

ORKNEY I

Biljana Scott

1. Ravie Hill

As well as being real rock, sea and soil,
– well, what place isn't, unless landlocked,
and we'd laugh at our father, so loyal
to the mighty cliffs and modest crofts,
the wind-worn hills and tireless toil
of ancestors (just to keep warm, we scoffed)
and pleaded to fly home: even the locals
call you incomer, Dad, get with the plot –
Orkney has become an imaginary
archipelago in a sea of texts.
Today, Hild and Mans greet me as neighbours,
Suki sulks over his lost dian stane and Magnus
succumbs at last to his saviour complex
while I, snug by the fire, draw from your library.

2. Stromness Shopping Week

By Flattie's bar, bairns dance while the music lasts.
Some dance on, still smiling, instead of dropping
to the ground, and get sent out for it. Browsing
through the bookshop, pipe-band passing, I come
to the family trees. You've had one done
I say to my cousin twice-or-something
removed. No, not me, your Dad was looking
into it. Who cares – folks is good and gone,
so why bother! True, but perhaps the song
my father sought plays its grace notes
through the landscape, inviting us all to dance,
and holds the trance of drones and drums
to haunt the few. Perhaps the call to belong
keeps some dancing long after the music stops.

3. Archaeologists

The green dust-sheet time has thrown
over these islands is growing threadbare.
Where storms have blown the turf away
or cows collapsed the slated stones
of homes long overgrown, the tear
gives history an airing. Archaeologists,
surgically masked, probe into these rifts,
– Birsay, Stennes, Brodgar, Skara Brae –
silent rifts sifted and spoken for minutely.
They pull out ore pots and the stone-age ‘cathedral’
starts to sing of a colourful past; they set nuptials
for the headless Westray man and Venus wifey.
Cut from its peaty cowl, the past takes breath,
but can we pull words from stone, as well as air?

4. Stone-age perspective

They’d read the landscape as we do a scroll,
says the potter at Fursbreck, unfurling it flat
with no regard for depth. He throws a bowl
as he speaks, then thumbs a collar of indents
along the rim: these could be the Bay of Skail,
– can you see it? – where waves scallop the sand.
And these, he says, walking over to show
a chevron pattern, reflected, are hills and islands,
and the same islands and hills below.
The stones of Brodgar stand in a circle, stand
ringed by water, its rolling ebb and flow,
ringed by the rise and fall of hills, mists and winds,
ringed by rim-lit crescents, and by the slow
spinning of everything we know. They stand tall
and unbending, still enough to be called
standing stones. But to see them all, you must turn
and turn and turn, like the potter’s wheel,
like the rolled-up scroll.

5. Nothing to See

Paw tracks, bird prints – the origins of script,
some say. At St Ninnians and Sandwick,
waves draw then redraw the fine outline of hills
with brush and sand, fading like the braes
I drive through later on the road to Voe,
three-toed posts – giant bird marks – scattered
through the peatscape. There's nothing to see
at Tingwall other than a visitor's info board.
When Braille readers lose their power
– from injury or stroke-induced aphasia –
the damage is not to tactile centres
but to the control room of perception.
Nothing, that is, unless you run your thoughts
over the place names, their tracks and prints.

6. Just like

Porcella – small sow, its vulva (or smooth-backed
piglet for the prudish) – is the Italian
for cowrie shell, and porcellana (porcelain)
– that lustrous glaze his language lacked
a word for – the gift of a speechless,
Marco Polo when he first saw dragons
curve round the liquid-light horizons
of a Chinese vase, smooth-backed and seamless.
Grautr, Old Norse for porridge, coarse-ground,
gives us the goat we spy in grotty-buckies.
Ridged and half buried in the sand, an infant's
finger, bloodless, as if nearly drowned,
startles me. We quicken to similarities
which false-foot the mind for an instance.

7. The Broch of Gurness

Low-lying mirror of fast-changing skies,
pounded, beaten, broken, but lapped at too,
and loved. At Aikerness, where a scythe
of coral sand curves between bere and blue
(aiker: a stalk of corn with the ear on),
we comb the beach for grotty-buckies,
those pink-flushed finger tips, like a newborn's,
fine-grooved and fragile. Closing in, swelkies
whip the sea into a pack of ridge-backs,
fierce and impassable. Within, a slow swell
rises from nowhere known yet somewhere
deeply felt, as fine wrought and fragile
as what we've always sought, as gently flushed
as our successes – bannocks, broch, safe passage.

8. Almost an Island

An isthmus links Deerness – almost an island –
to the mainland. At Dingieshowe
the tourist panel explains 'Parliament mound',
'scoots' and the tyranny of Earl Einar Wry-mouth
who, in 1020, would come here to attend
a banquet hosted by Thorkel the Fosterer,
would feast his last (why would, I wondered) and
on Thorfinn the Mighty's orders
would meet his end. When will you be leaving us?
Not long now, alas. And sure enough
I too would soon be feasting my last,
would make my way down to another life,
would feel the almost. Would? A future anchored in past
prospects, both here yet there, linked by an isthmus.