



# A PLACE BEYOND BELIEF

ORKNEY WRITERS' COURSE 2013

[www.gmbfellowship.org.uk](http://www.gmbfellowship.org.uk)

The Orkney Writers' Course is run as a partnership between the St Magnus International Festival and the George Mackay Brown Fellowship. Thanks to the staff of the Pier Arts Centre, the Stromness Hotel and the Royal Hotel.

First published electronically in 2013 by

**The George Mackay Brown Fellowship**

Compiled and edited by Pam Beasant. Designed by Iain Ashman

Text and photographs © individual contributors

This collection © The George Mackay Brown Fellowship, 2013.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.



LUCY ALSOP  
GILL ANDREWS  
PATTY BOONSTRA  
GRAHAM BURCHELL



A PLACE BEYOND BELIEF by Nathan Coley Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Orkney June 2013

STEPHANIE GREEN  
INGRID LEONARD  
REBECCA MORRISON  
DOREEN SINCLAIR  
KNOTBROOK TAYLOR



REBECCA MORRISON GRAHAM BURCHELL

JEN HADFIELD

INGRID LEONARD

GILL ANDREWS

KNOTBROOK TAYLOR

LUCY ALSOP

PATTY BOONSTRA

DOREEN SINCLAIR

STEPHANIE GREEN



PAM BEASANT course director and tutor



JEN HADFIELD co-tutor

photo: Pam Beasant

# GROUP POEM

## CATERPILLARS AND SHALIMAR

My poetry is  
not in the body, not confined.  
It lies spread out in front of me flowing away.  
A part.  
Of the Universal story teller picture maker.

My poetry is the grass under my feet,  
soft with the occasional tuft or rock,  
and the ground from which it sprouts.

My poetry is a lemon sherbet,  
both sweet and sour  
soft and hard.

My poetry is words in my mouth  
impervious to enzymes and dampness  
they float in the cavern behind my teeth,  
waiting...

My poetry presses her foot  
on the hard accelerator of a yellow convertible  
switchback mountain roads.  
How she loves to drive.

My poetry is buzzing with the vibrating, humming floor  
of a 1970s Loganair aeroplane.  
At eye level it's a series of water globules  
streaming backwards along the window to my right.

My poetry is musky as Shalimar,  
or the rose petals crushed beneath Salome's feet  
as she dances for John's head  
it smells of the sediment left in last night's wine glass  
or the dust-loved smell  
of the wardrobe of several generations ago.

My poetry is the sound of a Berlin summer,  
naked by the cold lake  
but it is also Berlin's Siberian winter wind  
with all its nostalgia and melancholy.

My poetry is a tug at the base of my gullet.  
I can feel its bony fingers tighten on my windpipe  
if I don't let it speak.

My poetry is my stomach.  
It's about keeping food down,  
or vomiting,  
overeating or starving,  
becoming aware I need it  
to give me energy, life.

My poetry is sometimes a gasp, sometimes an ulcer,  
or something stuck in a tooth.

My poetry is a complicated, origami palace.  
It's too unwieldy for me to give it to anyone.

My poetry is all of me.

My poetry is –  
a gift for those who see it  
a pause to mourn together  
for who we all are.

My poetry is sea-air  
island air.  
It tells me to be myself.

My poetry is the smell of bricks,  
exhaling under a bridge.  
They have gathered in the essence  
of fish, stones, chill, damp,  
and breathed them in my face.

My poetry is hairy and uneven,  
as soft grass under my bare feet.  
I sink deep and watch the ground  
spring back after each step.

My poetry is the rubber grumblings of wellington boots  
stuck in cowshit.  
If I walk too fast, off come the wellies  
and my bare foot lands in this cold, smelly stuff.

This one is for you,  
because you're worth it.  
I wrote the poem with you in mind,  
your presence in me totally.

# LUCY ALSOP

## MY POETRY

My poetry is the fresh smell of the sea,  
distant but insistent. I want to  
smile and walk briskly towards it

My poetry is a lemon sherbet,  
both sweet and sour,  
soft and hard

My poetry is buzzing with the  
vibrating, humming floor of a  
1970's Loganair aeroplane.

At eye level, it's a series of water  
globules, streaming backwards  
along the window to my right.....

## THE ONION

My minaret curves sit  
voluminously around me  
rooting me to the ground

My deep purpleness  
rises in stripes to my  
stubby brush head

A peasant peels away  
one of my crisp, crackling  
layers, like old paint

She places me in the  
palm of her hand,  
a perfect fit

## MY DAILY LIFE

My daily life is ruled  
by two small boys,  
one long-legged, sensible and freckled,  
the other smaller, unruly  
and brown as a berry.

I wash, clean, sort, wipe,  
iron, hang, sweep and Hoover.  
Good weather beckons me outside  
to mow and water and notice the bright  
green leaves on the willow trees.

I have to be careful,  
on pain of death,  
not to spray the caterpillars  
inhabiting those leaves, as a  
mini-David Attenborough lives among us...

Occasionally, I'll take a walk to the sea  
and sit on the pebbly beach, composing poetry.  
In thrall to my watch, I saunter back up  
the path, through buttercup-strewn fields,  
wondering  
'Are there 2 ice-lollies in the freezer?'

# PATTY BOONSTRA

## HAZE

You look in my eyes  
Which are full of expression,  
Meaningless to you.

I look in your eyes  
Which are full of expression,  
Meaningless to me.

It is as if  
A veil of opaque mist  
Hides our faces.

If we lift the haze  
We will see for a moment,  
Forget ourselves.

## NEAR WAULKMILL BAY.

He looks out to the sea  
Which frames the land ahead  
And finds, peering past a purple carpet,  
Stillness.  
Not a breath of sound.

Nothing there to block his vision,  
No hydro pole or wind turbine.  
Freewheeling  
Into meditation,  
No-one to distract his mind.

He starts extracting from his core,  
Deeply buried into storage,  
Symbols  
Of his lifelong journey;  
Totem sculptures on the moor.

A mind's eye collection  
Rises up from the ground,  
Which opens up slowly  
To allow skyward bound  
His proof of existence.

What for him has such meaning,  
Significant presence,  
Is to others invisible.  
And he, unobserved...

He feels quite absurd,  
And knows fine  
What they'd call him.  
They'd call him a nerd.

# GRAHAM BURCHELL

## FROM DADDY

For my birthday he gave me an onion,  
a left over from the summer show;  
a bomb, its fuse tied off with string.

The whole thing was bigger than my fist  
and dry-wrapped in brown paper, concealing  
a few words he'd bothered inside  
with a marker pen.

With a marker pen  
in the quiet of my room, I erased  
'happy' and 'love', leaving the bones –  
'To Kate .... birthday .... from dad.

There were no kisses to cross out.  
I cradled, learned the weight, stared  
and stared until the tears really stung.

## A MAD CONDUCTORS' TEA PARTY

No stay on Westray for me – flight delayed.  
The day's become a windless ragged flag.  
I shelter in Kirkwall,  
join a mad conductors' tea party.

The day's become a windless ragged flag.  
It's seen me lodged, sharing a meal.  
I'm at a mad conductors' tea party;  
pasta with Marco, Lars Tomas, Mehmet and Kim.

It's seen me lodged, sharing a meal  
with four conductors on a course.  
Pasta with Marco, a dormouse, Mehmet and Kim.  
We talk of universals while tucking our own cultures in.

With four conductors on a course  
and the added spice of a poet,  
we talk of universals while tucking our own cultures  
under our bones.

With the added spice of a poet thrown in  
I warp the conversation away from the baton.  
From under our bones  
we unscroll what we know of composers and poems.

I warp the conversation away from the baton.  
The dormouse pours wine.  
We unscroll what we know of composers and poems.  
A mad conductor waves Stravinsky at the kitchen sink.

A dormouse pours wine.  
I shelter in Kirkwall.  
A Mad conductor waves Stravinsky at the kitchen sink.  
No stay on Westray for me – flight delayed.

EYNHALLOW SOUND

Islands shift.  
Dark        Light  
changing places.

The distance moves forward.  
Foreground recedes into mist,  
like the wandering isle of Hildaland  
riding on tide-races of light.

Overlooking the Sound  
is the stone ship of death  
still aground on the shore.  
So remote.        So close.

Out of the dark emerge:  
a quernstone. A flint axe.

Darkness flaps  
like the curlew's flight:

a flash  
then falling  
to merge with the earth,  
invisible.

TWO GIFTS

For me?  
Groatie Buckie  
placed on my open palm:  
peedie clam, ribbed with a pink bruise.  
Good luck.

Back home,  
my son re-frames  
an old painting for me.  
*It's beautiful. Trust me.* More he  
won't say.

# INGRID LEONARD

## STROMNESS

A sound that rolls  
like pebbles off the tongue. Stromness.  
The moon here wears its clouds like a moustache  
on a bleached skull, a face that's pinched  
in pique at the lone walker and three felines  
who have come to bear witness to its lightshow  
on flagstones, smooth and new.

The street narrows ahead, forms a horizon  
of slanted stone. Van Gogh would have been proud,  
here we have a black and orange road winding treacherous,  
slippery into an unknown. And suddenly I am  
my feet, they are a metronome.

The old sky-relic tugs at my knees  
like I am a marionette. There is no room for error  
in this place, the scowling sky will not allow for it.  
'Don't you dare,' it tells me, 'Fall out of rhythm.  
Respect the silence, child.'

And so I respect the silence. My steps fall  
like the peel of stone bells.

## AGE

"Spring in the air!"  
once said, one fine April morning in Orkney.  
"Spring in the air yersel,"  
came the terse reply from the old man,  
whose limbs had long since grown stiff  
and whose mourning for a more youthful gait  
had calcified, petrified in the midst of winter's spate.  
But he looks up now at distant hills,  
tufted brown still and becomes moss  
to be cut across, into bricks  
laid out to dry, no, bask in the summer sun:  
what more vivid thought than this,  
the summer sun.

A world dappled by pink and purple  
heather in high summer, the drone of bees, drunk  
on honey and heat, drowsing, soft clouds reflected in a burn.  
Water flows, a single blade of grass charges thoughts,  
senses alive, tingling, flying, swifter than water,  
hills which have long since learned  
to maintain their pace, while an old man soars above them,  
the wind at his back, withered limbs transformed,  
hands searching an autumn earth.  
Heart sieving a warm sky of its wintery husks  
he returns, changed to himself, but yet  
his brittle twigs of legs lope in the air  
and through a seasonal kaleidoscope  
he skips and laughs, equinoxes turning,  
summer has not done with him yet.

# REBECCA MORRISON

## A VETTRIANO WOMAN COOKS

Will my fingers stain pink, she wondered idly.  
She ran her forefinger down the ribbed bulge of the onion,  
rested it on the bristled end, coarse as coconut-shell-hair.  
Off with your head, she whispered.  
A rapid incision, then the thick outer skin  
peeled away; four neat quarters, pearly white on purpled red,  
and the green of a tender shoot at its heart.  
She eased the layers apart with her fingers,  
like the scales of a fish in an Arabian tale,  
scattered them in the pan of rapeseed oil,  
and a twist of Moroccan-rose spice.

## ORPHIR, ORKNEY – LANGSTANE PLACE, ABERDEEN

I slept in a box-bed,  
Saw the year in with hens to feed  
and a stack of books from Tam's place;  
Sleeping and waking to the wind's wheedling,  
the moods of the firth; and time made sense  
the way it can through the writing of a poem.

~

So, Granite City, are you home to me now?  
I believe in my snuggerly,  
the 'London' garden square,  
the piano and its music;  
in Canaletto's Venice at the end of my bed,  
and the robin carved from pear-wood.  
'Upstream' – 'Pumas' – 'oil vessels' – 'valves',  
Hemingway tales of barbel and pike.

## A YEAR - 2013

Poppies in earthenware  
Alpine Edelweiss.

Lavender scent  
through Aberdeen morning  
Gulls laugh at crow from granite lookouts.

Swifts to bats,  
champagne to Nescafé.

Silver night meadows  
peopled by peewits,  
the low of a cow by the chapel.

Spiders spin  
their fire-spun webs.

A rabbit lives on the  
orb's silver tussocks –  
not a man.

The postmark, Darjeeling,  
The stamp is the bulbul.

Duet of Schubert and greedy wind.  
Hold a match to the suck  
of the wood-burning stove.

A no man's land  
of *Brief Encounter* and Harvey's Bristol Cream.

One-two-three otter cubs  
learn to eat  
the fear-blanching octopus.

Striped cats of Hoy  
chase dragonflies.

# DOREEN SINCLAIR

## SUMMER SOLSTICE

The year's on the turn  
and Light,  
full flowered,  
drops petals  
into the deep bowl  
of Dark.

## WINTER SOLSTICE

Darkness grows hesitantly  
less and Light,  
seeking for balance,  
holds the hand of  
each fragile, new day.

## THEY CALLED ME

When the plague came  
they called me healer,  
demanding I made them  
poultices to draw the humours.  
I crushed onion, drawing  
the juice to mix with honey  
from my hives, herbs  
from my garden, water  
from a hillside spring.  
Heated and applied  
they soothed and  
sometime cured.

The plague passed over,  
the dead were tallied.  
Plague blamed, cannot burn.  
They called me witch.

My poetry is  
not in my body, not confined,  
lying in front of  
me flowing away.  
A part.  
Of the Universal story teller picture maker.



Pier Arts Centre and Stromness piers

FLOE

wave poised like an upward slope  
I'm ready for the breaking  
thunder of the gods  
(goes on all day)

HOTEL

conversation between the floorboards  
refusal of the full English  
tomorrow night there's going to be an engagement  
with slamming doors and Elvis

POET

walked the rain spattered streets of Stromness  
midsummer's night and I'm searching  
through the Khyber Pass  
and Back Wynd  
for the man himself  
(or, perhaps, a lonely Burlesque)

SEVEN SKUAS AT HUNDA

sitting on the barrier  
its an odd number  
perhaps they are after  
my cucumber sandwich  
(Lord, I hope not)

SCULPTRESS VISITS JULIA'S CAFÉ IN STROMNESS

*I'm going to have the crab*  
Said Barbara Hepworth out of her round stone mouth  
The crab was un-amused  
(It had been un-amused for a while...)

A PLACE BEYOND BELIEF

Strung out and  
tight  
a place beyond belief

Across, buttercups shriek  
from a ditch cavity

In the Bay of Dew  
silence reigns  
here, we listen to roads and buildings

On the washing line, even jeans  
dry in less than an hour

It seems in the dark nights  
huddled by the fire  
only a dream

sharp, icy fall, wet bum  
cold fingers on the mug

Walls become shelves for snow  
imprinted with tree shapes  
of small birds' feet

Sweetness traps billing doves  
on three-tiered cakes

Where is the girl  
in the charcoal top?  
I ache and croon

Swifts to bats  
Champagne to Nescafe

Muted trumpet in a cellar bar  
closing cadence  
of a misty tune

Shirt sleeves stiffen  
into frozen robot arms

Orbs of ice  
hang like pearls  
on a cord

Bonfires, toffee apples, Catherine wheels, sparklers,  
spiders spin their fire-sun webs

Tyre change  
road tax  
six hundred litres of household oil

Soap on a rope  
as a Christmas present

The dead drop  
of emptiness  
after the party

Light seeps under curtains  
and into consciousness

A finger sings  
round the rim  
of a wine glass

Striped cats of Hoy  
chase dragonflies



Orkney Writers' Course participants with Festival Poet Christopher Reid and guitarist James Boyd at St Magnus International Festival event, 23rd June 2013