

The Grassic Gibbon Centre
Literary Lights Prize for Creative Writing

Winner 2020

Time and Tide

Enxhi Mandija

The window panes rattle like teeth. Fists over her ears, she groans – a cavernous, feral sound. The wind lashes the door open, sends papers flying, tins and brushes clanging.

Her feet move quicker than her thoughts; in a blink, she's outside. The wind is so strong, she finds it hard to breathe. She props a board on the grass, held still by an easel tempered for the North-East: its main body is made of an anchor. She stays close to the cottage, squeezing paint straight onto the board, a steady gaze on the edge of the cliffs, a few feet away. A movement in the clouds, a flicker of sunlight, a shimmer on the water – a glimpse of the bundle of time unravelling along the coast. Her easel for an anchor.

Once the wind dies down, it always seems like a dream. And she sometimes is not sure whether the wind was howling outside or inside of her: the veil between her and her surroundings has thinned, is frayed, beaten down by the gales.

The pictures remain, murmuring *peace*.

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The children don't judge. They're happy to sit with a piece of string or candy and chat away while she paints. One of them, Pat, bright red hair and pointy chin, squinty eyes and face like a turnip, keeps coming back. When she's not posing, she skips and hops around the studio, broadcasting the news of the street, her voice tinkering in tune with the sounds from the open window, telling tales about what's happened that day, who's been in fights with who, who's become sweethearts with who.

Have you got a sweetheart?, Pat asks her.

Joan smiles to herself.

No.

Why not?

She pokes her head from behind the propped-up board. Pat is perched on the windowsill above the sink, folding paper planes out of the bad sketches Joan's given her.

Maybe I'm not one for sweethearts, Joan says quietly.

Pat looks up. For a moment, her face shades into wrinkles and stains, misery and poor choices, blind streets and turned backs; then it clears again. Right now, she has no idea. She stretches up an arm, holding a paper plane, flings it into the room. They watch it dwindle and crash on the board, its wings sticking to the fresh paint. Pat jumps down, clapping her hands on her mouth, halfway between scared and delighted. Joan tosses her head back, roaring with laughter.

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She likes Glasgow because it does not ask much of her, but Catterline smells like fresh paint.

There's nothing quite like it!

Annette looks like a primula in her summer dress. She glides through the grass, pointing at the view.

There is so much sea! The people are nice. A bit quiet, you know, mostly fishermen. They'll like you. They're good folk.

Joan tries not to frown. Annette's yellow dress strikes an odd note against the stone and wood of the grey line of cottages.

And you can stay as much as you want. Stay and work for a bit. It's so quiet – it'll help you, you'll like it.

She knows Annette means well, so she smiles and thanks her and asks her practical stuff – how can she get post, groceries, paint supplies from Aberdeen, is it worth getting a bike?

Annette chatters away. Joan looks out, noticing the light. She will have to ask Annette to write everything down, she's stopped listening. Cliffs, sea and shore reveal their naked clarity in the rarefied light – beckoning her in.

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The salmon nets wait out on the shore, arms open.

The air tense, outstretched – a brushstroke out of place could topple the whole beach upside down. The sky is uneasy, a dirty, spoiled milk seeping unbroken onto the sea. The cliffs, blunt, bulging dark shapes mirroring that of the boat, there towards the middle. The sand, rust. A shrieking sound: the flesh of the hardboard scratched clean – the nets revealed beneath the paint.

You're not meant to be standing there, lass.

She turns around. An old man has come down to the shore where she is. He walks slowly, his voice coarse, disgruntled.

I'm so sorry, I'm not – not touching the nets. I just need to be near the sea, look.

He stops, rests his hands on his hips. Craning his head, he looks at the fresh painting.

It's not for the nets, we know you'll not touch them. It's the water, it's dangerous here. It'll wash you away together with your paints!

She looks at him as if the thought had never occurred her, her cheeks turning pink.

But I can get this angle only if I stand exactly here – and I can see both the nets and the cliffs behind, and I need those cliffs to be just there, far away enough and, see, like, on the side, not in the middle. And that way those cliffs leave an opening – onto the vastness, the vastness of the sea, the immensity of the coast. And I think you only get that from here, from this point of the coast, this beach in the North East.

The fisherman chuckles. His face is all withered, cheeks a web of wrinkles and sore dry skin. He lifts his head to scratch his white hair.

You sure are a poet too. Never thought you could look at those nets like that –

They both turn towards them.

I always thought they looked a bit like crosses. You know, like crucifixes.

Later, she paints a pale blue sun above the empty nets, and the picture closes itself, complete.

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Today, painting is no dancing, no caressing. Rather: a fiesta, a bull run. Hoofs clang on the pebbles, bellowing voices, rattling breaths, colours spinning running forward forward forward pushing chasing madly blindly running forward, forward still.

Still.

She puts the brush down, steps back. Standing on top of the cliffs, she sees dust swirling in an empty street. It's quiet – when even the last man, the one that at some point had smiled to himself and decided to step to the side and watch the tide pass, has walked home, hands deep in pockets, nose up in the air – and there is only dust left swirling on the cobbles.

Her breath rises and falls. The sea is far away, at her feet. Water and blood and colour rise to fill up every inch of her – she takes up space. The sea at her feet, her feet on the shore, her head on top of the cliffs. An endless movement – time and tide.

The pictures remain.