

TETHERED TO THE EARTH

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

Mum named me *Rubha* after her favourite headland, as if she wanted to tether me to the earth. I've never seen the *Rubha Mòr* of course, it was flooded before I was born and the waters around it are still a refuelling/repair station for the Water Defence Systems so ordinary boats are not permitted.

Mum has no family there now anyway, no real reason to go back. She always said her father died from a broken heart, Dad said more likely microplastics, although he always held the view that AI-diagnostics were never as neutral as we were led to believe. He told me to question everything, but questions can be exhausting. I wondered sometimes if Dad had just worn away from the worrying, the uncertainty, and was grateful that he had given Mac and me a childhood full of living. This place needs you to be *here*, to be present, active, alive, and that makes it easier to quieten some of the questioning.

I think that is what pulled them both to the island; Mum a Native Seed Programme technician for the northern hemisphere, and Dad a sea farm consultant specialising in shellfish, one of them born of the earth, the other most alive in the water so that this place, with roots in the land and a holdfast in the sea, became a haven, a home for them both. They always taught us that family was made, not born. That home was the earth you turned.

Oh, but how that earth has changed in my lifetime; roads that I used to walk are now kayak-ways, skerries where once there was beach, rocks that were green now salt-licked and shiny and dunes high in places where I remember undulating, run-between spaces. Shoring up they called it, I think I was 8 or 9 the summer they came, stacked wire cages stuffed with shingle and earth, piled them high, tethered them to the earth and covered it all in sand,

fast-planted with already part-grown marram, roots as deep as they'd go in pots teased apart and plunged into new-built nature. They worked fast the planters, teams with trolleys and sand shovels, science students from the city maybe, but we didn't know any of the faces, so we sat far enough away from questions but close enough to catch on-the-wind-laughter, sometimes songs, sounds that promised something more.

Late summer 2052 and I'm a little older now than those planters were when the shoring up was started. The dunes are no longer a new build but a 'nature-based restoration success story' shared with coastal cousins across the western seaboard. It's part of my duties as Ranger to survey the coastline, report signs of erosion; notching, avalanching, slumping or significant shifts in the distribution of the marram. I can do this by running an image review from drone surveillance, but I prefer to walk at the edge of the earth. Where we need to patch it up, I work with the other Rangers and with community volunteers, often young folk from croft school. We have nurseries of marram grass growing in several of the community gardens, grey-green pioneers preparing to become protectors of the land from wind and water.

Mum taught me that marram grass produces long rhizomes which spread through the sand, I used to call them roots when I was small but she told me they were more magical than roots, that roots alone are not enough for survival, but that rhizomes, those amazing, horizontal underground plant stems are capable of producing the shoot *and* root systems of a new plant and so allow the marram to perennate or survive an unfavourable season underground just by digging deep into the sand and, when the world around is safer, by sending out new life.

We still use the same print-pattern Dad developed to 3D print the materials needed for the crates and so shoring up for me has become something more than necessity, it's a renewal. Of course, any planting is a hope for survival, but it's also become a remembering of family and roots and all that has gone before.

Maybe that is why, whenever the young folk from croft school are helping with the planting, I like to ask Charlie or some of the other older community volunteers to come along too. Charlie was old when I was young, of course he wasn't as old as I thought he was then, but he's been here forever and remembers all the earth-changes.

Croft school was just beginning when I was young, mostly we learned alongside family, friends and with VLAs (Virtual Learning Assistants) and that model still underpins most of the croft school structure, but I think it's more organised than it was for a time, a little more formal than the scramble of the late thirties as we rebuilt structures for a new age. We didn't study 'subjects' in the same way that Mum talks about from her school days, everything was blended more holistically, and we learned more practically than theoretically. There is less urgency to memorise when your tag holds all the data you'll ever need. If we had picked subjects, I think mine would have been history. I love to listen to the stories some of the older folk tell about the history they learned at school. To hear about civilisations, cultures that had lasted, unchanging for thousands of years, eras that spanned generations. There is something comforting in this age of constant shifting to imagine human life settled long enough to be an era, an age of more than migration.

And so, whenever the young folk from croft school are helping with the planting, I ask Charlie or some of the other older community volunteers to tell stories of this place before the shifting sand, the rising sea. They tell stories of how this land was named and worked and loved. How we came together, welcomed, shared and, as the young folk push roots deep into our defences, we listen to stories of the earth and of survival.

Katharine Macfarlane is a Skye based writer whose lyrical poetry is rooted in the history, landscape and folklore of Scotland. With a passion for creating connections, celebrating communities and championing underrepresented voices her work explores themes such as identity, tradition, environment, relationships, parenthood, and journeys. Her work has been published by Speculative Books, Fanks Press and through the Making Publics Press at Atlas Arts.