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Theology in Scotland on arts and culture

Migrant poems

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A few years ago I wrote this poem[1] *from reading Psalm 73, and called it*

OPEN QUESTIONS

Show me bodies floating in the water, I don't care.
– Katie Hopkins in *The Sun*

For I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pain;
their bodies are sound and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not plagued like other people.
– Psalm 73:3–5

Alan Kurdi, toddler, drowned en route to Kos,
island of healing and some hope of passage;
a photo speeded evolution, changing migrant
cockroaches to human casualties in hours;

[1] For other poems on migration, and a discussion of migration and identity, see Jock Stein, *Temple and Tartan: Psalms, Poetry and Scotland* (Handsel Press, 2022), 106ff.

it might have seeded revolution, ranging
righteous sympathy against the gates
of fortress Europe, reeling from the hordes
who push the boundaries of Superpowers.
Can God be good as well as great? Abu
Hamada's never troubled by these issues,
handling boats and migrants from a distance.
Like every smuggler, business first – and other
jobs are hard to come by; he has family
to put through school; and if he was to stop,
demand would thrust another in his place.
Philosophy is seldom worth the bother.

Yet Israel keeps asking these big questions,
giving us hard words in psalm and silence,
fleshing out the tearing of our bodies,
flashing out a challenge to belief.
And if the psalm does bookend fear with faith,
and seem to close enquiry with a visit
to the holy place, consider this: what doors
can open through a body on a reef.

Big questions, indeed. And what can poetry, which famously 'makes nothing happen' (W.H. Auden), offer? Well, if a poet chooses to believe that God created a universe out of nothing, and did so through some kind of reason or 'word' identified in the person of Jesus, s/he will continue using words in all their weakness. Like this poem:

MIGRANT

Put this word on a stick, light fuse,
and run before the truth bursts into flame:
arrest, Brexit, cockroach; or despair,
escape, so strictly alphabetical
the fireworks and the firewalls
that define word games we play, forgetting
where we came from, ignoring who we are.

A child might see the word and think ‘my grant’;
then signal to the grownups with some excitement:
gift and generosity, hope instead of horror,
income not incomer, just keep it in the lexicon;
and stumble on some incorrect ideas,
that heaven prints tickets for these flights from hell,
that extra kids might help our lands do well.

That poem posits migration as a blessing to the host country, an attitude overall more likely to be found in Scotland than England. But it is one thing to talk generally, another to open your heart and life. We managed to grow a cardiocrinum in our garden, an exotic tall plant that looks different and flowers only once. It led to a poem:

THE MIGRANT CARDIOCRINUM

If you could blossom only once, and die,
where would your bucket choices lie?
With art or music, nature, love or beauty,
time with saints, or simple human duty?
Or would you walk the talk of evolution,
breed the species, keep the genes in motion?

If you were nine feet tall, your brain a sheaf
of petals, backbone green, your heart a leaf,
would you stand tall, or shrivel up with shame
at being different, labelled odd or lame
and coddled in a glasshouse, with a stake
to mark you less than normal, freak or fake?

If your birth name was limited to Latin,
or your passport prejudiced, so that in
every interview your entry failed,
with all the angst your variance entailed,
what would you wish the likes of us to try
if we could blossom only once, and die?

Migration is an issue for our times. But of course all peoples have been migrants at one time, and we should know our own roots. Here is a final poem about the patron saint of Glasgow, who was conceived, according to the story, not far east of our home in Haddington:

MUNGO THE MIGRANT

O God, the insolent rise up against me;
a band of ruffians seeks my life,
and they do not set you before them [...]
Turn to me and be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant;
save the child of your servant girl.
– Psalm 86:14, 16

He left Traprain in embryo,
the child of violent royal rape,
his mother's womb a cushion
as they bounced down cliffs,
were frogmarched to the coast,
dumped into a coracle,
pushed out onto the River Forth,
to drift unannounced on the tide
into the arms of Culross monks.

Tannoc named her child 'big chief',
but holy Serf said 'my beloved',
'Mungo' in his local tongue.
When ruffian boys threw stones
and hit a robin, Mungo took it,
asked the Son of God to heal it,
and it flew right into Glasgow's
coat of arms – the city named
from Mungo's 'happy family'.

Made a bishop, driven south,
Mungo walked through Cumbria,
a journey in the truth and power

of God, converting fear to faith,
as far as Wales, establishing
that monastery of migrant souls
who one day would go back with him
to Scotland, to Strathclyde again
to plan and build a Christian land.

Those miracles – the fire that stopped
restarted by a hazel branch,
the ring flung in the River Clyde
that popped out from a fish's mouth
– and far less magical, those steaming
baths he found on pilgrimage
to Rome and took each day at home:
we owe our legends to these migrant
saints who lived and prayed the Psalms.