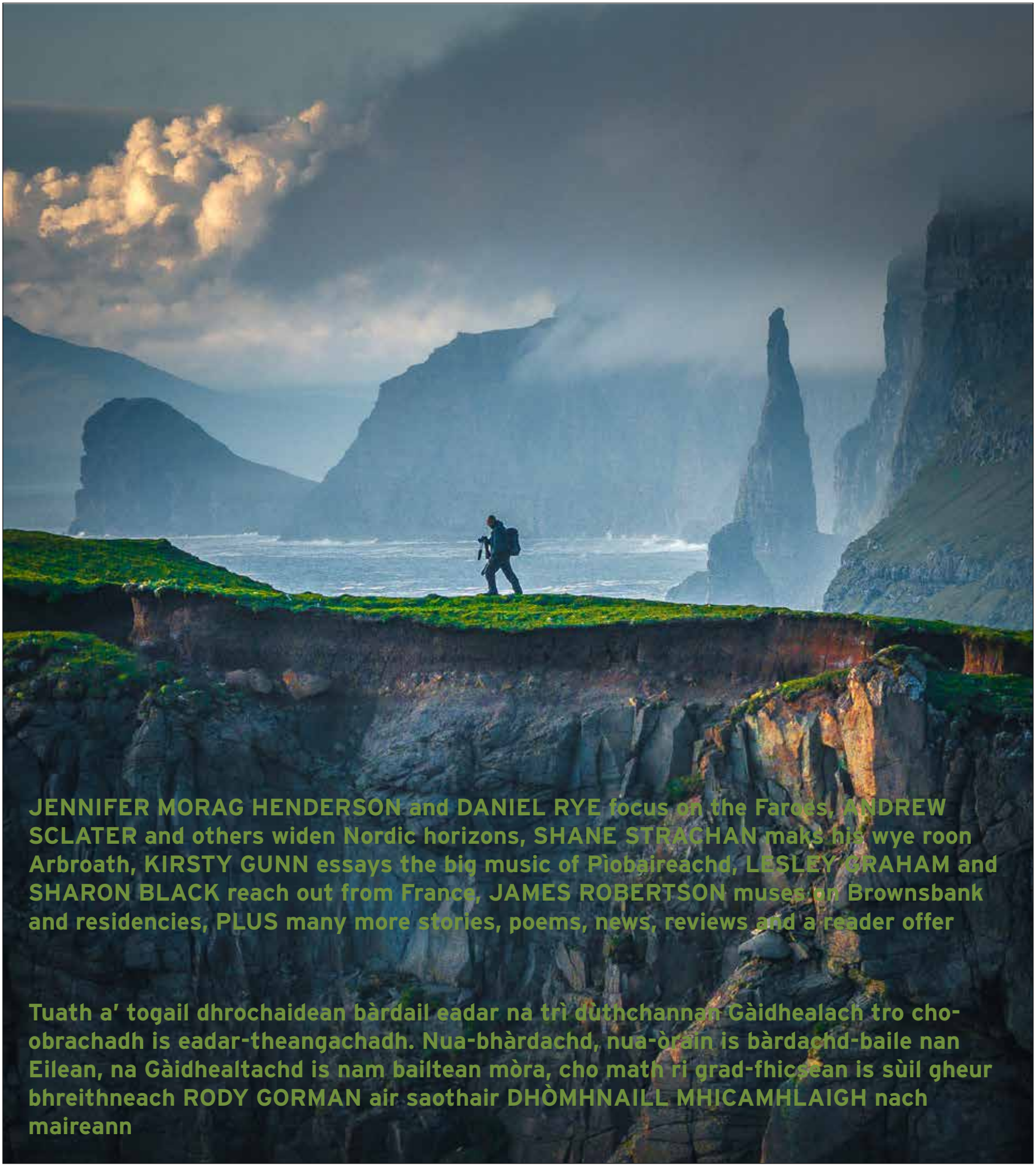
Issue 46, Summer–Autumn 2025

Northwords Now

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



JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON and DANIEL RYE focus on the Faroes, ANDREW SCLATER and others widen Nordic horizons, SHANE STRACHAN maks his wye roon Arbroath, KIRSTY GUNN essays the big music of Pìobaireachd, LESLEY GRAHAM and SHARON BLACK reach out from France, JAMES ROBERTSON muses on Brownsbank and residencies, PLUS many more stories, poems, news, reviews and a reader offer

Tuath a' togail dhrochaidean bàrdail eadar na trì dùthchannan Gàidhealach tro cho-obrachadh is eadar-theangachadh. Nua-bhàrdachd, nua-òrain is bàrdachd-baile nan Eilean, na Gàidhealtachd is nam bailtean mòra, cho math ri grad-fhicsean is sùil gheur bhreithneach RODY GORMAN air saothair DHÒMHNAILL MHICAMHLAIGH nach maireann

EDITORIAL

As regular readers have come to expect and enjoy, this issue includes work by writers whose names are well known and others you may never have heard of before. In that way, I hope this shares some of the element of surprise that comes with editing *Northwords Now* – finding poetry or prose that sings from the page.

There's a Faroese flavour to some of the early pages, thanks to Jennifer Morag Henderson's account of links between Norn – the old Shetlandic tongue – and Faroese, and how this has been used by the contemporary Faroese folk-rock band 'Hamradun'. Following on, there's work by Torshavn-based classical musician and poet Daniel Rye and a sprinkling of short poems by Ålesund-dwelling Scot, Robin Fulton Macpherson. Later, Scots poems by Donald Adamson, long resident in Finland, and Andrew Sclater – who combines Galloway, Norway and France in his background – further expand the Nordic horizons, while Lesley Graham and Sharon Black boost the French connections.

An essay on 'Pìobaireachd and Place' by Kirsty Gunn – a writer who ranges between Scotland and New Zealand - is redolent of the Highland games that are such an important part of summer community events across the region, but also follows on from her award-winning novel *The Big Music*. You can hear some of this very music, played by Kirsty's father, on our homepage for this new issue.

Finally, I'd like to draw your attention to James Robertson's review of the late Lorna Slater's poetry collection *Radiant Point* and his plea for support to fund restoration of Brownsbank Cottage, once the home of Hugh McDiarmid and Valda Trevlyn Grieve. Like James and several others, Lorna was a Brownsbank fellow some years ago, benefitting from a long-term writer's residency there. Few such residencies are available across the whole country these days. It's time that Scotland's literary community spoke up for the creation of more and joined James and other writers trying to protect a place that should be viewed as an irreplaceable part of our national and cultural heritage. ■

Kenny Taylor, Editor

Contents

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for archive resources and to submit work

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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
Faroe Islands coastal figure, photograph by Andrija Ilic. Andrija says: "I had been to this area a few times, and I thought it would be possible to make a photo like this, using the dramatic coastline in the background with a miniature human figure on a cliff in the foreground. So I started chasing my frame, exploring, trying until I got the photo I really wanted." https://www.andrijaimages.com/

Submissions to the magazine, through our online system on the Northwords Now website, are welcome within submission windows (see below). 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.

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Funds permitting, it is hoped to publish the next issue towards the end of this year. A submission window is likely to open in the autumn, so check our website **northwordsnow.co.uk** and Facebook group for details when available. If accepted for publication you will hear about your submission in advance of publication, but we do not have the resources to respond to writers whose work has not been accepted.

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What's New in the North

By Kenny Taylor

A dozen to savour

By the time you read this, you might already be aware of the titles shortlisted for the Highland Book Prize 2024, sponsored and run by the Highland Society of London and Moniack Mhor, Scotland's Creative Writing Centre, with further support from the William Grant Foundation. Our schedule for this edition of *Northwords Now* means that we didn't have prior knowledge of the shortlist before going to press. But in many ways, that's a bonus, since the longlist of a dozen, diverse titles would give anyone with a liking for good literature enjoyment for months to come.

You can savour the cover art of those novels, poetry collections and non-fiction books by looking at the outer back page of this issue. A further bonus from this year's list has been a series of online and in-person events where the writers could discuss their work, so you may have been lucky enough to attend one.

To explain for anyone unfamiliar with how the HBP functions: it's an annual award, established in 2017, that celebrates literature in or about the Highlands. It is open to books of any genre written by authors who live or were born here, as well as books whose content is Highland themed. That's a broad brush, so the list of titles that can enter the frame when submitted by publishers is now lengthy. Crucial to the process of narrowing the focus for long- and short-listing is a team of volunteer readers.

This year, the volunteers worked with Moniack Mhor, the Highland Society of London and a judging panel to select the twelve books on the shortlist. Jen Hadfield, the award-winning poet and essayist whose work featured in *Northwords Now* 44, chaired the judging panel, which also comprised multi-award-winning fiction writer Cynan Jones and Peter Mackay, poet, lecturer and broadcaster, recently appointed as the Scotland's Makar.

Each of the chosen titles is an excellent read. Among them, it's good to see recognition for the poetry of the late Aonghas MacNeacail, described in this column in issue 45; by our previous Gaelic Editor, Roddy Gorman with his 'intertonguing' of *Buile Shuibhne* in English, Irish, Scottish and Manx Gaelic; and by Niall Campbell, whose long-listed collection was also reviewed here. To sample Genevieve Carver's poetry, simply go to the author archive on our website to read some of the work included in her long-listed collection.

There's fiction by the renowned Inverness-born writer, Ali Smith in a novel which is part dystopian, part hopeful and fizzes with ideas and finely crafted prose; by Carys Davies, whose book set on Shetland at the time of the Clearances has attracted national interest; by Kirsten MacQuarrie, who places the poet Kathleen Raine centre stage in a novel about the poet's relationship with Gavin Maxwell; and fiction for young adults in a gothic mystery set on a Scottish island by Lucy Strange.

Non-fiction includes Jen Stout's first-hand account of the war in Ukraine – a Radio 4 Book of the Week and winner of First Book of the Year at the 2024 Saltire Awards; thoughts on how landscape, food, culture and sustainability intertwine by acclaimed Loch Fyne chef, Pam Brunton; a new history of Orkney by Peter Marshall; and a celebration of generations of feisty, hard-working and often witty Hebridean women by Lewis-based Joni Buchanan using detailed research and archival photographs.

Have a look at the Moniack Mhor website to get news of both the shortlist and the eventual winner.

Taylor Dyson. National Library of Scotland and Creative Scotland

Screivings

Back in April, it was good to see the appointment of Taylor Dyson as the Dundee and Angus Scots Scriever, taking up a year-long residency with the National Library of Scotland.

A partnership with Creative Scotland, the residency aims to support the creation of original writing in Scots, as well as the promotion of the language with communities throughout Scotland. The post follows successful appointments in previous years with Alison Miller as Orcadian Scriever in 21/22, Shane Strachan as Doric Scriever in 22/23, and Susi Briggs as Dumfries and Galloway Scriever in 23/24. You can read some new poetry by Shane on page 6 of this issue.

Passionate about the Scots language, Dyson has hosted the Scots Language Awards for the last two years, won the Scottish Book Trust's 'New Writers 2025' award for spoken word and co-runs the award-winning theatre duo, Elfie Picket Theatre, alongside her partner. Speaking a few months ago, she said: "promoting and encouraging Scots means so much to me, so to have the opportunity to continue to do this in a supported environment is so exciting.

When I was starting out as a playwright, connecting to the language I was brought up speaking helped me to find my voice as an artist. And I would love to help others do the same. I cannot wait to get started on creating work across theatre, poetry and story and connecting with communities in my hometown over the importance of language and how it can empower us to find our voices."

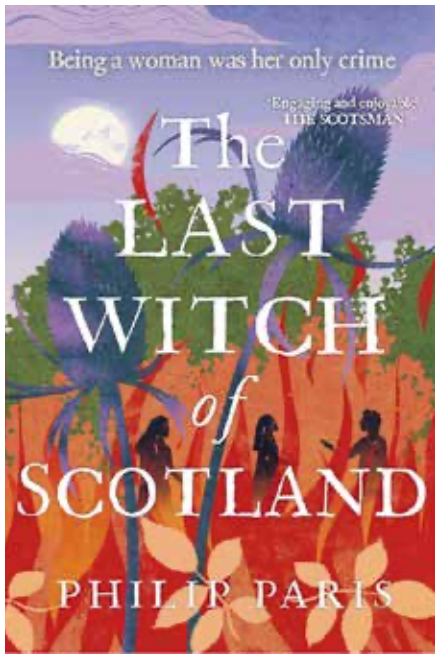
Alan Bett, Head of Literature and Publishing at Creative Scotland, said: "As the new Scots Scriever for Dundee and Angus, Taylor Dyson will be stepping into the footsteps of writers who have previously championed Orkney, Aberdeenshire, and Dumfries and Galloway. As a playwright and poet, she will not only have the time and space to develop her own creative work in Dundonian Scots but will have a platform to promote the Scots language across the region and further afield."

"...a rollicking good read"

Congratulations to Highland-based author and journalist, Philip Paris, whose novel 'The Last Witch of Scotland' was chosen as Waterstone's Scottish Book of the Year 2024. For people not yet acquainted with the book, I recommend reading Cynthia Rogerson's review from *Northwords Now* 44 (search on her author name on our website), which may both whet your appetite and dispel some possible misconceptions about the likely tone of the prose. To quote from that review:

"Paris avoids pandering to the stereotypes of evil doers and angelic victims, which is impressive in a mainstream work. The cruel minister is not portrayed sympathetically, yet neither is he a cartoon of wickedness. He is so perceptively described, I had a brief insight into his genuine fear of the devil and therefore witches. It's easy for us to deride and dismiss superstitious people in the distant past, especially when their actions caused grief - but perhaps that's over-simplistic. No doubt we're all complicit in some contemporary event which will one day be viewed with equal derision. Paris's book gives rise to reflections like these, which is a mark of a literary tome.

… It cannot be denied that the subject, the persecution and execution of witches, is terrifying and disturbing. And yet for the most part this extraordinary book is a gentle page turner, with humour and old-fashioned romance. It's a rollicking good read, and for local readers, it has the added thrill of a familiar landscape. Paris's best yet." ■



Norn

A cautionary tale from northern language history, with a contemporary twist

By Jennifer Morag Henderson

Faroe Islands scene. Photo by Eric Welch. Unsplash.

Norn is the language that was spoken in Orkney and Shetland, and in Caithness in the Far North of Scotland. It is now extinct – so I was surprised to find it used in a very current song from folk-rock band Hamradun, from the Faroe Islands. What is the link between the Faroe Islands and Norn, and why is a rock band interested in an old Scottish language?

The last speaker of Norn supposedly died in about 1850, but the language had been current in the islands of Orkney and Shetland much earlier, and then co-existed with Scots for many years. Orkney can be seen from the northern coast of Scotland, and Norn was spoken in Caithness, but did not spread much further into mainland Scotland.

Norn is in the same language family as Faroese, Icelandic and Norwegian, and there was some limited mutual intelligibility between speakers of these languages. Norse settlement had taken place on Orkney and Shetland from about the early 9th century, and this is where the language came from. The islands only became officially part of Scotland in the 1460s, as part of dowry negotiations when James III married Margaret of Denmark. Norn and Scots were both spoken in the northern isles from the 1400s on – possibly, especially in Orkney, from the 1300s on – but once Scots became the language of the people in charge, it became the prestige language.

Norn lasted longest in Shetland, due to the distance from mainland Scotland, but the process of decline was gradual. Travel, both in and out of the islands, was a driver of change. By the end of the 1400s Norn was probably gone from Caithness, by the late 1600s it was almost gone from Orkney, and by the 1700s it was on its way out in Shetland. Remnants of the language survived however, and people could recite phrases, songs and texts, and knew many Norn words. This is where the great Faroese linguist Jakob Jakobsen came in.

Jakob Jakobsen is thought to be the first Faroe Islander to earn a doctorate, and his thesis was on the Norn language. The son of a bookbinder and bookshop owner (H.N. Jacobsen's bookshop still exists in Tórshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands), Jakob Jakobsen originally studied the Danish language (Danish being the 'government' language of the Faroe Islands at the time), with French and Latin as his secondary languages. He came to Scotland, and became interested in Norn, travelling to Shetland in 1893 and staying for three years. In Shetland, he interviewed a large number of Shetland dialect speakers and scholars, work which became the basis of his thesis and helped to preserve what we know of Norn. In 1928 Jakobsen published his giant "Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland", which had over 10,000 definitions of Norn words.

There was a huge interest in the study of languages at the time that Jakob Jakobsen was working in the late 1800s, including the development of the system of phonetics and an International Phonetic Alphabet, a way of describing and writing all the sounds in a language. This meant that languages could be effectively preserved, and even recreated, even if all the speakers were gone.

Jakobsen's curiosity around languages, though, was not just theoretical. He was invested in the idea of whether his own language, Faroese, could survive or not – and what that meant politically. In the 19th century the Faroe Islands were part of Denmark. Danish was the main language, and Faroese was discouraged. However, by the late 1800s there was increasing support for home rule or independence, and the Faroese economy was growing. The Faroese language was very strong, even if it wasn't the official language of government, and Jakobsen was part of a group of scholars who were interested in Faroese language and culture, wanting to preserve and strengthen these, and make the political situation with regard to Danish rule fairer.

Norn was a cautionary tale: this was how language and culture could be lost. Jakob Jakobsen and others worked to create a standard written form of Faroese (though Jakobsen's phonetic approach and simplified spelling suggestions were ultimately passed over in favour of a different system), and to promote Faroese literacy. The growth of Faroese literacy – the spread of newspapers, for example, as well as the growing literature in the language – played an important part in the preservation of the language.

Faroese today is spoken by the 55,000 or so people who live in the islands, and around 20,000 people abroad (mainly in Denmark). It became the official language of government in the Faroe Islands after the Second World War, after a controversial vote on independence that saw the islands remain part of the Kingdom of Denmark, but gain considerable freedom and Home Rule. As the official language, Faroese is spoken in parliament, in schools and churches – all the places where it had been excluded when Jakob Jakobsen started his studies in the late 1800s. It is no longer under serious threat from Danish – but, like all smaller languages nowadays, there is the threat of the global language of English.

Hamradun are a folk-rock band, hugely popular in the Faroe Islands, who have played across Europe, part of a thriving music scene. Their songs combine original hard rock with renditions of the traditional kvæði, or ballads, of the islands – ballads which played a huge part in the preservation of the Faroese language. The kvæði are long stories, many telling the tales of the Viking age, and verses are

sung by a caller, with the chorus repeated by the crowd – all to the accompaniment of the traditional (and still common) Faroese chain dance.

Hamradun's latest album, their third, is called "Nætur Níggju", or Nine nights – the title referring to the nine nights that the Norse god Odin spent in the tree of life Yggdrasil in order to gain knowledge. The band's lyrics sometimes refer to old Norse legends – but more often to specifically Faroese history and culture. However, the song "Hildinakvæði" on the newest album comes from Scotland: it is based on a Norn song collected by a clergyman called George Low in 1774 from Foula in Shetland, from a man named William Henry. George Low was collecting songs a little earlier than Jakob Jakobsen, and when Jakobsen came in search of more details, all memory of this song had already been lost: even when George Low wrote it down, neither he nor the singer William Henry knew exactly what it meant.

"Hildina", as it is called in Norn, is thought to have been composed in Orkney in the 1600s, and tells the story of how the Earl of Orkney made off with Hildina, the daughter of the King of Norway. Hildina loves the earl, and tries to make peace with her father, but it all goes wrong and the Earl of Orkney is killed by a Norwegian man called Hiluge. Hildina is forced to marry Hiluge, but at the wedding-feast in a great hall she drugs the wine and then, when everyone is drunk, she burns down the hall and everyone in it.

The singer of Hamradun, Pól Arni Holm, nominated for the 2025 Faroese Music Awards 'Lyricist of the Year' for his original compositions on the album "Nætur Níggju", explains that their version of "Hildinakvæði" is sung half in Norn, and half in Faroese – he translated the original into his own language, showing the similarities (and differences) between the two tongues. "I have always been interested in history and especially the Viking era," Pól Arni Holm explained. "The Viking world is not only in present Scandinavia, but the seafarers reached the shores of North America and used all lands and islands as stepping stones westwards" – including both Shetland and the Faroe Islands.

He went on to add "If we did not preserve actively our Faroese language we could have met the same destiny as with the Norn on the Shetland Isles." Hamradun's version of "Hildina" is a tribute to the Norn speakers and to the people who preserved what is left of that language – and a warning: if language is not used, it will not survive.

When I asked writers working in Shætlan or Shetlandic about their knowledge of Norn, there was limited interest – perhaps understandably, since the Shetland dialect doesn't come from Norn, but evolved instead from the language which contributed to Norn's decline: Scots. The Shetland dialect has the underlying structure and grammar of Scots, relying on word order rather than the case system and inflected word endings familiar to modern Faroese speakers. However, many individual words of Norn origin have survived in in the northern isles – particularly words to do with the natural environment, such as bird and animal names. Pól Arni Holm noticed this from a Faroese perspective as well: "I have read stories written in the late 1800s where seamen from Shetland came ashore on the Faroes and… they find out that they used all the same words about fishing, sheepfarming, agriculture and many daily words and could have a decent conversation without major problems!" Norn is also preserved in place names of the northern isles, with the best known being perhaps "Hamnavoe" – the old name for Orkney's Stromness, now used as a ferry name. There is even a small project on 'Nynorn' – or new Norn – which aims to recreate the language, and some interesting material can be found online.

I loved the chance to hear this old language recreated in song – especially with such a powerful singer and band. I was delighted to contribute a small part to the translation (into English) of the explanations of Hamradun's songs on their newest album, and I highly recommend you check out their music – and this strange little link to a northern Scottish extinct language. For the band Hamradun, "to make our own interpretation of the ballad and put a melody to this ancient rhythm was a privilege."

Hildinakvæði

The original text of 'Hildina', as collected by George Low, has 35 stanzas.

This is the version sung by Hamradun, which translates the first four stanzas of 'Hildina' into Faroese, followed by four stanzas in the original Norn. The first two Norn stanzas follow immediately on from the Faroese, while the final two jump forward in the story to show the fate of Hiluge. An English version of the text follows. ■

Faroese:

Tað var jarlur Orkunoy,
vin sín spurdi ráð
um hann skuldi moy –
úr vanda hennar fá.

"Tók tú moyggj úr glæstriborg tú,
kæri frændi mín,
um verøld allar
heiður ber til tín".

Heim kemur kongur nú
frá leiðini long.
Burtur var frúgv Hildina,
bert stjúkmóðir var har.

"Hvar er hann í londum,
tel mær sannleikan!
Hann skal hanga í hægsta træ,
sum voksið er á jørd".

Faroese by Pól Arni Holm.

Norn:

"Kemi to orkneyar jarlin
vildi mien sante maunis.
I orknian u bian sian,
i lian far diar".

An geve drotnign kedn puster,
on da kin firsane furu.
Two rare wo ede,
whitrane kidn.

Nu leveren fram,
Hiluge: "Du kereda.
Fraun Hildina du,
gevemir live u gre".

"So mege u gouga gre
skall dogh swo.
Skall lathi min heran
i bardagana fwo".

English:

It was the Earl of Orkney
asked his friend for advice
if he should take the maiden out of danger,
free her from her misery.

"If you take the maiden out of the magnificent hall
my dear friend and kinsman
all around the world
you would be honoured."

Home came the king now
from a long voyage.
Lady Hildina was gone away
only the stepmother was there.

"Where is he in the country
who will tell me the truth!
He shall hang in the highest tree
that's ever grown on Earth."

If the Earl came to Orkney,
Saint Magnus would help him,
And in Orkney he will remain forever —
with speed, go after him.

The King stood before his lady
and hit her across the cheek
indeed the tears flowed
down her white cheeks.

Then Hiluge he jumped up
and cried out to Hildina
"My dearest Lady Hildina,
please let me live and give me quarter".

"This much good life and quarter
you shall receive,
as you yourself let my late husband
have, on the duelling ground."

English version compiled by Jennifer Morag Henderson.

To listen to Hamradun's song "Hildinakvæði" go to the current *Northwords Now* homepage northwordsnow.co.uk or www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEWhuAocxMk. Their CD or vinyl can be purchased online via the TUTL record store: www.tutlrecords.com/product/naetur-niggju-hamradun-2/ Their music is also available digitally on all major platforms. hamradun.com

Poems by by Shane Strachan, Daniel Rye & Robin Fulton Macpherson

Intervals

Shane Strachan

Doon in The Commercial Inn
the Geordie at the end o the bar
graisps his Guinness as he girns,
In Arbroath, there's loadsa taxis
sittin empty because nobody wants
ta drive them, but since I'm sixty-five
with a pre-existin heart problem, I've
got ta get a doctah's certificate!
He repeats this fower times ower
tae the ither mannies roon the bar
until the fisherman says, *Aye,*
I'm the same wi tikkin oot the boat,
then he jokes, *But I'd raither dae the ML5*
than bather ma pals in the RNLI.

Ye picter the taxi driver riggit tae the ECG –
the doctor heichins the treadmill speed
and the needle hyters alang the graph
drawin the rhythm o his heart,
the impty intervals
atween the peaks
shortenin
wi every
beat.

Bit for noo he's seated on the barstool
pressin the Guinness glaiss tae his lips –
a final cauld kiss, afore he lowps doon
aff the stool tae stairt his taxi shift.

The ither mannies shak their heids as he leaves.

The fisherman hauds up his *Daily Record*.
Hiv ye seen this in the pippers?
That junkie lass and the security guard?
He wis ma nibbor! Ex-Marine.
Deid at sixty-one. Shockin, eh?
Imagine them phonin yer faimly
tae say, 'He got attacked then
hid a heart attack.'

First rendeetion I heird,
she hit him wi a bottle.

Nah – she wis up to no good
in the drink aisle. He
intervened. She
pushed him
ooer.

There's too much o that stuff
in the toon. Folk say it's no
the hard stuff – get a grip!
Aw o it's bad. Junkies!
'Ye canna say that no more.'
Piss off… Junkie bastards!

The fisherman piynts tae
the impty pint glaiss –

Taxi Tim's daughter
gave him CPR for
twenty minutes.

Ye picter the ASDA oot on the edge
o the toon wi the security guard
lyin on the hard fleer, the spirit
bottles aroon him glistenin –
aa she must be thinkin is,
What if this was my da?
as she places a hand
doon on his chest
and feels for a
thrum that
jist winna
come.

The Last Ride

Shane Strachan

'One of the most unconventional people in Arbroath […
Marion Angus was] the first lady in the town to smoke
and the first lady in the town to ride a bicycle.' – Reverend
Andrew Russell

On the last bike ride, ye mak yer wye past
the grey aishlar façade o Erskine Kirk –
yer faither's pewpit staans quaiet noo
abune the stoorie pews whaur, as a lass,
auld wifies wi lang-sichtit een wid pass ye
saicret sweetmeats wi ringlass hans
and ye'd lowe wi a gowden licht.

Fae Commerce Street ye wheech throu
the crookit seaward toon, its forest o lums
huddlet roon the Brothock burnie
whaur the stink o flax heckilt and bleacht
in Millgate's plashies mells wi the sauty reek
o smokie barrels – a guff ye dreidit
as a bairn newly flittit tae Bank Street.

Ayont the fit o the toon, the wheels spin doon
atween the Signal Toorie an the Common green
whaur foxglove heids turn tae elifinlan
and the coconut scint o gowden whin sipes in.
Their yalla petals glint til the saut-moud sea
as it tries tae sough saftly sae the Bell Rock
micht slummer langer on the horizon.

This droosy simmer nicht, there's nae time
tae ging back tae Keptie Pond and waatch
the year gang roon frae green tae gowd,
nae time tae get yer skates on and skite ower
the lochie's icey face afore it fades,
the grey peewit pleeps seen replaced
bi sparras skimmin the glaissy burnies.

On Elliot Links the bike slaws tae a stap.
Yer nephew sets his mortal fit doon
on the grass and taks ye oot the basket.
As the laigh sun sets reid, he opens the urn –
Ye flee up and furl wi the blawin sands…
Like reek, ye become as shedaless as wind
an faa asleep anaith the hungry waves.

David Maver carves 197 flora and fauna for 7 pence per hour

Shane Strachan

May 14-8: Panel Flowering Currant 57h
May 21-8: Panel Carnation 59h
May 31-Ju: Panel of fruit 171h

Meenits upo hoors upo
days ma haans dirl
as I dunt the mell
aff ma chesel, ein-
lessly gan against
the grain tae gudge
oot strips o cedar,
a vide thit shapes
snaaberries, mint
leaves, orchids,
staaks o wheat,
passion flooers,
seashells, salvia,
daffodils, lizards,
aipple blossom,
clianthus, brambles,
abutilon, chrysanthemums,
conifer berries,
peir trees, lime leaves,
lilies o the valley,
an Solomon's seal.
Cin there be beauty
withoot bangstrie?
For ivvery pairt o me
thit I hae futtled awa,
look up at aa the life
I leave upo these waas.

Yird-Boond

Shane Strachan

'Although they did not create the first lawnmower, Alexander Shanks of Arbroath soon developed mowers that became leaders in the field. With their first patent registered in 1842, Shanks pre-eminence in the lawn-mower business came out of the skills developed in engineering for the textile industry of Arbroath.' – Signal Tower Museum, Arbroath

This poyem wis gan tae be
yet anither poyem aboot a flee –
trapt in the New Scriptorium
on the groonds o Arbroath Abbey,
duntin aff the windaepane
ower an ower an ower again
afore it clammert up the glaiss
afront the ruin's reid sandsteen
taewards the cloody hivvens, syne
stapped bi widden frame abeen.

Bit oot cam this gryte laan mooer
tae wheech awa ma een an lugs
wi the thrum o its furlin blades
chawin throu strips o sun-kisst girse
beheidin fite soukie-soos
swallaein ilka claver puff richt
up intae its bogie mou.

I doot the monks bathert tae cut
the girse wi scythes or shears or sheep
an insteid they jist daundert throu
a heich meedow o wildflooers –
baldie bairns in a sweetie shoppie,
sumplin God's apothecarie
howpin tae remeid the ills an pynes
that cam wi thir yird-boond husks
clammerin athort this warld for a
hivven ayont aishes an dust.

Thor's Harbour

Daniel Rye

A grey pleated curtain
of falling snow

draws across the fjord,
obscuring, then revealing,

the inner workings
of the waterfront stage

where technical crew
fork and shunt containers

to marked positions
ready for the next scene,

illuminated now
in cold turquoise

from an overhead lighting rig,
while in the wings

a Russian trawler
silently docks.

Yesterday's storm
is still at sea,

firing saltwater mortars
hard at the beach.

Turnstones scuttle
back and forth,

wave after wave
in the sandy saliva,

endlessly searching
for lost bodies

around a wet limpet shell
lying lifeless and defenceless.

Seaweed limbs
litter the tideline,

wrecked
by unexploded sunlight.

Rumours of a submarine
ripple from the lip of the horizon

Island Artist

Daniel Rye

Papa Preacher they call him, though
he's long since discarded God
to simplify, berthed in an old boathouse,
off-grid and not bothered.

He dreams of a narwhal tusk,
a spiralled spear,
lathed on the flow from Greenland.

Up at daybreak, he treads gingerly
over slime-wracked basalt, plunges
up to his bearded Plimsoll line, retreats,
steaming to heart-pounding coffee.

He dreams of a whale jawbone,
chiselled from its stinking carcass,
at prayer on the holm at Kirkjubøur.

He takes the bus to town to sell his wares:
driftwood inlaid with detritus
— seaglass, porcelain, bone —
artisanal gravegoods, traded for cash.

He dreams of a gannet's skull,
sanded on the stacks at Mykines,
its beak honed to daggerpoint.

Back at the nest, he brews a stew, gazes
at his restored boat, then hauls
to the fjord's edge, strakes
not yet swollen and sealed.

He dreams of an iceberg,
carved and calved from its Arctic mother,
merging with the midsummer sea.

The vessel hatches with a satisfied sigh,
oars withdrawn, all ambition thwarted.
He curls down, lapped asleep, and drifts
like a hermit crab, homebound.

Gannets

Daniel Rye

We're nowhere close
to their pelagic logic:

human time compressed
to an instant,

global positioning focused
in an eyeball,

hunting arcs taut
for sudden transformation

from bow to arrow —
prey triangulated,

ocean pierced by lasers
soldering sky to sea.

We merely lodge.

They possess.
.

Best remembered voices

Robin Fulton Macpherson

It´s the voices of less
authority I hear
most loudly,
like a curlew hiding
beyond miles of echo,
like an August corncrake
scraping along some dark
harvest edge.

Once

Robin Fulton Macpherson

Big pond or small loch,
higher than the road,
unseen from the road.
Once, seven decades
ago, I saw it.

Wide water-lilies.
Metal dragonflies.
Peat water seething.
Bog-myrtle lungfulls.
Long-distance curlews.

Parents

Robin Fulton Macpherson

The one enigma never
ever appeared in a dream.
There might have been dreams when she
was present but I wasn't.
If I had been there, briefly,
I wouldn´t have been noticed.
She hummed 'Child in the Manger'
and often sighed '*C´est la vie*.'

The other enigma came
and went like a familiar
as the years became decades.
We both seemed to be present
but in some dreams one of us
was 'absent almost present.'
Neither knew which it could be.
His Harris Tweed sleeves were rough.

Not the end

Story by Ian Tallach
(with a nod to Dante, Paradiso 33)

I'm sixteen now – a daughter of our times. I'm certain I've been here before. Perhaps there's been a lot of them – times. Circles inside circles.

It's been a year since they reported that assassination and a lot has happened. I didn't know this guy back then, but now I do – for *sure* I do. They say new life abounds after a forest fire. He's still alive, and not just in our hearts.

I want to shout, sometimes - *'He didn't die!'* It's not as if they would believe me, anyway - not yet. And if I yelled it from the rooftops, they'd believe me even less. (The only thing we mustn't do is post online - that way the truth won't *ever* come to light. Just imagine people not believing their own eyes when he gets back – that is one *terrifying* thought. 'Cos when he says - 'I'm here! Still breathing! Listen up!' – we'll need to do exactly that.)

That afternoon is on repeat inside my head. I've listened heaps of times to that recording. If I went back over it, I'd find more clues, but I don't need convincing anymore. He speaks to me, you know. (Of course you don't. You *can't* know. But soon you will.)

~~~

That afternoon …

I was in the back of the car, on my mobile… until Dad distracted me with his.

'This is NOT progress!' He thumped the steering wheel with his meaty hands. Mum stayed asleep, somehow.

'You trying to be ironic?' The deep voice made me jump. Dad must have put on speakerphone.

'No, I'm not,' was his reply. 'Been stuck here half an hour. Total gridlock!'

'But there's the bigger picture to consider,' came the voice again.

'What are you talking about?'

'The future… of humanity.' (Was this guy being serious? Anyway, I turned on 'voice recorder'.)

'What *ARE* you talking about?!' Dad repeated.

'The trial… at the high court. Must be the reason for your holdup.'

'Ah, *THAT'S* what the rumpus is about!' Dad thumped the wheel again.

The pavements were too narrow for the protesters. A woman fell against the bonnet. She had blue streaks across her face, like olden times – we studied that in history. 'Bloody cavemen!' Dad said. He made to open the window.

'Don't do that!' Mum leaned across. 'Think of those two.' She thrust a varnished thumb over her shoulder.

'I thought you were asleep!'

'Just pretending, silly. How could I… with this?!' She lifted her palms at everything – the demonstrators, banners, placards, traffic all jammed up, skyscrapers, angry clouds. She turned to Angelo and me. 'You guys alright?'

'Mmmm …' my brother said, without looking up.

'What's going on?' (That voice again. Kind of spooky.)

Mum grabbed the phone. 'I thought *you* were telling *us*!'

'Oh, hi Florence!' said the voice.

'Virgil, is that *you*?!' (So *that's* who it was. I think Mum already knew, though.)

'Yip. How's you, Italian bombshell?!'

'OK, thanks. Still writing those tunes?'

Dad took the mobile back. 'I'll… just… ehm… put my phone here on the armrest – let *you* guys talk!' (Who was he impersonating? Maybe Shrek.)

Just then, there was a sound of breaking glass from up ahead. The crowds spilled onto the street. People were shouting.

'What's happening?!' all three adults asked each other.

Dad shifted his salt and pepper head from side to side. 'I think there's two rival groups – one on each pavement.'

'Do they have signs?' Virgil asked.

'They're waving them about. I can't…' (Mum just needed to speak, I guess.)

Dad interrupted, 'Well, on my side they're better organised – green banners with white lettering – 'Stop holding us back!', 'The Earth is Round, Stupid!'… and a group of women in pink and purple t-shirts - 'AI saved my life!'

Mum gasped. 'Pandemonium over *here*… or just a pantomime – grim reaper with a loudspeaker. Hand-written placards - 'Imagination RIP!' … 'Kill the Machine!' And one with yellow flowers – 'End of… creativity!' it says, I think.'

'I told you!' Virgil reminded us.

Dad used the letter 'F' but said instead, 'Thank YOU, Virgil! That's a LOT of help to us, right now!'

'Sorry, guys. They don't believe in violence, though – these people - just a lot of feeling on both sides.'

In the mirror, Dad screwed up his face, but then his eyebrows shot above his frameless glasses. 'Look! That guy between the lanes of traffic. What's on his flag? 'Ex-ter-min-ate ex-tremes!!!"

'Well, that's a sensible place to start.' Mum sounded hopeful.

Dad sighed. 'Right, Virgil. Fill us in. I can tell you want to say something.'

'Thanks, Trev.' (Trevor to most people: Dad to us.) 'Switch me off if I say too much, but as a songwriter, I'm very keen to hear today's outcome. Someone's had the gall to sue the masters of AI.'

The crowd settled a bit. Some even smiled at us.

'Yeah, I heard about this,' Mum admitted. 'Seems a bit foolhardy.'

'Why?'

She ran her hands through her curly black hair. What she said was kind of like a question, 'Ehmmm … because history is full of… defeatists… but they all look pretty stupid, looking back… don't they?'

'AI on trial,' Dad said. 'Yeah, sounds a bit regressive.'

'OK, hear me out.' Virgil cleared his throat. 'Are you sure it's OK for me to…?'

'Well, it's not like we've got something else to do!' Mum laughed nervously.

'Excellent! So… you've used those words already – progress and regress. I think we all see ways in which the world has *re*-gressed to the dark ages, even *with* technology – sometimes because of it.' (I didn't understand, back then, but now I do.) He went on, 'We can see, from space, a crying child, but can't do anything about the war they're in. Social media platforms favour 'fake news' over fact. Algorithms pull the strings on our behaviour.'

'You've obviously rehearsed this!' Dad snorted. 'AI isn't social media, though.'

Mum asked, 'So… you agree with them on my side - 'Kill the machine!'?'

'Yes… and no. It's more nuanced than that.'

This time, her laughter sounded brighter- 'Isn't that the word that people use when they don't know what the hell they're trying to say?!'

'Nuanced?! Ha! You've got me there!' Virgil laughed as well. 'Let me ask *you*, then. What has AI brought by way of progress?'

'Are you asking *me* that question… with my line of work?!' Dad rolled his eyes.

'Yes.'

'Well, how long have you got?! Diagnostics, screening, radiography, new antibiotics… hmm… robotic surgery, vaccine development… patient triage...'

'I agree 100%.'

Mum and Dad looked at each other. 'So… you actually think… AI is *good?*' they asked between them.

'Yes…. *and* irredeemably evil.'

'What?!' Mum put a finger to her head and pulled a face. Dad snorted again.

Virgil didn't seem to notice. 'We have d*ifferent* issues here, conflated into one. And sadly, whenever that happens, people pick their tribes, start flinging mud. It can be used for good *or* bad, like any tool. That's why we desperately need legislation…'

Dad challenged him, 'Of course we know there's *potential* for bad. But you mean *now*, don't you?'

'AI is brilliant at defining… but there is that which defines *us*. We look down a microscope for the first… and we look to the cosmos, art, religion – I don't know - the transcendent… for the second. Rational thought can't explain some things we know we need – love, freedom… language around suffering… shared vulnerability.'

Mum was quick with her response, 'Well, isn't suffering the enemy? Aren't we trying to end it? Make us *less* vulnerable? And if some poet wakes up with a sore head, what's wrong with sparking his imagination over breakfast?'

'NO!'

They shrunk back from the phone.

'You sound… angry,' Dad observed.

'I'm FURIOUS! We've fallen for this thing, accepted a simulacrum.'

'What's a simulacrum?' I couldn't help asking.

'Ah, Beatrice, darling!' Mum turned round and touched my arm. 'I'm sorry! It's all a bit heated up front. Must be our ancestry!'

'What's a simulacrum?' I repeated.

'Well, sweetheart…' she looked to Dad for help. He turned away. 'It's... it's an imitation – something made to look very, very *like* another thing… but it's not that thing.' She winced at her own words.

'You mean a lie?'

'Thank you, Beatrice!' the phone blurted. 'Listen, it's three pm. You might want to check the radio.'

'You mean YOU want to…!' Mum guffawed.

'Yes, but we should all...'

Someone honked their horn behind us. We moved forward about fifty feet. Dad flicked through the entertainment options and chose 'FM', just in time for the beeps.

'THE NEWS AT THREE…

'A private jet has come down shortly after taking off from Glasgow airport. Witnesses describe an explosion. There were no survivors. And there are no reports of casualties on the ground. On board was Sal Artman, CEO for the world's leading artificial intelligence company. He had, only minutes before, been cleared of all charges at the high court. Over to Gayle, with the latest…' -

'Thank you, George. It is unusual for the police to use the term 'criminal act' from the start of an investigation. No-one yet has claimed responsibility. This has been a gruelling week for Mr Artman, but today, despite the unanimous verdict in his favour, he asked to speak. A microphone was quickly erected outside the courtroom -'

(It began to rain. I watched the drops merge with each other as they zig-zagged down the window – circles turning into bigger circles. That was the start of breaking out. And when he spoke, he spoke to me – the first of many times.)

'I hope you understand Midwest American! Thankyou for acknowledging the achievements of AI, today. The advances in medicine alone make for a brighter future than we dared imagine. Lives are being saved. The capacity to resolve deadlocks and improve all aspects of reality is so wonderfully GOOD - you'd sound like a crazy person to contest that!' He waited for the laughter to die down. 'So, why the detractors? Well, all the benefits
~~~

of AI seem to fall quite neatly into ONE broad category – analysis.'

'YEAH! This is what I was trying to…'

'Shhhh, Virgil!' Mum whispered angrily.

We missed the next few words –

'… scientific processes. But there is another form of human endeavour – synthesis, or creation – the reverse of analysis. This is a confession – three years ago a writer friend of mine was all out of ideas. He thanked me for the spark that AI gave his tired imagination. He began his next story. 'Very good', I thought.

'But then, the horror of it dawned on me, like something out of Dante's Inferno – ever decreasing circles. EXACTLY how much the idea (not even the work, but the IDEA behind it) is artificial, is how much the imagination shrivels. And this shrinking of the soul, multiplied however million times, is my nightmare now. My OWN imagination glimpsed a future in which every human need is met… but we can't see the point of living. And all the stories that we tell each other, the discoveries we make about ourselves, lose their power to hold death at bay.

'I've spent almost two years teasing apart the impact of AI on these two processes – analysis and synthesis. We need to celebrate the first… and destroy the second… before it destroys us. I pledge to begin exactly that, tomorrow morning, in Chicago. I hope others follow suit.'

Gayle finished her report, '*With those words, he left the building and passed through the teeming press into a car, which took him to the airport…'*

Another horn sounded behind us. Dad did not respond.

A lot has happened since that day. Did I say it's been a year?

What was unbelievable at first, I can't deny. *Now,* what is beyond belief is that it's *me* who's been entrusted with this message. WHY did he choose me? Well, I suppose it's got to be *someone* …

Today is my class presentation. And I'm scared. He says don't worry if they think I'm crazy. Very soon there will be proof that he's alive - he wasn't on that plane. He'll reappear, but when he does the cameras and flashing lights will turn him into myth again. So, first - the proof.

I'm practicing the last part of the talk, to get it perfect - split-second perfect. Over and over…

'In conclusion, I stake everything on what will happen in the next two minutes. This is the closing of an era… and the dawning of a new one. No intelligence was used in preparation for today… except my own. Thank you, Ms Jackson, for allowing me to speak now… *exactly* now... and for letting us bring phones to class today. I ask you all to switch them on… and begin the countdown.

Yours,
Dante's muse,
Beatrice
10,9,8 …'

■

The Look of Things

Chris Powici

i.m. Helen Lamb

I can't even guess the joy
you felt, kneeling on the raked earth
between the fence and shed
in old trainers and black jeans
sure of what the May sun meant
for any stubborn, scented life
and your secateurs' neat nip
made some flower I couldn't name
stand bright among the quiet ferns.

Instead, I'll walk to Sheriffmuir
lean against the broken gate
at the foot of Lairhill Wood
and do my best to say the look of things
cloud-soaked pines, wet bracken
moor grass swaying in the breeze
though words may fail me, even so.
I have watched the come-and-go
of wind and rain for years, and still
I hardly know the world.

A Braco Field

Chris Powici

For Kevin MacNeil

Rain is falling and always
a prayer being spoken
in the glint and swish
of broom and gorse
and meadowsweet
and always rain
is falling.

Coming to age

Grahaeme Barrasford Young

I'd be mouldy bones by now, a hundred years ago.
Time to admit age, time to wonder running out:
what tells 10,000 ants they must clamber
every egg to a different distant nest;
how does a bee feel finding an emptied flower;
why can two frenzied larks merge to hawk;
where is a mountain I can always climb;
do we sit in darkness, our switch lost;
when will our universe decide its fate,
what is that fate and does it matter?
Bees and ants and tardigrades don't care.

The poet accepts his place in the world's progress

Grahaeme Barrasford Young

These hills
will kill me,.

Have I strength
to let them take me:

not murder,
but a merging.

What we should really see

Grahaeme Barrasford Young

Nothing hard about winter
(iced water, chilled moss;
rodents safely tunnelled,
ptarmigan, deer, scrape;
eagles live on failure).

What is hard, are arid hills
under flattering blue,
without water, no seed,
absences fur and feather
do nothing to alleviate.

Death of grass ends them
more certainly than snow.

The poet seen as asteroid

Grahaeme Barrasford Young

Birth-cold, that place of memory,
emptiness unravelling pasts for fun,
contemptuous of relationships, discarding them,
making a fetish from each failed one,
carving a hollow so wide and high
warmth that might let connections grow
is lost in its space and ebbs to fear.

Cold rock, this place of memory,
elliptically curving your found sun,
so observers on its heights might predict
when, moving out of shadow,
its dense reheating core can melt,
let pain sink faster than its harm
and in molten rock transmute,
from magma chambers rise as love.

Song of the poet in a place that is not finding one who cannot be

Grahaeme Barrasford Young

certainty of voice, and time,
certainty of place, and smile,
certainty of hand, and touch,
certainty all treasures
are not worth any one of these,
certainty that is only dream

Poems by James Miller

Walking to Hawthornden

A magpie on a roof in Auchendinny
squawked at me, on foot, exploring.
A railway track had brought me here
down a long soft bed of dross and clay,
iron long gone, past deserted platforms
where willowherb waited for rain,
the rhythm of my feet steady as the wheels',
across a viaduct over the brown whorls
of the North Esk's shadowed underworld.

At the Dalmore paper mill, said a sign,
the last accident to stop work
fell twenty-seven days ago.
The young have pitbulls and brutal haircuts,
the old walk well-fed spaniels and recall
the last knell of pit boots, while the Army
fires a flare on the Pentlands, a single star
to swoop below its smoky mark.

Ben in his shop sells me Irn Bru
and Independence chocolate. Thus sugared,
on past the football pitch and crumbling towers,
with the late summer sun burning
on my shoulders – remember this heat
when winter comes – throwing my shadow forward
up the brae to Hawthornden.

Frosty morning thoughts

Ice ferns the kitchen window
delicately,
my breath caught in a web,
made visible.
I clean my teeth, spit, make tea
and think if ideas had dimensions
they would be this thick,
this delicate, a skin on glass,
as if God had a brainwave -
Uh-uh, so they think they're clever,
I give them sand,
they come up with glass.
Let's see what they make of this.
Ice ferns -
one of the small things
like an owl-voice trembling in the night
that tell you this is the world
before they disappear.

The empty boat

She floats, a shell,
the mast low on the casing,
the sail loose-folded canvas,
clear in the wood-curve
the builder's hand. The sea
tickles the ribstrakes
and she rises, remembering
the caress of the flood.

We laughed and laughed

We laughed and laughed the whole road home,
K, D, S, J, P and me.
I was the youngest, aged ten, tucked in a corner
and told to behave, but soaking up
the crack and the laughter, and laughing.
We laughed at nothing, laughed for laughing's sake,
ate chips and pies – 'My God, what pies!' –
it was K said that, and we laughed some more
and chomped the crisp crust and oozy meat
while the darkness opened to let the van through.
A half-hour moment in six lives.
K died on his ship in the Red Sea heat,
D fell over a quay in the dark,
J wrestled a croft towards a stroke.
S stayed childless. As for P, I lost track.
And me? I'm still chasing
my mysterious end, remembering
the half-hour moment and the laughter.

The map of the roads through my life

Rodrigo Bermejo, one of Columbus's crew, is held to be the first man to spy land in the famous voyage in 1492.

I've forgotten the first road
and a good few that followed;
they are marked on lost maps
in other minds.

Only the odd corner was flashed
before my eyes, and hangs on still
to the edge of memory's shelf,
treasured,

taken down, turned over from time to time,
wiped clean of dust, put back,
fragments of experience,
heirlooms.

Less distant roads are clearer.
They jump and dodge in sharper colours,
but despite the curves they end together,
where I am now.

I think of Rodrigo Bermejo,
cursing his captain in the moment
before he saw that horizon,
glinting in moonlight.

Was he falling into sleep
and welcome dreams of orange groves?
Anything better than this staring
at a heaving waste.

I imagine the shout, the rushing feet,
the end of the dread of falling
over the edge of the world.
The edge of the map.

It's not the fear of falling off
that troubles me. I live at the edge
but the edge keeps ebbing
as I come near.

Rodrigo came home with fame,
to the promise of a pension
he didn't get, and to his fate –
to be forgotten.

With a compass and a fair wind,
oceans can be crossed both ways,
the ship backtracking, smelling
its own wake,

and in the tack and gybe
a new course can be set,
a fresh try made to find
more new worlds

Seasons

In the space of one month, three friends died, two of 'natural causes' and one in a mountaineering accident on An Teallach.

Sunlight buttered the glen
as we drove to the wedding.
The birches wore fire.

The same sun three seasons on
scattered its bright coin
on the loch

as we sat on the warm grass
too many for the kirk to hold
and listened

to the tributes loud-speakered
from the lectern
to a life well-lived.

Death, you had no place
with us. You were elsewhere,
breaking another on your anvil.

Same week, under hustling clouds
May blossom shivered in the wind
and we mapped raindrops on our skin,
listening once more to tributes.

Another day, drizzle from a sky of lead
'The Flowers o the Forest'
and a slow walk to the graveyard.

Three friends in one month
is too many to lose,
too much alone with
the sad beauty of funerals.

The music, the words, the Word
He leadeth me beside the still waters,
He restoreth my soul.

Now, a walk alone,
the smell of cow parsley,
what we call hemlock.

Cold rain blues the hills,
an autumn come too soon,
hammering summer down.
There is nothing to do
but go home.

Poems by Bridget Khursheed & Jane Swanson

House of birds
Bridget Khursheed

Red mite minutes poised by the bantam shed
unnoticed

too close and they touch you
like a feather's claw

feathers are bad they make me cough
no breath and bed

but the eggs and their promise
are too much to resist

the hen straw another enemy to poke
itching embers raising blisters

pushed aside to find absent
reasons to be happy.

Waiting for the 06.28 at Tweedbank station
Bridget Khursheed

The station edge is all dapples and mews of cats
and buzzards.

There are pine trees and wild lupins
known as "the blue pink plants",

a puff of hawthorn;

if the sea came close it would be ticklish
on the rails but kind.

Instead the river and the sewage farm breed
flies and swallows that patter down

high-definition in the air again each oxygen speck.
Everything is full,

only the train is cancelled.

Kassandra
Bridget Khursheed

The words that force their way like fledglings
from my mouth they will fly
into a thicket of dust and green
shadow possibilities of growth
the smallest tree aphids and spiders spore breath
all the fertilities without any solution

there is no end to its protection and its misinterpretations
flight upwards is impossible
these little chicks fly home to a warm heart nest
in the smallest tree its rough bark familiar to their feathered heads

But they keep on flying out I cannot prevent any more
than future sight to know they will never reach
never sing to another.

River wandering
Bridget Khursheed

It's the shape of leaves that frees me
on this walk or the shape of trees
and the plod down the path
from hotel to riverbank between the yews.

Years ago this was a jaunt
for spa goers: the salt and mud hydration
all washed away by the river cobbles.
Treatments while couples flirt together.

Gents look at absent salmon.
The enthused medic at the forefront
of watery healing stares at ripples
and their birch branch frame

infinitely re-picturing.
Meanwhile I look at the toffee-coloured
highland bull as he runs away again.
The hedges need a clip. Dogs chase sheep.

An egret every month of Sundays
flies upstream above a slosh of wild geraniums
past the bottle bridge's gun emplacement
and the water that returns us to us.

The Cuckoo – a haibun
Jane Swanson

The hollow, timbered two-note sound of a male cuckoo chimes out amongst trees bursting with new leaves. Cuckoos are masters of trickery and masters of mimicry. They are nest-pirates who lay their eggs in nests belonging to meadow pipits and dunnocks and dupe them into raising the cuckoo chicks as their own. Cuckoo chicks are nest-wrestlers, they grapple with the host chicks and send them tumbling to their death on the ground. With their yellow-orange mouths stretched wide, the cuckoo chicks demand food with throated calls that sound like whistles, creaking gates, and flutes to mimic the calls of a brood of hungry host chicks. Why can't these birds see what the cuckoos are doing, why do they fall for the same trick each year? Is there is a message here? What is happening in the world around us that we aren't aware of, how are we being duped? The cuckoo calls again, this time it sounds as if he is saying 'fools-you, fools-you.'

A cuckoo's call warns
with a hollow timbered sound,
be wary of tricksters.

Dead wife's wood
Bridget Khursheed

It's larch and light inside
no heart-shaped oak acreage

or weeping willows
There must be a story.

Where Manor meets Drumelzier
and Dawyck the burn flows

down by a small cairn grave
a woman fleeing massacre

to die in a lee corner
down from Posso Rig.

Meanwhile Murderdean is a bit of the A7
near Newtongrange station.

It is not romantic to
remember violent death:

with three more Murdercleuchs here,
it is a clear warning not to walk this way.

But today goldcrest are the only alerts
flit deep in green.

Cuckoo chick being fed by reed warbler. Per Harald Olsen Wikimedia Commons

Poems by George Gunn and Cáit O'Neill McCullagh

Midwives
George Gunn

The Dunbar maternity hospital stands lonely
behind its steeple-jump of sycamore trees
no-one is born there anymore
no young midwives walk its corridors
in their blue perfect uniforms
the kitsch Balmorality of the hospital tower
points to a heaven
empty of angels
now all mothers must go to Inverness
for the mystery & the pain

the sandstone walls turn yellow
in the rising morning light
the small windows like half-open mouths
hold still the generations of voices
which formed their first sounds
beneath the grey slate roof
my brother & I gurgled there
like two seal pups
on a Pentland skerry

on weekday afternoons the Dounreay dayshift
drives past into Atomic City
their cars their contradiction
& their curse
neat rows of new-built houses
drop down to the river
which flows on shining
in its Viking sail
the dayshift will park their BMW's
outside their numbered nuclear doors

I run my finger across the index of my life
as I used to across the Dunbar's iron railings
& in my mind's eye I see
those maternity doors
swinging open
& my mother stepping out
with her pals & sister midwives
reassuring & chatty
these were the true deliverers
they held us all in their hands
their vigilance our guarantee
our breath their success
life & death on starched sheets
& polished linoleum floors

outside the main gate
there is a large flagstone plaque
celebrating the dead
English Queen's diamond jubilee
two decades of Caithness rain
have rotted the wooden seating slats
so no-one can sit & contemplate the Empire
at least the weather is republican

down town in Top Joe's & the Comm
on the TV lunchtime news
children are carried out
from bombarded hospitals
like wounded nativity dolls
such is the carnage of Gaza
where they will not break
or surrender or stop struggling
despite the thirty six kilogrammes
of high explosives for every
man woman & child in Palestine
provided by the US
their hospitals blasted to bits
ours silent & empty
like the stellar remnant
of a black dwarf

high above the clouds
I hear the exhausted honking
of the first skeins of the wild geese
returning South from Iceland
their melancholic navigation
echoes off the Dunbar hospital
we could all be in outer space

across the vast rolling stolen country
players move towards & actors give
the real story of unloved hospitals
& the emptied regions
where money attempts to alter time
& the classic Highland view
from the luxury hotel window
is valued more than people's lives
as weak government caves in
to the developer's plan for division & injustice

the wild geese fly beyond the hospital tower
their musical democracy hangs in the air
the remembered voices of the midwives transform
a pibrochd from across the ocean
into the migrationary blood & feathers
of being born

On Cnoc na Forsaich
George Gunn

When the south wind blows warm
with French & Spanish air
cliffs & firths & headlands
light up russet & ochre
in the April Sun
the sea bleeds blue into her native green
the ploughed & the breather fields
shine from the shochad's song
as it whistles with a dropping twist
of black & white feathers
the lilting curlew covers
the bog & the croft land
with her lonely welcome
these birds assemble memories
as if from nowhere
creating somewhere out of sound
staking their being on this hill
each beat & rhythm
proving if proof is needed
that instinct is thinking
& the universe is singing
of the unfinished world

Lines on a Caithness beach
Cáit O'neill McCullagh

—after Sonnet LXVI by Pablo Neruda

Hey Pablo! ¿Did nobody tell you?
Someone has carved your lines
in Sannick. Lithic lyric in rotten rock.
In stone that curtains this county. Si,
escrito en español. But (in a language
I don't want for your mouth; for North)
they might say this, that 'a soul; a man,
all fleero-wrapped, is falling—
into a sewer'.

The sea, Pablo. It makes
one streekit archipelago of us all. Wane
& flow. Your words; this moon: Janus—
one face alone turned to the daysky. A blear-
print on flaxflower blue. Yet … she cannot
be uninscribed. Water will not wash from us
what was wrought in *fire & blood*. O m'eudail,

did you imagine yourself another Keats? Ebbed-up
in love & once, at Cromarty; before the sea bore
him home (only to ringlet him in dulse, in Rome).
Scrieve new sonnets. Streak the flanks of Wick's
Trinkie quines, salmon-blushed, with tinta-de-
calamar. Let La Luna be soft light upon you.

In 2013, the BBC reported that a line-and-a-half of Pablo Neruda's poetry had been carved into the Old Red Sandstone at Sannick Beach. It reads 'Cae el alma del hombre al pudridero/con su envoltura frágil'.

Swan Song: Saint Cecilia's, Ardullie
Cáit O'neill McCullagh

for L V

Hidden in what light winter's creep can spare,
this melody of closeness—you, incessant:
the whooper swan, wings beating to tender

night's thickened air. Snow happit, the firth sounds
her silence upon me. This closure of day things—
pure chant of woodlark, unvaried; the clean cut

of robin chirr. I turn my dial south-south-east
to Croft na Creich. Your hearth: tintinnabula
of cups; spoonchime; tea; frosted earth unsullened,

our laughter. Each planet that pierces this blanket sky:
a bright ringing bowl. We hold the blue note too;
that quartertone of grief that has us shoogled

upon this earth, cry it: how in Kabul women
are made unshapes of cloud. How they are songsisters—
call & response—that not one should remain a bell unrung.

We'll mind on pomegranates, mo charaid, slakit lips
& listen to An Eala sing. Strong her straightened neck.

The Bairn

Story by Lesley Buchan Donald

It wis the mornin aifter the storm I fund her, lying at the high tide mark, tangled up in lang tongues o wrack. The wind blew in aff the sea liftin her hair, white as the sand whaur she lay. First I thocht she wis drount, bit whan I pit oot ma haund an touched her face her een flew open an she lookit at me. I've nivir seen een the like; grey an green as the watters o the Minch. Barfit she wis an her linen shift naethin bit a tattrel, bit she didna seem feart tae find a tall chiel leanin ower her.

"Lets get ye inside whaur it's dry an wairm" I said.

Syne I happit her in ma jaiket an cairried her hame whaur I laid her in the big chair neist the range.

"I'm awa tae get ma neebor. I'll nae be lang" I telt her.

Bit she wis awready asleep.

Mairi wis a distant cousin o ma faither, an kept sheep on her croft. Times she rentit oot her spare room fur a wee bit extra spendin money. She wis pinin oot her washin whaun I arrived: sheets snappin and crackin in the wind. Afore I wis half-wye through ma tale she was in the hoose and scartin aboot in her press. She piled awthin in her laundry basket an gied it tae me. A pint o milk, a loaf an some new-baked scones that were coolin by the windae went intil her shopping bag an the pair o us hurried back tae ma croft.

We sat talkin quate-like, watchin the bairn as she slept.

"She looks like her" whispert Mairi.

"Like who?" I askit.

"Elise of course. D'ye nae see it?".

Wi a suddentie the room seemed ower warm an stairnies daunced afore ma een.

"Here. Drink this" said Mairi pourin me a dram. "Yer an awfa colour".

Elise. Elise. Nigh on seven years sin she'd chapped on the door o ma cottage. Near midnicht it wis. There she stood in the simmers dim, her reid curls blawin aboot her like tongues o flame.

"They telt me at the ferry ye hid a room tae rent" she said.

"Ah, it's White Sand Cottage ower there you'll be needin" I explained pointin tae the buildin at the ither end o the beach. "Bit Mairi'll hae been abed these last twa hours. Ye've surely nae walked a the wye fae the ferry?"

Tae this day I dinna ken whit happened. Maist folk on the island said I wis an uncoth sort o chiel. Bit I couldna very weel leave her staunin there, syne I maskit a pot o tea an we sat newsin by the range aw nicht. I telt her a aboot ma life an how I wis pairt Norwegian on ma faither's side. Noo I think back on't she telt me verra little aboot her kith an kin. Bit we lauched a lot. That wisna something I'd done fur a lang time. I'd shut up ma hert whaun ma mither an faither hid bin lost in a car crash. I cam hame fae the Uni fur the funeral an nivver gaed back, instead takin ower the faimly croft. Workin masel tae numb exhaustion maist days helpit me tae sleep. Weeks would gang by wi oot me seein onybody ither than Mairi or Andra the postie.

By breakfast time I wis heid ower heels in luv.

Elise nivver went tae lodge at White Sands Cottage. We workit the land the gither, gaitherin seaweed an diggin it intil the sile. We plantit tatties, neeps an kale an took the wee boatie oot tae fish. Aw the while she would sing; strange wordless sangs like the wind in the machair. Oot on the rocks in the bay the seals seemed tae lift their heids an listen.

She sewed a quilt for the big box bed whaur we slept curtained aff fae the rest o the warld. Somewye she hid captured the sea in the greys, greens and blues she'd used. On cauld mornins I'd jump oot o bed, kittle up the range an pit the kettle on, afore divin back aneath the covers wi her. She'd surface whan the kettle stairtit tae whustle, gie me a last kiss syne slip on her goonie an swing her lang legs ower the side o the bed. She was fair skinned like maist reid heids wi a scatterin o freckles on her face. An how I lo'ed her.

Aftimes I felt ma heart would burst wi it. Ae nicht, late December, we were cooried doon the gither whan she whispered in ma lug that she wis late. The baby was due in June, almaist a year since she'd chapped ma door in the middle o the nicht. We hid sich plans. Lyin the gither at nicht we'd talk aboot names for the bairn an I'd lay ma haund on her belly tae feel it turnin ower.

I bocht her a siller luckenbooth oan a chain an she wore it every day. She wis wearin it the last time I saw her. We were oot fishing near the rocks where the seals lay. It hid been a glorious spring day. The sun wis glistenin aff the waves an Elise was leanin ower the side haulin in her line. A freak wave claucht the boatie an whaun I lookit she wis gaun. Nae splash or soond at aw. I cried her name; rowed back an forart frantic like. The seals watched me wi their roon black een. The lifeboat turned oot bit she wis nivver seen again.

The first week I walkit the beach morn til nicht. Times I jist stood an screamed oot the pain intil the wind. Why hid God taken awbody I lo'ed? Doun-sinking cam ower me like a fug. Neebors cairied the boat up ayont the reach o the sea whaur it lay, pent peelin in the simmer sun. I stopit warkin on the croft; hardly ate onything; didna shave or wash ma claes. Aftimes I didna rise til the aifterneen.

Ae morn in September Mairi came ower. She needed help wi the hairst. I tellt her I wisnae fit tae dae it. I turned fae the door, bit she followed me intil the hoose. She threw open the windae an pit the kettle on the range.

"Awa an get washed an shaved " she ordered. " I canna manage the sheep on ma ain. An Dougie is comin wi the float this aifterneen".

That nicht for the first time sin I'd lost Elise I slept in the box bed. Bittie by bittie I got masel the gither. I stairtit tae gaither findins fae the beach; sea-scoured driftwid, bits o auld fish boxes, sea-glass an shells. In the evenin I pit them the gither tae mak wind-chimes thit glinkit an tingelt in the sea breezes. The sound brocht tae mind her singin.

Mairi jossled me oot o ma dwam. The bairn wis awake an reachin oot tae me. She uncurled her fingers like an anemone an there wis the luckenbooth. For a mintie I couldna breath. She slippit it intil ma haund. Ma heid wis filled wi the roar o the ocean, an then I heard her. As clear as if she stood aside me. I heard Elise.

"Ah ma luv, I'm heart sorry fur aw the pain I've gien ye. I tried sae mony times tae warn ye I wis leavin. I hid tae gang back tae ma ain folks tae birth oor child. An noo I maun bide here, in this form. Bit oor dochter should hae a better life on the land. I gied her the name Mara fur she is of the sea; half selkie, half human".■

Mapping. without a name

Beth McDonough

The Burn; that definite article to big up
some ordinarily sluggish trickle-by filth.
Nonetheless *The* Burn could sometimes host

minnows of sorts. Fickle types
which your tottering self persuaded into nets,
rubbed against drifts of bright tressy weeds.

Those that survived their day of jam-jar life
did well, and were eyed, mysterious. You never learned
if they liked tap water or just *The* Burn's slopped own.

But then, there was a pipe to circus across
next to the barbed wire armoured one, which
was more awkward to balance over.

After days of rain, in spate, *The* Burn
rushed brown. For those sun-shined playtimes
you sat beside it with a friend. Let's pretend

you were in *Jane Eyre*, or *The Chalet School*
perhaps. Or what of the nighttime sledging fear
when jumped runners sparked magic from the drain?

All so fast – and you knew *The* Burn lurked *some*where. Stopping
was impossible. Another bank nurtured
your *Faraway Tree*. You didn't need to meet

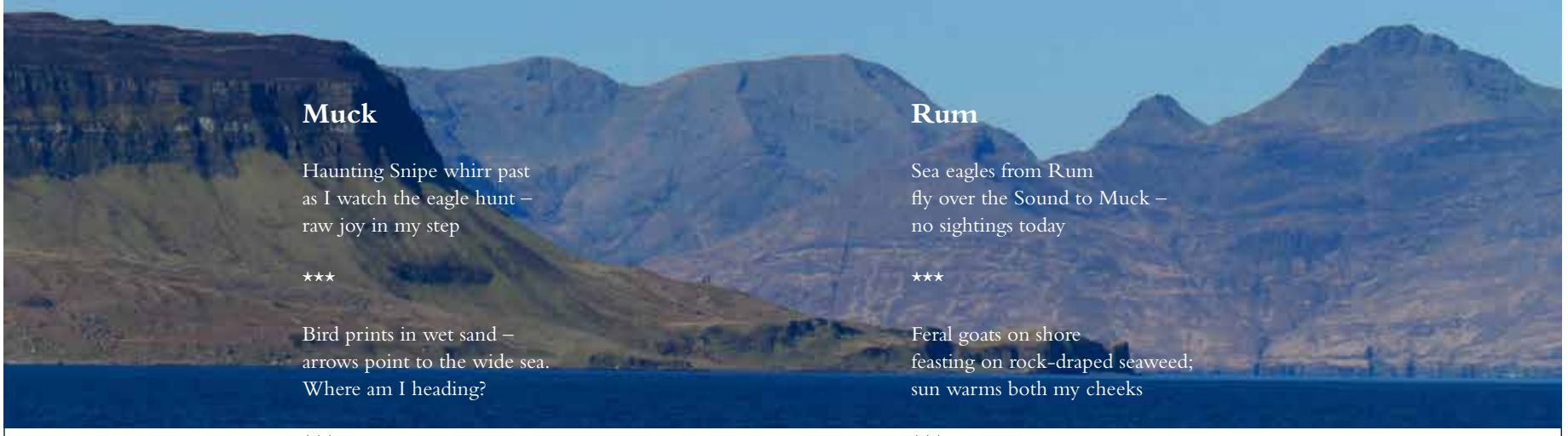
Moonface, or be invited in. He lived there.
That shingle beach underneath. And what was
some standing stone. Which really couldn't have been.

That's gone. The tree's long-felled. A new school
blocks the snow slope and the burn's re-routed,
mostly channelled below cindered ground.

You've studied maps. Learned the burn
has an official name. Of course it had
even then, before you lost it, on its way

Small Isles Summer Solstice Haikus – Summer 2024

by Jane Lewis



Muck

Haunting Snipe whirr past
as I watch the eagle hunt –
raw joy in my step

***

Bird prints in wet sand –
arrows point to the wide sea.
Where am I heading?

***

Swim round Corelag,
my Muck morning ritual –
clear turquoise thoughts

***

Bred just to be shot,
young pheasants follow our steps
like the Pied Piper

***

Rock pools are cloudy –
toxic substrate near fish farm.
Heart gulps at the sight

***

Soundscape is all bird:
Peewit, Skylark, Tern and Snipe –
find my soaring song

***

Gallanach, Port Mor,
Glean Mhartean, Beinn Airean;
machair and meadow

***

Lamb Point at sunset,
angry Arctic Terns dive bomb –
we all protect nests

***

A ewe leads two lambs
across the sweep of white sand –
go first or follow?

***

From this thrift-specked rock
I see seven more islands,
craggy as my mind

***

Rum has vanished now
in a haze of summer rain;
Eigg following soon

Rum

Sea eagles from Rum
fly over the Sound to Muck –
no sightings today

***

Feral goats on shore
feasting on rock-draped seaweed;
sun warms both my cheeks

***

Dipping in the burn,
solstice sun long since risen –
wash my mountain mind

***

So many red deer,
births, deaths, movement all studied –
tough life for young trees

***

Fish farm expansion?
Flip chart notes in Kinloch Hall –
Don't heed the greenwash!

***

Falling in a bog,
softer than in a river –
today I did both

***

Halleval, Harris,
Dibidil and Trollabhal;
gneiss and sandstone

***

From Guirdil bothy
double sunset on Canna –
find my glitter path

***

Heft, heart and courage
fill these wild mountain bothies –
hear my prayer of thanks!

***

From Kilmory Bay
we gaze out to Loch Coruisk;
sunshine on Elgol

***

Muck looks so tiny
from the high cuillins of Rum
it fits in my hand

Curiosity

Story by Isabel Miles

"Danger. High Entropy Zone!" The notice had been stuck on the lab door years ago, by some previous generation of the Prof's protégés. It was an apt enough description considering that half a dozen recklessly enthusiastic physicists, all in their early twenties, spent up to sixteen hours a day there. Joe List and his fellow research students had left it up, to keep stray visitors out.

This evening, Joe was alone in the lab. The rest were still in the snug of The Sonsie Quark, which, until the Prof had discovered two new fundamental particles, and labelled them thrawn and sonsie, had been the St Machar Bar. James, only a day or so away from his doctorate, had landed a post at CERN II and Joe, with his other fellow researchers, had been giving him a send-off. The others were probably on their fifteenth round by now but despite half a dozen pints, and a matching number of tequila shots, Joe felt clear headed. When his alarm had blasted out Ode to Joy at full volume, he had responsibly drained his glass and slipped out. Back at his work bench, he'd taken his nine pm readings, then topped up his cold traps with liquid nitrogen. Work done, he was feeling cheerful, sure that James's success augured well for his own future, and ready for another pint of Black Hole Ale, The Sonsie Quark's speciality.

As Joe headed out, the dim green lights in the dark matter research area flickered and he glanced across. The padlock on the door to the normally sealed cubicle hung open. Victoria Know-it-all must have missed a beat in her, usually ruthless, efficiency. The newest addition to the Prof's research group had inherited most of her kit, and all of that ghoulishly lit subsection of the lab, from James three months ago and, since then, the door had always been locked in her absence.

In Joe's opinion, Victoria was unnecessarily secretive. She might have got a first at the finest university in the United Americas, but the rest of them weren't stupid. If she hadn't been so possessive about her precious project, they might actually have been able to help her with it. As it was, all he or anyone else apart from the Prof, knew was that she was building on James's and the Prof's groundbreaking research, while taking it in a more practical direction. Apparently she was planning to save the world by isolating a form of matter with no measurable properties except mass, and deploying it to reverse global warming and eliminate pollution. How, Joe had no idea, but he wanted to find out.

He pushed the door open and entered the forbidden domain. Equipment was humming quietly and every minute or so a figure on a dial shifted. Joe tried to fathom what she was measuring. That looked like some kind of atmospheric monitor. He leaned closer and, as his beery breath hit it, the dial jumped up by several digits. He backed off. If he messed up her experiment he'd get endless grief.

Trying to breathe lightly, Joe moved over to the bench. An empty beaker was sitting on what appeared to be a balance. The reading on the dial was 121.14793, obviously the beaker's weight in grams. As he watched, it changed to 121.14794; the beaker seemed to be gaining weight at a miniscule rate. Joe wondered if she'd set up some kind of field in an attempt to detect dark matter. After all, its invisible particles, if indeed it existed as particles, might be passing through the lab all the time, like neutrinos.

He pushed the door open and entered the forbidden domain. Equipment was humming quietly and every minute or so a figure on a dial shifted.

Cautiously, Joe lowered his finger into the beaker. He was not surprised to feel nothing for it was empty. Then, as his finger approached the bottom of the beaker, the feeling changed from nothing to nothingness. Joe had just enough time for this thought to flash through his brain, for his fingertip had become a plughole through which he could feel himself draining. The green light went out.

It was after ten next morning when the first hung over PhD student entered the lab, and nearly noon before Victoria appeared. She got out her keys then noticed the undone padlock. Cursing her own carelessness, she went in and closed the door behind her. Everything seemed as she'd left it. Then she saw the dial, 136.48912 kilos. It should have read between 121.4 and 121.6. Her heart leapt. The intense gravity wave bombardment had worked after all. OK, the effect had been delayed, but her theory must be fundamentally sound. Yay! She did a quick sum in her head. This scale of carbon removal must have cleaned up Old Aberdeen's entire atmosphere. However, the rate of mass gain seemed to have gone back to what it had been before, so the effect was temporary. It was sod's law that it had happened overnight and she'd missed it, but experiments are repeatable. If she could modify dark matter to absorb carbon at that rate once, she could do so again. An image of a Nobel prize, even if it would have to be shared with the Prof, flitted across her mind, but she pushed it aside. There was still much work to do. And now she had an extra 15 kilos of dark matter to play with. Victoria tried not to show her delight. She didn't want to attract attention yet.

Everyone was feeling rough that day, and it was hardly remarkable that Joe's bench remained empty. He was a bit of a light-weight and no one had been surprised when he'd left the bar early. Late afternoon, the Prof stormed in, looking for Joe. He had a paper to submit that required Joe's data and the slacker hadn't turned up for their meeting. Victoria's heart plummeted as she did a rapid mental calculation. Joe would have weighed about 80 kilos, fifteen of which would have been carbon.■

Hope Street

Story by Jennifer J Henderson

Adam and Zane had arranged to meet at their favourite restaurant on Hope Street at noon. Because of the recently changed pandemic rules, they have to reschedule, zooming and supping different flavours of soup in their respective residences. Carrot and coriander for Adam, minestrone for Zane.

"Did you get my emails?" asks Adam, trying to read the spines of the books on the shelf behind Zane's unruly mop of dark hair.

"Every last one of them," replies Zane, trying to hide his dismay at the stark white walls in Adam's background.

"Fortune favours the brave, we need to go for this!" says Adam.

"Gene therapy for truth telling – really? How's that going to work, exactly? I know you've got a genetics PhD, but it sounds bloody ambitious to me."

"Just you wait and see; all I need is for you to fund the lab and the marketing, I'll do the rest."

"Knowledge is power, eh? Let me tell you something, Adam, money is even more powerful."

"Maybe so, sometimes, but in this case I hold all the cards. No-one is going to be telling lies in three generations' time once I've got this treatment rolled out. Of course, we won't be around to know if it's completely successful, but that's part of the beauty of it."

"Part of the beauty – so what's the other part?"

"Quite simply, it's just added to the atmosphere, so we all breathe it in. Release it in batches at certain points all over the world, simultaneously, and wait for it to circulate in the air."

"So what's the downside?"

"There is no downside, unless you take into account the fact that there's no legislation that covers this kind of thing, so it all has to be done below the radar."

"Unlike you, to be doing something illegal, Adam."

"Very unlike me, I know, but I just can't stomach all the horrific lying that has become so prevalent in recent times. Why not do something about it – make the world a better place?

"Exciting times ahead then, Adam, when do you want to start work in the lab?"

"You won't regret this, Zane; if anyone finds out about it we might even be nominated posthumously for a Nobel Prize!"

Zane sups the last of his soup and makes a very significant online bank transfer to his friend's account. ■

Poems by Donald Adamson,Andrew Sclater & Nick Allen

A Lane Leeterature
Donald Adamson

Thir's Pictish nems cairved in stane
but nae sentences. Or just the yin –
Iirann uract cheuc chrocs, whase owersettin
wuid be 'Iirann made this cross.'

Did Iirann – if yon wis his nem –
or hers, whae kens? – conseeder in the pride
o his craift that this wuid be his maist
unique memorial?

A think o him, the dings and dunts
o his chisel, the bonny howks and straiks
and A wunner if he'd a norrie
o whit he hud achieved –

creatin the lane leeteratur
o his people in fower wuirds,
leavin a testimony, a text for scholarts
tae wrastle wi thretteen centuries oan.

Maist like naw. His chisellin tool
wis his anely pen, and he vailyied mair
the pairmanence o stane, no wuirds
in a leid that wuid pass, as aa leids dae.

Flooer tae Flooer
Donald Adamson

'Nae man's an island?' Mebbe
but mair A'd say we're jined,
man, wumman, ilka yin o us,
like in yon gowan cheen A seen
croonin the heid o a lass
on the strand o a loch lang syne
on Sanct Johan's Day.

A bonny sicht it wis, wi licht
skinklin on the waves
and aye when midsimmer comes
A hae mind o her,
the face o her, her heid
and the flooers turnin upwaird
tae the sun.

Maiters o Importance
Donald Adamson

A cannae mind o the war.
Still there's things A ken, like
at hame we hud tatties frae oor yaird
and eggs frae oor ain hens:
mebbe there wis just aboot enough
but naethin mair.

Tae oor bit wis sent preesoners
o war tae help wi howkin: like Carmello
that missed his ain bambini
and made a fuss o me
while Wilhelm barely said aucht
but efterwards wis mindit: 'A grand worker'.

A mind o names, neebors and relations
and try tae guess at whit wis gaun roon
their heids, tae win an inklin o their thochts:
frienships, faains-oot and whae-kens-whit,
as important as the war, gettin on
or else no, wi the next hoose alang –

aa passed intae time, and left wi me
as voices, tones, speakin guid or ill,
sindered frae their source, like whan ye see
a field wi hanks o wool
hingin frae barbed wire, but wi nae soun
sauf the souch o gress, the yowes are gane.

Poem at the Simmer Solstice
Donald Adamson
(In Memoriam JK, screiver, dee'd aged 102)

Whan a bodie gaes frae us
whase days on airth hae been lang
and fu o love and creativity
and jye gien tae ithers
dule at the passin seems unnecessar:
mair like we'll dicht a tear or twae
and say 'truly, yon's a life weel lived'
and, gratefu, wish God speed.

Yit there's a pairt o us
that in the perly lucent licht
o a midsimmer mornin
leuks ontae the mirror o the loch
and disnae say 'Eneuch,
noo let's hae the dreich days drawin in'
raither 'Gin licht as braw as this
wuid nivver end.'

Wi that much gaun on
Donald Adamson

(John 20:15 … She, supposin him tae be the gairdener, says tae him, Sir, gin ye cairried him frae here, tell me whaur ye hae laid him, and A wull tak him awaa)

They friens that are noo
lost tae me
A'd want tae meet again
in a gairden
the wey a wumman met a man
amang the burrowin ruits
and swellin buds
o the bit they cry
the Skull Place
and tuik him for a gairdener
wi aa that resurrection gaun on
and a wheelbarrae beside.

Old McNeillie
Andrew Sclater

Old McNeillie on his bike
never before or after
anything like
that singleminded direction
in a man with eggs
to sell

No one ever really
thought McNeillie
was quite
the full half-shilling
his trousers all frayed
and wet

Wet with the roads and hedges
wet with the tears
he'd wept for
nobody knowing
his father had laid his mother flat
up there in her attic room

at the top of his house

and Jim now nothing for that.

Where are you Seppo Vesterinen?

Andrew Sclater

i.m. SV ce n'est qu'un début — continuons le combat!
(street slogan, Paris mai 68)

You came here from the other world,
breathing risen mist from trees
and lakes I never knew, but felt,
beside you in these Paris streets,

mapped out for us by mapping cheats
who narrowed them with their deceits—
So were we on this map at all?
Sebastopol,

the boulevard of battle pain
still runs into the rainfull Seine
and Austerlitz is plagued by trains
rumbling in and out again.

From where and how did we come here
to do our thing and then forget?
There was an altered atmosphere
arising from a cigarette.

Where are you, Seppo Vesterinen?

The ancient train groans on through grime,
the station clocks now never chime,
the windows have gone black. This line is awfuller
than what it was we knew. The whirr

and squeal of buckled wheel-rims grate
on rails and, jerking, we accelerate
then screech into a siding to await
the passing trains of '68.

Each hangar by this line is grey.
It is a dismal Russian scene.
It's somewhere-we-have-never-been
but also yesterday.

Where are you, Seppo Vesterinen?

All aspects of this steppe are flat.
There's not a willow doesn't lean.
I promise this is accurate,
I *do* know what I mean.

You may have died. For all I know
you may have spread your wings.
The canary that you bought still sings
in stairways where I go—

But still the train with the chafing wheels
sprays smuts across the Elysian fields,
and cobbles grunt at my steel-rimmed heels.
I need the key to what's concealed…

Come back, we'll travel hand-in-hand
across the sky of the Northern Land
and from such vantage understand
how all we loved has since been banned...

Where are you Seppo Vesterinen?

Evening Light by Feforvann

Andrew Sclater

For Nico

It came across the lake at ten to nine,
a weightless gold uncertainty encasing spruce and pine

it glowed in silence, then it rose to shine
as only it, in its diffuse intensity, can shine

as nothing else you know can ever come so strongly on, then go
and sink to where the water is, unmentionably slow,

to where the birches' branches catch the last of what is bright
and we ourselves become subsidiary to sight

which is itself foreshortening towards the coming night
as both of us turn tiny in the dimming light.

The House on the Cliff

Andrew Sclater

This is the house they cleaned before
they died. The roof's now in, the door's
swung off. They cleaned the house with broom
and mop. They tidied every room.
Their windows gleamed across the field.
Kindness to the house is what healed
their pain. Or so it's said. The Lord
looked out above their bed. Mice gnawed
one hole in the brown skirting board.
Just one. The west wind clawed and clawed
at gutter, lum and fencing post—
they lost a slate or two at most.
The mice have had her wedding dress.
Which is a sort of tidiness.

The Bergen train

Nick Allen

it is hard to describe the precision with which
the light that cuts between mountains is thrown
on to the valley floor scoring hard-edged shadows
sharp across the frozen lake and smoking river
the great flats of snow peppered with tracks
of animals long gone how barns are always red
in Norway and how every house has a small outbuilding
just for cut wood how a bridge over a dry bed confirms
the absence of a stream how we saw a loping hare
move through a garden how in the higher branches of firs
clotted nests of snow await some fiendish brood
while birches bend and bend and bend under snow
like the poor faced with the relentless grasping of the rich
and how the great dark forests might yet be home to wolves

A Great Left Hook

Story by Kate Nicol

'You're going to have to start shutting the door. There's no two ways about it.'

I stared at a tiny white hair clinging to a wrinkled shred of orange peel on the rim of a jar of Chivers Olde English; it was an unattractive prospect but better than staring at Granny Mack.

Staring was her forte. And I knew that if she sensed a challenge it would set her right off.

Funny how marmalade goes thick like that, I thought. You could practically sole your wellies with it…

'Och! I've been dirling in there since 1966 and never shut the door once.'

Granny Mack was especially frightening when she was on the defensive. I winced as she slammed the hook, which had replaced her left hand since a childhood accident with a scythe, into the scarred leatherette back of her favourite armchair – her only armchair, in point of fact - by the fire. I suppose anyone else might not have winced. They might have jumped clean out of their skin and rushed headlong for the door, but I didn't, because I was accustomed to the ways of Granny Mack. I won't say I was inured to them. I couldn't, for example, ever fully relax my guard; one had to be emotionally braced, always, because one simply never knew. Let us say that I had become sufficiently familiar with the early warning signs and likely conversational trigger points to enable me to weave in and out of her rages, ducking and diving, so to speak, and avoiding the hook-slammings, by and large.

'Well I think it's definitely time you started.'

'Michties be here! What on earth for?'

'You've been seen.'

'Ach away and dirt.'

My nerve was failing me, so I bent down and pulled a 'Daily Record' from a dusty pile of papers spilling out of the half of the sideboard with the broken door, otherwise known as The Black Hole.

I'd been worrying about Granny Mack for some time. It was difficult to tell with someone like her, and there was no doubting that she was a tough character, or at least appeared to be, what with being a hard-working widow crofter and having a metal hook for a left hand and all, but I was pretty sure that she was starting to lose the plot in a major way. Granny Mack talked about a lot of things that sounded convincing on the surface because of the way she said them, glaring at you as she did with her one remaining hand on her bony hip and a roll-up sticking out of the side of her thin-lipped, wrinkled mouth, pink floral pinny fastened with an unlikely bow round her skinny waist, skinny brown legs braced in fight-or-flight readiness; but mostly they simply couldn't have happened. Not the way she told it.

'That paper will do in the toilet so don't be getting marmalade on it. Stick it on the nail next time you go out.'

'I was about to do just that.'

'Standards dearie. We might be on a far-flung outpost, but this is still the British Isles, for goodness sake.'

That wasn't Granny Mack losing the plot. That was Granny Mack being Granny Mack. She didn't believe in spending on proper toilet paper - or on proper anything for that matter. And now that I'd been living with her for six months, neither did I. We wiped our bottoms, if we bothered to wipe them at all, on junk mail, council tax demands and copies of the Daily Record hoarded in the Black Hole. Milk spilt on top of the fridge would be left until it hardened into a yellow-green crust which could be scraped off with a knife, or indeed Granny Mack's left hook, unless the cat got to it first. In which case all to the good, and it saved us a job; not that it was the sort of job that would be top of our priority list. Not that we had such high-flown, pointless things as priority lists. Muck trailed into the cottage on muddy shoes would be left there and trodden into what was still, technically, a carpet, leaving a shining patina of filth.

I drained my cracked cup of tea down to the last half undrinkable inch, dark brown and soupy with leaves, and replaced it in the cracked saucer.

'Daily Record' in hand I headed towards the front door, which was half open. It was almost always half open, except when there was a storm. Outside, an ancient, yellow-eyed ginger cat was perched on top of a rusting, abandoned fridge, staring vacantly at four scrawny brown hens scratching in the dirt between clumps of rough grass and fading daffodils for who-knew-what. Next to the fridge was a dwindling coal heap, and next to that were the ruins of a concrete coal bunker with nettles and foxgloves growing through the rubble.

Beyond the area at the front of the cottage was a narrow burn where otters sometimes wandered. It was bordered by a stretch of reedy grass thick with bog cotton and flag irises, and after fifty feet or so became wider, reedier and boggier before tumbling off a two hundred foot cliff onto black, barnacle-encrusted rocks. Beyond the rocks roared the dark green sea, turquoise on sunny days, and beyond that, the horizon, and an impenetrable line of grey haze where the Outer Isles were.

Nobody ever went to the Outer Isles except trash and dirt, according to Granny Mack, and that was another one of the things she said that couldn't possibly be true.

To the right of the house, several yards behind it and directly by the burn as it oozed out of the peat bogs on the hill, stood a tarred wooden hut with a rusting corrugated iron roof secured with ropes salvaged from fishing gear and weighted at the ends with large boulders; the word TOYLET was painted boldly on the black door in peeling white paint. This housed the hens, in a perfunctory kind of way, as well as a fully-functional (some of the time) flushing lavatory. A neighbour from over the way called Donald the Shore had installed the lavatory in 1966, plumbing it in via the burn, being the sort who liked doing helpful things for a pound or two, and indeed it was just the very dab according to most people hereabouts; they enjoyed trying out the flush and admiring the privacy of it all, although Granny Mack still couldn't for the life of her see the point in it.

'Before we got this fancy flushing thing we did our business in the burn and our muck went over the cliff. Now we do it in the hut and it still ends up in the burn and over the cliff. I cannot for the life of me see the point in it.'

'You do it in the TOYLET. The hut is a toilet now,' said Donald, 'Not just a henhouse. You have PRIVACY what with the locking door and that.'

'Ach away and dirt,' replied Granny Mack, spitting out a shred of tobacco as she rolled herself a cigarette.

Donald the Shore went back to fixing up wrecked cars in his byre after that, and kept himself to himself for a long time.

Behind the TOYLET, high on a hill about a mile or so away, was a vast pile of crumbling sandstone, which had originally been a baronial-style castle built by an eccentric Victorian tobacco millionaire. All sorts of seedy goings-on had happened there, back in the day. Nobody knew for sure exactly what they were, but everyone knew they were seedy. Now it was just a crumbling, lichen-covered shell, overgrown with moss and returning to nature like Granny Mack's concrete coal bunker and the black houses that could be found broken and scattered elsewhere on the island. In spring, the cracks in its walls were filled with an abundance of primroses and bluebells, in summer, it was a jungle of vast green ferns and purple foxgloves, and in winter, when the snow came, it seemed to vanish entirely, as if it had never been.

All that was all very well, but I realised, as I headed out the door, that Granny Mack had pretty much out-foxed me regarding the important matter originally in hand.

'Wait a minute! Never mind me getting marmalade on the toilet paper. What about you and the lavvy door?'

'Oh, what about it?'

'Well, you were seen. Like I said.'

'Who would see me?'

'Dave Stark would. And he did. So they say anyway.'

'Oh they do do they. What else do they say?'

'They say that he's got a trail cam set up by the burn so he can film otters and that, and post it on the internet.' I gulped. 'He's got his own Youtube channel.'

'The dirty scunner!'

Dave Stark and his partner Val ran the community café-cum-shop up on the hill, just along from the ruins. They were modern, go-getting types, with up-to-the-minute ideas, according to the rumour that went around when they first arrived. And for once, rumour had been within an otter's whisker of being accurate. Dave was a wildlife enthusiast and offered 'nature safaris' to visitors who came to stay in their eco-friendly yurt. Not that there were many visitors.

'Not yet!' said Dave, 'Early days!'

Early days. They'd been there for fifteen years.

Val was a red-faced, silent woman who baked a range of whole-meal breads, pies and cakes, and made hedge-row jellies and jams from locally-foraged fruit. All these things were for sale in the shop, and mini-versions were neatly boxed-up on the dusty old tobacco shelf at the back of the counter in baskets woven from nettle fibres; Welcome Packs for visitors that never came.

Once, and only once, not long after they arrived on the island, Dave asked Granny Mack if she might sell them some of her free range eggs.

'… or perhaps barter them for some of Val's jams?' he smiled as he leaned against the door jamb with Val's hand-knitted bobble hat pushed to the back of his balding head, stroking his wispy ginger beard and swinging his binoculars. 'We're vegan, but we're prepared to be flexible and have eggs as an option for visitors, as long as the eggs are genuinely free range and we know yours are. They're not one hundred percent organic okay, but that's fine, we can live with that. We all need to co-operate, don't we, if we want this community to work.'

'Ach away and dirt,' said Granny Mack, frying Tulip bacon from the Co-op van on the propane gas stove. The fat sizzled and spat as she flipped the bacon over with her hook, and cracked a pair of double-yokers into the pan with her good hand.

Dave and Val had their own eggs these days, having imported fancy-looking 'silkies' from the Mainland. By all accounts they were excellent layers. Dave's latest idea was the 'trail cam'; he thought it would be an investment.

'It's an investment Val,' I heard him say, as I walked past the yurt during an evening stroll; I won't say I was listening in, but sound travels easily through yurt walls, and despite her snarled protestations of 'away and dirt', I knew that it made Granny Mack's night when I repeated any random, choice nuggets I happened to overhear, 'It's great advertising. We

want to stop people focusing on the ruins and the no roads and the midges and the lack of toilets and stuff. Let's show everyone what kind of brilliant wildlife we've got round here and they'll all want to come. It's all very well posting photos online but what everyone looks for now is a vid, okay Val? Everyone likes a vid. And there's bound to be all sorts round here. I can't wait to see what we capture.'

He certainly got more than he bargained for when he captured Granny Mack.

'What on earth possessed you to leave the door open? I mean it's none of my business but let's face it it isn't the 1950s any more, you can't be doing that kind of thing.'

'Oh don't keep on at me. It is none of your business, you're quite right, but here, I don't mind telling you. I like to sit in there, it's out of the wind and I like a read of the Daily Record while I'm at it. Look at this one now – this one interested me.'

She reached into the pocket of her pink flowered pinny and handed me part of a Daily Record. It was an inner page, neatly folded, and there was a round-ish, brown-rimmed hole in the top corner where it had, evidently, been hanging on the rusty nail in the TOYLET.

'I was sitting on the TOYLET for a wee while, with nothing happening. You know when you sit down and nothing happens...well no, you won't know what that's like at your age of course. Nothing'll put you up nor down… '

'Go on.'

'Well, I rolled myself a cigarette and started reading through the Daily Records in order to take my mind off things. Relax myself and that. I started reading that page there, that one you're looking at, and it got me thinking.'

I peered at the newsprint. 'This is quite a recent one.'

'Yes. Have a read.'

Granny Mack sounded nervous, which was a new one on me. She was never nervous. She hadn't even been nervous when the Great January Storm blew the TOYLET roof clean off in 1996; the racket as the wind ripped the nails out and the rusting sheet of corrugated iron flipped onto its side and crashed into the wall of the house had been enough to scare the dead, and me into going into her room and jumping into bed beside her.

Almost.

It felt like the storm had come right into the house that night. We'd bumped into each other on the landing, meeting somewhere in the middle as we groped our way through the dark. Pitch black as it was with the wind howling and the slates rattling, I could only see the faintly glowing end of Granny Mack's roll-up cigarette reflected in the steely gleam of her hook, as she raised it to her wrinkly, thin-lipped mouth.

'There's no room in there for you,' she'd said. She was one of those people who don't have to shout to be heard over a storm. 'Four hens, the cat, and the dog already under the eiderdown.'

'You don't have a dog,' I replied, shuddering as I clutched my Kumfi Kwilt more closely round my shoulders.

But she didn't hear me. I'm one of those people who do have to shout to be heard over a storm, and I hadn't shouted. 'I'm away out to thon TOYLET thing,' continued Granny Mack, 'the dirler's full up.'

The 'dirler', so called because of the noise she made when using it, was the iron bucket that she kept in her room for night-time TOYLET purposes.

I had to admire her nerve.

At any rate, she survived the storm that night, just as she'd survived everything else.

I peered at the section of the Daily Record that she'd handed to me. It featured Coleen Nolan's Problem Page.

'Dear Coleen,

I've been single for over forty years since my husband took unwell through the rum and then vanished. I'm an old woman now, and I live at the back end of nowhere. There's no chance of me meeting a man at my age, I know that, but I still have needs. I'm a big fan of the Daily Record and I like your style Coleen – you're a modern go-getting kind of person with up-to-the-minute ideas so can you help me I wonder. Thanking you in advance.

Kind regards

Bella MacAskill (Mrs)

I glanced up at Granny Mack. She was standing by the fireplace staring at her plimsolled feet. If I hadn't known her so well I'd have sworn her weather-browned cheeks were turning slightly red. I didn't like to see that. It unsettled me to think that Granny Mack might be anything other than unrelentingly hard. I didn't want to have to deal with the possibility that she might have a breaking point – kind of like the nails Donald the Shore had used to hammer the corrugated iron roof onto the TOYLET.

I folded the paper where it had been folded before, and placed it carefully on the table.

I sensed that I had a very good chance of winning the next stare-me-down contest, but oddly enough I didn't feel as pleased about that as one might expect. 'Coleen suggests Bella might try internet dating.'

'Ach she can away and dirt. What would I be doing with the internet?'

'I don't know. But you'll be all over it if Dave Stark posts his latest video online. You'll probably go viral. You might even attract some fresh blood to Dave and Val's yurt business.'

'He's a dirty scunner. Thon long-haired nyaff and his new-fangled contraption.' Granny Mack sat down in her favourite chair, the one with the scarred leatherette back, and rested her head in her good hand. 'Do you know what I was thinking last night? I was thinking that if I wasn't eighty two and didn't know for sure that I was going to die before long, I would have to kill myself.'

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. I felt I should think of something positive and up-beat, like Coleen in the Daily Record, but I wasn't sure I wanted to.

'Things were never the same after Granda vanished. I'll be honest with you. Part of me's been looking for him ever since. Forty years! Can you believe that? It's almost as long as you've been alive.'

I raised an eyebrow at that, but I didn't interrupt. What did time mean, anyway, in a situation like this? What difference did it make in any situation, now I came to think of it?

Granny Mack continued. 'Stormy nights, when the slates are rattling, I'm thinking is that him at the door. When I walk in the woods I'm thinking is he hiding out there in one of the abandoned black houses in the clearing in the middle. When I look out to sea, to that grey haze on the horizon, I wonder if he's made his way there, and if he'll ever come back.'

Me too, I thought, but again I stayed silent, afraid of getting too emotional. Emotional would knock Granny Mack right off her stride, at this juncture.

She rolled herself a cigarette, and speared it on the hook while she lit it via a spill taken from a bunch of others kept on the mantelpiece in a small blue china boot emblazoned 'Kyle of Loch Alsh' in white lettering.

'I know I'm hard as nails. I know I've a temper dearie. I know he wanted away from me sometimes. That's why he took to the rum. To escape from me. I used to shout at him something awful about it but I didn't blame him really, I knew it was me and my terrible nature driving him to it. Maybe the rum wasn't enough though. Maybe he wanted away altogether. Maybe…'

Again, I wanted to interject, to console, to contradict, but the words wouldn't come.

'Or maybe he found someone else along the way. Someone better. A nice fat nurse maybe. A good cook with a kind heart, a decent wage and a pension.' Granny Mack took a deep drag on her cigarette and blew a long plume of smoke into the fire. 'I'll never know for sure. I'll just have to carry on living with the pain and that's the long and short of it.'

'What does he intend to do with the thing anyway?' she continued, after a moment, pushing at a cinder with a skinny plimsolled foot.

'Who?'

'Who? The long haired nyaff. Who else?'

'Dave? Oh, I don't know. The video's probably very blurry, and what with the infra-red if it wasn't for the hook and the staring eyes I bet nobody would know it's you. And now I come to think of it, he might even pixellate your face.'

'He might what?'

Obfuscation. We could all benefit from that from time to time.

'Och he's only interested in otters, Granny. He's hardly going to post a grainy vid of an eighty two year old on the toilet.'

'But I thought you said I would go viral.'

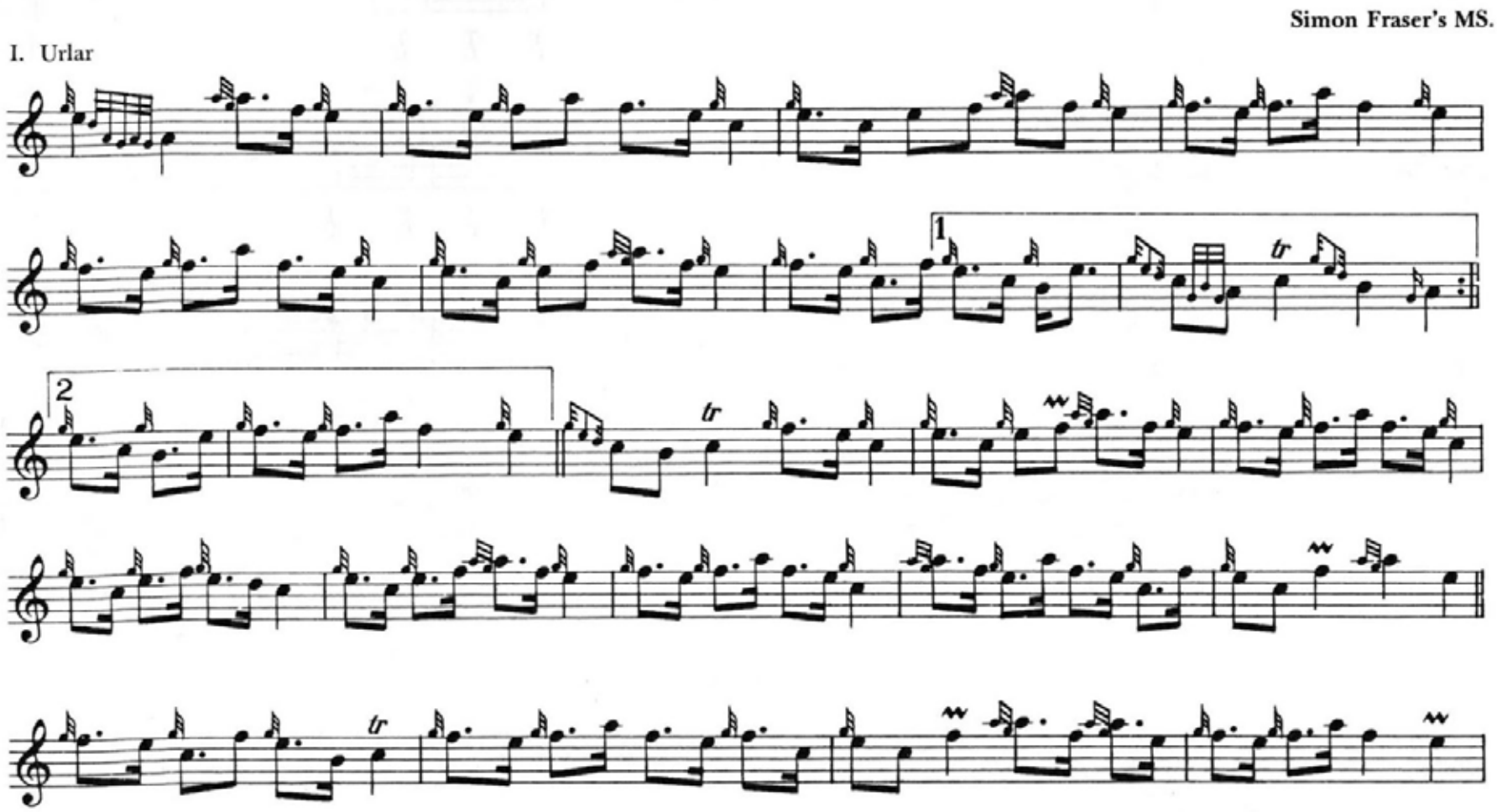
'I know what I said. It was just talk. You don't want to go viral, do you?'

Granny Mack peered at me, and I peered back, curious and, as usual, slightly fearful of meeting her gaze. Then for the first time it came to me, the reason for my fear. It wasn't merely the obvious fear of bearing the brunt of one of her frequent rages, for that was nothing to me now, really. It was fear of loss; the inevitable breaking of a fragile golden thread that had always held me grounded, through her. Because the fading blue of her eyes held sea and sky and ancient rain-washed heaven. ■

Collage by Kenny Taylor

Pìobaireachd and Place

Essay by Kirsty Gunn



Part of Cumha Dhomhnaill Dhuaghail Mhic Aoidh/Lament for Donald Duaghal MacKay

Start with a note. The low A. Then its octave above – A to A. The pipes' scale will give it. Even with its own strange low G that is the start of the tuning, the sound of the octave will come up through, open and large hearted and true. And…

There it is.

The clear tonic note.

Hear it?

The low tone held in the bass drones and playing through to A, and to the A, and to A…

Is here at the beginning of this essay as it is here at the beginning of the music's tune. After which will come in the scattering of notes for the main body of the scale - every piper has a tuning system of his own. There are some more shared than others, and I could even hum you the version I've heard more times than I can imagine - do re mi re do mi sol do - and then the drones are adjusted, adjusted some more, the pipes turned again, just a fraction, the bass to the mid to the treble, done here, and here… Then is all come together in the same long note of the A that is the beginning and so will be there at the end…

The tune itself starting up now, the first notes of the Ùrlar* sounding out into the air…

Is one way to open this piece: The tuning. The sound.

But here another: The moment before, when the piper hits the bag...

Or another: In the seconds before that, when the instrument is first picked up, the body of it tucked under the arm before the chanter is blown…

Or the moment before that, even: When the piper moves towards the small stage that is set up on the grass, the judges' tent before it… And there is the whirl and crowd of a Highland Games gathering all around, the cries of children and the fun fair and the loudspeakers announcing field sports, and the feel of the sunshine in the air, and the warm breeze… But all of this is only scattered behind the piper by now, around him maybe but at a distance - for there is only this moment to be lived in, here. At this moment. Of this small day. With these boards set up to make a platform upon which the piobaireachd can be heard. At this place. A stage. A world. Is this be when it all begins? The music? Upon this moment of stepping in?

I am writing an essay on how piobareachd is connected to geography, and so to time. For how can one disconnect Scotland's hills and open ground, its edges of waters and places of castles or battlefields or barracks…From history, and history's rhythm and beat? I am thinking about how this music of the Highlands is connected to the land and the past, of course it is - intricately bound up to the places it was fashioned for, came out of, was made from, sung to – but not to address those wider contexts so much as to consider instead piobaireachd's time in terms of what happens to time in the actual present tense of its performance.

That same A. That low G.

Come out of the past and arrived with us here on a wooden stage in the bright air; a piper before us and playing a tune.

So not an essay about the place of composition, then – musicians and scholars have written about the origins of the tunes and most can be traced to a handful of composers and the parts of the country they came from or lived in… No. I want this piece to be more about the connection of a tune to the town or village where it might be heard here and now, out in the open air every summer of the Highland year. As much part of our high, light filled months, I might say, as the sun on the hills and the coolness of the river after a long day out under the sky. As much a part of the season, the piobaireachd, as the Highland Games. As much a part of those Games as the Green.

Yes, I do want to start there. At Dornoch, say. And at Tain. And at Nairn and Bonar Bridge and Halkirk and Drumnadrochit. All places that host Games every year and so allow a space amidst them for the Big Music of the Highland Bagpipe. I want to think about where piobaireach belongs – to the location of the tunes, yes, for how can the two not be connected? But to have in mind, as well, the locations where the music is actually played, now, here, at a certain time of year: A piobaireachd sounding out while sitting on the grass at Helmsdale or Dunkeld or Drumnadrochit... And to think about how these places where it is performed may figure, too, in a memory of a piobaireachd - become played into it, even? - and how, for so many years, when he was younger, and finishing up with the great competition at the Northern Meeting for the most serious piping honour of them all, my father would compete at Games all over the Highlands and have stories about them, the tunes particular to each becoming part of his thinking not only about past performances but about the subsequent playing of those same tunes…

So, the memory of a certain judge, say, in Drumnadrochit. His words about a tune…

That might be part of his future thinking about how best to come at "Lament for Mary MacLeod", for example, or "The MacKay s Banner".

Or the recollection of a bit of a "Spree", following a win at Halkirk for

the playing of "Salute on the Birth of Rory Mòr MacLeod"...

Could well lend verve and bite to that same Salute when he plays it now.

And the thought of a friend's appreciation for a piobaireachd given at Blair Atholl...

Might seem to fill his pipes more soundly, more sweetly, when the tune is played now, in that same friend's memory.

I hear these various thoughts of his, these recollections, as musical nuances and forms of instruction, even, giving fresh shape and definition to something my father is studying or planning to play - now that he is 95 and no longer the musician he was once, though he still plays every day and thinks of piobaireachd every day and listens to it and reads it and hums it and dreams it.... And what it is, I wonder…

To be …That young man. Inside the tune. Who he was then. As he thinks about his playing now. And thinks, too, about who he might be, the same young man living inside him still to wonder about it, who he might become that he would play the tune, remember it through and play it well …The memory of those far away Highland Games at which he played and competed tall those years ago the same then – in a way – as now. As though no time at all has passed between the two.

And no need to think otherwise, is there? For the format seems to be the same; he says it is the same. The competition rules, the set up…It hasn't changed much to my eyes, either. There's the wooden platform. The small desk at which the judges sit before it, part enclosed to protect against any weather. The pipers milling around the periphery set off to one side of the stands of candy floss and the tents selling teas and local produce, and, with the helter skelter somewhere, the thump and drone of a distant disco beat, the sound of their own instruments being tuned and practised into the air…I remember all this – my father remembers it - and when I go back to Helmsdale and Halkirk and Dornoch, it is the same, it is the same…

The low A, the high A…

The scattering of the tuning notes…

The instrument being picked up, its heft adjusted…

The strike to the bag and the sound beginning…

And, before that, the other kind of beginning: the stepping up onto the stage, the salute to the judges: The leaning down to give a name and to give or be told the name of the tune… "Most judges will select the tune" a piper tells me this past year, at Tain, "of a number we have practised and that have been given." How many? I ask. "Oh, three or so, but maybe more" How many? I ask again, this time two years ago at Dornoch. "For today, there are three" the piper says now. "They're the same tunes that have been set this year for the Northern Meeting." And he gives them. What were they? I try to remember. Where are my notes from

Photo by Sean Mullen. Unsplash.

that summer's day? "I gave a kiss to the King's Hand", maybe? "The Old Man of Shells" ? I try to remember. "Lament for Donald Dugal MacKay" ? Let's call them now, those three great tunes. "Oh, they're all great tunes" my father says. "My first ever Competition was at Dornoch and I think I played Donald Dugal then. Yes, I did. And it was a great day."

So yes, I will call them, such piobaireachds and their places… For how this music – for yes, it does do this – carries with it the landscapes and details of Borreraig and the Ballindaloch Manuscript, and Loch Sligachan in Skye, and Strathnaver, all associated with these three big tunes. But how it also brings onto the page the paddocks and fields and grounds where it is performed. One idea laid upon another, as though the map of one is laid upon the map beneath. Two kinds of past, informing the present. Knowledge and fact and history and geography and musical mansucript, and the memory of a summer green… All placed together, a palimpsest, showing through the layers both a landscape and a score, a music and the music's story of being played. "I remember playing that tune,'A Kiss to the King s Hand' at Portree, says my father now, and he is at once layering upon his memory of that tune and everything he knows about it, from its composition, to the thinking about it from other pipers, to the canntaireachd version of it he would have heard when learning it…This other place. This place of its performance jumped forward in his mind: The younger man sprung up within him and here he is in Portree, his name next on the list to play, and so he is walking through the summer air to the boards of the stage right now…

In this way, I think, the definition of a town or village, its setting for the Games, its locale, might show through here, in my own writing, as though to deepen the colour of the notes and sharpen their outlines. The accidentals of the music, its siubhals and doublings, becoming a doubling of place, the music itself giving back to Tain or Helmsdale or Portree, or Dunkeld or Halkirk or Fort Augustus, or anywhere they have Games in the summer and where the music is played, a complication, an addition, intricacy, a translation, that makes of these places so much more than the sum of their parts. A region of the country, a town, a village, become changed, deepened, through its associations to that other landscape** where the piobaireachds' first came from and where they were composed, and first sang out their stories.

How Inverness, then, to give one example of what I am trying to get at here, seems to become another sort of city altogether when I think of it as the home of the Northern Meeting – for there is a piping competition that comes written with such gravitas and significance for a piper and their music that the town itself seems to fall away behind it. The Gold Medal…How many times have I heard of it? Local Games are used as testing grounds for this last and greatest competition of the summer every year; the finest player the one who played the finest tune…

"Ah, yes" says my father. "There is always that…"

Inverness, for him, such a place. A place of the Castle and the Sherrif's Invitations to play there as a young man, fresh out of instruction by the late Pipe Major Donald MacLeod. A city of Recitals, then, of the formalities and duties of performance and competition, and for musical education and for pleasure… And so somewhere far removed, in his mind and in this essay now, from the busy urban centre into which we may drive and park our car., go shopping or meet our friends for lunch. Inverness is all of these things, of course, but as a place to host the Northern Meeting? How then does it seem to change. As much as the Argyll Gathering and Braemar and Blair Atholl are places out of deep history for the pipes, their customs and traditions drawing musicians out of the present tense and into the centre of an ancient, highly sophisticated music? Oh yes… There is always that. Such competition draws golden outlines around these places on a map. They shine, these certain points of location. The quality of the sound of the notes like the latticework at the gateway of a castle. Or the multi-faceted gleam of leaded glass, or a tower's gilded spire…These places are a-glitter with the glory and the history of a grand tradition…And Inverness, yes, with its Northern Meeting, it takes the crown.

But even there, lit up in the dark lights of Eden Court, how the moment of that competition winds back at the same time to the other places…

The villages, the towns. The fields. The Green…

To those moments of the piper walking across the grass in the blowy sunshine, dressed in the traditional kilt and doublet and hose, a plastic cape over all that if it is raining, and over the pipes as well if the weather is really coming down… Walking across the ground as the ground beneath his feet…

As pipers have always done.

For a music that was made to be played outdoors, upon the ground; the feet upon the ground the first moments of the tune – and there, I've found it – as it was right at the start of my essay, after all.

Hear it?

In the spacing of the tune, its rhythm, measured out in those same footsteps on the ground? On the grass and across the wooden boards…

The first seconds of it…

The Ùrlar. The beginning. This ground of ours upon which we live and where now the piper stands. ■

Notes:

* Pìobaireachd is a music made out of place. The first movement of it is named for the ground itself, Ùrlar. All of the tune will come from ground's first few ideas, and will return to it. For further details on Pìobaireachd and its structure, including its various movements and how these relate to the initial theme, see *The History and Structure of Ceol Mor* by Alexander John Haddow, also *Piobaireachd and its Interpretation* by Seumas MacNeil and Frank Richardson.

** The Highland writer Neil Gunn referred constantly in his work, and in a novel by the same name, to another kind of reality that sat within the Highland landscape that is all around us, illuminating it with past and future possibilities and lending to its qualities of restraint and sometimes austerity a numinous and mysterious light.

Poems by Clare O'Brien & Donna Booth

Fresh British Octopus, 36p (Reduced)
Clare O'Brien

Our eyes were bigger than our appetites,
so we reduced you. We forced you from
your element and took away your worth.

Our greed was merely virtual. You served
us up a remnant of our holidays abroad,
a raw reminder of what we'd thrown away.

We even made you British, to prove that still
Britannia rules the waves. Your oceanic wit,
your alien fluidity, your instinct for escape,

were crammed into an oblong plastic tray,
yellow-labelled with your price. One tentacle,
eager for release, lay crushed beneath the seal.

Your death brought us no profit. At closing time
we tossed your little body in the bin. Our guilt
we sent to landfill with the rot we made of you.

North Coast 500
Clare O'Brien

"Scotland's ultimate road trip…stunning coastal scenery, white sandy beaches, rugged mountains, remote fishing villages, hidden gems, and a wealth of unforgettable experiences."

Released from clockwork time and tide,
they come to play. To race on thunderwheels,
to bag the mountains, take the trophies home,
to pin the light on Instagram.

None of that is real. They think they make the most
of us, our big wild skies, unfathomable lives.
Complete the circle, log the time they spent,
count the cash they didn't.

When the weather closes in they will return us
to ourselves, a tattered library book. The land
they borrowed licks its wounds and weeps.
In spring they will come back.

Full Circle
Clare O'Brien

a golden shovel
"The land is an ark, full of things waiting." - Wendell Berry, 'A Wet Time'

Our vows of love and trust were made again two decades past, the
day we brought our children here and set our lives upon this land.
We grew our food, our house, made columbines and bluebells bloom. It is
a world we know. This place has sheltered, held and fed us, been an
escape from nightmare, drought and doubt. It has been nursery and ark.
It has swallowed our sweat, welcomed our dead. Its undulations are full
of those who walked with us, our loss and love, the vanished voices of
dog and cat and bird and pig. This place is strong. Knowing these things,
and holding fast, we return to ourselves, and find each other waiting.

Wild Swimming
Donna Booth

From flag slabbed slip
with a definitive splash
the weight of others' need
drains into salt water

icy fingers strip
worries from my mind
and drip them down the tangles
to the fishes

the rocking lull
of the rolling tide
unfurls thoughts to silver flashes
and joy swells
on chuffed breath
of salted sea dog

The Seeing Stone
Donna Booth

Ah...my love
My boggy, stony, windblown love

We lay on our bellies for hours
lifting stones, chasing beasties
lay on our backs, chasing clouds

We climbed the stony curves of your ancient homes
walked barefoot in your peat dark pools
ate pieces on your sun warmed, lichen dappled walls

Found the seeing stone in your ruined walls
saw houses full, roofs whole, pots on fires
wild men in the bay
adventurers, explorers, fishers and farmers

Two boys, a girl
in our boggy, stony, windblown world

We learned to smoke in your shadowy corners
invisible to all
drank throat burning, nose holding, head spinning
whatever could be hidden

Too soon, we found love there
Strong and raw, fresh made
every tiny stone redrawn
every goose bumped hair
every pin pricked midge wound

And then we were gone
distant shores
other side of grey stone walls

the seeing stone weighs heavy in my heart
eyes closed I watch you wait
for bare feet running

Poems by Lesley Graham & Sharon Black

Creeping Normality
Lesley Graham

when soft voices die (P.B. Shelley)

Are we not all Cecilia sweating it out
  in the steam room
stubbornly heart-singing as we come to a simmer
like lobsters in a pot?
Wet heat rises, pearls of salt liquor
glow-lace our foreheads
tropical armpits glisten, scalded lungs expel
  plumes of muted protest
through nostrils agape
Our panting brains tick over, just
                & still our hearts sing out
quasi niente
Barring a miracle, the steam room will smother us all
but not today for like Cecilia
we have settled into the white fog
of incremental demise, deaf to the alarm
ringing out in the high notes —
praying for the fiery winged angel
to reach us before the axe

Our Struggle
Lesley Graham

January sun spits its wan ray, pokes at something
held over from six wordy seasons of faux intimacy
with Karl Ove Knausgaard — an image hidden in the
hand-me-down detritus of his struggle. Pale toddlers
wrangled into snowsuits for an outing to the Co-op,
sullied coffee cups, an affront to virility endlessly
polished, a piss-sodden sofa of seventies brown check: the
petty annoyances of his life that I'll carry for the rest of mine,
crockery, clutter, clumsiness. My head is *flooded with places
I have not been and yet know, filled with people I have not met
and yet know*. I am thankful all the same for the gift of a
never-seen slant of light on an unfamiliar fjord, for darkness
outside the window heaving like an ocean.
Winter settles in, hankering for a memory that is all mine.

For Daws to Peck at
Lesley Graham

Bite your tongue girl, bite it hard,
no need to expose the squibs of your heart.
When the talk lulls, look skywards
then bite down till you taste the sulphur fizz
of spent verbiage. Do not, I must repeat,
do not launch that unclad, half-formed thought.
Instead, let each fleeting notion implode in
damp pink hues, like an anemone
behind your incisors, then chomp down fast.
Better dead in the mouth, than offered up
for daws to peck at.

Toil and Trouble
Lesley Graham

In the guddle of my warm kitchen
I think of your bones in that cold place, &
bear down on the knife that severs the head
of the hen. Its pimpled skin stretches,
glinting ligaments resist, vertebrae
crack and cede. I bin the scraggy
neck — single eye staring back
in reproach. Those were fuggy weekends
in your too-small kitchen, learning to
make *confit,* our slippery hands wrist-deep
in duck fat, slowly softening to dough.
Adept now, I rub butter into naked bird,
giblets out, bread and garlic in, a glossy
bay leaf laid on her hunched chest as a
wreath. Set in the roasting pan, she is as
snug as your newborn grandchild.

Urn
Sharon Black

A woman is a water urn: empty,
her lips burn.

Full, she senses her unborn child
moving, and swallows fear,

sits perfectly still. This daughter
will be born, and then another,

and another. It will be centuries
before she cracks, before she steps

into the fields, the roads, or climbs astride
a horse, reads books, wears jeans,

drives a car, notices glass corridors –
stacks of them rising into the sky.

There's much to learn. For now,
she's almost glad of the sun on her back

as light leaps off the water's surface
then races off, growing smaller and more star-like.

Pets
Sharon Black

Young man, small girl, three or four, blond hair
in barrettes, table next to ours,

his Pelforth, glass still full,
her last half-inch of cordial, scooping out

the ice cubes with her hands.
Mummy's going to get a cat?

Her dad is deep in texting. She looks at him.
Mummy's going to get a cat in her house?

His fingers jab the screen.
She chews a yellow straw, adjusts it so

it sticks from both sides of her mouth.
Daddy, who'll look after it?

Stacks
Sharon Black

Twelve fresh duvet covers, folded;
pillowcases at the side.

A twelve-foot wall of schist, pointed
with lime, by the bright veranda.

An abstract by our friend,
a tower of wonky squares.

The ways we write,
the ways we live, stacked one upon the other.

On the line, more laundry to bring in.
Let me do it quietly; let me take my time.

Plot
Sharon Black

Single-track roads, potholes,
conflicting street signs, litter
like punctuation on the verge,
a freezer in the boot
that thumps each time we take a corner.

A narrow bridge.
A street lamp standing in a yellow pool.
A woman at a window
no one sees but me.

I know this scene.
I think this line and every line springs from this
deer, a female roe, suddenly at
the railing, rising unsteadily
on shining cloven hooves.

Whaup Letter

Essay by Chris Arthur

(i) Uncertainty about the addressee

Dear – well, for the moment, Question Mark –

I'm not sure to whom this letter should be addressed. Initially, I thought "The Rector". But my image of him reading it to a hushed assembly lost credibility as I imagined the scene. He'd not allow pupils to listen to the words of a stranger, especially given what they say. Parents would complain about their children being exposed to unsettling ideas. In any case, do schools still have assemblies? And, if they do, would an out-of-the-blue reading of a letter hold anyone's attention?

I'm sure there's a "Letters from Loonies" file in the Rector's office, even if it has a less derisory label. My missive would probably end up there, after acknowledgement via some bland pro forma that thanks me (insincerely) for my interest in the school. Or, more likely, there'd be no response at all. My letter would be glanced at and then binned.

So I scored out "Dear Rector" and thought again. In fact, the letter's intended more for pupils than for him. But in an age made so alert to protecting children by so many failures to do so, writing directly to schoolkids would invite suspicion. And, even if I could reach them, how would they view a letter? Too long to hold their attention, alien to the easy instantaneousness of their image-fed electronic consciousness, it would be dismissed as weird, some kind of outmoded artefact beyond the pale of their day-to-day preoccupations.

So I scored out "Dear Pupil" too. What about "Dear Council", since they're responsible for schools? The more I thought about the addressee the more unsure I grew. Maybe the letter's meant not just for the Rector, or the pupils, or the council, but "The Community" in which the school is based. Of course that includes me too, so maybe, in part, I'm writing to myself. But that sounds close to crazy, nor is "The Community" unproblematic. Once you examine it, its cosy resonances of cooperation and togetherness unravel into the disparate units in which we live our lives, without, in truth, much concern for anyone outside our own immediate circles.

So "Dear Community" was also ditched, at which point "To Whom It May Concern" began to beckon. But apart from sounding stilted, it allows too easy an opting out – recipients could decide without reflection that it doesn't concern them, therefore there's no need to read it. "To Whom It May Concern" also seems too similar to that desperate attempt at inclusion, "Dear All", which is a bit like saying "Dear No One". It casts the net so wide it risks catching nothing.

"Dear Question Mark" is just to get things underway – an (admittedly unattractive) expedient to move past a stalled beginning. And rather than sending it direct to any addressee, I've decided on a more roundabout – but I hope in the end a more effective – approach. If I send it to a magazine like *Northwords Now*, the Rector, teachers, pupils, council, the community…everyone/anyone might see it, read it, take it more seriously. Carrying the imprimatur of publication should widen its audience and give it more persuasive power than any simple letter on its own could hope for.

(ii) Uncertainty about what I want to say

My second problem, more serious than uncertainty about the addressee, is that I'm not sure what I want to say. When I started to write, I knew exactly what I wanted this letter to convey. Part protest, part lament, part plea, it was intended to speak out on behalf of the whaups. ("Whaup", in case you don't know, is another name for curlew. The word is used in Scotland and the north of England.) But once I started writing, it became clear that my concerns went beyond these beautiful birds, our largest wader and a species in worrying decline. When I realized I was writing not just about whaups but about, well, education, I almost stopped. Isn't that something best left to experts?

Yet, despite my hesitation, false starts, and lack of confidence, I still felt impelled to write. So this is my Whaup Letter to "Dear Question Mark" sent, message-in-a-bottle style, via *Northwords Now*.

One thing's easy to explain – what made me want to write. The impetus came from the building of a new school ten minutes' walk from where I live. Now, lest anything I say suggests otherwise, let me stress that this is something I welcome. What's more important than our children? And after loving, feeding, clothing, and sheltering them, what's more important than their education? A school is a tangible symbol of our hope for the future. It expresses our wish to enrich the lives of those who come next, to encourage them to fulfil whatever potential they possess. It shows concern for others, a wish for betterment. As we were blessed by previous generations passing on their knowledge, so we in turn pass on what was entrusted to us and what we've added to it. A school is like a reservoir, built to hold and channel the quicksilver of a culture. It serves as an aqueduct between the generations, allowing the water of experience and knowledge safe passage.

As I compose these metaphors, I'm taken back to my imagined assembly. I can see raised eyebrows, exchanged glances, stifled giggles as the ideals of education and the day-to-day realities of schooling grate and bump together (cue sniggering). As they collide, they can seem more like antagonists than twins. Yet, really, under all the shoddy ordinariness, the daily low-key battles for attention, doesn't what happens in a classroom show us at our best? Unlike, say, a prison, or a battery farm, or a storage facility for toxic waste, or a munitions factory, a new school being built is something overwhelmingly positive, a cause for celebration not regret.

(iii) Wonder, privilege, finitude

But (inevitably after this encomium) it all depends on the sort of education that's being fostered. I'm sure the Rector and his staff are competent professionals. Under their tutelage all sorts of advancements in learning will happen on a daily basis – and that is truly wonderful. I, for one, applaud it. I'm no expert in what a curriculum should cover, but I hope that as well as the subject-specifics they study, pupils will acquire a sense of wonder, privilege, and finitude.

Wonder because of the incredible nature of existence (it's oddly easy not to see this). We are life-forms evolved over precarious aeons, birthed on a spinning planet that's orbiting a burning star set in a galaxy that's one of trillions in an expanding universe we've yet to fathom. The chances against any individual coming into being are enormous. Each birth is improbable, unique, and precious.

Privilege because, for the nearly 8 billion of us living on planet Earth, education is by no means a universal given. According to UNESCO's Institute of Statistics, there are 773 million adults who cannot read or write. The education that delivers and hones literacy may sometimes seem a chore, but it is in fact something to be treasured. Instead of taking it for granted, we should feel privileged to be among those who receive it.

Finitude because it focuses the mind to know how short a time it has to savour living. We're not here for long, however endless tedious lessons can make a day feel. Our transience comes into usefully dwarfing focus when we bring to mind the Earth's age (4.5 billion years). Set beside that, an individual's lifespan is indeed ephemeral.

Despite their obviousness, this essential trinity of awareness can be slow to form. It's thwarted if education shrinks to training, plodding through an inflexible curriculum whose only vision is to turn out cogs that fit into the machine of commerce. Education fails when conformity is put to the fore instead of creativity, when the needs of employment eclipse the nurturing of individuals who can think and question for themselves.

(iv) Remembering what was lost

Coming last to what was first in terms of prompting this letter, namely my concern for whaups. Somewhere in the education that teachers are busy providing day by day, I hope note will be taken of what was lost on account of the new school being built. Perhaps this could become part of a lesson about the consequences of actions, or about environmental ethics, or simply noticing history as it unfurls at our feet, rather than treating it as a subject that only concerns other times and places. I want to flag up the fact that where today there are classrooms, astro-turfed football pitches, car parks, roads, there used to be fields. And every winter they were favoured as a feeding ground by whaup. I used to see flocks of nearly a hundred birds probing the ground for worms with their long curved beaks.

I know an environmental impact assessment will have been carried out before building was allowed to start. But did it, I wonder, take note of all the things I've seen in years spent walking in this place, and did it take proper cognizance of their nature? As well as whaups there were redwings, fieldfares, oystercatchers, tawny owls, goldfinches – and a host of other birds. This was also the haunt of hares and foxes, badgers and weasels. There was an abundance of wildflowers that, every summer, attracted swarms of insects. Sometimes, when I walk past the school these days, I imagine the fields' former denizens haunting the classrooms. Was that a draft from the open windows or the whiffle of wind from a ghost-hare speeding past the rows of desks in a French lesson? Perhaps the lapse in concentration during a chemistry experiment wasn't due to teenage hormones but the phantom fluttering of butterflies that used to occupy the lab space. Do the echoes of vanished owls' hoo-hooings merge secretly with the canteen's babble of noises? Can you hear the sound of paws skittering their subtle percussion as fox-spectres trot down corridors? I imagine the earth that's now locked beneath an armour of concrete, tarmac, and astro-turf veined with a honeycomb of shafts from years of whaups' beak-probings.

I count myself lucky that birds have been important to me from an early age.

They still delight me. For as long as I can recall, I've been susceptible to their beauty. Seeing a kingfisher or a goldcrest, a sparrowhawk or a dipper, a waxwing or an oystercatcher, makes a day special. But I know not everyone shares this interest and that many would dismiss my concern for whaups as eccentric, as investing too much concern in what's easily dismissed as "just some birds". As a response to such an outlook, I'd ask you to look beyond the individual birds we see and consider what they really are. Each droplet of life that is a curlew is weighted with a story that, for me, belies the easy dismissal of them as "just some birds". If you think of their beginnings, a new tonnage shunts into the picture, laden with an altogether different gravity of meaning.

By thinking of beginnings, I don't mean how they start as eggs, held in a shallow nest of dried grass on the ground. The algorithms that govern individual lives are amazing – mating adults, egg laying, incubation, embryonic development, hatching, fledging, flying, pairing, dying – but these stages of existence are expressions of a yet more astonishing story. Trace the thread of their existence back in time, beyond the truncation of any single life, and it connects to an ancient bloodline of being. Every curlew is a constituent part of a nerve that runs from the skin of the present far into the body of the past. Where did it start? Follow it back through the aeons and you can see it buckle and torque into different forms. Go back far enough and you'll come to *Archaeopteryx*. Whatever entity is considered to be the first true bird, it will, in its turn, have emerged from more archaic forms. Like every one of the more than 10,000 avian species now existing in the world, curlews evolved from a single ancestral species. Their lineage stretches back through time until eventually, like all living creatures, the curlew's heritage touches the spark of life's first shimmer and glint some four billion years ago. Like every multi-cellular creature on the planet, they emerged from unicellular forbears. Like every member of the animal kingdom, whaups were forged and tempered from the ore of a long-vanished primordial creature.

And if, as well as thinking about beginnings, you simply reflect on *where* they are, the coordinates that emerge are likewise spurs to wonder and reminders of how much our usual reference points are only abbreviations, fictions, practical conveniences. Pinpointing where I saw the whaups may seem simple – they were there in the fields on which the school's now built. But that location is held within town, county, country, hemisphere and planet, and beyond that within galaxy and universe. Like us, the whaups occupy a planet in a solar system that's in the Milky Way, one of the trillions of galaxies thought to exist. The Milky Way's nearest galactic neighbour, Andromeda, is 2.15 million light years away. The furthest galaxy yet detected is 32 *billion* light years from Earth. The whaups' true coordinates, the temporal and spatial beat of the rhythms that animate their existence, challenge efforts to express them and make a "just some birds" attitude seem woefully uneducated.

Curlew. Sharpe Photography. Wikimedia Commons

As a handy reminder of how much we tend to miss in the way we look at whaups, I like to bring to mind a sentence from Sankar Chatterjee's *225 Million Years of Evolution: The Rise of Birds*: "Modern crocodiles are the closest relatives to living birds and share a common ancestry." Putting a whaup in the same conceptual breath as a crocodile makes for a welcome disruption of assumptions. It's a good way of remembering the extraordinariness of their story, of keeping in mind the fact that there's so much more to them than is apparent at first sight, it points back to their dinosaur ancestry, to the long millennia it has taken to sculpt them into the form in which we now encounter them. The evanescence and fragility of a single bird obscures the ancientness and durability of the bloodline they're part of.

The mismatch between how we talk about things and what is actually there before us in the world is astonishing. By "literal description" people usually mean choosing words that innocuously fit the fictions of our labels, concentrating on what's immediately evident to sight and affixing names according to accepted conventions. Increasingly, I've come to think that a truly literal description would be a lifetime's work and that even then it would, inevitably, remain fractional and unfinished, daunted by the reality of what it's faced with. How should we live in that reality? How should we treat the incredible manifestations of life that share this planet with us? If education works, should it not bring pupils face to face with such questions?

(v) Signing off

I'm not suggesting that the school shouldn't have been built. Education is a priority. It's worth sacrificing a lot to have it. All I'm asking is that whatever is done here is worthy of what was lost to enable it to happen, and that what was lost is seen for what it is. I hope that this will be a happy place where friendships are forged, good memories laid down, understanding taken forward, individual intelligences honed and tempered – that the new school will, in short, provide an experience worth losing whaups for. To have disrupted the nature of this place for anything less would, I think, be shameful.

If I were wealthy, I'd abandon letter writing and instead commission an artist to make a tapestry of the fields, a giant square of cloth peppered with multiple holes to represent the whaups' bill-piercings. This could be hung in the atrium of the building whose presence now prevents such feeding, a tangible reminder of what the physical fabric of the school has covered over.

I've said enough. I don't want this letter to morph into some sort of tract or sermon – it's just a plea for whaup-worthy education. Beyond a certain point, I know, even the most eloquent letter won't be read, let alone one so unsure of itself that it doesn't know who it's addressed to. Whatever you make of what I've said, the next time you hear a curlew's cry (one of the most hauntingly evocative sounds I know), please stop and think about the sort of education that you're getting/giving/supporting. Is it good enough? Or, since not hearing whaups is more likely in these bleak days of the Anthropocene, ask the same question in the growing bird-silence that surrounds us.

Whatever uncertainties still attend the addressee, at least the sign-off's easy –

Best wishes, yours sincerely, kind regards – take your pick, it doesn't matter,

Chris ■

Poems by Sally Evans, Ingrid Leonard, Tom Bryan & Mandy Haggith

Named
Sally Evans

I've always known there was an Auntie Sally.
I think of her as long-skirted and tall.
Welsh she'd speak, she'd have a hat and shawl.
She looked after my grandma and her sisters,
not their mother, but family on call.

She thought my parents named me after her.
Perhaps she saw me, but I was too small.
They hadn't named me thus. Their benefit
was heirloom furniture on her decease,
book shelves and écritoires to grace our hall.

Perhaps she thought of me in what was left
of her long age in some village in Wales,
she gone before I spoke, and long before
I had perspective to make sense of tales.
So she remained, vague. ancient, lost, unknown.

No one has mentioned her through these long years.
But now I'm like her, I discover her,
imagining perhaps her end of days,
with no one to receive a case of books
(and to be fair, I used then lost her chairs).

She was my benefactress, unforeseen,
enabling a direct if distant view,
two Sallys far apart, who barely knew
this sliver of connection. But it's there,
I lived not knowing, but becoming her.

Time
Sally Evans

I never thought I would make it to eighty,
I never expected to live so long,
that I would wak through all these years,
I never thought I would sing this song.

I skipped through some year and strolled through
others,
I loved my fellows and said they were wrong,
I travelled the world and I dug my feet in,
I never thought I would sing this song.

I went too far and never far enough,
I feasted and shouted and asked Who am I?
was lonely in crowds and alone in gardens,
I saw plans crumble and I saw friends die

and I never dreamed I would make it to eighty
through all the desires of the moon and sun,
I never guessed I would make it to eighty,
I never expected to sing this song.

Happy Valley
Ingrid Leonard

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.

[In error, *Happy Valley* was printed in *Northwords Now* 45 as if part of the poem *Fire in July*. This is now the correct version of the former poem. Ed.]

Red Rover (Villanelle)
Tom Bryan

Cold War children played a game.
Red Rover: game of chance and skill.
"Run like hell when they call your name."

World-wide, rules are always the same,
on tarmac or on grassy hill.
Cold War children played a game.

A child could be bleeding or lame,
gulping breathless in winter's chill:
"Run like hell when they call your name."

It was never quiet or tame.
No chance to quit or just stand still.
Cold War children played a game.

On the cusp of nuclear flame,
or genocidal overkill.
"Run like hell when they call your name. "

When we lost we shared the blame,
of childhood guilt we had our fill.
Cold War children played a game.
"Run from hell when they call your name."

In anger
Mandy Haggith

Celandines open to sun,
a bank of primroses makes me smile,
violets offer new blue splashes
and geese skein overhead in hieroglyphs
rhyming with arctic nesting sites.

I choose to be happy with these things
despite bombing in the middle east,
social media trolling,
austerity, Brexit, covid and all the other
follies of politicians I did not vote for.

Anger is not beautiful, elegant or graceful
and a poem without these aspects
seems a lesser thing.
A moment spent in anger
begs the balance of wonder.

The world deserves praise,
words wielded beyond voice,
beyond human limitations and iniquities.
I feel the fury – here it is; I offer it to you:
burnt forest, polluted sea, poisoned children.

Now I take it back,
put it aside
and offer you this instead:
celandine, primrose, violet
and a carolling of pink-footed geese.

Shame
Mandy Haggith

A lynx is looking back at us.
Hunched, on the stump,
caged. Its gaze
sears.

Two wolves are watching,
one with bloody sore, limping an endless circuit,
one just standing.
Imprisoned.

How did we not know?
Bison breeding as cover for a zoo.
A field of cows and horses
concealing a lynx in a bird cage,
wolves inside a fence.
How can we unknow?

We cannot.
We are complicit.
We paid to see them.
We gave their captors money
to look in from freedom
and be scorched.

Translations by Paul Malgrati and poems by Robin Leiper

Jules Mousseron 1912.
Wikipedia Commons

Twa owersettins frae the rouchi (workers' leid o Picardie, France) o Jules Mousseron (1868–1943)

Paul Malgrati

A Brave Lass

She was bonnie aaright, yon Cathy lass
Afore she worked on the coal-bing.
But the stoor turned her hair yella
An chafft awa at her fair skin.
Her da's gaun ill – it's a sair sicht!
Her bairns wull beg withoot her,
Yet syne her coupon's blichtit
The quine's nae got mony takers.

Fowks say that Paris hures
Wi their cheek-loads o fantoush lure,
Hide their vices aneath pooder.
Here, fur Cathy, it's true anaw,
She didnae mean it, the pair brave sowl,
Tae hid her virtues aneath the coal.

Tae a Pit Moose

Come here, moosie, fine wee beastie,
Dinnae ye fash, A'm nae trauchle!
Let me gie this rucksack a shoogle
An fin ye some tasty crummies.

By day ye mak the lassies feart
But ye're nae bather here doon the pit,
Raither the opposite: fur I luve ye tae bits!
Bony moosie, blithe o ma hert!

Ye leal fere o pit-blin miners
Wha need but hear ye knack an birl,
Deep in the mirk, yer peerie beamer
Minds them o the chitterin birds!

I ken that whiles, ye wee rascal,
Ye dae oor nut richt in,
In oor bit pieces ye mak big holes-
Ach, but ye tae need feedin!

An A ken tae, gin ye shuid leuk
Ower yonder, in the staibills,
There's a fair chance ye micht get killed
Slauchtert atween the catties' cleuks.

An A ken that in times o strife
When there's nae trace o callant hewers,
When there's nae breid, ye'll weed awa
Ye that's sae fu o life!

A seen ye, oor fecht ower,
Hou muckle ye dreed an skrinkit
Sae peerie, sae skinnymalink,
And whiles yer legs up in the air.

But let's leave aff sic dreary tawkin
There's plenty breid an crowdie tae,
We'll greet when it's time fur greetin,
Come an enjoy yer feast the day!

Come here, moosie, fine wee beastie,
Dinnae ye fash, A'm nae trauchle!
Let me gie this rucksack a shoogle
An find ye some tasty crummies.

Stane

Robin Leiper

at 'Mary's Steid Stane', Dalbeattie

Stones we take as tokens of the real — how
cold, unyielding, true. As Dr Johnson when
he kicked his pebble — "thus!" — in refutation.

And this one… a bit big to kick, although you'd
have to find it first, hidden here behind the hedge
in a litter-strewn lay-bye near our work-a-day wee town.

Squeeze through the narrow gap — that crack in reality,
the portal, back of the wardrobe, rabbit-hole. Kick it
if you thought, at first, that stories were not real.

No sign or explanatory plaque but no question,
it's brute fact — a three-foot cube of granite — and handy
to take a seat or mount a horse. But what horse? Well,

that's obvious also, in its way — the way we tell
our tales, lying here in the realm of myth, parallel
to the track of a history, you only kind-of know.

You reach out and touch it, for it touches you.
Here is the legend realised — a Queen, beauty
betrayed, loss, a leaving never-to-return. And

everyone believes that they've lived this, one way
or another. A story that lies buried in the Land's bones,
work-a-day or not, the leaving, and it takes a stone

and a lie to tell it.

Stand

SWT Southwick Reserve
Robin Leiper

Ye shall hear of wars and the rumour of wars.
Mathew 24:6

As if they felt it coming, heard
the rumours circulate the understory,
a crackle of distant gunfire

Planted like a prophecy in this perfect
ring decades before, the stand faces
outward to an approaching menace

Wagons lagered, a platoon of Ash
drawn-up back-to-back to make
a fight of it, steadfast to the end

Heads high, the signs are there
already in the canopy — the dieback
has begun and they shall fall

together, comrades-in-arms, the last
stand of a company of the tree that
upheld, once, heaven and the world

Old Shoes

Story by Dilys Rose

They do not, as Monica imagined, arrive in the dead of night, heralded by looping bats or owls ascending in a slow flap but in the early afternoon, as agreed, just after she's put the scones on a rack to cool and hung up her apron. They stand on either side of Maud Binnie, who is as gaunt and austere as when she and Ronnie were summoned for interview. The girl is taller and more physically mature, and the boy shorter and scrawnier than the Zoom meeting led her to expect.

Sameera, Hamid—welcome! We meet properly at last!

Beaming, Monica makes to hug the girl but pulls back. Is hugging allowed? She and Ronnie should have been primed about such things. It wouldn't do to get off to a bad start.

I do hope you weren't thrown by our never-ending roadworks, she says. But of course you weren't, you're bang on time!

She must curb her gushing, lower the pitch of her voice.

The girl is gangly, hunched as a heron, with wide, wary eyes. The boy grins, fidgets, blinks. Of course they're reticent, apprehensive, and no matter what, she mustn't, *mustn't* pry. Both are kitted out in new jeans, quality jackets and branded trainers—courtesy, no doubt, of the Foundation. It gives Monica pause to realise that their compact backpacks contain the total of their belongings.

Do come in. So sorry Ronnie couldn't be here to meet you—

No problem, says Ms Binnie, ushering her charges over the threshold. Time enough for that.

Indeed! All the time in the world! Now, children, I expect what you'd like to do first is see your rooms!

Bathroom, says Sameera.

Of course! says Monica. At the top of the stairs, dear. Shall I show you?

I find, says Sameera, taking the stairs two at a time, all knees and elbows.

Your bedroom's upstairs, too. First on the left. And yours, Hamid. Would you like to see?

The boy nods. His gold-tipped curls bob.

Splendid! *Second* on the left! I do hope you like it, she says to the boy's retreating back.

Monica is already warming to the boy a touch more than to the girl. Not that she'd dream of showing any favouritism.

Ms Binnie remains just inside the door, tapping a sleek briefcase, pursing plum lips.

I'll make some tea, says Monica.

I can't stay.

But you'll want to take a look at the children's rooms before you go?

We have the house plan, she says, and interior design is none of our concern. But please refrain from referring to the young people as *children*. Sameera is fourteen and Hamid will soon be twelve.

Does that not, legally, classify them as children?

The Foundation requires host families to adhere to the guidelines. She removes a clipboard from her briefcase, passes Monica a pen. Please sign and date. I really must be going.

Monica imagined a more leisurely handover: tea and scones—which turned out rather well—and a chat, though it's unlikely the Binnie woman goes in for chat—or, judging by her rail-thin frame, scones.

Don't you want to say goodbye to the—*young people*?

We prefer to underplay farewells. Sameera and Hamid have all the information they need, and know they can contact us at any time. As can you. So, unless you have any pressing questions—

None I can think of, says Monica, for now.

I'll be on my way, then. A date for your review will be sent in due course.

Monica waves from the door as Ms Binnie, staring straight ahead, drives off in her mint green Fiat then climbs the stairs and knocks, tentatively, on both doors.

Would anybody like a drink, a scone?

No, says Sameera.

No, thank you, says Hamid.

Should I leave you to settle in, then?

Yes.

Yes, please.

Righto.

Well, that's that. But what to do while the new arrivals are holed up in their new rooms? She'd planned to show them the house: where things were kept, what they had and had not access to; she'd take them on a tour of the neighbourhood, advising on which shops and cafes were good to visit, and which best avoided, returning home by way of the park. *Home.* How long would it take the children—*young people*—to call it that?

Ronnie won't be back for hours. It's tempting to update him, but he has the auditors in, and Monica is under instructions not to phone unless there's an emergency which, clearly, there isn't. It's too early to make a start on dinner. There's no housework needing done, and the cupboards and the fridge freezer are packed to capacity. Ronnie had grumbled about the quantity of groceries she piled into the trolley, not to mention the time she spent cleaning the house from top to bottom. *Kids don't care about all that*, he said, *and I don't either. Don't you have better things to do?* They'd argued. What, then, did he consider better than making their home a welcoming place for children who'd been through so much?

Sameera is no stranger to sudden departures, but Ms Maud was mean to leave without saying goodbye. She closes the curtains and the room darkens. Silvery stars glow on the deep purple, picture-book ceiling which is like no night sky she's ever seen. She kicks off her trainers, flops on the bed. The pillow is soft and smooth against her cheek. The duvet smells like cut grass. Has she ever had such a fresh-smelling bed to call her own? She slides beneath the duvet and pulls it over her head; she hugs herself and, as they taught her to do at the clinic, takes long, slow breaths until the throbbing at her temples subsides, and her eyes close.

Hamid adores his new trainers, which truly feel like walking, *running,* on air. Ms Maud took them to a huge shoe shop and said they could take their pick. *Choose well,* she said. *We won't be doing this again*. When they got back to the centre, she told them they should throw away those they had on: *old shoes carry too much weight*. They didn't know what she meant but nodded all the same. Sameera dropped hers into the bin without a second thought, but Hamid slipped his battered trainers to the bottom of his backpack. Just in case.

It is beginning to get dark. The streetlights have come on. In the park across the road, shadowy figures move across the greying grass: walking, cycling, running for no reason other than to keep fit. Beyond the park, between flats and warehouses, are the solid silhouettes of docked ships, which Hamid wishes he couldn't see.

Life can only be understood backwards but must be lived forwards. He remembers the words, but not who said them. Was it Jamal? Everybody asked Hamid about the comings and goings—who'd arrived, where they'd come from, who'd left and where they were heading— but Jamalhe wanted more. He'd clamp Hamid's arm in his pincers, and not let go until he got what he wanted: the names of people Hamid had seen—or heard tell of, rumour was enough—who were breaking camp rules. When Jamal had your name, he'd make you pay for his silence. But no, Jamal didn't speak in riddles, only in plain, clear threats.

Maybe it was the shoe-mender who said it, the man with the melted face, who never needed a runner to find out what was going on. He called himself Massoud, but people changed their names all the time. Everybody was always on the move, always starting over, telling new lies about who they'd been and what they'd done, who and what they'd left behind.

The shoe-mender had a fine tent pitched near the perimeter fence. It was made out of stitched together rice sacks and lined with parachute nylon, scavenged from air drops. He always had plenty work but even those shoes he fixed up were wary of him. There were rumours: that he'd started a fire, accidentally or on purpose, which caused many deaths and left him disfigured; that if he didn't start the fire, he'd done nothing to stop it spreading; that if he wasn't a fool, he was a coward. The rumours may have been false but whatever he did or did not do, he'd have to live with his melted face forever.

Massoud was nothing to him, and he was nothing to Massoud. Like many people, he'll probably never meet Massoud again. And many others, like Jamal, he hopes he never meets again. Mean men whose names he never knew, and remembers only as the flare of a lighter, a steel toecap sparking off a rock, a rasping zipper, the pah, pah of a puffed cigar. He hates the smell of cigars.

How dark the room has become! Sameera doesn't feel as if she's been asleep. Her head doesn't jangle from the shards of bad dreams; instead, she is calm, empty. When she switches on the light, the room springs up around her, a padded swirl of pink and purple. Who needs so many cushions, pillows? When she opens the door, there is a tantalising waft of spiced meat. Downstairs, the TV is tuned to a noisy quiz show. Whenever somebody answers a question correctly, there's an explosion of pings and whooshes and cheers. Hamid loves quiz shows, and is laughing and clapping along with the studio audience. Ms Monica is twittering *Hamid this, Hamid that*.

Ronnie hadn't intended to be so late back, but by the time the auditors were finished nosing around the rush hour traffic was at its worst, and going for a quick one—which inevitably became two—was better than being stuck in city-centre gridlock. Then there was the kerfuffle at the station which made for further delays, and now they are at the end of a very late dinner.

In honour of the occasion, Monica

When they got back to the centre, she told them they should throw away those they had on: old shoes carry too much weight.

has brushed up a bit—lipstick, earrings, a sparkly top he doesn't recognise—yet throughout the entire meal she's been tense and brittle, firing meaningful glares across the table. But why exactly is he in the doghouse? He texted to say they should go ahead and eat without him, but Monica insisted they wait, though there was no need. As it was, the lamb was charred around the edges and the roast veg squishy inside, but everything tasted good, and the new arrivals ate heartily. Moreover, their table manners were perfectly acceptable; they even complimented Monica on the food.

Here's to many more grand meals together! says Ronnie, raising his glass of red, He catches Monica's eye and glimpses a softening.

They clink glasses and she lets him squeeze her shoulder.

Cheers!

The boy grins, his mouth crowded with strong, uneven teeth but, unless he's mistaken, the girl is rather too sullen for his liking. Does she have a problem with a drop of wine? Alcohol is certainly not proscribed by their religion. This was established well in advance—and was, at least for him, a clincher.

All's well that ends well! he adds, topping up his glass.

Getting to this point has been a total slog: the extensive personal scrutiny—on a par with today's auditors—the reams of paperwork, the aeons it took to receive official approval. If this is a humanitarian crisis, he'd put it to the Foundation more than once, shouldn't the powers that be get their bloody skates on?

When he and Monica rise to clear the table, Ronnie suggests, under his breath, that Sameera and Hamid might help, but Monica won't hear of it.

You expected Abby to help, he says. Insisted on it. Every night. So why not these two? We're not running a hotel.

There's time enough, says Monica. Let them settle in first.

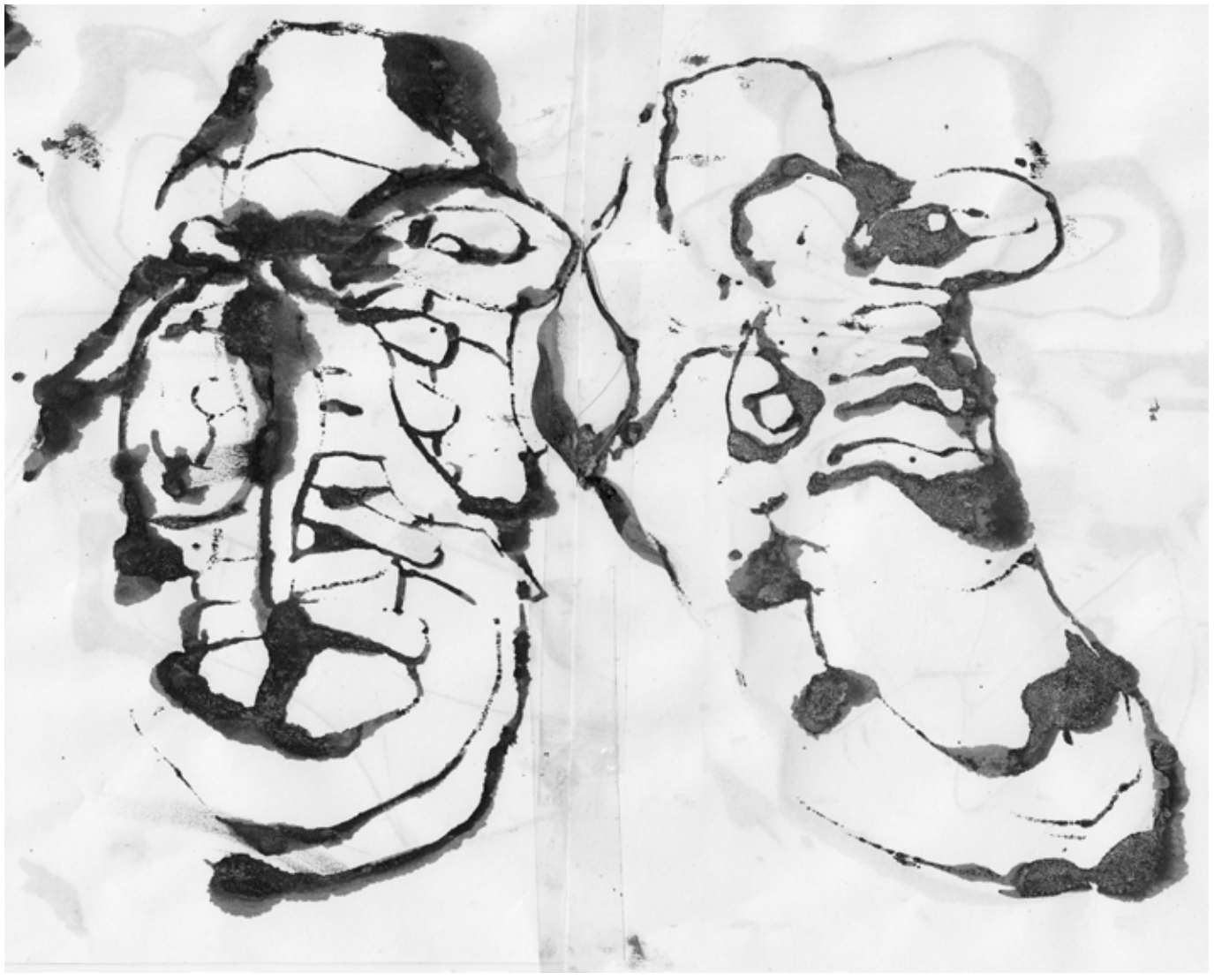
I'd say, start as we mean to go on.

The table lamp picks out Hamid's glinting curls and the dark bow of a nascent moustache which must, Monica imagines, be softer than it will become when the boy starts shaving—which can't be far off. She has no idea about school policy on facial hair but surely Ronnie can advise in the razor department.

Before she plucked them away to pencil-thin arches, their daughter had the softest, downiest eyebrows. When the fashion for luxuriant brows returned, she ditched the tweezers but, when they grew back in, the hairs were coarse and no longer nestled against her forehead. As Monica stacks the dishwasher, she feels the cold drip of life's irretrievable losses—the insignificant, and the life-changing.

Hamid scoots off to the living room and the TV. Sameera remains in her seat, staring at a trail of breadcrumbs on the gingham tablecloth. Monica pulls up a chair.

Is there something I can help with? You mustn't be afraid to ask. About anything. If it's … *women's matters*—



Artwork by Alice V. Taylor

No. No!

Well, if there's anything else, just ask.

No. Nothing.

We're so glad to have you in our home. And hope you'll be happy here.

With the tips of two fingers, Sameera rolls the breadcrumbs around the tablecloth. Monica marvels at the gleam of the girl's skin, the elegance of her long, slender hands but realises with a jolt that Zoom hadn't shown fingernails bitten to the quick or the scar tissue that encircled both wrists.

Monica has felt ready for bed since she woke this morning—very early—but now that she's finally lying down, with Ronnie shifting and shuffling beside her, sleep will not come.

You spoke her name, she says.

Don't, says Ronnie. Just don't.

But why tonight?

I was thinking about her. You were, too. I could tell.

I never stop thinking about her.

Do you really think I don't?

Flat on her back rather than curled up, with something hard and heavy to hand, Sameera wonders whether it will ever be possible to sleep like this: open, relaxed, unprotected. Everybody wants her to talk. Doctors, care workers, girls at the centre, everybody says talking helps. But whether she wants to talk or whether she doesn't, she has no choice. To have a chance of being sent back—and it's still only a chance—she must tell complete strangers, in more and more detail, what was done to her. But she has not told everything, *will* not tell everything, even to Hamid. How could she, when even to admit such things will bring everlasting shame?

Hamid unpacks his things and lays them out in the chest of drawers, except for his old shoes which he returns to the bottom of his backpack. They smell a bit, but it's a familiar smell. He flings himself onto the bed, spreads his arms and legs as wide as they'll go. The duvet crackles. Clean, warm, full-bellied, he's wide awake. In their room at the end of the corridor, Mr Ronnie and Ms Monica are talking, and the low rumble of their voices makes him think of an old train they once hopped. They were somewhere in Europe, Poland maybe. The train had ripped seats and doors that swung open whenever it rounded a bend in the tracks. At night, for no apparent reason, it would stop for several minutes at deserted, disused platforms. On one there was a station sign, grafittied over so much you couldn't make out the name, and a lamp with a cracked shade crusted over with dead insects. There was nobody around, and no security cameras. They could have dropped onto the platform and slipped into the encroaching forest, but the middle of nowhere was not their destination.

There are many journeys Hamid hopes he'll never make again. Across the hot desert, where sand burned through the soles of his shoes and blistered his feet. Across the cold desert, where icy blasts tore through his clothes. Through mountain passes, rocky paths, muddy paths booby-trapped with landmines. Across parched plains, across the seething, bucking sea. He never wants to see the sea again.

The house has its night voices: the bumps and peeps from the fridge-freezer, the rattling window frames, creaking doors, the scrabbling in the attic: ordinary voices of an old house in an old city. But there's another voice, a trailing wail, like the threads of grief which wound through the camps at night, even amongst the laughter and singing when something good was going on. Does Sameera also hear this or is it just in his head? She hasn't spoken a word to him since Ms Maud left in her little car. He doesn't know why she's in such a mood. This is where they are, now, where they must be. Together. They are young. They must think about tomorrow and the next day, and leave yesterday to the elders, wherever they are. And the dead.■

Poems by Deborah Moffatt, Michael Pedersen & Ãine King

Once a swan
Deborah Moffatt

Gone are the days when she wore
delicate shoes and flowing skirts
and caught every eye in passing,

those feminine trappings no use to her now
when she has to pick the flesh and bone
of a dead deer from the grill of a car,

every journey to town a dreary odyssey
in mud and flood and blinding rain,
grubby smudges of oil and dirt

staining her weather-beaten cheeks,
her long hair torn by wind and storm,
her arms and legs scarred by thorn and claw,

but still, on some dark night you'll see her yet,
dressed in all her finery, moving gracefully
through time like a swan on the water.

Orkney Bird Song
Ãine King

Today I am all birds
spread eagle-eyed
wheeling over Westray
high as a kite

I am skuas at Skaill
taking terns
storming the petrels

I am larking in the long grass

Lone as a heron
Lean and long-legged at low tide.

I am
sky-rolling stone-singing
ravens in Rackwick

A volley of gannets
hailing into Hoxa
spearing spume
in the whales' wake

I am a summer shower of swallows
whispering over wheatears
wing-weaving the stones
ringing Brodgar

A crowstep murder

A galaxy of starlings gathering dusk

I am all the notes of the song
the thrush full-throats to the sunrise

And a wee wren
window-struck
breast-bruised and beating softly
in the palm of my hand
a moment
before
flickering away.

Sweeney at sea
Deborah Moffatt

All this time out here at sea,
how long I do not know,
years, months, weeks,
or just one day.

But no, I'm not lost.

That swallow, though, flying high
up there in a wide blue sky
yet never far from land:
he'll guide me home.

I have never been lost.

I can smell it: the sandy shore,
the smoky fire, hearth
and heart burning,
sparks flying.

I've strayed, often enough.

Still, I don't trust the swallows
flying low before a storm,
fallen shadows, omens
of trouble to come.

Better astray; here I'll remain.

She'll wait for me only so long.
Let her keep the swallows
in the byre, the fire
in her heart.

Still, you dream
Deborah Moffatt

In some long ago
once-upon-a-time time,
a child half-asleep could dream
of a life to come, of fame and fortune,
of true love and happy-ever-after
and never even consider
any other future,

back when wars
happened in far-away lands
and hunger was only that hour
before dinner when the grown-ups
drank cocktails and laughter
was their answer to every
little worry.

Years later, still
you dream that what isn't
might yet be: the fame that came
and went, the fortune you never made,
the happy-ever-after that ended
in tears, the love that died
in a far-away war,

and you laugh
and drink a little too much,
and take pleasure in every day
that passes, and hope for an end
to all war, and soothe your hunger
for the life you didn't have with dreams
of a once-upon-a-time time.

in the forest
Michael Pedersen

& there's spare breath everywhere
gentling the lungs, 'specially in the sun
-sloshed moss. Grass spears,
a ferny curtain, juicy layers
in a glacier of green. We keep Buddha
schtum about such sorcery.

Our galumphing bodies gambol
into the clearing & shake the place
awake. A sparrow-hawk, wrapped
in tree's beardage, makes a French
Exit. Is a snowdrop in moonlight
a tadpole's version of a star? Happy

frogface. We sit on a fallen log
chipper as a box of matches. Chancing
our gunpower caps, the prospect of flame
in every sun-splintering false call. You
tell me: the best thing about a forest
is getting lost in it.

Leafy parasols umbrella out,
their flush filigrees scribbling the soil
with shadow-ink. There's the birds
again, singing as if we're holding back
their bread. Whereas you
meditate with the eye's shutters

drawn, I'm flouncing in foliage,
scooping up snail-shells—yellowed
ochre with lilac trims. A cache
of forty stacked into a cairn.
Beautiful really, if not for their death-
empty blackhole bellies.

In our wake, a mound of shells,
enough to take a stranger
by the throat, to have them twitchy
with questions of *how?* & *why?* Perhaps
a coven of witches firing-up
the cauldron, or a bear

with a taste for slime—a clump
of cow parsley to clean the gloop
off its teeth? Confronted
by the gothic thrill of this verdant
world, the sky lets out a *whooooosh*.

& so we get to snogging—
face-licking like sated lions
after a bloody kill. Aw the years & worry
& risk it took, yet here we still are:
pockets full of elderflowers
so there's tea from the spoils.

Behind the Scenes at the Hooseum

Radiant Point: Poems from Brownsbank
Lorna J. Waite
Main Point Books/Taproot Press (2024)
£10.00
Review and Overview of Brownsbank by James Robertson

Brownsbank interior. Photograph by Carolyn Scott

Hard to believe now, but thirty years ago writer-in-residence posts across Scotland numbered in the high teens. Some were hosted by universities, some by local authorities through libraries or culture or education departments, and one or two were attached to other institutions. Ross and Cromarty District Council in the 1980s, before local government reorganisation, was an early adopter of the enlightened policy of bringing poets, musicians and other artists to work in and with their communities, and other councils took the same road. Most often these appointments were half-funded by Creative Scotland's predecessor, the Scottish Arts Council. In two cases the holders of these posts actually resided in the homes of earlier writers: Brownsbank Cottage near Biggar, where Christopher Murray Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) and his wife Valda Trevlyn lived for 27 and 38 years respectively; and 27 Wilson Street, Perth where William Soutar, suffering from ankylosing spondylitis and cared for by his parents, spent the last fourteen, bedbound years of his life.

Together, all these posts formed a network of creative writing hubs from the Northern Isles to Dumfries and Galloway. They provided writers at different stages of their careers with financial security, usually for two or three years; they facilitated writing groups, school visits, reminiscence projects, readings and performances, publications and cross-disciplinary collaborations; and they brought authors (poets and fiction writers primarily) to a wide variety of locations, urban and rural, to practise their craft. Yet, despite their effectiveness in bringing a variety of benefits to communities for relatively little cost, they were always soft targets when institutions and councils came under pressure to make savings. Especially after the financial crash of 2008, many of them were axed. When the host organisation ended support, Creative Scotland's matched funding also ended. I may be wrong, but at present I can think of only eight long-term (a year or more) writing residencies or fellowships in operation.

Among the casualties were the Brownsbank and William Soutar Fellowships, which had their funding withdrawn in 2010. They had hosted seven writers each over two decades, but the buildings have been lying mostly empty since and are in grave danger of being permanently lost as significant cultural spaces. Perth & Kinross Council, the current custodians of the Soutar House, are seeking to sell it, whilst Brownsbank, now in the hands of a registered charity, MacDiarmid's Brownsbank, is in poor physical condition and has had all its contents removed to safeguard them from damp and deterioration. A plan for complete renovation of Brownsbank was scuppered first by the Covid emergency and subsequently by a huge rise in building costs. Despite widespread vocal approval - from government, cultural bodies and the public - for the proposals to restore the cottage and reinstate the writing fellowship, so far the necessary funding has not been found. Meanwhile, each winter leaves it yet more fragile.

These writers' homes may not be as grandiose as Scott's Abbotsford or as iconic as Burns's birthplace, but they are special in their own ways. The house in Perth contains the downstairs bedroom, redesigned and refitted by John Soutar, a master joiner, so that his son Willie could have a panoramic view from his bed out into the garden - *The Garden Beyond* as the title of Douglas Eadie's wonderful 1976 film about him has it. Brownsbank, a traditional farmworker's but-and-ben with a kitchen and bathroom extension built on the back in the 1960s by friends and supporters of the Grieves, is A-listed not for its architectural worth but solely because of its long association with MacDiarmid, one of the greatest Scottish cultural figures of the 20th or indeed any century.

I am doubly biased here, as a trustee of Brownsbank and as the first holder of the Brownsbank Fellowship from 1993 to 1995, two years that changed my life and enabled me to become a full-time writer. The thought that such an opportunity may not come anybody else's way in the future is heartbreaking, as is the idea that we, as a nation, might be careless enough to lose such an extraordinary and unique place. The same goes for William Soutar's home in Perth. Joni Mitchell's words are ringing out clear: 'Don't it always seem to go / That you don't know what you've got / Till it's gone?'

In 2011-12, after the long-term fellowships at Brownsbank ended, a further band of writers took up short residences of a few weeks. Among these was Lorna J. Waite, who stayed there in September of 2011. *Radiant Point: Poems from Brownsbank* is a finely produced book of the 38 poems she wrote or started in that month, along with photographs she took and essays and notes connecting MacDiarmid's ambition and achievement with those of Robert Burns. The book has been compiled and edited by Murdo Macdonald, Lorna Waite's husband, following her death aged 58 in 2023. In many ways, it is a product of love.

For Waite, an Ayrshire-born, Scots-speaking woman, Burns was 'symbolic of an unashamed, intimate, non-violent part of the psychological life of Scottish culture…He is perhaps…the most radiant lens, through which the mythological qualities of feelings particular to the inner and outer life of a place and people can be absorbed and reflected.' Her time at Brownsbank, living not in the shadow of MacDiarmid but illuminated by his presence, and by Valda's, led her to think about the influence on her of both his words and the cottage's physical space. She came to think of it as 'the hooseum', domestic yet full of artefacts, intimate yet expansive, contemporary yet historic: 'The cottage was "hame", and I felt "at hame". It is in the nature of the cottage itself and the imagined presence of its former occupants that this ability to be yerself is so rewarding for the writer.' Having spent two years sleeping in Hugh MacDiarmid's bed and surrounded by Valda's decorative eclecticism in every angle and on every surface of the hooseum. I can vouch for the accuracy of that observation.

A poster of MacDiarmid's poem 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' was proudly displayed in the classroom of the secondary school teacher, John Hodgart, who, Waite says, 'taught us our voices were worthwhile'. Waite's 'enchantment with astronomy' was sparked by that poem and thus 'poetry became an entry point to science as well as orbiting the Scottish democratic tradition of culture, philosophy and politics'. Some of the work that emerged in her stay at Brownsbank is a further exploration of these links. In her application to go on retreat there, reproduced in the book, she explained, 'The radiant point is a term used by astronomers to describe the point in the sky out of which comets emerge with their spectacular entrance and idiosyncratic orbit.' She expanded

Brownsbank interior. Photograph by Carolyn Scott

this as a metaphor for the poetry of MacDiarmid and Sorley MacLean and the historical analysis of their friend the philosopher George Davie, perceiving them as 'bright flashes of illumination on the horizon which have left trails for the contemporary writer to follow'. Accordingly, in 'The Net of Space', we find:

> It's aa mapped oot, woven thegither wi co-ordinates,/Magnetic fields an orbits under spatial lines,/Flowin interplanetary markins no seen,/Makin nummers oot o the void o space,/Haudin us aw in laws o physics/ Movin wi the rhythm o solar wind,/Lank nets slippin under the cauld tide o distance…

Waite's poems do not parrot MacDiarmid but honour and build from him. Her voice is her own - strongly affirmative of her class and sex, and blazing with intelligence and generosity. Her essays, as Murdo Macdonald says, show 'her commitment to poetry in both Scots and English, with due consciousness of Gaelic'. There is no posturing here: the basic simplicity of the cottage would not allow it. 'Now we have all we need,' Valda said to Chris as they settled into this, their last sanctuary, provided by Thomas Tweedie, the farmer on whose land it stood and who in all those years never charged them rent. 'Conscientious Objection and Cleaning', written for Valda, is a poem of Waite's from a longer sequence:

> I tenderly clean the framed photo,/Not the national portrait of the public realm,/ Proud and private Chris, wearing the robes of the honorary doctor, sitting/Old man on a bench, a Siberian woodcutter's face./The compliment pleased you.
>
> I dust away the debris of my skin,/Sweeping away strands of blonde hair on terracotta carpet,/Evidence of living in the museum of your memory.

Lorna J. Waite's work is strikingly original and *Radiant Point* is a book that demonstrates what a rare voice we have lost. Its contents make as strong a case as any for the retention and expansion of writers' residencies in spaces like Brownsbank. Her concluding remarks capture this beautifully:

"The month-long residency was of enormous benefit and of great significance, galvanising new work as well as energising and intensifying my understanding of, respect for and commitment to the work of Hugh MacDiarmid and his importance in world literature. By living at Brownsbank, his importance internationally is grounded in the experience of 'hame' in a way which is of inestimable value. I expect the currents and ripples of my time at Brownsbank to affect my future work for a long time."

Is it too much to hope that Lorna's words, written in 2011, may be a blueprint for Brownsbank's future, and not an epitaph? ■

For more information on Brownsbank Cottage, visit macdiarmidsbrownsbank.org.uk

Pretty Ugly
Kirsty Gunn
Rough Trade Books (2024) £13.99
Review by Lynn Davidson

'Risk! Risk anything! Care no more for the opinions of others, for tho*se voices. Do the hardest thing on earth for you. Act for yourself. Face the truth.'* These words, from one of Katherine Mansfield's journals, kept coming to me as I read Kirsty Gunn's latest collection of short stories, *Pretty Ugly*. Katherine Mansfield is a touchstone for Gunn, and just as Mansfield's stories take us into the sharp heart of a moment: its fracture, its light, its ache, its sudden freedom from constrictions, its glimpse of darkness and horror, the stories in *Pretty Ugly* do something similar, but with a harder shock, a darker lens. Gunn takes risks; she risks alienating the reader who might want to turn away from the 'ugly'. I did, at times.

In the stories certain things are brought disturbingly into proximity: the drawer of baby clothes within which 'nestles' two guns; well-heeled, well-presented mothers outside their children's expensive nursery with their shared pornography sites and absent husbands; a kitten in need of rescue and a 'lonely boy' about to be 'shipped abroad' to war; an elegant 'wife' who performs gruesome abortions on herself. It is the bringing into proximity that makes me feel that these stories have similarities to poems; the troubling juxtapositions that somehow activate each other because they hold each other's shadow, or potential. The stories feel open at their edges, unresolved. I felt drawn to the skill and reach and daring of these stories, and at times repulsed by their darkness. In one interview Gunn described the stories as like chocolates, you choose the most delicious looking one and you bite into it, and then the flavour is (she just pulled a face). Proximity again, delicious and foul, pretty and ugly.

I know that the prize-winning story 'All Gone' received a mixed response in New Zealand. It's terrible ending, with the mother killing both the Pakistani child her daughter had befriended, and her own daughter, is deeply shocking. It is a story about a racist person (to put it mildly), who is also a psychopath. This story is a bit too 'ugly' for me. I can't read horror. I have no appetite for brutality. But thinking about horror makes me start wondering if it is the fact that Gunn is a woman that caused some of the negative reaction to this story. If Stephen King had written 'All Gone' (different genre, different gender), would the story and the writer have become tangled in readers' minds?

There is little comfort in looking back, or returning to past places in *Pretty Ugly*. The past feels as untended, as lost, as the present. In 'The Round Pool' a man in a moment of loss in his life, wants to revisit the pool where, as a boy, he fished with his father. But this beautiful part of the Highlands is now fenced off, a 'private road.' This doesn't deter the man, who in his desire to get there, tramples down razor wire. But when he arrives the pool does not offer solace. The land doesn't come alive for him as it used to, the river and its fish are not well, and the memories that return are complicated. In the story 'It is lonely being a young man sent abroad to fight,' she said.' the protagonist returns to a previous home to see that a 'once pretty little sitting room' is now 'like no kind of room I'd ever been in before in my life, no kind of room anyone could live in.' It was cluttered with unpacked boxes and military boots and a StairMaster and a rowing machine. Going back, the stories suggest, can be a kind of horror. It is in the imagination, they suggest, where possible restoration lives.

In 'Poor Beasts,' one of several stories about the end of a way of life in the Highlands, the narrator describes visiting old friends who have worked on a Highland Estate for decades, but are now about to lose their position because one of the 'big outfits' have bought up the land. But the people who have cared for the land over time hold the stories and the knowledge, which includes knowing how to cull deer humanely, unlike the new owners who will shoot deer randomly from a helicopter. One morning, at sunrise, the narrator sees deer pouring 'like water' over the hill and towards the house, 'As though the deer were going to run straight through the walls of the house and into the kitchen and all around me in one great rush of movement, onwards, forwards, the house as invisible to them as the river had been …'.

The agency of land, land loss, belonging and alienation run through the book like rivers. 'King Country' is a brilliant story about the 'act' of belonging, performed by a man for his family, and about how the land can say 'yes' to you, while the community says 'no.'

The stories also play with the idea of a blur between fiction and memoir – the narrator is often a writer who comments on techniques used to draw people in to a story. In the last story called 'Afterword: Night Scented Stock,' The protagonist is returning home after attending a reading from the book, *Pretty Ugly*. She looks, aghast, at the bouquet that is waiting for her at her front door, with its 'Great fatted chrysanthemums,' 'thistles' and the 'many greasy hearts of lilies.' It is almost beautiful, and she holds it tenderly like a baby, but it is really slowly rotting, and from this rotting bouquet, she makes soup (for whom?). But don't expect resolution. The exquisite, the champagne-and-roses sort of upper middle exquisite, carries its shadow. The small town carries its shadow. Racism washes through all of the places from London to Scotland to New Zealand. The rotting bouquet with its vegetal smell is held up to our face. It

is not always comfortable to be part of the dynamic of these stories; to have to meet these moments in their prettiness and ugliness (both disquieting) and make our own decisions about them, if we can.

The organisation of sentences and paragraphs are also designed to unsettle. Gunn often starts with the end of a story/scene/moment/ memory and then moves backwards to show what lead to it. This retrospective unfolding keeps reminding us about cause and effect, and stops us 'getting lost' in the story – an idea that Gunn vehemently rejects, for her work at least. Here's an example from 'King Country':

> *'…by the time Mr Carter called us into the room with the guns to tell us we were going into the bush with him it was already too late. The time had passed long ago before bringing a truck-full of kids with him might have made a difference to men's minds made up. They were ready and waiting for him by the time we arrived in sight of the dirt track. We turned the corner, and there they were.'*

These narrative returns are a feature of Gunn's work. I think of the gorgeous, looping, musical returns and repetitions in her novel, *The Big Music*, which opens like this:

The hills only come back the same: *I don't mind*, and all the flat moorland and the sky. *I don't mind* they say, and the water says it too, those black falls that are rimmed with peat, and the mountains in the distance to the west say it, and to the north…

In *Pretty Ugly* the repetitions gather place and thought and resonance together, and then sometimes disperse them. Sometimes the repetitions are a kind of stuttering or fracturing, and at other times almost a litany, a gathering up. 'Flight Path' is about a time in the near future when the Highlands are bristling with wind turbines and birds are a rare sight, and a group walking through the bristling land see 'the annunciation of a white feather on the road.' And then something magical happens, and like the deer that pour over the hill in 'Poor Beasts,' the birds fly, the repetitions gathering and dispersing this moment of beauty and terror:

> *'We'd thought we were going to die. It was impossible to breathe, the sense of an almighty motion all around us, stifling us, and the beat of wings behind and above us, around us and in front of us…an endless flight, it seemed, of these living things, these actual flocks of birds that were upon us and around us […] as though there was nothing else to exist in the world, as though there could be nothing else, no person, no turbine, no piece of ground nor air, only this rush of terror and horror and wonder and beauty, and heaven and hell….'*

The art of horror is to take reality, and tilt it. I was in a café in Edinburgh recently, and in the display cabinet was a delicious-looking sandwich. I glanced at the description label and read 'rotted flowers'! I blinked a couple of times and looked again and read 'roasted peppers'. Perhaps, I thought, I need some distance from *Pretty Ugly*. But also, at such a moment as the one we are currently living through, maybe we need stories like these that don't allow us to become 'lost' in the reading, but rather provide vivid encounters with reality and its tilt. ■

Clear
Carys Davies
Granta (2024) £12.99 hb
Review by John McLellan

Clear attracted me as someone who has spent time wandering around the remains of clearance villages in the far north, discovering some of the reality and getting a glimmer of the grimness and horror of what the Clearances meant to human beings. I also came to *Clear* as someone who really enjoyed Carys Davies' first novel, *West*. This new novel did not disappoint.

This is a story about both isolation and connection. A lot of the time, the reader is immersed in the life of one man living in a remote and desolate place somewhere off the coast of northern Scotland. His world is about the day-to-day fight against the elements, keeping his home and his livestock, and himself, alive and in good order.

Unbeknown to him, other characters, richer and more powerful, have designs on his land. They want him off it – evicted. The basic story of the Highland Clearances maybe, through the lens of a singular life. A religious man is sent to do the deed, someone who is struggling to make ends meet in a life he shares with his wife and with the Church. He feels he is doing something against the grain but the need for the monetary reward trumps his conscience.

The two men encounter each other in a chaotic manner and after a near-death experience. The person who initially has power loses it and becomes dependent on the person who he has come to dispossess. The one who has spent years on his own finds it easier to manage than the one who has arrived from the seemingly more civilised world of the mainland.

Time passes and the religious man's wife fears for her husband and we learn something of the insecurity she has felt in her marriage, and this has not been just to do with the lack of money. Her journey is tricky and it's not obvious if she will manage it and what she will find when she arrives. She becomes dependent on the goodwill of others and I found myself fearful for her in a world of mostly rough and dour men.

What emerges is that both the religious man and his wife have been compelled to have trust in others, in unfamiliar and potentially scary situations. To this point the story feels to me that it is about those eternal concerns of power, trust and dependency. But ultimately something else emerges. Something very surprising, but a thing that made me realise this story could have been written about today. Yes, the setting, the world of the characters, is all in the past but the very human connectedness, central to the story, is as relevant today as at any other time.

The book left me thinking – a lot! I kept going back to passages for another look, ending up going through it all again. It is the subtle and thoughtful writing of the author that draws the reader so easily into another time and another place. It's also what makes this such a unique and enjoyable story. ■

What does it Mean to be Alive? Fourteen Attempts at an Answer
Chris Arthur
Eastover Press (2024) £21.99
Review by Graham Johnston

To essay (from the French *essai*), is to attempt, to trial – to try out. Rather than starting out with a conclusion and then seeking the best way to order and transcribe it, Chris Arthur's essays seem to record how the medium of writing itself – the process of naming and structuring through words – reveals previously hidden significance to both author and reader. Arthur, you get the feeling, isn't writing to deliver pre-conceived assertions – he is writing to think.

Unearthing 'hidden cargoes' (the title of a previous collection of essays) is a common aspect in Arthur's work and is particularly valuable in this age of the short attention span, the relentless algorithmic competition for our 'engagement'. In this, his latest collection of essays ('What does it Mean to be Alive?: Fourteen Attempts at an Answer') Arthur seeks to point us - beneath the surface of the familiar, the close at hand, the everyday – towards the extraordinary and the universal.

The full title of Arthur's latest collection of essays is important to bear in mind because the first part carries the tiniest risk of promising to answer its own question – as in a self-help guide, or the wisdom from some life-skills guru. But the sub-title defuses any such danger and alerts us to the nuance and humility that characterises his work - yet retains the scope to tackle the deepest of questions.

Essay writers are a rare species, and it wasn't until I found myself, in 2018, talking to the co-organiser of an academic conference on The Essay, that I realised that, looking back over decades of reading, it was essays that stuck out as having had the most lasting effect on my thinking and my way of looking at the world. Intrigued by this thought, and learning that the conference was at the magnificently eccentric Hospitalfield House in Arbroath, I decided to accept an invitation to attend, and it was there that I first encountered Chris Arthur, a guest speaker and, as an exponent of the form, an object of academic probing – a sort of 'Exhibit A' of the essayist genus.

The conference introduced two questions; what is the viability of the essay in the modern publishing environment; and what are the defining characteristics of essay writing? Perhaps one hope of the conference was to find an answer to the former question in the latter, but for me the success of the conference lay in its posing questions about the nature of writing, and, by comparing essays to other forms, how literature plays a role in the formation of individuals and societies.

The answer to the first question was rather gloomy – essayists, in publishing, are more than just rare – they're an endangered species. The second question was met more with an *essai* – an attempt at an answer rather than an arrival at any agreed conclusions. In a mirror of one unifying quality of essays, the conference looked closely at the surface of the essay form, to see what lay beneath. But what else unifies and defines the essay?

Essays can be on any subject, and are not limited to a particular length, though they do tend to be relatively short in form. Montaigne, the renowned father-figure of the essay, took a sort of free-range philosophical point-of-view, while the great essayists of more recent times have become famous through (and perhaps steered by publishing imperatives) a clearly defined subject area – John Berger will forever be associated with art and the politics of the left – Susan Sontag with photography. Essays resemble journalistic articles, but they are not tied to reporting on contemporary events. They have a lot in common with magazine and newspaper columns, but these tend to be opinion pieces from a fixed and familiar point of view – columns tend to reinforce rather than explore. Academic writing is also kin, but essays are less constrained by the need to 'prove' or endure the scrutiny of peer review. And there's a strand of essaying that could be considered part of the autobiography canon, but the presence of the author in an essay is rarely the actual subject.

This lack of clarity makes the essayist paradoxically vulnerable in what might be described as the Anglo-Saxon literary bias – which I would describe as the cultural dominance that defined verbal concepts have over all other forms of thinking in this part of the world. Words, as the cultural reserve currency, have given us the remarkable and powerful tool of being able share definitions and concepts across space and time. Literature has an almost hegemonic hold over the concept of an idea: if it's not in words, it's not an idea. Or at least, if it's a non-verbal idea – like a movement idea, or a musical idea or a painterly idea – it is of a lower order, intuitive sort.

What was beautifully circular about revisiting Hospitalfield, was that 40 years

earlier I had been a young art student on a summer residency there and had been pondering questions of the role of art on the formation of individuals and societies and, perhaps like all young art students, was wrestling with the nature and status of the kind of thinking that goes in to making art. I was greatly assisted in this by the essays of the likes of Berger and Sontag, as well as Raymond Williams and Rudolph Arnheim among others. I don't remember those writers reaching conclusions – but I do remember the originality and detail with which their words looked at the objects of their enquiries – how they used precise and original language to define and redefine what they were looking at, and in so doing revealed new emergent properties.

This is the part of the essaying tradition that Arthur exemplifies. But what makes him stand out for me, is that there is in his work an equivalence to the point of view of an artist – the way in which he draws on his immediate environment, projects a certain intimacy of experience -which is consistent with my own experience of making visual art.

The emergent properties that Arthur identifies are drawn from his encounters with objects and memories that are close to hand – from close looking at what is there, of questioning what we've come to accept that we think is there – to seeing it anew through his medium. As he says in 'Learning to See Goldcrests' - one of my favourites in this collection - 'Is it possible to use language differently, to forge our descriptions according to new reference points, so that our words create perspectives that are eye-opening?' If it isn't Arthur's foundational question, it'll do in the meantime, because it seems to be at the heart of every essay in 'What is it like to be alive?'

It's impossible to link the objects in each of these essays in terms of subject categories – there is no evident chain of thought - and as Arthur states in his introduction, 'they may appear like unrelated pieces that don't belong together.' What, for instance, connects the troubling history of prostitution buried in a decorative print by the Japanese artist, Hiroshige ('A Lament for Tama'), to the natural history of a patch of lichen on an Edinburgh sandstone windowsill ('Litmus Test')? Not much, on first inspection. However, one consistent theme – or perhaps it's more of a tenor – is that Arthur essays on the idea that the profound is embedded in the (one of his favourite words) quotidian and the familiar, and that language is the medium with which he can unearth it. It is not so much, as Marshal McLuhan famously put it, that 'the medium is the message', but rather, that the medium is the messenger. In fact, a double messenger: if you use a creative medium, it will reveal things to you – stuff shows up; and simultaneously, the product of that activity can reveal that same stuff to someone else.

It's possible, of course, to also see Arthur's writing as examples, not so much of the work of an endangered species, but of a beneficiary of another facet Anglo-Saxon cultural bias. Arthur makes no secret of his roots as a white, middle-class son, growing up in post-imperial, protestant Northern Ireland. But while this is perhaps an unfashionable starting point in today's publishing landscape, it becomes an enlightening point of departure in that it gives Arthur something for his language and his curiosity to cut through and emerge into a bigger picture. What makes them particularly fascinating to me, as someone trained in the disciplines of the visual arts, is that Arthur exploits the *essai*-ing qualities of his chosen medium to not only trial the words that will accurately communicate the objects of his attention – be they things or ideas – but also to attempt to track down what it is he is thinking about them in the first place.

In this, he seems much closer to a painter or a visual artist, in that the medium is a way of being in the moment, of sketching and becoming fully engaged with what is in one's field of vision: by focussing on describing what is truly there, rather than accepting received or handed down notions, Arthur is open to *what show's up* in the journey from first glance to revised cognition. As he says in the first essay of this collection, 'I'm interested in how easy it is to look at things and not really see what's there.' It's telling how many of Arthur's essays are based on a photographs of an image or an object which then go on to reveal an initially unknowable or contradictory reality.

We are as a species, programmed and conditioned to ignore or devalue the routine, the normal – it would be exhausting to experience as new and fascinating, every familiar experience in every day. If every task or activity required the same attention and care as it did the first time we attempted them, we'd never get anything done. Efficient this may be - and productive, even - but unless we pause occasionally, to see the conceptual gymnastics of a 'You Are Here' map ('Snowglobe Co-ordinates'), or the difficult backstory to a familiar historical statue ('Nicholson's Horse'), we fall away, in tiny incremental ways, from the kind of engagement with the world that really matters.

What allows us to be transported by Arthur's writing – to be carried from the specifics of his own history – is the precision of his language which seeks always to find the bigger picture. The process of essay writing, perhaps, is to be in a medium which carries its practitioner closer to the thing at hand; subject and object are in the same space - co-exist in the text. Arthur achieves this by an openness to the objects he encounters in his particular journey. Describing them reveals that they are emblems of something bigger than his own place and status in the world.

It is in these qualities that I recognise also those of the visual artist – the medium enables the author and the reader to be more fully 'here', to be truly engaged with the objects of their attention and to respect the vast histories of their being. What it means, perhaps, to be alive. ■

Anne Macleod rounds-up and reviews some recent poetry titles

Mariscat Sampler One: poets Helen Evans, Peter Kenny, Marilyn Ricci.
Mariscat Press (2024) £
Mariscat Sampler Two: poets Candida Elton, Phil Kirby and Jacqueline Thompson.
Mariscat Press (2025) £7.50
Sonnets for my mother as Lear
Martin Malone
Mariscat Press (2025) £7.50
[Mariscat titles can be ordered post free by emailing hamish.whyte@btinternet.com Ed.]
Dwams
Shane Strachan
Tapsalteerie (2024) £10.00
Reviews by Anne Macleod

In 2023, Mariscat Press won the Michael Marks Poetry Pamphlet Competition and two of their poets were shortlisted for the Poetry Prize. The generous prize money prompted them to open a submissions window and this beautifully produced series of Mariscat Samplers, three poets per issue, emerged.

In *Sampler One* we meet Helen Evans, Peter Kenny and Marilyn Ricci from Devon, Sussex and Leicestershire respectively. All three are widely published, and all three share a clarity of line and a love of simple, effective language.

Helen Evans spins confident vulnerability. "Flying isn't dangerous/ Crashing is." she tells us in 'Life Lessons for Girls', the opening poem and also the title of her contribution. "There are only two types of pilot./Those who have./ and those who could." She exhorts us to 'Always reach for the skies.'

In the poem 'this' her love of flight becomes ecstatic. "If you've ever soared the sunshine edge/of a snow shower in April - wingtip in cloud/ cockpit bright with warmth –/ this"

She celebrates flight. And light. In 'Collateral' she concludes "*you'll see bent heads transformed/by a shift in light….. which … illuminates you as well.*"

Peter Kenny opens his time-travelling 'Chrononaut' with 'The House with Blue Curtains', where he sees himself at four, playing with his grandfather, dashing about a room "in wild figure eights buoyed by his laughter… /Though mum told me he was already dead/ by then … never/lived a day in the house with blue curtains."

Still, in 'The Door in the Wall' he tries to open " .. every door, hoping to steal into a story;"

And the past can always be regained. As 'Chrononaut' concludes. "…I can open my laptop and, by typing,/crawl into the dolmen of my beginning".

In Marilyn Ricci's pared-down 'Revenant', the story is the thing. This emerges gradually, a dark tale where poems flesh the shadows of a sad, uncertain past. Also a playwright, Ricci skilfully unfolds the plot. Rooms are witnesses. Doors are locked. Owls, tigers, an elephant and the raven of the protagonist's relationship are uncannily remembered, outlived. As 'The Owl Advises', (the first poem of the set) "a raven, even in dreams, must be faced down".

The past and an apparent present clash here, jostling till the final whisper, 'The Last Word'. "… let's face it, you're merely a ghost/from my past and I am here, right now. Alive."

There is much life too, to be found in *Sampler Two*, where poets from Arbroath, Devon and the West of Scotland ply their words.

Jacqueline Thompson's 'Backspeirin' trawls a dark North Sea, "catching treats for beauties asleep/under flash Orion's belt". But "we mustn't gaze homewards," she warns. "It's pure backspeirin."

Backspeirin. The only Doric word in this series, it sets the tone for this lively questioning of love and loss, of how women are seen, persuaded to portray themselves. In 'Selfie' "my look is polished marble,/ skin purged of human blots,/jawline held divinely taut," while "voluminous on the heater," the poet wryly notes "Nana's pants."

Thompson objects to objectification. 'Step into your garden and watch' she demands in 'Glow Worms'. "Cradle us in your palm./Look us straight in the eye.'"

How could we do otherwise?

The 'Breaking Faith' of Phil Kirby's title is taken from the poem 'Her Spanish Watch' where sorting through his mother's belongings after her death feels like betrayal. The poet finds and keeps her Spanish watch, one she always wore, which 'measures nothing now except/ the compass of her absent wrist.'

These elegant, elegiac poems cast a wistful gaze on family life, on separation. "..how is it I've come to be / the only one of this side of the glass?" ('In the Garden'.)

And in 'Unsung' he muses "But I lose the point of numbering such ageless things, when… you could count how often I have said/ 'I love you' on the fingers of one hand."

Candida Elton's Soft Gifts of Moss has *Snakelock Anemones* concealing their ".. wild and / boundless dreams of conquering/ the world" and settling for "the small space conferred on us."

'Ravens' too are constrained. In the poem of that name they bear "soft gifts of moss for fair exchange" and

"nest and scavenge and connive" but "Rarely straying far from home, round and round/ the rugged rock the ragged ravens roam." This collection breathes hill and sea and mermaids, ending in 'October.' '"It's rainbow season". Winter will follow, bring "whooper swans" sunlit' or ".. heron's flight on a misty morning."

Not so constrained, then.

In short, *Mariscat Samplers One* and *Two* introduce six fine poets. I can't wait for number Three. ■

DWAMS by Shane Strachan.

Shane Strachan, Scots Scriever from 2022 to 2023, lectures in creative writing at the University of Aberdeen. Dwams, his first poetry collection was long listed for the Saltire First Book of the Year. A performer, he has written for the stage, and been involved in a plethora of creative projects. In this lively and varied collection he merges poems from all these different areas, poems from lockdown and found poems from the Aberdeen streets. And they're nearly all in Doric.

Strachan has a good ear, is particularly skilled at conveying differences in voice and tone. 'Dreepin', the long poem that opens the collection, draws us through Aberdeen's oil years from 1969 till the present day, a series of messages that start on landlines and end up, perhaps, on WhatsApp, the message read but not responded to. "Hello, Sexy, it's me,/ yer North Sea sugar daddy –/ weet, sweet and fiery!/ God's gift tae modernity!" Love at first sight. The poem reels us through the decades, oil crises and Gulf Wars, and inevitable downturns brought about by climate change, but in the end "O wad some power the gift give us/ tae see oorsels…. Weel, dare ye look…. It'll be yer ainsel reflected back" "But fa wis Orpheus?" The message echoes, "fa wis Eurydyce?"

Greek gods make another appearance in 'Colonnade', a poem written in response to a 2016 project responding to the architecture of Union Street. '"Watch Helen of Troy attempt to sail/ her buggy through showers of battling hail;/.. Poseidon's fingers turn cold and numb/ as he waits for a bus that never comes…. And poor Dionysus, bleezing since ten,/ has got his head stuck in a bin again."

Ordinary Aberdonians manage the buses better. In 'Shelter', a found poem from a Union Street bus shelter, Strachan weaves the richnesses of Doric, English and Polish into a tapestry of the city at Halloween. And in 'Just Another Job', Bill Gibb's working life and life as a child on a farm near New Pitsligo are celebrated. His sister offers the final conclusion. ".. *Oh, Billy was just an ordinary man/ and a man fa wis extraordinary*."

This collection is energetic; Doric dancing on the page. You will enjoy it.

Sonnets for my Mother as Lear by Martin Malone

Martin Malone, an editor for Poetry Salzburg and ambassador for the Scottish Poetry Library, has previously published four poetry collections and four pamphlets. He is also guitarist, songwriter and sound engineer for the band Innocents abroad. He divides his time between Donegal, Aberdeenshire and France, which must have greatly complicated the experience of dealing with his mother's dementia and the complex systems involved in caring for those with the condition. In the twenty 'raggedy' sonnets – his description – of *Sonnets for my Mother as Lear* he offers us a spare and moving retelling of their journey.

And what a story he shares. His proud and independent mother is eighty-six and struggling to live at home. As her confusion deepens, she is more and more at risk. One carer appears dishonest, others genuinely nurturing but not always able to manage their spirited charge who time and again refuses help. In 'The art of our necessities is strange' the baffling, Orwellian nature of official language looms. "The checklist below is representative/of the individual. Please do not worry/ if you can't give the data it asks for,// it may not apply to everyone; may not/tell us anything of importance at all."

The eventual crisis happens. In Sonnet XVI 'What should follow these eclipses?' "In Donegal when it comes, I take the call /in some car park as we count our blessings:/a fall but not a bad one.. a hospital bed" . They are at last able to organise residential care for his indomitable mother whom he visits in the home in Sonnet XX 'We two alone will sing like birds I' the cage.' He finds her in the lounge, singing and dancing, and she draws him into her dance. " .. of course, you've no idea who I am," he says " though now, at last, I think I know you." The poet is wrong in one thing, though. His sonnets are not 'raggedy.' Loss and despair are all the more poignant for this pared-down style. Malone's language and sense of line perfectly convey the human tragedy. ■

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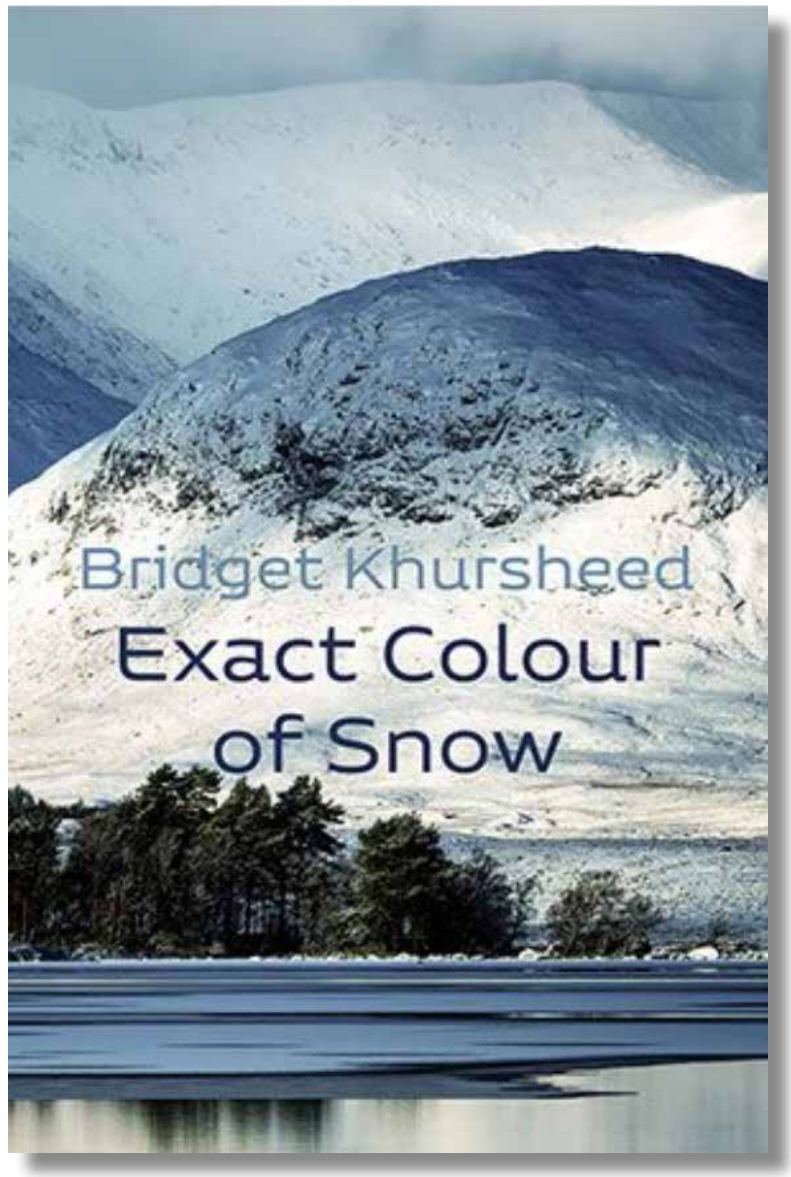
without title
Gerry Loose
Shearsman Books (2024) £12.95
Exact Colour of Snow
Bridget Khursheed
Shearsman Books (2025) £10.95
Leaving Songs
Donald S. Murray, with drawings by Doug Robertson
The Islands Book Trust (2025) £10.00

entitled to sing
Reviews by Ian Stephen



Gerry Loose's last book is a substantial collection at 128 pages but there is no sense of too much or everything being bundled in. That said, it is a collection to take in small doses – a very particular malt, close to hand for when there is time and space – these poems and prose-poems need both. It is one to return to as its linguistic pleasures are often complex at first sip and in aftertaste.

This does need commitment from the reader but the book is brimful of variety and wry humour. Settings of poems reflect the travels of an international poet, including Montpelier, Vietnam, Latin America. But Japan is never very far away, even if the poem begins in 'nothing but a hut' in Carbeth. There is a simple dedication to the person who made the most apt of cover images, the photographer Morven Gregor but that too has its surprising, not showey, conclusion which is also an opening for all that is to come. A flower is not picked but observation and language shares it while leaving it untouched. You read on to find a love poem titled with a quote from Pablo Neruda and freely using lyrical repetition. The languages throughout are many, including the dialect of the cicada, hints of Italian, French, Irish and Scottish Gaelic and the songs of a great variety of birds.

Arresting imagery is sketched strong and bold, with few brushstrokes but sound too is never far away. Gerry was a true makar in his compulsion to find form for thought and insight and out-of-sight imagining. And these forms do vary – lower case is often the way but then you will meet caps and stops and just feel there is reasoning or trust behind their use. You also trust his choice of a reflective prose style. Even though he was a master of disruption he made fine sentences and there is at least one poem built on them, as also used by Thomas A Clark and Ian Hamilton Finlay but Gerry's usage is his own.

The (non) title poem seems to me expressionist but brimful of celebration for the species we share earth with but also the language developed to honour them:

> 'allis shad and twaite shad vendace and powan'
> And this for mysterious music:
> 'there's four wrens to a penny'

Bridget Khursheed's acknowledgements in *Exact Colour of Snow*' include a nod to a friend who pointed out she writes in black and white. I'm not so sure. The 2nd collection of this poet shares the same format as 'without title'

and is presented with similar paper and typography. The subjects studied are also set in Scotland and abroad, also range from the natural world to crazy human interventions, also alternate between eschewing punctuation and using it. I would say there's a bit more storytelling but interspersed with allowing free exploration of what's within. Angels are personalised. In 'Collecting seaweed' she dives below her own surface:

> 'sometimes mask on I look at the silver jelly rocks/underwater and my hair escaping beanie prison
>
> reaches out weightless/the crimpy soft folds of endless plush
>
> grandmother's settee loose coverings/and tide push and loop
>
> the expensive stuff out of reach/on the sand I am in my element again'

That letting-go is strong in the title poem and even more so in the dynamic and intense sequence bringing us to childbirth in 'A confinement'. Freedom of form, incorporating a well-made prose, builds a swelling abundance of produce, meticulously catalogued. It's not all harmonic as the raptor's tooth and claw, observed, conveys a pregnant woman's sense of foreboding and risk. A story is told and there is suspense but the freeform writing is used to strong effect.

Yes, there is a monochrome effect in many of the poems which can jump from the recovering Kelvin to the ironies of a clay-pigeon range. But there is also a judicious splash of colour here and there, a technique also shared with Gerry Loose. Briget Khursheed's intense scrutiny of dyeworks seems like the territory of Tarkovsky's 'The Stalker' though the post-industrial landscape is all too real. In technique I'm reminded of a wonderful self-published book by the late Mairi Macdonald of Grimsay, a photographer and poet who used colour on one page only to show a poppy from Arras on a black and white page.

(www.wilibraries.org.uk/GroupedWork/d16e5a79-6815-627e-290b-635be15d1fe2-eng).

There is dramatic monologue too, for more immediate effect, in 'Old Biddy' revealing the versatility of this strong poet. That form is also found in Donald S Murray's 'Leaving Songs', an illustrated journey from the Butt of Lewis to Canada and (sometimes) back, told in a rhythmic dramatic verse alternated with short prose pieces, sometimes in character. The Islands Book Trust have used Donald's long-term collaborator Douglas Robertson to leaven the words with sympathetic and accessible illustrations. This book is very different from the other two in that the tale is to be conveyed rather than found within.

The publication ties in with a multi-partner touring performance of words, illustration and music to commemorate the anniversary of the departure of *SS Metagama in 1923*. She carried economic migrants from the Highlands and Islands (and other parts of Europe) to Canada. Donald Murray grew up in the Ness district of Lewis and has researched the experience of Hebrideans settled in the cities or more rural communities of the USA and Canada. It's possible that phrases heard or family legends shared have fed into the sequence of verse, sometimes character-studies.

For me the device of bookending with a voice of the Butt of Lewis lighthouse itself or its foghorn is effective. I was also jolted out of more regular rhythms and rhyming scheme in 'Love-Song' where chiming or half rhyme is used and the spoken voice came through strong:

'And yet it's gone and happened'

Additional lyrics used in the show, include new songs from Willie Campbell and Liza Mulholland, a relative of the bard, Murdo Macfarlane. Other performers acknowledged include Dolina Maclennan and singer, Calum Alex Macmillan. Here is a link to the Lewis 'Wee Studio' recording of one haunting example of a Macfarlane song of exile passed down generations:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=96ZNoGekj2A

There was an added pleasure of recognition in engaging with the work outlined above as all three poets have been published in *Northwords Now*. ■

We Are Migrant
Jim Mackintosh
Seahorse Publications (2024) £10.00
Review by George Gunn

There are two areas of poetry that are vital to its success. One is language and the other is story. Jim Mackintosh's book, "We Are Migrant", engages the reader with both. The Oxford dictionary describes *migrant* as "a person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions". So either as a noun or an adjective there is a sense of movement, of urgency and necessity in the term. Often it is used disparagingly but in Jim Mackintosh's work the word encompasses both the personal-political and the economic-historical realm, where family experience melds into the broader experience of emigration-immigration. No subject is more pertinent to so many in the modern world and used in such a toxic fashion by governments around the world.

Yet Jim Mackintosh sees the world as a poet and his radical and random empathy is apparent from the beginning in the poem "By Grace" where the protagonist states quite plainly.

> I am migrant. A century narrowed in eyes/ widened by Dunfanaghy's peace/and behind me on the hill a kirk-yard of my discovered ancestors resting/safe from our turmoil yet still/willing to guide me to a better understanding.

Thus the narrative of the collection is laid out and what we undertake as a reader is to inhabit the hegira the poet takes us on, through many states and time, whether it is, as in "The Fever Crossing", with the Irish navvies on the building of the Carlisle to Glasgow railway, dying of Typhus in 1840,

> "Stand on the hard shoulder," the poet urges the workers, "sense polluting thunder
> pass relentless, unforgiving
> of your silence buried between the ridge and the river."

Or in the poem "Grains", about the Srebrenica genocide of 1995 where the children are compared to scattered grains,

> I hold hope in my hands and wait.
> I must. It is too easy to let go.

When we let go of our empathy we betray our humanity. In light of the ongoing collective tragedy of Gaza Jim Mackintosh, in the poem "What Now?", notices a solitary workman in a ravaged Aleppo and captures a moment of continuity, of everyday human activity amid the violence, and asks,

"What is there now for the cabinet-maker
at the soot-trimmed velvet noon?"

> where "Aleppo's innocent children played on open ground…"

The English language in this book is spare, even tentative, allowing the image to inhabit its own space, as if too much detail would choke it, yet on the few occasions Jim Macintosh writes in his native Scots the language is freer, more relaxed and musical. As for example in "Revelled Thrums", where

> "yon skoddy notion o daein summit, ill-best,/gaun tae War until you Pointless Celebrity Jungle Factor/distracts wir confeesed-like state o breathin"

Here the Scots language is taken out of its often ghettoised rural comfort zone to witness a modern war with no rules. The language makes the subject memorable as well as highlighting the horror of barrel bombs and the "laser-precise deid", the "daith-ruckle… an corpies/ blank gawpin.." A living language is the life blood of poetry. Most poetry produced these days drips only embalming fluid.

Seamus Heaney once wrote, "The aim of poetry and the poet is finally to be of service, to ply the effort of the individual into the larger work of the community as a whole."

This is what Jim Mackintosh attempts in *We Are Migrant*. The book, the hegira, ends up where we began – in Dunfanaghy, on the north coast of Donegal – this time in a pub where the poet enjoys a pint of Guinness - weary one feels from the horrors he has witnessed – yet stoic, for it is no easy thing to aspire to clarity in an age of catastrophe. He finishes his pint and leaves.

> Crossing the street I stopped mid-stride. The Hotel with its familiar name and rooms/now housed, like we all are from something in life, refugees. I looked nine floors up/to a face and a hand on the window. I raised my hand in solidarity.
>
> We are migrant." (Nine Floors Up)

These poems help us all lift our hand and to recognise – the hand and the face at the window, yes, but something more, something greater and something summed up by the late great Hamish Henderson,

"No one can interest me in 'fine' writing as such… Any fool poet can write well if he happens to have talent – but the poets who LOVE have a much larger problem, not only to write well, but to express once again – after a lapse of several centuries, the WHOLE world, and this impinges not on one individual but on the collective."

This is the ambition of this book. Buy it, go on the journey and see for yourself.■

A trio of Sarabanders

There She Goes: New Travel Writing by Women
Edited by Esa Aldegheri
Saraband (2025) £
Dark Skies
Anna Levin
Saraband (2024) £
The Salt and the Flame
Donald S. Murray
Saraband (2024)
Reviews by Jennifer Morag Henderson

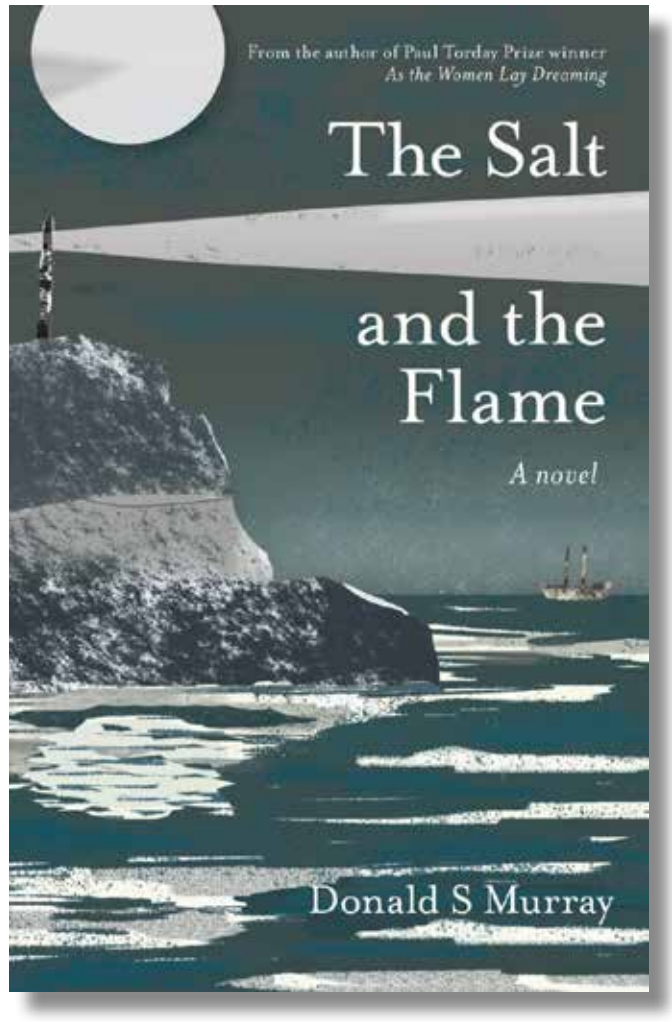
In *There She Goes* the contributors take many different types of journey, but the link between all the essays is that this is travelling done by women. The editor, Esa Aldegheri, argues in the introduction that women have a different experience of travel. They have societal challenges – dealing with peoples' perceptions of them doing an activity that is traditionally associated with men – and they have personal bodily challenges – dealing with periods while mountain climbing, for example. Aldegheri is the author of 'Free to Go – across the world on a motorbike', and she says that she not only wants to reclaim travel literature as a space for women, but also redefine what travel literature can be: it doesn't have to be about conquest and endurance,

but can be about the "everyday reality of what happens when women move through the world in their brave, scared, messy bodies."

Some common themes repeat in the essays, particularly what it is like to travel with children, or after having had children. There are also some wildly different journeys, from Palestinian artist Leena Rustom Nammari's minutely-described trip over the bridge that crosses from the Israeli-occupied West Bank to Jordan, to Lee Craigie's description of an endurance cycle race.

In an anthology, different essays will resonate with different readers, and some appealed to me more than others. There was some similarity in the approaches of some of the writers: not so much the common threads of being a woman, but a common interest in things like wild swimming, for example, or the discussion over whether covid lockdowns brought us closer to nature. There are consecutively-numbered endnotes throughout the book, perhaps a decision that was meant to give a cohesiveness to the collection as a whole, but which disconcertingly caught my eye by the end of the book. I felt there was inconsistency, too, in what these endnotes were for: were they academic or not?

The final essay in the book was my favourite though: Margaret Elphinstone's 'Sea Crossings: Time Circles'; her account of travelling in Scotland, Faroe, Iceland and Greenland while writing her wonderful novel *The Sea Road*, an account of Gudrid and the Viking exploration of the North Atlantic. The novel is a vivid reimaging of the travels and life of an extraordinary woman; this essay brings it together with the writer's experiences and the lives of others she met as she researched and wrote. I had read a version of this essay – or elements of it – online before, but this is more polished. It would be great if it brought more people to this extraordinary novel.



Dark Skies is part of Saraband's 'In the Moment' series; short books that "explore the role of mind and body in movement, purpose and reflection, finding ways of being fully present in our activities and environment". From the series, I had previously read *Atoms of Delight: Ten Pilgrimages in Nature* by poet Kenneth Steven, which is a lovely collection of short essays or meditations. Well-suited to the format, *Atoms of Delight* is a book I recommend and gift to others.

In *Dark Skies*, Anna Levin looks up into the night. Starting from a personal perspective, she talks about her desire to get away from all-pervasive light pollution and see true darkness: wide open skies full of stars. The chapters summarise the current situation with light pollution and its often-overlooked effect on our body rhythms and on the natural world around us, making the science accessible; feature journalism spread out. The dangers of darkness – such as city streets at night – are touched upon. The book then collects together some of the responses to this problem, including scientific conferences and Dark Sky Parks.

Anna Levin is enthusiastic about the people she meets who are working to restore and manage dark skies, such as the "upbeat swirl of stargazing, science, art and tourism" of Europe's first Dark Sky Places conference, where people travel from "New Zealand, Chile and Israel to share their stories under the promise of pristine night".

Any 'return to nature' nowadays will always be fraught: it can become an artificial creation with its own subculture. The problem of light pollution, however, is a serious one; personal solutions will not be enough and there needs to be a wider discussion. As Anna Levin acknowledges, it doesn't seem right that to get to the mythical preserved *Dark Skies*, we drive a long way, in cars with headlights, under streetlamps, polluting in many ways as we go.

The Salt and the Flame tells the story of people from the *Metagama*, an emigrant ship that left Lewis in 1923 for Canada. Mairead and Finlay leave their island home and eventually find themselves in Detroit.

Donald Murray, along with Liza Mulholland and others, performed the show *In the Wake of the Metagama: An Atlantic Odyssey in Story and Song*, which brought together music, writing and art to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the boat's departure from Lewis. The show had a successful tour around Scotland, including an excellent performance at Eden Court Theatre in Inverness, and will shortly be available as a CD recording, while Liza and Donald's process of researching in Detroit was featured in a fascinating BBC Alba documentary.

The Salt and the Flame goes deeper into the story, taking the fictional Mairead and Finlay and exploring not just the initial moment of emigration and adjustment to the new world, but taking their story right up to 1970: through the Depression and Detroit's race riots, through the personal disruptions to their family and on to their children's choice of different paths in life.

This is the story of two people and their decision to emigrate, but it's more than that: it's the story of how this choice of emigration was made by thousands of people. It's not so much a personal exploration of how it feels to be adrift in a new country, but a picture of what that emigration means to whole communities. Mairead and Finlay have their problems, but the book shows that these individual challenges are part of a much bigger story.

Once they get to America, the people from Lewis find that they are only one group among many: they might have their unique culture, but there are other immigrant groups dealing with many of the same issues. Mairead feels sympathy for others who have troubles, but Finlay finds that the best way to find work, especially as the Depression hits, is to band together with his fellow Scots – to the exclusion of other groups.

As the novel progresses on to the 1950s and 60s, the racism and deep societal divisions of Detroit are revealed. Sometimes it feels like major events – Finlay's growing dependence on alcohol, for example – are raced over lightly, but what we end up with are individuals that are placed within the context of the wider society made up of many different peoples, each with their own history, all suspicious of each other. We also continue to follow the story of Mairead's brother Murdo, left at home in Lewis, still dealing with the aftermath of the First World War, and trying to make a life in a place that many of his peers decided was not worth it. Murdo tries to imagine Mairead's new life, while Mairead is unaware of how life back in Scotland is still changing and evolving. Leaving is also the story of those who are left behind.

I have enjoyed all the iterations of the Metagama story: the show, the music, the storytelling and now this novel. It's a sustained exploration by a whole group of talented artists of an important part not just of Scottish history but of the wider history of emigration and how it made up the world we live in now.

Button Bog – Voices and Treasures from a Traveller's Kist
Jess Smith
Tippermuir Books (2025) £11.99
Beàrnaraigh na Hearadh: 'Tis Fifty Years Since'
Susanne Barding
The Islands Book Trust (2023 print, now e-book) £17.95
Reviews by Kenny Taylor

We are creatures of stories. For most of human existence, those tales would be told in person – around a fire; at or in beds; while walking and talking; over drinks. Conveying stories in other ways is a fairly recent phenomenon, notwithstanding some ancient scrolls and chiselled scripts. Both the number of stories and the ways of telling have burgeoned, first through the power of print and now through a plethora of visual, audible and readable media.

Yet the power of oral storytelling, conveyed by an adept storyteller, still holds magic for young and old. I recall how my own children sat with rapt attention while Janet MacInnes shared tales in Tore Hall; how the late, far-famed

Duncan Williamson held us spellbound in Cromarty; how Lizzie McDougall still entrances audiences at Belladrum and beyond across the Highlands; and how Gordon MacLellan is adept at unleashing imaginations of youngsters and adults to share their own stories aloud.

Members of Scotland's Traveller communities have always been important bearers of oral story inheritance, but in recent decades their role has been crucial in keeping old stories and songs alive through times when many of these had fallen out of use and fashion for other people. Jess Smith is part of the Traveller tradition. As a child, she journeyed with her family throughout Scotland in an old single-decker Bedford bus. Childhood experiences were the basis of her trilogy: *Jessie's Journey*, *Tales from the Tent* and *Tears for a Tinker*.

She's published both fiction and non-fiction while 'off the road' since then, but as she says in the introduction to *Button Bog*, has always wondered about the distinctiveness of Travelling people and the roots of their stories. "While in search of the elusive wanderers of the past I collected volumes of books, documents and wrote down personal stories which I referred to as my 'Kist of Voices': a wonderful wealth of tales, storytellers and poets."

So this book is the result of Jess opening that kist to share some its stories, reminiscences, poems and observations. For the reader, this mix of story and fact, comments and more makes it feel that you're sitting with the storyteller – one minute engrossed in the unfolding of a tale, the next hearing an aside about an historical event or getting a comment about a different story that's about to come next. That's part of the book's charm, since it's not constructed as a string of narrated stories, but more as a melding of many different elements chosen from the writer's life and knowledge of Scotland.

Other storytellers will value the range of tales told here, just as general readers will enjoy 'hearing' them in their mind's ears. I certainly did, while also aware that the book highlights some of the contrasts between stories composed and conveyed in non-oral traditions from those meant to be heard aloud. There's a tendency to melodrama in some of the book's stories, for example, such as thunderstorms or other wild weather accompanying tragic events. This works if you hear the words as if spoken.

Perth-based Tippermuir and Paul S. Philippou are to be congratulated on adding another characterful book to their already diverse stable of titles, as is Jess for opening her kist and letting others have a keek at the riches within.

Harvest at 5 Borve. By Susanne Barding

Given the Faroese flavour of some of the work in this issue, it feels appropriate to draw attention to a substantial book published nearly two years ago and another just released by the same author – Susanne Barding - that link the Faroes and the Outer Hebrides. Both are published by *Urras Leabhraichean nan Eilean* - The Islands Book Trust and available for purchase as e-books. I haven't yet seen the newest of these: *What's your name – A comparative study of personal names and naming in the Outer Hebrides and the Faroe Islands* – but look forward to making its acquaintance soon.

The Islands Book Trust is a charity that works to extend appreciation of the history of Scottish islands in their wider context through talks, conferences, visits, publications, education and research. It's based at Balallan on the Isle of Lewis and managed by a board of trustees chaired by the founder, John Randall. Last year, it organised 13 events, including a two-day conference in Tiree and published five new books and four quarterly newsletters: an impressive tally for a charity with just one full-time equivalent as staff, in addition to volunteer input. As I write, it's about to host an international conference in Stornoway, bringing together speakers from the Nordic world to discuss the sustainability of rural communities in North Atlantic islands such as the Outer Hebrides, North Isles, Faroes and Iceland.

First published in a substantial print volume a couple of years ago and now as an e-book, '*Beàrnaraigh na Hearadh*: 'Tis Fifty Years Since' is a major work of community history, documenting through interviews, photographs and the author's own observations and research how the crofting community on Berneray, in the Sound of Harris, functioned in the early 1970s. As a young anthropologist, Susanne Barding both lived on the island at that time, and self-evidently from the text, loved it. Having long resided since then on the Faroes, she returned to Berneray for the first time in 50 years for the book launch, which was followed by an island ceilidh.

Decades back, Susanne's time on the island was full of challenges, not least as an incoming urbanite who now had to cope with what she calls a 'high-context' community, where everyone knows everyone else's lives and backgrounds. "I learned very soon," she writes, "that all you say and do is remembered and that there is a strong chance that you will be confronted with it at a later date." She was also immersed in what – at that time – was a community where everyone spoke Gaelic. Luckily, everyone made allowances for her and adapted to English when she was present.

In his foreword, John Randall gives a neat summary of how the book records in meticulous detail how the crofting community functioned at the time of Susanne's research: "for example, the use of the inbye land and common grazings, the seasonal movement of livestock to and from offshore islands, fishing, peat cutting, domestic life, Gaelic traditions, the church and the role of men and women, young and old, in their interactions, personal challenges and social life."

At just over 600 pages, the original is a weighty tome, but it can be sampled as an e-book with pleasure in any of its parts to enjoy what are often first-hand accounts of Berneray life half a century or more ago. As a reference for information about that place and community it will likely be unsurpassed for many more decades to come.

In that way, it joins some of the other classic works by 'foreigners' who came to the Outer Hebrides, relished the people, scenes and culture here and documented aspects of those with respect and sensitivity, sometimes – with hindsight – just before some of these faded. I'm thinking of Margaret Fay Shaw from the Alleghenies and her song collecting adding so much to the Gaelic canon and much more. Then the German, Werner Kissling, on Eriskay in 1934, creating the first-ever film to use the Gaelic language as well as taking many still photographs. Of New-York-born Paul Strand on the Uists, creating the world-class photographs used in *Tìr a' Mhurain*. And the English apple-grower, Robert Atkinson – best known for his superb book *Island Going* about journeying to pursue Leach's petrels on North Rona and other Hebridean outliers – who also photographed everyday aspects of life and transport on Lewis and Harris in the 1930s and 1940s. These photographs are now archived in the National Library of Scotland thanks to the efforts of Stuart Murray to visit and correspond with Atkinson in later life and preserve this further aspect of his work.

Susanne Barding writes that her many years in Faroese society have taught her that a local anecdote requires…"the precise recounting of time, place and persons to serve its purpose. Otherwise it loses its social value." Most of the people she knew on Berneray are no longer with us, she says, but: "They will always be alive to me, as they were then, and by the same token I have subsequently heard that for them, I am *forever young.*" Thanks to her work and writing, the wider world can now share in some of that invigorating thought and benefit from what will be an enduring legacy from those days on the island at the Atlantic edge of the Sound of Harris. ■

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Donald Adamson is a poet and translator from Dumfries, now living in Finland, who has translated Finnish poems for collections and anthologies published by Carcanet/Scottish Poetry Library and Arc. His new collection, Bield (Tapsalteerie), contains original poems and translations into Scots of classic Finnish poems.

Nick Allen is a Trade Unionist and poet living in West Yorkshire. He has published one collection and four pamphlets of poetry (linktr.ee/nickallenpoet). His poems have appeared in magazines and anthologies, most recently *No Net Ensnares Me*, a Brontë-themed prose poetry anthology edited by Ian Humphreys.

Chris Arthur lives in St Andrews. He has published nine essay collections, most recently *What is it Like to be Alive*, named as 'One of the 10 Best Books of 2024' by the California Review of Books. For details of his work see www.chrisarthur.org.

Meg Bateman à Dùn Èideann – stèidhte san Eilean Sgitheanach. Bàrd a' Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich, 's i àrd-ollamh aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Dh'fhoillsich i bàrdachd ann an *Òrain Ghaoil* (1990, Coiscéim) agus – le Polygon – Aotramachd (1997), Soirbheas (2007) is *Transparencies* (2013). Tha i na h-àrd-ollamh aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

Sharon Black is from Glasgow and lives in a remote valley of the Cévennes mountains. Winner of several awards, she has published four collections and a pamphlet – *Rib* (2021). Her collection *The Last Woman Born on the Island* was the bestselling Vagabond Voices title in 2022. Since 2016 she has been editor of Pindrop Press.

Donna Booth is an award-winning wellbeing specialist based in Caithness, with post-graduate diplomas in NLP, CBT, life coaching and advanced clinical hypnotherapy. She is a Zen mindfulness & yoga teacher and Relax Kids coach.

Tom Bryan co-edited the original *Northwords* with the late Angus Dunn from 1992-1997, whilst living in a restored croft in Strathcanaird, Wester Ross. He is a widely-published poet, fiction and non-fiction writer. He now lives in the Scottish Borders.

Paddy Bushe à Baile Àtha Cliath – stèidhte sa Choirean, Co. Ciarraí. Ag obair sa Ghàidhlig Èireannaich is Bheurla, tha grunn leabhraichean aige is *On A Turning Wing* nam measg, a choisinn duais Poetry Now aig Tìm na h-Èireann ann an 2017.

Choisinn **Liam Alastair Crouse** Duais Sgrìobhadair Ùir aig Urras nan Leabhraichean is Comhairle nan Leabhraichean an 2020. Stèidhte an Uibhist a Deas, rugadh e an Eilean Fada Stàit Eabhraig Nuaidh. Na phìobaire cuideachd, tha e na thagraiche ollamhachd aig OGE.

Lesley Buchan Donald is a retired veterinary surgeon who grew up in Perthshire. Her father is a native Doric speaker and her mother Glaswegian. She has been writing in English and Scots since taking creative writing classes in 2020.

Lynne Davidson writes poetry, memoir, essays and fiction. She had a Hawthornden Fellowship in 2013 and a Bothy Project Residency in the Cairngorms in 2016. She was 2021 Randell Cottage Creative New Zealand Writer in Residence. Lynn calls Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand home.

Sally Evans is a poet, publisher, editor and poetry blogger. She has run her own press, Diehard, and was the editor of *Poetry Scotland* broadsheet for over 20 years while hosting the annual Poetry Weekend in Callander, where she lives and runs a bookshop with her husband Ian King.

Rody Gorman à Baile Àtha Cliath – stèidhte san Eilean Sgitheanach. Prìomh ghuth bàrdachd na Gàidhlig o chionn nan 90an, tha e air còrr is deich co-chruinneachadh dhi fhoillseachadh. Choisinn *Sa Chnoc* (2023, CLÀR) Duais Ruaraidh MhicThòmais. B' esan Bàrd a' Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich, 2021.

Lesley Graham is a Scottish-born poet who lives and works in Bordeaux, France. Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry Scotland*, *Dreich*, and *Ink Sweat & Tears*.

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.

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 lives in Assynt, teaches at UHI and has published five poetry collections, five novels and two non-fiction books – the latest being *The Lost Elms (2025)* www.mandyhaggith.net

Jennifer Morag Henderson is a writer from Inverness. Her first book was the biography *Josephine Tey: A Life* and her second biography was *Daughters of the North: Jean Gordon and Mary, Queen of Scots*. Her new book *Jofrid Gunn*, a biography in poetry telling the story of a woman who came from the Faroe Islands to Scotland in the 16th century, will be published in August 2025. www.jennifermoraghenderson.com

Jennifer J Henderson grew up in Edinburgh, lived for several decades in Aberdeen and now lives near Gairloch. She is a writer of short stories and poetry, a visual artist, photographer and mandolin player. She has had work published in the northeast literary magazine *Pushing Out the Boat* and short stories broadcast on Radio Wester Ross. www.pebblesonthebeach.co.uk

Andrija Ilic began his career as a documentary photographer in former Yugoslavia and Serbia and continued in the Middle East, Israel and Gaza. After moving to the Faroe Islands his work slowly transitioned into landscape and travel photography, where he explores widely, trying to understand weather and light patterns, and runs photography tours and workshops.

Graham Johnston has been an artist and creative nomad since graduating from Gray's School of Art in the 1980s and has worked in theatre, television, photography, design and education.

Bridget Khursheed is a poet and geek based in the Scottish Borders and a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award winner; her collections *Exact colour of snow* and *The last days of petrol* are available from Shearsman Books.

Ãine King is a London-Irish playwright living in Orkney, Áine's climate-crisis comedy *Burning Bright* won the 2022 David MacLennan Award. Áine will be performing her solo show *Lost Property Hotel* in London and Scotland in 2025.

Bha **Annie Kissack RBV** à Eilean Mhanainn na Bàrd Mhanainn an 2018. Dh'fhoillsich i co-chruinneachadh bàrdachd *Mona Sings* (Culture Vannin) an 2022. Na seinneadair is cumadair-ciùil, tha i an sàs sna buidhnean ciùil is dannsa Arthur Caley Giant Band, Caardjyn Cooidjagh is Perree Bane.

Robin Leiper is a psychologist and psychotherapist living between Galloway and Glasgow. His poetry has been published in various magazines and anthologies in Scotland and South Africa. He won the Seahorse pamphlet competition of 2022 and the Wigtown Festival Fresh Voice award of 2023.

Rhiannon Ledwell à Calafòirnia – stèidhte an Obar Dheathain. 'S ban-oileanach na Gàidhlig i aig an Oilthigh ann, is na cluicheadar sitàr le mòr-chliù is sgrìobhadair. Bidh i an sàs ann an sgeama Lasag le Theatre Gu Leòr fad 2025.

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.

Jane Lewis is a community song leader, mindfulness teacher, environmental and peace activist living in Edinburgh. She has a deep affinity with the Small Isles having spent many holidays on Muck and enjoyed walking in the wilds of Rum last summer.

Marcas Mac an Tuairneir à Eabhraig – stèidhte an Dùn Èideann. Barrabhàrd Caidreachas nan Sgrìobhaichean (Alba) ann an 2024, choisinn *Polaris* (2022, Leamington Books) Duais Nàisanta na Gàidhlig. B' e a choisinn Duais Bàrdachd na Gàidhlig (2017) is Duais na Bàrdachd Eadar-nàiseanta (2024) aig Fèis Leabhraichean Bhaile na h-Ùige.

Pàdraig MacAoidh à Leòdhas – stèidhte an Dùn Èideann. Bàrd a' Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich (2022) is Barrabhàrd na h-Alba (2024-), tha e na neach-breithneachaidh litreachas is na ollamh aig Oilthigh Chill Rìmhinn. Tha dà co-chruinneachadh bàrdachd aige an clò – *Gu Leòr* (2015) is *Nàdar De* (2022) le Acair.

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).

Iain MacRàth às Na Hearadh – stèidhte an Glaschu. Na chleasaiche o chionn nan 80an, aithnichte mar rionnag air *Machair, Bannan* is *An t-Eilean* (BBC Alba), rinn e obair le Tosg, Tèatar na h-Alba is Tèatar Nàiseanta na h-Alba am measg bhuidhnean eile. Mar sgrìobhadair-dràma choisinn e Duais Dhòmhnaill Meek ann an 2017.

Paul Malgrati is a scholar and poet from France, who joined the UHI Institute for Northern Studies in 2023. His first monograph (EUP 2023) explores Burns's legacy in Scottish national culture. He was shortlisted for the Edwin Morgan Poetry Prize in 2020, *which led to Poèmes Écossais (Blue Diode 2022), the first collection of poetry in Scots by a non-native anglophone.*

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 was Makar of the Federation of Writers Scotland in 2022.

John McLellan is an author and public speaker who has spent over forty years among the mountains of the Scottish Highlands. His novels *Faultlines* (2022) and *Unconformity* (2024) draw on his adventures here and in other mountain landscapes.

Deborah Moffatt was born and raised in Vermont and has lived in Fife since 1982. She writes in both Gaelic and English and has published four books of poetry, most recently *Eating Thistles* (Smokestack Books, 2019) and *Càirdeas 's Comain 's Eòlas* (Clàr, 2024.)

Clare O'Brien lives in Wester Ross and is current Poet In Residence at the NTS Inverewe Garden. Her novelette *AIRLOC* (2024) was published by ELJ Editions, and her pamphlet *Who Am I Supposed To Be Driving?* (2022), an ekphrastic series in response to David Bowie's music, was published by Hedgehog Poetry Press. Her second poetry pamphlet is due later this year from Intergraphia Books. https://clarevobrien.weebly.com.

Cáit O'Neill McCullagh writes at home in Easter Ross and had her first published poetry in *Northwords Now*. Her debut pamphlet *The songs I sing are sisters* won the Dreich Classic Chapbook (2022), and a Saboteur Award in 2023. Her first collection is *The Bone Folder* (Drunk Muse Press 2024). Nominated for a Pushcart International Poetry Prize in 2025, she is working on her second collection. https://www.highlandlit.com/cait-oneill-mccullagh .'

Isabel Miles is from Ayrshire and spent seven years in North-East Scotland. She now lives, walks and writes in the North Yorkshire Moors.

Jim Miller was born in Caithness and, after stravaiging about the world, has lived near Inverness for many years. He has written a number of acclaimed books including *Scapa*, *The Dambuilders*, *The Gathering Stream* and *The Finest Road in the World*.

Raonaid Nic an Fhucadair à Salisbury – stèidhte an Drochaid an Aonachain. Choisinn i Duais Danny Kyle (1999) aig Celtic Connections is Duais Seinneadair Gàidhlig na Bliadhna aig na Trads (2013). Dh'fhoillsich i clàraidhean le òrain ùra – *Gaol* (2020, Ròs Dearg) is *Despite The Wind and Rain* (le Aaron Jones) (2023, Ròs Dearg).

'S i **Ciorstaidh Ruadh NicLeòid** à Uibhist a Tuath a stèidhich IsleKnit às dèidh dhi MA Gàidhlig a thoirt a-mach à Oilthigh Obar Dheathain. Na dealbhaiche obrach-fhighe is na neach-togail dhealbh, an 2019 bha taisbeanadh an Taigh Chearsabhagh aice le Louise Cook, *Islands in Texture,* le fighe-phòrsalain – isleknit.com

Kate Nicol describes herself as: "Thankful survivor, interested in hope, synchronicity, inter-generational relationships and what it means to be old. Lone rambler and nature-lover. Storm-blown hawthorn, clinging to a hillside in the lee of a crumbling boundary wall. Fond of pies. Basically a hobbit."

Bha **Flòraidh NicPhàil** à Tiriodh na Bàrd a' Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich an 2015. Dh'fhoillsich i co-chruinneachadh bàrdachd *Maraiche nan Cuantan* (2012, Acair) anns an leughar òran den aon ainm a choisinn Duais an Òrain Ùir aig a' Mhòd Nàiseanta an 2001.

Màiri Anna NicUalraig à Glaschu – stèidhte ann an Àird Ghobhair. Na seinneadair, ceòladair, cumadair-ciùil, is craoladair, choisinn i Duais Sgrìobhadair Ùir aig Urras nan Leabhraichean is Comhairle nan Leabhraichean an 2022. Nochd a cuid òran ùra air *An Dàn* (2017, Watercolour Music).

Simon Ó Faoláin à Baile Àtha Cliath – stèidhte an Co. Ciarraí an Iar. Choisinn e duaisean CholmCille an 2008 is 2010. B' e an co-chruinneachadh aige *Anam Mhadra* (2008, Coiscéim) a choisinn Duais Èireannach Glen Dimplex agus Duais Eithne is Rupert Strong.

Michael Pedersen is Edinburgh's Makar and the Writer in Residence at Edinburgh University. He's published three collections of poems and has a debut novel, *Muckle Flugga*, fresh out with Faber & Faber.

Chris Powici is a former editor of *Northwords Now* who teaches English and Creative Writing. His two Red Squirrel Press collections are *The Weight of Light* (2015) and *Look, Breathe - Chris Powici and Friends* (2022).

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.

Dilys Rose lives in Edinburgh, and is a novelist, short story writer, poet and printmaker. She is currently working on a series of linked stories, *The Lost Sock Café* (working title).

Daniel Rye is a poet and musician living in Tórshavn, capital of the Faroe Islands. His poetry has appeared in online and print journals, including *Ink, Sweat & Tears* and *Green Ink Poetry*.

Andrew Sclater is a prize-winning poet currently living in Paris. He has Gallovidian, Orcadian and Norwegian roots. His new pamphlet *Quite Joyful* is forthcoming from Mariscat in September.

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. ianstephen.co.uk

Choisinn Maighread Stiùbhart à Leòdhas Bonn Òr a' Chomuinn Ghàidhealaich an 1993 is i na sàr-sheinneadair is neach-brosnachaidh traidisean nan Gàidheal. Le trì claraidhean ciùil aice, tha i na tasglannaiche do Thobar an Dualchais, Cruinneachadh Chanaigh is Sgoil Eòlas na h-Alba. Bidh i a' teagasg aig Conservatoire Rìoghal na h-Alba, agus Sabhal Mòr Ostaig far a bheil i na tagraiche ollamhach ann.

Shane Strachan was the National Library of Scotland's 2022–2023 Scots Scriever for which he won Scots Champion at the 2023 Scots Language Awards. His debut poetry collection, *DWAMS* (Tapsalteerie), was longlisted for Poetry Book of the Year at the 2024 Saltire Awards. He holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Aberdeen where he now lectures.

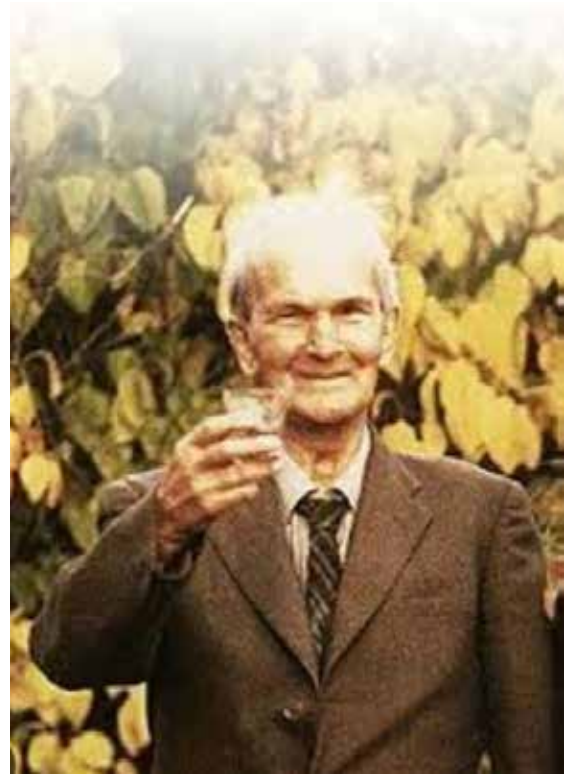
Jane Swanson lives in Aberdeen. A writer and creative writing educator, she has an MLitt from Dundee University and work published by The Scottish Book Trust, The Scottish Arts Trust, and the Aberdeen Press and Journal.

Ian Tallach Having previously worked as a paediatric doctor, Ian is now medically retired with MS. He lives in Glenurquhart, as do his young family.

Alice V. Taylor is 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. 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.

Grahaeme Barrasford Young is a former publisher and bookshop owner who lives in Lochaber. Widely published, his most recent poetry collection is *Starspin* (Stairwell Books 2021).



The Neil Gunn Trust is gearing-up for another Neil Gunn Writing competition over this coming autumn and winter. Check their website **neilgunntrust.org** in September for details, which we'll also post on our *Northwords Now* Facebook group page:

www.facebook.com/groups/northwordsnow