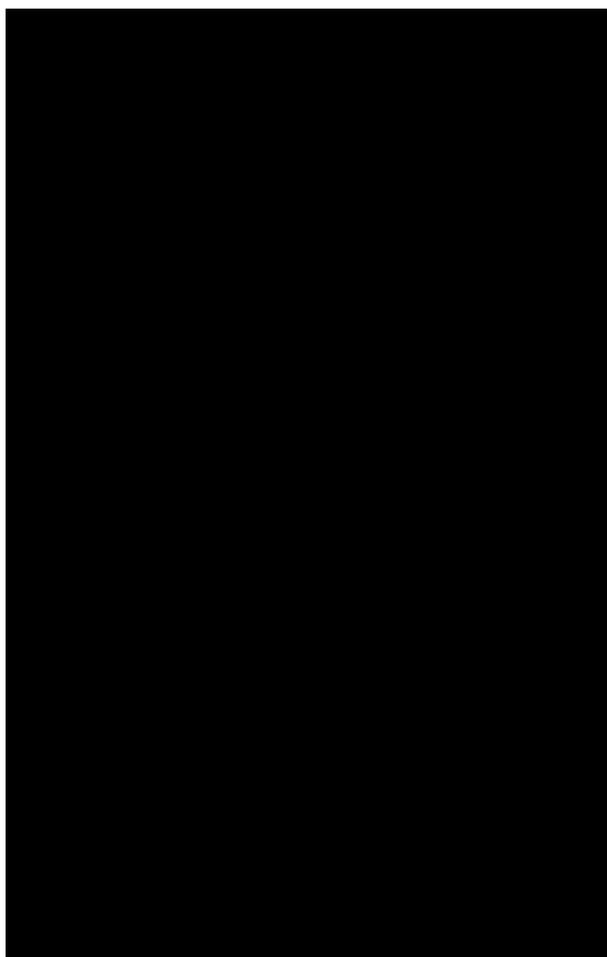


# 'Moder Dy | Mother Wave' by Roseanne Watt

## Review by Ian Brown



*Moder Dy* is Roseanne Watt's first published collection. She won the 2018 Edwin Morgan Prize for the best unpublished collection of poetry by a poet under the age of thirty. Two things are clear from the quality of the poems in this debut publication: the Morgan Prize judges found a worthy winner; Roseanne Watt is a fresh and refreshing poet. On the basis of this first collection, one could reasonably predict that she will contribute for years to Scotland's chorus of brilliant individual poetic voices.

Her poems have a concision and vitality of language that carries the sense of precise immanence one associates with haiku. Indeed, she includes four short poems on page 61 entitled 'Haiku'. None quite conforms to the exact syllabic and linear structure of original haiku. What they embody, however, is a sense of being haiku translated. The translation, even transition, is also embedded in their location, some set in Shetland, one in Leith. In reading, both silently and aloud as with all her poems here included they provide one with the profound sense that Watt is engaged in translating transformative experience.

Of course, one can assert that all creative writing engages in translation of experience. However, Watt engages in that process in a particular, as well

as that more generalised, way. She writes both in and between Shetlandic (she uses the local name for this Scots dialect, Shaetlan, rather than the more academic term) and Scottish Standard English (SSE). As she explores experience through words shapes on the page and sounds for the ear she moves between the resources of poems solely in Shaetlan, poems solely in SSE, poems using both languages and poems which appear on facing pages once in Shaetlan and then in SSE.

Morgan herself would be delighted by the way she exploits, as she sees fit, the ways words fit, fit on and are fit for the page. The very shape of the five different poems on, say, page 57 to 61 matters. In *Nightwalk with Natterjacks*, the phrasing and positioning of the words convey vividly the aural and visual sense of the walk at night:

*Aff li oh omn l*  
*I h n m*

*i h n l m es ffn*

[z]

*h q i g gil*  
*mf i o m*

*n h m m h*

E tymology in its entirety reads:

*f m h*  
*n q h n l i o n n l m*  
*m h g h n m j f*

*f e l h m*

The succinctness of this four-line poem embodies a richness careful (re)reading reveals. Time and again, poems surprise by the sureness and economy with which they bring the reader to fresh perception, understanding and experience, as if carried by an underswell of emotion and thought.

Moder dy is Shaetlan for mother wave . This is the underswell which, according to a *Simmeth* definition cited as an epigraph for the collection, old Shetland fishermen believed always travels in the direction of land no matter from what airt the wind blows, and even in the calmest weather . The definition carries within it the elements which underlie and interact in many of the poems: sea, land and weather. Watt engages with these elements, their chanciness, the

*i n l n f n o m*

*l , f p h o h i h*  
*f n o m l ð o g h.*

Watt's poems are entirely and unadornedly human. They also explore life beyond the human, moving meaningfully and flexibly between the two rooms of Shetland and English. The book contains a glossary of its Shetlandic vocabulary. This helps us read the poems' depths and subtleties as they draw from the dual linguistic chambers of their heart. It is also a reminder of the reality of the two rooms, the translation required in understanding one another even within one language community. But Watt does not represent these rooms as vacant. She brings to their expression clarity of expression, unsealing their richness. Archibald MacLeish resonantly concluded *Ars Poetica* with 'A poem should not mean / But be'. Watt's poems make a false dichotomy of MacLeish's disjunction: they both mean and be. Their creative economy also exemplifies beautifully the maxim, 'Less is more'.

[Mi l Ds](#) by Roseanne Watt is published by Polygon, 2019.

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