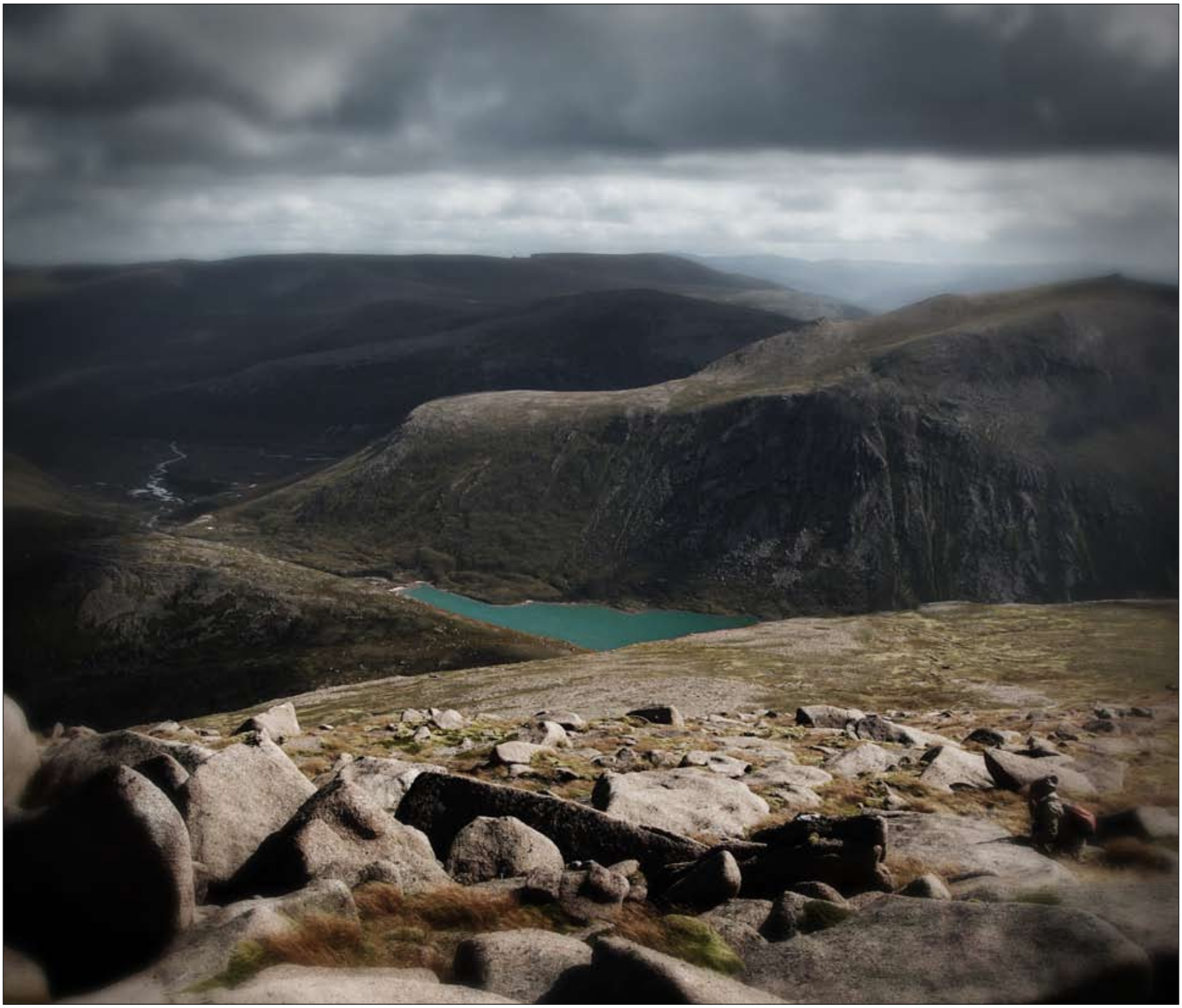
The FREE literary magazine of the North

Northwords Now

Issue 40, Autumn–Winter 2020



ZOË STRACHAN mines the mythic, CHRIS POWICI and friends go multilingual, KEVIN MACNEIL and LORETTA MULHOLLAND find Japanese inspiration, CHRISTOPHER WHYTE talks Gaelic without limits with JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON, SIMON HALL surveys the work of ROBERT ALAN JAMIESON, writers respond to C-World, PLUS stories, poems and reviews in harvest plenty

Sgrìobhadh ùr Gàidhlig le Maoilios Caimbeul, Màrtainn Mac an t-Saoir, Lodaidh MacFhionghain, Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh, Caoimhin MacNèill, Deborah Moffatt agus Eòghan Stiùbhart.

New Gaelic writing from Myles Campbell, Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh, Martin MacIntyre, Lewis MacKinnon, Kevin MacNeil, Deborah Moffat and Eoghan Stewart.

EDITORIAL

For the second time in a row, most of you will be reading this new issue online, rather than in print. A limited print run has been sent to writers contributing to this edition for sharing through their own networks, but most of our normal distribution outlets remain closed.

The situation's not ideal. But the good news is: we're still here; still making plans that will allow us to adapt to ever-changing circumstances; still attracting interest and warm support from writers and readers across Scotland and the wider north; still supported by our funders, who value the breadth of our reach in both language and geographical coverage. Advice from staff in Creative Scotland's Literature and Creative Industries teams has been an invaluable aspect of that support in recent months.

The diversity of voices and content in this issue gives a sense of vigour. That's reflected both in how we've grown from 32 pages to 40, plus the spring 'Tuath' supplement, in 2020, and in the energy of the work included. In turn, that reveals the current strength of new writing across the Scottish literary community.

Some of the writers included here have responded directly to the pandemic, with skilful wordcraft and even humour. But this is no Covid-19 souvenir edition, for many other writers have also flexed their keyboard fingers or pen nibs and produced exciting new work, untrammelled by lockdowns and social isolation.

I hope that what's gathered here will give you pleasure and inspiration through the darker months before spring. With a hard-working Northwords board, a community valuing the publication both on- and offline and vital support and advice from our funders, *Northwords Now* is still flourishing. Enjoy this autumn's harvest. ■

Kenny Taylor, Editor

Visit the Northwords Now Website:
northwordsnow.co.uk
for archive resources and to submit work

Find us on Facebook
www.facebook.com/groups/northwordsnow/
And on Twitter @NorthwordsNow

Contents

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Submissions to the magazine, through our on-line system on the Northwords Now website, are welcome. They can be in Gaelic, English, Scots and any local variants. Please submit no more than three short stories or six poems, in MS Word format (not .pdf). All work must be previously unpublished in print or on-line. Copyright remains with the author. Payment is made for all successful submissions.

Postal submissions of potential review books (not submissions of writing) should be sent to:

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To submit your work online, go to our website: **northwordsnow.co.uk**
The next issue is planned for April 2021. The deadline for submissions is **31st January 2021**. If accepted for publication, you will hear about your submission by **31st March 2021**, so feel free to submit elsewhere if we have not contacted you by then.

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Adrian Clark with his kayak on Skye. Photo: Kenny Taylor

Hats off to Adrian

A span of eleven years can have a certain resonance, not least for those with an interest in the Northern Lights. Typically, the number of auroral spectaculars that grace the heavens tracks the activity of the sun, whose 'spots' – and the explosive ejections from them that help to spark auroras – rise and fall and rise again on a roughly eleven-year cycle. According to space scientists, we've just begun a new cycle.

So much, so celestial. Back at the start of the previous cycle, and down on Planet Earth in 2009, *Northwords Now* was also experiencing a shift. Rhoda Dunbar was about to stand down as editor after more than a dozen issues. She'd resuscitated the publication, after a brief hiatus, from its predecessor '*Northwords*' – the magazine that ran for 34 issues from 1991 to 2004 – and would pass the editorial baton to Chris Powici in the following year.

In the summer of 2009, Adrian Clark joined the *Northwords* board and took over from Kathleen Irvine as chair. Adrian was already a weel-kent figure in Scotland's northern arts scene. Still working at that time as a Highland Council cultural officer for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, he helped to build enthusiasm and audiences across that vast area for exhibitions, live music, literature and more.

At the same time, he was part of a group that spent several years raising funds for the community purchase of woodland near his family home in Evanton. Villagers and supporters clinched that deal in 2012. Since then, Evanton Community Wood has been one of Scotland's leading examples of how to make woodlands work for people and wildlife. Access, education for all ages and abilities, timber building construction, artworks, skills training and boosts for biodiversity have all been part of that mix.

Adrian has been part of the Evanton Wood Community company throughout, including as Chair and now Secretary. At the same time, oral history, amateur dramatics, sports and Gaelic learning have been in his frame of activities. And – of course – *Northwords Now*. The expression can be over-used to the point of cliché, but he's 'quite literally' been a hands-on chair. Hands that have lifted and stacked the bundles of each new edition after it's arrived, fresh from the printing press, to clog his garage for a few days. Hands on the sorting of packets to be distributed by post. Hands on the steering wheel as he drove to parts of the Highlands and northeast to deliver bundles. Hands on a keyboard to create spreadsheets and budgets to meet the needs of funders and contributors.

During his time as Chair, Adrian has been helped by a range of other board members, who might often devote time and expertise for a few years and then need to move on. In the last three years, thanks are due in this way, for example, to Kristin Pedroja, Anne MacLeod and Peter Whiteley. The three board members who have joined in this time – Lesley Harrison, Sherry Morris and Kirsty Gunn – have all been very active in helping with different aspects of the *Northwords Now* project, not least during current challenges. A constant, across the whole span of *Northwords Now* from Issue 1, has been our designer, Gustaf Eriksson. His flair for page layout (including those tricksy, variable line lengths used by some poets, as if to stretch design skills to the limit) has been an important part of shaping the look of the publication.

But throughout Adrian's time on the board, Valerie Beattie has also been part of the team. Having developed the first undergraduate literature course for the University of the Highlands and Islands, Valerie is now happily independent of academia and working to complete two different books. Her good humour and patience in the face of this year's especially difficult demands of budgeting, planning and more has been a boon to all – not least this editor.

So, as the new solar cycle starts, I'll raise a cap (or maybe a bush hat, given his typical headgear) on behalf of the Northwords Now team to Adrian, to thank him for all he's done across those eleven years, and to welcome Valerie in her new role. Here's to some bright lights in the north. ■

Kenny Taylor

A Pat on the Back for *The Dark Horse*

Continuing a bit of a theme of time passed, time passing and yet to come on this page, it's fitting to give a friendly nod and pat of milestone-birthday-year approval to *The Dark Horse*. From humble – and cramped – beginnings on the kitchen table of the Ayrshire caravan where its editor, Gerry Cambridge, was then based, 'The Horse' has grown to become Scotland's leading poetry magazine.

Over the past 25 years, the publication has featured the work of some of the major figures of contemporary Scottish, Irish and American poetry (if I mention Edwin Morgan and Seamus Heaney, need I say more?) as well as other, lesser known, poets whose work has been championed by Gerry. With assistant editors in the U.S.A, *The Dark Horse* is Scotland's transatlantic poetry magazine, both in terms of the new poetry it publishes and in the essays and critiques for which it is renowned. Not afraid of controversy in some of the criticism and reviews within its pages, new editions are guaranteed to give readers both pleasure and challenge.

If you haven't encountered this lively equine as yet, go to www.thedarkhorsemagazine.com for details of how to subscribe. ■

Spirit: Autobiography – Call for Stories

As part of a major project to promote culture and heritage across the Highlands, 'Spirit/ Spiorad of the Highlands is looking for stories told by people who live, work and visit here. These will be used in a digital archive, called *Spirit: Autobiography,* and some will also be used to inspire commissioned artists and form the basis of an exhibition in Inverness Castle when it reopens.

"We're looking for stories behind the headlines of history," say the organisers, "stories about people you might hear at a ceilidh; the uncle who worked on the hydro schemes; the sister that set up the local fèis; the niece that kayaked the Great Glen in record time.

"And we want to hear stories of communities too, large and small."

Stories can be up to 350 words, and/ or photographs and short audio or AV files can also be uploaded. The deadline is November 30th 2020, and you can find out more – and upload your stories and images – at www.spiritofthehighlands.com. ■

Northwords Now online and in social media

Thanks to support from our funders, Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, *Northwords Now* will continue to develop its online presence in the coming months and to expand our use of social media. This should include an amount of new material on our website www.northwordsnow.co.uk between publication of new issues, plus extra postings to share news on Facebook and Twitter. The Facebook group @NorthwordsNow already has a good community of writers and readers who share their own news of events, publications and more. If you haven't joined or had a look at these social media channels recently, a visit could provide some helpful pointers for both writing and new reading through the *Northwords Now* community. ■

Mythopraxis

By Zoë Strachan

The stone known as Calanais XII stands in a small housing estate in the village of Brèascleit. Its base is set in concrete, four sloped planes set with round stones, a style familiar from the edges of car parks built in the 70s remodelling of the historic centre of Kilmarnock, my hometown. A wooden fence screens the megalith from the nearest house, or the nearest house from it. Sometimes there is a yellow grit bin beside it. The main alignments at Calanais were erected around 5000 years ago, so we can guess that Calanais XII has been there for a while. The houses may be fleeting neighbours, their inhabitants gone in the blink of a stony eye.

I became obsessed with Calanais XII after seeing two photographs taken by Homer Sykes when he made a trip to Lewis in the 1970s. It appears in the foreground of one image, almost inconveniently close to 14 Stonefield, the white pebbledash house behind it. A collie dog saunters past. The house behind and to the right looks identical, even down to the collie dog. In the next photograph in the series a woman looks out from the doorway of 14 Stonefield. In a trick of perspective, Calanais XII has grown to almost twice her height. From the angle of the photo, it seems as if she'd have to clamber over the concreted stones in the base to get out.

When I was a child, there was a playground game that involved working a tennis ball into the toe of a knee-high sock. The sock could then be thrown into a weaselly wiggle across the tarmac playground that was particularly effective in the neon yellow or pink colourways that had become fashionable in the 80s. Popular too was standing with your back against a wall and swinging the sock from side to side, under knee, over shoulder, bouncing the tennis ball while chanting a clapping rhyme. When I did this at home, against the side wall of our new-to-us house, the roughcast sprang off in glittery sprinkles, fragments of stone and shell washing around my feet.

Bumble bees
Louisiana
My black cat can play the piana
It can play the tune of Anna
Bacon, eggs, or chips?
Chips!

When the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland made a field visit on 19th July 1923, the stone at Blair, Township of Breasclete had been revealed by peat cutting on the south side of the road a few hundred yards north-west of the school. 'The stone is a flat slab of gneiss,' they recorded in the *Ninth Report with Inventory on the Monuments and Constructions in the Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles,* '3 feet 5 inches in height and 5 ½ inches thick, set in a packing of small stones at base.'

The Lewisian gneisses are at the extreme end of complexity in terms of age, geologist John Faithfull explained to me as we stood together on a picket line outside the university where we work. The stones used at Calanais 'lived' as dynamic geological entities for hundreds of millions of years, before resting in a stable state for billions of years more, until the present day. 'The Lewisian rocks have seen between half and three-quarters of the history of our planet.'

The stories we inherit stick in our mind like skipping rhymes, tied to a place or an action, remembered and misremembered.

When you begin to enlarge the online Canmore map of the western side of Lewis, there's a moment of disappointment. Nothing appears but familiar Ordnance Survey. Then, as you click to enlarge further, a host of grey blue dots burst into focus, scores of them, overlapping and overwhelming the B roads and lochans, the place names and contour lines. It reminds me of seeing Man Ray's *Dust Breeding* in an exhibition. You think you're looking at an image of one thing, and before your eyes it transforms, and you see Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*. At least nine more stone circles are extant near Calanais I, along with numerous cairns and individual stones. Close up, the western side of Lewis is a megalithic megalopolis.

Town planning photographs of Kilmarnock show the new Foregate development bright and new, the sun shining on early 70s shoppers. The old Fore Street is gone, as is Clerk's Lane and its church, the Star Hotel and the Sun Inn, the weavers and smithies, the wells and pumps, the skin yards and tanneries, the gallows that once stood at the Cross. I wasn't aware of the extent of the past when I was growing up, not really, although sometimes I thought of what might have happened at Judas Hill when I scrambled up hoping to see badgers. There was (and is) simply an excess of carparks, circled by a one-way system. The Pevsner guide reminds us that from the right angle, the multi-storey, 'with its many steel vertical emphases . . . has an architectural quality not usually associated with such a function.'

In 1934, the Stornoway Gazette published Donald Maciver's P*lace Names of Lewis and Harris*. Maciver was a headmaster who lived in Brèascleit for thirteen years from 1883. Calanais XII must have been obscured by peat then, but perhaps he walked past on his way to and from the school. He left for Bayble, on the peninsula I once heard referred to as 'the people's republic of Point', in 1896. Scholars of place names consider him an enthusiastic amateur, prone to missteps, but he lived in some of the places he wrote about and walked with people in others. He appreciated the potency of naming. 'The hill from which sheep are driven far and wide in summer', he termed one hill near Calanais, while another became 'the farewell place', the last place with a view of home.

The stories we inherit stick in our mind like skipping rhymes, tied to a place or an action, remembered and misremembered. Plain, purl. Perhaps sometimes we can retell them, make them afresh.

Under the bramble bushes
Under the trees
Boom boom boom
True love to me my darling
True love to you
Boom boom boom
When we get married
We'll raise a family
So
SS Blue
I love you
How many buses to Timbuktu?
Mr Brown says twenty four
So shut your mouth
And say no more.

The writer Martin Martin was much taken by the circle and avenues at Calanais I when he visited in 1695, considering them: 'The most remarkable Stones for Number, Bignes, and Order.' While reassuring his readers that only 'the Oldest and most Ignorant of the Vulgar' of the Western Isles indulged in pagan superstition, he, 'enquir'd of the Inhabitants what Tradition they had from their Ancestors concerning these Stones; and they told me, it was a Place appointed for Worship in the Time of Heathenism, and that the Chief *Druid* or Priest stood near the big Stone in the center, from whence he address'd himself to the People that surrounded him.'

When I was too young to have a sense of the size of my town never mind the world, I assumed that Jesus Christ had been crucified on the large cross that poked from a hill of stones outside the church on Portland Road. The church itself was modern ribbed concrete. I wasn't daft. I knew it had been added later.

Alan Stevenson tried to use gneiss from Hynish on Tiree for Skerryvore, the lighthouse that his nephew Robert Louis Stevenson considered 'the noblest of all extant deep-sea lights.' It was too difficult to work, and he got as far as the first three courses of stone before switching to pink granite from Camas Tuath on the Ross of Mull. 'The bottom part of the tower of Skerryvore lighthouse is one of the few structures on Earth made of shaped Lewisian gneiss,' John Faithfull said. (By this point, his collie dog Spud was keening to leave the icy picket line and head for the park.) The difficulty of shaping and moving megaliths gives rise to many of the legends that spring up around stone circles. Heathens petrified, that sort of thing.

Around 1960, night-time sightings of a strange white lady near the Garynahine Bridge were reported by local motorists as well as dozens of RAF men being bussed back to the base at Uig after an evening of R&R in Stornoway. Local tales of murder at Garynahine Lodge were recalled. When the *Stornoway Gazette* asked Mrs Elizabeth Perrins, wife of the new owner of the estate, whether she had seen anything of the 'Silver Lady of Garynahine' she explained that she often walked by Garynahine Bridge at night, 'for the heck of it, and sometimes to watch other people's nocturnal activities . . . it's not ghosts I'm looking for, but poachers.' The *Gazette* probed further, and Mrs Perrins replied, 'If it's a fine night I wear an evening dress, and if it rains, I wear a white drip-dry raincoat with a closed hood. I also carry a stick. I am sorry to spoil the ghost story but it really is terribly funny.' When the houses at Stonefield were being built a few years later, it was Mrs Perrins who ensured that Callanish XII remained in situ.

. . .
Died in a chip shop
Last night
What was he eating?
Raw fish.
How did he die?
Like this [mime]

In the late 80s, there was a spate of Grey

Lady sightings in the park surrounding the Dean Castle in Kilmarnock. Tucked away in the woods are the graves of the 8th Lord Howard de Walden and his wife Margherita, surrounded by a metal fence that echoes a mortsafe. Beside them is the statue of an angel consoling a shrouded figure, a memorial to de Walden's mother Blanche. The lichen on the stone plinth, the mottled blue-grey of the statue, the reference to 'All That Was Mortal' of Blanche in the inscription, combines with the dank setting to create an eerie effect. Sometimes my dog (a spaniel, not a collie) would run in there, off the lead and not particularly well-trained. I disliked going alone into the hedged enclosure to retrieve her.

Boswell and Johnson took a copy of Martin Martin's book with them on their own tour of the Hebrides. After visiting the stones at Strichen and then passing what must have been part of the Clava Cairns grouping near Inverness, Dr Johnson decided that, 'to go and see one druidical temple is only to see that it is nothing, for there is neither art nor power in it; and seeing one is quite enough.' Boswell seems to have concurred, and neither men made it to Calanais.

. . .
And the dance they do
Is enough to kill a coo
And the coo they kill
Is enough to take a pill
And the pill they take
Is enough to fry a snake
And the snake they fry
Is enough to tell a lie
And the lie they tell
Is enough to ring a bell
And the bell they ring
Goes dingalingaling!

In 2009, Junior Technician Jeff Chambers (5067068) remained unconvinced by the *Gazette's* explanation of the ghost at Garynahine, commenting on the Uig Historical Society website that, 'The white lady may be a myth, but I saw her when she was apparently run over by the RAF Aird Uig bus one night in 1960. When the bus stopped I was first off and ran back but nothing there and also nothing under the bus, but both I and the driver were certain we had run over her. Whatever she/it was we both saw it.'

For around eight years, I was an inveterate school refuser. There were several reasons for this, not all of which I recognised at the time. Now I consider myself easily institutionalised; then, my daily life was a mismatch. I preferred my own version of Stevenson's 'land of counterpane', books beside me to be taken one in the morning and one in the afternoon. In the absence of religion, I venerated reading and animals. Aged fourteen or so I wrote to the Pagan Federation after seeing someone with a copy of *The Wiccan* on a train. Membership seemed pricey though, and access to mysteries elusive.

Ink drawing by Alice V. Taylor

Polly's in the kitchen
Doing a bit of stitchin
In comes the bogeyman
And out goes she

The Neolithic has no user manuals to hand over, no holy books or hieroglyphs. Its circles and alignments stand silent and numinous. We don't know how to move through them, or what words to say. When I go to Calanais now it feels like a pilgrimage. I look for the glitter in the gneiss, run my hands over the rough surface, smell the damp of the rock. When I blink, it feels as if I might catch a glowing thread of continuity, something to hold me to the past, bind me to the future. I like to think that having a standing stone in your village, your street, outside your side door would be transcendent as well as everyday. That Calanais XII would feel like a touchstone, a truth. ■

Am Bìdeadh air Ais

Maoilios Caimbeul

Am broc is an rodan,
am marmot 's crogall,
iad a' bìdeadh air ais;

an struth is a' pheucag,
a h-uile creutair an cèidse,
iad a' bìdeadh air ais.

Mar a dh'èirich an Wuhan,
tha na beathaichean uile
a' bìdeadh air ais;

lagh na cruinne ag èigheach
na cuir sinn an cèidse
no bidh bìdeadh air ais.

Le bhìorasan nimheil
bidh dragh ann is ribe
leis a' bhìdeadh air ais.

Tha an saoghal dhuinn uile,
mura bi, bidh a' bhuil ann –
mòr-bhìdeadh air ais.

Às Dèidh na Càisge

Maoilios Caimbeul

H-abair latha!
Flòdaigearraidh sgiamhach mar a bha e riamh,
an t-adhar gorm gun sgòth san adhar,
na bruaichean buidhe le sòbhraichean
's buidheag an t-samhraidh na glòir òr-bhuidhe
's os mo chionn ceilearadh nan eun.

Na h-uain a' ruith 's a' leum 's ri mire,
mar an lainnir air Loch Leum nam Bràdh,
leis an t-seann taigh-sgoile os a chionn
falamh, sàmhach, gun aon phàiste,
a' toirt nam chuimhne
suidheachadh an t-saoghail
far a bheil a' phlàigh a' gabhail àite,
far a bheil èiginn is bàs
air an t-seachdain seo
às dèidh na Càisge.

Flòdaigearraidh sgiamhach mar a bha e riamh,
le ceilearadh nan eun,
ach bròn cuideachd a' bruthadh mar sgàile
oirnn uile, 's air na deiseachan gorma gràdhach,
ann am bliadhna uabhasach na plàighe.

Gidheadh, tha ar sùil ri aiseirigh eile,
aiseirigh bhuidhe,
a thàinig le gibht na Càisge.

Bròn Bodach an Stòrr

Maoilios Caimbeul

An seo nam aonar gun sgeul air daoine,
Càit air an t-saoghal a bheil an sluagh
A b' àbhaist bhith taomadh suas an aonaich
Le ceuman aotrom làn gàir' is luaidh?

An-uiridh fhèin bha an t-àite ag èigheach
Le iomadh treubh bho feadh an t-saoghail,
Ag ràdh slàint' dhut a bhodaich chàirdeil
Ach an-diugh tha sàmhchair is gainnead dhaoin'.

'S iomadh bliadhna a sheas mi ciatach
A' fulang shiantan le teas is fuachd,
Ach chan fhaca mi riamh e mar tha e 'm-bliadhna
Grian Ògmhios dian 's gun duin' mun cuairt.

Tha an t-àm seo neònach, no a' dol gòrach,
A' phàirc tha leòmach, i falamh lom,
Gun bus na càr innt', cho fad bhon àbhaist
'S gu bheil e gam fhàgail tinn is trom.

A chlann nan daoine dè thachair dhuibhse
Le camarathan daora a' togail dhealbh?
Tha gàire air m' aodann, is bithidh daonnan,
A' feitheamh ribhse a thighinn gam shealg.

A chlann nan daoine dè thachair dhuibhse?
Tha fhios gun taom sibh a-rithist nam chòrr;
Mi 'g ionndrainn dhaoine, 's mi seo nam aonar,
Gach là is oidhche a' sileadh dheòir.

23/06/2020

Trì Chuideim

Lodaidh MacFhiongain

Mionaidean tostach a mhaireas fad beatha
Is an fhadachd is an gaol is an spèis nan làthair
Daonnan a' beò-ghlacadh

Thèid an gabhail riutha coltach ri beusan nàireach
ga do chur fo thàmailt ann an doimhneachd
Far am beachdnaichear nach eil dol às

Ach thàinig leasachadh thron t-soilleireachadh
Gur e a bhith a' gabhail riutha
Gun bhreitheanas an rathad airson an
aotromachadh

Is na trì chuideim a tha seo
A' fleòdradh air cuan brèagha fiadhaich luasganach
Na thaomadh agus shruthadh gun chrìch

An Aon Chuairteal

Lodaidh MacFhiongain

Nuair a chì mi thu
Nad laighe a' sin
Air a' langasaid
Saoilidh mi gu bheil thu ann nad chiste
Beag, goirid, sgiobalta

Ach fhad 's a choimhead mi ort
Chunnaic mi mi fhìn
Ann an aigne mo shùla
Nam chuingean-ceangail òige
Beag, goirid, sgiobalta

Dà dheireadh

An aon chuairteal

Lodaidh MacFhiongain

Chaill mi mo dhìorras
chan eil fhios'm càite
tha seans an àiteigin
ann an amharas
ann an às-dùnadh
ann an àrdan
ann am bòstalachd
ann am brìoghmhorachd
ann am breugachd
ann an coimheirps eudach
ann an cinnteachd
ann an ceacharrachd
ann an earbs
ann an earbsachd
ann an eagal tràilleil
ann am fèin-mheas
ann am firinnteachd
ann am follaiseachd
ann an gràin
ann an gaol gun bhuannachd
ann an goid
ann an iochd
ann an iol-chomas
ann an iongantas
ann an leth-bhreith
ann an leibideachd
ann an lùbachd
ann am mealltachd
ann am mì-ghnàthachadh
ann am mór-uaill
ann an nàire
ann an nàimhdeas
ann an neo-eisimileachd
ann an onair
ann an oillt
ann an òl
ann am peanas
ann am pàirteachadh
ann am pròis
ann an ro-dhèidhealachd
ann an raige
ann an ro-aire
ann an sannt
ann an slìomaireachd
ann an soideal
ann an trèigsinneachd
ann an tuirseachd
ann an tiamhaidheachd
ann an uaigneas
ann an ùpraid
ann an ùghdarrachd

Do Phîhtokahanapiwiyin *Poundmaker* on Chinneach Ghàidhealach an Albainn Nuaidh

Lodaidh MacFhiongain

Bu ro cheart a bhiodh e na' faigheadh tu aithneachadh
Fireanachadh airson na h-uileadh a chaidh fhulaing
Uair air a' Phràiridh, treun, uasal, saor
Ceannsaichte 'ro chealg
Le cridheachan ceacharra

Fairichidh sinn na h-aona fhaireachdainnean
A dh'fhairicheas do threubh
Ana-ceartas, irisleachadh, breisleach
Nuair a ghoideas coimhich brìgh do sgeòil

Chaill sinn mar a chaill sibh-se
Ach 'ro thrèigsinneachd ar ceannardan
Treòraichean air an robh e air a dhèanadh
A bhi a' gabhail ri dòighean nan ceannsaichean
An cànan, an cultar agus an nithean-tàlaidh

An dà, chan urrainn dhuinn na ceannardan o shean againn ath-bhuannachadh
Ged a nì sinn sìth leò far am faigh iad easbaloid

Ach nì sinn dannsa cruinn còmhla ribh, làmh a chèile
Is cruthachaidh sinn ceannardan ùa às ar cinneach sgairteil às ùine bhig
Is gabhaidh sinn òran leibh am fonn ag èibheachd air Cailleach na Cruinne
A dh'altramaicheas sinn slàn, fallain, ath-bheothaichte
Nar fìor nàisean às ùr.

Marbh-bheò

Lodaidh MacFhiongain

Chan eil an comas agam a thuigsinn
do làthaireachd
rim thaobh dìreach an-dràst'

Bha thu ann nam bheatha gun fhiosta
triop às deaghaidh triop
ged gu coltach nach aithnich thu mi

Cho dlùth ri dlùth
Coltach ri Màiri, Banrigh nan Albannach
Is Ealasaid a h-Aon na Sasainne

'S na h-oghaichean,
a' sgrìobhadh litrichean gu a chèile
ach chan fhaca tè seach tè gu bràth

is cha b' urrainn do fiù 's an gaol a bh' ann
go domhain
stad a chur air a' bhàs a bha 'dol a thighinn

air a' chridhe mhòr,
air an fhadachd dhomhainn
air a' mhiann a dhìth air sonas

chaidh an dithist againn an tìodhlacadh
taobh ri taobh
coltach ris an dà bhanrigh seo

gun a bhith a' faicinn a chèile aonaichte a-mhàin,
marbh-bheò,
air taobh eile a' mhiann

Cò a sheinneas an t-altachadh-beatha?

Lodaidh MacFhiongain

Cò a dh'fhaodadh a ràdhainn cò sinne ?
An seanchaidh, an sgeulaiche, an seòd?

Sinne a tha air stac nòis aig an robh tuigs' air fhèin.
Nòs a tha sean, seasmhach, soganach.

Nuair a thig an luchd-coimhich air chèilidh
Gu dè an iùil, an linn, an fheallsanachd-mhaise a bhiodh gan stiùireadh?

Cò a leigeas a-staigh iad
Le an claon-bhreith gun fhiosta dhaibh,
Am bodach, a' chailleach, a' mhuime,
An t-oide, an t-eòlaiche, an tàilleabhachd na an t-òigear?

Air neo an e am bèibidh uile-làthaireach air ùr-bhreith
A' coimhead airson comhart gun chùmhnant
Le a ghàirdean sìnt' a-mach
A sheinneas riù?

Iuchair an Dorais

Màrtainn Mac An t-Saoir

Tha i agad a-nist
an iuchair
is bliadhnaichean a dèanamh
taisgte na do chùrsa.
'S ann mìn, sgiobalta, èasgaidh a tha i
cuiridh ioma glas fàilt' oirre gun cheist.

Ach mas e is gum fàs i meirgeach ri ùine
no a cumadh corrach, lùbte, na caith bhuat i
ged a b' e an drathair bu duirche b' ìsle a ghabh ri a cùmhnadh.

Is nuair a thig àm-cuingte, no mar as iomchaidh,
thoir às is glan gu math i - tog òrd mas fheudar -
is tionndaidh, air do shocair fhèin, a-rithist leatha,
is meal gach doras sean is ùr a dh'fhosgaileas ro do cheum.

Five poems by Chris Powici

with translations by five other poets

Drystone

another winter's ice and rain
the drub and scrape of hoof and horn
and these last lichen-riddled slabs
could creak and drop
to the bare, wet moor

but not yet

they stand and cling, they lean
against the blue May sky
the bright wind

a wheatear whistles from its granite nook
and a blackface ewe
pushes through the swaying broom
rubs her tatty arse against this poor, half-fallen dyke
and offers up a bleat or two
in praise of stone

Dryston

Shetland Translation by Christie Williamson

aniddir winter's frost an faa
da scratch an scrummel o hoof an horn
an dese hidmaest lichened slabs
could girn an drap
tae da weet, nekkit hill

but no yit

dey staund an cling, dey lean
agin da blue May lift
da bricht blaa

a wheatear whisltles fae hit's granite neuk
an a blackfiss yow
shivs trow da swayin broom
elts hir clerty erse agin dis puir amos, half faan daek
an offers up a böl or twa
in praise o ston

Falls

clamour of eddies and foam-edged
kinks of bright november water sliding
over pine roots and half-drowned rock

so many flashes and glints
so many cold quick voices

but lean into the breeze
take a breath, listen close –
all the river says
is how to let go
how to fall

just a noise among trees
it's all grace notes and throwaway riffs
a thing of rain and stone
making itself up as it goes along

Eas

Irish Gaelic Translation by Rody Gorman

gleo guairneán agus caisirníní
le ciumhais cúráin
uisce na samhna gile
ag sleamhnú thar fhréamhacha giúise
agus thar charraigeacha leath báite

an oiread splanc agus drithle
an oiread guth fuar agus tapaidh

ach lig do thaca leis an bhfeothan
glac anáil, éist go dlúth –
ní deir an abhainn
ach conas ligean as
conas titim anuas

díreach fothram ar fud na gcrann
díreach maisiú agus rifeanna caite i dtraipisí
rud as báisteach agus cloch
á chumadh féin is é ag gabháil an bealach

Claonaig Ferry

Oh I feel that you are near me, Oh I wish it to be
The Unthanks

I lean against the wet steel of the guardrail
listen to the engine's soft, oily breath
and creak of tarpaulin from the car deck

a gannet glides through drifts of summer rain
a cormorant stands for a second
on a green wave
and shakes the sea from its wings

halfway to Claonaig
we're all of us getting by
on weather and oil and light

guillemot bob on the swell

just below the surface
moon jellies billow and sway

Claonaig Ferry

Scots translation by Roderick Watson
Oh I feel that you are near me, Oh I wish it to be
The Unthanks

Leanin tae the railins' drookit steel
I dirl til the diesel's ily souch
an the reishle o tarps frae the car deck.

A solan snooves through simmer smirr
a scart stauns up on a green wave
jist for a second
tae shak the sea frae its wings.

Hauf owre tae Claonaig
we're hingin-in thegither
amang the licht, the ile, an the weather

maggies are oot on the swall

i the cauldrife watter
the jeely fish wax and swyve.

Coastal Town

a big October moon rises from the deep bay
shows its hurt, radiant face to the first stars
and a whooper swan looking to land

down here, just the earth up to its usual tricks –

a sea wind, an autumn tide swaying
the bladderwrack on a spit of beach;
the glad serious faces of boys
leaning on the bike-park wall

a woman watches a herring gull
flap and cry from the kirk roof
opens an old door, goes inside

afterwards, only the seaweed-scented air
streetlamps like small wet moons
some boys, somewhere, laughing
bike wheels spinning in the dusk

Costal Toon

Shetland Translation by Roseanne Watt

a grett October mön buts fae de djub o de voe
shaas its skammit, sheenin fiss tae de foremist starns
an a whooper swaan skoitin fir a laandin

doon here, joost de aert up tae its öswil klooks –

a bakflan, a hairst string swittlin
de bratwaar apo a sheave o saand;
de blyde sair faces o bouys
heeldin apo de bike-park daek

a wife waaks a skorie
flaag an greet fae de kirk röf
oppins an aald door, gings inbi,

eftir, joost de tang-waff air
kloss-lamps lik peerie weet möns
some bouys, ee pliss, gaffin
bike wheels spinnin i de darkenin

but — to pop up from under water; to rise to the surface as seafowl do
djub — fisherman's word for the deep
voe — an arm of the sea
skammit — an injured surface
skoit — to look with a specific purpose
bakflan — a sudden gust of wind which, by mischance, strikes a boat's sail on the back side
bratwaar — broken bits of seaweed strewn along the shoreline
sheave — a slice
sair — severe

The Quick Rain

A roe deer lies cradled in the crook of your arms
a buck of a few months, maybe a year.
Its ribs press against your ribs
its neck touches your neck
but no muscle twitch, no heave of breath

You just want to do the right thing –
lay the body down among the grasses
and clovers at the side of the road
but it's a rainy October night, without moon or stars
and for all you know, the grass could be tangled
in brambles and fence-wire
and the weight of the deer in your arms
could be the weight of your soul in the world.
For all you know.

Its hooves dangle and swing
and the quick rain beats against the skin and eyes
like a wild clock.

An t-Uisge Luath

Scots Gaelic Translation by Kevin MacNeil

Tha boc-earb na laighe ann an creathail do ghàirdeanan,
earbag nach eil ach beagan mìosan a dh' aois, neo bliadhna
's dòcha. Tha aiseanan a' beantainn ri d' aiseanan,
tha amhach a' beantainn ri d' amhach; ach chan eil fhèitheag
a' snaothadh, chan eil e a' tarraing anail ann.

Tha thu dìreach airson an rud ceart a dhèanamh -
an corp a chur sìos anns an fheòir agus 'sa chlòbhair
ri taobh an rathaid, ach 's e oidhche fhliuch 'san Dàmhair a th' ann,
gun ghealach 's gun rionnagan, agus cho fad 's a 's aithne dhut,
dh' fhaodadh an fheòir a bhith air a dhol na paidearan
le dris is uèir feansa, agus dh' fhaodadh nach eil ann an cudthrom
na h-earbaig nad ghàirdeanan ach cudthrom
d' anma anns an t-saoghail. Cho fad 's a 's aithne dhut.

Tha ìngnean ag udalach, a' luasgadh,
agus tha an t-uisge luath a' bualadh
air a' chraiceann 's air a shùilean
mar ghleog fhiadhaich.

'Mar Sin Leibh Ma-thà.'

Màrtainn Mac An t-Saoir

Cha chreid mi nach eil am fuaim againn a' còrdadh riutha.'
'Bha sinn fortanach ach rinn sinn obair chruaidh.'
'Chan e an aon chiall a th' Alba is Scotland dhomhsa.'

Sin na thuirt balaich Runrig agus gu leòr eile thar nam bliadhnaichean mòra
is thar a' bheagan sheachdainean air rèidio ron Dannsa Mu Dheireadh
an Sruighlea.

An sàr-chòmhlan Gàidhlig sin
a thrusas a threudan
far gach beinn is monadh o air feadh na Roinn Eòrpa
is bho bhailtean cian an t-saoghail.

Ach an seo fo chreig a' chaisteil
is na mìltean nam boil air am beulaibh
's ann a tha iad a-nist a' cur crìoch bhòidheach
air a' waltz a thòisich iad aig
Dìnnear nan Tuathach is nam Beàrnarach,
a' dèanamh cinnteach le cùram
modh is irisleachd, gun leig an ceòl-san
le casan an càirdean
na ceumannan ceart' a ghabhail.

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Ingrid Leonard

It was the phone number for the house
in which we sought each other in winter
storms, our family of four connected to others,
wires stretched on poles, tight-roped
under seabeds, from Stenness to Stronsay.

No great sweat for a child of seven to learn
and repeat, my fingers fit into hard-punched
holes as I turned the dial clockwise,
felt the elastic pull and click, till it righted
itself in a profusion of whirring.

Lightning entered the ear of a neighbour
when she answered, hand to elbow to head;
the wind clattered the windows
and obscured the voices of elders:
Don't pick up the phone in a storm.

My father sounding my name as a question
through a hall of booths in Chachapoyas,
between cloud forest and jungle, where I gave
our number to the operator, my father
imprinting onto her through the line.

The operator was the god of long distance
in her draughty *cabina*. Her pressed blouse
and skirt spoke of care and attention,
as if from the air-laundered shelves
of kinswomen - the arable call of home.

In Appreciation

Ingrid Leonard

Hid's cowld in the shadow o the stones,
beat fluiks. The day's the day fur uis tae set
wur last stone in the ring – roond uis a skry
o folk stand wi guid punk. Wance fithers,
brothers, uncles gi a last haeve, we'll hiv
a circle tae match the moon's standstill,
lit tang lowan atween. Efter, weeman
will serve crab cluiks fur engral stomachs,
eggs o the lerblade, Tak this draught o beer,
we'll drink hid taegither. Much obliged tae ye
fur bidan awhile among uis, haddan back
the litheran years. Stoop noo, hid's time.

beat fluiks – swing the arms vigorously across the body, to keep warm
punk – kindling
tang – seaweed
engral – ravenous
lerblade – cormorant
litheran – over-spilling
stoop – quiet

The Story of the Black Square

By Mark Ryan Smith

I first heard of the Book from an old Cullivoe man. He is dead now. He was a storyteller, one of many in his family, and, as a way of keeping their stories alive, a recording was made of him. It is this recording I have to thank, if thank is the right word, for the story I'm about to tell. I have no way of knowing if it will ever be read, but I type these words to explain, to try and explain, what has happened to me. I have been in this place for so long, walking and walking in the half-light, hearing nothing but the click of the keys and the sound of my steps echoing back from the concrete walls.

When I heard about the Book, part of my work was to make transcriptions of the reel-to-reel tapes held by the archives. There were boxes and boxes of them. I can still remember the smell of those tapes – musty when a lid was lifted, then a warm, sharp chemical smell would fill the room as the tape ran through the machine. There was always the fear a tape would break. They hadn't been played in so long. One moment of accidental tension and the voice would be gone forever.

Here, as far as I remember, is what he said about the Book:

> *For example, I do know that in North Yell there was a Book of Black Arts in circulation.*

He didn't know how the Book had come to Cullivoe, but in his grandfather's, or perhaps great-grandfather's, time, it had passed through the village, from hand to hand. It was filled with what he called 'mystical rites and spells', it had white writing on black pages (he repeated this fact several times), and it could not be given away. Once the Book came into your possession, the only way to escape its influence was to sell it for less than you paid. This, as the interviewer pointed out, could only go on for so long. Sooner or later, as the price dropped to nothing, somebody would be stuck with the Book. And what would they have to sell then? What would the price be, in the end?

I reached the end of his story and stopped the tape. The reels of the machine observed me like two enormous eyes. The story was only a few minutes long, but, over the next few weeks, as I worked at my transcriptions, I felt the old man's words nudge and rub against other things in my mind: books of magic written by people like John Dee; a story by Borges where an Orcadian appears in Buenos Aires with another mysterious book.

Borges's Orkneyman steered my research towards that archipelago. The folk traditions of Shetland and Orkney share a number of themes – seal lore and weather superstitions, for example – but the Book of Black Arts is mentioned more often in Orkney than it is here. Blind Borges, sitting in faraway Buenos Aires, knew what he was talking about. The Book had been in Orkney at some point. The Argentinian man in the story, the man who acquires the Book, manages to escape by placing the volume in the National Library. But should some casual browser happen to withdraw the Book, they would be one of its people too.

I wrote a short article on the Book of Black Arts for the *Shetland Times*. People seemed to enjoy colourful little folk stories about quaint local traditions, and, even though the article contained no great insight or originality (I dashed it off in half an hour), I couldn't help feeling pleased with the rush of comments that started to appear below the online version: 'Fascinating', 'Spooky', 'I never heard about this before thankx'. But, hidden in in a lengthy, rambling comment by 'Gilmartin', a comment which incorporated a rant about the Council's reduced bin collection service and a misogynistic threat directed at the owner of a Lerwick café, I found the words that appear on the first page of the Book of Black Arts:

> *Cursed is he that pursueth me.*

It took a bit of reconstruction, but the phrase was there. Without a doubt. A payload of six words sent my way, subtly smuggled inside the bulk cargo of a BTL contribution. Gilmartin clearly knew the story of the Book and was having some fun at my expense.

Before the comments stopped and the story was removed from the front page of the *Shetland Times* site, Gilmartin appeared another three times, always, it seemed to me, with sly little references to elements of the Book's story: mentions of people who once held the Book; a sneaky transliteration of the name of an Orcadian minister who allegedly buried the Book in the garden of his manse. Gilmartin was clever, despite the angry-man persona, and I wanted to ask what he knew about the book. The success of my little article had spurred me on to write more about local folklore and I was mulling over a longer essay or perhaps even a book on the subject. Gilmartin might be a worthwhile contact. I got his email address from the Times office and sent him a message.

Blind Borges, sitting in faraway Buenos Aires, knew what he was talking about. The Book had been in Orkney at some point.

An email came back right away. It appeared so quickly that it must have been an automated response. I opened the message but it said nothing. Not a single word. Nothing but a black mass filling the message window. Another Gilmartin joke, I assumed: the E-Book of Black Arts. I closed the laptop. Perhaps he would write back soon.

Then the words started to disappear.

It was barely perceptible to begin with. I would open a document I'd been working on and, when I tried to pick up where I'd left off, what I saw didn't seem to quite match my idea of whatever I'd written the day before. A phrase I thought I'd finished was suddenly incomplete. A plural would be sliced to the singular. Verbs were yanked from the middle of sentences, leaving subject and object to stare out in confusion as they waited to be given something to do. Holes appeared in paragraphs I thought I'd refined and tightened until they were as good as I could make them.

I assumed there was something wrong with the laptop. I did what checks I could and, when that made no difference, I took it to the ICT department and asked them to have a look. They found nothing wrong. No malware or viruses. No damage to any part of the hardware. No evidence of remote access or malicious infiltration. It must be something you're doing, they implied. Perhaps, they hinted, I wasn't as good a writer as I liked to imagine. I picked up the laptop and swept out of the room.

But maybe they had a point. After all, as any writer knows, we can read something we've written again and again, polishing as we go, and, when our text appears in print, the first thing we notice is a glaring mistake in the first paragraph, as if the language we have tried so carefully to control has played a trick and won the game in the end – a typographical slip, a grammatical blunder, an inexplicable absentee noun. Perhaps I was imagining things? Perhaps I should stop blaming the machine and simply fix what was wrong with my work? If an adverb is missing, put it back in. If the commas disappear from a long sentence, put them back in. Work slowly and carefully. Make sure you say what you mean. Read over what you've done. Drop the heavy anchor of a capital letter at the start of every sentence. Squeeze a full stop at the end. Stick to the basics and hopefully your words will retain the meaning you've given them.

This approach put me back in charge, for a while at least. But, eventually, there was no way to deny what was happening. The words were disappearing. Words I knew I'd written. Words I had typed, sometimes more than once, simply weren't there when I went back to the document that once held them. And it was happening faster than before. I couldn't keep up. I would put the words on the page but couldn't make them adhere.

I tried saving multiple copies in different places. I printed everything out. I took screenshots with my phone and emailed copies of things to myself. I opened cloud storage accounts with three different providers. But no matter what I did, every version would end up exactly the same. If an adjective was missing in one iteration of a document, it was missing in them all. If a sentence or paragraph was erased, every matching sentence or paragraph was erased.

Then, months after I wrote to him, Gilmartin wrote back:

> *Dear Dr Smith,*
>
> *Are you enjoying our little game? We certainly are. Taking your magic box to the ICT department was a splendid wheeze. They really got under your skin, didn't they, with their idea that a shoddy workman always blames his tools. But all these pixels and bytes you people are so fond of are so easily lost. Don't you agree? It's not like the old days when words were written on proper vellum, or carefully copied onto good paper in lovely dark ink. But we found our*

ways back then too, as you'll see when you follow the directions we are about to send.

Yours, ever, etc.
G.

What followed was an email with reference numbers to documents in the archives. I took my laptop and went to the room where the documents were kept.

I switched on the lights and went inside. There is a long alleyway through the centre of the large room, with dozens of shelves running away at 90° on either side. Halfway along each of these shelves, each of which holds dozens of boxes filled with hundreds of documents, is an opening which lets you through to the next set of shelves. I looked at the first number and entered the set of shelves where the document would be. At the end I found the box he wanted me to find.

The document was a rolled piece of parchment that probably hadn't been looked at in years. I untied the piece of ribbon that held it closed.

Because of the dim light and the antique handwriting, the document was difficult to read. I would take it to my desk and make a proper transcription, I thought, but, as I scanned through the text, I could see, in the crowded lines, that there were obvious gaps. The flow of the ancient words, with their ligatures and lobes and serifs, would be stopped dead by a space or a hole in the middle of a sentence. Sometimes there are blanks in an old document, a place for a name or a date to be added, for example, but this was different. As had happened with my laptop, the words had been made to disappear.

Feeling my breath and heartbeat quicken, I concentrated on rolling the document properly and knotting the ribbon around its middle. The words were gone. That was impossible. But it was true nonetheless. I reshelved the document and moved to the next reference Gilmartin had given me. It was a diary kept by a sailor in the 1850s. The same thing had happened there. His words had been taken away. They simply weren't where they should have been. I put the diary back in its place, looked at my laptop for the next document, and went to see what else Gilmartin had done.

I don't know how many hours I spent walking past rows of shelving in the gloomy light, stopping occasionally to look inside another of the boxes Gilmartin had directed me to. I could understand how somebody could access my computer and corrupt my files, but how had he done this? I could see what had happened but there is no way to figure it out. Nobody has access to this room but me.

I decided to retrace my steps. Back then, I still felt there had to be an answer somewhere. I worked backwards through Gilmartin's list, carefully reading each document as I went. There were blanks and cuts in every page. Words had been removed from documents I knew well. Spaces opened up in texts that had been written hundreds of years ago. I kept going, trying to remain methodical. I kept moving through the maze of letters and diaries and deeds and accounts that Gilmartin had laid out for me. I walked past miles of shelves. I don't know how long it took. There are no windows in this room and it's easy to lose track of time.

Eventually I reached the sailor's diary. Sitting down on the floor, I opened the little book. There was nothing there. All the words were gone. I turned the pages. Whatever the sailor had written had been rubbed away to nothing. It was gone. It was all gone.

I slumped against the wall and closed my eyes. Perhaps I fell asleep. I'm not sure. But the next thing I remember is the soft chiming sound my laptop makes when an email is received. I opened the lid and the screen lit up. The email was from Gilmartin:

Dear Dr Smith,

You will, by now, have reached the end of the jolly itinerary we planned for you. Don't you enjoy a nice ramble through the historical highways and byways? You will also, no doubt, be asking yourself how we accomplished our little vanishing trick. Well, my good doctor S, it's really not as complicated as you might imagine. We have, after all, had plenty of time to practice these things. But, my dear man, you should not worry yourself unduly. The words are quite safe. We're not, after all, in the business of mindless vandalism. History can never be erased completely; it's simply a case of who gets to tell the tale. If you look back at the first email I sent you all those months ago, you'll find your missing words.

With the warmest regards, etc., your friend,
G.

Gilmartin's first email was further back than I had imagined. When I found it I opened the message. The same black window appeared but, as I stared at the screen, I began to see, as if deep inside the thin wafer of the laptop's lid, words starting to emerge. Words floating to the surface of the screen. White words fixing themselves to the blackness of Gilmartin's message. I watched more and more words come. Old Scots and Norse words. Legal words from documents about land transactions. Words from diaries and letters. Words I had read in old documents. Other words I had written myself. It was all here. All the words he had taken. Words filling every part of my screen.

I scroll and scroll but I can never find the end. Gilmartin has taken it all. His first message, his black message, consumes everything, sucks everything in like some ravenous digital mouth. Even as I sit here, he is probably adding to his horde, words and syllables and punctuation marks funnelling into his unfathomable black space. The story of me. The stories in these documents. The story of this place. Every story that I am even a bit-part character in, the black square wants them all. Even these shelves and these walls and this floor I'm sitting on. It's all disappearing. All moving towards silence. Things don't exist if they can't be spoken about and it's all being pulled into this single black square.

Sometimes I walk. Then I sit down and add a sentence or two to this account. It is holding together so far. The words are staying where I put them. Sometimes I allow myself the idea that he has taken everything he's going to take; that the maw of his black message is refusing to accept another morsel. But then I look inside another box and find empty page after empty page. Gilmartin won't let a single letter escape. He is toying with me. These words, the ones you are reading now, will no doubt be sucked in like all the rest. But still I type. One word after another. Filling the white background. Telling this story in the hope that it will last long enough for someone to know what has happened to me. But I know it's futile. I know, in the end, that my story will disappear, just like all the rest. Then, when he wants it to, it will drift to the surface of this screen, a collection of white words caught in the frame of his deep black square. ■

Diefenbaker

Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Usgar-braghad rùbaidhean. Sin an coltas a bh' air. Bha a shùil air na boinneagan deàrrsach a bha a' nochdadh mar fhallas fàidheanta air a' chreig as fhaisge. Mean air mhean leagh iad ri chèile ann an comaran a shil a-nuas mar dheòir thiamhaidh air gruaidh na creige luime. Rinneadh lòn beag sgàthanach air an talamh chruaidh. Chuir seo thairis na bheag-shileadh ùr a lean air gu ruige bile sgoltaidh dhomhain far na thuit e a-mach à sealladh, na eas caol gleansach a' tilleadh dhan dìomhaireachd dho-thomhas às na dh'èirich i. Thàinig earrann dha inntinn —

"Ciod an tairbhe a tha ann am fhuil, nuair a thèid mi sìos don t-sloc? Am mol an ùir thu? An cuir i an cèill d'fhìrinn? Èist rium, a Thighearna, agus dèan tròcair orm. A Thighearna, bi-sa ad fhear-cuideachd leam..."

Taobh thall an sgoltaidh bha mar gum biodh tràigh neo-chrìochnach gun mhuir. Bha esan fhèin far na chaidh a leagail, air planaid neo-aithnichte, a shùilean caogach pianmhar a' sìor rannsachadh fhathast, mar chuairtiche-cladaich leònte ri uchd a' bhàis am measg treathlaich-mara a chuid dhòchasan gun stà.

Athchuimhne. Diefenbaker. Postair poilitigeach air post-lampa ann an Toronto. Esan na bhalach òg ga ghiùlan air druim athar air cabhsair dùmhail. Duin'-eigin a' priobadh ris gu càirdeil san dol seachad.

Lorg a theanga phàiteach an tiùba caol a bha stobadh an-àirde às a chulaidh-fànais. Dheothail e aon srùbag dheireannach dhen bhainne mhilis mar gum biodh bho chìch chofhurtail mhàthaireil na Talmhainn ud a bha e air a bhith ag ionndrainn cho fada. Dhùin e a shùilean gointeach ann an laigse.

Cò leis na bilean blàtha cùbhraidh ud a bha toirt pòg dha bhathais? Cò leis na làmhan coibhneil a bha sgioblachadh na plaide fo a chluais, los a chràdh bàsmhor a mhùchadh?

A chlisge thill a mhothachadh dha. Am broinn sloc-coilich luing-fhànais-cogaidh a bha e, a' bladhmadh tro cheò dearg air lethcheann...cò leis?...lethcheann... a cho-phaidhleit...Clara Jane! Brèagha. Cho brèagha ri beatha. Ach an sin air a gruaidh àrd chumadail bha sracadh dearg a' sileadh boinneagan fala air a broilleach.

"Fàilte mhòr air ais, ma-tà!" dh'èigh i. Bu lèir am faochadh follaiseach na guth, ach bha i làn mire mar an ceudna 's i fo bhuaidh aidrèanailin a-muigh 's a-mach. "Abair sgleog spadach a dh'fhuiling thu! Bha làn chinnt orm gun robh thu nad chlosach gun deò an turas seo... thug mi fiùs pòg soraidh dhut feumaidh mi ràdh...."

Chas i an t-soitheach gu grad agus shnìomh i seachad air spreadhadh tàirneachail. Chuala e fuaim de sprùilleach miotailte a' dannsadh seachad air cliathaich na luinge-fànais bige.

"Ach chan fhada a-nis gus am bi sinn slàn sàbhailte am broinn an luing-teasairginn a thathar a' cur chugainn. 'S e sin a gheall iad co-dhiù. Soitheach-giùlain mòr spaideil. Am Beucail Tiamhaidh mar ainm air, a rèir coltais."

Loisg i sreath de pheilearan mar shreanga deàrrsach de ghrìogagan dearga a dh'ionnsaigh cuspair fad às nach deach aige a dhèanamh a-mach.

"No Am Bèicear Dìomhain, is dòcha. Rudeigin annasach mar sin — bha sinn fo ionnsaigh uabhasach nuair a chuala mi an teachdaireachd. Abair ainm neònach! An eòl dhuts' e? Fo bhratach Chanèidianaich tha e coltach. Clas Saighead. — Hei! Nach e tha math fiamh-ghàire fhaicinn a-rithist air do bhus muice. ■

Together, Lit Up

i.m. Celia Monico

Paula Jennings

After she died she came back
to me, walking with a bouncy step,
waving a bottle of Cava, ready
to celebrate even my anguish.

Sometimes now she returns
at Winter Solstice with candles
in jam jars, and our feet slither
again over the stepping stones

as we climb through midnight,
small beacons flickering, towards
a ritual born from our bones
and the bones of leafless trees.

She laughs at the stream of loss
that the seasons inflict in their
helpless turn, at the illness that
eclipsed her scarecrow muscles

till only her eyes and her smile
could speak. We chant and sing,
frost crisping under our feet,
welcoming the returning light.

These Times

A Covid-19 sequence by Paula Jennings

As though someone stood on fragile ice
and the cracks shot out,
running like animals in every direction.

The Name of the Virus

I think of corvids,
the green-black of crows, the blue-black of rooks,
and the chough near Lochinver
flying upside down for the hell of it.

And the blackbird (not a corvid),

that stays close by me as I weed,
lining up worms in his golden beak.

Permitted Daily Exercise 1

I sit for a while on the graveyard wall
and watch patterns of blue sky rearrange
as branches shift in the breeze.
Time has vanished.

And now time is back, with its heavy cloak;
a rook and heron squabble.

On the Hall Floor

My front door key,
my car key,
my Co-op loyalty card,
my cash card:
a small pile of contagion.

Hands

They were always too big: even in adolescence
long and skinny with prominent veins.
Yet a teacher of massage once snapped at me.
'You have beautiful hands. Use them.'

Now hands are just danger hanging off wrists.
I sanitise door handles, quarantine papers.
My birthday cards are kicked aside to open later.
Wash your hands. Don't touch your face.

Permitted Daily Exercise 2

This is a beach of fragments
and here is a tiny piece of china,
an almost perfect square
with a pink line along the lower edge
like womanly bedrock. Comfort.
Above it, a dark blue arrow flies out
from shadow, left to right.

I crouch on slippery stones,
trying to decipher broken runes.

Hard Day

the self punctuating the self
with attempts to be bright
while the ferryman rows closer
and the self turns off its light

Permitted Daily Exercise 3

Today, in this bay of white shells,
the waves are a restless dazzle
that tires my eyes. I'm worried
about the railing I touched earlier.

There's the sound of a small engine
and a boat rounds the headland.
A solitary figure stands upright
in the stern, hand on tiller, no more than
slender darkness against the glare.
She radiates a quiet authority as though
she's beyond this dislocated world.
I feel the sun warm on my back.

This Is Not A Beach

Gail Brown

This is not a beach,
It is where over the dunes and across the road, my Mother grew.
That is not a field,
It is where my Grandfather tended to cattle with one arm.
That is not a path,
It is where the beach leads to the village.
That is not a wall,
It is where my Mother made porridge from childhood dreams.
That is not a cottage,
It is where husbands and wives and siblings and pet lambs lived.
That road is not a road,
It was the route I took when I was young once, and in love.
That track is not a track,
It is where my Father taught me to drive where planes flew.
That barn is not a barn,
It is the place we danced on summer nights.
Those are not just trees,
That is The Planting.
That is not a house,
That is where I split my chin dressed up in hats and too-big shoes.
That sound is not the sea,
It is the murmur of all of this.
That beach is not a beach and that road is not a road and that house is not a house.

Epicentre

Story by Ian Tallach

There was a stirring in the world of birds. The swifts above the city shrieked, finches on the pylons chattered, sparrows quarrelled in the hedgerows, warblers sang, oblivious to everything, and Turtle Doves mourned in the Poplar trees. Three months had passed since anyone had heard the call to prayer, and so it was the birds that woke them.

Many in Isfahan were having nightmares and Shirin was no exception. She didn't mind, though; she could never remember dreams. In daylight, they would vanish like a wisp of smoke. But not this morning- much as she tried to forget, to laugh at the absurdity of it, the vision stayed. She sat up straight, fighting for breath.

'Are you alright, darling?' Farouk yawned.

At first, she didn't recognize her husband. 'Oh!' she said at last. 'Just another bad dream.'

'Tell me about it' Farouk rubbed his eyes.

'Hmmm… OK' she cleared her throat. 'I'm on this plane. I think you're there as well. The pilot says we're going down, about to crash into a slum.' She shuddered. 'No-one seems to notice – they just carry on with their in-flight meals. The noise is terrible – we're thudding into buildings, smashing everything. Inside, though, it's calm. The stewardess is smiling. Finally, we come to rest. But there's a trail of devastation in our wake.'

'How did it make you feel?' Farouk tried to sound empathic.

She frowned. 'Helpless… and guilty as hell.'

She swung her legs out, found her slippers, doused her hands with sanitizer, shuffled over to the samovar and lit the gas. While it was warming up, she pushed the kitchen window open.

'Have you ever heard the birds this loud?' she shouted. Faraouk didn't hear.

She looked down at the courtyard, seven floors below. A man was lying there, on his back. 'Too far out for suicide,' she thought. She wiped the work-surface and took a teaspoon from the drawer.

The spoon fell to the floor. She gasped in horror. 'How has it come to this? We have become inured.' She went back to the window. The dead man was Musa, their neighbour. His beard wafted gently in the breeze. His eyes were open. 'He looks so peaceful,' she found herself whispering.

Later, many would describe the seconds just before it broke

Just then, the birds fell silent. Many took to flight. Shirin felt a tingling in her feet. Her legs began to shake. There was a welling up – pelvis to abdomen, to chest, to throat. She clapped her hand over her mouth, but out it came - a wail of desolation. She fought to hold it back, but by the time Farouk arrived, they could already hear the weeping from another flat. He held her and they cried together.

That's how it started – first the other floors, the building opposite, and then on down the street, and all throughout the neighbourhood. Once it reached the Kharazi Expressway it spread rapidly. The whole city was convulsed with lamentation. Some cried for all the wretched of the earth, some cried for parents they had lost, some cried for children born into this world and others just with rage at their confinement. Many wept for reasons they could not put into words; they only knew it was implacable – this wave of sorrow.

The tsunami reached Tehran in less than fifteen minutes. Yasmin Hoseini was already in the newsroom, with the latest figures from around the world. Halfway through the word 'pandemic' ('pan'demik', in Farsi) she lost the power of speech. Tears rolled down her cheeks, in front of millions. This contributed to what ensued. Within an hour, the whole country was engulfed.

The wave spread east into the day already started, on through Pakistan, Nepal and India, China, Japan, Korea (North included), Southeast Asia – none were spared. Many in cotton fields, tea plantations or rice-paddies fell to their knees. Those in the cities stopped their work and did their best to hide the upsurge of emotion, only to look out from between their fingers and see that they were not alone. For the most part, drivers and machine operators found their senses heightened; despite the flow of tears, there were remarkably few accidents.

Later, many would describe the seconds just before it broke – billowing clouds to the west, a tingling in their feet, birds falling silent.

Westwards, it spilled over the Bosphorus and into Europe. Refugees, celebrities, the droves of dispossessed and royals in their castles – nobody escaped. Those fully conscious as the wave approached heard something like the rumble just before a thunderclap, which culminated not in the expected boom, but rather in those symptoms visited already on their eastern counterparts. Many were wrested, howling from their sleep. Others were wracked with sobs. They woke with vivid dreams, but nothing to explain their tears. Those on life-support showed fluctuations on their monitors.

In Africa, outbreaks were more sporadic, and somewhat diminished in comparison. Reports, at least, were not of an entirely unprecedented phenomenon. The wavelet all-but petered out as it moved south, though not without a sudden intensification of collective mourning just before the Cape.

No-one knows for certain if news of the wave crossed the Atlantic first or if it was the wave itself. Radio-presenters in the wee-small hours began to read reports of what was happening in countries to the east. Some scoffed, on air, at the hysterical accounts appearing on social media, but even as they did so, words abandoned them and their guffaws turned into whimpers. The favelas of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo were the first communities in the Americas to be affected, although paroxysms of grief were almost simultaneous along the eastern seaboard of both South and North America, the narrow isthmus separating them and islands of the Caribbean. The events that followed cannot be exaggerated.

Yes, that was the day of lamentation, when we wept together. And at the epicentre was Shirin. ■

Caw

Story by Alistair Lawrie

Christ wid ye believe it but? Here ahm sittin on this here wa wi ma wee pal Mooney when this great bastern knicht comes clatterin past – wan o thae fuckers that acts like the world owes him a livin. Aye an that's the truth o it anaw isn't it jist? Awthin in sight his demesne – that's whit he caws it but aw the bastard means is that his faither's faither's faither was better at cuttin thrapples than ony ither cunt. Aye but does he no get himself doon affae his great brute o a horse an awa wi't in amang thae trees? An the look on his face. This bastard didnae sae much look like he wis plannin tae kill some cunt as like somebody that wis awready tastin how much he wis gonnae enjoy daein it. I says tae Mooney "Somethin's up here, pal. Let's hang on an hae a squint at whit this fucker's up tae." Christ an wis ah no right? We'd jist hopped ontae the other side o the dyke whan this wee fucker appears an this wan had a bint wi im. Too skinny fur ma taste like – need a bit o flesh on them ah aye say. Onywey the pair o them are hardly aff their cuddies afore they're at it like knives, ruggin at each ither's claes. There's wan o thae queer silences grips the wids, ye ken like awthin's listenin. Naethin but the odd gasp fae the twa that's screwin. Mooney an me are haudin oor breath cos we ken whit's comin. He comes in a rush, teeth bared in a grin as wide's a grave, in his hauns this battleaxe near as big's himsel. The fucker's roarin like he wants the world tae hear whit he's daein, foamy globs o spit aw owre his face. Mooney looks at me like as tae say, "S'this amateur hour?" Still anaw we hop up ontae the wa tae hae a proper look jist as the big fucker reaches his haun richt doon tae grab the other cunt. An Christ s'that no when he rolls owre sidieways an the bint's lyin there wi a great muckle knife; as the big yin stretches back his airm wi that great bastern hatchet, does she no push upwards wi baith hauns on the knife. Right in the fuckin thrapple. Pure dead magic so it wis. A beauty. Ah couldnae hae done it better masel. The dark faced fucker's drapt the axe an's runnin aboot wi baith hauns tae his neck. Stupid cunt, as if that'd make the blood spurt slower. No that it maittered. The other bastard he picks up the axe an puts it atween the big fella's shooders. Game owre. An here's the pair o them grinnin aw owre their faces at ane anither an Mooney nods at me that wiselike way he has an ah think, Christ they planned it this way. Ahm that caught up in admirin how gallus they've been that ah gey near forget till Mooney gies me a wee nudge an says, "Ah'll tak the hair, Hughie." There, starin up at me, are the big fucker's eyes. ■

Japan Poems

By Kevin MacNeil

Haiku

cofaidh dubh agus milsean
– café beag socair càilear ann an Shinjuku:
blàths na Dùbhlachd

black coffee and sweet pastries
in a placid wee café in Shinjuku
– December warmth

Summer evening, the
river clear and still; two fish
glide from clouds to moon

Senryu

A student drifts through
the poetry section, sings
softly to herself.

Kōfu

wandering the colourful forest,
autumnal wood of gold and red and yellow,
every so often i encounter a standing stone
inscribed, modest, grey,
rock-solid, ineffable
– i should like to have made something similar
of this life 11in all its weathered emptiness

A Teaching

she, too, is a zen teacher
the cleaner who throws
everyone out of their rooms
before they think they're ready

Tully's

to ask if i want a large
or small coffee
she brandishes two cups
i make my choice

and make my choice again
a moment later
when she holds up
two cups that are

different sizes
we each blush
the two of us sleepy, fluent in the
same understanding we lack

Ink drawing by Alice V. Taylor

How to Kill a Kappa

Kappa: a creature from Japanese mythology,
and the title of a book by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa.
The anniversary of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's death
by suicide is sometimes referred to as kappaki.

Akutagawa's sketch of a kappa
is like an x-ray
of a human mind and
an inner voice saying
with professional sympathy,
'I'm afraid we've found
something that gives us
concern…'This
is how cherry blossom
turns to rags. He was not
the only one whose kappa
mind begged 'for someone to come
and strangle me in my sleep.'

I recall: 'What love he must have
lost to write so much...'
Akutagawa,
it is the grin of the kappa
that turns cherry blossom to rags.
Sleep, properly done, strangles
the kappa, healthy food suffocates
the kappa, exercise throttles
the kappa, compassion asphyxiates
the kappa; understanding that
what the mind sees it creates
– this is what garrottes the kappa.
Loss of love is not the worst of it.

The Most Natural Word of All

It is difficult to say farewell
to a stranger whom I have only recently
met and who sleeps when
I am cycling, writing, dogwalking,
who speaks Japanese but not Gaelic.

It is certain that all things
– languages, train stations, people –
are impermanent, and farewell
ought to be the most natural
word of all. Farewell makes
us intimate with everything.
Farewell makes poetry real.
Farewell introduces life-as-is to
life-as-will be. Farewell's parting
gift is the lust for another life,
one that doesn't leave us like this.

Half a Moon

tonight's sky has half a moon
i imagine the other half within
a mind, a poem, nine hours removed,
on the other side of the world

appearing in a Japanese poem, perhaps,
shining platonically like a teardop

The Box is Only Temporary

By Anne Elizabeth Edwards

The news announcer, Val Auden, looked straight at the camera. The corners of her mouth twitched as she fought to control the seventeen muscles it takes to smile.

'And finally…archaeologists in Iceland report their latest find, revealed when an ice cliff collapsed due to Global Warming on Kirkjufell…also known as Arrowhead Mountain, this was used as a location for television series Game of Thrones.'

Val paused, mention of the popular TV show relaxed her mouth. A crinkly twinkle reached her eyes. Today's headlines might have been all warfare and rampant disease but this was frivolity; send the populace off to bed with a happy thought.

'Trapped in the ice were the bodies of eleven individuals. Male and female. Complete with clothes and their possessions, including tools and weaponry… Professor Eric Magnusson of Reykjavik University joins us to discuss the finding. Professor, this can't be an ordinary day for you and your team?'

The heavily bearded professor stood at the door of a brutalist - architecture building. He was dressed as a caricature of Scandinavian academia. Woolly jumper, tweed jacket and massive duvet coat. He paused mid foot stamp to speak to camera.

'Yes, it's an extra-ordinary day! It's very exciting. We have eleven individuals, male and female, women and men.' He nodded his head as his breath came in big misty puffs. 'They have been trapped in the ice, for many years, many hundred years.'

Val nodded in turn. 'Can you confirm any more details professor?'

'Yes sure. They have their clothes on, so we can see what they wore on their bodies. And they have their tools that they used for the crops and the animals and they have their weapons too. Knives and the bow and arrows.' His voice modulated up and down in unexpected places.

Val smiled widely now, displaying her pristine dentistry. 'I hear you have reason to believe they were on a journey?'

The Professor took his mittens out of his pockets to perform jazz hands. 'They were carrying many personal items and a portable shelter made of weaving. So, we think that they were travelling from one place to another, staying in the temporary blanket- house.'

'A tent?' Val offered.

The professor didn't acknowledge the suggestion. Maybe the word "tent" wasn't part of his archaeological lexicon.

'They have come from Hofstadir in Northern Iceland and travelled to Kirkjufell on their way to Eyrabakki '

Val's smile disappeared; she wasn't about to repeat any of that. 'That's very interesting professor, quite precise about their starting point and destination.'

The professor looked behind him to the closed door of the bunker. It seemed he could hear something that the TV sound recording couldn't. 'It's the information they are giving to the translator. Names have changed over the centuries, but it is a puzzle we can solve.'

Val adopted a quizzical look. 'Lost in translation I think. You mean there is information about their journey you can draw from the preserved artefacts they were found with?'

The door behind the professor opened a crack, wide enough for a grey hand to slip round and flail blindly for the catch. Erik Magnusson continued speaking, changing his position to obscure the hand. 'We are calling these individuals 'The Pilgrims'. They were on a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey from their home in Hofstadir to Eyarbakki, when they were overcome by the ice here at Kirkjufell. They have been frozen for many hundred years.' He responded instinctively to rapid knocking on the door, glancing round, then back to camera. 'Now they are thawed out, the ice is melted, so they can continue on their travelling.' There was a loud shout, "Help" in any language sounds the same.

Val's smile was back, as if she was in on the joke. 'Sounds like someone is impatient to get out and get on with it! Ha Ha. Well, that was archaeologist Professor Eric Magnusson of Reykjavik University with a fascinating find. We look forward to hearing more about this. Thank you, Professor.'

The screen returned to Iceland, where there was an undignified tug of war going on with the bunker's door. Before the swift return to the London studio everyone could clearly hear the professor's last words shouted above the clamour: 'The box is only temporary!' ■

Wild Things Are

By Adam Boggon

Which benefits the ten thousand things
And does not contend
- Tao Te Ching

Finlay Wild - GP of Lochaber, mountain runner, renowned among the lean

I saw him running up Meall a' Bhuachaille in the hill race there

I was middle of the pack, covered in snot

He came down like a stream in flood
Later I came down as fast as I could
Smeared thigh deep in bog
I did not not contend
And Finlay, so far ahead,
Neither did he

My first hill race was Meall a' Bhuachaille - mound of the herdsman. I ate too much beforehand, felt nauseated throughout the race, and at one point had to stop still to let a sharp cramp pass its worst phase. I lost my friend Donald - slight and quick and soon beyond me. Then others in the field I was running with. So I crossed much of the ridgeway alone. Descending from the high point, I gave chase after Iain, firefighter and fellow Highland Hill Runner, who swarmed past me. I overtook him briefly before tearing mid-thigh into sudden bog; scattering all over the track like a spilled glass of milk. The wind and lightness went from me. I stumbled toward the finish line, solo.

"Four minutes! Four minutes to the start!"

I pace around the platform at Strathpeffer waiting to begin the Knockfarrel hill race. This will be my second.

We're warned of ice on the course, of snow and wet tree roots. We grimace and strain our necks. I scuff at the ground with my trainers.

"Go!"

The race batters along the side of an old railway track, then cuts diagonally through a muddy farmer's field, then up a steep tussocky hillside where all runners are slowed to a scramble on hands and feet - grabbing fistfuls of heather, saplings and clods of earth.

I pop over the top of the all-four scramble and feel light enough to hack back into a run once my heart stops its escapee's clammer against my ribcage. I want to summon the old spirit of Browning:

"Pheidippides…Ran like fire once more: and the space 'twixt the fennel-field

And Athens was stubble again, a field which a fire runs through

…Joy in his blood bursting his heart"

But I'm not strong enough for that. Yet still there's joy somewhere streaming in my blood as I chase after the thin line of trail: leaping ice, streams, fences, rock. Descending I'm growing slowly to love - having learned the trick of Jay-Z:

"It comes from not being afraid to fall out of the sky"

I barrel toward the finish now, though not fast enough to keep up with Catriona Morrison, the Highland Hill Runners women's champion. I cross the line with a smile.

After, standing vested in the cold air, steam rises from the bodies and breath of the runners who huddle together, shaking hands. Smiles break gaunt cheeks. Streaks of blood on hands, arms, faces from rasps of gorse.

I shower in the Shinty Pavilion, the incandescence of hot water almost blistering my cold back - a thick coating of mud runs off my legs and the flecks of blood on my arms are cleaned too.

A runner tells me he washes his shoes in a stream at the bottom of his garden. I live in an attic flat with an irregular pentagonal door and no access to a hose. So I ask my pal Andy to drop me off by the river which rushes through Inverness.

I walk down to the water's edge, crouch on a domed rock, and wash the worst of the clart off.

Looking across the river, I see no fishermen out this afternoon - though often they are to be found in this stretch of water.

I think of a phrase from Wang Wei which I scribbled once in a scrapbook when I was 19:

"The fisherman did not suspect
that paradise is hard to find."

Plana Ùr Gàidhlig
Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Plana Ùr Gàidhlig
Plana Ùr Gàidhli
Plana Ùr Gàidhl
Plana Ùr Gàidh
Plana Ùr Gàid
Plana Ùr Gài
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Pl
Ple
Plea
Pleas
Please
Please S
Please Sh
Please Shu
Please Shut
Please Shut G
Please Shut Ga
Please Shut Gat
Please Shut Gate
- THANK YOU!
!”

Aiteal Bhom Rothar
Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Lon-dubh
air sgìtheach.

Gob buidhe
mar dhroigheann.

Seinn cruinn
mar sgeachag.

An t-Earrach
Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Chaidh uair a thìd’
a ghoid. Saoil càit
a bheil i a-nis?

Am Foghar
Chaidh a ceiltinn
san lios. Ach gheibh
thu air ais i tha fhios.

A’ Ghràineag ‘s an Sgòth Dhorch’
“Neòil dhubha na Càisge...”

Cùisean diofraichte am bliadhna.
Dhùisg sinn, ’s b’ eòl dhuinn sa bhad e,
mi fhìn ’s mo chàirdean deilgneach.

Feagal oirnn ron sgòth dhorch ud.
Feagal oirnn fiù ’s ro chàch a chèile.
Shloig sinn corra cnuimhe as t-oidhche,

Chnuasaich sinn na b’ urrainn dhuinn
de dhearcagan searca tearca seann
‘s thill sinn dhar neadan seasgair fhèin.

Fiodh-cladaich Ealanta
Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Dà leumadair air mo bheulaibh
os cionn bàirich nan tonn.

Is ann à bloigh fiodh-cladaich
a chaidh an snaidheadh le snas.

Cho fuadain ris na grad-fhaclan
a leumas cho tric às mo bheul?

Leum an Cat
Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Leum an cat
cho àrd ris an uinneig —
rinn a’ chailleach trod rithe.

Leum an cat
cho àrd ris a’ mhullach —
rinn an fhaoileag trod rithe.

Leum an cat
cho àrd ris an itealan —
rinn am poidhleat trod rithe.

Leum an cat
cho àrd ris a’ ghealaich —
rinn a’ ghealach lachan gàire.

Joker
Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Joaquin Phoenix gu tur buadhmhor,
an Seòcair san fheòil fa ar comhair,
fon daoraich le saicòsas an uilc,
plìonas mòr deargte air a ghnùis.
Mar Apolion a’ dol fodha san lioft
gus an daosgar-shluagh a lèirsgrios.
Na dhian-lasair eireachdail phurpaidh
a’ teàrnadh staidhre iutharna Dhante.

Le cineamateòlas fior bharraichte
siod e a’ tarraing ceò air toitean,
a’ dannsadh le breaban do-chreidsinn
gu glòrmhor a-nuas na ceumannan
gu ruige trèana fo-thalamh a’ bhàis
mar bhàt’-aiseig damainte an Stucs,
gu aiseirigh air bonaid càr mhillte
sa Bhaile Mhòr creachte le gràisg.

Am Fear-Fèinigs ag èirigh on luaithre,
ach tha sgiathan eile cuideachd a’ dùsgadh
air druim balaich a’ caoineadh san duibhre
far an deach a phàrantan dìreach a mhurt
le fear-gunna le aghaidh-coimhich thuaisteir.
Batman air ùr-bhreith ’s a sgiathan ialtaige
gan sgaoileadh gus ar n-iadhadh le truas
air beulaibh taigh-dhealbh mar uaimh sheunta.

Ìm
Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Thog mi sèithear na aghaidh.
“Leig leatha!”, dh’èigh mi.

Thilg i leth-phunnd ime ris a cheann,
ach chaill i e agus bhuail an t-ìm air a’ bhalla.

Chaidh an togalach sin a leagail
o chionn bhliadhnaichean mòra a-nis.

Ach tha smàl an ime ud
fhathast air balla m’ inntinn.

Ceistean Eascaiteòlach
Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Conasg buidhe san ifrinn?
Èisg a’ leum air nèamh?
Corra-ghritheach ciùin air bruaich
gu domhainn na smaointean fhèin?

Craiceann cùl mo làimhe
na meamram aosta seargte
air na sgrìobh cleit fhaondrach geòidh
a cuid sgrochail ghorm air seachran?

Tobar Gun Chuman

Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Air beulaibh uinneig mhòir, chìthear rìgh seang gun lèine
na shuidhe air sèithear chidsin gu h-àrd air muin bùird.
Na làimh aig fois tha ròs gun duilleagan mar shlat-rìoghail.

Sgoil-ealain a th' ann, is dòcha, oir siod canabhas taghta
le Alberto Morocco air a' bhalla, fonn drùidhteach Hey Jude,
sitrich eich ath-ioncholainnte Phòl Revìr air *Highway 61*.

Cha bhean na cruidhean ud air talamh cruaidh mo chridhe fòs,
oir chan eil annta dhomhs' an-dràst ach mac-talla fad' às is fann,
nam faileasan dìomhain air tobar domhain gun fhuaim gun chuman.

A' Chuileag

Màrtainn Mac An t-Saoir

B'e a' chuileag a ghlac m' aire
ged a bha i cho beag
is gun aice ach i fhèin
na dannsa, na mire
os cionn a' chuirp.

Samh chan fhaighinn
ach sin a' chiad smaoin
nuair a leag mo shùil sìos
a dh' ionnsaigh a ghobhail;
an e nach deach
a ghlanadh bho chaochail e
no 'n e gun do chac
e e fhèin ann an
saoghal nan neo-bheò,
a mhuinighinn air a trèigsinn
gun sgeul air athair no a mhàthair
- air *holiday* 's dòcha –
is gun ann dheth-san ach
cnap fuar de dh' fheòil
a ghrodadh is a leannraicheadh
mar an còrr
sgath mòr sam bith sònraichte mu dheidhinn a-nist
ach seach nach ann buileach 'an dùil'
a bha a bhàs nach fhaodadh neach san t-sreath
a làmh a chur air a' cholainn reòthte rag sin agus a ràdh
'Bha thu 88 a bhodaich; ach a-nist chan eil.'

Banais Ghallta

Deborah Moffatt

Sàr-bhanais a bh' innte,
le pìobaire 's uisge-beatha,
am ministear na fhèileadh-beag,

cuirm 's ceòl 's dannsa ann an loft an t-sabhail,
neul stùir a' snìomh mu chasan nan dannsair,
uisge-beatha a' dòrtadh air na clàran-ùrlair,

agus bha sabaid ann, mar bu chòir,
(cha robh banais riamh gun sabaid
bheag no mhòr), 's deòir gu leòr

mun robh glasadh air an latha,
athair bean na bainnse air mhisg,
màthair fear na bainnse air a sàrachadh,

stuirc air an t-seann fhìdhlear
a bha ainmeil na linn, 's e a' cluich
air The White Heather Club, mas fhìor,

a' chlann bheag a' fàs cànranach,
am màthraichean a' fàs diombach,
na deugairean a' fàs mì-fhoighidneach

oir cha b' e ach banais àbhaisteach
a bh' innte, gun chleas-teine
no fuaran-teòclaid

mar a chunnaic iad air a' bhogsa,
agus o! Am faca tu bean na bainnse
a gul 's a' gal air cùlaibh an t-sabhail?

Eadar na Beàrnan

Deborah Moffatt

Àm a bh' ann anns an robh an taigh seo
làn daoine, a latha 's a dh'oidhche,
làn còmhraidh 's ciùil,
's bhithinn ag èisteachd ris an t-sàmhchair
eadar gach facal, a' feitheamh ris
na beàrnan beaga
eadar na ceistean 's na freagairtean,
a' faicinn an doille eadar an sùil
's an cridhe miannach,
's fairichinn an ceòl mar dhriùchdan mìn
air m' aodann, 's bheirinn mi greim
air gach nì nach robh ann –
an t-sàmhchair 's na beàrnan,
an doille 's am miann,
na driùchdan binn,
's a-mach leotha aig briseadh an latha,
far am bithinn a' togail mo dhàin
ann an solas blàth na maidne.

The lantern bearer
Richie McCaffery

For Bonfire Night we got a class of kids
to make lanterns out of sticks, paper and glue.
I even made my own, a huge lopsided angel
for a procession through town.

That night an old woman in the crowd
was so taken by the lanterns she wanted one
of her own to carry, so I gave her mine.

She lit up more than the little candle
she carried and held up high
for miles through the evening.

At the end, I said she could keep the angel
but her face twisted. She dragged it away,
thinking of finding a place to dispose of it
before her return to darkness and metered light.

Routine
Richie McCaffery

is setting the table each morning
for breakfast. We have two old mugs –

1970s Hornsea 'Saffron' pattern
thanks to your eye for retro design.

One of the mugs is chipped, covered
in glazing cracks the tea's stained.

The other is as good as new.
When I do breakfast you get

the 'good' one. When you do it,
you give yourself the damaged one.

It's always like that, our routine.
Each morning, the thirst's there.

Errata
Richie McCaffery

Spent all day proofreading.
All those hours to track down
a handful of typos.

I've scoured miles of fields
and woods and never seen an error
unless it was human-made.

Perhaps we invented the concept
and went looking for it
anywhere and everywhere

except in ourselves,
disguising the fact
that none of us will admit.

Old friends
Richie McCaffery

We go out and wander drunkenly,
aimlessly. We talk, laugh
and remember none of it.

We empty bottles to fill the day
and swim naked in the cold
meandering rivers of our lives.

Our love for each other
is three-legged, like a cracket
for milking that always finds its level.

Years of school and university
have taught us less than nothing.
But we know where the blackbird

likes to perch to sing
when the blackbird's
silent and not there.

Time, please
Richie McCaffery

At long last I wrote to the widow
of a dead poet, like she'd asked.
I edited her husband's Collected Poems.

A reply came back from her son.
She'd been dead two years herself.
I temporised until it became forever.

Time's a curious thing. A British invention,
perhaps, for its insistence on queuing
days, years, generations. The odd coincidence

elbowing its way in while we stand there
confident of who is ahead and behind us.
Then we turn, already speaking, and it's someone else.

Two poems from Coronaworld
Graham Fulton

hair salons
have been ordered
to close immediately
along with bookmakers
and pubic waxers

a septuagenarian trim
is not considered essential
to the continuance of life
unlike tins of prunes
and mushy peas

bottom rolls
scented soap

there will be some
reckless experiments
carried out over
the next few months
with clippers and colourant

families emerging
squinting into the light
of a brave new world
with catastrophic hairstyles
and sutured scalps

bearded ladies
baldy children

cartoon-like tufts
exploding out at
extravagant angles
and irreparable damage
done to the national soul

***

we watch Death in Venice
which features an epidemic
everyone wants to ignore

it slunk from the east
a human feast

Venice awash
with generous sloshes
of milky disinfectant

beautiful stinky canals
burning piles of elegant rubbish

the body count
beginning to mount
a black tear
running down the side
of Dirk Bogarde's corpse-face

art drained
of soul or heart

out of control disease
is bad for business
it will totally bugger-up
the economy

bury it under
the time-worn carpet

Tadzio's slinky bum
silhouetted against the sun
as he turns into a Greek statue

a malevolent minstrel
sticking out his tongue

To find *The Tinkers' Heart*
Robin Munro

The Rest and Be Thankful will be no more
when the stones of the Cowal are trampled o'er.
Where is the Heart?
Where do I start?

'Leave us be' I hear dead travellers say
'tak your hurry', better by far
the paths of horses
than of cars and such imposters.

I have no horse. I had a dog,
borrowed from our origins
to help me know
the slow approach through Glendaruel,

North where three roads used to meet,
a tryst of old Argyll.
Quartz stones set back
from the glaur of grazing, high enough
to look down on smaller Inverary.
Their Loch Fyne view
wide as history, held in the head,
shared on the tongue
of all who travel, join,
take their leave, return or not.

Their metaphor of quartz
into the longing landscape
something of ourselves.
The heart?

I look over sea lochs of memory.
Where do I start?

Settlement
Robin Munro

Across the Balnakailly Burn
from the old *Wood of Rue,*
the *Farm of the Forest*
is a rickle of broken stones
freckled with lichen.

Outlines of lives.
A mother' mother sat here
in her final year,
a grandchild in her first.

So many might have been our fathers
went. Bracken in their stead.
Words and photographs.
Interpretation. Recreation.

Are there, in the old dog's scenting,
any diluted traces of the vanished?
Duty bound, he adds his information.

Neither of us able to foretell
what of us remains
in this or any other land.

Scottish Geology
Robin Munro

Land massed like fantasy:
'Avalonia broke away from Gondwana, collided with Baltica
and drifted towards Laurentia.'

I like the concept:
a splinter of Appalachia
our straggling twin
smashed into Europe
landed here.

These truly were our Arrochar Alps
back in the 'Caledonian Orogeny'.
Shrinking, I concede,
through passing climates of confusion.

Down here on Rothesay front,
a tourist signpost shows
'The Highland Boundary Fault'.
I place a foot on either side,
face up to our provenance:
universal, gone astray.

The Box
Antonia Kearton

It's hardwood, warm, mid-brown, and
beautifully hinged, just shorter
than my octave-and-two handspan.

I chose it when my grandmother died.
I thought it had lived forever
in her house, holding her cigarettes,

near the cabinet of wonders
- the seahorse, the book smaller
than my fingernail – or was it

lined with silver foil and filled
with fudge, brought out each Sunday
after lunch? I am uncertain.

I've memories of both,
and now no way of knowing.
Perhaps it doesn't matter.

My grandmother came from Latvia
before the war, with one
suitcase: a summer visit.

She met my grandfather,
the war broke out, she stayed.
The box cannot have come with her -

why choose it, even if she could
have known that this one case
was all she'd have from home?

I gave it to you, thinking
of your affinity with wood,
not knowing then that doing

so meant it was always
mine. We have it still.
It's on the bookcase, dark with age
and use, its carvings clear, now full
of sea-worn amber that I found
upon a beach in Latvia.

Sight
Kenneth Steven

The strangeness of that sudden rumble
coming from nowhere yesterday late.
I ran out and stood watching
the faraway threatening skies,
but around us an eerie brightness –
the stillness that comes before the storm.
The first flicker – a blink of silver,
seconds later the answering thunder.
I went in and watched from the window,
looked out and into the distance –
the lochan like a light blue stone
brooched in the tweed of the moorland.
The swans in the mirrored water,
so impossibly white to the eyes –
like the remains of snow after winter,
carvings that dipped and bent;
together yet ever themselves –
heads stretching into the west,
into the rain that came from the silence,
the veil that swallowed the day.

Necropolis
Kenneth Steven

The slow creak of the gate clangs –
I stand beyond the swish-swish of the cars,
the heart's drum calm at last.

The sun emerging like a hedgehog from the mist,
trees sculpted out of silence;
wintered in the distance, made of grey.

Breeze comes and ruffles through the ditches;
the sun is snowballed under cloud
as rain in bits and pieces stings.

Some stones are toppled; the names of those beneath
all smooth and rubbed away –
they do not matter any more, for no one comes

to crouch down close beside with candles,
to wait for dawn with them and pray
their souls have passed into a better light.

Homeless men creep here instead like moles
and cuddle up beneath the lintels, snug –
the living seeking succour from the dead.

They curl inside these caves, carve out a quiet
to sleep untroubled through the hours of dark.

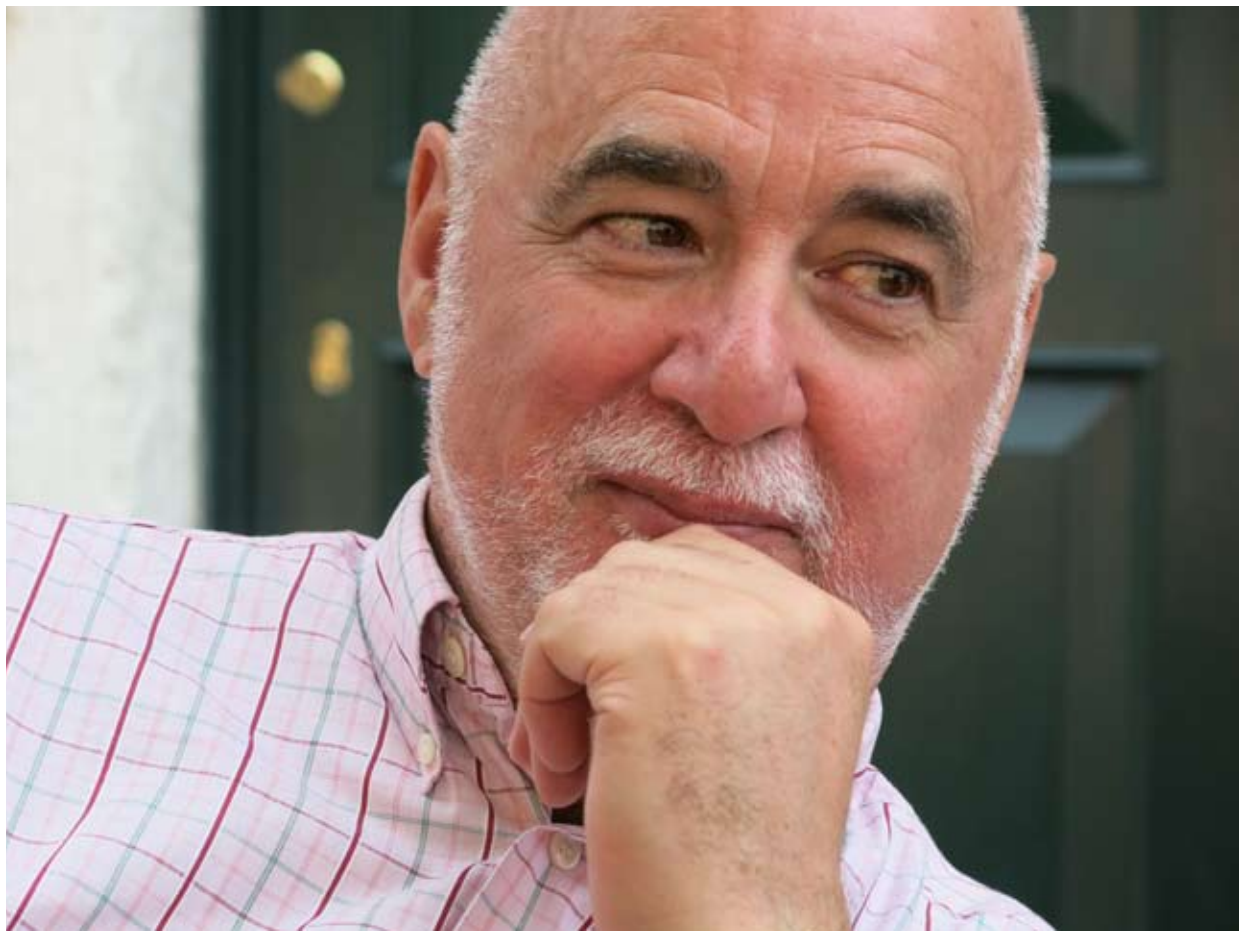
And in the morning, if they are blessed,
the deer come close to scent their breath
and rusty-furred fox-cubs yap and scrabble.

This is a place made somehow more alive
than all the world beyond.

Ceum air Cheum / Step by Step

An interview with Christopher Whyte by Jennifer Morag Henderson

Christopher Whyte's poetry collection *Ceum air Cheum / Step by Step* was shortlisted for the Saltire Society Poetry Book of the Year in 2019, and is currently shortlisted for the Best Poetry Book (Derick Thomson Prize) 2020 by the Gaelic Books Council. It is an audacious book in many ways, from the subject matter to the language it is written in, covering a wide-ranging variety of subjects from the politics of language and translation to suicide and child abuse. Sharp and unafraid, it contains poems about the author's difficult life experiences, and his writing in Scotland and in Gaelic – including a sometimes difficult relationship with Sorley Maclean – all set within a European context. It is a collection that has taken almost 20 years to come together, a cumulative group of experiences that have been thought about for a long time.



Christopher Whyte relaxing in Italy.

JMH: One of the things that struck me about the poems was their format: first of all the fact that this is a book of 'longer poems'. I don't think this is a very common format for contemporary Gaelic poetry, am I right?

CW: The most common format for poetry in Gaelic has for some time been shortish poems in relatively free verse, often topical or diaristic in nature. So you are right, the poems in *Ceum air Cheum* tend to swim against the current in this respect.

JMH: The poems are very rhythmical: smooth and wonderful to read out loud. The rhythm must come early on in your conception of the poem – can you speak about how you start to write – with a word, an idea, or with a line and a rhythm?

CW: Rhythm is indeed fundamental because all the poems are written in metre, often very strict. This counters the apparently "non-poetic", "prosaic" subject matter, asserting that what you are reading is very definitely poetry, if of an unusual kind. My characteristic metre is an adaptation to Gaelic of English "iambic pentameter".

I find it very hard to say where a poem "starts". A novel can start with a powerful image, or a situation, or the relationship between two people. At times a poem can be launched into the air on the basis of translating someone else's poem – borrowing and then adapting that particular tone of voice.

Probably for me a poem starts with a tone, an angulation or intonation of the voice, a way or a possibility of saying something. Deciding on the metre takes time. My image for that is cutting a piece of cloth at the point where it falls from the edge of the table. The choice you make about where to end the first line will be hugely influential for the development of the rest of the poem.

One element that fascinates me is running the sentence structure "against" the metre in a constantly varying counterpoint. What I mean is, not having the beginning and ending of a sentence coincide with the beginning and ending of lines but rather occur halfway, or one third, or two thirds of the way through. My image of that is a cat gradually settling down into a comfortable position. The end of the cat's tail corresponds to the last words of the sentence and the full stop to its tapering conclusion.

The poem addressed to Sorley Maclean is a virtuoso piece in changing metres throughout. The opening section imitates, in an ironical way, a traditional song metre, which of course comes over as odd without the melody, while the last is cast in "amphibrachs" – groups of three syllables – of which the central one carries the stress, with four in each line. That worked surprisingly well and also felt appropriate in a poem from one poet to another:

"A Face That Won't Be Etched Along The
Crest Of The Cuillin /
Gnùis Nach Dealbhaichear Air Bearradh
A'Chuilithinn

When next I go north
I won't see your face
etched along the crest of those mountains.
I didn't see them
when they buried you,
my presence that day was not needed. …

Nuair a thèid mi gu tuath
Chan fhaic mi ur gnùis
Air a dealbhadh fad bearradh nam beann ud.
Cha robh iad nam shealladh
Nuair a thìodhlaic iad sibh,
Cha b'fheumail mo làthair-s' an uair sin. …"

JMH: In "A Face That Won't Be Etched Along the Crest of the Cuillin" [the poem about Sorley Maclean], I like how you make the distinction between the poetry and the man. In today's 'cancel culture' people want to know so much about the internal life and thoughts of the writers they admire, and sometimes seem not to be able to like any of their work if they disagree with any viewpoint.

CW: The phrase "cancel culture" is completely new to me. I myself see no real need for public exposure of the author in readings and in interviews. Take the case of Elena Ferrante, whose identity is still far from being clear. That has done her books no harm. Generally I am ill at ease when reading my own work in front of an audience. It is something I have to steel myself to do and can feel unseemly and inappropriate. A breach of decorum. After all, reading a book or a poem is quintessentially a private experience that cannot always or easily be shared with other people.

Returning to the points I raised about writing in metre. I am pretty sure that rhythm and metre evoke in the reader or listener a psychological portrait of the person who is talking and will help them evaluate how trustworthy this person is, as well as the balance between emotion and thinking behind what they say. Two poems in *Ceum air Cheum* dealing with particularly awkward and disturbing subjects - 'Sealladh san Duibhre' and 'Aig Uaigh Nach Eil Ann' - observe the relevant metrical rules very strictly. What matters is the metrical regularity giving the reader the assurance that, however extreme the experiences and emotions being discussed, someone retains overall balance and control. Things are not going to get out of hand, and overall the situation is safe. However daunting and unsettling the exploration being undertaken, a guiding hand is there for them to hold onto. That hand is represented by strict metre.

JMH: Some of your poems talk about some highly personal experiences, and I sometimes think that forming difficult experiences into poems, into art, makes them understandable, easier to cope with in some ways. They become formalised and controllable – I had felt what you said about the metrical rules in those poems. But publishing these personal experiences can be a different experience to writing about them, as people can critique not only writing style, but content. I wondered if you

would want to say anything about your experience writing and publishing 'Aig Uaigh Nach Eil Ann / At A Grave That Is Not There'?

CW: When you ask about reactions to the publication of 'Aig Uaigh', it brings home to me the unbelievable pressure on people who have been abused to keep silent, even after they have spoken out. Of three siblings in my family, only my sister chose to refer to it, in hostile, suspicious and unsympathetic terms. It was a milestone for me when I realised that if the other family members refused to discuss the matter of my abuse, that by no means indicated they did not believe me. Quite the reverse! One friend said immediately: 'Oh, I wish you hadn't told me that!' while at least two others chose to talk about how tough it was for them handling the news, rather than about how it had been for me as a child coping with the abuse.

"At A Grave That Is Not There /
Aig Uaigh Nach Eil Ann

…If someone were to ask what sort of face
evil has, I wouldn't say, the face
of a head of state, of some general
who has a whole army at his command,
nobody famous, not the murderer

featured in the newspapers, so no-one
can possibly doubt the crimes that he
committed,
but rather a face that's banal, everyday,
such as the man that sells the morning
papers,
or else the one remarking to his neighbour,

while they are standing in a bus stop queue,
how unpredictable the weather is.
Or your own face, maybe. My mother's face.
…

…Ma dh'iarrar orm gu dè a' ghnùis bhios aig
an olc, cha fhreagrainn gur h-i ghnùis aig
ceannaird
stàit, air neo cinn-feadhn' àraidh is arm
fo smachd, no gnùis sam bith tha ainmeil,
eadhon an tè aig murtair nochdas anns

na pàipearan-naidheachd, is nach fhaod
teagamh
a bhith aig duin'air aingidheachd a
ghnìomh',
ach gnùis tha dìreach coitcheann, cumanta,
gnùis an fhir a bhios a' reic nam pàipear,
mar eisimpleir, no chanas ri a nàbaidh

mar a tha an t-sìde caochlaideach,
is iad a'feitheamh air a'bhus sa chiuda.
No do ghnùis fhèin, is dòcha. Gnùis mo
mhàthar. …"

JMH: Some of the translations in the book are by Niall O'Gallagher, and I know that you don't always translate your Gaelic work and have strong opinions about whether or not Gaelic poems should be published with an English translation. Can you speak a bit more about this?

CW: Ideally, there ought to be a situation where even long and demanding poems can be published in Gaelic alone and will encounter a competent and appreciative audience in that language. Unfortunately, such is far from being the case. Accompanying the "real" poem with translations is a matter of necessity. At the same time, I am certain that translations enrich and expand the original they are working from. Poems benefit from being translated! They are never quite the same afterwards. Translation opens up and discovers possibilities in them that might otherwise be overlooked. That insight strikes me as profoundly alien to the literary world in Britain today, ultimately so hostile and indifferent to translation, isolated in the beleaguered fortress of English, which seeks only minimal interchange with other languages of Europe or of the world. In this respect, writing in Gaelic, and being forced to seek out translators, represents an asset.

When I began publishing poetry in the late 1980s, it was practically obligatory to supply an English translation which could appear alongside. For me, translating a poem into English damaged my relationship to it, as if someone had inserted a foggy plate glass window between me and it. That disturbed me and upset me. It also worried me that magazine editors and prize committees regularly made - and still make! - judgements on the basis of the facing Engish version, without having any qualms about not bothering to learn Gaelic so they could evaluate the poem itself. I have to confess that, when I translate someone else's poetry into Gaelic, or English, or Italian, the translation tends to oust the original and take its place. Naturally I don't like this happening when the original is my own and I am also the translator!

For more than a decade, Niall's work as translator of my poems was fundamental. If he had not stepped in to provide English versions, I do not think most of them would have appeared in print. I used my own translations in *Ceum air Cheum* when these had already been published, and also with two poems – "To a Young Scottish Poet" because this polemic against so-called "relay translation" is pretty barbed, and "At a Grave That Is Not There" because of the extremely personal nature of the message being conveyed to my mother.

"To A Young Scottish Poet, Who Wrote That It's An Exceptional Occurrence When Someone Knows The Language They're Translating From /

Gu Bàrd Òg Albannach, A Sgrìobh Gur E Suidheachadh Àraid A Th' Ann Nuair A Bhios Neach Eòlach Air A' Chànain Às A Bheil E 'G Eadar-Theangachadh"

… What I felt for you was pity,
diligently employed making soup
thinner still than what you had to start with,

busily pursuing a shadow's shadow.
Whoever cast it moved, brilliant, unshackled,
Far away, heading for somewhere else
while you, or some of you at any rate,
paced up and down inside the cage of English
…

… Bha mi duilich air ur sgàth,
is sibh gu dìorrasach a'dèanamh brochain
nas tain' dhe bhrochan bha tana mar thà,

toirt ruaig air sgàile sgàil', 's an neach a thilg
e
siubhal ann an làinnireachd a dheòntais,
an àite eile, dol an seòladh eile,
fhad 's a tha sibh, no feadhainn dhibh co-dhiù,
ceumnachadh sìos is suas an cèids' na Beurla
…"

JMH: I was particularly struck by the poem "To a Young Scottish Poet". I found it extraordinary at first that a translator wouldn't know the language they are translating from, but when I thought about it I realised I had read poems that were done this way. There's a quote I've read from Douglas Dunn that "only an indifferent poem gets lost / In its translation". When and how did you start working with Niall O' Gallagher?

CW: Niall O'Gallagher was an outstandingly brilliant student in his year at Glasgow and I had the privilege and pleasure of being one of his teachers in the Department of Scottish Literature. He approached me with the proposal of putting some of my poems into English and I was delighted to accept. I did, however, warn him that close association with an out gay man on the Scottish literary scene risked producing a degree of "guilt by association". Even if homophobia can no longer be expressed as uninhibitedly as in the recent past, it is still a significant factor in how people respond to and evaluate poetry such as my own. Niall took my concerns on board, rolled up his sleeves, and went ahead, with excellent results.

JMH: I am a little surprised to hear those concerns – about him being associated with a gay man in the Scottish literary scene. Do you still think this is the case nowadays? I can see that it was an issue in the past, but I felt that attitudes had changed?

CW: I would say that being a gay writer continues to be problematic in Scotland today, even for those coming from a younger generation than my own. Homophobia is still there. It has merely gone underground, evading direct expression.

JMH: One of the reasons I wanted to do this interview was that I thought some of the notes you've been putting on Facebook recently have been so interesting: they come up on my feed in amongst other totally unrelated posts and sometimes I'm not sure what I'm reading at first - whether it is fiction, or an essay, your own thoughts from now, or something from earlier, or the thoughts of a character. I enjoy the engagement that's needed with each post. One of those notes was on 'Discovering you are not English': these questions about Scottish identity are not new, but what I found fascinating about *Ceum air Cheum* was the way it did seem to take Gaelic somewhere new: I feel that Gaelic is the medium, but not the whole message - the point of the poems is not solely that they are in Gaelic. You are using Gaelic as a working European language and in a way that gets you to the heart of community: people, not just nature, or a fixed point in the landscape and history.

CW: That is spot on, and very perceptive. The language in which it is written cannot always be the most significant aspect of a poem. My gambit - and my gamble! - has always been to treat Gaelic "as if" it were just another modern European language, even though that is not really the case. That sets me apart from a lot of Gaelic writers today, almost in a compartment of my own. Reading other European poets in the original language, and featuring quotations from them above my Gaelic texts, is one element in this approach. It's not something I do casually!

One danger with writing in an underprivileged or threatened language is what I call "reification". You are only permitted to write about certain subjects - the language itself, the community which uses it, their preoccupations and concerns, whereas – under normal circumstances – language can and should be used to deal with any topic whatsoever.

People using Gaelic should not be subject to limitations which are not imposed on writers in English or in German. It is rather like behaving "as if" Scotland were already what so many of us hope it can soon be - an "ordinary" smaller European state like Denmark or Luxemburg or Slovenia. And with creative literature, acting "as if" has a way of almost magically making things come true. Literature has the power to bring into being realities which did not exist before.

Concerning the old debate about who Gaelic belongs to, and who has the right to use it, I have settled on a very straightforward rule of thumb. A language belongs to anyone who uses it. What could be simpler or more clear?

I am so glad to hear that you were following the Facebook posts, and that you enjoyed reading them. The whole idea came from my dear friend here in Prague - where I am writing from now - Petra Poncarová, who won a prize for her translation of Tormod Caimbeul's Deireadh an Fhoghair, done directly from Gaelic, and who is a regular contributor to STEALL. I took a break from weekly postings over the summer but am planning to resume them in September.

This interview was conducted via email and Skype, and has been edited for length and clarity, with the permission of the interviewee.

[Christopher Whyte reads a further extract from "At A Grave That Is Not There" online at the *Northwords Now* website. Ed.] ■

Some poems from northern seas

By Mandy Haggith

Easterly

This wind is patchy and inconsistent.
It throws punches loaded with rain,
shoves the boat roughly over the water,
rucking up waves in breaking bunches.

Then it pauses,
lulls

long enough for us to lose way,
rolling awkwardly in wait
for its next fit of enthusiasm,
its next bit of belligerence.

It has made a mess of the sea
but there's something childlike,
almost loveable,
about the moody scruffiness of its path.

Its holes are made by hills.
The shapes of the Assynt mountains
are stamped all over it.

Bow-head whale

Two humps of peace on an ocean of ice:
head bump – a modest mountain,
behind it a ridge.

A flow as the head rises,
a gentle puff of exhaled air,
a murmuring blow.

Among the congregation
we might as well have said 'Amen'
to the emergence of a deity.

Cameras and glasses of devotion
rise in reverence
fall in supplication.

You make no popish gesture,
merely nod your huge head,
return to the deep.

Big behemoth
fellow traveller on the whale-road
we greet you.

How many years have you swum
at your monk-like pace
among this ice?

You could teach us
things we will never learn
as long as we keep scurrying on,

burning,
burning.

Svalbard walrus group. Photo: Kenny Taylor

You wouldn't want to wrestle with a walrus

Cos his head's like a dustbin with three foot tusks
He'll kiss you to bits with his suction lips
His whiskers'll tickle till you lose your grip
His penis bone's like a walking stick
And he won't feel your punches, his skin's so thick.
He is two tonnes of blubber and built like a bus,
No you wouldn't want to wrestle with a walrus

He farts like a rocket and he belches pepper spray
He flaps his flippers like he's practicing for flag day
He'll scratch you with his nails if you try to pin him down
Or push you down the sandy beach and roll you till you drown
If you grab him by the flippers he will squash you with no fuss
No, you wouldn't want to wrestle with a walrus.

He can hang out under water, he's a deep sea diver
He's like jaws with claws, has no sense of humour either
He looks kind of cuddly when he gives you a wave
But taking him on is neither big nor brave
He's got 20 of his pals lying out there on the isthmus
No, you wouldn't want to wrestle with a walrus.

Ice floe

Deep below, a whale dives
deeper than light,
deeper than time.
What do I know?

Huge baleen, tonnes of krill,
rise, blow, slow, slow
fin, blow, dive below.
What do I know?

Thinning sea ice, plastic, PCBs,
bottom-trawlers, fishing quotas,
oil-drilling, sonic blasts, submarines.
What do I know?

Strathconon
Ian A. Olson

When you took the autumn to London
And left me to burrow into winter
I said they could pack up Strathconon
Box up the birch and the larch
Return the swans on Achonachie
And while they were about it
They could empty the Curin dam.

There was, after all, no point
In the upkeep of Torr Achilty
In preserving the pines of Achlorachan
And sustaining the pass of Scardroy.
No need to retain Inverchoran
For the sake of a handful of eagles
Or maintain the forest of Meinich
For the amusement of the deer.

Last night when I entered Strathconon
The birches were naked and mourning
The larch trees stripped and shivering
The pines smothered in sleet.
By Dalbreac the river was silenced
From Craig Ruadh the deer were uplifted
The dams preserved in the ice
The mountains blacked out by the snow.

Have You Lost Your Tongue?
Karen Lesley MacDonald

Yes miss, the cat took it.
  The cat took my tongue,
    ran away with it
  long before I was born.
  On field after battlefield
    it took a licking until beat.
  It was hung out to dry, in tatters
on the edge
  of a clattering cliff.
  The sheep on one side of the wall,
me silent on the other.
    I was pushed and pushed
until my feet were wet.
    I had to learn how to fish,
  sink or swim.

In school my father
  was taught how not to speak.
  But I remember
how it appeared in a swear
  or a tune hummed under breath.
How he unwrapped it gently back North
visiting the old lady.
  Always in her shawl by the fire.
Tea and Pan Drops.
He offered it to old Colin along the road.
  It flew between them like a songbird.
He volleyed it with mischief
at his sister, at his brothers.
    It ricocheted off the old walls
  over my head and out the door.
    I ran to catch it
  but too late, much too late.

The Wye Athin Chynges
Edith Harper

Daunderin alang the beach makin siccar
tae haud awa fae the wee purpie scalders –
an amethyst necklace strung oot alang the tideline.
Sunsheen glisters like gowd oan the waves.
Nae soond bit the saft sough o the sea.
A guff fae a tangle o seaweed
that Ah kin taste oan ma saut-stung mou.

A at eence a stushie gets up fan boorach o seagows
stairts tae fecht oer a puckle fish or breid.
Syne, ae gow flees up an awa, a bittock in his yella neb
an the hale murtherous clamjamfrey gies chase.
The skraich o the gows cairried oan the Atlantic win
maks me think o the greetin o exiles, drien fae this lan,
fa traivelled athort the braid streetch o the ocean.

Ahint this strand lies the lan they left
fan it wis gien oer tae hedder an yowes.
An och, thon wis a dowie time.
Weel, the hedder's aye there bit the yowes are lang gane,
an a the hooses an steadins nocht bit a rickle o stanes.
Noo the lan is hame tae groose an peesie-weeps,
towerists, waukers an midgie-ridden lochans.

Lorna Moon
born Strichen 1886
died New Mexico 1930
Kay Clive

Lorna Moon, she liked the ring of it,
transformed from Nora Helen Wilson Low.
Names need to have a resonance, a fit
and this could take her where she yearned to go.
"Shameless", they called her in the staid wee town,
between the Buchan farmland and the sea,
writing about the folk she'd always known
probing pretence, revealing oddity.
The library refused to stock her book -
the quine whose scripts had dazzled Hollywood
was shunned in Strichen. They could not overlook
that searing light that showed more than it should.

She planned a journey home when gravely ill,
her ashes in a "trochie", back to Mormond Hill.

In Answer To Your Question About Poetry
Sharon Black
for Tim

You know that feeling when you hold your breath
to stop a fit of hiccups
and your chest hurts and your head swims
like that time you dived from the highest board
to please your dad
and fighting for the surface your lungs were ready to explode
you weren't sure which way was up
or if you'd even make it and the only thing that mattered
was heading for the light and finally you reach it
you inhale and the dive-board
and the trying to make him proud and the hiccups
are all gone and you're just there floating?

Wee Tam and Roy Rogers

D.B. MacInnes

Roy Rogers and Gail Davis. Creative Commons.

'Did ye ken Roy Rogers took ma daughter?' said Wee Tam. With a flick of the wrist he sent a metal beer keg spinning across the brewery courtyard.

'Oh, is that right?' I said, catching the keg from which steam still rose. Straight-armed and with a roll of my shoulders I swung it onto the gleaming stack behind me and tried to ignore Wee Tam's frown at my tone. I couldn't help it. Each morning he made the same complaint about the film cowboy from the Fifties. By evening, his mind had been wiped clean by the dregs he shook into the pint glasses that were filling above the steam machine.

All that summer I'd been working in Campbell, Hope and King's, the oldest brewery in Edinburgh. I'd failed my university exams so I wasn't going back. It was a watershed in my life. My maiden aunt had become my guardian after my parents had died in a skiing accident when celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary. A lecturer in History at Aberdeen University, she had made it clear her interest in me, and her continued support for me, was based on my academic success. I'd worked hard at retaining her affection throughout childhood, surviving all the angsty tests since then, but my lack of commitment had been exposed at last. The shock I felt was in proportion to the fear I'd accumulated over the years. After seeing the results on the noticeboard, that night I wandered from one pub to another, their windows splashing gaudy light on the pavement, their doors an invitation to oblivion.

Some of the pubs were in the Cowgate, that sunken canyon which threads its way through the Old Town and past the cobbled slopes of the brewery. Near my flat was one where musicians gathered to play jigs and reels and sing a few songs. The music was jaunty, carefree, and I especially liked when an old man turned up with a baroque flute. The bark and fat tones from the ebony cylinder made me want to dance. Later in the night more wistful airs were played, and in the first epiphany of that summer it struck me that beyond Hip-hop, Rap or Pop, beyond even the refined output of the Conservatoires, here was beautiful music played by ordinary people.

One night I sat in my usual corner, pint in hand, drifting on the river of melody, when I noticed the old man was playing a new flute, the same dark wood, but with extra silver keys. The old one rested on the table in front of him. Propped over it was a 'for sale' sign. I swallowed my beer and fished in my pockets for change. Money was becoming a problem, but I couldn't face going back to my flat just yet, so I ordered another drink.

By the following week I'd grown so desperate for a job, I turned up at the brewery with my lunch-box under my arm. The foreman shook his head: 'Good try, son, but we don't take on students.'

Nearby, a tiny skelf of a man had just punched his card in the clock and now was doubled over laughing, his scrawny arm stretched out, finger pointing at the lunch box.

'Whit a brass neck,' he said, 'Ach, I'll take him. Since we got they Belhaven pubs, I cannae keep up.' That was Wee Tam, whose wishes held a mysterious sway throughout the brewery.

Drink was strengthening its grip on me and now I could afford it. The brewery issued a pint of export strength 'stagger' each lunchtime which made the afternoon fly, but by five o'clock there was a thirst for more and that was when the pubs opened. One night I wandered down into the Cowgate in a mood of exploration. Two men staggered from the doors of the first pub I came to. One was middle-aged, with the dusty flat cap and overalls of a plasterer, the other younger and smarter, perhaps an office worker or bank clerk. Both were drunk. Out on the street the young man fell down and with difficulty was helped up by the other, who in turn fell down, his cap falling from his head. The ruinous choreography went on and on, until I couldn't take any more. I whirled round and headed back the way I came. Later, I thought about what I had seen. These men are hardened drinkers. Been at it for years, I told myself.

One day I went to the canteen porter as usual for my pint of 'stagger', but got a shake of the head. I said: 'What's going on?'

The man just shrugged his shoulders and nodded towards the courtyard where Wee Tam could be seen quaffing his pint, his head thrown back, his scraggy neck muscles working hard.

Later, in the afternoon, I queued in the brewery office for my wage packet. These were handed out by a pretty girl with long red hair. Her coarse banter with the other workers contrasted with her fine-boned looks. But when I stepped up, I wondered if the packet contained my final wages because she grew quiet and handed it over with an expression of sadness. Perhaps I had offended Wee Tam irreversibly? Then she winked. So that's what I look like, I thought. I walked away holding my wage packet and grinning like a fool.

What was in Wee Tam's head I would never find out, but that night I realised that it was the first time I'd been properly sober for weeks. I climbed the winding stairs to my flat, cooked a nourishing meal and considered the rich flavours of this new life. Later on I lifted the wooden flute I'd bought from the old man in the pub with my first wages. With only one term of recorder lessons at school, it took me two weeks to get a serviceable embouchure. A month later I had a set of jigs.

As the summer continued, I noticed that in good weather the red-haired girl took her lunch down into the courtyard to sit on one of the barrels where the sun was strongest. One afternoon I strolled over with my lunch-box, and mustering a smile which I hoped did not show my desperation, I sat down.

'Ye're no fuckin' shy,' she said.

I couldn't think of what to say. Then, by some divine intervention I discovered the fear inside me had a tap and by some strange alchemy it was possible for me to turn it. 'I'm shy with everyone else,' I said. 'You must bring out the best in me.'

She was drinking from her bottle of lemonade and her laughter made the fizzy liquid go down the wrong way. On clearing her nose and mouth and wiping her eyes, she looked me up and down. 'There's more to ye than fuckin' meets the eye, posh boy.'

Our sly teasing continued each time we met. It seemed like an act of intimacy that we shared our lunch-boxes; she was intrigued by my tuna and cucumber sandwiches, I craved the caramel wafers which her mother seemed to tip into her box by the half dozen. One day, we had traded happily again when I said, 'Wee Tam and Roy Rogers, eh?'

'What d'ye mean?'

'Well, all this stuff about Roy Rogers taking his daughter?'

She frowned. 'Aye, what about it?'

'Was he riding Trigger at the time?' I laughed at my joke, but she didn't join in.

'It's true,' she said.

'Really?'

'Aye, it was in the papers. My mum told me. The cowboy and his missus visited Edinburgh, went to the orphanage and fell for her.'

'Wow. She was in an orphanage?' I

was rattled by this and said the first thing to come into my head. 'With Wee Tam's drinking, I guess he couldn't make a fuss.'

She stared at me. It was clear I had misstepped. 'That's where you're fuckin' wrong. Wee Tam stopped drinkin' when his wife fell ill with cancer. Nursed her for a year he did, but the girl was taken into care as it was gettin' too much for him. But it was only meant to be a few weeks.'

I felt miserable – for Wee Tam, for the blighted family, for myself. But her look softened and also her voice. 'Then Roy Rogers came to town. Aye and his missus and Trigger too. Rode Trigger up the steps of the Council Assembly Rooms he did. After they visited the orphanage, the Social came round to Wee Tam and they gave him the choice. What I heard was he went up on the Pentland Hills all day and when he came back down, his mind was made up. What was best for the lassie.'

'Christ, what a choice to make,' I said.

'Aye, but a good one for her. They took her over to their ranch in Montana and brought her up with their other kids.'

'And what about Wee Tam?'

She made a fist and punched my arm. 'The day she left, he started drinkin' again.'

So the next morning I got to work in plenty of time. As usual Wee Tam sent the kegs spinning crazily over the cobbles, the sun flashing off their metal bodies. I had to be quick to catch them before they crashed into my knees. Nevertheless when Wee Tam finally said, 'D'ye ken Roy Rogers took ma daughter?', I was ready.

'Aye Tam, I know, and I'm sorry,' I said. ' D'ye want to talk about it?'

Of all the things I learned on the streets of Edinburgh that summer, the one from Wee Tam was the best. A lesson got without the goading of fear, from a small man with a big heart. The thing that drives us is love. The all-consuming power of love. ■

Overtime

By Mark Edwards

Half 4 and Stewart wis supposed to finish at 5. The loun had disappeared into the bogs, left him to get the drinks.

Being seen tae?

That had to be her standard question. Course he wisna being seen tae. He and she were the only folk in the bar.

Pinta Guinness and eh, a coke.

Draught or can?

Eh?

The coke.

A can'll dae fine.

Need a glass.

Aye.

Ice?

No.

They fairly made it easy on ye. He felt around in his overall pockets, realised he'd left his baccy in the van. He found the phone Flett gave him a while back. As soon as it wis on the bar it started to ring and vibrate. Hullo.

Far are ye.

The Clifton.

Ye aright.

The young lad winted ti come in.

I'll be there in 5 minutes.

He pressed the button, pit the phone doon. He could mind this place fae the bad auld days. They used to drop change in the Gents' urinal. There wis a sign above the urinal telling customers all this coin wis being collected fir auld age pensioners. Anybody caught stealing it wid be barred fir life. He checked his pockets. The baccy still wisna there.

£3.60 please.

Christ, ye gona throw in a massage and haircut while ye're at it?

That will be right. New owners pit the prices up.

It's ay bin steep in here.

I couldna tell ye. I've only worked here a month.

He fished out a fiver, handed it across, glanced roun at the ciggy machine. 5 coins fir 17 unless ye chose Royals who gave ye 19 but were that rough ye'd be as well smoking tar off the road. He wid jist need to put his bad habits on strike fir half an hour. Or at least 'til Glen extracted himsel fae the lavvy, coughed up one of his rarely dispensed Lamberts.

Ye fine Stewart?

In this type ae situation ye heard Flett afore ye saw him. If ye were onsite somewhere though it wis a different story. Flett wid switch to stealth mode, park the estate a few streets fae the huises ye were working on, creep in slowly, hoping to catch ye haen 40 winks or a quick read ae the paper. Far's the young lad?

Stewart nodded towards the Gents. The door opened. Glen appeared.

Fit ye bin daen in there, knitting?

I wis haen a shite.

Shouldna huv daen that, said Flett. That's the best ae ye gone.

Tt.

The barmaid held out a few coins. Stewart waved her away. Treat yersel.

Glen turned ti the bar, reached fir his pint. Nay think it looks like a priest?

Eh.

A pint ae Guinness. See the long dark cloak, the white bit at the top fir the collar.

Stewart shook his head. Gie's a smoke will ye, ma baccy's in the van.

I'll nip oot fir it. He made fir the door.

Tight as a duck.

Nay flies on him. Flett reached inside his jacket. Handed o'er a front door key, address written on the fob. Ony chance ye could dae a spot ae overtime. They're expecting it ready fir Monday morning.

Christ, they've some hope. I take it the water and power's on.

Far as I kain.

I'll see fit we can dae.

Flett gave the barmaid a wave afore turning fir the door. On his way out, he near bumped inti Glen. Mind it's jist wun pint if ye're driving.

Nay bother boss. Glen walked over, handed Stewart the baccy.

Ony plans fir thenight?

Nane so far, how.

Spot ae overtime if ye fancy it.

Double time like.

Time and a half.

Aww Stewart, could ye nay have haggled him fir time and 3 quarters?

Stewart looked away, caught the barmaid smirking. He picked his phone up, went outside.

Lissin, I'm working thenight, so I could jist get summin out the chippy.

Ony idea fit time ye'll finish?

If I'm nay back by eh, well, dinna wait up.

Ye are working?

Aye, I'm working.

Okay then.

Glen wis leaning on the bar, chatting up the barmaid.

C'mon then Romeo, sooner we start, sooner we'll finish.

Nay fir a wee drammy?

No.

I wis jist joking.

⋆

The hale flat wis decorated in the same pink wallpaper. Stewart thought it must've been a young lass that lived there 'til Glen said it wis probably a coupla gay boys. Fitivir. It wisna the worst job. The surface layer tore away in long strips. The backing jist needed a quick blast wi the steamer, a bittie persuasion wi the scraper. When it came to the timesheets though they would add a couple hours, tell Flett it had been a pure bastard. His stomach wis churning. He wis starting to feel light-headed. He checked his watch, pictured Glen chatting up whichever lassie wis working in the chippy.

There wis a knock at the door. Likely Glen up tae his antics. He sighed, got down off the steps, went to the door, pulled it open. A big lanky guy wis stood there. A wee blone next tae him, out of breath, red roun the een.

Can I use yer phone? I need ti phone the police.

He patted his overall pockets, realised he'd left his phone in the van. I'm only working here. There's nay phone in this flat.

I need ti phone the police, she sobbed. He's been hitting me.

Tt. We've jist been arguing.

Stewart glanced at the guy, found him staring back. A big nose that had been broken at least once. Stewart didna fancy his chances.

The lassie started greeting. I'm nay letting ye off wi it. She turned, headed down the staircase. The guy shrugged then followed. Stewart stood a minute, heard her chap a door on the floor below. He stept back into the lobby, leaving the door on the jamb. The emptiness of the flat surrounding him. A second or 2 afore he realised he wis still holding the scraper. Somebody wis coming through the door. He stept back, threw his arm up, scraper held like a knife.

Fuck sake!

Thought ye were somebody else.

Like fa?

How much I owe ye?

Forget it. Glen wis still outside the door. Ye got me that pint earlier so we'll call it evens.

Cheers. That's nice ae ye.

Glen reached inside the bag, handed Stewart a fish supper.

Didna pass ombdy on the stair did ye.

Nivir saw naybdy, how.

Jist wondered.

They went through to the living room, sat on the floor. Stewart wis staring inti space, supper in his lap. He minded the pub earlier, Glen's offer ae a dram. Jist the one kain. He'd managed though.

Nay hungry?

He forced down a few chips. They tasted awful.

Here, said Glen. Fit say we knock off aboot 10. You auld boys need yer rest eh.

⋆

When he got hame Elaine wis in her dressing gown. She stood up as he came towards her. He kissed her cheek.

Ye okay.

Aye.

Ye look knackered.

He near started telling her about the young lass coming to the door of the flat. She would want to know why he hadn't done anything. I'll stick the kettle on.

I'm off ti bed.

Be up in a while.

Mind and wash.

When the tea wis made he went back to the sofa. It wis still warm where Elaine had been. He could smell the lavender stuff she used in the bath. He closed his eyes, breathed deep. He opened them, saw the date at the top ae the day's paper. It wis his 26th birthday. He should go tell her. He reached fir his baccy. ■

Marguerite D'Écosse

Hugh McMillan

Margaret Stewart
wrote poetry every evening.
She was loved for it by a few
but to most of the courtiers
she was the butt of jokes:

they laughed at her clothes,
her diet, her manners,
but most of all her desire
to write: as if a teenager
from the savage north could

have noble fancies and
the skill and wit to pen them.
Her husband hated her,
married her for her dowry
of Scottish troops,

tore her verses up when she
died. He was a successful King:
in other words a brutal thug
with libraries of books
written about him,

but she is remembered
in the vague and beautiful
ways that matter to some,
in scraps and stories
that might be dreams.

They say the master writer
Alain Chartier,
France's finest, had a vision
where she graced him
with a poet's kiss.

The New Old Age

Hugh McMillan

I am looking at the contents
of my coat pocket:
a train ticket, a pencil
plucked from the playground,
a receipt for a steak pie

and large glass
of Sauvignon blanc,
and I think I should put
these on a shelf as symbols
of a lost and easy age

of innocence.
It is enough almost
to make you weep
this sacred detritus,
rubbish pregnant now

with such meaning.
When we emerge
blinking into the future
with our long hair,
our chipped teeth,

our bandaged specs,
will those months
of self-help, yoga,
soda bread and scrabble
swell our brains

to the size of a new world?
Will poetry have seen us through?
I think, jealous
of their high-fiving freedom
through our long days

of want and envy,
we will swarm out to find a rook
to strangle while nature
scatters with a collective sigh
of here's this lot on the piss again.

Public Safety Advice oan the Brent-New Pestilence o 1348

Hugh McMillan

If ye hae been fair awa
or hae met onyane traivellin
frae a kennt hot-spot
ie Asia Minor, the Crimea,
Genoa not Venice
an ye begin tae shaw
the followin signs:

Myld filever,
spreckle-lik spots,
pechin ,
byles in the oxters

an if it isnae possible locally
tae thraw a jew
or a humphy-backit wummin
doon a well, dinnae fash -

adopt the following meesures:

buy or mak a mask wi a big beak
an bide cosy in yer hoose!
There is nae evidence
the disease spreids tae pets
sae dinnae fret aboot yer rottans ,
looses, golachs, sclaturs
or mites they will be jist braw.

What if there was a visitor to Tong in Lewis in 1929?

Hugh McMillan

Mary MacLeod was walking down the beaten track. Ahead of her Broadbay glistened in the sheen of cold sunlight. The post had arrived and she was looking forward to reading a letter from her sister who was living abroad. Mary dreamed of leaving this grey place with its mud and its hopelessness. She was a good-looking girl, just past her 17th birthday. There had to be somewhere else and someone else. Happiness and out of a wind that cut through you.

A strange perturbation in the ditch, a sudden flare, sent a chicken running. Mary was surprised to see Angus Beag the itinerant grocer standing there: it was long past the time he should have been on the road. There he stood, with a strange sheen on him.

'Carson a tha thu cho neònach a choimhead, Aonghais Bhig?'
she asked, tremulously.
'Cha mhise Aonghas Beaghe' he responded, 'Is mise Hyperalloy.'
He was reaching in his sack. There was a strange pulse of light.
"Chan e cucumber Aonghais Bhig" she said, the words fading on her lips.

Uisgeachan Cealgaireach

Deborah Moffatt

Bhàsaich e anns an fhàsach Chanadach
's dh'fhàgadh a chorp air an talamh reòite
ri taobh Loch Marjorie, uisgeachan cealgaireach
an locha a' deàrrsadh mar airgead-beò, canù cuirte
os cionn a' mharbhain gus nach itheadh
na madaidhean-allaidh e.

Nuair a ràinig an naidheachd an taigh
dh'fhalbh a' bhanntrach òg dhan bhaile,
feuch an teicheadh i o uaigneas a' ghlinne,
a fàinne-phòsta òir a' lasachadh air a meòir,
an daoimean prìseil a' gliostradh gu fann
le deàlradh fuadain faoin.

Bha an naidheachd air sgaoileadh
air feadh a' bhaile, 's bha a càirdean còir
a' gabhail truais mhòr rithe, deòir nan sùilean,
ach chan fhaca i anns gach sùil ach faileas locha
iomallach dorcha,'s uisgeachan cealgaireach
a h-uaigneis fhèin.

Famhan

Deborah Moffatt

Tràth san t-Samhradh
nochd na dùcain anns a' ghàrradh,
torranan beaga de thalamh dubh
nan sreath anns an fheur,

na famhan rin saothair
a' treabhadh shlighean ùra
falaichte nan tunailean dorcha,
a' meudachadh an ranntair aca,

sinne nar tàmh,
glaiste nar taighean,
fad na làithean falamh,
a' saothradh gun toradh,

gar dalladh fhèin
le doilleireachd an eu-dòchais,
na famhan a' sìor tholladh fodhainn.
le gliceas an doille.

Peallag

Eòghan Stiùbhart

Shìos ris an abhainn
chunnaic mi an-dè i
Peallag bhochd
le leadan salach
coltas a' phris air
ceann gun chìreadh
's i gun mhothachadh
air steall an earraich
a' ruith seachad oirre
's i a' brunndail rithe fèin

Nan robh an sruth na sgàthan
cha dhèanadh i càil dheth
's coma leatha an saoghal
's coma leis an t-saoghal i
aonragan truagh
am meadhan a' bhaile
na daoine sìthe
cuide rinn fhathast
ach 's sinne nach eil
airson am faicinn.

**Bha Peallag na h-aonarag, ban-sìth a bhiodh a' fuireach leatha fhèin fad air falbh o dhuine, bha i aithnichte airson coltas robach, tana agus falt salach, troimh-a-chèile. Ged a bhiodh i ri lorg ri taobh lochan glè thric, bhathar ag ràdh nach biodh i uair sam bith a' coimhead air a faileas-aodainn san uisge.*

Cèilidhean Mòra

Eòghan Stiùbhart

Linne Shlèite aon mhadainn Chèitein
a' ghrian ùr aig deireadh bliadhna
iomadh earrach a chunna mi an sealladh
's mi ag èirigh às dèidh na cèilidh
samhail na h-oidhche roimhe nam cheann
na beanntan air fàire 's an impis falbh
a' siubhal na tìde ann an sìth na maidne
gach leòn slàn 's a' seòladh dhachaigh
gu fasgadh a thogadh aig an t-sabhal
a' chiad gheamhradh sin an glac an teangaidh
a chuir mi eòlas air blàths do bheòil
's gach sian a thàinig leats' on iar
ceò a dh'fhalaich Cnòideart, solas a las Mùideart
a h-uile là na ràith fa leth a' sìor-atharrachadh
o chràdh na ghaillean gu gràdh mar fhalaisg
agus dealachadh ceangailte balbh na bhun
mus tug mi dhut an litir a bha nam dhòrn
làn fhaclan o choille fhad às a dh'fhuasgail
na deòir a thuit mar uisge sa cheann an ear
's a thug blàthan samhraidh ar càirdeas beò

Àm-stòiridh

Eòghan Stiùbhart

Nuair a thig an sgeul gu crìch
na lidean deireannach a' teicheadh om bheul
mar sheinn nan eun aig laighe na grèine
's e mo rùn gun dèan thu cadal sèimh seunt'
làn sholas leugach 's bhruadaran mòra
a dh'fhàsas mar chraobhan le freumhan treun
's iad pailt le meuran 's duilleach a' spreadhadh
's geugan a' sìneadh chun nan reultan
nan ceudan a' nochdadh às d' inntinn
a tha mar iarmailt gun smeuradh
's nì thu ceum tron chruinne-chè ud
a' buain mheasan gan cur sna speuran
le sìl on sgeul mhòr bhuan nach tig gu crìch

The Seer

Alison Bell

Up the Cairn here, there is a strange corner of recollection, of vision, where the blown bleached grass throws back the early sun. I'm listening to the lark song high and dizzy above me and around me like I'm swimming in the sound of it and I see the man. Yes, the lost man, not in his real person you understand but it's him right enough. He treads with no lightness, no intention, with little heed for bog or burn or the gorse bushes tearing at his clothes and up to the knees in glaur. I can see the lost man through the hill… aye, like you'd see through mist. It's not easy for me, not sure at the first if it was a tree or a stone or just an old tired body with no sense of the world and how it is this while. The what or the why or the how we are to live with the thing that's about us in the air we breath, and dividing us from folk that love us. Think of a dog that's afraid and is running, running, without care for where, just moving, moving…the old body's down on his hands. Staggering up again now and wiping his face but how many more times will he manage that and keep going? No. I'm saying I can't tell you where he's heading, he doesn't know himself, how should I see that? Well, that's your lost man and if he gets to the falls before you reach him then he'll be finished with all of this. You'll need to shift yourselves. No, no. Ask me instead about birdsong, or the happiness of children.

Zen and the Art of Lady Bird

Loretta M Mulholland

The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection;

The water has no mind to receive their image.

(Zenin poem; date unknown)

Itō Tsurukichi unfolded the scraps of newspaper sent from London by his former employer, George Lewis, the successful English entomologist, to accompany the hasty note:

My Friend,

You may not be aware that Isabella Lucy Bird, described in our national newspapers as 'explorer, natural historian, writer and the first woman to be elected a Fellow of The Royal Geographical Society in London', died in Edinburgh on 7 October, at the age of 71. I know you spent several months travelling with Mrs Bishop, therefore I thought you might be interested in some of the obituaries that have appeared in newspapers across the country, as well as those in the London press, of which you may be aware. I have enclosed the following snippets, therefore, for your perusal.

I understand that you did not always see eye-to-eye with the lady in question, but such news is bound to sadden one, even simply by virtue of the connections that link our lives to people in the oddest of ways.

Ever your loyal and faithful friend,
George L

Itō settled into the futon in his sleeping area to read further. A cup of warm sake sat by the dim light of the andon. Would this be used for commiseration or celebration? Not the latter. No. This little English lady had made quite an impact on his life, though in truth, he often felt it was partly the other way round. He skimmed the first cutting:

Mrs Isabella Bishop, the well-known traveller and author, has died in Edinburgh. The eldest daughter of the Rev. Edward Bird, rector of Tattenhall, Cheshire, she was born on October 15, 1832, at Boroughbridge Hall, in Yorkshire.[1] *… Miss Bird was obliged to become a traveller by continued ill-health. For some time she suffered terribly from spinal disease – indeed, the variety and extent of her travels are extra-ordinary in view of the ailments from which she suffered at various times. She was ordered sea voyages to the Mediterranean, America, Australia, and New Zealand. She returned by way of the Sandwich Islands, where she spent some months … For the purposes of her travels she made herself acquainted with minor surgery, and sometimes found this sort of first-aid knowledge invaluable …*

At the edge of this torn-out extract, his friend had scrolled the source in Indian ink: *The Northampton Mercury*, 14th October 1904.

It was true that Miss Bird had some medical knowledge, even prior to her formal training as a nurse. Itō had witnessed at first hand, on his travels with Miss Isabella, her mixtures and potions that had helped ailing village folk. These often resulted in presents of a simple and honest nature, and a respect between the lady traveller and the peasants she encountered. He folded the scrap up, placed it back in the envelope, and began to read the next:

The London newspapers have not done justice to the wonderful career of Miss Isabella Bird (Mrs J. L. Bishop), who has just died in Edinburgh. She was one of the pluckiest travellers of either sex that the country has ever known, and her books were peculiarly rich in fresh, direct observation. They began with letters to her sister. Miss Bird started her travels at the age of twenty-two, and, with the exception of seven years, continued them until a year since, when, on reaching the age of seventy-one she had to retire to Edinburgh on account of ill-health … But it was in regard to the East that she was specially an authority … Round and about, she spent quite a number of years in Russia and Japan …

Once more, Lewis had scribbled the source: *Gloucester Citizen, 12 October 1904*

Itō smiled to himself … round and about … a number of years in Japan …

He repeated the folding process, inserted the second newspaper extract into the envelope, and began the next entry in his journal.

…

Tokiyo, 12th November, 1904

So, the honourable lady who started me off on my life's journey is with us no longer. Miss Isabella Bird is revered here in Japan but she could never have written her book on this country without my considerable skills in translation. I was the one who gave her the insight into our people. Even though she appeared to despise me, she was fully aware that she needed me, as I needed her, to launch my career, as aide to foreign travellers. Miss Bird did give me credit in the end, though I am not often painted in a good light in her books. She never once referred to me by my full name.

Miss Isabella did not know this, but I have kept copies of her books on our travels through the 'Unbeaten Tracks of Japan'. I've read her accounts in parts - but only parts - as her language is so dense and difficult to decipher. I have marked many passages of interest to me, with little pieces of paper that stick out and make the pages bulge. Tonight, for the first time in decades, I consult her volumes once more.

I have marked her description of me – 'the creature who appeared', early on in her journey:

He is only eighteen, but this is equivalent to twenty-three or twenty-four with us, and only 4 feet 10 inches in height, but, though bandy-legged, is well proportioned and strong looking. He has a round and singularly plain face, good teeth, much elongated eyes, and the heavy droop of his eyelids almost caricatures the usual Japanese peculiarity. He is the most stupid-looking Japanese that I have ever seen, but, from a rapid, furtive glance in his eyes now and then, I think that the stolidity is partly assumed.

My plain face is, unlike her description of my fellow countrymen, neither 'ugly' nor a 'ghastly-yellow'. Although she calls me 'stupid-looking', she saw past my cautious expression, which I employed to prevent too much questioning over my previous contract with the Botanist, Mr Maries. I had left him rather hastily, in preference to the prospect of this appointment … but that is another story, and not one to be concerned with at this juncture! Miss Bird did record some recognition of my intelligence, including, of course, my proficiency in the English Language:

I suspected and disliked the boy. However, he understood my English and I his, and being very anxious to begin my travels, I engaged him … He seems as sharp or "smart" as can be, and has already arranged the first three days of my journey. His name is Ito, and you will doubtless hear much more of him, as he will be my good or evil genius for the next three months.

So wrote my new employer to her sister, Henrietta, after she had made my acquaintance and resigned herself to the fact that she had a 'veritable "old man of the sea" on her shoulders'. But when she was starting out on the 'unbeaten tracks', in her first evening alone in the midst of 'this crowded Asian life,' she found it strange; almost 'fearful' – I was her 'sole reliance'. She reflected that I might prove to be a 'broken reed', and confessed that she often wished to give up the project, on account of her nervousness and cowardice! But she pressed ahead, assured by her European friends, that she would be perfectly safe amongst the 'savages' of the north.

I have, as a matter of fact, very fine eyes, as delicate as the petals of a lotus, and I take great care with my appearance - I must! My job and status as the most highly skilled interpreter in Japanese travel demands that I should appear as honourable and respectable as a foreign diplomat.

For all her acute observations, I believe that Miss Bird did not appreciate what she was seeing, as she experienced the way of Zen. I had not fully studied Bashō then, but I was familiar with Shinto beliefs and educated in the Chinese classics - before the Meiji Restoration began to dilute the connections between the two religions. There was much for Miss Bird to learn, and I was most honoured to be her first teacher!

…

The Japan that Miss Isabella entered in 1878 was very different to our country today. Miss Isabella was fully aware of the political aspects of the Early Meiji Period but these were not her focus when she first approached Yokohama, as she wrote, from the Oriental Hotel in 1878:

Eighteen days of unintermitted rolling over "desolate rainy seas" brought the 'City of Tokio' early yesterday morning to Cape King, and by noon we were steaming up the Gulf of Yedo, quite near the shore. The day was soft and grey with a little faint blue sky … there were no startling surprises either of colour or form. Broken wooded ridges, deeply cleft, rise from the water's edge, grey, deep-roofed villages cluster about the mouths of the ravines, and terraces of rice cultivation, bright with the greenness of English lawns, run up to a great height among dark masses of upland forest. The populousness of the coast is very impressive, and the gulf everywhere was equally peopled with fishing-boats, of which we passed, not only hundreds, but thousands in five hours.

Miss Bird appeared to be a little underwhelmed by the lack of vibrant hues in the Japanese landscape but I believe she was sensing that she was entering into a cloak of calm, despite the 'populousness' of the waters. She continues:

The coast and sea were pale and the boats were pale too, their hulls being unpainted wood, and their sails pure white duck. Now and then a high-sterned junk drifted by like

Isabella Bird

a phantom galley, then we slackened speed to avoid exterminating a fleet of triangular-looking fishing-boats with white square sails, and so on through the grayness and dumbness hour after hour.

At this point in her travels, our lady was still open to a little wonderment, before endearing herself to the 'doll-like manikins' of my nation - as she liked to describe us – and supposedly immersing herself in our culture. The first glimpse of our sacred mountain stole her, as it does us all:

For long I looked in vain for Fujisan, and failed to see it, though I heard ecstasies all over the deck, till, accidently looking heavenwards instead of earthwards, I saw far above any possibility of height, as one would have thought, a huge, truncated cone of pure snow, 13,080 feet above the sea, from which it sweeps upwards in a glorious curve, very wan, against a very pale blue sky, with its base and the intervening country veiled in a pale grey mist. It was a wonderful vision, and shortly, as a vision, vanished.

Miss Bird was very taken by our mountain, and no amount of grey could disguise her joy:

… I never saw a mountain rise in such lonely majesty, with nothing near or far to detract from its height and grandeur. No wonder that it is a sacred mountain, and so dear to the Japanese that their art is never weary of representing it.

I shall return to this loneliness and its relationship to our art at a later point. But now, I must confine my last paragraphs to Miss Bird's remarkable insight into how my people viewed the clumsiness of westerners, and how she recognised the bulldozing blatancy of her own kind, for my sake is calling me:

It was nearly fifty miles off when we first saw it.

The air and water were alike motionless, the mist was still and pale, grey clouds lay restfully on a bluish sky, the reflections of the white sails of the fishing boats scarcely quivered; it was all so pale, wan and ghastly, that the turbulence of crumpled foam, which we left behind us, and our noisy, throbbing progress, seemed a boisterous intrusion upon sleeping Asia.

As Mount Fuji faded into the mist, the 'City of Tokio' glided past the nods to western expansion; Reception Bay, Perry Island, Webster Island, Cape Saratoga and Mississippi Bay. A red lightship added an accent of colour to the peaceful picture, unveiling a clear message as the ship sailed closer, with the words, 'Treaty Point' painted in large letters:

Outside of this no foreign vessel may anchor.

…

Irimichi, Nikko, June 23rd

…the people are very kindly, though almost too still …'

This was my employer's first glimpse of the ways of a respectable Japanese family. Nikko, lying to the north of Tokiyo, was the centre of the Shinto religion and the Shogun Empire. With the Meiji Restoration, the samurai were outlawed and Buddhism frowned upon. Temples and shrines were abandoned and it was not unknown for samurai warriors to be hanged from trees on the outskirts of the city. Buddhism was separated from the Shinto religion, but we Japanese have a way of living that cannot be severed from our centuries old customs.

Miss Isabella thought our ways beneath her but when she visited the school at Nikko, she thought it was:

… too much Europeanised … I thought it and the children looked very uncomfortable sitting on high backs in front of desks instead of squatting, native fashion.[2]

I have marked these passages because her interpretation of things was not always how I had translated them to her. Take, for example, this lesson:

The children recited a verse of poetry which I understood contained the whole of the simple syllabary. It has been translated thus:

Colour and perfume vanish away.
What can be lasting in this world?
Today disappears in the abyss of nothingness;
It is but the passing image of a dream, and
causes only a slight trouble.

Our lady goes on to say that this is:

The echo of the wearied sensualist's cry, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,' and indicates the singular Oriental distaste for life, but (it is) a dismal ditty for young children to learn.

Simple syllabary? Ditty? This is not a statement from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament! The pointlessness of human activity is not the theme of this poem. Nor does it mean that God's laws must be kept, whether keeping them results in happiness or sorrow. Even less is it about the 'Oriental distaste for life!'

…

Lady Bird's chosen verse incorporates one of the four classic forms of Japanese haiku, reflecting the moment; a nostalgic sense of sadness, connected with autumn and the vanishing away of the world. It is called aware. The form and 'simple syllabary' are lost in this translation.

I remind myself of the four modes of Zen or haiku poetry:

sabi, meaning solitary or quiet
wabi, a feeling expressed when sadness overcomes you, catching a sense of the way things are - or the 'suchness' of things - through something familiar
aware - and
yugen - a sudden perception of something mysterious and strange, hinting at an unknown, never to be discovered.

It is my belief that you were experiencing the 'suchness' of things, as you travelled north, through the unbeaten tracks of Japan. You revelled in the sabi and soaked in the quiet life of the mountains and plants. Within you, there was a deep impression of wabi, relieved only by the 'suchness' of the landscape and the kindness of people you met. For wherever you travelled, however foul the weather and filthy the accommodation, you were the recipient of the finest hospitality that humans could encounter, and you were fully aware of it. Perhaps this was your yugen and the transformation that your visit to Japan brought within you.

Sobata, one of the greatest writers of the Sung dynasty, wrote:

Misty rain on Mount Lu,
And waves surging in Che Kiang;
When you have not been there,
Many a regret you have;
But once there and homeward you wend,
How matter-of-fact things look!
Misty rain on Mount Lu,
And waves surging in Che Kiang.
Like it or not, Miss Isabella Bird, your first journey here changed you. You knew it too, which is why you came back East, again and again.

…

I have rewritten that little 'ditty', as three separate haikus, just for you, Miss Bird. Call it my late eulogy, if you please:

Colour and perfume
Vanish away; what can be
Lasting in this world?

Nothing is permanent. No need to push that point now.

Today disappears
In abyss of nothingness
A passing image

Were you aware – even on your first visit – of this Zen sense of being 'no-one'?

Vision of a dream
That causes only a slight
Feeling of trouble

I pray to Buddha, and to your God too, that you 'vanished away', with 'only a slight feeling of trouble.' You were quite a special lady, Miss Isabella Bird, and if there is such a thing as a soul, I pray for yours.

I believe you rest here in Japan, as well as in your beloved Highlands and the little Isle of Mull that you talked of so much. I believe you exist in the mountains and rivers of the world, and in the raincloudsand the evening sunsets. You were a brave lady, and though you never directly praised me, I believe you thought I served you well. In my eyes, you were living by Zen, in the way you wrote, when you focused on the landscape, observing sounds and smells, describing what you saw, tasted and felt – all experienced in the moment, without thought or analysis. Of course, when you did stop to reflect, you were often less than complimentary. Your honesty was, I suppose, your greatest gift to the world. The yang in your yin. ■

Footnotes:

1 This is, in fact erroneous: Isabella was born in 1831

2 'It' here, refers to the teacher!

Woodcut
Joanna Wright

Sometimes
we're like a Hiroshige woodcut,
where snow
calligraphies an inky sky
and roofs and road
are quieted by white.
Only shadowed footprints
show our merging.
We meet, we talk,
our words are brittled
by the cold

and we pass on, our private
silences draped heavy
on our shoulders
like the heft of snow
on the rose-pink robe
of the hunched figure
heading one way,
on the paper parasol
and blue jacket
hugged close by the figure
heading the other.

a time of grace
Juliet Antill

when I began
I had no map in my mind
I was a child
with a child's eye
the country was all country
rivers streams hills bogs
nothing cordoned it
the sun pitched about like a drunk
I knew no destination
no barrier of ocean
only the ecstasy of falling

the world was mapped
over time
guarded with cardinal points
as a bramble guards its fruit with thorns
the world turned tenement and ginnel
turned five bar gate
turned straight paved road
it was vertigo
the sea gathering itself beneath me
a tidal almanac fluttered in my hand
a mockery of flight

time slipped its mooring
a pin grew broad and wide
as an oak
capillaries of sap
poked holes in the sky
planets scattered like pool balls
the moon was a witch
sowing self-heal in my garden
sending the wind
to play the long grass
the long grass bowing

Truck-stop, Umbria
Juliet Antill

The best *caffè* was the first,
taken at a roadside bar.
We sat inside, but wished we'd sat
with the smell of diesel
and the growl of passing trucks.
A hilltop village smouldered beyond the forecourt.
The first *caffè* was like pulling on a cigarette –
bitter and terse.
Language was made of bees.
A globe of light was in my cup.

Lemon Groves, Murcia
Jon Miller

In the red dawn small birds rise
from the lemon groves
with morning in their beaks.

Its scent rises on the rising light,
prickles the noses of farm dogs
setting them to barking.

It startles the throats of cockerels.
Goats hang out their tongues
to sweeten their breath.

The housewife dreams its scent
on her pillow, raises her hands
to rinse them in air.

A campesino glides along,
his bicycle headlamp picking out
constellations among the branches.

The schoolgirl chatters to it
hanging about her shoulders,
whispering its tang of womanhood.

In the distant cities villagers
are stopped in the street to have
their lemon-scented hair inhaled.

And at all the tables on that morning of small birds rising
the yellow bells are held above plates
and wrung for their bitter twist

as high above, the aviator finds his goggles awash
and Icarus falls, wings lemon-heavy,
into the grove of a million tiny suns.

Copenhagen Bicycles
Jon Miller

They glide swiftly along the lanes,
upright, as if in armchairs,
scarved and hooded, creatures of wind,
a wheeling flock clustering at junctions,
pausing at traffic lights cold-cheeked,
breathing lightly, hatless, faces glowing
as the wind winnows leaves from the trees,
scattering them before their wheels,
a wind bringing strange birds and, later, snow,
as the North slips down from its high latitudes
and we tilt away from the sun
and they ride on face first into winter dark,
the sky closing its slow eye till Spring.

Over the Hill
Jon Miller

I will fade to somewhere just beyond your inkling
to the house below the shore road
where leaning on fences is all the philosophy a man needs.

Leave laces untied. Learn an instrument.
Or not. Gather reflections in a sea bucket
and hold a rope for the worst fisherman in the west.

I will raise a slow finger in passing places,
restore dormice and stunned bees to life
as a murmuration dizzies the tree line.

Cup a warm egg, sip tea with the postman
while the sleeping hound twitches in the hall.
I will leave my door open for deer to enter.

The wheel has been off the truck for three weeks
and I have not finished a single book.

Heavy Weather

Leonie Charlton

There's a poem agitating on the B road to Abriachan

I keep going back to where I was pulled up by a roe buck
colour of rust, and the dead hare where I let the car rest
danced on tarmac to Frazy Ford in close horse-breath air
there in the middle of a moor of bog myrtle and pine, heather in total bloom,
birch on shine, asphodel horizons of dirty gold

juniper bushes all canted away from me in a conspiracy

I picked the single black berry from an unready of green,
held it electric between forefinger and thumb stopped dancing.

The hare's hips were snapped and haunches laid flat,
blood pooling to puce. Her ears rimmed in moon-sharp memory,
front legs lifted, ready to run across the hopelessness of heather.

I pressed my thumb-nail hard into the juniper berry, breathed back to that day in May
in the Birkwoods of Braemar, when you invited me to sit with you, to rest the horses.
I'd ridden on without a word through in-between worlds of juniper and wood anemone.

At my feet, on the B road To Abriachan, whiskers moved, still looking for meaning
in the whickering wind. Tears lifting for you and me, for that crushed moment.
For this hare in two halves.

The Whirler Stone

Leonie Charlton

The photo grabbed me, gutted me -
in those known hands a rose-orange stone
weight of cabbage, shape of planet
owl's energy field, perfect spacer for self

marvel of river-spent love

gone with the photographer
who with stone-bent desire
moved the man to lift what had sat
on his garden fence for years
and pass it over, (I'd seen this and turned away).
Now her photo - the stone, in his hands -
on my phone, and I can't sleep

I'd wanted the stone, not to take away
not for me to own, just to be there
almost unchanging, always on the fence.
I'd wanted to see how it settled into the wood
a little more intimately each year.
I'd wanted it to be there all for itself
for the place too, for the man and the raggedy roses

but mostly for me, to be steadfastly there, for me.

The heft of its absence presses my kidneys
while he, giver, lets things pass through -
rivers and unwritten words
stones found, held, handed on
not his to keep nor his to give away
a stone pausing in hands that grasp at nothing,
that open for passers through like salmon alevin, baby frogs
'a half and a pony', a shed-load of dreams.

His is a different hold to mine
I want it, the way it allows to time,
loosens feldspar crystals,
unravels me in possibility.

John the fisherman

Mark Vernon Thomas

John was a fisherman…and now I guess you think you know the way the story goes: how he loved the sea, and a running springtide, how he sailed with storms and seals and gulls, how he lived his life in wild places, amongst the elemental beings of the world. It could be. There may have been icebergs. Could have been typhoons. Or bright city lights, and tropical ports, and wild, wild women; it's possible. He could have been drowned saving someone he loved. Or saved by no-one he knew. Or perhaps by an enemy who turned out to be his long-lost brother. Maybe he couldn't swim at all - many fishermen can't, why delay the inevitable, they say. Maybe he found a golden ring in the belly of a fish, or a magic lamp – but no: that would make him just the moral of a fabulous fisherman's tale, and not a fisherman at all. And John was a fisherman. That much I know.
Perhaps he liked to drink. Many men do. Perhaps he never married. Many men don't. Perhaps he had an aversion to dogs, never smoked, broke his leg as a child, kept a canary in a cage (the canary was called Blue.) Perhaps he was fished from the sea himself, learned to ski, had a science degree, perhaps he was afraid of ghosts, loved poetry, never voted... all I know is that John was a fisherman. That's enough for me. If I said more, then this would be all about me, not John, and I'm not a fisherman. John was the fisherman, not me.

Haibun for the end of Lockdown

Simon Berry

When we first viewed and visited I never thought to take a look out this bathroom window. From the living room I remember we had admired that unexpected stand of birch across the road. The contrast with the traffic was striking.

Birch in a breeze
Unseen through many windscreens
Leafy waterfalls

In rain the birch seemed almost drab until the sun came through and caught the light. Now as owners of the house we thought we were already blessed enough with that view. Then one day frustrated by frosted glass I flung the bathroom window open.

Rain falls in sunshine
No breeze to stir the birch
See leaves turn sequins

Profiting from prevailing winds and daring the town's traffic, a seedling must have crossed and sprouted directly below this window. Now as the window swings inward in the breeze, washing me in exterior scents from the tree, I'm level with its canopy of rampant growth. No longer is it an agreeably distant landscape.

Scents sharp as flint
Tree at the open window
Whispering crescendos

Plague Clothes, macCloud Falls and the wider work of Robert Alan Jamieson.

Simon Wilson Hall on RAJ's recent work, Shetland background and national importance

Plague Clothes – this latest collection of lyrics from poet and novelist Robert Alan Jamieson – is a book with a remarkable genesis.

In March of this year, as the first wave of COVID-19 swept the world and society ground to its lockdown halt, Jamieson fell ill with what now seems almost certain to have been a case of the virus. The illness was bad, and the poet's recovery slow.

But, as his strength began to return, he did what he must and began to type-up his daily reflections. These were not, I should add, reflections on his temporary personal frailty, but rather reflections on the psychological processes of lockdown, on the rare moments of human joy and connectivity therein, and on the subhuman, venal political culture which better enabled the virus to carry out its deidlie wark.

The pieces began as simple Facebook status updates, albeit with characteristic Jamieson wit and a lyrical edge.

Within the space of a few days, they were emerging whole, and daily, in a quite remarkable series of reassuring and deeply cathartic COVID-19 documentary poems. As regular as the daily press briefings from the First Minister and the National Clinical Director, the lyrics became an alternative soundtrack to Jamieson's Facebook followers' lockdown.

Collection published by Taproot Press (2020)

Reading the untitled first poem of the collection by the glare of a small screen in my kitchen on one of the dark, dark evenings of the early lockdown, I was struck by its mysterious affirmative power:

> We lost us for a while.
>
> Until we were ill
> We didn't know how sick our world was.
>
> Until all was silent
> We didn't know how noise polluted.
>
> Until the hospitals were full
> We didn't know how brave the staff were.
>
> Until the animals came to town
> we thought them dead, or they'd deserted us.
>
> Until we saw nobody
> We didn't know the ones we'd miss.
>
> Some we'll miss forever.

A gentle incantation and a secular prayer, the poem seemed to distil everything that had appeared before us as we 'doomscrolled' the lockdown media. In its strength and simplicity, this was nothing less than a perfect lyric. And so, the tone was set for a sequence of quite remarkable poems that chart possibly the strangest experience of all of our lives so far and simultaneously succeed in offering some very welcome human comfort.

The poems divide into three categories. There are quiet, reflective pieces; there are poems which are really very funny; and there are others which are unapologetically aggressive and confrontational in their criticism of Johnson and Trump's handling - if it can be described as 'handling' - of the COVID crisis. From May 10th, the poem 'I call it what it is, a culling' belongs in the third category:

> I call it now what it is, a culling
>
> A culling of the old.
> A culling of the sick.
> A culling of the poor.
>
> a culling of the weak.
>
> I saw no change of heart,
> just camouflage and bluster
> over insincerity, personal
> drama to distract.
>
> Aim stated: immunity.
>
> You heard it too.

This final line could be a play on the homophony of 'heard' and 'herd', and while 'culling' is undoubtedly hard to read, it is not an unreasonable choice of term; we're still wondering whether or not 'herd immunity' has been the UK Government policy throughout the pandemic.

Three days later, by May 13th, we can be in no doubt that the post-COVID poet is getting his mojo back. He returns to the same theme of the previous piece, this time addressing himself directly to Johnson:

> But now, now that I'm a Lert and fully functional,
> I have no option but to ask the honourable member
> For Uxbridge
>
> FFS,
> WTF,
> WTAF
>
> d'ye think yer daein,
>
> yaprickya?
>
> WTAF,
> FFS?
>
> W. T. A. F.

This could be comical if it wasn't so deadly serious. The poetry is reminiscent of the anger of Tom Leonard, bringing language and class into focus once again and reminding us of the chasm of apartheid extant within the British system, stressing how this division has affected and worsened the course of the pandemic. Reading these poems again just six months on, it is hard to believe that these events happened so recently, and the poems serve as a record and a reminder lest we should forget the way things have been during these last few months.

There is a light interlude in the middle of the book. Part of Jamieson's recovery process (and part of his creative process) was to walk the river path from his home in the north of Edinburgh down to the Forth at Cramond. The walking and observing provide him with a number of Zen-like moments of reflection and calm as he contemplates the swans, the ducks, the trees. But there have nevertheless clearly been times when inconsiderate cyclists have disturbed the recovering poet's inner peace, as evidenced by a series of five hilarious satires entitled 'Know Your Cyclists'. In these, his wit is not unlike that of one of Robert Garioch's endearingly crabbit poetic personae.

Another of the many highlights of the collection, and a quieter, reflective poem, is 'I hear 'Take Peace'', which refers to a phrase used in the poet's Shetland family when he was a boy:

> I hear their voices in my head now,
> Saying, 'Boy, tak paes, sit still.'
> It was wisdom
>
> I didn't appreciate then.
> Now I get it
>
> I do.

This therapeutic memorialising of the language and wisdom of old Shetland goes back to the poet's childhood in the west mainland during the sixties.

The Jamiesons are an illustrious Shetland family with a long lineage, and this brings me to a final quirky footnote relating to this book. During lockdown, the poet's son Patrick Jamieson and his partner Daniela Silva realised their ambition of establishing a new publishing venture, the Taproot Press, with the aim of promoting new, outward-reaching Scottish and international literature. So, *Plague Clothes* has emerged extraordinarily quickly and with great vigour, and it is indeed a lovely looking book accompanied with a rich selection of black-and-white photographs of the north of Edinburgh during the lockdown. It is particularly satisfying to see new poetry appearing in hardback, and the fledgling publishers are to be congratulated on the quality of their

production. As well as being a superb collection of poetry, *Plague Clothes* sets a very high standard as a first product, and it seems likely that it will be the first of many ground-breaking and challenging productions from Taproot Press.

Jamieson senior has made a rich, colourful and unique contribution to Scottish Literature over a career that now spans some four decades. Although he has become an elder statesman of Scottish Literature, a familiar fixture of the Edinburgh literary scene and a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh, he also has impeccable Shetland credentials.

Born in Lerwick on Up Helly Aa 1958, he spent his childhood and part of his early adult life in Sandness in rural west Shetland, that land of lochs, rocks and heather where the black sea stacks assume their eerie and unkan shapes in the simmer dim. His was a typical Shetland upbringing. His father was a merchant and part-time sheep farmer, and he lived in a multigenerational family home where the matriarch was Jamieson's great-grandmother, who had been born in 1898. Through her, the young Jamieson had a link to the older past and the Shetland language of the nineteenth century. He has remarked that there were distinct differences between the language used by his great grandmother and that used by his grandmother, who found some of her mother's words archaic and odd.

The family were Methodists, but there was none of the stereotypical joylessness that is sometimes mistakenly ascribed to rural Scottish religious communities, and Jamieson remembers a childhood of happy family faith, although he is now agnostic, describing himself in Shetland terms as 'blide', a word containing a combination of connotations of contentment, satisfaction and gladness.

Although he has never been confined or restricted by his island background, Shetland has nevertheless provided him with a store of language, lore and inspiration. His first two novels used Shetland as their setting. *Soor Hearts* (1983) is a dark historical island saga of opportunist island capitalists and preachers, while the follow-up *Thin Wealth: A Novel from an Oil Decade* (1986) is one of only two Scottish books I'm aware of that deal with the advent of the oil age in the Northern Isles during the seventies (the other being David Sinclair's superb Orkney comedy about canny Flotta crofter *Willick o Pirliebraes* (1981)).

Thin Wealth takes a deep and serious look at the disruption to traditional ways of life and values that arrived first with the construction boom at Brae and Sullom Voe and which continued as locals found employment at the new oil terminal. The novel counterpoints the experiences of young Linda Watt, who takes some of the opportunities available to her generation, with those of the older crofters for whom the changes mean nothing but disruption and sadness at what seems to be the passing of an older way of life. Being young in the west of Shetland during the sixties and seventies, Jamieson was ideally placed to document these changes as they affected his community.

He developed a friendship with the Shetland novelist and lexicographer John J. Graham, who became a literary mentor to the younger writer. Graham published *The Shetland Dictionary* in 1979, and Shetlandic language was to become a necessary central feature of Jamieson's work, particularly in poetry. Jamieson and former Edinburgh Makar and west of Shetland compatriot Christine De Luca are now recognised as the two leading Shetland language poets of their generation.

Indigenous language has always been a key concern for Shetland poets (by comparison, Orkney Literature has been largely anglophone - think of Edwin Muir, George Mackay Brown or Eric Linklater) and Jamieson himself has published two splendid volumes of poetry in Shetlandic, *Shoormal* (1986) and *Nort Atlantik Drift* (2007), as well as a wide range of Shetlandic translations from European and other poetry.

I won't call it unkan, because that would be to assume a mainstream, southern point of view, but I will say that the language of these books is unapologetically confident, vibrant and authentic in a way that few modern writers in neighbouring Orkney have achieved so far (with the notable exceptions of Christina Costie and Robert Rendall). Jamieson has spoken of the importance of using a local voice for local poems and local material, and he describes the 'whittling out' of English as part of his process. He has certainly been influenced by the Glasgow work of Tom Leonard, and he speaks with relish of returning to first principles of orthography. It is interesting to note, notwithstanding Leonard's anti-nationalist linguistic insistence and his clear discomfort with regard to the concept of a 'Scots Language', that Glasgow poetry seems to have facilitated work four hundred miles further north in Shetland; surely there must be some commonality here?

Subsequent Jamieson novels moved into territory that is increasingly postmodern. *A Day at the Office* (1991) is a real-time, urban stream of consciousness departure from the more familiar rural material and has enjoyed enduring popularity and acclaim. *Da Happie Laand* (2010) returned and didn't return to Shetland, moving as it does between a contemporary island narrative and the story of a mythical Shetlandic South Seas colony. Most recently, and appearing again now in a new paperback edition from Luath Press, he has pursued these postcolonial and diaspora themes further in his most ambitious fiction to date, *macCloud Falls* (2017).

Protagonist and semi-reliable partial narrator Gilbert (or Gil, or Bert – for most of the characters in this deliberately unsettling story have multiple names and/or identities) is a sixty-something Edinburgh dealer in antiquarian books and a cancer survivor. Spurred by his recent brush with serious illness, he decides to make a bucket-list epic journey to the wilderness of British Columbia to research the life of his settler ancestor, the seemingly heroic Jimmy Lyle, and to make an important visit to the frontier home of a longstanding online client. Gilbert also has a third purpose in mind, as he hopes to write a history of Lyle's pioneer life. However, having read, bought and sold books all his life, Gilbert is tortured with misgivings about his own ability to make the leap to becoming an author.

Into this complicated mix appears Martina/Veronika/Sigourney, a second generation European Canadian with whom Gilbert strikes up an instant friendship on his flight from Calgary to Vancouver. (And immediately, the novel takes on a further, layered, autobiographical dimension, for we may have already spotted in the acknowledgements (can these even be trusted?) that '…thanks are due to Vancouver poet Miranda Pearson, who appeared as if by magic in the skies over Scotland in 2010 and … has remained magical ever since.')

The plot kick starts as Martina arrives at Gilbert's hotel somewhere high in the B.C. mountain territory. She has followed an instinctively sensed fear for his wellbeing, and, finding his laptop in the empty hotel room, she begins to read an imperfectly fictionalised account of their two days together in Vancouver before he took the road north along the banks of the Thompson River. So, there are shifting sands beneath the shifting sands, and we might as well accept that there will be multiple and conflicting 'truths' as the narrative progresses.

macCLoud Falls is at once a great American road-trip novel, a romantic quest, and an appealing mystery. Martina and her faithful sidekick, the ironically named Hero (that's right, there's no hero, just a heroic dog) accompany Gilbert on an epic journey round the province, encountering a rich cast of characters.

The indigenous people of the Nlaka'pamux Nation are the key to Gilbert's quest: his ancestor is reputed to have negotiated with the colonial powers on their behalf and is credited with having saved from oblivion a hoard of First Nations lore and knowledge. But there are truths within truths, and it is only with the help of a hostile First Nations guide that Gilbert learns it was in fact Lyle's wife Anko who bore the traditions. Lyle's lesser contribution was merely being in the right place at the right time, being the white man who scribed the indigenous woman's knowledge in English.

Comparisons with the recording of Scottish folklore and the possibility of the existence of Scottish 'natives' are never far away, mirrored in the comedy of misunderstanding of varieties of English that pervades between Gilbert and the white Canadians. The Scottish and First Nations experiences have become entwined beyond the point where it is possible to separate them, and Scots Canadians announce that they have indigenous ancestors while First Nations characters declare their Scottish credentials. The novel succeeds in its ambition to bridge nationalities and identities; this is neither Scottish nor is it Canadian literature, and it should also be given due consideration as a 21st century cultural artefact making a good deal more than mere passing comment on the culture and traditions of First Nations people in a part of the world that we might now hesitate to too quickly refer to as 'British Columbia'.

Ongoing, postcolonial concerns aside, this is also the tender, dubious love story of two emotionally and physically fragile cancer survivors cautiously circling one another at a distance. Near-death experiences come too frequently for comfort in this tale, from Gilbert's initial semi-suicidal ennui through to the later symbol of the 21st century frontier folk bagging up their treasured possessions and sinking them in a creek while a forest fire threatens to engulf everything they have built in their life - the constant fragility of our human situation is placed quite deliberately at the forefront of the narrative. For me, the sweetest, most tender moment of the story comes as the two frail survivors hold platonic hands and touch platonic toes in a cabin bed, contemplating the precious, delicate nature of life as represented by their friends' belongings deep in the creek.

Although by design *macCloud Falls* lacks heroics, it nevertheless charts a number of significant personal triumphs for the two leading characters, and the narrative pulls out a number of very pleasing surprises towards the end, one of which involves an antique book which may or may not be a first Kilmarnock Edition of Burns' *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*. But it is in Canada where the endearing old Edinburgh bookseller encounters a startling range of new truths about his own, his ancestors', and his nation's past. I'd go as far as to say that this is Jamieson's finest prose work to date, while *Plague Clothes* is his best volume of poetry so far.

Robert Alan Jamieson is still much too young to be described as a 'grand old man' of Scottish Literature. But the accumulation of his work, coupled with his ability to find such blistering form during periods of personal adversity, mean that he is assuming his position as one of the preeminent Scottish writers of our time. Readers await further lyrical grace and postmodern playfulness and, in the meantime, we wish him all the best for a full and speedy recovery. ■

Plague Clothes is available at £15 from Taproot Press and the 2020 paperback edition of macCloud Falls at £9.99 from Luath Press.

Til Gjogv

Robert Alan Jamieson

1

Hair-pinning round and up – precipitous,
round and up, and round – hire-car precarious,
round, that roadside parlous

becomes a mountain pass.

From here the distant steep is quite symmetrical –
layers of branch upon a conifer, trunk in floods,
shaped by singular, sculptural purpose.

Was this a giant building up of layers,
or a wearing down over thousands of years,
revealing different strata – or both?

So we descend, a long gentle valley,
erratic moor – one passing place, a single passer –
to hived turf roofs, hugging shallow earth,

their walls bright-painted, white, red, black and green,
where washed-out earth meets deepest blue.

2

The Gjáarfólk who live here,
they seem to call home 'Jeff',
this Gjogv. We call it 'gjo',
this cleft, a familiar geo-feature,
though here the need for shelter
requires some engineering,
to draw the craft, or cargo, up:
Faroe's only railway.
But there's more to Gjogv than
than a station for an ocean –
across the greengrey hillside,
fallen, mossy dykes
separate old fields
from common land
up on the mountain.
Below, overgrown ditches
commemorate
plots once worked,
rotated, I don't doubt,
much as ours were:
those hame-rigs –
ancient grounds
intimately known

⋆

Every little hollow, every
rock of substance, every pool
in the river stream, named
and full of story – myth;
every path kept trim
by hooves and feet;
those stones arranged
to make a ford where
no one crosses now.

Once, earth was turned,
the precious seed sown –
once, a meagre crop grew,
sheltered by immensity.

Each ear was *maet*,
each scything sway
a measured, careful step.
Each turn of the millwheel,
another winter morsel.
Each armful of hay,
most welcome in the byre.

⋆

I miss those fields, the folk who worked them, poor
and set upon by fate, bent and broken by sheer effort,
who smiled and took you in, a stranger to their fire,
who filled your plate with all they had to offer,
food wrested from salt water, nursed from earth –

Who asked you, eagerly, what news?

They were here, too, I know, those old ones.
I see their trace upon the hillside still.
The world beyond their valley, they knew little,
no more than stories sailors brought
.
but this land rutted by their forebears,
crossed by their paths,
it mapped a legend local.

Rebirth

for the Peruvian Princess Mummy, Elgin Museum, Morayshire

Helen Allison

Behind a curtain, mounted on a wooden pole
pushed up through her pelvis, she is foetal
under a glass dome, her sharp, little spine
rising to a sugar loaf skull, magic hair gone,
teenage body folded like brown paper
five hundred years old, her crumpled face
resting on her hands. Stolen from a cave in 1845,
she will never awaken to a new life, her soul
wandering in the forests, or falling down
a hole in the earth to the damned.

Holding open the curtain, a foldaway chair pulled up
beside her, they let me sit and sketch her face.
I tell her the forests here are deep and lovely,
that women cut their hair now to show their power,
how all my family's females are her five foot four,
and why my teenage daughter also bares her teeth.
I leave her for the cinema, to watch a star being born,
and while someone is deciding if she can return home,
I go back and tell her she is goddess of this museum,
that my daughters are my crops, and cannot fail.

A Day Like Any Other
Isla Dewar
Polygon (2020)
Review by Cynthia Rogerson

This is Isla Dewar's 19th novel. She's given us classics like *Women Talking Dirty* (made into a film starring Helena Bonham Carter) and *Keeping up with Magda*. Fans will not need any persuasion to read this new book – but even so, they are in for a treat, for *A Day Like Any Other* is not a book like any other. Technically a novel about life-long female friendship, the overall story is much wider, far deeper. It encompasses grand themes like guilt and atonement. Getting old and dying. Losing loved ones and never recovering. Poetry and the nature of writing. Social isolation and a sense of community. Being haunted by lost loved items (in George's case, an entire kitchen). And perhaps most resoundingly of all, the novel recognises that stupidity is universal and therefore worthy of forgiveness.

The two characters who deliver these weighty themes are themselves light. They make the book a joy to read and the medicine easy to swallow. Anna and George (another girl) meet as children and join forces against a classmate, Dorothy Pringle, who is as stuck up and prim as her name. But there is nothing noble in their conspiracy to torment Dorothy, and as old women they feel a need to make it up to her. Meanwhile they meet weekly for lunch, and we are given their back stories: George's teenage rebellion and love affair with an ill-fated handsome rogue, and Anna's ill-fated marriage with a man who has no interest in sex. Cleverly threaded through the stories and the lunches are their current lives: what their past has led them to embrace; or, in Anna's case, ultimately let go of.

It's an easy read, unsurprising from a writer with a long track record - but having read most of her previous books, I think this has something new. Warmth and honesty pour off the pages like a soft duvet thrown around the reader's shoulders, or indeed, like making two new best friends. But there is nothing remotely sentimental about this book. George and Anna do not live idyllic lives. They've had lives like any other, and they understand now that when death comes, it will probably be on a day like any other. We are all in the same boat and it leaks all our lives. Let's be kind to each other. ■

"Supp'd full with horrors"
Incunabulum
Carol McKay
The PotHole Press (2020)
Review by Valerie Beattie

Reading fiction about a pandemic whilst living in the midst of one may seem strange, like deliberately reliving a nightmare whilst the light of morning - nature's signifier of newness, possibility and growth - shines through the window. Yet the inherent prescient quality of a pandemic novel set just before Covid-19 can trigger an interest, capturing readers with the potential for initiating deeper understandings and insights into current personal, social and political crises with its imaginative construction.

Published almost at the end of March 2020, Carol McKay's *Incunabulum* seems to reflect current tentative steps and fragile hopes, but its pandemic is catastrophic, wiping out the vast majority of Britain's population. With minimum effort the aggressive sweep of infection creates "body piles: a spaghetti bolognese of limbs, heads and clothing", leading the narrator to admit to "roll[ing] up the windows and turn[ing] the other way". These abject sights in turn stimulate images of the Thames in London "running pus from all the bodies", even though none of the characters are likely to venture that far: the dread evoked by profound human, animal and landscape decay close by is effectively established early on, and serves to stifle any such thoughts.

The novel's descriptive energy successfully draws readers into a particular feature of crises - their ability to trigger "stun" moments. Our main eyes on the destruction are Alice's, a sixty-something local history librarian who, having lost consciousness for an undisclosed period of time, awakens in Glasgow to a sense that she's "slept for a million years". Through Alice we experience the emotional disquiet elicited by the transformation of the familiar and good into that-which-no-longer-is. While this is a short mental process, the novel highlights how residual elements - the essence of the object or person - linger in the deadened state as tangible reminders of what has been lost. Thus it is that, in the blink of an eye, crises activate feelings and sensations of horror in accordance with the mind's growing awareness of the alien scenes now overtaking the norm. And, with little time for establishing new maps, our sense of being can become suspended - or irrevocably, fundamentally, altered.

Upon realising she's one of very few survivors, Alice's instinct is to search for people she knows. When she discovers most of them are dead, she finds herself in the company of those she would normally avoid. And this is where the democratising momentum of *Incunabulum* resides as, with the city's capitalist institutions and modes of production inoperable, all goods are free, and normal status signifiers have no practical function. Symbolic of this transition is when Alice gazes at a twenty-pound note and some coins in her purse as one would museum artefacts from the Egyptian empire. But, despite the theoretical freedom afforded by the collapse of capitalism, hierarchies of social status are slow to weaken, and established paradigms of gender, family and sexuality often impact as seriously upon personal survival and growth as the pandemic itself.

Incunabulum's surgical illustration of the tenacity of capitalist ideologies is revealed through the detailed, crises-ridden interactions of Alice's group: these are shown to be as much a function of dogged habits, prejudices and behaviours as they are frantic, spontaneous reactions to sudden and significant change. The echoes of classist, sexist and racist paradigms that claim the empty space excavated by the pandemic are sometimes as tragic and profound as the impact of the disaster: it's as if (to borrow from Erasmus) in the land of the new, old habits and memories are king. But this is the way the novel highlights both the security of habits and their need to be changed. Alice articulates this when, taking her glasses off during a conversation about the tragedy of her lost baby, she says, "My life always looked better out of focus". This analogy reverberates throughout the novel, pointing to the need for a new focus, new ways of seeing. But *Incunabulum* is clear that only we can do this re-visioning; only we can look anew to the common humanity in all.

Incunabulum is also a form of book within a book. Early on, Alice takes a precious 16th-century incunabulum from her old library, one that chronicles a terrible tempest. In the final chapter, just before she puts the book in a safe, she explains to Basher, the Arabic-speaking asylum seeker, that it tells how "They overcome all the ordeals. […] They overcome all the obstacles and go on all the stronger". It is good to conclude with the capacity of the human race to come together with dignity and compassion in the context of radical change. ■

Quines: Poems in tribute to women of Scotland
Gerda Stevenson
Luath Press
Second edition (2020)
Review by Becs Boyd

Powerful writing, like Gerda Stevenson's *Quines*, not only creates a life beyond the page but alters the cast of light, modifying the sight, smell and taste of the present. Released in its second edition as lockdown loomed in early 2020 with the addition of five new poems, the collection charts a hidden history of over 70 extraordinary deceased women of Scotland (including a football team), from a 5000-year-old reconstructed girl's head in a Shetland museum to this century's remarkable quines.

Stevenson frames the collection as, 'not to highlight injustices…but rather to celebrate achievements'. Yet these intimate, deeply human voices turn tapsalteerie the traditional paean of 'derring do'. At one level the collection is surely a welcome and inspiring celebration of the extraordinary and too often undervalued contributions of women to the public spheres of science, political and social activism, leadership, medicine, law, engineering, the arts. One is left moved by frustration and admiration at skirmishes with the patriarchal dragon and impressed by the life-giving breath of Stevenson's poetry. As Hilary Mantel notes, 'as soon as we die we enter into fiction…only through art can you live [history] again'. But the true visceral impact lies in the way these individual 'voices' form a quiet collective, demanding a reimagining of the very edifices and structures of power today.

'Voice' forms the substrate for themes of identity and empowerment. Stevenson addresses the potential snag of maintaining each poem's distinct voice by removing herself from all but two. Instead she grants narrative voice to the subject or to a close person or object - a daughter, a Maggie's Centre, a sari, a ship, Death, even a constellation. Eighteen of the 62 poems are in Scots, with the remainder in English with the occasional Gaelic idiom. In the mouths of women like Jane Haining, Isabella McDuff, martyr Margaret Wilson and 'Hauf-hingit Maggie', the music of Scots is a resonant expression of both personality and heritage. Yet Stevenson maintains a broad notion of Scots identity. In the words of Countess McDuff:

> A skimmer o licht on the waves ablow.
> Scotland tae the North, England tae the Sooth.
> The samin mune abuin us aa, that hus nae care
> fur stane or nation, croon or king.

The English of the remaining two thirds reflects the collection's inclusivity, from Scots-born women, like Mary Slessor and Mary Somerville, who made their mark abroad, to those, like freed slave Eliza Junor and WWI doctor Elsie Inglis, who were of Scots heritage or made Scotland home. Had Stevenson had Gaelic, one senses that Sgàthath, Màiri Mhòr nan Òran or Màiri Anndra would have made expressive use of it.

Silence, as the unspoken as well as the quelled, becomes its own 'voice'. While patriarchal silencing seems omnipresent - in the form of the marriage bar ('another good woman consigned to the grave of wedlock'), male violence ('clure the hure') or societal presumption ('a person is defacto male') - there is also empowerment in the space between words. Lady Nairne, Helen MacFarlane and Margaret Wilson choose the voice of silence ('thae words wunna pass her stane-cauld lips, fur aa their soun wull gie her life'). Stevenson posits 'voice' not as empty noise but as intent - 'no false emotion, no romantic froth'. As Mary Slessor insists, 'My God wudnae demand I obey ony man's decree that wisnae true tae common sense'. While Stevenson's

writing demonstrates the power of language to reveal the hidden, these women remind a social media generation that they are essentially about action, not talk.

Part of the 'truth' of these voices seems to be the inextricable connection between the extraordinary and the deeply ordinary. Achievement is worn lightly. In 'Helen Crawfurd's Memoirs in Seven Chapters', the redoubtable suffragette, Red Clydesider and peace campaigner, now old, recalls her greatest moments on the international stage but now it's, 'Tea-time. Must get to the Co-op before it shuts'. Humour excavates the human, as when Mary Slessor chides St Paul on his imprecations to wifely submission, 'Na, na, Paul laddie! This will no do!' Elizabeth Meehan and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition deactivate sectarian hatred by simply dancing in its face. How, these voices demand, does one measure achievement in the public sphere against the 'ordinary' experiences of everyday womanhood – childbirth, miscarriage, love, loss, violence, self-sacrifice, ageing – that permeate each human story? This is the insight movingly embodied by Mary Queen of Scots, forced to abdicate the day after miscarrying twins: 'dinna waste yer tears on gien up a bittie gowd an glister, haud ma airm if it helps, but dinna, dinna greet fur this.' To be extraordinary, the poems suggest, is not a matter of status, statues or plaudits, but of a quality of spirit that knows the transformative power of the ordinary, transcending outward trappings.

For today's trauchled world of fake news, narcissism and persistent inequalities (notably fewer than a third of Luath Press authors are not white male), Stevenson's Quines sounds a clear note of both hope and warning. These are unique female voices ostensibly separated both from the reader and each other by such inconveniences as death, time, politics, religion, ethnicity and class. Yet their congregated presence assumes a mysterious autonomy, a female chorus, that speaks from the pages to challenge as well as to inspire. ■

Northern Alchemy
Christine De Luca
Patrician Press (2020)
Review by Anne MacLeod

In her introduction to *Northern Alchemy*, Christine De Luca lists the three choices open to a poet born with an indigenous mother tongue: a/ to write and publish only locally in that tongue; b/ to publish a tiny amount of indigenous work, weaving (and hiding) it in collections shaped in English; c/ to dilute the native voice in the interests of English clarity. De Luca could only contemplate the first of these. Anything else, she says, would have felt like selling out. She writes from the need 'to express thought and feeling using the full-bodied dialect' and proposes that 'language is a dialect with a literature.' She is grateful for the EU's encouragement for minorities and minority languages, and for a recent trend for publishing 'work with a feeling of liminality, periphery, of linguistic or cultural distinctiveness.' She traces the Norn that has evolved into current Shetlandic to the Danish-Norwegian history of the islands; and to the Old Scots with which Norn inexorably mingled.

De Luca grew up in Shetland, but left the islands to study and has long lived in Edinburgh. She was appointed Edinburgh Makar from 2014-2017. Both she and her work are celebrated across the world, anthologised and translated not only in Icelandic and Norwegian but also French and Italian.

In this retrospective and chronologically-ordered bilingual collection she offers her poems in proud Shetlandic matched with English versions she characterises as accurate translations framed for meaning and not poetic effect. She hopes that English speakers will 'sound out the poems phonetically' and that once spoken aloud, released into the air, the Shetlandic will feel 'less unfamiliar.' She is not afraid to challenge the reader.

Let me say from the outset that this work is a delight.

There are many ways in which you could approach the reading of it: aloud or silently; in Shetlandic alone; in Shetlandic followed by English; in English alone. You could intermingle the texts, comparing and contrasting, dipping in and out. You could embark on a straight-through reading, from beginning to end. But however you map your progress through *Northern Alchemy*, the music, the muscularity and poise of the language whether Shetlandic or English, the beauty and importance and life of each and every poem will linger.

The earliest poems tend to reflect the poet's deep-rooted Shetland experience and heritage: Gyaain ta da eela (Going evening sea-fishing) demonstrates perfectly the strength and beauty and exactitude of the Shetlandic voice.

'Abön da tide, laek a sel, wir boat wid lie;
we hed ta tize her doon,
bulderin an traan owre da ebb
but nyiff i da sea.'

In Wast wi da Valkyries, the language pins us exactly to the voe then spins us into an uncertain future:

'Dark burn ta voe, a rinkel
bi Nederdale, trist slow slockit
in a sea-baaled ayre…

….but fur wis
travaillers o da western edge
hit's a time to tak, ta pick owre
gaets wir taen, or no taen..'

De Luca's poems pitch us into the Shetland landscape but range widely beyond it, addressing not only the natural world, but life, joy, sadness, love, and time – always framed in and enhanced by the words she came from. She looks for, and achieves, a negotiated understanding, whether in the iconic cockle shell pattern so much Shetland knitting is famed for

' … therteen loops taen in
dan löt oot slowly on a oppenwark o gengs:
waves at shadit ta inky-blueness wi da wind.'
Da cockle shall

or in remembering, after her death, a much-loved aunt explaining the exact meaning of the word Yarbent:

"Weel, hit's a boo o wadder fae da sooth aest,
laid on herd an dry, no laek ta shift,
maybe roond voar, or efter hairst.'

Der a yarbent settled apön me far you göd:
sic a peerie wird, but nirse. A'll varg
i da face o him and keep i da mind's eye
as you wir wint tae, da bigger picture.'

The bigger picture. Life.

The poem as dance.

I have never seen it, but in the Faeroes there is a famous traditional dance performed to ballads chanted in the Faeroese language, which like Shetlandic derived from Old Norse. For centuries, this language was suppressed, not written down, but the ballads for the dance kept it alive.

Christine De Luca is not the only poet currently publishing in Shetlandic, but the poems in *Northern Alchemy* alone would set the heart dancing, keep any language vibrant.

And her English translations would do it for English too. ■

Facing the Persians
Ian A. Olson
Tellforth Publishing ISBN 978-0-9956419-0-7
Review by Anne MacLeod

Dr Ian Olson, who describes himself as long-retired, worked in medicine and education with a particular interest in handicap in children. His parallel career was in Scottish traditional culture, especially balladry and history. From the mid-eighties until the year 2000, he edited the *Aberdeen University Review*, and worked successfully to persuade Aberdeen University to create a Chair of Scottish Ethnology.

With such a sweeping, generous, background, it is no surprise that the poems are as diverse and as broad-based as the man. He is fascinated by Greek Mythology, by Celtic and Gaelic literature, by the Highland history and landscape. He is unafraid to write for children, and humour plays an important role in *Facing the Persians*, a collection which feels as if it has been many years in the building, each poem like a good malt – well-made, maturing under Highland skies. He is a man in sympathy with the landscape. In Strathconon [see page 23 of this issue. Ed.], he laments: 'When you took the autumn to London/And left me to burrow into winter/I said they could pack up Strathconon/Box up the birch and larch/Return the swans on Achonachie'…

In Just for you, he smiles Just for you/I'll make the sun to rise/And the birds to sing….Just for you/I'll open butterflies/Upon the flowers.. .. but warns 'Margaret, our forebear/Was a last witch/Tried in Scotland.. .. So even now/We'll keep these gifts/A secret'.

But he's not afraid, either, to laugh.. as in Poetry Reading.. 'Yes, My Titanic poem/at the poetry reading/Went down very well'.

As an editor, Ian Olson encouraged many young poets. His own work, distilled in this collection, deserves every respect. ■

Florilegium
Molly Vogel
Shearsman Books (2020)
Review by Lydia Harris

Molly Vogel's collection is a rhetorically inspired gathering of poetry, plants and a collection of extracts. The book is in two parts, the poems followed by an extensive glossary, each entry cross referenced to its base poem. The Glossary catalogues not only flowers but the thinking behind this meditation on flowers. The entries are in alphabetical order, so God, Honey and Rhetoric take their assigned places with Rose, Bluebell and Zinnia.

The mesmeric, questioning poems with their many biblical references, memories of childhood, reflections on time, human passion and God's relation to the universe, are expressed through the diverse languages of flowers. Students of nomenclature, like Linnaeus, are guests here, alongside Plato and Theresa of Lisieux, the Virgin Mary and Andrew Marvell: a Florilegium of scholars, poets and questing human souls. The poems observe, wonder, respond, mythologise, translate into prayers.

They are allusive; they come at their subjects slant as in 'Snow Bunting', where the bird is present obliquely in the delight of the human other, of the divine other. It is characteristically conversational in tone. This poem, as are many here, is part of an ongoing colloquy.

out on the bird-shore,
our rapine bodies sore
in their longings.

Vogel's writing is abstract and precise,

formal and free, sacred and profane. Human love is the energy which enlivens the collection. 'Isle of Skye' is a wonderfully bold and tender declaration of love.

> And then I remember: it is you
> I miss in the fetterless body
> of every living name…

'Una Ursula' is another flower in the bouquet gathered 'of other men's flowers'. A beautiful tribute addressed to poet Robinson Jeffers, it moves from his biography to his landscape. The lines flow through life and death to a yearning for the wild world and its rhythms. The movement of the thought replicated in the movement of the lines.

> …in your god-like
> Thirst for the delicate and the desolate.

'Definition' comes early in the Glossary. In it, Vogel discusses the conception of Hamilton Finlay's garden florilegium, Little Sparta. As his garden depends on 'juxtaposition and definition' so the poems and the essays of the glossary 'describe and dissolve accepted meanings'.

> …utopia has many interpretations…

Flowers and their classification are a language for the poet to probe. The collection identifies all life as sacred. The lover is present, as God is present. Vogel uses the language of flowers and the language of liturgy and Biblical texts to celebrate human love. The poems are underpinned by curiosity, analysis and prayer.

'Penny Wedding' with its half rhyme, elegant couplets and blending of the sea with the land, of flowers for healing with machair, of St Francis with Calafia, surprises and delights the reader with skeins of seaweed and fleck of coin, with movement and light. Here, where thinking, feeling and prayer are woven together in a celebration of human love.

> …scattered exchequers of manna.

'Interruption and Completion of a Thought' is a reverent, slow love poem. Vogel enriches the language with Japanese and with immersion in another culture. The poem is wonderfully distant and wonderfully sensuous.

The book is inhabited by other tongues. Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese and Spanish invite the reader into the vivid experience of unfamiliar words, scripts and mythologies. Through Ovid, we come to Proserpina and her transformations, analysed with particular attention to Rosetti's and Swinburne's response to this character. Proserpina links us to Mary and through her flower meadow, to Eden.

Vogel refers to many voices. In 'Ode to Neruda' the poem's humility is to be like Neruda. Vogel tracks the motions of the mind through the fingers of the poet. The epigraph which opens the whole collection includes Montaigne's assertion that 'he gathered the flowers of others'.

One spring of the book wells up in Eden, and this leads to a discussion of the flowers in 'Paradise Lost'. The poet exercises her own rhetoric to celebrate Milton's, as she explores the theology of the flower in the scheme of the Fall in the paradise garden.

From here, we are invited to read Dickinson in the light of Milton and Hamilton Finlay. Vogel's analysis of Dickinson's Eden is her way of understanding the sexuality and sensuality as celebrated in her poems.

'Honey' exemplifies Vogel's interest in theology and nomenclature. The glossary grows like a repository of potential poems, a store of ideas. The glossary invites us to read the poems in a new way. Having read them we reflect on their words afresh. 'Ikebana' offers us insight into the placing of the poem on the page, the poem as flower arrangement.

'Primrose' activates the poem it cross references, 'Child Dreaming in a Poet's House'. Like the primrose, the poem opens in less than a minute.

Consideration of Queen Anne's Lace leads the poet to Carlos Williams and an analysis of the techniques of his flower studies which form part of 'Sour Grapes'. Thus, we move from the common wayside summer flower to a study of the way poetic language works. The name, the whiteness and William's poem, inspire Vogel to a discussion of the flower and the female body. The role and nature of woman have been a preoccupation of the book.

The book concludes with the Zinnia, and Vogel's analysis of Zufosky's 1976 lines about Zinnias. It is a gesture of humility to close with another poet's lines on regeneration, of moving from z to a, to close her book. ■

User Stories
C D Boyland
Stewed Rhubarb, 2020
Disappearance/north sea poems/
Lesley Harrison
Shearsman Books, 2020
Letter to Rosie
Ross Wilson
Tapsalteerie, 2020
First Hare
Richie McCaffery
Mariscat Press, 2020
In Good Time
James McGonigal
Red Squirrel Press, 2020
Poetry review by Ian Stephen

Here are four new books of poetry, all single author collections and all published in this difficult year. The publishers deserve a cheer as much as the authors. All productions show a level of care and commitment to the cause of bringing their poets' work out to seek its audience. The appearance and feel of these books is going to help.

Within the limits of a wire-stitched, 24-page booklet with no spine, both typography and design emphasise the contemporary feel of the poems in 'User Stories'. These are mainly in lower case and often use unconventional signals for line-breaks and rhythm shifts. But other poems like 'The Puppet' use a more orthodox orthography and even a narrative with a sting in the tail. There's a literary nod to Pinocchio but older myths and the oral literature of Homer are also alluded to. 'The Sirens' is full of twists and ironies. Its arguments are convincing:

> '…heroes need swords, blood, war &
> death to make a world. we need only song.'

Maybe all readers of poetry have a shelf to place pamphlets or volumes which have the satisfying feel that make you return to them. Mine has Lesley Harrison's collaboration with Orkney artist Laura Drever, in its hand-sewn small form (Brae Editions 2011). Shearsman, publishers of this first full length collection, are also the publishers of poetry by the social anthropologist Tom Lowenstein. Lesley Harrison's close scrutiny of the culture of mariners who dare pass over the steep shallows of North Sea territories reminds me of Lowenstein's detailing of the mythology of the Arctic. The range of ambition in 'Disappearance' is immense. Characters range from surfers to trawlermen. Chosen forms can nod to Becket and Cage with

distinct words highlit by faded ones and all-but-lost ones. But they can also evoke the 20th century ballads of W H Auden:

'We'll weave the grasses into hours,
And when the hours are gone
I'll gather up my coat of earth
And take the road alone.'

'Lizzie Fairy' is another ballad, this time in a guid Scots tongue. From oral history to logs of past voyages, the source materials are wide in range. Sometimes the concept seems more crucial than crafted language, especially in the evocation of the Donald Crowhurst tragic voyage (the subject of many studies - most famously those of Tacita Dean). The lost voyaging artist, Bas Jan Ader, is referenced in a photo-based image. Navigating all these shifts of style, visual and poetic, takes a significant commitment from the reader. For now, this one is intrigued, but it's too early to say if this is a book that insists that you return to dive in deeper.

In stark contrast, 'Letters to Rosie' is a harmonic series of poems to welcome a daughter. This is fittingly served by a simple and no-fuss black type on white pages but stapled to a subtle 3 colour cover. There is variety in the chosen stanza form, (6 line to five, to four and to no breaks.) Half rhymes or more irregular chiming of sounds are used to strengthen what comes over as an intimate music. It all seems felt and artless. The poems are moving but they v def ain't artless. The verse is thus all the more effective when a wee jump is made:

'I didn't mention nights
drawing in. I kept it light
as the leaf lifted from
the gutter in your palm,
and you muttered au'um.'

Like most Mariscat publications, Richie McCaffery's 32-page collection is a handsome production which leaves you with a sense of experiencing something much greater than you might have thought possible in such a light package. As with Red Squirrel books, there's a quiet but completely appropriate aesthetic. In this case, the cover image illustrates the poem that provides the title but also catches the tone of the whole collection. The series of personal meditations and family studies build steadily until, too soon, you have reached the conclusion.

This could have taken the form of a 1000-page memoire but the amazing thing is that all these lives and a deeply personal revelation of a life lit by love emerge so naturally. There is no suggestion of jam-packing too much in. The art is in a straight-talking narration, close to matter-of-fact but judiciously highlit when it really counts. From the context, I could suss that a 'spelk' is a skelf in England's Northeast. The word 'peg' is as plain as it gets, but in the context of 'Falling' is perfect in a sustained series of narrations on 'free-fall' in the family. This brew is hopped but at least as dry as the districts ales tend to be:

'but he'd already laced his gene-pool

with a desire for descent.'

That on-run of the sentence over the line break is typical of the most restrained crafting throughout this collection. From the flex in the nib of a family fountain-pen to the thought of a beard likened to biro scratchings, this poet makes confident marks and turns phrases of accuracy and wisdom. I'm going to have to order another couple of copies for friends, because I know I'll want to return to these engaging sketches of lives, sad though they can be. Take this final couplet of McCaffery's portrait of a brickie with 'back and bladder gone':

'As he crumbles bit by bit, the young
put up walls all around him.'

James McGonigal is known and respected as an academic with, for example, his biography of Edwin Morgan (Sandstone Press) selected as the Scottish Research Book of the Year in 2011. I've enjoyed individual poems, encountered in journals. Now, in this exemplary production, his second from Red Squirrel Press, the publisher has judged cover, colours, paper and design to complement the expert typography of Gerry Cambridge. The production does justice to the considered but adventurous work of a master poet.

It's difficult to describe how this skilfully judged grouping of six distinct series of poems is so vital. The form of the book might sound a bit too well-planned if you simply say how the progression of movements is defined. But let's give that a try:

'Get Set' catches slo-mo snapshots of a childhood world speeding by to first loves and first motors.

'Far-fetched' takes you further out into a world, caught in shift of intense natural light, up in the air and down to the ocean as well as glancing on hedgerows.

'The Desert Mothers' are notebooks in verse, imagined from actual historical travellers' narrative.

'Approaching Autumn' is a series of linked verses, composed in the character of three poets of different times but with a shared sense of place.

'Star-Fetched' has the tone of Neil Young's 'After the Goldrush' and nods perhaps to the mental high-jinkery of Edwin Morgan in seriously playful mode.

'In Good Time' puts a new layer to 'marking time', with a range of voice from that of a retreating Roman centurion to a Lutheran 'soul register;' in Norway.

Throughout this range of subjects, voice, time and place, there is a consistent sensibility. The poet's skill results in the most rewarding aesthetic. Yet, in individual poems as well as in the overall composition, this is a poet who doesn't mind making a bold stroke. He's disrespectful in the best way, able to trust the right to re-imagine things. In this guy's world, the most mundane of everyday activities ring with significance;

'And on another day he compared history
to bubbles in a pot of porridge, their pechts
and vanishings. Our mouths across each bowl
must cool that simmering, and eat.'

This is from 'A Month of Teachings'. Any risk of solemnity is disrupted by the sheer power of the imagery and judicious use of a word: 'birl' or 'feart'. In 'Boxing Day' the myth of the robin's red breast becomes, accurately, a 'tomato soup stain'. That's not the only risk of cliché, gladly taken and so a phrase revitalised. Breaking spray is a tricky thing to catch on camera or in language but what about this:

'Meantime that fist of sea still pummelled
rock.

Stars of sweat flew off a boxer's head.
Take that. And that.'

Line-breaks, rhymes or half-rhymes are used only when they add something – similar to the approach in Ross Wilson's work. When James McGonigal adopts the haikai form (used for the imagined correspondence between poet and monk Caedmon, Edmund Spenser and Basil Bunting) I felt no hint of strain or squeezing. Clear observation seems more important than any tuning of syllables:

'*Caedmon* Butterflies tackle bent flowers
like bairns learning to walk.'

'Wonder' might be the key word to appreciate how these words arrest you:

'I wonder which school those trees all attended
to learn how to doze on one leg, poised.'

Really, I want to quote from each poem. The best way to use the generous space this fine journal provides for discussion is to urge the reader to buy this book too. I'd normally post books I've read to folk I'm currently corresponding with but I want this one ready to hand so I'm just placing a wee order with Red Squirrel Press. I'd suggest you do that too if you have a taste for superb craftsmanship, worn lightly, and lit by both empathy and knowledge. But all these poets and publishers need support. In the present climate, they seem to me an antidote to the disregard for truth and the inability to empathise displayed again and again by the 'leaders' of both the UK and the USA. ■

New kinds of wild

Antlers of Water
Edited by Kathleen Jamie
Canongate (2020)
Cottongrass Summer
Roy Dennis
Saraband (2020)
Review by Kenny Taylor

A good anthology is much more than a book to keep for occasional reference and sporadic reading. It can surprise, entertain and give fresh ideas. It can nudge imagination to move in unexpected ways. *Antlers of Water* is just such a work.

Its subtitle describes it as writing on Scotland's nature and environment. Yet that seems too slight a description for the diversity of voices, points of view and language from the commissioned writers within it. As its editor and curator, Kathleen Jamie, makes clear in her introduction, it's also a call to arms. She announces it as showcasing 'a new Scottish nature writing', which 'addresses the realities of our times and examines the relationship with our fellow creatures, our beloved and fast-changing landscapes, our energy futures, our ancient past.'

Bold claims, but coming from a writer whose work in response to nature and places in both poetry and prose has won international acclaim, they need to be taken seriously; seriously enough for this reader to overcome a long-standing dislike of the very term 'nature writing'. I remember, for example, attending a reading in Washington DC a couple of decades ago where Barry Lopez – one of North America's most distinguished writers on nature, the land and conservation – read D.H. Lawrence's poem 'Snake'. He relished the twists and multi-layered meanings of the lines as he read. Then he put the book down and said, raising his eyebrows: "that was by D.H. Lawrence – a 'nature writer'."

Since then, I've come, slowly, to accept that the term can be useful shorthand, while still covering work as varied and surprising as in any other genre. That's art; that's life. What's also changed since I heard that reading is that across Britain, as was already true in the US when I met Barry Lopez, there are now many writers whose published work responds to nature at a time of ever-worsening environmental crisis. Bookshop shelves, when it's socially acceptable to peruse them, have whole sections devoted to such writing.

In Scotland, we've perhaps been slow to recognise this burgeoning field, with some notable contemporary names as exceptions. We recognise past glories – such as Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir, Rabbie Burns, Neil Gunn, Norman MacCaig and Nan Shepherd. Those people also lived at times of national and international crisis, including civil unrest and wars, but had little reason to think

that global systems of life support were going to hell in a handcart because of human actions. That's what can distinguish present-day writing in this deep-rooted field from what has come before; that's part of why this book is so interesting, refreshing and challenging.

The breadth of writing within it includes prose, poetry and entries that defy easy categorization. That's the case with Alec Finlay's extracts 'From a Place-Aware Dictionary', where I relished entries such as 'ANTHROPOCENE: us being too much for everything else' and FOLKLORE: a supernatural glow that diminishes from generation to generation'. Our own *Northwords Now* former editor, Chris Powici, kicks off the whole collection. Or maybe I should say pedals it forward, as he considers wind turbines and species re-introductions while cycling the Braes of Doune.

A further *Northwords Now* link comes through Lesley Harrison's perceptions of land, water and creatures on the Angus coast, pared-down with a deft minimalism of line and word choice, such as 'dunnock a subsong,/full of ornament/a choir of one'. Part of the pleasure in the anthology is the way that a turn of page to a new writer gives a different voice and adds to the sense that – yes – this could be a movement in progress, with writers linked by a community of interest, but who can't be pigeonholed. That applies in large measure to two of the concluding pieces in the anthology.

One is by Amy Liptrot, whose life-affirmingly honest work always seems to defy easy categorisation as 'nature writing.' Even the title of her piece: 'Swimming Away from My Baby' makes you want to read it, and what follows doesn't disappoint.

The other is by the multi-talented Karine Polwart, who has the facility to move from music to stories in live performance and recording studio, and here, to write prose that also shifts in form as the narrative unfolds. It draws on her friendship with fellow band member, Inge Thomson from Fair Isle, incorporating some of Inge's lyrics from a song cycle album and performance called 'Da Fishing Hands'.

Karine melds these with her own experiences to consider island knowledge of land and sea, declines of seabirds and the untimely loss of the young Fair Isle writer, Lise Sinclair. There's a warmth in her style that seems to make the words glow from the page. If this is new nature writing, we need more of both that passion and compassion, I reckon. This anthology is an invigorating start.

Cottongrass Summer is a very different collection of work, but can similarly prod the reader to think afresh about nature and environmental issues. I don't know anyone who can match its author, Roy Dennis, for breadth of experience of wildlife across the north of Scotland. Since the late 1950s, when he was a warden of the Fair Isle bird observatory (a place he's championed ever since, including beyond the fire that ravaged it early in 2019) he's been both a practical conservationist and a refreshingly radical thinker.

In April this year, he celebrated the 60th anniversary of seeing his first osprey, while wardening at the RSPB's Operation Osprey at Loch Garten. In the decades since, he helped to pioneer satellite tracking of ospreys, greatly added to wider public awareness of this iconic bird and wrote books about them. But you can't define Roy's work by ospreys; nor confine it. 'Restoration' is more the word I'd use to give a flavour. He's the renaissance man of Scottish conservation, happiest to be hands-on and making changes to benefit wild creatures and their habitats, not restricted to one place, one species, one idea.

From re-introduction of sea eagles, red kites and beavers to more recent work to help red squirrels and wildcats re-establish in parts of the Highlands, Roy's been there to walk the walk. But throughout his long career, he's also talked the talk, helping others to think, not simply of protecting the wild, but of boosting and nurturing it. As I found when having the privilege of working with him on a couple of different boards, he's often looking to the future, not resting on old laurels, and coaxing others to do the same.

That's how it feels with *Cottongrass Summer*. The 52 essays in it (all short) do include plenty of details about his life, projects and travels. In some, he shares insights derived from journeys in Europe, North America, China and Japan with people who have devoted their lives to better understanding creatures such as wolves, eagles, lynx and more. In most, he grounds his wider knowledge in the soil and seas of the north, whether high tops, forests, coastal lowlands or islands. And (like another noted elder who's been keeping very active recently: hats off to Sir David) he's focused on what could yet be possible, if people have the courage and vision to shape new ways of respecting and healing the world we share with so many other forms of life.

The 52 essays are best savoured in small bites. I recommend at least one a day, taken over a couple of months, to refresh ideas, keep the eco-blues at bay and learn from a maestro. ■

McPhee's Day Trip

Story by John Robertson Nicoll

Not so long ago, McPhee was able to travel much further afield on his jaunts, but he was getting on in years now and of a mind to follow the line of least resistance when taking his pleasures. Besides, he never got tired of the ferry trip from Oban to his beloved Mull. The island was visible from Oban harbour and today it sat blue and purple in the early summer sun like some wonderful promise waiting to be delivered.

It was the start of the tourist season and the ferry was appropriately busy. McPhee watched the cars, lorries and vans jostling for parking space on the deck below with a certain amount of distaste. He resented all the noise and the fumes tainting this, his favourite part of his world. For the umpteenth time, he wondered why people couldn't leave their ghastly metal boxes behind for one day. Did they actually like living in these metal cages? Did they draw some sort of comfort from them – was it a security thing with them? He decided that if he lived to be a hundred he would never understand the human race, so he decided to give up trying - at least for now. He looked up at the blue sky overhead and his spirits soared.

The ferry left the pier bang on time and made its stately way out across the water. McPhee closed his eyes and breathed-in sweet air. He was just thinking that he was approaching Nirvana when the day trippers started pouring on to the upper deck. He wished they wouldn't. He would have preferred to have this space all to himself.

It may have been his advancing years that made McPhee so grumpy and hypercritical but he was sure that the holiday crowds got louder and coarser with every passing year: men with beer bellies and trousers that ended just below the knees, women with…. well pretty much the same really and every year more of those infernal electronic devices that beeped and whirred and whistled. It was all too much. There should be no room for such things in this little corner of heaven.

Instinctively, he moved as close to the back of the boat as he could and hoped against hope that people would respect his space. He thought it might keep people at a distance if he scowled at them and so for a while he looked from left to right and back again with a malevolent glare etched on his features so strongly that he feared he might never be able to erase it.

The ploy seemed to work. It was as if there was an invisible border running the width of the deck between McPhee and the holiday hordes and for a while this suited him fine. He looked back across the water. If Oban was getting further away, Mull was getting closer. His heart raced. All that the place meant to him came to mind in one glowing image after another and he was looking forward to dining out in Tobermory again, but now that the ferry was halfway between its two destinations his mood began to darken. People were still respecting his space, as they put it nowadays, but that very fact only served to remind him how alone he was these days. He was the wrong side of middle age and many of his family and friends had passed away – at least one of them in violent circumstances - and these days he barely saw any of the old crowd.

There was a cloud above his head now, both literally and metaphorically. He was staring at the deck, appalled by how suddenly sunshine can become shadow in this life, when he became aware of a small figure standing just in front of him. It was a child of about four or five in a little yellow summer dress. She stood smiling at him – a small sun to counter the cloud filling his head. She had crossed his 'line' because she didn't know that he had one. He looked at her and knew immediately that love had not vanished completely from his world.

The two stood there, clearly beguiled by one another. McPhee thought that with her fine golden hair and her beatific smile, she was the most innocent and lovely creature he had ever seen. She stretched out her hand. A gift? he thought. A gift from this little angel? Surely kindness, like love, was not dead after all.

"Shelley, get away from that dirty, filthy craitur!"

Their moment was invaded by a large woman with a wide expanse of bare midriff and a tattoo of a bluebird on her right breast. She lunged at the child and pulled her away with some force making her drop the crust of her cheese sandwich. Then she returned to kick out at McPhee with such force that one of her sandals went flying, but McPhee had already risen high in the air above the Mull-bound ferry. He hovered for a moment out of respect for his earth-bound angel and hoped that she would feel the rays of love that he was sending down to her. Her mother was still holding her hand but with her free one she waved and smiled at him. It was enough for McPhee. This kindness would give him comfort for a long time to come.

Heartened, he would head for Tobermory now and the overflowing bins behind Burrell's Seafood Restaurant. Dining out in Tobermory was always a pleasure. ■

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Simon Berry is a former editor of *The Scotsman* book pages, president of Scottish PEN and board member of 7:84 Scotland. He has a poetry collection *A Mask for Grieving* and biography of Victorian poet, Alexander Smith, published by FTRR Press.

Sharon Black is a prize-winning poet from Glasgow who lives in a remote valley of the Cévennes mountains. She is an editor of Pindrop Press, a poetry publisher 'based between Scotland and France'. Her third collection is forthcoming, and she is working on a fourth, about the Cévennes. www.sharonblack.co.uk

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

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

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Robert Alan Jamieson is a Shetlander who has published five novels and whose poetry has been translated into a dozen European languages. A former co-editor of *Edinburgh Review,* he recently retired from teaching creative writing at Edinburgh University. His collection *Plague Clothes* (2020) is the first publication from the new Taproot Press.

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Antonia Kearton is originally from Edinburgh and now lives in Strathspey, where she makes landscape photographs, has recently started writing poetry again after a decades-long gap, and is training to become a counsellor/psychotherapist.

Alistair Lawrie was born in Peterhead and now lives in Stonehaven. He co-edited *Glimmer Of Cold Brine*, leads Mearns Writers, is published in *The Interpreter's House* and *Poets' Republic* and won the William Soutar Prize 2016.

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*.

Karen MacDonald lives with her husband and various other creatures up a wee glen in Perthshire, with no internet but lots of pencils.

Rugadh Lodaidh MacFhionghain ann an Inbhir Nis, Eilean Cheap Breatainn. 'S e oide, òraidiche, fear-ciùil, bàrd, is seinneadair a th'ann. Chaidh ceithir leabhraichean dhen bhàrdachd aige 'fhoillseachadh "Famhair: Agus Dàin Ghàidhlig eile", "Fleòdragan Cabair", "Rudan Mi-bheanailteach is an Cothroman" is "Ràithean airson Sireadh".

D.B. MacInnes writes and plays uilleann pipes on the Skye croft held by his family since 1860. He is currently working on a novel called 'The Redemption of Quany MacColl' .

Màrtainn Mac An t-Saoir Rugadh Màrtainn Mac an t-Saoir ann an 1965 agus thogadh ann an Lèanaidh e. Tha Ath-Aithne, Gymnippers Diciadain, An Latha As Fhaide, Dannsam led Fhaileas, A' Challaig, Seo Challò, Cala Bendita 's a Bheannachda, Tuath Air A' Bhealach agus Samhradh '78 am measg nan leabhar a thug e a-mach.

Anne MacLeod has published two novels and two poetry collections. Her *Standing by Thistles* collection was shortlisted for a Saltire First Book Award and her first novel, *The Dark Ship,* was nominated for Saltire and Impac awards.

Caoimhin MacNèill Tha Caoimhin MacNèill na òraidiche aig Oilthigh Shruighlea. Am measg nan leabhraichean aige tha The Brilliant & Forever agus The Diary of Archie the Alpaca. Sgrìobh e am fiolm Hamish: The Movie.

Richie McCaffery lives in Alnwick, Northumberland and has a PhD in Scottish literature from Glasgow University. His most recent collection is the pamphlet *First Hare* from Mariscat Press (2020). He also has two book-length collections from Nine Arches Press, the more recent being Passport (2018).

Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh Tidsear ealain air chluainidh ann an Inbhir Nis.

Hugh McMillan is a poet from Dumfries and Galloway. Through lockdown he ran a daily video blog called #plagueopoets which has been described as "unique" and "wonderful".

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

Loretta Mulholland recently completed an MLitt in Writing Practice and Study at Dundee University. She is currently researching the John Murray Archives, held at the National Library of Scotland.

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Cynthia Rogerson's latest novel *Wait for me Jack* (written under the pseudonym Addison Jones) is published by Sandstone.

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'S ann à iomadh ceàrn a tha **Eòghan Stiùbhart**, sgrìobhadair tùsanach a' fuireach san Àrd-Achaidh ann an Inbhir Nis, tha a' chiad chruinneachadh aige "Beum-sgeithe" a' tighinn a dh'aithghearr.

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***Northwords Now* is published but twice a year. Full of literary goodness though its pages may be, we know that it won't be able to sustain readers across some of the months between issues. That's where our social media can be a boon, helping writers and readers alike to share news of events, publications, and even some new work in print or video.**

Our Facebook membership at www.facebook.com/groups/northwordsnow grows by the week, and our Twitter @NorthwordsNow has, for example, encouraged some writers to submit more flash fiction in the past year.

Thanks to our funders, Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, we'll be making further upgrades to our website in the next few months. Initially, this issue will go online in the form that the past few issues have taken, followed by changes to make it easier for users to access a range of resources, including audio-visual material. One way to be alerted to new developments on the site will be to be part of our social media community. Need we say more?