

Testimonies of the Rocks: the Hugh Miller Writing Competition 2015-16

1st place in poetry

Justin Sales: Romer's Gap

The Hugh Miller Writing Competition 2015-2016 invited entries inspired by the geological and landscape writings of Hugh Miller, Scotland's celebrated self-taught geologist. The competition was organised by the Scottish Geodiversity Forum, the Friends of Hugh Miller and many other partners.

Further details of the competition, and all the winning entries, are available at www.scottishgeology.com/hughmiller/

We hope that this writing competition has encouraged a renewed interest in Miller's work, a catalogue of superb new writings inspired by one of Scotland's greatest nature writers and greater awareness and appreciation of Scotland's geodiversity.

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Romer's Gap

Locked in lochans the cold winter long
Warped by forces of freeze and thaw
Silent amorphities of trapped air
Shivering beneath the ice
Assemble themselves
Bestir and quicken
Gain definition
Coalesce
Melt

Sep
arate

As the bubbles

burst!

Water
Flings
Itself
Down
Hillsides

while

gases and

trace elements

are flung

to

the

four

winds

molecules fizzing

glittering and glinting

like microscopic strands of gossamer

caught between the peaks

at dawn

wheeling

over the

low

waves

at dusk

exulting in the entropy of it all

Air is free, water never
From the first tentative
Drip, drip, drip
To the churning
Of the tides
Water accumulates
First pooling along the stems of the new grass
Then tripping
In rivulets
And down ravines
Smashed apart
By every rock
Then brought together again
By gravity or God's will or merely fate
To cycle round ever again
For another go

From the infinite possibilities
Of bound and rebound
Comes one outcome
Only one
Only
Ever
One
This one

Beneath the bubble of the atmosphere
The rocks move, shift, settle and seethe
Fossils swim upwards again
Surfacing together in ancient shoals
Exposed by wind and wave and hammer

Evidence of life fixed in place aeons ago is uncovered
Creatures somewhere between fish and fowl
Teeth skittering across the rocks
Bones shadowy to non-existent
Hands with too many fingers
Grasp at the air of an unfriendly sky

There's a gap

Where fins become legs
When fish became lizards
(Or, at least, semi-terrestrial limbèd vertebrates)

Between the Devonian and the Carboniferous
After the armoured fishes
And before the coal-bequeathing trees

Not much oxygen then
Not many species
Not many fossils now

But they are emerging, slowly
Along the shores and the riverbanks
The shingles and the strands
Near Bass Rock and along the Whiteadder
Lungfish and other tetrapods
Crawling out of history
With questions

And here they come in turn
The fossil hunters
Keeping their own time
Backpacks and bubble-wrap
And a look in their single-lensed eyes
That speaks
Of weeks
Spent scabbling on beaches like this one

Washing up along the shore each morning
Swept back at nightfall
To warm pubs and cold tents
Lingering over a sunset
Or returning later to see the moon
A silver highway across the sea
Ponderous

How big was the moon back then?
About the same size, less a few asteroids
How big did it *appear*?

About the same size, allowing for a slightly smaller orbit

But I saw this programme where the sky was a different colour...
Because of the methane?

What?
Never mind

Busy busy busy
Trying to understand everything
While there's still time

Another gap looms

Meanwhile information continues to accrue
Multiply
Inform
Transform
Take on a life of its own

Words scribbled in a notebook
Twenty years ago on Skye
Are unearthed to appear
Blinking
On the screen
Adapting and evolving
Adopting new configurations
And diverging

In order to live
Thrive
And survive

Trying to fit new conditions

Lines upon lines
Strata
Errata
Encoded data
Revealing just enough
To have a chance
Of living forever