

# LANDLINE

FIVE WALKS IN SKYE

## *Sundew*

Does this place look to you  
like the cusp of never  
and nothing and nowhere?

Look down into the encampment  
of the blanket bog. It flushes  
as it sweats out round-leaved sundew:

gold-panning, double-  
bunking, a mass of dew-  
blinged eyes. They just spread

their sticky fingers to get back  
in the black; close them  
on a fortune of tiny flies.

## *Butterwort*

Forget the day's eye.  
The bog's an erogenous zone  
baroqued by a million Gaudís –  
wave upon wave of zany  
nano-blooms proffering  
their tender meat-and-two-  
veg to the air. I've fallen

to my knees again not five  
minutes from home: first,  
the boss of Venusian leaves  
that look more like they docked  
than grew; a sappy nub;  
violet bell; the minaret  
of purpled bronze. And  
milkwort, gentian, asphodel,  
a Sistine ceiling of flowers.

The Loch Eriboll Chorus  
*for Lotte Glob*

I

You Mork eggs –  
you Finns, you eyeless  
Dia de Muertos  
skulls – how  
do you and your  
nation grow?

Are you  
peripatetic,  
rolling about the cliffs  
until the music stops,  
when each lets down  
a frail plait?

Or the moon  
herds you up  
through the mold  
like little white bulls,

forcing the walls  
of the *kyunnen's*  
burrow.

.  
  
When I wake on the cliff, with heart beating down  
on the thin, dungy soil, and waves seeming to break

inside me, I would just like to know what lies  
between belly and bedrock. I know how securely

the cliff clasps you and that to touch  
with lips is like nuzzling a kneecap.

To snack on you – sheepish – where you grow  
is like eating *löragub*, sea-haze, expanding foam.

To sniff your socket in the grass  
is to recall some humid porch of the body.

To explore it with my tongue  
very saucy, grass tickling my chin.

Your tanned hide is already  
the colour of a bog burial's skin, bronzed

and thin, half-hollow now, but tough but  
perforated neatly by a raindrop

.  
  
and you live  
to sing to blurt

your spore-mass  
from your ragged

moue!  
O pepperpot

lift up  
your voice!

For the wind  
to broadcast

like smoke,  
like spice.

'[...]So what primal buttons is the idea of 'treelessness' pressing?

I asked James Mackenzie, the Woodlands Officer at the Shetland Amenity Trust, what he thought. His answer was beguiling. 'Trees are branchlets of the life-lungs of the world, breathing in CO<sub>2</sub> and exhaling oxygen.' But he also enjoys the apparently bare hillsides, the contours – like muscle and bone – of rock visible under *djub* and *julk*; peat and sphagnum and heath.

I asked James if he thought he'd surrogated anything else for trees, and this set him off on sphagnum moss. A rootless plant, sphagnum is over ninety percent water. Jelly-like, it knits the delicate bog together, staunching it after heavy rain. As its subterranean layers rot, they turn into peat. Forming at a rate of a millimetre a year, peat 2-metres deep with a crown of living sphagnum could easily represent an organism 2,000-years old. Its antibiotic qualities are well-documented. The Vikings used to preserve fish in it. The peat is important too, as a 'carbon sink', sequestering carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Perhaps, proposes James, in the absence of trees to absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, Nature finds ways to compensate. At present, an experimental conservation project is underway in the fragile and much maligned valleys and hills of the Lang Kames. It involves sowing bog-cotton and sphagnum, blocking the gullies of damaged peat, sandbagging its leaking pools. At the mouth of the same valley is the Halfway Hoose, an old white-washed pile where cattle auctions used to be held, and latterly, epic parties. Pulling out plaster and lathe, its present householder discovered the walls were packed with sphagnum. The moss would've acted as both insulant and, with its prodigal thirst, a damp course. A resilient, useful and delicate organism, but can sphagnum moss fill the spiritual need that trees seem to? What does James see when he considers it? His face shines with a deep pleasure. "I think it's like living jewels."

[...] Shetland's 'treelessness' is inseparable from the pervasive conception of the isles as 'bleak', 'lonely', 'remote' and 'impoverished' – a sort of 'Edge of Darkness'. Does it matter? If places of the mind are projected over the true topography like holograms, can't they be dispelled? If we know a highly creative community of outward-looking, well-travelled folk; cliffs shimmering with squill and tormentil, fields of gentian and ragged robin, bogs of butterwort, grass of parnassus, *luckie-minnie's oo* and orchid, does it matter, really, if others, suffering from what Robert Macfarlane usefully terms 'attention deficit', imagine a depopulated rock, denuded of vegetation, in the middle of the North Sea? Writing about Pingok Island, Barry Lopez warned, 'It is in a place like this that we would unthinkingly store poisons or test weapons, land like the deserts to which we once banished our heretics and where we once loosed scapegoats with the burden of our transgressions.'

[..]We must cherish the world-tree in our back yards, be it an ash, a yew, a rash of ancient crab apple on a cliff-face, or a bed of sphagnum 2-metres deep.'"

from 'Yggdrasil in Shetland', Jen Hadfield