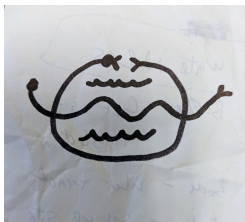


Where The Waves Erode The Heavens
(Far a Bheil na Tuinn a' Criomadh na Speuran)

Ruaridh Law

No Roof Only Sky [3]

Where The Waves Erode The Heavens



No Roof Only Sky:

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[1] Mòrag Law – A’ Siubhail Gu h-aotrom [June 2023]

[2] sideb0ard – Recompile (TNT89); [July 2023]

[3] Ruairidh Law – Where The Waves Erode The Heavens [December 2023]

Where The Waves Erode The Heavens

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Introduction

“Where The Waves Erode The Heavens” started, as most things do with me, as a last minute dash to complete something I’d committed to without planning it out. I’d submitted material for broadcast on the excellent Radiophrenia (a month of online sound-art broadcast online and live from the CCA in Glasgow) and they’d asked me if I would like to also perform something live during the month; I said yes, without really thinking what I could do.

With a few weeks left to go, and other deadlines having eclipsed this one, I had to pull something together reasonably quickly. Electing to focus on something with voices in it – as befitted a radio broadcast – and realising that I’d collected a lot of photos, film and sound recordings from the Isle of Lewis (where my partner’s family had a croft), it seemed like the seed of an idea was right under my nose. A beautiful map of the etymology of Gaelic placenames in the Arnol and Bragar areas of North Lewis (created by Anne Campbell for the excellent Grinneabhat arts centre on the island) had been sitting on a table in my house for months, and this suddenly provided the inspirational glue to hold it all together.

The text, audio and technical setup coalesced almost immediately; first the audio, mixing clarsach, harp and sung psalms with a deep chanter drone; then, a live performance interface built in Max/MSP and a Monome Norns to improvise and layer the audio; and finally, the text which was written in two nights, one per section, and mostly arrived out of thin air. For the voices, the first section had a world weary, well spoken Central Scotland drawl that was identical in my head to that of my friend (and gifted actor) Ronan Doyle – who, used to my sometimes pretentious-seeming whims, agreed with zero thought in return for a bottle of malt. And for the section containing Gaelic, only my mum Mòrag would be the right fit (not least as she wrote the first of these little No Roof Only Sky books in the first place)

I spent the bulk of my adolescence and early artistic career convincing myself that my Island heritage had little to no part to play in my own creative life, and put a lot of effort into trying to ignore it. It’s taken the last few years to realise that, instead, I was just looking for my own personal connection to the land – my own place Where The Waves Erode the Heavens. In the rocky, wind-blasted and desolate beauty of the north of Lewis, I think I’ve finally found it.



Ronan

It's already nearly dark and the stars are starting to trace their outlines across the great wide dark sky and I'm thinking to myself how I hate this stupid place. It's dark and cold and wet underfoot, and the light jacket I'm wearing is providing absolutely no protection from the elements at all. I'm not even sure where I'm going – the irony not lost on me as I acknowledge how that's true of my life in general – and I think back to the constellations I used to look at obsessively as a child under the covers at home in the city, far away from the wind and things squelching underfoot that may or may not be mud. Those constellations seemed like a map of the future, of potential places to go, rather than dots on paper. Arcturus, Aldebaran, Algol. That last one always scared me as it had written next to it in tiny printed letters "The Demon Star", a lone outrider of fear in a universe of peace

I know I'm rambling to myself, thoughts turning over like washing in a machine. It's a good distraction method, overall, meaning I'm not dwelling on the recent past or indeed the last few years. There's some anxiety underlying the recurring stars though (Altair, Bellatrix, Mizar) as I fear that some of these thoughts may not be quite my own, that my ill-judged actions might be starting to make their influence felt. Things that definitely seemed a good idea at the time are starting to gnaw at my subconscious. The impulse to Just Get Out from earlier – which at the time seemed like a dash for sanctuary, given poor company and induced claustrophobia – is now instead providing more obstacles than solutions.

I think back to the tourist map that had been lying in the community hall where we'd sat, the one with the Gaelic place names on it that meant nothing to me. The headland marked to the north seemed the logical place to get to, to be as far away from any other people or unnecessary added stimuli. But in the inky gloom – with the moon faintly glowing from behind thick cloud, but obscured enough to make it a weak, watery kind of light – one hillock looked much like another. Cursing under my breath (or was it out loud?) as I stepped into yet another of the brackish streams that criss-crossed the moor, i pushed my eyes upwards to locate any familiar pinpricks (Polaris, Rigel, Capella)



Eventually the bright dots turn to smudged, glowing lines, accompanied by a strong sense of nausea. I can still taste the residue of the tea in my mouth and i think to myself that the second and third cups probably were a very poor idea; not least as the last, scraping the dregs from the bottom of the pot, had noticeably larger quantities of the main ingredient swirling about, not quite broken up. A sudden thought flashing up unbidden, of a stalk hanging from my mouth slackly, draped on my lower lip, is enough to churn my stomach further. I'm usually fairly stoic when it comes to this kind of thing, but the familiar pleasant buzz on the skin has given way to a slimy crawl all over, matching the thought of the stalk slipping over the lips and onto the tongue.

It's hard to know how much of the feeling is psychosomatic and how much is a symptom. What's inescapable is that my thoughts are roiling and lurching to match my innards. I try to assert some sort of stability – Antares, Pollux, Deneb – and stumble onwards towards the distant sounds of the waves battering against the coast.

Between the sea and I, something blocks the landscape, slowly appearing via the moon's increasing brightness – revealed, like a burlesque, by the clouds being flung to the side – and the land starting to flatten on the approach to the coastal edge. Grey monoliths loom, much closer than anticipated. I rack my brains for where these might fall on the map but my by-now fully addled brain can't recollect standing stones on this part of the island. At least, I think, I can get shelter from the wind which is still whipping past my cheeks like thorned branches.

There's a mark on one of the stones; a strange shape, carved high, with a circle bisected by a snake-like line and what could be a crude pictogram for the sea behind it. On peering at it I realise how easy it is to see, suddenly bathed in moonlight unimpeded by cover. The sky is clear and a trick of the light – or very possibly a trick of my mind – makes it appear that between the stones themselves the moonlight is as bright as in the sky. The sounds of the rain have stopped and the wind suddenly calms; everything feels very still, a pregnant pause – the universe holding its breath in anticipation. Curious, I move into the circle of grey rock.



There's a sound in my ears – words in an unfamiliar tongue. I acknowledge the hallucination for what it is, and stare into the centre of the circle. The light is eerily bright and there's a [–pause for thought–] thinness about the atmosphere. Things feel stretched and I feel like something could snap if I breathe too hard. The pressure inside my head is getting intense and I look upwards to take solace in the sky above. But as I search frantically – Nunki, Castor, Betelgeuse – I don't recognise any of the points of light above. There seem to be new glows and strange hitherto unseen lines, rippling like worms across the heavens. Panic rises in me and I instinctively raise my hands up as if to entreat the familiar constellations to appear.

The wind rises again, fiercer than ever, and the words in my head mingle with a droning sound resonating, it seems, from the rocks themselves. Rain lashes me and I stare awestruck as the light in front of me pulses and grows, larger and brighter and almost painful with intensity. Eyes staring in front, I find myself, almost unbidden, yelling out the names of the stars, a frantic chant to reassert normality – but with each word my vision swims farther into unreality as in front of me I see a forming reflection of sorts; a feminine face, hand reaching out at the same time as mine is raised, a welcoming gesture to counter my fearful disavowal.

The light steadies, and I feel energy pulse through me, and I close my eyes waiting for it all to end.



Mòrag

It's already nearly dark and the stars are starting to trace their outlines across the great wide dark. My mother used to tell me that these were the signs of migration, lines traced from point to point as our people moved from the first world here, through the second world and into the final point, where we became one with the light. It seemed a frightening notion to a small girl sitting by the hearth, but now with time's gift I knew that there was truth in these words and she was preparing me for what was to come.

Despite the gloom, the moon is high and full and I can see my way across the moor with ease; but I could walk this gorse and peat with my eyes bound. I've traced my way over these lands since I could walk, and the invisible lines joining the points I'm tracking are just as visible and clear as the ones in the sky above. The Pale Ladies are not always clear in their instruction; but tonight the thoughts came fully-formed into my mind. Follow the trail of points as they asked, and arrive at *An t-Àite far a bheil na tuinn a' criomadh na speuran* before the moon is at its highest.

An t-Àite far a bheil na tuinn a' criomadh na speuran is The Place Where The Waves Erode The Heavens. It's at the far north west of the land, as far as you can go before the infinite grey water stretches out in front. They say that nothing lies beyond there; but from time to time intermittent flashes of light glimmer briefly, if you look long enough. The Place is the most sacred site of our people; visiting it outwith the behest of the Pale Ladies is forbidden, save for the time when you make your final journey into the wider beyond. I am lucky – or gifted, perhaps cursed – to hear their voice in my head intermittently, sometimes a whisper or, at other times – like tonight – a roar.



I look in front of me, into the deep of the moon-bathed moor, and begin softly reciting the points on the way as I pass each one.

Càrn Mhic ‘an Bhàin, cairn of the son of fair-haired John, who died here in a snowstorm
Lag nan Nathraichean, hollow of the snakes
A’ Mhachaire Bhàn, the white machair
Buaile na Sgoile, enclosure of the school
Cill Sgàire, Zachary’s chapel
Clach Mhòr a Mhullaich, big stone of the summit
Cnoc Mòr Arnoil, the big hill of Arnol where the conch shell is blown
Creagan Ni Ruairidh, the rocky hillock of Roderick’s daughter

I’m getting closer. I think how much easier it would be with something other than the moon to light my way; in her cold, dismissive glow, hillocks can become occulted; rocks I know as well as my own skin can appear as others, familiar pools becoming reflections that show other things. She is serene but keeps her own counsel and I feel that her wishes don’t always align with my own. I can’t allow myself to be distracted by her influence so I whisper a quick prayer of thanks to her for allowing me her light, and then keep my head down, eyes half closed as memory acts as my guide. My mother used to speak of a time long, long before now, when people could carry part of the moon’s essence as easily as I can hold a basket – the darkness provided no barrier. But she also told me that this meant they lost their way, as they no longer read the land’s contours and energies in the way that we do.

Fuaran ‘ille Phàraig, spring of the servant of Patrick
Cnoc Craidh, hill of torment
Cnoc Tobhta Cloich, hill of the stone ruin
Creagan nan Cnàmh Ìosal, the lower hillock of bones
Cnoc na Clàrsaich, hill of the harp
Blàr nan Corra-mhitheig, the place of the bilberries
Allt an Tairbh, stream of the bull
An Talamh Briste, the broken ground
Àrd a’ Chill o Thuath, headland at the North



I can feel the energy of The Place starting to ripple across the land towards me. Snaking tendrils of energy brush past me, raising the hairs on my arms. My breath catches a little in my throat, both with the exertion of my journey but also as things become thinner around me; the moon's glow, the sounds of the water and birds, and the air itself. Ahead, I can see the grey fingers reaching up from the ground, like a beckoning hand. The energy pulses as I get closer; a surge of approval at my haste and unyielding focus. Just out of reach of awareness, there's a chanting in my head: The Pale Ladies, I think to myself, spurring me on.

But the chanting is strange; not the usual high, austere feminine aspect, but a lower, rougher voice, chanting words I don't recognise

I'm at the stone now, the one we use for entry. High up on the surface I can see the sigil that my people carved, showing the way in, and through, and beyond. Just for a second as my eyes are aloft, I have a moment of vertigo as the stars above me wheel and spin; different constellations above from the ones I know and that my mother taught me. No sign of The Hooked Tree, The Crone, The Torn Bough or The Dark Other – instead, new lines joining new points. New maps and pathways, new ways to leave the land.

There's a shimmering glow filling the centre of the stones and a rising tumult of sound – wind, air, sea. Everything is thin, flat and washed out around as the light is drawn into the centre. Hand outstretched, I slowly walk towards the centre and as I do, I see a figure with eyes wide at the other edge. He's shouting something, over and over but the huge hum of the energy in the centre is drowning him out. Smiling, and reaching my hand out towards him, I walk across the threshold and the light blazes around me and the sea roars and the birds wheel and cry and the stones sing their deep thrumming drone and the light, the light is everywhere and in me and joining the places and the stars open and I move through

On

Over

and gone.

Druim a Bhaile	Sualocin
Creagan Ní Ruairidh	Rotanev
Cnoc an t-Solais	Acrux
Creagan an t-Sil	Grumium
Leathad an Fhuaran Dhearg	Polaris
Eilean Loch an Duine	Bellatrix
Tom a Charstoir	Tegmine
Loch Urraghag	Ancha
An Capall	Situla
Stac a Stainc	Merga
Allet na Muilne	Betelguese
An Druim Riabhach	Alasia
Feadan Loch Bacabhat	Muscida
Fibhig	Amadioha
Loch Salagra	Nunki
Creagan Cholmeach	Anadolu
Buaille Brunal	Aniara
Toman Beag	Tarazed
Tom a Ghille	Nekkar
An Rathad Caol	Mirzam
Tasgeir	Menkalinan
Sgeir Bhan	Algol
Am Buam	Adhara
Loch Mhí Fhionnláigh	Hamal
Cnoc na Loprach	Sheratan
Loch nan Leac	Sadachbia
Sithean Chalpigil	Sadalsud
Breunloch na Leargan	Sadal melik
Druim Thorradail	Izar
Beinn a Channach Bhig	

This is *No Roof Only Sky* [3]

“Àrd a’ Chill o Thuath, headland at the North”



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