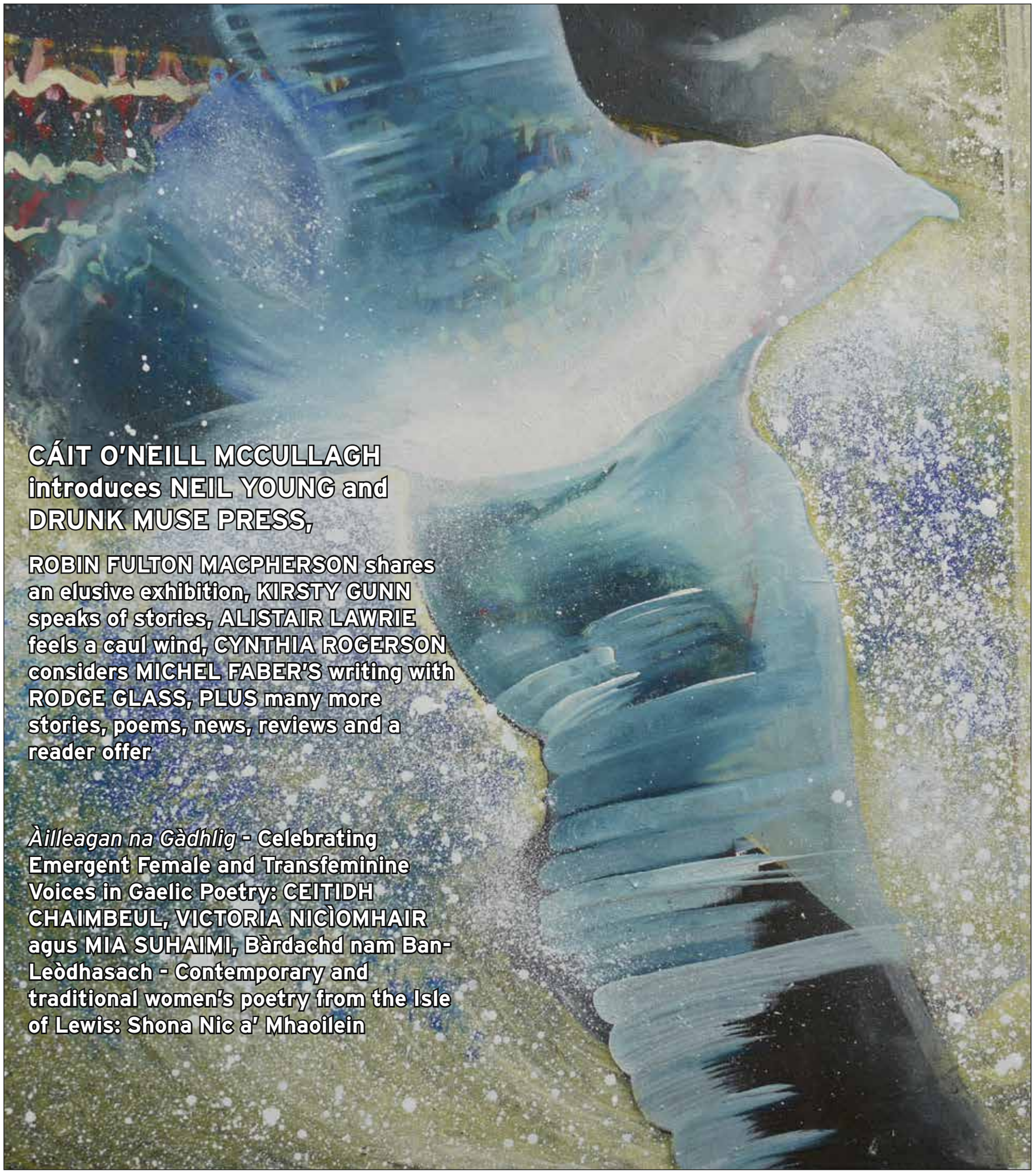
Issue 45, Winter 2024–2025

Northwords Now

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



CÁIT O'NEILL MCCULLAGH introduces NEIL YOUNG and DRUNK MUSE PRESS,

ROBIN FULTON MACPHERSON shares an elusive exhibition, KIRSTY GUNN speaks of stories, ALISTAIR LAWRIE feels a caul wind, CYNTHIA ROGERSON considers MICHEL FABER'S writing with RODGE GLASS, PLUS many more stories, poems, news, reviews and a reader offer

***Àilleagan na Gàdhlig* - Celebrating Emergent Female and Transfeminine Voices in Gaelic Poetry: CEITIDH CHAIMBEUL, VICTORIA NICÌOMHAIR agus MIA SUHAIMI, Bàrdachd nam Ban-Leòdhasach - Contemporary and traditional women's poetry from the Isle of Lewis: Shona Nic a' Mhaoilein**

EDITORIAL

It's always a pleasure to cast an editorial eye over a new issue of *Northwords Now* as it prepares to meet the wider world. For this one, that feeling is all the sweeter after a long gap in publication.

As anyone who follows the funding challenges of the Scottish cultural scene knows, the past year and more has been hard for artists (in the broadest sense of the word) to get financial support for their work. The same applies to venues and publications – like this one – that rely on grant aid to survive.

One of the many unique 'selling' points of *Northwords Now* is that is *not* sold, but available free in print and online. That allows many people who might not otherwise encounter a literary publication to read new work by contemporary writers. They can also sample writing in all Scotland's languages and many dialect variations.

This issue again showcases that diversity. Within it you'll find a quartet of pages that celebrate emergent female and transfeminine voices in Gaelic poetry, a long story in Doric and poems in Shetland dialect, as well as many stories and poems in English. There are also extensive reviews of some of the many fine books of poetry and prose produced in the past year or so by Scottish writers and publishers. In addition, several contributions come from writers based in Nordic countries, including a fascinating retrospective by internationally renowned poet and translator, Robin Fulton Macpherson.

It can sometimes seem like tokenism to hear the phrase 'thank you to our sponsors.' But this time, as keenly felt as ever through the many years of their support, I'd like to raise a glass to Creative Scotland. Thanks for keeping the faith in us, Creative Scotland – and through that, giving a boost to all the writers and readers who relish each new issue of *Northwords Now* as an inspiring part of the nation's literary scene. ■

Kenny Taylor, Editor

Contents

Northwords Now is a twice-yearly (as funding permits) literary magazine published in broadsheet print format and online. It 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:
'Wave Soaring'. Oil on canvas, 80x80cm, by Alice V. Taylor (2024).
Alice says: "This painting is inspired by many hours sketching the seabird cliffs of Caithness. In the studio, I used these on-location sketches, together with my emotional response to the place, to encapsulate the awe and privilege I feel when watching the effortlessly soaring Fulmar." www.instagram.com/alicev.taylor/

Submissions to the magazine, through our online system on the Northwords Now website, are welcome within submission windows. 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 single separate one, but otherwise please do not split work into multiple submissions. All work must be previously unpublished in print or online and not part of simultaneous submissions elsewhere. Copyright remains with the author. Payment is made for all successful submissions.

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

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To submit your work, go to our website: **northwordsnow.co.uk**
The next issue is planned for **May 2025.** The deadline for submissions is **8th March 2025.** If accepted for publication, you will hear about your submission by **30th April 2025**, so feel free to submit elsewhere if we have not contacted you by then.

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What's new in the north

By Kenny Taylor

North Isles stars shine

It's been a remarkable few months for writers linked to the North Isles. First of all, congratulations to Burra-based Jen Hadfield for being one of eight recent recipients of the prestigious and financially generous Windham-Campbell prize. This international award celebrates achievement across fiction, nonfiction, poetry and drama and aims to offer financial security to encourage creative freedom for recipients.

Speaking to *Shetland News* in the summer, Jen said that she had no idea the award was coming. Writers don't apply for the prize, but have their names put forward by people invited by an anonymous prize-giving committee. Known for her work in various genres and media, including poetry, visual art and recently nonfiction, Jen moved to Shetland some 17 years ago. She writes in English, Shetlandic and Scots, and among many other subjects tackles issues of environmental degradation and challenges ideas of remoteness and isolation. She became the youngest winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize earlier in the millennium and was awarded the Highland Book Prize (2021) for her fourth collection *The Stone Age*.

One of her prose pieces, *Bonhoga,* was first published in *Northwords Now* 44 (go to our online archive at northwordsnow.co.uk if you haven't already read it). *Bonhoga* is now included in her most recent book *Storm Pegs – A life made in Shetland* published this year by Pan MacMillan.

Come autumn, Orkney became part of the big-screen backdrop for the powerful film adaptation of Amy Liptrot's international bestselling memoir *The Outrun*. With a superb performance by Saoirse Ronan as 'Rona' (a renaming of Amy), the film also benefits from the author's input as co-writer of the screenplay. Satisfyingly, this shapes it as a major new work, which although rooted in the book, also feels fresh. Some local islanders feature, including people who have been through rehab. It was also good to hear that Papay, where the book was written and important parts of the story are set, had its own 'premiere' screening this autumn, attended by Amy, Saoirse Ronan, islanders and others involved in the making of the film.

Finally, as winter has come around, Shetland author, singer-songwriter and managing editor of '*Gutter*, Mallachy Tallack, has been having multiple events for launches of his new novel *That Beautiful Atlantic Waltz* and the accompanying album of the same name. Describing the work as "a novel with a soundtrack – an album with a story" these linked creations have been attracting wide attention. This includes through a long interview on 23rd October with Kirsty Wark on Radio 4's 'Front Row' where Mallachy talked about the novel and performed music from the album. Listen to it on iPlayer.

Aonghas MacNeacail.
Portrait by Áine Divine. With permission of the artist.

As described in the Editorial, the recent past has been financially challenging for *Northwords Now*. Though help has now been secured from Creative Scotland for this and the next issue, we still need to boost our coffers. It was a pleasure to be able to do this in modest amounts but grand style on the Black Isle at the cusp of autumn meeting winter.

Resolis Memorial Hall is in a rural parish on the north side of its home peninsula, not far from where several regular contributors to *Northwords Now* (and this editor) are based. For more than twenty years, Resolis Community Arts (RCA) has hosted a wide range of music, theatre, dance events and talks here, including performances by both internationally renowned musicians and singers and by local talent.

One person who liked to perform at Resolis was the late Michael Marra, one of Scotland's most quirkily talented lyricists and singers of recent decades. His last-ever solo gig, just months before his death in 2012, was in this hall and a memorial concert held here about a decade ago was supported by many well-known performers, Eddi Reader among them. So it was good to give a further nod to Mr Marra here through a long-planned event 'All Will Be Resolved' which also raised some extra funds for *Northwords Now*.

James Robertson, whose biography of Michael Marra was published through Black-Isle-based Bryan Beattie's 'Big Sky' a few years ago, was the lynchpin of the evening, describing aspects of Michael's work and his friendship with him in later years. He also shared readings from some of his other books and projects, including '365'(where he wrote a story of exactly 365 words every day in 2013 and later collaborated with Aidan O'Rourke, who had composed music for all of them). For the second half, singers, readers and musicians staged a ceilidh of performances, rounded-off by James to close the evening. Thanks to everyone who took part. This included music from The Disclaimers, Bob Dunsmore and Willie Gilmour, and readings from three of the writers featured in this issue - Cáit O'Neill McCullagh, Anne MacLeod and Ian Tallach. Thanks also to the enthusiastic audience and the team from Resolis Community Arts who made the joint RCA/*Northwords Now* event a memorable one.

A perhaps inevitable consequence of a long gap between issues is that intimations of mortality keep making unwelcome knocks at the door. That includes through the passing during the last year of several respected poets whose work has featured in both *Northwords Now* and its predecessor, *Northwords*. These include Sheila Templeton (see page 29), Gerry Loose, Paula Jennings and Rhoda Dunbar - the woman who made the transition between those titles possible.

Rhoda revived the 'Northwords' name after a brief absence early in the millennium and became the first editor of *Northwords Now.* Her enthusiasm for new writing from the north was crucial, her eye for detail keen, so by the time she handed the editorial reins to Chris Powici in 2010, the publication was in good heart. Rhoda had a particular passion for poetry and was able to have a volume of her own work published in retirement. For many years until her death this summer at the age of 89 she was also a supporter, including financially, of the Neil Gunn Trust and its biennial writing competition.

In the last issue, we noted with sadness the death of Aonghas MacNeacail in December 2022. Since then, an important volume of selections from his English-language poetry has been published by Shearsman (2023). Called *beyond* and edited by poet Colin Bramwell (a friend of the family) and with a joint introduction by Aonghas's widow, Gerda Stevenson, this collection shines, in poem after poem, with the writer's wit, warmth and skill.

"English was a partner language to Aonghas's Gaelic," writes Colin Bramwell. "Scots was another.

"This linguistic hybridity defines him, as much as it defines the general tenor of Scottish literature today."

That playful, polylingual aspect, to paraphrase Colin Bramwell, very much chimes with the ethos of *Northwords Now*. To continue to celebrate the man and that idea, it's a privilege to have permission from both the artist, Áine Divine, and Gerda Stevenson to publish Áine's late portrait of Aonghas here. As a bonus, you can see and hear both artist and poet in conversation as this work was created by watching a video on our homepage at northwordsnow.co.uk. ■

Introducing … Neil Young and Drunk Muse Press

Forty years ago, in a *Chapman* article in which he argues the need for a Scottish Writers' Cooperative, the poet George Gunn pronounced this grim sentence upon the state of poetry publishing in Scotland:

"… economic stringency dictates quite nicely what does and does not get published … The two phrases 'won't sell' and 'uncommercial' put the kiss of death on any book that a publisher sees as a bit risky. There is no such thing as taking a chance anymore."

It's a scene that will resonate for many who have been following the often sudden and seeming numerous closures of small-scale publishing enterprises throughout these islands. Many of directors of these sometimes-well-established entities have cited the ongoing effects of Brexit, pandemic, and the present cost-of-living crisis. Yet, somehow, in the midst of all, having really only set sail as the first of these apocalyptic horses was bolting in 2017, *Drunk Muse Press* continues to sustain as one of Scotland's most notable independent publishers. Neil Young, collaborating founder (as he might put it) of this 'maverick' venture, shares his thoughts on sustaining this publishing gem, including how 'taking a chance' is key to the vision that motivates him and his fellow team members Jessamine O'Connor and Hugh MacMillan.

Neil Young reading. Photo: Marcas Mac an Tuairneir

Cáit: **Tell us about your background as a poet and as a publisher? .**

Neil: My experience includes working as a political journalist and as a trade union activist. Around the time I moved to Scotland, 14 years ago, I was finding that the scope for the kind of work I had been used to doing and felt passionate about didn't really exist anymore within journalism. Around that time, I also had my first poetry pamphlet, *Lagan Voices*, published, and I decided to concentrate my creative energies on the writing of poetry, first of all.

In terms of becoming a publisher, there was a hankering to do something more. Within trade unionism and journalism, I had learned a lot of organisational skills, and so thinking about following my desire to increase the options available to readers it seemed a logical evolution, especially the more I became involved in the margins of the Scottish poetry scene. There were certain things about it that I thought were staid and conformist. I'm speaking from my political background, of course. You could probably describe me as a lapsed Marxist, or as a libertarian Socialist. I took the view that if you don't particularly like the way that things are, the best response is not to acquiesce or co-opt yourself to its values, but to try to create your own forums. I was tapping into some of those kinds of radical cultural values espoused, for instance, in the beatnik movement, where people just started shaping the rules of culture themselves; creating their own set of critical values.

Cáit: **I suppose you could see it as taking control of the means of production, distribution, and exchange?**

Neil: Yes, but initially I didn't have any resources or knowledge of how to do this. So it was a case of just finding out how it might be done along with other people who were also exploring similar ideas. It all started with *The Poets' Republic*, a magazine and series of live poetry events, back in 2014. The political climate at that time was very militaristic, and nationalistic, in anticipation of the First World War Centenary. There was a kind of insidious rehabilitation of imperialism and our first issue came out to coincide with that because I felt that there was a need to create an antidote or alternative to the many other poetry magazines and outlets, which might have regarded themselves as being liberal or even left-leaning, but who had succumbed to a ritualistic memorialising.

The first magazine was really thin, having no real resources. It has progressed somewhat and is thicker and more varied. We put out Issue 11 just last winter as a republican response to the spectacle of the coronation. It's out of this initiative of developing *The Poets' Republic* that *Drunk Muse Press* then emerged. Hugh MacMillan and I were already working on the magazine together and we wanted to do more together. Eventually, we invited Jessamine O'Connor to join the editorial team. We're all friends so it was an easy progression. All flowed out of a desire to expand on what we were doing with the magazine into longer forms, to publish books.

We maintained that spark that had begun with *The Poets' Republic*, too. More positively, there is the perspective that there just aren't enough outlets around to reflect the plurality of writing; of voices. There are a lot of people writing really good poetry, but very few forums for it.

Cáit: **What you are saying leads me to think about The Wee Gaitherin, the now annual festival of poetry that you and Hugh MacMillan launched in 2021, calling it 'Scotland's most democratic festival'. What inspired you to found this extension of the Drunk Muse Press venture?**

Neil: I think, initially, it began as a reaction to those more curated events, some of which I would suggest perpetuate hierarchies or the status quo. Good things are happening but, given that the single most determining discriminatory factor in culture is class background, there is a tendency for festivals, publishers, and arts venues to reflect the bias of their situation, then magnify it. If you look at organisation and staffing, many of these outlets are revolving doors for people from a particular socio-economic background to enter and control cultural life. They already have much of the cultural capital and what is produced reflects their sensibilities and world-view. It then becomes what people are encouraged to aspire to. I realise that not everything I hear or read is going to be relevant to me personally, but when I pick up a magazine, such as *The Poetry Review*, and one of the poems published there, by a renowned poet, begins in Latin, I think 'what are you doing here? Is this just someone waving to their pals? A reciprocal signalling that says 'look how smart I am'.

With *The Wee Gaitherin* we've been calling on poets to 'turn up, tune in, take part.' It's a risky mantra in one respect, as it could be taken as an invitation for chaos, but so far things have run with only a few hiccups, and close to schedule. Given the truism that poetry readings and revolutions always start late, that's not bad going.

By being democratic, we mean we really do want everyone with an interest in poetry – writers, readers, and listeners – to take part on an equal footing. We don't select and book the poets according to who or what we think is worthy. We throw out an invitation for poets to be in touch and aim to offer a platform for as many as is practicable. What we hope is that we maintain in being non-prescriptive.

Cáit: **Why is it important for you all at Drunk Muse Press – and others involved with you in The Poets' Republic, and The Wee Gaitherin – to support more people to share their poetry?**

Neil: Unpublished material leaves no record. There is a loss in terms of the intellectual life it represents. That is a loss for the future, certainly, and in the present, there's just always a need to respond to the world in which we live. This is reflected in the way we develop relationships with the poets we publish. In some ways it's a bit of a maverick operation. We are interested in tuning in to culture that is happening on an almost subterranean level. I think that's where the best stuff happens, and as publishers that's where we should be.

The bigger publishers are able to do great stuff, of course, but they also are inhibited by being part of a marketing circus. This makes it difficult for them to take the kind of risks we have been able to, for instance publishing Dareen Tatour and Mohammed Moussa. Both are internationally important poets, but they may not appear to be obvious choices for a small, independent Scottish publisher. Again, this comes down to

building authentic relationships with people who are outside of the established circles, remaining close to those who have been marginalised, and drawing on our backgrounds, for example my journalism, maintaining a kind of grassroots participation.

I would see Jessamine, Hugh, and myself very much as participants; each of us, ourselves being poets. Yes, there's a degree of privilege in being able to publish but we're using that to open-up opportunities.

Cáit: **You describe Drunk Muse Press as an outcome of friendships, shared values, and the kinds of poetry you want to see being published. In a short period you have achieved a great deal, including a back-catalogue of 13 books, and a list of forthcoming titles taking you into the mid-2020s. How do you manage it all?**

Neil: It's a fairly quiet operation. In simple terms, we produce the books and publicise them on the best terms possible for poets and within our resources. But I think every book we have published has been outstanding, both in terms of the poetry and in terms of being well produced. For me, that is key to our purpose; to demonstrate that that is possible.

This idea of the quietness is rooted in the financial model, which is essentially working on a shoestring. While there might not be the bells and whistles paraphernalia of the bigger publishing houses, competing for attention in what sometimes feels like a very full market of poetry, we have been able to sustain our intention of publishing, which is the primary purpose of a publishing house. It requires a degree of attention because for most independent publishers this work is by no means anyone's sole occupation, or even means of income.

The biggest inhibitor to doing more are the limits on time, energy, and resources. Having said that, as we found with *The Poets' Republic*, if you've got a small pool of talent, and keep it tight, you can do a lot with a little. I remind myself that I have been involved in publishing for more than 35 years as a journalist, so I must have picked up something that was of use. I look at other publishers and wonder 'why is it so expensive for you?'. Well, if you look at established publishing houses, they need an office; they need to pay people salaries, all those kinds of things. They've got to make a profit. It's a pressure and I'm sure it must guide the selections they make, always minimising risk.

You've probably seen recently quite a few magazines and smaller publishers closing down because of increasingly tighter margins. There are fewer and fewer opportunities for poets to get published. We maintain by running as a kind of cottage industry, especially in the face of the dilemma that more and more people are seeking publication, but not

Neil Young at the Wee Gaitherin, 2023.

enough people are buying books. I think of it as a kind of twin track approach where I'm trying to publish more poets, but also encourage an uplift in the reading and buying of poetry; encouraging this cultural activity as part of peoples' everyday life. The only way to do that is to keep the books relatively inexpensive to buy, without that in any way reflecting on the value of the content.

Cáit: **Thinking about the range of people you publish and your commitment to participating in the margins, I see the synergy. For instance your publication of Dareen Tatour's poems in the original Arabic, with an English translation; making available to readers here the works of an exiled woman, once imprisoned for the very act of writing a poem. I also see it in your tabling of Màrtainn Mac an t-Saoir (Martin MacIntyre), a poet who is writing tri-lingually in Glaswegian Scots, Gaelic, and Scottish English.**

Neil: Yes, and George Gunn, a well-established poet, writing bilingually, including in his own Caithness dialect, whose work is of an extraordinary quality, but whose worth is under-represented in terms of the Scottish poetry canon. We recognise him and want to demonstrate to all publishers that they should be queuing up for him

Cáit: **It's evident that even among independent publishers active in Scotland Drunk Muse Press is outstanding in demonstrating an interest in poets who are based outwith the central belt. I wonder if that's a reflection of the team, each of you also being outliers to that scene?**

Neil: Yes, very much so. We don't move in those kinds of social/cultural circles as much as other people simply because we don't live there. So we don't ingest and digest same kind of material. I wouldn't say that we would exclude somebody on the basis of them living in the central belt, but I think being based in Aberdeenshire, and Dumfries and Galloway, and with Jessamine over in Ireland, we circulate with different communities; participating in a different variety of activities.

For example, take Alistair Lawrie, now in his seventies, deeply committed to writing in his own tongue, which is Doric; I believe he one of the most outstanding poets writing today in Scotland. It also just so happens that he lives in the same town as me, which is how I got to meet him first, about five years ago. I've been talking to him for all of that time about publishing his poetry. And that is what we are doing this year, and it will be his first collection. If I was living somewhere else and moving in different kinds of circles I might never have encountered him. It seems bizarre to me that Alistair has not put out a collection before now. He is so well respected as a poet in Scots, and in English. I'm delighted. The book is going to be brilliant.

Again, there we are, a maverick operation, looking to the so-named margins where most attention might gravitate towards the capital, and Scotland's other big city!

Cáit: This poetry that you're trying to socialise, inviting people to see poetry as part of their day-to-day life, are you able to foresee what Drunk Muse will bring to the fore in the longer term? What poetry will we need in the future?

Neil: It's the stuff that we're doing. There isn't a prescriptive formula. Certainly, we are motivated in a lot of ways by trying to create antidotes that reflect our backgrounds and perspectives, but you know, we're not dogmatic about it.

Cáit: **Thinking about the early years of The Poets' Republic; and the developments of Drunk Muse Press, and The Wee Gaitherin; none of this has happened in an ideal environment - the pandemic, Brexit, the cost-of-living crisis. What has kept you going throughout it all?**

Neil: In some ways, sheer bloody mindedness. I think that the first book that we did was Dareen Tatour's memoir. I had never published prose before that, so it was an enormous challenge. But once we had done it, I thought, 'this is the most difficult thing I'm ever going to do. I can do anything else that comes after this'. It's a book in Arabic with an English translation that needed a lot of editing and also tremendous attentiveness in communicating with the translator and with Dareen in English. And also, of course, I didn't have any time, so, it meant taking two hours of my day each day, for about four or five months. I couldn't do it again, but it was worth it. It was a really good exercise in confirming that we were doing what was right for us, to dedicate the time and energy to what electrifies us, that unpredictable electricity that can change people's ways of thinking. Good art or most of it comes from a position of bloody mindedness in the end, doesn't it?

Cáit: **It seems so in terms of addressing the importance of poetry for sharing plural perspectives, and for exemplifying an independent (and maverick) press getting things done.**

Neil: Well, to expand on that, I think the foundation to it all can also be seen in the writers we choose to publish. Take George Gunn, again. George is very politically active. He doesn't see any separation between that and his writing. That's great. That's the way it should be; people being fully alive and engaged in the world.

Cáit: **I'm thinking about Brecht now …**

Neil: Brecht has been a tremendous influence on me, right from the time I studied drama. He gave us different way of structuring theatre; a real revolt against the conventions of the time, concerning what art and the role of the artist should be. He was an absolutist about it, saying you either had to be part of changing the world or accept that you're part of the problem.

Ultimately, it is hard to know whether writing and publishing poetry changes anything but if you don't wake up in the morning and try to affect the circumstances that you or the people around you live in through some form of creative action, then it would seem to me to be a fairly dull existence.

If you wanted to understand the importance of poetry, just try living without it. As Brian Patten observed, when it comes to the big occasions in their lives people reach for it. Look at Ukraine, poets are at the forefront of speaking about the war at the moment. They are revered figures, articulating their society's experience. Try finding this distilled crystallisation of what it means to exist in any other form, other than poetry. Without it, well there would be this immense absence; a vacuum of the soul. ■

Visit Drunk Muse Press and buy their books online at **www.drunkmusepress.com**.

Poems by Jon Miller

Famine Wall

Jon Miller

Over the hunched back of Beinn Dearg
a famine wall buckles, rising and dipping
along the ridge, going nowhere for miles
pointlessly separating nothing from nothing.

Each day they climbed to the stones
laid one atop another in exchange for oats
to gain another yard nearer nowhere
another inch further from hunger

Listen to them
*gaiseadh a' bhuntà*ta Murdo's sick cow
Hector and Mairi gone on the boat to Oban
Seonaid's wee one near death

wishing for wings of gulls to lift them
over the ocean to Canada to cousins brothers sons

Unzip the wall's long line across the hill and you will find them there

beards sprouting through moor grass
women calling in tumbling burns
dreams of children quivering in bog cotton

their breath on the breeze that brushes
your eyelashes, a breeze that is also
fingertips on your cheek, a breeze

that is now a wind keening the stones
that is voices singing through stones
a *clàrsach* strumming them alive.

Note
Beinn Dearg - 1,084m/3556ft, a Munro at Inverlael about 7 miles south of Ullapool.
*gaiseadh a' bhuntà*ta - potato blight
clàrsach - harp

Midnight Walk

Jon Miller

Winter. Full moon held
in a birch's leafless branches
and we are walking the paths
about our house. We pause
at the usual way stations -
sagging fence, roofless croft, river bank -
and note what the world misses
or dream into a midnight pool
measuring what depths of years
and have found us here,
peering deeper into the dark,
separating leaf from frond,
stone from rock till everything
becomes itself and other
as we do in our reluctance
to return to those hanging panes
stuffed with thick yellow light
where we are too much seen
and would rather keep going
out across moonlit fields
half-hidden silvered things
more forgotten than ever before.

Bonnie PC Hides Out Behind the Eastgate Centre Addicted to BuzzFeed Quizzes

Jon Miller

Bonnie PC is hunkered among bins
3% battery gagging for signal
dab dab dabbing the screen
porcelain white fingers
frantic as a teenager
(cos everyone's dead in the heather LOL)
the guts of a crispy crust
Four-Cheese and Pepperoni
greasing his shoon
placing his faith in answers
randomly generated by bots
blind as Tiresias
blinking in a Texan data farm

Which Disney Princess Will Be Your Perfect Dinner Guest ?
Are You Boomer, Millennial, Gen Z Or X Based On These Dessert Choices
Celebrity Crushes That Reveal Your Vibe RIGHT NOW!

Clip-clops through the deserted precinct—
Comic Con fetish weirdo in wig, frock coat, stockings,
dirty stag-night stop-out out-staring Primark's brazen windows
wondering which dress best hugs his hips,
nothing too skimpy for the jingscrivvenshelpmaboab Minch
maybe that hoodie with WTF across it—

—Ho! Charlie! there's no comeback
no Countdown, Voice or X-Factor
no Nessun Dorma or standing ovations,
no stone rolling away, no last minute equaliser—

Ducks down behind the grafitti'd warehouses
car showrooms, scrap yards, chain-link fences,
down the train tracks to the harbour
to find some trawlerman who won't rape him
and put to sea before they pin him
to that Graham Norton couch
with a Kardashian or Danny Dyer
to promote his new perfume *Chevalier*
then exiting through the Gift Shop
pick n mix of shortbread tins, coasters,
tea-towels, tablet, pencils, key rings
.
And weeping - *so close so close* -
enters the 24 hour off sales
(*Three Barrels* on 15% discount)
the buzzer startling the assistant
reaching for the baseball bat
while Bonnie PC catches himself on CCTV,
wig askew, pizza sauce in what stubble he has:
foreshortened, greyscaled, fading in 3….2….1…..
to cipher, signifier, data point, pixel,
gawping into the lens on a loop
that will wipe clean in an hour's time.

Pluscarden

57° 36‘ 1“ N, 3° 26‘ 14“ W
Zoë Green

For we remember this sound
caught in the creaking oars,
the hoarse shearing of gulls;
songs of men as foreign to me
as my father yesterday – who
when I tell of being here –
says he remembers the place just barely.
Funny-bone-hurt in my throat,
that I have embalmed his past,
a saint’s heart cotton-wooled in a casket.

I am staring at the tracery.
I have spent my life
tracing his, sending postcards home
from places he lived before I was:
Milan, Venice, Rome, Pluscarden.

In a damp-behind-the-knees
wild-garlic-summer,
a lay nun with burning hair
and skin cool as a creamery
laid my father before this altar.
People say we have the same eyes,
so I try squinting through
the same stained glass he did,
collapse back in time –

where I am staring at the rubble freshly mortared,
staring at the copse of pews creaking
like old knees genuflecting,
at men in dusk-white robes whose passing
gives the feeling of wings brushing
my cheeks in the woods at night.

This pew is a seeking galleon
setting sail for foreign shores,
carrying cargo of plainsong, psalters, rosaries.
Iona, Lindisfarne, Melrose, Waverley.
Visitors in anoraks, we look for signs
to stand, sit, say. All here adrift
look sideways at each other,
help sewn in behind our lips.
And silently we pray.

Dew Point

57° 24’ 34” N, 5° 28’ 33”W
Zoë Green

I always thought that if you
were twenty years younger
and I as many older – well, anyway
there was salt on the air
and little skiffles of foam upon the loch;
you wore streaks of egg on your pullover.
Never seen you scarecrow before.
Your spine was ammonite,
your face overexposed, blotched,
like something dug up long ago.

Not long now, you said,
fragile as dandelion breath
when I met you on the road,
your voice a winter sky;
I demurred; and gave you a hug
as brisk as an official stamping a document
and filed you away, walked back to the car
as if it did not matter –
to make you feel that I felt that you
would live forever.

That was last October.
Today the loch lies flat, black
as the dilated pupil of a deadening eye.

Cauldhame Road

Aidan Semmens

A banshee wind’s incoming from the western sea
throwing salt rain by handfuls against the glass,
bowing the window with its desperate gusts.

And then, as startlingly as it came, it’s gone,
fragmentary rainbows chasing the grey
across the pasture and away over Viewfield.

Suffolk and Cheviot silently observe
from behind dry-stane dyke, flat stones
laid course by course long enough since

for capstones to be richly silvered with lichen,
the lee side sheltering scrub willow, fuchsia wands,
crocosmia shoots. From the brow of the road

the view extends over lochs, braes and byres,
from the monument at Marwick thumbing the
horizon
to the distant masts of Wideford, the lit-up flare of
Flotta,

the ferry’s wake arrowing to Graemsay. A wide sky
scratched by skeins of geese, somewhere overhead
the ascending notes of an early lark,

descant to the distant long-wave bass
of rocky cliffs impeding an unseen sea.

By the Burn of Sunnardee

Aidan Semmens

The greylags as they turn
are Spitfires homing in,
fighter formation, finger four,
white arses flashing in the sun.

Here a war survivor,
barracks, observation post
or hangar, block-and-timber built,
is become a homestead
pebbledashed to grey;

nearby a shallow grave
in sodden ground
watered from the hill,
new-marked resting place
of Ozzy, presumed dog;

peewits picking over
new-ploughed earth; ravens
plucking eyes and entrails
from a roadkill goose.

Wishes

Robin Munro

Another summer’s leaves are falling,
a mother calls them ‘heaven-sent’:
‘if you catch one, make a wish,
it might be granted, let’s pretend.’

Wishes are secret, but the child believes
he shares her wish: *don’t let this end*
may our moments be forever.
Let’s pretend

Continuation

Robin Munro

After your life
we still share ancient circles,
faiths of stone; you loved
This Grand Conversation
linking Antrim to Argyll,
Ring of Brodgar, Bute.

Before the breadth
of another chambered cairn
I wonder with you
how they divined the sun;
within spirals I find you
minding my spirit.

The Last Call

Story by Frank Rennie

Domhnall Alasdair was perplexed. Three times in the last fifteen minutes he had heard a car alarm go off nearby, when he knew absolutely for a fact that there was not a car of any sort, moving, or stationary, or wrecked, within five hundred metres of his croft. The single road leading from the main island wound sinuously down from the slightly upland area of the great moor, and sometimes inquisitive tourists drove down looking for a beach, but he had a clear view into the far distance, and he had not seen visitors for several days. He looked in towards the moor and out to the coast, but the source of the sound remained a mystery.

Later in the day, as he went out to bring inside a few buckets of peats to refill the bunker in the porch, he discovered the culprit. He could hardly believe his own eyes and ears, but there on top of the *cruach mhonach* [peatstack] was a dark Starling, its collar scruffy beyond description, but its iridescent feathers glinting in the soft light. It stood facing him, boldly unmoving, the cold eyes unflinching and alert. Almost as a challenge, the pointed yellow beak opened, and a car alarm call was broadcast loud and clear. Domhnall Alasdair stopped in his tracks, dumbfounded, but to compound his bewilderment the Starling looked straight at him and gave the car alarm again. Now Domhnall Alasdair was aware that Starlings are known to be wonderful mimics, for he had heard the stories about Starlings imitating the calls of other birds, Curlews, Blackbirds, Wrens, but he never for a second thought that they would mimic inanimate objects. With a wariness on both parts, the Starling, and the old crofter, Domhnall Alasdair filled his bucket with peats and under the watchful eye of the bird he went back into the house.

Later in the evening he looked out of his kitchen window towards the peatstack but there was no sign of the Starling or any other bird. He could almost believe that he had imagined the whole incident, but he still had most of his faculties, so he parked his opinions and remained quietly contemplative until bedtime.

The following morning, while he was preparing to feed the dog in the byre, he caught sight of the Starling in the corner of his eye, watching him acutely from the top of the *cruach*. He told himself that it was unlikely to be the same Starling, although the scruffy plumage seemed distinctive, and he had almost convinced himself of this when the bird gave a slight cough followed by an ear-splitting car alarm call. In the flash of clarity that we sometimes have thrust upon us for no conceivable reason, Domhnall Alasdair became convinced that the bird was calling to him, directly and personally. He fed the dog then went back into the house.

When he re-emerged, he had a fistful of peanuts which he laid carefully on top of a large peat at the near end of the peatstack, the furthest away corner from the Starling. Then he back-tracked to the house and watched casually from the kitchen window. After a credible hesitation the Starling fluttered over and began to peck at the peanuts. Satisfied with his good deed, Domhnall Alasdair put the kettle on for tea and began to prepare for the tasks of his day.

When he went out the back door the following morning the Starling was again waiting to greet him. Domhnall Alasdair said grumpily '*Mach* à *seo, a bhodaich*'! [Get out of here, old man!] for in his local dialect of vernacular Gaelic any male over school age was an 'old man'. The Starling screeched a string of high-pitched vocables at him and Domhnall Alasdair repeated himself more loudly, '*Mach* à *seo, a bhodaich*', and continued into the byre. When he came out again the Starling was still watching and Domhnall Alasdair regretted his bad temper, so he went into the house, came back with a sprinkling of peanuts, and laid them on the path. '*Mach* à *seo, a bhodaich*' he said again, and shut the door firmly.

Over the next few days this ritual was repeated twice a day, and by the third day Domhnall Alasdair was convinced that the Starling was waiting for him to appear out of the door. Each time, he laid the peanuts a few metres closer to the house, and by the end of the week the Starling was feeding comfortably on the kitchen windowsill. When he was late to get out of bed one morning, he was washing his hands in the kitchen sink when he distinctly heard the scruffy Starling calling '*Mach* à *seo, a bhodaich*'.

At first, he could not believe his own ears. Could he be imagining this? Domhnall Alasdair went out of the back door and the precocious Starling fluttered to meet him. '*Mach* à *seo, a bhodaich*'. He could hardly believe his senses, but a few peanuts encouraged the talkative bird to repeat the phrase.

That whole morning Domhnall Alasdair puzzled over this revelation. A talking Starling, whatever next?

In the early afternoon the mobile shop arrived. The village lay at the end of a long, quiet road on a small island just off the main island of Lewis. The weekly visit by the mobile grocery shop, and occasionally the mobile library, were a vital source of information for Domhnall Alasdair. The driver of the mobile shop, Iain Bàn, was, like Domhnall Alasdair himself, a lifelong bachelor, and an enthusiastic and eclectic reader. They had gone to school together when the Earth was still young. Casually, without laying any obvious emphasis on his discovery, Domhnall Alasdair circuitously brought up the subject of the talking Starling and waited to be disillusioned or mocked.

On the contrary, exclaimed Iain Bàn, who was well acquainted with many strange phenomena, did Domhnall Alasdair not know about the German scientist in the mid nineteenth century who taught a Starling to recite verses of poetry? Domhnall Alasdair did not, but he was perfectly willing to believe the story. By the time the mobile shop had disappeared over the horizon for another week the seed of an idea was starting to germinate.

Over the following few days Domhnall Alasdair gradually induced the Starling to move in with him. By the strategic

placement of a little pinch of crushed peanuts, first on the kitchen windowsill, then on the steps of the open back door. Finally, the bird was enticed into the small porch occupied by a peat-bunker and an assortment of boots and jackets, where it hopped and pecked, and eventually slept there during the night. He left a small window ajar, so that the bird could come and go, but every morning it was inside the porch, waiting to be fed. On each occasion a slightly rasping greeting of '*Mach a seo, a bhodaich*' encouraged Domhnall Alasdair to dispense a small but regular helping of the desired peanuts. On the next weekly visit of the mobile shop Domhnall Alasdair requested that Iain Bàn should add a bag of wild bird seed from the Crofters Store to his order of groceries.

The rather vague idea of what he might do with a talking Starling gradually began to take a more solid form. Domhnall Alasdair lived alone on his croft, at the end of a single-track road, in a small island community connected by a few hundred metres of narrow causeway to the west coast of the Isle of Lewis. Although he had travelled far when he had been working, he had returned home to care for his frail mother, and since her death several years ago a constant concern had begun to nag at him. The Gaelic vernacular of his island was intriguingly distinctive in its cadence, with a rich vocabulary and phraseology that was quite unique throughout the Gaidhealtachd. Yes, it was similar to the Gaelic of the adjacent islands, but it was *different*. No native speaker could mistake the provenance of the dialect and very few could imitate it successfully, even the new batch of TV comedians that he sometimes saw appearing on BBC Alba. The problem was that he now had nobody left to converse with in the idiom of his own language. The few neighbouring families were all speakers of English. Very nice people, but Domhnall Alasdair held no hopes that any of them would suddenly desire to learn the Gaelic of Eilean Molach, far less that they might successfully speak it with any level of fluency.

So he turned his attention to the Starling, which by this time was almost a member of the household. The Gaelic for a Starling is *Druid*, and on the baseless supposition that the bird was female, 'she' had been named *Druidina*. The patience of Domhnall Alasdair was limitless, for this was no longer just a fancy idea, it had become a mission of great personal significance for his heritage. Slowly, although with greater precision than he could possibly have imagined, the scruffy Starling acquired a considerable collection of phrases. It is true that they were not always delivered in response to the appropriate question, and of course it was nothing like a genuine conversation, but that gave Domhnall Alasdair something to work upon. He liked to teach *Druidina* the names of various places on the moor that he fondly remembered from his youth, and soon they had progressed to some of the more obscure and antiquated local words to describe the nature of the landscape, or the quirks of the changeable weather.

Soon they were having conversations of a sort, although they were really only the repetitions of word associations and *Druidina* had no clue about the meaning of the games, only that she was rewarded with interesting seeds when he repeated the associations correctly. Domhnall Alasdair would name a place in the island, *'Am blàr dubh*' he would say, [the black field] and *Druidina* would respond in perfect idiomatic accuracy, *'Currach'*! [a bog where shrubs grow]. Another time Domhnall Alasdair would prompt, *'Uchdan Mòr*' [a big, raised, terrace] and the Starling would correctly identify that the place was *'fineagach'* [full of Crowberries]. So it went on. It was not a serious replacement for the tangled and spontaneous intricacies of human conversation, but to Domhnall Alasdair it was simply wonderful to hear a living being saying those words at all. Steadily the word list that *Druidina* could intone in perfect imitation of the traditional Gaelic of Eilean Molach grew to include an impressive vocabulary, even capturing the slightly nasal rendition of certain vowels.

As summer turned inevitably into winter, *Druidina* became a regular accomplice of Domhnall Alasdair, following him to the *cruach* and back as he took in peats for the fire, or even once or twice accompanied him on

short walks around the croft. Frequently *Druidina* would disappear, but she always returned. Sometimes the random combinations of her learned words in Molach Gaelic suggested a profound insight, or great intellectual awareness, and they would cause Domhnall Alasdair to pause in silent contemplation on the limitless possibilities. He had but one apprehension, niggling but growing more insistent, and whenever he thought of it he became uneasy. Although he had read online that a Starling had once lived over twenty-two years, he knew that the average duration they could be expected to live is about two to three years. The exchanges between himself and *Druidina* had become the highlight of his day, and he had a silent dread of the relationship ending.

In the final event he needn't have worried. Domhnall Alasdair had barely reached his biblical allowance of three score and ten years when a winter virus carried him off. The funeral service was large, for he was a well-known and well-liked character, and though the graveside tributes were mainly in English, for the benefit of those who were hard-of-Gaelic, there was one notable contribution of which Domhnall Alasdair would have been proud. As the sandy soil gradually covered the coffin there were several dozen people who clearly heard a scruffy Starling calling strongly, '*Mach* à *seo, a bhodaich*. *Mach* à *seo, a bhodaich*' in the rich inflections of the island. The irony that *Druidina* should be the last surviving speaker of richly articulate Molach Gaelic was lost on no-one. ■

Efter da appointment

Maxine Rose Munro

Pictir,

turnin da key athin dy front-door lock, hit sticks,
jöst a bit, hit aawis does,
bit wi da peeriest o scrapes, an a grate, du's in.

– hit's naethin, du kens hit's naethin –

Pictir,

inside is no quite da sam as afore, dere's a air
o shut windows, stoor.
Da tap drips waatter inta blocked keetchen sink.

Bare waas, pale patches whaar faimily photos eence wis,
or perhaps, wan day wid be.
Furniture, carpets, coortains, tv, aa vanished.

Hit's lik a tief cam an took dy past

– or wis it dy future? –

Pictir waitin,

white-knuckled, fir someen ta com, see whit's gein,
see dis terrible thing dat his happened,
say 'Hit's gyaan ta be ok'.

An dey com, bit dey see naethin – naethin –
aathing looks da sam ta dem.

Du fins du's fadin.

Pictir lookin athin a mirror dat isna dere,
seein naethin,

Pictir settin maet apö plates, apö table,
feelin fir whaar dey lie.

Or climbin inta bed, curled aneath covers,
bit is ony o it really dere?

Pictir dy past, present, an future's been stolen,
bit hit's onnly dee at sees hit?

Your introverted friend

Maxine Rose Munro

is a gift. A tiny, unshowy gift
that sits at the back of a gaudy pile,
wrapped discretely, presented
to very few,

for should your introverted friend
come to meet you,
rest assured their heart
pulls them to you,

so much so,
that they abandon beloved alone
to be two, with you –
only you count.

Your introverted friend won't see
the neighbour, the dog-walker, the gossip
outside the shop. They won't
let themselves be late.

And when you sit together in cafe,
park, pub, the ages spent apart
leaning on your extrovert friends,
you'll forget,

because your introverted friend
becomes the moment
you pivot around,
life slows down,

and your introverted friend
gifts you time
in which only you matter.

Sandmother

Andrea Turner

swaddles me in glass-starred grit
rocks me in her suck and
surge and I see the sky

blink in the salt-pools of her
eye, this is the stuff and
silt of ordinary day

dreams, I sigh.
But here's the warning -
if you're sinking do not

fight the grasp and pull,
splay like a starfish
breathing the sea. See

if my mother, if my human mother were
if she were to come
that close, she might

place her ear to my lips and hear
    away but remember, away
  but remember me
away

In the Presence of the Lighthouse

Andrea Turner

blaze darkness gleam absence

This globe is glass, ocean-grey, heavy in my palm,
in my other hand - candyfloss, rain, seagull jeers.
I lean into the north wind spreading my arms.

absence blaze darkness gleam

On my knees scabs swell like rock pools
clotted with sea anemones. This lens magnifies,
seeds beams in the marram grass.

gleam absence blaze darkness

Seal-song moans from lampblack rocks
I walk on kelp-slippered feet
crouch by a web of sea foam and dig.

darkness gleam absence blaze

Her beacon stop-frames my shape
my hands are a sluice box sifting,
I have eyes on my fingertips, pockets full of jewels

blaze darkness gleam absence

Àilleagan na Gàdhlig

Celebrating Emergent Female and Transfeminine Voices in Gaelic Poetry

Ceitidh Chaimbeul

In 2025, Ceitidh Campbell will publish her début collection, *Dàn nam Ban*, with Leamington Books. In this issue we are pleased to share a preview of works from the collection, written as part of a Gaelic Books Council writers' development scheme.

Fras-fhuilt

Bha a falt an-còmhnaidh geal, mar leòmagan,
gach gaisean snaidhte am bachlagan beaga
leis an t-seampù is seata a fhuair i gach ceala-deug.
Gan cumail mion an lìon-fhuilt is rolairean
is na cùlain air an cuairteachadh le gleò
bhon chana àrd òir ri a taobh, anns a' chabaig,
a' choinnleag bhon dealt ga cruinneachadh uimpe
an riomball meomhairean òige –
àile làn de dh'fhallas is toitean stòlta,
glàmar seargaichte làr-dhannsa structe.

Clobhsa Mhargaidh an Fheòla

'S e a' chiad shealladh a tha gad fhàilteachadh,
gad phurradh bho mhòrachd Scott
gu saoghal cruas Rankin –
am baile mòr ag iarraidh a phunnd feòla.

Ceum do chaiseige currach
taigh leth-an-rathaid air a ceàrr-ainmeachadh,
air mheudachadh le bròg an nach tig dhut,
lìth shliseigean a mhaireas bho dhà uair na maidne.

Stangan tanalach de dh'fhual-leann saor
bho gach puthailt dhallanach,
fallas a' cothlamadh le fuil nan linntean
ri sìor-shilteachd sìos gu claon.

Gàire a' taomadh à Deòrdaidh diongach,
a' cur fanaid nuallaich air do sreap
le anail cho trom ris na th' aig luchd gun sgairt,
's tu cinnteach à droch-threòir do chàis.

Flùraichean Buidhe

Bho thùs tha i air d' aithneachadh –
d' ainm daonnan air blas a bilean.
A sùilean làn de d' iomhaigh ghlan,
an dealbhan gan taisbeanadh dhi.
B' e an turas seo a' chiad athais
tadhal ort 's air an eilean o chionn fhada.
Glamaig chumhachdail gun atharrachadh
le ceò a' cumail an t-siabain bhon flathanas.
Rubha na h-aiseig srònagach sa mhuir fharsaing
fo dhubhar bataraidh na mhaighdinn-mhara
Ach fhuaireas flùraichean buidhe lamaisteach, calaisteach,
duilleagan grèiste a' maireadh na thachair.
Mar thaibhsear, a b' eòlach air d' àite tàimh
thàinig buatham brosnachail foimhpe is
gun ghluasad, theann i ris a' chloich
le tulchuis na h-òige is chuir i oirr' pògag gràidh.
"Tha gach chùis ceart, na gabh dragh,
gheibh thu flùraichean nas fheàrr a Ghanga."

Dùrachdan san Dorchadas

dha bràthair mo sheanair,
An t-Urr. Canan Aeneas Mac an Tòisich 1927-1998

An saoghal na bhaoghal, naidheachdan làn sgeulachdan
le firinn chlaon, bàs cha mhòr cinnteach.
Beantainn, anail, fuil
fathannan eagalach is breugan
bha tuilleadh co-fhaireachdainn do lobharan is strìopaich.

Thuirt iad gum bu pheaca e, ach cha robh ann ach aineolas.
Cha do mhothaich duine dithis a' dol a-steach air sheòl eile
airson beannachd os-ìosal air dàimh gun aithne
is anns an dorchadas, ministear làn le caomh-thròcairean.

Chuir solas-sràide bogha-frois tron ghlainne-dhathte
a' dearbhadh nach biodh AIDS na pheannsachadh.
Thar gach subhailc gu lèir chuir esan gràdh –
an nì a tha na cheangal coilentais.

Air a' Chladach

1921

Às dèidh rotach Bhealltainn
làgarsaid a' fàgail smòt ann an rabhainn grinn.
Dithis a' cruthachadh mhaoisean ann an craidhlean-droma
agus sluaisreadh cunbhalach nan cluasan,
ri sireadh a-measg na sgùillich.
Toradh-tuinn a' fàs bàrr-bìdh na croite.
Crom, a' togail probach, tha iad ag obair gualainn ri gualainn
irisean rin teannachadh trom.

An-diugh

Corragan a' smeangladh criomagan
sa ghainmhich 's a' ghaoth ga greasadh.
Cuachag a' cruthachadh sligean
gun adhbhar ach brèaghachadh.
Air uideal mar an drìlleach
a dh'fhalmaich iad.
Gach maighdeag air sgrùdadh
feuch am faighear an cruth is dath ceart.

Victoria NicÌomhair

Over the past few years, Victoria MacIver has found success in a number of poetry competitions. At this year's Royal National Mòd in Oban, she was awarded the Lewis and Harris Association Gold Medal for Poetry.

Againne

Mar na rionnagan os ar cionn,
cha robh toiseach no crìoch
d' ar ciad choinneachadh.
Lùghdaich an saoghal,
gun ach thusa is mise

Chaidh mi fodha le cuideam m' fhaireachdainnean is dh' èirich
mar a' ghrian gach là, a' deàrrsadh
's a' losgadh

Chan eil reusanachadh leis,
chan eil argamaid ann –
mairidh mo ghaol thar ùine,
thar thomhas

Tharainn fhìn.

Balaich

A' falbh air bhioran,
do bhodhaig tana àrd, mar
laoigh gun smachd air
a chuid chasan

Shrac iad aoibhneis
mar rasgailean le pàipear-naidheachd –
cho luath, aon-fhillte, gun tuigse

A' cleachdadh theangannan
mar bogha a' losgadh shaighdean,
gach facal geur a' gearradh,
a' spìonadh do mheanmna, beag air bheag
mar iolaire na creiche

Toisicheamaid a-rithist.

Leabharlann

Leis gach ceum socair, duilleag ùr
ann an seann sgeulachd na coille,
fo chleòca daraich ghlas mar
chòmhdach ghleansach leabhair

Priobadh na grèine a' tuirling oirnn,
mar fhaclan a' ruith air gach seantans.
Cha chuala sinn ach deò air a bhriseadh le gairm a' bhùirn

Dhòirt seudagan prìseil thar phrìs,
a' briobail mar chleas gun fhiosta.

Trom

Nuair a bhios cùisean duilich
is nach fhaic thu ach an ceò,
còmhdaichidh mi thu mar reul-sholas
a' seacadh is a' glanadh gach deòir

Nuair a bhios d' anail trom,
gach cnead gad mhùigeadh teann,
cuiridh mi thugad caladh ciùin
gus sèimheachadh do smuain

Giùlainidh mi do dhuighleadasan,
giùlainidh mi do dhuibhre,
cuiridh mi iad fom sholais shocair
gus an nochd rathad soilleir ùr.

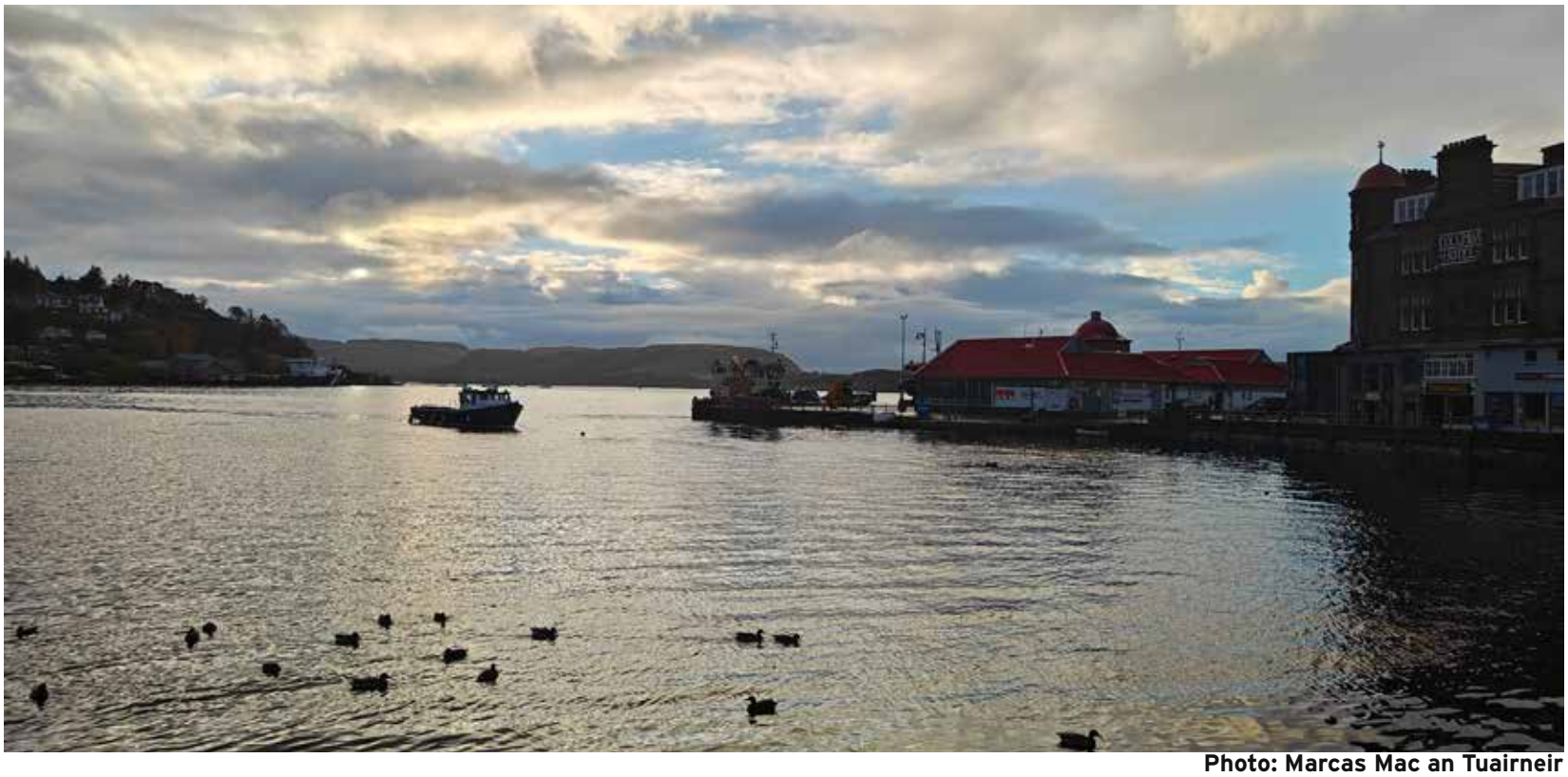


Photo: Marcas Mac an Tuairneir

Mia Suhaimi

Originally from Malaysia, Mia Suhaimi is based in Edinburgh, where she is involved in the work of Bothan Dhùn Èideann an Lavender Menace LGBTQ Archive. With the publication of her poems, we welcome the work of Gaeldom's first transgender poet, and first poet of colour, in print.

An Rìgh-chathair a tha nam Chridhe

Tha rìgh-chathair nam chridhe,
is 's ann leatsa a tha i.
Nach tuirt mi gur h-e
mo ghaol a th' ort mar-thà?
Ach, seall air a' ghealaich,
nach eil i cho buidhe
nuair nach eil mi
faisg air mo ghràidh?

Bha dà phiseig sa choille,
a' dol suas ri chèile.
Nach tàinig an tè
ris an tèile cho math?
Ò b' fheàrr leam a bhith
nam chat còmhla riutsa,
is b' fheàrr leam a bhith
nad chaidreabh gach là.

Seall a' ghrian a' dol fodha,
is seall os do chionn.
Tha tòrr dhathan air
an iarmailt an-dràst'.
Cho brèagha 's a tha i,
is cho cofhurtail i dhomhsa
nuair a bhitheas mi
ag ionndrainn do bhlàiths.

Leug Àlainn, Leug Gaoil

Nam b' fheudar dhomh
shreapainn pàlas Indra
's dh'fhighinn fhìn an lìon –
dhèanainn e gu dearbh

Dh'fhighinn na leugan a-steach
aon air aon 's air aon
gus am faicinn a h-uile rud ann –
an saoghal mar a tha e

Is dh'fhighinn barrachd a-steach
aon air aon 's air aon
gus am faic mi d' fhaileas ann
cho àlainn ris na leugan

Na leugan anns am faiceadh
faclan mo ghaoil

Mo Ghaol air Mullach Clach na Mara

Tha mo ghaol air mullach clach na mara.
Is mise Caiptean an t-Sàilein Bhig.
Thug mi gaol oirre ged tha mise nam bhean.
Tha mo ghaol air mullach clach na mara.

'S ann eadar dà shaoghal a tha an gaol againn.
Tha mise a' fuireach air a' chuan.
'S buidhe nach do dh'fhuirich mi tioram air tìr.
'S ann eadar dà shaoghal a tha an gaol againn.

'S e ceann cho ruadh a chuir i nam chuimhne.
Tha 'guth ag ath-ghairm nam chluasan.
Ruaiginn a h-òran gu deireadh nan cuan.
'S e ceann cho ruadh a chuir i nam chuimhne.

Solas na gealaich, reultan shuas.
Thug mise mo smiogaid nur n-aghaidh.
Leigibh leinn beatha a bhith againn le chèile.
Solas na gealaich, reultan shuas.

Bhithinn air Dol gu Eilean a' Cheò

Tha mo chridhe ag ionndrainn àiteigin
far nach robh e riamh air àite fhaighinn fhathast.
An d'fhuair thu cianalas riamh do dh'àite
far nach robh thu riamh ann?

Ach fhathast is ann nad làmhan còir'
a bhios mi a' lorg mo dhachaighe fior.
Gach oidhche, 's miann leam bruadar ort
oir 's toil leam d' fhaicinn nam chadal gu mòr

Bhithinn air dol gu Eilean a' Cheò,
bhithinn a dh'ionnsaigh nam beanntan air fad,
nighinn mo làmhan am bùrn nan loch
ach cha trèig mi fhìn do ghàire chòir.

Mus falbh mi bhod thaobh feumaidh mi ràdh
faclan sàmhach a dh'innseas mo ghaol.
Thig deireadh an t-saoghail, ach gheibhinn fhathast
sonas nad achlais an còmhnaidh gu bràth.

'S ann eadar dà dhùthaich a tha mi an-dràst'.
'S mulad mo chridhe a' smaoinntinn orra.
'S ann air do shon-sa a dh'fhuirich mi an seo,
ach feumaidh mi mo a leigeil fhìn às.

Bàrdachd Thraidiseanta

Traditional women's poetry from the Isle of Lewis

Cianalas

Shona Nic a' Mhaoilein

A' ghrian ag èirigh air madainn bhrèagha chiùin
Solas a' dòrtadh thairis air an Dùn
Uspag bheag gaoithe a' snàigeadh tron fheòir
A' dùsgadh nan sìthean, cho prìseil ris an òr.

Aig mullach na beinne tha 'n Dùn Mòr na shuidhe
Sa bhaile bheag againne, 's esan an cridhe
A' sealltainn air cùisean bhios tachairt gu h-ìseal
is fios aig' gu bheil an t-sluagh aice prìseil.

Taigh-òsta air iomall a' bhaile bhig
Agus cladach clachach aig cas na creig'
Daoine cho coibhneil is làn blàiths
Chan eil àite nas fheàrr do dhuine bhith 'fàs.

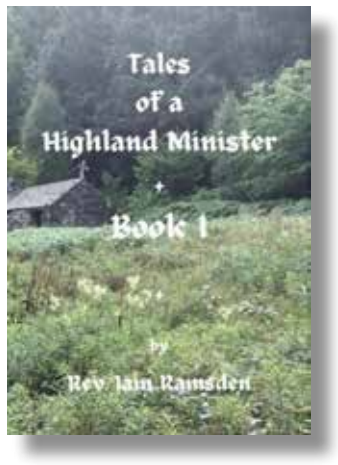
Làithean m' òige 's mi siubhal nam beann
Is greim agam air làmh mo pheathar gu teann
A' sealg shligean agus a' reic bho mo 'bhùth'
Ge bith an e cat a bha dhìth ort, no cù.

Latha Buidhe Bealltainn, is sinne nar ruith
Sìos chun a' chladaich, a' cluich san t-sruth
Ar bòtannan fliuch ach ar n-aodainn glan
Le dealt na maidne gar cumail slàn.

Tillidh mi dhachaigh chun Dùin aon latha
'S mi air a bhith air falbh fad bhliadhna no dhà
Gheibh mo chlann eòlas air sonas is sìth
Is bidh mise far a bheil còir agam a bhith.

Photo: Marcas Mac an Tuairneir

Tales of a Highland Minister
Iain Ramsden
Air fhoillseachadh leis an ughdar fhèin
Lèirmheas le Niall Gòrdan



Dh'fhaodadh an leabhar seo a bhith mar phàirt de shreath – aig duine a tha dha-rìribh na Mhinistear Gàidhealach, An t-Urramach Iain Ramsden, air a bhios mòran eòlach mar mhinistear aig Eaglais na h-Alba ann an iomadach paraiste, nam measg Cill Earnain faisg air an Eilean Dhubh. Gu dearbh, b' e "Ministear a' Mhotair-bhaidhg" a phòs mi fhìn 's mo bhean-chèile uasail mòran bhliadhnaichean air ais, agus is sinne a tha glè chleachdte ri dòighean caomha Iain.

Thathar eòlach air Iain air sgàth a chuid àbhachdais gun chron, ach cuideachd air tàillibh a dhòigh dhaonnda as gach rud a bhios e ris, agus faodaidh mise a ràdh le cinnt gu bheil a leithid seo a dh'àbhachdas ri fhaicinn gu làn san leabhar thaitneach seo. Is àbhachdas e a tha, is dòcha, a' buntainn ri là is linn eile – tha na sgeulachdan mar chnuasachadh air a' Ghàidhealtachd mar a bha, can, ri linn là caractairean Nèill Rothaich is Pàra Shanndaidh is dòcha. 'S e moladh a chuireas mi an cèill leis an seo.

Taobh a-staigh 294 duilleagan an leabhair gheibhear eisimpleirean aotrom àlainn air neochiontas na Gàidhealtachd 's a leithid. Ach tha pìosan eile a tha rud beag nas dàna – nam measg seann sgeulachd èibhinn mu "Coll / Call Girls"! Is sgeulachd e a ruitheas gu saor-ghlan agus sinn a' faighinn a-mach mu bheatha fear Cailean Caimbeul, minister òg – no "meenister" – ann am paraiste ùr.

Tha Iain cuideachd air rud beag de Ghàidhlig fheuchainn san leabhar – aidichidh e fhèin gu bheil a chuid Gàidhlig caran "meirigeach". Ach leigidh sinn às e!

Mar sin, mar chrìoch, dar leam gu bheil an leabhar beag seo mar ghaisgeachd sgoinneil an Urr. Iain Ramsden, agus is math is d' fhiach a leughadh aig daoine dhen a h-uile h-aois, mas e 's gun tuig iad àbhachd na Gàidhealtachd mar is còir.

Bu chòir 's gum faighear "Tales of a Highland Minister" tron ISBN air neo gu dìreach on ùghdar. Nì mi fiùghair ri tuilleadh saothrach o pheann an fhir uasail Ghàidhealaich seo. ■

Speaking of Stories: Language, Libraries and Scottish Jokes

Essay by Kirsty Gunn

At a family ceilidh last Christmas my husband was asked, as he always is, to tell a few jokes that he tells very well. He learned these stories - for stories they are, really, and not jokes as such at all - from his father who was an excellent raconteur, and had scores of such anecdotes on hand to entertain parties of fishermen and women and after dinner guests and his family.

So the tradition holds; my husband entertaining his own family on a dark night in Sutherland by the fire...A story in itself, you might say, beginning here, the first paragraphs of this essay. We sat on the edge of our seats, a party of us, knowing the punchlines by heart, along with the other turns of phrase and sentences that we knew were going to arrive in due course; preparing ourselves in advance for the pleasures and satisfactions of a narrative that we knew so well. My father, who also loves David's father's jokes, has a certain look on his face as he listens to these tales of impecunious gamblers and canny neighbours and timorous shepherds, just waiting for the moment he particularly relishes– a look that describes someone who is just, but only just, holding himself back from bursting into great gales of laughter.

This story that we were hearing now was the one about the three farmers who meet at the yearly "Fee'in' Merket" and compare notes, keeping a sharp eye on each other by way of talking up their crops and the number of children they've managed to produce. The whole thing is set in Stonehaven around the middle of the last century I am guessing and comes complete with precise place names and a certain tone, the pronouncement of particular words and phrases... "Well, now..." David leans back and narrows his eyes, exhaling a long and hard won sigh. "There were these three old schoolfriends, you see. One lived over near Fyvie way, another was in Aboyne, and the other, wee Eck, he lived in Huntly, and they'd not met for a while, so they decided..." It's a great story.

It struck me then, as David settled into the details, laying out the ground and circumstances, inching, line by line, through the delicious subtleties of character and place that were conveyed in the timbre and spacing and sheer rhythm of the narration, that I wanted to write about all this: About how the joke, the story – being almost entirely in the telling - is not even so much a "story", with story's certain givens and rules, as a situation of language. I say "situation" not only because of the way these anecdotes and tales are indeed located in a specific place, with certain geography and cultural markings, but for the way they are also placed most certainly in the time of their telling. They exist, precisely, in the room, in the space between the narrator and those of us who are doing the listening; played out minute by minute, second by second, in the interaction of word and response, response and word. Altogether, when you think about it, these stories that are spoken aloud by way of an after dinner entertainment or an item at a ceilidh are less about plot and payoff as they are about their very texture and sound.

This may be obvious, of course; all stories fare better in the charge of one who knows how to deliver them; sense and understanding crucially dependent upon the figure, the face, the voice, the timing. And language rendered not as the vocabulary and syntax and speech of a printed, published story which has been memorised and then recited but as expression, as words, to paraphrase literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, "in the mouth" of the speaker... Well of course this is to have a resonance much as music has resonance, where dynamics and expression and the pull of a time signature and phrasing contribute so much more to the notes that are printed on the score. But something other than performance, is what I am getting at, too, gesturing towards something that is surely more subtle than a presentation or an act. For just as there is a kind of exchange in operation, some contributive effect based on that "situation" of both speaker and listener, so, I am also starting to think, is the narrating voice – though the rest of us sit quietly by the fire, only listening – somehow... shared. By paying attention, as critic Harold Bloom tells us, we "create'.*

Many of the tales David tells as part of his repertoire - as surely they are by now, a set of fictions precisely ordered and governed, handed down, "told down" one might say, from father to son - are set in the region of the "Fermers' Story" here, in Angus and Aberdeenshire, but also a fair number of them in Fife where David's father was born. My own father who is a Caithness bagpiper has a different geography for his stories – they take in another kind of landscape, and, yes, because of his interests and that part of the world, there's often music in there somewhere. In fact, *canntaireachd,* a form of singing the notes of the music for the Highland Bagpipe that is passed down through generations from teacher to pupil as father to son, may well be a perfect metaphor for what I am trying to say here.** That this precise, ancient and Scottish form of musical 'notation" that is actually sung as notes in the air instead of read as marks on a stave, might express perfectly a form of narration that is heard, not read, spoken, not written. For sure, so much of the delight in this very regionally-minded storytelling I am writing about is to do with that kind of conveyance - the way voice and body combine to bring a place to life, have it be present in our midst as much as the characters whose story it is seem to be present. ***

Jokes, then - these kinds of stories – travel. They bring their geography and identity with them, to the new place where they are being told and let us come inside and live there. I remember, growing up in New Zealand, the pleasure my father and his Scottish friends took when a story came out that was from "Home". How the cadences and vocabularies and syntax all spoke in such a way that there, in the midst of a Christmas holiday in summer on the other side of the world, we were immediately transported back to that other beloved place. On the beach in December, maybe, but in our minds and emotions, in the language and words and accents that were in the air, somewhere else - by our fire in Sutherland, even, we may as well have been. Yes, we know jokes speak a sort of universal language, that humour is international, but what I am describing is not only a simple relaying of a place's particularity and essence by description and taking pleasure in that. This is a something participatory, contributive, as I mentioned earlier - a quality engrained in the voice, in the very centre of the sentences of the story, that comes to be embodied in the the teller of the tale and, in turn, as our responses synch in with the words, settles within the bodies of those of us who are listening.

I saw this happening the night that I am writing about. The way my husband brought Huntly and Aboyne to the fireside, with accents and mannerisms and a way of casting the world in the candid and highly localised terms of those places; the way we all inhabited that market over at Stonehaven as we listened, became locals ourselves, you might say, in our appreciation. David had got to the part where the three friends are comparing farms. "I've ten acres with mostly fat cattle, ye ken, over Fyvie way... The others saying they had mostly sheep and neeps..." And as he spoke he became not only the farmer but his own father too, in part, who, in turn, in his telling had returned from South Edinburgh where he lived to his own place of origin not that far from where the story was set. So as David came into that role, in voice, posture, gesture, he came into Aberdeenshire and Aberdeenshire came into him – as it did, then, for all of us. Of course, we know that it is by listening, for whatever reason, we affirm our connection to each other. For however brief a time, as we pay attention, we take up residence in the sensibility of the person we are listening to and feel, don't we, a brief intimacy with them then, a bond? And what I am now realising is that perhaps THAT'S what the joke is about, after all. The story a celebration of the language and situation of its telling, yes, and the place where that language comes from, but in the end it's the simple interconnection between narrator and those who come into that space and shares that it is life affirming and meaningful, that brings a smile to our face and makes us laugh. The mystery of the joke resides, its deep pleasure and sense of fun, in the way that by listening to it the language of the story becomes our own. A kind of miracle occurring: That in hearing, we also speak.

I was reflecting upon all this - linguistic affect, the impact of timbre, the very pitch, if you like, of vocabulary – while resident in Merton College, in Oxford, recently. Thinking hard, there in England, about how the *sound* of being Scottish inflects everything we do – from calling out in a hushed quad as though across the High Street in the teeth of an Edinburgh wind to using the familiar pre-emptive negative to express volition, which, to English ears, sounds so very challenging. For sure, I could hear so precisely, in that enclosed and lovely College down South, how strongly my own voice and manner and sense of humour and way of being – there, deep in the body of ancestral England! - was so fixed elsewhere. How it was, similarly, that I just couldn't help myself - a subject of the United Kingdom after all, though stravaiged in from the Highlands- but laugh at a certain kind of story, "get it", in a way that would only make sense north of the border. And how, too, I could no more monitor that appreciation other than in my body, somehow, within my very sense. It seems to be as though, just as with hearing of a "Fee'in'" market, "Ach, well now you see..." something sets off a sort of visceral, atavistic response to a code embedded deep in our dna, in our cultural memory and being'ness when we respond to Scottish syntax, tone and phrase. Language, I was reminded, taking my place in the dining halls and drawing

19th century map of districts near Huntly, Aberdeenshire

rooms and libraries of Oxford's oldest college, is not simply vocabulary, a form of communication conveyed in words. It *sounds…*

In terms of my own interests, there is quite a practical aspect to all this. For as long as I can remember I've been engaged by the aural texture of literature – more than by story, say, or character. From my first novel onwards there's a continuing preoccupation with creating a sort of "soundscape" for the narrative - whether that's in drawing out the plangent tones of Highland *piobaireachd* or, most recently, fabricating the tinkly mirror-lit conversations of parties and bars that could not be further from the Sutherland hills that I can see at the window, here at my writing desk. I've always wanted to make the kind of sentence that will lift off the page and envelop reader and writer alike.**** Strangely, though, it was in the Upper Library at Merton, established by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1276 and a quietly serious place of English scholarship and study, that I came to realise fully how Scottish literature, with its history of ballad and orature and clear aural qualities, might have been more of an influence on my own literary efforts than I thought. For it was while I was sitting there in the medieval reading room, the only person upstairs in the world's oldest continually open library, that I heard that *sound* of Scottish writing so distinctly in the still air it came as a kind of recognition.

We each of us have a language that comes from the world around us – the people and places we are familiar with, that make us feel familiar – and we put it into the books we write. How characters talk, the vocabulary and the diction of narrative… This is necessary, after all, not only to our understanding of the texts we read but also - as we do talk about, in reviews and in our literary appreciation of the social and cultural significance of the speech that finds its way into novels and short stories – in helping us develop a perception of ourselves. So I "heard" a language, a clear differentiation of one text from the others, when I sat in the hushed reading carrel, selecting, at random, essays, novels, travel writing, natural science… And discovered there, in a five hundred year old volume of writing about the north east of Scotland, including a map that was so detailed it practically included the fireside in Sutherland with which I began this essay, the notes and cadences of a Scotland as clear and direct that it was as though voices were speaking.

Writing, I was reminded then, on a morning in Oxford in early Spring, that is alert and reflective of all the subtle shifts in tone and register we hear when we are speaking and listening to each other, is as fresh and vital as the present tense of living. It has power and presence and force. And just as poetic language must be *used,* as Edwin Muir reminds us, if it's not to fall into away into mannerism, so the printed words of an anonymous 16th century writer showed me that sound is not only an underlying base note of our literature but is, as much as theme and style, part of its very temperament. People talk a great deal about needing stories to show us who we are, what we're made of and who we might be. I rather think, as I settle once again into the one about the farmer from Fyvie, or begin writing something of my own, that it's the language stories are made of that's complex and surprising and vital. We are who we *say* we are. "We carry" as Burns Singer writes, "that which we are carried by." ■

Notes from this essay

* Harold Bloom, in "The Anatomy of Influence" writes compellingly about the need, not only to pay attention to literature, but, if possible to memorise it so as to really make it our own. "Possess *Hamlet* by memory" Bloom says, "and he ceases to seem merely clever or as crazy as the rest of us."

** A discussion of *canntaireachd* could happily form the basis of another essay about orature and literature, and the similarities, in Scotland, between the two. It was during a discussion with James Kelman in the late nineties about Gertrude Stein and the use of time in his own fiction that I first became aware, too, of the political aspect of a fiction that sounded as though it was spoken not "published".

***Is this particular to Scotland, I wonder? Are "stories" told at parties in England as reliant upon their geography? Or is this something pertaining to our country, with its dramatic geographical differences and areas of isolation? Certainly the differences between an after dinner story about an Angus farmer and a crofter in Caithness might be about as different as either one in comparison to a story set south of the border. There' s much to think about here…

**** "The Big Music" was a novel I wrote, set in Sutherland and based around the structure and sound of *piobaireachd,* that was published before my most recent, "Caroline s Bikini", which takes place in West London. The two may not, on the surface, seem to have anything at all in common, but for the fact that the latter, despite its glamorous southern setting, with its pool parties and gin and tonics, is actually a tale told told by a Stuart about a Gordonston and has, I like to think, cadence and toe that owes more to Muriel Spark than to the Home Counties.

Final Note:

Burns Singer is a truly wonderful 20th century Scottish poet who is not as well known as he might be. For my money, "To Four Friends, Drowned in Loch Lomond, Easter 1944" gives Milton's "Lycidas" a run for is money in its traumatic failure to stopper grief while apparently smoothing the waters of a tragic drowning in beautiful elegy.

Poems by Ingrid Leonard

This Way to the Neolithic Village

My childhood veins are flecked with flint,
hop-skipping channels into homes open
to sky that once circled a roaring fire,
or curled in a chair with Kali and Brockan.
Summers, I pound the tarmac path
past a deep ditch, flush with forget-me-nots
and grouse to the Stones. Time falls away
in these horizons – the curve of the land warms
the blood in my arches, sounds a burr through
the seabed. My feet are wedded to Orcadian
rock, slipping over each other like the boats
that brought us to Skara in our younger skins,
shed in a sloughing of words and wave-drift
till we played houses in the cradle of our bearing.

Oilmen

There's a group of them in the Oxy lounge,
their fingers curled round nip glasses,
wrists chunky with gold chains;
they misconstrue the meaning
of the woman's instructions
as she leads us to the charter plane
in her pleated skirt, her pussybow.

We've made the earth cry
with our ingenuity, lowsed wails
from its sediment, its juiced crustaceans.
It's the sixties, three uncles emigrate
to Canada. It's the seventies,
our table is draped with architects' plans,
there's a fossil in the handsome fireplace.
It's 1987, our house is full of salary
and soft carpets, whisky in lead crystal.
I'm pretending sleep on a plane of Scots
and Geordies, trying not to hear *dae ye*
want tae fuck her and *aw sweetheart*.
The change in a life when you've a bedroom
each, a weekly comic, no one fighting
in the evenings. Thumbs and fingers
rub together across bar tables, boom times
for the isles. I'm derided at a dinner party
by a man in a fine coat for where my Dad works
(he knew hunger, worked door to door).
My boyfriend's gone offshore –
two weeks on, two off, orange juice
for the lass, perfume from the bond shop.
A paperweight is gifted to every worker,
a teardrop of oil at the centre –
billionth barrel. Derrickmen, divers
and roustabouts are off the clock, minted
and life-thirsty, roaring through the air to Orkney
with smiles on their faces in our time-capsule
aeroplane, sharper in the mind than a gas flare,
the question I don't think to ask –
what rig do you work on.

Fire in July

Men linger at thi top o a rope
ower roilan sea, grey hope.
Nothing sleeps; thi life
in thi water hears a keening,
flees thi thud o time's blood
let loose fae man-dug wells, sieved
an runnan tae this centre point,
this rig o rigs, thi Piper.

Oil, gas; we aal turn tae fuel
if left tae thi weight o dead
millennia. A burnan coal
is plissed in thi Stoorworm's
belly an hids body varies thi earth.
There're no heroes here,
nor virgins tae save –
are ye stout enough tae go,

calm yer cord-burned palms
in thi salt below? That's a jest,
of coorse; a valve's blown,
thi jig's up, energy'll keep pouran
in fae ither rigs an spill, set fire
tae thi oshun. Tae thi oshun,
beuys, tae thi oshun! Some'll stey,
some no, Wur Piper is peppered

wi dots o men by thi helipads,
thi spider deck, thi in-between
plisses, craalan, climban,
weet cloots ower mooths
that pech for an exit – whit tae dae?
Thi comms system's oot, min,
thi rig's dyan… time becomes
filmic. Then, thi bangs,

thi bleesters – thi Stoorworm' s oot,
hid twists an circles, dwarves
thi Alpha an men become skerries
in thi aize as deep time, this prolific
o sediment, bone is extinguished –
fire's broad knife scores a note
on each organ. Piper's wans perish,
or are saved by help come laet.
Happy Valley

It takes folk to change our frequency;
we dared each other to run through
an arch that was thick with bees
in an August of rude health, the air husky
with summer and the legs of insects.

We were a litter of newborns lying
near the Dams, chewing grass and squinting.
The sky-vault was where it would be
the day after, wrapped as we were
in our laughter and time on the idle.

Remote Scottish Island

Fealty to you catches at my skin like an un-
finished necklace. Always the barely-hidden
smirk, the necessary explanation before ears
bar their gates – no-one likes to be wrong.
Everyone else seems to come from somewhere
somehow more acceptable – Cumbernauld,
Basingstoke; no fodder for jokes about inbreeding
or sheep sex there. What's more, folk misremember:
are you going back to Harris for the holidays?
What do you mean it's not in the Outer Hebrides?
Like telling that one Frenchman that breakfast's
not the main British meal, or a Brit that Eastern Europe's
not all corruption, or cheap prostitutes, you're a thing
folk think they know. *What's it like to grow up*
in such a remote place? For the love of God,
don't ask that question. Few names can claim to be
at the centre of something – Rome, Byzantium.
It's not all bad; there are those who move here
for the love of it, to raise children in a quiet quarter,
forget the things they made in crowdier towns.
Others think that makes them the bigger animal,
but I'll meet their gaze, Orkney – you're too good
to be the blank letter in a fool's repertoire.

The New Age

It feels good to have a room with no smoke
when the wind is up and cold nips at bones
like a vexed crab. They came from a land
beyond the sun, who built this chamber,
in supple boats. We draped their bodies
in buttery leather, portioned their bowls
with beef and oysters. A few of us went
with them; those long in years raised eyes
skyward, yawped misgivings at the in-brought
air that blew about cattle-pen and lintel
and didn't settle with their withdrawing.
The rest of us went with our kin through
a dim passage to sweat, steam and sleep
with flushed collarbones, a deep-limbed
restfulness as stones whelmed in pools
with a scalded hiss. The water we drank
in the morning tasted cold, sweet.

Grave goods

Story by Greg Michaelson

1.

I left the cemetery feeling angry and aggrieved. That wasn't about the Meg I knew. Why hadn't they asked me?

In the car park, Meg's partner Charlotte was waiting for me. Charlotte and I had little time for each other, each resenting how close the other was to Meg. We shook hands, in that strange British concession to physical contact, and she handed me a small packet.

"Meg wanted you to have this," said Charlotte, and walked away without further explanation.

2.

Until her illness, Meg had enjoyed a controversial career. Her soubriquet – Mons Meg - belied her slight build, barely more robust than her aged army-surplus metal detector. She had no time for those who saw detectorists as, at best, their amateur helpmates. Rather, Meg fully embraced citizen science, always claiming to be a citizen first.

In late 1979, Meg had, against all the odds, identified the site of Mons Graupius, where the Romans finally defeated the Caledonii: hence her nickname. Ignoring the multiplicity of theories that failed to reconcile Tacitus with geographical reality, Meg, headphones beneath her trademark woolly bunnet, had spent many a weekend scouring Upper Deeside, arguing that any large pitched battle would leave metal remnants.

Sure enough, just outside Peterculter, Meg found a freshly ploughed field seeded with shards of iron and bronze. Despite establishment scepticism, she and local volunteers dug a trench across the field, revealing a huge pit filled with the long forgotten dead.

You can learn more in the Visitor Centre. Meg's succinct monograph is long out of print. I still have my copy.

3.

At the office, I peered into the packet, and choked up.

The circular dull metal brooch, inlaid with crudely cut glass, was a caricature of a Roman design. "Fatto in Italia" was stamped on the back. Meg had bought it from the curio shop in the Apulian village near her first dig: indeed, my first dig, where we'd first met.

Meg called the brooch, which she always wore to academic events, her memento mori. When questioned, she told people that we shouldn't forget that many of the artefacts we so reverently curate were most likely unwanted gifts. Why else had we found them?

I closed the packet and slid it into my bottom desk drawer; I'd look at the brooch properly when I felt less raw. Maybe I'd wear it to the launch of Meg's festschrift, which I was editing. I was beyond sad that the book hadn't been published before she had died.

4.

I'd really fancied Meg, as we'd crouched beside each other on that hot and dusty site. Once we'd established that wasn't going to happen, we became fast friends. Our interests were very different, she in Roman Britain and I in the Neolithic, as were our approaches. She liked self promotion. I thought good work should speak for itself, and was jealous of the visibility I shunned. But we could critique each other without rancour, and could always confide in each other, knowing that our woes would go no further.

Charlotte was the one part of her life that Meg wouldn't discuss with me. I'd long appreciated that Meg liked to keep her worlds separate; I couldn't recall a conference where Charlotte had accompanied her. I thought Charlotte mousy and dull. Meg was all we had in common. We encountered each other infrequently, and were mostly polite.

5.

As the semester progressed, the brooch haunted me. I spotted the packet every time I opened the drawer, infrequently enough for it to always catch me out. But the longer I left handling the brooch, the harder the prospect felt.

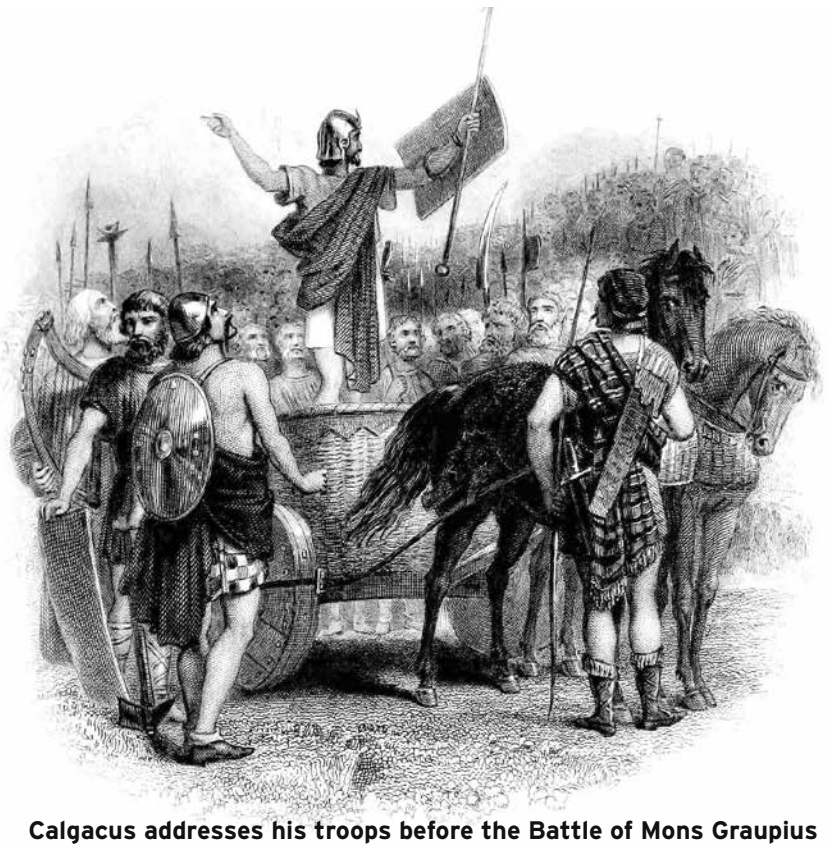
I felt a wry amusement at my complicated relationship with the brooch. Meg wore it as reminder of how transitory our lives are: how little possessions signify once disconnected from their contexts. But, for me, the brooch represented our long years of friendship, and signified how much I missed her. I now wished it had been buried with her, for future archaeologists to ponder over.

6.

Once teaching had finished, I chivvied my fellow festschrift authors, trading on guilt at our collective tardiness. When I'd finally signed off the proofs, I set about organising what was now to be Meg's memorial. All the authors had agreed to speak. The University provided a lecture theatre: the Department the reception.

Instead of name badges, I decided to give copies of Meg's brooch to the attendees. I passed the still uninspected packet to Sam, our technician, who scanned the brooch, and set up a 3D printer to slowly churn out copies.

I was impressed at how well this process captured the kitsch shoddiness of the original, even if the cut glass was now clear plastic, and the back read "Made in Scotland". My expectation was that these tokens of Meg's humility would become badges of hubris. That would certainly have amused her.



Calgacus addresses his troops before the Battle of Mons Graupius

7.

On the morning of the memorial, I finally took the brooch out of the packet, but I barely glanced at it before I pinned it onto my lapel. Now it would be just one amongst many, special to me, but no one else.

The event was well attended. From the podium, I spotted Charlotte in the back row. Of course I'd sent her an invitation, but I hadn't expected her to attend. I now regretted not consulting her about the afternoon's agenda.

I'd wanted Meg's memorial to be far more celebratory than her funeral. And, without prompting, her peers spoke of her with affection and respect, appropriately tinged with exasperation at her contrariness. The only teams Meg played with were the ones she captained.

The reception that ended the event was noisy and good humoured. But, throughout, Charlotte sat near the window overlooking the quadrangle, sipping from a tumbler of fresh orange juice. It was clear that she knew none of Meg's colleagues, even though many had known Meg for almost as long as I had.

8.

Feeling responsible, I left the huddle, and went to sit next to Charlotte, pleased that she was wearing one of the brooches Sam had made.

"I hope that was alright," I said. "Not too dull."

"Of course not," said Charlotte. "It was all most fitting. I knew she had to be a significant figure, even though she left all that behind at our front door. Well done."

"Thank you," I said. "That she was."

We sat in silence, more awkward than companionable.

"I never thanked you properly for the brooch," I said, finally. "I see you picked up one of our knock-offs."

"Oh no," said Charlotte, fingering her brooch. "This was Meg's. The one she bought on that dig with you, all those years ago."

"It can't be," I said. "Look."

I unpinned my brooch and turned it over. To my confused astonishment, the back was blank.

Smiling, Charlotte took off her brooch and handed it to me. The back read 'Fatto in Italia", just as I'd remembered.

"If you've got the one she bought," I said, "then what's this one? Another copy?"

"Oh no," said Charlotte. "It's an original. Going on 2000 years old. Meg said they were likely produced for Roman tourists. They're mostly in collections now, though. She spent ages trying to find one for you. She'd always meant to give it to you herself."

I looked at my brooch, and I looked at Meg's. Then I looked at Charlotte.

"Might we swap please?" I asked.

"But she wanted you to have that one," said Charlotte.

"I know," I said. "I know." ■

Extract from Birds/Humans/Machines/Dolphins

By Genevieve Carver

METHOD STATEMENT

Objectives
Make meaning of blubber and bone.

Render each creature more itself than it knows how. Give purpose to porpoise, definition to dolphin.

Survey Design
Be go-between, medium, shapeshifter. Play fast and loose with the data. A translator with an agenda is an explosive thing.

Sampling Locations
Moray West – out past the gas graveyards, the oil-rig mausoleums. Out to where the gales are caught in wide white arms and thrown down ducts with electric gusto.

Moray East, where the monopods line up like ancient stone rows, the nacelles tremble with progress.

Beatrice, who dreams in watts and shakes the sandbank in her sleep.

Sampling Periods
Every time someone says 'slack tide'

When the cloud lifts, the unforgiving grey allows

When terns wear the Westerlies like Flamenco dresses

When flukes smack the ocean's skin like revellers collapsing on the dancefloor

In between coffee breaks

Methods
Sea swimming

Tongue clicking

Self-aware anthropomorphism

Notebooks with marine-themed covers

Blue ink

~ echolocation click ~

this is the sound

of listening

the language of call

and response

rippling through

whole body

leaving like a streamer

returning like trumpets

from the gallery

in the knave

musical map vibrating

in guitar-belly head

softened by pillows

of held breath

ocean as orchestral score

seaweed as tangle

of earworms squirming

questioning

probing

searching

the song in the mirror

fathoming

foraging

the voice in the cave

~ buzz ~

those quickening clicks
rhythmic as drumrolls
are in fact blood-howls

zeroing in on a target
charging like a pack
of sea-hounds coursing

sometimes its food –
lithe muscle of salmon caught
by timpani crash of clicks

sometimes it's a plaything –
a porpoise to bludgeon
to stone-cold blubber

or one of our own –
a podless calf to harry to shreds
of skin and broken bone

you've read the smile all wrong
the bully-smirk of apex boss
ambassadors of ASBO Britain

the poster of us leaping
with the motivational quote
should read

Live
Laugh
Fuck Shit Up

Hydrophone

I hear what you don't – minke whale fog-horn
– hammer of haddock's swim bladder – alto
dolphin –

and what you can't – dog-whistle sonar
– soprano dolphin – higher than Minnie
Riperton – than tinnitus / puppy yelp / baby
wail –

I lock the notes inside me – like childhood
– pass them on – like lullabies – melody
flowing through umbilical cable

Spectrogram

/ a picture of sound /

    / a rainbow of music /

/ a ribbon of echoes /

    / dolphin whistles are blue mountains /

/ over bedrock of boat noise /

    / meadow of swell-grind /

/ pixels of frequencies /

    / noisy as oil paint /

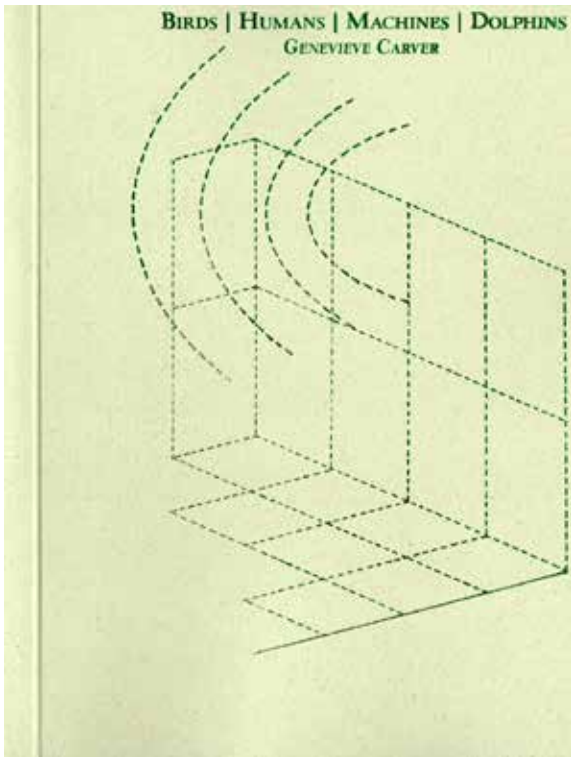
/ Kandinsky's dream /

    / a dance about architecture /

/ a technicolour melody /

    / harmonic reflections /

/ shimmering on the sonic lake /



~ whistle ~

hello

or I miss you

or go left

or I'm here

or I'm myself, my own dolphin and no other

or I'm tired

or go away

or let's play

or dare you to rub your belly on the beach

or do you ever feel like an empty razor clam?

or good one

or nice flippers

or do you ever dream of swimming in air?

or do you surface gasping, rock-scars searing your flanks?

or I like you

or here come the shore-walkers, finless and stiff

or the cloud-beasts grazing the hill, so graceful when they leap!

or eat my slipstream

or my blowhole's clogged with storm scud

or salmon steak!

or mine!

or it's like the legends say, above the surface only silence

These poems were written during a residency in response to ecological fieldwork by the Lighthouse Field Station in Cromarty (University of Aberdeen School of Biological Sciences), where scientists are using underwater sound recording technology to study harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin populations in the Moray Firth, and understand their responses to offshore wind farm developments.

The collection was published this autumn by Guillemot Press (2024) £8.00

Pictures from an Elusive Exhibition

Robin Fulton Macpherson

I was asked to write a commentary on my collected volume, 'A Northern Habitat', but I felt this meant pretending my poems had been written by someone else. I resorted to the following:

Many of my poems seem to approach the world obliquely and that´s the only way I can talk about them myself. Questions like "Why do you write?" paralyse my mental functions. I would rather talk about a few pictures: some exist outside my head, some don´t.

The first scene is dimly lit and uneventful. We are in someone´s holiday cottage late at night, surrounded by a pitch-black forest near the village of Sprakensehl, about fifty kilometres south of Lüneburg. We had been persuaded to leave, for an hour or so, the smoke-filled and resonant *Gasthaus* where we were staying, by an American who seemed pleased to find English speakers. The Lady of the House, or Cottage, a German university lecturer, having found out that I had published a few books, demanded "What are your poems ABOUT?" A crisp reply was expected but not forthcoming. What I thought afterwards but hadn´t got round to saying was - "Ted Hughes writes poems about animals, yes, but that says nothing about Ted Hughes´ poems." End of story, and not much of a story, but that question still echoes in my head whenever I come across a poem that seems to run on rails towards a predestined conclusion.

I don´t mean the Great Long Poems of World Literature. Dante´s awareness of how *La Divina Commedia* was to end informs almost every line of his three-part narrative, and Milton had to know how *Paradise Lost* would progress because his epic ambitions persuaded him to start in the middle of his story.

I mean the fairly short poems most of us come across, as readers or writers or translators, and my point is that if we have "something to say" or "something to write about" and we know in advance what it is, then the obvious thing to do would be to write a letter-to-the-editor (if we have only a little to say), or to write an article (if we have quite a lot to say) or to write a book (if we have heaps to say). If we are really clever with words we could write comic or satirical verse, a genre not to be sniffed at. If we are pompous and self-conceited we could write didactic verse, a genre fortunately out of fashion these days.

There is space in the world for all sorts of poetry, and those who try to convince us that poetry "is" or "ought to be" this or that can safely be ignored, but my own preference is for poems which give the impression of feeling their way along, of not quite knowing where they are going until they get there, of discovering what they are up to as they proceed. This may be the result of cunning on the part of a wily poet, but I doubt if that is common. It´s something which may well irritate the crisp people but that´s too bad.

I´d like to call in two poets, one not so widely known, and one universally known. G.F. Dutton (1924-2010), Scottish "by residence," distinguished bio-chemist, resolute host of a "wild garden" near the tree-line in Perthshire, wrote short knife-edged poems which often explore areas of experience where humanscome up against non-human conditions. He saw no essential contradiction between categories such as "science" and "art," and indeed saw his poems as little experiments.

What I thought afterwards but hadn´t got round to saying was - "Ted Hughes writes poems about animals, yes, but that says nothing about Ted Hughes´ poems."

I like this way of seeing poems not as statements but as speculations setting off from an "as if." The other poet is Borges, who in his Norton lectures in 1967-68 talked of poetry as something that "happens" between word and reader. A book is a physical object full of dead symbols. "And then the right reader comes along, and the words - or rather the poetry behind the words, for the words themselves are mere symbols - spring to life, and we have a resurrection of the word." At first sight these two ways of seeing poems, the one seeming to rely on the brain as it sets up a hypothesis or two, and the other seeming to rely on the heart, waiting for a magic moment, may appear to be far apart, but they share at least one essential feature: a predilection for unpredictability and surprise.

My second scene takes us back to the early 1940s. I´m perhaps five or six. I´m in the sitting-room of the Church of Scotland manse at Torbeg in Shiskine, Isle of Arran. The window looks east across a wide shallow valley with green fields and lines of hawthorn hedge. The Black Water runs north to south towards the sea: in reality a large stream but, with its deep pools, to me a dangerous river. The foliage of the trees cascades in the wind and rain. Grandmother, father´s mother, May Scott who married Edinburgh teacher William Fulton and has been a widow since 1926, is crouched at the piano, humming and mumbling through the music, making excessive use of the sustaining pedal. The different harmonies tend to run into each other just as the wet landscape outside runs in a haze down the window-panes. I may be doing her an injustice but that is what I imagine I remember.

She played a lot of "glorious" Mozart (whose name she pronounced Mosárt), made frequent expeditions into Beethoven but I don´t know how she tackled the many demanding pages to be found there, and was full of contempt for "modern" music. "*Bella* Bartók - fancy having a girl´s name!" My parents were musical only in a mild way. Music was something heard sporadically, briefly and passively, never listened to actively with real attention. Hymn-tunes were much cultivated. I liked some of them and still do, but I became puzzled when I began to notice the words and found it hard to understand how grown-ups could blissfully sing lines which often made little sense. My own later interest in music owed nothing to grandmother´s many hours at the keyboard.

Socially, a country minister in those days had an ambiguous position. Father was looked up to ("respect for the cloth" was the odd expression) and was given the use of an imposing house with an extensive garden, free as long he stayed in that charge. Yet his income, prettty low on the financial scale, hardly matched the dimensions of the house, a circumstance perhaps tacitly recognised by parishioners for when he visited a farm he always came home with some produce. This was managed without any sense of being patronising or charitable. It was never suggested to me that we were a touch different from the people round about us, but the idea seeped into me and caused me discomfort until I was old enough to think about it. My parents lost friends in the war (one of mother´s cousins fell in North Africa) and must have had many worries, but they never clouded my existence with them. In fact, I was lucky. As a minister of religion father was not called up. We weren´t bombed. We weren´t occupied.

Not every day was happy, of course. It couldn´t be, life being as it is. There´s a very blue sky, with a very bright sun shining on very green fields, and I´m at a Sunday School picnic. A modern child might think the event rather miserly but during the war the smallest "treat" was a great event, so I was supposed to be happy. But I thought suddenly of one our Sunday School teachers who had died recently, "before her time," and a panic of sadness consumed me. It was no use being told that she was now in heaven, for how could I know if the sky in heaven was as nice and blue as the one I sat beneath?

It seems absurd that we moved in 1944 from Arran to Glasgow: accepting unexplained decisions from parents, I assumed, was just what children had to put up with. We moved from gifts of farm produce to bread queues, from relative plenty to a miserable income that kept us not far above the bread-line, and I think both parents were unhappy and irritable. But I was very happy with the change and on a wider view wish we could have stayed on there. The trams were exciting. Pocket-money was rare but when it was to be found it went on exotic items like liquorice root and sherbet powder. I experienced life with electricity for the first time, but the house had none of the peeps and buzzes of modern gadgets, so it was still fairly quiet. That modern child would perhaps have found existence there boring, but up to a point boredom is useful for it can stimulate initiative and inventiveness.

The picture this time is of the interior of the loft in the solid pink sandstone terraced house that served as a manse. It was an "ordinary" building sitting among others in a leafy street, not a gaunt solitary pile. I liked the loft. The rafters gave off a pungent resinous scent and the only sounds to be heard were occasional ticks from the wooden roof and the muffled chirping of house-sparrows. I felt secure from bossy adults. The adults around me were not always bossy, of course, but one could never be sure: they were liable to turn bossy without notice and for inscrutable reasons. I had a large but incomplete Meccano set donated by the lady next door, whose children had grown beyond such things. And I read about the small creatures I had found or hoped to find in ponds and streams on my solitary and sometimes rather frightening expeditions to the open spaces within reach. The last time I saw some of these, they had been covered by housing estates.

The next picture is a black-and-white photograph - not just a scene inside my head - showing myself aged eleven or twelve on the footplate of a steam engine at Thurso station. Standing on the platform is Harry, the real engine-driver, who taught me how to shunt to and fro and piece together the wagons into a goods-train - that is, he told me which lever to push or pull, I pushed or pulled, and found this the most exciting activity of my whole childhood.

Mother´s family had deep roots in Sutherland and Caithness. Grandfather Murdo Macpherson had a formidable square jaw that said "You wouldn´t want

It seems absurd that we moved in 1944 from Arran to Glasgow: accepting unexplained decisions from parents, I assumed, was just what children had to put up with.

to argue with me." He was of substantial dimensions and rolled rather than walked. What he "was," I never found out. In my family a child simply did not ask about the business of adults. Rumour had it that he had been a joiner but was too much of a perfectionist and too little of an accountant. He was a returning officer at elections so must have been regarded as reliable. He was a member of the local Masonic Lodge, and that too was of course an impenetrable secret. He spent his last years of employment as caretaker at the site of the wartime air base at Dounreay, staying on a while when the nuclear power plant was built.

For several years we spent a month of the summer in Thurso. The night-train north from Glasgow was exciting, and so were my hours with Harry, but otherwise time dragged. The little that did happen seemed to involve water. Father took me on long fishing trips, some of which meant trudging for ages along the railway track. The local minister taught me to swim (a little). I was fascinated by the cliffs between Scrabster and Holborn Head, saving up images for a lifetime of nightmares about such places. Once we (myself, father, Murdo and another adult) were out in a rowing-boat fishing for mackerel. "Not proper fishing," father declared, "for they bite at anything." We came close to a vast basking shark, idling along with its jaws open. Not dangerous, was the general opinion, but I wasn´t convinced: the nearest "shore" was a vertical cliff plunging down into deep water.

We can move on now to another real picture, to a water-colour, not perhaps an exalted specimen of the art but a lifelike depiction of Loch Araichlin, and if the lady who painted it did so from life then she had gone to some trouble to do so. Two or three times I spent a day fishing there, with father and another man, probably the water-bailiff. First came a slow drive north the length of Strath Helmsdale, on a single-track road, to the southern tip of Loch an Ruathair. Then came an hour-long struggle westwards high-stepping through wiry heather over ground full of thigh-deep holes in the soggy peat. Once on the loch, the tactic was to row against the wind and then set the oar at a cunning angle, allowing us to drift down-wind while casting. I tied my own flies (Butcher, Grouse and Claret, Teal and Green) but found the actual process of using them rather boring. In fact, the boredom here was so extreme that it became pleasant, like a trance. People who have been to the Gobi Desert or the Antarctic would think nothing of the heathery wastes along the unmarked border between Sutherland and Caithness, but to me this was the ultimate remoteness. The chit-chit of an occasional stonechat, hard to locate, and the sad wail of a curlew, and above all the lap-lap-lap of the small waves made the enveloping silence inescapable and unfathomable. Those waves have been recorded and stored in some corner of my brain for I can hear them whenever I want to.

By this time we had moved north from Glasgow to Helmsdale, the result of another unexplained, unquestioned and unquestionable paternal decision (most likely on father´s part). In the late 1940s this fishing village on the east coast of Sutherland was relatively busy but to me it was a desert after the liveliness of Clarkston. We arrived as electricity was reaching this part of the country. We were back in a "proper" manse, large, draughty, cold, with servant bells in the kitchen which no servant had ever jumped to and a "butler´s pantry" which had never experienced a butler. The manse, the church, and the tall war memorial (whose clock chimed the quarters day and night) stood on raised ground to the south of the village. The river was crossed by Thomas Telford´s old stone bridge, from which I would look far down at the water. At low tide I could see the weedy stones on the bed. At high tide the water was still and deep and evil.

I commuted one hour each way five days a week for six years between Helmsdale (evenings and weekends and holidays) and Golspie Senior Secondary School (timetable hours only). I felt I existed in neither place and this got me down to the extent that I experienced something akin to depression. I developed phobias about the deep water in the harbour, the cliffs up the Caithness coast, and even certain streets in Helmsdale and Thurso. I took to the piano, seriously and very systematically, practicing for as many hours as I could.

That takes us to the next picture: it shows us a high-ceilinged room in a New Town flat in Edinburgh. Many pianos of various shapes can be glimpsed. The tall thick curtains are full of jagged holes. And here is Walker Cameron, gifted pianist and teacher, and an uncle has given me half a dozen lessons with him. He is kindly and as helpful as he can be, but alas his verdict is that my teacher in Helmsdale - the only one available, and she was not yet fully qualified - has neglected to teach me anything about the use of muscles and damage has already been done. Start again, if you can, but it´s probably too late.

Actually, many people have found or invented interesting things beyond various pales and in sundry backwaters.

I think I was about eighteen and I was very disappointed. On the positive side, I had at least got some idea of the inner workings of many of Bach´s "48" and of Beethoven´s piano sonatas. I have been returning to these regularly for almost seventy years, finding more and more in them. These, and not a few other musical works, have a powerful effect on me which has not been matched by anything I have come across in literature. We can do subtle things with words, but our grasp on them is not always firm: they often wander away and even if they do usually come back there´s no guarantee. In the eyes of the custodians of the word this might put me beyond the pale. Actually, many people have found or invented interesting things beyond various pales and in sundry backwaters.

One last picture: Tyne Commission Quay, just down river from Newcastle-upon-Tyne. My view is from the top deck of a ship ready for the nineteen-hour or so crossing north-eastwards across the North Sea to Stavanger. Cars and passengers are on board, all the doors are clamped shut, little men in dirty green luminous jackets have unlooped the ropes. In the course of nearly four decades I have watched a scene like this well over a hundred times. A narrow gap opens between the side of the ship and the huge rubber tyres lining the harbour wall. That is how all journeys, whether trivial or decisive, begin, with a tiny space that expands, with a scarcely perceptible movement that gathers momentum. My "native land" is still around me but I am already severed from it, unable to drive up the road onto the A1 and turn left to go south or right to go north. The gap widens and hordes of gulls swoop over the churning water: they seldom seem to find anything worth snatching. We slide down river, where the last rotting vestiges of a thriving industrial past have more or less been tidied up and new apartment blocks with glass balconies line the "redeveloped" sections of the riverbanks. Leaving the river and meeting the sea outside the breakwater, the boat takes on a restless motion, but once clear of the shallows it settles down to whatever that most fickle stretch of sea has to offer.

Motorways, city streets, facades, interiors are all stored in niches in my memory; the real-life equivalents, all that weight of hills, fields, buildings, shrink westwards in the fading light, soon to become an indistinct line that may be land and may not be. There are people too, just out of sight round the curvature of the earth. I used to think of my parents beyond that line. Up to 1984 they were both somewhere there; after 1991, neither.

If you move to another country and stay there for a long time you find yourself in a dilemma. The new country becomes familiar but is not and never will be home. The old country, when you visit it, is of course very familiar but there is now an unbreakable glass wall between you and that familiarity; you are no longer at home when back home. Out in the middle of the North Sea, with absolutely nothing on the horizon, I have often felt an íllusion of being "at home," of being free of that dilemma for a few hours. If seen from a plane high up, the boat would be a little cigar shape with a short white wake, hardly moving. If seen from the cold fishy deeps, from below, it would look much the same but not very secure, with all that depth to sink down through. No doubt Archimedes was right, but when I´m remote from land and have nothing to stand on but tons and tons of metal, I may be allowed to wonder. ■

An unhappy PS: in 2008 DFDS discontinued the Bergen/Stavanger/Newcastle route, which left their Esbjerg /Harwich route as the only North Sea ferry crossing from Scandinavia. In 2014 that too was discontinued. That leaves their Amsterdam/Newcastle route. It´s a long drive from anywhere in Scandinavia to Amsterdam.

Notes for a Retrospective

Poems by Robin Fulton Macpherson

Biography

I´m living fiction made from dead fact.

Young Light

Light is in such a hurry, never
gives itself a chance to be ancient.

Fear of Falling

Treading the past, much like
treading the present, eyes
on pavement edges, cracked
asphalt, unsubdued roots.

Losing a River

If I could drain off
adolescent fears
and bad memories
from the wide strath sides

would the whole river
from Flow Country lochs
to The Moray Firth
lose all its voices?

Sometimes Visible

Ground floor, like living beneath
high walls. I don't see much
of the sun and other stars
rotating on their poles. Now
cars parked for the night are like
furniture draped in pale sheets
while the owners seem far off
(and may not come back at all).
In the smallest of small hours,
between roof edges, between
blizzards, a sudden full moon
lays diamond shaped slabs of light
on my floor. They don't last long,
enough though to remind me
of forgotten other lives,
sometimes visible, sometimes not.

Persistent River

How many centuries
of ferrymen, how much
fear of drowning, until
Thomas Telford gave us
an unshakable bridge?
But we couldn't forget
the river. We heard it
every day, every night.

Otherwise

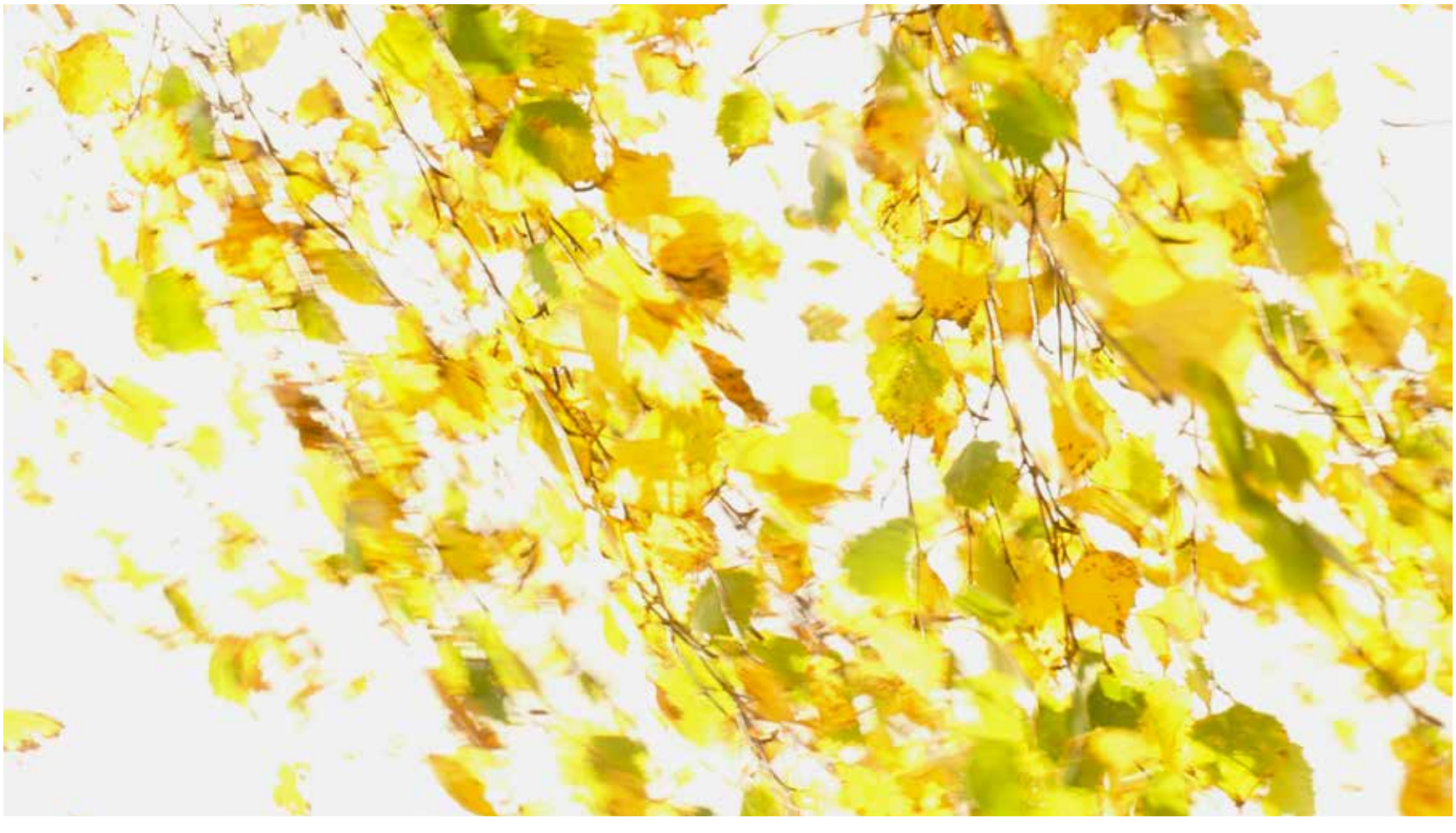
Alternative light
filtered through sea-mist.
A harebell can be
painfully azure.

Sea-Mist Gives Way

62 North. Spring´s always late
with its green haze of new birch leaves.

Autobiography

My fiction comes and goes, like birch leaves.



I Had a Northern Body

BY SAI LIUKO

It broke out in hives every spring in places that I'd keep wrapped up to keep the world out: ankles and necks itched and longed for wooly hibernation in the crook of a cave.

I want to suck on pine needles, it said. It never failed to make out the Big Dipper. It never failed to be the big sipper, downing vodka and beer. I had to trick it into champagne. Then I had to trick it out of it.

When I arrived for my exchange year at the Equator, it went haywire. The Singapore sun made its skin bubble, its brain woozy, and yet it refused to pay for the room with the AC. I got tangled up in the dorm sheets and watched the ceiling fan.

Of course we all burnt our shoulders at the beach. Summer all day, every day like a smorgasbord of hopeful thoughts.

I was suddenly an XL, legs stumpy and muscular. Short legs built to preserve heat, I learnt later. After three months, my body craved for cold undercurrents. May, June, July, it counted, it's time to cool down, it said. Three months of this is enough.

It's only March, I said.

It took a while to get so cozy that at nights I put on my fuzzy socks. And still, some invisible tree released pollen unbeknownst to my body. You are allergic, said the nurse. I couldn't believe that this environment had found a new way to reject me. The antihistamines worked, but it was Hongkong that destroyed me.

Hongkong was a mistake because Hongkong in the springtime is like home. I put on a jacket and never got used to the heat again.

When I came back on the second of May, it was snowing in Helsinki, but still not enough. I flew further north and climbed a mountain and the gray of my eyes grew deeper and piercing. Tromsø was a harshness my body knew. Between the mountains there was a valley with snowbanks the size of me. I had to stop the car and touch it.

The night wasn't nightless yet, technically, but close enough. It was a salty haze, forever clinging to my curtains. My body hummed along:

made for mountains. Made for sleet. Made for snow. Itchy Mays. Reluctant to sun. Storing heat. But when I give it lychee and coconut water, it curls up on itself, bloody and soft like the memory itself. ■

People Around The Arctic Circle Talk of Seasons

SAI LIUKO

but of course Finland is like America: a mall in the middle of a field.
Oo-äM-Gee- we call it, most of our language imported
like emotions and gods.

our ancestors: nested under evergreens,
seeing shapes in the woods, like i did
when i climbed the splintered fence of the daycare and ran to
the suburban sliver of woods, the crust of the snow,
crawled under the evergreen, sucked on pine needles.

dragged kicking and screaming back
to civilization, to R.E. classes and
summer camp leaflets.

the smaller spirits forever family secrets.

of course Finland is like America: yielding to whatever white men say.

my ancestors' sons explain:
you don't survive a forest by the
grace of god but the Gulf Stream.

this is why spring is inevitable,
but the bloodline-bones know: every winter the world has ended.

marrow-chill, hoarfrost, all-dusk,
praying for seeds to spill on a
plutonian picture of all things polar and boreal—

then: one weekend in May, fluorescent with birch leaves.

it must have made them—
it must have made me—
drop to their knees, praise—

whoever filled a black lake with warm water.

praise the diving maiden who did not give in until she found mud.
praise holding onto it and bringing it to the surface, so that lakes will hold lands
and we will have worlds.

this is all hearsay, a game of archaic telephone through neuromuscular instincts.
(but whatever I felt in the splinter of woods is not a singular experience)

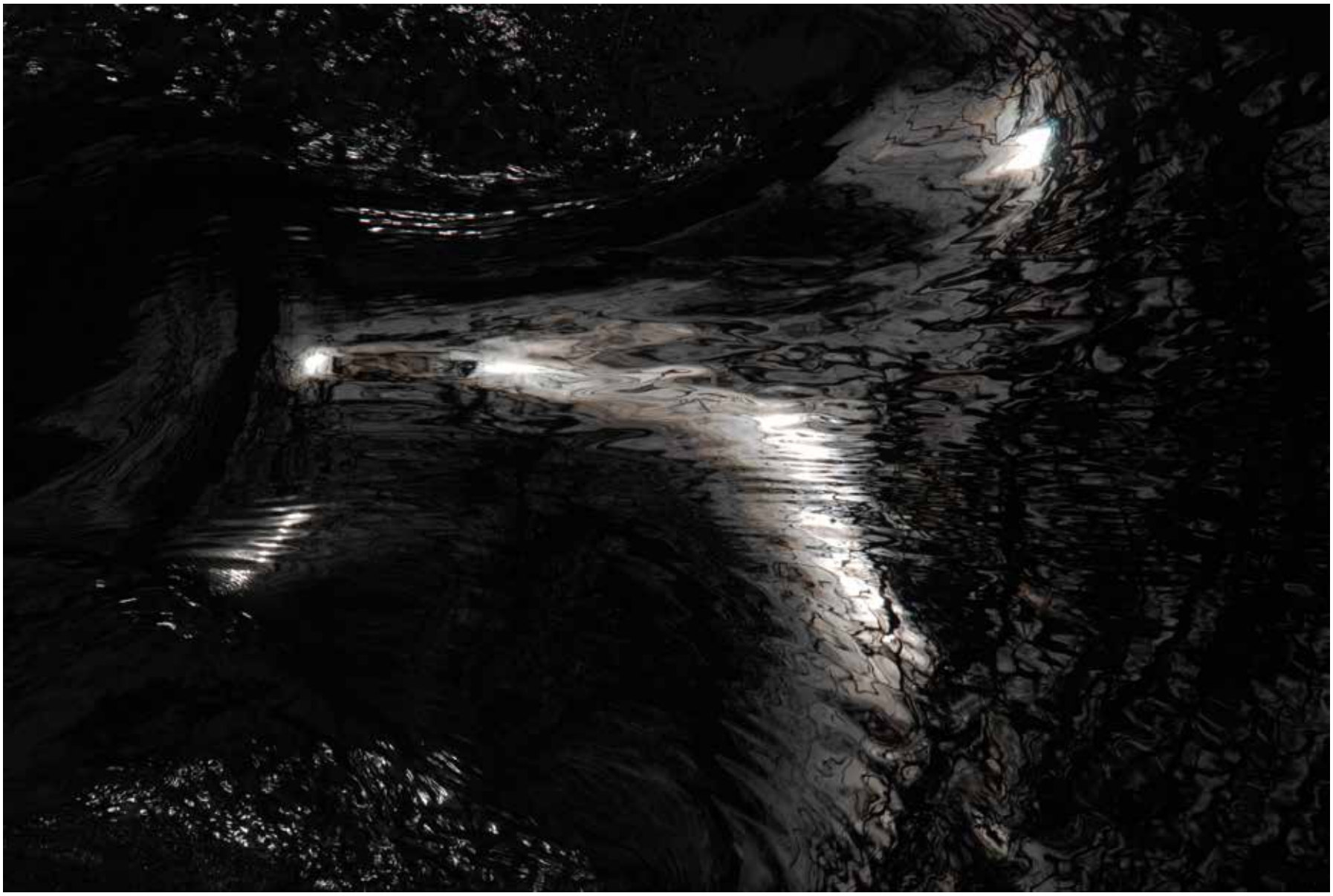
in other stories, the maiden a water fowl,
the goldeneye's cracked eggs oozy moons.

but see what becomes of a temple made of wood, if even that–
(what did you do, scorched and cracked–)

now we have churches on fields and four lanes.
and yet– our mothers swaddle us in our strollers and
we nap outside in subzero conditions.
the cold is good as the gods are good.

and when the only green is the aurorae and
my ancestors' sons say: charged particles,

i shut my mouth of
recycled
atoms.



Viewpoints

Donald Goodbrand Saunders
(from notes and a draft by Kirk Saunders)

Every ten miles
of this *scenic* Highland road
there is a *viewpoint*
where cars dutifully converge and cameras
come out.
There is usually an *interpretative panel*
that names the mountains
and keeps them in place.
Another one pictures
the shy creatures to be spotted
that no-one ever
spots.

I avoid such places.
I sit among trees, well away
from the *woodland walk* which labels them
and wait for creatures
to emerge
within my viewpoint
an ant on a stone, or
a crossbill on the highest pine.

Dark flow. Photo by Kenny Taylor

Across Loch Broom

Donald Goodbrand Saunders
(from notes and a draft by Kirk Saunders)

So many townships like this,
a straggle of white dwellings
signing the track
between brae and sea.

Pinned to the slope
they endure weeks, months
of leaden weather till
the sky clears, the sun shows and they become
a bracelet of shining charms
and I think, Yes
I could live here
For such moments of delight.

Now we are in the cold

Gordon Maclellan

Now we are in the cold
Now we are in the hunting time,
And the wild geese fly in from the north of the world,
Stitching grey clouds to the hills below
With the long, wavering threads of their flight.
Winter waits,
For the silent, cautious deer,
For the birds to settle in the stubble,
for the hungry fox to take a chance.

Now we are in the cold
Now we are in the hunting time,
And the stillness breathes
In the softest voice of the wind,
Whispering between the trunks, under the branches,
Among summer's bones in the echoing wood,
Winter waits,
In the cracked ice,
In the wonder of an oak leaf,
Frosted sharp on the bare ground.

Now we are in the cold,
Now we are in the dark,
And we are hunted by the wildness,
And a bitter wind through the treetops,
And the cold, brittle silence of a snowy night.
And now, winter waits,
For the sigh after the storm,
For the single candle on the window-sill,
For my heart settling quiet beside a midnight hearth.

Superb fairywren
(*Malurus cyaneus*)

Story by Ian Tallach

It's all a-fluster at the Don and Donna show this evening.

There is barely time to blow-dry hair, apply makeup or read the autocues - the countdown has begun.

'Shit, Donna! We're on in 90 seconds.'

'You're joking! OK, deep breaths… smile… show them your teeth...,' she intones, whilst wriggling and pouting seven times, as per the countdown ritual.

'It's alright. You look divine – you blonde bombshell, you - *really* divine.'

'Flattery will get you everywhere, Don. No-where you haven't been, mind.'

'Ha! Don't crack me up. You ready for this?'

'Yeah, good to go. This first guy - another zitty kid gone viral, right?'

Don reflexly clutches at the knot on his tie. 'Ehm, sort of… not exactly, though… want me to do this one, Donna?'

She shakes her head emphatically and takes a deep breath through her nose. 'Na, I've *decided* to feel good today. I'm gonna wing this.'

'YOU BOTH READY?' (This from behind the camera.) *'SHOW STARTS IN TEN!'*

'Donna - I think I'd better...'

'It's OK, Don. I'm all over this. Pitch in if you need to.'

'3 … 2 … 1 …WE'RE LIVE!'

'Good evening humans!' She beams

'Good evening, homo sapiens.' He smiles a little less convincingly.

'Good evening, fellow-sojourners.' She seems to be enjoying herself tonight. 'Our first guest this evening is a man of influence. His unlikely meme, the Superb fairywren, has well and truly broken through - it's become a *massive* hit on social media. At just fourteen, it seems he's influenced a generation. Well, let's see if that's true. Please welcome Farhood Kazar!'

The curtains part to reveal a mixed-race boy in a lime-green tracksuit, blinking in the glare.

'Well, don't be shy – come and sit with us!' She beckons.

He ambles down those well-trodden steps and languorously makes his way in their direction, hands thrust deep in pockets. As he moves, the shadow cast by his abundant hair becomes a huge, near-perfect circle on the wall behind him.

'Welcome, Farhood. Good to have you on the show, tonight.'

He slouches on the couch and stares into the camera, but somehow seems oblivious to everything. *This is not good. Has he taken something?*

Precious seconds of air-time pass. The tension mounts.

'Farhood?'

'Thank you' he says at last, taking in the audience. 'Do you mind if I start by correcting you on three points?'

Donna cringes, wondering how she could have made that many. 'Ehm… yes - please do.' Her smile is, so far, undiminished.

'You're right in saying there's been a lot of social media attention, but Superb fairywren has zero presence there – none whatsoever. There's no website, either.' His voice has an uncanny assurance for one still in the throes of puberty. He continues - 'And secondly, there is no meme. It's the *opposite* of a meme. We exist to crush memes, bust algorithms, act against hardwiring.'

It's astonishing - this kid's vocabulary. Where'd he LEARN these words?!

Donna looks baffled. Don interjects - 'Thank you, Farhood. Just out of curiosity - how have people discovered you? Do you advertise?'

'No - word gets around.'

Don raises one eyebrow. 'And the Superb fairywren… what are you - a movement, a society… a political party?'

'That's for the members to decide. So far, 'Superb fairywren' - without the 'the' - works fine. Describing it more would dilute the idea.' His tuneful drawl is just within the realms of comprehensibility. The accent is unplaceable – London grime meets Sub-Saharan hip-hop, maybe.

Donna has a lightbulb moment - 'You said there were *three* points you wanted to correct me on.' The challenge is thinly disguised.

'Oh, yes - three. My name isn't Farhood. It's Farhod.' Peels of laughter ring out from the audience.

Donna checks her cue-cards and dispenses with the effort to conceal them. 'But Farhod - sorry about your name, by the way - you have *the* most social media attention of anyone under eighteen… worldwide! And you have *nothing* to do with the internet?!'

The audience takes a collective breath.

'That's right.' Farhod smiles. 'People are hungry for reality, flesh and blood, spon-ta-ne-ity… stuff like that.' (*It sounds like he's trying out these words for the first time – and enjoying the taste of them.)* 'My generation's getting tired of algorithms playing us like puppets, like we're nothing more than market targets. If Superb fairywren has brought people together, that's only 'coz it's been a sort of a salvation… for me. Maybe it is for them as well.'

'OK, Farhod.' Donna blinks rapidly. 'I confess I'm a bit lost. Is the Wren a bird?'

'I'm glad you asked about that.' More laughter - it seems he's taken ownership of the whole studio, even if he evidently doesn't care. Perhaps *because* of that. 'OK, so it's like this – I noticed everything I bought for a whole year was in response to advertising on my phone. The algorithms had me by the… tenders.'

Don snorts and pretends to blow his nose. Farhod ignores him.

'I spent morning, noon and night - often *all* night - on my phone. I didn't have any real friendships or relationships - not even with my family. We were all in our own little worlds. I've got cousins in Australia. We went to see them last year. During the journey, my phone died; I almost did as well!'

The audience are leaning forward now.

'I went out for a walk and for the first time EVER noticed that the sand, the sea, the sky, the trees, the hills were beautiful. Can you BELIEVE - a thirteen-year-old who's never noticed any of that?! I'm serious - when all you care about is your next like, your following, your profile, your reviews, life takes a second place.

'Good point, Farhod, but the Wren?' Donna titters nervously.

'Oh, yeah!' he chuckles. 'On the path to the beach, I'm followed by this bird, with a sticky-up tail… like the wrens we have here… but this one has a bright-blue face as well. I'm a bit spooked… because it's not! It doesn't flinch at nothing… just keeps hopping… goes on past like I'm not even there.

'Back at my cousin's place, I asked about it. 'Oh, that's the Superb fairywren, they told me… so I looked it up - that's when the world changed for me. You see, behaviour is hardwired. We are conditioned. De-ter-min-ism, they call it - that's a new word to me.' He looks over at the crowd, who seem to offer in return a warm, united smile. 'BUT, the Superb Fairy Wren sort of gives me hope. See, through millions of years of evolution, the Cuckoo - bastard of a bird…… Am I allowed to swear?'

Don and Donna shrug and turn towards the audience, who nod as one.

Farhod continues - 'The Cuckoo gets much smaller birds to incubate its eggs and rear its chicks. It just buggers off, and watches from a distance. Those tiny birds are hardwired to look after the biggest egg. Their own chicks die. But damned if they don't feed the Cuckoo!'

'So… this is a sort of ironic name for your group?' Don suggests.

'Well, yeah - but not in the way that you think. It's ironic because… this bird has chosen to LEAVE Superb Fairy-land, override it's instincts, face reality. Orni.. ornith..'

'Ornithologists,' Donna offers.

'Yeah, that's it! They tell us that Superb fairywrens have stopped feeding Cuckoos. Instead, they kick them out of their nests and feed their *own* young… acting against their hardwiring. These guys are heroes, man! They've shown us change IS possible… that behaviour doesn't have to be de-ter-mined all the time. Know what I mean?!'

Don runs a hand through his Tucker Carlson quiff. 'So, this Superb fairywren of which you speak - it tells us we don't have to buy things we don't need?'

'Yeah, but much, *much* more than that.'

'You'll have to be quick, Farhod. Our next guest is waiting.'

'OK. People can see the conveyor belt. They want to get off, but don't know how. They might be wired to shrink from life, retreat from love and stuff, play the victim, think they're just another brick in the wall… as in the song. But it doesn't have to be that way. It takes one bird to stop feeding the Cuckoo. It takes just one to say – 'Enough! I'm gonna choose something different.' That's why Superb fairywren is catching on, without the internet. Our hard-wiring isn't us. We want the TRUTH about the world we live in. Lies really STINK, don't they?'

And, with that he smiles apologetically and stands to leave. 'Sorry, I've gone on *way* too long…'

The audience, as well, is on its feet, applauding. He lifts a finger to scratch his forehead. The gesture is an awkward one, with no deliberation or significance, but it is duplicated by them all - each member, young and old, of the assembled crowd. ■

Superb Fairy Wren in Brisbane Australia. Robyn Cockburn. Unsplash.

She has waited for this

Elizabeth Gibson

At night, when the deer run on the old railway bridge,
she steps out of the bedroom mirror, shakes out shards,
straddles the window ledge, feels no cold
against blood-red brick.

She jumps like she thought she would all those nights
she planned for fire, but instead of rolling over and over,
she lands like a cat, stands, palms criss-crossed
with their rivers, dried,

all of her dry now and so warm, and she snake-slips
around the gate, knowing no alarms will scream,
no men will grab. It really is like they said
it would be, years ago.

She dances in the crook of the road, tangles herself
in the scrub on the corner, blue-purple buddleia
flaking in her fist, falling like a spell
over her valleys of body.

The city opens for her, says, do whatever you need,
and she is zooming towards it, faster and faster,
the one light in that tower, she remembers,
and the bats by the river –

she always waited for them to return after the winter,
and now here they all are, squeaking so happily
that the air trembles, like it could split any time,
and you could step through.

Baleen

Elizabeth Gibson

We have been moving since we came into wet,
dark being, we would die if we were still.
Vast as an asteroid, we make noises to communicate
that they call song, but it is simply functional.
The young must learn to obey, carry our echoes first,
a base of bone and meat, before the barnacles
and salt of land stick to their skins.

All sandy, the young flop back, try to bounce
words off us. We turn away, wait until they revert
to rumbling again. They scoff, call us old and broken.
Some years, they'll tell us of a slip, a rumble
fragment, a starfish stretching arms into their speech.
They marvel that they went lifespans not knowing
it is not universal to say this or that, and *how*?

They say they spin a story for their friends, of us.
If only I could be there, hear how they paint
and weave, shape our language into their language,
if I could feel my planet of brain expand for it.
Our origin story in our tongue, and yet in theirs.
How do you find the words? We are suspended,
ancient, flowing like a twin galaxy against your edges.

Pancakes

Olof Samuelsson

A ladle heeds the empty heat of the pan.
The hard sizzle turns soft as the batter crisps,
the edges curling into lips calcified
before they ever could speak.
Hisses bubble through the liquid center,
lifting the pale tarp in jets of steam.
Then one flip and death is even.
Time, now, is all. On the plate
a dull brown, freckled. As sugar flits
and settles on its seared down
and lemon juice sinks into its pores:
the clink of cutlery, the clunk of plates,
the scuttle of feet, the scrape of chairs.
On the counter, ages away, small mounds
of white, islands of flour. It can wait.

Sávdni

Olof Samuelsson

1
The flame curled against the glass of the stove.
It spoke quickly, stuttered words
boiling with the steam of its stones,
an endless panting that became the room
and the life that lived beyond it.
Reindeer and wolf and wolverine and moose.
They pearled on our skin in sweat,
chains of desperation that joined
and spread as we moved. Silent weeping.

An owl flew past the window
and perched on a lobe of snow
and disappeared.

Then breathing was drowning and
the wood was blood and breathing too.
The sky was black, the trees were candles
too cold to light. And there we were singing.
Singing as we stacked more onto the blaze
and singing as we poured more
onto the rocks that crackled and spat
and singing as we whirled our towels
to share the pain.

2
The latch clangs as air fogs from the open door
and we traipse through the snow
with aching feet towards the hole
in the frozen river. And we breathe
passing shrubs like children tucked into sleep.
The water mumbles beneath. Imagine
the ridges that rise under. And breathe

focal emptiness
movement, slowly
hands wring the metal snakes
toes touch the growing tessellation, rippling
sinking shivering shoulders
a floating head in the moonlight
and you breathe your last, descending
as your heart searches
for the pulse of the world.

His father asks how he dreams

Beth Mcdonough

In our son's nocturnal films, can he form words
with ease, find clarity he can't possess in light?
Does he lose the stones which mob his mouth?
Have easy chats with friends? A normal life?
Without support, can he order cake and latte?
Can he make his needs and wishes known,
in another world, untripped by disability?
Perhaps his slumbered dark hours earn
a release from his great stimming cares,
his tensions being just, just what we all share.

After freeing dreams, does he have to rise
to pre-set wires? I feel such shame. I have not
thought about this, running through his nights.
My husband asks. We cannot know. Anything at all.

Spiking the bones of May

Beth Mcdonough

Thrawn as bleaker morning, red
wrinkles deep inside its owned skin,
intensifies the last of haws.

A warning against insistent thorns,
this hard-fisted consistency fights
thaw waters thrashing the muddied firth.

As sky throws ash in what we will not call
a storm, tomorrow is just another tide caught
in the maw between the road bridge struts.

Hawthorn purses shrivelled lips,
reserves next year's news
for better times.

The Win

Story by Alistair Lawrie

The win had haud in aboot the hoose aa nicht, its lang caal fingers fummlin at the locks, shooderin the windas, great dunts o't catchin at his breath an leavin him shiverin in the silence o an instant afore the neist an then the neist, files takkin the haill hoose by its timmers an giein it a gweed shak. It was an aal hoose an aathin intil't creakit, groaned or fuspert wi the win that came hirslin in aawye. Farivver he tried to sit there were draughts that creepit aboot his feet or blew their caal breath aroon his neck. He'd been here nae mair nor twa or three oors an it wis lang ere noo he'd startit in tae winnerin if he'd deen the richt thing by comin here ataa …

Jist fower or so oors syne he'd gotten aff the bus at the last stop doon at the herbour an withoot much thinkin aboot it went stracht owre tae far the aal hoose sat at the start o the pier richt on the sea waa, hingin owre the dunderin, crashin, croonin soun o the sea's lang fecht wi the shore. It wis aa lockit up o coorse. Lang years syne twis his folk had sellt it an noo the National Trust echt it. A museum o fishin life. He lookit ower intil the darkness ahin far the herbour announced its presence wi a hollow duntin as the twa or three cobles at were aa at wis left were rattled files thegither by the heavy swaal. Aye a museum richt eneuch. Iss had been his great granda's hoose, fisher tae the been, like aa his folk afore him. An noo… he turned back to the high crawstep gabled hoose an lookit up at the darkent windas. He'd nivver set fit in the place but his mither files wid spik aboot it an foo muckle she loved bidin there fan she wis a bairn. "Ye aye could hear the sea an on stormy nichts I'd lie cosy in my bed an hear the watter rummlin aboot aneth the hoose far there wis a wee jetty aye there doon by the cellar. I'd faa asleep dreamin o smugglers an pirates. It wis aye excitin tae be there. An granda Pow wid tak ye on his knee an ask, noo quinie faa's een are ee an fit's yer name, for he'd as mony grandchildren he'd lost track o them aa." He could hear his mither's voice. Fit a peety they'd ivver let it be sellt. But that had been Peem. The thocht soored his mood files an he turned as a splyter o weet struck him on the face.

He lookit up abeen the wee hoosies couriet aneth the cliff waa, up tae far here an there a line o scattered lichts showed the hooses on the road up fae the herbour tae the toon. Peem's hoose wis up there. Withoot further adee he steppit across the roch granite slabs o the slip at the herbour's end an crossed ower tae the road gaan up the brae. Despite or files on accoont o the scattert lampposts wi their pools o fuzzy licht the wye up wis fair shroodit in mirk. A shadda himsel he slippit past the first hooses wi their outside steps tae the first fleers an their bleeze o lichted windas, up an on till the row ayont far only a wee trickle o licht peered oot fae a puckle curtains' edges. An up still. The brae, ayewis steep, seemed steeper yet in the darkness.

The hoose sat on its ain at the heid o the road. Hine up on the heuch an abeen the stragglet row o hooses that curved roon up the seawart side o the road. Jist on the ae side. On tither side an for the maist pairt aa the way up, a hillock, aa grown up wi nettles an ill thriven bushes an stuntit trees pokin branches ootower the road, lourt ower its crummlin waa. Exceptin for halfwyes up far a wee bit iron gate shut in some kind o holy well. Saint Fillan's wis't or Drostan's or some like saintly chiel fae lang ago. He crossed ower tae hae a look an peered in the gatherin dark through the railins an hingin briar stems tae far he could jist aboot mak oot a wee fite basin set intil the waa, aa fu o dust, deid leafs an scraps o paper. The hooses ower by were aa smoret wi dark as he crossed back. An seen he wis at the last o them, a patch o darkent scrub atween him an the cliff edge an a win that catcht in his teeth wi caal as he hurried up tae the hoose that loomed aheid, darklins. Peem's. Nae that he wis there ony mair. Jist the last o his dothers, Auntie Rachel. Bein oot o the win in the lee o the hooses as he'd come up the brae, he hadna kent jist foo roch it had gotten. A houlin o win wis ruggin at his claes, styterin him aff his feet. He elbowed his wye aheid till he wun at the hoose but eence there the win if onythin seemed even waar.

Efter the hoose the road turned clear awa fae the sea towards twa or three ill favourt empty lookin cooncil hooses an, ayont at, through the darkness came the loom o a bourrach o well lit bungalows that were the start o the upper toun far the banks an the shoppies an the skweel an the kirk aa couriet couthily awa fae the sea. Here at the corner neist to the hoose hunkert a low dyke o crummlin steen wi an entrance, or gap mair like, that led tae a path alang the tap o the cliff. He peered intil't but the mirk wis as deep ye couldna see mair nor the beginnins o the path an hear the win rustlin and fustlin ower fitivver wis oot there.

He shivert an turned back tae the hoose itsel, tae its gable end waa, settin its blank whitewashed windaless expanse o steen against the wild heuch, its darkness and ragin wins. The door wis kind o a surprise ayewis, richt at the extreme left o the hoose front as if there should be anither hoose efter't, richt neist tae that great blank gable end. It aye lookit oot o place at the edge o sic wildness wi its polished reid sandsteen steps an dark green fower panelled door aneth a queer like star-shaped fanlicht wi a dim glimmer o licht intil't. She maun still be up. A blowter o win near took him clean aff his feet as he chappit at the door. Naethin happened. Nae mair licht. An then efter a whilie a feathery voice wis spierin, "Fa's at?"

"It's me, Rachel."

"Ye've come then. Ye'd best come in."

He'd tae tak haud o the door as it opened for the force o the win near caad it in ontil the aal wife ahin it. Like a skelf she wis, nae mair than a rustlin o claes, grey aa owre like a wee wizent hen. Grey aboot the face anaa. The first thing he noticed wis the foosty smell, age an damp an dust aa inthegither, as strong it jawed oot a muckle wave o't for aa that the win wis near blawin him through the door. Fit licht there wis wis comin fae an opent door at the end o a dark wee lobby, hung aa owre wi picters it wis, ower dark tae see. She took his arm in her thin bony fingers an led him owre the doorsteen an alang tae a door at the richt that opent intil a kind o kitchen sittin room. There wis mair licht here but still gey dim. It wis like walkin intil an aal phota. A muckle high backit ermcheer sat by the fireplace, happit up wi faded cushions. Aside it wis a table wi a puckle framed picters o the sisters. Richt in the middle o the room sat a great hulkit table that micht eence hae been fae a dining room but, for aa that the cloth coverin't wis clean an fite, the table itsel looked aal an scufft an scruffit kind an aneth the cloth wis a muckle stourie brocade coverin, wi tassles hingin doon, at lookit mair like a carpet nor onythin else. Fit licht there wis came fae the ae bulb in a crocheed flooery shade that wis sair in need o aa gweed dustin. The waas aboot hid picters tee bit twis ower mirk tae see them . The fire bleezed awa richt eneuch but he could hear the win roarin doon the lum an rattlin at the damper. Well eesed fire irons sat by the grate and a polished bou-backit hood bent doon ower its tap like some kind o beak. Jist ayont up twa steps an through a heavy curtain that fluffert back an fore wi a draft wis the scullery.

"There's tae brewed. Awa an poor yersel a cuppie."

He pushed the heavy velvet tee, thinkin it wisna jist the smell, it even felt damp an mochie kind. The scullery wis a lang thin room doon the side o the hoose wi a cooker, a sink, a shelf an a cheer an sma table at the far end neist tae the smaest bit winda an the door tae the backie. It wis o cheap hardboard wi a wee rectangle o gless in't that wis rattlin an shakkin as if fit tae burst in. A cup an saucer were waitin for him on the shelf. He near drappit them baith fan the scullery door rattled even louder an fae outside came a rhythmic bangin, an angry regular din like an ill natert bairn.

"The door tae the oothouse's come lowse. Gwa you oot an mak it ticht."

He unsneckit the ootside door an forced himself oot intae the win. The backie stretched the lenth o the hoose but there wis nae mair than fower or five feet fae the waa o the hoose an a great steen ootside dyke sieven or acht feet high, closed in at baith ends, makkin a rectangular, flagsteened space atween the hoose an the cliff edge. He lookit ower at the waa an shivered, an turned awa quick kind. On tither side o that waa there wis naethin, exceptin nae mair nor a foot o crummlin, brickly muild that slopit sharp doon owre the cliff tae the sea an rocks hine ablow. Inside, it wis mair like a closie than a back yard. The only wye intil't wis through the hoose. It felt mair like a win tunnel aenoo an there alang at the hinnermaist end the door tae the ootside lavvie wis bangin open an shut like as tae come aff its hinges.

Keepin his shooder close tae the hoose waa for shelter he hirslet across tae the door, pit it tee and tied some tow ticht roon its sneck. There wis a wee pitch-black space atween the toilet an the ooter waa far it angled in tae meet the hinner end o the watterie. He minded bein feart o that waa an fit lay ahin it fan he was a loon. Eence he'd clum owre't an dreepit doon tae stan, feet slitherin aneth him, on that foot or so o slopin grun abeen the cliff an fan he turned back feart, at first he couldna get his feet tae haud eneuch tae gie him purchase back up the waa an thocht he wis awa for sure. Syne his cousin fit's his name, the een fa'd egged him on tae dee't, leaned owre the waa an gied him a haun up. He'd had nichtmares for weeks aboot that waa. It feared him yet. As did the hoose.

Back in the scullery, he poured mair het water in the cup an pushed past the heavy curtain tae the livin room, pit his cup on the table an sat doon, aye yet tryin tae mind the cousin's name.

"I wisna sure ye'd come." A whisper, nae mair.

"Aye weel I'm nae bidin lang."

"No."

He drunk his tae.

"It wis granda said tae come, that he couldna manage. He wis gettin owre aal. My da said he wisna for haein ony pairt o't."

"No. It's nae bleed o his."

"So fit is't I've tae dee? Aa Granda'd say wis I'd ken fan I got here. I ken it's tae dee wi Peem."

"I dinna ken, loon. He nivver tellt me, jist gaed aff tae thon room …"

"Aye Peem's."

"Naa naa my loon. It's my uncle's room up yon stairs. Peem had the room abeen iss."

"Granda? But …"

"No that's Daavit's room. My uncle Daavit."

"I thocht there wis only twa …"

"Three o them there wis but Daavit … a bonny loonie wi takkin ways but he wisna … jist richt. He wis keepit in the muckle room at the tap o the hoose. For his ain gweed. Peem lookit efter him till he wis teen fae us. Efterhauns your granda came fan twis needed." She sat back a mintie, catchin her breath.

"Is he still up there? He maun be foo aal by noo? Fit needs deein?"

"Maistly jist tae be up there for iss ae nicht. That's aa I ken, aa they ivver tellt me. I nivver ging up there."

"So fit wye does he get lookit efter? Get his meat?"

"He's nae need o that , Daavit's been awa lang years syne."

"So fit …?"

"Ivry few years there comes a nicht. Peem aye kent fan twis aye your granda tee. An they've tae spend the nicht up there. It wis as if the hoose kent."

"Fit wye could I be here as a loon an nae ken naethin aboot iss? I've nivver liked iss hoose mind. There wis aye something aboot it…"

"We kept you clear o't. Your mither saw tae that. I dinna ken if the hoose has ivver likit you."

"Weel I'm here noo. I'd better tak a look tae see fit's fit. We'll spik the morn."

She jist noddit, stood up shakky kind an went ower tae the door. Syne turned.

"Jist mak sure you bide inaboot at room till mornin."

"Fit wye would I nae?"

But she wis awa ben intae her room. He sat on for a whilie starin at the dyin ashes in the grate, listenin tae the win howlin an the bullerin o the sea afore giein himself a shak, risin, an lichtin a cannle, gaan oot intae the lobby.

Cannel in hand, he crossed the lobby tae the fit o stairs, past the wee room far she'd be beddit. Shaddas jostlit an joukit wi een another aheid o him as he gaed up. An up, the steps ilk een creakin aneth his feet as the haill hoose shook an shiddert in the win's grip. The first landin wis darker still, picters on the waas peered oot at him as he went alang tae far a cheap panelled door opent on til the steers tae the attic. He unlockit it an turned his heid awa at the smoran stink o damp at met him. The steers were narra an his feet lood an dunderin on the widden steps. The door at the tap wis a muckle solid lookin affair that didna sit richt wi the plain linoed steers, the cheap pented waas. It opened easily eneuch an he gaed in. The brass switch for the lichts wis workin but the licht itsel wis dim like aawye else in the hoose. It wis caal an damp tee but thankfully there wisna muckle smell.

A big room it stretchit the full lenth o the hoose, the haill attic space an, for an attic, it had a roof that wisna ower low. A writin table tae his left didna look as if it'd been eesed in years. He set the cannel ontil't but didna blaa it oot for fear the storm interfered wi the electrics. He turned tae the richt far the room stretcht awa tae the sad wee fireplace at the far end wi its teem chimley an its aal gas fire in the grate. A big high backit cheer wis neist till't an in the far richt corner, set intae the waa wis a recess wi a box bed intil't, aa made up an ready, quilt an bedhap turned back. A row o twa or three gas mantle lichts wis still in place doon that same waa, the seawart waa, files on tither were a couple o windas lookin ower tae the street ablow. Nae windas lookit oot at the sea. But he could hear it. Ayewis there, files a laich like angert growl syne at times great waves would sclatter up an crash agin the cliff wi a fury, beatin spittin batterin the cliff ahin the hoose like as if tae draw its strenth awa, afore drawin, seepin itsel awa like breath through gritted teeth, syne eence mair it growled and grummelt afore eence mair it crashed richt back again. An then again. There wis an illkindetness, an illwill aboot its roarin voice he thocht as if it wanted him awa. Or wis't the hoose it didna like?

He pit his jaiket owre a cheer by the bed and switched on a wee electric fire aside the fireplace. A single bar gave oot a wabbit glim o licht an hardly ony heat. Fit aboot the bed? He pit his hand aneth the bedclaes tae feel for damp an felt something roch kind atween his fingers so hault the covers back tae find the bed wis clartit wi wee white wormies, weevil like things. Een stuck on his finger an curlt itsel aboot on its tip. Wi a grue he shook it aff an pulled the covers back ower. Far would he sleep? It'd hae tae be the big cheer. It lookit comfy eneuch but his scunner at the bed gart him check the cushions, doon its sides, aa ower in fact afore he settlet intil't an hault his coat aboot him , coverin himself as best he could tae keep awa the drauchts. He winnert if he wis richt tae come ataa …

… Ootside the win cam blatterin against the winda wi anither scudder o rain. An anither. Een efter tither like a kind o rhythm, a pulse. Efter a whilie the coat startit tae het up wi his body heat an fit wi that an feelin safe an bieldit fae the howlin ragin win that ruggit at the reef abeen his heid he began tae dover …

Syne waakent wi a kind o wee lowp. Nae avaa still sleepy but wide waukent. Aa at eence, his hert beatin quick kind. Aathin still an quaet, nae a breath o win. The room wis near pitch black aa but the glint o the cannel still lichtit on the table at the far end o the room. The power maun hae been cut by the storm wis aa he thocht but, even as he thocht it, as he peered intil the mirk a queerlike greenie lowe flickered, stirred an seepit its way through the darkness till the haill room had an eerie glow but aye wi that queer green loom till't that flickert an gart aathin seem like it wis aneth water. It took a minute afore he kent jist fit wis wrang wi't.

It wis comin fae the gas mantles on the waa. Ilk een wis alowe, ableeze wi that muggie licht. It wisna as much a licht files as that the dark itsel had turned visible. An yet ower by the bed a bit o darkness bid on, an ingatherin o shaddas. A wisp nae mair but as he watchit close it growed an spreid an boukit itsel oot intiil somethin like a shape. A tendril o that mirk startit tae stretch itsel oot lang an thin til fit … wis't like a haun wis at a finger .. a finger or a haun that caad him ower … an …

… an as it did the win rose up eence mair.

The haill room seemed tae shak an flichter, like as if it wisna aa there at eence or that aathin wis there aa at the same time or like bits o't were comin an gaan; as if twis at odds wi itsel aboot far it wis aye an fan it wis; he seemed tae see folk an then they were awa an the furnitur wis ae thing neist anither aathin wis aye changing; faces bits o folk appeart - his granda, fit he took for Peem, anither man wi impty een that lookit like the cousin fa's name he couldna mind, himself as a wee loon, his cousin - but in aneth it aa the room wis still jist as he fund it, like it wis a screen on which thae picters passed. An aa the time there wis a dirlin in his heid an a ringin hissin kind o soun that mixed in wi the hirslin o the win like angry breath. The win wis in the room wis in his heid, aathin wis blawin skyterin an fleerin nae findin rest an somethin there wis that wisna richt that wis … He kent he note tae bide but couldna. The door hung open like an invitation, an escape. An even files he took it he kent it wisna richt but on he stumbled clattered near trippin owre hasty in his rush tae get awa tae get doon the steers syne there he wis at the door o Rachel's room ower frichtened files tae knock an in he tummelt tae find there wis naethin there. Nae jist nae furnitur or an impty room, nae room wis there ataa, jist a swirlin kind o greyish haar … exceptin for the waa, that ootside backie waa that feart him as a bairn its great grey mass noo higher than he mindit on an ilka time he lookit it wis nearer yet till that it wis in his face as close at haun he verra near could feel its roch cement steen blocks against his lips an feel Oh crummlin aneth his slippin feet the shilpit muildy slope. Ootside the waa. He wis. Oh Lord The win startit intil ruggin at his claes as he lookit up for a haun that wisna there. ■

Charcoal, pen and pencil drawing by Julia Mary Lawrie

Sheila Templeton:
a personal appreciation

Abridged from a piece first published on the blog for Pushing Out The Boat by POTB team member and fellow poet, JUDITH TAYLOR

Sheila was born in Aberdeenshire: her father was a farm-worker who later became a railwayman, and this took the family furth of the Shire and indeed furth of Scotland, when he took a job with East African Railways in Tanzania. She came back to Scotland to complete her education and went on to a career in secondary school teaching (her stage-presence was honed on tough audiences), but like many women of her generation, her own creative work had to wait for the demands of job and family to diminish – as she put it, "early retirement and a headlong dive into scribbling".

From her first pamphlet, *Slow Road Home* (Makar Press 2004) to her most recent collection *Clyack* (Red Squirrel 2021), taking in collaborations like the *Writing the Asylum* project, and the two tri-lingual pamphlets she, AC Clarke, and Maggie Rabatski published with Tapsalteerie (*Owersettin*, 2016 and *Drochaid*, 2019), her work attracted justified praise: she appeared on many prize shortlists, and won the McCash Scots poetry prize so often that if it had been a trophy like the World Cup, she would have got to keep it.

Her last-published book, *Norlan Lichts*, produced jointly with Sheena Blackhall and Lesley Benzie (Rymour Books), was for many – myself included – one of the poetry events of 2022. She was generous too with her time and advice, acting as a Scots/Doric consultant for Poetry Scotland magazine and commenting wisely and helpfully on the work of poets – again, like myself – writing less surely in Scots.

Sheila wrote in both Scots and English. Her poetry in both languages is lyrical, accessible, and filled with a clear-eyed understanding that responds to its subjects with unsentimental human sympathy. Her poem 'Living Room' / 'Leevin Room', about the bombardment of Gaza in 2009, has been much on my mind this winter, and I remember how passionately she read it at Callander in 2013:

> And so he dances, this father, this citizen of Gaza, / smiling at his girl, making funny faces, breathing /love into a space full of brokenness and fear, /reminding us exactly how war is waged among the weary. /the innocent, in broken houses, the once living rooms.

And for the *Scotia Extremis* project (Luath 2019), when many of us were choosing famous monuments or spectacular scenery, she chose James Keir Hardie as her subject:

> Nae for you the cauld analysis, the lang-nebbit theory o the dialectic / settin the warld tae richts. Aa yer gumption, yer scrievin, yer wirds / cam fae life, fae a day's lang darg, fae the hard tyauve o yer hauns / burnt intae muscle memory

Though for most of her writing career she was living first in Ayrshire and then in Glasgow, her Scots poetry kept faith with her Doric roots. And although she explored those roots in poems like 'Cottar Wife' or 'The Clyack Shafe', or the English 'Priming the Pump', she was not one to let her mother-tongue fade into nostalgia, using it as she used English for any and all subjects, from a sunbather on Glasgow Green, to the paintings of Whistler, to the mysterious celestial object Oumuamua.

She had, too, a wicked and subversive sense of humour that glints out in poems like 'Dumfoonert', where a group of adolescents enter a fairground booth and encounter Estelle the Tassel Swinger ("*Whit wye is she able tae dee that?"*), or her appreciation of Captain Picard from *Star Trek*. The two poems from her that we were lucky enough to publish in *Pushing Out the Boat* 15 (and which later appeared in *Clyack*) capture these different aspects of her work: The Iceberg That Sank The Titanic, a sly telling of a grandfather's possibly-tall tale; and 'Unn the Deep Thochted', an exploration of the character of a woman in the Laxdaela Saga who takes her family to Iceland to escape the feuds and wars that have cut them down:

> Naebody iver sang aboot my byowty.
> Naebody / iver spak o my bonnie face.
> My ain faither / niver caad me his bonnie quine. But he gied me / a byordnar gift at my kirsenin – Unn the Deep Thochted / he kythed me. And that's been mair eese than byowty, / that's been shinin siller in the kist o ma life.

I couldn't make it to Glasgow for her funeral, but I was glad to hear that those who could carried out her wishes in the poem 'Living Will', belting out the hymns she loved as a worthy sendoff:

> Don't even think of sitting quietly.
> I want you on your feet. I want to go hearing you singing.
> Make a big noise.

The Screech

Alistair Hamilton

Ah pulled oot a side street tae a main thoroughfare,
We both hit the brakes, nivir kent ye were there,
By a busy wee bakers doin' guid lunchtime trade,
Whaur a stupid big builder left his van in the way.

Ah'd hae stopped if ah seen you, but couldnae fur the van,
Ah'd hae gaun even slower cos ah dinnae want a prang,
But we both hit the brakes an' a screech filled the air,
An we stopped really close, the proverbial ba' hair.

People stopped walking tae see the melee,
The sicht o' a cop car crashing intae me,
Then shrugged when the sound of bent metal nivir came,
It was only a close un, so they carried oan hame.

You eyeballed me, through your windscreen o' glass,
Ah smiled and ah waved, hoping you wid pass,
But ye hit your flashers and stepped oot- six fit three,
Pulled oan yir cap, cam an' towered ower me.

Ye leaned oan ma roof and ma window went bizzzz,
When ah saw aw them stripes ah went into a tizz,
"Are ye awright?" ye asked, "cos that wan was close",
I wis just shook up and ah had banged ma nose.

Why dae we value cars like they're gold?
A wee daft prang's nae a lot, truth be told,
Is it pride that oor car is an unblemished temple?
Or that the cost of repairs is just sae bloody mental?

"Alastair!", ye said, "fae the chippy doon the street?
Ah come tae buy twa suppers each Friday night?
Go oan yir way, ye seem like yir fine,
An' ah've a builder tae ticket, cos that's a yella line!"

So I went oan ma way- in only third gear,
Shakin' an' sweatin' an' driving wi' fear,
Like another car would leap from any wee alley,
An maybe this time, they widnae be pally.

Cars dinnae matter if they are Merc, Jag or Bentley,
Its people that mak' life rub along gently,
A copper who had me bang tae ma rights,
Let it pass sae he got his tea oan Friday nights.

The Wasp

Alistair Hamilton

Ma big dug
Tried tae eat a wasp,
It went in his mooth, stung him oan the cheek
His heid swellt up like a fitba'

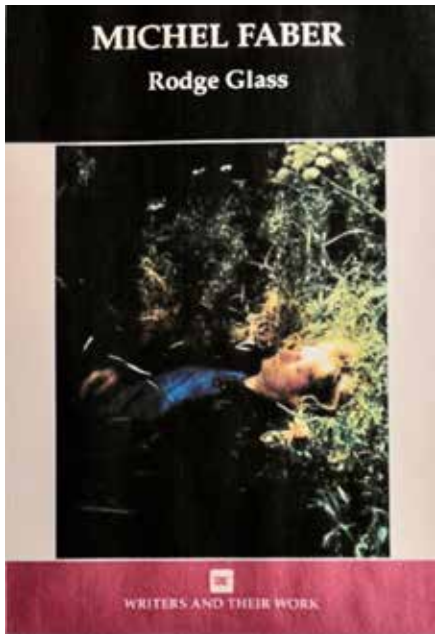
An the best bit is
he spat the wasp oot
An it floo awa

Sometimes, it's guid tae see the wee man win.

Rodge Glass on Michel Faber

Interview by Cynthia Rogerson

Michel Faber and his then girlfriend Eva Youren left Melbourne to live in Easter Ross-shire in 1993. They settled on Tarbet farm near Portmahomack with Eva's two sons. In 1996 Michel, who'd always written but never submitted, started winning competitions. The rest is history. Michel is now one considered an international literary star. Professor Rodge Glass of Glasgow University has written a fascinating book about Michel as part of the *Writers and their Work* series.



Rodge, how would you describe this biography? Primarily an academic look at his texts? Or how personal events impact on/rise out of the writing process? Or?

The focus of the book is mostly on the work – as I think the work deserves more time and detailed attention than it has had so far. This is the first full book that looks right across Faber's oeuvre. For any writer there is always an element of the life impacting on the work, and I do concentrate on some important practical elements – Michel's move from The Hague to Australia, for example, then his move to Scotland, and the ways in which he first got those crucial early breakthroughs. The way he reacted against his upbringing. His partner of 26 years Eva is critical to the story too, both as an editor and also as the subject of *Undying* – so there's bound to be some crossover, as the work invites that. But what fascinated me most was the common threads between Michel's various works, and I think my main contribution here is to interrogate that connection. Though I am determined to be rigorous and careful, I don't write in an 'academic' way. I try to use simple, clear language, and get to any potential readers who might be interested in the topic.

Who do you envision as your audience? English Lit students? General public?

Good question! My answer might have been different a few months ago, but I can already see the work is getting a broader readership than I expected. This book is part of a series called *Writers & Their Work*, which has been running since 1955. Most of the writers who get a book in the series are safely long dead! And some are canonical. There are recent exceptions – Alice Munro, Kazuo Ishiguro, one on Don Peterson's work – but largely the idea of the series was to act as an introduction to students and fans of the work, across maybe English Lit students and some members of the curious public. My approach is quite different. Including the writer in the conversation. Including unpublished works, primary research, archive access, all that. Mine isn't a skip through the research that's already out there, rather it's a case for Faber's stories as having a clear emotional territory, a clear compassionate approach, drawing on unseen sources for that. At the Edinburgh Festival, Michel's fans came out in droves for an event discussing this book, showing me there are fans of his who are genuinely curious about how the work is made and what its legacy is. I've been doing book festivals recently and some media as well. Even the reviews we've had have gone way beyond what I'd expect for a wee book like this, and none of the interviews have even touched on how Michel's work is studied. It's all about the enduring value of the work, and what it's made up of. In Scotland in particular, though internationally too, there's a genuine and wide-ranging interest. So I think I'd say 'General public' after all! That's who the book is for.

When were you first drawn to Faber's work? Why?

The first book of Michel's I read was *The Hundred and Ninety-Nine Steps*, the haunting, multi-genre novel set in Whitby, by the steps of the Abbey. That was over 20 years ago, and then I read everything, some of which I bought from the Waterstone's bookshop I worked in as a student. My interest has grown steadily since then. I think we writers tend to be drawn to other writers who explore elements of experience that we are already looking for, or already interested in. What attracted me to Alasdair Gray's work as a young man was his socially conscious outlook, his generosity of spirit and lack of pomposity or sense of self-importance as a writer. I was already looking for those things in an experienced writer I could learn from, and so it's no coincidence that I ended up writing about him. With Michel, I was coming out an extremely difficult, traumatic period of my life in which I was desperately looking for consolation in storytelling that showed me how we might use compassionate approaches to connect more with each other. Michel has said himself that what interests him is writing about how valiantly human beings search for connection with others, even when that connection is almost or entirely impossible. I needed something to connect with. I was writing a painful memoir at the time this book came along, and I saw an opportunity for Faber's work to selfishly cope with my own life, haha! (I'm half joking here. But not really…)

Faber's style is most often very simple and disarming, not clever or complex – and yet his ideas and characters have the power to engage readers from a wide range of backgrounds, intellectual and easy-readers alike. How would you describe his writing from a literary perspective? From a non-academic perspective? Any difference when you read him simply for pleasure?

Interesting question. It is simple and disarming, you're right. It refuses to look away, even when that would be easier. It's unflinching. It uses simple small words and is soaked in compassion. Even when writing stories about what the consequences of a lack of compassion for others leads to – Under the Skin, for example – what's under the stories is that outlook, which influences the selection of every phrase, every word. That's the closest I can come to describing from a literary perspective, but even that is led by emotion, as for me, reading Faber is an emotional experience. You can enjoy seeing those connections across radically different stories and that's intellectually my idea of fun! You see how he hops genre and form but consistently explores the same issues again and again, in different ways. But the emotional comes first for me. It also does for him, in the writing process. He starts not with a character, structure or genre, but rather starts with the emotional impact he wants to have on readers, then makes all his other decisions after that one. Very uncommon.

Do you feel living at Tarbet influenced his writing? Living in Scotland in general? If so, how?

Living in Scotland was crucial to Michel publishing at all. He had been writing furiously for 20 years and more before even arriving here, but just did so for himself – for 'the God of literature'. It was his partner Eva who persuaded him to let that go and just *try*. To think of readers, too. He won three writing competitions in Scotland, was picked up by Canongate Books. He won awards as a Scottish writer 'by formation' and has often been included, quite rightly, I think. We contribute to the places where we are, as long as we're there. Nothing about being born elsewhere or leaving for elsewhere should stop this, in my view. I could write a very long answer here! But also clearly Tarrel Farm where he lived in the 90s was crucial as it became the haunting Ablack Farm in Under the Skin. And his life in the years living in Fearn Station House that were the crucial years of his breakthrough success. None of which would have happened if Eva had not supported him to give up working in the nearby old folks home as a nurse and give his writing a go.

Faber (Australian, Dutch, Scottish) describes himself as a having no nationality. Do you think his diverse identity feeds into his writing?

Yes. I think he's truly transnational, though I'm not keen on that particular word. It just means you have been made by different places. But so much of his fiction in particular is about outsider 'aliens' who arrive in a place that seems impossible to live in, though the protagonist must try. Faber did this several times in his own life. He appeared at an Australian primary school with not a word of English as a seven year old. These things make a difference to your outlook on the world. Which then influences the stories you tell.

The blurb at the start of your book is from Faber, describing the essential tragedy of everyone seeing themselves as odd….a paradox. He mentions commonality and specialness. His books almost always have a main character who feels alienated, the odd one out – is he saying that this sense of isolation is a delusional vanity? Do you agree that everyone feels equally weird, but is in fact normal because we all feel weird? How does this theory play out in his work?

No, I don't think alienation or sense of isolation is a delusional vanity, in Faber's view. Rather, he's saying, this is how we feel, and that feeling is real – and yet, and yet! We all have so much in common! Storytelling is a reminder that opposites, or seeming opposites, can exist at the

same time. Yes, we are all unique outsiders. Yes, none of us are typical. But yes, we still have things in common. What I love about Michel's work is his insistence on looking for that commonality. We spend far too much time categorising ourselves as separate from each other as human beings. Identity is essential and undeniable. It has a huge impact on who we are, what we experience, what we see, on our privilege or otherwise. But it's not everything. Michel's work forces us to look for what we have in common with each other. I'm as soft as a marshmallow, so that kind of thing appeals to me. But the work is not soft at all.

Overall, what do you think Faber's work contributes to the canon of Scottish literature?

I think it's a huge contribution. I think his finest short stories and novels written here should be seen not exclusively in a Scottish context, but can contribute to our understanding of Scottish literature in an open-minded way. Michel was the first non-Scottish-born writer to win the Saltire for Fiction, and that has now become commonplace, as we are generally more open than we used to be in terms of categorising writers by their nationality. Michel is integral to the story of Scottish literature from the early 1990s to 2016 when he left Scotland – and that work lives on, no matter where he sleeps at night. *Under the Skin* alone is a huge contribution to the literature (and landscape) of Scotland, I think. In my view it's one of the finest Scottish novels of the last half century or so. And there have been a lot of good ones! ■

Michel Faber – Writers and their Work – by Rodge Glass, published by Liverpool University Press (2023) is currently available in hardback for £26.40 from the publisher

After parting

Cáit O'Neill McCullagh

Show me how it is to be the moon,
when the lift pegs up her patchwork
of merk; uncolour, lenticular drift.

Let me be the lanterned face of night.
Wash day's dimming upon me in the pitch-
livid lochan of a ben. Maroon me—

pitied light—the jettit caul of forgetting.
Keep me from lucence; from minding
on the swallow's spree. Fledged;

four-point stars, sootit motes.
They swoop us, entrust the plump honesty
of their milky bellies to our mercy, dance

the roilit barley, teach us to love the sky;
to know that it is gravity that makes a body,
claims it from the watered air. Arrow-tails,

they pierce us. Last generosity of summer,
to crave the agility of clouds & after
after & soon 'wing' & 'flit'

these become our loneliest words.
Remember this: when I ask you
to tell how a frayit ebb might

heal—do not show me a bird.
Rather, set a dark halo about this skin;
(itself, the long-waned memory of feathers)

then, show me: how it is to be the moon.

The Uncertainty of the Moss

(with four words from 'Antony and Cleopatra')
Lydia Harris

earth draws the moss into the dark
and out the far side but that's not it

the moon over the moss sits
in the whaup's beak but that's not it

the moss knows the tilt of the ditch
each clump of its own body

it shivers the cotton grass heads
rattles the sedges shines the kingcups

the moss traces the gorse
lighting up the night

clouds slide smudge and blur the moss
there or not there the spider hurries

the bee eye-level writes lines erases them the lark
raises banners of song stirs the standing water

but oh that's not it

White Moss, Westray

Lydia Harris

the individual thus becoming, it has been said, in a
manner immortal
(British Mosses Edward Fry 1892)

let her baptise you
quench you with new wine

she bears cells like tears

by day she abandons her moorings
keeps pace with the rise of water

at her own extreme point:
these foldings over

something more to see
before words and the rain

she resists, she allows
at her heart a grove of pines
gnarled as old pram frames

she is yellow, she is approaching red
with green fringes and fingers

plunge further in
than you've ever been
more hidden than seen

Moss: Scots: a bog, marsh, mire

Spoon feeding

Tom Bryan
(For my wife Lis 1948-2021)

Spoon feeding is a sacred act,
like healing or washing of the feet.
Open? Open wider? That's it! Please?

You swallow slowly,
the way ancient tortoises eat,
your brown eyes fixing on me,
like a child's at the breast..

I try not to think what might come next:
(nutrition by nose tubes or stomach pegs?)

You clench your lips,
shake your head *No, no more…*
(not just food
but no more of *anything…*
no more of *this*...)

I put the spoon down
ending our vital dance,
your lowered eyes open
to intimate loneliness.

Funeral Blues 2

Lis Lee

When I die, don't sing the usual church tunes,
Want to know what I'd choose?
Please, please, at my funeral
Play me the blues.

Yes, I know I won't be here then
To hear that irresistible beat,
Tap to a 12-bar
With my dead feet.

Hear slide guitar with my deaf ears,
Feel rhythm in my still heart,
But *you* will, so please,
It's the blues as I depart.
At my funeral, play me the blues.

(*Note from Tom Bryan*: We did play blues for Lis at her funeral in Melrose, 15 October 2021. The title refers to W.H. Auden's poem Funeral Blues. I found this poem in her final papers)

Discovering a new voice:

Thoughts from Jim Mackintosh on *Remembering Myself* by Donna Matthew
Seahorse Publications (2024) £10

We gather in the cafes, the jumble of back rooms or the occasional overly harsh spotlight in search of the tentative touchdown of truth where it co-exists with the rest of our family of wanderings. We gather to hear the simple but sincere outpourings of those who would be called poets. Sometimes we are obliged to grip the edge of the table, plant our hearts a little firmer and then inhale a precious moment, luminous and profound enough to revive our cynical exhaustion – the search for raw connection and artistic truth that are out there yet to be found: incorruptible melodic energies shaped by a life lived through their own wanderings. Occasionally we find something worthy of the gatherings, a salvation for the hours and miles and in that discovery we find the essence of learned structure and crafted spirit to make it all worthwhile.

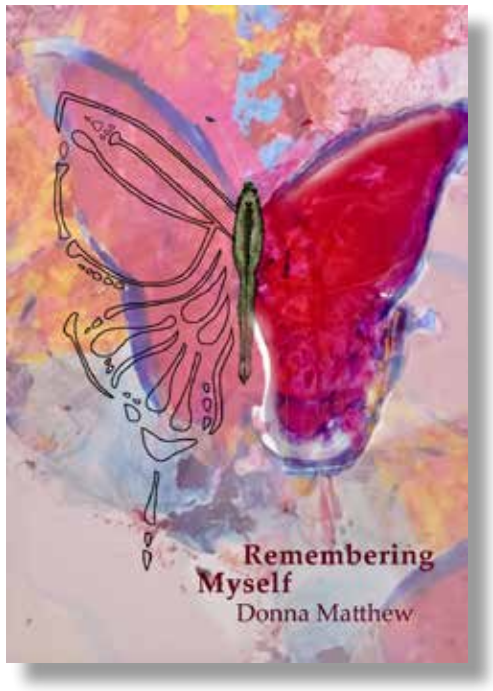
In Donna Matthew I found this to be worth the journey.

I knew from the moment I watched her reach out to the audience one sunny afternoon in Stonehaven this was a poet of essence. This was a voice honestly sharing her story and hungry for air and for sunlight willing to welcome her presence with a light film of acceptance. One she humbly yet assuredly embraced.

Many people will brave the naked darkness in front of strangers with eyes closed, hearts open and their words offered for sacrifice in the void between microphone and the dust of previous offerings in the gloom at the edge of the stage. This was not that. This was one of those moments when I knew I was listening to a poet who had found her way. The rhythm of her words, not just the passion of her delivery but the individual pace and choice of words.

This was a moment I had found a new poet. Not that she was lost – maybe she was in some sense if the subsequent title of her first book of poems was anything to go by. I hadn't been the only person to take note of Matthew's poetry, and it wasn't long before I learned that Linda Jackson of Seahorse Publications had also connected with the poetry. The result of this new partnership would be *Remembering Myself,* a collection described on its rear cover by another fine poet, Victoria McNulty, as '*a respectful ode to change with dignity in its pages'*. I would later understand this praise when I read the book for myself.

To begin *Remembering Myself* there is a short piece entitled *For Blanche* which provides clues to the journey Matthew would take us on in this collection. The process of metamorphosis – the transformation from immature to adult form in nature but also in ourselves the



process of discovery, the transformation of one life to another, the realisation that the one we have become is not always *the* one and that perhaps the true self has been there all the time. It's just remembering where you left it. It is, however, the next poem in the collection, *Beginnings*, which provides the pivotal moment in the story.

I must confess to cringing when I am offered another book of self discovery from someone who in later life has found the means to commit their life to paper. It rarely works as a book of any depth but by the time I got to the end of the poem *Beginnings* I realised this was not one of those confessional trudges. This was crafted poetry yet still had the necessary elements of raw honesty and integrity to her story. It takes a great deal of courage to write '*As I held in every breath because I don't love my husband anymore. There I said it.'* yet I found myself, although with a sense of deep-rooted Scottish presbyterian intrusion nodding and muttering rather inappropriately: 'Damn right! You go girl!'. It's a pivotal moment so early in the narrative but all the better for it. '*To fill my chest and spoke my poetry'* and to allow the poems that follow the stoked sadness of *Primary,* the tender beauty of *Her Hands* and after *Lifelines* to literally run down the street shouting 'I'm not going back. This is me. This my story.' As Matthew says in closing the latter, '*So, I can sit there writing poems in my plush wee Georgian home. Owning all my truth and journey fae a single parent hoose'*.

I must confess. Again! At this point in the book, I went and put the kettle on. Again! Jings, I needed a mug of tea and a reload of biscuits. I sensed the pace and rhythm would remain, the craft constant but the direction would change. It did. The poems that followed the pivot were still in themselves recollections, yet they were told in a different way – with a clean hanky offered to a pal in the telling. So we sat together and read the weathered memories of *The Tree,* the hushed grief of *The End,* the stark *Seven (*still makes me angry on her behalf), the powerful brevity of *Regret* and the pulling together of past experiences, of our common learnings and inherited traumas in *No Ceremony.* I was running low on biscuits, the tea long gone as Matthew paused to reflect at the end of this poem – '*We are hewn from generations born to plane away someone else's regret. That's an inheritance we can't outrun.'*.

And there it was. One of the most important elements of a poet's efforts to engage with the reader. The ability to connect through shared experiences. To have the reader find common ground. To silently nod in solidarity with the story and to place the author's world into one's own narrative. Poems should be in my opinion, and certainly are in Matthew's writings, ways of speaking truth. It was Ezra Pound (probably) or perhaps it was me who described poems as 'words loaded with meaning'. Either way, Matthew's work is loaded with considerable worth yet sensibly sparse in over-sentimentality. Confessional poetry is important especially to the writer but can be lost on the reader very quickly.

I had run out of biscuits and the book was only a quarter read. That's a good thing and as I turned the page to *When Nietzsche Gret* it was clear the momentum was about to change. There would still be measurable truths but sparing in the use of inflated sentiment. I sensed a fresh pencil and the rolling up of sleeves. A poet at work now balancing emotion with rational thought yet I also knew if Nietzsche was in play then tea was never going to be sufficient. This needed wine.

It's a rare thing for me to read a book of poems in one sitting. Perhaps it's just me? – indeed Matthew answers that question in her poem *Self-Possessed – 'You can rest assured, Sweetheart it probably is'* although I'm not sure many poets would expect that of their readers. So with that in mind, I put the book down until the wine chilled and I could brace myself for the inevitable resurfacing from my own shelved past of Apollonian and Dionysian philosophical discourse capable of turning the finest wines into vinegar.

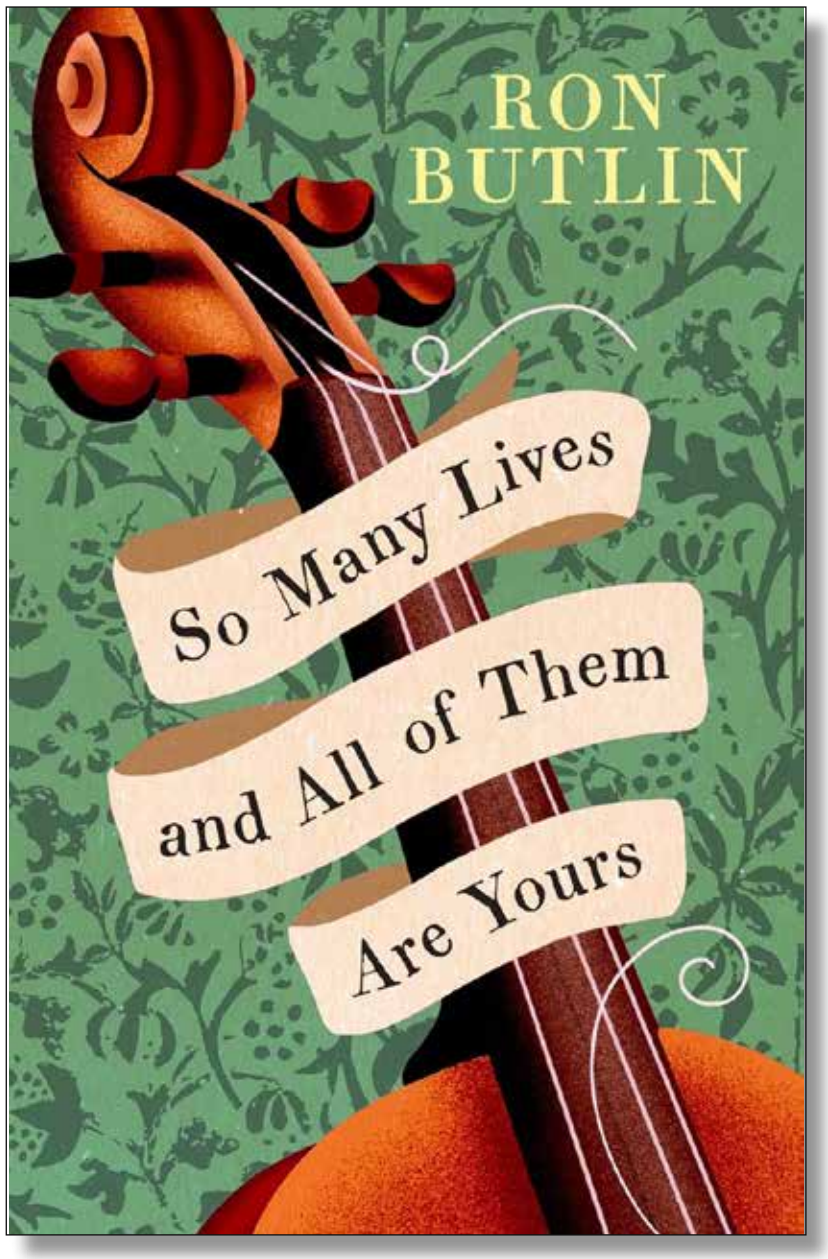
Armed with my Sauvignon shield, I continued with trepidation. The reference in poetry to the Gods and their superior adventures doesn't always work for me unless there's a huge slice of humour on the side, but in fairness Matthew's brief dip into this world works just fine in *When Nietzsche Gret*. It's a good poem in a style reminiscent of Joelle Taylor's - no bad thing - but also a Notice of Intention. A resetting of the story to allow her to move forward and it does this with purpose into the next poem *Fuck the Id*. I have said the same thing many, many times but perhaps not with as much juice telling the itching Id on my back '*to eff off with a poetic rhyme'*.

From here the collection truly finds its footing and confidence in the blank spaces on each page to join the poet '*cross-legged, surrounded by poems all keen as offspring'* and share the weave of words and newly released energy of a poet recognising their value. The subject matters are varied from here onwards, yet they retain a through-going rhythm and a keen eye for detail without burdening the reader with spurious vocabulary just for the sake of it. There is emotional significance in the poems, yet they leave enough space for the reader to understand they have a responsibility to add to the offerings.

It's important for me in reviewing a book that I don't comment on every poem and in doing so leave enough curious intent for the reader to explore the collection for themselves. The second last poem in the book *Words* could arguably have been that last poem. It's a struggle for every poet (and Editor) and there is no perfect answer, but in this poem there is a brief statement '*Now when I hear a pin drop it's followed by applause'*. For Donna Matthew, I hope and indeed I'm confident this will always be the case.

She was perhaps never lost, perhaps yet to be found in herself but through *Remembering Myself* has become a poet. As she writes herself, *'But fear is a cage of the unexamined life'*. Have no fear. You have they key. Unlock the door – you are a poet. ■

So Many Lives and All Of Them Are Yours
Ron Butlin,
Birlinn (2023) hbk £12.00
The Sound of My Voice
Ron Butlin
Birlinn (new pbk edition 2023) £8.99
Review by Ian Stephen



There is a high level of responsibility needed in writing reviews. Over the years I've found this feeling of weight has increased because there are so few forums for in-depth discussion. So I would usually read a book in any genre twice when there is an opportunity for discussion in a forum like this. I've now re-read Ron Butlin's *So Many Lives And All Of Them Yours*, published by Birlinn in 2023 as a compact hardback. That was no duty, as the precision of tone makes a music of language. But it seemed equally important to return to a novel first published by Butlin in 1987 (Canongate) but reissued in several editions and now, in a style to chime with the new novel, by Birlinn .

In a way it is one work. Both books stand alone and both are compulsive reads but they amount to a detailed portrait of the inner life of the central character. The first used the second person to get inside the pretty complex machinations and justifications of the alcoholic executive. Magellan has lost his way. The new novel picks up the strands many years after the breakdown of a marriage. The children have grown and the tentative strands of a relationship are just out of reach as the Covid pandemic reveals itself. The former businessman of biscuits comes to admit that he was sacked rather than making his own decision to follow his suppressed need to compose music, beyond jingles. The point of view differs but the uncanny probing and revelation of a mind at work is equally successful.

The tension which takes complete hold of you comes from needing to know if he can hold it together to hear the music in his head and get it down on the page. I was reminded of the anxiety which came from being mesmerised by Douglas Stuart's character of Agnes in *Shuggy Bain*. There's a bit of that in *Trainspotting* too and I was also reminded of James Kelman's breakthrough novel *How late it was, how late*. The registers are very different, but it seems to me that Butlin has been as precise in his realisation of a mainly middle-class Scots character as these three authors of seminal works with a main focus on working class life in Scotland, of a period.

In *So many Lives*….. Magellan gravitates back to the house he grew up in. There are rumours of a lockdown coming and he holes up in the near derelict shell, feeding floorboards to a fire in the house he has somehow rented from the estate agents who have it up for sale. There are blackouts but also periods where his nerve-ends and especially his hearing return him to the key moments of a childhood with a loving mother and an icy but domineering father. That might sound like the building tension in a Daphne de Maurier story ready to become a Hitchcock masterpiece but the writer who comes to mind is William Trevor. In fact the pitch-perfect tone achieved in both these novels (published with a 36 year gap) brought me back to the huge scope of the Penguin omnibus edition of all the published Trevor collections. It now seems to me that what Butlin and Trevor have in common is an uncanny ability to enter the heads of characters who are often struggling and for whom their past is inextricably linked with their present dilemmas. Occasionally Trevor can verge on satire (maybe a hint of a Somerset Maugham sting-in-the-tail story) and Butlin uses his wit to potent effect when it comes to characters who are cruel, whether they are blood relations or a vindictive laird.

But the mind, trying to find its way forward by reliving what went before, also lodges on the escape from that home to a free and easy squat in London. It seems inevitable that the breakout will give way to conformity. Many of the background tones left in shadow in the previous book are filled out as a man from the next generation again fails to show love to wife and bairns. Yet, in a word, I'd describe the tone you are left with as 'humane'. Echoes of the significance of the haunting melody of 'Neil Gow's Lament To His Second Wife' in Magellan's life confirm this. There is something to build on from his character at last finding the courage to return to the key scenes (very Hitchcock-like). And that is maybe the main development from one book to the other, both sections of a flawed man's life. But the whole experience of reading and re-reading these novels has been positive and rewarding and gripping. This is due to language which never seems 'worked' but amounts to the writer's own sensitive composition. One of the first works of Butlin I read was his short poem on Mozart and that has stayed with me, marvelling at how an artist who produces such a mesmerising surface, seemingly without effort, has also made something fathomless: you will never reach the bottom.

Don't be feared that such an intense subject and such tight focus will be difficult reading. The music will take a hold of you and I'd suggest you can read the new novel first but I'd be surprised if you weren't then desperate to probe further into where this lost navigator came from. ■

A Particular Man
Lesley Glaister
Bloodhound Press (2024) £11.99
Review by Cynthia Rogerson

I've read all of Glaister's novels, which now number 17. They are always a guaranteed good read. Like Helen Dunmore, she manages to combine a poetic style, convincing characters, a gripping plot - and somehow knits these all together into a thrilling page turner. Though *A Particular Man* is not quite like this. Nor can it be summed up as a historical novel or a romance or a book of sexual misadventures, even while all these elements are in it.

It has darkness of course, because no authentic portrayal of human life can avoid a sliver of darkness, but it is the first Glaister I've read which is not also frightening. *A Particular Man* is not the stuff of nightmares, but of something much more profound and moving. At a steady un-melodramatic pace, it delivers a stream of convincing post-war angst and grief, sexual secrets and a multitude of complicated broken hearts.

The book does not portend to sum up the legacy of post-war trauma on prisoners of war and their families back in the UK. Rather, *A Particular Man* is quite literally that: the story of one particular young man, Leonard Starling, who is abundantly not a cliché. He represents no one but himself. A soldier smitten in a socially unacceptable way and drenched with grief - not only because his love was never realised when it could be, but because it can now never be realised. Layers upon layers of bleakness and isolation, and there is not always a sense that Starling's intelligence and sensitivity will prevail. This makes him a riveting character.

The other main character, Aida, is likewise drawn with such quirky and original detail, it seems impossible she is not based on a real person. This, of course, is the victory of a talented writer. Aida's many flaws become endearing, not because she is also pretty and well-meaning, but because often enough she is neither of these things. She lies, she likes impulsive sex, she hates her job, she's a bit funny looking, she smokes and drinks and she despairs of her well-meaning parents.

Perhaps this is a page turner after all. I kept reading, not to see who gets killed or caught, but to see if Starling and Aida find some solace in the world. I worried (and worry still) about them, because they are lovable and vulnerable. The book ends, like all good literary books, raggedly. No tidy resolutions, no sense of final contentment for either character. Luckily for readers, Glaister is writing

a sequel. Aida and Starling will have another airing!

I urge you to buy this book. It adds something important to our understanding of what love is; of what it can (and can't) do. And that is no mean feat. ■

Unconformity
John McLellan
published by John McLellan (2024) £10.99
Review by Katharine Douglas
Ullapool Bookshop Manager

When I heard that Scottish author John McLellan was planning his second novel, after his beautiful debut with *The Faultline*, I waited with anticipation and some trepidation. In *The Faultline* (published in 2022), McLellan did hint that there was more to discover of his characters' journey in life, and I hoped that his second novel would not disappoint. *Spoiler….it did not!*

This is the second book in McLellan's new geology-inspired series, with the novels primarily set amongst the unique area of Torridon and in particular Kinlochewe (where all of *The Faultline* takes place). The title, *Unconformity,* is another geological term, which the writer employs as a metaphor for the novel itself; an interesting concept and one he uses extremely well.

Unconformity is unusual, in that it's set in four parts, over four different summers. I rather enjoyed this. It begins in Chamonix, Swiss Alps, as young people (some of whom appeared in *The Faultline*) reconnect by chance on a Climbing Club Meet one summer. Thereafter, the action returns quickly to the beautiful NW Highlands of Scotland, with a significant part set near Loch Eriboll (the site of a famous geological unconformity on Ben Arnaboll). Then follows a life-changing and poignant section in Assynt (home of some of the oldest rocks in Europe, if not the world), before returning to Kinlochewe, Torridon, where the whole of *The Faultline* was set.

As someone who has never studied geology, but has had a keen amateur interest, I learned a lot through reading this novel and its predecessor. Terms such as 'erratics', 'drumlins', 'faultline' and 'unconformity' are so well described that the novels should appeal to both geologists and those with an amateur interest. It also was fascinating to 'virtually' climb the mighty mountains of Suilven and Quinag. I really felt the trepidation of the journeys and the skills involved. Readers who are walkers will also enjoy these novels; McLellan's landscape descriptions are so vivid and real, you feel transported immediately into the Highland mountains.

Although *Unconformity* includes a lot about friendships, love and finding out who we really are, it is also an homage to the landscape of our wonderful country, as well as to the mountains. In producing two quality novels, John McLellan's writing has made me think of my own life-long connections, both personally and to the land we live in as a nation. The author clearly has a great passion for rocks, landscape, for writing and also for people in general.

The Faultline was launched in 2022 and has become Ullapool Bookshop's best-selling book ever, a fact which has astounded both the author and the bookshop itself. It is still topping our bestseller charts even now, some two years after its launch. I see no reason why *Unconformity* will not follow in its footsteps. ■

More Richly in Earth – A Poet's Search for Mary MacLeod
by Marilyn Bowering
McGill-Queen's University Press (2024) £
Shortlisted for the 2024 Saltire Society Award for non-fiction
Review by Cynthia Rogerson

I first came across Bowering when I read her second novel *Visible Worlds* in 2008, longlisted for the Orange Prize. I've followed her career ever since, enjoying her poetry collections as much as her fiction and essays.

Bowering has written about her current obsession – the 17th century poet Mary MacLeod from Skye. Why was she so haunted by a writer most of the world was happy to forget? It's a little mysterious even to herself, though she can date the interest to a holiday she took in the Hebrides many years ago. One day, with time to kill, her husband wandered one way and she wandered another. She didn't know it at the time, but the place she paused to admire the view and let her thoughts wander happened to be the place Mary where used to live. Was this a kind of visitation? MacLeod's posthumous urge to be in people's consciousness again? Bowering never states anything quite so mystical, and yet there it is - since that moment she began her quest to discover as much as she could about Mary MacLeod.

She tracked down and studied archived documents in the Library of Scotland as well as interviewed literary academics and Gaelic poets. One of the things she discovered is that much of what is known about MacLeod is up for debate. Scholars disagree and contemporary Gaelic poets spout contradictory versions of her life. A woman bard in those days was viewed with suspicion by some and feared by others. It is well documented that Mary herself instructed that she be buried face down – an odd request, given that position is often associated with witch burials.

Because Bowering is a writer with integrity, she never jumps to dramatic or sentimental conclusions. She speculates intuitively and sensitively. Her theories feel well-considered and plausible. In fact, MacLeod came to life for me so convincingly that even now, a month after reading the book, I feel I know her (and like her). In addition, because Bowering is a poet interested in the form, she examines MacLeod's lines in depth – both form and content. She magnifies each word and line and considers numerous meanings. Many chapters contain a MacLeod poem or extract, so the reader can also experience her work.

Against these literary explorations are the Scottish journeys Bowering took with her husband over decades. The place descriptions and the feel of each era – not only in her life, but of society at that time – are exquisitely evoked. I felt nostalgic reading them, even though they weren't my own past journeys. It made me remember how travelling can shake one's preconceptions out of ruts.

But these are not the only treats. Intertwined between Bowering's forensic search for MacLeod clues, her immersion in the poetry and the Scottish road trips, are threads of Bowering's own distant past. In particular, the times she spent as a young child in the company of her grandmother. These passages widen the book considerably, and it becomes about the nature of memory and story-telling in general. Perhaps her curiosity about MacLeod was the impetus to unwind to her own beginnings as a poet. These short memoir chapters are poetic and narrative masterpieces. If there were more of them, they could stand alone in a book about the legacy of Northern European emigration to Canada from a female perspective. In the context of *More Richly in Earth*, they give a deeper context to MacLeod's history, for Bowering is also a woman poet formed by a culture which has historically undervalued, misunderstood or feared creative women. These chapters offer glimpses into the genesis of all stories.

I am not a poet or an academic or a militant feminist or a prolific poetry reader. I'm not even a big fan of non-fiction. Nevertheless I read this book with intense pleasure. It felt like a detective novel in the most aesthetically pleasing sense. I wanted to know more about MacLeod, as well as Bowering.

More Richly in Earth is short, rich and nourishing. I recommend reading it slowly, the way proper Christmas cake should be savoured slowly to enjoy the many layers and nuances. It's too good to race through – you will not want it to end. ■

Caal Cries
Alistair Lawrie
Drunk Muse Press (2023) £8.50
Review by James Robertson

After a lifetime of teaching, encouraging others to read poetry and to write it, Peterhead-born, Stonehaven-settled Alistair Lawrie finally sets out his own stall with this, his first collection. And was it worth the wait? To borrow the last line from *Mysie*, 'Aye, loon, you took your time … at last.'

'Words are what we do,' Lawrie declares in a brief introduction, and he himself does them with passion, wit and craft. There are thirty-eight poems gathered here, the majority in his native Doric, but the shift is smooth between those and the English ones, so strong is the vocal propulsion that drives each poem forward. Take the opening lines of that poem *Mysie*, which, because of its dramatic flow, you hardly notice is in strict iambic pentameters:

> 'I mind the times I stood ootside her hoos,
> my hands cupped roon a steamin bowl o broth
> my granny made for her. 'Tell her it's gaan
> tae waste or ens she'll nivver tak it.' Yet
> again a bairnlike sense o daein richt
> impelled me past the peelin pent that swaalt
> an burst disease like on her door. The stink
> inside o sweat an pish an foost wid catch
> my breath; my hand wid shak a bittie files
> as I peered roon the mirk inside tae see
> far she cwid be.'

'I mind the times…' The memories unfold in hurried sentences just like those the anxious, feart loon himself might have used. Poems such as *Generations* and *Tales of a Grandfather* also look back to older folk with the same mix of wonder and grounded realism:

> 'An aal een an a younger, heids thegither,
> yarnin lachin lang syne in their een,
> the shadda o mortality hingin owre wis aa
> is keepit back a whilie mair by siclike
> dreams.'

Humour lightens the load considerably. There is biting satire in *Twa Newsmen*, which parodies the ballad *The Twa Corbies*, and *Dicht yer ain door steen* is a droll reflection on the tensions between speaking Doric and 'spikkin proper' (sometimes recommended by mothers for social advancement):

> 'I elongated aa ma vowels
> Till that it soonded like ma bowels
> Were comin through ma mooth;
> Aa full o diphthongs broke in twa,
> It wid be sure tae please ma ma;
> I'd soon like folk doon sooth.'

In longer pieces Lawrie really puts his native tongue to work. *A Glenbervie Laird Orders his Memorial* is the kind of monologue Robert Browning might have written had he had the Doric. Elsewhere older writers like Robert Henryson and Homer, whose contemporary relevance Lawrie clearly does not doubt, are referenced. *Sad Captains: Boys to Men*

is a brutal, Iliad-influenced take on the passing of rites of male violence from one generation to the next, while *Mithers* captures the age-old maternal worry for the son no longer a bairn:

'She winners fit he does the nicht
across the warld, aa owre;
is't drink or drugs or some bit lass
keeps him ootowre her door?'

In short, *Caal Cries* is a collection of linguistic brilliance and emotional depth which I expect to draw me back again and again. ■

The 4000 nights of New York in 1988
Peter Urpeth
Peter Urpeth (2022) £4.99 Kindle
Summer / Break
Richie McCaffery,
Shoestring Press (2022) £10
(*see also* **Passport**, Richie McCaffery, Nine Arches Press (2018)
Review By Ian Stephen

Let's do the disclaimer first. One of these poets lives in the same village as me and we've worked together a few times when he has had his musician's hat on. The other has reviewed one of my books and I've also reviewed a previous one of his. On the other hand I've also shared a poetry reading with Andrew Greig, whose novel I reviewed last year and I've just reviewed Graeme Macrae Burnett's novel when he reviewed mine a few years back. But, as a poet too, I'm all too aware how few accessible forums are available for review and discussion of poetry. I look back to half-page reviews of new collections in The Scotsman or The Herald and know that this is not going to happen these days. *Northwords Now* has consistently made an effort to cover a range of work, in decent depth. That's it, no vested interests and the editor says it's inevitable in a small country. Right, these books are both powerful, manifest drive and mastery of craft, expressed in very appropriate physical form, and they couldn't be much more different.

Moody Soho streetscape (Stephen Salmieri photograph) but matt not gloss, on the cover of Peter Urpeth's collection, has the intervention of a typewriter-like script to suggest that this could be a howl of beat into punk into contemporary slam. We shuttle from London to New York in a microphoned burst of rhythm, arythm, scattered and disrupted rhyme, chime, repetition and stark plain short runs for breathers. But it's not all like that. A second section, 'Mouth-music' is mainly rural in subject and imagery. Most of these poems are short and many take a bird or other point of focus in the natural word as a main subject. But you can't assume that the urban riffs are all in one style and the rural ones in another.

'The ash leaves are yellowing
on Morton Street
just now,
and the walk ups,
to the brownstone homes,
in unison with the fall,
pull back a yard it seems
to let the canopy
of light turn grey…'

The title poem of the second section beats with affirmation expressed in lyric. If like me you've been arrested by the rhythms of Louis MacNeice's *Bagpipe Music* but pissed off by the aloof and shallow content you will savour the language and shamanism of a poet who has invested in the culture he is embracing. Celebration soars in the city poems too. The poet glimpses the Goddess of memory, mother of the nine muses, after walking Brooklyn bridge, passing by the stoker of an oilcan broiler. Urpeth's Irish family background might have something to do with his openness to epiphany, as when the plover flies. His celebration of kite and dunlin but especially plover evokes, for me, Alexander Hutchison's *Gavia Stellata*, surely one of the great modern Scottish poems.

The most spare delineation of two figures, a wood and linocut by Willie Rodger, announces *Summer/Break* by Richie McCaffery. Shoestring Press have published Angus Martin as well as Tasmanian comparer of islands worldwide, Pete Hay. McCaffrey's work is easy in that good company. In form, the book is necessary and sufficient – appropriate and well engineered but without distractions. That's perfect for a poet who is a master of holding back as well as knowing when to let loose that arresting word or turn of phrase or insight which stops you in your tracks. As in Urpeth you can't get lulled, but the way of achieving that is very different.

First, I sourced and read *Passport*, his 2018 collection with Nine Arches Press, as I mainly know the work from individual poems in journals like NWN and from *First Hare,* his fine pamphlet with Mariscat. There is a consistency of theme and style that verges on the daring. In contrast to Urpeth finding strange familiarity in new territory (Highlands and Islands) McCaffrey is disorientated by his move to Belgium. He turns that to powerful effect, delivered in mainly flat tones as when he describes his work amongst newspaper archives:

'At the end of the day my fingers
are black like I'm a mechanic of words
tinkering with something I can't fix.'

Just when you're thinking you might be drawn down by the angst there's an insight that is affirmative. Because it arises from such a carefully composed inner and outer landscape of dark it rings true:

'but it takes a dirty little dinghy
to reach the best yachts in the harbour.'

That's enough from the book I'm not reviewing but you might want to get it as well as 'Summer/Break.' The new book begins with a love lyric but one of parting in a tone as genuinely sad as the words of so many Gaelic airs. That key is pretty consistent though the sheer inventiveness of jumps of comparison keep you held by your lapels. He is closer to Marvel than Donne but very much a metaphysical.

Vibrant tracings of family, schooling, mentors and makers gone by, are strong as in the woodcuts of an expert printer. But myths are scrutinised. The millstone against the wall of a family house is in fact the wheel from a tool-grinder. *Spelk* survives in Northumbrian English but is, it seems, from Old English. It is the splinter, the Scots 'skelf', that might lodge in your hand even by a kist with perfect dovetails. Of course, a kist can be a coffin too as well as the seaman's container for small possessions or the apprentice's means of holding the tools he will need for life. The word is a title because in McCaffrey-the-maker's art, one potent word on a deliberately plain board can take you along. The way back to survival, from being down, always seems to be in a return to fellowship, as when a nephew leads the speaker back to his mother.

A staghorn-handled fork, Georgian, is used to rake out a gutter but such introspection is always ready to jump out to achieve a wider range. That span is often the depth of time – acute awareness of past lives – and the way to that solidarity is precise language. During lockdown, like many of us, this poet got into gardening. This brings the word 'deracinated' and once again we have taken a joint leap from the dreich. ■

Diverted To Split
Hugh McMillan
Luath Press (2024) £9.99
Review By George Gunn

In the 34 years since Hugh McMillan published *Tramontana*, (Dog and Bone,1990) he has accrued an impressive body of work which marks him out as one of Scotland's busiest and most dedicated of poets. *Diverted To Split* is a book of poems in six parts and if you have not come across McMillan's poetry before then I recommend this book as a good place to start because it contains poetry of humanity, compassion and wit.

In the first part *Glass* and in the poem *Miracle* the poet suggests 'every moment/should have its ceremony' and this is what these spare, terse, engaged and conversational poems embrace: the business of human life, its grandeur and its trivia. Poetry is the art of observation and fulfils what Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote to a young poet: "Do not be clever, be accurate."

Diverted To Split is a series of beautifully observed moments rooted in their actuality, enhanced by the specificity of location where the poem occurs geographically and in time and is rooted in human reality. The titles frame the action – *Keats in the Maxwell Arms, Dalbeattie*, *Kirkcudbright Graffiti* and *Learning about the Religious Wars, Wigtown Book Festival 2022'*(first published in *Northwords Now* 44) where

'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.'

The metal bolt is eventually fired and the poet is our reporter.

'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.'

The *moralitas* of this tale is that the realisation of consciousness, the gathering of knowledge and putting ignorance to the sword can be dangerous.

Many of the poems flirt with this danger, toying with formal success and failure, which is naturally the process of art. But what is art if it is not people in a landscape? Without people there is no society. Without society there can be no culture and without culture there can be no art. The art of Hugh McMillan is a poetry of humanity and humility. He is one of the few poets in Scotland who writes about what he sees in front of him and refreshingly keeps his psychological idiosyncrasies out of the poems and yet as a reader you are always aware of the poet's compassionate arm around your shoulder. This is a rare gift. 'I have taken/ this view into my heart' he informs us in *The Chair*, and we believe him.

On trains, planes, ferries and trains Hugh McMillan, in *Diverted To Split*, embarks on his *hejira* through contemporary Scotland, much like Li Po/Li Bai of 8th century China – a traveller who is always sympathetic, not easily shocked, irreverent and dead-pan – always seeking something. Nothing human is beneath his concern. In the poem 'Waiting Room' he advises 'Life is always beginning-/remember that/ before you sleep'.

The poems veer from great beauty to instances of bizarre humour and for all the wit (which is so refreshing) there is an element of melancholy which alludes to the maxim of Patrick Kavanagh, that

all tragedy is just undeveloped comedy. This transitional quality is movingly evident at the end of the poem *Talking To Tony In The Stag*,

'As long as there is light,
there will be a chance
of love.'

Seamus Heaney has written that a poem has two primary areas of concern: language and story. These two examples show Hugh McMillan to be a poet with the great skill and empathy of a storyteller and a storyteller with the linguistic grace and gravity of a poet

This from *Ghost Boats* where the poet is ever the optimist,

'I think of the care
we have,
and the callousness.
How the next to go
extinct must be the
killers, the money
twisters, the dictators.

Then maybe the two
sides of our nature
can reconcile,

and we can tend
as we have done
at times,
for ourselves, our own,
our surroundings.
It is a long line of hope
spun in lengthening shadow
against burning clouds.
As the last boat
leaves'

And this from *Swan*, where beauty is almost beyond description,

'The plumage on the swan
is a dazzling white,
there
is no white whiter.
When it bends a wing
like a shield the sun
is in the cup of swan
like stars.
I know the swan is a bird
but it is also a tower,

a single shoe.'

Diverted To Split is the work of a poet at the height of his powers. These poems are a necessary delight in a world that is waging war upon itself and where Scotland as a nation is rocking politically like a drunken boat. In Hugh McMillan Scotland is lucky to have a poet who shows us who we are and where we are in the world. Buy this book. Because, as the poet has written, "the world is at my heels." ■

A Spell Of Watching
Hamish Whyte
Shoestring Press (2024) £11
Brother
Sheila Lockhart
V Press (2023) £6.50
Briny
Mandy Haggith
Red Squirrel Press (2023) £10.00
Poems, Stories and Writings
Margaret Tait
Edited by Sarah Neely
Carcanet Classics (2023) £14.99
The Bone Folder
Cáit O'Neill McCullagh
Drunk Muse Press (2024) £10.00
Review by Anne Macleod

In *A Spell of Watching*, *New and Selected Poems*, Hamish Whyte offers a collection that celebrates and delights. These beautifully formed poems, deft and elegant, reveal a lifelong passion for nature and family. He writes eloquently of love, of history, of changing times – always anchored, as in the title poem *A Spell of Watching,* to his fascination with life itself:

'I/am anchored/I cannot clap my hands
under the spell of watching'

Whyte is a natural storyteller with a clear appreciation of the complexity of simple language and, beyond this, an unerring gift for rhythm; he is, after all, also a drummer which may explain in part how perfectly the poems – mainly free verse – are laid out, the reader's eye exactly danced across the page. He can surprise. Apparently quiet poems will burst into unexpected beauty, as in *Siva in Lamlash* where

'There's a rainbow/at the foot/of Bungalow/
Road./'

Other times he'll reach unexpected philosophical conclusions. In *Pot Luck*

'..Every answer/is an answer./When in
doubt, doubt/'

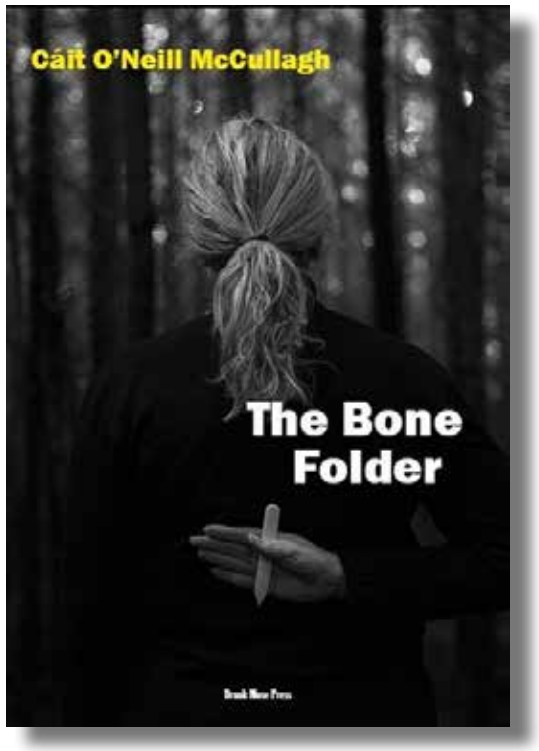
A handful of medical poems hit the spot. *First Day in Hospital*, a highly effective list, should be read by every medical student, and *Where's Jemima McGregor?* leaves us wondering, like Whyte himself, about that disappearing lady.

There's humour too. In *Argument*, his teenage self is

'/..ground on/ intent on getting it right/'

And in *Guiser*, he's running children home at Halloween, when

'/we passed a fox at the/ Crossmyloof
Station lights/ waiting for the green man./'



This collection, you'll have gathered, is a broad-ranging delight, a sifting of decades of work. It's much more than a collection – it's a finely woven tapestry that, as in the lovely *Cornwall To Glasgow (*written for Edwin Morgan,) has Whyte

'/Waving my hands/raising my voice
–/the splash the light/'

The splash.
The light.

Brother
The beautifully produced pamphlet *Brother* by Sheila Lockhart opens with *Prologue – Angels,* in which a host of advent angels appears not glorious, but

'/long substance-less things/no wings, pale
faces…/'

It is dedicated to the poet's brother Simon, and in these pages his life and death, and his sister's grief and gradual journey towards acceptance, are faithfully recorded. Some of these poems, under the group title *Elegy for a Lost Brother*, appeared in an earlier edition of *Northwords Now* (Issue 38). One of these, *Reciting Betjeman*, describes their meeting in a pub named the The Old Ship, and the poet's hopelessness as they part.

'/I watch you bear your loneliness back
home,/shoulders sagging underneath its
weight./'

In *Aldeburgh Marshes* (2) after his death she notes '/Piercing cry of the Redshank./ Let's brush frost from the reeds./ See it sparkle silver in sunbeams./' In Gaelic culture, the redshank and its keening cry – pillilliu – were associated with bearing souls to the underworld.

Lockhart clearly revels in the natural world. Though she now lives on the Black Isle, she grew up in Suffolk. A former art historian and social worker, she started writing after her brother's death, and has spoken movingly about her experience on the Mikeysline Podcast. She has healed, but gradually.

In *Melting Snow* she owns

'/Over time/I grow a narrative/irrigate and
hoe/yielding harvests of familiar sentences/'

And in *Little Buddha* she imagines being able to have

'/eyes open just enough/to let in some
light/'

The V. Press blurb on the back of this book terms the poems a 'heartfelt and unflinching consideration of grief and healing after suicide.' They are all that. And they are very fine poems. ■

[Both the reviewer and Editor would like to note that any Highlands and Islands readers affected by the content of the above pamphlet can find help available through both Mikeysline and the James Support Group
www.mikeysline.co.uk
jamessupportgroup.com/]

Briny
Mandy Haggith is a woman of many parts – poet, novelist, environmental activist. Musician too, philosopher, mathematician, and most of all, lover of the sea.

I should own at this stage my unfortunate tendency towards seasickness rather than sea fever, but had I read *Briny* earlier – much earlier, in my growing years, perhaps – things could well have been different. This persuasive, loving, questing immersion in salt water and northern fragility might then have convinced me. As it has now.

The voyage begins in Assynt, in

Loch Roe, and Haggith follows Pytheas to the far North, cataloguing on the way the beauty and danger, also the environmental damage, man-made, inevitably encountered. Did not the *Oystercatcher – Gille-Bridhe* warn us?

'/'Bi Glic, bi glic, bi glic!'/which means/'Be wise, be wise, be wise!'/

We have not been wise and yet still find beauty in *Noorderlicht*

/A harp, rigging strung,/soloist in an arctic concerto/'

Haggith's spare and easy style may offer, as Ian Stephen declares, a 'sailor's log-book of observations' but her wise eye and skill with word and line are clear in every detail. Playfulness too. Some poems, like *Shore*, offer a pleasing double structure, can be read horizontally or vertically, with subtly different meaning. And her choice of words, of consonants, reflect the physicality of the boat, the climate, as in *Stormbound* where

/It begins with whistles and whines of wind in wire./ Warps creak on cleats/ moaning at the limit of their stretch./

Whether you are a sailor or not, *Briny* is a book to read and re-read; its environmental plea firmly yet gracefully offered.

Poems, Stories and Writings

And briefly: Sarah Neely is Professor in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at the University of Glasgow. Her selection of Margaret Tait's writing, re-issued a decade after its first publication, re-introduces a woman whose life-force is undeniable, drawing together the diverse fields in which she worked.

Anyone visiting the Pier Arts Centre in recent years will be aware of Tait's talent and the sheer force and flood of her ideas whether expressed in film, or on the page – all this funded by locum work in General Practice up and down the country, though her home, for the main part, remained in Orkney.

In this inspiring book, the stories and poems are fresh, surprising and current. Margaret Tait had so many ideas and developed them with energetic dedication. One of her poems speaks to this. In *A Fire*

/The tiniest twigs will nearly always light,/Even if they're wet,/

It obviously worked for her.

The Bone Folder

Creating a poetry collection is not a simple layering of gathered work. It takes a great deal of creative thought. And it's different from actual composition: two fine poems laid side by side may sometimes undermine each other, simply implode. This is never a problem here. Cáit O'Neill McCullagh – archaeologist, ethnologist, essayist – knows what she is about, and confidently opens her first full collection with a quartet of useful definitions. Bone folder (noun) 1. Tool used to score, flatten and smooth folds with delicacy 2.One who turns the bones 3. A strong medium, creased and folded 4. A holding space.

The Bone Folder of the title proves to be a prose poem with ancient yet futuristic echoes. A woman who is undergoing chemotherapy returns home each night to sift a box of memories, precious mementoes of her past and possible future. She carves this history for meaning, for healing, using only a bone tool, a bone knife –

'/haunted, the hare springs/her winter skin: finds a form/ in her own ghostings./'

Any and all of the definitions stated above would apply.

The first poem of the collection warns us that ensuing pages will not necessarily prove a comfortable read. *Charm of the Bones* declares that the song of the lost bones is iron on stone, and that

'/It is by the nettle/ you know us, urtic-sharp../'

This is necessary. The initial swathe of poems dealing with the poet's cancer diagnosis and surgery are set against the backdrop of the Ukranian war. In *Odesa,* a father watches his children and partner leave the war zone, weeping. No words to help. In *Eighteen Words My Gynaecologist Whispers* the poet re-interprets the language of medical consultation.

'/Found/ three masses/ (I think *cancer*, but no-one says it)/'

The cancer journey, the war, continue through the first third of this book but even in bleak times the poet stretches for the lyrical. Prior to surgery, when an anaesthetist asks her to name *Ten Ordinary Things*, she remembers

'/In a room I'll never quite recall: yarrow; an open window/the marram that bladed our flesh; in Embo - dandelions./'

Her subject matter may be serious, but McCullagh assures us hope is never, can never be, lost.

'/In all the wounds that fray us/ hope seeds refusal./'
24th February 2022 (*A White Stork Sings*)

She is much concerned with time, how it affects us all – 'history's hurtle' (*At Loch Currane, 1965*) – and after the storm surge of illness and war, goes on to celebrate her Irish family, their strength, their immersion in recent history. Her love for family is deep. In *Solas,* a lament for her father, she imagines him travelling after death to a winter house where

'/..he will hang-up his life-heavy heart/ and lift to himself amber-cradled time/in him it will become fire/'

McCullagh is a considerable talent who came to poetry only recently, in pandemic years. She delights in language, in choosing the exact and only word every time. She uses Scots and Gaelic too. And previous study can also inform the text. The odd, possibly archaeological word creeps in here and there, a mention of cherts – flint scrapings – (*At Acragar*) and, once, stratigraphy. (*At the Well*.)

She loves form, plays with it. She has lived (mostly) in the Highlands since her late teens, and Irish and Highland sensibilities are clear, often merging in lyrical free verse. But *My Uncle Wearing a Blue Beret 1982* is a rhyme-free sonnet, *Ten Ordinary Things* an unobtrusive pantoum, and the lovely *Curlew*, a lament for the unborn, a winsome use of the reverso.

This impressive first collection is both sobering and heartening. Cáit O' Neill McCullagh is a poet to watch, a poet of energy and sensitivity who loves life, questions history: who recognises, surely, the power of the present, but a writer who redrafts time into holding space.

Her bone tool is poetry, is language itself. ■

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12 Airs
Gerry Loose
Dockyard Press (2023) £6
The Ways of Salt
Angus Macmillan
Drunk Muse Press (2024) £10
Play my game
Alec Finlay
stewed rhubarb press (2023) £10
no: poems of urban zen
greum maol
Dockyard Press (2023) £8
from outside into the cave
daishin stephenson
Dockyard Press (2019) £6.99
Review by Ian Stephen

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minimalist tendencies

Three of these books of poems are from the same publisher – Glasgow's new 'Dockyard Press' and two are from other Scottish presses which already have a name for getting poems out to their audience. Angus Macmillan's *The Ways of Salt* (from the robust Drunk Muse Press, also producers of the soon-to-be-revived 'Poets Republic' periodical) and Alec Finlay's *play my game* (from stewed rhubarb press, overlapping with the Tapsalteerie imprint via Duncan Lockerbie) are both full-length collections at 70 to 90 pages. '*from outside into the cave*' by daishin stephenson is 60 spare and spaced-out pages while the booklets by greum maol and gerry loose are small, notebook-style, sans serif, stapled and seem bare naked.

Let's get the disclaimer out of the way. I've a connection with three out of the five poets and two out of the three publishers. That's probably about the norm on the Scottish poetry scene but Alec Finlay was my main publisher for several years and Gerry Loose was a friend, though I didn't see enough of him. Gerry's sudden death earlier this year make this additional publication even more special.

Like Alec Finlay, much of Gerry's work with language was expressed outside pages. There could be interventions in gardens or inscriptions where the context and other visual elements worked in partnership with language. Gerry's *Printed on Water* was a new and selected poems from Shearsman in 2007. Shearsman, who I thought published only poetry, also published his very fine prose stemming from a residency in Ardnamurchan and Vagabond Voices made a rare departure into poetry to publish not one but two Loose poetry collections (2014 and 2018). His work doesn't easily fit categories but it does seem to find its own simple and just-right form. *Twelve Airs* is an exquisite but unfussy example. The stapled centrefold is blank. This separates two complementary expressions written twenty years apart.

Further breathing space is provided by a blank left page beside each spare right one. Here is the content of one page in full:

hinds on the path
/ no hinds on the path
sense of presence
sense of absence
knowledge of hind space
bracken moving

You have to slow down and try to be still as if not to disturb fellow creatures. As the title suggests this is more music than verse. A subtle chiming of language is born from years of play.

Angus Macmillan has music in his life too. He was a founder member of The Lochies folk group who helped bring some of Murdo Macfarlane's moving lyrics out to the world. He also has Gaelic song in his genetic make-up and the varied percussive roll of The Minch sounding through formative years. This gathering of many years of widely published poems alternates between pared- down forms such as haiku-like lines in Gaelic to longer lyrical lines which acknowledge Murdo and the trilingual William Neil. Though Macmillan's range is that of a spring

tide there are consistent concerns which bring cohesion out of the rich variety.

This is a psychologist both at work and play. Perhaps that explains such empathy with fox and owl and sanderling. He needs to let his steps take him beyond human maps:

'I tried to recall guides for the lost -
Angles of light, the greening of moss'

If this sounds heavy-going, it isn't because there is orchestration and balance in the grouping of poems. Wit and wordplay leaven his natural thoughtfulness.

The act of playing contributes title, cover imagery and a hop skip and jump into the refined but plain production of Alec Finlay's poems. Many collaborative and cross-art projects are referenced but these are words only, apart from three very simple drawings of hands on the cover. And yet the layers are often present. Sometimes this is overt, as in an opening nod to Celan, Creeley or Sappho. More often there is an unstated or hinted suggestion of allusion. For me Finlay's intervention of substituting flags with wind-blown clouds (as in Basho) for the partisan flags flown by two sides of Derry is a seminal work for those who are familiar with some of what has gone before. Here, there may be an over-the-shoulder glance back to haibun. I'd say a reader will be aware they are moving in an alternative current of poetry, perhaps 'minimalist' at times or 'experimental' rather than seeking to make something fresh between more conventionally formal structures. We are closer to Thomas A Clark and Gael Turnbull than we are to long-established forms. Yet forms there are. Once more it is the alchemy of placing language and thought together which results in the memorable. And once more the natural world is more subject than background:

'*what's a river?*
a flower with its roots in the hills'

And amongst a series of couplets stating the not-so-obvious:

'a wave can't reach any shore
but the one it faces'

The form as well as the title of *no: poems of urban zen* suggests that there are Buddhists at work - or play. The publishers' website says:

'Dockyard is a micropress run by two Zen Buddhist monks in Glasgow. Married to each other, we live in the Wyndford housing scheme in Maryhill, in a hermitage we call 'Comraich airson Lusan Leònte/Wounded Plant Sanctuary.' Modesty of presentation blurs any distinction between what is a little book and what is large in scale. All three 'dockyard' publications have discovered a form suited to the content. greum maol stops at two lines when that's enough or makes a formal haiku when it seems natural. Animals and plants are studied in this urban landscape but human lives are a main subject:

'he finds the half and half, selects two cartons,
stands in line at the checkout. light of dead
stars, her asleep now in their home. coffee
she will drink when she wakes. a journey

of two blocks in the universe.'

daishin stephenson also paints and takes photographs. Her considered monochrome sweeps are also a way in to observations. These alternate between nature and the human. There are many three-line poems but no attempt to use the formal measures of haiku. Poems which focus on kindness and clear sight in the everyday clutter moved me most:

'woman stands in rain
toothless, wearing one shoe
fixes her hair in window's reflection'

The Day Before
Aoife Lyall
Bloodaxe Books (2024) £12.00
The Island in the Sound
Niall Campbell
Bloodaxe Books (2024) £12.00
Review by Mandy Haggith

These poets have three things in common. They both hail from the west and have made their homes on the east side of Scotland; Niall Campbell is from South Uist and is now in Fife while Aoife Lyall hails from Ireland and lives in Inverness. They are both in their late thirties and are ten years married. And they are both parents to small children. Yet they handle these three commonalities in their poetry in hugely different ways.

Both collections are dense with references to place. Aoife Lyall's poems are firmly from her current abode with barely a reference to Ireland, featuring locations that feature in everyday life, like supermarkets and suburban housing. *The Day Before* concludes with a sequence of poems about the Southern Distributor Road around Inverness. A less promising space for poetry could hardly be imagined and they show us seven pieces of urban detritus and traffic carnage: a mirror off a car, a shopping trolley, an uprooted dandelion and a badger, pigeon and hedgehog, all dead, yet between which life is woven and honoured as they are compared to museum pieces, personified, played with, listened to, made kin, grieved for, and mothered.

Niall Campbell, by contrast, sets many of his poems in the Hebrides, as suggested by the title *The Island in the Sound,* and Fife hardly gets a mention. There are several island sonnets, evoking Lingay, Fugay, Eriskay, Mingulay and St Kilda as well as South Uist, and the sea is a constant presence, Gaelic folklore and history loom large and where there is everyday life it tends to be that of islanders doing their jobs: fishermen at the pier, an apprentice processing crabs, a lighthouse keeper.

It is a nice coincidence that both poets note the tenth anniversary of their weddings. Aoife Lyall celebrates it with a poem, *Wildflowers*, that compares the flowers they have grown together to their children, marvelling at 'the complexity of their form, at their ability to grow / and yet to know, to say *they would not be here if not for us'*. Niall Campbell's decade is the inspiration for six *Love letters from the Tenth Year of Marriage*, interspersed among the collection, as if kept as bookmarks, and they mostly look back on the start of the relationship ('do you remember how back we were at it, / being young, I mean') when their love was something wild that he now feels "incapable of", now that they are "away from the beginning". Yet these are still deeply romantic poems.

As parents, the differences between the collections is most stark. Aoife Lyall's a busy mother, handling the logistical difficulties of the pandemic, keeping children entertained (most clearly shown in *The Train*, which is a day-long game) and comforted in the early hours, frankly exposed in the sequence *The Back of Five*. There are fewer poems in her collection and her children feature in many of them. Niall Campbell's son is lovingly evoked, for example in *A Car for Jacob,* but his more prolific poetry perhaps reflects the different reality for fathers in our society, with his attention mostly free to be elsewhere, often back in time, relating tales of Fionn mac Chumhaill or conjuring the Harpy of Rubha Meall nan Caorach, 'her grey wreath of hair, her sickle claws/ the tea map of her ancient skin'.

Very different they may be, but both poets draw their poetry from deep wells of love. Niall Campbell concludes: 'this much I understand of things: / a great part will be revealed by watching / but the greater part will be revealed by love'. Aoife Lyall says: 'Whatever you use this love for, use it. I am giving it to you.' Both poets offer it to us with open-hearted generosity.

Writing landscape
Linda Cracknell
Saraband (2023) £8.99
Review by Kenny Taylor

People who know the village of Aberlady and the huge sweep of bay that flanks it will be aware of its natural beauty. Mudflats glistening at low tide, where flocks of wading birds swirl and call overhead and the breeze brings tangs of salt spray and seaweed: those are part of land and sea and sky here. But I also connect Aberlady with something harder to define, but no less fascinating – the ways that the act of walking in certain places can be a catalyst for creativity, including ideas for writing.

The bond between outer and inner here comes through the prolific historical novelist and non-fiction writer, Nigel Tranter, who lived in Aberlady until his death in 2000. Many years back I was told how local walks were fundamental to his writing practice. An account online through East Lothian's John Gray Centre describes how the author would start each day with a walk across the wooden bridge at Aberlady Bay, which he called 'The Footbridge to Enchantment.' He was a familiar sight walking on the coast, says the website, "stopping to jot down neat notes for his books on cards or even shells picked up from the beach."

That sense of a writer inspired by both a place and the act of walking in it, not simply to describe a scene but to generate wider thoughts, glows from each essay in Linda Cracknell's collection *Writing Landscape*. Based in Highland Perthshire for nearly three decades, with a writing career given early boosts from winning the Macallan/Scotland on Sunday short story prize and a Brownsbank Fellowship, Linda's work has focussed increasingly on non-fiction. This includes her warmly received *Doubling Back - Paths Trodden in Memory* now usefully republished in a revised edition by Saraband (2024).

Writing Landscape, also published by Saraband in the imprint's 'In the Moment' series, is both a set of essays and in some ways like one, extended essay. The places where walks (and overnight camps and occasional swims) occur are varied, such as Birnam, Erraid, Fontainebleau (through a Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship) and Edinburgh Old Town, but there are both underlying connections and pleasing contrasts and diversions in them. It's a bit like joining the writer in her stravaiging as she notices something just off the path and stops to ponder it and – crucially – to write down her response.

"The small weight of a notebook and pen in my pocket is my passport to feeling alive;" she says, "I cannot but be in the moment when translating observation and experience into words."

For those interested in ways of using the outdoors to help generate ideas for their own writing, this will be a useful sourcebook. But it's not a 'how to' guide. The quality of the prose and the ways in which the writer responds to different places make reading each essay a pleasure. To get a taste, go to the *Northwords Now* online author archive and seek-out *The Writer, the Island and the Inspiration*. Set on Erraid (another RLS place) and first published here in Issue 41, it's now the largest work in the collection. ■

Genevieve Carver is the author of *A Beautiful Way to be Crazy*, *Landsick* and *Birds / Humans / Machines / Dolphins*. She won The Moth Nature Writing Prize for her work on residency with the University of Aberdeen.
www.genevievecarver.com

Ceitidh Chaimbeul Originally from Kyle with links to Raasay, Ceitidh is based in Inverness where she writes poems and songs in Gaelic and English. Having won the ACG Gold Medal in 2018, her first collection is forthcoming.

Áine Divine RSW is a portrait artist and art teacher. Originally from Co. Cork and now living in Roslin, Midlothian, she graduated from the Crawford College of Art and Design. Áine exhibits widely in Scotland and is a winner of the watermark award at the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour summer show.

Katherine Douglas Has been Full-time Manager of Ullapool Bookshop since 2017 and a part-time bookseller since 2011.She chooses all of the books there and enjoys reading personally, especially Scottish fiction, crime (although not too dark / scary she says), travel writing (especially in Europe) and memoirs on the Scottish Highlands.

Elizabeth Gibson is a writer, performer, zine-maker, and facilitator in Manchester. Poems have appeared in Atrium, Banshee, Butcher's Dog, Dust, Magma, and Under the Radar. Elizabeth's first collection is *A love the weight of an animal* (Confingo, due early 2025). https://elizabeth-gibson.com

Ross-shire-born, Ardvasar-based **Niall Gordon** is a poet, translator and musician. His collection *Eadar Baile is Beann* was published by Clàr in 2003.

George Gunn grew up in Dunnet, Caithness, and now lives in Thurso. He has written over fifty productions for stage and radio, published several poetry collections and produced several series for BBC Radio Scotland and Radio 4. He was Artistic Director and co-founder of the Thurso-based Grey Coast Theatre Company.

Zoë Green originally from Montrose, Zoë now lives in Germany where she writes and teaches. A Forward-Prize-nominated poet, she won third place in the 2024 Gregory O'Donoghue Prize and was Highly Commended in the Edward Thomas Prize. Find her at www.zoegreenpoet.com

Kirsty Gunn is an internationally published writer of novels and short stories who was born in New Zealand and lives in Sutherland and London. Her work has received many awards and has been made into films, broadcast and dance theatre. Her latest collection of short stories *Pretty Ugly* was published in autumn 2024 by Rough Trade Books.

Mandy Haggith is a writer and environmental activist who lives in Assynt, where trees grow down to the sea. Her collection *Briny* (Red Squirrel, 2023) was longlisted for the Highland Book Prize 2023. www.mandyhaggith.net

Alistair Hamilton describes himself as "a 'Weegie wha hus bided aroon' the Highlands fur aw' his adult life. He currently bides in Culbo oan the Black Isle wi' three dugs. He's trying to be retired- but is nae use at it!."

Lydia Harris from Westray held a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award. Her most recent collection is *Henrietta's Library of the Whole Wide World* (Blue Diode, 2024)

Alistair Lawrie was born in Peterhead and now lives in Stonehaven. He co-edited *Glimmer Of Cold Brine* and leads Mearns Writers. His collection *Caal Cries* is published by Drunk Muse (2023) and he is a winner of both the William Soutar Prize (2016) and the McLellan Scots poetry prize (2023).

Julia Mary Lawrie is a freelance artist who lives in Stonehaven. She works in various media and designed the cover of *Caal Cries* (Drunk Muse, 2023). www.facebook.com/juliamarylawrie.art/

Ingrid Leonard was born in Orkney, graduated from Newcastle University with an MA in Writing Poetry and lives in Lithuania. Her debut collection, *Rammo in Stenness* was published by Abersee Press in 2022.

Sai Liuko is a poet from Helsinki, Finland, where she received her MA in English Philology. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Asimov's Science Fiction, 3Elements Literary Review, Grimoire Magazine, In the Mood Magazine, and others.

Marcas Mac an Tuairneir is Gaelic editor of *Tuath* and *Northwords Now*. He is an award-winning writer, performer and musician (including as recipient of the 2023 Gaelic Arts & Culture Award and as joint winner of the 2024 International Poetry Prize at the Wigtown Book Festival). Author of several poetry collections, he works through Scottish Gaelic, English, and Polari. @Marcas_Mac

Jim C. Mackintosh is a poet, editor and producer. The latest of his seven collections of poetry is *We are Migrant* (Seahorse, 2024). He has also edited or co-edited four anthologies including *The Darg* (Drunk Muse Press, 2019) celebrating the centenary of Hamish Henderson and *Beyond The Swelkie* (Tippermuir Books, 2021) marking the centenary of George Mackay Brown. He was named Scots Writer of the Year at the 2024 Scots Language Awards.

Gordon MacLellan is an artist, storyteller and creator of celebrations, who uses his work under the name Creeping Toad to help groups and individuals explore their relationships with the people, places and wildlife around them. Gordon has written several books, including *Sacred Animals* (revised and reprinted 2023). *Waiting for the snow* (Lulu Press, 2024) is his most recent poetry collection.

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.

Robin Fulton Macpherson Born on Arran and long resident in West Norway, Robin's own poetry and his translations from Swedish and Norwegian, including of Tomas Tranströmer, Kjell Espmark, Harry Martinson and Olav H. Hauge, are internationally respected. *A Northern Habitat: Collected Poems 1960-2010* was published by Marick Press (Michigan) in 2013, followed by *Unseen Islands and Other poems* from the same publisher in 2019 and *Arrivals of Light* (Shearsman Books, 2023).

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 and she has read throughout Scotland and Ireland. A co-director of the annual Wee Gaitherin Festival, her pamphlet with Sinéad McClure *The Songs I Sing Are Sisters* was published by Dreich in 2022. Her first collection is *The Bone Folder* (Drunk Muse, 2024) www.instagram.com/kittyjomac/

Greg Michaelson likes to write about how things aren't and how they might be. His short stories have been published since 2001. His novels include *The Wave Singer* (Argyll, 2008), and, with Ruth Aylett, *Equinox* (Stairwell, 2023).

Jon Miller's poetry has been published in a wide range of literary magazines. Winner of the Neil Gunn Poetry Competition, the International Book &amp and Pamphlet Competition 2022. His latest pamphlet *Past Tense Future Imperfect* (2023) is published by Smith/Doorstop.

Robin Munro now lives on Bute, after running a bookshop in Galloway. His two published poetry collections are *The Land of the Mind* and *Shetland like the World*.

Maxine Rose Munro is a Shetlander living in Glasgow and still suffering from the culture shock. Her poetry is an exploration, and interpretation, of this.

Shona Nic a' Mhaoilein born in Carloway, Lewis, and now resident in Skye, Shona MacMillan is well known singer, committed to Gaelic language development and promotion. She is a member of Carloway and Portree Gaelic Choirs.

Victoria NicIomhair Gaelic poet Victoria MacIver was recently published in the Federation of Writers of (Scotland)'s competition anthology. Born and based in Tain, she is a Gaelic-medium Primary School teacher and writes poetry in Gaelic, as well as stories for children. In 2024, she won the Lewis and Harris Association Gold Medal for Poetry at the Royal National Mòd.

James Robertson now based in Angus, is an acclaimed novelist, poet, short story and non-fiction writer who runs the independent publishing company Kettillonia and is co-founder of Itchy Coo. His novels include several award-winning titles. *News of the Dead* (Hamish Hamilton, 2021) won the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction in 2022.

Frank Rennie is Professor of Sustainable Rural Development at the University of the Highlands and Islands. Based in Galson in the Outer Hebrides, he has produced over 30 books and numerous articles. He was the Winner of the 2020 Highland Book Prize.

Cynthia Rogerson is prizewinning author based in Easter Ross. She writes mainstream literary fiction set in Scotland and California and is the author of five novels, one of which is under the pen name Addison Jones. She has also published a memoir and a collection of short stories. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies, been broadcast on BBC radio and translated into six languages. cynthiarogerson.org

Olof Samuelsson is a Swedish writer and physics student at Lund University. When he's not grappling with complex equations, he finds solace in literature, both reading and writing. His work has been featured in Lotus-Eater Magazine and Eunoia Review.

Donald Goodbrand Saunders has been writing poems, in English and Scots, for around half a century. He lives in Gartmore, in the Trossachs.

Aidan Semmens lives in Orkney and is a winner of the Julia Budenz Commemorative Prize (Scottish Poetry Library) and the 2024 Deirdre Roberts Prize (Mallaig Book Festival). His sixth volume of poetry, *The Jazz Age*, was published by Salt in 2022.

Ian Stephen is a writer, artist and storyteller from the Isle of Lewis. He won the inaugural Robert Louis Stevenson award and has worked full-time in the arts for three decades. His most recent book *Boatlines* (Birlinn, 2023) illustrated by Christine Morrison, is a coastal geography of the vessels and maritime culture of Scotland.

Mia Suhaimi Originally from Malaysia, now resident in Edinburgh, writes poems and songs in English, Gaelic, Scots and Malay. She works extensively at grassroots level to promote LGBTQ literature and Gaelic language and culture with Lavender Menace and Bothan Dhùn Eideann.

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.

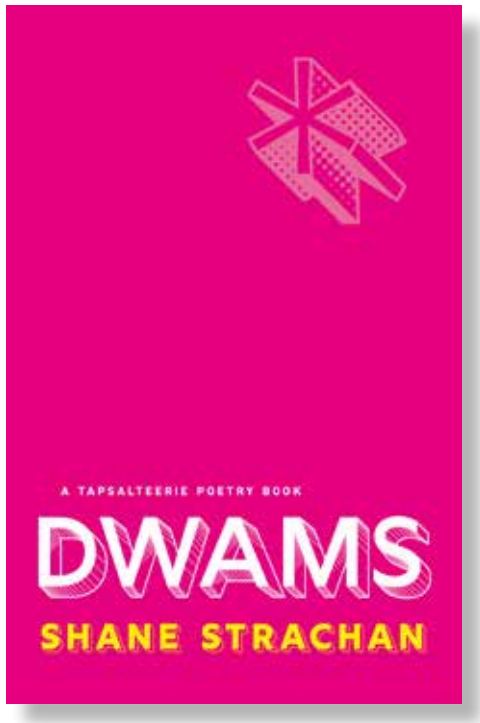
Alice V. Taylor is a Black-Isle-based artist whose painting 'Newhall Sheds' was included in the most recent Scottish Landscape Awards exhibition at City Arts Centre, Edinburgh. She was awarded the Leith School of Art painting prize in 2022. This year she was part of a group exhibition at Heriot Gallery in Edinburgh. https://www.instagram.com/alicev.taylor/

Kenny Taylor editor of *Northwords Now*, lives on the Black Isle and is also a writer, photographer and musician who works mostly in non-fiction features – especially for the BBC - books (seven to date) and performances drawn from nature, science and culture.

Judith Taylor, originally from Perthshire, now lives and works in Aberdeen. Her latest collection, *Across Your Careful Garden* (2023), is published by Red Squirrel Press.

Andrea Turner is a visual artist, singer and writer who lives in Moray. She has been a professional artist for several decades, exhibits throughout Scotland and has work held in many public and private collections.

Longlisted for the Saltire Scottish Poetry Book of the Year Award 2024



In a spectrum of voices across Scots and English, the poems in DWAMS concern themselves with the climate emergency and just transition, rising xenophobia, and with queer romance and sex, in a groundbreaking debut collection from North East Scottish writer and poet Shane Strachan. The collection looks anew at the city of Aberdeen and the wider North East region's industrial heritage, moving across time and place, from mountains and farmland to city and sea.

"A stunning collection. Razor sharp, unflinching and beautifully observed. Strachan is such a talent."
– Rachelle Atalla

Order DWAMS with 20% off and free postage by using the code NORTHWORDS at www.tapsalteerie.co.uk

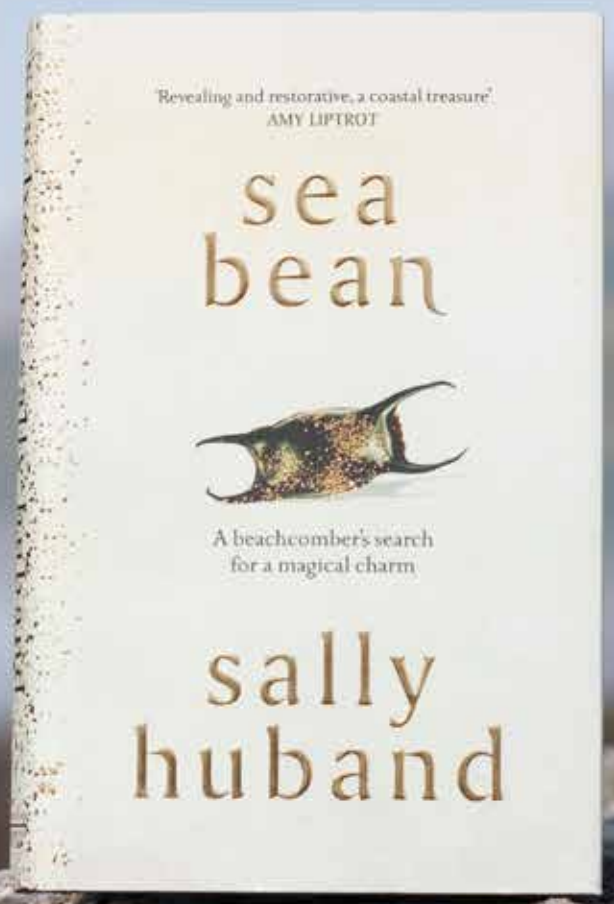
SHIPS

Highlands and Islands Stanza

Contact: Mandy Haggith (hag@mandyhaggith.net)

SHIPS (Scottish Highlands and Islands Poetry Society) covers a vast archipelagic area. In-person meetings are hosted locally by enthusiastic members wherever and whenever they can do so. SHIPS also piggybacks onto other events like book festivals etc where possible, has regular online sessions for quiet writing, and hosts open mics or readings, and 'creative cuppa' workshops. We have a Facebook group here: www.facebook.com/ScotHIPs

HIGHLAND BOOK PRIZE
DUAIS LEABHAIR NA GHÀIDHEALTACHD



PRAISED BY THE judging panel for its 'engaging, subtle voice', Sea Bean (Penguin, 2023) was selected as winner of the 2023 Highland Book Prize (announced in early September 2024) from a shortlist of five. As well as Sea Bean, the shortlist included recent titles by David Greig, Kapka Kassabova, Alan Warner and James MacDonald Lockhart. The judging panel comprised poet and essayist, Jen Hadfield; novelist and short fiction writer, Cynan Jones; and poet, lecturer and broadcaster, Peter Mackay.

2023 WINNER