

THE SCOTTISH REFERENDUM: A VIEW FROM CARRAIG UISNEACH

Two thousand years ago,
Deirdre of the Many Sorrows
Unpinned her cloak
To pin it at her shoulder closer still,
As the shore of Ulster,
At every oar-stroke,
Brought itself closer,
Closer still.

And at this gesture her lover shuddered –
Once out of Scotland,
Their lives were fastened
To the promise of a hungry king.

On this rock, facing Rathlin,
Great Connor's men
Waited for her, uneasily.
Extremes – even of beauty –
Unbalance everything.

This sea is still sometimes too blue.
A mineral cobalt, gleaming enamel,
Pinned in the compartments of a brooch,
It fills the channels, bounded by the lines of shores
And hugs the blunt bronze bosses of the islands;
A cold, fluid metal, a road that shivers,
Between Uladh and Alba.

The promise of a king
Cannot bind closer or undo
This cloisonné of straits and headlands.
Mist clears to reveal, sun strikes into view
The flanks of Scottish sea-loughs jig-sawing towards me.
Causeways – from Antrim, from Argyll – intend,
Striving to meet.

These cliffs and coastlines were a kingdom once,
Bright Dal Riada;
Its highways water,
Harbours, the gates and outskirts of its towns.

But what realm's fixed forever?
Allegiances pleat, one on the other,
Like dogged breakers brokering a bay.

As the folds of a cloak are slackened off or gathered
By the placement of a pin,
At this north-eastern shoulder
Sometimes we pull the Irish, sometimes the Scots,
A little closer in
And we acknowledge,
With Islay, Jura, Arran and Kintyre,
Our never-changing governance:
Winds off the Atlantic, the astringent rains.

* Carraig Uisneach is a rock jutting out from the north-eastern tip of Ireland which was from ancient times a point of arrival from and departure for Scotland.

Deirdre of the Sorrows risked returning to it from safe haven in Scotland with the three Sons of Uisneach: her lover, Naisi and his brothers.

Uladh and Alba: Gaelic names for Ulster and Scotland