

From Acorns

An Anthology of New Writing from Inverclyde

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Edited by Katharine Macfarlane

Supported by
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Acorn

The oaknut holds the life for more,
Rickety hope, yes, but what is dormant
Doesn't have to remain so. I clasp
This fleeting solace like a cupule
Till ripe, not wanting to hurry
The aeons of acorn growth
As mast is spread
From tree to tree
From my intimates.
I scatter-ward these thoughts
As I hold my guarded quiescence
Before the tumult
Like the Yokuts with their
acorn soup and mash, unknowing
What dreads the winds will bring.

Laurie Donaldson

Underland mapped

Maps chart contours
under our feet.
Footmarks echo
structures buried,
slow layers, silted down
sedimented,
placing underland
under pressure.

Boundaries remain,
edges of desiccate harbours
eroded and dark.
Caught in the layers,
detritus of nautical legacy
submerged. Above are tarmac,
pavements, modern streets
all mapped

as if a phantom Colin Lamont,
enquires of harbour edges
long gone,
mere records on discarded maps.

Maps that don't remember
water once filled
and still wants to flow
through cracks and subsidence
to bring down a spire,
and an old town hall.
Foundations need re-dug
sunk into soil once silt.

Instead, a police cell
under an old town hall
swamped with fresh concrete
allowing a building to float
on old crime,
close to masted ships
ghostly bobbing, butting
each other in play.

Wraiths of dead eras
still linger and keel
under the town.

Loosely based on the alarm raised in the late 1980s about the dangers of subsistence in the old Port Glasgow Town Hall. There was speculation that they might have to demolish the building, (now the Town Library) and leave the spire free standing.

John Moody

Reservoir

Empty reservoir
grounded down to memories.
Strangers now, we pass.

Broken fluid ash.
Kissing your winter embers.
Remember my last.

Cliffs of Cove

Silent echoing
chaos spills upon the cove,
from natures carv'd cliffs.

Our teardrop drops down through mud.
One more scar upon her face.

Untold

Our untold stories
stay sheltered from the frost,
patient for the dawn.

James L Duffy

Run

Something is snapping at your heels. Something only you can feel.

Carry on - even though your knees are splintering; your lungs are bursting, run! Up, up the lane to Greenock along a slate grey ribbon snaking through the burnt-ochre bracken. There is something thrumming - something unstable between your heart and your lungs - a ticking bomb. Keep going. You just have to keep moving on.

The hills are watching; the rooks are wheeling; the ewes are unsettled by your heavy breathing. Oh how your head is throbbing. You are gasping for air - no - not gasping - sobbing. Something is hanging over your shoulder, but there is no stopping.

Keep on - past the turbines (whining), to the shores of Loch Thom. Stop by a rotten turnstile, and a wordless wooden sign. There is no hill left to climb. You could take the road down the hill to town. Or follow this dark path, here - it cuts through the trees and heads to the East - there, where the mist kisses the peaks - then ends where

the water-logged bogs collide with the sky. You imagine if you leapt into the pool between the reeds, you would fly. But you really ought not to try.

No one would find you.

A cry, overhead - a gull fighting a rook. Look - there - a fisherman is reeling in his bait. A kestrel drops into a hollow then flies back up on the gale. They are all suggestions; they are signs.

A flash of light, down by the harbour. The sun is bursting through the rain; but the wind is growing harder. All along the shore, the towns curl up against the hills, like a herd of sheep hiding from the winter.

It's tapping on your shoulder

Down there in Greenock; a car is waiting. Back home in Largs, they'll all be waking. Dad will be heating up coffee and bacon. Go on.

Run with the water, streaming down the bend; past the houses erupting from the fields; the widening lanes. Don't think about that path you wanted to take. Turn left, then right, then right again. (The pools of light amongst the trees; the waters shining amongst the reeds). There, the car with its engine running. (pain, like a secret you have to keep).

Get in. Carry on.

When they ask, say *it was a lovely run. Tough but fun*. You're not sure how to explain - how there is always pain; how it takes being stung by the wind and the rain to make it go away; how you're afraid one day, you'll take that hidden path.

And then she asks it - the thing, you never thought of - not once. The thing you didn't know you even needed; the thing you didn't even think to ask.

Next time you run, can I come along?

Zephyr

Shadows flicker as trees give voice
At the zephyr's soft caress,
Whispering to and fro.
Meadows shimmer as flowers dance,
Heady aromas borne aloft
On the sun-kissed air.
Skylarks hang on high
In joyous exultation,
And I pause entranced
In a world of scent and song
And dancing light,
A land that once we knew
Till we fell and turned away.
Heart and soul we seek it yet,
But the road is lost.
Then all too soon the gentle air moves on,
The enchantment slowly fades
And the way is closed.
The memory lingers,
A torment on my yearning sadness,
For I have spied the other place,
And it calls.

David McCorkindale

A Dream of Hirta

On quiet firth,
Far below our sapphire height,
A blue sailed yacht
Passed slowly through,
As it went its gentle wake
Brushed lightly on to quiet shores,
And as we watched that vessel's
Gentle progress, it stirred within us
Memories of happier times,
Summer sails on sparkling seas,
The Minch's gentle warming breeze,
The scent of summer blossom
That colour lonely windswept machair,
Deserted golden sands
Stretched far to blue horizon.
Would that vessel's graceful journey
Trigger an enduring dream?
To sail west on Nordkyn,
Beyond the sheltered waters of the Minch,
Brave those wild Atlantic gales
Endure the endless raging seas;
And from that distant livid ocean,
Wonder at the towering cliffs of Conachair,
Gaze upon the long-deserted homes of Hirta.

Martin Goldie

The Sleeping Warrior

West, From Bheula's russet height,
Beyond Cowal's rare sought jagged hills,
Passed Bute's soft verdant fields,
And sleek still slate of Firth,
Clyde's sleeping warrior lies,
Burning under August sun,
Below a bright and fiery sky.
A fighter in repose,
Upon his bursting chest,
His Shreival sword lies proud
The solitude of office
Continued unto death.
No human hand chiselled that
Tough dark rock to statue,
Stepped iced breath
And eternal wind and rain
Wrought that regal form,
Which times sure hurried hand
Will never fade or age.
No mortals dank grave
Decay the flesh and bone
Of this great Steward of the Clyde,
Forever choirs of Scots
In awe will praise,
In death his prize,
Arran's boulders for a bier,
The sky to see
The wind to hear
The sun to feel,
The lash of rain to cleanse,
Crimson sunrise, coral sunset,
His to witness for all days.

When All Is Said And Done

The beauty of walking in the rain – people can't see your tears when you walk around without an umbrella. Here it comes again: *'You are so stupid and made a fool of yourself. I have news for you: it's NOT her fault – it's all YOUR fault.'*

Before entering the supermarket to grab my dinner, I take a deep breath in, and a deep breath out – no tears in public – I can do this.

I'm greeted by Harris J's song:
*You're the light that shines above
You're the reason I never give up
You're the one I try for, live my life for
Give up all I have*

I can't help but laugh. This was his funeral song. THANK GOD Ralf, aka mum's Angel, is dead. During his funeral service, I was very disappointed to see a closed casket. I wish I had seen his dead lifeless body to make sure my nightmare was finally over. The service was pathetic and full of lies. Everyone cried, except me. My parents arranged for a lavish funeral and demanded financial contribution: 'After all, Angel was your brother, and you meant a lot to him.' In what universe do they live in?

'You shouldn't talk poorly about your parents and the dead. Besides, you aren't a saint either, making mistakes all the time.' After his funeral, it took me three years before I finally asked my parents why they had ignored his behaviour when I still lived at home. Mum was too drunk to pretend anymore: *'Angel was our love child whereas you were an accident. My biggest regret is not having an abortion. When you were born, we focused all our energy and attention on him to ensure he never felt left out. Angel was an extremely gifted boy who had an amazing future ahead of him. Your arrival crushed his self-confidence forever. He was such a fragile soul.'*

Even now, mum tells everyone who can't run away fast enough how proud she was of Ralf. After all, he won two competitions:

within his class, he won 1st price for building a wooden truck at 5 years of age and a school spelling competition several months later. Early on, mum started working as a waitress as she felt dad's salary didn't allow Ralf to live his life to full potential. Surprise, surprise - he turned into a spoilt monster.

I think Ralf really thought he was the chosen one. He always got everything he wanted, and even bad behaviour was rewarded with gifts and attention. After punching mum in the face during an argument, she immediately apologised for making him angry and gave him money to go out with his friends. With dad being on business trips all the time, Ralf was the king of the household. It seems he always considered me as his hobby – a tool to boost his self-confidence. He used any possible excuse to beat me up or shout at me. Nothing was too trivial to provoke his anger. Everything was my fault. When I was 5 years old, he chased me around the house as, according to him, I had said something rude. I can still remember begging him: *'I didn't mean it Ralf. I apologise.'* Regardless, I got beaten up in my room while trembling on the floor next to the radiator. Watching TV in the living room could set him off if I didn't watch the channel he wanted to watch. His precious sleep was ruined by me studying late for a test because my room light was coming through the small milk glass window of my door – even though our rooms weren't opposite each other. Once I fell asleep with silent radio on as its light kept away the dark. He cut my radio's power cable as he *'couldn't sleep because of the loud noise'*. Things like that happened every other day with punishments getting worse over the years. Everything was my fault. I felt trapped in a deep dark forest with a beast constantly attacking me without any warning and nobody else there hearing my screams.

At the beginning, I tried to explain things to mum, but eventually, I gave up as it was pointless. Afterwards, I quickly turned into the invisible family member. I was careful not to attract any attention to myself and also forced myself to be as emotionless as possible because the difference between being happy and being punished without warning was too much for me to bear. My tears brought him joy. When I was 10 years old, I tried to speak to a teacher

about my situation at home. She was concerned and contacted mum who simply apologised for my obscure fantasies. Mum punished me for being a liar and forbid me to speak with outsiders about home again. Besides, other families have similar issues; so, I shouldn't complain.

If you live in a place long enough, you are that place. The same applies to abuse. Deep rooted in your mind you think that everything is your fault and every mistake, however small, needs to be severely punished – without mercy. I do wonder whether Ralf ever felt like a loser and desperately looked for something or someone to blame. After I moved out, he turned into an excessive alcoholic. He never left home or got a job.

After leaving home, I desperately tried to shrug off my past. For a while, I considered myself lucky as Ralf left me alone: out of sight, out of mind. True to his style, he managed to blame me for his end. A few days beforehand, he left a voicemail to tell me that he had drugged and raped a girl. He seemed very happy and rather proud of himself. My response was to provide the police with that evidence. Sadly, that girl never went home – her drowned body was found the next day. I'm sure she blamed herself for his actions and was too ashamed to tell anyone. Poor girl, I really hope she has found her peace. While I wrote my first suicide note when I was 14, I have never actually tried it. No method guarantees instant death. My biggest fear was surviving with permanent injuries that would require me being dependent on my parents. Surprisingly, the crime investigation caused trouble at home. Dad immediately stopped funding Ralf's lifestyle. I guess the shock was unbearable for Ralf. His actions resulted in consequences – the universe finally strikes back. After writing his suicide note blaming me for everything, he committed suicide by driving into oncoming traffic – another achievement, I guess. Unfortunately, in that process, he severely injured a single father. Obviously, my parents refused to allow for a toxicology test and suggested Ralf was distracted by trying to call the girl's parents to express condolences. He was an angel who never did anything wrong and was simply joking when he left the voicemail.

'Are we rambling again?' Here comes my inner critic again. *'You do KNOW that all these things are in the past. Get over it! Your feelings don't matter. You are worthless and your stories are boring. I tell you nothing but the truth on how others perceive you. I'm here to keep you grounded.'* Fine. I'm not arguing with you when I'm hungry and surrounded by people who are kind enough to mind their own business – deep breath in and deep breath out.

Finally – at home.

It has been a long week already and it's only Tuesday. I'm relieved I managed to survive today. My colleague's behaviour was rather bad today. I'm glad I finally spoke to HR.

'There are no toxic people – what matters is how you react to them.' Yes, but any communication involves two people. *'Things could be worse. You are lucky that you even got your job. No one else will take you. You can't even manage the simplest tasks. You are so embarrassing. You are a failure. Everyone has figured things out, except dumb you.'*

I finally had enough: F*** off!!! As a response – silence, for now.

It took me years to fight back my inner critic – old habits die hard. Only after Ralf's funeral, did I allow myself to start my trauma healing journey. After moving out, I had the naïve hope of being able to forget. Instead, the old lady in black knocked on my inner door – depression. I managed to find a job that pays my bills, but my happy ending hasn't arrived yet. After struggling for years, I was finally able to use a pay raise to finance my therapy sessions. They are expensive and I consider myself lucky that I can afford them. My self-discovery journey is still work in progress. I still feel deep ingrained guilt when drawing attention to myself and have a hard time trusting people. They could turn into Ralf without warning, like a werewolf at the time of the full moon. Some days, it's impossible to silence my inner critic after making a mistake. Other days, I'm fine. Thankfully, overall, my anxiety and worries are more manageable now. I don't feel anymore the long stretches of heavy depressive numbness and have learned to forgive my

inner child and teenager for not daring to fight back. I have even started speaking more regularly to my colleagues and slowly get to know people and build friendships. However, one of my colleagues is causing me grief. She seems to have the gift of constantly setting off landmines in my brain. She also thinks to know me well, whereas I would never claim to know someone. We all come with our own inner luggage and what we show to the outside never matches what is going on inside. She is driving me mad by doing things on my behalf and constantly making me feel like I'm too stupid to do my work properly. She doesn't give me time to breathe. Today, she got aggressive when I mentioned my idea. However, later during a larger meeting, guess who was suddenly quiet when someone made the same suggestion. Despite my extensive work experience, she still treats me like a child. I know, things could be worse, but these small issues have added up quickly. Yesterday, she told me that I'm the only person who has ever had any issues with her. I have tried very hard to put up with her ways. I'm angry at myself for wasting my energy. I should stop trying to work things out yet another time. Her constant interference with my work resulted in me not getting promoted – deep breath in, deep breath out.

Am I that tree? I think Dale Carnegie included a story about it in his book 'How to stop worrying and start living'. A giant tree survived several centuries of harsh weather conditions and even was hit by lightning several times. Luckily, people left it alone to grow peacefully. It was around 400 years old when small beetles came along. They ate their way through the bark and slowly destroyed the tree with tiny but relentless attacks. Considering my past, my colleague surely is nothing more than one of those bloody beetles! How can I stop small irrelevant things from grinding me down? Why are things still so hard? Deep breath in, deep breath out – repeat.

I wish I could ride my inner storms like the ravens that meet up in front of my window. During stormy weather, they ride wind gusts just for fun. Up and down they fly - facing the angry wind with ease. I wish I had their playful nature.

An old tune comes to mind.

*'Standing calmly at the crossroads, no desire to run
There's no hurry anymore when all is said and done'*

I agree with you, ABBA - it's just work and there is no rush at this stage. As long as I manage one baby step at a time, life will work itself out.

Sue Ulm

House

It gets dark, I look through the window.
The floorboards creak, the walls thrum
And the pipes begin to clang
“Why did he leave?” Says my house.
“Why is he gone?”
I do not have an answer.
She goes out and rattles the front gate,
she smells midwinter frost.

He had to go, I say.
I taste rust and mistrust.
“But I changed so much for him,
Emulsion and gloss, new curtains, brand new wiring!” Says my
house.

We will not go back to how it was before.
We have grown, we are better, more complete, more sure.
“But I miss him.”
Oh house, don’t be absurd.
The rain slides down her window pane.
She scratches her drain pipe nose, pauses a minute
“But how can I be a home without him in it?”
She whooshes the pipes and harrumphs in the rafters.

House, house, my sister house, scream if you want to, but house
warm me.
We will always be refurbishing ourselves. We are enough.

Bethany Lunn

The Red Scarf

The scarf would be a gift for Dominic's twentieth birthday, a proud declaration of Karen's love for him. She imagined the finished product wound around his neck like a cocoon, absorbing his scent. It would swaddle his chest and keep him protected from the winter's chill, broadcasting their relationship to the world.

Karen hugged her secret to herself. She went shopping for the yarn during her lunch hour. She browsed through a book of knitting patterns before settling on a simple ribbed style. On the advice of a sales assistant, she chose the yarn carefully: a soft red angora. Into the shopping bag, too, went a pair of knitting needles and a heart full of hope.

She hadn't done any craftwork since primary school, but how difficult could it be? To her dismay, Karen discovered that she had even forgotten how to cast on. She consulted YouTube.

Her fingers were clumsy and the yarn uncooperative, but she persevered. Each evening she laboured over her task and the red scarf slowly unfurled, matted and misshapen.

On Dominic's big day, he unwrapped the gift as Karen and his mother watched. Mrs Pearson sneered, pointing out the flaws, dropped stitches and uneven tension in the finished piece of work. Karen, picking at a raw cuticle, hung her head and said nothing.

Dominic closed his eyes and raised the scarf to his nose, inhaling Karen's scent. He wound the red scarf around his neck like a hug.

"I love you," he said to Karen.

Isobel Watt

The Clyde is Like

The Clyde is like a brave lion,
Its roar is heard from town to town.
The Clyde is fast as a hare on a full moon day,
With the tide high as high can be.
The Clyde is like a graceful swan
On a beautiful summer's day.
The Clyde is a devoted mother
To all her children who depend on her.
The Clyde is like a playful puppy
When the summer sun glistens on her.
The Clyde is like a strong horse ready for its race
Many ships approach her.
The Clyde is a wise Solomon
With all her secrets hidden beneath her.

Teruko Tissera

It Wouldn't Be Me

In a dream that never seemed to end I climbed a cloudy spiral stair, the mist receding before me as I dragged myself ever upward, step by step by step. I wondered why I should be climbing, and where I might be going, but I could find no answers.

So I stopped, to see what would happen. Rather disappointingly, the answer to that question appeared to be – nothing. The mist, my rather mysterious companion, stopped with me, showing me just a hint of the next, empty step, enticing me onwards.

I decided I had done quite enough climbing and stood my ground and, feeling ever so slightly rebellious, turned around. It wasn't what I was expecting; not the mist following on behind, nor an empty stair stretching down, but myself, patiently standing on each step as far as I could see. In shock I stepped back, moved onto that next, empty step, and there I was again, standing in the space I had just vacated.

I don't know how long I stood staring at myself, but gradually a semblance of calm returned and I decided I would try to communicate; talk to myself as it were. No reply. Indeed, no hint of life. I reached out for an experimental prod and discovered I was facing a phantasm, a figure not wholly there. I also tried to go back down the stair and found I could not, no matter how hard I tried.

This was apparently a one-way stair.

Or was it? For the first time I noticed the stair had no railings, that the sides of each step were open. Gingerly I moved to the outer edge and extended a foot, discovered I could reach as far as I dared. The implication was obvious. I could not go back, but I could stop climbing. I had only to walk off the stair.

Then the strangest thing happened. As I looked again at the figure immediately below me we seemed to become as one. I was in that other me, I could see its life, and all that life entailed.

Intrigued, I moved to the inner edge. My gaze moved down, from step to step, and as it rested on each figure, each younger than the last, the same meeting of minds took place, and for a time I took myself back to earlier days, recalling those younger lives, reliving their memories - some long forgotten, some happy, some not.

And then I knew.

I was being offered a chance – the chance to change one of those lives, to find a moment in my past where I could choose a different path, make a different decision, say a different thing. I had but to reach back into my life at the appropriate moment and all would be different thenceforth.

My mind raced down the stair, back and back and back I drove. And stopped, an uneasy doubt tapping upon my shoulder. What are you thinking?, the doubt seemed to say. What if you change this, or that, or some other? What of the life you have lived from that time, the memories you now have? What are you prepared to lose?

And then the doubt showed me consequences.

Yes, I could go back and change my life, and yes, that change would climb the stair, and yes, there would be someone standing where I now stood. But it wouldn't be me.

As I thought on this I realised it wasn't only about me. Lives are not lived alone, memories are not made alone, they are all a part of other people's lives. Could I destroy what others might cherish for my own selfish ends?

A dark thought befell me. I could walk off the stair, leave my life unchanged, keep the memories intact, and end the relentless climb. But again, the doubt would not let me be, and my heart cried out with the pain inflicted on others if I were to do this thing. Tears rolled burning down my face, telling me this could not be, and mercifully the darkness passed.

“Well old son”, I said to myself in a breaking voice, “looks like we are where we are, and that's the end of it. Maybe it's best to just get on, don't you think?”

With a sigh, wondering what might have been, I resumed my ascent, step, by step, by step, into the unknown.

David McCorkindale

Waking Coastline

The light above, eternal, shining bright
The ground below, an honest, humble nest
The mighty coastal doves, embracing flight
The flocking fledglings, coursing over crest
The standing stone, immortal, living clay
A sole to foot the ground beneath our feet
We walk the path, the brightest solar ray
A heart to feel the flame of summer's heat
We journey under firmament and star
An ark of time, a wholesome highland space
Oh, give us strength, that we may travel far
And grant us sight, that we may act with grace
We walk the law, or climb the steepest hill
The crown and spire testify our will

Kyle McKelvie

Branching Bark

The acorns turn to trees as they take root
The sun, the stars, the seasons in a day
The trees turn fields to forests under foot
Polaris in the centre of the play
The cycles turn as spirals, as a wheel
The measure of our maker as a mark
The spirals spoke the spindle, as to seal
The treasure of our toil beyond the stark
The branching stalk, a bridge of binding thought
A hundred steady seeds stem through the town
The bridge between our past and future lot
A thousand choral cups adorn the crown

At dusk it leaves, the seasons in a day
At dawn it barks, the centre of the play

Kyle McKelvie

Changing Climate, Changing Minds

I write this trapped in a building, looking out to the sun making the sky glow with more confidence than I could ever imagine having.

I write this outside in only a t-shirt and shorts on a warm day in March, when I should be feeling free, but instead worrying that the weather is going to do nothing but become more extreme each year.

I long for a day when I don't have to worry continually about how my future will look. But that can never be achieved as everything is always changing and there's nothing that can be done to stop it, so long as time keeps moving things will change, for better and for worse.

We need to stop living in the past, as everyone says, but also, we need to stop living in an ideal future. I need to stop living in someone else's life, it is not letting me grow or focus on my own life changing as I am so absorbed in my fantasy worlds, even though it's all in my head. We are all hoping and talking rather than acting.

Our generation shouldn't have to feel like we must go out now so that we can 'make the most of it' before prices rise too high to be able to go out shopping with friends or go outside while the temperatures aren't too warm, and we are getting sunburnt in winter months. I want to be able to enjoy my time and live, not just 'make the most' of it before my only thought is to survive.

We need to think in the present and about who changes are going to affect. The climate crisis is happening now. The cost of living is rising now. Mental health issues and suicide rates in teens and young adults are at a peak NOW.

No wonder people don't want to live and have to use unhealthy coping mechanisms. There may be good things about living in the

21st century, but it is sure showing a lot of negative effects the further we go without real action to help our planet and its people.

Poem

I long for a time
That the never-ending worry
Of the future that's mine
Is nothing but a memory gone blurry.

Everything is always moving
And the clocks will always be ticking,
But by no means is anything improving
Even though our leaders claim they are talking.

Our generation feels like we are missing
Cause we are just making the most,
Before all we have left is reminiscing
And leaving our planet to roast.

Erin McEleny, Winner of Write ON:INverclyde 2022

They Fought

On this day we remember the lives lost in 1820.

As the workers fight back there are riots and death.

They fought for justice to make things right.

They fought the guns with People Power.

They fought here, at Bank Street.

They fought because they knew the rules weren't right.

On this day we remember the lives lost in 1820.

Zoe Barclay

STELLA

As Stella cleared away the tea cups she stood and looked at the fireplace wall and seemed in a daze. ‘Mum, mum are you ok?’ asked Emily. ‘Oh yes, I was just thinking I’ll paint that wall green, you know that nice forest green, evergreen I think, it’s all a bit too creamy, plain in here but your dad liked it’ Stella said, placing the cups on a tray and handing it to Emily. She thanked the last of the mourners for coming and saw them to the front door and nodded politely as they said they would call for lunch or coffee in a few weeks. She knew they wouldn’t as they were all Graham’s friends not really hers. As she closed the door she kicked off her shoes and sighed ‘thank goodness that’s over’ under her breath.

Emily had already loaded the dishwasher and was putting the leftover sandwiches onto one tray when Stella sat at the kitchen table. ‘Thanks love, why don’t you head home, it’s been a long day’ Stella smiled at her daughter. ‘But, I was going to stay with you tonight, John is fine about it’ Emily said. Stella got up and hugged Emily ‘You go home you’ve got lots to do for Stephen’s birthday tomorrow, I’ll be fine’ she reassured Emily. She really just wanted to be on her own.

Emily said about ten times ‘if you need me, call me’. Stella knew she meant well and she was worried about her but she needn’t be. She knew that she would be ok and promised to help her with the plans for her eldest grandson's 21st birthday. She poured herself a whisky and plopped in two ice cubes, she couldn’t remember the last time she had drunk whisky as Graham liked red wine or a dry white, seemed a waste to open a bottle for one glass. Her thoughts turned to Maggie, her friend from college, she introduced her to whisky and Stella was surprised at how much she missed the golden warmth of the liquid she sipped now. She flicked through her address book for Maggie’s name and number and wondered if she was still at the same address. Only one way to find out, Stella punched the numbers in her phone and sipped her whisky ‘hello’ the silky voice on the end of the line said ‘Maggie its.....’ ‘Oh my god Stella’ Maggie interrupted ‘how the hell are you?’ Stella told Maggie about Graham's death and apologised for not being in

touch more over the years, the last fifteen years to be exact. They chatted for nearly two hours and it ended with Stella agreeing to visit Maggie that weekend. When she hung up the phone she felt tired but happy. She wondered if she should feel guilty about feeling happy on the day of her husband's funeral

Stella spent two weeks with Maggie at her cottage by the sea, sipping whisky in the evenings, staring at the setting sun over the water, talking into the night. She met Maggie's friends, some of them she vaguely remembered from college or Maggie's art shows, some of them looked like tramps on the street, knowing Maggie they probably were as she made friends with everyone. Maggie was a good artist and successful too. She not only painted the seascapes but had her interpretations on scarves and crockery sold everywhere. Stella had always known Maggie was a great painter and her first exhibition along with four other artists was where she first met Graham. He was fun then but then they were all young.

Maggie encouraged Stella to get back to pottery which she had loved at college; it was a welcome relief from her studies then but something she had let go. Maggie promised to come and visit Stella next which helped to quell the sadness she felt leaving her and the sea to go back home.

Stella threw herself into remodeling her house, yes, it was now her house and she could do what she wanted with it. The fireplace wall was painted evergreen and the walls throughout the house now had original Maggie Stone paintings on the walls. She sold Graham's Mercedes and promised his prized MG sports car to Stephen at his 21st birthday, he was picking it up at the weekend then she was going to convert the garage into a studio with a potters wheel and kiln. Maggie was coming to help her set up the studio and she hadn't been as excited in years; she felt like a child waiting for Christmas day.

Emily was coming straight from work for dinner and Stella made her favourite beef wellington with roast potatoes Graham and Emily both loved it. Emily drove into the driveway and Stella

opened the door and hugged her. She wandered round the house noting the changes while Stella checked on the potatoes and poured Emily a glass of red and a whisky for herself. 'You've made a lot of changes mum, every room painted, new furniture and giving Dad's car to Stephen, do you have anything left belonging to Dad?' Emily asked. Stella looked surprised. 'I don't need your dad's things to remind me of him Emily' They ate in silence for a while until Stella said 'is there something wrong, you seem upset'. 'You're changing everything, and giving stuff away like celebrating he is gone' Emily said. 'Oh no Emily, I'm not celebrating that at all. I'd forgotten the Stella I was when I met your dad, the Stella who loved colour and art. I loved your dad and I love you too but I'm celebrating finding and loving the Stella that is still inside me'. Stella put her hand over her heart 'your dad is in here and I did everything he wanted, I worked to let your father study and do what he wanted and I don't regret it at all but I am living, here and now and my future will be a celebration of life, love and colour and the things I want and it will be wonderful. Stella raised her glass to 'the future'.

Pamela C Marshall

Tomorrow

I heard a vision in a song
the music took me home
my eyes could hear rainbows
singing in my soul

The sun shone as the wind blew by
upon my skin and tongue
angels singing in my ears
spring had just begun

The tears of winter are over
warmth will soon return
struggle will turn to plenty
responding to the sun

A field of yellow daffodils
beneath a blue blue sky
and tears like raindrops fell
a new story for earth to tell

Do not look to tomorrow
for today is not yet done
Fate has yet to play her cards
before we see the sun

By Brian MacDonald

Recalled to life

Zebra fish, they say, grow back damaged dorsal fins. It's a pity I'm not a fish. The last time I sat in the Memorial Garden, my parents were here. Today, the letters in black lacquer – *lest we forget* – and the red poppies mean more. The bronze sculpture of three First World War soldiers, heads bowed, arms reversed, means more. How can you grow when the world has hollowed you out?

The lists of the fallen. *Iain Farquharson, KSOB, 1916.* How did Lance Corporal Farquharson die, I wondered, as I chafed the joint above the area of my right knee? I did not see the girl arrive.

'Are you in pain, lady?' she asked, head tilted like a child. Despite her childish manner and high-pitched voice, this person was at least fourteen. Since leaving the hospital in Dusseldorf, I avoided all contact, though this girl's strangeness was compelling. White face, anorexic build. Her clothing: dark brown dress, white apron, white headscarf, made her seem like someone got up as a servant for a dress up party.

'I can help with the pain, lady,' she said.

My knee clicked as I straightened it, making the girl start. 'You should let me, lady,' she said, taking my left hand, which caused me to start. I detest physical contact as an invasion of privacy, yet this young woman persisted. 'I can give you something for your leg, and something for your heart, which is sore troubled.' Deep brown eyes and childish smile relieved the plainness of her face. Stunned by this waif's oddness, I did not even flinch when she placed her hand on my chest, looking into my eyes.

‘I am Julie Duncan,’ she said, by way of explanation, as though the name meant something.

‘Julie Duncan?’ I asked. She shook her head.

‘Not Julie.’ She repeated something which sounded like Julie but was not. She rolled her head from side to side, in a gesture which said it doesn’t matter. ‘Come tomorrow. I will take your pain away.’

At that moment, the low sun shone between Scottish Baronial roofs, blinding me. When I turned back, she was gone.

In my rented cottage, I typed, erased, re-typed the by-line Kabul Airport. As I had for weeks before. The same futile routine. The Network was understanding of my failure to produce copy, but soon they would run out of patience. A correspondent who does not correspond is an expensive resource. I flipped down the Mac. ‘No such thing as writer’s block,’ I told myself, ‘just a dead writer, needing to come back to life.’

I took half an hour to hobble to the Gelateria, where I ordered pistachio and caramel. The coffee-coloured melt dribbled onto my hand by the time I reached the garden, where I leaned my sticks against the bench.

‘Taxi next time, idiot,’ I muttered, stubbing the cone on the end of my bench, the way Dad used to extinguish his full-strength Capstan.

‘It won’t have been your fault.’ She whispered, so close to my ear that I felt her breath. That childish tilt of her head was the same, but something was different. As often happens when an outsider makes a personal assessment, I was furious with her manner and gathered my sticks. Again, that hand on my arm. From beneath her apron, she produced an earthenware jug.

‘Let me put it on for you, lady. If you think it shame people see under your skirts, no-one will see. They never do.’

‘Whose fault then, Julie?’ I snapped, annoyed by my stupidity at listening to her.

‘A man,’ she said with a shrug. ‘It is ever men who hurt women.’

The situation was surreal. Although I have struggled against prejudice in the competitive world of journalism, I am not a feminist. Why was I listening to her? A delivery van pulled up at the ice-cream factory, the driver jumping down with an Amazon box. Almost in slow motion, my companion lay down on the bench and curled into a foetal position, tucking her head under her arms. Though she made no sound, her thin body rocked with her sobs. Taking her shoulders, I sat her up, whispering what I thought was her name. She uncoiled.

She pointed to my knee and looked into my eyes. As in a spell, I nodded. Although I expected an outburst of horror when she discovered my prosthetic lower leg, she gave no sign, simply rubbing the contents of the jar onto the area above the plastic knee. I felt no immediate effect, yet the child’s ministrations were gentle and caring. Though this was a busy square, no-one paid attention to us, as though we did not exist.

I thanked her, then realised what was different about her: her face, white yesterday, was deathly grey. As if compelled to do so, I pushed her headscarf back and shuddered. Deep red ridges, almost black, ran across her forehead. Congealed blood, in a line as thick as my thumb, round her head. Having spent months on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, I had seen many women tortured, but this was Scotland, for God’s sake.

I spluttered my questions.

‘Men,’ she said. ‘The Baillie’s men. Baillie Seaton. They put questions to me I could not answer. They thraved me. If you return tomorrow, I will bring another jar.’

I put my hands to my face, trying to shut out the horrors which followed me half around the world. When I uncovered my eyes, she was gone.

The last glimmers of the day’s sun caused me to close the blinds as I opened my Mac again. Having tried various forms of meditation and drugs, I knew I need not bother with the Kabul Airport line. As Lazarus, a dead writer, I needed a miracle to bring me to life. After searching online for details of abuse like Julie’s, I found myself with my hands across my eyes, seeing the women, beaten, and humiliated by religious extremists. A Saudi woman, stoned to death for suffering rape; the body of a thirteen-year-old Indian girl, abducted from a bus, gang-raped and beaten to death. And I saw little Julie Duncan, a Scottish child, tortured in her hometown in the twenty-first century.

I found nothing on the internet to explain what Julie told me, so I made do with noting phone numbers of police, social work department and local press, to call when I heard the girl’s full story. Unable to sleep, I rose from my bed, poured myself a brandy, and thought about the last two days. The unreality of it convinced me that the balance of my mind had gone, after my horror in Kabul. Or else the drugs, from an old friend in the town, were having their effect. The journalist part of my brain considered writing an exposé of Julie’s abuser when I discovered who he was. My better self, however, revolted at the thought of exploiting this child’s torment.

I woke mid-afternoon. The cocaine had helped me sleep, but now I was late. Expecting reality to return, assuming my visions of about Julie were drug induced, it shocked me to discover that Julie was there, seated on our bench. Beside her, another jar. She neither rose nor smiled as I approached, merely tilting her head in greeting.

‘Is your pain eased, lady?’ she asked, her voice croaking a little.

‘It is better, Julie,’ I answered, noticing to my horror that her appearance had deteriorated further. The skin, like thinnest tissue paper, drew taut across her cheekbones; her eyes I could no longer see, as though they disappeared beneath the shadow of her cap.

‘Drink ten drops at a time in mead or small beer,’ she said in a voice as tiny as herself. Perhaps it was the movement under her apron, or perhaps I sensed a hidden horror. I reached for her hands and drew them out. Wrapped tight in stained linen cloths, her hands were damaged. As I unwrapped the white-red cloth, she stopped me.

‘Lady,’ she whispered, ‘tell me of your hurt.’

Staring at the bundled hands, guessing what lay within those blue-black bandages, I told of Benesh, a student of mathematics, who sat beside me on a bus to Herat. At noon that day, we were stopped by the religious police, who inspected all the Muslim women; one held Benesh, while the other ripped the varnished nails from her fingers, ignoring my pleas and her screams. I went on, telling of other horrors I had witnessed in the six months since I took the assignment. If the Network head suspected my presence as a western woman journalist would provoke incidents, to his shame, he was right. As the sun dipped once more, I unwrapped the girl’s hands. Where there had been individual fingers, now there was a tangled mess of blackness, like the roots of a disinterred rose bush.

‘The same as your friend Benesh,’ she smiled. For the first time since I left hospital, I cried as I told of the land-mine which took my crew and my lower leg.

‘Can you read and write?’ the little girl asked, head tilted once more. I realised the reason for the question: Julie could not.

She raised her hands off her lap and whispered, ‘Pilliwinks.’ I did not know the word, but assumed it was an instrument of torture. ‘You should tell her story, lady. Your friend Benesh. People should hear. Write it down.’ She shook her head, causing the filthy cap she wore to dislodge. The action revealed a skull shorn of hair, the fresh, ugly scabs telling of force used in the shearing.

I implored her to return the next day, assuring her I would call police, when a Yamaha parked at the ice cream parlour roared into life. When I turned back from this new sudden distraction, Julie was gone.

She never returned. My own horrific experiences now blended with the torture of Julie Duncan. I was sick of the world, ashamed of my cowardice and impotence. My attempts to write were futile: all I saw when I looked at the keyboard were the bloodied hands of two innocent girls. I decided to leave town.

On the evening before I left for good, I returned one last time to the Memorial Garden. A rustle of skirts beside me drew my attention to an elderly woman, dressed in a coarse brown habit. Seeing the disappointment on my face, she sat down.

‘She is gone.’ She reached across, took my hands in hers and whispered, ‘Shh. Geillis Duncan, she is gone.’

‘Geillis?’

‘They took her for a witch. Like me.’ When I asked questions, she once more put a finger to her lips. ‘Shh.’

‘A servant girl from Tranent. Accused she was of creating storms which prevented the king’s return. Fingers crushed, hair shorn, thraved by the rope, they took her to Edinburgh. They probed her body most lasciviously, causing those wicked men

much excitement, for Geillis saw signs beneath their robes. A talent for healing the sick she had, which is why she came to you.'

Suddenly, the woman took my hand and pressed into my palm a dark brown coin.

'This is all that Geillis earned through her healing of the sick. Tell her story, lady.'

Opening my computer, I placed the bawbee on my keyboard. For the first time since the bomb, I typed. I had been paid to tell of the torture of two girls who might have been sisters.

'Separated by five hundred years, a girl from Tranent, Geillis Duncan, burned to death during the Scottish Witch Trials, November 1590; Benesh Ghulam, student, died of sepsis, Herat, November 2020.'

As I typed now, I no longer saw tangled black roots instead of fingers. I saw my fee, the life savings of the girl who healed me, and brought me back to life.

Anthony Watt

One step at a time

She kneels on the carpet in her new living room, a cardboard box in front of her. She takes in a deep breath before she slices the top open with her knife, Sellotape over Sellotape from years of living on the run from herself. She unwraps the ornaments that have been protected with the *Telegraph*. The beginning of freedom has begun. She examines each object with nostalgia, finding them a place on the black and silver bookcase. Time to start again, carefully cleaning and dusting all of her items from storage boxes. She has not seen these boxes in two years, not since she left. It is a bittersweet moment as she had always planned on seeing her perfectly aesthetic baggage in the south, in her new home, not her old one in a town where she feels like a prisoner in a society of deprivation. Wiping the single tear that escaped she reminds herself that this is a step in the right direction. Everyone has a choice after a loss, we can let our world go on without us as we are forced to watch from the boundary of our beds, or we can try, over and over again. You will fall, it will hurt, but not as much as regret, the worst psychological pain you will ever feel. Growth is inevitable, when you start to bloom again with spring you will begin to shed the hurt you have carried with you through the seasons. It is spring now and every day brings something new, good or bad. Revel in the joy of freedom. Endure the regret, but whatever you do, keep growing and never let the past hold you back from change. Take it one step at a time.

Lana R.T Taylor

Adrift

The grass beneath you grows, yet you remain still,
continue like this you risk an over-flow

Hatred.

You hold that feeling close as if it keeps you afloat.

If you do not look around you are going to drown,
the waters are rising, why is this surprising

I can't, I cling to it knowing the hurt comes after the loss.

The rage protects me from the debris
of the wreckage that is my life after they left.

They left me in a mess, a sinking ship I thought I could outlast.

So here I am drowning in grief,
living in chaos I didn't create.

Fantasizing about the day I drift to an island
and stay there till the sun dries my eyes.

The sharks are closing in.

I need someone to throw me a line but
this ocean of broken hearts is too vast,
by the time anyone hears my screams
I will have capsized in the sea of hopeless dreams.
The captain goes down with their ship, time is running out.
I'm ready to sink.

Lana R. T. Taylor

First January

Just a few hours have passed
since the human artifice of
containing and dividing time
into easily-digested calendars
resulted in significance granted
to nature's passing through darkness,
a death in one moment hailed as birth
in the next, yet no change is seen in
the night sky after the controlled
explosions give up their loud
and colourful dances.

Nothing has altered
and yet I am reminded
as I arrange and rearrange,
erase and replace, these words
upon an electronic page that,
with the right will and and a
little skill and craft, there
can be something of
meaning crafted
from almost
nothing.

Peter A

Ant-Man

It's official -
I'm almost old.
At this age of years
what do I have to give
now that my anchor has gone?
All that remains available for change
is a future where I less and less belong
- a place that my son and all of those
coming after inhabit - my presence
no longer required. So I must try
before I go to be a superhero,
a very ordinary, ultimately
exceptional though
everyday regular
and probably
small, hero

By all means let
me die in the process
but first let me give it a go

Peter A

A Radical Stance

They shot us in the legs
when we took them by surprise.
We wrestled guns from their hands,
and pulled our wounded to the side.
They shot us in the legs,
but there were more feet to come.

Feet that were ready to kick back
at the swagger an sneer
of their merry band of volunteers.
Little cogs in the big wig machine.
Waving weapons like flags.
Unskilled. Clumsy. Obscene.

Even with our craftsman hands tied
by poor conditions, soaring prices, low pay.
Even as we died a working death each day,
we grabbed bottles and rocks
and hurled them at the heads of those
tooled, ruled fools.

The papers might call it a riot.
The man from the bench
will say we were beat!
But we still released The 5.
Blood spilled;
bittersweet.

We took a stand that day in
Solidarity!
And we will stand radical again and
Rise!

On the very legs they shot at,
when we took them by surprise.

Polly B

A Haiku of Birds

January

RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch 2022 - West Coast of Scotland

Where are they hiding?
Troops in trenches hunkered down
waiting for a lull ...

February

Starling in Well Park - Greenock

argues with the wind
posing on an empty plinth
repeating our sins

March

Song Thrush at Dawn

like a *muezzin*
calling from the highest branch
now spring will begin

April

Solitary Magpie

shake an oil-slick tail
fluff out your puff of feathers
hide that ink-black eye

May

Little Brown Birds

PS LBBs
with your unknown pedigrees
NB we ♥ you

June

Blackbird with a Family to Feed

listens to the worms
collects a clat and scuttles off
beak full of wrigglers

July

Eider Ducks on the Clyde

calling the morning
arguing all afternoon
twenty-four chatter

August

The Afternoon Jackdaw

strides across the street
to drink water from the tap
winks and walks back

September

Nuthatch on Feeder

the upside-down bird
defies gravity and facts
living this far north

October

Local Seagull

pootling round the park
outstaring the Rottweilers
treading broken glass

November

Pied Wagtail in Lidl's Car Park

zigzagging about
up and down and back again
like a wind-up toy

December

Singing Robin

leading me from bush
to bush, from bench to bench, show
me the way back home

Sarah Dolan

Acknowledgements

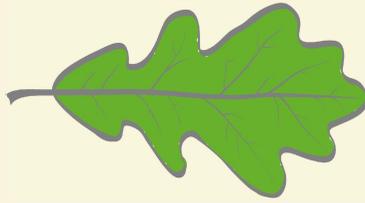
As Inverclyde Writer in Residence I have had the privilege of working closely with writers from across the area. Through our Culture Collective groups *The Writers Well* and *WORD* we explored some of the key issues impacting our locality and produced some outstanding writing celebrating and challenging our local communities. At our monthly Open Mic events we met new writers from across the area, shared our work and supported each other. You have individually and collectively embraced change, overcome adversity and celebrated diversity, this book is a reflection of your community spirit and I thank you!

Inverclyde Culture Collective is a dynamic partnership not of organisations but rather individuals with a passion for and commitment to promoting the arts in Inverclyde. I'd like to thank the teams at CVS Inverclyde for unstinting support, RIG Arts for creating a welcoming space for us to build our Open Mic (and for building *The Writers Well!*), Inverclyde Libraries for providing warm, welcoming venues, creative spaces and hosting our e-publications and *The Beacon & Kayos* for giving us a platform for our Spoken Word. Inverclyde is like an island – everyone knows someone you know- and in true Inverclyde style the partnerships went beyond the Collective. A huge thank you to Christiana Bissett of Dandelion Scotland, the teams at *The Inverclyde Shed*, *The Watt Institution* and *West College Scotland* for recognising that writers need much more than a pen and a piece of paper and supporting us with plants, placards, prompts, photography, post-production and places!

You can read more of the work produced by *The Writers Well* and *WORD* online at <https://www.inverclyde.gov.uk/borrowbox> or visit <http://katharinemacfarlane.com/publications>

Raise your voices, tell your truths and celebrate, together!

Katharine Macfarlane, July 2022



From Acorns: An Anthology of New Writing from Inverclyde

To celebrate the Year of Stories 2022 Inverclyde Culture Collective brings you this brand new collection of poetry and prose.

The people of Inverclyde are well acquainted with change. We know that great oaks can grow from tiny acorns. In this collection writers with a strong local connection encourage us to face, embrace and inspire change.

If you would like to participate in future Inverclyde Culture Collective activities please visit www.inverclydeculturecollective.co.uk

For creative writing opportunities across Inverclyde please visit the Write Inverclyde Facebook Group by scanning the QR code below



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