

Na clachan a tha a' seinn (The stones that sing)

Callum stood at the edge of the abandoned settlement, boots sinking slightly into the wet sand stretching towards the bay. The sea lay flat and silver under the low winter sun, clinging to the shore like a fading memory. Sea and land met in a long, unguarded line here, as though the residents had been deliberately placed at the edge of exposure. Broken walls traced the outlines of long-crumbled homes, and flagstone lintels, split clean along their grain and mottled with lichen, sank into the turf. Marram and salt-stiffened couch grass pushed through old doorways, and the wind moved freely where roofs once held it back, carrying sound cleanly across the open ground, unbroken by trees. Badaidh Bheag felt as though it was slowly dissolving, each ruin softened by time until it would be hard to tell where the clachan ended and the landscape began. Long emptied and long abandoned, yet Callum felt a gaze upon him.

He stepped through the broken gate, its wire loop twisting in the wind, and paused. The air carried the faintest thread of a voice, a single note rising and falling like tidewater.

O Thighearna, dèan tròcair... (Oh Lord, have mercy...)

He pressed his palm to a fallen lintel, feeling the stone deathly cold against his skin. The note persisted, more insistent now. Not memory nor imagination, but something alive in the ruin itself. He took out his notebook. It was too late to rebuild the settlement, but he could map the doorways, the hearths, the shared grain-drying kiln mounds, the stackyards, and the parallel ridges of feannagan behind the houses, shaped to mitigate the thin, nutrient-poor soil. In measuring and tracing their layout on paper, he felt the ruins respond, as if grateful for the attention.

The largest byre lay thirty paces east, its walls leaning but intact. Callum walked the perimeter, counting heel to toe, recording the stones with meticulous care. The OS lines on his map were neat and precise, but they could not capture the resonance of absence, the lingering life of a place emptied too soon. He began to sketch over them, marking the doorways, the collapsed walls, the paths between homes and those sloping towards the bay, not just for measurement, but for something more profound.

'S tu mo dhìdean; 's tu mo neart... (You are my refuge; you are my strength...)

The psalm rose again, faint but steadier now, threading through the broken walls. He realised, with a small jolt, that he knew the tune. Not the words, but the rise and fall of it. His grandmother had hummed it while darning socks by the fire, never translating, as though the language itself were too delicate to risk change. He had not heard the melody since childhood, yet here it was, carried on the wind as if it had been waiting for him to return before sounding again. The township was not only singing; it was reclaiming him.

In other buildings, Callum began to notice the smaller survivors: the flotsam that outlasted walls, roof timbers and heather thatch. A broken quern stone lay half-sunk in the sandy podzolic soil, its hollow still holding rainwater. Near one hearth he found the rusted bow of an iron pot, warped by heat and time. A child's slate, cracked cleanly in two, rested among the nettles, its surface clouded but faintly scored with the ghosts of script. There were two clay pipe stems, snapped short; a spindle whorl no bigger than a coin; the greened buckle of a shoe strap. None of it valuable, none of it whole, yet each object carried the weight of ordinary days: meals cooked, lessons learned, wool spun by lamplight. He realised these were not relics of abandonment, but fragments of lives paused mid-gesture.

Beneath the rotted remains of a fallen dresser, he noticed the edge of something pale, so knelt and worked it free. It was a spoon, its bowl worn thin as paper, the handle bent slightly to one side. Initials had been scratched crudely into the metal: M.M.

He turned it in his hand. His grandmother had marked her belongings that way when her eyesight began to fail, stitching the letters into woollen garments, scratching them into wood, as if afraid that the world might forget what had been hers. He could not know if this spoon had belonged to her, or to another woman whose name had diffused into history. The uncertainty pressed heavier than proof. He placed it back exactly where he had found it, the soil closing slowly around it like water. From that moment, he no longer felt he was mapping strangers.

The Clearances had not ended when these houses became occupied by uprooted families from the Strath of Kildonan, they had only changed form. The people forced to the coastal clachans did not step into new lives as much as diminished ones: crofts scraped from poor soil, families compressed, language and customs thinned by necessity and emigration. Some tried to fish, some left for cities, some for ships bound to Canada or New Zealand, carrying with them stories that would never again be told here. The clearance of families to this coastal setting had been an event, but in consequence it was also a process that unfolded across generations: economic, cultural, and spiritual.

Standing among the ruins, Callum felt that what had ebbed here had never fully returned anywhere else. The tide had not simply gone out, it had stayed out, reshaping every shore it touched. The psalm rose again, closer now, a tidal chorus of loss. He sensed that restoration might begin with listening, acknowledging, and mapping the life that had once flowed here.

Callum climbed to the ridge above the ruins, map spread on his knees. From this vantage point, he could trace every building, every byre line, every path. The tide had turned, taking its memories as it receded, but the buildings shimmered and reformed in

his mind: roofless squares became living houses, walls restored by memory, paths once walked by feet now visible to imagination.

He began to redraw the township, not with grid squares, but with lines of resonance: sightlines, hearths, doorways, and the imagined echo of voices. Each stroke of his pencil was a conversation with the place, an act of repair. The wind pressed through the ruins, carrying the psalm high across the ridges. Not from a choir, nor from the dead, but from the place itself, as if the stones and soil remembered every note sung here.

As he climbed down from the ridge, the turf gave way beneath him, slick with hidden water. His boot slipped and he lurched forward, catching himself against the low wall of a ruined enclosure. His palm landed on a flat coping stone, unexpectedly warm, holding the day's last light. He did not pull his hand away.

For a moment he stood there, bent over the wall, breathing hard, with his heartbeat loud in his ears. The warmth seeped into his skin, and with it came a sudden, vertiginous sense of contact, as though another hand had once rested in that exact place, steadying itself against the same slope, the same wind.

He looked down into the enclosure. On his map it was only a rectangle of collapsed stone but now he knew. This had been his family's croft, the one his grandmother had spoken of in fragments, before stopping herself as if she had said too much. The map trembled in his hands. He was no longer charting absence; he was standing inside it.

The sun dropped behind a distant Sutherland ridge, and shadows lengthened across the ruins. Callum moved among them, measuring, recording and listening. The clachan had been vacated but not erased. The tide of life had receded, leaving traces: footprints in sand, chipped stones, hearths, and doorways. Being there alone now felt like a revival, a way of attending to the past without undoing it. He sensed that careful attention, the act of mapping, had become an offering and an overdue acknowledgement.

Callum's pencil traced lines between each ruin, connecting doorways to hearths, byres to cottages, paths to the shore. He was not drawing for himself alone: he was drawing for Badaidh Bheag, for the life that had once ebbed from there, for the voices that persisted. Every measured step, every careful line, and every listening pause became an act of reconciliation.

Tha mo chridhe fo throm-eallach... (My heart is under a heavy burden...)

The psalm rose again, higher and stronger. He could not see the singers, yet he felt the vibrations in the ruins, in the walls, and in the grass beneath his fingers. The clachan itself was singing, its memory pressed into stone and earth, waiting for recognition.

He looked over the map he had drawn, lines flowing not just over contours but over the loss of a community. Yes, he was affected by that loss, but in this act of restoration he could answer the place's call, honour its persistence, and restore its memory through

acknowledgement and care. Badaidh Bheag was whole again, if only on paper and through imaginative recreation.

He paused at the path leading to the shore. The tide had slipped back across the sand like a long, quiet exhale, leaving the shore glimmering in its wake. For a moment the whole bay seemed to breathe with it. Looking back, he could visualise the community alive again: women tending fires, men repairing nets, and children running barefoot along paths.

The psalm returned, no longer distant or fragile. It gathered itself in the hollow of the settlement, voices layering upon voices, until the air itself seemed ribbed with sound. He could feel it under his boots, a low vibration travelling through soil and stone, through collapsed hearths and lintels and the broken mouths of chimneys. He tried to remain still, to listen only, but the melody pressed inward, insistent and familiar.

Before he realised what he was doing, he was humming it. Softly at first, uncertain, almost embarrassed, then steadier as the tune found its shape in his throat. He did not know the words, yet the rhythm lifted and cradled him. For a moment the ruins were not ruins; they were a congregation. And he, standing alone among them, was no longer listening but answering.

He crouched at the well, moss slick beneath his fingers. When he closed his eyes, the psalm persisted. It continued quieter now, but nearer, as though it had settled somewhere within his own breathing. He imagined the rope creak, the bucket rising, water spilling into waiting hands. He imagined his grandmother among them, not as a distinct figure, but as a presence threaded into the rhythm of work and prayer and ordinary speech.

When he opened his eyes, the clachan lay silent once more. The stillness had changed, though, and the place no longer felt bereft.

Callum closed the map carefully, tucked it under his arm, and began to walk. He glanced back one final time as he left the shore. The ruins stood as they had before: roofless, weathered, and dissolving slowly into grass and salt air. Yet the air trembled faintly, as if sound had only just passed through it.

He understood then that restoration did not mean rebuilding walls or raising roofs. It meant carrying the song forward. The tide of life had ebbed here, but it had not gone silent.