

ROOTS

SARAH WHITESIDE

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

That's how it is at times, the need to get away, to be alone; Esme feels it come across her like weather, a flurry of heat and activity, a squall of bad temper. Adam knows her well enough by now to see it coming.

'Go then,' he says. 'Go.'

And so she does.

In the small car park at the bottom of the hill, she swings the rucksack on her back, bracing against its weight. She locks the car door, glances at the screen of her phone and switches it off. There's no reception on the hill anyway, no chance to check in even if she wanted.

Going out of the car park, she catches eyes with a dog walker heading in. The usual voiceover plays in her head, the one saying *last seen leaving Carlops around five pm.*

It drones on in that way it has:

appeared to be heading towards the reservoir

not been seen since

family increasingly worried.

All you can do is ignore it.

She crosses the road and takes the path upwards between fields of sheep. She regrets the thin-soled trainers. Her softened feet feel the point of each sharp stone. Eyes on the path, she sees the last, pale light disappearing above the hills, wisps of late summer cloud. Already, in the distance, a dark patch of trees is visible on the hill's flank. Her wild place, where she plans to spend the night. She keeps her thoughts raised high, fills her mind with light, bleaching out

the dirty washing, the jobs on her list that remain unticked, and Max's hot breath on her cheek as he hugged her at the door. How he wouldn't let go.

In the end, Adam had come and peeled him off her.

'Say bye-bye to Mummy,' he said.

The sight of them still waving in her mind almost turns her back, but she goes on. She's had enough of the domestic, the daily round of meals and chores. She's wanting something deeper, something more.

Everybody knows you have to ask permission from the trees before entering a wood. All the old stories say that. In her hurry, Esme forgets. Perhaps that's why the biting midgies come. They follow her about like thoughts, nipping at her neck and wrists each time she stops. She has to put the tent up bit by bit. Between each clip and peg, she runs. Once it's done, she eats her dinner that way too, darting up and down the clearing between mouthfuls.

'I'm not enjoying this at all,' she says, aloud – to herself perhaps, or to the trees. Above her head the leaves rustle and confer. She hears them whisper in a language she's forgotten, their voices just audible above the constant running of the stream. She has heard enough fairy tales to know that when a girl goes into a forest, looking for something, what she gets is rarely the thing she wants: that if you're very lucky, you sometimes get a better thing. The midgies are a trial, perhaps, some test she has to pass. She tries to see them that way.

When she's finished eating, she sits inside the darkened tent, waiting for them to go. Max will be in bed by now. She won't get any message here, but she digs the phone out anyway and turns it on, holds the cold blue screen aloft. She thinks to him. His eyes flutter closed, then open, then closed: that nightly miracle of crossing into sleep, hard to believe in from here. She closes her own eyes. His arms are thrown wide in a gesture of trust. Of vulnerability. She sees that.

She should be there.

It's too late now. It's getting dark. She unzips the door of the tent and sticks her head out. The midgies have gone. On the far bank, a deer grazes in the day's last light under cover of the trees, for all the world like something from a myth. Esme has come here looking for a different story but it's hopeless. You can't travel with your anxious mind, with your own two eyes, and expect to find anything but yourself. The deer looks up and, seeing Esme as the predator she is, takes flight. It leaps off through the foliage. A moment later it appears, still leaping, along the brow of the hill. Then it's gone.

Esme doesn't sleep a lot that night. The ground is hard. Her hips hurt. She turns from side to side, trying to get comfortable, to trick her mind into ease. Above her somewhere, a buzzard hunts. Its cry echoes in her waking and her dreams, audible through the stream's burble and splash, through the whisper of leaves. By the early hours, she's no longer sure if what she hears is the bird itself or the screech of a thought, if that constant murmur is water running over stones or her own blood, rushing in her ears. It's as if she's made of sound. Beneath her, trees reach out and twine their roots like fingers, passing messages of sap and remembered light. She wanted to be alone but she's not alone. Life surrounds her, goes all through her. Everyone she's ever known is knotted in her heart: Adam; and Max; the old woman who lives upstairs; the man in the corner shop who always smiles but never looks her in the eye – the awkward exchange every time she goes in for a pint of milk; the great, tangled confusion of the human world. She can't leave it behind, however hard she tries.

In the morning she makes a cup of coffee on the stove she brought. The midgies haven't yet returned. The sun is coming up. She washes out her cup in the stream and packs up her belongings, then turns towards home.

*Sarah's stories have previously appeared in publications including *Ambit*, *New Writing Scotland*, *Gutter*, *Brittle Star* and *The Letters Page*. She holds a Master's degree in creative writing from the University of St Andrews and has recently completed a novel called *Auditorium*, about music, motherhood and neurodiversity.*