

The background is a detailed painting of a garden. It features several tall, thin stems with small, dark blue buds. Larger, vibrant blue flowers are scattered throughout the scene. The foliage is rendered in various shades of green, from light and airy to deep and rich. The overall style is impressionistic, with visible brushstrokes and a soft, textured quality. The lighting is diffused, creating a sense of a quiet, overcast day in a garden.

the half private garden

POETRY
FROM
THE 2015
ORKNEY
WRITERS'
COURSE

THE **gmb** GEORGE MACKAY BROWN FELLOWSHIP



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FROM THE
ST MAGNUS
INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL
ORKNEY
WRITER'S
COURSE
2015

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.

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**ORKNEY
WRITERS' COURSE
PARTICIPANTS
STROMNESS
17 - 21
JUNE, 2015**

SARA BAILEY



MAGNUS DIXON



MICHAEL HOUGH



KATE RAMBRIDGE



CIARA MACLAVERTY



KATE TOUGH



PAM BEASANT course director and tutor



JEN HADFIELD co-tutor



My poetry comes from....

longing, memories, other people's poetry. Words talking to each other, feelings between thoughts, recycled love, the back of a boy's neck, the washing machine, 1984.
The dark, the silly, the hiding place. I take it out to give it room – see if it breathes.
The breath moving in my body.
The crescent moon of salt under my fingernails
and the rust spots that constellate the trawlers.
Fish guts, blubber and organs.
Another channel (my other channel)
and from plunging in, wanting to learn to swim.
When my pen starts and something comes often meaningless sometimes insightful to me.
The internet and album sleeves
brochures, indices and the UN Declaration of Human Rights (in Scots).

In my mind, it is like...

a spring day with buffeting winds that ruffle my hair into my eyes and push me from behind like a toddler in the park.
A relentless drizzle that slowly drenches me.
Ice, jammed.
The anacrusis before the squall and the white knuckle upbeat before thunder.
Hunger, hunger, hunger, a deep map, known and unknown territory.
Winter, precise
rich and slipping with oil
constantly moving clouds or through mist clearing viewing life through
a break from busy.
Any day in Glasgow –
the sun breaking on your face while the
rain lashes at your back.

In my mouth it is like...

a croissant – buttery, flaky, knowing and manipulative, sneaking up on me.
The tequila worm – hallucinating ideas into form and shape.
Teeth, spit, cough,
the tincture of bitter herbs.
The exhaling coffee
cooling in the chipped mugs
that litter pirate radio stations.
A flying saucer, biting to sherbet.
The austerity of brine
Sometimes too easy to digest
through rich with small ingredients.
Foreign muck
that tourists will not eat because they can't pronounce it.

It carried me here from...

sickness, from Primary 3, from the island, from kids' bath time, folding clothes, wiping tables; from my daughter's asthma cough.
Exile, home.
Near secrecy, the half private garden.
The smell of tarred smoke houses
and the drying nets that cartograph clouds
and lock the gulls in gridlock.
Darkness, brightness, confusion.
Too much purpose.
My childhood, adolescence, when I wrote to escape, to calm
to find solace, meaning.
Norman MacCaig's visit to our school library,
basking in his chair by the tall sash.

My poetry is here with your poetry like...

children on the first day at primary school, sitting in the cloakroom, comparing shoes.

A chair in the corner of a room.

An uncertain animal tasting the air.

Pirate Gow's playing cards

on ale-bleached tables.

Festival strings.

Chemicals in a periodic table

sparking and stirring one against another.

To share and benefit from your response. I hope

you will accept my reactions as mine.

First thoughts, best thoughts.

Ciara MacLavery, Sally Bailey, Jen Hadfield, Magnus Dixon,
Pam Beasant, Kate Rambridge, Michael Hough, Kate Tough



Her Hands

You can tell so much about a person from their hands. Nice nails- not too long, no fancy polish. Buffed. A clean person, well brought up. No fancy rings – don't show off dear. Nail varnish is vulgar, long nails make a girl look cheap. A wedding ring shows you are respectable – acceptable. We can talk to her.

Clean.

Check under the nails. Did someone use the nail brush properly? Of course there's a proper way. You know as well as I do there's a right way and a wrong way to do everything.

Not bitten?

Good.

Bitten nails show a weak character.

Engagement ring; not too flashy, but not too small. Hmmm, I suppose that's the modern way. In my day one good stone was considered tasteful. In later life you'll appreciate those rings. Take them off to wash up. Marigolds to do the dishes, some lily of the valley lotion. Nice hands say so much about a person, don't you agree?

Fishing

The hook barely registers, a small tug, nothing more no resistance, letting the pull take her, not seeing the danger, enjoying the thrill of letting go.

He teases

watches the leap and twist of joyous freedom until

the line tightens.

And she is pulled in,

dropped,

dead eyed,

to join the others.

Homecoming

At the corner of the street
 At the crossing of the glen
 At the meeting of the water
 At the moving of the pen

At the signing of the paper
 At the knock upon the door
 At the ticking of the clock
 At the child who asks for more

I'm here beside you

At the hanging of the picture
 At the telling of the tale
 At the singing of the song
 At the lifting of the veil

At the hand upon the window
 At the lighting of the fire
 At the placing of the silence
 At the calling of the choir

I'm here beside you

At the rhythm of your heart beat
 At the making of the hay
 At the rising of the sun
 At the passing of the day

At the writing of the story
 At the saying of the prayer
 At the teaching of the lesson
 At the foot upon the stair

I'm here beside you

Once a week

I ran too far,
 too fast, too long;
 pounding pavements
 till that day
 it snapped. I stalled,
 hobbled home,
 cold compress, elevation,
 simple damage limitation.

Then physio, patient
 as a warming tea pot-
 I join her knee replacement
 group; gain an angle
 on my plight, succumb
 to her stretching smile.

Now my torn meniscus
 friends me, keep me safe.
 I cross at crossings, hold
 hands, lift with care,
 extend each day, make love
 just once a week. You laugh.
 It's true. My misadventure.

Along a street he sauntered, stumbled, triumphed.*(in appreciation of George MacKay Brown)*

Khyber pass leslie's close wrecked; in scapa flow
dry suit repairs little cream.

Victoria street, we have a large glass shower
screen, in back shop, ask to see if interested,

J.L.Brown. Eliza Fraser, legendary figure, manse
lane passing place - keep clear at all times.

Wildscape plainstone J. Wright and son. Free.
Kirk lane church road - children's play area.

Porteous close graham place, sutherland's lane.
I'm gonna throw up boys, lane the flattie bar.

the taxi driver

he stops

with o u t s t r e t c h e d arms
lifts the s

tartled lamb
to safety beyond the wall
while we continue on our way
to see the blind sheep

sealedtightwithinabox
like a fish
out of water

Up Brinkie's Brae*(after George Mackay Brown)*

each pulse faint beyond
the silver causeway
i climb uncharted steps
of drifting childhood
this a day too fine
to squander

Getting There (Ciara MacLavery)

The side-door of the Stromness Hotel
 is always open, wooden, heavy,
 adjacent to the revolving one,
 I have seen no one revolve in.
 Fags and chips ghost the foyer,
 flock wallpaper, louder than the carpet.

A man with a pleated beard
 gives me the silver key
 to Room 16. Single bed,
 the same flower-lacquered bin
 we had in the 70's. Pier view.

White and blue ships docking
 in midnight's not-quite darkness.
 Far from home.
 By morning I will small talk
 with coach parties,
 order bacon and grapefruit,
 leave the maid a note
 that she doesn't need to clean;
 tip and thank her when I leave.

The Poetry Doctor is IN

(for Jen Hadfield)

I didn't see it coming
 and now can't see
 how I missed it
 with her school boy lips
 and her pebble-smooth hands.

She's easy as a stretch, or wild flowers,
 comfortable as a lambswool jumper
 with the right neck line.

I could almost believe
 everything she says.

She'll help with beginnings
 and endings,
 show you what to keep
 and what to let go.

army (for Sarah)

we are the army carrying the egg across the wilderness which today is a
 brown and misty country crossed by burns tomorrow might be dry and rasping
 cold with masked hills closing in behind us there have been days of leaves,
 easy as Eden

we have no marching orders but find the path such as it is from one another
 out here, perhaps all pathways look like this one limping across the stony
 intervals there is not much else to carry our equipment two scabby
 ammo boxes and the swords left over from some penny opera is merely ceremonial

we hold taut that is a matter of pride but sometimes

we feel lost because we were not drafted for a combat strange shapeless
 bellowing hollows out the night

we don't know where the fighting lies what correspondents call 'the theatre of
 war' which

we can only imagine

we dare hardly look at the egg in case it is already fractured but if it were a
 wren's egg or only the feather from a wren's nest only a filament lost from
 the feather

we would carry it

we travel at the pace of the slowest for

we are not girls now and we know how much their loss might wound us
 the egg is more necessary than you can think

we pass it, one to another, mile by mile

Returning

Sometimes
 the journey drags you
 back across the distance
 already travelled, rigid links
 rust bound

but here
 the loose, bright wind
 catches you up – your maps
 bend, and blow like the future from
 your hands

- i. It,
- ii. stoorworm,
- iii. starts almost
- iv. as nothing, at
- v. the single, tiny
- vi. possibility of
- vii. absolute flat zero. One
- viii. wicked atom dense as fear sinks
- ix. into the weed and the cold discipline
- x. of cells compels a throbbly slime to swell,
- xi. blotched, from the belly of the sound, the slop
- xii. sick slop, slop, of a half tide, heaving out of time.
- xiii. Under the cover of the guileless sea it masses,
- xiv. fattening, coil on coil, a glistening bloat, a glut
- xv. extruding silent through the fathomy dream you call your own.
- xvi. The judder of the tankers overhead may wake it, or low tide
- xvii. draw back the water shuddering from its sides. Walking the ebb shore
- xviii. one translucent evening, bending to touch, the sea is all white twitching greed,
- xix. the beast's eye bulging half-blind at the light. Oh Assipattle, Assipattle, come
- xx. bring fire, come quickly what if one morning we should find its sour breath fills the ditches?
- xxi. what if a bleared sun showed, where once our islands were, the screeching helix of its hunger?
- xxii. what if the brave were gone before us, and the lighthouse blinked a silent desperation? Come,
- xxiii. flare, little yole, down gulping black, and fire the thousand ribs electric bright, come blaze, redeem us

Blake

Because of the blind chord
 hauling at his breastbone
 he must go out before dawn
 across fields shadowed with frost
 running on mud, stiff-cold,

where beeches stand like nightworks,
 hungering:

the same half-hymn
 haunts, dark, their wrought asymmetries;
 the burn of angels, throbbing, hovering
 is trapped in the pewtery ranks

and glints and brims
 into a thick blue dawn.
 Now will the blackbird loose his eager notes?

and then all down the line the branches will be carolling
 and Alleluia mobs his lofting soul
 he is glass-clear and single to the light
 and everything and heaven rushing in.

Unrecoverable Youth

Autumn term; glee-ridden girls push up
 the stone staircase as the head-mistress slips
 past. Spits, "Sort your hair for tomorrow, Kate." As if
 the beach-bleached curls are my fault, as if
 the bursting mess of womanhood can be held in
 with clips.

Past Priorities

I'd have a better general grasp
 of how The Great War started
 and of early agricultural practice
 if I hadn't spent Mrs. Dyer's history classes
 on the hunt for
 split ends.

Working Till 2pm

1.

Strangers knock
 flatter your vanity by wanting you.
 Cloister the self: the work of words
 never liked being photographed.

2.

Beaten on
 clawed at
 stained and torn
 you would not believe a manuscript could hold
 out so long against the furies.

Words found in *The Orcadian* article, *Working Till 2pm* by George Mackay Brown.

Caitlin

Okay, the plan is to
make a secret book
(at afterschool)
and write fake
secrets about people
we don't like.
Then we go to play
and "accidentally"
leave the book then
Tess will read it
and blab it
to everyone.

Contents found on a small piece of folded paper,
on a school floor, 2013. Names changed.



Washed in the stillness
Stromness wakes
fresh into music

Laughter trickles
down the Khyber Pass

And shall we strip at Brodgar?
We are naked voices curving round
the first phase of silence.

Corncrake-hush. Tarred wood
and amber creaks, creaks

clatter door munch saucer
poets yearn
for anechoic chamber

Here are the little vessels laid on shelves
cupping a doubtful light

How much
Gore-tex
can Orkney take?

Screech of blackened brides
seagulls at the Market Cross

Three lines of love
the hanging doves
a death or double life.

Your hands shelter my
heart against the wind

The blank wall a page
red shoes, her lipstick
like a tiny pink bulb

Peedie-beaked, whaps, splinter
snail shell on sandstone anvils

No more hiding age
let roots be
as they are

Grand-mere's advice:
curate your days, cloister yourself...

Very good sex
is
very important

Coppering brown like low tide
by next spring it will be living green.

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