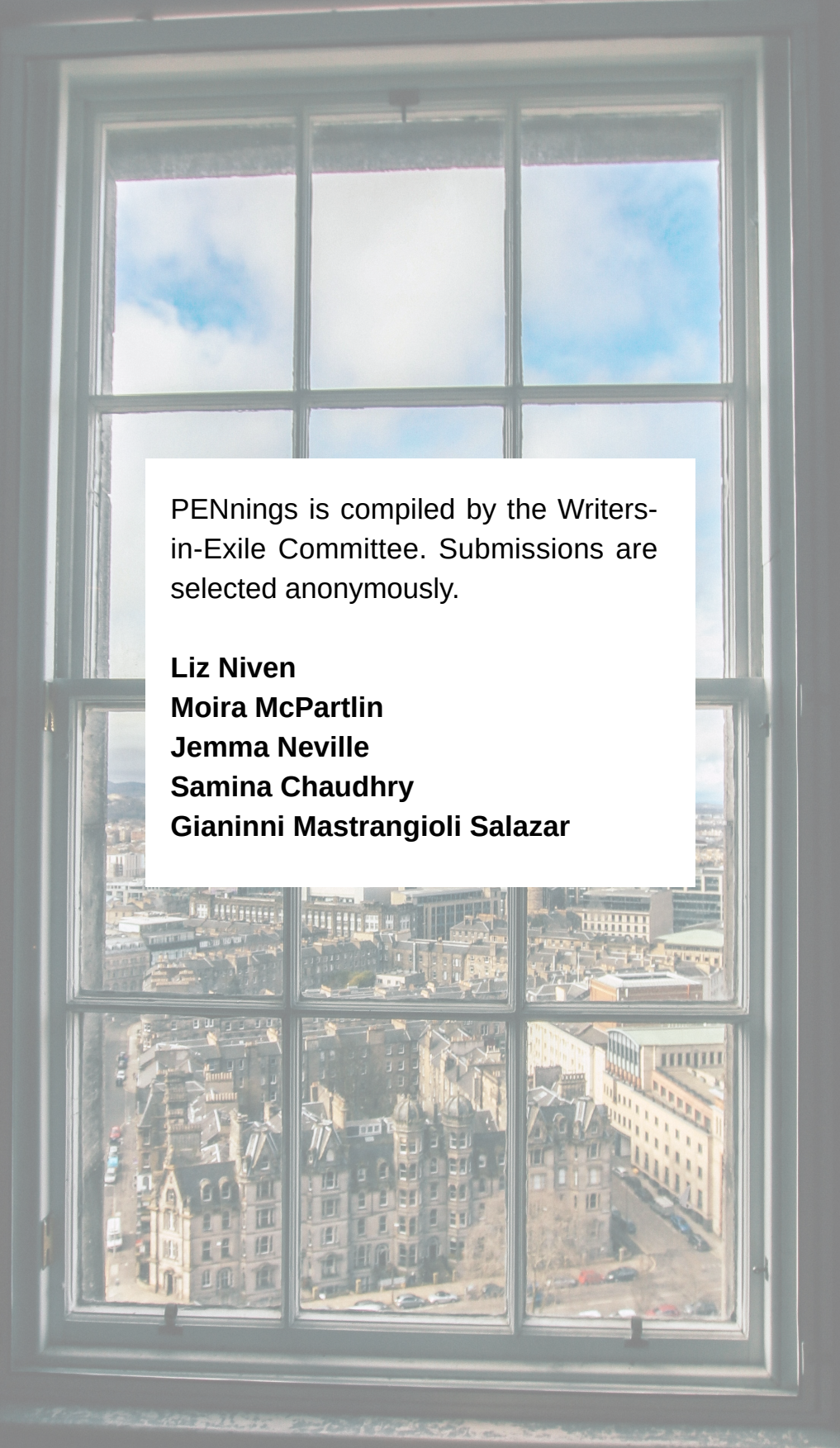


PENNING

JOY



DECEMBER 2020



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

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Joy

The year is wearin to the wane,
An day is fadin west awa;
Loud raves the torrent an the rain,
An dark the cloud comes down the shaw.

But let the tempest tout an blaw,
Upon his loudest winter horn,
Good night, an joy be wi ye a -
We'll maybe meet again the morn.

James Hogg, 'Good night, an joy be wi ye a

FOREWORD

This year is the 250th anniversary of the birth of Scottish poet, James Hogg, 'The Ettrick Shepherd'. It is particularly appropriate, then, and in this singular year, that the theme of the December issue coincides with that of one of his best known songs: a wish for joy, in the face of a departing year, for those from whom we are parting. Here, we have joy in its diverse dimensions, foregrounded by the recognition of the work, and activism, of Varavaro Rao, a writer who celebrates, above all, the universal bonds that bind us all: we are all 'related' as Chitra Ramaswamy highlights.

The work that follows is united by its humanity, and exuberance. Prose pieces include Lizzie Elridge's topical piece, encountering joy in motion; Lizzie Husm Bertelsen brings powerful imagery to bear on her treatment, in English and Danish, of joy's place within a range of emotions, in body and soul. The poetry which follows takes various approaches to joy.

Anne Connolly's 'Joy-Bird' delights in the associations, and inspiration of birds. A.C. Clarke finds 'Small Pleasures' in the commonplace, and our place within it.





Donald Adamson's 'Graced' gently remembers one who loved and was loved; his 'Saicrament o Airth' finds joy, too, in 'hert-brekin beauty'. In Jen Gray's 'Joy', a fleeting moment of exultation is captured, quickly and movingly. Mandy Hagith's 'Song of the Earth' is economical, taking the theme of joy away from the personal into the environmental: 'a long song / slow as the mountains'. The final piece, 'Aquarian', appropriate in treatment, as in the writer's name, is by Joy Hendry, 'I was born to float / on water'. For me, it was a great joy indeed to be Guest Editor on this special volume, which includes work of the finest quality, with the clearest of visions.

Dr Valentina Bold, Stirling

Dr Valentina Bold works freelance as a non-fiction writer, researcher, events' programmer and presenter. Formerly a senior academic, her books include 'Smeddum: A Lewis Grassie Gibbon Anthology', 'Robert Burns' Merry Muses of Caledonia' and 'James Hogg: A Bard of Nature's Making'. She co-organised 'James Hogg 250' with events in Scotland and the USA, culminating at the National Library of Scotland, 11th February 2021.

**FEATURED
WRITER**



VARAVARA RAO

In this edition of PENnings we are featuring the Indian writer, Varavara Rao, now 80 years old.

At the time of writing, he has been admitted to hospital directly from prison. For decades, he has been seized and imprisoned for writing and demonstrating against the Government. Varavara was born in Warangal in 1940. He is a renowned poet, journalist, literary critic and public speaker.

His thesis on 'Telangana Liberation Struggle and Telugu Novel – A Study into Interconnection between Society and Literature' is considered to be a landmark in Marxist literary criticism in Telugu.

VARAVARA RAO

During one of his many incarcerations as a prisoner of conscience, he translated the work of Ngugi Wa Ngugi wa Thiong'o (the Kenyan novelist, activist and theorist of postcolonial literature) into Telugu, and wrote his own prison diary, Sahacharulu (1990), which was translated into English as Captive Imagination.

He has taught Telugu literature to graduate and undergraduate students for about 40 years and founded Srujana (creation), a forum for modern literature in Telugu, in 1966, successfully publishing until 1992.

He was one of the founders of Viplava Rachayitala Sangahm (Revolutionary Writers' Association), popularly known by its acronym Virasam, that supports and propagates Naxalite ideology and practice. He is associated with many progressive and revolutionary journals in Telugu.

A recent project 'conceived and realised' by Scottish PEN, 'Declarations' to commemorate the 14th century Declaration of Arbroath, included a Letter to Varavara Rao by Chitra Ramaswamy. She includes the following quote from Varavara:

**A man's death perturbs me
I may not have any acquaintance
I might not have heard the name
But when you know that he is a man
How can it be
That he is not related to you or me.**

Fittingly, we hope that highlighting this courageous writer, more people will now be acquainted with his name.

FICTION

Lizzie 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. In addition to academic and journalistic work, Lizzie's novel, *Vandalism* (Merlin Publishers 2015) was shortlisted for a National Book Prize in Malta and selected as one of the Best Books 2017 by Waterstones Byres Rd Glasgow.

LIZZIE ELDRIDGE

LIZZIE HUSM BERTELSEN

Lizzie Husm Bertlesen's written work has appeared in the online magazine the Northern Review, Dundee University's Review of Arts and DC Thomson's magazine My Weekly. She also has short stories published in 5 different anthologies in Denmark.



IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

Lizzie Eldridge

'We're the lucky ones,' we said, sneaking a look at each other as we passed by. The older folk had no right to cross our path. They should stay safely shut behind closed doors.

People who'd never run since they were at school heaved their bodies forwards in the quiet darkness. Dogs were bought en masse and new leads sold out on online stores. The park became as popular as Blackpool on a busman's holiday. The supermarket was suddenly alluring.

At first, it was a quick mad dash, terrified of invisible fears which lurked outside. Some of the more fastidious timed themselves and made a bolt for it right at the last minute. Those who dared to venture out twice in one cramped day prayed their neighbours weren't stealing sideways glances from behind protective curtains. 'At least the troops aren't on the streets,' one gaunt man laughed.

The trees were our companions, their shapes twisting and curling against the tenement windows. Architecture acquired a new dimension in the ghost-like evening stillness. A single car seemed an inexplicable intrusion, its intentions worthy of interrogation. Nobody drives a car these days.

Sometimes the loneliness hit you with such an all-consuming ache that your eyes smarted as you made your way through the deserted pathways. Great big unstoppable tears started flooding out all over your face in a place where normally you'd never be seen dead losing self-control but who was for caring? Only the lampposts learned your secrets and maybe the wee lassie at the checkout when you popped in simply to remind yourself that you were not alone after all. That somewhere, somehow, there were others in this eeriest of worlds.

In the beginning, it was all about numbers and letters which represented numbers or people or those who were in danger, under threat, or maybe potentially under threat, but we were all under threat were we not? Did they have to keep chucking these bloody numbers and letters and diagnostic predictions at us the whole bloody time? Or was this to give us something to focus on in case we lost track of which particular day of the same old bloody week it was? It was always the week that was.

Sandra, who lost her husband a year ago, regretted she hadn't got a cat. A cat would've helped, she mused.

Alex, who'd planned to spend the weekend with his parents, wished he'd stayed at uni. At least he could've amused himself with drugs and distance would mean he'd think of his Dad in a fonder light. Now he was smothered with the realisation that his father was even more of a primal wanker than he'd remembered and he had to confront this incarnation of idiocy on a twenty-four hour basis.

'Aye, of course black lives matter,' his father said, as the glare of the TV lit up his hardened face. 'But that doesn't mean you have to go tearing down statues, for pity's sake. And look at them all. No masks. No social distancing. What's the world coming to?'

Lorraine wished she was a million miles away. Every time, she'd promised herself this would be the last. She'd imagined getting a place of her own, a wee place big enough for the kids, and making sure he didn't have a clue where they'd gone. She'd dreamed about doing this when he was out at work. He'd get back and they'd have vanished. He'd go mental trying to find her, shouting at her friends that he'd kill them if they didn't tell him where she was.

And so she stayed. She couldn't bear the idea of someone getting hurt on her account. It was nobody else's fault but her own. She'd make an escape plan but it had to be fool-proof, secure. She couldn't leave anyone else in the firing line. She wished now and she wished with all her heart that she'd been so much quicker off the mark. She should've taken her chances even though she'd always feared they didn't exist. Right now, there was no exit point and her body ached through every angry day.

Daniel was happy, more or less. He wasn't quite sure who the woman was who came by in the morning and knew his name and was really very friendly given he couldn't place exactly where he knew her from. Sometimes he thought she was the same woman or a woman he'd met one hundred years ago or maybe it was a different person each time because he couldn't be certain that he'd spoken to this woman before or that she always had the same colour eyes. But then lots of people have the same colour eyes and lots of people have different coloured eyes so how are you supposed to know precisely who's who or how the hell they know you or, because nothing's impossible, why the hell they're pretending to know you? Why go to all that bother to befriend a stranger and make out you care about their wellbeing and ask you kind questions because it wasn't as if he had any money to offer her or

if he did, he had no idea where he'd stashed it, unless it was under the bed, which would explain why she, or, assuming they weren't all the same, all these various different people, kept fussing around while he was trying to rest, tucking in the sheets or whipping them away completely with the ruse they needed a wash when how many times do you really need to wash sheets in the average week? He was sure his wife – because everybody has a wife, don't they? – had never been so diligent in her day whenever exactly that was. Had she hidden his money beneath the bed? The fairies lived under the pillow. Maria's tooth fell out on the same day her Mum said they might have to stay at home for a very long time. When she woke up, there was a big shiny pound coin right there in her bed. Maria decided it was definitely worth not going out and contemplated living inside for the rest of her life. But on the thirteenth day, she felt angry and jealous. The girl next door had a garden. The tooth fairies obviously loved her. They gave her a trampoline. Maria rubbed her coin and made a wish as she watched the girl jumping up and up and down. On day seventeen, the girl saw Maria at the window and waved her arms around wildly, inviting her to join. Sandra smiled as she watched two small skinny girls go flying through the air. It was like settling down to an old movie, a lullaby of sound and motion. She breathed in full and deep.

Alex told his Dad exactly what he thought of him.

'You're seriously complaining because two wee girls are having fun?'

Lorraine was relieved that one of her kids seemed safe.

Daniel had a dream that night. The world was white and bodies were rising and falling, light and free. No-one disturbed his dreams and he kept his eyes closed, hushed and soothed by this rocking to and fro.

Far away, on the corner of an empty street, someone, somewhere, began to sing.



VESSELS / BEHOLDERE

Lizzie Husm Bertelsen

(English/Danish) Translation by the author

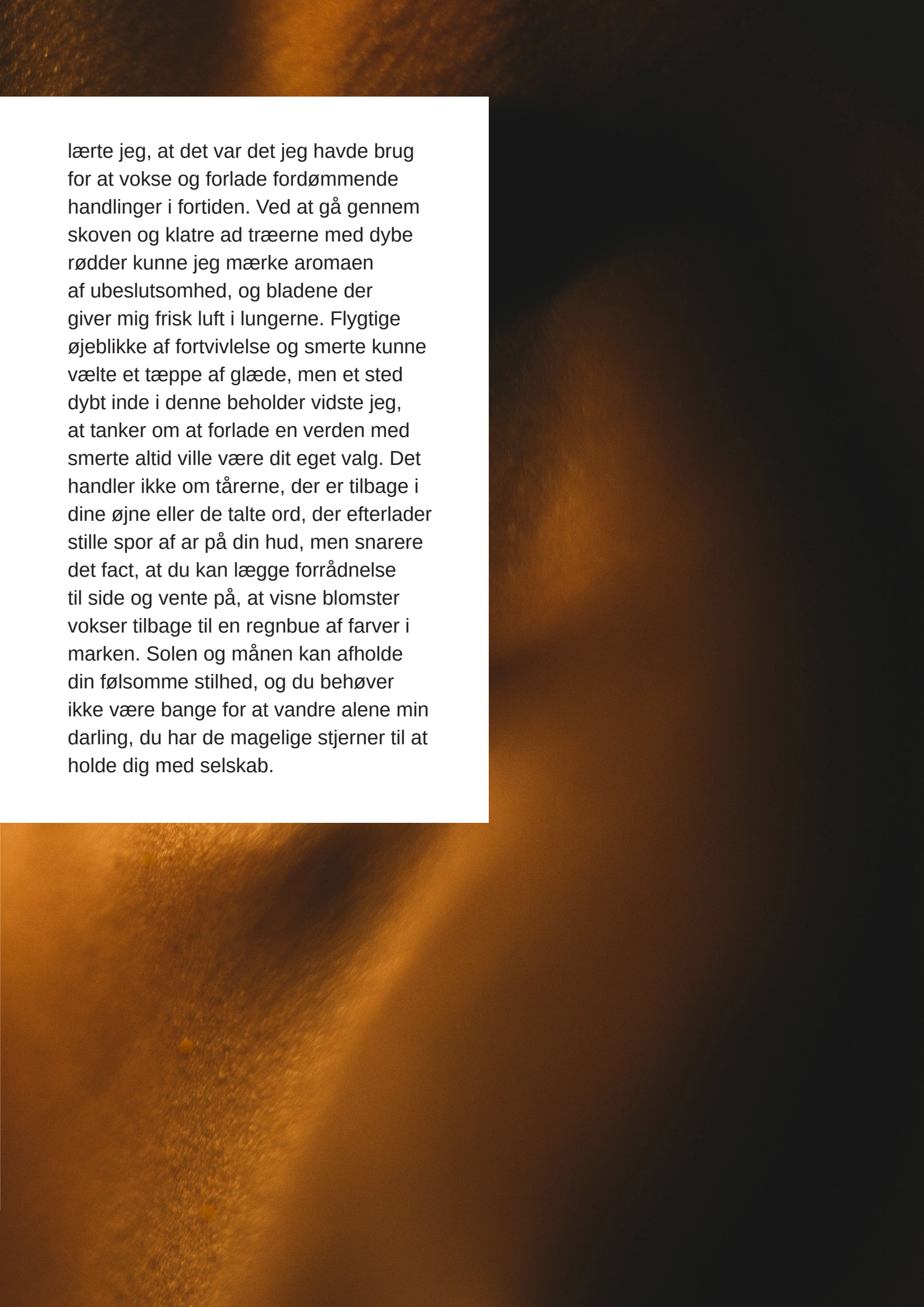
VESSELS

If my body is the vessel in which I guard and keep my soul, my feelings, my thoughts my very being, the sphere is the environment in which I want it to thrive, breathe, wander and grow. I give it water and food in order for it to live; I give it laughter and tears in order for it to grown, lessons to learn and thoughts to reflect in the air of flexibility. As a child, I was wrapped in fairy tales of happy endings and love as a feeling that would keep me warm, my heart beating and the world tender. As a teenager, I would breed a fire that I was first taught to put out, but with wisdom and faults I learned it was the thing I needed in order to grow and leave condemning actions in the past. By walking through the forest and climbing up against the deep-rooted trees I could feel the aroma of laxity and the leaves would give me fresh air to breathe. Fleeting moments of despair and agony could overturn a blanket of delight but somewhere deep inside this vessel I knew thoughts of leaving a world in pain would always be your own choice. It is not a matter of the tears left

in your eyes or spoken words leaving silent traces of scars on your skin, but rather the fact that you can put decay aside and wait for withered flowers to regrow into a rainbow of colours in the field. The sun and moon can stomach your sensitive silence, and you do not need to be afraid of wandering alone my love, you have the floating stars to keep you company.

BEHOLDERE

Hvis min krop er beholderen hvor jeg beskytter og varetager mit sind, mine følelser, mine tanker, mit eget væsen, er sfæren det miljø hvor jeg vil have den til at trives, trække vejret, vandre og vokse. Jeg giver den vand og mad, så den kan leve; jeg giver latter og tårer for at det skal vokse, lektioner der underviser og tanker til at reflektere i luften af fleksibilitet. Som barn var jeg pakket ind i eventyr af lykkelige slutninger og kærlighed som en følelse, der ville holde mig varm, mit hjerte bankende og verden omsorgsfuld. Som teenager ville jeg opfostre en brand, som jeg først lærte at slukke, men med visdom og fejl



lærte jeg, at det var det jeg havde brug for at vokse og forlade fordømmende handlinger i fortiden. Ved at gå gennem skoven og klatre ad træerne med dybe rødder kunne jeg mærke aromaen af ubeslutsomhed, og bladene der giver mig frisk luft i lungerne. Flygtige øjeblikke af fortvivlelse og smerte kunne vælte et tæppe af glæde, men et sted dybt inde i denne beholder vidste jeg, at tanker om at forlade en verden med smerte altid ville være dit eget valg. Det handler ikke om tårerne, der er tilbage i dine øjne eller de talte ord, der efterlader stille spor af ar på din hud, men snarere det fact, at du kan lægge forrådnelse til side og vente på, at visne blomster vokser tilbage til en regnbue af farver i marken. Solen og månen kan afholde din følsomme stilhed, og du behøver ikke være bange for at vandre alene min darling, du har de magelige stjerner til at holde dig med selskab.

POETRY

Anne Connolly is an Irish granny, now settled for many years in Scotland. Since taking early retirement she has enjoyed the poetry world to the full; keeping an eye on the School of Poets, chairing The Federation of Writers (Scotland), being their 2014 Makar, having three collections and two pamphlets published and appearing at numerous festivals throughout these islands. Poetry has been an enduring passion and inescapable nourishment to the roots of her life. She calls it music in its own right.

ANNE CONNOLLY

AC CLARKE

A C Clarke is a PEN member. Her fifth collection is *A Troubling Woman*. She was a winner in the Cinnamon 2017 pamphlet competition with *War Baby*. *Drochaid (Tapsalteerie)*, with Maggie Rabatski and Sheila Templeton, was published last year. She is working on poems about Gala Éluard/Dalí and her circle. A pamphlet centred on the courtship and marriage of Gala and Paul Éluard is due out from Tapsalteerie next year.

Donald Adamson is from Dumfries, and for many years lived in Dalbeattie. At the moment he 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 this year, joint winner in Scottish PEN's Declaration of Arbroath competition. His new pamphlet, *Bield*, will be published by Tapsalteerie.

DONALD ADAMSON

JEN GRAY

Jen Gray is a Glasgow-based writer poet. She studied Modern Languages at Glasgow University and the Sorbonne and taught English and French in Scotland and abroad. She worked as international officer in further education in Glasgow and also volunteered with refugees and people seeking asylum. She has published a chapbook of poetry and prose in collaboration with Lindsey Stewart and has had work published in *Postbox Magazine*, in *Janet Paisley: Growing and Dying*, edited by Linda Jackson, in *Mirrorball Showcase* and in various print and online anthologies. She is currently collaborating on video projects with other creative individuals.

JOY-BIRD

Anne Connolly

Joy-bird, free bird, high-in-a-tree bird, singing-for-me bird
evening and day,

carillon-ring bird, fan-feather-wing bird, many-song-sing bird
flying away,

harmony-glee bird, note-filigree bird, neatly-on-key bird
always at play,

sunrise-and-set bird, drip-dry-from-wet bird, blue-polished-jet bird
throat throttle gay,

crescendo-sweet bird, arpeggio-neat bird, staccato-tweet bird,
“ Thank you!” I say.



IN PRAISE OF SMALL PLEASURES

AC Clarke

Glory to whatever is at work to make things happen –
creator, demiurge, energy of atoms –
for the small mercies that get us through the day:

sun on a honey-stone wall, say, or a washing-line brisking
in a spring breeze, the caffeine jolt
of the morning's first cup, the tenacity
of the lopped elder, bare limbs already beginning
to clothe themselves, the audacity of weeds,
the slyness of mushrooms, the vespers of coal tits
the comfort of curtains drawn against darkness
the indulgence of mirrors, the kindness of lamps
the touch of newlaid sheets waiting for bodies to warm them

for the whole loud soft bright dim rough smooth sharp sweet stinking scented
gallimaufry that clatters and twinkles and tumbles and dances around us
to take our minds off ourselves and our pettiness.

GRACED



Donald Adamson

No doubt of it – hers was a life lived fully, even as her days narrowed into a corridor of remembering less and less. Diminishing and yet

much the same in essence, happiness swooping down like birds in sudden flight as when she heard a tune and placed the pitch with sol-fa repetition, every note.

Or just before she left us, wide-awake and open-eyed, enunciating clearly: ‘Love is the most important thing, wouldn’t you say?’

Moments in full song, an unquenched sense of wholeness felt in small epiphanies lived in, like the times she’d known herself fulfilled as friend, teacher, wife and mother –

graced in ways that we – if luck is ours – can be, finding joys like Christmas lights strung above our stepping: lamps undimmed illuminating us, and our way home.



JOY

Jen Gray

She sped past on a scooter,
her foot pounding the empty pavement,
a whee of delight in her smile.
Passers-by caught the joy
in the air
and smiled
in spite of themselves;
a gleeful child in a grown-up body
trailing a flapping scarf
of convention behind her.
It snagged on the rush of the wind,
swooped up to the trees
and lodged there,
leaving old ideas and worries
twisting and twirling
in captive frustration.

When they fell
with the autumn leaves
she was long gone.

THE SAICRAMENT O AIRTH

Donald Adamson

For the face ye turn
 in the simmer dawn
whan waves are glencin
 daffin, dauncin
wi wee scemps o clood
 an the trees on the inch
kythe green beuchs –
 A thank ye.

For the scarts an skaiths
 wittrins an werds
on sic a morn
 nor seen nor shawn
dauntend an derved
 by luveliness,
yer hert-brekin beauty –
 A thank ye.

An for this peace
 this oor o grace
this stoond atween
 whit's wrackit – an gane –
an wrackit – tae come –
 for this maument unsocht
o saicrament –
 A thank ye.

Mandy Haggith lives in Assynt, northwest Scotland, and teaches Literature and Creative Writing at the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Her books include four poetry collections (letting light in, Castings, A-B-Tree, Why the Sky is Far Away), a poetry anthology (Into the Forest), a non-fiction book (Paper Trails) and five novels: The Last Bear, Bear Witness and a novel trilogy set in the Iron Age, The Walrus Mutterer, The Amber Seeker and The Lyre Dancers. www.mandyhaggith.net

MANDY HAGITH

JOY HENDRY

Joy is best known for editing Chapman (literary magazine) over many years, mercilessly using it to help change the Scotland she was born into, (Perth, 1953). Chapman focussed on new writing, poetry and prose, but also became an important platform for critical discussion about Scotland's cultural situation.

She is a poet in her own right, also playwright, folk singer, public speaker, broadcaster, and is now concentrating on her own talents, mainly her poetry.

She was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Edinburgh University for services to Scottish Culture and the Saltire Society's Outstanding Women of Scotland Award in 2019.

SONG OF THE EARTH

Mandy Hagith

beneath high pebbly melodies
of warbling stream stones
a bass voice sings a deep peat lullaby
a long song
slow as the mountains
sweeter and deeper than sleep





AQUARIAN

Joy Hendry

I was born to float
on water
not to be tied down
with pegs
and ropes
into a ground
that knows so imperfectly
how to shift,
and bob
and flow.

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