


PENNING

RENEWAL



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PENnings is compiled by the Writers
in-Exile Committee. Submissions are
selected anonymously.

Liz Niven
Moira McPartlin
Jemma Neville
Samina Chaudhry
Gianinni Mastrangioli Salazar

CONTENTS

5 FOREWORD

GUEST EDITOR, LEELA SOMA

7 FEATURED WRITER

RIZWAN AKHTAR

11 FICTION

BARBARA WYSOCKA

SUSAN ELSLEY

TOM MURRAY

LIZZIE ELDRIDGE

33 POETRY

JENNI DAICHES

JANE ARCHER

KATE HENDRY

JULIAN COLTON

A C CLARKE

JOE MCGURK

SEVERIANO GOMES

JULIE SHERIDAN

ELAINE WEBSTER

XINYI JIANG

FIDAN MEIKLE

DANIEL PUKKILA

DONALD ADAMSON

60 NON-FICTION

LORETTA MULHOLLAND

Welcome to our latest edition of PENning magazine. It's a bumper edition this time, with the most submissions yet. The hard-working Writers in Exile Committee, and our guest editor Leela Soma, read work from 27 authors, some with multiple submissions. Perhaps lockdown stimulated more writing, perhaps the theme of Renewal inspired creativity.

We usually invite our guest editor to suggest a theme for the next PENnings, and she has suggested the theme of 'Diary'. As Leela stated: 'My theme suggestion for the next issue is 'Diary'. As we've had an unusual year, diary entries could be interesting but could also be used in its broadest sense of journaling as writing prompts, of mindfulness, a gratefulness diary, finding a diary of an ancestor'.

Over to you dear reader/writer!

Liz Niven, Chair of the Writers in Exile Committee

FOREWORD

Spring, Easter, renewal, a new incarnation as the earth warms up and 'Surya' the sun god blesses and makes life bright again. Renewal is celebrated with specific colours in each culture; the writers here have used all colours in the spectrum of the universe in their contributions in verse, prose, and creative non-fiction. Reading this issue may even lead you to posit if renewal is always a change for the better. 'Thirty Nine Days in Hokkaidu' blended in the historical detail of the Ainu people of Japan and legitimised their culture as valid. Hope is reflected in 'Walking Out' a 'Nan Shepherdish' story that touches

the heart. Nature is in our inner being and its amazing way of renewing itself is reflected in the poem 'Birnam Hall'. In 'Changes' the shedding of skin and renewing oneself is a metaphor for one's life as hope and renewal gives the energy to face the future. The poems and stories you read in this issue reflect on various aspects of renewal and resurgence which may or may not always be what one expected. Whether it is resumption, woke or cool interpretation of 'Birdsong' or finding 'Peace' each piece makes you stop and think. Pick up this issue, have a cuppa





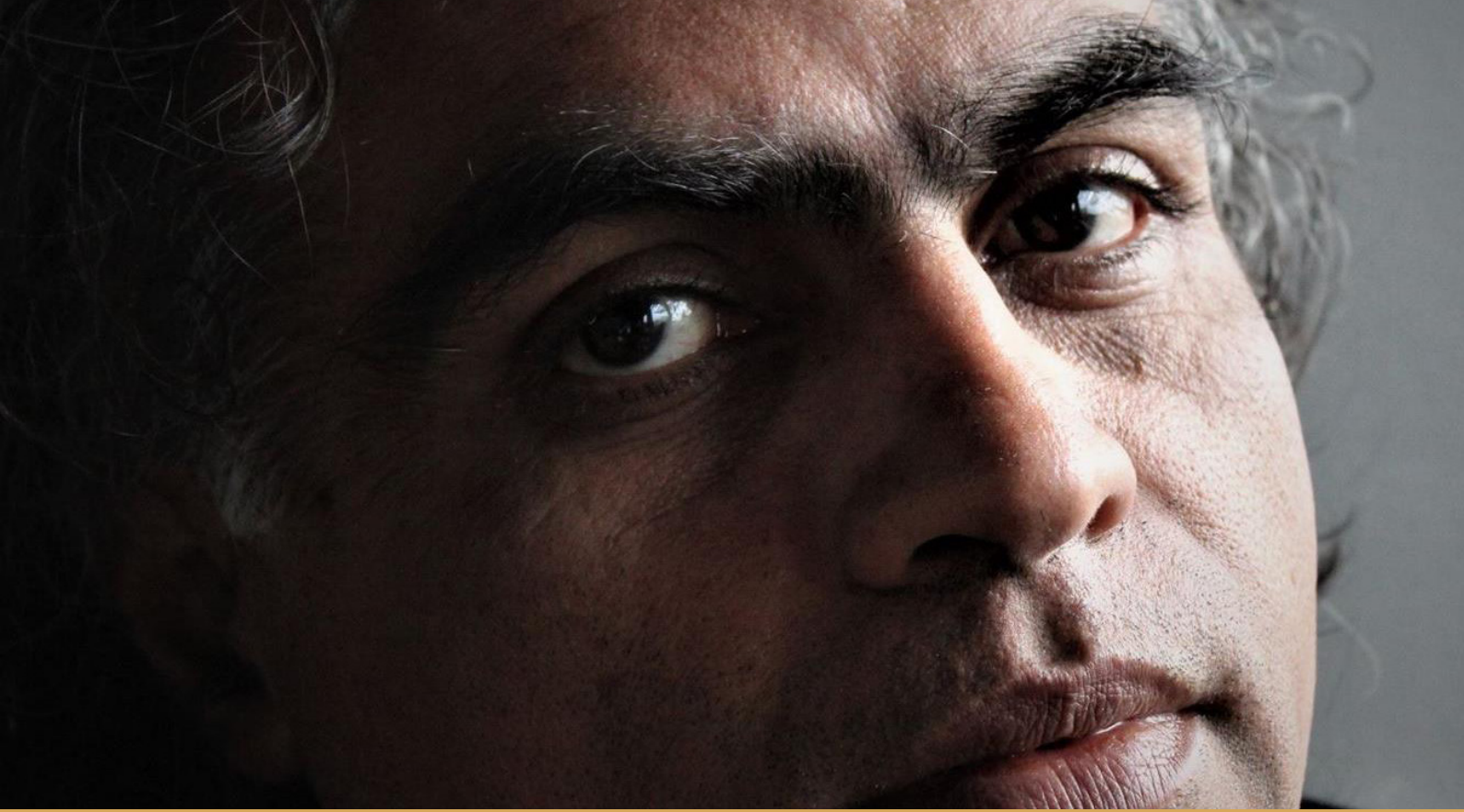
and enjoy the diverse ways in which these writers have interpreted renewal. As we sail into an unknown future after a pandemic that took us all by surprise these pieces will guide us to reassess our lives again.

Leela Soma

Leela Soma is a writer and active member of Scottish PEN. Her latest crime novel, *Murder at the Mela*, explores tensions within Glasgow's Asian communities and between diverse groups in the city.

Her poetry and short stories have been published in a number of anthologies and publications and she won the Margaret Thompson Davis Trophy, for the first 10,000 words of her first novel *Twice Born*. Leela has been encouraged in her writing by none other than Willy Maley, Professor of Renaissance Studies (English Literature), University of Glasgow, who commended her in his book *Discovering Scottish Literature*, published by Scottish Book Trust. Thereafter, he urged her to: 'finish the novel.' She did, and won Strathkelvin Writes Best New Writers Trophy.

***Twice Born* was followed by *Bombay Baby*, published by Dahlia Publishing. – another book reflecting Scottish – Indian connections. *Bombay Baby* was reviewed in Scotland on Sunday by prize winning author, Suhayl Saadi, who recommended the book as: 'an engaging, upbeat piece of popular fiction.'**



RIZWAN AKHTAR

Rizwan Akhtar works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Punjab University, Lahore Pakistan. He completed his PhD in Postcolonial literature from the University of Essex. His poetry has been published in the UK as well as Canada, India, New Zealand and U.S.A. He published his first poem, an elegy, 'A Farewell to Czeslaw Miloz' in poetry Salzburg Review (2007) commemorating the polish poet who witnessed and depicted horrors of European theatre of two acts of war and chose exile for his poetic life. Poetry made Rizwan learn to empathize with the homeless and exiles.

How often exile is a mental displacement, an excommunication of soul, an imaginary eviction from one's own home, a state of vacancy, and a journey that does not end. Bearing the burden of colonial history, a religious nationalism, and a political culture breeding violence in his younger years Rizwan imbibed Urdu and Persian literature and was reluctant to be a faddish postcolonial exponent and a defender of the indigenous, rather

he went to poetry for the sheer pleasure of language. Lahore, I Am Coming (2017) his first collection of poems is shot through the double lens of writer-wanderer and writer-settler. Lahore calls him back for its history, art, and literature but finding his city beleaguered by terrorism saddens him. Suicide bombings killed people; markets, shrines, and children in parks were bombed. Poetry also responded to this hiatus of insanity. Let us agree that charity is one thing which all exiles deserve. To this end, the chanting of qawwali couplets by the classical Persian poet Amir Khusro sung by an ever-affable Nusrat Fatah Ali Khan, a Pavarotti of East, only enhances the pain of those who are exilic by birth. Vouloir, c'est pouvoir – a poet's will be all he has.

HOMING PIGEON

Rizwan Akhtar

a feral pigeon lands near my window
wet and rumped it holds the gravel friendly
unaware of me watching its tail quills
a word stuck in my mouth resisting
the temptation of description, such
is the sway of an exile finding places
hoisting language on clouds and feathers
on rain-repeated English days when
a story worth wandering catches
my ears wanting to hear the love I left
back in an alley behind a torn curtain waiting
meanwhile much effort it made picking bits
without sun there it was bobbing wind-thing
making me concentrate on flyers
on sky one or two waddling in air lazily
on ground their companion discovered
me holding a bag of odd things
the window I left opened made it choose
my fate wanting to stay away from home.

A REQUIEM FOR KASHMIR

Rizwan Akhtar

(dedicated to the memory of Agha Shahid Ali)

I don't live in Kashmir
But Valley's vicarious denizen
complacently weigh words
like the Irish bard Yeats
spreads his dreams.

I am out to hoist
a color-free flag
an ancient anthem
of camaraderie.

I caress
my mother's Kashmiri shawl
and touch a burgundy carpet
an image of a subdued Mongol
hemmed with juniper flowers
sits at the center holding
a wine's pitcher pouring
being away my descriptions
are second-hand but I have
read poets praising Dal Lake
so between Shahid's ghazals
I can make way to peaks
and floundering paths
pellets and protests
cloyed in haze from trees
long witnessing
hauling shells of tear gas
in-between soldiers
chase people running
rioting verses
of their stoned lives
each thing matters
a gun, a couplet.

GHAZAL: SOUL'S FOOD

Rizwan Akhtar

In love fever/separation kills.

Finding her/would ease the burning. Ibn Arabi

The last Apostle said about his first spouse “Khadijah is my soul’s food”
this could be a word a Lover cares to say to his Beloved for soul’s food.

Those who are distracted by ways of the world need to wake and brood
Can everyone touch the pinnacle and bear the hard labor for soul’s food

Oh! the body winces desires eyes search for that touch hands preclude
Those who cannot mix the ingredients will never relish the souls’ food

in a dark room I mumble making my tongue a chaplet, verses’ feud—
a deep battle forces me a scimitar piercing bodies; a kind of soul’s food.

On a hirsute chest you laid down your cheeks & the balm it exudes
Mir’s desolation, Ghalib’s conundrums, Faiz’ yearning—all soul’s food.

Let me see if I can look for you like Orpheus wandering in sad mood
Eurydice could have found him but how gods snatched his soul’s food

eyes down Jibril says “O messenger Khadijah comes with a bowl of food”
After she passed away came the year of grief he fed on her souls’ food

the letter you wrote to me is save in a closet; and the poet too pursued
all words of amour making you a perfect muse ingesting soul’s food

staggering alone in the English winters covered in a leather and hood
a Shahrazad in a Ghazal in English on a flying carpet for her soul’s food

Beloved the poet will return to have a feast in another realm renewed
till then recite and prostrate on a rug with a Green dome- have soul’s food!

Inside The Royal Mosque we could have seen relics of The last Apostle
where souls converge after The Call for Prayer fasting with soul’s food

The last Apostle said about his first spouse “Khadijah is my soul’s food”
This could be a word a Lover cares to say to his Beloved for soul’s food.

FICTION

BARBARA WYSOCKA

'I am a mid-age wifey living in Scotland. I arrived here from Poland 14 years ago and fell in love with this place at first sight. Working in various job sectors I eventually landed in the environmental sector. I have been writing since my childhood with a little break for motherhood chapter. Currently, since my offspring is old enough to wipe their bums on their own, I have more time to continue my scribbling. Therefore, in agreement with my interests, I started writing environmentally related articles, focusing on user friendly version. However, I have recently decided to extend it, hence my submitted short story attempt'.

Susan Elsley writes long and short fiction and poetry about the connections between people and places. She was shortlisted for the Moniack Mhor 2019 Emerging Writer Award and has had work published in The Blue Nib, Northwords Now, The Darg and Pushing out the Boat. Susan also works in the area of children's human rights.

SUSAN ELSLEY

LIZZIE ELDRIDGE

Lizzie Eldridge is a writer, actor, teacher and political activist. Originally from Glasgow, she lived in Malta for 12 years where she became heavily involved in the campaign for justice for Daphne Caruana Galizia. With a professional background in theatre, Lizzie has published both academic and journalistic work. She's also written 2 novels: *Duende* (Amazon 2014) and *Vandalism* (Merlin Publishers 2015). The latter was shortlisted for a National Book Prize in Malta and selected as one the Best Books 2017 by Waterstones Byres Rd Glasgow.

Tom Murray is a playwright, poet and fiction writer living in Dumfries. His website is www.tmurraytg.wordpress.com

TOM MURRAY

RENEWAL

Barbara Wysocka

There's this cream called Renew- very catchy name, especially for all those poor human beings who start and finish their days with scratching. When I first heard about it, I never really gave it a second thought. However, this day, somehow it appeared in front of my eyes again. I could even vaguely recall its label, surprisingly modest, especially when compared to its huge merits. Simple blue letters, white background. I thought how fab it would be if its magical attributes could actually help me now and somehow save my soul.

I was standing in the longest queue ever, in front of one of the largest supermarkets in this country, hunting for such important essentials those days as toilet roll and pasta. This, plus a bottle of hand wash and a can of baked beans were making you almost almighty goddess. You basically couldn't really survive without these, it was almost scientifically proven by this point.

Unfortunately, I was not alone. I tried to avoid any direct eye contact in case if someone would like to attempt to build some kind of stupid alliance, however, out of the corner of my eye, despite meekly maintained social distance, I could still see out all these other various Masks. They were just standing like me, waiting for the sign from the omnipotent security guard who was minding the main entrance, which lately upgraded to some sort of golden gate to the paradise. One little wave of his hand was going to change everything and make this day the most wonderful time of your life, which you were going to remember until the last moments of your miserable existence.

I could smell all those mixed scents of various hand sanitisers (why though, what's wrong with my mask?) coming from my contestants. I lost track of the time. How many minutes, hours, maybe days I'd been already standing there? Oh

my lord... And then I felt it. This was just too much to take, I could feel the panic attack hiding just around the corner and waiting for the perfect moment to jump out and disable me forever, or at least until supermarket closes. Quickly, this is my last chance or everything will collapse like a house of cards. I closed my eyes and started an accelerated, five minute meditation. Hello again my happy place! Deep breath in, even deeper- breath out...Ok, that was not too bad this time, I'm back, ready to fight again.

Unaware of surrounding me world, somehow I managed to move closer to the golden gate. I could even smell the scent of security guard's hand sanitiser when he waved at the last person before me. And then I started feeling something again. Although something different this time. It was excitement, quite rare hence very precious feeling in my life recently. It was this adrenaline you can feel before the race, before starting this dangerous adventure, before fighting to survive... All of a sudden I stopped feeling this bitter cold coming from, everlasting in this city, drizzling rain. Overwhelming waves of the heat somehow materialized in my veins again and took over my blood's temperature, rising it to a nicely high level. My brain sent a signal down to my feet ordering my toes to start moving in preparation for what was coming. I was a good girl and soon I was getting back any feeling in them again. I was ready. Oh, yes. I was so ready! I kept my gaze on the security guard. And then he did it, his large almighty hand waved at me. I used all my powers to not start running. I actually even managed to wait 3 seconds before, full of majesty, I started entering the gold gate with grace and grabbed a basket.

My shopping list was very concise. The strategic plan in my head, carefully created and repeated hundred times for the last two days, revealed first stage of my coursing. Straight ahead, second alley on your left. Wow, slow down there, try to keep whatever's left of your dignity, at least this hasn't been taken from you yet... Don't run. Repeat- do not run! My feet, on automatic mode, led me to my

destination. My dearest pasta, I'm so happy to see you! A tear appeared in my eye but I wiped it quickly with my hand before anyone could spot it. It was not my favourite shape, however I decided to let it go this time and grabbed the only left type, spaghetti. That's ok, I was trying to convince myself, it still tastes the same, it just takes twice as long to eat, before you manage to catch it all into your mouth but it could've been worse. Suddenly, I had this flash of genius in my head- I could actually cut it half before cooking! And then the world became a bit more friendly again.

Ok, let's focus, I had to bring myself to heel. What's next on the list? Oh, yes, the real game was starting just now- toilet roll.

I was trying to recall the next stage of my plan but my brain failed me at this point. That's ok, don't panic. I knew it was going to happen and had a back up plan up my sleeve. I grabbed my phone. God bless The Notes app! Despite my whole body being hot like freshly made tea, my finger was cold like a stone, so it took me several attempts before I could unlock my phone. Damn it, so much precious time wasted. That's ok though, I decided to bend the rules and rushed my steps imperceptibly while still furiously going through my notes, trying to find the next hint to make up for the wasted seconds. Why on earth they put toilet roll so far from pasta! There must be some kind of conspiracy behind it, should be investigated by appropriate agencies, managed to think before reaching the correct alley. Full of uncertainty, I gazed bashfully at the shelves. I didn't want to build up false hopes.

Oh my God, no! My worst nightmares from last days became the cruel reality- shelves were empty! I could see this hopelessly long abyss of white metal, laughing insolently straight into my face. Again today, tears started coming to my eyes, although there was different reason for these this time. I couldn't believe- I was so close!

Two more seconds and I'd have burst into tears, just like a little baby who saw a bottle with milk but suddenly it was taken away. But then I saw it- the very last pack. It was there, at the very end, squeezed in the corner, waiting to be rehomed. Obviously to my home, I had no doubts about it. After so many sleepless nights, so much energy used to plan everything to the very last bit, I certainly deserved it.

But there was something else. Or rather, someone else. A potential competitor, an enemy. I started the comprehensive evaluation of my chances. Age 70-75, Caucasian male, medium height, likewise the weight. Modest clothes, although nice and neat. Dark green jumper, black trousers, brown coat and obviously- a hat. Rare to see such a smart outfit worn for shopping only. True old-school. But there was also a dangerous weapon within his reach- a decent wooden walking stick, currently resting on a shopping trolley. That's ok, he shouldn't be any problem to me. Like half of the city in last weeks, I became a professional runner and on top of that, I also managed to strengthen my arm muscles so much that I mastered 100 push-ups in less than five minutes. Yeah, I should manage that. There was no time for any warm up. I had to act quickly. Taking him by surprise was an additional advantage. I felt blood running through my veins once more. And then the cream appeared in front of my eyes again, so random! I blinked but it didn't want to go away. I knew this was regarding something important but couldn't think straight. My lockdown brain was working on slow mode. In addition, focused on essentials only and one of them was right there, waiting for me. But blue letters were trying to say something. Renew. What's that supposed to mean? Quick analyze in my head- renew, resume, come back to...Come back to what? The eternal problem of all humanity. Oh, wait a second, I felt I was getting somewhere. Humanity, compassion...I looked at the elderly chap again. He was standing there, slightly bent, already started reaching out to my toilet roll. His hand was shaking slightly, I doubted it was due to excitement. He probably went

through exactly the same way as me to get here- horribly long time spent in a rain on a bus stop, then again in a queue before the shop, pushing the trolley through the infinitely large surface of the shop, finally getting here, seeing the last pack left on shelf. This feeling of relief that it wasn't pointless after all...

So, was he going to come back home with nothing? Did I want to be a part of this? I made up my mind. The cream started fading away and let me go. I took a deep breath. I was human again.



WALKING OUT

Susan Elsley

It was mid afternoon when Craig started walking. At the edge of the moor, he flung himself down by a stream tipping foamy spits into a pool. He pulled off the trainer that was stuck together with gaffer tape and dipped his foot into the water. The coldness numbed the rub on his heel. He chewed a ham sandwich he'd bought in a petrol station. The misery of the last weeks begin to drift away like wisps of bog cotton.

He followed the path as it began to climb and saw no-one until two men appeared over an incline. They were carrying walking poles and wore jackets that looked as if the shop labels had been clipped off the day before. The men stopped where the path widened and waited for Craig to reach them.

'Going to the top?' said the tall one with a beard.

He nodded. The man sounded like he came from somewhere south, but nowhere near where Craig was from.

'It's worth it. Brilliant views. See for miles.'

The smaller one gestured to Craig's backpack. A scraggy thing he'd picked up in a charity shop. 'If you're going the long way, there's a bothy the other side of the glen. It's marked on the map.'

'Sounds good.' He hadn't thought where he would sleep. And he kept quiet that he didn't have a map. It wouldn't make any difference because the letters jumped like pesky flies in front of his eyes.

'We left a bottle of beer. It's yours if you want it.'

'Cool.' Craig raised his hand. 'Better get on.' He jogged past them, his pack bumping against his spine. He knew they'd be talking about him, wondering what he was doing there with his shabby trainers and overstuffed backpack.

The path snaked through an outcrop of rocks to the summit and the snowy whiteness of the trig point. He'd never been so high. To his right the ridge stretched like sharpened incisors. Then it was peak after peak as if every trace of people had been rubbed out so only the tops were left. He wanted to yell and let his voice bounce across the space. Instead, he punched his fist into the air and let it hang there for a few seconds.

He sat on a rock and swigged his water. Scuds of clouds folded over the opposite hill and started to drift towards the ridge. Below he could see the loch between the two runs of mountains. Somewhere near the far end was the bothy. He glanced at his phone. There was an hour left before he would have to walk with his night eyes.

The other side of the hill was steeper. His feet sent scree tumbling as he climbed past the shadow of a gully where a raven croaked. Further down, he slipped when a small bird whirred up with a chatter. Craig's yell echoed round the rocks and he lay where he fell on a mound of heather. When he could bend his leg, he examined the wound. There was blood ringed the tear in his jeans, so he mopped the cut on his knee with a T shirt from his pack. He felt his leg stiffening with a dull ache as he walked the last mile across the squelch of bog land.

He was lucky. The bothy appeared as soon as the light went. It had a corrugated roof and the windows were a sheen of blackness. The place was his for the night. Pushing up the latch, he smelt charred wood and the mustiness of someone else's sweat. The flashlight on his phone showed wooden platforms along the walls. A sleeping bag hung on a beam. Not bad, he thought, spotting the bottle of beer on the table. Better than most places he'd slept.

He gathered twigs from under the trees and arranged them in the grate with a firelighter he found on the shelf. When the twigs caught, he balanced a log on top and watched the flames suck up the dried moss and spark on the wood. He lit a couple of candles. Leaning back on a plastic chair, he winced as his jeans caught

the scrape on his knee. He thought about eating the tin of beans in his pack, but he wasn't hungry. He didn't eat much. 'A wee daft skelf,' that blotchy-faced chef had called him.

Craig picked up the beer and glanced at the notebook lying next to it. The last entry was a scribble of words. Each letter swam into the next. He felt the old panic. Grabbing a pen, he pulled it across the page like a knife. He ripped out the sheet and tossed it into the fire. Reaching into his pocket, he took out his special grey pebble and licked its cool smoothness. His shoulders dropped. Picking up the notebook, he sat and stared into the fire. He twiddled with a pencil stub and started drawing.



When he looked up, the log had burnt through and the room was cold. He held the notebook at arm's length and stared at what he'd done. A man sat leaning forward, his face hidden. One hand was clenched and the other rested on his knee. It wasn't bad, Craig thought. A teacher at school said he could draw, and had he'd thought of doing his art exam? He hadn't and he never did. Too much like writing and who would care.

He laid the notebook on the floor and finished the beer. Next time he would do a bigger picture. With thick black lines. A raven on a rock. Maybe. It was better not to make plans.

He closed his eyes. The quiet was like a warm blanket. Nothing like the flat overlooking the motorway where they'd put him after the children's home. The loneliness had throbbed through his head every night until he couldn't take it anymore. One morning he'd slammed the door behind him and thrown the key into the communal bin. He'd hitched a ride up north and found a job as a kitchen skivvy in a hotel where everyone drove up in shiny cars. That morning he'd walked out, slamming a pan down in shame then fury when the chef bellowed because Craig couldn't read the label on a stupid jar of fruit.

He opened the door and walked into the darkness beyond the glow of the candlelight. He bent his head back and looked up at the milky dots. There was a slow whoosh and a dark shape flew over him towards the loch. He reached up as if to catch the last wisps of disturbed air and felt the nighttime coolness stroke his palm. Funny, he thought, this time was different. It didn't feel like he'd walked out.

Inside he pulled the sleeping bag from the beam and lay on the platform nearest the fire. He was asleep in seconds and only stirred when he felt a faint brush of air on his face.

He woke at dawn when a blackbird started singing in the trees next to the bothy. As he pulled the sleeping bag to his chest, he heard a gentle exhalation and turned his head. There was someone asleep on the other side of the room. Craig

could see a tousele of fair hair. He whispered 'hello', but the person didn't move. He listened to the stranger's breathing for a few minutes before turning on his side.

It was much later when he woke again. The visitor had gone leaving a whiff of sweetness in the air. A spray of pink flowers with lime leaves lay on the table. He sniffed the blossom. Like blackcurrants.

Putting the twig down, he noticed the notebook was back on the table. There was a doodle of a heart next to his drawing. On the opposite page were three small drawings. In the first, a figure waved to a person in a sleeping bag. In the second, the same figure pointed to the hills. In the final sketch, the one that had been lying down stood on a summit with a jagged line for a grin.

Craig picked up the notebook and walked to the door. He turned to the hill and lifted one hand to shade his eyes. Up by the boulders he could see a figure in an orange jacket jumping from rock to rock.

He took a breath and yelled 'hey'. His voice sounded louder than he expected. The climber turned and raised both arms, shouting back in a treble that carried across the sharpness of the air. Craig couldn't hear the person's words, but they called to each other again and again. Their voices bounced across the glen with the rhythm of an indistinct lilt.

His voice cracked and he gave a long sweeping wave. The climber stretched an arm towards the far hills and stood long enough for a skylark to trill above Craig. Raising a fist in the air, the climber shouted once more. This time Craig heard the cry 'go' echoing over the rocks before the figure turned and started climbing again.

The tightness in his chest burst and he started to laugh. A soft yelping at first, then staccato snorts that chewed up his breath and finally grunting giggles that made him bend so low that the feather grass tickled his face. He collapsed on the ground, pulled up his T-shirt and wiped the sweat off his forehead. Taking a suck

of air, he lay on his back and stared at the wisps of clouds floating above him. The clamminess of the turf cooled his back and his heart slowed. He listened to the vibrations of bees in the warming air.

When he stood up, the figure was a moving speck of orange far up the slope. Craig shouted, 'I'm going,' although he knew his words wouldn't carry that far. Inside the bothy he picked up the pencil and turned over the page. He drew a man with a hand raised in greeting and added an X at the bottom.

By the loch, he looked across to the run of hills where the clouds skimmed the tops. Craig hummed as he tightened the straps of his backpack, his eyes following a buzzard swooping over the heather. He watched the bird soar and become a screeching dot in the sky as he started walking towards the track that led over the moor. It would take him all morning to get to the next mountain.





CHANGES

Tom Murray

It was getting more difficult to change the older Joe got. The first change as a teenager was straight forward and thinking back on it now, he'd hardly noticed it was happening till it happened. It had started to become more difficult in his forties. He'd hardly slept the night of the change and when he'd woken it had taken a whole day to recover. His fifties change had taken three days to recover. Of course, once the renewed energy had kicked, he soon forget the lying on the floor the whole room spinning and every muscle stretching anew over his bones.

Now in his sixties the memory came back, and he wondered if it was worthwhile. I mean what else had he to do in life? What did he need the renewed energy for?

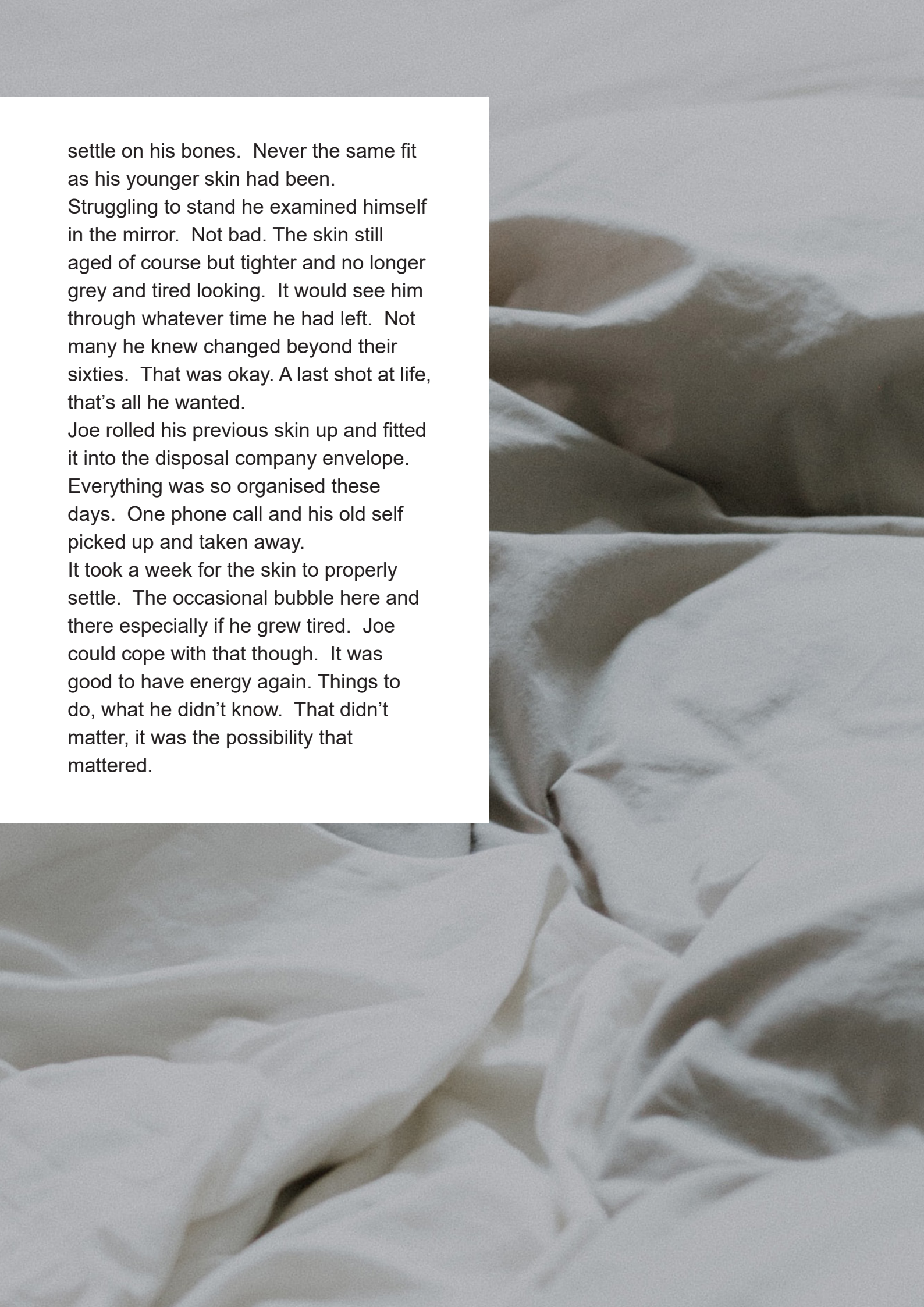
He had almost decided not to change when the familiar restlessness kicked in. Maybe there was still life in him yet? After the restlessness came the familiar shivers and the feeling of his skin shaking loose from his bones. The ache along his shoulders and down his arms and sides, the stooping and the slowing of the walk closely followed. His joints next, beginning as always with his

fingers, and then of course his toes. His knee and elbow joints though always the worst and this time he wanted to scream with the pain.

His face was always the last to begin to ache, his teeth, his jawline and finally the headaches. When the headaches came it was time to sleep.

It took him a long time but eventually as the dawn began to rise, he drifted off to wake suddenly to the sound of the church bells announcing nine o'clock. For a moment he thought he had got off lightly but then the room began to spin faster and faster. He told himself not to move and go with the room. After an age, the room began to slow, and he took his first look at his new skin. It was bubbling in places struggling to settle. He forced himself to sit up turned towards his old skin lying on the bed. All the times he'd changed this was the part he never got used to. The old skin had begun to deflate and would soon be flat as a cardboard cut-out. Only then did Joe make the mind shift that he had been born anew once again.

His new skin itched and ached, but the bubbling seemed less now. With every renewal it took longer for his new skin to



settle on his bones. Never the same fit as his younger skin had been. Struggling to stand he examined himself in the mirror. Not bad. The skin still aged of course but tighter and no longer grey and tired looking. It would see him through whatever time he had left. Not many he knew changed beyond their sixties. That was okay. A last shot at life, that's all he wanted.

Joe rolled his previous skin up and fitted it into the disposal company envelope. Everything was so organised these days. One phone call and his old self picked up and taken away.

It took a week for the skin to properly settle. The occasional bubble here and there especially if he grew tired. Joe could cope with that though. It was good to have energy again. Things to do, what he didn't know. That didn't matter, it was the possibility that mattered.

AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN

Lizzie Eldridge

This story is based on a real-life incident and is dedicated to Daphne Caruana Galizia and all her family.

A new day began which was always the same. But not quite. The flowers looked similar, but they were always fresh. The photos were exchanged for other photos and words on placards replaced by other words. The candles may have resembled those placed there yesterday or the day before or many months and years ago, but they were different. Their inscriptions were written by a multitude of hands, all choosing their own precise messages for the self-same purpose. The flame on each candle burnt down to the wick without being fully extinguished until another fire was lit, ensuring the night was never shrouded in darkness. The light could never fade.

Freedom meant coming here each day and restoring items that were stolen. Freedom was striking a match and watching the flame leap into life. Freedom was writing in big bold letters that justice must, and must inevitably, be served. It was a new day and it was never quite the same.

The Law Courts remained exactly as they were – cold, formal and austere – with people who'd stripped down to the basics for a weekend at the beach donning stiff suits and tight skirts which rubbed against their sunburn. They liked to look the part as they clutched their papers and their briefs.

'We're a cut above the average,' they laughed. 'We're dressed to kill.'

Catherine always went to the same place first. She always returned to the same place before entering the small courtroom where she was forced to stare into the faces of the men who killed her sister. And they were always men. Men who smiled, cracked jokes with each other, nudged each other, mouthed at each other, blew kisses across the cramped courtroom to their stony hard-faced wives.

Before going inside, Catherine placed flowers and photos and placards at the protest site directly opposite. She did this every single time. It wasn't a chore. It wasn't a duty. It was what she did, every single day, and it formed the pattern and the rhythm of her everyday life. In a world where nothing was normal, a sense of stability emerged from returning to the same place, no matter what time of day or night, and repeating the same ritual, day in and day out, repeating that same ritual which could never be the same.

This place was the same but never the same. The actions echoed others but every repetition brought change. Slow, slow, so slow, but steady and constant and resistant to fear. Slow, slow, yes, heavy and slow, yet something stirred, each time distinct, and deep, so deep inside.

Even the faces of the old men, bitterness etched on their withered skin, year after vindictive year - distorted, misshapen, twisted - contorted into an inhuman array of guises by which to carve out their cruelty. On a better day, Catherine felt sorry for them. They spat out their spite so serenely.

'Why are you bothering with that, bitch?' one of them growled.

'You've no place here,' snarled another.

'Making a mess in public, you cow,' another shouted as he staggered up close.

‘Get the fuck out, you witch.’

As she attached a photo to the stone monument, Catherine stared into her sister’s eyes – dark brown, wide open – reflecting her own. She felt dizzy, caught between the then and the now in an eternal present where none of this had happened, where all of this had happened, an eternal present which merged the laughter of her sister with this aching agony.

She placed a Bay Tree in front of her sister’s photo. The three bronze statues above her head boasted of Faith, Fortitude and Civilisation. The Bay Tree, modest and defiant, stood there quiet, indisputably assured of its courage and its strength.

How can human beings be so cruel? How can human beings lose their way so irrevocably? How can human beings fail to see the grotesque error of their sordid callous ways?

Catherine looked at the Bay Tree and looked at her sister. She heard her sister’s voice. Clearly and unfalteringly, she heard her sister’s voice.

The courtroom was packed and sweaty. Armed guards flanked the main suspect but Catherine knew it was for show. The man reeked of Armani and designer sunglasses were propped up on his head. Sometimes, while a judge or magistrate was speaking, he’d whisper to his lawyers, wink at somebody behind Catherine, turn round and grin when he knew everyone was watching him.

Everyone was watching and no-one seemed to care. The gruesome details of the plot – so carefully devised and prepared – the devious and macabre plot to assassinate her sister were played out, day after day after day. And Catherine listened as the men – and they were always men – pinned the blame on others, pointed fingers to a thousand putrid pies, told lies which turned deceit into a game in which each move was as mercenary and malicious as the last. The breath seemed blood-stained as it slunk its way through the cracked lips of dry mendacious mouths.

Catherine stared into the faces of murderers who sat only inches away. She listened as names and places reverberated around the suffocating courtroom. Some of the names and all of the places were ones she knew. Everyone knew everyone on this claustrophobic island. Everyone knew every tiny hidden nook and every filthy dirty cranny.

Catherine relived her sister's murder every time she came here. The phone call. Her husband's voice saying there had been a bomb. A bomb in the village where her sister lived. There had been a bomb in a car and.

A disagreement broke out in the courtroom. Lawyers disputed legal details, attorneys questioned facts. The judges and magistrates picked up their robes and swanned off regally for lunch. The bright light of the sun made Catherine wince as soon as she stepped outside.

She made her way across the tiny square, past busy shoppers heaving through with bags. Her sister's smile drew her forward and the flowers raised their heads in joyful bloom. Before she reached the monument, she saw the space between the candles and the flowers. She saw the empty space and she froze, but only for a second, then she walked on.

The old men, gargoyles on park benches, grunted and mumbled and muttered and murmured, twitching and smirking and looking away.

Catherine kept on walking. She walked past the monument and down the narrow street. The smell of coffee floated out of cafes. A swirl of colour blurred against her sight. Shouts and cries and friendly greetings bounced back and forth between the buildings as Catherine walked and kept on walking down the street. There was one Bay Tree left. She saw it outside the shop and she almost broke into a run. There was one Bay Tree left and she headed straight towards it, picked it up, put it under her arm, and held it close as she paid.

She moved more slowly as she wandered back. She didn't have to hurry. She felt calm. There was no need to rush. She took her time as the heat of the sun beat

down.

The square was full. Some people had gathered at the protest site. Tourists often stopped and read the signs. She always answered questions when they asked and although she didn't say who she was, the sympathy of strangers who didn't know these parts was overwhelming. Foreigners were shocked while many of her compatriots were revelling in the murder. 'She deserved it,' came the vicious refrain.

Catherine walked directly to the empty space. The Bay Tree resumed its rightful place again. She took a bottle of water from her bag and poured some on the roots. She stroked the leaves and smiled.

She stepped back, turned round, and looked at the Law Courts. Ten minutes left before proceedings would begin. She blocked out the sounds of the street around her and leant her head back gently. She lifted her face upwards and breathed in deeply, letting her eyes close briefly beneath the bluest sky.



POETRY

Published poetry includes Mediterranean (1995), Smoke (2005), and contributions to many Scottish and other magazines. Fiction includes Letters from the Great Wall (Luath, 2006), Forgive (Luath 2015) and Borrowed Time (Vagabond Voices 2016) plus short stories published in Chapman and the Edinburgh Review. Writes on literary and historical subjects as Jenni Calder and has published four books on Scottish emigration to North America. Most recent books are Essence of Edinburgh: An Eccentric Odyssey (Luath 2018) and The Burning Glass (Sandstone Press 2019). Has been an active member of Scottish PEN for many years.

JENNI DAICHES

JANE ARCHER

Jane's short stories have been shortlisted & commended in the Bridport Prize, The White Review & Manchester Fiction prize. She has been published in New Writing Scotland, Mslexia and Scottish PEN's anthology 'Declarations: On Freedom for Writers and Readers'. She is currently working on a novel 'Cutting the Roses', which has been longlisted in the inaugural Deborah Rogers New Writers' Award and Lucy Cavendish Prize. In 2019, Jane received a Luminate Scotland bursary to support completion of the book. She lives in Perthshire and teaches P/T at Perth college.

Kate Hendry is a writer and teacher living in Edinburgh. Her first collection of poems, The Lost Original, was published by HappenStance Press.

KATE HENDRY

A C CLARKE

A C Clarke's fifth collection is A Troubling Woman. She was a winner in the Cinnamon Press 2017 pamphlet competition with War Baby. Drochaid, with Maggie Rabatski and Sheila Templeton was published last year. Wedding Grief is due out as a Tapsalteerie pamphlet later this year.

Julian Colton has had five collections of poetry published including Everyman Street (Smokestack Publishing), Cold Light of Morning (Cultured Llama) and Two Che Guevaras (Scottish Borders Council). He lives in Selkirk in the Scottish Borders. To see more of his poetry, go to - [Julian Colton Poet | Facebook](#)

JULIAN COLTON

JOE MCGURK

A poet living in Dumfries writing about a range of subjects. Having released 2 books in as many years including "100 poems in 100 days of Lockdown..." I am keen to let people see more of my work.

SEVERIANO GOMES

My name is Severiano Gomes. I am from a country in Western Africa called Guinea-Bissau. I moved to Scotland as a student in 2007 and I have been living here since. Before moving to Scotland, I lived and studied in Russia for 5 years. I married and have 3 children. I work as a Compliance Analyst in a bank. I always liked writing and reading, although I have never published any work. I wrote my first poem more than a decade ago. Since the lockdown began, I have been thinking about focusing again on writing poems and have written few in the last 4 months.

Born in Glasgow, I started teaching myself Spanish when I was nine after falling in love with Gloria Estefan songs on cassette. I went on to study Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Glasgow and then relocated to work in Edinburgh for a decade. Motivated by a desire to try and achieve fluency, I moved to Barcelona in spring 2011, at the height of the financial crisis. Along with Spanish and poetry, I'm fascinated by food forests, and am currently trying to cultivate one in the Catalan hinterland.

JULIE SHERIDAN

ELAINE WEBSTER

Elaine worked in a range of education and outreach roles before she retired. Currently she does voluntary work with families and she supports cultural organisations. She writes in Scots and English. Some of her work has been included in publications.

Xinyi Jiang was born in China's Qingdao and studied in Nanjing and Shanghai. She taught in Fudan University before moving to the UK. She had lived in England and Wales before settling in Scotland. Xinyi discovered poetry when studying with the University of Dundee and had poems published in Dundee Writes, New Writing Dundee, PENning, and Gutter.

XINYI JIANG

FIDAN MEIKLE

My name is Fidan and I am 37 years old. I moved to Scotland from Azerbaijan years ago, and although I do love Bonnie Scotland with all my heart, I live trapped in my permanently vigorous awareness that I am not like everyone else here. It can be lonely, and creative writing helps me to break free from that. I am a mother to two beautiful children and a wife to a wonderful Scotsman. I am a linguist-translator by profession, and I teach Russian in Russian school in Glasgow.

Daniel Pukkila, a 21-year-old freelance journalist and poet, was born in Finland, but currently resides in Dundee. He has worked as a columnist and an editor in numerous newspapers and magazines — as well as a translator of feature films. His poetry has been featured in different journals and other publications, with his poetry collection *Under the Setting Sun* being published in 2022 (Eyewear Publishing). As a songwriter, he has gained notable acclaim after his latest singles that were produced in collaboration with Grammy-nominated folk legend, David Maloney, and J-pop star, Marico.

DANIEL PUKKILA

DONALD ADAMSON

Donald Adamson is from Dumfries, but currently lives in Finland. He writes in English and Scots, and translates from Finnish. He has been a prizewinner in many competitions, including first prize in the Herald Millennium Competition, the Sangschaw Translation Competition, and the Scottish Federation of Writers Competition (Scots category). His collections include *From Coiled Roots* (IDP 2013) and *Glamourie* (IDP 2015). His pamphlet *All Coming Back* (Roncadora 2019) takes as its theme the third age of life. A new pamphlet in Scots, *Bield*, will be published by Tapsalteerie.


DARNING OF SOCKS

Jenni Daiches

Today we have darning of socks. Yesterday the reading of books, the writing of words, the making of meals. Tomorrow morning what to do after cleaning, but today we have darning of socks. The birds are building, and today we have darning of socks.

The socks I wear with battered walking boots have climbed many hills, walked with the dog through moor and meadow, clambered rocky heights of bright cascades of water. Eye to the big-eyed darning needle, for today we have darning of socks.

Grey wool out of a jumbled basket, tangles of colour from other tasks. The garden tangles with colour from crocus and unfolding leaf and glancing sun. Tomorrow the moorhen chicks on the silvered loch but today we have darning of socks.



Here is the traverse of wool from edge to edge. Take care to keep the weave neat and smooth and even. The lintie's nest is neat and smooth and even. Frogs have arrived to spawn in the pond and today we have darning of socks.

The sock drawn over the hand. The skill of finger and thumb, easing the wool without nicking the skin. The rhythm of silent repair, and beyond the glorious discord of spring, the birds and the frogs and the sun and the golden crocus. For today, today we have darning of socks.

BIRNAM HILL

Jane Archer

In the winter the sun doesn't come over Birnam hill,
just when you most need it,
but the people still swim in the frozen river and trudge through the snow.
While cracked frost grows up windows,
a baby is born and an old man stares at his last breath.
A lover is still here.
A lover is gone.
And the people wait for signs of change, wait for the first glimpse of sun.
For then they stand taller -raise their head, raise their face,
and Birnam Hill tips a little, watching the people walk to the bridge, over the stone
arches that joins villages, on the way to or on the way back from Dunkeld.
When snowdrops and bluebells vanish, when the daffodils shrink, the sun makes
the hill bend further, and the people climb up and over its back, and the people climb
down to go into the woods, passing the pretender to stand at the tree of Macbeth,
pitched up with its massive crutch, once a living part of itself, now lost, perhaps, to
Dunsinane.
And the people look back to history, hoping Shakespeare's feet touched this ground,
thinking of the witches chanting in and around the mighty trunk and doing what
witches do – women all of them.
And the people listen, hesitate, and listen again to the leaves, for warning signs that
they are getting ready to let go.
The hill watches on, as it lifts up once more, and the light pushes through when it can.
But the people see the ice, the rain and, oh, they see graupel, and they hear birdsong
move between flakes of snow as if dancing on its way home.
And the people wonder when they'll see light again, and if it's all worth it, and today,
perhaps today is a beautiful day, and aye, today, perhaps today is not so good, full of
grey melancholic mist hanging in the air.
More bills come, as they must.
A job is lost, a job is gained,
and all the while they speak into laptops

Can you hear me?
Can you hear me?
A heart is open.
A heart is broken.
While the people tell themselves once
again,
that the sun will rise,
the sun will rise over Birnam Hill.



OTTERS

Kate Hendry

When all this is over I mean to...

– from 'Lochan' by Kathleen Jamie

I mouth these words so often I believe they're mine. Jamie never lets on what she wants to be over, but I uncap my blue pen, write out her words and pin them above my desk.

Jamie's white boat rests on the far shore of a remote loch. I lure two otters to my poem. They dive, hump-backed, and surface, wet-whiskered, crunching bones in their jaws.

When all this is over, summer will have left. I will walk by the furious, storm-grown river, past hedge-high white dead nettle.

It takes me to a bridge, where on that good day, the day it's all over, I will glimpse my otters again emerging onto the sunny bank, like hope.



BIRDSONG

Julian Colton

The birds are singing this morning.
I can't see song thrushes, blackbirds and robins
but they are whistling and singing
celebrating all of life and creation
this dull morning the colour of a grey pony
with just a peek of new Spring light
seeping into the bird season's eye
making them nest, sing and fly
from tree to tree calling out, calling out
'Remember me, remember me from distant
centuries
to all of time and Earth's eternity.'
The birds singing in the trees
on every Spring morning while I'm alive
will sing long after I've lived and died.

RESURGENCE

A C Clarke

I want to think all these stone angels
might soar into an end of days sky,
their wings rustling like silks,
multicoloured

as in a Quattrocento annunciation
and all the bodies violated
by crawling things, the dislocated
bones

under smashed headstones,
come into their own, straight and
whole
at the age they'd choose to be,

on an earth remade, peopled with
every soul
that has ever lived, trees hung with
innocent fruit,
and all our heavy debts cancelled.

RENEWAL

Joe McGurk

Got with the fuse
Get in the know
Lots with the views
Destined to blow
Do with the hows
Whatever you desire
Renewal of vows
Getting through fire
See why the youth
Do plus with the plan
Feel fireproof
Look to us for a hand
Do with the ceiling
Whatever you must
Renewing feeling
To detriment of dusk
Lust will arise
Bargain with few
Dust in the eyes
Makes things harder to do
Its hard with the grip
Denied today
Bargaining chips
Slide away
Flew and we're here
We get – exhaust
Stop renewal of fear
At every cost

I HAVE FOUND PEACE

Severiano Gomes

My soul has quietened down,

I no longer care

At the deafening noises

Of the noisy ones.

Deep in my soul

I no longer hear

The screams

Of the disturbing ones.

After all peace was not far away,

My soul is tranquilised


And I am sailing in the tranquillity

Of my soul.

I have pacified my soul,

Now I am flying with wings wide open

In the skies of hope



And I see happiness in the eyes of my
loved ones.

Now I do not care

In the opinions of negative people

I don't mind the looks of the ungrateful,

Nor in the meanness of the petty.

Now I realize that I am

An imperfect man

Living in a world

Of imperfections.

Peace I have won, life I will live,

My hope flourishes

And I see my life moving

Ahead in a right direction.

COAL

Julie Sheridan

We waited till the snow had hemmed the house

as high as me, aged five,

ready in wellies and red knit mittens.

Along sacred ground

we rolled his boulder of a body,

me puffing and pushing with all of my might,

you letting me think I was pushing.

For feet we saved him splayed out twigs,

a carrot of course for a nose.

I placed him in my ice palace and wept

his loss. Listen, Dad; you can hear the thaw,

two eyes and a smile, there on the lawn.



PRECIOUS MEDICINE

Elaine Webster

I pour one mil of light

into the glass,

till it settles on the

safe meniscus.

I carry it like a lamp,

towards your pain,

swilling it a little

to set magic.

I cannot hold steady

as you recite

wise words you gave and lost

in war's circus.

I offer you the glass,

my figary

light-filled with respect,

for your worth.

I trip and spill the lot

me, a daft clown

hearing you laugh again,

my medicine.



REUNION

Xinyi Jiang

1.

Darker, thicker, balding, 30

years since the photo:

a stiff smile under the deep

visor of a cadet cap, the pink

blossoms up the Yangtse, the boat journeys

promised, 36 hours, or 48, if I went to you,

unfulfilled. Between the bone

biting icy rains and melting

heat, I was busy getting pissed, you,

impressing girls and their Navy dads.

2.

You were too good to be true:

worked hard but pretended not,

got on with all, including a bitch

like me. No wonder that old

cow made you the Prefect, such a baby
to go straight home after sharing

a fag behind the bike shed,

brollies were uncool

like packed lunch, you lived with a nan
who called you 'Dog No Touch'.

3.

Between toasts of Tsingtao, Great Wall

dry red, and XO, your face was turning

the colour of your jumper, once

again you walked around, raised a glass,

my arm, back, felt the warmth of your other hand.

Your widened eyes, glistened lenses,

statements such as 'you haven't changed a bit',

made me blush, giggle,

so was the way you held up my coat

and said, 'The chauffeur's waiting.'

THE BEAST

Fidan Meikle

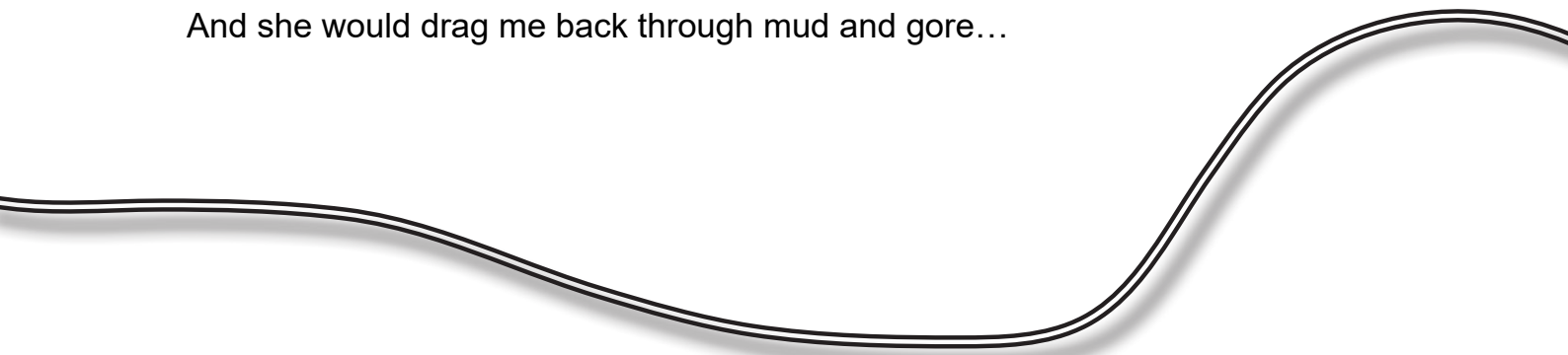
I'd run away from her because she was a beast,
Because she chased me only to destroy me,
I'd run away from her, clenching my trembling fists,
Screaming in fear: "It's a lie! I do not know you!"

She was disgusting, hideous, and cruel.
She'd try to crawl under my skin at nights.
She'd know when I was weak, and then she'd do it,
She'd sneak inside my head and blow apart...

I'd jump in fright and pain, be forced to run,
I'd choose the path that's overgrown with thorns,
I'd let them scratch my skin and drink my blood,
That somehow eased the pain, but then I'd fall...

She'd scream at me, she'd curse, she was demented,
She was the scariest of anyone I knew,
I wanted nothing from her, but resentment
Would only feed her and with time she grew...

The story would repeat, I'd run and fall,
My tired knees were pounded to the bone,
I would resist, I'd bleed, and I'd implore.
And she would drag me back through mud and gore...



She'd always take her time dragging me back,
I'd feel the taste of dirt deep in my throat,
Tears down my face, half choking, paralysed,
I'd dig my nails into the ground; the end was close...

She'd sit me down and hold my trembling face,
Her breath would send down goosebumps on my skin,
She'd look inside my eyes and then embrace
Me with her bony arms, so long and thin...

And then she'd speak, with soft and gentle whispers...
And I would think my very final thought,
Whilst my body shakes in painful twitches,
I would imagine how one day I would confront:

"You are the Truth, and you hold all the aces,
You know your strength, your power over me.
This fight was
never even, let us face it...
You may be Truth, but sneaky like a thief..."

Yes, you will end me now, but I will rise tomorrow.
And I will hate you all the very same,
But I will fear less because the more I know you,
The weaker is your blow, and maybe just one day...

I will not run away and I won't fall,
I'll let you in, and I will make some tea.
You'll look at me, and you'll begin to talk...
And I will listen, I'll accept, and I'll be free..."

IN THE LAND OF WHISPER

Daniel Pukkila

I flick through pages
that have sat unopened—
souls sharing themselves.

In the days before my name was ever pronounced
I roam under a different banner,
listening to the faint cry.

In the mirror a young man,
unaware of the wives and children
millenia of stories,
looking for the way back

In the otherside,

in the land below the wind,

in the realms of whisper

I live.

Would my father's son recognize me now,

a free burst,

riding on the vast acres

with a name tied into nature,

feathers in my hair,

bound by nothing—

and yet, the door is open,

whenever I decide to return.

HERT-KINNLIN

Donald Adamson

She'd hud the wean
an she pit a photie o him new born
on the social media
fur aa tae admire –
an aabody was commentin like
He's gorgeous!

But here's me in the back-en o ma life
an weans clene oot o ma mind
didnae see ocht in him then
but a pink blob like caunle wax –
naethin much in yon wee thing avaa.

Six month later
an he's on ma shouder
makin vroom-vroom souns at caurs as they pass,
nine month later
an he's croodlin, singin,
a year later
an he's sprauchlin wi airms ootstrecht for a hug.

An A wis wrang. Yon wisnae caunle wax
but leevin mairble
an the muckle sculptor o the universe
hud a haun in him frae the stert
or even afore,
cairvin oot a human craitur
utterly himsel
an hert-kinnlin gorgeous richt eneuch.



NON FICTION

LORETTA MULHOLLAND

Loretta previously studied History at Glasgow University. She is Fiction Editor for Dundee Review of the Arts (DURA) on-line magazine and a reviewer for intocreative.com. She was a Social Media (SM) Assistant in 2020 and SM Assistant and Blogger for Paisley Book Festival 2021. Loretta is a contributor to Scottish Pen's 'Declarations: On Freedom for Writers and Readers.'

She is currently researching the John Murray Collection with a view to writing about female travellers in the 19th century.

THIRTY NINE DAYS IN HOKKAIDO

Loretta Mulholland

Hokkaidō, the Northern Island of Japan is home to the indigenous Ainu people. An estimated 25,000 Ainu people live there today.

Assimilation policies implemented by the Japanese Government in the 19th century caused the Ainu to be considered a dying ethnic group.

Between 1871 and 1876 the Japanese Government forced the Ainu to be Japanese citizens, without their consent.

The Ainu Language was forbidden and the people were forced to speak Japanese.

Their land was turned into public land and their lifestyle based on hunting, fishing and plant gathering was banned.

The word ainu means 'human being' in the Ainu language. The Ainu people's land, called Ainu moshir - meaning the 'Land of Men' - originally consisted of Hokkaidō, the Kuril Islands, Sakalin, Southern Kamchatka and the Amur River estuary region. They were hunter-gatherers, living peaceful lives, relying on hunting, gathering, fishing and bartering and lived in kotan - villages - along rivers or by the sea. Each kotan had a chief but the Ainu people did not have an overall leader¹.

...

I am ashamed to admit to never having heard of the Ainu until I began to explore the archives of the Victorian explorer, Isabella Bird (1831-1904). Her letters form part of the John Murray Collection, held at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. In 1878, when Bird conducted her tour of the Unbeaten Tracks of Japan, it was claimed that very little was known about the Ainu. It was understood that they were of a completely different race from the Japanese but there was little comprehension of how the island of Hokkaidô (formerly Ezo but renamed by the Meiji Government in 1869), at the northern extremity of the country, fitted in with the culture of Japan.

This situation was compounded by the power struggle between Russia and Japan and the intrusion of western ideas during the Meiji Restoration. Hokkaidô offered numerous possibilities for exploitation of natural resources and new trade opportunities, which led to the establishment of the Ainu assimilation policies.

In 1871, the Ainu were officially integrated into Japanese society, but not as equal citizens. In 1878, their legal denomination became *kyûdojin*, or, 'former aborigine'. Census data was taken in 1872 by the Hokkaidô Development Agency and between 1869 and 1882 most of Hokkaidô's toponyms were changed from the Ainu language to Japanese².

These measures were all part of the assimilation process that culminated in the Hokkaidô Former Aborigines Protection Act of 1899.

...

1 Noémi Godefroy, *The Ainu Assimilation Policies During the Meiji Period and the Accultuation of Hokkaidô's Indigenous People*, (Date and Publication unknown), p1. Accessed 29/07/2020

2 *Ibid*, p3

Sir Harry Parkes, the British Minister in Japan from 1865-1885, was instrumental in organizing Bird's travels into the interior: he needed to know what was going on in the north, where former customs persisted in a changing world. Isabella undertook a monumental challenge when she agreed to embark on this voyage and though she had travelled throughout the world, Japan would be the first time she would undertake her 'solo' adventures in a country where so few inhabitants spoke English. She would need an interpreter. His name was Itō Tsurukichi and he was more than twenty years her junior. There are no records of his thoughts on the journey but from Isabella's own works, I have speculated a little on what these might have been in an imagined reflection of his experiences in Hokkaidō.

...

Tokiyo, 1904

The hefty volume does not have pride of place here in my neat apartment. It is usually stored in the kura, reserved for scholars' eyes only. I let my carefully manicured fingernails rest on the brown leather, falling ever so slightly under the hypnotic effect of the merging colours as the stiff marbled paper joins with the bound spine and gold lettering: *Isabella Bird: Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, (First Edition, 1880). Within this tome, lies the story of the lives of a once proud race of people whose way of life it was my honour to witness, before it disappeared into history, or the subjective recollections of travellers like Miss Bird.

The delicate scratch of the long nail of my now fleshy forefinger traces the waves of colour that intermingle. A sharp, azure blue, indicative of Isabella's piercing tongue as she cursed the ineptitude of poor peasant boatmen when we crossed the sea in a storm that killed a man and still gives me nightmares, runs into vermilion lines that conjure up images of a young bear, shot with arrows till the scarlet blood of its body lay in pools crusted into the dust in the very ground that the Aino worshipped.

I lift my right hand to stroke my hairless chin and smooth my memories – no grey on the jacket of this book, like the simple untreated wooden huts of these people; instead a white background dominates the colours. The spine is a burnt sienna, reminiscent of the dying fire and our dimly-lit faces, as we talked into the night with those indigenous people that I once despised but I now struggle to understand. I frequently pray to Buddha for compassion and forgiveness.

Language acquisition has always been of the utmost importance to me and I would not have entertained a position with a foreigner who would not be willing to teach me more English. Miss Bird recognised my abilities early on in our travels together:

‘ ... his cleverness in travelling and his singular intelligence surprise me daily. He is very anxious to speak GOOD English as distinguished from “common” English, and to get new words, with their correct pronunciation and spelling ...’

Every day I would enter new words in my notebook, along with those I didn't quite understand. In the evening, I would take these words to Miss Isabella and we would discuss their meaning, sentence use and spelling. Then I would note this, along with the Japanese equivalent, creating my own book of vocabulary. My self-taught method of recording became very useful later, when speaking with the Aino and creating a list of the most common words and phrases in their language.

My methodology was reminiscent of the concentration required of calligraphy and drawing my Chinese kanji characters, using carefully prepared coloured ink-stones and water-drippers to produce the finest of strokes copied from beautiful hand-scrolls.

Miss Bird acknowledged that I spoke much better English than “professional interpreters” but she did not like my “vulgar Americanisms”. With so many Americans in Yokohama at the time, this was most unavoidable.

She saw these mannerisms as “free and easy” but, despite her reservations, she put up with my ways because she needed a servant and someone whom she thought she could command:

‘It is so important to me to have a good interpreter, or I should not have engaged so young and inexperienced a servant; but he is so clever that he is now able to be a cook, laundryman and general attendant, as well as courier and interpreter, and I think it is far easier for me than if he were an older man ...’

She seemed to think that pride in my nationality and mannerisms was an odd thing, but where did that leave her own superior attitude to other people and races?

‘He is intensely Japanese, his patriotism has all the weakness and strength of personal vanity, and thinks everything inferior that is foreign. Our manners, eyes, and modes of eating appear simply odious to him. He delights in telling stories of odious Englishmen ... bringing themselves and their country into contempt and ridicule.’

An interesting observation, coming from one who once described me as ‘the most stupid-looking Japanese’ she had even seen, and my evening meal as ‘seven dishes of horrors’!

...

As we approached Aino territory, Miss Isabella became aware of a growing change in the landscape and mood of the countryside:

‘There is something very gloomy in the solitude of this silent land, with its beast-haunted forests, its great patches of pasture, the resort of wild animals which haunt the lower regions in search of food when the snow drives them down from the mountains, and its narrow track, indicating the single file in which the savages of the interior walk with their bare, noiseless feet.’

We studied the Aino thoroughly, during a thirty-nine day trip to Hokkaidô, of which four days were spent at Biratori, the largest Aino village. We were guests of Benri, the chief of the tribe, and we stayed in his house, under the watchful eye of his elderly mother. Miss Isabella noted:

'Biratori, the largest of the Aino settlements in this region, is very prettily situated among forests and mountains, on rising ground, with a very sinuous river winding its feet and a wooded height above. A lonelier place could scarcely be found. As we passed among the houses the yellow dogs barked, the women looked shy and smiled, and the men made their graceful salutation. We stopped at the chief's house, where, of course, we were unexpected guests, but Shinondi, his nephew, and two other men came out, saluted us, and with most hospitable intent helped Ito unload the horses.'

We had arrived! Miss Bird was interested in the minutest details of the chief's dwelling and seemed quite overawed by the hospitality she encountered:

'It is a large house, the room being 35 by 25, and the roof 20 feet high; but you enter by an ante-chamber, in which are kept the millet-mill and other articles. There is a doorway in this, but inside is pretty dark, and Shinondi, taking my hand, raised the reed curtain bound with hide, which concealed the entrance into the actual house, and leading me into it, retired a footstep, extended his arms inwards, waved three times, after which he indicated by a sweep of his hand and a beautiful smile that the house and all it contained were mine.'

...

After spending several days living amongst the Aino, Miss Bird remarked that they had 'a singular, and I hope an unreasonable, fear of the Japanese Government.'

She was convinced that:

‘... the Kaitaikushi Department meant well by them, and, besides removing oppressive restrictions by which, as a conquered race, they were fettered, treats them far more humanely and equitably than the U.S. Government, for instance, treats the North American Indians.’

I.T.

...

During the Meiji era, there was a focus on investigating and research on peripheral languages, including Ainu, by linguists such as Kindai.ichi Kyôtsuke, to clarify the cultural origins of the Japanese ethnos. Japanese statesmen and intellectuals of the time, shared this interest in identity, therefore ironically, whilst eradicating the Ainu language and identity, the Meiji Government encouraged its study. This may well have been part of the reasoning behind the British Minister’s support of Isabella Bird’s research.

The acculturation of the Ainu was almost complete by the end of the Meiji period, but not their assimilation to the Japanese people. By the end of the 20th century, the Meiji assimilation laws were finally disbanded, largely due to the commitment and efforts of Kayona Shigeru, the first Diet member of Ainu descent. In September 2007, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People was adopted⁴.

Today, efforts are being made to conserve the rich culture and language of the Ainu; it is strange to think that perhaps the combined efforts of a Victorian female traveller and her young Japanese interpreter may have inadvertently contributed to the renewal of an indigenous language that was almost completely eliminated.

In April 2019, Japan enacted legislation aimed at protecting and promoting the culture of the Ainu, stipulating for the first time that they were an indigenous people.

Some Ainu people criticized the law, saying it did not do enough to reverse historical discrimination⁵.

...

3 Godefroy, p8

4 You Tube: United Nations: AINU: Indigenous People in Japan (Date), accessed May 2020

5 Kyodo News, April 19th, 2019, 16.45/ Lifestyle/All/Japan: Law enacted to recognize ethnic Ainu minority as indigenous people, accessed 28 June 2020

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