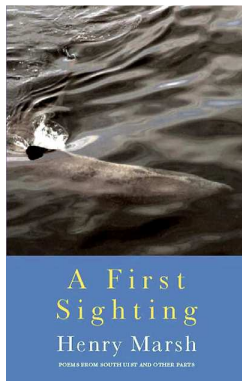




HENRY MARSH POETRY

SELECTED POEMS



Evening at Gearraidh Bhailteas
A First Sighting
Waking

From *A **First Sighting***
92 page hardback
Maclean Dubois 2005
ISBN 8-9514478-1-7

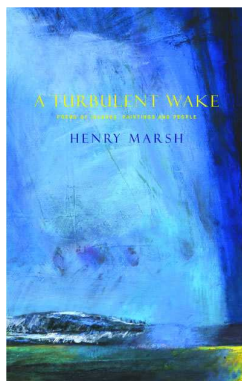
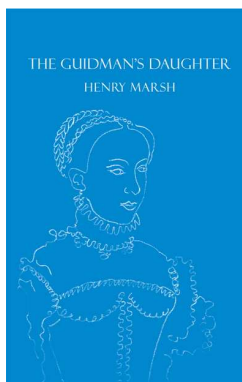


Figure in a Landscape
Betula odorata
Tegenaria domestica
Seasonal
Moment in Blue
North Atlantic 1941
Eriskay
Ebb Tide
For Emily

From *A **Turbulent Wake***
74 page hardback
Maclean Dubois 2007
ISBN 978-0-9514470-4-8



Wind Song
Encounter
Sleepless
Autumn Spider
At Fotheringhay
At Falkland Palace

From ***The Guidman's Daughter***
95 page hardback
Maclean Dubois 2009
Distributed by Birlinn Ltd.
ISBN 9-780951-447062

Evening at Gearraidh Bhailteas

Grey skies bestow
their own graces. In muted
light, purple vetch
and finger-rooted orchid
retire in modesty,
while buttercup and yellow
silverweed are bright,
alternative, emergent
stars. Above the miles
of white, deserted beach,
three gulls pass
in close formation, intent
on their patrol. They break right,
swooping and yammering
over grey rocks. A dozen
oystercatchers dabble
in the wash of the tide. The grey
sea has a closer horizon
than the land. Its gentle arc
is held within the wide arms
of the endless bay. To complete
an improbable perfection,
by the road across the machair,
in a hint of peat-reek
carried on the edge of the wind,
a man is mending a tractor,
singing in Gaelic a song
whose melody follows the contours
of the Uist landscape
close as a limpid burn.
top

A First Sighting

Some careless geometer has tipped
his set-squares into the Sound of Rum.
Yet order still prevails –
for pairs of black triangles ride
in tandem, more or less aligned
to the north. A hundred yards to port
they gently cut the tilting glass.

Basking sharks, the captain says.
A shoal of twelve. For a moment
inner and outer, word and world
mesh. Who knows how
long this fish has lurked in the murk
of the mind, mostly invisible, a wraith
summoned by the odd book or report.
Three tons of fish – a weighty
congruence. But the difficult things –
like love, or God or magisterial
death? The Geometer's full knowledge
must always be too late.
I watch you standing at the rail – and think
of all the paths that never cross.
top

Waking

From the beach near Smercleit
on this calm day you see
that the fingers of land and ocean
are interlocked. In April,
the hustle of waves and batting
wind distracted
from this bed-rock relation.
An intimacy is sustained
whose limiting possibilities
never vary. But
shapes change with the tide's
rhythms and the vagaries
of light and water and season
perpetually transfigure.
Even as we look, grey
gneiss, olive wrack,
white sand and shifting
tones of azure, call
into question the abstraction
of sameness. And so
you lay by me this morning
the same and never the same,
a warm, fragile sentience
overwhelming in the mystery
of what is most familiar.
top

Figure in a Landscape

*'S luath ceum fear na droch-mhnatha
air a' mhachair Uisteach*

Squall-swept – the machair.
Hunched against rain – where
is the wife of the man who walks
without a coat? There is nothing
between his head and the Atlantic.
The horizon is a fiery ring.
To the east, the wind searches
the rocks of Ruigh Choinnich.
What is to be found? A bodach's
mantle is enfolding them.
Now he is walking the track
in an under-light of gold. Shadows
of barley are rippling like water;
the grass is in delicate agitation –
irises are restless blades.
He reads from a loch how light
returning to the light fulfils
a luminous purpose. Perhaps
he was beguiled by surfaces.
She is as deep as water.
He walks till twilight folds
behind him. A lapwing cries out
in his turbulent wake.
How long can summer hold
against the mind he carries?
top

Betula odorata

Virginal girl-grace – she shifts
and sighs in a rainy wind.
Ten years ago I rescued
a seedling from the glaur dumped
by a new path struck
for walkers. Brown birch,
they say – have they seen the dark
smoulder in her limbs, that spirit
of place made substance?
Compelled, each spring
I've thrown away more
garden-centre candy –
her delicate beauty reigns
with the steel of the feminine.
Her lost kingdom is anemone,
cowberry, magic agaric,
hart's tongue beaded
in the spray of a cascade.
Already love-wise, she knows
the rending beauty of modesty,
how subtlety seduces.
Year by year, she works
her slow transfiguration
of the dumb earth at her root
into the song of her coronal.
Let be, she and her sisters
would transform the world.
top

broken
quills
with a few sparse hairs. There's something
vulnerable in beauty.
But the eyes!
From a battery of cameras – black
pin-head
polyps
undersea –
your brain collects
and pastes
the pieces
of a spider world.
Imprisoned now
within an endless
glass
horizon
your monitors display
a nightmare –
a multiple
ghost
distorting
in a circus
mirror.
I carry
you out
to the Autumn
evening's
wind
and rain –
make
your life difficult.
Find
your way
from there.
top

Seasonal

St John's Church

Through the austerity of winter nothing
so grand as a voyage, rather taking
a few tentative steps towards loving
the world a little in a landscape
where even the inanimate things
are shy as children, turn their eyes
away. For a moment the wine in the glass
catches the firelight, becomes
almost accessible, and in the lane,
snowdrops are struggling to disclose
themselves near a dog, blind in its barking,
agitated by a passage that was never a threat.
In the endless, wishful inventiveness
of our compulsions, we need intruders
to justify our scenes. So a song,
wailing in its loss, invites complicity,
flaunts the spell of its recessive mirrors.
Now in summer the edges are blurred,
if only because the lazy self is slurred
into the landscape by the dazzle of countless
claims. But in this church, light
through light is offering itself at points
of proximate access. Lilies, sculpted
in momentary reception, like snowdrops
in the lane, at least endorse a place
of possible meeting, while stone lifts
in arches that define white calyces.
But gargoyles whisper of absurdity,
constrain the monumental summer.
Yet moving in and out of light
you step beyond complicity to read
what's inarticulate in words of stone
and season. You find yourself in all –
or lost in stubborn, eccentric elements.
top

Moment in Blue

You catch Picasso's Woman Ironing
as if through a leaded window. You wince
at the ache in the skeletal shoulder
from the iron's heavy plod. Her head
is an intolerable burden, her eye a void.
Though protected by rags, her hands seem
hardly safe from the scorching metal.
A woman in labour delivers the weight
of her world – and our complicity in it.
In a final vertigo the frame vanishes –
you enter the blue of her winter room.
It's hung round the edge of a doorway –
so the crowd is made to flow faster.
Few are stopping to look.
The hanging protects their innocence.
top

North Atlantic 1941

What did it mean, docking at the quay
in Brooklyn, Liberty's torch dark
against the sky? Did you scan with relief
the blue-paved bay of dreams?
Death, wrote Wittgenstein,
is not an event in life – small
consolation for the dying. We just
got on with it, you said,
as if the sluice in the steel trap,
the haemorrhage of bodies' heat
in the lifting oil and flotsam,
the opening jaws of the Atlantic,
had been censored even from your nightmares.
Or was it, that the buzz that betrayed
a horror survived – the Officers' Club
on 42nd Street, the glitz, the girls –
resolved into another frantic drowning
in the canyon rivers of Manhattan?
top

Eriskay

From the photographs of Bernard Kissling
Threads of song they spun
and carried on their backs, rich
with harmonies of summer infused
from flower, root, leaf
and crotal from the rocks.
They measured time in lullabies
of spinning, the thump and lilt
of waulking, and always
with the counterpoint of wave and tide,
the movements of the seasons.
What strange compulsion
in the photographs – lost lives
in black and white, of quiet
smiles and seemingly
modest serenity.
Where are the acid passions,
the brutalities, the maniacal,
raking seas, the fishers
gnawed and broken, wrapped
in shrouding tangle?
Woven, perhaps, in the darker
tones of song and story,
above all, in the plangent
beauty that carries us far
beyond nostalgia.
You see in the eyes their difficult
passage – winter wolftime,
to spring and harvest, island
to island through calm
or turbulent seas.
top

Ebb Tide

On the harbour pier that holds the bay
in the crook of its arm a small
crowd has gathered. Their eyes stray
into the murmuring conversation
then turn, agin, sea-ward. The wind
is restless on the ebb. A pair
of worthies suck on pungent briars.

Their quiet talk sidles
from mouths holed by pipe stems.
Their theme is genealogy. Three men
have drowned in the eight knot
current. There is nothing to be seen.

Though you might say that the tide
scowls and wrinkles between us
and the rocks that rise in the swell
like the back of some ancient animal.

A wee boy holding
his mother's hand – awed, bewildered.
He sees no wreckage. The world is
as it was – though the knowing
engages a different looking. It's the failure
to find significance that is
significant. Though the tide-race will
ever afterwards provoke
anxiety. Gulls slap along the timbers
seemingly unaware of that momentous
voyage into the nothing to be seen.
top

For Emily

29th March, 2005

Flat on your back you fret
for the womb-curve.
You'll settle for being held.
In your sleeping, we arrive at the edge
of what we are willing to believe.
All night your mother
was alert for endless confirmation,
wondered at the blessing;
tremors of doubt passed
like shivers under a March sun.
You are the completion
for which we strive. Our threads
unwind in silly knots. Pray
that you come to view our loving
damage with compassion.
Your mother reaches to touch
her mother's joyful assurance.
As for grandpa – the room shifts –
a gentle but decisive displacement:
it's time that he grew up.
top

Wind Song

Take from this wind the songs
of scarred rocks, shot silks
of fine rain and sun-burst
revelations, the folding
agitation of yellow flags
and buttercups in nodding, curt,
acknowledgement of what passes,
three grey ponies bowed
under the spume of their manes,
and charged crests running
the spine of the Atlantic horizon.

Then at dawn, through the whoom
and whine, the wind's polyphony,
I wake at a cuckoo shout and see
the yellow dancers, their bend
and flow, that stubborn, fleeting
resilience. And turn to what I have,
our moments in this turbulence. Hear
the delicate breath of your sleeping
and think of all I never say.
For I am like the wind's damage –
but dumb to sing a simple yes.

Encounter

'Bonjour. Je m'appelle Emily...'
Solemnly, she's addressing a toad
in her one morsel of French. What strange
impulse moves this three-year-old?
Bent by a forest track,
she's parting the glittering grasses
with a twig. Instinctive politeness?
A sort of reverence for a creature
whose world, she knows, is beyond
the limits of her understanding?

She gives her one resource –
disclosure of her precious name.
What power she offers in her innocence –
the single word that an ancient spell
might always have been prepared for.
And suddenly you see how a princess
might deserve her prince – that leap
into simple consideration.
But stubbornly brown and warty
he shuffles on. She skips away.

Oh child, child how can I carry
the burden of your wisdom?

Sleepless

Uibhist a Deas,
I saw you from Balranald,
I saw your hills
and the sea, blue-black
and turquoise.
I ran to the south,
as the sun
fell behind the machair
I ran
to Cille Pheadair.

And the base of the cloud
became the sweep
of your shores,
the piled
cloud your amethyst
and purple mountains,
a Uist of the clouds
set in a sea
of orange light,
its reefs
and archipelagos
in running gold.
Time and the eye
stretched wide
stretched
into the heart's
peace.

But in the night I cried
put away your beauty,
turn away,
and let me sleep.
Oh mistress,
mistress –
when I close my eyes
they burn
with your light.

But the dawn is blessedly bleak,
confirms
you a creature of time.
Like the rest of us.

Autumn Spider

The spider in the bath
is stubborn. What drives him
up the glacial curve
to the point of losing traction?

He sees that walking upright
on the planet is perverse, condemns
to an infinite circularity –
how odd to live
with your head stuck in the blue,
to dangle upside down,
absorbed as a fly sucking
on a sugar-weeping apple.

In daring aerial experiments
he explores alternative perspectives
sustained by impossibly thin
ropes. Studies the obscenely
hairy, downcast human
crowns and the queer way
their limbs flick forwards.

His dream is to complete his arc
and walk upon the stars.

At Fotheringhay

February, 1587

Spent chestnut flowers, flooding
the gutters. Hawthorns swaying,
heavy in fretted lace. Your looking
is careful, as if you half
expected some hint encrypted in the day
to open and disclose an anguish,
a tremor at the root or in the enigmatic
mirror of the Nene. But
nothing speaks except tranquillity.

*

They brought her in September.
She watched the mists drift trees
along slow horizons,
lost herself in October's amber afternoons,
its bitter-sweet deceptions,
saw parables in light and water, the abyss
descend beyond the edge
of comforting reflections. Each dusk
drew her further into the dark.
Cold passed like spirit through the stone,
settled in more vulnerable bone,
took shapes in sleep that stretched
into the gestures of the proximate dead.
Waking, she'd sail free on the gold
and scarlet of winter mornings,
foundering in the lapse to a grey day.
Bowed, on her knees, did she read
that prophetic gesture as she breathed the ash
of penitence to a cold flame –
and reached at joy? Held tight
in that knot of circumstance,
her dignity defiant, she wrested her meaning
from a stubborn February dawn.

That endless, fleeting night, elusive
as the scent of flowers, she'd touched
on moments of serenity, drifted in Carver's
silver labyrinth – *O good Jesus...*
O sweet Jesus...

And the edge
falls.
Between
word
and word.
As jackdaws

At Falkland Palace

2008

Red Tod's lassie – a girl
who'd wear breeches at tennis
or skelping after deer hounds.
You can see the frozen faces,
black affrontit. She'd climb
to the priest's room. The stones
are worn as if by tides. You might
be walking on her shadow.
He'd sit, crow black,
under the dazzle from his window.
Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.

Fingers pressed together,
behind the venialities, he'd imagine
her circle of Hell. Did he find,
by that light in her face, few
sins of intention? But animal spirits,
tied down by the jesses? Perplexed,
he'd see how our strengths can destroy us.
And late the struggle to be wise.
He remembers her tawny eyes,
and the Maries capering, their laughter
ringing in the winter courtyard.

*It cam' wi a lass and it will gang
wi a lass.* Then he turned his face
to the wall. Only the wind sings
in Knox's rubble; round gables,
blackened from a Rough Wooing.
In that February dawn old Scotland
limps away. She carries our
language in the wallet on her back.
A sad tale for the Gaberlunzie Man.