



New writing

from Scottish Book Trust's
New Writers Awards

Volume 14

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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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 2022.

Every year we work with expert panellists to select some of Scotland's most exciting writing talent from many hundreds of entries. This year's awardees - chosen by respected authors such as Jenny Colgan, Sheena Kalayil, Jen Campbell, Sean Wai Keung, Ross Sayers and Akemi Dawn Bowman - received tailored support from our Writing Communities team, including a cash bursary, a week-long writing retreat at Moniack Mhor, mentoring from a writer or industry professional, as well as dedicated training in press and PR, social media and performance. They also took part in a Showcase event.

They also 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 things, including the Costa First Book Award, the Manchester Fiction Prize, a shortlisting for the Booker Prize and much more besides.

Have a peek at the publication list opposite to see some of the writers we are proud to have worked with. 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); Claire Askew, *All The Hidden Truths* (Hodder & Stoughton) and *Novelista* (John Murray Press); Rachelle Atalla, *The Pharmacist* (Hodder & Stoughton); Samantha Clark, *The Clearing* (Little, Brown); Juliette Forrest, *The Night My Dream Came Alive* (Scholastic); PM Freestone, *Shadowscents* (Scholastic); Gail Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (HarperCollins); Kirstin Innes, *Scabby Queen* (Fourth Estate); Mòrag Law, *Cuibhle an Fhortain* (Luath Press); William Letford, *Dirt* (Carcenet); Kirsty Logan, *Now She is Witch* (Penguin) and *Things We Say in the Dark* (Harvill Secker); Martin MacInnes, *Infinite Ground* (Atlantic Books); Victoria MacKenzie, *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy On My Little Pain* (Bloomsbury); Calum L MacLeòid, *Fon Choill* (CLÀR); Graeme Macrae Burnet, *His Bloody Project* (Saraband) and *Case Study* (Saraband); Sandaidh NicDhòmhnaill Jones, *An Seachdamh Tonn* (Acair); Lynsey May, *Weak Teeth* (Polygon); Mòrag Anna NicNèill, *Artair sa Chaisteal* (Bradán Press); Ryan O'Connor, *The Voids* (Scribe); Niall O'Gallagher, *Fo Bhlàth* (CLÀR); Alistair Paul, *Linne Dhomhain* (Luath); Louise Peterkin, *The Night Jar* (Salt); 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); Em Strang, *Bird-Woman* (Shearsman); Malachy Tallack, *The Valley at the Centre of the World* (Canongate) and *Illuminated By Water* (Doubleday); Alice Tarbuck, *A Spell in the Wild* (John Murray Press); Eris Young, *Ace Voices* (Hachette).

**Fiction and narrative
non-fiction**

Rae Cowie

Please note that the following writing extract makes reference to baby loss.

‘Rae’s flash fictions, like her characters, are textured, nuanced and accessible. Her stories reach the reader on many levels and stand for more than themselves. I admire the way she doesn’t tell us what to think, and trusts the reader completely. I’d follow Rae’s stories anywhere.’

Meg Pokrass

Rae discovered her love of flash-fiction writing at the start of lockdown and has carried on the romance ever since. She is drawn to themes of mothering and belonging, inspired by both folklore and ekphrastic literature. Her debut flash-fiction collection, *Fledgling*, uses a variety of writing styles to explore these interests.

Flash stories have been published by the Bath Award, *Cranked Anvil*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Potluck Zine*, Retreat West, *Romance Matters* and The Great Scottish Canvas, as well as being shortlisted for Flash 500 and the Scottish Association of Writers competitions.

Her short stories have been published in the Scottish Book Trust *Rebel* anthology, *The Scottish Field Magazine*, *Dinna Mess wi the Popo* and *Northwords Now*. She has also been longlisted by Fish Publishing.

Rae is an active member of the Romantic Novelists’ Association (RNA) New Writers’ Scheme, winning the RNA Elizabeth Goudge first chapter award in 2015.

Discover more at:

Website: raecowie.com

Instagram: [@rae_cowie](https://www.instagram.com/rae_cowie)

Fledgling

He flapped like litter; papery wings fluttering amongst the gravel of the verge, hopping awkwardly towards the blackened dandelions and sluggish ditch water. She was so certain she had crushed him; made him another piece of forgotten roadkill. Just another sad event in a crap day... a crap week... a crap month. But instead of being frightened, his blinking eyes shone moist, curious. Their inky softness innocent, like her son's, as the crow swivelled his smooth head, following her movements. He must be young. She checked the surrounding undergrowth. Was his mum tucked somewhere safe, within the thickets of grass? Watching?

On the opposite side of the road stood a sprawling ash, its branches heavy with foliage. Was there a nest hidden high amongst the scramble of leaves?

But crows were noisy birds that roosted in groups. She had listened to a podcast where a woman enthused about how intelligent, how sociable a species they were. And now she had gone and hurt one. Would he be missed? Was he longing for his mum?

She waited a second before kneeling and slowly reaching out a hand. Her fingers trembled as she stroked his fluffy wing, downy as catkins, which lay at a twisted angle. Was it broken? Would it fix? Cool sunlight lanced his head feathers, making their smoky tips gleam.

A luminous mayfly skittered amongst the weeds by his side. The chick chirped.

She couldn't leave him.

He felt unbearably light as she scooped his faint warmth between her cupped palms. Instinctively he

pecked and nipped, drawing a speckle of blood from her thumb. The violent patter of his heart matched the rhythm of her own. Slimy olive shit slid between her fingers and landed with a splat, messing her white trainers.

It didn't matter. They would wash.

She edged backwards, cooing to him as she nudged open the door of her jeep and set him into the shallow dip of the baby car seat. The fleece blanket she tucked around him still smelled of milk and talcum. She planned on warming some sugared water and feeding him from a teaspoon - a tip she had gleaned from the podcast, one she never imagined she would need.

Gently, she shut the door and rounded the vehicle, wiping her hands against her jeans before she slipped into the driver's side, checking the backseat in the mirror, a habit she had yet to unlearn. The bird glanced about him inquisitively, silent; seemingly happy enough to trust her. Her throat thickened with tenderness. She hadn't meant to hurt him. Her mind had been elsewhere. She would take him to the vet's, but what if his wing wouldn't heal?

Her breasts ached with fullness as her nipples tingled and her T-shirt grew damp. Not again. She gripped the steering wheel, tethering herself as she bowed her head, breathing deeply to contain the grief she felt - for the bird, for her son, for herself.

Hidden Mother Photograph (With Cats)

He had regular customers. A reputation to uphold. He wasn't a charlatan who toured the countryside, taking advantage of innocent souls. He cleared his throat with a small cough.

'What is it?' Mrs Cheshire snapped, from beneath the shiny satin sheet.

He hated these hidden mother portraits. It was awkward enough when it was a red-cheeked straining infant propped on a knee, or a baby staring as its drool stretched, long. What to say? How to word things?

But in all the years he had been creating magic with glass plates, this was a first. Taking hidden mother photographs - with cats!

'I'm most grateful for the commission... I truly am.' Sweat pricked beneath his collar. 'But taking a portrait of each pet...'

Felines prowled in the shadows, over dark, heavy furniture; they drank from tiny filigree bowls (the sort that usually held powdery bonbons). They tugged and ripped on a faded silken rug, probably shipped, at great expense, from the Orient.

'... It will be c... costly,' he managed.

She whipped the sheet aside to reveal bird-like eyes and a whiskery chin.

'Young Mr Miracle...'

He also hated his surname. He feared it raised client expectations.

'If you have any concern, *what-so-ever*,' she breathed, 'that I don't possess the kind of funds required to

complete such a project, may I remind you that my father was a judge, and his father before that, and *his* father...'

'I meant no o... offence...' he stammered. 'It just might make a more interesting composition if we take...' he fumbled for the right term... 'your f... family... as a whole.'

'One?' her eyebrows gathered like a furry caterpillar. 'All fifty-two cats in *one* photograph?' She slumped in the armchair as if she had never heard anything so preposterous.

'Yes,' he said, even though he knew it would be a challenge. 'With you in the centre,' he added.

He positioned her this way and that, arms crossed, skirts splayed, standing, seated... nothing felt right. Cats yawned and stretched, purred and hissed, washed behind their ears, licked their unmentionables. He had never worked with models so disinterested.

'Well?' Mrs Cheshire asked.

'Let's try this.' He draped the satin sheet over her head, before carefully unwrapping his handkerchief to reveal a fat dead mouse.

He swung it by the tail, back and forth.

Pure white, Angora, short-haired, Siamese... even the brutish one-eyed tabby, stopped and stared.

A pop! A flash! A masterpiece!

Staircase

On the first step, blankets rustle before the start of restless whimpering.

On the second step, he cries, 'Mama, Mama,' as if I can't hear.

On the third step, his piercing wails threaten to wake the neighbours.

On the fourth step, I cover my ears, cursing the baby books that insist I wait this out.

On the fifth step, his howls are broken with fretful hiccups.

I crawl to the sixth step and his cries reduce to gentle snuffling.

By the time I've reached the seventh, he chats, sharing his woes with teddy.

On the eighth step, all is quiet.

On the ninth step, I curl into a ball and weep.

Drawn by the Muralist

The muralist clambered up the scaffolding, pots swinging, to daub sweeping lines on the grey brick wall. All part of a scheme to brighten the city. I liked the swooping blue tits and prowling leopard but the boy with the ball and the girl who clutched a hoop were my favourite.

Each morning, as I shut my front door, I bade them a cheery ‘hello’.

Winters of rain came and passed, and still they greeted me, only fainter than before.

A brown envelope arrived from the city council. The building opposite was to be demolished, my beloved boy and girl knocked to dust.

‘Will you sign my petition?’ I asked. ‘To keep the mural...’ The neighbours scribbled their monikers, but I clocked their pitying looks. Their busy lives meant they had more to worry about than a faded painting. Or perhaps they already knew that the council would never listen.

I fetched a bucket and brush, and hurried across the street to scrub with bleach, as high as I could reach. I rubbed and scraped until my wrist grew sore, but the paint had sunk into the brickwork. Streetlights blinked on and still only half the girl’s leg was gone.

The next morning, storm clouds whipped overhead as the crane arrived, and its wrecking ball began to swing. I pulled my hood tight and hurried on.

When I returned home, hillocks of rubble lay scattered across the pavement. A wide empty scar gaped where the children once stood.

I turned the key in the latch then stalled as sobs drifted from the kitchen. I crept along the darkened hallway.

There, dwarfing the table, sat my boy and girl. Their thick torsos were as tall as the cupboards, their heads bowed, shoulders hunched, knees tucked.

The boy made to stand but bashed his crown against the ceiling and slumped back onto the chair.

‘I carried her,’ he explained.

The girl whimpered. The leg below her left knee was gone.

What had I done?

‘No need for crying...’ I said, as I picked my way around the ball and hoop abandoned on the floor.

‘We’ll try a broom.’ But the handle was too short to use as a crutch and she toppled onto the sofa. The springs pinged.

‘Are you hungry?’ I asked.

They nodded.

The fridge held a hard end of cheese and a couple of eggs. Not enough to feed two monster-sized children.

‘I’ll make porridge,’ I suggested. At least it would swell.

I retrieved my large soup-pot and tipped in a packet of oats. The boy loomed over my shoulder, rubbing cricks from his neck. He swung round to help set the table and knocked a poinsettia that scattered across the floor.

Once the plant was tidied, porridge made and supper scooped, I spread blankets and pillows the length of the hallway and patted their tired heads as they settled for the night.

I lay awake, listening to the whine of their gentle snores.

What should I do? They couldn’t stay. But they were children all the same.

Before they awoke, I headed to the hardware store and bought a ladder, along with paints in walnut, forest green and cherry red.

On the gable end of my apartment block, I designed a tall house, complete with window-boxes and a bright front door. I rushed to work. When I returned, someone had painted floral curtains and added a rosy glow that shone from the window out into the night. I couldn't wait to show the boy and girl.

But the kitchen was empty. The pillows and blankets neatly stacked. The ball and hoop gone.

Round and Round the Garden. . .

She winds the dangling mobile and nudges the snowy white rabbit until it spins. 'Round and round the garden. . .' tinkles, circling the pastel walls.

She bends to kiss the petal-soft blanket, as she's done each evening for weeks. Desperate for the form-filling to end and her precious daughter to arrive.

Carrion Call

It is her bleating that alerts us that her lamb has finally gone. Born too early, skinny-necked, when spring snow is still hard-packed across the hills.

We rise as one, as if a shotgun has been fired, flapping and cawing as we leave the safety of our roost to join her mourning.

She stands alone, save for the limp body of her offspring that lies twisted, off-white against the ice. Her breath steams in the grey murk of the late dawn. The other mothers trail down into the valley, rumps swaying, where the wind is less harsh and the rocky stream rushes on.

The winter has been long and hungry, numbing. I, too, am a mother who has lost.

There is safety in numbers, so we stand guard, a wide circle of blue-black, our clawed feet leaving sharp imprints all around. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, we watch, heads cocked, as if waiting for a sign that her grief has passed, and that nature, rough and sweet, can proceed.

I have been chosen by the flock to inch closer, head bowed, offering condolence - one mother to another. But her eyes are squeezed closed, the pale skin of her face tight with anguish. Her cries echo, raw and bare.

‘Please,’ I squawk. ‘Please.’

But she is no longer here, on the hillside, where alpine thistles grow, and spring has forgotten how to be. The ache in her is too much.

It is no accident that we are here, keeping company with the ewe.

I tell myself she won't notice when I lean in for a peck at the lamb's soft eyes, meaty and fresh. Blood runs from the socket, staining the woolly curls. The mother stamps her hoof. I flinch, then beckon the others forward.

Soon the snows will melt, and the carcass will be cleaned, bones heaved aside by the farmer.

Note: Inspired by *Anguish*, by artist August Friedrich Schenck.

Buffing the Tarnished Sundial

She sucked on a thin cigar, its tip glowing, as the sun crept around the garden and the minutes inched by, casting the azaleas into shade. From time to time, she crunched on slippery ice-cubes, awaiting five o'clock, when the shadow moved over the climbing rose announcing the cocktail hour.

'Can we get our ball back?'

She coughed, batting aside smoke before raising her sunshades, squinting. The voice belonged to a child, who appeared to be on tiptoe, staring over the hedge. A sister stood wedged by his side.

'Only if you promise it won't happen again?' Her voice was gravelly from lack of use. When had she become the kind of oldie she despised?

'We asked nicely. . .' The pair of little faces looked hopeful.

Dougal, a mutt long gone, had loved to dig. 'Crawl through the gap in the hedge.' The children disappeared, before reappearing on their knees, where she'd instructed.

She pulled her silk kimono tight. Didn't next door understand she enjoyed peace and quiet?

The children straightened and glanced around.

'Smoking is bad for your health,' the largest, and presumably the eldest, announced. He was probably all of seven.

'So is disturbing the neighbours. . .' She set the cigar on a china saucer.

'Mummy said we shouldn't annoy you.'

'She also says you're weird,' the youngest chipped in.

‘Does she now...?’

She knew they were new money. The builders had banged around for weeks.

‘Tell Mummy that at five o’clock I turn into a monster.’ Their eyes grew wide, but their curiosity was stronger.

They wandered around the garden, touching the crumbling birdbath, reaching to smell tangled sweet peas. Their hair was so blonde she had to stop herself from touching it. They looked like her sons, before they grew tall and embarrassed.

They reminded her of the grandchildren she had never met, never smelled, never hugged, who were trapped in photographs stashed in a drawer.

‘What’s this?’ the oldest child asked.

‘A sundial.’ It stood, mostly forgotten, amongst straggly yellow grass.

‘What does it do?’

‘Shows how slowly time passes...’

It was green with age and needed a good buffing. She lifted a corner of her kimono and gave it a rub, explaining how it worked.

When the children were done with exploring, they sat beside her on the chaise and chatted about their new teachers, how they missed the friends they had left behind.

When the shadow was well past five, she rose and stretched.

‘Time for you two to sod off,’ she smiled.

‘Can we come again?’

‘Perhaps...’ she said. ‘Now shoo...’

They scrambled like feral creatures back through the space in the hedging.

She stubbed out the cigar and vowed never to touch the damned things again.

In the kitchen, a highball glass stood by the sink, awaiting her daily splash of vodka. She lifted the crystal and placed it back in the cupboard.

In the garden, the sundial glinted in the soft evening light. Beside it lay the forgotten plastic ball.

Remembering Miss Mary

I'd sworn never to return, but the sale of the village hall has drawn me back. The wooden structure is smaller than I remember, dwarfed between the oaks of the manse and stern granite of the schoolhouse. The hunched caretaker knew my mother and is reluctant to relinquish keys, but when I explain he shrugs, as if my request is madness.

The piano sits dusty in the corner, like an old man greying in the half-light. I finger the notches and grooves carved into its lid and think of Sunday School; Miss Mary's disappointment when she discovered its scars. We'd whispered and giggled behind hymn sheets at the confusion in her pale blue eyes that one of us lads, *her boys*, would do such a thing. I'd longed to grass on Dickie Dickson, the minister's son, who liked to shove his penknife against my skinny shoulder-blades. Miss Mary surely guessed he was the culprit when he slashed the pulpit cushion and flung stuffing over the pews.

The narrow stool creaks beneath me as I lift the walnut lid and pick out a scale. Notes stick and twang, but the high-pitched tone is the same. Miss Mary's fingers flew as our excitement swelled like drifts, regular as snow in December. Until the Saturday before Christmas, when she played a jaunty 'Jingle Bells' whilst Santa swung his bell as he marched around the hall, our eyes following the lumpy sack of presents that dangled over his shoulder. We'd dared each other to peek outside at Rudolph, who we imagined waiting on the pavement, his nose flashing red, brightening the street.

But I was never bold enough to look. A precious green tractor, the only gift I would receive that Christmas.

Did Miss Mary know why I offered to tidy when my friends rushed home for supper? Why I shifted chairs and swept the floor, then pestered her to teach me how to play? She would rest her bony backside next to mine and offer a spongy pancake; insisting she had baked too many and I take the rest home. The times I cried, she would tell me not to mind Dickie Dickson, and I'd breathe her flowery perfume, my cheek pressed against the firm wool of her coat. Then, too soon, she would flick off the lights.

Years later, when *her boys* became teens, she made the piano dirl whilst shouting dance steps - skip change, pas-de-basque, wild circles of an eightsome reel. I shuffled around the floor, captivated by the girls' soft curves, sneaking kisses behind the curtains, swigging vodka from a hip flask, praying Miss Mary wouldn't see.

The piano is to be smashed and hauled through the door for firewood. I push my foot against the stiff peddle as I play 'Loch Lomond', Miss Mary's favourite tune.

Tears flowed when I discovered she had Alzheimer's. But *I* still remember.

I close the piano lid softly, run my palms across its scratched surface. I will save it, as it saved me.

Summary of *Fledgling*

Fledgling is a flash-fiction collection that explores mothering in its widest sense, through stories that challenge the reader to look afresh at the concept of mothering, the importance of mothering, and what it means to 'mother'.

Quirky, lighter pieces use humour and magical realism, which are interspersed with stories that handle difficult subjects with sensitivity - miscarriage and loss, family estrangement, coping with food poverty, and more.

Inspired by Rae's love of the natural world, connections to bird and animal life are woven throughout.

A blend of storytelling enriched by the poetic, *Fledgling* is an assortment of short tales with mothering at its heart, which reflects on joyous and bittersweet moments to treasure, alongside the inevitable strains and pains of caring for the young.

Firas Ibrahim

‘A writer of rare sensitivity, warmth and innate talent, Firas has a sharp eye for the beauty and strangeness of human connections forged across boundaries. Part fictionalised, part autobiographical, *The Boy in the Barrel* blends an expansive ache for his native Syria with the wit and grit of his beloved adoptive Scotland.’
Nick Thorpe, journalist and author

Firas was born in Syria and moved to Scotland in 2001. It was love at first sight with the people, place and culture. With a deep passion for writing, his Bachelor’s in English put him on the right track but he didn’t know where to start. Covid happened and the world ceased to exist. So, he decided to create his own world where people still hugged and had coffee together. In addition to working on his first book, he started writing short stories and with each one he went on a journey with people he met or had come across in the past. His first short story, ‘Syrian Morning Coffee’, was born in September 2020. Writing became a daily ritual. All his journeys shared one starting point, his kitchen table and a pot of Syrian coffee, but the beauty of it was not knowing where each journey would take him.

You can find out more at Firas’s blog:
theboyinthebarrel.com

Extract from *The Boy in the Barrel*

He stopped for a second at the bottom of the steps. The man behind him thought he was struggling to pick his case up. He felt his feet getting heavy on the tarmac. He looked up and his heart sank when he saw the passengers ahead of him disappear into the darkness of the plane. He felt the rock inside him getting heavier.

He was deep in his thoughts when he heard a voice behind him,

‘Do you need help mate?’ said the passenger behind him. He wasn’t really offering to help, more like, ‘What the fuck are you waiting for?’

‘Sorry, I am fine,’ he replied, and picked up his case and pulled himself up the steps.

At the top of the steps, he met the smiling stewardess and showed her his boarding pass.

‘Welcome aboard, please use the left lane, all the way to the last row.’

He nodded a thank you.

He knew exactly where his seat was. He had picked it two weeks in advance.

The amount of planning that went into selecting the seat was no trivial thing. He needed an aisle seat, so he had the freedom of standing up anytime he wanted without bothering his fellow passengers. He didn’t really move more than usual but it was the freedom of it that was imperative for him. Always last row too, so he could recline his seat to the maximum without feeling he was imposing on the passenger behind him.

He dragged his case behind him down the aisle, all the way to the tail end of the plane. He was one of the

first passengers to board, so it wasn't yet clear how full it was going to be and whether he would have the two seats for himself. He took out his iPad, book and a small bag of snacks. He hated to be stuck on the plane for hours at the mercy of whoever it was that organised the economy class food. Before sitting down, he noticed the patch of sunlight on the headrest of the window seat. He hesitated for a second, then moved and sat next to the window. His face was covered with orange light. The light was blinding but he didn't move. The plane sank into the darkness. He closed his eyes. He wasn't on the plane anymore. He was in his barrel on his family plot in the southern Syrian city of Alswidaa. He had just crawled in and the sun sneaked through the carefully stacked planks to block the opening. The small patch of orange on the wall of the barrel looked beautiful and warm. He wondered how many millions of uninterrupted miles the light had travelled to arrive in his barrel. He put his finger on the spot and felt the warmth. He had a direct line all the way to the sun. He swapped places with his finger, the patch of orange was on his right eye and the barrel sank into darkness, not that there was a lot to see in there.

He thought he heard his mother's voice calling his name, he jolted and opened his eyes to see a startled passenger looking down at him with his hand on Faisal's shoulder

'Sorry to wake you, but you are sitting in my seat.'

'I am so sorry, I was miles away,' he said while standing up.

'No problem.'

He sat back in his seat, plugged his headphones into the screen and started flicking through the movies.

He had enjoyed flying when he was younger but the

glamour wore off with the arrival of a young family and the crying children waving goodbye at the front door.

The only way he could cope with flying now was to have a ready list of movies to watch from the moment he sat in his seat until the plane landed.

Tonight was no different. He had been preparing for this important visit for a few months. He wasn't looking forward to the week ahead. Travel alone was hard enough, but to be responsible for a big business delegation took the stress to a completely new level.

He had finished two films and was going through the list on the screen. A film that wasn't on his chosen list got his attention; the title was *Call Me By Your Name*. The cover photo featured two young men. Another romantic story with either a happy ending or a drastically tragic one. He flicked past it. He started to watch a new one that was on his list. A few minutes into it he decided to stop. Something was nagging him to flick back to the film with the strange title. Something about the title and photo drew him back. It reminded him of *Brokeback Mountain*. 'Do I need more tragedy now?' he thought. He hovered the cursor over 'play' then decided to try the trailer first.

He wasn't sure what it was that drew him in - the music, the characters, or the setting.

Something about it was familiar, like a distant memory. He paused the trailer at the sight of trickling water in what looked like a spring. He was staring at the frozen screen but he could still hear the sound of water coming out of a hose and rolling along the small trench that was dug by his father between the climbing runner beans. His father had built a simple bamboo structure that initially looked like a skeleton, but over time it had disappeared slowly under a thick garment of green

leaves. The thirsty earth absorbed each drop and the smell of the wet soil filled his nostrils. On the high side of the trench, there was always a line of ants carrying whatever they could find to build their stocks for the winter. Some of those ants carried grains of wheat. He remembered one ant. He was sure that the grain was bigger than it, but it still kept up an impressive pace. The ant came across a small stone which must have looked to it like a massive boulder. It was impossible to carry its load over the boulder; the easiest way was to go round it. While the ant dragged its load across, the running floods below took the earth from underneath the boulder and it came rolling down into the water, causing the side of the trench to subside into the water and with it came the ant and the grain of wheat. Despite its plight, the ant wouldn't let go of the grain. Faisal put his finger near the ant, which grabbed on but still wouldn't let go of its treasure. He smiled to himself, pulled the ant out of the water and carried it the last few metres of its journey to where he could see the nest. He put the ant and its load down to join the line of its fellow workers and went back to where he had been sitting. The point where the ant had been was now totally submerged in water.

After he finished the trailer, he read the blurb on the screen. The film was set somewhere in northern Italy in the summer in the '80s. Two young middle-class men. Oliver is visiting Elio's father to assist in his research. Elio's family are in town just for the summer holiday before they go back to the city for the winter.

A lump was growing in his throat while he was watching. Initially he thought it was the usual emotional dip with every trip away from his family. It was like eating an extra hot spicy dish. Every mouthful sinks deeper and sets the taste buds on fire but through the

burning sensation emerges the beauty of the dish. He was drowning in a sea of different emotions that he couldn't understand. Every scene pushed him further down but he couldn't stop watching. A block of ice was melting inside him. He could smell the earth, and touch the water in the burn. He wasn't on the plane anymore, he was hiding among the runner beans on their plot in the village. He could still hear the shouting from their house.

'He is fucking useless, how could the fox take the chicken from under his nose!' he heard his brother Nauman shout.

'I know, it's unbelievable,' his father replied.

All he wanted was to dissolve into the soil and become one with the earth.

It was his turn to shepherd the chickens. He never understood why they were the only family in the whole village to treat chickens like sheep.

'I won't have neighbours shouting at us for letting our chickens go into their plot,' his father shouted once in response to the boys' protestations.

'Yes but Dad, while we keep our chickens in we watch the neighbours' chickens come into our plot and eat our plants,' Faisal said.

'I don't care what the neighbours do or don't do. We are responsible for our chickens. You and Marwan divide the shifts between you. Two hours in the morning and the same late afternoon.'

'And why is it just Marwan and me?'

'Because we have other things to do,' said his older brother Nauman with a conspiratorial wink that he concealed from their father.

It was Faisal's turn that afternoon. Everyone had gone out. His parents were at his uncle's. The older boys were

each on different adventures. Faisal walked behind the chickens to the edge of the village bashing his stick at the grass and tree trunks to make sure the chickens kept going. Why didn't they get a cow instead? It would have been a lot easier to look after and they would get all the dairy they wanted - milk, cheese and yogurt. Instead, they had to rely on the charity of his aunt when they visited her. They got to the usual spot away from any vegetable plots. He sat under a tree watching the chickens peck at insects and soft grass. Dancing patches of sunlight escaped the leaves in the tree and made it to the ground in front of him. After a while, he needed the toilet. He still had another hour to go and he was getting desperate. In the end, he ran the few hundred metres back to their house. He called through an open window for anyone to stand in for him while he went to the toilet but there was no answer, so he ran to the back of the house where the toilet was.

On his way back he could hear the chickens clucking hysterically. He ran the remaining distance but arrived too late. The chickens were in a frenzy and the colourful feathers of the rooster were all over the place. He walked the chickens back to their coop and braced himself for what he knew was coming when he saw Nauman, his father and mother sitting on the balcony.

His middle-class cousins, who only came to the village for the summer holidays, were on their balcony watching the public show of his humiliation with embarrassment.

Faisal didn't know how he found himself hiding among the plants. The shouting was so much that he just wanted it to stop. He sat among the runner beans shaking. Quiet tears rolled down his cheeks. Their words were still ringing in his ears. The three of them had

joined in. Where were they when he'd needed help? He took a long, colourful feather out of his pocket. It had some blood on it and a small piece of flesh was still attached to its base. He dug a small hole in the ground, lay the feather in it, sprinkled it with small petals of runner bean flowers and buried it, then marked the grave with a stone. He sat hidden, watching people pass a few feet away from him on the quiet road outside his house. His cousins passed on their way to the village shop.

'Are you sure George is coming?' Waleed asked his sister May.

'He said he would.'

'OK, I will buy an extra couple of drinks then, just in case.'

'I am so excited, I can't wait.'

'We are all so proud of you, your grades are higher than mine when I was in my final year and I'm supposed to be the brain of the family,' he winked at her.

She shoved him jokingly.

Their chattering and laughter became distant and then disappeared as they turned at the end of the road. Faisal and May were at the same level, but she studied in a private school in the city while he studied at the village school.

'I can't believe you got higher grades than me,' May had told Faisal when they were comparing their grades earlier in the day.

'Why?' he smiled at her.

'I didn't think the school here was any good.'

'Well, I worked hard too.'

It wasn't long after May and Waleed had turned at the end of the road before Faisal's best friend Yosef passed, walking between his father and uncle.

‘This is my friend Faisal’s house,’ Yosef told his companions.

They had just arrived outside Faisal’s house.

‘Hello,’ Faisal heard Yosef’s father start.

‘Oh hello, how are you? Come in, come in,’ he heard his own father respond and imagined him standing, welcoming the visitors. He couldn’t believe the switch in his tone.

‘Is Faisal around?’ he heard Yosef ask.

‘He was just here a minute ago. Nauman, check if he’s on the roof or behind the house.’

Nauman obliged grudgingly.

Faisal looked up. He saw Nauman near the edge of the roof behind the small border wall and saw him go back towards the staircase leading down to the front of the house.

‘No sign of him anywhere,’ Nauman reported back.

‘It’s a shame, we would have loved to see Faisal, he is my favourite of Yosef’s friends.’

With every mention of his name, Faisal wanted to scream, ‘I am here, I can hear you, take me with you,’ but instead he sank deeper among the plants. He felt like something very heavy was growing inside him, paralysing every muscle in his body and pulling him down.

‘Sorry to disturb you.’ His fellow passenger needed to get up. The voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

He paused the movie, unplugged his headphones and stood up to make way.

‘Thank you.’

He smiled and sat back down, looking at the paused scene. Elio was sitting under the trees waiting for Oliver to come back.

The passenger walked a few steps, then he returned.

‘By the way, I might stand for a bit at the back of the plane to move my legs, so I could be a while.’

‘Ah, OK, thanks for letting me know.’

He plugged in his headphones and pressed ‘play’ again. In the next scene Elio was sitting at the piano playing different versions of the same tune. They were all beautiful, but Oliver was insisting on the original traditional version, which seemed to slightly disappoint young Elio.

He wasn’t in his seat anymore. He was watching Elio and Oliver from behind a curtain in a neighbouring house or through a crack in a den on a nearby roof. He was following both characters like their shadows.

The lump in his throat was hardening and it was making it difficult for him to swallow the coffee that arrived.

Every scene seemed to blow a fresh breath on the embers inside him. He felt the glowing heat inside himself, but he couldn’t stop watching. For the first time in his life he started to appreciate the dilemma of the butterflies.

‘But why?’ little Faisal asked.

‘What do you mean, why?’ Hala responded.

They were sitting on their balcony in the summer and Faisal was looking up at the Vapalux paraffin pressure lamp hanging from the ceiling. It was sometime after supper and they could see their parents on the balcony of their uncle, who had arrived with his family earlier that day to spend the next three months of summer in the village.

‘Well, I touched the lamp before you hung it up and it was so hot I burnt my finger, but they fly so close around

it. Look, they even touch the screen with their wings. It must be painful, and they drop dead at the end.'

'Who knows? Maybe they think dying in the warm light is better than flying all night in the dark waiting for the sun to come out.'

'Or maybe they think the lamp is the sun.'

'True,' Hala responded, looking out at a neighbourhood swimming in darkness apart from the little lamps on balconies.

The fellow passenger came back. The same drill was followed again. Pause, unplug headphones and step out. Faisal did it on autopilot.

'Thanks, really appreciate it,' his fellow passenger said.

He smiled, he was scared to talk now.

He sat down again and quickly plugged his headphones in as he felt his fellow passenger's fresh appetite to talk.

The last straw came with the last scene. The lump was now blocking his airways. The floodgates opened and tears rushed free. Feeling embarrassed, Faisal stood up and went to the toilet. He washed his face. He didn't recognise himself, the red eyes and haggard face. He felt like years had passed since he'd looked at himself in the mirror that morning. He took a deep breath when he felt more composed, and turned to get out, but a wave of grief came over him and he broke down again, gasping for air. It took a good while for the wave to pass.

The pilot announced that he was turning on the fasten seatbelt sign. He'd need to go back to his seat.

Summary of *The Boy in the Barrel*

Faisal, a man in his early forties, on a business flight, comes across a movie that seems to, disproportionately, trigger so much for him. Movies might have the power to make us doubt, question everything we thought we took for granted, but in Faisal's case the movie doesn't only make him question things but turns his life upside down and forces him to make serious decisions about his life. The nature of the movie - a beautiful love story between two men - slightly throws us off track as one of Faisal's friends asks him after they watch the movie together, 'Is there something you want to tell me?', but we realise later that there is much more to the movie than its story as we go with Faisal on a journey into his traumatic childhood.

Shelagh Chaimbeul

‘Seo guth inntinneach ùr a bheir spionnadh do ghnè-litreachais a tha a’ fàs nas cudromaiche sa Ghàidhlig – an nobhail eucoir. Tha Shelagh ri moladh airson làmh-sgrìobhainn a tha a’ faighinn greim cho làidir air an leughadair, agus tha sinn an dòchas gum bi barrachd is barrachd de a leithid ann.’

‘This is an interesting new voice that promises to enrich an increasingly popular genre in Gaelic fiction – the crime novel. Shelagh is to be commended on this gripping debut, and we look forward to hearing much, much more from her in future.’

Alison Lang

‘S ann à Glaschu a tha Shelagh Chaimbeul agus bidh i a’ sgrìobhadh leabhraichean ficsean do chloinn agus do dh’ìnbhich sa Ghàidhlig.

Bhuannaich i Duais Litreachais airson làmh-sgrìobhainn neo-fhoillsichte as fheàrr do chloinn ann an 2020 agus chaidh an sgrìobhadh aice fhoillseachadh anns na h-irisean *Northwords Now* agus *Steall*. Bidh i

cuideachd a' stiùireadh seiseanan leughadh co-roinnte agus sgrìobhadh cruthachail sa Ghàidhlig gach mìos.

Tha i ag obair air nobhail eucoir stèidhichte ann an Cill Rìmhinn an-dràsta.

Shelagh is from Glasgow and writes fiction for adults and children in Gaelic.

In 2020 she won a Gaelic Literature Award for Best Unpublished Manuscript for Children and her work has appeared in *Northwords Now* and *Steall*. She also runs monthly Gaelic reading and creative writing sessions.

She is currently working on a crime novel set in St Andrews.

Extract from *Far na Slighe*

'S dòcha nach biodh dad sam bith air atharrachadh anns a' bheatha shocair, shàmhach aca mura robh Ciara air a bhith far a h-obair le cnatan dona air an latha siud.

Nuair a ràinig Amy dhachaigh an dèidh latha fada, doirbh san oifis far an robh i na h-ailtire, bha i an dòchas gum biodh Ciara na cadal. Cha robh i airson dad sam bith a dhèanamh ach sìneadh air an t-sòfa is coimhead air prògraman gairnealaireachd, air nach robh Ciara idir measail.

Choisich i a-steach dhan tranntsa, bhreab i na sàilean àrda aice fon bhòrd bheag agus shad i a seacaid is a бага air an ùrlar. Bha i an impis a sgiorta theann a tharraing dhith nuair a chuala i guth ìosal, briste, ag ràdh rudeigin rithe bhon t-seòmair-suidhe. Chaidh i a-steach gu seòmair blàth, dùmhail, anns an robh fàileadh làidir *menthol*. Ged a bha Ciara cho geal ri flùr, le sròn dhearg is làraich dubha fo sùilean, cha mhòr nach robh i a' leum às an t-sòfa, is i a' feuchainn ris an naidheachd aice innse do dh'Amy fad 's a bha guth fhathast aice.

'Amy! Cha chreid thu seo! Seall air a' bhidio seo - fhuair mi lorg air sreath ùr air YouTube madainn an-diugh, *Fuasgladh Cheist*, anns am bi iad a' dèanamh sgrùdadh air bàsan amharasach!'

Bhris guth Chiara, ach chùim i oirre a' bruidhinn co-dhiù.

'... Cill Rìmhinn... snaigheadh... cha b' urrainn dhomh creidsinn... Drogaichean! Bràiste! Nighean à California! Seall, Amy!'

'Ceart, bheir mi sùil air!' thuirt Amy, is i a' feuchainn ris a' bhòrd air beulaibh an t-sòfa a sgioblachadh, ach

cha chuala Ciara i, is ise a' casadaich gun sgùr.

Chaidh Amy dhan chidsin airson Lemsip agus cupa tì a dhèanamh, a' faireachdainn na bu sgìthe is na bu ghreannaiche buileach. Dè am murt anns an robh Ciara air ùidh a ghabhail a-nis? Ged a bha Ciara air a beò-ghlacadh le prògraman mu dheidhinn murtairean is eucoir, b' fheàrr le Amy coimhead air sreathan air nàdar, no gàirnealaireachd, no sgeadas-seòmraich, no daoine a' ceannach taighean thall-thairis, a bheireadh togail dhi às dèidh latha dòrainneachd san oifis. 'S i a bhiodh toilichte mura cluinneadh i na facail *Making a Murder* no *Serial a-rithist*.

Bha Amy air geama air an robh *Super Sleuths* (freagarrach do dh'aois 8-10 a rèir a' bhogsa) a cheannach dhi mar fhealla-dhà, ach cha tug e gàire air Ciara.

'Chan eil murt èibhinn, Amy,' bha i air a ràdh, a' coimhead air a' ghlainne-mheudachaidh agus an stais fhuadain le gràin. 'Thachair na rudan uabhasach siud do dhaoine bhochda ann an dha-rìribh agus 's dòcha gum b' urrainn dhomhsa no cuideigin eile fianais a lorg a bhiodh cuideachail.'

An àite a bhith ag argamaid rithe, bha Amy air an stais a chur oirre agus droch bhlas Fhraingis, coltach ri Hercule Poirot, a chleachdadh gus an d' rinn Ciara gàire. A-nochd, ge-tà, cha robh de neart innte tarraing às a bean. Bhiodh i a' faireachdainn ciontach co-dhiù, leis cho tinn 's a bha Ciara a' coimhead.

Mus do thill Amy dhan t-seòmair-suidhe, dh'fhosgail i pacaid briosaidean teòclaid agus phut i dà dhiubh sa gob, gan cagnadh gu luath gus nach biodh Ciara a' gearain gun robh i a' milleadh a dinneir.

'Seo Lemsip dhut a ghràidh,' thuirt i, às dèidh dhi seasamh san tranrsa airson diog no dhà, ag imlich

teòclaid bho bilean. ‘Òl seo agus laigh sìos air an t-sòfa - na feuch ri bruidhinn an-dràsta.’

Rinn Ciara fiamh-ghàire lapach fon phlaide agus chuir i a làmh air glùn Amy nuair a shuidh i ri a taobh. Rinn Amy fhèin fiamh-ghàire sgèth agus bhrùth i ‘Cluich’ air coimpiutair Chiara. Bàs an àite blàthan - abair oidhche.

Cha b’ fhada gus an do thuig i carson a bha Ciara cho troimh-chèile ge-tà.

‘An t-seachdain seo bidh sinn a’ bruidhinn ri bràthair Joni Dawson, a bhàsaich o chionn còig bliadhna deug ann an Alba. Thuit Joni far an t-slighe air an robh i a’ coiseachd air oidhche stoirmeil, agus b’ e co-dhùnadh na poilis aig an àm gun robh i air drogaichean a ghabhail mus do thuit i. Cha robh a teaghlach a-riamh ag aontachadh ris an aithris oifigeil, ge-tà.’

Bha am boireannach air an sgrion na suidhe aig bòrd air an robh maicreafòn mòr agus dà ghlainne uisge, mu choinneamh duine òg le falt buidhe. Fad ’s a bha i a’ bruidhinn, bha dealbhan a’ nochdadh air sgrion air an cùlaibh: Tràigh Ear Chill Rìmhinn; carabhanaichean os cionn na tràghad a’ coimhead a-mach air a’ mhuir; sràidean làn oileanaich is teaghlaichean air saor-làithean.

‘Tha Art Dawson còmhla rinn an-diugh, airson innse dhuinn mu dheidhinn Joni, a phiuthar, a chaidh a lorg ri taobh Slighe Chladach Fìobha, faisg air Cill Rìmhinn, o chionn còig bliadhna deug.’

Thòisich cridhe Amy air bualadh rud beag na bu luaithe. Thug i sùil air Ciara, ach b’ ann ris an sgrion a bha na sùilean aicese glacte, is iad cho mòr ri truinnsearan.

Fad ’s a bha am boireannach a’ bruidhinn, bha Art Dawson a’ coimhead sìos air a’ bhòrd agus ag òl uisge, is coltas aonaranach air aodann.

‘Bha Joni air a bhith ann an Alba fad seachdain mus deach i air chall – bha i an dùil cùrsa-samhraidh air luibh-eòlas a dhèanamh aig Oilthigh Dhùn Èideann aig toiseach an Iuchair agus bha i a’ coiseachd air Slighe Chladach Fìobha mus deach i dhan a’ bhaile mhòr. Bha i air làrach-campaidh a chur air dòigh ann an Cill Rìmhinn, ach chan robh dearbhadh aig na poilis gun do ràinig i Cill Rìmhinn a-riamh. B’ ann faisg air Kingsbarns a chunnaicear Joni beò mu dheireadh, air madainn Diardaoin 24 an Ògmhios. Bha stoirm fhiadhaich ann am Fìobha tron fheasgar agus oidhche siud agus, nuair a dh’inns a teaghlach dhan phoileas gun robh Joni air chall, bha dragh orra gun robh tubaist air a bhith aice air an t-slighe.

‘Thuair na poilis lorg air corp Joni seachdain às dèidh sin fo phreasan ri taobh na slighe. Bha a h-amhaich briste agus bha e coltach gun robh i air tuiteam far na slighe. Nuair a rinn iad deuchainnean air a corp, lorg iad beagan Ecstasy ann, agus bha dà phile ann am pòcaid Joni.

‘Chaidh aontachadh leis a’ phoilis gun robh Joni air drogaichean a ghabhail, air dol air chall ann an stoirm agus air tuiteam far an t-slighe. Cha robh teaghlach Joni a-riamh a’ creidsinn gur ann mar siud a bhàsaich i ge-tà. Nam beachd-san, rinn cuideigin cron air Joni agus thug iadsan oirre drogaichean a ghabhail mus do bhàsaich i.

‘Tha Art airson innse dhuinn dè a’ bhuaidh a bh’ aig bàs Joni air a theaghlach agus dè na planaichean a th’ aige airson cuimhneachan a thogail dhi ann an Cill Rìmhinn.’

Thòisich am boireannach a’ bruidhinn ri Art, ach cha chuala Amy facal eile. Bha fuaime àrd, bhiorach na cluasan agus bha dragh oirre gun robh i a’ dol a chur a-mach, no a dhol lag. Bha an dealbh a bha a-nis air an sgrion loisgte na h-inntinn: nighean bhrèagha, òg, le

falt fada, bàn is dualach. Coltas oirre gun robh i air a bhith a' siubhail airson greis, is briogais khaki, seacaid phurpaidh, dhìonach, bòtannan mòra, tiugh, is màileid-droma trom oirre... agus bràiste air a seacaid.

Bràiste annasach, eireachdail, air an robh pàtrain nach deach a dhèanamh ann am factaraidh sam bith, ach le làmhan agus le gaol. Duilleagan, craobhan agus flùraichean neo-àbhaisteach, àlainn, cho mionaideach 's gun tigeadh iad beò nuair a ghluaiseadh a' bhràiste air geansaidh no seacaid. Bràiste nach lorgar ann am bùth no margaidh sam bith.

Bràiste a bha a-nis air seacaid ann am preasa Amy. Bràiste a bha air a bhith air na seacaidean is geansaidhean oirre cho tric on a fhuair i lorg oirre, is i a' coiseachd air Slighe Chladach Fìobha faisg air Cill Rìmhinn aig deireadh an Ògmhios 2004.

Brùth Ciara 'Stad' air a' bhidio agus choimhead i air Amy, a' feitheamh air beachd bhuaipe. Cha robh comasan-labhairt aig Amy ge-tà, is i a' feuchainn ri na briosgaidean a bha i air stobadh na gob sa chidsin a chumail sìos.

An dèidh mionaid no dhà, chuir Ciara làmh teth air corragan fuar Amy.

'Feumaidh gur e an aon bhràiste a th' ann, nach e? Nach b' ann ann an Cill Rìmhinn a fhuair thu lorg oirre, nuair a chaidh thu fhèin is Seumas dhan charabhan còmhla ri Scott is Lauren?'

Cha do dh'fhreagair Amy i, ach lean Ciara oirre a' bruidhinn:

'Tha mi air a bhith a' smaoineachadh mu dheidhinn fad an fheasgair. Nas fhaide air adhart sa bhidio, tha Art Dawson ag ràdh gum bi esan ann an Alba aig deireadh na mìos seo, is e a' feuchainn ri airgead a thogail gus snaigheadh fiodha a stèidheachadh air an làrach far an

deach Joni a lorg. Mholainn-sa gun tèid sinne gu Cill Rìmhinn ron sin, feuch am bi cuimhne agad air rudeigin cudromach bhon latha siud. Dh'fhaodamaid coiseachd air ais air an t-slighe, is a' bhràiste fhàgail an siud, gus am faigh Art fhèin lorg air.'

Bha aig Ciara ri stad, is i a' casadaich gun sgur. Bha Amy fhathast gun fhacal a ràdh - aodann glas, sùilean cruinne agus beul tioram - ach nuair a thuirte Ciara 'fianais', leum i suas bhon t-sòfa agus nochd dath an fheirge na gruaidhean.

'Fianais? Cò - ach bràthair Joni - a tha air a ràdh gun deach a marbhadh? Chan eil na poilis den bheachd gun deach. Agus mas e is gun do chuir cuideigin às dhi, dè am fianais a bhiodh air fhàgail às dèidh còig bliadhna deug co-dhiù? Chan e Jane Tennison a th' annad, a Chiara, ge b' e cò mheud sreathan eucoir air am bi thu a' coimhead. Chan eil adhbhar sam bith againn dol an sàs ann an suidheachadh toinntè mar seo. Bi ciallach - carson a rachamaid gu Cill Rìmhinn? Ma dh'fhàgas sinn a' bhràiste an siud, nach bi Art Dawson den bheachd gu bheil sgeulachd ann ceangailte rithe? Dè thachras ma bheir esan dhan phoilis i? 'S cinnteach gu bheil an DNA agam oirre - am bi iad a' smaoinèachadh gun d' rinn *mise* cron air an nighean?'

Thionndaidh Amy chun dorais agus bha i an impis coiseachd a-mach dhan chidsin nuair a thuirte Ciara rudeigin anns a' ghuth bhriste aice.

'Dè?' dh'fhaighnich Amy. Ged a bha Ciara fhathast ro lag èirigh bhon t-sòfa, bha fearg na sùilean.

'THA mi ciallach an turas seo,' thuirte Ciara a-rithist agus, ged a bha crith na guth is na làmhan, lean i oirre a' bruidhinn.

'Smaoinich, Amy - càite an do lorg thu a' bhràiste? Taobh a-muigh pàirc Kinkell Braes?'

‘Seadh,’ dh’fhreagair Amy, a’ coimhead mi-chinnteach.

‘Cha robh dearbhadh aig na poilis a-riamh gun d’ ràinig Joni Kinkell Braes, an robh? Thàinig iad chun a’ cho-dhùnaidh gun do choinnich i ri cuideigin air an t-slighe a thug drogaichean dhi, agus gun do thuit i far na slighe mus do ràinig i Cill Rìmhinn. Nan robh fios aca gun deach a’ bhràiste aice a lorg taobh a-muigh na pàirce, nach biodh dearbhadh aca gun robh ise air a bhith ann cuideachd? Agus nach bhiodh iad air fhaighneachd carson a dh’fhàg i am pàirc a-rithist, carson a choisich i air ais air an t-slighe?’

Bha Amy a’ faireachdainn lag, ach cha robh Ciara deiseil.

‘Nis, chan eil mi idir a’ moladh gum fàg sinn a’ bhràiste air an t-slighe fhèin - cha dèan e feum sam bith do dhuine sam bith a’ chùis fhosgladh a-rithist. Ach gabhaidh adhlacadh far am bi an snaigheadh - ’s dòcha nach biodh for aig duine ach sinn fhìn gun robh i ann. Nach biodh e na b’ fhèarr cuidhteas fhaighinn dhi?’

Sheall Amy air Ciara, fhathast gun tuigsinn dè bha i a’ feuchainn ri ràdh.

‘Tha còrr is còig ceud mìle duine air a’ bhidio siud fhaicinn mar thà - air dealbh Joni fhaicinn. Dè thachras ma dh’aithnicheas cuideigin a’ bhràiste a-nis? An creid iad nach eil fios agad cò às a thàinig i? Bha dealbh Joni sa h-uile pàipear-naidheachd agus air a h-uile sgrion fad cola-deug co-dhiù nuair a chaidh i air chall. Tha cuimhne agamsa oirre math gu leòr - chan ann gu tric a thachras an leithid de rud ann am Fìobha. Carson a chreideadh duine sam bith nach fhaca tusa i, is nach do dh’aithnich thu a’ bhràiste aig an àm?’

‘Chan fhaca mi dad sam bith!’ dh’fhreagair Amy, is a guth a’ fàs na b’ àirde. ‘Chaidh mise a New York dà latha às dèidh dhuinn tilleadh bho Chill Rìmhinn, is mi air

obair-samhraidh fhaighinn ann an oifis m' uncail.'

'Tha FIOS agam!' dh'èigh Ciara, ach rinn seo cron cho mòr air a guth 's gum b' fheudar dhi an ath sheantans a chagarsaich gu feargach. 'Cuimhnich: b' ann às na Stàitean Aonaichte a bha Joni! Chan eil duine a' dol a chreidsinn nach do nochd an sgeulachd anns na meadhanan Ameireaganach agus nach fhaca tu sgeul oirre.'

'Innsidh mi dhaibh nach fhaca! Mus faca mi an deamhnaidh bhidio siud cha robh sgot agam gur e bràiste Joni a bh' agam!' thòisich Amy, ach cha robh Ciara deiseil.

'Chan eil dearbhadh agad nach fhaca tu dad. Smaoinich: nan robh fios aig na poilis gun robh a' bhràiste sin air a bhith agad on a chaidh Joni air chall, dè chanadh iad? Gun robh thusa an sàs ann am bàs Joni, no gum faca tu na thachair dhi, agus gun do theich thu thall thairis leis an aon phìos fhianais a tha ga ceangal ri pàirc Kinkell Braes. Agus gu bheil thu air a bhith a' cleith fianais bhuapa on uair sin.'

Chuir casadaich throm, dhomhainn stad air Ciara a-rithist, ach cha robh dad aig Amy ri ràdh. Cha robh dath air fhàgail air a h-aodann, mar gun robh grian a feirge air dol fodha. Sheas i airson mionaid agus, ged nach fhaiceadh Ciara mòran tro na deòir a thàinig leis a' chasadaich, bha e coltach gun robh Amy a' dol a thuiteam air an làr.

'A bheil... ceart... gu leòr... ' Cha b' urrainn do Chiara crìoch a chur air an t-seantans, ach cha chuala Amy i co-dhiù. Ruith i a-mach dhan taigh-beag, far an do chuir i a-mach a-rithist is a-rithist.

An dèidh mionaid no dhà, sheas i agus sheall i oirre fhèin anns an sgàthan bheag os cionn na since. Bha a falt goirid, ruadh mì-sgiobalta agus bha *mascara* a' ruith

sìos a h-aodainn gheal. Mhothaich i loidhnichean beaga ri taobh a sùilean is a beul, nach robh air aodann an nighean a chaidh a New York ann an 2004.

Bha na thuirt Ciara air cuimhne a dhùsgadh innte - rudeigin a bha air a bhith falaichte fon a h-uile cuimhne eile fad còig bliadhna deug. B' ann le crith-thalmhainn a mhàin a rachadh a thoirt gu bàrr a h-inntinne - abair crith-thalmhainn a bha seo.

Bha i air dealbh fhaicinn san New York Times. Joni Dawson, à California, a chaidh air chall ann an Taobh an Ear Alba. Agus bha a' bhràiste air Joni anns an dealbh siud cuideachd, agus - mar a bha cuimhne aice a-nis - bha Amy air na duilleagan brèagha aithneachadh.

Carson nach d'rinn i dad aig an àm? Carson nach tuirt i rudeigin ri cuideigin - carson nach do chuir i fòn dhachaigh ag iarraidh comhairle bho a pàrantan, bho Sheumas?

Dh'fheuch i ri cur a-mach a-rithist, ach cha robh dad air fhàgail na stamag. Dh'fhairich i fuachd a' gluasad tro bodhaig. Choimhead i oirre fhèin a-rithist, agus chunnaic i a' bhràiste air iomadh seacaid, geansaidh is còta thairis air na còig bliadhna deug a dh'fhalbh.

Thàinig cuimhne eile thuice: latha grianach san Ògmhios 2004. Cha bhiodh i air a' bhràiste fhaicinn mura robh i na laighe fo phreas bhealaidh. Cha b' urrainn dhi coiseachd seachad air na flùraichean beaga buidhe gun sròn a stobadh annta.

B' ann air meur ìosal a bha a' bhràiste steigte - bha na duilleagan òir a' deàrrsadh tro na duilleagan uaine, coltach ri dathan ann am falt ban-dia na coille.

Nuair a thog Amy a' bhràiste gu faiceallach, bha i cho annasach 's gun tug i oirre anail gheur a tharraing a-steach. Duilleagan den a h-uile seòrsa - darach,

calltainn, caorann, beithe, eidheann, - air an gearradh a-mach à meatailt mìn agus ceangailte ri chèile gu mionaideach. Agus bha cuideigin air a h-uile cuisle air a h-uile duilleag a riochdachadh - b' ann air na cuislean oir a thug Amy aire, is iad a' priobadh rithe bhon phreas.

Cha robh i a-riamh a' faireachdainn cho eu-coltach ris an nighean òg, neochiontach sin.

'Dè nì mi?' dh'fhaighnich i dhan sgàthan, ach cha d'fhuair i freagairt, oir bha Ciara air doras an taigh-beag fhosgladh. Bha i fhathast paisgte anns a' phlaide, bha a sùilean is a sròn dearg, agus bha i fhathast a' casadaich gun sgur.

'A... ceart gu leòr... chuala mi... cur a-mach... duilich... cha robh... ciallachadh... gad dhèanamh... tinn... duilich.'

Sa bhad, dh'fhalbh am fearg is a' mhì-chinnt is an dragh a bha air Amy - dh'èirich i airson grèim a ghabhail air làmh a bean.

'Ist, a Chiara - na gabh dragh mu mo dheidhinn-sa no mu dheidhinn dad eile an-dràsta. Gabhaidh sinn cothrom bruidhinn a-màireach ma tha thu a' faireachdainn nas fheàrr. Tha mi a' dol gad thoirt dhan leabaidh - tha thu a' coimhead sgràthail.

Agus, lean Amy oirre ged a bha Ciara a' feuchainn ri deasbad leatha, 'tha mi a' dol a chur fòn gu Marc sa mhadainn ag ràdh nach bi thu air ais aig d' obair ron ath sheachdain - cha bhi duine sam bith ag iarraidh pastraidhean ma chì iad thu a' casadaich is a' sreothartaich sa chidsin.'

Thug seo air Ciara gàire lag a dhèanamh agus leig i le Amy a toirt suas an staidhre is a cur fo duvet agus plaide eile.

'Oidhche mhath, a ghràidh,' chagair Amy rithe, mus do thill i dhan t-seòmair suidhe. Thog i a' bhràiste bhon

phreasa air an t-slighe agus shuidh i leatha air an t-sòfa
anns an dorchadas airson deagh ghreis, ga tionndadh
eadar a corragan a-rithist agus a-rithist.

Summary of *Far na Slighe*

'S e nobhail eucoir stèidhichte ann an Cill Rìmhinn a th' ann an *Far na Slighe*.

Ann an 2004, tha nighean òg, Joni Dawson, a' dol air chall faisg air Cill Rìmhinn, is i air a bhith a' coiseachd air Slighe Chladach Fìobha.

Seachdain an dèidh sin, tha na poilis a' lorg corp Joni - tha i air tuiteam far na slighe agus tha e coltach gum b' e tubaist a bh' ann, is i air drogaichean a ghabhail.

Ann an 2019, tha bràthair Joni a' feuchainn ri airgead a thogail gus cuimhneachan a stèidheachadh e do Joni. Cha robh teaghlach Joni a-riamh a' creidsinn gun do bhàsaich i ann an tubaist, ach gun d' rinn cuideigin cron oirre.

Tha Amy - am prìomh character - agus a bean, Ciara, a' faicinn prògram air-loidhne mu dheidhinn bàs Joni. Tha iad ag aithneachadh a' bhràiste a th' air Joni - 's i an aon bhràiste air an d' fhuair Amy lorg o chionn còig bliadhna deug air Slighe Chladach Fìobha.

Tha dragh orra gu bheil fianais aca a tha ceangailte ri bàs, no murt 's dòcha. Tha iad den bheachd gum feum iad cuidhteas fhaighinn den bhràiste, ach tha cuideigin airson stad a chur orra.

Dougie Strang

‘Dougie pulls you into a world whose beauty is raw and real and truly felt. Reading his work reminds you of every pore and sinew and bone you possess, as well as the brilliance of the natural environment that surrounds us. He writes with a clarity and honesty which is incredibly moving.’

Sheena Kalayil

Dougie is a writer based in south-west Scotland. He writes regularly for online journal *Bella Caledonia* and for *Dark Mountain*, contributing essays which tend to explore the relationship between natural and cultural ecologies, reflective in style rather than journalistic. He is currently working on the manuscript of his first book, *The Bone Cave*. An extract from the book, published as ‘At Diarmaid’s Grave’, was recently included in *Antlers of Water: Writing on the Nature and Environment of Scotland*, edited by Kathleen Jamie and published by Canongate.

Dougie also works with organisations such as Wild Journeys and Scapafest, where he helps to facilitate wholehearted encounters with Scotland’s remote and mountainous landscapes.

You can visit his website at dougistrang.org

Extract from *The Bone Cave*

Prologue

The wind was fierce on the ridge. At the summit I sheltered in the lee of the cairn, crouching among stones and moss, the tiny green hands of alpine lady's mantle. I stayed too late on top, thrilled by the views as the sun set behind the peaks and ridges of Lochaber. Below me, the moor began to heave and shift in the dark as though it was *unmoored*, as though the lochs dotted across it were the only fixed points, glinting the last of the light. Dropping down from the summit, I searched along the western slope of the ridge, among banks of turf and exposed peat hags. Water seeped to the surface in dips and creases, but you wouldn't call them pools.

It was late and time to stop even before I stepped into the bog. When I pulled out my leg it was cast to the knee in wet, black peat, and it was heavy, like a false leg, or someone else's, so that I had to shake it until it felt like my own. I pitched my tent in the dark on a patch of firm ground, pulled off wet clothes and put on all my dry spares, and then crept into my sleeping bag. My head torch threw shadows that billowed with the tent in the wind.

Rannoch Moor is a wide, elevated bowl, rimmed by mountains; a chalice that held the last ice of the last Ice Age. Twelve thousand years later, it's still rising by a few millimetres each year: a long, slow decompression after the burden of a mile's depth of ice. No roads cross the moor but there is a railway line, and the Glasgow to Fort William train trundles along it twice a day and

back again. Once, as a passenger, I experienced a kind of agoraphobia - at least I think that's what it was.

I was in my mid-twenties, travelling north to Fort William in February, one of only a handful of passengers spread between the two carriages of the train. We crossed the moor late in the afternoon and it looked dismal in the half-light of winter. Thin, wet snow smeared every surface, the lack of definition confusing the space between things. Peering out of the window, the mountains seemed both far away and looming, and I became disorientated, holding onto my seat while at the same time floundering out on the moor. The sensation was brief but overwhelming. I've never been so lost. I pulled myself together - that's how it felt, as though I had to haul some dislocated part of me back onto the train - and spent the rest of the journey unnerved, buried in a book for distraction, grateful as night fell that the windows reflected back the lights of the carriage, keeping out the dark.

Twenty-five years later and I was out on Rannoch Moor again, or rather, above it, sleeping fitfully. The wind jolted me awake and for a moment I thought that the tent had untethered and was slipping from the mountain. I lay in the dark, pressed to the ground while the wind beat at the flysheet, and thought about my family, my two daughters when they were young - those times when they would wake in the night in a storm, afraid, and I would pretend that the house was a ship, heaving on the sea's swell, so that I staggered as I walked from the bedroom door to their bunks, asking: *Avast me hearties, what ails thee?*

Teenagers now, they still remember the stories I'd tell to soothe them, and the funny house that we lived in, with its straw-bale walls and timber mezzanine; a house

that you would imagine might sail and list in the wind. The memory of being there for them was a solid truth, like a stone, weighting me to the side of the mountain.

Beinn a' Bhric means 'Speckled Mountain', speckled like a brown trout or like the back of a red deer calf. It rises above Corroul Railway Station at the north-western rim of Rannoch Moor and is twin-peaked - the summit to the west, which gives the mountain its name, is smaller in height and less shapely than its neighbour, Leum Uilleim, 'William's Leap'. The pair stand shoulder to shoulder, joined by a curving ridge, with Coir a' Bhric Beag, the 'Little Speckled Corrie', clasped between them. The mountain provides the backdrop to a well-known scene in the film *Trainspotting*. Fans still catch the train to Corroul, the highest railway station in the British Isles, to take pictures and pose at the spot where Renton delivers his soliloquy on national identity: *It's shite being Scottish...*

By morning the wind had eased and cloud huddled around the ridge of Beinn a' Bhric. I was inside the cloud, the air wet and cold, and there was no summit or sight of other mountains. I cut out a small circle of turf on a level bank and unpacked the bag of kindling and the half-dozen lengths of firewood that I'd carried in my rucksack. My fire was a compact sun, unnaturally bright against the grey of the mist. I set a pot of water to boil and willed the flames to lift the cloud and conjure the actual sun. I made tea, ate oatcakes and a cold, sweet apple, and carefully tended my fire on the mountain in the clouds. It was the morning of the 1st of May, Beltane according to the old Celtic calendar - the word's meaning most likely a compound of 'bright' and 'fire'.

When the fire died, I poured water over the ashes and replaced the circle of turf, tramping it firm, then took down my tent and packed my rucksack. The wind had shifted, thinning the cloud so that gaps were opening, and I could look down into Gleann Iolairean, ‘Eagles’ Glen’, and across to the grey lochans on the plateau of Meall a’ Bhainne, ‘Hill of the Milking’. I took out my map and gauged my position relative to what I could see around me. I was in the right place, marked Fuaran Cailleach Beinn a’ Bhric, ‘Well of the Old Woman of Beinn a’ Bhric’. In Gaelic, *fuaran* usually means a well in its natural state, an undug pool or spring, so it was possible that the peat bog I’d stumbled into the night before, with its few inches of surface water, was all there was to find.

The side of the mountain steepened below me. I clambered down to where a stream had formed a gully between two crags, and then followed its course back up amongst the folds of the slope, hoping it might lead to what I was looking for. Rags of cloud drifted across the hillside. I startled a mountain hare that was crouched in a dip to the left of the stream, encroaching on the tolerated space between us as though I had nudged a tripwire. It sprang away into the mist and left my body charged with adrenalin.

The Cailleach’s well is tucked in a hollow so that it’s hidden from above and below. Even at a short distance, you could walk by without noticing it. It’s an oval pool, gravel-lined and clear, like a portal, with the stream I had followed pouring from the lip of it. The water tasted like stone. I filled my water bottle and cupped my hands and washed my face.

Local tradition tells that the Cailleach cleans her well on the 1st of May. In her absence, I rolled up my sleeves

and cleared some of the silt that had built up around the outflow. After a few minutes of scooping and splashing, my arms were numb with cold. When I stopped, the pool returned to stillness.

Dropping beneath the cloud, I followed the stream back to the gully, intending to scramble down into Gleann Iolairean, and to walk out from there via the head of Loch Treig to the railway station at Corroul. A bird flew past, contouring the crags: a swallow, unexpected in this place and at this height. It tilted its body away from me in alarm, flashing its orange breast and looking back with a tiny, black eye. Small, quick life, heart the size of a Tic Tac, following an old ellipse from Scotland to Africa and back, carrying the sun from the south on its breast. Now I was blessed. Now it was the first day of summer.

Chapter 1

Hamish Henderson, folklorist and poet, famously observed that traditional culture is like a ‘carrying stream’, one where the surface ripples and changes, always renewing itself, but where a deep current endures. Hamish’s metaphor is akin to what mythologist Clarissa Pinkola Estés calls *rio abajo rio*, ‘the river beneath the river’. Both conjure a landscape of story and culture that is adjacent to, or that is held within, the physical landscape. My concern is with that other, adjacent landscape, and with the stories that shape it and that flow from it.

In a month of walking, while tracking some of those stories in the North and West Highlands of Scotland, I encountered a depth of meaning to them – old stories

of people and place, and of the more-than-human world – that continues to startle me. It also convinces me, at a time when so many questions are being asked about our relationship to place and to the other species that we share place with, that such stories remain vital, in the sense of being alive *and* necessary.

On the 1st of October I took a train through tidy Perthshire, past ploughed fields and stubble fields, and wind turbines on low hills, blades gleaming in the sun; past a field with grazing cows that were clustered in groups like guests on a lawn at a wedding, or a funeral. North of Blair Atholl, the fields become moors and the hills become mountains, and the train's engine strained as it pulled us up and over the Pass of Drumochter, before easing as we approached Dalwhinnie at the head of Loch Ericht. The loch fills a cleft between Ben Alder and the mountains west of Drumochter; it's a spear of water nearly fifteen miles long, pointed at Rannoch Moor. A way in, or rather, a way out: the loch is one of a number that formed when glacial ice melted and spilled from the great bowl of the moor.

Dalwhinnie was quiet and dull beneath a cloudy sky, and I was the only person to step off the train onto the platform. Surrounded by mountains and sitting at a height of over a thousand feet, the village is one of the least sunny and most consistently cold in the UK. I noticed the chill as I walked past a straggle of houses to the village edge, where I stuck out my thumb and gained a quick hitch along the A889 to Laggan. My driver was a cheerful estate agent whose black Labrador leaned forward from the back of the car and licked my face – 'kisses' said the estate agent, chuckling, as I wiped dog slaver from my cheek. And then I was walking west into

the wind, following the course of the River Spey, with the mountains ahead, and beneath my feet, under the tarmac, General Wade's Military Road.

I was a day's walk north of Beinn a' Bhric on Rannoch Moor, where I had climbed and camped in the spring. That trip had kindled the desire to go for a longer walk and now, five months later, I was stepping out with the whole of October ahead of me; my first solo, long-distance walk since marriage and parenthood. There had been other trips - day walks and the odd weekend - but this was different, a chance to walk without timetables or the need for a swift return. And it felt timely: I'd turned fifty; my children, as teenagers, were beginning to shape their own lives and I'm lucky, my wife and I both understand the gift of occasional solitude.

I climbed Beinn a' Bhric in the spring because I heard its name mentioned, years previously, in a tale told by storyteller Jamie MacDonald Reid, in a pub in Edinburgh. The tale concerns an encounter between a hunter and the 'Old Woman', the Cailleach of Beinn a' Bhric, and it stayed with me, in part, because the mountain is so intrinsic to the narrative. This was no abstract fairy tale, belonging anywhere and nowhere; its rootedness in a specific place gave it substance, lodging it more vividly in my memory.

When I'd sat down to look at Beinn a' Bhric on a large-scale map, before setting out to climb it, I'd noticed below the summit the name Fuaran Cailleach Beinn a' Bhric and felt the thrill of discovery. Jamie's telling of the tale didn't mention a well, but here was confirmation of a relationship between the Cailleach and the mountain, as well as a hint of other stories still to be found. Back home, after my camp on the ridge, I'd researched the traditions and lore associated with

Beinn a' Bhric, uncovering more folktales as well as fragments of song and pibroch tunes, all of them place-specific: a density of meaning concentrated on a single mountain.

Such a concentration is not, of course, unique to Beinn a' Bhric. Wherever you dig, you find that the land brims with culture, with stories, offering glimpses of that other, adjacent landscape, the one where time slips and myth happens, where the 'Old Woman', the Cailleach, is cleaning the well herself.

Rain scoured my face, driven by gusts of wind, making it difficult to see anything. I wrapped myself in waterproofs, pulled my hood low, and followed General Wade's Road as it skirted a nameless grey loch that had been formed by the damming of the River Spey. Two wooden boats were moored close to the shore, one painted green, one blue, both straining at their moorings in the wind. The rain came in squalls, with sunshine bursting through the clouds in-between, turning the grey loch luminous.

After the 1715 Jacobite Rising, General George Wade was commissioned to construct a network of military roads in the Scottish Highlands, to help enforce the rule of the British State. The most challenging of those linked the barracks at Ruthven in Strathspey, fifteen miles to the north of Dalwhinnie, with Fort Augustus at the head of Loch Ness. It did so by crossing the Monadhliath mountain range via the Corrieyairack Pass. Wade and his road builders breached the pass in 1731, completing the commission. Fourteen years later, it was the Jacobites, under Charles Edward Stuart, who gained most advantage from the use of the network. On the 27th of August 1745, British troops under the command

of General Cope retreated from their intended march over the Corrieyairack. Fearing an ambush near the top of the pass, they went north instead to Inverness, leaving uncontested the main route into Perthshire for the Jacobite clans of the North-West Highlands.

I'm not much interested in the doings of Charles Edward Stuart, an aristocrat whose failed quest to claim the British throne brought terrible consequences to the people of the Highlands; but I'd always wanted to climb the Corrieyairack Pass. During those intense, joyous, exhausting first years of parenthood, I would occasionally dig out my *OS Map of Northern Scotland* and trace a line along the shore of a loch or over a bealach between two mountains. It was a vicarious pleasure, imagining myself there by reading the topography of the map; but it was also a form of commitment to walks I might one day make. The Corrieyairack Pass was often traced, and now it seemed the most appropriate place to begin a journey into the north and west.

Late in the afternoon, I crossed a bridge over the River Spey and passed an estate yard bustling with 4x4s, trailers and argocats. Through the open door of a shed, I saw the body of a red deer stag hanging from a hook on the ceiling. A ghillie was in the shed, standing with his back to me, his attention focused on the carcass. It was an odd first encounter with one of the creatures that would be, more than any other, my companions on the journey. I was glad the ghillie didn't notice me and I walked on quickly, as though I'd witnessed something illicit or profane: the stag upside down, the bucket catching its blood; the ghillie with an apron over his tweeds, busy with knives.

An hour later, at dusk, another stag, very much alive, paused as it crossed the road ahead and turned to look at me. It was young, only a couple of tines on each antler. I stopped dead and for a moment we regarded each other in silence - two strangers meeting on a night-time road, each surprised and curious to find the other there. The stag jumped the fence by the side of the road and disappeared. I followed it into the forest, clambering over the fence with none of its elegance, hoping to find a place to camp for the night.

Summary of *The Bone Cave*

The Bone Cave is a work of narrative non-fiction. It provides a vivid account of a month-long walk tracking deer-lore and the deep stories of place - tracing 'songlines' of memory and myth - in the landscape of the North and West Highlands of Scotland. It's less an account of routes completed and mountains climbed, and more an engagement with the ways that place, people and culture intertwine.

There are 400,000 red deer in Scotland, and their annual rut starts at the beginning of October, which is when Dougie set out on the month-long walk. The bellowing of stags became the soundtrack to his journey and a vigorous reminder that, as well as mapping invisible landscapes of story, he was also exploring a real, living landscape.

Eimear Bush

‘Eimear writes with the loving detail of a miniaturist, creating startlingly vivid scenes and expertly observed portraiture. The worlds she writes are breathingly, brilliantly real, and her trilogy of novels soars.’

Kirstin Innes

Eimear has lived in Edinburgh for the last six years. Originally from Ireland, her writing is strongly influenced by the Irish literary greats, and often steeped in Irish mythology, history and culture. She writes across genres, including fiction, non-fiction, memoir and poetry. She is currently working on a fictional trilogy, set in contemporary Ireland; it is this that has attracted the New Writers Award.

You can see how Eimear mixes genres on her prolific blog (www.myedinburghpress.com), a collection of essays inspired by city life and nature in Edinburgh and Ireland, which draws on and melds literature, philosophy, history, art, memoir. Her blog has built up a sizeable following of readers and was featured in *Msllexia*. As well as her trilogy, Eimear is also working on a range of non-fictional pieces, most recently publishing ‘Why I Write’ in *The Blue Nib*.

Extract from *One More Day to Stay*

On Fridays Aideen didn't walk home with her friends after school, instead she turned in the opposite direction; towards the town where her nana lived at the tip of the peninsula by the harbour. She loved having one day of the week on her own, no friends to laugh or squabble with. Her walk took her down Main Street, past shops, cafés, hotels.

The first shop she passed was Harkin's, where she wrinkled her nose at the pungent smell of dulse and the sight of rotting cartons of fruit on an old trestle table by the door. Black bananas, soft lumpy lemons, bruised Conference pears, all of them crowned with a halo of fruit flies. Mr Harkin stood outside in his faded shop coat, which was stained and worn thin on the inside of the collar. He never had any customers.

'Were you ever in Mr Harkin's shop, Nana?' Aideen once asked.

'It's only visitors to the town that go there. They know no better.'

'How does he keep going if he doesn't sell anything?'

'There's not much needed to keep a man like him. He's the sort could live off the scrapings of a tin.'

Nana wiped a drop from the tip of her nose. The matter was closed.

Most of the shops were of no interest to Aideen - bookies and fishing tackle shops, a place selling yarn. Nevertheless, she had perfected the art of lingering, delaying the arrival at her nana's flat by making slow oxbow loops through the town.

'What took you so long?' Nana would ask the same

thing every time. 'Up Main Street and down the same street. How can you be so fast at running and so slow at walking?'

'The Master kept us back. He took us for a nature walk up the sand dunes and over the back of the golf course to the war hollow. Showed us where Magnus Barefoot was killed in 1100.'

'Magnus Barefoot? Your bum's a plum.'

The old lady had no interest in hearing about Aideen's lessons, but Aideen told her anyway as a diversion from more scolding.

Sometimes Aideen slowed at John Nixon's shop of high-quality Irish linen. A sepia Perspex blind was pulled down to stop the window display from fading. Mr Nixon sat in the gloom behind his mahogany counter. Drawers and cabinets were filled with Carrickmacross lace, superior linen from Clark's of Upperlands, and hand-painted Old Bleach damask from Randalstown. A team of reliable local knitters supplied him with Aran jumpers and collared cardigans with round leather buttons. Nixon's house backed onto Aideen's, he knew her parents, and he often called out to her on the street from the back of the shop.

'Did you get any slaps today?' He peered over glasses balanced at an angle at the end of his nose.

'No,' Aideen lingered, afraid of getting into conversation, but afraid too of walking away from it. She was too young to recognise the fondness in his gruff manner.

'Have you much homework?' His voice was jagged, as if there was something stuck at the back of his throat.

'We don't get any on Fridays,' Aideen told him.

'What sort of school is that? Half an education.'

He dropped his head back down into the *Belfast News*

Letter.

Rosen's Jeweller's, just a few doors up, was Aideen's first proper stop. Like a magpie she craved the silver and gold, garnets and amber. Her heart was set on a spinning silver pendant about the size of a penny. When it rested flat, all you could see were a series of meaningless markings, but when you spun the little disc, magic happened, and it flickered out the message: I LOVE YOU.

'I love you,' Aideen whispered into the window. She desperately wanted one but knew better than to ask Nana when the self-sanctioning answer rang loud and clear in her ears: 'That's far too grown-up a necklace for a child.' 'Love in bloom in a wee back room' was one of Nana's catchphrases, hissed far too loud if ever she passed a courting couple on the park summer seats. 'When poverty comes in at the door, and love flies out the window' was another from Nana's armoury, said with a knowing nod if ever they walked past the quiet lady who dressed in grey and lived up near the tennis courts. If Nana had her way, no grandchild of hers would ever grow up.

Main Street was also home to an art deco cinema called the Dominion, which hirpled from year to year, gradually losing its looks like a fading beauty queen. Like many of the town's businesses, it survived the winter from the spike in trade over the summer, and there were many winter nights it closed early, no customers having appeared. The owner, an affable man, turned a blind eye to the teenagers who smuggled in cans of Harp to drink in the back row, and he opened the side doors early for the rush of Catholics keen to leave before the National Anthem was played at the end of each film.

Sometimes Aideen met Nana at the halfway point from

school. She walked with a stoop, more so on windy days – of which there were many – in case she blew away, Aideen always thought. Nana was thin, proper thin, a boniness that came from a lifetime of pecking at the wrong food. She enjoyed the ritual of buying food on the day she drew her pension, but she took no enjoyment from eating it. Hers was a diet of tinned Fray Bentos beef pies, sliced turkey on white buttered bread, tinned sardines and Jaffa Cakes with cups of tea. This was supplemented with Powers Whiskey, brown lemonade and cigarettes.

Aideen could spot her from afar because she always dressed the same: a belted camel coat that drained her of what little colour she had, and a headscarf folded on the bias and tied below her chin. She had a rotation of headscarves, all made from heavy polyester because Nana said polyester didn't slip the way real silk did. Aideen's favourite was the one printed with Paris monuments: the Eiffel Tower, the Sacré-Coeur, the Opéra and the Arc de Triomphe. Nana's sister, Peggy, had brought it back from a visit there before Aideen was born. Peggy and Aideen had met briefly on the revolving door of life, Aideen born just as Peggy died. Aideen claimed to remember her.

'You can't possibly; you were fourteen days old. She was impressed by the size of you, though...' Nana stopped to cough up phlegm. 'When Peggy first saw you, she announced to me that you were born half-reared. She used to check your mouth for teeth. I hope you've not inherited the bad heart from our side of the family. It'll be the death of me yet, just like it was for Peggy. I keep telling your father, and he'll not listen. There are days I can't get a breath and I think my ribs will break with the pounding.'

When Aideen repeated this to her dad, he didn't raise

his eyes from his crossword. 'Cigarettes,' he said.

At each end of Jubilee Park, at the top of the town, was a newsagent's. Nana diplomatically divided her custom between the two. This meant she doubled up on the local news, hearing a different slant on what was going on in the town. One shop was run by Tommy McMonagle, who was slow and ponderous and about as likely to gossip as a corpse in the grave. He had a habit of kneading one doughy hand into the other as he spoke, recycling his three favourite topics: the weather, the turnout at mass the previous Sunday, and the priest's sermon.

'What does he talk to the Protestant customers about?' Aideen asked.

'Hould your whist,' said Nana.

Tommy McMonagle was kind to the children, patient when they deliberated over jars of sweets. He even allowed them to split the usual quarter-pound weight into two ounces of one and two of another. Aideen's favourites were midget gems, liquorice comfits and clove rock. While she was deciding, Nana would adjourn to the back of the shop to have a cigarette with Joy, Tommy's wife. 'An affliction of a name to give someone when you have no idea what a baby is going to grow into.'

Joy McMonagle had long since stopped trying to become the ray of sunshine her parents might have hoped she would become. Nana didn't seem to mind. She stayed longer with Joy than in any other shop. Each reinforced the other's dissatisfaction with the state of the world, both agreeing that life was a trial to be got through. Nana sat longest with Joy on the day she bought the *Radio Times*. They flicked through it together, marking up the programmes they wanted to see. On the *Radio Times* days, Aideen was allowed to go down to the rocks at the end of Jubilee Gardens to

search for fossils.

‘Ten minutes.’ Nana lit another cigarette without looking up and Aideen ran off.

Brendan Kiely lived down by the rocks in one of the big terrace houses that his parents ran as a bed and breakfast. Aideen always hoped she would see him.

‘Aideen!’ He came running over the grass towards her. ‘I’ve a new one to show you.’

They clambered over the shoreline to the rocks’ edge close to where the sea was lapping. Brendan spat on his hand and rubbed it onto a rock.

Aideen pulled a face. ‘That’s rotten.’

‘I do it because they’re easier to see when they’re wet. Look.’ He did it again, rubbed his spit in with his fingers, and traced the ammonite’s spirals into being.

‘Anytime you’re at your nana’s you can come and play with me.’

Aideen stared at the ground and nodded. She felt a whoosh in the pit of her stomach, the same sensation as when her dad drove out the Murderhole Road, long and straight with the huge dips. She would yell from the back seat, ‘Go fast, Dad, go fast. Make the car do the creeps.’ The creeps was a good thing; a thrilling sensation that rolled in her body from somewhere deep and unfamiliar, culminating in a rush of excitement she couldn’t put into words. It was how she felt now. She waited until it settled, then smiled at Brendan and ran off.

On the other side of Jubilee Park was Maggie and Peter Connor’s shop. Maggie was from ‘down south’, as Nana called it. Nana was profligate in her use of the phrase ‘down south’, employing it as a blanket description for anyone who hailed from the Republic of Ireland. It could mean Donegal – which was really

‘up north’ in terms of geography - or it might refer to Skibbereen - which really *was* down south - or it could mean Mullingar in the Midlands, or Clones just south of the border. Every accent from ‘down south’ - although as different-sounding as a polka from a waltz - was bagged up as one to Aideen’s ear, unaccustomed as she was to hearing regional accents from across the border.

If anyone knew where Maggie was from, they had long since forgotten. It was enough to know she wasn’t from here. Maggie’s voice matched her disposition, her accent mellifluous and soothing, like the most delicate of waves breaking on a still day. Nana called her ‘an eternally happy being’ in a tone of voice Aideen knew held no admiration. The old woman distrusted unqualified optimism.

‘What is there to be happy about? Aren’t we killing each other the length and breadth of the country? There are bombs going off a wheen of miles away and she’s off picking flowers in her head. If I’m not long for this world, I won’t be sorry. I wouldn’t miss the drums and guns and guns and drums. And there’s no end of it in sight.’

It was odd how someone else’s positive outlook could trigger Nana’s latent gloom and despondency. The butcher, Bobby Bell, had the same effect upon her. Bobby’s shop door was always open, sawdust on the floor, tiles painted with fattened pigs and bulls and black-headed sheep, and he sold every part of them. With his bloodstained, white apron of strong linen stretched across a bulging belly, he was a walking caricature. One smile was enough to rile her. Still, Nana bought his lamb’s liver once a week, and sausages at the weekend.

If Nana wasn’t meeting Aideen in the town, she would

leave her front door off the latch. Other times, she suffered an outbreak of security consciousness and left Aideen outside to knock.

There came one Friday when Aideen had agreed to meet Nana in McMonagle's.

'There's the pride of the town,' said Tommy on seeing Aideen, and he rubbed his hands in delight. Aideen had come to know his habits. He was in good form; when he pulled on his ears, he was worried. 'Where's your nana today?' He slipped her a white mouse from beneath the counter.

'Is she not here already?' Aideen popped it in her mouth and peered to the back of the shop where Mrs McMonagle was sitting alone marking up the *Radio Times* with a red pen.

'She's not darkened our door today.' Joy pushed her spectacles up her nose to look at Aideen. 'I've news for her and all. Auld Father Dolan died in the nursing home last night. In his sleep. I pray every night for to go the same way.' She blessed herself. 'Don't you forget to tell her now.'

The blinds were drawn when Aideen reached the flat. She knocked, first the door, then the glass of the porch window, then the sitting-room window, each sounding a different note. Nana got cross with too many knocks.

No answer.

Aideen went around to the back door and found it unlocked.

'Nana,' she softly called, letting herself in. 'I'm dying for the toilet.' Aideen took a quick pee, leaving the door ajar and calling through. 'Mrs McMonagle says to tell you Father Dolan's dead.'

She ran her hand under the tap, skipping soap - it was only a pee. She rubbed her hands on her jumper and

came through to the sitting room.

The top of her nana's head crested the back of the armchair, the Eiffel Tower was bent around her crown.

'Nana, are you sleeping?' Aideen went to lie down on the settee, but Nana didn't move.

Aideen lay still and held her breath.

The tick of the small clock on the shelf beside her Nana's armchair had never sounded louder. The brass ornaments, which Aideen had always loved, today looked woebegone. The bell girl in the bonnet and full skirt needed a polish, the brass boot with its tongue lying loose like a thirsty horse looked pathetic, and the three brass monkeys hunkered down and attached at the shoulders, which she usually found comical, today looked desperate to block out sights and sounds and speech.

She dared herself to look back at her nana.

Belted tightly into the camel coat, eyes closed, she was as lifeless as the brass. Aideen could imagine her getting ready to leave, then sitting back down, taking a moment to compose herself after the exertion of putting on her coat, breathless but talking to herself. 'One of these days will be my last.' She'd begun to say that so often that Aideen would finish the sentence for her, and they would both laugh.

An asthma inhaler lay on her lap alongside a statue of Saint Martin de Porres. Her hand, so still, was resting over his face. She was pale with a slight blueness to her lips and her face seemed younger.

'Nana! Nana!'

Aideen got up off the settee and bent down to shake her nana's knee. She was all bone under that pleated wool skirt.

'Will I go up to McMonagle's and tell them you're not

well? Will I, Nana?’

Last year, Aideen had seen Teresa’s grandad in the coffin the day before his funeral. Aideen had gone with her mum to the wake house; she was supposed to play with Teresa and not see the dead man. ‘Come on in if you want,’ Teresa had whispered, and Aideen had followed her friend into a bedroom that smelt horrible; the smell must have been that strange soap they covered Teresa’s grandad with that made him look so pale and soft.

She recognised the same look in her nana, but no smell. Her skin was like a well-washed sheet, pale and smoothed by the wind on a day with good drying.

Aideen felt hot to the point of burning, like that time she’d sat too close to the gas Superser heater and had singed the back of her Aran jumper. A trickle of fear and panic spilled through her.

‘Nana, I’m going up to McMonagle’s to tell them you’re not well. I’ll come straight back.’ She had started to cry. ‘I’ll run.’

Her lungs were burning when she opened the door to McMonagle’s. Brendan Kiely was there, standing by the rows of jarred sweets, choosing what to spend his Friday pocket money on. Aideen was too afraid to be embarrassed that he was seeing her cry.

‘Mr McMonagle, Nana’s not well. She’s in her chair and not speaking, and she won’t open her eyes.’

Aideen put her two hands over her belly and started to heave with tears.

Mr McMonagle pulled on his ears and said nothing. Joy appeared from the back of the shop, her coat over her arm.

‘Flip that sign to closed, Tommy, and come you with me. Brendan, take Aideen back to your house and tell your mother to mind her and that I’ll be round as soon

as I can.’

Joy lifted two bars of fudge from the shelf and ushered the children out the door.

Summary of *One More Day to Stay*

This extract is from *One More Day to Stay*, the first in a trilogy, telling the story of three women friends - Aideen, Teresa and Bronagh - born in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. This story, Aideen's, is set in a seaside town on the north coast of Northern Ireland. The novel opens as Aideen contemplates her final day in Ireland before moving to America to take up a prestigious academic post. Covering a twelve-hour period, from 3pm to 3am, the book spans thirty-five years of Northern Ireland, from the early 1980s to the present day. It traces Aideen's and her friends' triumphs, disappointments, betrayals and secrets, all underpinned by deep-rooted love and loyalty for each other. As the novel draws to its close, sadness and longing are revealed, and Aideen is confronted by a ghost from her past presenting her with the dilemma of will-she-or-won't-she make the move. Key themes in the novel include the role of fate in how a life unfolds, the characteristics of enduring friendships, the female relationship to power and success, what it means to be from or belong to a particular place, and the power of memory to shed light, heal and help one understand the past.

Poetry

Roshni Gallagher

‘I’m in awe of how Roshni balances nature and self in beautiful, deliberate lyricism, with deep tenderness and truth. Roshni captures the beauty of the world and holds it within her poetry, so much so that as I read I feel as if the moon itself is at my fingertips. Her talent is extraordinary – here is a poet set to change the literary landscape forever.’

Nadine Aisha Jassat

Roshni is a poet from Leeds living in Edinburgh. She’s co-winner of the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award 2022, and her debut pamphlet *Bird Cherry* is forthcoming with Verve Poetry Press (2023).

Her work is published in a variety of literary publications including *Gutter*, *New Writing Scotland*, *Propel*, *Butcher’s Dog*, *Middleground* and *The Scotsman*. She has previously been commissioned by the Scottish Poetry Library and is featured in the SPL’s anthology *Best Scottish Poems of 2020*.

She has read and performed her work at various events, including Edinburgh Multicultural Festival, the

Glasgow Mela and Counterflows Festival.

Roshni graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 2019 with an honours degree in English Literature and History. Whilst studying she was president and editor-in-chief of *Nomad Magazine*. She received a special mention for the University of Edinburgh's Grierson Verse Prize in 2019.

She is currently working on her debut collection.

Follow Roshni on Twitter or Instagram: @roshnigallagher or find out more on her website: roshnigallagher.com

April River

That morning I said *too much* -
it felt like stumbling out into the garden at night

and plunging right into the pond.
Later, *too much* followed us out on the drive

and out through the fields. Followed whilst the heat
made moons of our upturned faces -

as the clouds dandelioned apart.
I wanted to unloosen into the ice

of the April river. I wanted to be a gill.
The water was clear and cold and quiet.

Its depth a boulder against my belly.
My eyes still sticky with pollen.

In the river I found every river
I'd ever touched. Meadowsweet

and wet trouser cuffs.
I wanted to be cleansed. Like blooming silt,

like water over rock. Instead,
the river dappled and deepened its mirror

and I met myself - unchanged.

My Granny Dreams of Guyana

My granny looks at me and she sees herself.

Her living room full of glasses, half drunk.
Pictures of gods hang above the bed. She listens

to a record spinning out in another room,
another house.

The rant of rain on begonias.
Mangrove and wood slats. The parrot's asleep.

Things change.
I try to pull quiet in to cover us.
The walls sing.

She looks at me
and she sees herself
in the slant moon,
the water,
the waning bank.

First published in *New Writing Scotland* 40.

Dock Leaves

Often, I want to flick shut
strangers' eyelids.

I'm sick of anticipating my own othering.
Thank god for places where people aren't -

the green of the trees has always been a door
to walk through and become whole.
The green sinks into me and the woods beat

with spires of dock leaves,
deep red, like a hundred bold hearts.

Who dared trick me
into thinking I was a guest?
Up ahead, the wild silver lake exists

for a brown girl
to crouch beside it and try to catch the frogs.

The Whitby

The moon is thin and poised like a curlew's beak -
all bone. Hanging over the ocean, the abbey.
We watch the sea birds being swept by the wind
and I try to tell you about all my life you've missed.
There are still so many sentences I can't reach.

I know that out on the water, welcomed home,
is a replica of the ship they took my ancestors in -
to sugar plantations for former slave owners.
The Whitby, sailing from India to the Caribbean,
a stale silence blowing in off the water to greet her.

Coming back here is like mutely looking down
on my own odd body as it moves without me.
Nothing is familiar. This loved, blank cliff
is a memorial stone with the names bleached out.

First published in *Gutter 21*.

When the priest came knocking

for the third time we shut him out
and he stood for a moment clutching
his beads in the rectangular window
of the hospice door - *the line between
comedy and grief really is that thin* -
someone knew there wasn't time
for another rosary because suddenly
we're watching the life tip gently
out of her

like water from a cup
and we all lean inward as though
to catch some part of her leaving or
as though we're pulled forward the equal
and opposite reaction to her slipping
away so when you cough and say *now*
then trying to shake off the feeling like
a dog shivering off water I'm glad,
for a moment, to be taken briskly outside
*so that we might go to an art gallery
or a book shop or a café down by the river
somewhere with books and a fire*
but I'm thinking *what are we doing
your mum has just died*. All this before
I learn what a wake is and before
I mumble my first hail marys *and why
are there so many* and before I'm the only
brown person at the funeral and you're
smiling and trying to usher me through
the art gallery gates as though this were
an interruption in my yearly visit to Sligo

and now that the worst has happened
and the waiting is over with what's left to do
but mother me.

Attend

You sit outside language now
& I think of everything unsaid -

your brink & beating tide
the lilac of your mornings.

I know you in fragments -

Your Capuchin
Sheep Parrot Pelican -

they didn't have names!

I frame your photo
attend you
from a distance.

Imagine orange
flowers wilting in the heat
at your mother's
unattended funeral.

*I couldn't go back for hers
so I wouldn't go back for anyone else's.*

Wear black
when I learn your Indian name,
light incense,
let you be whole with your secrets.

That's Roshni, isn't it?

In the silence

I hold a nib of your life's words

& claim & claim.

First published in *Propel 1*.

Bird Cherry

To teach myself belonging.
I try to find the name
of the blossom tree darkening
by the window.
Bird cherry or sweet cherry -
from the curve of its leaves
I hold each possibility of its ungrown
berries in my mind.

If I met my great-great-grandmother
I wouldn't know the name
of the language she spoke.
Bird cherry or sweet cherry.
In the dusk, the petals fall in drifts
like sea foam.
The soil remembers
everything it used to be -
carbon, fracture, petal.
Last month, the full white blossoms
swelled and blotted out the sky.

All at Once

Last night I found you -
walking through my dreams.

Your voice was light unravelling
down the stairs.

A string of pearls -
all at once -

I remembered
& you remembered me.

On the stair the sun
pooled into a seed.

Your house was bright
with sleep.

It was you
it was you.

I remembered.
You came back for me.

Helena Fornells Nadal

‘Helena is one of my favourite writers. Her graceful, moving, imaginative poems present us with painterly landscapes, uncannily exact accounts of interior life, and a wholly fresh poetic idiom and approach to syntax. They show us the bottomless complexity that underlies clarity.’

Oli Hazzard

Helena is a Catalan poet based in Edinburgh, where she works as a bookseller. Her poems have appeared in *Harana Poetry*, *Finished Creatures*, *The Interpreter’s House*, *DATABLEED*, *Gutter*, *Magma* and the anthologies *The Evergreen: A New Season in the North* and *New Writing Scotland*. In 2018, she won the Oxford Brookes International Poetry Competition (EAL), judged by Kayo Chingonyi.

In 2021, Helena spent a month writing at Can Serrat International Art Residency, in Catalonia, and worked on a collaborative poetry installation exhibited at Allanbank Mill Steading in the Scottish Borders.

As someone who writes in English as a second language, Helena is interested in idiosyncratic and non-idiomatic uses of syntax in poetry and the lyric essay form. Her work is concerned with the natural world and the effects of climate disaster, and considers the connections between home and place and the interaction between trauma and linguistic disruption.

Follow Helena on Twitter: @sllenrofhelena

Nelumbonaceae

Beyond a gathering of grass growing—thoughts
on the slowness of clouds are processed—cows.
Please say, who are you
after you traverse the bridge—closed up for strength
or undeserving of love?

Cows. They stand there.
The power lines shook you, travelling
too far backwards up to the moment where you
opened like a lotus
that has abandoned poetry, exited it, looked at it
from the outside, your roots
latched in mud, submerging nightly
into riverwater, re-blooming sparkingly
clean the morning after—loving—me.

Pondlike, or often found in ponds, after the flood,
on flood plains, deltas, what not—where are you?
Not seen.

Goodbye to knowing you or remembering
the times of the tide. Cow, lotus, come
under the high voltage cables
floating over the fields in the afternoon.

Clouds of water camouflage you in the morning
running across pillows
rather than fields or riversides or beaches
which are cold. The funnel
of the Forth Bridge lands you softly on safe waters,
wool blankets, soft bushes.

Travelling too fast—opening
like a lotus beyond a gathering of grass—growing
in the slowness of cows latched in mud
off riverwater—where are you? Lotus, come,
tell us what comes
after the bridge in the pond of pillowed mornings
ripping you away from all—that.

New York, and also elsewhere

Say, on that pier. The words that were.
Breaking—rotting—the wood
today swells in the damp air.
And blue whales—hi Robert!—make an appearance
in someone's diary only to fade
into the privacy of words. Friends' smiles, and the pier
and its wood, change a little towards blue
with the hope that Robert will recover.
Never. And the skies won't mend his life
this time—two thin chimneys
reach high towards the sky
into anonymity.
A paradigm shift
floats on the water—who'll dare to help?—
a leisure yacht cruises by—the sharp sun
speaks for the hope of the day
which in retrospect kills, changing
Robert a little closer to blue.

After *Buddies* (1985), by Arthur J. Bressan Jr.

Meanwhile, the clouds

dance like river trout in turbulence and it makes me look at it twice, this sideways ascent and you digress and talk about river hydrodynamics and a study by means of ‘flow visualisation’—the cameras reveal so far uncharted swimming patterns. But

you only want to catch the biggest trout which discourages me from pursuing this conversation further so I look at the clouds and I remember windows images with depth that trick you and this is how they trick: limited planes of limitless depth behind which you may lie down and feel that, unseen, you are seeing everything unboundedly beyond a rectangle bounded by walls. Double glazing, the refraction of light between panes. This weightless observation, this is what happens when you lower your guard

and forget that *abuelita* is singing, or admiring
the hydrangeas—*hortensias*, she'd call them—
and that Mother is doing the ironing, or making dinner, or hanging up
the clothes on the indoor balcony.

Meanwhile, the clouds overcast the spot behind the house where you all put his ashes
with the pine's roots and

just as windows are pretences of a far-reaching view
the ground only supports the imagination up to its surface—
the cat could not see where he had gone
so she waited, not as far from the tree as you would think
though she hadn't seen it

the container lowering beyond the ground
into a hole already waiting.

Ships Came from Cuba

seen from bird's-eye view -
and it is bird, not drone -
the garden organises itself
around one old fountain
a tortoise, and a dead man -
who wouldn't shiver
if he awoke?

a mechanism of lenses
determines my longhand -
the inner convex lens
zooms in on grief
the outer concave lens
confused by the day's fog
curtains history's clarity:

fountains and tall palms
emerged on the Mediterranean
shores, half-antipodal
and to the dead we call
when the origins of beauty
are blurred
by capital and water.

man, gone, what would
you make of this me
unkempt now inwards
with eyesight dispersed
by prisms? I could not
see the fountain clearly
for what it was.

Endangered, Population Increasing

we wake up and we don't know how to go on because the mountain is eroding
& falling in big rocks ten years ago, too
pebbles were worn smoother under our window as the river moved forward
but I didn't, I think today as images superpose themselves five years
onto five years and we're back on the softer part of the hill next to the river

would it be considered a trespass
to walk on the path of the fallen rocks—for lack of safety
or intrusion of property? and is this poverty, the struggle to succeed at moving
& moving on daily and trying to love—it—you—the rocks going downhill
is this something we should be doing

or will we return to bed instead? blue whales
race each other against extinction faster than we heal as sure as I see them
in my mind, I'm sure that no one sees me losing you
again repeatedly each day at the speed of the river

the rocks, how sad that I should still remember you as you had been
when I wake up and the mountain grows vulnerable in its denudation

First published in *Gutter* 25.

The Fall

on the boat with a brother
with a father on the sea
in the sea rock below brother
on the island a tower and trees
from the woods to the sand
with the boat on the beach
from the tower to the father
after the father towards the sea
dark green woodlands on the island
with a fire on the beach
a few branches under the father
on the boat with a machine
made of wood towards the island
from the tower to the trees
after a red ladder a father
heavy rain under the trees
with a knife towards a father
with a brother to the beach
iron ladder up the tower
on the island with one fish
an iron boat and a rowboat
chopping wood from the trees
in the night on the island
on the beach with the father
on the rowboat with a body
 with his body
 in the sea

First published in *New Writing Scotland* 39.

Jean Rhys

she is the end fire
at the end

unnamed (wrong name)

look back:

what you become
when you grow up by the sea
they do not know

they do not know
it is white warm
blue and everywhere: sounds

islands
woman and
land occupied not the sea

~

‘no, I can’t be like her who writes from above.
We moved to the same country, cold in many respects,
that’s it:

I can understand her fury but she’s not me now, not this
me’

~

mother! mother we think
of you
before death all our lives

your hair is red but
it is with her that the fire was

Winner of the Oxford Brookes International Poetry
Competition (EAL), first published on the competition's
website.

Art Poética a l'Estranger

I don't speak what I say. I write
a thing like speech and then go quiet. I alone with a
silence like the silence of rugs
in big houses, spoken down by being trodden on under
the muffled light let in
by windows. Here it is, written down: the sea from home,
so quiet from the distance,
glows in my mother's eyes, a sea not wholly forgotten by
abuelita. I don't speak
as much as I write to pierce the memory of speaking
when I see Rhys or Morrison
smile from the shelves, redeeming the muteness of
displacement.

The mantelpiece is there in the mornings, behind the
rug, and the armchair, and I
sit down and contemplate the years I must retell, with
the blanked-out days and the coldness
of being made alone again in a strange country floating
like whales float on a cityscape,
a bit too far from the right place. I sit and wait, and the
patterns of words available seem perpetually ugly, so I
go back
to dreaming about our warm sea of pines and palms,
about the old man who died
and the young one who tried to. I build a silent house for
all the sights I've seen
and when it learns to speak
I hope its sight may touch you, I hope you'll see it and
hear what it is saying.

I don't like the word nightingale nor the Catalan for it,
rossinyol, and I say this
so that you know that I have feelings and preferences
and that I can speak several languages
even though from behind the windows you peek into I
look meek and tainted. I like watching
footage of whales and seals. What do you do when you
don't do much?
I pick words and when I distrust them I listen to Emily,
who I'm too scared to listen to.

Mute with the events that have piled up to make me
speak the way I speak,
I'll never be able to describe the worst of them to you, so
I collect words that
resemble memories and look out of the window. I hold
god knows who responsible for the things I lack words
for, so I lie in bed for days.
But I emerge to describe the smell of pine trees mixed
with sea spray under the sun,
writing as a stranger in this adoptive home which has
good windows, and in the mornings
I let myself feel like I burn in the light.

Agata Maslowska

‘Agata’s poetry is filled with strong, evocative imagery while also not relying on that imagery alone to convey feeling or meaning. Her use of bodily language and willingness to experiment with technique and form mean that each poem promises something exciting, visceral and unexpected.’

Sean Wai Keung

Agata is a poet, writer and translator born in Poland and living in Scotland. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in various magazines, including *Edinburgh Review*, *New Writing Scotland*, *Gutter*, *Magma*, *Blackbox Manifold*, *Interpreter’s House*, *amberflora* and *Tentacular*, and in several anthologies, including *Glasgow* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2022) and *Footprints: Ecopoetry Anthology* (Broken Sleep Books, 2022). As well as receiving the Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award, she has been awarded the Hawthornden Writing Fellowship and the Gillian Purvis Award for New Writing. Her submission was highly commended in the Emerging Writer Bridge Award competition. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow. Her areas of interest include ecopoetry, migrant literatures, translation and experimental writing, among others.

Find out more on her website:
agatamaslowska.co.uk and on
Twitter @AgataMaslowska

Lemon

Once we were talking
about our death
as if it belonged elsewhere

You cut the lemon half-way
it tasted sour, it still does
but death seems closer

Okay, look at the tree outside
the way it bends in the wind under the sterile sky
trees seem eternal, unlike lemons

I count my inhalations
one two
three

I'm talking to you as if
you are or were alive
four

Time five plays its game
against us
six

I'm no longer talking
seven
I'm writing things down

To remember
eight
nine

This obsession with dying
ten
when I can still

Nine
lemons are different from tomatoes
despite their round shape

A pen and a straw are lines
eight
I'm not trying to play things down

I loved you, when love wasn't given a time slot,
when touch
seven

Now I love you all
let's get in virtual touch
six

Did you hear about the animal which
five
no never mind

Yes this is just a surface
today I'm breathing here
four I could tell you about

And go deeper - I know -
would be better
three

All the stories of flora
two
that would make you

But what's more important
now than

First published in *Footprints: Ecopoetry Anthology*
(Broken Sleep Books).

Herbiporous

we used to be interlinked, not bound
by economy, but living space

as a child I swallowed
pullum iecoris and cor pullum
which my grandma cut out
with care

I sucked ossium dry, the cervical
vertebrae were my favourite
I looked through the foramen
vertebrale not thinking of my own

now I sense
our alienation as assets

our market value fluctuates
from one day to the next

there is no difference between
l'homme and oiseaux
there is a difference

I invest myself into the economy
of plantae to survive I dream
of the corpus hortus entanglement

calluna vulgaris on my forehead nephrolepis
exaltata in my shoulders kalanchoe
daigremontiana: devil's backbone is also mine
crassula ovata fingers dracaena bones
echeveria eyes geranium ears
begonia lips spathiphyllum vagina
maranta leuconeura circulation
ceropegia woodii in my chest I
loses itself deciduously

First published in Issue 26 of *Blackbox Manifold*.

The Rail Sleeps in the Snow

The train had been rolling for years. It came to a halt; a whistle cried. Snowdrifts grew bigger as time melted. It was advisable to choose heating over lighting, so we sat in compartments in dark silence, sucking on lollipops like there was no tomorrow. A nearby village shop had nothing left, apart from bottles of spirit vinegar and wooden brooms. Our thighs relaxed into each other, searching for nowhere. By the time we arrived, it was an after-time. No announcement was made. No sound. Dust on our shoes shone like radioactive salt. Snow in our heads.

‘The Rail Sleeps in the Snow’ was written in response to a line found in the notes to Erasmus Darwin’s set of two poems, *The Botanic Garden*: ‘The rail sleeps in the snow.’

First published in Issue 76 of *Interpreter’s House*.

Synthetic Lullaby

Follows the Oulipo method of Belle Absente (Beautiful Outlaw)

The moon bloom imbued into the blue
metal islets in glow swallow the blue whole
further away, fly closer to foam edges, the bluest of molecules
sound waves of acrylic devices receiving over any blue
non-linear rivers inside you playing slow blues
oh hush the star fish is growing its lost indigo limb
rayon flux of a sun washed in the cerulean air
endless body eased out of the blue neoprene
oh do not fear silvery ripples in the polyester sky of blue
synthetic creatures bear arms in sea stir, azure oceanic want
hair drifts, no shaming of the cobalt flow
skin shed into the nylon echoes of a cyan harbour

unmute the rhythm of something resistant, unfinished indigo
vinyl no longer binding bones, silence of the iris eye
ankles rotated into cloud fibre petals, no tension in the sapphire ground
collapse into unbroken sleep, the sea folded in, the bluest of dreams

First published in Issue 11 of *amberflora*.

Noonwraiths

We wake again to remember our exclusion from ourselves: the wedding dresses frayed, the darkening sun. Our placentas dried up somewhere in the desert with no sound. Imagine our bodies swimming, reading books, not split into pieces. Our children will never crave our milk.

We are reflecting what you want to see. If we are not possessed by men, we are possessed. The ruins of our wombs and twisting dust at noon. How dare we leave this world so unfulfilled? We're asking you a question. Be careful what you answer.

We are against the law, unmarried grating absence annihilates your crops. Searching for space where we are not submitting to our would-be husbands. Buffering in the heat, we can no longer die. And does it frighten you? Again be careful. Centuries of trembling.

Look we'd like to sit in silence and watch the moon.

'Noonwraiths' was written in response to a Polish myth about Południce.

First published in Issue 83 of *Magma, Solitude*.

Plant, language

Tarry breakages in the soil
unseeded vistas, the sun looks away

Treeless breathlessness catches on
the wind blows with no idea

Silent humming of chlorophyllic veins
and then the light, at last, flows through

Air particles tremble still in wait
syncopated seeds rooting for nothing

Time doesn't count one two no
deciduous plain in metabolic want

Multitudes of interwoven sounds
inaudible and persistent

Extinction Étude

Using your fingertips gather the dust
off the laptop screen showing
the photos of baiji white dolphin
and West African Black Rhinoceros.

Sprinkle the dust on your head
to get an idea of baiji white dolphin
and West African Black Rhinoceros.

You are visited by the sharp scent
of their howl, the bare sound
of their skin, their bodies skewed
shadows thrown on the wall.

Investigate the silent space and
ask if their existence started
with a drought or rain.

You sense it all as unrecognisable:
you've sensed it all before.

It shifts and changes
tiny edges of your bones:
the fracturing absence.

The echoes of their habitats are distinct
and yet within you swells the same
unutterable word.

First published in Issue 81 of *Magma, Anthropocene*.

Along with Glasgow

After Raymond Depardon's photographs of Glasgow

The rain arranges itself
on the asphalt to reflect (for) a moment

Steel herons crane their necks
to watch an idea propel men into (any)one

People can survive a fierce weight of water
breaking from the sky (or elsewhere)

The symmetry of stillness and motion
the air is not yet post-industrial

Unsettled chairs litter the sky-opened
house still to be hoovered and heated

Nobody will be arriving (to live)
crows burst through windowpanes

Leaving rooms like kidney
stones from the fatigued body

A desolate street makes it hard to decide
which way to go, past or future

Feeling much (damage) feeling full
someone once loved these spaces

(Not) the cut price fruiterer, she'd had
enough, kept peeling apples forever

First published in Issue 5 of *-algia*.

Children's and young adult fiction

Lindsay Hirst

‘Lindsay is a great new voice for the world of British picture books. Her rhyming text *Extreme Ice Cream* has the confidence of a seasoned children’s book author and I can easily see her book *The Dangerous Pet Lover’s Guide to Dragons* flying off the shelves of Waterstones.’
Ross Collins

As a child, Lindsay was certain about two things – she wanted to teach and she wanted to write. Originally from Perth, she went on to study Psychology and Philosophy at Edinburgh University and then, a few years later, completed a degree in primary education.

During the decade that Lindsay worked in the Early Years, she discovered the importance of using picture books to guide and support children’s learning – from developing core literacy skills, to encouraging creativity and promoting social and emotional awareness. This work reignited her passion for writing, and she’s been creating picture books ever since.

In 2021, Lindsay graduated from the Golden Egg Academy Picture Book Programme and was shortlisted in the Write Mentor Children’s Novel and Picture Book Awards. She writes stories in both verse and prose, from heartfelt to humorous, and is represented by Lucy Irvine at PFD Agency.

Visit Lindsay on Twitter at @LHL1618

Extreme Ice Cream

On the edge of a beach, in a grand seaside town,
Sat two ice cream parlours, both old and run down.
The Drips on the east side, the Whips on the west,
And each of them hungry to be the town's best.

But year after year now the sun hadn't shone,
The rain had lashed down and the tourists had gone.
'Our parlour is EMPTY!' howled sad Mr Drip.
'I CAN'T sell my ice cream!' cried old Mrs Whip.

From morning till night-time, they'd wail and they'd
whine.
But one July morning they woke to...

SUNSHINE!

The newsman reported, 'A heatwave is here.'
'We're SAVED!' yelled the Drips and the Whips with a
cheer.
'There's no time to waste,' they both cried to their teams,
'We need to make lots of delicious ice creams!'

They made every flavour... all colours and kinds...
With sprinkles
And cherries
And ripple designs.

The crowds soon arrived in their sunhats and shades,
With beach towels and deckchairs and buckets and
spades.

The Drip family waited... they peeped out their shop...
But no one seemed hungry or wanted to stop.
'I don't understand it,' sighed young Cherry Drip,
But then she looked westward...

'THEY'RE WITH MRS WHIP!'

They watched as the tourists all scrambled to buy
The Whip Whopper Ice Cream - ELEVEN scoops high!
With sprinkles and chocolate and chopped nuts and
cream,
Their super-sized sundae was everyone's dream.

'It's simply outrageous!' howled sad Mr Drip,
'I CANNOT - I WILL not - be pipped by a Whip.'
'Don't worry,' smiled Cherry, 'We won't be outdone.
Tomorrow we'll show them that *we're* number one.'

The next day grew hotter than even the last,
And Mrs Whip grinned as the tourists strode past.
She winked at her grandson, 'We'll sell lots today,
There's nothing that rivals the Whopper sundae.'

But then, in the distance, young Cane thought he saw
An ice cream commotion outside the Drips' door.
He stretched on his tiptoes, then tugged at his gran.
'I think,' he said slowly, 'the Drips have a plan...'

A billboard was flashing:
GIGANTIC! HOME-MADE!
GET DRIPS' ICE CREAM BUCKET AND SWEET
WAFFLE SPADE!

'It's simply outrageous!' cried old Mrs Whip,
'I CANNOT - I WILL not - be pipped by a Drip.'
'I've got an idea,' said Cane with a grin.
'They think they're the winners, but Whips don't give in.'

They worked until sunrise creating their treats...
Seaside-themed ice creams with seashell-shaped sweets.
The crowds flocked to taste them, deserting the Drips.
'ENOUGH is ENOUGH now, it's WAR with the Whips!'

And so, it continued...
the Drips won next day.
The Whips came back fighting...
and blew them away!

The heatwave continued and so did the tricks
(the best was a castle with *real* ice cream bricks).

The crowds found it funny, but far too extreme -
All that they wanted was yummy ice cream.
They found a new outlet, a van on the shore,
With simply great ice cream and no silly war.

'Our parlour is EMPTY!' howled sad Mr Drip.
'I CAN'T sell my ice cream!' cried old Mrs Whip.
'Don't worry,' said Cherry and Cane to the pair.
'We'll fix this, but YOU two must learn how to share!'

'The Whips will do sundaes - that's where we excel.'
'The Drips will do buckets - it's what we do well.'
'We'll do this together.'
'We'll work as a team.'
'We'll make the town's tastiest Whip Drip ice cream.'

The grown-ups got whipping (they loved the new plan),
While Cherry and Cane called the local newsman.

‘This story’s astounding!’ he shouted with glee.
‘You’ll be our star feature on breakfast TV!’

‘We’re going to be famous!’ shrieked old Mrs Whip.
‘Our parlours need fixing,’ declared Mr Drip.
So, working together, they fixed up their shops...
They put out fresh flowers and fun ice cream props.

By daybreak they’d finished - their shops looked like
new.
‘It’s lovely...’ smiled Cherry, ‘what teamwork can do.’

The broadcast was super - they spoke of their fight,
And how the two children had shown them what’s right.

The viewers all loved it - they queued down the streets,
All desperate to sample the Whip Drip iced treats.
‘Our parlour is BURSTING!’ exclaimed Mr Drip.
‘I’ve sold all my ice cream!’ laughed old Mrs Whip.

So now in the summer, and wintertime too,
The parlours are busy, there’s *always* a queue.
They’re no longer rivals; they love getting on.

The war for best ice cream is (almost) long gone...

The Dangerous Pet Lover's Guide to . . . Dragons

Hello brave reader and welcome to the best (and only) guide to dangerous pets. The information you'll find here will be everything you need to know about looking after your terrifying beast.

Of all the dangerous pets in the world, you've chosen THE most ferocious of all. Yes. . .

the DRAGON.

Dragons are well known for being sulky and difficult. However, by following these simple, but important, guidelines then you might just create a lovable and (almost) friendly pet.

FINDING YOUR DRAGON

There are many ways to acquire a dragon - some more dangerous than others - so think carefully about how, and where, to find yours.

Also, PLEASE acquire them when they're young. The older ones are extremely grumpy (and farty).

NOTE: Baby dragons also fart but the smell is *much* nicer.

HOUSING YOUR DRAGON

All dragon breeds are different. There are big ones, small ones, lazy ones and crazy ones. Choose one that will fit in well and not annoy the neighbours too much.

NOTE: The big, crazy ones are perfect if you live alone in the mountains or on a deserted island.

BONDING WITH YOUR NEW BUDDY

If you're very lucky it'll be love at first sight. However, for most people it'll take time and hard work to bond with your dragon. Try and find out about their likes and dislikes, and remember to ALWAYS stay calm and friendly. Do NOT upset your dragon.

NOTE: It's a good idea to have a fire extinguisher handy at all times.

FEEDING

Dragons love hunting, so make mealtimes fun by hiding their food in unusual places.

They're particularly fond of meat so ask the local butcher to make regular deliveries. This will prevent any unwanted behaviour.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT HABITS

Dragons have lots of difficult habits but the most troublesome are:

Fire-Breathing and Shiny Things.

An angry dragon = fire-breathing.

Not being allowed to have a shiny thing =

angry dragon = fire-breathing.

So, very simply, do NOT anger your dragon.

Hide all of your shiny things extremely well, and only give them as rewards for good behaviour. Dragons love to hoard their treasure so give them space to make a lair. Doing this will make them feel happy and calm.

NOTE: Never, under ANY circumstance, take any of the items back. It will NOT go well.

GROOMING AND WASHING YOUR DRAGON

Dragons don't like water so, whatever you do, DON'T try to wash them.

I repeat, DON'T try to wash them.

You can trim their talons if they're growing too long and scary, but ONLY do this when they're sleeping.

PLAYTIME

Once you've bonded with your dragon then it's time to play simple games with them.

Their favourite game is 'What's the Time, Mr Dragon?' (they love to chase). Dragons can be VERY sore losers so, unless you're feeling brave, let them win.

NOTE: Please don't EVER sneak up on a dragon when you're not playing a game (see Dealing with Difficult Habits).

EXERCISE

Dragons have wings so they can (and will) fly away at any moment. This is good exercise for them.

Some won't go far, and will come back when called, but others might be more adventurous.

It's a sad and lonely time when your dragon doesn't return, but try not to worry.

You might want to put some posters up, or contact 'The Dangerous Pets' Lost and Found Department'.

But, apart from that, you just have to wait. . .

and wait.

And one day, IF you've followed these very important guidelines, you'll probably find that your best buddy will come home again because it's really, *really* missed you.

NOTE: It might not be alone, so please be prepared!

Disclaimer: This guidebook accepts no responsibility for you, or anyone else, being injured or eaten by your dragon.

Scarytale

Mr Wolf was grumpy.
He HATED being tame.
Being good was really dull,
he missed his 'Big Bad' name.

But ever since that naughty day
he'd guzzled Granny Hood,
the woodcutter had made him choose:
'Wolf pie? Or being good?'

'If *only* I could chase some pigs
or gobble up a child.
I miss my young and happy days
when I was mean and wild.'

So, Mr Wolf devised a plan
to have a little fun.
'I'll play a trick this very night
and frighten EVERYONE!'

As darkness fell, he tiptoed out,
as quiet as a mouse.
Down the hill and round the pond,
towards the three pigs' house.

Now, Mr Wolf was not a fool,
they'd tricked him once before.
The chimney was too dark and hot -
this time he'd use the door.

‘BOO!’ he growled ferociously,
‘You’d better run and hide!’

But when he looked around the room...
no piggies were inside!

Feeling cross, he journeyed on,
towards the deep dark wood.
The next upon his list to scare
was young Red Riding Hood.

He crept towards the red-roofed house
and snarled a toothy grin.
Then CRASHED and BASHED in through her door...

but nobody was in!

By now the Wolf was furious.
Why was no one there?
His clever plan was not much use
with nobody to scare.

‘Perhaps she’s at her granny’s place?’
he thought, then laughed with glee.
‘To scare them *both* would be such fun!
I’ll sneak across and see.’

‘Oh, Granny Hood, it’s me again!’
he snarled with pure delight.
Then hurtled through her cottage door...

and S C R E A M E D with all his might!

An awful noise, a screeching wail,
was coming from inside.
'How DARE she buy a wolf alarm!
That's SO unfair!' he cried.

He moped back down the garden path
and slumped against a tree.
'Just *one* big scare, that's *all* I want,
but *where* can they all be?'

Just then he heard some music play
and saw an eerie light.
The royal castle, on the hill,
was glowing in the night.

'Aha!' he said, 'A party's on!
I BET they're all in there!
My cunning plan will work at last,
I'll give them such a scare!'

So at the door, he bared his fangs
and sharpened his long claws.
And then with an ALMIGHTY

GRRRRRROWWWLLL
he entered to...

APPLAUSE!

He looked around in disbelief
and there, before his eyes,
were lots of people, all dressed up,
in Halloween disguise!

'Fang-tastic!' laughed Red Riding Hood,
'What a great surprise!
We're choosing our most scary guest
and YOU have won the prize.'

Completely stunned, he took a bow.
'I'm glad you're all impressed!
But... rather than receive a prize,
I have a small request...'

So nowadays, each Halloween,
they let him have his way.
He becomes 'The Big Bad Wolf'
for one 'Fang-tastic' day.

Little Bunny's Big Question

Little Bunny was *not* having a good day.

He sulked when he got the yellow bowl at breakfast time.
He shouted when he put his jumper on inside out.
He screamed when he wasn't the first one to hop over the stream.

'What's wrong today, Little Bunny?' asked his mummy.

'It's nothing you can fix,' he mumbled. 'Only Grandad. I want to ask him something, but he's *never* here now.'

His mummy thought for a moment. Then she said:

'That's true, Little Bunny, but he's never far away. Sometimes I find him in the wind, as it blows through our forest. I can't see him, but I know he's listening.'

So, Little Bunny went into the forest and asked the wind his very important question. He listened for an answer, but the wind only blew his whiskers and tickled his nose.

On the other side of the forest was his auntie's house.

'Oh my! You're looking sadder than a soggy carrot! What's the matter, Little Bunny?'

'It's nothing you can fix,' he mumbled. 'Only Grandad. I just want to ask him something but he's not here... *or* in the wind. He's *never* here now.'

His auntie thought for a moment. Then she said:

‘That’s true, Little Bunny, but he’s never far away. Sometimes I find him in the sweet bird song that fills my garden. I can’t see him, but I know he’s speaking to me.’

So, Little Bunny went into the garden and spoke to the birds. He asked them his very important question. But their sweet songs made no sense, they just made his long ears feel twitchy.

At home, his daddy was making the dinner.

‘Uh oh! That’s not a happy face. What’s the matter, Little Bunny?’

‘It’s nothing you can fix,’ he mumbled. ‘Only Grandad. I just want to ask him something but he’s not here. . . *or* in the wind. . . *or* in the birdsong. He’s *never* here now.’

His daddy thought for a moment. Then he said:

‘That’s true, Little Bunny, but he’s never far away. Sometimes I find him in the stars that shimmer and dance at night-time. I can’t see him, but I know he’s watching.’

So, Little Bunny looked out of his window at the night sky, which was sprinkled with thousands of stars. He asked them his very important question. But the stars just twinkled back at him and made his eyes feel funny.

At bedtime, Little Bunny was still feeling cross.

‘What’s the matter, Little Bunny?’ asked his grandma, as she tucked him into bed.

‘It’s nothing anyone can fix,’ he mumbled. ‘Only Grandad. I just want to ask him something but he’s not here... *or in the wind... or in the birdsong... or in the stars. He’s nowhere.*’

His grandma thought for a moment. Then she said:

‘It’s alright to feel cross, Little Bunny, we all find memories of Grandad in different places. Why don’t you think about your question as you go to sleep? Perhaps he’ll answer it in your dreams.’

So, as Little Bunny closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, he thought as hard as he could about his very important question.

Until...

There he was! His grandad was there, standing right beside him!

‘Hello Little Bunny, I saw you looking for me today. Did you want to ask me something?’

‘I just wanted to know...

‘if you’d ever come and see me again, Grandad?’

His grandad smiled.

‘Of course I will, Little Bunny. But *you’re* the one who chooses how.

‘Your mummy feels me in the wind each day and remembers our time in the forest together.

‘Your auntie hears me in the beautiful birdsong and remembers our lazy days in her garden.

‘And your daddy sees me in the stars each night and remembers our adventures in the dark, with only the moonlight and stars to guide us.

‘But you, Little Bunny, have found me in your dreams, and I’ll be here whenever you wish.’

Little Bunny hugged his grandad tightly, and all of his crossness and sadness melted away.

‘Come on, Grandad!’ he laughed. ‘Come and play with me!’

And he did.

Armarna Forbes

Please note that the following extract contains descriptions of violence and execution from the start.

‘Armarna infuses Scottish mythology with a fresh and vivid voice. Her writing breathes new life into old legends, turning tropes and familiar yarns on their head to create a unique and riveting story.’

Sunyi Dean, author of *The Book Eaters*

Armarna grew up in what remains of the American Old West and likes to write stories about dead things.

In 2019, Armarna self-published her debut novel, *Dead Remnants* - a Young Adult dark fantasy about a teenage ghost girl traversing the Denver afterlife. This novel was then featured in the Edinburgh-based publication *Teen Titles* in May 2020.

Armarna placed in *Ink & Insights* Master category in 2019. She was also shortlisted for the New Writers Award in 2020.

Always interested in unique world-building involving the grim and macabre, her current project is a Young Adult slipstream novel merging both her American roots and her new forever-home, Scotland.

You can connect with Armarna on Twitter @ArmarnaForbes, visit her website armarnaforbes.com, or find her on Goodreads.

Extract from *We Wicked Few*

Chapter One: The Warning

They say it takes ten seconds for a severed head to lose consciousness. I've even read tales of them remaining fully aware, mouthing incoherent blather for upwards of a minute, but I've never witnessed that myself. However, I have seen teeth grind, eyes blink, and shocked expressions - long after the blade has been swung.

Ten seconds is an eternity. Something I'd never considered before I began my apprenticeship as an executioner.

More than a hundred display cabinets line the barracks hall. Inside each is a mounted skull. Precious renewable energy illuminates every furrow, scar, tusk and fang. For added drama, I suspect, though it's a ridiculous waste of resources. I hurry past, counting quietly - (*ten, nine, eight*) - a focusing method I use and, in this case, a sad attempt to avoid the dead stares of beasts - (*seven, six, five*) - of humans - (*four, three, two*) - and of those creatures somewhere in between.

(*One.*)

The heads serve as a grim reminder of tonight's ceremony, an event I've dreaded ever since I first held a sword. The courtyard door isn't much further, and I sprint the last few steps until I'm outside where cool, salty air fills my lungs. I feel as though I can breathe again. The relief, although temporary, is welcome.

Before I reach the gate to the empty crown square, I stop. Beyond the marsh that surrounds the castle, cobbled together with stone and metal bits that glint in

the fading sunlight, is the tidal wall. It's the only thing separating us from the unyielding sea.

This view is a rare treat. Other than for training purposes, I'm forbidden from leaving my chambers, and although I admit that the structure's not very attractive, at least it's more impressive than four blank walls. I take a moment to memorise its jagged silhouette, a visual to recall whenever my prisonlike bedroom closes in like a trap, but the distant braying of the waiting crowd corrupts whatever calm I had hoped to muster.

'Planning your escape without me?'

Behind me, the door to the castle barracks slams.

I suppress a sigh and turn to Dree, her tiny frame skipping over the cobbles, waist-length curls bouncing along with her. The ceremony isn't going to be my only challenge tonight. For as long as I can remember, I've been trying to match Dree's upbeat nature while keeping up appearances. Pretending everything's fine has always been an exhausting task and, today of all days, I'm just not sure my frayed nerves can take it. But if Dree knew how much I didn't want to go through with this, she'd worry. What kind of friend would I be if I let that happen?

'I could never leave you,' I say, but the anxiety coursing through me makes my tone waver. I curse silently as she approaches. 'Besides, you'd hunt me down.'

Stretching to her tiptoes, she flicks the front of my mask with her finger. The brass hums. I pay her back with a pat on her head and she retaliates with a swat.

'Knock it off, Sloan! So insulting. Respect your elders.'

'You're a month older, Dree. Hardly an elder.'

'Still older.'

'And still far, far shorter than me.'

She sticks out her tongue. Even though she can't see

it, I grin as she busies herself adjusting my tartan cloak and roughly stuffing stray hairs beneath the hood. As she works, the rustle of the wool fabric becomes amplified to angry scratching in my ears.

I notice the tabard she's wearing. 'I see you've been borrowing my things without permission. Again.'

Dree pauses. The deep purple sheen of the velvet complements her auburn locks, but the garment pairs oddly with the plain shift beneath. She fiddles with the embroidered gold thistle on the chest. It's the same symbol that's emblazoned on the jerkin I've got on, but instead of flashy metal, mine is carved into hard leather and dyed black.

'I'm sorry. I don't have anything this nice and, well, you've not used it in ages so I figured. . .' A blush rises to her cheeks. 'Please don't be mad, Sloan. I just wanted to dress up special. I mean, it's your big day, after all.'

A familiar queasiness returns. I hate killing. Whenever my trainer, Lennox, presents me with a scrawny sheep or hare to practise on, this same nausea emerges like an unwelcome visitor. I've tried to explain this to Dree, but she doesn't understand. How could she? A chambermaid's daily chores don't include beheadings.

Concern is etched on Dree's face as if she can read my thoughts. 'I realise you don't like this, but maybe,' she says, her perky disposition taking over, 'you can think of it as a really big horsefly? Or a murderous tick?'

'Decapitating a humongous bug does sound easier, but as far as we know, the condemned hasn't murdered anyone.'

'Yet,' she finishes, then her eyes widen. 'Oh! I almost forgot!' From a pocket in her shift, Dree pulls out a small glass vial and hands it to me. 'Don't forget to save its blood for me. Please?'

‘Oh, for Bruce’s sake, Dree,’ I say, my stomach taking yet another tumble, ‘you have some weird, weird hobbies.’

‘Pfft! It’s for science. You’re not the only girl here with lofty ambitions.’

Lofty ambitions? She must be joking. Being the best, the most feared, the most prolific: none of these interest me, but I can’t blame Dree for thinking they do. It’s not like I’ve been very honest about my real dreams and goals. I’m sure they’d sound childish to her. All I really want is to get out on patrol and experience a bit of the outside world, and maybe one day, I could save a life rather than take one. Be a real heroine. Perhaps if I did some good, I wouldn’t despise myself so much.

Unfortunately, the only way I can get outside the castle is by joining the Black Thistle Guard. Not that I was given an option. The powers that be took one glance at me and decided that this job was a perfect match. I suppose they figured my exceptional physique meant I’d also be an exceptional slayer. Seems I’m forever doomed to be evaluated by my size.

Of course, if I wished, I could escape. Overpower those who stood in my way. But then what? Beyond the wall is certain death, and my towering stature prevents me from blending in. The King’s Men or the Guard would eventually catch me, but when they did, at least I wouldn’t have to restrain myself like I do in training. If the other executioners knew how I hold back during our routine exercises, it’d mortify them. Or worse: scare them. And as much as I’d love to break the arm of any of the king’s favourite executioners - and believe me, I’ve thought long and hard about doing just that - I’ve seen what happens to those who are deemed disloyal. Traitors are beaten, whipped, hanged or worse. No point

in hoping my fate would be any different.

‘Dree, they only made me an apprentice because I crush them at arm wrestling.’

‘Nonsense.’ She plants her hands on her hips; awe, disbelief, and elation all battle it out on her features. ‘The first girl to be inducted into the Guard in a hundred years. I’m proud of you. You should be proud of you, too.’

I nod. She seems satisfied and crouches to check my boots for unsightly scuffs. As I tuck her vial into my sporran, chanting surges from the arena just outside the castle walls. Phrases filter through the noise. *Kill. Monster. Beast.*

Dree stands to look out beyond the crown square gate. ‘Pre-show’s over,’ she says, her once cheerful expression darker. More serious. ‘Time to go.’

A ghost of a frown is on Dree’s lips as we pass through the gate together, and I begin to wonder if maybe she’s acting optimistic for my sake, not unlike what I’m doing for her.

This whole twisted situation is so unfair, and I consider telling Dree this. That no, I don’t want to be some stupid pawn in the king’s game. By the time we reach the stairs, I’m ready to let the words spill out, but as soon as I open my mouth, Dree beams up at me. Whatever hint of her true feelings I thought I’d seen seems to have vanished.

She points to the nearby battery. ‘I’ll be watching from one of the ports there.’ Although she’s shouting, she’s barely audible over the commotion in the arena. ‘You know, for encouragement.’

Though it’s been years since the last siege, the battery is kept fully stocked with both modern and ancient guns. I reckon in case any neighbouring nations get any more tricky ideas. The fortifying wall’s half-moon shape

overlooks the esplanade, a large, flat area situated just outside the castle's gatehouse where the king likes to hold public events. Particularly executions. Those are his favourite.

'You'll be great, Sloan.' Certainty is laced through Dree's voice, though I don't share her confidence.

She hugs me. For luck, I suppose. I fight the urge to embrace her just a little longer, then head down the stairs. The Lang Stairs, they call them. Not sure who Lang was or why anyone felt it appropriate to name a set of stone stairs after him. Perhaps he was famous, but not that famous. I keep thinking about poor Lang and how he's forever lost to history as I go through the portcullis gate, then beneath the Royal Arms of Old Alba showcased on the other side - a red lion sparring under a crown - then past the length of the guardhouse. I hope to leave a better legacy than stairs.

The sun hasn't yet set, but ahead, sustainable light from the arena floods through the gatehouse archway. I take measured breaths in a futile attempt to steady my own thudding pulse. If only it were loud enough to muffle the ravenous roars of the crowd. My gaze flicks to the half-moon battery above, expecting some trace of Dree, but the angle is all wrong and the gun ports are too deep. I'm sure she's watching though, and if she wasn't being positive earlier for my benefit, probably cheering. And as I enter the passage, I imagine Dree is there, assuring me everything will be fine.

Applause erupts when I come through the archway. The harsh spotlights are blinding, but as I cross the drawbridge, the stands that skirt the outer edge of the esplanade become clearer. Thousands of people. Not one empty chair. Bile creeps up my throat and I swallow it back, grimacing underneath my mask while I try to

focus on the flames of a giant torch at the end of the bridge.

Don't get sick, Sloan. Don't get sick.

Two of the king's all-terrain electric trucks are parked on either side of the bridge entrance. They're meant to impress the commoners, but they've got rusty with age, slowly deteriorating like decaying metal soldiers. While I pass between them, a few attendants scurry about the arena, collecting props and debris the pre-show performers left behind. Near the platform in the middle, blocking my view of the creature awaiting my blade, is a two-tiered row of executioners. Each wears a brass mask identical to my own, each with the same tartan: a black and grey chequered wool with an intersecting purple line. The Black Thistle Guard's clan pattern. Although their uniforms match, every executioner standing side by side before me varies in size and build and height. One in particular is a living mountain. Unique designs are burned into the leather of their jerkins, an artistic tally of that executioner's beheadings. Above the central black thistle, etched into the chest, is the biggest, most intricate of these illustrations. The most important mark. It represents the executioner's first kill.

The space around my thistle, however, remains blank. That changes today.

As I approach, my trainer steps from behind the two rows of men, the normal twinkle in his eyes flattened to a dull seriousness. Unlike the rest of the Guard, Lennox is maskless, a perk afforded to those promoted from executioner to instructor. He positions himself between me and the others, grappling with my preferred fighting weapon. A claymore. But this is no ordinary sword. The rare steel has a greenish hue that makes it almost

luminescent, and I can't help but marvel at the beautiful craftsmanship. Sadly, it's not mine to keep. These special weapons are loaned to us for whatever job we're assigned, and since this metal cuts through anything, they're rather necessary in this occupation. A single dagger made from it could purchase a whole city, maybe more, but I don't know of anyone mental enough to steal one and hawk it to a merchant. At least not in New Alba. Not at the risk of crossing the king.

'Kneel, ye dafty,' Lennox mutters.

I comply, and he begins the 'Alba gu Bràth', an oath of loyalty every inductee swears to the current monarch. The pledge is recited in Old Albannach, an endangered language only a few, like Lennox, speak, so no one really knows what we're swearing to. Even if it were in English, most would struggle to understand it. Lennox's thick accent would obscure any meaning.

As Lennox's words shift into a low thrum, a group of girls in the king's favoured section start cooing. A new prospective executioner to fantasise about. It doesn't seem to faze them that executioners aren't allowed to date, much less marry and raise a bunch of babies. They just keep on batting their lashes while they shoot coy smiles, assuming that beneath this mask and cloak, the tall, solid-looking executioner hides a handsome face, bulging, manly muscles, and a tortured soul that needs fixing. The only thing they're getting right is that I'm tall and rather unhappy.

The flat side of the claymore touches my right shoulder, then my left, then the very top of my head. I'm grateful for Lennox's clear cue to stand, but as he presents the sword to me, I catch him rolling his eyes. He's used to me not listening to him. Likely presumed I wasn't listening now, either.

In well-rehearsed choreography, the double-tier of executioners separates and splits down the middle, allowing me through. The creature has to be sizeable; only one row of executioners normally obstructs the apprentice's line of sight, not two. At the end of the human corridor, I can see the bulk of the beast lying on a slab of granite, rough rope tying it down, but even so, I'm uncertain what it is until it flicks its tail.

A kelpie. The water horse is almost as rare as the steel of my claymore.

The short distance to the stage feels as though I'm trudging through mud, but before long, I'm in position by its head. Nostrils flaring, the kelpie casts a frightened glance towards me. The colours of its iris swirl, rippling between hues of brown and green similar to churned-up lake water, but rather than a central round pupil, there's a horizontal slit shaped like a tipped-over hourglass. Do those strange eyes reflect understanding? Self-awareness? Maybe even a soul, if such things exist?

Beneath its shimmery cobalt-blue coat, the beast's muscles tense and the three ropes that bind it tighten. I move my claymore to my side, out of its sight. To scare it further would be cruel.

Trumpets blast. The audience quiets. But as soon as the king bursts from the archway, his arms raised in triumph, the crowd goes wild all over again. The spotlights keep trained on him, making certain to capture every flourish directed at his fans. He struts across the drawbridge and when he nears the group of flirty girls, he flashes his too-white teeth in his too-small mouth, takes them by the hand one at a time, and kisses them on the cheek. My temper simmers as he works his way through them until he reaches the final girl. In expectation, she holds out her hand and leans forwards.

But he doesn't accept it. Instead, he gawks at two noticeable moles above her brow, then abruptly steps back, nods, and continues on to his outdoor throne, waving and smiling to all, but ignoring the frozen shock and humiliation of the girl he's left behind.

Sick rises in my belly. What a superficial, ugly wee man. But then again, who am I to pass judgement? If he's the king of hypocrisy, then I must be the queen of lies.

The king bounds onto the stage and turns to take in praise from the surrounding audience. 'I, King John Dhonaghart, the Saviour of New Alba...' The audience stomp their feet and roar, and the king lets them carry on until he's had his fill and motions for them to hush. 'I hereby find this hideous monster guilty of trespassing on Alba land, a crime of treason against humankind! The sentence... is death!'

Always a showman. Always such a theatrical twit. I bite my lip as the king settles in his throne. Front row. Centre. Like I said before, executions are his favourite.

'Help.'

A clear voice comes out of nowhere. My eyes dart from person to person, but all are too far away for it to have been them, including the king. No one around seems to have noticed. And it wasn't like I heard it with my ears... it was more like I heard it in—

'Please. Help.'

—my head. The voice. An intruder there, in my brain, right next to my conscience. But it's not me. Definitely not me. Definitely not—

'I know you can hear me. Please. I must warn them.'

Summary of *We Wicked Few*

Beheading fairy-tale beasties is about to become sixteen-year-old Sloan Ness's occupation. An orphan forced to join the king's executioner squad, the thought of killing fills Sloan with dread, but she endures with the love and support of her best friend, Dree.

At her first execution, a kelpie pleads with her for mercy. Sloan refuses to murder the sentient creature and when she lets him escape, he warns her of the imminent arrival of a world-ending demigod.

Sentenced to die for her defiance, Sloan flees with Dree across a dystopian kingdom forged by rising sea waters. As the girls race through the Scottish wilds with the king's men in pursuit, Sloan struggles to decipher visions of a skinless monster emerging from the sea.

To save Dree - and the rest of the world - Sloan will have to battle a demigod hellbent on destroying humanity... even at the expense of her own life.

We Wicked Few combines Scottish lore and science fiction in a story about found family, friendship and underestimated girls.

The best new writing talent in Scotland

Scottish Book Trust's New Writers Awards highlight some of the most exciting new writing in Scotland. This collection features work from the 2022 awardees, including short fiction, novel extracts, narrative non-fiction, poetry, picture books and young adult fiction.

'Winning a New Writers Award was such an exciting moment in my writing journey. The mentoring and training were brilliant and Scottish Book Trust has continued to be a fantastic source of support ever since. I'm so grateful to be part of this lovely community that champions books and writers.'

Victoria MacKenzie, New Writers Awardee 2016 and author of *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy On My Little Pain* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

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