

# Footprints in the Sand: the Hugh Miller Writing Competition II 2017-2018

## Poetry Winner

### Alex Woodcock: *Pneumodesmus newmani*

Footprints in the Sand: The Hugh Miller Writing Competition II carries the name of one of Scotland's most endearing geologists, Hugh Miller (1802-1856), and aimed to honour his legacy by inspiring new, original prose and poetry on the theme of Scotland's rich fossil heritage. The competition was organised by the Scottish Geodiversity Forum, The Friends of Hugh Miller and other partners.

Further details of the competition, and all the winning entries, are available at [www.scottishgeology.com/hughmiller/](http://www.scottishgeology.com/hughmiller/)

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*Pneumodesmus newmani*

I was twenty-three,  
Eight years before the discovery,  
Breaking my back in the ceilidh  
In Stonehaven

Drunk and wearing a kilt. The wedding lasted four days,  
The journey from York, six hours;  
We arrived in the dark  
And woke to the waves

But you were already there,  
A scratch in the sandstone,  
A feather on the finger of time  
Hiding out in the cliffs

Waiting for the hammer.

We ate blueberries on the train up, I remember,  
Something exotic, or so it seemed then,  
Like the first air that you sipped  
When Scotland was near the equator,

You, a whisper of life  
Held by the rocks for  
Over four hundred million years:  
*Pneumodesmus newmani*.

The story goes  
It was a local bus driver that broke you free,  
A fossil collector when not at the wheel  
And now the father of an ancient millipede,

Perhaps the first oxygen-breathing animal to live on land.  
There's a photograph online,  
A wide-toothed comb of stone  
Transient as a scar

And no longer than a fingernail,  
Legs floating like the tentacles of a jellyfish,  
A beautiful arrangement by the sediments  
Clearly thinking ahead.

We slipped in our smooth-soled shoes on the path  
To Dunnottar Castle  
And lined up in the rain and the ruins  
As Tim and Claudia were married;

I have a picture somewhere,  
A concentration of formal dress and umbrellas,  
Of men with long hair and cold knees  
And relatives sheltering beside masonry,

A moment in time  
Of many moments in time,  
As you waited  
And waited for the one

When we had evolved  
And had enough fortune on our side,  
To find your tiny footprint  
And recognise your pioneering life.

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Now, in another life of my own,  
Hundreds of miles south,  
And walking the shore like Kenneth White  
Ruminating on the rosy quartz,

Thinking of Okuizumi writing  
'Even the smallest pebble in a riverbed  
has the entire history of the universe inscribed upon it'  
– Well, he's right –

Recalling Miller, a stonemason like myself,  
Asleep and dreaming of the day's drab burial ground  
'suffused with the blush of sunset',  
the stones on which he'd only just worked

Antique and thick with moss and lichens;

Looking for echinoids below the chalk cliffs,  
Sometimes finding one in the shingle  
Like the other month,  
Turning over a grey pebble

And realising it was a heart-shaped urchin, *micraster*,  
A mere slip of a thing  
At around  
Sixty million,

I'm thinking of that long weekend  
(Still by far the best wedding)  
And of all the undiscovered and unknown  
Creatures beneath,

Their lives a faint cast or impression  
Deep underground,  
And of your emergence into our world  
In the early two-thousands.

Well

All the Palaeozoic fishes,  
All the smiths forging tools in the Iron Age,  
All the bus drivers,  
All the plants that have weathered

A life on the land,

All the artists and scientists,  
All the animals silent in the glow of the moon,  
All the feathered dinosaurs  
eating from the bird-table,

Salute you.