

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

## Highly commended in prose

### Paula Hunter: Updraft

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/](http://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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## Updraft

The summit cairn loomed up out of the bright sky. Molly stepped up to it and spread her fingers across the cool stone. The granite caught the light in slow winks. She turned to look back down the slope and Ross was still out of sight. He might have stopped to take a photo. Probably he'd be trying to catch up, struggling on the scree and cursing her. But if she couldn't see him, the chances were he couldn't see her. She was alone and unobserved as she hadn't been for a long time. She turned her face into the breeze and looked out.

At the bottom of the mountain, Loch Leven glimmered like split slate. The walls of Glen Coe swung out of it, up to their silver spines. Beyond them, more mountains tumbled into the haze.

Not far from her feet, the land dropped into a corrie, a giant scoop out of the rock, filled up with air and space. She edged up to the crags and filled her lungs with the warm updraft. It tugged back, gently, like an invitation. It would be easy to accept it, she thought, one little step and whoosh, knowing it was done and could not be undone. There would be time to watch the slide show of her short life with its brittle commentary and feel released. Time to watch as the staggering walls of granite rushed by and the loch spread below her like a plunge pool. She reached out an arm and felt the force of a wind which had climbed three thousand feet. What a ride that would be.

As she looked out across the void, the air came alive with little lights, swirling and darting. The first time she'd seen them, she'd thought they were raindrops, catching the light as they fell from the sky but their movement was more like a swarm of midges; they had life about them, each one independent of the rest. Yet they'd disappeared under her fingers. Sparks at the back of her eyes. Just a lack of oxygen, she knew now. But that first time, she'd

loved the idea of being able to see inside her head, to see her brain working. She was ten then, staring at the sky outside Mum's, as she waited for Dad, as separate from each of them as they were from each other. The thought sparks had helped her feel less like a foil, as she shuttled between their flats, reflecting back at each of them what they wanted to see, missing someone always.

Up in the mountains, she didn't miss anyone. From where she stood, there wasn't a single human visible. The crust of the earth was folded, wrought into peaks and ridges, lit by the vast sky. Everything was light and possibility. There was room to breathe and think.

In a couple of weeks, she was supposed to be going back to uni. Final year, law. Her classmates were writing for the law journals, chasing traineeships, hungry for the future, as she should be. It was the age of connectivity. There were democratic revolutions happening all over the world and more than ever, people could work together for justice. There was everything to live for, everything to fight for. But the bad news resonated more, the brutality of oppressive regimes, the suffocation of peaceful protest, and closer to home, the victimisation of the poor. The people who most needed lawyers couldn't afford them. The only firms hiring trainees were the ones representing the vested interests which were screwing up democracy. When she'd asked about this at the jobs fair, one of her classmates had dug her in the ribs. 'You don't bite the hand that feeds, Molls.' For a while, she'd thought direct political action was the way to go and joined the Occupy group at uni. But then Ross let it slip at a meeting that her mum was advising the Department for Work and Pensions. Some of the members were okay about it but most started looking at her differently. By the summer, it had become more his thing than hers. And generally these days, she felt sort of invisible. People stopped talking when she joined the conversation, narrowed their eyes and turned away. It was strange and confusing. She caught herself glancing in shop windows, to

check she was still there. The reflections showed her but not her, face pinched, eyes muddy in dark hollows, the brown hair in dreadlocks which had formed over the summer almost without her consent. Ross liked them. But even Ross was colder to her lately. She didn't really blame him. The delusions she'd been having about him were every day now, the nights broken by dreams. Worst of all was the weight over her head, pressing down around her ears and making her slow. Like a lid. She didn't know herself.

And now she was at the top of a mountain again. It felt surreal, in a good way. She'd thought she'd given up climbing. But no one had told Jess, Max and Pete. They'd pestered her to come with them, even though she'd ducked their messages and calls for months. Pete had even come round to the flat to talk her into it. And he'd answered all Ross's questions, calmly smiling through the sarcasm. Max's dad had a gap in the holiday lets and was happy to let them have the cottage in Onich for the week, so long as they didn't wreck it. The gas bottles needed replacing and a few other jobs which they could do to pay their way. He'd borrowed a van and equipment from the Mountaineering Club. All she needed was beer money. It left Ross with nothing to object to and her, more grateful than afraid.

The breeze swirled around her, holding her up, as ripped clouds moved across the sun and the light changed from grey to brilliant white and back again.