

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Adult Short Story section

Commended: The Convoy by Mary Paterson

Knowledge is high in the head, but the salmon of wisdom swims deep.

The Convoy

Solomon has grown fat from feasting on the pink shrimp of Svalbard. The teeth on his tongue hold back the great Northern prawn. He has filled his belly. Now it is time for him to leave the aurora and the deep, green, icy cold waters of the northland. It is time to leave the meeting of the oceans and start on the uncertain convoy, to the hollow redds of his ancestors.

Solomon must shun the long-line and the gill-net. He must flex his body and steer his way through the storms and currents. He must push through ocean and tide. He must evade the purse-net and the trawler. He must break free from the shoal and propel himself, onwards, upwards. He must leave the West fish to satisfy their instinct, going home to the pools and flats.

Solomon must elude the landing net and the dolphin, the shark and the sweep-net. He must evade the hunter and the deadly monofilament. He must escape from the seal, avoid the bag-net, and part company from the rest of the run.

Solomon relaxes and contracts his muscles. The graceful motion moves him forward. Like a wave he surges on. In a pair, evenly matched, ounce for ounce, he and Muirne propel themselves on to where the two firths meet. From miles away, he can taste the heady elixir of his home river. Like a wave, he whirls through tides, whose

energy matches his. Under escort, now at the parting of the ways, each going to his own place, the black lines, the unique olive-green and blue flecks, the silver scales, telling their own story.

Gill Pat pulls on his Bullseyes, and stands back to admire the pearl coat on the Willing Hands. Instinct tells him the fish are coming, the sea silver with them. He caresses the thaft. He dumps the dreekie, the bailer and the slap-line on the cabbie head of his pale grey coble. The launch is awkward, a combat of gravel and tyre rubber.

He walks painstakingly back to the bothy, takes off the padlock and wrenches open the wooden door. It's dark. It's musty. He lingers. Old initials carved on beams. A ray of light breaks through the corrugations. The voices of long gone fishermen echo in his head. The casks are rotting. The yard needs sorting. The bairns have been in again.

Steadily, he sets up the dock poles. With native skill, he checks the ropes, the guys and pulleys. And at low tide, he scrambles over slippery rocks and tangles to check the eyebolt, on which his hopes are pinned. It's solid. With deft fingers, he hitches the shackle through the chain, the eyebolt and the cringell.

The first trip is at high tide. He fires up the red tractor to load the duthie on the gunwhale, and two rails on the for'ard thaft. Carefully, he coils the orange lines and buoys into the coble. With a roar, he's off. He moves towards the tail, ties on the bridle, and heads out from the shore, shotting the gear with strength as he goes. He drops the anchor and tripper and they rush to the seabed.

Back on shore, he bundles the net onto the stretchers, lifting it onto the platform of the tractor. And into the coble, he plys the net. He tips the leader vigorously into the boat from the two-hand barrow, along with the floats, the sea poles, and the stones.

First the toogle, into the bridle. He shots the net. The poles are in, weighed with stones, but the net is flat. With immense effort, he raises it, pulling the bridle - pulling, pulling - and up it stands. He fastens it expertly, with a back handed knot.

Now the leader, the uphaul, the toogle, the eyelet and the grommet. He lowers the sole rope to the bottom. The slapline pulled, the boy shots the leader. They work to the shore. They heave, heave, reining it in against the incoming tide, joining leader to tailpole. A round turn and two half hitches and it's secured. He's fishing. On the short sail back to shore, he carefully coils the slap line.

He goes back to the bothy to wait. He tells tales of seasons past. He thinks of the back-ender, the 34 pounder and the reward that he would bring. He talks of smolts and seals and the price per pound. He shows the boy a splice. His parley passes the time. He fondles the sketcher. It's broken. It needs fixed. The warm tea is as good as whisky. He waits until the tide has changed.

Excitement fills his chest as the headpole is dropped. The pole springs up, leaping wildly. There's movement in the net. With expectation, he pulls the uphauls, collapsing the net. Hands work across the graith. A flash of silver darts athwart the fish-court. The fish are running.

He secures the ropes to the tallups and coaxes the fish into the middle of the bag... There's a hovey, there's a big one. He struggles to lift the net up, and over, the side. Opening the bag, he pulls the lace, and bright wet fish slide into the boat. Tails flap violently, the plocan flails. Veteran, he catches their tails. Two taps on the nose, out cold, into the sack. Headpole on, they sail back to shore saying little, moving along with the sea's motion.

But Solomon is quicker. He sees the little door. Silent, fluid, he shoots into the corner of the second court. He senses a weakness in Bobbie Druce's net. Down through the slearan to the floor he rushes, nose through the mesh. Noise fills his lively head. His gills gulp in water. He feels the heave. A vivid flick of the tail, in a flash, he streaks away.

Solomon avoids the harem and the rookery. Fear fills his front, but the need to wash his destiny keeps him moving. Hundreds of killers surround him at the Point, but he's alert. The skaravs stand, black and greedy, eight toes, waiting for the king's sons.

Solomon plunges on, in constant vigil for the spinner, the worm, and the gaffe. Past the castle, under the trees, in fresh water, he starts to change. His silver scales become black gold. His front is dark. He tastes the Carron, the Oykel, the Cassley. His small, keen, swivelling eyes search for dragonfly, the silver stoat, the executioner, the thunder and lightning. The rugged survivor swims determined, relentless, through the riffles, the beats.

Past the Tuitem Tarbhach, where long ago MacLeods of Lewis were thrashed by MacKay. Up the Ekkjal of the Vikings. Sensing the peaty waters of the big and little black lochs, his natal stream. Over the mussel beds, close to dun and fort, the bridge, the boundary, the cairns. Beyond the marsh and the bog, the steppes, he flows. His armour is slimy now. Beneath him is gravel. The reds of his fathers are near.