Some old photographs

In this poem, some old photographs act as a catalyst to allow Lochhead to meditate on the elusive passage of time.

Much of Lochhead’s identity and skill as a poet is derived from her innate sense of 'Scottishness' and her ability to really capture and convey a specific sense of place.

Here the old photographs from the title are used as a catalyst to transport us back to a version of Glasgow from the past.

Lochhead uses familiar settings such as Glasgow Central Station and George Square to create an atmospheric poem that invites us to reflect on the elusiveness of the passage of time.

**Form and structure**

This poem is written in free verse and divided into six stanzas of unequal length.

The poem is essentially one long sentence. Enjambment is used both within and between stanzas to create a very fluid, unbroken piece of writing.

The primary sense employed is sight and the poem is constructed to imitate the way our eyes would travel over photographs, resting on certain details before moving on.

However, Lochhead uses the technique of synaesthesia to great effect in this poem.

This device uses one sense, fin this case sight, to evoke another, for example smell. By the end of this poem all our senses have been employed.

Both the language and imagery create a very definite sense of time and place and the overall mood of the poem is nostalgic and almost wistful.

**Stanza one**

This verse is almost cinematic in its opening as Lochhead describes the photograph in front of her of a brooding, stormy image of Glasgow:

**“the romance of dark stormclouds/in big skies over the low wide river”**

The word choice of 'romance' foreshadows the glamorous depiction of this city in later stanzas. Its use is almost incongruous, given that Glasgow is not a city that usually has romantic associations.

The first line introduces the technique of synaesthesia - **“weather evocative as scent”**.

Lochhead harnesses the sensory power of smell to transport us back to specific times or places.

Here she is asserting that weather too, even when depicted in a still photograph can trigger forgotten memories.

A sense of scale is created in the line **“big skies over the low wide river”** which again helps to create a more evocative, atmospheric impression of Glasgow.

An interesting use of line placement is employed in the final line. Lochhead indents to create a pause before describing the **“long shadows and longer shafts of light”** that she sees in the photograph.

In doing so, she helps emphasise the length of the shadows and light by elongating the line so that it juts out from the rest of the stanza.

**Stanza two**

The use of enjambment between the first and second stanza links the two and allows a fluid continuation of ideas.

Again the sense of smell is evoked by the description of the smoke that can be seen in the photograph. Here though the images of the city move away from the landscape to focus on some familiar landmarks of the city.



Glasgow Central Station

The mood hints at past glamour. Glasgow is depicted as a sophisticated film set in the lines **“fabulous film-noir stills of Central Station/of freezing fog silvering the chilled, stilled park”**.

The repetition of the alliterative 'f' and the assonance of the 'i' sound gives the language a luxurious, rich texture. This adds to the idea of Glasgow as a movie set.

Lochhead creates a neologism (new word) in the verb 'silvering' to add to the feeling of richness.

Film noir was a genre of Hollywood film from the 1940s and 50s which was typified by stylised black and white cinematography. Evoking these atmospheric films helps the reader to visualise the photograph that Lochhead is looking at as well as date the period to which it belongs.

A touch of humour is hinted at in the following lines as the poet compares the drops of rain on a rainmate to sequins shining in the lamplight.

A rainmate is a cheap, plastic head-covering women used to protect their hair from getting wet. There is nothing remotely glamorous about it.

Here though, the suggestion seems to be that the photograph is so atmospheric and stylish that even the humble rainmate is imbued with sophistication.

**Stanza three**

Again the enjambment between the second and third stanza helps to move us seamlessly towards a different photograph.

The dark, broody streets of Glasgow have been swapped for an image depicting Lochhead’s mother in her youth on a windy Scottish beach.

The use of the second person in the line **“your young, still lovely mother”** invites the reader to visualise their own mother in a similar type of family photograph.

The main idea contained in this stanza is the perception we have of our parents in their lives before we were born.

There is something nostalgic and elusive about this kind of snap and it is often difficult for us to connect the person in these old photographs with the image of our parents in the present.

**Stanza four**

The idea of our parents in their youth is reiterated in this verse as the poet turns her attention to **“all the Dads in hats”**.

The pluralisation of the word 'Dads' gives the impression that their outfits are so similar that they are almost interchangeable. There is little to distinguish them from each other.

Now the photographs become busy as the men are shown in motion, heading for the train after work in a series of different seasons - **“in the snow, in the rain in the sudden what - a - scorcher/in the smog”**.

The reference to the starlings in the final line of this verse alludes to the poem The Starlings of George Square by Edwin Morgan.

Lochhead was tremendously influenced and inspired by the work of Morgan and this reference is a little homage to him.

In this humorous poem, Morgan describes the nuisance created by the birds that flocked around George Square. Although their excrement and noise was a perpetual annoyance, Morgan finds something uplifting and joyous about why these birds loved our urban cities so much.

Lochhead’s reference alludes to the nuisance caused by the birds by commenting on the **“white-spattered overcoats”** of the men in the city while also cleverly changing the setting from Central Station to George Square.

**Stanza five**

The starlings in the final line of the previous stanza become the focus of this penultimate verse. As Lochhead moves towards the conclusion of the poem she creates a pleasing image of the birds.

She uses alliteration in the description of the **“starlings swarming/in that perfect and permanent cloud”**.



George Square, Glasgow

The presence of the birds seems to provide a sense of comfort and security, almost as though their permanence counters the inexorable passage of time. However, this idea is short lived and in the next lines she seems to contradict this notion.

She doubts the truth and certainty that seems to be depicted in the photographs, writing that the image in front of her **“was/never really this photograph/but always all the passing now”**.

This is quite a complicated idea, but essentially she seems to assert that photographs can only capture a fleeting, transient moment. They can never truly convey the constant flux and change of time - something that is elusive and impossible to grasp.

In the final line of this stanza she returns to something that she can rely on, her senses, as she describes the **“noise and stink and smoky breath of George Square”**.

**Stanza six**

In the last stanza, Lochhead offers us one final image as she describes a ship launch on the banks of the Clyde.

She captures the festive, convivial mood of the day in the line **“wee boays, a duchess, bunting”**, but the elusive nature of the passage of time is alluded to again.

While in the photo, **“that boat is yet to sail”**, in reality of course many years have passed since that day.

There is something simultaneously hopeful and wistful in the closing lines, feelings that are often provoked when we look at old photographs.

**Themes and links to other poems**

This poem asks us to consider the paradox that old photographs present.

On one hand, they can forever capture a moment in history that we can return to again and again.

However given that we are in a constant state of change and flux we can never really return or go back to a moment from the past.

In that sense then the photographs only emphasise the elusive and relentless nature of time – as soon as the image is captured it is already gone and consigned to history.

This poem would make a useful comparison with View of Scotland/Love Poem and also The Bargain.