

1975

Ancestors

Robin Munro

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Recommended Citation

Munro, Robin. "Ancestors." *The Iowa Review* 6.3 (1975): 173-175. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1936>

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The salmon cobble slides in, slowing down.
The morning slows down. (Why should
mornings hurry? Evenings arrive
in their own cool time.)
The world slows
well below the speed for dealing, right
to ripen wheat,
and grapes in the Moravian village,
heavy with clover, remote
from this northern one
of the grinding mussel paths.

Our south side cottages
formed like a friendship
against the obvious gradient,
with no more reason
than to be when wanted
for a time;
till time *is* the reason.

“Before my mother or her mother’s time
all men were fishermen
here; and all things came and went by sea.”
The woman who told me
heaves her oldness
over the jumping North.
Far out at sea, the long ships,
freight and container ships, angle
towards Aberdeen. When you pick things out that clear,
the clarity won’t last.

With all their sky blue confidence,
the harebell skin is fragile for a wind.
I listen to their inclination
in the sea-breath, rising.

Ancestors / Robin Munro

If they had the sea in their blood,
what have we?
There’s petrochemical in mine.
I shiver to recognize something of me
at Stevenston and Invergordon.

Their faded eyes, the photo-ancestors,
will meet in mine
the images of steel on stone, the still
of the created world.

I'd tear my own life clear
of these earlier lives
where they yielded
and were put to the sea,
like people, I imagine,
who decay on newsreel.

Their suffering
is in a body where the bones escape.

Sheep crop the scruff of this brown land.
The skeletons of little water mills
where burns drop
to an empty shore.
The six oared boat, frame giving way,
is shrouded by wrack.
Some bits of guillemot, a little oiled.
And that is all, this back end
of a century.

Fulmars take over the old croft houses.
A raucous confidence, fulmars
thriving. Peregrine falcon
back up on the hill,
smashed on our legal acids,
dropping painfully out
of this bare place.
A dying bird knows.
A winning one is aware.
Between the bird sense and the oil,
I begin to be doubtful:

*May the wild protect us
from a stiffening of vision!
May the wildness speak the right
of people to their love,
their past . . .*

Their way too
was of acceptance, ancestors. My great
great grandfather spoke back to Sutherland.

“Na, Duke, I’m right. I’ll not apologize.”
He was exceptional, then homeless.

I’m leaving the wild to itself.
The wheatear persuasion
(inside the dyke, a perfected nest).
The curlew urging
(her young urge into the ground).
The chorus reminding.
This country has been rich with them,
the birds that sing,
and those who are silent.

Roger Garfitt on Robin Munro

The title of Robin Munro’s paperback collection, *Shetland, like the World*, neatly encapsulates (significantly, the phrase used to be “puts in a nutshell”) the relevance of making poetry out of the past and present of a particular place: namely, that in registering the pressures acting upon an area one is able to register, at least in part, the pressures active within the whole economic complex. Seen in this way, regionalism is the opposite of provincialism: it is a tactic for selecting from and comprehending the otherwise innumerable and incomprehensible interrelations of social and economic forces that compose, or are discomposing, the contemporary world; at the same time it is a way of registering a set of personal loyalties that are themselves part of the pressure. If this seems in itself an act of discomposition, I would argue that we are at a stage where we probably have to take apart in order to understand, to re-assess and later to re-compose. We are also at a stage where we have a certain duty to record and so to preserve.

In writing of Shetland and North-East Scotland, of the impact of the new oil industry upon the remains of an old subsistence economy, Robin Munro is able to focus in a particularly acute form the clash between past and present, a clash that he skillfully pinpoints in “Coastal Village” by transforming “the long ships,” with their echo of the Vikings, into “freight and container ships.” “Coastal Village” is well constructed around the fragility of the harebells, as an image of this northern, marine environment in the final days of a thousand-year phase, a clarity that can’t last, an inscape soon to be torn by the sea-breath, the oil ships bringing change as once the Vikings did.

I’m not sure about “the *caring* harbour”: I would have thought a harbour was by its very nature “caring.” “Haven” has the implication even more strongly: “harbour” and “haven” are both Old English roots, but I see there’s