

RON DRUMMOND

Broken Seashells

lost cause

I could begin almost anywhere. With the sound of ocean surf crashing in the sky high above a landlocked Hebridean valley. With a solo flute's haunted descent through my boyhood ears into some wide-open space inside me. With the utter silence of the midnight view from a snow-covered school desk in the Colorado Rockies.

Anywhere, that is, that's deep in the blood.

Blood and song are places, capacious enough to hold islands and mountain ranges and forgotten dreams. The river running through me is unbroken, has flowed continuously through ten thousand foremothers to surge down my tributary veins. Their blood is the river in which my forefathers swim, a river compounded over millennia and thrumming with the myriad feeling-tones of what it is to be alive.

Some call it ancestral memory. Everyone has it, though many are deaf to it. Even those alert to the call don't always hear it clearly, and even when clear it's redolent of far distance, a melody heard in a dream. In order to hear it at all, or to hear more of it, or to hear it in new ways, ways that brighten the inner eye and open up the sky, sometimes we seek out those who can tap into the blood's music and sing it back to us. Call us home.

The landscape of deep blood is vast. It's the place from where one can best understand the music of the British band Jethro Tull. When I hear Tull's music, it feels like blood calling to blood. Because I share the ethnic heritage (full-blooded Scotsman) of the band's singer/songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Ian Anderson, I've sometimes wondered if that makes me particularly sensitive to the ancestral memory I hear in his music. Neither of us need go back more than fifty or a hundred generations before we recross the Channel and begin retracing the ten-thousand-generations-long road across continents and oceans that leads in time far out of mind to every soul's dark (un)common Eve and the old man watching over her. Despite the vividness of his own blood's last thousand years—the period that constitutes his ethnic identity and point of departure—Anderson includes everyone who might hear him when he sings in “Another Christmas Song” (from 1989's *Rock Island*):

*Sharp ears are tuned in to the drones and chanters warming,
Mist blowing round some headland, somewhere in your memory.
Everyone is from somewhere —
even if you've never been there.
So take a minute to remember the part of you
that might be the old man calling me.*

Ethnic solidarity leads to universal commonality, the latter wrapped inside the former, like a gift—put that under your tree! And between the commonality of our deepest roots and our simply being alive together in the here and now, the door of ethnic specificity opens both ways. Ancestral memory is meaningless apart from its presence *in* the present; it adds depth to our field of vision, casts shadows or clears them away, pricks up more than our ears at the echo answering our call.

One morning two winters ago, I paused in a mountain valley on the Isle of Skye, a place I had never been before and would soon leave. With no sign of the human race anywhere around me except the dirt path beneath my feet, I listened to the only sound there was—a high keening that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. For the longest moment I couldn't fathom what was causing the sound, until suddenly I realized it was all the surf crashing on all the beaches of Skye, combined with the whispering of all the tiny brooks that crisscrossed the valley floor.

Later, training northeast across the Highlands, I recalled where I had heard that sound before. On Jethro Tull's classic 1972 album *Thick as a Brick*, Ian Anderson sings:

*The legends (worded in the ancient tribal hymn)
lie cradled in the seagull's call.
And all the promises they made
are ground beneath the sadist's fall.
The poet and the wise man stand behind the gun,
and signal for the crack of dawn:
Light the sun.*

Seven years later, for the 1979 album *Stormwatch*, Anderson wrote a song called "Dun Ringill," named after Skye's ancient cliffside fortress. With its closely meshed acoustic guitars, the song begins and ends with the sound of seagulls calling, thus nesting it in the lyrical universe of *Thick as a Brick*. Seeking to heal the primal rift essayed on that earlier album, to disenfranchise the cosmological prerogatives if not the arrogance of wise men and poets, and adopting variable guises from old god to unnamed observer, Anderson sings of

*Clear light on a slick palm
as I mis-deal the day.
Slip the night from a shaved pack
make a marked card play.
Call twilight hours down
from a heaven home
high above the highest bidder
for the good Lord's throne.
In the wee hours I'll meet you
down by Dun Ringill —
we'll watch the old gods play
by Dun Ringill.*

Surging through "Dun Ringill" is a sound like the blend of waters I heard keening in the skies over Skye, a sound unchanged since time out of mind. If during the wee hours of the morning you were to stand in that valley not far from Dun Ringill, you might imagine that what you're hearing is the sound of twilight falling from heaven.