

The Grassic Gibbon Centre
Literary Lights Prize for Creative Writing

Winner 2018

Unknown, Unknown, death c. 1629

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Clay Loan, Kirkwall, Orkney.

What an unremarkable patch of grass, so shortly trimmed it looks like carpet. You almost want to scrape the mud off your shoes before stepping on it. How green it is; so full of carefully maintained life. In the centre of the grass is a stout circular hedge. You are lured towards it, not because it looks particularly interesting, but because it is the only thing planted on the lawn. They have done their best to tame and straighten its edges, but it keeps sprouting new jagged arms – watch, they’ll swipe your ankles if you get too close. Best admire from a distance – there, that’s it. Congealing in the centre of the hedge is a plant with leaves the colour of old blood. The plant blisters with pink flowers that release a sickly smell, like perfume masking something rotten.

Faceless people crawl by in their cars, and lights flicker in indifferent houses. What would happen if we were to silence these cars and send them rolling backwards down the hill? What if the houses were to follow, tumbling down brick after brick? What if we reverse the wind, and send it retreating so rapidly it rips the hedge from the ground, severing its bony arms and exposing its pale worm-like roots. Then all that’s left is the flowers, but no bother. If we rename the hill Gallows Ha’, crush the flowers with a scaffold, pile peat around it, and shout promises of a gruesome death, a crowd will quickly gather. Feet, large and small, booted and bare, will scramble towards that wooden post, kicking out the grass in their haste, and turning it back into the greasy mud it was four hundred years ago. The smallest feet

would slap up and down in that mud whilst pulling on their mother's skirts, begging to be lifted up so they can catch a glimpse of the witch – they are dragging her up to the post now.

“Please, Ma—please.”

The boy's mother hooks her thumbs beneath her son's armpits and sits him in the crook of her elbow.

“Can you see?” She whispers.

He nods.

The witch's hands are bound behind her back. Her hair hangs like a shredded curtain over her bowed head.

The lockman strides ahead of her, tugging at her arm as though it were a bridle attached to a stubborn horse, but the witch does not resist him. The crowd presses up against her, spitting on her feet, and yelling *whore* and *witch* in her ear. She grimaces every time someone steps on her right foot, which is swollen and bent at an odd angle.

As she nears the scaffold she notices, rising from the mud ahead of her, the white bones of the witch they executed the week before. Her concentration breaks – there is the stake; the weapon that will kill her, bury her, and mark her grave. Her foot slips, her legs buckle and, unable to soften the fall by stretching out her arms, she plunges head first into the mud.

The lockman grabs a handful of her matted hair and yanks her up. Several men assist him, digging their fingers into the woman's waist and diving into the folds of her skirt.

The woman flails, but her movements are sluggish and futile. Mud drips from her face, masking how old she is. Her body is hunched and frail, but from age or exhaustion it is impossible to tell.

The men carry her onto the scaffold and turn her in their arms until she is upright. Then they press her into the post and prop her up while the lockman wraps a rope around her knees, waist, and shoulders. She is thin. There is plenty of rope left – better go around her arms twice more. These witches may seem fragile, wounded, and without strength to hold up their heads – but they are cunning. Any moment she might call upon the Devil, her master, to loosen her bindings.

Anticipation flutters through the crowd as the lockman slides a noose over the witch's head. The folk's hearts stir with the witch's; their blood warms, and their breaths quicken. But, unlike the witch, they will pass through it. Their hearts will keep on beating, and next week, they will come to Gallows Ha' to feel the thrill again.

The lockman tilts the woman's chin up and tightens the knot. He marvels at how fragile the neck is and traces the blue veins beneath the witch's skin. He can feel the lump in her throat, the trembling of her pulse, and the lock of her jaw. Her life, delicate and fleeting, is in his calloused hands.

Hurry up, yells a man in the crowd, strangle the whore!

Tears carve lines through the mud on the witch's cheeks.

The lockman clutches the length of the rope and moves to stand behind the stake.

The witch's lips twitch. She glances towards the Sherriff, who stands to the right of the platform. She takes in a quick breath and – a sharp tug from the lockman silences her. Redness crawls up her throat, spreading up her forehead and down passed the neckline of her dress. Her cheeks swell, and the mud on her face cracks. Her empty eyes stare over the crowd and grow wider and wider as the rope tightens. A twitch starts in her throat, then travels down her neck and into her shoulders. The ropes around her arms strain against her expanding chest.

The crowd looks on in wonder as the woman's tongue begins to swell.

The lockman leans back, using his strength and body weight to pull. His knuckles are white and his shoulders shake with the effort.

The woman's head slumps forward.

The crowd erupts in a cheer, but the lockman keeps pulling.

How merciful they are, strangling before burning. Sheriff Harie Aitken is an expert at identifying witches, but not so skilled at identifying dead bodies. This is why the lockman pulls for a few moments more – he has to make sure the witch really is dead this time. How awful it would be for the children to have to hear those animal shrieks again.

After several breaths the lockman relaxes his grip.

The Sheriff steps onto the scaffold and places his hand under the woman's nose to feel for breath – none. He shakes her shoulders – she does not rouse. He slaps her cheek for good measure – *she's dead*.

The Sheriff's servant, having attended many executions with his master, knows the drill well. The torch is lighted and ready. He steps swiftly over to his master and passes it to him, avoiding the bloated gaze of the witch above. He has seen a great many stares just the same. To look at the witch was to invite another pair of glassy eyes to roll through his sleep.

The torch's flames are blown flat by the gale. With a small adjustment of his hold, the Sheriff lights the peat around the woman's ankles and retreats from the scaffold.

The crowd tenses and looks warily up at the witch.

She does not move, she does not scream.

The piper begins his lilting tune and the crowd relaxes around their human bonfire, turning to one another, smiling, and congratulating each other on the slaying of another witch. Children wriggle out of their mother's arms and splash into the mud. Pewter mugs are slapped into the waiting hands of men. Red faced women turn to each other, they are not offered ale, nor do they go in search of it. The smell of burning flesh, the uncomfortable heat of the fire, and the sour stench of burning hair, will be the only things that make their heads spin.

Every now and then, they look over at the stake; *how's she doing?*

The gale draws the flames away from the witch's body. She is burning slow. The smoke does not veil her peeling flesh, or mask the flashes of white bone. It takes hours for her to turn to ash. Her feet go first. White and black flakes blow onto the crowd and turn into powder in the creases of the townsfolk's skin. They'll be picking her out from their fingernails for weeks.

The sky is dark and heavy by the time the piper's tunes slow and the last of the flames have shrunk under the collapsed scaffold. Most of the women and children have wandered off towards their homes. The men left swaying on top of the hill head towards the tavern.

The ground is slippery underfoot. Two charcoal faced boys slide over to the scaffold. Their legs are caked with mud, and their skin shines from the moisture in the air. With exaggerated grunts they kick the blackened post and cheer when it falls. Then, they stamp their bare feet on the remaining steps with a satisfying *crack, crack, crack*, and then – a different *crack*. They look at one another and dig through the splinters. The smaller boy reaches down.

His companion gasps.

The boy cradles a blackened, caved in skull in his hands. They dig some more, plucking out bone after bone until they find two large enough to act as swords. They poke each other in the ribs, and bang on the skull until it crumbles. Their pockets rattle as they race each other home.

The remaining bones are left to sink under the mud, where they will be forced down by scaffold after scaffold, and joined by the bones of more accused witches with no friends to bury them. Then, the stakes will be erected with less frequency. Fewer feet will dance over Gallows Ha'; the grass will grow in patches, houses will be built, and tar rolled out. Gallows Ha' will be known as Clay Loan, and the roots of the hedge will curl back around the bones

of those unfortunate men and women, and grow to be an unruly headstone; they sharpen its edges and trim its sides but it remains an unmarked grave.

Who was the woman? She is faceless, ageless; she is Unknown, Unknown, death c. 1629.

But what lovely pink flowers – oh, and the *view*.

[For further background to the 2018 Literary Lights Prizewinning story reproduced here, go to <http://aberdeencurtinalliance.org/2018/08/20/alliance-phd-student-perth-wins-scottish-writing-prize/>]