

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

1st place in prose

Jane Verburg: Learn to make right use of your eyes

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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Learn to make a right use of your eyes

Fossils are ghosts. Ghosts that I can hold in my hand. Turn in my pocket. Ghosts that last beyond a moment. Fossils stay. They are solid and dependable. Once a nodule is split, it stays split. I can't change the split, can't change the fossil inside. It is. And it will remain.

I have one here. A feathery echo. Filigree tidelines drawn across a sea pebble. Perfect as a hand hold. An anchor to the past. Tonight I use it to weigh open pages. I found it down on the seashore, on the east beach below the midden and the archaeology of medieval Cromarty. I'd like to ask you about it.

Sometimes I sense you about the place. I have walked the Vennels and felt the fringes of your shepherd's plaid brush my arm. I have been at the corner of Church Street at Lammastide and seen you heading off to the Clach Malloch, hammers stuffed into your pockets. Once I saw you and Lydia up in the woods, giggling.

You often saw ghosts threaded through the stairs of time. You said you knew the *tilt* of old John Feddes wandering in the dark in his light-blue greatcoat. The night your father died you saw a *dissevered hand and arm stretch towards* you; five years old. Saw straight through where the body should have been to the objects beyond. A ghost. A fleeting fossil. Nothing left for you to hold. Nothing left for you to see and study. No wonder you became fascinated by stony ghosts that stay where they are; caught in their matrix forever.

A fossil is a petrified thing. Once living, now turned to stone. Did you begin to ossify when your father drowned in the man-stealing sea? A few years later, were you gulping for air, calcifying, under your mother's rejection and the death of both your sisters? You wrote that the Accursed Stone, the Clach Malloch, underwent a *feverish dream of intense molten heat and overpowering pressure*. But how much pressure and sadness can a child contain? How many layers of grief can land on such small shoulders without change? Much later your eldest child died. And more years again, you had a

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fearful dream the very night you lifted your fisherman's jersey and shot into your skin. Stratification comes in many forms. The delicate layers rot, the scaled harder layers remain and the die is cast. The earth is a book of geological pages and epochs. You were a book. We all are.

At the low point of a spring tide, I climb in to the marble-producing Doocot Cave. A single rock pigeon stays. Here, where bats, like fossils, are locked for winter torpor in crevices and sharp-edged cracks; I rest on the story of a man searching for his wife amongst the mermaids. You too stayed a night here with gasping sea ghosts. So many tales, so many layers. Each of us: a precariously balanced mould with crushed internal features.

In the gloaming a sun-gilt sea outlines the promontory. Curlews etch the crooked bay.

I pace the South Sutor; with fish-bearing Old Red Sandstone and Conglomerate below. Could we be formed in some way by the bedrock below us? Could our natures be influenced by the characteristics of the geology in which we live? Could the red sandstones that have been dug from this hillside and that have built my home somehow infuse my very being? You gathered fossil fragments - squashed, contorted jigsaw pieces - collectively revealing the scope and shape of some strange creature. You walked these pathways, followed the contours, knew when a nodule might release another ghost into the world. Did you fear that one day your own father and all the lost souls from your life, would walk, arms out-stretched down the Sutor towards you?

You touched the cold enamel scales of *Osteolepis macrolepidotus*, cracked open from its sea-washed nodule. A story opened, a page in an ancient book, a folktale whispered from the rocks. You: part *sennachie*, part religious scientist. May be it is not only the Earth that holds deep time and folded complexities but also ourselves.

You call me to observe *even the commonest of things*. And I try. I watch the seasons kiss the seashore. I know the prevailing winds from the lichen on the

rowans and the tilt of the downy birches. Once I touched a dying woodcock when the ground froze through December and into January. I know where the

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woodpecker raised her young last spring and I watch the treecreepers with their downturned bills skirting ivy-ed ash trees. I hear the chaffinches' warning calls, the wrens alarming my approach, the redshanks as they move ahead of me. I know where the ferns grow greenest and which beech will fall in the next gale and even where the yellow shells get swirled and gather. I collect sea-scoured pebbles with grooves like runes, like Darwin's tree of life; keep them in a basket in the hall. But I do not notice the blue tits' nest and the bullfinches' perch nor have I plotted the edges of the buzzards' territory. The exposed Conglomerate by the Target Stone is pointed out to me not observed by me.

I am learning to use my eyes - all my senses - still learning.

Your words stay with me as I take another step along the strandline, as I watch an oystercatcher return, over and over, to her drowned partner.