

## Young Shetland Writer 2010

Age 12-17 Winner - Bethany Byrne-McCombie

### *Unfinished Goodbyes*

The Americans sauntered into the pub deep in conversation. They were arguing in a way that all couples do, just niggling at each other.

"These Scots have a lot of cute legends," the woman began.

"But that's all they are, Mandy. Just stories."

"But, Matt, who's to say they're not true?"

"They aren't and that's all there is to it."

The man behind the bar - who looked about seventy five years old - smiled. He was cleaning glasses with an old dish cloth but stopped at the mention of folk stories, of which he was an expert.

"I agree wi' the lady, sir. I know a great many yarns tae be true. I ken a particularly good ane about an Ashray if you'd like tae hear it."

The couple hopped up onto stools at the bar and listened intently to the myth that was about to unravel. And so the man went on.

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"It started wi' a lad called Hamish. Hamish McKinely. He were only nineteen an' lived no' far awa' fae here in a wee, village further doon the coast. He came fae a long line o' fisherfolk an' lived wi' his grandfather."

"Excuse me, sir," the man piped up. "I didn't understand half of what you just said. Can you water down the accent a bit."

"I'll try. Now wheesht and stop interrupting me. Now where was I? Oh yes."

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Every morning he'd get up early before the sun rose to fetch and repair nets for fishing in the day ahead. He liked to sit in one of the fishing boats with an oil lamp at his side and work under the stars until the golden ink-blot of sunrise smudged the horizon line. Hamish was never lonely. Occasionally, a gull would sit with him and jabber away in a series of scratching squeals, harmonising itself with the peaceful lullaby of the sea. His life was simple and happy. What else would he want?

On a rough February morning, the sharp wind that cut his face and bit at his hands blew the trusty lamp out. As he clambered over the side of the boat to return to the cottage to relight it, he caught a drift of a song. It sounded like a woman. Her voice sweet and flowing but with a haunting edge that unnerved him slightly. He turned to see a girl about the same age as him on the rocks, resting her dainty feet in the icy water. She was deathly pale under the dying moon, almost translucent, ghostlike even. She was dressed

in but a thin blue-silver frock, no shawl. Ever the gentleman, Hamish decided to advise she went inside.

"Scuse me, miss," he muttered, putting his hand on her shoulder. No sooner had he done this she leapt up, thrashing about in his grasp like a fish on the shore. She was unusually strong for a girl fighting back with the fierce strength of the sea in midwinter, pleading, begging for her release. Hamish clinged on for dear life reasoning with her to no avail.

"Look, I'm no' gonnae hurt ye! Calm doon! I would'nae hurt ye!" And with that she froze solid, fear glazing the piercing green eyes. "That's it, easy. Who're ye? Whit brings ye here on a mornin' like this? You're no' a local."

She was silent for a moment before whispering: "My name is Arloa. I'm just visiting. Please let me go free. I live not far from here."

"But miss," he replied. "Are ye no' cauld in but a dress? I could get ye a shawl, I live in that cottage up there, on the cliff."

"That would be wonderful. You know, I think you are the kindest person I have met in a long time. You are warm hearted, unlike those at home. Please come back, I would like to see you again." she sighed. Hamish hiked the cliff face home. He could find an old shawl of his late grandmother somewhere.

The sun had risen before he got back and the girl was gone. He turned round hoping to find her but she'd obviously gone home. Shame. He'd taken a liking to her. None of the other girls could match her beauty, or strength for that matter. Her singing was indescribable, in a good way. All of this was recounted to his grandfather over breakfast.

"And ye say she were gone at daybreak?" Angus McKinely asked taking a mouthful of his smokies.

"Aye. I think she'd gone hame. Does'nae matter now."

"Laddie, have I ever told ye about Ashrays?"

"Aye, ye have, grandad. Faeries o' the sea who only appear at night and melt into a pool o' water in sunlight. Who're ancient but dinna look a day ower twenty. I ken. I were practically raised on your folk stories and legends of the deep, but she wis real. I could feel her skin and her hair."

"Fine, lad. Jest dinna say I did'nae warn ye."

"As I said, she's probably gone."

However, Hamish was wrong. Arloa was waiting for him in the boat in the early morning. She climbed over the side and came charging through the sand towards him. She clasped him tight in her arms. She was wet through but she didn't seem to mind. That is what he loved about her, she was carefree. She led him into a dance native to his homeland and kept going until they collapsed onto the sand. They sat talking for what felt like hours. She understood him. He adored her. They sat on the rock where they first

met and tossed pebbles into the sea. Arloa seemed to jump slightly in pain the moment one broke the surface and shuddered as the ripples spread across the surface.

"Ye a'right?" Hamish would ask.

"Yes, I-I-I am fine. I am purely grateful that you came back." The girl would reply. "I love you. But my sisters will be expecting me. I-I had better go. You too, go!" He turned to the cliff route and didn't look back for fear she did possibly melt into a pool of water. It was impossible but the dread remained with him. The same routine occurred for the next three days.

On the fourth day, Hamish was late but he ran to the beach. She was pleased to see him. He halted and knelt at her feet.

"Marry me! Arloa, marry me and we can a'ways be together."

Arloa looked down in horror at the golden ring held tightly in the fingers of the man she loved. As much as she would have loved to say yes, more than anything in the world, but she could not.

"I cannot." she sobbed. "If you love me, you must leave."

"I understand. Ye canna bear to be far awa' fae the sea. But we'll live on the cliff, you'll never be far awa'. Please!"

The first light of day slithered across the waves. She clinged onto him, her cool, wet hands on his cheeks. A sad and desperate look flooded her demented face.

"Come with me to a land where nothing matters!" she cried, her hands starting to slip.

"I dinna understand! Whit do ye mean!"

"Come below the waves. Be with me." By this time she had started to melt away, flowing into the waves.

"I'm sorry."

"Look, you'll be close to the sea, it'll still be part o' your everyday life!"

"You do not understand. I am an Ashray. I am the sea." And she just faded below the surface into ripples.

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"What happened then?" the woman asked. The man sighed.

"I ... He never saw her again."

"How sad. But thanks for telling my wife and I such a lovely story mister ..."

"Ye can jest call me -" but he was interrupted by a man younger than himself (only twice the size and already bald), swaggering up to the bar with an empty beer glass.

"Another pint please, Hamish."

