

UNDER A BLANKET OF MIST  
FO PHLAIDE CEÒ



AN ANTHOLOGY OF CREATIVE WRITING  
FROM THE FEDERATION OF WRITERS  
(SCOTLAND)

AUTUMNAL EQUINOX COMPETITION 2022

## **Foreword**

It's hugely exciting to be able to share with members and friends of the Federation of Writers (Scotland), fellow readers and – indeed – writers, the fruits of our labour over 2022. This year has, like those previous, presented us with significant challenges – personally, professionally and creatively – but the annual competition was just one example of the many ways that the Federation, as an organisation and also as Scotland's largest cohort of writers, faced adversity with creativity and found jewels in the ashes.

This anthology was edited by Janet Crawford, with cover design and Gaelic editorial from myself and I would like to thank Janet and all of the competition judges, who considered all of the entered pieces so thoroughly and thoughtfully – Beth McDonough (Federation Makar, 2022), Moira McPartlin (Federation Scriever, 2022), Electra Rhodes and Ann MacKinnon – for all their hard work, which has brought this anthology into being. As ever, with the Federation's offer, this anthology showcases the diversity of our writers and the writing they bring to readerships. Among these pages, you'll find writers from across Scotland and beyond, those who call Scotland home by birth, residence or inclination. All were and remain welcome to enter our annual competition and it remains a significant way that we engage with existing members as well as a means to bring new faces into the fold.

As ever, the quality of the writing was high and so this reflects just a sample of the very best that Federation members have achieved through the year. Do remember, though, that choices such as these are always subjective – what one enjoys, another may not – and so we would encourage all that didn't make the top three in our five categories to keep exploring publication opportunities for their writing.

Thank you for reading this work and for your continued support of the Federation.

Marcas Mac an Tuairneir  
Cathraiche, Caidreachas nan Sgriobhaichean (Alba)  
Chair, Federation of Writers (Scotland)

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## **Brochtisland – David Bleiman**

Nae broch at aa, bit grumphie-hinnerend lairstanes  
proponed oor local leegend o the víkingar,  
wha brocht the hail inch oan their langships  
an plowpt hit i the plashie shallas,  
biggit a den, ate mait, caroused, afore they got tote in.

Seeven saisons sweetin oan the links  
aroon thon beerial grun o ae high heid yin,  
yon ginger-heided Doacter o the howkin,  
his peely-wally legs cam oot aa reid an lowpin,  
bit at lang lenth hit wis the blowster done the darg.

A whalebane kist wappit i selkie skin  
cam oot the sannie grun split-new,  
an twa grand airmies, bleck an white,  
aa fechtie, rife tae rammie oan yer diceboard,  
nae aesome piece wis oot the gemme.

They taen fae us the hail clanjamfrie,  
bit sure ye'll fin them noo ootset in Embra  
an—here's the thing tae birl ye tapsalteerie—  
thon jet gang fechts wi aicht pawns graithed i snaw,  
thair Queen is white, white's King's a coaly craw.

## **City Break - Don J. Taylor**

Easter 1991—to Lubeck. *My idea.* I contrived a few days off from the Ministry. A break. Try to get your head together and see what we could salvage.

Lubeck, a maritime city, Queen of the Hansa. Here great art was made: Buxtehude, Bach, Mann and Grasse. Art, paid for by trade across the northern seas. Hemp, flax, and timber; Russian tar to seal the ships; potash to melt and meld the coloured glass. From Poland, iron and copper. Beeswax and pelts from the Finnish forests. Baltic beer and herring, pickled with Luneburg salt.

They say a fish rots from the head down.

The city, hard by the old border that divided a people. In the stony womb of the Marienkirche a lunchtime recital on chairs of wood and rushes. A pastor in Lutheran-black, white-ruffed, wanders the shadowed aisles.

At the museum, I drop a Euro in the slot to animate the clockwork tower looming two storeys above us. Folksy figures of wood and iron chop, and saw, and jerk a bale onto a cobbled dock. The glockenspiel strikes out a wistful little tune. I turn to smile at you, but you look away.

We take coffee and cake in the beach-side Casino. My feet seek yours beneath the table, gambling on a future that might restore sanity and order.

\*\*\*

*He wants to shut me down. Have you taken your meds, Hannah? In that whining voice. Like he fucking cares! Arse!*

*Me, shrieking in my sleep, back arching to escape. The devil's claw pierces; deep, to my kidneys. Rips the dripping liver out of me.*

*From Cathedral brows fanged gargoyles jut, black-hearted, spewing bile. Here they call the cathedral 'Dom'. Dom, dee dom dom... dom...ahaha.*

*He thinks of my cleft, waiting for him; warm eel-mouth, lips blood-thick; needle-teeth gape, primed to trap.*

\*\*\*

**As I told your colleague on the telephone, I guessed the visitors were from the West, even before they spoke: the clothes, the man-bag, the fashionable spectacles. English, I surmised—like your newspaper. I thought I might expect a good tip from him, perhaps. *He* wore a cap: flat and tweedy. *She*, a red coat and a black hat crammed onto her head.**

**I greeted them: ‘Good afternoon. My name is Stephan and I welcome you to the jewel of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, (some might say of the *entire* former DDR): Schloss Schwerin. My expert guided tour costs only three euros per person.’**

**Frau Berg, my co-worker disapproves of smiling at the visitors. She speaks only German and Russian. I need not tell you her tips were meagre, and the municipality paid us a pittance. As the price of food went over the roof, and her new landlord hiked the rent on her one-room apartment (eight metres square, shared toilet) she struggled.**

**I had on several occasions mentioned to the Chief Curator my colleague’s reluctance to embrace new ways of working. However, I regret Frau Berg will be left behind in the new Germany.**

\*\*\*

At the B and B, the boiled eggs come with *Good Morning*, and a smiley face drawn in purple felt-tip on the shell. We breakfast, me looking through the lace curtains onto the narrow twisting street; beyond, neat, stepped gable-ends, lofts, the harbour, a sailing ship moored by the wharf. You stare at the checked pattern on the tablecloth, and score the criss-cross lines with a ragged fingernail

Frau Engel, the landlady, pours coffee, hot and fragrant. I ask her about the old East. ‘At the finish of The Wall’ she says, ‘already one year ago, fifteen euros to every person is given. A gift from us...to *them*. To bring us back...Zusammen...together.’

You stare at her blankly and she retreats to the kitchen...

‘You might at least be civil,’ I grind out, jaw locked.

You toy with your egg, chopping the yolk and the white into a sickly mess. Your wrist rotates mechanically, oddly angled, like a mannequin. Your sleeve rides up, revealing the bone-white

ridges of the healed tissue. Healed, but dead.

Frau Engel comes with fresh coffee.

I tell her, ‘My partner’s not feeling too well today. We’ll be on our way. Our plan is to follow the river down to the estuary and then drive east, to visit the castle.’

‘Oh, the castle is very fine. Enjoy. Gute reise.’

The plastic tablecloth is a snarl of disordered gashes. I take your hand. Your fingers go limp in my grasp.

\*\*\*

*Let go of me. I am the automaton in the hall of the museum. I whirr and click. The Bell marks each lost hour. Atop the quaint carved figures (the butcher, the baker, the brew-maker) leers the fallen angel, Lucifer. His wooden prick, his scarlet tongue*

*Let go of me, go of me, gore, more of me, spore of me; the red fleck stains the yellow yolk; a smear of yeast on the laboratory slide.*

*Black bread. Dead.*

\*\*\*

**I continued to address the newcomers: ‘My pleasant duty is to provide you with information about the castle and its history.’**

At this stage, of course, I did not tell them three quarters of the building was dangerous and inaccessible. This was due to the poor...No! I will go as far as to say *neglectful*, maintenance programme since the state took it over in 1945. It was not my responsibility to inform the English of that.

**What I did not know, I made up. Forgive my little joke—please do not write that down.**

\*\*\*

I ask: ‘Hannah, are you ok for this trip today? I mean, we won’t see the old east like this again. It’s changing already, they say.’

‘Sure’, she says, ‘you’ll find it interesting. Like you say—a last chance.’ And she gives me a smile that isn’t a smile.

‘Looks like rain’, I said, ‘best take a waterproof.’

Obedient, she buttons up her red plastic mac, the one she wore the first time. The time they found her at the railway station.

Driving along the coast we glimpse rusted rail tracks curving deep into the sandy forest.

\*\*\*

*I shit on your work. Arbeit Macht Frei. Your mathematical music: each beat, each miserly second, accounted for. From your paintings, the dead stare at me, mocking. A life's work. A faultless likeness, a perfectly rendered green velvet, or an elegant arpeggio, won't mask the stink of a body rotting. The nose has it!*

\*\*\*

The pines give way to soggy pastures, and mud-clogged piggeries. In the town I park by the canal opposite an empty factory. We walk through the drizzle towards the castle.

\*\*\*

*He fumbles for my hand again. I pull back into my sleeve to escape his groping fingers. He will not touch me. I am beyond... reach.*

\*\*\*

‘Your English is very good’, the visitor complimented me.

‘Much obliged,’ I replied. ‘I had the privilege of studying the work of your great novelist, Charles Dickens. Our former masters (I mean the Communists, of course) approved of his liberal principles. It is from hence my love of English derives.’

The man smiled politely, and glanced at his companion—Ms Fletcher, as the police told us later. She seemed a few years his junior. She wore sunglasses— inappropriate on this day of clouds. She wore no make-up, and her cheek displayed a faint bruise, yellow and blue, just *here*.

I said before she wore a colourful coat, but her demeanour was far from bright; the gaze directed to the

ground, and her face angled away from the man. A circumstance which I noted as most unusual.

‘What do you think darling? Shall we take the tour?’ he asked. She shrugged and tilted her head back, exposing her thin neck, and looked up into our celebrated cupola above the entrance hall. She murmured ‘whatever’. Not an English expression I was familiar with in this context.

\*\*\*

*‘Work makes you free’. The carvings and the paintings. Sea monsters twist and turn around Neptune’s trident. Eels ride the tide up the river from the chill North Sea, to swarm at the sewer mouth to eat our tepid shit. Pull them squirming from the water, strip the flesh to stuff our mouths. Shit eats shit.*

\*\*\*

The man purchased two tour tickets. I led the couple up the main staircase, having already given the shortened history of the castle and the family as far back as 1253.

\*\*\*

I hold out your ticket, to touch your hand. *Anything*. ‘Hannah, please!’ I say. You walk on. At that moment I know it’s over.

\*\*\*

**By and by, we came to the long gallery where the gentleman admired the wood carvings in the Chinese style, while the lady attended to the oil painting, *The Rape of Lucretia* by Van Cleef. The work depicts the noble lady taking her own life by means of a dagger to the heart.**

\*\*\*

*See the dagger pierce the belly; slice yellow fat, through to the warm womb, red and pink. The thick-veined gut snaking, purple and grey. Her shame cut out. Cut. Cut. Cut.*

\*\*\*

We climbed the spiral stone stairway to the Belvedere, or ‘lookout’, the highest point in the castle. I left my guests alone to enjoy the view, and I confess I took advantage of a convenient niche in the wall to enjoy a cigarette out of the chilly wind. My only indulgence, you understand.

As a result, and as I explained to the investigating officer, I did not have a clear view of what occurred. I had reported to the Chief Curator that the fixing of the handrail on the balcony was loose. I can show you a copy of the relevant memo if you would like.

But the Herr Doktor was old-school would not, surely, concern himself with the welfare or safety of mere *visitors*. Indeed!

Yes, I am sorry, I digress. You are interested in the English gentleman. I understand.

The couple were out on the terrace for only a few minutes when I heard raised voices. From my position, I could not make out the words, but the *tone*, the tone indicated they were not in agreement. His voice was quite high-pitched as though he beseeched something of her. Might one say... ‘wheedling’? Just so, *wheedling*. In response she spoke low and quick.

\*\*\*

*Take your hand off me! Leave me leave me leave me leave me you can't save me. Now you will suffer.*

\*\*\*

I try to hold you, but you push me...turn away.

\*\*\*

Then there was silence.

It was broken by his cry, so wretched: ‘*Hannah!*’

I immediately stepped onto the terrace. The metal railing, now detached from the wall, bent outwards like a broken limb. He stared into the abyss (is that the correct word?), his cap crushed in his hand.

I followed his gaze. She lay on the stone floor of the innerhof...forgive me... *courtyard*, below. One leg was twisted around behind her back. A pool of blood spread outwards from

**her head. It was as though her coat had melted and flowed across the slabs.**

**I ushered the gentleman, whose hands quivered uncontrollably, down the stairway. On arriving at the foot of the stair I instructed Frau Berg to call Herr Doktor and the police. I took the master key from the drawer and let my colleague, who is the certified first-aid attendant, into thehof. I myself remained with the gentleman, since only I spoke English. I had a conviction he should not be allowed to leave.**

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The female attendant returns from the quadrangle, her skin ash white. She looks towards her colleague, gives an almost imperceptible shake of the head and picks up the telephone.

I do not enter the courtyard. A baleful wind moans high in the dome. The guide gives me a cigarette. When he holds the lighter to it, the loosely packed tobacco hisses.

I exhale a plume of blue smoke, which corkscrews up into the void.

## A Letter to Glasgow - Marcas Mac an Tuairneir

Evening and, at the end of certain backstreets, a tendril of smoke curls into the clouds. Amongst the fumes of the cars, it isn't often you can smell it, but it's still there, even though it's now prohibited in the bike-shed at St. Aloysius, hanging at the mouth Kelvin Bridge and Cowcaddens, sucked in with the warm breath of the train, as it emerges from the chasm.

So, you history is underground. Merkland Street Station under the veil of darkness. The lightbulbs that once lit it long disconnected, fizz and flicker are no more. All that are left are the footsteps of your ghost, lying it wait for a train that never comes. They hum a melody heard on the Barras' parquet. It has no harmony but the dirge of junction-boxes and the gurgle of the drains. They will never be taken to the ball.

Above, on land, the staccato of heels on the flagstones. Your young daughter on her way to Sauchiehall Street, enticed by a bassline. Her steps are impeded by the boom of laughter, there, by Partick Station. Lads leaving after the game. Cans of Vitamin-T in their hands. Whether their scarves are blue or green, their songs have no meaning.

She'll find freedom tonight, travelling across the city, down a rail that cuts through the lattice of the streets. Her eye is distracted by the buildings flashing past her, the swoon of the carriage and its clanking. People make you, says the sign, but who are these? Her guidebook lies open in her lap.

In it, your every surname: Buchanan, Dunlop, Glassford, Ingram, Wilson. 'These Great Men' she says to herself. In her bag, the chime of a phone and a response to a message sent half an hour ago. It seems like the reply is on Highland Time, bursting through the soil of your dear green place, seeking the light of the gloaming. Text and image, a friendly face and a

Jamaica football shirt. Your son has made a wise choice tonight.

Somewhere beneath her, her path might intersect his own. Your son tries to read the station's names in a language foreign to him, though to this place it belongs. Maybe he heard its whisper one time on the lawn in Partick, before it fled on the wind. A word that filled fishwife mouths on the Saltmarket, that dissipated with the centuries, like the puff of Pàraig nan Dealbh's camera. Your song does not know their names. Then the carriage jerks as it comes to a halt.

The night's possibilities haul your people out, and your son follows them, towards the sunset. He will take a gentle stroll, Clydeside, to see the colours of sunset in the water. Russet in the black water. If he didn't know better, he'd see this a streak of blood, the rust of iron sediment, spreading from where ships no longer sail out into the world. He'll take his time, light a cigarette, in your city, built with tobacco.

## **Toll an Lochain – Seonaidh Charity**

Bha braon mìn air mo bhilean  
a' gabhail cheumannan clearbach  
tarsainn aghaidh bhriste na Caillich,  
is Sròn Goibhre gharbh.

Rinn mo chridhe èirigh le dòchas faoin na h-òige  
is iomagain gheur na h-inbheachd:  
an t-àite seo, aisling nam fichead bliadhna,  
a riocdh gus tighinn nam fhradharc.

Gun agam ach dealbh inntinn  
air a tarraing le fathann is criomag sgeòil,  
an Stalcair, nach maireann, mar theachdaire,  
air meud is glòir an tuill.

Sheas sinn aig ceann an uillt,  
an loch fhathast fo phlaide cheò.  
Thionndaidh mi air mo shàil, cur cùl ri ceann-uidhe,  
a ghabhail tiotan eile iongnaidh.

## Pillar Of The Street - Paula Nicolson

I'm nearly 70 and everything is heading south: cheeks, tits and bahooky.

But I was once a party girl, in the 1960s. My pulling outfit of a mini skirt kilt, knee high suede boots and a fake fur yeti jacket would turn the hardiest of thighs duck egg blue in any Scottish winter.

'All fur coat and nae knickers!' was routinely shouted at me by the fishwives as I strutted to the Saturday night village hall dance, but I'd turn the eyes of girls green and leave men craving for a chug. A regular at the bike rack for a gobble, just for a few fags. Yet, I snatched myself a hard-working man that forgave me for serving mush on a plate; what won't choke you won't stick in your arse.

Now, my nights out are shopping in the supermarket, looking for marked down scran and picking up fags. I'm the pillar of my street, giving a helping hand in taking folk to their dental appointments. I still tell my girls not to go touching tadgers, and for my boys to wear a raincoat; their overplucked eyebrows and oiled beards rise in disbelief.

But tonight, excitement is crawling up my varicose veins; it's the annual potluck supper at my local church.

'Dunnae go to any effort Kathleen,' Anne said yesterday when I offered to cook. But then I overheard her, sniggering to the others under the sign of the cross and whispering, 'I woudnae give her food to my dug!' I decide I'll show those snooty old bints.

I get out my mam's old cookbook and finds a recipe for beef broth. I'll be the talk of the church and for all the right reasons, this time.

So, I strap the dented saucepan full of broth with a seat belt meant for a 13 stone man, onto the back seat of my car. An emergency stop later, half the broth projectile vomits from the pan into the footwell and into an open packet of broken dog biscuits.

The air is ladled with the odour of beef, and then blasphemous that I'll have to repent to a jaded priest. But nevertheless, I scoop up the spilt broth with my hands by the light of one pokey car light, and a lit fag to console me.

Arriving at the church hall, I'm pointed towards a table covered in a plastic purple flowered tablecloth you'd return as a

prize at the next raffle. The table is sagging, like the gusset of a pair of overstretched nylons with unappetising looking brown scones, brown sandwiches and brown sausages; my brown beef broth fits right in.

But as we tidy up, I hear, ‘Aye, that was braw broth, Kathleen.’ They even compliment me on the croutons and could I give them the recipe? But I don’t remember adding any of those feckin’ fancies.

I’m nearly 70 and everything is on the up: soup, church life and dog biscuits.

## Helen of Troy - Alan Kennedy

‘Can’t believe I left Glasgow for this.’

Three below zero, skin-piercing hailstones, a coupe d’état sucking the charm out of the island. This dismal February morning isn’t living up to Rory Morrison’s idea of Crete.

‘Never mind. Dreams come true.’

After six weeks’ hitching, he has dislocated his thumb, worn down his shoes, chapped his lips. But diarrhoea in Venice, being shot at in Dubrovnik, getting kidnapped in Alexandropoulos, cannot erase his jaw-cracking grin.

‘The Mermaid Café. Thank you, Joni Mitchell.’

His exotic lady of the canyon, his future love, destiny itself, will show up here, on Matala Beach. Guitar slung over his back, face-acne at bay, twenty years old, never been kissed. Rory blows a kiss at his reflexion in the restaurant window.

‘What’s not to like?’

Despite not knowing her name, what she looks like, or anything about her, Rory is upbeat.

‘She’ll come.’

A monosyllabic exchange of pidgin English and nods with Spyros, the Mermaid’s owner, sees Rory in a job, scrubbing pots, scouring lavatories and a broom closet to sleep in. Apart from two or three barely understood quotes from secondary school Classics, Rory’s all but non-existent Greek mushrooms with a clutch of key words. Come here, go there, quickly, cleaner, and several throat-challenging swear words that pepper both Spyro’s sobbing fits and his wife, Olympia’s nonstop singing.

When Rory sets about his duties that very evening, he holds Spyro’s simmering temper at bay by looking busy. He rewashes clean glasses, runs the cloth over spotless surfaces, keeps the toilet glistening like new.

Although Olympia oversees the kitchen, Rory scrubs up, puts away the plates, takes the leftovers out to feed the pigs. Testing the quality of the daily deliveries of wine, ouzo, and brandy, however, falls under Spyro’s sole scrutiny. A task he undertakes with stoic devotion.

Rory grows fond of the acrid stink of bleach and is soon

able to pronounce the names of the cleaning products stacked round his bed. Since he has nothing to read, Spyro finds him a phrase booklet with basic sentences he practises with Olympia.

The most outstanding cook on the isle is renowned throughout Crete. Her goat pilaf, lamb puff pastries, fried snails delight adoring admirers every weekend. Between crushing garlic, slicing cucumber, decanting the whey off the feta cheese, Olympia waxes on about her sister-in-law's girl.

'She arrive soon, Mister Rory. Pretty. You'll like.'

So begins Rory's wait. One day, the door will fly open and there she'll stand. Unfortunately, the high school portrait of Spyro's niece doesn't quite stir his pulse.

Without fully understanding what the pictures in the Saturday newspaper's two-page full colour supplement mean, Rory limits himself to spelling out the words with his finger. The subject changes each week; history of Greece, European aristocratic houses and, one day, typical Cretan dishes.

Rory studies this last feature in more depth, not because he's suddenly into cooking, but because of the handsome chestnut-haired woman who offers food to the camera in every photo. Since it doesn't put her name, he christens her Helen after the kidnapped princess.

Inspired by the images, Rory scribbles down some phrases in the style of his favourite singer.

*My words, fresh and so fierce.  
My anchored verses, seaward  
Brand me. You're in my veins.  
Like sacred liquor. treasured life water  
Carry my crown, I drift away in your embrace...*

After he pins the supplement on the wall of his room with a safety pin, Rory recites each day's poem before sleeping, every single one dedicated to his Helen of Troy. In his verses, he strums the guitar for her; they meander along the beach; they play in the surf like baby dolphins.

He has discovered the love of his life.

One Sunday morning, while Rory is scribbling down a flowery sonnet, Spyro greets two women who have just stepped through the front entrance.

‘Always a pleasure to serve such distinguished clients. Please, take your usual seat here by the sea view window, ladies. My good wife has prepared your usual.’

He raps on Rory’s door, hissing under his breath.

‘Boy. Shift your bum. Change the photos, sprinkle some ammonia round the women’s toilets. We’ve got guests, special guests.’

Still immersed in his musings, muttering ‘*cloud dreams I have...*’, Rory takes down and hides away the image of the recently deposed monarch, puts up one of a moustachioed general, draws the mop out from behind his cot and applies a hefty amount of bleach on both porcelain seats... ‘*I dream of clouds,*’.... Today, he is particularly possessed by his muse.

But when Rory Morrison steps into the dining room with a bucket of clean water...

‘Helen. My Helen. What are you doing in my bar?’

She must have read Rory’s mind because she looks at him, stands up in slow motion. His tongue sticks to his dried-up palate. Although he struggles to recall some lines of his poems, all he comes up with are... “... *Hercules won...*”, “...

*the men of Troy...*”, “... *half litre of bleach with four of water...*”

Helen’s right leg strides in front of the other with a gazelle’s grace. He whisks off his steamed-up glasses. The second leg overtakes the first. His chest thumps louder than an empty beer keg. The young woman looks him up and down. Rory’s already quivering knees wobble and buckle.

She’s coming to speak to him. But, when she scrutinizes him from down to up, a thousand acne darts flare up on his face.

Three metres away, two, one and a half. Mesmerized, Rory stares at her like a goldfish in a bowl. His jaw drops and closes. She sweeps past in a wake of perfume.

He swallows hard and holds his breath...

A shriek plucks Rory out of his reverie. The clean water he is about to rinse the lavatory seat with spills over the ground.

Although he doesn't catch what she says, four recognisable curses in the local dialect season her outburst. Helen barges past him and runs, screaming, to squat down in the surf.

He gapes at the empty pail spinning on the marble tiles.  
The bleach!

After the two women leave, swearing holy revenge, Rory stuffs his clothes in his bag. Spyro will surely sack him. Olympia trumpets out to see what's going on. Despite her husband being hardly able to breathe, he reels off the events. They observe their illustrious guests rushing to their car and burst out laughing. Tears roll down Olympia's cheeks.

'I'm wetting myself. I'm bloody wetting myself.'

Rory picks up his rucksack.

'Sorry about what happened to Helen, boss. I'll be off.'

The big man bearhugs him. Once Spyro catches his breath, he puts his gnarled hands on the boy's shoulders.

'Where's that famous smile, my little Homer? We're nowhere near Troy. You're no Achilles and she's not called Helen, boy. She would more likely turn Medusa to stone or make the Cyclops cross-eyed than launch a thousand ships.'

Olympia takes over. 'Her name's Dimitra Hatzidakis, the..., the... Spyro, you say it.'

'Bastard offspring of a colonel in the regime. Ever since her snooty features turned up in that...'

'Stupid rag. She reckons she's Sofia Loren. No one can bear her. Even her mother, a secretary in the capital, hates her.'

Spyro dries his eyes with the filthy dishcloth.

'I don't take pleasure mouthing off about a young woman, but...

Olympia whips the rag out of her husband's hands and wrings it tighter and tighter as she talks.

'Let me tell you about that low life scum. Turns up every bloody month with her stuck-up half-sister. They gorge themselves like queens and piss off without paying. And here's us, struggling to make ends meet.'

'Won't her father get mad when he finds out?'

'Listen boy, Colonel Limp Dick will probably send you a medal. No more free meals for Miss Hungry Hog. Eh, my love?"

His wife smashes the young woman's half empty glass against the counter and stabs the broken stem repeatedly into the bread. 'No more. No bloody more.'

Spyro strokes her hand and Olympia orders Rory to sit at the dinner table.

'I sweated for four hours over this Cretan roast lamb with golden thistle and chicory for that glutton. It's a shame to waste good food. Come on. Eat. Spyro! The finest Adrianna wine for our darling boy.'

Rory has never tasted such exquisite flavours. He has helping after helping. The drink slackens his tongue. He tells them all his fantasies about Helen or whoever she is. Whenever he mentions her name, they burst out giggling again.

When a taxi braking in front of the inn cuts the conversation short, Olympia wipes her palms on her apron.

'Spyro. Look who it is. A day early, too.'

'Hello, Aunty.'

'My gorgeous girl. Come in.'

'Boy. This is my sister's daughter. Elena. She's staying with us for the summer holidays.'

Rory stares without breathing for ten seconds.

'You came.'

## **Inhale - Mary Wight**

I light a rare cigarette—toasted tobacco  
carried home from abroad—  
a wee act of rebellion in a winter of rain.

Smouldering strands flicker a courtyard,  
rugs stacked high in sweet-scented gloom,  
women laughing, weaving rainbows from rags

but this afternoon's lengthening lour can't kindle  
old lovers, well-seasoned wood fallen  
soft in a grate, silver ash of colourful days.

Outside, frayed prayer flags hang still  
and the moon reveals an old gilded path.  
I exhale, count down the end of the year, more.

Inhale, fireworks exploding, tearing open the dark.

## **Insomnia - Kevin Crowe**

The first night you think nothing of it, telling yourself that everyone has sleepless nights occasionally. You find it tedious, irritating even, lying there, awake, but not particularly worrying. You rise earlier than usual, shower, eat breakfast and go to work, where you feel spaced out for much of the day, so you spend the time doing mindless routine tasks.

The second night you can't sleep either. You toss and turn, swear loudly, throw off the sheets, remake the bed, punch the pillows, all to no avail. You switch on the radio, hoping the sound of the BBC's World Service broadcasting from a country you've never heard of reporting on an issue you care nothing about will lull you into unconsciousness. It doesn't work, instead you find yourself wondering what it would be like living in that remote land. You get up and search the internet for information on this faraway mountain nation, finding a mass of fascinating articles. So fascinating that several hours later you realise there is no time for breakfast and barely time to shower before having to leave for work. You then spend most of the day staring into space, unable to concentrate on anything for more than a few seconds. When a colleague asks you if you're okay, you smile and nod your head, and after he's gone you try to look busy.

When you get home you pour yourself a large glass of wine, google "cures for insomnia" and make a note of the dos and don'ts. The don'ts include not eating late in the evening, not drinking tea or coffee or alcohol after mid afternoon, not watching TV before going to bed and not looking at a computer screen before going to bed. You switch the computer off, throw the remains of the wine down the sink, prepare a small salad instead of the steak and chips you were planning for dinner and have a cup of herbal tea to wash it down. You decide to give the TV soap operas, crime thrillers and reality shows a miss, instead opening that book you've been meaning to read for ages.

After an evening of boredom you make another change to your routine suggested by the internet: you have a shower before going to bed at the usual time, having earlier changed the bed sheets. You

lie awake. The ticking of the alarm clock pounds in your head like a drum.

In the morning you ring work and tell them you're ill. The paracetamol you take leaves your headache intact. It's a pleasant bright spring day, with the trees beginning to bloom and birds scavenging for nest material, so after breakfast you decide to walk along the river that meanders through town and passes close to your home. After just a few minutes the fresh air and sunshine have eased your headache and put a smile on your face. Others too are enjoying the good weather and you greet them all with a nod and a "hello", stopping to stroke an excited puppy and stepping out of the way of a couple of toddlers not looking where they're going. You stop at a bench and admire the family of swans and their cygnets, the mallards and their ducklings, the pure black coats of the moorhens and the courting display of the great crested grebes. You move on and chat to an angler who complains about the weather.

You agree to disagree and walk on. You leave the path when the river reaches the town centre and have a pot of tea in a favourite cafe, followed by a bit of shopping before leisurely making your way home, where you play some music and, sitting down, close your eyes. When you wake up, it's almost dark and you remember what the website said about not falling asleep during the day.

Annoyed with yourself, you open a bottle of wine and during the course of the evening drink it all, accompanied by a greasy fry up. When you go to bed with a belly full of booze and cholesterol, you do fall asleep, but wake up an hour or so later, dehydrated, hungover and needing a crap. After relieving yourself, drinking several glasses of water and swallowing a couple of paracetamol, you go back to bed, where you find it impossible to get back to sleep. Just as you think you may be nodding off, you realise you need a pee.

In the morning you decide to take the whole week off work, claiming to have caught some virus. You attempt to tire yourself out by giving the house a thorough spring clean, in the process finding various things you thought you'd lost, like the smartphone you recently had to replace and the DVD of the wedding that ended

in divorce. When you go to bed you are convinced you will have a good night's sleep.

You are wrong.

In the morning you ring your doctor to make an appointment and get irritated with the receptionist when she tells you that you'll have to wait ten days. Her response to your annoyance is tell you to take it or leave it. You take it and make a note of the date and time.

Over the next ten days you try all the strategies you can think of to get some sleep. You try leaving the radio on, playing relaxing music and lying in total silence; you see if the level of heat makes any difference; you leave the window open sometimes and close it other times; you lie on your back, your side, your stomach, under the duvet and on top of the sheets. You try having no pillows, one pillow, two pillows, three pillows; you see if it makes any difference being naked or clothed. For the first time since you were a child you drink Horlicks before going to bed. You even try counting sheep, just so you can tell the doctor you've tried everything. Nothing works and you get up every morning feeling exhausted.

You spend your days spaced out, feeling like a zombie. Fond of gardening, you look out of your lounge window, disgusted at the state of the lawn and flower and vegetable patches. You ask yourself why you've let the garden get in this state, but you know why.

You force yourself outside to the garden shed and get out the lawn mower, strimmer, hoe, scimitars and stiff brush. You stand there staring at them, momentarily unsure what their purpose is. You shake yourself out of your reverie and pull the recoil start on the lawn mower. Nothing happens. You try again, still nothing happens. You check the machine and realise it's out of petrol. You swear loudly, not realising your neighbour is in her garden, staring at you. When she complains about your language, you tell her to mind her own fucking business.

She goes indoors, slamming the door behind her. You realise you'll probably have to apologise to her later, but at the moment you don't

care. You go in search of the extension cord. You find it and plug in the strimmer, but nothing happens. You swear even more loudly and storm indoors, leaving all the garden equipment on the lawn. It begins to rain and you know you ought to go out and put the equipment back in the shed before water gets into the electrics of the strimmer and the sockets of the extension cord, but you're too tired to be bothered. You collapse in your favourite chair. Knowing you're not up to sorting out the garden, you decide to ring a local landscaping company and pay them to do it for you, but you don't even have the energy to get the phone and make the call.

The next day you can't find any clean crockery so have your breakfast on the cleanest dirty plate. After eating, you decide you really must tackle the washing up in the overfull kitchen sink. You make a start, but your butter fingers drop a plate which smashes on the floor. The red mist comes down and doesn't disappear until you have emptied the sink and smashed

every plate and cup on the floor. You decide to brew some tea, but after switching on the kettle you discover all your cups are

broken, so you trawl the cupboards eventually finding an old dusty plastic cup.

The day of the doctor's appointment finally arrives and as the surgery is a few miles away, you decide to drive. As you approach a pedestrian crossing on which a teacher is escorting a group of schoolchildren across the road, you finally fall asleep, unaware your foot has hit the accelerator.

## **Mo Chridhe - Victoria MacIver**

Chan e blas a' chiad chofaidh sa mhadainn,  
No fàileadh an toist aig àm sam bith,  
Chan e sealladh na tràghad aig deireadh an latha,  
No na duilleagan dathte nan tuiteam as t-Foghar,  
A chùm mo chridhe làn.

Chan e còisir nan eun ann an co-rèim,  
No na tuinn air a' chladach a' baslachadh,  
Chan e na rionnagan a' deàrrsadhbh mar chrùn na h-oidhch',  
No a' chiad bhleideag sneachd', a' tuiteam sa Gheamhradh,  
A chùm mo chridhe làn.

Chan e dol air chall sa choille,  
Air mo chuairteachadh le iomadh dath uaine is donn,  
Chan e an fhois a lorg thu aig mullach a' chnuic,  
No am bogha-frois' a' deàrrsadhbh tron stoirm,  
A chùm mo chridhe làn.

Chan e sealladh na beinn' phurpaidh ag èirigh 's an fhàire,  
No na flùraichean a' nochdadhbh as t-Earrach,  
Chan e an iolaire air sgeith 's ag èiridh suas sna speuran,  
No na leumadairean a' chluich còmhla as t-Samhradh,  
A chùm mo chridhe làn.

'S e fuaim ur gàire làn toileachais agus saoirse,  
Is ur làmh air a neadachadh nam làimhe,  
'S e coltas làn gràidh is iongnaidh ort,  
Is do bhodhaig faisg nam ghàirdean cho bog,  
Seo na rudan a chùm mo chridhe làn,  
Gach latha a thèid an cuan na thràigh.

## **Outside Mod One - Alison Cohen**

*Everything is going to be alright*  
is behind me  
in front is all the seduction of curves –  
what could go wrong  
with a spiral of grass and moons of water?

Except, my moons are falling into moans –  
moans of water  
where Jencks is winding his impossible mown edge  
trying to divide  
the greens of pleasure from transparent collections of pain.

*Note: the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art is affectionally referred to as Mod One*

## **Siding - Gillian Dawson**

Crouch here at the boundary of wild and untended  
in the half-light. March violets, musk and urine-  
drenched comings and goings speak loud of intent,  
of territory claimed and encroached. Remain  
frozen, downwind, watchful—there will be no second chance,  
no supplication can deflect the swift strike, the pounce.

Outside and inside are constructs snarled in blackthorn-  
fankled palings, the bared whites of eyes, teeth, bone.  
Sleek through interstices, the thin places where none dare  
follow your glimmer of thought to its natural  
conclusion. The line ends here—your amber stare,  
afterlight on an edgeland growing feral.

## The Funeral of Mags Cook - Gordon Lawrie

Mind when ah discovered Mags Cook deid in her kitchen? Mean an' cantakerous as they come? Turns out she'd fallen oot wi' every freend, an' a' her family, tae, no' just her neighbours. And guess whit? She wiz sae determined naebody wid benefit from her passin' that she left a' her belongins' tae her three dugs.

She hated undertakers tae – ah mind masel' her callin' them “maggots feedin' aff corpses” – so she'd arranged her funeral in advance oan the cheap. She'd even passed some jinery course an' built her ain coaffin frae a kit!

Ah find a' this oot at her funeral at Warriston Crem a few days later, an' ye can imagine ma shock when ah discover there's only five people present a'thegither – me, a nice young wumman “celebrant”, an' three undertakers each lookin' like Rikki Fulton straight oot o' yon Reverend I. M. Jolly. They wheel the coaffin in oan a trolley an aff we go.

The celebrant says a few brief words aboot Mags – ah mean, there wisnae much pleasant tae sae, wiz there? – then reads a nice wee poem. Then it's oan tae the cremation itsel'. Ah mean, why waste ony mair time? So now the undertakers move the trolley an' start tae lift the coaffin up the cremation platform.

At that point things take a bit o' a turn. Turns out that yez need a bit mair than Access 1 jinery tae pit together a self-assembly coaffin, either that or yez have tae read the instructions right. Mebbe it wiz frae IKEA an' in Swedish, ah dinnae ken. Whitever, as the coaffin reaches the platform, the tap end cams adrift frae the rest, an' tryin' tae catch it, the I. M. Jollies panic. Mags – wrapped in a canvas bag, thankfully – starts tae slide through the front. There's naethin' the undertakers can dae tae stop the auld wumman zippin' right oot! Mags ends up oan the crem platform while the Jollies are left standin' in the crem chapel wi' a dae-it-yersel' coaffin in twa bits. For a moment, they actually debated keepin' the coaffin back, sortin' it an' usin' it fur some ither soul, but in the end they sent the pair o' them, Mags an' the box, doon in twa journeys. Fortunately, the service had been that short it wisnae a problem.

The I. M. Jollies were pros, like, poker-straight faces, but me an' the pair wumman celebrant couldnae help laughin', an' soon enough that set the undertakers aff, tae. Ah said it wiz the biggest laugh the auld crone had gi'en anyone in her entire life. The

celebrant quoted some line frae Shakespeare, “Naethin’ became her in life like the leavin’ o’ it.” Macbeth, she said. Ah widnae ken. Wan fur Wikipedia, ah suppose.

Nae bunfight, of course, Mags wiz mean tae the end. But me an’ the celebrant went fur a cuppa an’ a fly cemetery at that new cafe in Canonmills efterwards. Ah paid. Ah’d had a laugh.

## **Thi Haily Isle - Lynn Valentine**

A scattirin o skerries—  
bairns tae thi mithir isle—  
hazin lang deys in fae sea.

Sich a schyne o licht is if  
thi saunt himsel hid strick  
thi air wi a sweet o sweetniss.  
She taks a seat whaur monks hae sat,  
plants hir shin oan cauld flags, feels  
anither's braith slidder doon hir nek.  
Naebidy thair bit shaddas o ghaists,  
a forgottin prayer, a bummel  
o samethin ithir in hir thrapple.  
She taks hir thochts oot tae thi strand,  
back tae mortal lan, whaur Cadell paintit  
thi muckle hulk o baldy-heided Ben More.  
Skylarks flee alaft thi machair,  
eiders bob aboon hem o sea,  
she wishes fir mair deys lik these.

## Turas Toirmisgte - Donnchadh MacCàba

Ceithir uairean sa mhadainn. Tha am balaich eile nan laighe air na beingean, nan cadal fhathast. Feumaidh mi am bothan fhàgail an-diugh. Tha a' ghrian ag èirigh gu luath os cionn nam beanntan. Tha na boireannaich ag obair anns na h-achaidhean mu thràth.

Dèan cabhag! Tha am bus a' tighinn. Cha bhi bus eile gus madainn a-màireach.

“Stad! Stad!”

Tha e a' dol ro luath agus tha an rathad cho cumhang is lùbach. A bheil e gam fhaicinn? Mo chreach! A bheil an dràibhear glan dearg às a rian? Gu h-obann tha e a' tighinn gu stad. Taing do shealbh!

“Thoir dhomh do bhaga-droma.” ’S e am stiùireadair le maoidheadh anns a shùilean.

“Dè a th’agaibh na bhroinn?”

“Chan eil càil ann ach mo chuid aodaich”

Chan eil àite-suidhe air a' bhus, ach ri taobh bodaich ghrànda fhàileanta. Tha na suidheachain reubte is salach, ach chan eil roghainn agam agus tha mi a' dèanamh mo shuidhe ri a thaobh co-dhiù.

Tha am bus a' dol aig astar àrd a-rithist. Tha stùr is stuth ag èirigh bhon rathad dhan adhair, mar a ghabhas sinn tòrr lùban teanna. Tha an dràibhear a' coimhead air a chùlaibh, a' bruidhinn ris an stiùireadair. Cùm do shùilean air an rathad! Cuiridh thu sinn uile gu bàs - nach bi thu faiceallach!

Tha i a' fàs fada nas teota gach mionaid air a' bhus fon ghrian theinntich. Tha am bodach ri mo thaobh na chadal. Nach buidhe dha! Tha mi a' faireachdainn cadalach cuideachd, ach feumaidh mi a bhith mothachail.

Cha chreid mi nach eil a h-uile duine a' gabhail norraig a-nis, ach

mi fhìn agus an dràibhear craicte - tha mi an dòchas. Tha am bodach air a cheann chur air mo ghualann agus tha e a' dèanamh sranna mhòir. Agus am fàilleadh! An do fhliuch e fhèin? Cha ghabh mi ri seo airson ùine fhada.

Dh'fhàg sinn na beanntan còrr is uair a thìde air ais, gun trioblaid. Cha bhi astar mòr mus ruig sinn am baile. Bidh mi sàbhailte a dh'aithghearr, ach dìreach mar a thig an smaoin sin a-steach orm, stad am bus.

Chì mi iad. Buidheann beag. Poileas no saighdearan? Cò aig a bheil fios san dùthaich seo? Tha iad uile coltach ri chèile.

Tha an t-oifigear a' bruidhinn ris an dràibhear is an stiùireadair. 'S e mo bhaga-droma a tha iad air a' toirt a-mach. Tha iad a' risleadh na bhroinn. Uill, cha bhi sibh a' lorg dad ann, co-dhiù!

Tha am pasgan nam poca beag le mo chead-siubhail agus botal bùirn is beagan bìdh. Dè nì mi leotha? Tha am bodach na chadal fhathast. Na dùisg, a bhodaich! Tha a chasan air an sgaoileadh a-mach agus 's urrainn dhomh am pasgan a chur eatarra is a-steach dhan suidhe fhèin, a tha reubte. Sin e.

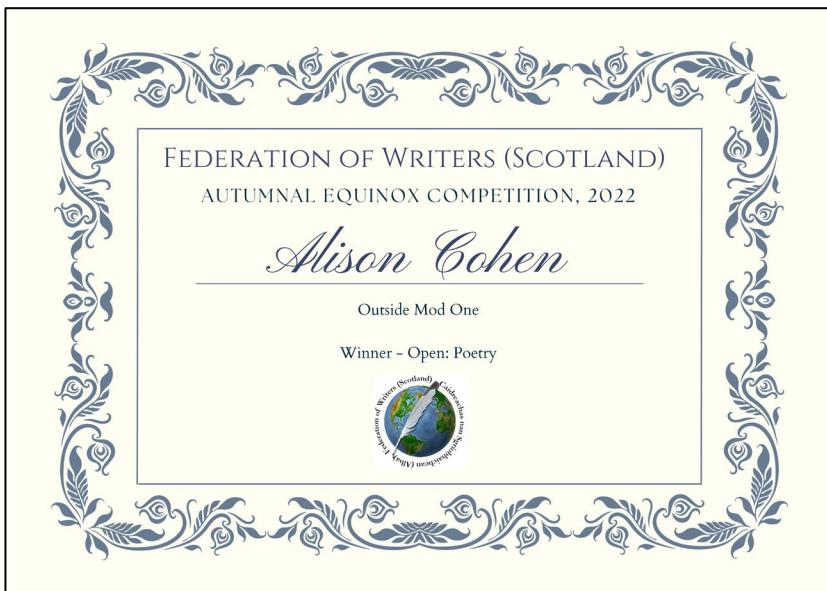
Tha an t-oifigear air a' bhus fhèin a-nis agus tha e a' tighinn dham ionnsaigh. Tha gunna aige na làimh. Chan eil ùidh aige air na daoine eile. Tha e ag ràdh rudeigin riumsa.

“Tiugainn leam.”



## Competition Results

### Open: Poetry



#### Winner

Alison Cohen

*Outside Mod One*

#### Highly Commended

Mary Wight

*Inhale*

#### Commended

Gillian Dawson

*Siding*

## Competition Results

### Open: Short Story



#### Winner

Don J. Taylor  
*City Break*

#### Highly Commended

Kevin Crowe  
*Insomnia*

#### Commended

Alan Kennedy  
*Helen of Troy*

## Competition Results

### Open: Flash Fiction



#### Winner

Gordon Lawrie

*The Funeral of Mags Cook*

#### Highly Commended

Marcas Mac an Tuairneir

*A Letter to Glasgow*

#### Commended

Paula Nicolson

*A Pillar of the Street*

## Competition Results

### Scots



### Winner

Lynn Valentine  
*Thi Haily Isle*

### Highly Commended

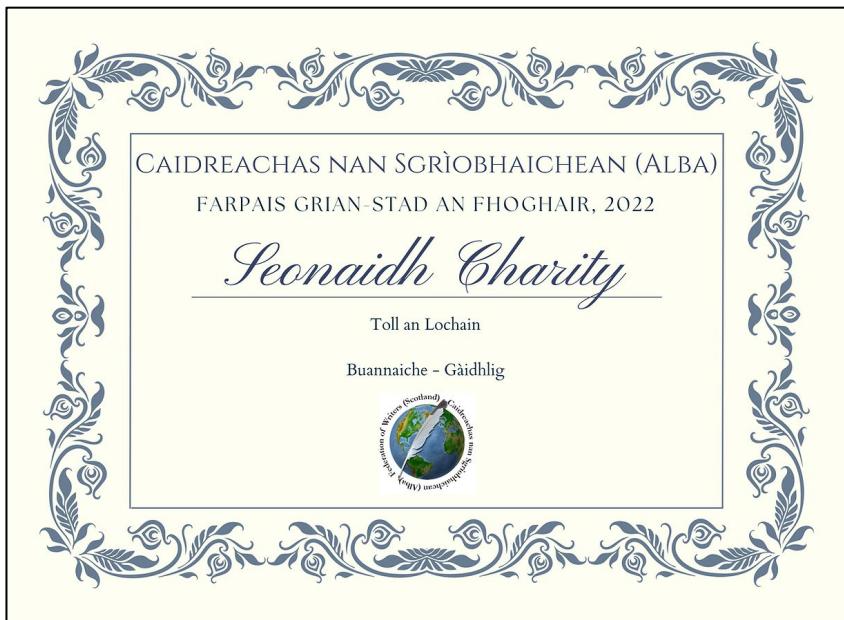
David Bleiman  
*Brochtisland*

### Commended

Gordon Lawrie  
*The Funeral of Mags Cook*

## Competition Results

### Gaelic / Gàidhlig



### Buannaiche / Winner

Seonaidh Charity  
*Toll an Lochain*

### Ri Shàr-mholadh / Highly Commended

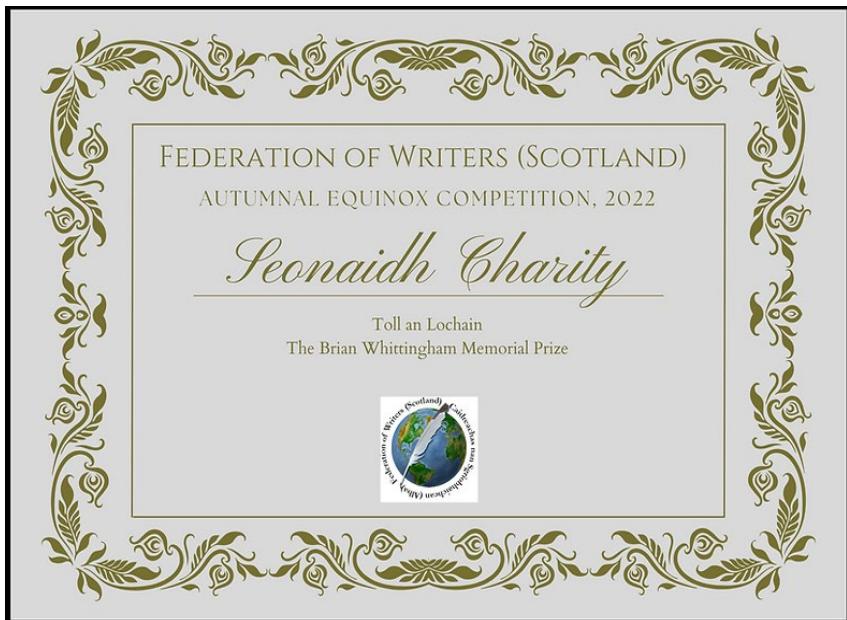
Victoria MacIver  
*Mo Chridhe*

### Ri Mholadh / Commended

Donnchadh MacCàba  
*Turas Toirmisgte*

## Competition Results

### The Brian Whittingham Memorial Prize



**Buannaiche / Winner**

Seonaidh Charity

*Toll an Lochain*