

“If you don’t get caught”: islands, isolation and entrapment in contemporary Scottish women’s poetry

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“If You Don’t Get Caught”: Islands, Isolation and Entrapment in Contemporary Scottish Women’s Poetry’

The Floating/ Islands

In “Hairst”, from Jen Hadfield’s collection *Byssus* (2014), the eighth of twelve short sections is a haiku-esque proclamation:

To know your place:
a doorstep amongst the floating
islands (Hadfield, *Byssus* 58)

The idea that you can “know your place” is, in this poem, on shoogly ground. As is often the case in Hadfield’s work, the utterance is not located physically, geographically or temporally: the voice comes from a nowhere and speaks of a “place” that cannot definitively be imagined. Not only are the islands “floating”, but there is uncertainty about what the “doorstep” actually *is*: the “place” you know, or the act of knowing that place. The question arises if or how these can be distinguished (of how, in Yeatsian terms, we can know the dancer from the dance) and also what use, in the most banal and literal terms, actually is a doorstep – rather than a stepping stone, say – amongst “floating islands”? Is doorstep the right word or a mis-step (and if it isn’t the *right* word, why is it the word chosen here)? And what, given Hadfield’s careful accumulations and typographies, is the relationship between the image of the “floating / islands” and “Hairst” as a whole: is the ‘*’ symbol separating each section then itself a doorstep? Do the twelve sections of the poem map onto the calendar months, and if so is this – the eighth section – in some way the time or product of the “hairst” or harvest?

There are, in other words, many ways to mis-read this poem, to miss one's step. It implies – with its dislocations and uncertainties – a multiply liminal position, a place of knowing that is itself a passing between, in a world in which everything around you is floating and in flux (and inasmuch it is very much a poem *des nos jours*). And there is an added layer of complexity, uncertainty and deep literary context that comes through what should be its most rooted and grounded element: the well-trodden, almost over-determined, topos of the “island”. Islands in literature – even or especially “floating islands” – are never *terra incognita*: the “island poem”, as Edna Longley argues in “Irish and Scottish ‘Island Poems’” (2010), “like all island literature, is massively pre-trope”, and islands are always already imagined or indeed are in the process of being reimagined by others (often in the webpages of the online journal *The Island Review* or the pages of *Archipelago*) (Longley 144).ⁱ Each island has at least the potential to be a Utopia or a Hy Brasil, Hether Blether, Laputa, or Tìr nan Òg, if not an Alcatraz or a Devil's Island. And, as Longley comments, responding to Peter Conrad, islands have tended to lend themselves in the popular and poetic imagining to “fertile antinomies” including “innocence/fall; escape/prison; utopia/dystopia; isolation/connection; same/other; self/community; wildness/civilisation; discovery/loss; survival/extinction; margin/centre; unity/diversity; Odysseus/Penelope; Prospero/Caliban; Houyhnhnms/Yahoos” (Longley 144; Conrad).

One might add stability/instability or groundedness/floatiness to these antinomies. In recent critical writing about islands (Longley's included), there has been a tendency not to focus on the rigidity and rootedness that such antinomies

might suggest, but on the complexity and shiftiness of islands. For islands themselves (even when they aren't "floating") are fundamentally imprecise and difficult to define or delimit. This is in part because of Benoit Mandelbrot's coastline paradox, which renders the circumference of islands fractal and therefore immeasurable, and also because of the definitional difficulties involved in tracing the shifting boundaries between rock, skerry, stack, and island. This immeasurability and instability is a source of artistic and critical potential as well as (or instead of) anxiety. Amy Liptrot, for example, turns to the coastline paradox in her exploratory memoir about addiction in London and recovery on Orkney, *The Outrun* (it is "thrill[ing] and daunt[ing]"); Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom and Jos Smith use it, meanwhile, as the introductory image of their essay collection *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge* which explore the way in which "archipelagic island spaces might ... emerge as plural networks" and encourage "an awareness of the fluid but grounded nature of place" (Liptrot 259; Allen et al. 1, 13). Allen, Groom and Smith engage with various current critical trends - "island studies", "blue humanities", "archipelagic studies" - which all trace in different ways the shifting (cultural) relationship between land and sea, island and island, island and mainland, and which - in the Scottish context in particular - have provided useful lenses for re-evaluating the relationship between different parts of the country in ways that allow us, in Timothy Baker's words, to see "islands as a place of shifting relationships, whether it is between ideas of centre and periphery, between ideas of insider and outsider, between exile and belonging, and even between genres" (Baker 41). Baker follows Deleuze in viewing Scottish islands - or writing about these islands - as negating (positively) "any assumed stability in the world": they are places of "re-

creation and re-beginning”, providing an “idea of origins to which one always returns, often despite resistance” (Baker 39). Alexandra Campbell makes similar claims of a focus on the archipelago (marked out to avoid any insularity left residually attached to the idea of the island): “Able to navigate multiple scales and forms of relation, from the bioregion to the biosphere, archipelagic literatures remind us of the inherent fluidity and plurality of place in an increasingly bordered world”; the “local” then becomes a “constantly shifting place” (Campbell 183).

As my use of Hadfield’s example of the “floating islands” might suggest, I too drift towards an understanding of the shifting and fluid nature of islands (even if the accumulation of these examples might warn that island criticism might also be, as Longley noted, irretrievably “pre-troped”). However, what I would like to explore here is slightly different from the approach of Baker, Campbell, Longley et al. I’m not necessarily interested in the essence of islands in the abstract, or particular Scottish islands or island groups in the concrete (is a “Skye poem” different to a “Lewis poem”? How would one begin to quantify that?), or even the insider’s knowledge and reflection of “the deeper realities of island life” that Kevin MacNeil attempts to capture in his anthology of Scottish island poems, *These Islands We Sing* (MacNeil xxiii). Rather, my focus is on the desire to explore the island experience as an “other”, or to adopt an island perspective: the idea of *journeying* to an island, rather than the island itself; and the ensuing encounter with difference, whether it be linguistic, cultural or gender (all of these are crucial). This casts the island (or the island perspective) as, primarily, a site of desire (including desire for that which is shifting, unstable and elusive). Behind this is the age-old narrative of the Odyssey

and Saga and immramm, of the island-hopper (usually gendered male) sailing from island to island looking for a “home” in the broadest sense, a locus for rootedness, meaning, or origin (with a focus on regained domesticity which, as Robert Crawford and Louisa Gairn notes, is complicated for female poets) (Gairn 168; Crawford 147). In the second half of this essay, I will look at the ways in which three different women poets relate to islands, or an “island perspective”: Liz Lochhead and the Inner and Outer Hebrides, Meg Bateman on Skye, and Jan Hadfield on Orkney. Each of these islands (or island groups) has their own distinct identity and contradictions, and each of the poets their own sense of separateness: in each case, there is a meeting with linguistic difference, and also with the idea of an established and rooted community, to which gender can be seen to add a dimension of estrangement or distance.

As such, each of their explorations adds some level of complication to any attempt to seek unity or a simple sense of welcome or belonging in islands (or indeed in writing about islands); this is in marked contrast to a recent attempt by Jackie Kay, the Scottish Makar, to figure Scotland’s islands (and indeed peninsulas) in largely liberating terms. Kay announced on National Poetry Day 2016 that she wanted “as makar to get around every single Scottish island and peninsula, just because they often get left out. I want to write a long poem where each island has a stanza” (Brooks). The aim “to get around every single Scottish island and peninsula” ignores the difficulties of identifying, let alone visiting, every Scottish island (and the addition of peninsulas makes things even more complicated); but the desire is not for encyclopaedic coverage, but of a gesture towards an active inclusivity, with a

hint of a restated centre-periphery relationship (the desire to visit them “just because they often get left out” raises the question of who is it that “leaves them out”). Kay is responding to shifts in the public discourse and, especially, the xenophobia that surrounded and followed the Brexit referendum:

It seems to me that we’re living in times of political turmoil that I’ve never seen in the course of my lifetime ... None of us has seen this level of uncertainty, this level of a lurch to xenophobia, this very worrying insularity and racism, or such a massive divide between parts of the UK ... It is a writer’s responsibility to tell the story of their time. That doesn’t mean necessarily being directly polemical but it does mean not shying away. Poets tell the time. (Brooks)

The voyage to the islands then becomes a claim for a “multi-voiced, multi-tongued Scotland”: “It’s a chance to say [in Kay’s words]: ‘Here’s Scotland, we’re a country that’s welcoming and open to the world. We’re trying to do something different’” (Brooks).

There is an element not just of celebration here, but also projection, of imagining a Scotland that might be (that “something different” that might arise): this is not just a case of “telling the time”, but of attempting to shape that time, and create a desired future. This is, necessarily, an act of at least half-creation: the witnessing or documentary nature of “time-telling” mingles with fabulous “story-telling” where we are all drifting at sea, perhaps, but just over the horizon there is an island on which we might make landfall. This places poetry at the centre of a national reimagining (with the nation here being Scotland), and the act of writing or reading

poetry – metaphorically at least – part of a great odyssey of nationhood. Such thinking lies behind Kay’s tendentious metaphorical identification of islands and stanzas: “I think stanzas and islands have a lot in common – stanzas have a lot of space around them and islands have the sea” (Brooks). (Other comparisons are possible, however: sea might be to island as world is to stanza, or symphony to poem.)

Positively, by focussing on the difference encountered between islands – and the sense of *interconnected* difference – Kay allows each island to have its own unique identity, culture, language, norms, rules, rate of development, inequalities, rites, genders, rhythm, rhyme (and so on), but still remain part of a wider organism with which it interacts and develops its meaning. This, in a utopian reading, could see islands as rhizomes, able to avoid hierarchical control and definition. Or, in another utopian reading, it could see islands, and the travelling around islands, as necessarily a story of romance, of leaving one world for another – perhaps more colourful – one. With this, however, comes the risk of dashed romance. One could think here of Gulliver’s inability to reintegrate himself at home at the end of *Gulliver’s Travels*, or of Louis MacNeice’s *I Crossed the Minch*, where MacNeice discovers that the dream of finding “that blood was thicker than ink – that the Celt in me would be drawn to the surface by the magnetism of his fellows... was a sentimental and futile hope” (MacNeice 7-8). MacNeice’s search for a “Celtic” similarity in the Hebrides akin to the west of Ireland fails, perhaps because Scotland, unlike Ireland, does not have quite the same relationship to its mystical “west” (taking the “road to the isles” – plural – is different from becoming a “playboy of the

western world"). This doesn't mean, however, that others don't use Scottish islands as the site of desire for identity or belonging.,

Indeed, although I have great sympathy for the political impetus of Kay's odyssey, there is a troubling underlying desire for a mystical, originary or generative "Scottishness" to Kay's project: somewhere an "ideal" Scotland can be discovered, rediscovered or invented; somewhere that she hoped to be able to say "Here's Scotland" (Brooks). The use of islands as locations of national character or ur-identity has such a long and fraught history that her project risks being scuppered from the outset: the islo-eroticism that sees islands as a locus for rootedness, meaning, or origin has itself long been queried and parodied. There may be intoxicated celebration as in Madeleine Bunting's description of how "In British literature, islands emerge as places of particular power. They offer magic, intrigue and adventure as well as damnation" (Bunting). However, this often coexists alongside a sense of incompleteness. Thus, in Derick Thomson's poem "An Darna Eilean" ["The Second Island"], arrival at a dreamed-of island only leads to the desire itself recalibrating and shifting: "chunnaic sinn / gun do theich am brudair pios eile bhuainn" ["we recognised / that the dream had moved away from us again"] and the madeleine-like attracting smell fails: "fàileadh na h-iadhshlait a' faileachdainn oirnn a-nis" [we have lost now the scent of the honeysuckle] (Thomson 220-21). In Don Paterson's "Luìng", meanwhile, the trip to Luìng, "Kilda's antithesis", signifies the refusal of "that cup / of emptiness that is our one completion" (Paterson 1). Why, indeed, would "completion" ever be wanted?

Paterson is contrasting Luing to the *locus classicus* of Scottish island myths of origin. St Kilda, or Hiort in Gaelic, still offers – in its distance and abandonment – a frisson of excitement and inspiration: one need only think of Douglas Dunn’s *St Kilda’s Parliament* (1981) or Robin Robertson’s “Leaving St Kilda” in *The Wrecking Light* (2010). Of all Scottish island groups, St Kilda is perhaps the most overwritten with expectation and prior narrative: a community that survived incredible hardship before asking to be evacuated, an island trapped in – or rather out of – time, a last stop before America, unparalleled (in European terms) seabird colony, a commercialised and consumed “wild” landscape, and latterly Cold War outpost. St Kilda is both synecdoche for the cultural, natural, physical and historical limits of the human and also UNESCO brochure fodder (while also, through the presence of an army base there, showing the traces of the good ol’ military industrial complex). There are other omphaloi dotted around the Scottish islands, of more or less ancient origin – Callanish on Lewis, Skara Brae on Orkney, the “fairy pools” of Skye – but St Kilda still has a particular magnetic attraction or, indeed, repulsion (as in “Luing” or in Kathleen Jamie’s *Sightlines*, where St Kilda is rejected as the climactic endpoint of a Hebridean journey in favour of the less visited, even more culturally “remote” Rona) (Jamie 179–205).

The most influential critique of the tendency to make Scottish islands a site of mythical symbolism or “unreal” desire – a place where “realness” is necessarily absent – has been Iain Crichton Smith’s polemical “Real People in a Real Place” (1986). He argues that books about the Hebrides make the “special world” of the islands “appear Edenic and unreal: others suggest that the islander is a child who

appears lost in the 'real world' ... In this way the islander is labelled, surrounded by mythology, so that the nearest tourist can feel himself superior to the brightest islander" (Smith 14, 15). Crichton Smith here echoes MacDiarmid's calls in the 1930s for "the de-Tibetanisation of the Scottish Highlands and Islands", which itself mischievously develops earlier calls for the de-Anglicization of Ireland. Indeed, Crichton Smith pointedly opens his polemic with an extended quotation from Daniel Corkery's *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931), with its diagnosis of how "Everywhere in the mentality of the Irish people are flux and uncertainty", as a result of an education that focuses on "English" culture, and so creates an "alien medium" through which the Irish view their "native land" (MacDiarmid 18; Smith 13-14).

One doesn't need to agree with the nativist tendencies of Corkery to see ways in which Crichton Smith's argument continues to have traction in Scotland: the focus on the "deeper realities of island life" in *These Islands, I Sing* suggests as much (and it is notable that MacNeil has edited two excellent volumes of Crichton Smith's short stories). However, there are significant differences between the island-visiting (and nation-building) of MacDiarmid, MacNeice and Corkery in the 1930s (as carried over into Smith's essay), and any contemporary response to the nation, the island or indeed "flux and uncertainty". For the purposes of this essay, I am defining "contemporary" loosely, from the run up to the devolution referendum of 1979, to cover repeated periods in which the political organization (and ideological matter) of Scotland was up for discussion, debate and had a real and pressing possibility of being changed (and in which the cultural activity of the nation could be seen to

inform and prefigure political movements, formations and ruptures). However, it is also a period in which deconstruction of the nation was as common as ideas of “building” it. Accustomed as we are to “imagining communities” or the fantastic projections of “working as if in the early days of a better nation” then flux is to be celebrated, rather than lamented (as Corkery does); the fault-line between reality and unreality is to be traversed and deconstructed, rather than reinforced, restated and patrolled. Whether such imaginative free play has destabilised political conceptions of ‘reality’ is far beyond the scope of this essay; a case is to be made on a Scottish level, though, that “If the Shetlands deconstruct the Hebrides, all the islands taken together deconstruct Scotland” (Longley 146).

But this also works on the scale of the individual: the porosity, openness and dissolution of islands deconstructs the idea of the “entire” singular body, especially that of an individual identified with the island. (This is a dynamic hinted at in Donne’s famous claim in “Meditation 17” that “No man is an island, intire of it selfe”; no-one is “intire” in this way). This sense of complicated interrelation and interaction (and of the fraughtness of being “intire”) is perhaps more pointed when asking if any woman is an “island”. The openness of islands is exactly coextensive with their boundedness; with Kay’s idea of Scottish islands being “welcoming and open to the world” comes the parallel possibility of islands being “closed” and imprisoning (and it might all depend on who rules the waves around them). The history of Scottish women and Scottish islands is, at least in part and in a way that it is *not* for men, one of imprisonment: Mary Queen of Scots in Lochleven Castle, for example, or Lady Grange banished by her husband to St Kilda, “erased from

Edinburgh society and removed from its civilised comforts" (with Edinburgh=civilised and St Kilda, one assumes, "barbaric") (MacAulay 18). In Scottish terms, Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman in the attic is often, instead, "a madwoman on the island"; and island pilgrimages have often tended to present a masculine perspective: the voyaging between islands [and women] of Odysseus, for example, or of Mael Duin or Boswell and Johnson.

The risk of playing Rochester does, however, give me – as a male critic – pause, not least because Mary Shelley offers a powerful, warning metaphor: where Victor Frankenstein had completed his first male creation (those "features" selected to be beautiful) in Ingolstadt, on "one of the remotest of the Orkneys" he leaves his female creation torn to pieces (Shelley 117–22). The poems discussed below hopefully show that the association of islands and female imprisonment (or bodily dissolution) is not a barely suppressed Freudian desire on my part. Nevertheless, I am wary of forming or repeating summative, conclusive and androcentric statements about women's poems from or towards islands, about delivering a neat, limiting or imprisoning single version of an island poetics; nor indeed in easily delivering incompleteness and fragmentation. Instead, the poems discussed below show – with full psychological, societal and postcolonial complexity – that islands have helped some women poets, in Liz Lochhead's words, explore how "Things fall to bits" (Lochhead 107).ⁱⁱ

Liz Lochhead's *Islands*

The title of Lochhead's "Outer:" suggests a necessarily open-ended exploration of islands: there is, with the approach to any islands, a colon gesturing outwards, a

tendency towards voyaging rather than arrival, as well as the more troubling hint of “colonial” appropriation. Lochhead is not usually considered an “island” poet: she was born in Motherwell, and is strongly associated with Glasgow. However in her 1978 collection *Islands* (in which “Outer:” appears, and which gives this essay its title), she travels to the Inner and Outer Hebrides (off the north-west coast of Scotland) and recasts the Yeatsian sense of the end of civilization, or the Achebean reapplication of this to the end of empire (those “Things [that] fall apart”) in terms of bodily decay, and a cyclical, annual fight between the human world and the landscape:

Things fall to bits.

Sheep come apart in handfuls -

it's that time of year -

Old cars in the salt air.

Far too many stones to ever clear. (Lochhead 107)

The suggestive Hebridean dichotomy of outer/inner is another to add to that list I quoted earlier on; and it is one metaphorical axis of Lochhead's island poems. Although Lochhead's “Outer:” “marvels” at “the tweeds / a bale by each gatepost” - the markers of “Another life” - marvelling is only one side of the coin (Lochhead 106). The “magical / and more” quality of the Callanish stones is balanced by the “harshness of [the] winter” at Dun Carloway, where the narrator and an undefined “we”

crawl the long ramp

between the inner and the outer

wall again. (Lochhead 108, 110)

The relationship between inner and outer is here one of “doublebluff” in the terms of the poem – “stonewall / doublebluff / drystone” – where the walled broch (an island of stone) is at once protective and constricting (Lochhead 110).

In section V of the poem this sense of constriction takes on a gendered dimension, and the split between the “inner” and “outer” meets the other axis of these poems: the tension between freedom and imprisonment (previously, the poem had warned that otterboard fishing and using a motor on your loom is to be recommended “if you don’t get caught”). Two 16-year-old girls, having escaped from the Mòd (the annual celebration of Gaelic song, held on both local and national levels), walk “easily” around the town – Stornoway, one assumes – but are at risk of metaphorical entrapment. There are 3 different references to “nets”, almost as if the environment the girls exist in is one that is constantly threatening to catch them:

They giggle
or go blank
or bat back smart answers
to the young gods (sealegs,
cuffed wellingtons) moving easily
among nets and hooks and weights.
Luminous floats,
wolf whistles. (Lochhead 111)

For all the easiness, floatiness and luminosity, there is an inevitability about the fate that will befall the girls as a result of the meetings with these local “gods”:

Trouble is this town’s too small.

They've twice trawled around the circuit
of mainstreet and back round church street,
sneered at every white-net Sunday hat with streamers
in the Pakistani draper's shop display.

In the autumn there's the nursing. (Lochhead 111)

Circled by church and communal expectation – that “mainstreet” – and informed by a narrow, perhaps even racist denigration of cultural hybridity and interchange, their fate seems naturally bound by expectations of religion and familial responsibility (the inevitability of “there's the nursing”). The (translated) Gaelic song “Golden Harvest” circles round to become, at the end of the section, the hair-dye “Harvest Gold”:

At Woolworth's beauty counter
one smears across the back of her hand
the colour of her next kiss.

The other nets in her wiremesh basket

Sea Witch.

Harvest Gold. (Lochhead 111)

Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* had tried to “fly by” the “nets” of “nationality, language, religion”, nets which are flung at the “soul of a man” in Ireland to “hold it back from flight” (Joyce 220). In the apparent updating of this in “Outer:” the nets are associated with the traps of male desire, religious stereotyping and advertising: whether they are flown by or accepted is another matter. Any attempt at individual or personal freedom is bound by

convention, expectation and consumerism – the “inner” cannot escape the “outer”, and the ways in which the desires of the “inner” are already circumscribed and commodified, even the desire for alterity and the rebellious claiming of previously proscribed versions of femininity: being a “Sea Witch” is now a matter of make-up. Clearly, the commodification of identity and rebellion isn’t just an island phenomenon, but the boundedness of an island does make such constrictions more acute and palpable: there are on the island, as in section VI “incomers”, and so, therefore, some who are more “inner” than others.

If there is an over-riding difference between the experience of the “Outer:” and the “Inner” in Lochhead’s poem, it appears to come in the complexity of experience. “Outer:” stages a meeting with a linguistic other, and the narrator’s stumbling attempts to master even black and white truths. The poem describes how “Laura” is repeating phrases at the Beginner’s Gaelic competition in the Mod: these are phrases which “we stumble after her, repeat. / Is e seò tigh ban /Is e seò tigh dubh. This is a white house. This is a black house” (Lochhead 112). By “Inner” (no colon) the bluntness of the tones (black and white) has been made murkier and more nuanced, to reveal a spectrum of visual engagement that did not map in direct ways onto an anglophone experience of the world:

last week on Lewis

Jim said he’d found the Gaelic words for colours

weren’t colours as he thought he knew them...

rather a word might mean

red or reddish-brown earthbound.

another black or deep or purplish –

the colour of darkness.

blue a clearness...

“glàs”

might mean green or even calm-sea grey.

more a chroma of the weather

. colour of the mind. (Lochhead 113)

Rather than the binary opposition of black and white, there are shades of grey: the “chromatic” understanding of colour (and any form of truth, perhaps) as a matter of relationship, of relative intensity, and of internal projection (the “colour of the mind”).

The self, here, can affect some form of individual freedom: the opening lines are “Make a change / if you get the weather”, and the phrase “make a change” reverberates through the poem:

I’d like

an art that could marry

the washed-up manmade

and the wholly natural

make a change (Lochhead 115)

Across “Outer:” and “Inner”, in other words, the fact of “Falling to bits” becomes the opportunity for change. The transformative, “inner”, art that is possible is working towards a “collage on the windowledge” [of flotsam and jetsam], rather than

towards a complete unity. Even a “heart urchin / rare to find an unbroken one / perfect from the sea” belies its “perfectedness”:

shake it you can tell

something small and dry is shrivelled inside.//

shake it and your page

is seasoned with smithereens of sand. (Lochhead 115)

By the end of “Inner” we are in Wallace Stevens’s world of “description is revelation” and the fractalic sense that if you stare at a heart urchin – as you might an island – you may unsettle your previous conceptions and worldviews: “don’t even know / if I like cities or small places”, the poem/poet interjects. But since both “cities” and “small places” will bring their distinct infinite variations “not even knowing” seems to be the only possible position to take to either (Stevens 344; Lochhead 115).

Meg Bateman and Isolation

Meg Bateman’s poems share with Lochhead’s *Islands* the sense that an island way of knowing and being *is* different. This difference is, on one level, a matter of geography or psycho-geography: the accommodations humans make to the landscape, and the changes in human relationships wrought by their environmental conditions. In this, the distinction between island and “mainland” might not be as important in Bateman’s work as that between Highland and Lowland. Thus, passing a car on a single-track road “in the Highlands” – as in “Cosamhlachd” from *Transparencies* (2014) – becomes “dannsa sùbailte sèimh” [a slow, supple dance]: a

matter of eye-contact, of giving way and beckoning (Bateman, *Transparencies* 26–27).ⁱⁱⁱ On the “rathad mòr” [the “double track”, literally “big” road] she is, instead,

gun diù do chàil ach mo smuaintean fhèin,

's mi dràibheadh gu saor, gun bhacadh. //

'S tearc a-nist a dh'fheumar

stad do dhuine eile,

is 's tearc a smèideas duine air ais.

[aware of nothing but my own thoughts,

driving free, without hindrance. //

Rarely need I pull in

for another to pass,

rarely does another wave back.] (Bateman, *Transparencies* 26–27)

“Freedom” – the freedom of the double-tracked or “big road”, the ability to follow your own track without minding others – clearly comes at a price here, in terms of isolation, of not being waved back to. This might appear to be a hearkening after community or communalism (the thrown-togetherness and interdependence of life on an island), and indeed Bateman’s poems, like Lochhead’s *Islands*, are relatively heavily populated with crofters, fishermen and women, islanders dancing, groups at funerals (almost, one might think, more populated than the islands themselves). But if “Cosamhlachd” uses dancing as a parable for community, it is only a “likeness”, or appearance, rather than a reality: there is still a physical distance, and the most that can be hoped for is eye contact, beckoning, gesturing.

To some extent, everyone is an island in Bateman's poetry; but the fact that they are not, however, "entire of themselves" is one of the main emotional and philosophical drivers in her work. There is a yearning, a desire for community or unity or communion that can never be achieved. So in "Pòg" [Kiss] – from *Soirbheas / Fair Wind* (2007) – every "ciad phòg" [first kiss] is a "pòig-dhealachaidh" [kiss of parting], and there is a metaphorical Minch surrounding each speaker:

Ar ciad phòg na pòig-dhealachaidh,
is m'inntinn ga luasgadh fad an fheasgair
le blàths do bhilean,
mo chridhe ga lìonadh uair eile
le iargain, gun fheum, is eadarainn
an Cuan Sgìth is fichead bliadhna...

[Our first kiss a kiss of parting
and all evening my mind rocked
by the warmth of your lips,
my heart again swollen
by a useless longing, the Minch
and twenty years between us...] (Bateman, *Soirbheas* 80–81)

This is a repeated trope. Reading "Gun drochaid ann", from *Òrain Ghaoil* (1990) it is perhaps important to remember that this poem pre-dates the opening of the Skye Bridge:

Gun drochaid ann,
chuir thu do chùl rium,

dhùin thu do chluasan ri m'ghuidhe,
rinn thu tàir air fochann mo dhùthcha. //

Ach nan robh thu air làmh a shìneadh,
bhithinn air gearradh a-null
ann an cruinn-learn thugad.

[Without a bridge,
you put your back to me,
you closed your ears to my prayer (*or beseeching or curse*),
you mocked the cornblades of my country. //

But if you had stretched out a hand,
I would have leapt across

to you in a standing jump.] (Bateman, *Òrain Ghaoil* 90) My translation

Islandness, here, is a matter of physical and emotional isolation, a trope that is repeated in Liptrot's *The Outrun* where she notes that "It's been some time since anyone's touched me. This week I've seen more seals than people, noses uppermost in the bay" (Liptrot 142). Or in the Lewis poet Anne Frater's "Eilean Phabail" [Bayble Island] where the poet is – like the island – 'na dhà leth' [divided]:

Faisg air daoine
gan coimhead,
gan cluintinn,
ach tha rug iad orm –
tha mi ro fhad' air falbh.

[Near people,
watching them,

hearing them,

but they cannot hear me –

distance is maintained.] (MacNeil 212–13)

This is not to say that physical isolation or the lack of physical human contact is solely an island phenomenon; again, however, psycho-geographical tendencies perhaps lead one more quickly to the realisation of our physical distance: of lights glittering across a kyle which it requires a “standing jump” to cross.

In Bateman’s work this isolation, this incomplete islandness, is also a matter of language. The amorphous linguistic otherness that pervades Lochhead’s “Outer:” and “Inner” is more present for Bateman as an (exceptionally skilled and authoritative) learner of Gaelic. Bateman was born and raised in Edinburgh, and learnt Gaelic while a student at Aberdeen University; she has long lived in Tarskavaig on the Isle of Skye, where she is a professor at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic college; and she has edited and translated multiple volumes of poetry from earlier centuries as well as four collections of her own poetry. Her work suggests that – like many Gaelic speakers, native or learner – she has a sense that a fuller Gaelic existence always existed prior to now: in general, Gaelic Utopianism tends most commonly towards an Edenic past rather than a imagined future. As “Tiodhlacadh” [Burial] from *Soirbheas* suggests, we are always leaving the burial of “cruinne-cè / nach eil ann tuilleadh” [a universe / suddenly not there], and are unable to reach a fluid, communal entirety of existence (Bateman, *Soirbheas* 170–71). That this nostalgic utopianism might be related to the cultural “tourism” of the islands and the “Edenic and unreal” appearance of the Hebrides critiqued by

Crichton Smith in problematic ways is implied by “Tròndairnis” [Trotternish], again from *Soirbheas*. This is Bateman’s only concrete poem, and the form foregrounds and calls into question the relationship between textual layout and the landscape the poem mirrors, evokes and – perhaps – deconstructs. What our eyes do to and with the text is all important. The shape of the poem – and here it is reproduced in full – replicates the long-term geological slippage of the Trotternish ridge on the Isle of Skye:

An seo chithear an talamh a’ tuisleachadh,
chithear a chìr uaibhreach ga criomadh;
chithear slìos na beinne a’ sleamhnachadh,
ceum air cheum fad na slighe dhan chladach,
ceum air cheum dol fo uachdar na mara.

Thig daoine às a h-uile cèarn
gus a’ charraig chruaidh fhaicinn na ruith,
gus an saoghal fhaicinn mar staidhre bheò,
homo sapiens a’ nochdadh an aon frèam a-mhàin,
is coltas air na ceumannan gu bheil iad nan stad.

[Here you see the land lurching,
its frilled comb fragile;
you see the slope of the hill slipping,
step on step down to the shore,
step on step below the surface of the sea.

People come the world over
to see the solid rock in flux,
to see the Earth as an escalator,
homo sapiens caught in a single frame
on steps that momentarily seem to stand still.]

(Bateman, *Soirbheas* 54–55)

Geological tourism is not the only type of tourism at play here. The opening “An seo” [“here”] directs the reader not just to the evoked landscape of Trotternish, but also to the poem, with its Gaelic and English textures (it was published with the two texts *en face*). Reading the poem it is not the land that we see “a’ tuisleachadh” [lurching], but – because of the lineation – the language, as the poem slips from Gaelic to English across the gutter of the page that separates the original from the translation. Geological tourism here becomes a tendentious metaphor for “Whig history tourism” of the type practised by Johnson in his *Journey to the Western Isles*: his thwarted desire to see “a people of peculiar appearance, and a system of antiquated life ... savage virtues and barbarous grandeur”; or as Bateman’s poem might put it, “gus an saoghal fhaicinn mar staidhre bheò, /homo sapiens a’ nochdadh an aon frèam a-mhàin” [to see the Earth as an escalator / homo sapiens caught in a single frame] (Johnson and Boswell 73–74). The geological frame of reference – its erosions and decays – encompasses cultural concerns, and in so doing queries the reader’s interest in that process of erosion. It is not possible to read this poem – and the Gaelic flowing into the English – innocently, without feeling your eye to be that of the commodifying, consuming tourist. As Bateman had noted in

“Iomallachd” [“Remoteness”] from the earlier *Aotromachd agus dàin eile / Lightness and other poems* (1997) it is an irony that it is “luimead na h-oirthir / a shàraich na daoine / is a chuir that lear iad” [“the bleakness of the coast / that wore the people down / and sent them overseas”] is what draws people to the Highlands today, with “na làraichean suarach a dh’fhàg iad / cho miannaichte ri gin sin rìoghachd” [the miserable sites they left / as desired as any in the land] (Bateman, *Aotromachd* 48–49; MacNeil 176–77). “Desire” might be felt not just for the land here, but – with our tourist eyes – for a lingering trace of misery.

Puffballs

Linguistic otherness – with opposed dynamics of curiosity and isolation – is also crucial to Jen Hadfield’s island poetry, and her coming to terms with Shetlandic dialect. Hadfield was born and raised in Cheshire but, after a spell in Canada, has made her home on Shetland, and much of her poetry traces the process of learning to thole the islands’s “blashy-wadder” (wet and unsettled weather), of exploring the “daed-traa” (the slack of the tide), and redefining or re-embodying the words “Gish”, “Hüm” or “Snuskit” (Hadfield, *Nigh-No-Place* 31, 35, 36, 38, 39). These examples all appear in Hadfield’s second collection, *Nigh-no-Place* (2008), but I’d like to finish on two images from her third collection, *Byssus* (2014), which are not dependent on her relationship to Shetlandic, but make more general points about islands, or poems about islands, or indeed the idea of stanzas as islands. The first is from the prose poem “The Word ‘Died’”, from the sequence “Definitions”. Here, “died” is “almost an island” (and, because the form is of note, what follows is the complete poem):

It's a cliff-sided stack: sheer, almost an island. A human can't stand upon that high, tilted pasture but life crowds its cliffs: sheep and nesting maas, the waste-not plants of heath and moor. You hear the waves breaking but can't see them. You shrink down into yourself as you reach the edge: getting your head around where you are. It's marvellous. It's awful. It is always on. Like a massive *and* unfolding its wings, and mantling. It was here all along, reached by Shirva and the derelict mills; turf sweating in the hot, midgy smirr. (Hadfield, *Byssus* 35)

If the word "died" is *almost* an island, that is because it isn't quite entirely disconnected from experience, isn't quite "isolated". Like any threshold or bourne, it is one that we can work our way up to the edge of without knowing, ultimately, when we are at it: death is a concept that we can only (and can't help but) "tilt" towards, without approaching; the word "died" is one that *almost* outstrips our ability to comprehend it. On an existential level, this poem draws on the careful and ethical acknowledgement of unknowable otherness that Kathleen Jamie – one of Hadfield's key exemplars – undertakes in her "writing towards nature": an attitude, as I argue elsewhere, of "tilting" (see Mackay). On a linguistic level, however, the poem also rejects the "marvellous" metaphorizing tendencies of language, as a means of approaching islands meaning. In "The Word 'Died'" a simile – or the tendency towards creating similes – meets something that predates it, and is beyond it: "Like a massive *and* unfolding its wings, and mantling. It was here all along..." The simile is incomplete, the second half of the comparison absent: what it is "like" we cannot know (and so we can't, then, even be sure what "it" is), beyond its scale and action, "massive" and "unfolding": the temptation is there, however, for this

reader at least to read it as death, creation and a gigantic gull – “maa” – all at once. The absolute isolation of a sea-stack is beyond the capacity of language to compare and contain it, apart from in the understanding that it was here before us and our language: this too is true of “death”, which we can only gesture towards with the word “died”, which itself stymies our comprehension.

It is important that this is a prose poem. The metaphor of stanza as island or sea-stack does not hold, and the idea of a poem as archipelago begins to be unpicked (although since this is a series of prose-poems it could still perhaps be read in this way). In “The Puffballs”, however, the metaphor is exploded, but in a fruitful, life-giving way. This, at least, is the visual conceit of the poem, with individual stanzas representing fungal “puffballs” rather than islands. They are dotted around the white-space, centre-aligned to form little fungal heads which, with the turn of the page, reveal one giant “Puffball” head that bursts:

Its gob gapes:

Their yellow teeth this amph of moorit smoke, across

of blinding business, sheep assay with

nova it squats, rocking its stoor

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What the poem “means” is unclear, but the ending suggests that any meaning might come only with an explosion of “doubleness” (of the “amph” that means “on both sides”), a giving away, a “hiccupping out of spores”. But this hiccupping of spores necessarily suggests also the dissolution of the physical self. The “puffballs” are corporeal in their make-up, containing or evoking the (female) body: “buboes”, “fine, / private hair”, “pocked sphincter”, “(a female smell / on your fingers)” (Hadfield, *Byssus* 27–28).

These spores, drifting off into the nothingness of the page, are one endpoint of an island journey: the internalisation, and embodiment of Lochhead’s “smithereens of sand”, or the shift from a geological metaphor for island-existence and island

tourism to a metaphor based on the alienness and incomprehensibility of fungal life (although even fungus tourism too may now be having its day). This though is another leap of communality, beyond the human, into a form of identification with the natural world that undermines any idea of physical isolation or social entrapment: there is a level of existence on which such concerns simply drift off on the air. This is not quite, perhaps, the kind of “story of their time” that Kay feels it is “a writer’s responsibility to tell”, or if it is, it is dependent on an understanding of “their time” that is not limited by the news cycle or the Gregorian calendar: Hadfield’s first collection, *Almanacs* (2005), is very much interested in the creation of one’s own timescales. If poets do “tell the time”, as Kay suggests, it is perhaps with the constant awareness of clock-bells tolling, of “leaden circles dissolv[ing] in the air”, of our individual “time”, like rocks, being ground down, dispersing into a communal wash; and it might be that “time” will work quite differently on each island she ventures or indeed, for each woman that undertakes such an odyssey. For each poet travelling to an island perhaps it is inevitable – following Donne – that what is discovered is a lack of ‘intirety’; where this on a national level might mean a welcoming porosity and openness to the world, on a personal level there is the risk that it will see the self reduced, irreversibly, to spores.

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ⁱ There are, at the latest count, twenty-four pages of poems on the website of the Scottish poetry library tagged with the word “island” and Kevin MacNeil’s skimming-the-surface anthology *These Islands We Sing* runs to over 240 pages. As MacNeil notes, “Scotland has about 800 offshore islands, 94 of which are inhabited”: the absence of other human beings might be one of the attractions of most Scottish islands (MacNeil xxiii).

ⁱⁱ *Islands* was first published by the Print Studio Press in 1978; since this is relatively difficult to procure now, I refer here instead to *Dreaming Frankenstein* where the volume is collected alongside other of Lochhead’s poems.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bateman renders the Gaelic title “Cosamhlachd” as “Allegory” in her English translation; however, the Gaelic can also mean likeness, resemblance, probability or parable.