Magi Gibson: Washing Hugh MacDiarmid’s Socks

By Magi Gibson

WASHING HUGH MACDIARMID’S SOCKS

Late at night, long after she has tucked his child in bed,
lied to the ‘little scone’ he’ll see his daddy soon, she
scribbles letters with a borrowed pen, a broken pencil stub.

In the ghost-filled kitchen of her Cornwall birth
she begs stamps from her scowling aunts, sends letters
like a trail of ragged geese – nine hundred miles north.

The child needs new shoes. Another red-ink bill has come.
It’s sunny. It’s raining. Is he remembering to eat?

From time to time she bakes him simnel cake, parcels,
posts it, pictures his delight when he unpicks the twine,
inhales the mingled scent of spice and fruit and marzipan.

In return, he sends … his dirty socks.

Sometimes she sinks low as the glowering clouds that roll
in on the choppy tides. *She misses him. And can he spare a bit?*
She’d like to buy the child a treat.

Her mother and her aunts complain she’s saddled
with a man who’s not a man, who fails his wife and son;
the boy sobs hard so sad he is his father does not come.

Sometimes she feels so bad she thinks of wading out to sea,
swimming *out and out – sun shining – can go no farther –*
arms up – a few gurgles – & all is over – it sounds so easy – but –

On sunny days she stands before the chipped enamelled sink,

suds frothing at her wrists, knuckles reddening as she grips
the scrubbing board, frots the poet's socks to cleanliness.

But this is Valda Grieve! Flame-haired fireball!
Mouthy harridan! Why would this virago deign
to wash her absent husband's socks?

Then I find the letter, the one where she instructs
It is easy to buy brown paper and a ball of string.
Send me your dirty linen. I know you forget such things.

Perhaps she waited till the child was wrapped in sleep,
until her mother and her aunts had grumbled off to bed,
then in the privacy of her room, she closed the blind, stripped

off her clothes, snipped the tangled twine, ripped off
the wrap, breathed in the distant, lonely smell of him …
fell upon the sheets he'd sent, wound them round

and round her in a lover's wild embrace,
remembering his touch, his skin, his face,
the musky warmth of waking by his side.

Valda, sock-washing housewife,
scarlet-nailed Bohemian, Kernow quine
wha aye lived whaur extremes met

washed MacDiarmid's socks, pinned them to the line,
folded, parcelled, posted them nine hundred miles
for love. She washed his socks for love.

Magi Gibson

Published in *Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks* by Magi Gibson (Luath Press, 2017)WASHING HUGH MACDIARMID'S SOCKS

Late at night, long after she has tucked his child in bed,
lied to the ‘little scone’ he’ll see his daddy soon, she
scribbles letters with a borrowed pen, a broken pencil stub.

In the ghost-filled kitchen of her Cornwall birth
she begs stamps from her scowling aunts, sends letters
like a trail of ragged geese – nine hundred miles north.

The child needs new shoes. Another red-ink bill has come.
It’s sunny. It’s raining. Is he remembering to eat?

From time to time she bakes him simnel cake, parcels,
posts it, pictures his delight when he unpicks the twine,
inhales the mingled scent of spice and fruit and marzipan.

In return, he sends … his dirty socks.

Sometimes she sinks low as the glowering clouds that roll
in on the choppy tides. *She misses him. And can he spare a bit?*
She’d like to buy the child a treat.

Her mother and her aunts complain she’s saddled
with a man who’s not a man, who fails his wife and son;
the boy sobs hard so sad he is his father does not come.

Sometimes she feels so bad she thinks of wading out to sea,
swimming *out and out – sun shining – can go no farther –*
arms up – a few gurgles – & all is over – it sounds so easy – but –

On sunny days she stands before the chipped enamelled sink,
suds frothing at her wrists, knuckles reddening as she grips
the scrubbing board, frots the poet’s socks to cleanliness.

But this is Valda Grieve! Flame-haired fireball!
Mouthy harridan! Why would this virago deign
to wash her absent husband’s socks?

Then I find the letter, the one where she instructs
It is easy to buy brown paper and a ball of string.
Send me your dirty linen. I know you forget such things.

Perhaps she waited till the child was wrapped in sleep,
until her mother and her aunts had grumbled off to bed,
then in the privacy of her room, she closed the blind, stripped

off her clothes, snipped the tangled twine, ripped off
the wrap, breathed in the distant, lonely smell of him …
fell upon the sheets he'd sent, wound them round

and round her in a lover's wild embrace,
remembering his touch, his skin, his face,
the musky warmth of waking by his side.

Valda, sock-washing housewife,
scarlet-nailed Bohemian, Kernow quine
wha aye lived whaur extremes met

washed MacDiarmid's socks, pinned them to the line,
folded, parcelled, posted them nine hundred miles
for love. She washed his socks for love.

Magi Gibson

Published in *Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks* by Magi Gibson (Luath Press, 2017)

(c) The Bottle Imp