*A Telling of Stones* was launched with a performance that was close to virtuoso. Its author, Neil Rackham, is best known in the business world for books on the strategy of selling. He made it clear from the start that this is not another compilation of the 'prophecies' and lore related to Coinneach Odhair or The Brahan Seer. It is an audacious weaving-in of legends with a storyteller's disregard for the normal passage of time. The author takes the Celtic knot as a central motif. So an end can as easily be a beginning. The casting of the seer's stone into a deep loch can thus be the action that prompts a varying version of the central story of the curse that comes from focusing through the aperture of the seer's stone.

There's as many kinds of story as there are ways of telling one. Neil Rackham likes complex asides which become yarns in themselves and the audience is invited to gasp when somehow the teller does pull it off and catches the main thread again. No matter how well you know the tales there is great entertainment in observing them re-made in this context. It seemed to me natural to gather in the

selkie story as there is a strong Hebridean tradition of the seal wife as a daughter of a King of 'Lochlin' which is also a strand in the Uig telling of the finding of the stone. The Corrievreckan legend seemed more strained. To me, its function as a naming tale for the Sounds north of Jura and Scarba is an essential element. This is lost as the action happens on 'Lochlin'. In this fable, that name (often written as Lochlann or the Welsh version, Llychlyn) is applied to an imagined island, mapped between the Butt of Lewis and Faroes, rather than Scandinavian territories generally and most usually Norway.

This recalls Malachy Talach's summary of *Imagined Islands* – a previous Faclan event. Like Birlinn's production of that book, Acair have spared nothing on the production values. These do justice to Alisdair Wiseman's clear and bold drawings, in pen and ink, adding much to the pleasure. The designer has thoughtfully placed short sections on lore linked to such topics as 'second sight' or 'the nature of selkies' in a pale Scandinavian blue, as inserts. For me, the spare nature of these summaries is one of the strongest strands of this daring book. ■

#### The Lyre Dancers

(Vol 3 of The Stone Stories trilogy)

Mandy Haggith

Saraband, 2020

REVIEW BY MARGARET ELPHINSTONE

*On the Ocean* by Pytheas the Greek must be one of the most enigmatic texts we

don't have. In c. 325 BC he explored the west coast of Britain from Cornwall to Orkney and maybe Shetland, then north to Thule, and east to the amber coasts of the Baltic. Pytheas' book has been lost for over 2000 years; all we have are tantalising quotations from hostile critics. Haggith's trilogy is a convincing, provocative attempt to fill the gap. But she doesn't start with the Greek explorer, she begins and ends with the Celtic Iron Age people whose lives were changed by Pytheas' intrusion. In her account, the people who never had a voice and never wrote anything down: the remote, the non-literate, the enslaved, and even the women, get their chance to write back. In *The Lyre Dancers*, the last word is with those who dwell in the liminal spaces on the margins of Europe, where written history has no authority. Pytheas and his Greek world have vanished south over the horizon, and such resolution as there is, is all Celtic. The sea has the final word.

*The Lyre Dancers*, like its predecessors, is an alternative *On the Ocean*. A sailor herself, Haggith knows the sea as her characters would have known it. When Rian returns to Assynt (Haggith's home territory, evoked with lyrical detail), the ever-changing connections between land and sea make the place alive; this is the true awakening of coming home. But the sea calls: nothing is forever, and it isn't possible to stay.

*The Walrus Mutterer* (2018) told how Rian grows up in Assynt until she is



forced to travel with Pytheas and the terrifying, powerful woman trader, Ussa. Rian is intrigued by Pytheas' scientific measurements and the unknown culture he represents, but her involvement in his explorations comes at a desperate price. The potential for widening mutual horizons cannot be fulfilled: Rian is a woman and a slave, and for her the encounter with the Greek is all but lethal. And yet, in the second book, *The Amber Seeker* (2019), the reader is drawn to Pytheas. His enthusiasm about his calculations and his instinct to discover cannot but appeal to readers attuned to the trope of the archetypal adventurer into the unknown. Pytheas endures his own rite of passage during his sojourn on the amber coasts of the Baltic, and this reader found herself willing him to survive. But this same man has wronged Rian brutally, betraying her over and over again, and consistently abusing his power over her as girl, woman and mother. He has no moral sense of any rights but his own. I want to hate him but I can't, which is a tribute to Haggith's nuanced portrayal.

Third volumes of trilogies can sometimes disappoint, but *The Lyre Dancers* (2020) triumphantly draws together all the threads followed so far, while successfully eluding any simplistic resolution. Having shown how individuals are caught up and wounded, sometimes fatally, in the clash of cultures, Haggith offers no simple answer, and certainly no unambiguous ending. The encounter with Pytheas the Greek has changed everyone, but in *The Lyre Dancers* he himself is now, as the sagas say, 'out of this story' – perhaps it never did belong to him. Haggith also negotiates the transition between generations so that the emphasis passes to Rian's children without leaving Rian marooned on the boring shores of middle-aged motherhood. Rian remains true to what the Walrus Mutterer originally saw in her. She survives a third volume undiminished, even though the plot sometimes leaves her behind in order to follow the lives of others.

This bringing together of the Greek and Celtic worlds happened through an act of violence, and *The Lyre Dancers* shows that the offspring of this dubious alliance cannot resolve their inheritance easily. *The Amber Seeker* was Pytheas' apologia to his daughter Soyea, but we never see her read it. Instead, *The Lyre Dancers* shows how Soyea finds her own way in her own world. In contrast to her half-sister, she looks different, which is a handicap, and she seems to think a little differently too. At the heart of her experience is a scarcely-remembered, unbearable loss which has shaped who she has become. But in *The Lyre Dancers*, self-awareness for all characters comes through irreparable loss. Even the impossible Ussa becomes more herself than ever. If the world were less inimical, it appears, there would be

no fulfilment for anyone. What would any of us become, if history, like Haggith, did not unfailingly provide us with a testing plot? ■

### Wordplay and energy

#### makar/unmaker

Edited by Calum Rodger, tapsalteerie, 2019

#### Horseman

Em Strang, Shearsman Books, 2019

#### Nub

Lesley Glaister, Mariscat Press, 2019

#### Line Drawing

Ross Wilson, Smokestack Books, 2018

#### The Unreturning

Martin Malone, Shoestring Press, 2019

#### Let out the Djinn

Jane Aldous, Arachne Press, 2019

#### Cairn

Gerard Rochford, Malfranteaux Concepts, 2016

POETRY REVIEW BY IAN STEPHEN

A selection of new(ish) gatherings of poems reveals energy and commitment even before you turn one page. Tapsalteerie describe a new gathering of Scottish poets working 'outside the mainstream' as 'some of the most urgent and adventurous poetry of our time'. You have to believe in that possibility just to keep making the things and definitely to publish them when attention, far less reward, is likely to be scant.

For me, the poet in this collection who makes the words ring in an engaging way is Harry Josephine Giles. The first impression is in sound and maybe there's more modernism in the profitable clash of speaking styles than in the more sombre pallet of previous Orcadians such as Edwin Muir. Yet there's something of the ballad there still – an elusive fable behind the ephemera of sensation. In 'Astrid sketches Orcadia' the airborne artist 'dights away the natralism/fae her slaet, an stairs ower again/abstrack...' this results in 'black lines fer the starns, blue dubs/fer the tides, green aircs for the peedie skail/ o wheels an airms an bolas gaithered roond Central'.

Translations or versions are provided but these are just as full of wordplay and energy. You get the feeling that this Orcadian's collision course with the city is more positive than that of the Muir family's anxious clash with Glasgow, maybe a century before.

Em Strang enters the natural world, especially animal kingdoms. You get a fair telling of this book by its cover (Kate Walters). Horse and human merge in an ink and wash imagery that hints more of shamanism than surrealism. Shearsman's choice of a matt laminate, lean typography and a hint of vellum in the pages serve the effect of entering into an artist's book which is considered but in which the language has not lost urgency. This poet alternates between framed perceptions in three or four lines and more extended

explorations of the nature of human loss. In all, there's an uncanny gift of making the move from the most understated but accurate observation and seeing what's not visible to most, more sure than Coinneach Odhair. The feathers of a dead crane fall from a table 'like milk for the cat.'

Or take this jump:

'Anything that's not tied down is gone,  
even the sun.'

It could be the simple act of chopping firewood or it could be the chance find of roadkill, but this poet sees and feels with equal intensity. Flora prompts equal scrutiny as fauna. In fact, they seem joined in blood. You might have thought you were on safer territory with the vermilion pompom of a peony. But you're not. That hangs

'like a bloody fist or a fresh heart.'

There is also variation in the techniques used to similar ends. 'Elegy' and 'Because the moon...' come close to incantation with employment of refrain and regular rhyme. Elsewhere rhyme or half-rhyme is often used but occurring as if by accident along with chiming of sound inside the line. These measures tend to accumulate to a form that is only very occasionally lulling. And that when it is the intention, maybe just before the pain of birthing or burial returns as it must. It's all too seldom that such a clear way of sensing meets technique which serves its purpose but with no need to flourish it or prolong its display. And all that has also met, in this case, with illustration and design which combine to present it in a form which suits the poems so well.

Mariscat has a long-established use of a form which is between a pamphlet and a book. These are wire-stitched but certainly not spine-less in content. *Nub* has the simplest graphic but the colours and typography on its cover gives it a quality look and feel. This promise is more than met by the content, presented in a sans-serif on a good weight of near-cream. Lesley Glaister has written a dozen novels, well regarded, but her poetry has the freshness of someone newly in love with the game. Her second collection with Mariscat has her persona merge with a tree rather than Em Strang's horse. The first section is simply an episodic love-letter to the 'vegetable hulk' of an ancient fig tree in Moreton Bay, NZ.

The object of admiration doesn't speak back much but there's still some tiffs. The lover is disturbed to find the young tree was an epiphyte, feeding off others, a bit like a cuckoo. A strangler too. Pummeling happens. The series, celebratory poems but offset with gin-dry wit, prepares you for a looser grouping with shifting settings but all probing. Just when you think it's all a bit cozy, a child takes a fork

to the underside of a table which carries four layers of protection on its upper skin. If there's one theme to the fore, I'd say it's family matters, but the minimum of apparent artifice and maximum honesty are used to examine memories.

Ross Wilson's title, *Line Drawing* comes from his revelation of the story behind a phrase you take for granted. His lines are often drawn in the conceptual space between men squaring-up to each other. That could be in a ring for amateur boxers or the line could be the surface of the earth – miners who work below the crust but cross fencewire to roll Easter eggs with their kids in the open day. Language can also draw the line – a ned on one side of a border is a chav on the other. His poems are muscular in their terse storytelling but more tender than macho.

Shoestring Press's good service to poetry includes bringing a selected poems of the Argyll postie and social historian, Angus Martin, back to the light and introducing more in this hemisphere to the work of Tasmanian, Pete Hay, another celebrant of the vernacular voice. Now the Nottingham press have published a substantial collection by Martin Malone, a lecturer in Creative Writing at Aberdeen and one who has made the move from England's NE to that of Scotland. A century since its ending, this poet assumes the voices of soldiers of World War One. He does not attempt an idiom unnatural to him but that of informed and educated commentators, participants or family.

The paintings of Wyndham Lewis and Paul Nash are cited but so is the artist Christian Boltanski (born 1944). The book has two parts, one a looser gathering and one a numbered series of prose poems. In all, directness and clarity are sought. Often a film-like feel is created by linguistic imagery – 'his last things' on a hanger or a tank compressing two walls of a trench, 'as you'd close two sides of a wound.' Narrative is again to the fore.

Narrative clarity also drives Jane Aldous. Then she lets herself go. An eel is 'tricky as a spiv'. There's much to admire in this poem but, for me, the Sargasso birth and death cycle as 'mysterious stillness' doesn't quite sustain the spell.

Sadly, Gerard Rochford is no longer with us (he passed away last December, Ed.). *Cairn*, his group of poems for the Isle of Lewis, comes with a foreword from Robert Macfarlane to catch the tone:

"These special, subtle poems are the work of a writer of rare versatility, who can move in a beat from the frailty of elegy to a robust address:

"I'd like a word with the maw  
of this river"

One poem celebrates the moment when the poem which Iain Crichton Smith regarded as his strongest work,



'Deer on the High Hills' was revealed in Aberdeen. Anyone who had the privilege of hearing that makar will nod. In contrast, here's one of Gerard Rochford's series of haiku for Lewis:

'lichen graffiti  
coloured the Calanais stones  
scraped off by vandals'

## Reprise Some Poetry Reviews Online

An editorial slip meant that Helen Allison's superb overview of five poetry collections published in 2018-19 was omitted from the print edition of Northwords Now 38. For any reader who hasn't yet seen these on our website, where they appeared at the time of that autumn-winter edition's distribution, go to northwordsnow.co.uk and search under Helen's author entries to read her *What is the writer risking with this book?* review of the following:

### This

Jim Stewart, Voyage Out Press, 2018

### Eating thistles

Deborah Moffatt, Smokestack Books, 2019

### Noctuary

Niall Campbell, Bloodaxe, 2019

### Stitch

Samuel Tongue, Tapsalteerie Press, 2019

### Why the Sky is Far Away

Mandy Haggith, Red Squirrel Press, 2019

## Marram – Memories of sea and spider-silk

By Leonie Charlton  
Sandstone Press 2020

## Pabay – An Island Odyssey

By Christopher A. Whatley  
Birlinn 2019

## Reading the Gaelic Landscape Leughadh Aghaidh na Tìre

By John Murray  
New, expanded edition  
Whittles, 2019

NON-FICTION REVIEWED  
BY KENNY TAYLOR

Narratives describing journeys with an equine companion can have great appeal, even for readers with no prior knowledge of such animals, save for offering the occasional handful of grass over a fence. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879) is an acknowledged masterpiece, both of this horse family sub-genre, and of travel writing in general. Through the skill of his descriptions and asides, details of place and character that might otherwise seem trivial become fascinating; the meandering journey beguiling. And improbably, at the core of the book, is Stevenson's love for a small, mouse-coloured donkey, Modestine, at turns both amusing and moving.

Writing to dedicate the work to his

friend, the literary and art critic, Sidney Sheldon, RLS sets out the stall: '...we are all travellers in what John Bunyan calls the wilderness of the world – all, too, travellers with a donkey; and the best that we find in our travels is an honest friend. He is a fortunate voyager who finds many. We travel, indeed, to find them. They are the end and the reward of life. They keep us worthy of ourselves; and when we are alone, we are only nearer to the absent.' Fitting, then, that Sheldon would become a significant editor of Stevenson's letters, both during and after the great writer's short life.

Some 140 years after Stevenson's stravaiging in the Massif Central with Modestine, his travel credo also applies to many aspects of Leonie Charlton's journey in *Marram*, where she goes north, at pony pace, through much of the Outer Hebrides. Her human travelling companion is a friend, Shuna Shaw. Their four-legged companions are the ponies, Ross and Chief. The writer's passion for the ponies (shared with Shuna) shines through from the outset, including in descriptions of coat colours which make them sound nice enough to eat: 'Ross is a Rum Highland Pony with rare ancient bloodlines... They have unique colour combinations – fox dun and silver dun, liver and mouse and biscuit dun too. Some have zebra stripes along their spines. Ross's passport states his colour as 'dappled chocolate'; his mane has blonde highlights, and in summer you can see the dark dapples across his body.'

Chief, in contrast, is bright silver grey. Together, the ponies' characters complement each other, with Ross being the older, 'experienced' one and Chief's 'bravery' bolstering Ross in moments of pony doubt. As below, so above in the saddles, as the two equestrians support each other through challenges of weather, wild camping and more, meeting diverse island residents along the way, from Barra to Callanish. But a central challenge for the writer is not the externals, but the lingering trauma of her relationship with her late mother. This can still haunt her waking present, whatever the glories of sea and machair and camaraderie might be.

At different locations, Leonie, (nicknamed 'Beady' as a baby by her mother, on account of her eyes being 'shiny, like beads') strings a bead or more from her mother's collection through silken thread – also her mother's – to leave as a kind of necklace, punctuating the journey with small, symbolic gestures. This is part of what gives the journey an unexpected emotional undercurrent. Studded with well-crafted and memorable descriptions and told with great honesty, *Marram* is much more than the 'travelling with two ponies' book it might seem at first glance. It's moving and compelling, in quite a different way. RLS would understand.



'At the shore of Sky foresaid, lys ane iyle callit Pabay, neyre ane myle in lenthe, full of woodes, guid for fishing, and a main shelter for thieves and cut-throats. It pertens to M'Kynnoun.'

So wrote the clergyman, Donald ('Dean') Monro in 1549, just a few years prior to the Scottish Reformation. Some three centuries later, Hugh Miller – geologist, writer, editor and key figure in the disruption that split the Church of Scotland, early in the Victorian era – wrote in glowing terms about the same place:

'This island, so soft in outline and colour, is formidably fenced round by dangerous reefs. He would be a happy geologist who, with a few thousands to spare, could call Pabba his own. It contains less than a square mile of surface; and a walk of little more than three miles and a half among the line where the waves break at high water brings the traveller back to his starting point; and yet, though thus limited in area, the petrifications of its shores might themselves fill a museum.'

Fast forward to recent years, and a time of further changes – not in religious practices, but in other ways. Shifts in ownership of land, especially along the west coast and in the isles; declines in population and traditional means of making a living from that land and surrounding sea; shifts in the culture and background of many people who make their homes there; now all part of the contemporary scene across much of the Highlands and Islands. Fertile ground too, perhaps (in contrast to the wet, nutrient-poor soils of the west) for an historian with deep knowledge of the region to dig in archives and document past changes and how they might inform current thinking.

Christopher A. Whatley, Professor of Scottish History at the University of Dundee, has now turned the soil of the small isle of Pabay in ways such as those, and more, to write a remarkable book. As might be expected from someone with his standing as an historian, the breadth and detail of his research into the history of this little place is impressive. At a rough tally, there are more than 1,300 entries in the index and many hundreds of chapter notes (placed at the end, so not encumbering the chapters themselves).

But this is no dry-phrased, academic treatise, aimed principally at other historians. It's a story with narrative drive to power it, and a passion that shines through for both the place and the people who have shaped it.

What makes the book unusual is how it blends both personal and wider history: 'Islands mesmerize and intrigue me,' writes the author, 'They have since I was a very young boy. One in particular, the subject of this book.'

Christopher Whatley's link to Pabay came through his uncle, Len (named,

as revealed in an amusing anecdote, in honour of Lenin) and aunt, Margaret. They moved from the Midlands in 1950 and lived on Pabay until 1970. During that time, they raised a family (one of whom, Stuart, runs the Edinbane Pottery on the adjacent mainland of Skye). And they tried, tried and tried again to find ways to eke a living from land and sea and to develop a range of small, potentially money-making ventures.

Towards the end of his Aunt Margaret's life, Christopher, who was a regular visitor to Pabay as a child, promised his Aunt Margaret that he would write a book about the part the family had played in the story of the island. By blending his own experiences there, family recollections and old photographs, he has fulfilled that promise. But he has also achieved something with much wider resonance. By casting an expert eye over sources that reveal (including through richly characterised key players) shifts in ownership and thinking about land, for example, including in times when shipping magnates held sway here and earlier generations farmed, he gives the story of this tiny place national significance.

This is a book that will be a resource and a pleasure for readers for many years to come. Margaret, Len and the many Pabay dwellers who came before them could be proud of that legacy.



Any Ordnance Survey map has layers of meaning hidden, for many, in plain sight. Scattered across it are names of topographic features whose origins could be from centuries before even the first edition OS maps were drawn. It's as if past generations can still speak about parts of the land where they lived and worked and fought and travelled, if you trouble to look, then listen.

Across the Highlands and Hebrides, especially, and parts of Scotland beyond, this means paying heed to Gaelic names. But even if you have little or no knowledge of the language, you can still get expert guidance as your eye scans the maps or walks the terrain. *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* by John Murray is the ideal aid to such exploration. Its style is clear and engaging, making even an overview of Gaelic grammar and pronunciation a pleasurable read.

But it's the details of many names (some common, some scarce) that have made this book such a valuable resource since first publication in 2014. The expanded edition has additional images, enhanced drawings and extended text in parts. The useful format remains, where separate index entries for Gaelic nouns and specific place-names help with searches. The chapters are short, but full of inspiration. Just think of where Chapter 9: 'Climate, Season, Mood, Sound and Time' might lead you. ■

# Shoormal

**Report by Lesley Harrison on a conference organised by Shetland College and UHI Centre for Rural Creativity last autumn**

*shoormal n - highwater mark on beach; the water's edge. Dey fann his boady ee moarnin ida shoormal.*

[Shetland ForWirds online dictionary]

**W**HAT DOES NORTHNESS look like? What are its sounds? Is there a clear aesthetic of the north; or does 'northness' exist only as an antithesis of everything we leave at our back when we pack the car and head for the ferry? Not stuffy rooms and multiple flickering screens, but cool blue landscapes and a sense of space; not traffic, but airy, empty roads; not blabber, but silence.

Which make the North Isles and the Hebrides ideal (idealised) holiday destinations; but this romantic isolation, whether real or imagined, presents significant cultural, economic and emotional barriers to development for the islanders themselves.

Shoormal, a conference held in Lerwick in September last year, put this issue front and centre. The UHI's Centre for Rural Creativity invited artists, academics and community workers to take the long view of the creative economy of the Highlands and Islands: does it only service the tourist trade, or is there a deeper interconnectedness of rurality and intellectual and creative activity? What does this look like in this new nomadic age? Is there resilience; or is it wrong to look for this?

UNESCO describes intangible cultural heritage as including 'representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces' which are transmitted from generation to generation and which are 'constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history'. A community's intangible heritage comes under threat at the point at which it is no longer self-perpetuated within and for the community itself, but is transformed into something intended primarily for a stronger outside group – for the nostalgic 'tourist gaze'.

Katrin Dautel and Kathrin Schödel propose an alternative understanding of the ontology of the island-world as a 'constantly re-created space with changing boundaries and inscriptions'. This perhaps offers a more empirically accurate picture of the 'islandness' of Orkney and Shetland – as held in a web of semi-isolated island and mainland settlements

which share a sense of interconnectedness and commonality. Heritage and cultural identity now become much more fluid. Cait McCullagh described her role as a co-curator of Orcadian 'heritage', and its constantly renegotiated parameters: "where it stops and where it starts cannot be clearly bound".

The University of the Highlands and Islands aspires to be deeply immersed in its communities. In his keynote speech, Vice-Principal Neil Simco described how, in future planning, the university visualises itself within and from the perspective of the islands. There is clear evidence, he said, that learning has a direct impact on intellectual, cultural and academic development of the wider community; its senses of place and purpose are deeply interconnected. The UHI is further distinguished in its emphasis on the humanities, said Prof Simco: it is in the social/cultural/creative continuum that the scientific disciplines have meaning. The Shetland Arts Development Association also has a strongly civic role, said director Graeme Howell, which explicitly links cultural creativity and wellbeing in the "advancement of the resident".

To look back is to look forward. See, for example, the Bray Editions booklet Orkney futures: a handbook (eds. Alistair

Peebles and Laura Watts). A diverse range of Orcadians and non-Orcadians – poets, politicians, scientists, tourists, locals and exiles – were asked to speculate on the islands' evolving future. Elements of Orkney's ancient past are interwoven seamlessly with migration, mobile phones, and energy from wind and waves: 'the future is imagined and made by us in heritage strategy, in timetables, in roadmaps, in schematics, in prototypes of new technologies', says Watts. This symbolic trajectory of past, present and future is important to the islanders' own cultural understanding of themselves as self-defining, as both integrative and outward-looking.

This question of representation rose again and again as speaker after speaker described their own representation, or re-presentation, of the islands. For me, the most powerful artistic responses were those that grew out of listening: as in Shetlandic jeweller Helen Robertson's ice-thin Hentinagaets – lace shawl patterns knitted in silver wire, stitched like cobwebs into fences and frames on abandoned crofts; and Catherine Munro's cultural study of the breeding of Shetland ponies and the crofters' discussion of 'the hill'. Nordic Viola's musical journey round the North Atlantic was incredibly moving. Katherine Wren (viola and laptop) and Gemma McGregor (flute,

piano and percussion) traced threads of melody and song which had migrated round the North Atlantic rim. Their performance – an interweaving of Greenlandic polkas and drum dances, Shetlandic fiddle tunes, whale songs and whale sounds, wind and water – left the audience all but speechless.

I left Lerwick with a sense of foreboding: the things that can strengthen the islands' creative economy – technology, renewals of interest and participation, outcomes-based funding – also have the power to affect it disproportionately, and change it beyond recognition. Perhaps the ethical response of the artist is really to set themselves aside: to refuse the compulsion to word or frame what's around them, but instead to let this unique world assert itself, and to document this as it happens. I arrived on the Northlink on the Thursday morning, and waited out the hour before the conference registration opened by having another coffee out on the rear deck upstairs. Everyone else was inside or already ashore. The ferry berths 'nose in': the sky was clear and I could see all the way up and down the Bressay Sound. And something was out in the channel, travelling south to north, and at some pace. Every 10 seconds or so it surfaced and spouted, or 'blew'; the water was too choppy to see what it was, and it was gone in a minute. ■





## CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

**Craig Aitchison** is a teacher and writer from Galashiels in the Scottish Borders. He is about to complete a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Stirling.

**James Andrew** has had three books of poetry published and recently won the Autumn Voices Poetry Competition judged by Sally Evans. The Book Folks have published three of his crime novels.

**Chris Arthur** lives in St Andrews. He has published several essay collections, most recently *Hummingbirds Between the Pages*. [www.chrisarthur.org](http://www.chrisarthur.org).

**Gabrielle Barnby** lives in Orkney and writes short stories, poetry and full-length fiction. She is committed to supporting creative experiences for young people. [gabriellebarnby.com](http://gabriellebarnby.com)

**Heather Beaton** lives on South Uist and is inspired by the changing seasons, wild weather and connecting with the hidden wild. [www.heatherybean.blogspot.com](http://www.heatherybean.blogspot.com).

**Valerie Beattie** is a *Northwords* Board member and developed UHI's first undergraduate literature degree. Her research interests include Gothic studies and she is working to bring an accepted book draft to publication.

**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 *Mslexia*, *Spelk* and anthologies from Hedgehog Poetry Press and The Emma Press.

**Hamish Brown** MBE, D.Litt. (St. A) is a writer, photographer, lecturer, poet and editor of over thirty titles, most recently two collections of non-fiction: *Walking the Song* and *Chasing the Dreams*.

**Ricky Monahan Brown's** memoir *Stroke* was one of *The Scotsman's* Scottish Books of 2019. He's working on a screenplay set in nineteenth century Sutherland as part of SFTN's Write4Film programme.

**Rachel Carmichael** was once a lawyer but now writes stories. She has been published in *thi wurd* magazine.

**Paul F Cockburn** is an Edinburgh-based freelance journalist specializing in arts & culture, equality issues, and popular science. He is Scotland editor for [broadwaybaby.com](http://broadwaybaby.com)

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

**Carey Coombs** breeds pedigree Beef Shorthorn cattle at the foot of the Pentland Hills near Dunsyre.

**Derek Crook** lives on Mull. He has published in *High Tide*, *Dreamcatcher*, *Snakeskin*, *Message In A Bottle* and elsewhere.

**Gillian Dawson** is participating in Clydebuilt 12 – the Verse Apprenticeship Scheme run by St Mungo's Mirrorball (Glasgow). She was runner-up in the Hugh Miller Writing Competition 2017-2018.

**Imogen Forster** is preparing poems for publication as a pamphlet, and posting haiku and cinquains on Twitter.

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

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

**Amelia Graham** is reading History at the University of Edinburgh and was shortlisted for the Jane Martin Prize for Poetry in 2019. She is currently working on a collection: *People, Places*. These are her first poems published in a national magazine.

**Barry Graham** is what Foucault called an Author Function. More than a dozen books. <https://barrygrahamauthor.site/>

**Edith Harper** writes poetry and stories in English and Doric. Although now living in Kelso and originally from Aberdeen, she still finds writing in Doric easier and more expressive.

**Lydia Harris** lives on Westray. In 2017, she held a Scottish Book Trust New Writer's Award. Her latest pamphlet *Painting the Stones Back* was published in 2019 by Maria Isakova Bennett of Coast to Coast to Coast.

**Lesley Harrison** is a member of the *Northwords* Board. Her most recent collections are *Disappearance* (Shearsman, 2020) and *Blue Pearl* (New Directions, 2017).

**Jennifer Morag Henderson's** biography *Josephine Tey: A Life* was acclaimed by the *Observer*, *Independent* and *Telegraph* as a Book of the Year. [www.jennifermoraghenderson.com](http://www.jennifermoraghenderson.com)

**Paula Jennings'** most recent poetry collection is *Under a Spell Place*, published by HappenStance. She facilitates poetry writing workshops in Fife and Edinburgh.

**Suzy A. Kelly** holds an MLitt in Creative Writing from Glasgow and is also published in *Gutter* and *New Writing Scotland*. She is working on her first novel, *Vile Deeds*.

**Ingrid Leonard** comes from Orkney, which inspires much of her poetry. Her poems have appeared in *Brittle Star*, *The Interpreter's House* and *New Writing Scotland*.

**Gail Low** is the general editor of the arts review DURA ([www.dura-dundee.org.uk](http://www.dura-dundee.org.uk)); *Imagined Spaces*, a co-edited anthology of essays with Kirsty Gunn, will be published by Saraband later in the year.

**Robin Fulton Macpherson's** *A Northern Habitat: Collected Poems 1960-2010* (Marick Press Michigan, 2013) is to be followed by *Unseen Isles and other poems*, from the same publisher and *Arrivals of Light* is due from Shearsman Books later this year.

**Nicola Madill** is a singer songwriter/writer from the east coast of Scotland, who 'alchemises the oneiric and ethereal by blending lyrics with poetic prose into songs and short creative pieces'.

**Nick Major** lives on a biodynamic farm with the usual menagerie and a sexually-frustrated peacock called Percy. His writing has appeared in *The Herald* and *The Scottish Review of Books*.

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

**Robin Munro** now lives on Bute, after running a bookshop in Galloway. His two published poetry collections are *The Land of the Mind* and *Shetland like the World*.

**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. She has now completed a second book for Luath Press.

**Lydia Popowich** dreams, writes and paints by the sea in Caithness. Her first pamphlet, *The Jellyfish Society* was published in 2016 by Paper Swans Press.

**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.

**Evelyn Pye's** collection, *Smoke That Thunders*, was published by Mariscat Press (2015) and, from it, the poem Mosi-Oa-Tunya was chosen for the 20 Best Scottish Poems of that Year.

**Marka Rifat** is a member of Mearns Writers. She has been published in US and UK publications and began writing poetry, short stories and plays after careers in journalism and corporate communications.

**Nikki Robson's** poems appear in places such as *Acumen*, *Under the Radar*, *The Lake*, *Obsessed with Pipework* and *Scotia Extremis*. She was runner-up in the 2019 Shooter Poetry Competition.

**Cynthia Rogerson's** latest novel *Wait for me Jack* (written under the pseudonym Addison Jones) is published by Sandstone.

**Isobel Rutland** enjoys penning novels as well as short fiction. She won the Romantic Novelists' Association Elizabeth Goudge Award in 2015, is an arts' correspondent for *The Wec Review* and member of the Aberdeen Writers' Studio.

**James Sinclair's** poetry collection *Yarnin* was published through Bluemull Books in 2017. His first play *Da Sam Rodd My Ancestors Drive* was broadcast on BBC Radio Shetland in November 2019.

**Ian Stephen's** selected poems *maritime* is published by Saraband, as is his novel *A Book of Death and Fish. Waypoints* (Bloomsbury) was shortlisted for the Saltire non-fiction book of the year award, 2017.

**Ian Tallach** Having previously worked as a paediatric doctor, Ian is now medically retired with MS. He lives in Glenurquhart, as do his young family.

**Vawdrey Taylor** is an artist and writer from the Black Isle with an interest in etching and illustration.

**Clair Tierney** lives in Ardentinnny and is a singer-songwriter, teacher and emerging poet. Themes include voices of women in history, children, immersive environments.

**Isabel Thompson** is a UHI Creative Writing/Literature student currently staying in Oban.

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

**Iain Twiddy** studied literature at university, and lived for several years in northern Japan. His poems have been published in *The Poetry Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The London Magazine* and elsewhere.

**Hazel Urquhart** is a second year degree student studying Creative Writing with UHI, Inverness, enjoys writing poetry and prose and was published in the Scottish Book Trust's 2019 Anthology *The Bletcher*.

**Lynn Valentine** writes between dog walks. She is working towards her first poetry collection under the mentorship of Cinnamon Press after winning a place on their Pencil Mentoring competition.

**Petra Vergunst** is a poet and ecologist living and working in Northeast Scotland. Her writing deals with the multiple ways in which we know, relate to, and participate in our environments.

**Mags Wallis** lives in Strathpeffer. She keeps hens, enjoys knitting socks, climbing trees... and writing.

**Pip Osmond-Williams** graduated in 2019 from Glasgow University with a PhD in Scottish Literature. Her poems have most recently appeared in *New Writing Scotland* and the SWC chapbook, *Island & Sea*.

## Story of the cover art



**Self-portrait Dreaming of Portavadie by Pinkie Maclure (2019), Stained Glass Light Box 23" x 27", recently purchased by The National Museum of Scotland**

IN THE 1960S and 1970s, we used to spend our summers in Portavadie, a wild, remote corner of Argyll, where my grandad had a small cottage on the edge of a shallow, sandy bay known as the Salen – Gaelic for ‘small inlet’. The house had no electricity or running water, but I remember those days as the happiest of my childhood.

In the mid-1970s, the government approved the sale of the surrounding land to a company who built oil-rig platforms. The multi-million-pound project was heavily subsidised by the public purse and Portavadie was destroyed – the Salen had explosives placed in it, transforming it into an enormous, deep gully, a large, concrete workers’ village was built, wide

roads were cut through the landscape and a razor-wire fence was erected all around my grandad’s cottage.

However, no orders for platforms came and the company soon went bankrupt. Portavadie was left derelict for many years, and my grandad’s cottage was eventually sold to a hotel company for development.

In this image, I am dreaming of Portavadie, before and after the cataclysm, joined by my parents on their honeymoon, my brother birdwatching and the cat from Portavadie farm.

The piece is made with handblown and salvaged glass, which I have sandblasted, engraved, filed, painted and fired. ■