

Impressions of Rothesay, Judith Parrott
Diary Excerpts. 2007 and 2009.

The sky today is a crumpled blanket of sheep's-wool curls. The dense knit holds in a silent stillness over the island; the water becalmed, the hills turned to stone. The only movement is when a gull cuts through the middle-air, throwing the scene into a momentary three-dimensional film clip...

...There is nothing straight about this little town. It twists and turns and hiccups in idiosyncratic surprises, which make me laugh with delight at how life is always at its best when it is slightly off beat. And it is the unsophisticated that binds me to this place, the crumbling old walls, the back lanes, the closes with layered stories billowing in the air captured there, which everyone can feel but no-one can say why or how it is they feel them, bellied as they are by the benign hush that hovers and settles to nothing...

...It is a glorious chilled spring day - rich and still as thick cream on iced blueberries. The daffodils are beginning to show hints of yellow pushing through green tips. Snowdrops and purple crocuses splash through the grass and around the bottom of the trees. I take to the streets to photograph around town. I feel bold in the fresh sunshine and approach an old man sitting at the old Victorian wrought iron and glass bus stop in the square. He beams at me when I ask if I can photograph him. 'Aye', he says, 'Nae bather'. And so, encouraged, I ask others too; young girls with prams, friends buying burgers at a street stall, a group of men outside the pub. They all grin broadly and embrace their part. 'Ye wan an ugly ol' fella like me?!' asks one guy as he rushes to pose....

...I get up early to walk the couple of miles out to Loch Fad. The fishermen come down from Glasgow to go out on the loch, and it's the beginning of the trout season so I expect a big crowd. I get there in time to catch them all tumbling into their little boats, the choppy waters of the loch tossing them around as they gather their rods and jackets and hoods and take their hilarity out into the open where it bounces off the waves and dances around the chilly morning. They wave to me as they go, bright, frosty faces turning to the wind....

...From my living room window it goes like this. First there is the little road that circles the castle. There is a low, stone, moss-covered wall around the castle, then the lime grassy bank, which tumbles to the moat, and rises again on the other side of the water to the castle. On the castle side of the moat there is a stunted spindly bush, rather like a bonsai weeping willow. And under the protective branches of this bush, against the brown earth, are three large, white swan eggs. She is sitting

on her eggs this morning and her mate is pecking around the twiggy soil beside her. The little white duck is still doing his laps around the moat...

...This evening Maria, Julie and I cycle down the road to Port Bannatyne, the first wee village along the shore road. We cycle in perfect still darkness, the moon bouncing off the water to our right, the icy air glowing on our cheeks. No helmets, just the soft rustle of cool through our hair. We pull up outside our pub and lean the bikes against the wall, opening the door to a cosy, yellow glow and the sound of singing rising from the warmth inside. The singers gather in the Port Inn every Thursday and play along together. They are gathered in what looks more like a tiny living room, floral wallpaper, the curtains of the wee window pulled close and a small lamp on the windowsill....

...This evening has the light of summer in it. The grass is dazzling – so green it is beyond green. The air has taken on a brilliant Antarctic clarity with the dry cold weather we have been having. It brings the mountains of Arran and the Cowal Peninsula so close. They seem to creep up on us in the night, stealthy across the still, dark water. And in the morning they are smiling mischievously on our doorstep, sharp and bright as polished pennies. Everything has a crisp edge, the stone work on the pubs and cottages, the edge of the road where it bends around the castle, the blades of green grass stepping down to the moat, the quills and wing feathers of the swans. On other days, when the air dampens, the mountains creep away again, turning to softer lilac and seeming as in some unreachable, mysterious land...

...The swan no longer sits under an umbrella of bare twigs. Her shelter has burst into a palace of white blossoms, which drape all around her in a glorious crown. And scattered through the grass at her feet are hundreds of tiny, butter yellow flowers. She becomes ever more regal with each passing day, preening herself in the perfectly rounded open archway through the flowers, which faces out onto the moat and lets in the long rays of the sun...

...My connection to this place is sensory; it is the smell of wild garlic and the coconut sweetness of broom; the taste of salt from the sea-laden air. It is the light, diffused to multiple pastel shades, soft and gentle enough to keep my eyes wide and open, still able to see. It is the warm, worn stone of the pavements on which I walk and the buildings which rise on either side. And the crisp tightness of my skin in cool youthful air...

...It is a beautiful summer evening and like many in the town, I take a stroll along the esplanade. The water is milk opal and the great weight of the sun bulges in the sky and splits the water with a strip of pure gold.

Silhouettes saunter with their ice-creams, dribble footballs or sit to watch the sun go down. A huddle of teenage boys fly on the swings in a little park, soaring as high as the bar and singing Auld Lang Syne with the swell and the ebb of the swing; the brooding shadow of hills as their backdrop. The town is out together for its evening walk. We unambiguously reflect the weather and the season and paint the canvas of summer with our style and our bodies and our chatter, and so are held together by obligations of land and sky; by traditions forged with the landscape that are so much a part of us we do not know they are there. They spill over us and melt us together with the smooth, unfractured motion of caramel pouring from the pot. Our social mores might seem in one breath to hold us back, to confine us in what we may and may not do, but in the next they are the loving arms around us; the balance for a world that rushes too hastily to a shallow grave...

...The weather is wild. The sea has a long laborious heave under the fluttering whitecaps. The hills are purple and the sky Payne's grey, folding on feathered goose-white. No ferries today. Two children skip and leap behind me down a blowy street in well worn anoraks and soaking jeans, singing a home-made song about, chocolate cake and chocolate ice-cream' and occasionally, 'chocolate milkshake', a song which gets lifted and carried by the wind into the day. And it belies me to bottle the day any further than that. So much is always missing from any picture I write, that can only be breathed and tasted on the tip of the tongue. It cannot be kept or pocketed or passed to another. It cannot be known more deeply nor sealed in an envelope to be enjoyed again. It is here alone for a fleeting day, and gone...

...The colour now is layers of steel-blue on ice-grey with a white patch caught in the sun where a swarm of seabirds have found food beneath the waves, and the hills are deep purple-grey where heavy clouds dump snow, and the strip of grass is still catching the sun and shining iridescent lime green, and the gale force winds are moving everything; clouds, birds, water, trees, towards the east. Today I not so much walk along as be picked up and carried along, with pieces of leaf and debris flying past at all levels, the whitecaps of the water skidding in their haste, the birds a white flash of feather. Even the lampposts are jiggling and bending to the wind. The roar in my ears; it all brings on a feeling of total disorientation where the sole focus is to put one step in front of the other and inch along the road to shelter. I can't see for the driving sleet, which screws up my eyes and directs them down. I can't hear for the roar of the wind. I can't feel for the numb battering of the elements. The storms have been unrelenting, today with icy sleet, which burns my cheeks and makes it impossible to look up from the pavement, sandblasting my skin in horizontal swipes. And then as fast as it came, the gales speed off across the Atlantic, spinning a trail of milk opal sky and water so calm and benign it flickers

its innocent eyelashes at me and tosses blue eyes skywards at any accusations of the battering it gave last night. Not a hint of a breeze, but the calm crisp air smelling of salt and sugar and the honey yellow on blue...

The ship pulls away from the shore and pushes into the white lace which reaches to the sky – not so much a curtain, as a curtain is too flat and is not the lace which fills every depth and breadth of the air, so soft and white; the houses of the shoreline fading to ghosts as we draw away. And the water and the sky can not be separated, both as still as each other, except perhaps, a few dark crossing patterns on the water's surface, cloaked in silence.