

Scottish
Book Trust

The best new writing talent in Scotland

Scottish Book Trust's New Writers Awards highlight some of the most exciting new writing talent in Scotland. This collection features work from the 2025 awardees, including short stories, poetry, spoken word, picture books, middle grade fiction and young adult fiction in English, Gaelic and Scots.

'It's been a privilege to be part of the New Writers Awards. Self-doubt often creeps in when you're laying yourself bare on a page, so the support – and validation of your writing – from Scottish Book Trust has been invaluable. The opportunities they've provided have changed my life, and I know that they'll continue to change the lives of many incredible writers for years to come.'

– Lindsay Hirst, New Writers Awardee 2022 and author of *The Dangerous Pet Lover's Guide to Dragons* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

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Comhairle nan
Leabhraichean
The Gaelic Books Council

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New Writing from Scottish Book Trust's New Writers Awards

Volume 17

Volume
17

New Writing

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Scottish Book Trust is a national charity that believes books, reading and writing have the power to change lives. A love of reading inspires creativity, improves employment opportunities, mental health and wellbeing and is one of the most effective ways to help children escape the poverty cycle. We work towards a Scotland where everyone has an equal opportunity to thrive through literacy.

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For more information about any of the writers included, please contact Lynsey Rogers at lynsey.rogers@scottishbooktrust.com or call 0131 524 0160.

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From Scottish Book Trust's
New Writers Awards
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Contents

Introduction 6

Fiction and narrative non-fiction

Jade Mitchell (story collection extract) 10
Jess Dolan (story collection extract) 22
ZK Abraham (story collection extract) 34

Poetry

Taylor Dyson (spoken word collection extract) 50
Flora Leask Arizpe (collection extract) 66
Petra Johana Poncarová (Gaelic collection extract) 76
Kim Crowder (collection extract) 92
James Sinclair (collection extract) 102

Children's and young adult fiction

Jac McGill (middle grade novel extract) 114
Lucy Goodwill (young adult novel extract) 126
Sarah NicRath (Gaelic children's stories) 138
SE Holland (middle grade novel extract) 150

*This sampler has been produced for literary and publishing
professionals. Please be aware there is a range of content featured
in this book, some of which is unsuitable for readers aged 14 or
younger as it contains strong language and mature themes.*

Introduction

We're delighted to share the latest volume of our sampler. In these pages you'll find writing from the talented awardees on our New Writers Awards programme 2025.

Every year, we work with expert panellists to select some of Scotland's most exciting writing talent from many hundreds of entries. Our judges for 2025 included respected writers Ashley Hickson-Lovence, Camilla Grudova, Serena Patel, Tendai Huchu, Cat Hepburn, Tolu Agbelusi, Thomas Clark, Ely Percy, Joelle Taylor and Jay Gao. Awardees received tailored support from our Writing Communities team, including a cash bursary, a week-long writing retreat at Moniac Mhor and mentoring from a writer or industry professional, as well as dedicated training in press and PR, social media and performance. Awardees also took part in a Showcase event.

They join our growing body of awardees, all of whom we are pleased to support with advice, guidance and promotional platforms throughout their careers. Many have achieved wonderful accolades, including winning the Costa First Book Award, the Manchester Fiction Prize, the Saltire Scottish First Book Award and Poetry Book of the Year Award, the Arthur C Clarke Award, a shortlisting and longlisting for the Man Booker Prize, and much more.

Have a peek at the publication list to see some of the writers we are proud to have worked with during their path to publication. We look forward to including many of the names in this sampler on such lists in the future.

Selected books from former New Writer Awardees

- Nadine Aisha Jassat, *Let Me Tell You This* (404 Ink) and *The Hidden Story of Estie Noor* (Hachette)
- Claire Askew, *All The Hidden Truths* (Hodder & Stoughton) and *Novelista* (John Murray Press)
- Rachelle Atalla, *The Pharmacist* (Hodder & Stoughton)
- Krystelle Bamford, *Idle Grounds* (Hutchinson Heinemann)
- Eloise Birtwhistle, *Splenectomy* (Stewed Rhubarb Press)
- Shelagh Campbell, *Far Na Slighe* (Luath Press)
- Samantha Clark, *The Clearing* (Little, Brown)
- Tim Craven, *Good Sons* (Blue Diode)
- Lyndsey Croal, *Dark Crescent* (Luna Press)
- Jane Flett, *Freakslaw* (Transworld)
- Juliette Forrest, *The Night My Dream Came Alive* (Scholastic)
- PM Freestone, *Shadowscents* (Scholastic)
- Lindsay Hirst, *The Dangerous Pet Lover's Guide to Dragons* (Bloomsbury)
- Gail Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (HarperCollins)
- Sally Huband, *Sea Bean* (Hutchinson Heinemann)
- Kirstin Innes, *Scabby Queen* (Fourth Estate)
- Mòrag Law, *Cuibhle an Fhortain* (Luath Press)
- William Letford, *From Our Own Fire* (Carcenet)
- Kirsty Logan, *Now She Is Witch* (Harvill Secker)
- Martin MacInnes, *In Ascension* (Atlantic Books),
- Victoria MacKenzie, *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy On My Little Pain* (Bloomsbury)
- Calum L MacLeòid, *Fon Choill* (CLÀR)
- Graeme Macrae Burnet, *Case Study* (Saraband)
- Lynsey May, *Weak Teeth* (Polygon)

- Sandaidh NicDhòmhnaill Jones, *An Seachdamh Tonn* (Acair)
- Mòrag Anna NicNèill, *Artair sa Chaisteal* (Bradán Press)
- Ryan O'Connor, *The Voids* (Scribe)
- Niall O'Gallagher, *Fo Bhlàth* (CLÀR)
- Heather Palmer, *Deathbound* (Audible)
- Alistair Paul, *Linne Dhomhain* (Luath)
- Louise Peterkin, *The Night Jar* (Salt)
- Rachel Plummer, *The Big Day* (Little Tiger)
- Allan Radcliffe, *The Old Haunts* (Fairlight Press)
- Lucy Ribchester, *The Hourglass Factory* (Simon & Schuster) and *Murder Ballad* (Black & White)
- Helen Sedgwick, *The Growing Season* (Harvill Secker) and *When the Dead Come Calling* (Point Blank)
- Catherine Simpson, *When I Had A Little Sister* (Fourth Estate)
- Sarah Smith, *Hear No Evil* (Two Roads)
- Thomas Stewart, *Real Boys* (Polygon)
- Richard Strachan, *The Unrecovered* (Bloomsbury)
- Em Strang, *Bird-Woman* (Shearsman)
- Dougie Strang, *The Bone Cave* (Birlinn)
- Malachy Tallack, *That Beautiful Atlantic Waltz* (Canongate) and *Illuminated By Water* (Doubleday)
- Alice Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild* (John Murray Press)
- Alessandra Thom, *Summer Hours* (Polygon)
- Eris Young, *Ace Voices* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers)

Fiction and narrative non-fiction

Jade Mitchell

‘Discovering Jade’s work was an exciting moment: it is visceral and allegorical, funny and heart-warming. As a judge, I knew immediately we had found something special. I cannot wait to read her completed collection and see what she does next.’

Camilla Grudova

Jade Mitchell is a writer and poet based in Glasgow. She holds an MLitt in Creative Writing from the University of Strathclyde, where she was the recipient of the Brian Hamill Common Breath prize. Her short fiction was shortlisted for the Bloomsbury Mentorship Programme 2024-25, and her poetry has appeared in online publications such as *Moist Poetry Journal* and *Untitled Writing*. In 2022, she collaborated with queer theatre company Moot Point Collective to write her first poetry film, *The Door*. She has performed at literary nights and festivals in the UK, such as Loud Poets and UniSlam. As a writer, Jade is interested in the intersection of mundanity with the surreal and the strange. She is currently working on her first short story collection.

Instagram: @jmitchellwriting

‘Jessica Walks Into A Bar’

The story goes like this: Jessica walks into a bar, orders a whisky sour, and takes a small, neat sip. The bartender says: ‘Hey, why the long face?’ and she laughs, because nobody tells jokes like that any more these days.

In another story, Jessica walks into a bar and orders her whisky neat. She plants a khaki-toned duffel bag onto the countertop, which rattles with a dull thunk. As she pays for her drink, the bartender asks her: ‘What’s in the bag?’

She smirks knowingly, and tugs on the zipper: ‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’

Multi-coloured wires pop out of the bag like the heads of eager snakes. A muffled beeping begs to be heard. Numbers flash, counting down. *Sixty. Fifty-nine. Fifty-eight. Fifty-seven.*

‘I know the protocol!’ Jessica says in mock singsong, ‘You pick up the phone, say *lemonade* and the police come running. But you wouldn’t say that, would you?’

‘What do you want?’ The bartender pleads, with a panic he is struggling to swallow down. ‘I’ll give you money. Booze. Whatever you want. Just, please. Don’t do this.’

Jessica continues to nurse her whisky, and clears her throat in preparation.

‘I want several pink flamingos in my front garden. The plastic kind, of course, I’m not crazy. I want to be the owner of courageous toenails. I want a sunset that tints the sky green as it sets. I want to be the kind of person who is going to stretch their body every day, and *really* follow through on it. I want eight hours of sleep

to feel like twenty. I want a time machine that only goes back to the summers of my childhood. You know that nostalgic kind of heat? I want that. Not the kind we have these days. The kind that swells cancer, melts glaciers or boils oceans. I want to be better than my mother was. But what does that really mean? Are any of us better than our mothers when our mothers are just children too? Maybe scratch that last part. Keep everything else though.'

Surrounding them, the patrons of the bar live out their ideal fantasy of a Friday night. Pool balls are socked into pockets. The jukebox croons a Bon Jovi classic. Some of the drunks begin an off-key rendition of 'Livin' on a Prayer', belting out the words as if they are their last. All the while, Jessica lists off her wants, her desires, hangs up her little window of dreams.

The bartender listens to her with perfect attention. He says: 'Of course, of course, yes, yes, let me get that for you, yes, right away', as he takes small, measured steps towards the phone.

Step.
'An adult tricycle.'
Ten.

Step.
'A lobotomy that actually works.'
Nine.

Step.
'Twelve perfectly circular oranges.'
Eight.

Jessica pauses in her daydreams, calculates the

distance between his body and her drink. The bartender's eyes flash. His fingers curve around the telephone. 'Lemonade' spills from his mouth, foaming and urgent. *I'm sorry*, is the last thing his eyes try to say, *I can't give you what you want. Nobody can.*

In a story which was told to you by a friend of a friend of your neighbour's cousin's aunt, Jessica struts into a bar, slides behind the booth, and begins the World's Longest DJ Set. She is twenty-four years old when it starts and fifty-six years old when it ends. Her manager, Amanda, did not believe that Jessica would become her longest-serving employee of thirty-two years. She had only been hired for a trial period, to bring in a fresh, young clientele amidst the old set of regulars.

It was a Friday night when the World's Longest DJ Set began. Many of the bar's customers had flocked towards Jessica, excited by the new arrival. They twisted and thrashed, their bodies lost in the beats she laid down. But when the bell rang for final orders, nobody moved. The music refused to cease. Jessica was locked in, and the crowd were entranced in her thrall. Even Amanda was entranced, by the money in their pockets; the tabs running up at the bar. When dawn rose and the bodies were still held under Jessica's musical spell, Amanda saw it for what it was: a business opportunity.

They danced for years, the customers. Locked in an endless sway. Family and friends of the customers reported them missing, only to find them in the bar, having forgotten themselves. They tried to pull their loved ones towards freedom, towards reality. But they, too, heard Jessica's infectious melodies. They couldn't help but join in.

The dancers flooded their way out onto the streets,

the bar unable to contain them. Amanda supplied more speakers just to keep up with the demand. Soon, dehydration and malnutrition set in. Some bodies cried out, pain mistaken for ecstatic euphoria. Their bones grew brittle and fractured, their muscles wearied by refrain. Still, their bodies writhed, wriggling like worms on pavements sticky with tequila and sweat. Emergency services eventually arrived to try and put a stop to the madness. Ambulances for the atrophied, the police for the imminent arrest of Jessica and Amanda. They really did try their best to fight it, with foam earplugs and comically large headphones sellotaped to their ears. But they could not resist the musical pull of the World's Longest DJ Set.

Throughout all this, Jessica was unscathed. Her attention was razor-sharp, her concentration unwavering. She barely noticed Amanda's daily approach, with offerings of onion rings and a change of clothes, to keep the bar's most successful venture looking presentable.

In the early years, Jessica sustained her audience on EDM, pop and R&B. During the eleventh year, they danced solely to 'The Macarena' - with a three-month break for 'The Time Warp'. By the thirteenth year, a melancholia had set in. One that could only be sustained by Joni Mitchell's entire back catalogue. It was heralded as *Jessica's Blue Period*, which lasted for three years, before transitioning into remixes of Simon and Garfunkel. She experimented with math rock in her nineteenth year, and acid jazz in her twenty-seventh, as the flesh dripped from near-skeletal bodies that clattered to drum snares and eclectic piano keys. Before the thirty-second year, Jessica yearned for the beginning. Members of the endless dancers cringed at the repetition of

the past, crying: 'You've already played this one!', 'Do 'The Time Warp' again!', only to be drowned out in a rhythmic flood of thirty-year-old nostalgia.

In the end, a power surge did her in. The harsh vibration from a nearby speaker tremored through Jessica's fingers, her arms, pausing her heart. The music scratched to a halt. The dancers blinked, suddenly self-aware. They cracked their stiff necks, rubbed their aching feet, and mourned the decaying remains of the earliest attendees to the World's Longest DJ Set. Amanda, hearing the silence through the ringing in her ears, called for everyone to clear out, allowed the paramedics to cart the dead towards the nearest morgue, and began to close the bar that now held the record for hosting the World's Longest DJ Set.

Let us begin this tale of tragedy and woe, as we watch our heroine, Jessica, walk mournfully into a bar. She is wearing the ivory dress she got married in six years prior. The buttons are partially fastened at the back, with the rest separated by time's widening of her shoulders. There are flowers embroidered along the hemline of her dress; flowers that the bride once loved receiving. Little specks of dust are caught in her veil, which grey her face, making her look more apparition than lover. She carries only a manila envelope in her hands.

The bartender welcomes her warmly and pours her a glass of white wine. Jessica takes a seat in the corner booth at the back. The bar is empty. The rain plasters itself adoringly across the windows. A bell rings. The door exhales the arrival of a man.

At first glance, he looks like any other man. Tall, sharp-suited, a black tie resting on a creased white shirt, his fedora hat making a shadow of his face. But

his skin ripples beneath the fabric of his clothing. He takes careful, considered steps, as if the act of walking is suddenly a stranger to him. The man takes his seat across from Jessica. She lifts the veil to see him better.

‘Thank you for coming to see me, Robert,’ her smile strains to lift itself.

‘What is this about, my love? (*Love? Love? Love?*)’

In the silence of the bar, Robert’s voice is an echoing nasal. His face is a flurry of fluctuating grey fur. Many black, beady eyes blink in earnest tenderness, as a multitude of pink snouts sniff the air. His greying hands tap the table, taloned claws eager to scamper towards their love. But Jessica does not reach towards them. Her pale, human fingers only clutch the manila envelope. She holds Robert’s gaze as she surrenders it towards him, her smile falling like torn petals.

‘I’m sorry, Robert, but it’s over.’

Claws and teeth tear at the glue that fastens the envelope. Papers spill out onto the table, spelling out the beginning of an ending. Robert hovers close to the ink, his pink snouts smearing it in little wet breaths.

‘Why? (*Why? Why Why?*)’ he squeaks.

‘I just don’t love you any more, Robert. You’re not the man I fell in love with,’ Jessica says, resigned with the relief of confession.

‘But of course I’m not! I am changed! (*Changed! Changed! Changed!*) Your love saved me from the floor of this very bar!’ The rats that make up the body of Robert speak as one, squeak in a language that Jessica has grown to understand, love and loathe. He reaches towards her, claws wriggling to latch onto her fingers, his rattish snouts kissing into the absence of a ring.

‘Don’t you remember, darling? We heard you through the floorboards, saying you were coming down to change

the keg. But the basement is for screaming. Everyone knows that. Everyone else’s screams were much too harsh, too hoarse, too full of stress and anguish and hatred of customers. But your screams, Jess, were like music to us. The grandest symphony. No, we were not afraid of you. We crawled out of the dark and cowered before your feet so that we could offer you our sympathies. You were the first person to touch me (*and me! and me! and me!*), to see us for who we were and still love us for it. Oh, Jessica! (*Jessica! Jessica! Jessica!*) Please don’t say it is so!’ Droplets of rat tears leak onto the table, pattering like the rainfall outside. Jessica only takes a napkin from a holder and gingerly mops them up.

‘Oh, Robert. I am truly sorry. The love I felt for you was genuine, was true! But it is gone! I do not know where it went. I have walked all around this great city, trying to find out where it has run off to. But I cannot see it, Robert. I can only see myself. I cannot lie next to you at night any more, feeling like a fraud. I am sorry, Robert. I cannot be your wife. I hope, in time, that you can understand, and forgive me.’ Jessica blots her own tears with the napkin. The ratly snouts of her husband snuffle as one.

‘(*But!*) (*Wait!*) (*Jessica!*)’

Slowly, the fur of Robert’s body begins to drip. A slow trickle of grey that puddles and scatters itself, scurrying into the corners, squeaks of anguish separating until all ratly trace of Robert is gone.

Once her tears have dried, Jessica rifles through the pockets of her husband’s wedding suit. She pockets his wedding ring, a half-nibbled block of cheddar cheese and an expired lottery ticket. She holds his wrinkled shirt to her nose and smells the ratly scent of what once

was.

As she drinks into the lonely night, she hears, faintly, the song of her former husband. The tiniest chorus of ratly cries, calling from the basement below her.

It's storytime! Jessica walks into a bar, and says, 'Ouch!' She goes to the hospital for a concussion. In the night, a pink fleshy bump begins to stretch from her forehead, which her boyfriend, Gregory, teases her for, earning her the name of Unicorn. It does not retreat when the doctors poke and prod it. When the pain recedes, it remains. Jessica's bangs are forced to be curtains. She grows wary of doors, of low-hanging ceilings. She learns to kiss her boyfriend without giving him head trauma. When she walks into the bar - the correct one this time - everybody cheers. 'We've missed you, Unicorn!' they all cry in unison. They kiss her forehead, which has become a sword, a shield, a shelter from the rain. She is taken by the horn out onto the dancefloor, and sways in time to the beat.

So, like, have you heard the rumours about Jessica? She's not in the stables any more. I know. Crazy, right? *Where is she?* The bar is where she is, or was. Aggie saw her smoking outside it, like, every night since last Tuesday. See, everyone's saying she quit but if she's in that bar, I don't know, it sounds like she might have had a bit of a problem? Maybe she was bringing that to work and Peter had had enough, decided to let her go? Anyway, it doesn't matter what the reason is. What matters is that Jessica was at the bar. Still wearing company shoes. Like, girl, get those the fuck off! And she's covered in dirt and mud and everything, like, she hasn't even bothered to clean herself up. And the bartender clearly notices,

right? Like she doesn't belong there. And he's not happy about the mess she's bringing in. Flies are *everywhere*. It's disturbing the customers! And there's a reason we don't go to the bars! They're not *our* spaces. And why the hell would you want to go sit at a cramped table and fight to be heard over the football? I'm getting off-topic. Anyway, the bartender isn't happy. So he says to her: 'Hey, I'm not serving you any more. You need to clear out.' And she was drinking from a bucket. Not a trough. A *bucket*. Embarrassing. And she's drinking from the bucket still, not giving him any attention. He keeps asking her and asking her and he's getting really pissed off. Like, yelling in her face kind of mad. And then she turns to him, like she finally hears him, and leaps over the bar and starts beating the shit out of him. I know! I didn't think she had the nerve. Pummelled her hooves right into his head. Cut up his skin into little crescent moons. Maybe fucked up his brain too? Anyway, she shot off as soon as the sirens started sounding. Now who knows where she's gone. Good riddance, I say. She never pulled her weight around here.

And through the doorway of this story, we enter a bar called *Jessica*. Everybody is welcome. There's no need to be shy. You can leave your things in the cloakroom and wade your way into the depths of her.

The bar called *Jessica* is very busy tonight. Bodies heave and surge along her neural pathways, down the tides of her blood, along the black hole of her gullet. There is an orgy taking place in the back room of her lungs, orgasms sighing carbon dioxide back out into the world. The lovers, the needy and the lonely all congregate in the heart, where cocktails are served in watermelon halves and aquarium tanks, desperate

straws sucking at the dregs of desire. Do *not* enter the liver. It's full of chain-smokers coating the world in grey film. Let's circle back to the brain, where, unfortunately, a bar fight has broken out. The kind found in old Westerns: glass bottles sparkling off shelves, the comical snare of speeding bullets, horses stampeding dust storms while men with grizzle and grit point and shoot and fire, destroying any kind of thought that exists.

The bar called *Jessica* is suffering from an internal haemorrhage. The bar called *Jessica* is wondering how long it is until closing. The bar called *Jessica* is tired of this evening, full of people she does not know and does not care to know. But she cannot live without them. The bodies of her body that swim in delirium with her.

Her mouth opens and receives shot after shot of bodies. Her mouth orders a last call for bodies. The bar called *Jessica* chases it all down with salt and lime, and staggers off in the wake of her body.

Summary of *Jessica is Born (Again)*

'Jessica Walks Into A Bar' is taken from the short story collection, *Jessica is Born (Again)*.

The narrators of *Jessica is Born (Again)* all have one thing in common: they are all Jessica.

Set within a multiverse of infinite possibility, where fairy tales turn traumatic, a box blurs the boundaries of existence, capitalist clones devour one another, and worms, rats and vending machines are worthy of love and desire, this collection plays with the absurdism of parallel lives to ask: what are our identities? Are they our bodies, our souls or something in between?

Jessica is Born (Again) offers a surreal look at the everyday of office politics, workplace mistreatment, motherhood and romantic relationships, whilst examining individuality, consent, desire and autonomy.

Jess Dolan

'Jess writes sharp and sensual stories, minutely attuned to the shifting codes of class, navigating the inner contours of women who feel, like the protagonist of 'A Lovely Day for a Party', sidelined within or bystanders to their own lives. This story is done with real confidence and panache – without wishing to spoil a moment of it, what an unexpected swoop it takes at the end! A great pleasure to recommend her work to readers here.'

Lucy Caldwell

Jess Dolan is a fiction writer based in the Scottish Borders. She is interested in the relationship between people and places. Her work was shortlisted for the Bridport Short Story prize in 2024 and 2025, and she was the second-place winner in the Frazzled Lit short story competition 2025.

Jess is developing a short story collection with linked themes of fractured identity, water, blood and psychogeography.

jessdolan.org

'A Lovely Day for a Party'

Come away in, Marissa says.

She shelves the bottle you brought in a separate drinks fridge and hands you a prosecco from a tray. The house is in two halves, she explains, the old part used to be the farmhouse and the new section is designed to bring the outdoors in. She demonstrates how the doors glide soundlessly, leading to the courtyard and beyond that, the fruit trees. Clusters of children are running in and out of bushes. You spot Iona, Marissa's youngest daughter, almost five – the same as your Alex – as she explodes from a hiding spot in a shower of crimson petals.

You're very lucky, you say.

Marissa smiles. Yes, we are.

She trots out the line so you think she doesn't really consider herself lucky, more rightful. She tells you Iain's family have farmed these plump Perthshire hectares for centuries. That's both true and not true as you understand it: his family were farmers once, generations back, but Iain's father, and now Iain, have made a killing in fintech. It all speaks of worlds you don't know how to navigate. You work in the hotel in town, on the front desk, checking tourists in and out. Another space where you are barely seen. You hand your glass back and Marissa offers you the same again or something different.

White wine please, you say perkily.

You try not to drink too fast. Gooseberry and zest on your tongue. Enough to keep you occupied.

Tucking her hand into your elbow, Marissa steers you outside. The garden is arranged on different levels, easy

to mingle, easy to slip away. Iona re-emerges, chased by three other little girls, and behind them, someone's mother plaintively reminding them to take care, not to run too fast, and to watch out for other people. You see a man with the collar of his rugby shirt flicked up, then turn and spot another, and another.

Help yourself to anything, says Marissa. Iain's making pizzas for later. Now, who can I introduce you to?

You let yourself be piloted up and down. A blur of names passes over you. Andrew, Lachlan, Isobel, Cameron. Eventually Marissa parks you next to Iain, who is stretching pizza dough like a TV chef. Slap, slap, pull. He takes his time re-balling the dough then nods at you.

Live locally? he asks.

You chew the inside of your cheek. You have said hello to Iain at the nursery gates most weeks through spring and summer. This is your life now: either you are extremely prominent – an unexpectedly single woman jarring against the orderly two-by-twoing of the other parents – or you are invisible, for the very same reason. In the five months since your husband left, you have become an object of pity, threat or void.

Iona's in the same class as Alex, you say.

Is that right? says Iain, and he tells you about the new pizza oven.

It's all about the process, he says. He strokes the curve of the oven and shovels in a scoop of seasoned wood pellets. You thought only food could be seasoned, but it turns out wood can be too. Though all this means is that the wood has been dried out for a year or more. You catch the look Iain gives one of the other interchangeable husbands when he explains this to you.

Do you have one?

You've never much seen the point of a pizza oven, but you are glad to be fed by someone else, even if it's by someone else's husband making a show of prepping a few pizzas. Iain twirls the dough, flaps it onto the floury board and smears passata, heady with garlic and basil, across the surface. You stretch your mouth into a smile, or show your teeth at least.

I don't, you say.

No outdoor space? another husband asks.

You give your best tinkly little laugh.

Something like that, you say, and you fumble to change the subject, remarking on the borders and the clever planting. Your own garden is a patchwork of moss struggling against the persistent thud thud of a football bounced into the lopsided goal. At four, Alex has no notable football skills but he loves the swish of the net as the ball swooshes through the open goal again and again.

Watch me, Mummy, he says, and you watch. Behind the goal mouth is a snarl of brambles, then the boundary fence. On the day your husband left, you drank a shot of neat gin,

took every single plate from the cupboard

(wedding present/

you'd never liked the pattern anyway)

and frisbeed them against the fence

one

two

three

where they'd shattered into shards and dust

You don't say any of this to Iain. Instead you drift over to the snacks table where Marissa has laid out a spread of crackers and cured meats. You want the saltiest, the earthiest, the sharpest, of everything. You crave distinct

tastes, distinct sensations, anything that roots you back in your body. Every morning you have a shower that is either too hot or too cold. Both and neither sort of work. The shower is too feeble to really blast away, nonetheless you spin the dial to its extremities and as the water sluices over you, there's a tiny gap, when just for a moment your skin is screaming and the pounding loop of thought stops.

The man next to you offers you a bowl of olives. You let one roll over your teeth like a green bullet, suck lemon and herb dressing. Sunshine and brine. A cut above the squishy ones you fish from a supermarket jar at home. It is almost enough.

So, he says, have you had a good summer?

He is chasing hummus round his plate with a crisp and you suspect he's not really interested in your response.

We went sailing, he says. Round the west coast. The fishing! Incredible. When the weather's like this, there's nowhere better than Scotland.

Nowhere better, you say, and it's true: this past month the weather has been unusually sunny and consistent, like the summers everyone claims used to happen when they were kids. You have experienced it more as an endurance test, a jigsaw of jumbled pieces that don't fit together comprised of your paid work, the limited number of nursery hours available and the short days of summer camps. There has been no routine but also no novelty.

Savour every moment! says his wife. Next year they'll all be in school and we'll be wishing this time back.

You smile, your lips-stretched-over-bared-teeth smile, and nod. This final week of the holiday period has gleamed at you through the long trudge of days. And

here it is! Your husband has taken your boy, your most precious love, your deepest anchor, away from you, to go to Greece with his girlfriend as a mock family unit. Communication so far has been functional. Flight on time. Yes, they've arrived at the hotel. Why has Alex only got one set of swimming trunks? You've been on tenterhooks all day waiting for another update. Your phone pings and you snatch at your pocket, thirsty for news. A photo of Alex blooms across the screen. You smile at his face and then look properly. His chubby arms are cuddled round the neck of the girlfriend, blue sea behind them. The wine you just swallowed rushes back into your mouth, sour and sharp. You tilt your phone towards the wife, a woman you vaguely recognise. Looks like he's having a grand old time, she says. You've lost all sensation below the neck. You are a sham, a shell of a person. Without Alex, you can feel yourself slip away. You stab at your phone screen as you fumble to reply

*Tell her to keep her hands off my son
I hate you I hate you I hate you
You self-centred tosser
Fuckyoufuckyoufuc*

<delete <delete <delete

You send back the thumbs-up emoji. There are four days of Alex's holiday week left. You want desperately to know every detail and you never want to look at your phone again.

Marissa reappears.

Come down to the burn, she says. It's cooler there.

You hadn't noticed, but this part of the garden is in full sun and the tops of your shoulders have started to prickle. Somehow all the snacks on your plate have disappeared, along with your wine. Marissa hands you a

fresh plate, replete with slices of pizza and thin cigarillos of sliced ham.

Marissa chatters as you both pick your way along the bark-laid path. Fragments lodge between your foot and your sandal. Marissa seems unaffected. You give yourself a jolt when you look down. Blood glistens on the tips of your toes. Then your heart settles. The pedicure you gave yourself in a rush before coming here has smudged into an approximation of ten tiny wounds.

We've just had a swing put up, Marissa says. Such a fun project for Iain. And Iona of course.

And there you see a sturdy oak tree, the rope lashed to a branch. The swing is made from a fishing buoy, orange plastic faded pink. The rope swoops out across the burn – a river really, you think – and a person has a choice whether to drop from the swing into the water, or let rope bring them back to shore. The gaggle of kids don't hesitate. Plop, plop, plop they go. There's Iona. There are others you think you know. One by one they leap from the swing, squealing with delight as they enter the water. The near bank is churned up where they scramble out.

It's been a great success, Marissa says, we've got so much use out of it already. And just in time for this good weather!

She looks fondly at the scene. One of the older kids has the rope now. He climbs onto the whisky barrels stacked against the trunk. From this higher vantage point he pushes off with more force and the rope carries him further out across the water, where he drops, a neat arrow, with an even more satisfying splash. All the kids are wet now. You think of Alex swimming in that blue sea. You know you packed three sets of trunks for him. Your husband is an idiot.

You and Marissa watch as the swing is taken over by

the cluster of men. One of the husbands hands his beer to his pal and lumbers onto the barrels.

Watch out lads, he says.

The branch shakes as his full weight lands on the fishing buoy. The rope reaches the pinnacle of its arc and he spins back to the bank. He slides off, landing in the mud, complaining about what it will do to his new trainers. The trainers are box fresh you notice, and somehow look like they will never be broken in, they'll remain stiff on his feet, like he's playing dress-up. A boy masquerading as a man. But he's started a trend. One after another, all the men want a go. They dare each other to swing faster, swing further. Marissa watches on, a slight smile on her face. She does another lap, takes orders for drinks, snacks, does anyone need anything?

You wish you could be as calm and generous as Marissa. She seems so contained.

Thank you, you say and drain your glass again, why not?

Left alone you hover at the edge of the group. The kids have grown bored and wandered off. The woods would be a peaceful spot, were it not for the animal jostle of men. You like the bosky smell, wet soil, leaf mulch. It smells real. Primitive almost. You want to grub around in the mud and fill your face with it. The night before Alex left for his holiday, you'd nestled your head next to an open block of mince on the kitchen counter. You'd breathed in the coin-sharpness of blood and fat and your mind had cleared. You'd wanted to smear it on your cheeks like a facemask. Then Alex had crashed into the kitchen on his scooter and you'd told him off and tipped the mince into the pan, where your intent vanished with a sizzle. The impulse is the same now.

Having fun? asks Iain, at your shoulder.

He's holding a fresh bottle of wine. You wonder if he's sought you out or if he's just acting the good host.

The best time, you say.

And you actually sort of mean it. Being in Marissa and Iain's garden is restful, even with the party going on, in a way you hadn't expected. There's a sense of perpetuity to their lives, rooted by the confidence that generations of Iain's family have stood here before them. Whereas you feel like a sycamore seed, birling through the air, waiting to see where you'll land.

Will you have a go yourself?

Me, no, not likely!

You hold up your hands, showing Iain the plate with the remains of your pizza, and your empty glass, smudged in your sweaty grasp.

Let me top you up, he says, wine splashing.

He suggests sitting down and gestures to a bench, nestled into the slope of the hill, perfectly positioned for this moment. Marissa and Iain really do think of everything. The bench is just large enough for two people. Iain scootches up so there is space at the other end for the wine bottle and your plate. You aren't out of sight, not really, but the crowd by the swing is much too focused to notice anyway. Marissa's there, handing out beers. She looks around, looking for you perhaps. Then she wanders off again, busy with her duties. Iain spots her too, you are sure of that, but he doesn't call out to his wife, instead he turns back to you and asks you questions. What questions does he ask? Immaterial: they drift in and out of your mind like the froth on a stock. You laugh at things he says and he laughs at things you say. There's no denying you are both a bit pissed.

Shoulders bump

Knees bump

A sun-warmed hand rests briefly on sun-warmed skin
Who's to say

Who's to see

This lasts five minutes or much, much longer, you aren't sure which. When you do look, the riverbank is deserted. The sounds of the party are still going on above you, on the upper terraces. The sun is still high in the sky, this is midsummer in Scotland after all. The swing hangs flaccidly, no breeze to move it.

Show me how it's done?

Suddenly you want to jolt Iain out of this wine-soaked cosy afternoon. Just because you've been jilted is no reason to get into trouble with someone else's husband. Whatever is he thinking, all cooied in with you, out here in the woods?

Iain's up the whisky barrel already. King of his castle. You hand him the rope. It's thicker and rougher than expected. The buoy is heavier too. The rope twists in your hands, like something alive.

Away we go, shouts Iain, Watch this!

(Watch this, Mummy, says Alex.)

What does it mean to always be the one who watches. You are fed up of always being the bystander in your own life.

The swing swings, its trajectory set before Iain pushes off. You whoop and cheer; it's expected after all. As the buoy loops back, you taunt Iain, just a little.

Is that all you've got? Have you no tricks?

You're not sure what you mean exactly. Still, Iain must have heard because he scrabbles his feet on the plastic. His trainers look unsullied as well, you notice. He pushes up, shorts ruffled by the friction with the rope, until he's standing proud on the buoy.

Give us a push then!

So you reach across and give the buoy a great shove with your flat palms. Your arms are still your best feature. You've maintained your muscle tone despite the past few months. When you frisbeed those plates against the fence, your aim was straight and true, you could have hit a bullseye with each one. Iain shrieks as the swing suddenly moves much faster. Does his foot slip? You aren't sure. All you can say is by the time the swing comes back to your waiting hands, Iain's no longer on it. He's crumpled against the trunk of that solid oak tree at some point between the upward curve and the reciprocal counter-swoop.

And that's how they find you both. Iain with bark and splinters embedded in the cavern of his head. And you crouching like a goblin, red smears round your mouth where you've dipped your pizza crusts into the sticky mess, shovelling it all in.

Summary of *Desire Paths*

'A Lovely Day for a Party' is taken from the work-in-progress story collection, *Desire Paths*. Often set in or around water, these interconnected stories consider how relationships are shaped by environment, and how bodies respond to specific places. In turn sharp, wry, tender and gentle, the collection is anchored by four stories featuring the same protagonist, as she moves through phases of her life. As with 'A Lovely Day for a Party', the collection is predominantly realist, grounded in the nuances of everyday life, with occasional glimpses to another world, just beyond reach.

ZK Abraham

‘Zebib’s writing emerges from a deep concern with the complexities, contradictions and vulnerabilities of her characters. In the haunting ‘NuReal Meat’, revulsion and compassion are tensely harnessed to portray an unsettling near-future scenario, in which the possibilities and failures of human and more-than-human connection are movingly explored.’

Jane Alexander

Zebib K Abraham (who publishes as ZK Abraham) is a writer of speculative and literary fiction, and occasional non-fiction, as well as a psychiatrist. Her short work has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Fractured Lit*, *The Rumpus* and others. She has been a Royal Literary Fund fellow for the Reading Round programme, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and a Best of the Net award. Her debut novel, *My Darling Clementine*, is forthcoming from Amistad (Harper Collins) in 2027.

zkabraham.com

‘NuReal Meat’

She’s a goddamn beauty, our NuReal cow. She’s not a she, exactly. These cows aren’t sentient. These are facsimiles of cows, facsimiles of living things, but underneath, there is nothing there.

But yes, she’s a beauty. I call her Jean, although she’s subject X541 in our developmental research. Her huge body stands in the middle of the white, rectangular room, a section of the lab meant for product test cases. Glassy eyes, a grey-white tinted with a sheer blue, like clouds floating across a spring sky. Shining, auburn fur that glistens in the lab’s harsh light, absorbs the fluorescence. She stands in the middle of the long, cold room. Tucking my braids behind my ear, I run my gloved hand over her warm flank. Inhaling her fertile musk, I smell her exhales sour with the cud of her grassy feed.

There is no consciousness behind her eyes; I know that. It’s called global cognitive absence. We designed her for just that purpose. To eat and shit and grow but not to *be*. Not to see, to feel, to think or process on any conscious or subconscious level, if cows even have a subconscious. But those eyes reflect the light in such a way, like two crystal balls swirling with future secrets. Crystal balls aren’t alive, but they channel something from another realm. Or I’m just tired, possibly slightly tripping from all the stimulants I’ve used in the last few days to stay awake, to get through the final push of our years-long project. Higher-ups are stopping by for a demonstration on Friday.

Another lab member calls out to me, wanting help with some calculations via our analysing software. I

wave back at them, give a stiff smile, then turn back to our cow. Just a sec. I want to stand with her a moment longer. Closing my eyes, a rattling noise echoes to my left; the feeder sounds just like the approach of the tractors on the farm.

I inhale the malty, heady stink of the food and choke. Jean's head twitches. Instinct guides her down, down, mouth open and tongue flicking in the air. Her senses lead her to the pile on the floor, which she begins to eat at a brisk, mechanical rate. Just as we designed. The sharp, bitter scent of the feed flows into her nasal passages, hitting the olfactory neurons that run straight to the clump of rudimentary brain structures attached to her brain stem. A signal is sent back from her brain stem; eat, feed, chew, consume.

Her blinks are erratic, senseless twitches. I bite my tongue and try not to chuckle. Blink blink. Stare. Chew, blink. Her brain stem knows when the lab is dry, when her corneas have been exposed too long, when scleral cells scream for moisture and oxygen, BLINK BLINK BLINK. In this way, with each necessary function, we shaped her body to respond like clockwork, to experience the world as inputs into her fleshy machine, requiring outputs, in and out, keeping her going. She is a beautiful loop of air and blood and electricity.

'Dr Jedda! We need you! The oxygenation levels for the last few days are giving us anomalies.'

Leaning down, I inhale Jean's floral aroma, with undertones of ammonia and acrid earth.

*

Jean is a facsimile of a cow I knew from a long time ago. She is a facsimile of a memory, recreated within

the walls of our lab, a lab which sometimes feels like a manifestation of my own mind. Seemingly clean, organised, always busy. Clear white walls, ventilated air, shining glass tubes and so many humming, spinning machines. Contained madness.

When I finally get back to the apartment, Layla is asleep. Curled into herself, like she's trying to get away from me, even in her dreams. I've been working so much. She's pulled away, by degrees, less touch and less eye contact, fewer questions about work. Layla likes to think she's the moral barometer for our relationship, for the whole goddamn world. What we are doing in my research unit has great benefits for society, for the environment, for the preservation of animal life, but she's like a lot of people, unwilling to get into the sticky details of what that means. Alternative solutions. Yes, brainless cows. I've been talking about cows for five years straight. Layla thinks she cares about the cruelty of 'Frankensteinian, capitalistic' work, but she has never even seen a cow and she became a vegan last year to spite me. She doesn't get it. I don't care about the financials. Big meat is on its way out. NuReal meat is the future.

'Jedda.' She murmurs, groggy with sleep.

'Yeah?'

'It's late.' Turning back over, she begins to snore.

I wander into the living room. In our high-rise apartment on the outskirts of the city, we are outfitted with the best appliances, a kitchen of chrome curves, wide rooms with silent air-purifying and tall windows with endless settings. I've taken to sleeping on the couch, given my bouts of kicking and talking in my sleep.

Staring up at the ceiling, nestled under a lightweight blanket, I review the measurements from the last few

days, floating pixels in the air. The neurological response rates are faster than ever. The entity still displays certain erratic movements of the legs and head, sometimes leading to a minor convulsive episode. That is to be expected. Sometimes, I even like her weird spasms and disjointed steps forward, to nowhere. Like a newborn fawn. We just need the seizures to stop. Digestion and defecation are working better. No more bowel distentions and explosive diarrhoea. Things are moving. Stomachs are churning.

Sleep is still a few hours away.

I review the data. As I read the oxygenation numbers, I become hyper-aware of my own breathing. A narrowing of my trachea, a tightness in my chest, which resists expansion. As I try to take deeper breaths, I follow the shifting graphs of O₂ saturation. I could get Layla, ask her to help me, breathe with me. But I don't. No, I don't need her for this.

My ears ring. Sticking my head between my legs, I force my breathing to slow. An earlier version of Jean couldn't breathe right. Suddenly, after weeks of these erratic breathing episodes, her legs began to kick out, her nostrils flaring, her automatic functions misfiring, until she fell to the ground, CO₂ levels soaring as her whole body seized.

I have to stop thinking of her as *she*. Jean is an it. These things aren't living animals. They are a system of coordinating functions in the shell of a living thing. Sometimes, when I'm panicking like this, just like I did as a kid, I breathe in deep, exhale slowly, imagining my brain seeping out of my ears, my nose, carrying all my circling thoughts and higher functions, until I am just warmth, a pumping heart, twitching organs, touch, scent. It's dissociation, my last therapist said, but it helps

these episodes stop.

Fatigue crashes, bludgeoning me as the stimulants fade away. Muscles sore, my eyelids are tugged down by invisible strings. I sleep. I dream of the pastoral. I'm running through the same fields of the farm that I visited as a kid. The farm Dad and I toured, with the farmers dressed like scarecrows from *The Wizard of Oz*, and ladies in long blue dresses carrying milk pails. *What a strange place*, I thought. *I wish Mom were alive to see this*. The farm we drove four hours to reach, leaving the smoky abyss of the city behind, arriving with too many bags in the trunk, more than we needed for a trip of a few days.

The farm we didn't leave for three years.

*

I wake up to a bright day; I forgot to pull down the UV filters and the room is scorching.

Back in the lab, Jean is doing well. O₂ levels have evened out. Vitals and certain blood levels were concerning, sending a faint alarm off in the back of my head, but things are back on track. We feed Jean. Test its reflexes with minor electrical shocks, test internal implants. One of the hardest parts is keeping Jean standing without a brain. We realised we needed to provide assistance to the cows, juice up the rhythm-generating centres along the brain stem to maintain dynamic posture. We implant those at birth; light sedation, intubation, injecting paralytics, cutting through the skin, back muscles and ligaments, a gentle saw through the vertebrae to expose the tender, shining pink of the spinal cord, placing our small disc on the raw bundle of nerves.

We replaced Jean's implant last week. I petted her head as they did the surgery, watched her cloudy eyes stare back at me, blinking, then not blinking, mouth hanging opening, like she was going to moo.

Monitors flash. There is so much to do before our final review on Friday. We have multiple meetings a day reviewing test results. With the lack of sleep, the endless light, my eyes ache. A shiver runs down my arms as we discuss the five cow fetuses in various stages of embryogenesis, our dissection of the failed subjects from last month. All the errors, the horrors that have led us here. That's the definition of science. We've learned so much. It's not just gene splicing; we have to work with RNA, root down and attack these genes at every level.

We work into the afternoon, into the night. In between meetings, I gulp down protein smoothies, then suit up, walk into the lab and breathe in Jean's aroma.

*

The next night, Layla and I work off our holographic screens while eating. When I sleep, I dream I'm howling and running stark naked through fields of dark green grasses, at the blush of sunrise, hooting into the morning sun. I find our cow, Jean, standing amongst the crops. I stand over her, taller than when I was a kid. When I hug her, she smells of baby powder and she's warm.

I wake up early, pop stimulants, and practise my pitch to the higher-ups. This is our grand reveal.

A less stressed and fearful cow makes for better beef.

A meat industry that can lower harmful emissions can be sustainable in this world of deadly pollution and overpopulation and flooding coasts and wildfires that burn for months.

*We must do our part. We must innovate.
I understand cows. I grew up on a farm!*

*

Dad kept talking about fresh air, natural living, connecting with higher powers as Mom died. I remember him kneeling by her hospital bed. I remember when I was small, driven by them to see a farm upstate, seeing chickens for the first time. After she died, we moved to the commune, to our cult farm.

On 'the farm', a hundred of us slept across three horse barns, emptied out and cleaned, painted white and converted to human dwellings. It smelled like fossilised horse shit. At night, there was only the breathing of so many bodies in the musty, pitch-black dark. We rose together, knelt on the concrete floor and prayed. I went to 'school' in the red barn. Crowded along benches before our teacher, Sister Sara-Beth, who taught us the ways of our apostle, Jonah Matthews. He started 'the farm'. When I didn't listen, staring out the windows at the roaming cows and sheep, Sara-Beth came over and snapped my hand with a ruler.

How will you find God if you don't pay attention?!

Dad would hold my sore hand, told me how lucky I was to be close to salvation. A hot pressure built up behind my eyes. He thought I was just sad. I was rageful. So full my sinuses ached and I thought my eyes would explode. I couldn't stop any of it - Mom dying or Dad's disappearance into this God or my own stupid fear. I wanted control.

I never understood what we believed. God or Jesus or Jonah Matthews or natural living or blue skies or the cows and the sheep or whatever they told us that week;

just listen, just go out and milk the cows and obey like a good girl.

*

Somewhere amongst all the failed generations of NuReal cows, the genetic and embryogenetic changes that went haywire, I saw the potential to reach our ambitious goal.

Our embryos grow into fetuses, then babies, in clear, breathable, artificial wombs in a warmed section of our lab. We can inject our sampling needles through the thick membrane, extract amniotic fluid and tissue samples to test the growing bodies.

Many embryos failed at their earliest stages, the genetic changes too drastic, at first, to sustain life. We went back to the drawing board.

There were severe spinal defects, like spina bifida, fetuses born with their spines protruding through poorly formed vertebrae and back muscles. Their bodies failed to tolerate corrective surgery. In trying to eliminate the need for a brain, we fucked up bone formation, leading to chaotic spinal columns, fusions and severe kyphosis and scoliosis and torticollis. There were fetuses which seemed fine, with hearty musculature, whose growth factors couldn't be stopped. We hadn't perfected the release of hormones with such a small, rudimentary hypothalamus. The little cows had muscles that wouldn't stop expanding, growing denser. Too much good meat. Growing until they wobbled in place with massive shoulders twice the size of their heads and bones cracking under the weight of their own bodies.

Sudden, inexplicable necrosis, taking over in under a day. Fur-skin turning from white to pink, distorting, caving in, oozing a white-yellow pus. A fungal infection,

spreading through the whole goddamn cohort. All their wheezing, near-dead bodies stank of sour, yawning failure.

*

I met Layla in our PhD programme. Layla was doing a combined MD-PhD; she wanted to help save people from all the new, highly mutating infectious diseases moving through coastal communities. She wore silvery eyeshadow which glowed on her baked-earth skin.

We both stayed late in our adjoining labs, working longer than anyone else. We started talking about our dreams for a better future. How we both held onto hope, even then, even as the world itself mutated into something unrecognisable to us. Late at night, we'd walk by the bay and I described wanting to study genetic manipulation of ectoderm formation in mammals. Breeding a generation of farm animals better able to survive in the changing climate. As we walked, I studied her face. My stomach churned, my cheeks flushed. The parting of her lips. The twitch in her cheek. Rejection? I sank, retreated into a leaden shame, before her hand was suddenly on my cheek, she was giggling, then we kissed.

*

My sleep is worse the next night. I double my dose of stimulants that morning. I hear the shower run. In the bathroom, I tap on the steamy shower door.

'What?' Layla calls out.

'I'm heading out.' I don't know why I came in here.

A pause. 'Do you want to wait? I'm almost done. We can have coffee.'

‘I have to go.’ I’m restless. There is no time to waste.

*

At the farm, I snuck free time in the afternoons, as the sun was setting in shy oranges and volatile pinks, to pet the cows. I had my favourite. She was called Jean. All velvety brown fur, plaintive, low moooooos, a slobbering rough tongue.

Those three years, I learned the Bible, the scripture of Jonah Matthews, how to milk a cow, how to tend a garden, how to stare straight ahead in class while my mind wandered away, how to mend a dress, then how to kill a cow with the most efficiency. Dad took me with a group of boys and men to watch the slaughter. Out by the edge of the woods, amongst the overgrown grasses, we gathered near the teenage boy as he lifted the gun and shot the cow right between the eyes.

We scattered. Bad shot. His head spasmed left then right as he brayed, a strung-out, clarinet moan.

They killed Jean on the third Saturday of that cold February. We left the next day.

Dad figured out we were in a cult eventually. He woke up, little by little, rising out of the viscous haze of his grief. He decided to take us away, back to the city, back to actual jobs and school. I didn’t know how to be a normal kid any more. I didn’t know how to stay and I didn’t know how to go back.

*

As I run through numbers for the developing fetuses, I monitor their neural development and musculature. They are doing well, the next generation of Jeans.

If we wanted, we could carve a chunk out of them. The adult cows. Cut into their loin or rump; as long as we controlled the bleeding, they’d live. Probably. I haven’t tested that out yet; the shock to the body, what it can survive. Their pain sensors are turned down. They can’t plan or process or fight. But what if they could still live, if we dampened the muscular reactivity, perfected the release of stress hormones and accelerated healing? One cow could be an endless source of meat.

That’s not our goal, torture and exploitation. Although they wouldn’t feel pain, if we did the torture. Our goal is a cow that can produce the highest quality beef with the lowest environmental impact and financial cost, as well as freeing humanity of the horror of slaughtering sentient life.

Jean has grown to her fullest form in the last month. Her gut bacteria help in digestion while also dramatically reducing the methane emissions from her flatulence and defecation.

My dreams are tumultuous and I wake up gasping several times during the week.

Summary of 'NuReal Meat'

'NuReal Meat' explores a near-future world, in which scientists are developing a new kind of 'artificial meat'; meat from cows specifically developed without brains, to provide beef without a 'loss of life'. These cows are living incubators; a perfunctory set of functions that enable a living body without sentience. The protagonist, a scientist leading the project, grapples with delays in her research, her desperate desire for control, and traumatic memories of her childhood on a farm. A capitalist, eugenic view of 'life' and 'progress' haunts the story. 'NuReal Meat' is part of a collection titled *I Dream of Produce*. These loosely connected stories explore the theme of obsessive consumption.

Poetry

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Taylor Dyson

‘Taylor creates urgent, urban mythologies that reach bone deep. Her immense skill with characterisation gives real breath to every voice. The musicality of her writing and performance always comes to the fore – through exhilarating rhythmic and sonic choices contained by a nuanced and assured physicality. She is a master of emotional currents and undercurrents, drawing from a vast vocabulary of the intricacies of women’s lives and relationships – of grief and inheritance, fear and complication, anger, humour, hope, ambition and love. Taylor writes and performs from all these places with such grounded authenticity that readers and audiences are sure to follow.’

Rebecca Sharp

Taylor Dyson is an award-winning playwright, spoken word poet and actor from Dundee. She was appointed the Scots Scribe for the National Library of Scotland in June 2025, and runs theatre company Elfie Picket Theatre. Taylor is passionate about Scots language, working-class representation and women’s stories. Her writing credits include *Ane City*, *Dolly Parton Saved My Life*, *Pushin’ Thirty* and *Goodbye Dreamland Bowlarama*. Taylor has been working on a new spoken word show and collection, *Mither/Daughter*, as part of the New Writers Award: an urgent and raw exploration of motherhood, intergenerational trauma and class, combating the stereotypes and stigmas associated with single motherhood and working-class lives.

elfiepicket.com | Instagram: @tayemilylisa

Thurr’s a Scheme

Thurr’s a scheme,
Whaur streets knot thegither
Celtic patterns forged fae bricks and watter
Thurr’s a burnie that rins richt through the hert o it
Tyre swings, trolleys ditched, needles – nae fae trees.
Roads lined wi Corsa-crushed Coke cans,
White vans drehv roon helpin fowk flit feechie flats for
tenners
Decayin hooses built efter war, blocks o cooncil white.
Thurr’s auld fowk fae far-flung places
And anes that have never left this place.
Baith groups wrapped in blankets o beige,
Some o the wummin hae pooder-pink hairdos
Done fae Gaynor wha gaes aboot dain homers.

Thurr’s workies, bakers, shoap workers
Artists, poets and scribes
Never been a believer masel but
Thurr’s a stoorie kirk
Next tae the purple skale.
Which inside isnae adorned wae gold or jewels,
Nae an ornate stained-glass windee in sight.
Nae distractions when yer no quite intae Faither
whitshispus’s mass
But ye shid see the gairden and its emerald grass.
Jeanie the priest’s righ haun wummin does it.
Plants lilies and violets and hyacinths.
Jasmine curls up the grey stane wa’s.
Thurr’s a community centre an a,
Soviet brick oan the ootside
Inside it’s Barbie pink and 80s leisure-centre blue

They've been threatenin tae shut it doon since 1982
Stappit wi wabbit mums, snottery bairns, ladies knittin
dollies.

Bletherers, modern-day spaewives and dae-gidder
crusties.

Painters, candlestick makars and wannabe fitba players
Thurr's a staund aff atween karate and taekwondo,
And then there's the wummin wha runs salsa-zumba-
flamenco

Three for the price o one.

Thurr's the wee strip, as we like tae call it

BAYNES/ROWLANDS/SPAR/IANUCCI'S

Empire biscuits, moarnin rolls, methadone, Gaviscon,
milk and fags and chips and fritters

Shoplifters and prams, skale bairns and gifters

The chippy wummin's oot takin orders. Johnny wi his
bike and his twa radge boxers.

The doags. No like actual boxers.

Cross the road and doon the brae, a pub whaur nuhin's
ever cheynged

Step inside, go back in time,

Unco smoky for this day and age,

Puggies, except the fruit has been replaced wae boobs.

The men wae nae wives, deid wives and wives they
canna thole,

The haverers the veterans and the anes that fritter their
dole.

The regulars come at the open o the day and leave the
place in a sorry state

The wummin poap in sometimes for a wee bar lunch
date.

*Specials include macaroni wi chip and brade,
Mince wi chip and brade or*

Sasij wi chip and. . . brade.

Cobwebbed photaes adoarn the wa's o nichts lang
forgoatten,

Brian the barman propped up craftin his concoctions
Frida the eighty-fev year auld wha's no stopped coughin

Then there's a big, fat man at the back o the room,

Sportin a blazer in an affy shade o maroon,

Sittin coontin his dosh and chawin his choonie,

He's got bags o stuff we dinna ask aboot,

And see when he's in a good mood

He'll shout

Athin' is oan the hoose!

And wee Jakey Jim nips in fae time tae time, sellin his
wares

I've seen him wi CDs, seen him wi perfume, seen him wi
handbags, books and ane time he actually haud a loom.

And oan the edge o it aa

Ye'll never believe

A castle

Built for a femly seat

That's been there for hunners and hunners o years

Bent ower lik mither ower cradle,

Barbed-wire fence and broken gless

The fairmhooses whaur the peasants once boozed

Broken and bulldozed

Their histories scattered tae the scheme

And left in their place a shadow o what used tae be

A castle left tae rot

And every person here has a memory o braklin in,

Drinkin, reekin o booze and piss,

It's often whaur ye'd hae yer first. . . kiss.

A lassie wis murdered there,

By a man enraged,
 And still they tell us no tae waunder or stray...
 But this is oor lives
 We dinna hae much o a say
 Intertwined wae the groond that once was blessed
 As ancient and sacred as the rest
 O this country
 Whaur for thoosands o years
 Mithers and their daughters have fought
 Argued
 Apologised
 Broken each other's herts
 And moaned
 Groaned
 Forgotten tae phone
 Skipped curfews
 Ignored the news
 Plasterin single mums and their cooncil bairns a ower
 For views
 So you could spew
 Hatred and lies
 And misgiven statistics
 As you spout that it's morally wrang for us tae exist
 Well, I hate tae burst your bubble o bliss
 But we *do*
 And some o wi live oan this wee scheme

Meet Leanne

Leanne is a single mither.
Leanne's no a soccer mom
 And her daughter, Chelsea
career mom, or cool mom
 Has a lot tae say about her
career mom, or cool mom
 They faa oot every ither week
*In fact,
 she doesna really ken
 whit kinda mom she is*
 Screamin matches, greetin for days,
 then turn the ither cheek.
Mibbe there's a quiz?
 Screamin matches
Leanne's pastimes include
 Readin... True life stuff...
*Magazines...
 The glossy trashy anes.*
 Ye ken the anes -
 wi the stories that canna possibly be true
*Val, 59,
 gets paid 100 grand a year
 to shit on men's chests,
 and you can too*
 Oor Leanne used tae be carefree,
 life and soul o the party
Life and soul
 She was renowned for her strikin looks
Life and soul
 Cool claes tae boot
Life and soul

The life and soul

*Fowk were kent tae queue,
As she dished oot pills,
like a priest haunin oot the body o Christ,
Aabdy wantin a sip fae Leanne's cup.
Noo, she prays for the days tae end,
Her days broken up by powdered cappuccinos,
Loose Wummin or Jeremy Kyle*

All the while, treadin oan eggshells wae hersel,
Never kennin whit she's gonna git
Or whaur her mind will tak her.

*Leanne gets these obsessions,
Lately it's goin tae confession,
draggin her bairn tae church
in their Sunday dresses.
She confesses her sins
and blesses hersel wi the watter*

And dishes oot coins and shakes hauns
*sips teas wi auld ladies,
as her daughter is forced intae the Sunday class.*

Leanne's taken a dislike tae the wummin
Wha does the flower arrangements - Jackie,
Jackie gies her daggers across the congregation,
as she taks big sips o wine.
Leanne doesna mind though - cause the priest far
prefers her.
He gied Leanne a Bible

*Sent her spirallin,
It wis probably for Chelsea,*
But it's the first time she caun read it properly,
BIG letters and pictures coloured in.
Every Saturday, Chelsea haus tae read it

Plonked in front o the telly, wi Prince o Egypt

And Joseph
See
She
Doesna want tae leave her daughter tae the streets,
Her bairn is kind and sweet,
Mild-mannered, and shy,
Her daughter wonders why she
Doesna get oot as much as the others.
Easy - ye dae whit I tell ye, I'm yer mither.

*Cocooned in this cooncil white block
She rocks hersel tae sleep*
Convincin hersel she's dain the right thing.

Isolatin?
Protectin.
Ye see, Leanne isna sure how tae be a mither.
Meh mither

Meh mither
Is...

It's no right. Speakin tae me like that, it's no.
It comes and goes. Self-doubt and sheer confidence.
Stickin tae meh guns or no.

Whit kind o mither does that?
Whit kind o mither are ye?

This is your fuckin fault
This is aa meh fuckin fault

*Leanne doesna ken
whit kind o mither she really is.*
Leanne doesna ken wha she is at aa.

Leanne is. Leanne is?
Wioot an identity. Personality scattered tae the past.
Leanne is aboot riddy tae crack. The life and soul?
Life and soul.

Traditional Family Values

It's no that I dinna love her
I just, dinna ken how tae
Look efter her
It's times like this whaur
Ye dinna ken if yer
Comin or gaun
It doesna really feel real
We are just hame fae the hospital
The hoose is empty. Completely empty.
I light a fag.
Even though I ken I shouldn't.
I just dinna ken what else tae dae.
But smoke. Fuck. That was
Traumatic.
What noo?
She's so tiny. How do they even breathe?
Where does she go noo?
I'll have to call someone. Soon.
But I'll have a fag first. And a coffee. And maybe
A nap.
If my mum could do it so can I
I think.
It canna be that
Hard
She winna stop
Greetin
Ocean blue. Aye. When they opened they wurr
Saft. Wattery. Wee beads o tears fallin
Fixed her gaze oan tae me, the rest's a blur.
I think she kent, I love you the last thing

First thing I said tae her, I swear she smiled
She did, I'm positive. Then, naethin else.
Hame, sweet hame. Canna wait for it, meh child.
Hame. Her's. The ringin o phone and kirk bells.
Shut it aa oot. Shut them oot.
Lock the doors, close the blinds, turn the lights oot
I'll sing ye sangs... I dinna think I ken any
This is my sign tae get a van. Get awa. Just me.
Fuck that!
Don't worry about a thing cause every little thing is
gonna be
Fragmentit
Pieced thegither frae collections o memories
Stuffed intae drawers and
piled high intae cupboards
I hate tae be the bearer o tradition
Oor tradition is this. This cycle.
A never endin circle that canna be broken.
Cause every little thing is gonna be
A man in a suit shouts at a wummin in a trackie on the
telly. People clap.
A man in a suit snickers at me
as I talk aboot whaur Am fae in a lecture hall.
As I let my guard doon, and the accent comes oot.
A man in a suit shouted at me
as I smoked a rollie up in the café chairs on the street.
A man in a suit eyeballs me
when I walk into a conference,
like Am a piece o meat.
A man in a suit told me I will never be
A man in a suit laughed at me
when I told him I need a carer and he's probably right
I dinna need
Men in suits mak decisions

about every little thing we do

Let's get back to basics.

Back. To. Basics.

Stop the benefits

Stop their benefits.

Back tae basics.

'Morally behaved people should be placed ahead of
single mothers on housing lists'

'Children of single mothers are better off in the care of
good, religious institutions'

'I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week had
no dad at home'

'They never would be missed, young ladies who get
pregnant just to jump the housing list'

'One of the biggest social problems of our day is the
surge in single-parent families.'

'What is more worrying is the trend in some places for
young women to have babies with no apparent intention
of even trying a marriage'

'or stable relationship with the father of the child.'

'The natural state should be the two-adult family caring
for their children.'

'Family values.'

'Traditional roles.'

Traditional family values.

Mum? Mum?

Rise up this morning, smile with the risin sun.

Can you listen to me for once?

Three little birds pitched by my doorstep.

Mum - I don't know what to do. Please.

Singin sweet songs of melodies pure and true.

Mum! Mum!

This is my message to you.

Chelsea and the Castle

Chelsea hides in the owergrown hedges,
Huddin her breath, cheeks puffed, tip-toein ower
primrose, cornflowers and broken bottles,
She leaps ower a rustit dagger nestled in atween
dragon's eggs.

The air smells of herbs.

Chelsea gets a fleg when she hears the group o boys
approachin

Encroachin oan her safe space.

Hears their screamin, they are attention seekin.

She picks pink and purple flowers aff their stems and
crushes thum, in atween her fingers

Smears the dye across her face.

She kens this place lik the back o her haun.

Has explored every pairt o these grounds,

Kens each soond.

She's practised bein still and silent

Seen and no heard.

The boys get closer.

They are haein a competition tae see wha kens the maist
swear words...

Fuckin cunt

Stupit slut

Bitch

Tits

Fanny

The words, though she doesna ken whit they mean, gie
her a pit in her tummy,
She creeps intae the castle windee that's been panned in
for years,

Adds tae the etchins in the wa's
 A tapestry o graffiti,
 Dicks, names, numbers, letters
 LM & TP 4 eva
 Hearts
 And stars
 Tits
 RYAN IS A SHIT
 Folkloric
 Chelsea draws Ariel – wha's her favourite cause she's
 princess *and* a mermaid.
 Imagine.
 The boys come poundin in
 Riddy tae kill
Hot
Face
Red
Raw
Tears
Stream
Runnin
Screamin
Swearin
Zero tae a million
Any wee lassie wull dae for a beatin
 She batters doon the knottin roads
 Till she's hame
 She lays hersel oan her mum's lap
 She can breathe...
 The next day Chelsea plays with her friend
 Who bides at the endie bit o the street in a hoose
 Wae a gairden
 The sun is shinin
 So her mum, in her good mood, singin,

Allows her oot
 Chelsea taks her pal tae the castle
 Crossin ower the burnie
 Past the settee crawlin wi weeds
 The boys are there batterin ane anither
It's okay, they winna dae anythin
 Her pal, no convinced, continues oan the pathie
 taewards the castle doorway
 Forgettin
 Pretendin they're princesses,
 Twins separatit at birth
 Princess and the pauper
You're the mink.
 Chelsea's friend laughs in her face
 Makin crowns oot o roses
 Thorns pokin intae her fingers and scalp
 The pair, searchin for lost treasures,
 Separate.
 Convinced they can find somethin tae mak them rich
 Jewels?
 Or
 Precious stones?
 A chest filled wae gold?
 Chelsea weaves bracelets ootae damp gowans
 And baby buttercups
 Hummin melodies saft
 When she hears a scream
 Thinkin it's pairt o the game
 She ignores it
 Silence
 Golden
 Peaceful whirrs o cars oot oan the street
 Train horns and seagulls shriek.
 Chelsea, proud o her creations

In aa her elation
 Seeks oot her friend
 That lives at the end o the street
In a hoose
 Her hert sterts tae beat fest
 As she winds roon
Kayleigh?
 she says in her best princess voice
Oh Princess Kayleigh, my sister?
 Naething?
 It is gettin daurk.
 The sun is shinin orange in the sky.
 Pink streaks.
 Kayleigh is naewhaur tae be seen.
 Her panic rises -
It isn't funny Kayleigh stop hidin!!!
 Kayleigh lies inside the castle door
 Bruised
 Crumpled up
 Defeatit
 The enemies have retreatit
 Nae a word said
 Chelsea runs for her mither
Mum I think Kayleigh is dead.
 Flashin blue sirens wail intae the night
 As Kayleigh's mum screams intae the air
 Panic and
 Panic
 Chelsea's mum is manic,
 Naebdy caun breathe
 Polis knockin
 Neighbours seethin
 Auld yins peerin oot their windees

Kayleigh's mum looks at Chelsea wi a look o utter hate
 As if it wis her fault
 As if she wid dae this tae her mate.
 Chelsea's mum taks her inside
 Locks the door
 And shuts the blinds
 And maks her hot chocolate wi milk
 No just the pooder and watter
Why did the boys do that to her?

Stey awa fae them, d'ye hear me?
 Her mum clips as she stirs the mix in the pot
Nae mair playin in that street.

Kayleigh and her family leave the hoose nae lang after
 Leaves the skale and the scheme atgether
 Probably went tae live their happy ever efters.

Summary of *Mither/Daughter*

Mither/Daughter is a brand-new longform spoken word piece, a duet between mother and daughter, utilising Scots language, weaving in reality and fantasy whilst exploring the landscape and stereotypes surrounding working-class women and single motherhood.

To see Taylor perform her spoken word poetry, scan the QR code or visit scottishbooktrust.com/taylor-dyson



Flora Leask Arizpe

‘Flora writes with vivid precision mapping landscapes, languages and intimacy into poems that feel both timeless and urgently contemporary. Her collection Vagabonda is a brave exploration of travel, desire and impermanence where every image lingers – a true companion for the restless and searching. Her voice is lyrical, daring and unforgettable – a poet of rare clarity and vision.’

Janette Ayachi

Flora Leask Arizpe is a writer from Glasgow, although she has also lived in Mexico, Spain and Ireland. Her short stories and poems can be found in publications such as *Gutter*, *Interpret Magazine*, *Propel Magazine* and *Palimpsest* arts magazine. She has been a member of the UK/Barcelona-based artist collective Age of Concern since its founding in 2020.

Flora’s previous publications include the risoprint zine *Flower-Star & Other Poems* (2023), *Visions* (2022) and the zine collaboration with Hermione Byron, *JAPAZINE!* (2024). She is currently working on her first collection of poetry, *Vagabonda*, which is centred around travel, exploration, language and connection.

Hook & Lure

Fishhook, as in, a hook shaped like a fish,
how salt-water makes old scars sting

(even if they can no longer be seen).
How much a single man can drink,

the things worse than fighting, like keeping quiet.
The tide of the mood turning, all at once, on day five,

a hook used to bait a fish,
the strength required to play a steel-string guitar,

how fingers bloody the song.
A mouth that curls over an offering
& bites down hard.

Requiem for the Flux

After Joseph Macleod's long poem, *The Ecliptic*

There, on the table, lies praxis past.

A poet, who like all poets loved meaning & sound:
'rhizome', 'deliquescence', 'elephantine'.

His work sits eloquent, over-loquacious,
a young classicist who spooled a reel of nectar
to a brand-new typewriter, laid down words
urgently, not haphazard nor underhand,
only over-hazardous. The black marks, like alchemy
cast a lattice to catch whoever was nearby.

I was reeled, read, confronted the table, asked:
what kind of conversations can be had
when the actors stand far-silhouetted
across a breach so wide that the world
& its decades are falling inside?

One way starts, one side. There is one listener here,
I incline an ear to the ancient scroll to hear
a muffled movement within.

Oh great sage! Speak of the zodiac & other hermetica -
I will listen to the music of alchemical equations
which tried to locate gold, what gold meant,
as in the meaning of the word
& any other such word.

Its fluxion images
produce by avid dictionarianism:
bulls & boats flurry forth in Olympian thunder,
the zed of zenith vibrates past like a wasp.

I refute any effort made to be misunderstood,
for opacity is a reminder to hear the music in the word.

I refute all public-school-boy marginalia:
all interest in the ungraspable belongs to be shared.

I listened, now must try to complete the question.
What chance did we have of reading your mind
they ask? It wasn't up to them - I know,
I've written scores which clamber up walls,
refuse to enter the ears of audiences;
the point was to let them diffuse into the air
become spray. Enjoy, wantonly, words.
For poetry is grasping something that is not ours,
but we take from anyway, a sliver of understanding,
bubble delicate, web-strong ambivalent,
perhaps completely wrong.
It's about desire - we reach out
to steady our trembling with another's hand,
to banish our fear that what surround us are ghosts.

So by casting this net of words to link each star
with this hair-fine needle I'll reach you
take some of that understanding across time & father-
lines
build a fine shivering rhizome from sounds
once made deliquescent; now through speech able to
evaporate into air
to rise over the elephantine chasm
& hear them pluck each thread
to create of the stars a table,
& see atop it a book.

The Sequence

For starters, Fibonacci numbers can be found in the natural world all around us.

- The beauty of maths, BBC Bitesize

One meristem
& one man, made
euphor(b)ia by the two coronae
of brown plaits on his lover's head.
He opened himself up to her iris, three
petalled in that odd old spiral, & very red.
Five was the number of flowers he gave her:
larkspur, frangipani, wild rose & hibiscus,
then forget-me-nots; the hand's five fingers sensed
her always when nearby. He stretched & it opened, palm-
upwards,
vulnerable, to catch that which floated towards him
from her. It was
the eighth day of the eighth month, the aster was
flowering - there were
many-petalled tongues of thirteen & twenty-one.
Pigment-livid, he said he would
marry her at thirty-four in the sunflower field; she
would have whole meadows at fifty-five;
& finally, at eighty-nine, those round brown plaits would
turn to white roses before his eyes.

Tourist Season

By the time the helicopter takes off
the whole place will be on fire again.
Cicadas sound like rubbing two sticks together,

we're making the yellow figs black,
we're as careless with seeds
as a child throwing eggs on the ground.

Buildings take root as selfish mushrooms
cats attack chains from boredom.
Meanwhile dust falls

from the stars: burning, burning.
Soon this island will be the surface of a star,
its people charred as St Michael's demon.

Their long shadows, still drinking & dancing
will be thrown far by the endless wildfires.
This time the burning bushes prove no god to be real,

except as the thing
which restores all
to an equal plane.

Sand, sun, surplus
we take it all from the other
& then burn the remains.

Ways of Getting There

I dreamt of never-ending voyages, waiting rooms,
waiting for you among endless cappuccinos
drowning visitors' boredom, watching
them wake & stretch, those sleep-riders,
passenger seat in the ambulance.

With me, you. With me, the oldest woman I'd ever seen,
wheeled from emergencies in a blue plastic palanquin –
her smile creased her face tyrannically,
a leader who orders, not with demands, but needs.

I heard the sea in each of your wheezes as you slept,
felt the worry rock me back & forth
like a boat tending towards whirlpool
or some other final place.

What can be made in a hospital bed?
Holding hands we sped towards Cles
a pair of honeymooners, romantic
if not for the Italian paramedic
touching your chest.
You chatted: *Ragazza? Sì, bella!*
Bambini? No, è complicato.

I dreamt of never-ending voyages, by my side, you;
only now beginning to fear
the ways we could be getting there –
ambulances & stretchers
not being my first choice –
dreaming with those whose journeys were ending
all around us as we waited.

While every small dark hour a car
pulled up outside *pronto soccorso*,
ushered us, dreaming still, to wait anew
in a different room, or the same room,
(for if you travel too much too fast
you find another final place: sameness)
taking us further
& further
& further
from where we'd come from.

So, at two in the morning
when the hospital spat you out
& I awoke to the news of no taxis
there was nothing to be done but travel
to the morning together
in two blue plastic beds
set up in the middle of emergencies
by the friendly blonde air-stewardess
& say
we're getting there.

Forum #282 take midnight mass

o
baptise me Daddy with your wide-legged lunges on stage
daily routine of minmaxxing microdosing at 4am
an elite diet of psilocybin &
methylenedioxymethamphetamine
o
shave my head & kiss my naked scalp & take me to the
kind of ego
death that can only be scrolled by thousands who would
give
their only extended amygdala to get even close to ur
kind of play
o
lost boys don't look for milfs in their area any longer,
drowned
in their synthetic cannabinoids or lysergic acid
diethylamides
alone in their childhood bedrooms or simply thru the
power of prayer
o
St David St Outsider St Peterson St Tate St Trump
i haven't cum in 3 days but the blue steak will make me
alpha
im going canis lupus boys - it's not shamanic but
scientific
o
beast mode activate me, i haven't felt anything inside
since puberty
protein power shake me up & ill cut those feminised
vegetables
if it means i grow up bigger & stronger than my own

mother

o

me & the boys help each other measure our maxillary
bone
brotherhood is an arena where we shit on each others'
pillows
& groan & feel the frequency of lower registers together
o
homo erectus y did u debase urself by settling down?
we had power but it got lost some point in the
agricultural stage
& im going to be the man who takes us all back one day

a men

Summary of *Vagabonda*

All of these poems except 'Requiem' and 'Forum' are from Flora's current project: a collection centred around the character of a woman, travelling, or 'Vagabonda'. Vagabonda was born screaming and wayward, a woman who refuses to stay in one place. As she makes her way around the world, she realises that travelling in the 21st century opens up a wealth of questions about the self, the environment, and the relationship between the two. Is there still freedom to be found in movement, when a traveller must carry the weight of their carbon emissions, their privilege, their status as outsider and tourist? What does it mean to be travelling alone? What kind of connections can be made, sustained and lost by movement?

Petra Johana Poncarová

‘Tha bàrdachd Phetra domhainn is spòrsail, tuigseach agus ceòlmhor. Tha liut aice air dealbhan a thogail na briathran a bhios a’ maireachdainn ann an cuimhne an leughadair. Tron chuid bàrdachd gheibhear sealladh a tha aig an aon am ur agus air a bhogadh nar canain is cultar.’

‘Petra’s poetry is deep yet playful, considered and full of music. She is skilled at creating images through her words, which linger in the memory. Through her work, we gain insights that are at once refreshing and rooted in our language and culture.’

Calum L MacLeòid

‘S e neach-rannsachaidh, eadar-theangadair, agus sgrìobhadair a th’ ann am Petra Johana Poncarová, agus tha i air a bhith ag obair eadar Seacais, Gàidhlig na h-Alba, is Beurla. Nochd a’ chiad làn leabhar-rannsachaidh aice, *Derick Thomson and the Gaelic Revival* (Chlò Oilthigh Dhùn Èideann ann an 2024) agus dheasaich i co-chruinneachadh de rosg Gàidhlig le Ruairidh MacThòmais, *An Staran* (Acair, 2025). Tha i air a bhith ag eadar-theangachadh bho Ghàidhlig gu Seicis, mar eisimpleir *Deireadh an Fhoghair* le Tormod Caimbeul agus bàrdachd le Pàdraig MacAoidh, Ruairidh MacThòmais, agus Niall O’Gallagher. Nochd na dàin aice ann an *Aimsir*, *Steall* agus *New Writing Scotland*, cuid dhiubh fon ainm-pinn ‘Johana Egermayer.’ Fhuair i cuireadh a cuid bàrdachd a leughadh aig tachartasan ann an Alba, Sasainn, agus anns a’ Ghearmailt.

Petra Johana Poncarová is a researcher, translator and writer, working between Czech, Scottish Gaelic and English. She has published one research monograph, *Derick Thomson and the Gaelic Revival* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024) and edited a selection of Thomson’s Gaelic prose, *An Staran* (Acair, 2025). Her translations, made directly from Gaelic into Czech, include the novel *Deireadh an Fhoghair* by Tormod Caimbeul and poetry by Peter Mackay, Niall O’Gallagher and Derick Thomson. Her Gaelic poems have appeared in *Aimsir*, *Steall* and *New Writing Scotland*, some under the penname ‘Johana Egermayer’. She has been invited to read her poems at events in Scotland, England and Germany.

petrajohanaponcarova.com

An t-Eadar-theangadair

Uaireannan, bidh amharas a' tighinn orm
gu bheil e fada anmoch mar thà,
gu bheil na beàrnan eadar na trì cànan
fada ro dhomhainn is ro mhòr.
'S ann leatsa a tha an dithis aca bho thùs,
fhuair mise dhiubh ach iasad.
An dà chànan seo, agus na rinn thu leotha –

oir chan urrainn dhomh neo-leughadh
na coisrigidhean do dhaoine eile,
na rannan gaoil a tha a' dearbhadh
gu mair cianalas is cùram gu sìorraidh bràth.
Bidh na geallaidhean clò-bhuailte sin, air aimhreit,
ag ath-ghairm na mo cheann, mar chagar fiatach.

Aig an ìre seo, bhiodh e furasta aideachadh
nach urrainn dhomh ach a bhith
ag ath-aithris, a' strìochdadh, agus a' trèigsinn.

Ach is dàna leam, is bhithinn dàna ort,
is chanainn gu bheil cothroman fhathast ann:
seilbheachadh na brù-chainnt,
mise a' cur d' fhaclan air mo theanga,
gan slaodadh a-steach gu ionad eile,
far a bheil thu air chall gu loma-lèir,
is mo stòr-sa a' lìonadh suas le gach lid'.
Tha e do-dhèanta an tasgaidh seo a thoirt air falbh,
chan urrainn dhut, fiù 's ged a dh'fheuchadh tu.

Oir tha an t-eadar-theangadair coltach ri faileas,
doilleir, gun guth air leth, agus buileach sleamhainn.

Cha robh mi air mo mhealladh, oir tha e fada anmoch
mar-thà.

Dh'imrich na faclan. Chan eil tilleadh ann.

Nòta: Chaidh an dàn seo fhoillseachadh ann an *Aimsir*
(Samhain, 2023).

Nàdar de Dheas-ghnàth

An toiseach, flò:

Dòbhrain a' snàmh gu frogail,
faoileagan gàireach air iteag
mu sgaoil eadar na dealbhan.
Ach, anns an dàrna sealladh,

chithear nach robh iad nan cruthan a-mhàin
ach daoine beò le sùilean luath
agus deismireachd shòlaimte,
a' carachadh ann an nàdar de dheas-ghnàth.
Tostachd, glaine, fiamh – agus fèineachas fuar.

An clogaid le sreamaidhean eanchainn
(no an e claigeann fosgailte a th' ann?),
lus-chrùn, na driseagan, deur fala –
no smal air uachdar an deilbh.
Agus na sùilean air sabhd bhon cheann-uidhe.

Is an cupa-gaoil na làmhnan,
cupa an t-slànachaidh, cuach-nimhe,
nighean rìgh fo thuinn thrèigte,
an càraid fo gheasaibh mhaireannach.
Nàire, sannt, is call, uile anns a' chiad shùgan.

Triùir isean-eala gleansach air a' chreag,
tachas nan itean, gàirdean gu bhith na sgiath,
agus balach eile na h-eun coileanta,
coilear mun amhaich, is òran ùr leth-tachdta.
Naoi linn de sheinn thiamhaidh ri sheasamh.

Gobhar-dhuine a' tàladh clann dhan choille,
manaich air an glùinean aig crois shnaidhte,
agus cruth sgàileach a' gabhail suas an cnoc
gu adhradh eile, am baile bàn air chrith fad às.
Agus aodann neulach am falach ann an sgòth.

Laoidh an ròis ag èiridh bho gach sgòrnan
ach aon: am fòirnear dì-sheirmeach
a' taibhseachadh air a' chearcall leadarra.
Agus anns a' challaid, fosglaidhean fàilteach
gu tìrean seunta, gu cùl a' chanabhais.

Cha sguir na caran seo gu bràth,
leig sealladh farsaing, deireannach, air dearmad:
oir gach turas, chì thu samhla ùr,
peucag a' teàrnadh, eilean ùr air fàire,

agus saoil dè bhios a' tachairt às an amharc.

Nòta: Tha an dàn seo stèidhichte air ìomhaighean bho obair John Duncan (1866–1945), peantair ainmeil a rugadh agus thogadh ann an Dùn Dè. Bha ceanglaichean dlùth aig John Duncan ri Èirisgeigh, bha e eòlach air Maighstir Ailean Dòmhnallach, agus fhuair e far-ainmean anns a' choimhearsnachd, 'Iain na Tràghad' agus 'Iain a' Chladaich'. Tha teisteanasan ann gun robh ùidh aige ann an Gàidhlig.

Chaidh an dàn seo fhoillseachadh ann an *Steall* 10 (2026).

Àite nan Iomadh Loch

‘... gun ach ainmean sgrìobhte marbh
air a’ chloinn ’s na fir ’s na mnathan
a chuir Rèanaidh às an fhearann
eadar ceann a tuath na Creige
’s an Caisteal a thogadh do MhacSuain
no do Mhac Ghille Chaluim
airson fòirneart agus dìon.’

‘Sgreapadal,’ Somhairle MacGill-Eain

‘... ’s an dèidh sin, an dèidh sin,
tha mi gu bhith ’na mo charragh-cuimhne.’

‘Ged a Thillinn A-nis’, *An Rathad Cian*, Ruaraidh
MacThòmais

I: Losgadh na Tìre

Teine a’ strì ri uisge tro na linntean.
An loch a bh’ ann an toiseach.
Staidhre sa ghàrradh, agus co-shìnte rithe
dà allt a’ ruith san amaran de ghaineamh-chlach.

Chaidh an taigh-mòr ’na smàl
uair ro thrì thairis air ùine.
Dèan peanas no mallachd dheth.
No tubaist. Do roghainn-sa.

An dèidh a bhith a’ gluasad eaglaisean,
– am mìorbhail sin,
tunnaichean is tunnaichean
de chlach shnaidhte, ainglean, agus airsean,
air an tarraing airson naoi ceud slat,
fhad ’s a bha an saoghal air fad a’ coimhead,
air a bheò-glacadh, is aig an aon àm
an seann bhaile a’ dol an deachamh
le daineamait –

chan eil e buileach cho doirbh
a bhith a’ gluasad dhaoine.

Fhuair iad ionadan an àite taighean,
ann an cathair bhàn a chaidh a thogail,
ri taobh làrach a’ chomhaltaich
air an robh an dearbh ainm,
mearachadh-sùla concrait air a’ chnoc,
a’ cumail faire ris an uaigh staoin.

Dh’fhalbh an loch,

is chaidh an tìr air fad na lasadh,
ìobairt-loisgte air leac teasa.

Saighdearan fo mhisg mun cuairt teine-èibhinn
a rinn iad le leabhraichean is spùinn na seilg.
Roimhe seo, leagh iad deiseachan-cruaidhe
agus clogaidean airson spòrs.

Nach iongantach gu bheil
mèinn-uachdair gu math coltach ri loch,
ach falamh, sin an rud. Tioram.

II: Na h-Ìomhaighean Àileach

Ach roimhe seo, bha tuathanaich ann,
a' solarachadh do rìomhadh is sàimh
an taigh-mhòir, àrd air sliabh na beinne.
Bailtean sgiobalta, achaidhean torrach,
ceòl is cuideachd, sealg is seinn.
Òr-mheasan agus figean ag abachadh
ann an teas nan taighean-glainne,
ainmhidhean bho thìrean cèin
a' dol ànrach anns a' bhuaile,
cinn-cloiche nam mòr-rìghrean Ròmanach
a' coimhead suas bhon bhalla le plìon.
Le belle immagini.

An oighreachd gu lèir air a dealbhachadh
mar ghàrradh gàirdeachais,
ach le prothaid fhallain a' tighinn gun sgur
bho na raointean – agus bho na mèinnean,
oir bha iadsan ann mar thà:
Èibhlean a' sgriosa a bha fhathast ri teachd.
Ho con me l'inferno mio.

Am balach seo a thogadh
eadar an taigh-mòr is na seann choilltean,
theich e gu Pràg an toiseach.
An dèidh sin thàinig Eadailt, Sasainn, fiù 's an Ruis.
Cò aig a tha fios ma bha seanais nan craobhan-faidhbhile
fhathast a' cagair 'na chluasan.
No glaodh nan slocaichean, mar ro-chluich.
Ach 's iongantach gun robh. Bha cus ciùil eile ann.
Dell'aure il susurrar, il mormorar de rivi.

A-nis, tha com a' chù de chlach
na laighe san duslach air an làr,
taobh ri innealan àiteachais air aimhreit,
iarann toinnte air a chòmhdach le meirg,
agus spealgan uigh liath bhreac.
Stad fiù 's an sealg thaibhseil.
Fàileadh lus na tùise,
aghaidh-thogalaich air a rùsgadh
mar chraiceann bolgach anns a' ghrèin.
Che puro ciel, che chiaro sol!

Tha e buaireil
a bhith ag èisteachd ri criomagan ciùil
am measg duslach, eòrnach, agus sgrios
ann an tobhta an talla-cluiche.
Chan fhaigh thu ach balbhachd ghramail.
La quiete che qui tanto regna.

Orfeo a threòraich Euridice
à tìr nam marbh,
ach thionndaidh e.
'S e rud cunnartach
a th' ann an sealladh air ais,
oir ann am priobadh na sùla
bidh an taigh-mòr, na coilltean,
na bailtean, na h-achaidhean,
a h-uile càil a' teicheadh ann an toit.
Ombre sdegno, deh, placatevi con me.

Che farò, dove andrò?
Tha mi gu bhith na mo stalla-guail.

III: Caoineadh is Cagar

'Nuair a bha sinn òg,
b' àbhaist dhuinn a bhith a' suirghe
air bàtaichean beaga air an loch
ann am meadhan a' bhaile.'

'Tha cuimhne agam fhathast
càit' an robh taigh mo cho-ogha,
ach dh'fhalbh na cuid eile bhuam.'

Chualas nuallan is blaodhan cruidh
a chaidh fhàgail anns na bailtean.
An dèidh beagan làithean, thàinig tost.
Nas ainmiche, donnalaich nam faol-daoine.

'Am feasgar mu dheireadh
a chuir sinn seachad aig an taigh,
bha an dealan dheth.
Cha robh ach lampa-eòlain againn air a' bhòrd,
a' bhaile a-mach à sealladh mar-thà, mar gum b' eadh.
Dh'fhalbh sinn sa mhadainn, is cha do thill sinn
tuilleadh.
Cha robh dad air fhàgail. Chuir iad an solas às.'

Ulbersdorf, Kommern, Bartelsdorf,
Neudorf, Niedergeorgenthal.
Na h-ainmean a' tàisleachadh
mar chagairean fiatach air uachdar an locha –
is cò seo a tha ag èisteachd riutha?
Chan eil duine ann.

IV: Ròs-chraobhan is Eòrna

Chaidh am fearann thionndadh
gu achaidhean-guail
– ach, achaidhean co-dhiù –
agus bha foghar ann, dubh is teth,
a’ tighinn bho na raointean
a chaidh sgrìobadh às
mar chraiceann is feòil
gus cothrom fhaighinn air na cnàmhan.
Àm gu curachd, àm gu buain.

Dè bhios a’ tighinn às an talamh a-nis?
Ròs-chraobhan bho ghàrradh-uchdain,
a’ lunnadh air na seann choilltean-faidhbhile.
Duilleagan mèith, dileagan caithteach,
ùr, bras, coigreach – ach ’s e fàs a th’ ann.

Agus air bruaichean nan lochan ùra
tha craobhan, preasan, lusan
a thàinig gun iarraidh, gun sireadh.
Chan eil iad sgiobalta no snasail,
na tuinichean stèidheachail seo,
ach tha iad deònach ath-shiolachadh,
agus teicheadh a chur air an eòrna taibhseach
a b’ àbhaist a bhith a’ gasadh
bho na h-achaidhean fàs.

V: Loch os cionn an Locha

Ach a dh’aindheoin abachadh toite is teasa,
dhrùidh uisge air ais, mean air mhean.
Buaidh na fliche.

Tha na lochan ùra a’ lìonadh suas,
na mèinnean air an sgioladh,
falamh, caithte, gun fheum,
gual gu lèir air a thoirt a-mach.
Uisge a’ tighinn agus a’ cur am falach
gach toll is gach sloc.
Ann am bliadhna no dhà,
bidh luchd-turais a’ snàmh ann,
agus ag iomradh air longan-toileachais.

Bha loch ann an toiseach,
agus mairidh na lochan.
Agus mur am bi an loch seo,
bidh lochan eile ann.

Nòta: Chaidh Caisteal Eisenberg / Jezeří a thogail anns
na Beanntan Mèinne (Erzgebirge) eadar a’ Ghearmailt
agus an t-Seic. Eadar 18mh agus 19mh linn, b’ e
ionad cultarail cudromach aig ìre eadar-nàiseanta a
bh’ ann, agus bha ceanglaichean làidir ri Eisenberg
aig co-ghleusaichean leithid Gluck, a thogadh air
an oighreachd, Haydn, agus Beethoven. Aig àm an
dàrna cogaidh, b’ e prìosan Nàsach a bh’ ann. Anns na
1960an agus 1970an, chaidh na bailtean mun cuairt a’
chaisteil fhuadachadh agus sgriosadh gu tur air sgàth
mèinnearachd ghuail. Mhair an caisteal air iomall na
talmhainn fhàs seo. Anns an latha a th’ ann, bidh na

seann mhèinnean gu tric a' dol fon uisge, mar phàirt de
leasachadh na h-àrainneachd. Tha an dàn a' cluich le
criomagan bho na h-oparan le Gluck, *Paride ed Elena*
agus *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

Chaidh an dàn seo fhoillseachadh ann an *New Writing*
Scotland 42 (Iuchar, 2024).

Kim Crowder

'Kim is a poet for our times. Her exquisitely crafted work is the result of a precise, respectful relationship with the natural world, which she documents with an artist's sensibilities. She is never afraid to confront environmental or climate concerns head-on. These are brave, meticulous poems, filled with life and portent, energy and promise.'

John Glenday

Kim Crowder is a writer, researcher and visual artist. Born in London, she has lived on the coasts of Kent and Suffolk and is now based in rural Angus. Her PhD in Visual Anthropology was awarded by Goldsmiths, University of London. She is a two-time winner of the George Crabbe Poetry Competition. Her poems have been published in *The Rialto*, *Envoi*, *Pennine Platform*, *The New Statesman*, *Gilded Dirt*, *Skirting Around*, *Causeway Cabhsair*, *Wet Grain* and *Wildfire Words*. During 2024, Kim participated in the Edwin Morgan Trust's Clydebuilt 16 poetry mentoring scheme. She is currently producing work for her first poetry pamphlet.

Dwelling

a step cut in the bank
sunk in mud a stone slab
a place for her to stand
at the edge to scoop up
water in rusted pails
gorse cramming the gate
wood-stack block axe
rhubarb potatoes in rows
blue lupins tapering to seed
hoe shovel tin tub
wallop and thwack of
wet linen strung on a line
in the fabric
harsh elements ingrained
wind forever from the north
never neighbourly
gagging the chimney
grabbing her hair
splitting the skin of her lip
hills remote overlooking
shrugging cold shoulders

Crop

on the flat colour-field
 precision-sown oats
disposed dead centre
 in a silver-blue block
inclining in shadow to a pale
 willowy shimmer
set in a yellow-green mount
a frame of young barley

soft focus surrounds of
 white cow parsley
wild grasses feather-headed
 coming to seed
foxtail cocksfoot fescue
 chamfering the border
mingled they blur
the crop's hard-edge

Foreflight

Juvenile swallow, in first flight
learning the protocols of air
perched between two blue pegs
on the line. So new, so near I saw
the wide lemony gape; the egg-hook
vestige intact at the tip of your beak,
your stumpy streamer-less tail.

Such dainty splashes dropping to
stain my freshly washed sheets.
No trouble – feels more like being
given the gift of a vital life sign.
Why would I mind sleeping in
swallow-streaked linen, proof
of new life fresh from the nest?

Abstract of June

i

a neighbour walking her ferret
in harness at the solstice
takes his mind off sex she says
swarming aphids daisies and moss
 bugging the man who mows
under the cobalt-blue ceiling
 silver mezzanines of cloud
iris lily foxglove lupin leaning
crescent moon rising over briar
 butterflies upping
the roadkill repertoire fleeting
divines keeping company awhile

ii

the song's silver thread drawn
and said at dawn
in the hush left by the lambs
whitethroat and dunnoek
 wagtail starling
blackcap and chiff-chaff
 thrush dove wren
woodpecker goldfinch
 corvids at midnight
flocking in hundreds so diligent
clean sweeping and raking
the never-night span of sky

Equinoctial

Measure September's mid-point moment. This inter season instant. Half and half.
Apogee of summer past. Perigee's darkness yet to come. Quotidian equivalents.
Symmetry of light and dark. Linger in the overlap. Autumn's advent.
Read the signs. Mark the change to changeability. Grow certain of uncertainty.
Rain forecast. Sun appears. Forecast sun. Clouds nudge the hill. Sudden fall of
barometric pressure. Swallows dwindle. Blooms malingering. Long encore
of crimson petals. Late dragonflies parade in foils and spangles. Light diluting
by degrees. Chilling down. White crystals ghost the grass at sunrise. Tarnish
cusping silver. Brisker breeze. Contagious agitation in the trees. Hanging on and
letting go. Legacy of leaves. Assertive robins up the volume. Greylag flocks
arrow into opaque sky. Vega rising. Now. Fold up dresses. Unpack jumpers.
Lay a fire. Leave the match un-struck. Resist. Light lamps. Muster shadows
familiar of this darker space. What recurs? Our winter selves caught
in the window's coal-black shim. Doubles. Out there. Staring in.

Lungwort

Pulmonaria officinalis

constant in being never the same
plant of diversity clusters of flowers
of diverse colours forms of flowers
diverse in diverse plants
in the same individual leaves of
diverse shapes stamens contrarily set
either high or low
attuned to the zeitgeist variously
gendered and bi-named
antithetical flower
Adam and Eve soldiers and sailors
gooseberry fool Bedlam cowslip
spotted comfrey Bethlehem sage
beggar's basket bottle-of-all-sorts
the one that is ever other

After Gertrude Clarke Nuttall, botanist (1867-1929)

Ivy-leaved toadflax

Cymbalaria muralis

trailing clinging gracefully drooping
untrammelled over walls wherever
making a way petals bearing signage
guide-lines for insects two wattles erect at
the mouth lower lip large fleshy triple-lobed
upper lip slight inky purple indicates the entry
flower tubular in form deep in the throat
copper hairs fur-line the conduit in
three coequal rows stiff tufts
set either side of the cavity steer fervid insects
inward hold their heads up-pointing
the flower forestalling reversals taking the lead
assuming control keeping wanderers straight-aimed
to the vitals true to the honey path

Curations

Into acres of exhibition space at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry - 'the largest science center in the Western hemisphere' - the curators put several fairy castles; a working coal mine; a model of the Santa Fe railroad; the first train to travel at 100 mph; a Stuka dive bomber; a Spitfire; a combine harvester with GPS; a 1977 Atari gaming system; a robotic milking simulator; a 1910 street-scene with drug-store, grocery, cinema, post office, restaurant, corset shop; the Apollo 8 module; the Aurora 7 capsule; the Mars Rover; a bicycle collection; Earth's largest pinball machine; a chick hatchery; a chicken-wire and plaster of Paris giant walk-through human heart; a cardiac operating theatre; a virtual reality transporter; the U-505 German WW2 submarine, 'the length of a city block, triple the weight of the Statue of Liberty'; a mirror maze; a 1969 transparent anatomical manikin; a Boeing 727; *Antarctica*, 'the most remote continent in the world'; *The Blue Paradox* of pollution; *Pompeii*, 'a volcanic time capsule of a city destroyed by nature, with 4D eruption simulator'; the planetary view of Earth and *Passport to the Universe*, a permit to 'explore your place as a citizen of the cosmos, 9.30 to 4.00'.

Into the meagre cubic capacity of the 1949 trinket-box souvenir bought from the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, my mother - or possibly her mother - put a packet of Tootal Sew and Care crewel needles, sizes 3 to 9 (rusted); a crumpled Remembrance Day poppy; a brass picture hook; a front-door key; a 1929 half-penny (George IV, heads - Britannia, tails); a

faded pink confetti horse-shoe; a card of ten blue-tipped Nelson-brand matches (label illustrated with an 18th-century ship in full sail); a legless, pincerless earwig corpse (a stowaway?); a stocking suspender; a 1937 threepenny bit (heads, George VI - tails, a thrift plant); a half-used card of darning wool, beige; a brown metal hairgrip; a screw-eye for securing net curtains; a bent panel pin; a prickly blue plastic hair-roller; a cracked bone white button; a pair of yellow metal collar studs, tarnished; a single yellow metal cuff link, also tarnished; a tiny plastic antelope; a dried spillage of tarry stuff; a milk tooth; a fingernail flake; countless dust particles; shed skin cells; other invisible DNA traces - odds and ends that held a world together - and apart.

James Sinclair

‘There is no finer writer in the Shetland dialect today than James. His poetry is rooted in Shetland’s contemporary life as those of Vagaland and Rhoda Bulter were in their own times, and the easy conversational style of the dialect in his hands belies great skill in constructing verse. James’s new collection shows once again he is now a mature voice, assured and wide-ranging in both theme and tone.’

Robert Alan Jamieson

James Sinclair has been writing poetry for the past twenty years. His natural voice is in the Shetland dialect. Over the years, James’s work has appeared in a number of literary magazines: *Northwords Now*, *Lallans* and *Poetry Scotland*. His work has featured in the poetry compilations *These Islands*, *We Sing* and *Mailboats*. He has self-published one pamphlet, *Gulf Stream Blues* and two full-length poetry collections *Yarnin* (2017) and *Sheeksin* (2021) through Bluemull Books. His radio play, *Da Sam Rodd Wir Ancestors Drave*, was transmitted on BBC Radio Shetland in 2021. James has just completed work editing script dialogue for the long-awaited sequel to the film *The Wicker Man*, called *An Ill Wind*. James is on the editorial committee of the *New Shetlander* magazine and is a committee member of the Shetland dialect group, Shetland Forwards.

Aliens

‘Fly me ta da mön.’ Dat’s da wirds o da sang.
I tink da mön’ll be jöst da stert: dey nicht
hae ta mak fur a black hol ur een o yun cluster galaxies.

Dey’r loddin da rocket as I spaek, dir crambed in
as muckle reestit-mutton an saat fysh as dey can.
Dere’s Maggie wi her hens an dueks an someen’s
goin ta hae ta pit a rubber baand apö da rooster’s neb,
Dey’r saawn aff da hoarns o Lowrie’s ill-vynded ram,
an Tammie has a göd grip o his dugs Ike an Tina
as he climbs aboard.

Da owld eens is left ta man da fort,
an wi dem da last o da coarned beef, red cans an
poodered mylk.
Shoutin, ‘We’r no goin furt i dis wadder.’
An dis, da ill-best day i da past six mont.

Shö’s da last craft o her kind, aabody idder is gien.
Da engines are fired up as shö taks aff wi siccan
a racket an a roar, aa da reek spewin aawy roond.
We watch dem sail awaa, hiecher an hiecher
Makkin fur da stars an onbye, an can but winder
if da oceans o space have ony calmer waves
dan da rough seas an hiech tides o haem watters.

Capstan Full Strengt

Smok her up, smok her up
go on smok dat fags
till wir aa shockit in clouds o reek.
Filter tips, menthol ur rowlies
Embassy Regal, Consulate ur Owld Holbourn,
Ony real men can smoke Capstan Full Strengt.
Hit's guid fur clearin da breest,
dat cough i da moarnin brings up aa da flem.
Da doctor'll tell dee jöst da sam,
he's a forty a day Kensitas man.
Niver leet, you can dö hit onywhaur
i da car, i da hoose, i da pub,
da doctor's waitin room ur even da hospital ward.
Da mair we smok, da mair cairds we can gadder
fur da free trinkets oot da catalogue.
Smok her up, smok her up
go on smok dat fags.

Kellister

(Cullivoe, Nort Yell)

Steyn waas, double-skyeined wi möld packit in atween.
Sma rooms hüld tagidder wi driftwid.
A steep trap up tae da laft wi hit's coombed-ceilin.
Dis is whaur generation eftir generation
listened fur da snyirk o da wirm ridden waas.
Jöst laek da widden hull o a sailin clipper.
Da gale howlin annunder da eaves,
sea spray strikken da sma skylichts,
peppered wi shotgun blasts o rain.

We still spaek aboot da time
dö fil't in da owld waal i da ben end
wi rocks fae da steyny parks afore da hoose.
An how dö wid gadder dy fock's bits an pieces
Fillin dir widden kiysts wan bi wan, as du watched
faimily een eftir annider mak fur da idder side.
Stackin dy sad cargo box bi box i da kitchen laft.
Dere tae soak up da cookin smells driftin up da wyes
o sheep's puddins rampin apön a hot Rayburn
an fish livers spittin apo da pan.

Tireless haands dat wir niver idle:
da clack o makkin pins dirlin awaa,
ur da smack o cobbler's hammer on awl.
An dere du wis, shewin glitterin froaks,
wirkin dat stutterin needle wi a steady peddle.
Du held dat saft fabric wi a ticht grip
atween dy rough fisherman's fingers as dö wrocht.

Whin dy time cam ta geng, dir wis

ta be nae kiyst o past treasures stored i da laft.
Kiyst by kiyst shu draggit dem outside
biggin a burnin bonfire, her ain Viking funeral
Waantin dee tae ken, dat du meant mair ta her, dan aa o
dis.

Growin Pains

Du minds wis as boys, da day we fan
Uncle Ertie's BSA M20 under da hay i da baarn?
How we draggit her oot i da daylight,
pat some petrol in an fired her up.
Uncle Ertie shaaed wis how ta stert her,
nae trottle, retard da ignition, decompressor on,
turn da engine wi da keekstert till shö
cam ower tap dead centre, tickle da carb
till da fuel ran owre your fingers, dan
lay your weicht in wi wan haevy swing.

If you got wan pert o da procedure wrang
shu wid edder fling you owre da haandlebars
ur tak aa da skyein aff your shin bane.
Du minds foo nedder me nor dee
could pit baith o wir feet flat apo da grund?
So wan o wis wid hadd da bike up while
da idder wan started her an jump aboard.
An aff we wid geng wi a roar an a puff o reek.
Dat's foo we laearned ta ride, trial an error.
An eftir you'd faan aff twartee times, you kent foo sore
hit wis.

Dat winter we set her up afore da daek end i da yaard
An whin we cam back da following Voar, shu fired up
second keek.
Dat year we wir a lok braver an guid faster an faster.
Till we brook aa da spokes i da back wheel.
Dere shu laid fur twartee year
till dere wis a muckle redd-up afore da doors
an da M20 guid ower da banks wi da rest o da proil.

Doon at da Huts

Shenanigans Apo a Seterday Nicht

Da blink o heids fleein past da lit window.
Da skirl, da hyoochs an da soonds o gaffin.
Inside da dancers birl an swirl tae da
playin o fiddle an accordian tae twa-step an reel.
Whin dere's nae instruments ta be hed
dey baet oot a rhythm
fit tappin an haand clappin.

Gutter lasses, drifter men an coopers packit in.
Makkin new acquaintance apö simmer nichts.
Accents fae Yarmouth, Wick an Da Broch.
Tilley lamps dirl fae da rafters
as dey race fae ee end ta da idder
an widden flör boards reboond
in time ta da music.
Da men pass waarm half-bottles fae mooth ta mooth
an lasses jockey fur position eftir da boanniest boys.
Dey wir eens claspit taggidder laek limpits,
Haein dem boasies an smoorikins... an ootside
mair slippit, wi filskit shenanigans an liftit claes

Dan, as da Toon clock dings da first strick o da heavenly
oor,
lichts is slookit an fiddles laid by.
Dey oag back ta whauriver dey cam fae
an laeve da place paecefoo, da mirk gadderin
wi da last strick o da oor.

Greasers

Wir rockers an wir rollers
dat's whit gets wis in an amp.
Ledder jackets, rock band tees an denim,
dat's da uniform we wear.
We ride wir motorbikes laek da wind
an hang oot in rough drinkin dives.
Heidbangin, lang-haired louts,
Dat's whit da borin an dull caa wis.
Fast free an drunk, we laek ta hae a gaff.
Live fast an dee young wis wir mantra.
Noo we hae graet puggies an nae hair
boogiein awaa ta baands dat leuk da sam.
Too owld ta rock an roll, we be damned.
Wir rockers an wir rollers.

Da Blacksmith

Gyet da haet i da richt spot.
Dat's whit me foreman wid say,
Hit's aesy dan, hit'll no wirk idderwyas
an let da hammer dö da wark, no dy airm.

Du has tae luik eftir dy fire
Owre muckle clinker, an du
canna get da haet i da richt plaes.
Use da richt crushed smiddy coal
no muckle lumps, dey dunna burn even.

An whitever du does,
dunna luik owre deep i da flames,
dey'll trick dee wi dir flicker
an afore lang dy iron'll be clinker.

Draw da steel oot intill a point
till hits even an flat.
Dan whin hit turns a cherry redd,
dip da point inta da watter pail an wait
till hit turns da colour o strae.
He's dön dan.

Changeable

A blutteration o rain fae da Suderd,
da Wasterly swell braks owre da banks
an Sooth Aesterly gales laaberin
wis doon i da grund.
Hailly puckles flee in fae da Nor Aesterd
cowl'd an dry wi a droucht fae Nor Wast.
No a pirr a wind ta be felt, still an calm,
lochs lie in sheets o polished gless.
Dan, a glink o licht spears trowe da clouds
owld Jamaica is aboot ta mak his comeback,
da sea lyin laek a suit o baetin siller armour.
Gie hit half an oor ony day
an you'll get da wadder you're eftir.

Summary

This selection of poems gives an overview of the different styles of poetry I am looking to include in my next book of poems. My work has its foundations in Shetland's rich heritage and language. It is all about the place, the people and ever-changing weather. I also like to take a look at contemporary living and explore the possibilities of moulding our lovely way of talking and writing to the modern world. My writing has a conversational style and much of my inspiration comes from talking with people.

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Children's and young adult fiction

Extract from *War Giant*

Chapter 18 Pebbles and Promises

Jac McGill

Jac has a real gift for storytelling. In War Giant, she has deftly woven history and folklore to create a thrilling and memorable story. The protagonist is endearing, and her journey from feeling weak and vulnerable to strong and powerful is inspiring for young readers. I am excited to discover how Jac's writing career develops!

Lindsay Littleson

Jac McGill has always been a storyteller at heart. Born and raised in Helensburgh, she is a teacher, children's life coach, wife, and mum to two teenagers. Her home is a lively 'mini-zoo' of pets, where new story ideas are never far away. Jac is currently working on her debut middle grade novel, set in 1941 Scotland, where World War II evacuation meets the rugged magic and folklore of the Highlands. Her work, whether in the classroom, through coaching, or on the page, reflects her deep commitment to helping children uncover confidence, resilience and self-belief.

Lucy sat in the courtyard, moving her hand over a selection of pebbles. The lessons with Hazel had taken it out of her, but she was determined to practise the green way until she mastered it. Uncle Jack was relying on her, and so was the Home Guard. The best she had managed so far was a slight tremor, but no real movement. A shadow fell as Kit loomed above her.

'When are you going to give up on this nonsense, Lucy?'

Lucy did her best to ignore him and stay focused; they had hardly spoken since that night in the cellar, and Lucy missed Kit's company terribly. If they had had arguments before, Lucy was always the one who backed down first, but not this time; this was different, this meant something to her.

'It's not nonsense, Kit. I can do this. I'm getting better every day.'

'I'm sure that the soldiers fighting in Europe will be greatly relieved to know that you can move a few pebbles. Hitler will be shaking in his polished black boots,' snapped Kit.

Lucy felt the flicker of anger ignite in her stomach. Closing her eyes, she hovered her hands above the stones and focused with all her might to make them move. Nothing happened.

Kit sighed, 'Come on, Lucy, just admit that this is just a

silly story. You were always the brains of this family, but you've all but given up on school. Spending every day with Hazel on the hills or in her garden, picking plants or boiling moss. You can't even make a pebble move, never mind wake a mountain!

Lucy looked up at him, 'What if, just for once, I could make a difference? What if, Kit, I could matter?'

Kit shook his head, 'You do matter, Lucy. We all love you, and I look out for you.'

Lucy's shoulders slumped. How could she explain that although she appreciated that Kit looked after her, it was stifling at times? Lucy knew that she could be more... she wanted to be more.

Kit folded his arms. 'The most important thing is Mum getting better and Pa making it home - not playing with pebbles - you are our little Mouse - that's all you need to be.'

As her clenched fists hovered over the pebbles, a fury burned through Lucy that she had never experienced before. Without warning, the pebbles flew up and hit Kit's shins. He yelled out, more in shock than in pain. Blood trickled down his legs where the sharp pebbles had pierced his skin.

Lucy and Kit locked eyes; shock silenced them.

Hazel appeared round the corner with a basket of washing on her hip and took in the sight. On seeing her, Kit scurried away, scowling at his sister as he did so.

'Lucy, whatever's going on?' demanded Hazel. 'Why is Kit bleeding?'

'I did it, Hazel! I made the pebbles move! I moved them!' whispered Lucy.

Hazel put down the basket of washing and sat beside her. Sternly she asked, 'Lucy, did you hurt Kit?'

Shame flamed her cheeks. 'I didn't mean to, he just

made me so mad. I wasn't aiming at him; he just got in the way.' Her voice trailed off. Her moment of triumph had lost its sheen.

Hazel took her hands in hers, 'Lucy, you have a gift that is in your blood and in your bones, but you *cannae* use it for your own petty means.'

Lucy hung her head as Hazel continued, 'Be mindful of your feelings, Lucy. Tapping into your anger has limitations; you're not fully in control. It's not the *green way*; instead, feel into the energy around you, feel the vibration of the earth. Try again, Lucy, but not from anger, from gratitude.'

Hazel collected the pebbles and placed them in front of her.

'Close your eyes, feel all your emotions, but don't let them control you. Feel the rhythm of the earth... breathe into it and be grateful for what you have been chosen to do. This is the *green way*.'

Lucy closed her eyes and breathed deeply into her chest. The anger she felt towards Kit trickled from her body and left her feeling limp and exhausted. Shame rose, and again she took a deep breath, letting it flow through her body and away. Lucy now knew that she could move the pebbles when angry, and she had to believe that she could also move them when she was at peace.

'Lucy...' whispered Hazel, 'open your eyes, lass, but keep your focus.'

Opening her eyes, Lucy gasped. The little pebbles were hovering just above the ground, and their shadows danced on the cobblestones. Lucy looked at Hazel and smiled; her heart was full of joy. 'When women awaken, Lucy - mountains move,' whispered Hazel.

Lucy was so excited, she desperately wanted to tell Kit,

but then she remembered, and the pebbles fell to the ground.

Just at that moment, Stitch ran from the kitchen door, barking and growling, then sped off down the farm track. Hazel jumped up and ran after him. Lucy got to her feet and moved as quickly as she could, too. Whatever could have made Stitch react like that?

As Lucy rounded the bend, she found Hazel bent over a man lying on the ground. He was wearing what looked like a uniform, which was covered in blood. Stitch had stopped barking and was whimpering by his side.

‘Lucy, come here quickly, he’s hurt, I need to go and get help. I’ll be faster, so you stay with him,’ ordered Hazel. Grabbing Lucy’s hand, she pulled her down to the ground and pushed her hand onto the man’s chest. ‘Keep pressure on his wound, lean heavily on it until I come back.’ Hazel took to her heels and ran back to the farmhouse.

Lucy was shaking but kept her hand as steady as she could on the wound; the warm blood seeped through her fingers. She dared herself to look at his face; he was the colour of clay, and his eyes were shut.

Lucy thought back to Mum being pulled out of the bomb shelter. The men who found her had spoken to her and tried to bring her round.

Gulping down her fear, she leaned over him, ‘H... hello... can you hear me? Can you hear my voice?’

His eyes flickered open, and Lucy fell backwards but quickly righted herself and put pressure back on the wound. The man groaned.

‘Sorry, I don’t want to hurt you, I... I’m Lucy. Hazel is bringing help.’

His eyes flickered again, ‘Mac? Mac? Map... give... him this map. Find it... pocket.’ Using her free hand,

Lucy delved into his pockets until she found a crumpled piece of paper with lines and shapes and names on it. It was like no map she had ever seen.

The man opened his eyes and gripped her wrist, making the map in that hand flutter. ‘Trust no one! Our country... is not safe. Trust... no one. Tell no one. Only Mac... give it to Mac! Promise me... Promise?’

Lucy, too shocked to speak, nodded to show him she understood.

‘Promise it... please.’ Blood gurgled in his throat as his eyes bored into hers.

‘I promise. I’ll only give this to Mac. I’ll trust no one else,’ she whispered.

His eyes shut tight, and his breathing slowed further. Lucy kept up the pressure on his wound, but the blood flow was lessening and his colour was fading. Stitch gave a mournful howl and nudged the man’s arm with his nose, but his eyes did not open again. Hazel and Danny hurtled down the track towards them with Captain and the cart in tow. Working together, Hazel and Danny lifted him and placed him in the back of the cart as Lucy continued to apply pressure on his wound. The man cried out and his grip on Lucy’s wrist loosened as Hazel knelt beside him and took over his care. Danny took the reins and they headed to the doctor’s house. Lucy stood in the road and watched them disappear, unable to move. She looked down at her blood-soaked hands and wiped them on her skirts before she unfurled the map. What did all those lines and symbols mean, and why would that man risk his own life to protect it?

Chapter 19

Farewells and Secrets

Hazel and Danny returned home with an empty cart that evening. The man in the uniform had not survived; his injuries were too severe.

It turned out that he had been a sailor on HMS *Trelawney*, Owain Morgan, but he was affectionately called Taffy for his Welsh roots.

The next few days passed in a blur. The McPhee family felt that they wanted to honour him and decided to hold a tea in his honour. Lucy and Hazel made a beautiful wreath filled with wildflowers, and Aunt Jean put on a splendid spread.

Lucy had kept Taffy's secret; she had promised to trust no one, only Mac – whoever he was. She had hidden the map behind the picture frame of the painting of their mountain in the kitchen. Lucy thought this was as safe a place as any, and the mountain was already keeping a secret; another one would not be too much of a burden. But the burden of the secret felt heavy on her.

One of Taffy's senior officers came by to speak to Aunt Jean and Uncle Jack. He was particularly keen to know if he had given them anything... a piece of paper, perhaps?

Of course, they knew nothing, and as the villagers and naval personnel mingled in the farmhouse, Lucy snuck out of the kitchen door. She felt sick to her stomach. Had she done the right thing by not telling? Taffy had said to trust no one, but did that mean the Navy and his commanding officer?

Hearing voices coming towards her, she ducked down behind some steel milk urns. It was the same officer;

he was snooping around the outbuildings with another man in tow.

'I need you to have a good look around this farm, Tom. We know Taffy and Mac got the map before they were compromised; they were good men. Taffy gave his life defending that map... we need to find it, or Mac, as soon as we can. If that map falls into the wrong hands, well... it doesn't even bear thinking about!'

Their voices trailed away as they moved into the barn. Lucy took the moment to sneak out of her hiding place and go back inside; her head hurt, and she felt dizzy. If only she had Kit to confide in, he would know what to do.

At that moment, Kit appeared in the doorway. He took one look at Lucy and turned the other way. Perhaps confiding in Kit was not the best option now. Downhearted, Lucy went back inside and helped Aunt Jean tidy the kitchen.

Chapter 20

Maps and Mystery

Four days after Taffy's tea, Lucy was thinking her brain might explode from all the facts Hazel was spouting about marigolds when Danny appeared on their hillside. A letter had arrived about her mum and Lucy had to get back to the farm quickly. Gathering her belongings, Lucy said a hurried goodbye to Hazel as Danny helped her up onto Captain's back. Calling for Stitch to follow, Lucy galloped off as she tried to beat down feelings that the worst had happened to her mother.

Suddenly, Stitch started barking, and he bolted off the path, heading straight into the heather and bracken and completely out of sight. Lucy pulled Captain to a

halt and cantered back, calling for Stitch again. Cursing the dog under her breath, Lucy slid from Captain's back and ventured into the bracken, 'Stitch! Come on, boy, we must get back. I need to find out what has happened to Mum. . . Stitch! I need to get back quickly, and you decide to chase rabbits! If I get 'what for' off Aunt Jean for this, you are not getting any table scraps for a week! Do you hear me? I mean it, a whole week. Now, come here! Stitch! Sti. . .' Lucy tripped over something hard and fell forward, eating a mouthful of dirt. Stitch appeared by her side and began licking her face.

'Yuck! Stop it, Stitch,' said Lucy as she got up onto her knees and pushed her hair out of her face. Standing up, she wiped the mud from her mouth with the back of her hand. 'Ugh. Thanks a lot, Stitch!' Lucy looked crossly at the little dog, but his adorable face meant that she couldn't stay angry for long.

'Alright, I forgive you, but let's get going, I need to know if Mum is well.' Looking around the bracken and heather, she placed her feet gingerly, not wishing to trip again. Stitch was still barking and racing around her. Lucy didn't know what had got into him; she hoped that he hadn't injured or killed some poor wee animal.

Her foot hit something hard; it must be the log she'd fallen over. Taking a larger-than-normal step to avoid it, Lucy tried to move forward, but something caught at her ankle and stopped her in her tracks. Lucy tried to pull her leg free, but it was snagged tightly. The bracken was so thick that she couldn't see clearly. Parting the plants, she guided her hand through the foliage to her ankle, only to discover that the thing holding her back was not a plant at all, but a human hand!

Scrabbling through the foliage, Lucy quickly discovered an arm attached to the hand and then a body,

and finally a head. It was a man! Another man who was badly injured in a blood-soaked Navy uniform. Lucy checked his pulse; it was weak – he was alive, but not for much longer. Pulling her satchel towards her, she rummaged inside and found what she was looking for. Placing the mosses inside his jacket, she managed to stem the bleeding in his chest for now. Using more moss, she dripped water on his parched lips. Calling Captain over, she beckoned the horse to lie down as close to the man as he could.

Lucy kneeled over the man and shook his shoulder, 'Wake up! I need you to wake up now. I must get you on my horse. Can you do that?'

His eyes flickered, and he nodded ever so slightly. Lucy helped him get over the horse's back, then stumbled round and pulled him towards her. Her clothes were drenched in sweat, but eventually he was safely in position. Slowly, the horse stood up, and Lucy did her best to keep the man's body steady.

Having given up her only transport, Lucy took hold of the reins and made her way towards the farm. Stitch, now obediently walking alongside her, still gave a low growl every so often.

Aunt Jean's voice could be heard before Lucy made it to the brow of the hill. When Jean caught sight of her, the relief on her face was clear, but her tongue was still sharp.

'Lucy McPhee! What in God's name are you playing at? Out for hours, and it's getting dark! I'm waiting here to tell you that your mother is well and has been allowed home to her sister's house. . .' Jean's voice caught in her throat as she caught sight of the man on Captain's back.

'Oh, my days! Not another one!' She rushed forward, and Lucy, who had walked for miles, collapsed into her

aunt's arms. Taking Captain's reins, Jean led the way, supporting Lucy around her waist whilst shouting for Kit, Danny and Hazel – who'd both got back long before Lucy – to come and help.

They got the man into the barn and onto a makeshift bed of hay and blankets. Hazel and Jean set to work, using tinctures and balms to tend to his wounds. Lucy refused to go to bed; she had to know that he was going to be well. She didn't want to lose this one, not after losing Taffy.

Curled up in the corner of the barn, Lucy fought sleep until it won. As the cockerel announced the new day, Lucy woke and shuffled over to the man. With his face cleaned up and his wet clothes replaced, he looked quite peaceful and much younger than Lucy had first thought. He wasn't really a man at all; he was probably only a year older than Hazel. His chest rose and fell, but his breath sounded ragged. Stitch, who had been asleep beside her, gave a low growl, and Lucy shushed him. 'Don't wake him, now, Stitch, he needs to rest.'

Peering over him, Lucy noticed the identification tags around his neck and gingerly lifted them from his neck to read.

Murdo 'Mac' Mackenzie.

Could she have found the Mac that Taffy had told her to trust? His injuries were similar to Taffy's, and the officer who had been poking around had said that they were both compromised during a mission. This must be him. Lucy couldn't believe it; she could make good on her promise. She leaned in and whispered, 'Don't worry, Mac, I'll help you, and when you're well, I will give you the map, just as I promised Taffy. It will be our secret.'

Summary of *War Giant*

Set against the harrowing backdrop of the Clydebank Blitz during World War II, we follow the journey of Lucy and Kit McPhee, twins thrust into the heart of danger and espionage.

Lucy and Kit are sent to live with estranged family members on a farm in Balmacara. Lucy, born with a physical disability and having had a sheltered upbringing, must adapt to the rugged farm life.

Revelations about their heritage unfold as Lucy and Kit learn of their ancestor, young Jack, who could awaken a granite giant, a guardian of the land. With his green earth magic this gentle giant helped transform their one-cow farm into profitable farmland. Jealousy and greed threatened to expose the McPhee family's secret. Young Jack's desperate journey to protect the giant inadvertently seeded the legend of 'Jack and the Beanstalk'.

Returning to the present, the hills above Balmacara conceal a secret operation. Lucy possesses the power to awaken the granite giant, potentially altering the course of Scotland's history and the war's outcome. With a spy infiltrating their midst and blighting their plans, all seems lost until Lucy finds the courage to save her giant and embrace her true power. She becomes the War Giant herself and stops the U-boat in its tracks.

Lucy Goodwill

'I've been mentoring Lucy through Scottish Book Trust, and I fell in love with Jessie's story immediately. There are not enough disabled romances, especially dealing with the tricky teen years, and Lucy deftly weaves swoons, yearning, comedy and the realities of being a disabled teenager. She's a voice to watch!'

Lizzie Huxley-Jones

Lucy Goodwill is a writer, educator and charity worker based in Scotland. She has a Master's in Creative Writing from the University of Edinburgh, and her work has previously been featured by publications such as 404 Ink, Dear Damsels and *Popshot* magazine.

Lucy reads and writes widely but is currently focused on writing young adult novels, telling the stories her younger self once needed. As a disabled writer, Lucy has used her New Writers Award to focus on a novel exploring the experience of becoming chronically ill at a young age and the myriad of challenges that come with it.

Extract from *Let Me Start Again*

Chapter 1 I Dream of Ferdie

Here's how my story should start.

My best friend, Ferdie, is waiting for me at the school gates, his tall, angular frame propped against the scuffed metal posts. He pulls himself upright and waves wildly at me, as though I didn't immediately clock him from his flash of fiery red hair.

'Alright?' he says as I approach, pushing the thick black frames of his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose. His cheeks are covered in vast constellations of freckles, the dimple in his left cheek deepening rapidly as he smiles.

It's the last day of school and we agreed to walk in together for the final time. I stand next to him, arm to arm, and look out across the school grounds.

'Can you believe it's over?' I ask.

'End of an era,' Ferdie says.

'Everything's changing.'

'It's funny you should say that.'

I turn to look at him and see his cheeks are flushing, while my heart begins to flutter in my chest. Ferdie takes his glasses off and rubs them on his shirt, even though they look perfectly clean, and I wait (impatiently) for him to elaborate. Glasses back on, he finally meets my gaze, pausing for a moment before forcing the next words out.

'I've been thinking... there's one thing I'd like to

change about you and me.'

'Is this it?' I ask in a dramatic whisper, claspng a hand to my chest. 'Is our friendship over too?'

He laughs and shoves me playfully, the redness of his cheeks intensifying as he does so.

'The opposite,' he says, and my fluttering heart begins to race. 'I've been thinking for a while now that I don't want to leave with any regrets, and... well, what I mean to say is... I want to ask you to the sixth form ball. As more than friends.'

This is always the part where I get nervous, both the imagined me and the real me, hearts beating in tandem, a little nauseous but in the way that only happens when you're excited as well as scared. I'm swallowing hard and breathing deeply through my nose because there's a good chance the wrong words will fall out if I part my lips.

There are a few different directions this dream can go in. The one where I take his hand. The one where I straight up turn and kiss him. The one where I make a wisecrack and we both pretend it never happened; the one that's not a dream but a reimagining of the truth. When the real Ferdie asked me to prom at the end of year eleven and I panicked and made a joke about my legs not being up to dancing.

I much prefer the versions where I say yes.

This time, I make an awkward grab for his hand, exhaling deeply as his fingers lace through mine. I'm almost certain I can see tiny sparks flickering between his skin and my fingertips.

'I think it would be nice if you asked me,' I say.

'I thought that I just did?'

'No, you told me you *wanted* to ask me as a way to sense-check asking me, without *actually* asking me.'

'Ahh, I see... you've got me there.' He thinks quietly for a minute before releasing my hand and getting down on one knee, smart school trousers be damned. He straightens his tie dramatically, takes my hand in his again and looks me right in the eye. 'Jessie Anne Lewis, will you go to the sixth form ball with me?'

For once, words escape me (both the imagined me and the real me). Sparks are flickering everywhere. The voice that usually motors so loudly through my head is silent and all I can hear is my heartbeat in my ears.

I nod and his face glows with a perfect smile as he stands up. Fully focused. Totally sure. I can feel the sparks pulsing through my body as he pulls me close...

But, no matter how much I wish it was, this is not how my story starts.

Chapter 2

The Real Ferdinand Wilson

Here's how my story really starts.

In my bedroom.

Ferdie is standing at the foot of my bed, recreating this morning's assembly – the first of his last year. He came straight from school so he's wearing a suit, though he's removed the jacket and tie, unbuttoned his shirt a little and rolled up the sleeves. His hair is a little longer than usual, and I can see small tufts of it around his ears longing to curl. I've always told him it's a travesty he won't grow it long enough to let it.

He looks so good, so fresh, so full of life, that I feel increasingly self-conscious about the fact that he's looking back at me while I'm slumped against a sea of cushions, in not-so-fresh pyjamas, with a dry shampoo-laden topknot. I'd have washed and dressed if I could

(God, how I wish I could), but today my neck decided my head was far too heavy to hold up, so here I am. Ferdie's used to this by now – it's become the norm since my body forced me to drop out of school last year – but I'm not sure I'll ever fully accept it.

'Today marks the beginning of the most important year of your lives.' Ferdie's impression of the head teacher is so perfectly pitched that a laugh ripples through my body and forces its way through the knot that has been tightening in my stomach ever since he arrived. He finishes his speech by slapping both hands onto the bed frame, as though it's a lectern, and looking me dead in the eye. 'Let's get to work.'

'Always so dramatic,' I say, looking down at my duvet and folding it between my fingers. 'Sorry I missed it.'

'He was really milking the moment, that's for sure.' Ferdie lifts his right foot onto the bed frame and uses it to launch himself upwards, flopping down onto the bed next to me with a shuddering thump. I try not to look too delighted about this increased proximity and tuck my hands under myself so I don't accidentally reach out and touch him. 'Apparently it's time we start getting *serious about success*.'

'Oh yeah?' I turn my head towards him and he does the same. I can't quite tell if I'm shaking because of his dive bomb onto the bed or because my heart always skips a beat when we lock eyes.

'He had this entire PowerPoint presentation with a timeline for the year ahead,' Ferdie says with a trademark eye roll. 'University open days, application deadlines, mocks and exams, all coming to a close with the sixth form ball. Not sure how formal-wear and finger food count as a reward for a year of gruelling study, but here we are.'

'You never know,' I say, giving him a gentle nudge. 'Could be fun?'

We hold each others' gaze for a moment and I wonder if he's thinking about the same thing I am. If he'll acknowledge it if he is. His mouth curves into a dopey grin, the dimple in his left cheek deepening slightly as my heart begins to race.

Oh my God, could it really happen? This feels an awful lot like...

Just as he's about to say something, Mum knocks on the door and then immediately bursts in anyway.

'Hello you two,' she says, popping her head around the door with a smile. Ferdie quickly sits up and brushes down his clothes as though we've been caught doing something we shouldn't have. I stay lying down, out of spite. 'Everything OK?'

'Why wouldn't it be?' I ask, a little bit more coldly than I intended, quickly shooting out the words before Ferdie can jump in and be polite.

I love Mum, but you have to be firm or she never learns. Admittedly she hasn't learned much from my firmness yet, but I'm hopeful that one day my assertions – including the one that knocking implies requesting permission and not announcing your entrance – will actually stick.

'Never hurts to check,' she replies in the bright and airy tone she uses in front of guests. I can almost see the twitch in her hand, which – had Ferdie not been here – would have reached for something soft to throw at me.

'All good thanks, Mrs L,' Ferdie chimes in with a beaming smile, revealing his perfectly straight teeth (which he never even needed braces for, the bastard). Ferdie is the sort of friend that parents love: polite, clever, thoughtful. He's the friend your parents compare

you to wistfully, not even hiding the little part of them that thinks it would have been nice if they'd birthed them instead of you.

'How was the first day back at school?' Mum asks, taking Ferdie's response as an invitation to come in and take a seat by my (now long unused) desk. 'Is it exciting to be in your final year now, or a bit daunting?'

'Hmm,' Ferdie bunches his mouth to one side and looks into the distance, his eyes and brows narrowing together in concentration. This is what Mum loves – he really gives what she says such thought. No witty one-liners or barbed comments like she gets from me. 'Mixed, I reckon.'

'Why's that, love?'

'Well, part of me feels ready to finally be done with school,' he pauses mid-sentence and takes a deep breath, 'but the unknown's a bit scary, I guess.'

'Change is always scary, but it can be incredibly exciting too,' Mum says with a warm smile before suddenly turning to me, her posture sharpening. 'Of course, change isn't everything...'

Oh God. Not this again.

'Mum...'

'I just mean...' She's flustered now. 'We all have different paths, you know?'

'I know, Mum...'

'It's all just about your perspective, isn't it?'

A deep red flush is climbing up Ferdie's neck as my face starts burning too. I need to make her stop. 'I mean, today is a big day for Ferdie because of school but it's no less important for you because...'

'I know, Mum,' I cut into her sentence, finally dragging myself upright to give my words added emphasis. 'It's OK. I asked Ferdie to tell me about school too. I'm fine.'

Of course, I'm not fine. My stomach is churning with the steady burn of frustration, the liquid chill of envy and the thick and viscous weight of the certain knowledge that I'm on my way to losing my one remaining friend – but they don't need to know that. There's no point in making all of us feel worse. Since developing a chronic illness, I've discovered there's nothing that makes people vanish faster than talking about your chronic illness. The only thing that would feel worse than seeing Ferdie move on without me would be not seeing Ferdie at all, so I'll be keeping those uncomfortable feelings to myself, thank you very much.

There's a stillness in the room now and I glance between Mum and Ferdie, who both smile awkwardly at the same time. Thankfully, we're rescued by the sudden appearance of Teddy – my beloved cocker spaniel – who leaps across the bed and leaves a trail of muddy paw prints in his wake.

'Theodore Lewis!' Mum leaps to her feet. 'You come here right this instant!'

Teddy's eyes are full of the joyful chaos of a dog who has just romped around in the forbidden flowerbeds (and possibly snaffled a snack off the kitchen counter) while their mother wasn't looking. Mum lunges for his collar, but his tail continues wagging furiously even as she tries to usher him out of the door.

'Sorry about that,' Mum calls out, slowly vanishing from sight. 'Stay for dinner if you'd like, Ferdie, you're more than welcome!'

We sit in silence as the door swings closed again, listening to the clatter of Teddy's paws fading down the hallway as Mum gives him a hushed lecture on manners. As soon as we can no longer hear them we burst out laughing.

'Sorry,' I say, exhaling the word as a sigh. I lie back down and turn to look at him again. 'She's so embarrassing.'

'She means well. . .'

'She can't hear you.'

'I know,' Ferdie says with a mischievous glint in his eye, as he lies down too. 'Still, could've been worse. . . could've been your dad.'

'Don't!' I groan, giving him a playful whack on the arm. He feigns injury, rolling around and laughing.

'Sorry,' he says eventually with a contented sigh. 'Where were we?'

I pause, pretending not to remember, as though I've not been thinking about what he might have said if Mum hadn't come barging in this entire time. 'The PowerPoint, I think. You said the sixth form ball sounds underwhelming.'

'Oh, that. Yeah.' He pauses and I hold my breath, hoping he'll continue. 'Well, Annabel said if we get a group of us together, make a thing of it, it could be fun.'

I stifle a groan. Wrong answer. He has officially ruined the fantasy.

I've never met Annabel - she joined our school for sixth form and our paths didn't cross before I had to drop out - but I loathe her. I've seen her face on Ferdie's Instagram far too often for my liking, smiling next to him in photos I should have been in. Littering his comments with in-jokes I don't understand, as though she's laying claim.

'You don't have to go just because Annabel wants to,' I say, trying my best to sound neutral.

'I know. . . but maybe it would be nice. Like a last hurrah or something.'

The knot in my stomach, which has been growing

slowly with every sentence, tightens so hard it takes the wind right out of me. Somehow this response was even worse than the one about Annabel. A last hurrah sounds like an ending. An ending that might include me.

I want to ask him for reassurance that nothing's going to change. That his imminent departure from our hometown, and our shared life, won't fracture us forever. That he isn't going to find someone new who he likes better and replace me.

But, in the end, I can't quite muster up the courage, so all I say is, 'Everything's going to change.'

And he just replies, 'Not for a while yet.'

In the silence that follows, as I try to tame the anxiety which is ricocheting around my ribcage, a single thought enters my mind:

What if I ask Ferdie to the sixth form ball?

Summary of *Let Me Start Again*

Developing a chronic illness was not on Jessie Lewis' bucket list. Dropping out of school, being ditched by almost all of her friends and side-eyed by doctors (and her dad, no less) wasn't either. So, when Jessie's best friend (and love of her life) Ferdie starts talking about leaving for university, she has just about had enough.

Since getting sick, Jessie has coped with her complex feelings by imagining the different ways her life could have turned out, but now she feels desperate to make one of those dreams come true. She's going to recover, and win Ferdie's heart, no matter the cost.

In her attempts to achieve her dream, diving into the murky territory of wellness culture, Jessie finds herself not only feeling worse but drifting further from Ferdie too. A shock betrayal changes her course and sends her to the one place she never thought she'd find the answers she was looking for: the disabled community.

Jessie's story is ultimately one of love, acceptance and self-discovery as she figures out the life she's meant to lead.

Sarah NicRath

‘Am measg nan caractaran ainmeil air a bheil a h-uile pàiste le Gàidhlig eòlach tro eadar-theangachadh bhon Bheurla, tha e follaiseach gu bheil cruaidh fheum air sgeulachdan a tha sgrìobhte bho thùs anns a’ Ghàidhlig agus a bhios a’ bruidhinn ris a’ chloinn bhon dualchas aca fhèin. Tha na rannan eibhinn agus na dealbhan àlainn aig Sarah a’ tighinn còmhla ann an dòigh a bhios a’ còrdadh ri clann agus pàrantan, a’ conaltradh ris an fheadhainn òga tro chleasan le faclan is dealbhan. Chan eil anns An Ròn a Chaill a Shròn ach a’ chiad character am measg mòran a bhios, tha mi an dòchas, rim faicinn air sgeilpichean, ri taobh na leapa agus ann an oisean leughaidh an t-seòmair chlàis ann an ùine nach bi fada.’

‘Amid all the popular characters that have become part of every Gaelic-speaking child’s world through translation from English, there remains a clear need for original stories written first in Gaelic that can speak to children from within their own culture. Sarah’s humorous rhymes and charming artwork combine in ways that will appeal to children and to parents, communicating with young readers through wordplay and visual references. The Seal Who Lost His Nose is just the first of a whole cast of characters that I hope will be gracing bookshelves, bedside tables and classroom reading corners very soon.’

Alison Lang

‘S ann à Loch Aillse ann an taobh siar Siorrachd Rois a tha Sarah NicRath. Dh’ obraich i ann an sgoiltean-àraich Ghàidhlig ann an Loch Aillse agus ann an Siorrachd Pheairt far a bheil i a’ fuireach a-nis. Tha na sgeulachdan aice freagarrach airson clann òg agus teaghlachan Gàidhlig. Tha ùidh aice ann an ruitheam is rannachd le cuspairean eibhinn is caran gòrach- a bhios tlachdmhòr is tarraingeachd do chloinn òg. Tha teisteanas aice ann an Dealbhadh Grafaigeach agus bidh i a’ dealbhadh na stòiridhean aice fhèin cuideachd.

Sarah NicRath is an aspiring illustrator and Gaelic children’s book author from Lochalsh, now residing in Highland Perthshire. She has a background in graphic design and Gaelic Early Years education. Her writing has a focus on repetition and rhyme and silly storylines suited for families with Gaelic or children learning Gaelic in the early years.

Brot Grod

Shìos anns a' choille
Bha rudeigin a' goileadh

Dà bhana-bhuidseach a' gogadaich 's a' seinn
A' bocadaich 's a' leum mun cuairt air poit' mhòr,
chruinn

'Tha sinne 'dèanamh brot!
Tha sinne 'dèanamh brot!
Gheibh sinn rudan sgreamhail is
gheibh sinn rudan grod!'

'Cluasan madaidh-allaidh
agus casan damhain-allaidh
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
Tha sinne 'dèanamh brot!'

'Radain agus sgadain agus
baga làn de bhadain
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
A-steach dhan a' phoit!'

'Peapagan is seanganan
is sileagan de theangannan
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
Tha sinne 'dèanamh brot!'

'Mearagan is maragan
is bara làn de nathraichean
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
A-steach dhan a' phoit!'

'Stocainnean is neapraigean
is bogsa de sheann cheapairean
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
Tha sinne 'dèanamh brot!'

'Buinneagan is duilleagan
is bucaid mheanbh-chuilleagan
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
A-steach dhan a' phoit!'

'Corragan is colagan
is cnogan làn de mholagan
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
Tha sinne 'dèanamh brot!'

'Losgannan is loiteagan
is poiteag làn de bhoiteagan
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
A-steach dhan a' phoit!'

'Luchagan is daolagan
is poca itean fhaoileagan
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
Tha sinne 'dèanamh brot!'

'Ialtagan is feusagan
is BARRACHD meanbh-bhiastagan!
Plup, plob, plup, plob!
A-steach dhan a' phoit!'

'Tha sinne 'dèanamh brot!
Tha sinne 'dèanamh brot!
Gheibh sinn rudan sgreamhail is
Gheibh sinn rudan grod!'

Gu h-obann! Sguir iad a sheinn
Sheas iad a' coimhead a chèile thar na poit' mhòr,
chruinn

Bha fios aig an dithis gun robh AON rud eil' a dhìth
Is b'è sin an t-adhbhar a thòisich an strì...

A bharrachd air na stuthan sgreamhail, grod
an rud bu chudromaich' dhan reasabaidh brot

B'è 'A' bhana-bhuidseach as grannda san tìr'
Ach cò a bu mhiosa eadar an dithis?

'Uill, tha THUSA sgreamhail' 'Tha THUSA grod!'
Is dìreach mar sin, thòisich an trod!

Deiseal airson sabaid, aghaidh ri aghaidh
Dhiochuimhnich iad mun t-slatan-draoidh!

Thog iad an sguaban mar chladheamhan mòra
Geasagan neo draoidheachd, cha robh tìde gu leòr ann!

Le buille is le brag
Chaill tè dhiubh a h-ad!

Le sgailc is le sgleoc
An tè eile a stoc!

Air an sguaban a-nise os cionn na poit'
Bha e doirbh dhaibh càil fhaicinn tro dhuibhe na toit

Slatan nan làmhan, thòisich na geasan
A' lionadh an adhar mar chleasan-teine

Lasan mar dhealanach a' boillsgeadh bhuap'
Mu dheireadh le buille, chaill tè dhiubh a sguab

Thòisich i 'tuiteam, a' cur car agus charan
Agus bhuail i na caraide gu h-àrd anns an adhar

Fhuair iad greim teann
Air cas is air ceann

Is le sgail is le sgrreeuuch,
Chaidh an dithis dhiubh sìos...

Le PLUP! Is le PLOB!
A-steach dhan a' phoit!
BROT GROD! BROT GROD!
Is e sin mar a nì thu brot grod!

An Ròn a Chaill a Shròin

Uair a bha siud, thachair rudeigin neònach
A dh'fhàg ròn beag, breac, a' faireachdainn brònach

Mhothaich e nuair a dhùisg e
Gun robh aodann rud beag rùisgte!

Bha a cheann a' faireachdainn aotram
'S bha rudeigin ceàrr le aodann...

'O mo chreach!' dh'èigh an ròn
'Càite idir an deach mo shròin?'

Shnàmh e gun stad
airson taic fhaighinn sa bhad!

'O Mhaighstear Dòbhran. Cuidich mi! Seall!
Tha mi air mo shròin a chall!

'Uill, uill' ars' an dòbhran lìogach
'Gheibh thu sròn ùr gu cinnteach!'

'Thig a-nall dha mo bhùth,
is chì sinn dè nì mi mu 'n chùis...'

'Seo a' chiad rud a th' agam.
Fhuair mi e bho Mhaighstir Sgadan.'

Dh'fheuch an ròn air an t-slige thana...
'Obh obh, tha seo ro fhada!'

'Ceart ma-thà, tha mi a' tuigsinn...'

Tha seo dìreach air ùr-ruigsinn!'

Dh'fheuch e air a' chrosagag òir...
'O mo chreach, tha seo ro mhòr!'

*'Uill, seall dè a fhuair mis' an-dè,
Is cinnteach gur i seo an tè!'*

Thog e an fhaochag suas gu aodann
'Ro bheag! A bheil dad eile ri fhaotainn?'

*'Na gabh dragh, a charaid chòir,
Mar a chì thu, tha a' bhùth seo làn gu leòr'*

Thug an dòbhran dha clach dhonn
'A Shìorraidh mise! Fada ro throm!'

*'Gabh mo leisgeul Ròn a' charaid,
De mu dheidhinn seo; Cnagan-feannaig?'*

'Aobh!' thuirt an ròn - 'fada ro spìceach!'
Bha an creutair làn de dhrisean bigeach

*'Muir-tèachd ma-thà, dè do bharail?
Ach tha e fhathast beò, thoir an aire!'*

Thilg e dha an creutair grod
'Amaideach!' thòisich an ròn ri trod!

*'Seadh, dad ort! Tha an dearbh rud agam...
Cò thug dhomh e ach Bob am bradan?'*

Dh'fheuch an ròn air a' chìochag-dhearg
'Tha mi coltach ri cleasaiche!' thuirt e le fearg

‘An e seo uile ’s a th’ agad an-diugh?
Dè mu dheidhinn rudeigin dubh?’

*‘Mmmm rudeigin dubh, rudeigin dubh
A bheil thu coma mun t-seòrsa cruth?’*

‘Coltach ris an t-sròin a bh’agam
Mun mheud cheart is cruinn mar cnagan!’

Dh’fhalbh an dòbhran a dhèanamh rùrach
am measg na stuthan anns a’ bhùrach

Nochd e le gàire mu dheireadh thall
‘AHA!’ dh’èigh e, *‘Slige dhubh! Seall!’*

‘Tha seo sgoinneil!’ ghlaodh an ròn
‘Tha e CHO coltach ri mo shrò. . . AAAAAAAOooo’

Leig an ròn a-mach sgiamh!
Cha chuala an dòbhran a’ leithid a-riamh

‘Obh! ars’ an ròn, ‘bha siud cho goirt!
O Mhaighstir Dòbhran! Bheir mise ort!’

Ach nochd greimirean às an t-slige
is chuala iad an guth gu bhige

‘Is mise Lachaidh,
agus is i an t-slige seo MO DHACHAIGH!’

Is dh’fhalbh e le fruis
A fàgail an dòbhran, is an ròn le bus. . .

Thill an ròn dhachaigh agus e fhathast fo bhròn,

Ann am pian a bha uabhasach agus e fhathast gun sròin!

Nuair a dh’èirich e an ath mhadainn
chaidh e na deann chun a’ chladaich

Thug e sùil ann an lòn. . .
Is am meadhan aodainn. . . bha sròin?!

CNAP MÒR CRUINN
far an d’fhuair a chrùbag greim!

Le sròn ùr, àlainn is dubh gu leòr
Bha cùisean ’sa bhàgh air ais mar bu chòir. . .

GUS. . .

an do mhothaich e dha theaghlach san t-sruth
Is sròintean àraid air gach aon dhiubh!

Creutairean-mara, sligean is clachan
A h-uile coltas gun do thòisich e fasan?!

Agus is e sin mar a thòisich ‘Là na Sròin’
Co-fharpais bhliadhnail eadar na ròin.

Summary

Brot Grod (Disgusting Soup) is a comical rhyming story about two witches creating a horrible concoction in a large cauldron deep in the woods. The story follows them as they chant out the recipe, naming lots of disgusting and unusual ingredients as they chuck them into the pot. They come to a sudden halt once the final, most important ingredient is required – ‘The ugliest witch in the land’. This begins an argument which quickly turns physical, and they end up fighting on their broomsticks above the cauldron. The story ends up with them both falling into the pot!

An Ròn a Chaill a Shròin (The Seal Who Lost His Nose) is a rhyming story about a seal who wakes one morning to find he has lost his nose! He immediately heads for his otter friend, who runs a swap shop on the seabed. The otter then proceeds to offer a variety of (unsuitable) nose replacements for the seal to try on. He gives him a shell which is ‘too long’, a stone which is ‘too heavy’, a winkle which is ‘too small’, etc. Unbeknownst to the pair, they are all the while being watched by the rest of the seal clan hiding in the kelp.

The seal starts to lose patience when at last the otter produces something almost perfect. However, just as he is admiring it, he lets out an awful shriek! From inside the shell appears a set of pincers and a little voice announces that this shell is in fact his home. An unhappy hermit crab and not an ideal solution after all. The seal heads for home, dejected and in pain and still without a nose.

The next morning however, he wakes to find that he has a nose once again – or at least a large nose-like

swelling from the hermit crab’s pinch! Things in the bay seem to be back to normal at last until he returns to the sea and finds his family – each one of them sporting unusual ‘noses’. It would appear that he has started a new craze! And so begins ‘Là na Sròine’ (‘Nose Day’) – an annual competition and celebration within the seal community.

SE Holland

‘SE Holland packs a huge amount into her storytelling – a great, resourceful heroine, reptile aliens, clever escapes, discussions on technology and colonialism, neurodivergence, and a missing parent mystery, all served up in a fast-paced and humorous style. Here’s to more sci-fi for kids!’

Alastair Chisholm

SE Holland writes stories for children with humour and heart... and sometimes an alien or two. Based in Glasgow, she holds an MA in Screenwriting from Screen Academy Scotland. She’s produced animated TV and web series for LEGO, helped beam National Theatre productions onto cinema screens, and is a qualified Early Years Practitioner who believes stories are the best kind of magic. Holland’s tales are often laced with the spooky, sprinkled with fantasy, and occasionally rocketed into space!

Extract from *Livvy Livewire*

JOLT!

Livvy found herself sitting in the pilot’s seat of her beat-up spaceship, *Starkiss*, having just landed haphazardly on the planet Calasott. She sighed in relief – she had escaped dealing with Mrs Macready and the maths test. Unclipping her seatbelt and flicking a switch on the dashboard, she waited for the hatch to groan open. ‘Oh, come on, *Starkiss*, old gal!’ she ribbed the ship gently, patting the metal hull as she pulled herself out and dropped onto the forest floor below. Stepping from the air-conditioned ship into the rainforest was like stepping from a fridge into a sauna set to ‘jungle’. Pushing the hatch closure button, she took a deep breath. The air was close with moisture, familiar and yet different, somehow. She stepped out from under the shadow of her ship.

Things on Calasott seemed more real than ever. The light catching on dust motes floating through the forest canopy, the tropical birdsong in the trees, the sweat beading on her forehead and dripping down the back of her vest. Everything was in vivid technicolour, sights, sounds and smells turned up to 11. A bird landed on her shoulder with a ‘peee-riiip’. This was a wyvre bird, she knew. It had shiny black eyes and a red body, with a long, plumed tail of yellow and orange. It seemed to look straight into her eyes before flying off as quickly as it came. Livvy absently rubbed the spot where the bird’s claws had dug into her skin. She didn’t remember things feeling quite so real here before. She felt a pang of guilt and shame as she remembered the test and Mrs

Macready's exasperation. She ought to go back to class and face the music. She had calmed down enough. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply and tried to summon the girls' bathroom. It didn't work. She tried again. And again. Worry started to bubble in her chest.

'OK, OK. Think of something you love. Think of Ifeanye.' She screwed up her eyes and pictured her friend's smile, hair pulled tight in a scrunchie at the top of her head, her neat uniform perfectly pressed every evening by Mrs Chukwu. She took another breath and summoned Ifeanye's generous eyes that conveyed a hundred feelings that only she and Livvy would understand. Opening her eyes again to see jungle all around, the heat from the Calasott suns beating down upon her, Livvy started to feel the panic rising – thinking of her loved ones always worked to pull her out of her daydreams. She pinched her skin. Nothing. She punched *Starkiss*.

'OW OW OW OW OW!' The pain was real. She looked at her red knuckles, a bruise blossoming under the skin, and blew on them. 'Oh no. Oh no. Oh no no no no... this can't be happening!' she muttered to herself, pacing around the ship. 'Am I really here? It's not possible! Get it together, Lowden!'

She stopped pacing and started problem solving. 'OK. I'm here. I can't seem to break out of the daydream just yet. So just go with it, alright, Livvy? Just deal with the moment. What do I need?'

She took a deep breath and opened *Starkiss*'s hatch, climbing aboard. She grabbed her canvas pack – all this technology and she didn't even have a waterproof backpack – shoving water, rations, first aid kit, a rope, knife and binoculars inside. She fastened the pack, shrugged it on, strapped her diode microcomputer to

her wrist and pulled her mass of red hair back into a high ponytail. 'OK. Time to go for a little look around. You've been here a million times before. Just go explore, save the planet a little as usual, then you can leave.' Livvy took another deep breath and strode out, glancing back at *Starkiss*. Tendrils of vegetation seemed to be cloying at the ship already, reclaiming the space. An uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, she squared her shoulders and strode into the wild.

*

In her visits to Calasott there was always a river close to her landing spot. If she followed that river she would get to the village of Treen, where a peaceful settlement of Serri lived. The Serri were the native people of Calasott and they lived a life in harmony with nature, tending to the rainforest and taking only what they needed. However, recently their peaceful lifestyle had been invaded by the Zelit. The Zelit were a technologically advanced culture from a planet called Venebrae, light years away. They had a nasty habit of zooming through space to discover other planets, claiming whatever natural resources the planets held for their own use and treating the native people with cruelty and contempt. In her imagination, Livvy had saved the Serri people from these hard-hearted colonisers a thousand times. As she stomped downhill, following the river, she slipped in the mud and landed hard on her bum.

'OW! Eesh!' She dragged herself up from the mud, hmphing at the audacity of the ground. Something was strange – normally in her daydreams of Calasott she was a hero with a Teflon sheen, moving swiftly and cleanly

through the environment, never putting a foot wrong. Now, though, she just felt like... herself. Her usual, clumsy, awkward eleven-year-old self. Just as she was trying to scrape mud from the seat of her shorts with a leaf, she felt an incredible pain in the back of her thigh.

‘AAAAAHHHH!’ she shouted, jumping in agony and trying to reach the sore spot. She flailed around like a dying giraffe before spotting a giant ant the size of a rat with what could only be described as fangs sunk into her flesh. ‘AAAAIIIIIIIEEEEEEE,’ she escalated, ineffectively swatting at the beast’s hard body with her hand. Realising her efforts were useless, she grabbed a nearby stick and shoved it between the creature’s face and her skin, prying it away from her leg until it finally let go, leaving two huge red welts where it had dined upon the back of her leg. She leaned forward with her hands on her thighs, sweating and panting. What the heck? When had Calasott become so inhospitable?! Just as she regained her composure, her leg burning like a hundred thousand midge bites, she looked down. On the ground was a marching corridor of the giant fanged ants. They had huge black eyes, tough brown shell-like armour on their heads and abdomens, and red bulbous behinds.

'Oh no. Nope. Not today. No thank you!' exclaimed Livvy as she extricated herself from the path of the march, leaping over the line of dangerous insects and putting some serious jungle between her and the awful beasts. Her leg was still throbbing, and she found herself leaning on her stick to walk.

Livvy stopped for a moment at the base of a huge walking tree. These trees had thickets of stilt-like roots that grew from the base of the trunk, meaning that over time they would shift position from one part of the jungle to another. She leaned on the sturdy tree roots

and shrugged off her pack. Pulling out her first aid kit, she grabbed an antiseptic spray and blasted her wounds as best she could. She was about to wrap a bandage round her upper thigh when a noise stopped her in her tracks.

'Iyiyiyiyiyi,' came the almost tinkling refrain. She recognised the sound as Serri laughter.

‘Hello?’ she called. ‘Is anyone there?’ Straining her eyes, she scanned the jungle. Eventually she saw a movement and slowly a young Serri girl came into focus. Her green skin was perfect camouflage in the jungle environment. Like all Serri, her slender humanoid body was covered in a soft green down, with more on the top of her head, giving her a tuft-like hairdo. Her large amber eyes, placed either side of her head, blinked slowly as she considered Livvy. Her frog-like hands and feet gripped the bark of a trunk as if she had just scampered down from the treetop. Her clothes were made of a brownish-grey woven material which Livvy recognised as the lichen dripping from the Calasott trees.

‘Er... uh...’ stammered Livvy. Normally in her daydreams she spoke fluent Serri, Zelit and a multitude of other languages. Not today.

'Oh dear. I'm Livvy,' she said, pointing to her chest. 'Livvy.'

The other girl laughed in her tinkling way and pointed to her own chest. 'Sila,' and again, 'Sila.'

Livvy smiled, 'Hello, Sila!'

Sila paused for a moment before replying in perfect English, 'I see you speak the common tongue.'

Livvy sighed with relief. ‘Oh, I’m so glad you can understand me!’

Sila laughed again, and stepped a little closer. ‘Where

are you from?’ she asked.

‘My planet is called Earth.’

‘Eearth,’ repeated the girl, sounding the new word out. ‘Are you hurt?’ Sila gestured towards Livvy’s leg.

‘Yes. I was bitten by a giant ant!!’

‘I don’t know this word, “ant”?’ Sila said, frowning.

‘You know – six legs, marches in a line, big eyes and...’

Livvy started impersonating an ant, using her fingers above her head to create antennae and making what she hoped was an ant-like face.

‘Iyiyiyiyi,’ Sila bent double with laughter at Livvy’s impression and clapped her hands. ‘A vroki!!! They have a very painful bite! May I see the wound?’ she asked, laughter subsiding. Livvy obliged, turning round to show her the red welts. Sila made a clicking sound in her throat. ‘Wait here!’ she called, before swiftly and silently making her way behind the treeline.

Livvy felt a sudden loss, and hoped her new friend wouldn’t be gone for long. Moments later Sila reappeared with a fistful of leaves, which she expertly scrunched up, releasing a green juice that smelled a little like mint.

‘Can I touch you?’ she asked gently. Livvy nodded, eager to see what Sila would do. Sila’s long fingers were cool on her hot red skin as she gently rubbed the leaves into the wound. Almost immediately, Livvy felt the heat reduce and the pain subside. Sila gestured to the bandage Livvy had dropped at her feet. Livvy passed it over and Sila quickly wrapped it around her leg, holding the leaf mush in place.

‘Wow! That feels so much better! Thank you!’

Sila simply nodded, as if helping a wounded stranger from another planet was an everyday occurrence. She stepped back, assessing Livvy before saying decisively,

‘My sister is preparing food – will you join us?’

Livvy nodded furiously. ‘Yes please!’

Sila smiled and beckoned for Livvy to follow her. She was a courteous guide, pulling back vines for Livvy and helping her over fallen tree trunks. She showed her how to walk on the moss dotting the jungle floor in mounds, rather than through the sticky mud. Soon they came to a small clearing where another Serri girl, smaller than Sila, was squatting before a smoky pit in the ground. She stood up as they entered the clearing, her eyes wide and mouth open as she stared at Livvy.

‘Vri vek şey van?!!!’ she exclaimed.

‘Skrey va *Livvy*. Vraim *Eaarth*. She speaks the common tongue.’ Sila turned back to Livvy and gestured towards the younger girl. ‘This is my sister, Reya.’

‘Hello Reya, I’m Livvy.’

‘He-llo. Nice to me-et you,’ said Reya haltingly. ‘Hungry?’

‘Starving!’ said Livvy, realising her stomach was in fact rumbling.

Reya smiled and handed Livvy and Sila large, waxy green leaves. Sila sat down on the moss and Livvy joined her, copying the way Sila held the leaf out like a plate. The scent of barbecue rose from the crackling fire and Livvy’s hunger rocketed. When Reya gracefully put a skewer of roasted giant ants on her leaf-plate, Livvy’s face dropped, her stomach lurching.

‘Iyiyiyi!’ Sila spoke rapidly to Reya in their own language and Reya burst into the same tinkling laughter. ‘I told her about your bite from the vroki,’ Sila explained, smiling. ‘But don’t worry, they taste good!’ She carefully lifted her skewer to her mouth and took a huge bite of the red flesh at the rear end of the creepy-crawly. Livvy’s stomach heaved again and she thought she might revisit

her morning cornflakes when Sila chewed the barbecued meat and licked her fingers. 'Good! You try!'

Out of politeness, Livvy steeled herself and lifted the skewer slowly towards her mouth. As she did so, the scent of barbecue reached her nose. The dead bug's jaws were still fearsome, its eyes seemed to look right at her, but... it actually smelled good! She took a dainty bite and chewed – it was just like Dad's pulled pork on his lame Taco Tuesday nights! She laughed and smiled. 'It is good!' Reya and Sila laughed with her.

When they had eaten their fill, the three girls sat for a few moments, enjoying a companionable silence. Livvy stretched her tense muscles and lay back on the soft moss. The day seemed to be getting cooler, evening stretching over the alien land as the suns lowered in the sky above the treetops. The sisters had a rapid-fire discussion in the lilting music that was their own language, before seeming to come to a decision. Sila turned to Livvy.

'Livvy. You arrive here how?' Another of her signature head-tilts.

'Well. That's a good question. I... I guess I came here on my spaceship...' Livvy wasn't sure how to explain that this entire planet was a fiction created by her imagination and she visited it every day.

'From Earth planet?' asked Reya.

'Yes. That's my home.'

'Do you know Venebrae? It is a faraway planet,' asked Sila.

'I haven't been there. But I know of the Zelit... and what they do...' replied Livvy, sitting up.

'The Zelit are not good for our planet,' said Reya firmly, a scowl on her face. Sila touched her shoulder gently.

'We have to be very careful not to be seen by the Zelit

guards. We stay deep in the jungle and move our camp from place to place. If they find us, we will be put to work. They will put you to work, too,' Sila explained, a pained look on her face.

'What kind of work?' asked Livvy nervously. On her previous visits to Calasott, she'd seen how the captured Serri endured a brutal existence mining for precious metals.

'We will be taken to the mines, like our parents and most of our village were.' Sila's clear amber eyes clouded over. 'And made to dig, dig, dig for ore. This ore, the Zelit use to power their technology – their ships, gadgets, computers...' She shook her head. 'On Calasott we have no use for these things. We live with nature – the sun is my clock, the land is my teacher. They have no use for nature, except to dominate it.'

'We have no way of fighting back,' whispered Reya, staring at the sharpened stick she had used as a skewer, rolling it between her long fingers.

Livvy swallowed hard, holding back emotion – the injustice of the situation was more than she could bear. If only there was something she could do, something she could share with them to help them take back the planet... but *Starkiss* was just a beat-up old junker with no warfare tech. What good would a comms system and a satellite map do against the weapons and satellites the Zelits commanded?

'I'm sorry,' she said, eyes brimming with tears. The words rang emptily in the rainforest, too small and insignificant to convey how she felt. A buzzing noise filled the silence, and immediately Reya and Sila sprang into action, covering the firepit with leaves and burying the skewers. Soon there was no trace of their meal. Livvy looked on, feeling confused, as the buzzing grew louder.

Reya approached her, holding out a hand. Livvy grasped it and the smaller girl pulled her into a run.

‘Quickly!’ hissed Sila. ‘We don’t want to be here when the seeker arrives.’

Summary of *Livvy Livewire*

Livvy Livewire is a middle grade sci-fi adventure novel that explores themes of friendship, neurodivergence and the environment.

What would happen if you got stuck in a daydream? Livvy is an eleven-year-old girl with a new ADHD diagnosis and an established daydreaming problem, who is about to find out. Livvy daydreams to escape the challenges of school and a home life where her mum is missing. Her favourite scenario is when she plays a space explorer visiting a lush alien planet. Calasott is home to the Serri, who live in harmony with nature. Their peaceful life in the rainforest has been shattered by an invasion of the tech-forward Zelit, who enslave the Serri and strip the planet of its natural resources. As the heroine of her daydreams, Livvy swoops in to Calasott and saves the day. Until one day she finds herself trapped on a very real Calasott, in a very deadly jungle. She meets two sisters hiding in the wilderness, and they work together to try and free the sisters’ family. Through her adventures, Livvy comes to terms with her diagnosis, discovering her strengths and a clue to her mother’s disappearance – but will she find her way home?