

*Alan Riach*

**Since Then: 1 Spring**

‘Now I’m scared,’ he said. Schedules scrubbed, visa expired, window closing.  
 All other planes but his that night were cancelled. We drove to Glasgow  
 Airport, through spooky waves of mist on almost empty motorways,  
 Through almost empty city streets, around the road to the car park,  
 Past the wire mesh fence, the planes beyond lined up on the runway,  
 Silent on the tarmac, parked, wingtip to wingtip. In the hall, six people,  
 Perhaps, looking like miles from each other, until the whispering doors  
 Slid open, and the disembarked passengers walked through. We all  
 Got home by midnight. Since then –

Lockdown. Homework. The computer’s disc fills and slows things down.  
 A rationing of exercise, of news reports, the visible, of spring.  
 Easter days, the sunshine: transparency hides in the air the invisible  
 Virus that flies in transmission, light and night, day and dark, the inimical,  
 The killers. So to resist: making selections, company kept. But looking  
 At screens is not reading people. Ink and paper come from things  
 You touch and smell and even taste. Intellect is physical. A property of body,  
 Throat and muscle. The shape of a head, the lifting of it, the glancing of eyes.  
 Birdsong persists. Since then –

Since then there’s modesty, and reach.  
 Card games, meals, and nothing is ever the same, now, is it?  
 Except what is, the best of what there is. To remember,  
 To act upon, to be reminded by. To bring to bear.

That kaleidoscope of greens in those trees overby.  
 The squirrels racing, leaping from high branch  
 To branch on high. Or zipping over the road, ahead  
 Of oncoming tires. Scotland's rainbow greys. And rain. Replenishing rain.  
 What goodness commends. Since then –

### **Since Then: 2 Summer**

Enclosures secure. Summer opens sunshine in extending solitude.  
 Travel over-ruled, unwanted. The books come into their own.  
 Old books, unread or un-reread for decades. And allocated time is set  
 For music: Let's get reacquainted with Vaughan Williams. What goodness  
 There was in that man. And to complement, Prokofiev: spiky,  
 Sharp, self-protective, yet then when you least expect it,  
 So tender in the giving, so utterly strong in the song of love and praise.  
 Begin with these to reinstall the virtues at whatever level they reach.  
 But still you wonder what the words might mean: Since then –

Birdsong draws away, mornings start in silence. Hours to days,  
 Days to weeks, weeks to months, and then? What then?  
 Each room becomes a person in itself. We're fortunate.  
 We have more than one room. And wealth enough to be  
 Unworried and without anxiety, so much as many others.  
 Face masks for the ventures out to shop for what necessities  
 Are. Plan for further travels, just – imagine them.  
 A thirty-six hour summer holiday, not too far away.

Return. Exhausted. Since then –

Dawn without birdsong. Gloom gathers time.

The brutes of all the world are at each others' throats once more.

Preparations start. The world is now online, to some advantage,

Just as it curtails the breathing of the different air of places

Other where – the portals open, the contacts make themselves

Possible, the work in this new nature starts again.

The pressure starts: where is this taking us?

What ending is beyond the master plan?

Wondering begins again, since then –

### **Since Then 3: Autumn**

Slow dawn, less light, not so much awakening

As slowing down, a growth of darkness. Long silences

In which the hostiles multiply, a pertinence of sadness.

After a retreat of fear, a tide of fear returning. Fools dance

And kiss, and kill themselves because

Their need to be so close, simply for the company,

Is weakness. Government enwraps itself

For siege, employs more laws for thuggery,

Control. Never before so clearly seen, the need

For borders, how they can protect. Never

Before so clearly seen, the brutal inhumanity

Of London. Since then –

Rainy days and rainy days and long dark rainy nights.

The gutters fill, the birds gone home, the study is a cave

Of warm retreat. How fortunate we are to have such things  
As books, how far advanced from screens, to see in ink  
And paper what the trees and resin, pigments, octopuses,  
Blood, can do, when used with such selective purpose  
As good writers may. The world returns us to the world  
Through such as these. While outside Osrics thrive.  
The flourish of the fancy hat, the swirl of feather,  
Smile of charm, in which such depravity beckons,  
Entitlement will know no tether.  
Such is public discourse now, since then –

**So long***For James*

So many mornings come, unwelcome:  
the sky dark, the air cold, the call to rise and go

A hard sound from the necessary voice,  
the body once again propels itself

Into a day of long farewells, of silences,  
of memories and hopes. The clichés turn

Again and here we are, again.  
My father or my uncle or the clock, whatever

Summons the awareness,  
self-determination focusing, a long drive,

A long flight, a long voyage, ahead.  
Pilgrims, comrades, partners, friends,

The navigator tells us, time to move.  
The tide has turned, is running out.

She's swung as you slept. The anchor rope is taut.  
All presence now becomes a mindful keeping.

You'll treasure it, but later. Up anchor, now, and concentration:  
knowledge to the point of all delivery.

Dress for the road. Gather the gear.  
Check the essentials. Now, cast off.

## SciFi Truth Poem

It was that feeling when I opened the book and read  
 The first sentence: 'The earth, as every schoolboy knows,  
 Is hollow, and habitable within.' *Tarzan at the Earth's Core*,  
 1930. 'No,' I thought, 'that isn't true.' Is it? What is this world  
 I'm standing on? And then the night sky, Mars, the Moon:  
 Those miles and miles and miles of old Barsoom,  
 The never-known before inhabitants of planets, orbits, habitats,  
 Beyond the farthest star, and lost in time to all but those  
 The Time Machine was built for. Or sailing through the air  
 To continents unkent with wily Captain Nemo, or deep beneath  
 The oceans in the Nautilus, visiting Atlantis and  
 Cathedrals undersea. How many worlds, what universes  
 Opened to my open-eyed enquiries? The horror-filled,  
 With no return available, Poe's maelstrom, the Planet  
 Of the Apes; the endlessly surprising, where dispossessed  
 And those who japed, asked if androids dreamt  
 Of electric sheep; the science-fuelled and speculative  
 Studies, where cosmic rings and corridors connected,  
 Rama found a rendezvous, the Odyssey through space  
 Found Home out there, and then, returned  
 To where the word for world is forest.  
 That final one I'll name, with thanks, by  
 Ursula Le Guin: the last small book  
 My grandfather read, not long before he died,  
 He smiled, and said, 'It's true.' That happened,  
 1979. Imagination's what it takes to get there.  
 Truth is what you find along the way.

**Alan Riach** (b.1957) Poet and Professor of Scottish Literature, Glasgow University. Born in Airdrie, Lanarkshire, studied at Cambridge and Glasgow, worked at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, 1986-2000, and has been back in Scotland since 2001. Books include poetry: *The Winter Book* (2017), *Homecoming* (2009) and *Wild Blue: Selected Poems* (2014); criticism: *Hugh MacDiarmid's Epic Poetry* (1991), *Representing Scotland* (2005), and co-authored with Alexander Moffat, *Arts of Resistance: Poets, Portraits and Landscapes of Modern Scotland* (2008), described in the *Times Literary Supplement* as 'a landmark book', and *Arts of Independence: The Cultural Argument and Why It Matters Most* (2014). Riach and Moffat are also the co-editors of the annotated edition of J. D. Fergusson's radical manifesto-book *Modern Scottish Painting* (1943; new edition, 2015). Contributor to numerous books and journals, co-editor of *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature and Scotlands: Poets and the Nation*, and General Editor of the Complete Works of Hugh MacDiarmid.