The Body in Space
Also by Gerrie Fellows

Technologies and Other Poems (Polygon, 1990)
The Powerlines (Polygon, 2000)
The Duntroon Toponymy (Mariscat, 2001)
Window for a Small Blue Child (Carcanet, 2007)
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The Body in Space

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I

The Miraculous World
The Miraculous World

From a bothy
spun around a pole    odd tree
in a place without wood
its sills, shells    its windows
onto water and the cliff
where our men lean outward
roped over waves

she watches her father climb
through the sheared air
holds him in her sight
out over the dark      all I saw of the minke
triangular fins of coasting sharks
the gannets’ dive      the explosion
that comes to us across the water

At the end of his route
he’ll show her a pinioned boulder
triangle of air      she might
step through:    we’ll hold her
in the net of our observation     unroped
in a place sheeny with quartz and salt
that slants away

to the waves’
white rushing and falling back
the sharks’ dark fins
the ballet of gannets
their light bones      their perfectly
aerodynamic skulls     diving into
all around us
the miraculous world
From Breanais

I

At Uig building a mountain
a castle, a harbour
my daughter’s bridge
the only one that will stand
in the wet sand

towers are brochs
fallen into ruin
even as they’re built a rubble
like the concrete blocks
left standing
the roofless houses

From the back of the beach
she yells urgently over and over
what is this?

pellet knit with fur and rabbit bones
the knuckles as clear
as if just lifted
from the broth of the stomach

What bird coasting on great wings
gurgled this knot disgorger
over the machair
over eyebright and sandwort
bird’s-foot trefoil

II

What bird
casting on great wings
over half-built dwellings
    hump-backed houses fallen back
to walls the hurricane filled up with sand

    stones   flung above a beach
(the way a hurricane enters a conversation)

    places revealed by storm
    places sealed and hidden

over the dead buried at the edge of the ocean

III

The custodian is telling us
how fish and seal meat, seabirds
    smoked above a hearth
were stored in the cool stone cellar
how smoke drifts from the hearth
how she brushes the ashes out
    day after day
in a house set down in earth
The English she speaks is smoky with Gaelic sounds
(as if it had in it a colour found only in this place)

    orchid   clover   tufted vetch
    heath milkwort   siabann nam ban-sìdh
    forget-me-not   cotharach   protector

her purple cardigan   like a flower of the machair

IV

Mealisval, Cracaval,
Laival a’ Tuath, Laival a’ Deas, Griomaval
They might be the names
of colours
    in a poem about light
    shades of blue
    when the sky
is a clear, subtle turquoise

shades of translucence
when the ocean
is a green mineral
light/ness of elements
    suspended between wave lengths

V

Even on Leòdhas they say it—
Breanais is the back of beyond

a house with yellow like the eye
or the beak of a bird
as if a great seabird
ground-nested there
coasting      watching the ocean

In the grass of the machair
the head and beak of a fulmar
the beak intact  ochre
the closed curve of a knife
broken-open   empty skull
delicate   white
almost translucent

This is what we found

The bones of birds
are lighter than ours
Island Journal

I

Walking on Mull’s basaltic sands
we look aslant over water
from our wet footprints
the way the lava ran
from the caldera molten

to the slate islands’ riven fins
Cullipool’s black steep
that pitched our daughter’s football once
from beach

to wave tips white on white
taking the yachts’ sails
against the lava flow
from that island
cattle-grazed with green

to this island’s cooled opposite
to our being here now
aslant in time and distance
bound by black sand by water

II

After rain: you and I
over moss water-logged pasture
steep up into the
rain diary logged rainbows
sharp showers sharp
wind dipping below the cloud
of our big dark neighbour
but we’re on fire
the caldera’s flow fixed to stone
cold, but we are warm-blooded animals
moving in the bellow of stags
scree travellers footing it
over and up looking back

at the distant col at unexpected
others might be rocks
but their legs jolt as they stand
I expect them silhouetted
crossing the ridge but
they are nowhere
our co-inhabitants vanished
into the planet of time and rock

III

Gone over water
he travels towards his father
fallen flyer on Warfarin

She and I at a forest edge
talking of this
between upheaved tussocks
grass, pathless bracken
the conversation of years:

beyond us, unseen the debris
of a wartime flight ripped
aluminium in rock a vanishing
as of walkers on a ridge or the flit
of yesterday’s texts on her phone

our bootprints trackless
on the steep black scree
IV

At the boat rail
our daughters

mottled as young birds
as seal pups
    out on the water

towards a landing stage
    light-stepped
    pyramid

    out towards
    bird churches
broken lava terraces

    out towards

And where we were
    a green falling away

V

a walk by raised beaches    sheep
fort    verdant headland in rain
taking us by columns cooled
to the hexagonal    the not-quite
we marvel at    dark honeycomb
    over which the sea escapes

racing away from us
    as the beaches lift
        tip us    descending
towards fanned basalt
tettered by sunlight

A child’s delight
at the monkey puzzle shape of it
dashed to a stump   hollow impress
of a trunk   gigantic horsetail
   up beyond us,   craning necks
   until I say to her—
   fifty million years

standing as we do
in the Atlantic forests
in the warm damp
young as we are   in the ancient
The Invisible Field

Beyond a gate emblazoned with padlocks
in a ghost territory of bracken and fencing
bootssoles smash downwards on concrete
and powerlines burr under the arch of pylons

Where the shepherd had a house from the master
two cows’ grass pasture for sixty sheep on the hill
chainsaws fell upright stands of conifer
for chipboard cellulose rayon newsprint
for boxes fences telegraph poles

The graziers were at first considered by the natives
as aliens and invaders of property
Abortive attempts were made to extirpate them

The soil of the plantings rain-washed downwards
leached ash grey iron pan on the slopes
(salt and earth kept separate on the breast of the corpse)
the alkali of the spirit
the destructible granular body graded and quarried

concrete uplifted by mountains
where ice cup was argent spillage of cold
rasped over quartz mica
All this broken through a saltire engrailed
(The crest a demi-savage
brandishing in his dexter hand a broadsword)

A torse of rock crushed and sectioned
one hundred and fifty tons an hour transported
across submerged and treacherous regions
mixed with sand became the healing balm
on cableways slung from headmasts
three thousand cubic yards a week
eight and a quarter miles of concrete aqueducts
a hundred and four intake dams
section by section the headwall
thirteen buttresses spanned by arches

*In an escroll above* the motto *THIS I’LL DEFEND*

Upright upon the earth the engineer
calculated the meanings of rock and water

*Let concrete be the balm*  *Let water run*
*in the penstocks*  *Let energy equal light*

*Supporters*  *two highland men in belted plaids*
in trenches of rock and mud
incomers from war at war with the earth
rainwashed slipping beneath them
(the cast-off cladding the falling timber
the men bare-headed sweating shaken)
(anonymous but for the injured and the dead)

Section by section the headwall
a memorial plaque one hundred and sixty feet high
*all Proper*  *standing on a compartment wavy*
*whereon is the word* *LOCH SLOY*

The slung cables sigh under the arch of pylons
The invisible field dwarfs the bungalow
a man and a woman fenced and netted
bodies disrupted as mine is
passing beneath that charged singing

*Let there be light in the dark regions*
*an end to black Mondays on Clydeside*
*an end to blackouts on washday in the tenements*

And there was light: far down Glen Loin
it burns over the nuclear secrets
over the shipwrecked yards
over my own boots on the road