

Place  
of  
Pillars.

RUTH BARKER

# Foreword

Emma Nicolson, Director, ATLAS Arts

The Crofters Act of 1886 brought relief and security to crofting communities across Scotland. It was the outcome of The Napier Commission of Enquiry into the Conditions of Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands, which was in response to crofters' struggles. Alongside many others, the crofting tenants of the Kilmuir Estate, Trotternish in the north of the Isle of Skye, had been agitating for reform since the early 1870s. Whilst these events have not fallen from local memory there is little that remains in the public realm of their unrest. This work was initially inspired by a desire from the Staffin community to create a memorial artwork in remembrance of those people and their experiences. Barker's text is a personal and evocative account informed by time visiting sites and meeting people in Trotternish. Her melodic prose threads a tale of ages, mapping a non-linear journey across time, traversing nature and history. Rich and free flowing, she creates a slow, cyclical tale linking local imagination to its environment.

This commission is part of a wider collaboration between ATLAS Arts and Staffin Community Trust exploring the Crofters' Wars in Staffin through local stories and memories.

Our sincere thanks go to members of the Staffin Trust who have been very supportive of the project and to the artist Ruth Barker.

## About ATLAS arts

Based in the Isle of Skye, ATLAS Arts was founded in 2010 with the aim of generating and presenting innovative and ambitious contemporary arts projects. ATLAS Arts is a pioneering producer and commissioner of contemporary art that creates connections between artists and audiences, and responds to the unique qualities of the region, its landscapes, its culture and its people. Through our work we aim to inspire and explore the specificity of place within a local, national and international context.

# Place of Pillars

I read a book once. And in that book it said that Skye is called the isle of mists. And I thought, that makes sense somehow. Because mist is air and water together; you can feel it but not touch it. It is physical and it is not. In Skye, the stories are fractal. Each one opens onto another, and another, until a grain of spoken sand has become the telling of a mountain range and you are lost in the crevasses of familial relationships that you cannot quite grasp. This is a story of sorts. It is the story that grew from the tiny handholds of all the stories I have heard, and it never quite reaches the summit because I can't speak Gaelic.

So, I read a book once. And in that book I read that Skye is called the isle of mists. And from that book I learnt that once upon a time we lived in ages.

The age of Iron.  
The age of Salt.  
The age of Time.  
and the age of Peat.

So. I read this book once. And in this book I heard that Skye is called the isle of mists. And in this book I saw a mouth moving. And the mouth had a tongue that was full of stories. The mouth told me how the world turned on its axis, then. And how as it did the continents came into being, slotting into their places like the terms of a crossword. Everything was a riddle, said the mouth, or a poem. Either one. The great landmasses were the stanzas. Once these were in place the language could be arranged and the sense could be found. This is how the islands came to be named and versed, it said. This is how the island of Skye found its definition against the blue of the crashing sea, and the white dome of the clouds, as words fit into their meanings. The mouth was convincing. I believed all of it.

So: I read a book once, which told me that Skye is the isle of mists.

I saw the coasts of Trotternish, stacked in basalt  
(they are upright poems).

I saw the hills of Trotternish, humped with granite and scree  
(they are the elevation of riddles).

I saw the valleys of Trotternish, bedded in loam  
(they are the hollows of novellas).

I saw the people of Trotternish: open faced, long minded, two hands  
each, and ears for listening  
(they are the talk of fables).

Here we are, telling a story of ages, and salt, and Trotternish  
(we are footnotes on a page somewhere, or the lame digression  
of a joke).

I read a book. And it spoke to me, and told me that Skye is the isle of  
mists. Who will stay to listen to the words? You, I hope. Open your  
ears. Open your ears to my mouth, now.

## The age of Iron.

*South to north*

*The old man*

*Older than the dream imagination.*

*They dissolved into one another, in ways I could not pronounce.*

*Mistaken for wilderness.*

*Take up your hands. Set up a marker.*

*The last crumbs scattered to the wind.*

We drove up the peninsula, south to north, from Portree past the Old  
Man, up to Flodigarry. The sun was hot and the sky was iron hard and  
dry. We bought Monster Munch and I drank Red Bull and I had a map  
that I wrote on in biro, while your dog sat on the back seat showing  
his teeth and his tongue to the sunshine.

I folded and refolded the map, tracing ink across the flattened hills  
and lochans. I wrote in the names and the notes as you spoke, shaping  
the paper in creases that I hoped would be memorable. *Tote*: ruin of  
hut or house; *Dun Grianan*: sunny fort; *Lealt*: half stream; *Culnacnoc*:  
back of the hill. And again: green bog myrtle grows here; short willow;  
lush and fertile. Loch Mealt of the unlucky river. Sky Pie café. The  
Ecomuseum. The diatomite mine. The place where someone might  
build a bridge. Here and now. The place where there used to be a  
road. The place where there might be a new road. The place where  
the woman makes handmade dinosaurs. How much are they? I'd like  
a blue one. My daughter likes diplodocus. The place where there are  
footprints in the stone. The way is older than the dream imagination.  
Are you sure?

We drove past the Storr and there were thirty cars there at least,  
shining like sweetie papers blown to the kerb of iron hard rock. We  
watched tiny men and women walking slowly upward, winding their  
way through the vertical lines of the stone. They would reach the  
summit and return, sending tiny miniatures of the ridge to bounce  
back down the dusty track. We talked about infrastructure, and  
logistics. Toilets. Suitable footwear. Your dog didn't like going round  
corners. We drove, and the stories were as fractal as the scuffed stones.  
The narratives dissolved into one another, keeping their structure  
but changing in scale. Your father, his grandmother, her sisters,  
their nieces, brothers, neighbours, sons. Nicolson, Ross, MacLeod,  
MacKinnon, Iron. I could not pronounce the Gaelic. In the museum  
there were crofting tools and dinosaur bones. They were the same  
somehow. Silent, speaking, strong. In the evening the Storr was empty.  
No-one lives there. The cars had crept away, blown back over the  
bridge today or tomorrow. So light. They will be long gone before the  
iron hard winter.

The map I smooth across my knee is full of ink. The stories I have  
scrawled crowd out the written hills as they run in fertile rigs across  
the page. The paper land is plentiful with words and tongues and  
memories in inscription.

Beyond the road though, the hills outside my moving window blur to green and ochre. They are featureless for the want of talk and crofts and labour. Once upon a time the slopes were full of people. This working land could not always be mistaken for wilderness. Now leisure snakes across the horizon, in Gore Tex and insulated jackets. And the ground cries out to be trodden, and sings to the yellow jacketed workmen, who are doing something in the ditch.

Take up your hands, men and women. Set up a marker. Carve me a man as small as a coin. His face is indistinct. He has no eyes. He is Morgan Woodward in Cool Hand Luke. If you like you can give him sunglasses. Around the rim of the coin you write his name and title: *William Ivory, Sheriff of Inverness, come late to Skye with warrants of arrest and summonses for eviction.* Cast the man in iron. He is immovable. Cast the man in iron so that he is hard and unchanging and eyeless. Then give the coin to me. Coming out of the shop I drop my wallet and the coins spill into the ditch. Swallowed by the brackish water, the iron sinks like stone. My crisp packet blows into the hedge and then away, back towards the bridge. The last crumbs scattered to the wind.

*South to north  
The old man  
Older than the dream imagination.*

*They dissolved into one another, in ways I could not pronounce.  
Mistaken for wilderness.  
Take up your hands. Set up a marker.  
The last crumbs scattered to the wind.*

That was the age of Iron.

## The age of Salt.

*I opened my mouth,  
The sutures of a yellowish skull became stronger.  
She pierced me with her needle beak.  
I was every perforation,  
A porous constitution of the universe.*

*Take up your hands. Set up a marker.  
Together we will plunge into the sea.*

In the age of salt I was a river. I opened my mouth in the high peat near the Storr and I gathered up shingle and the leaves of bracken, letting the heather spin in ash coloured whorls as I ran to the salt of the sea. I cut through the land then, scouring the flanks of the moor with a looping, confident line. From above, I looked like the sutures of a yellowish skull, marking the thin synarthrodial joints of the land.

This was my body then, skulling through the world. Dinosaurs waded me. Damselflies bred in me. Deer drank from me. Herons sliced through me. Water shrews danced across me. Wild cats stopped at the edge of me, peering down to see their reflection in my skin. Men opened their flies above me, joining themselves to me in glittering arcs. Women squatted above me. Children played in me. I became stronger.

I was the lochan and the stream and the freshwater and the salt. I was the waterfalls at Inver Tote, and the rivulets pulling across the Quiraing. I was the river and the torrent and the flood and the tributary and the spate and the puddle and the bog. I was every perforation of the land with water, and I kept my face turned up to reflect the sky. Three elements in one: Earth, Air, Water. I was a porous, mutable constitution of the universe. I was the mist.

Poll (pron. poull), a pool, pond, pit.  
Rathad (pron. ra-ud), a road, way.  
Raidh (pron. rai), plain, level, smooth.  
Riabhach (pron. ri'-ach), drab, greyish,  
brindled, grizzled. Other form: Riabh.

## II NORSE

Riagh (pron. ri), a king. Other form: Rie.  
Roimn, a point, headland, peninsula.  
Ros, a point, promontory. Other form: Rose.  
Rasdh (pron. roo'-a), red, reddish.  
Rudha (pron. roo'-a), promontory. Usually Ru.

Rhu, Row.  
Riagh, a run for cattle, shelling, land sloping.

Ragart (pron. sa-kart), a priest.

Sall, a heel.  
Sean (pron. shen), old aged, ancient.

Selleach (pron. shil'-ach), a willow.

Sgeir (pron. skeir), a reef, a sea-surrounded rock.

Sgeir or Sgeurt (pron. skoor, skoor), a peak,  
conical sharp rock. Sometimes Sgeur.

Sith (pron. she), a fairy.

Sithem (pron. shee'-an), a fairy hillock  
or knoll.

Slochd, a deep hollow.

Sneachd (pron. anyachg), snow.

Sneachd (pron. sna), a valley, plain beside a  
river, stretch.

Sron, nose, peak, promontory. Other form:  
Struan.

Stac (pron. stak), a steep rock, conical hill.

Stob (pron. stop), a point.

Stac (pron. stook), a pinnacle, peak, conical  
steep rock.

Suidhe (pron. soot'-ye), sitting, resting place.

Tairbheart (pron. tar'pyart), an isthmus. Other  
forms: Tairbet, Tairbert.

Taigh or Tigh (pron. ty), a house. Usually  
form: Tyr.

Tair (pron. tyer), country, region, land. Other  
form: Tyr.

Tober, a well, spring, fountain. Usually Tober  
form: Tdm, a hillock, mound.

Torr, a mound, heap, hill.

Traighe (pron. try), sea-shore, strand, sands.

Tuisach (pron. too'-ach), knoll, hillock.

Tuisach (pron. too'-ach), knoll, hillock.  
eminence. Anglicized forms: Tilly, Tally.

Tuisach.

Uachdar (pron. ooch'dar), upper-land. Us  
Auchter, Ochter.

Uaine (pron. ooin'-e), green.

Lamb (pron. oo'-av), a cave, grave.

Beginning:

Iron. eunnic

Salt.

Time. on.

Peat. ait.

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eat.

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Victoria Infirmary Glasgow  
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Glasgow G42 9TY  
26/04/2016

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FLAT 2-1  
Glasgow

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Specialty: Obstetrics  
Hospital: Victoria Infirmary Glasgow  
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Location: Clinic J First Floor Victoria Ambulatory Centre

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You  
You  
You

South to north  
The old man  
Older than the dream imagination  
They dissolved into one another, in water  
Mistaken for wilderness  
Take up your hands. Set up a marker.  
The last crumbs scattered to the wind.



The clock ticks loud,  
Too slim and frail to be grasped.  
Some shatter. Others fall.

When you gave testimony  
No-one asked for the words of women.

Take up your hands. Set up a martyr.  
Her hand rests on the plough.





I opened my mouth.

The sutures of a yellowish skull became stronger.

She pierced me with her needle beak.

A porous constitution of the universe.

Take up your hands. Set up a marker.

Together we will plunge into the sea.

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South to north  
The old man

Older than the dawn imagination.

They dissolved into one another, in ways I could not pronounce

Mistaken for wilderness.

Take up your hands. Set up a marker.

The last crumbs scattered to the wind.



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Langside Road  
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61 ALBERT AVE  
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When I was the bend of the Lealt river, a heron with salt on her legs pierced me through with her needle beak. I saw the flat of her belly and the curve of her grey undertail as she waited for someone to write her into a poem. When the words were finished the heron leapt up into the sky, bunching her wings and pressing the mist into her wake. I was the scatter of droplets that fell from her feet back into the body of myself below. As I fell, water descending through air, the land spread out for miles around me, filled with men and women who tilted their faces to their crofts, and never looked up. They were plentiful. Water joined to water and the river ran. To them I brought cold clear life for their cattle and their crops and their kettles. To them I brought boundaries and the order of the land. I was their skeleton, their anatomy of place. They gave me songs, and they gave me a woman big with the world with salt in her hair, to sing them.

Take up your hands, men and women. Set up a marker. Carve me a woman as tall as the mountains. Carve her a chair to sit in, and cut her a face like a slab of earth with no-one to till it. Give her broad fingers and feet planted firmly on the ground. Carve her name below her: Mairi Mhor nan Oran. Carve her in salt, so she is crystalline, sharp, and essential. Let her tower over the empty land, with her salt eyes open. Let her salt tongue rest in the cavern of her salten mouth. Then you must plant her in my river bed. She will season me with her dissolving language, and then together we will plunge into the sea.

*I opened my mouth,  
The sutures of a yellowish skull became stronger.*

*She pierced me with her needle beak.  
I was every perforation,  
A porous constitution of the universe.*

*Take up your hands. Set up a marker.  
Together we will plunge into the sea.*

That was the age of Salt.

## The age of Time.

*The clock ticks loud  
Too slim and frail to be grasped.  
Some shatter. Others fall.*

*When you gave testimony  
No-one asked for the words of women.*

*Take up your hands. Set up a marker.  
Her hand rests on the plough.*

In the age of time I was a woman, spread out across the hills. My skirts were the colour of knapweed in shade, and my vetch and bluebell skirt was [...] and my eyes were pale forget-me-knots in the soft sandstone of my face. And I cannot remember the time. What time is it? Eleven o'clock.

My eyes are poor and I will not read now. The telly is a blank black wall. The clock ticks loud. I ask you the time. Eleven, you say. Eleven. And I nod, looking past you, looking straight ahead from my chair to the corner of the room.

I always knew the words to things, and now I am forgetting them. They slip from me like the handles of tea-cups, too slim and frail to be grasped. Some shatter. Others fall. There is time for you to sit with me. It is the only thing to do. You see me as [...].

You see me know and I am this place. I am the place it has always been. I am the grandmother of rock, the bearer of mountains who suckled the arable lands and the roads and the pinnacles. I remember what we once shared: starvation. When I was stripped and could not nourish you.

When you left and could not care for me.  
When they came in the night for you.

When you were summoned to speak and those who listened to you  
wrote down the words.

When you gave testimony.

When you were eloquent.

When I could not speak.

When no-one asked for the words of women.

When I was barren and abused, and when it was too late, and the  
beasts were gone with the crofts.

This is what we have shared. When you have been here for a long  
time. When I have been here for longer. When you were my children.

When my years number hundreds of thousands. When I am not going  
anywhere. When you are so brief. When your stories are fractal and  
momentary. When I have granite beneath my nails and basalt in my  
hair and loam between my toes. When I welcome the blow-ins and  
the agate and the holidaymakers and the Gaelic speakers and the  
microliths and the pearlwort and the ling. When I am the bed and  
breakfasts, and the A855, and the wigwams and the viewpoints and  
the footprints and the Free Church and the lost lamb lying by the burn  
with one high bank. Is she breathing? I cannot see. And if I could I  
would not tell you.

I am all of it. What time is it? Eleven oh five, you say. Just after eleven.  
Take up your hands, men and women. Set up a marker. Carve me a  
woman made only of time. Her mouth is ageless. Her hair is ageless.  
Her fingers and her toes are ageless. Her breasts and her belly and her  
back are ageless. She sits at the edge of the diatomite road and she  
stares out at the sea. At her side is a foot plough, hard with long use.  
The waves roll in and peel back. The clouds come down and lift up. The  
day closes and opens. She does not blink. She waits. She breathes. She  
[...]. Her breath is the motion of grasses and the birth of soil. Her gaze  
is the knowledge of [...]. Her testimony has not been recorded. She is  
silent. Her hand rests on the plough.

*The clock ticks loud*

*Too slim and frail to be grasped.*

*Some shatter. Others fall.*

*When you gave testimony*

*No-one asked for the words of women.*

*Take up your hands. Set up a marker.*

*Her hand rests on the plough.*

*That was the age of Time.*

## **The age of Peat.**

So, I read a book once. And in that book I read that Skye is called the  
isle of mists. And from that book I learnt that once upon a time we  
lived in ages.

The age of Iron.

The age of Salt.

The age of Time.

and the age of Peat.

So. I read this book once. And in this book I heard that Skye is called  
the isle of mists. And in this book I saw a mouth moving. And the  
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how the world turned on its axis, then. And how as it did the  
continents came into being, slotting into their places like the terms  
of a crossword. Everything was a riddle, said the mouth, or a poem.  
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in place the language could be arranged and the sense could be found.  
This is how the islands came to be named and versed, it said. This is  
how the island of Skye found its definition against the blue of the  
crashing sea, and the white dome of the clouds, as words fit into their  
meanings. The mouth was convincing. I believed all of it.

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I saw the hills of Trotternish, humped with granite and scree (they are

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I saw the people of Trotternish: open faced, long minded, two hands each, and ears for listening (they are the talk of fables).

Here we are, telling a story of ages, and salt, and Trotternish (we are footnotes on a page somewhere, or the lame digression of a joke).

I read a book. And it spoke to me, and told me that Skye is the isle of mists. Who will stay to listen to the words? You, I hope. Open your ears. Open your ears to my mouth, now. I'm talking still.

*South to north*

*The old man*

*Older than the dream imagination.*

*They dissolved into one another, in ways I could not pronounce.*

*Mistaken for wilderness.*

*Take up your hands. Set up a marker.*

*The last crumbs scattered to the wind.*

## Artist's Biography

Ruth Barker lives and works in Glasgow, Scotland who works with text and performance. Her practice throws together moments of strange poetry and autobiographical sketches, with echoes of humanity's oldest stories. Reflecting theoretical ideas of connectivity and finitude, Barker often recounts her complex prose-poems from memory. Her performances, on first examination, foreground the artist's own daily experiences and the quotidian narratives of life in contemporary Scotland (shopping lists from Lidl, Hovis bread with cut crusts, plastic bags, stubbled legs and the TV news). However, her work regularly suggests echoes of the larger, longer stories of our own mortality, our sense of self, and our internalisation of ancient myth. Barker's performance poems are hypnotic, ritualised events. They are layered in structure and intensity, and use repetition, mnemonic, and moments of unexpected humour.

Ruth Barker is represented by the Agency Gallery, London.

**[theagencygallery.co.uk](http://theagencygallery.co.uk)**



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL



Highlands and Islands Enterprise  
Iomairt na Gàidhealtachd 's nan Eilean



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# Place of Pillars

RUTH BARKER

Please download and listen to Ruth Barker reading *Place of Pillars* at:  
[soundcloud.com/atlasartspeopleplace/place-of-pillars](https://soundcloud.com/atlasartspeopleplace/place-of-pillars)



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