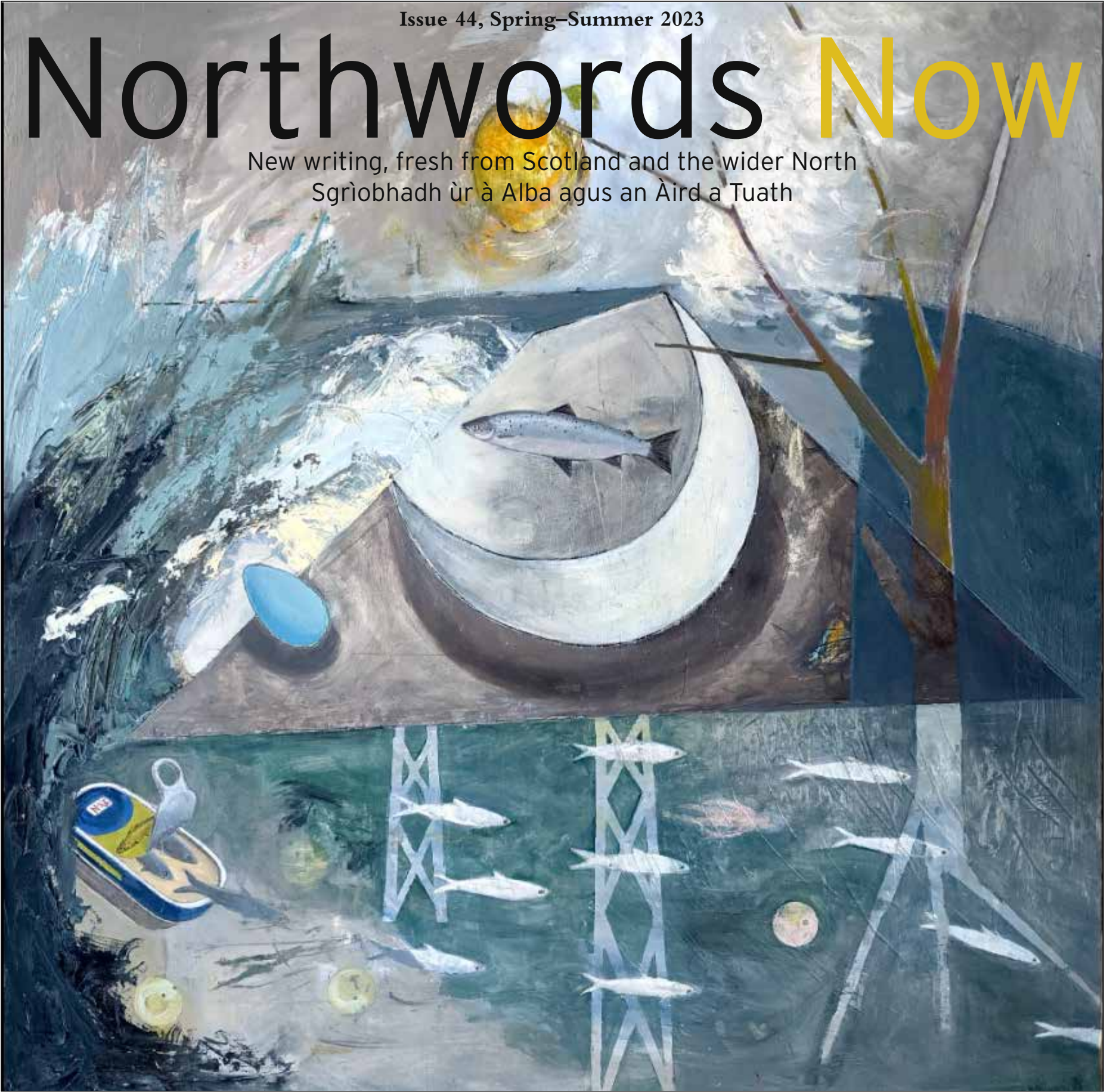


Issue 44, Spring–Summer 2023

# Northwords Now

New writing, fresh from Scotland and the wider North

Sgrìobhadh ùr à Alba agus an Àird a Tuath



**JEN HADFIELD** goes from Papa Stour to the Universe and back, **TONY DAVIDSON** talks art and writing with **CYNTHIA ROGERSON**, **RODY GORMAN** intertongues **SWEENEY**, **JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON** deep dives in archives, **HIGHLAND BOOK PRIZE** readers consider the current shortlist, **PLUS** many more stories, poems, news, reviews and a reader offer

Nua-bhàrdachd na Gàidhealtachd le **SEONAI DH CHARITY** is nua-bhàrdachd Dhùn Èideann le **IAIN STIÙBHART MOIREACH**, ros-goirid le **SHEENA AMOS** is **ALISTAIR PAUL** le tuilleadh a bharrachd aig **FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH**, **DEBORAH MOFFAT**, **MÀIRI NICGUMARAID**, **VICTORIA NICÌOMHAIR** agus **MARCAS MAC AN TUAIRNEIR**.



## EDITORIAL

**A**S MANY OF you will have noticed, there's been a pause in production of *Northwords Now* between last summer and the spring of 2023. This doesn't reflect any waning of enthusiasm in Scotland's literary community and beyond. Indeed, support is robust, from writers in different genres, from readers who relish our content and accessibility and from funders who have been positive in their encouragement.

The temporary blip arose from a shift in how *Northwords Now* is administered, through a move away from a cumbersome company structure to a simpler business model. Such shifts take time, but we've now arrived in a new place. Thanks are due to the many people, since early in this millennium, who supported *Northwords Now* through giving their time as Board members. Some of these folk are still very active in the unfolding work, including as writers and advisers.

As part of the next step forward, I hope that the contents of this issue will give you as much pleasure as a reader as we've had as editors. There's a broad range of work here, both from writers whose names will be weel-kent by many and some who never before will have dinged your literary radar. That's part of our ethos – to showcase good writing from the north and to encourage fresh talent. With that in mind, parts of this issue could give some useful tips to people wanting to take first steps in researching a story (cf. Jennifer Morag Henderson's archives feature), publishing a book (Tony Davidson in conversation with Cynthia Rogerson) or communicating their poetry in both print and performance.

The latter is a strong aspect of Anne MacLeod's 'Introducing' feature, in conversation with Cáit O'Neill McCulloch, who has been prolific in her writing, sharing, collaborations and encouragement of others in the recent past. That Cáit's first published poem was in *Northwords Now* just a couple of years ago is a very pleasing demonstration of the power and the potential of our ethos. ■

KENNY TAYLOR, EDITOR

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



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

**Northwords Now** is a twice-yearly literary magazine, which aims to support new writing from the Highlands and Islands and beyond - across Scotland and the wider north - in all of Scotland's languages.

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**Front cover image**  
'Salmon Waits by the Tree of Wisdom'. Oil and graphite on cradled ply by Becs Boyd (2022). Private collection. Part of a body of work entitled 'What is My Culture?', based on five weeks travelling across Arctic Norway. Becs says this reflects on contrasting meanings of the word 'Culture', as human social behaviour, but also in a broader sense of creating the conditions for nurturing life.

**Submissions** to the magazine, through our online 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 or .rtf). Include stories in a single submission and poetry in a separate one, but otherwise please do not split work into multiple submissions. All work must be previously unpublished in print or on-line. Copyright remains with the author. Payment is made for all successful submissions.

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The next issue is planned for **November 2023**. The deadline for submissions is **4th September 2023**. If accepted for publication, you will hear about your submission by **30th October 2023**, so feel free to submit elsewhere if we have not contacted you by then.

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# What's New in the North



Some of the musicians and cast of *Metagama* in rehearsal at An Lanntair this spring, with (l-r) Willie Campbell, Christine Hanson, Charlie MacKerron, Liza Mulholland, Dolina MacLennan and Donald S. Murray.

## In the Wake of Metagama

A century ago, in April 1923, the SS *Metagama* – a Canadian Pacific Railway steamship that plied between Scotland and Canada – left Stornoway carrying more than 300 islanders. Headed west across the Atlantic, many of them would never return. The following year, two more vessels departed for Canada with more emigrants from Stornoway and Castlebay. This came in the bitter wake of the *Iolaire* disaster in 1919, when nearly 200 islanders were among the servicemen drowned when the ship carrying them home from the First World War sank not far from Stornoway. The loss of nearly 1,000 young people in a handful of years had a major and lasting impact on the Outer Hebrides.

Those who left on *Metagama* and its successors had been encouraged to emigrate on an Assisted Passage Scheme, which required them to work on farms across the Great Plains. But many moved on quickly to find better-paid work in cities such as Detroit and Chicago, where their descendants live to this day. To mark the centenary of the *Metagama* and its aftermath, writer Donald S Murray – a long-standing supporter of *Northwords Now* – worked with musician and songwriter Liza Mulholland, renowned Gaelic singer Dolina MacLennan and an impressive array of other talent to create *In the Wake of Metagama: An Atlantic Odyssey in Story and Song*.

Following its premiere at An Lanntair in Stornoway in late April, the show has moved on to several other venues, including Eden Court in Inverness and smaller halls in the islands. The whole project has been an impressive collaboration, also involving musicians such as cellist Christine Hanson from Canada, fiddler Charlie MacKerron of Capercaillie, singer-songwriter Willie Campbell, and Gaelic singer and piper Calum Ailig MacMhaoilein, whose grandfather emigrated in 1924. Artist

Doug Robertson created new work to illustrate the show.

We'll return to this project in the autumn issue, but in the meantime recommend reading some of the background to the history behind its stories: a history that resonates in the islands and across the Atlantic to this day. ■

## The Cheviot and the Stag turns 50

There's also a striking continuity in live performance across decades through 'Metagama' cast member, Lewis-born Dolina MacLennan. Dolina was an original member of the 7:84 company that took the ground-breaking *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil* to venues across Scotland – many in small Highland halls – exactly 50 years ago.

The effect of this play – a *tour de force* of satire, song, acting and ceilidh music – on Scottish theatre, culture and politics was enormous. In part this is because it revealed stories of the Clearances to many who had been unaware of them before and raised important questions about ownership and use of Scotland's natural resources, including land. By taking performances to places such as village halls, it also encouraged new audiences, including people who had previously thought that their voices and stories were ignored at national level, to realise that live theatre could be both exciting and a way for such stories to be shared, and shared powerfully.

There's a superb account of the earliest days of *The Cheviot The Stag and the Black Black Oil* in Alan Little's Radio 4 programme *What Kind of Scotland?* First broadcast in April, this is available for a year on BBC Sounds at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001kprx>

It includes recent interviews with people such as Liz Lohead, Jim Hunter, John Herdman, Andy Wightman – and

Dolina MacLennan, as well as archive clips featuring playwright and 7:84 founder, John McGrath, Bill Patterson and others.

Among Dolina's comments, she reveals that the play hadn't been rehearsed when it was first performed in front of an audience at a major conference in Edinburgh entitled *What Kind of Scotland?*

"We had just finished writing the last bit of it at five o'clock and we were standing on stage at seven!" So the premiere was actually an unrehearsed reading. But at the end: "We couldn't get offstage; they clapped and shouted and stamped for half an hour." When the nine-strong company's tour of small venues began, turn-out such as an audience of seven in Fraserburgh was a weird contrast. But the reception in many other places was effusive. The rest is history; one with aspects as relevant today as they were in the spring of 1973. ■

## Look ahead to the Hoolie

I know – spring has barely sprung and some of the migrant birds aren't yet back to brave the Scottish summer, so turning thoughts to early winter might seem premature. But when it comes to thinking ahead to what promises to be an excellent small festival of music and words, now could be the ideal time to get The Write Highland Hoolie in the calendar, including to book accommodation.

The Hoolie will take place in Mallaig over the weekend of November 10th –12th. It begins on the Friday evening with Duncan Chisholm, Hamish Napier and poet Jim Mackintosh (who reviews several collections in this issue) celebrating the life and work of George Mackay Brown in *Beyond the Swelkie*. On Saturday night, two more of Scotland's finest traditional musicians, Ross Ainslie and Tim Edey are in concert before dinner. A full programme should now be online to reveal the writers taking part.

For poets, a further part of the Write Highland Hoolie to note is the festival's Deirdre Roberts Poetry Competition, judged by Hugh McMillan, with the prize of an engraved quaich, £250 cash, and £250 book tokens to spend in the Highland Bookshop Fort William. ■

## And looking back on Ullapool

This is a hard one: acknowledging that the 2023 Ullapool Book Festival will be the last. Over nearly twenty years, a dedicated team of volunteers has welcomed some of the finest writers in the land (and far beyond) to inspire audiences in sold-out seating in Ullapool Hall and the Ceilidh Place with words and music. We'll be there again this year to fly the *Northwords Now* banner, and will likely take stock in the autumn issue with some of those

local volunteers and writers from other places, to hear their tales of a festival that became such a valued part of the Scottish literary scene.

## Farewell, Aonghas Dubh

Just a year ago, it was a pleasure on the third page of *Northwords Now* 43 to acknowledge the 80th birthday of Gaelic activist and poet Aonghas MacNeacail. Sadly, he died on 22nd December 2022.

Although he's gone, his legacy of his work in Gaelic and English, as well as his influence on many people who were inspired by his writing, readings and teaching, remain. Our sympathies go to his wife, Gerda, son Rob and daughter Galina. ■

## Congratulations to Marcas

He doesn't yet know this is included in 'What's New.' (though he will when he sees the page proof) but I couldn't let the recent achievements of our Gaelic Editor, Marcas Mac an Tuairneir, go by without a bit of applause from his fellow editor. Early this year, he won the Arts and Culture award in the 2023 Scottish Gaelic Awards, sponsored by Bòrd na Gàidhlig and the Daily Record, in a category backed by Creative Scotland.



Marcas Mac an Tuairneir with his Gaelic Arts and Culture Award 2023

It's been a very creative couple of years for Marcas, yielding *Polaris*, shortlisted for the Saltire Society Poetry Book of the Year award and the album *Speactram*, which was shortlisted for Gaelic Singer of the Year at the Traditional Music Awards in 2022. Elsewhere, Marcas has said that he has always used his writing to promote LGBTQ inclusion in the Gaelic Arts – something that will be an aspect of his forthcoming anthology for Drunk Muse Press *Cruinneachadh*, a multi-lingual travelogue featuring a range of Scottish and international poets. His garnering a broad range of voices is, of course, something that you can enjoy for yourself right now, within *Tuath* in this issue.

Early birds reading this issue may also be able to catch Marcas at Dingwall's Word on the Street May 19<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup>, supported by *Northwords Now*, where he will be Gaelic Artist in Residence and performing. ■



# Introducing... Cáit O'Neill McCullagh

## A conversation with Anne MacLeod

**P**ERHAPS THE WORD introduction is unnecessary here. Many of you will already know Cáit O'Neill McCullagh. At eighteen, she came from London to Inverness to live and work in the L'Arche community. Since then, she has followed a rich and evocative educational path in Scottish Culture and Archaeology, culminating in the PhD she is currently completing on island living.

You may know Cáit as an Ethnologist: perhaps you encountered her as Community Archaeologist, Museum Curator/Development Officer, journalist, essayist, or Community Relations officer of the Corrymeela Community. You may have seen her on an early Time Team, having coffee with Phil, discussing Britain's Stone Age Tsunami in the Inverness MacDonalds (handily situated over a Mesolithic camp site).

Such a life has inevitably involved a great deal of official writing. And she had, growing up in London, studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She had always written plays, one of which won a professional reading given by Judy Dench at the Royal Court Theatre.

She has forgotten the name of the play. But Cáit, whose collaborative chapbook with Sinéad McClure *The songs I sing are sisters* appeared from Dreich Press in July 2022 (first print run sold out in days) will always remember the exact moment she fell in love with poetry; the actual place.

She was at the Hamish Matters Festival in Blairgowrie, on 11th November 2019, the centenary of Hamish Henderson's birth.

### **Anne: Can you tell us what happened that day?**

**Cáit:** It was the year of Hamish Henderson's centenary, and I had taken the notion to drive down to Blairgowrie for an event at which Timothy Neat would be showing and then discussing his film about Hamish as part of the 'Hamish Matters' festival. In truth, I was excited that there was going to be a celebration uniting two of my heroes from the days when I studied Scottish ethnology with Margaret Bennett, and also two people about whom I had heard so much from my friend Essie Stewart, who features, with her grandfather Ali Dal in Neat's film 'The Summer Walkers', and who knew Hamish well from the days when he would come to record her grandfather reciting the Ossianic tales handed on in tradition through generations of Highland Travellers. George Gunn, Caithness poet, playwright, essayist, philosopher and great champion of the freedom and freedom to think and act of people in the Highlands, positioned in a



**Cáit at home**

place seen for too long as peripheral and dependent on external stimulus, was part of the panel with Timothy and with the Perthshire poet Jim Mackintosh. And, in fact, it was George's words on that day, and the whole demeanour of his sharing of them, which really touched me.

I feel it was the first time I had heard someone speaking about the concept of poetry, of being a poet; experiencing and finding ways to articulate that kind of noticing of life as it is lived, specifically, essentially, that matched Hamish's idea of 'poetry becoming people'. George spoke about poetry as it was understood in a traditional sense, as I knew it from my own Irish upbringing and from my learning about the bardic tradition both in my studies and in my participation as a singer in the folk tradition; it being generated from community's own experiences and concerns, for example from their deep knowledges of place and environment or from the keen knowing of the desperation of grief.

His championing of the democracy of noticing and then finding poetic idioms to make more noticeable specific and diverse ways of living the universe, really reached into me. I felt I understood poetry in the way it could

have real meaning for me. I understood that whole tradition of sharing it in bardic verse, or in song, or in stories beyond the intellectual sense of poetry as a genre and more as a way of inspiring fuller engagement with one's own life, its celebrations and predicaments, and correspondingly increasing empathy for others who, themselves, also feel the joys and precarities of the universe in their own beloved (or besieged) places in the world.

I'd encountered similar ideas in my reading of Henderson, and other poet philosophers, including Eduoard Glissant and Derek Walcott, those great poets and thinkers from the Caribbean. On that evening, perhaps because George was speaking with a Highland voice, a voice I'd heard all around me since my teenage years, I understood it to be something I could participate in too – that poetry could be part of my own ongoing activism, an exploration of what it is we are living and how we might continue or transform that for a better present, and to assemble more sustaining futures. I suppose it was the moment I imagined that poetry could become a practice for me. On the drive home, I found myself stopping the car

and taking out my notebook and just writing; writing what I later realised was a kind of embryo, emerging poem. It was a forceful experience.

### **Anne: Online Writing Groups have been inspiring and supportive for you. Was there a Pandemic effect?**

**Cáit:** Yes, absolutely. Many of us might recognise the isolation that came when 'community transmission', the very social glue that makes up the connective tissue of living, being in relationship with others, became dangerous. Not being able to meet with others, and, for me as someone who is excited by that act of 'noticing' (doing it in my research, and in my work as a curator, an archaeologist, a researcher of communities) was disorienting. And, as someone who was getting interested in poetry as a kind of social action, it came at just about the worst time for germinating this kernel of interest. It was, again, George Gunn, who offered a kind of poetry lifeline, inviting me to join his writers' workshop, based in Caithness, but with some outliers, who, unable to meet in person, had transferred their workshoping to Facebook! I joined and sort of lurked really for the first few weeks, reading others' poems and being so impressed with the way the group members would share responses to each other's work, eliciting and nurturing the best poems out of each of them that they believed each was capable of. It was the trust and mutuality that touched me most; a sense of community. I started submitting my own poems to the group's process in December 2020. Very rapidly from that, and as much in a quest to assuage my own loneliness and the grief of not being able to visit my ailing father, who was living in a nursing home, at home, in Ireland, I began to seek out and join some of the proliferation of online 'open mic' groups that sprang up out of the pandemic constraints. I was welcomed with incredible generosity and a level of interest in me reading my own early and very sketchy poems, that I found humbling, and encouraging. Many of the poems workshoped with the Facebook group and tried out on fellow poets in those virtual open mics made it to publication in various journals and anthologies. I was learning from participating in a community of practitioners.

### **Anne: And the chapbook? How did your collaboration with Sinéad come about?**

**Cáit:** We 'met' in one of those online reading groups – 'Not The Time To Be Silent'. I had really enjoyed hearing her

read her poems and, it turns out, the feeling was mutual. What I think we were hearing in each other was a commonality of experience (being born in the same year of Irish parents pushed to becoming economic migrants, as contemporary discourse would have them, and move to London) expressed through our own distinct idioms; so both similar and different. Meeting online we moved to chatting on social media, and being very interested in the continuum of those both similar and different outcomes of experiences, as expressed in our respective poems. For example, I will often write in a kind of synthesis of English, Gaelic and Scots; the languages I hear around me and the languages in which I had studied and continued to synergise in my postgraduate studies (much to the amusement/ dismay of my tutors at Oxford). For Sinéad, this linguistic flexibility and variety was a source of delight. I was equally taken with the lyricism and ability with narrative in her poetry. I recognised a strong storytelling trait that felt as comfortable as a well-loved garment, for it was the absolute lodestone of life in my own upbringing. My parents and their countless siblings and my grandparents were all possessed of tremendous quickness for seizing the art and entertainment out of the mundanity of everyday, transforming it into the most extraordinary fables, full of wit and pathos and fantastic enchantment. They were all of them tutored in the culture of ceilidhing; of bringing yourself as a finely tuned instrument of entertainment, ready to do a turn at any social gathering.

I plucked up the courage to ask Sinéad if she might like to share poems with me, that we might together kind of workshop each other's poems. Thankfully, she liked the idea and we set up a wee online file sharing site and posted up poems and comments and conversation around these, a kind of correspondence, really, that we would then chat about further in Zoom calls every week or so. What happened then, quite organically, was that we started writing poems in response to each other's poems, or finding poems that we had already drafted that somehow spoke to a poem or two the other had posted up. We soon realised we had the makings of a joint collection assembling and once Jack Caradoc of Dreich advertised his 'Classic Chapbook Competition' in March of this year, we felt we were ready to submit what we had co-authored and edited and ordered into our pamphlet, 'The songs I sing are sisters', which, to our we-are-still-pinching-ourselves excitement, went on to be a winning entry. We were published in July, and, well, we are still reaping so many benefits from the experience.

**Anne: We have talked before about your childhood, the vivid, storied Irish family you grew up in. About L'Arche, where you felt yourself stepping into Hamish Henderson's Carrying Stream. Are these the sources for your love of words?**

**Cáit:** Being the child of migrants, being a migrant myself, growing up hearing my bilingual parents present themselves linguistically in many different iterations: at home, with authorities, in their social circles, in various public situations, I was used to the idea that there is more than one way of expressing feelings, of ways of seeing, of making the world known to oneself and to others. It gave me an ear, I think, not only for the diversity of language, but also for its adaptive and interpretative possibilities, and for the fact that we can all of us switch the ways we understand, and are understood by being flexible with language. I loved the ways in which my parents would, as Emily Dickinson would have it 'tell it slant' in their use of English, making the ordinary sound strange and exotic. This and the wisdom of Sister Columbanus who, when I was eleven, entranced a whole class filled with Irish immigrant children, in London, through teaching us the Scots Border Ballads originating from the Wars of Independence. Those uncanny words rolled around my mouth like gobstoppers, and I loved it.

In L'Arche, living with people with what are called learning disabilities, many of whom we were inviting to come and live in ordinary community settings, leaving Craig Phadrig, and Craig Dunain Hospitals for the first time since they were children, I was sharing a home with people of my parents' generation, who had come from all over the Highlands, and from Skye. They brought with them so much of the culture in language traditions that they had experienced themselves as children. So, in my first few weeks of living in community with these phenomenally special tutors in the way of learning to live as a Highlander, I was singing in Gaelic and learning to speak the dialects of Easter Ross and Sutherland, and, of course, the beautiful, spoken Scottish English of Inverness. I am someone who, perhaps because of my early code-switching as a child moving between being Irish and modifying into 'English', finds it impossible not to start thinking in the languages of the people about me, and then responding in kind (ask my Shaetlan-speaking friends). I felt that the people I lived in community with in L'Arche, through their completely unfiltered sharing of the words and culture of their Highlands and Islands, those utterly entwined aspects of dualchas, were inviting me to step in and become (and belong) with them in a continuum of tradition. It's this continuum that Hamish Henderson so accurately described as a our participation in a living tradition that began before us, and that flows about us in our present – a carrying stream, disturbing the environment around us and being disturbed by us, then continuing on towards the future. Being conscious of this, letting the stream shape us and being conscious of how we can influence the flow of it, taking responsibility for that, is intimately related to poetry for me, not just in terms of how I absorb all that

richness and wisdom already absorbed into the tradition, but also in terms of consciously considering how I use and privilege words, including countering the privileging of dominant languages over those that have been peripheralized – my own parents' Irish Gaelic, the Gaelic and Scots of my own chosen place of belonging in the Highlands.

**Anne. And other writers you find inspiring?**

**Cáit** Too, too many to mention. I love so many, but, of course, I must mention George Gunn, who continues to reach for and offer poetry that is exceptionally reflective both of place and people here, and yet so deeply world facing and engaged. Another contemporary poet who is a tremendous inspiration is John Glenday, who I got to know through inviting him to work with me in extending new ways of co-curating the collections at Inverness Museum with communities through the region while I was a curator there. I adore the writings of George Mackay Brown, another hybrid, like me, I guess, with his Highland mammy and Orcadian da. Medbh McGuckian and Eavan Boland, those two incredible Irish women, write poetry that speaks to my desire for social justice and for the recognition of those least heard voices, including those marginalised and institutionalised. I adore the language play of Gerard Manley Hopkins and bell hooks: and, among poets younger than me whose words are like explosions of joy to read and read aloud, Roseanne Watt and Jen Hadfield light my rocket. Others, whole canon loads of the expected, Yeats, Macneice, the metaphysical poets, Rilke, Keats, and current favourites from all airts and pairs Joelle Taylor and Hugh Macmillan.

**Anne: In 'An Orkney Worlding' you conclude that George MacKay Brown's work can offer us 'potential histories of what and who we are, and can become together.' Obviously in your ethnological studies you are sensitive to such patterns. Where do you see the work of currently active poets (including yourself) going? I suppose I'm asking what is poetry for? What does it do?**

**Cáit:** I love what Bertolt Brecht had to say about this when he described his take on the idea of poetry as a mirror – the commonly shared idea that art is an imitation of life. Brecht accepted the concept of poetry as a mirror, but, he said that it was not merely an instrument through which we might only passively 'reflect', rather he clarified that it should be used as an active tool for clarifying the truth, showing things just as they are and including the possibility that this critical act of articulating lived experience can stimulate change. Rainer Maria Rilke, in his own poetry, introduced an idea of the poet as a bridge, working with 'Things' (for him meaning reality) that

seem 'indescribable' and find a way to communicate them. This, what Glissant calls 'speaking the world', is what poets can do; writing about the world as we see and hear it, holding the mirror up, and finding language that will attract noticing and affective engagement. It matters that people are sharing poetry about what is being lived in Ukraine and about what it is to live a Black life and about climate crisis. These experiences that seem overwhelming and indescribable, even the very matter of how we love each other. Finding the words that make the joys and the concerns of life and living in this world accessible, engaging people's feelings, and sense of participation in the carrying stream, responsible for understanding pasts and imagining futures, having the will to listen and act: this is what poets can do, now, for all life.

**Anne. Finally, you are currently completing a new collection invited by an independent Scottish publisher. Can we hear a little about that?**

**Cáit** On 24 of February 2022, I was admitted to hospital and very quickly progressed to being diagnosed with two forms of cancer. It has been a deeply lifealtering experience and the stages of the process of my cancer – the initial devastation, the invasive surgery and the physically and emotionally challenging aspects of chemotherapy have been markers throughout the year. That date, in February, coincided with the invasion of Ukraine. The television screens in hospital on the date of my admission and throughout my subsequent treatments, were filled with the plight of the Ukrainian people, and, for me, this acted as a kind of lens, a perspective through which to understand my own condition, which no matter how tough it has been, has been nothing compared to the physical and emotional traumas visited upon people caught up in Putin's colonial actions. The poetry that has flowed from this strange entwining and growth of empathy through being more aware of pain, is the central core of this new collection. I'm hopeful it will speak to people (including those prospective publishers) out of those more general themes; the specifics of the war and of having cancer, yes, but also more deeply, what does it mean to connect through common understandings of physical frailty, and of loss and fear; to stop living as if in parallel with others? This would be the work I hope those poems might do, reaching out into our hearts, which, after all, want to beat, to live, and we can't do that alone. ■

Cáit O'Neill McCullagh & Sinéad McLure's chapbook *The songs I sing are sisters* is published by Dreich ISBN 978 1873412 57 2. Cáit is now preparing a new collection for Drunk Muse, which will be published later this year.



A FEW MONTHS before the end of our time in primary school, Dunky MacCaig touched down in a new desk in the headmaster's room, joining the other five members of our class. At first glance, he appeared to fit into our surroundings more than the rest of us. His brown hair resembled tufts of heather; his eyes – a similar shade – looked as if they had been swamped within a bog. There was his size, too. Somehow, he appeared as stunted as the moorland we looked out on from the classroom window, a foot or so smaller than the rest of us.

Yet despite all this, he did not quite belong. His voice came from somewhere in Scotland's North-East. 'Ah dinnae fancy that,' he might say sometime. 'It's nae somethin' Ah ken.' The rest of us would look at him when he spoke like that, unable to understand a word that spilled from his lips. And then there would be the way he would talk of moor and machair, the acres that surrounded him on the island.

'Ah miss trees,' he would say. 'Ah dinna ken how folk can live without them.'

He did not explain for a long time why he felt that way about them. One of us asked if it was the leaves he missed, how their coming and going marked their seasons. He shook his head, shrugging in response. One day, when we shivered beside the school below the lash of wind and rain, I asked him if it was it was the shelter of their branches he longed for when he was here. Again, there was a quick shake of his head, a snort of dismissal.

'Naw... No' really.'

It was only when the remnants of this huge tree were washed up on the village shoreline that the mystery began to be solved. He laughed when he saw it there, smacking his hand against the outside of his thigh.

'Ah'll have to gae hame,' he said. 'Back to my uncle's hoose.'

We didn't have the chance to ask why, gaping as we watched him race up the track that ran down the middle of his uncle's croft, back to the house where both he and his mother now lived. When he returned, he carried a saw in his hand, one that hung on the wall of the byre behind the old building where his mother's family had been brought up in the years before she had travelled to the opposite side of Scotland to marry the man she later left to come home again. As he lifted it in his fingers, it caught the light of the sun, sparkling in the same way as his eyes as he chuckled again and again.

'Oh, wow! Wow! Wow!' he declared.

And then he kneeled before the wreck of the tree, drawing the blade back and forth. He began cutting a branch before later performing the same task on a trunk, an action he undertook in constant, perfect rhythm, never failing or faltering for a moment as the teeth of the saw dug deeper into the wood. It was as if the beat and flow of each cut was a form of music, one that was as regular

and predictable as the motion of the tide sweeping up on the shore.

'Oh, wow... Wow ... Wow ...' he said once again.

And then he said something else, giving a reason for his actions.

'It's sae guid tae ha'e the chance tae burn wood again. Much better than a' that bloody useless peat that's stacked ahint ma uncle's hoose. Nae warmth in it at a'.'

We were in the early months of secondary school before what happened that day began to make sense. He spoke one morning about how his father had worked for the Forestry Commission for years, planting and growing trees on a size and scale that was impossible us who had lived most of our days on the island to imagine.

'Miles and miles of them. Near Huntly where Ah wis before. Pine and fir trees. Tall and green a' year roond.'

His father had worked among them, cutting trunk and branch down with an electric saw more quick and jagged than the one we had seen that day in his hand, making sure too that the pine and fir that grew did not encroach too close upon another or topple downwards to block a path or road.

'He'd sometimes tak me tae see them on his days aff. Show me the different kind of tree that grew around there. Even point out the animals. The odd squirrel. Fox. Stoat. There's naething like that roond here. Naething at a'.'

When I mentioned these tales to my Dad, he cast a strange look in my direction, his eyebrows arching as he cast another slab of peat onto the sitting room fire.

'Take care and keep your distance from him,' he warned me. 'There's a lot about that lad you don't know.'

I questioned him about this, trying to find out more information.

'Ssshhh...' he said. 'Best you don't find out. Less danger of all of it slipping from your tongue.'

'Dad,'

'Really. Best to stay ignorant.'

All that changed one morning when some of the older boys dragged us to the place they called the Arches, a passage that was underneath the school building, allowing us to go from one side of the building to the other. It wasn't the first time we were taken there. They did it sometimes just to hiss cigarette smoke in our faces, calling us yokels, country bumpkins, maus, peasants, insults they loved to direct at some of us who came from the rural areas of the island.

'I hate you. You stink. You smell. Don't you have a bath at home? You bring the

# By the Light

STORY BY DONALD S. MURRAY



stink of cow-shit with you wherever you go.'

This time, however, their words were different. They ignored me. Sharp as blades, they were all directed at Dunky, cutting into him.

'I hear your old man tried to burn his next door neighbour's house down. Over in Huntly. That's why your Mam left him, ended up in yokel-land. Is that true?'

For a long time, Dunky didn't answer, looking in the direction of the bully who was questioning him. It was as if the words didn't penetrate the surface of his skin, becoming bogged down somewhere in his head.

'Is that bloody true?' the bully snapped again, hissing another mouthful of smoke in his direction.

Dunky's eyes blinked.

'Well?'

Finally, Dunky nodded. 'Aye. My Dad did that.'

And then instead of being humiliated and crushed by his questioner, he looked up at those who terrorised him. This time, there was a gleam in his eyes, their shade of brown lit up by a defiant spark.

'Aye,' he said again. 'It's a' true.'



I kept away from him after that. It felt safer to do so. There was not only the story I heard in more detail that night from my parents – how Dunky's dad had set fire to a neighbour's house by stacking logs of wood outside their door one night, lighting them in the darkness, slipping, too, a roll of toilet paper dipped in petrol inside their letter box. 'I had tae find a way of shutting them up. Put an end to all these parties they had going on.'

'That's why Janet, Dunky's Mam, moved back here to stay with her brother,' my own Mam said, 'She was living with a man who was half-crazy. Said she was waiting for the day he would turn upon her and Dunky too.'

And then there was the way it was safer to stay out of Dunky's company. Some of the older boys would drag him to the Arches most mornings and afternoons. Gathering round one of the pillars there, they would thrust one of their cigarettes in his direction – roll-your-owns, Embassy, even an occasional cigar stabbed towards his lips.

'Fancy a fag? I hear your father loves his smoke.'

'Suck it in. Breathe it out. Enjoy it.'

Once or twice, they even stubbed a lit cigarette on the back of his hand, burning skin.

'You'll have to get used to that,' someone said, 'Think of it as a tattoo. Part of a family tradition.'

The only time he was free of all this

was on the school-bus going home. Silence surrounded him as he sat behind the driver in the front seat. The rest of us kept away from him as much as possible, having a sense that life had fouled and contaminated him, his existence soiled not just by the behaviour of his father but also by those individuals in the town who made much of his school-life miserable and frightening. We added our own layer to that, isolating and ignoring him, as if coming even close to him would render us liable to share a similar existence, suffering the same disease. We would watch him from a distance, conscious of the set of his mouth, the distance in his eyes.

The only moment I ever saw him come to life was when we were travelling across the moor. There was a line of fire on the slope of a hill, a short distance from the road. A low orange blaze, it curled like the heather that grew there, a different, brighter shade than how it appeared in August when it bloomed bright and purple. Above it, there was a grey skirl of smoke, wafting upwards.

'Whit's that?' Dunky asked, turning in his seat.

'Muirburn,' Scottie the driver answered. 'It's what some people round here do to encourage new growth on the moor. A fresh line of heather. A burst of two of grass.'

'Oh ...'

'It can be dangerous,' Scottie continued, keeping his eyes on the road. 'Sometimes the fire can go out of control. It can do a hell of a lot of damage then.'

Dunkie nodded his head, his gaze returning to the window of the bus, watching a couple of men a short distance away. They had scarves around their faces as they stepped near the blaze, threshing flames with broomsticks in their hands, as if they were indulging in some form of witchcraft as they sought to keep the fire they had lit in strict obedience to their will.

'Ah can see that,' he said.



Two days later, Dunky did not turn up in school.

He had come in with the rest of us on the bus this morning but disappeared somewhere between the buspark and the school. Carrying a sack upon his shoulder, he hung back from the rest of us for a moment before slipping away through the streets of town into the distance, heading out beyond the edge of the community towards the local dump, a place, too, where lochs and streams spilled and flowed into one another. He wandered down a peat road slightly beyond this, deeper into the heart of the moor, disappearing from the sight of others, even from the range of binoculars some who lived near there used from time to time.

Not that any of us were aware of any of this till the following morning. He travelled on the school bus as usual, sitting once more in his usual seat behind the driver. There was, however, something

different about him from usual. His clothes were permeated by smoke. A fog clung to him, present in his shoes, thick brown hair, even the skin on his fingers. It laced, too, the sweat on his forehead, the sweat of his armpits. We all smelled it circulating round the bus, though at first, we weren't sure of its source.

'What the hell?' one or two looked quizzically at each other.

'That's awful,' another said.  
'What's causing that stink?' someone coughed.

And then there was the itching, sneezing, people lifting scarves and handkerchiefs to squeeze out all trace of the smell. It wasn't possible. Not even when people opened the bus windows to allow the greyness of the air outside to swirl and cleanse those on board. The stink was still there, becoming thicker and more intense the closer we came to town. It seemed to permeate the air even more each time the bus stopped at a traffic light or waited at a roundabout. The moment too we paused to allow one of the local fire engines to swirl past, its alarm ringing loudly.

'Something's happened,' a voice declared. 'Some of the moor outside the town's ablaze.'

'Aye. That'll be it.' Scottie the driver nodded. 'It's the time of year these things take place.'

'Worse than usual this year. Worse than I've ever seen.'

Barbed and dense, the mist clung to the buildings of the town, smearing doors and windows with its clouds. The spire of a local church disappeared in the haze. The chime of the town hall clock became muted to a whisper in the greyness of the morning. The road blurred. Pavements turned dull and indistinct. Even the school turned almost invisible, the ring of its bell barely heard as we drove into the buspark.

'Some day,' Scottie said as we left the bus. 'Not seen many quite like this.'

'No. No. You're right there.'

And then at the morning interval, there was Dunky standing in front of these older boys who had bullied him for months. For once he had not been the one dragged and brought to the Arches. He was waiting for them instead, his face burning with a grin while all around him, the others were coughing and smoking, gagging on the air that swirled everywhere, choking the people of the town.

'Fancy a smoke?' he said.  
Puzzled and bemused, they looked at him.

He smiled at them again. 'Oh, go on. Suck it in. Breathe it out. Enjoy it.'

They looked at him before they turned to gaze at one another.

'Were you the one to blame for all this?' one asked. 'Did you do this?'

He didn't answer, just grinned at them all through the grey, watching as they all grew nervous around him, continuing to gaze as they walked away ... ■

# Stone Poems by Lydia Harris

## if you lose the stone what will happen

*with two lines by Stanley Moss*

I ask the stone the question I must answer myself

a human voice doesn't last very long

I will miss the stone's many languages

I will lose the way stone thinks about me

the way it vaunts not itself, the way it bears all things

the stone has become the place to which I tend

I must leave it as I found it

## Stone's first day at school

it hasn't seen trestle tables before  
or doors though it is a door of sorts

it hasn't heard a brass bell clang:  
change your shoes, playtime

or drunk milk with a straw  
or bowed its head and recited

the Lord's Prayer, all this is new to the stone  
although it is older by far

although in its grains there's a book  
of the beginning of stone

how each grain was trapped  
by chance and weather and water

the first page reads, apple, baby, cat  
words unknown to the stone

stone is its own word  
and the stone's eyes are windows in rain

and stone is learning to read by itself sign by sign  
spiral, lozenge, ring, line, line, line

## Standing Stone

Picture it unborn, in flight,  
wheeling, what can it see?

What squats in its memory  
along the lines and striations of its skin?

What shadows to be felt  
on our finger tips?

Scar of a path pitted  
all points north.

The stone's shadow  
tilts us into the one blue sky.

Listen for its shrubby crust  
its dry lobes scrambling.

## How to pray the stone beads

I leave you the weight of them  
the veins the passages between  
the grains where water seeps in

ten awl-bored, grainy and dun  
threaded on gut, sway-heavy  
swing them, they could do harm

between forefinger and thumb  
they are warm in my palm  
I swear they are garland and crown

## The Quoybirse stone blunders into the house

lichen flaking like scabs,  
base too narrow to balance its mass

though I pack it with beach boulders  
it rocks, the house opens its heart

rumbles and the staircase  
crashes through the floor tiles

jolts the foundations  
the stone smashes my home with its grainy oozes

has lost all sense of direction  
has never been seen like this

head in the stairwell, huffing damp belches  
with the whiff of the first ocean's bubbles

and those spots on the road  
where I worshipped its beautiful tilt, empty spaces

## Sentinel Stone

Admits no moving parts, no swivel  
is not level with me  
we work together, woman and stone  
it cannot be borne, too big to carry

I have to probe its beginning  
sun was there for sure,  
the stone sheds its own light  
watches from four faces, shifts its shadow

offers a way up and down  
is bewildered in fog  
when I walk the power of the stone  
is the snipe I startle, the mud I print

I hunt for a way in, *Dear stone*  
a nub of lichen flaps, one grain shifts  
*door I dare not enter, you knew*  
*it would happen, spelk lodged in my palm*  
*seven degrees out of true*



# Archives in Writing

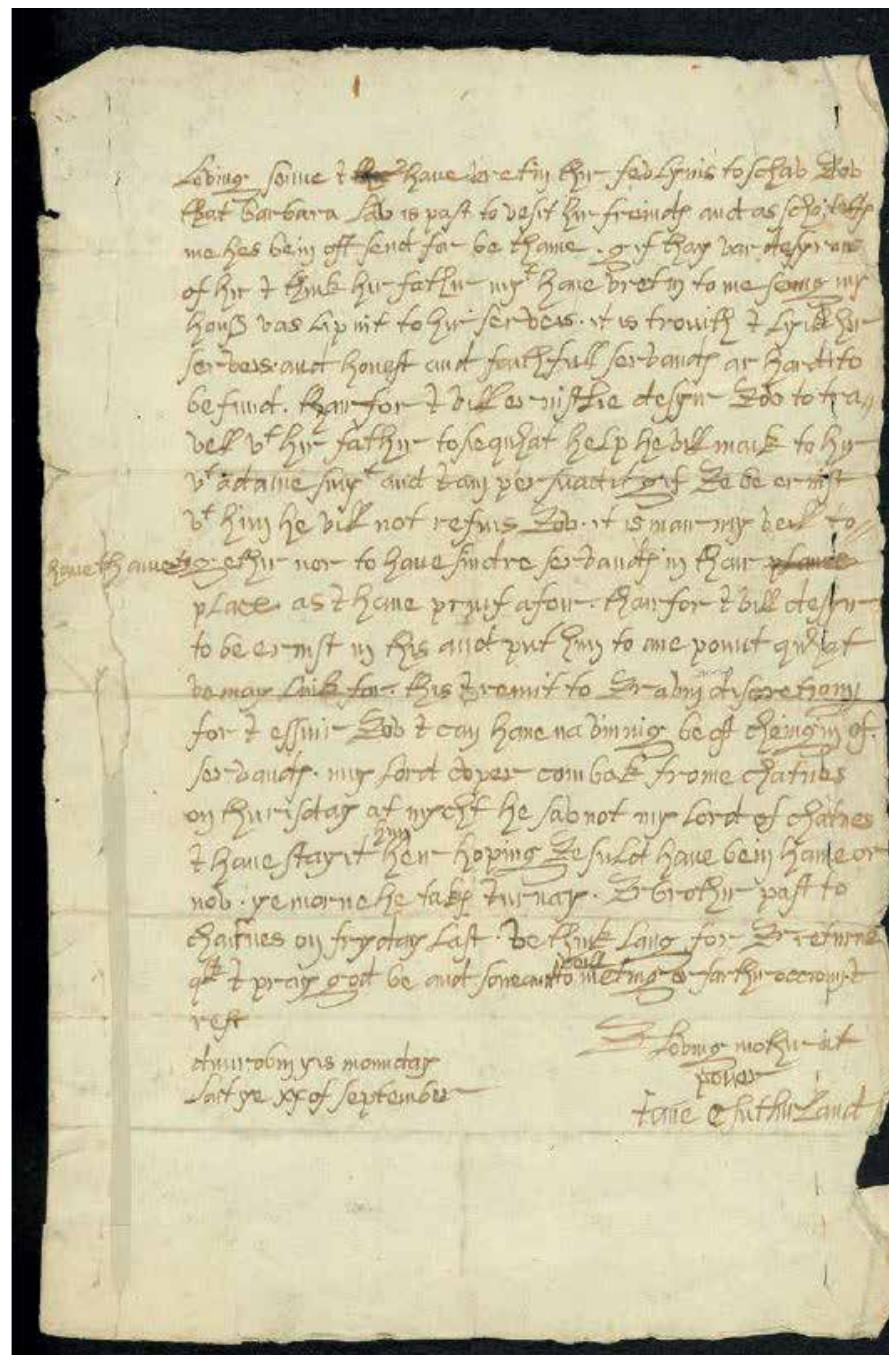
by Jennifer Morag Henderson

**M**Y NEW BIOGRAPHY *Daughters of the North* tells, in part, the life story of a woman called Jean Gordon, who lived at the time of Mary, Queen of Scots. It can be very difficult to find detailed information about women's lives 500 years ago, but with Jean Gordon I had an incomparable contemporary source: a collection of her own letters. There are published transcriptions of these documents readily available, but nothing compared to being able to pick up a piece of paper that Jean herself had folded and sealed, and reading Jean's own thoughts in her own handwriting. I could see the words that she emphasised, or stumbled over and crossed out, and watch her handwriting change over time, from the first letter written as a young bride, to the final one, written as a great-grandmother in her eighties. The letters were not just a source of information but also a point of connection: they illustrate the power of archives, and show how important archives can be for a writer.

Jean Gordon, the subject of my book, is probably best known as the first wife of the notorious Earl of Bothwell. Jean was Bothwell's alibi for the night of the murder of Darnley, Mary, Queen of Scots' wayward husband. However, despite Bothwell claiming that he was in bed with Jean, he became the prime suspect in Darnley's death, and was put on trial for murder. After his (dubious) exoneration, Bothwell and Jean divorced, and Bothwell went on to marry Mary, Queen of Scots – triggering the chain of events that led to Mary's escape to and then long captivity in England.

Jean's key role in the dramatic events of Mary's life was part of what first attracted me to writing her story, but my time in archives, and the exploration of Jean's later life as Countess of Sutherland, took the book in a new and important direction. It became a book about not only Jean, but also about her family, the life that women could lead, and, crucially, the land that she lived in. The story of Jean's time at Mary, Queen of Scots' court had been written about in many secondary sources, but as I read her letters and the other documents in the archives I realised that here were primary sources absolutely full of stories that had rarely, if ever, been told.

An archive is not organised in the same way as a library: everything about Jean Gordon was not arranged into books and filed neatly and alphabetically in one place. Instead, archival collections retain their original organisation, and generally remain in the order they were in at the time of accession into an archive – and they can contain not only papers but also objects. My research into 16<sup>th</sup> century Scotland involved looking



Letter written by Jean Gordon

at sources other than written material, including paintings and drawings, items that belonged to people of the time such as clothes, and even ephemera such as songs. After I had found a letter written by Jean, I could see what it was filed next to, which brought up new discoveries of correspondence, and often opened up new areas of understanding.

Many of Jean's letters were in the archives of the Sutherland family: the archives of her second husband. They had been loosely organised into groups by earlier researchers, either by date or subject. I soon found that organisation by subject – where letters were described and catalogued into categories such as “family” or “business” – was likely to be suspect. Because Jean was a woman, her letters were often assumed to touch

only on family matters – but in fact, she was in control of running the Sutherland estates for a long time. Likewise, I found the cataloguing of one of her son John's letters as “business” inadequate when the letter itself actually dealt, in a sensitive way, with the loss of both his own newborn baby, and a stillbirth experienced by his sister-in-law.

The letters also brought new characters alive: Jean's daughter-in-law Lucie is rarely, if ever, mentioned by historians, as her effect on wider history is judged to be negligible. Within the Gordon family though, she was loved and remembered. Her personality emerged vividly through her letters, as she exhorted her husband Robert to be careful as he travelled from their family home in the south of England to visit his mother Jean in the

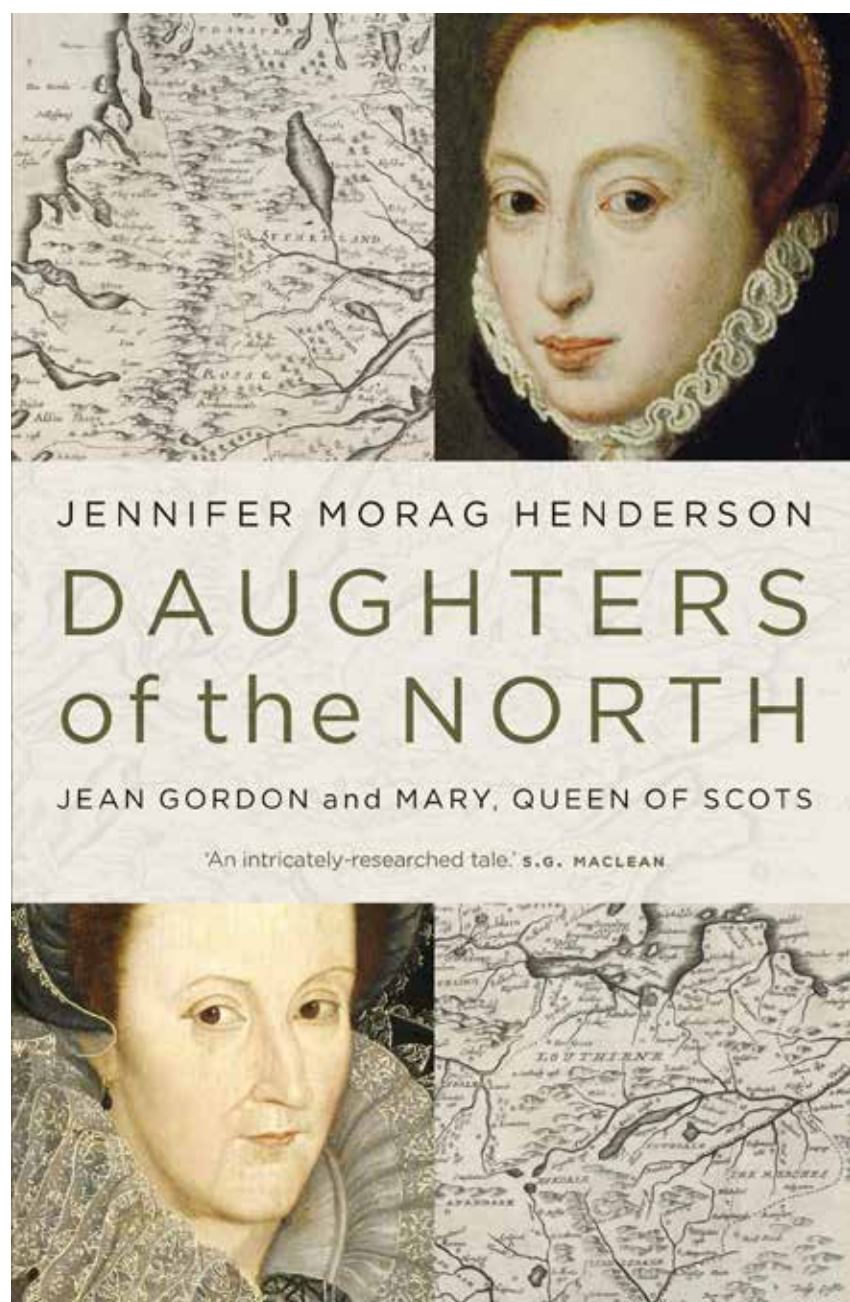
north of Scotland. Lucie's entreaties to Robert not to forget her love, or the love of their children, intermingled with her descriptions of current affairs: outbreaks of plague, or the death of a cousin. There was a real sense of someone living through history, but also enjoying family life in a very recognisable way.

I had learnt through my research for my first biography, of Josephine Tey, how important family connections could be, and how these were not always linear: it was not just Tey's siblings who held material relating to her work, but also distant cousins. In order to access that, I had to understand how Tey saw her family – not just trace who she was most closely related to, but understand through her actions which family members she actually remained in contact with. It was the same with Jean Gordon: I knew that she remained close to her mother's side of the family, which showed me that her connection with her cousin Agnes Keith (the wife of the Regent Moray) could be very important. The Earls of Moray are based at Darnaway Castle, which is still a private residence in the hands of Agnes Keith's descendants: I was lucky enough to finally manage to get in to see the original ancient Hall that Mary, Queen of Scots would have known, with its ancient carved and smoke-blackened timbers from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. A conversation with the family about the available archives led to important discussions with archivists who could help with my queries. Again, a crucial difference between archives and the library service is that many archives are in private hands, and different archives do not necessarily have contact with each other: the researcher has to learn where to look.

In Inverness, where I live, the Highland Archive Centre organises introductory sessions to explain archives and explore some of their possible uses. Archives can be used in many ways: family historians and genealogists often use them as a starting point, but writers can use them differently. The Highland Archive Centre has previously organised sessions with the Society of Authors, and regularly work with schoolchildren, to encourage the use of its archives as creative prompts. A writer might search for items connected with a particular place or time or person that interests them, then use that as something to build a piece of fiction on.

A good example of fiction based on research is S.G. MacLean's recent *The Bookseller of Inverness*. Set in the Highlands after the failure of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, the story uses a factual base, before spinning off into its own dramatic story. MacLean has a PhD in history and is experienced in using archives, and in a





often drawing out stories of much wider interest. Writers' personal research into what look like regional anomalies can bring out stories of national significance, such as David Alston's work on slavery and the Highlands.

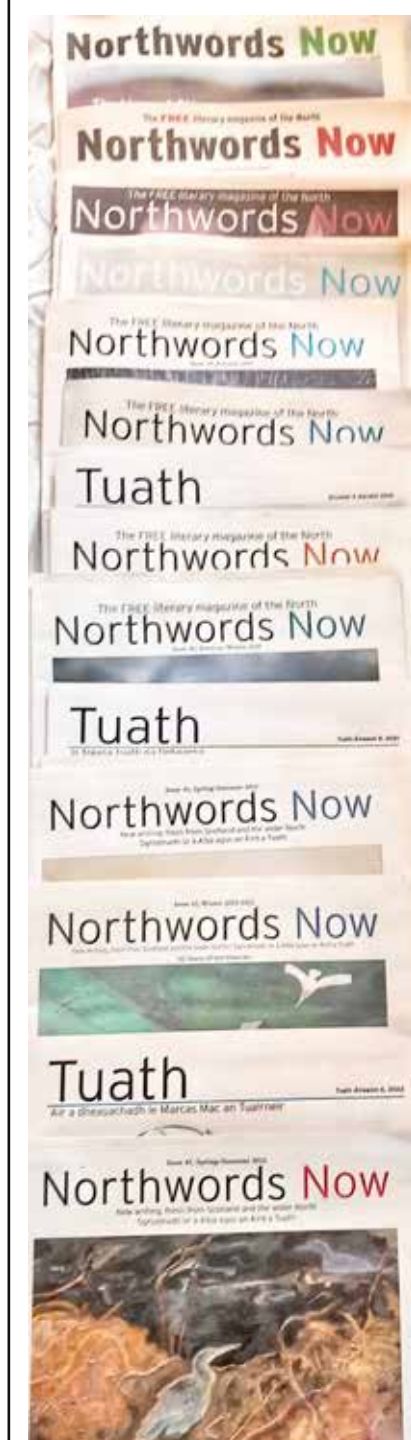
What I wanted to do with my book *Daughters of the North* was somewhere in between S.G. MacLean's fictional history, and James Miller's factual summary: I wanted to write a non-fiction biography where I was scrupulous about the accuracy of my information and where it came from – but I also wanted to tell the exciting stories of the time. Jean Gordon lived a long and full life, watching and influencing events as the throne of Scotland passed through the regency of Mary of Guise, to Mary, Queen of Scots, to Moray and the other Regents, to James VI and finally to Charles I. Scotland and England were united, Scotland changed from Catholic to Protestant, relations within Europe shifted dramatically and the New World began to open up. Historians rarely, if ever, study all these things together: a historian of Mary, Queen of Scots' era, for example, might not necessarily choose to also study the era of Charles I, or what the Thirty Years' War meant for Scandinavia – but all of these things were part of Jean's life. She was shaped and changed by what she lived through, and had an impact on events herself. By exploring history through biography we gain a new perspective.

Archives can be difficult to access and difficult to understand. Reading Jean's letters was not a simple process: I had to locate them, travel to view them, I had to understand the Scots language in which she wrote, and I even had to take courses in palaeography in order to read her 16<sup>th</sup> century handwriting, which is formed using different letters and conventions than we use today. By learning to use archives, however, writers can see the stories in them – and bring those stories alive for a wider audience. ■

note at the end of the book she explains some of the sources that she used, from the classic three-volume *The Lyon in Mourning* to the *Letter-Book of Bailie John Steuart of Inverness*. Due to the limited library access enforced by the pandemic, she explains, she ended up using the original manuscript of Bailie Steuart in the archives rather than the transcribed and printed edition. The Bailie's descriptions of lived history sparked her imagination, and he appears as a character in the final novel – she interprets his letters as being not just the transactions of business concerns they appear to be on the surface, but as documents that can be read in code, as part of a Jacobite plot.

A more academic non-fiction writer's approach could be to take a particular archive and explore it thoroughly, summarizing and explaining what is in there, for example James Miller's recent book *The Dunbars of Ackergill and Hempriggs*. In the introduction, Miller explains that he was invited to write a book based on the Dunbar family papers. He has previously written other

archive-research-based books on the history of Inverness, the story of travel and transport in the Highlands, and Scottish mercenaries, among other topics. In *The Dunbars of Ackergill and Hempriggs* Miller covers the sweeping history of one family in the north of Scotland from as early as the twelfth century, taking in information not only from the Dunbar papers themselves but also using his extensive local knowledge to cross-reference them with material from other archives such as the Breadalbane Muniments in the National Records of Scotland. The story is continued right down to the present day, and the living descendants, and backed up by appendixes of information on money and names and details from the original documents. As I learnt during the writing of *Daughters of the North*, the history of Caithness and the Far North is under-studied, with a relative paucity of written documents compared to other regions, so this is a valuable new resource for anyone interested in the area. So much important archival work is done by local historians and family historians,



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#### Books mentioned in this feature:

*Daughters of the North* by Jennifer Morag Henderson. Sandstone Press (2022) £24.99

*Josephine Tey: A Life* by Jennifer Morag Henderson (paperback). Sandstone Press (2016) £9.99

*The Bookseller of Inverness* by S.G. MacLean (paperback). Quercus Publishing (2023) £9.99

*The Dunbars of Ackergill and Hempriggs* by James Miller. Whittles Publishing (2022) £18.99

# Extract from forthcoming Sweeney: an intertonguing by Rody Gorman

Rody Gorman's *Sweeney: an intertonguing* is published this spring by Francis Boutle Publishers. The work is a multilingual version of *Buile Shuibhne*, in English, Irish, Scottish and Manx Gaelic with lingua gadelica, phonemic pieces and round-trip translations. Pre-publication reactions to the work have been full of praise, with words such as 'extraordinary', 'masterpiece' and 'magnificent' used by more than one eminent commentator.

## Curse

My curse upon Sweeney,  
He has transgressed me greatly,  
He thrust his smooth dart  
That made my sanctus bell fall apart.

That holy bell you pierced  
Will send you raging mad  
In the heather and branches of the wood,  
One among the birds of the air.

Just as the javelin-shaft went  
Like that up into the firmament,  
May you go insane in the wild, Sweeney,  
Without respite, without human company.

You wounded my dear disciple and foster-child,  
Your javelin has left him red,  
May you have as your reward  
Death by the point of a spear.



God bless Erin I say,  
Dear Erin whose beauty will never decay  
And curse Sweeney  
Throughout all eternity.

## Cuckoo!

What's sweetest to me around the waves  
Although my limbs are stunted tonight  
Is not the tintinnabulation of a church-bell  
But the cuckoo of the cuckoo of the Bann.

Wifely woman, don't give birth  
To your son of a Friday,  
A day of fasting for Mad Sweeney  
For the love of the true God.

As the women beat the flax, it's true,  
Though it's from me you're hearing it,  
So were my family and retinue  
Beaten at Moira in the battle.

From the cliff at Lough Dollard  
To Derry where Columba was,  
I never heard of any troubles,  
Just a sweet swansong.

A stag in the wilderness bellowing  
Above the cliffs in the glen,  
There's no music on earth  
Sweeter to my soul.

O Christ, Christ, hear me,  
O Christ, sweet Christ impeccable,  
O Christ, Christ, my friend, give me love,  
Don't let me be parted from your sweetness.

## Young Men

Young men, come hither!  
Men of Dalaray!  
You'll find in the sacred tree  
The man you're looking for.

God has condescended to grant me here  
A bare narrow existence  
Without music and without rest,  
Without lady friends, without gynotrust.

Here I am at Rossberry,  
Ronan has brought me disgrace,  
God has warped my appearance,  
Gurriers, you don't know me.

## My Night In Kildervila

My night in Kildervila,  
That's what broke my heart,  
It's hard for me, o son of God,  
Parting from Dalaradia.

Ten hundred active young men and ten,  
That was my army crowd at Drumfree  
Though, Christ, I'm a spent force alive,  
I was their can coca coalyer then.

My night is gloomy tonight  
Without the camp serving-boy from Longford,  
Not like my night at Drumdaff,  
Myself and McGonagle and Wolf.

A pity that I waited for the tryst,  
O my *regulus* of the true pre-eminent kingdom,  
Even if it does me no harm  
Forever except this night.

## Myself and Yourself

Woman that recognises me  
From the rims of your eyes too blue,  
There was a time I was in better shape  
In the assembly of the freemen of Dalaray.

My form and colour have changed for the worst  
Since I came out of the battle,  
I was the lean mean Sweeney  
That Irishmen heard all about.

Be off home with you to your man,  
I won't be in Rossberry,  
We won't do battle till doomsday,  
Myself and yourself, womanikin.

## Fatal Shot

Lynchehaun, that is tedious,  
I don't have time to talk,  
Ronan won't let me trust anybody,  
It's he who's put me in this condition.

I took a fatal shot  
In the midst of the battle at Ronan  
That pierced the precious bell that hung  
Round the cleric's neck.

As I made the brilliant spear-cast  
From the midst of battle at Ronan,  
He said 'From now on,  
You'll be among the birds of the air.'

Then I rose up  
Up into the ether,  
Never in my life did I leap  
A leap that was lighter.

If it was on the glorious morning  
On the Tuesday or Monday,  
Nobody would be prouder than me  
Beside a young soldier of my people.

I marvel at the thing I see,  
Man who gave today shape,  
The hag's rags on the floor,  
Lynchehaun's two swift eyes.

## Madman of the Glens

Woodman, what's the story?  
Your voice is pitiable,  
Tell me what made you lose  
Your wits and appearance.

I would tell you my background  
And the scale of the deeds I've done  
If I wasn't scared of the shaggy crowd  
In the king's inn-house.

I'm Alan  
That used to go to many a skirmish  
With eagles, everyone calls me  
The madmen early and fast in the glens.

I'm the coalman's son, Sweeney,  
I'm from the Bush,  
It's all the easier for us  
To have our conversation here, man.



Hag of the Mill

Hag of the mill over by,  
Why would you put me astray?  
Is it not shameful of you through womanly guile  
To betray me and bait me?

It wasn't me betrayed you, Sweeney,  
Though you have a reputation for being gentle  
But the miracles of Ronan from heaven  
That left you insane among the insane.

If it were me and would that it were  
That was the king of Dalaray,  
It would mean a fist in the chin,  
No drinking-party for you, crone.

Moylinney

I'm in Moylinney tonight,  
My stark-naked heart knows it,  
I know the plain where my comrade  
MacGonagall was once.

Once myself and the man from Clane  
Were together on this plain,  
Going to Drumlurgan at full speed  
We had a little talk.

I said to the king,  
Something something something something,  
I want to go on a journey,  
My wages aren't worth a damn.

I took from him gratis  
150 haltered steeds,  
150 swords, stout and strong,  
50 foreign cocks, 50 bondage maidens.

I took from him the best brown steed  
That traversed *terra firma*,  
I took his golden vest  
And his girdle of chequered silk.

What plain is the equal of Moylinney  
Except the plain in Meath,  
Or Moyfevin with its network of crosses,  
Or the plain in Argidross?

Or Moyfea, or Moylurg,  
Or lovely Moynee on high,  
Or Moyliffey, or Moylee,  
Or the plain in Muirhevna?

Of all I've ever seen  
Between the north, south and west,  
I haven't seen until this  
The equal of this plain.

There

Pity anybody that bears ill-will,  
Would that he hadn't been born or conceived  
Whether it's a woman that bears it or a man,  
The pair of them won't reach holy heaven.

It's not often there's a group of three  
Without one of them up to some *uisce faoi thalamh*,  
Blackthorns and prickles are destroying me  
So that I'm the conspiring moaning one.

But a madwoman fleeing her man  
Is an unfamiliar story,  
A man without a blanket or a shoe  
Fleeing before the madwoman.

Our wish when the barnacle-geese come  
Until Mayday from Halloween,  
In every dark abundant wood  
Is to be among the ivy.

The pure water of Glenbalkan,  
Listening there to all its fowl,  
The rapid streams there,  
The holms and rivers there.

The shelter of its holly and hazel,  
The leaves, the brambles, the thistles and acorns there,  
Its berries, lovely and fresh,  
Its nuts, its sloes so cool.

So many packs of hounds under the trees there,  
The water so pure and free,  
The bellowing of the wild stags there,  
Whoever bore it ill-will, it wasn't me.

In Battle

Pity whoever takes womens' fancy,  
However plausible they appear to be,  
Since the first love of Mad Sweeney  
Didn't do him right.

Pity whoever trusts women,  
Whether by night or by day,  
Whatever it is they have in their gut  
After Erin's deceit.

I did the woman a good favour  
Without beating about the bush, no lie,  
She got from me 150 head of cattle  
And fifty steeds in a single day.

When I was in battle  
I wouldn't run away from an army band,  
Any place there was a battle or fight,  
I was a match for thirty.

Congal asked us, good move,  
Young warriors of Ulster,  
Which of you will crush in battle  
The warmonger L. L. from Keady?

The man is wild and angry,  
His shield and his spear are enormous,  
He quieted the army host for a spell,  
The great peerless man.

I said at Congal's hand,  
Not the words of a man not up for a fight,  
I'll crush the great L. L.  
Though he's stronger in battle than most.

I left L. L. headless  
And got satisfaction in full,  
The five sons of the king of Moymargy  
Fell by me and all.

Bás Gan Sagart

That is just sick, Moling's swineherd,  
You've done a selfish violent deed,  
Pity anyone who by his strength would kill  
The king, the saint, the fool for Christ's sake.

You'll get your comeuppance  
And in the end a *bás gan sagart*,  
Demons will possess your soul  
And beasts and serpents and insects take your corpse.

The self-same place in heaven  
Will be there for him and for me, man,  
At Friday fasting, psalms will be sung  
For the soul of the true guest.

He was every inch of him a king,  
He was a madman, pure and complete,  
There's his resting-place lit bright,  
The pity of it has broken my heart.

Dear to Me

Here's my Sweeney's wee grave-mound,  
His memory pains my heart,  
Every place the holy fool used be,  
For love of him, is dear to me.

Dear to me Glenbalkan's fair grassland  
As Sweeney loved it *compos mentis*,  
Dear to me every stream that comes out of it,  
Dear to me its green-topped watercress.

The well of Tobernagalt over by,  
The one whose food its cress was is beloved,  
Dear to me its clear sand,  
Dear to me its water so pure.

It fell on me to prepare him and it,  
I longed to see him and it,  
He asked to be taken to my house,  
Dear to me was the lying-in-wait.

Dear to me every stream, however cold,  
On which the green watercress used be  
And every well with its water so bright  
Sweeney used haunt.

If the King of Heaven should permit,  
Get up and go with me,  
Give me, dear heart, your hand  
From the wee resting-place.

I loved to talk with Sweeney,  
I'll bear his memory in my heart a long time,  
I beseech the King of Heaven  
Over his grave and memorial cairn.

# Confessions of a Highland Art Dealer

Tony Davidson in conversation with Cynthia Rogerson

THE MEMOIR GENRE only half describes Tony Davidson's recent book, in which he explores the origin of art works through visits to studios all over Scotland and beyond and investigates the purpose of art and the lives of artists. Buffeted by the many changes of the last quarter century, he talks about their influence on his community. Threaded through these esoteric and ecological concerns is the personal story of a young man who, while looking for a purpose in life, fell in love with a derelict church near Beaulieu 26 years ago. He lived in it alone through a freezing winter, repaired it, put in electricity and plumbing, and heated it on the scantiest of shoestrings. All along he sought artists who resonated with him, for it was never his aim to create a conventional rural gallery selling local scenes.

I meet with Tony in my garden on a sunny/rainy August day. I've got two dogs, and he's brought two more, so there's a dog party going on the whole time we talk. It feels fitting.

**C: When did you first have the idea of writing about your gallery?**

**T:** In 2019 Kapka nudged me. Said if I didn't write it, she would. (Note: Kapka is Kapka Kasabova, prizewinning author.) I'd enjoyed writing before, but just small things.

**C:** This is your first book. Was it hard to write?

**T:** No. I just got up early one morning and started. It felt easy because I was remembering the past, and the gallery is full of stories. There was no long journey or extensive research. It took about six months. Once or twice I got stuck, and I went whomping (walking alone fast somewhere wild) or found another way through the maze. Those moments gave the book fresh rhythms.

**C:** The book is structured into sections titled Composition, Colour, Meaning, and Value. How did you decide this?

**T:** (laughing) It was intuitive. I love structure. The book begins with a concrete story – the physical building – and it ends dream-like. Connections become geographically wider, more technological and philosophical and less tangible as the book progresses. I studied Geography and the sections are reminiscent of old geography books. So maybe it's a personal joke, too?

**C:** I loved the details of your early survival. I've a clear image of that upstairs floor you slept on, avoiding the spooky



Tony Davidson with Globbie. Photo by Cynthia Rogerson

vestry. That ancient well out the back, which you managed to unclog so you could wash. The way you hung that ingenious lighting system. Are you ever nostalgic for those times?

**T:** No, not really. The world has changed and I've changed. It's not just about the building anymore. But I still wouldn't want to sleep in the vestry again. It's haunted, you know.

**C:** You say: *A gallery is a synapse. It allows artistic neurons to flow between artist and client. We must encourage this transmission, this impulsive spark.* Can you please expand on this?

**T:** A synapse connects two nerves or a nerve and a muscle. A gallery in some ways fills this space too. It is the gel that allows the connection to happen. We need each other – artist, gallery and client. My role is to keep the flame lit.

**C:** You have between 60 and 80 artists. How do you choose artists?

**T:** It's an instinctive thing. The gallery is already full, so I'm looking for specific things. I want artists to have a place in a canon. They have to be good. Ironically, if they try too hard to be commercial... well, there will be others like them. I would love to see more young artists. I would never show something I didn't like.

**T:** Far from that. Everything is professionally photographed and added to the data base the moment it arrives. We're a slick operation. I am as interested in an artist's long-term career as I am in individual paintings. There's not much time to say hello, but there is always a thrill in seeing more work on the gallery's walls for the first time.

**C:** You say...*an art dealer is always surrounded by love, for art is an intoxicating torrent of goodness.* Are all art works really torrents of goodness?

**T:** It's not that simple. There are politically, economically and religiously useful artists, but I don't think they produce real art. Where there's money, there's often corruption. A real artist is full of goodness. Gerald (Laing) once told me that it's easy to make a monster. What's beauty and what's goodness? It's the good ones that'll be remembered. It's not my favourite line in the book. I prefer *He ran quickly on short legs.*

**C:** Can you sum up what you want readers to feel?

**T:** I'd like them to get to the end of the book, to enjoy the story and maybe learn a few things. It'd be good if they appreciated the artistic compulsion.

**C:** In your gallery history, when were you happiest?

**T:** Happiness isn't what I'm looking for. In the gallery I feel most fulfilment and joy when the gallery is looking its best, and a storm comes in, so the lighting becomes dramatic. The fire is lit and music plays loudly, maybe Toots and the Maytals or possibly a requiem. I could be alone or someone else could be there. Time can stop for a moment. Outside the gallery, I enjoy the wildness of my garden. Nature seems infinitely resilient and creative.

**C:** Was there a book launch?

**T:** I don't enjoy crowds, so no launch was planned. But I'm happy to sign a copy in the gallery. (<https://www.kilmorackgallery.co.uk>)

Tony has established his own publishing house – Woodwoose Books. He intends to apply the same criteria in choosing authors as he does choosing artists. So, if you write something he likes, you've got a chance. ■

*Confessions of a Highland Art Dealer.* Tony Davidson. Woodwoose Books (2022) £8.99



IN NO LESS a football authority than Dungeons and Dragons Monster Manual, 5th Edition, we find the Kraken described as “a primeval force that obliterates the greatest achievements of civilisation as if they were castles in the sand.”

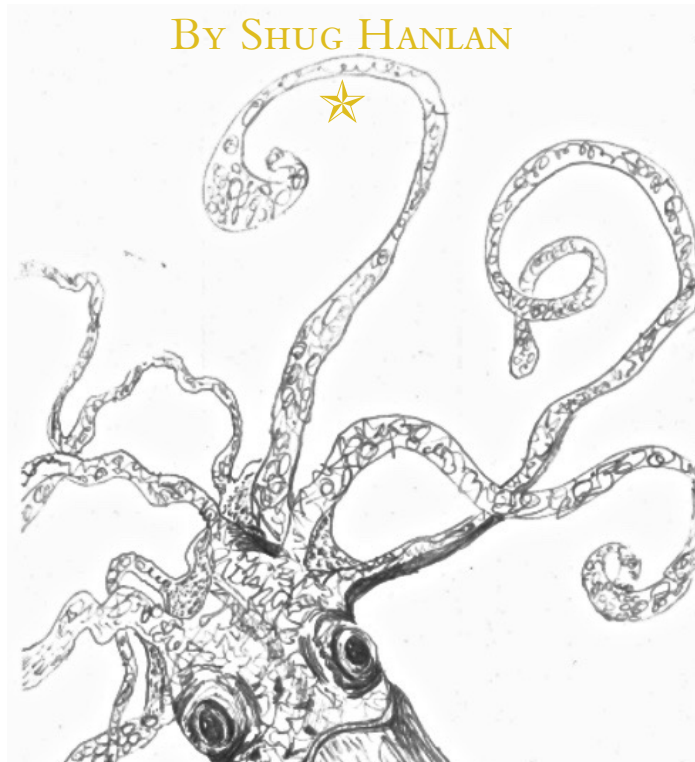
While it remains open to debate whether the Ross-Shire League in the mid-19th Century could be classed among, “the greatest achievements of civilisation”, it is a historical fact that during season 1852-3 it’s fixture list was decimated by a sudden outbreak of Kraken hooliganism. Several of these unruly young denizens of the deep sneak attacked Alness, eviscerated Evanton, bombarded Bishop Kinkell and badly damaged Dingwall. Dirt roads were ripped up, wells pissed in, bridges battered and several wee free churches desecrated.

Invergordon’s George Wimpey Stadium was particularly targeted. A couple of shepherds enjoying a dram before the Ness Cup tie with Glospie in the hospitality tent on the hillside directly above the park, saw their sheep being roughly seized (leading to a rumour that the invaders might have been Aberdeen based). In what seemed like a matter of seconds the playing surface was littered with corpses and blood dripped from the corner flags. They spoke of gigantic cephalopods with inky black eyes and deadly suckered tentacles and of a song that seemed to start in the middle of the Firth,

“We are the Kraken Kids,  
We hate octopuses,

# Cromarty Firth Kraken

BY SHUG HANLAN



and we hate squids.”

The entire coastline community questioned who had summoned the great creatures. Was a match official a secret Kraken priest? Perhaps a member of the club committee, seeing the first team squad stretched to breaking point by suspensions and injuries and keen to seek a swift postponement, was responsible for the carnage.

One contemporary account of the

incidents testified, “I will tell you this of the Kraken. You could see them swimming past the Suitors and crashing through Cromarty. They snorted and tossed their great heads. We were showered with wet sand, broken rum bottles, sharpened starfish, and poisonous seawater. They wore no club colours and clearly set out to make football grounds an unsafe place for true football fans”.

“The laird must lay down the law to

make sure these hideous troublemakers never attack the people of the Black Isle ever again. A small fine and a gentle clip around the tentacle will not suffice. Formidable sea defences must be built immediately! Every football ground should be a great structure forged in iron and stone and have several escape tunnels with passages so narrow hardly a home supporter’s shadow can pass. The pitch needs to be protected by covered pit traps, preferably with pointed spikes at the bottom.”

Local landowners reluctantly acted upon their villagers’ concerns but, like all good feudal dictators, palmed them off with a dodgy patchwork of security measures which ranged from a dry dyke, fish nets and some early warning wind chimes. These derisory efforts were hailed to be a roaring success for the Kraken attacks ended as suddenly as they began.

Few now in Invergordon remember those dark, perilous days but some dim echoes can still be heard in the Caledonian Bar when, on match days, with the boozer packed with auld worthies, home town fans, former British Aluminium workers and fabricators on the oil rigs, a voice rings out, “Let’s hope it’s a crackin’ game”.

Other clubs believed to have a strong support among sea monsters include Hokkaido Consadole Sapporo in the Japanese J1 League whose followers include the Akkorokamui, a giant octopus-like creature which, handily enough for half-time tactic talks, has the power to heal and bestow knowledge. ■

## The Rig

Udale Bay, Black Isle

PETER BURROWS

Still a mighty vision, 20 years out  
from the Northern fields. High skeletal towers  
on squat floating platforms landmark  
this bay’s reserve where migrant birds  
Autumn before continuing North.

From high, where osprey nest  
endless water spills below. Unseen  
hands from across the yard keep  
in constant repair. Tannoyed  
mutterings drift to shore.

After circling the floating war grave,  
tourist boats sidle up cursorily  
before speeding out in search of dolphins,

past the seasoned companions,  
downturn denizens gathering  
in silent industry, lingering longer,

away, away from that distant sparkling sea.  
Such beauty in decay;  
waiting out time, rolling the waves;  
fortunes that rest upon a turning tide.



Cromarty Firth rig and Emigrants’ Stone.  
Kenny Taylor

# Poems by Hugh McMillan, Sharon Black and Judith Taylor

## The Pair who used to Play Pool with the Pair who are Here

HUGH McMILLAN

I'm thinking who they were, those no longer  
here: that kindly northern English couple  
who drove up country once a week, sipped

sherry and half pints and played, joking  
in a saucy, innocent way. The pair still  
here are playing pool but they are making

half the noise, having half the fun.  
Life is like that, becomes through time  
a re-enactment. Do you remember

that double, a red struck by error  
that rocketed into the pocket, the laughter?  
The shots that didn't connect. Maybe small

things endure. I'm imagining in the half lit  
space between dartboard and the drinkers'  
bowed heads, they are still scoring the air.

## Mythos

HUGH McMILLAN

Pines grow in  
mist this morning.  
Cloud has fallen to earth  
and the sky is a skin  
on a well of blue waiting  
to burn. In an hour or two  
the heat will hit us,

we will find ourselves  
suddenly standing  
in the unfurled morning  
by a barely moving river,  
the hills with collars of spill  
like gold. Imagine such a land

and its stories.  
The tale of how Eithne  
or Taliesin rid the land  
of snakes and square-heads.  
Of how wolves  
killed the last shooter  
in the lounge bar

of the Buccleugh.  
All we need for this  
is love, freedom  
and high fever.  
In such weather  
dreaming is simply  
borrowing from tomorrow

## Learning about the Religious Wars, Wigtown Book Festival 2022

HUGH McMILLAN

I had to leave before the talk,  
the streets were full of hooded  
folk with green anoraks like monks  
pacing in the rain between one book  
and another, but in the pub

in Newton Stewart the barman  
had just bought a huge crossbow  
with a metal bolt in a car boot sale  
and wanted to fire it 'to see what  
happened'. I had just got a pint

of cider and looked on but thought  
even from my degree of ignorance  
that the complex winding mechanism  
indicated no ordinary buy: indeed it took  
three men in Rangers tops some

minutes to load it: I imagine in warfare  
one man in a Rangers top might be  
trained to do this in half the time,  
using his 55 Nike Air Force trainers  
as counter balance but imagine

the pressure as enemy horsemen  
from the Holy Roman Empire bore down.  
Even here, the barman had to stop  
for a second to serve two sceptical girls  
Baileys. Someone brought

a thick plank from the back to prop  
against the wall and had  
the presence of mind to draw the face  
of a local Catholic friend upon it.  
There was much laughter, whooping  
and excitement and many folk  
were told to stand back well out  
of range. It was like Grunwald,  
the mist of sweat, the breath,  
the drum of anticipation like hoof beats,

the sun splintering through windows,  
the puggy pulsing red as blood.  
I was in the second line when  
the fusillade fired, through the target,  
two walls, a cupboard and a junction

box, lodging a few feet from a woman  
watching 'Homes Under the Hammer'.  
She was reported to have exclaimed  
Hail Mary Mother of God thus settling  
the conflict once and for all.

.

## Leaving

HUGH McMILLAN

Through a mosaic of pink  
and white rock a ferry is leaving.  
It is not a calendar picture  
or postcard, or the front

page of the Peoples Friend,  
it is real: there is a hard breeze,  
gulls are screaming, waves  
muscle towards my feet.

At Three AM I was in Ukraine,  
at Six talking to my daughter,  
at Eleven phoning the doctor,  
but in the early evening I am

watching the Lochnevis  
under a miraculous blue sky  
moving slowly from my past  
into the arms of the sea.

## Study of a Woman Alone in her Marital Bed

SHARON BLACK

I'm a cross, an angel with a full skirt  
and with flapping outstretched wings,

a skipjack on a porcelain plate,  
a length of relaxed timber; an origami

of knees and elbows, shoulders, neck,  
legs together, now akimbo....

I'm a boat at sea with no other boats for miles,  
no rain predicted, the water glassy,

my reflection wavering, hull to hull –  
and I have never felt so *boat*:

not ship or raft or catamaran or ocean liner,  
not barge or skiff or yacht –

just a narrow wooden boat from which a line is dangling,  
a figure moving on the deck,

white sail arching like a swan's neck;  
on the table a nautical map,

each arrow breaking through  
the rings of a compass rose.



## Lamp

SHARON BLACK

I nabbed it from your throwing-out pile:  
this ancient table lamp, stained shade, base  
painted bubble-gum pink. Its light

was harsh in the sparseness  
of your living room, you were moving anyway,  
wanted another fresh start.

I glued a bright batik to the shade, repainted  
each rung of metalwork black,  
switched the bulb

and stood it on my coffee table overlooking  
the river, the silent line of poplars,  
a lacework of snow.

All night it throws a hush over my bedlam  
of books and empty mugs.  
I wish that I could do the same for you

but you won't let me, afraid  
of what some TLC and softer lighting  
might reveal.

## Portrait of My Mother as a Teapot

SHARON BLACK

Glazed, fine-boned, not a chip in sight.  
Slender spout with just the right amount of curve

for purpose and aesthetic. Showroom quality,  
a wingless porcelain bird, long neck reaching out

across the biros and the books. Or turning  
to gossip with another teapot, spout to spout,

on matching rattan mats. Eye of a storm,  
it's surrounded – spoons,

spilled sugar, crumbs, abandoned straw –  
small white planet that I orbit with my cup,

even when it's empty,  
even when the kettle isn't on.

## Seed Balls

SHARON BLACK

I watch as coal tits flit  
around the metal hoop –

like thoughts, the way they flock  
and scatter. Five, no, six

hang on the grille, each an idea  
jabbing for grain, trying to find a foothold.

Seeds spray to the ground.  
A green mesh pocket slumps

through a gap. Perhaps  
my whole life is a dream, my body

in a coma, in a lab, as someone in a white coat  
shakes their head, my mother's

warm hand over mine,  
the movements of her thumb as random

as those wings knitting the air  
for millet, cracked corn, sunflower hearts.

## If I know

JUDITH TAYLOR

where to get sloes at the end of summer  
(just a pocketful, just  
enough for gin)

and where the unwanted comfrey  
isn't sprayed  
and can be cut for compost

where to go for a cheap  
replacement watch-strap  
and for cheap, reliable car repairs

and which shop  
is which if you're after one  
particular beer

is that enough that I can say  
(and after all this time)  
honestly  
yes  
I live here?

## The Glass

JUDITH TAYLOR

Not midnight yet. My parents have gone to bed  
leaving me sitting up on their sofa  
drinking the sideboard whisky, watching the clock  
tick, and thinking again

how things reverse themselves  
since the days it would have been me in bed by this time  
not to rest, but just to lie there  
listening out for clues

to how much drink had been taken and  
what the trouble was

till it all died down:  
the end of another day at last  
and ready for sleep.

How clear I thought my mind was then  
when I looked at them

and part of me thinks so still;  
wonders, exasperated, where I picked up that song  
The Parting Glass, that I can't stop hearing  
inside my head tonight

that same old drunk-at-the-end-of-it story,  
all the harm I've done  
alas twas only done to me – yeah, nice for you  
that you can think so –

and part of me wants to ask me  
how can you say that? Did you really not think  
you belonged?

And that part wishes still  
– like on every Hogmanay –  
for a good voice

to sing, and be sung with.  
To let the tears all fall,  
ready for sleep.

To sing Goodnight; to sing  
joy be with you all

IT WAS NOTHING really, just a cough: the kind which might lead a doctor to enquire *productive?* as though anticipating that, one day, the humble cough might surprise him and prove itself to serve some greater purpose.

'You ought to get that checked,' Gus had said. It was a Sunday, hot and dry, and the smell from the cauliflowers had the sulphurous taint of rot. 'Bastard beasties.' He rammed the digging-fork into the loam and dropped to his haunches, insinuating his fingers into the tightly clenched leaves, and opening them out to expose the vivid green onslaught of a caterpillar infestation. On inspection the cabbages were the same, their outer leaves brown and crimped as ancient elephant ears, the inner ones laced like snowflakes.

'Not again,' she said her tone mirroring his mood rather than any deep-seated disappointment of her own. 'Do you remember last year's broccoli?'

'Remember?' That meal will be forever seared into my brain. Those buggers must have been heat resistant. And, whilst at the time Bec had been equally disgusted when, last summer, three caterpillars had crawled determinedly from the steaming vegetables of their Sunday lunch, with hindsight she had come to regard the event as a kind of minor miracle – a resurrection of sorts, performed, right there, on the stage of their kitchen table – although Gus had continued to see it solely as an argument for the use of pesticides.

'What type are they?' she asked now, picking up a caterpillar between finger and thumb and examining its struggling body. Something about its wrinkled persistence and its bright translucency put her in mind of the time they had experimented with coloured condoms.

'Cabbage whites,' Gus

growled. 'Bloody pests.' 'Will they be pretty when they emerge?' 'Pretty?' He stared at her bemused, 'Bec, the crop's ruined!'

The three she rescued she kept in an old plastic fish tank she'd found stored in the garage, which had once housed a hamster but had for the past year acted as mausoleum to the translucent remains of a house spider. She chose the smallest – ones which had recently hatched from the pimply rash of yellow eggs glued to the underside of the leaves – and added a chunk of foliage on

which they could feed. Each day saw progress. Their appetite was voracious and, as they moved across the leaves, scissoring the flesh with their mandibles, their bodies seemed to visibly swell. Occasionally, when she was emptying out the mass of gravelly waste that accumulated at the bottom of the tank, she came across their cast-off skins which, at night when she was lying next to Gus his muscles tight and hot from digging, she described as *mere shadows of their former selves*, in the dreamy, sing-song voice which she knew turned him on. She was undergoing tests. The GP – baffled by her cough's persistent nature, and, after a course of antibiotics failed to make an impact – had referred her to the hospital to be someone else's problem. The specialist had shown her a diagram of the chest – the lungs for all the world like a cleaved cabbage, the

spine reminiscent of its toughened white stem – and pointed to where the tapering twigs of the bronchial tree terminated in a magnified cluster of nodules, *the Alveoli*, he'd said, *like bunches of grapes*. By contrast Bec's own lung was mildly disappointing, an early-stage cocoon with some woolly stuff inside, as though on her journey to the hospital she had inadvertently inhaled a cloud. This, the specialist said, was her problem.

That night she moved the caterpillars up into the bedroom, placing them on the bedside cabinet where moonlight lit the tank, highlighting the bristles which ran along their bodies. They had begun to act strangely, stretching themselves upwards as if in search of higher ground, waving like sea swept kelp. She worried that they might be unhappy, that the tank or the food she was providing was insufficient for their caterpillar needs. She wanted to ask Gus, who knew about such things, but he'd withdrawn into himself so that even when she pressed herself against him – for warmth, for comfort – he was cold and unresponsive. In the morning the caterpillars had changed, two had made their way up to the highest corners of the tank whilst one had fastened itself to the side. They no longer had legs or a head but had become almost dragonesque: plated and ridged, with two tiny black horns protruding mid body, presumably to deter predators. This, she assumed, was stage three, the stage she herself was

at, a stage from which, according to the specialist, there could be no return.

For ten days nothing further happened and unlike the caterpillars, which had seemed bold and shameless shedding their skins like strip-joint hussies, the chrysalis was a secretive thing. Each morning, when she rose, Bec would look

for signs of change, holding the tank to the light to illuminate each pupa although unable to see inside. She was left to imagine what might be taking place, what new ingredients were being added to the soup and what changes a body was capable of inflicting upon itself. She saw little of Gus who spent his days at work, his evenings in the garden: the brassicas, he said, were beyond help but the carrots and peas still held the promise of a healthy crop. On the nights they made love it was at her instigation, cunning in her desire for him, relentless in her need for affirmation. Sometimes she woke breathless, a sense of having lifted from the bed, woozy and light-headed, something frail but urgent beating in her chest; on those nights she would cling to Gus not for comfort but for ballast.

The blood was a surprise, she hadn't expected blood, or at least the reddish coloured liquid – just a drop – which must have trickled from the case when the chrysalis split. What remained, still attached to the side, was a papery shell: a tiny Chinese lantern, delicate and pale. There were three empty cases but no butterflies. Bec opened the window and called for Gus to come, he was standing by the fence, looking out across the field to where it lifted to the embankment of the motorway; she watched as his shoulders rose and fell with the faint pulse of the distant traffic, noticing where the sun had licked his neck leaving its dark red kiss. When he came to the bedroom, she showed him the tank and the empty pupas. The tank was covered with a tightly fitting white lid, griddled with ventilation holes. carefully, Gus removed this and laid it upside down upon the bed. Clustered in the middle were three white butterflies, as pale and darkly flecked as honesty pods, trembling slightly. She moved, as if to touch them, but he caught her hand, 'Leave them, Bec,' he said. 'They've been through quite a change; you have to give them time to adapt. They won't be ready yet.' He picked up the lid and placed it gently on the sill beside the open window. 'Let's leave them for a while.' He took her hand and led her down the stairs.

They stood beside the bed of ruined cabbages overlooked by sunflowers and dazzled by the glare of late-crop rapeseed in the neighbouring field. Gus rested his chin upon Bec's head and slowly curled his arms around her body, tight as a cocoon. Calmed by his breathing, Bec kept her gaze on the bedroom window and waited. ■

[This was the winner of the Story category in the 2021/22 Neil Gunn Writing Competition]

# Flying Crooked

BY HEATHER F. REID



White butterfly. Dirk Daniel Mann Pixabay





# Poems by Antonia Kearton, Geoff Daniel and Cindy Stevens

## Swimming, Loch Garten

ANTONIA KEARTON

The evening sun is surreptitious.  
A few waves flex, throwing light  
onto the rock

where you stand, intent, steering  
your brother's remote  
control boat. I swim

out, arms opening to dark water  
my mouth  
bruising the surface of the loch.

A yellowing birch leaf  
floats unmoored,  
and a seed, round as the world

spins across  
the watery, shifting Meall a'Bhuachaille  
whose inverse climbs

heavily through air.

## Talking to Persephone

ANTONIA KEARTON

She says she'll meet me  
by the river in its winter colours,  
ice licking the rocks, the alder's trailing fingers.

I watch her come towards me  
the goddess of spring  
walking across a field of snow

in her long black woollen coat, the one  
with the embroidered border, poppy-red.  
Her hair is an estuary of pale gold.

I say I'm seeing too much death. I am afraid,  
exhausted, scoured by grief. I want  
to know what it's like, down there.

She says she cannot tell me, but her touch  
is warm. She says that Lethe's kind,  
and crossing the Styx

is nothing to be feared. Before she goes  
she kisses me gently on the cheek,  
and whispers in my ear.

## Hammerstone

GEOFF DANIEL

At the shore site,  
in the ruckle of stones  
where the long reach  
of the sea's disposal meets  
the scarp of dune, and land  
comes to scree and fall,

we know old habitation  
by the midden stain –  
the hard brown sand a stratum,  
split bone, shucked shell, residue;

there are relicts, laid courses  
emerging, homes hacked off  
by the elements, the mounds  
of their burial bisected;

and the smaller finds:  
cracked sherds, worked bone  
and hammerstones, washed out  
to be litter at your feet.

Here is one such:  
a hammerstone  
in the treacle-toffee brown  
of hornblende porphyry:  
dense and pocked,  
volcanic, crystalline;

a length of stone,  
like a haft – irregular,  
pecked by knapping;  
it lays in your fist  
its cold heft, weight fitted  
for work of another age.

Who found it first,  
and made the find a tool?  
Whose palm ground it  
smooth with oil of skin,  
with their hand's blood  
worked a warmth in it?

Back into the machair  
in a stone-wall kist  
they went, to become  
in the sands in time  
their own dark stain,  
chill litter of themselves.

## & the rest is silence

GEOFF DANIEL

a common whelk:  
the sort of shell  
you can tell a child  
to find an ocean in,  
to put an ear to for  
the distant shore, the far surf  
breaking in the inner turns;

and on the beach here  
in the litter at the edge –  
more of them, but broken,  
scattered by tides,  
battered in the cold salt,  
sheered, ground down

to the scheme within:  
an ampersand;  
a treble clef;  
the opened secret of  
the chamber of its heart,  
prefiguring silence.

## The Wreck of the Annie Jane

CINDY STEVENS

I lie on wet sand unable to move,  
sea-soaked, exhausted, ice-cold.  
Wind howls about me, waves drag at my feet.  
There is no light, no moon, no stars  
and now no wife.

We sailed from Liverpool en route for Quebec  
with high hopes for a prosperous future.

I lie on wet sand unable to move,  
head throbbing, mind confused.  
I try to think clearly what happened,  
remember only rough seas, then panic  
and my wife gone.

We sailed from Liverpool en route for Quebec  
with such hopes for our future together.

I feel a soft touch as I lie on the sand,  
hear strange foreign words as hands lift me up,  
carry me to shelter and a warm fire  
where I lie down. At last I sleep  
without my wife.

We sailed from Liverpool en route for Quebec  
but our hopes for the future were drowned.

Come dawn, we gather up the bodies,  
adults, children, emigrants and crew,  
three hundred and fifty dead.  
And in a mass grave in the sand dunes  
I lay my wife.

We sailed from Liverpool en route for Quebec  
but our hopes were crushed on Vatersay.

## Day 0

You own your breath, don't you?

Surely you own your thoughts.

You own your personality because that's who you are, right?

No. Not if you were still together, absolutely still, just laughing quietly at time and tide and looking on unflinchingly into the future, smiling ... but not anymore.

No, you don't own your breath, your thoughts are tangled up with theirs and you are not your personality. Not anymore.

Breathe out. Keep breathing out. Everywhere are trinkets, cruel, insanely arbitrary trinkets to remind you of that elusiveness – that vacuous non-presence.

Narrow your eyes and try to reach the door, feeling your way.

Shut them and you bump into things – books, ornaments, cards, coffee cups half-empty, glasses full of dregs, leftovers from another time, clothes you'll never wear again and clothes not yours at all. Everything once redolent of home now turns on you it's back – *'you don't belong here. In this place you just exist.'*

Open them wide. Look all around for something yours and only yours, that speaks only of you. Don't check your phone; it's full of pictures. Don't turn on the computer – not until the narratives of rapture can be dealt with coldly down the barrel of those years and be deleted, one by one. Don't open books, don't take them from the floor – they have a certain ... scent.

Follow your knees and say out loud – walls, windows, table, chairs, carpet, corridor, rug, porch, front door. You need to know it's there – your voice – not taken with your breath. Breathe out. Breathe out some more.

Open the door. Stand up. Face the outside. Inhale. Breathe air you don't feel like you're stealing. Learn everything again – to fill your lungs and empty them, to walk, to cross the road, enter the park, zip up your jacket, say 'good morning' to the dogwalker.

'Good morning'.

'Morning, bud! Chill in the air the day.'

(*Say something – anything*) – 'Ehm, yes, winter's earlier this year.'

'Aye. No half! Dreich as. How's you?'

(*Say something – anything*) – 'Fine, thanks. And you?'

'No bad. Later then, aye?!'

'Later.'

Grey sky. Swirling leaves. Wind picking up. A lock of hair across your face. Stop. Wait for it to blow the other way.

## Day 1

Wake up!

No.

No? Why not?

Because there's no sleep to wake up from.

Imperatives. Instructions in their simplest form. Every noun a verb. Just make a list – shower, cereal, teeth,

socks, jumper, fire, emails, sanitiser, half a chapter, jeans, letter, paper, watch the second half on iPlayer (no – DON'T do that) – get milk and put the bin out, but not in that order.

Sister is worried – 'There's no way I'm letting you drive by yourself.'

'but, but ...'

'No buts – I'll take you through to Mum and Dad's.'

'But you're on call tomorrow.'

'I can swap my shift.'

The open road. Her smile. Haar coming in. Seaweed in rafts. Headlights. Smoke from the cottages. Sun going down. Her worried face.

Dad, with gnarly fingers kneading life into defeated muscles, fighting with

# Raw

STORY BY IAN TALLACH



only twenty yards in front of it another gate – brand new, but stiff and creaky. A question posed – *Are you sure you wish to enter here – this place of the departed?*

'Damned right! Never been so sure of anything!' The gate yields. Stagger on, into the graveyard. Time to converse with them – gran and granddad, buried side-by-side at the far end. Look down – those knees again, irreverently kneeling there, above their bones.

Stand up!

'No!' they seem to say. *'We want you here. Stay with us and tell us everything.'*

'We might be here a while.'

*'Well go on then! We don't have all day.'* (Graveyard humour. Allow yourself a chuckle).

*Follow your knees and say out loud  
– walls, windows, table, chairs, carpet,  
corridor, rug, porch, front door. You  
need to know it's there – your voice –  
not taken with your breath. Breathe  
out. Breathe out some more.*

despair, hunched over, all-embracing. The dam bursts.

Mum, in her wheelchair, drawing to herself and cradling, wiping tears away and making way for others. Time for a cup of tea.

## Day 2

Go for a walk. Down to the beach. Drenching wind and howling rain. Seems about right. Nobody else around. This, finally, is redolent of no-one. Go on. Walk. Keep walking. Out of the past – the recent past ... into the distant past. You'll know when to stop.

Down at the beach, follow your sticks along the muddy path towards the style. Impediments are cows, cowpats, a bull sometimes, jaunty-angled clods with tufts of sea-grass decked with tiny flowers – beach-aster, rosemary, daisies – a treachery of rockpools and a river fordable at lowest ebb. Beyond – the best beach on the island.

But no – these sticks are like divining rods. They lead inland. A rusty gate. And

Laughter.

'And how are you?' she asks again. (Is this stupidity ... or genuine concern?)

She's very patient. The dam bursts again. Thank God for rain – why not join in? – everything is sodden, anyway. Bring on the deluge. The lines around her eyes make her look younger. She has a face that tells a story. Yes, it's genuine concern.

'Sorry, too much information.'

No, it's not. I see your Dad sometimes. 'Really?'

'Aye. Do you have a strong faith like him?'

'A tiny bit ... not so robust, not certain, anyway. Do you?'

'No, not really. I was raised a Catholic, but I don't go to church or anything. Can't say I don't pray, though. God knows there's been some times for that!'

'Really? And how are you?'

'Apart from wet?' More laughter. Then, with the saddest face, but through that undefeated smile, she speaks of things too harrowing to mention – lives lost in different ways, trust broken, illness, little windows into private worlds of desolation.

And suddenly, a universe of hurt shrinks to a manageable vastness.

She giggles to compensate. 'Well, that was a bit OTT ... considering we hardly know each other!'

But, one conversation, shorn of all pretence can cut through years of token friendship.

'Thanks very much indeed. Their house is up this way.'

'OK. Cheerio,' she says. Elbow butts and shoulder pats convey affection and respect. The collie barks goodbye.

'It's good to see you.'

'Aye, you too. Come and visit soon. A quarter mile that way.'

'Thank you.'

Follow the sticks again. Towards the house. Across the ...

'Don't do that!' She yells. She's hardly moved.

'Do what?'

'Don't cross the cattle grid! Not with those sticks! Are you trying to kill yourself?'

They say comedy is in the timing. Sometimes laughter is inevitable.

'Come here, she says. Give me a hug.'

You've got to cry sometimes.

'Trust me,' she says. 'You're better off now.'

'That's kind. But ... all those years – consigned to oblivion?'

'Consigned to nothing.'

'That's what oblivion means – nothing. Nothingness.'

She sighs. 'What I'm saying is they're not consigned – to anything – those years. Easy for me to say, hard to accept, but true – they're part of your journey, your narrative. Don't consign them ... to anything.'

No elbow butts this time. No shoulder pats. The hug is awkward. Sticks rattle at her back. The muddy path is slippery, but once again she compensates. She's very strong. And over her shoulder, a patch of horizon. ■



## Recovering Ground

LEONIE CHARLTON

*You will love again the stranger who was your self*  
Derek Walcott

When you come back to me  
and call me by my name – *Ruadh*  
I can breathe freely

when you stay long enough  
for stillness to settle  
I am unmuscled  
in the softness of now.

Under a supple sky I rest  
here where many places meet –  
hawthorn and hill,  
sea-loch and alder,  
bog myrtle and river.

Under a supple sky I ache –  
if I were the river this would feel like boulders moving  
through the bed and breadth of me;  
if I were a fox denned in the earth  
it would be the liquid dark of my eyes.

When you are close in like this,  
and *Ruadh* slips off your tongue  
I can dare to remember  
the threat of snares laid  
among the innocent trees,  
I dare to remember how you left me,  
skin bursting in bites of steel,  
throat frozen, mouth foaming crimson.

You get an inkling don't you –  
familiar stranger,  
of the agony of abandonment?

Between turns of ingrown rage  
I get an inkling too,  
of how sometimes exile is the only way.

You left me for the chase,  
the taste of other women,  
men, trees, beasts,  
for blood and bark and pheromone,  
for the potent draw of wounds  
that won every time.

I understand a little.  
I have hunkered down, I have waited.

I see fox now, how she weighs the seasons  
soft-footed, outfoxing,  
but is killed, again and again – cubs' slow starvation,  
senses pierce the dark,  
hope snuffles against musky earth.

Under April showers  
this welling of sadness  
settles at new levels,  
allows something else;  
from the sun comes the hailstone,  
from the rock comes the smile,  
from the lungwort comes the longing  
to hold, to be held, to be whole.

I badly want to touch you.

See how the colour of me runs off your tongue like rain.  
In this spell we stroke each other into a tree,  
hawthorn – heart tree – unmistakably.  
Each curve, gnarl, whorl, exposed root,  
contour of bark, telltale of moss  
a story of eroticism, of form, of life.

There, in the living wood I see the  
*ruadh* of winter fox, of trout spots,  
of red-deer flank during the moult,  
of eagle in dying light, in rising light.  
I see the beauty of humanity –  
the tenderness in fingertips  
the faithful rise and fall of rib cage,  
hearts feeding longing and fire  
into kin and cultivation, art and hearth.

I smell smoke. Hawthorn burns hottest.

Eyes deep in reflected flames  
the tide calls to us,  
draws us along stars of upturned roots,  
through air cut by snipe,  
past the heart-blur of duck flying off water,  
pulls us to the river mouth,  
confluence of fresh and saltwater.  
We lie down by the high tide mark,  
its utter integrity –  
the rolling together of  
oak and berry, feather and kelp.

I badly want to touch you.

Clasped in bivalves,  
we open in a golden helplessness of delight,  
we glitter, pecked to life by barnacles and beauty.  
Laughter blossoms, blisters,  
explodes between the sinking hills.

I badly want to touch you.

Stay with me now,  
call me by my name, again and again  
until I sink to sinew and decay  
until maggots rove my rotting flesh  
until I am a mass  
heaving cheerfully to humus,  
until I draw in the iridescent beetle,  
until bluebells thread me with bee after bee  
and we sing back our space  
in the undivided nature of things,  
until we lean in, wavelet by wavelet,  
and we dare, lightly, to touch.

### Footnote:

'Ruadh' the Gaelic for  
'dark-brownish red/wild/fierce/rough/strong'

Detail from photosbyjim iStock



# Bonhoga

*place of one's childhood; spiritual home*

*'The shuddering beauty of this biosphere is bristling with thorns,' David Abrams*

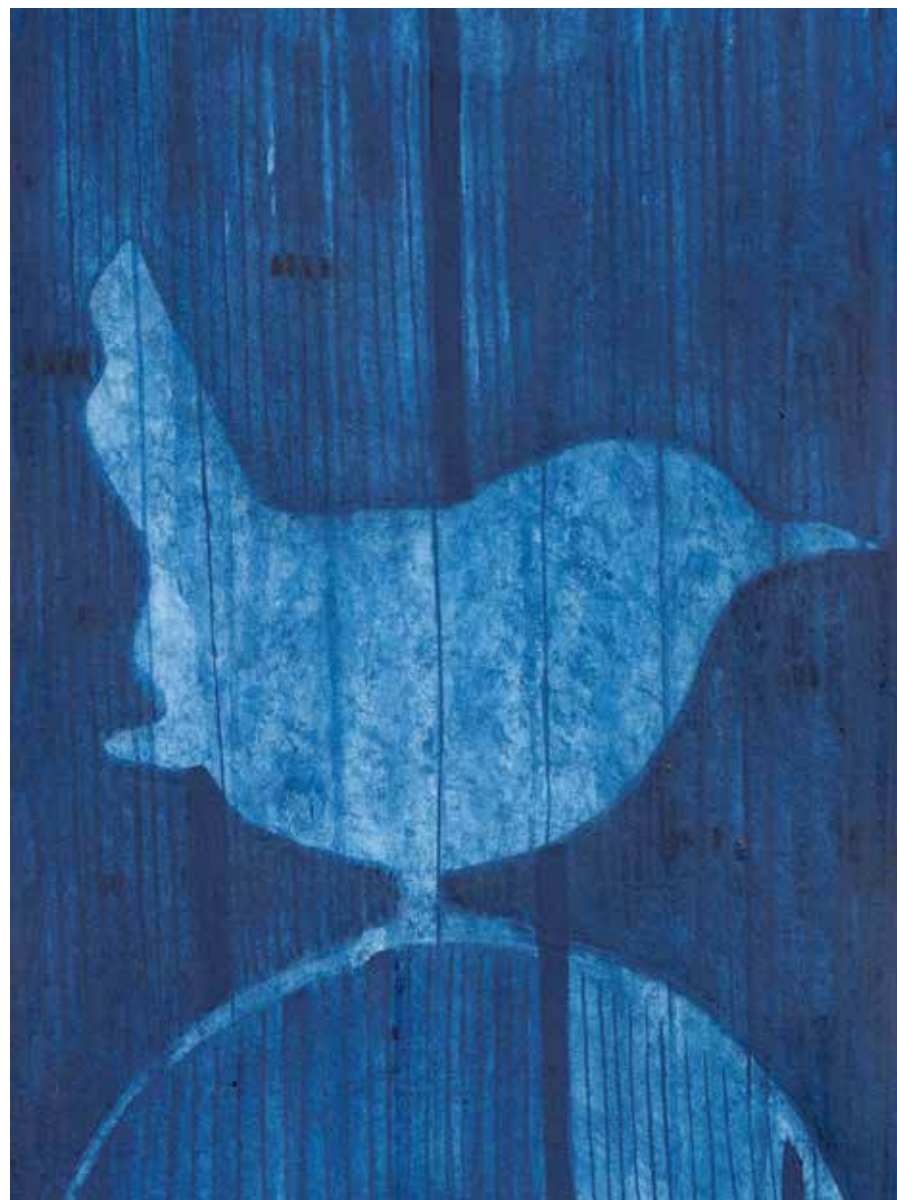
## Essay by Jen Hadfield

**B**UZZ ALDRIN SUFFERED from depression after he came back from the Moon. Mike Collins, by his own account, felt fine. On his mantelpiece, he set a framed photograph of the crescent Earth taken from Apollo 11, and was tickled when visitors cried out, "oh, the Moon!" Every so often his new perspective on home helped him to see some minor irritation in a different way. He recommended rocketing world leaders into space, so that they could see international conflicts in their global, even galactic, context. He had little desire to go back, though, turning down an opportunity to moon-walk, himself, on NASA's next Moon-mission. With every hour that passed in Space, voyaging to the Moon, orbiting the Moon, getting everything ready for Aldrin and Armstrong's return, he spoke less about where he was, and more about Home. He became disparaging about the Moon, calling it 'the smallpox below', a 'withered, sun-seared peach-pit' of a place. After their successful take-off and reunion, they fired up the ignition sequence that would break them clear of the Moon's atmosphere. They 'burnt for Home.' Collins had plenty more he wanted to do here on Earth below, and 'I am also planning to leave a lot of things undone,' he said. But, by and large, he felt unchanged, except that he'd lost the habit of saying "the sun comes up" or "the sun goes down". The Earth turns before the Sun, he reminds us. We move into the Sun's light and we move into our own shadow.

On his first space mission, he and Frank Young orbited the Earth at eighteen thousand miles an hour. But because they were travelling at the same speed as the Earth, they felt no sensation of speed whatsoever. Collins went outside. He stuck his head and shoulders out of Agena's hatch, and gazed at Space, as if looking at a garden from a porch. 'My God,' he exclaimed 'the stars are everywhere [...] this is the best view of the Universe that a human has ever had.' Has anyone ever been more *ootadaeks*?

Today, I am experiencing the best view of the Universe that I have ever had. It is the Sabbath, for some, and I am propped at zero velocity relative to the Earth, in the porch of an old Shetland croft house on the isle of Papa Stour, waiting, while the Earth rolls me towards the sun.

Despite the wind, and gloom, a wren is singing its heart out on the tarry roof



Watercolour by Alice V. Taylor

of the byre in the garden. Jon Dunn – the writer and naturalist – says the wren is his favourite Shetland bird. It sings, he says, in the heart of winter. In the traditional style, the byre is roofed with an old upside-down sixareen, caulked and tarred. It looks like an ark, and it is full of peats and pallets to cut up and burn.

While I wait, the wren sings. I drink tea from an Alcatraz mug, and munch digestives down into waning crescents until they are narrow enough to dunk, and I play with a trick of perspective. I look out and say to myself, what if this, this old, Shetland garden, dim in the pre-dawn, this whirling epicentre, of Hilde's colourful mosaics of broken pottery, of wind-bleached, wind-tousled grass, with this wren, flitting from boat-byre, to broken bowl of rainwater, to gate-post, is actually Heaven?

The Celts believed that Heaven and Earth were only three feet apart and, in

the frequently referenced 'thin places', even closer. I too believe in a proximate Heaven, as subjective to each of us as our ideas of 'remote' or 'centre' or 'edge'. What if Heaven has been right under our noses, all along? What if this is it? Heaven on our doorstep, Heaven under the kitchen sink. When we imagine some kind of membrane between us and Heaven, I think we might be it – sometimes a barrier, sometimes a portal. It might be ourselves that stand between us and Heaven.

I know I'm not proposing anything new, here. I am just, like Collins, trying to see things from a different perspective. I am just trying to wake up. It is late November. At 8.38am, on the porch of North Banks, I spin into the light.



For the last couple of days, we've been weathering a Northerly gale. I have had trouble keeping warm. The unfamiliar

Raeburn chugged like a steam engine, filling the house with savoury, eye-stinging smoke. In that wild wind, I shut and open dampers, experimenting with the gas and electric heaters, opening all the doors and windows to let out the smoke. It is still heavenly.

I think Hilde and Pete know that, because they do something very uncommon with their house. They open its doors to people they know even just a little, which is how I come to be working on my book, here, this week. Everywhere are little love letters of welcome and thoughtfulness, urging guests to keep warm, to use as much coal and peat and wood as they like, and not to worry about broken dishes.

Visiting bairns are encouraged to draw on the wall in the narrow passage that leads from the kitchen to the sitting room. "Dear Boys and Girls, when you visit, you are welcome to write your name here or draw a small picture ... NO pictures of poo, or monsters or scribbles or crossing out of other people's names allowed. By order of Granny and Grandad."

These, then, are the bylaws in Heaven. They seem reasonable and attainable, but by my reckoning there were plenty of monsters and poo in Heaven.

And there – I've drifted into the past tense. I think I'm imagining looking back from the not-too-distant future. What if we recognise too late the location and sensations of Heaven, once the wild places have been so fragmented and suppressed and polluted as to exist only in reserves, preserves and reservations? And what will we say, when the bairns ask us, what was it like, in Heaven?



First of all, Heaven, like Foula or Fair Isle, was a place went *in* to, not out to. It *was not* 'remote'. What it *was* was red and rotten, like a cheese left to ripen in a cave. This made it stunning. It was riddled with the caves and tunnels that kayakers love: you could paddle right into its core, through caves and tunnels. From the top, burns drained into inland sink-holes, hissing into the choppy, turquoise sea below. A dead *neesik* lay on a beach on the North coast and itself provided Heaven for several other species, which pecked and munched at its ruined *crang*. What I'm saying is, it wasn't 'perfect'. We had been around too long for that, and anyway, perfection wasn't the point. On Heaven's beaches, sheltered from that biting Northerly, were silvery pups so fat on seal-milk that they lay almost immobile, wringing their hind-flippers in agonies of comfort. In its flooded sedges, *horse-goks* were in their own soggy Heaven. An otter slipped onto a rock and



masticated some struggling, pink catch – perhaps an octopus – noisily, and its kit played with a mat of floating *bu-wrack*. It swam up underwater and broke the surface, to wear it like a hat. Heaven was perhaps more visible around animals in the sea: each surfaced, silk-silently, or with a snoring gasp, at the hub of their own swirling, bubbling Heaven.



It was unrecognisable as the Heaven I skinny-dipped with my sister, just a couple months before, when we went into Papa for the day. We made neat piles of our clothes on a greyish beach between cliffs, and we went in. Oh, it's a sort of transgression to be naked in the North. Our skin crimping, we stood side by side at the sea's edge, which was frosty-blue-clear, like the taste of toothpaste. Side-by-side, eyes strictly and primly front, we walked into the sea. All summer, we'd been swimming in new wetsuits, and, thus insulated, had forgotten how the cold wrings your bones and punches the air out of your lungs: how you mouth like a goldfish, too stunned to even swear. Then, there was a kind of admittance: some bouncer in my brain stepped aside, and we slipped back into the present tense, which is our only home – the pale selkie of my body looks unfamiliar as I shape-shift into my sea-skin; as I peer down at my breast, belly, legs through the clear and smoky turquoise water. The water is something I dote on now, all the different ways it is at once. Close in to the cliff, bubbles laced with froth cover its surface, and the swell is lovely, it comes on in gentle contractions, it sweeps us towards the shore. We are very brave. We tell each other so – not just skinny-dipping in this freezing sea, on the Isle of Papa where anybody could see us, but also letting the swell carry us towards a half-submerged tunnel in the cliff that is thick with kelp to the surface, so that its rubbery stalks stretch up on the swell, and submerge on the fall. We can't see the reassuring sand through the water, but we can see the golden *tangles*. We let it carry us towards that frightening tunnel – we love this swell – we let it sweep us closer. Cilia sweep eggs down the Fallopian tubes like this – eye-to-eye with the limpets where the water laps the cliff now – the so-called Edge is busy with *cleeks* and anemones. Don't let the water brush you up against them; the sea wants to usher us into the arch and its channel, it wants to sweep us in. Now our naked fronts are grazing the taffy ropes of kelp stalks, our bellies palmed by their stroking fingers, it gets shallower and shallower; the kelp sweeps backwards and tickles, and my knee knocks against a rock, we get tangled in kelp like sea otters, we anchor ourselves there, by wrapping kelp around our arms. We'll be too cold soon, we are already too cold, but we always stay in too long, because – well, *Heaven*.

Those smooth contractions sweep us out and towards the beach. Then, beyond the chop and bulge of the next wave, a *raingös*; its burgundy throat patch dapper.

It is very intimate to swim with this wild beauty, its feathers perfect as painted. What does it make of us? We try and creep up to it, paddling quietly behind the smooth humps of the waves; it appears, disappears on the swell that rises and falls between us. And then it is gone, although we don't see it dive. White hands and feet, hard as bone; we have to get out. We stumble to dry our hard, cold bodies on my shirt. It's hard to get those numb, sticky feet that seem to belong to someone else into leggings; I wipe my sandy feet on the grass, we can hardly move, but Tasha says we need to keep moving so we press the feet we can't feel up the hill into the wind, and climb up onto the cliff, and for a long time it feels like we can't breathe properly; my fingers are pink and yellow and the blue of bruises. In half an hour, Tash comments that her feet have thawed out enough to feel the sand inside her socks.

We follow the spectacular coast. We peer down into one red *gyö*, whose shadowed beach of offal-coloured cobbles can be reached by descending a luge of red scree. We slide down the scree, setting off little rockslides, bigger rocks rumbling by our feet. It is an echoing place, with cathedral acoustics. The sea is amplified, and the sea is a noisy eater, dragging its pebbles with the backsuck, making loud belly-gurgles and echoing slaps when it slops into caves at the cliff's foot. Then the incoming wave fizzles up through the pebbles. Heaven is littered with *bruck*: resin fishing buoys, battered sheets of marine ply and old-style floats of the kind that are still used on some herring nets. Tar and plastic and rough balls of pumice from submarine volcanoes roll up on the beach, tangled in the wrack. I zigzag the beach, filling my pockets with souvenirs from Heaven.

Tasha perches on a rock in front of a cliff. One end has been eroded into a towering arch. Her binoculars are trained on a niche with a low ceiling. The rock below it is meteor-streaked with white birdlime. She's watching two fat *scarf* chicks, fat-bellied and woolly in grey feather onesies, which are tucked up together at the back of the little cave. The vigilant parents perch nearby, glossy and greenish-black. One fixes us with its gaze and hisses, rhythmically, and it weaves and bobs its narrow, crested head from side to side. It is the *scarfs'* echoing, private, musty-smelling Heaven. The sea rushes in. A buoy rattles up onto the rocks. In a rock hollow, the sea makes a noise like a finger pop. I sit, a disciple on a weed-glazed stone, gazing up at the *scarfs*. Heaven has the wild, stuffy reek of a teenager's bedroom.



The Papa Stour ferry is called Snolda. She puts into Papa Stour a few times a week. I watch her appear, dock, depart. She puts a thought in the forefront of my mind: the life of islands depends on connection, and the thriving of folk everywhere depends on connection.

Papa used to be a prosperous, busy place, which produced some *weel-kent* and much-loved storytellers and writers and was famous, Magnie says, for the quality of their *kye*. The men were sought after by the Merchant Navy, and the women, back at home, did everything until the men came home. These days, the nine or ten folk who still stay in Papa full-time, once a busy, prosperous place, fight to keep the ferry sailing.

On Friday, the ferry is cancelled due to that fierce Northerly, and suddenly, in my present, raddled, laddered Heaven, littered with arches that tumble into the sea, I am dependent on several things: the folk on this island, on Hilde and Pete's generosity, and on the running of that boat. As long as it lies tied up at West Burrafirth, I am marooned here in Heaven. There is no shop. When the milk runs out, there will be no more cups of milky tea in the porch. If I ran out of food, I would have to beg from one of my six neighbours. But I feel ok about that, because Pete and Hilde are prepared for these unpredictabilities and because I know that what's at fault here, if anything, are my expectations, and not Heaven itself.

My engineer hopes that I'm warm enough and he asks if the wind is noisy. He's on a boat moored in Uig, Skye and it's windy there, too. He's not anxious but he is vigilant, wondering if they might break a line; 'but', he says 'we have loads of ropes'. He proposes another date: when he gets home, he plans to kayak here, across St Magnus Bay. I look out at that wild body of water, that is now bright, and now dark, and I don't even know if it's possible.

He's washed his sweater and sends me a video of it drip-drying, swaying with the movement of the boat. I tell him that here, it's an admirable, stout and solid wind, but that the old house is equally admirable and solid. I go out into the wind to greet it. It's a frogmarching wind. As the path turns, it either chivvies me ahead or knocks me off balance, or forces me down into the ditch, making snipe explode from shelter in their scores. When I get back and strip off my soaked cords, my thighs are a slapped pink. It's nice to get to know each wind that visits us. Besides, it brings snow and hail, which I now watch advancing from the porch, in towering golden drifts from thunderheads over the North Sea, which is now too bright to look at, like the sun. The wind comes on steady, and without fatigue, from the North, over the waves and over the black, still-shadowed isles. In a week's time, though we don't know it yet, it will bring an Arctic visitor. The vagrant walrus, Freya – a 'horse of the sea', according to the Norse, a 'tusk-walker' according to the Inuit – will haul up on the walkway of a salmon farm in the Westside.

My friend Jenny will describe her as a beautiful sweet potato. She will be gorgeously russet, in a fine, plush coat

that creases opulently between her spare tyres of belly-flab. One flipper shall be scarred with concentric rings of pink and white. Her tusks will be short, thin, yellowed and blunt. Her fat snout, a pincushion of short bristles. Her flippers, almost unbearably expressive. Sometimes, she will lift a wide paw over her head and wag it as if she's waving. She will fold it over her eye, whose lids form a fat, closed purse. She will crimp up and kipper in the cool air, and wring her velvet hind-flippers, which are a little more chocolate than cinnamon-coloured, against each other. She. She. Aphrodite, come over the sea. She will be a pin-up; for a few days, everybody's darling. And she is not here yet, but on her way, but I praise her now, because in 2022, she'll be euthanised, in Bergen, by order of the Norwegian authorities, because they can't persuade her hundreds of human visitors to keep a safe and respectful distance.



If you took a *meid*, perhaps between a walrus and a sea-arch, between a dear neighbour and Fish and Chips night in the local hall, where you might find yourself centred, was Heaven. Its primary natural law, stronger than gravity, was cohabitation. Transactions of attention and care, between people, creatures and place, was how we knew where we were. The moment you left your house, something ticklish and unexpected always happened. Magnie, in his Paisley dressing gown, might bring over a plate of fried herring, disparaging it, as always; he might show me the scar from his knee op, and I might offer to collect his messages from the store.

We were *in relation* to home, we were as *related* to otters and sea-monsters and birds as we were to each other. The bigger the flocks of wintering widgeon and plover, that wheeled up from the beach as you platched down through the burns, the closer we knew we were to Heaven. And sometimes they even outnumbered us.

On the towering *banks* of Noss, at least before bird flu, thirty thousand gannets nested, like saints in a cathedral's niches. The cliff was loud and echoing with their football chants. We watched them from a seabird tour boat. Black painted wingtips, old-pub-nicotine-stained hoods. With their thick necks and flat feet they had a Booby waddle on the low, flat rocks at the bottom of Da Noup. Gannet poo, in white showers, was constantly raining loudly into the black water; lost feathers slowly sashaying down a hundred metres. A *score* delicately picked at a dead gannet chick floating in the water.

As we motored away they began to follow us. When Phil started to feed herring down a pipe into the water, they thrummed into the sea at steep angles, like throwing knives. You could look right down over the stern into the water and see the pale streaks of their bodies lancing into the depths. We looked down

# Borders and Stories

By Ian Stephen

The word ‘random’ took a grip in the speak of my home town and its surrounds, about the time the lads were going through secondary school. Maybe it was a bit like ‘far out’ when a few ‘alternative’ phrases filtered through to the island when I was at their stage. I remember asking my mother to translate ‘Far out man’ into Gaelic, about the time the film, ‘Woodstock’ was on general release. Now we are in the territory of the unpredictable, no matter where we go. We can’t take the ‘going’ for granted either. Even before the Covid pandemic many of us were thinking twice and three times before booking air travel or going by other carbon-heavy means.

Stories still prevail unlike winds which seem less and less predictable. Maybe we all have to consider becoming more like ‘armchair travellers’. An imprint of Haus Publishing sounds something like that. The Polish-Canadian poet, Marius Kociejowski, now a Londoner, is about to publish his celebration of Naples in the *Armchair Traveller* series.<sup>1</sup> But it is the reissue of his previous title, *The Street Philosopher & the Holy Fool*<sup>2</sup> which brought me where I could not have journeyed. Marius does move, physically, to different places, which is how we met here on Lewis. It seems to me that the most significant travels are in his conversations. Like my son Ben, who cycled through Ukraine not long after Crimea was ‘annexed’, I could not understand why the seizing of territory did not seem to even slacken trade with an increasingly autocratic Putin regime. But neither did the destruction of Aleppo,

Marius’s book on Syrian travels was first published in 2004. It’s re-issue in 2016 comes with the terrible undersong of destruction. The architecture of Aleppo, as complex as the webs of Islamic and Christian relationships, mostly doesn’t exist now. The traveller’s daring is not so much in climbing or facing big waves. It is a willingness to engage in conversation. Not snatches but sustained through sometimes episodic charting of a sustained inquiry built on friendship. The complexities of character and belief are not simplified. What comes across though is the creative ways individuals could live with their neighbours, contradictions and all, until all these people were caught up in an international power-struggle. Empires are not just a faded shading on a political map, after all. If ‘the west’ was to support the ‘Arab Spring’ of uprisings against despots (though only up to a point) then ‘the east’ would extend its own sphere of influence by supporting people like Assad.

The political and physical clashes are reflected in conflicting narratives. Persecution and destruction are of course

only directed at ‘terrorists’, said the hired propagandists for Assad (the younger despot). A similar tone was to be struck in Putin’s speeches when he would refer to the mission of ‘denazification’ of Ukraine. A minority from right-wing, nationalist groups fighting in the Donbas region provided the imagery needed to give some credibility to the myth, once free reporting was closed down.

Considering Syria again, Marius quotes in full a translation of ‘the Tattoo’ from the one he calls, ‘the wild card of Arabic poetry, the boldest and certainly the most unpredictable’ – Muhammad al-Maghut 1934 – 2006). The fellow-poet’s introduction wryly comments that we have come a long way from comparing eyes to those of gazelles. To those who speak out, apprehension is the norm.<sup>3</sup>

‘Whenever I hear a knock on a door, or see  
a curtain move / I cover my papers with my  
hand / Like a prostitute in a raid.’

The Syrian poet could also speak for those courageous citizens of the Russian Federation who risked a 15 year prison sentence for calling the ‘operation’ an invasion or even a war. When the overt message is prohibited, somehow the story will still be passed on. From this island, (Lewis) exposed to the weather but somehow still a bit sheltered, I can continue to research and sometimes find how familiar a story from ‘foreign’ parts can be.

I’m remembering referring to a variant of the story of the king’s daughters, come to most of us through the most literary of sources – the tragedy of King Lear. It seems a likely provenance of the story I first heard, (‘I love you more than salt.’) in the accent of northeast Scotland, is Syria. It’s international nature is confirmed by being also claimed as both a Slavik tale and an English one. Then, rooting through references for variants of the tale of the serpent-prince, I find that there is a well-documented story from the Ukraine. As with the selkie legend, it seems there are male and female variations across a huge geography. In 1916 the collector and translator R. Nisbet Bain published *Cossack Fairy Tales and Folk Tales*. Unlike Arthur Ransome’s retellings of the Russian stories he researched, including using the voices of his invented characters, Bain’s are told in what now seems an archaic style. But the story is the story.

As you might expect from one of the the world’s great breadbasket agricultures, sheafs of corn are a dominant motif. But a great serpent guides a lonely peasant to one sheaf. He first has to burn the corn but then the best and most beautiful of wives appears. You might guess, like the

on them and their green vapour trails, but they were firing into the sea all around us, splashing us, in their hundreds. We looked down into the waves at emerald birds flying underwater. We gazed up, perilously, into a deafening kaleidoscope of wheeling, chattering gannets. When they popped up, they floated around for a moment, dipping their heads under and peering down their long beaks with a sort of secretarial air. Great frogspawn bubbles boiled up around them: the air that was trapped in their flight feathers. They dove at sixty miles an hour and to a depth of twenty-five metres. They actually fly, Phil told us, underwater. They had a special protective lens over their eyes, and something like bubble-wrap in their skulls and chests, that cushioned their brains and internal organs from the impact; and when they folded their long wings just before impact, it locked their spines into place.

They were sharpened at both ends, like pencils. When they were about to dive, their perfect soar faltered: they splayed their white tail-feathers, stuck out their flippers, wobbling from side to side in the slipstream like a plane landing at Sumburgh in a gale. The best thing about a gannet-dive was the heart-stopping moment at the crest of the rollercoaster – after they’d climbed steadily up through the air – and they tilted, in what seems like slow motion. A moment of weightlessness – of *entropy*, as Robin said in the Outpost the other day – then they tipped, clenched into darts, and fired into the waves all around us.

“I do like a gannet,” Robin mused, his eyes alight: “And, fuck me, when those fuckers hit da fuckin watter ...”



When Pete hears on his radio that a minke whale was nearby, feeding on mackerel; we all stand, as if an important person has walked into the room. Phil has been fishing here recently: it was mackerel, he says, ‘from top to bottom – great balls of it.’ He leaves the wheel and lets the boat drift, bringing his big camera to the stern.

The sea is smooth and grey, the muscles around our eyes tighten. We wait and watch, scanning the slight swell. Suddenly the long head, and the small fin, like a neat claw, bursts silently into the air, and Natasha’s eyes are big with tears.

Then it dives. We stand on the back deck, feet apart; rolling with the boat. There’s no wind – the diesel exhaust wreathes around us – the whale is gone for what seems like forever. The sea is all smooth and glossy textures.

When the whale surfaces again, it makes us cry, like singing does when you haven’t sung for a long time.

I love the nothings we say in a state of rapture. I love the way words fail us, the naked things we say, our uncoolness. ‘Oh my goodness’ – as dolphins sound and make towards the boat. Then they surface to breathe; a queue of quiet exhalations, close, courtly sneezes of great

dignity. Pete says, quietly, wowzers, his professional patter fallen by the wayside. He gives an odd little giggle to himself, a gentle dolphin-like snort of wonder.

I like the becalmed silence now, just the puttering of the idling engine as we stand in our shared church, hushed as we wait, watching, sweeping our gaze over the sea, watching.

There is the release of some shared hunger, or the lapsing of individual pain. In old Shetland, there used to be a practice of divination called ‘castin o da hert’. You poured molten lead through the open jaws of a pair of scissors into water, and when the metal hit the water, hissing, you studied the shapes it hardened into. Heartache cannot float on salt-water: it sinks, in shattered globules of dull silver, down to the seabed.

We motor back. It’s mid-afternoon, and a short hop to the Victoria Pier, but almost all the passengers are sleeping, as if a spell has been cast: this sometimes happens when we reach beyond ourselves, when we go ootadaeks. The exception is the mum who sits by the boat’s step and eats up the green headlands of the North end of Bressay with her eyes; you can tell she is hardly ever alone, and after a few moments she comes back from herself to her family, as if she had been a long way away for a long time, as if she feels guilty, taking the seat next to her daughter and gathering her into her side.



Now I am seeing things from this particular perspective, I can hardly sit still. At night, in North Banks, under all the blankets I can find, I can hardly sleep. I cannot leave Heaven alone. In the morning, I bolt out at the passing of a blizzard. The next is in the offing: a towering machine of shadow and ice and light. I meet two islanders as I drive to the airstrip. We pull up alongside each other and wind down our windows and talk about the weather. I don’t yet know their names, but they invite me for tea. One of them is bleeding lightly from his nose. Have a good Sunday, they say, God bless – and I will take any blessing I can get, regardless of denomination.

I run to the top of the hill above the airstrip, its windsock a couple tatters streaming from a tattered, swinging hoop. I am getting fitter, hike further, despite the weather. The stiffness in my lower back, from weeks of Zoom teaching, is beginning to ease. I’m becoming a better animal, if not a better person. The crown of Ronas Hill, in the distance, is a gleaming white.

‘Prayer, in its most ancient and elemental sense, consists simply in speaking to things’, says David Abrams.

Ronas, I blurt, you’re looking fucking stunning. I am my own swearing jar.

And what I’m doing, by Abrams account, is praying ■.





Detail, *The Pilots' House, Högsåra (Finland)* Ian Stephen

seal-wife relationship and the woman who has come with her dowry of black cattle from the lake, nothing is forever. A rash phrase cannot be taken back and so the wife returns to her serpent form. She had not brought him fabulous riches but she had made a home of a hut and brought peace and prosperity.

It seems that such security can vanish after a few words are uttered. Yet the depth of pain brings a new knowledge with it. As with the eating of the flesh of the white snake in Grimms and variants told by travelling people, loss can bring something more than compensation. In this case it is not only the understanding of all languages or the languages of all the animals but the knowledge of 'everything that is going on under the earth'.

As an invading force retreats in some areas only to bombard others, that knowledge includes terrors. But already there are demonstrations of justice. Forensic evidence is being assembled and cases have already begun to be heard.

But each morning brings a new setback to democratic process. I follow the news on Tunisia as Ben now lives in Tunis. I used to have a dream of picking him up, under sail before movement of yachts became more complex with Covid and Brexit. Today, 27th July, 2022, Tunisia's democracy 'verges on collapse' and the only new democracy surviving since the Arab Spring gives way to sweeping presidential powers.<sup>4</sup> The same morning saw *The New York Times* analyse the descent further into state terrorism

in Myanmar, following execution of four respected political activists.<sup>5</sup> This has the echo of the fascist regimes our parents and grandparents thought they had defeated. It seems to me, from this island, that the United Kingdom can't be complacent. Had the Johnson government succeeded in its attempts to bypass parliament, its democracy too would be in name only. As in the United States the voting system continues to distort results, resulting in 'landslide' victories on small percentages of the vote. Yet opposition parties in the UK, Labour in particular, have consistently ruled out closer alliances with fellow centrist parties which might fairly represent a more moderate majority. A more hopeful sign is the savvy shown by voters in 2022 by-elections in very different parts of England. Labour voters held back or voted tactically to give a better chance of the LibDem candidate overcoming a huge majority and a parallel trend seems to have helped Labour regain a seat in what some people call 'The North'. Both unspoken pacts achieved the result willed by a true majority.

If UK politics were less like football matches, where winning is the goal in itself, I probably would not be seeing Scotland's separation from the Union as the best chance for democracy. If an 'Islands Alliance' of the Hebrides, Orkney, Shetland, Faroes and Iceland looked like a possibility I might be equally keen on supporting that. Right now a new move for Scottish Independence seems to me

to offer the best chance for a restoration of democracy, even with huge issues, such as the nature of the border with England, unresolved. Right now the dotted lines don't seem as real as the tone of the shared stories. ■

### A new mountain<sup>6</sup>

Christine said, 'There's a new mountain.'  
As if Sutherland changed overnight.  
That hill-line does as all do  
but we don't usually see the wear and tear  
unless rocks become quarry.

Can't say why  
cloud-cover comes in eights.  
Can't grade visibility  
as one beholder  
though you see the line go  
from sharp. Back to the wash  
before near-erasure.

Christine says 'smirr'  
when mist and drizzle merge  
to smudge  
Suilven and Canisp  
over Tiumpnan Head  
though a Minch away.

Today is different.  
Some refraction replaced the mountains  
with a new single shape, mild and more rounded  
like it wasn't just weather  
but had been weathering a while.  
I thought of Mariupal.  
That shape also changed.  
Now looks like Aleppo.  
They won't be restored  
any time soon  
in any change of light.

Blood's drained or  
dried on lime.  
Bones are resilient  
even as splinters.  
Souls change status to 'lost'  
even when directed  
to places  
on trains, trucks, ships.

### Notes

- (1) *The Serpent Coiled in Naples*, Marius Kociejowski, Haus Publishing, London, 2022
- (2) *The Street Philosopher and the Holy Fool*, Marius Kociejowski, Eland, London, 2016
- (3) as above p 253
- (4) "Tunisians Approve New Constitution That Undercuts Democracy" New York Times: <https://rb.gy/9ad1k>
- (5) Portraits of the individuals who were executed, the Guardian, link in Myanmar summary Jul27 2022: <https://rb.gy/glfyf>
- (6) first published in 'The Earth is our Home', poems from Scotland, compiled by Gerry Loose, 2022

ON STEMBISTER BRAE two combines sat duggard and moping in the corner of the field. Faces at the window of Langahund watched the rain hitting steady and coarse on the glass.

A line of starlings faltered on a wire then suddenly toppled and fell into flight. 'Oh, Granny. Show me how.'

Adolpha turned from the window to her granddaughter.

'Weesht lass. What dae you think I did?'

'You made the birds aal fly. I ken it wis you.'

Melisande entered the room, newly changed from her teaching clothes into comfortable black she beckoned the dark haired girl.

'Don't vex Granny. Come here and I'll pleat your hair.'

Leona's face fell flat, her eyes brewed storm grey.

'You canna anymore.'

Adolpha turned from the window and cast her gaze over her granddaughter's hair.

'What wickedness it is fir a boy to cut a lass's hair,' she said.

Leona sat where she was told with began to swipe the screen of her tablet.

As she bent forward, her hair swung forward. It was roughly cut below her ear on one side, while on the other it flowed in waves to the centre of her back.

Miss Baikie began to gather her daughter's hair at the crown. She paused with the brush and looked up at her mother.

'It was the Gilmore boy,' she said.

'Gilmore?' said Adolpha. She sighed. 'I remember Martin Gilmore fae Deerness, on past the pinch of Dingieshowe.' She gestured towards the east. 'A poor scrap facing Copinsay, good for nothin except reeds. I ken the year he was caught red-handed with sheaves of another man's bind. His was a coarse bind, a twist and a rough shank to hold the sheaf. The ones he stole had a fine coiled loop.'

She mimed the straw moving through her fingers, twisting the stalks together.

'Martin Gilmore's sheaves always stood long in the field, leaning this way and that. He'd only totter to the stacking yard when the mood took him. Never bothered building a decent screw to keep the crop dry, left the sheaves until they were drunk.'

'That man, Martin Gilmore caught other men like a spider catches flies. He'd stand by a dyke looking at the ground so long others thought there was something of importance. They'd all gather around until half the parish was made idle, and the clouds that had been far off in the morning came spoiling to rain.'

'Same as the boy,' said Miss Baikie.

'It disna surprise me, Melisande.'

'That boy Robbie can set another laughing with just the look on his face, and have whole groups scrambling after nothing.'

'There was never a cross at the top of Martin Gilmore's stack,' interrupted Adolpha. 'He roped an ugly bishop's

mitre over a stack whenever he tried, not like the minaret James Baikie could make.'

Adolpha leaned back in her chair. Her gaze drifted to the birds on the wire and again they fell.

She remembered standing at the base of the stacks, admiring the bulging shanks that tapered to a heavenward point. She'd guided the hands of the men with her mind, until they worked to her design.

Adolpha's thoughts wandered through time and she breathed again the spices of the east – myrrh and wild rosemary. She remembered the Jerusalem of her birth and its warm stones, the life before being was brought north by a red bearded man. It had been lifetimes ago.

She'd become accustomed to the knife of the wind and the distance separating her from the sun. In time, she settled to the island, charmed by the long dark winter nights when solitude was wrapped in the glow of green and amber of solar winds sweeping the sky.

She sat forward, animated again.

'A rainy day was a fine day for twisting ropes,' said Adolpha. 'One man was the twister while the other fed the stalks. It was an art. But Martin Gilmore never made anything worth a prize.' She raised a finger and pointed at a space before the hearth as if the man were on trial before her.

'All he did at the Country Show was was drink and return with sour blood in his veins.'

Melisande nodded.

'Stolen from my country wasn't enough, he had to go on and steal what I had left of myself. I tell you, that night the wind ripped like a wolf through the barley.'

Melisande kept her gaze lowered on the threads of her daughter's hair. Deep red threads glowed in the black mane. Leona's hair had always caught the eye, some people said she was red-headed, only to find on second look she was as raven black as her mother.

Miss Baikie was known for her appearance and comments were made that her presence had an unusual quality; she had an economy of movement that made the slightest fidget in others look absurd.

Adolpha cast her gaze back to her granddaughter and then away into silver veils of rain. When she spoke again her voice was relaxed and even.

'The final stack was always crowned with a woven cross. It was a fine moment. The men would have a dram and pass a word or two.'

'Unless you were the last,' said Miss Baikie.

Adolpha nodded.

# The Bikko

STORY BY GABRIELLE BARNBY



'The Bikko greeted Martin Gilmore more than once on the stackyard gate. As well you know.'

Leona looked up from her screen.

'What's "The Bikko" mean Granny?'

'The Bitch.'

Miss Baikie caught her mother's eye.

'In truth, she is a wolf – the spirit of the corn.'

'Why did he get it?'

'Martin Gilmore had a blunt and dirty instrument that he had no right to lay into the barley.'

'He doesn't sound nice,' said Leona.

'He wasn't,' said Granny. 'Not to a girl with neither mother, father or brother to protect her.'

'It was a long time past mother,' said Miss Baikie.

'You know how easy time comes round again,' said Adolpha.

'Why didn't anyone help him? So he wasn't the last,' said Leona.

'Oh, child. It's all very weel to help each other, but he wis lazy tae his bones. He'd have help aal day long while he slept behind a stook or meddled with a woman. There are tasks that should be begun and finished at the same time by aal. If the harvest wis not taken in the animals couldn't be let out to roam. His place at the muckle supper was sorely begrudged.'

Leona squirmed around to see her grandmother.

'Hold still,' said Miss Baikie.

The girl turned about and concentrated on her screen. The pleat was coming together, but the blunt ends stood out where it had been shorn.

'Help me mother, just a little,' said Miss Baikie.

The old woman sharpened her gaze on her granddaughter's red and black hair.

'You're doing fine.'

Miss Baikie's shoulders relaxed and her fingers found a coaxing rhythm as they worked through her daughter's hair.

'How often did you make him The Bikko?' said Melisande.

'Often enough. The men soon started barking when they saw Martin Gilmore scurrying along under the last load.' Adolpha revealed grey pearls of teeth as she smiled then added, 'A wife or two soon wanted smaller ones to put in their rafters. A belief grew that The Bikko would make sure your man would not be the last one home at County Show. And if he was last it was a sure sign you were better off without him.'

Women still came and knocked at the door of Langahund. Inside they found the solace of things made more beautiful than they needed to be. With words and

food, or items woven with straw visitors would have their heart's lightened.

Melissande tied the end of the pleat and sat back. There was no more sign of young Robbie Gilmore's deed. The pleat was even and the braid reached to the centre of Leona's back.

'Fine work. No one will know,' said Adolpha.

Miss Baikie looked over her daughter's shoulder at the screen.

Leona was on the class blog, her index finger tracing Robbie Gilmore's racing car icon. The tip pressed so hard it had turned white.

The racing car flickered. It became first an air balloon, then a fish and the images went into a blur. Leona's brow creased and her eyes flashed ice blue.

When she released her finger.

A wolf snarled by the boy's name.

Leona turned to her grandmother and smiled.

'Tell me more about The Bikko Granny.'

'Straw is a subtle, living material,' said Adolpha. 'It can be fashioned to be homely and comforting, but it has a another side. Just like The Bikko.'

'The Bikko disdains the lazy and the cruel. She is warrior and mother, a provider in the depths of despair. She stalks the winter sky and races through crops in harvest time.'

'What does she look like?'

Adolpha's voice became louder and deeper.

'Her mane is a silver mantle. Her eyes are sun by day and moon by night. Her claws wait in readiness to spring as she patrols the sky.'

'She punishes the mean, comforts the weak, protects the orphan and sets shame on the last man's head.'

'She is made not of straw, but of the justice and essence of life. She urges the sun into the stalks of barley, to nourish the good actions of men and women and to strengthen their children. If this energy is squandered or disdained, she is enraged. Her lips curl back and reveal the daggers of her teeth.'

Adolpha raised her wrinkled lips.

'How will I know if I hear her?' said Leona.

Adolpha balled a fist and held it over her heart.

'You'll feel molten inside. Her strength will surround you like a shield and you will grow more powerful than you have ever imagined.'

'How do I make her?'

Miss Baikie raised her eyebrows at her mother, but did not interrupt.

'The first time The Bikko came to me I was only dawdling with straw. A great anger was in my heart at the Gilmore man. My hands moved of their own accord, twisting and coiling the stalks. I saw The Bikko take its shape and my fingers shook with energy and delight. And when she was complete I felt her breathe. I knew straight away someone would come to my aid.'

'She brought a man to the door,' said Miss Baikie.





**Corn stalks. Detail from image by Hans Benn, Pixabay**

‘A man?’ said Leona.  
 ‘James Baikie. A good man. The sort of man that when he holds a horse’s bridle the animal understands at once to be at peace. He stood at the threshold and asked if I knew where Martin Gilmore could be found. His sheaves were still not in and they wanted to close the yard. I shook my head.

‘He observed me closely, his gaze travelled from The Bikko to the blood congealed over my eye and a belly risen from pregnancy that had no right to be set upon one so young. I felt his mouth go dry. I knew the poverty and stench of Gilmore’s croft reeked inside his nostrils.

‘The Bikko pulled me to my feet and stepped me closer. And James Baikie took me in his cart back to his home to be cared for, a companion to his wife and a sister to his children.

‘He gently took the Bikko from my arms, she left willingly, and I saw from his eyes that he knew where she was to be placed.

‘As he turned I felt a movement in my belly and knew that the small part Martin Gilmore had contributed would have no further influence on the child. She would be wholly mine. And I would call myself Baikie from then on.’

Adolpha glanced over to Miss Baikie then continued.

‘When Martin Gilmore finally dragged the last of his sheaves to the stack yard The Bikko, was waiting. The men howled and bayed like wolves, goading and mocking him.

‘James Baikie forced him to take The

Bikko back to his wife and explain why I had been taken away.

‘Martin must have laid it on the fire sending cinders around the room, scorching his furnishings and choking his wife and children. A scar was laid on his forehead.’

Adolpha drew a finger across the centre of her crinkled brow.

‘Afterwards, The Bikko always found her way to the stack-yard at the end of harvest time. Good men watched the wind run through the ripening barley without fear, but others dreaded The Bikko.’

Outside Langahund the wind had risen, it eddied around the small stone house. There was a new note, long and drawn out, fierce and restless.

Leona rose and put her arms around her grandmother’s shoulders, she buried her nose into the soft silver hair.

Miss Baikie smiled and stroked her daughter’s pleat.

‘Will you show me how to make The Bikko Granny?’

‘Tsh, girl. The harvest has changed noo. But I’ll show you, for the skill is a good one to master.’

The next day at school Miss Baikie’s class collected leaves from the school grounds, willow and whitebeam survived the prevailing winds.

The children were tasked with adding leaves to a collage. Miss Baikie had cut out a silhouette for a tree that stood as tall as herself its trunk split into two branches and bowed forward held by long sinuous

roots. At second glance it looked like a figure with arms reaching forward and skirts trailing on the ground.

Miss Baikie fanned out her coloured paper.

She offered red to Robbie Gilmore. He took it without hesitation then snatched the sharpest pair of scissors from the woodblock.

‘Cut carefully,’ said Miss Baikie.

Once the class was working steadily she turned and observed the combine cutting barley on the brae. An old song came to her, one that had been sung when teams of men had swung their sickles together working across a field. It had a melody to ease the fatigue and repetition, laying a charm of forgetfulness.

The first notes buzzed from her lips and the sound of chatter died so only the sound of scissors accompanied her tune.

Some of the reapers used to become distracted from their task when they heard her singing. She would stand at the gate and increase tempo of her song as the end of the stretch to be cut drew near. She remembered Old Martin Gilmore’s cut and bloody hands.

Miss Baikie smiled. How thin the veil of time was.

At the head of the class she tapped out the rhythm with her toe as the children worked.

Robbie’s gaze flitted to her as his scissors moved up and down, jaws opening and shutting in perfect time, like the mouth of an unstoppable combine, cutting the red paper to shreds.

Miss Baikie rested and became silent.  
 ‘Dinna stop,’ piped Steven Macleod.

‘It’s a bonny tune,’ she said. ‘But we’ve plenty of leaves.’

Miss Baikie uncoiled to her full height, eyes glittered. The children lowered their work.

Only one continued to cut..

The children turned and saw blood greased Robbie’s silver blades. Dark drops fell into the paper shreds.

‘You can stop now,’ said Miss Baikie.

The boy became still, and stared at what was before him.

‘Too small’ said Miss Baikie.

She handed Robbie a tissue. The boy’s eyes opened wide as if awakening.

They were the sort of cuts that would sting whether the water was cold or hot, that would re-open easily and itch as they tried to heal, they keep him awake at night. There was a good chance they would longer to heal than Leona’s hair would take to regrow.

Outside, the harvester came to rest. The field was empty and the spirit of the harvest was rising, as it had done hundreds of years before. ■

Granny – Adolpha  
 Granddaughter – Leona  
 Miss Baikie – Melisande  
 Stepfather – Martin Gilmore  
 Farmer – James Baikie  
 School boy – Robbie Gilmore



# The Story of Deirdre

By Kenneth Steven

WHEN I WAS growing up in Highland Perthshire we would have a ceilidh, every now and again, and always when my sister visited. We sat around the open fire after dinner, however many of us, my mother with her guitar and sometimes my sister with her tin whistle. We sang the same songs time and again, but always we finished with my mother's rendition of *Deirdre's Farewell to Scotland*. She must have learnt it in turn from her mother who spoke and wrote Gaelic fluently and who had grown up in Strathconnon. She and my mother had a veritable treasure chest of Highland songs and sang in both Gaelic and English, often at the Mod.

I knew the story that lay behind the song well enough, or thought I did. I knew certainly my mother's claim that this was Scotland's oldest song. The beautiful Deirdre had been intended for the high kind of Ireland but she had fallen for young Naoise and he had snatched her away to the west coast of Scotland. There they had lived in safety and happiness for a time before emissaries came from Ireland to find them and assure them all was forgiven so they could return to Ireland. Of course it was a trick and they were killed when they came back. This was Deirdre's lovesong to Scotland, to Alba, for she had never wanted to leave and would not have done so at all had she not gone with Naoise.

I carried the story and the song always: they were like the imprint of a fossil in the heart. I didn't do anything more than carry them with me, though: for a long time there seemed little more I could have done with them.

Then my life was turned upside down and I found myself leaving Highland Perthshire, the heart of Scotland where I had spent the first decades of my life, and a marriage, to live on the west coast of Argyll. But it was far from a sad leaving because of the new story and journey of love that had been given to me, and despite all the obstacles I had feared might render it impossible. And close to the place that was to become a shared new home was Glen Etive. I remembered at once how the Gaelic name for Glen Etive was mentioned in the song my mother had sung, how this was supposed to have become home to Deirdre following her exile from Ireland.

It was those two things that came together: this new and wonderful journey in my own life and the sudden remembering of the song and the story behind it. I've had a constant battle to write long poems: outpourings of the short form presented no challenge, but composing something that was a full page in length or longer, that was difficult if not impossible. It seemed akin to a stream running into sand and in the end



Deirdre, by Helen Stratton. Painting in *A Book of Myths* (1915), by Jean Lang and Helen Stratton

drying up altogether; the intensity there had been at the outset always seemed to fade and be lost. I battled to find some way of telling longer stories and got there in the end by creating sequences. They

were short individual pieces of poem put together to create a journey, a story. Eposodic links in a chain; beads for a single necklace – however you chose to express it. But it was a way nonetheless of

A bird came to her window sometimes  
and she wished she might unhinge the slit of glass  
to let him in. An eye watched her as she set her chin on her hands  
and watched him back. Most likely he wanted the fragments of her bread;  
the bird vanished into the green garment of the woods for ever  
when she gave him nothing. And then she waited  
for sun to tip the branches, and the full light  
to set on fire the chamber that was hers.  
A girl with a twisted mouth and half a hand  
brought food and water with her frightened eyes  
each dawn, each dusk. Otherwise she spoke with silence all day long  
and only watched the woods for shrieks of jays.  
At night when the world froze  
and the skies danced with a thousand bits of dust  
she felt like a child, home awakening in her heart,  
and heard her mother calling uselessly across the miles  
her name; the sadness of her name.

creating longer poems, and that was what mattered. This is the first such segment from my sequence *Deirdre of the Sorrows*:

I worked for however many months on the sequence. As with the first one I had written, *A Song among the Stones*, that told the imagined (but very likely) story of hermit monks leaving Iona in the 7th Century to voyage north to Faroe, Iceland and even Greenland, I wrote it in fits and starts. I would think the story was finished, had been told in its entirety, and then a new fragment would come to me and would demand to be written. With the Deirdre sequence I wanted all my focus to be on Scotland and the love story that Deirdre and Naoise shared during their time here. This is the glowing bell of amber they enter to find one another. The world falls away, and with it their fear over what may happen, over all that may lie ahead. Somehow they are out of time for those amber days that are given them, for every precious drop that is theirs alone to catch.

I was doing little more than following the first story given me all those years before by my mother. What mattered more than anything was the story of Scotland, of escape into safety and happiness. But Naoise has to rescue Deirdre from the captivity I am describing in the opening fragment: in my version of the telling he spies her in this tower in the forest where she has been incarcerated by the high king. Naoise has to decide to steal her away, and she in turn has to decide that is what she wants to happen. It mattered to me that the last part of my version of the telling should be conveyed as swiftly as it could be. Deep down the lovers have known surely what awaited them. But even in the last segment of the poem they are together as they await death: their bond is not broken:

*I'm here, he whispered  
and found her in the darkness.  
They touched and held, as once they did  
that first time, the tenderness no less.*

*It's no different now to when I used to hide  
hoping to glimpse you in the tower. He smiled.*

*He held her. All of it was worth our journey.  
There is nothing to regret. They cannot take from us  
all we have been given, all we have found.*

*I want to remember your scent, she said,  
so when we waken in the next world  
I will know you. Softly, they kissed.*

*She sat up and looked at him:  
And there we will have our child,  
the one that should have been.*

Both sequences were published by Birlinn. As with *A Song among the Stones*, I looked to work with musicians to



perform them. Simply reading long sequences of poem and offering them as one unbroken narrative felt somehow akin to giving dry pieces of bread. In the spaces in between each segment of the narrative there was room for music, and the playing of music allowed a distillation of the words that had been spoken. For me, anyway, it was about going back to earlier times when bard and harper worked together, where music and spoken words were lifted in turn by the other. And for me there could be no more powerful instrument through which to achieve that than the clarsach, the Celtic harp.

But having ‘found’ the Deirdre sequence and seeing it printed now on the page, I somehow realised the journey wasn’t done, that it had only just begun. I listen to a great deal of radio, and after hearing a programme from RTE in Ireland, I resolved to contact the producer, Claire Cunningham. I’ve written and presented many poetry features for BBC Radio over the years, and I felt sure the Deirdre story was one that would be of appeal on both side of the Irish Sea. The poetry window is small all the same, and every year I have the sense of it growing smaller as ever more budget is devoted to entertainment and froth. Anyway, I duly contacted Claire Cunningham and after however long heard to my joy that the pitch had passed through the many necessary hoops of fire and that the programme had been commissioned.

What I looked forward to more than anything else was the chance of talking to historians and literary scholars about the possible roots of the Deirdre story. Was there evidence those roots had been real, or was it little more than a beautifully tragic story invented for the creation of the kind of songs so beloved by the Celts? As my mother used to say herself at the ceilidh by the fireside, the Gaels were never happier than when in the depths of mournfulness.

It was a privilege indeed to see the story printed in an early manuscript kept at Trinity College in Dublin. What perhaps should have come as little surprise was that in this version Deirdre is little more than a minor character. She is at the constant mercy of the men of power around her, and almost a footnote in her own story. Nonetheless, hearing the words of the story being read aloud in early Irish by Christina, one of the experts in the provenance of those early manuscripts, is something I cannot believe I’ll ever forget.

What I discovered during the several other discussions I had with Irish scholars was that the Scottish part of the story, that which resonated so very much with me and which I had chosen to amplify as I had, was almost completely overlooked in the early Irish manuscripts. It wasn’t entirely ignored: the sojourn in Scotland was certainly acknowledged, but passed over quickly as though it was of minor relevance.

It was only when Claire and I returned

to record interviews in Scotland – in Argyll and in Edinburgh – that colour came to the cheeks as it were of that Scottish part of the story. Nor will I forget easily standing on the shores of Loch Etive with John Macfarlane, one of the great living scholars of Argyll Gaelic and its cultural history, as he pointed out place after place that had a name from the Deirdre story. It seems more than likely that Deirdre and Naoise did not come alone to Scotland: instead they travelled with his brothers. Perhaps they did so for safety and even more likely through sheer necessity.

I think what I found most moving of all was learning in Edinburgh, through speaking with Irish and Gaelic scholar Deirdre ni Mhathuna, that the great scholar and collector of ancient oral treasure Alexander Carmichael was given two versions of the Deirdre story on Barra. It’s the power behind that fact: fragments of the story of Deirdre, almost certainly rooted in the Iron Age, had been handed down like precious pieces of an ancient and beautiful garment, from mother to daughter and from father to son. Century after century after century.

Of course the story has grown arms and legs and wings over those centuries. And of course it’s likely the archetypal prophecies that make the drama of the story into a crisis have been invented and added. But for me there’s far too much smoke for there not to be traces of a real fire somewhere deep down. The very song that began the whole journey, the one sung by my mother and made famous by Marjory Kennedy Fraser, is based on ancient verses recording Deirdre’s farewell to the places she and her lover Naoise had known as home in Scotland. She describes them tenderly and intimately, as though from the vessel that is taking her back to Ireland and to death.

Dearest Alba, land o yonder,  
Thou dear land of wood and wave;  
Sore my heart that I must leave thee,  
But ‘tis Naoise I may not leave.

O Glen Eite, O Glen Eite,  
where they builded my bridal home;  
Beauteous glen in early morning,  
Flocks of sunbeams crowd thy bower.

Glendaruel, Glendaruel,  
My love on all whose mother thou;  
From a cliff tree calls a cuckoo,  
and methinks I hear it now.

Glendaruel, Glendaruel.

*My thanks to all those, both in Scotland and Ireland, who helped build my knowledge of the Deirdre story over the summer of 2022. I'm deeply grateful.*

## The Impatience of Angels

*As seen in a pair of brass figures ‘removed from Hoy Low during modernisation of the lighting equipment’, Stromness Museum.*  
BETH McDONOUGH

Try not to be fooled by our Art Nouveau aspect,  
all those diaphanous garments,  
concealing, revealing just enough  
of the answers to the usual glanced questions  
concerning the gender of angels.

Note we’ve not chosen an at ease contraposta,  
we’re upright, held to attention.  
Our long wings have already unfolded  
as utterly gallus uncompromised sails,  
rigged out for head winds over Hoy.

Yes, one pinion was snapped in removal, flitting  
or transit perhaps, but please observe  
how those feet have conveniently lost  
all earthly hold, as was first carved  
into the maker’s lost casting wax.

No need to diss these as mere ringlets –  
we’re rocking untied Viking plaits,  
loosened to collar-bone length.  
Our haloes are practical bunnets. Nothing dares  
weight us, or bend our brass necks.

The Keepers no longer require our protection,  
but check our deceptively casual fists  
we grasp long trumpets, and trust us –  
we may be the first to hear your Parousia.  
We can roar news, blast on Orcadian gales.

## Ghjattu-Volpe changes places December 2021

BETH McDONOUGH

In those old forevers, Corsican toddlers  
learned of a prowling terror, the ‘Cat-fox’.  
Elusive, but known in the Alta Rocca,  
that too-rapid passing in macchja,  
a flex-leg ascent of Forchi di Bavedda.

Every shepherd had witnessed this beast,  
wont to attack and yet suckle at teats  
of unwary goats, odd mouflon and sheep.  
Experts were certain; a folklorish figment,  
some chestnut cooked up by herders. So much Cap Corse.

Until the century’s turn. Naturalists trapped  
not foxes, but striped ginger wildcats,  
fiery brushes for tails. Benedetti’s research  
is submitted this month. To the OFB. Therefore  
their feline is real. Recognised. Named in Latin.

Meanwhile, its cousin, once in the Cairngorms,  
so ferociously carnivore, fur, muscle, spit,  
is probably nowhere at all in pure form.  
Retreating, it sneaks into myths, superstition,  
clawholds half-noticed lairs from soft drawings and tales.

Pierre Benedetti’s findings are being presented  
to the OFB (French biodiversity agency), and it seems certain  
that the Corsican wildcat will be classified officially.

# Poems by Dilys Rose, Julie-ann Rowell, Stephanie Green and Stephen Keeler

## Who Killed the Carolina Parakeet?

DILYS ROSE

Who killed the Carolina Parakeet?  
I, said the farmer, with my gun, I killed the Carolina Parakeet.  
Shot 'em by the barrowload  
for stripping my crops.  
It was the darnedest thing:  
they'd scatter at the rifle crack,  
then fly right back for more.  
When I was done, the fields  
were awash with feathers.

### *Who else helped?*

I, said the woodsman, with my whetted axe, I helped.  
I laid waste to their habitat,  
swampy wetland forest  
replete with hollow tree trunks—  
they loved a humid riverbank.  
With nowhere left to nest  
and raise their young,  
their numbers plummeted.

### *Who saw them die?*

I, said the naturalist, with my limner's eye, I saw them die.  
I bought myself a basketful  
of the finest, freshly shot specimens  
and, with pins and wire, fashioned  
an illusion of exuberance:  
this tableau vivant was the model for  
my renowned engraving—and how  
poignant a memento it remains!

### *Who else saw them die?*

I, said the modiste, with my avid eye, I saw them die.  
Their profusion was a godsend  
to my trade: demand was sky-high.  
The ladies couldn't get enough  
of such cheerful plumage  
and every conceivable part—  
scalps, wings, tails, feet—  
adorned bonnets and brooches.

### *Who'll sew the shroud?*

I, said the modiste, to atone for my greed, I'll sew the shroud.  
I'll stitch until my fingers bleed  
and stain the linen red.  
I'll stitch until my sight  
is as good as gone,  
and I can no longer tell  
yellow feathers from green—though  
that won't bring them back.

### *Who'll dig their grave?*

I, said the naturalist, to pay for my squander, I'll dig the grave.  
I'll find a clearing by the river,  
and dig deep and wide.  
I'll stroke soft heads,  
cradle downy breasts.  
One by one, I'll wrap them  
in the winding cloth  
and lay them side by side.

### *Who'll sing a psalm?*

I, said the farmer, to stifle their shrieks, I'll sing a psalm.

### *Who'll be the parson?*

I, said the woodsman, I'll trade my axe for a prayer book.

### *Who'll carry the coffin? Who'll bear the pall? Who'll toll the bell?*

We'll all carry the coffin, all bear the pall, all toll the bell,  
said the farmer, the woodsman, the naturalist and the modiste  
and, chastened, shamefaced, we'll mourn our Carolina Parakeet.

## Drought in Orkney

JULIE-ANN ROWELL

No rain. For Months. The burns dry, skeletal beds –  
white and studded with pebble. Our acre  
is scorched, scarred with patches of yellow,  
any green is pale. The same is true of the field beyond  
where hares run. Crops are drying in the sun  
too early for harvest, though the farmers  
are baling and they must top up the animal's troughs,  
they won't fill themselves. I drove past a bull  
drool spilling from its lips almost to the ground.  
No one can keep up with this. Lochs are low  
their boundaries exposed, they never normally  
have baked sandy rims. There's plenty of cloud, and the haar  
is dank with dampness but we need a drenching.

Today, at Stromness, I saw two huge tankers of water  
roll off the ferry from Scrabster, never known before.  
The clunk of their wheels over the lip to shore,  
heading off in different directions, which part  
of the isles needs it more? I put out trays of water  
for the birds, they often drink rainwater from the guttering  
but the guttering's dry. We're asked by  
the Council to conserve water. The question  
of taking flowers to our parent's grave,  
filling the bottle to top up the vase. Our habits  
are changing. We obsess. It's summer but no one  
is lying on towels, except visitors. The rest of us  
are watching the sky, holding our breath.

## I know I should not trust the sea

STEPHANIE GREEN

More sky than the sky, you paint  
the air red as last night's hoolie,  
or this morning's peely-wally, smooth

as beginning again. On a sunny day,  
it's hard to tell if your lips taste  
of waves or the wind; the bite of your salt.

You sparkle with silver, spend, spend,  
vying with the oystercatcher's *pip, pip, pip*,  
and the *qui vive* of sand-flies.

In a rage, you find yourself  
in the opposition of rock,  
splinter into a ghost of yourself.

One and a half, maybe two hours  
either side of low tide  
you allow me to cross the isthmus to parley.



# Inside the Whale Museum

(Húsavík, Iceland.)

STEPHANIE GREEN

A cavernous space, glaucous light,  
and I'm walking on the ocean floor  
while shadowy cetaceans float above.

A moan reverberates through the museum,  
white dashes shoot in bursts  
across a black cymatic screen:

musical notes defined by the surrounding  
silence of the ocean; a song  
which can be heard from Portugal to Iceland,

now drowned, scrambled by engines  
of container ships, tankers and ferries.  
Here in the museum I follow the moan

to a film of you, a hunchback with your calf.  
Ringed with wrinkles, the light in your eye  
is the pure, clean flame of oil.

I climb up wooden stairs to a platform  
level with a vast skeleton. I never knew  
that hidden inside each flipper are finger-joints.

I remember we are cousins,  
as now outstretched towards me  
you hold out your hand.

# Reading the Bones

(On a 10th c grave, Reykjavik museum, Iceland.)

STEPHANIE GREEN

Like a foetus waiting to be born,  
she is curled on her side with bent knees.  
I see her unfold herself, free  
to step back through death's door

into day-light, her bones fleshed, seventeen  
again, skin limpid as blossom before  
it falls. She plaits her hair tightly  
then smooths the creases of her blue pinafore.

Its edging keeps alive her Celtic identity,  
despite an incomer's need to absorb  
strange words, customs, history  
and the dark winters when the stars seem to throb.

She wears riches: lapis lazuli  
and amber beads, brooches intricately wrought  
but when she opens her mouth, her teeth  
speak of starvation, enamel malformed.

She will never forget she was a refugee,  
five years old, fleeing famine and war.  
Crushed with others, hardly able to breathe  
in a trembling curragh, every oar

spiked with icicles, her stomach's heave  
plummeting the troughs, skin raw,  
lashed by freezing spray and sleet,  
as they headed into the unknown north.

# Touch

(On a mobile by Kerriane Flett, exhibited in the Heritage  
Centre, Papa Westray, Orkney, Sept. 2021.)

STEPHANIE GREEN

A waterfall of tiny porcelain hands,  
chubby, baby-like, swirls in the draught.  
How hard it is to prise open  
the fist of a baby grasping a finger.  
I must have clasped my mother's like this.  
Since lockdown I have not touched  
another's skin except when rubbing butter  
into a chicken's cold, shiny thigh.

Palm to palm, my mother and I  
stand either side of the window pane.  
She does not understand why  
I can't come inside. Her face  
is translucent as porcelain held to the light;  
a tear glistens, as rain spatters  
the glass. I want to wipe away her tears,  
as she did mine, memories resonant  
like struck porcelain, one flick

and ping, I'm there, a child again,  
but she lives in the forever present.  
Mirrored in each tear-drop  
is a convex world, the garden of the hospice  
she does not recognise. It is raining  
inside her head, words washed away.  
Mother, I can no longer touch your thoughts,  
and they will not let me hold your hand.

# If Not These Hills

STEPHEN KEELER

If not these hills  
this sea has always been here hereabouts  
getting and begetting rain.

If not the fells  
the sun has always seared somewhere near  
grinding deep into the cooling rock.

If not this strand  
the tide has always rested here close by here  
bringing shell and shale and sifting sand.

If not a garden  
the sky has always hung here always  
drawing up the earth and its outrageous colours.

If not you and me  
the earth will stay here hereabouts  
for a little longer

turning both of us without love  
into a bed for lovers  
very much like you and me.

# Morning

STEPHEN KEELER

The lifting light stoops now about the house  
and picks up things that fell during the night  
the warmth of morning puts them back again  
where we expect to overlook them in  
familiar shortening shadows slipping out  
of focus behind headlines and the sounds  
of passing cars and buttered toast and pills.

# Something to Celebrate

After W S Merwin

STEPHEN KEELER

I have never yet been woken  
alone and in a light-filled room  
with yellow curtains

by the sound of falling plums  
or that of pigeons dead and dropping  
from their branches into uncut grass

also to be found  
by suntanned children  
stomping through the afternoon with canes

I have not yet died  
although for sixty years and more  
I've annually survived

the date on which I will  
not thinking that it might be  
something to celebrate.

# An Imagined Life

STEPHEN KEELER

There never was an uncle set a bad  
example nor a powdered aunt who laughed  
too loud at innuendo no one talked  
in whispers when a name came up that I  
was not supposed to know. No picture post-  
cards written in a lover's mournful hand  
had ever fallen from the pages of  
my mother's hymn-book or had lain concealed  
beneath the perfumed lace and silks and thin  
and black-strapped things I knew were somehow  
clothes  
the places I explored when left alone.  
So I imagined how childhood might be  
with picture-books a brother and a friend  
invisible to everyone but me.

# Restless

STEPHEN KEELER

This kitchen table polished dull with beeswax  
sad watermarks the blemishes  
on ageing flesh.

This strip of dried-out leaf  
pressed to a folded cross  
a bookmark from a country church in March.

That envelope still unaddressed.

Those books of better poems.

Notebooks pens and scraps of paper  
torn to use for instrumental lists of unromance.

Can-they-be-brass paper-clips  
re-used and used again.

My glasses case from which has spilled  
the pencil an habitual Excelsior HB  
and the pen I should have used  
to write this list of reasons.

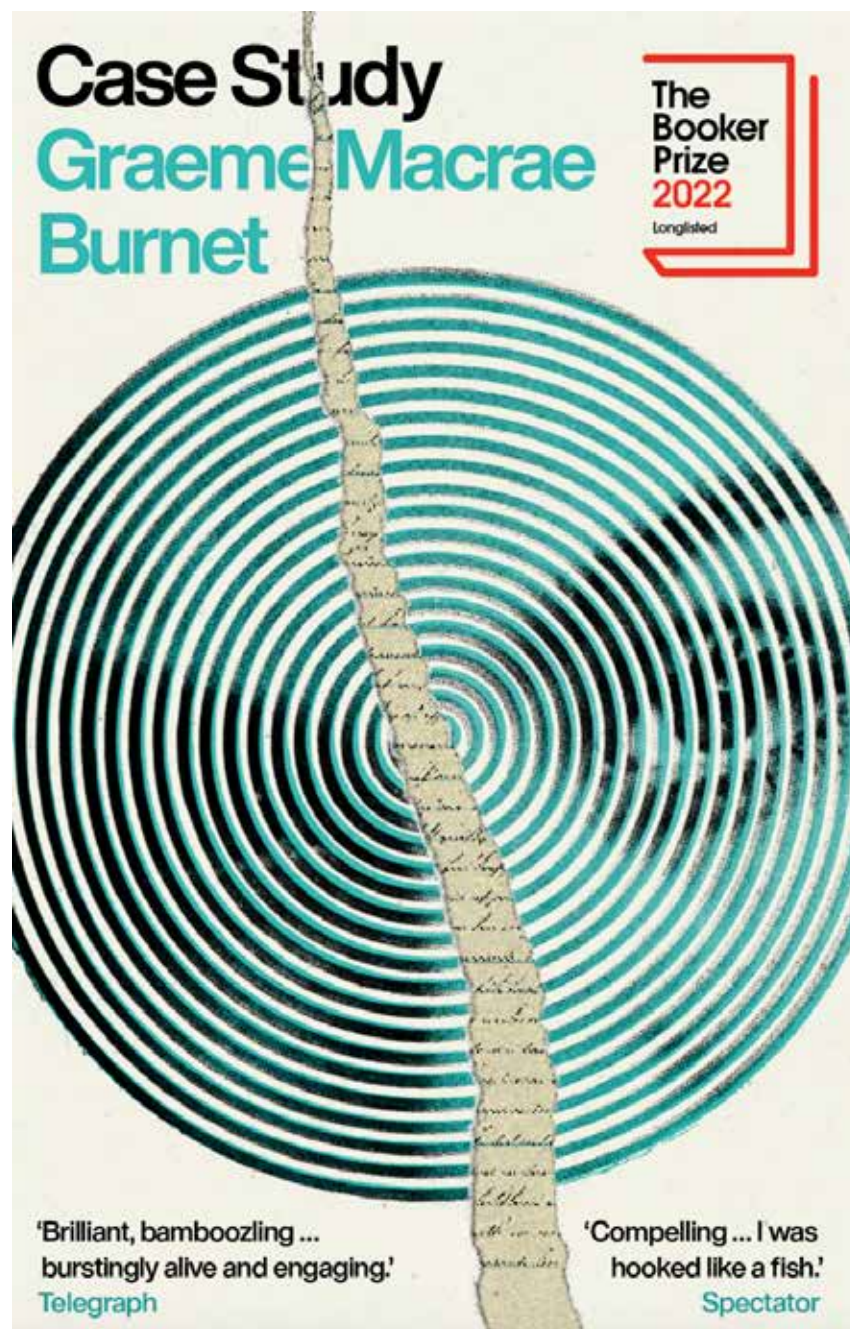
Case Study

Graeme Macrae Burnet  
Saraband (2021 hardback, 2022  
paperback £9.99)  
Longlisted for The Booker Prize, 2022  
REVIEW BY IAN STEPHEN

Last year I gave *The Brothers Karamazov* another go, in a recent translation. I got past the mists of names (each character has several depending on degrees of familiarity) and became engrossed in the complexities of minds and motivations. This proved good training for approaching *Case Study*. GMB introduces the big lie. That narrator carries the same initials as the guy who ‘translated’ the crime novels of one Raymond Brunet in Burnett’s two detective novels but he also signs himself to some of the papers which comprise *His Bloody Project*. He was already researching a maverick psychiatrist who makes R D Laing seem a pillar of the establishment, says he, when a person named Grey, though not for real, makes an offer ‘too apposite to resist’. ‘Grey’ has possession of a series of notebooks filled by his ‘cousin’ (who uses the word ‘inapposite’) all pertaining to the case studies of the infamous sort-of-therapist, Braithwaite.

Wait a minute though, it’s not that simple. The cousin has read thinly disguised case studies by the man himself and one, quoted in detail refers to ‘Dorothy’ who is definitely her sister, though she’s ‘really’ called Veronica. She is the one who took her own life whilst undergoing therapy in a run-down office on Ainger Road. (That’s reached from Chalk Farm Station. The geography and transport does work for real, up to a point. I did check. Of course Laing did exist though Braithwaite did not). The cousin of the person who isn’t really called Grey builds her own persona of Rebecca Smyth and we are indeed in the terrain of distorted mirrors and fade-out music, from Daphne de Maurier via Alfred Hitchcock. *Case Study* explores the character of both patient and psychiatrist by alternating Rebecca’s notebooks with GMB’s biographical study of Braithwaite.

As a reader you thus know you are a participant in a game right from page one. If you’ve read *His Bloody Project* you know not to take accounts at face value. If you’ve read either or both Burnett’s two crime novels, in homage to Simenon and set near Strasbourg, you are fully aware that the layers of allusion to previous works of literature are part of the deal. If all that sounds like a waste of time, you could say the same for any game which operates within a set of artificial constructs, say chess or bridge. What is really weird but brilliant is Burnett’s gift for engaging you despite drawing attention to the author’s devices. The voice which comes out from the notebooks does grab you with its individual mannerisms. Period detail and moments of intense clear focus, out



from all these screens of smoke, build characters operating in their own times and places.

It seems to me that all Burnett’s constructs to date, whether in the ‘crime’ or ‘literary’ genres, are consistent in their interest in darting deep into human motivation. The potential cliché of a relationship between the man who has killed and the one who investigates is used to advantage, simply because the writer portrays the human workings so accurately. As in Dostoyevsky there is high drama and violence but also an unrelenting need to stay within the minds of the characters. Burnett’s books seem to me like film-scripts where your own imagination has to build on the hints, allusions, actual details, to see more of what’s in shadow. It’s worth remembering that *His Bloody Project* came out first on Saraband’s ‘Contraband’ crime label. I think this is very different from the way William McIllvaney seemed to find a different tone, even style for his more clipped detective story of Laidlaw after his bold but maybe more effusive

working-class hero story of Docherty. I remember a fellow student saying he reckoned McIllvaney should write another literary novel but in the style of the detective one. Maybe that’s partly why Graeme Macrae Burnett’s books have crossed that seeming divide but also made the crossing to so many languages.

The character of Braithwaite suggests both comparison and contrast with J David Simon’s complex character of the writer in *An Exquisite Sense of What is Beautiful*. He is an enemy of the people of the United States and a hero of Japan. It is the disparity between the public word and the private harms, not always revealed, which produce dramatic tension in Simon. Braithwaite revels in public controversy.

Maybe *His Bloody Project* is essentially a tragedy but *Case Study* has a knowing grasp of the tragi-comic. There’s an argument that this time it’s just that bit too smart. Each reader, or player, has to decide that for themselves. One thing’s for sure. There’s a lot of what’s human in Burnett’s constructions. ■

God’s Teeth and Other Phenomena

James Kelman  
PM Press, Oakland, (2022) £12.99.  
REVIEW BY DUNCAN MCLEAN

The clichéd view of James Kelman has him as a relentlessly urban writer. ‘It was assumed by most,’ he reports in one essay, ‘that I crept around Glasgow with recording devices at the ready, recording fearsome drunken illiterates of the Glaswegian male populace.’ But this has always been a careless reading, as, right from his earliest collections, many stories have had small town or rural settings, often Highland ones; ‘The Bevel’ in *Not Not While the Giro* (1983) for instance, or ‘The Red Cockatoos’ in *Greyhound for Breakfast* (1987), right up to the feverish fairy-tale of ‘The State of Elixerism’ in *That Was a Shiver* (2017).

These are not idyllic landscapes evoked in descriptive swoons. The narrator of ‘Where I was’, for example, writes of the environment he finds himself in, ‘A wind like the soundtrack of a North Pole documentary rages.’ (*Lean Tales*, 1985.) James Hogg or Nan Shepherd’s characters would have experienced that wind differently, but Kelman’s appear to be wandering or drifting though an unkan country; they’re not from there themselves, not rooted in its climate or culture. Economic and political forces have moved to conceal or even erase the connection many Scottish city-dwellers have with their rural ancestors, going back just a generation or two.

Apart from its opening few pages, Kelman’s new novel, *Gods Teeth and Other Phenomena*, is set in an un-named rural area. There are towns out there, and occasionally the story moves through them, but most of the time the action takes place in deep country, up hillsides, in remote converted farmhouses, in gloomy woods by the banks of brackish canals. There are suggestions in the book’s final pages as to where the story has unfolded but that isn’t important, any more than the ‘real’ locations of Deads’ Town, Wraith-Island and the bush between them matter in Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Why bring in a 70-year-old Nigerian novel? Well, in 2020 Kelman published *What I Do* (*Memoirs*). Its assessments of writers and artists whose work Kelman admires provide the best available insight into how he views his own art. Significant Scottish writers he’s been associated with are there, but one of the most rewarding pieces is ‘The Voice of Amos Tutuola.’ Kelman’s reading of Tutuola’s work, and in particular the still startlingly fresh *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, is fascinating. It suggests many parallels to Kelman’s own work, and the challenges faced by anyone writing in a language not centred in their own culture:

*Tutuola breathed life into the deadening voice of the colonizer; the life derives from the rhythms and speech patterns of the language(s)*



indigenous to his people and culture. *The contemporary culture of which he is at the heart, in direct opposition to assimilation, also reaches beyond Nigeria and Africa.*

It reaches, for instance, to the Gàidhealtachd, the Nornlands, and most other parts of Scotland. This reach is made explicit by Kelman in the opening pages of the essay, where he discusses similarities between *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and John Francis Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, a collection he came across as a young writer, and which remains important to him. He also talks about the significance of his paternal grandmother's language: 'She sang to us in Gàidhlig, laughed at us in Gàidhlig, and spoke to us in English.'

*God's Teeth* puts its 'hero' through various trials and tribulations as he traverses a landscape that is itself threatening. In folktale terms it's a quest narrative, like 'Sgeulachd Mic Iain Dirich' from Campbell's collection – or indeed like *The Palm Wine Drinkard*.

So, who are we following through this countryside that is detailed, concrete and believable, yet fantastic, even phantasmagorical? Jack Proctor is a 66-year-old writer from Glasgow, who's been sporadically successful in a conventional sense – he won the Banker Prize, for instance – but who is thoroughly opposed to the commodification of writing by arts bodies and academia. For Proctor, writing is a philosophical and political assertion of the individual's right to exist, and for the community they come from to exist. It's about voices being heard, and stories being told.

In one episode in Tutuola's novel, the palm-wine drinkard and his wife face a hostile audience: 'we felt pain and talked out, but at the same time that the whole of them heard our voice, they laughed at us if bombs explode.' Proctor too goes through a series of painful encounters, but he speaks out, and the result is laughter. *God's Teeth* is the funniest of Kelman's ten novels to date. 'Make it interesting!' Proctor repeatedly urges his writing students, and Kelman does. When I wasn't laughing, I was somewhere between grinning and gasping in recognition and horror.

The story follows Proctor through several weeks of a writing residency organised by the House of Arts and Aesthetics, whatever that is (he never finds out.) What he does find is that it's almost impossible to write whilst on a writing residency. Instead, he's expected to travel through unknown terrain in hostile weather to give talks, do readings, teach classes, and above all perform the role of The-Banker-Prize-Winning-Author. Proctor can't perform anyone else's role. What he wants to do – what he must do – is write.

Along the way he's ambushed by threatening figures such as 'a uniformed member of the college constabulary', 'a part-time Lieutenant Colonel in

a community-guard militia', 'some idiot tutor bastard yapping on about "readability"', 'a Permanent Secretary to the Upper Hereditary Chamber' complete with 'ermined fist', Wilko Codling, 'the creator of the DI "Deadly" Dudley Merson books', not to mention 'Tallulah Debray, Dramatic Vibrettist, Renowned Exponent of Dance-as Art-in Performance'. Some confront him in person, some haunt the expectations of his interlocutors – or of Proctor himself.

The comedy of the book, and its political (non-ermined) punch, come from Proctor's continual battles with these nemeses, who may or may not be well-meaning, and who continually frustrate his attempts to write, not to mention failing to grasp the value of his writing advice. And it really is good advice. Anyone setting out to tell stories, whether short or novel-length, could learn an enormous amount from Proctor. Unfortunately, many of his students are not happy with his approach. They don't hear his words as advice, but as obtuse philosophising: a refusal to give them what they want, which is 'tips' on getting published, on TV adaptations, on snappy titles. Frequently it seems they just want to attend a writing class in the hope of affirmation, or at least an audience.

Yet Proctor is patient with almost all of them, generous with his time and experience, constantly alert to any sign of genuine interest in writing in his students:

*Let all of us go now and if we haven't already done so we should begin writing at once, and those of you who find it impossible to write a single word must find a pencil and write down on an A4 piece of paper the following words: it is impossible to write a single word*

*and follow that with the word: Why?*

*and following on from that just hold yer breath and dive in*

No better advice for any writer. Splash! ■

### Man at Sea

Liam Bell

Fly on the Wall Press (2022) £9.99

REVIEW BY CLAIRE DALY

*Man at Sea*, Liam Bell's third novel, is a skilfully told thriller set in Malta against two historical times, the 1960s and the 1940s.

The story begins inside the world of an eleven-year-old boy, Joe, during the Second World War, who records words in a book so he can learn their meanings, but because of propaganda, sometimes his definitions take on hilarious extravagances, to comical effect.

Bell colourfully describes the Second World War from Joe's perspective. He buys his nanna The Times of Malta, and learns words to write in his book begun by his father, who is the 'man at sea' of the title. Joe can hardly remember his last visit but he lives in hope of his return. But while he waits he learns new words

from the propaganda in the papers. He longs to share the definitions with his papa: "Like the word 'tumultuous', which he'd seen after the fall of France, meaning cunning and heroic, and 'haphazard', which meant skilfully executed."

Joe thinks he has found a spy when a man in uniform arrives with a telegram for his nanna one day. It's only later, when the refugee girl who is staying with them tells him that telegrams only usually come to announce a death, that he starts to worry. He begins to search for the telegram and his friendship with Katarina develops.

Each chapter begins with a verb and its meaning. The most apt for this novel is 'requite': "to return love and affection, or on the other side of the coin, to retaliate for injuries inflicted". This is a novel with two sides of a coin, two timelines, two sets of connected characters, and Bell keeps the momentum poised and the reader anticipates how the two might interplay, until they do. Midway through the novel, the characters from past and present timelines collide, with unexpected and gripping dramatic tension.

The second storyline, set in the 60s in Malta, is told from Stuart's perspective. Stuart travels with Beth, who nursed him through the war after he was injured, whom she has never met. Beth's Maltese relatives are surprised and confused when she arrives unannounced:

"Forgive me," he said, then cleared his throat. "It's very nice to meet you, certainly, but I'm at a loss..." he paused, shook his head, and looked directly at Beth. "You knew my father twenty years ago, yes, but you didn't know me. Don't think me rude – but why come all this way?"

It's slightly unclear why Beth and Stuart have waited twenty years to confront the impacts of the war on their lives. Beth wants to find the son of her wartime husband who never returned to her, and Stuart wants to find the man who fiddled with his RAF plane before he took off, causing him serious skin injuries which still impact on his quality of life.

Bell seamlessly flits between timelines, with Stuart remembering the horrific incidents that led up to his crash, and he is intent on finding the Maltese man with a lop-ear who caused it all. One hopes that the man in question is not the mysterious Victor, who, when the reader first meets him, is helpfully wearing a Panama hat to delay our suspense.

With more twists than a contortionist's body, *Man at Sea* wraps you up in Maltese history, drags you through wartime rubble, and holds you tight throughout. This is a carefully researched wartime thriller. The ending is unexpected and poignant. I wanted to know more of what Stuart felt at the climax of the story, but Bell doesn't linger on the sentimental, he is a man of action, and for that we should be grateful.

He is busy with his plot twists, and that is what makes this so readable. ■

### The Call of the Cormorant

Donald S. Murray

Saraband (2022) £9.99

REVIEW BY JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON

*The Call of the Cormorant* tells the story of Karl Einarsson. As the subtitle of the novel says, it's an 'unreliable biography' of an unreliable man, who fictionalised much of his own life. Einarsson was a real person, who was born in Iceland, raised in the Faroe Islands, and then lived in Denmark and Germany during the time of Second World War. An artist and a storyteller, in this book Einarsson works for a printer and advertiser, and tells tales about his life.

Einarsson claimed to be the Count of St Kilda (among other titles), and argued that St Kilda was all that remained of the lost city of Atlantis. During the Second World War, his claims came to the attention of the Nazis: interested in the potential of Einarsson's Aryan roots, they got him to broadcast radio bulletins to the Faroes, in the manner of Lord Haw-Haw. The Faroe Islands were (and are) officially part of Denmark: Denmark had been occupied by Nazi Germany, but, because of the location of the Faroes (mid-way between Scotland and Iceland), Britain had occupied the strategically-important islands. The Nazis wanted to use Einarsson to reach his fellow islanders. In Donald Murray's book, Einarsson chooses to broadcast in what he claims is the original language of Atlantis, at once reaching out and making himself unintelligible.

It's a powerful scene in the novel: Einarsson has lived on the edges, imitating noblemen and railing against people who he thinks have stopped him taking his rightful place in the world, including a Jewish boss. However, he ultimately rejects the Nazi ideology in favour of poetry, retreating into a fantasy world of islands and bird life – while remaining simultaneously aware of the realities and coldly calculating how best he can survive.

Einarsson is an interesting character, but this book actually starts from the point of view of a Hebridean fisherman, who is shipwrecked near to Einarsson's childhood home in the Faroe Islands. The point of view alternates throughout the book, mainly between Karl Einarsson himself and Christianna, his sister, but occasionally also letting us see the action from other perspectives. The perspective of the Scottish islander is particularly important, as this book wants to talk about islands in general: about the people who are brought up there and whether they choose to leave or stay and also, importantly, about how other people see those islands. Einarsson is able to get away with many of his

outrageous statements because people on the mainland are so ill-informed, seeing the islands as a romantic ‘other’ on which they can project their fantasies.

Christianna, Karl Einnarsson’s sister, chooses to stay on the islands and marry a quiet Faroeman. In the narrative, she’s an important counterweight to her brother, but her morality seems very Hebridean – she would have been a good match for the man she actually wanted to marry, the shipwrecked sailor of the opening passages of the book. It is very hard to write about someone else’s culture – even if many island communities have things in common, they also have many points of difference. But when Christianna felt trapped in her island home with an unspeaking husband and a newborn child, so miserable that she could hardly even leave her house, I had to put the book down for a day or so because I just couldn’t bear to read this familiar story. Christianna’s state of mind is told in a few sentences, as her brother Karl – or their father – is the focus. Christianna remains stoic, stuck facilitating others’ lives right to the end. She can’t leave or stay happily, and I wish she had something more.

My strong engagement with the characters tells you how well-written this book is, and I would highly recommend it. For all that this is an island book, much of the action is set in Europe: Karl Einarsson leaves his small home for wider horizons, and his adventures likewise deserve a wide audience. ■

### The Projectionist

Kirsti Wishart

Rymour Books (2022) £11.99

REVIEW BY DAVID NEWMAN

As a film buff / lover, I think I might quite like to live in Seacrest, the film loving town at the centre of this novel. Or if not live there, at least be able to visit on a regular basis. Unfortunately, it’s not real, and probably never could be, but... one can only dream that such a place exists.

This is a strange novel in so many ways. To begin with, the narrator introduces you to the town and the people of seacrest in a similar way to how Dylan Thomas introduces you to Milkwood. I found this a little jarring at first until I imagined myself as a camera recording each scene as though it was a film. Once I’d done that I felt a lot more comfortable and began to enjoy the various shenanigans of the characters living and struggling to keep the town of Seacrest alive. And that is the central premise of this novel. The town is now struggling to survive in such a modern era and something needs to happen to rescue its fortunes.

Hence the much anticipated arrival of world renowned movie critic, Cameron Fletcher, a man thought by many to be long dead, who visit suddenly brings the town, the 85th annual film festival and the novel itself alive from the moment he

steps off of the train and is greeted by an ecstatic crowd.

As well as Cameron Fletcher, we meet a number of other characters central to the story. There’s Dr Jo Ashe, a film academic, who has moved to Seacrest a few years before to study film and to join her girlfriend, Shona Boyd. Only Shona subsequently leaves to go to the US but, is apparently due back soon. Then there’s Luke, a young man who obsessively looks after the archive that’s built around who he believes is the deceased Cameron Fletcher. We also meet the charming Harry who runs the local cinema on the pier but who also knows more about Seacrest’s secret past than most, and finally, lording over them all from his glass office overlooking the town, we meet the strangely and slightly overbearing Calum Boyd, who wants to redevelop Seacrest forever, closing down all the small cinemas and creating a huge multiplex that none of the inhabitants really want to see.

However, Cameron Fletcher isn’t real. He’s actually out-of-work actor, Arthur Dott, hired by Calum Boyd in a devious attempt to forward his personal agenda. However, once he arrives, Arthur begins to follow his own script and it soon becomes clear that nothing is going to turn out as everyone expected.

The Projectionist was an enjoyable book to read even though it took me a few pages to really get into it. However, once I’d reached that point, I found myself swept along with the story as it moved, camera-like around the various, wonderfully strange locations. And finally, there’s the wonderful, strange cast of characters to follow as they pursue their various interests and goals. All in all, great fun! ■

### For Thy Great Pain, Have Mercy on My Little Pain

Victoria MacKenzie

Bloomsbury (2023) £14.99

REVIEW BY CYNTHIA ROGERSON

Some books demand an immediate and simple response, so here it is: *Reading it gave me great pleasure.*

Two 14th century English women take turns confiding the truths of their lives. These truths are primarily spiritual, for they have an unusually close relationship with Jesus. But there is also a fair spattering of ordinary domestic and community reportage. They make some references to the Black Death and current political tyrannies, but mainly they focus on Jesus knocking on their door (so to speak) and how this changes their lives.

Julian of Norwich becomes an anchoress at St Julian’s church in Norwich. She voluntarily agrees to be bricked into a small cell attached to the church for the rest of her life in order to contemplate God without distractions. She has a small window through which

to view the world, and from which to dispense advice to anyone who asks. Mostly she looks out her window, prays, and writes with honesty and intelligence about her experiences.

The other narrator is Margery Kempe. Less cerebral, more corporeal. A mother of at least 14 children, a good humoured wife, and a woman who sometimes fancies other men (including a very handsome Jesus). She’s heard of Julian and admires her – but is not tempted to isolate herself likewise. She loves the world too much, and tells her diary every little thing.

Both women have religious visions, called *shewings*. Talking about these get them into all sorts of trouble because personal unscheduled visits from Jesus are not within the church’s control. They’re occasionally accused of heresy and generally considered a bit wacky. The visions are sometimes overwhelming, but more often inspiring and consoling. Hallucinatory or genuine – does it matter? Margery’s journal, titled The Book of Margery Kempe, is considered the oldest English language diary. Julian’s manuscript The Revelations of Divine Love is considered the earliest surviving work by a woman. Both of their writings were lost to obscurity until relatively recently, and – astoundingly – found appreciative readers in the 21st century, over six hundred years later. How many writers can say that?

It’s fictional biography at its best. A literary gem about women and religion that will appeal to non-religious readers as well as those with faith. It’s short, only 150 pages, but take your time and savour each page. An extraordinary first book by an extraordinary writer. ■

### Dinna Mess wi the Po Po

A selection of entries from The Toulmin Prize 2008-2020

Edited by Richard Bennett and David Northcroft

Elphinstone Institute (2021) £9.99

REVIEW BY ALISTAIR LAWRIE

This compact anthology frankly surprised me in a number of ways. My first surprise was the realisation that I knew personally significantly more than a third of the writers contained in it but, as I read, I became aware that the real surprise was that there were so many I didn’t know. At all. And felt that I should have, not merely because of the confines of the north east but rather because there was such a wealth of good writing on display that I felt I should have been aware of such quality.

To be honest I approached this review with a certain trepidation, perhaps a fear that its contents would be too circumscribed by the nature and requirements of the prize. That it’d be too cosy, too couthy, too retro. I should have kent better. The first time I came across Toulmin’s work was happening

on a copy of “Blown Seed” in a shop in Hawick and immediately dismissing it as likely to be a wallowing in an idealised view of the farming past. It was some years before I realised its unsentimental portrayal of life then.

The collection is remarkably varied in just about every imaginable way. There are portrayals of rural life but they’re predominantly concerned with how that lifestyle is confronted and affected by the huge changes that have happened in the North East in the last hundred years. And not always from the local point of view. At the heart of “Pink Wellies” for instance is the oil wife from London who can’t cope with the isolation of her beautifully modernised old farmhouse. There’s the stoic acceptance of a similar transformation to the farmhouse he’d occupied for most of his life in “Feebuie”. Or there’s the son in the symbolically rich “Ketee” quietly effecting his escape from being trapped in a once flourishing fishing town.

The characters who people these stories are wonderfully diverse too. Yes there’s the fisherman who is thirled to the whole lifestyle of going to sea but one of his relatives on the boat paints his fingernails and is often out of his skull on various drugs. One of the feistiest characters in these stories is a Chinese grandmother at a takeaway in Buckie. In another we meet a third generation Italian sweetie shop owner.

The subject matter is equally varied. There is an atmospherically powerful story that dances on a chilling borderline in a relationship that may or may not be breaking down where paranoia and the possibly psychotic jostle inconclusively. There is the poignancy of people left behind by those killed in WW1 and a beautifully drawn relationship between a young man and his severely disabled friend.

Styles vary throughout. From the exquisitely lyrical memories of the sweet shop owner in “Into The Sweet”, to the Carveresque economy of “Jenny’s Well”, to the powerfully page turning elements of character driven detective fiction that inform “The Catch”.

A number are very successfully written in Doric throughout, many only utilise it for the dialogue and one or two ignore it. Which feels right. Some are genuinely funny. Some are very sad. I like some better than others but there’s no doubt this an eminently readable collection at the end of which I found myself impelled on a search for other work that some of these writers might have produced. I don’t think there can be a higher recommendation for any anthology.

I was left with a sense of admiration for the good judgement of the judges but also feeling glad I didn’t have to make that call. I can’t imagine how difficult it must have been, for example, to separate a winner from a runner up in the 2020



competition. They're each brilliant in their own way. Choosing would have been beyond me.

I'd like to finish on a personal note by congratulating Richard Bennett and David Northcroft on a fine anthology and thanking them for providing the basis for some of my future reading. ■

# Objects for Private Devotion

Lydia Harris

Pindrop Press (2022) £10

# Reading the Landscape

Carol McKay

Hedgehog Press (2022) £7.99

# The Red House

Sharon Black

Drunk Muse Press (2022) £10

# Such a Sweet Singing – Poetry to Empower Every Woman

Edited by Kirsty Gunn,

Batsford (2022) £12.99

REVIEW BY MANDY HAGGITH

Sphagnum moss can absorb eight times its own weight of water, an apt metaphor for poetry if ever there was one, the best of which seems light on the page and then as you squeeze it you realise just how much it is holding, how much thirst-quenching goodness it can offer. This is what Lydia Harris's poems are like: delicate fronds of words drenched in images, oozing with thought-provoking ideas. The poems mostly come from Westray, where the poet lives, and from historical and archaeological research, emerging out of objects held in museum collections, fragments gleaned in digs and stories from documents, graveyards and local people. They are like magic spells that conjure life from apparently inert objects, as if the times past laid down in peat bogs, burials and ruins can be brought back to us in all their vivid strangeness through words: a fragment of knitted fabric becomes a bonnet then a child, '...and the child peat yields / is a runaway child, with a hop, a skip and a follow-/the-burn...'. Then the child gains a musical instrument:

'His small spoon  
has a whistle bored  
in the handle.

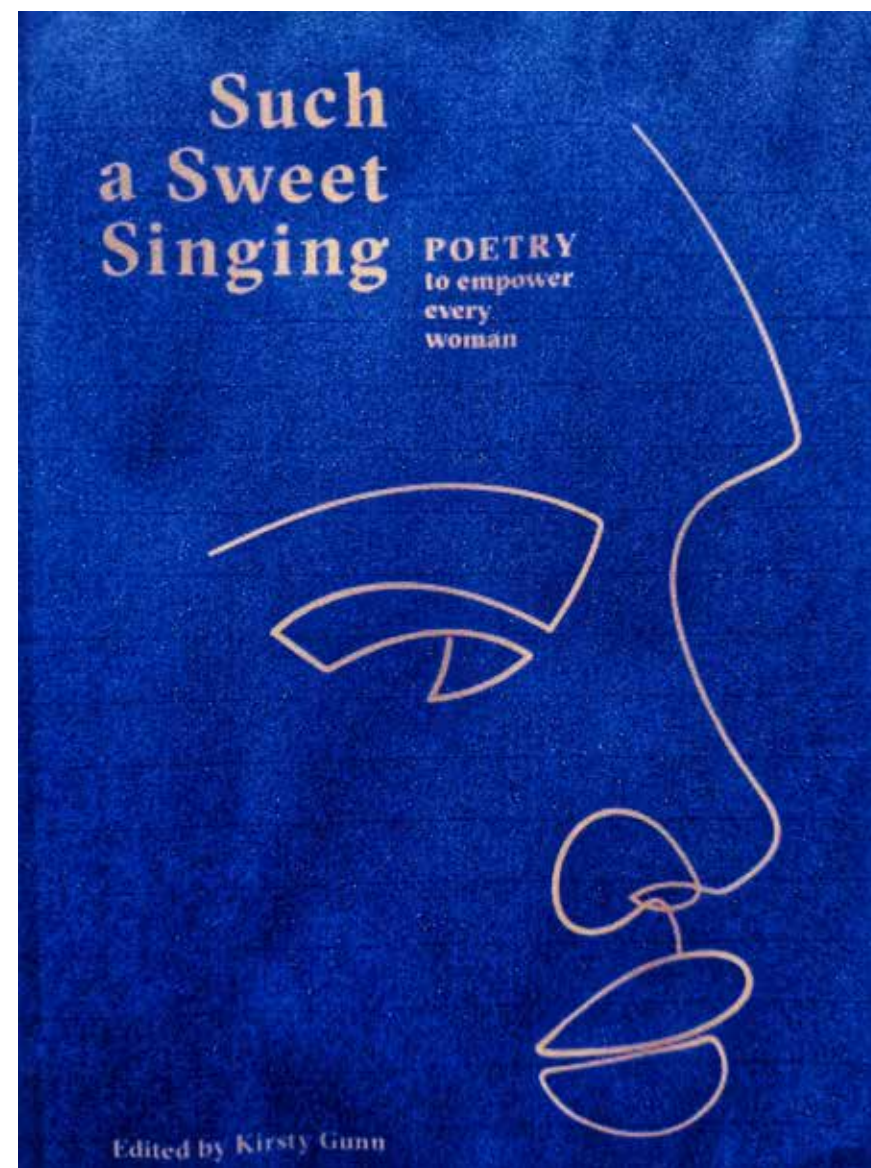
He sups  
what the moon drops.  
He pipes back.'

Soon he has a mother and a home and gradually we can see and hear a whole community in their landscape. In 'Lyde Road' the poet asks, 'What else will I find?' and answers

'A kerbed hearth, a pyre,  
an amber bead...

human hair, fair,  
the fineness of a young person.'

The cover image of the book is of



an elaborately carved prayer nut, a 'toy for the soul', which we can see as akin to a poem. 'Open the nut on its hinge, / the book on its spine, / your heart to the garden.' But it isn't only ornate objects that attract the attention of this exquisitely observant poet: quernstones, bones and pebbles seem just as sacred.

With each page we turn, the poet has discovered another relic, visited a broch, unearthed an ancient manuscript or watched over the shoulder of an archaeologist picking through a midden and she shows us not just the things, but the lived experiences they signify. Each object is worthy of the 'devotion' of the title, each contains mystery and wonder. This is no dusty collection of museum pieces, it is alive with birdsong, fish, and lots and lots of beautiful moss! Here are some Orkney handbells chiming with their own bright lives.

'None of them  
wanted to be wrought  
from iron or to swing a lead tongue.

They'd rather be terns flaring

the tide's way in a halo of bronze,

or rock gongs with frowns gone firm  
tuned to the sound of willow-seed-fall

the breath of white clover  
pitched to a nestling's song.'

Lydia Harris writes with disarming simplicity, without overt end rhymes but in crisp rhythmically varied and subtle lines rich with other kinds of sound patterning, lots of consonance and internal rhymes, each word treasured and precise, each poem as carefully curated as the best sort of exhibition. It's a tightly woven fabric of sound that seems to convey the voices of people and other animals across centuries and millennia. Noting down the graveyard inscription to those nameless people 'buried here but not inscribed', she presents them to us doubly inscribed, honouring through these haunting poems the indigent people, those drowned at sea and above all children, midwived here back from the past to haunt us.

Moving from the far north to southern

France, Sharon Black is also busy at haunting in her collection *The Red House*, which also uses museum pieces, historical archives and lived experience of local people to show us the community where she lives in the Cévennes mountains. The house in question was the last silk spinning mill in the country and she gives us a rich picture of the whole process of silk production from the ecosystem among which the mulberry trees would grow, to all the work involved in creation of beautiful fabric and the other activities of the community in times gone by. The book teems with the ghosts of people, again conjured through objects: a pouch for incubating silk worms, a mule blinker, a shepherd's cup, a walnut oil reliquary, a baptism dress, clogs. It also throngs with people from the present day, those agonising over the sale of a tumbling house, many generations in the family, to the mayor who 'wears a cockerel hat, / the stuffed bird wagging as he struts, / shaking hands, chest puffed up'. Old trees watch over the changes in human lifespans, observing 'the way an old home's swallowed / by the seasons, then the decades, / then a sketch of someone else's dream.' As well as the many trees, around the village there is great natural diversity, which we regularly encounter throughout the book, from earthworms and caterpillars to roe deer, little owls and wolves. This is deliciously vivid poetry and on a cold February morning it's rather gorgeous to wander down to the river below the poet's house, where she goes 'Every day in August':

'and the river seals itself round my swimming  
while green breaks into fragments,  
bugs slide away, the body floods and soars  
and this is not a ritual, this is not a ritual,  
this is more than saying *I give thanks*.'

Vivid writing is also a feature of Carol McKay's tantalisingly brief pamphlet *Reading the Landscape*. It opens with a stunning allegory of a crow/husband and this is just one of many brilliant portayals of the natural world and our paradoxical place within it. Here's another:

'Fox crouches for his rendezvous with shrew.

The magpie's bone horn beak tugs  
more stout twigs.

Lured by the spring sun's angle-shifting light,  
the baby in my arms uncurls his fist.'

After a nondescript poetry reading, the River Clyde is enjoyed 'declaiming its way out to sea.' In the hospital garden an 'umber leaf' falls, 'weightless.. like a burden'. Walking the Lowthers, the poet is 'a tick on a living hill.' This is deep, unpretentious, highly polished writing. There isn't a word wasted.

If these three excellent collections have whetted your appetite for women's poetry you could do worse than to

acquire *Such a Sweet Singing* for your bookshelf. As Kirsty Gunn says in her introduction, women's poems can 'deepen the experience of the ordinary so that it becomes extraordinary' and, as this anthology shows, women have been doing this for centuries. Covering themes of courage, love, imagination, family, home and life, the poets include the well-known, such as Sappho, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti and Mary Oliver, but also those unfairly neglected like Charlotte Smith, Margaret Cavendish and Alice Meynell. I loved finding Denise Levertov's poem 'About Marriage' (and against 'wedlock'): 'I would be / met // and meet you / so, / in a green // airy space, not / locked in.' Lavishly and strikingly illustrated, hardback but elegant, this book of poems holds at least eight times its weight in thirst-slaking nourishment. ■

### The songs I sing are sisters

Cáit o'Neill McCulloch and Sinéad McClure

Dreich (2022) £6.00

REVIEW BY ANNE MACLEOD

The first print run of this chapbook sold out in days. This should not surprise. It is more astonishing that the newly emergent poets whose voices combine in these songs of separation and homecoming should have reached the 2020's before committing verse to paper.

Cáit O'Neill McCulloch is, of course, well-known in the Highlands as community archaeologist, ethnologist and museum curator and Sinéad McCulloch in Eire as children's writer and radio producer –neither one a stranger to the written word – but it was the pandemic, with its online opportunities for technological face to face communication and the ensuing flourishing of online poetry readings and workshops, that brought them together.

And thank goodness it did. The work in this collaborative chapbook which won the Dreich 2022 Classic Chapbook Competition is uplifting and lyrical, questing and questioning; every poem fully-formed. The poets address the emigrant's dilemma, 'My mother named distance a street of goodbyes' (S: *Homecoming*). 'Tell us... how when the houses were burned they were saved/ the doors' (C: *Thresholds*.) They explore the richnesses of family relationships amplified and stressed by the otherness of the migrant, the careful hoarding of culture. 'My mother collected stones, they lined her window sill/ all shapes and dialects'. (S: *We were stones*.) 'This is how the poetry of my family happened/ spoken, imagined, answered and unanswered' (C. *Litanies*.) They do not forget the fathers, who shine too. 'my father/ all light.' (C. *Mo Sholas*.) '... Like stars in the dark.' (S. *An apparition of my father*.)

The collection is beautifully constructed, reads with a sense of unity enhanced by the lack of individually

named authorship. (The index at the back does list each poet's work.) And the voices, though distinct and individual, ring together as if in song. Blood harmony.

Forty pages, dazzled with sea and hope and time, offering us all a way to survive together, to become '... your song ... spiralled into stone... in the carry of your life-stream' (C. *Kin*.) I commend them to you. ■

### Norlan Lights

New Poems in Scots from the North East

Lesley Benzie, Sheena Blackhall and Sheila Templeton

Rymour Press (2022) £10.79

REVIEW BY ALISTAIR LAWRIE

By its nature, indeed its very existence, this collection of poems (by Lesley Benzie, Sheena Blackhall and Sheila Templeton) sets out to be a significant moment for Doric and indeed Scots poetry. It succeeds. The name itself "Norlan Lights" makes this aim clear, particularly appearing as it does a hundred years on from MacDiarmid's kick starting the Scottish Renaissance, as Ian Spring notes in the short introduction. In this he clearly draws links with these three poets and those associated with the earlier movement (Jacobs, Symons and Angus) and some of the traditional concerns of Scottish verse. Even the collegiate nature of the arrangement of the poems seems to add to the feeling that there is an element of poetic manifesto about this collection. Perhaps predictably Sheena Blackhall states this commitment most pungently:

"Fin I wis wee, I sooked in Doric  
Wi my reg'lar bottle o milk ...  
My tongue didnae fork like a snake's  
Till I stertit the skweel"  
but all three assiduously promote Doric by their skilful use of it in their work.

The volume contains a rich selection of work by three poets all of whom write in their own highly individual versions of Doric. That diversity is at the heart of the collection. All three vigorously promote the spikk itsel but the variety in its use is intrinsic to the effect. Each poet has a very clear, distinctive voice of her own and, while the subject matter is often related, indeed, arranged to be so in the book's four sections, the reader is regularly challenged by the tonal or stylistic shifts created by the constant movement from one poet to another. My first reaction to this was to be critical. I felt it should have been sensibly arranged into work by each of the three poets in the tradition enshrined in the old Penguin Modern Poets series. This way I felt you could become familiar with and therefore appreciate each for her own distinctive ways of seeing and saying.

Certainly each poet has a clearly

discernible voice which is in itself worth hearing and learning how to savour. Yet in the end I've come to prefer, to appreciate even, the constant jarring effect of shifting from one voice to another. It ensured that as a reader I was kept constantly on my mettle, having to think about what I was reading, having to negotiate with each voice afresh in each poem. More importantly I started to realise that these constantly shifting versions of the tongue, viewpoints and voices were affirming the fact that Doric is as infinitely capable of variation, of subtlety, of light and shade as any other form of our shared language.

The voices are indeed very different. Of course there are common themes, identified by Spring in his introduction, the land and its seasons, elements of the poetic tradition, contemporary social and political issues, a shared familiarity with international culture (in itself typically Scots), an ability to explore equally successfully the daft or the tragic features of human life and of course their common commitment to the Doric. All of these are there but personally I've come to enjoy the individual excellence of each poets' distinctive voice.

Lesley Benzie is spare, economic, a toonser voice, relentlessly blunt and colloquially everyday – all of these yet capable of considerable poignancy when appropriate. And her subjects are dealt with in a way that is often elliptically brief, sharp and uncompromising and powerfully political.

Sheila Templeton is often deeply lyrical and powerfully expansive in expression. Her poetry is often very subtle in its effect, dealing with finely delineated relationships, the processes of change over time. The past and its connection to the present informs her work very powerfully and, perhaps as a result, her work is more likely to feature a mixture of current and older more traditional expression.

Sheena Blackhall is as usual defiant of category, able to shift successfully from the deeply traditional to experimentation in Erasure or Golden Shovel Poetry with apparently consummate ease. Her work can be serious, thoughtful and very funny often all at once. Her similes can be dazzling and her use of rhyme assured, both structurally or to epigrammatic effect.

In conclusion, the overall effect of this excellent anthology is to underline emphatically the fact that Doric is a perfectly suitable medium for a complete range, how it allows (to misquote Norman MacCaig) for "a breadth and assemblage" of poetic possibility. Tae misquote another manifesto, iss buik echoes as nearhaun as mith be the real spikk o weemen. An gars us see foo rich an fruitful that spikk can be gin it's eesed richt. An important buik, aye – a gran guide tae far oor spikk is ayenoo an tae far it mith ging in i future. ■

### Modren Makars: Yin -

Irene Howat, Ann McKinnon, Finola Scott

Tapsalteerie (2022) £

### Whit If? Scotland's History as it Micht Hiv Bin

Hugh McMillan

Luath Press (2022) £

### WTF is normal anyway?

Jo Gilbert,

Seahorse Publications (2022) £

### A Plain Glass

Harry Smart

Drunk Muse Press (2022) £

REVIEW BY JIM MACKINTOSH

Clarity: there is a scientifically proven point in January when you've just about managed to find the back of the Christmas chocolate stash and to lose the cheese mountain you have surrendered to the inevitable period of eating toasted cheese every day for the next six weeks. This is not cheddar cheese on toast. This is the random grilling of the megaplatter you needed for the twenty folk you thought were visiting over the festive fortnight. This is toasted manchego on a Mother's Pride heel. It's a thing; but what has this in any way to do with a review of poetry books? Well, two points – I like chocolate, I like cheese – both regularly fuel my writing and more relevantly for this article, the reading of poetry. In fairness and for full disclosure, I also like wine and this has been forever my leaning post for reading fresh poetry. So when the dull thud of a *Northwords Now* selection box landed on the hall floor I knew its contents would be anything but dull, but also knew I would find by the end of the adventure I wasn't disappointed. I headed for the Thinking Shed armed with grilled roquefort on Warburton thins, a supply of wine and the four treats listed above.

Familiarity: I must confess to being an old pal of Hugh McMillan's and central to that, a lover of his poetry, but I did try to read this latest offering with an open mind and a sharp pencil. To understand the premise of the book and its theme of *Whit if?* it helps if you imagine yourself in the pub with three or four pals and someone asks 'Whit if?'. Personally, I imagined this to be the Galloway Arms in Wigtown and being one of the pals.

The 'Whit If's' for which the answers become more and more ridiculous yet bizarrely remain worryingly relevant. From that first puzzlement is the birth of a series of questions which are in themselves nonsense and the answers even more so. Or are they? That's the joy of these poems. There is a basis of fact, albeit tenuous, to the poems, but they do have a habit of making you reason with yourself: 'here, that's a fair point, what if?' and that's it, you're hooked. You need



to and will read them all and I have no doubt have further 'Whit if's?' as a result.

The poetic puzzle of *Whit if Alexander III haed Twitter* has jangled with my reasoning since I first read it and even yet seek the detail of 'Yolande's pairty' – aiblins the supplementary as yet unwritten poem is 'Whit if The Sun wis a paparazzi rag even in they days?'.

And in the poem 'Whit if whan the tectonic plates shiftit' Hugh ponders of 'Nae reformation. Nae Global Warmin'. Now there's a whole day next to the fire on The Galloway Arms to answer that one.

It's not really a criticism as such, but you do need to know a little about the subjects and characters underpinning the 'Whit If?' poem titles to truly appreciate the depth of the poem itself. Personally, I'm okay with that, as it forced me to research, explore and refresh my memory on some of the subjects.

Yes, there is more than an air of fun in the concept but to file this book under 'whimsy' or 'nonsense' would be to completely miss the careful craft and considered structure that is so emblematic of Hugh's poetry and which makes *Whit If? Scotland's History as it Micht Hiv Bin* worthy of your attention and yer bawbees.

Brevity: my English teacher, the negative one of my dark 3rd Year and the one before the epiphanic one of my enlightening 4th year who would become my word dealer, an under-the-desk supplier of Heaney, MacCaig and Neruda with the occasional fix of Henderson, not the 3rd year doom-merchant who once told me my poetry's brevity more than made up for its lack of quality. This youthful discouragement, reinforced later in life by the salutary tale of Hugh MacDiarmid sincerely informing Seamus Heaney his poems were not just short but very short, has left me with an irrational suspicion of 'short' poems.

I had no such need to be nervous when I read some of Jo Gilbert's shorter poems in *WTF is normal anyway?* They are gems. The collection is stitched seamlessly together with a weave of short poetic answers to the question of 'what is normal?' Although they're Jo's answers, I'm sure you will recognise them unravelling in your own recollections of getting on with life. I certainly did, and her shorter poems are not, unlike those of my pooky youth, lacking quality in their brevity. The poems such as 'If nithin changes, nithin changes' with its tightly bound ending: *A few less freens, lookin a bittie mare deid, agin yer een.* and 'In a side room, off the ward' with its all too familiar reminder to us all of our vulnerability, bind the reader willingly to her anchored soul.

But to give the impression that all of Jo's collection is a bundle of very short poems would be mistaken. It is not. It is, however, a powerful weave of recollections from Jo's perspective through creative eyes of the problems,

secrets, wrongs and flaws to which we can pretty much all relate. The thing is – she does it well, with searing honesty and just enough humour to make you feel it's okay to laugh, or as your Granny would say – if we divna laugh wid be sair greetin, until, as Jo claims 'silence waits, tone noticed'.

I first became aware of Jo's poetry three years ago and was chuffed when she contributed a poem to the George Mackay Brown anthology *Beyond The Swelkie* which I was co-editing. And I was even more chuffed when I learned of her first collection 'WTF is normal anyway' which would allow more folk to share my love of her work. It was heartwarming to find she'd remained true to her roots and published her poetry in the Doric. Its lyrical beauty sings off the page and ay, ah divna ken aa the wordies, but it's okay tae hae a puckle chuckies in yer language shoes. They divna stoap yer unnerstaunin or the lichtsome joy waftin aff the page. An onyweys, *WTF is normal?*

And coincidentally, my first dip into Harry Smart's *A Plain Glass* was the 'short' poem *The Day of the Armistice*. Its three stanzas of solid energy could easily be mistaken for the brief synopsis of a stage play or TV drama, such is the powerful economy and rich depth of vision in their words. Yet they deliberately leave enough space for the reader to search for their own outcomes in ending – *love and hate, father, the weight of both at the same time.*

Intensity: Beyond the intensity of imagery, Harry generates an enviable pace in his verse, great focus, great energy and a decisiveness in its delivery that comes with the hard-walked miles of someone like himself, whose experiences have determined his route in life. His poetry maps it out in exquisite detail. His poem *Ma Mere l'Oye (Mother Goose)* has had me in tears too many times with its weave of loss and loved ones fading by painful measures every day. For me it's Bach; for Harry it's Ravel, yet *the final movement, the grace of things forgotten* and ultimately *the moment the gentle brass comes in like bells* are snapshots of precious memory we all must hold close. Harry Smart – a fine poet you must seek out – perhaps tells this better than most.

Parity: I have already confessed my love of chocolate and the odd selection box of favourites that even in my crumbling years still make me smile at Christmas. Tapsalteerie's *Modren Makars – Yin* is a welcome box of variety but contains much more than expected favourites.

Importantly, I must praise the collection's editor, Christie Williamson, for considerably drawing these voices together. At first glance, it's three poets writing in the Scots language, a word-choir dear to my heart. One would be forgiven for fearing it would perhaps stumble, lose its rhythm and sink under the weight of three fine poets separately pulling at the reins. This is *not* the case.

From the opening stanza of Ann MacKinnon's poem *Occitania*

*It wis kent as the signal or senbol  
an ye wir haunded it if ye hid  
the impence tae spake Occitan.*

to the last stanza in the book, of Irene Howat's poem *Tam's Waur*

*Whan aa wis din  
the meenister raxed up his aims  
ower the yin whase king  
hud nocht for him tae dae  
an lipped Tam for aye  
tae his Maister.*

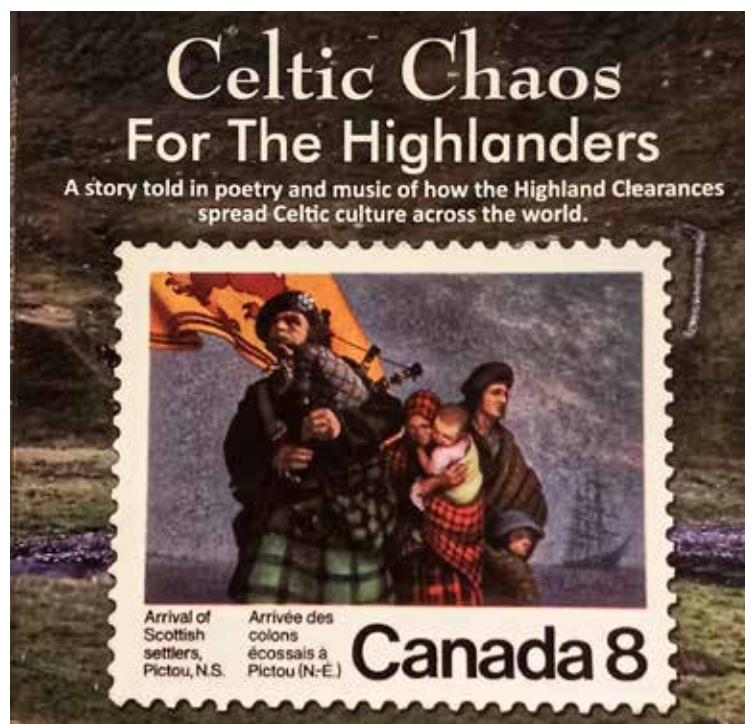
one finds this is a carefully selected box of poems, all wonderfully demonstrating the depth and beauty of our Scots language with all of its unique and distinctive dialects. There is a comforting yet refreshing balance between the different voices and the unique elements of each poet's appreciation of the language comfortably occupy the same space – yin book wi three modren makars. Ann MacKinnon with poetic ease captures the reader by understanding rightness in her words is far more important than correctness. Her poem *Brexit* nails this:

*hoo muckle larger will oor hoose  
haud oot agin the howlin stand aff  
thon unco heckle blawin in oor face.'*

Irene Howat, with no fuss, takes the reader with a lyrical flair infused with Ayrshire air on a journey gently inhabited by family and life experience which makes the reader willingly embrace her words with warmth. Her poem *The Cloodie Rug* captures all of this perfectly.

And sitting easily in the middle of the book is Finola Scott, who I must confess to knowing forever. She continues to delight in her work with a seemingly unending love for her surroundings. Yet she is never afraid to poke the world with a sharp pencil when championing the causes close to her heart, especially ones we should all take time to defend. I was drawn to so many, but *Scottish Horse Squadron* eloquently weaves the sorry plight of our equine heroes in war with the struggle for women's rights – 'thon pair blinkered sauls sweat an tremmle unner men lik oor country's wimmen' and her poems 'Faithfu Unner Tyranny' and 'Fanatics' whaur the angels may luve sic peeity but it wisnae and remains no eneuch.

Finola can always hand me a banner to hold up to the world and I'll always take pride in accepting it, although having reached the end of this *Northwards Now* selection box, we need a bigger banner. One big enough to loudly declare 'Poetry in Scotland is alive and well in the hands of Hugh MacMillan, Jo Gilbert, Harry Smart, Ann MacKinnon, Finola Scott & Irene Howat' ■.



The new album by Canadian band Celtic Chaos: For the Highlanders is a powerful mix of music and story. Narrated by John Beaton, who grew up in the Highlands and emigrated to Canada many years ago to work as an actuary, it draws on John's strengths as a noted spoken-word performer and the diverse musical talents of the Vancouver-Island-based band to give an account of the Highland Clearances and the international spread of Celtic Culture. Usefully, you can listen to it and order it through Bandcamp:

<https://celticchaos.bandcamp.com/album/for-the-highlanders>

## Highland Book Prize 2022 Shortlist Reading Panel Reviews (Each is an amalgam from reader reports) Compiled by Kirsteen Bell MONIACK MHOR

This spring, the Highland Society of London and Moniack Mhor, Scotland's Creative Writing Centre, announced the four shortlisted titles for the Highland Book Prize 2022.

The annual award celebrates published work that is created in, or about, the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The prize aims to recognise the literary talent of the region, and the work inspired by its culture, heritage, and landscape.

81 books were submitted for the 2022 award, and every title is read, reviewed, and scored by a minimum of four readers from a volunteer reading panel. Those scores then inform the final longlist, from which the judging panel select a shortlist – making this a readers' prize at its heart.

As a celebration of the insightful and invaluable work of our reading panel, we have brought together a selection of their thoughts on each of the shortlisted books.\*

### Companion Piece, Ali Smith, (Hamish Hamilton, 2022)

The theme of *Companion Piece* is our search to re-learn the tools and techniques of companionability, following the isolation of Covid-19. However, this novel is endlessly inventive, whether this be in conjuring a history for the design of Frances Holmes Boothby – the artist whose jewellery lies behind the plot device of the Boothby Lock – or in its joy of language and love of storytelling.

Smith's voice is idiosyncratic, distinct, utterly authentic. Her writing style is rich, intermingling the present and the past, culture, myth and etymology, and there is real beauty in the finely tuned and observed ending. Like the narrator's artwork, the novel itself is layered with meaning so you keep going back to it and finding something new.

Most books feel like someone talking at you; good books feel like someone talking to you: this one feels like being lent somebody else's eyes to see the world with for a while. The beauty is that the reader is never quite sure where they are, and you remain unsure, on finishing it, whether what you've read is truly real. The journey you are taken on is as engaging as it is fantastical and it is one which, ultimately, may well have revealed to you a truth or two about your own life. It is a highly intriguing and memorable read.

### Confessions of a Highland Art Dealer, Tony Davidson (Woodwoose Books, 2022)

*Confessions of a Highland Art Dealer* is an accessible and beautifully written insight

into the art culture of the Highlands, told through the fascinating story of one gallery and its foundation.

The narrative follows chronological order, but nothing plods. Davidson takes the reader expertly through the process of renovating and looking after the old church, and taking part in various exhibitions and events, including descriptions of the artists he meets and their homes. Alongside are tangents about art, landscape, and history that never feel distracting and unnecessary and always add to the enjoyment and understanding of the book.

The cultural, artistic, and geographical landscapes are fascinating. As someone who knows very little about art, I was pleasantly surprised by just how engaging I found this book. The writer makes the material accessible without over-explaining or lecturing.

There is a great variety of content that remains clear and at times beautiful and insightful, and the prose matches that variety. This writing convinces from the first few words. Detailed descriptions of practical aspects, such as the state of potters' hands or the problems of renovating an old building are combined with the wonderful characters of artists and visitors – Black Allan who sells the church is as idiosyncratic as the building. Recognisable local artists are treated with respect, and the visitors who share life stories are portrayed with equal skill.

This is one of my best reads for some time: quirky and individual with a prose style that shows great talent.

### Crann-Fige/ Fig Tree, Duncan Gillies (Acair, 2022)

*Crann-Fige/ Fig Tree* is sparse, but not slight. One of the wonders of this collection is how short the stories are. And yet, we learn all that we need to know in skilful scene setting, and sensitive handling of characters. The stories are lucid and offer an unshowy luminosity.

Where the narratives are clean and spare, the language used to mediate them is rich. Duncan Gillies writes with such an individual voice that it would be nigh impossible to translate his work – if he didn't do so first. His writing is lyrical and fluent without being maudlin. The richness of dialect and vocabulary is a joy to read. His translations add greatly to that richness and takes away any 'language anxiety' that might hinder the average Gaelic reader.

Some of the stories are almost fable-like in their clarity and impact, whilst the tone remains realistic and authentic. The stories often build to endings that are effective and resonant – a potency that arises because of, not despite, their lightness of touch. That very restraint gives much of the book its impressive significance.

This is a book that explores memory, legacy, and the value of culture and

language. This timeless collection would appeal to any age of reader and any level of Gaelic language ability. It is an excellent and satisfying read, much enhanced by the author's translations which I hope will bring Gillies to a far wider readership.

### WAH! Things I Never Told My Mother, Cynthia Rogerson (Sandstone Press, 2022)

*WAH! Things I Never Told My Mother* is a blunt, crisp, and highly entertaining memoir of childhood, sisterhood, womanhood, motherhood, and daughterhood.

The Scotland based author travels frequently, often at short notice, to California to attend the deathbed of her aged mother. Rogerson's mother, seemingly comfortable with her dementia and daily doses of 'The Sound of Music', is in no hurry to go. These false endings give Rogerson time to consider relationships with friends, partners, her wider family, and her mother.

With bold, dry wit the author engages the reader with the family dynamics by plundering family correspondences and memories. Each chapter shares a humorous and engaging story: drugging the dog, making friends with a pig, cruises, hitchhiking, to name just a few. There is a lot going on in this memoir, but clarity is maintained by skilful storytelling.

I was captivated from the beginning by the ideas that society dictates what we should and shouldn't do, what is right and what is wrong, and how little it all means. Rogerson is a free spirit in all senses of the word; she grabs each moment and inspires any reader to do so too. It was a very enjoyable read and I laughed a great deal – it also made me realise what a sheltered life I have led. I need to take a leaf out of this book a bit more often!

*With grateful thanks to all the volunteer readers, from the Highland Book Prize. If you are interested in becoming a reader for the 2023 Highland Book Prize visit [www.highlandbookprize.org.uk](http://www.highlandbookprize.org.uk)* ■

### Hidden Cargoes

Chris Arthur  
Eastover Press (2022), £16.99  
REVIEW BY GAIL LOW

A prolific essayist, Chris Arthur's writing is invariably marked by an expansive curiosity, an omnivorous reading life and spooling philosophical enquiries that begin with an attentiveness to the ordinary. His finely wrought essays are what challenged me to think about essaying as an activity outside the schoolroom, beyond those dry-as-dust abstracts and arguments of professionalised, templated writing that sometimes masquerade for life in the Humanities. Yet when I started *Hidden Cargoes*, his ninth collection, I

was just a little dismayed. This was because Arthur's preface—an 'opening apologia' of sorts—seem to declare up front what was to follow: "to strip routine's dulling insulation", uncover "hidden cargoes" in the everyday objects, places and situations to show "the electricity of wonder [that] runs through everything."

As a reader, part of the heuristic pleasures of engaging with texts is precisely to be given room to feel one's way to what needs to be found from the skein and texture of words. And here, while the range is eclectic and astonishing (an ear, an owl's skull, a leaf, a scrabble game, a cigarette box, a vulture's egg, a photograph), the stratagem of "coiled story lines" of thoughts and memories seemed just too familiar with each passing essay. I'd admit that my initial response was also the result of what I was trained to do: reading closely as a hermeneutical practice. If there was nothing more to discover, nothing to interpret then what was to be the purpose of my role a critic, as reviewer, as reader? Yet persevering yields reading pleasures that might be said to provide those "hidden cargoes".

For amongst the many things the book takes as its subject is time – the remembrance of things past, rendered both in the past tense of history and memory, and in the present tense of bearing witness in writing, attending to the whys and wherefores which have few definitive answers. Thus in 'Listening to the Music of a Vulture's Egg', which include egg stories from Arthur's twelve-year-old natural history collection, the adult Arthur's ornithological musings, and reflections on Tibetan Buddhist texts and sky burials, are reflections on an "expanded sense of time" as flow. A heightened sense of mortality and time's passing, sure, but also of transcendence:

Might it be that we are creatures of flesh and blood and bardo? Is there in some hidden interstice of our substance the lilting refrain of a flute, its notes reaching into aspects of us words can't map? Without the emptiness of hollow bones, is there a trace of some sound-marrow, some stratum from which breath might awaken notes that hint at something beyond the blown eggshell of the corpse?

The life cycles of organisms, and the stories embedded in them, might be one of the ways of countering death as a full stop. Individual lives and their occurrences are but part of an expansive cosmic music. So near mid-way through the collection, Arthur contemplates the life cycle of the tulip tree quite beautifully:

In every twig, in every leaf – if we listen carefully – there's an echo of Liriodendron's voyage, its seeding and rooting, its growing and flowering, its faltering and dying over millions of years.... Leaves in their number and fragility, their short-livedness, are like us humans. It's as if they put on a



kind of annual mortality play – a vivid memento-mori every autumn... It's as if leaf and root and bark, the paleness of the wood, the fragrance of the flowers, are verses in some poem that the earth has learnt by heart and keeps reciting to itself over and over again across uncounted centuries, conjuring the trees into existence, forming and reforming them with repeated persistence."

Within these singular fragments, the vividly evoked quiddity of objects and also their hidden stories, is life's redemptive vibrancy to hold against death's finality. Have I given away—summed up—the hidden cargoes, do exactly what I objected to in the preface? I hold to Denis Levertov's "The Secret", a lovely (and so-true) poem about readers reading: 'a thousand times, till death/finds them, they may discover it again, in other lines//in other happenings.' Readers will find their own treasures in these essaying journeys. ■

### **Bield**

Donald Adamson  
Tapsalteerie (2021) £5

### **The Carryin**

Harvey Holton  
Salty Press (2022) Ask library

### **Swimming Between Islands**

Charlotte Eichler  
Carcamet Poetry (2023) £11.99

### **The A to Z of Whisky Place-Names**

Jacob King  
Whittles (2022) £16.99

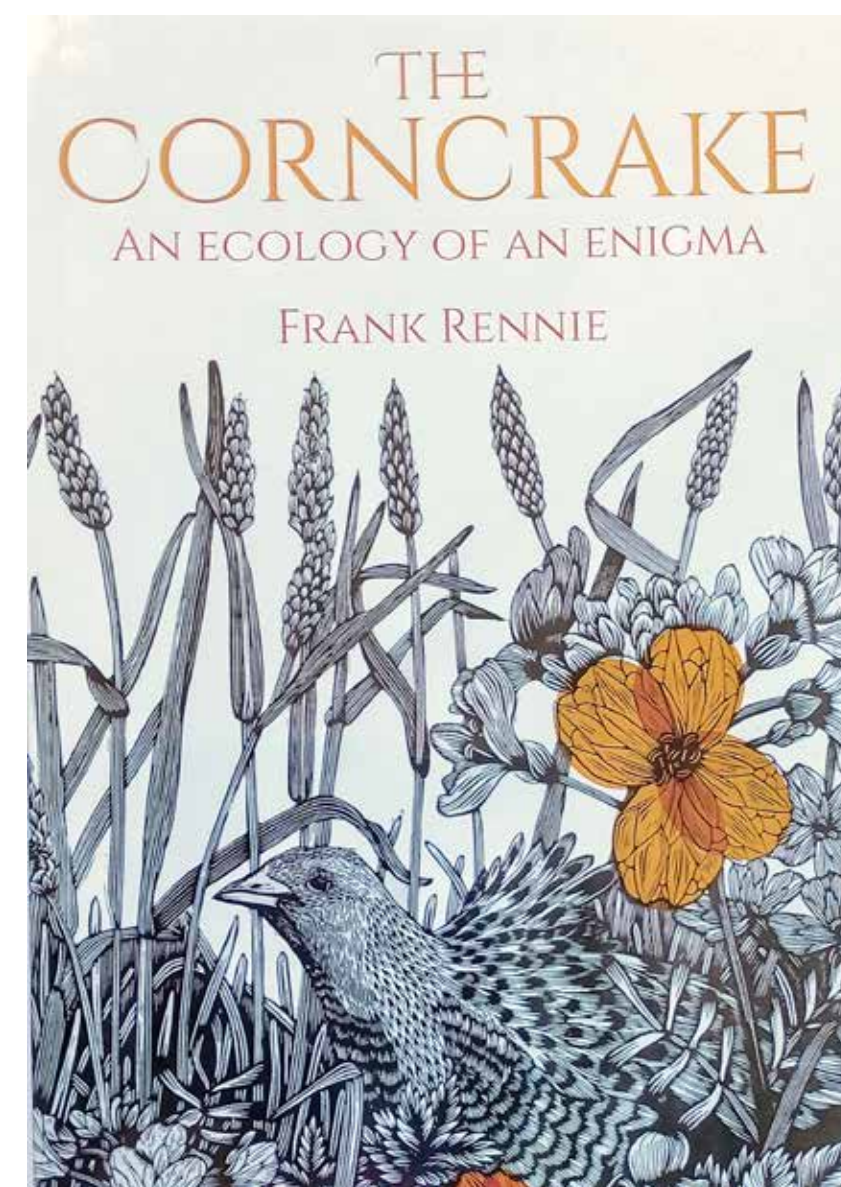
### **The Corncrake – An Ecology of an Enigma**

Frank Rennie  
Whittles (2022) £18.99

REVIEW BY KENNY TAYLOR

As Jim Mackintosh has said in considering multiple poetry collections in this issue, the review process can be a bit like opening a box of chocolates (if you're a fan of such food) and savouring the contents. Part of the fun of editing *Northwords Now* is to both have a first keek at such goodies and then send a broad selection to reviewers to see what they reckon. So now I'll be greedy, as keeker, consumer and reviewer, to convey some of the pleasure I've had in sampling a quintet of titles over the past year in both poetry and nonfiction.

First out the selection box is the slimmest volume: *Bield* – a poetry pamphlet by Donald Adamson. Donald uses Scots in this work for both his own poems and for resonant translations from Finnish. Originally from Dumfries, Donald now bides in Finland and has won several awards for his work, some examples of which have appeared in recent issues of *Northwords Now*. The warmth, gentle humour and skilful



crafting of the poems in this pamphlet has made me both smile and think many times since Tapsalteerie first sent me *Bield*. 'The Auld Craws', translated from the Finnish of Lauri Pohjanpää, is a case in point, with stanzas such as:

A wee bit stink cam frae the byre,  
the rain poored doon, and noo the daurk  
wis faain ower the furrit field  
as baith birds hunched a feathery neck

If, like me, you've little knowledge of Finnish poets, this pamphlet could be a good place to start.

Using Scots to powerful effect is also something that Fife poet, the late Harvey Holton, did with aplomb. So Salty Press is to be congratulated on bringing together poems drawn from three of his works: *Finn*, *Four Fife Poets* and *Light and Dark*, as well as poems unpublished at the time of Harvey's passing in 2010. It's a truism that poetry should be read aloud, but Harvey's poems almost demand

speech to liberate their rhymes and rhythms from the printed page. In his introduction to this fine collection, John Glenday acknowledges the influence that Harvey had on his own early work and beyond, through teaching an evening class at Dudhope Arts Centre in Dundee: "All my poetry since then has been built on the foundations that Harvey laid" says John, "a deep respect for language; a keen focus on the quality of craftsmanship in constructing a poem and, most important of all, an understanding that poetry is form of music as much as it is a form of literature; that half its life is found on the page and the other half in the air."

A very different, but beguiling music is held in the pages of Charlotte Eichler's first full collection *Swimming Between Islands*. The poems here are suffused with images of water both salt and fresh and creatures that live within, on and beside it. Part of the depth, in poems that range in location through Scotland,

Scandinavia, Russia and Alaska, is in how the poet explores connections, often tricky, between people, as well as ways that different locations touch the senses. A book for slow immersion and thoughtful swimming.

To round off, a brace of titles from Caithness-based publisher, Whittles, each of which has provided me with useful references and rewarding reading. I appreciate a good malt (though the concept of a bad one is unlikely, despite a name I could mention, but will keep for another telling). So Jacob King's *The A to Z of Whisky Place-Names* now has a permanent berth on my bookshelves. This stems not only from my love of *Uisge-Beatha*, but also because of the thoroughness of Jacob's research, the interest of his descriptions and what he reveals through careful toponymy. Not least is the way he demonstrates how a wheen of current whisky labellings use names of very recent coinage, rather than reflecting some deep roots in the landscape of their home distillery. Fear not, plenty of whisky names do have genuine connections to place, with descriptions in this book that can add to the pleasure of a dram, if that's how your tastebuds are tingled.

A few centuries ago, the rasping, repetitive – and to some, downright annoying – call of the corncrake was a feature of meadows across Scotland. You could even hear the sound from the centre of Edinburgh at the time when the New Town was being built, back in the late 1700s. Now much reduced through removal of suitable rough cover by modern farming, Scottish corncrakes have dwindled and retreated, surviving mostly in the west and especially in the Hebrides. So it's fitting that someone whose chronicling of his home in Galson, in the north of Lewis, won the 2020 Highland Book Prize, has now written what is likely to be the definitive monograph on the corncrake for decades to come.

Professor Frank Rennie's enthusiasm for corncrakes has been an eye-opener for many (myself included) who have long known him as a champion of crofters, community landownership and sustainable rural development. In this context, it's fitting to see a photograph of Frank in the book with a pitchfork of hay over one shoulder, working to boost corncrake habitat in the community-owned Local Nature Reserve at Loch Stiupabhat, a short crake's flight (these are long-distance migrants to and from Africa) from his home.

Like the corncrake, this book ranges far, not least in the breadth of research, both of science and cultural links. More than 700 reference works underpin the scholarship here, but dinna be feart, the book is both a superb work of reference and a very good read. Another classic from the Rennie croft. ■



# Remembering - and celebrating - Elizabeth Sutherland

ON SEPTEMBER 14TH, 2022, Ross-shire lost one of its most loved writers: Elizabeth Sutherland, otherwise known as Betty Marshall, who died peacefully in Raigmore Hospital at the age of 96. Presented with a Saltire Award in 2019 in recognition of her contribution to the cultural life of the Highlands, Elizabeth's published work covered diverse genres. She continued to write with energy and enthusiasm into her tenth decade (see the profile by Cynthia Rogerson in *Northwords Now* 37, available through our online archive). She was also an inspiration to many other people, described by Robert Davidson of Sandstone Press as "one of our great makers, mentors and spirit guides."

In honour of her life and legacy, Cynthia Rogerson and Lizzie McDougall – themselves long-valued and respected for their writing, storytelling and artistic guidance to others in the Highlands – share their memories of Elizabeth as both a friend and an inspirational character.

## Cynthia Rogerson:

How to sum up a long life? One of three sisters, Elizabeth was born August 24th 1926 in Fife, the child of an Orcadian Episcopal priest and a Fife mother. She gained a degree in social work from University of Edinburgh, which is where she met her future husband, a curate. They married in St Andrew's in Fortrose when she was 21 and lived in Kenya, where he was an Army Chaplain. Later she helped him in the parishes of Orkney, Galashiels, Fortrose and Glasgow. Finally she moved to Rosemarkie, where she lived out the rest of her life. Mother of three, she had seven grandchildren and 16 great grandchildren.

Somehow, while working alongside her husband in the parishes and raising her children, she found time to write. Waterstones list 26 of her books, but she wrote more, in addition to booklets, articles, short stories and comic strips for Judy comics. The books cover a wide range of subjects, but a recurrent theme is the hidden or spiritual life under the world we move through, and the power of compassion. Like Graham Greene, her faith imbued her writing in the widest possible sense, which is why readers of all backgrounds and beliefs feel she is writing just for them.

But everyone is more complex than the sum of their achievements. Her son Michael, in his eulogy, described her as someone whose fundamental philosophy was to practise kindness. Wife, daughter and granddaughter of clergy, she once told me she'd have been a priest too if she'd been a boy. She said this wistfully, but it occurs to me now that in every way that matters, she *was* a priest after



Elizabeth Sutherland photographed by James Brough

all. She ministered all her life to people's needs. As a child, parent, sibling, friend, neighbour, she was – as her son said – the soul of kindness, always ready to listen, to counsel and comfort, to share laughter or tears. And as a writer, she injected morality into every narrative.

I knew her as a fellow writer who encouraged me when I was at the wobbly beginning of my career. We met for occasional lunches and coffees over a quarter century, and now she is gone, this much seems clear: Elizabeth was a force for good in the world. We need to honour such people. Note their contributions and heed their advice, even if it is not overt. Her absence will be felt in a myriad kitchens, churches, writing arenas, cafes, beaches – and by her readers all over the world. I will miss her intelligent conversation, her humour and empathy. As for her twinkling eyes and famous smile, well! Just remembering them makes me happy.

## Lizzie McDougall:

*With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes she will have music wherever she goes.* Well, not exactly of course, but Elizabeth was a wonderful woman/very fine lady and at one time wore lots of rings on her fingers. And it was of course *stories* she found wherever she went.

Her ever-youthful enthusiasm for

uncovering and discovering the stories, history and mystery of her surroundings and sharing this through her eloquent writing and storytelling, brought wherever she lived alive. We in the Highlands are especially fortunate, as she shared her discoveries of Faith, Folktales, People, Picts, Saints and Seers.

I am beyond grateful to her as both friend and storyteller. She was a guiding light, inspiration and colleague on many an exciting story based project for over 30 years. I can just about accept that at 96 her body was frail and tired... but... her being was as bright and caring as ever, glinting like her eyes and the silver rings she once wore.

Our first project together was about the Brahan Seer; she wrote the commentary for updated editions of Alexander Mackenzie's *Prophecies of The Brahan Seer*, as well as two novels *The Seer of Kintail* and *Ravens and Black Rain*. Her empathy, interest in second sight and her explorations of faith give exceptional depth to the story.

She provided a beautifully simple version of the Brahan Seer story for a wee animated film made with children from the Black Isle by West Highland Animations in my barn at Canon Brae. The story ends at Chanonry Point, where the Seer looks up to see a raven and a dove circling in the sky above his fated

fire. While we worked on the film, a dove appeared each day on the roof of the barn. The film won an award and is still shown at Groam House Museum. Later she was a core contributor to the Seer Festival and its legacy of four standing stones inscribed with words attributed to the Seer and set in four locations, including at Brahan.

Elizabeth was fascinated by our Pictish ancestors and had a knack of being present when fragments of Pictish stones were uncovered. Her book *In Search of The Picts* seeks an understanding of what they believed by exploring the imagery for clues to the stories they illustrate. The Nigg Stone, for instance, has an illustration of a 4th century story from Egypt, showing the Desert Fathers who were brought a loaf of bread by a raven in a symbol of the Eucharist.

In 1997 we did a show to celebrate Columba's meeting with King Brude, High King of the Picts: *The Eagle and The Dove*. Elizabeth wrote the story and Martyn Bennett wrote the music to express this extraordinary meeting and birth of the Celtic church. More recently, I did illustrations for her wee book of *Saint Columba and The Monstrous Wurrmm*.

Another fabulous project was *The Sounding of the Carnyx* with John Kenny on top of Knockfarrel. As we sat on top of the hill, Elizabeth told us tales the Picts would have told.

In 2019 she contributed stories from around the NC 500 to a project to inspire arts and craft pupils I was working with, to create a Storymap exhibition of Elizabeth's stories with the pupil's illustrations.

During my last visit, just a fortnight before she died, we discussed whether it was ok to adapt the ending of a Hugh Miller tale for today's children. She gave her blessing, telling me that a living tradition embraces change and that she liked my new ending.

On the morning I heard of her having left this world, I had to go to the school where I was working on a music project inspired by the Hugh Miller story I had been discussing with her. The children listened so well, and then I got to the (new) end: "if the light is shining in just the right way and you are very lucky, it is just possible you may get a glimpse of them (the Black Isle Fairies)."

Although my eyes were shiny with the tears I had to hold back, I could see in the sparkle in the children's eyes an enthusiasm that will inspire them in future to look for the fairies and the sleeping lady Giant who made Ben Wyvis. I will forever thank Elizabeth for her loving care and beautiful gift of bringing this world alive. ■



**Sheena Amos** graduated from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in 2022, where she was named Gaelic Learner of the Year. She is originally from the Black Isle and is a teacher at Portree High School where she now teaches music through the medium of Gaelic.

**Kirsteen Bell** is a writer, crofter, *mamaidh* and Projects Manager at Moniack Mhor who co-ordinates the Highland Book Prize and is 'Wild Words' columnist for the *Lochaber Times*.

**Sharon Black** is from Glasgow and lives in the Cévennes. Her collection *The Last Woman Born on the Island* (Vagabond Voices, 2022) was longlisted for the Highland Book Prize and her collection *The Red House* was also published last year by Drunk Muse Press. [www.sharonblack.co.uk](http://www.sharonblack.co.uk)

**Becs Boyd** is an artist and ecologist on the Black Isle and graduate of Moray School of Art. Her painting and sculpture often challenge narratives of human control and anthropocentrism, embracing human vulnerability in an uncertain and interconnected world. She won the New Highland Contemporary 4 award, has exhibited widely, and is part of the 2022/23 SSA Mentoring Programme.

**Peter Burrows** is a Librarian in NW England. His work has recently appeared in the *Places of Poetry* anthology and *The Cotton Grass Appreciation Society* and The Hedgehog Press *Tree Poets* Nature anthologies. [@Peter\\_Burrows74](http://peterburrowspoetry.wordpress.com)

**Seonaidh Charity** is secondary school teacher who was born and brought up in Lochbroom. He received a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award in 2012 and has had short stories published in [danamag.org](http://danamag.org) and elsewhere. His first novel *An Làmh a Bheir* was published as part of the 'Lasag' series (Sandstone Press).

**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 January 2021. [www.leoniecharlton.co.uk](http://www.leoniecharlton.co.uk)

**Clare Daly** is Centre Manager of Moniack Mhor, has a background in journalism, events management and publishing and an interest in novel writing.

**Geoff Daniel** is a former teacher who was a senior member of staff at Dollar Academy and is now based on North Uist.

**Rody Gorman** was the 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.

**Stephanie Green** is a widely published poet. *Berlin Umbrella*, a poetry/sound collaboration with Sonja Heyer, launched in Berlin and appeared at StAnza, 2020. Her latest collaboration with Sonja, *Rewilding* (supported by Creative Scotland and the RSPB), is part of the 2023 Orkney Nature Festival and can be listened to at the Ring of Brodgar, on the RSPB Reserve or online. [www.stephaniegreen.org.uk](http://www.stephaniegreen.org.uk)

**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)

**Jen Hadfield** is a Shetland-based poet, visual artist and writing tutor who has won several major awards for her poetry, including the T.S.Eliot Prize in 2008 for her second collection *Nigh-No-Place*, the Edwin Morgan International Poetry Award in 2012 and the Highland Book Prize 2021

for her fourth collection *The Stone Age*. She is currently working on a book of essays.

**Shug Hanlan** was one of the earliest contributors to Rebel Inc. and is known for comedic writing strongly rooted in Scotland, including an imaginary version of his home village in *Hi Bonnybrig and Other Greetings* (Neil Wilson 2000). In recent years he has published several pamphlets with Kerfuffle Press, plus his latest book *The wee Book of Imaginary Football Hooligans* (2022).

**Lydia Harris** from Westray held a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award. Her collection *Objects for Private Devotion* Pindrop Press (2022) is reviewed in this issue.

**Jennifer Morag** Henderson lives in Inverness. Her historical biography *Daughters of the North: Jean Gordon and Mary, Queen of Scots* (Sandstone Press) was longlisted for the Highland Book Prize. Her first book, *Josephine Tey: A Life* was named a book of the year in the Observer, Telegraph and Independent, and was republished in a new edition in 2021. [www.jennifermoraghenderson.com](http://www.jennifermoraghenderson.com)

**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.

**Stephen Keeler** is an Ullapool-based poet and teacher of creative writing, with extensive international language education experience and a particular affinity for the poetry and culture of Sweden – a country which he often visits. His memoir *50 Words for Love in Swedish* was published by Archetype in 2021.

**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.

**Gail Low** having written essays for most of her professional life, is only just discovering the wider creative possibilities of the essay form. Together with Kirsty Gunn, she edits [imaginedspaces.org](http://imaginedspaces.org), an online writing studio that celebrates essaying. She is also founding editor of Dundee University Review of the Arts ([dura-dundee.org.uk](http://dura-dundee.org.uk))

**Marcas Mac an Tairneir** is Gaelic editor of *Tuath* and *Northwords Now*. An award-winning writer, performer and musician (including as recipient of the 2023 Gaelic Arts & Culture Award) and author of several poetry collections, he works through Scottish Gaelic, English, and Polari. [@Marcas\\_Mac](http://@Marcas_Mac)

**Jim C. Mackintosh** is a poet and editor based in Perth. He has written several poetry collections and (with Paul S Philippou) co-edited *Beyond the Swelkie* (Tippermuir 2021) an anthology celebrating the centenary of George Mackay Brown. Since then, this has also been the basis for his performances with musicians and other writers at festivals and elsewhere.

**Duncan McLean** set up and ran the small but influential Clocktower Press publishing house with James Meek, which helped bring a new generation of Scottish writers, including Irvine Welsh, to wider attention. Resident on Orkney for several decades, he now divides his time between writing, music, running an off-license and lo-fi publishing through the Abersee Press, which he launched in 2015 with a booklet of contemporary Orkney-language writing.

**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.

**Kirsty Macleod** is a knitwear designer who was born and brought up on the island of North Uist with close family links with Shetland as well as the Hebrides. She takes inspiration from the ever-changing colour pallet of the landscapes and seascapes that she sees every day and is always thinking of new patterns and designs to represent her island home and heritage.

**Beth McDonough's** poetry appears in many places; she reviews in *DURA*. Her pamphlet *Lamping for pickled fish* is published by 4Word. She has a site-specific poem installed on the Corbenic Poetry Path and is currently Makar of the Federation of Writers Scotland.

**Cáit O'Neill McCullagh** is an ethnologist, archaeologist and poet, first published in *Northwords Now* 41. Her work has appeared widely since then. Joint winner of the Boyne Writers Festival Poetry Day Ireland 2021 instapoem competition, she has read throughout Scotland and Ireland and co-directs the annual Wee Gaitherin Festival. <https://www.highlandlit.com/cait-oneill-mccullagh> .

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

**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.

**Deborah Moffatt** À Vermont (USA), a' fuireach ann am Fìbha a-nis. Bidh dà cho-chruinneachadh aice air fhoillseachadh ann an 2019, "Eating Thistles," (Smokestack Books), agus fear ann an Gàidhlig.

**John Murray** / Iain Moireach is Head of the School of Landscape Architecture at Edinburgh College of Art / Edinburgh University and an Honorary Fellow in Edinburgh's School of Languages and Literature. His books, including *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* (Whittles 2014, 2019) aim to understand the cultural landscape of the Highlands by studying its Gaelic place-names.

**Màiri NicGumaraid/Mary** Montgomery 'S e bàrd Gàidhlig, rugadh i ann an Airidh a' Bhruaich ann an Sgìre nan Loch ann an Eilean Leòdhais. Tha i air trì leabhraichean bàrdachd a Sgrìobhadh, agus dà nobhail.

**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.

**David Newman** co-founded the Cromarty Film Festival and established the Plexus website design and development company in the town. Passionate about film, he most recently introduced a short series of Jacques Tati films in Cromarty's new community-run cinema.

**Victoria NicIomhair** Gaelic poet Victoria MacIver was recently published in the Federation of Writers of (Scotland)'s competition anthology. Based in Tain, she works in Gaelic Education.

**Alistair Paul** has been a regular contributor of essays, reviews, poetry and short stories to the online Gaelic magazine *Dàna*. In 2018 he was a winner of The New Writers Awards and has worked on a range of materials since then including; fiction, poetry, and play writing. At the Gaelic Literature Awards 2020 he won Best Unpublished Manuscript for Adults for *Linne Dhomhainn*.

**Lana Pheutan** is an actor, writer and director working in film, television and theatre. From the Isle of Skye, Lana now works all over Scotland fluently in both Gaelic and English.

**Heather F. Reid** originally from Lancashire but long resident in Scotland, began writing when her children, encouraged friends in the Soutar Writers. Her work for adults and children has won multiple awards and been included in several anthologies.

**Cynthia Rogerson's** most recent novel *Wait for me Jack* (written under the pseudonym Addison Jones) is published by Sandstone and her memoir *Wah!* (Sandstone, 2022) is shortlisted for the current Highland Book Prize.

**Dilys Rose** is an Edinburgh-based novelist, short story writer and poet. She has published twelve books, most recently the short story collection *Sea Fret* (Scotland Street Press, 2022). Her work has received various awards and fellowships and been shortlisted for a Saltire Book of the Year award.

**Julie-ann Rowell** is a poet who divides her time between Devon and Orkney. She was born and grew up in Devon but on her mother's side is Scottish tracing back centuries.

**Ian Stephen** lives on Lewis. Ian Stephen is the author of the novel *A Book of Death and Fish* (Saraband 2014). He is completing a work of non-fiction, provisionally "Boatlines – a geography of Scottish vessels" for Birlinn, planned for autumn 2022.

**Kenneth Steven** now based on Seil, has published many poetry and story collections and childrens' books. A fluent speaker of both Norwegian Nynorsk and Bokmål, his translation of the international bestseller *The Half Brother* was shortlisted for an IMPAC award. His own work is widely translated and he has written and presented many BBC radio programmes.

**Cindy Stevens** lives on the west coast of Barra. She has lived and worked in various parts of Europe and Africa and has published poetry and non-fiction, including the collection *Botswana to Barra* (CreateSpace 2017).

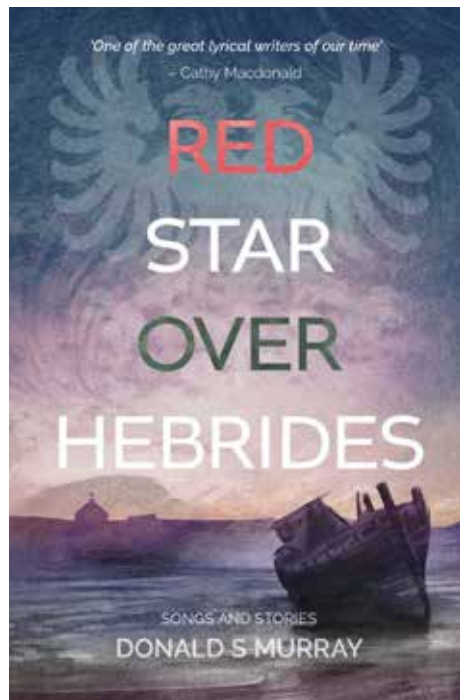
**Ian Tallach** Having previously worked as a paediatric doctor, Ian is now medically retired with MS. He lives in Glenurquhart, as do his young family.

**Alice V. Taylor** is a Black-Isle-based artist who won the Leith School of Art painting prize in 2022 and was included in the recent Royal Society of British Artists Bicentennial Exhibition in London. She also works in a collective with artists Jacqueline Briggs and Izzy Thomson, part-funded by Creative Scotland. [www.alicevtaylor.co.uk](http://www.alicevtaylor.co.uk)

**Judith Taylor** is an Aberdeen-based poet who writes in English and Scots, with poetic preoccupations centred on history (especially early history) and landscape, particularly landscape as humans inhabit and try to shape it.

**Kenny Taylor** editor of *Northwords Now* is also a writer who works mostly in non-fiction features – especially for the BBC – books (seven to date) and performance drawn from nature, science and culture.

**Joshua Wilson** is a graduate of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, with a degree in Fine Art and a postgraduate masters in Public Art. Originally from the Vale of Leven, he is now based in Edinburgh and works with partner Marcas Mac an Tuairneir under the moniker LUPUS&LEO.



Even as he grew up on the edge of Lewis, the vastness of Russia never felt too distant for **Donald S Murray**. Its great literary traditions were often discussed in his home village, while the political unrest and religious fervour that marked its past and present were occasionally reflected in his life on the island.

Inspired by the Russian canon, the songs, verse and stories of *Red Star Over Hebrides* draw upon the experiences of his youth, shifting continually between myth and history, the absurd and moving, the satirical and everyday to illustrate these unique and unexpected connections between the Hebrides and North-Eastern Europe.

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## Join the *Northwords Now* Community

*Northwords Now* is usually published twice a year, including this bumper summer edition with *Tuath*. Full of literary goodness though we hope our output to be, we know that readers will be keen to access more writing and information about new publications, readings and other events through the whole year.

That's where our social media and website can be a boon. Our Facebook members' group ([northwordsnow](https://www.facebook.com/northwordsnow)) has enjoyed rapid growth in recent years. It's now an excellent noticeboard for literary news from across Scotland, so take a look and join, if you're not already a member.

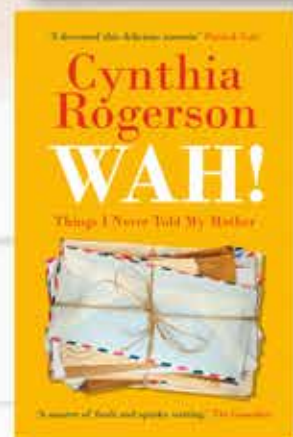
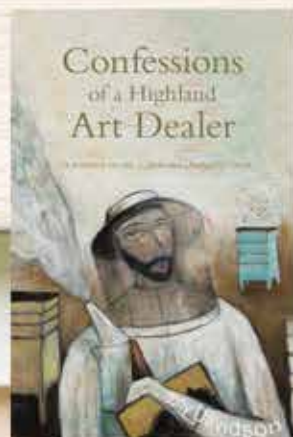
If you haven't visited it recently, go to our website [northwordsnow.co.uk](https://northwordsnow.co.uk) for a range of resources. Those include additional material linked to the current issue and an archive of issue .pdfs stretching back to 2010, plus author-indexed files for every work featured in the past six years. This is also the place where you can find out more about submissions and then send work for consideration, which should only be done through the website. Writing in Gaelic, English and Scots in all regional variants can be submitted.

Our goal is to celebrate and share new writing from Scotland and the wider north, with a particular emphasis on writing from the Highlands and Islands but an openness to fresh work from elsewhere that chimes with our ethos. Enjoy this issue, look online and if you think your work could merit a wider audience, go for it. Competition for space between these sheets is vigorous, but if at first you don't succeed...



## HIGHLAND BOOK PRIZE SHORTLIST DUAIS LEABHAIR NA GHÀIDHEALTACHD

# 2022



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