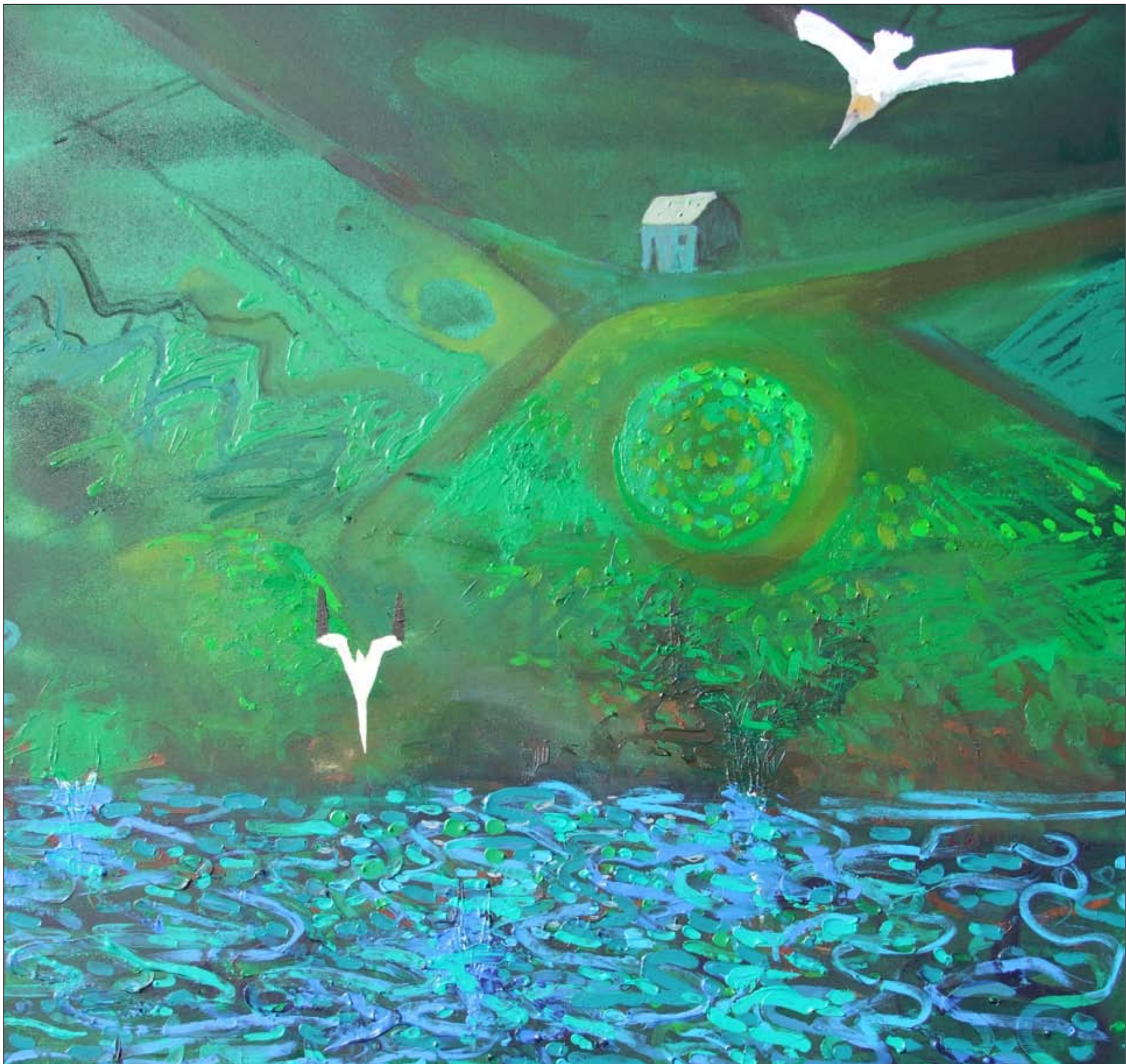


Issue 42, Winter 2021-2022

# Northwords Now

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

**30 Years of Northwords!**



**JAMES ROBERTSON** gathers up time through **GEORGE MACKAY BROWN**'s novels, **BRIAN HOLTON** takes hard roads to the Tang, **JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON** makes Faroese kennings, **PLUS** many more stories, poems, essays, news, reviews and a **SPECIAL READER OFFER** on page 40.

Sgrìobhadh ùr Gàidhlig le **CEITIDH CHAIMBEUL**, **SHEELAGH CHAIMBEUL**, **CAOIMHIN MACNÈILL** agus mòran a bharrachd.



## EDITORIAL

**T**HE CHALLENGES NOW facing humans, nature and planet are obvious and dangerous. Thinking about them – as everyone with an ounce of feeling for life beyond our individual existences should be doing from here on in – can be dispiriting. But art, including good writing, is nothing if it can't explore both spirit and depths of experience. Even in times of crisis, artists can reveal aspects of shared experience that may empower readers, listeners, viewers through the spark of imagination.

That's part of what *Northwords Now* aims to do, through the breadth of new writing we reveal in each new issue, making connections across Scotland and the wider, global north. The range of writing in this issue is no exception. Publication is a few weeks later than intended because of some autumnal cash-flow glue. But thanks to Creative Scotland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, we've now got a brisk winter swing to our step and our content.

Despite problems from local to global, there have been some celebrations in Scotland's literary community this year. Marking the centennial of George Mackay Brown has been part of that, so it's a privilege to be able to share the full text of James Robertson's GMB Memorial Lecture, delivered this autumn, as a resource for readers. As a contemporary counterpoint, we're also excited to include several poems (including one read on our homepage) by Kevin Cormack – one of several Orcadian writers now attracting attention and praise far beyond their northern island shores.

As a new development, we've a book offer specially arranged for our readers on the outer back cover (Page 40). Think of it as a birthday present to readers as 2021 moves to 2022. The 'Northwords' lineage is 30, and counting (see Page 3). Now read on. ■

KENNY TAYLOR, EDITOR

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



[www.facebook.com/groups/northwordsnow/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/northwordsnow/)  
And on Twitter @NorthwordsNow

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

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The next issue is planned for May 2022. The deadline for submissions is **27th February 2022**. If accepted for publication, you will hear about your submission by **30th April 2022**, so feel free to submit elsewhere if we have not contacted you by then.

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# What's New in the North

## Gaelic Editors in the spotlight

*Ceud mìle fàilte* to Marcas Mac an Tuairneir as our new Gaelic editor. Marcas is well known as a writer and performer across Scotland, not least in his current home city of Edinburgh. He's a former chair of Bothan Dùn Èideann and involved in different ways with The Heretics, The Scottish Poetry Library and The Federation of Writers (Scotland), for whom he's the Gaelic and Social Media coordinator.

He's also an experienced literary editor, proof-reader and translator and a popular singer-songwriter, including through collaborations with artists such as Rachel Walker, Mary Ann Kennedy, Ainsley Hammill and Pàdraig Morrison. Marcas introduces himself on Page 13 of this issue. Expect some interesting developments in the use and sharing of Gaelic in print, online and in live events in future.



Meanwhile, as we say '*Fàilte air bòrd*' to Marcas, it's also time to congratulate Rody Gorman, who was our Gaelic editor from 2010 until earlier this year. In October, the National Mod appointed Rody as the new An Comunn Gàidhealach Bàrd, in recognition of his contributions to the Gaelic literary world.

Rody says that he is greatly honoured to have been awarded the position and hopes to promote Gaelic poetry and produce relevant work while in office. Readers of *Northwords Now* will already know some of Rody's work in Gaelic. But to celebrate his multilingual talents (and the cultural strength that Scotland gains through all its languages) we're delighted to include two of his recent poems, in English, on Page 30 of this issue. Here's to many more, whatever language the new Bàrd chooses. ■

## Northwords Turns Thirty

IN SEPTEMBER 1991, a new literary magazine emerged on the Scottish scene. The first edition of *Northwords* (the *Now* came with a later incarnation – think *Dr Who*) ran to 52 pages and cost £3 (about £6 in today's money). Its aim was to "provide a forum for writers from the Highlands, while reaching out to include submissions from all over Scotland and beyond."

Founding editor, the late Angus Dunn, said that it had been "obvious that in the Highlands and Islands we had writers who were of national calibre, but who were known only locally, if at all.

"We felt that the time was right for a magazine with a fresh view, a northern



Cover of the first *Northwords*, Autumn 1991

perspective."

That first issue included dozens of writers, some of whom are still very active today. The cover art was by John McNaught, a freelance artist and photographer who is also Studio Manager of the Highland Print Studio in the heart of Inverness.

After 34 issues, edited both jointly and severally by Angus Dunn, Tom Bryan and Robert Davidson, there was a brief hiatus between March 2004 and November 2005. Later in that period, Rhoda Dunbar convened a public meeting upstairs in Hootenany's (also in deepest Sneek) where many people expressed support for a refreshed *Northwords* project. Rhoda then re-launched the publication under her editorship and in its current newspaper format, as *Northwords Now*. Following Rhoda, Chris Powici was editor for seven years until April 2017, when Kenny Taylor took over. Rody Gorman was Gaelic editor from 2010 until 2021, now followed by Marcas Mac an Tuairneir.

After Angus Dunn's death from Motor Neurone Disease in the autumn of 2015, a double-page spread of poems by some of his many friends, and dedicated to him, formed the centrepiece of *Northwords Now* Issue 31. In his introduction to those poems, Chris Powici said of Angus that: "Put simply, this magazine would not exist without his energy and passion."

It's pleasing to reflect that the key aims and purpose, set out by Angus for Issue 1 of *Northwords* and beyond, remain at the core of what *Northwords Now* aims to do today. Some things have changed. We're now free of charge, thanks to our funders, and our distribution across Scotland is wide. The print edition can be picked up in coffee shops, ferry terminals, libraries, schools, bookshops, writers' groups, galleries, theatres and more. Online, our website has an ever-expanding archive of content that can be searched and

used for study and reading pleasure, plus audiovisual material on the homepage.

'Energy and passion' have driven the evolution throughout. They've been there in the efforts of many, many people – our board members, print designer, editors, web designer, printers, distribution managers and, most of all, the hundreds of writers who have supported us and who have featured from 1991 onwards. Those include both internationally known writers and people who've enjoyed their very first publication in *Northwords* pages. Now – as always – there's a joy to reading and sharing such work.

'New writing, fresh from Scotland and the wider North – *Sgrìobhadh ùr à Alba agus an Àird a Tuath*' is the star we steer by; as then, as now, as ahead. Roll on the fourth decade. ■

## Informal Readers' Group - some new suggestions

IN ISSUE 41, we listed a few of the books we've now reviewed in the current issue, so that interested readers can compare their own ideas with those shared here, in pages 33 to 38. It's pleasing to see that several of these have now been included in the current Highland Book Prize shortlist (Page 32). As a heads-up for some of the titles coming up in our next review section (late spring, 2022), see what you reckon to a few (or all) of these:

As noted in Issue 41, poetry publishing appears to be on a roll these days. One consequence is that we can only share small tastes from the cornucopia, to give a flavour of some notable work published in recent months. Two such volumes are *Chronicles of First Light* (Drunk Muse Press), the fifth collection by George Gunn and *The Rush of Lava Flowers* (Amazon) by George's fellow Caithness dweller, Lydia Popowich. Stewart Sanderson's new collection *the sleep road* (Tapsalteerie) is crafted with his usual skill and is redolent of deep time. *Ben Dorain: a conversation with a mountain* (Irish Pages) is Garry MacKenzie's beautifully produced, widely praised response to both this mountain and to Duncan Ban MacIntyre's praise poem, written 250 years ago.

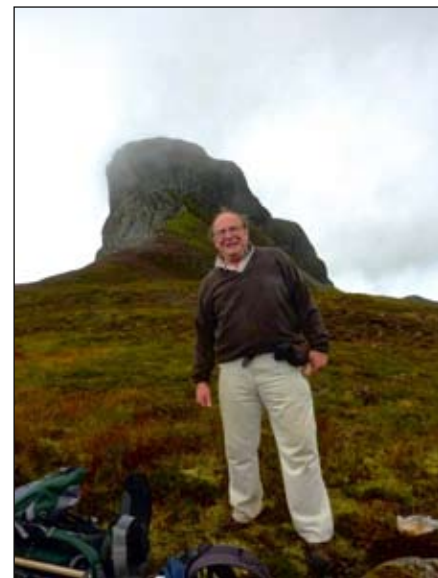
In nonfiction, four of the titles we'll cover will be *With Net and Coble – A Salmon fisher on the Cromarty Firth* by George Chamier (Pen and Sword), *Unspoken – living with mental illness* (Zen Cat Press) by Suria Tei and *Slaves and Highlanders* (Edinburgh University Press) by David Alston. There's a *Northwords Now* reader discount offer for David's book on Page 40. For a deep dive into the thinking of a wheen of notable Scottish penfolk, *Walter Perrie in conversation with*

*Scottish writers* (Grace Note) is a kist o' riches.

Memoirs are likely to include *bleak – the mundane comedy* (Saraband) by R. M. Murray (see his short story on Page 5 of this issue) and several others. For novels, Donald S Murray's *In a Veil of Mist* (Saraband) is a book we couldn't squeeze in this time, but will include in the spring.

That should keep you busy for some of the months ahead... ■

## Remembering a fine torch bearer



Martin Gostwick on Eigg, 2014. Kenny Taylor

FOR MANY PEOPLE with an interest in the 19th century writer and polymath, Hugh Miller, there's been a link in recent decades to another Cromarty dweller and writer, Martin Gostwick. Martin, who died in July, was a former curator of the Hugh Miller Museum (re-established earlier by his wife, Frieda).

As a journalist, Martin worked for the *Morning Star* for many years. His legacy now is in the ways he communicated his enthusiasm for Hugh Miller's writing (including through two of his own books) and encouraged contemporary interest in Miller's wide-ranging work. Through the Friends of Hugh Miller, Martin helped to arrange international symposia, wrote much of a fascinating newsletter over many years and gave support to new ventures such as the former High Miller Writing Competition. In 2014, he helped to plan and was a shipmate aboard a 'Cruise of the Betsey' voyage in a tall-masted ketch, retracing some of Hugh Miller's journey to Eigg in a vessel of that name.

All those who were inspired by Martin's passion for Milleriana and much more besides will miss his wit, eloquence and camaraderie. ■

# Poems by Kevin Cormack

## A Handless Hoose

No four second rule. No salvagan the wreckage  
o claggy home-made cheesekeck fae dense  
1970s carpet fibres, the plate cracked clean,  
a hert-line curve, his mither gaan mental.

*A handless hoose*

The pale puddeenless visitors arranged  
around a six-foot snooker table, fitted  
wae a custom-made widden cover, doubler  
as a dining table in the living room.

*“Ye kinna git angry at somebody if hid’s an accident!”*

Thir kers, asleep against kerbs o the hoosen-  
scheme ker-park, thir conversations an customs,  
err aal like snooker baals: religiosity icons  
waarn smooth under a cue baal moon.

*A moothless mirror*

Fer oot tae sea: a crewless fisheen bott, the hoose  
o hooselessness risen. Hids name like a buoy  
brokkan free in a mountainous waste o black  
waves.

A power cut.

—  
*handless* clumsy, inept  
*moothless* quiet, having little conversation

## For a Song

Wur dopplegangers welcomed us  
wae cult-like smiles, trestle tables  
decked oot wae wur stoor-bliind  
bruck, at the Hell’s Half Acre  
ker boot sale.

A rookle o years, fae ahint an under  
beds an stairs, waardrobes an draars;  
obsolescence shouldered through hatches,  
hidey-holes an the usual inter-  
dimensional portals, hid come away  
in a wanner — a gret suburban skrog  
fae the bowels o wur marital ark.

Heidlight an steethless  
we bowt hid aal back, of coorse,  
bowt hid aal back for a song.  
Weaponry, defence — this comfort  
cacophony — hitched tae the bumper.  
Wur industrial estate.

—  
*stoor* dust  
*bruck* rubbish  
*rookle* heap, pile  
*skrog* a tough root or old branch  
found in peat  
*heidlight* dizzy  
*steethless* without foundation

## Gertie an Albert

If we say hid is, hid is, that’s hid. No bigsiniss,  
jist belief. Afore the words even catch up wae ye.  
No trauma tongue, blackened speech bubble  
in the blood-brick mooth o Magnus.  
No prayers, like half-shut knives,  
at the waddeen o these twa ruined palaces.

Violence will oot, best be in the driveen saet.  
Wur acrylic crotches, like CCTV, constrict  
around unholy watters...  
I live fur these days!  
Kirks, palaces, claes, kers — bae the time  
yir truly comfortable, yir faalan apaert.

Her.

Aal else is blur.

*Bit revenge wis the engine, I doot, no love.*  
*Whit differ dis hid mak noo?*  
*Streetlights, like vicars, swept thum oot the oil-*  
*rainbowed road tae the last substation,*  
*lipsticked wae thir initials, oan the edge*  
*o vast country darkness, an the deadly ambush.*

—  
*bigsiniss* arrogance  
*claes* clothes

## Island o Death

Like Moses oan a mobility scooter  
he sat, deid, within sight o the promeessed land:  
the back berr o The Kirkwall Hotel.  
Closs by a teenage boy, perched oan tubular  
metal railleens, scanned the shut-doon face,  
the owld hand hingan, pale in the driv,  
runkled like drookled newspaper. An whit tae mak  
o the blotted belly whuppid up in a tarpalyin kott,  
like the guy afore bonfire night?

Some fock wakked by, oblivious. Some  
said aye-aye, oblivious. The boy half-laughed  
ower tae mates who werena there, checked  
himsael  
wae an exaggerated blink, frowned doon  
at his phone, puzzled. The deid man caerried oan  
starin at the pub door in hids darkened nook,  
the ootline an window aglow.  
A daft peedie bright flag  
fleetered aboot oan the gangly ariel sproutan  
fae the back o the scooter. The whole thing  
seemed a mosst ancient set-up: an abandoned alien  
radio-rig atop o some haar-drenched hill,  
bliind an dreich, transported tae Bridge Street.  
An island o death.

The rain steppid up a gear, waashan doon  
the owld man’s face. Nearby closses shrunk,  
dank an sinister. The boy hid heard the name afore,  
bit couldna mind oan noo. He havered a meenit  
oan his perch, gawkan, gittan weet...  
then shrugged off the railleens,  
heeded doon t’ward the pier, the blue —  
the blue whar the botts kissed  
each ither ivver so lightly  
in the besseen.

—  
*driv* fine rain, drizzle  
*drookled* drenched  
*haar* sea mist, fog  
*dreich* dreary, bleak  
*closses* narrow passages between buildings  
*gawkan* staring vacantly

## Ga

*Laborare Est Orare*  
*(To Labour is to Pray)*

Reluctancy caad us tae Ga instead o you.  
BOWIE bored intae his fore-erm  
wae a school compass, dipped  
in primordial blue-black,  
back in the peelie-wallie day.

Ga’s eyes, wance the burneen sand  
o a caereless welder, hid wept  
thumsaels intae the light.  
No metter hoo celestial the model  
a bookie’s biro sufficed. Ga

keeked at the blueprints beneath  
the flourescent street-sweeper  
fishan oot bottles o bus drivers’ piss  
fae anunder the faalse castor oil bushes.  
Descended

oan the greasy spoon grundhog day café  
whar wur eternally needy shadows hung oot.  
Elsewharniss wis rife afore Ga:  
brain-glaze, breathan in the Everbuild,  
hammeran the pianos. Ga,

the guide tae draa gratitude an grip  
fae wur universal zero oors contract.  
I drew until I dreamt o me draaeens  
an me dream, sinkan through the moss,  
thrappled intae prayer.

—  
*peelie-wallie* sick, feeble, thin, off-colour  
*thrappled* choked

Kevin Cormack’s collection *Toonie Void* (2021) is  
published by Abersee Press and available through  
The Longship



I WOKE UP in bed and felt very peaceful. Never more relaxed. I'd had such a good sleep. I stretched and yawned and thought about what I had planned to do that day.

But I'd forgotten and it didn't matter anyway.

It reminded me of when I was younger with fewer responsibilities. Of when I was very fit. And earned my rest through work and physical effort and awoke renewed. Reborn. Each day a gift. A promise.

My resting pulse used to be forty-five beats per minute. It must be something close to that now. I put my fingers to my wrist.

But I could not find a pulse. I pressed two fingers against my throat. Nothing.

I am exceptionally relaxed I thought. I may never have been this relaxed. This calm.

I got up and as I was taking my pyjamas off, I heard a noise downstairs. But I live alone. It seemed unusual to have an intruder, not at the dead of night, but on a bright sunny morning. Somehow though, I was not alarmed. I went to the bathroom, showered and afterwards took my time getting dressed: fresh underwear, new socks, jeans and my dark green sweater. Then I laced my boots and went down into the kitchen.

Silhouetted against the window, washing a cup at the sink, was a slightly built figure, his head haloed by the morning light. I cleared my throat: Ahem. At which he turned round and resolved into the room.

He had a pale, benign, obliging face. About my own age, yet with a youthfulness latent beneath the skin. You might say he was dapper. Compact and

self-contained. Well put-together: Pressed trousers, collar and tie, a V-neck Fair-Isle pullover. Polished brogues and careful grey hair, combed with a spirit-level parting on the left.

I imagined him mowing the lawn on a Saturday morning, just as he was. Without looking, I saw his elbow-patched herringbone jacket hanging in the hall. I was sure he had a dog.

I had surprised him.

'You're not supposed to be here' he said. 'We've rented this place. It's all prepaid.'

I said 'I don't understand. This is where I live.'

When I spoke, it was as if I were listening to my own voice on a tape recorder. Or standing beside myself. Off-set. In the wings. Or as if there was a delay on the line.

I must still have had some water in my ear.

A quizzical look fleetingly crimped his face. Like a ripple across a full moon reflected in a still, deep pond. And then he smiled, graciously.

'Yes,' he said 'There's been a misunderstanding. Perhaps we got our dates mixed-up. My wife and children are in the living room watching television. I hope you don't mind.'

'No, of course not. I won't disturb them.'

# Pulse

By R M MURRAY



And then I said, 'I thought you'd be on your own.' But I don't know why I said this to a stranger in my own home about whom I knew nothing.

'Oh no' he said, 'We all came. It was the least we could do.'

I wasn't at all sure what he meant.

I glanced at the framed photo of my wife and our two children on the wall beside the door. And remembered that squally day at the beach. The intermittent bursts of sunshine, the strafing showers. Four seasons in a day. How the wind had whipped her fair hair across her face and the blown sand scoured our feet as we walked. The crabbit sea, distanced by the low Spring tide. Salt. The awkward huddle when we took shelter behind a tall black rock, ankle-socked with seaweed. How the children had complained and just wanted to go back and sit in the car.

The future we had discussed. It seemed only yesterday.

I suppose I forgot about my guest momentarily because I was slightly startled when I became aware of him again. Only now I didn't know what to say. Nor could I comprehend, how such a small kitchen within a modest two-up, two-down could accommodate such a vast, vacant silence.

Our eyes unlocked, and he returned to the sink and began to fill the kettle. And sound and process poured into the room.

'I'm making some coffee' he said. 'Would you like a cup? How do you take it?' His soft voice sounded louder. More brittle.

'White, please. No sugar.'

'Of course.'

He looked in the fridge and frowned. 'Ah, it looks like we're out of milk. Forgive me, I always take it black.'

'No trouble' I said, 'I'll go out and get some. I won't be long.'

Although it was morning, and not especially early, there was no-one else about and as I walked, squinting in the sunlight, I began to wonder whether the shop would be open. Perhaps it was Sunday. Or a Bank Holiday. I decided there was no point and turned back to go home.

'I'll take it black from now on,' I thought.

When I arrived, there was no sign of my guests. And yet, although they had gone, the house somehow felt more occupied than when I left. Even so, my own presence seemed inadequate. Incomplete.

Quite suddenly, I began to feel overwhelmingly tired.

I woke in my bed again. My phone beeped and thumped on the side-table. It was a text from the Bank saying that I had exceeded my agreed overdraft limit and would need to pay funds into my account before 3pm or I would incur further charges.

Traffic droned and murmured outside. Rain swept across the window.

I felt exhausted. Anxious. Fearful. My heart was pounding. ■

SAHAR LOOKED OUT across the white sands, the waves rolling over the beach like foam. They really did look like *white horses* she thought. Behind her, a grassy mound marked the place where sand met cultivated grass: *The Links*.

Two men hefted their bodies into the prevailing wind. Their clubs held high. Sahar shuddered as she watched them take aim. The tiny white ball ricocheted high into the air until it was nothing but a spec on the horizon. The juddering 'whack' of their clubs carried with it images of a past life: her mother cowering on the ground, the shadow of a gun hovering over her.

Sahar averted her eyes as she edged her way slowly towards the lip of water suddenly recalling the beaches back home, how they had once been places of sanctuary and freedom. Places where nature and the city lived in harmony. But then something changed. The natural rock pools where she had explored endlessly as a young girl vanished gradually supplanted by metal and wire. How she wished for those days, for those happy

times. This place she realised might not yet be home but it had the possibility of being called home. Here, at least it was safe. Here everyone came to the beach. Men, women, children, the old and the young: all were drawn to the sea.

She was close to the edge now, felt the water brush against her flimsy trainers.

'Awright hen?' a voice beside her said.

Sahar looked up, felt the memory retreat into the back of her mind. The woman reached out her hand, 'fancy a wee paddle?'

She had taken off her shoes and

# Sahar

Story by GILLIAN SHEARER



Sahar's eyes were immediately drawn to the paleness of the woman's skin. Like alabaster, she thought. Like the statues that had once adorned her beautiful city. A city now reduced to ashes and bone and an uncertain future. Sahar shivered.

Then she thought about the *white horses* and how wonderful it would be to be carried far out into the shimmering sway of foam and water. But she felt stuck; stuck in a past where such thoughts were dangerous. It was a boundary that even now, she found difficult to cross.

'Nae bother, hen. Another time mebbe...'

The woman had a kind face and Sahar returned her kindness with a smile.

She thought back to those early days: the long coach ride across the border; the woman holding her hand telling her that everything would be *awricht*. The words she had used were strange yet comforting. And when they drew up at the border there had been no guards, no guns, just the sight of the blue and white cross welcoming them. The woman, Jean, had talked long into the night. Words rolled off her tongue like the road unravelling before them.

'Here's Flodden, the site of a great battle, and Melrose where the heart of a great King was put to rest.'

A history as bloody as hers, thought Sahar and yet peace had finally prevailed.

'Tired hen? Want tae go back?'

Sahar shook her head. She let her gaze wander out to sea to the vastness beyond. The waves rolled in towards her, white spumes of light twisting, swirling all around her. She smiled, took hold of the woman's hand, and stepped forward. ■

# Deasaiche na Gàidhlig

Marcas Mac an Tuairneir

THA ENA urram a bhith a' sgrìobhadh thugaibh, bhon taigh ann an Dùn Èideann, air feasgar brèagha fogharach. Tha e na urram, cuideachd, a bhith a' gabhail thairis dreuchd deasaiche na Gàidhlig airson *Northwords Now* agus *Tuath*. Le seo, tha mi a' gabhail ris an dùbhlán, ach ga fhaicinn mar chothrom an sgrìobhadh co-aimsireil as fheàrr a th' againn air saoghal na Gàidhlig a chumail romhaibh, le sùil air coimhearsnachdan aig tuath – air feadh na Gàidhealtachd is nan Eilean is Alba gu lèir.

'S ann le beagan iomagain a tha mi a' leantainn ann an clais chliùitich Rody Gorman, a rinn obair ionmholta cor litreachas na Gàidhlig a dhìon, na

dhreuchd mar dheasaiche na Gàidhlig den iris seo. Bu mhath leam taing a thoirt dha, gu pearsanta, airson duilleagan na Gàidhlig a chumail ann an deagh ìre. Mar an ceudna, tha mi a' dèanamh fiughair na dàimhean a stèidhich e, eadar an iris is na sgrìobhadairean a chuireas thugainn an cuid saotharach, a neartachadh ach, cuideachd, le bhith a' fosgladh na h-uinneige airson àile ùr fhaireachdainn.

Mar sin, fhad 's a tha mi daingeann agus gur àite a tha seo, far am faicear na sgrìobhadairean as motha a chòrdas rinn, tha mi buailteach cothrom na Fèinne a thoirt do sgrìobhadairean òga ùra is a thilleadh do dh'fhoillseachadh cuideachd.

Tha an t-aonamh linn thar fhichead air iolrachd air leth a thoirt air litreachas na Gàidhlig agus tha sin na bhuannachd dhuinne aig *Northwords Now*. Mar sin, ma tha sgeulachdan agaibh ri innse, cuiribh thugam iad, feuch am faigh sinn dòigh taic a chumail ribh.

Bhiodh e caran àraid a bhith a' nochdadh an-seo gun iomradh air mo chuid sgrìobhaidh cuideachd, chionn 's gur ann mar Rody as aithnichear dar coimhearsnachd mi mar bhàrd cuideachd. Uime sin, bha mi airson sealladh a thoirt air pròiseact anns a bheil mi an sàs an dràsta – *Òran na Cille* – stèidhichte air dàn a choisinn duais farpais na Gàidhlig aig Fèis Leabhraichean Bhaile na h-Ùige.

Chaidh eadar-theangachadh don Ghàidhlig Èireannaich is don Ghàidhlig Mhanannaich le Ben Ó Ceallaigh agus Custal y Lewin. Le seo, tha sinn a' teannachadh dàimhean, cuideachd, eadar na trì nàiseanan Gàidhealach – rud as iomchaidh fhad 's a tharraingear sinn ceann-bhliadhna Chaluim Chille gu crìch.

Tha mi an dòchas gun còrd na dàin is na h-eadar-theangachaidhean seo ribh cho math is gun còrd a' bhàrdachd eile, rosg is beatha-aisneis a th' againn dhuibh, san àireamh seo. ■

MARCAS MAC AN TUAIRNEIR  
Dùn Èideann, An t-Samhain, 2021

## Òran na Cille

MARCAS MAC AN TUAIRNEIR

*Oir 's a' ghrian, a ch'inn ag èirigh gach là,  
a dh'èireas a-rèir A dh' àithne.  
- Naomh Pàdraig*

Coisich còmhla rium,  
cas-rùisgte thar feamainn  
is clachan na tràghad,  
gu comraich a' chladaigh.

Coisich còmhla rium,  
a dh'ionnsaigh an fhearainn  
is beannachd nad bhràghad  
làn an dàin is an Dòmhnach.

Cuir fàilt' air ciùin' an dorais,  
barra-chaol chun a' chorra.  
Seachain manadh an donais,  
eadar ballachan mo chille.

Cuir cùl air cron na cruinne,  
corra uair rèir na tìde.  
Dèan ann faire na grèine,  
's i air laighe chun an iar.

Coisich còmhla rium,  
thar cabhsair ar cinnidh  
is claisean gach ceuma,  
cuirt' ann leis gach creideas.

Coisich còmhla rium,  
o àgh Phort na h-Innse,  
gu suaimhneas na cille,  
làn caoimhneas na caime.

Bhuannaich an dàn seo Duais  
Bàrdachd na Gàidhlig aig Fèis  
Leabhraichean Bhaile na h-Ùige ann  
an 2017, is chaidh fhoillseachadh sa  
chiad dol-a-mach ann an Southlight,  
beagan às dèidh sin.

## Arrane ny Killey

CHYNDAAIT LIORISH CUSTAL Y LEWIN

Jean shooyl marym,  
cass-rooisht harrish famlagh  
as claghyn y traie,  
dys kemmyrk y chladdagh.

Jean shooyl marym,  
lesh y thalloo  
as bannaght ayns dty chleeau,  
lane yn erree as yn Doonaght.

Cur failt er kiuney yn dorrys,  
baare-cheyl gys y vullagh.  
Shaghyn monney yn donnys,  
eddyr boallaghyn my chilley.

Cur cooyl rish cron ny cruinney,  
ny cheayrtyn rere yn earish.  
Jean ayn arrey ny greiney,  
as ee er lhie lesh y neear.

Jean shooyl marym,  
harrish taagher nyn gynney  
as clashyn dagh kesmad,  
currit ayn liorish dagh credjue.

Jean shooyl marym,  
voish sonnys Purt ny Hinshey,  
dys soccarys ny killey,  
lane keainid as kemmyrk.



'Cille' by Joshua Wilson

## Amhrán na Cille

AISTRITHE AG BEN Ó CEALLAIGH

Siúil in éindí liom,  
cosnochta thar fheamainn  
is clocha na trá,  
go foscadh an chladaigh.

Siúil in éindí liom,  
i dtreo na talún,  
is beannacht le d'ucht  
lán le dán is leis an Domhnach.

Cuir fáilte roimh shuaimhneas an dorais,  
barrachaol go dtí an stuaic.  
Seachain an drochthuar,  
idir ballaí mo chille.

Iompaigh do chúl ar dhochar an domhain,  
amanta de réir na haimsire.  
Déan faire ar an ngrian ann,  
agus í ina luí san iarthar.

Siúil in éindí liom,  
thar chosán ár gcine  
is claiseanna gach coiscéime  
curtha ann le muinín.

Siúil in éindí liom,  
ó shonas Phort na hInnse,  
go suaimhneas na cille,  
lán cineáltais agus ciúnais.

## Cupa Tì

CEITIDH CHAIMBEUL

B' e òrdugh a bh' ann, seach cuireadh  
iarrtas uaigneachd a sheachnadh car uair.  
Am pòrsalan cnàmha as fheàrr aice a' cur ceud furanadh,  
slis air chall bhon t-sàsar le flùraichean.

Leisgeulan airson coltas an taighe air diùltadh  
am brothall na dighe, sionnachan mar a prab-shùilean.  
Blas clòthadh siùcair a' cur milse ro mhòr  
air caob a' chèic-mheasan teann romham.

Sealbhan bigeilich eun a-muigh, b' fhogharach  
pronn-chainnt aotrom ar conaltraidh.  
Gu tric prosbaig air a chleachdadh air muinntir na h-aiseige  
ach sèithrichean eile, falamh gun aithneachadh.

Gach sùgan a druthaige na sheòl casgach.  
Tabhainn ath-lionaidh mus bu chaithe an còmhraidh  
is anabasan dhuilleagan aig bonn a' chupa  
a' tàgradh do-sheachnadh na cùise.

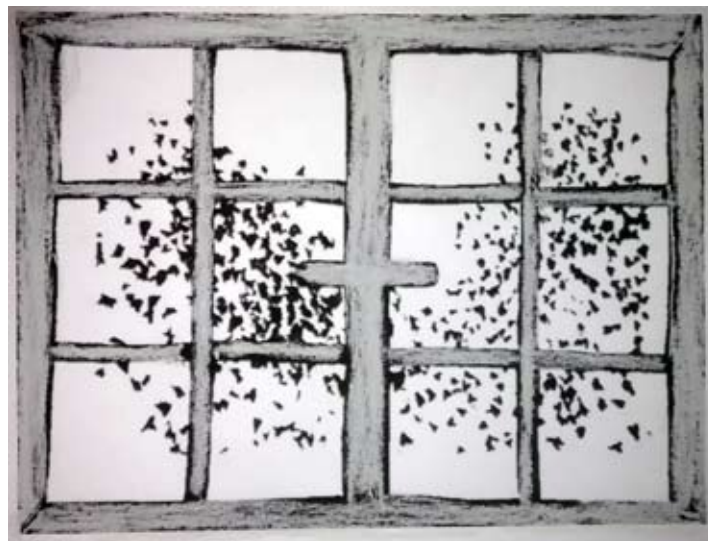
## Cup of Tea

*It was an order, not an invitation,  
an entreaty to avoid loneliness for an hour.  
Her best bone china extending hospitality,  
a chip missing from the floral saucer.*

*Apologies for the state of the house dismissed  
in the heat of the liquid, milky like her rheumy eyes.  
The taste of sugar over-sweetening, overwhelming  
the chunk of solid fruit cake in front of me.*

*The flock of twittering birds outside echoing  
the triviality of our conversation.  
Binoculars frequently used to spy the ferry crowd  
but the other empty chairs unacknowledged.*

*Every drop a stalling tactic.  
Offers of refills until speech is exhausted  
and dregs of leaves at the bottom of the cup  
foretelling the inevitable.*



## Teine

CEITIDH CHAIMBEUL

Bha brathadair nach do thuig mi nam òige.  
Chuireadh tu fadadh air seann èibhleagan,  
bhirticheadh tu iad gus am biodh iad air losgadh.  
Ge b' e an ràith, bhiodh tu ga theallachadh sa mhadainn  
mar theine leathann no las gun bhàs.  
Bhiodh do ghealbhan air chleachdadh gu bràth.

Ach an teas tràth mo dheugaireachd,  
cha do mhothaich mi gainne dhrillseanan nad eanchainn.

Bu shlaodach a mhùchadh do ghalladh teine.  
Chaidh a' chràmhainn na smùdan  
is beag air bheag thàinig am fuachd ort.  
D' àite-teine furanach ga lughdachadh,  
a' caochladh na fhaileas dubh  
le cumhachd na bu làidire na tùrlach Dhante.

## Fire

*There was a blaze I didn't understand in my youth.  
Kindling the spent embers,  
you provoked them into burning.  
No matter the season, stoking in the morning,  
your signal fire, or eternal flame.  
Your hearth, always in use.*

*But in the warmth of my teenage years  
I didn't notice the sparks lacking in your mind.*

*Your bright core slowly extinguished.  
Turning the fire to ash,  
little by little the cold engulfed you.  
Your welcoming fireplace reduced,  
transformed into a dark shadow  
by a power stronger than Dante's inferno.*



THE GREAT BEAST was first sighted in the ice-capped water, still groping and writhing, but quelled by unabating sea and soon to sink under, extinguished like sunlight dropped from the sky in the dark North. Ten crewmen readily hauled the bear on board, imbued as they were, as all whaler-men became, with the barbarity of their endeavours. This white brute was an Arctic trophy, though she howled pitifully whilst being roped. Undecided whether to eat or grow rich from their hunt, they let the bound creature be.

When the storm came that night, the bear, rested and fearing for life afresh, bellowed into the wet air and wrestled against the bonds tethering her to the tilt of the ship. Furious waves capsized bergs, breaking apart island coasts, lifting sediment and sea ice, such that anything not frozen in place was hurled at the whale-catcher. The bear broke free only to be faced by a boy, held tall by the cry of his voice, sung in foreign tongue above

Northern Seas in reach of the raging ice bear.

This motherless cabin boy was youngest of the crew; born to natives but fathered by a sailor and taken onboard a returning voyage alongside three matured men of his tribe who died soon thereafter, savaged by the hunt and witnessed by the child. The crew wished well for their waif but beliefs held fast that work on a quarter deck was the acme of opportunity, the envy of countless youngsters in whaling ports back home. The boy, it seemed, believed differently.

The Arctic storm subsided but left faded men with a wild animal loose in their midst. Still, danger fell secondary to

# Towards Tundra

By HANNAH WHALEY



fascination, for the bear and the boy sat entwined, young hands working through salted fur, his infant face pushed into the muddled flank of the mighty polar creature, soft comfort for them both. The bear flared at anyone who thought to intervene. The crewmen heard unceasing whispers and swore the boy sang secrets to the animal through each of the following three nights.

The crew acted to recapture their prize only when the ship made port, the bear unfurling as planks slapped the stone of the dock. She forced a path forward, fending against corralling crewman with savage might until pausing, dauntless, at the deck's edge. The boy stepped past

injured sailors to join his companion, small fingers in the fur once more, heaving himself onto the back of the bear. They walked straight through town, it was said, and people stood out to see the bear and the boy as they passed by, journeying towards Scotland's tundra to live free, together. ■

Story inspired by the photograph below of a polar bear captured by whalers, now part of the University of Dundee archive.



## Far north: four poems by Mandy Haggith

### Glacier

What can we learn from it?  
How to be blue.  
To move mountains you just have to be cool.  
Beware of the sea.  
You're bound to look a bit different every day.  
Feed growlers to the bears,  
decorate the fjord with bergy bits,  
keep bergs for special occasions.  
Don't be afraid of cracking up in front of people.  
Calve, momentarily, when no-one is looking.

### Jan Mayen

Don't worry. When our voices and engines have gone  
fulmars will mend the gash we made.  
Their beaks will sew the sea back together  
with a million copepod stitches.

And then there will just be waves,  
endlessly asking the same question,  
stones and black sands  
giving a different answer every time.

### Quinuituq

The rhythm of the arctic:  
long stillnesses  
broken by sudden movement.

The deep patience of an Inuit hunter  
at a fishing hole;  
his catch.

The glacier at the head of Svitjodbreen's  
photo-perfect calmness;  
its calving wave-storm.

At Ny Ålesund,  
after lying dormant for a week offshore,  
purses frenzy at the butikken.

### Svitjodbreen

The fjord is a sundae  
of peppermint sorbet  
with clotted cream floating on top.  
An ice-sugar confectionary is poised  
on a chocolate biscuit island  
just in front of the main cake.  
Its surface is house-sized  
cocoa-dusted marshmallows.  
The troll's barbecue is all set.  
A greedy giant with a mountainous spoon  
has already begun scooping  
chunks from its front.  
Mere trolls can't make much of a dent  
but human gluttony  
will soon scoff the lot.



# Faroe Islands quartet. Jennifer Morag Henderson

## Memory and Thought

Towards the evening, Thought on one shoulder  
And Memory weighing on the other  
The fire flickers, faces half-shadowed  
As the old stories begin to unfold.

Outside the circle, I sit to listen  
Hear the wheels of others' lives set spinning  
Roses on the hill, rare, pale pink, thorned stems  
And Burnt Njal's ghost in the dying embers.

Swords and poets' songs, sad men and women  
Others who, like me, are far from their dwelling  
Long, complicated, looping histories  
The endless nodding genealogies.

I stand, walk shorewards to tell, say in a whisper  
To the birds, I am my own chronicler.

## This is a Feigdarferð, a doomed sea journey.

This is a journey where we don't reach home  
the stones never tell you that you belong  
the landscape will never gather round you  
like a cloak, fitted for warmth, loved, well-used.

The uncaring mountain will shrug you off  
each step will always stumble, tentative  
every footprint leaves an accusing scar  
a reminder that you should not be there.

What does it take to love with certainty  
to belong to this place unthinkingly  
give it only a glance as you stride through  
expect that it will rearrange round you.

Stay, sit outwith, beside the mountain by  
the sea. Wait here a moment, wait with me.

## Sólja

he sits in stillness  
his back to the house  
a focus  
birds dipping like small brown heavinesses through the air  
around him.  
the small yellow flowers on the grass are sólja – buttercup  
the wind drops, pausing before  
it starts rifling through the petals again  
tiny white flowers grow, no longer than short green grass blades,  
at the top of the windblown mountains in the Faroes  
snow buttercup  
snjósólja  
tiny purple flowers in the moss here  
circle flower  
weed spread  
out of place  
I envy his thoughtful contemplation  
he looks like a man creating –  
if only poems came from stillness.

## kennings for the sea

I came in on the sea-road  
the sail road, the ships' path

The oarstroke-lands  
the ring of islands taking me to  
a wedding ring  
the island ring

from the necklace of the Faroe Islands  
away from the plain of puffins  
along the water way, the ship's way

sailing through a land of wonders  
the broad gunwale road  
the gull's land  
the whale's land, the bed of fish  
along the roads of the redfish  
to the land of the salmon

through the known fishing stations, the fish-field  
to the cool plot, the wave world  
to a sea of nightmares  
the melted ice world  
the land of the surge  
and trembling ground  
the high wave enclosure  
of the earth-belt

to the roaring field of the whale  
the water-monster's stronghold  
truly in the outlying land of the ship  
where it earns its name the blood of land  
the storm-twisted enclosure  
the roaring-beach of the trolling-line.

Then slipped, calmer now  
to the enclosure of seaweed  
the kelp's land  
the ground of Scotland  
a new homestead of the prow

follow the birds' track  
the marshland of seagulls  
the bed of coal-fish

the chain of lands keeps me here  
the hollows of the herring  
the swollen hall of sands  
the boat-land  
the deceit-ring  
the island fetter

HE CAME INTO the library every Thursday morning, dapper in a neat blue suit, pulling his tartan shopper behind him. “Hail to thee, blithe spirit!” he would say when he came to the desk to change his books. He enjoyed westerns with lurid covers and titles like *The Vengeful Deputy* and *Open Range Fury*. Always six books in, six books out. One for each evening, with Saturday spare for the *Manchester Guardian*.

He lingered longer at the desk as he got to know me. He liked me because of my accent. It reminded him of training in Achnacarry, being billeted on the Isle of Bute. He had become so close to the woman he stayed with in Rothesay that he continued to visit for years and she had named his three children: Donald, Morag and Eilidh (the neighbours always had trouble with that one.) He talked about Scotland with the fondness of someone who still believed in an uncomplicated Britishness. “You must be missing home,” he would say, and I nodded, because I could see why he would think that.

Had things been different, he wouldn’t have stayed in Halifax, he told me. He’d been accepted to Art College but there simply hadn’t been the money. Then the war came. He still wondered about what kind of a painter he would have made. But it wasn’t all bad – he had his garden, his roses.

That’s the thing about working in libraries. You think it’ll be all about the books. In fact, it’s all about the people. They offer up their stories as if they know you will care for them as tenderly as you do the novels on the shelves.

Another thing about libraries: when you issue a book, it’s like you’re giving a precious, handpicked gift. People have to give you something in return. Sometimes it’s chocolates. Sometimes it’s secrets. He would bring me oatcakes when they were on offer in Morrisons, and Tunnock’s teacakes that I left in the staffroom.

*Hail to thee, blithe spirit.*

## The Last Rose

### STORY BY SALLY HUGHES



Despite myself, I looked forward to seeing him. I kept an eye out for any westerns he hadn’t had. He had no memory for covers or titles, and so would pencil a tiny grey cross on the corner of the endpapers of the one’s he’d read. X

As winter set in, his body shrunk, and his suit lost its smart fit. He still came into the library each week, clinging onto his shopper grimly, but our chats were brief, and he left without any books.

My Christmas present to myself that

*That’s the thing about working in libraries. You think it’ll be all about the books. In fact, it’s all about the people.*

marks the spot.

It became a struggle to find him new ones to read. I asked my supervisor about ordering some new titles, but the publisher was phasing them out because their readership was dying. I phoned the other library branches and asked them to check the shelves for any westerns without a cross in the back.

For a few happy weeks, they came pouring in: *Dead Men Don’t Bleed*; *The Hunted Four*. He went home every Thursday with a shopper full of books. But soon the flood became a trickle, and then I had nothing new to offer him.

The weather was growing colder when, one morning, he came in carrying a single white rose in a tiny glass vase. He put it down on the desk in front of me.

“For you, Puck of the books,” he said. “The best present I can give you – the last rose from my garden.”

I had never been given such a gift.

year was a night in London, to stock up on out-of-print Penguins. I was on the top floor of a second-hand bookshop when I saw the tattered image of a moustachioed man gurning at me from a dusty table. There was a whole pile of them, and I didn’t recognise a single one. 15p each. I bought a boxful and carried it down Charing Cross Road as carefully as if it contained a kaleidoscope of rare, live butterflies.

Two Thursdays in January passed while the box waited in vain for him under the issue desk. I looked up his address and drove there on a Friday afternoon. My sat nav took me to a suburban part of town I’d not visited before, filled with modest, respectable houses treasured by the first generation that didn’t have to rent.

He lived in a street of pebble-dash bungalows, and his was the only house without a paved driveway. The whole front garden was covered in rose bushes,

cut savagely short. He opened the door in a stained plaid shirt, using a Zimmer frame to walk. “Hail to thee, blithe spirit,” he said, showing no surprise at seeing me. “Come in.”

He led me through a boxy kitchen to a living room with an upright piano and embroidery samplers on the walls. Grey underpants dried on the radiator, and it was unbearably hot – both the gas fire and the central heating were on. There was a sour smell in the air.

When I gave him the box of books, he drew a shaking hand over his face. “Ah,” he said. “You’d have been drowned as a witch in olden times, I’m sure you have some magic in you.”

The skin on his wasted arms looked shiny and paper-thin, as if the slightest touch could split it.

There was a vase of blowsy white roses on the mantelpiece, and as we talked, his gaze kept flicking back to them. “Aren’t they beautiful?” he said finally. “You know, it was illegal to grow flowers on allotments during the war. They needed the food. But my dad didn’t care. He carried on growing his roses, though he could have gone to prison for it. He said, what’s Yorkshire without her roses?” His voice cracked and he closed his rheumy eyes.

He died in the spring. His funeral was on a Wednesday, delivery day. We had six crates to unpack that morning, and at the top of one was a brand new western. A grizzled cowboy gave me a world-weary smile beneath his Stetson.

*Hail to thee, blithe spirit.*

I turned the book over in my hands, feeling the smooth plastic cover beneath my fingers, and delaying for just a second the moment when I would have to look inside. Then I held my breath and opened the back cover quickly, as if I was ripping off a plaster. The endpaper was an unmarked cream, pristine as a flower petal. ■

WHENEVER HE GOT ON the bus at the infirmary he was, you know, kind of loud, uninhibited. I kept my eyes to the front, my bag solidly placed on the seat beside me. He sat down next to a woman across the aisle, short grey hair, beige jacket. Below the seat I could see her feet in extra-wide fitting sandals.

“Bonnie day i’nt it? Good to see the sun, I like the sun.”

“Yes, it’s fine.”

“I’ll jist tak ma backpack off. It’s ok, I’ll pit it here, beside my feet. That’s better. Good view, it’s a good view you get from here. You can see an affa lot from a bus, big windies, when they’re clean. Canna see much if they’re dirty and the sun’s shinin’ on them. They must o’ washed this bus recently. The ither day I sa’, I couldna really believe it, I sa’ a mannie coming oot the hospital car park wi’ a cage in his hand. Ye’ll never guess fit wis in it. I’d nivver hae guessed masel’ like,

if I hidna seen it wi’ ma ain een. It was a parrot. Fit wye would onybody hae a parrot if he’s gan to the hospital? Nivver seen the like!”

“That’s unusual, right enough.”

“Vicious beasts, parrots, ill-naitered, supposed to be. Oh, there’s the sign to Walker Dam. Used to play there fin I was a kid. Me an’ ma brithers an’ sisters. A hale day in the summer holidays, oot in the mornin’ wi’ a piece, an’ a bag o’ crisps if we wis lucky. I’ve got three brithers

an’ twa sisters. An’ Sally, she’s deid noo, ma collie dog. She loved it an’ a’, loved to sweem, she wis a great sweemer. I jist paddled, I couldna sweem then, but I can noo. She wis a great dog, better than a parrot.”

“Are you going to Soutarburn, ma loon?”

“Aye, Soutarburn, Cooper Place, get aff at the dry cleaners. Een o’ ma sisters is in hospital iv noo. Cancer. It’s nae lookin’ good. But I says to her, Kathleen,

I says, fit the doctors say isna ayewiys fit happens. Just you concentrate on gettin’ better, dinna give up.”

“Yes, that’s right. Is this your stop here?”

“Dinna give up hope. Aye, that’s the dry cleaners, Cooper Place. That’s me then.”

He stood up in the aisle, wrestling expansively with his backpack and the hood of his jacket.

“Well, it’s been great speaking to ye. Thanks very much. A lot o’ folk dinna want tae speak, but we’ve had a grand chat. I’ve really enjoyed it. Have a good day. See ya!”

“Aye, you take care son.”

The driver nodded as his passenger swung off the bus.

“Thanks Driver, cheers now, see you soon!”

Me, I just kept looking to the front, eyes blank, staring straight ahead. ■

## Passengers

### STORY BY MORAG BAPTIE





# Catriona Fraser: Saving the Past

By Cynthia Rogerson

NOTHING ABOUT THE present ever seems likely to be lost – it's so obvious, so permanent seeming. Yet information takes very little time to be distorted and forgotten. Is this a bad thing? What is the value, for instance, in knowing what happened in one little B-listed ruined church in the Highlands? The answer, of course, is that the past is always rewarding to explore – for it gives us perspective on our present and clues to our future. Perspective is crucial in understanding how the world works.

But the urge to record the past is stronger in some individuals than others, and not everyone can write with the needed eloquence. The Ross-shire village of Evanton is lucky to have one such local hero – Catriona Fraser. A Black Isle girl, as she says of herself, married to local boy Willie Fraser whose art graces the cover of her book *Kiltearn 2020: The Church in the Parish*.

It began when she listened to her father give a talk in the mid-60's about post-reformation Kiltearn parish history. When the talk was over, she was dismayed at the waste of all his material if nothing else was ever done with it. Perhaps the first impetus of recording history is a strong sense of not wanting to lose things. In the late 90's, Catriona took up the reins her father had dropped and began to work backwards in time. She re-read his material and proceeded to investigate pre-reformation history. She found the church was far older than previously thought, dating to at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century.



Catriona Fraser at Kiltearn. Photograph by Willie Fraser

That there'd been more ministers than previously thought, and that legends such as that attached to Reverend Thomas Hogg were more complex. The more books and records she read, the more she felt excited, for historical detective work is a special addiction. She was solving mysteries. And to be physically in a place

– a roofless ruin surrounded by ancient headstones near the Cromarty Firth – and vividly imagining the past, is a heady experience.

But writing about it is not always a smooth process, because the past is not static. Truth tends to wriggle around according to who is recording it as

fact. Catriona found different dates in different books pertaining to the same events, and sometimes different names too. It's almost impossible to be precise or objective, because not only is every recorder fallible, they each have their own agenda. Generally people record a version of events that is sympathetic with their own political and religious beliefs. Historical records, in this sense, are a batch of subjective narratives.

Catriona's task was simple but huge: To collate, condense and then present in readable form over 800 years of parish history with as much likely truth as she could glean. I am pleased to tell you she's been successful, and it is not just Evantonians here and abroad who are grateful. Nor is the book more relevant for church-goers than others. Every history book written with integrity about a small place contributes to our understanding of the whole world. And any history worth writing begins with the big picture. Her book opens with: *It took about four centuries after the resurrection of Christ for the first breath of Christianity to reach Scotland.*

Is she proud of her book? *It's imperfect*, she says, because like every proper historian she recognises accuracy is unachievable. But yes indeed, she is proud of it – and hopes a younger generation picks up the baton now. Arise young historians everywhere, for a decent history book about anything can illuminate everything. b/w image of Catriona will illustrate this. ■

## Wide Open Spaces...

Some thoughts on a new kind of literary world by Meaghan Delahunt

THE PAST 18 months have altered our relationship with the natural world, with time, and with ourselves. It's sent us in two directions – outside into parks and gardens and any glimpse of green and even further online into the digital world. These two directions have had personal and collective consequences – a greater understanding of our place in nature and our impact upon it – and a greater understanding of what we want to do with our creative lives, how we want to spend our allotted time on earth – to understand that we're more than just our paid work. That we are also what we make.

With people on endless furlough, losing or changing jobs, many have turned to online courses and tapped into their creativity in surprising ways. People have tried painting, knitting, languages and song. In the North, especially, one

can often feel the distance between where we are and where we want to be – and wherever we are, online spaces have filled in the miles between us. Writers and writing teachers have had to adapt to this challenging new reality.

The past 18 months I've had to learn fast. From the Australian launch of my novel *The Night-Side of the Country* on Zoom last year, to a script collaboration on the same novel with a fellow-writer in New York; from short videos on writing for St Columba's hospice to creating an online at-home writing programme with a writer-friend up north ... bringing together the wynds and closes of Edinburgh with the wide open spaces of Sutherland to create publicity and writing materials...like most people during this time, I've had to learn new skills.

It's been fun, though, roaming the country and thinking about writing

projects and literary worlds...while staying at my desk. It means I've been able to access not only the "idea" of a wider Scotland and the world around me – but the actual reality of that, as time and distance telescope in a new way. Until recently, workshops, literary events and collaboration would have involved travel – to Inverness, Beaulieu, Dundee, for example – and much further afield. That's no longer the case.

So, the North seems to be a view out of my window now, along with the rooftops of Leith where I live. Writing is often about bringing disparate worlds and ideas together, making connections that wouldn't always be apparent. New ways of working and learning are part of this.

It will soon be autumn, a time which always prompts reflection. The beauty and melancholy – the fallings and shiftings – as one season surrenders to another. It's

an ideal time to write, to be inside, to turn inwards to the imagination. This autumn, I think, more and more people will also want to explore their creativity in a different way; to realise that they are more than what they do for a living. They may turn to an online course – poetry, art, music – who knows? – to discover a new kind of path from the comfort of home... and as a writer and teacher of writing this takes me out of my study and into a beautiful new landscape. ■

★

Endnote: Meaghan Delahunt is working with fellow author Kirsty Gunn on an at-home writing programme – WordPath Scotland – an international as well as local creative writing course that brings together ideas gathered from the hills of East Sutherland and the Pentlands, that is Scottish in feel but global in reach. Contact: [www.wordpathscotland.com](http://www.wordpathscotland.com)

Sheas Caoimhe air a' chidhe san t-Sròin Reamhair, a' coimhead a-mach air sealladh glas garbh. Muir ghlas, sgothan glasa, eòin ghlasa, agus ceò gheal air faire, a' fàs nas lugha.

Na h-inntinn, bha i air a' bhàt'-aiseig P&O ud, air an t-slighe dhachaigh airson a' chiad turas ann an deich mìosan. Na h-inntinn, bha ceò uaine Latharna a' fàs na bu mhotha air faire agus bha fàileadh bèicearachd a màthar a' sgèith ga h-ionnsaigh air oiteag.

Dhìochuimhnich i airson greiseag gun robh duine òg, ann an deise a bha ro mhòr dha, na sheasamh ri a taobh – dà mheatair air falbh.

“Gabh mo leisgeul,” thuirt e, a' feuchainn ri sgarfa thana, a bha fasanta ann an Lunnainn ach nach robh gu feum sam bith san t-Sròin Reamhair aig deireadh an Fhaoilich, a theannadh na bu dhlùithe mu amhaich. “Ach, feumaidh mi tilleadh dhan phort-adhair aig uair feasgar.”

Cha mhòr nach do thuit Caoimhe far a' chidhe nuair a bhris guth Sasannach a-steach air fuaim sachdadh na mara agus cuimhneachan Dhùn nan Gall a bha a' cluich na ceann.

“Duilich,” dh'fhreagair i – “Eddie, an e?”

“Seadh...”

“Ceart, Eddie. Nis, càit an robh sinn?”

“Uill, bha thu ag innse dhomh mu dheidhinn duine air choireigin a rinn ceanglaichean làidir eadar Alba agus Èirinn – *Columbo*?”

“*Columba*. Calum Cille.”

“Ceart, *Columba* – an aon duine a fhuair lorg air Ameireaga? An d'fhuair esan lorg air Alba cuideachd?”

Cò an duine seo? Bha e fada ro thràth sa mhadainn airson a leithid seo de ghòraiche.

“*Columbus* a bha siud,” dh'fhreagair Caoimhe, “900 bliadhna às dèidh *Columba* – agus bha làn fhios aig Calum Cille gun robh Alba an seo mus do ràinig e.”

“Ceart.”

Thòisich Eddie a thaidhpeadh air a fòn.

“Seall, seo e! Calum Cille – tha e air Uicipeid. Tha mi a' tuigsinn a-nis. B' e Eilean Ì air an d' fhuair e lorg.”

Cha robh Caoimhe cinnteach carson a bha i an seo madainn Dimàirt, air cidhe gaothach, puinnseanta fuar, dà mheatair air falbh bho ghloic. Carson a dh'iarr esan air neach-obrach bho bhuidheann turasachd coinneachadh ris nan robh freagairtean dhan a h-uile ceist aige air Uicipeid?

“Nach truagh nach do chuir sinn coinneamh *Zoom* air dòigh,” thuirt i ris, a' feuchainn ri beachd fhaighinn air na bha aig cùl na coinneimh, “is an dithis againn ag obair bhon taigh co-dhiù. An robh e fiù 's ceadichte dhut siubhal an seo bho Lunnainn?”

“Ò, bha,” dh'fhreagair e, sùilean fhathast glacte ris an sgrion, “s e obair air leth cudromach a tha seo.”

“Tha mi duilich, Eddie – feumaidh nach eil mi nam dhùisg fhathast. Dè an obair chudromach a th' agad an seo?”

# o Shruth na Maoile

SHEELAGH CAMPBELL



San t-Sròin Reamhair? San Fhaoilleach? Ceangailte ri Calum Cille?”

“Nach do dh'innse iad dhut?” dh'fhaighnich Eddie, a' coimhead oirre mu dheireadh thall, ged a bha a chorrach fhathast steigte ris an sgrion.

“Tha mise nam phàirt de thanca-smaoineachadh aig Westminster agus tha sinn a' beachdachadh air an tunail seo. Chaidh iarraidh orm sgeulachdan no beul-aithris iomchaidh a lorg a chleachdas sinn air taobh cultarach na pròiseict.”

“Tunail?” Bha fios aig Caoimhe gun robh i sgìth, ach an robh i fhathast na cadal? Ghreimich i air a gàirdean fhèin gu cruaidh – bha e cho goirt 's gun do leig i sgreuch beag aiste, ach cha tug an duine òg aire dhi.

“Àidh, tha iad a' dèanamh sgrùdadh an-dràsta air ceangal-rèile eadar Ceann Loch Cille Chiarain agus Baile an Chaisteil ann an Èireann, nach cuala tu ma dhèidhinn?”

“An tunail *ud*? Ach chan eil sin a' dol a thachairt ann an dhà-rìribh, a bheil? Pròiseact *vanity* eile bhon a' bhumalair bhàn, nach e? Ciamar idir a tha sin a' dol a dh'obair? Agus ciamar a tha Calum Cille ceangailte ris?”

Bha Eddie a-nis a' coimhead rudeigin mi-chofhurtail. “Uill, an tòiseach, chan e innleadair a th' annam – cò aig a tha fios mar a chuireas iad tunail fo mhuir? Agus nach do thòisich thu fhèin air bruidhinn mu dheidhinn *Columbo* nuair a dh'fhaighnich mi dè seòrsa sgeulachdan eachdraidheil a bha a' ceangail Alba agus Èireann?”

“ColumBA!”

“...*Columba*...agus tha mise a-nis a' dèanamh tuilleadh rannsachaidh air an duine, air eagal 's gum biodh e freagarrach dhuinn.”

“Freagarrach dhuibhse? Do thanca-smaoineachadh ann an Lunnainn?”

“S dòcha – cha robh for againn gun robh duine cho...*eachdraidheil* ann, a ghabhadh a chleachdadh ann am margaidheachd agus mar sin air adhart. Tha e ag ràdh an seo gun tug Colum... *ba* an creideamh Crìosdail do dh'Alba? A bheil ceangal cràbhaidh ann fhathast eadar an dà dhùthaich?”

Bha Caoimhe a' fàs na b' fheargaiche agus na bu sgìthe buileach. An robh duine sam bith san tanca-smaoineachaidh ud air sròn a chur a-mach à Lunnainn a-riamh? Bha i a' beachdachadh air freagairt nach biodh mì-mhodhail, ach cha d'fhuair i cothrom bruidhinn, is Eddie fhathast a' lorg fiosrachaidh air fhòn.

“Seall seo, b' e manach a bh' ann, nach b' e? Agus stèidhich e manachainn ann an Eilean Ì. A bheil manaich an seo fhathast?”

Ged a bha Eddie a' bruidhinn ri

Caoimhe, bha e soilleir nach b' ann bhuaipe a bha e a' sireadh freagairtean.

“Ò, seo rudeigin... An t-Òrdugh Orains. A bheil iadsan ceangailte ri *Columbus*? A bheil iadsan ann an Èireann a Tuath cuideachd? Am biodh iadsan airson a bhith an sàs anns a' phròiseact?”

Bhreab Caoimhe i fhèin, a' feuchainn ri dùsgadh fhèin bho bhruadar anns an robh aice ri eachdraidh nan Trioblaidean a mhìneachadh do dh'amadan aig deich uairean madainn Dimàirt.

Ach cha do dhùisg i. Leig i osna aiste.

“Eddie, an tòisich sinn an còmhraidh seo a-rithist? Tha mi a' faireachdainn gu bheil sinn air dà shlighe eadar-dhealaichte an-dràsta. Am mìnich thu dhomh a-rithist dè dha-rìribh a tha thu ag iarraidh bhuamsa? Bhon bhuidheann turasachd? A bheil *brief* sgrìobhte agad?”

Thug Eddie sùil air uaireadair gu luath agus nochd rudeigin mì-fhoighidneach na ghuth. “Nach do chuir Lisa post-dealain thugad?”

“Cha do chuir.”

“Uill, bha mi ann an Èireann a Tuath an-dè agus tha mi an seo an-diugh, a' feuchainn ri sgeulachdan a lorg mu cheanglaichean eadar an dà dhùthaich, gus an sgrìobh an tanca-smaoineachaidh iomradh air eachdraidh an tunail-rèile. Ceanglaichean cultarach, 's dòcha?”

“Ceart,” thuirt Caoimhe.

Cha robh de neart innte mìneachadh dha – do chuideigin air an robh brògan gun stocainnean san Fhaoilleach – mar a tharraing Calum Chille cultar, cànan agus ceòl còmhla ris mar shnàithlean. A' chiad shnàithlean ann am plangaid a chòmhachadh Sruth na Maoile, agus fuinn is rannan is sgeulachdan fhathast gan cur rithe, gam fighe a-steach innte.

“Neo ceòl 's dòcha?” dh'fhaighnich Eddie.

Ceòl. Smaoinich Caoimhe air an latha siud san Lùnastal nuair a dhràibh i fhèin agus Alice gu Ceann mu Dheas ann an Cinn Tìre, le cèic agus an fhìdhle a bha i air togail a-rithist tron ghlasadh. B' e cò-là-breith a màthar a bh' ann agus b' e siud a' chiad turas nach robh Caoimhe aig an taigh air a shon. Bha an sac air a bràthair òg, Éamonn, agus bha an teaghlach gu lèir ann an Leitir Ceanainn air a bhith a' fuireach aig an taigh bhon Mhàrt. Bha eagal a beatha air Caoimhe dol faisg oirre gun fhios nach cuireadh i iad ann an cunnart, ach air an latha ud aig deireadh an t-samhraidh, b' e an snàithlean neo-fhaicsinneach, ga ceangal gu Dùn nan Gall, a bha ga tarraing is ga tarraing.

Bha i air fòn a chur dhachaigh an oidhche roimhe agus plana a mhìneachadh dhaibh. Air an latha fhèin, chaidh a pàrantan agus Éamonn gu tràigh Bhaile a' Chaisteil ann an Siorramachd

Aontroma agus dhràibh Caoimhe is Alice gu Cinn Tìre.

Cha robh ach deich mìltean eatarra, ged nach fhaiceadh iad a chèile, fiù 's air latha ciùin, grianach mar a bha e. Cha robh cianalas cho dona air Caoimhe a-riamh. On a ghluais i gu Alba – gu obair ùr ann an turasachd agus gu flat ùr còmhla ri Alice – bha i air tilleadh dhachaigh co-dhiù gach dàrnacha mìos, mus do nochd am bhìoras. Bhiodh i ag innse dhi fhèin gun robh i fortanach gun robh obair aice fhèin is aig Alice fhathast, nach robh duine sam bith san teaghlach air fàs tinn, ach bha cuideam na laighe air a cridhe, is a' fàs na bu thruime a h-uile latha. Fiù 's leis an teicneòlas as ùire, fiù 's le airgead, tuigse, gliocas, eòlas mun t-saoghail – chan fhaigheadh i tarsainn a' chuain. Chan fhaigheadh i dhachaigh.

Sheas i ri taobh na mara air tràigh bhrèagha agus chuir i fòn gu Mam air *FaceTime*. Chunnaic i an triùir aca air tràigh bhrèagha eile, ri taobh an aon mhuir. Dh'ith i fhèin agus Alice pìos cèic agus dh'ith iadsan pìos cèic air an sgrìon. Thug Caoimhe am fòn gu Alice agus chluich i fonn à Ìle, *Sine Bhàn*, a bha Alice air theagaisg dhi. Thog i am fòn a-rithist – “An cuala sibh siud?”

Bha an triùir aca a' gàireachdainn, a' leigeil orra gun robh iad a' dannsadh ri port air an tràigh. “A bheil thu eòlach air òrain *Westlife*?” dh'fhaighnich a màthair, nach robh a-riamh measail air ceòl traidiseanta.

Dh'fheuch Caoimhe ri gàire a dhèanamh, ach cha do ruig i a sùilean.

Nuair a chuir Mam sìos am fòn, shuidh Caoimhe air a' ghainmhich. Chuir i a ceann na làmhan, agus rànaich i.

Smaoinich i mu dheidhinn Calum Cille, a bha air lorg-coise fhàgail faisg air Ceann mu Dheas. Dh'fhàg esan a dhachaigh agus a theaghlach – an do sheas esan air an dearbh tràigh seo, no air tràigh air Eilean Ì, is e an dòchas gun cluinneadh cuideigin air taobh eile Sruth na Maoile na bha e ag ràdh?

Air an t-slighe dhachaigh, dh'fheuch Alice ri cridhe Caoimhe a thogail. “Saoil a bheil am fonn fhathast a' siubhal tarsainn a' chuain?” thuirt i. “Ma thèid iasgair a-mach air bàta madainn a-màireach, an cluinn esan *Sine Bhàn* tron cheò?”

“*Cammy...Keevie...Kelly*?”

Gu h-obann, thill Caoimhe dhan duine air a' chidhe ghlas, a bha fhathast a' gluasad a chorrach sios sgrìon fhòin. An cluinneadh duine fonn sam bith anns a' cheò dhubhach seo a bha a' cuairteachadh a' chidhe?

“*Caoimhe. Kee-vuh*,” thuirt i ri Eddie a-rithist. Dè cho doirbh 's a bha e dà lideadh a chuimhneachadh? Nan robh cluicheadair bàil-choise ainmeil air an robh *Caoimhe*, cha bhiodh trioblaid sam bith aig Eddie.

“Duilich, *Keew*, ach tha am plèana agam a' falbh aig uair feasgar agus tha mi dìreach air *Uber* a ghairm.

“*Uber*! Gu Glaschu bhon t-Sròin Reamhair? Chan eil an tanca-smaoineachaidh gann de dh'airgead, a bheil?”



Cha d’rinn Eddie gàire.  
“Co-dhiù,” thuirt e, “taing airson innse dhomh mu *Cholumbus*. Tha mi air fiosrachadh gu leòr fhaighinn air Uicipeid. Tha dealbh snog an seo bho sheann leabhar air choireigin – am biodh an leabhar fhèin agaibh an seo? Dh’fhaodamaid dealbhan a chleachdadh anns na trànaichean?”

Dh’fhairich Caoimhe blàths na cridhe airson a’ chiad turas sa mhadainn. “Leabhar Cheannanais Mhòir! Abair deagh bheachd, Eddie – tha sin a’ dèanamh ciall! Dealbhan bhon leabhar tron tràna, ag innse sgeulachd Chaluim Chille fad ’s a thathar a’ siubhail fon dearbh mhuir air an do sheòl esan!”

Airson a’ chiad turas, thuig Caoimhe dè seòrsa chothroman a thigeadh às a’ phròiseact, gòrach ’s a bha e a’ coimhead air pàipear, mar gum b’ eadh.

“Agus bhiodh na soidhnichean uile trì-chànanach: Gàidhlig, Gaeilge, Beurla Ghallta...agus Beurla fhèin ma dh’fheumas

sinn. Bhiodhte a’ cluich ceòl traidiseanta na h-Èireann air an t-slighe gu Latharna agus ceòl traidiseanta na h-Alba air an t-slighe air ais!”

Mu dheireadh thall, chuir Eddie fhòn na phòcaid agus nochd gàire air bilean a bha a’ fàs gorm. “Seadh, siud an seòrsa rud air an robh sinn ag amais.”

Mus tuirt e dad eile, nochd càr anns an robh dràibhear nach robh air an leithid de dh’iarrtas fhaighinn ann am mìosan. Bha e coltach gun robh e air a’ chrannchur nàiseanta a bhuannachadh – duine bho Lunnainn ann am brògan spaideil a’ siubhail faisg air 90 mìltean – abair *tip*.

“Duilich gum feum mi falbh, is sinn a’ tarraing air an aon ràmh mu dheireadh thall,” thuirt Eddie ri Caoimhe. “Iarraidh mi air Lisa coinneamh *Zoom* a chur air dòigh agus leanaidh sinn oirnn ann an àite nas blàithe.”

“Glè mhath,” dh’fhreagair Caoimhe, a’ mothachadh cho òg agus cho fuar ’s a bha an duine a’ coimhead; cho gorm ’s a bha a

chorragan. Cha b’ esan bu choireach gun robh ceannard a’ phròiseict loma-làn fèin-spèis agus aineolas.

“Agus, Eddie?”

“Seadh?”

“Na bi...uill, mura tachair seo, na gabh san t-sròn e – tha mi cinnteach gun dèan an tanca-smaoineachaidh agad obair air leth air taobh cultarach a’ phròiseict. Gheibh mi lorg air goireasan sam bith a th’ againn air Calum Chille mus bruidhinn sinn a-rithist.”

“Taing, a Chaoimhe, bhithinn fada nad chomain,” thuirt Eddie, a’ tighinn ga h-ionnsaidh. Bha a ghàirdean crùbte, is e ag amas air uileann a chur ri a h-uileann fhèin. Ghabh Caoimhe ceum air ais agus smèid i ris – abair amaideas a bha siud leis na h-uilnean.

Dhùin Eddie doras a’ chàir agus chuir e sìos an uinneag.

“Ò, a Chaoimhe?”

“Dè a-nis?”

“Tha sinn cuideachd airson ainm

a lorg. Tha beachd agam – chan e ach beachd a th’ ann – ach dè mu dheidhinn *Columbo’s Passage*?”

Cha do thill comasan-labhairt do Chaoimhe gus an do dh’fhalbh an càr à sealladh, air ais air an rathad beag, cumhang, fada gu Glaschu.

Nan robh e comasach dhi siubhal air ais ann an tìmh, chòrdadh e rithe coinneachadh ri Calum Cille ann an Eilean Ì, 1500 bliadhna air ais. Cha robh Caoimhe cinnteach dè seòrsa àbhachdais a bh’ aca anns an 5mh linn, ach bha i an dòchas gun còrdadh e ri Calum Cille gun robh tanca-smaoineachaidh ann an Lunnainn am beachd na ceanglaichean a rinn e fhèin eadar Alba agus Èireann a chomharrachadh, agus gun robh iad am beachd ainm lorg-poileis bho phrògram telebhisein an fhicheadamh linn a thoirt air tunail fo Shruth na Maoile. ■

## Mar an Fhiadh

FIONNAG NICCOINNICH IS BRIAN Ó HEADHRA

Mar an fhiadh a bhios mi  
Mar bhan-dia a bhios mi  
Mar ghuthan nam mìltean  
A’ seinn gu h-àrd, gu treun

Bheir mise sùil air an t-saoghal le sùilean ùra  
Dùisgidh mi bho m’ aisling agus seasaidh mi an àird

Bidh mi cruaidh mar chloich is bog mar bhùrn  
Leughaidh mi an tìr mar na gaisgich a chaidh

Èistidh mi ris na craobhan a lùbas sa ghaoith  
Is gheibh mi neart bhon ghrèin gach là

Fuirichidh mi san dè, san diugh is san màireach  
Is cha bhi an t-eagal orm ro olcas sam bith

Gabhaidh mi am fulangas a thig le bròn  
Agus cumaidh mi slàn nam anam is bodhaig

Ruithidh mi ris an treud ach seasaidh mi nam aonar  
’S bidh mi stòlta mar neòinean sa mhàgh



## Like the Deer

*Like the deer, I will be  
Like a goddess, I will be  
Like voices of the thousands  
Singing loudly, strongly*

*I will look upon the world with a new vision  
I will awake from my slumber and stand tall*

*I will be hard like a rock and soft like water  
I will read the land like the heroes of old*

*I will listen to the trees that sway in the wind  
And I will gain strength from the sun each day forever*

*I will live in the yesterday, today and the morrow  
And I will fear no evil*

*I will endure suffering that comes with sadness  
And I will nurture my spirit and my body*

*I will run with the herd but I will stand alone  
I will be still like a daisy on the plain*

## Haiku

CAOIMHIN MACNÈILL

tha bàs an tidseir Zen  
– a bhruidhinn mu thruas na bu thrice na chuir e gu feum e –  
gam lìonadh le truas

fosgail doras an teanta  
agus sin i – an làn-ghealach  
os cionn Shùilebheinn!

## An dèidh Santōka Taneda (1882–1940)

CAOIMHIN MACNÈILL

a’ ghealach a’ tuiteam:  
mise nam aonar  
a’ coimhead oirre

a’ cleachdadh ollag mar chluasag,  
dha-rìribh na chadal –  
an dèirceach seo

## Act One

### Scene 1

#### Hell

*THE DEVIL frowns thoughtfully. He looks down at an exhausted middle-aged man slumped on the floor.*

THE DEVIL: Now then... where have we got to? Day... 19,967. Excellent.

*THE DEVIL raises his eyebrows and looks optimistically down at THE MAN on the floor. THE MAN doesn't move. THE DEVIL feigns sympathy.*

So how are we feeling now?

THE MAN: Terrible.

THE DEVIL: Good! Not *quite*, as terrible as you did a moment ago, I should think?

Those neonicotinoids were quite an invention. Even I had to wince a bit. The paralysis, the twitching limbs, foaming at the mouth. Even in the context of eternity that wide-eyed stare you gave me went on for a *very* long time. It was quite something. I compliment you and your ability to cause undue suffering on all of God's dear little creatures, but you're paying for it now aren't you dear boy? Oh Yes. Ha ha!

Remember all those nagging doubts you had? Hmm? Remember plunging a lobster into a tub of boiling water? Extracting a hook from the mouth of a fish before smacking it over the head? What about the worms eh? How they writhed and stretched and twisted when you stuck them on a hook!

I delight in it all of course, knowing that when you, at last, finish your days, I get to repay you in kind for each and every last one of those moments of terror you inflicted upon your fellows of the earth. I must say I've got my work cut out with you lot. How you came to believe that you are superior and immune to this I will never know. *Arrogance* I suppose. Yes that's it! *Arrogance*! It's the one thing I'm sure I've never witnessed in any creature, other than humans. Anyway...not to worry eh?

*THE MAN looks up and groans weakly.*

You think you've got it bad do you? It could be a lot worse. You were a vegetarian. I mean I know you ate meat, but venison ... well it's virtually a vegetable isn't it! One minute the deer is happily munching grass on the hillside, the next, "Bang!" and it's dead. One single intoxicating rush of adrenaline to the brain and it's all over. The perfect kill. You get to eat; the deer hardly knows a

thing. Down here my boy you can view that kind of death as a veritable holiday!

You should spare a thought for those who like their food fast and junky. Sometimes they eat battery chickens that weren't quite dead when their feathers were stripped off and their giblets sucked out! Try that for a laugh why don't you? Or what about those wonderful sporty types who kill simply for the fun of it? Oh yes you can take some comfort from that. They really get to understand that it really isn't all that much "fun" being splattered with hot lead. I love all those guys! I just think they're great! They all wish they'd been a bit more careful, a bit less eager to impress, when they reach *here*, I can tell you.

Anyway... I do apologise. I digress. So... day 19,967... still in your fifties... we're getting there. Don't worry, you'll soon be dead. Ha ha!

*THE MAN groans loudly.*

Now then let's see... I wonder if you can remember this one. Shall I give you a clue?

*THE MAN sits up and pleads.*

THE MAN: Please! Whatever it was I did ... please ... can we get it over with?

THE DEVIL: Aha! Remarkable! He Speaks! I see you're recovering from that last little incident with the fly spray then. Excellent! It's always so much better if you're feeling refreshed and a just little bit hopeful before embarking on your next bit of abject misery. It heightens the senses and makes the whole thing so much more worthwhile.

As for "getting it over with" I'm afraid that will never do. You know the routine: Quick discussion about the misery you inflicted before you get to experience it yourself in exactly the same way... one by one ... in all their glorious visceral beauty. All, I might add in chronological order. So here we go then, without any further ado, day 19,967...

It all began when you went out into your shed. You noticed a faintly foetid smell and slightly curled up your nose in disgust. Just as you were thinking "something must have died in here" you spotted, struggling across the floor, a large black beetle. Do you remember the beetle?

# Afterlife

A PLAY BY WILLIAM McLEAN



*THE MAN sobs*

THE MAN: Yes. Yes, I do.

THE DEVIL: What was it about the beetle that caught your eye?

THE MAN: It was covered in red mites. Completely covered. They were crawling all over it and it looked like the beetle could hardly walk.

THE DEVIL: Hmmm? Go on.

THE MAN: I don't know. I felt sorry for the beetle and I was worried that the mites might infest the place.

THE DEVIL: You felt sorry for the beetle?

THE MAN: Yes.

THE DEVIL: Interesting. Go on. What did you do next?

THE MAN: Er... I found a jar and I nudged the beetle into it with a stick. It was still covered in mites. All over it! I thought I saw a red mite on the end of each antennae but then I realised the antennae were red just like the mites. An odd coincidence I thought.

THE DEVIL: Coincidence! Do you really think so?

THE MAN: Well yes, I don't know, but then all I could think was the poor beetle must be suffering. I was imagining it as if it were me and I had rats crawling all over me or something like that. I wanted to put it out of its misery.

THE DEVIL: Aha! There we go. There it is again! Ha ha! If I had an ice cube, for every time I've heard that, this place would be flooded. I could have pot plants, a shrubbery even! Imagine that! You "put it out of its misery"... please do go on. How exactly did you "Put it out of its misery", this poor, *miserable* beetle?

THE MAN: I... well... I thought about stamping on it, but then I thought about all those mites and what would happen to them. Where would they end up?

THE DEVIL: Tell me... sorry to interrupt *again*, but did you, at any point, *really* spare a thought for the mites? Were they also... 'Miserable'... perhaps?

THE MAN: No! I admit it, I didn't! I

thought about how mites kill bees and bed bugs. Honestly... I felt sorry for the beetle. I was trying to be kind!

THE DEVIL: Kind! *Kind* to the beetle? *Kind* to the mites?

THE MAN: Yes! Honestly! I didn't know! Please! I... I thought...

THE DEVIL: *Thought?* You didn't think at all di you! You were thought...less! I'm quite happy to draw this out if you wish. It prolongs the agony. No sense in brushing over the details. We do have an awful lot of time don't we. Go on... what didn't you know... exactly?

THE MAN: I didn't know that the beetle was a... a carrion beetle. That it feeds on dead animals and that the mites are ... basically ... its ... friends.

*THE DEVIL Shakes his horned head and jeers*

THE DEVIL: "Its friends". Ah that's sweet.

THE MAN: The mites eat flies' eggs so then there will be more flesh available for the beetle to eat and less for flies' maggots. The mites were just hitching a ride and the beetle was probably oblivious to them, grateful even to have them on board. It was an incredible example of how things interact and how nature is balanced. Without the beetles and the mites and the flies, all the dead mice and birds or whatever would just pile up... but I didn't *know* that at the time!

THE DEVIL: I see. Oh dear, oh dear. What to do? So, tell me, what did you do next?

THE MAN: I lit a fire

THE DEVIL: Marvellous! I love fiery endings! Go on! Please... do go on!

THE MAN: It was only a very small fire

THE DEVIL: Yes, but it was a very *hot*, little fire, wasn't it?

THE MAN: I blew into it to make sure it was very hot yes.

THE DEVIL: You are a man after my own heart. Splendid fellow!

THE MAN: I was trying to make it as quick and painless as possible.

THE DEVIL: Ah yes... of course... how very considerate of you. So how did that go?

THE MAN: Not very well. The beetle crawled and the mites scrambled all over the place but in a few seconds, they stopped moving and the beetle then ... popped in the heat.



*THE DEVIL'S red eyes glow like hot coals*

THE DEVIL: It popped! That sounds marvellous. I do so very much, especially like the sound of the popping bit! We'll let's get going then, shall we?

THE MAN: What? But I meant well?

THE DEVIL: Did you now? I'm not sure those poor little mites would see it that way. Well, that's enough chatter... you know the routine...C'mon up you get.

*THE MAN Staggers slowly to his feet and looks pleadingly towards the Devil.*

THE MAN: Please! I'm sorry!

THE DEVIL: It's no good saying that now. You say that every time! It's boring and to be honest with you I'm losing patience so I'm going to sit back and really enjoy this one. All the quick deaths: the fly swats and chopped off hens' heads. That's all routine. Not like this one. This is a good one, a "popping" good one.

THE MAN: Please! No! Don't!

THE DEVIL: I do so much enjoy how you all plead for mercy *after* the event, after the deed is done. If you people took

just a little bit more time to think beyond the confines of your own pathetic little existences, you'd realise that your only real friends on the earth are the beetles and the mites and the only parasites are you! So please... if you don't mind... hurry along now. Your fire is ready. It's not very small, but don't worry I made sure it's very *very* hot.

*THE DEVIL ushers THE MAN towards a door and opens it. He gestures to THE MAN to go through.*

After you. Please.

*THE MAN, followed by THE DEVIL, exits through the door into a fiery furnace. THE DEVIL joyfully sings as they pass through the door.*

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

A lie for a lie, a truth for a truth.

**Eyrie i)**  
**(The evening we went to ring the eaglet with the bird man)**  
LEONIE CHARLTON

She-eagle came in straight and low  
red grouse gripped, flash  
landing in bracken and scree

detonating pulse of eaglet cries.

*It's on the ground       shit  
the thunderstorm this morning,  
chick must've jumped, they're scared of thunder.  
It needs to be back in the nest to survive,  
it's still two, three weeks off fledging.*

I climbed, climbed  
pulse of eagle against clavicle,  
translucent scales laying down on arms,  
chest, in the hollow of my throat

scent of first fire  
buzz of flies  
yellowest eyes.

Up, up, and all the while  
above  
she-eagle stalwart  
in treacherous blue.

We left the eyrie quickly,  
walked hopeful across heather  
in the early fall of summer,  
slugs gentling under decay of bog cotton.

Scales are still falling from my skin, my eyes.

**Eyrie ii)**

Nothing so quiet  
as an empty eyrie

in the smir we share  
one pair of binoculars

a small brown bird  
flutters down the rock-face

loosening last hopes  
for an eagle chick

that leapt too soon  
from a thunderclap.

**Eyrie iii)**

The bird man texted  
*video footage of the eagle chick  
was harrowing*

Its damaged neck meant  
it could only see the world upside down,  
meant it couldn't swallow and digest,  
meant it couldn't regurgitate pellets.

I think of the parent bird,  
trying past twisted cries,  
trying until all went quiet.

How after that concavity of time  
she carried the body – now the slightest thing,  
to a discreet location.

The bird man texted  
*we never find eagles that die of natural causes*

I find that unaccountably consoling.

# Cha Bràigh a' Bhàrdachd

**Sandaigh NicDhòmhnaill Jones**  
**Bàrd a' Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich 2019-2021**

‘**C**HA BRÀIGH MIS’ an crùn’: seo luaidh dhuibh às an dàn agam ‘Cumhaa’ChrùnChiomaich’, a nochd ann an cruinneachadh bàrdachd agus òran ùr agam ‘An Seachdamh Tonn’, a dh’fhoillsich Acair san Ògmhios 2021. Bha mi a’ ciallachadh nach bi spiorad na bàrdachd a chaidh fo ghlasadh, fiù ’s ann am bogsa dorchlaiste. B’ e samhla mu dhèidhinn crùn Bàrd a’ Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich, nach deach a thoirt seachad rè fichead bliadhna eadar 1978 agus 1999, a bh’ ann. Ach, dh’fhàs an luaidh seo gu bhith cuideachd na shamhla airson bàrdachd agus sgrìobhadh, no ealain eile, san àm fo ghlasadh-sluaigh.

Abair iongnadh mòr a fhuair mi fhìn san t-samhradh 2019, leis an naidheachd gum bithinn air m’ ainmeachadh mar Bhàrd a’ Chomuinn ùr. Agus abair urram a cheart cho mòr, gun teagamh. Bha mi mu thràth ag obair san àm air leabhar ùr – ‘An Seachdamh Tonn’, air an do rinn mi iomradh mu thràth.

Rè a’ gheamhraidh 2019-2021, ann an co-obrachadh dlùth leis an dà bhuidheann-taice, An Comunn Gàidhealach agus Comhairle nan Leabhraichean, chuir sinn ri chèile prògram loma-làn fhèisean litreachais agus thachartasan eile, airson na bliadhna 2020, anns am bithinn an sàs, agus a thogadh inbhe agus faicsinneachd na bàrdachd Gàidhlig. Nochd mi aig Fèis StAnza aig toiseach a’ Mhàirt 2020, a’ leughadh na bàrdachd agus a’ gabhail nan òran agam. Sin a’ chiad thachartas beò is aghaidh ri aghaidh a bh’ agam, mar Bhàrd a’ Chomuinn gu h-oifigeil: agus am fear mu dheireadh, gu ruige Fèis Bhaile na h-Ùige san Dàmhair 2021 – air sgàth Covid-19.

Bha againn ri co-dhùnaidhean duilich a ruighinn – air dè a ghabhadh a shàbhaladh de na planaichean a bh’ againn roimhe, agus na tachartasan a dh’fhaodamaid a dhèanamh air loidhne. Bha dòighean-obrach gu math cruthachail a dhìth, agus tòrr diorrasachd, tionnsgalachd, sùbailteachd agus foighidinn.

B’ fheudar dhuinn uile, a tha nar sgrìobhadairean agus luchd-ealain, fàs cleachte gu math luath ri tachartasan air loidhne a chruthachadh: nochdadh air Zoom, ar cuid sgrìobhaidh a thaisbeanadh gu h-èifeachdach, clàradh agus craoladh, dèiligeadh beò ri trioblaidean tèicneòlais, agus iomadh dùbhlán eile – a bharrachd air an obair làitheil – sgrìobhadh, leughadh, seinn ...

B’ e ‘leathad-ionnsachaidh’ cas a bh’ ann dhomhsa. Ach dh’fheuch mi fhìn fàilte a chur air, mar chothrom sgilean craolaidh agus riochdachaidh ùra, agus eòlas eadar-dhealaichte mar neach-ealain agus sgrìobhadair, a leasachadh.

Agus gu deimhinne, leis an ùine, chaidh againn – sin a ràdh, agamsa le taic seasmhach agus luachmhor bhon A’ Chomunn Ghàidhealach agus Comhairle nan Leabhraichean – air còrr is ochd tachartasan a chraoladh beò air loidhne; còmhraidhean agus iomlaid bàrdachd le bàird, sgrìobhadairean agus luchd-acadamaigeach eile. B’ e tlachd agus urram a bh’ ann dhomhsa, agus tha mi fada an comain dhaibh uile. Nochd mi cuideachd aig iomadh fèis air loidhne, a’ gabhail a-steach Seachdain Leabhraichean na h-Alba, Creative Conversations Ghlaschu, Fèis Leabhraichean Nis, Mòdan air loidhne is eile.

Lorg mi cuideachd ‘a’ ghrian air cùlaibh nan sgòthan’: leis nach robh e ceadaichte dhuinn uile siubhal idir, rè còrr is bliadhna, chaill sinn iomadh cothrom gus tachartasan a fhrithealadh – ach bhuannaich sinn tòrr ùine. Chuir mise romham an ‘duais-ùine’ seo a thoirt a-steach don leabhar ùr agam ‘An Seachdamh Tonn’, le ceann-là teann gus a choileanadh, agus gealladh don fhoillsichear agam, Acair, gum biodh gu ruige trì fichead dàin agus òrain ùra air an libhrigeadh san leabhar, le measgachadh farsaing de chruthan is cuspairean ann. Thug mi an gealladh gu buil.

Bha iomadh rud eile ceart cho comasach a choileanadh ‘air astar’ no bhon taigh. Sgrìobh mi colbh mìosail

airson Cuairt-litir a’ Chomuinn, a’ meòrachadh air iomadh cuspair co-cheangailte ri bàrdachd, agus cuideachd a’ tairgse roghainn de na dàin agam fhìn. Fhuair mi cuireadh gus a bhith nam bhrìtheamh airson farpaisean bàrdachd – Fèis Bhaile na h-Ùige agus Comhairle nan Leabhraichean – agus gabh mi ris na h-uallaichean seo le deòin.

Fhuair mi coimiseanan cuideachd, agus ghabh mi riuthasan le tlachd, nam measg trì coimiseanan airson aon dàn a-mhàin. Ach, thàinig cuideachd coimisean mòr agus cudromach a-steach, airson sreath bàrdachd fada a chomharraicheas 1500 bliadhna o rugadh Calum Cille; fhuair mi an coimisean seo bho Acadamaidh Rìoghail na h-Èireann agus Roinn Gnothaichean Cèine na h-Èireann. Cheadaich an ‘duais-ùine’ dhomh sreath de seachd ‘Cantos’ deug a libhrigeadh do na buidhnean-coimiseanaidh, air Là Fèill Chaluim fhèin, 7mh an Ògmhios 2021. A bharrachd air sin, chuir mi eadar-theangachadh gun Bheurla ris; chaidh an leabhar a-steach airson clò-bhualadh san Dàmhair 2021; agus thòisich mi, le co-cheòladair agam, ceòl san stoidhle ‘cantus planus’ no ‘plain-chant’ a chur air cuid de na ‘Cantos’. ’S e ‘An Naomhsgeul as Buaine’ (foillsichte le Sallan) tiotal an leabhair ùir seo, a tha a nis ri fhaotainn.

Ach dè mu dheidhinn buaidh a’ ghlasaidh air ar cuid sgrìobhaidh? Le

cinnt, ’s e àm cianail duilich a th’ air a bhith againn uile tron ghlasadh. Dh’fhairich cuid dhinn coiteachadh no ‘catharsis’ – no fhuair sinn cuireadh, fiù – gus sgrìobhadh mun ghalar mòr-sgaoilte agus glasadh, mu iomagain, tinneas, bàs, call, bròn, so-leòntachd. Ach aig an dearbh àm – dhomhsa co-dhiù – bha cuspairean aotrom, dòchasach – no dìreach diofraichte – cudromach, mar chothrom teichidh, tarraing air ar cuimhne, no sealladh nas fhaide air adhart. Ghabh sinn buidheachas airson nam beannachdan as cudromaiche – slàinte, càirdeas, saorsa. No fhuair sinn co-fhurtachd le fòcas simplidh air rudan beaga bòidheach – flùraichean, eòin, faclan coibhneil.

Fhuair mi fhìn tlachd à cluich agus deuchainn le diofar chruthan bàrdachd; thug e togail agus ionnsachadh dhomhsa a bhith a’ feuchainn ri pòsadh nas mothachaile agus a dh’aona-ghnothach a ruighinn eadar cuspair, susbaint agus cruth gach dàin – agus fuinn a dh’fhreagradh air cuid dhiubh a chur orra cuideachd. A bharrachd air sin, cheadaich na sreathan-ùine na b’ fhaide agus na bu shitheile dhuinn, tron àm-glasadh, na dòighean-obrach na bu mhionaidiche agus na b’ fhurachail seo a thoirt gu buil. B’ e cothrom meòrachadh air ar cuid ealain a bh’ ann: na roghainnean againn, ar cuid thlachdan agus cuireadh liut is comasan a lìomhadh.

Mar sin dheth uile: chan àichear gun robh a’ bhana-bhàrd seo fhìn – mi fhìn mar Bhàrd a’ Chomuinn – fo ghlas rè a’ chuid mhòr dhen ùine agam san dreuchd; agus le sin, cha robh na cothroman gus nochdadh gu pearsanta agus ìomhaigh phoblach a thogail ach gann. Ach theirinn co-dhiù gun deach agam ri tòrr a choileanadh agus a sgrìobhadh, a dh’aindeoin a h-uile bacaidh. Dà leabhar ùr ann an clò taobh a-staigh ceithir mìosan – tha mi riaraichte le sin, feumaidh mi aideachadh. Agus bidh mi an còmhnaidh làn buidheachais airson a’ chothrom agus urraim a bhuilich An Comunn Gàidhealach agus Comhairle nan Leabhraichean orm, airson an cuid taice agus aig Acair, mar an ceudna airson a’ cho-obrachaidh agus càirdeas bho bhàird eile.

Fiù ’s ged is bràigh am bàrd, cha bhràigh a’ bhàrdachd. Seo dhuibh, san dealachadh: earrann às a choimisean a fhuair mi bho Caidreachas Litreachas na h-Alba san Iuchar 2021, airson dàn mu dhèidhinn nan ealan aig an àm a bha bacaidhean mòra fhathast orra. B’ e ‘Prìosanachd nan Còisir’ a sgrìobh mi: agus bha an t-sonaid seo gu h-ìosal aig teas-mheadhan an dàin nas fhaide. ■

## An t-Sonaid-Bhràighe

San t-sàmhchair chruaidh, gun fhonn ’s gun cheòl  
Shuidh sinn gu brònach bochd;  
is ghuileadh leinn gu goirt ’s fo dheòir  
le ar clàrsach ’s ar guth nan tost.  
Oir chuireadh casg air còisirean  
tighinn còmhla ’s togail fuinn;  
cha cheadaichte ar companas  
is toirmisgte dhuinn ar seinn.

Na ceannardan a rinn bràighean dhinn’  
’s a thug sa phrìosan balbhachd sinn,  
cha tuig iad an ciont gu bràth.  
Ach mairidh ar ceòl bho linn gu linn:  
an seo air cuirm-chiùil chuimhnich sinn,  
is molar ar seirm – le àgh.



## Christmas Day 1903, Kirkcaldy

LYDIA HARRIS

Jimmy rolls a walnut and an orange,  
the shop bell clangs, the minister pops by  
for his short trim, for his moustache wax.

It's Christmas but it's a day.  
On the High Street, the horse float clops.  
The wives of Kirkcaldy

trail black skirts, carry baskets,  
they aren't Christmas baskets.  
The minister returns to the Manse.

The Provost polishes the lamp.  
Christmas is starched and hungry.  
Christmas knows she's blundered.

Jimmy can't crack the walnut.  
He peels the skin from the orange,  
offers the winking flesh to his mother

who is rubbing sheets clean, tending the set pot,  
shouting, *Be off with you*  
to no one in particular.

## The Quoybirse Stone

LYDIA HARRIS

i  
a vertical stroke  
a head butting the moon  
a spell in a giant finger  
a single tooth in a gaping gum  
a gnomon, a line drawn  
the dug-in never-surrender  
stone-in-your-shoe  
the blunder  
the lone reminder  
immovable compass needle  
four blank faces  
a city of lichen sprawl  
spy in the land  
dumb dictator  
secret holder

ii  
from the fulmar's wing  
to the shock-headed stone

from the face of the moon  
to the base underground

from the knot in the shroud  
to the outstretched tongue

iii  
before I wore gauntlets and bird tattoos

I swirled and frowned, I was Marin,  
I was ribbed sand, I was rock face.

Before I turned into earth, before I was stone,  
I was grain after grain, I was rubbed red raw.

Before I was tide out, tide in, my double song  
was wrapped in a salmon skin.

My voice was grey ochre, a sand nocturne,  
washed up with a rennet pot and scallop shell.

iv  
One of our faces gazes  
at the rising sun.

The west wind  
yammers our back.

Our growth rings  
ooze salt between.

We speak the hill line  
in the old tongue.

How our pit was filled,  
how we were transported.

We want harden  
for a winding sheet.

*harden: linen*

## The Man in the Woods

JULIET ANTILL

His tent buckled in Saturday's storm.  
All summer, mould had made itself at home  
and now the meagre shelter  
lay like a wounded raptor,  
its cartilage of poles at unnatural angles.  
I reached inside, tossed out the rocks  
that weighted the corners.  
The occupant hadn't trusted pegs.

For months he'd brandished sticks  
at walkers, cursed their dogs.  
The police came often, talking him down.  
Now he was gone;  
gone away in his too-big raincoat,  
the shopping bag of faded oranges  
banging at his calf.

He'd left it all – sleeping bag, mattress,  
the barbecue he'd cooked on  
which wasn't much more than rust.  
In its belly a single ready-meal container:  
twin chambers full of rain.  
The water shuddered in the wind,  
wobbled in its revelation  
of trees, sky, everything.

## Love

(after Miroslav Holub)

JULIET ANTILL

Two thousand texts  
A hundred different tricks  
to catch a signal  
An eternity of outstretched arms

A live-stream of declarations –  
each wrought from the viscera  
and novel as a coprolite

A hundred poems written  
A hundred poems burned

An organic veg box of lust  
A Subscribe and Save of disappointments  
Tears enough to change the weather

Dry rot  
Asbestos in the roof  
A slinging of mud

Let me tell you –  
it was beautiful

## Pal –

JULIET ANTILL

it's not you that's caught my eye  
but the hills at your back,  
lit as they are by the slant October sun.  
Have you noticed how the world smells  
of ripe fruit?  
And that leaves are dropping  
like take-out cartons?  
If I've to choose I'll take the hills'  
hard embrace over yours.  
Aye, and the snow to come.

## Grounded

KAREN HODGSON

Work has me guy-roped  
to time and place, still  
I stumble out, daily—  
dazzled, shin-scraped.

This tenuous tent strains  
in the lightest of breezes,  
the drizzliest of rains  
but it's the bivvy bag I crave.

My face forever to the big sky  
just one more element  
in the universe. At its mercy,  
in its grace.

# Six poems by Donald S. Murray

## A Legend Among Lightkeepers

Great Uncle Lachlann would regale  
us with salt-riddled tales  
tall as the tower  
he served on, long as hours  
he watched and tended light.  
We would spend nights  
listening to his voice boom  
out stories to a crowded room  
where some flashed anxious grins  
while others shifted back and forth in winds  
to which he kept returning – a maelstrom of a kind  
that inundated nerve and mind  
as surely as salt water overwhelmed that rock  
we journeyed towards while he talked,  
a stark and narrow stretch of stone  
to which we were all exiled  
those weeks he swirled round to visit us  
in our family home.

## The Lightkeeper Listens To Waves

He could translate the ocean's languages;  
when it was still and languid,  
he would interpret the hush,

comprehending, too, its rages,  
each inflexion in its liquid  
voice when it rose to lash

the lighthouse walls.  
He understood it most, though, when it spoke  
to layers of shingle, sand

these hours his footsteps stalled  
halfway up the steps where he'd listen as each wave broke  
upon the shoreline, understand

the reason for the discontent  
it so often displayed  
at the thought of sharing earth with mankind

for it knew too well the debris within depths  
choking the ocean's voice in every swell and sway,  
the dirt and desolation human life had left behind.

## Tiumpnan Head

Even in sunlight, it reminded him of a pearl  
necklace circling neck and throat of that girl  
he'd waltzed with all those years before  
inside Laxdale Hall. Impossible to ignore  
or forget the way she looked at that dance,  
for she had hypnotised him – each glimpse and glance  
cast towards him spinning his head round and round  
till all else was a blur to him, even the music's beat and sound.

And she is still with him today – a beam  
upon a dark horizon, a distant gleam  
in his lonely life. There are nights when in distress  
he stretches out for her, longing for the caress  
of that light to scratch out a track  
that will take him where he came from,  
find some direction back.



Painting by Alice V. Taylor

## Sea Story

(for M)

We have all been in similar places,  
occupied these spaces between the wreckage and the rock,  
felt the shock of impact,  
experienced a moment when careless talk

diverted love and life,  
put an end to the smooth voyage we'd been travelling on,  
discovering instead we were heading in a dangerous direction,  
that the compass fixed between our fingers was set wrong.

And that is where the light comes in,  
where its gleam can restore our ability to navigate  
our way to calmer waters,  
give us the chance not to be abandoned to the fate

our misguided course has taken us.  
Instead of drift, where that tide has washed us up,  
a small gleam of salvation,  
a tiny and persistent beam of hope.

## Fisherman Ashore

Strolling down the streets of his  
hometown,  
there were times life reeled  
round him more  
than it had ever done at sea.

He longed for maps and charts,  
to assist him in defining  
the topography of avenues and  
thoroughfares  
he travelled down unsteadily

as storms rolled out to bowl him over.  
A foghorn, too, that could assist  
him to find his way  
through the mist of life's confusions.

But most of all that light  
helping him to define  
what were risks and hazards  
and what was just illusion,

all these things that had been plainer  
on the bridge and decks of boats  
he'd occupied for decades,  
keel protecting and preserving him,

keeping him afloat.

## Bressay Lighthouse – 6/4/2021

Today it's been impossible to thread  
light through the cloak of feathers  
gulls and gannets must have shed  
in that chill wind storming over Noss,

their plumage plucked and lost  
when it was most required,  
tumbling in a blizzard, tossed  
and scattered across Bressay Sound

to conceal wave and water, fields, stretches of  
brown  
peatland till everywhere around here  
stacks of down and quills are found,  
all clipped and sheared

from seabirds waiting for the hour to veer  
downwards from cliff-faces,  
reclaim feathers for their breasts and backs,  
ensure that flight was once again in gear.

# The Unnatural History Museum at No Miracle Bay

Essay by Fiona Stirling and Jane Swanson

*What happens if I bind two places together?  
a sky that tastes of salt  
the click of heels on a marble floor, echoing voices  
water lapping in rhythm with the breeze  
a white statue of a Greek god  
jellyfish with flailing tentacles, flitting fish, boats bobbing on water  
a light sculpture by Nathan Coley, 'There Will Be No Miracles Here'*

**A** PARADOX. A juxtaposition. Writing an imagined space that sounds like a description of the lost world of Atlantis, a place forged by fire and earthquakes, a city that disappeared beneath the ocean, never to be seen again. A sunken world.

Waves can wash away islands; can waves wash up the unknown? This imagined space is a surprising creation, a space for floating ideas. Will there be miracles here?

A new world bubbling beneath the water, ready to be found.

I'm waiting for a miracle, I think. Right now. I'm waiting for the upside down to be upright again. Or am I the one that is upside down? It doesn't feel strange to write like this. *Be* like this. Is it strange that it is not strange? I think I have always been more excited by the unknown than afraid of it. I am not afraid to be writing with you.

Maybe that's because growing up the 'known' was never safe anyway. Mystery Door Number One was always preferable to Good-Chance-of-a-Kicking Door Number Two.

Huh.

It's taken me by surprise writing that. I didn't expect to journey to that place today, but here I am.

Here we are.

I feel compelled to name the 'here' we are creating because names give shape and texture to the simmering uncertain waves of the world. No Miracle Bay. It sounds like one of those quaint American towns that the infamous amateur detective Jessica Fletcher would arrive in at the start of a *Murder She Wrote* episode, a rendezvous with an old acquaintance or distant relative that would inevitably end in murder.

I used to love that show, watching cross-legged from the floor on a Saturday afternoon at my grans house, swatting away my brother during the adverts to prevent losing control of the all-powerful TV remote. My gran, also a Jessica and also grey-haired but not a detective. She would float in and out of the room with juice and biscuits and quiet affection. Every Saturday. Until she was gone.

I don't know who lives in her house now. I don't know if the living room still smells of rich tea biscuits and medicines

I can't name. I don't know if red stalks of sour rhubarb still sway at the garden edges, waiting to be picked.

Good old Jessica though, *she* would always know. Using her uncanny crime-writer genius she'd unravel the mystery, return calm to the troubled town. Now I'm older I can't help but consider how suspicious it was that her arrival consistently precipitated death. It's funny what a change in perspective can bring.

Nathan Coley was inspired by too many miracles, an echo of a royal proclamation in seventeenth century France at a time when the village of Modseine was rife with the things.

The King of France ordered an end to the miracles. Miraculously they ceased.

But to say *There Will be No Miracles Here*, suggests miracles happen *elsewhere*.

My grandma often spoke about her miracle.

Matilda was born into a mining family in Monkwearmouth, near Sunderland, one of thirteen children, she left home at thirteen and went into service in Yorkshire. When she was eleven, she was invited to a friend's birthday party, Florence was the mine manager's daughter. Matilda had nothing to wear to the party. I remember, Nanny Tilly, as I called her, telling me that as a child she only had one set of clothes.

Matilda prayed for a miracle.

Walking home one evening across

Wearmouth Bridge she found a brown paper parcel tied with string. She took it home – inside was a length of soft, lustrous white satin. Matilda asked everyone she knew if they had lost a parcel, she ran all over town and enquired at all the drapers and the haberdashers. No one claimed the parcel, only then did her parents allow her to keep it. An aunt with a sewing machine made the satin into a dress and she went to the party.

Elsewhere.

My father kept a black and white photo of his mother by his bedside. The photo is blurred, the satin dress floats over Matilda's body, the corners of her mouth are smoky, enigmatic, and unresolved. Matilda's long dark hair is tied back with a wide bow, the dress is high-necked, long-sleeved, with a full skirt and cinched at the waist with a wide sash.

Matilda has never had her photo taken before – no smiling says the photographer – the camera has a slow shutter – keep still or he'll fetch her mother to stand behind her and hold her by the waist – he will – he'll disguise her mother under a black cloth and put a plant on her head – he will – Matilda says her mother is short – very well – he'll disguise her as a chair under a decorative throw – he's done it before – her mother will be vexed if he has to send for her – straight back – he disappears under a black cloth hood – eyes on the birdie – a mechanical

brass bird opens its beaks and chirps – no smiling – *my mam pretending to be a chair!* – Matilda's chin wobbles, her eyelids crease, her cheeks lift at the corners as her lips crinkle with laughter – the shutter snaps shut.

If miracles happen *elsewhere* perhaps *elsewhere* can be found not in the spaces or places, we know and remember, but in the ones we imagine into being by writing, thinking, feeling together.

I began by writing about a jellyfish laden beach in the Argyll I visited last summer. You began by writing about a trip to an art gallery. Together they became an essay of an impossible elsewhere. Our Unnatural History Museum at No Miracle Bay. And the museum is growing each time we write. The memories of our grandmothers are filling hungry glass cases with decorative throws, lost and found white satin, forgotten rhubarb, and old televisions. Objects to collect and examine, to prompt the jump to the next elsewhere.

And I can imagine it, this new place. Feel the water snapping at my shins as I stride deeper into the blue of the bay, pushing my way to the heavy wooden undersea doors of our collaborative museum. To enter means full immersion, means pushing under the cold current and trusting there will be a way to keep breathing. It means floating into the damp light of flickering neon ghosts that point the way to forgotten exhibits. It means obeying the low, strange voice that urges movement forward with a single word: Swim.

Crash, dive in, think back to being a child – to a time filled with magic and shapeshifting. To when beds and bedsheets became galleons with genoa sails! When jam jars filled with rainbows and rose petals became potions and perfumes! When a blanket tossed over a coffee table became the entrance to whole other worlds

*this is what this new place,  
this elsewhere is like –*

hallway doors opening onto deep ocean troughs, echoing voices erupting from hydrothermal vents, and miraculous laughter lapping with the rhythm of the breeze. In this water the deep flowing currents are hidden from detection, silently washing up both the familiar and the unknown as we breathe, together, the pure bubbling silent air.

*'Is it lack of imagination that makes us come  
to imagined places not, just stay at home?'*



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# Honouring the legacy of GMB

**B**ORN IN STROMNESS in October 1921 and living there for much of the time until his death in 1996, George Mackay Brown is the pre-eminent 20th century Orcadian writer of poetry and fiction. There have been many different projects and publications to mark his centennial year. These include new editions of his work, celebratory anthologies such as *Gousters, Glims and Veerie-orums* and *Beyond the Swelkie*, a special edition of *The Dark Horse* and several initiatives through the George Mackay Brown Fellowship. As part of the Fellowship's many special events through 2021, James Robertson gave the George Mackay Brown Memorial Lecture in September. We are grateful to both the Fellowship and James for the opportunity to publish the text of this lecture in full here, as a resource for *Northwords Now* readers and as a further way of raising a glass to the memory and abiding legacy of Hamnavoe's most famous son.

**‘All time was gathered up...’**

**Brief life and the everlasting in George Mackay Brown's novels**

**The George Mackay Brown Memorial Lecture, given by James Robertson, 22nd September 2021**

**F**IRST OF ALL, it is a great honour to be asked to give this lecture. It would be an honour in any year, but in this centenary year it feels especially weighty, and I thank the directors of the George Mackay Brown Fellowship for the invitation, and especially I thank Yvonne Gray for liaising with me over the summer as we wondered what form the lecture might take and whether it would even be possible for me to be in Orkney to give it. As it turns out, I am here, but the lecture is online. It is great to be back in Orkney after a gap of several years, and particularly in the wake of what we have all been through these last eighteen months. Although, of course, we may not be in the wake. Only time will tell.

That last phrase – *only time will tell* – relates to what I would like to talk about this evening, which is the concept of time in George Mackay Brown's fiction. From the perspective of the author looking at his work from a slight distance, it was a pretty simple concept: he believed that only time could separate the wheat from the chaff in terms of literary reputation. ‘Booker prize – Nobel prize – what a song and dance about such baubles!’ he wrote in 1983. ‘What does it matter, the opinion of a few contemporary judges, compared to the near-infallible verdict that time sends down its long corridors.’ (Quoted by Dennis O’Driscoll in *Poetry Review* in 1997.) He was absolutely right, in my view. A quarter of a century has passed since his death, and he has become an ancient, born a century ago; but his books are still in print, his words are still read, he goes on surprising and enthralling new readers; so we may say

that his reputation is secure for now. As to how future ages may read his work, that is beyond our knowledge or control.

But if we forget about literary reputation and dig down into the work itself, we find an author looking at time as something of greater complexity.

Over the last few months I’ve reread – or in some cases read for the first time – all five of his novels and two long stories that might qualify as novellas. The novels, in order of publication, are *Greenvoe* (1972), *Magnus* (1973), *Time in a Red Coat* (1984), *Vinland* (1992), and *Beside the Ocean of Time* (1994), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The novellas, *The Golden Bird* and *The Life and Death of John Voe*, were published together in 1987 and won their author the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Obviously George Mackay Brown's oeuvre is much larger than these six books – a huge body of poetry, plays, short stories, journalism, books for children, autobiography and essays published over some forty years – but for my purpose tonight I’m going to concentrate on the long fiction.

I have greatly enjoyed my voyage through these books. They contain much variety. They are full of beautiful sentences, big ideas, mischievous comedy, powerful tragedy and, again and again, simple observations that make you pause and say, *yes, that's it, that's how it is*. I cannot deny that there are aspects of George Mackay Brown's fiction that irk me: I sometimes baulk at his depiction of women, or the subservient or mainly reproductive role he *seems* to accord women, and – related to this – I sometimes find him too hidebound by tradition or too thrawn in his attitude

to social change. But then, I remind myself, he was of his time and family circumstances and upbringing: is there any writer, dead or alive, with whom one would never disagree? And furthermore it is always important to distinguish between a writer's opinions and those of his characters or narrators. More than this, a novel is a two-way experience: the writer begins it, and brings to it his or her personality; and then readers respond, bringing to the text whoever they are. It's in the meeting of the mind of the writer with the minds of not just one but many readers that any novel comes alive and says whatever it has to say. George Mackay Brown's fiction lives and speaks in this way and does not apologise for

doing so, and it is up to me, the reader, to close the book if it says nothing of interest or importance to me. I may be discomforted, I may be puzzled, I may feel an argument coming on, but those are not reasons to close a book. They are reasons to keep reading. I have never felt remotely like putting down one of George's novels thinking, ‘No, this is saying nothing to me.’ (I feel somehow it is appropriate to call him ‘George’ from now on, even though I did not know him personally; it seems friendlier than

trotting out his three names over and over, or referring to him as ‘Brown.’)

Nearly everything he wrote is located in Orkney, or at least somehow anchored to it, even if sometimes by a very long chain – I’m thinking of *Time in a Red Coat*, which moves over several centuries from Asia across most of Europe before finally reaching the village of Ottervoe – and yet his work is insular only in the literal sense of that word. It is *of the islands*, but it is universal: ‘There are stories in the air here,’ he told his biographer Maggie Fergusson in an interview. ‘If I lived to be five hundred there would still be things I wanted to write.’

It is true, of course, as Seamus Heaney put it in a review of *An Orkney Tapestry* in *The Listener*, in 1969, that George could ‘transform everything by passing it through the eye of the needle of Orkney’. But I think it is also the case that he looked at life through a prism that simultaneously showed the immensity and the brevity of time.

It is sometimes said that novelists write the same book over and over again: it is more accurate to say that they are likely to be driven by the obsessions, curiosities and mysteries that started them writing in the first place. Writing is a continuous exploration, and it is only when a writer has nothing left to explore that the well dries up. Time – how its passage affects individuals and communities, and how the past and present interact with and exert influence on each other – has been a recurring theme in my own fiction. People sometimes tell me that all my books are different, but in many ways I feel they are all the same, they are just in different disguises. Reading George's fiction, I come to the same conclusion: his books are all the same; they are all

*Writing is a continuous exploration, and it is only when a writer has nothing left to explore that the well dries up..*

quite different.

Anyway, back to time. Let me give you quotations from two other Scottish writers, both of the generation or so before his, and try to use them to home in on George's sense of time, which is bound up with his sense of place. And, by the way, despite the obvious Orcadian-ness of both the man and his writings, I think it is also right to include him in the tribe of Scottish writers. He began an essay of 1988 (in Part 12 of the 52-part *Sunday Mail Story of Scotland* of that

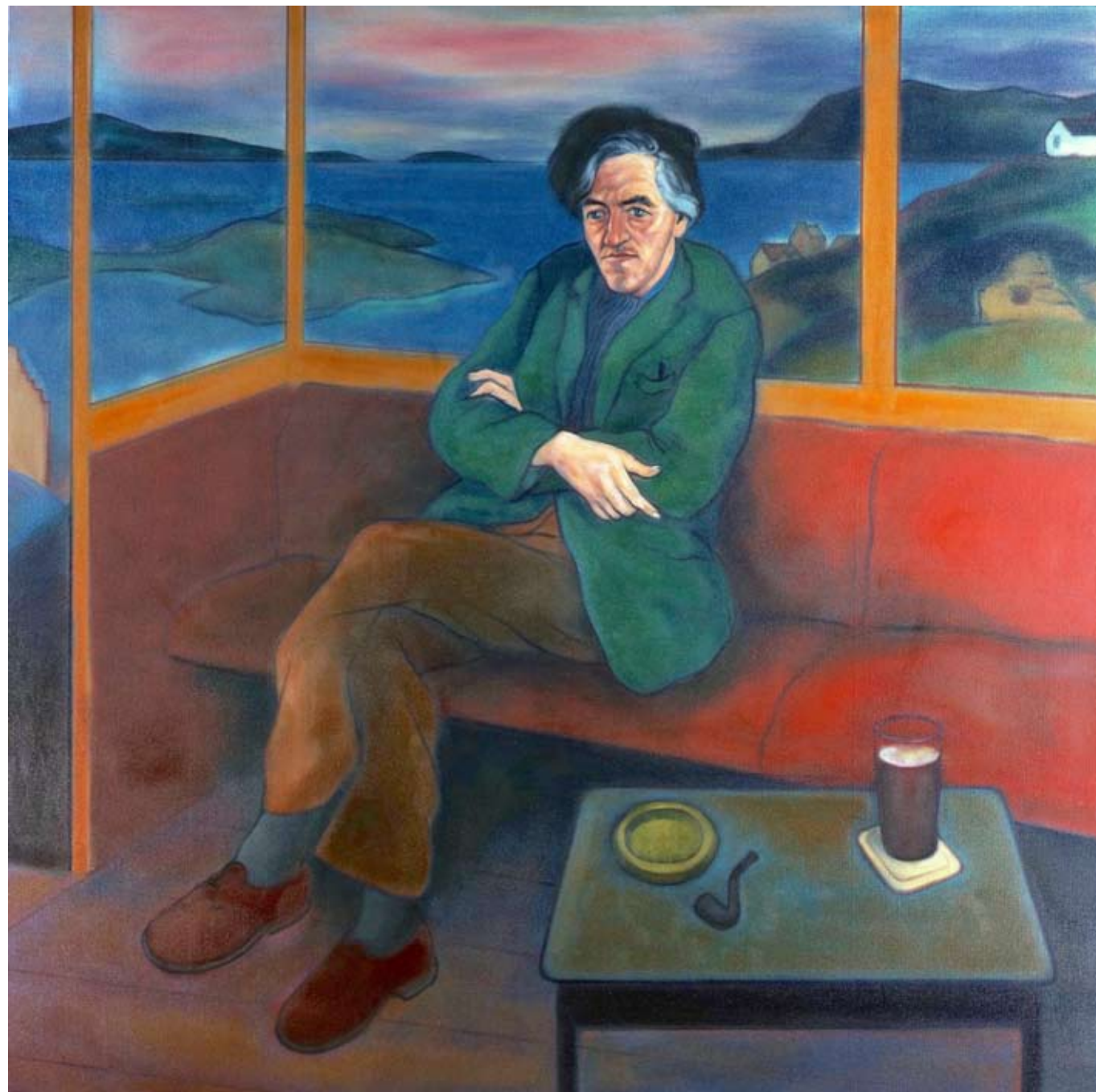
year) by saying, 'To be Scottish and yet not Scottish is to be strangely situated', but went on, 'That we are as much a part of Scotland as Galloway or Buchan is beyond doubt'. And this despite the poor treatment of Orkney by predatory Scots over several centuries, of which he was very well aware.

The first quotation comes from John Buchan, born in 1875, the same year as George's father. It appears in the posthumously published *Memory-Hold-the-Door* (1941). Buchan is writing of his own fiction: 'I was especially fascinated by the notion of hurried journeys... We live our lives under the twin categories of time and space, and when the two come together we get the great moment. Whether failure or success is the result, life is sharpened, intensified, idealised.'

The second quotation is from Neil Gunn, who was born in 1891 and was the same age as George's Gaelic-speaking mother, and who came to give a talk at Newbattle Abbey in the early 1950s when George was a student there. In *The Atom of Delight* (1956), what his biographers called a 'sort of spiritual autobiography', Gunn describes himself as a boy sitting on a boulder in a river, cracking nuts: 'Then the next thing happened, and happened, so far as I can remember, for the first time. I have tried hard but can find no simpler way of expressing what happened than by saying: *I came upon myself sitting there.*'

Buchan's twin categories of time and space and the tension between them, and Gunn's concentrated moment of self-awareness, seeing one's self from another perspective as if seeing a stranger: somewhere between these, I think, we can locate George Mackay Brown's take on the world and the clock ticking somewhere out of sight. On the one hand, he has an unerring eye for the details of everyday life – the smells, sounds, colours and noises of land and sea, the faces and hands and speech of people, the materials of which boats, creels, clothes, teapots and houses are made, the physical world we inhabit. On the other hand, he seems repeatedly astonished to be in such a world, to have been given the ability to witness and record it – to be the bard of his people. He cannot quite believe that he is here at all, or that *here* is all around wherever and whoever he is; and yet the evidence is overwhelming.

These quite different perspectives on being alive are connected by George's very acute awareness of the passage of time. But time is fickle, hard to grasp: it is both huge and endless – the ocean of time – and brief and finite – the span of a day or a season or a human life. George, like John Buchan, understands the race of the fishing-boat against the coming storm; he feels the drama of the destination that must be reached, the decision that must be taken or the deed that must be done before it is too late. But he also knows that there are timescales that may be just as crucial to men and women: if the harvest is in before the weather



**George Mackay Brown in the Braes Hotel, Stromness, 1980. Oil on canvas by Alexander Moffat. With kind permission of the artist.**

turns, or the house is finished before the bairn comes, or if a feud will last three weeks or three generations. And, beyond these important matters, like Neil Gunn George knows what matters much less: the times-tables or dates the bored schoolboy fails to learn, the routine task a man puts off in favour of a dram or two, society's expectations of good behaviour – are these not trivialities when compared with the crystal-clear occasions of self-knowledge, the moments of stillness and strangeness that are never to be forgotten? *I came upon myself sitting there*: this is surely one of George's dreamers peering into a rockpool or watching a thrush or a seal going about its business.

It could be argued that an interest in these two kinds of time are not particularly unusual in a writer of fiction. Just the other day, I found this sentence in the crime writer Ngaio Marsh's first novel *A Man Lay Dead* (1935): 'To the members of the house-party at Frantock the days before the inquest seemed to have avoided the dimensions of time and slipped into eternity.' Or again, there is

the 'postscript which should have been a preface' in Walter Scott's first novel, *Waverley* (1814), where he describes political and economic change and says that such change, 'though steadily and rapidly progressive, has nevertheless been gradual; and, like those who drift down the stream of a deep and smooth river, we are not aware of the progress we have made until we fix our eye on the now distant point from which we have been drifted.' The distinction between two speeds of time – operating simultaneously yet also somehow independently – is not identical in these examples; but clearly both authors are conscious of a loose, faulty connection between time's passing and our perception of its passing. George, I believe, repeatedly attempted not so much to repair as to describe this faulty connection, and perhaps to conclude that it was not faulty at all.

In *Time in a Red Coat*, he – or the narrator if it is not George – plays with clichés only to discard them, whilst conceding that they may yet contain truths:

It is a worn metaphor, surely, that sees life as a river issuing from high mountain snows, with cataracts and torrents, down to a fertile plain and then, with many windings and turnings, finding its way to the vastness of the sea.

And yet, when it was new-minted, the metaphor must have seemed beautiful and true.

The central figure of the novel, a girl moving through hundreds of years of human history, is then described as being on a ferry 'afloat on the river of time'. But is the girl herself, who wears a coat sometimes red from flames and blood, sometimes white though usually torn and filthy, not Time? George's own metaphors seem confused and inconsistent. In the next chapter life is an 'inn' – another worn metaphor with which the narrator is dissatisfied. And in the chapter after that, we are in Dante's dark wood:

Time is a dark wood, in which men and animals and birds and worms live and have



their being; the creatures with immediacy and innocence, the men and women questioning all that they experience, leaf and branch and trunk, birdsong, the animals' circuits of hunger and renewal and death. Men feel themselves to be kin to the branches that blossom and wither, and to the animals that have their hour of brutishness and beauty and then die. But men question: 'What are we here for? What or where is a meaning? What are they, birth and love and death?'

'Good try, Dante,' George seems to be saying. 'Your metaphor is also somewhat worn, but I am with you. I want to explore further into and beyond the wood. I want to get as close to the edge of mortality as possible – and then come back.'

And indeed this is what happens, in the beautifully crafted chapter entitled 'The Longest Journey'. We follow the soul of a soldier, the Orcadian Simon Thorfinnson, wounded in a battle in the Napoleonic Wars, right to the door of an inn – the Inn of Death now, not of life. At the last possible moment, the soul turns, summoned back to life by a woman's voice (the voice of Maurya, the girl wandering through time). In this sequence, time is squeezed almost, but not quite, to irrelevance by the contest between life and death for the soul of one man.

George had made a previous attempt to push his imagination to the very moment of extinction of a human life in *Greenvoe*. In that novel, the deeply religious fisherman Samuel Whaness very nearly drowns when lifting his creels in a heavy sea; he, or his soul, sets off on a pilgrim's progress that takes him through a strange fair full of drinkers, thieves and other sinners, then through a countryside emptied of people. The City of God is Sam's desired destination, and like the soldier at the inn's door he comes close to the gate before his body is pulled from the sea by another fisherman, the man he believes has been stealing his lobsters:

'So you're alive,' said Bert Kerston above him. 'By God, Whaness, you nearly had it today. The sea nearly got you. You'll never be closer.'

Earlier in *Greenvoe*, though, somebody does die: the old sailor, Ben Budge. What happens when somebody does go through the gate? For those left on this side of mortality, an answer to that question is denied. For the living, as the narrator says in *Time in a Red Coat*, 'the dark forest itself, that is all we know for sure'. (60) But at the moment of Ben's death, time again performs its double-act: it shifts not just for him but for his sister Bella too, as she decides to lay his body out herself, without the assistance of the other village women:

She had comforted Ben when he was a peedie boy – he was five years younger than Bella – the times he fell and cut his knees

on the road, or had toothache, or his pigeon flew away. So she alone would give him this last comfort.

She bent over the shape in the bed.

Ben had been five years younger than Bella but now this very ancient wisdom was graven on his face; she felt like a girl in the presence of a stone idol. Ben lay there very old, very remote, very strange.

Bella remembers his gaping, five-year-old fascination with a showman whose tongue licked a white-hot poker as if it were sugar. 'Now he looked into a much greater mystery.'

'That's enough, Ben,' said Bella. She pressed his eyes shut. She bound up his jaw with a strip of flannel. Then Ben seemed to be more at ease with his new state.

The implication is that the mystery may be revealed to Ben, now that he is away, as it almost was to the soldier and the fisherman who came back from the brink. It is the empty, sightless shell of Ben's body which remains mystified. And Bella, too. She is shutting not just Ben's eyes but her own against the unknowable mystery beyond life.

### *And so at the root of George Mackay Brown's conceptualisation of time is his infatuation with the two inseparable yet distinct sides of existence: life and death..*

And so at the root of George Mackay Brown's conceptualisation of time is his infatuation with the two inseparable yet distinct sides of existence: life and death.

In *Vinland*, a novel rich with the influence of the sagas, especially *Orkneyinga Saga* which had so profoundly affected George as a young man, he comes at these difficult ideas from another angle. The hero, Ranald Sigmundson, now living a life of peaceful retirement in Orkney after adventures that have taken him to North America with Leif Ericson, to Norway, and to Ireland where he takes part in the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, talks to his friend Peter the abbot, and the abbot tells him a story:

Imagine, my friend, a great grim keep, in which we wake up and are told, 'This is the House of Life – here you must do what you are given to do, told to do, for the time that is allotted to you... Even as the animals out there pursue inexorable ways, so must you, but you are creatures of intelligence and memory and foresight, and so your pleasure in the chase and the kill, so to speak, will be much the more vivid and heightened. Obey the rules of the House, and you will learn acceptance and a kind of peace. Seize the opportunities the House allows, and you may get fame and wealth and power. Now be stirring, man, there are many things for you

to do, you will come soon enough to the last dark door...'

One day, going about his daily duties in the endless corridors and staircases of the castle, the man sees through a casement window a garden of great beauty and delight. He was never told about this garden, but he realises it is not a dream: it is part of, enclosed by, the House of Life. There is a door, unfettered unlike the hundreds of other locked doors he passes daily, and he goes through it into the garden and takes a flower from a tree and goes back to his cell. From that moment on, long after the flower has withered, he remembers the garden; other than this memory he has no evidence of its existence and others, when he mentions it, don't know what he is talking about; but occasionally he catches a scent of the garden as he goes about his chores, and sometimes he passes somebody and the other person's coat gives off 'the enchanting subtleties of tall grass, dew, rose blossom and honeycombs'. 'Ranald Sigmundson,' the abbot concludes, 'we monks have a faith and a hope that the garden exists all right, and we think that we can go out among the birdsong and

kirk in Egilsay as the priest goes through the ritual of Mass:

The Mass was not an event that takes place in ordinary time, like eating a fine dinner in some hall, or sailing in a boat between two islands, or sharpening an axe... it takes place both in time, wherein time's conditions obtain, and also wholly outside time; or rather, it is time's purest essence, a concentration of the unimaginably complex events of time into the ritual words and movements of a half-hour...

The end and the beginning. All time was gathered up into that ritual half-hour, the entire history of mankind, as well the events that have not yet happened as the things recorded in chronicles and sagas. That is to say, history both repeats and does not repeat itself.

Here, the crystal-clear moment of stillness intersects with John Buchan's 'great moment' of action: 'Whether failure or success is the result, life is sharpened, intensified, idealised.' Because when Magnus, still at this point only a man, not yet a saint, steps out of the kirk into the new day, he will have made the decision to meet with his cousin Hakon, knowing he will be killed, sacrificing himself for the sake of peace. And, to demonstrate that this is history both repeating and not repeating itself, that this is *all* human history, George does not show us *that* murder, but – as Maggie Fergusson puts it – he 'swings the narrative from twelfth-century Orkney to Nazi Germany, and the hanging of a Lutheran pastor from a meat hook in a concentration camp.'

That is a bold leap, both of location and time, in a bold and unconventional novel. And, as if the horrors of Nazism do not need to be shown in the late 20th century, we do not see either of these killings in a chapter that is called 'The Killing'. Lifolf the camp butcher, the narrator in this section, does not remember the execution he is forced to perform – or, at least, he claims not to remember it. George simply takes the name of Hakon's cook in *Orkneyinga Saga* and confers it on the hangman in 1945, in a fictionalised version of the murder of Dietrich Bonhoeffer at Flossenbürg concentration camp. For all his seeming traditionalism, he was never afraid to break the bounds of novelistic convention. Perhaps the sheer innocence of his approach to writing – 'All a writer needs is a cheap pad and a 10-penny biro' – freed him to take risks where another writer might have hesitated.

In his last novel, *Beside the Ocean of Time*, he transports his protagonist Thorfinn Ragnarson back and forth across human history; and while he uses the plot-device of Thorfinn's daydreams to place him at the Battle of Bannockburn or in the reign of George III, it is also evident that Thorfinn is a 'stumbler into time' and that there is a Thorfinn Ragnarson in every age. Towards the end of the novel he is a prisoner-of-war in Germany during the Second World War: this episode does not

appear to be another dream, but reality, yet it is no less dreamlike or more real than the other episodes. It is a feature of this strange, short, flawed yet mesmerising novel that the reader is never quite sure what is dream and what reality.

When *Beside the Ocean of Time* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994, George declined to attend the ceremony in London but had to endure the judges discussing his novel on television. I quote, again, from Maggie Fergusson's excellent biography:

A.S. Byatt, while paying tribute to some of George's earlier work, felt that this time the 'imaginative effort' had not been 'fully realised'. Germaine Greer had felt unhappy about the book even before she opened it: what was the 'ocean of time' and how could one walk beside it? Sarah Dunant, chairing the discussion, had found the novel instantly forgettable.

How painful and awkward this must have been for the watcher in Mayburn Court, especially as he had company! But then, Fergusson continues,

The poet, Tom Paulin, speaking last, silenced them all with praise and passion. This was a 'wonderful' novel, he said, displaying to the full George Mackay Brown's 'sacral, primitive, highly sophisticated and at the same time deeply naïve view of the world'.

The novel had left Paulin 'joyous'. But what of Germaine Greer's unhappiness? Does the novel answer her questions? Yes, it does, but not by giving a 'right' or single answer. Like the tide, George keeps approaching and retreating from a definition of the ocean of time, in a sequence of statements threaded through the novel, of which the following are just a sample:

The life of a man, thought Thorfinn, is a brief voyage, with the ocean of eternity, the many-voiced sea, all around.

Such a short day is the life of man – brief labour and love and laughter between dawn light and the first star in the west. Round Norday island, the great ocean music goes on and on, everlastingly.

A wave in the Sound...crashed against the round ancient ruin on the shore, and carried away another stone that had stood for twelve centuries. That stone would trundle here and there with the tides, flung back and fore in the mill of ocean for a few decades, growing smaller and ever more spherical, until it was at last a scattering of sand among the oyster grains and the grains of crab and cormorant.

A hundred years on, and a child might be building a sand castle on the edge of the tide, on a summer afternoon.

There Thorfinn was, on the far outside wall of the broch, two thousand years lost in time.

Thorfinn writes two novels while he is a prisoner in Stalag 29B. After the war he writes more fiction, has some commercial success, but is finally disenchanted with



Swirls of deep time: red sandstone holding sediments from Lake Orcadie. Kenny Taylor

his work, with Edinburgh where he is living, and with the lifestyle his success brings:

It was time then to go away, to go home, alone.

To make something of what was left... There were enough fragments to see his time out, folk memories, legends, the seal people, the trows that loved music and lived under the green hill. But to write that kind of novel, a man needs to be a poet, and the stones he had broken up to then showed no least trace of ore.

There is a clear nod, in this section, to George's own writing career, and his dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the literary life away from Orkney, specifically in Edinburgh. As George came home, so Thorfinn returns to the island of Norday, laid waste by its transformation into a military base during the war, and abandoned in the aftermath. All the preceding episodes and encounters of the novel, stretched over many centuries, now seem entangled and overlapping. Thorfinn is not alone on the island: a young woman, Sophie, has also come back, and he resents her presence. He knew her once years ago, before the war, but is she really the same person? There is something uncanny about her, like the selkie woman of an earlier chapter (and also, I think, like Maurya, the time-crossing young woman in *Time in a Red Coat*). Sophie seems an amalgam of the women in the book, as Thorfinn is an amalgam of its Thorfinns. This sense that

they represent man and woman across the ages becomes very strong in the final scene of the novel.

The shifts of time, not just in *Beside the Ocean of Time* but in all of George's long fiction, indicate how strongly conscious George was that *his* time, his period of being alive, was just a passing moment in an infinity of moments; and that his witness to it, through his writings, was also transient and insubstantial. Underpinning that sense of impermanence, there looms in much of his work the threat of devastation, even annihilation. We see it in the 'Aerodrome' chapter in this novel. It manifests itself more menacingly in *Greenvoe* in the shape of Black Star, the military-industrial project that takes over and destroys the island of Hellya. It is there in *Vinland* too, in the constant cycle of power struggles and appalling violence, and the possibility that mankind might, as Peter the abbot says, make 'a shambles and a burnt-out ruin of this earth' (209). It is a constant presence in *Time in a Red Coat*. Almost always this threat is connected to the false dream of progress: human cleverness is no guarantee against the collapse of civilisation and community, and may even be hastening us towards such an outcome. In *The Golden Bird*, the schoolmaster John Fiord at first praises social and economic progress as the only way out of ignorance, poverty and superstition, but later comes to believe it to be destructive of wisdom, contentment and truth. 'All this idle curiosity,' he tells his pupils, '– all this striving towards whatsoever is new... It is vanity and

vexation of the spirit. What the spirit of man longs for, truly, is the wisdom and enlightenment that is neither new nor old, being outwith the bounds of time.'

Life, birth, love, death, history, mythology, the certainties of daily existence and of the seasons, the mysteries of faith and whatever comes after death – all these are bound up in George's relentless questioning of the nature of time in both its brevity and its immensity. The sum of his questioning is a turning-away from anxiety towards a kind of contentment, a quiet understanding that the questions will remain unanswered this side of mortality, and perhaps on the other side too. And so I come to the final scene *Beside the Ocean of Time*, and here, because there is nowhere else to go, I will stop.

They walked along the island shore in the afternoon. The waves threw glories of light about them. The great fog bank had rolled away westward...

'I won't go on much longer with this writing,' [Thorfinn] said. 'Till the bread and fish are assured, here I'll sit every lamplit night, toiling at the unattainable poem. In the end the pages will be food for moth and rust.'

'I'll dig my three acres and milk my goat,' said Sophie. 'I'll settle for that. We never find what we set our hearts on. We ought to be glad of that.'

A wave, thrusting higher, washed her feet till they shone.

'It is our son who will be the poet,' she said, as on they walked beside the ocean of the end and the beginning. ■



# Poems by Robin Fulton Macpherson

## As seen

from the viewpoint of Cairn Gorm:  
impossible not to see  
black cloud too heavy to move.

Down in a deep tight chasm  
an ice-water blue loch must  
be staring at clarities  
the observer didn't notice.

[This poem was inspired by Antonia Kearton's  
cover image for Northwords Now 40. Ed.]

## Three Summaries

Of the north coast, all that remains:  
harebells restless above Scrabster.



Leaves have been undisturbed all night.  
Their life-expectancy seems good.



*Nox perpetua*? But I find  
only light that lives in the dark.

## Three Miniatures

### A LATE SPRING

Four degrees plus, feels like zero.  
Hard buds decide to wait, stay hard.  
Softer bits of life are stopped short.

### WAVES

Their long journey is masterful. Why  
does it end in such uncertainty,  
hesitating along harbour walls?

### AFTER EARTH

What'll I miss most after earth  
after those multitudinous  
aged experienced Scots pines?

## Three Swedish Poets

Gunnar Ekelöf  
insisted, tell me please have you seen  
the desert bloom? "Yes, it was the face  
of the blind man feeling with his hand  
what his mouth remembered."

Werner Aspenström  
looked in the dark forest within us  
for the northern soul. It was "only  
a wavering sunspot between trees  
where the slanting light lands."

And Lennart Sjögren  
wondered what the stones wanted of him  
that evening. "All they might want of me  
is to return like them to the waves  
which once tossed us both here."

## Undated Loch

The little waves perhaps  
in a remote B.C.  
or new this afternoon.

One day, present tense waves  
were no longer present.  
Their past tense has survived.

The watercolour dried  
seventy years ago.  
Sometimes when I watch it

the little waves still break  
and the watercolour  
still refuses to dry.

## Village

Nothing flowed along the river-bed  
nothing filled the harbour basin full  
yet centuries of water weighed them  
still, fresh from Flow Country, salt from sea.

Names had left the war memorial  
but their mass pressed the granite to earth.  
In sycamore shade, in the locked church  
empty pews were crowded with daylight

## Things get lost

If I went back north now  
some things would be missing.

That ditch south of Helmsdale  
where each year primroses  
defied the winter mud.

The Green Table rock, once  
thirteenth-birthday terror  
and not visited since.

Across from the locked church  
the sycamore wood full  
of the loudness of rooks.

I've put them into poems,  
wouldn't find them again.

Someone else might find them  
radiate them  
with memories not mine.

## Deep in centuries

Unmelted snow on high ridges.  
Far above summits a blue sky  
has spent all day turning so blue  
it's black. Across it, something like  
alphabets disintegrating:  
each shape, that once was a letter,  
Is a soft-edged hesitant wisp.

At ground level we leave behind  
the graveyard with its hard-edged dates.  
High summer sycamores, at peace  
for centuries, watch over us  
like parents who are always there,  
who don't die, who take care of us  
especially after our deaths.

# Hard Roads an Hairst Winds by Brian Holton (translator)

Introduction by Robert Alan Jamieson

LITERARY TRANSLATION IS difficult, poetry especially so, and the reader is always entitled to query the accuracy of what is presented. Ideally, the translator should be fluent in both the original and the target language, and a scholar of the poet concerned, their life, their period and its idiosyncrasies, as well as their writings – but this is not always the case. They must also be poets themselves, for it is, after all, poetry they are making. This is what we as readers desire, but sometimes what claims to be a ‘translation’ may actually be quite far removed from the original, either by design or through misinterpretation, even if it makes for a good poem. So that degree of honesty in those who do not claim to have translated, but to have created something anew is welcome, as Brian Holton does, and as Robert Lowell called his efforts, ‘imitations’.

That said, the work remains – the

desire to honour the form of the original in some manner, its very sound, its line length, syllable and stanza patterns, whilst balancing that against the content, the meaning of each word in the given context in order. These are objectives often in conflict with one another, but before the business of form, content must be understood in its original context, as what the poem means in subtle ways depends upon that. The poem’s semantic totality, text and beyond, however vague, must be decoded.

It’s a tricky business. Words or phrases may have particular connotations in a certain period or location – localised knowledge may be key to unlocking the deeper meaning of the poem, in ways the outsider may not understand. For instance, when I first read the following transliteration of the opening line of a Czech poem I was working on, ‘The pianist in the sweetshop window is drunk

as a rainbow’, I thought what a wonderfully inventive, slightly surreal image – not knowing that in “Communist Times” it was common for a sweet shop to have tables and someone playing music, or that to be ‘drunk as a rainbow’ was a common Czech idiom. Luckily my Czech co-translator was on hand to keep me right. Yet, even with this knowledge, and with the right words in right places, unavoidably the literal translation conveys a glamour of strangeness to the English reader which the original in Czech did not inspire to the same degree in native speakers. To them, it was familiar. A single case, then, to illustrate how misunderstandings are potentially manifold, and can pile upon one another to the extent that a relatively simple poem becomes complex, and far removed from the original mood or atmosphere created.

To find a translator fluent and expert in both languages, who brings to the work

a depth of scholarly knowledge of both the original and the intended cultures, is a rare and special thing, enabling versions as close as possible to the source in spirit and form. When that translator is himself a master poet, the text is exalted still further. This is what we find in Brian Holton’s translations of the classical Chinese poets Li Bai and Du Fu, mastery of material and great skill in the shaping of verse from a rich vein of literary Scots. These works so distant in terms of time and miles find a home in Scotland through Holton’s poetry. I need not stress this further, for I believe the book will speak for itself. The poetry and the scholarly annotation makes this a special volume alone, and with Chi Zhang’s calligraphy, a visual bridge between cultures as well. ■

## Hairst Winds

Du Fu

1

Hairst winds reishle-reishle  
blawin owre the Witchie Knowe,  
Owre Bunemaist Fank, Nether Fank  
an Fettelt Watter-Yett;  
Eastren masts, Southron steerers  
pullt alang wi muckle raips,  
It’s warmer gettin bi Castletoun wey  
an the cauld hesna come back;  
When’ll be the day the hie roads  
are dune wi aix an halbert?  
The weirs hae spreid frae the Blae Drovers  
as fer as the Southron reivers.  
Frae Midhaun County the’re nae news,  
an yon’s a guid thing;  
The gloaming brings cateran drums  
toukin in the lang clouds.

2

Hairst winds reishle-reishle  
blawin at ma claes,  
East o the Lang Watter, ayont the rain,  
the wesslin sun gaes down;  
Owre the wee touns the lift lichtens  
as fowk waulk the white silk,  
On auld stanes an nerrae gates  
gaun-about fowk are few;  
A dinna ken, the bricht mune  
wha’s it guid for?  
Late or air the lanesome coble  
it’ll win hame anither nicht;  
Then A’ll tak my white hair in ma haun  
an lean on the tree in the close –  
Ma auld kailyaird, the stank, the deas,  
are they aye there yit or no?

杜甫

## Lines on the Norlan Wind

Li Bai

The Caunle Dragon reists at Cauld Yetts,  
Licht comes wi his open een at keek o day;  
Sae whit wey does the shinin sun an mune no set hereawa?  
Aa there’s here is the norlan wind’s roused gurlin frae the lift abune;  
On Swallae Braes flauchts o snaa  
muckle as bass mats,  
Flaucht bi flaucht blawin down  
ti the Deas o the Yalla Imperator;  
At Dernt Annay he grienit for his wife,  
in the twalt month o the year;  
Singin nae mair, lauchin nae mair,  
her bonnie eebrous droopin;  
Leanin at the yett she looks for traivellers,  
Thinkin on her man on the Lang Dykes in snell cauld, muckle ti mane;  
Whan he wan awa he took his sword  
an gaed ti sauf the border,  
Left his gowden dorlach here  
pattrent wi gowden tigers;  
In’t wis a pair o braw arraes  
wi flichts o white feathers;  
Ettercaps wove wabs aa owre it,  
aa mankie wi stour it wis;  
The uiseless arraes are there yit,  
But he’s deid in battle,  
an he’ll no be comin back;  
She cudna thole seein thae things,  
Brunt them, turnt them ti aiss;  
Gin the Yallae Watter rives its banks  
it can be stappit back up again,  
But in norlan wind an snaa an rain,  
this rue’ll no sned awa.

李白

Taproot Press was awarded a Scots Language Publication Grant this year to produce Brian Holton’s *Hard Roads an Cauld Hairst winds: Li Bai an Du Fu in Scots*. Back-orders for the hardback edition, which includes calligraphy by Edinburgh-based artist, Chi Zhang, can be made through Taproot’s website [taprootpress.co.uk](http://taprootpress.co.uk)

MAE FOUND THEM in March and buried what she'd found in April. The day before they appeared had been the last of the whipping winter storms. She'd seen the sea rising and falling as she walked across the fields from the school bus. Each crash of the waves was followed by the rattle of pebbles being sucked back in a slow drag. She gave a skip. Saturday would be a perfect day.

She was up by eight. In the kitchen her father lifted his head from his laptop as she put on her yellow oilskin jacket. 'You off, Mae?'

He had spent another night pacing downstairs. In the early hours, she had pulled the duvet over her head to shut out the Joni Mitchell song he played over and over on his record player. When she came down this morning there was a whisky glass and a half eaten packet of biscuits balanced on the arm of the chair. His late night comforts.

'I'll be an hour or two,' she said, waiting to see if he looked down.

Her father picked up her scarf from the back of a chair and tossed it to her.

'A pile of cracked plastic and old fishing nets is all there'll be, sweetheart.'

'Dad, that's not true.'

Mae pointed to the shelf he had made from driftwood. Her best finds were there: a dolphin's scapula, the porcelain white skull of a gannet, a giant seed pod from another place. In the centre was the conch that he had hidden among the seaweed on the beach when she was eleven. She'd picked it up, wondering at its strangeness until he confessed that he'd bought it in a gift shop. Mae had been furious and pushed him, so he fell onto the sand.

She remembered her mother's delighted laugh. 'Jack, you've turned into a teaser.'

He had got up and brushed the sand off his trousers. 'Only for the special women in my life,' he'd said, and hugged them both.

These days, if it got hard, Mae picked up the shell and ran her fingers over its surface, remembering how her parents had put their arms around her so tight that she had felt them and nothing else.

Her dad thought she didn't notice. When he came back from work and saw her sitting at the table doing her homework, he would grin in the old way for a moment before his shoulders sagged. He never looked at the door on the other side of the kitchen. It was always closed. Mae made sure of that, even though she lay on the velvet couch when she got in from school and pressed her nose into her mother's silk scarf with its faint scent of roses.

Down by the beach, she walked towards the largest dune with its edge carved sharp by the wind. The sand was covered with storm debris. A tree trunk, a couple of lobster pots and the usual plastic tangled in the tideline kelp.

The sand near the dune was pockmarked with speckles of grey. At first,

she thought they were pebbles shovelled in by the sea. She picked up one and scraped the surface with a fingernail. A limpet shell. Working her fingers into the sand, she pulled out handfuls of periwinkles, mussels, and oysters.

It was a midden. She knew because she remembered her mother pulling a book off the bookcase and flicking through the pages to find a grainy photograph of people kneeling around a trench marked with lines of string.

'That's our beach. It's a wheelhouse. The rubbish was thrown into a midden.' She pointed to the photograph of a skull. 'They found this buried close by. Imagine it. A woman lying there for centuries.'

'They should have left her,' Mae said.

'Maybe. People from the old times died young. They would have had a ceremony. A celebration.'

She'd tickled Mae and they had both laughed. That night Mae dreamt of a woman lying in a sandy grave with her arms folded across her chest, her hair loose and her body covered with shells and flowers.

After that Mae searched the shore whenever she could. Most of what she found was human leftovers: plastic bottles, sandwich cartoons and fishing twine. They all went in bags. The special finds were taken home.

It was midday. She would go back soon. Mae wriggled her hands deeper into the damp sand and felt something solid beneath her fingers. Even before she had brushed away the sand, she knew it was a bone. It was not smooth like the bleached bones of birds she found most weeks. It was pitted and rutted, and long like a leg bone. She kept on digging and found two other pieces. One broke into shards as she pulled it out.

Her phone pinged with a message from her dad. 'Got a call out. See you in an hour. Love you.'

He never used to say those words, she thought. He never used to say much, letting her mum fill the house with the bounce of her words and trickles of laughter.

'She's off,' Dad would whisper. 'Shall we listen?'

Her mother would pat the cushion beside her. 'Storytime,' she would say and pull Gran's shawl off the back of the chair and wrap it round Mae's shoulders.

She would tell Mae about who'd lived in the house, scrabbling to make a living until she, Ailsa the teacher, had come back after Gran died. She'd brought Dad with her, announcing in the shop that Jack was a cattle and sheep vet man. The phone rang day and night afterwards.

# Midden

STORY BY SUSAN ELSLEY



Her mum had got paler from the end of last summer. Mae didn't know for the first few weeks, although she noticed the silence when she walked into the kitchen and found her father holding her mother. When he pushed his bowl of soup away one night, Mae turned to her mother.

'Tell me.' She'd thought one of them was leaving.

He'd picked up Mae's jacket and rainbow scarf and handed them to her. 'Let's go down to the shore.'

It was almost a full moon, and the sky was filled with milkiness. They climbed to the crest of the biggest dune. The light floated like petals on the water.

'Race you,' her dad said, and ran down the dune.

She followed, and the sand filled her boots. At the bottom she turned round. Her mum was bent over coughing. Mae knew then, even though she knew nothing.

When her mother stood up, she said she wanted to walk to the point. They sat on the sand and watched the tide come in. They talked but Mae couldn't remember what they said.

Back home, her mother kissed her goodnight. 'It'll be alright, my darling girl. I'll keep an eye on you.'

That was six months ago. Mae clenched her fists to make the tears stay away. She picked the pieces of bone she'd found and carried them up to the top of the dune and covered them with sand.

There was a smell of bacon when she walked in the kitchen. Her Dad stood at the cooker humming.

'You're back quickly,' she said, breaking off a piece of baguette that lay on the table.

'Collie with a cut leg. Couple of stitches and I was on the road.' He waved a wooden spoon. 'I thought we'd have the full works.'

She reached into her pocket and put the shells on the table. 'I found these today.'

Her Dad lifted his glasses and peered at them. 'Old. Dirty. Neolithic.'

'That's what I thought.'

'On the beach?'

She nodded. 'Hundreds of them. There was other stuff too.'

He handed her a plate and a fork.

She took a mouthful. 'That's good, Dad.'

'Thought I needed to practice.' He picked up his own plate and leant against the counter. 'What stuff?'

'Bones.'

'Bones? What kind of bones? Seagulls? Sheep?'

'Real bones. Human.'

He put his fork down. 'Human?'

'I'm sure of it. I hid them.'

'Hid them. Why?'

She looked away. 'Bones need respect.'

He turned off the cooker fan. The kitchen was quiet. In the distance, Mae could hear the old tup grumbling in his corner of the field.

Her Dad put his plate on the countertop. 'Eat up. Let's go and have a look'

The wind had picked up down by the shore. Near the dunes the sand blew in sharp spits of spray.

He knelt and picked up a handful. 'It's a midden, isn't it?'

She nodded. 'They're up there.'

At the top of the dune, she dusted off the sand and handed him the biggest bone. 'Is it a femur?'

Her father turned the bone over in his hands and rubbed the surface. 'Well done, Mae. Yes, it's a femur.'

She could feel her chest constrict. 'I thought so.'

Her father had a hand across his mouth and his shoulders shook.

'It's not funny, Dad.' She punched his arm with her fist.

He let out a guffaw and bent over.

'Stop it now.'

He stood up and wiped his face with his sleeve. 'Sorry, Mae. It's the bone of a juvenile cow.'

'It's not human?'

'No. Old but not human.'

She stroked the bone. 'I thought...'

Her father caught her as she swayed and began to fall. He pulled her up and held her in his arms.

'I couldn't leave the bones. Lying there.'

'I know, Mae.'

She burrowed her face into his fleece. She could smell the antiseptic he used with the animals.

'Because she's alone.'

'She's not alone, Mae. We left her in a good place.'

'It's too far away.'

They stood long enough for the waves to cover the rocks and creep up the beach towards the midden.

Her father stroked her hair. 'We'll bury the bones, Mae.'

'Where?'

'By the point. In the turf beyond the dunes.'

That night they went down to the beach. Mae pulled her old cart. On it was her mother's silk scarf and the conch shell. A bunch of daffodils lay on the bones.

The moonlight was rippling on the water when they got to the point. They knelt by the narrow trench that they'd dug late afternoon. Mae placed the bones at the bottom and draped the scarf over them. Her father laid the conch shell on the scarf. They tossed handfuls of sandy earth in the grave.

'Our Ailsa,' her father said.

'Mum,' said Mae, and scattered the flowers on the ground.

They lit a fire and sat on the sand until the tide turned and the moon had risen and started to tip again towards the land. It was a good start to April. ■





Marilyn Monroe. Creative Commons Stockvault.

“Wystan!”

“Norma!”

“You don’t mind me calling you that, Wystan? You did say on the phone ... I’m ... I’m so *thrilled* to meet you. I – I feared I wouldn’t recognise you in ... in here.” With a sweep of her left hand, she seemed to encompass everything – the vaulted ceiling, gothic arches, the dome above their heads. “But it’s just us ... and your face is so ... so distinctive. Pardon me...” She blushed, looked down awkwardly and clasped her hands.

“Distinctive?! That’s a very charitable way of describing an unmade bed! *Your* face, on the other hand, is more beguiling than ...” he paused, and ran a fingernail along a groove above his nose, as if carving yet another crease into that careworn forehead.

She let out a nervous trill “Thank you – that *is* a complement. W H Auden can’t find words to describe my face!”

“Sit down, Norma. Those words will take their time.” He smiled.

She gathered up her dress and slid along the pew. Wystan took another draw on his cigarette and let out a gust of blue-grey smoke which made the flames above the votive candles quiver.

“Wystan, you can’t smoke in here, can you? Folks ... not me, of course ... I hate religion ... might see that as some kind of desecration.” She averted her eyes again, but this time her gaze took in the massive wooden ribs of the cathedral roof.

“Norma. I expect that you and I would desecrate a place by looking at it.”

She laughed again. “Speak for yourself! So ... I hope you don’t mind that I contacted you ...”

“Not at all ...” his face realigned itself to reassure her further.

She blushed. “When I phoned, after your poetry reading on Thursday night, you suggested we meet here ... in a *church*. Why?”

“I thought it a fitting place for an icon such as you!” The humour in his eyes told her there was another reason.

“No. Seriously” she made to pick out dust-motes from a narrow beam of light that rested on the pew in front. “Why the hell did you chose *here*?”

He hung his massive head and there was silence for a while. Silence that sounded right, somehow.

A smile played at the corners of his mouth. “Three reasons, I suppose. I couldn’t resist the shock-value. The perversity of it. And I’m delighted to see that you are not a prude.”

“A prude? I thought a prude was someone who came to a place like this.”

“Perhaps, Norma. But that is not prudery so much as that of cultured people who think of religious belief as the last remaining shameful thing.”

“B ... but you’re a poet. Truman says

no-one can speak the truth like you. He says you have precision. You *define* things.”

Wystan put a warm hand on her shoulder. “Thank you. That is very important to me. That is a poet’s duty, to define. To disenchant and disintoxicate. But there is also that which defines us. We cannot find ourselves unless we lose ourselves. And I can lose my ego here.”

“Wystan, I like your hand – on my shoulder. I feel safe. Your eyes don’t look me up and down. And you don’t patronize me ... treat me like what they’ve turned me into – a ditty, dumb blonde that exists for the pleasure of mankind ... a girl who never thinks.”

“On the contrary, you’re sharp ... very sharp. And Norma, there’s perhaps a reason my hand’s perfectly still.”

“Yes, I know. You’re queer, aren’t you.”

“Crooked as the age we live in.” The echoes of their giggling came back at them from the altar. She edged a little closer and leaned against him.

“Truman is like you ... that way. He says religious people want to stone him.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be alone in challenging the first of them.”

“Are you *seriously* religious? I’ve seen you drunk. I ... I didn’t think. How can you, when the Nazis ...”

She tailed off turning her face to his, knowing that she’d already said enough for him to understand.

“Well, in some ways, the Nazis are the second reason.”

“Second? Oh! Yes ... you said there were three reasons you’d suggested we meet here.”

“Yes. The novelty and shock of the Nazis was that they attacked Christianity because they thought that, the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself was fit only for effeminate weaklings.” He smiled shyly and carved with his fingernail a groove along the back of the pew in front. “The chaos and tyranny of this world, we must try to hold at arm’s length.”

“But I’ve been made so *sick* of Christianity. My mother was obsessed. She was a Christian scientist. It drove her mad. And then, my luck, I got fostered by some Southern Baptists. That was before the orphanage. *They* thought everything to do with the body was vile.” She noticed the acoustics, the amplification of her voice.

His rheumy eyes looked down at her. In them she saw a sadness and the ebb and flow of tides. “I *hate* that.” He said, with venom. “I too, *hate* that. T S Eliot may be comfortable with a Christianity of disembodied spirits. But not me – can there be anywhere a philosophy that endorses the flesh *more* than this one” He inhaled deeply. “– the word became flesh and dwelt among us ... mud on the eyes of a blind man, words in the dust, the body and the blood.” He seemed to seethe with rage and large tears welled up behind his lower lids.

She took a handkerchief from her breast pocket and passed it to him.

“Thanks, Norma.”

“Aw. That’s nothing. I got a hankie collection .... One from every place I’ve been. And that’s a lot.”

He snorted in mid-blow. They laughed together.

“Wystan, I’m jealous. You got something to believe in. *Someone*, maybe. A certain ... peace.”

Wystan guffawed. “No, Norma, peace is something that I’ll never have.” He frowned as few on earth could frown.

She changed the subject. “What was your third reason?”

“For suggesting the cathedral?”

“Yes.”

“My hotel is right across the street.” He chuckled.

“PUT OUT THAT CIGARETTE RIGHT NOW!!!” The voice of the priest, forgetting reverence, rang out across the nave.

“Oh!” was all the poet said before grinding the stub against the marble floor. He wasn’t sorry, so he couldn’t say the word. That would not have been his way. “Can we meet again, Norma?”

“Please, Wystan. I’d like that.” ■

## Marilyn Monroe and W H Auden

STORY BY IAN TALLACH



## Nae Nemesis

HUGH MACMILLAN

I've aye wunnert why Philomela  
didnae chynge tae a beir  
an byte aff Tereus' bas,  
or a bull wha micht hae bluitert them  
sae far up his airse they'd hae lantit  
in his mooth fur brakfast,  
no that he cud hae haed ony,

wi his heid hingin aff eftir yon leopard  
she could hae bin got haud o him.  
While lassies were kilt,  
forcet or rent apairt, plucked their ain  
een oot or lowped ower  
cliffs, yon soor sho' oer o bastirts  
the Greek goads moont aroon

brousin thru the Olympian Guide  
tae Flora and Fauna, matchin the roll ca  
o the deid tae dowlie soon o nichtingails  
wee trees or licht hertit wather formations.  
Wummin turnt intae birdsang  
so poetry luvn hoplites could scribe  
some verse atween rap and murther.

## Couple, New Cumnock

HUGH MACMILLAN

He's drinking strawberry hooch  
and adding to it  
from a green vial  
like in a horror film.

She is half sleeping on her  
handbag. They both look  
about fifteen but my compass  
is off on these matters.

The train is passing  
New Cumnock, and he takes  
his parka off to cover her,  
even though she already

has a parka, and strokes  
her face under a curl  
of blonde hair  
that seems carelessly

arranged but has taken  
a hundred thousand years  
of human evolution  
to place in exactly that

heartbreaking manner  
on her white cheek.  
I want to say cherish  
and take care,

but somehow it's like  
a painting and I wouldn't  
say cherish and take care  
to a masterpiece

even though it has flaws,  
so I watch them instead  
poised like this  
while the rain comes down.

## A House Standing In Darkness

EM STRANG

Out in the open, something old and dark  
shakes out the glass from its frames,  
blows wide the front door  
to let more darkness in.

Somehow the house is both hollow  
and full of darkness at the same time.

If you walk inside, the hunger for something  
outside the house – the quarrying – ends  
and each footfall comes along by itself.

The whole house is bursting with darkness.

There are cupboards here and old sofas,  
memorials with no names.

Yet the whole house cannot be penetrated  
with the silver pin of the mind.

## Embers Of Flowers

EM STRANG

In December, when he died, she got old –  
she stuffed her blood and breath inside his heart.  
The embers of her fire turned black and cold.

You could hear it in her voice, the blasted hole  
that grew inside her throat in early March.  
It's true that when he died, she got old.

You knew she'd tried to muster self-control  
by the brittle, chatty comments at the start,  
but the embers of her fire grew black and cold.

On visits, she would show up bright and bold,  
but her skin and teeth and bones all fell apart.  
It's true that when he died, she got old.

A thousand hungry stories left untold,  
lined up in her chest like blades of grass,  
as the embers of her fire grew black and cold.

You could buy her yellow freesias, marigolds,  
still she never learnt that nothing lasts.  
In December, when he died, she got old  
and the embers of her fire grew black and cold.

## Arthur's Seat

ROB A. MACKENZIE

A thousand candles of gorse  
fizzed from volcanic roots  
like a church floodlit  
by vanity, or the buzz  
of taxis vying for  
dominance at the crossroads.

The city below took the brightness  
as a taunt,  
shrouded the stars  
in neon. The gorse spat  
flames like empty prayers  
for stonechat and yellowhammer.

*Note:* "thousand candles of gorse" is from  
George Mackay Brown's poem, 'The Storm'.

## Bessie

D JAMES ROSS

On Brinkies breezy Brae,  
Humpbacked behind Stromness,  
Bessie haunts her peat fire.

Oracle in an Orkney chair,  
She is rocking and stroking her  
Witch's bow-sprit chin.

Cassandra thrusts out a claw,  
Clutches your unerring sixpence,  
Its silver suddenly shrouded.

A whirlwind now of whispers,  
This shape-shifting, sibilant Siren  
Is shaveling her salmon jaw –

Sibyl is whistling up a hissing  
Syllable-squall. You salvage the words  
You wish to hear. *'East - east!'*

So. The winds are propitious.  
Vertiginous vennels usher you down  
To the pier. You sail with the tide.

In the glow of peat embers,  
Anchorite Bessie bites on salt silver,  
Cackles, breaks blustery wind.

Footnote –

A real-life resident of Stromness in the 18th and  
early 19th century, Bessie Millie used her boiling  
kettle to predict favourable winds for mariners in  
exchange for a silver sixpence. In 1814 she was  
visited by Sir Walter Scott. She told him the story  
of her fellow-Orkadian, Pirate Gow, who had  
failed to consult her when he visited Stromness  
in January 1725 and who came to grief shortly  
after his departure. In addition to supplying a  
description of the historical Bessie, Scott featured  
her in the guise of the *'Queen of the Elements'*  
– Norna of the Fitful Head – in his novel *'The  
Pirate'*, loosely inspired by the life of Pirate Gow.  
As her ability to remember events in 1725 attests,  
Bessie must have been over a hundred when Scott  
encountered her.

EVERYWHERE CAN BE gorgeous in June. It's afternoon and I'm alone in our quiet garden with my son who's lost in his world of play. From my seat by the wall I can watch him and smell the first roses of the year, the colour of sunset with a sweet sharp scent of apricots. They have outgrown their trellis and are clambering along the rough cast, almost touching me. Tonight my husband will trim back their messy beauty, as he's been threatening for weeks.

I hold my face up to the sun and let the soft breeze dry weak tears of pity clouded by self-pity. My heart is beating too

hard, too fast and, though I've managed to blink my vision clear, my thoughts remain foggy and tangled. If he could, my husband would tidy those up too.

On the soft new grass our son squats, intent on something I can't see.

# Pruning

STORY BY ISABEL MILES



He may be tempting a snail from its shell with a sliver of sorrel. Perhaps his hand is cupped round a dandelion clock, sheltering it from the wind. His long dark waves are tied up in his favourite yellow ribbon and he is wearing the blue

dress I let him choose. So far I have kept it safe for him, hidden in my jumper drawer. He is happy and if he were not so happy I could be stronger. Tonight we will cut his hair, for I have promised my husband. I bend over my son, breathing in his fragrance of sun-warmed skin and hair. 'What have you found?' I ask. ■

FURNITURE POLISH WAS the weapon of choice. Pledge, if you must know. Other brands are available, but we don't use other brands – Paul didn't think they did the job well enough. He may not ever have done the polishing, but it didn't stop him from having an opinion.

As a freelance contractor, there weren't many work colleagues to tell but they all sent sympathy cards, some even sent beautiful flowers. All were very kind.

A quiet burial. Numbers restricted – stringent virus rules, I reminded them. My sister was keen to come but she's shielding, lives in a tier 4 area. Too risky to travel, I insisted. So, it was just me and his best friend present. That wasn't a lie, it wasn't even stretching the truth. It was just me and the dog, who was his best friend – he didn't have many. Paul that is, not the dog. I can't think Hector, the Labrador, has many friends either, except perhaps the postie who brings him a biscuit most mornings but even Hector can see that that's a bribe, not a gift.

He was a victim of Coronavirus. It was his decision to sack the cleaner on the grounds that whilst he was happy for her to visit our home, risking infecting us and her, he drew the line when he discovered that she was also cleaning several houses, increasing the risk of contamination. Which is all very commendable if he then helped with the cleaning other than his self-appointed advisory role. It was his insistence on using furniture polish on the floor, ignoring my warnings that it would be too slippery, that was the catalyst for the accident.

The cleaner was indeed a luxury, especially since I'd given up work to concentrate on painting, a hobby I've loved for years but had no time to enjoy. With no children and with sufficient income to see us comfortably off, I gave up the rat race. He loved his job. He claimed we needed his salary, but I suspect work gave him a sense of self. Although, that dwindled with demand for his work, when lockdown induced him to give up the office lease and to work from home.

The straw that broke the camel's back wasn't a straw but a plastic container. Sat on the table. Empty. He'd eaten the last of them, Marks and Spencer's double chocolate rolls. I don't like them, so it wasn't his selfish act of eating the last

three that did it. I had bought them for him, he likes them and as he tells me, in jest, of course, he pays for the shopping so what does it matter if he eats them all? It wasn't that. I do the shopping, I put things away, I do the cooking, I do the clearing up, I tidy the house, I do the laundry. I manage the garden. He earns the money to pay for it all.

Rushing to finish the housework so that I could do some painting, he was left to have his morning coffee on his own. This irritated him. He didn't like to play second fiddle to anything, including the housework. I left him glowering and sarcastic at the kitchen table with his

coffee and the tub of cakes. Which is where I found the used cup and empty container a couple of hours later, sitting dejectedly alongside a tell-tale pile of crumbs. At that point, he shuffled in to check that his lunch was not being overlooked.

'Are you just leaving those there?' I challenged him, incensed.

He laughed sheepishly and went to move them. I headed to the larder to get out the bread. When I returned, he'd scarpered, leaving the cup and empty container now sitting by the sink. He'd had to pass the recycling bin to put the plastic container on the worktop and the dishwasher is right next to the sink.

Taken in isolation this sounds petty, but this wasn't a one-off. That morning I'd skipped breakfast to go for a walk, yet when I went to make the coffee the detritus of Paul's breakfast stared back at me from the table. As every morning, I put the now warm milk and butter in the fridge, the glass, plate and cup in the dishwasher, the jam, the marmalade away. There was no point in leaving them out or saying anything it just led to sarcastic remarks and encrusted plates.

He hadn't always been like that. When I met him, he was kind and generous and supportive. We'd been happy and had lots

*He didn't like to play second fiddle to anything, including the housework.*

of fun in our long marriage. He even did the cooking and shared the chores. Only, as work took on a greater focus for him, he lost sight of what was important and took so much for granted. And then this virus, so me on breakfast, lunch and dinner duties, seven days a week. No meals out, no meals with friends, no takeaways – Paul didn't want to take any risks. Paul didn't want to lift a finger either.

And even then, I would have just inwardly raged, if he hadn't slipped on the floor. It was bad timing.

The postman was involved, but he could not have known of the trail of events he was unleashing with his kind act. Hector is not entirely blameless as it was his mad dash for the postie's biscuit – rushing in case Paul or I decided that morning to get to the manky biscuit before him – that caused Paul to slip and concuss himself. Although, it wasn't Hector who then fed him a cocktail of Nurofen and Glenmorangie, to finish him off.

I did miss the support of family and friends at the burial. His body was so difficult to manoeuvre into the shallow grave alone. The house is tidy now, just how Paul liked it. ■

# Polished Off

STORY BY CATHERINE HALLIDAY



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## EX-YU

RODY GORMAN

Mother's only flesh and blood, her skin and blister,  
We were never that close but I was back again  
With herself and the rest at month's mind  
Just the same. What I mind most, after all that time  
Of pain and all the lying in state, is a body  
Being placed not in freshly-consecrated earth  
But like a bird released up into the ether  
Or Dame Hird off to bed on her golden stairlift.

I was reminded of the Gaelic *teàrnadh* then,  
How it means ascending, descending, afterbirth,  
Saving and what have you and all the family  
As we stood by the misty fields beyond  
The runway and terminal fence where we'd gone  
On hearing the voice for the last time  
Calling out from above: *Head to the Gate.*  
*Final Call. Gangway Closed.* And that was that.

All the different flights and connections and people  
You think you know. Check in/out. The vast concourse.  
The control tower up there. Security. Another  
Plane coming in to land. Another departing out  
Of sight. A vapour-trail. All passing with such power  
And force over us to as far away as darkest Africa  
And herself going *Aer Lingus* to Split  
And the coast of what used to be Yugoslavia.

## Strome Ferry (No Ferry)

RODY GORMAN

On the return journey near Strome Ferry and the end  
Of the line (the start for some), a voice calls out  
*This is a Request Stop* as a couple go to alight  
With their sticks and belongings. On Platform One  
The conductor waits and I think of Charon  
Carrying them in his wherry across the Acheron.

I've lost my place in MacNeice's *I Crossed the Minch*  
As we inch through a blind tunnel underground  
And there's my reflection again. In next to no time  
The deer will be down from over the hill  
Behind Lochcarron and appear all over Wester Ross.  
The old man opposite has had his last piece.

Looking back, a young boy, facing me on the other side  
With his new toys and *ephodion*, cries out  
*Bye bye now, No Ferry! Bye bye!*  
*See ya later!* I forget now we're in the quiet  
No-noise compartment and can't communicate  
Except via MacBook and text and MySpace.

The long passageway's emptied up there.  
On the further shore and the horizon, Lochalsh,  
Skye, the Cuillin, then the Sound of Sleat and home.  
Another halt or two and that's us in Kyle.  
It's high water, the narrows are gunwale-full  
Of sunken skerries, old buoys and fleets.

## The Racer Burn

ROBIN MUNRO

When Scoulag moor has had its fill of rain  
it lets the water leave,  
a seabound urge  
we intercept in ditches, cuts, lades and the like  
(where Thom the engineer trained water to his will.)  
This Racer Burn (before it had a given name)  
ran through a Great Estate (before the ground had status).  
John Patrick Stuart (to personalise the Marquess)  
saw it was good to landscape in the Bute design  
and had the Torr Wood brae laid out as *Calvary*  
far from the dust of Jerusalem  
fae from the dust of Cardiff coal.

The burn, incorporated, splashes into artificial pools,  
stations, I suppose, of lamentation, absolution  
and containment

then release  
out of the Policies, over the beach,  
into the Firth of fulfilment.

Today, a visiting boy playing on the shore  
apart from the others, like John Patrick,  
takes stone after stone he can barely carry  
to place in the determined water.

He is young but has an old intent  
to rein in, redirect,  
be master, albeit for a second,  
of the Racer Burn.

## Day of the Last Star

HOWARD WRIGHT

The last day has taken a million years, just about,  
and we can stand in our trenchcoats  
of infinite knowledge, our celebratory hats.  
Hindsight is a marvellous thing.

At this extremity, home to us, whatever 'us'  
has become, we can watch the last star shut down,  
switch off, close the door. Life has become death  
and we, whoever 'we' are, will die alone.

A thousand billion years – God, we now know,  
has been away all the time, relaxing, lost  
to his Alzheimer synapse. He doesn't even know  
who 'he' is anymore. We toast our hands

and crumble. A final glimmer – no ghosts, no time,  
only our wasted breath on this little crumpled rock.  
This is what it means to survive without regret,  
one with the void, its intractable mind,

the universe of naught, the one last thought  
from this absolute spot could do no worse  
than be there was a point, that the effort  
to start again, from scratch, might be worth it.

## The Cairn with its Back to Ireland

ANTONIA KEARTON

If I could have a superpower  
it would be flight,  
because I'm scared of falling.

I've always been afraid.  
Even as a little girl, looking up,  
I thought the tenements would fall on me.

My worst dreams now  
are of my children falling,  
sometimes from cliffs, sometimes

into swollen rivers. Sometimes falling  
isn't falling, but the sea rearing up against me,  
battering our windows.

Even on my magic isle,  
the one I know so well –  
where to find the little marble stones like tears,

when to swim in the lagoon of the White Port,  
with the tide coming in  
over sun-warmed shell sand –

even here, there is one place  
in the south west corner,  
below the Cairn with its Back to Ireland,

where I've never been –  
the last green swathe  
before the Atlantic's heave,

below a tall grassy cliff.  
I stood there looking,  
but did not climb down

in case I fell, and couldn't  
find my way back up. But if I could fly  
I would be without limits.

Perhaps it's a good thing  
to have an unexplored place,  
to know there's always somewhere beyond,

somewhere I cannot go.

## The Drink Talking

DONALD GOODBRAND SAUNDERS

Awright son eh? eh?  
Ah kin see you think  
this's jist the drink talkin  
well by the way  
drink doesnae actually *talk*  
in my experience.

'Cept mebbe the wance.  
When was that ye say?  
well, there was this hauf-full  
(awright, hauf-empty  
ya smartarse numpty)  
onyway, this bottle of ecks ecks ecks  
ecks— howma doin— ecks  
Napoleon Brandy  
five a cloak wan mornin  
the arse end o  
wan o thae west en parties  
(ay, Ah'm gaun back a bit)  
an aw it said wis  
keep yer fuckin hauns aff me  
ya sick bastart. Course Ah'd mair sense  
'n tae answer it and onyways  
Ah wis embarkin on  
a long-term relationship  
wi a six pack of Superlager  
so it wis nae skin aff ma nose  
if some foreign swally got a bit lippy  
but nex mornin  
Ah got tae thinkin an ...

Where was Ah?  
Ay, ken thae  
messages in bottles  
yer shipwrecked punters  
heave intae the sea?  
Well, Ah wis mair intae  
bottles in ma messages  
in thae days. A castaway  
wi a takeaway  
ye might say an Ah wisnae  
lookin tae be rescued no siree ...

You're an educatit man son  
naw y'are, Ah kin tell, so tell me this —  
*in vino veritas*. Eh that means  
bevvie tells the truth right?  
But whit if it's tellin ye  
it's no tellin ye anythin  
Eh? Eh?

What's that son?  
*what would I say to a wee half?*  
nae worries but,  
it's jist Ah cannae be sure ...  
what would the wee hauf no say tae me?

## The Stuff the North is Made O

(Finland 1970)  
DONALD ADAMSON

A cuidnae trou ma een —  
simmer still, tree-lined boulevards  
unner skyrie skies, a waukin dream  
o the sooth. It wis like some place A hud been  
(but whan?) completely chynged  
wi wuirds, signs, letters, meaninless,  
scrambld aa weys, whummld  
mixtur-maxtur, like the coins pit oot  
by Britons whan the Romans hud gane hame.

Real eneuch it felt. An yit aa wrang:  
sib tae a memory biggit  
frae less than air, a swirlin, circlin haar  
that meant no-weel, no-ill  
like in Tarkovsky's Solaris,  
craitur-like, sculptin whit the mind  
in sleep or in a dwaum ettles for  
oot o whit wis plantit in a bodie  
at time o birth. A think that it wis waitin

tae tak a haud o me whan A glenced  
oot o the train windae an hauf-kent  
that noo, frae this day on  
ma life wuid hae a coonterpairt in yon  
nivver-endin — whit? Forest? Thon  
or some ither orra entity  
that husnae got a scienteefic nemm,  
the mirk primordial, elemental stuff  
the north is made o.

## Bathgate Hills in Lockdown

MICHAEL STEPHENSON

This past year, my steps  
have pressed these paths  
deeper into the hillside  
and deeper into myself,  
taking me back to Witchcraig  
and Cairnpapple, back  
to the top of Cockleroy  
where the world opens out in every direction.

I'll watch the light changing  
on the Firth of Forth, and remember  
coming here while they built the new bridge —  
first the three crosses upright in the water,  
then the beams and cables  
reaching towards each other,  
reaching towards the day  
when, at long last, they could touch.

## Rewilding of the Dynamite Factory

Ardeer Peninsula, North Ayrshire  
ANGI HOLDEN

Summer's end, and the leaves are turning.  
Soon they will be airborne,  
falling into an ambush of drifts.

Slender trees, broken by the seawind  
hand, half-tumbled, hard to distinguish  
from the concrete posts  
which once formed boundaries  
of mesh and razor-wire.

Now both sides — the inside and the out —  
return to the earth, become layers  
of scrub and bracken,  
home to the old creatures:  
the woodlouse and the shrew,  
the rabbit and the jay.  
Listen to the vixen's call,  
the wrenching creak of timber,  
the susurrant of the breeze.  
Nature's slow and quiet explosions.

## Spoots

JON MILLER

The big boy next door to our holiday house told me  
and my sister how we had to walk backward  
when the tide was right out in the bay.

So, once we'd buried our dozing parents  
up to their necks in sand and bored of castles  
and shells, we grabbed our supermarket salt and  
buckets

and ran down the beach to where it hardened  
into ripples. Cold pools splashed my Speedos  
and the tiny bikini covering your flat chest.

We passed black branches, an oily glove,  
a rusty bike wheel. You slid on tongues of seaweed  
and I thought about how, hours before,

fish would have nudged our waists  
or how urchins, barnacles, clots of anemones  
groped with their suckers and mouths.

When we were far enough out we walked  
backwards, looking for the sag in the sand  
so we could spurt a pool of salt into the hole

when we saw one and when we did,  
up it slid, erect, blindly rising out of silt,  
its muscle pulsing as it thrust itself up and out.

You knelt down, wrapped your hand round it,  
pulled and out it came with a little gasp.  
You giggled — you knew what this was —

and dropped it in the bucket. But all I could  
think about was our parents dead in the dunes  
and the tide rising between our legs.



## An enthusiasm of anthologies

**A**N ANTHOLOGY CAN be an excellent way to get a flavour of the work of a range of writers. That includes through occasional volumes produced by writers' groups. These usually require a great deal of voluntary effort from group members to write, edit, compile, design and print, which gives them an added sense of both value and commitment.

A recent work that ticks those boxes is the *Grey Granite, Red Earth* anthology of verse and prose published by Mearns Writers (2021) [mearnswriters.simdif.com](http://mearnswriters.simdif.com). In his foreword, Chris Powici (a self-confessed fan of writers' groups) says that a good group like Mearns Writers: "can equip burgeoning talent with craft and skill and reassure the accomplished writers that there's always more to be learned, and that learning itself is rewarding and invigorating, fun even!"

The growth of Mearns Writers from eight members fifteen years ago to more than forty people now shows just how much it is valued and appreciated, reckons Chris. "And rightly so."

Alistair Lawrie, whose review of Sheena Blackhall's autobiography is on the facing page, is a founder of the group. "The collection of short stories and poems enshrines the depth and variety of literary talent in the Mearns," he commented when the book was launched this summer.

During the pandemic, Mearns Writers have held their meetings online. "Creative writing meant a great deal to us before Covid, said acting chair of the group, John Richardson, "and, with lockdown, it has become a wonderful release from

worries for some, and for others a way of making sense of the times we live in."

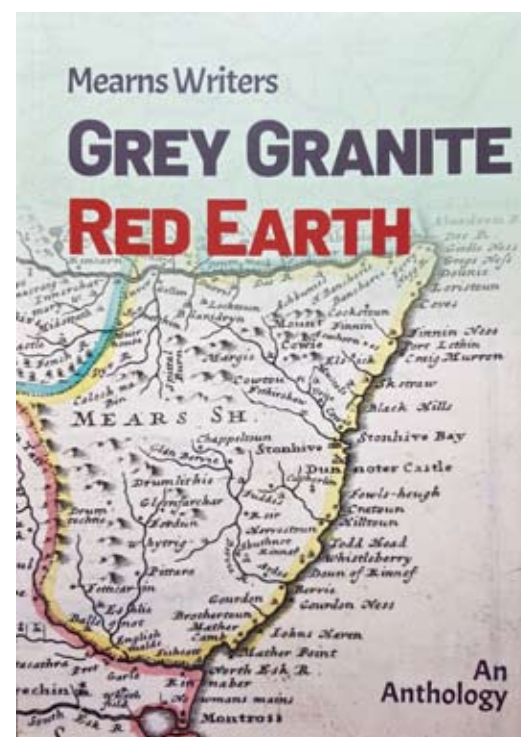
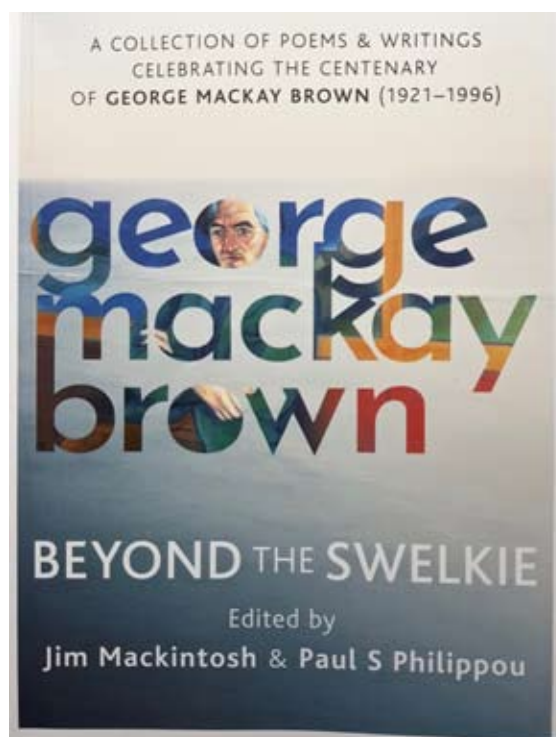
A different and geographically more widely dispersed group of writers has contributed to *Beyond the Swelkie* (Tippermuir Books, 2021). As described in the introduction to James Robertson's essay in the centre of this issue, this book is one of many works that have celebrated the life, writing and legacy of George Mackay Brown in GMB's centennial year. Around eighty different people,

including some writers of national and international standing, contributed to this volume of many voices. The editors – Jim Mackintosh and Paul S Philippou – made sure that each writer, including the *Northwords Now* editorial duo – had the freedom to respond to the centenary as they wished, whether in a poem or short prose, including essays and reminiscences.

The result is a collection that might have coaxed a smile of pleasure from the

great writer himself, including at how his poem *Beachcomber* has become something of a national treasure. There was certainly much enjoyment when some of the contributors gathered for a launch of the anthology in the Scottish Poetry Library this autumn. With luck (what can you say, these days?), there might be a further small event in the north in 2022 through *Northwords Now* to share some of the book's range of poetry and prose. ■

KENNY TAYLOR





**A Bard's Life**

Sheena Blackhall

Rymour Press (2021) £9.99

REVIEW BY ALISTAIR LAWRIE

Alan Spence refers to Sheena Blackhall's *A Bard's Life* in his preface as "a kind of autobiography". The book is certainly surprising, "no ordinary telling" as Spence puts it. Biographical information consists of three pages of timeline at the end, surprisingly detailed explanation of the photographs and drawings and regular wee notes throughout, setting pieces of writing in the context of her life. Yet minimal as this is, the book is remarkably frank and revealing about her life.

This "autobiography" bears witness throughout to the struggle Sheena Blackhall's working life has been to ensure that her writing is true to her North East roots while remaining experimental in style and challenging in its subject matter.

The story "The Smiling Horse Of Troy" is central to this, exploring as it does the difficulty faced by a Doric speaker confronted by a world where English is the dominant tongue. It's a fine satirical portrayal of a self-important head teacher interviewing a boy to see if he's fit to join her prestigious school and his inevitable, tongue-tied and angry failure as she loses patience with his apparent inability to identify toy farm animals, eventually exclaiming within his earshot:

"Of course he's failed ... Didn't even know what a horse was. A horse for God's sake."

On her table the boy sees:

"a coo, a grumphie, dyeukies, chukkens, yowes, a tyke, a kittlen an a cuddy."

His relatives farm as did Sheena Blackhall's. A note makes clear this was her own experience. Which is the point. Everything here presents key moments in her life through the writing they informed.

It's a Bard's life, charting that interplay. Even the photographs play a part. All biographies feature family photographs but these resonate with the quintessential importance family has, or had, for folk in the North East. That sense of ancestry permeates the early poems. The volume starts with "Homage To The Ancestors", making clear the profundity of her commitment to family and the area itself:

"Grandmother's ghost is weaving a wooden cradle  
So she may nurse my bones."

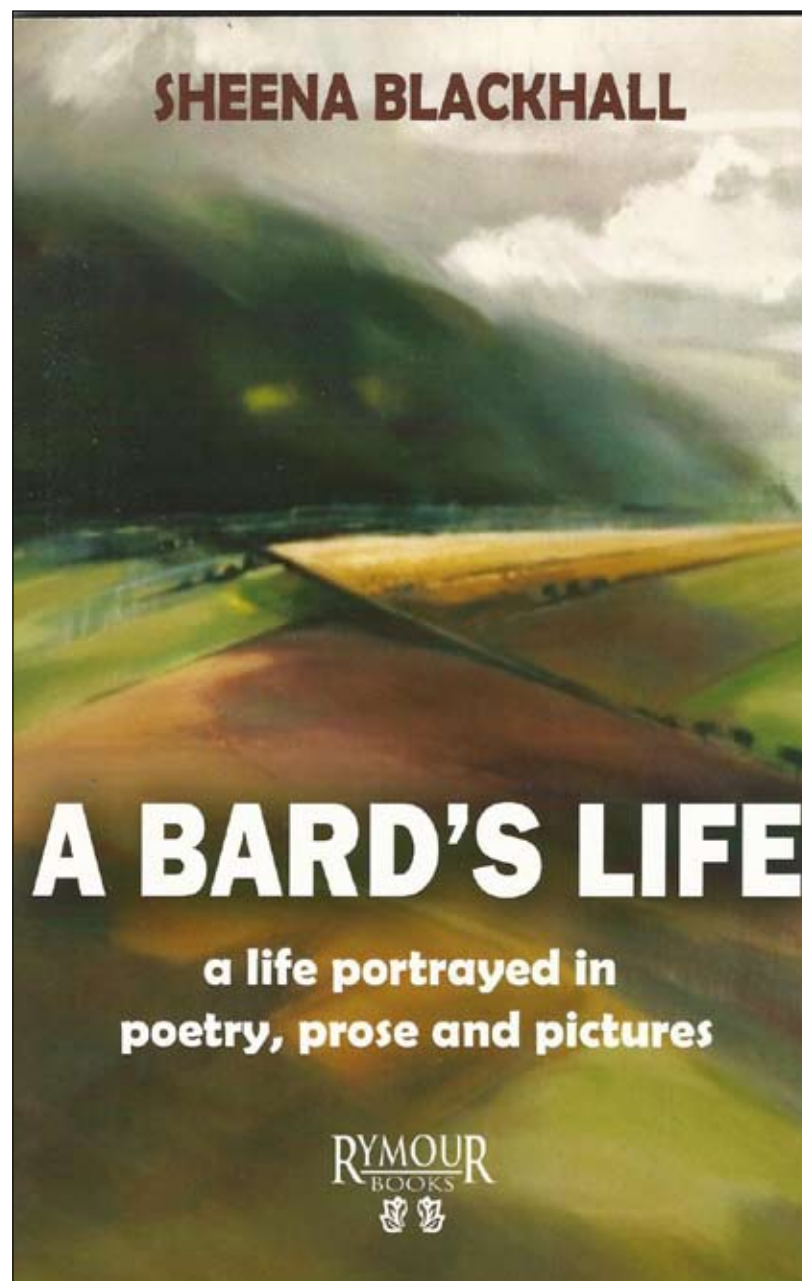
A photograph is listed as:

"Coull Kirkyard. My family's graveyard since 1623. Morven and lots of relatives buried here, as I will be."

Her identification with the area is complete:

"My vertebrae are the pebbles of Glen Cairn, Glen Muick".

Her commitment to Doric will have contributed to a sense of isolation that



is a strong motif throughout the book. A poem recollecting a childhood party ends:

"Sitting way out on a limb, at six, sixteen or sixty, ...

On the outside, looking in."

Her hospitalisation during the 1964 Typhoid epidemic merely provides background to a contemplation of the nature of isolation. She notes witches were once burned nearby:

"nonconformists, the eccentric, those who were a little odd, the outsiders who didn't fit."

There's no doubt which camp Blackhall is in.

Appropriately for a bard most of the work here is poetry. Although always illustrative of her life, it's a rich, representative selection, displaying mastery of a variety of poetic forms, from traditional ballad to free verse. I was particularly struck by the vigour and vitality of her imagery. Spring is "the sweet in the wid-wasp's byke/Wild-cat, wi its teeth bared fite!"; peats are "Sun biggit histories"; there's a "creepy-crawly tractor." Metaphor abounds and at its best her use of simile demonstrates Alice Oswald's observation that the technique

allows "both worlds to exist at the same time":

"Always, I heard the river, murmuring

Like granny when she muttered in her sleep".

Where she uses rhyme it's often in an idiosyncratic, intermittent way, but always to effect. For example, a poem entirely in free verse concludes with an elegant rhyming couplet. There's a sonnet with a couple of lines that rhyme with nothing. And yet it works. A striking example is the poem "The Mountain Hare" which rhymes AAAB throughout each of its six stanzas, certainly making it sound song-like but, more importantly, dramatically embodying the difference between a sterile married life and her inner desire for freedom:

"When day was done and the small things said,

The dishes dried and the paper read,  
I would lie in the house like a thing half dead,

Till I danced like a mountain hare."

She can switch from one regular pattern to another within the one poem. At its best it's extremely effective, as in "Jean Buchan Ward Cornhill" in which

Blackhall fearfully observes a disturbed young woman who occasionally lapses into "the styte o Bedlam". It opens rhyming ABACDC then, after four unrhymed lines, a different pattern emerges:

"The ghaisties o her thochts hung on a barren loom / Like eildritch tentacles ... like tenants dispossessed / Evicted frae a room; naewye for them tae flit. / A guillotine had drapped inbye her heid / Aroon her dottled deems began tae knit. / Her wandrin wirts led tae a mirey bog / Far nane daur follow. Nane cud enter it."

The poem finishes after two highly alliterative unrhymed lines with a series of three rhyming couplets. It's a very tight piece of writing, demonstrating a control of form, expression and imagery that is highly skilful in the way its edgy, occasionally jangled rhythms embody her own fear of losing control, "feart" that the young woman's "widden dreams" might:

"Herry my ain mind keep. An gar it fa."

Blackhall is relentlessly blunt in her description of the woman's madness and even more so of her own "cruel" reaction to it.

Indeed Blackhall is uncompromisingly honest throughout, whether it's the witheringly bleak portrayal of arriving at married quarters in Durham in 1973, the moving reflection on shaven hair at Auschwitz or her bittersweet memories lamenting the death of her son:

"Even my tit was useless.

They said I had hungry milk."

Whether in English or Doric her work is rooted in a precise, down to earth expression:

"twa oors o the sma oors clock"

that effectively embodies that honesty and that, either way, resounds with the living tones of her native tongue, satisfactorily reflecting her life and writing. Of course not everything here is of the highest order but enough is to raise a difficult question.

In her closing biographical notes each (much deserved) accolade is firmly clutched and waved triumphantly. In reading them one feels strongly that there should have been more, that much more of her work should be available. Over 150 poetry publications. Try finding them in print. Even Alan Spence's excellent collection of her poems from only seven years ago seems to be out of print. As she says:

"Fit price d'ye set

On a kintra's leid an lore?"

It's a challenge those of us who value i wye we spik need to address.

## The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line

Ruth Thomas

Sandstone Press (2021) £8.99

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

Reading this novel brought to mind both Muriel Spark and Anne Tyler. Something harsh and true, presented sincerely and with intelligence and consideration.

*The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line* is a measured narrative from the point of view of Sybil, a young Londoner who's not having a very good time. First she gets a concussion in a freak ice skating accident, then almost immediately the love of her life dumps her in favour of her old nemesis, Helen. Things steadily decline from there, but Sybil's account is not melodramatic or cliché. Her tone is even funny sometimes, but mostly bewildered.

One of the hundred reasons this novel cannot be dismissed as chick lit, is the literary angle. Sybil tries to climb out of her black hole by taking a class called Poetry for the Terrified. Sprinkled throughout her story are her attempts at haikus and her lists of words which might go into a poem. Poetry anchors her to the world and gives her tools to notice it.

Another one of the hundred reasons this novel cannot be dismissed as chick lit, is that the story takes place mostly in a museum. Ancient history informs every chapter, and more – it forms the plot. Sybil works in the Royal Institute of Prehistorical Studies, and while her job is relatively low-level, her research and findings are pivotal to redressing the pain Helen has caused. Almost unconsciously, Sybil addresses big questions such as: What assumptions do scientists make simply to make a splash? What role does morality play in a highly competitive field like archaeology? What can we really know about the distant past from studying what remains? Overtly, she suspects Helen of lying professionally, and hates her anyway because she stole her boyfriend.

But I didn't care about that, as much as I cared about the mental and emotional well-being of Sybil – a narrator who seems unaware of the extent of her own fragility. I worried about her. She does not confide in anyone except the reader, giving an honest, sometimes painful account of how loneliness feels, and jealousy, and nostalgia, and loss of confidence. She does not dwell on her brain injury and the possible long term effects of concussion, and this makes her seem even more vulnerable.

*The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line*, as a title and theme, has echoes of Oku no Hosomichi's work called *The Narrow Road North*. We are all travelling, according to Hosomichi, and even the journey itself is travelling. *Every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home*. And because the author is Ruth

Thomas and not Helen Fielding, the end of the journey is one that actually feels both credible and optimistic – not an easy combination to manage. But then, I've found this to be true of all Thomas's books. Each one is unique, but all have her trademark low key intelligence and warmth. ■

## Of Stone and Sky

Merryn Glover

Polygon (2021) £13.59

REVIEW BY VALERIE BEATTIE

## The Revenant Voice

There is a kind of haunting in Merryn Glover's *Of Stone And Sky* that is both natural, or normal, and also intimately connected to nature. The novel's natural representations of haunting reside in the memories and feelings that linger when a loved one has gone – the multifarious ways the mind and body register sudden sensations which, in the blink of an eye, flit in and about the rhythms of daily life long after the event has passed. They are set alight perhaps, by a chance happening, a piece of music, a book, scent or image that somehow evokes the lost loved one. Such lingering is especially tangible when the departure has been untimely or when its circumstances were troublesome. In these cases it often happens that thoughts and sensations take on a different, disquieting import, drawing the mourner back, splitting their experience of time in a way that blurs the distinction between the departed and the living, thereby offering a glimpse of, and a momentary encounter with, a dead world. This is what happens when for instance, transported by a specific melody, we excuse ourselves by saying we are "lost in thought". Or, indeed, lost in a world of the dead.

The haunting that is linked to nature is a literal one, and entirely apt given the novel's emphasis on how the Munro family (central to the story) and their community depend on, and love, the land. During the seven years between Colvin Munro's disappearance and the eulogy which opens the book, the Cairngorms' landscape has gifted various intimate tokens of his life, as if nature herself has become Colvin's final confidant and spokesperson. Seven years is the biblical timeframe set by some societies (including Scotland) to mark the period between a person disappearing and remaining absent before they can be declared legally dead. Yet *Of Stone and Sky* makes no such declaration. Rather, the first time we meet the principal narrator, Colvin's founding sister – Mo – she makes the emphatic and startling claim in her eulogy that, "of one thing I am certain: Colvin Munro is still alive." Whether readers interpret this literally, figuratively or both will depend on what each one brings to the book, but for me it foregrounded the deep sense of intimacy and eternity surrounding the

interrelationship between human and nature in the novel, a little like Mary Oliver's treasure of a poem, *I Go Down To The Shore*, wherein the sea responds gently to the speaker with, "Excuse me, I have work to do."

The chapters in which the intimate tokens of Colvin's life make their appearance show nature both tending to and returning them, item by item, over a period of three years. Nature's role thus advances to become a type of intermediary, both preserving and expanding on conversations about Colvin, illustrating his influence (or lack of) on others, and highlighting pivotal conversations between those who cared about him and those who didn't. Most significantly, nature's gifting of Colvin's possessions activates a form of a long goodbye; one which, ultimately, can promote healing.

The novel's structure was, for me, a little distracting. The story is told by two first-person narrators: Mo, a very modern minister who recalls events using the past tense, and Sorley, Colvin's younger brother, who speaks in the present. Sorley's voice is largely confessional, and we're alerted to his perspective by a change in chapter title foregrounding his name. While this is instrumental in signalling a change in narrative perspective to the reader, it's more the intermittent nature of Sorley's voice in the novel that felt strange. But perhaps this was the point. Certainly, it's made clear that Mo has long forfeited any permission she had to speak on Sorley's behalf, so his unmediated representation accords with the plot line, functioning as a counterpoint to Mo's. Still, its sporadic insertion runs the risk of affecting the development of a rapport between readers, Sorley and the flow of the plot.

The concord between the living and the dead, presumed dead or disappeared is crafted beautifully and effects its own quiet, soulful rhythm in the main characters' lives. We see this initially when Agnes, a young girl at the 1939 Kirkton Highland Games, meets Gideon Munro and shares a passionate embrace with him. Upon his return from the World War Two in 1946, Agnes eagerly seeks him out. Sadly, she sees he's a different man, who now has one foot walking with the living whilst the other trails behind beside the dead.

*Of Stone and Sky* progresses to take readers into a factually and emotionally rich story of the Munros and other key families in the area, including those connected with Rowancraig, a farming estate in the upper reaches of the Spey. All of this takes place during the last half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Harold Macmillan's 1957 pronouncement that 'most of our people have never had it so good' was both empathetic and prescient; it didn't apply to the likes of the Munro family, and it likely never would. Their poverty is

tangible, their life a hopeless battle against too few resources that leave them with no option other than to experience life itself as a burden. Colvin will eventually leave after decades of struggling on his farm just as his father and mother did.

The level of detail in *Of Stone And Sky* concerning local politics, power struggles, national policies and tradition and place, produces a comprehensive picture of a community whose inhabitants are as interdependent as they are desperate for independence – particularly financial. Pivotal characters are all too aware of the manifold indignities that befall those reliant on tradition, or, indeed, the decency of others.

The novel's final chapter draws together the spiritual strands woven throughout. In the midst of tragedy, loss and life-changing physical and emotional pain, *Of Stone And Sky* shepherds us to feel our part in the existence of something greater, kinder, more powerful and eternal. Ultimately, as the novel's title indicates, it is nature herself which offers the portal to this remarkable feeling, this magical knowing. As Mary Oliver asks in *The Swan*, "And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?" ■

## The Broch

Graham Bullen

Troubador (2021) £8.99

REVIEW BY MANDY HAGGITH

I haven't had a television for twenty-five years – there are too many good books to read and too much excellent music to listen to – and although I'm vaguely aware that this means I am missing out on things like drama series, I've never found my ignorance of them to be much of a problem, certainly not when reading books. However, Graham Bullen's second novel, *The Broch*, is packed with scenes from TV programmes, watched then rewound and watched again. Characters and dialogue, storylines and plot twists litter its pages and each chapter is even headed with quotes from the telly. I can't help feeling that there are strata of references that a more screen-savvy reader would be able to pick up. Although the action of the book takes place over a single week, its protagonist, Martin, spends much of the time binge-watching the series that he and his late wife Trish enjoyed together. Having never watched a single episode of *The Wire*, *Battlestar Galactica* or *True Detective*, I'm no doubt missing what signals they give about the characters who rate them so highly – but hopefully you're immediately sussing out nuances I'm oblivious to.

As well as TV, Martin is also bingeing on whisky – multiple bottles per day, and not just any old blend, but eye-wateringly expensive rare single malts, plus a hefty number of 'Jacks', which he consumes at all times of day, while walking, driving, writing and of course,



watching the box. You can guess what's coming, can't you? That's right. I don't drink the stuff. But I do feel less out of kilter with this dimension of the book, partly because I have to confess to being considerably more familiar with alcohol than with BBC drama, and because as each new bottle is cracked we're treated to outrageously over-the-top descriptions from Jim Murray's Whisky Bible. I can almost taste them.

The telly and the drams, along with the ashes of his dead wife, form the basis of a ceremony that Martin carries out each night of this week, which we're told is the last of his life. We, that's me and you, the reader of this review, are invited by Martin to spectate the painfully choreographed count-down to his suicide. To witness this he has brought us from his home in the Highlands to a reconstructed iron age broch in Harris, a bizarre, luxury holiday let in which he is literally drowning his sorrows.

His sorrows, of course, fight back. Things happen to disrupt the plan. All that high-octane alcohol fuels chaos. The arrival of a naked waif, who Martin rescues from a beach, threatens to overturn the carefully laid-out path to his final destination. The weather is appropriately dreadful. And all the time, we have to watch as he chews and chokes on the relics of his relationship with Trish.

I hope I'm not giving too much away to you about this book. I wonder if you're interested yet? I find I'm adopting the narrative voice of the novel, persistently and insistently addressing, cajoling and questioning the reader: you, me, us; suggesting or asking outright all manner of difficult questions. 'So I must ask. How is your own relationship with Death? With the dead?' 'I hope I'm not prying too much... but how have your own brushes with death been? What have they taught you?' If you're ready to ask yourself and try to answer these kinds of questions and if you like being grabbed by the scruff of the neck by a narrator and dragged into the most intimate and painful corners of their private life, then this is a book for you. If you like a high-class whisky, even more so. And if you're into TV drama and know your *Justified* from your *Breaking Bad*, you're probably going to love it. ■

### Had We Never Loved So Blindly

Liz MacRae Shaw

Top Hat Books (2021) £12.99

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

This novel proves the adage *Don't judge a book by the cover*, for the cover does not in any way convey the kind of story inside. I'm very grateful I was sent it to review, for I would never have bought it based on appearance. The title is also poor, for the famous line from Robert Burns is so cliché, it only signals sentimentality – and this book does not contain that

despicable item. But the title does at least have relevance, for the two main characters are visually impaired. And like Burn's *Ae Fond Kiss*, Shaw's story is a romantic tragedy – but then, isn't tragedy the definition of romance?

Shaw, who studied history at Oxford and lives on the Isle of Skye, is not a poetic writer. Nor is her style particularly sophisticated or subtle. She doesn't seem to bother with the usual writerly devices. What she does instead, is effortlessly pull you into a convincing wartime past, into a beautifully evoked Skye landscape, and into parts of southern England I now feel I know. And then, maybe while your imagination still reeling, she pulls you into the very heart of her characters. From the first page I felt not just sympathy, but empathy with John Norman and Felicity. I'm a slow reader normally, but I finished this book in two days. At 323 pages, it still ended too soon for me.

John Norman is the son of an island fisherman and Felicity is the only daughter of an embittered wealthy widower from London. The elements, I thought, were all in place for a Romeo and Juliet scenario of thwarted love. Class obstacles would daunt them! But neither of Shaw's characters are your typical hero and heroine and defy stereotypes. They are not beautiful, merely memorable. They do not fall in love instantly, steal kisses and struggle melodramatically against societal disapproval. Instead, they meet briefly, mumble a few words, go fishing, then separate. For the majority of the book, the narrative is not concerned with their relationship at all, and yet their separate story lines arch inevitably towards each other.

And what happens to them? I won't say, but I can tell you this – it's not what you think. Shaw doesn't overtly manipulate readerly emotions, and yet I don't think I've ever enjoyed being misled in a book so much before. Perhaps it's because her protagonists are just weird enough to feel real, and I cared about them.

To my mind, this makes Shaw a kind of magician. The publishers may have missed a marketing trick with their ill-chosen cover, but at least they had the sense to print the book. ■

### Lairds in Waiting

Anne-Mary Paterson

The Highland Railway Society (2020) £9.90

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

Technologically, the Highlands has always been bit of a late bloomer. By the mid 19th century it was still only accessible by narrow twisting roads, while the rest of Britain (even the remotest parts) was benefiting from the railway. Predictably, the advent of the railway when it eventually arrived in 1865 had a profound impact on every part of Highland life. Paterson's *Lairds in Waiting* is a unique

exploration of one part of that life: the private stations and private waiting rooms built by the Railway as a token of gratitude to the lairds who allowed the railroad to be built on their estates.

Paterson is the author of two previous train-based books – *Pioneers of the Highland Tracks*, and *Spanning the Gaps*. As the great grandniece of William Paterson (engineer in chief of the Highland Railway), and his brother Murdoch (involved in the construction of Highland railway lines), she has a personal interest in the subject. She knows what she's talking about both in terms of historical accuracy and the less quantifiable cultural changes that came to pass.

The chapters focus on individual stations, namely Beaully, Kildary, Alness, Moy, Duncraig, Rosehaugh, Blair Atholl, Castle Grant, Orbliston & Fochabers Town and Dunrobin. Each section contains treats like original photographs of the stations' interiors and exteriors, maps of the area and oil portraits of the aristocracy connected to them. Both concise at 88 pages and leisurely in tone, Paterson's style is refreshingly unfancy. Reading her work is never work. But the best part for me, is the way the book feels personal. Not only does she thread her own insightful impressions throughout, she brings these Victorian families to life. Their odd habits and preferences and traditions are fascinating.

This book is a much-needed preservation of information about a time already fading from memory. It's obvious Paterson finds everything about old railways – their designs, constructions, viaducts, stations, waiting rooms – beautiful. This book confirms her role as the unsung queen of Highland Railway. ■

### POETRY ROUND-UP

#### Nina Simone is Singing

Leontia Flynn

Mariscat Press (2021) £7.50

#### The Voyage of St Brendan

A.B. Jackson

Bloodaxe Books (2021) £10.99

#### The Saints are Coming

Andy Jackson

Blue Diode Press (2020) £10.00

#### Wedding Grief

A.C. Clarke

Tapsalteerie (2021) £5.00

#### The Marketplace of Ideas

Stefan Mohamed

Stewed Rhubarb Press (2021) £5.99

#### Naranjas

Tom Pow

Galileo Publishers (2021) £9.99

### REVIEWS BY RICHIE MCCAFFERY

The first collection under scrutiny from this impressive gallimaufry is Leontia Flynn's pamphlet *Nina Simone is Singing*. Deceptively simple and terse, these

poems of clipped quatrains open out to existential and emotional vistas that belie their subtle forms. The title poem is a spell-binding mediation on how far the speaker has come through life, since remembering listening to Nina Simone's 'In my Solitude' as a student 'playing at solitude', back in 1999:

Set down this cup.  
Oh drink not from this glass,  
young, irrepressibly  
thirsty former self!

For what you call solitude  
is a yawning mouth  
into which might drop  
quarters, lengths, fathoms.

There is a consistent underlying theme to these poems of solitude and privacy contrasted with the public arena: 'The footage from the drone' tells us of how 'Fire's poetry tore / through the building's prose', 'In the municipal pool' is about the search for a space for women, as seen in the Roman idea of the 'gynaeceum' and in 'In public squares on cobbled streets' the speaker is so enthralled by the beauty and bustle of Paris they nearly come to grief like Roland Barthes who 'was run over by a laundry truck'. The poem emphasises the narrowness of the streets being to blame. This nagging sense of narrowness or of being trapped makes for a powerful and challenging poetry, the neatness and order of these poems forever being threatened by the great seismic forces at work underneath them:

It is solstice in the city.  
The gulls are flying – high  
into pale infinitesimal light.  
Each building on the road

south from the centre  
is standing, robustly,  
on its own square shadow.

[...]

I scan each surface

for the remnants  
of my Gross Domestic Product.  
One sock. A half-read book.  
This child's plastic volcano –

its small dome cooling  
after the explosion.

A. B. Jackson's collection *The Voyage of St Brendan* finds Jackson in mytho-poetic *terrae incognitae* with his rendering of the 9th century tale of Brendan and his band of sea-faring brethren. Composed of prose poems and a mixture of heroic couplets and rhyming ABCB quatrains, the book naturally has something of a balladic or bardic music to it. The sound system of the poem being like the tidal



forces that move Brendan's currach along to new discoveries:

Fair winds and wave-voice  
the currach speeds west  
as Brendan's heart thumps  
an apple harvest

Arrow-fall gannets  
bullseye the sea-skin  
on board all chatter  
high moods in a swim

from 'The Great Fish'

Jackson is particularly adept with images and similes, such as one of the friar's who is described as having hair 'wood-shavings curly'. This is an immensely enjoyable, spirited and at times witty collection, boosted visually by the presence of Kathleen Neeley's striking woodcuts. It is also the fruit of a great amount of academic toil – having come from the creative strand of Jackson's PhD on the poetry of polar exploration. The reader is very grateful for the explanatory notes behind many of Jackson's decisions to reworking the legend in a certain way, his scholarly effort perhaps comparable to the huge odyssey undertaken by Brendan and his men across the world.

A number of collections up for review here have a very distinctive set theme and this is certainly the case with Andy Jackson's *The Saints are Coming*. It's particularly apt that John Glenday has provided a laudatory blurb for this collection, considering Glenday's own poem 'St Orage' which is about imagining the saints in the gaps in familiar words like 'storage', 'steadfast', 'stanza' and the like. Here Jackson brings to life the obscure and overlooked patron saints who have found themselves in death tethered to some frankly bizarre causes. This is no dull hagiography and in his preface Jackson quips that this book is more likely to see him excommunicated than canonised. It seems there is a patron saint for just about everything, even those who seem least in need of one, such as arms dealers, thieves and bankers. It's hard to believe some of these are real, but we are assured they are, such as 'St Gang Bing', the 'patron saint of eunuchs' whose name sounds phonologically close to something rather suitably rude.

A.C. Clarke is a very rare breed of poet who is capable of being very prolific without any dip in the high quality of her output and her latest pamphlet *Wedding Grief* is further evidence of that. This is a poetic dramatization of the turbulent relationship between Elena Dimitrievna Diakonova (known as 'Gala') and her first husband, the French surrealist poet Paul Éluard. The time span of the collection runs from their first meeting in 1913 to their divorce in 1932. The first section of

the collection concerns their love letters and draws largely on them set against the backdrop of World War One. The second section shows how war took Éluard away and changed him and the closing portion gives a poetic overview of their life together. There is little doubt that the war has much to answer for in driving a wedge between them:

His heart hangs on a tree exposed  
like soldiers blackening on the wire.  
In two days he receives three thousand wounded.

Like a tree struck by a shell his heart is split  
between plain duty and rosy desire.  
In one day he writes to a hundred parents.

from 'Battle'

There is an admirable control and deftness of touch to these poems, a sympathetic treatment that does not seem like prurient snooping in the past. The sacredness of the love between the two is at all times respected:

Inseparable souls  
sharing bacilli  
from their unexplored lips  
from their not-quite-meeting hands  
they infect each other  
with the live  
serum of love.

from 'Gala and Paul in the  
sanatorium'.

On the topic of surrealism we have the powerfully outré poems of Stefan Mohamed in his pamphlet *The Marketplace of Ideas*. On the surface, Mohamed seems to deal in trivial things, the petty concerns of angsty millennials, raised by the internet and social media and all their attendant dangers and rabbit holes:

Millennial can't afford to kill themselves  
because they spent all / their money on  
avocado frappes.

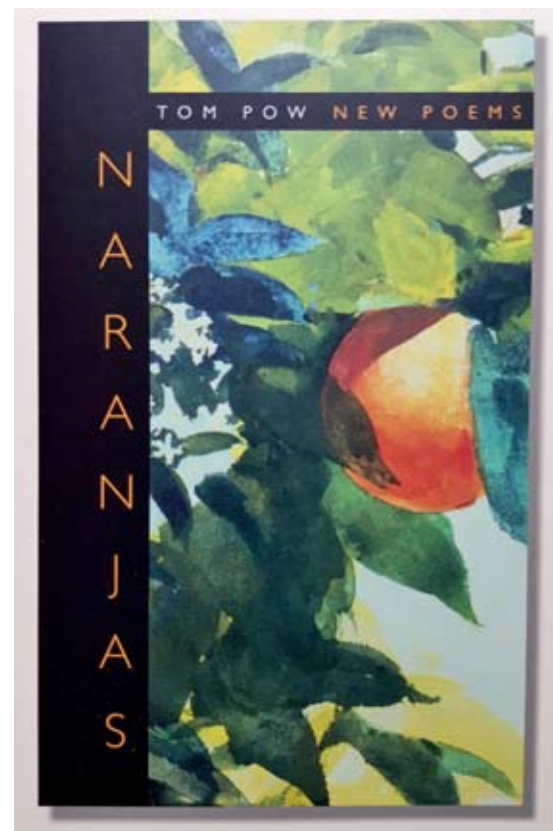
Millennials are killing the avocado frappe  
industry – is love to / blame?

from 'Big Mood'

However, I think to dismiss such poetry is to do it a huge injustice as there is much more to this than surface absurdism or humour. In fact, as the pamphlet goes on it seems less and less like the speaker is a disenchanted millennial but rather someone with a deep social conscience, who looks around and sees they are living in a cacotopia. In 'Darling Boy' Mohamed tackles privileged toxic masculinity which seems so entrenched in society:

What are you telling your sons?

*You are a future gorilla*



*and all of this will one day be yours*

These are troubling and darkly bizarre poems that make you reassess your comfortable lot. In 'Sleep Paralysis' I'm reminded of Stefan Zweig's image of Europe sleepwalking into catastrophe and here, in a nightmarish image, Mohamed seems to hit at the very taproot of all that is wrong with smug, sham, nationalist middle-England:

all of us trapped in England's most ruthlessly  
authentic / café, Diana beaming from every  
surface, builder's tea on tap, / and all around  
the room the salt of the earth murmur *green*  
/ and pleasant murmur *fair play* murmur  
*Blitz spirit* murmur / *mushy peas* murmur  
*PARKLIFE*

And we wake up screaming *error 404*

screaming *country not found*

constitutionally unable to breathe

*Naranjas* (Spanish for 'oranges') is Tom Pow's substantial new collection, coming in at over 130 pages long. Yet for all of its copiousness, it never strikes the reader as being over-long or not selective enough. Each poem, like the oranges of the collection title, is rounded, fully achieved and bearing light, nourishment, refreshment. Few poets can appeal to all the senses simultaneously as well as Pow can:

[...] Because it is Wednesday

the inhabitants of each  
scattered wooden dwelling  
have hauled their kitchen tables  
outside. There is a word – un-  
translatable – for this action.

But its sense is this: to absorb  
as much summer light  
as possibly into the heart  
of the wood, so that, come  
winter, an incandescence,

faint as honey, will reflect  
on every face.

from 'North Land'

*Naranjas* is a bravura display of the length and breadth of Pow's interests as a poet, his zest for new places and travel and his unfastidious joy in life. There are poems here prompted by all sorts of experience and stimuli, from fine ekphrastic poems to elegies for fellow poets and a poignant poem for a dead cat that strikes a transcendent note:

Terrible things were happening  
in the world. This was certainly  
not one of them. This was simply  
an old cat returning to us  
the fictions we imagined sharing.  
Not a *you*  
in any meaningful sense –  
but a life that had drawn  
others' lives around it  
and that carried the years with it  
like sunlight passing  
through a garden.

Pow is certainly not ignorant to the 'terrible things' happening in the world, as a number of these poems demonstrate such as 'The Ballad of Jolanta Bledaite', a migrant worker in Scotland who was brutally murdered and dismembered simply for her £200 savings. The poems in this collection show that Pow's gaze is attuned to many places at once and his poems are like the 'pomology' mentioned

in ‘Bricks and Mortar’ – the study and cultivation of fruit and in Pow’s case the fruit is his poetry and his harvest is a bumper one. ■

# Toonie Void

Kevin Cormack

Abersee Press (2021) £5.00

REVIEW BY ALISON MILLER

Duncan McLean at Abersee Press, the small publishing company he set up a few years ago to publish new work from Orkney, has outdone himself this time. Kevin Cormack’s poetry in *Toonie Void*, written in Orcadian, is such a departure from anything published before in the Orkney tongue that it takes us into new territory, barely recognisable as the Orkney of literary tradition.

No lucent countryside here, no fluent lines of goldgreen fields, no fishermen with ploughs, no selkies, no silver line at the sea’s horizon, no celebration of the healing powers of nature, of island life. This is landscape of a different order. The settings are housing schemes, the murky edges of the toon, wastelands, construction sites, derelict buildings, ‘dark industrial pipes an circuitry’, left-behind WW2 concrete, ‘roosty barbed wire’.

Doon twaard the concrete  
ower lumpy owld fields,  
tough gress an rabbit holes,  
anunder grimleens’  
tullimentan song-threeds,  
we wakk...

Nor will you find here Viking saints or heroes, country girls, following the harvest sunwise, stoical fishing widows making do, communities drawn together by a common belief in the rural, the island idyll. Kevin Cormack’s characters all struggle to connect, to find shared ground to stand on, to look each other in the eye without flinching. They come from ‘a long line of piss-takkers’, men who find it ‘seffer tae drink alone noo’, ‘visitors [with] sidey-slant smiles’, ‘the wabbit, the gyte’, the bullies.

In ‘A Face in the Dirt’ there is a ‘we’ and an ‘I’ and a ‘you’; a ‘former bully’ named and shamed:

We fund a face while diggan, a face an  
nutheen else,/green-nilded an buried in the  
black dirt.

The ‘I’ sends the face to the ‘you’, ‘Bully whisperer. Occasional exorcist. Postman’. But sharing the triumph of the demise of the bully is elusive:

The lights wur aal oot bae the time I gott tae  
yirs, / fullo the bad vibes. I gave up leanan /  
oan the buzzer...

The human attributes that permeate this collection are anxiety, alienation, mistrust, clumsiness, crossed wires.

There are twins and doppelgängers, stowaways, ‘cult-like smiles’, a dead man on a mobility scooter. Somewhere in the hinterland, embers of an abandoned religion still smoulder.

In ‘The Flinch’, efforts to reach out to another misfire:

Keep yir hands tae yirsael,  
ramstam ringleaders o noise an chaos.

Kevin Cormack turns on its head the Alasdair Gray insight:

“...nobody imagines living here... if a city  
hasn’t been used by an artist not even the  
inhabitants live there imaginatively.”

For ‘a city’ substitute ‘an island’. In ‘Noah, or The Feraway’, on a visit to Jim Baikie, local cartoonist, creator of super-hero comic strips, that iconic landscape of Orkney is put in its place:

...the hills o Hoy –  
so less real, since no imagined.

Instead, Judge Dredd “...steps oot o the waal, growlan: / ‘Draw Me Like This, Punk!’” And smashes George Mackay Brown’s ‘huddle of blue shoulders’ off the drawing board.

Nature provides no consolation. ‘Gertie an Albert’, swept ‘oot the ... road’ found themselves ‘oan the edge / o a vast country darkness, an the deadly ambush.’

When ‘finches, tits, robins an sparrows’ appear in ‘Gaerdean Bunker’, it is only because their ‘chirpan, bleepan, bubblan noises’ describe the sounds of ‘the operational centre’:

The pitfalls of visiting – even an  
admired artist – are caught perfectly:

‘I blank/blink, double blank – the terrible  
soporifferissniss o ither focks’ hooses –’

So what is it that makes this nightmare vision of life in Orkney not only fascinating but also weirdly compelling? There is to begin with, Kevin Cormack’s voice, conversational and intimate; his unique use of language, mixing the vocabulary of high-tech modern living with chewy old Orkney words and pronunciations. There is the sophisticated music of it which marks him out as a poet with an unerring grasp of rhythm and sound. He paints a bleak view of an imagined Orkney – the ragged edges, the ugly, the dangerous, the surreal and bizarre, the darkly humorous – and reveals the weird beauty in it.

OK, so there is no invitation to warm your feet at the Orkney peat fire, take your turn with a story all present will recognise, sing your party piece, consolidate the collective sense of community. But still, we do find ourselves ‘in the shared speech bubble o Orcadian’ and that promises

new possibilities, a language not dying, but evolving. So:

‘Whit next?  
Hair o the dog? Voicemail? Text?’

Weel, Beuy? I luk forwird tae hearan fae you  
again. ■

# Philosophical histories

## Rose Nicolson: Memoir of William Fowler of Edinburgh: student, trader, makar, conduit, would-be Lover in early days of our Reform

Andrew Greig

riverrun (2021) £18.99

## News of the Dead

James Robertson

Hamish Hamilton (2021) £18.99

REVIEW BY IAN STEPHEN

Andrew Greig trained as a philosopher and James Robertson as a historian. In this year both have published a historical novel, set in mainland Scotland with some excursions to sea or over borders. Both work in full knowledge of a literary tradition. If Scott was the inventor of the historical novel then his contemporary, Hogg, could be seen as one who set a premise then watched as his characters tested that. If you are ‘justified’ in that your name is already in the book of the saved, by belief only, then it follows you can do what the hell you like. Issues of faith and ambition are strong themes in both novels but time is a major player.

Let me say from the start that both novels have been a huge pleasure to read. They are grand stories first of all, with many layers but all to the purpose. I’m not going to tell these stories, bearing in mind that I can no longer read a Peter Bradshaw film review because he insists on retelling the stories in the films. With a few weeks space from the full-pelt journeys through them, I’m still sensing so much in common. But in hindsight, it’s possible that the philosopher has written a mainly historical novel and the historian a more philosophical one.

That’s my starting point as I return to the texts, another kind of pleasure because both writers use language expertly. Both include a range of Scots voices. Andrew has a concurrent reputation as a poet but James has also written strong poems, mainly in Scots and edits and publishes poetry, also mainly in Scots. This manifests itself in both novels, not as ‘poetic’ flights of language but as wit in the wording and in memorable turns of phrase.

The story of Rose Nicolson and the lives touching hers begins with an explosion of cannon fire. The King’s Men are making an assault on those of Queen Mary. Wee Will Fowler is caught between his father’s and his mother’s beliefs to mark him from the start as one

more example of the Scottish character, wavering between two selves. This is sketched from the dramatic start and naturally recurs as the story unfolds:

‘I swithered atween selves, as I have  
all my life, following the dark horse and  
then the light.’

And later, as the regent stands down and everything is in the balance Will’s personal switherings exemplify those of the nation. It is commerce and finance which drive political actions by enabling them but it is heart, spirit and creativity which generate passion. In his own poetry Will finds some resolution as his wit can thrive on tension:

‘I sat in a dwam, between my orderly  
ledgers and the scored-out page. Perhaps  
the course of one’s life is made by the  
particular manner in which we never  
quite resolve ourselves.’

There are sea-adventures to echo Stevenson and border raids to nod to Scott. There is the judicious use of skilled examples of verse written in character. But I’d say it is character itself which really drives this book and the central female one imprints herself on you as a reader. In this respect, she is an heir of Scott’s Jeanie Deans, admired by Balzac and Tolstoy. Although the novels are completely different in time and tone she is also akin to Agnes, the beautiful, flawed, failing and mesmerising pivotal person in Douglas Stuart’s “Shuggy Bain”. Both have a struggle to be seen as other than a bonny woman.

Rose’s admirer, Will, is a penman as well as a poet and he can imitate as well as create. Such actions have effects beyond his own circle, overlapping with historical characters such as the scholar George Buchanan – a myth in Scottish folklore as well as the actual author of plays and treatises in the international language of Latin. However, it is the near-impossible love for Rose Nicolson which forms the central story.

James Robertson takes forgery one step further. It is the driving force of the over-arching narrative in his equally mesmerising “News Of The Dead”. But when does a version become a forgery? Any translation will be slanted by its time but when does that slant become ‘spin’? This is a writer who has moved fluently between the physical and political landscapes of a post-World-War -II Scotland (“And the Land Lay Still”) and the fathomless moral issues explored in his study of the judicial process following the explosion which brought devastation to the air and land at Lockerbie.

Now he has invented a glen, somewhere in the Angus area, complete with its own saint. I did have to look it up just to make sure it didn’t exist. That saint may have left his own mapping of a spiritual journey but how far can you trust the original as a fair record? And what of a 19th century very free translation? A near-contemporary attempt to make



sense of the history of the glen adds a third layer of time. In the hand of a lesser maker, the elusive threads could so easily have become a boorach. What we have instead is interlocking narratives of those who have tried to live their lives in this place through the tensions and dangers brought by the political machinations of the day.

Complex personal passions and ambitions are made real. Characters don't just jump through the hoops placed for them by the author. They come alive for you and so you feel for them as they try to work things out for the best.

So, after re-reading, how does a working premise of the leanings of one writer to the historical and the other the philosophical, hold up? Not that well. Even though the wording is playful as a reflection of the art of 'flying' there is a sustained undertone in Andrew's novel. When a question of faith, the issue of the day is posed, here's an answer, in character:

'Dinna ask me,' he said, 'I'm a philosopher. I can only tell you how to bear it.'

I think it is fair to say that James' book is driven by fascination with history. He persuades us to try to imagine what the life and work of an 8th century missionary monk might have been like, seen through the mists of a 12th century literary transcription of the oral history, later rendered into the vernacular (like the bible during the Reformation).

However, the multi-layered form (brilliantly controlled) seems to me to have kinship with the exploration of duality in both Hogg's justified sinner and Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde. Graeme Macrae Burnett made stark drama from conflicting assessments of the psychology of his main character in "His Bloody Project". Here, the motives behind the slants on the 'translation' of the chronicle of Cronach change with the day as well as the character.

Despite this exploration of such ideas in the narratives, it's the effects of the times on the lives of folk which moved me most. James is with Jonathan Swift in his despair at the inventive means of producing pain and terror by 'advances' in weaponry. The Napoleonic wars bring disaster, rather than advancement to the folk of both the big house and the satellite cottages. As with Andrew's book, there are strong female characters. The elderly artist, Maja, is conscious of her own sands running but builds an honest trusting relationship with a troubled youngster of two generations on. It is Maja's inner voice which expresses the most sustained meditation on the passage of time. She takes the comparison with the movement of the deer from Sorley Maclean's "Hallaig". The thought goes beyond her own personal situation:

"When I used to meet the deer it was like meeting time. I didn't know that

then. I know it now. It was like meeting time and then Time fled and left me on my own. But time never goes far. It is in the wood behind my window, it is in the churchyard behind my garden wall. If I am very still I can hear a twig cracking under its weight." ■

#### Veeve

Christine de Luca  
Mariscat Press (2021) £12.00  
REVIEW BY ANNE MACLEOD

*Veeve*, Christine De Luca's recent collection from Mariscat Press, is a bilingual and lyrical foray into life, the universe and everything. From the opening poem 'Veeve' (vivid, clearly seen) to the 'Clos Encoounters' of the ultimate page, we are swept into De Luca's world of musical language and clear-eyed observation.

Linguistic riches operate, as always with this poet, to enhance the exploration of her chosen subject, whether she is reliving past times in her native Shetland, as in 'Sisters' "Twa peerie sisters, we'd skip across da brig/ ta veesit da spinsters"

or celebrating Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in 'Coonterpoint' "Da Wast-Aestern Divan Orchestra/ is playing at da Proms: Palestinian/ an Jew, side fur side. Dey hae/ da very laekly o een anidder/ ... At da end, he claps an claps, strangin/ at der göd-haertitness, der mutual trust."

In 'Stumbling on ghosts', the effects of ethnic cleansing in a Turkish village "So Kaya died; doors swung on listless jambs/ roofs collapsed. A few Turks trickled back/ to the valley, but no one recalled who held/ the key to the old mosque." are contrasted to the dwindling of local communities in Shetland. "Whar I baed dey wir nae ethnic cleansin/ though vod houses aplenty, mulderin."

Not all international tales in this book are tragic, but De Luca thinks it important we find our true bearings. In 'Storytelling in Padua,' she describes "old maps hung on old walls:/ oceans the focus, cardinal points the wrong way/ round: a reminder that there's no right way up." And art, she warns, requires perseverance, skill and energy. In 'Elegant proof', a blackbird hunting wasps proves "art is to conceal art and/ it's not for the faint-hearted."

She is aware that life is a series of unexpected adventures. In a long line of ifs "If the coffee grinder hadn't lured me into the deli/ and the young man hadn't undercharged me/ or stacked his winking apples quite so perfectly;/ If his mother, your granny, hadn't wanted/ to escape – through untimely marriage – a controlling aunt and her shop counter: –// if her mother..."

She finds beauty in life, sometimes unpredicted. Anticipation. "It's white below: cloud/ with sudden bright transfigurings:/ hidden beyonds, oddly nunataked.' And joy, as in Olympic runes.

'Höve caution tae da fowr erts, an scribe/ ecstatic runes apön da tidders haert."

Always, there's love. In 'Clos Encoounters' she assures us "Hit's Clos Encoounters o da First Kind/ dat's real: dat skyin-saافت mystery o creatin/ mintie and momentous; linking wis ta past/ an future, beyond music;"

This book is indeed veeve, a Clos Encoounter, perhaps, of the Fourth kind, at once beguiling and thought-provoking "whar minds can meet/ in a single wurd" Bonnhoga. It will enrich your life. ■

#### The Stone Age

Jen Hadfield  
Picador Poetry (2021) £10.99  
REVIEW BY ANNE MACLEOD

*Stone Circle*, the opening poem in Jen Hadfield's new volume is a concrete representation of delight.. 8 ever-circling, ecstatic O's. That this is the one of the few poems in the collection not to end in a dash or exclamation mark gives you some idea of the energy fizzing off the pages in the free flow of language and playful punctuation that sometimes allows a new verse to open with a comma, or even a full stop.

The book is an ambitious combination of word and and word become visual art. Whether the creative spacing, print size and paler tones in works such as (*Lighthouse*) and (*You said what you said*) delight you, or cast you into (*Lunar Transmission*), 'to be honest with you–/ to be frank–/I have to admit' they add a visual ambiguity to the text which is skilfully echoed in the diminishing print tone in the poem *Drimmie*, where fogged lines mirror dank weather and fading light. 'I wonder what Drimmie might mean . . . /a fleeting moment in the quality of dusk'.

Jen Hadfield has a distinctive voice, an exact talent with language. And an occasional, disarming vulnerability. In *Rockpool* a spare stream of two-line stanzas warns : 'This is no place//to show up/without a shell'.

In *Hardanger Fiddle and Nyckelharpa* she admits the need to 'write a song,/ a wordless song for the/strings of the North –' and succeeds admirably. If many of poems focus on standing stones, rocks and landscape, humans and their complicated lives are never far away, though less reliable. In *Dolmen*, 'humankind/are brief, soft// fireworks, prone/to go off at a moment's/ notice' and landscape imbued with human feeling – 'Rage is a cold/ cliff: longing a skerry. Pleasure is kelp-hung arch, glittered / constantly by the licking of a wave.' *Gyo*.

Most of her poems sing of the northern landscape, but in *Ben Wyvis*, 'the long, wide strath is// made simple with snow,/ each word minted' and the lost lover to whom the poem is addressed leaves 'the wound of your trail/thin flocs of clear gore –'. In *Snowline*, she counsels 'Hare,

your sprinter's legs are too long /for the valley' advising the hare to dispense with rabbit manners and 'Loup the border that can take/you home.' Everything has its own voice for this poet, even an old scroll of birchbark. In *Neverspel* 'all it does in bark back to the forest// all it can think about is the forest –'

Jen Hadfield's work is distinctive, energetic and musical. I commend it to you. ■

#### Rib

Sharon Black  
Wayleave Press (2021) £5.00  
REVIEW BY ANNE MACLEOD

How many meanings can one word encompass? In *Definitions* Sharon Black offers us 10 possible explanations of rib, from 'a slender, curved bone/ articulated to the spine' to a 'Rigid, inflatable Boat/ or to tease good-naturedly'.

There are 24 poems in this elegant slim volume – one for each of the 24 ribs found in most humans – but whether she's describing the framework of a hull, a vein of leaf or insect wing, or knitted fabric, the rib is both elastic and supportive.

In *Thoracic* Black considers ribs as porcelain cage – perhaps a zoo, or animal refuge where 'the echo/of the keeper's heartbeat was a comfort' until the porcelain bars are damaged, 'bars cracking one by one;/ the inmates pacing, highly strung.' In *Cavity*, she characterises the heart as a 'chubby fist clenching/unclenching, banging its plastic hammer/onto tiny wooden tracks' the lungs as 'twin sacks of air, slung/on a hook' the liver as washing machine, and the kidneys as sponges. *Tlaltcuhtli* is darker. Here she meditates on Aztec sacrifice and mythology, where 'the blade slips in, scoops out/the heart'.

A number of the poems deal with personal experience of illness, of pain caused when ribs damaged by radiation eventually fracture. 'A common side-effect/up to fifteen years after treatment' . And though her ' doctor advises /rest, it's no big deal' there is no comfort in that reassurance. Still, though, courage and hope flourish in *Seasonal*, even when 'My chest hurts, I can't turn on the mattress./The weeks stretch on and on.... I breathe carefully, noiselessly/ so none of them topple. Last night/I dreamt I swam all the way through Antarctica.'

Sharon Black is a master of the pared-down, under-stated line, but the 24 short poems in this highly-recommended collection burst into life on reading whether aloud or on the page. As she says in *Beach* 'Out there:/ribs tug at empty boats, at buoys./ Such bodies of land and water!/'

And– an interesting detail – this book boasts no page numbers. Reading the poems, like reading life, remains wistfully unmapped. ■



**Donald Adamson** is a poet and translator from Dumfries, now living in Finland, who has translated Finnish poems for collections and anthologies published by Carcanet/Scottish Poetry Library and Arc. His new collection, *Bield* (Tapsalteerie), contains original poems and translations into Scots of classic Finnish poems.

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

**Morag Baptie** is a retired teacher living on the North Aberdeenshire coast with an interest in the Doric dialect and a tendency to lug in on other people's conversations.

**Valerie Beattie** is a Northwords Board member and developed UHI's first undergraduate literature degree. Her research interests include Gothic studies and she is working to bring an accepted book draft to publication.

**Paul Bloomer** has lived in Shetland for 25 years and through drawing, painting and printmaking explores the threads, fault lines and tension between nature, culture and spirituality. He is Site Leader of the BA Hons Fine art degree at Shetland UHI and exhibits widely, including at the Kilmorack gallery.

Le freumhan ann an Ratharsair is Penicuik, buinidh **Ceitidh Chaimbeul** don Phloc. Na tidsear aig Acadamaidh Allt a' Mhuilinn, choisinn i bonn òr a' Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich ann an Dùn Omhain ann an 2018. Tha i ag obair air a' chiad cho-chruinneachadh aice, an-dràsta.

Bidh **Sheelagh Chaimbeul** a' sgrìobhadh rosg do chloinn is inbhich. Choisinn i duais son an làmh-sgrìobhainn do chloinne as fheàrr aig Chomhairle nan Leabhraichean an-uiridh, le *Ailig agus an Dalek Gàidhlig*.

**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 in 2021. [www.leoniecharlton.co.uk](http://www.leoniecharlton.co.uk)

**Kevin Cormack** is a musician and writer from Kirkwall. He lives in London and runs Spillage Fete Records. His poetry collection, *Tòonie Void*, was published by Abersee Press in Aug 2021.

**Meaghan Delahunt** is a widely translated and anthologised novelist and short story writer whose latest novel is *The Night-side of the Country* (UWAP, 2020). Born in Melbourne, she has lived in Edinburgh for decades and runs the WordPath Scotland 'At Home' fiction writing programme with Kirsty Gunn. [www.wordpathscotland.com](http://www.wordpathscotland.com)

**Susan Elsley** writes short and long fiction and lives in Edinburgh. Recent work in Postbox, PENning, and Pushing Out the Boat. Shortlisted for Moniack Mhor's 2019 Emerging Writer Award. [www.susanelsley.com](http://www.susanelsley.com)

**Rody Gorman** is the current (57th) Bàrd of An Comunn Gàidhealach. The founding Gaelic editor of *Northwords Now*, he lives on Skye and has published dozens of Gaelic literary translations and original collections of poetry in Scottish Gaelic, Irish and English.

**Mandy Haggith** is a writer and environmental activist who lives in Assynt, where trees grow down to the sea. [www.mandyhaggith.net](http://www.mandyhaggith.net)

**Catherine Halliday** is three years in to a Creative Writing Degree at UHI and writes in a variety of genres. She lives in

Lossiemouth and is a member of Elgin Writers.

**Lydia Harris** lives on Westray. In 2017, she held a Scottish Book Trust New Writer's Award. Her latest pamphlet *Painting the Stones Back* was published in 2019 by Maria Isakova Bennett of Coast to Coast to Coast.

**Jennifer Morag Henderson's** biography *Josephine Tey: A Life* was acclaimed by the *Observer*, *Independent* and *Telegraph* as a Book of the Year. [www.jennifermoraghenderson.com](http://www.jennifermoraghenderson.com)

**Karen Hodgson** lives in Aviemore. Her poetry is published in numerous magazines such as *Mslexia* and *Butcher's Dog*. She won 3rd prize in Café Writers Open Poetry Competition 2019.

**Angi Holden** writes adult and children's poetry and fiction. She won the MMB Poetry Pamphlet Prize for *Spools of Thread* and the Victoria Baths Splash Fiction Prize.

**Brian Holton** translates into English and Scots and is the only currently-publishing Chinese-Scots translator in the world. His latest book *Hard Roads an Cauld Hairst Winds: Li Bai an Du Fu in Scots* has just been published by Taproot Press (2021)

**Robert Alan Jamieson** is a Shetlander who has published five novels and whose poetry has been translated into a dozen European languages. He is a former co-editor of Edinburgh Review, and now retired from teaching creative writing at Edinburgh University. His collection *Plague Clothes* (2020) was the first publication from the new Taproot Press.

**Antonia Kearton** is originally from Edinburgh and now lives in Strathspey, where she makes landscape photographs, has recently started writing poetry again after a decades-long gap, and is training to become a counsellor/psychotherapist.

**Alistair Lawrie** was born in Peterhead and now lives in Stonehaven. He co-edited *Glimmer Of Cold Brine*, leads Mearns Writers, is published in The Interpreter's House and Poets' Republic and won the William Soutar Prize 2016.

Sgrìobh **Custal y Lewin** *Droghad ny Seighill* an nobhail a-mhàin den aonamh linn air fhichead sa Ghàidhlig Mhannanaich. Thug e ollamhachd ann an cànachas Mannanach a-mach à Oilthigh Dhùn Èideann agus bidh a' fuireach anns an Fhionnlainn le a chèile is dithis cloinne.

**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.

**Rob A. Mackenzie** lives in Leith. He is reviews editor for Magma Poetry and runs Blue Diode Press. His third collection, *The Book of Revelation*, was published by Salt (2020).

Tha **Caoimhin MacNèill** na òraidiche aig Oilthigh Shruighlea. Am measg nan leabhraichean aige tha *The Brilliant & Forever* agus *The Diary of Archie* the Alpaca. Sgrìobh e am fiolm *Hamish: The Movie*.

**Robin Fulton Macpherson** is originally from Sutherland and has lived in Norway for many decades. He is widely respected as a translator of Scandinavian poets, including Tomas Tranströmer and Olav Hauge, and for his own collections, including *A Northern Habitat Collected Poems* 1960–2010. His latest collection *Arrivals of Light* was published by Shearsman in 2020.

**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).

**Hugh McMillan** is a poet from Dumfries and Galloway, currently editing *Best Scottish Poems 2021* for the SPL and working on a modern version of *The Brownie of Blednoch* commissioned by the Wigtown Book Festival. His latest collections (2021) are both from Luath.

**William McLean** is an ecologist, woodworker and song-writer, living in Abernethy Forest in Strathspey.

**Isabel Miles** is from Ayrshire and spent seven years in North East Scotland. She now lives, walks and writes in the North Yorkshire Moors.

**Jon Miller** has had poetry published in a range of literary magazines – The North, Chapman, Dark Horse, New Writing Scotland, Ink, Sweat & Tears, Dreich and various anthologies – as well as a poetry pamphlet 'Still Life' published by Sandstone Press. He was shortlisted for the 2021 Wigtown Poetry Prize.

**Alison Miller** is an Orkney writer, appointed Scots Scriever for 2021–22. She runs a creative writing group for Orcadian speakers and writes prose and poetry in Orkney language herself.

**Robin Munro** now lives on Bute, after running a bookshop in Galloway. His two published poetry collections are *The Land of the Mind* and *Shetland like the World*.

**Donald S Murray** is a writer and teacher originally from the Isle of Lewis. His first novel *As the Women Lay Dreaming* won the Paul Torday Memorial Award (2020). His latest novel *In a Veil of Mist* (Saraband, 2021) is longlisted for the 2021 Highland Book Prize.

**R M Murray** is from the Isle of Lewis. He is Head of Visual Arts & Literature at An Lanntair, Stornoway. His book *Bleak: the mundane comedy* (Saraband 2021) is longlisted for the 2021 Highland Book Prize .

Rugadh **Fionnag NicCoinnich** ann an Griaies Eilean Leòdhas is chaidh a togail ann an teaghlach làn ciùil. Chlàraich i mòran le a peathraichean Eilidh is Gillie, ag obair leis na còmhlain Anam, Cruinn agus a fear-chèile Brian Ó hEadhra. Tha i a' fuireach ann an Inbhir Nis.

Tha **Sandaigh NicDhòmhnaill Jones** na bàrd, cumadair-ciùil, neach-ciùil – mar sheinneadair agus clàrsair – agus cànanach. 'B e Bàrd a' Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich 2019–2021 a bh' innte is tha i air iomadh duais bàrdachd eile a choisinn.

Rugadh **Brian Ó hEadhra** ann am Baile Àth Cliath is chaidh a thogail ann an Talamh an Èisg is ann an Èirinn. Stèidhichte a-nis ann an Inbhir Nis, bidh e ag obair na cheòladair, le a bhean, Fionnag NicCoinnich agus leis na còmhlain Cruinn agus McKerron, Brechin and Ó hEadhra. Cho-stèidhich e buidheann ealain na Gàidhlig, Ealantas.

Thug **Ben Ó Ceallaigh** ollamhachd a-mach à Oilthigh Dhùn Èideann is e a-nis na òraidiche aig Oilthigh Aberystwyth. Na chuid rannsachaidh, bidh e a' dèiligeadh ri planadh is poileasaidh na Gaeilge is na Gàidhlig.

**James Robertson** now based in Angus, is an acclaimed novelist, poet, short story and non-fiction writer who runs the independent

publishing company Kettillonia and is co-founder of Itchy Co. His novels include several award-winning titles. His latest novel is *News of the Dead* (Hamish Hamilton, 2021).

**Cynthia Rogerson's** latest book *WAH! Things I never told my mother* will be published by Sandstone Press early in 2022.

**David James Ross** lives in Culloden Moor, Inverness and has published four poetry collections. He divides his time between music performance, poetry and stand-up comedy.

**Donald Goodbrand** Saunders lives in the Trossachs and has several recent pamphlets of poetry and translations – *Knotgrass*, *Some Gas & Crude* and *12 poems frae the German o Heinrich Heine* (with R. Crombie Saunders) published by Tomnavoil.

**Gillian Shearer** is a poet and writer from the north east of Scotland. She recently received a New Writer's Award from the Scottish Book Trust.

**Ian Stephen** lives on Lewis. His 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.

**Michael Stephenson** is a poet from Bathgate, West Lothian. His pamphlet collection, *Starsailor*, was published by Mariscat Press (2019).

**Fiona Stirling** is a writer, counsellor, and educator based in Dundee. She enjoys exploring the narratives people create about their lives and filling her house with too many books.

**Em Strang** is a poet, novelist, mentor and founder of Scottish charity, Three Streams. Her writing preoccupations are with nature, spirituality and the relationship between the human and nonhuman. <https://em-strang.co.uk>

**Jane Swanson** lives in Aberdeen, has an MLitt from Dundee University, and has had work published by The Scottish Book Trust, The Scottish Arts Trust, Tether's End, and the Press and Journal.

**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](http://alicevtaylor.co.uk)

**Hannah Whaley** is a writer and children's author based in Angus, and past winner of Writing Magazine's Self-Published Book of the Year. @hannahwhaley

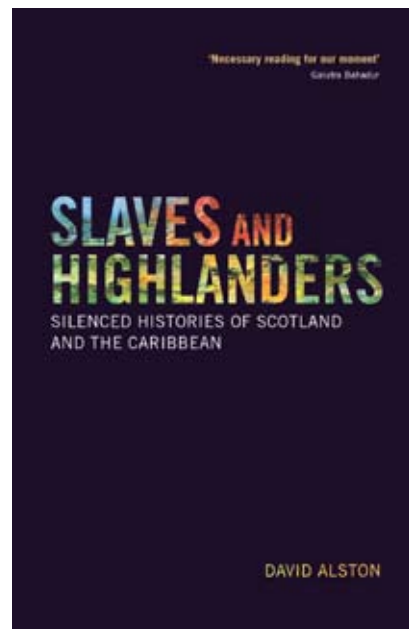
**Joshua Wilson** is a graduate of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, holding an undergraduate degree in Fine Art and a postgraduate masters in Public Art. Originally from the Vale of Leven, he is now based in Edinburgh. He works with partner Marcas Mac an Tuairneir under the moniker LUPUS&LEO

**Howard Wright** lectures at Ulster University, Belfast. He was awarded second prize in 2018's Ver Poets Open and Commended in the McLellan Prize. Poems have since been published in *Cyphers*, *Blackbox Manifold* and *Stand* .

## Northwords Now Reader Offer

Thanks to a special arrangement with Edinburgh University Press, we're pleased to offer readers the chance to buy a copy of historian David Alston's new book *Slaves and Highlanders* (2021) at a discount and with free postage.

*Slaves and Highlanders* is a major contribution to current debate on reparations through exploring the prominent role that Highland Scots played in the exploitation of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the cotton, sugar and coffee plantations of the 18th and 19th centuries. It gives voice to both Scots who were involved in every stage of the slave trade and to their victims and their descendants. It also features a foreword by Rod Westmaas and Juanita Cox-Westmaas, co-founders of Guyana Speaks, an organisation for the Guyanese diaspora in London.



Order direct for £13.99\* and save £5.50 using the code NNow42 on the Edinburgh University Press website: <https://edin.ac/3Cz65u5>.

\*RRP £14.99, free p&p worth £4.50.

## Board Members: Northwords

Northwords publishes *Northwords Now* and *Tuath* in print and online to inspire writers and readers with the power of new work in Scotland's three languages, including local variants. This includes work produced in places remote from major centres, together with that of writers living and working at the heart of such hubs. We also feature material linked to the wider north, including other parts of Scotland and places around the northern world.

We are seeking additional board members to join us in an exciting period of development following a major upgrade to our website and developing plans for the future. This year is the 30th anniversary of the Northwords lineage and a fitting time to welcome new board members who want to bring their ideas and approaches to the magazine.

Applications are invited from a wide range of people. You will be committed to Scotland's literary and cultural life and want to play an active role in our forward-looking, inclusive and highly creative magazine. Key to this is supporting creative output in Scots and Gaelic which we believe is intrinsic to the successful and inclusive cultural and economic life of Scotland, and working with us to realise the full potential of *Northwords Now* and *Tuath*. While experience of being a board member is not essential, we do welcome applications from experienced individuals and those keen to play a key role in shaping the future of the magazine.

To submit a short expression of interest please email [northwordsnow1@gmail.com](mailto:northwordsnow1@gmail.com) by Monday, 27 December 2021. If you have any queries please email [northwordsnow1@gmail.com](mailto:northwordsnow1@gmail.com) marking your email FAO Chair of the Board.

We welcome applications from people of diverse backgrounds, particularly people with disabilities, people of colour, people who identify as LGBTQ+ and people from a range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

Board of Directors | Northwords



### Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2021-2022

We're back! The Neil Gunn Trust and High Life Highland are pleased to announce that the 2021/22 Neil Gunn Writing Competition opens for entries on 20th September 2021 and closes on 4th March 2022.

**The Adult Short Story** and **Adult Poetry** sections are open to all writers worldwide. Writing to be inspired by one of the following themes:

- "Wild Geese Overhead" (title of a book by Neil Gunn)
- "But already, behind, the new wave was gathering volume, massing itself, steadily advancing." (Morning Tide by Neil Gunn)

The lead judge is Scottish author James Robertson.

Entry forms, rules and full details are available online at [www.highlifehighland.com/neilgunn](http://www.highlifehighland.com/neilgunn) or from any High Life Highland public library.

