Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Naming the Bones

Written by Louise Welsh

Published by Canongate Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

NAMING THE BONES

LOUISE WELSH



CANONGATE

Edinburgh · London · New York · Melbourne

Published by Canongate Books in 2010

1

Copyright © Louise Welsh, 2010
The moral right of the author has been asserted

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by
Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street,
Edinburgh EH1 1TE

www.meetatthegate.com

'In Memoriam I.K.' by George Mackay Brown
reproduced with kind permission by The Estate
of George Mackay Brown.

Extract of 'Punishment' taken from *North* © Seamus Heaney
and reproduced by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84767 255 1

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD



For Clare Connelly and Lauchlin Bell

That one should leave The Green Wood suddenly
In the good comrade-time of youth
And clothed in the first coat of truth
Set out on an uncharted sea

Who'll ever know what star
Summoned him, what mysterious shell
Locked in his ear that music and that spell
And what grave ship was waiting for him there?

The greenwood empties soon of leaf and song.
Truth turns to pain. Our coats grow sere.
Barren the comings and goings on this shore.
He anchors off The Island of the Young.

'In Memoriam I.K.'
George Mackay Brown

Part One

Edinburgh & Glasgow

Chapter One

MURRAY WATSON SLIT the seal on the cardboard box in front of him and started to sort through the remnants of a life. He lifted a handful of papers and carefully splayed them across the desk. Pages of foolscap, blue-tinted writing paper, leaves torn from school jotters, stationery printed with the address of a London hotel. Some of it was covered in close-packed handwriting, like a convict's letters home. Others were bare save for a few words or phrases.

James Laing stepped out into an ordinary day.

Nothing could have prepared James for the . . .

James Laing was an ordinary man who inhabited a . . .

The creature stared down on James with its one ghastly fish eye. It winked.

Murray laughed, a sudden bark in the empty room. Christ, it had better get more interesting than this or he was in trouble. He reached into the pile and slid out a page at random. It was a picture, a naïve drawing done in green felt-tip of a

woman with a triangular dress for a body. Her stick arms were long and snaking. They waved up into a sky strewn with sharp-angled stars; the left corner presided over by a pipe-smoking crescent moon, the right by a broadly smiling sun. No signature. It was crap, the kind of doodle that deserved to be crumpled into a ball and fired into the bin. But if it had been deliberately kept, it was a moment, a clue to a life.

He reached back into the box and pulled out another bundle of papers, looking for notebooks, something substantial, not wanting to save the best till last, though he had time to be patient.

Pages of figures and subtractions, money owed, rent due, monies promised. A trio of Tarot cards; the Fool poised jauntily on the edge of a precipice, Death triumphant on horseback, skull face grinning behind his visor, the Moon a pale beauty dressed in white leading a two-headed hound on a silver leash. A napkin from a café, printed pink on white *Aida's,* a faint stain slopped across its edge – frothy coffee served in a glass cup. A newspaper cutting of a smiling yet serious man running a comb through his side parting; the same man, billiard-ball smooth and miserable on his hirsute double's left side. *Are you worried about hair loss?* The solution to baldness carelessly cut through and on the other side a listing for a happening in the Grassmarket. No photograph, just the names, date and time. *Archie Lunan, Bobby Robb and Christie Graves, 7.30pm on Sunday 25th September at The Last Drop.*

Then Murray struck gold, an old red corduroy address book held together by a withered elastic band and cramped with script. A diary would have been better, but Archie wasn't the diary-keeping kind. Murray opened the book and flicked through its pages. Initials, nicknames, first names or surnames, no one was awarded both.

Danny
Denny
Bobby Boy
Ruby!
I thought I saw you walking by the shore

Lists of names with the odd phrase scribbled underneath. There was no attempt at alphabetisation. He was getting glimpses already, a shambles of a life, but it had produced more than most of the men that went sober to their desks at nine every morning.

Ramie
Moon
Jessa * **
Diana the huntress, Persephone hidden, names can bless or curse unbidden.

Murray would have liked photographs. He'd seen some already, of course. The orange-tinted close-up of Archie that showed him thin and bestraggled, something like an unhinged Jesus, his hands knuckled threateningly around his features, as if preparing to tear the face from his head. It was all art and shadows. The other snaps came from a *Glasgow Herald* feature on Professor James's group that Murray had managed to pull from the newspaper's archive. Archie always in the background caught in a laugh, squinting against the sky; Archie cupping a cigarette to his mouth, the wind blowing his fringe across his eyes. It would be good to have one of him as a boy, when his features were still fine.

Murray pulled himself up. He was in danger of falling into an amateur's trap, looking for what he wished for

rather than what was there. He hadn't slept much the night before. His mind had got into one of those loops that occasionally infected him, information bouncing around in his brain, like the crazy lines on his computer screensaver. He'd made a cup of tea in the early hours of the morning and drunk it at the fold-down shelf that served as a table in the galley kitchen of his small flat, trying to empty his brain and think of nothing but the plain white cup cradled in his hand.

He would divide the contents of the box into three piles – interesting, possible and dross – cataloguing as he went. Once he'd done that he could get caught up in details, pick at the minutiae that might unravel the tangled knot of Archie's life.

Murray had handled originals many times. Valuable documents that you had to sign for then glove up to protect them from the oils and acids that lived in the whorls of your fingertips, but he'd never been the first on the scene before, the explorer cracking open the wall to the tomb. He lifted an unsent letter from the box, black ballpoint on white paper.

> *Bobby*
> *For God's sake, find me some of the old!*
> *We'll wait for you at Achnacroish pier on Saturday.*
> *Yours, closer than an eye,*
> *Archie*

No date, no location, but gold. Murray put it in the important pile, then took out his laptop, fired it up and started listing exactly what he had. He picked up a discarded bus ticket to Oban, for some reason remembering a hymn they'd sung at Sunday school.

God sees the little sparrow fall,
it meets His tender view;

Even this simple ticket might have the power to reveal something, but he put it in the dross pile all the same.

Murray's interest in Archie Lunan had started at the age of sixteen with a slim paperback. He could still remember the moment he saw it jutting out from a box of unsorted stock on the floor of a second-hand bookshop. It was the cover that drew him, a tangerine-tinted studio shot of a thin man with shadows for eyes. Murray had known nothing about Lunan's poetry or his ill-starred life, but he had to have the book.

'Looks like a baby-killer, doesn't he?' The man behind the counter had said when Murray handed over his fifty pence. 'Still, that was the seventies for you, a lot of it about.'

Once he owned the book Murray had been strangely indifferent to its contents, almost as if he were afraid they might be a let-down. He'd propped it on the chest of drawers in the bedroom he shared with his brother until eleven-year-old Jack had complained to their dad that the man's non-existent eyes were staring at him and Murray had been ordered to put it somewhere where it wouldn't give people nightmares.

He'd rediscovered the book the following year, when he was packing to go to university, and thrown it in his rucksack, almost on a whim. The paperback had languished on the under-stocked bookshelf in his bed-sit through freshers' week and into most of the following year. It was exam time, a long night into studying, when he'd found himself reaching for the poems. Murray supposed, when he

bothered to think about it, that he was looking for a distraction. If so, he'd found one. He'd sat at his desk reading and re-reading Archie Lunan's first and only poetry collection until morning. It was an enchantment which had quietly shadowed Dr Murray Watson in his toil through academe, and now at last he was free to steep himself in it.

It was after six when Murray stepped out from the National Library. Somewhere a piper was hoiching out a tune for the tourists. The screech of the bagpipes cut in and out of the traffic sounds; the grumble of car engines, the low diesel growl of taxis and unoiled shriek of bus brakes. The noise and August brightness were an assault after the gloom of the small back room. He took his sunglasses from their case and swapped them for his everyday pair. A seagull careened into the middle of the road, diving towards a discarded poke of chips. Murray admired the bird's near-vertical take-off as it swooped up into the air narrowly missing a bus, its prize clamped firmly in its beak.

It dawned on him that he was hungry. He hadn't eaten since the Twix he'd had for breakfast on the Glasgow to Edinburgh Express early that morning. He crossed the street, pausing to buy a *Big Issue* from a neat-pressed vendor who readjusted his baseball cap when Murray declined his change. There was a faint scent of salt in the breeze blowing through the city from the Firth of Forth. It suited Murray's mood. His mind still half on the island where Archie had been born, Murray began to walk briskly towards the city centre. The Edinburgh Fringe was well under way. The town had taken on the atmosphere of a medieval fête and it was hard negotiating a path through the crush of tourists, rival ghost-tour operators, performers and temporary street stalls that swamped the High Street. He sidestepped the

spit-spattled Heart of Midlothian, at the same time avoiding a masked Death, cowled in unseasonably warm black velvet. On other days the crush and stretched smiles of performers trumpeting their shows might have irritated Murray, but today their edge of cheerful hysteria seemed to echo his own optimism. He turned into Cockburn Street, his feet unconsciously stepping to the rhythm of a busking drum troupe, each stride on the beat, precise as a policeman on duty at an Orange Walk. Murray accepted leaflets shoved at him for shows he had no intention of seeing, still thinking about the papers in the box, and keeping his eyes peeled for a chippy.

In the end he settled for pie and beans washed down by a pint of 80/- in the Doric. He ate at one of the high stools by the bar, his eyes fixed on the television mounted on the wall above the gantry, watching the newsreader relaying headlines he couldn't hear. The screen flashed to soldiers in desert fatigues on patrol then to a crease-eyed correspondent packed into a flak jacket, the background behind him half sand, half blue sky, like a child's what-I-did-on-my-holiday drawing.

Murray slid his hand into his rucksack, brought out his notebook and read again the names he had copied from the red corduroy address book, wishing to God it had been a diary.

Tamsker
Saffron
Ray – will you be my sunshine?

It was a misnomer to call it an address book. It had contained no addresses, no telephone numbers, simply lists of unfamiliar names occasionally accompanied by phrases of nonsense. If

he knew the identity of even one of them he'd have something to work with, but he was clueless, the knot still pulled tight. Murray folded the words back into his pocket, feeling the pleasure of possession, the secret thrill of a man on the brink of a discovery that might yet elude him.

His plate was cleared, his pint nearly done. He tipped it back and placed the empty glass on the bar, shaking his head when the barman asked him if he'd like another. It was time to go and do his duty.

Chapter Two

THERE WAS ALREADY a crush of people beyond the glass front of the Fruitmarket Gallery. Murray eyed them as he made his way towards the entrance. He couldn't see the exhibits from here, but the bar was busy. He paused and took in the exhibition poster, the name JACK WATSON shining out at him from the trio of artists. He lingered outside, savouring the rightness of it all, suddenly wishing he'd bought a camera so he could record the event for posterity. When he looked up he noticed a young woman wearing an orange dress gathered in curious origami folds gazing at him from beyond the glass. Murray half returned her smile then quick-glanced away. He ran a hand through his hair and fumbled in his pocket for the ticket Lyn had sent him, getting a sudden vision of it tucked inside last month's *New York Review of Books* somewhere midway down in the pile of papers that had colonised his couch. He hesitated for a moment then stepped from the damp coolness of the bridge-shadowed street into the warm hubbub of bodies and chatter, steeling himself for the embarrassment of getting Lyn or Jack to vouch for him. But no one challenged his right to be there. Murray wondered, as he helped himself to a glass of red and a leaflet explaining the artists' intentions, how many

people were here to view the art and how many had been drawn in by the vision of a free bar.

He was scanning the paper for Jack's name as he turned, glass in hand. His rucksack jarred and a little wine slopped onto his cuff. 'God, I'm sorry.'

The woman he had jolted glanced down at the clever folds of her dress.

'You're fine, no harm done.'

'Are you sure?' Her arms were bare and freckled, her nails painted the same tangy colour as the fabric. Murray realised that he was staring at the point in her midriff where the folds met and felt his face flush. 'I wouldn't want to spoil your dress, it looks expensive.'

She laughed. There was a small scar in the centre of her upper lip where long ago an operation had left its mark.

'It was that.' She had a Northern Irish accent, the kind that sometimes drew comparisons between harsh politics and harsh brogues. It sounded cool and amused. 'You're here to see Jack.'

Murray realised he was still wearing his sunglasses and took them off. The world blended into smudged brightness and the girl's face slipped out of focus. He fumbled for his other pair, trying not to squint.

'I guess that's why we're all here.' He found his specs and slid them on. Everything sharpened. He held out his hand. 'I'm Jack's brother, Murray.'

'I know.' She took his hand and shook it. 'Cressida. You don't remember me, do you?'

Not for the first time Murray wished his brain were as efficient as his computer. How could he retain a minutia of dates, form and verse but dispense with the memory of a good-looking woman? He tried to sound sincere.

'I remember your face, but not when we met.'

Cressida laughed again.

'You're a terrible liar. Jack's up the stairs, his pictures are amazing. Have you seen them yet?'

'No.' He recalled something Lyn had said and repeated it. 'I find openings aren't the best time to see the exhibition. I just pay my respects then come back when it's quieter and I can explore what's on show properly.'

To his own ears the spiel sounded as stilted as one of his students tripping out a half-understood argument they'd read in a book, but Cressida nodded.

'I see your point. But all the same, you must be keen to get a glimpse of them, especially with the subject matter and all.' She'd gone serious, but now she rewarded him with another smile. 'You know what might help?'

'What?'

'Do you mind?' She reached up and took his specs from his nose, placing him back in a landscape of lights and smearing colour. He heard the quick exhalation as she misted his lenses with her breath then caught the orange flare of her dress as she rubbed them against its hem. 'Now you can really see what's going on.'

She returned them and the world slid back into focus just as a man in artfully distressed jeans and a blue and white striped shirt that for all its lack of red put Murray in mind of the Union Jack emerged from the press of people and wrapped an arm around Cressida.

'Steven.' She lifted her face to him and he kissed her on each cheek, his lips making contact with her skin, his arms pressing her into a clinch that made one of her feet leave the ground.

'You clever girl. It's amazing, by far the best thing you've done.'

Murray took the bundle of leaflets from his pocket, cursing his own ignorance and giving the couple the chance to escape. The exhibition guide was sandwiched between an advert for *Richard the Turd*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's classic set in a toilet, and a flyer for the *Ladyboys of Bangkok*, the name *Cressida Reeves* printed just above Jack's. Why hadn't it occurred to him that this woman in her spectacular dress might be one of the trio on show?

Cressida extricated herself from the hug.

'Steven Hastings, this is Murray Watson, Jack Watson's brother.'

'Jack?'

Steven rolled the name in his mouth, as if tasting it for the first time and unsure of the flavour. Cressida met his vagueness with a stab of irritation.

'You know Jack. He's one of my fellow exhibitors, we were at college together.'

'Ah yes, *Jack*. The flayed corpse.'

Murray winced at the memory of Jack's degree show, but he could remember Cressida now. Her hair had been shorter then, her thrift-shop-chic outfit tighter and darker than what she was wearing today. Jack had been impressed and maybe a little jealous. She'd won a prize, a big one, though Murray couldn't remember what. He steadied his gaze at Steven.

'He's moved on since then.'

'Glad to hear it.'

Murray felt an urgent need to knock Steven Hastings' head from the high collar of his jaunty shirt. But he stifled the impulse and instead gave an awkward stiff bow that he couldn't remember ever performing before.

'I'm looking forward to seeing your work, Cressida.'

He turned towards the bar as Steven put an arm around

the woman's shoulders, guiding her towards the exhibition space and commanding, 'Now, you're going to explain everything to me in minute detail.'

Cressida rolled her eyes, but she allowed herself to be led away, giving Murray a last smile. He raised his hand in goodbye, then swapped his empty glass for a fresh red and went to look for his brother.

The paintings at the front depicted massive, candy-coloured Manga cartoon characters collaged into pornographic poses. Murray sipped his drink, taking in a doe-eyed schoolgirl in congress with an equally wide-eyed black and white spotty dog. The image was imposed onto a background of a devastated landscape, Nagasaki after the H-bomb. Murray checked the artist's name, relieved to find it wasn't Cressida or Jack, then headed towards the staircase. It was busy here too, the traffic going in both directions, people clutching their drinks as if they were vital accessories. He didn't see Lyn until she was in front of him.

'Hey.' She stopped on the step above his so that their faces were almost level. Murray kissed her, smelling wine, cigarettes and fabric softener.

'How's the wee man?'

'The wee man.' She shook her head. 'The wee man, as you call him, is doing very well, considering he's been working till three in the morning practically every day for the last month and only finished hanging ten minutes before the doors were due to open.'

Murray grinned.

'He should have given me a shout. I would have held the ladder for him.'

'Rather you than me.'

Lyn was smiling, but there was an unaccustomed

flatness in her tone that made Murray wonder if she and Jack had argued.

He asked, 'And how are you doing? You're looking well.'

His brother's girlfriend had pale freckly skin that couldn't endure sunlight. Maybe it was the contrast between her fairness and the unfamiliar red lipstick she was wearing, but Murray thought she looked a shade whiter than usual.

'I'm doing great. Glad this has come round at last.' She smiled hello to a couple going up the staircase then turned back to Murray. 'You get yourself up there. Jack'll want to see you.'

'Jack will have a lot of people to talk to. I just came to show my support, I'll not stick around getting in the way.'

Lyn raised her eyebrows comically.

'And you've got a lot of work to be getting on with.'

'A fair bit, aye.'

'Well, you'd better go and pay your respects then.' She slid past him. 'I was about to get some wine before it's all sooked up. Do you want a refill?'

Murray looked at his glass, surprised to see that it was almost empty.

'Why not?'

'Give it here then.' She hesitated. 'Murray, Jack talked to you about the show, didn't he?'

He knocked back the last dreg of wine and handed his empty glass to her.

'I think so, maybe a while ago.'

Lyn pushed a stray curl away from her eyes.

'You've no idea, have you?'

He grinned, embarrassed at being caught out.

'Maybe not.'

'You might find it . . .' She hesitated, searching for the right word. '. . . challenging.'

Murray laughed.

'Aye, well, that won't be a first.'

Lyn gave a weak smile.

'Just remember it was done with love.'

'No blood this time?'

'No blood, but it was still painful for him, so be kind.'

'When am I not?'

'Never.'

She touched his arm gently as she descended the stairs to the bar.

Jack was at the centre of a small knot of people, but he saw Murray and broke away, flinging an arm around his brother's shoulder. Murray wondered where it came from, this physicality. He couldn't remember them ever touching as boys except when they were fighting.

'Hiya.'

'Hi, Jack.' He put his arm round his brother, feeling the heat of his body through the fabric of his suit. 'Congratulations.'

Jack's face was shiny, his forehead beaded with sweat and his eyes bright. Murray could hear his brother's voice coming from somewhere else too, a voiceover on a video installation he guessed. The words were indistinct, but Jack's soft tones were cut through with another wilder, higher voice. The Jack in front of him looked anxious. He squeezed Murray's shoulder and said, 'I was keeping an eye out for you. Have you been round everything already?'

'No, I just got here. All I've seen are those Japanese cartoon-collage things.'

Jack gave a quick scan of the room then whispered, 'Pile of pish, eh?'

Murray laughed.

'I don't know about art, but I do know a pile of pish when I see it.'

'Don't let them put you off. Anyway, don't congratulate me till you've seen my stuff. You might not like it.'

'I'd better go and have a butcher's then.'

The walls behind him were lined with photos. They looked more muted than Jack's usual sharp-focused colours, but they were too far away for Murray to take in their detail.

'Wait a moment.' Jack took his sleeve as if worried that his brother would escape. 'Murray, it's all about Dad.'

Murray pulled himself gently from his brother's grip. He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and walked into the heart of the exhibition.

Their father looked pretty much as he had when Murray had last seen him. He was propped up in the high-backed chair, wearing a pair of brown paisley-patterned pyjamas. His hands clutched the armrests. His head was thrown back, his old face lost in the crazy smile of another man. Jack's camera had caught him mid-word, his mouth open, the wetness of saliva coating his lips. His eyes dazzled.

Murray shut his own eyes then opened them again, the vision of his father remained in front of him, exposed to the wine-drinkers. He could hear his father's voice now, chatting to Jack. He walked to the curtained darkroom in the corner of the gallery, ignoring the display cases and trying to blinker himself to the other photographs. The two long benches inside the blacked-out cubicle were full, so he stood at the end of the row of people leaning against the back

wall. The close-up of his father's face was six foot high. Jack's voice came from somewhere off-camera asking, 'Mr Watson, can you tell me if you've got any children, please?'

Their father grinned.

'I've got two boys, terrific wee fellas. Six and eleven, they are.'

'Great ages, and what are they up to the now?'

The old man's face fogged with confusion.

'I don't know. I've no seen them in a long while.' He was getting distressed, his pitch rising. 'They telt me they were fine, but how do they know? Have you seen them, son?'

'I've seen them, they're absolutely fine.'

'Are you sure now?'

'I know for certain.'

'Aye, well, that's good. On their holidays, aren't they?'

'That's right. Away with the BBs.' The old man on screen nodded, quickly comforted, and Jack asked him, 'Do you remember who I am?'

The mischief was back in his father's face.

'If you don't know, I doubt that I can help you out.'

The old man and Jack laughed together.

'No idea at all?'

Their father stared at the Jack-off-screen intently. He stared at Murray too, his broken veins scoured and red. There was a patch of grey stubble on his chin that whoever had shaved him had missed.

'I don't think I know you, son.' He hesitated and a ghost of something that might have been recognition flitted across his face, bringing a smile in its wake. 'Are you yon boy that reads the news?'

'Poor auld soul.' The woman standing next to Murray whispered to her friend. 'He doesnae ken if it's New York or New Year.'

Jack-on-screen told the old stranger who had taken up residence in his father's body, 'You've rumbled me.' And the old man slapped his knee in glee.

Murray pushed through the black curtains and out into the brightness of the white-painted gallery. Jack was standing where he had left him. Murray shook his head and jogged quickly down the stairs. Lyn was coming towards him, chatting to another girl, both of them clutching brimming wine glasses. She said his name, 'Murray', but he continued down onto the street, then further down still, towards Waverley Station and the train that would take him home.