

The **FREE** literary magazine of the North

Northwords **Now**

Issue 25, Autumn 2013

SALT IN THE BLOOD

New Voices from the North

Cynthia Rogerson on the pleasures of the short story

Ken Cockburn and Alec Finlay take the road north

New poetry and fiction

Articles and Reviews



EDITORIAL

IN THIS ISSUE of *Northwords Now* we showcase writers making their debut in the magazine. These 'new' northern voices hail from a variety of backgrounds, but what they have in common is something to say and a voice to say it with. Indeed, they show that the North is wonderfully alive to the art of poetry and fiction in all its forms. I'm not usually given to making predictions, but it's a pretty safe bet to say that you'll come across these names again – whether in *Northwords Now* or in the pages of other magazines and books.

This emphasis on new voices is reinforced by the article on page 18 – 'So You Want To Be A Writer'. Nobody who's ever picked up a pen (or poised their hand over a keyboard) to begin a poem or a novel would claim that writing is easy, but it is a vital and enriching experience. It's great to see new writers being given a chance to make a mark

As you may well have heard on the news, this year's Nobel Prize for literature went not to a novelist, nor even a poet, but a short story writer, Alice Munro. *Northwords Now* has long been a welcoming home for this under-sung literary genre and Cynthia Rogerson has provided a lucid and passionate guide to what makes short stories so special (page 3). Within these pages you can find some prime examples of the form, not least Lily Greenall's 'Madame Bovary' – a story which dares to challenge the supremacy of the novel by borrowing its title from one of the most famous novels ever published! ■

CHRIS POWICI, EDITOR



Becks Denny, page 12

Contents

- 3 The Art of the Short Story – Essay by Cynthia Rogerson
- 4 Poems by Helen Addy, Peter Gilmour, Stephanie Green, Frances Sessford, Mandy Haggith, Lodaigh MacFhionghain & Lindsay Macgregor
- 5 The Call – Short Story by Sarah Whiteside
- 6 Poems by Anna Macfie
- 7 Poems by Marion McCready, Peter Maclaren, Derek Ramsay, Graham Fulton, Kenneth Steven, Niall O'Gallagher & Gordon Meade
- 8 The Pull of Ice – Short Story by Jane Verburg
- 9 Poems by Angela Skrimshire, Grahaeme Barrasford Young, Kate Hendry, Dawn Wood, Julian Ronay, Lodaigh MacFhionghain & Mark Edwards
- 10 Poems by Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh
- 11 No Fear – Short Story by Mike Russell
- 12 The Beach – Short Story by Becks Denny
- 13 Poems by Roseanne Watt
- 14 Poems by Anna Danskin
- 15 Madame Bovary – Short Story by Lily Greenall
- 16 Hide an' Seek – Short Story by Sheena Blackhall
- 17 The Road North
Poems by Ken Cockburn and Alec Finlay
- 18 So You Want To Be A Writer – Article by Chris Powici
- 20 Reviews
- 23 Contributors' Biographies, Where To Find *Northwords Now*

At The Northwords Now Website: www.northwordsnow.co.uk

Podcast of Roseanne Watt
Gaelic Poetry in translation
Reviews Extra
How to download *Northwords Now* to an e-reader
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New Address for Submissions

Northwords Now
6 Kippendavie Lane
Dunblane
Perthshire
FK15 0HL

Board members

Adrian Clark (Chair), Ann Yule,
Valerie Beattie, Kristin
Pedroja, Stewart Lackie

Editor

Chris Powici, editor@northwordsnow.co.uk

Gaelic Editor

Rody Gorman, editor@northwordsnow.co.uk

Advisory Group

Jon Miller, Peter Urpeth, Pam Beasant

Designer

Gustaf Eriksson
www.gustafriksson.com

Technical Advisor

Tony Ross
webenquiries@rosssoftwaresolutions.com

Contact NNOW

Manager: Angus Dunn
manager@northwordsnow.co.uk
Advertising: Vicki Miller
admin@northwordsnow.co.uk

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<http://margaretfergusonart.com/>

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They can be in Gaelic, English, Scots and any local variants. They should be sent to the postal address. Unsolicited e-mail attachments will not be opened. The material should be typed on A4 paper. Contact details and SAE should be included. We cannot return work that has no SAE. Copyright remains with the author. Payment is made for all successful submissions. The next issue is planned for March 2014

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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL



The Art of the Short Story

Essay by Cynthia Rogerson

YES, AN UNORIGINAL title, but then perhaps this addresses one of the first concerns – is it possible, or even desirable, to be original? Does originality miss the point, and if so, what is the point?

Surely, all that matters is that a story is enjoyable.

But few stories are enjoyable in a universal sense; that is, few stories exist which affect every reader the same positive way. Reading is an intensely personal experience. I can only talk about the short stories I love.

When I think of my favourites, I struggle to find a common denominator, aside from all being written in English. Some are compressed history, others are slices of familial life, or a particular kind of day, or simply a stream of consciousness. Some are autobiographical, others are clearly imaginative. They are written by both genders, with and without resolutions, conclusions, or epiphanies.

But there is this sense, with all these stories, that what is important are the not dramatic events themselves, but the moments leading up to them, and the days, months and years later. Anticipation and memory. Imagination and nostalgia. These authors recognise, and salute, that most puzzling and maddening of human traits – the periodic inability to experience the present, in the present. All those movies and novels which show people weeping on cue or smiling warmly and wisely at appropriate moments collude in the conspiracy that our hearts' most genuine responses are always during the dramatic moments themselves. Not so!

Think of that final poignant scene from *Brokeback Mountain*, with Ennis buttoning up Jack's shirt, and saying: Jack, I swear... That is all he needs to say, we understand perfectly his belated passionate commitment to his lover.

We are essentially slow creatures, and can take decades to fully respond to events, as in 'A Story of Folding and Unfolding' by Ali Smith – an older man remembering his long dead wife. We can also spend lengthy periods anticipating the future, as in 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' by Hemingway – a sick man considering his imminent death.

Freed from the burden of plot and resolution, short stories are the perfect vehicle for these less dramatic moments. They can pivot on a single glimpse of an unguarded character's reaction.

At the end of the day, what all writers tell us is simply what it is like to be them. To perceive the world through their eyes. And that is endlessly fascinating of course, because we're alone and hoping that we're at least a bit like other people. It's the moments of secret recognition that move me. When a writer accurately and dispassionately conveys some seemingly inexpressible emotion lurking in my heart, I want to phone them up and invite them for a five course dinner. I momentarily want to marry them.

But how do good stories work? Sometimes they lower your guard, then deliver that sharp



Cynthia Rogerson

punch you keep going back for. A delicious sadness. Consider, for example, 'A Small, Good Thing' by Raymond Carver. The narrator explains, un-dramatically, that a boy has been hit by a car on the way to school and ends up in a coma. It happens to be the boy's birthday, and the mother has ordered a cake from the bakery. Most writers would focus on the boy, or the mother or father, but Carver decides to approach the event sideways. He tells us about the baker who has never met the boy. The baker is fed up because no one has collected the cake he's so carefully baked and iced. He feels used, tricked, betrayed. He begins phoning the boy's house, leaving threatening anonymous messages. The reader is forced to think about the baker's lonely and exhausting life, and forgets the boy. The parents eventually understand who is leaving rude messages, and in their hour of numb grief, march to the bakery to confront this monster. When the baker hears their story, he's quiet, then serves them warm rolls from the oven and some hot coffee. This is the small good thing he can do for them. And, like the baker, the reader has no defences against sudden sadness, because he's been thinking about something else. He forgot to brace himself against a child's sudden death.

Sadness in life is terrible, of course, but sadness in fiction is a good thing. Happiness is good too, obviously, but harder to achieve. Happiness is something we rarely know we possess, till years later. The trick is to twist some hope into sadness or nostalgia. And it

has to be realistic hope; hope without sentimentality. Carver is king of unsentimental poignancy, and I deliberately set out to be like him. I mostly fail of course, but give him credit whenever restraint wins over gushing.

All writers are influenced by other writers. Back and back it goes, until one can imagine Chaucer admitting that, ever since he read The Bible, he'd been wanting to write something about mortality, and maybe try a similar structure as John the Baptist. I wrote a story a long time ago that was influenced by 'A Small, Good Thing'. My story, 'A Dangerous Place', was rejected dozens of times. Then it sat in a file on my computer for a decade. Finally, in a moment of impulse I sent it to the V.S. Pritchett Prize competition and it won. I loved it, so wasn't surprised it won – but I also understood competitions are quite random, and I was just lucky for a change.

Like most stories, it began with a germ of truth. A boy I knew in California, when we were both 16, died in a car accident. The fact his family were British made it sadder. I decided the boy would not die in my story. I would focus on the physical manifestations of emotion in his parents, and the fact of their being in a foreign country. I would also describe the driver who killed him. I made it up. I'd never known his parents, or the other driver. My clear goal was to make the reader as sad as possible, and I began by describing the domestic details of a house suddenly hit by tragedy. I over-wrote, and deleted about half. Then I trimmed it more, and experimented

with the ending before settling for the sound of crickets at dawn. When I imagined people reading it, I pictured them entering my house, and I had an overwhelming urge to make them feel at home. That was the mood I was in while writing it.

When I consider the short story form, I see it a logical compromise between the sincerity of a poem and the artifice of a novel. A novel cannot dwell simply on moments; it needs dramatic twists and turns to serve the plot. A poem is better suited for peripheral moments, but most lack sheer reader-time to achieve this end satisfactorily. But a good short story must be like a poem; every word must count. And it must be like a novel; the reader must lose themselves, albeit briefly, in entirely different lives.

Perhaps the genres are not so different. A good short story has most things a good novel or poem has. It emotionally engages you. You're sorry when it ends. You feel as if you know the author. You may never re-read it, but you'll never forget it. It may even become so familiar, you'll wonder some days if it happened to you. You'll tell other people to read it, in order to better understand marriage, or death, or mental illness. Sometimes you haven't even read it. A friend summarised a Carol Shields short story to me once, about a wife hiding in the garden rather than confronting her husband with her awareness of his affair. This picture stayed with me, and a few years later I wrote 'Stepping Out', the title story of my collection.

I don't feel guilty about using an idea from Carol Shields or a style from Raymond Carver anymore than I feel guilty for writing about a family holiday we had in 1967. No one ultimately owns stories, and styles can never really be stolen. They can only be assimilated into one's own style. If one avoided using everything one had experienced, everything one's family and friends had experienced, everything one had read or seen on television or a movie, then one would be left with maybe three things to write about. Maybe just two. And the longer you live, the more any effort to not draw from life becomes ludicrous.

I began writing novels because no one would publish my collection of short stories. My favourite novels are written like a series of short stories, each chapter self-sufficient, with its own logical rhythm. Carson MacCuller's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and Tim Pear's *In the Place of Fallen Leaves*, are two examples.

Perhaps they too wrote novels because no one would publish their short story collections.

If poems are like flats, furnished minimally, novels are rambling houses, with endless sheds in the yard. And a short story is a compact cottage. Maybe two small attic bedrooms, and enough cupboard space to accommodate mystery. Just enough clutter to prickle my curiosity, but never so much that I feel confused.

To my mind, the perfect size. ■

Poetry

Childminder

PETER GILMOUR

The pram had become a burden that day.
The month was against her: the light wasn't right.
Quite a few times she withdrew her hands -
going downhill, for instance, whipped them away,
fluttering them jestingly before her
as the pram got boldly under way
and she ran after it sort of, stumbling,
catching it as by accident really
just before the bend. A double bend,
actually, and then a sharp hill beyond
wobbling in the heat, fractured white lines,
between earth and sky, a further tangling.
Here the trick was to thrust the pram upwards
and step aside, letting it run back past you
and away, with you after it now
as if perhaps you had left it too late
as if, in the last analysis,
that was it perhaps, to leave it too late,
try out your gambling instincts here,
a pram, a hill, an infant sleeping.

20th Wedding Anniversary

(Stromness, Orkney)

STEPHANIE GREEN

Cumulae, sky and stone dissolve,
waver upside down in the harbour,
long accepting their different perspectives.

A cloud of wings, haloed dust-motes,
blows here and there, to coalesce,
bickering around our heads.

The humped mountains of Hoy
frown blue-black, the last of the sun
on a gable-end yells

a protest against the simmer dim.
We walk back, arm in arm, in silence,
more than half way through our lives.

20 Primrose Street, 1972

HELEN ADDY

Barely room for cigarette smoke,
my parents spent Sundays in bed.
Bicycles hung on nail-flecked walls,
three tables stacked in the kitchen,
their flat full to the gunnels
with furniture for a future house.

After a blonde first footer,
came two burglaries and dead twins,
treasures scattered across the city.
Flitting to a quiet town in Moray,
Glasgow shrank to a buttonhole,
raw edges softening as they made it through.

for RC

FRANCES SESSFORD

Mr Muir
is terribly sure
and does not become upset on
hearing of those who have died
and gone to heaven.

He is a happy man.

Ach he said
and shook his head
upon hearing of your demise
on the bathroom floor

I thought he might have said more
but he is an untroubled soul
who lets me in
on his thoughts on sin
he knows
we are destined for something better

we should not let these
rumours of hell and burning
fetter us, have

the odd dram
the odd lie
the odd sin he says

we are all loved
by someone

Spreading the Word

MANDY HAGGITH

Yesterday a man approached me in the Dornoch Inn
interrupting my macaroni cheese and wine

saying he'd overheard a comment about poems
and was I 'the Assynt poet' and if so

- what was the Balinese word I'd used
for being in this moment, full of gratitude?

Rahayu, I beamed. He nodded, *rahayu*.
Smiling, in unison, *rahayu*.

every day it's a bit

MANDY HAGGITH

honeysuckle leaves already
ferns keep on
primroses are going to
grass is raring to
badgers are just about
every day it's a bit more

Yew

LINDSAY MACGREGOR

A biblewood. For her
it's Sunday every day.
She grieves for those
not yet dead, makes green
a shade of black. Taps
water from the Styx. Sucks
marrowbone, reminding
penitents there's always
something worse than death.

Small-Leaved Lime

LINDSAY MACGREGOR

There was an awkwardness between
us when we met, unsure what to say,
where to start. Colour drained from you

to me as you turned sky to diadems
of green. I told you everything
I knew, you told me nothing in return

except the quality of light
when tightly twisted by the wind.
Our only fluency was rain.

An aon dannsa

LODAIDH MACFHIONGHAIN

Gabhaidh e siorraidheachd
Tha e coltach
Gus an tig
Às an doimhneachd
Am fiosrachadh bunaiteach

Coltach ri fitheach mòr
A' puinneachadh
Sgaoilidh de thuigse
O bhàrr a sgiathan;

Nach gabhadh aithris;

Nach gabhadh fhaicinn;

An turraban ann
Coltach ri Suphach
A' dol mun cuairt
Post ag innseadh
Taisbeanaidh,

No duin'
Air a chuir am paisean
Ag èisteachd
Ri laoidhean a rinn
Hildegard a Bingen,

An aon dannsa gu h-ìomlan.

OUTSIDE THE HOTEL, a crow cried. The sound it made was like it had mud stuck in its craw, like it was half choked. Crows at home would sound the same, of course, but you have to be listening to notice these things and you always do that more when you're abroad.

On the sparkling, rain-wet roof of the building opposite, a man danced. His arms were raised like he was holding someone, his head tipped to one side. Though his feet were hidden by a low wall, Branwen could tell from the lilt and spin of him it was a waltz he was doing. She thought he might have a radio up there, unless the music was only on the inside, humming in the bones of his head, in his stomach and heart.

She had come to Paris to see some life and here it was. It was like Mum had said when she told her about the envelope in the drawer of the bedside table (three hundred pounds, cash); once it was all over Branwen would need some time. She would need to be taken out of herself.

A bell started up now, but for once it wasn't for her. She stayed where she was, head propped on pillows, and an abandoned novel closing by her hand. She didn't have to do anything.

At work it was always the buzzers. Someone needed the toilet, or was in pain, was breathless or nauseous. Nothing that could wait. When Mum got ill, everyone had assumed Branwen would know what to do,

and she'd done what she could. It turned out that working in a hospital didn't stop the people you loved from getting ill; it didn't make you immune. Even in her dreams these days a buzzer was always going off. She would walk up and down lengthened corridors, or drive impossible streets between the hospital and hers and Mum's place. She kept looking for the source of the sound.

The dancer did not seem to hear the bells; his feet kept to their own rhythms. The late sun caught his white shirt, his moving shape slender and lit. He was carried by the dance, or he was carrying it. Either way, he knew what he was about; she could see that from here.

The Call

SHORT STORY BY SARAH WHITESIDE



The dancer did not seem to hear the bells; his feet kept to their own rhythms.

The late sun caught his white shirt, his moving shape slender and lit.

Unlike Branwen who, this week, did not know. She had been listening to other voices so long that she had forgotten how to listen to her own. Now nobody needed her, it was like the music had stopped. She just could not convince herself it mattered whether she went up the Eiffel Tower or not, whether she sat down in this cafe or the one next door, whether she drank red or white. She had in fact today spent most of the day in the Louvre, Mum's voice telling her to Make the Most of Things. She had wandered from painting to painting, hoping to be moved.

Now she stood and went to the window. The crow was down there in the carpark. It strutted about and looked into things. Puddles

reflected the sky and it peered in, turning its head this way and that.

I am that crow, she thought: mud, water, feather, beak. Me in the puddle world, fancy-dressed as death, in mourning, with my best black frock and sickle beak. One feather on my head is out of place, come loose like a lick of hair that Mum would have smoothed down, years ago, spit-and-polishing. That white-shirted dance against the sky is just a dream; this is reality. I am crow, rooting about in rubbish and roadkill.

A car pulled in, and the crow lifted from the ground, unruffled, as if it didn't matter whether or not it lived. Easy come, easy go. And yet when it opened its beak it spoke of the eternal, made it audible, called up an oboe squawk of void from somewhere else.

Over on the roof, the dancer had stopped. Branwen watched him pick up a cardigan from behind the wall, dropping for it like he was bowing. He put it on. Behind him the sky had gone an orange-pink. The bell had fallen silent. He stood there, too far away for her to read his face. She told herself he wouldn't be able to see her, hidden in that shadowed room.

But then he raised a hand.

She did not move.

After a moment, he did it again.

She realised she had stopped breathing. She wanted to disappear, to go thin, or under, to be beneath considering. But her own hand fluttered up, stupid and white, too solid. He nodded. They both stood there then, because what do you do, and then he cocked his head to the side, inviting but casual, as if it didn't mean a thing.

She heard then how silence sounds. Him there, her here. She took three practice steps on her bow legs. He took another turn of the roof, holding his imaginary partner again. His movements now were stilted and in the changed light he looked too tall. She liked him more.

She flew around the room and came to perch on the edge of the bed. She preened her oily feathers with her beak. Dandruff and debris fell on the white sheets. She shimmied and settled, stretched out each wing, and then she spoke.

CAAAAA, she said.

Only this one sound was hers to make. Even though it wasn't what she meant, she couldn't keep quiet. Once she started, she kept on saying it. No words, not yet, just this. CAAAAA. She said it for what she knew. She said it for what she'd seen.

Several times she shut her mouth and swallowed, and finally the sound stopped making itself through her. This was what Mum would have called a Temporary Measure. She could not swallow it once and for all; neither could she spit it out.

He stood there waiting, shielding his face from the sun. Hidden in the room's dark in-nards, she tipped her head from side to side to look at him with each eye. Finally she chose. She would stay here and wait for him to go.

If she'd gone over, he would have held her in the dance. He would have wanted to talk. Once she started, it would all come out again and neither of them wanted that. Her voice would be too loud. She could feel it, stuck there in her throat. ■



FINE ART PORTRAITURE

BY MARGARET FERGUSON
www.margaretfergusonart.com

Poems by Anna Macfie

Monadliath Spring

i.
All November,
the cold drives a frenzy into the ravens' bones.
They soar a thousand feet above the ridge
then plummet like black flint.

ii.
There is no rejoicing in May
though the lark's voice cracks the cold
occasionally and a wheatear scratches away
the drab dusk, undaunted.

Gralloched bones litter the bleached moss
polished clean by wind and rain
jawless skulls torn
from their hinges by foxes.

*Peace talks between warring parties
will be postponed. When will spring come?*

iii.
I am mending the holes in my jacket
listening to the radio, afraid for the motes of down
escaping through the lining, taking wing
like dandelion seeds on the wind.

*the children began to cry
after eating their lentils and rice*

iv.
I can never keep up with his stroll
and luckily he stops often, examining skylines,
the spaces between hills filled by empty sky,
patrolling the borders of clouds.

He is looking for eagles,
knows their crags, looks over their eggs and young,
picks up their fallen feathers
from the ground.

A single wandering bird, crouched in the wind
or sleeping in a wooded gully on a still day,
a pair returning to an abandoned eyrie
in the hail. The air shrinks

around her; massive, vulture-like, flight feathers missing;
her silhouette draining desolation from the sky
over the slope, still brown in May's last week.
Only cold, emptiness, the wind.

v.
I sew up the lining with careful stitches
trying to keep the warmth in.

*they smelt of organochlorides
after they died*

vi.
He returns, hands shaking,
fragile as the broken shell in his open palm
and I see her: sleet soaked, ravenous,
lifting from her young for the last time.

All warmth driven into the melting ice
until the pale shellac grows cold.
And I think, how I hold onto things
while he lets go, unhindered.

Kintyre Way : 21.01.13

The track has disappeared under the snow
its white ribbon under the layers
now indistinguishable

Uinniau came this way, the clouds white as doves
his footprints mingled with those
of deer and hare

I follow their patterns, skirting the frozen mire
then plunge from the Way
alarming the wrens

looking for dry ground beneath the snow,
somewhere on the slope
to lie up

I courie into the dried grass,
brittle and scentless under the snow
a non-descript place

watching for the passage of raven
from a down and wool holt
as the cold sinks into my skin,

coating the wren's wings,
settling in my lungs as I await
a notion

in the last hour before dark,
on a breath of air, paler than cloud,
a hawk ghosts in,

slowing the moment like river current
dragging the bank,
its wingbeat soundless over the snow.

Then night flows over the Way,
catching in the heather, drifting up
willow wreck

and filling the snow hollows,
submerging references and definitions,
dousing reflection

Kintyre's coastline shadow
of shattered bone cliffs
and vitrified molars of rock

Perhaps Uinniau was brought in,
a snipe's cries searing the darkness
as he stumbled from the marsh,

cattle panicking at his approach,
their hooves sucking up mud around the broch.
Or did he hurry on

down to the bay, its crescent unlit
by a scallop's fringe of windows, no light flashing
off the coast of Eire.

Woken by Silence

i.
First thrush flutes a clean whistle
three identical notes, each
echoing only itself, the river,
the wind.

ii.
Sound of the river's echo rushing against the banks.

iii.
On which trapped day of spring
did those birds
batter their hopes
against the windows of this confined space?

I peel their dried carcasses off the floor,
empty vessels of feather and bone.

iv.
Never fall asleep with a naked flame!
Do not climb on the dry stone walls
Or walk on the overhanging river banks.

v.
The sea has sucked all the light out of the sky

vi.
Live, live, live
Calls the voice of love

vii.
Sleep.

viii.
Morning,
a dully luminous square
behind the darkness
reflected in a sleeping bag zip.

The dog flaps her ears
like waterfowl taking flight suddenly.

Somewhere on an island far from here
geese tear at the grass.

As the light grows words fade.

ix.
A whole day of peace is possible
only a few sea miles away.

A whole day of peace.

Peace.

Woken by the silence
of a liquid fluting thrush
pooling a pure sound
between each repeated note.

Poetry

Set the Controls For the Heart of The Club Bar in Paisley

GRAHAM FULTON

Scotland have just beaten Croatia 1-0
in Zagreb
when we least expect it,
and to add to
the amplified wash of unreality
the pub is now playing
back to back songs by Pink Floyd
beginning with
Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun
which I've definitely not heard
in a pub before
with Nick Mason's moody voodoo drums
and Roger Waters' mumbling zombie vocals,
and to enhance even more
the giddy sense of insanity
the barman offers me a choice
of lemon
or lime
to plop in my gin and tonic
which just doesn't happen
in this town.
and Roger has quietly asked
is there anybody in there,
and we're huddling in here like apes feeling
uncomfortably dumb
and wondering if
we imagined it all or someone put something
psychedelic in our drinks
as Roger philosophically winds things up
with
all that is gone all that's to come
which is probably
a 0-0 draw with San Marino.

Mountain Lion

GORDON MEADE

If you were to look deeply,
and I mean really deeply, into
the eyes of Mountain Lion,

it could almost melt your heart.
But, if you were just to catch a glimpse of her,
say draped across a barstool,

or wrapped around a pole, the reaction
would be far more visceral. Mountain Lion's most
recent stage name is Puma,

and her act is out of this world.

Feitheamh na Grèine

NIALL O'GALLAGHER

Tha sinn a' feitheamh na grèine;
cha do dh'èirich i, tha geal
an aidhre na chòmhdach mhillte
agus sinn, an seo, fo cheal;

aig an àm-sa dhen a' bhliadhna
mus do bhris a' mhadainn, dreach
na dùthcha sàmhach is falamh,
bonn na talmhainn uil' fo shneachd,

tha gathan-s' cho fann 's gum faillig
oirre àlachadh, a buain
ach na miann ghràdhach fathast
is i fada air falbh uainn,

ach tha fhios gu bheil i torach
is gun toir iad oirre fàs
agus le beagan deagh threubhaidh
thig a teas air luchd a gràidh.

Enough

KENNETH STEVEN

Out of the scurry of the days
A place of late sunlight, and the sky
Swimming into blue unclouded;
The trees held in a bonfire of the last sun.

Enough to wait here by the wood's edge
And let the things still hurrying to be done
Fall silent, as the first stars
Vague the orange of the far-off west.

Gamrie - this year

DEREK RAMSAY

There are two parts to this village -
The painted fishermen's cottages below the cliff
And the drab upper display of the Purser man's wealth

Down here everything seems old -
The cat along the path, all bones and grit;
Even the potatoes growing in the
Plot beneath our house are last year's

The Animal in the Pot

MARION MCCREADY

She was browning the animal in the pot,
by 'the animal' I mean meat.
And a young girl was screaming in the next room,
by 'screaming' I mean singing.
The sun was spitting crystals through a window,
through the leaves of a basil and a poinsettia
she had managed to coax back to life.
The pot sizzled with blood and scum
as she turned the dead with a spoon.
The screaming girl in the next room
was also no longer animal
but a young woman who was singing.
The basil remained as did the sun-crystals,
but the poinsettia, having lost its Christmas reds
and summer greens some time ago, was mere memory
and could only be coaxed back to life in the mind
like the animal before it became meat,
and the screaming before it became singing.

Assynt Morning

PETER MACLAREN

The night before
in the hotel across the kyle
the owner expounds from the bar
"We get trade from the Duke
that's his place over there -
two weeks every year, his people from Belgravia,
complete refurb, money no object;
he ate here, once."

Meanwhile
seven on a Sunday morning
under Quinaig's implacable buttress
the exterior designer
has placed deer on the hill's flank,
a cuckoo rippling the soft air,
while a striped furry caterpillar
arches his way
along the Drumbeg road.

HARDENING OF THE arteries and softening of the brain, the doctor just said, closing the curtains around us and leaving us together. Time to think, he said. Softening. It sounds so sweet a thing. Not like hardening. Calcification. Ossification. The process of becoming rigidly fixed; frozen. Maybe the doctor was confused as well: softening of the arteries and hardening of the brain; seems to me, that captures it better. Snow and ice.

You held my hand. Once. In the church at Nigg. An easterly wind whipping at the tiles. The sky: a William Blake painting. You wore my father's kilt, a wee bit short and high on your knees. And I wore the dress that he, ever the tailor, had made for me before he died. All pleated and white. He would say, 'Will that girl never marry?'. Thought that my moving south to London had gone to my head. Never knew it was not London but you and your stories of whaling and your love of ice. You who had lain in the snow at Ben Nevis Observatory counting flakes carried on an updraft. You who could recite snowy place names like poems: Svalbard, Novya Zemlya, Franz Josef Land, Spitsbergen.

Did we not start with the excitement of new snowfall?

My mother wept the day we married, while I, I felt like a diving tern. The minister blessed our love. Said, we would bear children. Said, we would have and we would hold. In sickness and in health. Forever and ever. Until death do us part.

He was right about some things.

The following day we walked the edges of Nigg Bay and watched the birds wade and the curlews cry. We followed a turnstone, head down rushing along the frilly sea, pushing into a northerly breeze. Just like us. In old boots we took the path to the North Sutor and I said, over there beyond the Firth is Culloden. The Battlefield that the locals say could be smelt on the air in April '46. And you stood up there and told me you would take me north and take me south, show me real snow and blue, blue ice. I remember you nudged me and we threw snowballs, gathered the wisps that kissed the ground and we laughed.

I knew you would need time away. That you would continue to explore and measure and observe. I thought, foolishly, that your trips would be like wintering apart. That on each return you would be heady and snowy, share stories of seals and skuas; let me in on your world. You were free for all those months away with a ship and a set of men and shiny scientific instruments. And then, I hoped, on your returns, that you would need me and want me and fold me in your polar arms. How wrong can a woman be? Why did I assume your need for space would be met by being out there under another sky? Why did I not see that you would need separateness even at home? You were not fulfilled by the time you had away from family ties and a podgy child; you were not fulfilled at all. Why did I think you would need occasional physical isolation from the world? You needed it constantly. And not just from the world but from me. What a thing to get wrong. What a thing to misunderstand.

We slipped apart so early. Like a seam not quite stitched. No one knew it. Only you and I. No signs of a fault line. No gaping ice

The Pull of Ice

By JANE VERBURG



crevasse for outsiders to see and comment on. Your death certificate will say we lived at the same address, 17 Joppa Road. But we didn't. You and I know that. When you were home we took the stairs to different rooms. Different lands. Closed our doors and puffed our own pillows, our own nests, not each other's. It suited you. It near killed me.

You were a map-maker, of sorts; with a sextant to aid your navigation. You had a compass and a watch; knowledge of the stars and of horizons. You had a ship of purpose and a crew of men. I had a child with soft, fat wrists who blew bubbles on my chin.

Fields are for battles, not homes.

Soon after Eillium was born you were far away. Antarctica. With an iced-in ship and a crowd of men. Your photographs showed your feel for snow. Your knowing of ice. Your love of cold. Your at-homeness. Your daily log lists precise sightings and exact observations, detailed dissections and verifiable facts. Facts. Nothing beats a reading from a scientific

instrument. So fathomable. At least with a taxidermist or a botanist or an engineer you can measure the scale of it all.

You named a land for the child you did not meet again until he was two. You named a bay for me. I prayed it was like Nigg – shallow and filled with soft brown birds. You named a whole peninsula for my Highland family. Grand gestures. Given far away.

You had a compass and a watch; knowledge of the stars and of horizons. You had a ship of purpose and a crew of men. I had a child with soft, fat wrists who blew bubbles on my chin.

The men said you were good at soundings. That you were the man to gauge a depth. The Ross Deep and the Weddell Sea were there for the taking. Two thousand, six hundred and sixty fathoms deep, you said, as if I would gasp at the accuracy.

Those photographs reached me before you did. The *Scotia's* masts and booms sliced each icy view. And the penguins. The penguins and the men were the same. Squat on the snow. Men with hands in their pockets. The very shape of a man is a penguin.

Of course, you were an excellent

ornithologist. A natural at observing nature. Nature; not man, nor woman. You said that penguins return to the same mate after wintering apart. If only. That they follow the same paths across the ice, year after year. Creatures of habit. That they form queues along straight paths linking the ocean to their rookeries. The making of a pebbly nest – a ritual of elegance and intimacy. The giving of pebbles to the female by the male – the very essence of their courtship, their love.

The day you returned from the *Scotia* I wanted my fingertips to trace your forehead. The creases that were there. I wanted the wee man to kiss your nose. Blow bubbles on your chin. But you pulled away. Forever more you pulled away.

You had sent out float papers from the ship, you said, papers that might mark the currents and tides of the southern oceans, papers that were measured for their latitude and longitude. So why could you never calculate your own trajectory? Why were you so indifferent to the ice field that stretched between us for miles and miles? You did not measure that.

And yet, why did you slip into the palm of my hand a penguin's pebble? Was it that you could not find the words?

I stitched that small, flat pebble into the hem of my petticoat. It is here with us now in this sparse hospital corner.

You said once, long ago, sitting at the dining room table, tugging your beard, that memory should never be trusted. Not even for the matter of a day. Things observed must be immediately recorded. Notes taken. Black and white. Systematic investigation and documentation was what counted. I should have seen then that rigidity of thought, that calcification seeping in. I am nothing but memories. Highland lore is layered within me like sedimentary rock. Even the memories of my mother and my mother's mother are here. Fossil feathers held within my strata. But you, you never saw the value of a muddled history of recollections and reflections, too lacking in hard clipped edges.

As your balance weakened, as you heeled, rolling like a ship at sea, those calcified facts did not give stability. They did not hold you where you wanted to be. They did not give you the foundation every person and building needs. Rather, those facts seemed to shift and fracture and you fell in to a slush of float papers and fumbling fish. The nurses at this hospital eventually tied you down to stop you from rubbing sore imagined frostbitten toes. They medicated you to stop you from screaming out to watch the boom and haul the observation nets. Softening of the brain. Such an unscientific description to give your death. You, who should have died at sea or been lost on a glacial plain tracking penguins, have your death here on this miserable ward for the insane.

After the rituals of death are performed and once your ashes are – as you wish them to be – scattered over Antarctic waters, then I shall take a boat to Australia. For much needed sun. With two children and a pebble. ■

Loosely based on William Speirs Bruce, Polar explorer (died Liberton Hospital, Edinburgh, 1921) and Jessie Bruce nee MacKenzie his wife (died Sydney, 1942)



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Poetry

Ruairidh

KATE HENDRY

Loudoun Hill carpark
Ruairidh is screaming at me
I hold the car key

At the bathroom door
Ruairidh is screaming at me
I'm wrapped in a towel

At the bathroom sink
I am screaming at Ruairidh
Toothpaste mixed with tears

Morecambe Bay

KATE HENDRY

April, Morecambe Bay.
Noughts and crosses in the sand.
My son wins each time.

My son, Morecambe bay.
Bring me sunshine, in your smile.
He draws boats in sand.

Gimel

DAWN WOOD

A half-wild whippet licked my knee -
I'd fallen in the mountain scree.
I'd rush to call that kindness,
she, to taste the blood and salt.

Days, as a caravan of camels
bearing little tags of grace;
I'm a rich man if I thread
my needles into here, this place.

Gun Dùil

LODAIDH MACFHIONGHAIN

Tha hamstair ann
'S e scrambalain an t-ainm a th' air

Ithidh e
Is òlaidh e

Is ni e a mhùn,
Is ni e a chac

Is chan eil dùil aig duine sam bith ris

Tha gaol mòr ac' air scrambalain.

Furtachd

JULIAN RONAY

ann an ceallan prìosain
fireannaich aonaranach agus cràidhte
ri fèin-bhrodadh air an oidhche
san fhuachd
saoghal neo-shuimeil
a' briseadh na mhìrean
mòmaidean teth fallasach san dorchadas
furtachd sealach
na cneadan agus eacaoine
a' cur a-mach
stealladh sil

sàsachadh miann
a bhith coltach ri dia
a bhith oirdheirc
a choinneachadh ris an neach
a tha eòlach ort
chan eil feum air faclan
an cràdh a tha a' ruigsinn cho fada air ais
a dhèanamh grèim air an t-seud
an seud
a shlànaich an cridhe dhe gach tinneas

More than one half to everything

GRAHAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG

What is visible, what is not,
are of course the same:
a bee doesn't see a Picasso,
nor I a violet buttercup.

What is heard, what unheard,
are of course the same:
blackbirds don't hear a symphony,
nor I microtones in their courting song.

What is felt, what unfelt,
are not, of course, the same:
how could I know if *we*
was ever more than you and me,

brief as a halo
reflected on a trumpeter's cheek,
or what my cat feels
as I stroke his dreaming feet.

Bucket

ANGELA SKRIMSHIRE

this bucket of grief
from what well was it drawn?

memory has lost the path to it

but I remember the shape of the stones
that walled it in

an intricate ironwork of anxiety
meticulously knotted

and love that when I knelt to drink
drank me.

Half my life

MARK EDWARDS

I knew that tarry lane
as a shortcut to the only place
in this gutless town worth going

though maybe it was always just
2 sharp turns that flung you
amongst every kind of rubbish.

Cracked harling the colour
of day old porridge
8 feet of breeze block

with broken glass topping
the only thing new
- a spray paint warning.

That other me
who writes the murders
might describe precisely
Geoff's payday kicking
300 sheets to fix those teeth
and that's your cheapest dentist.

No wonder I'm content
to chop wood in the sun
though the shorts
were a tad optimistic.
Off to bed all blisters and bites
half past 10 on a Friday night
forget the social aspect.

Cause this town was on its knees
before you were even born,
leave school join the forces
stay put for 12 hour shifts
stacking shelves, wiping arses.

With no change in sight
but an Inver
before the name of the river
plus of course a spanking new sign.

Day by day I plan my escape
to Finechty or Sanine.

Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches

TOBAR AN DUALCHAIS/KIST o Riches is a landmark project to digitize, catalogue and make available online thousands of hours of folklore and folklife recordings made in Scotland over the past century. Most of these recordings come from the Sound Archive of the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh which contains a wealth of traditional songs, music, tales, poetry, oral history and information on a range of traditional customs and beliefs, from weather lore to second sight, and much more.

Already an invaluable cultural and linguistic resource, Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches contains a great deal of material in Scots, English, and Gaelic, including many hundreds of recordings made in the Hebrides by John Lorne Campbell of Canna (1906–1996), starting in the 1930s. The archives are also an important documentary source of information on the enormous social and economic changes that occurred in 20th century Scotland, with ordinary people across the country describing the last days of centuries-old working practices and the corresponding effects on their communities.

Although the website now contains many thousands of such tracks, several thousand more hours of recordings from the School of Scottish Studies Archives and Canna Collection are still waiting to be catalogued and added to the site. To help achieve this goal members of the public are invited to donate to a new crowdfunding campaign, hosted by Sponsume at sponsume.com/project/tobardualchais, and running until the 15 December 2013. Donors can choose from a range of fantastic rewards, including limited song releases from our recent Gaelic and Scots Artists in Residence, traditional musicians Julie Fowles and Chris Wright, short-courses at the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig college on Skye, and a year's membership of the National Trust for Scotland.

For more information on Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches and our new fundraising campaign, please contact Mairead MacDonald (Director) on 01471 888 600 / md2.smo@uhi.ac.uk, or Chris Wright (Crowdfunding Campaign Manager) on 07826075019 / chris.wright@ed.ac.uk. ■

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Dàin le Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh

Sùilean Dhàibhidh Bhuidhe

Nach air a bha an dà shealladh sna 70an.
Oir tha sinn uile a' seinn òran Ziggi a-nis,
crochte mar gum biodh bho uèirichean-stèids,
a' smèideadh gu bàidheil ri Mèidsear Tom,
fiamh-ghàire oirnn air sgàth nan camarathan.

Each

An là tha seo.
Each stòlda ciùin.

A' togail mo mhic.
Mo chridhe thruim fhìn.

Gun annam ach asal.
Crann crom air mo dhruim.

A' treabhadh sgrìob còmhla
tron fhànas is tron tìm.

Speuclairean

Cuimhneam. Sia no seachd.
Samhradh Canèidianach.
Mise air chluinntinn an àiteigin
gu bheil comas aig iolair
geur-amharc air a' ghrèin.
Bu iolair mi fhèin. Greis.

Suids

Bidh iad a' coimhead
a-steach dhan cheann agad

mar a nì innleadair le lòchran
's e a' càradh inneil-nigheadaireachd

a tha air sgur dhe bhith cur car
no a dh'fhàgas smàl air aodach geal.

Is ann air iomrall a thèid iad
oir chan eil càil a dh'fhios aca fhèin

cà bheil suids dìomhair do-ruigsinn
cridhe ann an teinn.

Snàmh

a' snàmh cho domhainn
gu freumhan nam beann
an sàs san fheamainn uaine
a shuain turban teann
mu cheann Iònais an fhàidh
's e teicheadh bhon àithn'.

THERE'S A PARK in the city where I like to sit. It's as close to untamed countryside as the city can get. There's a shallow river, cleaner than it used to be. Trees hang and droop over the flowing water and in summer everything is green.

There's a bench in the park where I sit, along the riverbank, hidden among the bushes and branches. Every day I have my lunch on that bench, unless it's too wet or I'm too busy.

That's what I do.

Today, it is dry and sunny and I'm not too busy.

Downstream, some 200 yards away, a narrow wooden bridge crosses the river. On the other side, shoving each other around, are a group of five boys. They are underneath the bridge and too far away for me to hear. They can't see me because of the bushes. I'd say they are 15 or 16 years old. I watch them for a while then continue reading my book.

One of them shouts above the sound of the rushing water. I look. It's the one wearing a black T shirt. He scrambles up the bank, and jumps, catching hold of the underside of the bridge. He hangs there for a moment. Then, hand over hand, he clammers out over the river.

One or two of the others throw small stones but Black T Shirt carries on, unperturbed. He's about a third of the way across when he stops. He looks to be struggling to hold on. But then he hooks his legs under the bridge, and hangs there, upside down, arms swinging loose.

I'm transfixed now. He'll fall. He has to fall.

It's about 10 feet between the dangling boy and the river, which can't be more than a foot deep. Rocks poke from the water. If he falls I imagine he'll fracture his skull, or maybe break an arm. But after a few seconds he pulls up, grabs the rung, and frees himself. Hand over hand he swings back to the group on the riverbank and drops to the ground.

No Fear

SHORT STORY BY MIKE RUSSELL



One-nil to Black T Shirt.

Three of his pals cheer, but the biggest group member, the one wearing a baseball cap, straight away scrambles off up the slope and follows suit. Only this time he doesn't stop a third of the way across and hang upside down, and no one throws stones at him. He keeps going, from rung to rung, pulling up and stretching out, until he's all the way across. I clap my hands softly a few times, safe on my hidden bench. This is turning into quite a show.

I'd say Baseball Cap has covered about 70 feet, going rung to rung with not so much grace as brute athleticism. He disappears into the bushes and emerges on the bridge, strutting back across the river to join the gang. The others come up the bank to meet him and they all vanish into the undergrowth. Black T Shirt 1, Baseball Cap 1.

A few seconds later and they're going for the winner – along the top of the railings that run on either side of the bridge. Black T Shirt is on one side, Baseball Cap on the other.

I know the top of the railings are pretty flat and three or four inches wide. The boys are now about 20 feet above the river. From that kind of height you're talking snapped ankles, cracked pelvises, crushed vertebrae.

The race starts, each boy with his hands outstretched for balance, while the other gang members are content to lag behind, crossing the bridge in the traditional fashion. The rail-top pace quickens.

There's a wobble or two from both boys. They're almost running. I'm standing now. I'm waiting for the inevitable to happen.

Jesus!

But it doesn't happen. Black T Shirt wins by a nose.

Cheers go up again. The whole group disappears into the trees and doesn't come back.

It was pointless stupidity. It was sheer recklessness. It was fucking amazing.

I stand there for a moment, open mouthed.

Sense of place and purpose return; there is nothing more to hold my attention. I notice my book has fallen to the ground and there's a splash of mud across the front cover. I gather my lunch things and set off back to work.

I rejoin the main path through the wood; the steps up to the street are just a few minutes away.

Coming towards me on the path is the same gang of boys.

My shoulders tense.

There is no one else around. They could kick the absolute shit out of me and no one would know.

Should've put the book in my pocket. Musn't catch their eye.

Two of them are looking at me. Baseball Cap is in full flow. He's a shade bigger than his rival and is going to get his own back. He's a shade bigger than me. Two of the smaller ones, I can now see, are wearing football tops.

"Aye, yer shagging the biggest bike in S4," says Baseball Cap. "There's no fucken conquest there, know what ah mean? Two gulps of cider and she's anyone's. Ask anybody."

The rest of the gang laugh, but Black T Shirt takes issue with his new girl being called a bike.

"Ask who, ya lyin prick?"

As I pass the group, Baseball Cap struggles to think of a non-incriminating answer. Black T Shirt catches my eye.

"Alright," he grunts.

"Aye," I reply, as toneless and unthreatening as I can make it.

The gang walks on. Their shouts and laughter disappear along the path, lost among the trees. I mount the steps to the street, breathing hard, relieved that I'm no longer afraid of the boys who hadn't been afraid. ■



Mike Russell is deputy editor of the West Highland Free Press newspaper. His fiction has recently appeared in Fractured West, Gutter and Polluto magazines. He is a graduate of Glasgow University and is trying to finish writing two novels, one of which is science fiction.

Highland Literary Salon - Writing Competition 2013

THEME

The theme is simply "Roots". This is open to your own interpretation!

There are four categories:

Prose (for adults) - short fiction of up to 2,000 words

Poetry (for adults) - up to 40 lines, excluding title

Prose (for under 18s) - short fiction of up to 2,000 words

Poetry (for under 18s) - up to 40 lines, excluding title

Everyone is welcome to enter this competition.

COST

Adults (18 years of age and above) - £3.50 per entry (or £6 for two entries)

Under 18's - £2 per entry (or £3 for two entries)

ENTRIES

Enter online at <http://highlandlitsalon.com/competition2013.asp>

Entries should be typed using any "plain" font (no script or fancy font styles please) at a minimum of 12 points in size.

Entries are welcome in either English or Scots. Entries in Gaelic will only be accepted if they are accompanied with an English translation.

CLOSING DATE

The competition closing date is 31 January 2014

Shortlisting and judging will take place over February & March 2014, and the winners will be announced and prizes awarded at our April 2014 salon.

PRIZES

In the adult (18 years of age and above) categories, the first prize will be £100 and the second prize £50.

The Beach

SHORT STORY BY BECKS DENNY



THE BEACH IS pinned to the land by a hard weight of shadow at the base of a crag. He bursts straight out of it, a sharp line of movement cutting into the bright white, head back, fists and knees punching the air, sharp scuffs of sand spitting out behind him. He heads for the sea but stops just short of it and stands, shoulders hunched, hands to hips, chin tilted to the horizon, the mountains and the great sheet of summer slick ocean. Beyond him, with only the tiniest scurry of wings, a guillemot is swallowed by the water and a red-throated diver drifts, bill jabbing into its wing feathers, white belly flashing, paddle foot dry and dangling.

He stands until his shoulders descend, then with head lowered he turns and walks away from the edge, where the water swishes so softly. Each wave trails a blanket of bubbles. He walks away until he is half way back to the land, pauses then begins to stagger backwards, dragging his right heel hard into the sand, his arms tight angles at his sides, left knee bent and straining. A bird feigning injury, luring a predator from its nest. Wet sand ploughs up

She sees him squatting in the shallows, splashing water up over him like a gull at a fresh water pool and she stares at the mess of the sand where he's staked his claim.

dark as he moves, he slices the beach open. I LOVE YOU RACHEL.

From so close in he can't see clearly what he's doing. He doesn't judge it quite right and only just manages to squeeze RACHEL in before he runs out of space. The I and LOVE are enormous, YOU just a little smaller. RACHEL is crushed beneath it all, pressed hard against the waters edge and the sea already starting to lick around the base of the letters, setting grains of sand slipping, filling in the trough of the word.

The guillemot, released, bobs through the surface. It pauses momentarily, then arches up and forward and clear of the water, releasing a silver spray of droplets as it scoots just a short way, shakes itself furiously, then settles back down on the surface. The diver slips under and an oystercatcher begins to chivvy its way along a thin foam path at the edge of the sea, orange bill jerking as it chippers nervously and casts shifty backward glances at the man, who is stamping loose his clothes. He plunges, with a shout, into the sea.

Rachel is in the shadows, wedged hard in at the base of the crag. There is no sun warmth here, the night hangs cold and damp still and dewdrops, like tears, roll slowly together where the tent outer has sagged and creased. They wet her face as her head pushes through, eyes searching after the sound. She sees him squatting in the shallows, splashing water up over him like a gull at a fresh water pool and she stares at the mess of the sand where he's staked his claim. She pauses just a

moment before she disappears back into the warm fug of the tent.

On twisted mounds of sleeping bags her daughter squirms and rolls on her back. Rachel grabs a leg and pulls the small body back down towards her, tries again to do the poppers at the base of the vest but is already exhausted by the effort it has taken to change a nappy and wipe hardened weatabix from a protesting mouth and hands. She tries not to be rough. But her husband is out there, in the light, in the water. And she is here, eyes burning from a sleepless night of breastfeeding, sweat pooling under the folds of her breasts, beneath the thermals she hasn't had a chance yet to remove. She needs to find her bra. She needs a coffee. She needs to get out. None of these things seem possible until he comes back and helps her.

She wrestles her head through the slit of the door again and sees him perched, legs dangling over the edge of a sea smoothed boulder, his back to her. She knows he is rolling a cigarette. Her forehead wrinkles and she presses the heel of her hand hard in under her cheekbone, fingers fanning out to cover her eyes as they close. When she opens them again he is still there sitting and she watches, just a little longer before she slips back inside and starts to stretch out across the tangled bags and sleeping mats to the edges of the tent, hands rolling sand and grit as she searches.

She finds her purse and her bra. From the pouch of the inner tent she pulls a notebook and pen, tissues and nappies and begins to stuff them into a baby carrier she drags in through the back of the tent. She takes bread and cheese and apples from the stash of plastic bags at the front of the tent and throws them in too.

Sensing new energy, her child has quietened, found a small book amongst the folds of a sleeping bag and is sitting now, straight backed, head bowed, flicking the pages over. Rachel scrabbles and finds a soft knitted jumper and trousers and the child allows herself to be dressed, head straining to be free of the neck of the jumper and back into the pages of the book.

She opens the back flap to the tent now and squeezes out of a too small gap like a fox under a fence. Reaching back in she pulls out the carrier and props it up beside her then stretches back in again for the child. Rachel guides her gently through the gap and straight into the seat of the carrier where she sits and looks calmly around, then reaches out to disturb a shower of drops from the tent flap. Fascinated, she holds her hand up in front of her face and then very carefully pushes her tongue out to lick the dampness from her hand.

Rachel grabs the strap at the shoulders and hoists the pack up onto her back, her daughter giggles with the swing and then they turn their backs to the sea and the writing on the sand and the small figure blowing smoke and begin to head up the slope to the side of the crag, before dropping out of sight onto the machair beyond.

The sea is almost turquoise below him. If he stretches out his leg he can flick water in a shimmering arc out over the sea. It is so still the smoke from his cigarette hangs in front of his face obscuring his view. He blows it away with a sharp exhale. When his third cigarette is finished, he holds it between his thumb and first finger and throws it like a dart to the sea. The discoloured stub rocks a little then begins its slow, shuddering journey back to the shore, ash crumbling into a fine film around it.

He thinks of coffee and stands up. Crumbs of lichen and dried seaweed cling to the seat of his trousers. As he heads towards the tent he does not look back at the writing on the sand. He does not see that RACHEL has already gone. Still water stretched so thin, the tide has turned without being noticed. ■



BECKS DENNY:

Writing for me has always been about being as alive and alert in the world as I can be, about noticing, an instinctive way to process and understand what's going on around me and a treasured way of communicating. I have always written. Amongst family and work my writing has been less about sustained stories and more about sketches and small observations, pieces of prose, poems, journeys, snatches of story, often about the tension between domestic and wild lives, human and animal, our relationship with place and how it influences us, the undertones these things create all around us. I like to write about places where humans are not the dominant force and how these places heighten the relationships within them. I am starting to experiment with how it feels to have an audience, a curiosity about how writing changes through being read. My writerly habits are erratic - unless I manage to steal an early morning hour. I write most when I am alone, on the move and outside.

Poems by Roseanne Watt

Bird Skull

Now you are no more
than paper bone, empty sockets
glowering at the absence
of horizons once held in
dual perspective; wet sand
the grey matter that once
fulfilled the wish of flight.

Saat i da Blöd

Lass, du's parched dy tongue
o dy ain land, knappit
dy wirds sae dry dey sift
atween dy teeth lik sand
sprittin doon an oer-glass.
I gied dee a langwich, wan
dat cud captir da percussion
o waves apo its consonants,
unravel da condeeshuns
o da sowl wi a single wird;
shoormal, mareel, bonhoga;
a gift dat du's left oot
tae mulder i da gales.

Lit me start ower:
Lass, du dösna hae da wirds
tae haad me on da page
an du'll nivir fin me dere
until du understands:
da saat dat courses trowe
dy veins is da lifeblöd
o an aulder converseeshun
wan dat ebbs and flöds
joost as da tide. Dese wirds
ir my hansel tae dee.
Tak dem; gie dem
a pulse.

The World Tree

'Da sie's da wy da wirlid kums tae wis.'
- Robert Alan Jamieson, 'Apo Da Bloo Djoob'

To see me is to an absent world
lurking behind kelp and old fishing nets.
You will not find me there; I am

storm-born, sea-changed, torn
from the landscape I once knew.
Look; oceans tossed their tempests
through my grain, brine has made
black tentacles of my roots, where I now
snare the moon, hook the stars –
cosmic soil, in place of my lost land.

Bring to me your pretty worlds,
your lovely secret places,
make gallows of my ashen boughs
and hang your old gods there.

First Memory for Anne Watt

I woke to feathery light,
your face smiling
down. You named
me "Good Morning",
lifted me into the day
so I could discover
where all the doors
of our home led.

Summer, 1939

I think of you sometimes. That other
granddaughter, with your islands
old bedtime stories told in tall
Marchmont rooms, carving your dark
into distant seascapes, which will vanish

into the reeky hum of Edinburgh,
the dusty-honey summers of her Meadows,
those wee hours spent *jooterin'* down
her crooked wynds, mapping
the secret patterns of your veins.

Would you ever stop to wonder
at what quirk of history made you?
How all that comes between us is the summer
of 1939, and a woman's choice
to board a steamer at Leith Docks.

I doubt you would.
But if you were to stumble
on some relic of the isles concealed
within your city – Jawbone walk, maybe
of St Ninian's silver – perhaps

the fabric of our separation
would wear thin, so we could sense each other
as a quiet crackling in the blood
like the white noise of the waves
you do not know.

ROSEANNE WATT:

The poems featured here are from my undergraduate dissertation; a collection of eight poems that sought to explore the themes and issues surrounding Shetland's island identity, both temporal and linguistic. Shetland is my first landscape, so my poetry often examines the interaction of personal memories with those inherent within the natural world, and therein the creation of a personal folklore - one that can only exist in retrospect.

The dissertation also documents my first forays into Shetland dialect - and I am, in particular, indebted to Shetlandic poet Robert Alan Jamieson for this. As well as giving me confidence to write in the local vernacular, his verse informed and inspired many of the poems in my dissertation.



Roseanne Watt graduated from the University of Stirling with a BA (Hons) in English and Film Studies. She has since returned to complete the university's MLitt programme in Creative Writing. She currently lives in Edinburgh, which is very nearly as nice as Shetland.

Dàin le Anna Danskin

Latha Bealltainn

Tha àm, 's àite, airson gach nì,
mar a chanas iad.

Tha na Garbh-Eileacha nan seasamh,
an casan an uisgeachan Innse Gall,
far an cluinnear na tuinn, a' sguabadh,
a' bristeadh tro uaimhean,
far an cluinnear glaoidhean
iomadach eun mu na creagan.

Bloodhna ocho ceud leth-cheud 's a h-aon,
gheamhraich cìobair anns na h-eileanan.
Chuir e fàilt' air duine a ràinigeadh.
Am Màigh, nochd balaich air chèilidh
nam bàta prìseil Arcaibh.
Ceathrar am madainn am beatha.

Nuair a dhùisg iad, bha goath air èirigh
Ach thog iad seòl, ri fàsgadh rubha.
Cha robh iad rim faicinn tuilleadh.
Ràinig an stiùir gu cladach Leòdhais.
Lorgadh an Arcaibh, dhen Rubha Chorrach
a' dol leis a' ghaoith, dall, gu tuath.

Àm, àite, airson a h-uile nì, mar a chanar,
Airson a' cheathrair òig seo, latha ro thràth.

Buidheagan-an-t-Samhraidh

'S gann gu bheil cuimhn' againn air
buidheagan-an-t-samhraidh
san fheur fhada, no na seamragan,
no cneas Chù Chulainn cùbhraidh
is sinn a' dol dhachaigh
le sreang de rionnaich sleamhainn.

Cha mhòr gun gairm sinn air ais
faileadh fann "Woodbine" feadh falt
fior-ghlan, a bhith ribeadh
solas, luaith ar beatha
sgeadaicht an oilsgin deàlrach.

Air ais a-rithist, chan fhaod sinn
a dhol nas fhaisge.
Tha claidheamh a' gleidheadh
geataichean na h-òige.

A Bhò Dhuinn

A bhò dhuinn, 's tu a' cnàmh na cìre gu sìochail
am measg feur is flùraichean samhraidh,
le ainmnean – buttercup, marigold, daisy, clover,
a tha a' bruidhinn ort le blasan air a bheil
do theanga eòlach – tha thu, gidheadh,
dìreach thu fhèin. Ged a tha thu a' comharrachadh
na mairt 's na laoiigh, ar companaich 's sinn òg.

A' Dol air Ais

Sràid, 's e falamh, air leathad meadhan a' bhaile.
Pàipear a' gluasad rù-rà an oiteagan gaoithe.
Cailleach a' fàgail bùth-leabhraichean,
a' tighinn gu oisean a' chabhsair.
Fuaim a' meudachadh. Calmanan ag itealaich.
Busaichean air chabhag. Cha ghabh a dhol tarsainn.

'N uair sin, sìothchail sìos sràid na fir-lagha,
saoilidh i a bhith ga faicinn na coinneimh.

Lorgan

Casruisgte san fheamainn, tha a' chlann
a' sireadh lorgan air cladach Stafainn,
a' cur sìos an lorgan fhèin.

O chionn ghoirid, bidh iad a' coiseachd,
a' coimhead airson dinosaur, a bha an seo,
dìreach an seo, aig àm Pangea.

Tha a' chiad lorg, air leac, a' toirt ionnsaigh
air an inntinn. Mar Chrusoe a' faicinn
lorg-coise Man Friday.

Air inntinn inbheach. Dhan fhear as òige,
stad a chàirdean, a chompanaich mhòra,
an seo dìreach an-dè.

A' Caoidh Bràthair

'S tu fhathast còmhla rinn
bha aimsir dha-rìribh ann
gach là den Chèitean seo.
Làn-aimsir ciobaireachd –
's math bha thu eòlach àir!

A-nis, 's tu air seòladh,
tha fuarachd san Ògmhios,
frasan reòt' air an uinneig,
sgòthan dorch mun a' Chuilitheann.

Gidheadh, tha an saoghal mas grinne
a chionn 's gun do thadhail thu.

Aig an Aodann-Chailc

A dh'aon rùn, furachail, dùrachdach, cùramach,
tha 'n clas beag a' tarraing dealbh biast mhiotasach.
An do dhealbh Dia, 's e òg, gu furachail, dùrachdach,
matha, ròn, sròin uilebheist, sìoraf, each-uisge,
aig toiseach èirigh grian is gealach?
A dh'aon rùn, furachail, dùrachdach, cùramach,
tha 'n clas beag a' dealbhadh biast mhiotasach.

ANNA DANSKIN:

**À Bhatairnis an Eilein Sgitheanaich bho
thùs. Dàin leatha ann an irisean leithid
An Guth is Gairm. Ag obair air a' chiad
chruinneachadh aice aig aois thairis air
ceithir fichead.**

Madame Bovary

SHORT STORY BY LILY GREENALL



THEY CALLED HER Madame Bovary, but I didn't know why at the time. She was a tall woman with broad thighs, packed into close fitting jeans, bosom exploding above the zip of a faux leather jacket. Not young. Mutton dressed as lamb was the phrase I'd heard strewn around by the adults. I understood it to mean stealing your daughter's clothes.

You could time her by the church traffic. Just as the procession of sleek, gleaming cars trundled up the hill to the church then she would emerge. At the point when utter silence fell and the whole island was bathed in peace, the devout shut up in their stony walls at worship, the unbelievers tranquil after Sunday lunch, then she would ride forth like some Babylonian reminder of sin in the world.

Those heels must have given her blisters but still she marched out, every Sunday, beating brusquely down the twist of the hill into the village, every thundering step bouncing off the valley sides.

At twelve I had a pair of heels just like that. Imitation snake skin, pale pink with long pointy toes and six inch steeple to keep me off the ground. Witches shoes. I'd got them as a birthday present from an aunt but so far was only allowed to wear them in my bedroom, tottering up and down on the wonky slatted boards until my father rattled the ceiling with a broom.

Dolled up to the nines, that was another phrase my mother used. She said it like there was a bitter taste in her mouth, peering down her nose as she smoked a cigarette and lifted her binoculars.

I couldn't tell you what 'the nines' were or where to locate them on your body but I would twitch at my mother's floral skirt and she would hand the binoculars down to me.

It was Rita who had given her the name Bovary. Rita lived several feet down the valley from us. You could see her house from my bedroom. For some reason her house was full of mirrors facing the wrong way. One on every window shelf so that looking down at the cottage all you could see were the winking reflections of the moor and refracted images of the village, contorted out of shape.

I could tell it irritated my mother. She would huff as she skimmed Rita's house with her glasses, return to washing the dishes with renewed vigour and wonder out loud what she had to be so cagey about. I think that's why she sent me down there with the eggs, more as a spy than as a gesture of goodwill.

I thought she wanted to see if Rita was really a witch with her garden of flowers, fragrant and colourful as the Good Witch from the Snow Queen story. I know now it was me who wanted to know that.

Rita's house was full of books, winding up to the ceiling in tenuous piles. Rita made me sandwiches and let me thumb through them or play with her cats that lounged in regal heaps all over the furniture, coating everything with a tongue of silver fur.

It was through me that she got friendly with my parents, chattering at the bus stop

as my mother hustled me down the road for school. And it was through Rita that the name 'Madame Bovary' caught on.

I don't think she meant it to. When Rita said it, it was with a sighing, head shaking kind of sympathy. I got an impression through this; that she was the only one who really knew what it meant. All the other women I heard use it did so with a snarky kind of leer, gossiping at the bus stop, but as Rita was the one who made it up I decided the other women

Dolled up to the nines, that was another phrase my mother used. She said it like there was a bitter taste in her mouth, peering down her nose as she smoked a cigarette and lifted her binoculars.

were the ones using it wrong and that Rita was the secret guardian of its meaning.

It was from a book Rita told me. Not the type mum and dad would read, I said. The only books in our house were the old Holy and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Rita had laughed at this and fed a biscuit to one of her cats. I remember it licked the crumbs from its almond coloured lips, rolled over in the sun and purred.

On Sunday's after tea I was allowed to ride my bike. Anna was allowed to ride her bike anytime. She'd say with a swaggering air that her mum didn't even notice if she didn't come home for tea and poked fun at us for still waiting to be called like babies and not just fixing ourselves something like grown-ups, though she was only just thirteen herself.

Anna was Madame Bovary's daughter. None of us wanted to ask her if she knew where Madame Bovary went on Sunday afternoons because whenever the subject was brought up Anna's lips went hard and tight and a steely, merciless glint came into her eye. Then she would be especially vicious at choosing our games and always pick the ones that involved fighting and rolling people down hills on the moor, through the scratching heather and the creepy crawlies and the little piles of sheep dirt.

One afternoon she threw Ritchie Clark's bike down the hill after him and one of the pedals took a chunk out of Ritchie's forehead as he was standing up, dizzy from his forward roll.

That was my fault because I'd talked about it. I'd dashed out from finishing my tea, the taste of parsnips still in the back of my throat and gravy splashes down my sweater. My parents had been talking in the warm, meaty

kitchen smell. Everybody knows where she's going. While his wife's in church.

It was a shame, Rita said. I asked if she meant for the 'wife.' Rita said yes but for everybody involved. For Anna, and for Madame Bovary's husband, a scrawny loom weaver whose eyes were always red and whose breath always stung with whiskey. It was a shame for Madame Bovary herself. She had spent all the money, spent the house, whatever that meant I'd thought as I nibbled Jaffa cakes in Rita's kitchen.

Always got a new outfit, every Sunday, my mother said, looking piqued as she shook out her own laundry.

There was a girl at school who wouldn't speak to Anna. Who gave her long brooding looks as she went to and from class and to whom Anna responded with absolute silence and that same thin hardening of the mouth. This was strange for Anna. Usually she'd pounce on people for the slightest remark, even an innocent head tilt in her direction and she was on them; confrontational, aggressive, terrifying. Never with Nicola though. It seemed that Nicola had some sort of silent upper hand.

Laying in wait was the phrase my mother used and she was very excited. She'd heard something at the bus stop concerning Madame Bovary and was positively gleeful throughout Sunday dinner. My father seemed stern. He turned his lips down and shook his head a great deal. Mother didn't care though, she kept bouncing across to the window to peek through her binoculars.

Finally something was going to be done. About time too.. Amazed she hadn't done it sooner... If it had been her husband...

But it wasn't, my father remarked gravely. I was dying to get outside and left half my food untouched, something I wouldn't normally have got away with but today my parents seemed distracted. Madame Bovary streaked by, stomping at her usual pace, face set in those hard lines that so reminded me of Anna and by the time my knife and fork had clattered down I had made my decision.

I chased her into the pale blue evening, bike chain clanking as I powered up the hill into the heart of the village. Anna flew behind me, shouting. She wanted to know where I was going so fast.

I caught up with Madame Bovary at the crest of a low hill, looking down over the moor stretching to the cliffs where a glowing copper penny was hovering above the ocean. The houses roundabouts were silent, the familiar Sunday peace hovering all around.

Suddenly broken by screams. Madame Bovary staggered back on her heels, wobbling on the gravel driveway. A

fierce looking woman with bobbed black hair and a sallow face appeared from inside a parked van, her expression one of ragged fury as she bore down on her rival. She was shouting something but the open space overhead stretched out the words, scattered them brokenly to the distance and all I could make out were shrill, wailing sounds.

A man was crunching out onto the gravel now, heavy set with arms spread wide. Anna pulled up beside me. I could hear her hot, panting breath as she stopped and didn't dare look round at her face.

The black haired woman had rounded on her husband, shoving him back towards the house. Madame Bovary was rising slowly, dusting down her new clothes where she had fallen. She didn't respond to the woman's cries, didn't hang her head. She simply stood there with those hard lines of resignation encrypted on her face, by age and make up, and heard the woman out. I felt a strange surge of compassion towards Madame Bovary, as though she were an actress in a play, not there by choice but simply performing her role, the villain to the end.

Finally the woman surged back towards the house where her husband lingered in the doorway. Turning on her broken heel, looking straight ahead although the windows were lined with faces, Madame Bovary began to march silently back down the hill.

Now I glanced round at Anna. Now I saw the horror etched into the young features, the characteristic hardness, shiny and wet with tears but no less hard for all that, staring wide eyed as her mother trudged past. I felt sorry for Anna now, a penitent voyeur, and was glad it was only me and not Ritchie and Don and Sarah and the whole crew that had seen it.

Anna let her bike fall with a clatter, chased after her mum yelping, calling out questions. In the quiet evening her voice was like the awful lost cry of the spring born lambs scouring the fields for their mothers. ■



LILY GREENALL:

I am a twenty four year old English Literature graduate who grew up on the Isle of Lewis and studied at the University of Aberdeen. I am currently studying for an MLitt in Creative Writing at Aberdeen.

RAB DUNSMUIR AND his sister Madge were born at Drumtocher estate, at the Hame Farm ained bi the fowk at Gulaig Hoose, the young laird Keith McAllister an his family. Rab Dunsmuir senior luikit eftir aa the estate duties. On Winter mornins, the bairns waukent tae frost feys dauncin inbye the windaes as weel as oot, an it wis a sair thocht tae turr the bedclaes an rin barfit ower the steen flags tae the heat o the kitchie fire.

The kitchie fire wis a muckle blaik reenge, far their mither Sally, baked their breid, the scones bein cooked on the griddle. There wis aywis a blaik iron kettle hung ower the fire, an a mug o tarry tea (tinky-tea) Rab Dunsmuir caad it, hotterin on the bile. Whyles he wid takk 'a Birse cup', addin a jeelip o fuskey inno the tea.

It wis jist eftir the secunt warld war that the Dunsmuir's bedd on Drumtocher Estate, an the hinnereyn o rationin didnae gee them ae bit, fur ahin the Hame Farm hoose lay a braid gairden, an in simmer it wis stappit wi tatties an neeps, kail an ingins an fruit. There wir brummils, rasps, an strawberries...the verra nettles made tasty nettle soup wi a puin o mint skirpit ower it. Grumphies an chuckens war fattened up on the leavins, naethin wis iver left tae rot.

Young Rab an Madge mair or less ran wud in the simmer months, gin their faither or mither didna need their help. Aften, they tuik tae the wids, tae search oot the secret nests that layin awa hens biggit. Twice ilkie day the byre's fower kye war milkit, an the milk for Gulaig Hoose wis cairtit up tae the laird in lidded pails, ferried by young Rab haudin the reins o the shire shelt, Auld Colonel. Winter, tho, wis affa byordnar cauld an keepit the bairns nearer haun the fire, their lugs an taes dirlin

Bit ae Winter a veesitor cam tae Drumtocher Estate, the laird's nephew young Niall. He wis as ill tricket as ony futteret, wi a coorse streak in him, bit cud cherm bluid frae a steen fin he'd a mind tae. Tae takk up his attention, the laird allowed him tae play wi the Dunsmuir bairns, even up at Gulaig Hoose itsel. Their faither wid yoke the muckle shire tae pu the sna ploo.

Winter hid cam early that year, aroon the time that the grumphie wis killt. The bairns watched frae a keek in the barn waa, Niall kecklin wi delight as the breet skirled an skreighed as its thrapple wis cuttit. Eftir, Sally Dunsmuir washed aa the intimmers an scoored them wi roch satt, wytin tae be stappit wi pork sausage maet. The muckle hams war cured in timmer tubs wi satt peter an broon sugar, syne hung frae heuks in the reef. Naethin wis left ower, lugs and snoot gied inno potted maet, an the trotters byled up inno a gran soup. Even Niall, fa wis a pickey craitur, suppit his bowl clean.

Noo, hynae awa at the back o the estate, in a deep, derk pairt o the wids, Hector McInnes bedd. He'd bin a young gamie on the estate afore the first warld war, an hid listit wi the lave. His fiers an kin aa deed roon aboot him in the sotter o bluid an dubs that wis the Somme. It wid hae bin better fur Hector hid he deed wi them, fur he cam hame hauf gyte. Ooto peety the auld auld laird gied him the eese o an auld rick-ma-tick o a hut tae bide in ooto the wye o fowk, fur like as no he'd hae bin lockit awa in the mad-hoose if he'd bedd amangst ithers, for fleggin them wi his

Hide an Seek

SHORT STORY BY SHEENA BLACKHALL



daft capers. For aa that, he wis a skeelie trapper o rabbits, brocks an tod. Naebody cud set a snare or a gin trap an hide it like Hector McInnes.

He wad set his snares or gin traps ootbye a den or a sett, or a rubbit weel happit bi girse or bracken. Eftir he teemed his traps, he loaded the pelts aroon his roosty auld bike an cycled them up tae Gulaig Hoose kitchie... whyles he'd catch a craa, an the cook wid pit them inno craa pie fur the laird. He wis skeely as weel at spearin eels in the burn, sae he niver wintit for maet. He keepit bees in hinney coloured skepps, and gaed the jars o hinney as rent tae the McAllisters.

Niall McAllister wis ay on the luik oot for somethin tae tyraneese, an it wisna lang afore he singlit oot Hector McInnes fur a target. Fa'd takk the wurd o an auld gyte chiel afore the laird's nephew? He stertit aff wi smaa coorsenesses. He'd wyte till McInnes wis inbye his hoose at nicht, syne creep throw the snaa, sclimm up a thatchin timmer laidder ontae the reef an plunk a divot o girse ower the lum. The hoose wad fill wi rikk, drivin the puir auld Hector oot hoastin an spoolooterin inno the sna. Niall McInnes didna even trouble hisselt tae rin awa, jist denied aa kennin aboot the maitter. Bit fin the auld gamie clyped tae the laird, the loon declared it wisna his wyte.

'Luik me in the ee an say that!' quo McInnes. 'Ah, ye sleekit vratch, bit ye winna, will ye,' for the laddie cudna face thon weird, gyte face. McInnes's een wir mirled an piercin, like they cud see doon tae the verra foons o a body.

Rab Dunsmuir an Madge tuik nae pairt in this baitin o McInnes. Tho they war blythe eneuch tae play wi the laddie in snaa baa fechts, or sledgin, they let him ken smairt - quick that they wadnae thole tormentin the auld bodach. Bit fin Niall wis his lane, an the Dunsmuir's war helpin their faither or mither, twis anither maitter.

Ae day he fand a tin o creosote an peintit Hector's cat wi it. Hector hid tae sheet the puir breet an beery it. There wis a queer kinna thraw till his mou as it did it tho, for a chiel fa'd focht in the Somme his different meisurs o fit is richt an wrang. An Hector McInnes didna watch sae mony guid men dee for the likes o Niall McAllister tae thrive. Nae lang eftir, the twa meet up bi chaunce, in the wid.

'Luik me in the ee say ye didna ill use the cat!' quo McInnes. 'Ah, ye sleekit vratch, bit ye winna, will ye,' he cried, for again, the laddie cudna face thon weird, gyte face wi it's mirled an piercin een.

'Ye canna touch me, ye daftie,' the nickum lauched, skippin aroon the bodach. 'I'm a McAllister. Ae wurd frae me tae ma uncle, an yer for the daftie hoose!'

'We'll see, ma mannie, we'll see,' muttered Hector.

Neist day, the lift luikit gurly, bit the sna held aff lang eneuch for Rab an Madge tae play a gemme o hide an seek wi the laird's nephew.

'Mind an be back bi denner time!' their

mither telt them. 'Yer faither thinks we're in for blin drift afore lang. Bide nearhaun the hoose.'

The bairns war riggit oot in buits and thick hose, jaikets an scarfs an mochles. Niall cam tae jyne them, bit telt the Dunsmuir's that he wadna be gaun straicht hame as he'd an eerin tae dae fur the laird. In fack, the vratch hid thocht up anither ploy tae deave auld Hector wi. He'd taen a tinder box wi him tae crack a lowe. He wis gaun tae set fire tae auld Hector's hut, an smoke him oot foraye like a swarm o bees. He'd begun tae grow feart kine o auld Hector. There wis something aboot the glower he gaed tae Niall in the bygaun.

First at the dell wis Niall, fa coontit tae a hunner. Eftir much plowterin aboot in the drifts he fand Rab in the henhoose an Madge in the ootside lavvie. Neist it wis Rab's turn. He follaed the fitsteps ben the sna an fand Niall an Madge thegither in the byre. Last ava, wis Madge's shottie. She steekit her een as the loons creepit awa. She'd gotten tae 50, fin her mither cam tae the edge o the wids, cryin them in.

The Dunsmuir's forgot aboot Niall, forby, it wisnae far tae Gulaig Hoose frae the wids far they'd bin playin. They war nae suner safe hame than the first flichters o sna cam driftin doon frae the lift. The clouds darkened, an

wi'in an oor there cam a storm that keepit man an beast inbye for twa days, aa bit the heid gairdener, fa brocht news tae the Hame Farm that Niall wis tint. The bairns telt him aa that they kent, bit the laird said he'd sent Niall on nae eerin.

Nae search cud be stertit fur five days, sae coorse an strang wis the storm, sae heich the drifts, near up tae a chiel's oxters. On the sixth day, fin the win drappit, the laird's fowk set oot on sledges, bit there wis nae hide nor hair o the tint loon. Nae till a thaw in a fortnicht's time wis he fand, caught in an auld gin trap on a brae atween Hector's hoose an the Dunsmuir's hame, weel aff the pathie. Likely the gin trap hid bin there sin the first Warld War, for it wis a man trap, set bi the auld laird tae catch poachers.

Niall McAllister wis steen cauld deid, his leg snappit clean throw like a rotten stick. He hidna deed faist, a young strang weel fed laddie. Frostbite hid nippit his lugs, an war, frostbite hid nippit aff his eelids, for his twa een war gapin up wioot them.

'I saw this ower in France,' quo auld Hector. 'In Winter, it happened tae puckles o sodjers. The frost nippit their ee lids, an they drappit aff like petals. Of coorse they cudna sleep or steek their een, sae they gaed clean gyte. Terrible thing, tae gyang clean gyte.'

The laddie wis beeriet in the McAllister lair, nae far frae the eyn o the wids. Gin ye gaed there o a gloamin fin the warld wis quiet, ye micht hae seen auld Hector McInnes glowerin in throw the bars an spikkin an lauchin tae hisselt.

'Weel, weel ma wee birkie, we twa focht an I won. An noo ye canna luik awa, ye sleekit vratch, for yer een are open foraye!' ■

Tor Na Breac, 01.05.12

ANNA MACFIE

Something has brushed silently between hawthorn leaves and ground elder, leaving a russet scent, its warmth radiating into the frozen air.

Something else follows me down to the brown burn and is caught in its flow -

I turn and nothing is there.

On the plantation edge, amongst the frozen violets, I stoop and peer

under the heavy stook of branches - in the sandstone shadow of oak and spruce children have made a camp of sticks and moss

and in the gloom I no longer see my own broken privacy, but theirs; ranged in stone circles of hearth and crockery.

Ken Cockburn and Alec Finlay

from *The Road North* a word-map of Scotland guided by Basho's *Oku-no-Hosomichi*

The Road North is based on Basho's *Oku-no-hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep North), which describes a journey around northern Japan made by Basho and his companion Sora in 1689. Alec and Ken paired each of Basho's 53 'stations' with a place in Scotland, from Edinburgh and Glasgow to sites in Perthshire, Argyll, Galloway, Sutherland and the Hebrides. During journeys in 2010–11, at each place they wrote and left poems, drank a tea and a whisky, and left a paper wish. A 'journal' of the 2010-11 tour is available as a series of blog posts at www.theroadnorth.co.uk. The long poem offers a distillation and extension of this material.

Glen Lyon

on the longest day
we slip in by Sput Ban
looking for the Lyon

along crooked Gleinn Fasach,
the deserted glen,
the glen of stones,
where once twelve castles strode

tides of nettles thrive
in Carbane's ruined hearth,
at each corner

the rowan will flame
remembering the flight
of the arrow

slow in lithe waters
of the Lyon
we turn our strokes
upstream, towards

the stone family
washed and set
before the doorway
Tigh nam Bodach

Loch Etive

we've scanned the maps
read up the old stories
now Donald phones to say
our approach from the south

a cruise on Scotland's most beautiful sea loch!
Seating for 12
Teas & Snacks

is cancelled by today's rain

the loch bends deep
between the mountains
towards the glen's fastness

the secret sun-bower
we'll seek next month
and dream today

Deirdre and Naoise
exiles happy a while
in the badlands

as trees on steepes
thrive beyond
the deer's reach

as berry-laden rowans
sheltered in the gorges
cling with sturdy roots

as birches gusts
bend and harry
mint leaves of gold

forced to depart
when the game fails
Ulster brings only sorrows

and they return as swans
a muted assembly
at Camas na Cùirte
Bay of the Court

the rain hasn't stopped
but, ach, we're brighter
out here in the wild

Schiehallion

beyond trees
beyond bracken and heather
beyond ruined farms
beyond inlaid stone steps
beyond way-cairns
beyond false summits
beyond the ankle-wrenching boulder-field
beyond cloud

I offer the topmost cairn
a cube of white quartz
chosen on the lower slopes
and the angel's share
of the Tullibardine
a midsummer toast

Schiehallion! Schiehallion! Schiehallion!

look out on implausible
rows and rows
of flown-in peaks
the sheen of Lochs
Tummel and Rannoch
and descending
after my shadow
I see everything
in a new light
bog cotton
the waxing moon
dribbles of white
through the rock
height in my ears
at the foot
the gloaming trembles
with rowan-blossom

Berneray

Berneray –
aye, Berneray.
Berneray! *after Basho*

As we cross the causeway from Uist
to the hostel at Baile

the spirit of the place
recalls the old sisters
Annie and Jessie
crofters and wardens

How many folk were offered
their scones, pancake spreads
and strawberry jam
with the lilting refrain

very good
very good

windbent in faded blue macs
herding the sheep
with their handbags
shearing them by hand

Annie's place isn't right
for us to come in
but she'll sit a while
with us at the door

her hands are shaky
but she's still the wit
to gently tease

Eck, are you not married yet?

every time I visit
I get something new,
this time it's the memory
of those who've died

Jessie gone
& Angus
& Rover
& Kirsty too

So You Want To Be A Writer?

By Chris Powici

THERE'S NO DOUBT about it, the path of the writer can be a hard one to walk. The rewards may lay a long way off and be rather smaller, when it comes to money, than is sometimes supposed. But it's still a path that people want to take. Stories and poems are a kind of cultural DNA, part and parcel of who we are. Making a living, or a life, from that basic impulse to explore the world through language is something that growing numbers of people aspire to. Why else would

the phrase 'aspiring writer' have achieved the status of common currency?

But how do you move from being an aspiring writer to becoming the real thing? How do you learn to shape the plot of a novel or blend image and phrase in a line of poetry? And for those people who simply know that they want to make a life in writing — or make writing part of their life — it isn't just the technical and artistic challenges that need thinking about. There are all kinds of other questions

looming over the writerly path. Who do you go to for advice and even inspiration? How do you find an agent or publisher, and how are you going to pay the rent and put food on the table while you wait for somebody to recognise your talent with hard cash?

Luckily the outlook is rosier than the old cliché of the starving writer shivering in a lonely garret, lit (and heated) by a trembling candle flame, may suggest. One of the many good things about Scotland is that it's a country that

takes its literary talent seriously (if not too solemnly), and for the aspiring poet and novelist (and playwright and screen writer), there are people and organisations dedicated to helping you find your way. That doesn't mean the path is an easy one, but it does mean that that all that hard work, and hard dreaming, can find its reward. The following list of public bodies, courses and writers groups is by no means exhaustive but it is, I hope, a practical guide to the range of help that's on offer.

University Courses

Creative writing forms a part of many undergraduate English and Scots literature degrees, but most specialist degrees in Creative Writing involve postgraduate study. Fees for full time study range from approximately £3,500 to £5,500 pa (most courses last for a year), though it is usually possible to study part time at a reduced rate.

University of Aberdeen

www.abdn.ac.uk
Contact: Dr David Wheatley
d.wheatley@abdn.ac.uk

University of Dundee: www.dundee.ac.uk

Contact: Professor Kirsty Gunn
CASS-creativewriting@dundee.ac.uk

University of Edinburgh

www.ed.ac.uk/home
Contact: Dr Robert Alan Jamieson
rjamieso@staffmail.ed.ac.uk

Edinburgh Napier University

www.napier.ac.uk

University of Glasgow

www.gla.ac.uk
Contact: Elizabeth Reeder
Elizabeth.Reeder@glasgow.ac.uk

University of St Andrews:

www.st-andrews.ac.uk
Email: english@st-andrews.ac.uk

University of Stirling

www.stir.ac.uk
Contact: Professor Kathleen Jamie
k.m.jamie@stir.ac.uk

The University of the Highlands & Islands

www.uhi.ac.uk
It's also well worth contacting The University of the Highlands & Islands to find out about creative writing, in English or Gaelic.
Tel: 0845 272 3600

The Open University

www.open.ac.uk
The Open University offers distance learning undergraduate courses in creative writing. The contact phone number in Scotland is 0131 226 385.

High Life Highland

highlifehighland.com/adult-learning
A good starting point to find about local courses provided by High Life Highland is their website.
highlifehighland.com/adult-learning

The Scottish Book Trust

www.scottishbooktrust.com

The website of the Scottish Book Trust is a great place for all kinds of news and information about writers and writing, but of particular interest to new writers of any age are the New Writers Awards –

Awardees receive a £2,000 cash award, allowing them to focus on their work, as well as a tailored package which can include mentoring from writers and industry professionals; training in PR; performance and presentation training; and the opportunity to showcase work to publishers and agents. The awards also include a week-long retreat at Cove Park. The retreat provides time, space and the freedom to create new work in idyllic surroundings.

The Scottish Book Trust also has a section of its website dedicated to young, school-age writers, full of useful information and advice.

The Scottish Book Trust also operates a Mentoring Scheme which supports emergent and more established practitioners by pairing them with a writer or industry professional — such as an agent, editor or producer — for 9 months of mentoring.

The current round of applications for New Writers Awards and the Mentoring Scheme is now closed but it is well worth checking with the Scottish Book Trust next year about these schemes.

The easiest way to keep up to date with the work of the Scottish Book Trust and opportunities for writers is to sign up to its newsletter:

www.scottishbooktrust.com/newsletter-sign-up

Emergents

emergents.co.uk

Contact: Peter Urpeth
peterurpeth@emergents.co.uk

Emergents is a community interest company that aims to support the development of creative careers, enterprise and the economy in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and beyond.

They provide a wide range of programmes and projects for writers, including:

- Our highly acclaimed, professional critical assessment service 'Work In Progress';
- Individual support through tailored, short and intensive mentoring partnerships;
- 1-2-1 meetings with writers to discuss support and training needs and to provide e tailored development services;
- Information and advice on opportunities for writers;
- Genre showcasing projects with leading literary agents;
- Networking events and promotions,
- Where appropriate we can also offer agent and editor services to writers.

Writers Groups

These are many and varied. Some last but a little while, others thrive and flourish. They can be a great source of support and encouragement, as well as a forum for testing your work. I've tried to make this list of writers' groups in the Highlands and Islands — or within easy-ish reach – as up-to-date as I can, but do bear in mind that some groups may become dormant (or deceased!) and that contact details can change.

Argyll Writer's Ink

Contact: Elizabeth Clark
 Eac.bookworm@yahoo.com
 Meeting info: Last Wednesday of each month.
 Venue: Oban Library, 77 Albany Street, Oban

Kintyre Writers' Circle*

Contact: Jose Maria Lopez, Library Supervisor
 campbeltownlibrary@argyll-bute.gov.uk
 01586 555435
 Meeting info: 1st Wednesday and 3rd Saturday of the month
 Venue: Campbeltown Library, Kinloch Road, Campbeltown

Black Isle Writers' Group

Contact: Freda Bassindale freda.bassindale@btinternet.com 01381 620663
 Meeting info: Every second and fourth Wednesday of the month starting 26th September 2012 until 24th April 2013. 2-4pm

Caithness Writers

Contact: Catherine Byrne / Margaret MacKay Catherinbyrne@aol.com
 margaret.mackay@btinternet.com
 Meeting info: Fortnightly on Mondays from 8pm-10pm
 Venue: Breadalbane House, Breadalbane Terrace, Wick

Cromarty Writers' Group

Contact: Jeremy Price
 01381 600709 jeremy@cluneshouse.co.uk
 Meeting info: Ad hoc – whenever the fancy takes!

Highland Literary Salon

www.highlandlitsalon.com
 Contact: Caroline Deacon
 caroline@highlandlitsalon.com
 Meeting info: Mostly the third Tuesday of every month (excluding August, during which there is a break for the summer) at 7.30pm
 Venue: Glen Mhor Hotel, 12 Ness Bank, Inverness IV2 4SG

Inverness Playwriting Group

www.spanglefish.com/
 invernessplaywritinggroup/
 www.facebook.com/
 groups/239056849510849/
 Contact: Phil Baarda
 philbaarda@hotmail.com
 Meeting info: Most Wednesday evenings, 7-9pm
 Venue: Eden Court Theatre, Inverness

Lochaber Writers

Contact: Ilona Munro
 Ilona@stage8.fsnet.co.uk
 07909 553 585
 Meeting info: Once per month on Tuesdays, 6.45pm and at various times online (Facebook)
 Venue: Kinlochleven Library, Riverside Road, Kinlochleven

Warnings

HELEN ADDY

Ruinous nuggets gleaming in the sun,
 gold and silver cigarette packets
 litter the path to the park.
 Like Victorian mourning paper,
 their warnings have black borders,
 photographs of cancerous lungs
 emerging from red backgrounds,
 diseased mouths offering
 graveyard teeth.
 Once blown into hedges,
 the packets lie undecayed,
 their lungs turning verdant,
 mouths blossoming once more.

North-west Highland Writers

Contact: Irene Brandt (Chair)
 01854 612955
 branchis@dsl.pipex.com
 Meeting info: Second Saturday of the month 11am-1.30pm
 Venue:Varies between the Ceilidh Place, Ullapool; Assynt Centre, Lochinver; Village Hall, Scourie and the Village Hall, Durness

Pol-Uk Creative Writers

Contact: Catherine MacNeil
 catherine@merkinch.com
 Meeting info: Every Monday 7-9.00pm
 Venue: The Bike Shed, 4 Grant Street, Inverness

Sunart Writers' Group

Contact: Sylvia Hehir or Ruth Ellis
 01967 402114 or 01967 402194
 Meeting info: Third Thursday in the month, 7-8:30pm. Check for any variations.
 Venue: Upstairs at Ardnamurchan Library, Strontian

Sutherland Writers' Group (SWG)

www.sutherlandwriters.co.uk
 Contact: Simon George
 01862 810163
 nicola@nicolageorge.wanadoo.co.uk
 Meeting info: Alternate Tuesdays during term-time, 19:30-22:00.
 Meetings recommence Tuesday 14th August 2012.
 Venue: Golspie Primary School, Back Road, Golspie

The Pen and I at Nairn

Contact: Eve Evans
 01667 459632
 eveevans11@btinternet.com
 Meeting info: Tuesdays 10am-12 noon during school term times
 Venue: St Columba's Church Hall, Queen Street, Nairn

Elgin Writers

Contact: Angela or Nick Walker 01343 547919 or Elginwriters1@yahoo.co.uk
 Website: www.elgin-writers.moonfruit.com
 Meeting info: Alternate Wednesdays from September to May.
 Venue: Elgin Library, Cooper Park, Elgin

forWORDS - The Forres Writing Group

Contact: Brian McDonald 01309 674489 / 07805 733947 bmcd@keme.co.uk
 Meeting info: Weekly, Tuesday evenings, 7-9pm
 Venue: Royal British Legion Boardroom, Sanquhar Road, Forres

Bute Writers' Group

Contact: Jenny Campbell 01700 502334
 jenny@westfaliabute.wanadoo.co.uk
 Meeting info: First and second Wednesdays of each month at 7.30pm
 Venue: Orissor House, 12 Craigmore Road, Isle of Bute PA20 9DP

Lerwick Writers' Group

Contact: Donald Anderson
 donald.anderson1@shetlandarts.org
 Meeting info: Meet 7pm on the first Tuesday of every month
 Venue: Bowlers Bar, Clickimin Centre, Lerwick, Shetland

Ross of Mull Poets

Contact: Jan Sutch Pickard
 01681 700316
 jansutchpickard@gmail.com
 Meeting info: Monthly, 7.30pm
 Venue: Tigh na Rois, Ross of Mull Historical Centre, Bunessan, Isle of Mull. Also occasional ceilidhs, various venues.

The Skye Reading Room

www.theskyereadingroom.wordpress.com
 Contact: Richard Neath
 01470 582448
 Richard.neath@hotmail.co.uk
 skyereadingroom@yahoo.co.uk
 Meeting info: Monthly, no set date. 7pm
 Venue: Skeabost Hotel, Skeabost Bridge, Isle of Skye.

Stromness Writing Group*

www.orkneylibrary.org.uk/html/reading_group.htm
 Contact: Stromness Library
 01856 850907
 Meeting info: Every second Tuesday, 6.30-8.30pm
 Venue: Exhibition Room, Stromness Library

Taigh Chearsabhaigh Writing Workshop

taigh-chearsabhaigh.org/arts/
 Contact: Pauline Prior-Pitt 01876 560360
 pauline@pauline-prior-pitt.com
 Meeting info: Throughout the year on the first Saturday of the month from 10.30am-12.30pm but contact Pauline in case any dates have been changed.
 Venue: A room in Taigh Chearsabhaigh, Lochmaddy, Isle of North Uist

Stirling Writers Group

Contact: Robert Ritchie
 01786 464541
 Meeting Info: Normally Tuesdays 7.30-10pm, weekly
 Venue: Tolbooth Arts Centre, Broad Street, Stirling

Soutar Writers (Perth)

www.soutarwriters.co.uk
 Meeting Info: Soutar writers meet twice monthly throughout the year (membership by invitation)
 Venue: A K Bell library, Perth

Nethergate Writers (Dundee)

nethergatewriters.webplus.net
 Meeting Info: Regularly during term under the auspices of the University of Dundee's Continuing Education Department

Lemon Tree Writers (Aberdeen)*

www.lemontreewriters.co.uk
 Contact: info@lemontreewriters.co.uk
 Meeting Info: Meetings at 11am on alternate Saturdays
 Venue: check website for details

*For more information about writers groups in the north east, go the North East Writers Website: www.northeastwriters.co.uk/

Call of the Undertow

by Linda Cracknell
Published by Freight Books
REVIEW BY STEPHEN KEELER

There is probably a sense in which all novels are about damaged lives, not all of them seeking redemption. Why else would we read them? Why else, if not for illumination and consolation, for confirmation and a chance to play safely for a while with hubris? For a few hours, to kick around a bundle of emotional responses and triggers on a small patch of grass on the other side of the fence marked 'in real life'?

Of course there's the story, the sheer narrative line of the novel, as if what-happens-next can ever be separated entirely from character and motive, from the poetry, the mystery and the mythology.

If this is the appetite we seek to satisfy in reading then reading *Call of the Undertow*, rich as it is in concentrated nourishment, is the equivalent of unpacking the family car from the monthly hypermarket shopping expedition. So clunky a metaphor for so lyrical a novel, I know.

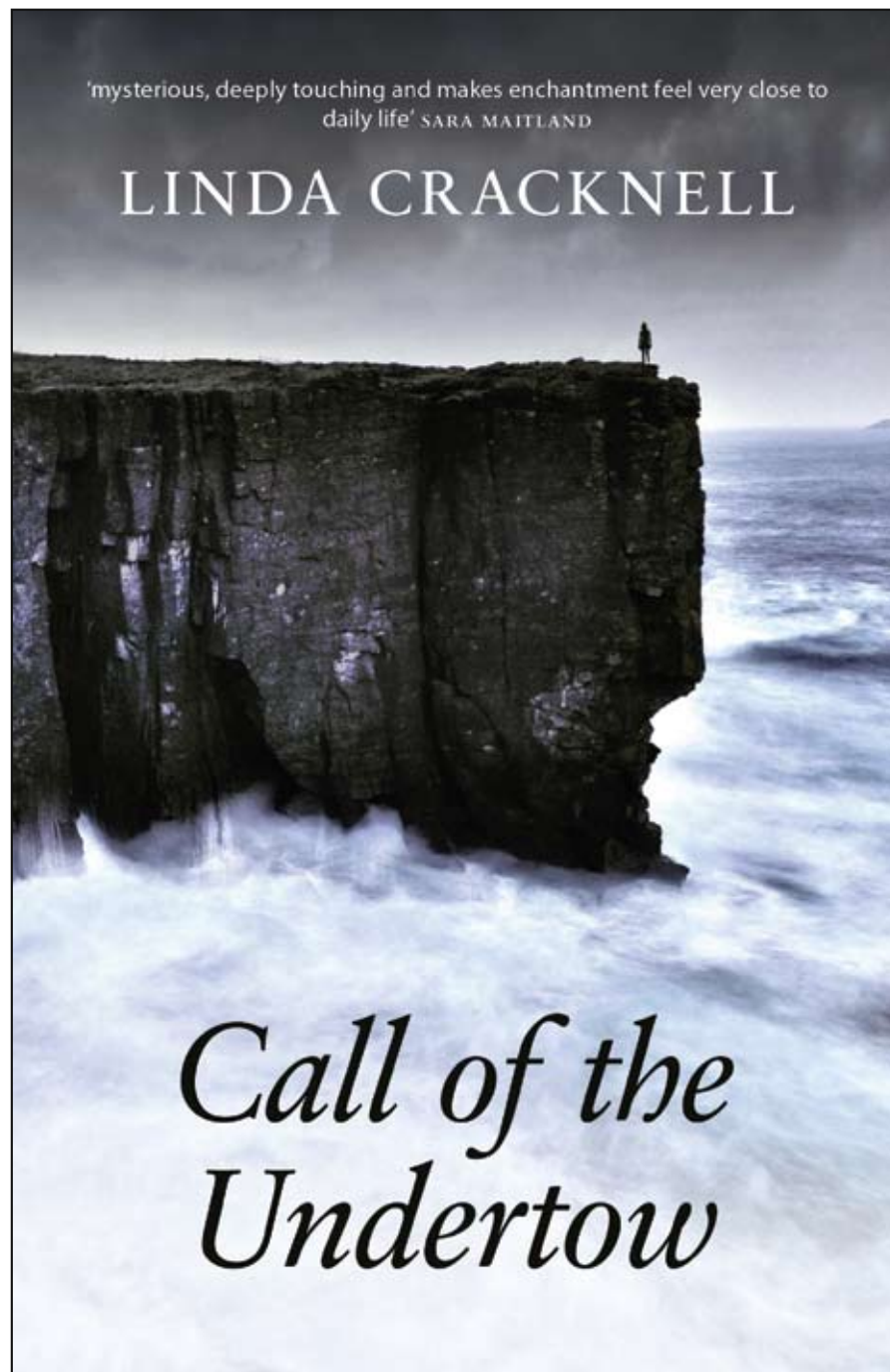
Maggie Thame, a freelance cartographer from Oxford (as her name, not coincidentally I'm sure, pronounced 'tame' suggests) removes herself to an isolated settlement, barely a village, on the far north-eastern tip of Scotland from where she intends to focus on her work. It is clear from the outset, when a Pinteresque snowman appears anonymously in her garden overnight, that all is not entirely what it seems. Maggie's reaction, 'an impulse to punch its head off', suggests that the serenity she is seeking may still be some way off, and hints at something fractured and unhealed in her past.

Within a few pages, then, of this beautifully written and closely observed novel we are set up for the Novel of Redemption in a spare and purified landscape of wind-polished stone and marram-fringed coast, among the dunes and the fissures in the symbolically unyielding cliff-faces, with a soundtrack of surf and the menacing screams of gulls overhead. Perhaps Maggie will meet A Good Man (or Woman for that matter) whose undemanding sensitivity will draw her out into the healing light? Maybe she'll solve a local mystery which has poisoned village life for centuries, and become a star dowager incomer? She might bring her outsider energies to front an environmental campaign through which her own redemption is realised?

Linda Cracknell has a far more seductive, far more powerful story to tell. She deftly gives the clichés the slip, and she tells it with such lyrical ease and in such sharply-drawn scenes that I found myself re-reading some passages for their descriptive beauty alone.

Maggie is drawn into an unlikely friendship with a nine-year-old boy, Trothan Gilbertson. He is 'elf, fish and circus performer', ethereal and removed, fascinated by Maggie's map-making and obsessed by the map he begins to create himself and which ultimately leads to the novel's dramatic and melancholy denouement.

This is a novel about 'people who feel pulled between two worlds', people like the selkie, 'who're not sure where they fit in'. Both



Trothan and, it seems, Maggie find the place where they might fit in if only ultimately by recognising the places where they don't.

An astonishingly beautiful novel with passages of exquisite nature writing, light-touch description and a well-paced narrative which moves around the human psyche like a restless wind. ■

The Interpretations

by David Shaw Mackenzie
Sandstone Press
REVIEW BY ALISON NAPIER

No no no I thought, not another tartan sub-Welsh thugfest. And phew. This isn't. Instead, *The Interpretations* is a dense and intelligent new novel from David Shaw Mackenzie. It begins with Tom Kingsmill, a worker in a fish factory, finding himself on the receiving end of a short burst of blood-splattering violence, a single shocking act that triggers the events in the remainder of the novel.

When Tom later disappears, it is assumed that he leapt to his death from the controver-

sial Drundyre Bridge although to his friends he had no reason to.

The bridge is a theme – and a metaphor – throughout the book. We bridge-build when we want to make something better, to make peace, to further understanding. Bridges are dramatic and dangerous and often controversial, yet they reach out to people and places that were previously separate, and they do not ask permission. They force contact and hasten connections. Myths and legends are fabricated around them, and young Tom's disappearance and presumed death joins the litany of mysteries. Death haunts this unpopular bridge. It has been the scene of many tragedies, some accidental, one possibly murderous and too many suicidal.

The unhappy Reverend McFarren has strong opinions on the bridge and the lives it has taken. His opposition to its construction, which included the desecration of an island grave in order to position one of the central supports, was vocal and obsessive and ultimately fruitless. The bridge was built, and the minister sits and stares at the fading cuttings of his angry letters to the newspapers.

But two people are not convinced by the explanations offered by the police for Tom's disappearance. His flatmate Mike continues to hold out hope even after seemingly incontrovertible evidence emerges and a funeral is held, while the gloriously cynical boozing reporter on the local Herald, needing a change from his fictional Horoscopes column and football reporting decides to embark on some serious investigative journalism for the first time in his life.

There are many set pieces in this novel that could stand alone as short stories. The drunken leaving do at the Herald for a retiring colleague is beautiful. Awkward, embarrassed and poignant. The minister preparing himself prior to climbing to the pulpit for a funeral, but coming a cropper and being revived in the vestry with the recitation of the books of the Old Testament is pure delight.

Women are peripheral throughout, not because of macho posturing, but because this is a book about men and their trials. It is a tight exploration of the causes and effects of what we would now politely call 'bullying in the workplace', a phenomenon here that should more accurately be labelled intense male violence. In 1982 there were few enforceable policies or complaints procedures to evoke.

Many of the familiar Scottish boxes are ticked here. The Clearances, General Wade, incomers, cheviots, pints with a double whisky chaser, men fighting. But the pleasure of this novel is that the author weaves his narrative so skilfully around his themes and subplots that what was already a thoroughly good story becomes an excellent and high quality piece of writing that gives literary fiction a very good name indeed. ■

The Home Corner

by Ruth Thomas
Published by Faber and Faber
REVIEW BY ALISON NAPIER

Classroom assistants are strangely underrepresented in fiction. Where campus novels win glittering prizes and Jean Brodies sweep into classrooms delivering caustic mots justes, the classroom assistant remains in the background tidying up the plasticine and spilled glitter and jabbing twenty-five miniature boxes of Costcutter juice with a pointy straw. I know this. I once was a classroom assistant.

Luise is the classroom assistant in Ruth Thomas's latest novel. She is nineteen and her life has fossilised in horror following a drunken encounter with a hopeless male. She is stuck and without direction. She has returned to her childhood, living at home, sleeping in the same single bed under the same duvet reading back copies of *Cosmopolitan* for the umpteenth time, hoping for a better solution to Anna Raeburn's problem page dilemmas but never getting it, while her mum makes her packed lunches and bakes for the school jamboree and fails to reach her daughter again and again.

And initially it is the pace that becomes the difficulty with this novel. It feels constrained and stunted. The plot moves at the speed of continents, the apathy and silences are stultifying, and Luise thinks and acts like a stunned teenager on temazepam. The stage is too small, the reader is left awkward and

gawpy and gawky in a P1 classroom like Gulliver in Lilliput. Shadowy colleagues and dubious friends lack vibrancy or vim or vigour and I wanted to jump out from behind a papier mache model of a palm tree and shout 'BOO!'

However, what Thomas has done is clever because that is precisely the point. Luise is frozen in a post-rape trauma and this is quietly offered in beautiful and understated prose. She has told no one of the repercussions and is a dead woman walking. We walk with her, futureless and stultified, adopting her slow-motion pace, as she observes herself dissembling and going through the motions from an unsafe distance.

The risk of this strategy, from a reader's point of view is that we too begin to drown in passivity and defeat. The urge to shout 'Boo!' remains overwhelming but moments before we lose all patience and stomp off to the pub for strong beer, Thomas rescues us – and Luise – with compassion and subtle plotting.

I would have liked tighter editing ('quite' and 'just' appear in excessive quantities and unlovely adverbs abound mercilessly). Initially I feared being underwhelmed but the hope and resilience that peep out in the final stages of *The Home Corner* make this a novel to return to again and again. Unlike, it must be noted, a career as a classroom assistant. ■

Blossom

by Lesley Riddoch

Published by Luath Press

REVIEW BY PAUL F COCKBURN

'Scots are currently being asked to define Scottishness through the constitutional prism of independence alone,' writes Lesley Riddoch, early on in her new book. 'But perhaps that isn't a wide, searching or engaging enough perspective.'

Riddoch admits from the start that *Blossom: What Scotland Needs To Flourish* 'could be dismissed as a rant. It is certainly a polemic.' Yet she believes there is a 'way out' for Scotland: 'a way out for this country to truly blossom. But it needs us to question what we currently regard as normal and inevitable. And that, by definition, is very hard.'

Her inspiration comes from 'the exceptional 'ordinary' Scots' that she's met during her 30 year career 'as a journalist, broadcaster, feminist and supporter of community action'. The book is 'an account of Scotland at the grassroots through the stories of people I've had the good fortune to know—the most stubborn, talented and resilient people on the planet.' And they've 'had to be.' The people she introduces were—in a few cases, still are—doing their own thing, ignoring the traditions and policies of institutional Scotland.

Although clearly in the "Yes" camp for the forthcoming independence referendum, the target for Riddoch's frustrations isn't the British state per se, but the institutionalised top-down governance that it has for so long made its own. This has been largely imported wholesale into Scotland's so-called 'local' government and the devolved Scottish Parliament.

It is this 'top-down' approach, Riddoch argues, that has effectively disempowered

and paralysed so many Scots, at best leading to 'sticker-plaster' policies rather than long-term solutions needed to sort out the country's many and damaging inequalities. The same approach that has ensured some of her examples—the Drumchapel Men's Health Group, or Mary Hepburn's work with drug-using mothers—lost public funding, with often tragic personal consequences. The same approach that's ensured success stories, such as the housing co-operative that turned around the local community in West Whitlawburn, Glasgow, are unheralded at least in Scotland. 'Aye Right. We are the only nation who could turn a double positive into a negative,' she points out at one point. But then, Scots have been 'badly served by a political debate which is often sloganeering, simplistic and scaremongering and by a media which has become a collective echo chamber for suspicion, pessimism and despair'.

Somewhat repetitive gardening metaphors notwithstanding, Riddoch's book is a fervent call for something better and more positive. Some of her solutions will be risible to the 'No' camp, not least land reform, but her wider suggestion is perhaps more palatable; nothing more than a call for the many peoples of 21st century Scotland to value themselves and what they have more. Whether that could lead to some Scottish equivalent of the more egalitarian and community-focused Nordic nations is open to debate. But if we don't at least try, she fears we may well be destined to remain 'a grudging and grumbling part of the UK forever.'

The Collected Poems of Alastair Mackie

Published by Two Ravens

REVIEW BY IAN STEPHEN

This is a book both brave and braw. While most publishers are cutting back everything but crime, cookery and psycho-geography, Two Ravens Press have produced a full, well edited and well-made volume of the collected poems of a dead man. I spoke to the Lewis based publisher who described a very traditional labour of love. Alasdair Mackie (1954 to 1994) was introduced to the work, in Scots, of Hugh MacDiarmid by George Mackay Brown when he lived in Orkney, working as an English teacher. Mackie went on to make poems in his own craggy Aberdonian breed of Scots and to translate from several European languages into Scots.

The editor, Christopher Rush was taught by Mackie and another ex pupil Andrew Grieg contributes a memoir. Rush clearly felt the weight of this task as well as a strong sense of purpose. He groups the poems into work in Scots, work in English, a section of longer poems and one of translations. He also summarises the critical reactions to Mackie's poetry, from a dismissive review from Robert Crawford to the belief in the work's worth from George Bruce, Alexander Scott and Robert Garioch. The publisher Duncan Glen (Akros) also believed in Mackie's poetry and he contributed an obituary, still available in *The Independent* on line. The editor's own comments are incisive and the biographical sketch is a moving portrait of a dedicated makar who struggled with depression for

many years. The glossary and index are clear and helpful as are the dates of texts and revisions.

There have been some detailed appraisals and I recommend J Derrick McClure's close reading of the poems in Scots. (www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue13/McClure.pdf)

As a student in Aberdeen, in the late 1970s, I was aware that Mackie had a reputation beyond that you'd expect from the limited range of available texts, not all of them anything like so well produced as this collection. I valued the chance to return to the few poems I had read and to discover the full scope of this troubled writer.

As you'd expect, the influence of Singschaw shows through the poems with the earliest dates. There is a close observation followed by a huge scale reflection that sometimes seems to be struggling for bigness. But very soon I think the makar who loves his medium uses it to convey what is there, perceived by alert senses: '...for memory crines down tae the end o a park,/a squatter o hens, a bleachin-green, ae tree,/an auld man dellin intae the dark.'

The lives in tenements by the sea are caught by observed details. Haar is prominent and if space permitted, I'd quote in full the poem of that title. Here is one glimpse: 'A motor-boat's a saw/shearin the lyft./The gash steeks up itsel.'

Wit is another main element whether the poem is long or short. Odysseus, the storyteller, trickster and adventurer casts his shadow into the daily life of the modern man who keeps 'my lee-lane watches in a sitting room.' (from 'Back-Room Odyssey') The makar's skill and playfulness with the material, which is nothing but language, serves the vision. It remains robust writing even though clearly worked and worked.

If you're like me and have decided to keep less books on your shelves, give space to this one. Or encourage your library to stock it. It's not so expensive when you see it as several books in one. I'm returning to the shorter poems which combine shrewd perceptions and vital language but I see the longer ones and the translations as part of a forthcoming winter journey. ■

ALEXANDER WILSON: The Scot who founded American Ornithology.

By Edward H. Burt, Jr. & William E. Davis, Jr.

Published by Belknap Press

REVIEW BY JOHN A LOVE

Even if they have never seen the birds, Scottish ornithologists will be familiar with the names Wilson's storm petrel and Wilson's phalarope (both species are on the British list), less so perhaps Wilson's plover and Wilson's snipe. No other American ornithologist has quite as many birds named after them. But few are likely to know who Wilson was, or indeed that he was Scottish, born in Paisley in 1766. He was the son of a weaver but a child of the Scottish Enlightenment. Always interested in the outdoors, Alexander Wilson first began to make a name for himself – locally at least – as a poet. Inspired by Robert Burns, Robert Tannahill and others, he began writing in the Scots dialect and was not afraid to highlight in

published verse the grim exploitation of the weavers by the mill owners. Committed to civil rights, his was the first protest literature of the Industrial Revolution and even earned him several short prison sentences.

Disillusioned by his prospects as a poet Wilson emigrated to America in 1794, aged 28. He found employment as a teacher but was encouraged in his love of wildlife and wilderness by one of America's foremost naturalists William Bartram. Wilson began painting birds, and soon resolved to illustrate and describe the entire avifauna of his adopted country. At the time America comprised only 18 states and Wilson travelled extensively in his studies. On one occasion, boating down the Ohio river, he contemplated the huge flocks of Passenger Pigeons. 'A column eight or ten miles in length would appear from Kentucky, high in the air . . .' Wilson recalled. He would later shoot some in the company of a fellow ornithologist and artist John James Audubon. Later still he bagged three Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. One was only wounded so he took it back to his lodgings where he tethered it to sketch it in real life. With its huge chisel-like beak the hapless captive promptly set about demolishing the furniture!

From being known as the most numerous bird that has ever existed the very last wild Passenger Pigeon was shot in 1900, while the Ivory-billed Woodpecker survived only a few more decades, just two of several species Wilson illustrated that are now extinct. In those early days, ornithology was driven by shot specimens but Alexander Wilson was way ahead of his time by going outdoors to observe bird behaviour and ecology in the field. 'It is only by personal intimacy, that we can truly ascertain the character of . . . the feathered race' Wilson maintained. 'The greatest number of descriptions, particularly those of the nest, eggs and plumage, have been written in the woods with the subjects in view, leaving as little as possible to the lapse of recollection'.

This newly published study of Alexander Wilson is liberally illustrated with his field sketches and some finished, hand-coloured watercolours from his nine-volume magnum opus 'American Ornithology'. He was to feature no fewer than 268 species including 26 which were newly described. As well as standardising Latin nomenclature according to the Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus, Wilson also broke with tradition by portraying multiple species against naturalistic backgrounds, and in poses that facilitated identification – a precursor to modern field guides.

While the authors ably describe Wilson's life and times, their approach is as much an appraisal and critique of his artwork, against those of better-known peers, including Audubon himself. It is high time that Alexander Wilson, now considered 'the father of American ornithology', is brought to public attention, especially in his native Scotland, and on a par with the conservationist John Muir from Dunbar. This is indeed a handsome, readable publication as well as being a timely one: this year is the 200th anniversary of Wilson's death, while next year it will be 200 years since the ninth and final volume of his ground-breaking *American Ornithology* was published posthumously. ■ ▶▶

► **Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach**

by Tim Armstrong
Published by CLAR
REVIEW BY MORAY WATSON

Tim Armstrong's impressive debut, *Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach*, is the first full-length science fiction novel for adults in Gaelic. With more than a passing allusion to masters of the classic era of science fiction, such as Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein, *Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach* is otherwise a thoroughly modern cyberpunk exploration of the genre. The novel draws on Armstrong's own experience as a musician, and this gives the plot much of its motive force and lends its characters a good deal of their 'humanity'. Armstrong is much to be congratulated in being the first to attempt such an ambitious undertaking in Gaelic: in fact, you easily forget that you are reading the first Gaelic science fiction novel and quickly accept the terminology and Gaelicised technobabble. This is even more the case when the novel really gets into gear after its first chapter, which is recycled from an earlier incarnation as a short story that appeared in the multi-author collection *Saorsa* (previously reviewed here).

It is worth mentioning another aspect of language at this point. Several recent Gaelic novels have struggled to find an appropriate balance in the use of English. *Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach* handles this most innovatively. In this novel's universe, Gaelic stands for the interstellar lingua franca. When the offworld characters interact with humans, the humans' English is represented as a Gaelic-speaker might 'phonetically' render English if he/she had no experience of that language. The result is surprisingly effective, although there are moments in the novel where the device is over-used and gratuitous, and it tends to feel as if the two human characters were really only introduced to be a vehicle for this trick. Similarly, another interstellar dialect or language is represented later on in the novel when two characters speak in Irish: the Irish used is similar enough to Gaelic that most readers will follow it without much difficulty, but the scene creates a sense of texture in the context of a major city that would undoubtedly be populated by diverse ethnic groups.

The novel is set in the present day, in an interstellar civilisation that is familiar to any reader of the genre and that perhaps pays a particular nod to Banks and his 'Culture'. Our own planet is not yet part of this civilisation (or even aware of its existence), but the story is populated by humanoid beings, who are similar enough to imagine that they can pass for Earth people. There are plenty of little twists to hold and pay off the reader's attention, although it is, unfortunately, easy to see some of them coming. Armstrong controls the narrative deftly and manages to fend off most of the obvious clichés.

Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach seems light and pacy to read, but it is grounded in profound and absolutely current themes. Among other things, the novel raises questions regarding artificial intelligence and the advent of the technological singularity, as well as the morality of cybernetics, along with notions of totalitarian rule, liberty, rights, hegemony, oppression, genetic cleansing, eugenics, drugs, human experimentation and the responsibilities of

family and friendship. It is no mere page-turner: this is a novel with substance.

Armstrong has taken numerous risks with this book and most of them have paid off. Probably the biggest risk, though, is with regard to audience. Simply put, the novel's genre is likely to polarise the potential readership: those who normally enjoy science fiction will almost certainly take a great deal of pleasure from this book; those who are not science fiction fans are likely to avoid this novel altogether. ■

Poetry Reviews

BY PAULINE PRIOR-PITT

A Northerly Land from Braevalla Press is a well honed collection from Caithness poet, George Gunn. Landscape, seascape, weather, and the natural world are a constant presence, bound together with philosophy and politics; some more personal, dedicated to people and friends. His poetry is thrilling, visceral, intense; reminiscent of coastal paintings by Joan Eardley. You are there with him in every line. The images are precise and new: no ground is better cut/for weather than Caithness/gravity hugs the skyline/as the air opens up for snow (The Meeting).

He can be gentle too in writing about frost: the birches are still /with the silver morning in their leaves. There is a longing in some of these poems. In 'The Winter Coast' he longs for a different way of living, a fairer way:

*we should give it all
& think nothing think nothing think nothing
of the cost
there is no cost
only love
which is our purpose*

Gunn's poems are written without the intrusion of punctuation, but it would be interesting to know why he chooses to use an ampersand throughout the collection.

The Good News (Salt) by Rob A. Mackenzie is an eclectic collection in content, style and form, written in the assured voice of a very accomplished poet. The poems are multi-layered and readers will be greatly rewarded by second or third readings. Thirteen is a sequence of thirteen poems, each thirteen lines in length, in which the poet wonders if the attempt to find happiness is worth making, or will it lead to disappointment.

*Today you turn up
five habits to quit for happiness:
criticism, control, complaint, excuses, expectations,
without which you'd be happy, bland
and unbearable. The claw is back, scratching at
the window, your head immediately clear.*

In 'A Scottish Cent(o)ury' lines borrowed from a hundred Scottish poets, are cleverly woven together, to express the problems of Scotland at this particular time in history. He uses the line repetition of the villanelle form, to bring out the humour in 'The Point: The point is to repeat. To repeat the point, / the point is worth repeating, even if not; / we need to stick by the manual, even if useless, / to talk about how we think the things we've thought

The collection is divided into three sections and the central section comprises a sequence of poems about living with an autistic child. Eleven poems; straight, unsentimental, written with compassion, but blunt; these poems get inside you and stay with you.

Devotees of U.A. Fanthorpe's poetry will be indebted to Mariscat Press for publishing this early work: *In a Highland Gift Shop*. In her introduction to this pamphlet of twelve previously unpublished poems, R.V. Bailey tells us that these are holiday poems, apprentice pieces, about a visit to the North West of Scotland in 1974, written just after U.A. had begun to write poetry. She writes about the places she visited, the people she met, sheep; even midges. Eight of the poems are written in a conventional sonnet form and of the other four, three have strong rhyme schemes. Even at this early stage, she creates a conversation between the poet and the reader. Here she draws you in to this poignant sonnet 'Strathcarron', about a shepherd who runs a B&B.

*And so the hands turn to. The perfect day
Watches them as they wash, dry, bake, clean, peel.
These are the only hands to do such jobs,
For mother at the farm is old and ill,
The shepherd has no wife; the English mobs
Who rent the cottage ramble up the hill.
Someone must housekeep. So the hands can't drop
Their work to see what makes the tourists stop.*

I am not a fish (Overstep Books) by Marie Marshall is a highly unusual collection of poems, a set of narrative verses about the sartorially elegant Mr Coelacanth, who is in denial about being a fish. He meets various characters who in turn meet each other; the old-man-of-the-woods, the elephant, the Huntsman spider, the monkey, the Japanese beetle and many others, including the Lamb of Tartary who is crucified.

*When the last, great, warm, white flake has settled,
every witness can see the always-green husk of what was
the Lamb of Tartary.*

Standing at the foot of the tree is Mr Coelacanth.

*"Truly" he says, his eyes upon the Lamb
"I am not a fish."*

This is not just a simple story, telling us about ourselves; the content is wide ranging, serious, witty, flippant, and takes us beyond the usual boundaries of our imagination into a mysterious world.

In *The North End of the Possible* (Salt) Andrew Philip opens and closes with poems about MacAdam, the character he introduced in his debut collection *The Ambulance Box*. Having found 12 months' /unused moons in a wheelie bin, MacAdam settles/to cobbling light apart/into constituent darknesses;/pit mirk, pick mirk, part mirk, heart mirk to try to find the fundamental particle of night.

These are finely crafted, lyrical poems, rich in humour; poems that you want to keep reading.

There is drama, disturbance and isolation too.

*and suddenly he's on the run
pounding each element
with desperate feet
and hands that keep no grip
It seems he's running
backwards through all his time*

The central part of the collection has poems of place, love and politics. Northern English people are spontaneously becoming Scottish. 'A Lousy Piper in Edinburgh' is taken to task in a Burn's pastiche.

In a delicate and moving sequence of poems about the first ten years of his marriage, '10 x10 for Judith', Philip has referenced each one with the anniversary gift for that year; paper, cotton, leather etc. Each poem has two stanzas of five lines, and because of the way the second stanza turns, they are like short sonnets. These are love poems with underlying grief. But I /don't pine to buy those times back, not even though/what we've shared since then would temper steel.

Bessy Bell and other Irish Intersections (HarperCrest) is a collection of 21 of Gordon Jarvie's Irish poems, old and new. They take us from Troon, where Jarvie grew up; across to Ireland and his student years in Derry and Dublin; and to visits in his later years. There are also several homages to WB Yeats.

The poems are stories, told in an easy anecdotal style. Jarvie was in Dublin when President Kennedy was shot: We talk, and then go separate ways/I, in a blank daze,/ enter a pub to watch it all/on a merciless blue screen/high on a bar room wall

In some of the poems, the rhyme schemes are intrusive. Sometimes only parts of the poem rhyme, which is confusing. The later poems in the collection are the strongest, when Jarvie visits Ireland to climb Ben Bulbin's plateau.

*A cold eye surveyed the turning world today
just as it watched yesterday and yesterday.
Bagpipes below Ben Bulbin blew and skirted
as all the wings on the host of air unfurled
and all the world's wild elements piped away*

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CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Helen Addy is from Forres, Moray. She was a runner-up in this year's BBC Proms Poetry competition and is currently working on a first collection.

Grahaeme Barrasford Young returned to poetry ten years ago, and is widely published. He recently reached a century of published work.

Sheena Blackhall is a writer, illustrator, traditional ballad singer and storyteller. She has published four Scots novellas, twelve short story collections and is working on her 98th poetry pamphlet. In 2009 she became the Makar for Aberdeen & the North East of Scotland.

Paul F Cockburn is an Edinburgh-based freelance journalist who writes on disability issues, performing arts, and culture. Recent articles and reviews have appeared in *The Herald* and *Scotland on Sunday*.

Ken Cockburn and **Alec Finlay** have collaborated for many years, on projects including pocketbooks, *The Renga Platform*, *Mesostic Curriculum* and others. Current projects include *Out of Books*, following Boswell and Johnson's famous 'Tour to the Hebrides' of 1773.

Mark Edwards lives in Lossie. His first book, *Clearout Sale*, was published in 2008. He is working on the next effort.

Graham Fulton's collections include *Open Plan* (Smokestack Books) and *Full Scottish Breakfast* (Red Squirrel Press). His latest publication is *Reclaimed Land* (The Grimsay Press).

Peter Gilmour was born in Glasgow where he still lives with his partner and one of his two sons. His pamphlet, *Taking Account*, published by Happenstance Press and, just recently, a novel, *The Convalescent*, published by Vagabond Voices.

Stephanie Green's pamphlet *Glass Works* was shortlisted for the Callum Macdonald award. Her latest pamphlet, inspired by Shetland, is to be published by Happenstance in 2015.

Mandy Haggith lives in Assynt and writes in a shed with a tree-top view. Her latest novel is *Bear Witness*, published by Saraband. Mandy can be contacted at hag@worldforests.org

Kate Hendry is Reader in Residence at the NLS. Her poetry and fiction has been published in many magazines, including *Msexia*, *Harpers*, *New Writing Scotland*.

Stephen Keeler is a former BBC World Service website columnist. He writes non-fiction diary and travel pieces, haikus and poems and is currently working on a first collection of poetry while teaching occasional literature and creative writing courses in Ullapool.

John A. Love was Area Officer for Scottish Natural Heritage covering the Uists, Barra and St Kilda. He still lives in South Uist, works as a freelance author, and gives illustrated lectures about the Hebrides and travels to many other parts of the world.

Anna Macfie was born in Glasgow in 1967 and lives and works in the Highlands. She writes about this experience of place.

Lodaidh MacFhionghain À Ceap Breatainn ann an Albainn Nuaidh far a bheil e ri ceòl agus na Cheannard aig Roinn Ghàidhlig an Rìgha-ltais. Cruinneachaidhean leis Famhair (2008) is Fleodragan-cabair (2012.)

Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh Bàrd a tha air an dreuchd aige mar fhear-teagaisg ealain ann an Inbhis Nis a leigeil dheth o chionn ghoirid .

Lindsay Macgregor has completed an MLitt in Writing Practice and Study at the University of Dundee and co-hosts Platform poetry and music nights in Ladybank.

Peter Maclaren's poems have appeared in various magazines and journals, including *Lines Review* and *New Writing Scotland*. He lives in Glasgow.

Marion McCready is the winner of the Melita Hume Poetry Prize. Her first full-length collection, *Tree Language*, will be published in Spring 2014 by Eyewear Publishing.

Gordon Meade is a Scottish poet based in London. His seventh collection, *Sounds of The Real World*, is due for publication in Autumn 2013.

Alison Napier lives in Perthshire. Her fiction has appeared in various journals and anthologies and her first novel, *Take-Away People*, is currently seeking a publisher.

Niall O'Gallagher Fear-naidheachd is fear-breithneachaidh. Saothair leis ann an irisean leithid An Guth, Gath agus Irish Pages.

Pauline Prior-Pitt lives on the island of North Uist. She has published six poetry collections and three pamphlets. *North Uist Sea Poems* won the 2006 Callum Macdonald Memorial Award. www.pauline-prior-pitt.com

Derek Ramsay on Derek Ramsay: 'Mostly I write within spaces but last night I listened to my best of Albert Ayler L.P. instead; that was good.'

Cynthia Rogerson has published four novels and a collection of stories. Her novel *I Love You, Goodbye* was shortlisted for the 2011 Scottish Novel of the Year, and developed into a Woman's Hour serial. Her latest novel is *If I Touched the Earth* (Black and White).

Julian Ronay A' fuireach anns an Aghaidh Mhòr. Saothair leis anns an duanaire An Tuil agus ann an irisean leithid Gairm agus Poetry Scotland.

Frances Sessford lives in Perthshire and has started writing again.

Angela Skrimshire is formerly a research officer in Oxford. She has lived on Colonsay for 17 years. She writes seldom, but had four poems in *Envoi* last February.

Ian Stephen's 'St Kilda lyrics', first published in *Northwords Now* will be published, in an expanded version, along with the music of David P Graham by Inventio-Musikverlag in Berlin, in 2013.

Kenneth Steven's novel *Glen Lyon* was published recently by Birlinn. His poem 'Enough' comes from a new volume of work, *Coracle*.

Jane Verburg lives in Cromarty. 'The pull of ice' is very loosely based on William Speirs Bruce (the under-acknowledged Scottish polar explorer). His wife Janet came from Nigg and this local connection was the beginning of the story.

Sarah Whiteside lives near Edinburgh, by the sea. She is a graduate of the creative writing programme at the University of St Andrews and is currently writer in residence at Roxburghe House in Aberdeen.

Moray Watson is a lecturer in Gaelic Studies within the School of Language and Literature at the University of Aberdeen.

Dawn Wood lives in Perthshire. Her poetry publications include *Ingathering* (forthcoming, 2013) and *Quarry* (2008) with Templar Poetry, and *Hermes with Gift* (UAD Press, 2011).

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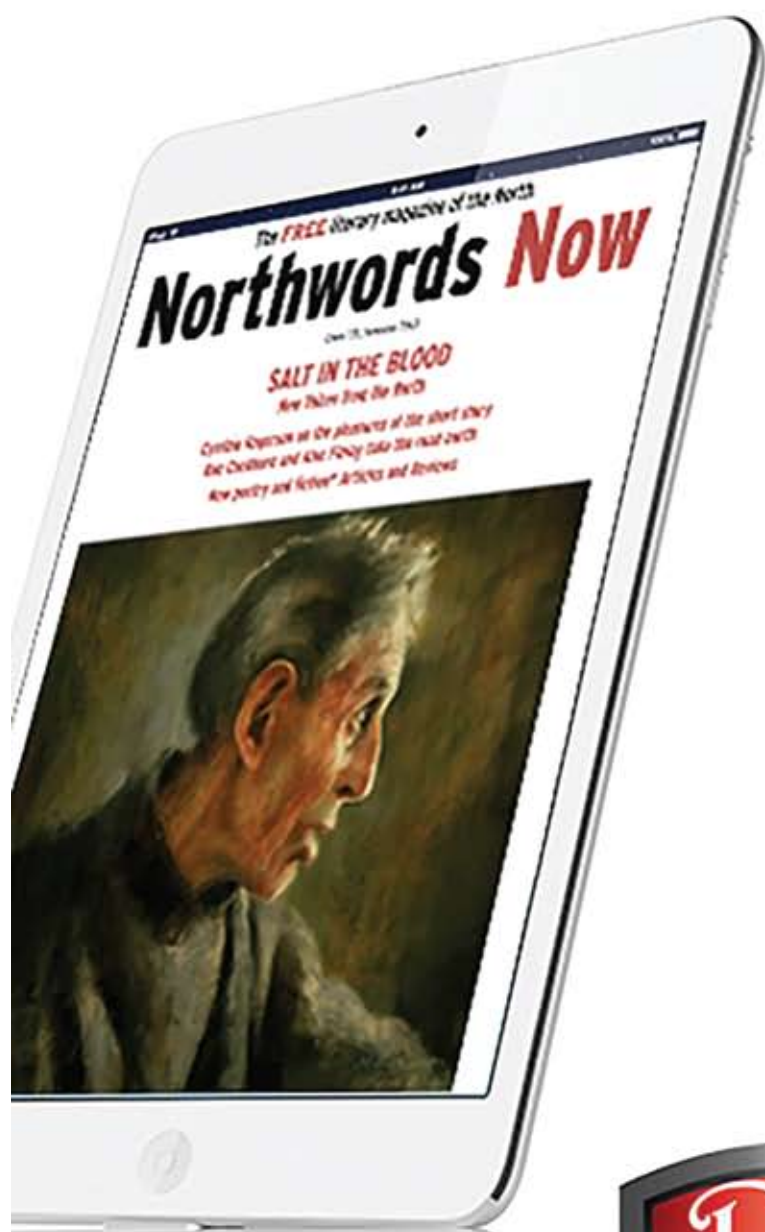
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