

Tiny growth is shaken on the high slopes of Scotland where the wind has made its home. The mighty arcs and curves spread out in all directions, beneath a sky hung in layers. And far below the ravens circle. Beneath the ravens, a carpark, nearby it a window. Should one descend it may glimpse a riot of tartan, the sound of a till and a pale faced girl in a kilt.

She is Eileen and she is elsewhere. Close by is Mrs Buchan, proud of her domain and happy in her hemisphere of approval. To her Eileen looks like a useless thing that needs to pull her socks up. Eileen doesn't even want socks. She'd rather have bare feet on the earth.

This morning there was a coach due so jumpers had to be carefully folded in preparation. Eager to prove she wasn't just a useless thing that needed to pull her socks up, Eileen continued to fold jumpers into rectangles set in perfect piles of graded colour, in readiness for them to be scattered all over the place. She wondered at why no one would want the jumper were it not folded. Same jumper folded, unfolded. An image came to her of one lying on a bedroom floor.

It was a strange thing to call work this. 'For a living' didn't seem to fit when every day her soul died. She never understood why it should make you a better person and Mrs Buchan hated her for not seeing the point.

- Break up that out of date fudge and put it on a plate for the customers, said Mrs

Buchan, adjusting a pale green jumper over her hips as the tour bus pulled up. In the car park folks were assisted down off the steps, faltering a little then gathering themselves to assume one direction. Soon the shop filled with the lifting and touching of things to take home to lives as memories of a time when something different was happening.

Eileen took up position. Occasionally there was a good spell when her brain was sparking and she could work the till and enjoy interaction with the customers and feel normal, sort of efficient and worthy –a pleasant girl at the till taking money. She never quite knew when this would be. It wasn't today. A man stood bemused at being charged £200 for a postcard.

-She's training, apologised Mrs Buchan and edged Eileen aside. Eileen watched Mrs Buchan's powdered face speak in accommodating tones to anyone who may have an inkling to buy.

-These make a lovely gift, she said as Eileen wondered why anyone would want such things in the first place. Her eye fell on a calendar of Scotland's golf courses, then met with the eyes of a plastic piper – a burly man for whom mass production had given red lipstick and slim fingers on the chanter. She would sooner take the people's hands and lay them on the heather to feel the land and smell it.

Outside the fitting room a man leant with a bored air as his wife wrestled behind the curtain. Eileen stood by. The pale green presence of Mrs Buchan soon intervened to enquire as to how the woman was getting on.

-It's a bit neat on me, came the reply. Mrs Buchan aimed her face at Eileen like a weapon.

-Cat got yir tongue? she said.

For Eileen it was like being accused of passive silence when you're being strangled.

There was so much in her to say but the words would only ever come out if there was somewhere for them to go.

-Size fourteen, said the face, Muted Heather.

Having located the shade Eileen's hands worked through the ladies' kilts as a wheel spin ensued in her mind. Had her hands found the right size the brain did not register so they continued to work back and forth through the rail as if size fourteen did not exist. Mrs Buchan, fuelled with impatience, was there in an instant. She lifted one immediately and returned to pass it through the gap beside the curtain where the wrestling began again. Eileen re-checked the rack, bewildered as to where the fourteen had come from, and shortly the woman appeared triumphant. Mrs Buchan joined with the woman in agreement that it was a lovely shade, and the man's demeanour became more lively. She led the couple to the till, leaving Eileen to deal with the rejects.

- It's a helluva thing this getting old, came a voice from behind her. Eileen turned round.

- I'm no doin it again. A woman was looking in a mirror whilst arranging a scarf around her neck.

- Although there's one good thing about it, she continued. You can't see the dust on yir furniture anymore. A laugh of recognition joined the company from a woman rummaging through raglans.

-After I got my cataracts done, she continued, I saw these big circles. Big coloured circles. Eileen smiled in wonderment at the thought.

-It wore off after a while, she quickly added, breaking the spell. The rummager had something to say.

-He canny see a thing, she said, a thumb indicating her husband who had joined a group of men gathering around the bus driver.

- He's got a lighter with a naked woman on it and he thinks it's from Lourdes.

Laughter rose and fell and the rummager moved on. The woman with the scarf turned back to the mirror, Eileen close by.

- That shade drains all the colour out of me, she said, and pulled it off. Noticing a soft toy lamb on a shelf she picked it up and stared into its lifelike, pink nosed face.

She turned to Eileen and said

- Look at you, you're so young. Eileen felt a sensation at the front of her head as if it had jumped forward from the inside, as if she had the head of a sheep. With that Mrs Buchan arrived.

- Have you tried the Natural Born Heather? She said.

The driver had been jangling keys in his pocket for some time now. The last groups began to trickle towards the door whilst looking in carrier bags, the piles of jumpers now a tangled mass of flailing sleeves. In their wake Eileen was duty bound to begin the process of refolding. It could sometimes help her piece her mind back together, this making order out of chaos and the slow repetitive rhythms. But as the busyness left the shop Eileen became aware of the din in her head. It was already joining in with the various accusations of uselessness emanating from Mrs Buchan. She had a brain that could not always cooperate with a till, and it would seem another pair of hands in her that needed stone and peat and logs. And another pair of eyes that saw

money the way it looked in the mountains – like a burden, useless and heavy.

While Mrs Buchan was safely occupied in the store room, Eileen's mind began to seek escape in the prospect of stolen fudge. Her body soon followed blindly going through the motions of lifting it and heading for the fitting room. From the land of ancient stones and sagas, skulls and northern light came this sugar sludge used to bludgeon herself with, as her spirit left her behind like an abandoned dwelling, cold and empty and stone with no hearth. Flinging it in at high speed she tried to locate herself, some evidence at least that she was still there amongst the intolerance of couthiness and keyfobs.

With the sound of plastic covering being bundled at the store room door, Eileen quickly emerged. She was met with one of the dummies who looked at her with a turned out hand. Seeing its nipped in waste in tartan, Eileen began to feel inferior then despair that the dummy's life would be more full of fun and happiness than hers. In the background someone sang of the hills and glens and some bonnie wee lassie wi golden hair and a white briest. She moved across the shop with an indented chest. Mrs Buchan did not like the way she walked.

-Look at the dust on those skirting boards, she said.

The next day Eileen was squatted with a damp cloth and basin. It was an awkward job, the skirting boards. There was no point in sitting as the reachable area passed too quickly, and being bent over could ignite backache for the rest of the day. The dragging along of the basin had to be done with attention to avoid the sloshing of soapy water over the edge. Her mind returned to the woman with the scarf. Maybe

they had been sheep together in a former life. Among the many helpless creatures that had filled the glens in the wake of the clearances, perhaps they'd now been reunited over a pink nosed fabric version of their former selves. And as she soaped along the thin line she considered the plight of a sheep with a conscience at that time, and the shadow cast into future lives.

Suddenly the door was bounced open and pinned back by the fast moving forearms of a delivery man. Holding it with a high pile of boxes he went to retrieve more. Eileen, grateful for the break, headed over. She began to lift the boxes and bring them in.

-Been busy? said his moving voice.

-Yesterday but quiet so far today, replied Eileen.

-Weather's no been great has it, said the man.

-Nah, said Eileen as she began to move towards the store room. She glimpsed inside. It was more plastic pipers from China, all looking in different directions. They would outlast any human all the way to the landfill site and beyond and she pictured thousands of them, still looking in different directions, under the skin of the earth.

Together they worked till the job was done.

-You'll be wantin that signed then, said Mrs Buchan as the man tapped a rhythm on the counter impatiently.

-Yip, time is money, said he beginning his usual exchange. If ye want a holiday ye work yir tail off then ye work for yir spending money. Mrs Buchan gave sounds of agreement as she checked a list.

-Then ye hope it doesnae rain, his mantra concluded as he went on his way. It was not the voice of the land, but that which had chased the people from it. It had got

inside him.

Outside the land whispered. Layers of sound and time compacted in the quietness of rock. The mountains knew what time was and it wasn't that. It was something else and it was folded through the seams of everything.

Satisfied with a neat pile of boxes Eileen made her way back to the soapy basin. The line of the skirting continued to take her around the shop and in time she paused for a moment to straighten her back. She lifted a book of Scottish Flowers. Heather, scabious, thistle, harebell - there were many shades of pink and purple. The colours gave her eye some ease and she enjoyed finding the ones she knew so well, the ones she'd seen buffeted by the wind in wiry grass on a sunny day. She read the soothing words to herself, aloud but quietly.

-Bun moss, flat moss, wild thyme: a low, mat-forming shrub, aromatic when crushed, bell heather, its sepal-lobes...before heather is in bloom...

Mrs Buchan began to organize the till area. The pink lipstick had been re-applied, its colour sitting nicely with a darker green jumper creating a combination maybe more beautiful than she knew, while those very colours repeated themselves in balls of wool arranged in the crisscross shelves behind her. Eileen could not help but remark on them and expressed an interest in some of the brightest to knit into patterns in a traditional jumper.

-You just want to shock, said Mrs Buchan. Go round with the Hoover while it's quiet. Eileen felt the pain of talking to a face that did not get her.

The Hoover, ungainly and difficult, had a cable that often stopped short of the skirting. As she set to work, she pictured its fellow hoovers droning in households across the land with their neat and tidy suction faced noise, dust bags full of unlived lives. She began to move across the floor with the one step forward one step back routine, switching it off from time to time to retrieve a stray thread or label. And the birds sang in the gaps.

Through the window foxgloves pink and white had risen out of the ground since last she looked, those in the book pale representations in clumsy line of these three dimensional beauties. Incredible how something could appear out of the ground from apparently nothing year after year. The sun was drifting in and out casting weak shadows after the rain. She hated for it to shine without her. When a high bird caught her eye she seemed to become it with the blue all around and beneath cool on her body, circling on a tilt with head straight and steady, and watching below with a pointy face. How would it be to have wings, she thought, to have loose shoulders, to never have sore, heavy feet again. And to have an orange underside when the sun was low.

A man of local generations entered. He had an easy gait for his years – long strides and some speed. His mind had not survived the loss of older ways and his body sought comfort for it, covering ground in circles and figures of eight in his very own highland dance. It was a regular occurrence this, and Eileen watched his panicked eye as he travelled the aisles of clan crest coasters in desperate search of something to rock his mind to sleep. Deranged as a rogue boulder, he was perpetually alert for what was missing. Mrs Buchan, whilst tolerating, had deemed him not good for business.

The man did two circuits of the shop, one shout for help, and then was gone. Eileen knew this restlessness. It was in her too, piled right up to the back of her face.

Mrs Buchan involved herself in the men's luxury lambswools. Eileen wound in the Hoover cable as a feeling of inevitability fell about her. She looked back to the coloured wool for help, for sadness has a downward slope.

The next day clan badges were to be put on pegs - Menzies, Mackintoshes and Russels. The various socks were already arranged in beautiful coloured columns and the 32's and 48's in perfect piles. The Fairisles, the Shetlands, the Embroidereds had all been placed in order, ghillie hats and deerstalkers hung. The preserves and pickles were stacked, the front of the shop mopped, railfulls of jackets and trolley loads of wellies wheeled to their destinations. Mrs Buchan would be pleased. In pale blue today she checked the cupboards. A cold feeling went down Eileen's front like a shudder across one of Scotland's gloomy pools.

-Pull them out and start again, said Mrs Buchan.

It was the cable cardies. She had laid them under a heap of 38s then forgot to include them.

At the end of the day Eileen stood cleaning a pile of coathangers, her mind an empty carpark with horizontal rain. She could not see herself. She could not see the landscape within nor the roads she'd travelled, the turns and heights traversed. She moved towards the door, collecting the sweeping brush as she went, and began the closing ritual of taking down the tartan rugs. Hooking them with the pole, she

gathered them up and carried them back inside.

Outside the night waited for the day to leave. It would take the purple from the hill, the green from the pines and leave only the greys. And the black of the raven's face.

The next day, a piper with missing hand and mouthpiece, lip indented to no avail, stood in silent pibroch. Beside him west highland terriers in kilts and jackets occupied spoon handles, others in snowdomes with scotties. Amongst hands thrusting swords, tea towels telling lies and various sections of Nessie, Eileen priced shortbread with a gun.

Mrs Buchan caught sight of her. Something fierce and all consuming rose up inside - that desire to slap hard the dreamy.

-Once you're done polish the mirrors, she snapped. Then go down the front for shoplifters. Mrs Buchan, bound by too tight a gauge in a culture that had gone off, awaited a response, but the air was held. Eileen knew she would never win in this world. This chasing, this never ending expectation to be something she was not. Spasmed in this mockery of an outfit she saw how futile was the pursuit of approval. Anybody's but her own. She put down the gun and left.

It was her feet that carried her. Full of shock and Mrs Buchan, foxgloves with curvature of the spine crowded round her in the upheavalled ground of a clear fell. Eileen looked only to where her feet landed, the way the growth sprung up after them, peaty moisture seeping up around the shoe. The feet marched though she knew not where, as long as it was away from here.

As she travelled on, the day went about its business. It was becoming a day of high skies. The sun on the trees made them a triumphant thing against the blue, and though she could not feel it, illuminated the yellow joy of whin. While her eye followed the strong work of the ankle over tussock and bog, the shop clothes spoke of the trouble she was in and a nausea rose. She foresaw shoes scrabbling over scree further up the mountain and found herself more worried at the prospect of reprimand than injury.

Through the trees she could hear the river rush, never stopping to get its picture taken. Far above she saw the infant springs that fed it from on high and she caught the air as if hers were the nose of a dog. An urgency came to be in the high places. Those places where the wind blows through, where no walls are for worry to gather, nor sticky woes of humankind. Her feet had already left.

Like the clouds she moved in layers and as she travelled trails of thought hung where she'd been. When the forest threw her on to the bare flank of the hill she began to feel the mutual appreciation of land and foot. Ankles still strong and upright her feet crossed sloping ground with their own knowledge and after some time she raised her eyes. From a neighbouring hillside warmth shone out causing her to stop and breathe, the landscape going up and down before her with no explanation as to why it gave relief. Her mind returned to Mrs Buchan.

There was sales stuff to shift and Mrs Buchan told herself to get on with it. But though time had moved she had not, and the sun had made coloured beads of the rain on the window. Her eyes stared, beliefs and values in a twisted heap.

On the hillside Eileen was crossing the patch of burnt heather she had often seen from below. Sharper twigs scratched her lower leg sometimes causing a small run of blood but it was hard for her to stop such was the pull of the high places. In time she stepped out on to an expanse of even rock where hard heels could have their sound. Sunlight flooded over the glen below inviting her to take in the small scale loveliness. It was worth sitting down here. All around the purple spread, and within it a singular sprig of white with greenery paler than the norm. Nearby water trickled among tiny threads of moss, and she opened a palm on the smooth rock to feel its warmth. The air's delicious nectar slipped up her nose and travelled through every cell in her body till her feet sought release. The shop shoes, now scuffed and scraped were no longer fit for purpose. She pulled them off and bared her feet to the hillside. They were all happy to see each other.

After her eyes settled she could make out the shop with its miniature proportions so at odds with its effects. She considered Mrs Buchan and the remote kindness about her, never easily accessed. And the cornered mind of the pacing man crossing her background. Once part of a moving people looking for fresh grazing, these were now his movements.

Eileen lay back on the rock, mica reflecting the cool silver truth. Close above the slow wings of a raven moved in near silence as it gave a single croak. She followed its gleaming blackness in the sun till a clearing came, a wordless quiet where she fell into a slumber beneath a vast quilted sky.

When she came round it was to the tiny paper sound of bell heather, late this year. Dull normality began to bleed in, obscuring that place she had been. As she sat up death wafts came on the wind from where a sheep lay in its chosen place, head back. She could see the wool carcass ballooned in the banks of a spring, horns like massive earrings adorning its Scottish blackface. She felt the sorrow and sadness at life's departure because she couldn't see where it went. So hard not to think life was the creature itself, once full of joy and comical moves but soon to be a jawbone in the peat.

All around were spilling hills and liquid light but there were surging raging things, as if the air had eons to speak of. Inaudible things, hidden in the purple backdrop of a postcard, or the flattened teapot of a bulldozed cottage. In the glen mist moved of its own accord, stopping to hang around the boulders of absent dwellings where once beat the four-four time of boiling porridge.

Eileen felt the high places beckon her and quickly replaced her shoes. A thin track led her up a slow incline beyond the deep heather to where the growth was small. The dry scree and luminous green lichen told her she was entering its territory. A darkening spread. Eileen huddled into herself. Big rain began to slap the landscape and the cold shudder of the past blew in a few more times. The summit too close now for turning back kept her legs working like pistons. Though she knew to hone her attention near steeper edges and was sure footed as a mountain goat, the frights came this time when she looked back and saw where she was - high up and alone on a bald mountain in daft shoes and a lady's kilt.

A white stone dislodged and rattled down the mountainside causing her to stop for a moment, so steep the incline now she could lean back whilst standing. The moods of the skies were changeable. To the grey north a high lochan shone, to the east the flat berry lands opened out under stripes of sky, and to the west the landscape spoke in pigment, its stories recorded by weavers in yarn. Down below the raven's handsome beak aimed south to where the people went, their descendants to find the good things of life stolen, packaged and hung out of reach.

Her mind began to drift. And she remembered swimming in a deep pool of waters made of melted snow, and how she had felt fish-like twisting and turning around the hips as if another veil of her being had taken over and was alive in that glacial water. And how welcome was the air that moved along its sparkly surface. Looking down she saw the glen in various sun angles. She saw small summer evenings and mellow slopes. Then as if seeing a distant herd of deer, she saw her ancestors sow seed on a Wednesday, and the first plant raise its head.

Over in the carpark where once the shop had clanged out some idea of itself, there was no pulse. She watched as primroses rose from underneath and spread over the ground beneath the death filled air. This universe, she thought, we cannot fool it with clever talk. And she began to feel tiny in the huge. Mere bait for increasing gusts.

The view was wild and the air sang up her nose. Deep inside the mountain torrents thundered through cave holes and eye holes. Head down she continued her ascent.

Mrs Buchan picked up a book of Scottish flowers. Cnamh-lus-Beag, small plant that wastes/chews slowly ...on windswept shoulders and bare patches where snow lies late. Her eyes moved beyond the pages but were interrupted by a fridge magnet depicting a grouse family nestling in heather. Her mind shut tight as a living room. As her gaze returned to the window she saw the mountain's damp banks seep and trickle, its waters dropping below to gather before heading on their journey to the hollow of the city. Water, see-through as a sprite. Clear, transparent, no lies.

Eileen stood at the top of the mountain, the force of the wind on her back. Its deafening sound and freezing blast causing her to coorie for shelter at the base of a rock. In the sudden quiet she held herself for warmth, aware that it would not last for long. She pulled her kilt as tight as she could round her bare legs, the lines in the tartan crossing dark and light just the same. All around the mighty had gathered - the surrounding mountains pale blue with distance, displayed the shapes that affirmed her place and opened her heart. Islands of words began to form. She was bright when presumed dim, grown when presumed dead. Mrs Buchan felt a free breeze blowing, something hard to return from.

The mountain stood with the purple and green, the raven, sheep, fish and past lives, butterscotch, scones and boredom. It felt the crystal truth in everything whether animal, plant or moon. It knew of life's great creep of rust and how the panic of money would slowly cool in rock. As Eileen gazed beyond horizons a word formed and was uttered from her so quietly but resonated far into the quartz depths of the mountain. The mountain knew that freedom is whispered not shouted.

