

Poems by Toni Maclean of Roshven

THE FERRY-BOAT

Before the road the boat came twice a week
to bring the mail and messages, and everything
from drums of paraffin and T.V.O. rolled overboard
to float ashore, to visitors in overcoats
with leather luggage, lowered to the dinghy, still awash
from being towed, and rowed up to the jetty
where they had to jump in case the dinghy
scraped or bumped. Few made it dry.

On stormy days it didn't want to stop, and tried
to sneak along. We had to watch for it,
a slowly growing, rhythmically recurring blur
that tried to hide far out: we'd shout,
and wave a sheet and dance about.

As kids we'd scramble aft
to travel in the wheelhouse where the Whaler
let us steer and gave us cigarettes and beer.

These days I travel more. I drive
from door to door, and shop on line.

And sometimes I go surfing on force nine.

FARQUHAR

I've known him over fifty years, I first
remember him astride a Clydesdale galloping
along the beach, and in the lean-to where
he built his motor-bikes, and made
a waterwheel from rusty cans
tacked to a cycle wheel, to charge their batteries.
A man of gentle words, he saved his breath
for distance running, nearly every year
he won the hill race at the gathering here.
He always led the music on his button-key
as now the piper leads him and his bearers,
old friends taking turns to carry him
this final lap of honour round the field.
I've pushed him in his chair, I've lit
his pipe and doused the fire when he set his bed alight.
And now I follow, with the rest, treading a slow march.

ALL HALLOWS EVE

In pointy hats and scary masks they run and shriek and laugh
and try to spook each other in the dark, the way we used to do.

Where are our childhood ghosts? the postie's squeaky bike,
the creaking hinge of southbound geese, the hiss

of Tilly lamps at twilight, with the flutter, singe of moths;
the smell of heather-fire always brought us hot-foot to the flame

in fascination for its power, or the scents that ambush us
from long unopened drawers, and dressing-table jars.

We wait for wintertime to wreath each other's wraiths,
we walk a skin of ice and call to one another in the night

our echoes lingering like roses in November.

NOTHING ADDED

We didn't go to school till I was nine, we played around
the steading, balancing on rafters, up above the cow's warm breath
and sounds of languid chewing, shuffling. We smoked behind the bales.

On rainy days we lit the bothy stove and battered pancakes with
secreted flour, eggs from the chickens' hidden nests and milk that
the cows let down. They were so used to us, to being
scratched and petted, butted at, they didn't mind.

The mill was derelict but all the cogs still turned, the wheel
a carrousel for riding on, but best of all was when the smithy fire,
goaded by enormous bellows, roared and spat, the glowing metal
sparked, and sweating horses stamped and fretted, waiting to be shod.

It's all in ruins now, and sold for redevelopment, I went
to school and tried to learn arithmetic, the dates of English kings
in copperplate, and how to play by other peoples rules.

NETTLES

I used to ride along this way,
a milk pail on each handlebar,
well balanced, smooth,
when London Pride adorned the wall
where now the nettles grow,
before the road eroded
down to the mettling.

They have their uses, nettles.

We used to feed them to the hens,
their odour sharp and pungent
in the steamy mash.

We gathered them when young,
bare-legged, open-handed and unstung.

We're older now, we've grown.

Their stalks are woody, bristling,
leaves toughened, poison-tongued.

And now we keep away,
or wear protective layers
as we try to sidle by,
my childhood friend and I.

THE TRIALS

On a sunny day in the middle of May
The motor-bikes begin
To test their skills at climbing hills
And coming down again.
The Scottish six-days cycle trials
When Edinburgh drives for miles and miles
In rainbow-painted, supped-up wrecks
To watch their fellows break their necks.

It looks like Brighton or Southend
The ton-up boys are everywhere.
Their followers over backwards bend
To ape the wonderful clothes they wear,
The multi-coloured anoraks,
And quite extraordinary hats,
Petroleum Company boiler suits
And socks turned down over welly boots.

While down at the Inn a terrible din,
Unseasonable crowd,
An excuse for a drink, and to say what they think,
They voice their opinions loud
On revs and gearboxes and carbs
For many hours afterwards,
Then one last beer and stow their gear
For they'll take the day off again next year.

SEA

With dreamy opalescence you explore
and hold the glossy pebbles in a hand
lace-cuffed and intimate, or
brush with a silken fingertip the sand
on which I play. Sand ribbed and furrowed,
coiled in casts of crusted worms,
dimpled where razor-fish have burrowed
down into safety, till the tide returns
to claim the puddles and abandoned life,
the stranded butter fish, and crabs, beneath the weed
which shelters them, for opportunity is rife
for shoreline birds to search and catch and feed.
The oyster-catchers' pied and orange flight
and probing scarlet bills, the gulls who crack
open mussels on the rocks, sandpipers who alight
to search for tiny shrimps among the wrack.
Keen as bare-legged herons in the bright
shallows, among the floating, tangled weed
we stalk the shoals of sand-eels, which take fright
with synchronised, quicksilver, darting speed.
At lowest ebb, the undulating kelp
that looks like highly-polished leather gloves,

waves in the water, signalling for help,
neglected by the element it loves.

And then we join the predators, with pails,
to hunt for winkles, coated with a dusky sheen
and clustered on the stones. These grazing snails
we gather, for a penny each they mean
to us, who nickname them “black gold”
and search as keenly ever as wader’s bill,
even when feet and fingers, numb with cold,
can scarcely scoop them up, our buckets fill.

I’m thinking of the islands in the bay
where sometimes with my brothers I explore
the tidal pools’ transparent pink array
of crusted coral and anemonies, or
scramble on the rocks where orange wrack
which crowns the boulders, look like ginger hair.

When barnacles feel the water coming back,
and wave their tiny fingers in the air,
a slushing, sighing, gurgling sucking sound
accompanies the rushing tidal flow.

and everywhere above, on higher ground,

kaleidoscopic summer flowers grow.

The mustard-coloured lichen in the splash-zone, clumps of pink-headed, nodding thrifts, grass of Parnassus sheltered from the crash of breakers in protected clefts and rifts.

Bluebells so thick we cannot walk with care, primroses, campion, creeping juniper, and overhead the sea birds everywhere wheeling and crying in a frenetic stir.

Over the back, among the seaward cliffs each bird defends a fraction of a ledge for nesting on. With squabbles squawks and tiffs each tries to push the other off the edge.

So many birds in constant carnival, the guillemots in summer black and white, the kittiwakes and cormorants, the gulls and razorbills in alternating flight, and down below the cliffs, the water too is thick with birds, who swim and skim and dive for fish, and sometimes we can see a few porpoises jump for joy that they're alive.

Beyond these islands where the sea birds nest,

a long and oily swell, on summer night,
reflects the dying embers in the west
in technicolour shades of fractured light.
Taffeta shot with all the gemstone hues,
rose-quartz and topaz change with amethyst,
and opal with sapphire and midnight blues,
while through it is woven gold and metallic schist.
Because it is our favourite fishing ground
we row out in our little wooden boat
into the open water of the sound
to trail our lines, as dreamily we float
on all this liquid colour, till a bite
distracts and animates, and hauling line
we see the green and silver fish, and fight
it's streaking energy which flashes and churns the brine.
Out of the sunset, just to spoil our sport,
riding formation, dorsals sharp and black,
contending with us for the fish we've caught,
the giant kingfish come in to attack.
They hunt in packs, and having found our shoal
they dive and thrash beneath our little boat.
Nearly as long as it, they turn and roll,

showing their piggy eyes and pallid throats.

We head for home and leave the catch to them,
scared of their size and strength, these mini-sharks.

and now the shifting colour of the gem
has turned to malachite, for it is getting dark.

But twilight brings the herring fry ashore,
so floating in a hushing velvet glow,
encircling with phosphorescent oar
we net the slippery harvest from below.

The shining days, which memory recalls,
but many another mood you can display
of sloppy indolence, the creamy train
with which you wear your satiny silver grey.

Or when you're flirting with a north-west breeze
and in a pretty blue and white you dance,
with lots of little tripping steps, to tease
the patient beach awaiting your advance.

And when you sulk and glower with thunderous frown
we soon forget our summer in the sun,
and pull ashore the boats and batten down
knowing that when your tantrums have begun
they're likely to go on for many days.

And while you rage and scream and tear your hair
and throw yourself about in wilful craze
we watch with admiration for your flair.
The fisher-women call you slut, you lure
their men and steal their hearts away.
You are not really evil I am sure
but childishly capricious in your play.
From algae-covered rocks that shine and stream
with furious flying spray, I watch
successive mighty mountains break and cream,
topple and fall with pounding roar, to catch
at the shingle, sucking it back with crack
and crunch and squelch and tumble in greedy undertow,
then drawing yourself up for new attack
in lurid green and cobalt, grey and black,
upon the cringing helpless shore below.

It's Coronation day and I am eight,
we set out in the morning in the sun,
to go to Church, to pray and celebrate
before the evening's revelry and fun.
But setting out for home an evil hour

besets us as we leave the harbour, for
a squall so sudden, of such vicious power,
makes turning back “as dangerous as go o’er”.

We have to keep our head into the wind
because the heavy sea is short and steep,
and try to leave the weather-shore behind
by heading out into the threatening deep.

Down in the trough the towering rollers seem
unclimbable. We wallow in the trench,
so slowly stagger up the hideous green
ascent, whose curling top prepares to drench
us all. Then hover there in space,
in awful view of all the monsters stacked
before us, and with sheets of water in the face,
till down we plunge with stomach-lurching smack.

Over and over, up and down, the further out we go,
and terror gets acquainted with my mind.

It all goes on and on, time goes so slow
until the shelter of the further shore we find.

And still it isn’t over. For a while
by following the coastline, in the lea,
we gain a less ferocious half-a-mile,
but have to cross it in a following sea.

It doesn't seem so bad this suck and roll,
though actually it is, courage revives,
competing with the horror in my soul.
It seems that after all we may survive.

How can I ever trust you any more?
Your lovely smile can take my breath away,
but now I pace, distractedly, before
an exhibition of your violent temper, pray
that my fisherman is safe and will return
and all the other fishermen who keep
vigil with you, their daily bread to earn
upon the troubled waters of your sleep.