

Edinburgh is a Story

by Hannah Laverty, Edinburgh *Makar*

My father said he dreamed of these Edinburgh Streets
in his sleep. Another walking ghost, finding this city as it was
and can never be again. Memory is a shifting thing
like this city, it cannot be relied upon. Like Hutton discovered in the rock
'we have no vestige of a beginning—no prospect of an end'—John Playfair
We are layers upon layers, lives built upon lives.
You can, if you reach out, feel the dead. We don't let them lie
here in their shallow graves. We dig them up.

Offer them eternity in drunken tales.
They live on in the harr. They will run you down.
Come at you as sharp as the rain comes
as unrelenting. There is no let up on that.

This is an old place, growing older by the day,
and we struggle with all that, looking back.
There is darkness—an open pit. Light—cracks in the sky.

Good luck, avoiding our contradictions.

My dad said, he walked these streets in his sleep
but like dreams, these streets shift. If you spend too long away
you will find it has changed just enough. Just enough to remind you
that time has passed. Hutton in Salisbury Crags. Time showing itself—a deep abyss.

It can be a dangerous place
if you want to hold on to your certainty.
I can't be sure but looking back at ourselves
there is nothing here that offers that sort of comfort.

It is a hard place for faith. The imagination threatens you
like the weather here. We hold no truck with neat endings, it is a never-ending
still-to-be-done place. Cradled by seven hills, made in fire and water, and we
struggle still with the spark, and the urge to dampen it. Wind yer neck in.
We mock surety in the Flyting. We will make you cry
and then we will carry you up to see the word as it is...

Our doctors turned devil in the middle passage.
Our folk, midwives of the imperial dream.
Clerics greedy for Mission. Our great men who twisted
their enlightened thinking, to justify bloody classification.

We see you, for all our Dr Jekylls, Mr Hyde.
For all our clannish ways, radical minds
growing revolutionary in our city slums
we see you too, and on it goes, and on it goes...

Good luck hiding from our history, it is a gathering storm.

It is fire. It is water. It is action. A dying volcano throwing rock
making new pit, new vista, again and again. Don't think this is telt yet
our story is not a fixed thing. Don't come here for anything
as limiting as clarity, as reductive as forward momentum.

Our tale has a sting, it bites,
and you will hurt, if you try to lay us out
there is always a Close you did not account for,
snakes and ladders. Our steep hills will lead you down
as often as up. Watch your step! There are trips built in
they will catch you out. It is a brave soul
a rare soul even, that looks up to the sky
but if vision is found there, be sure we will claim it
as if it were our own.

They said once, that you could not stand a moment
in this city without touching genius. We smile at that
as if that was true of us all, as if it was true of any of us.
Our genius is a contested thing. Good luck to you,
if you want to claim it as pure light, be careful of that
there are traps built in. A muffling of a scream
the sudden fall from grace.

But at the shore you will find him, my father
looking out at that working sea. No place for a poet
it is a living place—a harsh living.

They threw their oyster shells out
and were caught in the catch. They met the world
and returned with it in their nets, dead and glistening
to be taken and displayed... Treasure the cruelty.

This city is not a place it is story of each life lived
and absorbed in the sandstone, in the rock.
Walk the streets now to sleepwalk them later
and again and again...

This is an old place being forever remade.
This is a new place forever being born.
Your time here will become another haunting
another story for us to tell
no beginning—no end.

Och! Edinburgh is not a place, it is a story.
It's 'Once upon a time...'
Rock resting on sediment. Life upon life.
Layer upon layer, upon layer
stories made to be remade.
Story told to be retold.
Story lost, story found.
And on it goes and on it goes.

Take it!
It's yours.
Take it, it's yours.