

Issue 43, Spring–Summer 2022

Northwords **Now**

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



HIGHLAND BOOK PRIZE readers look at the latest shortlist, **ALISON MILLER** introducing skrievin fae Orkney Voices, **GRAHAM FULTON** in Kilmartin and the city, **JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON** profiles **CLIVE BOUTLE**, **JAMES SINCLAIR** dramatizes a Shetland Fisher Prince, **PLUS** many more stories, poems, essays, news, reviews and a special reader offer.

Rosg-goirid ùr Gàidhlig ann an Tuath le **SHEENA AMOS** is **DOLINA NICILLFHINNEIN**. Bàrdachd le **CRÌSDEAN MACILLEBHAIN**, **MEG BATEMAN**, **MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL**, **MÀRTAINN MAC AN T-SAOIR**, is bàird eile. Sgrìobhadh-cuimhneachaidh air **RUARaidh MACTHÒMAIS** is **UILLEAM NÈILL** le **ANNA FRATER** is **HUGH MCMILLAN** agus lèirmheasan a bharrachd.

EDITORIAL

ONE OF THE many pleasures of editing *Northwords Now* is reading new work in a wide variety of voices. That might sound like a truism, since most good writing has a tone that reflects the individuality of its creator. But part of the further variety in *Northwords Now* and *Tuath* comes from the diversity of language and dialects we publish.

Within these pages, you'll find new writing in Gaelic and English and many pieces in diverse variants of Scots used in different parts of the country. These dialect pieces aren't quaint museum exhibits, but reflect something current; something important. There's now a liveliness in the use of local speech in contemporary writing in many parts of Scotland. That vigour is evident in the breadth of work in Orcadian, Shetlandic, Doric and Lowland Scots in this issue, drawn from the farthest isles to the hearts of cities.

Our Gaelic editor, Marcas Mac an Tuairneir, has also gathered a feast of Gaelic work to savour over the summer. That includes an appreciation of Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson). His centenary last year was perhaps less widely celebrated than that of another of Scotland's great writers, George Mackay Brown. We gave an extensive appreciation of GMB in the previous issue, so it's a pleasure to move our gaze from Orkney to Lewis and Glasgow this time in *Tuath* to do likewise for Ruaraidh MacThòmais.

There's also a nod to another writer from a previous generation whose work may not be as familiar to many readers as that of the aforementioned pair – David Ogston. His Doric prose still has bite, reckons Alistair Lawrie, without a whiff of kailyard.

There's also another exclusive *Northwords Now* reader offer on Page 40.

Relish the new work in many voices within, from Shetland to the Solway and Newfoundland to the Nordics. It's our pleasure. ■

KENNY TAYLOR, EDITOR

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

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What's New in the North

Co-là-breith sona dhut, Aonghais Dhuibh



THIS SUMMER SEES the 80th birthday of Gaelic bard, Aonghas Dhubh MacNeacail. Renowned as a poet and songwriter, Aonghas was born in Uig, Isle of Skye, on the 7th of June 1942. He writes in both Gaelic and English and is also a broadcaster, journalist, scriptwriter, librettist and translator.

To celebrate the very day of his birthday this year, an impressive group of his friends, including Karen Matheson, Donald Shaw, Mary Ann Kennedy, some fine poets and more, will perform in his honour at a special event 'Skerries, Trawlings, Tides' in The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh.

By way of also marking the continuation of the 30th Anniversary of the *Northwords* lineage, here's one of Aonghas Dhubh's poems that was included in the very first issue, in the Autumn of 1991.

Clann a' Cluich, Sgoil Achadh nan Sian AONGHAS MACNEACAIL

glac am ball seo
tha saoghal ann

cumaidh mise
mo shaoghal dlùth rium

tha mise cunntas nan saoghal
am barraibh mo mheòir

nì mise sgairt agus
dannsa tron àile
tha do chruinne gun fheum dhomh

tha fainne nam dhòrn-sa, ach
cò dh'iarraidh fainne

eadar dà ghreim tha ràpa
nathair nan cleas
nathair nan briathar
nathair nan òran

Children playing, Achnasheen School:

catch this ball/there's a world in it//I'll
keep/my world close to me//I'm
counting the words/in the tips of my
fingers//I'll shout, and/dance through

the air/I don't need your globe//I clutch
a ring, but/who needs a ring//two hands
hold a rope/the snake of games/the snake
of words/the snake of songs

We send our good wishes to the bard,
including for many more poems and
performances to come. ■

Trees Meet Sea

INVEREWE GARDEN, NEAR Gairloch, is an inspiring place to visit at any time of year. The diversity of plants there is glorious, from trees and shrubs to flowers and vegetables whose vigour can make visiting gardeners more than a little envious. And all within a coastal setting, where garden and shore and sea interlace. Right now, there's also an extra reason to visit.

When Mandy Haggith had a residency at the garden in 2019, she wrote poems that led to a dozen artists making work in response to her writing. Those poems and artwork, including paintings, ceramics, sculpture, photographs, carving, textiles and etching, are now displayed as the Trees Meet Sky exhibition. It runs at Inverewe's Sawyer Gallery until June 18th, following which it will travel.

"I have been delighted by the response of these artists to my poems," says Mandy. "The result is a celebration, through this meeting of poetry and visual art, of our inherent connectedness with nature and with each other and our ability to speak across the margins of our lives, finding and making beauty where we tangle." ■

Does your hand shake, Vladimir?

THE ATROCITIES NOW being perpetrated in Ukraine are beyond comprehension, as a brutal aggressor attacks civilians and defending soldiers alike. Coupled with the invader's Newspeak, where lying on an industrial scale is the norm and words are distorted to mean their opposite, the war is an assault on both fundamental human rights and the very core of language.

So it's good, despite this craziness, to welcome a gentle act of resistance that faces the aggression with dignity and poetry. It began late this spring, when Odveig Klyve, a Norwegian writer and film director, wrote a poem called *Skjelv du på handa, Vladimir?* which she posted on her social media feed. This rapidly was viewed thousands of times, including by Robert Alan Jamieson in Scotland. Supporting Odveig through a Facebook group, RAJ and Tapsalteerie have helped to spread the word to encourage people to provide their own translations, including in minority languages and dialects, and to post recorded readings and videos

online where possible. It's hoped that a sound art work will be created from all the recordings.

At the time of going to press, the global 'choir' is on the home stretch to 100 translations. These include the one shared here, by Kenneth Steven, with a reading at soundcloud.com/user-931240004/english-kenneth-steven. You can watch Odveig Klyve read her poem in Norwegian (with great power in her delivery) at www.facebook.com/watch/?v=273803374958782

Does your hand shake, Vladimir?

ODVEIG KLYVE
translated from Norwegian
by Kenneth Steven

Does your hand shake
today, Vladimir,
as you lift the cup
to your mouth,
when they tell you
thousands upon thousands have died
at your command
on the nineteenth day of the war.
Does your hand shake
when they tell you
ninety children have been killed,
and hundreds injured
by bullets and bombs.
Does your hand shake
when they say that thousands
of your own are dead -
these young soldiers,
almost children themselves.
Does your hand shake
when you hear
that hospitals are bombed,
that old men and women
are killed
as they flee,
that some have bled to death
while you drink
your morning coffee.
Does your hand shake
Vladimir Vladimirovich
as you lift your cup;
as you flee
from humanity.

Informal Readers' Group - some suggestions

IN THE PAST year or so, we've given a heads-up for some titles likely to feature in the forthcoming issue's reviews, by way of allowing readers to think about certain volumes in advance.

As ever, poetry continues to be published in abundance by presses both small and larger across the land. Pointers to a couple of superb new anthologies are *Other Worlds – An Anthology of Scottish Island Poems* edited by Stewart Conn (Polygon) and *Such a Sweet Singing – Poetry to empower every woman* edited by Kirsty Gunn (Batsford). Some very recent pamphlets and collections awaiting our review include *Svetlana's Dance – Triptychs* by Tom Pow (Mariscat), *Haphazardly in the Starless Night* by Hugh MacMillan (Luath) and *tapsalteerie Modren Makars: Yin* (featuring Irene Howat, Ann MacKinnon and Finola Scott).

In nonfiction, four of the titles likely to feature will be *The Lighted Window – Evening Walks remembered* by Peter Davidson (Bodleian Library Publishing), *The Dunbars of Ackergill and Hempriggs* (Whittles Publishing) by James Miller, *For the Safety of All* by Donald S. Murray (Historic Environment Scotland) and Jennifer Morag Henderson's *Daughters of the North: Jean Gordon and Mary, Queen of Scots* (Sandstone Press). **There's a Northwords Now reader discount offer for Jennifer's book on Page 40.**

In fiction, Kirsti Wishart's second novel *The Projectionist* (Rymour), set in a coastal town where there's a perpetual film festival (we feel your envy, Cromarty...) is already tickling our fancy. Sue Lawrence's *The Green Lady* (Contraband) gives a fictional take on the times of Mary, Queen of Scots, as a counterpoint to the volume of history already described.

We'll also be including some imagined pictures, drawn from his life and described by the internationally respected poet and translator, Robin Fulton Macpherson. Have a look at *A Northern Habitat – Collected Poems 1960-2010* Marick Press (2013) and Robin's latest collection *Arrivals of Light* Shearsman (2021) to get in the mood for the exhibition. ■

Six poems by Hana Wilde

Gannets

Don't waste a dive
On shallows, tricks of light:
I know the strength it takes,
To keep yourself in flight

The underside of water

The light on the underside of water
The skin of the water seen from under

Kick down into the belly of the water
Look up, look at the skin of the water
Bright skin, the skin of the water
Kick now, you're in the belly of the water

Salt lips inside the belly of the water
Soft beat under the skin of the water
She's moving in the belly of the water
Rise up and through the skin of the water

For the sleepless

Some nights, I think I hear the baby
growing in her sleep,
the creak and rustle of stems.

The world insists on forward motion:
the column of sleet
holds a rainbow within it,
lone passenger up the loch.

She insists
on forward motion. So,
every day, we walk; and with each step
I fight the urge to fall

Into the winter,
the waiting snow;
to crawl into the slow dark peat,
dissolve into the rock below

devotion

half waking
half light

the morning
the meadow

the lilies, lidded
the peat, silk

the water adores the skin

Hypnobirthing for seals

No rainbows,
No flowers slowly opening.

This is the surge of tides
The search for a high beach
The fear of storms
A bladderwrack tangle

A place to pup
Where everyone else can
Fuck
Off.

The urge to shallow waters,
A high place,
The sound

Of pebbles in the wash
Pup pup pup

Of gulls
Pup

A job to do
Pup

Raw slick and salt:

uncaring,
reassuring,
vast.

37 weeks

We broke in, swung through the low gap, a shower of rust
You riding in my belly, small passenger
Looking for seals.

Grey, soft, still
All noises amplified.

Past the old shed settling,
A Marie Celeste of plastic,
Japanese knotweed growing through the rot.

At the tideline we found perfect shells
small scallops like fingernails, translucent, pink.

And in the confusion of rust and rope
By the shore, a dead thing;
All blubber and muck.

You kicked,
And the seals breathed lazily between
Sea and sky, soft slick of water.

I wondered what they made of us.
I wanted to tell them it wasn't safe here
The plastic islands
The rot

And then a noise, an upwards rush;
A seal leaping.
From a distance it looked like joy..

Congregation

IAN McDONOUGH

Standing in our back garden
among the sea-washed whisper
of a Thurso summer night,
we grew aware of starlings gathering
on rooftops, chimneys, aerials, rones,
First a dozen, then a hundred,
finally beyond two thousand
clustering on every elevated space.

They sat, for half an hour quietly gossiping.
And then – in slow unhurried dribs and drabs –
took off for God knows where,
leaving us neighbours
grounded, landlocked at our doors.

The Single-Track Road

IAN McDONOUGH

So much heather and so very few of us,
even if we count the dead.
Today I'm driving on lonely,
hill over Northern Highland hill.

Only my thoughts
are crowded,
spilling through
the open window of the car,
landing on the tarmacadam,
sensing escape, taking to their heels.
When will we see their likes again?

I capture one before
it makes its break for freedom.
What flag is big enough
to cover all this land
and thin enough to let us breathe?

The Smell of Him

East Coast Newfoundland, 1952

HE SMELLED OF fish and more fish, sharp as an unexpected slap. He smelled of today's fish, yesterday's, and last week's, the fish of seasons stretching back decades—his own few and those of his father and grandfather and some father before that. Fresh gurry or dried rot, it didn't matter, it was still a smell that would make a flatlander's stomach heave like a punt on a quartering wave.

He wore layers of days and nights hauling, offloading, heading, gutting, scooping the stinking liver out and dropping it into the gunk hole. He held the stink of diesel and used engine oil. He smelled of sour muskiness, of moldering hair and clothes long unwashed and crusted with salt. He carried the stink of soot, tarry rope, and burned things.

To her, he smelled like a life she didn't want. The smell of fish mingled with birthing blood and yeasty dough rising and baby vomit and trouble. The stink of her parents' house mingled with the sweet and funky tang of woodsmoke as if there was something wild out there she might be able to have. She knew the odor of musky sex she had smelled on her mother as she put the pre-dawn kettle on for her husband's tea before he left for the dock.

She knew milk gone sour, curdling flesh wound, brothers' sweat at the table, her own skin smelling the same as salt cod drying on the flake. She knew the sickening sweetness of mold and rot. Most of all she knew the smell of poverty.

She didn't want that life. She knew it stank. But still the smell of him pulled her in. It hung all around him like a quilt she just might like to pull over herself. She stepped in closer, inches from his half smile and hooded eyes. She took a good deep breath. With a jerk of her head she said, "Hey, fisherman."

The Headland

East Coast, Newfoundland, present day

ALWAYS POOR PEOPLE, but they made a living. Land-poor, you might say. His grandfather had two hundred acres along the headland that he got from his grandfather. Wasn't much use for it—just tuckamore and berry barrens, shore too high to bring a boat in and no beach to speak of for the cod drying flakes.

Yes, you could, and did, berry in season, plenty of those: bakeapple, raspberry, blueberry, kinnikinnick. No money in that, though. And anybody has the right to pick berry land. The grandson can see the pickers even now leaning like ladders against the hill's pitch.

So a wee house in town it was and the grandfather working day boats, and the grandmother making the salt fish with the other women on the beach and afterwards setting a solid meal in front of

him. Some grand times, for a while.

It's all the grandson's now. He always loved the headland's long wild views of the Atlantic stretching like a possibility. His people had come from other isles across that sea. His grandfather showed him how set a trapline for rabbits out there in the winter to keep the family fed. Maybe there'd be a fox or marten pelt to send up to St. John's for money in your pocket to buy candy for you and your mates. Sometimes, the two of them snow-shoed to the shabby tilt a mile in to hunt deer, the wind at night beating

around outside and the wolves howling and the smoke of the grandfather's pipe patrolling the shack and holding it safe and cozy. It was always "them two" in those days—grandfather and grandson.

But still the land not of much use and the fish mostly done now. A girlfriend and a baby, so he goes out west with the rest of them to the Alberta oil fields: three weeks on, three weeks off. Steady pay and good money. New roof on the old place and another room for the babe. (How did all of them live in those two rooms back then? He never questioned before.)

Two Newfoundland stories

BY LINDA BUCKMASTER



Then the accident. "Not your fault," his mates say. "Could've been any one of us." The company pays to fly him home, the Halifax airport at midnight for the connection and no one to have a beer with for the wait. "Never be the same," they say after the surgery. "Better get another line of work."

So now there's nothing else for it but to sell lots on the headland—long, narrow lots," they say, "is the smart money." That way, those from St. John's or Ontario can have a road at one end and their own waterfront on the other.

The grandson turns his back to the wind to roll a cigarette. *Yes, that's the right thing to do*, he thinks as he takes his first drag. *Family to mind—sell lots. Yes, that's the only thing to do.* He steps around the corner into the wind and sees the Atlantic, cold and green, snapping with white caps, stretching out before him as it always has, except now it feels like a rebuke. ■



Watercolour by Alice V. Taylor

Four poems by Cáit O'Neill McCullagh

Winged Solstice

Flight-cold winded
heavy-winged, we are
wild geese grain-hungry
skeined to the sun we chase
we coorie to the cairn's mouth
cleave to Clava's dipped strath
there she strews last & first light
there chambers corbel to capture her
wedlocked in this earliest midnight, we
press palms impassioned, plead promises
beseech boulders dimple-ringed with pasts
& watch our shadows conquer every lintel
sentinels at this warming of the earth's womb
as solstice sweetens, filtered amid our fingers
she whispers spring & unfolds our wings to soar.

*The wild goose has raised its accustomed cry,
cold has seized the birds' wings;
season of ice, this is my news.*
- Anon., Ireland, 9th Century

Drift

We comb them, drift-matter, flotsam **In the wake of home faering**
the sadness upon them **our mothers, breaching every ocean**
ribboning our fingers **their savage magnificence filling horizons**
where the sea forgets herself. **metal-luminous and impossibly blue.**
We frantic-wrap them, ringlet our wrists. **They were always too far out**
Not the shore cleave of dulse **silver-distant in the fish-milled grey**
this kelp is deep-sea frayed **colossal cosmologies of mammal and mar**
gathered tangles **brine barrelled and lidded with memory**
between the mother waves' returns **flesh cured for the days of hollow**
father fragments, goose-barnacled **ivoried fat pressed to pallid lips**
breast-close clasped in kishies **too rich, a feast gulped in gasps**
then scattered over parched parks. **every oil-cold drop drained**
These uncanny hauntings nurture harvest **to remake our earthy selves.**
Da! Cry it across the haar? **Orphaned, the cormorant keens the ebb.**

Embers

Samhradh is on your skin
cinder warm, I breathe you
lips loosed to your mouth
pressed then to your heart
we are embers - incense

while we burned the whins
liquid-heating the afternoon
I saw you roar for the joy of it
bellow slow, I burned too

fire licked my breath from me
like it was whiskey
like when a peat tumbles
- or a heart

I lick the salt of you
tip my tongue to taste the Ben
this close blaze between us
your skin, smoke-scent soaked
and all the summer on it.

This Love

O there are many kinds of love you might regret
the queasy softening of your spring queen knees
as a boy (or robin) tilts beak-up & blush-chested
to trill dowl into your nest-ready heart & steal it

the dead Spaniard eyes of a silver-crowned sparrow
love in the constant uncolour of cloud-covered sky
lead & ash its promise, fierce unfaltering faithful
calling *coorie here forever under steady eaves*

you might never regret the love for you alone
goose-gorgeous down-nested & mounded in
moss-happit lichen-love that can only heal
you'll find it on the lee side of the sun

large & all black-mortal is a raven's love
a passerine one to sing life's end with
& what if this love is all that yearns
between sky & earth? Regret it not.

This love will call you home.

Late Or Early

MARY WIGHT

The wind is dropping, near
silence, except blood surging
through veins, a scrabble
behind the skirting.

A car thrums, coming closer,
someone else awake - late
or early for them I wonder,

travelling, as we all must,
through degrees of darkness,
aware that the far edge
of the map remains rolled.

Ghosts of Seasons Past

MARY WIGHT

In cold rain, she makes her way
steadied by a cane, hood pulled tight
over white hair, pink rubber booties bright.

She is rounding up her dwindled herd.
Three sodden reindeer lean against a wall,
tinsel collars glint in the fading grey light.

Unseen, I watch from a small, high window.
An unwashed blue shirt lies crumpled on the floor.

From Rusty Staple to Highest Apple

An interview with Clive Boutle of Francis Boutle Publishing

By JENNIFER MORAG HENDERSON

A NEW ANTHOLOGY of Scottish Gaelic literature *The Highest Apple / An Ubhal as Àirde* was recently published, from an unusual publisher.

Francis Boutle Publishers specialise in publishing minority languages, and this is their first publication in Gaelic – though it will likely not be their last. I interviewed Clive Boutle, founder of the publishing house, to get an idea of the company's ethos and learn more about their approach to publishing.

Clive Boutle originally worked as a second-hand bookseller. At his work in the late 1990s, he came across a manuscript collection of Cornish poetry, which intrigued him. Unused to Cornish contemporary literature, he was fascinated by the modern sensibility of the writing – and this curiosity started him on the track of publishing works in Cornish. Interest in the Cornish language led to awareness of Breton, and then to a wider interest in minority European languages. From a more general list which took in books on local history, Boutle began to specialise in publishing books in minority European languages, ranging from Occitan to Faroese, Esperanto to Sámi, and many more.

The Highest Apple / An Ubhal as Àirde is part of the 'Lesser Used Languages of Europe Anthologies' series, which aims to introduce the reader to the diversity of European writing and thought. Each of the ten anthologies in the series so far presents texts in the original language side-by-side with newly-commissioned English translations, and glossed with (English) explanations giving context and background. Aimed at the general reader, the books also provide a starting point for the more serious student, with considered introductions by experts in their fields. *The Highest Apple / An Ubhal as Àirde* is arranged chronologically, starting with historical texts from the period 600-1600, and ending up with contemporary verse from poets such as Pàdraig MacAoidh. Poetry is well-represented, but there are extracts from longer prose works, and even from essays and speeches about the place of Gaelic in modern society. The title *An Ubhal as Àirde* comes from a Runrig song on *The Cutter and the Clan* album, but the anthology carefully explains not only Runrig's immense influence on the modern perception of Gaelic, but also the inspiration of the song title, which comes from a well-known Gaelic proverb 'Bidh an ubhal as fheàrr air a' mheangan as àirde' (The finest apple is on the highest branch), as well as drawing attention to the Christian imagery in other lyrics. It is a considered approach which aims

to present a rounded overview of the history of the language and how it is used and seen.

Boutle explained that he saw the minority languages as being all very different – but also in many ways the same. They frequently come up against the same barriers, for example, as they try to co-exist with more widely-spoken tongues. However, the situation often varies from place to place: "Grains of Gold", the Occitan anthology equivalent to *The Highest Apple / An Ubhal as Àirde*, was one of the first anthologies Francis Boutle Publishing produced, and as such was a model for the others that followed. However, whereas Gaelic has official support in Scotland, in France the term 'Occitan' is not even universally accepted. People may distinguish between dialects, saying that they speak 'Provençal' rather than 'Occitan', or presenting it as 'only' a version of Old French.

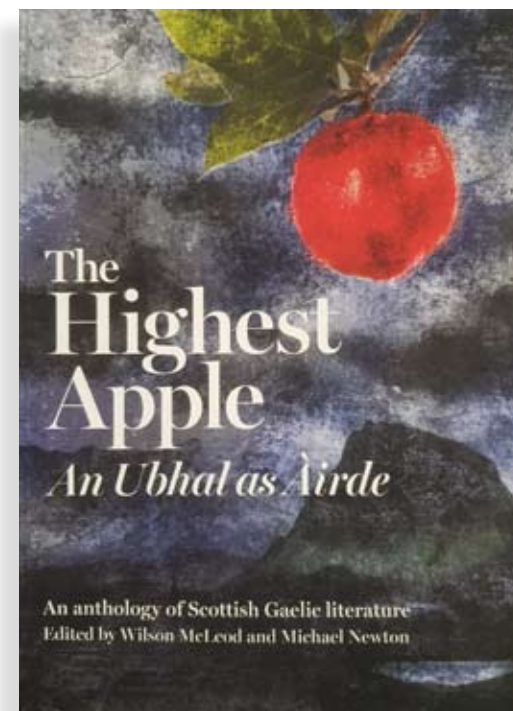
Throughout the compiling of the anthologies, Boutle works closely with his trusted translators. The approach to each book is slightly different – some of the anthologies, for example, are arranged thematically rather than chronologically – and he discusses decisions closely with the translators. He believes the relationship between the translator and publisher is crucial – though often overlooked in a focus on the relationship between translator and author. Although the literary partnership with the author is important, the trade relationship between translator and publisher is crucial, he says, particularly for a small publisher. Often books are the publisher's idea – and, of course, backed initially with the publisher's money – so the building of these relationships is very important when bringing new work to the public.

New work can be brought forward in discussion with translators, who often have a wide knowledge of the literature of their language. After successfully working with translator Marita Thomsen on the Faroese poet Sissal Kampmann's beautiful collection *Myrking / Darkening*, Clive Boutle plans to publish more Faroese work, with Marita having input on which Faroese authors to look at. *Myrking* is a long sequence of poems which looks at the modern Faroes, the dark landscape and its situation away from mainland Europe, through the lens of a sometimes long-distance romantic relationship. An uplifting read which recalls, in its looping sequences, the traditional ballads for the repetitive Faroese chain-dance, it is also thoroughly contemporary. Clive Boutle first saw Sissal Kampmann – a well-known poet in her home country – at a reading in London, where she read her poems in

the original language, followed by an English translation read by an actress. He found the contrast between the two readings striking: Sissal's gentle delivery was followed by a demonstrative performance from the actress, which he felt did not capture the essence of the original. One aim in publishing parallel translations is to allow people to compare original and translation, and the sequence *Myrking* was particularly interesting as the translation was composed simultaneously with the original, with Sissal sending the parts of the poem, as they were completed, directly to the translator. It remains one of a very small number of Faroese works translated into English.

Poetry is a particular interest of Clive's – reading poetry, he says, in all sorts of languages, has helped him enormously in dealing with the semi-isolation and challenges of the last couple of years. *Myrking* is often bought by poetry lovers, rather than by learners of Faroese. Meanwhile, the Gaelic anthology is often purchased by Gaelic speakers and learners in Scotland, but also by many readers with a wider interest in Scottish heritage and history, particularly in North America. The customer base can be atomised, with different markets for each language, but some customers buy across the board, following all new work from the publishing house and supporting the aim of highlighting minority languages by donating to Francis Boutle Publishing as a charity.

Clive Boutle sees the work he is doing as a publisher as not just a personal and commercial journey, but also an important contribution to endangered cultures. He recalled the original Cornish works which sparked his interest in minority languages, joking that they used to be called 'rusty staple' books – although put together with the best intentions, they were often badly-produced and unprofessional-looking. He has always aimed to produce books with high quality design, working with his partner, a graphic designer, who designs the covers. Each book in the Francis Boutle imprint has a distinctive red spine. In 2017 Clive Boutle was recognized for publishing services to Cornish culture and the promotion of European minority languages by being invited to join the 'College of the Bards of Gorsedh Kernow' at the Gorsedh Kernow Esedhvos Festival. Gorsedh Kernow was established in 1928, with the



aim of promoting Cornwall's distinctive Celtic culture, and the Esedhvos is similar to the Gaelic Mòd. Clive Boutle considered the recognition to be a great honour. Bards choose a Cornish name for themselves, and Clive chose "Dren Rudh" – Red Thorn. The word 'dren' means not only 'thorn' but also 'spine' – recalling the distinctive design of the books he publishes.

In the future, Clive Boutle will be publishing further work in Gaelic, with two publications forthcoming from two very different Gaelic poets, and he is also looking at publishing work in Scots. His focus will remain on languages and minority cultures in Europe, though with interest also in folk song and song collecting. It is also a long-held ambition to do something in Icelandic.

The shape of each book changes with the needs of that particular book – parallel translations remain of paramount importance, but it is also vital to be aware of exceptions. This sympathetic approach to understanding and sharing languages has led to a fascinating list of works which shed light on many little-known cultures. *The Highest Apple / An Ubhal as Àirde* may be of interest to many *Northwords Now* readers, but Francis Boutle Publishing's wider list is well worth seeking out, and contains many gems. ■

(Visit francisboutle.co.uk for more information on the aforementioned titles. See page 8 of the current *Tuath* (6) for a review of *The Highest Apple*. Ed.)

“YOU ARE A silkworm in a cocoon, a bird in a cage, an oyster hiding itself. I’m done!”

These are my Scottish husband’s last words to me. I curl up in bed like a ball, hearing the door closing. My husband goes out after our quarrel as usual. I don’t understand why, after ten years together, there is still a barrier between us. We fought as always over nothing, and I withdraw myself into my own world, pushing him away.

I lie on bed tormenting myself, then fall asleep. When I wake up, it takes me ages and lots of energy to haul myself up off my bed. My attic bedroom at the top of the house makes me feel like a bird in a cage. The more I lie in bed, the more I think I am a bird trapped in this room. So, I shuffle into the kitchen and make myself a drink. A ray of lemon yellow light streams onto the window sill as I step into the living room. Holding a mug of hot chocolate, I fix my eyes on the movement of the natural world; fast-moving clouds wash out of the horizon to reveal the lush green rolling hills and a patch of blue sky appears above the distant North Sea. I glance at my watch, it is around four now, so I hurriedly grab a coat then head to the street. The river Don is like glass, showing pebbles lying motionless through its crystal blue water and the banks wear a verdant coat scattered with colorful flowers. I take a deep breath, enjoying the delicate fragrance of wild garlic. *The gentle spring is the renewal of a dead winter.* My thought is interrupted by a man in black, leading a big Alsatian dog, approaching from the opposite direction. From a distance of about ten meters his face is still a blur because of my short-sightedness. I turn right towards the water to obey the social distancing rules in this Covid-19 pandemic. I am surprised to see there are four policemen wearing reflective clothing on the opposite bank observing the water. I wonder whether someone drowned or perhaps there has been a crime. Then my instinct tells me to turn back to see the man in black passing by. He greets me and now I can see his uniform clearly with the word police written in white on his back. I step forward but am startled to see a baby black bird lying on the bare ground. Its tiny beak, closed eyes and wet feathers cause a current to pass through my body. It must have blown out of its nest in the howling wind. Returning to the path, I see a woman holding her son’s hand, both walking slowly; sometimes she bends her head down towards him. She speaks so softly that I can’t work out what language she is speaking. Suddenly, the boy looks over his shoulder; perhaps the noise of my boots reaches his ears. I am drawn to his attractive dark eyes, as black as longan seed, sparkling with innocence and curiosity in his Asian face. He stares at me for a while, his knitted brow slowly relaxes, then he turns back to the path, keeping pace with his mother. That little boy leaves me in a very strange state of mind. I remain motionless,

The Farewell

STORY BY NGAN NGUYEN



feeling my loneliness, letting the fragrant summer air breathe over my face and an old childhood memory comes flooding back.



Bao, my neighbour’s oldest son, was five years older than I. I was seven at that time, my black hair hanging below my ears. His brown skin contrasted with his bright eyes and he always wore dark clothes, sometimes black, brown, green or blue but never bright colors like mine. My parents were busy on the farm for most of the time and my brother always sneaked out, so I followed Bao. He

That winter afternoon five of us watched Bao flying the dragon kite and my brother the butterfly one

carried a big bag and a sickle. Whilst he knelt down to cut wild sam vegetables to feed the pigs, I squatted and plucked them by hand.

“Bao brother, why do you wear that black shirt? It’s said that black is the color of funerals. I love bright colours, you see my red flowered clothes.”

He paused, glanced at me with a broadening smile. “Your clothes are very pretty. Never believe what adults say to you.”

“Why? Even our parents?”

“They are still kids somehow.” Bao shrugged his shoulders.

“What if you grow up one day, will I believe you?”

Bao laughed at my question. He never answered it. Instead he pointed his index finger to the sky where swallows were flying, then spread his arms. I stood up and mimicked his action.

“We’re birds, flying with the wind,” Bao yelled.

I closed my eyes and in my imagination I was a swallow swooping in the sky. The wind in the field that afternoon was gentle and it brought the pleasant fragrance of freshly cut plants. Bao cut a bunch of oxeye daisies, then made a headband from them. I was glad to wear it, pretending to be a princess and he my servant. We walked home in an orange

sunset, wild grass dancing like the waves in the river.



My brother brought home a bird cage, four times the length of my hand and hung it on a guava tree. It was made from bamboo, and a small bamboo stick placed across the cage made a perch. For water it had a tiny plastic cup cut from a bottle and another small lid for food. He would often join a group of boys, carrying a slingshot to hunt birds in the orchards whilst everyone else was having a nap. He never let me join them. One afternoon I woke up to see a blackbird standing in

the cage. I sat down on the swing made from an old tire from my father’s tractor, and swung back and forth. The bird and I looked at each other.

Another day, my brother came home after his hunting, his eyes were sparkling and a big smile crossed his face.

“Guess! What is in my hand?”

“Sweets?” I gave my hand to him.

But when he opened his hand, there were two tiny turquoise eggs. I trembled as my brother handed them to me. I had never seen eggs with such a beautiful color.

“Beautiful!” I murmured.

“Can’t wait to see what kind of bird.”

Then he put the two eggs in the cage. I was excited to look after the bird, hoping to see baby birds. My brother and I hunted grasshoppers in the fields and I never forgot to give the bird clean water every day. But one day when I changed the water, I saw broken pieces of eggshell and the yolk was dry, and the blackbird’s feathers stood on end. It looked at me with blurry eyes.

“Such a waste.” My brother startled me. His brow furrowed, then he left without letting me know what I should do with it. I fixed my eyes at the cage again whilst the bird looked up at the blue sky appearing above the leaves.

“What are you doing?” Bao leaned on

the guava trunk, handing me a mint.

“Did you fall? Are you hurt?” I asked when I saw a bruise on his left cheek.

He didn’t answer so I told him about the eggs. He moved close to the cage, observing it. I could see his tears and a shaft of light lingered on his bruised cheek which made his skin look like the broken turquoise eggshell.

“Can I give it freedom?” Bao had never wanted anything from me before.

“Yes.” I stopped moving on the swing.

He opened the cage, but the bird stood still.

“Is it too weak to fly now?” I whispered, afraid that my voice would scare it.

“Maybe not. But when someone is kept in a prison too long, they may forget how to live.”

I didn’t understand why Bao said someone rather than it for a bird. We sat on the lower branch of the guava tree and I felt the mint flavor melt in my mouth. I didn’t know what I was waiting for but I kept silent. It must have been ages and my neck was sore. So I glanced down to watch groups of ants carrying food to their nest. Lots of different types, small black ants, tiny red ants and big brown-yellow ones.

“It’s gone,” he said.

“What?” I looked at the cage, it was empty now. “I missed that moment.”

“The important moment of life,” he murmured.

I had no idea what he was talking about, nor if he was saying it to me or the escaped bird.



That winter afternoon five of us watched Bao flying the dragon kite and my brother the butterfly one; they slowly rose up in the high blue sky. The melodic sound from these kite flutes flew through the open sky which gave me a thought that this music was always better when it is played by the wind rather than humans. Some cows grazed. We shouted whenever a kite flew lower. The river bank was big enough for a small field but it had been abandoned when the owner left town. So the children used it for playing football and flying kites. Suddenly the dragon flew up in the sky, we shouted at it then looked at Bao. There was no sign of him.

“Bao fell into the river!” someone shouted.

We hurriedly ran to the river bank, where Bao had slipped on crushed grass and wildflowers. He was moving up and down in the river. His black shirt made the water dense in darkness and his hands kept splashing the water furiously.

My brother ran off, shouting “Help! Bao is drowning.”

Someone threw a piece of wood into the river. Bao stretched out his hand but he couldn’t reach it. One more time, he struggled with the splashing water which was shining in the sunlight.

I stood still, placing one hand on my heart to stop its fast beat.

“Move. All of you!” Some adults arrived.

The children huddled together on the grass. We stood there, our hearts thumping. When a man carried Bao out of the water, others rushed to help him. His body lay on the man's shoulder like a wet towel. Then he was laid on the grass, his black shirt now dirty with mud. They pumped his chest, blew air through his lips.

"Bao, wake up!" I cried, jumping towards him but my brother grasped my hand. "Stand here!"

Bao's mother came. She knelt down next to him, hugging him. "Wake up, my boy. Wake up. I promise I will never let him beat you anymore." Her crying was louder than any clap of thunder I had heard in my life.

Bao's stepfather knelt down and touched Bao's motionless legs. His eyes

were red but there was not a single teardrop.

His mother's crying seemed too far away in my memory but I will never forget the way her son lay in her arms, so reassuringly. That position and her green work clothes and his black T-shirt reminded me of the statue I had seen somewhere, a mother kneeling down to hold her dead son, a soldier. Bao seemed to be having a peaceful sleep. His step brothers and sisters knelt down around him. People were so crowded that I was afraid that Bao could hardly breathe. A crow flew across the sky and croaked mournfully. People said that crows are the messenger of Death. I never believed what adults said, as Bao had told me. I wondered if that was Bao.



I dig a hole among the wild garlic with a tiny piece of bark, placing a layer of their leaves on the soil and laying the dead bird on it, then making a blanket of the white garlic flowers to cover the poor creature. I don't know what this little bird suffered in his short life but from now on nothing can disturb his peaceful sleep as garlic will protect him from evil. How could it die without having had a chance to fly? I have this thought when I cover the bird's grave. I didn't have an opportunity to see Bao again after that afternoon. I stood next to the guava tree, watching people carry him in a small black coffin. The wind blew the black and white clothes and papers in different directions. His mother's crying

was swallowed into the funeral music which was similar to crying cats and the birds crowed repeatedly making the afternoon the saddest I had ever known. Adults didn't allow us children to attend his funeral because they were afraid that his ghost would come back to tempt us to play with him in another world. I looked at the empty bird cage and suddenly I felt how close I was to Bao.

The scent of wild garlic lingers on my fingers. Whatever. I don't care. Bao will never die. I'm sure that he had turned into a crow on that winter afternoon, in a far away country named Vietnam. I continue my walk, knowing that my husband will be somewhere on the same river path. ■

Laura put the tray in front of him, two cups of tea and a plate with three biscuits, one for her. He was sitting awkwardly, leaning on one arm of his chair.

"You need to learn when to ask for help, Dad."

"Aye, I know. Impatient old bugger."

"What did you need from up there? I thought we'd cleared everything out."

She remembered the day, and resolving to sort out her own house.

"Over there," he said.

A squat black case was by the shelves of war stories and spy thrillers.

"You're not going on holiday?"

"Ha. You're meant to be the one with the good memory. Bring it here."

Up close she recognised it.

"The accordion." She smiled thanks at him.

"I'd love to learn."

"Wait your turn, I'm taking lessons," he said. "Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing, Dad. It's great you're doing this."

Laura could see he was pleased with himself. If he'd done this while Mum was alive, got off his backside and done something with his retirement. But it would have made no difference.

"You know wee Amanda from the cul-de-sac? She's Mrs Mackie now at the primary school, she's teaching me."

Laura could tell him things about Mandy. But no, she wouldn't put him off.

"She comes here Mondays and Thursdays after school. Awfully nice. She says I've got a good ear. Not for hearing, obviously."

He excused himself and hirpled to the bathroom. It was good to see him this way. Embarrassing if he was flirting with Mandy, he was still capable of that. Though why care now.

"It's the co-ordination that's hard," he said, wiping his hands on the sides of his trousers. "The two hands. Two hands and only one brain. Would you get it out for me?"

Its weight was awkward, but she turned it the right way and placed it on his lap as he settled on a chair brought from the kitchen.

Dark Island

STORY BY RACHEL CARMICHAEL



He slipped his hands through the straps – had he always had those ridges on his fingernails, the white marks that might signify something? – then let the instrument expand and squeezed out a chord.

"I might order a performance stool," he said. "Mrs Mackie recommends them."

"Are you thinking of touring?"

"I may surprise you."

Laura watched his fingers get their bearings on the keys and buttons.

"They're not that expensive."

"Good. If it makes you happy, Dad."

His exhales had become slower and

heavier this year, making him sound impatient even when he wasn't. He put his hands in position, looked at her, smile fading as he concentrated, and he played. An old, mournful waltz Laura had grown up with, laughed at, then realised that she loved. The accordion had always been here, left to Mum by one of her aunts, waiting for someone to learn how to play it, but Laura couldn't bear the thought of anyone hearing her practice. A few times when she was alone in the house she had taken it out of its case and worked out a tune, allowing it half of her attention while she stayed alert for the sound of

anyone returning. Never expressing an interest. But they must have known.

She saw him watching her, his fingers stumbling slightly as her inattention distracted him, and she smiled and moved her head to the rhythm. Fumbling and unsteady, but the tune was there, and this pleased him. She used to know that feeling, losing herself in drawing or painting, and afterwards enjoying that it had made her happy. Double happiness.

He finished playing and she had to say something.

"That was lovely, Dad. Well done."

He squeezed the ends together and clipped them shut.

"You don't have another tune for me?"

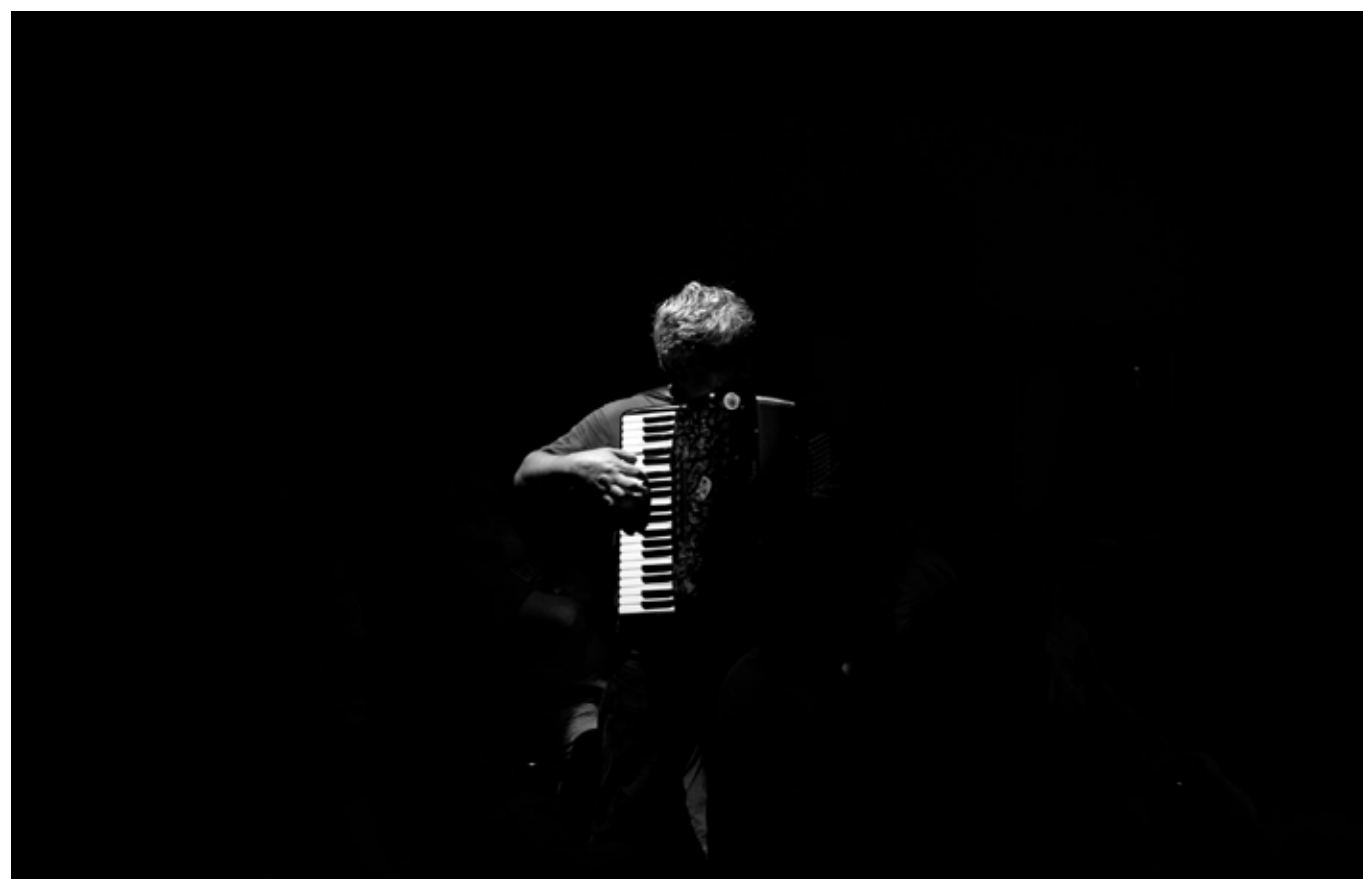
"That's the only one," he said. "That's the one I wanted to learn."

He shook his head.

"It's tough, you know. It's still tough."

She lifted the instrument off him and put it back in its case. ■

Photo by Simone Impei. Unsplash.



On an August Train

BRIAN GOURLEY

The late summer evening is burning down to its last embers
as the Deutsche Bahn shuttles through the pallid plains,
through this ghost state whose ruins
we barely dare to acknowledge or accept as our collective legacy.

This, Stalin's misbegotten offspring, the saddled cow,
the rump-arse of a state that no one ever wanted,
and now we panzer our way through
as the phantom twilight discloses the colours

Of a Nolde painting, both boringly familiar yet also perplexingly strange:
amethyst, indigo, a crimson shade of menace.
You look out the window and say that this place gives no cause
for us to stop and conquer; we battle over the chessboard

And don't know if we are playing to the death,
and I tell you why I haven't got round to reading Sándor Márai.
Through the murk we can barely glimpse the brick-and-glass corpses
of former factories and work installations

Whose dark shadows advance like black-booted battalions,
and you wonder if our collective history has overrun us
like the nightfall. Yet again, we aren't the makers of our fates
but rather pawns on a general's chessboard,

The loose change of history that's discarded
like the coins inserted in the vending machine
in the *Hauptbahnhof* of Leipzig,
whilst waiting for the taxi to take us

Away from the coming autumnal chill
to the comfort of a neon-lit hotel room,
knowing full well we're nowhere
near real illumination

Crossing the Aegean

BRIAN GOURLEY

Before the day broke upon us like the waves
we waited on that last shore of Asia
for the boat to take us to golden Europe.
"It shall be, God willing, our Promised Land,"
I told you, my only son,
"where we shall live in freedom and in peace."
I held onto you, swaddled you in a blanket
as the wind sniped at us from its cross-sight.
To kill the time, we played chess
and I taught you new words
to survive in English and French.
The *Icarus* was rocking from side to side
when she appeared and the boatman
ordered us aboard and told us it was Death or Patmos.
On this, our golden wing we flew, seeking our sanctuary;
the waves pounded us like artillery
and the boat was smashed into timbers
on the jagged black rocks.
You plunged into the black waters
and I dived in to rescue you,
tussling with the swirling waters,
trying to wrench you from its grasp.
The next I knew we were lying together on a beach
and you were swaddled in my arms,
concussed and choking out seawater:
a revelation of rebirth into new life under golden light.

Long-lines

RODY GORMAN

Long-lines

They'd all have cleared and ploughed and harrowed up and down and
sown and spread in turn
Each lot of tacked inbye, outrun, drill and rig in their own townships and
been around
The headlands of the Horn and Hope in the image here from way back
when
The burns, black as the Styx, were full of salmon and brown trout and
ling and char
Fairly abounded and a man could walk, they say, across the beach, then
the Dornie and the sound
On the decks of brigs and gigs, cots, creelers, cutters, drifters,
gabbarts, luggers, merchantmen, pinnaces, smacks, scows, skiffs,
tramps, tugs, yawls and yoles and the frigates, big liners and tall
ships passing and tenders and old wrecks from the pier
On the island straight over to the cliff-fall and fixed light on the shore and
Ben Screel on the the far side.

Today at first light the back of six in the morning in the light mist, hail
and rain,
The flag on the slipway down at half-mast, *Pibroch* and *Loch Carron* and
all
The flights of migratory terns and herring-gulls following them near
astern
As if they were a John Deere or Ferguson or a white Clydesdale or
garron,
With MacInnes and MacLeod and their ancient landcraft and their hands,
are the last pair to keep going out still.
They shift gear and bale out and cast off with their long-lines and deep-
lines and bag-nets and darrows and light out on the slack tide,
Dragging and hauling on the ropes, letting go of an endless chain.

Fámairí

RODY GORMAN

There I go, old father that I am, once again,
Watching himself stroll and strike out
On his own out there past us on the strand
And promenade on the Costa Daurada, Spain
On our last summer holidays as a family.
And signs are it might indeed be our very last –
Come New Year, he's going to turn all of seventeen
And we may not have another one together anymore.

It could have been me going past the Esplanade in Bray
Or in *Funderland* amusement park in the rain, portable Sony in hand,
The distortion mirror halls and arcades closing one by one.
Or walking back with my twin after evening mass,
Over the last reaches of sand reed and tall grass,
Going dark, talking and whistling to myself, in time
For tea in that boarded-up guesthouse outside Camp
In Kerry and then our own bedroom, cold and damp.

Here, it's getting late. The sun's set. Time to go and shut up shop.
It's almost turn-the-clocks-back-time and all but Halloween.
I'm standing outside the palm reader's, gazing out before me
To the Med and all along Golden Pine Beach and the rocky shore,
The dates falling fast, the leaves fading and losing their green.
The merry-go-round, the rides-and-slides, the rollercoaster and big top,
The strongman and all the acts, the *fámairí* and sunshades are all gone.
The ghost train stations and picture houses are nowhere to be seen.



Montgarrie Mill aflame. Photo with permission of Jason Dory

Montgarrie Mill 1882 – 1st April 2020

(there was an oatmeal mill sited here from 1317)

ANNIE STURGEON

*At five o'clock we quickly rise An hurry doon the stair;
It's there to corn oor horses, Likewise tae straik their hair.
Syne, efter workin half-an-hour, Each tae the kitchie goes,
It's there tae get oor brakfest Which generally is Brose...*

Extract from the Bothy Ballad 'Drumdelgie'

Grist... grind granite ground grain grits
clank grind shuggle riddle coarse kernel shaak
meal dust coat fine fog haze mist
Esset Burn lade waater sluice spoots slap
wheels turn shillin-steins turn corn churn
flat-kiln dry oats sheeler rake furnace burn
mill stein harp-stone belts chines straps
winnowed chaff groats ground dry meal snaps
sieve dry cool screen grind bag ...mill

Mill Fire Burn Smoke Flame Smoke Burn Fire Mill

Granite steins black lie still
Husk dry rubble dust shill
Grist... ..mill

I wonder what happened to the ice-skate
that hung by its strap from the kiln
'like a talisman'?

Isle of Harris, 1967

BELINDA JENNET WEIR

There are better ways to peel a potato.
But this is the way you showed me
Forty-five or fifty years ago
when we were camping by the sea
on Harris, and the others had gone swimming,
in Woolworths' masks and flippers.
I was too young to dive with seals
but just old enough to be shown
how to gouge out eyes with a peeler,
scrape the green bits off and
pare a muddy strip of skin in one stroke
from top to bottom.
Now as I stand at the kitchen sink
clutching the rusty cord-bound peeler
and dropping potatoes into cloudy water
I wish you had taught me how to dive.

Tao Te Ching 9

MICHAEL STEPHENSON

Caw cannie – if ye keep fillin yer bowl, it'll skail;
if ye ower-uisse a blade, it'll niver stey shairp.
Whit if ye fill a hoose wi siller, an aw ye dae is gaird it?
Whit if ye get the rank ye want, but loss yer sel tae gain it?
Best tae tak what ye need, an nae mair –
that's the wey tae haud oan tae whit maitters.

Big Sur

MICHAEL STEPHENSON

The highway ebbs and flows along the coast
and lay-bys gather cars on every curve.
A mile past Nepenthe, you pull over too
and stand outside to try and take it in.

The green hills give way to sunlit crags,
crescents of sand and crashing surf.
Mist drifts off the headland like unmoored memory
and sails slowly over the Pacific.

You stay till you couldn't say any more
if that haze on the horizon is sea or sky,
that shadow on the water a wave or a whale,
that phasing sound the road behind you
or the rolling ocean below.

Out here it's all one –
you can forget all those separations.
Even the one you have carried here with you
which is now both the weight of a stone in your hand
and the lightness of letting it go.

THE BEFORE MUM and the after mum. That's what Kirsty and I call it. Thursday 13th April at 11.15 p.m. I was the one who found her. Sprawled at the foot of the stairs. Her mug of cocoa smashed beside her. I had missed the last bus home. The ambulance man said I had done the right thing. I had checked her tongue. Laid her in the recovery position. Had rung 999. The left side of her face had slid down, like it had melted.

I'm on autopilot at work, swishing through the corridors in plastic apron and see-through snap on, snap off gloves. Hair scraped off my face, make-up free, nose stud popped into my purse. I rap on doors, stick my head round and put on my upbeat voice.

'Hello, it's me, Helen. Shower time.'

We work in pairs, stripping them down, hosing off the urine, the faeces. Patting skin so thin it looks like tracing paper, rubbing in barrier cream, padding them up, selecting their clothes. I chat to them. Tell them about the weather. What I watched on telly. What I ate for my tea. Look at their photo albums. Stare at them as they were. In naval uniform. In wedding dresses. In their gardens on deckchairs. At family parties. A red dot on the door. Do not resuscitate. Blind George feeds me garibaldi biscuits and asks me to water his cactus on the windowsill. He enquires about my mum, my dad, my sister, my live-in lover. I tell him my mum looks like a film star, that my sister is studying music in Vienna, that my dad owns a racehorse, that my live-in lover has just proposed. He says he likes my voice. Says it has just the right amount of cheek in it. I demand to know what it is like to be blind.

'I miss working out what folk are thinking by their expressions, their body language.' He asks if I'm okay. That my voice isn't its normal cheery self. I slot in his audio book tape, a Scandinavian crime one, read him the blurb on the back, brush crumbs off his jumper.

'Helen?'

'I'm fine George. Busy. I'm going wedding dress shopping on Saturday with my mum and sister.'

'Good. I want to hear all about it on Monday. You hear?' I lean over him, breathe in tobacco and coffee, cup the headphones over his ears. Hover at the door, grip the handle. I want to shout out, to tell him the truth. I don't know how to stop the lies.

I'm on Carer Autopilot Mode. I like that I can follow the routines of waking, washing, dressing, breakfasting the clients. That's what we have to call them. Not folk or people but clients as if they are going to buy double glazing from us or take out life assurance. I have nicknames for them all. Not anything I say to their faces but wee things about them, which makes them them. Like Johnny Cash Bill, Velvet Hat Dora and Smooth Skin Maureen. I keep notes about them, prompts about their lives, where they worked, where they lived, their families, pets, hobbies. I like to know what makes

In the Blink of an Eye

STORY BY MAIRI SUTHERLAND



them tick. Kirsty thinks I'm mad working with all the old fogies. I glare at her, ask her to cook the tea, that it's her turn. We are back to being teenagers at home, bickering.

Kirsty and I shared a bedroom. We laid on our beds, listened to Abba, sang with our hairbrush microphones. She showed me how to draw on eyeliner, how to eye up boys at the bus stop, how to make my bust seem bigger. Kirsty this. Kirsty that. Mum told me once that Kirsty isn't God you know. I laughed.

It's time for my break. I like to sit in the smokers' shed, even though I don't smoke. Stella calls me an honorary smoker. I listen to the buzz of conversation, not joining in. Stella says I need a life.

I'm on Carer Autopilot Mode. I like that I can follow the routines of waking, washing, dressing, breakfasting the clients. That's what we have to call them.

I had a life. All mapped out. I was going off to university. I was studying English with Creative Writing at Glasgow. I had a boyfriend. I was going to travel. It's funny how it can all change. Vamoosh. All gone in the blink of an eye. I still make stuff up. Still get to be a creative writer. Yay. I tell the clients all I want to be. It's easy with those with dementia. They've forgotten a few seconds later. I can give a different version each time. It's Blind George I need to be careful with. He's sharp. Maybe his hearing is more acute because of his loss of sight. I don't know where the wedding story came from. I'll need to add in some breakup. That it's all off. That I'm heartbroken.

Stella hands me an envelope. I open it. 'Hey, thanks Stell.'

She blows rings of smoke, eyes me out a too long fringe. 'I want you to come. Ramie's going. It's my 21st, so you can't say no. We can go shopping later, if you like? I want us all to be glamorous.'

I blush. 'Maybe.' I mutter.

'Hel, it wasn't your fault. I keep telling you. You need to start believing.'

I look at my watch. 'I've got to go.'

'Ramie was asking after you.'

There's faeces to clean up in the corridor. Some poor soul with loose bowels. I head for the locked cupboard, peer at the chemicals. There is a stench of off-vegetables and wet jackets drying

on radiators. I find a large white bottle with a Danger sticker on it. *Causes Severe Eye and Skin irritation or burns. If swallowed, do not induce vomiting. If conscious, give two glasses of water or milk.* I wonder what would happen if I glug it down. Who would find me? I douse it into my bucket. My eyes smart. That time when mum took me and Kirsty to the swimming baths in Portobello. They'd put too much chlorine in, our eyes went pink-pink and we had to pull t-shirts over our faces. Mum urged us to stop being 'drama queens.' We perched on the wall outside, nibbling on our shivery bites, with nippy eyes which made us blink, whispered about Colin McFarlane, the boy we both fancied. Kirsty said he was after her. Not me.

I find the mop, swirl round the bleachy pools. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down. The swishing of the mop, sloshing the water. It's the rhythms of this job I like. How you can be lost in a mundane task, blotting everything out. There are some visitors clutching flowers and carrying plastic bags crammed with boxes of chocolates, packets of biscuits, wet wipes, bottles of juice, magazines, bags of Warburton toffees. Essentials to surviving being in a Home. I pause mid mopping, to let them past. I have a set smile I put on for them. I gauge how they are today. I call it my Mood Barometer. I can tell if they need to cry, to vent, to talk, to shout, to be silent. Sometimes I tell them about mum. The Before Mum. How she liked to blast up her music, dance around whilst she dusted and hoovered, died her hair purple and wore gypsy skirts in summer. I bring in ground coffee and make a cafetiere for them, rather than the powdered stuff from Costco bought in bulk. Chef tells me he has £4.65 per person per day for their food allowance. £4.65 when they are paying a thousand a week. Mum would call it daylight robbery.

Mum has live-in nurses, from an agency. They sleep in our spare room. Mum's room is in the old dining room with the faded wallpaper. It had to be adapted. Doors widened; ramps put in.

A specialised bed. All the paraphernalia. Hoists. Boxes of incontinence pads, tubs of barrier creams, plastic aprons and gloves. Dad looked into grants. Kirsty and I call it guilt money. He's shackled up with some thirty-four-year-old. Said mum wasn't the person he married.

Maybe she'll get better. I'll waken up one morning and she'll be in the kitchen, bustling around, opening and closing cupboards, eating a piece of toast and making a list for the day. Joni Mitchell will be on full volume and she will grab my hands, twirl me around, tell me I am gorgeous. I have a bottle of her perfume. *Je Reviens.* Ha. Funny. *I will return.* I unscrew the stopper, take in deep breaths of her. I carry it with me, in my handbag, dab it on my wrists, my neck.

I'd read an article about a woman waking up from a coma after twenty-eight years. She croaked her son's name. Omar. He had been arguing with a nurse over a change in her symptoms. Language dormant. Words to be relearned. A speech therapist holding laminate cards with pictures of a hen, a boy, a factory. Her mouth drooling spit.

I told Kirsty. She had sighed, told me to get real, that had my job not taught me anything, that there was no getting better? She had taken compassionate leave from university, to handle things. I pictured mum wrapped in bubble wrap, with a sign marked Fragile. Kirsty sat beside mum's bed; her thin lips pressed together. That bristly way she gets as if to say 'You. You, keep away. You've done enough damage. Keep well away.'

I've gone over it a million times. If I'd not spoken to Stella on my way out. If I'd not swapped my shift with Pauline. If I'd walked a bit quicker and caught my bus. All the decisions we make on a daily basis, with no thought. It's only when things go wrong, that we have to pay attention.

I pause with the mop, blink away the chemical sting. Stella steps out from the lift. She carries a box of Christmas decorations. She chats with Blind George. I smile, wave. She nods.

I squeeze out the mop, lift up my bucket, swish past in my crinkly apron. Stella who has been with me day in, day out. Who has let me sleep in her bed. Who has got drunk with me. Who has mopped up my sick. Washed me. Let me bawl. Whom I have snotted over. Who tells me, every day that I am not to blame.

'I was thinking.' I call over. 'About looking gorgeous. With it being late night shopping.'

She stops, turns to me, yells. 'You're on.'

Blind George adds. 'For wedding dresses?'

I laugh. 'No George. I need to tell you something. I need to tell you lots. I'll make us some coffee. Nice stuff.'

I wander to the cleaners' cupboard, put away my mop and bucket. Lock the door. I'll choose something for mum too. A shawl she can wear in bed, with sequins and jewels handstitched in peacock blue. Something to make her mum again. ■

Narcissi

MARION MCCREADY

When the March snow fell, the monkey puzzle tree
hallelujahed in the neighbour's garden.

Invisible bushes, ignored
like the homeless in Buchanan Street,
filled out suddenly, became three-dimensional animals
supplicating on either side of the road.

Like a jellyfish bell, the satellite dish hovered
above a long-empty house.
When the snow fell, the narcissi in the garden
bore the weight of fallen clouds.
I saved five for my crystal blue vase.

I picked five narcissi, explored their petals
with my lips. The petals overlap
in a circle of hands, each one laying
across another. Five narcissi in a crystal blue vase
became five hearts beating simultaneously.

The next day, the snow melted. The unexpected safari
became an ordinary street again.
But the narcissi in the window burn brighter;
orange and yellow hot air balloons.
They carry me out of this winter.

March Mooness

MARION MCCREADY

The March moon ducks behind fast flowing spume-clouds
pouring across the sky, wind-whipped and pinkish mauve
against the navy night, against the moon-bulb flowering
between cloud-blast. March mooness. The sky
is not mellow and twinkling. The sky is no respite for the eye,
for the mind. It is a swift passing. Clouds are unbuttoned shirts
flapping around me, drawing me into a promise of warmth,
of arms, of heldness. Will the clouds hold? Will March moon
come out? Will the night air envelop me? I envelop the night air.

Ribwort plantain

BETH McDONOUGH

Before I grew old enough to skip
outside school, chant 'Mary, Queen of Scots
got her HEAD CHOPPED OFF', I'd learn games from Gran.

She'd indulge my west coast Doric to the road end,
lift the wooden boxy's two plank lid, hinged
with leather straps. She crooked new bottled milk,

quick replaced with clanky empty glass.
Gran would nod 'We cud aye play Carol-Doddies',
picking a tall plantain bud apiece. I gripped mine

in a wee tight fist. We stood square on,
and hit, and hit and hit and HIT the neck in turns,
until one broke the other's stem to win.

How many years in full-sized shoes, before I knew
how casually country children liked
to decapitate our half-forgotten monarchs?

Gran never told me this. Our interest moved
to a different plant, leafed with darker spots.
'Christ's blood', she smiled. 'Dropping from the Cross'.

Posted from the Sidlaws

BETH McDONOUGH

Sometimes the world enters flatfish moments.
Already flounder, half-hidden in sand,
nearly an etching, or a soft rubbing.
Well on its way to scrutiny,
as almost a fossil, caught behind glass.
Watched under rising water. Stopped breaths.

But all I will tell you is of ling-scratched legs,
marked fine as graph paper feints.
You've no need to learn of any unseen stumble,
of the shuddering rucksack, of those moments
of timed cyanosis, of whites of eyes rolling
of that thin dribble into insistent green.

All I will tell you is there were blaeberries, bled ripe
thickening this path, and a peated way down
to the hairst's hazing fields. You'll trace your gold
right to the start of Dundee. Somewhere beyond,
squint at an uncertain Tay. There must have been Fife.
Mostly there was warm mist, and us.

All I will tell you is how fast he ran,
uphill, out of sight, more rapid than nightmares
where I can't to follow. All I will tell you
is he found this springing bed,
blazed out with butterflies, and again
the world floundered ahead.

He is nearly an etching, or a soft rubbing,
half-hidden in kicked peat, in ling.
Under the scrutiny of watches and skies,
his is a moment of stopped breaths
gone fossil. A pale tremor,
of seconds turned aeons until this subsides.

Ash dieback

GAIL LOW

Tree surgeons with chainsaws have
come and done their amputations.

Ash trees felled; logs, darkened by rot,
line the path by small confetti mounds.

Sawdust still hangs in the air,
branches heaped as for a funeral pyre.

We circle what remains, marvel
at the growth rings, shamed

by what's revealed: concentric circles
each marking one year of life

ancient witness to the wind and rain,
and the warming sunshine.

Heartwood, sapwood, cambium, phloem,
and in deep grooves and fissures, bark wood –

Trunks whose girth exceeds
our arms' span, these be dinosaur bones.

And they'll not be come by again.

WE HAD BROUGHT very little with us that summer, but Mum and Dad thought we would find plenty to do as we had so much free space and could play by the river and let our imaginations run wild. The petrol-blue Triumph Herald stood stationary by the side of the house for the entire period we were there. Mum and Dad went to the Clachan for any necessities and left my two brothers and I to our own devices. We spent every day playing by the river, or in the nearby fields, where the barley grew tall as my little brother and green as the summer grass. We spent all summer playing make-believe games in imaginary worlds inhabited by different characters every day.

One day, we stood transfixed, watching a flock of birds, their shapes dark against the clear blue sky, and we immediately entered a world where humanity was threatened by a fatal disease, carried by birds from around the globe, and only three children and an eccentric scientist could save the world. On another day, sheep appeared in a field with strange blue and red markings. What had happened to them? What would happen to anyone who approached them? They were the dammed creatures, and we would be marked in the same way if the soldiers caught us in this dying world. Another time, a stranger appeared amongst the barley. What was that he was carrying? Was he whistling or was he speaking to his dog in a strange tongue? How had he got here, to this isolated island?

But the day we found the body by the river changed our world forever. This was not make-believe. This was no story. It involved police and reporters and medical people and Mum and Dad and the 'stranger' in the field and many more people besides. We were interviewed and separated from each other and for a time, from Mum and Dad. Our holiday became the busiest time I could remember in all my ten years. I could no longer make up stories and characters, because one image would never leave my mind.

The body was bloated, like an inflatable balloon that you might see outside a garage, with long arms dangling around. The face was chalk white, eyes staring in a forever trance, looking upwards at who knew what. There were ragged clothes wrapped around the torso. It was a woman. She looked like a ghost but not a pretty one. Her hair floated around her head, like a halo of death. Angus was the first to speak. He said we should run for help. Told us not to touch anything. Dragged my little brother away. Put his arm round my shoulders.

'Shouldn't we dial 999?' I asked.

'The grown ups will do that. We just need to tell them where it is. Don't cry, Catriona.'

Donnie, my younger brother, stopped speaking entirely. Angus started to draw. He drew all the time. Never had a pencil or pad out of his hands. He drew furiously for hours at a time, flicking the pages, over and over. He drew bodies in a

That Summer

STORY BY LORETTA MULHOLLAND



river. Faces with long hair floating in the water. Ladies with long dresses, drifting around the pages, going nowhere. Eyes. Sometimes he drew pages of eyes. Only eyes. Black and white sketches, with long lashes and staring pupils.

Me? All I tried to do was be good. I offered to wash dishes and made my bed every morning. I read books with stories about houses with golden windows and any adventure stories I could find on the shelves of the old bookcase. I emptied bins and set the table, doing every single chore I was asked. And more.

Mum and Dad never left us alone. They were with us every minute of every day. Our family was not allowed to leave the Clachan. Then one day, my parents were taken away to be questioned again. We were left in the care of an old lady who lived by the byre up the hill.

'Can't we just go outside into the garden to play for a while?' I pleaded with her, after three days of being locked in. 'Pleasssse?'

Angus looked up from his pad. She hesitated. Donnie was nodding furiously.

'Weel, jist fir hauf an hoor,' she said, 'But dinnae leave thi gerden. Dinnae stray fae thi hoose.'

Angus laid his pad and pencil aside, stood up and took Donnie by the hand and we headed for the back door together. Our wee brother headed towards the swings but me and Angus didn't go to the garden. He had taken the keys for the Herald, and we crept inside where another unsettling discovery awaited us and I felt a chill go through my whole body.

Inside the glove compartment was a red headscarf that did not belong to my mother.

'Why do you think that's here?' I asked Angus.

'Don't know.'

'Maybe the police thought it belonged to Mum?'

'Did it?'

'Don't be daft. We'd have seen it everyday.'

'Take it out.'

'Don't touch it,' Donnie squealed. We both turned in shock. It was the first time

he'd spoken since we'd discovered the body. We hadn't heard him creep into the vehicle. Last time I checked he was still on the swing. He had seemed to be in his own wee world. I looked at him, seeing terror in his eyes.

'Don't be scared, Donnie. It's only one of Mum's old scarves.'

Angus had taken the scarf out now, and was wringing it through his hands, like our granny used to squeeze the washing before she put it through the mangle. He looked like he was thinking hard, puzzling out how on earth a scarf belonging to another lady could be in Dad's glove compartment.

'It's not Mummy's,' Donnie cried. 'It's not got her smell.'

Angus unfurled the scarf. We all looked at it in horror. One corner was stained dark brown with dried-in blood.

'What should we do?' I asked. Angus had read lots of detective stories. He must know the answer.

'We hide it. Bury it where no-one can find it. Then we run away.'

'Why?'

'A decoy.'

'What does that mean?' asked Donnie.

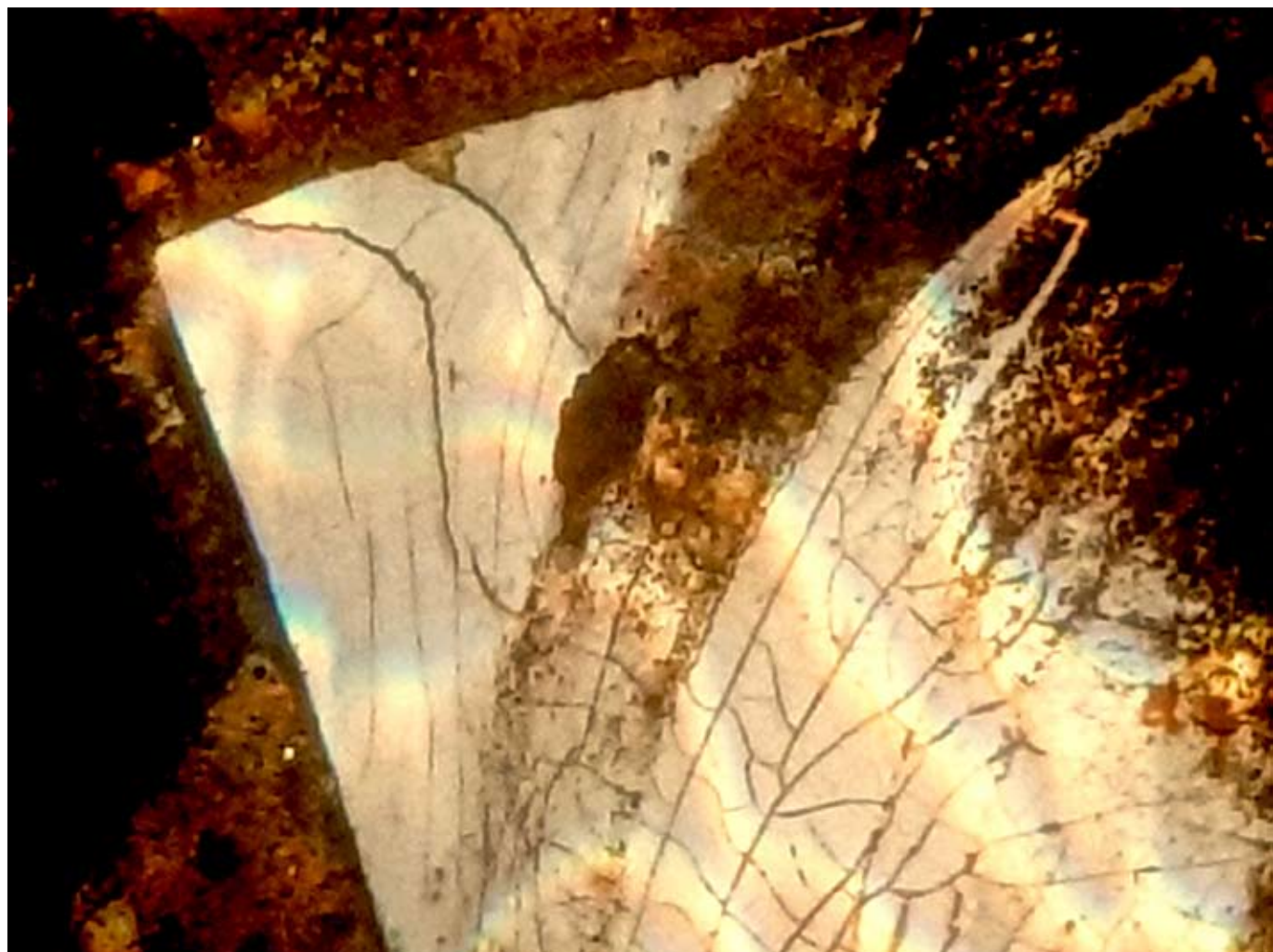
'We get the police to stop asking Mum and Dad questions.'

'How?'

'Because they'll be too busy looking for us.'

I looked at Angus. I knew he was thinking the same as me. We *would* be running away. But not from the police. ■

Underwater fragment. Kenny Taylor



What Geese Know

EWAN CRAIG

Go north!
The geese know.
You have been waiting in your tired south
through the dead times, the grey times,
times of cold and darkness
waiting there for something like a sign—
and there they go
all strung out diagonal in a row.

I watched them till they dwindled
beyond vision; beating north,
they know what lies beyond
the northern horizon,
dream of a waking promise—
and on they fly
one by one on into the northern sky.

Was it a whisper carried on the wind
that made them lift their heads,
break their slumber;
was it a shiver passed silently over the water
and opened their eyes and their wings to
the quickening season?
They know this is a time
for leaving, time
for going where the north is wide and free—
and so they go
into that unknown they somehow know

Drumbeat

JAMES APPLEBY

Those boys don't know how old they are.
Coming by me in the road, bass drum
hung on the strongest's shoulders.
When the mallet strikes taut skin
he asks my street a question: with us?
His mates join in song.

Insistent as a pulse
in the ear, standing up too fast,
in the wrist of a clenched fist.
It could be any pack of half-pissed lads
chanting their fathers' tunes.
Funny how abuse becomes an heirloom.
I've sung at rival towns and referees.
How different is it? I don't ask myself.

The worst of us
slowed to a heart's pace.
The inevitability, I think —
a drum will make you cruel.
They're passing now.
That pulse fades, seems to quicken,
slows again, like a remembered insult,
and the city ghosts maybe
stretch a hand to one another
or scrap and rage, long dead.

A Kingfisher, A Dead Fox

JAMES APPLEBY

Carving halo and heart
from candle flames, knapping until
that bird's blue-orange back. When you see her close,
the slick of turquoise between wings, her different shades of vapour,
eat everything. The bank unfocuses. Whatever the iron fence
— she settles on a spoke — is guarding: well, whatever.
But there's candle-orange past that fence.
It nags in the field of the binoculars. Turn the dial
to see a cub asleep, breathing, you're sure,
and shallower as you watch, until it was always dead.
Entirely whole but for the eyes
the dark inside the skull looks out
and it seems strangely wise for a dead dog.
The bird is shifting on the spoke
almost too alive, then up,
upriver, low over the rocks.

Purple Melamine Mixing Bowl

DILYS ROSE

Saved up for months to buy my mother
for her birthday what, covertly, I coveted:
a thing so now— in the swinging sixties—
when purple was the new black
and the clean lines of Danish design
were, I convinced my ten-year-old self,
what every woman wanted. She ran
a hand across the full smooth lip,
tested the non-slip ring on the base—
it worked, even on Formica! —cradled,
fleetingly, the roomy, womb-like bowl,
stowed it in a cupboard.

As purple was all the rage, I should have
known she'd suspect anything so hued
might abet my budding delinquency.
Besides, she hardly ever baked. I can't
recall a single cake she made. Sweet treats
were Gran's domain: gingerbread, treacle
tarts, though by then she'd lost the vigour
needed for family favourites. To spark
my mother's interest, I tried my hand
at foolproof, no-bake recipes. She told me
not to leave a mess, to put everything back
where it came from.

House-clearing, I reclaimed my gift.
Dusty from disuse, it scrubbed up nicely.
I've used it ever since. My girls learned
to tip in clouding flour, snowfalls of sugar;
to stir, beat, whisk, fold, to scrape the batter
off the sides *before* they licked the spoon.
Now (on tiptoe) the grandkids take their turn.
At sixty, the purple melamine mixing bowl
retains its youthful bloom, has barely a scratch.
Pushing seventy, I know the bowl will
outlive me, know too that I'll bequeath
a lasting promise of cake.

56°49.0153'N / 4°10.959'W

SHARON BLACK

This heart is made of stone
a lumpen fist
beside a muddy track near Newtonmore

Its vena cava and aorta gleam
with zig-zag puddles
held in tractor prints. It overlooks

Glen Spey — the river's peaty vein
dispensing nutrients
to fields of sheep, of neeps,

below the Cairngorms
with their litany of vitals:
Ben Macdhui, Braeriach, Cairn Toul,

Sgor an Lochain Uaine, Beinn a' Bhuidr...
The body stretches out, bulging
And magnificent. A mizzle

lubricates the joints. Down there
on the A9: the bright lights
of a lorry flowing north to Inverness.

Here, a metal gate slumps
against a wall; summer hay ferments
in lines of black wrapped silage.

One transplant is enough.
This heart is roped with quartz,
tied around the planet's core.

*Note: The geographical centre-point of Scotland
was marked by Ordnance Survey by a stone
in a wall with a plaque. After it was stolen,
it was replaced in 2015 by a boulder.*

Pervasive

SHARON BLACK

On a crowded sill behind the sink
it spread in all directions while their three girls
painted at the table, the dog
ran yapping through the house,

crumbs and leftovers on all surfaces, music scores
in jumbled piles, home-made jams
cramming open cupboards; marrows, gourds and onions
caked in earth along the floor.

Yann kept the place on after Karen left,
the tiny cutting is now twice my height
trailing languorous fingers
across the lantern hook, the indoor washing line,

drinking and drinking water. It flowers
year-round, pink fists emerging
overnight on woody knuckles,
clovers massing brightly on the soil.

We open on a 5 star hotel room. Robbie a man in his early thirties, medium build, dressed in a brand new three piece Saville row suit and wearing a Rolex watch on his wrist is sitting back in an expensive reclining chair. He cups a large brandy goblet in one one hand and has a lit full corona cigar in the other hand.

Weel, see's du dis, sittin i da comfy chair, in dis posh suite itill Claridges Hotel. A dram o da finest braandy an sookin apo a muckle Cuban ceegar. Du could say, da cat's got da cream. I could get used ta dis. Da boys aa hae dir ain rooms, some difference fae a smelly an damp bunk. Mind you, I bet we aa still stink o fish, nae quantity o scrubbin'll get rid o dat. Da sweet smell o success (beat) wir success.

He'll be some nicht danicht (beat) I doubt dat. Da Fishin News awards, tap boat, highest earnin boat ageen fur da third year on da trot. No dat hit's been aesy dis year, wir been seldom hame. Wir secret, yea, I doubt dat wid be hit, we geng gaff in aa wadders. We'll geng aff in wadder naeboid idder wid. Dat frichtens a lock o fock, dir's been twartree greenhorns ower da years come aff fur ee trip and niver geen ta sea more (**laughs at the memories**) Mind you, if you're makkin da big money, da crew'll bide wi you. Dey've aa biggit muckle new hooses, hae tap o da range cars an weemin wha ken foo ta spend da cash.

Hit goes tagidder, da boat dat maks da first laandin eftir coorse wadder maks da biggest gross. A'm sittin here, an Jenny an da bairns aa sittin at hame. Da peerie lass, Ruth, A'm barely seen her fae shö wis boarn, an dat's her a year owld nixt week. I tink hit's nixt week, is hit?

Me faider'll be i da chair afore da fire, half wey trowe a bottle o rum, dat's whit he does ivery Saterdag. Me midder leaves him at nine o clock an gengs ta bed afore he gets ower drunk, he aye spends da nicht i da chair. You wid tink he'd be proud o me an whit I've done, makkin a name fur mesel, name spoken aroond da Toon, da Prince, dat's whit dey caa me. But naa, he aye fins something ta whinge aboot, I can niver be guid enoch fur him, owld bastard dat he is. I widna care, he spent aa his wirkin life on owld wrecks o boats dat barely scaeppit a livin. Hit's nae winder dey caa him Macphail.

Weel, hit's time ta geng. We'll get da doorman ta hail wis a posh limousine. We micht as weel turn up in style. Hit's time ta lap up some o dat respect dat's on offer. An wis signin da contract fur a new boat danicht. Dat'll shurly get wis da front page an da centre spread itill nixt week's *Fishing News*!!

....

Robbie sitting on a plastic chair in a Hospital A & E department. He is dirty with dishevelled hair. A care-worn blanket is wrapped around his shoulders as he cups a mug of steaming tea in both shakky hands as he tries to extract as much

Da Prince

PLAY BY JAMES SINCLAIR



warmth from the cup as he can.

Jesus! Jesus! What da fuck hiv I done? (beat) What da fuck am I goin ta dö? (beat) Whit happened? Wan minute hit wis aa goin dat weel. Dan athin a half oor, hit's aa geen, aathing. Da boat, da crew, da fish, aathing (beat) aathing. A'll niver be able ta luek da wives ur da bairns i da face, niver! I wiss I'd geen doon w idem, I wiss I wis deed. Whit's da point in onything (beat) onything onymair.

Eftir monts o strugglin ta mak a wage, da crew gettin twitchy an crabbit. Da pier side gossips sayin we'd lost wir touch. You wid see hit i dir een an da wey dey turned dir backs ta you ta hae a peerie gaff among demsels. Aaboid winderin if dir wis annidder big landin left in wis.

Dan aff we guid on Tuesday, tinkin we wid get a couple o days aff da back o Foula afore da start o da winter gales. Da first twartree shots wir promisin, dan we got a muckle haul. Da wadder wis closing in though, I said we could mak fur hame ur bide wi da fish. Da boys, dey aa smelt da money, da tow't o da market filt wi wir boxes. So we battened doon da hatches, lashed up onything dat micht shift an kept on fishin, da wadder getting waar an waar.

Dan at da hiecht o da gale, dir wis a muckle bang an aathin guid black,. Joost laek a roller coaster goin trowe a tunnel. Hit's laek aathin is in slow motion. Willie, da engineer climded up i da wheelhouse, machtless, sayin a connectin rod had come oot da side o da engine an wrecvkit da

water pump an dir wis nae wye ta get ta da sea cock ta stop da water. I grippit fur da VHF an switched ower ta da batteries. I transmitted wir mayday. Aathing speeded up dan, hit turned ta a blur. I heard da shouts o da boys, I mind wis wirkin wi da liferaft. Da Steadfast sinkin oot under wir feet, da monstrous waves an vaguely mind da helicopter winchman liftin me oot da raft.

I can see da owld man's face, a peerie smeeg, sayin. "Dir's no muckle craa wi dee noo, dat's dee croon slippit" (beat) Owld bastard!! (beat) Whit am I goin ta dö? Whit am I goin ta dö? Aaboid says, du has ta tink o dee wife, tink o da bairns. I canna tink o naethin, I wiss I wis deed.

Dir waving me ower, Whit's dat? Willie's goin ta be fine, dat's aye something, I suppose.

...

Robbie is sitting in a small untidy sitting room in a careworn chair beside an open fire. There are empty rum bottles lying all around. Robbie in dirty jeans and a holey jumper, his hair unkempt is bent double in the chair holding on to a dirty glass. There is a half empty rum bottle beside the chair. Robbie is Drunk!

Du picks dee time, doesna du? Naethin I could do wis iver guid enoch, (beat) Macphail du owld bastard. Weel midder'll hae some paece noo, shu deserves a medal, a sainthood mair laek! Jenny says shu's comin ta da funeral, but shu's no sittin wi me, da bairns are goin ta her midder. Bugger, bugger, I med a richt erse o yun. I couldna see whit I wis doin ta dem fur worryin aboot mesel. I hed a lot on me mind, hit wis a bad time fur me. So if I needed a dram ta get through, shu should a hed a bit mair sympathy fur me.

Dis is me noo, a mont affshore, dan a mont at hame. At laest A'm sober whin A'm at sea. A mont lycin at station waitin fur naethin ta happen, hoopfully, If een o yun rig's geed up, dey'd be damn all you could dö aboot hit. Wir dere fur lueks, mair as onything idder. Wir lycin no far fae da grunds, Da Deeps an dat trinkie dat's teen mony a set o gaer, Da Shambles! Da boat wir on is an owld trawler. I tink if we joost pat up new set o blocks i da gallows an a smaa rockhopper trawl. We could hae twartree shotts and hit wid gee wis somteen ta dö, fur he's a lang mont. Mind you, I widna gee dis crew a punt i da harbour, fur dey wid aa droon. A'm niver sailed wi siccan a crood o fols in aa me days. (beat) Naa, I tink we'll joost laeve hit.

Dey come ta me i me draems, sometimes hit's joost dir shouts an skirls an soonds o iron bucklin. Dan idder nichts, da crew A'll be staandin aroond da bed, da waater dreepin fae dir hair an claes and dey aye aks da sam thing "Whit ir we goin ta dö?" "An aa I can say is "Go away"" "Go away" Dan dey joost stand an stare an say naethin, dat's worse.

Robbie stands unsteadily and raises his glass

Photograph by Ruth Archer. Pixabay



Weel, here's ta dee, aa laek dee, gae few an dir aa deed. I canna say A'll miss dee, fur dat wid be a lee. Dey'll be nae mair, more steam Macphail!

Robbie drinks from his glass, he drinks down the liquor in one go and takes a wobble.

Jesus!!

He falls head first into the fire.

...

A small fishing boat is tied to the end of the pier. Four young boys jump ashore. They're pushing and laughing as they run up the pier. Robbie climbs onto the pier with care and sits down on a mooring bollard. He takes a bottle of water out his jacket pocket unscrews the cork and has a drink, wiping his hand across his face. He lifts off his hat and rubs a large burn scar on the side of his head and smiles.

Dir no a bad bunch, raelly. A'm seen waar, some o dem even mind me o me at yun age. Dey luek up ta me, dey say. "Come on an tell wis stories fae da glory days." Dey say. Dey tink A'm a richt character. Even dis blödy scar, dey tink I got hit on some epic fishin trip, (beat) if ony dey kent. Dey'll be oot on da spree danicht, dat's fur sure. Dat's me, nearly three year fae I whet da drink, da day eftir da owld man's funeral. Haand on haert, I canna say I've missed hit. Funny thing is A'm niver missed Macphail edder.

Dis is a peerie cracker o a job. I tow't hit wid be shite, but du sees whit tow't did. A chance ta geng aff ivery day an get da

gaer ower da side. Hit's aye an expectation whin da bag comes in ower da rail, dat niver goes. An dey pey me a wage ivrery mont whedder I catch onything ur no. I hae da knowledge, fur sure, A'm med ivery mistake dir is ta mak. We used ta tink trainin wis nonsense. Learn on da job, dat's whit da owld eens said. Fishin nooadays is an exact science. Dir's dat muckle different pieces o machinery an digital aids, hit's a job figurin oot whit ony o dem does. Wan mistake can cost a fortune, ur a life. Nane ken better as me.

Me an Willie, we wir da ony twa ta mak hit aff da Steadfast an Willie has niver brokken braeth ta me fae syne. I dunna ken whedder he blames me fur hit aa, ur he joost canna bear ta spaek aboot hit ava. He niver did geng back ta sea, Someen's said dat Willie has niver even been aff in a smaa boat, since. Jenny his'na hed bugger all da dö wi me. I doubt aa da faat dere, lies at my door. Shu married ageen, a Sooth fellow, dey seem blyde enoch wi whit da bairns say. I dö hae some kind o a relationship wi dem noo, wir getting dere, hit's a wark in progress.

Dey still come ta me in me draems, da boys, no as aften as dey did. An whin dey aks whit dey sood dö? I say, joost hadd on a peerie while, A'll be wi you shun enoch an dan dey'll joost fade away.

Dey caaed me da Prince eence, weel me croon fell aff an I ended up da coort jester. But A'm on da mend an A'm some kind o content.

Robbie pushes himself up off the bollard and walks slowly up the pier with the gait of an old man, old before his years. ■

May Day Rituals

LYNN VALENTINE

No banners, no songs, no queen
being crowned with hedgerow blossoms—
just the cry of a buzzard hunting,
a rash of rabbits in grass.

In my hometown
my sister is knitting before leading prayers
for the dead. My friend is calling everyone
she knows, matching homes to refugees.

Further south there might be Morris dancing,
Maypoles, beer. Here, the bark of a tractor
in a bogged-down yard; the buzzard hunts—
no rabbit spared.

Unlocking

LYNN VALENTINE

Never a dreaming sleep
or sleep at all now.
Instead the fumble and fuss of opening
the door at 3am, being surprised
by April snow, while the old black dog circles
the lawn, his blind eyes focussed
on younger days; days patrolling the farm.

He takes his time
to make sure that the house is filled
with a good raw draught and the moon with it
until all the rooms roll
to the lustre of light,
the affirmation of cold.
How can you sleep
in these bleached hours,
this porous night?
The door left open.

ONCE, A GOOD few centuries ago now, there was an old woman. She'd never been young, only ever old. She sat in her round room in a tower, with arched windows, overlooking the sea. It was her job to spin wool, in a tower, in a round room.

Susan was very placid, only her fingers moved. They say that the work of the fingers is what reaches the soul. Well, that's as maybe, it seemed that only her fingers moved. The rest of her sat in her skirts on her seat, by her spinning wheel. The old woman speaks: Susan is my real name.

People are afraid of me.

Why were they afraid of me? I had answers, they called up and I decided if they should be ignored or answered. I was a sort of oracle.

How did I know the answers?

In the wool that I was spinning, if it resisted or not, if it was thick or thin. I knew whatever I felt.

It was easy to give a 'yes' or 'no' answer; if the wool went thick, 'no'; if it went thin, 'yes'. Sometimes, if it went too thin and broke, that meant the extreme end of something, 'yes', but it would still break.

Could I get any other sorts of answers from the wool? If I spread out the wool flat when wet, I could look at the pictures

in the weave, I could use my fingers to create pictures. I didn't tell people I could create pictures with the wool. I could see deep into a scene.

Their questions were so boring; 'yes' or 'no': should I marry so and so, should I go into business with so and so.

I didn't understand what I saw, it was the universe swirling. Like clouds. It had no meaning for my life either. I was Susan. I had no patience with these stupid people. I like to be by myself with my wheel. I was close to the heavens. I never went out from my tower room. Me and the wool, we were close to the sea.

Real things don't speak with words. They swirl like clouds and patterns. It's patterns that matter, not words.

Patterns are everlasting and eternal. Words aren't.

Patterns don't have sharp edges. If it

has a sharp edge, it's man made. Patterns have no 90degree angles, no straight lines, they swirl. Even words have edges.

Is there anything else about the patterns? The colours are iridescent, when they're all added up, you get white. The colours can be distinguished, but the final result is white.

That's why my wool was white, it was condensed patterns and condensed information. I could tease the wool out to get the real pattern, but people asked stupid 'yes' or 'no' questions.

Do the people matter? No. Nor I.

What does matter? Just the wool matters. Why? The wool is the condensed pattern; squash the pattern all up, end up with wool. Pattern is when you tease things out to look at it, that's a human action. Otherwise, it's just white wool. It's

just there if there's nobody to look at it, just wool.

Is the wool to do with sheep? I was just about to say, No. It's the reason why sheep have wool, it's Platonic. A poor representation of real wool. Shadow on the cave wall stuff? Yes. We have sheep's wool as a poor representation.

What is the real wool? Some kind of matter. It is physical matter. It comes out of the cradle of the universe. It comes out of black holes. People think black holes swallow things, no! real physical matter comes out of them. It's not a religious thing. Not a spiritual thing. Not alive. We humans put too much meaning on 'alive', we think it means to be thinking. 'Alive' has no real meaning. Either a thing is there, or it's not. 'Alive' is a human word. A very limiting word.

Either it's there or it's not.

Susan is shaking out her apron: You've had more than your time. She's given us all we need. She was a *cailleach*, an old woman. She didn't heal people. She tholed them. Was Susan ever young? Susan was only ever old. Mostly she looked at the patterns, they were fascinating to her.

And Susan was her real name. She sat in her round room in a round tower, with arched windows, overlooking the sea, and she spun. ■

Shopping Week Queen

INGRID LEONARD

Children line up to pick a queen
who'll give a speech she doesn't write
in a debutante's gown, her ladies
carried through town in a pony
and trap, cutting ribbons, pinning
rosettes on pressed lapels.

There's a cell
at the foot of my heart's stairwell
whose walls are pasted with the un-
voiced words of what girls should be –
it's piss-soaked, shadowy. It says *smile*
and never speak of painful sex
or messed-up tests, homoerotic boys,
or a despair that changes the colour
of the sky. Don't have strong opinions,
get spots, never say anything so clever
it confounds.

I'm crying in a minidress
outside Matchmakers, speaking out
of turn to a guy who's stuck his hand
up my skirt, expletives unfurling
in my mouth, scenting the air with their
hard musk.

On the island's other side,
creamy hand-picked girls accept posies,
tilt heads into smiles for dumbstruck boys,
vicarious parents with chests upswelling
at the doings of their gentle daughters.

Voar

INGRID LEONARD

I gid in me own time's voar among
a guid skrythe, aipsan atween doors
fae wan student flat tae anither. I'd shower
wi thowts o voices that teemed thi air,
kennan we'd soon be mullan ower
music or Voltaire, guys who widna luk
at wir eyes when they spokk, steam risan
fae hot cups. Is their a better wak than
thi wan ye mak tae see yer freends?
Nights in May wi family steyan, pizza
for tea an home by nine. Whar turns in
when thi dark's a blip an thi day begs
daean at a lick, I hear a hunder thoosand
yamils sayan hii! Mak use o yer legs.

skrythe – crowd
aipsan – meandering
yamils – contemporaries

When I was seventy-eight

DEREK SMITH

she asked that I sit for her
slippers pipe and pullover

wearing a kindly smile

I insisted these great furnishings
of skin
hang
loose

she snapped me
nude and still
called it life

An Orkney Couple

(efter Ann Scott-Moncrieff)

INGRID LEONARD

Peter's pullan straa across thi back

o a widden chair-frame wi a silver needle,
thi twine oilan tae gold in thi daylight.
Thi floor below is spread wi owld *Orcadians*,
flecks o gloy across smudged ink.

He's half-done; strips o unspun straa
stick oot at thi sides, luk raa, dry.
He's gaeen me brither a lesson
in an owld craft; his strong fingers
continue thi row, hids coorse sewing.
Hid's no wark for a lass, he tells me.
By thi time I ken him, he waks
stiffly, oot in his workshop till meal-
times served at thi peal o thi cathedral
bell, grim-faced until he greets uis,

wir names booman warm-like roond
Waukmill's living room. When uncle Jim
Isbister got his death at thi Brig o Waithe –
gaan oot tae check on a neebor,
owld an on her own in an air-raid,

thi bluisk o gunfire, thi rollan moan
o thi Luftwaffe – some season efter
thi bombs fell, Peter cam tae thi door
o his widow sayan, *ah'm come*
tae luk efter you an thi bairn.

Time wears on. Gret nephews an nieces
are runnan doon thi passage tae thi kitchen,
whar Peter an Lily are slicean a rabbit's tongue
for thi cat. In thi ley end o their life,
they serve clootie dumpling an custard

at yule-tide, thi shows, keep a Payphone
for B&B guests, dividan its silver spoils
atween thi youngest, peediest hands.
I hated thi quiet street that brithless
bonnie evening, an air so blue it whistled

as I wakked, aged 16, tae a kerfil o fock,
parked by their door, gyte
efter a concert that kept its crowd singan.
Time dandered in thi sky but Lily an Peter
were in bed roond thi back.

gloy – clean straw
bluisk – flash
gyte – crazy, wild
dandered – strolled

Twa Ducks at the Port Elphinstone Brig

DEREK SMITH

Its fower year syne the ane in twa-hunner
year flood; sic a muckle spate it smoord
the fires o' Hell and rose like the deid

through the very founds, ruckling fluurboards,
seepin through the fabrics o' oor lives,
watermarking these days. Indelibly.

Whit rare gifts o' second sight would hae seen
sic a torrent in the noo mickle rin
o' the River Don, whaur in the sun a pair

o' mallards shokel; the drake richt prood
o' his garb, skinklin like a dream coat,
his neebor's shawl a mair modest affair,

drab as a Puir Clare nun. Further doon
ablow, a lang-droont sheep, grey as the nappy
o' Christ on the cross, coories aroon

a staunchion to entertain the craws.
I staun oan the brig, a man abin it aw.
Weel versed in reason, I ken fu weel

that probability and the dyke,
rebuilt wi Tam's Forest Quarry stane,
stack the odds in my favour. Mostly.

But, for the weetest winters yet to come,
there maun bide a deeper faith
in the twa ducks' prayers and the sacrificial yowe.

On Home Ground:

Three poems

GERRY LOOSE

On Not Meeting Du Fu in Skeoch Wood Twelve Hundred and Fifty One Years After He Left

each day the paths grow deeper in leaves no-one here
the hound runs there & here back to check on me
I think like father & son we love each other
the jays scold us for walking on acorns
maple leaves keep falling tree limbs cracking
for a few days no duties tonight I'll drink more wine
who needs me sober ravens fly upside down

pandemic & storms two years
away from the hut heart failed half
blind in one eye fearful for the other

woods and hills walk on
leave me here reading Du Fu
dreaming of the orchard
flyting owls flying geese
I'll steal the stars set them anew
such freedom in staying still

Notes on Flying

though they walk polite
dogs here these days

the hound & I stravaig
the woods' upper reaches

together we almost soar
he bounds for sheer joy

heart dancing left footed
grey haired stumbling

after even myself
flying into emptiness

The Folly

ROBIN MUNRO

Go past the private gate to playing sands
and see a bothy of our local whinstone,
made up like a castle for Edwardian eyes,
stormed and tidalised
since they established it above their foreshore.

Here they changed.
Ladies to one side.
Gentlemen to the other.
Redressed for the sea.

Down from the Big House on days deemed halcyon
to a landing stage deemed quaint
while we with naturally bare feet
kept in the background
their occasional tea service.

At least that's how I see the heyday of a sold Estate
where rhododendron turns in on itself and stifles everything.
Our cottage flowers migrate as fragrant weeds
while each spring tide erodes the Folly.

Playground 1952

ROBIN MUNRO

We are playing. We are talking.
Though talking, when you're five, is playing too.

My eyes are among silver movements I know as seagulls

Some one (Barry? Ian? only names now)
some one my size anyway
says 'there's a bomber'.
He's watching a plane, and so must I.
Much greyer than silver, and far too near.

I fear things I don't know.

I hoard words, especially doing words.
I hope bomber is a thing word
though it has a doing sound.

I shove it down into my vocabulary
to fester there. I forget how we met

until a too fast forwarded 2022
when I am aware how far more real they are, the new words,
creeping into the children of Kyiv.

Banff Baillies

JAY WILSON

Alone,
in snow muted woods,
fox prints tack
across my path.

Cast out from snow-laden
Banff Baillies
a single flake drifts,
lifts slightly
on my breath,

lands on outstretched
palm, settles
and melts,
caught in the storm's eye.

Killing Times

ROBIN MUNRO

I walk the flowering merse
more or less the flow of the River Bladnoch
in our Killing Times

guessing where people stood:
Provost, Sheriff, soldiers, we
-the righteous and the feart -
down from the County Town, to watch
two tethered women choose:
acquiesce or slowly drown.

The tide would have risen, as predicted,
round the stake. Sea into river.
And resistance. Rising water.
And resistance. Final answer?

Take the oath I'd say
but then I'm centuries away from knowing
how the land lies in 1685.

The 'Martyrs' Stake' today is high and dry.
The River changed its course.
Rivers are all about expediency.
Killing times have moved on.

Cheating By Nature

JAY WILSON

Don't you go wagging your finger at me,
chucking accusations left right and centre.
Homewrecker. Shirker. Defective sense
of motherbird. To say I lack maternal
instinct affronts me. It's not my fault
airmiles to Africa and back take their toll,
odds always stacked against us. Twenty fledglings
in place of four, or even five, are my reasons to fly.

Don't you go saying it's easy for me to turn
my back, leave my bairns to colonise
their hosts' nests. Eight seconds flat is all it takes
to swoop in, chuck out eggs
excess to requirement. My chicks are not helpless
from birth. Mine have tools to survive.
In built. Instinct. In their genes. It isn't personal,
and anyhow, Crossbills can fairly fight.

Don't you go forgetting that as April turns to May
my cuu-cuu calling spins your head towards
summer's warmer days. What's that name you have for me.
Harbinger, isn't that right. Herald of spring
when your winter weary smile spreads wide
as the horizon.

Don't you tell me, is all I'm saying,
that if you, like me, were under threat, you wouldn't
just lie down and die.

A Tod's Thought

SHANE STRACHAN

I
cam scoolin
fae the cleuch,
sekan tae be hyne
awa fae jeelin snaa.
Leave ma aleen
tae berk at the meen -
I'll mak nae
reerie amo the stirks, winna
bather yer lams,
hens or cocks.
Jist lat ma lie
aneath yer lum,
the rik warmin
throu tae ma roosty tail
as snaa faas
doon ower this warld,
pinntin it fite
an smorin it hale.

Cyanotype

SHANE STRACHAN

The sky is midnight blue
as the crescent moon x-rays
the weeds in our garden,
printing negatives on the backs
of my eyelids as you bend
down to blow a steaming gust
at the dandelion clock -
it dances itself empty, sends up
its parachutes on a new journey
to take root
under someone else's sky.

Snug Bar

SHANE STRACHAN

Linger on that cobbled corner
far James and Virginia Street meet,
ye might hear the clink o glass,
a smoker's rasp, the soft scuff
o ashtrays dighted clean, the whine
o the foamy glass-washin machine
as its coorse bristles furl bricht green.

Listen for pound coins rattlin doon
the bandit as barmaids shout through
the cellar hatch - the till pings, stappit-fu!
Hear the repeated *whack* o darts
puncturin holes aa ower the waa,
the urinal's spluttrin waterfaa,
the mannies mummilin at the bar...

Och, noo ere's only revvin cars
and a scurrie's lonely *caa-cao*
abeen this impty carpark far
the Snug Bar eence stood - this void
atween fancy flats far folk hide inside,
deef tae the last orders bell chime
and the "Drink up! It's hame time!"

From Paisley to Kilmartin

The recent work of Graham Fulton

GRAHAM FULTON HAS been writing and performing poetry since the late 1980s. His output is impressive, as the prolific author of many poetry pamphlets and – at the latest count – some twenty full-length collections (his *Dreams of Scottish Youth Volume 1* comes out through Published in Silence this year). Much of his work draws on urban life, where his powers of observation and description, including in full-on Glaswegian Scots – can transform what could seem mundane at first glance into the stuff of poetry. It's not surprising that the late Tom Leonard was an earlier influence, nor that a recent collection *Replacement Bus Service: Collected Bus Poems* (Smokestack Publications, 2021) does exactly what it says on the tin, with poems drawn from people and incidents seen on, from or while waiting for buses. Such subject matter might sound potentially tedious if you're not familiar with Graham Fulton's ways with words. But think again, not least after Des Dillon's commenting on the collection that: "Someone needs to sit up and take notice of just how good Fulton is at digging diamonds out of the dust of everyday futility...Hat's off to the man's talent."

In other collections from the past handful of years, poem titles such as 'The Elemental Co-op' and 'Set the Controls for the Heart of the Club Bar in Paisley' suggest a kind of Scottish Bukowski – and someone unflinching in his realism and tone. "Fulton is a true iconoclast and subversive," wrote Alan Dent in reviewing the 2020 collection *Coronaworld*, "a writer unafraid of well-placed moral outrage and willing to offend the sensibilities of the powerful, the rich, the corrupt and the dissembling."

With Central Belt grime so evident in his work, it may surprise many to learn that Graham Fulton has also had a long-standing fascination with part of Argyll far removed from post-industrial cityscapes and urban deprivation. Kilmartin Glen has one of the most remarkable concentrations of Neolithic burial chambers and ritual stone monuments in Scotland. Repeated visits here have provided inspiration to Graham for both poetry on an epic scale and drawings rendered in meticulous detail.

Intrigued by these contrasts in his work, *Northwords Now* asked Graham Fulton to share some thoughts on the background to both his book inspired by Kilmartin, *Flesh and Stone* (Controlled Explosion Press, 2018) and two other recent collections drawn from city life and in response to the pandemic: *Chips, Paracetamol and Wine* (Smokestack Books, 2020) and *Coronaworld* (Penniless Publications, 2020).

A small sample of Graham's poetry



Dunchraigaig Cairn. Drawing by Graham Fulton.

from these, some cover blurbs and one each of his drawings and photographs are included to help readers savour the contrasts and connections.

Flesh And Stone

"Kilmartin Glen and Loch Craignish lie deep within the heart of Dalriada in Mid Argyll, an ancient land of mystery and ritual, silent power and haunting beauty. A world of ceremonial death and dark swirling currents. Graham Fulton first came here on holiday with his family in the 1960s, and he keeps coming back. *Flesh and Stone* is an illustrated poem which tries to capture the elusive magic of the area by creating two parallel journeys full of recurring voices, fractured rhythms, tumbling imagery and scrambled memory. Streams of humanity that dance and intersect until an end is found. An epic of long gone people who have left their traces of order and chaos. Footprints in the flow."

GF: *Flesh and Stone* is an illustrated poem which tries to capture the elusive magic of the area by creating two parallel journeys full of recurring voices, fractured rhythms, tumbling imagery and scrambled memory. Streams of humanity that dance and intersect until an end is found. An epic of long gone people who have left their traces of order and chaos. Footprints in the flow.

I'd been going to Loch Craignish and Kilmartin since I was a boy. I'd written a couple of poems about the Kilmartin area and then I read *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams which I really liked, even though I hadn't a clue what he was going on about most the time. An epic poem about a place as well as a man, mysterious and haunting. It then gave me the idea to do a very long, meandering poem about Kilmartin and Loch Craignish. A labour

of love about the area. I began gathering images and ideas which took about three years building it up and up. Piles of it. I made a list of each place I wanted to write about and any other ideas I wanted to go into it.

Once I got all I needed I worked out that it would be two journeys weaving together. Kilmartin Glen from south to north, Loch Craignish from north to south. I wanted it to include poetry, strange line breaks, punctuation. A mix of poetry, prose, geological facts, song lyrics, gravestone inscriptions, lines from movies, history, all working together. Flashbacks to childhood would be in prose form and then back to the main journey in the poem. A journey through time, from prehistory to the immediate moment. My memories all linked within the history of the area. The two places are inextricably linked to me, but I wanted to give them equal billing so to speak. I wanted the journeys to be parallel.

I eventually had a lot of the sections written but didn't know how to make it all hold together, and I didn't have a beginning. Then I cut my finger going over a fence at Craignish Point and the falling drop of blood gave me a beginning (the red drop of blood on page one of the poem is hand drawn). The beginning of the world, creation. And then as I was crossing a stream at Loch Craignish I got the footprint idea, which gave me the way to make the two journeys weave together. The footprint worked-in with the footprint at Dunadd, first settlers in the area, footprints on the moon. Despite all this 'organisation', it's still a poem that grew organically, instinctively. I didn't know how it was going to pan out all. The writing of it and the drawings took two and a half years, so with the original image-idea-gathering it took about 5 years from start to end. I like being published by other people, but this

I knew I wanted to do entirely on my own. I don't remember now what was the first part I worked on and completed, and looking back I can't believe I actually put it all together in a coherent way and made it work.

It's an antithesis of my urban poems, an antidote, a way of escaping from the claustrophobia of town and city life, yet they are still all about ordinary people. Only the landscape has changed. I knew it had to be multimedia, so I used drawings too, the only other thing I'm good at (I'm not much good at quick spontaneous drawings so went down the detailed, slow, almost photographic route) as well as unusual black and white photographs to try and catch the atmosphere of the area. Repetition and things folding back on themselves to hold it all in place. The detail and humour I use in my urban stuff is still here, but it's a different landscape, different time. It has to flow, be intimate and epic, not give any answers. What it is to be a human. I don't really know, or want to know, what it's all about. If something resonates with me without looking for a big meaning then hopefully it'll resonate with others. The little huge achievements of mankind, communication, writing, expressing ideas, moon landings, leaving our footprints. A way of staying in touch with innocence and beauty, keep the cynicism at bay. ■

Extract from *Flesh and Stone*

*
mingle the bones,
honour the dead,
create your sense

these cold stones getting older

faces appear
if you stare long enough

layers of wind, tiny ferns,
beakers,
bones,
arrows and dreams,
ghosts of ash
.
.
idiot scratched initials,
an insect scuttling out of a shell

a stick man
that's been chalked on one of the slabs,
a graffiti message telling us HOWDY

I AM HERE

Armstrong! Aldrin! Collins!
We've always been here

painting our caves
planting our rags
preserving ourselves

the instants that last

for
e
ver

flame and smoke
rocket fuel
moon rock sun stone

I push my head through the hole at the end
like I did when I was nothing
like I did when I was 8
like I did when I was 49
like I'll do when I'm dead,
grinning joyfully,
trying to look Neolithic,
Bronze
like sprinkled quartz,
fallen stars

Coronaworld

“Tragedy, comedy, fear and hope. Dystopia, claustrophobia, sacrifice and selfishness. Insanity, incompetence, walking and shopping. The world closing down; the world opening up. March–June 2020. Coronaworld is here to stay.”

GF: I wrote the first few poems when the pandemic began, thinking that would be it, but more and more started to appear so it quickly took the form of a coronavirus diary, made up of mundane detail combined with a horrific backdrop, surreal menaderings, melancholy, silliness, looking out the window, political content as things started to clarify about the incompetence of the governments and their handling of it, walking, shopping, watching, thinking. No great plan to it, just see where it took me. I decided not to use any punctuation early on so as not to detract from the breakneck speed of the sequence. No time for punctuation. Things were unfolding very fast and I wanted to reflect this in the poetry. I was writing several a day at one point as I moved faster and faster. Above it all I had to be spontaneous without hardly thinking, make it immediate. Situations are personal to me in it but people should see the parallels with their own lives. I don't see any merit in producing a self-consciously 'profound' hindsight book two or three years down the line, it has to be reported quickly so nothing is left out, no selective memory. I don't usually do 'Political' stuff but it was vital here to work it in alongside the more personal journey, there's no escaping it. I chose to stop at the end of the first lockdown although it's obvious it was going to run and run, but felt that this first 'campaign' was the benchmark for everything else. The collection has lots of my disdain and anger and cynicism as well as lots of compassion, humour, frustration, and empathy for the predicament of ordinary folk at the mercy of clowns.

From Coronaworld

in Boots the chemist
they've stuck
a zig-zaggy bumble-bee-coloured



Photograph by Graham Fulton

length of tape on the floor
which you are forbidden
to cross

something like
a crime scene

you have to shout
what you're there for
and what you want until
everyone in
the immediate vicinity
knows you are
in desperate need
or *Viagra* or *Vagisil*
or *Vicks Vaporub*

anything
beginning with V

then you have
to lean at a disturbing angle
to pick up your bag of drugs
and shout your address
so everyone knows
where you live
and where to go
if there's a nationwide vacuum
of haemorrhoid cream

Chips, Paracetamol and Wine

“The things we need to keep us alive, and the things we need to dull the pain of being alive. Poems about the weakness, foolishness and brilliance of human life, places rarely visited, poems without convenient endings. Hopeful and hopeless, detached and engaged, this is a book about dunderheads and smackheads, lost cats and stuffed dogs, Charles Bukowski, Jimmy Johnstone and Kylie's golden pants. The book holds up a mirror to the world, reflecting the chaos just below the surface; just the way things are.”

GF: I wrote Chips mainly in 2014 and 2015. A ridiculous amount of poems were written over a three or four year period which became this collection as well as two or three others including *Glitches of Mortality* published by Pindrop Press and

Circulation from Clochoderick, as well as two or three still to come (*The Testes of Lenin* from Pindrop Press in 2022). The poems just built up and up and I split them and grouped together the ones that seemed compatible. Full of the usual laughs and tears. It grew haphazardly, randomly, until it just seemed right. I think I'm at the peak of my poetry writing, and I think Chips is probably the high point of my ordinary 'non-concept' collections (concept ones being *Flesh and Stone*, *Open Plan*, *Equal Night*, *Photographing Ghosts*, *Coronaworld* etc), just a strong grouping of like-minded poems that all move and work together. Overlapping themes. Epics and short ones, funny big ones and intimate quiet ones. Fast sections and slower sections, ebbing and flowing, which gives it a connection to *Flesh and Stone*. All grouped together and knowing just when to stop. With every collection I make sure there are no fillers, no padding, all the poems have to pay their way. What do I write about? It's all here – mad postmen, lost cats, hairdressers, dead poets, Charles Bukowski lookalikes, junkies on the road, buses, strange encounters, bowel tests, people in museums, details on buildings, statues, drumming City buskers, political rallies, decrepit phones, traffic lights, funerals, graveyards, dead flies, dead footballers, vanishing time, going to the shops, meaninglessness, everything, nothing, death, life.

Three poems from Chips, Paracetamol and Wine

Book Terrorist

I put books on the shelves
of bookshops when no one
is looking

when the assistant
is eagerly stacking
the creaking wood
with celebrity memoirs

I lift them out of
my book bag

slide them into
the right place

leave,
slowly

I don't want money

Someone someday
might find one
and take it to
the counter and say
Dear Mr and Mrs Bookshop
how much is this excellently dusty
slim volume of slim verse?

and they won't know,
or how it got there

The Poetry Reaper

sitting in The Scotia
after John McGarrigle who-
was-killed-in-The Clutha's funeral,
wolfing
triangular tuna sandwiches
and listening to someone singing
'We Shall Overcome'
into a feedback microphone, I ask
Bobby Christie
if he remembers walking home
twenty-five years ago
from Tom Leonard's Writers' Group
in Paisley in the dark
with
towering orange streetlamps
and turning left into Penilee Road
where a cop in a panda
wound down his window and asked us
what we had in our bags
to which we shouted *POETRY!*
in unison,
lifted
thick majestic photocopies
and *POEMS OF THIRTY YEARS*
by Edwin Morgan into the air
as he looked on in horror
and told us to be on our way
and not to do it again

and Bobby
disappeared over the hill
as I turned right into Atholl Crescent
to go to a house where I no longer live
to talk to people who
are no longer there,
and Jim Ferguson
is wearing a burning red tie
and brandishing a virtual cigarette, and
'We Shall Overcome' was sung
by Joan Baez in 1963, it's really
hard to believe, it feels
as if yesterday
has still to happen, tomorrow
is already gone

David Ogston - an appreciation by Alistair Lawrie

Syne tak a makar.

Woman or man, the same spierin raxes them:

Foo the wecht o wirds can cairry faat they see. (Fechts)

THIS ARTICLE BEGAN in a Red Cross shop one Saturday afternoon when I picked up a wee thin book with a faded greeny cover that looked as if it had been left out in sunlight too long. I almost didn't bother but, looking inside, I found it was written in what looked like Doric Scots. My immediate response was that it would be sentimental, badly written, kailyardy stuff, particularly as it seemed to be about growing up on a farm near Auchnagatt. I expected lengthy disquisitions about how the author's mither made broth (if I was lucky) or more likely a gristling list of names for the forty seven different kinds of graip used on the farm alongside a detailed contemplation of the various uses to which they might be put. Still it was only 50p so I bought it to see what it was like. At that price it hardly mattered. I only started to flick idly through it later that night after coming home from the pub. Three hours later I'd finished it and was enthusiastically firing up my laptop to see what I could find out about the author. Why?

Partly because growing up in the area he grew up in and at roughly the same time, many of his experiences paralleled mine living as I did less than a dozen miles away. But mainly because I'd realised with growing and genuine excitement that I'd found a writer who appeared to have created that Holy Grail for those of us who write in Scots and particularly Doric, a readable Doric prose. And I'd never heard of him before.

"I look at the haill picter, for that's faat it is. This is the story o a place, a country, nae in narrative bit in expressions. ... this picter is nae life frozen, bit life, for a brief meenit bringin intae focus aa the loyalties, the loves, the meanins an the values that faistened them tae een anither an the braid land that ringed them." (Dry Stone Days)

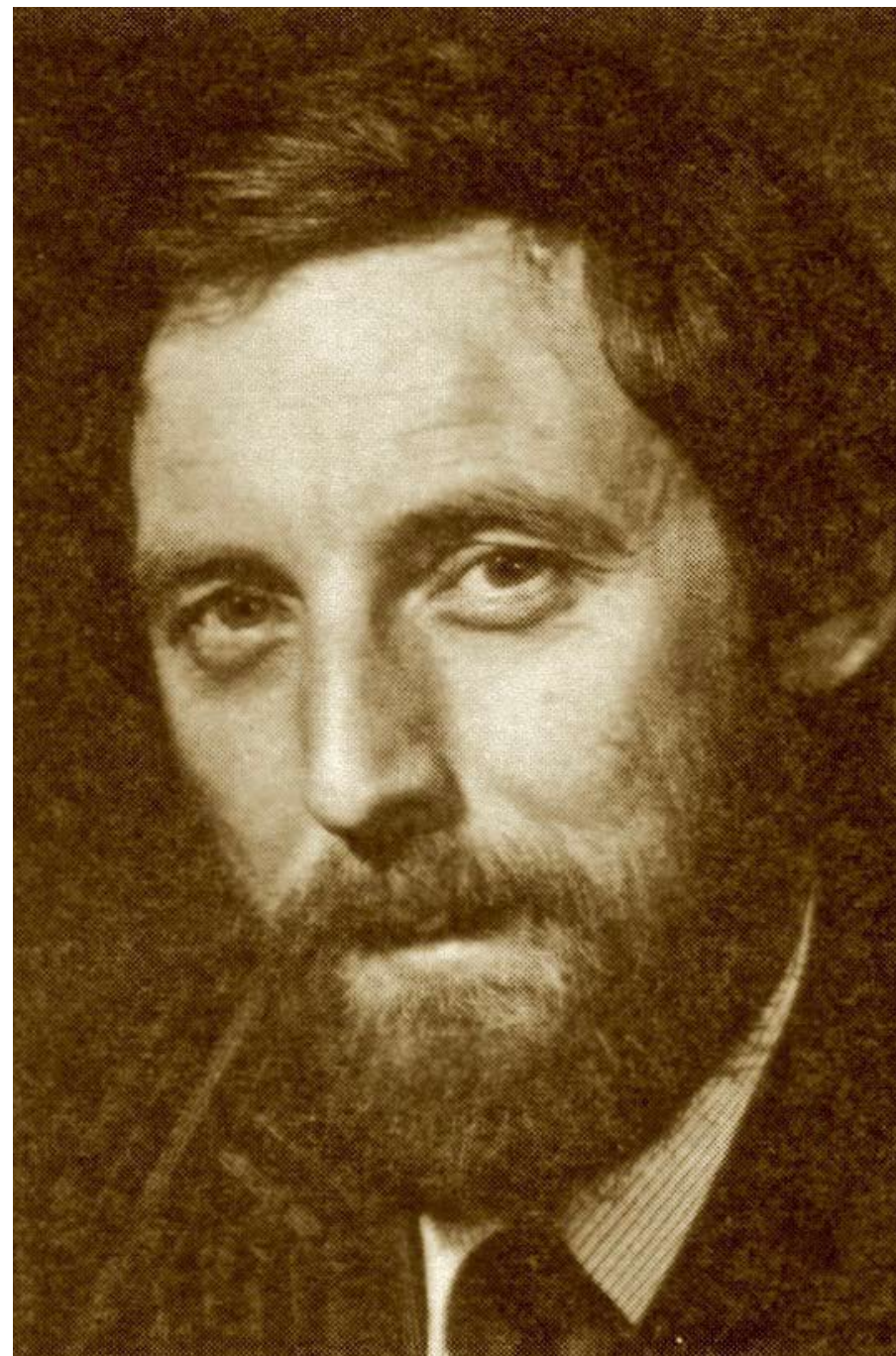
This picter is by a writer that should be better kent in his native Buchan. His name was David Ogston. "Was" sadly because, as I discovered to my enormous disappointment that night, he'd died some years before. My intention had been to

get in touch with him to discuss what he'd achieved. There were however two further volumes to his autobiography to be checked out.

David Ogston was born in Ellon in 1943 and brought up on a farm just outside Auchnagatt. He went to Inverurie Academy then took two degrees at Aberdeen University, the first in Arts, the second in Divinity. After graduation he was assistant at St Giles in Edinburgh before becoming minister at Balerno followed by the kirk of St John's in Perth where he was till he retired. Sadly, he died quite a young man in 2008. He made a name for himself as a minister and was a popular religious broadcaster, often heard on BBC Radio Scotland, and he loved to use Doric whenever possible. He even wrote a special marriage service in Scots, concluding it with: *"May they aye win farrer ben till een anither's herts."* His obituary in *The Times* called him one of the most creative ministers in the Kirk o Scotland. He wrote a couple o books of prayers and sermons called "Scots Worship", both still in print.

Bur he also wrote a bourrach of poems, some of which can be found in the Elphinstone Institute's site as part of their "Kist" and, more importantly, he wrote a three-volume autobiography about what it was like to grow up in Buchan in the forties, fifties an sixties. They're called *White Stone Country*, *Dry Stone Days* and *Grey Stone Zion* and frankly I think they're wonderful. I'm sorry to say that all three books are out of print. An shouldna be.

The books are a fair delight to read. They're funny and philosophical; they deal with traditions but also with the modern world as it was then. They give a detailed picture of life on a farm for a wee loon but they also speak about his later love of jazz and blues music, the poets and writers that influenced him, lassies he took out, his own intellectual growth. And all in Doric. The best place to start is with a short passage in which he describes reading Lewis Grassie Gibbon for the first time:



David Ogston

"Grassic Gibbon wis a map markin nae places but experiences. The story he tellt came fae somewye close at haun, the characters fae deep inside masel. They said things, ... that I'd heard masel in the spik o the big fowk; they said oot loud things I'd thocht an sensed an reached for, an been gey near tae lauchin at for they winted the validity o print – tull I saa them in front o me, the unspoken said, the unsayable made definite ..." (White Stone Country)

The full quote is longer and richer but there's enough here to make clear not only the powerful effect reading Gibbon had on him as a boy but also to show the quality of prose it inspired in Ogston himself.

What struck me most forcibly on that

first reading were two things. First that, after a page or so, it was extremely easy to read despite the unfamiliarity that even a Doric speaker feels when confronted by our native speech in print as prose. I found this deeply reassuring.

By and large the Doric Ogston presents the reader with is fairly easily read for anyone who speaks the language. He spells words as he'd say them but keeps enough of English spelling not to make it unintelligible. If the only appropriate word available is English he doesn't hesitate to use it. And why not? This is how we mostly speak. Even my granda would occasionally reach for an English word if he felt it appropriate. Just

think. There is a recognisable difference between saying “Wid ye dee at?” and the emphasis implicit in “Wid you dee at?” He avoids the trap of raiding the SND for words not current since the Middle Ages and by doing so creates I believe a usable prose. His orthography largely works but there are some failures. By the time I’d read “havers” three times I was seriously puzzled about what he meant until the context of the fourth occurrence made clear that he meant going halves with someone, what I’d have spelled as “halvers”.

The second and more important feature of his writing, however, is the way in which he is able to utilise the language to discuss such a wide variety of subjects. He can be couthy, dealing with his experience of close-knit family life while growing up on the farm, but always with a precision and vigour to his expression that embodies his boyish enthusiasm. For example, describing how he and his father “*cowpit weet stooks roon tae the win ae nicht*”, in his imagination he is a:

“fechtin chiel oot on a nicht manoeuvre, the shaves wir faes, sentries sleepin at their posts. I crept up on em an breenged at their heids an warsled em tae the grun. Afore they kent fit wis happenin I’d cut their thrapples an they wis aa goners.” (Dry Stone Days p42)

The excitement and joy of that memory is caught precisely. Or he’ll shift to equally lively reminiscence of the things that fascinated him as a boy, the snow cutting the farm off when it “*pounced at nicht*”, his excitement at a variety show in a local Town Hall, his boyish pleasure in heroes such as Dan Dare or Davy Crockett or Johnny Ramensky “*brakkin oot an gien the bobbies a reid face.*”

His observations are often perceptively sharp as when he comments on how “*the spoken wurd, mesmeric in its ain richt, took on a wecht o its ain in the moo o the public man that spak for a livin*”, the auctioneer. The texts used as epigraphs throughout are like a statement of intent and demonstrate how the book concerns the growth of a man of intellect, taken

as they are inter alia from Saul Bellow, Dennis Potter, Norman MacCaig, Dylan Thomas, leavened by Alison Uttley and a quote from “Timothy Puddle”. This is most evident in the last volume dealing with his time at Aberdeen University where the focus ranges from his studies, the books that had most influenced him to date, the girls he chatted up to his taste for blues and jazz on Saturday night at the University Union:

“the cornet-player is a brosy chiel, nae exactly Bix Beiderbecke, bit he gies it aa he’s got an the place is shakkin wie the licks an riffs he conjures up.” (Grey Stone Zion)

Hardly has he finished describing how “*the neist drum solo is finally gyaan tae rattle the foons o the Union tae crockanition*” before he’s telling us how afterwards they’d “*cowp throwe the door*” of the chip shop next door to demand “*Twa fish-suppers, extra vinegar, wie ingins, an a mealie puddin!*”

In a list of his heroes in the same volume he mentions Jackie Hather, Sonny Terry, Paul Tillich, Acker Bilk, Chris Barber, Eliot, Corso, Ferlinghetti, Kerouac, Bonhoeffer and Orwell; he adds “*Jackie Hather played for Aiberdeen in the 1950s.*” For me one of the greatest delights of his writing is the easy and natural way in which he can shift from the purely local to the lyrical to matters of intellectual weight without ever losing that ease of expression in his own tongue. He can shift from: “*he’s a thorough-bred optimist bit he still gyangs tae Pittodrie*” to commenting on John Updike’s “Rabbit Run”: “*Some beuks ye faa ower, they trip ye up, ambush ye faan ye’re nae expectin it*”. This is no accidental use of Doric. In a revealing section he deconstructs: “*tak an tirr this littlin. She’s tummelt in o the horse troch an she’s drookit like a droont moose*” arguing that its alliterative and assonantal effects are “*absolutely typical o the netral wye we lat the music in, even fan we dinna think about it ... This alliteration a feature o the wye we spik an the wye we write.*” Here is a man consciously shaping a usable Doric prose based on intelligent analysis of its “music”. His effort, his achievement, must not be left to wither on the vine.

Ogston created a believable, readable

Doric prose that can deal with the intellectual as well as the homely, that can deal with life now and not be rooted in the past and yet hardly anyone knows his work. Of course it’s out of print. The recent growth of Doric teaching in schools and in Aberdeen University should have these volumes enshrined in their syllabuses.



I’m hopin that fit ye’ve read has gart ye think about readin some mair o’t. As I said he’s oot o print but aa three are available tae order fae the Library Service. Tae finish I’ll ging back tae far I startit wi fit he scrievit aboot the effect readin Lewis Grassic Gibbon had on him “*the unspoken said, the unsayable made definite.*” He spiks aboot his experience wantin the validity o print. Fit he felt was that Gibbon gied him that validity; gied him

permission tae be able to write aboot his ain experience in his ain tongue. Ogston does the same, certainly for me, and gin ye’ve ony love for i wye we spik I’d urge you tae ging awa an read thae books. Or are we tae be deaved forivver by foo mony wyes we can spik aboot graips? ■

(Readings from David Ogston’s work by Alistair Lawrie for Aberdeenshire’s Library Service and the Across the Grain Festival can be found on anchor.fm by using the link <https://tinyurl.com/2p98hsaf>)

The Bottom Drawer

LYDIA POPOWICH

I love lying in my own stink,
fish and piss masking the toxic
naphthalene of grandma’s
candlewick bedspread, nylon
nightie and flannelette sheets.
My safe space, the bottom
drawer filled with has-beens
and shady dreams. All’s grey

in this echo chamber of my fears.
I count my breaths, ponder
the sanctity of prime numbers.
There’s a shaft of light, an escape
hatch. I’ve seen a spider come
and go. I’m staying put. The last
time I popped out wild dogs
were snarling at my boundaries.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON. OUTSIDE, the snow swirled from a pale ochre sky. I was cooking a mushroom omelette when the cat dragged a tiny man head first through the pet door.

She placed him gently on the table by the fruit bowl. *This one needs feeding up,* said the cat. She shook snowflakes from her fur before retiring to her hammock.

The little man lay prone for a few moments, wheezing and groaning. Then he sat up leaning against the bowl with one arm anchored around a banana.

Well, that’s the first time I’ve been rescued by a cat and madam, I am truly grateful to you and your courteous feline. I’ve been lost in your Rosa rugosa hedge for three days. You must give that jungle a trim. A person could die in there. Forgive me for being rude but I’m

so very hungry. The only thing I’ve eaten is stale bird seed.

He began to wrestle unsuccessfully with a grape so I fetched morsels of bread, cheese, ham, apple and a thimble of hot tea.

The visitor was nine inches tall. He wore a green jumpsuit, an orange beanie and red boots. His eyebrows and voluptuous beard were laced with frost.

He finished eating and began to comb the snow from his beard using his fingers. I watched, not knowing what to say. After a while I asked if he’d like to sit by the fire.

That would be fine and dandy, thank you. I need a wee rest and then I must complete my mission so I can go home. I have important news to deliver but I forget what and to whom and for why... His face folded like

origami.

I offered to carry him to the sofa but he shook his head. He slid down the table leg agile as an elderly pole dancer and curled up on the rug in front of the crackling logs.

Where’s home? I asked but already he was snoring. I noticed a burning smell. *Shit!* My supper was charred beyond recognition. I threw the mess in the bin, chopped up mushrooms and was cracking eggs into a bowl when I heard the rattle of the pet flap.

A blast of cold air entered the kitchen. I looked around. The cat had vanished and so had the messenger, leaving a damp patch on the Persian rug. I returned to the kitchen and fervently whisked up a yellow cloud of forgetfulness. ■

The Messenger

STORY BY LYDIA POPOWICH



THE DREAM PROMPTS me to write, but what I need to write about is very real.

Propulsion paralyses me. The gainsayers are deafening- 'No-one will believe it.'... 'Of what RELEVANCE is this?'

Ry Cooder once described a piece of music with the words 'unhurried urgency'. I cried. Those irreconcilables describe my whole condition.

This time I'm going to do it, though, 'coz if I don't, I *will* go insane. It's almost 6am. A molten wedge of sun defines the eastern ridge. Fleeting, the shadows of the cacti stretch to where I sit, on the veranda, with my coffee. I like to be here... now.



'Cup of tea, Farquhar?' It's Melody, my wife.

'Al-right,' I mumble.

Her expression is part sympathy, part amusement, part... whatever made me fall in love with her in high school.

She blinks rapidly, like she's about to laugh.

I put down my pen. 'Tea?! I don't drink tea.'

'Time for something new, maybe?'

I chew the biro. It's an old one- these marks were made by sharper teeth. 'OK. Sorry... it's just... I've never *felt*... so stuck.'

'The dream again?'

'Yeah. What it *reminds* me of... If you think it never happened, I don't blame you.'

'I *believe* you. I believe *IN* you.' She smiles. Her silver hair catches the sun. 'What kind?'

'Of tea? Surprise me.'

Her flip-flops make a shuffling sound. Linen really suits her. Lilac too.



Alright- the dream. Let's get it over with.

A sharply dressed black man is walking down a railway line, towards a sun that's not long set. I follow him. He stops and puts an ear against the track. I lie down too. The rail is cold. 'Hear that?' he whispers. 'Beautiful.'

'Isn't that Beethoven?' I ask.

'Damn right. String quartet.'

The track rings with a hammer-blow, but he just keeps on lying there, smiling. I stand, but even so the second blow is deafening.

'Get up!' I shout.

'Shhhh! Lis-ten!' His voice is like a tremor underground. 'Eternity is almost here.'

Against a navy canvass, clouds are being sucked into a funnel. I watch a tree with twisted limbs resolve into the outline of a face. The quartet carries on, the hammer strikes again, the man keeps smiling and the face contorts in agony.

Then I wake up. Seven times, I've had that dream.



Melody is back. 'For you. One cookie too. Ginger and honey.'

What do I do?

STORY BY IAN TALLACH



'The tea?'

'Both- comes as a set.'

No! You fell for this gimmick? *You?! Something has shifted in the universe!*

'Cheaper than your stuff! And, speaking of the universe, I think it wants your story.'

'In universal terms... it doesn't mean... anything.'

'Oh? Didn't you say the opposite, last week?' She lowers her chin to her chest to affect a growly voice- '...either my undoing or it's gonna change the course of history.'

'I did not.'

'You *did*. And not-writing- THAT is your un-doing. Don't think about anyone. Just yourself... and the universe.'

'That's broad!'

'What I *mean* is, think of the very-very big... out there.' She flings an arm at the horizon, releasing crumbs. 'And the very-very small... in here.' She touches her chest. 'There's a connection, no? You've felt it and it's overwhelming you.'

'Thanks, darling.'

'Look, I've never heard this thing. Wish I *had*. It's driven a wedge between us.'

'Maybe if I hear it one more time?'

'To *prove* to yourself you're not delusional?!?' She gets up to leave. 'Tell them about Wyatt,' she shouts from the kitchen.



OK, I will... but first...

We used to have this radio show in college- 'Wee, Wee Ours'. One night it featured the tune later to invite that

oxymoron- 'unhurried urgency'. It sounded very old, but also futuristic, somehow. Behind the hiss of the 1927 recording, a groan rose and fell. I imagined the musician gently swaying to a music far beyond this world. And that slide guitar- I've never heard an instrument so *connected* with a voice.

The DJ spoke eventually. 'That was Blind Willie Johnson- Dark Was the Night. *Impossible* to follow.' He eulogised the man, but, to my shame, I forgot about him until decades later.



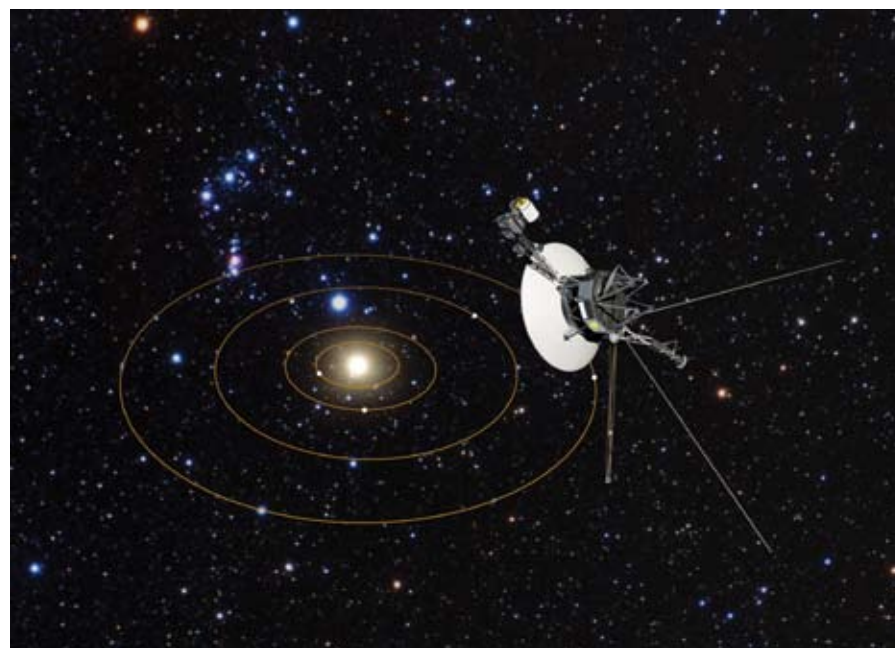
Trip of a lifetime - Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia - 1990. On the way, night fell around us at 33,000 feet, offset by the spin of the earth, I suppose. We hit bad turbulence. Stewardesses scuttled for the alcove. Lights went out. Melody was quite unphased, though- 'Just close your eyes, wait for a tune, and listen.' That sounded unhinged, I but tried it. And very clearly 'Dark Was the Night' was that tune. I *listened* to it! My fear of turbulence was superseded.

I looked out at the stars. 'Is there a loneliness at the centre of the universe?' I asked my diary.

On that holiday, I heard the tune again, hummed by a beggar, on the pavement. We got swept on by the crowd, though. Next day he wasn't there.

Back in Arizona, I bought 'best of Blind Willie Johnson'. His voice is very powerful. Must have been *some* preacher, if you like that kind of thing. But then I lost the tape.

Voyager 1's view of the Solar System. Artist's impression. Wikimedia Commons.



In 2004, about three miles from here, it came another time. Strange things happen in this desert, so I wasn't too surprised... initially. But it was loud and very clear and only audible for the duration of the track. That freaked me out. I told the police- couldn't think what else to do. They thought I was crazy. Looking back, I should have persevered.

In 2012- same thing, but only for about ten seconds. Then, after another eight-year gap, it came again, but this time, it was all stretched out... and faint.

Soon afterwards, the dreams started. I wake up terrified. Cold sweat might be a cliché, but not if it's as cold as mine. Coffee, then the urge to write- a sense of obligation- but to WHOM?



Let me tell you about Wyatt Ho.

We were at school together, forty years ago. I looked him up, gave him a cyberwave and he replied 'woah! Farquhar MacNeil! Cannae believe it!' (We used to tease each other about roots... or lack of them.) Turns out he and Sylvia, his wife, live sixteen miles from here, just past the state line. He recently retired from the Deep Space Centre, also in the Mojave desert.

Last Thursday night they came for dinner. 'No ceremony,' he insisted. 'I just want to talk.' To help with that, we had Malbec. I was nervous; their lives have taken them to places we can only dream of.

Melody put on some background music. Wyatt was telling us about his work as Sylvia- a sparrow of a woman- sat demurely by his side. Suddenly, he stopped and pointed to the stereo. 'Know this? B flat major string quartet. I *love* Beethoven!'

The hairs rose on my forearms.

'You OK, sweetheart?' Melody touched my hand.

'That's... the music in my dream!' I swallowed. 'Never heard it... in real life.'

'Your dream?' Wyatt and Sylvia chimed.

I told them everything, including what I'd actually heard.

Wyatt shivered. 'And you've never spoken of this?'

'Well, I *did* tell the police. They thought I was crazy.'

'That well-dressed man must be Blind Willie Johnson,' he enunciated.

'But, this guy could *see* where he was going!' I tried to sound composed.

'You said he was heading towards the sun?'

I thought back. Strange- in the dream, I never see his eyes.

Wyatt was unperturbed. 'Born 1897. Apparently, his father's lover threw lye at him, when he was little- some kind of indirect revenge for infidelity. That's when he lost his sight.'

'How'd you know this stuff?' I was feeling more and more inadequate.

He closed his eyes. 'His life was hard. Played the blues to survive. Of course, he didn't *think* he played them- the guitar was just a vehicle for preaching. Funny- he's

the only bluesman on the cover of a Led Zeppelin album! At forty-eight, he slept in the charred remains of his house, after a fire. He contracted malaria. No hospital would admit him, so he died.

When Wyatt opened his eyes, he seemed to come back from another place entirely.

'And wait for this,' he added – 'Dark was the Night went up with Voyager 1 in 1977, on 'the Golden Record'. The idea, at the time, was that intelligent life-forms might be able to decode it and play it. It's the second-last track on the disc. The *last* one is the Beethoven we've just listened to– the blind man and the deaf man, side by side.'

I couldn't respond.

'It was fainter the last time?' Sylvia spoke with an assertive voice.

I tried to hide my astonishment– she hadn't really contributed until then. She put me in mind of a heron– motionless for hours, before announcing its true height. I nodded.

'I worked at Deep Space too.' She nodded back. 'We have one of three giant radio antenna facilities. The others are in Australia and Spain. We're still able to detect *occasional* transmissions from Voyager 1, even if it's *very* far away... and low on power.'

'You keep a diary?' Watt asked me, inexplicably.

'Sometimes. Why?'

'If possible, could you check those dates?'

I went to the bedroom. Wyatt and Silvia were pacing the floor on my return. Melody smiled nervously.

I found two of the dates– August 25th 2012 and December 17th 2004.

Sylvia began. 'On August 25th 2012, Voyager 1 crossed the heliopause, the outermost reaches of our solar system. It's now the only man-made object in interstellar space.'

'And 2004?' I downed the last of the Malbec. 'What happened then?'

'On December 17th it broke the sound barrier– what we call the termination shock– the point at which the solar winds have finally decelerated to the speed of sound.'

'Wait! Wait! You cannot *seriously* be telling me there's a scientific explanation?!' I was agog.

'No, we're not.' Wyatt took over. 'If it *were* a physical phenomenon, the signals would have arrived here later.' He looked at the ceiling. 'We believe in physics, 100%. That's what physics *is*– proof beyond doubt. But that doesn't mean we *disbelieve metaphysics*. In your dream, he mentions eternity, yes?'

'Yeah, but it's just a... I c-can't believe...'

I stammered. 'In the observable universe, we have time. But we refer to certain things as time-*less*– a piece of music, for example.

'Dark Was the Night' has often been described like that. Ry Cooder, whom you know, called it 'transcendent'. Others say it's 'a window to eternity'. Bach, who 'channelled the music of the universe', has three pieces on the Golden Record.'

Melody shook her head. 'Wyatt, are *you*, of all people, saying there's a *spiritual* connection between my husband and a piece of metal 14 billion miles away?'

Sylvia gasped. 'How d'you know that distance?!'

'I-I read science magazines.' Melody blushed. 'Listen! Farquhar *has* to write this... without interference. All I can do is encourage him. It's exasperating!' She laughed shrilly. A tear rolled down her cheek.

I didn't know whether to berate or comfort her, so I laughed too. Then we all laughed together.

Wyatt suppressed his giggles. 'And... your dream... sorry... your dream seems to me to be... about... a meeting of eternity and time. I think you *might* know what I'm trying to say. In Scotland, your dad was a presbyterian minister?'

'I don't want to go there.'

'OK... just... I think it's still in your subconscious– the tree from the ground and the pillar of cloud from the sky. The agonized face. BC, AD and all that.'

'You're joking!'

'No. For you, it might still be a powerful picture– of irreconcilables being

reconciled– time and eternity, physics and metaphysics. We often process events through our religious traditions.'

I put my forehead on the table. 'So... what... now?'

'Like Melody says – write it down. We'll stay in touch, alright?'

I raised my head. 'Thanks. Immense thanks.'

'It's past eleven,' Sylvia observed. 'We'd better go.'

'It's our duty to record what we observe, even when it seems meaningless,' Wyatt proclaimed from the doorway– an interesting parting shot, after a *very* interesting evening.



So, I'm sat here and I suppose I *have* told you the facts, along the way. What do they MEAN, though? What's their SIGNIFICANCE? I only have more questions.

Oh, yes– just one more thing. Wyatt phoned next day to ask about our holiday in 1990. Turns out that was when 'the pale blue dot' was taken – our part in the 'family portrait' of the solar system. I wasn't overly surprised– to be surprised again.

What now, though? WHAT DO I DO? ■

ISWIPE A hand over the kitchen table. Still, the bird droppings stay. My hand is nothing but shadows and light. I pace, silently, no little huffs of breath. I press my hand to the windowpane, mouldering to green and black. It does not shatter. Start smaller. I notice her then, outside my house. A click and a flash. She walks away, with a tiny image of my house, grey upon grey. I pace. Stop at the butter dish, white spattered. Press hard. With a crack, it splinters, capturing the weak sunlight in the new-cut glass.



Photograph after photograph, she captures the house. She does not come at night. Or in storms. Only in gentle sunlight, not too bright. I wait for her, pacing.



A click and a flash. She shoves open my crumbling half a door. I leave the

The Cracking of Glass

STORY BY ELLEN FORKIN



window. Swipe a nervous hand over the table. She doesn't see the shadows and light. Just shivers. Eyes wide in the gloom, peering through thick glasses. She aims at the piano, sagging with rot, while I find the hurricane lamp. The noise of it shattering makes her jolt. She scurries away like the rats and mice. They scent everything sharp and sour. Her perfume lingers, a flowery stickiness in the air.



The window has a crack, slowly done. It does not smash. I thump my hand on

the windowsill. The rabbits outside dart underground.



She is crouched low, fascinated with the lichen, rust and mildew of the fireplace. A click. A flash. I bend over her, press a finger to the curved glass in its tortoiseshell frame. It shatters, a tinkering sound. She stumbles back, clutching her eye. Bolts out of the half-door, broken glasses bouncing on her nose.



Her house looks warm, tidy and safe.

I AM a selkie; a seal that is not a seal, a woman that is not a woman. I am saltwater and waves and sun-kissed rocks and glistening fish. I am dishrag and floury bannocks and small, neat stitches. Humans have no words for bubbles in whiskers and the tricky shadows of a kelp forest. Humans hug and laugh and tickle and tend to sore feet with gentle fingers.

We both sing. Only a stolen selkie will hear the songs of land and songs of the deep. Why one yearns for a wife and another yearns for the sea. Why neither wish to be lonely but somehow end up so.

My sealskin has a song.

Song of the Sealskin

STORY BY ELLEN FORKIN



It sings through the stone of the walls, the stone of the floors, the wood of the table, the peats of the fire and the iron of the cooking pot. It sings through the snores of my human husband and through the voices of my half-human children.

How it sings to me and no amount of human love can hush it.

My sealskin, I cannot find it. It is stolen, hidden from me. Somewhere close, in the stone-built house, I feel it.

I do not wish to leave. I do not feel I can stay. The sealskin beckons, and with it

the whole ocean calling me. It waits for me to slip inside the velvet fur, to thicken with blubber, and delve into the welcome chill of the waves. To be a woman only on moonlit nights on sandy shores.

For now, I'll darn human husband's socks and spoon porridge into half-human mouths. I will smell the smoke of peat-fire, sing songs of the land, take a sip of whiskey on a dark, howling night. All the while my sealskin will sing to me. It will sing of bubbles in whiskers. Of clouded sunlight through thrashing waves. It will sing the salt-tang freedom of the deep, deep sea.

One day, I will find it. ■

Just For The Craic: Scotland's women at the main table

Essay by Tom Bryan

SINCE I AM primarily a poet, I will begin this essay with a poem I wrote over three decades ago. It was published in my first collection *Wolfwind* (Chapman, 1997).

Craic (for Aonghas MacNeacail)

Craic is the quicksilver of song and wit, poetry, drink and the laughter in it.

A man with hair the colour of a Tanera sunset, sings in the corner about the last trawl out of Grimsby. Bound for the arctic fishing ground.

(Craic has been around)

More songs and stories in all tongues, blues and Gaelic from Iona to Indianola, Uig to the Isle of Dogs. Name your sound.

(Craic has been around)

This is it. Chemistry of sight and sound, illumination of whisky and wose. Council house walls transformed to bardic hall and outlaw cave, shelter against the yapping of the wolfwind.

Craic is the soul of night, a fire at the torn fringes of the world's hem. Friendly farewells, fearing neither snow nor hail, nor the hard wind howling.

During Corona lockdown, Scottish writers probably miss(ed) the same things as most people: family contact, the beach, the playground, the pub, the cinema or theatre or a meal out. My late wife Lis, a trained journalist and published poet, was shielded because she was particularly vulnerable. Being shielded also meant we couldn't have visitors for fear of bringing the virus into our lives, to a person with a very weak immune system (Lis' MS was an immune deficiency disease) Thus, we had only rarely been outside of our small flat and had not had any visitors for nearly eight months, including our children and grandchildren who live long distances away. A person who knew me well once called me a 'sociable hermit' but I deeply missed 'craic' (no, not cocaine but that quality known mainly to people like myself of Irish and Highland Scottish extraction). A writing friend of mine, Bess Ross, once wrote a novel based in her native Scottish Highlands titled *A Bit of Crack and Car Culture* and some readers actually thought it was about cocaine abuse in the fishing communities of the Cromarty Firth!

Craic is an Irish Gaelic word meaning fun or enjoyment based on music, conversation or storytelling: *Bhi craic agus ceol*: we had fun and music. So it

can typically entail entertaining and informative conversation or local gossip, usually informally in a kitchen or pub. Sitting down with someone whose 'craic' is good is refreshing, often uplifting and mostly just fun. You will likely be smiling and laughing a lot when it is done. It is a high compliment in Scotland or Ireland to be labelled 'good craic'.

Because of corona restrictions, none of us will be giving dinner parties anytime soon, but good craic would also be a key part of those ideal dinner parties we often hear about in the media. I could rattle off many names of those frequently mentioned ideal guests: Freud, Marx, Plato, Churchill, etc.

However, many years of attendance at folk sessions, ceilidhs and informal gatherings in kitchens also taught me that one element of good craic is democracy: children, women and men of all races and nationalities are its feature and I'm afraid in a country where Burns, RL Stevenson, Scott, Hogg and others always sit at the main table, there is a danger that our Scottish cultural dinner party might become MEN ONLY!

So, for now, keep your Darwins and Freuds. I could imagine that historic table dour and gloom-laden, picking at food and rejecting it, asserting, mansplaining, etc.

Craic? Wit, knowledge, humour, adventure, discovery. Most of the suggested dinner parties of the great and the good do seem to be like mens' clubs, men only, images of cigars, gaming tables. I have been fortunate to sustain my own writing at a time when Scottish women writers have been to the fore. Magi Gibson, Sheena Blackhall, Liz Niven, Anne MacLeod, Liz Lochhead, Lis Lee, Val McDermid, Jackie Kay, A.L. Kennedy, Janice Galloway, Valerie Gillies the late Janet Paisley and so many, many more. I have had the benefit of encouragement and critical advice from many of these authors. Yet, in the past as well as present, these powerful writers have not always been present at the main table. I want to do better than that and have an extensive guest list: all women and Scottish women at that! My culinary skills are limited and I live in a small one-bedroom retirement flat but I think I could invite six to my 'Ceilidh of Craic'. And six more and six more. It was a tough choice, but here goes...

Fannie Wright was the daughter of one of Dundee's political radicals who freely risked life and limb to popularise the revolutionary ideas of Thomas Paine. Although orphaned when still a child, she managed to educate herself and was writing philosophical works in her teens. She voyaged to America in 1818. She had become interested in the abolition



Frances Wright. Engraving by J.C. Buttre, after J. Gorbitz

of slavery and actually bought a tract of land in Tennessee as an experiment to show Southern slave owners how to free their slaves. The experiment was deemed a failure but she was able to free slaves. She next became part of the famous Utopian Socialist experiment in New Harmony, Indiana, financed by the famous Owen family of New Lanark. She edited America's first socialist newspaper, whilst advocating the abolition of slavery and promoting gender equality. She was among the first to campaign for universal suffrage. She also had an all-female bodyguard to restrain hecklers!

Wright had a great impact on female activists in future generations, having been considered far ahead of her time. She was also a close friend of the more famous Mary Shelley. Although one male (of course) critic said she did not have an "excess of humility" I would want Fannie to tell us more about her Utopian experiments in America as we sit down to our tea.

Isabella Gunn was born in Orkney circa 1788 and died there in 1861. Her life was remarkable and inspired many poems, stories, songs and plays. The Hudson's Bay Company in Canada recruited many Scots to work in their outposts. The work was hard and dangerous. Starvation, freezing and drowning were common as were attacks by wolves and bears. However, the pay was good - if you were a man. For many centuries 'The Company' refused to employ women for all but the most menial of tasks. In 1806, Isabella disguised herself as a man and signed up for the Company as "John Fubister." She served as any other employee, exploring, trapping, canoeing. She once paddled for 1800 miles through the Manitoba

wilderness and was highly-regarded as a skilled and dependable colleague. However, at least one man knew her secret, for in the middle of Christmas festivities this "John Fubister" gave birth to a baby boy! Despite her excellent work record, she was sent back to Orkney in disgrace, where she was forced to live a life of poverty and vagrancy. She was often ill-treated and teased as "The Nor'wester." She was buried in a pauper's grave in Kirkwall. However, her remarkable story did not end with her death. As early as 1810, she was the subject of a song in which she dressed as a man in order to follow her lover to his life in the Canadian wilderness. The Canadian poet Stephen Scobie wrote an epic poem about her. She is also the subject of a song by Canadian folk singer Eileen McGann (on her album *Elements*, 1989) in which Isabella continues her life as a free trapper with her son in Canada. Isabella Gunn proved she was the equal of any man in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company at the time, making her story both tragic and heroic. Her fellow trappers admitted later that "Isabella worked at anything and well, like the rest of the men." Isabella lives on, not as an old woman buried in a pauper's grave but as the inspiration for song and poetry on both sides of the Atlantic.

Craic is essentially a feature of Gaelic life, both in Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland. Our next dinner guest was the epitome of good craic, for no gathering would be complete without Màiri Mhòr nan Òran, Big Mary of the Songs. Born Mary MacDonald in Skeabost, Skye, Mary lived from 1821-1898. Mary was a nurse by training and both tall and broad, hence "Big" Mary. She once said she was 5ft 10, weighing 17 stone. She moved

to Inverness and married shoemaker Isaac MacPherson. Her poetic interests were supported by her political interests, on the side of crofters who were being driven from their lands. Whilst working as a domestic servant, she suffered the humiliation of being charged with theft and was imprisoned for forty days in Inverness. She later moved to Glasgow and sometime later in life taught herself to read and write English. Her most famous songs are those supporting the crofters who were struggling against the landed interests of the time. She sang widely in her own day, but her songs are still performed by Highland singers and bands today. *Oran Beinn Li*, *Coinneamh nan Croitearan* and *Eilean a' Cheò* are most often performed.



Finally, in keeping with the democratic notions of good craic and hospitality, I would naturally like to resurrect some women from my own past. Scottish working-class women have kept our society together, have kept it running, and

have done the really hard work. Whilst their men were at war, women kept food on the tables whilst resisting rent hikes and evictions. The wives and daughters of miners kept life going in the face of unemployment and tragedy. Here are some of those women: my own mother Betty, who raised three boys on her own at a time when single parenthood was nearly a crime. Her grandmother Jessie, born into a Scottish regiment in India, who raised her in Edinburgh. My great-great-great grandmother, Grace Stewart, who patiently reared children through famine and war and lived to her eighties in Perthshire. All these women could sing and tell stories of their own lives which would enhance any gathering. Some stayed in Scotland, some came from India and others went to America and Canada. The local thus becomes international, also typical of Scots and Scotland. Of course there will always be room for Scott, Stevenson, and Burns but not at the expense of our redoubtable women!

I think it is natural and right that any



A CHUIGEAL.

Màiri Mhòr nan Òran spinning. By D. Whyte, Inverness. Am Baile.

man in Scotland should defend, admire and respect what women have done for all of us. What success I have had as a writer I owe to a long line of Scottish

women who fought for what we now take for granted. I owe them my life. Of course, they should sit at my table. ■

THE SEAL'S EYES are large and round and polished. I could live off eyes like that. Accept a pint and turn on the lamps, no charge, "Keep your change, Jim," and I would. It's a small creature, not fully grown, with downy marbling along its back. It bites, or tries to, fixing its teeth on my glove (I feel nothing).

It's afraid. Of course it is.

You see a lot with large eyes. You see a lot to fear.

"It's alright," I tell it. "I'll be quick."

I do what I was sent here to do: unwind the ghost gear caught around the seal's neck. It's fishing line—it usually is—and I begin. One loop, two, I bind knuckles and loose the tie upon the mammal. Its wound is superficial and there's no need to call the wildlife vet.

Good, I hate that woman. She gives me paperwork.

When I say ghost gear, I mean any spent fishing equipment that's been abandoned or lost or thrown overboard. It's what we call it. All that junk is harmful to the marine ecosystem, though I s'pose it keeps me in a job.

Each morning begins with a sighting, reported to me. I go out, clean up and take back all I find. I used to haul it to the dump, until the local arts centre got involved. Now they use it – the ropes and buoys and fenders – to make crap. I went to an exhibition in Truro once and saw all the ghost gear arranged in abstract shapes. It's art, apparently.

All I wanted to do was clean it up.

It stills, the seal, it stills beside me where I crouch on the beach. As if it knows, somehow, I'm trying to free it.

When animals have patience, they don't feel like animals.

I think I feel like an animal sometimes, in the alone hours, when I've been too long with myself. I think the sea could

drive a man mad, that churning, endless tidal whisper. And there are times I think it's telling me something, the same way the seal's eyes are telling me something.

As soon as the line is gone, the seal knows: feels it, leaves.

Slides into the water like soap running down a bathtub's side.

The line that trapped the seal is long

and reaches all the way into the ocean. I pull and do not find the end. How long into the Atlantic does it go? I could cut it, heave the remaining tangle onto my shoulder, take it back and call it a day.

I almost do, 'til the line tugs back.

There must be another creature at the end. One who needs help.

I follow it.

Entanglement

STORY BY REBECCA FERRIER



THAT

R M MURRAY

Yes, that conversation about our ex-es.

How many? She asks.

I say, not that many.

What does that mean?

It means what it says. What I just said.

No. That. That qualification. What does that mean?

I shrug. That many.

How many is that?

That isn't a number. It's relative.

To what?

To what you think is 'a lot'.

Is that what you were going to say?

What? I haven't said it yet.

Say it then.

No. You go first.

If I say it, you'll just adjust to what I said

No. I'll be honest.

How will I know you're being honest?

It's called trust. Without that there's nothing.

There. That's the proof you're hiding something.

In the distance, the sun's belly sits on the horizon. It has been there a while now, low and heavy. I free the dingy from the harbour and follow the line round the cove. Row, tug, row, tug. The line spools in a translucent thread to halo round my ankles. It sticks close to the cliffs, this line, and leads me to a place I have never gone and yet have been to before. The two are confused in my head.

I didn't even drink last night. I can't remember last night.

There's a seal following me—its eyes are following me—and if I look too long at them I'll die. Don't ask me how I know this, I can't tell you.

Sea meets shingle and I haul the dingy up. It's quiet. Only the tide—in—out—telling me: *No one has been here in centuries. No one has ever been here.*

Only, I know that's not true: there are footprints.

I slot my wader's boots into them. We are the same size, me and this other man. He must be here still, for the brine has yet to take his tracks.

The line is growing heavy, wrapped around me, a fisherman's cocoon.

When I look back to the sea, the dingy is missing. And there are seals, a hundred seals and all their fearful eyes, which tell me: I've gone and lost the dingy. It's as good as ghost gear now. And I think I have done this before.

Again, the sea whispers. It tells me to turn around. Find the line's other end.

I do.

I am holding it: I was always holding it.

I see myself, washed pale.

When I raise a hand, this other me raises his. He is a mirror polished into slate and I am here, in the cove where I drowned after I sought to save a seal.

I have done this a hundred times.

The line—always this line—leads back to me. ■

Tod-Flam

DONALD ADAMSON

There are monie wuirds for it:
*heivenly dauncers, nordern lights,
aurora borealis*, or aroon the bit
whaur A bide, *tod-flam* –

a flichterin in the mirk,
sib tae a wild craitur
in a mell-moorin, shakin its fur free
o clingin glister,
splairgin skinklin skelvies tae the lift.

A think o the first Sámi fowk,
hou thay wuid hae seen it
like some greit gawsie baist
heizin its mighty mane
abuin the horizon,
pawtin yin wey, yon wey, gluntin oot
a bleeze o colour.

In ma mind A'm yin o thaim,
kennin a truth aboot universe
an the pooers that hale us efter thaim
like a reindeer harlin a slipe
by the licht o sterns created
lang, lang afore oor warld wis born.

Abiding Sweetness

DONALD ADAMSON

It might have been a bend in the river
where they met, hunters from the north
and herdsman from the south,
with hides and flesh for barter
till one day someone brought along
the sweet stuff he'd found
by following the bears who had a nose for it.

They jabbered, pointed and tasted
and were enraptured. Mm, Mm they moaned
then Me, Me, Me
before they had a name for it
then baby-like, finding a sound that suited,
they said 'medhu'.

And so the word spread far and wide
and so it was the Anglo Saxons
marked life's joys
and sorrows with 'mead'
and so it is just once I found
(most rare, secret and delicious)
a single shy dark red
Rubus arcticus –
mesimarja, nectar berry.

*Note: The word 'medhu' (honey) may be 6000 years old.
It survives in Finnish as 'mesi', meaning 'nectar'. It is not
known which language invented the word originally.*

*In North Ronaldsay there lived a woman named Ragna, a
great lady. Thorstein was the name of her son, a man of fine
character.*

The Orkneyinga Saga translated by Alexander Burt Taylor

Ragna the Wise sails to Kirkwall to challenge Earl Rognvald

LYDIA HARRIS

I'm a doe leaping the dykes
deer hide bristles my shoulders

at sea I bail out seeped water
the hem of my tunic brine-weighted

when I'm storm-stayed with the link broken
when the tide runs strong and mighty

I light the Selkskerry beacon
keep vigil in need of God's mercy

unlock the gate of your kindness oh Lord
there's light in my shuttle and comb

for Rognvald I twist my hair through withies
wind it with strands from the stallion's tail

I cover my topknot with damask
when he kneels to say sorry I unfold my silk veil

and guided by light from the prow-slung lantern
set the sail north my promises kept

Ragna becomes a netleaf willow

LYDIA HARRIS

A withy crown roots into her hair,
creeps past her ears, thrusts
into the sag of chin. Catkins sprout
from her tongue, leaves bud then open

fan after fan and she's up to her knees
in peat. A comb slips from her pocket.
At her ankles coils slacken their grip,
a branch eases over each breast,

a stem springs her belly.
She's on her back laced with sprigs,
each tender-tipped and they breathe
puffs of down on her skin,

a blanket a mother might spread
and the Perseids are scoring the sky.
She watches through ice-eyes
as peat-moss overspreads each limb,

rests in her bog bed,
boulder clay firm under her spine.
Her fringe is the shoreline at mid-tide,
waves strewn haphazard on Samland.

Ragna as scribe

Lydia Harris

On each page she adds primroses
from the hill at Hammers,

transcribes the corncrake's cry
on a stave between strainer posts,

listens for lichen on stone,
guides her pen through Kyrie Eleison,

traps voices from the broch
brought by the wind,

settles them into the ground
to be ploughed, harrowed and trodden,

adds some words I would understand
noust, bere, mulder,

conjures the way
day begins with kye in fog,

gilds the giant puff ball
which wasn't there before,

spins benisons from the air
from the folds of her throat,

how the muscles in her face
move with the clouds.

Saint Tredwell and the otters

Papa Westray

JOANNA WRIGHT

For L.H.

Three slipped from the marsh,
backs long and smooth as grinding stones,
knotted the water

under a triptych-sky
washed to every corner.

Lady of stones white with lichen;
Lady of yellow iris beds;

Lady of the piecemeal judder of windmills
speaking across fields; of flood,

illumination spilling
over swans and stubble;

ribbon, ribbon the fallen sky
along our pilgrim tracks

Northern summer

JOANNA WRIGHT

The year comes home at summer,
lays her cloth over lean boughs,
demands a story. Even the hawthorns
clam up, hide their telltale blossom
in dry fists. Hard won, all of it —
ice scissored through the river leaving scars.
Ask my advice? Discard those memories:
let the rowans fondle everything
with green, let the aspens dwell
in their own reflections. Enough
that we are here, that the water's grown
its little voice, that the sky closes
out the sunlight, that in order not to hear
each other, everything hums.

Epic Misunderstanding

Richie McCaffery muses on poetic styles

WHEN I WAS at school in the early 2000s I started to notice many of my contemporaries suddenly adding the term ‘epic’ to their lexicon. To contextualise its usage, it was generally employed outside of the classroom, during break, for such feats as throwing an empty drink can across the room and landing it in the bin or tossing up a water bottle in the air and getting it to fall upright on the table. I was smug as I reminded them that ‘epic’ was not an adjective at all, but a noun meaning ‘a long poem with some war and fighting in it’. I know my definition back then was very reductive, but I stood by it. I was willing to accept that certain great works by artists could be described as ‘epic’ – Melville’s *Moby Dick* and Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Pound’s *Cantos*, Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, maybe even classical compositions like Sorabji’s *Opus clavicembalisticum*, but not the slam dunk of a drinks can.

Such is the hubris of youth. Nowadays, I cringe at the prescriptivist grammarians who tell us – *ex cathedra* – that things have to be a certain way. I much prefer the Walt Whitman notion (pilfered by Hugh MacDiarmid) that adventurous minds tend to gainsay themselves: ‘Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)’. Whitman himself had stolen it from Keats who spoke of ‘negative capability’ and Burns who coined the term ‘intermingledons’. This is all a longwinded way of saying that the word ‘epic’ belongs to the snobs and to the streets equally, that language is vitally pluralist. I was wrong to scold my schoolmates for using the word in a way I disliked, but we are all fragile beings held together by our pet peeves, superstitions and loves. Still, the urge to compartmentalise and pigeon-hole people remains in us all.

I’m a passionate reader of the poets of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. It’s widely agreed that the renaissance itself was manifested through three distinct waves. Hugh MacDiarmid might be considered the instigator of the first wave but I’m increasingly interested in the tail-end of the movement – the third wave – comprised of writers generally born between the 1930s and the very early 1950s. One poet who arguably belongs to this era is the poet D. M. Black (b. 1941). Black, who had long written formally satisfying, short poems began in the 1970s to experiment with longer poems engaging with fairy-tales. In 1979 Callum Macdonald published his most ambitious collection called *Gravitations*. This extraordinary book was sparsely reviewed and largely overlooked because of the presumed difficulty of its longer narrative poems, though Black himself, amongst some of his peers, hails it as his finest work. In 2020, I was corresponding

with D. M. Black and asking where I might be able to find a copy of this rare book, since I owned everything else he had published (I’m a terrible completist). He sent me a copy with the caveat that ‘it occurs to me that your own poems are about as different as they could be from the poems in *Gravitations*! I hope you will find things to enjoy’.

Enjoy them I did. I read epic or narrative poetry with a sense of wide-eyed wonder, not to mention jealousy. To resort to one of the most hackneyed idioms out there – I am ‘a sprinter and not a marathon runner’ when it comes to writing poetry, but not in reading it. I don’t have the patience, vision, plot-invention and intellect to write epic poems, or even a sequence of poems. In my whole writing career, the only way I’ve been able to write a poem that went ‘over the page’ was to club together a group of lesser poems I’d written into a sequence of maybe 30 odd lines and hope that it all held together. For now, I am sticking to what I know and love, little lyrical poems that try and capture something fleeting but notable in the world. It’s fine lace-work rather than heavy industrial graft. Both have their place.

Those who read poetry for enjoyment are likely a pretty well-read bunch. I hope that we are a broad church – none of this ‘poetry must rhyme’ malarkey. All of us whose reading of poetry moves us into writing it for ourselves will face the arduous process of trying to find our own voice after imitating things that have appealed to us, such as the deadly allure of Dylan Thomas to the febrile adolescent imagination. Some poets are great shape-shifters – they can move with ease from writing a little lyric to a sprawling epic. To me, that is where the real mystery lies. What is it that inspired such a change, such a reinvention of artistic identity?

A great example of this is Edwin Morgan, whose vast poetic oeuvre encompasses not merely many different modes and forms, but nearly every subject from here to the moon and beyond. Perhaps Morgan’s magnum opus is the epyllion *The New Divan* – a long sequence of often mysterious episodes, from Morgan’s experience of the North African campaign of World War Two as seen through the prism of Sufi mysticism. The problem with being such a protean artist who can move between forms with ease is that it becomes hard to place the personality of the author, in that they are always hiding behind another guise and putting the ‘art’ in artifice. Morgan was one of the most versatile of poets. But not all poets are capable of versatility and I don’t think that should be seen as a stumbling block.

It’s a fallacy to say that we are what

we eat, or rather what we read. My earliest published poetry was extremely condensed, often rarely over 10 lines long. I styled my work on that of Ian Hamilton (1938–2001), a poet who never wavered in his commitment to writing the tiniest, most exquisite poems. Such was his dedication to a certain type of pained lyric that at the time of his death only about 60 poems had ever been published. My own inspiration mainly came from the emotional auras I felt emanated from objects that mattered to me or had mattered to people whom I connected with in some way. I didn’t care much for metre or rhyme but I was vaguely interested in syllabics. Very quickly I became known as an ‘object’ poet and a miniaturist. It’s a label I’ve not been able to divest myself of, but then I think it’s good to be known for something, even if it is restrictive. Still, I really do find it irksome to have people assume that my reading habits as a result never venture beyond the parish pump of pretty neo-Georgian verse or the couthy kailyard of the Celtic Twilight.

Hugh MacDiarmid provocatively titled one of his most unapproachably difficult book-length poems *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961). In the 1940s he’d called for ‘giantism in the arts’. I don’t doubt that he wanted a sort of poetry to act as a pasilaly – a universal language in an idealised society yet to be reached, where people know all of the vocabulary for various scientific and academic disciplines by heart. I’d love that for myself, in theory. I read such poems with fascination and fury in equal measure. MacDiarmid was the first to admit that he wasn’t laying down rules, but merely trying to stir people out of their intellectual slumber. It’s worth looking at the trajectory of his life as a poet. He began in the 1920s by writing small but cosmic lyrics in a rejuvenated Scots that won the hearts of many of his readers. He cited Heine, the German poet who was also lauded for his early short poems, but who felt constrained and moved into longer, epic modes that the public largely ignored. Most people would cite MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) as an epic poem, but it’s written in a rhyme scheme of three- or four-line stanzas that give a nursery-rhyme or comic effect and downplay the profundity of the message of the poem.

Most poets in their apprenticeship write small, formally conservative poems. Rhyme is often *sine qua non* and it can become a crutch. Many grow out of it – some leave it behind altogether – and others go off in search of more innovative or ambitious forms. Everyone longs to write a villanelle as good as Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘One Art’. Some epic poems are all the more effective and powerful

for remaining incomplete, or having failed in the eyes of their creators. Take, for instance, George Campbell Hay’s ‘Mochtar is Dughall’ which is about a chance but ill-starred meeting in the North African desert of World War Two of an Arab and a Scottish soldier, brought together in their death at the hands of a German. The incomplete state of the poem, planned as an epic, not only speaks of lives brutally cut short but also the life-long trauma that Hay sustained during the war that led inevitably to mental illness and prevented the completion of the poem.

One of the best living examples of a poet visibly developing and growing with each new collection is that of MacGillivray, who has published three ever more Promethean collections, each one delving into Scottish song, history and myth. Her most recent, *The Gaelic Garden of the Dead* (2019) is one of the most exciting poetry collections I’ve ever had the chance to review. It is a melting pot of numerous styles of poetry coming together under the epic and overarching themes of the collection as a whole – there are Petrarchan sonnets, calligrammes, speculative writing, prose poetry and much more. It adheres to Ezra Pound’s maxim that ‘poetry is news that stays news’.

It’s generally assumed (like a Victorian sewing sampler) that a poet has to demonstrate a range of work to show that they have found the optimal outlet for their voice. But this isn’t always the case. A number of poets strike on their formula early. Take Michael Longley for instance. His is a life in poetry based on whittling away all redundant expression and padding, to get to the raw emotional kernel of the issue. If you discount ‘A Man in Assynt’, Norman MacCaig hit upon his winning blueprint in short, imagistic poems in the 1950s, after an earlier wartime apprenticeship as a surrealistic ‘New Apocalyptic’ poet.

Some poets find their groove and perfect it over many years and repetitions, some have a stylistic and poetic wanderlust which drives them to ever greater ends. Regardless of what is written, be it a haiku or a heap of cantos, do not assume that the poet in question is blinkered to all of the happenings in the poetry world, that they are only on the look-out for their like-minded cronies who do something similar and give them strength in numbers. Some of the most interesting poets are the lone wolves, not the followers and joiners of schools. ■

Orkney Voices

An overview by Alison Miller, Orkney Scriever 2021-22

THE ORKNEY VOICES Group as hid is noo wis started at the beginneen o 2018. The aim o hid wis tae mak a spaece whaar Orcadian spaekers could finnd weys o writan and spaekan aboot writeen.

The idea grew oot o a Scottish PEN project, Many Voices, that encouraged different marginalised groups ower Scotland tae finnd thir voices in creative written classes.

At the end o the project, the fukk in the Orkney

group wanted tae keep gan, so the George Mackay Fellowship (GMBF) agreed tae tak is under thir umbrella. Wir supported be Orkney Library & Archive and Orkney Islands Council Culture Fund.

At the end o last year, efter meetan throughtoot 2020 and 2021 online, we launched a collection o wark fae the members: *Gousters, Glims and Veerie-orums*, as the George Mackay Brown Centenary publication fae the GMBF. This haes led tae invitations tae read at a variety o events. In the next few months we will

be appearing at Orkney Nature Festival, Orkney Folk Festival and St Magnus International Festival.

Gousters, Glims and Veerie-orums, price £10, is available to buy from Orkney Bookshops, Stromness Books & Prints, Tel: 01856 850565; and The Orcadian Bookshop, including online sales from their website: www.orcadian.co.uk/shop/poetry/1303-gousters-glims-and-veerie-orums.html ■

The poems on these two pages are from members of the Orkney Voices Group. Ed.

Island life

SHEILA GARSON

Five
There they go, heeds taegither,
Pickin ower the bones fae last night.
No that either o them wis there, mind
Tae ken the rights o whit geed on,
Bit that's niver stopped them afore.

Four
Sheu lighted on him in the shop,
An he'd cheust geen in fur breed.
Buey, he fair got his character,
An the failings o his forebears tae.

Three
Whispers ahint hands an sideways luks,
Smiles that niver mak thir eyes,
Aye, hid's aesy tae sit in judgment.

Two
Hid's the gospel truth he said,
Fur Willock o the Ha telt me.

One
Whit wur you spaekin tae them fur?

On the Road

VERA BUTLER

Beggars and thieves they called is,
Romanies, travellers wir chosen neem

Pull the curtains lock the doors
Dae they think thir no seen?

Rap at the door, peer throo the windows
Times are herd and lean.

Roond the hooses we go cap in hand
A hungry, greetin bairn means a hen's teen.

Run oot o the toon, cursed and chased
A kindly fermer's wife gaes is eggs and cream

A drystone dyke wae a gressy ditch
Wae can stey the night and dream

O life on the road whar the world is kind
And nature is still wir freen.

The Nugget

LORRAINE BRUCE

Thurs a nugget o blue cheese
under the teeble.
I caught a glimpse o id whaen
I sat doon.
I mind droppan id yesterday
or mibee
the day afore.
Lunch wis Westray watar biscuits
wae butter
and blue cheese.
Stilton?
or mibee Daeneesh Blue.
I winder if the cultyursh
in the cheese
are interactan
wae the bacteria oan
me wid eefect laminit floareen.
Mibee thurs a scientific miracle
hapnan
right there
under me kitcheen teeble.
Some unkan pathogens
are mibee mixan wae the
spores oan the cheese
an mutaetan intae a mould juice
capable o killan this
bliddy virus.
Hids mibee sittan
Under that nugget o cheese
Choost wettan tae be fund bae some
Twenty furst century
Dr Flaameen.
Weel weel,
Me cups empty.
Al away an git the dustpan an brush.

Recipe For a Good Storm

INGRID GRIEVE

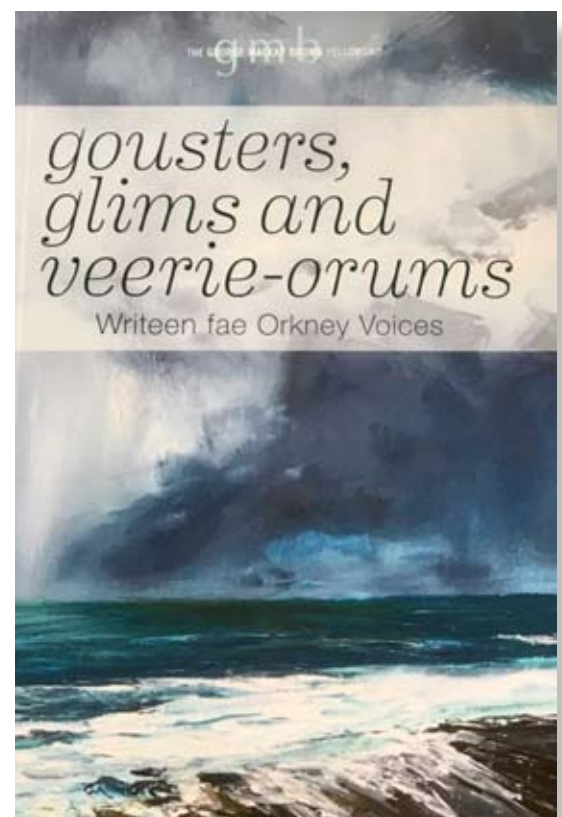
Tae start wae yu'll need
A reid morneen sky
A ripple o sea
And a kithy wind

Add a gethereen o fairweather clouds
a scatter o shoosers
and a change o ert

Leav it tae build
until the sky turns black
A gouster howls
and thurs a good demmle in the sea

Steer in
thunder, lightneen
and helly shoosers

Noo, whip furiously until ye hiv a
Northwesterly skreever,
howlan and screaman
wae a sea o riggid owsen,
crashan and smookan
and roaran
in an air filled o salt spray.



Census: Sock Knitter

BARBARA JOHNSTON

Ah'll hae tae light the lamp soon
The peedie window is fur no use
I need tae feeneesh this sock afore bed
Me fingers aer sore and reed
The oo is coorse cumman off the wires
Moorit broon, hid's haerd tae see the loops
I wish I could dae a soft lacy shaal
Bit no bernes fur me
Lizzie's been blished wae three
Haer wark's more lightsome than mine
Baekan, hingan oot washeen
Feedan haens, wurkan in the haey
I sit here at the window an knit
Hid's coorse on me eyes
Ahll need thick glesses like Celia soon
Shae's nearly blind
Bides in a fine hoose in the toon
Surrounded bae books
I wish I hid time an light tae read
I wish, I wish I hid oo in bonny culurs
A shaal tae keep oot the draft on a winter night
Hoo minny socks hae I tae knit afore hid's enough?
Maggie an Nell got away – off tae Canada
Hoo minny socks for a passage across
A new life full o possibilities?
I wish...

Whit wir ye thinkan?

ISSY GRIEVE

Yir knackered the entire row o stabs.
Did ye no watch th irt o the wind?
Whit wir ye thinkan?

Ye trailed the glowan knave o gress along the ditch.
Did ye no think tae luk ahint ye?
Whit wir ye thinkan?

Ye thowt hid wis weet in the buddum.
Did ye no notice hoo high the flames wir lickan?
Whit wir ye thinkan?

Ye herd the peeng o the wires tightman.
Did ye no see me stabs gaan black?
Whit wir ye thinkan?

Ye sa the reek driftan across the road.
Did ye no twig hid wis feral thick?
Whit wir ye thinkan?

Ye can hear me noo, no more burnan.
No more owld gress in the ditches fur you.
Ye hiv new stabs tae drive, a new fence.
That's whit am thinkan!

The Weather Dance

GREER NORQUOY

An Eva Three Step, the weather's fine,
warm sea breezes and bright sunshine
the stert o the weekly dance.
Cross me palm wi silver an yir in wae a chance
o good fortune at sea.
The horizon held the settan sun
swayan tae the rhythm o a St Bernard's Waltz
movan gracefully.

Tuesday, lighthooses, Noup Head and Brough met,
in a push-me-pull-you tidal dance, The Westray
Wan Step.
They winked at each ither, a blink oan the waater
I heard the ebb and flow o idle chatter,
a whisperan sea.
I cast a blanket o sea haar
a grey, Slow Air
playan hauntanly.

Wednesday I whistled up mild winds, a gentle gust
tae ruffle the waves and keek up a dust.
The Dashing White Sergeant tuk tae the floor
Noo the fiddler's ready let's begin wans more
a lively reel at sea.
I chuckled as I cast a spell
and stirred the pot
singan gleefully.

Thursday gales deterred the creeler as
nae siller passed tae this owld dealer
Jigs and hornpipes, strathspeys and reels
the dancers skreked and keeked thir heels
a troubled sea.
White horses ran ashore
thir heids held high
Raised loftily.

I summoned up a weekend storm
a right hooley o a wind wis born
The wind looder an looder blew
the dancers queek and queeker flew
a frenzied sea.
A skirl, a dirl, an Eightsome Reel
laevan them reelan,
mercilessly.

Thiv reeled, thiv set, thiv crossed an more
an covered iviry bit o shore
a summer storm blawn fae the west
will noo be tamed and laid tae rest
a settled sea.
Thi'll cum tae me anither day
cross me palm an say,
"Be thanks tae thee."

Thunder, lightning, sunshine and shower, I haad
thim aal within me power.

Slaves and Highlanders: Silenced Histories of Scotland and the Caribbean

David Alston

Edinburgh University Press (2021)
£14.99

REVIEW BY JAMES ROBERTSON

This is a mighty book, the product of more than twenty years' research by David Alston, who has over that time generously shared his findings on a website, also titled *Slaves and Highlanders* (www.spanglefish.com/slavesandhighlanders/). It is a book that reshapes our understanding of Highland and Scottish histories, and – as the subtitle indicates – places those histories in an international context. It is a major piece in the emerging jigsaw that shows the extent of Scottish involvement in the slave trade and especially in the slavery-based economies of the Caribbean. More than this, it enlarges the existing narrative to include the stories of the enslaved, of free people of colour, and of mixed-race children who had to negotiate hard paths between countries, classes, cultures and social attitudes. It interweaves global history with local history, and while it interrogates in great detail the available evidence, it does not shrink from asking broader questions. What is the relationship between what happened in the past and how we find the present? What moral obligations, if any, does this present inherit from that past? And what long-held myths (such as 'it wisnae us', or the notion of Scotland as an oppressed colony of England – the two are not unconnected) and false comparisons (plantation slavery with, for example, the Highland Clearances) must be challenged?

David Alston quotes the Caribbean writer Jan Carew (1920–2012), who was descended from both slaves and Highland slave owners (his mother was a Robertson) on the Kiltarn plantation in Berbice (like neighbouring Demerara and Essequibo, a former Dutch colony ceded to Britain in 1815, and now part of Guyana). Carew's great-grandmother had said, 'There are ghosts in our blood and we're lucky because the lowliest, the ones who suffer most in the world of the living, are always top dogs in the spirit world.' This idea shaped Carew's own understanding of how to interpret the mess that is history: 'The ghosts are always there talking their conflicting talk until there's a Tower of Babel inside your head. So you've got to listen well and search out the kindest, the strongest, the most human of these voices and make them your own.'

David Alston concludes his book with a fresh affirmation of this idea. His motivation, I think, is simply to say, this is what happened, and it had consequences and legacies that are still tangible. If we are to understand Highland and, by extension, Scottish history at all, we must see it in its entirety, and that must include

the exploitative, wealth-generating engagement of several generations of Highlanders in every aspect of the slave-based economies of the Caribbean.

Anybody who knows the Highlands will experience a perhaps surprising, certainly unsettling sense of familiarity as they read of the individuals and places that feature in, for example, the chapters on Guyana (where the Highland presence was especially strong). As well as Kiltarn, we find plantations named Alness, Brahan, Cromarty, Dochfour, Kintail and Lochaber, and innumerable planters, traders, financiers and other facilitators with Highland names.

What should be no surprise is that the entire system of slavery was founded on control and forced compliance, the reduction of humans to chattel status and therefore the removal from them of basic familial and individual rights. Underpinning everything was violence – both the threat of it and its application in grotesque and extreme forms, from abduction in Africa to flogging, torture, mutilation, rape and murder. There is scarcely a page on which reference to this terrible truth is not either explicitly or implicitly made. The hands of few of the Scots in this book were clean, and some were horribly bloodied.

'It would be absurd,' David Alston writes, 'to claim that any individual living today bears a personal responsibility for the evils of British colonial slavery. But does that mean that...we have no obligations and responsibilities – no moral relationship – to this past?' In a fascinating chapter, he examines this question. We cannot deny *this* past, he says, while at the same time enjoying the reflected sunlight of more positive aspects of Scottish history, such as the Enlightenment.

In any case, slavery and the Enlightenment were not separable and distinct episodes, as the ongoing arguments about the reputations of Henry Dundas and David Hume illustrate. You can take your history whole or you can be selective, but the latter course leaves you open to accusations of hypocrisy and myopia. Quite rightly, David Alston has no truck with a civic nationalist exceptionalism which, however well intentioned, sidesteps these issues. My own view is that modern Scotland's political journey of self-determination has helped towards a deeper, more questioning reading of the country's past. It is true, though, that some prefer either to ignore the role of Scots in every aspect of British imperialism or to see it as a kind of aberration from the true path of Scottish history.

A few years ago, University College London's massive *Legacies of British Slavery* project published a database of those who were compensated when slavery was abolished in the British colonies in 1833 (compensation, it should be stressed, was paid to slave *owners*, not to those who had been enslaved). I searched the database to

see if my forebears, the Robertsons of Kindeace, had been compensated, and great was my relief when I found no mention of them. But why the relief? I had never felt any loyalty to or empathy with these ancestors, but I sometimes wondered how I would have acted in their shoes, in their time. Perhaps the relief lay in not knowing. What I do know is that in the late 1700s five brothers of the family died overseas. Two were killed in the service of the East India Company, while the other three – a merchant in New Orleans, a planter in Jamaica and a planter in Demerara – succumbed to yellow fever. Like so many Scots, they took up opportunities offered by the burgeoning Empire. These Robertsons may not have been slave owners in 1833 but they were managing plantations forty years earlier, and were closely connected, in some cases by marriage, to other Ross-shire families, mentioned in this book, who were deeply invested in the Caribbean. If blood links me to Easter Ross it also links me to the colonial slave system. Those people are in my ancestry as surely as there were Robertsons in Jan Carew's.

David Alston's extensive research delivers a study loaded – in places, almost overloaded – with statistics and biographical information. Yet the main themes are not obscured by this detail. The book's achievement is twofold. First, it presents a vast array of material which other historians can explore further, thereby enhancing our understanding of this complex past. Second, it draws real, human stories from the mass of facts. We see Highland Scots striving, succeeding and failing, some becoming rich beyond imagination (the Gaelic poet Robb Donn wrote of 'am fear a tha 'n Seumeuca', 'the man who is in Jamaica', returning with gold enough to fill a flagon), some losing everything, including their lives; we see the enslaved surviving, resisting, rebelling and sometimes winning freedom; we see a small but not insignificant number of freed people of colour, especially women, using whatever means was available to improve their status and situation; and we see the tangled relations among indigenous Caribbean people, planters, soldiers, colonial administrators, the enslaved and those, the Maroons, who escaped the plantations and established new communities in the bush.

All these lives were shaped by slavery and often by the geographical and familial ties between the Caribbean and the Scottish Highlands. By showing this so clearly and incontestably, *Slaves and Highlanders* makes for a sobering, challenging but thoroughly compelling read. ■

With Net and Coble: A salmon fisher on the Cromarty Firth

George Chamier

Pen & Sword (2021) £20.00

REVIEW BY JAMES MILLER

The salmon occupies a unique place in our culture. Whether as the beautiful sleek shape on Pictish symbol stones, as a character in folk tales, or as the silver leaper on the end of a fishing line, it has been present. Its name was taboo among generations of fishermen because, I suspect, it was a relic from ancient beliefs in witchcraft. The salmon has also of course been of tremendous economic importance. Possibly no other fish has attracted around itself such a corpus of legislation through the centuries.

One of my grandfathers and an uncle or two were salmon fishers in Caithness. They worked with stake nets at fishing stations that no longer exist, their presence removed by laws attempting to cope with a decline in fish numbers that has so far escaped full explanation, although it has not been for want of theorizing.

George Chamier writes about another method of catching salmon – sweep netting with a net and a coble in the Cromarty Firth. It is an ostensibly simple technique, involving rowing the coble in a loop out from the shore and dragging a curtain of net astern in an attempt to corral the fish, but it demands a deeply detailed local knowledge and skill at reading the water to spot the presence of salmon. Some trusted to luck and dragged in hope but Chamier is scornful of such practitioners and preferred to fall back on knowledge, the best way, I suppose, to maximise return for minimum of effort.

The book is very much the author's personal memoir. He began fishing as a 'loon' in the 1960s at Balconie, just on the shore below Evanton, during holidays from school or university. After a few years working furth of the north, he returned to the Balconie fishing ground and worked it until the fishing rights were bought out by the District Fishery Board in 1987. The lure of the Firth was strong enough, however, to bring him back as a part-time 'hobby fisherman.'

The narrative, splendidly illustrated with many photographs (one advantage of a shore fishery is that camera-handling is greatly facilitated), is about far more than just the catching of salmon. Anyone who has fallen asleep over pages describing endless casting with flies on the great salmon rivers of Scotland can rest assured that this is one of the most engaging books on fishing that I have come across in a long time.

With its recipes, anecdotes, a poem or two, and long cast of characters, it is as good a picture of daily life in the late-20th-century eastern Highlands as you can find anywhere. George Chamier's narrative is imbued with the atmosphere and camaraderie of the place. In short, the crack is terrific. ■

Everything Passes, Everything Remains

Chris Dolan
Saraband (2021) £9.99
REVIEW BY CHARLOTTE LUKE

Chris Dolan's *Everything Passes, Everything Remains*, subtitled 'Freewheelin' Through Spain, Song and Memory', opens with a warning against pigeonholing the book as a standard memoir. "Believe me," writes Dolan paradoxically, "this is not a reliable record". While writing this review I have often found myself typing 'novel' by mistake, instead of 'memoir' or 'book'. Dolan continues along these lines by telling us that the contents of his book are based on nothing more than his own "precarious" memory; had he kept a diary, he assures us he would have filled it with lies.

This initial set of provisos contrasts rather mind-bendingly with the formulaic presentation of the work. There are maps, tables, and an array of different fonts and headings and sections. Yet its narration is chronologically all over the shop, something Dolan expresses beautifully in his preface: "Journeys are never what they seem, or what you expect. In 2019 my head was often in 2000, my friends' in 1978 or 2017, while reading about 1830, singing an old 1969 hit and discussing 1936". It is certainly not your average travelogue; its leaps across time, space and the blurred lines of memory versus reality give rise to a thoroughly enjoyable odyssey through the Spain of the 1970s, the 2000s and the 2010s.

The adventures and misadventures of Dolan and his friends as they cycle through Spain, whether made up or otherwise, convince the reader that it does not particularly matter, really, whether the anecdotes and circumstances of the trips are completely accurate. Indeed, Dolan often argues with himself, and his friends, over what is true and what is not. We are, instead, trusted to see the bigger picture. The universal truths behind the stories are people, places, music, geography, and the transcending of borders.

The visually eclectic 275 pages are divided into sections, which are often preceded by poetry by Seamus Heaney, accompanied by the Spanish translation. The work is loaded with references to the history, culture and politics of Spain and Scotland, which come whenever something Dolan has seen or heard on his travels jogs his memory. This gives a wonderfully vivid impression of the cyclists' journey; three friends having a lovely time, busking in town squares, chewing the fat, and commenting on whatever comes into their heads next.

Laurie Lee, in whose footsteps Dolan treads, is a constant spectre throughout the work, to an extent that unfortunately verges on the irritating. Virtually everything Dolan encounters is compared to what Lee would have encountered on his travels through Spain decades before;

he tells us that, during his 1970s trip, "the toilets I used were like the ones Lee would have". Meanwhile, the recurring image of both Lee and Dolan venturing out with little more than a fiddle under their arms is just a shade too rose-tinted for my liking. Dolan is, for the most part, fairly knowing about the dangers of over-romanticising the past, but I am not convinced he is always aware when he does it.

His despair over the current political situations surrounding Brexit, the Catalonia question and Indyref, chimes interestingly with discussions about Franco's Spain and the Glasgow of Dolan's upbringing; however, for me, the book's strength lies in the anecdotes about the people and places he encounters on the road. They are funny, touching, often very sad. When politics is added into the mix, some of the transitions between introspection and description can be a little jarring. However, his descriptions of modern Spain, with its disappearing villages and divisive politics, tug at heartstrings closer to home. We are all, despite the periodic rubbishness of the world, in the same boat. For me, that is what this book is all about. ■

50 Words for Love in Swedish

Stephen Keeler
Archetype Books (2022) £8.99
REVIEW BY OLGA WOJTAS

Stephen Keeler is known as a fine poet, so it's no surprise that his prose memoir, *50 Words for Love in Swedish*, is a linguistic delight. And the language, as the title indicates, is not confined to English. This is by no means a conventional chronological memoir, but instead offers a series of fascinating vignettes evoked by fifty Swedish words, such as *osthyvel* (cheese slice) and *pimpling* (ice fishing). This leaves the reader complete freedom to read from start to end, or dip in at will, perhaps wanting to know more about *semla*, a cardamom-infused, marzipan-filled, cream-topped Lenten bun which proves just as effective as Proust's *madeleine*.

In 1973, Keeler, newly qualified as a teacher, moved to Sweden to teach English as a foreign language, his first foray abroad. Thus began a lifelong love affair with the country, which Keeler presents as so welcoming and entrancing that he should be on commission from the Swedish tourist board. He has lived and worked in many other places, including China, Vietnam, and the former Soviet bloc, and now has a home in the north-west of Scotland, but still makes frequent visits to Sweden.

While each vignette is free-standing in terms of theme, length and mood, there are intriguing contrasts between Keeler's upbringing, and the new society he finds himself in. As well as being a fan of Keeler's poetry, I'm one of his Twitter followers (@stephenkeeler). His tweets,

as with this book, are witty, humane and thoughtful, and also show him to have a deep knowledge of a host of subjects, including literature, art and classical music. Because of this (exposing my own prejudices), I had him down as a posh boy, and it's been a shock to find in this volume that he had a less than privileged upbringing in the north-east of England.

A section entitled *ljus* (candle) reveals that even in the 1960s, his great grandmother's house had no electric lighting upstairs, and no hot water supply.

"None of us had bathrooms. All of us had an outside toilet across 'the yard'." On particularly bitter nights, Keeler's mother would put a night light next to the cistern to prevent it from freezing.

Keeler contrasts this with Sweden's culture of winter candles, functional, affordable and decorative, packaged in dark blue boxes emblazoned with the Swedish royal family's coat-of-arms. On his first visit home for Christmas, he brought candles as presents for everyone – an unexpectedly welcome gift since it coincided with the Three-Day Week and the hazards of power cuts.

Several vignettes contain references to Keeler's beloved late wife, Yvonne, whom he met in Stockholm. These are touching, sparing, and affectionately humorous. He records moving in with her in a section entitled *sambo* (live-in partner), explaining that this "functional word for love" is "clumsily welded together" from *samman*, together, and *boende*, living accommodation.

They named their daughter Lucy after *Lucia*, St Lucy's Day, the midwinter celebration of light, giving her the middle name Astrid after the children's author Astrid Lindgren. Another section tells how Lindgren rocked the government with a satirical story, *Pomperipossa*, attacking the punitive system that had her paying tax of over 100%.

Lucy clearly shares her parents' love of Sweden, and every year she and her father buy one another Swedish Ballograf pens for Christmas and birthdays.

With a cast list encompassing elderly Mercedes-driving ladies, Erik the naval cook, and Bjorn Borg as well as Keeler's own family, this is a beautifully written, life-affirming book. Bear it in mind for Christmas and birthdays. ■

Birds of Paradise

Oliver K. Langmead
Titan Books (2021) £8.99
REVIEW BY KIT SPINK

As a piece of speculative fiction, *Birds of Paradise* is a kind of thought experiment for exploring a question – in this case, 'What if you were made before death'. It takes as its premise the idea that Adam, the first man, cannot die and has lived until the present day. There are flashes to other times (Roman, Egyptian, Celtic) as he struggles to piece together all that has

happened to him, though the story largely follows him inhabiting and reflecting on the modern world.

These reflections on place are well done, a good chance to experience the many locations visited – a lot of travel happens in this book – through the eyes of someone who has seen cities like Glasgow & Edinburgh rise ever upward. But it is the reflections on mortality that are the real interest of the novel. There is something despairing, weighty, and oddly human in Adam's sense of his own immortality. He seems world-weary to the extreme, having lived through so much that he often struggles to remember anything, let alone anything new sticking. Weeks are confused with days as he is unable to experience any kinship with the modern humans that may be his descendants though are far removed from the placid gardener he is in essence.

This listlessness does little to drive on the plot, so a cast of characters emerges in other beings that have survived since Eden. These 'first animals' seem to be the only creatures Adam has time for, and in their desires and need for Adam's strength so comes a globetrotting plot we can follow. It could be said that the plot is a little filmic at times, something that's at odds with Adam's slow pace and tender observations, and the cast of animals often sits on the edge of caricature, but these are issues down to personal taste.

The cover recommends the book to fans of Neil Gaiman, and there are clear resonances with *American Gods* – both in theme, style, and tone. Yet the novel remains wholly original, with interlaced metaphor throughout of fruit ripening, maturing, rotting, of knowledge and of trees; all the things that have brought Adam to this point. The writing manages this without ever seeming theological, and within the narrative there are deeper questions of free will – for despite being placid at heart and seeking peace, Adam brings about a lot of violent death – all of which are there for the reader to ponder without it ever feeling hard work. That Adam is black and therefore not what many of the human antagonists expect or can comfortably handle is a commendable, important choice that is done well, with a light hand.

The most refreshing aspect of the novel is one that develops gradually on reading. This is the shift in perspective we gain from Adam's point of view, a shift away from the modern idea of progress – that we are societally moving towards something greater – seeing instead the more traditional perspective that we are moving ever further from paradise. In writing Adam as being a green-fingered and compassionate character rather than one that assumes his dominion over other species, we gain a measured, almost objective view on all that humans have done and continue to do to the world. If this were a thought experiment perhaps

the result would be embedded within this: in being granted the wisdom Adam's ages of experience affords and seeing that if we fought and took less, and grew more gardens, perhaps we would find a more harmonious world. ■

Highland Book Prize 2021 Shortlist

Reviews from the Reading Panel
Compiled by KIRSTEEN BELL,
Moniack Mhor

Announced in the spring of 2022, the 2021 Highland Book Prize Shortlist is testament to the quality and range of literature made in or about the Highlands. Seventy-one books were submitted for this award, and so the selection of a longlist and subsequent shortlist was an exciting undertaking. Rising to the challenge was a 180-strong volunteer reading panel.

Each title was read, reviewed, and scored by a minimum of four readers, but more often as many as ten. It was those scores that formed the final longlist, from which the judges selected the shortlist, making this a readers' prize at its heart.

As a celebration of the insightful and enthusiastic responses of the reading panel, we have brought together a selection of their thoughts on the four shortlisted titles (covers are shown on the back page of this issue).

These reviews are amalgams from multiple reader reports for each title and the titles are not ranked in order of inclusion. The winner will be announced at a Moniack Mhor event, live-streamed in late May (see Moniack website): ■

The Stone Age

Jen Hadfield
PICADOR (2021) £7.99

An exploration of neurodiversity in poetry, authentic and original, the individual poems grab the reader with a host of fresh images and aperçus; each has a jewel-like quality. The collection is highly polished, skillfully arranged, and elegantly composed.

Lyrical wordplay depicts Hadfield's internal consciousness and the interplay of that with the external landscapes of her Shetland home. The language creates a rich visual tapestry around these impressions, with lovely use of similes and metaphors such as 'whalebacked hills' and 'hands flachtering like birds', giving resonance and immediacy to the changing weather, scenery, flora and fauna of the Shetlands. Invocation of ancient stones, rites and cultural references conjure up ancient Shetland for the reader who may never have visited the Isles.

Hadfield makes good use of Shetland

vocabulary to paint visceral and tactile images through her poetry so that the imagination is strongly encouraged to fill in sensations of taste, touch, and smell. When you feel a dictionary might be required to decode some of the trickier words, a glossary of Shetland words is included which is very helpful and achingly lyrical.

This is a remarkable collection, speaking with an assured and mature poetic voice. ■

Islands of Abandonment: Life in the Post-Human Landscape

Cal Flynn
William Collins (2021) £8.49

The central idea of *Islands of Abandonment* is stunningly simple but entirely original. Rather than looking for hope in places where the impact of humanity on our planet is less obvious, or where a sense of untouched wildness might still linger, Flynn takes an incisive, honest look at the places on Earth which have been most affected by the worst that our society has offered and looks for signs of hope in the darkness.

In a clear-headed, forthright, honest manner Flynn approaches a difficult and emotive issue. Many readers will be familiar with the history of some of the places Flynn travels to, like Chernobyl, but other areas are likely to be completely unknown. By focusing on such varied landscapes with such varied histories, the book feels fresh and engaging. It seems incredibly vital, addressing some of the most pressing environmental problems the planet is facing.

Flynn's writing is wonderfully controlled, and she is not afraid to take the path less trodden and look at the world head on without flinching. Written in beautiful, lyrical prose that brings the landscape to life and sensitively expresses the writer's response to it, this is easily one of the best I have read in the past few years. ■

Slaves and Highlanders: Silenced Histories of the Caribbean

David Alston
Edinburgh University Press (2021)
£14.99

This book is the product of 20 years of devoted research into the links between the Highlands and slavery in the Caribbean through the 18th and 19th centuries. The author's immense depth of knowledge of his subject, and his enthusiasm for it, is undeniable. Despite its academic nature and tone, Alston's style has a prose-like, storytelling quality and he does a good job of excavating the stories of individual people amongst all the facts and information presented.

Where there are gaps this is not Alston's fault but of gaps in the record. The author deliberately seeks to provide

a voice – as far as he can – both to enslaved people and expressly to women. His theme is also to consider the extent to which research into local history can help inform national debates and, with his brave, excoriating criticism of the lack of references to slavery in some of Scotland's leading institutions, this aim is certainly achieved. On the modern impact of his theme, he pulls absolutely no punches.

This is an important and urgent addition to the debate and historiography surrounding the complicity of Highland Scots in the Atlantic slave trade and how this has directly affected the Highland region as a whole. At times difficult, but overall a fascinating read, one I feel richer for having read. ■

In a Veil of Mist

Donald S. Murray
Saraband (2021) £9.99

In a Veil of Mist skillfully weaves the strands of island life in the early 1950s with the experimentation of germ warfare, against the background of the Cold War.

Murray's work is steeped in the history, culture and geography of Lewis, providing ample evidence that the island functions as far more than a simple backdrop for his story, but rather forms the foundation on which his tale rests. Although a work of fiction, the book is based in the facts of military testing of chemical weapons across the Highlands and Islands region, a dark slice of history with which many people may be less familiar. In bringing its reality to light, Murray does a great service to those people who were affected by these events and reminds us that governments may not always have the best interests of their remoter regions at heart.

The art is ensuring that the stories from the island and on board the scientific ship do not become disjointed, and Murray carries this off with aplomb. Written with authority and a firm grasp of language, the story lines and the descriptive passages made this a highly enjoyable read, with superb evocation of Lewis and its people.

With grateful thanks from the Highland Book Prize to all the volunteer readers. If you are interested in becoming a reader for the 2022 Highland Book Prize visit www.highlandbookprize.org.uk ■

Walter Perrie in conversation with Scottish Writers

Grace Note Publications (2021) £12.99
REVIEW BY KENNY TAYLOR

Imagining relaxed conversations with people living or dead whose reputation and work you admire can be rewarding, even if you've never met them. Tom Bryan explores that idea in relation to some impressive Scottish women, past and present, on Page 26 of this issue. There's

a risk, of course, that your musings will be little more than a projection of your own personality onto the characters you picture, but at least you'll give some time afterwards to further researching those other lives.

Now consider real, convivial conversations, rendered in print as spoken, with some luminaries of Scottish literature and culture. Poetry, fiction, drama and non-fiction writing, visual art, folklore and song, broadcasting, literary criticism, teaching and editing all fall within their experience over many decades, sometimes with several of these skills combined in one person. Savour the list: Donald Campbell, Duncan Glen, Tessa Ransford, Trevor Royle, William Hershaw, Alasdair Gray, Margaret Bennett and John Herdman.

Several of those folk have now passed away. But in interviews recorded between 2006 and 2020, all of them give fresh glimpses of their artistic motivation at different stages of their lives, share thoughts about works that have influenced or scunnered them, recall incidents that show something of the character of other writers, talk politics, crack jokes. For these are real conversations – sometimes meandering as they divert from main thrusts of questioning, then returning, then moving somewhere else, just as you'd expect if you were sitting and having a chat.

Walter Perrie – himself a man of many parts as a poet, critic, editor, travel writer and publisher (he co-founded Chapman and Frasers Publications) – is to be congratulated on bringing these conversations to print, not least in the way that he has rendered them *verbatim*, whatever the diversions and casual asides, thereby making each have a natural warmth – a sharing. He was assisted in the interviews by John Herdman, also co-founder of Frasers, who in turn is interviewed at the close of the book by Richie McCaffery.

With such a kist o' riches, it would be invidious to select just a few quotes. Suffice to say that this is a volume that repays repeated visits, to read conversations whole or in smaller sections. Its future use as a reference should be significant, as is its current contribution to better understanding some major aspects of Scottish artistic culture and some of the people who have helped to shape it. ■

Perfit words

REVIEW BY ANNE MACLEOD

So many great collections have landed on my doorstep, rerouted by NN editors. These books – this dance of language interrogating the world we inhabit – at best spark both insight and delight. And these two collections from Red Squirrel Press *How to Walk in the Dark* by Helen Lamb and *Look, Breathe* by Chris Powici & Friends vie with the very best of

them; share a clarity and light not often encountered. ■

How to Walk in the Dark

Helen Lamb

Red Squirrel Press (2022) £10.00

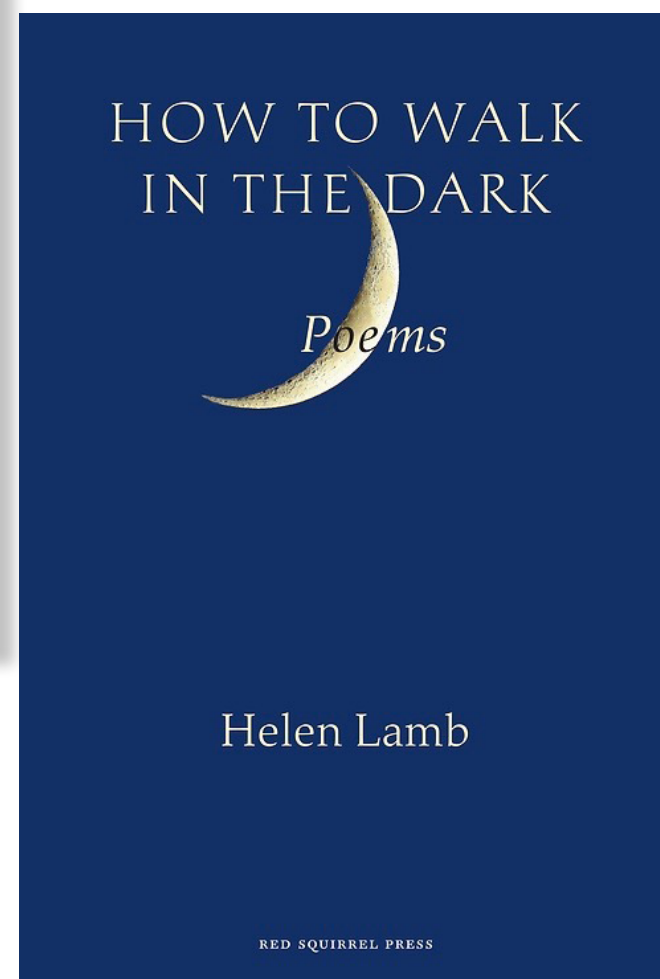
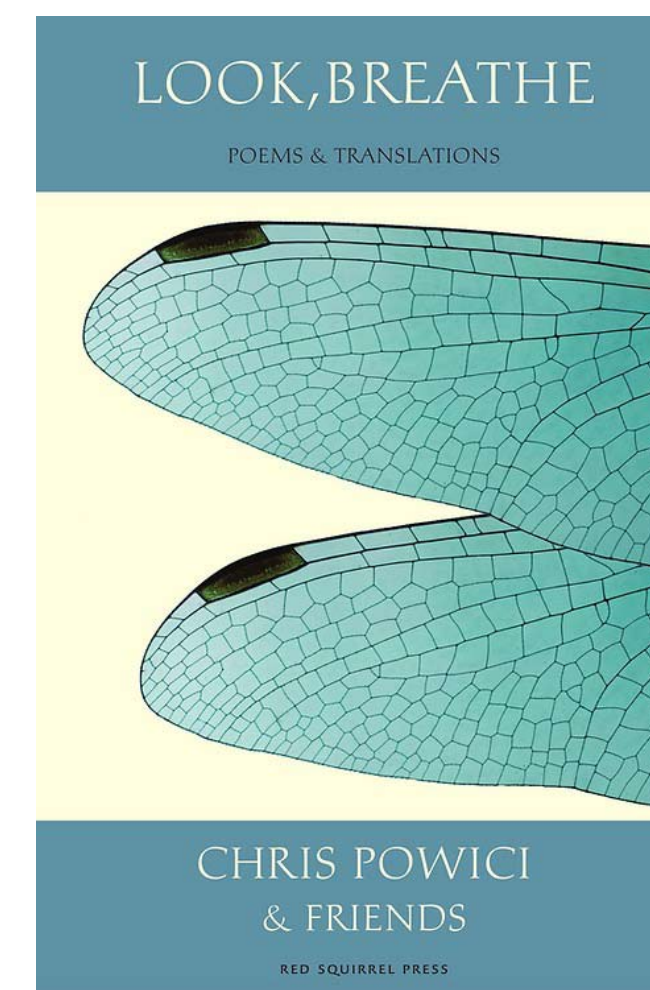
As many of you will already know, Helen Lamb's sudden and early death in 2017 robbed us of a wonderful writer and tutor. Fiction had seemed her main area of interest. Her short stories were widely published, read on radio, and anthologised. A short story collection *Superior Bedsit* appeared from Polygon in 2001, and her novel *Three kinds of Kissing* was published in 2018 by *Vagabond Voices* to great acclaim. But she was a considerable poet too. In 1997 Duende Poetry published *Strange Fish*, a much-praised anthology by Helen and her friend Magi Gibson. Some of these poems reappear in the new volume.

In the foreword to *How to Walk in the Dark*, Gibson, and Lamb's partner – Chris Powici, explain that this new book consists of the poems Helen herself had woven into a collection after decades of writing; some old and widely published, others recent. Their editing was light-touch, limited to deciphering her handwritten comments. *How to Walk in the Dark* is an unusual journey, zigzagging in time over two decades, the poet's own selection.

And they are remarkable poems; thought-provoking; storied. But this is *not* the practice of fiction. Spare, perfectly-structured poems rise from the page, take flight, at once understated and lyrical. They are not haiku, but the always-perfect choice of every word, and each poem's clarity and – outward – simplicity offer a similar expansiveness.

In three sections, *The Secret Heart*, *Thirteen Spells* and *Seven Poems*, Lamb explores the world with thoughtfulness and humanity. Uncertainty is balanced by hope, warmth and a rare fearlessness. She may be describing a bus journey in blizzard conditions 'Down the screeching brae/we skid to the river' (*Getting there*) or her grandmother knitting 'Grandma spoke as she knitted/ the tension of her yarn exact' (*Passing the Needles*) or a child running in a snowstorm '... you dance out/ a little dot of scarlet/in a white whirling world'. (*Snowgirl*) and in every case observation and generosity beguile. In 1962 she comes home from school to find her mother transfixed by a TV news bulletin. It's the Cuban Missile crisis. 'my mother, on her knees,/wrings a yellow duster./The newsreader cannot/ promise us tomorrow.' I remember that time. None of us was sure we would live through the night. But Lamb does not leave us on the edge of the precipice. In *How to Walk in the Dark* she advises her daughter (and us) '...no matter what/you stumble upon/always keep one foot/ on the ground'.

Like her stories, Helen Lamb's poems



are perfectly mapped – sculpted – light and space around, insight and love within. Read them individually, savour them.

Learn to walk with one foot on the ground. ■

Look, Breathe

Chris Powici & Friends

Red Squirrel Press (2022) £10.00

Chris Powici has published two previous collections, *Somehow This Earth* (Diehard 2009), and *This Weight of Light* (Red Squirrel Press 2015). In autumn 2019, he asked his colleague and friend, the poet and novelist Kevin MacNeil, to translate one of his new poems into Gaelic so that versions by the two could be published

together. MacNeil immediately assented, and Powici joked that finding translators for more of his poems would be quite a good way of compiling a third collection in record time. This was a joke, but he found the thought would not go away. The musical possibilities of different language versions, the inclusivity, the unexpected interactions that would undoubtedly occur in the process grew more and more persuasive.

Powici himself has Romanian roots, grew up in the South of England speaking English and now lives and teaches Creative Writing for the University of Stirling, and the Open University. From 2010 till 2017 he was editor of *Northwords Now*. His clear eye for the moment – for presence in that moment – drive the work, which is always lyrical, always engaging. In

Look, Breathe he has assembled a band of poets who address the task with energy and commitment. Their translations are indeed, as Powici allows in the foreword, often translocations. In *Look, Breathe* you will find his work redrawn in Scots, Shetlandic, Danish, Irish, Gaelic, Flemish, Arcadian, Doric, Italian, Romanian, and Kannada. As he says, a feeling for the earth may be universal, but how we experience it is affected by culture, language, all the geographies. All the histories.

There will be many ways of approaching this collection.

For myself, I chose, first, to read Powici's work alone, untranslated: a satisfying and full collection. His talent for immersing himself in the natural world, in the moment – the right, exact moment – draws the reader in, enfolds.

His unerring sense of line, the natural music in his words do more than describe.. they convince. As he says in *Glen Tye* ‘some day I’ll raise myself/ into a dawn so delicate/I won’t have to say anything/ not a word/ just look, breathe—’

And he’s right about the translocation. My second reading of *Look, Breathe*, comparing the poem versions, does indeed offer different music. Magi Gibson’s *Glen Tye* is a faithfully translated and an utterly different song. ‘sune enuch Ah’ll raise massel/ into a dawn so delicate/ Ah’ll haud ma wheesht’

You could say the same of *Argaty*. In Powici’s poem the last couplet reads ‘ a moon, a wood, rainwater, wet bark/stars blinking on twigs’ while Kathleen Jamie’s Scots version avers ‘a mune, a shaw, rainwater/ weat bark o trees/ sternies blinterin oan twigs.’

The heart of the matter may perhaps have crystallised in *The Wild Summer*, a poem written in memory of Angus Dunn, much-loved writer and previous editor of *Northwords*. ‘ and this, as you know, is the real poem, Angus—/a lone dark bird telling the truth about the world/ telling it well— /not these words//though given time I’ll get them as right as I can’

translated in *Snell Simmer* by John Glenday ‘Ach Angus, this here’s the leed, the richt leed/ weel ye ken: this lane corbie scrievin’/the trowthfu things – no these words, mind/ no my words, but the perfit words.’

Having grown up with Highland English, without Gaelic, and with no more than the slightest smattering of Doric, I revelled in the variety and richness of Scots in these translations – a visual and aural scenery as diverse as Scottish landscape. I wish I could understand, or at least have heard the Gaelic and other versions on offer here. (A CD, maybe? Downloadable readings? A project for the future?)

In the meantime, this is a fresh, exciting collaboration. I commend it to you. ■

Life’s Stink & Honey

Lynn Valentine
Cinnamon Press (2021) £9.99
REVIEW BY JON MILLER

First collections are always intriguing: a new poet announcing themselves to the world.

Lynn Valentine from the Black Isle has quietly been garnering a considerable reputation across Scotland, recently reading at both the Wigtown Poetry Festival and St Andrew’s Stanza and this has now come to fruition with *Life’s Stink and Honey*. Many of these poems are about half page long but rich in ringing phrase-making and in the deep sincerity of their emotional journeys.

There are ways in which Valentine is a nature poet but a nature that is invariably

fused with the human and how we are shaped internally by nature’s happenings, psychologically and emotionally, how it lends itself to our natures and what we find in or gain from it. There are animals – crows, horses, hares – and, surprisingly, there’s a lot of water in a collection whose title is tactile, physical, embodied.

Poems evoke the sea, wild swimming, islands, rivers, waterfalls and tidal flows as Valentine moves easily between different elements with an eerie fusion of sensibilities and an ability to dissolve the barriers between the human and natural worlds – she wonders if she ‘will ask the tide for answers’ – and those beyond our everyday earthly perceptions – ‘messengers/between this world and the next’.

Contained in the idea of water is that of a mother’s waters breaking in childbirth or the sea as mother and this acts as a background to Valentine’s poems about childlessness. This is a difficult subject – Valentine evokes a longing that never leaves and can rise unexpectedly in ordinary everyday happenings. When clearing out a junk drawer, out-of-date parsley seeds ‘remind you that you don’t have children’; or on a visit to the Sheela Na Gig at Rodel on the southern tip of Harris:

My barren belly
concaves in the wet
afternoon, my waterproof
the only second skin I’ll own.

However, these reminders are never maudlin or self-pitying but a dwelling in and acknowledgement of the presence of a deeply-sensed absence, one she notes wryly that is displaced into making:

a magnet
of your heart for dogs, bees and postcards
from pals you’ve not seen for years

Grief and its sadness are prevalent elsewhere in this collection. In ‘Witness’, there is a kind of rage against the dying of the light moment evoked in magnificent imagery of her mother’s

fury at leaving...
A wild colt galloping in the corral of her bed
the mattress her saddle
the blankets her fence

And the brilliant ‘Grief as an Iceberg’, she observes its

long creak into the sea
screaming, as it tries to keep itself whole

Valentine is also an accomplished writer in Scots (she was runner-up in the Scots category of last year’s Wigtown Poetry Competition) and the half-dozen poems in Scots included here are not the slightly forced or hackneyed ‘Scoats’ that we sometimes hear but finely wrought contemporary pieces that fit easily into

the voice and sensibility of the collection. *The Leid o Hamie* is her mini-manifesto – ‘A will take this hansel/an pass it oan/ scribe ma wurd, sing ma sangs’; there is a portrait of her exhausted father as snow-plough driver; *Rag Dollies* and *The Loast Bairn* return to childlessness.

However, I don’t want you to think this is a despairing gloomy collection or one that concerns itself with unrelenting tragedy. Hers is a voice that is tender but resilient, its griefs leavened by her delicate touch of language and an ability to catch the numinous, the half-seen in the half-light of living and this is where much of the power of her poetry resides.

Always there is Valentine’s musicality of phrasing, a deftness and delicacy of touch in her imagery and linguistic constructions. The collection is littered with beautiful phrasing: ‘the fat lap of dark’, ‘the shape of rain fastened/ in faraway trees’, ‘my breath a pearl a severed shell’, ‘a dance of wind/through a worn door’, ‘punch-drunk on light’, ‘house martins writing/their goodbyes, zebra-ing/the sky, until all was wing’, ‘I catch the solstice in my hands,/pass it to you’ – and indeed this passing on, this generosity of observation, is what she achieves time and time again.

It is this richness which provides the uplifting soul of the collection, that brings to it its hope and its rescue in the haunting beauty of the world that sustains, despite everything. ■

The Last Days of Petrol

Bridget Khursheed
Shearsman Books (2022) £10.95

The Sleep Road

Stewart Sanderson
Tapsalteerie (2022) £10.00

The Inner Circle

Henry Bell
Stewed Rhubarb Press (2022) £5.99
REVIEW BY HELEN BODEN

‘How did we get here?’ is the apt first line of a book that asks us to consider when innocuous, inevitable change becomes emergency or crisis. Khursheed’s title *The Last Days of Petrol* provides only a cryptic clue to the ways in which she will do this (driving to her ‘geek’ day job, making a virtue of the endgame of commuting, is what provides her with both time and subject matter for poetry). It’s a daring but ecologically and poetically insightful perspective, one that hovers over the realities of choice – while we still have it – and complicity. At its best this is achieved with wry wit:

There are several
lorries ahead and they all contain animals
or quarried stone; an accident
could reinstate acres of field and dyke.

Several poems highlight tension between landscape ‘managed’ and rewilding, in both past *A Better Prospect*

and present – *New Media, Teviot in Flood*, and *Peak Oil*:

the long grass around the machinery harder
to manage vole tunnels the kestrel ceiling . . .

The word, *manage*, works hard here; offers an updated take on MacCaig’s dichotomy of who owns / is owned by the land: do we manage the land or does it, eroding and depleting, manage us, its tenants?

the tide is coming in and will
wash up the beach, next the cottage, one day
the garlic, the tourists, the viaduct
where our car is parked, eat up our very home
blow us down it is before we’ll see
(*Sookin-in Goats*)

The sequencing is careful. The end of the title poem seems to offer hope: ‘and the grid flows into green lanes’. And the next poem is titled *The Green Path*, but this concludes:

roll the green carpet right out to sea
and its gannet pierced tidal slop
of toothbrushes and tampons and wire and
algal bloom
back into Eden again

It is followed by a detritus list-poem, *Good Intentions*, where ‘this is a latrine’, overseen by an intermittent and indifferent lighthouse beam: are actions such as litter-picking any more than a futile, uneasy, managed gesture at greening? Elsewhere *The Clovenfords Vineries* considers the paradise / hell of supporting the growth of something outwith its own *terroir*, the disruptions implicit in adapting and making indigenous. We’re invited, too, to imagine starlings as ‘teenagers in a mall’, and other reversals of the usual direction of analogy between artificial and natural:

that birch shining up on the hill
imitating a phone mast
so real it is fake
(*No Signal at Muchrachs*)

As well as the speaking ‘I’, acknowledging the complicity of those for whom off-grid is not an option, poems take the point-of-view of other occupants of the land – creatures, an historical estate worker, a burn ‘seducing’ its bridges – or imagine the subject (a Culloden fatality) behind an object (an oatcake).

This is a rewardingly difficult read on several counts, not just the content and the speaker’s perspective on it. Threatened deluge or overwhelm is enacted at the level of syntax.

Peak Oil and *Commute* – where ‘water’ is repeated nine times (plus half-a-dozen synonyms for it), in an inexorable train of association and implication – are unpunctuated single-sentence poems. Khursheed’s is an impressionist eco-poetics, but this is not single-subject

collection. She is adept at recording the forensics of species' (hedgehog, dragonfly, many birds) behaviour, and diverts from the late days of road trips to verse-map the workings of other ecosystems - her own brood, familial fittings, biodiverse edgelands, the human body.

Sanderson's book is a glorious practical experiment in ways of mediating the natural world in words, through borrowed and invented forms.

A reading knowledge of the land reveals what is recorded here . . .

. . . I walk across
this written and unwritten ground
my footprints footnotes to its loss
a poem waiting to be found.
(*Hill Fort*)

Nan Shepherd noted the pleasure of walking alongside tracks of creatures who went before, 'companioned, though not in time'. Sanderson is companioned by 'precursors', ranging through 'langsyne', as his title poem has it, on a continuum from deep to historical time, with 'others who came to this place / before you did' (*Dunadd*) - including Gaels, Picts, Romans, Scots, and 'stone straining to articulate / a sense of something in the haar' (*Broch*). He demonstrates too the portability of vocabularies assumed specific to particular eras or discourses, such as Communism (in *Sleepwalking*), or economics:

the Beaker People's tongue
. . .
is turning silence into song.

Tuning the words. . . tests
their torque, presses at prosody
until at length the whole work rests
in an achieved economy.

This way wealth is created out
of any raw material . . .
(*The Wealth of Nations*)

Despite the call to 'walk with me on this road to sleep' (*Ways to the Wood*), the announced 'sleep' theme carries less weight in this volume than 'petrol' does in Khursheed's. It's hinted that we sleepwalk or 'drowse' towards climate disaster and species extinction - but also continue in the footfall of ancestors required to be constantly alert, while 'somehow the vault of heaven held / and holds' (*Dunadd*). Sanderson's environmental language tends towards the apocalyptic rather than polemic ('a thousand hills / overflowed by the sea'). He signals times out of joint, but his virtuosic use of form suggests alternatives, possibilities; hope.

This is a rich yet delicate mix of traditional and experimental, that begs to be read aloud, from the textured ottava rima lyric *Cowlairs* (the collection's obligatory and appropriate deer-sighting poem), to sparser statements derived from

sources including Ogham inscriptions and musical cryptograms. Several poems imitate the visionary rhyme of Blake's songs or Wordsworth's lyrical ballads. Their insistent, regulatory iamb supports an ample syntax, whose archaism works because of balance provided elsewhere by the modernity of the found texts - such as the four meditative list-poems which punctuate the collection by simply but compellingly naming 'The Lichens of Scotland'. More ambitious samplings and interventions include *An Unstatistical Account* - a listing of topographic features 'entirely' found from a text contemporary with *Lyrical Ballads* (1798-99), but ingeniously reworked into a 21stC litany.

Several poems (*Sleepwalking*, *Highland Vowels*, *The Sense of Beauty*) are made of text juxtaposed from more than one source. There are some beautifully set notes at the end of the collection; I'd have liked to read them on the same page as the more complexly constructed poems - such is the intertextuality of the work, the note seems as central to our understanding of it as the very apposite epigraphs to other poems about Lady Grisell Baillie and Anne Grant of Laggan. What lingers, though, is the simultaneously sharp and dreamlike way Sanderson dwells on, and with, the 'unstated' - where words are not yet, or are being, lost.

The content as well as title of Bell's *Inner Circle* riffs on the intersections between urban infrastructure and social attachment. The first word(s),

Ahinkivrycuntsjstgonnagitoanwi-
eachother', acknowledge what Tom Leonard made possible for Glasgow Scots poets, but don't prepare us for the surprise reveal of their context five lines later: 'Ach, it's jst lik me cawin ye yer honour, /yer honour'.

These poems are often conversational: remembered, invented or implied dialogues - between auld firm fans, domestic partners, Govan neighbours debating the merits of Partick's 'gentry-ficayshun'; between English and Scots. And in *Thi Seccont Burnin*, the School of Art fires are situated in a longer history of city conflagrations, 'Glesga fighters / mixing two unmalleable naitures / Clyde n fire.'

But there's also a mute conversation going on, between what's kent and what's said. Bell's speaker retains the detachment of outsider-witness - on a fantastical bus trip, or 'getting on a train full of Rangers fans, / I'm reading a book about the Easter Rising, / and I'm feeling a wee bit self-conscious.' They know to 'quick have some small talk ready' when working as butcher's assistant or spotlight operator at the Pavilion Theatre - where the 'circle' trope is superbly aligned with that of omniscient observer, until:

After the matinee and evening's done
you climb, light-headed, down.
You missed a cue, and didn't light the dog
again.

Who cares. You're on the subway home.

The aphoristic *Thoughts on Keir Street* conversely add up to a polyphonic chorus: 'when it is truly clear and dry the sky pulsates right out from the sandstone' / 'Mice are fine if you only have a couple'.

The 'inner circle' is Bell's emphatic, and often empathic, shorthand for all this city embraces: panegyrics to the people and the patter of its districts; to iconic buildings, the plausibility of the downright improbable, Edwin Morgan, and 'Comrade [Tunnocks] Teacake':

No empire biscuit this, no.
A teacake
of internationalism,
circling the earth
spreading its mallowy joy.

How to Burn a Woman

Claire Askew
Bloodaxe Books (2021) £10.99

she tells me

Amelia Graham
Peanut Press (2021) £5.00

The Grass Boat

Imogen Forster
Mariscat Press (2021) £6.00

Wild Women of a Certain Age

Magi Gibson
Luath Press (2021) £9.99

REVIEWS BY MANDY HAGGITH

All shapes and sizes and styles

Here are four radically different women's poetry collections. They span the spectrums of scale and experience, from a tiny first pamphlet from a new graduate (Amelia Graham) to a chunky 21st century anniversary edition of a key work by a much-published poet (Magi Gibson). They also display a range of styles and content, from the quiet precision of Imogen Forster's nature poems, to the ferocious passion of Claire Askew's poems about witches and sexual abuse.

How to Burn a Woman is the standout collection in the group. Written with assurance, these poems feel like the work of a poet who is at the top of her game. They arise out of Claire Askew's deeply researched investigation of the deaths of women convicted and executed as witches, and she brings them back to life with compassion and well-justified fury. The collection comes with a trigger warning, as might this review, for the poems do not shy from details of torture, sexual abuse and assault suffered by women and girls either in historic witch cases or more modern times. One of the powers of the collection is the way that the past and present crimes are woven together, which both serves to make it easier to see those accused of witchcraft in former times as just like us, and also proves the relevance of this history to

present day women's struggles. But it's not all about sexual horror - one of the ways the collection is potent is that it presents the reality of being sexually active and the possibility of love with a gorgeous man ('lying on my plain bed like it's white-/ hot coals, my body a hammered blade'), yet the backdrop of other women's stories shows how vulnerable we may be if or when things go wrong.

Many of the poems begin with an epigraph taken from a historical document, which sets the context for poetry, often in the first person, giving voice to female victims in language of searing power. Here's just one example, the voice of Eunice Cole, who died in 1680.

'I counted every cobble in the floor of
their jail. I slept on straw
like the whipped grey calf
that never grew right. I dreamed about
the gallows rope holding
its blue teardrop of night.'

We are similarly shown Merga Bien, Sarah Good, Anne Askew, Janet Horne and other women who were simply ordinary, misunderstood, poor and, crucially, unmarried, and therefore both uncontrolled by men and vulnerable to their predation. In *A Field Journal of Witches* the poet draws a picture of women at a time and place with 'not enough men there to wed them'. The logic of the poem unfolds. They were landless, and thus dependent on and thereby knowledgeable about wild plants. 'So they knew their Jack-by- / the-hedge from their Robin- / run-in-the-Grass'. The shack / attracted vermin, so they kept cats.' Survival on the margins and at the mercy of men is deftly demonstrated through the names of wild herbs, from Jack-in-the Pulpit to Bruisewort. This is important and profound poetry that reclaims the wisdom and strength of our forebears.

Also sexually active and strident is Magi Gibson, in her collection from 2000, *Wild Women of a Certain Age*, republished and still potent today. She too presents us with a rage at injustice against women, but instead of horror stories from a historical past, her approach is to retell stories from legends from a modern female perspective. So we get Queen Maeve transplanted from a Celtic twilight into 21st century Scotland, Goldilocks as a grumpy teenager and the faery women telling us what really happened with Tom of Ercildoune and Tam Lin.

'But my bright eyed boy
with the hunger in your groin
and the fever on your brow
don't ever claim you didn't know the score
when you placed your lips on mine...
You bounded to my arms
as eager as the cock runs to the hen.'

This poetry is often funny and always

confident, though it's less subtle than Claire Askew's, and after the 'Me Too' years it has a swagger that seems risky and unquestioningly self-assured and, to quote the jargon, hetero-normative. But it is great to read, and we need much more poetry that celebrates ageing as neither scary nor full of loss. 'For there she stood! / Naked as sin, her whole life written on her skin'.

While Gibson's collection, at 120 pages, feels long for a book of poems, *she tells me*, by new voice Amelia Graham, runs to only 16 pages, several of which are black-and-white drawings, so we have only eight poems to get a flavour. She, too, indulges the sexual theme, but here, in 'boy', we have a much less confident persona.

'You prise my body unopened and make it yours;
the dreams of you are thick and coarse
and make me thin
to tremble....

I am tired.
I want my own bed,
runaway sly fingers
don't creep and crawl on me
touch itches.'

She is at her strongest exploring images, such as when she dreams herself into becoming a fish, letting herself slide 'into the silver, /rocked and overgrown water... the peaty gold flow... the stream's awesome load', or out on the hills on 'foaming overcast days' or under trees that 'open up their blossomed eyes'.

Imagery is also the strength in Imogen Forster's pamphlet, *The Grass Boat*, and I love her fresh, insightful ways of describing the natural world. A dead leveret has 'feet as small as the pigs' / trotters hanging in a dolls' house kitchen'. A wagtail's nest of chicks is 'a ragged yellow handful / of desert flowers' and fish are 'smudges / of black ink, brushstrokes / dissolving through our fingers'. My favourite is a heron that 'puts down careful feet, / two bunches of loose keys'. This is delicate, precise writing, a tantalising and impressive debut. ■

Chronicles of the First Light

George Gunn
Drunk Muse Press (2021) £9.50

The Rush of Lava Flowers

Poems of Survival and Hope
Lydia Popowich
(2021) £6.99 through Amazon

Sheeskin

James Sinclair
Bluemull Books (2021) £10

REVIEWS BY KENNY TAYLOR

Over many decades, George Gunn's contribution to the cultural life of northern Scotland and to drama and literature appreciated far beyond has been huge. His working life has included diverse jobs – as a deep-sea fisherman, driller for North Sea oil, journalist, poet

and playwright (with more than fifty plays for stage and radio to his name).

"My subject, in the main, is the people, culture, history and landscape of the North of Scotland," he has said, adding that he sees what he creates as part of world literature. Those connections – to local specifics and wider resonance – are evident in *Chronicles of the First Light*, his fifth poetry collection, and rendered with the skill you'd expect from such an accomplished writer. Many of the poems are dedications to other people, some deceased. But the sentiments are never maudlin and can frequently raise a smile. That's the case with *Dunnet Ode*, for Paddy Bart (1954-2017), which avers: 'everything is beautiful, Paddy/ even the quarter bottle of Bells/I got from the Thurso Co-op/to salute your majestic beard/your easy kindness/your democratic energy,' and concludes with the glorious line 'the thick sweet blue salt wine of life'.

I'll drink to that, and toast another fine collection from the Caithness makar.



The war in Europe gives *The Rush of Lava Flowers*, the second collection by Lydia Popowich, extra poignancy, though publication came months before the current conflict. Now based in Caithness, Lydia was born in Yorkshire to parents of Ukrainian origin, who came to Britain as refugees in 1947. Her maternal grandfather, who has been an important influence on her life and work, was a writer and political dissident in the former Soviet Union.

Fears of persecution and dispossession seem to prick in some lines: 'Tackle it when thrust through the window/Look difficult when leaving the control area,/ keeping right. Drive gentle up the road. /There may be more than you.'

In *Inheritance*, she brings eastern Europe into grimy 1960s Britain: 'No one knows the people of bone/or why my drunken Dedushka brought them home/from an auction room on Lawkholme Lane,/ textile wages blown on beer, cigarettes and porcelain./Their unexpected arrival, smooth and brittle,/put Babushka in a flutter.'

Elsewhere, there's a dreamlike or stream-of-consciousness aspect to successive lines, as in *Zero to Ten*, which holds the book's title phrase: 'In my eighth year, I survey the crater of an extinct volcano, /see you small and alone down below. Turning circles/you shout my name. I hear the rush of lava flowers.'

There's a vigour to the language throughout this collection, which George Gunn has described as 'clear, with a jazzy cello-like music.' Seek it out online and savour the sounds.



Regular readers of *Northwords Now* will know that we were privileged two summers ago, in Issue 39, to give first publication to a major poem sequence in Shetland dialect by James Sinclair. Called

Back Fae Da Edge, its poems are drawn from the voyage of the ill-starred Hull whaleship 'Diana', which was trapped in the Greenland ice in the winter of 1866-67. Many of the crew were Shetlanders, and bodies of the deceased were buried on the islands after the ship returned from the ice to Lerwick.

That poem sequence is now included in *Sheeskin* and stretches across more than thirty pages, but there's much breadth and variety of subject and tone in the rest of this substantial collection (114 pages, including a useful and extensive glossary for those not fluent in Shetland speech). Poems range from lyrical, as in *Mirrie Dancers*; 'Sae mony shads fae green ta aquamarine/glittrn siller starn, boannie vari-orm/flicker and dance, jig an reel, trowe a winter's lift' through the gritty humour of *Simmer o Love*: 'An eftir he'd knockit da livin daylight oot o me/shu guid hame wi him onywy'e' to the irony and climate change comment in *Better Wadder*: 'An dey moan aboot a young lass staandin apo a/soapbox/tellin wis whaur wir goin wrang./Dey say, get her back ta da skule/fur shu doesna kenn whit shu's spaekin aboot.'

Robert Alan Jamison reckons there's no finer writer in the Shetland dialect today. This collection deserves a wide audience.

Rammo in Stennes

Ingrid Leonard
Abersee Press (2022), £5.00
REVIEW BY DAVID WHEATLEY

'Yet /these roads do not turn in here but writhe on /Round the wild earth forever', wrote Edwin Muir in 'The Sufficient Place'. The journey away from roots is a primal theme in Scottish writing, but usually on the understanding of a larger narrative – call it the nation – that connects both ends of the voyage. As an Orcadian, Muir stood at an oblique angle to that narrative, as reflected in his demurral from Hugh MacDiarmid's Scottish nationalism but also in the haunted quality of his landscapes, in which the elsewhere to the island home is as likely to be Franz Kafka's Prague as Edinburgh, or some stylised, allegorical nowhere. The edgy landscapes of Ingrid Leonard's *Rammo in Stennes* have much in common with Muir's work. Stylishly and mysteriously, they move between the Orkney of childhood, wartime family history, the neolithic past, and life in Lithuania, where the poet now lives.

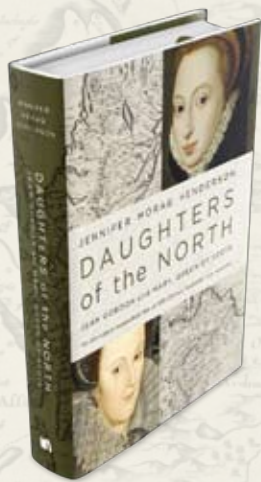
The past is not a single road but forking paths, as in 'Thi Early Dead', which recalls the death of the poet's father before imagining 'thi clean /stone path tae home' that he no longer walks, as the dead man's memory passes into the landscape ('but thi dial wis fixed; /in wake or sleep, I'd be faerd o thi ditch'). Present and past are not discrete entities, but overlap like shifting tectonic plates; in 'Rain in November' the young speaker lies

in bed while 'a glacier advanced over hills /by our house, the colour of a polar field'. 'Shopping Week Queen' recalls Kathleen Jamie's poems of nascent female sexuality and the multiple ambushes that lie in wait for its young narrator. War is a constant presence. In 'Transmission', death in conflict robs a great-aunt of her husband, leaving us with the soldier's name fading from the lips of neighbours, and a 'kistless plot in the kirkyard.' Meanwhile in 'An Orkney Couple' the poet recalls an older man teaching her brother to reupholster a chair with a needle and thread. 'Hid's no wark for a lass', he tells the poet. The gendering of needlework as masculine comes as a small surprise, but the poem absorbs the slight as it reaches back into further family memories of war and its aftermath.

There is continuity with previous generations, as the poems stitch their impressive tapestry, but awareness of difference too. In 'The Kinswoman', an emblematic figure from the past goes about her never-ending 'industry of the hearth'. But 'I am no kinswoman', insists the poet, resisting the impulse to take over the foremother's experience and present herself as its mouthpiece, as might happen in an Eavan Boland poem. And yet the poet remains 'bound to the women of the past /by the red pain of belly and haunch', as she writes in 'Maeshowe III'. If this represents some swithering on Leonard's part, another difference from Muir is her alternation between English and Orcadian – Muir having judged that the future of Scottish poetry lay in English. For readers whose experience of Scots stops with Burns, 'skrothales', 'whaap' and 'lerblade' will present a strange but tangy Nordic quality, handled (as far as this non-native can tell) with authority and skill.

At the death, *Rammo in Stennes* branches out in a different direction. 'Lithuanian Post Office, December 2020' transplants the poet to somewhere altogether elsewhere, where she fills out a 'small-print form in triplicate' to keep the lines of communication with home open in a post-Brexit world. Like Muir before her, Leonard writes with wry wisdom of communication across cultures, and the often troubled relationships between smaller countries and their larger neighbours. As a chapbook, *Rammo in Stennes* is an intriguing snapshot of work in progress, which may settle into different patterns by the time Leonard publishes a first full collection. As it stands though, this is work of both promise and distinction, gestating its griefs and joys in the Northern dark and carrying them 'in sweat and song to the earth's clean womb /to be blessed by a sun gaining strength. ■

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HIGHLAND BOOK PRIZE SHORTLIST DUAIS LEABHAIR NA GHÀIDHEALTACHD

2021

