

THREE STORIES, THREE POEMS AND THREE  
ESSAYS FROM A PRIZE-WINNING WRITER

# GLEANINGS

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If you enjoyed these writings you will find more on the author's website: [www.mandyhaggith.net](http://www.mandyhaggith.net)

## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction .....                      | 3  |
| New Moon Cairn .....                    | 4  |
| Cromalt .....                           | 7  |
| A Tree Called Li .....                  | 8  |
| Back Home from the Botanic Garden ..... | 17 |
| Immigrants.....                         | 18 |
| A passion for Assynt.....               | 19 |
| Fire.....                               | 23 |
| Ice .....                               | 27 |
| Stone.....                              | 34 |

## Introduction

This trilogy of triads is an introduction to my written work for anyone who would like to see the kinds of things I write about. I am at heart a poet, hence the three poems nestle at the centre of this selection and they are all about Assynt, in the northwest Scottish highlands, where I have lived since 1999. Not all my poems are about Assynt but a lot are and these three seem to sit together in their different forms. Both 'Back Home' and 'A Passion for Assynt' are deep bows to Norman MacCaig, whose poetry it is impossible for any poet here to ignore. The latter was inspired after our community buyout of four of our mountains because MacCaig asked 'Who owns this landscape?' in his long poem 'A Man in Assynt' and the answers are so different now from when he used to visit.

I also write novels, and four of them so far have been historical, so 'Cromalt' and 'New Moon Cairn' reflect this interest – the cairn in question is a bronze age chambered cairn that I'm very proud to say bears my name as I tripped over it on a Historic Assynt expedition more than a decade ago. 'A Tree Called Li' is a whimsical story reflecting the large chunk of my life I spent as a paper campaigner.

The three essays at the end are further demonstration of my obsession with Assynt's past and our troubling future, and are here by way of illustration that I write a lot of short non-fiction.

I hope that there is something here for everyone's tastes. My occasional email list will keep you updated with new books and other writing projects and other free material all of which are available from my website: [www.mandyhaggith.net](http://www.mandyhaggith.net)

I'm always delighted to hear from readers, so please don't hesitate to contact me if you have comments or questions.

## New Moon Cairn

I take care of the moon shrine. It is a quiet place. It is less grand than the sun temple or the shrine to the harvest spirits, but I think it is more beautiful.

They call it the grey tomb, some of them, mostly men who have never been inside. There is nothing grey about this place. It is white and red, like the moon and like a womb. It is a safe place. We smile, we laugh, we sing. We cry too, but sometimes it is helpful to cry. And always it is good to sit together, without speaking, in the darkness. It is always good to be quiet.

I have become familiar with all the nuances of quietness, its many mysteries. I will never tire of them. Chatter, livestock, the sound of running water: leave them elsewhere.

Inside the shrine, within the cairn, there can be silence deeper than the night sky. Instead of stars, flames. There is a particular quiet when a flame is put out. That particular quiet is good. It is powerful, but not harmful, not evil, not if treated with respect. It can be scary, that's true. I have known many women to be afraid when a flame snuffs out, especially in here. Flames are life and the way back to life for those who have lost their way. We help them back, just as we help the moon to come back, when it thins away to nothing and needs our songs to give it strength to grow again.

Women come here to make requests or to plead for a kick inside the womb, but mostly to remember. Perhaps because I am alone I am able to intercede on their behalf with those we cannot name. We never talk about my solitude. We never do, never. I speak only about them. I try to become invisible and simply inhabit the quiet space where they come to grieve, to pour out their sorrow for their lost children. I offer them a vessel, that is all.

I have seen so many women mourning unborn daughters or those taken too soon, before they could cry for their mother, the unheard, silent births, the still ones. They bring bones of infants laid to the earth without being weaned. Some have died in ways that are rumoured to be unkind, some have been put out to starve because they are crippled, six-fingered or twinned. I take the bones anyway and I ask no questions. The moon shines on us all and her movements are unperturbed by storms, famines or pestilences. I must be as she is. So they bring me the bones of their children and I take care of them all.

And I watch the moon.

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There is no moon tonight. She is lost from us. This is the time women come to the shrine.

They arrive, one by one and in little groups, and wait for the darkness of evening. Some have walked far. In the gloaming, we light the rush wicks of our lamps. Sisters and mothers share, gathering around one flame. It is good to share.

I remember my first time. My aunt was the caretaker back then. I came with my mother and my sister and we huddled around one flame, hands held in a triangle to protect the memory of my brother. He was dead then, but now he is back among us: my sister has him for a son, a fine boy. This is why we have this shrine. Without it, how would the children be able to cross back over the threshold?

At first there is banter among the women, and laughter, especially from the girls, as they take off their clothes and give me the bundles to keep them dry. It is cold tonight, the wind is from the east, so I waste no time. Once all the lamps are lit and we are all bare-skinned, I lead the way in. It is a simple cairn: there is no outer chamber or long passage. We must stoop to enter and, crouching inside, our flames turn the quartzite walls to moon-glow white.

I position my light on the shelf to make the red roof-stones shine, then sit in the hollow at the back with my drum, patting its belly, so it laughs everyone inside. We sit in a circle and push the lamps closer and closer together until they form a tight ring at our centre. The shrine glows like milk and blood.

I ask them all to hold hands as I say a blessing. I have made a sweet potion of milk and moonwort in the whalebone beaker we use to awaken our memories. I pass the memory cup to the girl on my right and she sips and hands it on. We sing the memory song. Then I open the casket. All the things the women have brought me are in it, and I pass them one by one: this month there is a tiny boot of soft kid-skin. When it reaches the fourth woman in the circle, she sighs and speaks about her daughter. We listen, and then she passes it on. Everyone touches the little empty foot, handling it gently, and when it returns to me I lay it on the stone shelf. Some of the objects bring forth no comment. Some are spoken to by many.

When the casket is empty I close it. The moon cup is refilled and we sing the moon song as it is passed around. I beat the heart drum. I drum the beat of hearts. A drum, a beat, a heart. The flames die one by one. I drum until they all go out. When only my lamp burns under the red roof stones, I stop drumming and kill its flame.

Darkness and quiet. It is always good to be quiet

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listening

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hushed breath

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shuffle of the dead

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a move inside a womb

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The dead and living mingle, passing back and forth through the opening we have made. Seeing nothing, our other senses wake up.

I hold the unborn skull in my left hand and listen to its silent howl. Then I pass it to my left, setting it free to undo the circle. Closing my eyes, I listen to its passage around the shrine, a wave of sorrow as the unnamed ones unleash themselves among us.

When the cold dome of the unborn reaches me again I pass it on to my left and it circulates once more. Sometimes this second wave is wilder than the first, but tonight it is less intense.

When it returns to me, I feel that the small bone moon is warmer. I send it around again and this time it manages to gather up all of the sobs as it passes. I have known it to take many rounds to mop up all the tears in the shrine but tonight three turns are enough.

The small hand on my right passes me the skull and silence is restored. The unborn knows it is not alone. The moon knows its way home.

Soon I shall begin the womb song, but for now we sit, because it is good to sit in the darkness, in quiet. It is always good to be quiet.

## Cromalt

That man, that survey man, he came with Donald from the manse, who I never trusted, and two young men. Willy and Jock they called themselves, and the surveyor was Mr Home. He scribbled on his chart all the time. I had a look and it seemed just a lot of scratchings to me, but they say his maps are very fine.

I'd seen them coming for miles, trudging and stopping, for there is nothing out here to block the view. You can see the whole of Assynt laid out under the sky.

I gave the boys some milk and they slipped me a coin. I listened to their talk. I learned the English language – Beurla we call it - as a girl, although I don't like to use it, but they spoke to me as if I was deaf or stupid. Among themselves they went on as if I was not there. The crone, Mr Home called me. The crone sounds like the stones in the burn, he said. I thought there was a kind of poetry in that.

They were talking about four lads the Duke had sent from Golspie to help them, but they had not been able to thole the fatigue and had run off. The days are long in June and he looked a hard master. With rain like we've had lately, the bogs are wet, though nothing to how they are in winter, but I suppose they're not used to land like this and walking the marches is hard going in some places. He'll need to get in plenty of whisky if he's going to keep a man like Donald with him.

I told him about the storms we suffered, about my boys away fighting in someone else's war, and my husband and daughter having to handle the cattle themselves. But he was not interested.

I showed him the world's story laid out in the banks of the Cromalt: above the stones you can see the tree roots from Eden, then the peat grown over it. But he looked only at our cornland and remarked how well it grew.

I pointed out the old druid's mound but he never took his eyes off the haughs, saying what a shame it was that the river cut through them. I explained that the flooding was what made the ground good, just as the bleeding of a woman's womb allows a child to grow there. But the boy whose job it was to tell the surveyor what I said, he blushed and lied that I was speaking of the storms again.

After that they left, cursing the wet spouty mosses, dragging their chain, looking for all the world like convicts, imprisoned by their thoughts and their tongues, missing all the good things the land gives, so driven on they were, measuring how much of it to take from us.

## A Tree Called Li

In the heart of a great forest, a wise old tree dropped a seed into the earth beneath her and watched over it until it hatched. First came a little shoot, then a little root and when the first two leaves uncurled, the mother tree named the seedling Li. She helped him to push down roots and to drink up nourishment from the soil and enthralled him with stories woven into patterns of sunshine and shade. Li listened to birds singing up in her canopy and, unfurling his buds, he stretched himself up towards them.

When Li was still only a few leaves old, a great storm charged through the forest, shaking and jostling the trees. Li's mother tried to stand firm to protect her little one, but the more she resisted the wind, the more it pushed at her, until with a mighty gust she toppled over onto the forest floor, falling right on top of Li. He lay flattened, with only his tip sticking out from under her huge trunk. At first he was unable to do anything but weep into the dead leaves all around him. After a while, rain revived him a little and he tried to wriggle out from under the weight of his mother, but he could not budge her. He stopped struggling, his leaves withered and everything went very dark.

But light came again eventually. One day a blackbird came scuffling among all his mother's fallen leaves, peering under them and into them and singing as if they were song sheets. Li felt life pushing inside him. "Spring, spring! Spring, spring!" sang the bird.

Without the dappled shade his mother had cast, the sun beamed down like a hand held out with the offer of a dance. Li began to squeeze, sliding out from under his mother's trunk. He pressed down with his roots and allowed the light to tug him upwards. He felt a bud at his tip unfurling into a little flag of miracle green. Another leaf grew. He stretched up his stem and took great gulps of sunshine. It tasted wonderful. He sucked at the soil with his roots and found it delicious as well. He swelled with sweetness.

By day, Li breathed and drank and grew, and by night he watched the stars and listened to animals rustling on the forest floor. Ferns and mosses covered his mother in soft blankets and all kinds of wriggly little creatures came to make their homes inside her. She became softer and lighter. Meanwhile Li's stem turned strong and woody. Up and up he grew. He listened to the talk of other trees in the wood, but always stood a little apart, in the space his mother had occupied, wishing he could remember all of her stories, wondering how it might have been if she could have lived forever. He always retained a kink at the bottom of his trunk to show where his mother had fallen on him.

When Li was a sapling and almost a tree, two strange birds came to the forest. Instead of wings they had two branches with five twigs on each and instead of normal bird heads they were topped by hairy buds with very small beaks. The bigger of the two birds sang from a hole underneath its beak in a rough, rasping voice. 'Story time,' it said, sitting down underneath Li.

'Who are you?' asked Li.

'We're people', said the smaller bird, sitting down beside the other, who pulled a package from a pouch under its right branch. It seemed to be made of leaves sewn together, and the strange people-bird opened it up and sang a story from it. It was more of a drone than a song, but the story was the best Li had ever heard. It was about a people-bird whose dreams were stolen and hidden in an underground cave. After long and difficult struggles with darkness and danger, it

found its way to the cave and set the dreams free. The end of the story made Li feel as sweet as when he filled with sunshine. The hole under the people-chick's beak curved up at the sides, as if it would burst.

The big people-bird put the package back in its pouch and pulled the small one to its feet. 'Did you know that books are made from trees?' the big one said, as they strolled away through the forest.

Li rustled his leaves and clapped his branches. He couldn't stop thinking about the people-birds. He felt sure they held the answer to his loneliness, with their magic book, which made you feel as if your buds were bursting. That was as close to everlasting life as anything could be. He decided that people-birds were his favourite animals.

Li grew on for several more years, gradually taking up the space his mother had left and becoming a handsome tree. Sometimes a bear came along, snuffling for roots and slugs, and it stood up and scratched its fat back against Li's trunk. One spring Li tried making flowers and found that bees and butterflies came to nuzzle them. He liked the way they tickled him, so he took to blossoming every spring, and he squeezed a little bit of sunshine sweetness into each bloom so the insects would keep returning. But his favourite pastime was making leaves. He loved to pretend that they were the sheets the people-bird read from. He fluttered them at the sun, as if to say, 'Look at me, I'm full of stories.'

It was getting towards the time of year when Li was thinking about taking a big long sleep, when a group of people-birds came by with baskets, collecting mushrooms. He admired the way they were so supple they could bend under branches, the neat way they tiptoed about on their nimble feet and the clever way they used the five twigs on the end of their branches to pick the fungi. One of the smallest came up to Li and stretched her branches around him. 'You're such a lovely tree', she said. Li felt himself go sunny inside. 'I'm so sorry you're going to die.'

She looked up at him and he stared down in shock. 'Uh?' he said.

'Didn't you know? They're going to make you all into paper,' the people-chick said. 'I think it's so sad. I just hope they do something good with it, like make story books.'

At this suggestion, Li waved his upper branches with joy. He started whispering to the other trees and soon the whole forest was buzzing with alarm. A wind drifted in and stirred up the debate. Most of the trees were outraged at the prospect of being cut down. 'I've always said I'd go for nothing less than a piano', creaked the biggest tree in the woods. 'House timbers would at least give us some kind of future', moaned another, 'but to be used for paper, it's so humiliating'. Only Li was pleased about their fate. His life's ambition might yet be fulfilled.

It seemed like no time at all before the paper company arrived. First people-birds with paint pots came and slapped crosses on trunks. Then big metal beaver-monsters with chains and blades for teeth charged into the forest, smashing down the undergrowth. They grabbed at trees, sawed through their wood and brought them crashing to the ground, then chopped them into chunks. Another great yellow beast on caterpillar tracks followed behind, picking up the logs and stacking them on its back. The air filled with the hot resin reek of wounded trees and diesel. Giants that had stood for hundreds of years fell with great moans, bleeding sap onto the earth. The machines growled and roared to drown out the sounds of the howling and sorrow of the forest.

A little monster rolled up right beside Li, who watched as a people-bird got out wearing an orange coat. Li paid close attention as it paced around, inspecting the felling and scratching into a sheaf of book-leaves. Then it got back inside its monster and trundled away.

Li waited for his turn. He wished they would hurry up and get it over with. Trying not to listen and watch too closely as the trees around him were felled, he focused all of his attention on the sky. He guessed being cut would hurt a bit, but he was sure the end result would make it all worthwhile. He watched birds flying away, squirrels hopping and scampering to somewhere safe. Gradually the sound of the logging reduced. He looked down to see just a wreckage of twigs and branches where his neighbours had been. He was alone in a great clearing. The monsters had moved on, continuing their rampage, cutting almost every tree in their path. There were a few other trees left standing, but the nearest was too far away to talk to, and there were no trees in between to pass even a rustle-message to them.

It began to dawn on Li that he had been left out. His branches drooped. A wind gusted in, and he shivered as it buffeted him.

As night drew in the monsters stopped and Li saw a people-bird get out of each one. They walked back towards the edge of the forest passing under Li along the way. As they approached, one said ‘Why did you leave that tree?’ looking up into Li’s branches. ‘Is it for woodpeckers or something?’

‘That scrawny thing? No, the boss’s car was in the way’, the other replied.

Li wondered what that meant.

It was a lonely time for Li from that day on. There were no other trees to whisper to and no way to shelter from the wind. The lichens on his bark dried and flaked away. No birds hopped from branch to branch and few animals scuffled around his toes. The deer that used to come to graze, murmuring gently in the shelter of the trees and sharing stories from other parts of the forest, now passed through quickly, looking scared.

One day another pair of monsters drove into the clearing. One dug up the stumps of the trees that had been cut down and loaded them onto the back of the other. One by one all that was left of Li’s friends and neighbours was wrenched from the ground. Li felt their roots snapping around his where they had intertwined. When dragging the stump closest to Li, the digging monster bumped against him. The last of Li’s leaves trickled to the ground. The monster’s tracks squashed them into the mud.

In spring Li put out only a few tentative leaves, but when he sucked in moisture from below with his roots, it no longer tasted rich and nourishing, and when the sun shone, his sap felt thin. He cheered up when a flock of people-birds arrived carrying white bags.

These people-birds had a metal extension on their upper branches and they looked as if they were trying to imitate the big digging monster. Just as it had, they hurled their metal limbs into the earth, cutting its flesh. Out of their bags came the strangest thing: little trees, their roots bare to the air. They were all as alike as the leaves of a single tree, and almost as numerous. Li watched in fascination as the people-birds marched up and down the trenches, dancing a kind of pecking dance, bending and stretching, up and down. With each step, they sliced a gash in the

earth, then bent down to place one of the little trees in the hole, burying its roots in the soil then stepping on.

When the sun was high, the people-birds gathered under Li for a rest. These ones told no funny stories and their buds never looked as if they were going to burst into leaf. They complained about the soil, about their tools and about something small called 'pay'. One of them took a blade and carved two shapes into his bark. They looked like this: MH. Li trembled but managed to stay silent, holding in the howl that he felt inside. He wasn't sure what hurt most, the sharp metal cutting into him, or his disappointment in the people-birds.

When they had finished standing the little trees in lines all over the clearing they went away. Li tried to speak to the new arrivals, but they did not seem to understand him. Still, it was better to have them there than to be alone. Li contented himself that they were young and probably shy. He was impressed by how quickly they grew, as if they were racing each other for the sky.

Those nearest to him soon began to try to twine their roots with his, but instead of mingling and sharing the soil's juices as all the trees he had ever known had done, they sucked it all up for themselves. Li had to dig a little deeper to find some nourishment but before many seasons had passed the roots of his neighbours were sucking away down there as well. Not only that, they were jostling for space. They had grown so fat and there were so many of them all around Li, their branches scratched his trunk and their prickly twigs poked at him from all sides. He pulled himself in, politely, and stretched up to give them some space. They raced up after him and kept on pushing into any space he made. He tried again and again to be friendly, to chat and to sing. But the new trees ignored him. They grew so densely there were no flowers between their toes and even the toadstools and mushrooms that had once been so common refused to grow.

Each year, Li tried to carry on as he had always done, making flowers for the insects and seeds for the birds. None of the new trees made either, and hardly any flying creatures came by. One day a butterfly did flutter in. 'I'm so pleased to find you', she said. 'I've flown for miles and I'm starving. There's no nectar from these new trees.' A few more moths and bees flew in, and all had the same story. They feasted on what Li could offer them and for a brief time he enjoyed their humming and happy buzz, their tickling and slurping in his flowers.

Then one morning, all the strange trees began to emit a powerful smell and between their needles, they opened strange, tiny pink cups. The bees went to investigate. 'Flowers!', they droned, nuzzling into the scented flesh. The other insects flew out from Li. In all directions, the new trees were offering nectar. At first the winged creatures sang feasting songs, but then something seemed to go wrong. The bees were unable to fly straight. The princess butterfly, the most sensitive of them all, was the first to keel over. With a gasp of 'poison', her wings closed like a snatched book and she flopped senseless onto a branch. A hoverfly's wings seized up, it stopped in mid air and tumbled down from the canopy to the forest floor. Soon bees followed. Beetles scratched, scabbled and fell. Moths wafted and collapsed. Wasps swooned, lurched and fell dead where they stood. Li watched in horror as his insect friends were massacred by the poisonous blooms.

The toxic blossom lasted only a few days, and then the trees began to grow hard bulbous lumps on their twigs. Li made his seeds as usual, and when the birds flew in to feast on them he heard what they thought of the alien trees' fruits. 'Inedible' was the verdict and many a raucous and rude song was sung about them.

For many years Li did not see a single big furry animal, but one night a scrawny old bear padded up to Li and climbed up into his branches to munch on some buds. The bear hugged Li's trunk, gave a big sigh and one pearly tear rolled down its thin hairy cheek. Then the bear slid down to the ground and plodded away.

Li's leaves gradually wilted and fell. Each year he was squeezed more and more by the alien trees and soon they were as tall as him. He tucked in his roots and waited for the people-birds to return.

He was sleeping when they came. He woke to the squeal of a monster's jaws and the thump of timber falling. This time the people-birds seemed only to be taking some of the trees. 'Thinning' he heard one of them say. Li was desperate to be among the chosen ones, but when they came close to him, the ring of jostling neighbours was cut from around him, but his trunk was not touched. He couldn't believe it. He had failed to become a book – again!

Many more years went by before the people-birds came back. Li tried to resign himself to life among the new trees, which soon grew their biting prickles into the space around him. He had become used to them, and thought less and less of the old companionship he had once known when the forest was full of trees like him. He had almost given up hope of ever achieving his dream.

One wet day, the monsters returned, growling and snarling. Li watched the first big yellow machine as it rolled within reach of a tree, paused, then grabbed it by the trunk and wrestled it to the ground. Once horizontal, it dragged the tree through the mud, ripping away all the branches and twigs and biting it into chunks about the size of a bear. Then it moved on to the next tree, leaving the logs in a heap. It had two green servant monsters that followed along behind, one picking up the bear-sized pieces of wood and another, like a greedy goose, gathering all the other scraps.

The yellow monster got closer and closer until it reached the tree next to Li. He could smell its hot rock breath and shivered at its song, like a squealing vixen, as it bit through the trunk. This tree had been pushing into Li for a few years now and their limbs were tangled. As it fell, one of Li's branches was ripped off. Pain seared down his trunk and sap welled out of the ragged stump. As if in a dream he saw the tree next to him stripped and chopped, his own lost limb mixed up in the debris. And then it was his turn.

The monster shuffled forward and reached out. Li felt the metal hand seize him low down on his trunk and a judder rattled up to his smallest twigs. This was it! 'I'm going to be a book', he sang out as loud as he could muster, tumbling all his fear, thrill, excitement and agony into a roar like thunder as the monster's jaws bit through him and he crashed crown-down to the forest floor.

It is not possible to describe what it felt like to Li to be horizontal. The memory came back to him of the day his mother had fallen on him in the storm. He swooned as his twigs were stripped from his trunk, and juddered with each cut as it was sliced into logs. His once-oneness disintegrated into many pieces like a great wind in autumn. Some parts were grabbed by one servant monster, the rest by the other, and some shreds of him were ground into the earth by the wheels of the machines.

Li's sense of himself almost drowned. Many trees are lost when they are cut down, though not all. Some hide themselves in their roots when they are cut and then grow back again from their stump. Some live on in their wood: you may have heard them wail or spit or moan in a fire. Li's desire to be a book kept him going, despite being chopped up and his pieces split far apart.

Soon he was travelling away from the forest. The monsters rumbled off down a track, then out onto a long impossibly straight grey pathway that was stitched onto the earth with a row of white stitches like this: -----

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They seemed to travel down the grey track for hours. At one point they passed through a kind of barrier where people-birds clambered up onto a platform to look at the logs. Li heard words he did not understand: 'border', 'customs duty'. The people-birds in the head of the truck-monsters performed ceremonies involving exchanges of paper. Li took this as a good sign.

Not far down the road, the truck-monsters turned and stopped by a huge gate. Inside were enormous buildings with stone towers as high as the sky, breathing out clouds. This, thought Li, must be the palace of the paper king.

The gate swung open of its own accord and they rolled in, circling the buildings to a yard where a whole forest of timbers was stacked. Li's trunk-monster drew up in a line of others waiting to be unloaded by a long-snouted machine, which lumbered back and forwards between them and the log piles, carrying them with its snout. Li's branches and twigs were driven round to the back of the palace and dumped into a mound.

Now things started to become confusing. Li's logs were fed into a cylindrical grater that turned round and round, tumbling the wood against sharp scrapers that tore off the bark. Yet the pain of being skinned was nothing compared to being chipped. This was done by an ogre that chewed Li's logs between huge sharp teeth, tearing and chomping, then burping them out onto a tray. Nothing could have prepared Li for what came next, as his chips were poured into a scalding acid brew in a cauldron as tall as a cliff and as wide as a river. The poison tore at Li's wood. All the years of sunshine that he had stored away to make himself strong dissolved into sludge. All that was left of him were threads, little tiny fibres that he had spun out of the soil-water he had drunk over all of those years. He gasped in the toxic black soup, swimming for his life, burning.

At the back of the mill, Li's leaves and twigs and branches were dragged from their mound, torn apart in a shredder then tossed into a furnace. He burned. The sludge from the bottom of the cauldron was slopped out and drained and then packed into the furnace. He burned. The threads of him that were left were squeezed and washed in boiling water and cooked up with a bleach that burned, and burned and burned.

Eventually the torture came to an end. All that was left of Li were a few scraps of fibre, mixed up with the shreds of thousands of other trees, all packed together, dried out and bundled up into a heap of bales marked 'pulp'.

The bales of pulped Li were sent to all sorts of different places.

Part of Li found himself squirted into a whirlwind machine that spun his threads into a web, and scorched and pressed and turned him into a roll of paper as light and delicate as an autumn leaf. He was coated with a plastic cover with a little blond Labrador dog on it called 'Andrex'. He

went to a huge flood-lit emporium, paraded in a carriage by a smiling people-bird who placed him on a pedestal, where he was kissed by a little monster with a winking eye in another ceremony involving the exchange of paper. Li took this for a good sign again. But then the people-bird took him to his home and did something so unspeakably horrible that you do not want to know the details.

Another part of Li was taken to another whirlwind machine that made him into thick, strong board, shiny on one side, shaped into a tube. He felt almost like a little tree, but instead of roots and leaves he had two plastic discs, one at each end, and inside him were little pebbles of all different colours that smelled like sweet sap and seeds. Again he went to the emporium and this time a baby people-bird snatched him up and exchanged gold and silver with a big people-bird in a ceremony that Li was sure must mean something magical. But it must have gone wrong, because afterwards the people-chick emptied all the seed-pebbles into the hole below its beak and tossed him away into a puddle.

A lot of Li went to the biggest whirlwind machine it is possible to imagine, where he was mixed with clay and boiled and spun and squeezed and squashed and roasted and dried and polished into a huge roll of shiny paper. He was certain that this time he was destined to become a magnificent story book. Imagine his excitement when he was fed into a printer and covered with bright-coloured pictures and dazzling lettering! Imagine his joy to be bound and stapled into a package just like that one the people-bird had read under the tree! He was wrapped up in a shiny coating and delivered through a special book-hole in the door of the house of a people-bird. But imagine his horror when the people-bird who received him took one look at him, shrieked 'How can I stop these catalogues?', and tossed him into the rubbish bin.

Toilet roll, sweetie wrappers, junk mail. None of these had been part of Li's dream of being paper.

The last few remaining shreds of Li were in a bale of pulp that was made into a block of smooth, white, rectangular pieces of paper. They sat around in a warehouse for a while, then they were parcelled off to an office where they sat in a dark cupboard, and eventually the packet containing Li was placed next to a silver and black machine called D88. It had a sticker on it that said 'Be Earthwise! Think before you print!' Next to the machine was a desk where a people-bird called Brian did not seem to do much thinking at all. He sat in front of a box with a shiny face and he performed strange tapping finger exercises in front of it on a flat instrument covered in square finger pads. Li tried to make out what he was doing – searching and surfing seemed to feature a lot. He printed out pages and pages of something, then swore, dumped all but one page into the bin, read that page, screwed it up and tossed it after the rest. He spent hours on something called 'minutes'. Then he used up a lot of Li printing these minutes and taking them to a meeting, where he handed them out to other people-birds, who took them away and threw them in the bin.

The moment soon arrived when there was only one sheet of Li left. Brian had been working for hours, seeming to think a lot, for a change. Li was trying to come to terms with the failure of his dream of being a book. He had heard a lot of conversations in the office about saving the planet. Surely he could help? On Brian's screen was a chart showing entitled **Greenhouse Gas Emissions**, showing a blue block marked 'aeroplanes', a much bigger red column labelled 'paper', a smaller brown one saying 'wood'. A group of people-birds gathered around and

pointed at it. Brian said he intended to send it to the Minister for the Environment. The others seemed impressed. 'I never realised paper's worse than flying', one said.

'I'll print it off then', said Brian, hitting a key. Li's last sheet was sucked into the printer and he felt the warm jets of ink splattering across him. He emerged proudly into the light, waiting for Brian to pick him up, slide him into an envelope and send him off on his mission to save the world.

The printer spat out the sheet of paper and Brian snatched it up. His voice was like a knife carving three sharp cuts into bark. 'Wrong way round!'

Li felt himself screwed up into a ball then hurled across the room to the bin. He summoned all of his remaining strength as he realised that this had been his last chance. As he flew in a long, slow arc towards the bin, all those years of hope poured out in a high-pitched wheedling cry. 'Noooooooooooo.....'

He hit the bin edge and bumped down onto the floor, rolling with the force of the throw. He came to a halt by a red foot and looked up into the round face of a people-chick, who picked him up, and uncrumpled him back to a rectangle. She waved the sheet at the back of Brian, who was stomping towards the door.

'You should recycle this', she said. 'We recycle all our paper at school and you're supposed to be environmentally friendly.'

'Too right', one of the other people-birds said. 'You're a bad example to Abi.'

Brian turned. 'Sorry', he said. 'You're getting some real work experience at last. Brian has a bad day.' He pointed to himself. 'Would you like some tea?'

Abi shook her head and sat down at a table, smoothed out Li's last sheet, and began to draw on the blank side with a stick that dribbled green ink out of the end. It reminded Li of the time he had oozed sap when his branch had been ripped off. After a while she changed to a brown stick. Then red. Then yellow. Then blue. Slowly Li felt his mother taking shape on his surface. He could feel her trunk and branches, her huge canopy of leaves, speckled with seeds, all reaching up to drink in the sunshine from a clear blue sky. And below, where her roots would have been, Abi wrote 'THIS COMES FROM TREES'.

She put down her sticks, picked up Li and strode over to Brian's desk. She was sticking the picture above the screenbox just as Brian came back.

'That's me told,' he said.

'Mrs Jenkins says we should always use both sides,' said Abi, 'and then take it all for recycling. Paper can be used over and over, you know.'

Abi reached into the bin and pulled out the big pile of Li that Brian had thrown away earlier when he had been surfing. 'This should all be recycled', she said. 'You can't just throw it away like that. It's a tree!' She waved Li in Brian's face. Li did the leafiest flutter he could muster.

Then Abi went around all the bins in the office and gathered up all the paper, telling everyone that they had to recycle it. One of the other people-birds started to help her. They found a big

box, wrote PAPER FOR RECYCLING on it, and when it was full they took Li and the other papers to a huge skip in a clearing with lots of little monsters doing line dances.

Li lay there in the dark for days until he heard a rumble. He felt the skip being lifted up and then a monster growled and carried it away to its castle. There the monster dumped all the paper into a bubble bath. The threads of Li swam about in the warm water, washing off the printer ink. Then Li found himself rushing down a pipe and into another whirlwind machine where he was squirted onto a web, spun and fluffed and heated and pressed and rolled back out into paper.

All this time, Li did not dare to hope what might happen to him. But at the end of the whirlwind was a printing machine that stamped its little letter feet all over Li's new sheets. Li felt words soak into his fibres and knew that when they were read out, they would taste as sweet as sunshine. An old wise people-bird sorted out the sheets and gathered them up and stitched them together into a book. You can guess what is on the cover:

*A Tree Called Li*

## Back Home from the Botanic Garden

This is how MacCaig must have felt  
returning to Assynt in summer,  
soothed and thrilled by the birches' dance  
and the aspens hushing and clapping,  
egging us on and calming us down  
in equal measure,  
an exuberant jostle of lushness  
awash with flowers,  
untamed bushiness  
thronging without orchestration.

What grows is so much more gorgeous  
than what is grown,  
woods so much lovelier than garden,  
the assemblage so much more alive,  
leaves in rampant proportion  
to the profusion of flowers,  
life revelling -  
moths, earwigs, spiders and birds  
frolicking about in all dimensions  
fighting, fornicating, feeding.

There is no watering - the sky does that.  
No-one prepares the ground - it prepares itself  
or is joyfully unprepared for the surprises thrown at it.  
Nothing is sown or planted - seeds set themselves  
or let the wind or animals take them,  
sometimes contriving their own personal supply of fertiliser.  
Otherwise there is no fertiliser.  
It is all already fertile.

## Immigrants

A horde of Viking birds  
descends  
to pillage  
our rowan trees.

They squabble  
in foreign accents,  
feasting  
and carousing.

Should we try to  
apprehend them?  
You say  
'Send them back to Norway!'

But there are arguments  
for asylum -  
foxes, eagles,  
men with guns.

In detention  
should fieldfares  
be kept apart  
from redwings?

Perhaps they are economic migrants,  
just here for the berries  
moving on when  
they have all gone?

Even the bullfinch agrees  
there was too much fruit  
this year  
for the residents alone.

So we let them flock  
from tree to tree  
scot free  
free as birds.

## A passion for Assynt

*'... a visiting eye,  
an unrequited passion...'*  
Norman MacCaig, 'A man in Assynt'

This ice-sculpted loch-and-cnocan space is still  
the most beautiful corner of the land.  
The air prevaricates on,  
the ups still lift,  
the hollows still astound  
with sphagnum art and puddle-craft.  
The tide glides out  
and slides back in again.  
Tourists (though he wouldn't use the word  
not seeing himself as one) continue to come,  
maybe even wearier now of our much newer civilisation:  
the clock's tyranny out there is strong as ever.  
Here, natural rhythms perpetuate,  
day and night, moon and season.

His questions pointed at true north,  
a compass bearing that has driven  
men in boats and folk inland  
on a journey he'd be proud of.

Who owns this land?  
Loch Roe, Clachtoll, the pools in Stoer,  
the fanks, Clashnessie Bay,  
our litany of mountains -  
Cul Beg, Cul Mor, Suilven, Canisp –  
they're ours, the local people's,  
crofters, women even, all who live here  
who fought and won,  
raised the funds to share the rights  
to this rock-bog-wood-loch land.

We possess and it belongs to us  
but what he knew was that  
we owned it all already  
and though we have the title now  
its text does not express the two-way deal:  
it is also us who belong to it.  
It remains masterless

Suilven's snow-clad, sun-drenched,  
an iced pudding in a bowl of cream,  
as delicious as it's always been  
and always will be.  
Nothing we do changes the mountains,

though I swear they gleamed  
the day we bought them.

He asked if owning has anything to do with love.  
I answer him, everything and nothing.  
It's a marriage made in a solicitor's office,  
the deeds are silent about what matters.  
Yet it was passion for this place  
that drove the people to rewrite its history,  
to wrest the land from rich and absent men.

The mountains are unaffected.  
Lochans do not care.

The sea's as merciless as always,  
still practicing arpeggios on the beaches  
ready for wild jazz jabbling in the Minch,  
ragged as ever, robbed of its fish,  
pulsing in and out of a harbour  
he wouldn't recognise:  
no boats tied up unloading  
catches from whisky-drinking fishermen;  
the bar land-locked;  
fish market, an empty hangar;  
a tanker full of cage-grown salmon;  
and a row of French and Spanish freezer lorries  
vacuuming up the guts of deep-sea ships.  
In Lochinver, the ancient smell of brine,  
seaweed and fish is laced,  
for the time-being at least,  
with diesel.

Outside, it's the old Atlantic perfume,  
great westerly gusts of it,  
soft and wet and welcome  
as a grandmother's tea.  
They say trouble's brewing  
in the ocean, the great web  
of feeders and fed, collapsing.  
For now though,  
dolphins line-dance northwards  
past Cleat and Soyea  
and beneath them sand-eels  
shoal to a deep-sea trance-beat.

The untiring tide has worked its shifts.  
At the end of the winter the thaw is slow,  
toads keep to their secret places,  
great-tits teach in tree-tops,  
woodcock blunder among birches, dodging bullets.

We argue, of course, this is still Assynt:  
less poaching than in his day, maybe,  
but no fewer devastating views.

He watched folk waning,  
eking a subsistence from acid soils, which he called  
dying acres, seeing abandoned lambing fields,  
larochs, rushes, heathered lazybeds untilled,  
but was it death he saw, or people  
tiring of the struggle  
to yoke the land to their control?

How do we tell if a land dies or thrives?  
Whose assessment of life or death do we believe:  
the March crofter who sets a match to heather  
and lets the muir burn, or the children  
counting dragonflies by Loch Beannach  
on a summer afternoon?  
Who loves this land the best:  
the hunter coming in  
with a stag on the back of his quad,  
or the woman heaving a basket of seawrack  
to her berry patch in the rowan wood?

Another non-question;  
like ownership,  
our love is shared and various  
and as unlikely to run dry  
as the rosary of lochs,  
Urigil, Cam, Veyatie, Fewin,  
fingered by streams, their destiny  
the gushing fervour of the Kirkaig.  
Yet it, too, swells and wanes  
to the pulse of seasons.

Spring comes,  
polytunnels flourish,  
rowan berries will feed  
the fieldfares' skirmish,  
woods regenerate where teeth and hooves desist,  
seals feed in the fjord,  
otters glide out on the rising water,  
ravens tumble and gannets plunge  
and lift  
and ride the sky.

The land lives, despite what we do,  
or fail to do. Schemes start,  
abort. Traditions  
grow and cease.

The land lives on.

A tide of people ebbed  
and turned: new generations  
replenish the land, coming into our own,  
coming in, coming in,  
to renew the unrequitable passion.

## Fire

When evicting a household, the sheriff's first act was to put out the fire.

The hearth was the heart of the old black house, within which the embers were never allowed to go cold: without fire to keep it dry, in this climate a turf or thatch roof will rot and start to crumble within a year. Extinguishing the fire was symbolically and practically the ending of life. Without fire, even an August day in Assynt can be life-threatening – how else do you dry yourself after a drenching in the fields or on the hill? How do you eat oats or fish? In the winter, how do you see for the eighteen hours there's no daylight?

When the sheriff put out the fire, he put out the people. Each hearth supported a family of on average 5 people. In the 1810s and 1820s, more than 150 fires were put out in Assynt. The parish roll dropped from more than 3000 to 2000 and it has been falling ever since.

The sheriff's second act was to remove the furniture. Only if the house was being re-let to another would he relight the fire in the hearth, to welcome the new tenant. But for most families cleared from their Assynt homes, their buildings were to remain unoccupied. Their land was being turned into sheep farms and sheep in these parts are not offered accommodation. Sometimes, if the people were being cleared to a particular place, having been given permission to abide in some other part of the estate or offered a tenancy in some other Highland glen, the family would be allowed to take the roof beam of their house with them, to help them construct their new home, but if the people were being evicted by force or if the sheriff felt no mercy should be shown, he was entitled to burn the roof timbers.

Fire. It is a force of destruction. For many of the Assynt families, the early nineteenth century clearances were not the first time they had lost their homes: a raid by Mackenzies on Macleod land in 1646 burned 180 houses. The rich had their share of arson: Calder House was razed to the shell it remains a mere twelve years after it was built in 1728. It was the grandest house in the West Highlands at the time, but too much resentment glowered between the Macleod and Mackenzie clans to allow such an arrogant architectural gesture to stand.

Did the same fate meet the building on the split rock at Clachtoll, which would in the 1990s become the icon for the Assynt Crofters Trust in their historic land buyout? What, other than hubris could have motivated construction on such a site? The vitrified stones on its tip are one of Assynt's many mysteries, and although I've made up a story about how it was used for my Iron Age novel *The Lyre Dancers*, we will never really know whether it was a defensive structure, a beacon post for signalling to friendly navigators or firing warning shots to foes, or whether it was, along with 'duns' at Clashnessie and Culkein Stoer, a grandiose folly built to show off, a flaunting of wealth and power or merely the iron-age equivalent of the current craze for conservatories. Keeping-up-with-the-Mackenzies? 'We simply must have a dun, darling!' Either way, and whatever it was, it was burned. As were the ambiguous and much more ancient piles of stones dotted about the landscape, known as burnt mounds, their meaning unfathomed: sauna, feasting venue, brewery or ceremonial site, we may never know.

Burning has shaped more than the buildings here, and it still does. Each year, without fail, somewhere in Assynt a crofter will set fire to the heather on one or other stretch of common grazing and the muir will erupt into flames. There's a code, a rulebook, for muir burning. It isn't always followed. There are those of us who mourn each fire, for the loss of wildlife in its wake and for the check it makes on natural ecological succession, stopping the development of scrub

and woodland. But that is precisely the point of the exercise from the perspective of those who strike the match, who want not woods but pasture lands, open grazing for stock, especially sheep. I loathe sheep, not only because they stink and are ugly and stupid and don't belong here, but mostly because, for their sakes, land owners here in the Highlands have perpetrated evils, banishing native people and destroying the richly wooded environments that close-herded cattle and resident people create. You only need to look at some of the places to which people were cleared around the Assynt coast – Glenleraig, Drumbeg, Achmelvich and Torbreck - to see that people and woodland flourish together. In places where the people made way for sheep – Ledbeg, Kirkton, Achmore, Beannach, Tubeg – woods recorded in the late eighteenth century have been decimated, the vegetation hammered down to the ground and kept there by teeth and flame.

Where woods survive in Assynt they are now largely safe, in these cool, damp times, from fire, but thousands of years ago, when the weather was much warmer here than now, the woods would have been dense and wild fires would have erupted naturally in the forest after lightning strikes. Imagine the deer running, bears diving into lochs, birds in flight – and how scary it must have been for the hunter-gatherer people who lived here.

For thousands of years, wood was our main source of heat. As recently as the 1790s, the statistical account reports wood being used for iron smelting at Tubeg, “where charcoal was plentifully got, the bounds being one thick forest.” Fires have been used for industry of various kinds here. There's a lime kiln at Achmore and corn drying kilns all around the coastal townships, some like the one at Ardroe still showing the flue where the flames would have been fed and fanned, perhaps drying the barley grains to be boiled up into whisky at the illicit still on the other side of the Dubh Loch. Itinerant bronze smiths must, from ancient times, have shared stories around the fire as they forged. There was kelp-processing and fish-smoking, and always food to be cooked and wet clothes to dry. Travelling people were given short-term shelter in the grain kilns, where people would gather for the craic. Fires are sociable places. Their dance and flicker welcomes conversation. There's always more than one reason to light a fire.

As the cleared population crowded into coastal villages and wood supplies diminished, peat became the primary energy source. Its cutting was a vital community activity, testified to by the peat roads that wind into the hinterlands of the parish, down which slices of the fibrous flesh of the land were carted and heaved, to be burned, to keep people alive.

These days, to keep themselves warm, most folk depend entirely on bought-in power: oil drilled out of the seabed, coal from southern lands, gas from wherever it originates these days – Russia? – or electricity from the grid. This is due to a combination of wealth and necessity – it's a cash economy here now, and people don't have time to cut peats, or wood, anymore: they're far too busy working to earn money to pay their rising fuel bills. The fragrance of woodsmoke on a winter's night has been replaced by coal and diesel fumes. We have to wonder how long will it be feasible to warm ourselves by burning fossil fuels and what energy sources we will use in future? There are signs that wood may make a comeback: there are trees being planted and old woods regenerate as sheep numbers decline; Charlie Russell can be seen driving trailer-loads of split wood to the increasing number of households with wood-burning stoves; we even have a ceramic artist, Fergus Stewart, whose pots are birthed from a wood-fired kiln. Like I said, there's always more than one reason to light a fire.

An academic project I worked on years ago involved a series of interviews with a researcher from Sri Lanka. The first was with the project leader, a soon-to-be-Professor of ecology and resource management. The rather daunted researcher described to him how women in the Kandy region light fires in their home gardens at the end of the dry season, sweeping up leaves and burning them, 'in order to release their nutrients back into the soil to help crops to grow when the rains come'. I carried out the follow-up interview, and perhaps because I was similarly young and female, the researcher confessed that she didn't actually think the women were concerned about nutrients at all, but lit the fires as 'an opportunity to relax, gossip with friends and neighbours, cook food together and have a social time'. Is that what the women told you? I asked. 'No', she said, 'they say they light the fires to send messages to the cloud spirits, asking them to end the dry season and bring the monsoon rains.' She had censored the spirits from her account to the chief academic as being 'unscientific'. She smiled to me, 'I sometimes wonder whether, just maybe, it really works. What if the smoke particles from their fires seed clouds, and really help the first rains to come?'

What if fires here in Assynt, too, were not just practical ways of keeping warm or making a living, not only social venues to ceilidh through long winter nights, but also spiritually powerful forms of communication? Would that help us to explain all those enigmatic ancient burnt mounds? Maybe explanations of them as hunters' fireplaces or sites for bathing sound so hollow and unsatisfying because something more enthralling was going on. Up above Kirkton, near Inchnadamph, along the stream called Alt-an-Druim-Torr, there are five, perhaps even seven, burnt mounds close together. If the building of one is a mystery, surely the building of seven requires a mystic explanation?

A burnt mound is described as a crescent-shaped pile of burnt stones, beside a trough, presumably where they heated water. They are always close to water. At Druim Torr, they are in a small, secluded valley. The nearby hills were dense forest, we can assume from their names: Druim an Coille Moire (hill of the big wood) and Creag a'Choimhleum (woody crag). The Alt – the river – is formed from several vigorous springs that burst out of the limestone here into beautiful wells of fresh, sweet water, trickling together into the single stream that flows for just a few hundred metres then cascades down a sparkling waterfall into Loch Assynt. The top pool of the waterfall has a handy washing platform with a spectacular view out to the west down the length of the loch, perfect for a sunset shower.

The burnt mounds are not so much crescents as double mounds the shape of two hips joined by a sternum. The triangular trough lies between the hips like a crotch. I imagine a round tent stretched over it between the hip mounds like the big raised belly of a pregnant mother. I feel the wonder of fresh water gushing from the earth here. My instinct is this is a place for giving birth and these burnt mounds are the remains of womb rooms, birthing tents, women's fertility places, where rituals of earth worship would have been performed around the hearth and where mothers would have been helped to bring forth children in the warm safety of the round shelter. They would have been both sacred and practical; the pure spring water both mystically powerful and a hygienic help. I wonder what other ceremonies would have been performed here: initiations into womanhood for girls at their first bleeding, spell-casting to assist fertility, recovery after miscarriage, perhaps more general healing and life-affirming magic. I imagine the cleansing fire and the pure, hot spring water. I imagine the springs changing through the seasons, their limestone channel-fed movements, their moods and fluxes, how the siting of the womb room would have had to modify as the years passed and how the burnt mounds would have been even

more wonderful to those who understood their full significance and believed that they, and the sacred fire that made them, connected them to their ancestors and to the earth.

Our excavation of a burnt mound has shown that it was used for at least a thousand years in the bronze age and then again in the mediaeval period. The charcoal comes from a variety of species including alder, birch, hazel and willow, indicating plentiful woodland in an area now almost completely denuded of trees. Once again, the evidence points to the conclusion that if we want woods to be present, we need people to be there, valuing the trees. We are forest creatures.

When the sheriff put out the fires in the Kirkton houses below the Alt-an-Druim-Torr, he extinguished not just the physical life of the people there, but also their spiritual role as children of the land, birthed as pure as spring water from the earth. To heal the injustices of the past, to heal this land, to heal ourselves, we need to relight the fires in the Assynt glens. We can reconnect to the earth through the warmth of burning, flaming wood. And if we can change our attitude to fire as a precious mystical force, even all the little blazes and crackles of gas stoves and petrol engines, perhaps we would find it easier to be more thoughtful, less profligate, with our use of fossil fuels.

Go, today, and rekindle a sacred fire.

## Ice

This year seems to be giving us the snowiest and most beautiful winter for at least a decade. I wake to a world written all over with clots, blots and spatters of white, lochs frozen over, snow doubling the girth of posts and gates and hoar crusting fences. Every overhanging rock is festooned with elaborate stalactite formations and icicles that drip by day and gleam by night. Water, the liquid we know so well, has metamorphosed. What was clear has become suddenly white; from colourlessness it reaches out and fills the full spectrum. Instead of soaking in or running through, it rests on and covers over. Fluid becomes surface, as if blood has become skin. Inner motion transforms to outer formation. The ubiquitous damp that flows, pools, trickles and ripples is brought to a standstill.

Ice, if we let it, can stop us too: give pause, halt the mental stream and make way for wonder. Our footsteps leave a visible trace in snow, then with the next flurry they are rubbed out again. It is most marvellous because (at least in Scotland) we know it is temporary, ephemeral, fleeting, soon to be chased off by sun or a wet sea breeze. But while it is here, we must both wonder at its glory and face the questions that it raises.

Frozen water is a key component of dynamic earth. Far from fixed, its extent over the surface of the globe has varied hugely over the life of the planet, from no ice at all to almost total cover, shrinking and growing in response to global warming and cooling. Ice is not only influenced by perturbations in the weather, it has become an icon of climate change. As a metaphor, it raises political and ethical questions about how we, both as a species and as individuals, might think about the future.

Climate change is nothing new. It has been one of the most important drivers of the evolutionary process that has led to biodiverse life on earth. However, two things are different now: first, the human species is having a measurable influence over the global climate; and second, we know that those who will suffer worst as a result are some of the world's poorest people. This leads me to understand the climate change issue not as an environmental issue about 'saving the planet' but as a moral imperative towards people whose survival is more precarious than mine.

### Polar bears

The ultimate symbol of icy terrain is Nanuk, the great white bear. Although currently the nearest polar bears are found far north of here, they used to roam northern Scotland. We know this because one left its skull behind in a cave known as 'the bone cave' at Creag nan Uamh, near Inchnadamph, near my home in Assynt. It was discovered along with many reindeer antlers and other bone fragments, which together evoke a landscape of wild tundra and the icy climate of a colder era, thousands of years ago. The skull itself is 18,855 years old. Quite how this sea mammal (polar bears are not called *Ursus Maritimus* for no reason) ended up in a cave 300 metres above sea level, several miles inland, is a mystery. Did it wander there to hole up for its final old-age sleep? Was it summering between freezes, waiting for ice to form in Enard Bay so it could head out to sea to hunt seals? Did it encounter a well-armed paleolithic human, hungry for meat and fur? Or did it find itself stranded, starving, as the climate warmed and the ice-sheet failed to form?

We will never know for sure, but this last scenario has a ring of truth about it, echoing what we see happening now, further north, as polar bear habitat in the arctic is threatened by the

shrinking summer sea ice. Polar bears need ice to hunt their preferred prey, ringed seals, and without it they go hungry.

Polar bears have always been my favourite animal. One of my earliest memories is of my grandparents' white Triumph car pulling into our drive with a big white teddy bear on the back seat and knowing with total certainty that this was *my* polar bear. She was bigger than I was and the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. She is in every photograph of me from the age of two to about thirteen. We are still inseparable.

I harboured the need to see a real polar bear for decades. I used to go to zoos and cry at the caged bears in their ice-free pools, deranged by boredom. In my thirties I started actively seeking them out in the wild. It was important to me not to be shown a bear, not to stare out from a bus or boat at an unreachable animal while some tour guide gave a microphoned commentary. I had to come across one on its own terms. When I finally did, it was in the woods, waiting for the ice to form on Hudson Bay in northern Canada. The polar bear's woods were in the full glorious blaze of autumn, fiery tamarack trees over a carpet of ruby and jade undergrowth, sparkling with the first winter frosts. That polar bear was also bigger than me, and beautiful, and it settled a calm gaze upon me that contained not the slightest hint of fear. I was a mere edible option, probably not as tasty as seal. My two-year-old self had the same urge as ever to reach out and hug the big white furry bear, while the rest of me thrilled to feel the humility of meeting an animal of such power. Imagine these big, fierce creatures roaming the landscape of home in years gone by!

The polar bear's ferocity is an essential aspect of its beauty. The reverence it inspires is due in no small part to it being dangerous, quite capable of knocking off a human head with one swipe of its big ice-insulated paw. Love can be close to fear. In our risk-averse times we must not forget this. William Spufford, in his analysis of the Edwardian obsession with polar adventure, *I May Be Some Time*, reminds us of the potency of 'the sublime', where danger and beauty, both just out of reach, combine to produce a heightened sense of wonder. Polar bears are sublime in this sense, which is why they are such appropriate symbols of the icy north, with its crevasse-riddled glaciers, ice bergs calving into ocean, floes, blizzards and northern lights gleaming on frost. Ice gives us snowballs but also frost-bitten fingers; a sundae with a cherry on top or a perfect murder weapon. It's lovely but it's lethal: it's sublime.

As polar bears have struggled in recent summers to find sufficient sea-ice to hunt from, they have come specifically to symbolise the prospect of runaway global warming. Yet the melting ice-cap is only the most recent threat to them. Hunting by people has been the biggest cause of polar bear population decline for decades. In 1973, after polar bears had become endangered, an international treaty was signed by the arctic polar nations: Russia, Canada, USA, Norway and Denmark (for Greenland). All banned sport hunting. In Canada and Alaska, indigenous people were granted limited quota rights to hunt polar bears, but in Russia, even indigenous people were banned from hunting them, and this has caused conflict, particularly with the Chukchi people from the Russian Far East.

Traditionally, for a Chukchi boy to be initiated into manhood, he must take part in a polar bear hunt, and the prize from the ceremonial killing of a bear, all parts of which will be eaten or used, is a pair of trousers made from the fur. These will be worn for the rest of his life as not only a hugely practical item of clothing but also an emblem of bravery and a sign of connection with

and respect for a fellow dweller in the northern landscape. The Chukchi people continue to fight for the right to wear polar bear pants.

As a result of stories like this, I have come to realise that ice, and how we as a species interact with it, is a human rights issue. All round the arctic, indigenous people have come together to assert their right to live in an environment that is not trammelled by the activity of people elsewhere. For the past century their land and sea have been intruded upon by nuclear weapons tests, long-distance persistent air and water pollution, drilling for oil and gas, and now the ice-melt caused by global warming. In 2009, indigenous peoples from around the world stated in the Anchorage Declaration: 'We are deeply alarmed by the accelerating climate devastation brought about by unsustainable development. We are experiencing profound and disproportionate adverse impacts on our cultures, human and environmental health, human rights, well-being, traditional livelihoods, food systems and food sovereignty, local infrastructure, economic viability, and our very survival as Indigenous Peoples.' A decade later, things have only become more difficult.

### Sea levels

We're all now aware that melting polar ice will cause rising sea levels and it's important to remember this isn't something new and to understand where we are in climate change history. Whatever the story of the Assynt polar bear, we know for sure that when it lived here this land was ice-covered. The ice has left its signature carvings all over what was once a year-round snowscape, scraping out valleys, giving each of the mountains their individual shapes and shifting boulders for miles. We also know that over subsequent millennia there was a huge melt-down, glaciers retreated to a few high corries and by 15,000 years ago Scotland ceased to be a viable home to ice-dependent animals. Some of this melt left dramatic formations in the land: humps like the Stronchrubie drumlins and hollows like the shake holes at Cromalt and Inchnadamph plus many of the lochans.

As far as polar bears were concerned there was a short reprieve, known as the Loch Lomond advance, when ice formed again between about 13,000 and 11,600 years ago. This was caused by a massive lake in North America, which had been trapped behind an ice dam, bursting out and releasing vast quantities of fresh water into the northern ocean. This cold, fresh inundation collided with the warm, salty water that is pushed north from equatorial seas by planetary gyration. This current of warmth, the north Atlantic conveyor, brings temperate conditions to northern Europe. It eventually meets the cold, less salty water of the polar region, causing it to sink down and back south. The sudden influx of fresh water 13,000 years ago caused this to happen much further south than previously, giving polar bears more northern room for manoeuvre.

But not for long, geologically speaking. After a 1400-year cold snap, northern Scotland suddenly shifted from tundra to warmer than now, as part of a global temperature rise of more than 2°C in just 70 years. This opened the period called the Holocene and created the conditions for woods to grow. For the next 3000 years the climate became more and more benign, trees migrated in and vegetation moved up the glens and hills, growing in soils formed from the rich mineral tills left by the ice. By 8500 years ago it was as warm as it had been for more than a hundred thousand years and, as temperatures reached their maximum, this was a verdant forested world.

Ice movements over millennia have had a huge effect on the level of the sea. During the ice age, the weight of ice effectively squashed the entire landmass under it and ever since it melted, the land has been slowly bouncing back in what is called isostatic rebound. This upward movement of the land results locally in falling sea-levels, whereas the ice melt causes an increase in sea volume and thus a sea-level rise. The different pace of these two factors has caused several metres of variability of sea-level around our coasts over the past twenty millennia.

A single metre of sea level rise can be catastrophic for a coastal community. In India, the Ganges and other rivers torrent down from the Himalayas and debauch out into the Indian Ocean via a huge delta in the Bay of Bengal. A few years ago I was invited to the Kolkata book festival and afterwards stayed on a Bengali island where 1800 people live on a few hundred hectares with a maximum height of 50 centimetres above sea level. Among neighbouring islands, the highest one, with its two-metre summit, has been designated a refuge in case of sea level rise. The daily tidal variation is a massive 10 metres, so at low tide, huge mud banks flank the island, pocked by mangrove roots and populated by egrets, kingfishers, crocodiles and tigers, then at high tide the islands are fringed by floating forests. Brackish water laps at the clay walls mounded up around the villages to protect their fields from flooding. When cyclones blow in from the ocean, the risks are high. Inundation of farmland by the salty water would mean no crops could be grown for at least five years and for the subsistence farmers this would mean the end of their livelihoods, with migration to cities like Kolkata the only way to survive. Watching a group of men digging clay and carrying it on their heads in scoop-shaped baskets to shore up the village dyke, I knew I was watching desperate people trying to fend off imminent disaster. It is not only arctic people who will suffer the effects of a large-scale melt of sea-ice.

### Freezers

So, globally, ice matters. It's also a handy substance, particularly for preserving food, and its use for this purpose is emblematic of our society's consumption patterns, which underpin the atmospheric emissions worrying climate scientists.

In Scotland, commercial fisheries, in particular, have made great use of ice for keeping fish in edible condition on its way to markets further south. By an old fishing station at Culkein Stoer, in Assynt, there are two intriguing semi-subterranean ice houses. Both have a small outer vestibule leading to a large inner underground room. One is square in section, the other round, no-one seems to know why, nor how old they are. Both have only one small window, up at ceiling level on the inside, at ground level outside, where ice was loaded into the building during cold weather, to be extracted from below at times of fishing surplus. Both ice houses are now home only to the odd sheltering sheep, their roofs disintegrating after several decades of neglect.

These days, most of the fish caught off the west coast is landed in Lochinver, where the ugliest building in the parish, a tall, rectangular, concrete monstrosity, looms over the harbour. This is the ice plant, and long gone are the days of relying on winter weather to provide the freezing service. Nowadays it's done with fossil fuels and nuclear power.

Such is the madness of our food and fuel economy that almost all the fish brought ashore in Lochinver is taken from the sea by French and Spanish boats, which (until Brexit) are unloaded into huge, refrigerated lorries to drive the catch to markets on the continent. Despite the second biggest landings in Scotland (after Peterhead), so little fish comes in on Scottish boats that the local fishmonger has been unable to sustain a business. Therefore, most of the fish eaten here

results from an 80-mile round trip by road to the nearest supermarket where people buy frozen food products to take home to their domestic freezers.

These freezers are powered by electricity from the grid, which is all, apart from a micro-hydro scheme near Oldany, generated outside of the parish. There are a few of us who have resorted to generating our own small-scale electricity supplies. Our croft is powered by two solar panels and a wind generator and we've survived happily without even a fridge, let alone a freezer, for more than 20 years – it's easy if you eat your leftovers the next day and don't open another jar or packet until you've finished the contents of the open one. A couple of other homes are similarly off grid, but most of the heating and cooling in the area, as in the rest of the country, is achieved with fossil fuels and grid electricity. One local effort to develop more renewable energy supplies included a proposal for three wind turbines, but this caused so much controversy about the visual impact of such installations on the landscape of our National Scenic Area, that the proposal was put on hold. Ironically, the language used to describe the shelving of this project was that it was going 'in the deep freeze'.

All these freezers are important for two reasons: climate change and consumption. First, the burning of fossil fuels to power them releases carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) into the atmosphere at a level that is unprecedented for hundreds of thousands of years and which is driving global climate change. Second, freezers have a huge environmental footprint. In the UK, we are living lifestyles which, if everyone on earth behaved like us, would require the resources of three planets. It is crazy and unsustainable to consume at these levels. While we focus on carbon emissions we must not forget the urgent threats to communities and habitats from mining, logging and industrial pollution caused by our consumption.

While the climate change movement has made massive strides in raising awareness of the problem and encouraging politicians to set targets towards net-zero carbon emissions, there is still an awkward silence when it comes to policies to use less of pretty much anything, and you can bet that post-pandemic recovery plans will feature plenty of encouragement to get people buying more stuff in order to try to reverse the shrinking economy. But this is also a human rights issue. Rising sea and increases in extreme weather events are the result of the past and present profligacy of our northern lifestyles, but the price will be paid first by blameless, vulnerable, poor people in the global south and far north. This makes me angry. In fact it generates a slew of uncomfortable emotions. I feel guilty on behalf of my society, my continent, my country and my community, with its street lights on all night, empty buses, shiny new cars, oil-fired central heating, chest freezers, road gritters and refrigerated fish lorries driving cod and monkfish to southern Spain to return with a truck-load of sardines to use as bait. What's worse, I feel completely impotent to change this state of affairs.

### The ice cube

My feelings of anger, guilt and powerlessness have gradually led me to a deeply cynical sense of gloom. I have no faith that political policies (even if they could be changed by my emails, which I doubt) would influence the fish lorries and freezers of our society. I have no faith that a political pact between nations will really challenge the petroleum and paper industries or the billions of people who want a car, a bigger TV screen and a tub of ice-cream to eat in front of it. I watch my moral imperative melt into impotence like an ice-cube vanishing into a gin and tonic. Is there any way to keep my moral ice-cube frozen?

One way would be for politicians to refuel my faith in them, not just by responding to emails about targets, but by showing that they are willing, at international level, to strengthen and reform the multi-national governance institutions so they actually can influence global industry, and at national level, to wield full-throated power to put the brakes on runaway consumption. Politicians need to start taxing and banning things, putting serious obstacles in the way of greed, embracing the idea that less stuff being bought and sold on the high street, even at Christmas, could be a good idea. They need to start implementing real world programmes to reduce our national footprint: not only insulation and energy efficiency schemes. Let's have a minister of thrift heading up a government department of resource efficiency making laws about using less stuff. Let's have a national conversation about the opportunities offered by the lockdown recession, the benefits of reduced consumption and how to manage the downsizing of our material economy.

Globally, each year, people use as much energy as the entire living planetary system can absorb from the sun in four hundred years. If it weren't for the few millions of years when the earth laid down some energy reserves in the form of coal, oil and gas, our species' existence in anything like our current form would be completely untenable.

### Resilience

While I wait and hope for change, there is a lot to be done to make my local environment more resilient and an effort I need to make to try to make up for my own life's environmental footprint. There is woodland to regenerate. There are skills to develop to help the community to manage the land in future. There are soils to nurture to allow more food to be grown, fruit trees to plant, knowledge about wild foods to be re-discovered. There are renewable energy resources to develop. There are wind breaks to build and storm defences to construct so we can withstand the extreme weather events predicted for the future. Perhaps we should also be making plans to accommodate climate refugees from places like West Bengal and the arctic.

We can also listen to peoples whose cultures have been around longer than ours. Back in 2006, I fulfilled a long-standing urge to go to Russia in winter, to experience the biggest country in its full snowy majesty. My nostrils froze when the temperature dropped below minus thirty. Walking out onto Lake Baikal in Siberia, the biggest body of freshwater on the planet, the half-metre of ice creaked beneath my feet. Snow blew and drifted as the wind sang across its ridged and pitted surface. I'll always carry the wonder of those moments with me: ice at its most sublime. But most of all I will carry the memory of Fayina, the Buryat woman who chortled at my delight at bubbles in the lake's frozen crust, which proved to her that Baikal was a breathing organism, a living being. What else can we learn from the wisdom of indigenous peoples who are still connected closely to nature, even where it seems most inhospitable? How to survive with fewer consumer goods? How to adapt to earth's rhythmic changes?

### A frozen future?

There is evidence laid out in the land, the ice-caps and the sea, revealed by clever scientists, showing the history of the changing climate over past millennia. The saw-tooth temperature graph indicates we are in a warm phase, following the most recent ice-age, and although the mercury is still on the rise, if past patterns continue this place is due to freeze again sometime. If things go as they have in the past, at some stage the North Atlantic conveyor will stop drawing warm water northwards and an arctic cold will penetrate south to Scotland, restoring conditions conducive to polar bears again. I find that scenario somehow comforting.

So, meanwhile, perhaps it is enough to plant trees on good days and enjoy the delights of winter, seeking out the beauty of frozen H<sub>2</sub>O: icicle-hung grottos formed under overhangs on crags; goose-wing feather patterns on frozen lochans; the lacework of frost. I shall imagine the paw-prints of polar bears in some future century and hope, in my untrusting way, that we don't drive them to extinction before the next ice-age comes.

## Stone

When I die, I don't want a stone on my grave. I will leave no descendents to remember me and I am willing to rot away forgotten. I mark my presence here on earth, here in Assynt, daily, with graphite or ink on paper. If my words survive me, I won't need a stone to show I'm still here, anyway.

But most people seem to want a stone with a name carved on it, marking above ground where their corpse or ashes or memories lie below. A signpost slab, like a doorway at the top of a staircase leading down into a subterranean place, a marker post to indicate where they passed, the body's termination point, the disembarkation station. A grave stone is the final full stop, the punctuation indicating the end of the lifeline, whether we believe there's anything beyond that point or not. Sometimes, like the marker on the grave of an unknown seaman, buried in Nedd graveyard, a stone speaks only of merciless forces of nature, but most gravestones carry a name, the label attached to the self in the final register, and sometimes some other words of love or images expressing who or what the person was.

Just by its presence, a gravestone answers the spatial question 'where?' with its mute, immutable 'here', but it cannot answer 'when?' unless numbers are engraved on it to represent the time spanned by the life of the person below. The stone itself is immune to time as we know it and however deeply the dates are carved it will try to slough them off, to blur their message of that particular human 'then' into the stone's almost immortal 'now'.

Stones defy time. They hold secrets of many long yesterdays and will continue to do so for countless tomorrows. They bridge across the lines we draw to cut our experience into palatable temporal chunks. They are neither dead nor alive, neither sleeping nor awake, neither bodies nor spirits. Shape and texture are the stone ways of being: mineral hardness, moveable stillness, engravable inertia.

Defiance of time is not the same thing as refusal to change. Stones are all works in progress, on easeful journeys from rock to dust. From their origins in earth-core fire, they have been ground out and down by ice, water and air, or by earthquakes and rock slides, as they meander from mountain, via boulder and pebble, down to grit. They will wash or blow away, then settle, and slowly, very, very slowly, become rock again.

Stones mark and memorialise but do not remember, at least not in human timescales. We cannot carbon date a stone artefact: its age is the age of its minerals, which are as old as the earth, or the age of its formation from ground-up even older stones in the bed of some ancient lake or sea. They may retain traces of geological trauma from the distant past but they are silent about such brevities as human history. A stone axe or cross can only be dated by means of carbon-based material found with it, such as charcoal in a midden or bones in a grave, or by analogy with other similar objects whose age are known.

Because it is moveable, stone can also keep secrets of place. The stone cross fragment found at Inchnadamph, for example, may, by analogy with similar crosses from further south, have been carved as early as the eighth century and possibly carried to Assynt from Argyll by early Christians. Alternatively, it might be a fake made as late as the 1800s from rock just a few miles away at Clachtoll. We may never know.

There is a near-sphere in the basement of the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, which was found somewhere in ‘Sutherlandshire’. It has three faces carved on it, and a dip in the crown of their single head. It’s a marvellous mystery, the only thing like itself found in the north, made of a granite that is similar to some in Norway. Could it have come here as an erratic carried by an ancient glacier, before being picked up by its engraver? Or was it made in Norway and brought by a Viking? We will never know where or when it was carved, but its form, the tricephalos, was a cult among warrior Celts, hundreds of years before Vikings arrived in Scotland. Two thousand years ago, Celts liked to make symbols of the heads they took as trophies. This one has droopy moustaches and smiles like Confucius. Their triple mystery – what, where and when – remains their inscrutable secret. They do what stones do well. A stone won’t rot like a spiked head. Your dog can’t crunch it like bone. It will continue. It will carry a story on, though not necessarily in a language that will remain in use.

By defying time, unlike almost all the wood, cloth and food that rots away, stones remain like beacons from the past, hinting to us about lives lived long ago. Stone relics of past people are vital archaeological evidence for those people’s lives. The tiny sharpened flint fragments known as microliths have revealed themselves as tools of Mesolithic (mid stone age) people. Bigger axes come from older, cruder times, and built structures like standing stones (megaliths), henges and cairns, indicate more recent, new stone age or Neolithic people.

Some stones must have been special. Gems like amber and jade have travelled far from where they were taken from the ground, raising questions about human values. Did the early people make tiny sharpened blades for weapons out of quartzite because, like contemporary dwellers of Arnhemland, they believed them to be the petrified bones of ancestors, imbued with a spiritual power that would help them to hunt and kill animals, or just because they were easy to sharpen? Did the cairn builders drag quartzite boulders from the mountains to bring a lunar shine within their shrine, or just so that their bright white constructions would impress the neighbours?

Because of the obstinate nature of the stuff, stone pieces and configurations remain as our most tangible signs of past lives. From dykes, houses and barns, through millstones and querns, down to tools and jewellery, stonework blurs on long after its users are silenced. It shouts loud and clear using industrial terms still current in the economy, through marble quarried at Ledbeg or the harbour breakwater made of tonnes of gneiss and sandstone boulders. It echoes with past labours too, in old fishing traps like the one close to Lochinver post office, once-labyrinthine sheep fanks like those up the Clachtoll peat track, at Glencanisp or Beannach, the hidden illicit still at Ardroe and the ruined limestone kiln and grinding stone at Achmore.

In sheer volume, walls best show up people’s labour. For thousands of years folk have been heaving boulders into lines, so as to keep livestock on one side or the other but just as much to use the rock’s power of declamation to announce ‘mine’ to the world. You can stake a cow out of a cornfield or chase deer away with dogs, but a dyke declares possession. Walls are all about power and posterity. They delimit holdings. They are visible representations of land tenure, defining relationships between people, in particular those on the inside versus those left out. Walls describe arcs in space that express a feeling of the need for a place of safety: they speak of the insecurity of those inside, of their fear of the dangerous folk ‘out there’.

Many of the stones in this land are thresholds and boundary markers, etching lines of difference that we no longer comprehend. The chambered cairns at Ledbeg, Ledmore and Loch Ailsh are eerie crossover places between who knows what conceived-of realms. How distant or close were

the living and dead, people and spirits, ancestral family and the as-yet unborn? The cairns stand, more or less rubble, raided or turfed over, clusters of stone or mounds too round to be drumlins or moraines of ice-decay. They occupy the edges of old fields, where complex underlying geological transitions are overlaid with millennia of changing land uses, creating seams between patches of different kinds of vegetation and soil, lined by ditches and streams. The cairns echo the forms of barrier mountains. They overlook river valleys that carve the land into zones and quarters, into territories of otherness.

The cairns stand like portals from our time into the past, questioning the flux and flurry of human-induced change along the centuries, mocking the traffic teeming by at 60-miles-an-hour, intent on elsewhere and oblivious to the past. They are thresholds from what we know to what we may never remember. Each stone remains silent on the many roles it has been rolled into during the last few thousand years.

The stones stand: so many, so varied, so hard. We understand so little about them, and in that mystery there is wonder.

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