

Land below the waves

poems by Julie Leibrich

A series of seven poems by New Zealand author Julie Leibrich inspired by her visits to Tiree in 1987 and 2001, expressing thoughts that many of us have but can't put into words. The poems are from Julie's second collection of verse - *Land below the waves* - and are reproduced here with her permission.

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Julie Leibrich

THE PROPHET OF TIREE

by Julie Leibrich

Church for Sale

Isle of Tiree, 1987

Leaving the island
for the last time, the boat
backed away from the very idea
of us staying.

The vacant sign was still nailed
to the door. I'd not known
how to convince you. Tugged
at your sleeve, trying to draw you in.

The ferry swerved to the south
as you turned your face
to the wind, murmuring
something about cold winters.

All I could see were windows
too high to open.

The Safety of Maps

Isle of Tiree, 2001.

This morning, coming down into dawn

I see you have left the map on the table
spread out, so we know where we are.

*Latitude, 56 degrees, 31 minutes north.
Longitude, 6 degrees, 48 minutes west.*

We can place ourselves exactly here
in time and temperate century

among the ruins we do not own
but which belong to us

beside the church which holds
the bones of your grandfather Neil

and in every stone of this house
we did not build, but live in.

The Land Below the Waves

The archivist explains that Nancy
was really Ann, using her Sunday name.

Ian is John and Marion, Sarah.
The world is upside down and that's all right.

In the land below the waves
the beach is a boundless hour-glass.

The ferry rolls in, rolls out.
The people roll off, roll on.

The wind's in charge of the clouds
and so, the sun.

A storm of lapwings explodes
from corn, driven by ancient

sounds, old assignments.
The grass is having a field day.

A seal pretends to be seaweed.
Or is it the other way round?

Gaelic chicken is a leg on a bed
of haggis with whisky sauce.

Doctor and priest are invisible.
Yet everyone speaks their names.

They tell of a man who rode his horse
through night and came home missing an arm.

In the co-op, as we buy sliced bread and milk
the islanders stare at us because we're strange.

The Genealogist

In Kirkapol, you dissect lichen in hope
of another clue, tease it from tombstones.

Meanwhile the clouds go wild and the crazy light
of Tiree is dancing on the backs of sheep.

You prise open books for the taking of names
steal the smallest print, prepared to go blind.

You do not notice the sun go out or the fields
turn brown, do not hear the rustling of small birds

in dark grass, disturbed by your ancestors
taking the coins off their eyes.

Rainbows

You try to entice me with rainbows.
One, specifically, falling over itself
to show me the spectral chapel

but I'm bone marrow weary
can only look through glass
and ask you to tempt me tomorrow.

Place of No Shadows

I like being here
somewhere between
my eyes and the horizon.

Above the derelict church
I see a fine line of cloud
ethereal.

Closer, the rust which clings
to life while ancient
bell towers crumble.

Closer, a window
where someone has pressed
his face, too eager for dawn.

Closer, I see that I see beyond
the glass, the wall
the church, the dusk.

This is the place of no shadows
no sound, where you
are not alone.

I slip here from time to time
without meaning to - into the arms
of this old familiar love.

Inner Hebrides

The Prophet of Tiree did not die
in his bed or even his house.
This man wanted to see the stars at the end.

His son found him by the byre
not far from windows blackened.
His wide eyes open.

Today we stand on the machair
where *he* stood. I photograph *you*
under the lintel of your grandfather's house.

You are strangely at home again.