To a Hamnavoe Poet of 2093

George Mackay Brown

Language unstable as sand, but poets
Strike on hard rock, carving
Rune and hieroglyph, to celebrate
Breath’s sweet brevity.

Swan-path, whale-acre. Do you honour
The Sea with good images?
We wear the sea like a coat,
We have salt for marrow.

I hoard, before time’s waste
Old country images: plough-horse
Skylark, grass-growth,
Corn-surge, dewfall, anvil;

Rain-trail from hill to hill, a hushing;
Mayburn a penny whistle
Lilting from Croval, lingering
(Tinker-boy) under my window;

Creel-scattering gales; Thor’s
Hammer, studdering*, on Hoy.
Do your folk laugh and cry
With the gentle ups-and-downs

Not so different, I think
From talk in Skarabrae doors,
Celtic shepherds at Gurness,
Sweyn’s boatmen off Gairsay?

The masque unchanging, the maskers
Wear different motley.
‘Ox’ is ‘tractor’ now
On the green surge of Fea.

So, image maimed more and more,
On the grid of numbers
Folk must not forget
The marks on the rock.
Keep vigil. The tongues flow yet
   To rhythms of sea and hill.
   Deeper than stone, guard
       The purse source, silence.

* studdering = reverberating

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