

BODY IN THE LANDSCAPE

ELSPETH WILSON

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND: NEW WRITING 2020

At night, the salty air licks its tongue against my window, poking its way in through the gaps like a child missing its front teeth. It whispers, spits its spray, begs me to go out. I can answer its call only once a day but answer it I do. Come morning, its murmurings have mixed in with the sleep in my eyes, dragging me out of bed. When the sun is preternaturally hot in April and then the cold hits again in May like a slap across the face, I head out to forage for nourishment that goes beyond mere food.

On the high street, I dodge other people as if they are ghosts and I am Pac-Man, the gaps between bodies saying as much as blank space on a page. The brightly-coloured shops and takeaways that I used to pop into without a second thought are now something to be navigated, my mind drawing up maps, diagrams and charts without me even realising it. A child licks an ice cream, liquid spilling down their chin like fat raindrops. I nip down the vennel, away from the clogged arteries of the town, and suddenly there is space and sea as far as the horizon, the line between what is sky and what is water blurred and irrelevant.

Down the worn red stone steps to the beach, the kelp crunches under my feet like I am smashing biscuits. The dog is delighted by the sand giving way to seaweed, would gladly stand there munching away all day if he could. Way out to sea gannets sharpen themselves to a fine point, piercing the water, peppering the waves with white splodges like salt to chips. Would that I could be out there with them, plunging with abandon. But I am back on the beach where a dead bird washes up; at first it looks like it could be sleeping but as the days go by it goes back to its separate parts, one wing floating in a rockpool, returning to whence it came. Its bluish beak a reminder that nature is not a simple fix. It is the whole and it is its parts, it gives and takes away, from the empty razor shells strewn on the sand to the frozen peas waiting back in the freezer for my tea.

The wind billows through my hair, pushes the smell of the drying kelp up my nostrils. This breeze that has touched so many other bodies, plants and places on its way to me is the sails that keep me going; helping me remember the difference between the bright yellow of the gorse, gentle paleness of cowslips and the sunshine of ragwort. Telling me that there will be other days in other places. And yet I find that, day by day, as the seasons slide effortlessly into each other – and then shudder backwards again – I do visit different places even if I am in the same geographical location.

Some days the waves are whipped into frothy meringue peaks and there is barely any beach at all, the sea having forced the land into retreat. Other days the beach shows itself off, stretching out for miles into the distance, the pale sand pockmarked with rockpools full of periwinkles and speedy crabs. There are warm days where there are picnics and chatter and games and dogs fighting over balls and there are cold days where the waves have only the cormorants and the oystercatchers with their flashes of orange for company. There are days where I love the beach, want to cover myself in its grains and there are days where the white noise of the waves echoes the worries crashing against each other in my own head. A sand-fly crawls over my foot and I smile, its confident tickling on my skin bringing me back into myself.

My allotted time is over, the tide is going out and I am drained, too. I scrunch the sand beneath my feet one more time but I know that just because I'm going back inside doesn't mean I am leaving nature behind. There's no such thing as nature returning; it was already here all along if you chose to look for it. It was there in the eider ducks bobbing to the beat of the breakers, the bladder wrack squidging between your toes, the heron waiting for the swimmers to leave, the mushy banana on your counter, tired after its long journey to you. It was there in the cracks, fighting for survival, sometimes finding it, sometimes not – begging the question whether it is something separate from ourselves after all.

And although I have wandered within the same few hundred metres, I have become much more intimately acquainted with both this place specifically and the notion of place. Like an overlooked friend, the one who's been with you so long that their presence feels like breathing, this beach that has seen many versions of myself sustained me without me realising it. As someone who lives with PTSD and fears disorder, focusing on my surroundings has grounded me, like a supercharged version of a breathing exercise. This is nothing so facile as a blessing-in-disguise but what I thought was previously a conflicted relationship with the outdoors – too much noise, too much uncertainty – has turned out to be less one-sided than I thought. It has helped me to survive. It has helped me to live.

As I walk up to my door, returning to the house feels more like home – a home situated in its wider context. The light on the waves visible from my bedroom window winks at me, their repetition soothing my creases away. At night, the air twists its way around the sides of the windowpane to encircle me in its salty arms, caressing my hair, wicking away sweat from my forehead as the heatwave jitters inside my mind. In its gusty, undulating voice, the wind whispers there is tomorrow. There will always be a tomorrow.

Elspeth Wilson is a writer, researcher and poet whose work has been shortlisted for the 2019 Nan Shepherd prize amongst other awards - when she's not writing, she can usually be found in or near the sea.