

Obituary

POLLY GOULD

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON

Obituary is a video work about the story of a dead woman found at Cam Loch, in Scotland. The newspaper description of her on discovery said she was found in the foetal position lying on the ground, some distance from her tent. This is a curiously visceral and material impression of her body. When I first read this, it drew my gaze to her cadaver as body on the ground, rather than as a missing person. In this more shocking form, it seems less of a scenic death than a death-scene investigation. A rambling tourist enjoying the scenery was the first to discover her body. His witness turned the place into a death scene. He went to seek help. A local gamekeeper then led police back there. They discovered her journal in the tent, the entry in the diary trailing off into empty pages. Then the story began to circulate, drawing the attention of journalists.

I first encountered her death scene as a short newspaper article. It fascinated me, and, through a process of speculation and confabulation, I made a fiction out of it and then a video work. *Breakfast at the Beauty Spot* was first published as a short story in a collection of fiction written by contemporary British artists.¹ Here, the

work is presented as a series of stills from the video. The video takes the conversation between the couple in the story and overlays it upon the empty landscape in which the death took place. The soundtrack is made up of the two voices of the airy low drone notes of the didgeridoo and bagpipes.

With camera in hand, I went to seek out the place where the woman had died and found a multiply empty place, criss-crossed with absences: the absence of a dead woman no longer there; the absence of the empty 'wilderness', which is constructed against human presence; the absence of a people from a landscape as a consequence of their annihilation from a territory and a wilful obscuring of their traces; the absence of the place of the corpse as it empties out place, and creates a 'nowhere'; and a reflection of our own absence we experience in witnessing these. The death scene puts subjectivity under question, exposing a radical instability underlying the witness-object-agent nexus, in life as in representation. When death takes place, place is taken away, our place as well as the others. Seeing the figure on the ground, we lose the ground beneath our feet. The only reply to the silent complaint of the corpse is to keep bearing witness to the story, and walk on.

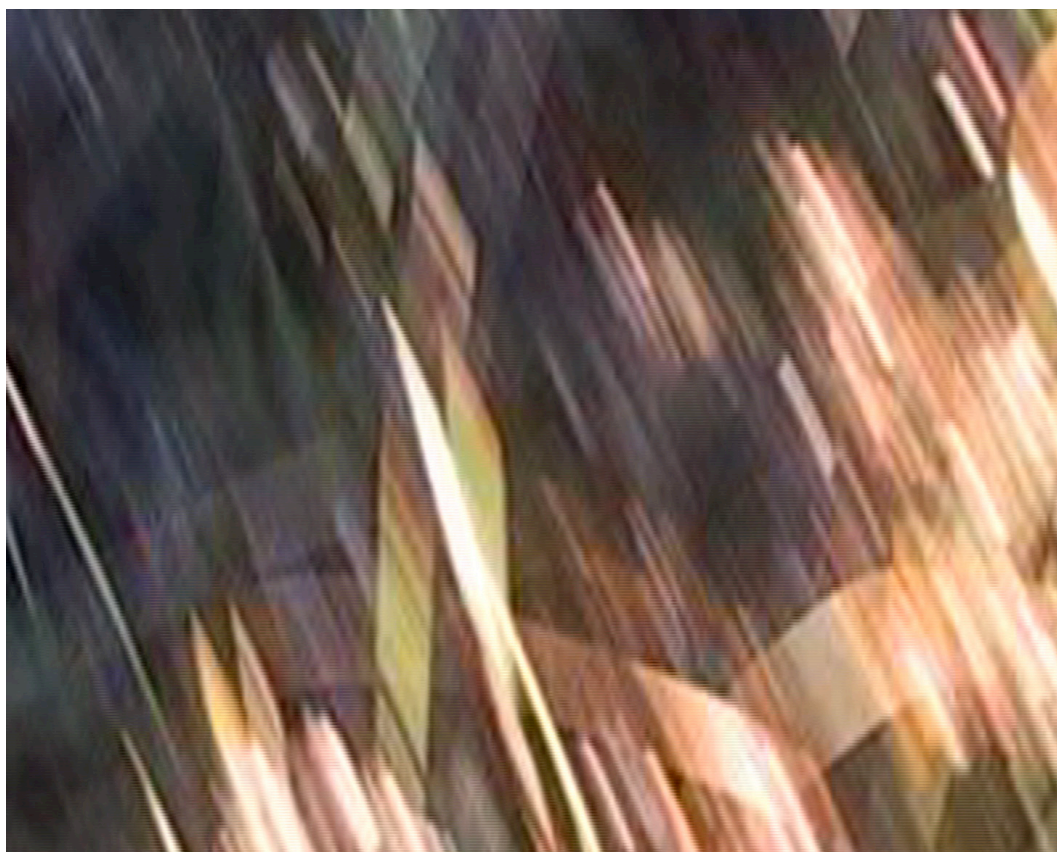
—

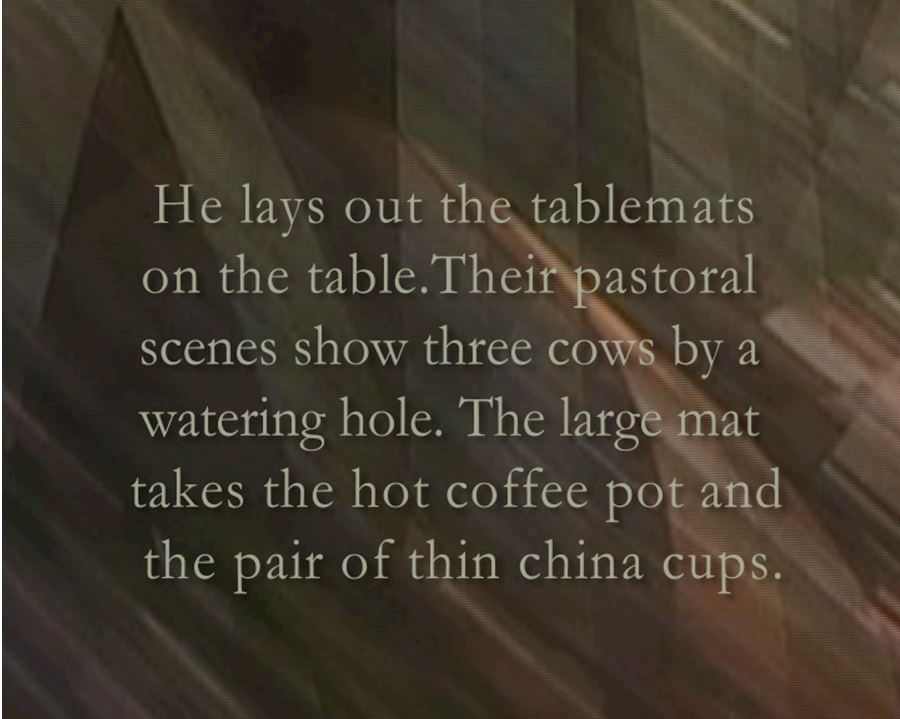
Polly Gould is an artist and writer based in London. She shows regularly in the UK and abroad. She is currently a PhD candidate at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, London. Her doctoral project, titled *no More Elsewhere: Melancholia, Subjectivity, Landscape*, focuses on the watercolours of Antarctic explorer Edward Wilson.

—NOTES

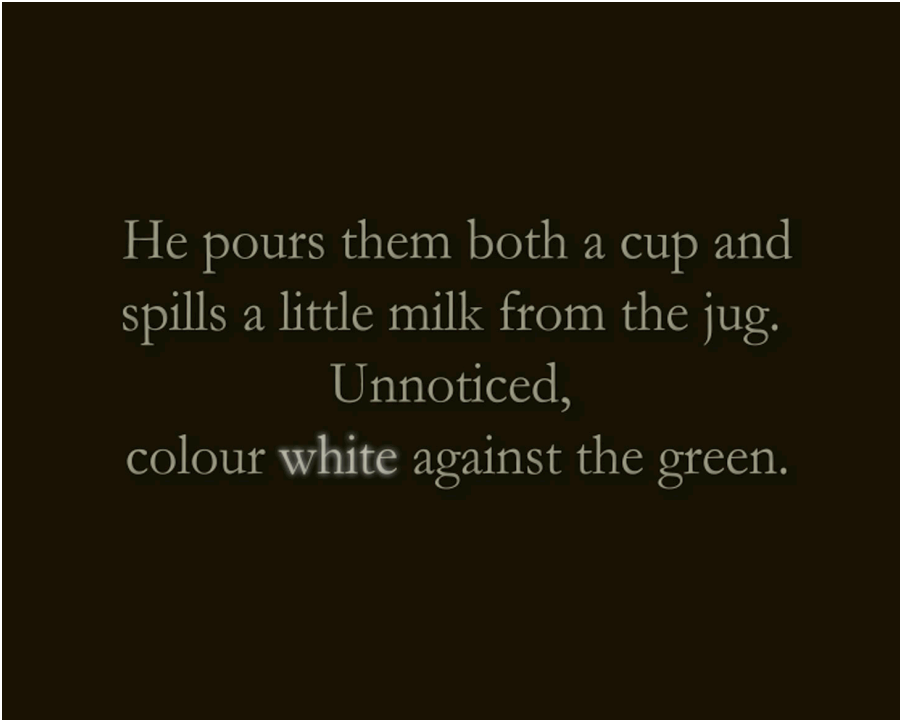
¹ Jeremy Akerman and Eileen Daly (eds), *The Alpine Fantasy of Victor B and other Stories*, Serpent's Tail, London, 2006.

—OBITUARY





He lays out the tablemats
on the table. Their pastoral
scenes show three cows by a
watering hole. The large mat
takes the hot coffee pot and
the pair of thin china cups.



He pours them both a cup and
spills a little milk from the jug.
Unnoticed,
colour **white** against the green.

She takes the kitchen cloth
in her hand and wipes away
the little pool of spilt milk,
before putting the jug
back in its place.

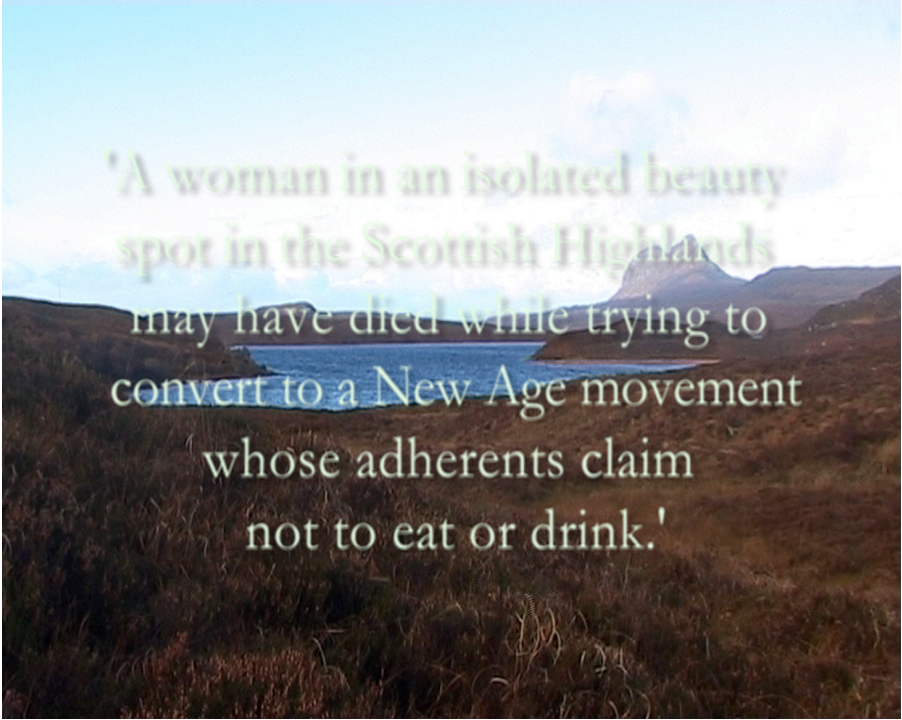
He picks up the newspaper,
takes a red biro from the breast
pocket of his shirt and
deliberately
circles a column.

listen...

I've found something for you

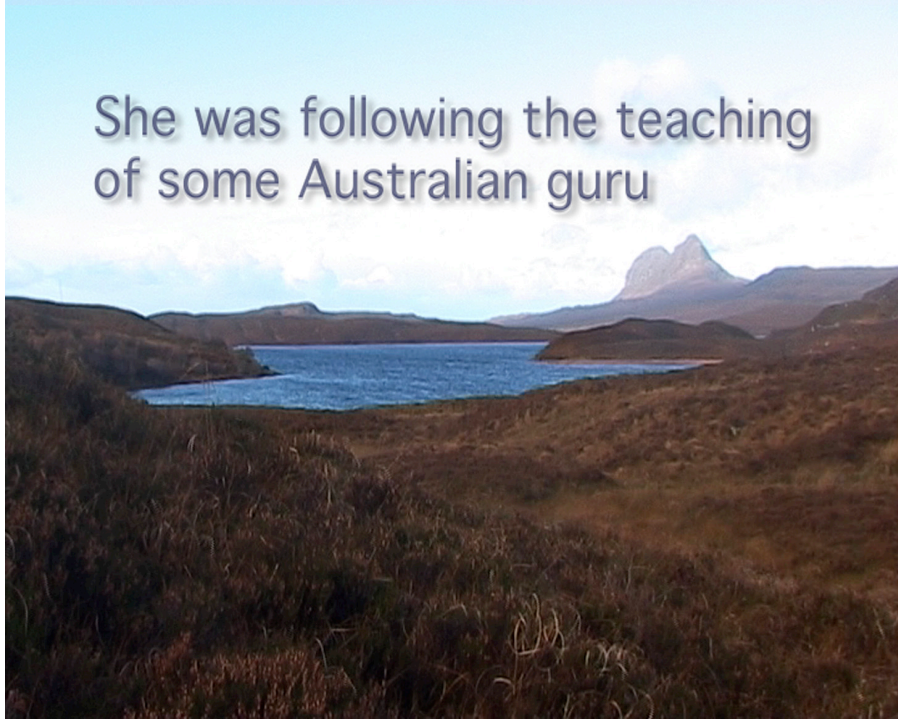
dead woman 'ate nothing but air'

Go on



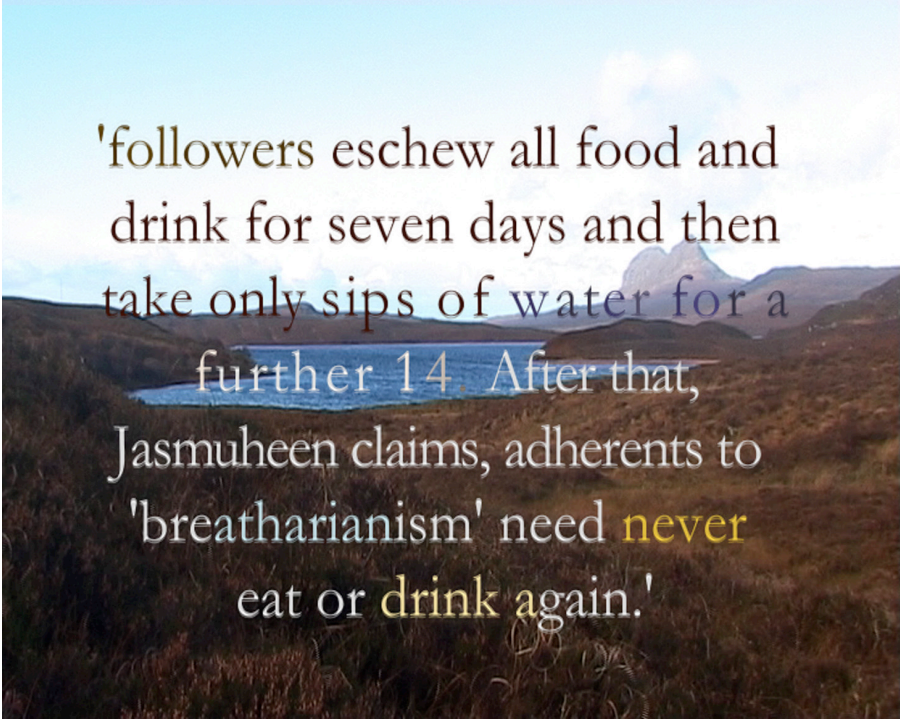
'A woman in an isolated beauty spot in the Scottish Highlands may have died while trying to convert to a New Age movement whose adherents claim not to eat or drink.'

She was following the teaching
of some Australian guru

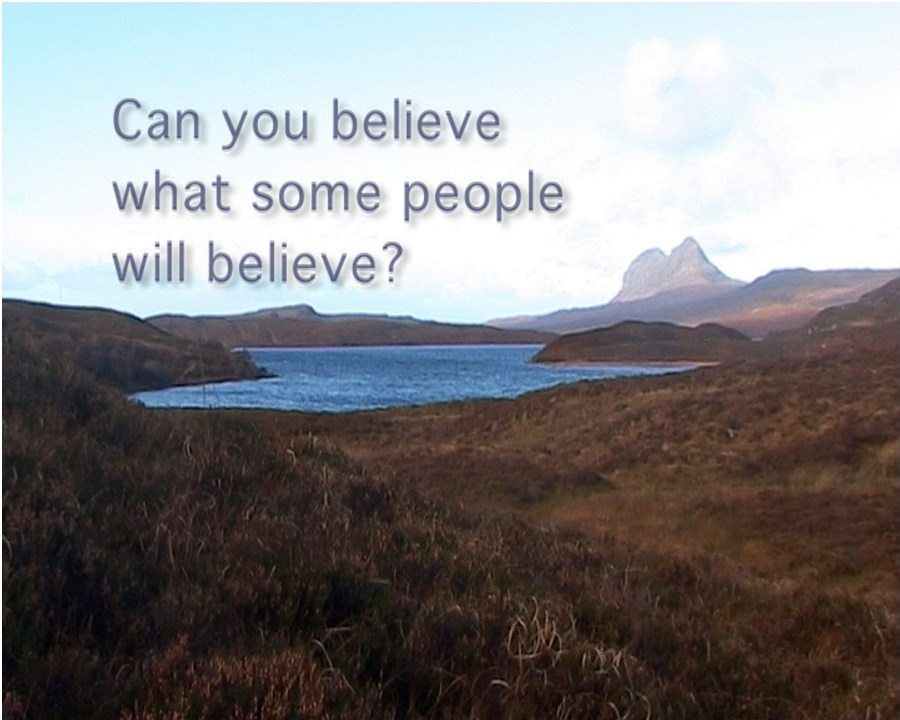


a 21 day conversion course



A scenic landscape featuring a calm blue lake in the middle ground, surrounded by dark, grassy hills. In the background, a prominent mountain with a sharp peak rises against a light blue sky with soft white clouds. The foreground is filled with dry, brownish grass.

'followers eschew all food and
drink for seven days and then
take only sips of water for a
further 14. After that,
Jasmuheen claims, adherents to
'breatharianism' need **never**
eat or **drink** again.'

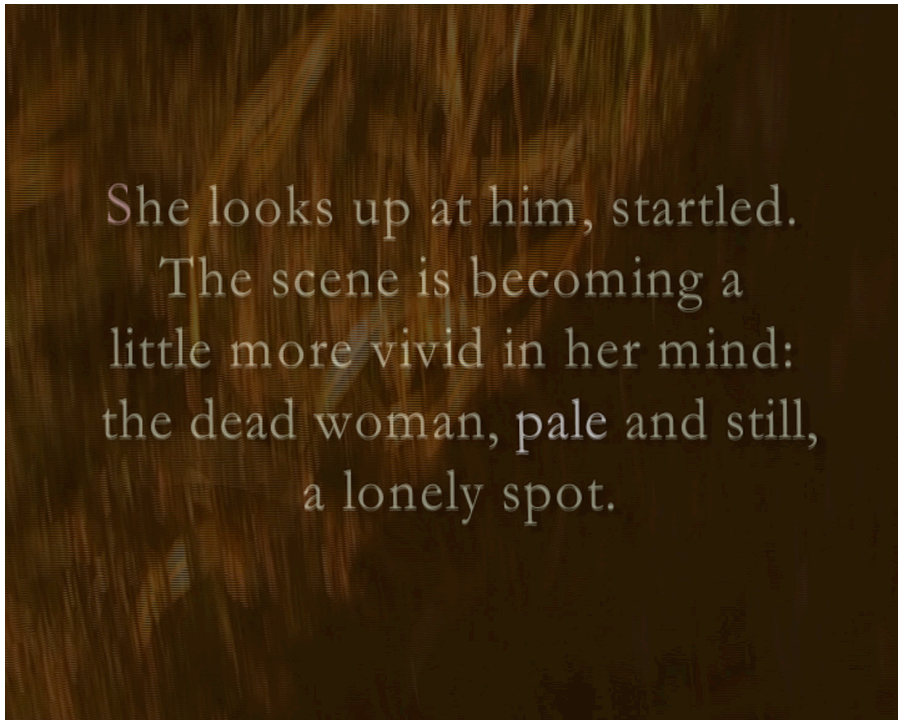
A scenic landscape featuring a calm blue lake in the middle ground, surrounded by dark, grassy hills. In the background, a prominent mountain with a sharp peak rises against a light blue sky with soft white clouds. The foreground is filled with dry, brownish grass.

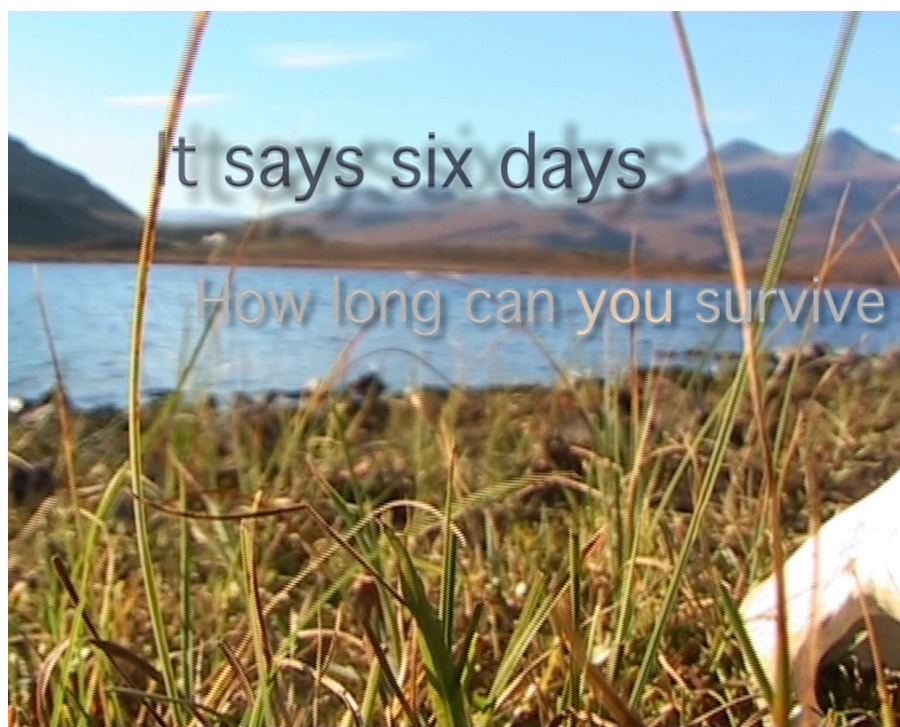
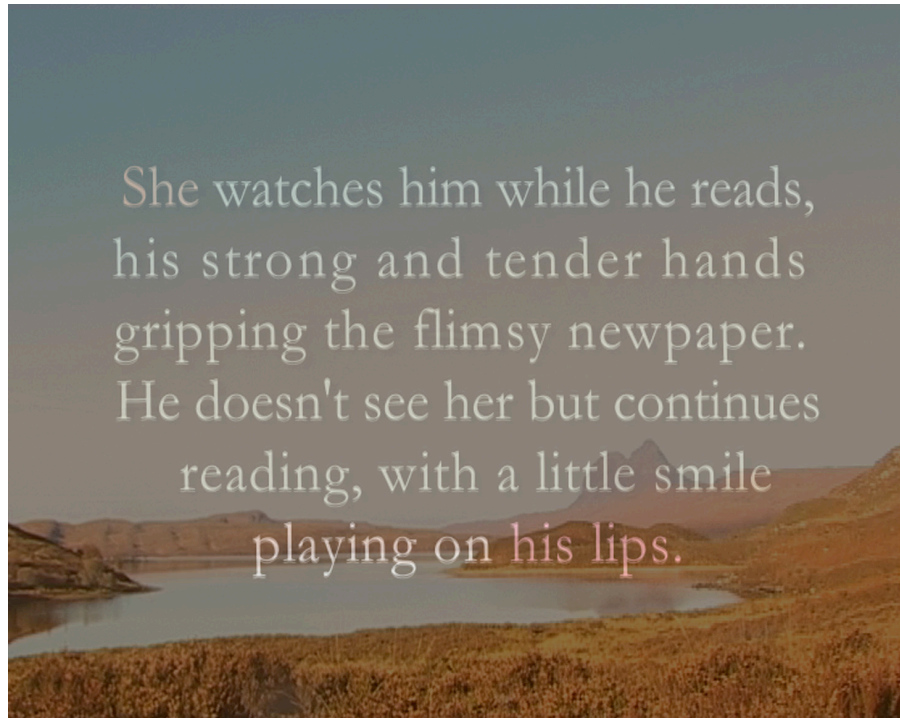
Can you believe
what some people
will believe?

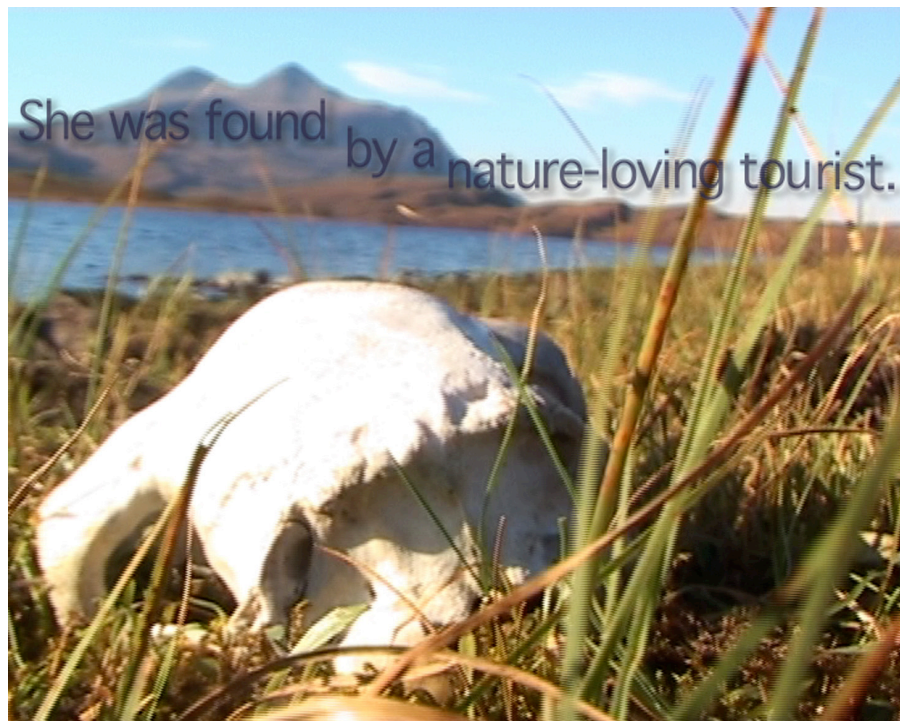
stupid cow...



She looks up at him, startled.
The scene is becoming a
little more vivid in her mind:
the dead woman, pale and still,
a lonely spot.



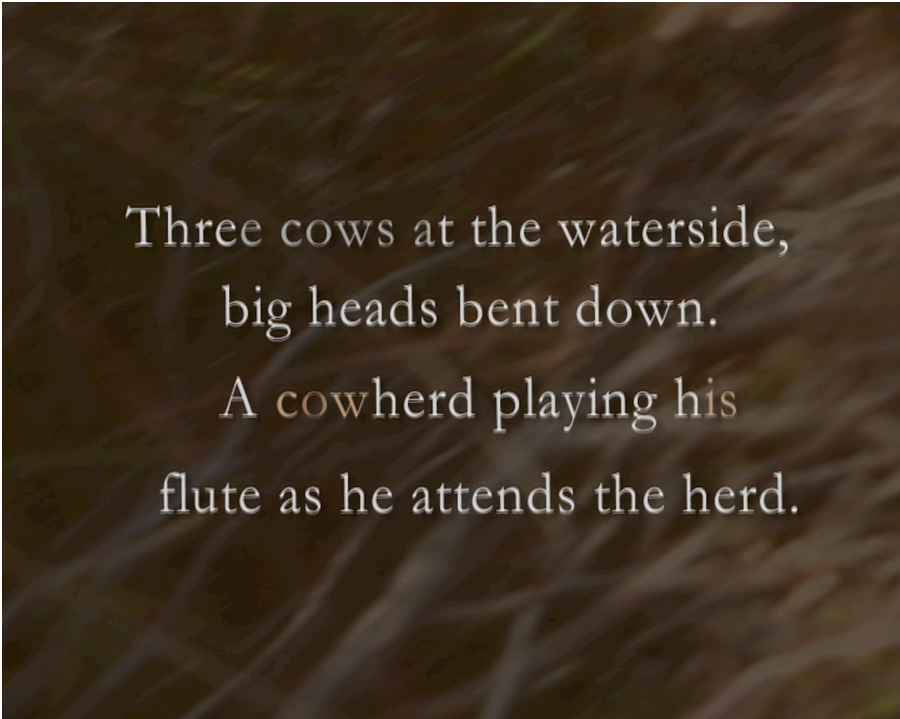




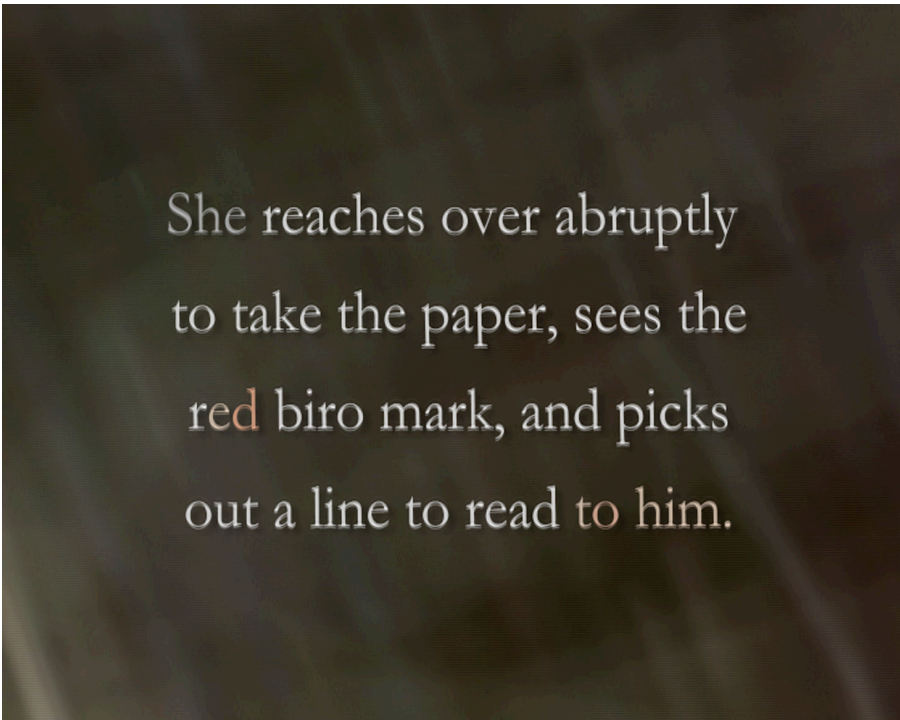




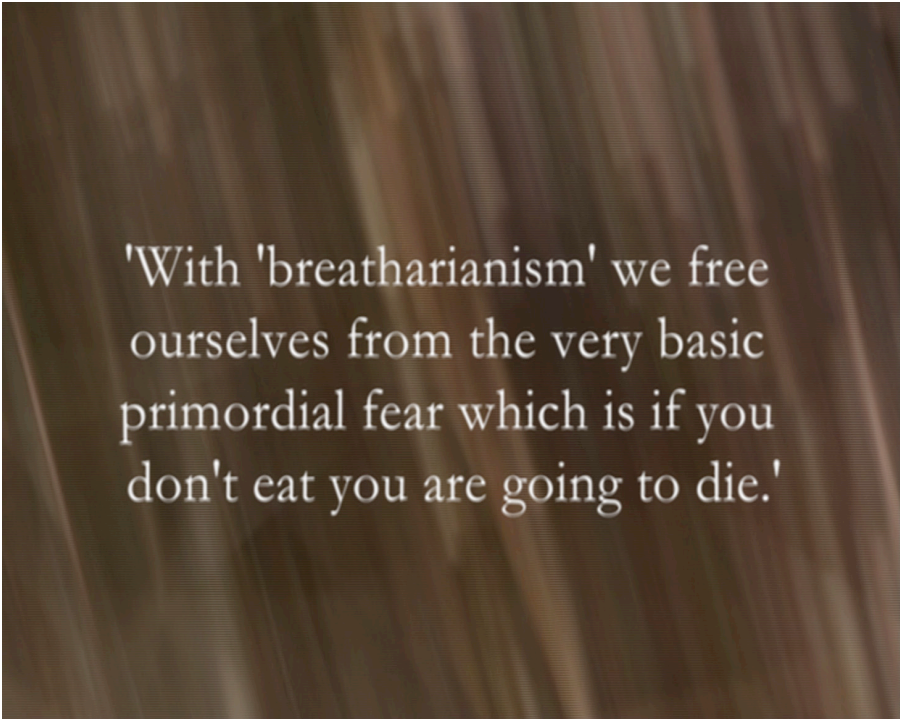
As he talks, she has been staring
at the brown and green of the
tablemat. It is a painting of a
pastoral scene from the
nineteenth century.



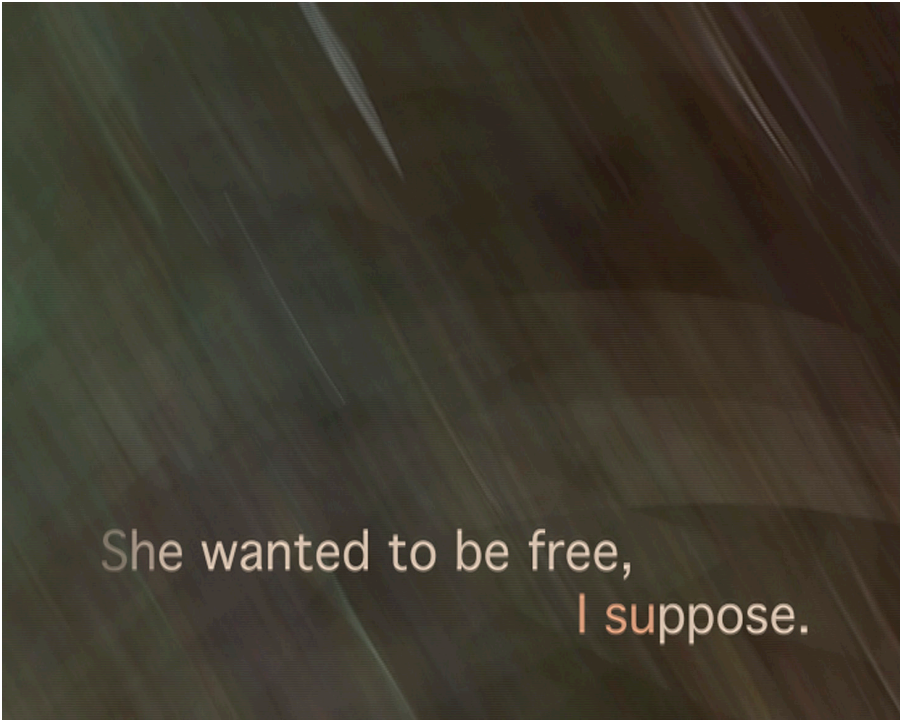
Three cows at the waterside,
big heads bent down.
A cowherd playing his
flute as he attends the herd.



She reaches over abruptly
to take the paper, sees the
red biro mark, and picks
out a line to read to him.

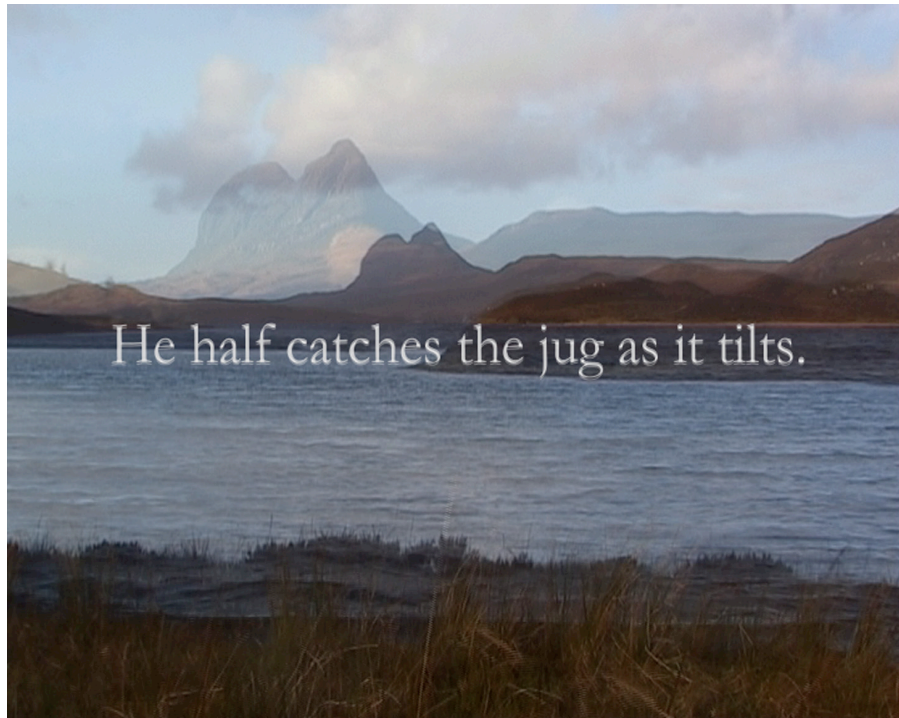


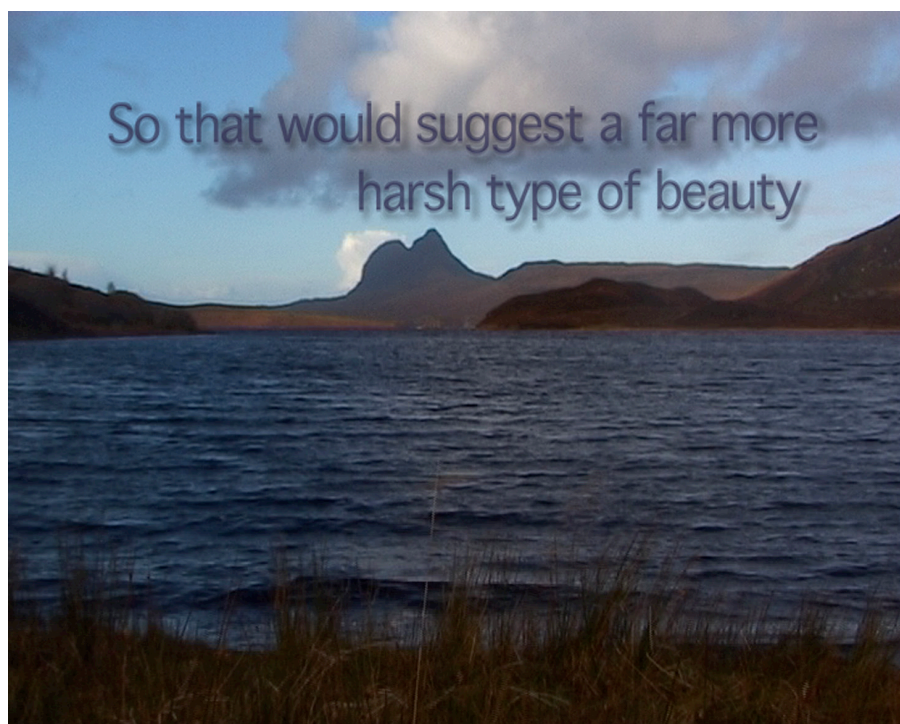
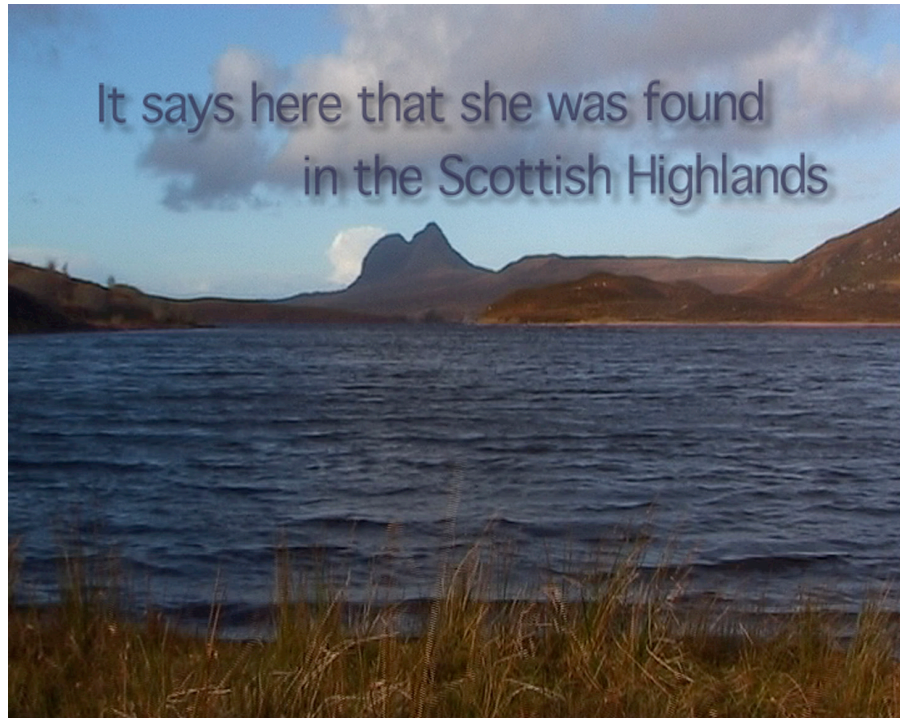
'With 'breatharianism' we free
ourselves from the very basic
primordial fear which is if you
don't eat you are going to die.'

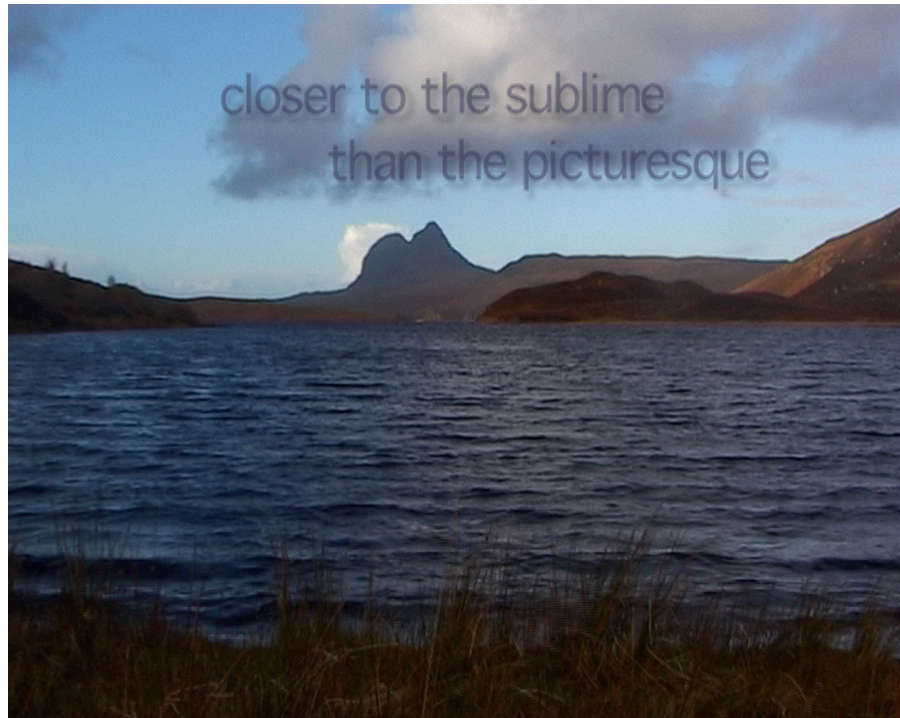


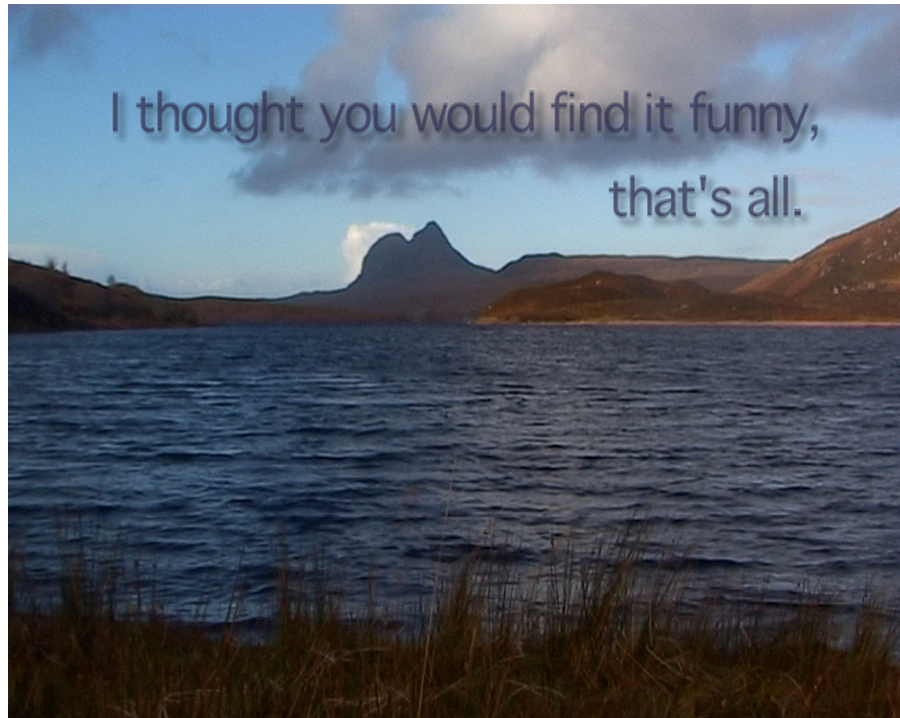
She wanted to be free,
I suppose.

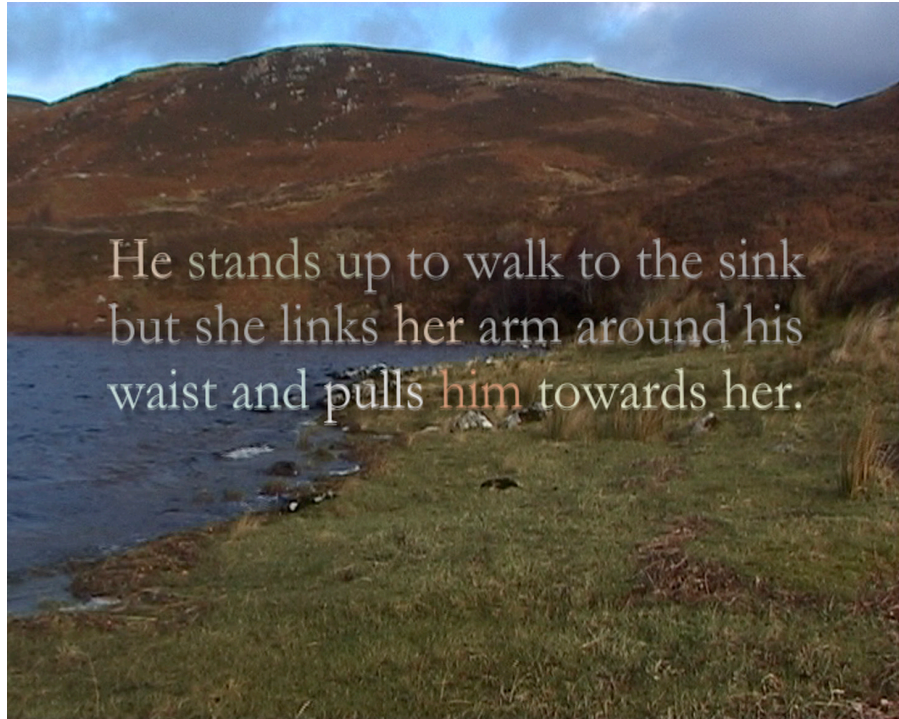




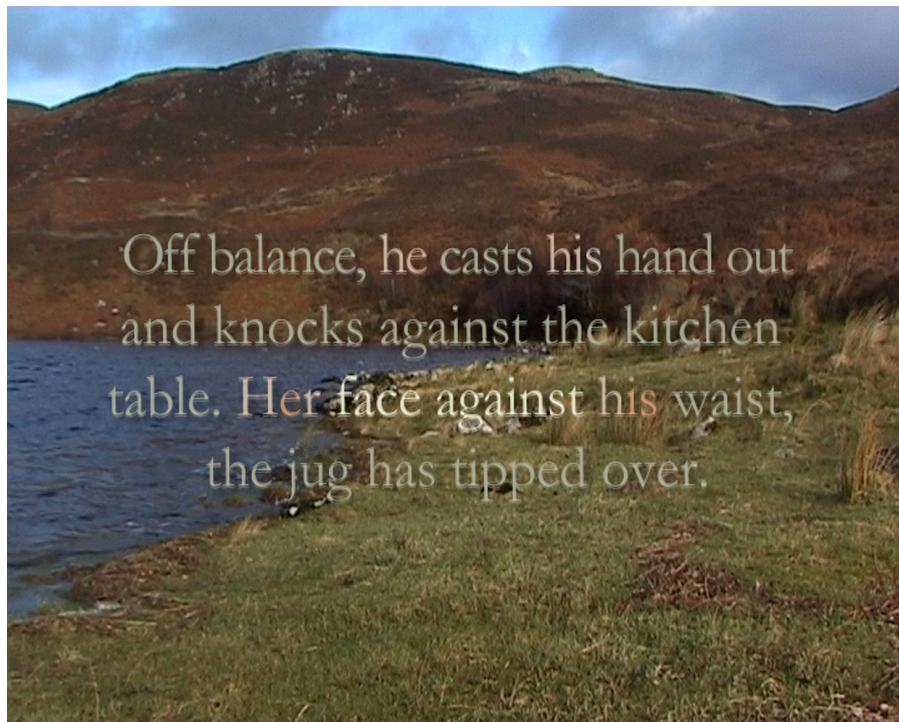




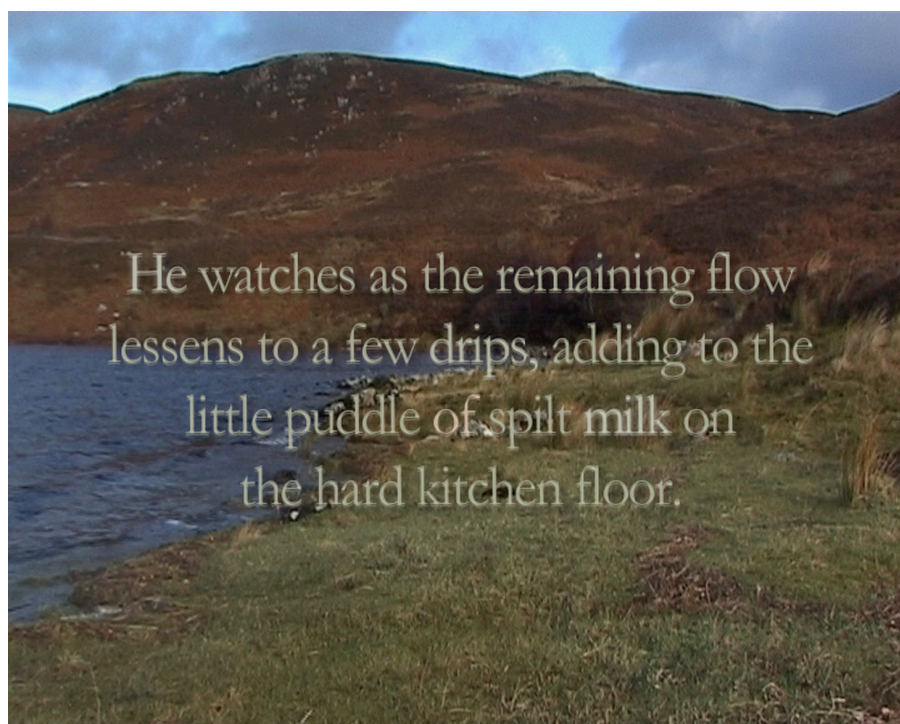
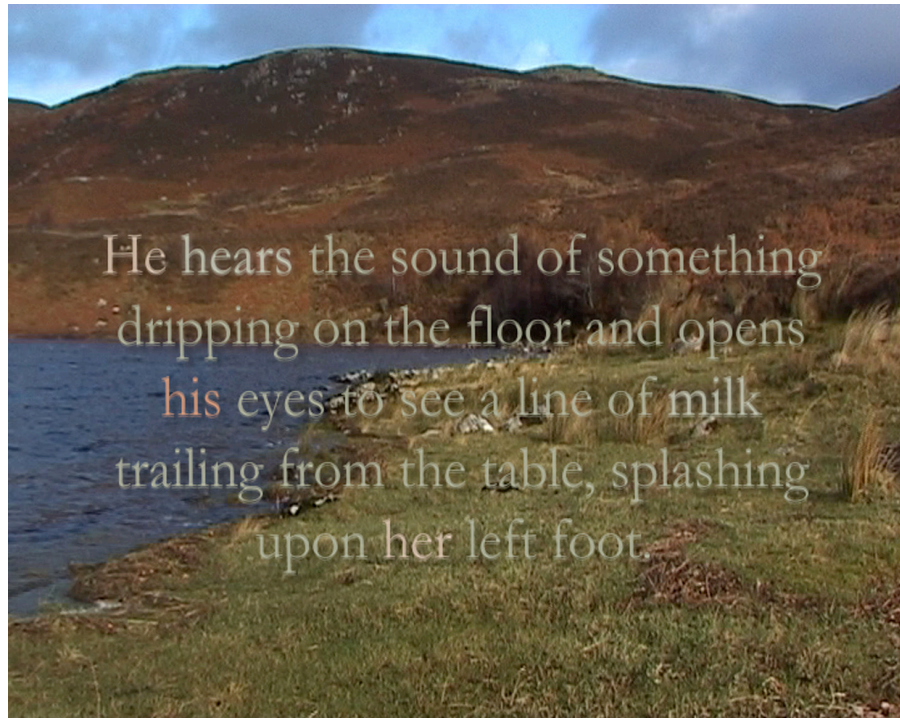


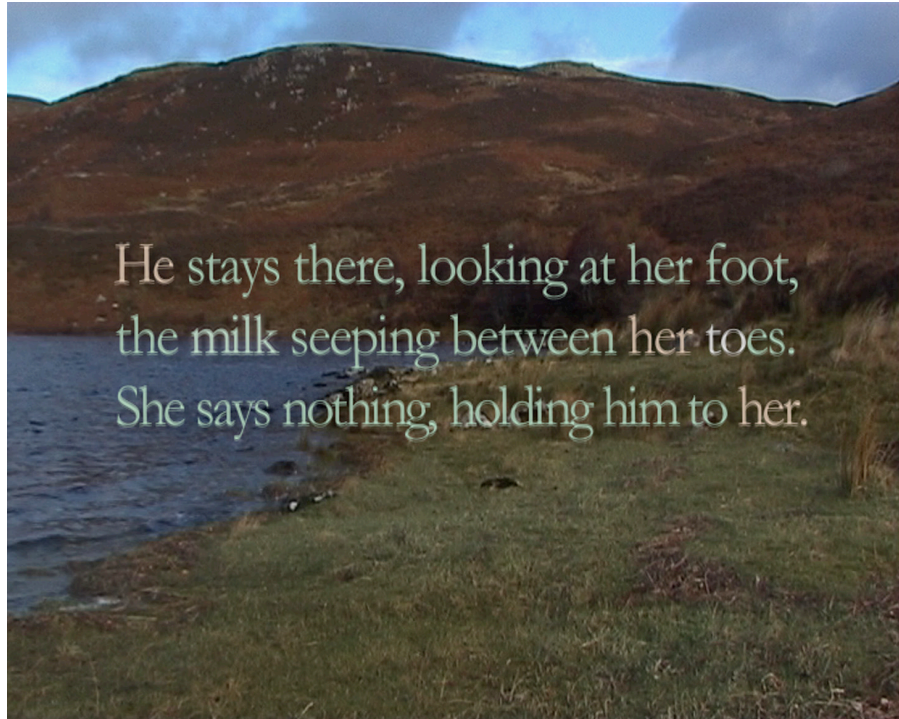


He stands up to walk to the sink
but she links her arm around his
waist and pulls him towards her.

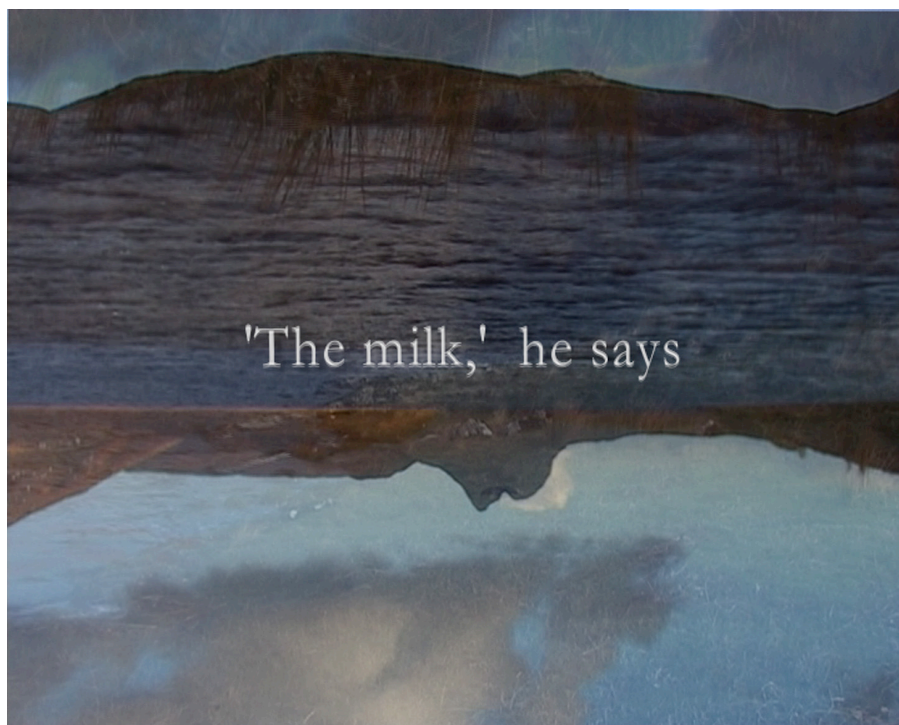


Off balance, he casts his hand out
and knocks against the kitchen
table. Her face against his waist,
the jug has tipped over.





He stays there, looking at her foot,
the milk seeping between her toes.
She says nothing, holding him to her.



'The milk,' he says



