

On Rona

by Kathleen Jamie



Far over the horizon, out in the north Atlantic, where one might expect a clear run to Iceland or even Labrador, or, if anything, just a guano-streaked gull-slum, the island of Rona is one last green hill rising from the waves.

Or so they tell me. It's forty miles out, several hours sailing, but pretty soon I was prostrate on the aft deck, shivering under the wind- and engine-noise. From deep in my sick cocoon I heard the others calling they could see Rona on the horizon, then more salt, cold, immobilised ages passed until the boat slowed, the wind-rush dropped. When they cut the engines and sent down the anchor, I felt gratitude, but then the boat began wallowing. Worse than the leaping waves was that awful wallowing. There were guillemots, though their cries echoing as though they were stuck down a well, because we were in the shelter of a geo – a steep-sided inlet. Dark cliffs on either side, a rattling as the dinghy was lowered, and voices, one, a man's saying, 'let's get her ashore'.

I must have jumped and scrambled up the slabby rocks as per instructions, and when I met grass, collapsed on it. A green unheaving bosom. Blessed deep core of steady rock, reaching down, down.

Lay there till the nausea passed, and the shivering. Coming back to myself, I heard land-birds, starlings, rolled over, looked up at the sky, smelled a sweet smell, some kind of wildflower, thrift maybe. How lush the grass I lay on; that surprised me. Lush-long and harsh at once. The sky was high and bright with fleet clouds. Lay there, as slowly the sun and breeze dried my

waterproofs. Bob the skipper blew the boat's horn as he left, then Stuart and Jill appeared up from the shore, grinning, laden with gear, and we were on our own.



So, for a short while last summer we had Rona to ourselves. Alone in the encircling ocean, me and my companions Stuart Murray and Jill Harden. Stuart's of that sterling tradition of self-taught naturalists; a bird-man who says, 'believe what you see', but a prerequisite of that believing is a great accuracy of seeing, and a rough idea of what you're looking at. For him Rona was an old and beloved haunt, he had brought notes in his own hand from thirty years before; lists and columns of figures pertaining to puffin colonies, to black back gulls and storm petrels. Jill is an archaeologist and, like Stuart, not one to be fanciful. Though she knew most of the Scottish islands, Rona was new to her. It intrigued her because, despite being so remote, as we would say nowadays, when our sense of centre is different, it had been inhabited for centuries. On its south-facing side, there's a long abandoned village surrounded by a swirl of field systems, and a very early Christian chapel. These remains are themselves ancient, but who knows what lay beneath.

Those two, Jill and Stuart, were great observers. Late on the afternoon we arrived, when I'd recovered myself and we'd unpacked all the food and gear, I was out walking, when I caught sight of Stuart in characteristic pose. He was hunkered against an exposed rock that offered views of a cliff loud with guillemots and kittiwakes. He had binoculars in one hand and a notebook pressed open on his knee. I was back at the bothy when he arrived through the heavy door.

'Well?' I said, meaning, how goes the world?

'No' bad.'

'What were you doing?'

'Just having a damn good look.'

'And?'

'Kittiwakes have young, two sometimes.'

'That's good.'

'It *is* good. Maybe it's the start of a recovery. How many gulls have you seen?'

'Me?' I said. 'Gulls? Some. A few.' A few standing on a broken wall, kept a steely eye on us interlopers.

'Exactly. There were near a thousand pairs of Great Black Backs in 2001, chicks running everywhere. They've completely collapsed.'

Then Jill arrived back too, carrying her drawing board. Already she'd been down at the chapel, at the semi-subterranean village where she'd spend much of her time, brushing earth from stones with her strong hands, crawling into passages, shining a torch into gaps unlit for ages.

'Well?' I said again.

That merry smile. 'Ooh, *interesting*.'

'What were you doing?'

'Oh, just... having a look!'



Inhabited once, but now the island is returned to birds and seals; grey seals in thousands breed there, many seemed disinclined to leave. Every day, all around the shore were rocks softened by the shapes of seals; seals watched us from the waters. What we called 'the bothy' was properly a field station for a team of biologists who arrive every November to study the seals at pupping time. The bothy was a green shed, gale-proof and insulated, with two rooms, one with bunks and the other with a kitchen and table, and a container for well water. Every store and roofspace was crammed with equipment and supplies. There were spades and ropes and cupboards of tinned food, and a shelf of fantasy novels and thrillers, which says much about Rona in November. There was even a handwritten copy of Kipling's *If*, pinned to the wall. 'If you can keep your head

when all about you / are losing theirs...' But there was little fear of that. Although we were on our own and far from anywhere, Stuart and Jill were both relaxed and robust, old hands at this kind of thing.



That first night sea-sickness and sea air had done for me; come twilight, I dozed in my bunk a couple of hours, but when Jill came and said they were going to the village, I got up again, and like the others, made ready to go out. It was nearly midnight and we went out, because, well, how often do you get the chance to ramble round an uninhabited island, in the northern ocean, in summer – but also, there was something in particular we wanted to witness, which happened only in the darkest hours. Saturday night, and we had a date in town – but instead of glad-rags we pulled on winter waterproofs and hats, because the sea winds were persistent and cold.

The island is only a mile and half long, one fertile hill, two flat near-barren peninsulas, one north, one southwest, like two mismatching wings. There are no beaches, all is cliff, swooping now high, now low, and cut with many geos. The sea prowled into every geo; by night its sound seemed muted, though now and then the breeze brought whoops of seal-song.

Clouds were gathering, but that was good, Stuart said, the darker the better.

We walked westward up a slight rise, which at its crest, gave views down a long slope to the ragged peninsula called Scepull, which soon surrendered to the waves. A dusty, antique sort of light lay over the island, the sea was the colour of tarnished silver. The path led over a hillside, through a gap in an earthen dyke, whereupon the land began to rise and fall in ridges, like those of a vast scallop shell, waist high ridges between shadow-filled troughs, all with a pelt of long grass that shivered in the wind. The ridges curved downhill toward the sea. Hundreds of years ago oats or barley would have been

grown on them, but now, long overgrown, they had become sculptural, land art.

We passed through that strange estate, then arrived at the shell of St Ronan's chapel. Just four stone walls, all speckled with lichen, a low doorway, no roof at all. It faced the southern sea, and dug into the earth between the chapel and the cliffs a quarter mile away ovals and pockets of darkness, bound by overgrown turf walls – all that remained of the village. Beyond that, beat of the waves.

This was what we'd come for, something faraway and special, so we settled ourselves against the chapel wall to wait.



I think I fell asleep. Half asleep, but started awake because someone had laughed right in my ear. It came again – a stuttery laugh, in the air, a burst of high chatter, sudden as a match-strike. At once it was answered from within the wall itself. A shape tilted fast overhead and Jill beside me said 'look, that's one, they're coming'. Even as she spoke another spat of glee came conjured of the night air; now several dark shapes were darting about the chapel walls, quick like bats but not bats. They chattered as they flew, and from deep within the walls came rapid replies. Jill cast me a laughing look, and as more birds appeared from nowhere, to chase and chatter around us, we could feel the thrum of their wings on our hair.

You have to go a long way to find a breeding colony of Leach's fork-tailed petrels; to a handful of the furthest islands, St Kilda, the Flannens and here, Rona, where, on summer nights, they make the quick dash ashore. Mate calls mate, *dit-dit diddle-dit!*, rival pursues rival, one partner creeps back into his burrow-nest, allowing the other to be off on her small black wings, far out to sea.

The call, to our human ears, sounded like laughter. At the darkest hour, the walls, like a hive, were busy with birds. They're small as swifts, but their challenge isn't the ocean

storms, it's the short race ashore. Great Skuas – Bonxies – prey on them, god knows how, hence their dash by moonlight – except, they prefer no moon. They prefer the darkest of summer nights.

Surf, and seal-song, and petrel glee. By about two o'clock dawn was breathing onto the northeast sky again, and there was an urgent war-time feel in the air, of subterfuge and thrill, and exchanges of the birds' high rapid Morse.

Stuart had been prowling about the village, now he came back, a white-haired figure rounding the chapel end.

'It's wonderful!' I whispered. We stood in the chapel doorway, watching the dark bird-shapes chase above its old walls.

'How far out do they go?'

'Right to the edge of the continental shelf.'

'How far's that?'

'We're about halfway there. Another fifty miles.'

The birds jinked about our heads as we spoke; if they saw or heard us at all they paid no heed.

'Just *magic!*'

'There's no' many..'

'There's loads, look...'

But he shook his head. 'No there's no'.



Leach's petrels are rare and so, under European law, we're supposed to keep a weather eye on them. This was Stuart's task, he'd come to Rona to count their secret nests. He had done the same 10 years ago. Over the next days he'd do it again.

In the morning – though the sun had been high for hours – we again made our way through the fields-systems to the village. The ruins were all innocence by light of day; not a sound came from them, nor from the stones of the chapel. Human presence and retreat was all they admitted to; they denied all knowledge of the night's merriment.

We were blessed with the weather. I had the sensation I always have on Atlantic islands, in summertime, when the clouds pass quickly and light glints on the sea – a sense that the world is bringing itself into being moment by moment. Arising and passing away. Stuart, however meant business. From a rucksack he produced some bamboo canes and plastic tags. Then he handed me a Sony Walkman.

'Right' he said 'Give three blasts, about thirty seconds, then move on'.

'Where?'

'Anywhere that looks likely.'

Looks likely. We were standing by a curved waist-high wall, that contained an oval space now brightly carpeted with silverweed. Two stones jutted up from the wallhead like praying hands.

'Does that look likely?'

He shrugged. 'Try it'.

I held the tape-recorder to a tiny gap between stone and turf, and pressed the button. The tape whirred, then issued the *dit-dit diddly-dit* of a Leach's petrel, and at once, from under the stones, a muffled but outraged householder *dit diddle-ditted* right back again. It made me laugh, but Stuart wrote a figure on a plastic marker and rammed it into the turf.

'You do the rest of these walls. This'll be your patch, we'll do the village every day. Jill's taking the graveyard. I'll do the chapel dyke.'

'Does it work if you play them Abba?' I asked, but he just gave me a long look.

It was a joy. In sunshine and a businesslike breeze, I made my way around the old walls, pausing every few yards to play the tape and quickly learning the 'likely places'. Some burrows were neat round holes in the turf; the birds dig them out with their feet. If I saw such a burrow, I played the tape, then pressed my ear to the turf. Silence was disappointing, but every time a bird responded from within, it made me laugh again. If a burrow was live, if a bird was tucked inside, there

were tiny signs: broken grass stalks, a discrete dropping. You could sometimes smell their peculiar rich musty odour. Some burrows had no visible door, the response came from deep within green tussocks, as if from a fairy boudoir. Now and again the tape elicited some sexy Eartha Kitt purring – that was the female. Only males made the chatterbox call. Sometimes, if one piped up, he set off his neighbours too, so an old turf wall, warming in the sun, started up like a barrel organ.

I found myself saying ‘thank you’ and ‘sorry’, and began to feel like a door-to-door salesman, except that, if I looked behind me, there was the ocean, brightly shifting everywhere, meeting the sky in every shade of grey. A little farther uphill, around the chapel, Jill and Stuart worked at their own sections, leaning in to their own walls, as if listening to the heart-beats of stones.

But when we met to compare notes Stuart was again muttering darkly. It was not good, he said. Not like last time. Worrying.



Over the next ten days, he covered the entire island, from the lighthouse at the eastern cliff-top, down to the ends of both storm-scoured peninsulas. Sometimes Jill and I helped. We laid blue nylon ropes over the ground to mark off strips of land, so we could tell where we’d been when every stone began to look identical. Within the ropes, we crawled a few yards apart, playing our tapes under rocks and cairns. Sometimes birds answered, and soon I couldn’t see an unexplored rock without my heart giving a little leap – a likely place! We found bits of birds, a cradle of seals’ ribs, the exquisite skeleton of a starfish, no bigger than a thumbnail. It was a curious task, very intimate, to sail to a faraway island, then crawl over it on hands and knees, like pilgrims or penitents.

Every morning we worked the village, which held by far the greatest concentration of birds, and soon developed a feel

for the colony’s dynamic. If a bird who’d replied every day for three days was suddenly absent, he got a cross against his number in my notebook, and I knew that he’d slipped out to sea in the small hours. Gone from the chapel, from the village. A wing and a prayer. Now his mate would be sitting meekly on her single egg, a dark eye in the darkness within the dyke.



While Stuart spoke to the birds, Jill communed with stones. First she concentrated on St Ronan’s chapel. It’s just a shell now, the stones of its western gable much collapsed. It stands at the southern wall of an enclosure, and within the enclosure is a little graveyard, very old. The turf has risen over the centuries, so the humble gravestones, hewn of the sparkly island feldspar, tilt this way and that like little sinking ships.

Nothing is known of St Ronan but his name, which, oddly, means ‘little seal’ – as if he’d been a Rona selkie who’d swapped his seal skin for the habit of a monk. Doubtless he was one of the early Scots-Irish monks, who sailed from his monastery to seek ‘a desert place in the sea’, where he could live a life of austerity and prayer. Hundreds of years later, the people built the chapel in his name, and buried their dead beside it. Now those people are gone too, their graveyard is a poignant place.

But suddenly it was *en fête*. This was Jill’s doing. One day she went around the graveyard and festooned it with a little orange flags on wires, one beside every stone, and the flags snapped in the breeze, so the cemetery seemed to be celebrating a day of the dead. She was plotting the grave markers on a chart; the yellow flags helped her see them as she measured their distance from a baseline: a measuring tape strung across the enclosure wall to wall. She was doing this because the stones were going missing. By studying black and white photographs from the 1930s or ’50s she could tell that the stone crosses were being quietly stolen away and, by dint of wind and weather, the medieval chapel was ever more collapsed. It troubled her.

The chapel, village and all the surrounding fields are a Scheduled Ancient Monument, in the care of the state, but the state is far away and has more pressing concerns. So Jill said, 'we can at least plot them, so there's a record of what there was.' Really, she'd like to get people out here, experts from official agencies, an architect, or a drystone dyker, who could do some discrete shoring up and save the chapel from complete ruination.

One bright afternoon I held measuring poles and called out the numbers she needed, while Jill, a black baseball-cap pulled over her thick hair, bent over a board and mapped the people's graves.

Of course it made us think of them. The long dead people whose graves we knelt on. We called them 'them' and spoke about them every day. How did they live, what were their lives like, people who'd managed for generations, out here alone in the sea?

The Rona people weren't unique, they were Gaels; part of the wider culture of the Western Isles and, as Jill kept reminding us, the sea then was a conduit, not a barrier. Nonetheless they lived a long way from any neighbours, had to fend for themselves, with their fields and few cattle and sea birds' eggs. But by the time Martin Martin wrote his travel journal of the Western Isles, in 1695, the people were already gone. 'That ancient race', he called them, 'perfectly ignorant of most of those vices that abound in the world', and, when you wander round their village and look out at the uninterrupted sea, you know why.

Ronan's name is known, but the names of those buried under the turf are lost, save for one tantalising detail, which Martin gives. The Rona people, he says, 'took their surname from the colour of the sky, rainbow and clouds.'

'Such *work*', Jill would say, as we strolled through the overgrown fields. When I asked her who had first come to Rona, if it were Neolithic or Bronze Age people or what, she just smiled and said, 'Ooh, we don't know, do we?' The sea

may have been the highway then, but it was still a long way to venture in a dug-out boat.

The work indeed. All those acres of undulating fields, built up by hand of the scant earth and seaweed. Outside the enclosing dyke, lay the rest of the island, not a mile and a half long, which the people must have known down to every blade of grass, every stone. They must have felt acutely the turning of the seasons, the need to lay down stores and supplies, because summer was fleeting. We arrived in early July, when bog cotton was in bloom, soft white tufts facing into the wind. Two weeks later, its seeds clung to rocks and grasses, or were out to sea and lost.



Daily, our sense of time slowed, days expanded like a wing. The days were long in the best, high-summer sense; at night we put up storm shutters on the bothy to make it dark enough to sleep. Time was clouds passing, a sudden squall, a shift in the wind. Often we wondered what it would do to your mind if you were born here, and lived your whole life within this small compass. To be named for the sky or the rainbow, and live in constant sight and sound of the sea. After a mere fortnight I felt lighter inside, as though my bones were turning to flutes.



St Ronan rode to Rona on the back of a sea-monster, so the legend says. Monster or boat, he'd have jumped ashore giving prayers of thanks, sometime in the eighth century.

Whether he was really alone, as romanticists would have it, or whether others came with him – monks, lay penitents, men without women, – well, as Jill would say, we don't know, do we? Surely it would have taken more than one to do the spadework; even saints must eat. And if there were people on Rona already, watching as the Christians' boat drew nearer – we don't know that either.

But we know what the saint sought, because on Rona – too far away to have been bothered with, to have been destroyed by Reformation zeal, there survives something unique. It's within the chapel, and is entered through a square of darkness low on the eastern gable, a portal with a lintel of white quartz, as though it were Neolithic. You have to crawl to enter, but once inside you can stand freely. At first it seems wholly dark, and it smells of damp earth, but as your eyes adjust, stars of daylight begin to spangle here and there overhead, where, over the many centuries, the stones have slipped a little; so after a while, it's like being in a wild planetarium.

Darkness, earth... and a sudden quiet: no wind or surf; you find yourself in a place from which all the distracting world is banned. Then you see the stonework. It is beautifully made, and has stood for 1,200 years. A low stone altar stands against the east wall. So there is one thing we know of the saint – he had a feel for stone; strong hands. Or someone did. This is what he made for himself; having sailed to this island of sea-light and sky and seals and crying birds – a world-denying cell.

Two or three times, when Stuart was inquiring of the birds, and Jill of stones, I crept into the oratory, and waited till my eyes adjusted to the low light. I went warily, because a fulmar had made her nest in a corner; too close and she'd spit. A fulmar guarding the saint's cell, and it was strange to think there were Leach's petrels secreted in the walls. Petrels, named for St Peter, who walked on water, had colonised a cell built by a saint named for a seal.

I crept in just to wonder what he did in there, Ronan; to imagine him right there, in front of the altar, wrapped in darkness, rapt in prayer, closed off from the sensory world, the better to connect with – what?



I say we had the island to ourselves, but of course that's nonsense. There were the seals, and thousands of puffins, and colonies of

terns on the low rocks, forever rising against some fresh outrage, and down among the rock-pools, shags' slatternly nests.

One evening six swifts appeared, circled above the bothy and then vanished again. A party of Risso's dolphins arrived out of the blue, spent half an hour feeding just off the south side, then they too went on their way. The time of thrift had passed; every day we met a flock of crossbills, of all things, which twittered round the island, feeding on thrift seeds. Crossbills are birds of the northern pine forest, but nary a pine tree here, and long sea miles to travel before they saw one again. There were about a hundred; the males were bright red, and the females brown, so when they all flew by, they were like embers blown from a bonfire.

And although no inhabited land was in sight, we weren't even truly alone in the ocean. Ten miles west, like the moon to Rona's fertile earth, rose the barren rock of Sula Sgeir, – a gannet factory. And there was always the sense of the 'ancient race'. Personally, if ever I felt remote or cut off, it wasn't from the mainland far over the horizon, but from the abandoned village a quarter mile away. There was something sweetly domestic and recognizable about those few rickles of stones, the humble chapel. We ate packet soups and tinned fruit, looking through the window at the relics of a lost intelligence, the long-forsaken fields, gilded in evening light.



Cleared of dishes of an evening the bothy table accumulated notebooks and bird reports, archaeological monographs, plans and photographs. One evening, maybe a week after we'd arrived, Stuart was sitting opposite Jill and me, head bowed, noting figures and tapping a calculator, calibrating the figures his field work was producing. He'd covered about half the island with his tapes. Abruptly he said, 'there's some consistency emerging here. Almost 40% decline, I think, all over. And very suddenly.'

We paused. We all loved the Leach's petrels: their midnight flit, the back-chat they gave us from their burrows.

'That's bad.' said Jill.

'Why though?' I asked, but Stuart didn't answer.

'Maybe they get eaten...' Jill said, but he shook his head.

'I'm sure it's not predators. Bonxies get the blame but I'm sure its not just that.'

'What then?' Again he shook his head.

'But you must have some idea' I persisted. 'Is it to do with climate change, with the ocean; is there not enough food? What *do* they eat, anyway?'

'Zooplankton, larval-stage fish... creepy-crawly things...'

'Plankton? We're not running out of plankton, are we?'

This time Stuart put down his pencil, took off his glasses and pinched his eyes.

'I *don't know*. But *something's* going on out there.'



Stuart often said there was no such thing as 'natural harmony'. It was a dynamic. Populations expand, then crash. Mysterious things happen; catastrophic things sometimes, on the island, everywhere. Nothing stays the same.

Our attitude to the village houses we explored and the fields we walked was tempered by a particular piece of knowledge, this: the Rona people hadn't simply quit their tenancy and sailed away to a life less isolated. Neither had they been forcibly cleared. The village was abandoned because the people had died, all wiped out, suddenly.

It happened about 1680. Their fate was discovered because of a shipwreck. A man called McLeod, his wife and a 'good crew' were heading home from St Kilda to Harris, but a storm blew up which drove them a hundred miles north until they were cast up on the rocks of Rona. They managed to save themselves and some provisions, but their boat was destroyed. They'd have been hoping for help, but what they found were corpses.

What had happened is unsure, the stories are peculiar.

A plague of rats had somehow swarmed ashore, and devoured the people's supplies. Pirates had stolen their bull. No boat had come north from Lewis that year, which might have brought supplies. These calamities, compounded, were too much. But with everyone dead, who was left to bear witness?

The shipwrecked party buried the bodies, and overwintered, and in Spring, fashioned a new boat which they sailed home to Harris, to arrive like revenants. That was then. No-one has really lived on Rona since.



'Come and look at this stonework', said Jill, on our next to last day.

She led us through the village to its southern edge toward some more curved low walls, built, as were all the dwelling houses, of stone and turf. To my untrained eye the walls looked no different to the others, but Jill beckoned us to follow her as she jumped down into a curving sort of trench. Then she kneeled at the entrance of a short passageway about four feet long. There, she brushed the side wall with her hand. Its stones were close-packed and neat.

'See how different this stonework is to the rest, how thick? This wall's about three-feet thick. Solid. But now, come and look here.'

From the doorway, she followed the external wall a few yards rightward, to a place where it had partially collapsed. There was a hole just big enough to peer into. She handed over her torch and told us to look through the gap. It was like spying through a letterbox into a hallway beyond.

'It's hollow!'

'Caved in, I think.' She took the torch herself and shone the light into the gap within the wall, so the light played along a particular stone, which was tilted with one end in the earth.

'See that stone? If that's a lintel, and if all that stuff that looks like a floor is actually accumulation debris, then we're looking at a passageway enclosed within two walls. Now come up here...'

She climbed nimbly up onto the wallhead, which stood above us on an uneven platform of flat stones.

'This is its roof, a bit caved in...'

'You're standing on the roof...?'

'...of a cell-like structure. Which is a side chamber to that bigger interior, the one that first passageway entered into. This chamber is contained within the thickness of the wall. Maybe it was a sleeping area. All of this' – she gestured around her – 'was a very thick-walled circular structure...'

'That means it's old?'

'Ooh, two thousand years? But what's happened is that new people have come and changed it to suit themselves. So, jump down here again, come inside... and you have a rectangular room, cut into the pre-existing round structure, see? This was done much, much later... look how the stonework here's not very well made, really, compared to where we just were...'

'Two thousand years? You mean when the Christians came, there was already a thousand years of settlement... ?'

Jill smiled. 'Could have been people here, or they could have come and gone... more than once.'

'Long periods of abandonment...?'

'Maybe centuries...'

'Perhaps that's what this is.' I said, meaning that perhaps some day in the future, when change unimaginable has come, a few acres far out in the Atlantic might be pressed into service again.



Tonight, at home, with the blinds closed against winter dark, I wonder what Rona is like right now. The Leach's petrels, new colonisers of the village, will be away far down into the

Southern Atlantic. The cliffs will be empty too, the puffins and guillemots dispersed out to sea. Skuas also, all headed south. As for the crossbills, heaven knows. One day they must simply have upped sticks and gone, all at once, twittering over the waves.

As I write the shipping forecast gives '...increasing severe gale force nine later', but that's nothing. Some storm waves are so big they sweep clean over the peninsula of Fianius. I'd like to witness Rona in winter – short terse days, the sea roar, nights under the wheel of the stars. You'd soon find out why the houses were dug down into the insulating earth.

Many people, including the Stornoway coastguard, knew we were on Rona, and we had radios, but still, that last morning, as we cleared the bothy and prepared to leave, we all three kept glancing at the horizon. Nothing was said, but only when the boat appeared, a steady gleam in the south east, did we relax. When it did, that was our signal. The wind was rising, skipper wouldn't want to hang about, so we began to heft all the sea bags, sleeping bags, gas bottles, tape recorders and notebooks back down the hillside to the geo, where black rocks tilted to the waves.