

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Adult Short Story

Section

Third Prize: On an Earth Uniformly Covered by Sea by Laura Morgan

On an Earth Uniformly Covered by Sea

The roof had already been knocked, leaving just four walls and a crumbling concrete floor. Callum stared at the hardheads growing in his uncle's yard. The whole reason for his trip north was for a bit of peace to study, and yet here he was, a quick visit with Uisdean turning into a 'wee job'.

'So what do you think?' his uncle asked.

'How long will take?'

'Day or two for the frame, another couple for the sheets.'

A breeze stirred up the smell of old straw. Callum's resit was only a fortnight away, but then he did study best late at night.

'I'll no be doing evenings mind. I've this exam, like.'

Uisdean said that was fine and after they'd shaken on it, Callum walked back to his mam's. In his room he set about unpacking. He'd been too tired the night before, taking out only his toothbrush. Now he pulled the books one by one from his bag and stacked them on the windowsill. The set text, the others from the reading list, the course handout, and the two A4 pads of his own scrawled jottings. He opened the cover of *Foundations of Fluid Dynamics* and let his eyes flit over the contents, the layering of chapters and subtitles – the light from his small window warmer somehow and thicker than the light that washed from the tall windows of the refectory. He dropped the book on top of the others and watched the dust in the room surge and swirl in something like the movement of the sea. He felt that easy wash inside himself. He could give the revising a miss for one night surely.

His mam gave him a shake early the next morning. It was like old times, his hurrying down to Uisdean's to cadge a day's work. Together they lifted the tarp off the pile of timber behind the byre. Callum's first job was to take a broom to the lengths, sweeping them free of the stoor that had gathered there from the damp and winds of the two winters they'd lain under cover – nothing ever got done in a hurry up here. Along with the yard dirt, the wood had become a home for sleeping moths. Wings folded, they hid themselves in holes in the pile like splinters of a darker wood. They were reluctant to wake and with the sun in his eyes, he brushed at them impatiently.

'I'd forgotten about the moths,' he said.

'Hang on till I get another count on these rafters. Six, eight, ten. You should have two more there and then the joists. You thought any more on that job?'

Uisdean had an old bosun pal in Newcastle who might take Callum as a trainee. Marine engineering. Propellers, shafting systems.

Callum shrugged. 'I'm halfway through uni now.'

'It's not often Donald takes trainees.'

'But Newcastle. I don't know. They're supposed to be taking on a load of folk up here soon. With the decommissioning, like.'

'You want to be looking to the future, no be coming back for a job that's temporary.'

It was all you heard from the time you were wee. Dounreay's closing, nothing to take its place, get a degree and get out, there's no money in sheep. His mam had stood over him while he signed the uni applications. 'Don't be going to Aberdeen,' she'd said. 'It's too close. You want to, you know... spread your wings.'

They made the most of the fine weather and by eight that night, they'd got the rafters measured and each joint cut and tested. Uisdean said that was enough for one day. Callum grabbed his hoody from the grass and headed off over the fields.

The days passed with him balancing on the byre walls, fixing the frame in place, the headland dropping away beneath him – a feeling of being there in the sky. Looking out the window of the fourth floor tenement in Leith, you got that sense of height over the rooftops, but it was different from seeing only fields and sea. Every morning when he woke he thought about his studying, but every night he was too tired. He'd go to bed with the tingle of sun on his skin and a heaviness in his arms, a sudden tightening of his muscles when he turned over. And then it would be morning again and he'd walk over to his uncle's with the sea in the bay glowing whiter than the sky and just a hint of dark where the lines of swell were, like a whiteboard scrubbed of its dry marker squiggles.

Some days his auntie gave him his dinner and then he and Uisdean would go out again in the evening with a breeze rushing through the long grass, and work until

late, the moon crisp and white, and the sky with that pale nothingness that comes with midsummer. And then the moths would appear. One night Callum watched as their shadows clogged the dusk.

‘Yellow Underwings,’ his uncle said.

‘*Underwings.*’

‘That or Common Rustics. I’ve a book somewhere. Come on and put that saw away and we’ll call it a night.’

When the byre’s roof beams were done, he had a few days off while his uncle waited for the corrugated sheeting to be delivered. Box Profile 34/1000 with two glass fibre roof lights. Callum helped his mam around the croft. There were three lambs she’d had to hand rear and they were still getting a bottle in the evenings, their little mouths pulling at his aching arm. At bedtime, when he went to usher the hens into the coop, he watched tiny white moths in the long grass, their blank wings fluttering doggedly.

‘Uisdean was just here,’ his mam said, when he went inside. ‘Says that’s the roof stuff arrived and he’ll see you in the morning.’

On his way to bed, Callum picked the top textbook from the pile on the windowsill. He could do an hour. At least get a study plan in place. He got into bed before he noticed the grey-green of the ancient fabric cover, its loose spine. *Moths of Northern Sutherland*. Uisdean must have left it. He opened the cover to black and white photographs, the ink too dark, and careful sketches – the powdery look of the wings captured in the stippling of the pencil. *Following eclosion from the chrysalis, the animal’s veins are pumped with a blood-like fluid, and with this forceful action the wings swell to their adult shape.* It sounded painful, like a man dislocating his shoulders to fit through a hole. He fell asleep to dense

dreams – prehistoric, lichen-mottled and crumbly – and then the sea rushed in and he woke to the refracting of light from its surface. But it was just the sun flashing over the dark stack of textbooks. He'd forgotten to draw his curtains.

That morning they began the sheeting out. He was halfway through his last week now but he only really needed three days to cram, and he had the whole of the train journey too. Uisdean balanced the sheets on the roof frame and Callum hauled them up. It was hard on your back and arms and after he'd screwed in the first two his hand had a warm buzz about it. His uncle went to fetch more screws and Callum rolled his shoulders and stood to take in the view. The tide was way out, coming in on long low waves, the sun catching each breaking face so that the bay was a glitter of broken lines. Something spooked the gulls on the beach and they took off all at once into the incoming waves, suddenly swooping up and out as one broke beneath them, and scattering like scraps of paper thrown on the wind.

The last day was a long one, working late to get all the sheets in place. By now they'd struck a rhythm and Callum's arms told him when to take the weight and when to haul, his eyes seeing only ridges and runnels sliding by. About nine, he turned to take the next one and found it wasn't there.

'What's up? It's no dark yet, I can still see.'

'No for long you won't. Squall's coming.'

Sure enough a billowing grey curtain moved over the sea.

'But we've still two sheets.'

'Come on I'll get you home.'

Callum looked at the curtain coming closer. The change in light more sensed than real though it would be with them in minutes. They should have got it finished – the tools put away and a final appraisal of their work. Uisdean started up the van just

as the first drops began to fall. In the cab, with rain drumming out the engine noise, Callum thanked him for the book.

‘It’s very old. My great-uncle’s I think.’

‘It says when they hatch first, they have to hang upside down until this blood stuff, *haemosomething*, floods their wings.’

Uisdean took a hand from the wheel and gestured north to the sea and the horizon. ‘I’ll tell you something I remember. Being out there one night in a creel boat and looking up, and there was a moth fluttering about the cabin lamp. Five miles out we were.’

‘You think it had flown there?’

‘Ach, it was probably just a stowaway, but it didn’t seem to know any different. Spent the whole night fluttering at that lamp.’

Callum gave the van door a farewell thump as Uisdean pulled off. It was late now and after he peeled off his wet hoody, he went to say goodnight to his mam.

‘What day’s this reset of yours?’

‘Tuesday.’

‘You haven’t been doing much with the books.’

‘I’ve two days still. Two days is fine.’

‘You know, maybe you should be thinking about Australia.’

‘Australia?’

‘They’re always needing engineers in Australia.’

‘Ay,’ Callum said. ‘Maybe.’

He turned from her into the dark hall. His bedside light showed under the end door and he went towards its glow.

On Tuesday he filed into the hall with the others, left his bag at the back and carried his pencil case to the table. They sat in stuffy silence watching the clock. Beside him, an invigilator nudged a window up and fresh air drifted down.

‘You may begin.’

Callum turned over the paper and read the first question. ‘On an Earth uniformly covered by sea...’ Tide theory. He reached for a pen but on opening the case found a tiny blue moth inside – inert on his ruler. He saw in its wings the sky above Strathy Bay, the shining sea, felt the roof sheets in his hands and the memory of the long, hard haul in his muscles. He thought of moths hanging upside down before taking flight – the painful swelling of their wings. Never taught a thing, only listening to their bodies.

In the draft from the tall window he sensed the city’s towers and steeples, felt the breeze lifting him over the outlying towns, the network of roads, and bringing him north, further north till the traffic shrank back and the moor began, the air rippling the lochans and a dreamlike floating as grasses and reeds whipped by.

On an Earth uniformly covered by sea.