

# Northwords **Now**

Issue 9

Summer 2008

**At the Word's Edge - NNow interviews  
LES MURRAY**

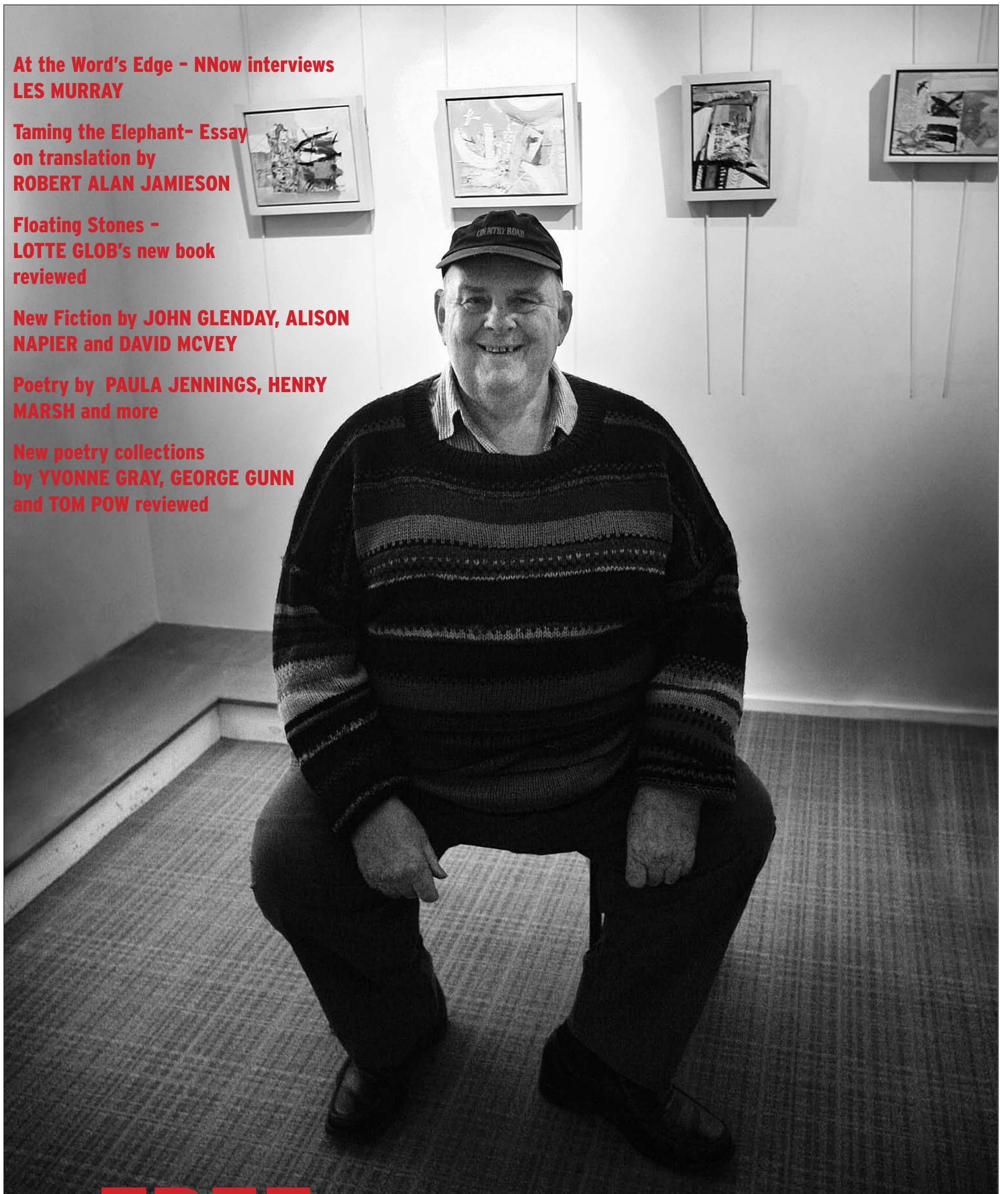
**Taming the Elephant- Essay  
on translation by  
ROBERT ALAN JAMIESON**

**Floating Stones -  
LOTTE GLOB's new book  
reviewed**

**New Fiction by JOHN GLENDAY, ALISON  
NAPIER and DAVID MCVEY**

**Poetry by PAULA JENNINGS, HENRY  
MARSH and more**

**New poetry collections  
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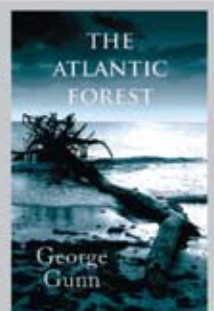
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# Contents

- 3 EDITORIAL
- 4 Poems by HENRY MARSH
- 5 Taming the Elephant, Essay by ROBERT ALAN JAMIESON
- 6 New Gaelic Writing at Northwords Now
- 7 Two microfictions by JOHN GLENDAY
- 8 The Season of Festivals
- 9 Mirror. Signal. Manoeuvre. A short story by ALISON NAPIER
- 10 Poems by GERARD ROCHFORD
- 11 Dewpoint
- 12 At the Word's Edge, Jon Lesley's interview with LES MURRAY
- 14 Poems by RYAN VAN WINKLE and PAULA JENNINGS
- 15 Poems by CHRIS SAWYER and MARK EDWARDS
- 16 An Elemental Alchemy
- 17 Here be Serpents, a Short Story by DAVID MCVEY
- 19 Poems by DEBBIE COLLINS, LAURA-CLAIRE WILSON & GRAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG
- 23 REVIEWS
- 23 LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS
- 23 WHERE TO FIND NORTHWORDS NOW
- 23 Introducing ISABEL ROGERS

## EDITORIAL

**I**N NORTHWORDS NOW, issue 9, we continue our interest in minority languages. When we stumbled across these matters a year ago we thought we were dealing with a little local difficulty. Now we learn that the Council of Europe has a vigorous and active Secretariat of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Just as we were preparing issue 9 to go to print the UHI offered a Conference in Inverness on this subject titled 'Voices of the West', and led by Dr Donna Heddle of UHI, Orkney College.

Emyr Lewis, Welsh lawyer and poet, and UK representative on the Secretariat of the Charter, set the scene for the conference with an account of the impact of the Charter across the ten years of its existence. He describes it as 'an international instrument (the recommendations of which must be ratified by individual states) for ensuring the promotion and protection of Regional Minority Languages.' He defines it further, not as establishing rights, but as creating norms: not primarily legal but more socio-linguistic; a language-planning instrument. One of the virtues of lawyers is that no word they use carries poetic ambiguity; meaning is defined!

We look forward to having, in our Autumn issue, a fuller account of what Emyr Lewis and the other highly informed speakers of this eye-opening conference had to say, prepared for us by Dr. Heddle.

In this issue we continue NNow's modest contribution to the promotion of minority language interests with a major essay, 'Taming the Elephant' (page 5) by Robert Alan Jamieson who continues the discussion of translation matters begun in these pages in the Spring.

Further, and importantly, with tangible support and encouragement from HIE and HI-Arts, we have made a start on the process of developing a more formal policy for our gathering and presentation of Gaelic writing, in collaboration with experienced Gaelic writers from around the Highlands and Islands.

First planning for NNow began in late 2004. None among us would admit to having enough Gaelic to be our Gaelic editor; nor were we well enough acquainted with the Gaelic literary world to have a sufficient sense of direction within it. Nonetheless, we have been able to carry some attractive Gaelic material in every issue to date: fine new poetry, a school Sorley MacLean celebration project, and several excellent poetry collections for review.

Please see our notice of invitation to Gaelic writers on page 6 of this issue.

- RHODA MICHAEL

## Northwords Now

A three times yearly literary magazine published by Northwords, a not-for-profit company, registered at February 2005.

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### Subscriptions

The magazine is FREE and can be picked up at locations across Scotland. See list on P22

The fee for individual 'home-delivery' is £5 for 3 issues, cheques payable to 'Northwords'.

**Submissions** to the magazine are welcome.

They can be in Gaelic, English and any local variants. They should be sent to the postal address - see above. Unsolicited E-mail attachments will not be opened. The material should be typed on A4 paper. Contact details and SAE should be included. We cannot return work that has no sae.

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**Next publication** date planned for early July 2008.



The Board and Editor of Northwords Now acknowledge support from Inverness & Nairn Enterprise, the Scottish Arts Council and Hi-Arts.

ISSN 1750-7928

# Poems by Henry Marsh

## On the Glasgow Train

She sits opposite. Wrings her hands  
round her mobile. Her head, pushed  
back into her seat shifts, side  
to side. She settles.

Yawns. The blue-grey eyes  
fix. But their broken panes  
will not allow her passage  
to the dreich fields.

Flares in the murk over Grangemouth  
appear to make her shiver. Her phone  
won't work. I don't have mine to give.  
She wears two brooches:

on one lapel of her grey suit,  
a poppy; the other carries the photo  
of a soldier. They share the shape of a mouth,  
the arch of an eye-brow.

You're in distress, my wife says.  
I bless her for speaking. The son  
was killed by a roadside bomb. November  
is a difficult month.

Unemployed – he went for a soldier.  
Eighteen years – three weeks in Iraq.  
The black puddles in a derelict yard  
could be fathomless.

To die for a lie. I remember, though,  
a September in Central Park and a woman,  
her coat rain-black. Rachel  
weeping for her children.

## Canal in Autumn - Maryhill

Wintry breaths – a thin  
mist is polishing the glass.  
But the light restrained,  
muted, sees further.  
It permits you to enter. Alders  
drown in brown. From endless,  
lucid depths a birch  
grows upwards from its twigs,  
their few, sunk leaves  
like uncertain glimmers of fish  
or fragments fallen  
from the morning moon.  
The reflection elbows  
at the root in a watery  
metamorphosis, becomes  
substantial in the air – enough  
to carry a few small  
birds and the frail sun.  
Though a ripple threatens,  
the image is persistent – it follows  
as you pass till swallowed  
behind by the gulp of a bridge.

## Oregon Pine and a Child

It wasn't the spirit of place – for she ran,  
happy and laughing by the spring wood, brought  
something from the depths of a woman's  
passing face that looked like joy.

It wasn't the wind, in its tiresome  
insistence on recalling a passion of winter,  
for in spite of itself, it shifted the hanging  
larches to a shimmer of bright green.

It was more, perhaps, an instinctive  
shiver at sublimity under a great pine,  
the swart roots braced across rock  
before knuckling into submissive earth.

And the cage of its trunks, like the limbs  
of an ancient yew, stretched into dizziness,  
promising some dire entrapment,  
a dumb and wooden metamorphosis.

And its shadow – the nothing that is,  
a bold, yet subtle absence –  
whispered these intuitions of loss  
that haunt even the happiest of children.

'No,' she said, 'I don't like it.' And ran.

## Out of the Dark

Winter is a weight on the sea.  
Stars are falling into the breathing surf.  
Orion is aloof and stubborn,  
studded to a bleak bulkhead.  
Warmth seduces. Fire flames  
ghost across closed eye-lids.  
Cheeks burn – backs  
freeze. Sleep drags  
to the tomb of a bedroom. Bored  
with lucidity, the window enjoys  
the night in transmission – the cold  
unfolds in opaque equations.

Morning elms are hoarse –  
have found their voice. Etched  
flat on a slate sky,  
navigation through the net seems  
improbable. But rooks are  
bouncing and dancing, steering  
between suppliant limbs,  
assuring that the sap will rise –  
unfold its pulse in the sun.  
They wheel in sudden clamour,  
settle to talk the wisdom  
of a black brooding on icy sticks.

Why remember only now, shadows  
of birds, lustre on the night sea?  
Slowly, roots are finding the dark.  
And yesterday, I found a grief  
that unreality had shrouded.  
After forty years it broke  
through a window in a film.  
And meeting – knowing, utterly,  
that love would grow, your gifts  
of body and spirit, your quiet,  
insistent goodness lead into life.  
All this, beyond my agency.

# Taming the Elephant

BY ROBERT ALAN JAMIESON

Robert Alan Jamieson continues the discussion, begun in NNow # 8, of dilemmas about translation for writers who choose to write in minority languages.

## The State of Scots

**M**AOILIÓS CAIMBEUL, in his essay 'In Bed with an Elephant', addresses issues around translation as they affect Gaelic poets and which resonate with us writers of Scots. The key difference, perhaps, is that in the case of Scots it is less easy to see where Elephant ends and bedfellow begins. Scots and English shade into one another – part of a complex spectrum of language which rounds the North Sea. Whereas cousins across the water, just as indistinct from neighbours, achieved 'language' status centuries ago, Scots struggled to reach such a state of grace. Its current situation is both parlous and hopeful – parlous in that it appears ever more diluted by anglicisation and globalisation; hopeful in that rather than being, as once, popularly misconceived of as the 'broken' version of Imperial English spoken north of the border, there is increased understanding both at home and abroad that it too has justifiable claim to 'language' status – as recognised, finally, by the resumed Scottish parliament.

The academic work of the last century is vital and impressive – the *Scottish National Dictionary*<sup>1</sup>, produced between 1931 and 1976 under the editorship of firstly William Grant and latterly David Murison, set out to represent the full spectrum of Scottish vocabulary, and its single volume spin-off<sup>2</sup> helped publicise the richness of the Scots tongue. In the 80s Billy Kay provided a popular yet informative assessment of both the history and late 20<sup>th</sup> situation<sup>3</sup> and William Donaldson's research illuminated an overlooked area, the widespread use of Scots in the press in an era which previously had been regarded as something of a low point.<sup>4</sup>

Scots in the 21<sup>st</sup> century began with Matthew Fitt's first novel, a groundbreaking futuristic dystopia,<sup>5</sup> and Fitt's subsequent work in tandem with James Robertson in the Itchy Coö<sup>6</sup> project is providing books for children that have proved – surprisingly, to many doubters – genuinely popular. 2003 saw the publication of *The Edinburgh Companion to Scots*,<sup>7</sup> an important benchmark academic work which further underlined this new-found status, and in 2004 a team at Dundee University digitised the full text of all ten volumes of the *SND* and made them available free via the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* site.

The pluralistic approach employed in these key works, recording historical and geographical variants, shows Scots to be a very broad kirk, reaching from Shetland to Ulster, encompassing urban and rural – a 'pluricentric diasystem'. The question of a fixed or standard orthography, for so long a sore issue, now appears less pressing in the

postmodern era. Variations co-exist – indeed, it is a happy thing that they should.

Despite the obvious parallel experience of marginalisation, the relationship between Scots and 'the Elephant' is markedly different from that of Gaelic. Many English people understand Scots – north eastern English dialects particularly have much in common with the southern forms of Scots, reminding us that the old kingdom of Northumbria reached from Forth to Humber, that it was to the south of Humber the land of the Angles began, and that traffic and trade across the border is both ancient and everyday. A quick look at the work of Bill Griffiths<sup>8</sup>, for instance, will confirm this sense that the forms of West Germanic found on the east coast of Britain do not neatly fit the current political map. There are many specific examples I could quote, but a favourite one of mine is the word 'haar'. In my adopted home of Edinburgh, people take a certain pride in naming the North Sea fog thus, as if it was specifically an Edinburgh (or Leith) phenomenon. But it is a word used as far north as Shetland and, according to the OED, as far south as the Humber. Another example comes from a small pamphlet of Yorkshire dialect writing I picked up years ago. I was amazed at the title – 'Cum thee Wis' – which I recognised immediately as 'Kum de wis' ('come this way') from the tongue of Shetland. The contents too seemed very familiar.

So it is a complicated picture. Even the name 'Scots' is potentially misleading, for as we know the Scots themselves were originally Celtic and not Germanic, and the term firstly referred to Scottish Gaelic. While one of the distinguishing factors between Scots and the other West Germanic tongues is its many Gaelic loan words and phrases, it is relatively easy for the language we now call Scots to blend into English – too easy, some might say. The danger of 'false friends', or 'negative transference' is great, where the same root word has evolved different meanings over time. Compared with Gaelic, it is not so easy to distinguish Scots, to maintain a 'forked tongue' as W.N. Herbert calls it. In the work of writers such as Kathleen Jamie or Don Paterson, we find a quieter Scots voice inhabiting their predominantly English language work, rather in the manner that the voice of Orkney inhabits the work of George Mackay Brown – the occasional word amongst an otherwise English text, perhaps the odd idiom translated to give the feel of Scots. As a result, the need to translate into English is less pressing – in many cases a small glossary is quite sufficient.

But in my own case, or that of my native tongue, the picture is different. I come from the most northern part of the Scots world, and grew up speaking a very distinctive form with considerable North Germanic

(Scandinavian) elements, even 500 hundred years after the transfer of political power from Copenhagen to Edinburgh. Shetland's long history of North Sea trade with speakers of Dutch, Frisian, and Low Saxon is also a factor. Distinctiveness for the Shetlander is not an issue. The problem is more what to do with those parts of the local tongue that do not fit neatly into the English or the Scots alphabet, particularly the 'Scandinavian vowels' as they were once termed by the education authorities – but these issues I have written about elsewhere, and lie beyond the remit of this essay.<sup>9</sup> I should mention, however, the vital work of the late John J. Graham in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the key figure in giving the Shetland tongue the same authoritative credibility described earlier in relation to Scots as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

## Translation: visibility and enrichment

Visibility is a difficulty for any writer, if they are at all bothered about their work being read. In situations where the medium is a smaller tongue isolated by a larger, where the media is largely conducted in a 'foreign' language, this difficulty is obviously magnified. I recall an interview with the Faroese poet Rói Patursson, winner of the Nordic Council's prize for literature in 1986, where he bemoaned the fact that Faroese writers had a maximum of some 48,000 readers. At the time I thought this substantial, but of course not all the people of Faroe read poetry. And the point is linguistic isolation, not poetic.

The 'minority' writer is invisible to a world which does not know how to decode and so cannot recognise the merits of the work. A true poet may well make poetry whether anyone reads it or not, but we are entitled to ask, after Derrida, whether it is fully writing if no one reads it. And so, for the writer working in a so-called minority language, translation takes on a much greater importance. The irony is, perhaps, that the very Elephant that threatens to squash its smaller bedfellow, can also be the beast that helps transport. For the Elephant has a back so broad it can be a 'bridge' language that carries little us to distant others – others like ourselves, marginal and isolated from

an Elephantine viewpoint. And to use the English as a beast of burden is perhaps a kind of revenge for being long-squashed; a tool to increased interaction and propagation of minority language via translation. This, I suggest, is payback for centuries of cultural imperialism – the revenge of the bedfellow. But here I must add that this Elephant has been, to me, a marvellous craitur, has carried me as reader from steppe to dustbowl, from old world to new, from saga to haiku. While I do not wish to be swallowed by it, I am grateful to it.

My own first experience of translation was into English. It grew out of a friendship made at the Scottish Universities International Summer School in 1989, in 'Soviet times'. Volodymyr Dibrova had something he wanted to show people 'in the west' – that Ukrainian literature existed – and I fell into line, working the literals he provided into the target language – English – for *Edinburgh Review*<sup>11</sup>. One thing he explained to me was the iconic place of the letter 'i' in Ukrainian, for it was this symbol that most distinctively marked Ukrainian from Russian – which reminded me of the non-English graphs in my Shetlandic work. And I consider this approach apposite for Scots generally, as one feature of Scots which distinguishes it from the southern Elephant is that whereas English lost the sound once represented by the graph 'æ' centuries ago – a short 'a' – Scots did not; so that MacDiarmid's famous line, for instance, might be represented as: "I'll hæ næ haufwæ hoose."<sup>12</sup>

Following this work with Volodymyr Dibrova, I was approached to work with Nadia Kjurik on a Ukrainian feature for *Index on Censorship*, focusing on Yevgen Pashkov'ski.<sup>13</sup> I later worked on a similar basis with Liv Schei, on a novel from the Danish, and out of all this a habit developed. I got to like the process. And about this time I began to translate myself – that is, began to make bilingual text. I realise now in doing so I was recognising that the child inside me had been translating ever since starting school in

Shetland in 1963. In 1989, those Ukrainian translations were a political act – anti-Soviet – and the translations I began to make of my own work had that tenor to me. They were statements – notifications – of existence in English. I aimed for redress – if not equivalence then at least a relation, a speaking-to-►►

“Translation responds to the original by freeing it as a mutable thing, a complex of encoded ideas and associations not merely to be admired, but transmuted, necessarily rearranged. It is, in effect, a kind of ‘Re-Creative Writing’.”

► one-another, a dialogue between the voice of Home and the voice of Education.

My involvement with *Literature Across Frontiers*<sup>14</sup> in recent years has developed this interest. *LAF* is a Euro-wide venture which brings together writers (mainly poets) from minority languages in order that they may translate one another. In most cases, an Elephant is required – a bridge language, generally English. This involvement led to a new understanding on my part, that inward translation is a means of testing and extending the native, a way of adding to the body of literature written in that form – a means of enrichment.<sup>15</sup> So far, as a result of *LAF*, I've translated – via these Elephants – the work of over 20 contemporary European poets into my version of Shetlandic Scots.<sup>16</sup> In each case I learned something about my native tongue as a consequence.

Yet translation is no simple business – it is, and always has been, fraught with the issue of correspondence: how can two essentially different things be made alike?

### Re-Creative Writing

We might argue that the original process of creating in language is just this: a process of translation, in its broadest sense, of mood or feeling or idea or observation into thought-words, then those into writing – then follows 'translation' from draft to draft until: alchemy, the energy has led to something magical. All that making in the workshop has created something – we hope: the encoding of meaning; an event in semantics, and perhaps publishing – we hope. The energy of composition has, ideally, crystallized something to be treasured – even festified: 'The Definitive Text'.

However, publication and its core notion of 'deadline' do not always coincide with completion. Writers may be hurried towards it, the published text may be incomplete. It may be the victim of careless publishing, littered with typographical errors. The 'definitive' is not really, then, a thing that resides in any of the editions or revisions – it is not made of text at all. It is in the author's mind, an ideal aspired to, and, on rare occasion, blissfully achieved. The 'made thing', that fixed identity in words – the event in published language – emerges out of flux, and stops the creative process, sometimes drastically.

Translation is kindred to creation, but different in that it begins with reading whereas creation ends with it. Translation responds to the original by freeing it as a mutable thing, a complex of encoded ideas and associations not merely to be admired, but transmuted, necessarily rearranged. It is, in effect, a kind of 'Re-Creative Writing'. So the translator and the creator are not so far apart – indeed the essential semantic instability of any text, dependent on the subjectivity of the reader, suggests that translation is not such a different thing from the kind of necessary interpretation made by a reader in their native language.

Ah, but poetry – it is often said – is untranslatable; an idea sometimes attributed to Coleridge and the elevated Romantic station of the poetic art his work helped to engender. But it is an ancient thought, and in more recent times we find Roman Jakobson taking it up: "Poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape to another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, eg. from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting."<sup>17</sup>

This distinction between translation and transposition is hierarchical – the presence of the word 'only' suggests the latter is inferior. In 'transposing' a poem interlingually, something less than 'translation' takes place. The person responsible is at best a 'transposer' – which has an amusing if accidental negative connotation, in its association with the French loan, 'poseur'. The implication is that we are fooling ourselves if we imagine otherwise.

The text, to the structuralist, is the text is the text – a fact, or series of facts, ink marks on paper. But what is contained there, especially in the case of poetry, is something other, something allusive and elusive, even in the original – a complex of sound, image and idea, within an architecture, if we follow Pound's following of Aristotle.<sup>18</sup> As different languages encode different world views, different ways of thinking about experience, so replication is impossible. "A word is a microcosm of human consciousness," as Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky<sup>19</sup> wrote. Poetry, which makes such use of the musicality and the associative power of words,

where density of allusion and ambiguity is far greater than in speech or prose writing, must inevitably be misrepresented in 'transposition'. But then poetry, one might argue, lies in the active attempt at understanding, not graphs, and translation at best is exactly that.

Reading poetry is difficult enough in one's native tongue – the very nature of it resists the intelligence, almost successfully, as Wallace Stevens<sup>20</sup> phrased it. A translation is always partial, a subjective reading, a response to a call, to some appeal found in the original, but if the thing that is made is genuinely responsive, based on deep understanding of the original, the 'transposition' may itself attain the state of being poetic. Poetry is not, then, simply what is lost in translation, as Robert Frost once famously remarked – it is also, potentially, what is found. And if all translations fail to make different things alike, that is simply inevitable.

Untranslatability is part of translation as Jacques Derrida once said: "... There is no experience of translation when we don't experience the untranslatable ... it's absolutely linked to the idiom, to the extent that the idiom is not translatable, that the translation translates the untranslatable. That's why literature is the experience of translation, is what calls for translation. To write a poem, an untranslatable poem, calls for translation. The poem cries for being translated precisely because it can't be. That's why we try and translate Hölderlin and Milton and Mallarmé, and we know that they are not translatable. But that's why the untranslatability is not a negative concept. It's not opposed to translatability. Untranslatability is the element of translation."<sup>21</sup>

The difficulty is intrinsic to the process – as being elephantine is a condition of being an Elephant. And however oppressed we native speakers of Gaelic or Scots may have been by being educated in English, we are at least fluent in one of the world's great languages – not the case with all minority language speakers.

I feel we should use this to our advantage – by taming the Elephant, become 'mahout', and guide it to where we want to go. We should endeavour actively to direct it, and not lie passively abed awaiting the crush. And that is just what we are doing, Maoilios Caimbeul and myself, in using it as vehicle for this Gaelic/Scots exchange. ■

### Notes

1. www.dsl.ac.uk
2. The Concise Scots Dictionary, ed. Mairi Robinson, 1985
3. Scots: The Mither Tongue, Billy Kay, 1986.
4. The Language of the People William Donaldson, 1989
5. But n Ben A-Go-Go, 2000
6. www.itchy-coo.com
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## New Gaelic Writing at Northwords Now

**N**ORTHWORDS NOW OCCUPIES something not unlike the place previously occupied by the Magazine Northwords which was published out of Dingwall from 1991 till 2004.

What do we mean by 'North'? Our interests are wide-ranging. They extend beyond a fixed geographical location. We've had a featured review of 20thc. Russian poetry; an essay on Margaret Tait, Orkney poet and film-maker; have used images from Inuit art and have been offered an essay on the Sami.

To date most of what we have published has been unsolicited. Some wonderful surprises come our way.

We are a magazine where creative writing can be published. The ties of the writing or the writer to the north may be close or not. We look for 'high quality', by which is meant, that which is satisfying to readers of discrimination and experience. We have a sound reviews section and seek informed and lively reviewers. And we have a features section which is evolving into a mix

of researched essays and reviews of books or events which merit specialised attention.

We also aim to be accessible to a wide (mainly English-speaking) readership. We have a 7000 print run per issue and the fact that we are, notionally, 'Free' makes it easy for us to place NNOW with stockists across Scotland; and for them to be able to report on high rate of uptake.

We get messages from readers saying how they have enjoyed it.

We have had, to date, something GAELIC in every issue: poetry, a schools project (Plockton/Sorley), and 6 excellent poetry collections to review. And now we have begun, in collaboration with established Gaelic writers, to formalise a Gaelic policy.

We are being supported and encouraged by HIE with HI-Arts in this enterprise.

Northwords Now is published three

times yearly. The Autumn issue is planned for 1st November '08; the Spring issue for 1st March '09. It is planned that there will be a Gaelic Editor in place for these 2 issues. This person will be keen to receive submissions of new creative Gaelic writing, of suggestions for essays or features on matters that are issues 'now' for Gaelic writers.

Anyone wishing to have more information, or wanting to submit material for possible publication should write to the **General Editor at Northwords Now, PO Box 5706, INVERNESS. IV1 9AF.** It will be passed on to the Gaelic Editor.

Rhoda Michael  
(aka Rhoda Dunbar)  
Editor NNOW

# Two microfictions by John Glenday

## What My Mother Called Me

The human heart, I am led to believe, is the same size as a clenched fist. And so it was that in that single heartbeat between the last beam of last night's dark and the deep, grey first light of today I caught sight of who else but, coincidence itself, my mother settling from the air. She was built from old smoke stacked in a shuttered room. Light in the air as the last of hopefulness, she batted the dandelion clocks of her fists towards the draught, pulled herself clear of the peeling bedroom wall, one hand to the place her heart had been. In the moment between forming and her own words dissolving her again and me thinking all that about the human heart; its size, her hands, that room, and the messy rest, she mouthed the word it was she had called me by, which was my father's also, with an upturn to its only syllable, as if it were a question she had never framed before.

## The Woodling

**S**HIT THICK NIGHT. Wind up with its long thin glum-voiced call. Trees doing their thrash and flails. Face-rain, needle sleet and all. Two of us for a deed's doing: me for the looking out and Spirket - our fish-eyed, smile-faced jobsman - for the burying. The pair of us at the swither where two roads cross their hearts. Loitering to earth a deadborn dabbled from the Inn girl's godfriend's sister. Him has a blackwood spade. The pair of us carries iron.

'Where's tricks then?' says I to the smiley-boy. And he gives me the follow with his finger, ducks through a gap by the wood's rim.

'In here by the beech fall, where the going's soft,' says he, then hacks out a thin hollow for the carcase of the babe thing I'm carrying, fish-cold in my hod. He takes grip of it from me, fumbles the damp grilse of its greyness in and slips a shaved farthing against each half-closed socket. Heaps back the leaves and dirt for a coverlet. Steps back a step. Eyes the finish of it.

'And here's for the wetting of his luck,' he smirks, unbuttoning, and pishes brazen-like on the hummock he has delved; then says it again, but softer for fear of a priest's hearing. Now of a sudden that stream of his water roils up this swell of a leaf-whimper and a grim steam, a rising boil of peat mud and beech mast and shadows. That bairn surfacing; coins dropping. Brown glint of half-ways to rotten flesh, struggling to stand.

'Whoa, boy!' And Spirket leaps back from the quick rising of soil and livening corpse. It burgeons. It lifts its head. It squalls. The brace of us wearing a sudden emptiness of moons for faces.

'Jesus squail him and squab him!' says me, 'this spawn of a woodling.'

And up it grows in an instant, all mushroom-like, and picks the plug of earth from its howl. First as a tottery suckling, then fresh boy, we decides, that toddles to

his roots or feet and grows like dark in the night to the size of a piglet, then a lambkin, then a stirk. That sudden. Stripling he is in a blinking, then half man and giant man.

Spirket says on the quiet:

'Whose life can gallop on like this and yet have the living in him still? He'll cast a white shadow,' and he does the sign.

We steps back and looks one into the trembling other. Our hearts shift in their cages like a shift of wind.

And still the undeaded babe does its growing, this elf-fleck the piss raised; a first and last beard spurling from him now, and the snow of his hair coiling through the coal of his hair, and he falters to something older than the minute he has lived. The arc of his earthtime founders in a handful of breaths. A rainbow washed white is his breathing as he sets him to take his one footstep in the world. But he stumbles and droops and pants and halts. And so old is he now, he husks into himself and as he withers turns up a last shrivel of his face and says with a gentle plead and the lifting of a hand and a voice like a paddle-blade through grain:

'Give us a name to me Father, bless you. Tell us. What was I called?' but is gone in the breath that began it. To wood-mush. To wind. To forgetting.

Spirket puts the brief spade to it, fleshbits and mulch and all, then touches the arm of me. Points to the woodless where two roads cross their hearts and are gone, just like I said. One rising in the smoke rot and pig oil lamps of town; faltering in moorlands under a sprung pod moon; the other wending from not much of anywhere to the far side of all but nowhere.

Spirket touches again and points.

'Our way,' he whispers. 'Be off with us now.' And wipes the done deed from his spade's white grin.

'Be off with us too,' says no one.

'Be off with us all,' says I.

# The Season of Festivals (the quieter kind)

## Dances of Thought in Scotland's Ceilidh of Ideas

### Wordfringe

COMPILED BY FREDA HASLER  
(AND FRIENDS)

**W**ITHIN ITS COMPREHENSIVE website [www.wordfringe.co.uk](http://www.wordfringe.co.uk), where you can read full reviews of the 32 events which make wordfringe an established part of our northern festival calendar, wf director Hodgkinson reminds us of “the incredible range of literary talent we have in our midst.” Add invited guests, at tempting venues in Aberdeen and around the Shire – that’s May in North-East Scotland!

The programme featured the expected vibrant mix of poetry, drama, fiction, laced with music, dance, visual imagery. This year, special emphasis was placed on the writers’ groups that nurture talent, with five launching anthologies. Several workshops covered aspects of the narrative voice, all chock-full [someone noting this demand?], challenging and instructive. Readings by Writers in Residence too: four employed by local councils during the 1990s gathered in historic Duff House: Gunn, Bryan, Dunn and Gibson in the same room, on the same evening? Inspiring.

Enthused by the WORD festival, what do we, the audience, look for in this exciting and ever-expanding fringe? Something different? Our reviewers hover, pens poised, eager to share their highlights.

wordfringe got off to a jubilant start ‘Pushing Out the Boat’, with its stunning artwork and diverse voices. An Arts Centre audience of 70+ watched talented writers breathing vibrancy and life into their readings. This venue staged several wf events, including Shetland Night: island life observations by talented indigenous writers, enhanced by guitar, harmonica, plus local literati. There was drama at the Woodend Barn. In ‘Everything but the Truth’, Wordfringe Festival Players presented three monologues and a dialogue, compellingly written and performed. While ‘Poetry and Music of All the Faiths’ at Midmar Church offered Mary, Joseph, digging, burying, mantra and lament – with Bach on guitar.

Tiny venues provided intimacy: at Balmedie’s Tarts & Crafts, humour, suspense and sadness in ‘New York Dialogues and Island Blethers’. No amplification required at the ‘Open Mic’ in Better Read bookshop, Ellon, with standing room only for an excellent mini-ceilidh. Local flavour augmented by a good sprinkling of Doric at Aberdeen’s St K’s, with Portal Creative Writers dipping into their recently published ‘Poetry from a Postcode AB24’.

Among Aberdeen Central Library’s weekly pleasures, ‘All Said & Dunne’ welcomed back this poet’s startlingly clear philosophy of life, fearless and sometimes ferocious. Enigma’s ‘Poetic Off Licence’ provided a real treat for the head and the heart: sex, drugs – with goats – and vicars? While at convivial Musa’s ‘Demented Eloquence’, this reviewer’s favourite performance poet



James Robertson (left) and Stuart Kelly at the Ullapool Book Festival

Dickinson, back by demand, deftly supported by Balgoni, Wizard and co.

North again, Duff House launched Huntly Writers’ first anthology “Spirit of the Deveron”: humorous post modern experimentation. At Fraserburgh’s Museum of Scottish Lighthouses, the Blue Salt Collective in ‘Hooked by Emerald Froth’ – the heart and soul of life painted using nature’s palette. Regular wf host, Aberdeen’s literary enclave Books and Beans, gave us ‘Four Paris (based) Poets’, an evening of fine, intelligent verse; ‘Poems of Quality’, just as it says on the tin, Ryland’s poems shedding light on the world through her fresh and most original voice; and wf grand finale ‘A Celebration of Childhood’, with a new anthology in aid of Children 1st.

What did we used to do in May?

### StAnza

STUART B. CAMPBELL

**S**TANZA CELEBRATED ITS tenth anniversary last year, confirming its fixture in the literary festival calendar, and while this year didn’t have anything like the ‘100 Poets’ extravaganza, to expect an anticlimax would’ve been to misunderstand what StAnza is about. This year, like previous years, StAnza did so very well what it exists to do: celebrate poetry.

This year’s festival themes, ‘Poetry & Conflict’ and ‘Sea of Tongues’, seemed unlikely companions, but they complimented each other in some surprising and subtle ways. Although StAnza is ‘Scotland’s Poetry Festival’, it has always oriented the poetry

within an international context and this year there were more non-Anglophone poets than ever. That poetic connectivity was emphasised by Kenneth White’s reading and in his interview with Andrew Clegg. It was also echoed in Annie Freud’s discussion of Eliot, in a ‘Past & Present’ session; she argued that every new poem contributes to a greater organic whole, altering the canon. At a ‘Poetry Breakfast’ John Burnside with Norwegian poets, Odveig Klyve and Finn Øglænd, discussed the survival of older native languages in the face of the engulfing tide of the internet. They argued that remaining connected to their locality enabled them to be international, but just as rural life needed to be guarded against becoming a pastiche of itself, similarly, poetry had to resist the shallow discourse of commerce. Alexander Hutchison, Robert Alan Jamieson and Kevin MacNeil, along with Franconian and Friesian poets, spoke about having a ‘mither tongue’ that in various ways conflicted with the country’s dominant language. There was a sense throughout the festival of poetry, whether as a specific text or in its defence of language, existing as an actor within a personal and global context.

It was perhaps less to do with Brian Turner (whose 2008 collection ‘Here Bullet’ communicates his experience as a soldier in Iraq) contributing to the debate ‘Poetry & Conflict’ that the discussion focussed on ‘conflict’ meaning ‘war’; it was probably unavoidable. August Kleinzaler’s point was that war has paradoxically been a continuous feature of ‘post-war’ civilisation. He argued that global institutions regard war as an equally valid means of obtaining their goals

as advertising. Referring to Akhmatova, Tom Jones suggested that poetry’s position in all this, is ultimately, to be ‘at variance with the world’.

In the StAnza Lecture, Sarah Maguire questioned poetry’s relevance in relation to the Iraq conflict, referring to Auden’s point “poetry makes nothing happen”. She noted, nonetheless, that the continual complaint that ‘poetry is irrelevant’ was contradicted by the fact it is a perennial grumble; poetry refuses to go away. Referring to Brecht and MacNeice, Maguire argued that writing poetry, even in the darkest times, is a necessary act. Maguire suggested that poetry is, however, vulnerable to political exploitation; poets from the former Soviet Bloc are promoted, but not Arabic ones. Having worked with poets from Somalia, Maguire argued that poetry translation is the opposite of war; it requires negotiation.

With around seventy events featuring almost as many poets, it’s not possible in the space available to say more about how StAnza crackles with energy and enthusiasm. If you weren’t there this year, don’t miss StAnza 2009.

### Ullapool Book Festival

PAUL BAIN

‘**A**CEILIDH OF Ideas’ were Donny O’Rourke’s (the gregarious and hugely generous honorary President of the Ullapool Book Festival) opening words, suggesting the intimacy, vibrancy, the entwining of word and thought that sums up this festival’s unique qualities. ►►



# Mirror. Signal. Manoeuvre.

A SHORT STORY BY ALISON NAPIER

THE INDICATOR IS still on. You lean sideways and flick up the arm. “Thanks,” I say and keep driving, not turning my head. Past the computer superstores, the carpet and furniture warehouses, the exhaust fitters and the kebabs and the minicab firms and the drive-thru McDonalds. Heading for home.

The green eye blinking on the dashboard stops, I hear the ticking, a racing caffeine heart, only after it stops. Blinking and ticking. I have blinked and ticked all the way from the supermarket. Without you I might have blinked and ticked all the way home. But without you I would not have been at the supermarket.

“I just need a couple of things,” you said. “You don’t mind do you?” A couple.

I said I did not mind because I knew what a couple was. A couple is one and one makes two. A couple is lots of things on the shelf, and choose the two ingredients that go together. A couple is two items from a long list going up the aisle. We are a couple of things from the supermarket.

“I’ll come with you. Maybe we can go for a coffee after?” I was already imagining the double chocolate muffin and the crazy-big mug of cappuccino with a sprinkle of everything. I don’t think you heard the coffee bit. No worries.

Blink blink. We left the house fifty-seven minutes ago. I know this because we left as the Archers’ theme tune was signalling the end of an episode and now it is nearly ten minutes past three. We left the supermarket five minutes ago. We arrived at the supermarket forty minutes ago. I know. I can barely keep up either. But although I am not by nature a calculating person I reckon that we were at the supermarket for thirty-five minutes. And that is seventeen and a half minutes per item. Blimey.

I am not a risk taker so when we reached the supermarket I swung in to the far side of the car park because I knew there would be a space for us. I have tried sometimes to trust in my luck, headed brazenly right up to the front entrance, only to beat a humiliating retreat back to the wastelands by the

grim landscaped litter-garden. You would say, “Look look, there’s a space, there, bastard, we were here first, oh, they’re leaving, quick, in there, reverse, yes I know there’s a queue behind you, so what, wait, Jesus you’ve got to be quicker than that...” but I, embarrassed, have already changed gear, moved forward and skulked away back to the perimeter.

And so I parked. You said, “Won’t be long, you stay here.” So I stayed here. Where else would I go? I put the radio on and switched it off again. I stared out at the shrubs, nameless dusty abandoned bushes in a pretend herbaceous border sandwiched between parked cars and the recycling centre. I watch the recyclers recycling their wine bottles and pet-food cans, and almost get out to rescue a flapping carrier bag that has missed out on its chance for reincarnation. Doomed to spend a thousand indestructible years blowing in the wind. And where will you go to my lovely.

A tank draws up confidently, roaringly, beside me and slams to a halt. I turn in my seatbelt, in my lowly civilian Sierra, and craning my neck I see, in what is actually a monstrous black and chrome Cherokee Jeep, a solitary woman in a tweedy-green deer-stalker. Sherlockina Holmes in the supermarket car park. Stalking deer. I smile and I know I will tell you about this when you get back. Deer stalker. Jeez, you will say.

Dear stalker, I am writing to you because I have seen you many times but have never had the courage to speak to you. What is it that you find so fascinating about me? Is it my flamboyant yet sophisticated style of dress? Or my artful manoeuvring of a supermarket trolley? Can I save you endless hours of trouble and invite you up to my riverside apartment in the Old Town? Here is the address. I do hope you can come. I am generally at home between Whitsun and Easter, otherwise I am painting at the villa in Provence. Do call. Yours etc.

I glance in the mirror to see where Ms Holmes has gone. No sign. I move the mirror slightly and know that this is a mistake because I will have to rearrange it when we leave. Ah well. I once drove a car, an older

model, down the motorway, and suddenly the rear-view mirror fell off. Just fell off. Landed on the floor at my feet all tangled with the pedals. I got it kicked out of the way and kept driving, checking the wing mirrors instead, but always always forgetting a second later and looking up. I had no idea that I looked in the mirror so often. And now here I am doing it again. A vanity case.

I can see the vast gaping doorways of the store from here, everyone is moving in or out except the supersize security guard with the LA cop-style uniform, standing, legs apart, arms folded, mirror specs alert, looking for trouble.

There is a screen, certificate U, with revolving adverts at the side of the main entrance, and at the other side there are rows and rows of trolleys snaking in wobbly lines across the paving slabs. Trolleys with baby seats at the front and ones with a clipboard for the organised executive’s shopping list. Ones that hook onto a wheelchair and ones that are split-level, for if you have a couple of baskets. And deep ones, for tumbling into as you laboriously empty it at the checkout, and shallow ones for the timid and moderate shopper. And even the injudicious, who place all their eggs in one solitary basket, are catered for here.

Families stream in and out, man pushing trolley, steering helplessly without satnav, kids trailing behind, woman dreaming of another life. Bustling singles stride in with a credit card and stride out again with ciabattas and chiantis. Its only bread and booze, sonny. Don’t be fooled.

I adjust the mirror again because there are you! I know you even back to front, I know you in all your reflected glory. I know you framed in your little secret video screen, a video that is now showing on a tiny television five inches by two, set against a backdrop of a dusty windscreen (at least the bit where the wipers never reach), and behind that is the shrubbery with a forlorn plastic bag perched on a twig. I’m gonna make a big star out of you.

I know you are a star because you are

wearing your cool shades. Cool shades, I said the first time I saw you wear them. You lowered your head and looked at me over the top, eyebrows raised, grinning. And look, you are grinning again. A superstar at a superstore! And your arms are outstretched like my angel of the North. Someone steps into the frame, onto the set, enters stage left, a new character in an idiosyncratic hunting hat. A deer stalker. Steps into the limelight, under the spotlight, into the circle that your arms would make if you were an equation, the circumference being I think two pie are. The shopping list joke. Elementary my dear Watson. Dear god. The circle completes.

There are revolving adverts at your side but hey, surely when the ads start the main programme is meant to stop for at least, oh, a while, two and a half minutes maybe, not just keep going with images of blood oranges and sparkling Spanish cava and patio sets and sun screen, all on a grotesque split screen multiplex, now showing simultaneously. I did not know (and how could I know) that you knew her quite as well as it appears you do.

You gesture over towards our car and I see you laugh. She laughs too. A newer model. You gesture because you are a risk taker. This is my signal. I see it all now. I have seen it all now. The whole thing was brief and mute and wholly predictable. I can smash the screen and risk seven years of misfortune. I am not a risk taker though and I watch you astonished as you take, take risk after risk after risk. Taking away. My future. A takeaway role, a kiss as the credits roll. And there you have it. The past before I knew you, precisely mirroring the future I will have after you are gone. Empty. Only choking. Blink blink. Jeez.

The two items separated although I know this only to be temporary until they meet again and they will, as they have and have and have. I had a Loyalty card, yes it’s in here somewhere, I know I have it somewhere. And do you need any help packing your bags? No no I’m fine. I’ll do it myself. Blinking, blinking hard.

## ► (continued from previous page)

Writers and audiences congregate over a weekend, conversations continue and evolve, the threads picked up, gathered, drifting off again.

The festival was opened by James Robertson reading from his highly successful novel *The Testament of Gideon Mack* and a glimpse of as yet unpublished novel about Scottish life and politics in the latter half of the twentieth century. He suggested that Scotland’s uncertainty about itself allows provocative and elusive questioning, an ambiguity picked up by Louise Welch in her lecture on Robert Louis Stevenson and ‘The Theatre of the Brain’: the influence of dreams on his fiction and their eruption into and influence on the conscious state- the

obvious reference here being Jekyll and Hyde with its notion of fluid identities.

Essie Stewart told of her life as a traveller, stories where the landscape became story, where geography became embodied in tale and myth, stories and traditions that are vanishing as a way of life vanishes. This was continued by the folk-lorist Margaret Bennett, reading from her *Scottish Customs from the Cradle to the Grave*, with her accounts of folk customs, rituals and superstitions from birth to death, some which still keek through into our less credulous modern age. This sense of haunting was continued by Alasdair Macleod, the great Cape Breton writer, reading from his novel *No Great Mischief*, a Highland culture displaced to Nova Scotia,

the questing sense of who we are present in his quietly elegant prose.

Gradually, the festival emerged from these longworn preoccupations. Sam Meekings, a young poet, presented his new collection *Bestiary* alongside the more solid and querulous figure of George Gunn, also reading from his new collection, *The Atlantic Forest*. Gunn’s stands firmly in Caithness but reaches out and draws in references from Brazil to Iraq in a widening circle and confluence of ideas that swirl around his favoured still (and stormy) centre of Dunnet Head.

The notion of identity all but dissolved in the brilliantly theatrical performances of Luke Sutherland. Luke, Orcadian-born, who has lived in Glasgow and London and now

lives in Barcelona, prefers to swim between identities and remain undefined, seeing them as equal and creative rather than particular and defined. This was further taken up in the modernist poetry of Richard Price, in its eloquent compressions and contrarpuntal rhythms and was finally blown apart by Zoe Strachan’s brutal description of oral sex in a toilet. We had safely reached a modern world now but not before a final flourish from Alan Spence reading from *The Pure Land*, his historical novel about Thomas Glover, switching between Aberdeen and Japan.

So this festival’s trajectory continues to recognise that our past is rich and thrums below the surface, redefined in the contemporary spirit. ■

# Poems by Gerard Rochford

## In My Aunt's Kitchen

A summer evening's walk along the lane.

She will offer me cider and I'll watch her  
cook, sweep, bend, reach, wash.

I enter without knocking. Beside the fire,  
her body painted by the brush of flames,  
she is sitting in a tin bath soaping her breasts.

She does protest, but only teasingly.  
*No looking now*, she says, but of course I do,  
waiting for my eyes to seize their chance.

Slowly she stands before me jewelled in water,  
leans across for a towel to rub herself.

I register that tender shadow of hair  
which binds me still to the body of a woman.

## Ironing a Sari

This hand dyed cotton  
unfolding on and on,  
until its face and colour  
are young again.

Such length is like a path  
down to the river,  
which morning and evening  
feels the feet of women

who wander from the village  
to the washing place  
and laugh about their men  
beside smooth stones.

The cloth has no one now  
to fold around;  
one brown shoulder covered,  
the other bare,

breasts shaping  
a tease of bodice,  
the crucial tucking in  
around the waist.

And I am wrapped  
within this task,  
breathing warmth  
from what has touched your skin.

## Sun Rise

I listen to the water in the shower  
rain upon the silking of your body.

With face upturned, eyes closed,  
your hands are busy with soap.

You glance down to the right,  
and lift your foot to the pumice,  
the balance of your breasts askew  
like fruit, giving themselves  
to the gentle persuasions of weather.

You are unaware of self, of me,  
of time; absorbed without reserve  
within the set imperatives of ritual.

Unseen I move away, a hunter,  
diverted by the beauty of his prey.

## Water Fall

We follow paths but then we wander  
beyond the scattering of children,

into the arms of trees, the giving moss,  
the darkening growth, the cover of leaves,  
trying the anxiety of birds.

There is an ache to trace the source of you.

Hand in hand the messages come through;  
you know my feelings, read my thoughts,  
my need for you upon this bed of rock.

We overhear the waterfall  
filling its depth and always wanting more.

## Swimmer

Into this other element  
you slide, fluid as otter.

Within the loch you are free  
like the making of love.

You float on your back,  
legs wide apart,  
or cleave into the darkness.

Your eyes are shut or open  
to whatever closes in  
around your skin.

Beneath the rowan trees  
this man is watching.

He spreads a towel, white,  
upon the green moss.

## Proposal

Come in your black silk nightie,  
the one with a broken strap  
over your right shoulder;  
through an unattended tear  
the bud of your breast breaks out.

The first time you said: Oops, and covered it up.

Come to me in your new kimono,  
on its back a bright redwing  
rising into the parting leaves  
of a Japanese Abelia,  
its blossoms flushed with pink.

I will say: *The bird knows the best places.*

Come with the light-green blanket  
your good friend lent you,  
the day I showed you the path  
into the listening forest  
to look for chanterelle.

I said: *They lie near a stream where the paths cross.*

Come when the curious moon  
stands on tip-toe at night  
to watch through the window;  
and come again at dawn  
under the frank blue sky.

You will smile and say: *You are so predictable.*

And come to me  
after your shower,  
as my towelling bath-robe  
opens up, like the white wings of a swan,  
upon our feather bed.

You will say: *Yes...*

## Flight

I ring you like a bird then set you free.

The sky may bring you back to land again.

I am a watcher of winds and weather;

a reader of seasons, signs of tameness.

My arms reach out like branches.

There is a garden with no traps;

a cage even, its doors left open.

There is the uncertainty of homing.

# DEWPOINT: the saturation temperature of water vapour in air at which dew or fog is formed.'

This is an exhibition of photographs, phrase poems, screen prints and photograms, the result of a remarkable collaboration between print-maker, Carol Dunbar, poet Valerie Gillies, and photographer Rebecca Marr. Its first presentation was at Inchmore Gallery\*, mid-May, 2008.

By RHODA MICHAEL

IT IS A complex exhibition. Its title, *Dewpoint*, is an attractive word, something a poetic imagination might have created. But it is a term drawn from the science of meteorology and it has an exact scientific definition, as given at the top of this page.

As a collaboration it draws not only on their creative imaginations but also on the intellects of these three women. In the gallery books including scientific text books lie on offer for visitors to browse through. These are texts that have been explored by the artists in their efforts to arrive at an understanding of the physics of cloud formation. They have made themselves expert.

A key text for them has been Richard Hamblyn's *The Invention of Clouds* (Picador 2001, ISBN 0 330 39194 1) It is a biography of Luke Howard, important as the man who, at the start of the 19th century, proposed a taxonomy for cloud forms and their processes of formation. He based it on Linnaean principles of classification and his work remains the standard system used today.

In considering the part played by Howard's studies in the work of the artists who created this exhibition, it is worth noting its influence on artists and writers of his own time. It was the period of the Romantic Revival in Britain and Europe. In England the *Lyrical Ballads* was being published and Wordsworth could write about 'wandering lonely as a cloud' or as being 'alone amid the heart of many thousand mists'; indeed there is a very long tradition of using clouds and all other aspects of weather as a source of imagery for the ups and downs of human experience.

Hamblyn's book, however, points also to the 'profound excitement that is generated by new (scientific) ideas' and cites the influence of scientific discoveries, including Howard's work, on writers such as Mary and P.B. Shelley, Coleridge and, among others on the Continent, Goethe.

How then, does this play out in the Dewpoint exhibition?

The exhibition space is on the upper floor of this handsome gallery. You enter the space directly from the staircase. There are two major groupings in this exhibition. Most prominent is the collaboration proper. A suite of twelve cloudscapes digitally photographed (RM), identified by generic and specific, and each placed in the upper half of a frame are hung round the room. The lower part of the space within each frame is empty. The glass covering these has been hand-inscribed in white paint with brief phrase poems (VG) as her response to the cloudscapes.

These artefacts are separated/connected by groupings drawn from twelve very small screen prints (CD) titled *Fragment*



Photo: Rebecca Marr

– *dewpoint I–XII*. They remind the eye that this is an artist who makes tapestries with the finest thread. The numbering of all these frames leads you round the space. They are

positioned with intention. The fact of the painted poems draws you more strongly on, other senses become involved; there is a hint of hidden narrative, a sense of expectation.

You have to see the cloudscape to get the intention of the poet.

The inscription for *cirrocumulus stratiformis undulatis* is: *first cut/ of the scythe/ ice crystals fall.*

For *cirrus intortus* it is: *a wave-form/ moves as one/ with the swimming snake.* For *nimbos-tratus* it is: *with cloud-swept face/ the mountain hermit/ smiles.*

These verses offer something like a reference back to creation myths; perhaps to a sense of that primitive capacity to go on creating them even when the science is understood.

This is a well-designed exhibition. Which, I wonder, would I like to have? One of these by itself wouldn't do. How would I separate them out? As you go round the room their force accumulates; their connection affirms itself. This is not an exhibition of discrete objects but something more like an installation – which would be impressive if it could be held as a unit. Perhaps in the foyer or board room of a significant and relevant public service: a university science block; the head office of Scottish Water or Scottish Hydro-electric?

The other groupings in the exhibition are by Rebecca Marr. While coherently connected to the main collaboration, they can also be viewed as independent of it. One set is of digitally photographed cloudscapes, titled *Cloud Atlas*, 1-12.

The other of these sets is presented as a homage to Anna Atkins (1799-1871) a name new to this reviewer. A brief biography of Anna may interest some readers. Her father, a scientist with an interest in the processes of photography, was a friend of John Herschel, originator of the cyanotype process. She is best known (see *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, 6th edition 1997) for, in particular, her books of original cyanotype illustration of plants, the first of which was *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* (in 12 parts 1843-53)

It is RM's set of hand-printed photograms (ie. made not with a camera but by using cyano-sensitised paper) of algae that constitutes the homage. Each is named by the botanical term followed by the popular name: *Ascophyllum Nodosum/Knotweed Wrack*; *Laminaria digitata/Tangleweed*. An elegant tribute, and a significant feature of this exhibition.

Part of this exhibition can be seen at Porteous Brae Gallery, Stromness. ■

\*Inchmore Gallery is on the A862 seven miles west of Inverness.

Contact: Fred and Gwen Black at 01463 831573

TENNYSON RECKONED HE knew the weight of every word apart from ‘scissors’ – Les Murray claims to know the weight of even that word. It is words and their weight that have given Murray his place of eminence in world poetry, not only their power to invoke and transform but also their dark talent to wound, marginalise and dispossess has occupied much of his work and life.

Words obsessed him when he was a child – there was ‘a set of eight encyclopaedias in the house and I read them till they fell apart. I got to be interested in everything’. He claims that ‘the most useful member of the Murray family was Sir James Murray, a cousin of mine, who wrote the Oxford English dictionary’ (and who died, ironically, when he reached the word ‘turnover’). Even bad language which he revelled in as a child he calls ‘black poetry’ – he was ‘scared out of it’ by having spirit of solder flicked at him when he was four years old and this combination of ideas about language, not only their inventiveness and creative potential but also their power to cause pain seems to constantly rock against each other in Murray’s world.

When he talks about his discovery of poetry he realised ‘there was somewhere to put these words, there was something you could do with them, they had an immense power and force that could be directed. Having a large amount of electricity, I suddenly discovered the transmission.’ Although he claims to be musical illiterate (‘I only know two songs : one is Yankee Doodle Dandy and the other one is the one that isn’t that one’), it is in the manipulation of the sounds of words that we find his musical inventiveness – ‘it’s the closest I get to music’. In the poem *Great Bole* from *Translations From the Natural World* :

*Needling to soil point  
lengthens me solar  
my ease perpendicular  
from earth’s mid ion.*

Murray’s meaning here seems to echo Seamus Heaney’s description of the word as ‘pure vocable, as articulate noise’, meaning subsumed by the liquidity of its soundscape, what happens on the tongue and in the ear rather than an appeal to rational understanding. This use of phonosemantics – the construction of meaning through sound – is a practice he often uses. In fact, he claims, along with Don Paterson in his recent essay *The Sense of Sound*, that sometimes ‘the worst thing you can have for a poem is an idea – you come to the idea through the other things. And sometimes you don’t even bother to come to the idea. One of my favourite poems I ever wrote was called *The Images Alone*. I just started using imagery and followed it line by line. There is somehow a kind of picture in there but it never comes completely into focus. It’s in effect a piece of music written in words.’

Murray seems to have an almost feral sense of words, a faculty that works below the level of consciousness, able to inhabit animals and landscapes and return them to us renewed, as if we have been handed something of their essential presence. ‘Language is what humans do. Nobody else does it so you can go back and find their life and translate it into the human terms of language. I used

to be a translator and it continues the same idea as a translator. There are animal systems of communication and I’ve been fascinated by them. They’re not always simple and they’re not a series of spoken syllables. Ants when they meet open their mouths and kiss their messages to each other. Each one tastes the chemicals in the other one and it tells him things. The world for a lot of creatures consists of a perpetual exhibition of pictures that we can’t even see.’ Murray refers to the phenomenon of blindsight – the ‘sight’ which blind people develop based on sensory experience – ‘which is really made of echo most of the time. There was a fellow I was talking to on the phone one time...I asked if he had always been blind – he said he had so I asked him what senses he used. He said I can walk down the street and I can tell you what every house is made of, whether it’s cement render, brick or glass and I can feel the people in my forehead. It’s a kind of mixture of pressure and echo.’

It is this ability to inhabit other states of living, to transfuse himself into other selves – animal selves, tree selves, river selves – to sense the other worlds of ‘pressure and echo’ that shows he has something of the shaman’s power of transformation. In an offhand but revealing comment, he says that his father and his daughter, Clare, are psychic : ‘I’m hopeless at psychic...but maybe it’s with words’.

Nevertheless, many of his poems are driven precisely by ideas : metaphysical and philosophical ideas as well as fiercely held ideas and opinions about ancestry and origins, victimisation, oppression, history – ideas which continue to run through Murray’s poetry and reveal his uncompromising sense of injustice.

His sensitivity to having enemies, which can at times seem like a persecution complex, is rooted in his experience of his school days at Taree High School. Here he had to endure savage bullying because of his bulk, his precocious intelligence and intellect and his background : that of the rural poor. His time at High School he has described as being ‘hell’, a time when he was ‘monstered’. Much of the anger went into poems such as *Where Humans Can’t Leave and Mustn’t Complain*, *The Head Spider*, and *Burning Want* in his collection *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, a title that is itself savagely, provocatively ironic. In this collection, the poem *Rock Music* begins ‘*Sex is a Nazi*’ and continues :

*‘...to castrate the aberrant, the original, the wounded / who might change our species and make obsolete / the true race’*

Murray says ‘I had a theory that this tormenting of people was a counter-evolutionary

# At the Wo

Les Murray, the internationally celebrated poet,  
Jon Miller interviewed him during his visit to Australia.

‘our dreaming mind’, ‘poetry is the only whole dream’



instinct to prevent aberrant and different people from mating and reproducing so the species would stay stable.’ Much of this bullying was sexual and mainly from girls, which has led to some difficult passages in his work regarding the treatment of women – and yet it is women Murray often defends. The turning on individuals, women in particular, by power groups, is something he finds ‘loathsome’ – an attitude that contradicts those who see aspects of his writing as an attack on feminism. He refers to women such as Linda Chamberlain (the infamous case of the mother who claimed her nine-week old baby was taken by a dingo in 1980 at

Uluru (Ayers Rock)) and to Princess Diana as victims who were attacked by journalists : ‘It was always a woman, always a lone woman. They’d check whether she had any defence, any big voice that might protect her and if she hadn’t then it was open ridicule, usually not based on anything she had done.’

It is the tortuous experiences of school and its cruelties that help define Murray’s challenging of the world and its complexities. He has an intense suspicion and dislike of elites – of any kind : in his eyes, the principles by which the ruling classes rule are ‘always to be distrusted’. This extends

# Word's Edge

renowned poet recently visited Ullapool.  
During his brief stay in Wester Ross.

'Dreaming', 'Nothing's true till it's dreamed out in words'



Les Murray, photographed by Margaret McAtier

to literature, for instance, in the dictates of high Modernism. In a 1974 essay, 'Pound Devalued' he rails against Ezra Pound, particularly because of his 'anti-Semitism, his bullying, his exclusiveness' and still speaks of him today with huge distaste. In *Memories of the Height-to-Weight Ratio*, (a poem about when he was forced to lose weight to keep his job) he states: 'Modernism's not modern: it's police and despair'. 'There's always been bullies. I watch out for them. I tend not to be quiet about them.'

His antipathy towards power elites is echoed in his distrust of the media – 'There was a part of the middle-class that turned on the

rest of Australia to destroy it and get rid of it and it's still there. It's a minority but it runs the media, it runs culture and if you don't go along with it a hundred percent you're in trouble. If you're in my business, it'll be on your back all the time'. Another echo is heard in his distrust of the universities and academics: 'You never know where you are with an Australian academic. The surface treatment is not in any way related to what they might write about you.'

Murray's counter to this has long been to use the language of the people he grew up with and who are often excluded from power structures and the advantages within

society. To this end, he grounds his work in the vernacular, a Wordsworthian 'language really spoken by men'. His work is full of sympathetic, poignant portraits of the people who inhabit the Australian bush, the outback, who have struggled to come to terms with their lives and inhospitable landscapes, one of the best examples of these being his poem *The Last Hellos*, about the death of his father.

Nonetheless, much of his poetry is difficult, employing syntactical and intellectual constructions requiring careful reading and re-reading to fully grasp their complexity. Another contradiction is that formal and linguistic aspects of Murray's poetry would not be possible without the experimentation made possible by the Modernist movement he disparages – the playing with form, the use of sound, such as in the poem *Bats' Ultrasound*. However, where Murray differs is in not creating a mandate, a set of rules, a poetical-political elite dictating that only certain ideas will be allowed within the canon of the canon and from there be used as weapons of mass deconstruction.

When he was at Sydney University, he realised that this institution 'was based on critique', on criticism, whereas he was 'a person that likes to turn things over and enjoy them for their existence and hold opposing ideas at the same time. Anything that's true has got a place in there. You don't want to go selecting your world picture and excluding things'.

A further contradiction would appear to exist in his stated attitude, mentioned above, towards Princess Diana whom he saw as falling inside his definition of the defenceless woman hounded to her death by the media. This could be seen as either a contradiction given his ideas about monarchy (he is a republican) and about elites (she was a member of the privileged ruling classes) or, more generously, as Murray refusing to be bound by the rules of even his own principles and allowing a more benevolent, humane, forgiving response to suffering. In *Fredy Neptune*, his epic picaresque verse novel, a work Murray has described as his 'secret biography', the main character, Fredy Boettcher, is witness to and endures tremendous humiliation and exile in the course of his journey through the twentieth century, yet in the end is restored to full bodily feeling through his own distinctive understanding of forgiveness.

The depression he has suffered for most of his life, stemming from his treatment at school, contributed to his making of enemies – and his forgiving of them. 'I got a really unbalanced anger a lot of the time. You find yourself talking exaggerated nonsense and making enemies, offending people.'

And certainly the 1990s were a time when Murray seemed to be in constant conflict with the modernising trend in Australian society. He was seen as 'a running dog of capitalism' when his apparently anti-liberal and conservative views on multi-culturalism, feminism, his loyalty to the bush and the rural poor he grew up with conflicted with Australia's attempts to distance itself from the stereotype of the Aussie and become more urban and urbane. Ultimately, however, he claims his depression has helped his writing – 'my head was such a rotten place that I went and lived in other places, other lives. It made me more sympathetic to other people. You stop judging people because you realise they might be in as much trouble as you are'.

It is this empathy with those whom society ignores that has allied him with the aboriginal culture, a set of ideas that runs through his work and, although he says he has moved on from these some time ago, he still returns to them if something needs said. Much of his poetry about the flora and fauna of Australia seem to 'sing' the land into existence in the manner of the Aboriginal dreamsongs. His latest collection *The Biplane Houses* often looks at Australia from the air – there are references to flying, airscapes, weather – and this idea of looking down on the earth from above is 'an aboriginal perspective. A lot of aboriginal art is taken from above – it's maps of the country.'

The concept of 'dreaming' reappears constantly in his poetry and conversation: 'our dreaming mind', 'poetry is the only whole dreaming', 'Nothing's true till it's dreamed out in words' – a concept that is integral to the Aboriginal way of living. It returns again to Murray's desire to speak the truth about his country and its origins. His interest in aboriginal ancestry (he has even considered being genetically tested to discover if he has Aboriginal ancestry) is tied up with his concern about origins, about the society he lives in, to remove the deceits we construct for ourselves about our identities, both individual, social and national. He sees the tensions in Australian society, its attitudes towards the Aboriginal people and the rural white, non-urban society, as being caused by a failure to recognise its own historical origins and ancestry. 'If you're going to talk in terms of traditions then at least know about everyone of them and not just the favoured one. It's just a matter of telling the truth. If you're a number of ancestries then admit them all and learn from all of them because that's the truth of you. Human beings are all intricately woven together.'

In his poem, *Gentrifical Force*, he details the gradual transformation of personal history into bourgeois gentrifying intolerance:

*From the high ground we now tell our blood  
that they are scum, living on stolen salt land -  
Gentrifical force leaves so many behind  
and turns them to primitives in its mind.'*

With Walt Whitman, another poet who attempted to 'sing' his continent in his own words, Murray could be said to contain contradictions yet is happy to live among them. Perhaps he would add the proviso (perhaps even against himself, just for devilment): 'Never forget that any good idea can rise up and come against you, no matter how good it seems.' ■

# Poems by Ryan van Winkle and Paula Jennings

## They Tore The Bridge Down a Year Later

RYAN VAN WINKLE

One.

I found her in a blue dress  
beneath the old wooden bridge  
with ropes round her wrists,  
her neck, her ankles.

It's how we would tie a hog.  
When there was money  
for that type of thing.

Falyassa's hair was perfect  
the day she left Beaumont but,  
by the time Powell got her to Texas,  
her dress looked like it had caught  
the wrong side of a horse.

I remember they told me  
Falyssa Van Winkle was ten,  
and she got raised  
a little north of here.

They said she went to buy peanuts at  
some flea market in Beaumont and  
her mother watched Falyssa go,  
kept hawking clay ashtrays  
and heavy magnifying glasses;  
nothing too fancy, just stuff  
people sometimes need.

Five hours later Falyssa  
was under the bridge I used to spit off  
and Powell was cleaning his mobile home,  
readying to drive north.

Two.

A year later the new bridge went up.  
All clean cable and wire,  
so the cars can drive too fast  
and my boy and I can't simply sit there,  
let the water pass.

As a kid, I'd rest on the splintered rail,  
protected in the strong shade of the Cyprus Pines,  
drop pennies or spit onto the frogs of Cow Creek.  
It ran pretty clear then.

But they said a good car couldn't cross it.  
So I guess the children  
who used to throw pennies, spit,  
had to find something new.

I can still see the old bridge,  
the pennies rusting in water.

Three.

Nowadays I don't pass the creek much.  
There is no reason to walk my quiet boy  
across metal into Louisiana.

If the bridge I knew still stood  
maybe I could bring my boy down,  
tell him the lawn can wait.

Tell him his father wants to pass the time,  
make him talk.  
But the bridge is not there any more.

And Falyassa's paper bag of salted peanuts  
has run down, met the big river now.  
That last thing of hers,  
heading out for the open ocean.

Four.

She was from across the border in Lake Charles.  
I used to like the song about it,  
could play it a little on the guitar.

My boy found the scratched thing up in the attic  
with some photos of me and his mom  
and he asked me to play.

I like to think I could have taken him to the creek,  
brought a fishing pole, that cheap guitar,  
made something happen,  
before he too cuts out for some sea.

I told him I couldn't remember anything.  
Maybe I can't.

Somebody told me Powell made it into the papers,  
said his last words were, "I am ready for my blessing."

Next time the boy gets into the attic  
I want to follow him up, tell him,  
So am I.

## Night Road

PAULA JENNINGS

After the skidding thump and splintering of glass,  
the night has settled into small rustlings  
and a deer is cantering on silent hooves,  
carrying a woman who moves easily to its rhythm.

She's riding the road kill,  
both of them fresh from their deaths,  
the deer as fleet as on its final arcing leap  
from trees-edge to tarmac, the woman bareback.

They've outrun that other scene:  
the steaming huddle on the road,  
the cooling portrait in the windscreen.

## Seabird, What Has Death Left In Your Belly?

PAULA JENNINGS

*After Salvador Dali: Oiseau, 1928*

The artist has tunnelled your head to a circlet of bone  
for the beach to wear, a beaked ring for Death to rattle

on his scythe. You look as though you are in flight,  
but land is your sky now, a shore like graded sandpaper

on which your feathers wave smokily, as though  
you had passed through aerial fire. Are you cleansed

for the final crossing? The moon is full, the light theatrical.  
You still have one wing for your journey

and Death has left a golden gift inside your belly;  
dog-shaped, skull-grinning and pregnant.

Death steals life but leaves a changeling,  
and here's a changeling within a changeling,

like grim Russian dolls. Curious, I reach through  
the frame to the swollen dog-belly, scratch away paint.

## Driving in Autumn

PAULA JENNINGS

On the Strathkinness low road I remember  
a voice from last night's dream -  
let go of the reins and let your animal carry you -  
then form follows thought into my headlights:  
a flow of fur from road to verge,  
a tawny brushstroke sliding into damp grass.  
I brake,

unbuckle myself into my animal.

Now we are travelling through stiff stars  
of cow parsley. High up, black leaves  
arrange themselves against the moon,  
a beetle drums its gleam across our path,  
and in this night's cacophony  
of smells, our seed-beaded pelt  
yelps out its rank fritillary scent.

We are a long time gone, long enough  
to hear the wing-beats of sycamore keys,  
the small explosions as each splitting seed  
begins its long dive into leaf-mould.  
My animal carries me faithfully  
through a rip of brambles

back to the verge:

now every weed in the ditch is breathing,  
even the tarmac is alive,  
even the ticking flanks of my car.

# Poems by Chris Sawyer and Mark Edwards

## **mother**

MARK EDWARDS

if its a fart at one end it's a  
shite at the other she would say of  
news carried through the village

her being the middle child  
she could get off with the likes  
of that and was rarely shy

jumping into fights  
to defend the elder brother  
till he got out the place

leaving a fair few fearing  
her temper his resurfacing so it  
was never going to be a local

affair and when finally the bairn  
arrived it was pinned securely  
on the landlord's left tenant

him with the straggly beard  
who'd roadied his way through  
the nineties but she fair piped down

after beardie went back to the rigs  
retaining only enough spite for  
pervy auld mannies young lads

hanging about shuttered windows  
shellsuit bottoms torn at  
the hem the young lass

now screams for reebok trainers  
then turns austere for an hour long  
service having the foresight

to pick her moment tug the  
minister's sleeve informing  
him the tea's too weak

hardly substitute for the stuff  
mummy prefers straight from  
the bottle

## **ghost**

MARK EDWARDS

had he lived  
she would've called him John  
a name like a blank canvas  
leaving him free to weave his own thread  
through the same gray cloth

a child's voice calling for help  
in the miaow of a cat  
the squalling of gulls

she is seen going to the shops  
she is talked about behind her back  
she picks up things with a hand  
that won't give up its tremor

small quick steps on the path  
he runs but she can never catch up  
the cruellest trick  
she has learned not to move

## **science fiction**

MARK EDWARDS

in the glistening  
blueblack window  
the shadow of wiry branches

wind batters the window  
branches flailing

in the distance a few spots of light  
orange, white, yellow

a science fiction night  
nothing out there  
is human

## **The Dry Lake**

CHRIS SAWYER

The edges are blurred now, beneath  
A scrub of heather.

The trees stand back from the valley base  
On guard, watching for the  
Water's return.

The dust sometimes curls into a memory of waves  
Exploding upon impact, covering the dry grass

A nature trail, useful maps, resting points.  
These are all incomers  
Living on time borrowed from  
The changing climate.

## **Early Morning, Dunecht**

CHRIS SAWYER

If I cried out  
I would be heard only  
By the soft, damp earth  
And musty trees.

There is no deference here  
To the Angelic orders:  
Nature is too fierce,  
Its brilliant temperament  
Leaving the birds and foxes  
To rule, singing and sniffing.

Paths go up and across,  
Leading into darkness  
And only on through into light  
By my act of will, faith.

No angel can break the canopy.  
My cries would bounce  
Back to the soft, damp earth.

## **Mother Tongue**

CHRIS SAWYER

(1920 – 1970)

Gently, he lowers the memory of his mother  
Into the water.

Gently, he cradles his mother's head  
In the water.

Eyes closed, he scatters the language of his childhood  
Upon the water.

Finally, he turns the blank pages of his adult life  
Compound words fading  
In the water.

# An Elemental Alchemy

An appreciation of Lotte Glob's new art book *Floating Stones* in her fiftieth year of ceramics by Lesley Strachan



Lochan Beinn a' Chearcaill, The Lunar Loch - Near the top. Photo: Lotte Glob

**E**ARTH. WATER. STONE. Ash. Mineral. Heat: words which any geologist would be familiar with and understand as vital to explaining and understanding the powerful elemental processes which form the landscape we inhabit. These landscapes come no more spectacular than that of North-west Sutherland, newly recognised 'Geo-Park' and for some 40 years duration, home, and workplace of Lotte Glob, ceramic artist.

Earth. Water. Stone. Ash. Mineral. Heat : words which any potter would recognise as vital to the exhilarating process which is the alchemy of the ceramic process. The artist's hand and eye transforms mud and minerals, changing them forever when given up to the heat of the kiln, a substance made durable, given longevity, usefulness, purpose – life. It is unsurprising that for so many ceramic artists the physical landscape has allure and meaning often providing spiritual significance. Few, however have placed the link between geological and ceramic processes so squarely at the heart of their work as Lotte Glob. For Glob, this connection, this flow of energy from environment through artist into artwork and back out again, is convincingly realised in the body of work entitled *'Floating Stones'*.

Between 1994 and 2005, Danish-born

ceramicist Lotte Glob journeyed from her workshop near Cape Wrath, Sutherland to visit 111 lochans around the Scottish Highlands. With her she took three ceramic stones that were then launched into each of them. The visit was documented ; photographs were taken ; a journal kept and drawings made. The project was a highly personal one – almost a diary of private pilgrimage, with all the documentation held in two thick ringbinders. It was when Watermill Gallery owners Kevin and Jayne Ramage were shown the work by Glob, that the idea of publishing a book was born. The fact that 2008 would be Glob's 50<sup>th</sup> year of working in ceramics gave added impetus to go ahead with the publication of a high-quality book to mark the occasion.

*Floating Stones* has the look and feel of what we have come to expect from a quality art book. The book is hard-backed, bound in soft grey-coloured cloth with simple embossed details for text and illustration. The pages have good weight and decisions on quality of paper, ink depths, layout and content have been carefully considered. All these aspects work their own alchemy to produce what is indeed a pleasing aesthetic. Apart from the introduction by Jayne Ramage, there is no other comment or analysis, allowing the artwork to breathe

and exist for itself. We come to the book as we would to a painting or other fine art piece in a gallery.

And, as we would view or experience any other artwork, our initial response is to the aesthetic. The 33 lochan visits illustrated here occupy a double page to themselves. Glob, we see immediately, is a skillful enough photographer. The landscape is recorded in all weathers, lights and seasons with an eye for colour, texture and mood. Whether it is long views, low views, close-ups or broad sweeps, the photographic compositions have a deeply felt sense of space within them, the smaller ones being perhaps the most absorbing with the rhythmic repeat of the circular motif of stones, held steady within the textures and forms of the landscape. The ceramic pieces themselves become studies in form, surface decoration and glaze quality. No two are the same, and we are struck by the variety of effects as Glob layers, experiments and uses her vast knowledge of glaze development to create ceramic pieces as varied as found stones or pebbles. The stones are photographed within and against the natural textures of the environment, sometimes echoing their surroundings, sometimes providing a more startling contrast to the colours and forms around them. The accompanying line drawings are fresh

and airy, reflecting something of the spontaneity of the writing and bringing life and presence to the pages.

And, as with any artwork, we are drawn further in. We slow down, we begin to see connections between images, catch a rhythm in the visuals, start to read the field notes that accompany each of the visits. We begin to formulate opinions, ask questions and build a relationship with the artwork.

The work seems to fit most comfortably within the context of what we call land art, or environmental art. We make immediate connections with artists such as Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy or Chris Drury. We may even think fleetingly about the landscape photography of Colin Prior or that other Colin – Baxter. However, whereas Goldsworthy and Long work with nature's materials directly, Glob takes her own ceramic creations into the landscape and leaves them there.

Glob is quite firmly and definitely a ceramicist – a potter (or is that now an unfashionable term?) whose creative process involves a close, continuing and intense relationship with the mountains and wilderness of the Scottish Highlands, and who clearly needs the ceramic process to give physical form to her ideas. A visit to Glob's studio, or a glance at her website makes clear that





Loch Choire a' Mhullinn, Strathconon. Photo: Lotte Glob



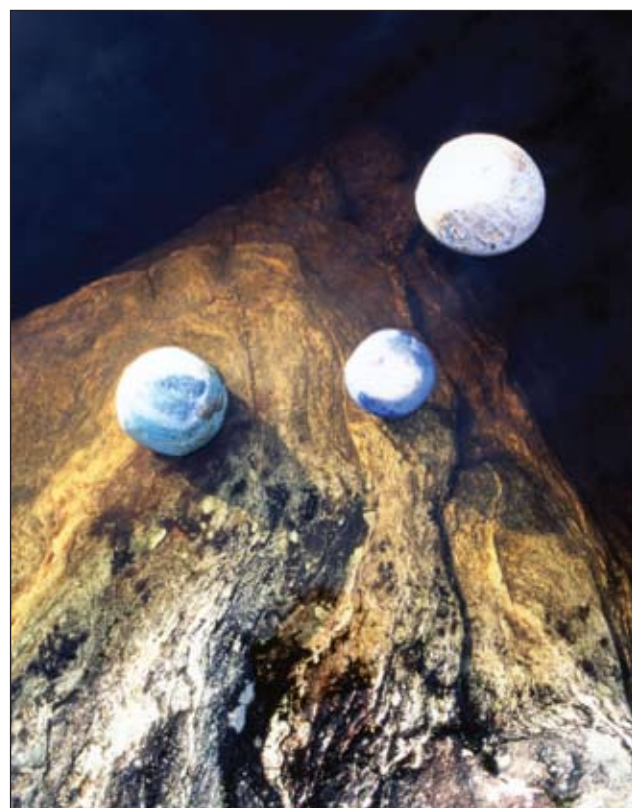
Loch Luchd Choire, Seana Bhaigh. Photo: Lotte Glob

here is a ceramicist interested in pushing her work in many different directions – plates, garden pieces, sculptural forms and installations are all evident. The most interesting of these seem to be when the surface decoration and firing processes become the important element rather than the sculptural form. Experiments in using sediments and rocks – firing them onto and within clay, have resulted in some of her most successful work. One recent project involves the creation of ceramic books. Each book chronicles a walk taken or a place visited, the found stones and sediments (memory markers of birds spotted, landscape features beheld or sounds heard) fired between the clay pages, fused there forever – only able to reveal their secrets when broken apart by the geologist's hammer.

Glob writes of a 'fear of nature' within Western Art, and describes how she seeks to escape dogmas of imposing structure upon nature, of taming and controlling. She seems to seek a transformation in attitudes to landscape. Through looking closely at her work, we feel Glob's familiarity and comfortable relationship with her surroundings to be a possible way forward.

One aspect, which becomes more evident as the book is experienced over time, is the deeply personal, and unselfconscious nature of the work. The writing specifically reveals much about Glob as a person. If we see these notes as integral to the appreciation of the project a whole, we can perhaps begin to judge whether she has indeed escaped the dogmas she seeks to avoid. Although the writing has little of the poetic quality of, say, the text pieces by Richard Long, there is an intimacy and familiarity with surroundings that is quietly compelling. As well as records of routes walked, with references to weather and specific landscape features, we learn of abandoned shopping trips to Inverness, Glob's preference for oatcakes and cheese as trekking food, her habit of napping

outdoors in any sunny or sheltered crevice and her love of wild swimming. Glob is unashamed about revealing her personality, her humour – her humanity : the person is very much here. Among the wilderness, those empty lochs, the loneliness of the three ever present stones, there is the artist. This is no longer an abandoned wilderness. It is in fact the writing – and curiously the little drawings – which bring much of the book alive. Somehow we need Glob's presence, her



Lochan Creag Faoilinn, Loch Eriboll. Photo: Lotte Glob

personality to make complete sense of the project. Glob's relationship with the environment, and specifically this small pocket of wilderness we call the West Highlands, is at the heart of the *Floating Stones* artwork it would seem. Whether Glob has wrestled free from established dogmas is debatable, but

what she does do is bring a strong female presence to the genre of land art with this relaxed, unselfconscious aspect and assimilation of artwork and self. The writing and drawings bring the dimension to the work which ultimately sustains interest and keeps us asking questions.

Intrinsic to the whole concept is the notion of pilgrimage, ritual, offering and sacrifice. Is this a way in to understanding something of the spiritual relationship Glob has with her environment? There are many spiritual and magical connections – the significance of the number three (the triple goddess, references to traditional tales and legends), the walk to a wild, often high place of beauty (in all weathers and conditions), the offering up of a creation (an ancient ritual common to practically all cultures ) and the letting go. Glob herself becomes an almost magical, mystical character – trekking into the wilderness to present her own stones – wrought from the very stuff of earth and rock, transformed in the kiln at 1300 centigrade (undergoing physical alterations similar to the landscapes volcanic origins). The artist as shaman : it is a powerful metaphor, and one which still intrigues

the art viewing public. The most notable feature of Glob's particular brand of shamanism, however, is again the sense of ease and homeliness intrinsic to her activity. The domestic rituals common to each walk are all as important a part of the alchemy as the launching of the stones into the lochans.

Glob is completely at home in this place. Her creative process and artwork here are ageless activities – connecting with the enduring geology around her.

But there is much about the book and the work that will appeal at more prosaic levels. If your experience of Highland landscape goes little beyond the view from the car windows, or hotel bar or restaurant, then there is much to admire here. *Floating Stones* takes the reader to the hidden corners, not the mountain tops or familiar vistas, but to the corries, the folds, the intimate still places. The stones themselves, while clearly a human creation (the throwing rings are a subtle feature on many of them), do not dominate or even attempt to compete with the natural forms around. They have a comfortable modesty, an inescapable female form abstract enough to take various interpretations – stones, eggs, pebbles, vessels. The range of glazes used on the work gives added personality to each piece but again, the overarching feeling is of modesty and simplicity. These ceramics do not aim to make grand statements – they are almost not important at all which is why in this context they work.

Lotte Glob has stated that, 'my work is therefore of the land in inspiration and origin'. In many ways, *Floating Stones* also reinforces the fact that we too are of the land. The joy this artist shares of her close relationship with the wild ancient places is what lingers and uplifts. This is a landscape most of us at best rarely experience, or at worst, fear, seek to dominate or exploit. Lotte Glob compels us to get out our gaiters and boots and forge a re-aquaintance with that part of ourselves.

An exhibition of Lotte Glob's work to mark her 50<sup>th</sup> year of working in ceramics can be seen at the Watermill Gallery, Aberfeldy in August 2008.

'Floating Stones' by Lotte Glob, published by Watermill Books 2008, price £25 ■

# Here be Serpents

A SHORT STORY BY DAVID McVEY

WE STOOD AT the foot of the vast grey mask of the rock face. Gav looked up, his head held slightly on one side. 'We can try to go round to the point where the slope eases,' he said, wearily, 'There should be a route up one side or the other.' We turned right along the bottom of the face, and began to slither our way up loose rock and heather at the point where the sheerness gave way.

We had reached the face after a sweaty haul up a dank glen whose lower reaches were choked by dense conifer plantations. The trees had ceased abruptly and we had ascended from the airless depths by a path that corkscrewed up the headwall of the glen. The May afternoon was muggy and dry, but the sun remained coyly absent. There was little breeze. At the summit of the pass, the rock face had proved to be more substantial than expected. It lay on our planned route, and as we couldn't get up it, we had to go round it.

Gav was first up the shallow gully at the edge of the face. He made his footing on crumbling rock and sometimes maintained his balance by grasping clumps of heather. I came a few paces behind, careful to dodge any mini-rockfalls that he dislodged. It was hot, dry work, but slowly we made progress. There was no talk. That was usual, but today there wasn't the easy, comfortable silence that we usually shared on the hill. Normally we seemed to tune independently to the spirit of the wild, chatting if we felt like it but comfortable with silence, relishing the spectacle, the air, the quiet, the peace. Today, though, Gav was silent for a reason.

We had driven to the village at the foot of the glen, where Gav had tried to park by a small public garden. As he did so, he had scraped the car against a metal railing. He stopped the car and inspected the damage: a noticeable dent and some badly scraped paintwork. The railing wasn't in such good shape, either. 'Hell! Sheila will be raging,' he snarled.

Everyone knew that Gav and Sheila's relationship was crumbling; he'd barely been able to persuade her to let him have the car. They were a volatile pair and theirs was not a home for small talk. Later, halfway up the glen and in the midst of that uneasy silence, Gav had mumbled to himself, 'That bloody railing. What the hell am I going to do about Sheila and the car?'

I felt especially involved because it was through Sheila that I had met Gav. Sheila had been a good friend of my wife, Angela. At their engagement party, Sheila had grabbed my arm and introduced me to a

stern Gav - always awkward in situations of enforced jollity - and said, 'You'll like him, Gavin: he wanders up hills for absolutely no justifiable reason, just like you do.'

Now that we were more than halfway up the side of the cliff face, we could see that there were none of the overhangs apparent from below. The rock wasn't even truly vertical, just a steeply angled slab. Gav had found a line of old fence-posts that made progress up the unstable slope a good deal more secure. Beneath us was the headwall of the glen and below that, dark with growing timber, was the lower glen. Still the uneasy silence, a static electricity, hung between us.

The slope eased and we relaxed. Broken slopes of rock and tufty grass, still topped by the ruined fence, lay before us and we began to cover the ground more swiftly. Then I heard a shout of triumph ahead of me, loud, raucous but lacking in enthusiasm, and I looked to see Gav squatting on a short, fat cairn of grey rock. But he wasn't smiling. Instead, he gazed at the western sky, hidden until now by the bulk of the rock face and the hill.

Sulky black clouds were unfolding towards us, underlit by flickering threads of blue. Slightly to the north, a sad, pale beam of sunshine glinted on heavy showers. As we watched, it went out and was engulfed by the blackness.

'Time to forget it,' said Gav. We turned to look at the ridge along which our planned route continued. It snaked southwards, dipping to a broad, peaty col splashed with pools and old snow and then reared up, over broken rock and peat, to a pudding-shaped summit that lay in deep shadow.

'Looks like we didn't miss too much, anyway,' I said, 'It's all peat hags and grassy bumps.'

'Yeah,' said Gav, 'We'd've been hag-ridden.'

As he spoke, a nearer streak of electric blue was followed by rumble, deep and resonant, that seemed to issue from the mountain itself. 'Time to get down quick,' said Gav, 'I don't fancy going back the way we came.'

He let out a sigh of irritation. Normally, I'd think it was a reaction to our thwarted plans, but today I wasn't so sure. A nearby flash illuminated the neighbouring hills and we set off without speaking; no need for words.

The slopes leading directly from the summit were littered with boulders and fields of smaller rocks, but the slope was a lot easier than the one we'd ascended. We quickly lost height, but the slope did not lead us directly back to the path down the glen: once we

reached the steep headwall of the glen we would have to contour round the face in order to reach our ascent route.

At the foot of the summit slope, I caught up with Gav and we shared a bar of chocolate. He pointed to the steep face we would have to traverse. 'There are a couple of snowfields on the way. We can't avoid crossing that big one.'

'Will it be a problem?'

'Nah. Shouldn't think so. Not at this time of year. Our boots should dig into it nicely.'

And so we set off gingerly with the rising slope on our right, using our right hands to help us balance on the more insecure bits. The going now was less rocky, the vegetation mostly upland gardens of blaeberry and wild strawberry - out of season, but providing firm handfuls when we needed something to grasp for security. I was a little worried about the large, steeply-angled patch of hard-packed snow. As we approached it, we saw that it stretched down for over a hundred feet, and above us for some distance, too. I saw Gav crouch down and stick his gloved hand in the snow as the bowl of ground was bathed in glaring blue light. His words to me were at first lost in the rumble of thunder, but he repeated them. 'It's no problem at all. Have a go yourself.'

He moved aside a little to make room for me. True enough, the snow was firm but easily took an impress when you put weight on it. Its texture was like coarse, damp sugar. We should be able to kick steps into it as we contoured along. Of course, if the snow were glazed and hard further on, we would have to backtrack and go the long way round, with the storm coming ever closer.

We set off, Gav in front as usual. It was easy to kick little ledges into the snow with the side of the boot and so we made good progress. The field remained uniformly steep, and there was a dizzying sense of exposure once we had gone a few yards. Below our boots, sugary fragments of snow skittered downwards and out of sight. I began to worry: what if the snow *did* become difficult further on? I looked up to see that Gav had pulled a few yards ahead while I had been dawdling. I began to inch my way along again.

Gav was renowned for his coolness, and on several occasions I had had reason to be grateful for it. Adrift on a high plateau, afflicted by dense cloud, piercing rain and a soul-sapping wind, it would be Gav who patiently studied map and compass and who returned us safely to lower ground. In winter conditions, he knew just when to rope up, when to put on crampons - and when

to admit defeat and turn back. I trusted his judgement.

The last time Angela and I had gone to Gav and Sheila's for a meal I had mentioned, in a light-hearted way, his reliability and coolness; the *trust* that Gav inspired on the hill. Sheila's jaw had set. 'Well, it's a shame all of that vanishes when he gets home,' she said, and the room suddenly chilled. She went on to change the subject and, slowly, we got back into conversation again. Gav had said nothing since her outburst and at one point left the room without explanation. He seemed a bit more cheerful when he returned, ten minutes later; he and Sheila were soon on good terms again and we thought no more about it at the time.

Just ahead of me, I noticed Gav stoop over something small and dark lying in the snow. It looked like a heather root or a small twig. He picked up the object, turned to me and said 'It's a lizard!'

I hurried to look into the cup of his hand; it *was* a lizard, stiff, motionless and seemingly lifeless. Gav closed his other hand over the animal, as if to warm it, and said, 'It must have cooled down while crossing the snowfield. They go torpid if they get cold.'

I had often seen these creatures in the hills as they basked on rocks in the sunshine. This one seemed to be as inert and cold as death itself yet soon Gav said that it was starting to squirm as it absorbed the warmth from his cupped hands. 'Let's get free of the snow and into the heather,' he said, 'there's no point releasing it here again.'

We moved off again, more slowly now, since Gav had to keep his balance with two hands enclosing the animal. Soon the snow thinned and we stood among limp brown heather and blaeberry. Gav stooped, opened his hands, and the lizard leaped free and lost itself in the heather.

'Here be serpents,' I said.

Gav stood staring at the spot where it had disappeared, then forced a brief smile. 'Aye. Here be serpents.'

Another glaring blue flash came, and we hurriedly contoured the last section of steep slope to the path, and then ran the remaining few hundred yards to the forest and easier ground. Thunder boomed and echoed around the upper glen. We stopped to rest just on the edge of the forest as large drops of rain started to fall. I immediately started walking for the spurious shelter of the trees, but at first Gav stood where he was, pensively, looking at something or someone who wasn't there. Then he made up his mind, and followed me into the forest. There was no point in staying where we were.

# Poems by Debbie Collins, Laura-Claire Wilson & Graeme Barrasford Young

## Hangin' Your Shirt

DEBBIE COLLINS

While you are out I go to hang your shirt in my wardrobe,  
raise it white as a sail to the skylight,  
draw out the ticket folded in your pocket  
to try my fortune.  
It's bigger than my body,  
stiff as a handshake,  
this second skin you wear  
to work, to show your friends,  
to take me out.  
I swore I'd never bind myself  
with washing, ironing, tending.  
But I'm only settling  
the collar where a tie will slide.  
Then unwinking the cufflinks,  
bright as tossed coins,  
little as my new love,  
folding them in the oyster-shell of my palm,  
almost a promise.

## The Night Dad Lost His Memory

DEBBIE COLLINS

Between the back door's slam  
and the gape of garage jaws  
it started to unravel.  
His life's thread:  
a glistening ball of yarn snagged on the  
wood of garden fence,  
snapping the heads of hollyhocks.  
By the time he reached the rosemary bed  
the thing he'd come to fetch had danced out of his  
head.  
He felt the tug of it unwinding,  
the years rewinding, scented the cologne  
of his first kiss inside the shrinking light  
between the shed and fence, picked up  
the ghosting football chant  
coiled in the gate-spring's creak.  
Caught on the teeth of clothes-pegs on the line,  
he found again the tattered flags of war years. Till it  
became  
the loose strand jerking out the ribs  
of his schoolboy pullover, leaving him  
trembling, bare,  
amazed.

## Long Vacation

LAURA-CLAIRE WILSON

I came home to shorn hills  
and gardens foreshortened  
like empty offering hands.

Bridges hunched narrow streams,  
the streets were smaller, so close,  
and even the air was indifferent.

Having arrived to be deprived  
of my return, I reeled upright,  
standing directionless  
without behind before me,  
adrift.

## For Shadows

LAURA-CLAIRE WILSON

The wide sky fell on gardens,  
contemplative stones,  
clean of time.

It drizzled waves of heavy roofs  
that swept its clouds from shoulders,  
shadow-bristles brushing.

It misted, weakly, secret rooms  
where silent feet bent, kneeling.

Inwards, and veils of dim  
blinded it, dissolving  
through each magician's box

where light failed finally  
on drooping arms of silk,  
skin as pale as silence

teeth and blackened smile  
and midnight-wood dark eyes  
opened in their whiteness.

## Friends reunited

GRAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG

Paused forty years ago,  
our words might have been trivial,  
a renewing with much to say  
that never spoke of things  
peering through latticed memory,  
events twisted from reality  
by imagined slights and scars.  
Yet what we both gave then  
informed our lives enough  
that sentences started arm-in-arm  
now end a life and land apart.

## She has no mouth but she must scream

GRAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG

if her lungs were always still  
our breathing would be laboured;

if her tears were never shed  
our bodies would be withered;

if her ears heard only what she knew  
our silence would be absolute;

if her bones were never broken  
our soil would stay infertile;

if her green dress was all she danced in  
our boredom would be deadly;

if her eyes reflected only dark skies  
our horizons would be too narrow;

if her milk had not erupted  
our lives may not have happened;

when she at last explodes her pain  
how can we ignore 'enough'?

## Severn unopposed

GRAEME BARRASFORD YOUNG

When flood,  
dangerously deep,  
flattens at its peak,  
sucks down debris,  
imitates a placid lake,  
bridges, stranded  
in a way no builder  
could expect,  
become gates:

orb, almond, square,  
each to futures  
not allowed for:  
cackle of loons,  
whispers in rotted trees,  
weeds through tar,  
unloosed dreams.

Trapped by ripples,  
their stones drown.

## REVIEWS

## IN THE HANGING VALLEY

Poetry by Yvonne Gray

Published by Two Ravens Press,  
80pp, £8.99

REVIEW BY DAISY MACKENZIE

In a short introduction to this new collection of her poems Yvonne Gray says of Orkney that 'your gaze turns constantly outwards'. It is her hallmark that her gaze constantly does; and that simultaneously it looks inward too.

Her poetry draws the reader in to what her gaze sees: the way things look and sound; the way life is for the people and the creatures that inhabit the places and the elements she writes about. And her style, the manner of her writing, is characterised by a marvellous absence of display, and by the finger-tip exactness with which she finds the true note.

Her title poem, In the Hanging Valley, is something like a sampler of how she does it. It describes an afternoon of (surely?) two people rowing in a boat, somewhere Scandinavian and to the north. Two people responding to the detail of their experience, absorbed in the intimacy of it:

*All afternoon we pulled to the south//the sun on our backs and a breeze/feathering our hands and faces.//We listened to our breathing/to our hearts beating//oars knocking in the rowlocks/and blades lapping// as they dipped and pushed...*

There's hardly a word in this poem that a ten year old child couldn't read; yet scarcely a word or phrase that doesn't offer up a secret and a revelation, or echoes and connections:

*We paused//hung between sky and lake, poised/ in the golden boat, circled//by ice crusted peaks./ Strakes creaked; timbers quivered . . .*

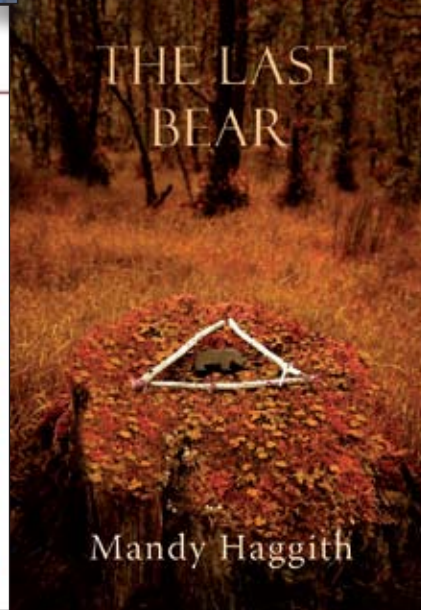
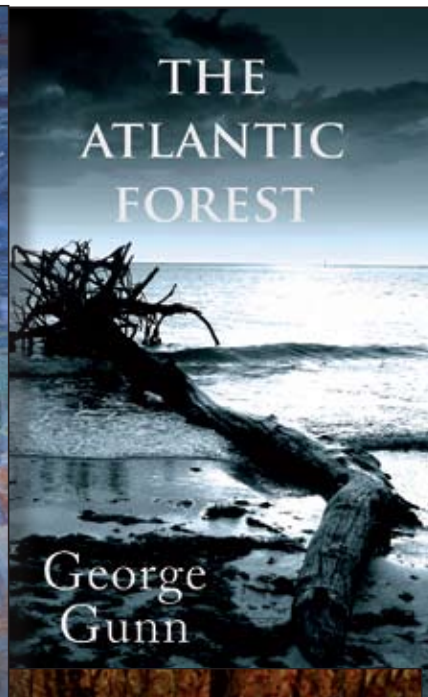
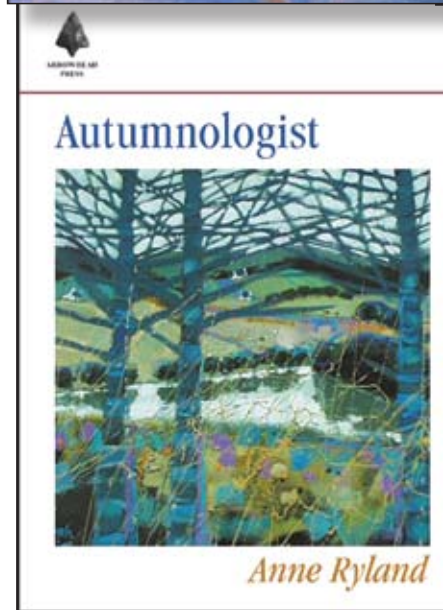
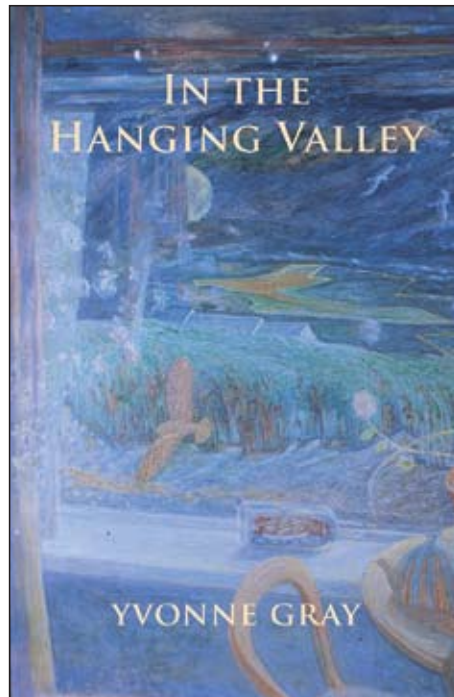
The language is so quietly offered that the full ranging of all its potential meaning comes on the, or 'this', reader gradually. Even as the rowers watch how families on the farthest shore are gathering their harvest and hanging hay to dry on lines,

*Like a silver thorn, an airliner drew//across the blue and passed into silence/beyond the icefield's edge.*

The 'silver thorn' like a mythic brooch, holds together a timeless past with futures scarcely yet imagined.

The poems in this collection draw on wide-ranging experiences for their inspiration, among them her life across the last eighteen years in Orkney. The first poem of the collection is Nousts. It sketches in the endless rise and fall of the sea, the way the fact of the sea shapes the working world of the islands: the wash unfurling of the ferry, empty nousts, the new marina, steel-armed pontoons, how at night a floodlit hull bleeds rust . . . She knows the turns of the seasons, the urgency of crop-gathering, the erosion of the rocks. She understands the experience of exposure and frailty.

Uncoiling Lines is a set of poems that speak of risk, of loss and the foreshadowing of loss. Again the voice is quiet, she uses the exact minimum of detail:



*What was it you said/in the city bar that night?/ ... it was not the tongue's honed blade/you drew .../ They left you at the back door/ your blood tide ebbing down the street/long past closing time.*

Among the work Yvonne Gray has done are several collaborations. It is easy to see that others would want to work with her – many of her poems reflect the strength of her respect for the gifts of others. Voices from a Tapestry does this for the tapestry-maker, Carol Dunbar; Reflections does it for the artist, Sylvia Wishart. She has worked with both of them.

But two poems, maybe three, each describing funeral journeys and the responses of the community to the individual losses show most fully her profound awareness of the qualities of others.

'Valediction' is the first of these, for a young man, a boy, his life not lived yet – it reveals the meaningfulness that ritual can have, simply understood ritual.

'April Journey' is for George Mackay Brown, perhaps the finest of the many poems, by many poets, that have been written for him. The journey is across the island – 16 slow miles from St Magnus Cathedral to the burial ground. Along the way daily life goes on: the Ola is leaving Stromness as the hearse gets there.

*Turning from the sun, Malcolm sees light/ glance from cars on the kirkyard road -/he cuts the tractor's roar; at the shore at Warebeth/ (the children) fetch water, gleaming circles/that tilt in their pails// . . . Shalders sweep up/ sudden flights of white crosses . . ./clouds gathering/the last of the neeps to be brought in./ Cold rain coming;/the first lambs due*

The third of these intensely moving poems is titled Harvest. To comment on it at all would feel to this reviewer like a huge intrusion; and so I settle for pointing out that it is there, in this very fine collection, and am leaving it to readers to discover it for themselves. ■

## DEAR ALICE

A poetry collection by Tom Pow  
Publisher, SALT. 80 pp, £12.99

REVIEW BY DAISY MACKENZIE

This most recent collection of Tom Pow's poems is his response to the history of the buildings which are now the location of his place of work, Glasgow University's Crichton Campus in Dumfries. This, its original buildings recently refurbished, was the site of the Crichton Royal, a Victorian Hospital, an Asylum for those once identified as insane. It was, as were other similar Asylums across the country, built in the 1830s and used for their original purpose well through the 20th century.

Tom Pow is already an experienced and nationally respected poet; and the poems that constitute Dear Alice are arguably his most interesting yet. Here he has offered that most welcome of things, a looking at the world outside himself, and then an imagining of himself into the experience of those he finds there, perhaps extends them to some aspects of those who run them now in their new guise ('we are a liberal arts college after all')

These asylums were humane in intention and civilised in the care they provided for their patients by comparison, certainly, with the practices of the earlier Bedlams. And if their practices now seem old-fashioned, and because of the relatively recent advances in the understanding of brain chemistry which can provide a rather different instrument of control of mental disorder.

In 'The Great Asylums of Scotland' Pow describes their domestic organisation: *Their farms. Their laundries. Their water supplies. And their architectural style: their portals . . . the tree-lined avenues. . . still with us, as keen to serve as the day they were built.* And he refers also to a curious side-light, their co-incidental contribution to the local economies, providing employment as tradesmen and nursing staff for Victorian cottage-industry workers made redundant by the rise of urban manufacturing industries. As an opening up of a chapter of human history it is a book of value, even if not quite as a professional psychiatrist or historian would have done it.

So what is gained from Pow's approach to it as a poet? It's something more than a collection of individual poems; it's an articulated whole with the parts, the limbs and the organs positioned and connected up. Images echo, voices refer back and forward to other voices. The title poem 'Dear Alice' is the gently ironic heart of it with its poignantly searching last two lines: *some-where I've missed out on love, dear Alice/Wendy tells me I don't know how to kiss.*

And there's a sparrow that haunts the pages of these poems. In 'Prelude' a young cat has it in its mouth, it's beak still soundlessly praising the day. Occasionally it reappears again, finally in 'Resistances 5':

*I will let into my world/ three things air light //and the trapped sparrow/matron took a brush to.*

This collection is all the stronger for its quiet but clear tone, sometimes with an awareness of potential comedy, but always

with respect, finding the exact detail which reveals or gets to the heart of things. ■

### AUTUMNOLOGIST

Poems by Anne Ryland.

Arrowhead Press. 2006. £7.50.

REVIEW BY GERARD ROCHFORD

I first came across the poems of Anne Ryland in *Northwords Now*. They passed the A.E. Houseman test of quality – the hairs on the back of my neck bristled. I invited her to read in Wordfringe festival 2008 – she entranced a large audience who queued to buy her book. Now I have read her collection another test has been passed, poems in which a single word or image can set off on a poem of one's own.

She loves words, even invents one for the title of her work. One way into the world of this fine poet is to notice what she loves – words, the sea, languages, paintings, her mother, her imagined sister, reaching out to her father, the grief of a longed for child, faery tales, colours, especially blueness. These themes are explored with elegance and a poetic imagination which rarely fails her. They are sometimes brought together aptly and creatively . . .

*I always loved/ a verb table, the way tenses string/ together as pearls, each mirroring another/ . . . the carved drawers of etymology where/ tide derives from time.*

For her mother, (whose dead body she views with fearless honesty), she writes:

*two cow seals (will)... /sing her limbs back to life,/ . . .until she is silver and streamlined.*

and for her father:

*I clutch his wrist/ he snatches it back...*

In 'Last Words' she laments the terminal dying of a language:

*The last speaker swallowed / . . . the taste of Ubykh on the tongue.*

and in 'The Goodbye Timetable' we taste the parting from a lover:

*Breakfast crumbs from his mouth/ cling around mine.*

Every poem is a new presentation of herself. In 'The Pause', inspired by Vermeer's 'A Lady Writing', she writes:

*I pause to gaze while my sentences seep/ into paper, then I slowly sign/ with all that I am.*

Anne Ryland can be sharp, 'a man who is so old he will always know better', and funny. In a poem 'The Tall Man' she imagines:

*a giraffe on the football field,/all legs and no tactics –*

adding:

*I would be happy to wake up/ to his boat feet protruding/ from the end of the bed,*

imagining herself perhaps as the WAG of Peter Crouch.

When she is exploring faery tales there is intense colour, as when the wolf devours Red Riding Hood:

*I didn't spill a drop/ except her cape over the floor - / a pool of velvet blood.*

In the final poem of the collection, 'Ripe Fruits' she prays:

*Bring me sticks of cinnamon / its inner bark peeled then rolled/ into a quill with fragrant grooves. // And bring me, last of all / the children who have not come. // Let them climb in that tree and sway / from its low branches like ripe fruits.*

There will be many more ripe fruits from this poet:

*A glut of crab apples, flushed skins / splitting into lips that weep brown.*

I hope her sensual poems will be securely caught in sheets of publishers' paper where their insights and beauty can be savoured. ■

### THE ATLANTIC FOREST

A poetry collection by George Gunn

Published by Two Ravens Press. 84 pp. £8.99

REVIEW BY DONALD MACKAY

On the un-sober occasion I first met George Gunn, he struck his chest and shouted at me, 'I am the voice of Dunnet'. At the time this struck me as a bit of hyperbole; I believe now that, at the time, I failed to catch what it was he was saying. George knows himself to be made from the place he was born in, genealogically and physically, and, being such a creature, Dunnet speaks through him.

Gunn as a visceral, anti-intellectual poet, then? There is an element of this in his writing, and it's a fine one. Difficult to convey clearly without quoting at length, it consists in throwing-off of images centrifugally. The thread that connects them is the writer's own intuitive consciousness and the landscape, historical and present, he is walking through. And so 'the beach before us beckoning/ the tongue of the tide licking at the bay/ like an April calf at an empty milk pail/ we walked wet to the widening sky' (*The Solution*).

I find this evocative. As someone who also lives in Caithness, it reflects and informs my experience of what I see every day. And yet it is more than a gut response to landscape, for the poem just-quoted ends, 'our promise to the sea-lit sand/ to never become a symptom/ of the problem we mean to solve'. In the ideology of the poem, visceral authenticity is a covenant which underpins action and thought. It is, among other things, a refusal to be fashionably urban or cosmopolitan.

A faith that the endurance and beauty of this county will be a guarantor of regeneration of both it and humanity, underpins many of the best poems in *The Atlantic Forest*, particularly *My Grandfather Ogun* (his blacksmith grandfather as the Yoruba

god of thunder, assimilated to the landscape, 'will dress in black/ with a red scarf around his neck/ he will caress the bellows into thunder'), but also many others, including *Saga* (which ends with 'the desire to complete/ that which can never be completed') and *Christmas Dawn*.

In that poem, 'the messiah/ chases Venus home'; frequently, throughout the whole book, alongside exfoliating, sometimes effulgent imagery, and occasional political self-indulgence we have great, taut wit. There are two short poems, *Rob Donn* and the title poem of the book, which, to my mind, are wholly built-to-last, because, while maintaining the loyalties of the other poems, they do so with a perfect economy of wit and intelligence, and without any waste. In *Rob Donn*, the writer sits by the grave of the Mackay bard who drove cattle to the Falkirk tryst 'to learn news of The Pretender/ or the new German king/ who like you could not speak English'. As Gunn sits in the place of belonging, with 'all my many grandmothers', he points up the bond of connectedness between those who, for whatever reason, are outsiders.

In *The Atlantic Forest*, 'A boy stands on a headland' looking beyond the Pentland Firth to what cannot be seen and what is therefore 'not there', the Atlantic Forest of Central and South America. But 'he can see it fine/ he can see the timber shore/ somewhere in Brazil or Nicaragua/ he can see a boy lounging in a tree/ looking back'. That imagined boy, who mirrors Gunn as a boy looking out from Dunnet Head, expands the known parish-landscape of Caithness to include the world and all who live on it. This is a fine task for any poet to set the imagination. ■

### THE LAST BEAR

By Mandy Haggith

Publisher, Two Ravens Press, 256pp, £8.99

REVIEW BY DAISY MACKENZIE

This novel has been written by someone with intimate knowledge of the terrain and landscape in which, albeit centuries ago, it is set. For many readers that far north-west corner of Scotland may seem remote, but as described in the book it has its own centrality, a place entire in itself, yet linked by sea-roads to a connected world.

The period of the story is that point, say 1000 years ago, when Norsemen had made settlements in the further north of Scotland and had a policy of something like what we would call 'integration'. It was also a period when Christianity was established but when pre-Christian beliefs were still powerful and practices were still observed.

Wolves are still around but mainly in places remote from settled communities. Bears are almost extinct – the 'last' bear is female but has no mate. They have been significant creatures for those who still follow the 'old' pagan beliefs. And it is the fate of 'The Last Bear' that is imagined in this story.

The author is primarily a poet, particularly experienced in description of landscapes and their inhabitants. She uses that experience well in this story. She is good at describing conditions of the elements that her characters have to endure and to struggle

with. Her knowledge of the properties of plants, types of trees and the uses their wood can be put to, and of the foods that can be gleaned, hunter-gathererwise, from the land is considerable. These aspects will be interesting to a wide range of readers.

Though the writer knows a lot about such things of the period the writing still has a slightly 'modern' feel to it. Eg After a storm which has been severely damaging to the stables there is mention of their 'traumatised' horses. There are accounts of shamanistic experiences, neatly done, but perhaps not imagined powerfully enough to engage the reader.

To some extent this applies also to the development of the characters generally. Youngsters, perhaps teenagers, will find a great deal in it to enjoy for the adventure and for the 'good/evil' conflict. Other readers might look for more subtle and deeper development of individual characters and conflicts.

But there is sufficient strength and control in the narrative drive to provide most people with a satisfying read. ■

### LAPWING CHAPBOOKS

Publisher, Selkirk Lapwing Press. 20pp.

www.selkirklapwingpress.co.uk

REVIEW BY DAISY MACKENZIE

### MILNE GRADEN POEMS

By LAURNA ROBERTSON

The first poem in this chapbook sets the quality and tone for the pages that follow. The poet is at her window asking for inspiration, *Come little poem...* She has lovely lyric control. And she knows how she wants her poems to arrive, *like mouse tails/quivering/ between plant pots.*

*Like twittering birds/ swooping/in a cupful of wind*

This poem is delicately but firmly crafted, a slender bracelet of language.

She has a fine sense of landscape and all that landscape holds: *A hedge of wet lambs/ bleats through the mist. Thin cries catch/and hang on grey wire.* Her touch is precise.

Some of these poems draw on her experience as a school teacher. They reveal a mature warmth, a clear understanding of her pupils, and an imaginative humour. In *The Mountains of Europe* the members of the class become the mountain ranges and place themselves in atlas relation to one another.

*Andrew, Ben, Euan and Lee, sitting at the front . . . are the Great Plains of Europe . . . Julie and Kim/ are the Vosges, Kirsty and Monique the Jura./ Then the basketball team . . . – 'stand as tall as you like' – become Alps . . .*

*But over time there is drift. One of the Alps/ moves to the south of England. A Jura breaks a leg.*

There's more of it. It's affectionate fun, and, along with its companion piece, *Whereupon the Assassin*, it's a delightful chuckle. ►►

## REVIEWS

▶ (continued from previous page)

**SOMETHING IN THE BLOOD**  
By Vivien Jones

The work in this Chapbook has a colourful vitality, sense of life experienced responsively, vivaciously. As in *The Mermaid's Song* where she sings 'for the whole sea kingdom, for its eternity . . . its sway and endless dance; as in *Bologna Food Hall* where a 'vendor arranges cheeses with the air of a lion-tamer'.

There is a fine sense of self running through it, not quite rebellion, more a claim for the right to express life in one's own way rather than within the requirements of convention, as in *Chamber Street Museum* when the laughter of her two small boys as they discover the excitements of the tall horse-shoe staircase causes a 'convergence of keepers. (Who chorused) Shhhh! As if life itself could be silenced'.

Vivien Jones' vitality is engaging. These verses will come over well in performance. But for reading off the page, more attention to the crafting, to the rhythms and the management of where the stresses fall, would make them more satisfying both for the reader and for the poet. ■

**WITNESS**

by James Jauncey,  
Young Picador 2007, ISBN  
9780330447133

REVIEW BY MANDY HAGGITH

Witness is ostensibly a novel for teenagers, especially boys, but it deserves wider attention than this suggests. Its setting is the central Highlands in a future post-independence Scotland, in which things have gone terribly wrong, largely due to a misguided land-reform process that has nationalised all land holdings greater than one acre. An Orwellian state 'Department' has been running rural affairs so badly that civil war has erupted in the Highlands. A grassroots protest movement, funded by the former landlords, has evolved into a guerilla military resistance, the National Liberation Army (NLA), which is brutally suppressed by the national army. Although this scenario seems to go beyond the limits of any real political plausibility, it does raise interesting questions about why Scotland has avoided the so-called 'Troubles' of Northern Ireland, and by presenting such a totalitarian approach to land-reform, poses the important question of how the current community-based land-reform process *should* evolve in the Highlands.

But Witness is by no means a dry political book. Its story rips along at high pace, chasing the only person to observe a horrific massacre of all the residents of a remote Cairngorm village by the national military. The witness, John, is an eighteen-year old fiddle-playing loner. On the run, and unsure who he can trust, he finds a mysterious boy called Ninian, who suffers a disability called Fragile X and is unable to tell John where he belongs or who he is. In his search for a safe haven for himself and Ninian, John endures a succession of 'hero's journey' challenges including storms, violent attacks and betrayal, but also finds aid along the way, notably

from Lila, a chain-smoking bar maid who happens to be house-sitting John's auntie's home in post-tourist ghost-town Aviemore and who helps John to unravel the mystery of Ninian's identity. Dashing through a deftly drawn war-torn Highland landscape, John is forced to grow up fast, developing a heart-warming stalwartness and facing up to the losses and traumas of his past life.

James Jauncey has conjured some of the Highlands' best-known landmarks into an atmospheric future world; there is something strangely entrancing in the prospect of Inverness' Bught Park as a refugee camp and the funicular railway up the Cairngorms rusting in disuse. If you like a read packed out with scrapes, hide-outs and lucky escapes, don't let your teenage sons hog this adventure tale. ■

**Ettrick Forest Press**

Poetry Collections

44pp; £6.99

REVIEW BY DAISY MACKENZIE

**Love's Pathos**

By Graham Hardie

Graham Hardie is the founding editor of an interesting new publishing venture, Ettrick Forest Press; and he has, bravely, issued his own collection among the first.

Des Dillon and Dr Linda Jackson, people of experience in these matters, endorse Hardie's poetry warmly: *shows insight into the archetypal truths at the root of all literature; gems of delightful lyricism studded throughout; a deeply poetic spirit romancing with the primeval elements of nature.*

This reviewer notes the highly individual imagery, often repeated across the poems as if the writer is evolving a set of personalised symbols. There are also many idiosyncratic conjunctions of language: *culpability of truth; kudos of my soul; setting her tenure alight.* Such phrasing stops the reader short; demands interrogation of the poet's intention.

But he can do straightforward clarity too as in: *A piece of celery/hanging from your mouth/as I make breakfast/for two/while listening to Schubert.*

One of those moments quietly experienced, nicely caught.

**Earth, Fire, Air and Water.**

By Robert Marsland

'Magnificently kaleidoscopic: that's Robert Marsland's own phrase from his *La Vie et la Mort*. It describes well the style of many of his poems; glassy pieces of colour selected, collected together and shaken into sets of lines.

It shouldn't work but often it does, making short sharp poems that catch an emotion well; as in *Thank You* where he speaks of composers and the characteristics of their music which, *expressed (his) soul/as though (they) knew it intimately.* Or as in *Winter* where he describes quite exactly those bleak dark moments in a life when the dead state of things feels as though it will go on forever.

Occasionally his meaning obscures itself a little with abstractions but many poems have moments of capturing of sensation as in, *love is amethyst . . . is wine and music and waterfalls and laughter . . .* or as in, *I am a just born foal/I am a gem, clean hewn . . .*

**Whoor of a City**

By Les Quinn

The city is Glasgow; the voice *faux-naïf*. These pages are primed with shocks and alarms that segue into ambush for the patronising. Quinn's subject: life as lived on some of the more derelict streets of the city where he finds a kind of poetry, counterpoint to a more conventional beauty.

His occasional mis-spellings, the slides of syntax – they are conscious and deliberate. He lets us have brief glimpses of his literacy – hopes he is 'more Jim Kellman (*sic*) than Irvine Welch' (*sic* again). He can make cross-references as in 'Not-so-clockwork Orange', as in 'Lost in Paris/Drunk in Prague' (Orwell?)

His wit is, inevitably, ironic; his undoubted lyric gift camouflaged by skirmishes along the edges of propriety. Consider this: *Gorgeous turned ankles -/Kneecaps on student lassies/Breasts of varying cup/And lovely flanks./All tucked away/In hibernation/Until the first thaw of spring.*

Or yet again, the neat observation in this: *I trip into street diners/whose smoking demands/have created a kafay culture/In these out-of-doors/far from European/Glasgow City/Streets.* ■

**Pushing Out the Boat, Issue 7**

New Writing from the North East of Scotland

REVIEW BY CHRISTIE VANLANINGHAM

A pronounced sense of place ebbs and flows through the pages of this most recent collection of prose, poetry, and artwork, not only providing readers with the thrill of a literary journey, but also the bone-deep comfort of home and hearth.

Issue 7 brings together such disparate themes as the horrors of war, the subtleties of the seasons, and the shadowy boundaries between love and sex. Contemporaneous angst is woven expertly with the sweetly nostalgic, creating a happy amalgam of work that will have something to please most readers. Throughout the voice is strong, whichever of English, Doric, or Scots, is used

Among the highlights of this issue is Eleanor Fordyce's *Bidin*, which muses, 'I canna win awa; it's far I'm fae./It's fa I am, an far I wint tae be.' A short story, *Red Apple*, by Maggie Wallis describes the 'clank and bustle of real life,' contained in the family kitchen. Keith Murray's poetry focuses on rediscovery in *Manby*, and the 'womb-innocent,' watcher of a 'coal-golden,' sea. Knotbrook Taylor's *Ammonite* describes a time, 'before Sunflowers and mathematics,' and Elaine Kay's *Onslow Road* imagines a home, 'layered over with the smell of cloves and pipe smoke / drifting from your armchair corner kingdom.'

Alongside wistful reflections are reminders of beauty born in pain and loss. Mary Leith's protagonist in *The Shepherd* goes from being, 'ready to fall in love with everything,' to witnessing the slaughter of innocence inside a lamb's execution pen. 'There may be answers in this river / but questions pervade every nook,' according to Steven Porter's poem, *On the River Findhorn*. George Hardie's *Crofter Man*, describes the trials of those that have gone before; 'Thair chyce, ti pey or muive. / Ti stairt aa over the / weary darg fattenan, / aye, anither's hungry purse.' And Ian Morrison's chilling story, *Protection*, explores teenage sexuality amid class conflict, where seduction seeps into the classroom; 'conjugate's like, posh for shag. Ken?'

Pushing out the Boat, Issue 7, provides another quality collection of creative work, sure to satisfy readers at home and abroad; and the team who have edited and published are to be congratulated. ■

**THE SEARCHING GLANCE**

By Linda Cracknell

Published by SALT. 184pp hardback,  
£14.99

REVIEW BY DAISY MACKENZIE

The satisfactions to be got from reading a short story are, as we know, different from those of a novel. The novel provides a longer wave of expectation and tension. It carries you along for many hours, usually more than can be done in a single reading. It sets up the desire to get back to it, and there's a sort of tristesse when you reach the end of it. The scale of the short story is manifestly different. It is different in other ways too. To experience its virtues another set of expectations has to be entered into.

This collection from Linda Cracknell is an excellent demonstration of what such virtues are. She is an experienced and respected writer in the genre and *The Searching Gance* is her second collection. (And we are keen to remind our readers that we published one of the stories in it, *And the Sky was Full of Crows*, in our Spring edition, 2006).

Most of them are stories of self-discovery, of life-changing moments. There's a practical realism to it, you recognise it as belonging to the world you know can believe in even if it is outside your direct experience: even as in 'Over the Garden Wall' where it is about the disintegration of a personality; or in 'Night's High Noon' which shows how a psychopath can depersonalise his victim in order to have no guilt about the pain he will inflict.

These stories are finely disciplined in construction. When the denouement arrives you see how it could not have been otherwise. All that precedes it provides all the detail of the preparation for it. No trick endings, no twists in the tail; all that precedes it falls into place.

The first of the collection, 'The Smell of Growth', does it well. The child, the growing girl, still plays with her doll, Pauline. She dresses Pauline, advises her, behaves like a wee mother to her; and she still likes to ▶▶

REVIEWS

► (continued from previous page)

go down to a rough bit of pond and try to catch the tadpoles. But she is also growing up, observing the restricted life her mother lives, her one luxury the wearing of Marigold gloves to keep her hands nice; trying to make sense of things she sees: like her auntie Nina persuading herself and Mum to come shopping for bikinis at a cut-price store, and Nina seeming to forget to pay for a bikini she has put in her bag.

Like suddenly noticing that Nina, who can seem so sophisticated with her cigarettes and lipstick, has thin red lines on her skin, 'like wee cracks in a blackbird's egg-shell'. (Gosh, how well Cracknell can find the exact little picture to make clear what she wants you to see!)

And that's when the child says to her mother, 'Nina is a good girl, isn't she'. And then she takes her step forward, takes Pauline down to the tadpole pond where, wearing her mother's Marigold gloves, she pushes the doll down into the mud at the bottom. And then the pond odour, the 'smell of Growth' oozes into her nose.

And alongside the discipline of the structure Linda Cracknell has the gift of making you see a whole picture with just the exact right handful of words. A startled pheasant is 'a diagonal line of sleek russet feather trailing a clatter of shock'. The tweed of a gamekeeper's jacket is 'fracturing colour, just as was intended, to camouflage him against the hill'. 'Glitter' is about Jeanie, not quite fitting in within a small community. She knows that what had looked like love could be 'just the sparkle glued to a Xmas card that falls off when you brush it.'

It is also worth saying that this publisher, SALT, has, for *The Searching Glance*, produced a very well designed hardback book. ■

CONTRIBUTORS

**Stuart B. Campbell**, poet, publisher, musician and mountaineer has recently had *The Stone Operation*, a new collection of his poetry, published by Dionysia.

**Debbie Cannon** is an almost full-time writer working on poetry, screenplays and is completing her first novel. She was winner of the 2007 Scottish Association of Writers' Poetry Prize.

**Mark Edwards** lives and works in Aberdeen. He has published short fiction in *Northwords* and *Cencrastus* magazines. He is currently working on his first novel.

**John Glenday** works as an addictions co-ordinator for NHS Highland. His third book of poetry will be published by Picador in 2009.

**Mandy Haggith** is a writer living in North-West Sutherland. She has recently published *Castings*, a poetry collection, and a novel, *The Last Bear*.

**Freda Hasler** spent untold years

producing business manuals and quality assurance tomes. In retirement, she is applying these skills to more creative endeavours, editing prose for literary publications.

**Robert Alan Jamieson** is a native of Shetland who tutors creative writing at the University of Edinburgh. His most recent book is *Nort Atlantik Drift* (Luath Press 2007).

**Paula Jennings** lives in Fife and works creatively with people who have dementia. Her poetry has been supported by SAC Writers' Bursaries and a Hawthornden Fellowship. Her collection *Singing Lucifer* is published by Only-women Press.

**Donald Mackay**, teacher and poet, is from Glasgow but has lived in Caithness for many years. His most recent publication is *Kept in the Dark*, by Mariscat

**Henry Marsh's** first collection, *A First Sighting*, was published in 2005, his second, *A Turbulent Wake*, in 2007 (Maclean Dubois).

He is currently working on collaborations with two Scottish artists. He is due to appear at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in August.

**David McVey** currently on sabbatical in Inverness, is a Lecturer at UWS, has published 80 short stories and hopes to live to see Kirkintilloch Rob Roy win the Scottish Junior Cup.

**Jon Miller** is a part-time teacher and writer living in and around Ullapool.

**Alison Napier** lives in Sutherland. She recently abandoned a career in social work and is poised to relocate to Devon to finish her first novel and write full-time.

**Gerard Rochford's** poem *My Father's Hand* was in *Janice Galloway's 20 Best Scottish Poems of 2006 - SPL. Collections: The Holy Family and other poems* and *Three Way Street*. [www.koopress.co.uk](http://www.koopress.co.uk).

**Chris Sawyer** is a lawyer in the

oil industry, was born in Wales in 1971. He lived in London for thirteen years before moving with his family to Deeside in 2005.

**Lesley Strachan** is a teacher of Art & Design in Ullapool.

**Laurie-Claire Wilson** was born in Inverness and grew up in ancient Egypt. She currently lives on a tangent, studying the Renaissance and spinning on words.

**Ryan Van Winkle** is currently Reader in Residence at the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh. His work has appeared in *New Writing Scotland 26* and *New Leaf 24* (Bremen). He is a member of *The Forest Arts Collective* ([www.theforest.org.uk/](http://www.theforest.org.uk/)) and has had poems published in the *Golden Hour Book* from Forest Publications.

**Grahaeme Barrasford Young** returned to writing five years ago and has since been published in over two dozen magazines and recently in the anthology *Celtic Verse*.

# Isabel Rogers

From among those who answered our recent advert for an addition to the editorial team, we have invited Isabel Rogers to join Jon Miller and myself. Here she introduces herself to our readers

AND THEN THERE were three ... I'm the newest member and I've been asked to look after the fiction. What do you need to know? I write; I read. I moved to the Highlands a while back from London to breathe clean air,

climb mountains and write. The most important thing is that I am addicted to reading. Good writing: the stuff that eyeballs you round the room after you've closed the book. Stories that leave their imprint on your retina. Echoes of phrases that

wind themselves into your head. The odd joke. This is *Northwords Now*, but send us your stories from any corner of this planet as long as they are sharp and true. We want to discover the good stuff. We have a PO Box number: please

use it (see page 3 for details). We'll read your words and may be able to send them out across Scotland to get into other people's heads.

- ISABEL ROGERS

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- Tam's Bookshop, Stromness

**Shetland Times**, Lerwick

- Shetland Arts Trust, Lerwick
- Shetland Libraries

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- Fruitmarket Gallery, 45 Market Street
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- Scottish Arts Council, 12 Manor Place
- Bongo Club, Holyrood Road
- Oxfam Bookshop, Raeburn Place
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Full details for all of this and more besides will be in the Festival brochure which will be available soon from libraries, bookshops and other information sources throughout the region.

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