

Communion

Suze Adams / Anna Saunders

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Introduction

*Here where absence and presence coexist
Ghost and flesh in the same room*

If universities are to fulfil their educational obligations they need to support their students in both the creation and the dissemination of creative work, not least because the promotion of high-quality communication has to be at the centre of their enterprise. A sense of that obligation lies behind the original conception of this book.

The visual images here arise from and relate to a doctoral project that Suze Adams has pursued with the Place, Location, Context and Environment (PLaCE) Research Centre, based in the Department of Art and Design at the University of the West of England, Bristol. As Director of PLaCE, I am delighted that we have been able to facilitate the production of this exemplary collaborative work. I am delighted not least because it also allows us to reciprocate the generosity of the artist and poet involved.

It has been through Suze's many-layered personal engagement with Mull, and her desire to share that, that students, colleagues and I were drawn into that island's orbit, undertaking fieldwork and exhibiting as a group there in 2009. Later, it was through Suze's ambition for her work that we were able to work with the poet Anna Saunders, who has been unfailingly supportive of our endeavours, and so to make a contribution to the first Cheltenham Poetry Festival.

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As that mysterious thing *a place-in-time* (and so always somehow both 'flesh' and 'ghost'), Mull's rich interplay of water and stone, silences and stories, scarring and beauty does not open itself to anything less than the most exacting creative exploration. That Suze Adams and Anna Saunders have been able to weave such a rich and finely attuned response to that rich but reticent interplay - evoked in this book through its tensioned and finely crafted confluence of image and word (to which music and the cadence of the voice are added in live performance) - is an extraordinary collaborative achievement.

It is a tribute to both Suze and Anna's commitment to the project, and equally to Anna's sense of adventure, that she has been willing to take a risky creative journey into lyrical poetry, having previously understood herself to be a narrative poet. While Anna has written of these photographs of Mull as inspiring her "to see nature anew", of being herself "obsessed with textures and smell and understanding the components of nature", the poems included here take us well beyond 'nature poetry' as conventionally understood. Poems such as *Between Sunset and Dusk* and *The Shore Speaks to the Sea* take us into a place that is both more and less than carnal, a place prior to any categorical distinction between 'nature' and 'culture', where the visceral and the spectral combine in a dark illumination. They do so in counterpoint to the images and, in consequence, open us to the latent possibilities of our attending more closely to the world in all its dynamic meshings between and beyond the capture of either text or image alone.

Iain Biggs

Director, PLaCE, Bristol June 2011



*Here where absence and presence coexist
Ghost and flesh in the same room*

The Hollow

Concave swoop
of stone spine,
rocks exposed like
beads in a rosary
descending to a hollow
holding only absence.
Above it all a sky
as cool and empty as a church.
Air still and expectant
as the breath of disciples
who wait in the cloisters
for their god to sweep through.



A Truth the Heron Knows

The woman, poised on the lip of a lake
grasps a truth the heron knows.

She is waiting for epiphany
standing in the gloaming,
skin white as feathers and fluttering.

Waiting for the emergence of light
through cloud. For the silver fin
which will break the lake's dark skin.

How motionless she is.
Only her mind moves.

The truth the heron knows
that to be still is to catch the dance.

Suspended creature, on the brink.
Body stock still, wings folded in.

Waiting to spear the sudden flourish
that breaks the lake's dark skin.





All Night that Muted Boom

All night you have heard a muted boom
as if a distant city were being bombed
and on the shore with dawn you face it
the devastation of each incoming wave.
A smooth blue truth
fractured to shard and splinter.

And in the thrum of each deeply borne
detonation, as your eyes weep with flares
and your ears fill with explosions
you wonder what else can be so blown apart
only to come whole again.
What else but the sea, the sea and the heart?

Arrival

On arrival you will ascend into light
as if breaking water.
The ether will seem thinner
somehow, the sky more intact.

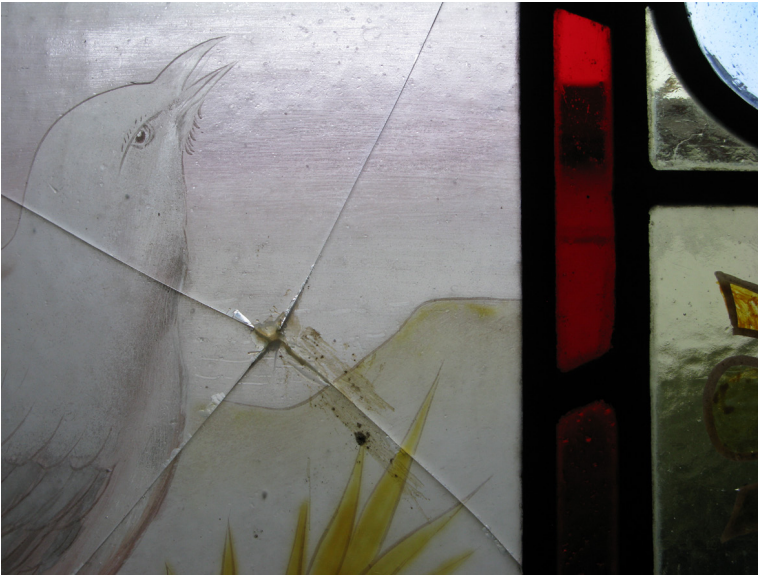
You will feel as if you are experiencing
the transition of a soul freed from flesh.

You will still have stones from the city
impaled in your shoes,
their weight a manacle
to your flight.

This is how it was for Eurydice,
before she plummeted back.

Her head birthing a brilliant expanse.
Her feet fettered by the dark.





How to Look at Absence

To see what exists within absence
observe it in the same way
you would a 3D stereogram.

Stare at it, with such intensity
and weight that you would gouge out
a hollow in its flat plane.

Then loosen your eyes.
Let them glide over the aperture
and watch the images rise.

At first they may seem abstract
and psychedelic.
Senseless swirls and amoebic shapes.

Continue to gaze and forms will emerge.
Lithe shafts of light spinning in streams.
Pearl-pale auras
quivering around the roots of trees.

Gaze longer, deeper and with love
and you will see mist seethe
like an aroused ghost.
A quickening that must be the soul of a stone.

All this exists under,
around, and over the surface of things.
You need only know how to look.

When your head starts to spin
and your eyes begin to blear,
refocus on the flat veneer.

Sit in darkness, close the book.
Let your ears echo with a sibillance
which could be snake or spirit
or the rasping lament of a haunted land.







The Rivulet Escapes the Sea

This is a hymn of mass and multitude
of innumerable notes melded into a roar.

This is a chorus, a crowd holler.
Too numerous, too various
to extricate a single chord.

Unless, of course
you have the ears of a cat
finely tuned, primed to the heart-rending mew
that is the outcast's song.

The hymn of those who walk alone at night
and envy the starling's synchronised flight
or the ease of shoals of fish.

The sensitive ear only
can pick out the single rivulet
that dances more fluidly alone.

Clumsy in company, out of synch,
anxious to forge its own groove
and dazzling as it makes its quicksilver escape
from the melting pot of the sea.





Distant Islands

Sick of extravagance we craved austerity.
Sought clear stone,
a dour sack-cloth sky.

We came after plain truths,
an artlessness of approach,
simple mantras - bird song,
the peal of a bell.

And the abstract -
mountains transmuted to symbol
plain shapes of rock, featureless
as faces in shadow.

Far out islands,
too distant to reveal
each fissure and fault line of rock,
each individual crystal of quartz

or the barnacles clinging,
hollow, pale, heaped high as skulls
stored in a catacomb.



Gods of Mull

Water Gods

spinning sun
in clear spines

sheer cords
glinting

moving in swift flits to lakes
which lie still

dermis quivering
with the tremors of

Air Gods

scatter who mingle with ghosts
the gold glamour of beaches

in pin pricks
of cut crystal.

Air Gods

the ether for the dance
in which the dead spin

and ascend.

At their roots

Earth Gods

implacable
muscular

mute.



The River Seems to Say

Leave your flotsam, float
like Ophelia, gazing up at the sky.

Leave behind on the bank
the prickly stick of 'I',
and glide.

Here, no reed beds
will catch you like a loose thread.

Bulrushes will act
only as exclamation marks
excited at your drift,

and the crows over-head
who manipulate eddies of air
will be envious

of the way the water works for you,
and how your limbs lie inert
in your effortless flight.

Suddenly, The Sunset

We are duped
by the crust
our soft feet tread.

Hoodwinked
by a carapace
of hot river
turned to stone.

Walking the cool roots
of volcanoes
we rule out instability
and flux.

Now the plates have shifted
and stilled
surely, we are set as rock?

How could we forget
the way precious metal acts
when plunged into fire?

Suddenly, the sunset's flourish
of liquid-gold quickening,
solidifying to mass.

A brief alchemy.
Almost too swift
for the eye.

A change as short-lived
as emotion
illuminating the face.

As transient
as our own dazzling
play of light

before we slide down
into the dark
behind the edge of the earth.



Between Sunset and Dusk

The stones have seen him
and the petrified rock,
but you did not expect to glimpse him
here on a pale shore.

Not here, between sunset and dusk.
Between *dog and wolf*.

You expected him still confined to Arcadia
clinging to cover of darkness.
Not here, in a *blue hour*.

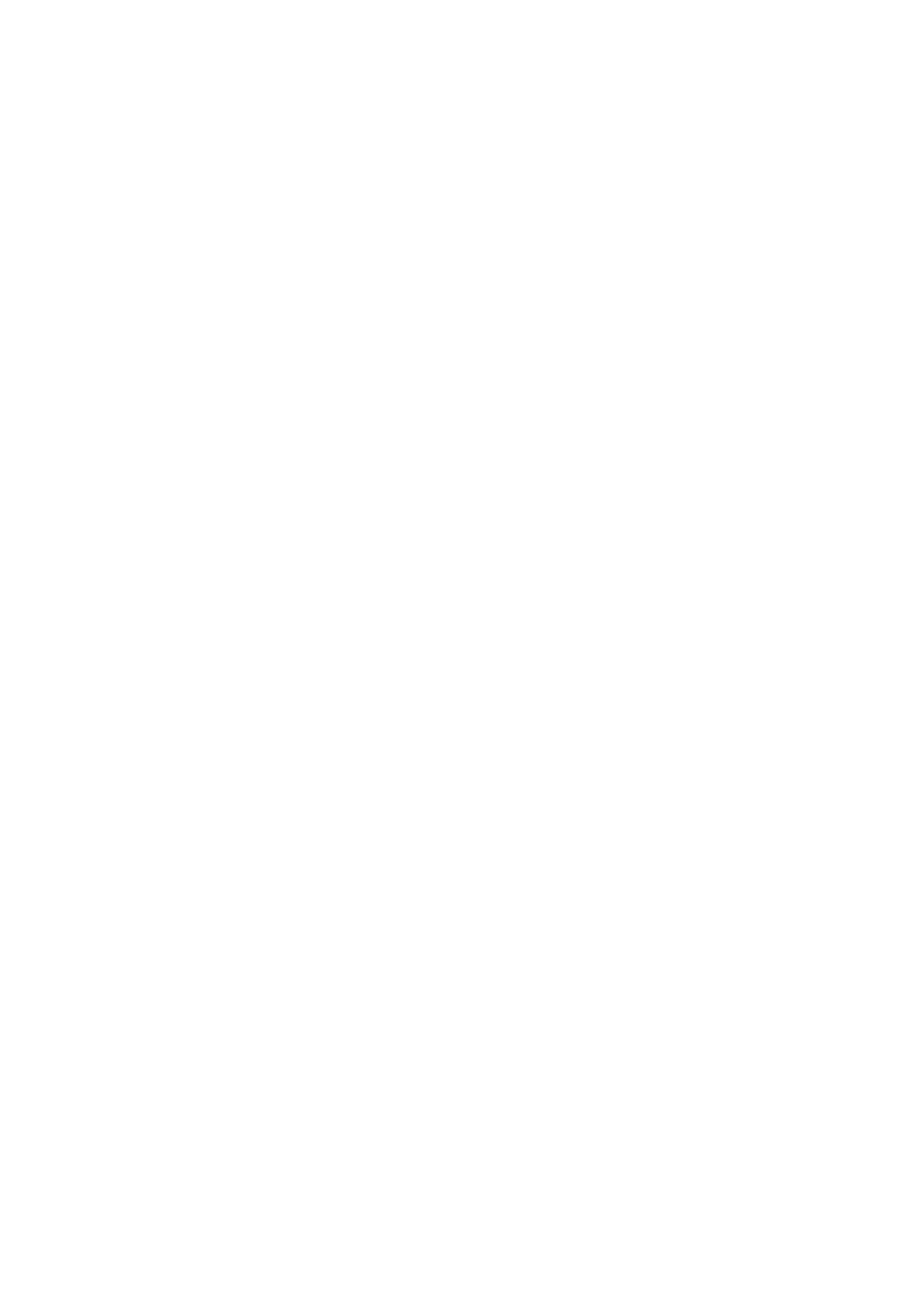
Yet some things thrive
on obscurity, on a bewildering light.

It is not the sinking of the sun
that cools your skin
or the wind, that makes your hair rise.

It is a sound that could be laugh or shriek.
The scrape of hooves skittering.

The horizon cowering,
and the Goat God coming in

summoning up echoes,
head bowed low as the lowering sky,
clinging to the carriage of night.





Pale Copies

This island teems
with traces of the dead.

Their pale copies drift unhindered
through absence.

Through dusk
the airy replicas glide.

It is as if they move through water
with silvered scales
refracting light.

Their glinting fins
a gilded luminosity,
dazzling, yet weightless.

The bodies of the dead
would only burden them now,
as they dart, insubstantial
and ephemeral.

Lighter than dust.
Lighter than the rain
that falls in the emptiness
which is their ether.







The Shore Speaks to the Sea

You are luminary.
A spangling thread of stars.
A glitter limb, unfurling.

Tide out - you gleam
with the glimmer of Kristallnacht
Blaze like silver beaten to plate.

I long for you to break and peak
above me. For your clamorous song
of insatiable flux.

Shift and dissemble above me.
Sluice back and sculpt me
in an echo dance of ebb and flow.

Let me view the sun through you
as it stretches, bleeds and expands.

Let us converge
and dance and lilt as one
in your swell,

until the moon
who owns you in your ebb
sucks you back
and leaves me,
skin plucked to a peak and alone.





Lineage

We walk, eyes pulled by a taut thread
to sky. Gaze looped to the gulls' arc of flight
the cotton clot of cloud.

By day the sea glints
with the metal of needles,
and waves peak and beat like linen
blown on a line.

We watch rivers run through
like glinting cords
see gleaming stitches
and new steps.

We forget, until the dark folds in,
like linen pushed into a drawer,
about the stitches cast
by buried bones.

The weave of ancient lineage
which holds the fabric of earth
to our feet.

Working the Dark

The sea is impenetrable
promising annihilation,
and the mist a bloom
softening the edges of the shore.

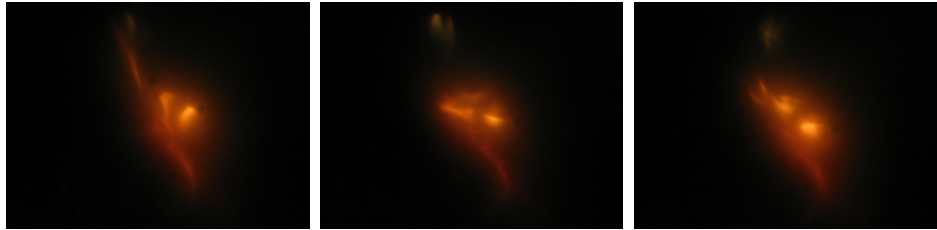
Soon everything will be lost
to you. The black bodies of boulders
the spike of furze.

If you stand here too long
only your hands, working the dark
will remain luminous

and the waters at your feet
will entice you to lie down
so they can extinguish your light

by closing like a trap door
over your lustrous head.



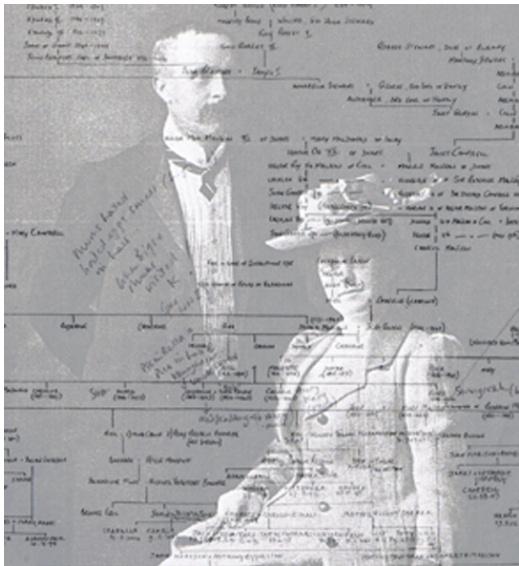


*Communion: for those who have gone before and
for those who have yet to come*

an adhich a cheile
a dean freasdal a struchdadh
th an fhirinn na h'eigin
l gilean a's aighean
n bhi comhradh be'm boud e
crioch lannanachd posadh
us for maith na dheigh ain!

thach sud a tha dullech
ach bi furasda pentach
dean cleir a na lissinn
dhanas easan gun geiladh
sinn uile nar sagart
ibhse chailagean gaolach
in mar fhaleas a sgathan
is a faq sinn a saoghal!

na bithibh fo mhi-ghean





Communion

No
really,
I am listening.
Its just that I thought I heard children,
laughing.

But it was only the wind
calling,
the lake lapping ...
A coruscating circle glimmering against stone.

Ripples opening out in concentric circles,
like the layers of a trained heart.

How easily water makes way for mass,
how accommodating the lake is.

All those thin black lines
but I am not even ink yet.

And there they were
Hector Roy; deceased
John Garbh;
Lachlan the 8th; accidentally drowned.

Jessie, Christina, Donald,
Uncle Coun, Auntie Katie, Flora;

John
and Mary ...

That mirth!
It must be the waters
chortling at a private joke.
What is it you are trying to tell me?
What is it you are trying to tell me?

How long must I stand here?

Blue veins form lightening forks at my feet;
my skin goosepimples as if I had touched a ghost.

I am straight backed as a heron,
sentient on the shore.

There,
there is that whispering again.

What is it you want me to hear?
What is it ... ?

When water retreats it folds in on itself,
corrugates like crushed steel,
as if it were to squash itself small
to make room for me.

I move and the water answers.
I dip and wade and meet no resistance,
just whorls and ruffles
around my feet.

How deep we become in conversation,
how much more intimate can we get?

How amorphic I am when immersed in you;
I lose my boundaries,
become blurred.

Look at me; I am nebulous.
Giving way to each ripple and wave,
malleable in your depths.

All that I thought fixed and impermeable
is transmuted and turned to fluid.

How crazy I was to think I was separate.
A hard edged, impervious individual;
each wave modifies me.

From a distance I must seem all ego,
alone on the edge
only observing you.

But close up, what rapport!

Your lilting language of surge and retreat,
my skin porous, taking you on board.

Our communion is not merely one way -
in return I give you piece of me.

You sluice my skin cells,
turn them over and over on each wave
and read me like Braille.

No really, I am listening.
Its just that I thought I heard children,
laughing.



In conversation: Suze Adams and Anna Saunders

Suze Adams lives and works between Gloucestershire and the Isle of Mull. Her research practice covers a variety of media - primarily photography, film and sound. She regularly exhibits/performs in the UK and her work is held in collections across the globe.

Themes that recur in Suze's work centre around personal and socio-cultural issues of place and time, memory and belonging, presence and absence. Suze explores creative tensions between these often conflicting issues as she continues to examine notions of land and considers what and where we might call 'home'.

"Working with Anna is a joy ... her poems, so full of wondrous surprises, prompting me to reach ever further in my own endeavours. Her deeply-felt and eloquently expressed insights, as reflected through her words, are full of mystery, a mystery she so generously shares."

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Anna Saunders is a poet and the Executive Director of Cheltenham Poetry Festival. She has a passion for poetry and is currently studying for an MA in Creative Writing. Her work ranges from the lyric poetry of Communion to narrative and confessional poems.

Inspired by the likes of Sharon Olds, Anna is now working on her second collection, due to be published in 2013.

"Working with Suze took my poetry in a new direction and encouraged me to face themes which I had danced around in my previous work. Staring at Suze's stunning images of shores, seas and lakes inspired me to look deep within for inspiration and led me to address such themes as the soul, absence, death and emptiness. All writers need good triggers - what better object to spark a poem than one of Suze's sumptuous and evocative images."

www.cheltenhampoetryfest.co.uk