

# *Land below the waves*

**poems by Julie Leibrich**

A series of seven poems by New Zealand author Julie Leibrich inspired by her visits to Tīreē 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.

Publication details: Leibrich, Julie (2004). *Land below the waves*, Steele Roberts Ltd, Wellington, 55pp., ISBN 1-877338-39-7, NZ 821.2 – dc 22.

For a profile of the author and publication list, [click here](#)



**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.