

POEMS

Christine De Luca

Raingeese at Lowrie's Water

*When da raingös gengs tae da hill
tak doon your boats an geng whaar you will.
When da raingös gengs tae da sea
Poo your boats up inta da lee.*

1 Evie, Orkney 400 AD

Over the broch of Gurness, raingeese fly
to the hill. Their call tells of fair weather.
Boats are drawn down for the crossing.

The sun is hot on the shell gatherers
There will be fresh spoots and mussels
to share out in the ebb of evening.

A young boy is proud, for today
at Rousay he has killed a seal.
The skin will line his winter bed.

2 Evie, Orkney 1915

Barefoot and skirts kirtled, you forget
your summer errand to Lowrie's Water,
a nest by the loch to rediscover.

The kye know your ways. They find you
by the loch; take a last long draught
gaze while you sail partan shells.

You drive them home through buttercups
watch your father's boat, low with creels
round Eynhallow. He knows the rip tides.

You tilt mugs to your Evie faces
Ploverhall milk for a row of sisters

3 Evie, Orkney 1999

Wind ruffles Lowrie's Water
Two solitary raingeese are watchful
their young still vulnerable.

The massive windmill on Birsay Moor
is a monument to mammon. Only
the shalder and lark disturb the air.

Heads into the wind, the raingeese preen
flash red throats, white bellies in a blink
of sun. A sea supper will come.

*raingeese: red throated divers
spoots: razor-clams
kye: cows
partan: crab
shalder: oyster catcher*

Pagan passage

Sanday, Orkney 9th century

The eyes of the woman of Scar are red-rimmed
The house of the boat-builder has been visited
by death. Her three nearest. She will bury him
with her old mother and the child. The tide takes.
The boat built in Norrawa will carry again
three generations safely to the other side.

It will be a burial fit for an Earl's family
The woman turns her mind to her man's needs
rivets for boat-building, a quiver of eight arrows.

She breaks his silver-hilted sword
lays it at his side. Pride of place
must go to the mother, her age

beyond counting. Beside her she lays
vestiges of work: shears, her Orkney whorls
needle, weaving baton, her iron sickle

So many coats, so many corn summers.
She props up the whalebone plaque
pins the proud brooch at the neck.

At least they will accompany each other
This takes the edges off her devastation.
From Sanday to Hoy there will be talk
of the Scar gravegoods for generations.

Westness burial

Westness, Rousay, 9th century

On Rousay a young man goes grey-haired
overnight. His infant newborn dead
with his bride of a year.

Gifts are brought: jewels made in Norrawa
well wrought oval brooches for an oval grave.
His gift, an old brooch won in a raid,

its sword shape softened by the cross
twin guardians on her solitary journey
She will marvel at the gold and silverwork

the amber like her hair, the red glass like her lips.
When young women hear, they will stitch
their shrouds for their marriage kyists.