

GRASS IS GREENER?

TOM MURRAY

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

Just another day. A ray or two of sun, lines of rain and wind swirling the yard like the farmer's breath as he throws out the seed on the harsh ground.

Just another day except that it isn't. If you look carefully enough and not distracted by the rattle of cows inside the huge barns that dominate the yard, or by the tractor impatiently coughing diesel, and the farmer cursing the world for being the world, something...So much noise, and the repetitive greedy peck of the chickens.

There it is.

One of the chickens stands still amongst her circling hungry companions, hardly it seems aware of the seed scattered at her feet.

What is she looking at?

Follow her gaze and...The open yard gate.

What is she doing now but following her own gaze one slow step at a time, with occasionally a backwards glance at the rest of the oblivious chickens?

She has reached the gate and stands on its border with the road beyond. No-one has noticed. The other chickens still gorging themselves. The farmer still cursing and heading in for his breakfast.

Now if you travelled down that road every day or even the occasional day you might have seen that chicken before standing there or more likely looking as if it was dancing on the spot, its head stretching to glimpse the field beyond the wall on the other side of the road. You

might catch its eye focusing on the gap in the wall where the stones had worn away and crumbled. Maybe you wondered if it was wondering about the ‘grass is greener.’ Or you might have concluded that it was a dance of fear at the roar and suddenness of the cars on the road. You might have thought about shouting, ‘run. Take a chance. Go for it.’ And then carried on not giving it another second of your time.

On this day if you had roared past the open gate, you might have caught out of the corner of your eye another chicken slowly and carefully joining the first at the gate.

This one had been watching all along even while peck pecking at the seed.

Watching to see if there really is an invisible barrier at the gate’s border. Hoping that the first chicken will make the leap before it follows.

The first chicken though only dances on the border and stares across at the gap in the wall and the hint of green beyond.

Then the second chicken gets too close, and the dance pushes it against the border. It feels a rush of fear as one leg then two stumbles across the border and onto the road.

The dancing stops.

There is no invisible barrier.

Now again if you can understand chicken language then the second chicken could have been saying ‘come on’ as it ventures further out onto the road. If that’s what it says, then a shake of its head from the first gives the answer. A screech of a warning confirms its decision as a car roars down the road, the second chicken directly in its path.

And I suppose more decisions are made on the spur of the moment or with the spur of danger than curiosity or hope. Maybe all are mixed in so much that you can never separate them out.

The second chicken makes the decision without thinking maybe only following something deep inside that had risen to the surface, and dashes to the other side. The car churns up the road and splatters the second chicken with stones and fear and wondering ‘is it too late to go back.’

When the dust settles the first chicken stands, no longer dancing, at the border of the gate. No chicken language this time just a look between them as the farmer emerges from the farmhouse and heads for the barn and the restless cows. Maybe they sense that it isn’t an everyday day.

There is still time before the farmer looks across and catches the chicken standing at the gate.

But both chickens know that decisions have been made. For the first chicken the moment has come and gone, and she turns back into the group and pecks at what remains of the seed.

When she turns to glance at the border of the gate the second chicken is disappearing through the gap in the wall to the field beyond.

Tom Murray's stories and poems have been published in magazines and anthologies in Scotland and wider afield, his plays widely performed. He is currently a Poetry Ambassador for the Scottish Poetry Library.