

# Henge in the Surge

ORKNEY WRITERS' COURSE 2017



THE GEORGE MACKAY BROWN FELLOWSHIP



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# 2017

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# AILEEN BALLANTYNE

## *Two Poems for George Mackay Brown*

(in Response to 'Riddles of the Universe,' from Under Brinkies' Brae)

### I

#### **Life Beyond?**

Alone.  
Sky scientist.  
Human. Weaving his web.  
Seeks significant other.  
Soon please.

### II

#### **The Poetry Place:**

#### **Where my poetry comes from:**

She stauns aside the burn  
talkin' tae tadpoles,  
speirin'  
aye speirin',  
askin the tadpoles  
'tell me, tell me yir truth'.

*Lowland Scots: spierin' = asking*

# *Family Album: at the Miners' Gala*

*(Cowdenbeath, Fife)*

Look how they laughed then,  
the gang of them, before you and me,

lying on the grass,  
their sandwiches and snowball-cakes  
held up for the camera,

my father at 20,  
with his Fred Astaire hair,  
stretched out his full length,  
balanced like a Busby Berkeley chorus boy  
on the shoulders of three girls.

His head is on Lillie  
who will become famous  
for her annual "Jerusalem",  
with her back to us all,  
at Auntie Agg's New Year party.

His rib-cage is on Annie,  
his cousin,  
who will die of pneumonia  
at her son's house in Bahrain,

and my father's bare feet  
are on the shoulders of  
Cathy,  
who will be my mother,

who will throw back her head  
in old age  
to see the great lights  
of the 10 o'clock Concorde  
move across my London garden.

# *In the Garden*

*(For M)*

You saw it today: you gazed  
at the apple tree's buds  
like someone who never saw blossom  
unfurl in the sunlight until now.

As light fades,  
the blossom's a quiet silhouette.  
I reach for your hand in the dark,

we lie on our backs  
on the red tartan rug  
we once used for picnics,  
watching the holes  
in the sky effervesce.  
You tell me the night  
has the chilled almond  
taste of champagne

and you ask  
if I'll help you to die.

We have no desire  
for the cold prefab-blue  
of Zurich, or Switzerland's snow.

I move the old stereo close to the window,  
put Fingal's Cave on the turntable.  
We can hear it quite loud  
in the shade of the trees  
at the foot of our garden.  
I pour you the dose  
in a clear crystal glass  
well-laced with Bruichladdich,  
sit down on the grass  
and hum every note alongside you,  
until only I  
am singing.



# CATHERINE EUNSON

## *GMB*

Lookout  
for the town where  
everybody's busy.  
Holy Magnus help me sing to  
Orkney.

## *My Stromness*

Grieveship  
11a  
many fading photos  
vivid in my own personal  
archive.

## *Me writing*

A smell  
  
from the background  
tugging at my pencil  
something's creeping across the page  
at last.

## *Cap of rainbows*

Still dark dog  
one warm window  
waiting for

barking to switch on  
the breeks, the boots  
the kettle, the tea

long weathered woollen  
cap of rainbows  
threaded through invisibly

he puts it on  
clasping the door  
calling the dog.

## *Norwegian Wood*

Hans Wegner held nordic haunches  
in hip hugging wood  
snug through each Scandinavian winter

and every simmer dim, cradled close  
on well seasoned wood,  
Norwegians sat on their art parts & lived.

Even Baltic bums became comfortable  
on fashioned forested wood,  
impressed the cherished chairs weren't imports.

Till one of their sons, the owner of a restaurant,  
thought thriftily, who'd  
pay so many krone, what about a copy?

His internet noticed China was cheaper  
the pricetag patiently wooed  
at his common sense till he succumbed.

The order was made, the invoice was paid,  
he waited - who'd  
ever know? No-one! Then the news,

his batch was seriously stuck in Bergen  
might as well be still in the wood,  
had to be smashed - bit like his cash.

The moral? Copyright really really matters,  
Møbler's a meanie,  
& cargo from China can't take shortcuts.

## *Night operations*

My son's body is heavier, and now we're in a huddle, almost standing on the dark sand, so near is the runway to the sea. He's my drowsing little cub, and through the sort of savage black that can run all day in those unpeopled forests comes a weak and persistent droning. It is an approaching

plane, and it's coming in to land. Soon we're lit up with juddering lamps for the quick delivery, a kind of backwards birth, mother and boy climbing into the plane with the nurse. This makes it well

after one before they can cut through his gut in Glasgow -

and then the hospital daylight, after doctors wake him, sees plastic warriors vanquish more beasts on his bed.

None of us alone, can cope with what we're up against, or see past the rattling flight, through the roar of the night.

## *The early boat*

You walk beside a railway track  
brambles escaping  
rust painted railings.

Nothing in particular  
looking at other peoples' houses.

Sometimes thoughts go  
with you too, the momentum  
of a moving shoal.

Remember the girl on the boat?

No-one could have told, shown  
her left behind, below  
stacked roofs, tucked  
up a close  
through the door in the wall.

Of course  
there were holidays.

But in all those dreams  
for all of those years  
she never could disembark  
from the boat  
which never docked

the original ship  
the Ola.

## *Victoria Street*

Will you not come in  
from the garden, light  
the fire, see  
to the cat's fish?  
Between ivy walls and the flowering  
borders, rhubarb and gooseberries  
once held the cat's snooze.  
Passing lorries still slice light  
away from the front room window  
and damp walls hang heavy with news,  
but no-one has buttered it;  
and upstairs is quiet.

So you must be in the garden.



# MARTIN MALONE

## *Midsummer*

As though nothing happens  
our hemisphere shoulders the sun,

the hill asleep on its trove of peat,  
the sea is soaked in light.

In the days before Johnsmas  
we bear fuel to the sgùrr,

our own brief blaze stoked  
in its hours and seasons

by the darkness and the light.

## *Midwinter*

Sun's pale wick  
slants a glim  
into the cairn's  
stone gut  
to glean  
lost moment  
from its nameless  
priest-king,  
is slaked  
by the hill-line  
black  
over  
Hoy,  
skimps  
a last  
from  
the year's  
yielding  
and  
drops;  
drops  
below  
world's  
end  
time's  
end,  
shifts  
then  
slow  
to  
the  
onset.



# KATE OLDFIELD

## *I cast my words across the sea*

We throw words like clay,  
Sling them as arrows.  
Splice then fling them – reel them back in.  
Such outrageous fortune.

This is Orkney.  
The longest day.  
As poets we are unhinged.

I turn south upon the brae's brink.  
Can you hear this? Can you hear me now?

## *The moon in my man*

Side by side, we travel this straightened road.  
As the sky opens out  
so do you.

You were in another place – you say  
– like you were on the moon.  
*Under water.*

All this rolling beneath a pale hung moon.  
To our right the sea,  
Endlessly.

Three years since the tide returned you;  
maybe less before you flow out  
from me again.

Look up, see the moon shadows, howling.

## *Lost and Found*

I misplaced myself,  
after your interest palled,  
usurped by a creature  
I didn't know, did not conjure.  
As months became years,  
I tried to self-substantiate.  
but flailing, failing, flayed,  
mistakenly shed my self.  
Until, pleading for recognition  
with pen and ink  
I found me here  
on this page.  
Fixing time long lost  
on paper,  
with paper.  
Re-ticking all my boxes.  
Reclaiming my lost properties.

Your vision of me is still at large  
pacing monstrously.  
Abandoned by you  
unrecognised by me.  
Lost property. Unclaimed.

## *Hebridean Air*

You stop, breathing the scene. I stand:  
pilgrim toes; sun-bleached sand.

Our mourning walk now quiet, and tied  
tight to ebbing wind and tide.  
The mainland's pull is faint and far.  
*Can we not stay just as we are?*  
Then here at seam of land and love  
come threading, memoried notes to prove  
*(O, Will ye no' come back again?)*  
that life can hold in pitched refrain.

So maybe Larkin's almost wrong;  
what might survive of us is song.



# FIONA SANDERSON

## *Norholmen\**

The bell rang out but it was no bell  
it was the sound of a stave, a staving in of the metal sides  
light splintering in where it didn't ought to be  
and water, everywhere.

There was no bell to ring,  
no deck but an upward ladder of caulked planks  
that couldn't be walked.  
The world was sideways, circled about with different rules.

Then, nothing. No sound. No land  
as we lifted high then plunged. Stopped.

*An echo in my ears  
clearer than the waves themselves.*

We are vessels, the lot of us, quite subject to wreck;  
containers of sounds that let fly  
as we leap, make for shore.

Some land.  
Others float away to sea.

*\*The name of a ship that was wrecked off Stromness some decades ago. You can see the wreck in Sylvia Wishart's paintings, local photographers have captured its gradual disintegration ever since. When I work on the beach, it is often in the lee of one of the chunks that remains.*

## *Pieces for a lost sundial*

### **I.**

A family lived here once, my forebears.  
He was the lightkeeper, made boxes  
stuck all over with shells. She, well  
she did everything else.

I can see the lighthouse still.  
From Kirkwall, a good throw would almost reach it  
or a mighty swim, across the String,  
if a boat could pick you up half way.

### **II.**

*Like water, it pulls at me again,  
into the stream, to this other-ness.  
There is no solace here  
that is not of my own making:*

*Bring me my tools for the new world  
And let me fix a different north  
to my old midday,  
numbering only the sunny hours.*

### **III.**

On courting sundays  
she would walk from the town  
to wave a tea cloth.  
From the island, he waved in return

like Rapunzel.  
With a compass.  
Perhaps happier in the tower  
than he reckoned for.

**IV.**

On occasion, she said  
he ran out of tobacco  
putting tea in his pipe!  
Times we didn't have much

but what we did have was contentment.  
Latterly she would repeat this often.  
I mind him in his shed, puffing,  
saying little, maybe nothing.

**V.**

Now come the bairns in black and white,  
already playing at boats. Summer picnics  
within the walls of the Bressa' light,  
Gran, by the packing crate, knits

a very fine day.  
The copper has been on since three.  
The washing is done  
its quartered sails are luffing, sprightly.

**VI.**

*Let this fair wind carry me too.  
This is my invocation  
to the elements I know  
stamping letters hard from steel:*

*Let this work count  
in the important ways of making,  
a way home measured  
in these very lines*

**VII.**

The pinpoints of unspoken things  
join up to light a way;  
a kenning of the sea roads  
in old illumination.

We can see our way across it.  
Or reach, with our hands,  
signalling what we know -  
the distance we have come.

# *The Lord of the Rings*

## **I.**

### **Concerning hobbits**

A small hero sets out on a journey.  
We all go to watch.  
How old were you  
my little son?  
We understood it perfectly.  
We went to see it again.

## **II.**

### **The Bridge**

We were ready for this one!  
Planning the food we would need for  
a three hour journey; elvish bread  
beef jerky. Apples.

All of it still in our rucksack  
when the film ended. We turned to each other  
full up with the story, hungry for the next one.  
It wouldn't come out for a whole year.  
That's even longer when you're twelve.

## **III.**

### **I am no man**

It was an epic.  
First we watched films one and two again.  
You missed a day of school.  
And oh, the magic of that final film.  
To venture so far and then - to succeed,  
carried home by eagles.  
One of my best memories this.  
Like going to Tesco's at bright lit midnight  
to buy two copies of the last Harry Potter,  
then staying up  
to read it through  
with haribo and muffins.

You didn't make it.  
In the big stories, that's what happens.  
We fight for important things.  
People die along the way.

## *Limpet*

Casting along the seashore  
what is it I will choose  
what will I leave behind?  
- I think it is strength I look for -

In a shell, a thumb can feel right at home  
as if once, it belonged there.  
Little ridgy carapace!  
You know what it is to hold fast.  
Alison tells me your teeth are strong,  
- stronger than steel, she says -  
more mighty than spiders' silk,  
and that this may prove useful  
in car manufacture.

To  
hurtle  
with infinite safety!  
It almost makes my head spin  
let me sit down  
and think  
for a  
bit

hold  
on while  
I settle to think  
about  
fast

## *Women who go 'ting'*

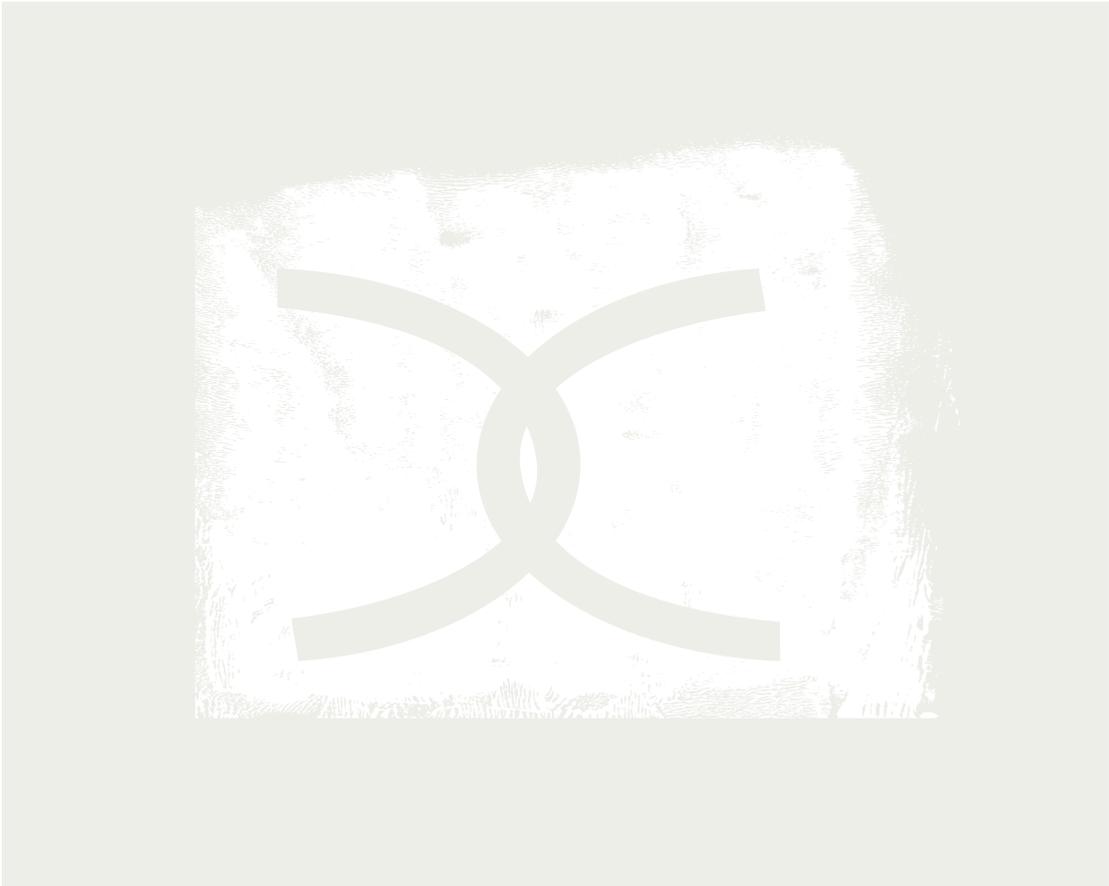
(for Jen)

We start the journey with confidence,  
all the long way between Argo's and the library –

two of us on a small bike - 'women who go ting!'  
A system of efficiency; one pedals - the other brings momentum.

You, holding on tightly -  
me - smiling - ringing - tinging! This

is how a bike becomes a poem,  
and a poem is a two-wheeled thing



# SEONAIID STEVENSON

## *An idea let loose*

It is infinite  
is it not?  
An idea let loose  
barrels into the darkness of time.  
Like Peter Pan it leaves its  
shadow behind  
for us to wrestle into a drawer  
but the rest has flown  
into the night  
an exploding star for passers by  
a tasty morsel for a gluttonous bite.

We're spoilt for choice

still throw it all out  
into the street or  
the ether  
see where  
it lands if  
anywhere  
you could watch it sail away like a lost balloon,  
ignoring the reality of its probable death by seagull.

Instead, dream for it a new life  
somewhere peaceful  
perhaps into the hands of a wee bairn  
lamenting the balloon she lost at the fair.

## *An ode to laughter*

I hate my laugh

It's not a little chortle  
or a giggle, it'll sort of  
guffaw and wheeze, snort and  
spit through my teeth.

It's ALWAYS too loud.  
More often than not it comes out  
like an abrupt bark - but

I've started  
watching my friends splits their sides  
I'm not saying they lie  
about being unhappy  
I wouldn't dare try  
to contradict their feelings  
or nitpick the reasons  
why the things I find easy  
leave them paralysed.

But at the same time  
a laugh can't be pushed aside.  
You can't deny  
an involuntary reaction.  
It can't be dismissed,  
it exists  
as a tiny pocket of time  
where you thought of NOTHING ELSE.

Hard evidence

Gone in a moment  
but it sets a precedent.

You thought you were dry years ago.  
Your body had other ideas. I know  
it's fleeting  
sometimes few and far between and  
often rare  
but when it's there  
it is a hundred bells ringing  
and under the clanging  
my hideous cackling sounds exquisite  
because when you're laughing with me  
I can't resist it.

## *Invisible villain (fight or flight)*

Lately I've been drilling in  
ideas of a villain. In the  
silence I've been billing the  
violence to an  
invisible antagonist.

'Cause you are always digging inwards  
slashing through the undergrowth  
fuelled by apathy  
cutting a pathway  
to some cankerous clearing,  
rank and sour,  
where you can purge every rotten bower.

But I can see why  
when our instinct to survive  
doesn't note the predators that haunt us in our minds  
can't differentiate between  
the problems we create  
and those which we could not control  
but paid for anyway.

Well I propose we look up and out,  
expose this villain as a fraud,  
a ruse,  
an unworthy, crude impersonation of you.  
What good did it do to prune  
in the end?  
Put away those tools -  
take up arms instead.

But you've spent years fighting for the wrong side.  
Fear  
is fight or flight  
and better the devil you know so  
you've kept your enemy closer than close  
and now your bones  
ache.  
You're a stone's throw  
away from a surrender, not a second wind.

Every time I lift  
those chipped away limbs  
they slip and sway  
from my grip, but you say  
'Don't leave me'  
so day after day  
I train in your stead  
I grow in strength for what you're up against.

An invisible antagonist  
for a Visible in agony.

And yet when I approached your den  
and found you with hackles raised,  
poised to spring,  
I braced myself for a beast within,  
ready to snap.  
And before considering you'd sooner run and hide  
than bite  
I launch an attack.

But I can see why  
when our instinct to survive  
filters our fear into fickle fight or flight  
how I could lose sight of where this villain resides.  
I will never leave you  
but I can't help but fight.

## *The Washing Machine*

The washing machine spins like a hurricane of which we are the eye.  
He is so still, his wine  
looks painted on.  
It's a prop.

We've got plenty to paw at in here  
but there's not  
a stir, not a ripple, not a peep.  
I keep my distance  
and awkwardly lean  
at the only spot I can linger in this windowless box of a kitchen,  
discreetly shifting my weight  
to keep my backside away  
of the knobs and dials of the machine.

This place is filthy from four people sharing a two person flat,  
with a cat.  
Dishes ignored  
crummy floors, it's  
no wonder we're claustrophobic.

The unceremonious tumbling of the clothes  
ramps up to a violent whisk  
and rattles into the silence. I risk  
a glance.  
Knuckles whiten against the wine  
glass.  
Red vibrates into life as  
air dissipates  
quietly from the room.  
Something's got to give soon because  
we can't stay here all night.

He stares at the floor.  
The machine roars.

His eyes give him away in the end.  
The din dies  
and exhausted and spent  
the machine lets out a low whine  
as if to concede,  
it doesn't need  
to fight this time.

## *Tamquain*

Don't tug  
at the muscles  
round your lips. Try to kiss  
instead. That will get them working  
again.



# CHRISTIAN TAIT

## *First Snow*

### **First Snow 1**

Today  
through a feathered window  
I see an untouched world.  
All familiar points of reference  
have been altered  
beyond knowing.

Snow  
has turned the ugly clutter  
of ropes and creels  
to a sculpture  
of elegant planes and textures,  
transformed the jagged teeth  
of the limestone ridge  
into a series of innocent  
undulations.

It has eroded  
the sharp-edged imagery  
of danger and left in its place  
the innocent beauty  
of the morning. The stillness  
is a holy thing that touches my heart  
like an unexpected blessing.

### **First Snow 2**

Fenceposts  
stride out like soldiers  
measuring the length of virgin fields  
whose purity is pierced  
by bristles of sedge  
that quiver stiffly  
in the wind.

### **First Snow 3**

Sheep  
huddle in the lea of the drystane dyke.  
Winter has stolen their individuality.  
No black, grey or moorit now – only  
a cruel dazzle of white.  
Motionless and silent, they wait  
for the armful of hay, whose scent  
reminds them of their purpose –eat,  
grow strong and produce good lambs  
that they'll suckle for a season then  
briefly miss, before grass fades  
and the cycle of the year begins  
all over again.

#### **First Snow 4**

Down by the shore,  
where the burn streams over the cliff,  
icicles hang like burnished swords,  
drip, drip, dripping blood  
in the first thin warmth  
of the rising sun.

#### **First Snow 5**

Here in the garden  
a tangle of naked branches  
etches its strange calligraphy  
onto a cloudless sky, and sparrows  
skirmish over the seedpods  
that I missed in my gathering.  
Their chattering is a life-song  
that raises my spirits. Everything  
is covered with ice crystals that lie  
like a sprinkle of stardust, making this  
a magical place where anything  
could happen.



# ABIGAIL ZAMMIT

## *Islanders*

For George Mackay Brown

(i)

Sea stacks cranky with salt,  
prey to blue-marine, froths

with hurricane throats. If only  
I could stop one molecule

the moment it shatters  
against this raw castle, hold it

tenderly in my eye.

(ii)

Not the foul cold - slashing -  
as he sails to the sister island.

Maybe, the *rank upon rank*  
*of crows*, their *beastly black*

*noise*, harbouring some time -  
some other time, inside you.

## *The Wordsworth Flower*

Challenging the wind, laughing hysterically  
at the moon. It isn't candour which spurs it to  
throw its head backwards. Poet, say deaf flower  
sprinkled in dust. Confess, the last time you  
traipsed through a field of crowded yellows,  
you coughed asthmatic for two days.

All that stigma and stamen piercing the air –  
perhaps not cruel, but indifferent  
to your will, the cupped centre prodding  
the fabric of life which it owns and  
disowns, wanting nothing but itself.





# GROUP RENGA

## *Henge in the surge*

Under the lifting fog  
rooks grumble  
stretch and shout

A lapping bed  
a lazy day

Falling tide  
settles the rock pool  
limpets wait

The past snakes down  
between the houses

Flotsam –  
a square orange board  
denotes Trump

The kelp's foecal stink  
of low tide wash

A priestess  
walks  
to the oracle-hole

settles deeper, lapping stronger  
creeping in

A child in a blue coat  
runs up the slip  
crab in bucket

pages spill out of the printer  
in the window

A roar  
as doors are thrown open wide  
here are the people

Below the black cliffs  
our henge collapses in the surge

Rusty orange  
battles  
the blue

Lobster baskets pile on doorsteps  
set to go, catching the harvest

Martin's Scrimshaw  
etches  
a thumb on a button

The fun  
is in the real possibility of losing ground

Cattle lie down  
in the meadow  
the forecast is rain

Tirricks return screeching  
from warmer places

Bog Asphodel  
clover cotton heads  
sail beneath our boots

The sky, Scottish white  
a blank canvas

Abigail Zammit,  
Kate Oldfield,  
Catherine Eunson,  
Aileen Ballantyne,  
Martin Malone,  
Christian Tait,  
Fiona Sanderson,  
Seonaid Stevenson,  
Jen Hadfield,  
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