Issue 41, Spring–Summer 2021

Northwords Now

New writing, fresh from Scotland and the wider North
Sgrìobhadh ùr à Alba agus an Àird a Tuath

LEONIE CHARLTON follows pony paths, DEBORAH MOFFATT muses on Mexico, CHRIS ARTHUR asks "What is it like to be alive?", LINDA CRACKNELL gets castaway inspiration from RLS, WILLIE HERSHAW introduces poems by the late DONALD MACKAY, IAN STEPHEN speaks in three voices, PLUS many more stories and poems, news and an effusion of reviews.

Sgrìobhah ùr Gàidhlig ann an Tuath le ALASDAIR CAIMBEUL, AONGHAS PHÀDRAIG CAIMBEUL, MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL, SANDAIDH NICDHÒMHNAILL JONES, MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR, PÀDRAIG MACAOIDH, IAIN S. MAC A' PHEARSAIN, IAIN URCHARDAN, CHRISTOPHER WHYTE / CRÌSDEAN MACILLEBHÀIN

EDITORIAL

The blossoms and birdsong of spring seem especially fine this year, as people emerge, blinking, into the light of post-lockdown days. Part of the challenges and sorrows of the past year is reflected in some of the writing in Gaelic, Scots and English in this issue.

But another – positive – effect of recent restrictions seems to have been to boost the output of many writers and small publishers in Scotland. Submissions of new work to *Northwords Now* have reached record levels. I'd like to thank all those who did submit poetry and prose through our website, but whose writing we couldn't include, and to say: 'keep trying – we appreciate your interest.'

To give ideas for possible reading and fresh inspiration, whether indoors or out, the reviews section has expanded to six pages for this issue. Within it, you'll see how eight writers responded to a wheen of new publications, including a dozen recent poetry collections.

We'll also be running some reviews on our recently re-vamped website (see 'What's New in the North' on page 3) as well as having a rolling programme of audio-visual, news and archive material to refresh our homepage between publication of new issues. Thanks to many of our distribution outlets re-opening, we've also had a return to printing many thousands of copies – something that wasn't possible last year.

If you're reading this online, you can find a list of Stockists under the 'Info' tab. We can't guarantee they'll still have a print copy when you get there, but we do know that every one of these *Northwords Now* supporters will be worth your visit. ■

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 Twitter @NorthwordsNow

Contents

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

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Where to find us
The magazine is FREE, online as a .pdf and - at pandemic-free times - available in print across Scotland (details of stockists are on our website).

Front cover image: North Stole. Watercolour with chalk rubbing on paper by Peter Davis (2018) – Private collection. The painting reflects the shapes, colours and light found on the coast at Stenness in the far NW of Mainland Shetland. More of Peter's work can be found at www.peterdavisshetland.com, at The Kilmorack Gallery www.kilmorackgallery.co.uk and The Birch Tree Gallery birchtreegallery.co.uk

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 **October 2021**. The deadline for submissions is **2nd August 2021**. If accepted for publication, you will hear about your submission by **1st October 2021**, so feel free to submit elsewhere if we have not contacted you by then.

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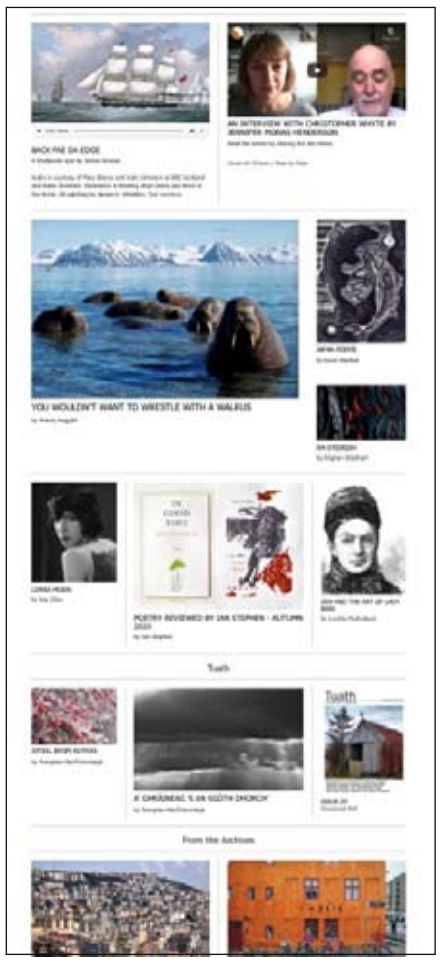
What's New in the North

Re-designed resources online

By now, many of you will already have made use of our re-designed website at northwordsnow.co.uk. We've made changes to make the site more useful and enjoyable, whether on casual visits or as a resource to help you delve into our growing archive of new writing from Scotland and the wider north.

Parts of the homepage will be refreshed from time to time between issues, with a gently rolling programme of new poems, reviews and stories. We'll also be featuring more audio and video material - another way for us to showcase work in all of Scotland's three languages, including regional variants.



As before, you can read each issue of *Northwords Now* (twice a year) and *Tuath* (annually) as both .pdfs and as files linked to each writer. To keep in touch with occasional news from us, such as public events, you can now join our email list by filling in your name and email address through the 'Subscribe' tab at the top of the homepage.

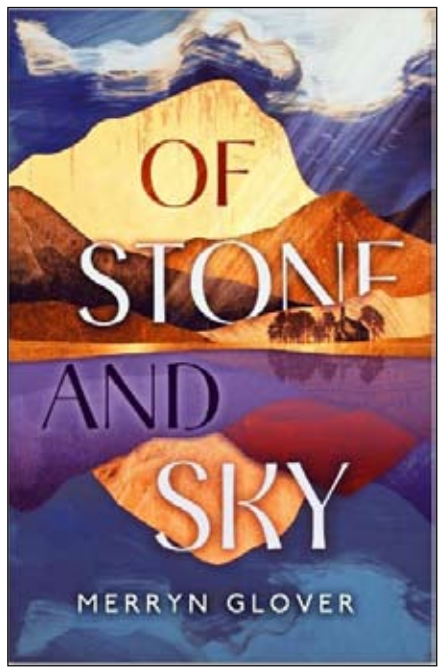
Feedback so far has been very positive, including from our funders – Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig. Thanks to them, and the skilled work of Garve Scott-Lodge at Plexus Media, our online presence has never been stronger, complementing our printed editions and opening new possibilities for the future.

An informal readers' group

Each issue, it's hard to include reviews of all the titles we'd like to consider. In part, this is because we need to delay coverage of books received close to our own publication time.

Thanks to our re-designed website, we'll now be able to include some additional reviews between print issues. But it could also be fun for readers to get some early pointers to books that we know will be reviewed here in the next few months - some online and some in the next print edition.

You could think of it as a kind of *Northwords Now* readers' group, where you can seek-out a title that you know will later be reviewed, and then see how your perceptions mesh with those of our review writers. To help you make some selections for spring and summer, here's a small list of some very new titles we know will feature (many others will also be reviewed in the autumn issue):



Of Stone and Sky (Polygon) is a novel by Merryn Glover, zoom-launched this May through Grantown's impressive independent bookshop The Bookmark. It's a tale set in the Cairngorms, with the disappearance of a shepherd, Colvin Munro, at its heart and the gradual finding of twelve of his possessions threading through it to reveal much wider connections.

A Bard's Life (Rymour Books) by prolific champion of north-east Scots, Sheena Blackhall, is an autobiographical sequence of poems, stories and photographs, including work in both Doric and English.

The Stone Age (Picador Poetry) a new collection by T.S. Eliot and Edwin Morgan prizewinner, Jen Hadfield, is deep-rooted in the landscape of her Shetland home.

Larksong Static (Hedgehog Press) holds poems from 2005-2020 selected from his several collections and pamphlets by Gardenstown poet, Martin Malone.

The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line (Sandstone Press) by Ruth Thomas is a novel about things lost and found and about love, grief and forgiveness: letting go and moving on.

Pressing ahead

At the best of times, it takes courage to launch a new press. In 'these times', it takes even more boldness. So it's refreshing – and life-affirming – to see some new imprints arrive on the Scottish publishing block in recent months.

One such is Edinburgh-based Taproot Press. It was started in the depths of the pandemic last year by two University of Edinburgh students – Patrick and Dani – with help from editor Jennie Renton and poets Robert Alan Jamieson and Miranda Pearson. Its first publication, *Plague Clothes* (by the just-mentioned RAJ) has been warmly received, including in Issue 40 of this publication. Linda Cracknell's *The Other Side of Stone*, launched online in a joint event with Aberfeldy's excellent Watermill independent bookshop and gallery, has followed this spring, It's reviewed on page 34 of this issue.

Even newer is Drunk Muse Press. It was founded late last year by a trio of poets: Hugh McMillan and Neil Young in Scotland and Jessamine O'Connor in Ireland. They say that their purpose is to champion poetry 'that insists on wider attention by poets with a compelling way of expressing it.' Two publications due soon from Drunk Muse seem certain to fulfill that purpose through the work of two very different writers.

The first is a new collection, *Chronicles of the First Light*, by renowned Caithness poet and playwright, George Gunn –who will need little introduction to many readers of *Northwords Now.* In likely contrast will be *My Threatening Poem*, a memoir by Palestinian poet, Dareen Tatour, recalling her experience of being arrested and imprisoned in Israel for posting a poem on social media.

Thinking of poetry on social media, bunnets aff tae Drunk Muse co-founder, Hugh McMillan, for his 'pestilence poems' blogspot. Through the troughs – and deeper troughs – of the past year, Hugh's blog has featured an ever-widening array of contemporary poets from across Britain, Ireland and far beyond. It's been both a pleasure to view and a useful source of information about the poets – including *Northwords Now* writers – who've taken part in the project so far.

We'll continue to draw attention to developments in the Scottish literary scene that could be of interest to our readers. But for now, these examples give a taste of some of what could be enjoyed through fledgling presses and projects. Seek them out online and – importantly – purchase some small press titles to support these ambitious new ventures.

Ceud taing, Rody!

Rody Gorman's involvement with the lineage of this publication stretches back to the old *Northwords* in early part of the new millennium. He became Gaelic Editor of *Northwords Now* with Issue 15, in the summer of 2010 – when Chris Powici also moved into the editorial chair.

For the 27 issues from then onwards, Rody has encouraged and edited new work from a wide array of contemporary Gaelic writers. Since 2017, this has included the Gaelic supplement *Tuath* as part of the spring-summer issue. Rody's dedication to nurturing new writing in both Scottish and Irish Gaelic is widely respected, including through editorship of the annual *An Guth* anthology, his translations into and between Irish and Scottish Gaelic, teaching at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig UHI and his own poetry, widely published and translated. Although he's now stepping down as Gaelic Editor for *Northwords Now*, we look forward to publishing more of his poetry in future, and to continued advice – preferably over a dram some day on Skye, when social distancing becomes more relaxed. Airson a-nis, gach deagh dhùrachd, Rody, agus mòran taing airson a h-uile rud a rinn thu airson *Northwords Now* agus *Tuath*.■.

Pony Paths

Essay by Leonie Charlton

Highland Pony foal in snow shower, April 2021. Leonie Charlton

It's late August and I've been walking the pony paths in this glen with you since early June. Now the frogs are half-grown, no longer springing like tiddlywinks from under our feet. Gold rush of bog asphodel is over, empty flower shells relaxing to rust. Meanwhile the Scotch argus butterflies have exploded, we're passing through dark, sweet clouds of them now. It's been fifteen years since ponies took deer off the hills here, and today there are no Highland garrons living in the glen. Lintel, Morag and Duke, Amber and Jodie, all long-buried. Yet the paths cleave on, works of craft and hard graft. These remnants from the Victorian deer forests are culturally and politically problematic for me, and yet their physicality is a balm; they are works of art. Walking them my hearts sings, and my feet find ease.

I walk with the stick you gave me. The shank is hazel cut locally. The handle is carved from the horn of a tup you found on the hill – he'd fallen into a hole and died there. Twenty odd years ago you'd shot his horns off, a stick maker couldn't leave them to go to waste. I imagined the pink scud of the exposed quick. I shuddered, it sounded violent. Hard to sync that to the soothing heft of horn handle now fitting my palm. The lucent aliveness of it, how it catches every colour and mood of the day. This is a careworn stick, you'd taken it to the hill yourself for years, replaced its shank many times, before giving it to me.

You and this stick know the pony paths so well. I feel very fortunate to walk them with you both. Today we are high on The Rough Hill. It's early August and hot. Sweat pours down my back and we drink at a pool where you tell me Morag used to drink on her way to collect deer shot on The Round Hill of the Birches. We're keeping well above The Burn of Split Stones. You hold a lot of store by not losing height, it saves energy and time. The water below breathes over madder-rose rock, my lungs want to float me down there, let my toes trail through the uppermost needles of the Scots pines on the way. These trees that have survived against centuries of odds. Previous owners admired the pine trees, got helicopters in and fenced the area off to protect them from grazing. The pine trees were infertile through old age, so seedlings were brought in from outside. The old and new are flourishing. I imagine that these long-standing pines must know everything there is to know of this place, mapping it all in the jigsaw of their bark: each birth, love and bare-boned death; every secret of wolf, vole and cone; every land-use change, displacement and replacement; summering of cattle, gathering of sheep, then the last cow walked out of here, last of the lambs sold. And when the hydroelectric power schemes go in next year, and their roots are shaken by heavy machinery, they will feel yet one more tremble of time.

In this stronghold of golden eagles, this curved place where voices of land and water and sky can be heard crystalline clear, you urge me to think positively. This glen has seen so much action over the millennia, at the hand of ice and human, it can surely cope. And maybe the current owners will put the money generated back into this generous place; into restoration and regeneration projects, like the one in the remnant pine forest below; perhaps even the repopulation of this glen, now there is only you, one man, living here, an all-time low. I follow you through a gate that after fifty years is still hung to within a millimetre of perfection. You point out the workmanship, how every fencepost is straight, every wire still taut. You shake your head in admiration. Simple things, in the here and now, that make sense to you. That are full of meaning and connect you to the people who have worked here before you.

These pony paths are the same, painstakingly built, often over older pre-existing paths, by people who knew what they were doing, who built things to last. We're following the cairns – large glacially deposited rocks with small stones placed on top by stalkers and ghillies – that mark the pony path. It is a slow hot trudge, my heart is pounding into the hush of the hillside. From here, on the other side of the glen, two more pony paths are visible following burns that curve round each side of The Hill of the Hinds. I have walked them slowly with you, you who knows them by heart. I feel the pony paths, all four of them, in the warm open spread of my hand. The lines on my palms tingle. From up here I can see how the deer paths cross the pony paths, running like threads of bruise and grace through the story of it all.

The path curving round the west face of The Hill of the Hinds is the pony path I know best, I've walked it three times now. The first was with you this time last year. We were shadowed that day by a juvenile golden eagle and you told me how the eagles are your friends, how they know you, have been watching your every move for thirty years. They recognise the measure of your step, sense in the air the days you will leave deer gralloch for them. The second time was with my friend and our two Highland ponies, Ross and Chief. We'd been training Ross for the deer. You shot a hind and Ross carried her down off the hill that day. We'd loaded him on the other side of the burn among the shielings at the base of The Black Glen. Ross was willing, the work still present in his Rùm blood, but he was twenty and his hocks were sore and we all knew he wouldn't be doing any more of this work.

The third time on that path was

this June. I passed Ross' droppings, still there on the path from last year, and I cried. I cried because he's getting older, and I won't take him on hard high hills anymore. I cried for the passing of time. There will be other ponies you'd said, I just need to cry for this one, I'd replied. It had helped to walk behind you, forgetting and thinking only about where to place each foot, and counting frogs. When we got to the shielings, and the crossing place where months before Ross had ferried the hind across the burn, a dipper spun past us, sat bobbing on a rock up to its knees in torrent, a miracle of resistance. As we walked higher, the scoop of the corrie wavered in a heat haze. I was carried into the thinness of this place, the closeness of other worlds. Under The Round Top of the Cattle I could almost hear the Molinia grass being torn by cattle mouths, high voices lifting from the shielings, taste woodsmoke and warm milk. I heard too the calls of a greenshank, so insistent that I lifted my binoculars. Eventually I saw it, but only in flight, skimming over the tussocks. When it landed it became invisible once more. The first greenshank I'd seen here. We walked on, following cairns and crossing trout-plucked pools, up towards The Sandy Bealach glowing pink with broken granite, to where the watershed tips over. On the other side was The Corrie of the Twisted Ones, a hard and hungry place you said. You pointed out up on our left The Corrie of Snow, where you'd shot a stag one day, and as you dragged him out another stag had followed you. It was horrible, you said, horrible; you'd shot his friend, never seen anything like that before or since, they'd probably never been apart.

We walked back down through a spin of dragonflies. You told me that's why hobbies like it up there, they hunt the dragonflies. You used to see ring ouzels in this place. We saw neither hobbies, nor ring ouzels, nor eagles nor a single deer that day. It was important, you said, to know that in some places the deer numbers aren't going up. Where are the deer, you ask. And where are the trees, I ask. You believe in a world where deer and trees co-exist. Deer are forest animals, after all. Aye, but it's complicated, you sigh. You talk to me of where you would plant trees if you had the say. Stands of woodland in your mind's eye, bits best suited to rowan or aspen or birch. Juniper too and Scots pine. You paint trees into the landscape for me to imagine, and for the deer to bide in. But no wolves, no wolves in these trees of yours. You are most adamant. That's others' dream, you say; they can fill their boots you say, but it wouldn't work, there just isn't the space anymore. They'd be persecuted. More pain. More trouble. I cannot deny my own longing to hear wolves.

There on the east side of The Hill of the Hinds is the other pony path, the one that shadows a steep, deep burn, and your single-plank swing bridge that crosses it down near where it joins the river – a bridge that makes dogs cower and stomachs turn. My eyes home in on this second pony path, a steady green line inclining westwards to pines up above in the gully; yes, more Scots pines hanging on in a final hold. Safe there from axe and fire, sheep and deer, surviving where they are forced to survive. The tree stock is strong and resilient, like the people who must have lived in these places, I think to myself. Before they ran out of toe-holds.

The July day we'd walked up that second pony path on The Hill of the Hinds it was hot and close; I was struggling. We drank from pools, and I stopped often to admire the path, patches of plaited stonework still perfectly in place, slabs set snugly over burns like lintel stones. Lintel was the name of your favourite deer pony – you said she'd been good craic, had trusted you. You told me about the day you'd fallen asleep as ponyman, it was a Saturday, you'd likely had a hangover. The stalking party hadn't been able to rouse you, not even by lighting a fire and sending smoke signals. In the end they'd had to send the ghillie down to wake you. You laughed, remembering as we followed the path to where it ended at The Spying Point. We carried on to the summit; at over 3000 feet it is a Munro; at the bottom the bog asphodel had been at the peak of its flowering; at The Spying Point it was just budding, and finally there on the tops there was none.

It had been like tundra up there. Worlds of tiny lichens and plants I didn't recognise, bound tight to the ground, with antlers and eyes and bright colours. You showed me a mountain hare's shelter, a small natural cave, full of droppings, and pointed out the livid moss marking a spring in the hard high ground. Up on the very top the ravens met us, lifting off their shit-splattered rock in casual ease. We lay out of the wind and watched two walkers fool around taking selfies on the summit cairn. You said they were great, you loved how they were having so much fun. We waved at them. They were exuberant back. Some peoples' faces cloud over when they see your stick, your dog, your tweed. After the women had left, the ravens found their apple cores. They swallowed and hopped as you and I passed a bag of nuts and raisins between us.

I'm pulled back to this butterfly-hot August day on the steep side of The Rough Hill. Your hand has come behind you in an urgent 'get down' gesture. We both drop. Ahead of us, fifty yards away, two stags are leaning into the hill, knees and hips at uncanny angles, the deep velvet on their antlers holding light like rain. Through my binoculars I could see their calm, interested expressions, their periodic chewing. They stood at their leisure, watching us. They just know we're not stalking, you say, such clever beasts. Then they're gone, over the top, and my thoughts follow them down to the fourth pony path that runs up The Pass of the Storms. I think back to its steady climb of spider webs and pyramidal moraine, its Scots pine that crowns all of the others and the pony post longstanding above it. You'd told me that day how that path, its smell of dry heath, always reminded you of home on the east coast. You'd pointed to the spread of pink, wild thyme. As we'd walked through patches of lain-down-upon grass, and the taut-sweet smell of deer, you told me if it was your shout you'd have planted this whole burnside with native woodland. You pointed out the old Drovers Road, to where at the head of the corrie it turns into a series of sharp zigzags where they used to walk the cattle up and over the top, then down into the neighbouring glen. We talked about how in the past people had trodden lightly, using only what they needed, leaving barely a trace, just this, a memory of walking, still green from long ago dung. 'We need light hands and feet, now more than ever… see there, at the foot of the zigzag path, you can bring a pony round between The Round Top where there are Birch Trees, and The Hill of Wild Garlic. Then down onto The Greens to meet up with The Rough Hill pony track.'

Today, on the top of The Rough Hill, surrounded by the imprint of these four pony paths, a single painted lady butterfly sashays past. We're on the lookout for a juvenile golden eagle. A week ago a landslide wiped out its nest. All that rain we've had – you've never known the ground here so 'full' – has destabilised the ground. The chick was right on the point of fledging. You're hopeful that it will be safe somewhere, that its parents will be taking care of it. I am anxious. You've borrowed my ears, your own a roar of tinnitus, and I'm listening out for the insistent peep of a young eagle. It's been a bad year for golden eagles; this was the only pair to successfully breed in the area. I think the chick will be fine, you say. I wish I shared your optimism. As we eat our lunch of salted almonds and cheese the female parent bird shows herself, distinguishable by her size, her darkness, the spaces on her left wing where she's missing primary feathers. I am thrilled to see her. It's a perfect day, you say, standing up.

I look back across the glen to the top of The Hill of the Hinds, I breathe in all the space between, hoping hard that the young eagle has survived the wreckage of its nest, the premature slide into the unknown. I pick up my hazel stick, let it take my full weight, We start the steep descent down towards the river, its pools glinting in golden brown. You told me there's been a good run of salmon in the river this year, and I've seen the hazelnuts beginning to ripen. Even as we spin towards environmental collapse, I feel a flicker of faith that wisdom can still break through. I step down over the falling away ground as swallows strike ancient knowings against a clear sky, and two damselflies, locked in mating, crackle past like newly-lit fire. ■

Author's note: *In this piece, some Gaelic place names have been changed to safeguard the location of golden eagle nest sites.*

The Oak on Allt Coire Mhàrtuin

Leonie Charlton

A crumple of hill hides
The Tanning Pool, eye
of Kyloe-dark dreaming:

leather steeping, bellows
fanning Ardmaddy Furnace
for pig iron and warfare.

Above this watchful place
two copper-pink hinds, hefted here
break like peace into bracken

high ears lift away, flick back
on the weight of your breath,
an invitation to get wind of the day

for you the chances are slim.
You head for an oak reigning
over helter of the rising burn.

Up close, ferns and flying rowans
trust with fragile roots
from the hollow of its throat.

The oak shouts for nothing.
You stack vertebrae 'round its deep belly,
it takes your back

more completely than bone can believe.
Turning your face to barksin
you lose your lips in shadow

ache to be rewritten in oak gall ink
each sepal of your lungs, bough of your mind
defined, indelibly

note the rhythm of my charcoal chambers
ink me viable,
please, you whisper, your mouth full of moss.

Lament for the Children

John Bolland

Urlar

In 1626…

Padraig McCrimmon's sons pass
from clan to meat and memory.
Smallpox.

Padraig's father, unforgiving,
burned some houses in Glenelg and killed
in vengeance for his brother's murder.
Who will avenge this massacre?

A prodigal returned, they say.
Sang at the ceilidh, prayed in the kirk.
Blameless.
Infectious.
Plagued.
He died. So many died. His seven sons.
Seven out of eight.

It happens in strange weather.
Heat shimmers on Dunvegan Loch.
The burns run dry. Black cattle
cool themselves knee-deep in lochans.
Lose themselves in shade beneath the oaks.
Offshore, the busses bulge with maizies
mad to spawn but gill-caught gutted salted.
Barrels of dead herring
extracted and exported.
Ex.
He is the piper to the laird McLeod.
He shuffles notes
in lines of four

A B A B
* A B A.

That silence is his namesake.
Padraig Og. His one surviving.
Scarred.
Disfigured.
Death

in such fine weather is a wonder, is it not?
The world awash with fire, within, without.

Can you make melody
when 7 out of 8 tones are missing?
This is the beginning. 1626.
Sugar pans bubbling stirred
by plantation slaves.
Sweetness. Smoke.

Dithis

Viewed from the pitching birlinn on an Cuan Sgith,
Eilean a' Cheò dissolves and Innse Gall
precipitates out of the winter squall,
grainy under Roineabhal. But it is you
who travels from nostalgia towards a different shore:
though every ache and whimper, every blurring tear, caress,
bramble stain, skint knee, milk tooth, giggle,
mischief, kindness and reproach were real and will be real,
though entropy pays out the tow of time,
binds you to what's lost, ensnares you in what will be lost
(for there'll be losses yet). McCrimmon sails
towards his dead sons' future though already in their past
and Padraig's future griefs are real and inconsolable
though not yet now – or merely overlooked. Ceol mor
as hair-shirt and as valediction. St. Clement's tower
at Roghadal.

Suibhal

On Innse Gall…

The pibroch needs lost time to make its harmonies
proceed from memory to anticipation
across the fragile bridge of one
particular configuration of eight digits
and a constant pressure on the bag.

Nine tones and four phrases.
He locks the pattern into memory like spin-cells
evolving from experience - DNA transcripted
amidst trial and error – heuristics and tradition.

Grace-notes and doublings, tachums and birls
encrust like beardy mussels, trail like kelp-
reminiscences slowing the steady tread of the Urlar,
the steady progress of lament celebrating
present absence

and coming absence present just the same
until the chanter's broken and the drones
proscribed – the tongue's forbidden :
headstones mumble in the mist like puirt a beul.

Homecoming

Anna Macfie

When nothing is left, memory returns
and what you have been waiting for
is turned to, like an old dog on a path
half-acknowledged, unerring -
there does not have to be wood-smoke
or Mistle-thrush song
there is only the indefinable interior silence
that comes with stillness and rest
a stream running in the background
leafless trees lining the way
a scent of leaf-mould seeping into the earth
cloven prints in the mud
A grey tin roof seen through branches
unadorned, a metal latch lifting shadow
to daylight; cleanly lit rough boards
and a faint smell of tar -
the window frame corner stuck with chitin
moths' wings dropped by bats,
frost on the grass

Ware

Cáit O'Neill McCullagh

the ware on the Kiltearn shore waits
steady and held fast, but for the ebb
that sifts and slakes over its tresses
the ware on the cobbles at Balconie
waits for the safe return of the sea
the birth-break-water mother wave
a hamefarin lover, not lost at all
returns
repairs
renews
and the unruly dance of all living
stirs up the drookit, shanty ware
and lifts its weeds to freedom

Fulmar. Monoprint by Alice V. Taylor

Glacialis, the Blue Fulmar, flies south

Lydia Harris

i
She hears dogs in the storm,
she's come to her ledge

from Greenland,
you can hear her heart beat

through rotting flesh
through the oil slick.

She is half blue.
She fell through the east wind.

Just the touch of a feather,
a tap from her splayed feet

in the language of home,
is a shaft of light.

ii
She says, *Try me with salt water,*
the weather in Greenland is colder.

I say, *Show me your webbed feet*
let me wrap my hands round your rib cage.

She squats on the table.
Open your wings, I plead,

spread the blue of you,
fly to the sink and back

land on my head
ruffle your beak through my hair,

lower your wings either side of my head,
let me hear your breath.

iii
She roosts on the altar of the Ladykirk,
at watch, she ices each stone with her stare,
at dream, she sees the light of snow.

She receives the first inkling of spring,
her wings slide into cloud,
her flight path is a willow in the west wind.

iv
Between breast and wing
her grey heart pushes
towards the sky

v
Propelled by air
she sails through
a tangle of cloud.

She fears blind-eye,
wing-splitting wind,
her feathers sleeched,

she fears the drowning,
her ledge iced, her chick
screeching mid-ocean.

vi
Enter her dusk, her blue cloud,
share her miles, her air streamed,
the gust which carries her,
her ghost-glide to where
the cuttles have gone.

vii
She returns to last year's flag in the roof,
knows it by smell, by light, by over and under,
by the tide, the eye of the flounder.

She knows homecoming in her down,
in the flexed tendons of her legs
and the flow of blood through her.

She follows the sun and the moon
with the point of her yellow bill.
The film in her brain loops hatchlings,

(she's been here before) on the wing,
taking off, settling down. The lichens' crust
on the ledge is home.

You're Breaking Up

Mareth Burns

We are talking-
talk-
we-
….
Back again, talking
in mixed up pixels,
I rebuild your face in my mind's eye
I frame you sitting at
a distant window looking
, watching
Your smile blurs
….
I call you from across town
on the other side of the upside down
we're hanging out-
different dimensions,
cubist, right? Little boxes
Can you - ?
You're-
"What did you do today?"
What answer is there
I walked all the way back to my room
picked up my phone and called you
and I talk: Like This Now, projecting
fracturing protection
from-
Will I still know how to talk after this?
Will you know me? Will I know you?
We are talking
and my words come in bursts,
typing, like:
"Another day living out history!"
"I really hate this, hahaha!"
"…"
I want
I-
…… All that I am-
-do you understand?
and I see myself only in this glass
smeary with thumb prints,
longing for somewhere else to be.
When I go outside
the sky feels like a lonely prayer
and I want to crumble like dust,
dance into the air
Are you still there?

He, For One, Did Not Need the Blood of Those Who Loved Him

Story by Kevin MacNeil

The old man who lived next door said he saw people in 'more than five dimensions'. He also said that we have more than five senses. I was a kid and didn't know what to believe. In Gaelic, we have *'an dà shealladh'* – 'the two sights', better known as 'the second sight'. So I asked the old man if that is what he meant – seeing a body of mourners winding their way through the village a week before someone dies, that kind of thing. There was a war going on, and many young men were dying.

He shook his head.

I tried a different tack. 'What do you mean by more than five senses, then? Miss MacDonald said we have' – and I counted these off on my fingers – 'taste and touch and sight and hearing and smell.'

We were sitting on an old wooden bench out the back of his croft-house. He turned, raised the pipe in his right hand up to his mouth, clamped it between his few teeth and brought his hand down swiftly and shoved me hard sideways, pushing my scrawny body right off the bench.

I fell to the ground, outrage flushing my cheeks before the ground punched me in the hips and hands and side. 'Ow!' I yelled, as much for attention and anger as pain.

Flushed with adrenalin, I sprang to my feet. He looked me in the eye, removed his pipe and said, 'Are you telling me your sense of balance doesn't exist?'

That shook me more than the fall. My anger vanished. I think my mouth gaped for a few seconds as I stared at him, unblinking. I sat on the bench in slow-motion.

'What have you learned, *a bhalaich*?'

'Uh, that your sense of balance is...a sense.'

He smiled and nodded, puffed some smoke out. 'And what else?'

'Not to believe Miss MacDonald?'

He laughed. 'Och, she means well. I have a painting of her underway somewhere.'

I thought he said a painting of her underwear and was going to be brave enough to ask if I could see it though I was not truly sure whether I was brave enough to see Miss MacDonald's *drais*. But right then his face grew serious and he said, 'What did you use to learn what I just taught you?'

I couldn't answer his question. I don't remember much more of that conversation, except that I was frustrated not to be able to give a good reply, and it left me tossing and turning in bed that night. In fact, the question stayed with me for decades because I recalled it years later on a robust Buddhist retreat in the Kandyan hills. 'Buddhism,' said the monk, 'shows us that the mind is one of the senses.' That hit me, but is not really what this story is about.

Maybe a week after the old man pushed me off the bench I was back visiting him. It was stormy outside, so we were in his sparse living room, a clock ticking loudly on the mantelpiece above a blazing fire. His living room was almost empty. I wondered how he passed the time when I wasn't around. He must be so...bored.

'What do you do all day?' I blurted.

'What does yourself do?' he said.

'I go to school. Play football. Go fishing.'

'You think I haven't done all those things?'

'But what do you do?' It made my mind into a painful, empty thing to picture him sitting in that dismal room all day with a clock ticking and nothing happening. (Not long after this I realised my parents sent me to his house not only to give them a break but to ease the old man's loneliness, and a long time after that I realised no, it was because the old man gave me infinitely more than I gave him).

'It must be so boring,' I said, annoyed by his silence, 'sitting around all day doing nothing.'

'Oh, I would hardly say I do nothing.'

I was a bit *bragail* – cheeky – and said, 'Smoking your pipe doesn't count.'

'Does capturing a person's essence count?'

'What's a person's essence?'

He paused. 'You can't explain it in words.'

'How then?' I whined.

At last he said '*Ceart*,' sighed and stood up. '*Trobhad*. Come on.'

He led me through to his bedroom – and there, to my astonishment was Miss MacDonald. On a big wooden table.

Not in person. A painting of her. A much younger version of her. Now, in retrospect I can see that Miss MacDonald was a lonely, unhappy and, I think, anxious person. Certainly, she had a drink problem. And she was what was then known as a spinster, a word you don't hear so much nowadays. On more than one occasion she arrived to class very late; we were making a racket, which died down as we became aware that Miss MacDonald was standing in the doorway with an incongruous and unconvincing grin, waving at us like somebody signalling a wilful bull to change direction. There were other things. The way her handwriting was sometimes immaculate, but just as often misbehaved. Her acrid perfume, I now see, had a practical purpose.

'What's a person's essence?'
He paused. 'You can't explain it in words.'
'How then?' I whined.
At last he said 'Ceart,' sighed and stood up. 'Trobhad. Come on,'

But there she was in painted form – not just in how she looked, but something else about her. Miss MacDonald sits there – present tense because at the time of writing (1975) I still own the painting; the old man, with typical prescience, left it to me in his will. In the top right is his name and the date on which he painted it (1900). Miss MacDonald is hunched over a table which has a blue bottle and a glass, strongly suggesting an alcoholic drink. And indeed an alcoholic. Miss MacDonald is at once hugging and protecting herself. Her left hand rests under her chin – perhaps not so much propping her head up as unconsciously stroking her chin as one does when deep in contemplation.

She looks as though she is ruminating, almost scheming, but I don't think it's quite that. I am more persuaded that she is either reliving a memory or running through her mind some vivid possibility, a lucid daydream. Her hair is fixed in its usual uncompromising bun with sideburn-like embellishments, but is black as outer space whereas when I was a child it was as grey and forlorn as slush. The drink has made her unselfconscious, for the body language and the expression on her face seem private. That is what makes the painting so vivid and lifelike. It offers up Miss MacDonald's...essence.

Miss MacDonald was, at the time I saw the picture, in her 60s (and looked, to my boy eyes, so much more ancient than that). The old man showed me this painting when I was about eight or nine years old, which would have been some time in the early 1940s. I remember how Mum and Aunty Ciorstag and my cousin Murdigan and I would gather round a wireless radio most evenings in Donnie Brainy's house and listen to a man with a posh accent describe the unimaginable killings of World War Two.

So, a little over four decades had passed since the old man painted Miss MacDonald. A few things occurred to me: he was a gifted painter, not just, as I have increasingly learned, a wise teacher who planted slow, slow seeds in my mind; Miss MacDonald's essence was still evident after all this time; I never grasped what he had meant when he described the picture as 'underway' forty years after he'd painted it; I truly believed, and still do, that the old man could indeed see people's invisible dimensions.

In the late 1950s I went to Aberdeen University. Being shy of the city meant I spent most of my time in the library or the pub. And one day I was mooning around the library when I picked up a book from the art section. I wasn't studying art, but I was bored of staring at dense theology texts and wanted to look at something easy on the eyes. I absently picked a book from a shelf and flicked through it. I can still feel that large, cold hardback book in my hands. It fell open on the very image the old man had painted of Miss MacDonald. The entire room collapsed, telescoped in on itself. You could have knocked me off a bench with a feather!

I may even have physically gasped, because some students at nearby carousels shushed me. But anyone would have made a noise of surprise. That painting was hanging in my lodgings in Diamond Street and I knew its every nuance. Here it was in the book, every detail of the picture, from the bright, tempting blue of the bottle to the sadder, darker blue of Miss MacDonald's dress, reproduced exactly. Every detail except one. For where it should have been signed by my old, now deceased, neighbour and friend, it offered, like an insult, the name of Picasso instead. And whereas I knew it as 'Portrait of Miss MacDonald, 1900', this book claimed it was called 'Femme au café (Absinthe Drinker)' and that it had been painted in 1901-02. My mind reeled.

I tried to understand what had happened here. Did one of the most famous - and, I learned, notorious - of modern artists somehow encounter a crofter from the Outer Hebrides in 1900 or 1901? Had the old man next door lied to me?

I checked the book out of the library and ran home.

Two new areas of investigation opened up in my life that day. One was instigated by the book, the other by what I discovered on the back of the painting.

The book catalysed an exploration of - I almost wrote an 'interest in' - Picasso's life.

I had no interest in this man whom I conceived from the beginning as an imposter, a fraud. The more I learned of him the less I liked him. I leave aside any analysis of the quality of his paintings (other than to say that there is obviously at least one of 'his' works I have loved since I was a little boy, a painting that has played a meaningful role in the narrative of my life).

As a human being, Picasso was a misogynist, an egotist and a sadist. His own grand-daughter said of him: 'He needed the blood of those who loved him.' Notice she didn't say 'of those whom he loved'. He loved himself. A rich and powerful man, he kept the women in his life poor and dependent. He demanded human sacrifices (dignity, love, life itself). Of the seven most significant women in his orbit, he drove two mad and two to suicide.

He took.

The old man next door gave. He freely planted subtle seeds. His was a more brilliant genius than Picasso's, for it lacked ego, it existed for the greater good. As an example, look at what he wrote in pencil on the back of the painting, which I discovered when I unframed it in my Aberdeen lodgings, manically searching for clues:

"What appears is the dependent. How it appears is the fabricated. Because of being dependent on conditions. Because of being only fabrication. The eternal non-existence of the appearance as it is appears; that is known to be the perfected nature, because of being always the same. What appears there? The unreal fabrication. How does it appear? As a dual self. What is its nonexistence? That by which the nondual reality is there."

Trisvabhāva-nirdeśa (Treatise on the Three Natures), Vasubandhu

The old man next door did what he did without fanfare. He maintained a quiet commitment to planting these seeds for their own sake, not for 'rewards' such as fame or money. He lived by fine, subtly miraculous, principles. He was humble, and showed kindness to everyone. He cut peats for neighbours, he fished for them, he made all his acquaintances' lives that bit better. And he always had time for a restless nuisance of a boy. His life was his teaching, and I am still seeing its nuances.

The ideas expressed in the writing on the back of the painting planted another seed in my mind - an interest in Yogacara, a form of Buddhism that explains how thoughts, words and actions are seeds that migrate from one life to the next.

What he did with that painting is what he did with my mind. The self is the other, and there is no other.

It is noteworthy that he attributes the quotation, much as I disclose here that I heard this story from my friend and neighbour John MacLeod, who asked me to share it. May its own humble seeds grow into something worthwhile. ■

The Museum of Loss

Story by Peter Davidson

The Museum of Loss has no permanent home: its collections are always on tour, sometimes on show in more than one location at once. Things restless of their nature, disquieted and melancholy, objects borne down by a burden of memory too grave for them to sustain. It was to contain these that the Museum came into being.

The Museum has no website, publishes no maps, offers no directions to visitors. When it has halted and set forth its exhibits, the Museum never advertises its presence, save by the most discreet placard, noticed only by those predisposed to see it. There are, however, conditions in which the Museum is most likely to be found.

Winter dusk, prickle of frost, cold in the air, smoke in the throat.

Lesser streets of provincial cities, railway arches, smudged brick, flaking stone.

River Harbour, fog, ships' sirens, splinters of glass and ice between cobbles.

⋆

Latest summer, sullen and overblown, thunderstorms approaching. A fair on the edges of a country town.

Cut grass on the drainage ditch, level horizon, murmur of insects, heaviness of trees.

Vapour of petrol, mechanical music, arc lights and flares.

⋆

Outer London, failing parade of shops, overshadowed autumn day.

Weary end of afternoon, rain setting in, tyres on wet asphalt.

One shop lit behind a whited-out window.

⋆

Spring, hill road, long views of cold slopes and shores, far bitter wind.

Cardboard notices and arrows, tracks which are only a scatter of stones in matted grass, rusted gates and fallen stones.

A croft or field barn, sole on that scarred hillside.

The visibility of the Museum depends to a great degree on the condition of the visitor. Unease and longing are the moods to which the Museum will disclose itself. Or a degree of fever, illness coming on. An aimless walk, undertaken as a late distraction, is liable to end at the door of the Museum. Those more robust, more anchored in the present, will stride past and never see its sign, never guess that it has almost brushed against their lives.

The curatorial staff are highly qualified for their posts, which is why they appear inconsolable. Hence the weary perfection of their manners, the sincerity of their expressions of regret.

The collections policy of the Museum is governed by the dictum WHAT IS TERRIBLE ABOUT OBJECTS IS LESS THEIR SILENCE THAN THEIR ELOQUENCE. The order of exhibits in the Museum's cases is governed by heirarchies of displacement. And always the sense that there is a perfect place for the display of any object, and that that place is elsewhere.

There is no museum shop. Visitors will come to appreciate the absence.

Opening hours: *belated, benighted.*

Price of admission: in one sense, free. In another, *at a price.* ■

CARVED

Patricia McCaw

Buried beneath the daily news feeds
lies a substratum of archaeological findings,
like today's discovery in a Scottish river

of unworked stone, complete with triple disc,
crossbar, mirror, notched rectangle
and two internal spirals. Pictish.

A memory surfaces, of Dad, a year before
his funeral, examining a rock on our home
beach across the shortest sea route to Scotland.

I'm tracing sand with my foot, trying to create
patterns, and I see how the papery soles of his shoes
are being sucked by the sand into moulds.

His face is alight, born again with discovery.
These are markings, I'm telling you,
workings in the rocks by ancient men.

His fingers, rarely keen on human contact
touch the grooves and whorls as if they're in love
with stone, and at last his hazel eyes

make hopeful contact with mine.
But I can only see damage from impact,
erosion, with no meaning or lineage.

Yet today, I'm willing to accept new findings,
trusting in strangers who've come from afar,
not believing in the words of my source.

How I wish that just once, I'd looked closer,
read the runes and placed the ear of my heart
to the stone of deep time.

A possible Kerouac
Deborah Moffatt

In a small café we ate lunch
tucked away somewhere behind the Zócalo,
our pockets full of packets of herbs and nuts,
seeds and doubts, witchcraft or magic, *brujería*
in abundance for those who believe, sly eyes
and sleight of hand to us.

We were three, or five, or seven,
or more, foreigners, but not strangers,
friends, by presumption, by circumstance,
by default, one always going spare, all of us
falling in and out of love, with each other,
with ourselves, with Mexico.

Kerouac came here once
someone said, and maybe Burroughs.
The odd man out among us knew all about it,
himself more Burroughs than Kerouac, not a loner
but always alone, an errant thread dangling
loose at the edge.

Everything was red: the tables, the chairs,
my skirt, the food soaked in tomatoes and chipotle.
I ate goat, a notion, a disappointment, tough
and stringy; you drank beer from a bottle
and only later noticed the gritty sludge
lying at the bottom.

It was a mere coincidence
that everything that day was red, fading,
all of it, as we ate, sucking seeds and nuts
from our teeth, threads and strings fraying,
lives disintegrating. What did it matter
if Kerouac had ever been here?

The sediment was everywhere,
undermining the city, a constant erosion
of purpose, of integrity. One by one, we left
the café, each other, Mexico. Scattered, gone,
disappeared, dead or alive, we exist, still,
a tale to tell, a possible Kerouac.

The Turn
Deborah Moffatt

Half a life, I've left behind,
an old pair of shoes in Bundoran,
a skirt in Glenties, journeys lengthened,
roads travelled twice, a ferry nearly missed
as back and forth we raced between Cavan
and Larne to collect my flute forgotten
in Cootehill, my passport in Donegal
returned by mail, my wedding ring
nearly lost forever.

Everything else I kept safe,
every tune I ever heard or played
in public houses the length of the land,
night after night from Baltimore in Cork
to Ballycastle in the north, pints drooling,
jigs and reels streaming, the smiles and tears
of Erin in every liquid eye, peaty smoke clinging
to my hair, my skin, my clothes, every note
lingering in my lungs, my heart, my blood,
and by day, remembering
the forgotten, retracing our steps
through lonesome Glenade in a mist
of amber and grey, the last of summer
fading, on the radio Seamus Heaney purring
as if to reward me for my carelessness, returning
again and again a necessity, like the turn of a tune,
a beginning and an ending. an answer
to a question understood.

The Bride
Deborah Moffatt

She waits, day after day,
her fleecy dress soaked with rain,
the hem anchored with stones
and embroidered with dirt,
her feet buried in earth,
vines coiled around
her stick-thin legs,
her veiled head littered
with leaves and dead flies,
her lips forever smiling
"Mackie's" upside down,
her suitor a crow
picking at her gown,
and all those little rabbits
nibbling at the fallen petals
of the bouquet she never held
like the children we didn't know about
until now: just look at her, out there
in the garden, a wreck of a woman
past her prime, time, we decided,
to take her down.

Saints of Central Station
Marion McCready

Floating through the melancholia of Costa Coffee,
the stripes on my cardboard cup resemble
a slashed face.
    The shop music speaks to me;
the aroma of Chai Tea speaks to me.
Whose clump of black hair
lies on the slippy floor? How did it get there?
Where is the head missing this hair?
Where is the hand that yanked it?

It's 7pm and I'm in Glasgow Central
killing time before night shift takes me
to the south side.
    What's the time? Is it time yet?
Night shift is calling up the train tracks.
Central Station clock tick-tocks
above the lives of so many.

I sit in the corner of the coffee shop,
a man walks past, money chinking
    in his pocket, he says
It's a bloody shame, so it is.
I'm people-watching through the goldfish bowl
of the window. The glass creates halos
on the bodies of commuters.
    Creates a Hildegard with cobalt hair;
Kentigern with a mohawk; Joan of Arc
in heeled ankle boots, tattoo on her lower leg
rising up and flying through the air.

A Rainbow Kneels on the Shoulders of Dun na Cuaiche
Marion McCready

A faint rainbow, like a quiet burst of applause.

A muted rainbow of autumn trees
circles the heels of Dun na Cuaiche
like the faded hues of a dying glow stick.

The trees are wild horses champing at the bit,
charging up the hill, manes flashing behind them.
    I cannot catch hold of them.

I cannot catch hold of this autumn.
I'm waiting for the rainbow of trees to smash into
    the rainbow in the sky.

For these horses to carry me out of the shadows
    into spectacular light.

Lockdown
Marion McCready

When the world stopped, all that moved
was the Clyde Firth
inside of me.

I saw no one, I heard no one.
My ruminations were stored in the great
ballrooms of the waves.

They opened like the mouths of basking sharks
closing on my thoughts,
tumbling to the shore.

Occasional raindrops on the window
became my playmates.
I did not know how alone I was.

When I stopped moving,
the Clyde was always in motion.

When I was in stasis,
the Clyde was a funfair;
its light shattering the sky all night long.

MRI

Story by Ian Tallach

'Right! Lying comfortably, Sir?' the radiologist is asking. 'Good to go!' I send my voice, as best I can, beyond the plastic shield that keeps my head in place, up to the shiny metal inner-workings of the scanner, then on down the tunnel to the room outside. Hopefully, she'll hear at least a whimper. But there's no reply.

Her voice, when it eventually comes, is like a whisper in my ear. 'OK. That's your scan about to start. What music did you want, again?'. It must be coming through my headphones. I take it she can hear me too.

'Ehm. Music? This thing, you say, is… ehm… loud? So, Bach… might be the boy. Sort of a counterpoint, maybe?' I chuckle to myself… inanely… never mind.

I hear the first few bars of Toccata and Fugue, before it starts – first, metallic grinding, then machine-gun fire and something like a sawmill, only louder, then all 3 - white noise - every amplitude and frequency at once. In the seconds between salvos, Bach's organ masterwork is an enfeebled squeak. After perhaps five minutes, there's another whisper in my ear. Only one word - 'Loud…?' is understandable to me. But still, her voice is reassuring, I must say.

'Louder, please,' I tell her, just before the onslaught starts again.

I'm feeling strangely relaxed. Some folks I know who've had an MRI say they would never come back here – not for a million pounds. 'Too claustrophobic,' they say. 'Deafening.' So… I'm smiling with the knowledge that I'm actually quite grateful for the chance to disengage from all responsibilities and expectations, for an hour. Thoughts come and go. Breathing is slow. Hmm… this 'mindfulness' - it must be working.

But then, I realize she must have meant the SOUND – she was asking me if the MACHINE was loud, and not the music. And I asked her to turn it up! Ha! I laugh again. Then the notion that it might be inappropriate to laugh, or move at all, whilst an expensive, high-end, micro-millimetre-perfect reconstruction of my brain is underway, makes me laugh more.

Right! Mindfulness! Thoughts come and go. Observe them from a distance. I wish they'd have a little narrative sometimes, though… that they'd be more meaningful, connected… relevant, maybe. Thoughts - where do they come from?!

In the coffee roasters, last week, I had a chat with Heather – the wife of the proprietor. (Lovely guy. He doesn't mind – she chats to everyone).

'Where did you land this time? She asked me.

'Well, pretty close to Peru, albeit in the ocean,' I told her.

'Cup of Arequipa for John!' She shouted back to Kevin. (Kevin's her husband, by the way. John's my name).

And I see I must explain another thing. (These thoughts! I told you they lacked narrative.) At the coffee place they have a globe just to the left of the entranceway. As a half-ritual-half-standing-joke sort of thing, I spin it every time I go there, close my eyes and point. My finger stops the twirling world, so to speak. And the closest coffee-producing country - I get beans from there, if they have them in stock… which, so far, they always do.

I remember thinking 'Ah! Peru!' I closed my eyes and thought of memories of toucans in the jungle, musty smells and howler monkeys, sun so bright between the trees I had to blink.

Back in the scanner, it occurs to me, my eyes are very closed indeed. Closed here, of course, closed in the coffee roasters and the jungle.

'And… how are YOU?' asked Heather. She had a coffee too.

'OK. Could do with a little structure to my life, though.' (I don't know where that came from.)

'Ah! Structure. I need a lot of structure,' she sighed like someone envious of those who have it.

'You need more structure too?' I asked.

'No! On the contrary.' She took a sip of coffee, smiled and then said - 'can't go through a day without it – planning, to-do lists, frameworks, blueprints for everything. I'm very organised! (It sounded claustrophobic – more so than this MRI). 'Just ask Kevin,' she swivelled her chin slightly, to indicate her husband, who was busy with some beans from Ethiopia, behind the counter. It impressed me, her economy of movement – just her jaw and not her head, or eyes, which never left my face.

'That true, Kevin?' I asked, turning to look at him.

He nodded gravely.

'Well, that's very strange,' I said. 'Heather, you've always struck me as… ehm… temperamentally, the opposite of that – refreshingly so, if you don't mind me saying. I mean you're spontaneous, warm, empathic, always flexible enough to accommodate the wishes of another… genuinely interested.' (I use too many adjectives, I know. Sorry.)

'You listen to jazz?' she asked, incongruously.

'Sometimes. Why?'

'Bill Evans, the pianist on 'Kind of Blue' by Miles Davies – probably the ultimate jazz album – writes on the back of the L.P. about a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous.'

'Forced?' I blurted.

'Yeah, forced. He must paint on a thin, stretched parchment, without lifting the brush, not even once.' She held up one index finger. (At the time, I thought that was to emphasize the word 'once', but looking back now, I can see she meant to symbolize a lifted brush.) 'The result,' she said 'is something immediate… free from deliberation. Takes a lot of practice.'

'But, pardon me' I scratched my head. 'I've always thought Japanese art was… ehm… characterized by rigorous discipline, austerity, maybe… sort of a stoical detachment.'

There was a pause and a curious look from Heather, as if she wanted me to think instead of speak.

Eventually, she said 'Ex-act-ly.'

'Hmmm…' I scratched my head again. (That must have been my itchy-scalp beginning. Here in the MRI, there's nothing I can do about it.) In the coffee roasters, I continued 'So… you mean a lot of structure and discipline has to go into the… ehm… preparation of your… ehm… canvas… before any direct or… spontaneous action… which makes it SEEM to me… that… ehm… everything is undeliberate?'

'In not so-many-words.' (She has a way with gentle mockery. Can't say I don't deserve it.)

'Alright. I must be going,' I said. 'Bye, Heather. See you later, Kevin.' He nodded and gave me a languorous wink from behind the counter. Very cool – I think the man has reggae in his head. They make a perfect couple.

'Five more minutes,' the nurse says in a chirpy voice. I open my eyes, but only for a second. Bach is now Stravinsky. Rite of Spring – the Sacrificial Dance. I can just make out that final plunge of the dagger, between cycles of metallic grinding. Consider me menaced. I laugh again; I have to.

Someone sent me a map of the universe on Facebook, recently. It's theoretical, of course, but looks remarkably like the inside of my eyelids. I imagine it looks like the inside of an electron. Reminds me of Hamlet - that's the Shakespeare play I've read – 'I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space…' Ha! That's better than mindfulness! I think I'll be alright – the MRI is almost finished. ■

The Lift

Howard Wright

I see my life for what it is
as I wait at the lift. Inside, all the buttons
are pressed and no one says anything,
and at every floor no one gets off.

At each floor, no one gets on. Then
the wall speaks and a couple enters and talk
all at once as if no one is there.
There is only me, and they laugh

and we are all impressed
as we are meant to be. Eventually, without
realising it, we reach their floor
and the couple leave together.

No one gets on. I go back down
only to find my life waiting for me.

Latvian Fall

Kevin McGowan

it's a place people clatter to in old baltic trains
come to forget the tell-tale heart of the city as colour
fades to sepia. dogs who still remember their lupine
forefathers guard ramshackle homes and hearing
their guttural terms and conditions instead of another
taxi backfiring is a good argument for being alive

gurgling brooks flank autumn roads like moats
around each house crossable by plank bridge
or spring-heeled leap. through a mesh fence
potatoes sit heaped at the door of a root cellar
winter defences harvested by those who yet hold
communion with the earth. it does not seem to me,
a visitor, the stodgy centrepiece of lingering soviet
tastes, but rather a testament to survival
hardworking hands and indomitable spirit

rain bubbles in peat moss, blackening the single-file
boardwalk through the bog, mortar shelling the fox
moth caterpillar traversing a sphagnum labyrinth
on the quest to metamorphosis. to take wing and see
the world anew must be like rubbing shoulders with god

Reynisfjara

Kevin McGowan

i zig-zag my way to basalt refuge
in a tug-of-war between my feeble
strawman husk and the north atlantic's
vacuuming suck, a sonic blitzkrieg
of white noise fury, dragged inch-by-inch
toward the frothing snake-heap of waves

along this beach at the end of the world
where black sand gathers like ashes
or midnight bone meal from mythic
titans, the lashed pink pulp of my face
is just the beginning as i remind myself

people have died here and will again
but how magnificent all the same
such is the quest to experience beauty:
we are sometimes compelled to play
the part of knight-errant venturing
into the den of some fabled wyvern

The Borrowed Days

Jennifer Morag Henderson

We are living in the Borrowed Days, the Old Days
an extended month, lending extra time –
the Dangerous Days, shaping the year.

The month of storms, the Winter *Faoilteach*
the month of wolves, circling nearer and near
scenting the stockpiled foodstores.

They say the Borrowed Days need storms –
welcome these days, embrace them,
the lockdown sun, green shoots of dying elm.

Half-green, half-bare, the wind moves the trees
diseased branches cage the sun
bar the light that comes down to us

The blossom snows around us
blooms pile up in birdsong drifts
these three days, and they were ill:

The first day was air, pure and clear, the easy breath.
The second day, that sun, bright and high; the moon, its counterpart, full and near.
The third day was cold in the shadows.

We are living in the Borrowed Days
the lengthening month
a piece of time snatched from the larger plan

the last days without knowledge
of the future, what weather will take over from
this locked moment.

The Daft Days

Jennifer Morag Henderson

More than half the year is made up of lost days and
Daft Days, borrowed days and half the year is
gone – bits of our lives slipping away.

My friends' faces have fallen into old age
jaws pulling down on screen, lips thinning –
searching the mirror for evidence

and the reflection shows the branches
out the window behind me.
Even a dying elm is teeming with life

the leafless branches, peeling bark are home
to a host of insects, the woodpecker comes into town
to search for them; easy prey.

The crows mob til he flies in a flash of red
the pigeon puffs out its feathers against the cold until
it is as large as a hawk

the starlings arrive later in a burst of noise.
People don't know what chaos looks like –
the streets are still in the morning air

but the colour of unease is creeping up to the first floor windows like the old fogs
like a sea mist like a haar like a smoky winter frosted morning
delay that sinking dread connection but

tune in now to the outside broadcasts
chaos doesn't look like explosions,
it is order, overwhelmed –

we are living in the Daft Days now. The Borrowed Days are long gone.
The time slipped through our hands like sand, like it always did,
ran out, and we were back at the beginning again.

Poet's notes: *there are a handful of days in February, or in March, that in old folklore are called the 'Borrowed Days'. There are many old rhymes about the Borrowed Days, and how the events and weather of these days can shape the rest of the year.* 'Faoilteach' *is Scottish Gaelic, and it can variously mean different things relating to this part of the calendar, but has its roots in the word for 'wolf'. The 'Daft Days' are the days between Christmas and New Year. Dutch Elm Disease has been around for a long time now, but has really only just reached the Highlands.*

Four poems bringing my Mexican family across the Atlantic Ocean to Scotland

Matthew del Valle

I. Daughter

I tell my daughter that she will be coming to the land of rainbows.
Why is it full of rainbows, Papá?
Because it often rains here at the same time as the sun shines.
But, Papá, I have so much more sun over here,
and such heavy rain
that it bounces
back up in the air
to come down twice.
So, why are there no rainbows where I am, Papá?
Refraction has no traction
in a child so young,
so I seek an alternative fact.
Y'know about the leprechauns and where they hide their gold, right?
Yes, Papá, in rainbows.
Well, the Aztecs hid their gold,
very carefully,
somewhere else.

II. Going to school

I have to pass a multiple choice test
on registering my children at their new Scottish school.
One of the questions is
Ethnic Origin.
A short question
that sends me on a long clamber
up family trees
to try to understand
who my kids really are.
They are not
White - British
because that's me, not them
and, even then, it´s not quite me either.
They could be
Asian - Other
but that would have been over 14,000 years ago
when the Asian - Others crossed the Bering Strait
and got copulating and populating the Americas.
Unfortunately, there is not an option for a
Conquered Aztec - Other,
whose **Hispanic Mother**
took a **White - British Lover.**
So, seeing
as I have a feeling
that crossing the choice
Other - Other
would suggest that my children are
not from this world,
or that
Not Known
would suggest my
care-less-ness,
I opt finally for
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups
in the hope that my kids
- who sometimes
can be as peely wallie
as the best of them -
will have room in them
for a bit of **White - Scottish** too.

III. Swapsies

We will swap the land of sun and fire
for the land of rain and ice, and
angry earthquakes and spitting volcanoes
for dormant rocks of royal miles.

We'll swap
cihtli for the celtic rellies,
danzón for a ceilidh,
Los Pumas for The Dons,
Chivas for roast lamb.
We'll swap
malinchismo for better together.

We'll swap
speed limits enforced by
surprising, shattering, sleeping policemen
for those enforced by insomniac cameras.
We´ll swap socially learned laws enforced by physics
for signs, signs, more signs, police warnings and fines.

We'll even swap
seeing dogs kept on roofs or in a designer pram,
for the middle ground of keeping them on *terra firma*,
whilst valeting their number twos during our walks together.

As a means of deciding where to go,
we used to write a ledger of pros and cons
comparing the two countries.
It is banal, but no less true:
that there's no swapping good for bad,
just two incomparables, two unweighables.

How can you compare
finding a half-hidden pyramid,
in a rainforest full of *xocolatl*
and howler monkeys roaring Jurassic,
with
clear blue skies
over a white blanket of fresh snow
and
the surge in your heart
as the first daffs bring back the warmth of the sun?

And so we'll just go ahead and swap
so many things, including this:
the feeling that anything can happen
for the comfort of knowing
that it likely
shall
not.

IV. Son

My young'un likes running as fast as he can
into the walls of our sub-tropical flat.
Then smack on his back
he falls with panache
on the hard, cold Mexican tiling.

Say not a word, about the deep pile, to Mum
found in our new Brittanic bathroom.
But son, you'll love it,
to fall back hard
on a soft, snug Scottish carpet.

What is it Like to be Alive?

Essay by Chris Arthur

A little boy with a horse in winter, 1958. Sweden.

The only information provided is in the caption: "A little boy with a horse in winter, 1958. Sweden." I first saw this photograph on December 6th 2017. That was the date when it turned up as the illustration on a calendar that gives a different picture for every day of the year. Since then, I've kept it by my desk and look at it often. In the way that some photos do, often for no apparent reason, this one speaks to me. It made an immediate impression; it continues to draw my eye – even though by now the elements of the picture are so familiar. For attribution, "Landskrona Museum Collection" is all that's credited. The name of the photographer isn't given.

What does the photograph show? A little boy is holding the reins of a white horse. They're standing in a snowy field or garden. There are four bicycles to his left. Only their rear wheels and saddles are visible, the photo cuts off the rest. The boy is holding the horse's reins in his ungloved right hand. You can see his fingers clearly. His grip is too loose, and the disparity in size between boy and horse too great, for him to be exercising any real restraint or control. He's four years old at most. His left hand is empty and held relaxed by his side, encased in a thick woollen mitten. He's well-dressed for the cold – hat with ear-flaps tied snugly under the chin, heavy coat and trousers, boots. Apart from his righthand fingers, the only exposed flesh is his face. He's looking towards the camera. It's hard to read his expression, but he seems content. The horse towers above him; the boy looks scarcely bigger than its head. It's a calm, unthreatening looking animal, but to call it "placid" would be a misnomer; there's a powerful sense of strength implicit in its body, which seems massive in comparison to the boy. The horse's head is turned away from the camera, its attention taken by something out of the picture on the boy's right. Behind them are some leafless trees with snow-covered trunks and branches. It looks as if it's almost dusk, or perhaps it's just a heavily overcast day. It's snowing, and the camera has caught the pale smuts of numerous flakes as they fall earthwards. It makes it seem as if the sky is stippled with a scattering of blurred stars – and it's possible that at least some of what at first sight seem like snowflakes are indeed stars, their pale luminescence dappling the fading light. Boy and horse are standing on what is probably a path, partially cleared of snow. A pair of ski-poles has been stuck into the ground not far behind them. It's hard to tell for sure, but the path may join a wider track or road. Where the ski-poles have been planted could be part of the tree-lined bank that marks the edge of this thoroughfare, which looks as if it leads to a house. My guess is that the photographer was standing in its doorway, sheltered from the snow. Horse, boy, bikes, and ski-poles, the suggestion of a path – there's something about the whole ensemble that has a sense of arriving home, even though no building is visible.

Describing the photograph is easy. It's more difficult to explain the impact that it has on me. It seems to have successfully caught a moment, which it offers up – intact and perfect – for the viewer to examine. It's almost as if a sliver has been netted from time's quicksilver flow and preserved here, its liquid voltage somehow confined within the frame, as if it were a kind of aquarium, instead of just draining away into the spent force of what's past. But almost any photograph can claim to capture whatever moment it pictures, albeit few do it as convincingly as this one. It's not this quality that gives the photo its particular potency.

What drew me to "A little boy with a horse in winter, 1958. Sweden" – and what keeps drawing me back to it – is the way it seems to pose a question, and to propose itself as a contributory fragment of an answer. From the moment I saw the photograph on December 6th 2017, a question came with it. The same question accompanies it still. Whenever I look at the picture, I hear a voice asking: "What is it like to be alive?"

This is, of course, a metaphorical way of putting it. I don't mean I literally hear someone asking me this question. Hearing a voice that isn't there might cast aspersions on my sanity rather than explaining anything about the photo's impact. But the question has become so closely linked with the photograph that I can't look at it without its asking also happening. Naturally this won't be the case for everyone. Others will bring to their looking their own interpretative perspectives; they'll see the photo through the unique filter of the person that they are. I can't tell what catalogue of associations this winter scene will create for others, or whether they'll find it as striking as I do. All I can say is that, for me, photograph and question have become so closely entwined that "What is it like to be alive?" now seems a better title for it than the one that's given.

Who poses the question? The best answer I can give is "the photograph itself." It's not as if the little boy – let alone the horse – turn questioner; it's not as if the ski-poles or bicycles, the trees or snowflakes come emblazoned with this interrogation so that everyone could see it. I don't think the lie of the land that's shown here has any question implicit in it, nor does the time of day or season. Yet there's something about

the totality of this scene that sparks the question. Or maybe what I mean is that there's something about the totality of the encounter – of my seeing this image – that invariably results in the question being asked. Sometimes I try to picture what happens by thinking of the photograph's elements as swirling contour lines or isobars marking out the shapes of horse, boy, ski poles. When I look at them, these lineaments temporarily detach from their positions, uncoil from the shapes they mark out and snake into me, tangle with the lines of my inner topography. The intermingling that results before they return to the photo braids and knots the psyche so that this form of words is invariably thrown out: "What is it like to be alive?"

It is, obviously, an impossible question to answer – or at least to answer fully and conclusively. Maybe one of the things that keeps drawing me back to the photograph is the way the question beckons to itself a whole swarm of contributory answers. What is it like to be alive? It's like having the warm smell of horse in your nostrils as snowflakes fall on your face and melt there. It's like sitting writing this sentence, trying to choose words that convey my meaning. It's like the taste of sun-warmed wine, the feeling of thirst, the glint of candlelight on hair. It's like a pilot's view of runway lights, an egg hatching, a leaf falling. It's like feeling the bits of rust from an old anchor chain come off on your hands as you haul yourself aboard an abandoned fishing boat left beached and abandoned in a remote bay. It's like being ambushed by a question held invisibly in a black and white photograph of a little boy holding the reins of a white horse.

I've tried out scores of formulations since first seeing the picture on December 6th 2017 and I know I'll try out more. But however large the swarm of answers grows, they'll never amount to more than a few droplets in a tiny rivulet that's one of billions feeding into an immeasurable ocean.

Who took the photo? The calendar gives no name. When I contacted Landskrona Museum, they told me that the photographer was Anders Hilding. This isn't the only Hilding photograph in their collection, but none speak to me the way this one does. I can see the others are accomplished compositions, taken with a high degree of technical competence, often accompanied by considerable artistic sensibility. That's not surprising. Hilding was a respected press photographer. Born in Landskrona in 1931, his pictures appeared in the area's newspapers over a period of forty years. In 2007 the museum held an exhibition of his work. His pictures also appear in a series of books compiled by his friend and colleague Kalle Berggren. I'd like to have asked Hilding about the circumstances of his picture of the little boy and horse, and wish I'd done so when I saw the photo in 2017. By the time I came to write this essay, it was too late. Hilding died in April 2020.

Looking at the Museum's holdings also alerted me to the fact that Ven (formerly Hven) is within Landskrona Municipality. This is the island in the Øresund Strait where Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) built Uraniborg and Stellaeburgum, his two famous observatories. I like to think of Tycho gazing into the same night sky the little boy in the photograph would have seen years later. What is it like to be alive? It's like lunar light falling on Tycho's retina, his brain forming pictures of the moon orbiting the earth (his accurate observations of the stars provided crucial groundwork for future discoveries). It's like losing his heart to Kirsten Jørgensdatter, the commoner with whom he contracted a morganatic marriage, in accordance with the law at that time, alienating many members of his disapproving noble family.

And what of the little boy? I know nothing about him beyond what the photograph reveals. I don't know his name, where he lived, who his parents were. I don't know if he had brothers or sisters, whether he enjoyed school, what path he followed through the years, what gave him pleasure, what caused him pain. I don't know if he's still alive – but there's a good chance he is. Is there somewhere in Sweden today, drawing breath into his lungs as I write this sentence, the man in his sixties who the little boy grew up to be?

What is it like to be alive? It's like knowing there are lives glimpsed in passing which unfurl beyond my notice into whatever shape they take. It's like looking at a picture of Anders Hilding and knowing that the eyes you're looking at once looked at the scene framed in this photograph. It's like sailing beyond sight of land, feeling another's heart beat close to yours. It's like walking in the rain and shivering. It's like the recurrent knowledge of our certain death. It's like walking down a crowded city street, or passing time with friends. It's like the sound of school playgrounds and the silence of the desert. It's like seeing injustice done and being powerless to prevent it. It's like the taste of cinnamon and blood and mint. It's like hearing a new-born's cries, watching news reports of famine, listening to an old man's fading breath. It's like balancing a tower of sea-polished pebbles till they fall, or throwing sticks for dogs.

Perhaps part of the appeal the photograph holds for me is that in 1958 I was about the same age as the little boy pictured. This makes me feel a kind of fugitive companionship, knowing that we've run life's course together, kept pace invisibly through the years without either of us realizing it, he following his life-story, I following mine, each locked into our own particular orbits of concern, members of a secret guild of unmet contemporaries, innocently complicit in the simultaneity of our momentary being. I imagine our two dots of sentient existence, the glow of our personalities, as tiny dust-speck meteorites following their trajectories across the space of our species' canvas, the biosphere of time and space that's occupied by Homo sapiens. What is it like to be alive? It's like living amidst the enormity of daunting numbers, knowing you're in the world with 7.8 billion unmet strangers, occupants of one planet among countless others in a universe that's some 14 billion years old. It's like forging a niche of familiarity, a cocoon of home and family, amidst incomprehensible scales of time and space. It's like knowing that, in the end, there's no image that can catch life's likeness, but simply the extraordinary reflection of our experiences looking back at us through the mirror of our consciousness.

In that most engaging of modern philosophical classics, *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962), J.L. Austin makes an observation that always comes to mind when I look at Anders Hilding's photograph. Austin says that "like" is a "flexibility device", with whose aid, "in spite of our limited vocabulary, we can always avoid being left completely speechless". He sums up this point in a memorable image, suggesting that "like" provides the linguistic equivalent of being able to shoot round corners. The photograph's question seems to have taken Austin's valuation of "like" to heart. What gives "A little boy with a horse in winter, 1958. Sweden" its power is that it helps to avoid speechlessness when faced with the raw fact of Being. It encourages me to shoot round corners. Looked at directly, life shrugs off our attempts to net its nature or explain it. The obliqueness of the comparisons the photo prompts provides glimpses of fleeting meanings, elusive faces, glimmers of a sense of sense. ■

Highland Cathedral

Larissa Reid

His name calligraphies in the river here;
Conversations ghost in autumn woodsmoke.
Even as his body turns to ash,
I'll cup his soul from the cinders,
Encase it in the palm of my hand,
Coorie him in, so that I may
Bring him back to his cathedral in the trees;
This open arched, golden echo of a place,
Structured in stillness and crafted time,
Where I can turn over a copper leaf
And bring him back, whole,
Breathing light and air,
And laughing at the birch leaves
Caught in my once-long hair.

Depth sounder

Larissa Reid

Once more, I am in the presence of river,
Conscious of slip-tread and pull
Into the realm of depth and ever-onward,
Moss drip and dipped flight,
Where time's tone and texture slip away.
I am citrus needle and wind empty trees,
I am fern filigree and copper foam rapid,
I am fresh fungi pushing upward,
Breaking soil's skin.
I am passing insect blur;
Wing-kisser, segmented body builder.
I am flow of once molten rock;
Liquid light queller, river cave dweller.
I am held, deep within.

Two Lockdown Tales

By Kevin Crowe

1. James.

I wish I could take my words back.

I never understood why she needed to work in such a stressful, low-paid job. No matter how often she told me she really enjoyed the work, I still couldn't get it into my head. Surely, I sometimes asked her, there are other enjoyable jobs you could get, ones that pay better and have less anti-social hours. No, she would reply.

She works shifts in a care home and is paid the minimum wage, with a small addition for when she's on nights. She told me once that she sees a lot of the residents as friends.

"Even those whose dementia is so far gone, they don't recognise anyone?" I asked her.

"Especially those," she replied. "Especially if there's no-one who visits them."

"Even if all they do all day is piss their pants and drool constantly?" I asked. She sighed. "They're still people. They're still human." She paused. "None of us can see into their minds. For all we know, there could be someone in there trying to get out, to express themselves. Even if there isn't, they still have feelings. They can still feel hunger, pain, pleasure. Anyway, they're not all like that."

I know she loves her job, but even so I can't understand why she puts up with the bullying and harassment. She just won't complain about it.

When I pressed her, she'd say: "What good would it do? You know what would happen if I complained. It would be my word against theirs, and I wouldn't get anywhere. Everyone would think I was playing the race card, and I'd end up having to leave. And I love the job." The last time I raised it, she added: "Remember what happened to you."

I nodded. I had been passed over for promotion once too often, so I challenged the IT company I worked for, invoking their grievance procedure. And I won. But it was a pyrrhic victory: life was made so uncomfortable, I couldn't stay there and stay sane, so I left. Then I found I couldn't get another job in IT. I remember how difficult life was at the time. I was afraid we'd end up having to live off Gloria's measly income, especially after I was diagnosed with type 2 Diabetes, which made finding another job even more difficult. So, almost in desperation, I set up my own IT consultancy business, working from home. No-one was more surprised than me when it proved a success.

Coronavirus had us both worried, particularly when the local hospital dumped more people in the care home to free up beds for the expected spike in Covid-19 numbers. I don't think the poor buggers who were moved around like cattle had any say in it, and according to Gloria the care home had no say at all. Apparently it was something to do with a service agreement.

When lockdown began, I thought I was one of the lucky ones. I already worked from home anyway and I was my own boss. I couldn't visit clients to sort out their problems of course, but I found that providing help at a distance worked most of the time. Whether it was a Skype or Zoom meeting or talking them through the problem over the phone, normally I could sort things out for them, at least temporarily.

I knew my diabetes and age put me at increased risk, so I stayed indoors, only going out for exercise and even then avoiding anyone I saw in the street, so I knew I was safe.

Gloria, ten years younger than me, was concerned, though. "What if I bring something back from work?" she asked me.

I laughed it off. I reminded her there hadn't been any cases at the care home yet. "And anyway, when all that protective equipment arrives from Turkey, we'll be fine."

That turned out well, didn't it? By the time she was provided with the necessary protective equipment, someone transferred from a hospital brought Covid-19 with them and it made itself at home, infecting other residents.

She came back from work one day wearing a mask and a gown, packed a bag and told me she was going to spend the next two weeks isolating herself at one of the caravans in the care home car park. When I moved to hug her, she stepped back and wouldn't let me get any closer. "It's for your own good," she said. "What if I've got it. I'd never forgive myself if I made you ill."

"Fuck my own good!" I yelled. I turned my back on her, refusing to speak to her.

"Please," she said. "You know I love you, you know I'm only thinking of you. Please James, don't be like this." I sat at my computer and ignored her. A bit later she said: "I've cleaned all the work surfaces I've touched and I'll clean the door handle on the way out. I love you."

I ignored her. I heard the front door close.

Later that night she rang me. She tried to explain, telling me the care home was doing its best to keep the healthy residents separated from the sick, and that she needed to be there to help, particularly as some of the carers were ill and they had extra residents to look after. She told me she loved me too much to put me at risk.

I replied: "If you love me so much, why are you putting them before me?" I could hear her sobs, but ignored them.

This morning I received a phone call from the care home. Gloria is now in hospital, seriously ill with the virus and needs oxygen. I'm not allowed to see her.

I love you Gloria. I didn't mean what I said.

2. Emily.

The lift was broken again.

Despite the protests of her two young children, she returned to her flat and collected the baby backpack carrier. Even though her youngest was now too big for it, she had no choice, not if she

was going to go to the shops. With Olivia on Emily's back in the baby carrier, the folded buggy under her arm and the oldest, Sam, who had only started school a few months ago, holding her hand, she made her way down the five flights of stairs, ignoring the stinging aroma of urine and navigating past the accumulated litter.

Long before she reached the ground floor, Olivia was kicking against the restraints of the baby carrier, her mumblings getting ever louder until they become a full-throated tantrum. Meanwhile Sam was dragging behind her, whining that his feet were sore. With a floor to go, he sat down on a step and when Emily told him to get up, he shook his head and pouted. No matter how much she pleaded, cajoled and even bribed, he refused to move.

After what seemed an eternity, she managed to get both Olivia and Sam to the ground floor. She unfolded and

Balquhidder, Blessing Of Angus

Donald Goodbrand Saunders

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, if you look to your left
you'll see the spot called Beanach Aonghais
where, they say, St Angus, our patron saint,
first gazed up the valley. And seeing
these fine woods, fertile plains,
steep, shapely braes sloping
to sparkling waters - seeing such loveliness
he knelt and laid
his gentle benediction on the land.
And just round the corner
at Auchtoo farm we come too … "

A filthy day in dark age Breadalbane. Gales
howl down the glen. A sky all cloud.
White horses on the loch. A clawing downpour.
On a hillock a figure, weighted
by his sodden robes, red face
and bald pate rain-lashed, shakes his crosier,
facing down the storm, and as it grows
he howls the louder,
hurling back at it
his indefatigable obstinacy.

Yes, they were tough buggers, the old tonsured ones,
their curses were brutal, their temper legendary
and when they blessed a place, it stayed blessed.

secured the buggy, strapped Olivia into it, stored the carrier in the back of the buggy, and the three of them made their way to the nearest shop: a small, overpriced supermarket. With two children in tow, there was no way she could have gone any further.

The shop only allowed two people in a time, so she queued outside, holding Sam tight to force him to maintain his distance from the man in front. Despite his wriggling and pulling, he was unable to free himself from her grasp.

When it was finally her turn to enter the shop, she had to let go of him in order to have a free hand for the groceries she was buying. Sam took his opportunity and ran down the aisle, pretending to be a plane and making appropriate noises. He ignored her calls to come back and, when he collided with an elderly customer, she was told to keep her children under control or she would be asked to leave.

Eventually, the nightmare was over and, with the shopping safely tucked in free spaces in the buggy, they returned to the tower block they called home.

She stared at the steep stairs, realising getting up the five flights would be even more difficult than getting down, now she had two bags of shopping. She knew she couldn't manage it, and did her best to keep the threatened tears at bay. She left the shopping on the ground floor, hoping it would still be there when she returned, struggled with the buggy and two children, eventually reaching her door. She sat the children in front of the TV watching cartoons, retrieved her shopping which, thankfully, hadn't been stolen. When she got back to her flat, she collapsed on the sofa and burst into tears.

Sam came to her and took her hand, asking: "What's wrong, mummy?"

She smiled, told him she was okay and pulled him onto her lap. Olivia, not wanting to miss out, insisted she too be allowed to sit on mummy's lap. It wasn't long before both children were asleep. Emily, despite the discomfort, didn't want to disturb them.

Later that night in bed, unable to sleep, her mind took her back over how her life had changed since lockdown. Being a single parent living in a high-rise flat with two young children was never easy, she accepted that. But she used to have a part time job that brought in a bit of money and her own mother would look after the kids while she was at work. The job in a local cafe had gone, not furloughed, but gone, as the cafe owner had decided to close the business altogether. And her mother was no longer allowed to help.

In the first weeks of lockdown she had relied on the local food bank, while her application for additional Universal Credit was assessed. She was grateful for the food, but it was humiliating having to ask. Surely, she thought, in one of the richest countries in the world, something was wrong when people had to rely on charity through no fault of their own. It made her so angry when she saw wealthy tax exiles pleading poverty and threatening to close their businesses unless honest hard-working tax-payers helped them out. She felt like puking.

No point in getting stressed out, she told herself, there's enough to worry about here making ends meet and keeping two young kids amused all day.

That was easier said than done. These past weeks she had begun to understand what drove some women to harm their children. The continual needy whining and pleading, the fights between the two of them, their refusal to allow her to have some quiet time to herself were all just too much. And she had to watch them like a hawk, otherwise they could harm themselves. Oh, she knew it wasn't their fault, that it was a combination of boredom and not understanding why they couldn't see their friends or their Nana.

But she was reaching the end of her tether. What with the lift being broken half the time, not even being able to relax on their daily exercise and the stress of shopping with two over-active and bored children.

The next day she kept it together over breakfast, and even when Sam and Olivia decided to help with the washing up and cleaning. She thought if she took them out for an hour, it might tire them out. She was pleasantly surprised to find the lift working. She ushered the two children inside, thinking it was a good start to the day.

Part way down, the lift stopped between floors. ■

Seed Time

Story by Amanda Gilmour

Heather placed her hand on her queasy belly—Alec's gift fluttered: her secret. Father could never know or else he'd beat the bairn out of her. She grabbed the war office telegram from Gordie's hands, and then she was outside running downhill, stumbling through frosted April greenery. The rising sun ignited thousands of frozen cobwebs in grass, gorse and the spaces in-between.

'Heather! Wait, lass!' Gordie called.

She knew he was grieving for his brother, but she had to get away. Fat tears rolled from her eyes, blurring the haar blanketing the Moray Firth. Sweat pricked her scalp, and the scrunched telegram lay limp in her damp palm. She slowed down to a fast walk. What was she going to do? Oh, how she wished it was her coarse brute of a father who was dead, not Duncan.

Gordie still called her. His voice was closing in. Heather stopped mid-field and sat amongst reams of drookèd grass. She flattened the telegram out on her lap, scanning her eyes over the words but the content hadn't changed: we regret to inform you Private D. R. Falconer, SEA, HRS, was killed in action on the 2nd of April 1916. She couldn't give a fig what they said. It couldn't be true! A surge of rage coursed through her, flushing her pale skin pink. She tore the telegram in half, and then into quarters, and kept tearing until tiny pieces lay around her, and buried her face in her hands. What would folk think of her?

She wasn't sure how long she stayed in that spot, but a plan formed. Gordie had proposed to her in February. Father had been so angry that she'd turned him down. He couldn't thole her beloved Duncan, but he thought Gordie would make a fine husband. Accepting the proposal now, was the only way to protect the bairn and herself from Father, but would Gordie still want her, knowing she carried another man's child: a bastard child? Still, the bairn was his brother's, so he might accept it, or perhaps he didn't need to know. She stood up and shielded her eyes from the sun, searching the yew-lined horizon, and then she spotted him coming fleet-footed, like, through the path she'd made.

'Gordie! I'm here!' She cried, and she started running towards him. Grass chaved at her hands. Her thoughts raced faster than her steps, and she thought her heart would explode in her chest. If they married soon, she could say they conceived the bairn on their wedding night. When it was born, she could pretend it had come early - like Maggie Croft's twins. A shadow crawled over her. She looked up, and he was there, right in front of her, back-lit by the sun.

'Do you still want to marry me?' She asked, shy like, but she was panting, trying to catch her breath, and he must have thought her a madwoman!

'What?' His face looked queer, like.

'I, I want to marry you. I've changed my mind.' She flushed pink around the gills.

He said neither nay nor yea, just nodded. She threw her arms around him, weeping into his shoulder for her stricken heart, and her treachery, but most of all she sobbed with relief for her bairn. Over Gordie's shoulder, the God-like presence of Ben Wyvis watched her, as it cushioned the lapping firth. ■

The Crimson River

Story by Elle Paterson

No one will believe this was an accident. He stares in fascination at the crimson river staining his hands. This is bad. So, so bad. Better get rid of the evidence.

Quietly, he opens his bedroom door and listens. Voices deep in the bowels of the house. Far enough away for him to risk it. He edges out of the room, creeps to the bathroom, grabbing all the tissues and towels he can carry.

Trying to clean it just makes it worse. He scrubs in increasing frustration as it spreads and stains, soaking through his trousers. They stick to his skin. He wants to cry.

The voices are louder now, coming up the stairs. What should he do? Heart exploding with panic, his eyes dart around the room, desperately searching. No more time. He has to hide. He holds his breath, trying not to make a sound. Trying to be invisible.

The women stare, confused by what they are seeing. Fresh, dripping handprints smear the wall, glistening rudely red in the overhead light. Footsteps mark a trail between bathroom and bedroom. What is going on?

They push the bedroom door open and flick the switch. The horror of the scene is evident in their wide eyes and shocked gasps.

'Charley Davidson, what have you done?' his mum exclaims. 'Come here right now!'

A curly, four-year-old head peeps out from under the bed.

'There's paint everywhere! Oh Charley, you've ruined the carpet. And my good towels too!'

'Wasn't me,' he mumbles. ■

Donald Mackay – An Appreciation

By Willie Hershaw

I FIRST MET Donald Mackay in the David Hume Lecture Theatre at Edinburgh University in 1976. In fact, he was the first fellow student who spoke to me. We were both first year undergraduates studying English Language and Literature and we ended up going for a pint at Teviot Row. Donald was a seemingly laid back fellow who rolled incredibly thin cigarettes from a little tin. As I got to know him better I realised that although we came from very different backgrounds we shared much in common. We both looked like long haired hippy types at that point. Shy and dour was the combination. He had an obsessive interest in poetry – writing it and reading it. We shared the same political views – left wing Scottish Nationalism. Our heroes were John McLean, Hugh MacDiarmid and Hamish Henderson. We were both into Folk Music. We enjoyed what was then termed "real ale". He was the first vegetarian I met. We became pals.

Later I discovered that despite Donald's quiet demeanour and dry sense of humour he was very determined and principled – he had a moral seriousness and deep interest in spirituality and this revealed itself in his poems. He had high standards that he applied both to himself and to others. When he had a cause he believed in nothing would deflect him. And Donald introduced me to many causes, all of them worthy, forcing me into thinking and often reappraising. Neither of us felt that we fitted in with the Eng. Lit. colonialist agenda at Edinburgh. Donald was openly critical of both the antiquated curriculum and the equally antiquated attitudes of some of the teaching staff. So he was marked down. It was a great loss to me when my mate left Edinburgh after two years and changed his course. He went to Aberdeen where he was much happier and felt encouraged and included. Later he completed his PhD in Religious Studies. I missed his company and our arguments and his major influence on my ideas but I admired his gumption for not putting up with an unfair situation. I enjoyed my many visits up to Aberdeen where we would resume our ongoing poetical/political /philosophical/debate and visit new pubs.

As the years passed we kept in touch, but in an increasingly desultory way. Neither of us were interested in sharing the minutiae of our domestic lives in epistolary form and the Internet had not been invented. Neither of us were phone guys let alone mobile phone guys. At one point Donald, who had lived in various airts of Africa, Derry, Leeds, was bringing up his family in Earlsferry just a few miles along the coast from me in Kirkcaldy and I didn't even know he was there. Eventually he and his wife Pauline settled in Caithness and he became an RE teacher. Donald and Pauline were married for 35 years and they were blessed with four children. Whenever I spoke with Donald I knew that his family were the single most important and signifcant part of his life. For the remaining 26 years of this life he lived in Caithness among a landscape he loved.

Pauline and Donald stayed with us briefly in Lochgelly when he came down for the launch at The Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh of his pamphlet Kept in the Dark published by Hamish Whyte's Mariscat Press in 2007. A second Mariscat publication, On Time, was shortlisted for The Callum MacDonald Award in 2012.

One day in 2019 I realised that I had pretty much lost touch with my old mate. I was too embarrassed to make the effort to pick up the phone. And then out of the blue an email arrived from Donald. It was like I had only seen him the day before as we picked up from where we had left off. Poems started to flurry back and forth between Caithness and Fife. Although he never revealed much, I realised, reading between the lines, that his health was not good. Having reached an age when he could leave teaching and enjoy other aspects of life, this seemed very cruel.

When the poems stopped arriving I assumed that he was in hospital for treatment. Nevertheless, the news of his death from cancer was completely unexpected. For Pauline to lose her husband and the children their Dad was a terrible blow. I've not read the poems since. Despite the sadness I am glad that I was able to reconnect with Donald and share in his poetry before he left us. I will remember him always as being quietly spoken in a way that made you lean in to listen – his words were always worth the hearing.

Donald's earlier writing often portrayed a troubled soul on a quest – personal, spiritual, metaphysical. The later ones he sent me are different. The former concerns are still present but there is wider social inclusiveness and there is anger and disgust at the contemporary political situation and those who practise its dark arts. The poems are sparer and a bit bleaker like the Caithness landscape has seeped into them. Punctuation and vocabulary have been stripped back to the bare bone to make the meaning the clearer. The lines can be angular and jagged with the syntax reflecting the poet's leaping thoughts. They are full of irony and sometimes caustic images. Yet there are many unexpected flashes and epiphanies like orchids in a peat bog. There are moments of acceptance and serenity among the rage. These final poems are true to Donald as I knew him.■

Lochgelly, Fife, February 2021

Late Poems

By Donald Mackay

Beyond the Split Stane

in Caithness suddenly
a boulder
on the border
makes this into Sutherland

an easy crossing
from the flat
and so beyond a fault
to where the hills are rising

a transition
in the history of landscape
bitten to the quick by sheep

the writing is on
our near horizon waiting
we cannot escape

Seeing Scotland

as the clouds merge
Morven Maiden Pap then Scaraben
are disappearing
leaving a mirage

floating one dark peak
above the weather
were they ever there?
and then at dawn the clouds break

no more rain
the vision
was the clouds that vanish
while the rocks remain

The Master

would you get off my land!
he yelled at the walkers
waving his shotgun
at a vixen

letting her have it
as she slid behind his whins
both barrels bang! bang!
at the geese just in from Iceland

both barrels
but they flew up laughing away
and at a mole
moving mountains

well? this is a free country
as its liberator
bang! bang!
worms etcetera

bang! bang! till it was free from
insects
larvae
germs

Crash

suddenly no money
with the markets vanishing
their vast invention
no more parsimonious simony

or even trade
now everything was worthless
nevertheless
we tried

the world had ended
yet life went on
necessity the mother of invention
we invented

At the Ball

Brexit now it is upon us
can be likened
to a braying sound of anglo-saxophones
in England

meanwhile quietly silenced
in the middle of such jolly noisiness
Scotland stands
listening to seeming nonsense

not invited to the party really
but you can't leave yet
it's far too early
be a dear and hand around that plate

Theses

a poor country
where everyone is poor
has untold wealth

if I have nothing
nothing my neighbour lacks
my neighbour lacks nothing

no thing should endure forever
in a poor country they value
decomposition

gold? stone has the greater value
it stays useful
more or less a longer time

in that country lawless beyond the city
I was never safer
than in the country

it happens gradually the slow collapse
stores or cities empty people live otherwise
what does it look like? look outside

you dread the collapse of economy
I look forward to
a new beginning

The Beast

I don't believe in
but I sense an animal
beside me in the darkness breathing
minimally

and a wee bit feart
I'd like to be its friend
no name for it
I have refrained

as much as possible
from saying *God*
for this is vast and peaceable
and on its breath the universe is rocked

The Vestigium

beneath the deep blue sea a female angler fish
is chased by a tiny independent male
as he bites into her his spit dissolves her skin
his skin until they fuse

her blood his blood
a symbiotic sperm-bag stuck outside her body
while certain unions
are desirable

or necessary
who would wish to be
a nation's last vestigium held on by motorway
and blood and government and rail

to somewhere real
which has forgotten you exist?
have you or does that memory as if a bit of grit
sometimes annoy you?

The Book

by night while nobody is reading
words and phrases
and even full paragraphs
migrate

slipping from page to page
crossing the borders
of chapters
under the radar

of you dear reader
who wonder sometimes
haven't I read these words before
somewhere?

never dipping into the same book twice
the strangest thing
it always makes as much sense
as it ever did

SS. Great Britain

this notion of Great Britain
as an island
nation rapidly isolating
we will be departing

from the EU like a ferry
or a transatlantic liner
God bless all who sail in her
set free

our boat
until you find the stowaways
choosing who stays
and who goes overboard

A

or else the beginning
was the word
read
inking-in

reality
with what it meant
humanity
uncovering a world

I may not understand
a single word you say
but as for what you see
from where you stand
I'll share your interest
so one might say I see!

To the Year's End

the yellowing flowering currant
offers a little livid light
with barely any green in it
too late

about to die
ghastly and yet it half-restores
the day
as it stares

blind
light into the darkness growing
and beyond

if this is winter spring
not far behind
as Shelley said, a slow uprising

The Writer, the Island and the Inspiration

Essay by Linda Cracknell

Hôtel Chevillon by Linda Cracknell

Not everyone enjoys the experience of being alone on an island. Forced to eat limpets, buckies and periwinkles, some of which made him sick, young David Balfour, used to being landlocked in the Lowlands, never did make peace with his 'horrid solitude' when he was shipwrecked on the Isle of Erraid. It rained continuously for nearly three days and he had only 'dead rocks, and fowls, and the rain, and the cold sea' to talk to. Ignorant about tides and assuming himself surrounded by sea, he hailed passing boats as he circled his prison, but was ignored and left hungry.

I wasn't knowingly a fan of Robert Louis Stevenson (RLS) but once living in Scotland from 1990, and referred to as a 'Scottish writer' since 2000, his work became part of my adopted literary inheritance. The meaning he took from travel, particularly journeys on foot, chimed with me. Some of his *Treasure Island* characters populated the Admiral Benbow Inn, a familiar landmark when visiting my mother in Penzance, and I glimpsed his family's lighthouses in my travels around Scotland on headlands and far skerries. They have long illuminated my imagination as elemental monuments with potential as dramatic crucibles.

But it wasn't until I won a fellowship to France in his name in 2019 that I picked up *Kidnapped*, for many years unread on my bookshelf. Perhaps I was partially drawn by the cover of the Penguin Popular Classic which shows a detail from 'Voyage to the Pacific' in which a square-rigged sailing ship is cresting a wave in a churning sea just off a high, rocky headland. I was beginning to research and write about my own seafaring ancestors in North Devon who ran some of the last cargo-carrying sailing ships in Britain, and so I began to read.

Here is a lowland boy, orphaned, betrayed by an uncle, shipwrecked on the West Coast and forced to walk across the war-torn and rugged landscapes of Scotland as he becomes a man. He travels with a diametrically opposed Highland character. Lost, disorientated, an innocent, he is unprepared for the physical challenge, but learns about life and his country as he goes. The author's passion for people and human nature surfaces as visibly as the sea and landscape in all its harsh romance. So I was surprised to learn that RLS wrote it in physical confinement resulting from the ill health which had often kept him isolated in his bedroom as a child. The novel came close to remaining unfinished.

Before travelling to France in summer 2019, and having now read *Kidnapped*, I made a mini-pilgrimage to the Isle of Mull's western peninsula; the 'Ross of Mull'. And then, to where, at its far western tip, Erraid is connected and separated by the tidal pulse.

I'm intrigued by tidal islands; a threshold opening and closing in a rhythm cosmically determined. I wanted to arrive there under my own power – bicycle and then foot – and then be contained, surrounded for another twelve hours, forced to appreciate nature's disinterest in my needs. I was intrigued by the idea that a space that was land when I set out on my journey would transform to sea. A drawbridge raised.

As a voluntary castaway rather than an enforced one, my experience was as different as it could be to Balfour's. June sunshine sang over me as I pedalled, with my load of camping gear, the 40 miles from the ferry landing at Craignure, over a high pass towards the tip of the peninsula. I finally stopped on one side of an inlet tapering from the Sound of Iona towards the place where the two land masses of Erraid and the Ross of Mull come closest to touching.

I'd timed my arrival for low tide at 6pm. But far from being dry, a small estuarine river ran midway, and it was clearly deep enough to prevent me taking any chances. Only later I understood that as this was the 'neap' period of the tides, when the moon is midway between phases of old and new and has least magnetic influence, the difference between high and low water is smallest. In contrast to the tidal conditions for David Balfour at full moon, for me not only was high water not so very high, but neither was low water so low.

A farmer directed me to a place further around the coast where I'd be able to cross. Abandoning my bicycle, I struggled across fields carrying bike panniers loaded with enough food and 2 litres of water to allow me to stay a single night. I stepped across a narrow stretch of white sand and barely lengthened my stride over 'the sea' between islands.

Cheered by landfall, I climbed from shore to plateau and dropped my bags. Flickering bog cotton marked soggy channels ahead but there were no obvious paths, no visible 'Balfour Bay' on an island only a mile in diameter. Abandoning one of my panniers, I set off with the other, following a compass bearing I hoped would lead me to it.

I sweated across the highest ground, ankles scratched by heather and bog myrtle. The scrape of barren terrain went on until, without warning, the scale suddenly flipped, and the sea appeared below me. Between me and it was a narrow green valley leading to a slot of white sand which widened between a pair of granite cliffs striding south-west, out into the sea. Even from a distance it was clearly the paradise I'd imagined. The bog relented and my steps quickened as I dropped down, small hills rising around me, till I was on sheep-cropped, firm turf above the sand. A cobalt sea waited beyond. There was no yacht moored in the Bay, no other tent. I had the place to myself.

Within an hour I'd returned for the other pannier and the tent was up on the grassy bank. I was alone with rock-pipits, plovers, sandpipers whistling the place alive on a long, cool Midsummer night. I walked barefoot down the shallow burn which carved the sand with feathery branches resembling the bronchioles of lungs. At the beach-proper, the bite of seawater on my toes told me I would not swim. But I paddled in a lagoon which crossed the beach, trapping a mix of salt and freshwater against a rise in the sand. It was brackish and warm.

When planning the trip, the short length of my stay seemed determined by the unavailability of fresh water. But now I found that, although unmarked on my map, a small burn ran towards my camping spot just before driving through turf to drop to the sand. There were sheep here so its cleanliness was not guaranteed, but I reasoned that by boiling it for five minutes, I would make it safe.

Because of the effort of getting here, I immediately decided to stay not one night, but two. The weather promised well for the next day and I wanted to sink into the place. My adventure in cycling

from Craignure had already purged my restlessness.

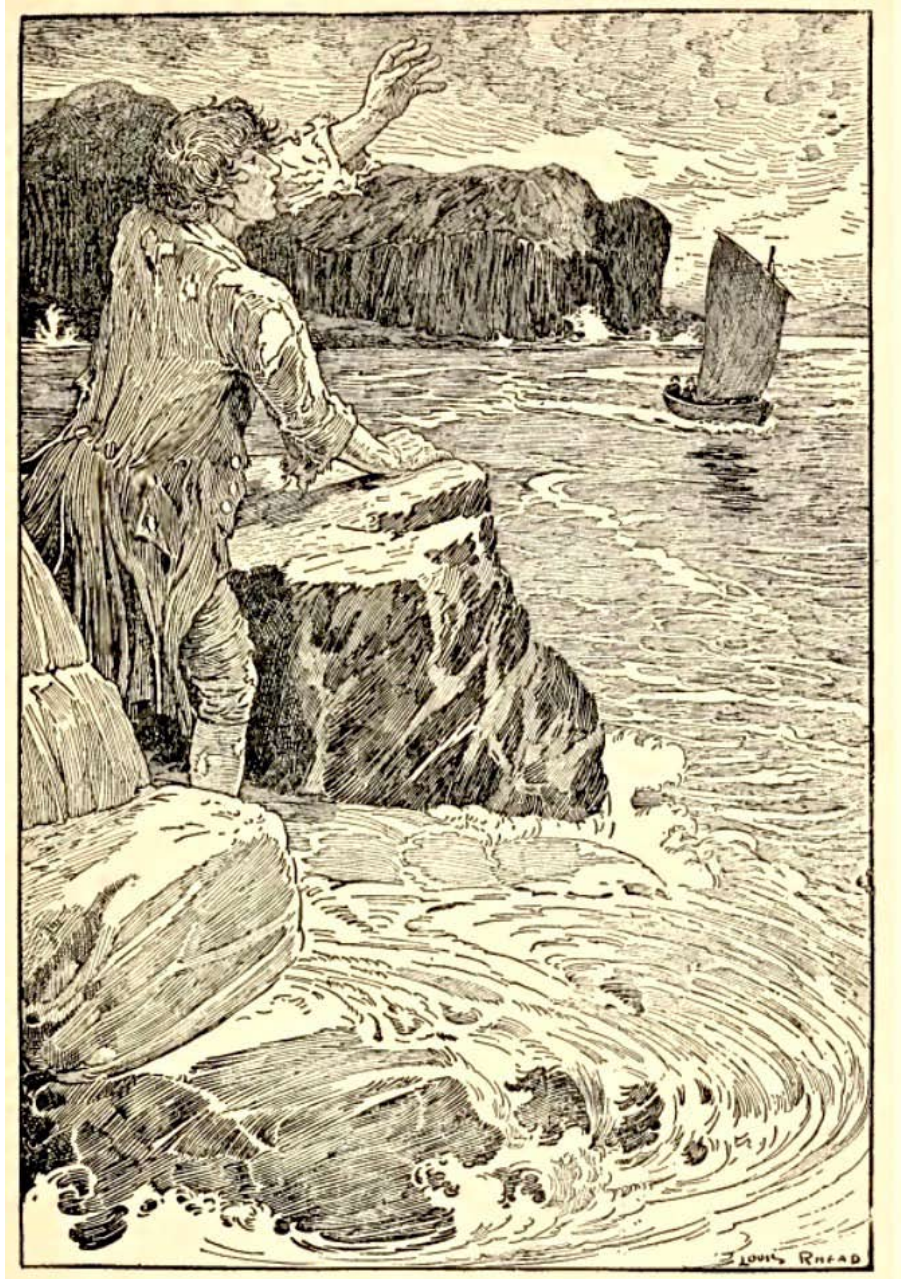
Balfour's 'horrid solitude' was now possible. But that first night on Erraid I relished being alone, and an escape from what I had witnessed earlier at Fionnphort, the ferry port for the Isle of Iona. While consuming takeaway langoustines and tea, I'd watched a boy of about eight in circular spectacles bagpiping ashore strangely quiet tourists from the ferry as they returned to rows of coaches. The procession seemed to go on and on. This shock of mass tourism in what we think of as a remote place, was later compounded by the sight of a cruise ship, luminous in low sunlight, looming like a tower-block, first over the tiny island of Staffa and then the harbour at Iona.

I was unhurried, free to enjoy simplicity. To sleep, stroll, boil water for tea, munch oatcakes and cheese, stare at the lengthening shadows and the strike of last sun on white sand. Not for the first time I wondered whether I've been designed to be a desert-island castaway, to live unobserved amidst the small patrols of sheep and the cormorant family out beyond the shore. One flew in and out from a nest deep in the cracked granite, delivering the catch. Their cackles were amplified by rock, conjuring monstrous creatures. Barnacles clustering on seaward rocks charted the sea's departure and return in their breathing and feeding, their shell doors opening and closing with the tides. I heard birds pipe on from within my tent till at least 11.30pm. The night temperature plummeted and I slept in thermals with the sleeping bag hood caught tight over my head.

I relished my own 'exile', reconnecting with my 17-year-old self on her first cycle-tour with a tent. No one, including my parents, knew exactly where I was. I met people, solved my own problems and fended off harassment long before the days of mobile phones. It was a thrill, that first independent adventure. I inhabited my true self, or another version of it. I also discovered that I was more gregarious than I knew, but that the comfort of talking with another person could sometimes be traded for dialogue between pen and notebook. Such travels, I believe, gradually led me towards a writing life, with travel in it. When taken alone, such journeys offer keen exposure to adventure, adversity and joy.

Stevenson was far more expert on the sea's ways than his character, Balfour. He said of his family, known as the 'Lighthouse Stevensons' for their impressive deep-sea tower building particularly around Scottish coasts: 'whenever I smell salt water, I know that I'm not far from one of the works of my ancestors'. There was pride, and a lifelong maritime-affinity. In a letter to Henry James, written from Honolulu in 1889, he wrote: 'though the sea is a deceitful place, I like to be there ... and to draw near to a new island, I cannot say how much I like'.

This dissonance between the writer's knowledge and his Balfour character's ignorance drives the novel's sea-drama. Tricked aboard the square-rigged brig, 'Covenant', at South Queensferry, Balfour is dizzied by the sheer scale of the ship, the unfamiliar humming of the tide and sailors singing as they haul ropes. He's carried off as a prisoner towards slavery in the Carolinas. Sea-shaken through the Northern Isles, the ship's Atlantic crossing is thwarted by adverse winds and they are forced through the Minch, south to the Inner Hebrides.



A COBLE WITH A BROWN SAIL CAME FLYING ROUND THAT CORNER OF THE ISLE

Kidnapped book illustration by Louis Rhead, 1921.

They're still underway when Balfour notes the moon, nearly full. Whilst he couldn't have known the effect, his creator does, commanding lunar magnetism to accentuate high and low water in a spring tide. Not content with that, he 'moves' the infamous Torran Rocks 20 miles or so closer to the Ross of Mull. Add a captain without a chart and the ship is now in a sea 'thick' with rocks.

Kidnapped is set in the mid-18th-century before the famous Dubh Artach lighthouse was built. The need for it in this major shipping channel had been well made by countless losses on the lengthy archipelago of rocks which RLS wrote of elsewhere as 'an egg-shaped mass of black trap, rising 30 feet above high-water mark. The full Atlantic swell beats upon it without hindrance, and the tides sweep around it like a mill race.'

As the ship begins to struggle, Balfour observes how the brig is thrown about by the tide and three strong men struggle with the tiller. Just as a reef is spotted to windward, the sails empty. On the rocks, the brig falls onto her beam and he into the sea, 'hurled along, and beaten upon and choked, and then swallowed whole'. However, once the tide race has flung him out, he's able to struggle onto the south-west shore of the island of Erraid, at *Tràigh Gheal*, a place usually now spoken of as 'Balfour Bay'.

Cold, wet and weary, he spends the night walking to and fro along the 'desert-like' sand with a sense of terrifying aloneness. From higher ground at daybreak he sees that he's imprisoned by the sea on a small island and so his manic circling begins.

When Balfour finally understood the word 'tide' shouted across the water by a fisherman, and realised that at the ebb he could simply walk onto the Ross of Mull, he berated himself for not understanding better the ways of the sea. Admittedly he was unlucky on his three or four days (and it was convenient fictionally) that each time his circular prowl of the island brought him to the gut between Erraid and the Ross, he found it flooded by the high tide rather than fully emptied.

The words inland and island are visually so close; a trick, a slip of one letter away from each other. It suggests a congruence. On an island one is surrounded by water, a 'castaway', whereas inland we might feel swamped by land. As David Balfour found, one may induce a longing for the other.

Perhaps I understand his compulsive looping better from today's perspective, writing in the time of Covid-19 which has kept me treading within a more-or-less domestic radius for months. Lives seem both mundane and extraordinary. Lashed by the language of the sea, statistics are characterised as 'surges' and 'waves'. The numbers of dead are announced daily, and sometimes I imagine the terror of being isolated in hospital with lungs mechanically pulsed in ebb and flow.

I realise that, at first, it released me into acute appreciation of a glorious spring. I explored more thoroughly than I have in 25 years of living in rural Perthshire, discovering new paths, ruined villages, listing bird species spotted and rediscovering the names of flowers. A particular delight arose from the ritual of climbing to a west-facing rock on a small hill, sometimes carrying breakfast and a flask of tea, or with a bottle of beer in the evening. Gaining a sense of perspective, I could watch squalls approaching from the hills beyond Ben Lawers and look down on where I live – the compact grey stone town encompassed by moor, forest, field – where a safety net of relationships is woven. I knew that I was fortunate.

Nevertheless, over the months, my landlocked location began to tumble me into dreams of past travels, voyages, shorelines and horizons. On my inland-island I sometimes felt the loss of touchstones in the literary world, the wider world. But I felt most disorientated by the coast – usually a mere 60 miles away on either side of me – decamping beyond reach. Sixty miles became a forbidden distance, vast and dangerous. Above all in these months, I have longed for the sea.

Being forcibly stilled for wider travel made me realise how much my wanderlust and restlessness usually determine my life. The previous year between March and August I'd walked limestone Alps in Austria, taught residential workshops in the English Dales and in the Cairngorms, visited my mother in Cornwall, and spent Easter in Sussex. The whole month of August was spent in France at Hôtel Chevillon.

RLS had spent time on Erraid when his engineer father was quarrying and building the lighthouses at Skerryvore and Dubh Artach. It must have had a powerful effect on him at nineteen

because he used it as a setting three times, not just in *Kidnapped*, but also in the story *The Merry Men* and in an essay reflecting on his time there, *Memoirs of An Islet*, in which he said: 'I steeped myself in open air and past ages'. Not in the engineering calculations his father might have hoped for.

Before choosing the life of a vagabond and writer, aged 18, he travelled Scotland with his father on the annual lighthouse inspection, and later served his apprenticeship with the family business over summer vacations from civil engineering studies at Edinburgh University. Unimpressed by some of the coast, he called Anstruther 'a grey, grim sea-bitten hole'; Wick 'one of the meanest of man's towns, and situated certainly on the baldest of God's bays'. But other aspects thrilled him. While in Wick he took a trip in a diving suit to watch underwater builders, felt the ground under him 'quail' in a storm, and witnessed the North Sea's power to destroy the harbour developments not once, but twice (to the Stevensons' professional embarrassment).

In his essay, 'The Education of an Engineer' he summarised the incidental delights of the profession: 'It takes a man into the open air; it keeps him hanging about harbour sides, which is the richest sort of idling; it carries him to wild islands, it gives him a taste of the genial dangers of the sea...'. But he scorned the desk-work that followed, shut in an office, to draw or measure or wrangle with figures.

Caring 'for nothing but literature' he took 'a memory full of ships, and seas, and perilous headlands, and the shining pharos', and crafted fiction from them. Ships sail through his work, tide and storm generate drama between humans and nature. Stories of the sea's isolating power were passed down to him. Whilst building Dubh Artach, 13 men and the resident engineer were besieged for two weeks by an Atlantic storm, captured in their barracks – an iron pod on legs teetering on a rock. Erraid, used as the shore station, was 15 miles away from the reef and unreachable. RLS learnt how a storm at sea might capsize men's minds or how fellowship might arise from shared terror.

After a short stint as a lawyer, having rejected the lighthouse business, he cast himself off from family to become a writer. In August 1876, at the age of 25, he journeyed by canoe along the canals and rivers of Belgium and Northern France, leading to his first publication, *Inland Voyage*. The journey generated something to write about and expressed his adventurous spirit, but perhaps he also made a statement by turning inland. During his stays at the Hôtel Chevillon in Grez-sur-Loing in France, where he washed up for the first time after this voyage, he was protected from salt spray and granite cliff by 200 miles of land on one side, and a continent widening into remote distance on the other. Land-locked rather than sea-girt, his rebellion played out far from salt and family pressures, and with his liberated cousin Bob he found a bohemian 'family' amongst artists and also met his wife, Fanny Osbourne. Further summers there proved formative and changed the spelling of his middle name from Lewis to Louis.

Beach and Shore, Erraid by Linda Cracknell

Morning sun penetrated the yellow inner tent at 6.30am with surprising heat. I heard bleating and looked out. Grey-white wool on grey-white sand; they were barely visible. It was only the contrast of one black sheep which tutored my eye on the subtler shades of the others, settling cold-night bones on warm sand. Knowing that this was the hour of the morning's low tide, I walked to the beach barefoot on dew-jewelled grass and then icy sand.

Turquoise in retreat, the sea was poised to rise up the beach again. Newly exposed granite on the shore was marked by a few feet of plimsoll-line black lichen. And a small new bay was reachable by rounding a corner. It was a more secret place, skirted by pillars and blocks of granite and giving way to grassy banks rising towards the great western arm that reached into the Atlantic. Beyond it, I could see the isolated rocks and skerries on which Balfour's ship and many other non-fictional ones came to grief. But for now I had no need to explore further than my beach, the grassy ledge where I camped, and the burn that travelled through it.

I returned to sit outside the tent as growing heat burnt off the dew, boiled water and felt the keen rush of coffee. A light aircraft droned somewhere, and the odd pleasure-boat passed. Two luminous kayaks slunk silent lengths into the next-door bay. It wasn't even 9am and yet the world was already alert to the peculiar beauty of this day.

I became aware that a golden eagle wheeled above me, reinventing its shape by leaning its head or bunching its shoulders or braking with parted wing-tip feathers. It came and went over the course of the day, sometimes so close that its brute grace caught my breath. When the eagle was absent, a gang of ravens took the air above the cliff. Boy-racers cavorting with the thermals, their boisterous croaks and shrieks were reserved for the most echoey places.

Even when horizontal in my tent with no view, the place pulsed on conspicuously.

The rhythm of walk and pause, day and night, activity and stillness over several days – just as RLS describes in *Walking Tours* – is my usual urge. On towards the new. But here I was content to settle, paying respect to a particular place and easing myself into its ways rather than imposing mine. Tide. Breath. Day and night. Waves washing a little closer or retreating.

I left the bay for a while that afternoon when a pleasure-boat came in and emptied a family onto the beach. It wasn't unexpected, but anyway I wanted to get up higher and to see the observatory on the north-west corner of the island which I knew had served a communication system with the lighthouses during their construction. From that vantage point, as well as the entire eastern coast of Iona, the rocky, western shore of Erraid was revealed. I could see a yacht below sheltering amongst the skerries from increasing north-easterly winds. 'Pippin', I read through my binoculars.

I lingered at the restored circular observatory, enjoying inside the way its two windows and door framed the panorama into horizontal slices of sky, sea, land. I read the story of the lighthouse building, learning that 50 souls had stayed on the island during the quarrying and construction. And then I wandered down to see their cottages on the north-western shore and the quay, all still solid and robust as one would expect of a Stevenson legacy. The project brought granite-working experts from Aberdeen together with Gaelic-speaking hammermen on the drills. It must have been an interesting cultural meeting. In 1872 they were affected by a scarlet fever outbreak on the Ross of Mull, and then by an epidemic of rodents on the island.

I pictured a young RLS striding out and loitering just as I was, with his writerly sensibility raiding caves and crags and bogs for fictional opportunities. What kind of character would be tricked by the inconstant tides? Perhaps he was already imagining a dramatic episode for a young man, an inlander and Lowlander, alone here, stranded and hungry, wet-through from his wrangles with the sea and missing his companions. Such an imagination must already have been distancing him from his father, making him dreamy and aloof. 'I shall be a nomad, more or less, until my days be done,' he wrote to his mother in 1874, emphasising the restlessness he had always felt, perhaps invisibly to her. He told her how he would watch the trains leaving Edinburgh and long to go with them.

As I returned across the highest point of the island, I could see that in Balfour Bay no further tents had been erected and no boats were anchored. I walked on in bliss.

Whilst following the burn towards my tent, I saw a turquoise garment abandoned on the bank. Going to pick it up, a movement in the deep cleft where the burn dropped to the beach startled me, and I glimpsed the back of a human head. Copious grey hair straggled to shoulder length. I continued to my tent, wondering why someone would be hiding here; at least that was what it looked like.

Distracting myself with books, notebook, binoculars, I noticed after a few minutes that the garment had gone. Perhaps the person had climbed out and walked away up the valley while I wasn't looking. But I found it hard to relax into the coming evening without being sure I was alone. And that piratical wild grey hair: I pictured some vagabond unhinged by sea or solitude. Would the head turn to face me with an eye patch or gruesome scar or long red beard? ■

Now read on…For the second part of Linda's essay, go to the current Spring-Summer 2021 homepage at northwordsnow.co.uk

Tiger-man
Suria Tei

I was ten when my mother told me a story
about a tiger who disguised as a man
and climbed up the house of an old woman.
The tiger-man poured a sack of soybeans
on to the aluminium roof
and they dropped pat-pat-pattering
like a monsoon downpour.
'It's raining,' the tiger-man shouted,
'Go and collect your washing!'
He held open the empty sack
and waited for the old woman
to step out of the house.

My mother stopped talking and
looked out of the window.
There was no rain that day,
the sky clear and blue,
just like it had been the day before
at Grandmother's funeral.
Sunshine fell onto my mother's face
just like it had been the day before, too;
so are her eyes: gathering moisture, glinting.

I never knew what happened
to the tiger-man or the old woman.

Many years later, I would hear
the pat-pat-pattering of soybeans
when the tiger-man climbed up
to the roof of the hospital ward
where my mother had been lying,
where she would slip out of her bed
and walk towards the tiger-man
waiting at the door
with an empty sack.

Bananagrams
Suria Tei
- for Alasdair Gray

I remember those evenings, after dinner,
we sat down and played a game of Bananagrams.
You and I, twenty-one tiles each to begin with,
of vowels and consonants, spread out before us.

You sat in silence, head bowed low
as you squinted at the pieces on the table.
And I watched in amazement as a lifetime
of words swooped swiftly down like monsoon rain
and gathered between the folds of your brows.

I watched them trickle down like
mountain springs through your veins
into your arms, your hands, your fingers,
onto the little square tiles before you.

I watched their every move
that came with every touch of your fingers,
dry and wrinkled, as eight decades of
wisdom tumbled out,

frozen in time.

Hai-land-ku
Colin Bramwell

You must listen close
to what is not being said.
The next stop is, In—

Your wish
Colin Bramwell

as our car passes below
the Kessock Bridge: *put me*
in a home, Colin—honestly
when the time comes, whatever
I tell you in the future, remember
this conversation. A home—

Tonight
Elegy for Professor Chen-chen Tseng
Colin Bramwell

Tonight, time takes a quiet colour.
The waves are hushed. Dark
enamelled mountains bow
and fog your specs with thunder.

Seven stars above
the coast spark out
and set one shore alight:

morning's coming soon.

Pause the coursing sky, the clouds.
Find the sun and disembark.

Tonight you are his mother.
Today, you are the moon:

Deep Close
Eftir Yang Mu
Colin Bramwell

Time wiss I micht
huv tried tae impone logic

oan the tarmac
o this playgrund

its hopscotch lines
drawn fain in chalk.

Insteid, I think oan ye here—
in the deep close o munelicht—

whaur the singer arrives at the indraucht
an water sinks intae itsel.

Needless, noo, tae memorise your name.
We are amang the bairnies again

an the schoolbell is jowin,
cryin us. In.

TO THE MOTHER & CHILD IN ORBIT BY GRANDDESIGN or ILLICIUM VERUM
Molly Vogel

A restlessness pervades the
body; I wake preemptively,
nights of it—
now, God's work. You can get used to
anything. Light has yet revealed the picture
except—
a spider mends her web, redacting a stray
leaf. And how did the spider get this high? And
leaf ?
The articulation of thread
peaks under moonlight in great
design.
A gnat caught. Another's wings
pluck a morse chord. I reconstruct
my way around the dark, babe in
arm—
the quiet is so present
the arachnids are
weaving. Your tufts of
breathing poise.
I get the sense this is
happening everywhere,
around the dark—
constellate, star-anised
astronomer and star.

The Shepherdess
Molly Vogel

The staves steady under foot; she knows which to avoid. A creature of habit, the kettle warms. Steam rises, curls the end wisps about her face. The old night dress illuminates her nakedness, skin smells of ewe's milk. It's late; and the children are sleeping. Breath carried away in tufts. Everything is done in earnest purpose, learned through divination, through feeling around the dark. A corner is settled on, the fire stoked. Bedding laid down, and a pair of shears at arm's length. In this most tender of mercies, we seek out aloneness, like the sheep. To bear the world, we are borne away.

Sunwise - an extract from a novel in three voices

Ian Stephen

Anna turned the handle on the window. A thin current of air came in with a whistle. It must be a southwesterly, funneling down the street. It would blast between the lantern tower of the new arts centre and Martin's Memorial spire. She breathed in at last and realised she'd been holding her breath as if she was underwater. There still wasn't enough air coming through. She turned her head. There were card folders and loose papers amongst the piles. It would be a right paperchase if she let the window tilt to the next setting. She left it at that with a bit more than a trickle coming through. A whine in the gusts.

Anna retraced her route, across the room, more slowly this time. She looked at the office chair, the ancient 17-inch screen, deep like tellies used to be when she was young. It was perched on a raw, blockboard stand which housed the bulky driver. She didn't sit but put her hand out to a brass-scoop handle in the desk drawer. She pulled. The secret of the universe wouldn't be there but there might be something more than a pile of crumpled receipts.

There was quite a neat pile, CDs in cases and all of them had a name, in bold type, on a lined label. The sort you printed out yourself, a whole A4 sheet of them. You peeled them off the backing sheet.

The three titles couldn't have been much clearer. THESIS. JOHNNY BELL AND THE GOPHERS. SUNWISE. There was also a tobacco tin, an old one she recognised. The oldest joke not in the book. The lettering had been scratched, many moons ago so it read ' ...OLD VIRGIN... ' It had come from a watchmate of the olman's. He'd finally jacked it in. In turn, the new owner had fished it back out of the bin a couple of times. A lot of people said they found it easier to stop smoking if they knew there was tobacco stashed away, somewhere. Just in case the cravings got out of hand. Other folk said it was mostly about hands and something to do with them.

Her fingers closed over it first. Then she unclenched them. More slowly, she pocketed the tin. Next she reached for one of the CD cases from the three now stacked in their own little coffins. The choice wasn't an accident. She knew the guts of the olman's thesis – they'd been spilled out before her often enough. She didn't have to read the final version now. She couldn't bear the thought of trying to print out, far less read, any file that contained the Johnnie Bell stories. Peter had made them up for her alone. She wasn't even sure she wanted to consider a written version. So her tight palm held SUNWISE. That was new to her.

It had to be more digestible than the huge typescript she just had not been able to face. Two book-sized volumes of it were handed over by Michael, the executor. It was supposed to be a Will of some kind but even the practical bits pointed out to her had made little sense. And she had no idea why he'd wanted to tackle a PhD at his age. SUNWISE was packaged up a bit different. He'd lined the plastic case with old cards. Publicity for plays. They looked a bit hand-done so maybe they'd been made to advertise student productions. One was for Brecht's, *Drums in the Night*. The other had a black and white photo of a group of guys, done up like gangsters. *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. That was a bit topical. Political gangsters were on the rise again.

Judging from the computer, the discs would be in some god-forsaken format. Not her own strong point but she knew just where to take that problem. The high road to the University of the Highlands and Islands. That lay up the tarmac road by the golf club. Instead of continuing on to the rough and even higher road to Gallows Hill she'd to swing a right into the campus. That Janet MacLeod could fix just about any computer issue known to womankind. She also fixed all the software issues on the laptops of the Ukrainians and Bulgarians crewing the SY trawlers. Come a Friday afa and she'd get the call to collect a monkfish with a head bigger than your own. She'd give you one of the fillets if you did the butchering. 'I get it, you gut it.' Anna had the skills, to earn her share. But her olman would have made good use of every single bit. There wouldn't be a thing this Friday. Not a single boat had moved in the port for the best part of a week. Janet would be in credit. A monster fry, next time.

Now that really was a pity. The guy who could have prepared a monkfish feast as well as anyone was not in a position to repay this posthumous favour. His out-of-date files could be made readable again. Just another wee contemporary miracle. That Peter MacAulay was a good cook, a sharp cookie but a daft bastard. He could have looked after himself. His ancient version of a Word Doc would get deciphered to be intelligible to his daughter and any other interested parties.

Peter MacAulay's name was fixed to all these folders of stories but it was no longer on the title deeds of this house. She was at the door to the hallway quick as a cat. There was a clear corridor alongside the row of neat, regular, cardboard boxes, The Packaging Company stamped on every one of them. Someone had started the clear-up. Hell, what was it like, before?

She checked she'd put the keys back in the envelope. Safe in her snug pocket with the velcro tabs. The CD case fitted into the safe breast pocket, also zipped. Anna left the rest. She just pulled the door shut and didn't bother with the second lock. The olman probably never used that one anyway. At once, she was walking north, wind-assisted. Getting the turn in before the steep fall to Bayhead. Crossing the road by the gable end of the model-shop. There wasn't too much wind coming along the harbour. There she was. *Peace and Plenty*. Moored as described by Michael, the formerly swinging vicar. Maybe the swinging former vicar. The executor. Not right now. She couldn't walk from that room right into another domain of the late Peter MacAulay.

If she carried on and swung the left over the bridge she might find Janet still in the office.

Sunwise –

an account of an exceptional voyage to outlying isles
by Peter MacAulay, Esquire

With a brief introduction and additional contributions by
Mrs Isabella Morrison, spouse to the former steward of St Kilda

This introduction will indeed be brief for the conventionally given reason that none is required. It will become immediately apparent to the reader that the chronicler of these journeys is eminently qualified for the task, both in maritime knowledge and in his natural abilities as a storyteller. My own main role has merely been to insist on his competence for the duty and the suggestion of the above title. I cannot deny that there are some phrases in the narrative which would not have been my own choice and some comments which I must admit I would have thought better unsaid, yet you cannot consent, in fairness, to a narrator having his free hand and then apply censorship. It is an honest account and that is that.

Under duress, I have also provided my own narration of a very small part of our story. This has been felt necessary only where Mr MacAulay, through events, was not privy to some possibly pertinent aspects, at first hand.

We are very grateful to the Estate of MacLeod of Harris. This body has long been the feudal superior of the island of Hirta, St Kilda. As will become apparent, it was my husband John Morrison's duties as Steward to the MacLeod of Harris Estate which prompted the adventures we will describe in this volume. We must, however state, for the avoidance of doubt, that the publication is the responsibility of the authors alone, although our vessel was in the ownership of that Estate and skippered by a seaman in its employ. We are very grateful to the care taken by the printers, Mssrs Sands, Donaldson, Murray and Cochran of Edinburgh. It was Mr Donaldson's suggestion that the English face, Baskerville was most appropriate for this purpose. I can only add that Mr Baskerville's own words convinced us, if any convincing was required, that this was indeed most suitable:

"Having been an early admirer of the beauty of Letters, I became insensibly desirous of contributing to the perfection of them. I formed to myself ideas of greater accuracy than had yet appeared, and had endeavoured to produce a Set of Types according to what I conceived to be their true proportion. It is not my desire to print many books, but such only as are books of Consequence, of intrinsic merit or established Reputation, and which the public may be pleased to see in an elegant dress, and to purchase at such a price as will repay the extraordinary care and expense that must necessarily be bestowed upon them."

Baskerville's preface to Milton

With no further preamble I now urge you to give time to Mr MacAulay for you will not regret it. The Isles of the Outer Hebrides are blessed with more than their share of the natural storyteller (*seannachie*). It is sadly still all too unusual to encounter one who moves with such ease through printed pages.

Narrative of Peter MacAulay Esquire

I was christened Peadar. You can call me Peter. It matters very little to this narrative, who I am. Who are my people? That would be the more relevant question and the one to be asked first in my own homeland, the Isle of Harris. Let us say for now that I have made a sort of a living for myself, more from the sea than the land. Yet I possess no certificates to say I can read the tides or splice manilla, long, short, eye and backsplice. I can keep a log but with apologies that this is not your copperplate. It appears to be tidy enough for others to follow and I am grateful to Mrs Morrison for casting her eye over it, correcting some of the errors and contributing her own account of certain events. Some have said I happen to be one of those who can tell a story. If that be the case, it is due to no praiseworthy efforts of my own but to those gone before me.

Let us say for now that I was taken under a good set of wings. Those kept the weather off and let me thrive in this hard place. Stories were passed to me. Now that I have grown more conscious of the worth of these, I try to look after them by the simple method of casting them out into the world again. There is a "knack" to telling a story, people say, as in any craft, say boatbuilding. Yet a boatbuilder will say you simply allow one plank to lie, neat and snug, on another and that is all there is to it. All I can say about it is this: You possess but one voice to use and that is your own. Maybe those who reared me could see a story as if it were a thread in the dark. Any one of them could follow a pattern in knitting or weaving. But if there was no pattern to follow, my own natural forebears could still make something that would work. I have taken on the duty of telling this story because people have said it is worth the telling. It is no tradition, handed down, but an attempt, as memory permits, of an accurate account of an eventful journey.

The true starting point is the town of Stornoway, for that is where we found the vessel which brought us on our way. Are you ready for the shock of it? We were not. The boatyard out on Goat Island was smoking and the hammers beating. There was a lot of shouting going on, from the high walls down to the boats and from boat to boat across the raft of black shapes. You could step from one to the other and just about reach the shore on the far side. But the thing that hit you first was neither the sound nor the sight of the harbour. It was the stink: the catch of pitch; boiling bark; herring and the guts of them.

Let me stand back and try to see what our unlikely group must have looked like, to a passer-by. John Morrison, steward of Macleod of Harris, and his wife, were both both tall folk. They were well-dressed in a practical way, wrapped in their tweeds as defence against the biting east wind of the spring season. The skipper was Mìcheal and his nephew Ruaraidh kept close to him. That young fellow would be the apprentice. He had a good head of curls on him. More red and a good bit thicker than the thatch on his uncle. The skipper was not that tall but he had a wide set of shoulders on him. He was quiet-spoken. The others would lean over to listen to him. As I am in the crew, I had better step aside to sketch myself, also. I would be close to Mr Morrison in height and very near black in hair and beard.

I suppose I would be called the mate, if we could find the vessel that would carry us out to the west. That was our purpose here in the town of Stornoway. We were dropped off here on a skiff that was sailing light to join the herring fleet in the town. Our intention was to sail back through the Sound of Shiants in a skiff of our own choosing, if we could find one to meet the demands of the skipper. She would have to be fit for an intended voyage into the Atlantic to St Kilda.

I saw Mrs Morrison bury her face in her scarf. She made no complaints. She was here by her own choice and we all knew it: a woman who wanted to come on a voyage, whatever it took. But she wasn't the only one shocked by what they smelled. Mìcheal and myself and maybe John Morrison the steward had smelled a harbour town before but maybe forgotten the force of it. That was a lot of houses, a lot of boats and hundreds of buckets being emptied into that soup every day. Young Ruaraidh had a look of horror on him.

'That's a powerful smell. That's your education beginning,' said his uncle.

The town was dry. There was not a single jig nor reel to be heard. It had its own music and that was as strange a mix as the Babel of voices that floated around us. We could pick up the Gaelic, although that had something foreign to us in the tone of it. The spoken English too had something you would not encounter in any other harbour.

"Look you over there now," said Tormod. "There is a regatta here, every tide. It was a dance of vessels, composed of a great number of individual movements. Many of these high tan sails we were observing would have been cut and stitched in lofts on our own island and some of these Scaffies had Lewismen and Harrismen at the helm. Once the leading boat began its tack, the rest of them followed, gannets in a squadron. Their mainsails fell, but only so far, before each one was dipped with a single sweep. That was the great yard pivoting to the other side of the mast. Then all the rigs were down but only for seconds before they were rising again on the other tack. And then the flock was off again, continuing the beat out. Tonight, these crews would cast their nets of black cotton and take their share, God willing.

The Morrisons were silent but I could see they had been affected by this sight. The lairds might be financing this industry, laying oak keels and setting up kippering sheds to use even the shavings of these. But the vessels were giving us our confidence. We could read a compass or a star like the rest of them and get ourselves out into the world on our own terms.

Another dance took place on the high pier. The curers and the merchants, the packers and gutters and the fishers were plying their trades. Once you caught your breath you got the hammering in your ears, the clenching of planks, the hoops going down the barrels. There were the high masts of the traders from Gothenborg or Kiel.

There might be the spars of the Hudson Bay Company ship, taking on a few Gaels before they put in to Stromness for the Norsemen. Others from the Scottish islands had sailed for the new England. There was word of trouble out there. Plenty sailed away but only a few would ever return to set foot on their own rock again. ■

Voice

Seth Crook

For years
she complained about her silent husband,
wishing them to chatter
like easy garden birds.

Wren, wren,
why couldn't I marry a wren?

Until she grew reconciled,
thinking of him as the wrong species,
loving her cheap radio,
listening to more talky men.

Wren, wren,
why couldn't I marry another wren?

After he died,
after the quad bike turned,
she listened every week,
completely absorbed,
to the stories of an unknown, late crofter,
written with loving detail
about a croft exactly like theirs.

Little wren, little wren,
o why did you marry me
if I wasn't what you wanted?
I am a hen harrier
and I must quarter my fields.

Yoga by Zoom

Seth Crook

Our instructor poses perfectly.
  In her box, all is poise and balance.
Ours create a gallery of unfortunate angles,
  crack-flashes, feet pointing at half faces,
yoga as if illustrated by Picasso.

"Just a few more stretches", she says.
  We're breathing incorrectly.
That is, we're wheezing correctly.
  "You're all doing so well", she adds,
adopting the Pinocchio pose.

oyster sonnet

Issy Thompson

silently I feel the ligature
begin to flex its sartorial lines
each craggly piece is clamped around the oyster
each push and pull the tide's shifty designs

slanted glances captured in between the shards
of sunlight, broken shell crunched into mud.
dragging our hands in the water - junkyard
civilities - cause we both've spilt blood

the shocking stench of sweat and oil and sea
will bring us to our senses and the toil
it's easier to kid on that we're free
watch shoals of tiny fish with skins of foil

grit: the pearl of knowing in another's eye
half submerged, one fathom from the seabed high

Help Wanted

Story by Alistair Lawrie

Someone must have told Dod the Baker once to keep his shoulders back, Billy thought, because he walked in such a braced kind of splay-footed fashion that he looked as if he was wearing his clothes on top of a coat hanger. This had the unfortunate effect whenever he moved of making it look like he was trying to attract attention to the size of his belly. His shop sat on the corner of Hope Street, its pink granite belying the gloom inside. Entering it, Billy noticed a grubby bit of paper pinned to the dusty glass panel with "Help Wanted" scrawled on it. Absolutely, he thought and felt the familiar irritation of waggling the limp door handle uselessly for a moment before remembering to lift and waggle at the same time. Why didn't the miserable old sod have it fixed? The door jerked off its latch and Billy vengefully stamped his foot hard on the cracking patch of lino where the floorboards had started to sag. Once inside, you had to remind yourself it was a baker's shop as you picked your way through piles of dry goods, coils of stacked barbed wire, garden tools and unidentifiably full sacks to the counter, occasionally stubbing your foot against things in the gathering obscurity. Billy sometimes wondered why old Dod, who dressed with a military crispness in his brown overall coat and neatly pressed trousers, refused to have his windows cleaned. Too tight-fisted? Perhaps it was to prevent too close examination of the few fancy cakes huddled garishly together between the piles of sober brown butteries, softies and loaves of bread that made up the bulk of his sales.

Billy rapped a coin on the counter to annoy him further as he watched the shopkeeper's progress – there was no other word for it he thought – belly first out of the deeper shadows of the back shop.

"Ye'll chip at counter, ye young limmer."

Billy looked slowly down at the faded blue and white pattern that sworled across the cheap plastic cover that had been screwed to the counter top, its fraying edges coated with grime and back up at the man before saying, "Is at richt? Onywye, hiv ye a loaf o broon breid, six safties an fower butteries?"

"An fit's the word ye use tae your elders, loon?" There was a slushiness to the way he spoke that made Billy look up at him, his face, his mouth … Christ the old bastard hadn't got his teeth in. "Pleash," Billy replied before he'd even really thought about it and so hurried on to fill the gap, prevent old Dod from realising he was taking the pish. "Aye the aal man's siccan tae hae some o his aal crew roon so we're getting in supplies, like…" His voice petered out as he watched Dod staring at him, torn between a tart response and just letting it slide, his fat loose lips pursing until, with a grunt he bent, tore off a brown bag from the pile on the counter and blew wetly at its edges to open it up.

From the store which was through the door half open at the back of the counter he heard sharp nippet footsteps moving away and the mingled rattling thumping sounds of scales being used to weigh out bags of flour. Unexpected relief washed over him. Gracie had been listening at the door. Dod's eldest daughter had eyes that could pin you like a marlin spike and a tongue that was sharp as a gutter's knife. If she'd thought he was making a fool of her father … Billy let the thought go with a shiver.

The door of the shop rattled loudly as if a hurricane had taken hold of it making Dod look up quickly, mouth ajar,

"Onywye, hiv ye a loaf o broon breid, six safties an fower butteries?"

held on the cusp of deciding whether the intrusion required spluttering annoyance or servility. Either way, he'd splutter, Billy thought. It was perhaps the urge to check this out that made him keep on looking at Dod rather than turn to see who had come in so forcibly. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times. A muscle twitched in his eye as he looked down and began to arrange the empty bags in front of him. What was he playing at?

"Is at you Dod the Baker? Far's at besom o a quine o yours? Hidin ben the back as usual, nae doot."

Caught up in this whiplash Dod's eyes and Billy's were jerked up to a silhouette that filled the bottom half of the doorway with an ominous darkness. Although at first it seemed like a dumpy Russian doll, gradually features became clearer against the brightness outside. An oilcloth apron hung down near to the toes of a pair of toppers that glistened with fish scales. A fishwife's makkin belt bulged threateningly around her middle. Billy knew her. Knew the sharpness of her tongue of old.

"Fit div ye mean, Nellie? Fit's aa this aboot?"

"Dod Buchan, dinna be mair o a feel than ye were born till. You ken fine weel fit I'm here aboot. My brither Charlie's quinie, your niece, Maggie." The woman advanced bristling, hooked nose curved ominously under a loose strand of hair from what was otherwise drawn strictly back into a bun. Billy retreated to the dimness beside one of the pillars that supported the floor of the flat above from where he hoped he could observe the coming quarrel unnoticed. Dod was fumbling with the paper bags again.

"Ach, Nell, I wis as sorry aboot it as onybody especially seein it wis Chaes' lassie but folk were complaining their measures were short an aathin pintet tae her an so Gracie wis clear we hid tae let…"

"Be quiet, faither, I'll haunle iss."

The old man aye said that if Gracie's voice was any sharper she'd be in some danger of cutting her throat every time she opened her mouth. It was more likely to be other folks', Billy thought as he watched her pick her fastidious way through the clutter of the shop floor. Like a cat with a mouse.

Except this was no mouse. Long before Gracie reached the counter, Nell bore down on her, spitting fury all the way. "Aye there ye are. I'm fair astonisht ye've got the gall tae come oot here an face me, ye ill thochtit vratch. Fit's aa this ye've been sayin aboot your cousin Maggie? Your ain cousin, for gweed's sake. Fit gies you the richt tae ging aroon tellin lees aboot folk?"

By this time Nell had marched right up to within a couple of feet of Gracie and was staring angrily into her face. The smell of gutted fish that accompanied her was now filling the shop and causing Gracie to wrinkle her nose and purse her thin lips as she glared down at her aunt. Billy was surprised to see a slight twitch at the side of a face he was accustomed to see as immovable granite. "Well now, Auntie Nell, you'll ken we hiv to think about our customers' needs as a local business first an foremaist .." She paused and sniffed.

"Dinna you sniff at me, ye young limmer. Iss is naethin bit the smell o fish. The same fish at built iss shoppie for yer faither because he was ower saft a lump tae ging oot an catch them for himself. Ye micht hae heen a better sense o fit was fit if yer da had had tae dae at for a livin."

Gracie's narrow face paled with anger. "Bit, Auntie Nell …"

"Auntie Nell naethin. Fit's aa this aboot short wecht?"

"It's richt, Nellie," said Dod. "Gracie catcht her at it."

"Och, Dod Dod, ye were nivver awfa sharp were ye? The haill village kens your lassie has a heavy thoom fin it comes tae measuring. That's why maist o them walk intae the toon for their messages. It was nivver oor Maggie."

"Are you caain me a liar."

"Aye coorse I am, Gracie, for at's fit ye are, fit ye ayewis was. Bit at's nae important. I've nae doot the quine was pleased in the end o't tae hae an excuse tae get awa fae ye. The only reason she workit here was tae please her faither that thocht it was richt for her tae help his brither. Naa naa, fit I want tae ken is fit wye ye tellt the mannie at the broo your cousin handit in her notice fae the job fin ye ken fine weel that you sackit her?"

"Fit's at ye're sayin? Gracie tellt me she sackit Maggie."

"Mebbe bit that's nae fit she's tellt the mannie at the broo. At een smirkin at us kens fine at your brither Chae is owre quiet a chiel tae come roon here an show ye fit's fit bit mark my words, Dod, ye've ither brithers that arena jist sae thochtfu, including this loon's granda."

Billy looked from Nell to Dod to Gracie in the silence that fell. Nobody moved. Dod's mouth hung open Gracie's face was twitching even more and had become even paler if that was possible. She looked down to where Nell's toppers stood in a puddle of dirty yellowish water that was beginning to trickle towards an open sack of tatties. Both women started to speak at once, Gracie a high pitched wail that sounded like a scurry in pain but Nell's harsh clarity overrode it. As Billy struggled to disentangle the words of the one from the other, a loud crack cut through the mesh of noise into a still reverberant silence.

Dod loomed over the counter with a large rod in his hand which he'd just brought down on its wooden top. He looked somehow different, not only the redness in his face but there was a light in his eye and a squareness to his jaw, Billy had never seen before.

"Will ye haud yer tongue for eens in yer life, dother, and I'd be obleeged if you cwid be quiet anaa, Nellie. Tell me, Gracie, fit exackly did ye say tae the broo mannie?"

"Weel, da, I jist tellt him that Maggie was wanti …"

"Wantin fit?"

"Ach but I didna mean .."

"So you tellt him that she handit in her notice an noo the quinie winna get her broo money. Gweed be here, div ye ivver think past yersel, Grace? Fit on earth'll my brither be thinkin aboot his? Ye menseles dytit gowk, lassie. It's your ain folk ye're deein iss till. Nellie, I'm deeply sorry that this has happened. Gracie'll ging doon tae the Broo the morn's mornin an mak clear there's been a mistake. An I'll gwa

roon tae see my brither Chae an Maggie the nicht tae sort oot fit's fit. Gracie, I'd like you tae come wi us so ye can say ye're sorry."

"But, da, I canna …"

"Nivver min yer cannas. Hit's lang past time at you were thochtit enough tae min at I'm yer faither. I've let ye get aff wi far owre muckle for far owre lang maistly for yer mither's sake an it his tae stop now. I'm black affrontit at fit my ain faimly'll be thinkin o me. Noo awa ye go an get yersel ready tae ging roon tae Chae's."

Gracie turned so sharply she stumbled into Billy who was still in the shadows beside the pillar.

"Fit are you daein hidin in the dark spyin on decent folk like a snake in the grass?"

Oh shite, thought Billy, right first time but before he could mumble an apology and before Dod could get beyond shouting "Grace," Nell said quietly, "Ach, Gracie, ye hinna got the sense ye were born wi. Wid ye try an min fit een o yer uncles is iss loon's dydie an fit he mith be likely tae dee theday o aa days iffen he fins you miscaain anither een o his family for nae reason ither than yer ain ill natur?"

Gracie's shoulders visibly slumped as she made her way through to the back of the shop.

"I'd thank you for letting me ken aboot this, Nellie. It'll be aa sortit oot by the morn," said Dod.

"Aye weel I think maybe it will, Dod, but you mak siccar." And, with that, she stomped wetly to the door and left. Billy waited a moment then, crossing to the counter, he looked up at Dod, who wasn't fidgeting with anything now, picked up the bag of bakery with his change and said, "Thanks, min. I'll be awa."

"That's aaricht, loon." And then as Billy turned to go. "Tell yer dydie I'll be doon tae see him."

Billy picked his way through the half filled trays and boxes and bags to the door. As he reached for the handle he noticed the curling edges of the paper sellotaped to the glass. Grabbing it firmly, he returned to the counter where Bob was still standing.

"Are ye still siccan somebody tae help?" he asked. ■

The Green Muse

Story by Tristan ap Rheinallt

The Absinthe Drinker, etching by Edouard Manet, 1862

For Marcel, the ritual was almost as important as the act of drinking. He picked up the glass and placed it directly in front of him, then extracted a small slotted spoon from the inside pocket of his jacket. It was his lucky spoon and he would never dream of using another. After balancing it on the rim of the glass, he took a lump of sugar from the saucer and placed it carefully on the spoon. Then, with even more care, he poured a trickle of iced water from the carafe so that it soaked the sugar and then dripped into the glass.

This was what he loved most: the moment when the water combined with the absinthe in the glass to create swirls and eddies of emerald green, which just as quickly faded away as the mixture turned cloudy. This, he felt, was beauty in its purest, simplest form, and all the more poignant because it was so transient. Where else could be hope to encounter such beauty?

He drank and waited calmly for inspiration to come. It was not assured, of course, and when he later looked at his notebook, there might be nothing of value there. But on certain occasions, provided he had been lucid and receptive, he would find jewels nestling within the pages; not yet revealed in their full glory, perhaps, but needing only some judicious cutting and polishing.

He had seen a painting once that depicted a young man, better-dressed than him but otherwise much the same, with the green muse at his shoulder, whispering into his ear. If she could come to him, Marcel, what did it matter that Héloïse had left him for some ignorant bumpkin from the Auvergne? Or that the sleeves of his jacket were frayed? Or that he had insufficient money to take advantage of the upstairs room and so must ignore the teasing smiles of the filles de joie?

At another table, someone was noisily proposing a toast to Pernod Fils. For Marcel, it was never Pernod Fils: he could not afford it. But there was no shortage of alternatives to suit his pocket, and they were quite satisfactory.

Something had changed since his last visit, he realised: something to do with the monkey in the corner. The creature was chattering away to itself, perhaps sensing that it would soon be let out of its cage to run around and cause havoc among the customers, who would not mind in the slightest and would feed it titbits if it perched on their shoulders.

As far as Marcel could see, the monkey was the same as ever, but his gaze kept returning to the same corner of the room. Suddenly he understood what it was: the monkey's cage had been painted. He could not remember what colour it had been originally – grey perhaps, or even black – but now it was bright green. It might even be a different cage; he did not know or care. But the change upset him. It disturbed his peace of mind.

When Marcel woke up the next morning, he reached down for his notebook. That was always his priority. He would inspect it before doing anything else, even before preparing coffee. But his scrabbling fingers made contact only with rough wooden boards, and when he peered over the side of the bed, all he saw was dust and cigarette-ends.

Suddenly he was seized with panic. What if he had lost it? What if it had fallen out of his pocket on the way home? He had made fair copies of only a few of his poems; the remainder were still in the notebook. Ignoring his aching head, he leapt out of bed and picked up his jacket from the floor. Relief washed over him as he felt hard edges within the folds of worn fabric. With the notebook firmly in his grasp, he dived back under the covers. The air in the room was bitterly cold but the fire could wait until later and, in any case, he needed to economise on coal.

Disappointment took over when he saw how meagre his output had been. The little he had written was barely legible:

I am that monkey

The green fairy at my shoulder -- muse or succubus?

A silver spoon tap-tap-tapping against the bars

I cannot get out

If that was meant to be poetry, it was a poor effort, but perhaps he had simply been making notes. Either way, he could tell straight away that little could be done with those few scribbled lines.

Sighing, Marcel let the notebook fall to the floor and wondered how he could pass the hours until evening. ■

Sheela Na Gig, Rodel

Lynn Valentine

Such a long road to drive.
I find you weathered by Harris winds,
worn in the smirr of rain,
hollowed, unholy mother.

I seek your protection, projection
of fertility, one stopped hand
holding a child or a lamb;
the other lost in a shape
that meant something once

My barren belly
concaves in the wet
afternoon, my waterproof
the only second skin I'll own.

Yet there's hope in your arms,
the cleft in your legs, an open
O
on the rough bricks of stone.

The Cleaners

(after Wislawa Szymborska)
Lynn Valentine

Some unknown people dust the world,
mop round after tragedies, offer
a clear river, a green park,
somewhere fresh to sit and think.

My Dad, a council man,
minimum wage, clearing roadside drains,
other people's silt and shit.

I knew the name of Weil's disease
when I was small, would worry on it,
survey Dad for a sweaty brow,
an unlikely cough.

Some days he'd come back pale -

the person after the accident,
the person after the ambulance,
the person after the police had gone,

the person who would damp
down blood, throw down sand,
lift gristle up in both his hands.

Witness

Lynn Valentine

Death is not what I thought it would be,
slow progress of doctors, bed and peace.

I hold her hand, can't let go,
can't ring the bell to let others know.

Tough all her life until this illness gripped her,
increasingly weaker 'til this quarter-hour fight.

A curl of strong fingers, her fury at leaving.
a grasp for my hand like a new-born child.
A wild colt galloping in the corral of her bed,
the mattress her saddle, the blankets her fence.

Soon Awa

Edith Harper

Ah heard fit the doctors hid tae say.
They wir couthy mind, bit couldna jink the trowth.
An ma mind kent ye'd be soon awa,
but ma hert hid nae thocht o sic a thing.

Fan the dowie day cam, jist as wis foretellt,
ma mind cam oot wi a the richt wirds –
'it wis time'; 'she wunted awa',
bit ma hert skirled 'naw, no yit; dinna gang'.

Efter fower years Ah'm aye hertsair.
Ma mind kens that greetin chynges naethin.
But Ahm wearied wi the muckle weight o dool
at sits in ma hert like a granite stane.

The gap atween hert an mind
streetches as braid as the Nor Sea
an is as grey an cauld an lanely.
It's a sair trachle tae rive the twa thegither.

Legacy

Edith Harper

A her days she shived the needle in an oot,
tylerin, dressmakin, aye shewin.
Her warld wis ane o preens an tylers chack;
o tweeds an serge an cotton-lawn.
The daily darg wis ruled by paper pattrens,
tape-mizzers, bastin threid an pinkin shears.
At hame, aye she shewed – curtains, aaprons,
claes fur me – Ah mind thon bonnie dresses still...

Ma fingers shive the needle through the claith,
pu'in the lang fite threid ahint.
Ah troo ma hauns growe like hers –
the wrunkelt skin, the swallen finger-jynts.
Her legacy – mindins o ma bairnheid,
an the hauns o a shewster.

The Bothy

Romany Garnett

Near the eddies of the full-flowing burn,
past the sodden peat hags and black rock,
beyond the hillock and over the low dyke,
in the dismal half-light the stone bothy stood.

The flames flickered licking the air,
softly triumphant in the gloom,
he stood dripping on the stone floor,
she looked away avoiding his stare.

They ate in silence,
crumbs tumbling unheeded,
beside his boots,
moments stilled into breath.

The rain outside lashed unrepentant,
his craggy hands fumbled with a match,
her eyes followed his movements,
as the smoke curled behind his ear.

Wheelbarrow

after William Carlos Williams
Sharon Black

Ours is green with a battered lip, a dribbling

of old cement, speckles of rust.

It's parked beside the patio doors – red
curtain hoiked to one side – glazed

with a kind of stoicism. White chickens

scratch through nettles outside.

So much depends on this one too –
piled with logs of ash and oak and a toupée

of dead broom, it's the measure
of our winter warmth:

flames sketch out our daughters
sprawled at homework, our three cats

curled in their favourite chairs,
you and I trying to kindle

words and sentences, to make amends
until one of us must brave the cold

to clack across the doorsill,
set the chassis on the floor.

A Life

Jenny Fothergill

look west, to the direction
of a life. the minds slow tug,
the inland chicane
of the wind revolving out to sea
and back again, the omnipotent haulage of
steel rope and starlight. the constellations
of a life.
a lone telegraph pole, thread of slate
and grey wool, clouds departed from their origins,
abandon and cold. unobserved timetables,
and religion. laughter in lightness, grief
in isolation. look west: towards time
diffused, reams of silver harvested
from the sky. the islands, like sleeping men lie
perennial, on an ever changing light box.
look west, to the song

of grandparent, black
cormorant and child unborn,
to the direction of
a life.

Cuan. Pen and watercolour by Jenny Fothergill

Incubation

Story by Aoife Wren

In the deep-rimmed bowl of her woven stick nest, high up in the broken flat top of an opened-out pine, the golden eagle incubates. A branch, the curved crook of an arm, stretches out behind her, away above the petering edge of a forest far below, above the open, tawny, still-wintered moor beyond.

A slight breeze moves a twig-caught wisp of down. Her head crouches low, her feathers slick-press against her neck. She is crying, a loud, repeated, mournful yelp as her black eye, round and unbroken by light, watches from behind the deep-curved dome of unbreakable smoothness that is her bill. The sky is empty beyond her. The moor is still. She is waiting, way above the rest of the forest, on a launch pad, a landing pad, a nest. She is crying, her slight head-moving cry, and the blonde feathers of her neck ruffle in the breeze, as her head begins to turn, over her shoulder towards the space behind her. When he lands on the offered crook of the branch, its uneven bridge a motion of dancing needles, she is facing him. She knew, she knew he was coming.

The instant his talons close around the branch, her calls quicken but begin to quieten. Passive, aside her calling, her body is mute. His has the lightness of sky in its feathers, though they close and smooth around it. How fleeting his landing, how sudden his air-filled arrival behind her. And the lightness of flight, an exhilaration, is in the way he leaps again, closer, to land at the edge of the nest's rim. Its sacred circle stills him. His head turns slightly towards her. In his bill, he carries a slim and tender twig and at its tip, a tiny spray of fresh pine needles hangs. He steps closer and gently lays it on the nest beside her. Her head pulls further down and the feathers of her neck open to a ruff of darkening spaces, her crying quieter still, the closer he has come. The breath of pause ripens between them and while he steals brief glances towards her, to the tight weave of twig and stick, they share the space of the nest again. He is cowed now and she is frozen; a spell, a dwam, a dreaming holds. The daze of incubation.

Wait, wait. The light of air is leaving him, softening him. The weight of nest subduing him, soothing him. It is wooing him. He makes a tiny bow towards it, a step into its ring and perhaps it is the leaving lightness of flight that rouses her, the smell of it loosened from his breast. With a ruffle of feathers her body rises on thick-feathered stretching legs and releases her. Air rushes into the broken vacuum as she steps back onto yellowed feet, head dropping to survey her anchor, the bright perfect rounds of her two white eggs. In a moment, with each leg pulled waveringly high, the point of black curved talon glinting, she steps over them in an exaggeration of avoiding; she is clear of them and with the spread of her wings, lifts. She is hopping onto the nest's rim, onto the curled crook of encircling arm, to the sky's edge. To the lightness of flight and dropping away. The sound of her unpausing cry goes with her, its rhythm a pulse, a heartbeat. It fades and falters. Is gone.

He is left in an invisible sphere of emptied silence. The moment she stood up to reveal the eggs, he began his movement towards them. Their gravity pulls him, head lowered, each step a quivering, brim-full of hesitancy, of inevitability. He is transfixed in an unerring reverie, with a trepidation that is breathtaking. The air filled is earth bound, even here, raised on his altar above all others. His feet touch earth, his weight is taken and as if in horror of their holiness, he advances, with a care that is as profound as any ever seen, to the smooth white centre of the eggs. His aloneness in that sacred space is startling. His silence. He lifts the sharpness of points that have cut through and squeezed the life from so many to be what he is, as if they were impotent, numbed, dream-filled appendages. Each careful lift, a softened droopiness he lays numbly down, approaching closer, closer, one tiny step at a time, until the yellow wrinkled skin of his feet touches the smooth white of the eggs' sides.

He bows forward, towards them, and with the needle point of his scooped bill that is almost the depth of his head, he picks up a tiny twig from the edge of an egg and places it, carefully, to the side. He nudges the belly of each egg and rolls it a tiny fraction outwards. He tips forward above them, so that the flat of feathered chest and belly hangs and opens into warm patterned fringes of dangling feather curtains. He sinks their downy softness down and around the white of eggs and their starkness dissolves into disbelief. Carefully, so carefully, he settles over them and a soft rocking of his body begins. Lullaby, side to side, the tips of his wings pressing past each other, each pale-edged feather rustling, ruffling, lowering around them, and his neck sinks and his head, until he is forehead pressed, deeper and deeper into the cup of the nest at the edge of the rim. His eyes, his bill are hidden and the rocking continues for a time that is long enough to make a heart pour open. Like the profoundest of love, like a longed for return, like prayer, like worship. Like the deepest of need, like submission, like grief, like acceptance. Like listening, with everything that is, to the first tiny stirrings of life within.

I am here. I am here. Know me. ■

Fresh-Landed, Copenhagen

Robert Alan Jamieson

A small boy passes by, carrying
a sizeable codfish, held by the gills.
Its tail, about touching the ground, trails
drops of bloody water – where's he headed?

In answer, the vision suddenly diverts
into an unmarked doorway –
next to … quite a high-end restaurant.

Reminder – this is not a river, but the sea,
not a tidal estuary, but deeps –
and though this wooden dock is on a little island,
the city's imperial centrum's near at hand.

Two older boys, I see, are doing the fishing –
baited lines. Silent patience.
One, Greenlandic by his features,
seems the expert - he it is who knows this prey.

A blond boy watches, slightly awed,
as a sudden jolt up-draws another cod –
this one very much alive.

I ask, in hopeful English, to take a photo. The blond
steps up the dock towards me, grinning,
a handsome healthy Danish lad, while the other
turns away to make the kill, to sort the tackle –
till I insist he show his catch. I wait as, smiling, he does.

Through the lens, against the backdrop of a veteran schooner,
the codfish sleek and green, but gaping dead, between them,
pride irradiates – such innocent young killers!
I think: I know your kind from childhood very well.

Click.

Later, in 'Nordatlantens Brygge', a former warehouse,
where trade from the Danish North had centred once,
a wall map shows the route from København
north west to Tórshavn – Faroe – from there, to Reykjavik
and on round Greenland's southern cape, to Nuuk.

Colonial satellites in former times.
The names have changed, but on this map
they're still chain-linked by a thick red line –
a sea-route looping coasts to find safe haven,
as any ship must obviously do – except,
that thick red line of ink goes straight
through the very heart of Shetland,
as if it flew – obscuring the isles beneath it.

How odd it feels – to be
so close-related yet passed over,
in this red Danish, northern chain –

to so connect, yet find yourself irrelevant –
a mere tourist, with an eye for passing fish –
in such a strangely 'hjemlig havn'.

Dry Eyes of Frozen Fishes

Story by Ngan Nguyen

I think Mei got an A for her poem *Frozen Fishes* because she writes about the Chinese people who died in October in a lorry in Essex.

'We have been rowing and rowing for thousands of years

From the North to the South of our Earth

From Africa to the rest of the world

We call ourselves - human.

But today we are frozen like fishes

Not in the ocean but a fridge.'

Mei's cheeks turn a rosy blush as she receives a round of applause. I know her poem is about an awful tragedy but it makes me think about the frozen fish which Mum and Dad usually cook for me yet everybody claps for Mei's poetry as if they have never seen frozen fish in their fridge. I wish Mrs Lily would ask me to read my essay. I would love some applause too. Mei is my best friend and we are the only pupils who look Asian in Kirkcudbright Academy. 'You've done a great job!' I stretch forward, whispering to her as she sits down. She flashes a cheerful smile, still beautiful even though it has a big gap.

Not the song from Alan Walker but the bell is the best music in the world. As soon as that wonderful bell rings, everybody hastily puts their notebooks, text books and stationery into their school bag then dashes for the open air, without caring about what Mrs Lily is saying. I follow Mei into the corridor. Mark hurts my left shoulder as he chases after another boy; the strap of his green bag had dropped down his right arm. I am so upset that he doesn't hear my scream and offer an apology. I want to see his smile, as bright as the sun whenever his lips open.

The late autumn pours its weak light from the sky. Ancient golden leaves are rustling against the wind. There is a huge line of buses and parents' cars waiting for the pupils. Mei and I leave the crowd, walking slowly to the High Street; it is quieter. Her pink skirt sways around tiny legs. I can count twenty horses on her pink school bag. We stand next to the tolbooth, an old prison opened as a museum, where a middle-aged man is sitting at the table; his job must be very boring, I guess, waiting for tourists in that cramped room. Some older pupils glance at us as they pass. They remind me about the poem which Mei read to the class today. Mei was the only person Mrs Lily asked to read out her homework, and now she is popular in our school. A red Kia arrives, Mei's mother puts her head out of the window and waves towards us. 'Bye Lan, see you tomorrow.' Then Mei dashes to her mother. My mother walks along the pavement in her yellow lemon coat, wearing a broad smile and waving at me.

'How was school today, darling?' Her voice is as soft as wool.

I can't tell her how sad I am as she will think what kind of person can be jealous of her close friend, and I can't tell her the truth, that I am worried that Mark will like Mei, not me. So I mimic Mei's high-pitched voice to read her poem.

'Such a touching poem. She can become a poet.'

'Do you think she got an A because she wrote about the Chinese people who died in a lorry recently?' I try to keep my voice natural but I can hear it is quite strange, too weak and forced.

'Darling,' my mother suddenly stops walking and bends over me, 'she deserved to have an A +. How was your essay?'

'I got a B.'

'That's fine. Don't worry about it. I love your essay. Dad loves it too. Mei got claps for her poem whilst you got your father's laughter.'

I keep silent. My mother's coat is too bright in this grey thin air. She holds my hand gently, and we walk home.

'What are we having for tea, mum?'

'I won't tell you until we are home.'

My house is not far from school so it only takes us fifteen minutes to get there. It is built on the hill, among similar houses with tiny gardens and brown roofs. As soon as my mother opens the gate, I rush to the backyard to look at the pink roses. They are swaying in the breeze. I always check these flowers as I am afraid they will disappear. A slap of wind can blow my beloved roses to the ground.

'What do you want to drink, darling?'

'I would like a mug of hot chocolate.'

I climb the stairs, leave my school bag on the table, change my school uniform for jeans and a purple t-shirt with a large Mickey Mouse head. When I walk into the kitchen, my mother has already arranged a dish of four spring rolls on the table. We sit down by the window, looking out at the garden where I can see my neighbours walking their dogs.

'So delicious, mum.'

She reads my thoughts. That's why she always surprises me at tea time with British cakes or Vietnamese snacks. Her spring roll is wrapped in rice paper with a half boiled egg, grilled pork with sesame and salad. She never lets me eat more than two so that I can keep my stomach for dinner.

At four, my mother walks me to her private client, George. He lives alone after his wife's death two years ago and his only son lives in Leeds, very far from here. She has been looking after him for a year and a half following his stroke. In the morning she walks me to school then works with George for three hours, then two more in the afternoon. My mum doesn't want me to stay at home alone so I follow her to George's. Actually I like joining her as she makes me feel how supportive I am.

When we arrive, George is sitting on the sofa, watching a comedy. He blinks at me as I greet him.

'Would you like to have tea now or go for a walk?' My mum sits next to him, asking him in a gentle voice.

'How is the weather, Mickey mouse?'

In his raucous voice, George always calls me according to what I am wearing.

'You can't miss this sunset.'

'Ok, let's go for a walk.'

I stride across the room to the cupboard next to the door to fetch a warm coat, a pair of gloves, a hat and a scarf for him. Mum carefully places a big wool blanket over his legs, then pushes his wheelchair into the open air. The cold air violently rushes to my face, then slowly becomes gentle. We follow the path across the grass to the river path. We slowly head to the bridge, rays of sunlight glittering on the sporadic cloud, dyeing the river in orange. A flock of birds, in a V, fly across the sky, making a huge noise. We walk through the line of trees showing their skeleton branches in miserable movement. There is an old couple walking their two dogs in the opposite direction. When we arrive home, the last ray of sun has already disappeared.

Whilst mum is making dinner, I tell George about Mei's poem and my essay. He asks me to read them for him. I can quote Mei's poem as I have learnt it by heart now. I feel happy as he especially cares about my essay.

'I love these sentences, Lan. *'A petal of a rose is as soft as a cloud, as red as a cherry, as gentle as wool. And my rose drink is more delicious than my father's whisky. It makes me taller and stronger whilst a glass of whisky makes my dad's belly bigger and bigger. When he is old and cannot walk like Mr George, my mother's private customer, I will just offer him my rose drink to make him stronger and younger.'*

'Do you think I deserve an A instead of a B?'

'A or B are just letters of the alphabet. Don't let them make you unhappy. I'll tell you a secret. I never cared about my grades, Lan. School is the place to enjoy your happy time for digging up knowledge because you're a hungry child. Mei has the ability of a poet but you are very good at beverages. Everybody has their own ability, am I right?'

He smiles, more lines on his face like threads and his left eye closes. Whilst he drinks his tea, I continue reading for him *Red Dust Road*, an autobiography by Jackie Kay. He pays me a pound for my reading which makes me extremely happy. My mum earns eleven pounds an hour. Kay's story reminds me of travelling to Vietnam with my parents when I was six. I had no feelings for anybody there, even my mother's parents. They are strangers to me, not like my father's parents whom I meet every year and who give me gifts for my birthday and Christmas. But I remember how I liked the rice fields, their fragrance was so special and there is no perfume in Scotland to compare.

'Dinner is ready!'

I hear my mum's call to let me know that I should stop reading. So I quickly set the table and get a glass of water. A dish of fried noodles, mushrooms, red chillies and some cashews. Back on the sofa, I watch my favorite cartoon. But I can still hear my mum and George speaking.

'Such a tragedy. Did you know that those people in the truck wereVietnamese not Chinese?'

'Yes, just today.'

'Why did people have to risk their lives to come here?'

'In Vietnam, country people can have three proper meals a day for only one pound. They work hard to save money for their old age and sickness. People abroad never tell the truth about their lives and people at home imagine they have the life that they want because films have poisoned their imagination. I am not in their shoes to know about their motivation but I'm sure everybody has their own reason for leaving their families behind. We can't blame anyone, just the wars.'

'It's sad. Do you miss your family in Vietnam? Is your father better now?'

'Not really my family, but I know how much I miss my country when I am in Scotland. He is in hospital now. Very bad. But I can't go home.'

At seven, mum helps George to bed, leaving water and pills on the table, then we leave. Darkness embraces the houses. The sign of life comes from the pale lights from the windows and the murmuring sound from the televisions. My shoes keep making a noise on the gravel whilst I count my steps in Vietnamese, *một, hai, ba*.... Mum says that a person who can't speak her mother tongue will never truly find peace in her life. I wish my mum's father was George, so we could look after him here. I haven't met him for four years, so I don't really remember him. Whenever my mum asks me to speak to him on WhatsApp, I always try to find an excuse. He bores me. I had no feelings when I knew he must go into hospital, but I feel sad whenever we leave George alone in his house.

Dad is making dinner for us when we get home. He has a dental clinic in the town, only five minutes walk away. This is a small town so I guess there are

not many people with dental problems so that my father can earn lots of money from them. I take a quick shower, then go down to the kitchen.

'Do you need a hand Dad?'

'Oh yes, my treasure. Can you check what we need?'

I examine the table, three dishes of smoked salmon and steamed broccoli. I open the cupboard to get glasses. Dad and mum always drink whisky at dinner.

'Did you call your brother today?' my father clears his voice.

'Yes, he asked for more money. I didn't tell him that I work as a carer and don't earn much. But if I don't send him money, he will borrow from other people and pay high interest.' I can hear my mother's voice. She seems a bit nervous. I wonder if my mother knows that her sigh is louder than thunder.

'Don't worry about money my love. I'm happy to help your father.' My father always stresses the final word in his speech, as if he wants to say more but doesn't know what else to say. He must have been trying to cheer my mother up.

'There's something I want to say...' My mother hesitates for a moment then continues, 'My second cousin is planning to travel to England illegally. His father is borrowing money from any source he can. I refused to lend him money with the excuse that my father is in hospital. I tried to stop the boy but he still insists on leaving Vietnam. People don't abandon their plan after the truck accident in England.' My mother's voice breaks then she manages to finish what she is saying with a great effort.

Dad holds my mum gently in his arms, resting his chin on her head. I walk towards the fridge to get ice. The fridge is bigger and higher than me. I could turn into a snowgirl if I stayed in there for a while. As soon as I open the freezer, the raging cold rushes into my face. I see the fishes staring at me. A tray of ice sits next to the fishes. I remember we bought them in Glasgow two months ago. I don't know why my parents haven't cooked them yet. My fingers tremble as I take out the ice tray. The cubes freeze my fingers as I hold them for a while. I can't imagine how those Vietnamese people stayed in that refrigerated truck. Did their eyes open like these fishes when they lost their breath? Their eyes must be as dry as those of these fishes.

I close my eyes, feeling my painful fingers with melting ice on them.

'What keeps you so long, my darling?'

My mum approaches behind me. I can't let her see my teary eyes; they should be as dry as those of these fishes. ■

Author's note: *In fact, the Vietnamese travellers suffocated and died from the heat in a refrigerated lorry.*

Black Bob – Dandy Wonder Dog

Julian Colton

Black Bob wonder dog
Leaps heather, stile, cleuch and burn
Black Bob saves the day.

Appears every week
Black Bob Dandy wonder dog
Comic strip hero.

Lives with Andrew Glenn
On Ettrick Farm, near Selkirk
Bob rounds up the flock.

In the sheep dog trials
This black and white collie dog
Wins cups of silver.

Around Border hills
Bob has many adventures
Saves lambs, thwarts bad men

Teaches the lesson
In life there is wrong and right
Drawn in pen and ink.

Black Bob wonder dog
Leaps heather, stile, cleuch and burn
Black Bob saves the day.

A raging torrent
Man and beast in deep peril
Bob is saviour

This Border idyll
Beneath lurks much dark evil
Bob restores order

A rural policeman
Corrals strays into the pen
Obeys his master

Faithfull collie dog
A life of happy endings
Set in golden past

A time of plenty
Everything in exact place –
Farmer, village, land

Across the seasons
Over bridges, crags and stall
Black Bob guards it all.

Black Bob wonder dog
Leaps heather, stile, cleuch and burn
Black Bob saves the day.

Sartorial Evidence

Story by Jennifer Henderson

"Wear this for a week. See how you get on," Caroline said to her last client of the day.

"A bow tie? I never wear bow ties. Ties, yes, but not bow-ties," Malcolm said, frowning.

"Just give it a go. Nothing ventured, nothing gained," Caroline smiled as she held open the door.

"What on earth is that?" Sheila asked the next morning, over muesli and decaff.

"Nothing, it's just a bit of a change," said Malcolm, spreading butter on his wholemeal toast and dipping his knife in the marmalade.

"Use a spoon for goodness sake! How many times have I told you?" Sheila hissed.

"So, have they promoted you to professor or something? Is that it?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Malcolm opened the newspaper, held it higher than was strictly necessary.

"Reader, then? Senior Lecturer?"

"No, I tell you, no."

"It's about time they did. We could do with some more income."

"We're fine as we are, Sheila. It's not as if we have had to support a family," Malcolm sighed, folded the paper and got to his feet.

"I'm off now. See you later. Do you need anything from the shops on my way home?"

"No, no, it's fine, I'll get it all after work. You'd only buy the wrong kind of lettuce and forget something, as usual."

"Going somewhere interesting after work, Malcolm? Didn't put you down as the sartorially elegant type!" chortled Charlie as he arrived in the office.

"No, no, just having a bit of a change," Malcolm replied, settling in at his desk by the window. He could see the sea out of it; blue and calm and peaceful.

"Oh come on, what is it? Another woman? I wouldn't blame you, you've been a saint ….."

"Stop right there, I won't hear a word against Sheila, Charlie, you know that."

Charlie raised his hands in submission, made a zipping motion across his lips, and swivelled his chair back round to his desk.

The students in his first lecture of the morning stared a little more intently than usual, whispered comments to each other and then generally behaved as they normally did. Yawned, drank their takeaway coffees and looked at their mobiles under the tables as if they believed he could not tell what they were doing. The keen ones, who sat at the front, took notes diligently and even asked a few questions at the end.

Later on in the afternoon, he had a meeting with one of his research students. Lily was a mature student; she took life very seriously and seemed to want to prove her entire family wrong; she was a single mum with two teenage sons. She had left school at fifteen with no qualifications. Her research into the psychology of bereavement was proving very interesting; soon she would have enough data to start writing up. And then submitting. And then leaving, probably. Malcolm brushed these thoughts aside as he ushered her into his office. Charlie had gone home early, as usual, so they had some peace to discuss her findings.

"So, how did you get on with wearing the bow-tie?" Caroline asked the following Tuesday.

"Well, it was a bit odd to start with, but I soon got used to it," Malcolm said, trying to find a comfortable way of folding his long limbs into the low armchair.

"Any adverse comments?"

"No, not really, well…maybe some, but I didn't pay much attention."

'Now, if you'd care to swap that one for this tartan one, we can get on with this week's session.'

"Good, glad to hear it. Now, if you'd care to swap that one for this tartan one, we can get on with this week's session."

"A tartan one? Really? Is this some kind of test?" Malcolm said, undoing the plain black bow-tie and handing it over.

"No, not a test at all. I'd say you have enough to contend with, without me adding to your stressors! So, how have you been this week, Malcolm?"

"You're late again! Why are you coming home late on Tuesdays all of a sudden, Malcolm?" Sheila barked as he came through the front door. The smell of burning cabbage assaulted him.

"It's not all of a sudden, Sheila. I told you we're having team meetings at 5 o'clock on Tuesdays. I'm not that late, it's only 6.30 now"

"But we eat at 6pm on the dot! You didn't tell me, I'm sure. You must have misremembered. I would have remembered if you'd told me something like that. Team meetings indeed! Whatever next! And at five o'clock too. How inconsiderate. Your tea is in the oven."

"Thank you Sheila. I'll just go and wash my hands."

"What on earth is that?"

"What?"

"That! That monstrosity below your chin!"

"It's a bow-tie."

"I can see that. But a tartan one, really? What is going on Malcolm? Are you having some sort of breakdown?"

"I don't really see that wearing a bow tie is that extraordinary, Sheila."

"Really? After thirty years of wearing a tie, you suddenly switch to a bow tie? I call that very strange, very strange indeed, Malcolm. What will the neighbours think? And my mother? Please tell me you won't wear it when we go to visit mother at the weekend?"

"I hadn't really thought about it, to be honest."

A month later, Malcolm had worn four bow ties of differing hues, in successive weeks. The plain black one, the tartan one, then navy blue and finally burgundy velvet. He had come to quite like their reassuring quality at his throat.

"I think we can stop the bow-tie experience now, Malcolm," Caroline said on his next Tuesday afternoon visit. "We have all the evidence we need. I can see that you have been telling me a version of the truth; the abuse is really a lot worse than you have said. It is distressing to see how Sheila treats you."

"Evidence? What evidence?" Malcolm asked, leaning forward in the perpetually uncomfortable chair.

"From the cameras in the bow-ties. We often find that clients play down their experiences. Tell things in a way that minimises their pain and makes the perpetrators look less bad. But no-one should be treated like that. No-one. Ever. And now I can help you find a way out. And a way to tell Lily how you really feel." ■

Fish-man

Story by Eòin Marsco

The fish-man boarded my boat some short time after I'd left Kinloch Bay. Dropping the engine in deeper water and settling in for the long ride back to Mallaig, I glanced to my left to watch Rum recede behind me, but instead met his gaze.

His stare was vacant. Was he frightened? I saw only his walleye and damp, gelatinous skin. I knew cornered animals attack, hopelessly, viciously but I turned away anyway. If he was scared, perhaps he'd fall on me now, eat me, or at very least I'd turn back to find him 3 inches from my face breathing hot brine onto me. And yet, something gave me the sense that he was still where he had been before.

Looking back, he seemed less alien. There was now some substance to that damp skin, and intelligence in those marble eyes. I noticed the long, slender hands in his lap, the fingers joined by fans of skin at the second knuckle (and I'd been sure those were just broad fin-like things before) and his skin, stretched thin across his whole body but all more human than I'd thought before. I turned again to maintain our course.

Tall cliffs, flanking the Isle of Eigg, rose monstrously to our right. It was eerily still. A pained snorting noise surprised me and, turning, I saw the fish-man (more man now) with his fingers at his throat, his face flushed and helpless. He was trying to breathe through his throat. Looking into those childish eyes I drew long, deliberate breaths, trying wordlessly to reassure him.

Approaching Mallaig, I idled the engine. I reached into my bag to throw him a t-shirt and swimming shorts. They looked comically small on him and his damp skin darkened them instantly. But how human he seemed – the gills were a vague scar, his eyes were warmer, and grateful. Pulling beside the pontoon, I suppose we looked like two ragged West Coast fishermen, because the people watching us were unconcerned when, to my surprise, he hopped from the boat, deftly cleated the bowline and dived effortlessly into the Saturday crowd. I don't think I ever saw him again. ■

The Quarant
Graham Bullen
Matador Books (2020) £9.99
Review by Cynthia Rogerson

This is one of those books that gives you no time to warm up. From the first page, before you get to know anyone, you're plunged straight into catastrophe. The only thing you know for sure is the date - January 26th, 1348. Venice has just been struck by an devastating earthquake, followed by a tsunami. Malin, an English trader standing on the deck of his ship coming in to dock, first notices a woman's body drifting out to sea, her white veil swirling over some flotsam. It's both disturbing and mesmerising, much like tomorrow's scene of hundreds of bodies laid out in the Piazza, with Confraternities milling around them in their robes and tall pointed hoods. Malin has arrived with plots and plans - commercial, political and personal - but he's not prepared for what he finds. The images of death are laid out in short, halting lines, hauntingly bleak, much like the corpses lined up in solemn rows by the canal.

Quarant is the mandatory 40-day requirement for imported cargo, while merchandise is ascertained and taxes calculated and paid. Malin must use this time to negotiate buyers, as well as accomplish his more complicated political and romantic aims. Each chapter title announces the date, and Bullen uses this constraint as the book's structure to great advantage. Tension builds as the quarant time shrinks, creating a page-turner. But the literary quality makes this difficult, for who would want to rush?

Through Malin, Bullen has much to say about the ambivalent nature of the world. About immoral elitist politicians who nevertheless stabilize their country: About an emotionally abusive father which results in an honourable son. About greed and the inevitability of betrayal – which never quite destroys trust or hope. About natural disasters undoing the work of centuries in a day, but not preventing people repairing and building again the next day. But the most intriguing parts of the book for me were the times Malin acts against his own benefit, trapped by patterns of behaviour formed in his childhood. To write a complicated plot set in the distant past is tricky enough. To people it with three-dimensional characters whose problems and sensibilities are very much of their time, but also instantly recognisable to us - is a feat.

And all along, the reader knows more than the characters – that the worst disaster of all is hovering on the horizon. The word quarant (and eventually quarantine) will be applied to people, not cargo. By the end of the year, only 40,000 of the city's 100,000 will be alive. This is not a plague book, it was written long before Covid - although in a sense maybe all stories are. Maybe beneath all our struggles and endeavours, all our preoccupations, we are subconsciously waiting for the next plague.

This is Bullen's first novel. With another completed novel due out this summer and a third on the way, one gets the impression he is making up for lost time; that all this and more has been simmering for decades, and now it's tumbling out. This is exciting news. ■

Arrivals of Light
Robin Fulton Macpherson
Shearsman Books (2020) £10.95
Review by Chris Powici

When a poet has been plying their craft for half a century or more, they could be forgiven for resting on the laurels of a volume of collected poems. Not Robin Fulton Macpherson. His collected poems, *A Northern Habitat*, was published in 2013 to wide and well-deserved praise. Here is a book of new poems. And so many of them! *Arrivals of Light* contains over 150 poems. Many of these consist of just a few lines but they're suffused with a remarkable keenness of eye and, especially, freshness of thought and phrase. The very title – *Arrival of Light* – speaks to a sense of continuing revelation, or more accurately *revelations*.

If there is a thread that unites these poems, it's that of time, of how we make sense of it and of how, sometimes, we need to question the ways it seems to make sense of us. An uneasy sensation of being thrust into the future or, indeed, thrown into the past, crops up again and again. In the opening poem, 'Crows and Heron', the speaker confesses to a feeling of befuddlement as to why birds move in any given direction 'while my own landscape hurries me forward.'

In 'Rooks, and Others' (Macpherson likes his corvids) the palpably memorable world of people ('the drifting tobacco smells/of wartime adults') is contrasted with the apparently memory-less world of birds who, the poet speculates, may regard their every cry as the saying of something new.

Out of this sense of the perplexity of existence, Macpherson forges a poetry that touches so memorably on its 'big' theme by being so grounded in lived experience. It's a way of looking at the world that isn't blind to hurt and heartbreak. Sometimes language itself signals our separation from a wider, more-than-human reality:

> The word for cloud tries to hide the cloud.
> The word for eye tries to hide the eye.
> ('From a Very High Window')

At other times light illuminates what has been lost, what time has ruined:

> neglected backyards, dumped tractors,
> dried willow-herb stalks from last year
> ('Cloud Mastery')

For all that Macpherson's outlook may be unflinching, it isn't bleak. We may feel an urge, even a compulsion, to revisit the past, but any pain involved is balanced by a refreshing awareness of what can't be nailed down in time, nor given the ambiguous weight of a name:

> The wind that ruffles my hair today
> can't tell the time and can't tell the year
> and doesn't know which island we're on.
> Without it, I wouldn't know where I am.
> ('Far Away is Here')

If the distinctions between past and present, here and elsewhere, aren't as certain as they appear, then the same fluidity holds true for culture and nature. A quartet playing Beethoven 'becomes a wide forest…The leaves breathe as one.' ('String Quartet'). A November evening spills so much 'indigo and scarlet', it resembles an Emil Nolde landscape, 'leaving no room for/everyday light, everyday dark.' ('November Dusk').

Ultimately, reality may not accord with our common-sense view of things, but imagination and insight take up the slack left by our workaday assumptions:

> my eyes are too big
> to see eightsome reels
> whirled by particles
> in the solid rock
> I think I stand on.
> ('Some Things Great and Small')

Nor does the sheer out-of-kilter oddness of human consciousness mean that we are compelled to feel cut off from the larger life that links atoms to stars by way of birds and trees, rivers and oceans. The universe may be vast and (with new insights provided by cosmology) getting vaster but the sheer familiarity of a crow or a beech tree is a kind of saving grace: 'Such neighbourliness, centuries deep,/ protects us from the empty light years.' ('Neighbourly'). All we have to do, as Robin Fulton Macpherson notices so deftly, is to step outside – outside the house and outside of the hurrying-forward landscape of human chronology – where stars and streetlamps feel as close and as far away as one another and

> The night universe sweeps me with a freshness
> As of a quiet wave breaking in sunlight

('I Step Outside, Late') ■

Mother, Nature
Aoife Lyall
Bloodaxe (2021) £9.95
Review by Alice Tarbuck

Aoife Lyall is a poet whose first collection demonstrates such clarity of vision and assurance of language that one wonders how readers coped without *Mother, Nature* before it came along. It ought, really, to be available on the NHS, accessible at any stage of pregnancy parenthood, or grief.

Lyall's *Mother, Nature* is an immersive, compulsive text, that offers you a view of motherhood and infant mortality that cannot be looked away from. The candour of Lyall's work is the key to its impact. The mundane, quotidian aspects of parenthood and grief are writ large, and, through scrupulous attention, turned into moments with resonance far beyond their specificity. In 'Haunted', the aftermath of grief must make its home amongst all the busy-ness of living, and this enormous effort splits the text in two:

> 'Baby books lie buried
> Moved there weeks ago
> beneath the spare bed
> by well-intentioned mothers while'

Here, things can never be put away neatly – everything is cyclical, appears and reappears, is fallen over, made new and sharp again in discovery. Grief is not the only thing felt new and extraordinary – Lyall also speaks about the extraordinary intimacies of new life: 'You sleep on my chest/ hands splayed like a sunset'. Lyall's poems are concerned with transforming the small moments, wrapping them in amber, marking them as important.

> 'he held you sleeping, thumbing the smell
> from your newborn head, easing around
> the knots, the soft spot, humming.'

However, Lyall's work is not salvific, and does not aim to transcend from incident to broader moral or social message. Instead, Lyall's power lies in her refusal to allow grief, pain, and the ordinary business of living to be abstracted. We stay in the moment, are forced to look at the difficult thing, experience grief as durational in line with the poet's breaths, the poet's daily routines, the poet's vocabularies of loss. Instead, these poems ask us what to do with grief, where our empathy can bridge, where care is needed. In 'Autumn' for example, Lyall listens to the husky next door howling, and makes a fascinating comparison between forms of loss and forms of memory: 'Listless I listen, longing for the intensity/ of his grief, the impermanence of his loss'. Human grief is, here, permanent and quiet, and these poems form elegant howls out into the world, vocalising the pain that threatens, but never overwhelms, close attention to form and communication.

The means by which the force of this collection is achieved is a form of skeining, where emotions are woven through patterns of everyday movement, routine, and love. Love, for Lyall, is a tangible, bodily thing, which is borne of daily practice, patience, and perseverance. Passion is transmuted to love of children, the romantic for the domestic which is, in turn, transformed into the romanticism of the everyday. For example, in 'Soft Spot', we see the poet's gaze turn to her spouse, though her address remains direct to her baby, in a form of transmitted love through a central fulcrum:

This attention, born of long love and deep knowing, begins with Lyall's family, her immediate surroundings, but it does not end there. Lyall has a clear eye for landscape, and the comma between Mother and Nature in the title shows the two main preoccupations of the collection. The natural world is solace, play-place, a world not apart from the world of parenting and grief, but a theatre where these are performed, where comfort is found from the more-than-human, and the long cycles of the natural world provide comfort and lesson as to forms of perseverance. In 'Loch Ness', Lyall's attention spreads across the imposing loch, tracing its shape and its personal significance: 'Grey ebbs and flows reflect/ a sky that has a sun in it/ somewhere'. This is, I think, a wonderful way of thinking about the collection: as variegated and quick-changing as the sky or the water of a loch, and similarly full of unexpected depths and shifts. Lyall is a generous, talented poet, and this first collection makes clear her skill and promise. ■

Leaving Camustianavaig
John Beaton
Word Galaxy Press (2021) £15.95
Review by Anne Macleod

John Beaton is a bard in the oral tradition who happens to write his poems down. He recites the work from memory as spoken word performer and poet member of the band Celtic Chaos, and though his home is on Vancouver Island, in non-pandemic years he spends each spring in his native Scotland.

Beaton's work is widely published in Canada and this, his first collection, sweeps us from Skye to Canada's lush west coast and back again. It is a celebration of wildlife, landscape, history, and love - Beaton's delight in all these things is palpable.

There is sadness too, the emigrant's wistful regret. The title poem 'Leaving Camustianavaig' hints at beauty, at loss of birthright, and 'Stillbirth', the opening poem series is a sensitive exploration of the gradual loss of parents to ageing and death.

Camustianavaig, the crofting township in Skye, is near the site of the famous Battle of the Braes, a mass land protest by crofters in 1882. Beaton is unafraid to address ensuing hardship and conflict.

'..nets hung dry; rust stalked the waves of the eaves..' (Brothers of the Byre)

In 'For the Crofters', a breath-taking sweep through crofting history, he concludes:

'As you drive on the roads that run where your forefathers trod, you lean to the whine of the wind.'

He celebrates Sorley Maclean's great Gaelic poem 'Hallaig' in 'The Burn of Hallaig':

> ' ..the words …/ .. your own Gaelic, and
> .. your own English' and Robert Burns
> in Immortal Memory. 'A nation's heritage
> defined/ by peopled landscapes of the mind.'

The Canadian landscapes are peopled too. And exciting. In 'River of Refuge', he visits a backwoods cabin. 'sign/above the door: *Come in but mind/ the bear-board welcome mat!*'

The mat being a plywood sheet with upward-pointing two inch nails.

In 'The Way' he drives his truck on defunct logging roads and hikes through chest-deep brush to 'A played-out quarry' with 'huckleberry, salmonberry, devil's club, and thorns'. And cougars.

He loves Vancouver Island. In 'Qualicum Sunset' he declares '..this is my life and this fair coast, my home'.

But finally, in 'When I Am Old', he yearns for Scotland. ' ..it's here I'll yield/ to the stubble and seeds of the past.'

This genial, thoughtful collection will repay time spent reading and re-reading. And these are poems to be read *aloud* – musical, a song cycle, as Alasdair Fraser the fiddler attests on the back cover. Though he has been creative with stanza form and line-break, Beaton's love for metre and joyful, often internal, rhyme demand the actual human voice. ■

Rehearsals for the Real World
Robin Lindsay Wilson
Leaf by Leaf (2020) £10.99
Review by Shane Strachan

Inspired by reading Lydia Davis, Wilson got the idea that these 557 micro-monologues originally created for his drama students could work as a collection of flash fiction to be read and enjoyed. Like Davis's best writing, Wilson's most successful monologues are those that give the sense of a whole life existing beyond the snapshot we are presented. This is particularly the case when there is a focus on something or someone external to the speaker – such as a shipbuilder describing their handiwork with love and care – or a sharp evocation of the senses: a miner emerging into the light and fresh air; the memory of a stone being dropped from a bridge onto a passing car, the collision echoing through time. The monologues from animal perspectives are also particularly original in illuminating experiences far removed from our own, such as a grey heron weighing up its place in the animal kingdom.

However, one of the initial monologues sets the blueprint for many that miss the mark: 'I could not hear myself think unless I exaggerated. […] No love of ordinary things.' Too many are composed

of pure abstract thought disconnected from a sense of real, lived experience and often shout from the page with an overkill of exclamations! In these, nuance and genuine surprise are often lacking, ending in epiphanies that become so spelt out and expected that they are forgettable, or we are force-fed a moral, rather than trusted to see it for ourselves: 'I debased myself, came back round for another go! My choices just got smaller, yeh smaller… I became irrelevant and facile. Irrelevant to life. Real life. I wish these wishes would end' bemoans a speaker later in the collection who tricks a genie into giving them endless wishes – all I could wish for by this point was that some last lines, and some entire monologues, had been edited out altogether.

In fairness, this is very much a criticism from the perspective of a reader, rather than that of an actor using *Rehearsals* as useful source texts to be pulled apart and brought to life in a myriad of ways. I might think very differently about some of these monologues if an actor imbued them with new meaning through a careful choice of tone, a pause or intonation by 'actioning' each line with their own interpretation of the narrator's desires. Maybe the voice in my head just isn't up to the acting job?

Others might commend the multitude of voices, perspectives, themes and topics – the *everythingness* of Wilson's book – but I felt it didn't hold my attention or pack the same sustained punch as the likes of Lucy Ellman's all-encompassing, 1000-page behemoth *Ducks*, Newburyport because the latter's kaleidoscope of tangential, conflicting perspectives all belong to only one character's unending monologue, who we come to know and care to listen to, unlike Wilson's conveyor belt of voices. Ultimately, I can't help but wonder if *Rehearsals for the Real World* could have been much more with much less. ■

The Nine Mothers of Heimdallr
Miriam Nash with artwork by Christina Edlund-Plater
Hercules Editions (2020) £10.00
Review by Chris Powici

Everybody knows the Norse myths. At least we think we do, the gist of them anyway. From comic books to Hollywood blockbusters by way of Neil Gaiman novels, archaeology programmes, even lager adverts, images of a thunderbolt-flinging Thor or Odin hanging from a tree, have taken root in the modern imagination. But amid all this elemental drama, some things have been obscured, which is what makes Miriam Nash's version of *The Nine Mothers of Heimdallr* so engaging and timely in its re-telling of the killing of Ymir.

In the best-known versions of the myth, Ymir, the first and oldest giant, is slain by Odin and his brother gods who then form the earth and humanity itself from his corpse. It is, as Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir makes clear in her introduction to Nash's poem, an exclusively masculine act of creation.

I began this 'chapbook' (a rather too under-stated word for such a colourful and beautifully designed wee book) by letting the images that illustrate the text – wet-felting and needle-felting pictures by the poet's mother Christina Edlund-Plater – work their magic. This is an unmistakeably northern world. You feel the bite of the wind and the heat of the hearth flame. A particularly striking image consists almost entirely of a black circle at the centre of the page, evoking the void before the world is formed but also, significantly, a mouth opened to tell a story or ask a question.

The poem itself begins with a question: 'What do you see in the flame-light child?' The answer – *'You're my mothers, mothers nine'* – means we know from the outset that we'll be reading or, better still, listening to (read these resonant, echoey quatrains aloud) a creation myth that challenges the dominant version of the story. Here's how Ymir is described:

> Ymir was frost was wind was flame
> Ymir was form was voice was name
> Ymir, the giant, the first, became
> our mother-father

Later the narrator tells how the debt to Ymir for the created world was disavowed and responsibility for 'his' murder concealed:

> Then Odin and his brother-gods
> built palaces from Ymir's thoughts
> and looking down on Ymir's realms
> they said the world was made by Gods.

From this point, the poem not only restores Ymir and a sense of female agency to the creation of the world, it also highlights how well-told stories don't deliver cut-and-dried truths. Instead it asks the listener to think about choices:

> *Am I a giant or a god?*
> Child, you're a giant to us
> *Who was my father?* Odin, child
> god or giant, you have a choice.

This isn't a story that tells us what to think; it simply asks us to think: about what stories have been obscured by dominant narratives and how they may be retrieved and re-imagined. After all, the power of myth, of narrative, isn't a narrowly academic issue. Consider the furore surrounding the Dundas statue in Edinburgh or the media vilification of historians for daring to shine a light on the links between some National Trust properties and the slave trade. For good or ill, we live by the stories we tell.

According to the late Australian poet Les Murray, the 'big' narratives in our lives – religions, political creeds, national identity – take hold of us so completely, body and soul, they have the force of poems and are, therefore, largely immune to rational critique, no matter how deft or well-intentioned. 'Only a poem can combat a poem' wrote Murray. *The Nine Mothers of Heimdallr* may be just such a poem.

MORGAN & ME A Memoir
Hamish Whyte
Happenstance Press (2020) £10.00
Review by Anne MacLeod

In *MORGAN & ME*, Hamish Whyte lays out his long association with Edwin Morgan, perhaps the most influential and inventive poet Scotland produced in the twentieth century.

In 1968, at twenty-one, Whyte was vice-president of Glasgow University's Alexandrian Society, and a little surprised that a lecturer from the English Department should be addressing him and his fellow Classics students on Greek Comedy. Morgan seemed young (48) 'with Buddy Holly spectacles.. .. erudite and, above all, enthusiastic.' No mention was made of Morgan's own poetry. It was not till the next year that Morgan's second collection *The Second Life* was published and recommended to Whyte by a medical student friend.

He borrowed the book and found it fascinating. It contained concrete poems printed on coloured paper – typeset by computer – which must have been unusual in 1969. Later in the memoir, Whyte tells us that Morgan was 'a believer … that poetry had to acknowledge science and the contemporary world..' and perhaps this early use of technology reflected that. At the time, discovering the poems, Whyte was moved by the work and it prefaced their long literary and personal friendship.

On graduating, he found a job in the Mitchell Library, married and started a post-graduate diploma in Librarianship. This fostered his interest in bibliography and in Glasgow's literary scene. Preparing *Glasgow Poets and Poetry: a representative Bibliography 1950-76* he read every post-war literary magazine and conceived the notion of an anthology of Glasgow poems, an idea well received, but tricky to fund. It finally appeared in 1983, as Noise and Smoky Breath: an illustrated anthology of Glasgow poems 1900– 1983. Poems by Morgan were naturally sought, and literary correspondence flowed, but it was not until 1980 that the two men finally met and Whyte became Morgan's bibliographer.

Morgan & Me covers a lot of ground. It maps family life, with all its happinesses and tragedies (the joy of children, the sadness of Whyte losing his wife to cancer in 1999 and in later years finding new happiness with his partner Diana Hendry); it sheds light on the formalities and friendship that developed between Whyte and Morgan over 40 years; it follows their careers, gives a sense of the responsibilities of the bibliographer, editor and publisher, and the creativity of the poet; it addresses Morgan's coming out at 70, final illness and death.

And then there are the lunches. A recurrent theme is the lunches shared over the years, whether carefully laid out in Whittinghame Court by Morgan, as Whyte works his way through the copious archive, or the more diverse lunches of later years in a kaleidoscope of Glasgow restaurants.

There is kindness too: Morgan's sending a 'Santa' postcard to Whyte's children, having blown all the money from a translation prize on a Concorde flight to Lapland; and the practical help and camaraderie Whyte and a slew of Glasgow poets were able to offer Morgan in his later years, There is poignant reflection when, driven round his childhood homes in Glasgow, Morgan talks about his father, deaf from childhood, who would get upset because he thought people were laughing at him.

Whyte wonders, in the end, who Eddie Morgan was, the busy public figure, the man who '..gave his poems to the world'. In 2020, preparing the *Morgan Twenties* series for Polygon with Robyn Marsack and James McGonnigal, Whyte typed out the poems for typesetting and experienced something 'intimate... a glimpse into the ... creative processes.' He felt able to '...see the twists and turns, the use of banal phrases to say extraordinary things, the unabashed repetitions..' He wonders why 'so many lines end with the... wee connectives that face the empty space to the right of the page: 'till', 'but', and 'and'.

In his poem 'At eighty', Morgan declares 'unknown is best'. Whyte is not so sure, but happy to take us with him as he sets out 'to navigate one of the most important relationships of my life.'

It is a fascinating journey. ■

The Night Jar
Louise Peterkin,
Salt Publishing (2020) £9.99
The Book of Revelation
Rob A. Mackenzie
Salt Publishing, (2020) £9.99
Hunger Like Starlings
Ken Cockburn, ed., Tapsalteerie (2020), £5
The Wreck of the Fathership
W. N. Herbert
Bloodaxe Books (2020), £12.99
Reviews by Richie McCaffery

Although we live in virulent times and face multiple crises of an epidemiological, environmental and political nature, at least poetry appears to be in rude health.

Louise Peterkin's *The Night Jar* contains poems that are incantatory and dream-like but always bordering on nightmares.

In 'Perfume' two children decide to make their own fragrance with whatever they can find. What follows is rather like Heaney's 'Death of a Naturalist' in terms of the loss of innocence and encroaching horror, that the beautiful fuchsias picked for the scent end up as festering sludge. Unlike Heaney, who ends his poem with an image of almost paralysed fright, Peterkin pushes it further, her speakers revel in the abject:

> When it was ready
> we opened the lid to a tomb,
>
> black sludge edging the inside:
> a necromantic border.
>
> We hid our horror at the slime,
> baptised the fetid pong, "Parisienne"
>
> and in emptied shampoo bottles
> labelled over with a flouncy script
>
> distilled the sullied water
> for our mothers.

What is most striking about Peterkin's approach is that often she draws her cues for poems from popular culture or fairy tales. This is nothing new, but most poets are praised for seeing the extraordinary in the quotidian (*vide* Larkin). Peterkin inverts this; she sees the mundanity in the fantasy, often to great comic effect. Take, for instance, 'Jaws', a poem about one of James Bond's more terrifying foes. The poem recounts all his bloody exploits in vivid similes (one of Peterkin's main strengths) and ends with an image of a disillusioned company man:

> […] In the end, I doubt
> I am so very different from others – always
> someone else giving the orders, always
> the taste of blood in my mouth.

Rob A. Mackenzie's *The Book of Revelation* seems like much more of a symptomatic text of our times than Peterkin's. Biting, satirical, polemical and eschatological, this collection is Mackenzie's attempt to navigate the outrageous labyrinth of the 2010s. Many of the poems talk shop about the poetry world and cock a snook at its self-serving and navel-gazing irrelevance, as in 'Chapter 3':

> I should have prayed for a Creative Scotland
> grant/to write in situ, perched on Patmos
> rock and recording/ local detail at taxpayers'
> expense: how other poets – /the true
> professionals – wangle a holiday from doing/
> nothing at all except scribbling in sand, what
> I do when/neither working nor plagiarising.

The supineness of Auden's claim that 'poetry makes nothing happen' is enough to fire poets up to prove him wrong, but in this collection Mackenzie asks a serious question – what use is poetry in the midst of apocalypse, how can poets do anything meaningful when they are torn between back-scratching and back-biting? To quote from 'Atmospheric': 'there will always / be work for hairdressers during a war'. As a Church of Scotland minister, Mackenzie knows that portentous sermonising is not the best way of getting the message across. Instead he makes acute remarks about our condition via humour. Here is a glimpse into 'The Future':

> […] If poets/were paid according to what
> they're worth, the literary/ economy would
> flatline, leaving arts cash to manufacture /
> the four nuclear submarines politicians keep
> promising, / a writer-in-residence for each.
> Doncha see the future/ brightening like
> a golden sunset? The future is in capable/
> hands, between tweets.

It remains to be seen how well Mackenzie's poems will date, imbued as they are with so many specific cultural references, brands and trademarks, but on the basis of the grim forecast for our future in these poems, that might not matter.

Hunger Like Starlings is the fruits of a 2019 translation workshop funded by the Edwin Morgan Trust which teamed up three Scottish and three Hungarian poets. Morgan himself had a great proclivity for translating Hungarian poetry. Ken Cockburn's introduction raises some important points, how the tenor and register of Hungarian and Scottish poetry differs – the former more 'depressive' and conversational, the latter 'expressive' and performative. What follows, however, is a laudable cross-cultural exchange of practices, perspectives and poems. I was particularly struck by Mónika Ferencz's 'Cementgyár ősszel' as translated by Em Strang as 'Cement factory in autumn':

> The sound of Death could not be heard,/
> drumming his eight legs in the guts of the
> man./I began hitting the cold concrete wall/
> to the faint rhythm of the sound coming
> through/and realised that it, too, is only
> cement/and water; that what is made from
> dust/will eventually once again become
> dust./I kept hitting the concrete wall,/and
> realised my fist was made of porcelain.

W. N. Herbert's new collection is called *The Wreck of the Fathership* and it's a dreadnought of a book, well over 200 pages long. Readers might wonder why Herbert chose 'fathership' rather than 'mothership' and this is quickly explained with the dedication to his late father. The first couple of sections of the book are distinctly elegiac and local to Dundee, mourning and remembering the poet's father, one section is even called 'Algos' (Greek for pain). Although Herbert is praised for his linguistic elan and brio, code-switching between registers and dialects in his often ludic poetry, many of these poems are starkly poignant:

> I remember the nurse saying 'Goodbye'
> to my father's dead body as I left, having
> attempted a kiss which felt too formal,
> as though I were being introduced to
> this foreign ambassador, his corpse.
>
> from 'XVII' in 'The Wreck of the Fathership'

These ruminations on fatherhood begin to take on a more universal significance as the book gets towards the midway point of its voyage. The weather – political and climatological – becomes distinctly more tempestuous and readers are warned repeatedly about the 'ninth wave', the wave that could capsize everything and drown them like the ill-starred crew of the lifeboat *Mona* in Dundee in 1959. Nature might have always been seen as essentially maternal but it's the patriarchy across the world that seems to be locked in a maelstrom of self-destruction:

> *The Faithership, the Faithership!*
> *Wha sall loosen its deid man's grip?*
> *Auld Man o the Sea, Youth's scorpion ride*
> *He'll no let gae till the Yirth huz died.*
>
> from 'The Fathership'

In the latter stages of the book, faced with the most pressing issues of our times, Herbert begins to get his old verbal dynamism back, not to mention his wit. There are puns and parodies galore, including the resurrection of 'Oor Wullie McFrankengonagall' with 'a hunnert and fufty thoosan volts'. The richness and multiplicity of this book can only be saluted. Hugh MacDiarmid once archly described his writing in synthetic Scots and English as 'Ecclefechan gongorism' and I'd like to think that here Herbert channels his Dundonian duende, and it's this playfulness and linguistic vigour that is ultimately redemptive. ■

D
Michel Faber
Penguin Doubleday (2020) £16.99 hardback
Review by Cynthia Rogerson

Essentially, *D* is a road story. Like most road stories, there's a quest. Thirteen-year-old Dhikilo - along with Mrs Robinson the huge Labrador who is also sometimes a huge cat with a woman's face - sets out to save a world from which all the D's are disappearing. A world without D's is a world without diversity. Her quest drives the story, but it's what happens to her along the way that's most interesting. And this is where Faber's magic enters, for above all he is a master of whimsical creatures. Fans of *The Book of Strange New Things* will be delighted to meet the Droods, who are as quirky and lovable as the Oasans, while being distinctly different in appearance and culture. In addition, to mention a few others, there are the scary Magwitches and Quilps, the narrowminded Spottletoes and the evil Gamp. And they all live in a world that, despite being permanently winter, you might recognise.

Dhikilo - born in Somaliland, adopted by an English couple - is not your stereotypical adolescent. Like Faber's refusal to write easily categorised books, Dhiklio does not fit easily into a box marked *teenage girl*. She's serious, kind, lonely, and often bewildered but stoical about life as the only Somaliland citizen in town. She understands she's fundamentally different and therefore friendless, but also accepts that in some ways she's lucky. She seems incapable of self-pity. That is, until she finds herself frozen and starving on her quest to rescue the missing Ds. How she responds to obstacles and privations is what the book pivots on. Meanwhile, the voice of her only true human friend, ancient and bumbling Professor Dodderfield, threads through the book. It is his observations that I find most memorable. Even the asides are great: 'Don't be sad on an unslept brain, it stops the memories settling where they should.'

There's danger and darkness in abundance, but *D* oozes charm and warmth. It's a feel-good book without the sentimentality normally associated with feel-good books. Faber takes the reader (of any age) gently by the hand and leads them through experiences which - though at times horrifying - never seem wholly hopeless. If Faber's books have anything in common, it is this narrative voice – starkly honest but always reassuring.

This is Faber's seventh novel, three of which have been made into major feature films and drama series. His short fiction, *Some Rain Must Fall* in particular, is the subject of doctorates. By any measure he is a hugely respected author, but his work has always defied the usual categories of literature. They don't even resemble each other - and never so much as with this book. *D* is a lovely tale to give a 12-year-old or read to a six-year-old, especially if they like C.S.Lewis's Narnia stories. In America it's marketed as a children's book, but not in Britain, because it's also an astute political satire for adults about shifting societal values, as metaphorically clever as *Animal Farm*. It's a fantasy novel for fantasy fans, and science fiction for sci fi fans. Last but not least, *D* is also an homage to Charles Dickens, with imbedded allusions to his characters and place names.

My advice is to not worry about what kind of book *D* is, or whether it's your cup of tea. Just read it. It's a short book, which you'll want to read very slowly to make it last. ■

Firth
John Glenday
Mariscat Press (2020) £6
Where I Was
Diana Hendry
Mariscat Press (2020) £6
Quiet woman, stay
Jane McKie
Cinnamon Press (2020) £9.99
The Ages of Water
Walter Perrie
Grace Note Publications (2020) £11.50
Stone the Crows
Dilys Rose
Mariscat Press (2020) £6
Reviews by Beth McDonough

In this time of restricted travel, the following collections offer both close examinations of home, and take us to distant places and times.

Returning to any home area after considerable absence likely provides its own echo and releases queuing ghosts. Presumably, John Glenday's beautiful meditations on the Firth of Tay would have been entirely different had he lived there uninterruptedly, or had *Firth* been written on brief visits. Deep places, like that water.

> to catch that fish you've been hunting
> all your life,
>
> first of all you must
> spear your own reflection.
> (GREY HERON, nine coastal birds)

Alhough there are Biblical intonations, and classical references, Firth is inherently spiritual, mindful, rather than religious. At the 'least used railway station' he celebrates non-human traffic:

> a single skylark
>
> close-by and invisible – listen to him –
> rehearsing/and rehearsing the abandoned
> stations of the air.
> (at barry links)

Then, in *Firth's* intermittent prose poems, each entitled 'wild flower' (followed by the plant's name):

> look at us for once, just for a moment, down
> here, but please don't look down on us,
> (bird's foot trefoil)

there's that closely inspected extraordinary ordinary, which Glenday does brilliantly. Every poem is as quirky with wonders as the jar of 'vintage porcelain tap tops from the fore-shore west of the caravan park, washed out from the fifties foundry slag-pile by the tide.'

For those familiar with the area, it's especially precious, but *Firth* is for all walkers, for everyone with someone who 'lies on the far side of language' (my mother finds grass of parnassus).

In her fascinating memoir, *Where I Was*, Diana Henry's childhood home's role is potent indeed. Akin to organising a doll's house, the poet lets the

> thought
> it a good place to grow our three girls despite
> the grief that exuded from the walls like damp
> (Before Us)

develop its Gothic quality. Henry's abilities as a children's book writer intensify her imagery. Perhaps the book's dark heart is fully revealed in the poignant 'Their Room', but clues thread throughout. Nor should these shadows imply this is solely a woeful tale. The right kind of nostalgia is always around; spying on a big sister meeting boyfriends from 'On the Landing', the 'glossy black magic of Japanese lacquer' of the Singer machine, and the charms of period scents' names.

> where under the table, beneath the
> damask and linen cloths the paper dolls lead
> their riotous lives.
> (The Breakfast Room)

So much magic happens in those choppy line breaks, and these undercover activities. A forbidden trip into Mother's sewing cupboard (Her Room) has nightmarish traits which are also Yeats-like in their beauty.

Cleverly, the penultimate poem steps outside the interior's claustrophobia to build a strong metaphor, shedding light on the choices introduced from the first poem onwards. The sequencing is both gripping and moving.

Travelling further, *Quiet woman, stay,* Jane McKie's ninth collection, is hallmarked by her fascination with collaborative processes. Not only are her ekphrastic poems powerful, but she draws less directly on fellow creatives' output (including the remarkable sequence celebrating Ithell Colquhoun) with sustained intertextuality. She demolishes the barriers built between 'art' and 'science'. As much chemical as alchemical, adept at harnessing myth, nature and science in tightly-made shorter pieces, these are remarkable, and often ultimately subversive poems.

> I love a mind that can't be contained.
> I try to unravel your skittish thoughts
> from the branches of a pine.
> (The Snow unfurls in Dancing Figures)

McKie has been called 'surrealist', among other labels. None are quite adequate to describe her examination of the strangely luminous, and the liminally strange:

> In the wood a fungus ticks. It has no
> alternative. It waits/The hoof-falls of a
> pair of a pair of muntjac won't yet/smoke
> undergrowth with its powdery shrapnel –
> (The Plant's Chemical Laboratory)

Opening with the potent 'Port Glow', the poet finds 'hot flowers', ' dragonfly wings' and 'rose quartz' in a possible Grangemouth. Nevada, Las Vegas and other artificially-lit places are given the same care as a hospital stay. Consider her poignant study of dementia in 'The Memory Clinic':

> how she wants to be noticed,
> And listened to.
> And left alone.

McKie's subject-matter is wide, her similes marvellous:

> Her thirteenth summer will stretch
> and flex like a salmon.
> ('You should see me in a crown')

These poems offer themselves gradually, and are all the better for that.

Established editor, critic and publisher Walter Perrie's latest collection is drawn from six years of work, but spans millenia, enbracing classical and Celtic sources, through Titian, Mary Queen of Scots, and the poet's South Lanarkshire boyhood. Unafraid to tackle some major themes, *The Ages of Water* is dense with Christian references, considers humanity's destructive relationship with the planet, the origins and development of language, and more. Running throughout these powerful currents, there are several very focused short poems, with a haiku-like quality.

> Three crow-crones on a crooked branch
> warn against love with black dismay.
> Love who you will, defy their shrill
> crowcophony.
> (Love who you will)

This collection knows considerable certainty, and deals with the heart, soul and great beyond, in ways steeped in great learning and appreciation:

> Wherever I go, forever up to my knees
> in peat-bog bloody histories.
> (Test)

Referencing both the poet's and Dungavel's past, without its present, may prove disquieting for some, but Perrie's sources run deep.

Crows set more scenes, as Dily Rose's titular poem in Stone the Crows opens gloriously:

> We really should be more nocturnal.
> Roosting/at dusk- think what we're missing:
> mole tartare,/spatchcocked frog, toad hash!

A sequence playing with collective nouns follows – who knew budgies also congregate in murmurations? There's linguistic playfulness here, but be wary; this poet is adept at pulling away the metaphorical carpet. She does this hauntingly in the final lines of the 'Lamentation of Swans'.

Whether referencing Sri Lanka, Greece or Italy, using both Scots and English, these are indelibly Scottish poems. In a gutsy series giving huge character to clothes, from the disintegration of the 'Black Lace Dress' 'never meant to see the light of day[.]' to the 'too much palaver, extravagance' of the 'Red Dress', there's terrific rendering of colour, shape, texture, plus that developing narrative.

The poet has a wicked way with the initially familiar, the 'well-kent face' of phrasing. Note the crafted sharpness of dealing with the 'Catwomen couchant of the Enlightenment' (Twin Sphinxes) and the 'Drop-chinned, splay-kneed, bellies like sandbags' in the 'bollock-shrinking Baltic' of old men at leisure (Season Ticket for the Turkish). Recognisable and revealing.

There's great delight here, from a writer often relishing her inner curmudgeon.

> A poem is unemployable./It is just a poem.
> Take it or leave it. Either way, it couldn't care.
> (The Unemployable Poem)

Finally, I must commend these vivacious independent presses, and their excellent production values. Elegant, affordable books. ■

Imagined Spaces
Edited by Gail Low and Kirsty Gunn
The Voyage Out Press (2020), £14.99
The Other Side of Stone
Linda Cracknell,
Taproot Press (2021)
£14.99 direct from taprootpress.co.uk
Reviews by Ian Stephen

One time at Uni in Aberdeen, my tutor George Watson, a poet himself as well as a critic, explained why my essay on 'The Ancient Mariner' wasn't that great. 'It would make a good lecture,' he said. And then I remembered that the times the writing seemed worthwhile were when it was getting out of control. Words were tangled with developing thoughts in a way that turned out to be productive. Before you even open it, this book of developing conversations gives a sense of the freedom to explore. The texture and typography remind me, somehow, of the folios and one-off publications which used to come regularly from Alec Finlay's Morning Star Publications. You might dip into a white envelope to unfold a map but it would most probably guide you to an artist's imagined land. I'm thinking also of Gary Snyder's poetry and George Oppen's and that of Olav Hauge, mainly through Robin Fulton's translations. There is a sense that the form has been

discovered rather than prescribed in advance.

The front cover of *Imagined Spaces* has an embossed rectangle which suggests sanctuary. The reverse lists the 22 contributors, not including editors Gail Low and Kirsty Gunn. Their introduction is itself a collaborative essay, with no need to credit the voices as they engage in conversation. And there is also a quote on the back cover:

'A book of essays is like a series of conversations in your own room.'

The book contains another six examples of collaborative essay or recorded exchanges between individuals. For example, Scots of Nigerian and Pakistani background, Tomiwa Foluronzo and Hamzah Hussain, exchange meditations on meanings of something sometimes called 'hame'. The discussions cross artforms too – Lorens Holm opens the considered chat with visual artist Paul Noble by sharing recent photographs of residential parts of Wuhan. These in turn prompt an exchange of descriptions and images of the work of Patrick Geddes. As audience we are included in the only slightly edited spinning of ideas. All plans have to be provisional. Kenny Taylor in the Black Isle and Duncan Maclean on Orkney swap considerations on what the hell 'north' might be from their relative positions and from the diverse backgrounds composed of their own trades and concerns.

Whitney MacVeigh shares both her own explorations with inks on paper and the language she has arranged to face these. Again there is the suggestion that excursions into essay suit chancers, but diligent ones intent on exploring the range of their medium:

'Doubt, uncertainty are passions for the artist, only understood by those in communion with their materials.'

Appropriately for a book born in Dundee, Susan Nickalls draws you into the shapes of the ideas contained in the new V and A building. There is a thorough describing of buildings by the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, to give an international context, but also the surprising correspondence of aesthetic affinity with the architect's words on Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

Philip Lopate, editor of multi-volume collections of American essays of different periods, has read more of this form (or non-form) than most. I'm guessing there's a serious intent in his playful opening:

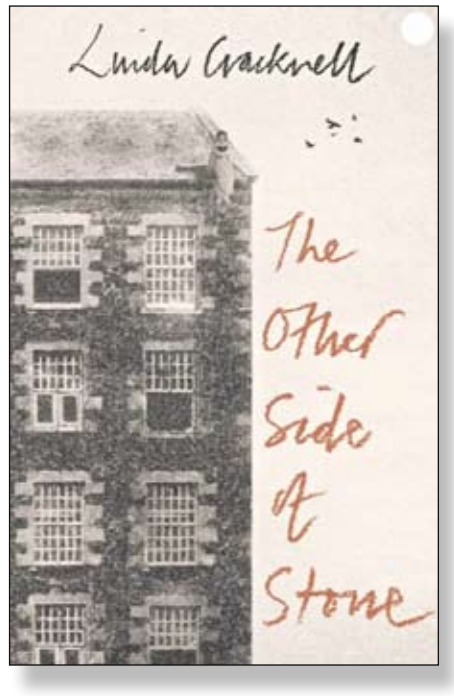
'…I invite you to find this particular article disappointing from the get-go.'

There has to be something that takes you along for the hurl and spin. Lopate's provocation is one way. Meaghan Delahunt is a novelist unable to find a publisher for her most recent novel and, in another impasse, waiting for the operation which will make mobility less painful again. Her meditation (like that of George Saunders in his demanding novel) entices you to consider the Bardo. It could be just too heavy going but it's not. After describing the preserved shark presented by Damien Hirst as 'The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living', she comments that the title is the best part of the work, but even that could do with an edit. She turns from the mad commercialism which can think it OK just to slay another tiger-shark, for the sale of the physical form of the work, to make a contrast with installations in salt by Motoi Yamamoto. These are compared with the drawings in sand by Tibetan monks, in that the material is returned unharmed to its own place in the world.

There are juxtapositions and startling choices, challenging invitations, throughout this book, which you will want to set aside and then return to. Take the detailed inventory of observations of a military transit flight described by Dai John. You're intrigued and also sucked in to the jargon and the texture of report-writing. Then comes the jump. Not with parachute but in a mind moving from darkness to daylight. This is something beyond any listing of detail, no matter how diligent:

> '…the geography conspires to rearrange itself to coincide with the emergence of first light and objects – trees, buildings, whatever – change their relationship with you and with each other'

Often such carefully made publications have been difficult to get hold of. 'The Voyage Out' press have linked with Saraband publishers for distribution. I wanted to pass this handsome book to a friend but I knew I'd want to return, soon, to find more of what I've missed so I just got on the internet to arrange for another copy, to be sent direct. That proved to be no bother. I can now look forward to conversations sparked off, in turn – a chain reaction.



In our times a novel can pretty much do what the hell it likes. To counterbalance that, maybe now most publishers will feel they have to play a safer game, even though the strong voice of *Milkman* won the Booker and Roddy Doyle's latest, *Love*, returns to modernism and dares to imitate the repetitions and false-starts of two pissed old mates talking round what might need to be said. Linda Cracknell has published both short story collections and a novel. It may be telling that she also is vastly experienced in adapting works for radio. You might expect such a writer to have a fair grip of narrative. You'd be right but that helps her take some risks with chronology. Some of the chapters in this second publication from Taproot Press have been published as individual stories and the author describes the work as starting with the intention of writing a novel.

The narrative structure linking the stories is founded on a building. An itinerant mason carves a symbol in an unseen face of the date-stone. There is a flow of stories which will take us from 1831 to the revelation of that mark. As a reader you know that has got to happen. The risk of such a structural device is predictability, but this refined expression of the writer's craft avoids that. After the initial monologue of the mason, the story goes back and forth between two periods – the pre-First World War days of agitation for worker's rights and women's rights in particular and the turn from the 20th to the 21st century.

OK – the next risk, knowingly taken, is that such a pattern could get messy. Except that this is a weaving mill, and the colours and the patterns of the cloth, changing with the times, are a linking motif through the book. This becomes most prominent in the story of the last tweed, completed by a thrawn Yorkshireman doing a one-man lockdown:

'He filled the pirn of pale blue yarn for a crossway that made up thirty-eight parts of the hundred, and replaced it in the shuttle. He thought of the oval recess inside as a womb, a strangely tender place within the grease-smoothed metal-tipped wooden bullet.'

There's never any confusion, partly because the social and political background of each period is bold and partly because there are signatures which differentiate the times. Earlier days are re-made in a first person voice, later ones are told in the third person but holding very close to the thoughts of a main character.

The voice itself could have been an issue, in dialogue and in close narration, near flow of consciousness, in places. In the same way as Malachy Tallack avoided the issue of imitating the more dense Shetlandic voice in *The Valley at the Centre of the World*, Linda Cracknell draws characters who would not speak in the most pronounced Perthshire voice. The mason is a travelling artisan and the master weaver hails from Huddersfield. The thwarted suffragette moves in the political language of her day. There is more continuity in her story than that of any other single character, as we weave in and out, through time. We are engaged by the forceful personality of that woman as her husband is drawn into dependence on the reasonably benevolent mill-owners:

'Principles aren't to brandish about in a wee family firm.'

A single character (the thrawn George) does enter more than one section of the later period, but there are also individual strands which are not followed. A returning son meets a man on the train who shows a reminder that Perthshire lives can still be bereaved by actions in other lands. An ambitious architect is not very good at listening to the advice of a sister who has a much stronger grasp of structure than he has.

For this reader, the refusal to tidy everything up by linking more of the characters is a strength. I recently re-read *Winnesburg Ohio*' by Sherwood Anderson and this came to mind. Graham Roberts, a lecturer who did much to foster creative writing at Aberdeen University steered me to the seminal work of linked short-stories. There are shared characters and, like *The Other Side of Stone* there is the need of one person to go out from 'home' to find a place in the world.

Perhaps Linda Cracknell's book could well be termed a novel but I don't think that matters. What does count is the skill in the telling of the tales, whether they obviously interlock or no. So does the careful presentation and so does the venturing spirit of this publisher. Like *Stefan Tobler's & Other Stories*, a subscription scheme has been developed to enable risks to be taken. I'm grateful that both publications from Taproot Press to date have seen the light of day. ■

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

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Sharon Black is from Glasgow and lives in a remote French mountain valley. Her poetry has won many prizes and been published widely. A pamphlet, *Rib*, will appear with Wayleave Press in 2021 and her third full collection with Drunk Muse Press in 2022. www.sharonblack.co.uk

John Bolland's first collection – *Fallen Stock* – was published by Red Squirrel Press in 2019. His forthcoming collection - *Pibroch* – explores the climate emergency & the Piper Alpha disaster. www.aviewfromthelonggrass.com.

Colin Bramwell is a poet from Fortrose. He was the runner up for the 2020 Edwin Morgan Prize; his first pamphlet, *The Highland Citizenship Test*, was recently published by Stewed Rhubarb.

Mareth Burns is a student in Dundee. She's usually writing, drawing, or trying to find ways to combine the two. More of her writing can be found in *DURA*.

Leonie Charlton lives in Argyll. Her travel memoir *Marram* was published by Sandstone Press in 2020. Her first poetry pamphlet *Ten Minutes of Weather Away* was published by Cinnamon Press this spring. www.leoniecharlton.co.uk

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

Linda Cracknell is based in Aberfeldy and works principally in prose fiction and narrative non-fiction. *Her Doubling Back: Ten paths trodden in memory* was a Radio 4 Book of the Week and her novella *The Other Side of Stone* was published by Taproot in April. www.lindacracknell.com

Kevin Crowe lives in Wick and is author of the short story collection *No Home In This World* (Fly On The Wall Press, 2020) and editor of the Highland LGBT+ magazine *UnDividingLines*.

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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) was the first publication from the new Taproot Press.

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.

Anna Macfie grew up on Knoydart and works as a field ecologist in the Highlands. It is this connection with wild places and associated states of being about which she writes.

Donald Mackay was teacher from Caithness whose poetry pamphlets were published by Mariscat and in publications such as *The Dark Horse*, with which he had a long connection.

Eòin Marsco is a writer based in the West Highlands. This summer he plans to become the (unofficial) poet laureate of the Corran Ferry.

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.

Kevin MacNeil is an award-winning poet, novelist and dramatist from the Outer Hebrides. He lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Stirling and his most recent books are *The Diary of Archie the Alpaca* (2017), *Robert Louis Stevenson: An Anthology* (2017) and *The Brilliant & Forever* (2016)

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).

Patricia McCaw from Edinburgh was born and raised in Northern Ireland and had a career in social work before studying creative writing and becoming widely published. Her pamphlet *Breaking Apple* (2019) is published by Cinnamon Press.

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

Cáit O'Neill McCullagh normally a straying ethnologist and researcher, has been home-bonding in Easter Ross since spring 2020. Here, poems have been emerging from her. This is one of her first.

Beth McDonough from Broughty Ferry is a widely published poet who also reviews in *DURA*. Handfast (with Ruth Aylett) explores dementia and autism, and her pamphlet *Lamping for pickled fish* (2019) is published by 4Word.

Kevin McGowan is based in Stirling and has had numerous poems and short stories published. His chapbook, *Eastern Thistles* (2020) is published by Dreich.

Deborah Moffatt was born in Vermont, lives in Fife and writes in English and Gaelic. Her most recent collections are *Eating Thistles* (Smokestack Books) and *Dàin nan Dùil* (CLÀr), both 2019.

Ngan Nguyen is a Vietnamese-born author who writes both fantasy and realistic fiction. She received her MLitt in Creative Writing from the University of Aberdeen and the Mentoring award from the Wigtown Book Festival.

Elle Paterson from Inverness is currently studying Creative Writing at UHI. Just coming to the end of her second year, she also has a short story on Amazon entitled 'Awakenings'.

Chris Powici edited *Northwords Now* from 2010 to 2017 and teaches creative writing for the University of Stirling and The Open University His first collection is *This Weight of Light* (2015) and a new collection *Look, Breathe* will be published by Red Squirrel this year.

Larissa Reid from Burntisland is a former English teacher turned freelance science writer who has published poetry and prose regularly since 2016. She is a founder member of the Edinburgh writing collective, Twisted::Colon.

Tristan ap Rheinallt is from Wales but has been living in the Scottish islands for over 30 years. He is a member of Stornoway Writers' Circle.

Cynthia Rogerson's latest novel *Wait for me Jack* (written under the pseudonym Addison Jones) is published by Sandstone.

Donald Goodbrand Saunders lives in the Trossachs and has several recent pamphlets of poems and translations - *Knotgrass, Sour Gas & Crude* and *12 poems frae the German o Heinrich Heine* (with R. Crombie Saunders) published by Tomnavoil (2019).

Ian Stephen's selected poems maritime is published by Saraband, as is his novel *a Book of Death and Fish*. Waypoints (Bloomsbury) was shortlisted for the Saltire non-fiction book of the year award, 2017.

Shane Strachan holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Aberdeen. His most recent work is the spoken-word film, podcast and exhibition *The Bill Gibb Line* (Aberdeen Art Gallery; Look Again). www.shanestrachan.com

Ian Tallach Having previously worked as a paediatric doctor, Ian is now medically retired with MS. He lives in Glenurquhart, as do his young family.

Alice V. Taylor is an illustrator and printmaker from the Black Isle alicevtaylor.co.uk

Alice Tarbuck is an Edinburgh-based poet, editor, creative writing teacher and Scottish Book Trust awardee for poetry (2019). Her debut non-fiction book *A Spell in the Wild: a year (and six centuries) of Magic* (2020) is published by Hodder & Stoughton.

Suria Tei is a poet, essayist and novelist. Born and raised in southern Malaysia, she has been living in Glasgow since 2002.

Issy Thompson is a UHI Creative Writing/ Literature student currently staying in Oban.

Matt del Valle lives by the Cairngorms with his family of Mexicans. After writing for family, he thought it might be time to show his work to someone else.

Mark Vernon Thomas lives deep in the Machars, Southwest Scotland. He's been published in *Takehe, Poet's republic,* is a prize winner in the Federation of Writers 2020 poetry competition, and included in Scottish Library Champions 2020 collection.

Lynn Valentine from North Kessock is working towards her debut poetry collection, to be published by Cinnamon Press next year, after winning their Literature Award. She has a Scots pamphlet out in July with Hedgehog Press.

Aoife Wren is a writer based in the heart of the Cairngorms National Park, near Nethybridge.

The Highland Book Prize
Duais Leabhair na Gàidhealtachd

Presented by the Highland Society of London

Moniack Mhor Creative Writing Centre, the Highland Society of London and the Ullapool Book Festival congratulate the shortlisted authors for the 2020 Highland Book Prize. The winner will be announced in May 2021.

***The Nature of Summer* by Jim Crumley (Saraband)**

***To the Lake: A Journey of War and Peace* by Kapka Kassabova (Granta)**

***The Changing Outer Hebrides: Galson and the meaning of Place* by Frank Rennie (Acair)**

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

Public engagement supported by the William Grant Foundation.

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Highland Book Prize shortlisted authors will be hosted (and the winner announced) at a free digital event at 7pm on Saturday 8th May. Free tickets can be booked at www.moniackmhor.org.uk/courses/2020-highland-book-prize-award-ceremony/.

GAELIC EDITOR VACANCY

Northwords is seeking a freelance Gaelic Editor to join its team from this summer onwards. The work includes selection and commissioning of new Gaelic prose, poetry and book reviews, arranging short interviews, translations and film for online use and liaising with the Editor, Designer and Board. Two issues of *Northwords Now* are published each year, with most Gaelic content for the spring-summer edition in the 8-page *Tuath* supplement. The Gaelic Editor also needs to assist with grant applications and reporting to funders. This post receives modest payment, with terms that can be discussed.

If you've a wide knowledge of contemporary Gaelic literature and arts and a passion for promoting Gaelic writing and writers in print and online, we'd love to hear from you. Please contact Kenny Taylor at editor@northwordsnow.co.uk by 31st May, 2021 for more details.

Tha *Northwords* ag iarraidh Deasaiche Gàidhlig a bhios ag obair mar bhall den sgioba aca bhon t-samhradh a-mach. An lùib na h-obrach tha taghadh is iarraidh rosg, bàrdachd agus breithneachadh leabhraichean ann an Gàidhlig, a' cur agallamhan goirid, thionndaidhean agus film air dòigh rin cleachdadh air an Lìon agus ag obair leis an Deasaiche, an Dealbhaiche agus leis a' Bhòrd. Thathar a' foillseachadh dà àireamh de *Northwords Now* sa bhliadhna, leis a' chuid as motha den stuth Ghàidhlig airson àireamh an earraich/an t-samhraidh mar an leasachan 8 duilleagan air a bheil *Tuath*. Bidh aig an Deasaiche Ghàidhlig cuideachd ri cuideachadh le iarrtasan thabhartasan agus aithisgean do luchd-maoineachaidh. Tha tuarastal beag an lùib a' phuist le cumhaichean a ghabhas deasbad.

Ma tha eòlas farsaing agad air litreachas is ealainean Gàidhlig an là an-diugh agus ùidh ann an cur adhart sgrìobhadh is sgrìobhadairean Gàidhlig sa chlò agus air an Lìon, bu mhath leinn cluinntinn bhuat. Nach cuir thu fios gu Coinneach Mac an Tàilleir aig editor@northwordsnow.co.uk air 31 Cèitean 2021 air a' char as fhaide airson barrachd fiosrachaidh.

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