

# Ekphrastic Inquiry into the Neolithic Mind in the Islands of Scotland and Wales

**Amanda Nicole Gulla, Ph.D.**

Lehman College/City University of New York

As a teacher educator, I am sometimes asked why I spend so much time in my teaching methods classes teaching poetry when it is such a small part of the curriculum teacher candidates have to learn. My response is usually to quote William Carlos Williams (2001, p. 310):

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.

In a world of schooling that is increasingly driven by the measurable and quantifiable, poetry provides a rare experience of the ineffable. While there are indeed many other things teachers need to learn besides the reading and writing of poems, the practice of poetry teaches us to be nimble communicators, and allows us to either follow a strict structure or make our own rules. Poems demand that we choose words with just the right weight, tone, and rhythm to make the poem sing, or invent the right words if they don't already exist. By breaking us free from the structures of formal prose, writing poetry can help us to find our voice and express the universal aspects of our personal experiences. When we are conscious of crafting imagery with words, the experience of making a poem can feel closer to painting than to writing prose.

This work explores the imaginative possibilities that exist when ancient structures intermingle with the trappings of modern-day life within a community. The remote northern and western islands of Scotland contain rich archaeological records dating back to the Neolithic and Iron Age periods. In the Orkney islands there is a popular expression: "Scratch an Orcadian and he bleeds archaeology." There are no written records from this period, all of the evidence left behind is in stones and bones.

Through a series of ekphrastic poems that incorporate data from the Royal Scottish Archaeological Society, I am attempting to create a portrait of quotidian life some 5,000 years ago.

The poems included in this article are inspired by the archaeological sites in the northern Scottish islands of Orkney and Shetland, as well as the western islands of the Outer Hebrides and the Welsh island of Anglesey. Once we were visiting a good friend at his ancestral home on the isle of Anglesey, and he spoke about the idea of going home in one's heart—finding a place in which the soul feels fully alive and expansive. He taught me the Welsh word “hiraeth,” which was explained thusly by Val Bethell in 2003 on BBC Wales:

“...the link with the long-forgotten past, the language of the soul, the call from the inner self. Half forgotten - fraction remembered. It speaks from the rocks, from the earth, from the trees and in the waves. It's always there.”

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/val\\_bethell\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/val_bethell_01.shtml)

This definition speaks to my lifelong restlessness because it does not require that one's primary spiritual and emotional attachment be to one's literal place of origin. Rather, it seems to allow for the possibility that any place might sing to a person. I am a lifelong New Yorker, but my soul has always been drawn to remote rocky coasts. The merciless wet winds of the northern islands are invigorating, but that sense of aliveness is not just from the climate. I am drawn to the ancient stones carefully erected thousands of years ago by Neolithic ancestors, and left in place as giant, towering mysteries. I have a love for these stones that is beyond anything I can explain. It is hiraeth, not in the usual sense of a nostalgia for a home that is distant or changed. Rather it is that longing for a place one may be surprised to discover feels like home. It is the sense captured in the 1933 film *Queen Cristina*, when Greta Garbo as the titular character asks, “Is it possible to feel nostalgia for a place one has never been?”

To have grown up and lived a quotidian existence among these stones as do the people of Orkney and Shetland, and so much of Britain as well as Brittany must have a profound effect on one's sense of place—a hiraeth that resonates back to a time before written language.

This sensation of longing for ancient stone places dominates my dreamscape. The rugged northern and western islands of Scotland are wonders of archaeology full of stories that can only be deciphered through deep imaginative dives. A summer spent wandering among the stones on the Orkney and Shetland island, trying to imagine the language, thoughts, and beliefs of people who were just beginning to work out a new relationship to place, to materials, and developing this new idea of a

home. Their homes had shelves. What did they keep on those shelves? What was their relationship to objects?



*Figure 1: Skara Brae, Orkney, UK. Photo by Amanda Gulla*

By day I walked among the massive stones of the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stennes with Ann, who had proposed marriage to me several years earlier whilst kneeling in the peat in the midst of the Callanish stones on the Isle of Lewis. We travel the world to visit these Neolithic sites. On Orkney we embraced the stones, photographed them, talked to them. We had discovered this bond between us in both being fascinated by stones and bones.

While we were there words more or less failed me. It was only once we'd returned home that I began to write poems to work out what stories the stones might contain. This writing takes an image or a place and spins a tale that is centered on an imagined protagonist. It is a form of Ekphrastic inquiry in which imagination weaves a narrative out available bits of information. The experience of such writing is fully engaging the mind and body to be lost in "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Sullivan (2009) describes this engagement as "intuition," which she describes as, "something biologically real, a cognitive process that arises from being finely attuned to the signals that our physiology delivers from subconscious perception" (p. 112).

Any form of writing can be a means of discovery, but poetry in particular allows us the freedom to use words, sounds, lines, and their arrangements on the page to shape thoughts and discover what hidden mysteries lie beneath the surface of consciousness. Prose may explain what the writer is thinking about but poetry invokes it. In particular, Ekphrastic poetry has the capability to

locate(s) the act of viewing visual art in a particular place and time, giving it a personal and perhaps even an historical context. The result is then not merely a verbal "photocopy" of the original painting, sculpture, or

photograph, but instead a grounded instance of seeing, shaped by forces outside the artwork (Corn, 2008).

In a certain sense, writing ekphrastic poetry is about responding to essential themes of the human experience such as coming of age, love, loss, and the cycle of life as they are voiced by artists and writers in endless possible versions. When we respond to art with poetry, we enter a conversation that has been taking place across human history.

Here is a poem that was inspired by Maes Howe, a Neolithic burial cairn in Orkney with a low, narrow entrance that requires that one stoop very low or crawl to enter. Once you are inside the domed roof allows you to stand, where you can see runic graffiti scrawled by Vikings who broke in during a snowstorm when the place was already ancient. My imagination would not let go of the fact that the entrance of the cairn is aligned with the sun at the Winter Solstice. What powerful beliefs and prodigious knowledge led these people to construct this edifice which still stands, and which I was able to touch?



*Figure 2: Maes Howe, Orkney, UK. Photo by Ann Sherrill*

## **Your Neolithic Life**

On the day you are born  
a storytelling of rooks  
takes flight from the trees above your slate roof  
over the low-linteled cairn whose walls  
align to winter sun just for an hour's  
respite from endless cold and dark.

We raised these stones to capture the solstice—  
light magic is the sacred seed of cinema.  
Limestone awash from a single ray—the sun-  
filled chamber promises that light will return  
with or without you.

The wheel turns another click,  
gravity pulls you a few inches closer to the core.  
Midwinter sky settles around your shoulders,  
in the creases of your palms, in your hair.  
You crawl  
down the rock walled entryway  
and wait.

I wrote this to imagine a moment in the life of a person who might have had that experience 5,000 Solstices ago, and stumbled into the image of a lone person in a movie theater, dust motes floating in the light of the projector. Perhaps this single ray of sun lighting up the wall of the cairn was a proto-movie. The narrative could have been provided by a Shaman. Who knows what they saw in the shaft of light that pierced the winter darkness? Perhaps this means that our impulse to tell stories in movies, plays, songs, and poems is an unbroken chain reaching back to prehistory.

Later that same summer in Shetland, a group of Scottish islands that is closer to the North Pole than it is to London, we took a midnight ferry to Mousa Island, an island that has had no human occupants for two hundred years, but is home to many sheep and birds. We were going to see the storm petrels dive bomb their way into the perfectly preserved ancient broch, which they did at midnight. This time of year, on the verge between spring and summer, day slowly bleeds into a perpetual dusk the Shetlanders call the simmer dim. At midnight it is still light enough to read outdoors, but dim enough that these tiny swift birds can dart past the raptors and make it safely to their nests. It is also dim enough that the sky and the ground become difficult to distinguish from one another. It is an eerie light that can send the imagination into overdrive. The poem Mousa Boat Man and the Storm Petrels chronicles that experience of walking this small island to the towering broch in the simmer dim.

## **Mousa Boat Man and the Storm Petrels**

### I. Mousa Boat Man

He speaks of the storm petrels in a hushed tone.  
“Twenty-seven grams. Weight of a one-pound coin.”  
His back to the dock where his ferry boat bobs,  
eyes fixed on the long stretch of peaty bog  
between us and the broch,  
Iron Age fortress, mysterious  
tower of Norse legend.  
Dark stone sentinel that  
looms at the edge of this  
lonely Shetland island.

Mousa boat man reaches into  
the pocket of his wool trousers.  
Artifact in a plastic sandwich bag  
“The storm petrel flies  
halfway around the world  
on *these wings*.”

he makes an arc in the air with his  
calloused fingertip

A perfect pair of peerie<sup>1</sup> black wings  
passed among the sturdy walkers.

Storm petrels nest in the Mousa broch.  
Round, windowless tower  
raised high on the cliffs and  
silhouetted against the sky.  
Ancient tower of double  
walls and secret passages.  
Witness to the ages on this  
misty northern island.

---

<sup>1</sup> Shetland dialect: diminutive

Mousa boat man says

“Take your time. See the birds.  
They swoop under cover of dusk  
past hungry raptors, into the broch.  
Careful where you step.  
They nest in the stairway”

## II The Simmer Dim

Early in Shetland’s summer,  
dusk comes at midnight.  
In the simmer dim,  
night holds its breath in liminal light.  
Mousa boat man waits by the dock.  
Ann and I head off with the sturdy walkers.

My job is to walk and to see.  
Sky slowly dims, just  
enough to match the ground.  
I struggle along the path  
etched by sheep into mud and rocks  
along the cliff edge. Ann asks if I want to go on.

I say yes.

The last few feet a steep climb,  
“I’ve got you,” she says,  
pulls me up by the hand.

It is night but not night.

First moon since we’ve been here.  
I realize how much I’ve missed it.  
Storm petrels circle around the moon,  
dive into the broch. Tiny winged missiles.  
We crouch beneath the low-linteled entrance,  
crawl into its skylit tower.  
Ann climbs stone stairs that  
rise like jagged teeth  
between massive double walls.  
I stay below, listen for  
wings beating in the shadows.

The sun sinks lower, the

moon rises higher and  
disappears in the mist.

In the simmer dim, faint light lingers  
deep into the night.  
Tonight, the wind has knives.  
The ground is unforgiving.  
It's time to find our way back to the boat.  
The going is slow. The  
simmer dim won't illuminate.  
Ann lights our way with an iPhone.  
No time to pause to  
gain or regain footing.

### III. Mousa Boat Man Waits at the Helm of his Ferry.

Into the half-light with a torch and a staff,  
come two of the sturdy walkers  
calling out, guiding us  
away from the edge of the cliff  
toward the dock.  
One foot in front of the other.  
A doctor once told me  
a foot is just a bag of bones.  
I place my bones gingerly  
along the rain-slick path.

Fleece-wrapped walkers  
huddle quietly on benches.  
Straggling storm petrels  
still dive toward the broch.  
Mousa boat man says nothing.  
He starts his engine and  
turns away from Mousa island.

Ann starts the car.  
We drive home to Scalloway,  
Village in the shadow of a ruined castle.  
Porch light on the house  
overlooking the harbor  
Beth and Ian's kitchen,

stories flow deep  
into the simmer dim.  
A dram of whisky.  
A Tunnock's teacake.



*Figure 3: Mousa Broch, Shetland, UK. Photo by Ann Sherrill*

In *Your Neolithic Life* I began with thinking about all the ways in which this life of a person 5,000 years ago could be so different from my own, leading me to find the threads of continuity. My imaginary subject had crawled down the same entryway as I had. In *Mousa Boat Man*, the island and the broch were the setting for an important story about my life in relationship. The moment at which Ann reaches out her hand and says “I’ve got you” was the story of that night every bit as much as the birds, the broch, the whisky, and the teacake. That moment is the beating heart of the poem. In the long tradition of poets engaging with ancient megaliths, I had placed my own story right at the center of the circle. Through the vehicle of Ekphrastic inquiry I pursue my curiosity about the people who built these ancient monuments, seeking common threads that connect us across millennia.

## References

- Bethell, V. (2003). Interview on BBC Wales.  
[https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/val\\_bethell\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/val_bethell_01.shtml)
- Corn, A. (2008). *Notes on ekphrasis*. Academy of American Poets.  
<https://poets.org/text/notes-ekphrasis> retrieved 06/12/2020
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper Perennial.
- Sullivan, A.M. (2009). On poetic occasion in inquiry. In M. Prendergast, C. Leggo, & P. Sameshima (Eds.), *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences*. Sense Publishers.
- Williams, W.C. (2001). Asphodel, that greeny flower In *The collected works of William Carlos Williams volume II. 1939-1962*.