Wild Landscapes of the Self: Embodiment, Eco-Autobiography, and Contemporary Memoir About Place

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis employs a creative and critical methodology to examine the body interacting with landscape in the context of contemporary memoir. Looking at links between the body, gender, and embodiment as discussed by autobiography scholars, this work questions how we think about being in wild places—who is allowed there, and in what manner—and explores how correlations between writing and bodily movement bear out as methodology in creative writing. The body, according to life narrative scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, is "a site of autobiographical knowledge" (49). But embodiment, or how the body is narrated, is dependent on cultural discourses that "determine when the body becomes visible, how it becomes visible, and what that visibility means" (50). The purpose of this work is to explore the ways in which bodies are visible in memoirs about being in nature, and also in eco-autobiography, an emerging genre—and thus highlight gendered conventions that exclude the body in genres that merge life writing and nature writing.

The creative component of this thesis, "Salt Marks," is a memoir of the body, set in Scotland and woven through with myths about shapeshifting. The memoir explores how immediate, lived experience in wild places affects my broader and more complex sense of self. Beginning in the Orkney Islands, the narrator, fascinated by the myth of selkies—seals that could shed their skin and become women—travels alone through the north-western islands and Highlands of Scotland. As she explores these wild landscapes, the image of the selkie evokes the metaphor of multiple bodies and provides a way for her to redefine her relationship with her body after a recent heartbreak. Weaving travel writing, folklore, and an essayistic reflection on how we interact with landscape, "Salt Marks" maps an experience of self-discovery in an unfamiliar landscape that comes to feel like home.

The exegesis discusses how people write about their bodies in memoirs about landscape, and explores gender and genre in relation to narrating embodiment. Chapter one of the exegesis discusses methodology in "Salt Marks" as an embodied act of walking and draws on Rebecca Solnit and Katrín Lund to do this. I also discuss working between the three modes of thinking in this exegesis: creative; scholarly; and the reflective voice that connects the two.

Chapter two considers Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, and uses the concept of autobiographical embodiment to explore walking as a methodology for narrating women's experiences of solitude, belonging, and wildness in contemporary memoir about nature.

Chapter three turns to *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* by Tim Winton to explore a different relationship between narrator and body. I use this memoir to think through the emerging genre of eco-autobiography, and seek to identify why it might be a relevant mode of contemporary life narrative in which an intimate account of the body does not exclude the text from being read as ecocritical.

This discussion concludes this thesis' creative and critical exploration of why writing about the body is important, and of the problematic standards around how bodies are narrated in relation to gender in memoirs about nature.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed

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NOTE

The following manuscript is a work of nonfiction drawn from my memory and the written accounts I kept during the events. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect privacy. While an interview and email correspondence with the historian Tom Muir contributed to my understanding of Orkney's history and mythology, I also undertook my own research. Any error in this area is my own.

Parts of the following manuscript have been published as extracts elsewhere:

"Blood Land" in *Southerly,* 75.3, "War and Peace" 2016.

"Salt Skin" in *Overland*, Summer 2015.

"Singing My Mother Home" in *Meanjin*, Autumn 2018, 100-104.

"Sister Tongue" in *Lip,* 14 May 2015.

"The Summer of Leaving Ghosts" in *Lip*, 15 October 2014.

SALT MARKS

All day she said I feel all day

The earth dilate beneath my feet

I hear in fancy far away

The tidal heart of ocean beat

Jessie M. King

PROLOGUE

Picture the Portuguese man o' war. The ridge of its back curves like a rippled fin above the water. Its translucent blue belly billows up through the surface, the skin taut. The blue is alluring in the way that tangled, dangerous things often are.

The water's meniscus licks up the side of the creature: below the waterline, luminous tentacles feather out under its body. Further below still, the ocean is black and impenetrable. Above, clouds bruise the pinking sky. The last of the day's light reflects in wet splinters off the body. It hangs halfway between sky and deep water, between the warm known and the unknowable dark.

Printed on a postcard above my bed, the man o' war has a flat, glossy sheen. The postcard is illuminated for a few short minutes every day by the late afternoon sun that moves across my wall. In the sudden brilliance of light, the creature is hard to make out. On paper, in the light, it becomes something else entirely to what it is in the water.

People often think the man o' war is a jellyfish, but it is not. A jellyfish is a single organism: its body is its own. The man o' war is a siphonophore, a collection of organisms called zooids which band together to survive. They integrate to the point where they can no longer function independently, so we call them a single animal. A body made of many. Water bodies are multitudinous.

I have always dreamed of the sea. But the dreams feel closer to memories than something I have imagined. I might be sitting on a hillside, the wind biting through my jacket and nothing but rocks and sheep around me. The ocean will flood through my mouth, rush to my lungs. Fill me with salt, leave me clutching at a tide I almost remember. And yet I fear the ocean. Fear the smash of its teeth against the rocks, fear the thunder and thump of its immense weight, fear its call. Still, I yearn for what it promises me, for what is just beyond my hearing. Stories of fishing nets dragging wishes

up from the deep. Shores that are barren but for seals that may have once been women. Emerald shadows moving across the ocean's surface above slow, lumbering creatures. What is below, concealed in deep shadow, pulls at me insistently, evading understanding or reason.

In Celtic mythology, selkies are seals that shed their skins and become beautiful women. I never knew if they were seals that became women, or if they were women disguised as seals, and it puzzled me. To which world did these seal-women belong? They would swim to shore if the shore was empty, shed their skins and dance. Sometimes, however, a fisherman would catch a glimpse of their pale bodies on the rocks, hear their pipe music. And he might creep to the pile of seal skins and steal one, and that selkie would be unable to transform back. The fisherman would marry her, and they might have children—I thought they must be strange ones—but the selkie would pine for the sea always, and search constantly in the hope she would find where the fisherman had hidden her skin. If she found it, she would disappear back under the waves, leaving behind forever the fisherman and her children. These women who moved between skins, moved between water and land: in their story is an underlying thread of sacrifice, of having to leave who they love so they can return to the skin they yearn for. The way that love and grief are bound together in these stories troubled me. Why were women forced to choose between their bodies, their homes, their loves: essential parts of their identity? At first glance, the selkie story is about love. But only at first glance.

What does it mean to have two skins? To be in two worlds, but not properly belong to either? I wanted to know where home was for her. If her flesh was strange to her. She was blubber and muscle and sleek-dark-graceful in water and cumbersome on land and was this strange? Her human form, pale, spindly—what did she think of it?

Did she think like me?

In a constant and gut-deep way I have been preoccupied with skin since I can remember. Skin is like the waterline: it is the physical barrier between two worlds. It divides the seen and the unseen. Roots us firmly in the tangible. Makes us bodies that are not imagined, not remembered,

but felt. Skin is the site of sensation, of what we know. Skin is what keeps us apart from the other world.

In Celtic Christian nomenclature, a “thin place” is a place where the membrane between the seen and the unseen worlds is permeable. Where whatever it is that separates us from other realities is barely there. In the way that skin is at once solid but porous, a barrier, but penetrable, there are some places in the world where tangibility does not preclude other things from seeping in and drifting out. Notions of the empirical and the ineffable tangle strangely in these places. Experience and memory and longing—all of those things from which we write stories, through which, in the most basic way, we know the world and know our selves—tangle in much the same way.

The Orkney Islands, which lie off the northern tip of mainland Scotland, is such a place. The night before I flew from my home in Australia to Orkney I had a dream I was a seal. Long after, the feel of rubbery kelp in my mouth and the sight of barnacled pier pylons sinking deep into the ocean’s darkness did not fade from my memory. I remembered diving. I breathed the seawater into me. As a seal I was me, but not-me. Familiar to myself but strange. The world I knew was overlapped by another and in the morning I woke aching with yearning and something like memory. Orkney, I was convinced, was one of the last places in which existed remnants of the other world, the unseen one, where selkies rose dripping from stormy water and enchantments lay knotted in fishing nets. The one in which I might find that I was me but not-me if l looked out from the corner of my eye like the old stories instructed.

In this world, a woman’s skin might not be what she thought it was.

It may not even be a skin at all.

After all, skin is strange stuff. As a conduit, it is both impermeable and porous. Impenetrable, or penetrable, depending on what is doing the passing through.

Perhaps a skin is not a barrier, but a path between.

*

The slip of skin happens at dark-time. Scallop-taste in her mouth, whisker-slick droplets shedding warm and glassy behind her as they come into the shallows. Amongst the wavelets, she is barnacle-rasp against sand. Around her, the faint chatter and slap of water against bodies, seal-sisters eager for the shore.

Quick-slither, then the gasp of air on new skin. In human form she rises, her feet for a few moments unsteady, prickle-sensitive on the cold wet, the wet crunch. For a moment, disorientation; even in the murk of twilight the world is bright and sharp. These eyes are almost blind after dark-water-vision.

Around her now, the sisters are music. Human voices singing songs from the deep, songs made for throats that know another language altogether. She follows the singing up to the rocks, leaving the sea behind.

In high summer, they come to shore in the simmer dim, the long glow, the time of light that does not leave. In cold months they come when the sun still lingers above the horizon, and they whisper from the water, shaking off the icy chill, seeking any warmth left behind on the rocks. The rough scrape of them against her hipbone is a strange pleasure to her every time, the newness of this body that has bends and joints and planes, that moves in an entirely different way to what she knows in the water.

She ambles along the sandy ways, weaving through the rocks until she reaches the tidal forest. Her sisters do not like the trees, these unbending pillars of wood like weeds that do not move. But she lays her palm against the bark, feels the rough-sap pinewood against her skin, and she thrills at it. She wonders what lies beyond the forest. This is as far as she has ever dared to come, here to the outskirts of trees.

It is easy to forget her other skin, waiting in the sand where she does not need it.

Preoccupied, peering into the trees, she does not see him draw his curragh up behind the rocks. She does not imagine, then, that he will take her skin, bury it under a pile of old fishing nets to keep it from her. To keep her from herself.

Fall in love with the sea, or something from it, and you will never wholly be yourself afterward.

This is what the fisherman learnt.

She knew this long before he did.

What she didn't know was if she ever wanted to be wholly one self in the first place.

THE ISLANDS

A haze of sea-mist hovered over the Pentland Firth, the stretch of water that lies between mainland Scotland and the Orkney Islands. Behind the ferry, the coast disappeared. My eyes couldn't find focus on the restless sea, nor pick its colour; its hues shifted between silver and gunmetal grey, the suggestion of dolphin-back blue and the reflection of the colourless sky. Through the salt haze ahead I made out a landmass, rising steeply from the water.

As the distance between us lessened, the cliffs began to come into focus. These were the cliffs of Hoy, the one island in Orkney's archipelago of seventy islands that is not flat and rolling. The island is named from the Old Norse *háey,* meaning "high island" Vertical shadows veined its face. One section of the rock glowed in a beam of cloud-hidden sun. The swell drew us slowly on.

Orkney. The name is the screech of its giant sea-birds, the sweetness of the peaty banks of heather. The particular brogue of the word was a reminder that I did not know the history of this language. This place was once known as Orkneyjar—pronounced "ork-nee-yar"—an Old Norse name meaning the Seal Islands.

I was close enough now to see the cliff face from underneath, and a trick of the light made the shadows in its face look like crevasses that split the rock down to the seabed. The Old Man of Hoy, a 450-foot stack of rock sitting just off the island, watched like an unblinking sentinel as we churned by. The rock face, impervious in the shifting light, was an imposing sight. Rounding Hoy, I almost shivered. I had not expected this arrival to feel like a gateway, that might demand something of me in return for my entry.

I was going to Orkney because that's where the selkies were. These women came from the sea but could live on land; I was a woman who lived on land but longed for the sea. Selkies never wholly

belonged to whichever world they were in. Human but not, when I pictured their faces their black eyes were blank and animal, holding the uncanny presence of the familiar and the wild, feral unfamiliar. Woman but water-thing. Me but not-me. I was going to Orkney, this place where selkie stories were entrenched in the landscapes and seascapes, because by immersing myself in them, I was convinced, I would understand something of myself. Understand why it felt like somewhere deep inside me, a skin was unpeeling. A skin that was shifting and moving and wanting, more and more insistently; wanting the wild, wanting solitude, wanting the north. The mythical history of women who could assume different skins and move between worlds lured me like a clarion call.

Stories about shapeshifting were rife in the Orkney Islands. I would discover the beach whose shores selkies were rumoured to come to, and squint into the distance at the skerry—a small rocky island off the coast of Orkney's mainland—that appears in the famous ballad *The Silkie of Sule Skerry*. I would learn of the Fin folk, the eerie enchanters of the sea who sped across the water in magicked seal-skin kayaks. But Orkney is also rich in prehistoric remains, and I had made a list of the places I wanted to visit in the two months I would spend there. There were the archives of the two museums in Orkney to browse, the Standing Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar, the strange island of Hoy, and the recent archeological dig called the Ness of Brodgar. Here, the remains of one of the largest Neolithic constructions in the world had been discovered on the tiny isthmus of land between the stones of Stenness and Brodgar. What was being uncovered was thought by archeologists to be a temple complex, and every time I pictured this ancient ritual site that sat between two stone circles, goosebumps prickled my arms. Beside Orkney, there were other islands in northern Scotland, too, that I was drawn to; the Isle of Skye off the western coast, and beyond Skye, the Hebrides.

I had contacted the Orcadian folklorist Tom Muir, who was based at the Orkney Museum in Kirkwall, and who had published numerous books on Orcadian folklore and history. I wanted to ask him what he knew about selkies, because I was sure it would be different to anything I would able to read for myself. He lived in the islands, had spent years there, and I was sure his knowledge of

their myths must be made immeasurably rich through his inhabitation of the place. This was a kind of knowledge I would never have, and even then, when I emailed Tom, I knew it, and I envied him for it. The prospect of meeting with him excited me in a way that merely making travel plans alone did not. Our planned meeting was evidence, I felt, that I was investigating something quantifiable; something for which there might be real-world, historical traces and artefacts. I clung to this small certainty, this sense of purpose, when people asked why I was going to the Orkney Islands.

I told them I was going in pursuit of the islands' myths and history. It was true, but it was an easy, simple version of the truth: the reasons I was setting out for these old, remote islands that were on the opposite side of the globe from my home, were more difficult to articulate.

Difficult, because I wanted to keep my true motivations to myself. Selkies were a myth, and yet they seemed *real* to me. In these stories about women and bodies and belonging there was wisdom, an answer to a question that eluded me, and the need to understand it compelled me. I too gravitated to the sea. But I was reluctant for people to know what was driving me. This trip, this feeling of compulsion to go to Orkney, was something I kept secret, like something tucked out of sight under a pile of fishing nets. I knew I could not expose this fragile, deeply personal need until I was there in the place where these myths might still be alive.

Quite apart from the selkies who hovered in the back of my mind, I was lured by what lay waiting in wild landscapes. In solitude. From what I had read and heard from others who had gone to Orkney before me, there was something almost mystical about the islands; a sense of an enduring wildness; a remoteness that had little to do with geographic location. The interplay of wind and salt and tide. Communion and solitude. A need to go to these islands that were so different from the dry bushland of my home lodged in me, urgent and compelling. I wanted the unfamiliar. To be alone, to be stripped open.

In the weeks leading up to my departure, I had been desperately impatient to be gone. Somewhere in my backpack now was a pair of grey gloves which I was trying not to think about. Jacob and I had been broken up for six months; half a year of yearning and missing and wishing.

The last time I had seen him, shortly before I left, we both cried. In a dark Adelaide side-street we stood in an embrace, both unwilling to break it, knowing that one of us would.

As I turned to go, he fished out of his pack my grey gloves that he'd been carrying for me since the rain had stopped earlier that day. He held them out to me, then after a moment, drew one of his hands back.

"Can I keep one?" he asked, looking at me, his face wide open and vulnerable. "I just want to . . . keep part of you."

When I emailed him weeks later, asking for the glove's return, I told myself it was for practical reasons. It would be cold in Scotland; I needed my gloves. He dropped it in my letterbox without a note for which I was grateful, because even the sight of his handwriting left my eyes swollen with tears.

The salt spray clung to my hands where I gripped the ferry railing. It dried on the side of my face that was turned to the wind, leaving my skin tight and slightly sticky, stinging in the sharp breeze. I watched as we slowly rounded Hoy, making for the harbour of Stromness on the Mainland. Perhaps it was the deep thrum of the ferry engine, or perhaps it was the too-salty mushroom soup I'd eaten earlier for lunch, but I was starting to feel queasy. As the ferry rose and fell, my stomach clenched.

I had travelled before, but it had always been in the company of others. I had spent two months in India when I was eighteen amidst noise, colour, ripe fruits and spices and the undulating evening call to prayer. A year later in Ireland, I cycled with a friend along the western coast, battling the weather, anticipating every pub where I could warm my hands and order a tall coffee with a shot of Baileys. These travels had been profound and formative in the way that travels in one's early twenties often are. This trip to Orkney felt different. I was in my late twenties now, and no longer going somewhere with no expectation other than to explore a new place. Experiencing the world had come to mean instead experiencing myself in it. It amounts, perhaps, to the same thing—

and yet an increased awareness of self inevitably leads to a changed understanding of what it means to be in the world, and the myriad realities we construct for and around ourselves.

Why did it feel different, this time? It was a need, not a curiosity, that lured me away from what I knew. Alone, in a place I didn't know but that called me irresistibly, who would I be?

I was going to find out, I thought.

There is a discordance to travelling in a new place. Like inhaling frigid air: it hurts the throat, but it thrills at the same time. On the train from London to Inverness, I had traced the train route on my map with a yellow highlighter and watched as the land around me changed. As we sped north, England's wheat fields gave way to grassy stretches dotted with fuchsia-coloured blooms. Along the east coast to Berwick-on-Tweed, the sun turned the coastal cliffs to blue, green, gold velvet shadows. Highland cows grouped together in the fields, their horns curling above their fluffy coats. Mountains rose in the distance. The land strained toward the wilderness, the green deepening around me as the train wound through it. The tracks clattered beneath me: *to the north, to the north, to the north*, they seemed to say. I was alight with the knowledge that here I was out of place. As the hours passed, I ate my sandwiches and listened idly to the conversations around me. Curled against the window, the rocking of the train was soothing.

But now, on the ferry, my hands clenched on the railing and the roar of the engine vibrating through me, I was scared. On a map these islands were tiny. After months of anticipation, I was here now, and as the ferry drew deeper into the archipelago, something was creeping over me that was not reverence and excitement and everything I thought I would feel. There was something deeply frightening about being this far north of anywhere I'd ever been; something bleak and desolate. This place was not romantic and mystic and wintry. It was at the furthest reaches of the world that I knew, and I didn't know how I hadn't realised this. Why had I wanted to come to this scatter of rocks flung far out in an ocean that lapped at Atlantic ice floes?

It was astonishing, the panic. It beat in my stomach. This was not how it was supposed to be. I thought of forests, and roots, of things that gripped the earth. There was so little on this ferry, on the barren islands that awaited me, that separated me from the nothingness of the endless ocean.

I closed my eyes against the nausea and fear welling in me, all thoughts of the islands' history and enchantment gone from my mind. My breaths were quick gasps, barely audible over the roar of the ferry ploughing the water.

Yet, as we rounded the northern tip of Hoy and turned east, passing the smaller island of Graemsay and drawing alongside the Stromness harbour, the fluttering fear calmed. Perhaps it was the sight of the small township, settled at the edge of the water, its pale stone buildings aglow in the early evening light. It might have been the thud and clink of the smaller boats anchored in the harbour, the fading white paintwork, bobbing buoys, and old moorings I could make out on the shore as we drew closer. With the bulk of West Mainland between me and the North Atlantic Ocean, this stretch of water, scuffed with a light breeze that blew in from the islands' grassy hills, I calmed, felt more at ease.

When I shouldered my pack, walked down the long ferry gangway and stepped onto the pier of Stromness, I was met with the sound of gulls cawing and the smell of kelp and beach things. Long shadows reached down from the hill that rose behind the town, above which the sky stretched in pink bands, bleaching to pale blue and scattered cloud. A sharp breeze raised the hair on my exposed arms, and I pulled my jacket out of my pack, shrugging it on. I took a deep breath, and exhaling, felt my shoulders relax. As I turned a corner onto the high street, looking for the hostel that would be my home for the next two weeks, the wide paved way was illuminated by the square lights of windows. Their warm gold was the colour of comfort. Something curled with happiness within me. As I knocked twice on the brown door next to the yarn shop, and footsteps approached and the door swung open, I smiled. I had arrived, and it was good to be here.

STROMNESS

The fat from the greasy fish I just ate has stained the pages of this journal. I like the look of the marks. They are not neat fingerprints. They are smudges, incidental moments of touch.

I've been thinking of the salt that comes from this place. It clings to the great white birds that caw like they would tear their throats out. It seeps from the cracked stones mottled with algae beneath my feet, seeps from the hill behind Stromness and is carried on the wind that whistles down its slope every evening. I've been thinking about how strange it is that we are full of salt too. It seeps out of us, also. But sometimes it remains on our skin, whether we can see it or not. Dries into layers so fine we don't know it's there. And so we carry on us something that is part of the place we are in, or part of us, it becomes hard to tell.

I looked up to a susurrus of birds overhead. They circled the Stromness harbour twice, three times, dipping like light glancing off water. I could make out the texture of Hoy now in the thin evening light, seven miles away across the Hoy Sound; it was changing from gold to something paler, a blue-green milk with a yellow tint. The land was lined like skin, with marks that could be tracks. There was a small scatter of buildings near the base of the island that could be houses.

The stiff waterfront breeze grabbed at my empty fish and chip wrapper. The last few nights I had come to the harbour to watch the sun go down, and look out across the water to Hoy. I sat at this bench because there was a good view to the island from here, a gap between a boat house at the edge of the pier and the west-reaching arm of the jetty, cluttered as it was with ladders and rigging and light posts. The clink and thud of moored boats, the skirling gulls, the snatches of thickly-accented conversations I caught from passers-by could have belonged to another century; it was

easy to imagine other worlds here. Easy to think about fisherman and seals and strange things the sea washed up. Where the harbour was now would have been a stretch of beach, a scatter of rocks, wet kelp heaped along the corrugated sand. Shells, strewn by tidelines, would glimmer in the twilight when the selkies dragged themselves up through the shallows. I could almost see them, hear the harsh bark of their laughter, their voices more sea-creature than human. But somewhere behind me, a drill droned incessantly. Beside me, a lone gull clutched the jetty railing, blew out its feathers and gave a sharp squawk.

I had been here for almost a week now. I woke in the late morning on my first day, after having slept the dead sleep of exhaustion, and set out to explore Stromness. One of two main towns on the Mainland of Orkney, Stromness has a population of about two thousand. The town is small, and as it sits right on the waterfront, some buildings perch within metres of the lapping sea. The high street is wide and cobbled with broad, grey stones. It rises and dips, hemmed in by tall buildings with whitewashed or brick facades. Shop windows are set into frames painted white, maroon, cerulean blue. Looking up to windows on the second level, I caught glimpses of fine lace curtains and ornate lattices that matched the occasional streetlamp leaning out underneath tiled eaves. Exploring, I passed a post office, an art gallery, two shops that sold yarn and craft, a potter, a butcher, a small shop with fresh produce, and a place selling fishing gear. With the discovery of each new shop and hidden lane, delight spread through me.

After half a week, the town had settled into me. I had continued to explore, content just to wander. The high street was almost always quiet. In the small spaces between houses on the waterfront, the sea was flat and grey in the cool air; buoys and old boats bobbed by low rock walls. There were lanes to the other side of the street, through which cats and wildflowers wandered. These small winding ways rose steeply up steps, vanished into the sides of buildings, wound up in empty lots brimming with foxgloves, honeysuckle and swathes of tall grasses. I spent an hour patting an old white horse in one of these lots, leaning against a crumbling rock wall as the horse huffed gently into my palm. Apart from passenger boats and ferries, and the intermittent scream of

the huge white gulls, Stromness is an old, quiet place. There are about twenty other inhabited islands in Orkney, and on these, like on the Mainland, you can find Neolithic remains, standing stones, burial mounds, a few distilleries, and, on North Ronaldsay, sheep that live almost entirely off seaweed.

I tossed the greasy fish and chip wrapper in the bin. I wanted to go for a short walk before I went home. It *did* feel like it was home, the little hostel in which I was staying, with its door, hidden in the building's overhang, that opened out onto the high street. I had a small room with a bed that creaked so loudly it woke me up sometimes, set against a wall through which the plumbing thundered and rattled. But there was a bunch of flowers by my bed when I arrived, and sun fell in through the window I cranked open every morning, bringing with it the ever-present sounds of water and gulls. I felt peaceful here. Settled. The fear that gripped me on the ferry ride across had faded into a puzzling memory. Wandering down the high street, or sitting in the grass at the outskirts of town eating my lunch, the feeling of peace settled in deeper as every day passed.

My home in Adelaide, Australia, had never felt too small until one day, it did. It's a deceptively simple thing, how home can become not enough. I had finished my university degree with honours, my relationship was breaking down, my job was exhausting me.

On what felt like a whim, I moved to Melbourne. While I had godparents living there, I knew almost no-one else, and had no job or house lined up. My grandparents lived in Korumburra, a small country town an hour and a half southeast of Melbourne. My mother grew up there, and I had been born not far away. In a way, I thought long after moving to Melbourne, I had gone back to a place that could have been my home. It was a strange thought. How could I call it a homecoming, moving to a place I didn't know?

But when I arrived in Melbourne, that's what it felt like.

I stayed with my godparents until I found a home in a share-house with two women called Meiki and Naomi, and settled easily in with them and their grey cat Frankie. The house was filled

with bookcases of Finnish poetry, baskets of craft supplies, dusty guitars. My bedroom was small and light. My bed was a loft bed, so high on its frame that as I fell asleep, wrapped in my wave-patterned doona, I would imagine I was in a small boat, gently creaking and swaying at sea.

The little wooden house in Melbourne did not *become* home, it *was* home from the start. After the initial excitement of moving wore off, and I started working at Flinders Street station distributing the local newspaper, and I went to free concerts in the park and lay under the stars listening to the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, happy tears leaking out from under my eyelids, and I got my nose pierced, and found favourite cafes, and rode my bike along the Merri River for hours, I wondered if the enchantment would last. As the weeks, then months passed, I wondered if I felt homesick. At times I did. But it sprang up around me, that life: my room with the loft bed and the constantly purring Frankie and the two women who shared this house too and loved me as much as I loved them, and the Merri, whose banks and reeds and hidden nooks came to feel like a secret terrain made especially for me. I learnt swing dancing, and made friends who took me to markets, taught me how to make bread, cut my hair, and went riding and dancing and drinking with me.

Had it been within me all along, the fierce independence, the joy I found there? It changed the meaning of home entirely for me when I made my own. And now, here in Orkney, my feet seemed to know the paved streets of Stromness in a way I couldn't explain. A few days ago, as I left the potter's shop one afternoon, a breeze whisked a scent past me—something of ocean and salt and old stone—and such a swell of recognition seized me that for a moment I couldn't move. Was this what home meant, too—this grip of something that felt like memory?

Pulling on my jacket, I left the Stromness harbour, and followed the road that led to the outskirts of town. After walking for ten minutes, I had climbed high enough to have a clear view out over the water of the Hoy Sound to where the flank of the Mainland curved back around. I could see other islands from here. Graemsay was long and flat, a short ferry-ride away; Hoy was a shadowed hill rising up to the south. Up here, away from the harbour, the screech of seabirds and the smell of kelp was replaced by the sweet smell of cows in the twilight. My jacket was buttoned

tightly and my breaths came in smoky puffs. A group of crows circled in a dark ring not far from me, floating in the air with wings barely moving, and I watched them, chafing my hands in the cold.

Before it was called Stromness, this place was called Hamnavoe, a Norse name which translates to "haven bay." I knew that this name was probably a practical one—the anchorage where Stromness now sits is sheltered in the Hoy Sound, and would have been an obvious place to dock ships. I was far from the first to come to these islands in search of something; a refuge, a home, a connection to the old ways through clues scattered in stories. Coming here, I was preceded by thousands, from Norsemen in the late eighth century, to travellers through to the twenty-first century, seeking something of the past, or something of themselves, and perhaps finding, as I would, that sometimes it was hard to separate the two. But still, I couldn't help but feel that the name signalled something of a home-coming. Like this small town was a haven waiting for me.

I was not sure, yet, how the next few months were going to go. I knew that there were stories here, but I wasn't entirely sure how to go about finding them. I needed somewhere to start.

The crows circled lower. Suddenly they dropped, sweeping in, alighting on the grass, and waiting, as though for a feast, for a communion, I couldn't decide. It struck me, as they bobbed and croaked on the grass, how their voices were the only bird calls I recognised here.

The crows ignored me and darkness fell. Thinking of bird calls, thinking of home, I looked upward, searching for early-evening stars. When the night set in properly, the star constellations would be different. Dad had taught me to recognise Orion's Belt, which we called the Saucepan, and Crux, or the Southern Cross. I knew to extend a line out from the tail of the cross for four lengths; this was the Southern Celestial Pole, and, dropping a line directly from the pole to the horizon, I would find true south. In the northern hemisphere, I didn't know what to look for. I didn't even know the stars' names.

Below me, the lights of Stromness made the streets look different, and drew my eyes out to the pitch black of the Sound. I liked the dark. I liked the idea of night falling, of the darkness drawing in close to me the sphere of what I knew, what I recognised, making the known unfamiliar.

I liked it for precisely this moment, when I stood in it all, unable to pinpoint, exactly, the time everything changed, knowing only that I was in the midst of it changing.

WARBETH BEACH

Sedna is an Inuit goddess. But she was a human girl before she was a goddess. Her father married her to a shaman who was half sea bird, half man. So Sedna lived on an island of rock with the seabird, and never saw another human being. After a year, her father repented his action, and set out in a kayak made of fish skin to bring her home. Sedna rejoiced when her father pulled up on the shore, and climbed into the kayak beside him.

When they were halfway back to the mainland, in the middle of the open sea, the bird shaman found then. Upon discovering Sedna was gone, he had set out to track her down, and when he found them, he beat his wings in fury until the waves threatened to overturn the kayak.

Sedna's father, terrified, begged the seabird to take her back and spare his life. He pushed his daughter from the kayak. Sedna clung to its side, trying to keep her head above the roiling waves. Ignoring her pleas, her father raised his paddle and brought it down onto Sedna's hands, severing the fingers with which she gripped the kayak. The fingers sank into the sea, and Sedna sank with them.

Her fingers transformed into seals, and Sedna became a custodian of the ocean. When humans displeased her, Sedna used her hair to ensnare her sea beasts, keeping them close to her breast so hunters had nothing to spear. When the people began to starve, their shamans sought out Sedna, and sang to her in remorse. Upon hearing their songs, Sedna forgave the people, and provided for them once again.

The Orcadian folklorist and historian Tom Muir paused after telling me about Sedna and the seals, letting me finish writing down his words. I wrote with my notepad on my lap, hunching slightly on

my tall, upright chair, sitting before Tom's wide desk. It was cluttered with books and bundles of papers, which spilled onto the cabinet to his left, and gathered in piles on the floor. His office, otherwise mostly bare, was warm and slightly stuffy despite the window behind Tom being open. Outside, the tips of flowering branches moved in an occasional breeze. We were on the top floor of the Orkney Museum in Kirkwall, of which Tom was the Exhibitions Officer.

"This is only one version of the myth," Tom said thoughtfully, his large, hairy hands folded across his wide belly. "The selkie story appears in many guises. There's another story you should know of, actually. It's about a golden-haired Norwegian woman called Gunnhild, who married Erik Bloodaxe, the king of Norway and son of Harald Fairhair. As the story goes, she was living with and learning sorcery from two Sami men. The men told Erik about her beauty, and he decided he wanted to see her for himself. When he set eyes upon Gunnhild he fell in love with her, but Gunnhild told him that the Sami sorcerers were in love with her too, and would never let her leave with him.

"Together Erik and Gunnhild plotted to kill the sorcerers. Every night the men would sit on either side of Gunnhild to make sure the other didn't have his way with her. Both men were so powerful they could kill you just by looking at you. But Gunnhild had learnt well from them, and one night, lulled them to sleep with a magic song. She pulled bags made of seal skin over both sorcerer's heads to conceal their eyes, and signalled for Eric and his men to rush in and kill them. Gunnhild and Erik married, and she became the Queen of Norway.

"The story goes downhill from there, really. It's written in *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturlason's Old Norse saga of the Kings of Norway. Snorri was feuding with one of Gunnhild's descendants, apparently, so he made her out to be a pretty nasty type. She ended up in Orkney. A lot of Norse myth is mixed up with what people think of as Orcadian myth, you know. You know about the Fin folk, I take it?"

I looked up from my notes. "Only vaguely. Were they similar to mermaids?"

“They were a gloomy lot, the Fin folk.” Tom frowned. “The mermaid myth is something altogether different, I’d say. The Fin folk were fishermen and sorcerers. The Vikings named them, perhaps thinking they were similar to the Fins of northern Norway. Fin men paddled in sealskin kayaks and were so fast no one could ever catch them. But there were no Fin women, so that’s not really useful to you, is it.”

Tom talked, and I took notes, pausing sometimes to check I’d understood correctly. I was struggling to keep up with the various myths connected to Orkney and the points at which they overlapped. Later, I would learn that Orkney’s history is one of Norse colonisation in the late eighth to early ninth century. Orkney, poised at the northern tip of Scotland—although not part of Scotland until the mid-fifteenth century—was right at the heart of what Tom called the “Viking sea roads.” This made the islands an ideal destination for migrating Scandinavians, a central location from which to raid and trade.

Long after, when I learnt of this history of colonisation, it was the Picts with whom my thoughts dwelled, the original occupants of the islands, whose myths and customs are largely lost to our knowledge due to the obliteration of their lives in the Viking Age. Was the selkie myth Pictish in origin? The understanding of how this story came about felt just out of sight, tantalising me. After all, it is impossible to pinpoint where a story begins. Impossible to know who first spoke about a dark shape in the water that looked like a woman.

Sources are scant about Vikings settling in Orkney; it’s unclear how much land was taken by force, and how much a more peaceful assimilation occurred due to trading and intermarrying with the Picts. I wondered, as Tom spoke about Fin men and sealskin kayaks, Norse invaders, translations, sagas, and superstitions about the sea, exactly whose stories I was pursuing. The golden-haired Gunnhild, as I would later read, was in fact an infamous Norse queen in the tenth century; ferocious, ambitious, and politically influential, she was known as Gunnhild konungamóðir, mother of kings. She disposed of her enemies, manoeuvred her sons onto thrones, and as a woman of that time she looms large in legend for her ruthless rule. In the Icelandic sagas,

there are dark tones underwriting her history; she trails rumours of sorcery, poison, and influence behind Erik's murderous rampage against his brothers. What we know of Gunnhild, mother of kings, this fierce, scheming, powerful woman, is pieced together through sagas and folklore. At what point is it important to differentiate between exaggeration and verifiable history—in short, to separate the strands of the myth she has become? It was a complex question, the more I thought about it. What I was sure about, however, was that history changes depending on who is doing the telling—and who remembers the words spoken. Enemy, friend, descendant, stranger. It is so easy for a story to change shape.

In the lead-up to this meeting with Tom, it had been vitally important to me to know where the myth of selkies grew from. Understanding this, I felt, would bring me closer to these shapeshifting women, and grant me insight into the relationship between the people for whom these stories were true, and the landscape in which they saw these mythical figures. But then, was it the selkie myth itself that I longed to understand—this slippery, symbolic tale that knew many skins—or was it the people who believed in these stories?

It is a strange thing, how a realisation can come into being like it has been there all along. During my meeting with Tom, an understanding took root that would slowly, softly settle into me in the following days. What I was pursuing was perhaps not what I thought it was. I was fascinated by the myth of selkies—wanting to understand them, wanting to be closer to the story itself—and never truly being able to pinpoint why. Or what it was I wanted from this understanding.

What I began to realise, after I had thanked Tom and left, and found a place in the sunny museum garden to eat my lunch, was that perhaps it was not only traces of selkies themselves I was looking for. It was just as much the people for whom the selkies were real. What I was searching for was a connection, a common way of thinking, a link to people who had seen these wild, coastal landscapes in the same way as I did.

What I was searching for, I realised, was a community of people who longed for the thin places in the world, like I did.

St Magnus Cathedral sits at the heart of Kirkwall, Orkney's largest town, where Tom is based. Its red walls cast a long shadow across the graveyard that lies to one side of it; I had to crane my head back to see its topmost spires. After the meeting, I found a bench in a patch of weak sun by the graveyard, and took from my bag a pair of socks I had started knitting. I had found the wool in a small shop a few doors down from my hostel in Stromness. I had visited the shop a number of times to run the yarn through my hands. The skeins were expensive. They were a deep, bright blue, hand-dyed and dappled with patches of aquamarine and russet: the exact colours of the shorelines of Orkney on a warm day. Under the smiling gaze of the woman who owned the shop, I bought the wool, and a fine pair of needles, and began my socks.

It was slow, delicate work as the yarn was thin. A brisk breeze gusted past me, tangling the wool across my knees. It was not yet noon, and the streets were quiet. It took me by surprise when an elderly woman approached.

"Well, I haven't seen anyone doing *that* for a long time," she said, looking down at me.

I held out my knitting. "This? Really?" I asked. "But there are such lovely yarn shops around here!"

The woman looked at me for a few moments longer, then said, "It's good to see." Nodding once, she walked away.

I had been looking out for wool shops and hand-knitted garments since I had arrived here, my heart set on purchasing a genuine wool sweater, preferably a Fair Isle one. Fair Isle knitting is a traditional style of working coloured geometric patterns, originating on the island it was named for that lay further north between Orkney and Shetland, and I had always loved it. Looking through the shops in Kirkwall before meeting Tom, most of the sweaters had been made with Shetland wool, which is valued globally for its fine quality. I had noticed several Létt Lopi yarns, an Icelandic brand, in the wool shop in Stromness—but I wondered if there were many sweaters made with wool grown and woven in the Orkney Islands themselves. I was currently in a place that produced some

of the world's finest yarns, sweaters, and tartans, but I still longed for something that was hand-made, something that might contain a flaw, some small human variability. Something that had someone else's story threaded into it, even if that threading hadn't been intentional. I wanted something that bound me here. That was made of this place, that I could take with me when I left. Something that said I have made a mark.

Or was it something that said, instead, that I have been marked?

That night, I learnt about Sule Skerry, and the selkie beach. Before I left for Orkney, a friend said she knew a couple there who would love to meet me, and made me promise I would email them when I arrived. I did.

Stephen, a geologist, and his wife Sandy invited me out for a pint at the local. The Flattie bar was small and dim, nestled off to the side of the Stromness Hotel. I arrived early, and took a seat in one of the few booths, conscious of the curious looks from the handful of older men who sat at the bar with pints. When the bell above the door tinkled, I looked up hopefully, and knew from their smiles that the couple who entered must be Stephen and Sandy.

Stephen was a quiet man. He looked weathered in the manner of some of the older men in Stromness, and when he spoke, his soft voice and rolling accent made it hard for me to understand him at times. But then he smiled, and deep under his greying eyebrows his dark eyes glinted with merriment and what I thought might be a wicked sense of humour.

Sandy hugged me when we met. She was tall, her hair also greying, her face also lined and soft. She exuded warmth and like Stephen, there was something in her demeanour that seemed poised to smile at the slightest prompt.

I liked them both immediately. After easy conversation and a few pints, Stephen and Sandy offered to show me a bit more of Stromness. It had started to rain and the streets appeared streaky through the car window as we drove through the town. I had noticed already that when it rained here—as it did, often and suddenly—the rain leached the colour from the air and everything turned

a wet grey wash. Only a few bedraggled cats were out on the streets, slinking into stone nooks, perched on fences, watching us pass.

After ten minutes, driving slowly in the downpour, the windscreen wipers beating heavily across the glass, we reached what Stephen and Sandy told me is called the "ootertoon"—or Outertown—of Stromness. The outskirts of the town were deserted: green-brown fields sloped down toward the island's edge, interrupted by narrow roads like the one we followed. Travelling through Ireland years previously, I had discovered that these lanes were called *bóithríns*. There, like here, the cross-hatch of lanes in fields were bordered by dry stone walls that had been impeccably constructed with no mortar binding them, only the builder's skill in fitting the stones together in a way that prevented them from dislodging.

Approaching the edge of the island, the land sloped down to a rocky shore. At the place where the road seemed to simply end and a few lone cottages stood between us and the ocean, Stephen stopped, and we climbed out of the car.

"Further up the coast," Stephen shouted, bending towards me in the rain and gesturing to something I couldn't see, "are the Black Craig cliffs. There was a terrible shipwreck there in 1834. Almost everyone died. If you come back down the coast, closer to us now, there's Warbeth beach. Stand there, look west, and there's Sule Skerry, which is where the selkies came from."

I blinked in the rain, trying to see where he pointed.

"It's really just a small hump of rock in the water. Nothing on it but gull droppings. But that's where the selkies live."

Excitement pulsed in my stomach as I looked out into the rain.

"The story's far older than I am," Stephen continued, his eyes twinkling under the scarf he'd pulled over his head. "My grandad told me about the selkie at Warbeth when I was a small boy. He often brought me down here to see if we could spot her. No-one I knew ever saw her, but everyone knew that this was where she'd come."

I looked out in the rain, not quite believing that this man, who stood before me now, shielding his eyes with his hand as I did against the weather, had looked for selkies too. Had waited for them since he was a child. The rain sheeted down around us; rivulets ran down my face; a few tendrils slipped like cold fingers down my neck where my scarf had come loose. While I couldn't see it from where I stood, I knew the ocean must be tossing, white-capped and icy, against the rocks on the shore, heaving in the weather, dragging shell and weed in swathes across its floor, stirring up that which has long lain dormant.

I wondered, for a moment, what it would feel like to be part of the maelstrom under the surface, my body moved by current, at home in the tidal pull, my flippers reading the rush and suck and break of wave, my skin the cold temperature of the water.

The veil between the grey, wet world I stood in and the other, unseen world seemed suddenly to move, to disappear, for just a moment.

The next day was bright and clear; a perfect one, I thought, to look for Warbeth Beach. For the first time since I had arrived in Stromness I felt driven by purpose. There were places that I was planning to visit here, sacred places like the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar, where I felt sure I would experience directly the sense of mythology that had drawn me here. But this was the first time I had come across an instance of local myth, of stories that were passed down between families. The first time I had come across this in person, not just in research.

In being privy to someone's story, to the lived history of their family, I was distinctly aware of myself as an outsider. As someone who was granted a glimpse *in.* There was a complex tension and strangeness to navigating this. To balancing what was an instinctive interest for me—a gravitation, a longing, that had always been part of the fabric of my thoughts—with the knowledge that others here would regard me as a newcomer.

I made myself a sandwich in the hostel kitchen, packed oatcakes, a banana, some water, and my knitting, and headed out along the western coastal path that would take me to Warbeth Beach.

The path was boggy after the rain. I walked for about an hour and a half, through bright sun and then sudden gusts of rain. With the turn of the weather came the knowledge that the rain jacket I had brought with me had impractically wide zips through which water permeated immediately. When the rain set in, I sheltered in an abandoned military bunker on the edge of the water and watched as a squall blew in over Hoy, flattening the daisies in the grass around the bunker. Sandy had said that they'd been having an unusually wet summer, and the weather was still a bit wild.

I knew wild weather. As a child, when there were sudden storms, I would run through the trees with my siblings, squealing at the lash of the sodden bush. We would roll our eyes, as we pulled on our gumboots, at Mum's reminder to "put something warmer on, kids." Wild weather was rain whipping wattle blooms from acacias, wind keening through blue gums, and in the aftermath, strips of terracotta bark lying limp on the ground, stained a rich red in the rain.

But I knew another kind of wild weather, too. The roaring, shrieking heat of the fire that flares suddenly, when someone doesn't bury their burnt toilet paper on a school camp in the bush. I knew the way a fire leaps and eats at surrounding foliage, desiccated after months of South Australian summer heat. I would not forget the acrid scorch and lung-cough of inhaled heat and ash as I ran through billowing smoke, towing buckets of water, trying to see with streaming eyes where the flames were. For days after, we watched the plume of smoke that the fire service told us was under control. The fear, astonishing, devastating; the knowledge that I had never truly realised before the wild horror of a bushfire. Wild weather, to someone who has grown up surrounded by paddocks and gums, means hot wind and the smell of smoke as much as it does wind and rain.

The kind of weather that tosses waves in thunderous piles to the shore, that whips a spray of salt across the beach until it floats, in a fine, clammy mist, through towns built on coasts—this was the wild weather I had always wanted. Sitting in the bunker, watching the squall shirr the surface of the sea, cradling my knitting with hands clumsy in the cold, I was overwhelmed, momentarily, by a giddy happiness. My skin sung in the stinging cold. The memory of the wild, burning heat of

Australia felt like a half-remembered dream; my memories like they belonged to someone I couldn't quite remember.

When the shower cleared, I continued on, struck by how deserted the track felt, even though I was only a handful of miles out from Stromness. The path crept right to the edge of the island; in some places, the edge of the path dropped down into rocks covered with weed and red lichen. On a whim, I climbed down onto them. There was no beach. The water churned and frothed at the rocks, receding, in areas, to bare long stretches of lichen and piles of thick, slippery kelp. I took up a long ribbon of the seaweed and picked my way across the rocks, and the kelp streamed out behind me in the wind, snapping like a kite. It was cold and rubbery against my skin. When the rock became too slick, I stopped, let the seaweed fall and trail behind me, and watched the water churn across the dark boulders, flinging tendrils of wet across my boots. My eyes focussed, in the way that eyes do in the presence of an ocean, on the waves, whose movement echoes the involuntary rhythm of our own bodies. Surge, retreat. Inhale, exhale. Rhythmical and inherently comforting. While my body stood motionless on the brink, I felt that I moved with the sea. As always, the insistent pulse of longing murmured within, familiar as my own breath; to be in the water, submerged in this wash of myth and rain. The feeling of not-rightness, that I was not.

The afternoon brought with it another grey drizzle that seeped further through my jacket and into my clothes, and I came across the graveyard—or kirkyard—that Stephen had mentioned. It was enclosed in a dark red stone wall, sitting right at the edge of the land; the track almost disappeared around its perimeter. I unlatched the gate and went inside, hoping to shelter in the lee of the wall and escape some of the slanting rain. I sat on the gravelly ground and ate my slightly squashed lunch slowly, thinking about George Mackay Brown, Orkney's most celebrated novelist and poet, and the countless other writers and artists who had been enthralled by these islands. From the first morning that I woke in Stromness, I felt the pull of this place. The silence here was different to other silences. The salt, the pale light, the fleeting gold of the afternoons.

When I reached Warbeth Beach, the sand was bright silver in the sun. It was a small cove, a white slice cut into the edge of the island, and it was empty. I took off my boots and picked my way down through the rocks, passing a disintegrating seal carcass. I poked at its flipper with a stick. Its skin pulled apart under my gentle prod, falling open in dark yellow fatty layers and I stepped away from it, nauseated.

I left the rocks and stepped down onto the beach itself. It was humming. Not sure if I was imagining the sound, I bent down to see almost invisible clouds of sand flies speeding across the sand. I left my pack and my boots in a pile. The sand flies followed me down to the water.

I kicked my feet in the shallows. The sea was so freezing it burned. I walked through the clear water, squinting in the white glare that surrounded me. Stretching out before me, the sea was empty for miles. Sule Skerry was out there, forty miles into the North Atlantic, beyond where my eyes could see.

There is a famous ballad from Orkney called *The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry*. It was one of the only selkie, or silkie, stories I knew in which the selkie was a man. The ballad tells of a selkie who woos a human woman, gets her with child, then disappears. He visits them occasionally, bringing gifts, then foretells that the woman will marry a hunter who, when the selkie is teaching his young child to swim, would shoot them both inadvertently.

I learnt of the ballad of Sule Skerry only after I had been to Warbeth. As I made my way back up the sand, and lay flat on my back under the sun, I thought only of the seal-woman who had long swam in the corner of my mind; the tantalizing trail of her hair, the flash of her glistening skin. Long after, I wondered at the story the ballad told, and why stories about humans taking lovers from the sea were always laced with tragedy. It seemed such a doomed thing to be drawn to the water. To be drawn to what might be found there. So much of the folklore and fairy tales I knew cautioned against mingling with worlds that were not your own, like the story of the curious farmer who, lured by the sound of fiddles, disappears into the fairy mound and emerges generations later.

Stories of the sea in particular feature the theme of sacrifice. The little mermaid, who longs for the prince on land, relinquishes her tongue so she can belong to his world, and even then, her sacrifice is not enough. She gives everything she can to him and he does not see her, will not see her. At the thought, a sudden memory of Jacob saying to me *I find it intense, knowing how much you . . . knowing your feelings for me.* Before I could think on it further, I thrust the memory away. Alongside the mermaid, there is the selkie woman, whose skin is stolen by the fisherman, who allows him to marry her, who gives birth to his children and moves like a ghost around his village that she never chose to belong to—when she finally discovers her skin, and can at last return home, she must abandon her children. Why must she choose between being a mother and being herself? Was is so frightening, the thought of her loving more than one thing, of her having more than one home?

Home was more than one place for me.

On the smallest finger joint of my right hand there is a scar, a tiny, fleshy thing shaped like a heart. I was five, perhaps six. Mum and I were laughing, wrestling, and the sapphire on her engagement ring cut me. The scar it left is something that makes me think of home. It reminds me of the house in which I was born; bottlebrush fence out the front, pea-green roof, black and white cat. My father covered the shed in the garden with white paint, and then we painted a mural on the wall. My grandmother disapproved, but she didn't know the magic that lies in marking your own home.

But the place where I was born is no longer my home. Home is now a place with trees, seven hundred kilometres away from that pea-green house. A place where I would sit in the grass at dawn. The air would soften by the minute, losing the blue glass bite from the first half hour of the day, that brief stretch of time where the world astonishes. Birds would sweep and thud the air and a bright smell would come from the ground. I would crouch in the bird calls and the wet grass and the ants that were beginning to pick their way through the undergrowth. The hillside would be still

dewy in the shadows, carpeted by white, interrupted only by mounds of hay bales and the gums, their white skins lighting up with the day.

Down the hill from where I would sit was the old sheep pen, still fenced off, its wire sagging and its forests of grass untouched. The sheep shelter is an old water tank, sliced in half and turned upside down. Piles of brush and kindling were stacked inside, their twiggy ends all pointing in the same direction. As a child, it was sometimes my job to restock the kindling. I would scour the bases of trees, taking care not to unearth fat, sleeping spiders in the shredded bark. Before I left for Scotland I spent a night in the house, now empty of inhabitants, in which I grew up. In the dawn I had walked through the trees, slapping away the occasional mosquito. I wanted to take my shoes off, feel the grass stubble under my feet. I wondered if my younger self ever stood in the exact same spot I stood then. The dog, the old blue heeler cross, would have been slumped at my feet, drooling over a chewed chicken neck. I had forgotten the groan of the rusty swing-set by the clothes line, the way the grass heads nodded at the slightest breeze, the jarring screech of the white cockatoos.

The sudden moment of memory, the flash of birds and the distant lowing of bulls among the gums, pierced me. Eucalyptus mingled with salt water and for a moment I couldn't feel my body, weightless in the sand. The arid heat of Australia had seared me to the bone, burnt itself into me in a way that meant I would always know its landscapes, always know myself in them. But I quailed before them too. Had turned for as long as I could remember to the mountains and the north, searching always for landscape that felt like the place my pale, water-loving body came from.

Beneath the humming of the sand flies, the sea hissed and murmured. I closed my eyes, drowsy on the whispering beach, and wondered about the selkie whose body might have once pressed the same sand I lay on now. Wondered about my body, and what landscapes had marked it for their own. Wondered, like for her, what home was for me.

STANDING STONES

This is a place that calms the breathing. This land feels slow and old under my feet.

From Stromness, it is a six mile walk to the area that is known as the Neolithic heart of Orkney: the Ring of Brodgar, the Stones of Stenness, and between them, on a narrow isthmus of land, the Ness of Brodgar. This partially excavated site is the remains of what was thought to be a huge temple complex. The dig, as the geologists and archaeologists staying at my hostel referred to it, had been in operation for about twelve years, and currently comprised only a tenth of the temple complex, which covered an area of two and a half hectares. According to Rosalie, a French archaeologist with whom I had become friends, this was the biggest Neolithic construction discovered in the world to date.

I had planned to hire a bike and ride there, but was informed that I would have to return the bike before sunset. I decided to walk instead.

It was the first time I had ventured inland. As I rounded the hill that overlooks Stromness, Orkney's Mainland stretched out before me, flat and rolling and golden, small lochs glinting, the smell of manure and grass blowing over me. The sun was out but the wind was so strong it almost blew me off the road at times. I patted the curly heads of cows that ambled over to the fence as I passed and sang as I walked, the wind whisking my voice away. My eyes watered in the sun and the wind and I felt replete with contentment.

I reached the Stones of Stenness first. Like many of the Neolithic remains in the Orkney Islands, the stones stood in a field just off the road, at once an ordinary part of the landscape but at the same time, distinctly not. Standing up to almost twenty feet high, the slabs of stone were roughly triangular, piercing the earth in a way that looked like they had dropped from above. It was

thought that there had once been twelve stones here, and they had originally been laid out in an ellipse, not a circle. Only four of the stones remained now, with two shorter stones, standing close together, at the entry to the ring. Sheep wandered through the field, grazing and idling near the stones, their coats a bright white against the shorn green grass. An unobtrusive sign by the gate described the Stones' history. Further on, the road stretched across the isthmus where the excavation site of the Ness of Brodgar was. Squinting, I could just make out in the distance the Ring of Brodgar on the gentle slope that rose beyond the isthmus, purple with heather and shadows cast by the cloudy sky. I could see even from here that the Ring was a far wider circle than the stones I stood amongst now.

Turning back to them, I approached a stone. It towered above me, double my height, a few feet wide, about a foot deep. I laid my palm on its surface. The rock was roughened with lichen; pale green, rust, pale gold. In a few places, people had scratched small marks onto its face. The wind blew gently against me, intermittent, carrying the smell of grass.

I moved around the circle, pausing at each stone, touching them all. I touched the bases of the missing ones. A small collie darted up to me, sniffed at me, then dashed back to its owners. Its barks rent the air before it fell silent and I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate. Stretching my arms around the stone I leant into it momentarily, distantly self-conscious, but also not. The stone remained cool beneath my hands. The dog began to bark again.

As more people arrived at the site, I left the Stones and headed up the road that led to the isthmus. Cars were parked precariously on the verge of the road and handmade signs directed visitors to the dig. Roped off, with makeshift shelters built at the side-lines, it was an organised bustle. Low stone walls emerged from the dirt, and people knelt on mats in demarcated sections, surrounded by buckets of digging tools. Flags, markers, and stacks of rubber tyres to cover and protect the site when the digging season ended littered the area.

I waved at Rosalie who was crouching in a corner of the dig, her curly hair blowing across her face in the breeze. After taking a short tour of the site, taking a few photos of what the guide

told us were called dry stone walls, I continued on, following that track that lead up to the Ring of Brodgar. Tiny daisies studded the grass leading up the slope to the Ring. Closer to the stones, the grass was muddied in places by hordes of feet. Banks of heather filled the space in the centre of the circle.

These stones were of a similar shape of the Stones of Stenness, but not as high; they ranged between seven and fifteen feet tall. There were twenty-seven stones in the ring. Starting with the stones at the highest point of the circle, I touched each one, holding my palm to each rough, lichen-covered face, like I had with the stones at Stenness. I tried to ignore the other people walking around the ring; tried to block out their voices, the bright colours of rain jackets, the couples posing for photographs. I moved slowly down the slope, walking around the ring, my hair knotting around my face in the whistling breeze.

When I reached the stone where I'd started, I sat at its base, sheltering in its lee from the wind which had picked up. The lochs on either side of the isthmus grew choppy with waves, their crests white dashes against the blue. I watched the water, trying to impress the feeling of this place into my memory.

Before I left, Mum had said that I would hear the stones if I wanted to. Every few years, she packs a tent and hiking poles and sets off for Ireland to visit sacred sites. She lives in the bush in South Australia, in a small octagonal yurt, an open space of wood and light, with tall windows that look out across the paddocks and a glass section of roof that lets the moon in at night. Sometimes the tips of the overhanging gums scratch at the glass like fingers. Sometimes there are bats in the cupboards. Piles of books balance on almost every surface of Mum's home: on Ancient Egypt and Greece, sacred astrology, standing stones, stone circles, the meaning of dreams. I wonder sometimes about the things my mother knows.

Down the hill from her yurt, in a clearing between the gums, she made a stone circle. The white quartz and rusty ochres are partially hidden by leaves and rings of bark that the gums throw down. When I visit, sometimes I pick at the leaf mulch collecting between the stones and top up the

wide flat bowl that sits in the circle with clean water. Millipedes often fall in the water and I flick the curled husks of their bodies away into the grass. Small bits of bush are constantly creeping into Mum's house but she doesn't mind. If I borrow a jacket from her there will be small hunks of quartz or a twist of smoothed wood in her pocket that she will have picked up on one of her evening walks. It seems easy for her to speak with the land in which she lives. I thought of what she said about listening to stones, and tried to understand them, tried to hear.

I tried to concentrate on my own stone circle, here and now, but my mother, in her circle of faraway stones, hovered behind me. I sat there for what might have been a long time; time felt loose and spooling there, looking out over the circle, down the hill to the distant water. Tiny purple flowers of heather were soft under my fingers, and I snapped off some sprigs and slipped them into my pocket. Thinking of temples, of places between this world and the next, I stayed with the stones until my legs grew numb beneath me.

I had wanted to watch the sunset at the stones, but I grew too cold in the wind, and, stretching out my stiff legs, decided to walk home. Back across the Ness, past the Stones of Stenness, I crumpled up the directions I'd written and decided to take what I thought might be a short cut home, that cut closer to the coast rather than following the main road. I tried for a while to hitchhike, but the few cars that passed didn't stop for me.

It was a strange feeling, walking through the landscape I didn't know, with no map, and no other human within sight, hoping I was going in the right direction. There is a passage in Cheryl Strayed's walking memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* where she encounters a section of the Pacific Crest Trail that has been snowed under. Using her compass and maps, she follows what she hopes is the trail, fluctuating between thinking she has correctly interpreted her maps and doubting herself, fearing that she is wrong. As I walked, my thoughts chased themselves incessantly as I reassured myself that this coastline led in the right direction—but what if there was some kind of obstacle ahead? Should I have stuck with the road? The pace and

nature of walking is such that to reach the top of every hill, you need to walk every step of it. Nothing hastens the viewpoint and new knowledge that the crest of the hill affords. Uncertainty is a maddening walking companion, and I pressed on, not able to relax into the walk.

When I stopped for a rest, sitting off the road on a grassy verge, I put my hand down on some broken glass and cut my palm. I pressed it tightly but it wouldn't stop bleeding; I watched as a small bead of blood dripped off my finger and sank into the head of a dandelion, then disappeared. I fingered the heather in my pocket, thinking about the different ways we leave traces of ourselves in place, and how this can be a two-way marking.

Sometime after, when my shadow had started to stretch out long beside me on the road, and I had pulled out my map that was now crumpled and smeared with blood, I hobbled over the crest of a hill and found myself looking down onto Stromness. The silver stretch of the harbour lay before me like a sigh of relief, beyond which the late afternoon sun lit the misted shoulders of Hoy. In the field beside the road a handful of woolly sheep raised their heads from the grass and as one, stared at me with that particular flat stare sheep possess. I looked right back at them, suddenly unreasonably glad to see them.

Upon returning to my hostel, limping now in the old Doc Martens I'd decided to walk in, I discovered that one of my hiking boots, which I'd hung out of the window after they were drenched on my walk to Warbeth Beach and had been drying for days, had come loose and fallen into the lane outside, and had spent the day lying in a puddle that looked like it had seeped from the nearby rubbish bins. There being no one with whom to share my frustration, I fetched the boot in silent resignation, and hung it up to dry once more. For someone whose interests lay increasingly in long walks and being out in the elements and who had ostensibly prepared herself to do just this, I thought ruefully, I was spending a lot of time hiking in impractical boots and raincoats that didn't keep out the rain.

That night I forewent my usual meal of fish and rice that I cooked in the little kitchen, and went to a pub instead, where I ate steadily, burning my mouth on a steaming ham and apple pie. I

was eating more and more at the end of the day, I noticed; hungry and wet and sunburnt and, at times, lonely—when I clamped down on the tendrils of Jacob-grief that threatened to surface—but I was mostly happy. The cold had kindled an appetite in me for pushing myself further, walking for longer, eating more, wanting more. The backs of my heels were tender, the cut on my hand beginning to throb, and my wind-burnt cheeks were flushed in the warmth of the pub. I ate until I couldn't fit anything else, devouring the food in a way that I had rarely ever let myself before, relishing this sense of being sated but also relishing the hunger in my body to have more, to feel more, to know more.

HOY

Looking from the Mainland, Hoy was often darkened with storm shadows, its sloped face blank. In the days previously, it seemed that this island had been in the corner of my eye wherever I looked. Yet when I stepped from the ferry onto the wet stone of Hoy's jetty, I saw that the island was in fact a series of hills folding into each other. I had wondered about the inhabitants of Hoy. I didn't think there were many.

I had started to think that anyone who lived here must live with a foot in two worlds. I didn't know if it was the stories that a friend, who had also been to Orkney, had told me before I left; she spoke about strange piano music at night, about how children had drowned on Hoy, and how the island inhabitants had moved away when no more children were born. I didn't know how much was truth or myth. Perhaps it was the physical presence of the island itself that was so foreboding: the dark shoulder of land loomed in the south, hunching in on its secrets.

Now that I stood at Hoy's base, looking up into its misty hills, and the few people who had come across on the ferry with me had disappeared up the road, this sense of two worlds was stronger than ever. I might have been the only living creature on this island, standing here in the middle of the road.

Wrapping my scarf tightly against the chilly air, I began to walk.

Once I had climbed some way into the hills, the wind dropped. Like sides of a bowl, the hills curved up on either side of me, their summits disappearing in the low-hanging mist. When the sun isn't out, the landscapes of Orkney looked bald, mottled purple-green—particularly so because Orkney is almost treeless—and it was only up close that I could see the diversity and textures and colours in the small-scale plant-life that clung to the ground.

On a whim, I stepped off the road and picked my way into the undergrowth. I stood in a thick carpet of ferns, thistles, wiry grasses and the ever-present mesh of purple heather that I had come to love. I folded my knees under me and settled in. There was no sound but the intermittent whirr and skirl of a bird somewhere above, and the occasional drone of a passing bee.

Sitting there, my eyes picked out a path I hadn't seen from the road, leading up the hill slope. On approach, I saw that it was made of hundreds of wooden planks, settled into the hillside among the grass and heather. Curious, I followed the wooden path upwards. It was raised up from the ground, although wet and sinking into the heather in some places, and for almost a mile, I climbed until I reached what I realised must be the Dwarfie Stane. The large, rectangular, hollowed-out block of sandstone looked out across the valley to Ward Hill, the highest hill on Hoy. Some archaeologists thought that the stone, carved between 3,500 and 2,500 BC, was a tomb. A slab of stone, thought to have sealed its entrance, lay to the side of the opening in the rock. I bent down and looked inside. There were two stone benches carved into the walls, not unlike small beds. Reluctant to duck down through the opening, I reached in instead, and laid my hand against the wall: it was soft to the touch, and freezing. I could have gone in. But alone on the cold hillside with the wind shrieking in my ears, imagining what this small chamber must have been like when sealed up unsettled me deeply, and I didn't stay long.

I trod back down the plank path and continued along the road. As I passed small pyramids of peat cuttings heaped by the road, the earth around them furrowed with dark, rectangular scars, I wondered who would collect them: I had not yet seen a house. Around me, the shape of the hills was changing imperceptibly, noticeable only as I looked back: it was only by watching a flock of birds move slowly across the hill faces that I could grasp how immense they were. It is hard to determine size, when the eye has nothing on which to focus.

I walked through the valley, the only sound the scrape of my boots and the faint whistle of my breath. It seemed like I could reach out and touch the hills but at the same time that I was the smallest speck in the wildest, oldest land I'd ever set foot in. Each step I took felt insignificant in

the face of it. Walking, I felt little more than an entity made of muscle and resolve. That was all. It was a raw thought, that I was the sum of my own grit.

I was walking with my head bowed against the quick rushes of wind when suddenly I was warm, glowing. I looked up, squinting in the sudden bright light. The clouds had moved and the sun was bathing a patch of the hills in a single, white beam. To either side of me, the hills were still purpled with shadow, but I was pinned in the light. After a few seconds, the sun passed. I had seen this phenomenon from afar when looking over at Hoy from Stromness; I hadn't realised the heat of the white light.

As the hours passed, something came to me in the great stillness, with only the wind whistling and my feet creaking on the road. I came here seeking what dwells in the sea: the salt-tipped, wind-whipped wet rocks, the flash of silver scales, the tangling of coarse fey hair. I came seeking sea-stories, secretly longing for historical, archival evidence of selkie remains. But with Orkney's rainy coastal edges, and places like Warbeth beach—these littoral zones in which anything could happen—I had also found Orkney's rolling hills, grassy and sweet-smelling in the late afternoon sun. I had discovered its eco-system of wildflowers, the miniature world at my feet. The tiny bells of purple and pink heather, darkening to orange as they aged; the crawling rose-like vines, the whisper of the wiry grasses, the weeds like wild onions with their heavy, bobbing heads; the clutches of red berries that I bit into; the ferns, the seed heads, the bees, the soft-tipped thistles, the vivid red moss gleaming in the undergrowth. It was not only the stories in the sea but the language of the grasses that consumed me. The brackish water in the grey rocks, the springy beds of heather that held me like a mother when I tossed aside my bag and stretched out under the strange silver sun in the silence of the empty hills of Hoy.

Walking, I lost track of time. The pace of my legs matched the pace of my breathing, until this rhythm became the only thing I was aware of; the expand, the exhale, that propelled me forward. It was only in a distant part of my mind that I was conscious of moving onwards—to measure the *onwards* necessitated that I focussed my gaze, look to external factors, landmarks and

surrounds, to grasp this distance. In the movement, the moment, of walking, my sense of the world was reduced to the gentle, regular rock of my hips, the tense and release of calf, the rolling motion of my boots impressing my passing.

This particular movement—the press of the walking foot—is so unthinking it is easy to forget what we do in this ordinary act: in a single step, from our every point of balance, negotiating our gravity from every angle, holding nothing of ourselves back, on a single foot we press our body into the earth. We make known every embodied idiosyncrasy, every learned hesitation, every secret point of weakness we have adapted to. In this moment, this series of infinitesimal shifts of the foot on the earth, rolling from heel, arch, and up to toe, we press everything of ourselves into the path we are making.

And yet, we forget to know it. It is too much to comprehend all the time, the particular and unique way in which we move across landscape. It would demand too much of us to know this constantly; and it would mean that the anchors in ourselves that are shifted by walking—those deep-held thoughts and ways of seeing ourselves that we have buried and swallowed until they become part of us—are unable to come loose.

Because shift they do. As I walked through the valley in Hoy, at once immersed in the rhythm of my walking but at the same time released from it, my thoughts moving in the way that thoughts do when they think they are not being noticed, there was a shifting in the seabed. Anchors began to lift. In this new place, alone, I thought about home; what bound me there, and who bound me there. Who I *was,* when I was home. Home had always meant the five-acre block of bush in the Adelaide Hills in which I spent most of my childhood. I thought of home now and I saw the glint of a corrugated iron roof through a cluster of blue gums. I thought of home and it meant my family. When I moved to Melbourne I realised that home could be more than one thing. I found a city and a house that opened themselves up to me. It was easy to leave the thought there; to think that I came to the city and loved it and because of this, felt that it was home for me. But finding a home is always more than that. A home-coming, a home-discovering or making, requires that something

within you has its arms open. That something within is willing, wanting, to discover an aspect of self that has never until now unfurled in the sun.

As I walked, I thought without thinking.

Everything I thought I came here to find was shifting.

THE SECRET OF LEAVES

It was only by chance that Jacob and I met. I was living in Melbourne at the time, and had come back to Adelaide on the spur of the moment for a friend's birthday. I was walking out to the balcony, mid-conversation, swinging a bottle of wine in my hand, when I saw Jacob. He was leaning against the balcony railing, half facing me, framed by tendrils of grape vines and limned by the afternoon light that came through the leaves. In my memory he is laughing, face tilted back in soundless mirth, arms crossed over his chest. There might have been other people with him; I didn't notice them.

The party skipped forward in bursts. I caught up with old friends and tried to focus on the conversations, my attention divided, tuned in part to wherever he was, this man whose curls fell in his eyes in a way that made it difficult to look away.

I couldn't find the courage to go talk to him, but later in the night, I found myself sitting on the balcony in a group of people. The grapevines had disappeared into the dark and cool air drifted up from the river. We passed a bottle of whisky around the circle, wiping mouths on the backs of hands, talk and laughter tumbling into the night. In the jumble of conversation Jacob and I had been introduced; somehow, we wound up sitting together. It was easy, so easy, talking with him—under his regard I felt sparkling and bright and thought surely they could all see this.

When the whisky came around again I took a big swig and said to Jacob, "Hey, I'm going for a walk by the river, do you want to come?" Something in me jolted warm and gold when he stood up to follow me. We walked side by side down the steps to the water, not touching. There was an old wooden dinghy by the river bank, turned on its side. Without speaking, we ducked down, crawled under the overhang of the boat. The press of his shoulder, his arm, his hip against mine was dizzying. The night sky scudded above us as Jacob asked, "Do you want to—?" and I said, "Yes."

But I didn't tell anyone about the rest of the night. After the whisky wore off, after we had fumbled our way into each other's clothes, and put them gently back on again, after we walked away from the river and down to a thicket of trees under which he'd set up his swag. The silvery trucks of birches stretched tall above us, their highest limbs bare and spindly, the last leaves clinging to the lower boughs in papery clutches of crimson. I took my shoes off and climbed carefully into the swag beside Jacob.

I didn't tell anyone that we lay there, skin to skin, talking softly about inconsequential things, while the sky moved through different shades of cloud and night and the moon turned the trees around us to white. The secret of leaves, whispering down from above, that brushed our exposed limbs and settled around us in the grass: I kept this to myself. When Jacob got to his feet, his breath coming in deep gasps, and walked away from me through the trees to curl in a ball on the ground, I took a blanket from the swag and followed him. The ground beneath my bare feet was damp and rough. I knelt down, tucked the blanket around him. Reached under it and moved my hand slowly in circles across his shoulder blades. His skin was cool to the touch.

His ragged gasps made his body shake. My hand circled on his back. I sat through the numbness then cramping in my legs, my arm growing leaden, my shoulder aching, until his breathing slowed, and he shifted on the ground, nestling his head into my lap.

Into the silence, I asked, "What do you need?" and in a voice little more than a whisper, he replied, "I don't know."

*

Selkies come to deserted beaches to change their bodies. In these littoral zones, where sand and water seep into the other, for a moment, the selkie is both seal and woman. She has the choice of breathing liquid or air, taking to the deep or treading paths on the land. She can choose her body.

When the selkies emerge from the sea, they creep onto the sand under the beginnings of stars, wet and heavy-boned, hair more seaweed than warmth. A fisherman, salty with fish-grease, might spot them in the twilight as he drags his curragh up the sand to unload his nets. He might hear the selkies' voices, rising together in strange melodies he has never heard before. Or he might be entranced by the sight of the seal women themselves, their bodies pale and beautiful on the rocks.

He creeps closer to these women who beguile him. He comes upon a pile of discarded sealskins. He takes one.

When it is time for the seal-women to return to the sea, they slip into their sealskins and vanish one by one. But after their glistening heads have disappeared into the surf, one woman remains on the shore. Puzzled, she searches the empty sand for her skin. Behind the rock, the fisherman watches on, clutching the skin, falling in love with her.

At last, he steps forward and says, "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I wish for you to be my wife." She has never seen a man before. She takes his hand. They are wed in the small village church, and if the other villagers think there is something unusual about the fisherman's beautiful wife, they don't say it.

The fisherman hides the sealskin, knowing that as long as she is without it, she must keep her human form, and stay with him.

The years pass. The fisherman and his selkie have children, whose eyes are wide and fey. The skin on their hands and feet is translucent, almost webbed between the fingers and toes, and while the fisherman watches them closely, they do not love the water more than the other village children. They are mostly human.

One day, returning some fishing nets she has mended to the boat shed, the selkie discovers her sealskin, bundled up and hidden under a pile of old nets. Overjoyed, she gathers it up and runs down to the sea shore. There she changes back into her seal form, and slips into the waves. Beyond the breakers, she pauses for a moment, her gaze turned back to the fisherman's cottage, her wide, dark eyes full of sorrow for the ones she is leaving behind.

That night, returning to the empty cottage, the fisherman discovers the selkie is gone. Broken-hearted, for years after, he walks along the beach where he saw the selkies come, his gaze searching the water, but he never again sees her.

This sounds like a story about love.

Tell it again.

Selkies come ashore in places they know are deserted, where they can shed their skins in safety. They creep onto the sand under the beginnings of stars, wet and heavy-boned, hair more seaweed than warmth. A fisherman, salty with fish-grease, might spot them in the twilight as he drags his curragh up the sand to unload his nets. He might hear the selkies' voices, rising together in strange melodies he has never heard before. Or he might be entranced by the sight of the seal women themselves, their bodies pale and beautiful on the rocks.

He sees beauty, and he wants it.

Taking care not to be seen, he creeps closer to these women who beguile him. He comes upon a pile of discarded sealskins. He takes one.

When it is time for the seal-women to return to the sea, they slip into their sealskins and vanish one by one. But after their glistening heads have disappeared into the surf, one woman remains on the shore. Distraught, she searches the empty sand for her skin, a barking, weeping sound coming from her. Behind the rocks, the fisherman watches on, clutching the stolen skin, and knows he must have her for his wife.

A story about love?

When the fisherman steps forward, holding her skin behind him, he says, "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I am going to make you my wife." Not knowing what else to do, the selkie takes his hand, and follows him to his home. She has nowhere else to go. They are wed in the small village church and if the other villagers think there is something strange about the fisherman's beautiful wife, they don't say it to him, but mutter it to one another. She does not belong here.

That night, the fisherman hides the selkie skin, knowing that as long as she is without it, she must keep her human form. He stows it deep under the nets to mend and the rope to weave, deep under the oil and stink of things that kept him company in his lonely life. Every evening when he returns home from fishing, his selkie bride is there to greet him, and cooks and cleans for him when he is gone in the day. He knows she will not, cannot, leave him.

The years pass. One day, returning some fishing nets she has mended to the boat shed, the selkie discovers her skin, bundled up and hidden under a pile of old fishing nets. With tears of relief, she gathers it up and runs down to the sea shore. There she changes back into her seal form, slips into the waves, and doesn't look back.

Returning to the empty cottage, the fisherman discovers the selkie is gone. Unable to believe she has left him, for months after, he walks along the beach where he saw the selkies come, wanting, always, to own what belongs to the sea.

This is not a story about love.

But perhaps that is how we have chosen to remember them, the seal-women who became wives when their skins were stolen. We hope the selkie in this story fell in love with her captor. We hope it was at least partly her choice to be land-bound.

We hope that when she found her skin, it caused her grief to leave the fisherman. To leave the half-human children she might have borne him. We hope that motherhood tugged at her. Surely, we think, she cannot leave these children that are part of her, that bind her to the land now.

We hope, in other words, she understood that in claiming back her sealskin and returning to her home, she would be leaving behind someone she loved.

We imagine that it grieved her, at least in part, to return to the sea.

We prefer to think this, because it is better than the other option. That she has been trapped on land, held against her will, in a skin not of her choosing. In this version, there is nothing of love in the tale. Only dominance, and the forcible removal of self.

RACKWICK

The Hoy valley through which I walked led down to Rackwick, the pink beach. It was not hard to believe, here, that the island could eat you, that you could disappear into its shadowy hills and be devoured by the birds that wheeled from the high mists, their *craa-craa* shrieking suddenly in the echoing valley. Or that you could sink into the heather and emerge, years later, as a pile of bleached bone on this shore amidst the scattered pink boulders, the smallest of which was the size of a baby's cradle. Sharp cliffs stood at either end of the beach's grin: rising steeply up from the sea, their faces were riven and etched with cracks and dark green growth. A thin stream of water ran from somewhere in the island down to the shore. I followed the burbling trickle down to the sea-line. There the rocks grew a pale green crop of spongy hair that looked like it would make a comfortable bed.

There was an old stone bothy up on the grassy rise overlooking the sea; a long, low-slung cottage that was open to travellers looking for somewhere to sleep. I had known about it before I came to Hoy, and had my sleeping bag in my pack just in case. I pushed the creaking door open with anticipation. Inside, its walls were soot-blackened and cold. Empty bottles collected in corners, a small pile of wood sprawled beside an open hearth. The bothy smelled like smoke, old cooking oil, and beer. I looked around, feeling uneasy, latched the door and went back down to the shore, with no further thought of staying there.

Sitting on a rock and watching the water, I was uncertain if I felt welcome here or not. There was a deep and complex sense of history here on this island and I wasn't sure what it was or if I wanted to be part of it. It came to me, as I sat at that empty shore, arms wrapped around my knees, with no sound but the lap of water around me, that I had been chasing other people's mythologies and sacred places and maybe that was why I hadn't yet experienced mysteries and revelations of my

own here. As I watched the grey tide move gently against the rocks, eating a chocolate bar I found in my pack, I realised that I would leave the Orkney Islands. I had had months to dream about these islands; to unwittingly, as I saw now, build up expectations of what I was going to find and what I was going to feel, that were born of my longing and fuelled by the stories I had been surrounded by, even as a child reading fairy tales. This immersion, this abundance of others' perspectives and tellings—from the stories of acquaintances who'd been here before me, to books about Celtic myth I had soaked up, to the histories Tom told me in Kirkwall; it all spoke for the powerful allure of mythology in this place, but this was precisely the problem. What was I even looking for, in all of this? I was starting to realise I had been grasping after something I was not sure existed.

What I was searching for had shifted. I had never quite been able to put my finger on it; never quite known what it was, exactly, that called me to watery myths. There were numerous strands to the tight knot of need that compelled me to the Orkney Islands, and I was only just starting to separate and recognise them now, and see how they were connected. I came here because of a tale of shapeshifting women whose home could be sea or land. But what I was also searching for was an understanding of, a connection with, the long-gone people who valued these stories like I did, the people for whom the seal-women were real. Finally, I felt like I understood something of what had driven me for so long. I had come here looking for people who thought the same way as me so that I might understand this aspect of myself that longed for the unseen, that gravitated towards the thin places of the world. I was drawn so helplessly to the selkie myth because I longed, with everything in me, to be able to move through multiple worlds like she did.

I was discovering a part of myself I had not anticipated. A part that loved walking. That craved the scrape of boot on rock and the long burn of tired legs; that found contentment in the swinging, breathing rhythm of this motion. I was settling into an unexpected, fierce appreciation for the sturdiness of my body. And with this groundedness, that had been welling slowly up but surged through me now that I let myself know it, came a longing for an entirely different landscape that was not this place where water and sand mingled and nothing felt certain.

Nan Shepherd, a twentieth-century Scottish poet and writer, spent most of her life exploring the Cairngorms, a mountain massif in the heart of the Highlands of Scotland. *The Living Mountain*, the small book she wrote about the years she spent in the Cairngorms, was dog-eared in my pack. The book is a contemplation of the summits and plateaus she so loved, a meandering account of being in them, being with them, learning their seasons. "I have walked out of the body and into the mountain," she writes, and the sentence had stayed with me for days. I was deeply curious about this woman who had spent most of her life in the mountains. She was born almost one hundred years before me. *The language of the grasses*—that phrase that had come to me on my walk here—swam into my mind. I thought, suddenly, that Shepherd would know what I meant by it.

I wanted to know her. I wanted the mountains. I wanted the grip of solid earth and roots and trees, and I knew, suddenly, where I was going next.

Behind me, mist was gathering thickly in the hills. As I straightened up, what I had thought was a rock in the water a few metres out from me moved. It looked straight at me with unblinking black eyes. The seal must have been there the whole time I was here, watching me. I stepped out into the water, balancing on the pink rocks, going out as far as I dared. The seal didn't move. It bobbed up and down, disappearing, but always coming back to the same place before me. I spoke to it before I left, and my voice sounded strange after hours of silence. When I fell silent, the seal seemed to blink at me in farewell.

I set off back to the ferry. This time I didn't follow the road but cut through the hills directly, following a muddy, rocky track. The walk was unearthly. I couldn't see beyond the crest of each hill before me; to the side, slopes scattered with heather and shale disappeared into banks of mist only a few metres above me. A pair of hawks kept pace with me, once swooping so low I heard the whirr of their passage and ducked. Their occasional eldritch shrieks, cutting through the mist, raised the hairs on my arms. When I paused and looked back, the valley wound away into brightness. Before me, the track disappeared into the cloud-hung rocks. Under the colourless sky,

my shadow was a fleeting suggestion on the heather. On an impulse I cried out wordlessly into the strange silver mist, and the way my voice disappeared was at once unnerving and exhilarating.

By the time I emerged from the path through the hills, I was tired, greasy with sunscreen and cold sweat. I didn't know how far I was from the jetty, and I didn't know what the time was, and I very much did not want to miss the last ferry off Hoy. I did not want to stay on this island at night.

I rounded a crest and saw, far below, a small ferry nearing the jetty. I broke into a run, my pack bouncing against my back. Hearing a car behind me I moved off the road, but it pulled up beside me. A man leaned his head out of the window.

"Are ye all right there?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks," I gasped, "I'm just running late for the ferry."

Squinting up at me, the man pushed the car door open and gestured. "Here, hop in, I'll nip ye down. We should just make it."

I scrambled into the car, my eyes weeping from the wind, and he whisked me down the hill. I pounded down the jetty and clambered onto the ferry, and had barely seated myself before the engine coughed and churned and we were off. I looked back, rolling my shoulders, feeling like I wanted to shake something off. The island seemed to slumber, nestled in its old, old secrets and memories. But perhaps Hoy simply rocked in the swells, keeping company with seals in the low tide and gulls in the high winds. Gazing inward at its mysteries while the rest of the islands were drawn inexorably forward into the twenty-first century.

When I got off the ferry at Stromness I wiped the tracings of salt crystals from my face with fingers stiff with cold, fetched a thick sweater and took myself to the Stromness Hotel for a hot meal: I hadn't eaten anything except the chocolate bar since breakfast. Between sips of lemonade, I ate a small basket of buttered bread, a vegetable and cheese tart, a side salad, a serve of chips with tartare sauce, and a toffee pudding in butterscotch sauce with ice cream. On my walk home, I paused at the pier to look out toward Hoy. The island was invisible in the night. I gazed into the dark for a while, searching, then walked on.

In my bed that night, with small insects dashing themselves against my reading light and the sound of waves a faint hiss beyond my window, I reflected that for the first time since I could remember, my interest in the sea had waned. She was still there, the selkie, murmurous in the depths of my mind, borne on the salty air I breathed here, but she was not as insistent now. The need to find her, understand her, had become eclipsed by a new gravitation towards the tangible, the corporeal, the heart of the forest rather than the edge of the island. What I found myself thinking of most was the spring of heather on hill faces. The loamy darkness of trees and the musky scent of rock. The russets, the purpled greens, the shadows of shifting mountain mists. The company of birds that were not gulls. It was mountains and forests and walking endlessly for hours that I thought of now.

In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking,* Rebecca Solnit writes about the connections between walking and thinking and being in the world, and suggests that a kind of parallel rhythm occurs between them. As the walker traverses a landscape, they fall into a particular walking rhythm that is echoed in the passage through their thoughts. “This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage,” she writes; “one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it.”

This notion, that thinking could be an act of travel rather than just an act of “making,” as Solnit puts it, was a revelation. It delighted me, but not because I had encountered new knowledge: it was more that she had articulated something I was coming to know in a deeply, bodily, way.

I was coming to regard identifying as a traveller—for however transient a time—a complex thing. Travelling didn’t just mean moving between places anymore. Being rootless no longer felt synonymous with drifting: instead, my roots were shifting from the soil of home, and the people and place that that word evoked, to the soil of my own body. I no longer felt certain I understood what home was. The shifting of this sense of belonging—this growing sense of being at home in myself—felt like something being peeled back and warmed in the sun.

In my life at home I did not consider myself much of a walker. I walked to get myself from one place to another, sometimes begrudging the time I saw as being wasted. Intellectually, I understood psychogeography's interest in the pleasure of meandering, but I rarely took long walks for the simple pleasure of it.

So thinking about *how* I walked was new. The word *pilgrimage* had occupied a corner of my mind in the time leading up to my departure to the Orkney Islands, swimming to the fore in quiet moments when I let myself consider why it was I felt so drawn to this place. But pilgrimage was a powerful word. To walk a pilgrim's path, it seemed to me, was to follow a trail of footsteps laid down by others. Historically, by travelling certain routes that were revered as sacred, countless people sought to become close to their saints, gods, and sacred beings. All of these walkers were searching for something, whether absolution or meaning. Perhaps then I could think of this as a pilgrimage with an as-yet unknown destination, the kind in which, as the writer Linda Lappin describes, the sacredness of the pilgrimage is found in an interior space, or internal state, rather than a geographical destination.

Or perhaps I was walking a labyrinth. One that spiralled across both physical landscape and the terrain of the psyche. I had always been drawn to labyrinthine shapes. In *Wanderlust,* Solnit discusses that distinct from the maze, which offers multiple forks in the path, the purpose of the labyrinth is to move inward. To reach the heart. Even though the path of the labyrinth doubles back on itself, and sometimes goes back almost to its outer ring, to travel the labyrinth is to know, all along, what you are seeking. I knew what I was seeking, coming here, but at the same time, I didn't know. Years ago, Mum had given me a silver disc the size of my palm engraved with a labyrinth, accompanied by a thin silver stylus. She told me to trace out the labyrinth on the nights I couldn't sleep, and it would calm me. There was something of the sacred to the motion of it. A reverence. A kind of deep peace that resonated in a place that I could not name. The labyrinth, with its association with the sacred feminine, seemed to capture something of this ability to know and also not know. I knew I was searching for something; I just couldn't understand what. The wildness of

these islands—in fact this area of the northern hemisphere itself—held me and drew me in a way that felt mystical. The yearning and knowing and the feeling that something eluded me in all of this twined together.

That there was something sacred to my walking, I knew with a growing certainty. And it was bound up with my body. With seeing my body. With being in it. This landscape was seeping into my experience of self and profoundly altering it, to the point where I knew I couldn't isolate the phenomenon from the landscape through which I travelled, in which I spent vast, timeless spools of time.

"Exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains," Solnit writes. The simple movements of my body astonished me: the act of being, and thinking, had become something entirely new. I was becoming entirely new.

LIGHT STRUCK THE DARKNESS

Jacob and I rotated on the hilltop, lurching in the wind, wound around each other like tree roots.

"We're dancing!" Jacob said, his mouth at my ear.

Something in me burst and spilled gold through my body. The storm screamed at us, lashing my hair. I wanted to freeze this moment. I leaned against the wind, relinquishing my weight.

Mist buried the hills beyond us. Tucking my face into the warm of his neck, I pointed out the distant lights of the town, the direction of the lake. Everything was a haze of thunderous clouds. We sat with our backs against a tree, trying to escape the wind that grabbed at us like it knew we were trespassers, like it meant to hurl us down the gorse-scattered hill. I poured us thermos capfuls of coffee. It cooled in less than a minute. It made his breath sweet as he kissed me, pushed me gently back until he blocked out the sky and I could see nothing but his wild hair.

I felt for him through layers of jackets and sweaters, my hands sluggish with cold. He stood before me and I sank to my haunches, stripped back his undergarments, a swell of desire at the thought of crouching on this hillside, in an unknown farmer's paddock. In the howling cold, his nose seared the exposed skin of my stomach; his head was a blur as he knelt before me. I locked my knees, leant back against the tree's rough trunk. The wind tore a gasp from me. The cold, then the burning warmth. The laser beam of his tongue, tracing. I wove my hands through his hair and drew him up to me. In the grey light he understood, wordless. Clasped me to him like he would impress himself onto my bones.

Hands clasped, we staggered down the hill avoiding the rabbit holes. Scaling the barbed wire fence, we clambered back up to the railway tracks.

Jacob paused on the tracks and tugged at my hand. We left our clothes in a pile, but I kept my rubber boots on and my underwear. He was a ghostly smear in the darkness. I fumbled my way

to him, pressed myself to him, our hipbones jarring. I felt raw, reckless. Aroused at my exposedness. The wind bit less fiercely under the canopy of trees, but I shivered as a soft breath of rain fell. He took his camera from the bag, told me to face away into the darkness. He stood behind me a moment, touched my belly. Moved away.

A jagged clap of light struck the darkness. I was momentarily blinded, my eyes imprinted with the overhanging gums, the rusty tracks stretching into the night, pinpricks of rain illuminated in sharp relief. Flash, again. Every hair on my skin, every scar, every hollow and angle of my body was frozen in sight. I stretched my arms up to the storm, felt my muscles tense and give, bones shift, breath exhale. Flash, again. I shifted my weight slowly, deliberately, onto one leg. The tilt of my hips, the roll of my shoulders. Blinded, I could see nothing but white behind my eyes. I knew Jacob was watching.

We were acutely new to each other. Earlier that night I had sent him a text saying I was staying by myself in my old family home in the bush and would he like to come over. I hovered anxiously by my phone, my palms sweating, waiting for his reply. Since I had moved back from Melbourne two months after we met at the party, we had been on a handful of dates. We went to a few gigs together, went to the zoo. In the first photo I ever took of him, Jacob looks through the glass of a seahorse tank, past the waving yellow weed, to a point just beyond me. I was proud of the photo. Proud that I had something that was tangible proof that this was a beginning of something. The photo would end up in a black binder Jacob would give me for the Polaroids I would take with the film he helped me choose. The binder would come to be filled with pictures of when we fed stray pigeons in the city, went hiking and had a BBQ in the rain because a storm rolled in. Pictures of when we went to gin bars, kissed against a wall slashed with graffiti, whispered the kind of promises that mean nothing but feel like everything in that moment.

That night, though, when I asked if he would come see me, and he drove an hour from the other side of the city, up the freeway in the rain without his glasses so he could barely see, and I

told him to meet me at the graveyard because it was the closest thing to a landmark near my home that I could think of, and I brought him a spare jacket because it was raining heavily—that night we were still cut-glass new, and every inch forward we took together exhilarated me.

In the trees below the railway tracks lies the house in which I grew up. In photos from back then I was round-cheeked with eyebrows so pale they almost disappeared. A serious face, wheaten hair in a home-cut bob.

The place where I grew up teems with memories. They are bare-footed, gravel-toed, summer-grass ones, of bikes with no brakes, churning milk from the neighbour's cow to butter. Still mornings as cacophonies of birds called the sun up above the horizon. The glow of the pot-belly stove in the evening, the wail of my sister practising the viola.

The sensor light flicked on as we walked down the driveway, the thick clusters of gums that lined it protecting us from most of the rain. Treading carefully down the steps that Dad laid from railway sleepers, Jacob gripped my hand, his own cold. The moss on the steps was slippery in the wet.

Inside, Jacob looked around. "This house is beautiful," he said softly.

I sensed the ghosts of my family heavy at my back, watching him as he watched where they had been. No-one had lived here for a long time. I looked around at the cobwebs, the dust on the lights, the piles of books, shoes, phone chargers, pencils, odd socks heaped in corners. Nervous, I had vacuumed before he arrived and wiped down the kitchen.

"It feels empty and sad to me now," I replied.

Jacob continued through the house, looking at photo frames, picking out a few notes on the piano. This was the first time I had ever brought a lover to the place where I grew up. Walking with him along the railway lines, fetching kindling together so we could play Scrabble in front of the fire, wrapping him in my father's old coat because it was cold—I was offering, without knowing it then, that which he would not offer me in return.

THE CAIRNGORMS

Somewhere in the sprawl of the Abernethy Forest, deep in the Cairngorms National Park that stretches across the Scottish Highlands, lies the Lazy Duck Hostel. I walked from the closest town of Nethy Bridge. It was an easy walk, about half an hour, along a quiet bitumen road. A sparse clutch of houses lined the road, sitting back behind gardens surrounded by low, dense hedges. Some plots were overflowing with an abundance of uncut grass; some were shadowed by birch and tall pines that stood right up against the road. The overgrown gardens cheered me; and when the road left the houses behind, and began to rise slowly into the pinewood, I was elated.

The greenness of trees pressed in on me. The air felt cooler as I walked, and I breathed deeply. I was on the outskirts of the largest remaining Caledonian pine forest in Scotland, descended from the ancient pines that grew across Scotland as far back as 7,000 BC. This was the oldest forest I had ever been in. My pace slowed at the smell of damp heather and resin; at the forest floor, coppery with beds of fine needles and green with patches of plumy lichens and small plant life; at the mottled grey and copper trunks of the pines proffering small sprays of needles on fine limbs; at the papery silver trunks of birches, striated with fine, dark ridges. I was hard-pressed not to leave the road and clamber over the sagging wire fence, sit down in the needles, press my fingers into the grooves of the pine bark or just find a path and follow it deeper into the trees. The change in scenery from the last few weeks in Orkney felt like a visceral thing. Among trees, I felt myself stretch up to my full height. Among their trunks I walked taller, felt my spine lengthen easily. Here I was not the tallest figure in my surroundings; it was different, looking upwards, instead of outwards. I hadn't realised how much I missed trees until now.

At the thought that the place I was looking for would be somewhere here in this pinewood, I picked up my pace again. Shortly after, I spied the small wooden sign, left the road, and followed a

long gravel track, the forest pressing in high above me, until I pushed open a low-slung gate and looked around the clearing in which the hostel sat.

To my right, soft brown rams with long, curling horns lazed under some trees. To my left, a wheelbarrow full of spinach and broad beans leaned against a shed with a hand-drawn sign saying "£1 for a handful." Directly ahead lay a small cluster of buildings, tents, and woodsheds, with a stretch of grass leading to a creek beyond which the forest resumed. Fat white ducks as large as geese—Aylesbury ducks, the namesake of the hostel, as I would learn—sat in the grass, and splashed and clattered in the creek, bossing smaller ducks in and out of the water. I stood near a tree from which an old hammock was suspended. An old bell hung from a branch. Clouds of thistles and ferns gathered between sheds and along the creek. I could hardly believe that this was to be my home for the next week.

I turned at the crunch of gravel. A girl who looked about my age approached me.

"Hiya! Welcome to the Lazy Duck!" she said, her face widening into a huge smile. She had a Canadian accent. I grinned back at her. She gestured me to follow her, and explained, as we walked, that she was one of the seasonal managers who ran the hostel. I followed her along one of the many tracks that wove through the garden beds to a log cabin that stood right at the edge of the forest clearing. Smoke rose from the chimney that jutted up from its sharply angled roof. Its latticed verandah nestled into the forest's overhanging boughs and undergrowth.

"You cut your firewood here, see?" she said, pointing to an axe and chopping block at the side of the cabin. "Make sure you leave enough wood for the next person, and try to gather kindling too. Some people struggle to get the fire going. Actually"—she looked at me anxiously—"you *can* light a fire, can't you? That's how the cabin is heated, see."

I smiled at her. "Yes, that's more or less how I grew up. I'll be fine here. Thanks."

She left, after instructing me to ring the bell that I'd passed earlier if I had any questions, and to write my name on the list pinned to the main woodshed if I wanted to order some homemade bread for the morning.

Inside, the cabin was long and narrow, with an upstairs galley where four of the six beds were. I climbed the precarious stairs carefully, in danger of being overbalanced by the pack on my back. I shuffled along the landing, ducking my head because the A-frame ceiling was so low, and chose a bunk. This cabin was perfect.

That night, I headed out to the forest. In the hour before sunset, when the light is fading but not yet gone, forests take on a different colour. I moved between areas of dark lavender shadow, deep greens, and startling corridors of pale gold light. I passed through pines so tall I couldn't see their tops. The ground was springy with ferns and mud, and gnarled with the outcropping tree roots. It took no time for the clearing behind me to disappear and the soft, mossy, tree-crackling sounds of the forest to settle around me.

I climbed a small wooden stile and scrambled up the sudden knoll beyond it. An old, knotted pine rose from the knoll, under which sat a wooden bench. The tree's branches were bare, and twisted down around the seat like it would embrace it. I sat down. The forest opened out before me into a shadowed purple moor that stretched for miles, interrupted by pale, spindly trees, disappearing to a distant horizon on which the outlines of mountains hovered like storm clouds. The pines smelled sharp in the twilight. I shifted until I lay flat on my back, my feet hanging over the far armrest.

It had been an unremarkable few days, travelling from Orkney down to the Highlands. As soon as I had made the decision to leave, I had suffered through my last few days in the islands, impatient to head to the mountains. Stephen and Sandy had invited me to their house for dinner before I left, and served me course upon course of locally-caught seafood, hand-made fruit crumble, platters of cheeses and grapes, and wine that Stephen chose from his extensive collection. As I walked back to the hostel that night, flushed with wine and the lingering warmth from their farewell, I felt a tender ache of regret that I may never again see these people who had extended such welcome to me.

The ferry ride from Stromness to Scrabster, the port on mainland Scotland, had passed without incident. As I boarded the bus that would take me to Inverness, from where I would make my way down to the Highlands, I looked back, out past the ferry, out to the choppy waters of the Pentland Firth. There was no sign of the islands; not even the cliffs of Hoy were visible. The day was sunlit, brisk, ordinary. I smiled to myself and settled into my seat.

Looking out now from my bench, I wondered if the mountains I could see on the horizon were the Cairngorm Mountains. It was unclear to me where they actually were: I knew that I was in the Cairngorms National Park, but I didn't know where it was that Nan Shepherd had lived and written about, or how to find the mountain slopes that British nature writer and explorer Robert Macfarlane, whose books I was currently immersed in, had hiked into and skied over.

Touching the gnarled tree goodbye, I walked out onto the moor. The ground was humped with heather and low-growing bushes, and even though it was early evening, large bees moved lazily between bushes specked with small blooms. Between the clumps of heather, I picked up a faint track, and decided to follow it. It was barely discernible and erratic, often doubling back on itself. I trod it for some time out into the dim, flat moorland, until, as it became increasingly difficult to pick out, I realised that the path I was following was not one made by humans but by deer.

Drops of rainwater, Macfarlane writes in *The Old Ways*, falling again and again onto limestone, eventually carve out a route in the rock; the shallow channels broaden and deepen as more rainwater follows in this path. Cracks become fissures, which become significant landscape features, which we use as markers around which to lay down tracks and ways of passage. Thus, naturally occurring phenomena in landscape come to direct the way we traverse it. "Humans and animals, seeking a route, are guided by the pre-formed configured habits of the terrain," Macfarlane writes; these formed configurations, these "preferential pathways," then attract more pedestrians. In this way, he observes, "the path of a raindrop hundreds of thousands of years ago may determine the route of a modern-day walker."

Rather than raindrops, it was deer that had, with their quickstepping feet, trod carefully between the skeletal trees and around the heather here to make faint traceries across the landscape, such as the one I was now following.

With the realisation that this path had not been made by humans came a momentary prick of fear. I stopped, looking around me. I was some way out into the moor, and the light was almost gone. Human-made paths connote a certain assumption of trust. Without really being conscious of it, we assume that a pre-made path leads to a destination; that someone previously has walked this way to prepare it for us, their unknown descendant. There is a comforting knowledge about a path that there is a destination waiting for us out of sight.

For Macfarlane, paths are like lures. They draw the sight, he writes, "up and on and over. The eye is enticed by a path, and the mind's eye also. The imagination cannot help but pursue a line in the land – onwards in space, but also backwards in time to the histories of a route and its previous followers." This was true for me too—but it had mostly been other *human* walkers that I had wondered about. If the path was made by animals, like this one was, the set of assumptions and expectations I held for it changed abruptly, making me very aware that I was in unchartered territory—or territory that had been chartered by a kind of mammal that did not share my needs or way of thinking.

While they mark common ways through a place, paths, these "habits of a landscape," these "acts of consensual making" in Macfarlane's words, also serve to map landscape across landscape. They make palimpsests of the places we think we see. As I stood in the moor, looking out towards the grey smudge of mountains, the shadowy mass of the pinewood at my back, rocking gently forward and back in the spongy mud and heather of a path not made for me, it seemed so obvious, suddenly, that I saw my surroundings through human eyes. This landscape was vastly different for the deer and I: I wanted to know that the path would take me somewhere then lead me back; I could only guess at the deer's purpose in repeatedly treading this track through the heather—and if there was any purpose at all.

Off to my left, on a green slope that rose into the pines, five red deer stood poised, almost invisible in their stillness and the low light. As if they sensed my gaze, they sprang into action, disappearing into the trees in seconds.

I turned back, heading in what I hoped was the right direction. Now that I knew I wasn't following a proper path, it became even more difficult to pick, disappearing in places in a way that made me turn in slow, measured circles as I tried to find it again. I was growing cold. When I reached the spindly trees, every group of them looked the same. When I stumbled into the open space before the bench under the pine, I slowed, resolving not to head out in the dark again without properly marking where I came from. In *The Old Ways,* Macfarlane describes descending a snowy mountain and encountering the trail of footsteps he left when climbing up. Rather than prints depressing the snow, the trail of footprints was slightly elevated. His earlier footfalls had compressed the snow, and in the time since he had made them the sun had melted off the loose, surrounding snow, and left an upraised trail of footsteps. Such prints, as Macfarlane has it, are uncanny; in this moment of coming back across them, the walker encounters "the altered traces of an earlier self." These inverse footprints were evidence, Macfarlane submits, of the earth changing minutely but irrevocably in the time that the walker has last been there. He imagines these footprints, or "footplinths," as belonging to an unseen walker, making "the surface of the earth nothing more than a flexible film through which the walker's ghostly feet are pressing, leaving these raised marks on our side of the world: an inverted spectral presence striding through the solid earth as easily as we stride through solid air."

We think of path-making as a pressing-into, a carving-out, a scooping-aside of what is already there to make way for a new line-making. Paths are laid down onto, as well as into: the more I thought about it, the less sure I was that this didn't amount to the same thing. The figure of Macfarlane's spectral walker added a wholly new dimension to path-making; that paths could be made from underneath, from the other side, from a direction we did not normally consider was a

surprising thought that shifted my perception of paths: how we followed them, how we laid them down, where they led from and where they led to.

Finding my way back to the clearing with the bench under the pine, it was unnerving that this ground I had earlier traversed retained no trace of me. I had made a path, laid down my own footprints, and could not recognise them now. Apart from the deepening darkness, there was no way for me to detect the changing of the world that occurred between the going and the returning of my passage.

And yet, like when I had wondered if I was lost on Hoy, and when walking back from the Ring of Brodgar, the thought of being lost here did not cause me real worry. When I was in Orkney, I had decided, half flippantly but also seriously, that if ever I became lost near night-time, I would climb the fence of the nearest field and huddle overnight in a herd of the docile, woolly sheep. The thought still appealed to me.

It did not escape my attention that this was not a decision I would have made previously to being in Scotland. I was usually thoroughly prepared and unlikely to be very spontaneous when hiking in unknown areas. I acted differently here, made decisions that I would not have made at home. I walked consciously and deliberately, and at the same time walked in a way that was unselfconscious, drawn into the rhythm of it, accepting the process of minute decisions made one after the other that comprised the act of walking and selecting, from every possible direction, a path. On this rhythm, Nan Shepherd writes: “Eye and foot acquire in rough walking a co-ordination that makes one distinctly aware of where the next step is to fall, even while watching sky and land.” I relied on the rhythm my own body made; aware of it but not, able to let my thoughts range and wander while my body kept on.

The affinity I felt with the landscape through which I walked surprised me. Was it the place that was different, or was it me, in this place?

In forests, if you are quiet, you see what others don't see. I awoke early on my first morning, made a cup of tea and went to sit by the vine-covered trellis outside the cabin. From the nearby creek came the honk and chatter of the ducks, and from across the clearing, I caught drifts of occasional sleepy human voices. I sat motionless, watching the steam spiral up from my tea. In a flicker of motion, a red squirrel dashed along the trellis to pause at a hanging birdfeeder filled with peanuts. The squirrel spun suddenly and hung upside down, suspended by its back paws that rotated a strange three hundred and sixty degrees, and snatched at peanuts with peculiar, jerking movements, devouring them in a manner that made its jaw shudder with the speed of its nibbling. Its wide, beady eyes watched all around constantly, its tail quivering. At a sudden thrum of wings in the bushes, it disappeared up the trellis and into a tree. The birds in the bush chattered on. The squirrel inched into view again, hovered, and dashed back to the feeder. This time it lifted the lid of the peanut box and dived in, again and again, its bushy tail raised in what looked like a rude gesture above its backside.

During the day, I wrote and read my book by the creek. A sweet pea bush twined up a bird bath nearby, and the scent rising in the sun had a soporific effect. I dozed for short stretches on the grass. I met the other women who were staying in the log cabin. Vivienne was a writer from Glasgow with a severely cut black bob, a penchant for swearing, and a bottle of good Glenlivet whisky from the nearby distillery that she shared liberally. Emily, from Aberdeen, had just been dumped by her boyfriend and was on her way home from a weekend away with some girlfriends. I tried to keep my voice neutral as I commiserated with her. Thoughts of Jacob surfaced. The last time I saw him, the night air was heavy with the smell of rain; we sat side by side on a bench in the city, in a pool of shadow beyond a streetlamp's light. I was exhausted from crying; he wanted to drive me home, said he wanted to make sure I was safe, and it was almost more than I could bear, that he still cared. I forced the memory from me, focussed fiercely on Emily as she spoke. In the days she spent at the cabin, she would share with me her crosswords and chocolate, and I taught her

how to light a fire. Conversation with her was easy, but we steered cleared of talk of relationships after that first night.

And then there was Harriet.

When she strode into the cabin on my second evening, her eyes misty with the night, long plait glinting in the firelight and boots wet from the ten hours of walking she'd returned from, I liked her immediately. Harriet was a marine scientist and she spoke quickly and passionately about her work. She was currently on a short vacation from Wales, travelling through the Highlands doing as many mountain hikes as she could.

This was the first time I came across the term "munro bagging." A small mountain, or munro, is classed as such when it is exceeds 3,000 feet, and there are two hundred and eighty-two in Scotland. Munro bagging in Scotland, I came to understand, is an obsession that attracts people from all over the world. I had been looking at maps and talking to people over the last few days, looking for some hikes through the mountains. I didn't have a car, and while I was happy walking to the nearby town of Nethy Bridge to catch a bus elsewhere, often the serious hikes started at a point quite far out of town.

This was also when I learnt about Scotland's "right to roam" walking law. This law rules, essentially, that every person has the right to pass through almost any area of land they wish. There are some exceptions to this rule: some developed or agricultural land is cordoned off, or if written, legal, or paid permission is needed to enter a particular area, the right to roam doesn't apply. But to my understanding, I was free to walk as the crow flies through most places.

I found this knowledge confronting. Growing up in a rural area, on a few acres of land surrounded by a dairy and various farmers with cattle and crops, the barbed or electric fences I encountered in my childhood signalled very firmly that there were areas into which I may not enter. Sometimes, this made the lure of forbidden land tantalising. As children, my neighbours and I wriggled through fences and into hay sheds and dashed up the hill behind my property to where an illegal dump had been dug into the hill. We would lower ourselves down into the dump, daring each

other a little further each time, throwing rocks at the stinking corpses of cows that were occasionally splayed across the rubbish, or sift through the outer edges of the debris, bouncing on rusting mattresses and once, uncovering a pile of discarded syringes. The place in which I grew up was clearly demarcated; my place, someone else's place, place that was out of bounds and that would get me into trouble.

If there was a fence, it meant, mostly, that the land beyond was not somewhere on which I could set my feet. And in this way, the land beyond this wire barrier ceased to exist for me. I knew to hesitate before I touched a gate, which might be connected to an electric fence. These childhood habits went deep—deeper than I had realised, until now.

Harriet and I talked about this phenomenon late into the night. The other women went to bed, so we sat at the cabin's small table, sharing some wine she poured for us. I liked the lilt that her Herefordshire accent lent to her speech. She wanted to know so much about me; why I was in Scotland, what I loved, what I thought. Her interest threw me after weeks of travelling alone, not often speaking with other people. It was easy enough to explain that I had gone to the Orkney Islands because I was curious about the place where the myth of selkies originated. Easy to tell her that my heart had changed there, and it was mountains rather than coasts that drew me now.

And then, as the evening moved toward midnight, I told Harriet how I felt like I was changing through travelling alone. I found that I could give voice to the growing sense of contentment I felt in my own company; the budding sense of independence that was starting to feel familiar. I shared with her that I was eating meals with abandon; that my relationship with food felt for the first time in a long time uncomplicated. With words that were halting at first but then felt like a release, I told her about Jacob. That he wasn't the reason I had come here but that he was bound up in it all, even though I didn't want him to be; that I desperately wanted to leave him behind and had thought the geographical distance would help me do this, but that he felt like a gaping wound, lurking beneath it all. I told her, the words squeezing out of my chest, that I was coping by just trying not to think about him.

Without Harriet knowing me, knowing the full history of my past, I found that I could speak about my life in Australia with a clarity that was profoundly cathartic. There is freedom in being removed from yourself; in choosing how to shape and what to reveal. There is nothing to hide. No idiosyncrasy to excuse, no habit to avoid, no pattern to follow. It was a delight to rediscover myself in her eyes, through her questions; to see and hear myself as a reflection rebounding off her. We both paused at times, acknowledging without words the raw, hesitant intimacy of our sharing; the vulnerability of it, and the pleasure.

When we finished the bottle of wine our conversation turned back to walking and, ducking briefly out of the kitchen, Harriet returned with maps. She carried an Ordnance Survey map in a plastic sleeve, the kind I'd learnt to read years ago in high school, but wasn't sure I could read correctly now.

"I want to do this one tomorrow," Harriet said, as she traced with her finger a hike that headed into the heart of the Cairngorms, that, with a lurch of pleasure, I discovered I had been looking at from the pine bench. "It'll be a serious hike, right into the massif. See there? That's Ben Macdui, the second highest peak in Scotland. I'm not sure if it'll head right to Macdui, but it should get us a pretty decent view!" She looked at me, the corners of her eyes crinkling with her smile.

"You're coming with me, right?" she asked.

I couldn't contain my grin. "Absolutely! What do I need?"

Harriet had a car, a compass and maps. We agreed to head off in the morning. I hoped she didn't invite me along out of obligation, because I could barely hide my eagerness. Finally, the Cairngorms. The mountains that Nan Shepherd had walked over, hiked into, camped in, and written about. I had gazed at them from afar, imagined them as I read about them—these deserted summits and plateaus that were home to rare capercaillie, elusive red deer, birch groves, burns and corries with secret pools.

Tomorrow I would walk into them.

THE LAIRIG GHRU

The mountain pass was called the Lairig Ghru, or the Làirig Dhrù in Gaelic. The name was old, and when I tried it out, lodged deep in my throat. It sounded like the cough of a red deer, conjured a faint smell of peat, required my tongue to roll in an unfamiliar way. The pass was a five hundred-metre deep valley that lead through two of the highest mountains in Britain. The full Lairig Ghru hike was nineteen miles through the heart of the Cairngorm plateau which included some of Scotland's highest peaks, but Harriet and I wouldn't walk the full length. We only had one day. The sun set around eight o'clock. If we left in the morning, that was enough time, we thought, to climb some peaks and get back before dark.

We left Harriet's car in the small carpark at the start of the hike, our packs laden with water, trek bars, waterproof pants, map, compass, and midge repellent. It was short walk down a gravel road and then we were in the valley proper. Purpled with heather, the valley floor was bright in the sun. To either side of us, beyond a short expanse of grasses and wild flowers, the bases of mountains rose from the pines to disappear into low-hanging clouds. As we walked, we talked, and I almost fell over my words in my impatience at not knowing Harriet yet. She responded in the same manner: we both sensed that there was a friendship waiting here.

I had always found it easy to make friends with women. I had gravitated towards female friendships and mentors since I was young—Mum had once told me that as a child I would only go to female doctors. The fit between Harriet and me was right immediately. Striding down the track, side by side, packs strapped to backs and boots matching pace, I knew suddenly that I thrived off this kind of intimacy. The kind that occurs between two women who cross paths while journeying. There was no place here for the tentative feeling-our-way-forward manner that we often default to with new friends. I was relying on Harriet's navigating skills, and she was relying on me to match

her in pace, stamina, and ability. Briefly, I thought of Meiki, my housemate when I lived in Melbourne, and the hours of conversation we spent in the backyard when we first met. Then, we would build a home together. But now, travelling, Harriet and I both possessed the knowledge that we only had this finite window of time together, and as such, there was no reason to hold anything back from one another. Contrary to my thought the previous night, that meeting a new friend while travelling gave me the freedom to present myself as whoever I liked, this kind of interaction, I reflected, was also a gift; an opportunity to completely and wholly embody and respond as my instinctive self. Few situations in life allowed this.

When we entered the Rothiemurchus Caledonian pine forest that lay in the valley of the mountains, the peaks disappeared. We were in another world, here, one that swayed waist-high with ferns rising from the heather, lit with red toadstools and black slugs the length of my hand. The boles of the ancient pines towered above us, growing so closely together that the path, muddy and veined with roots, disappeared more than a few steps ahead. I had to keep stopping, touching the bark on the trees, stroking ferns, pressing the tiny bells of heather between my fingers, while Harriet watched on, laughing.

After about an hour of walking, the sound of rushing water became audible above the rushing of the pines: we stumbled onto the river almost before we knew it was there. It tumbled brackish-gold over a mess of stones, its gravelly banks thick with ferns on both sides. Harriet and I strode up and down the banks, pushing through the ferns, searching for stepping stones across the water.

Harriet's voice came from somewhere downstream. "I can't find anything! You'd think there would be a bridge, wouldn't you! What do you reckon we should do?"

I looked at the water, knowing it would be icy, and started to take off my boots. There was a rustle behind me. Harriet thrust through the ferns, groaned in resignation, and followed suit.

The shock of the cold was severe and the current was stronger than I suspected. I picked my way slowly to the middle of the river where a few rocks sat higher than the water. I stepped up onto

one for a few moments, my feet clumsy. Harriet followed me, shrieking. The water was deep, and the iciness burned, and before I lost my nerve I slipped back into the river and waded to the far shore with numb feet.

We rinsed our feet as quickly as we could and put our shoes back on, batting away the clouds of biting midges that had appeared. I spat them out of my mouth, remembering the warnings I had been given about these insects that terrorised damp, boggy areas where the air was still. The tiny things descended in swarms; soft, maddening flutters in my face that I inhaled up my nose and that gathered in my eyes. For days afterward, I would scratch. The red welts that rose on my body would linger for weeks, itching.

We continued through the forest. The ground began to climb. I watched the back of Harriet's boots and my legs began to burn. Not as much as they once might have, I noted, thinking of the hours I'd spent walking and on occasion, riding a borrowed bike in Orkney. Halfway up a slope there was a glimpse through the trees of the ravine far below, the flash of the river. We'd climbed quickly.

After miles of this rising forest we came out on the slope of a mountain. Its face was bare above us, dappled moss-green and mauve with heather. The air was still, verging on humid. I took out my drink bottle, breathing hard.

"Want to have something to eat now? I'm starving," Harriet said, taking off her backpack.

I was hungry too, but as we paused to dig out our sandwiches the midges swarmed us. We climbed higher, looking for a breeze that would hold them at bay. The hillside was silent except for the scrape of boots and the hiss of air in my ears. We jumped patches of bog where the path was eaten by mud and crossed small streams that gurgled under rocks, stopping just long enough to unwrap our sandwiches so we could eat as we walked. My bread was so dry it sucked the moisture from my mouth.

Ben Macdui was visible in the distance, its slopes misted and dark. At 4,295 feet, it was the second highest peak in the United Kingdom after Ben Nevis, which lay about eighty miles

southwest of where we were now. It was hard, though, to appreciate the height of individual peaks now I was up in the mountain massif; Nevis looked much like the slope I was currently climbing, and intellectually, while it was a thrill to know I was in the vicinity of this famous peak, I was more occupied by the immediate experience of scrambling up through the tumble of rocks before me, and swatting away the midges that threatened my eyes.

As we pulled ourselves up through a rocky cleft in the mountainside, I thought of Nan Shepherd. Had she drunk at this stream I was picking my way up? I crouched on a protruding rock and cupped my hands in the flow. The water was bright and piney tasting. The old photos I had seen of Nan were a grainy black and white, but when I imagined her face it was weathered by the mountain's summers, her eyes dark like those of the squirrels I'd watched scurry in the pines the last few mornings.

The way Shepherd wrote about the mountains was becoming a lens through which I saw them; both panoramic and microscopic in which the colours and tastes and temperatures of the landscape sprang out at me. A mountain has its own air, Shepherd muses, and it is tinged with the specific colours of the peaks. Shepherd writes of them: "Brown for the most part in themselves, as soon as we see them clothed in air the hills become blue. Every shade of blue, from opalescent milky-white to indigo, is there. They are most opulently blue when rain is in the air. Then the gullies are violet. Gentian and delphinium hues, with fire in them, lurk in the folds." Unlike china blue, the violet range of these colours, Shepherd thought, "can trouble the mind like music." I was captivated by the richness and sense of absorption in Shepherd's observation of the Cairngorms. Enthralled by her way of seeing, of smelling, of heeding the texture of her surroundings. And I was gripped by what I thought of as her fearlessness and her love of solitude in the mountains.

Nan Shepherd was born in 1893 and died in 1981, living for most of her life in the house in which she was born just out of Aberdeen. She lectured in English at the Aberdeen College of Education. She never married. She mostly explored the hills alone, although sometimes with others: even then, she declared that her companion must be the sort "whose identity is for the time being

merged in that of the mountains, as you feel your own to be." She avoided, largely, hill-walking with "the talking tribe," content to walk alone. "However often I walk on them, these hills hold astonishment for me. There is no getting used to them," she writes, and an echo of her joy, this glimpse into the private sense of her fascination, reverberated off the page and through me. It thrummed piercingly in me now as I looked around at the scree up which we scrambled, and then down at my hands, my fingertips reddened and roughened from grasping the rock. I was fiercely glad of the marks, these tiny triumphs, these tributes that the mountain exacted from me.

I climbed on into the Cairngorms, the home of Nan Shepherd's heart. I was intrigued by this enigmatic, unusual woman, who had walked where I was walking almost one hundred years ago, almost the age I was now. She felt like a spectral presence, walking perhaps on the same surface I trod but in a different time, her searing love for this place translated as a static whispering against my skin.

"I am a mountain lover because my body is at its best in the rarer air of the heights and communicates its elation to the mind," she writes simply, offering a pure truth of her belonging, giving voice to the human experience of being stamped through with place.

While my head was full of thoughts of Shepherd, the mountains I walked in now were not the mountains as she knew them, as much as I wanted them to be. I had a skerrick of the familiarity with the landscape that she had. I felt it would almost be a travesty to compare my experience on these slopes with hers; she, who had spent decades wandering, sleeping in, walking in, seeing these mountains. And yet. Her love affair with this place was seeping under my skin. I wasn't sure, exactly, what it was I was falling in love with. The shifting colours of the mountains? The smell that rose from the land, of heather, pine trees, granite, loamy undergrowth, and the ever-present sheep? And then there was my body, my body that was being moulded, tuned, becoming sure of itself here in this place. Was it that?

Tears stood out in my eyes, there on the slope of the mountain, with the breeze lifting my hair and sweat cooling between my shoulder blades.

I followed Harriet over a small crest of rocks and we were at last on the mountain plateau of Cairn Gorm, the false summit before the ridge that rises steeply to a knife-blade edge. The reflections of clouds moved quickly across the ridge face and the wind shrieked up here. I ran the last few steps to the plateau, ignoring the pinch in my hip, my boots sinking into the squelch of the wet, rocky ground.

We could have been on top of the world. Miles below, between humps of hills and rolling banks of clouds, the carpet of forest stretched away from us. The air was bright and stung my face. There was nothing human here except us.

Harriet turned to me, exhilarated. Looking out toward the horizon, I let out a long "*Coooeeeee!*"

The sound disappeared. I looked back at Harriet, disappointed. Then, refracted into a cascade of voices, the mountains threw my voice back at me, the echoes rebounding from the horizon. Harriet and I yelled in surprise and some fear at the sound's thunder, and I remembered that there had been a landslide recently that closed one of the mountain routes. I mentioned this to Harriet.

"Shit! Well, at least we'd be at the top of the landslide," Harriet remarked, and then we were both laughing, and I wanted to shout again, but looking at the ridge opposite I could too vividly imagine it collapsing down onto us, so we sat back on the boggy mountain top and shared some chocolate. The wet seeped into the seat of my pants but I couldn't bring myself to care. Mid-bite, I nudged Harriet: on the ridge opposite, a double rainbow was forming. I had never been this close to a rainbow, nor looked down at one from above.

At the same time, far below us, a blanket of mist was creeping over the forest. I watched it in astonishment. It took less than a minute for the trees to be submerged. That forest had taken us hours to walk through.

Noticing my gaze, Harriet stood up suddenly. I looked up enquiringly as she said, “Ah, we should probably—” and then the mist was upon us too, spitting freezing rain. Abandoning our chocolate, we yanked on our waterproof layers, any exposed skin stinging in the rain. The mountain-top was devoid of any shelter, so we scurried, swearing, back the way we’d come, slipping in the wet, hopping carefully down the rocks.

During our descent, the midges were furiously, unbearably settling in for the evening and forced us to move at a quick pace. The light faded quickly. By the time we walked out from the forest mouth and headed back up the gravel path toward the car, my feet were aching and my hip pinching painfully. Trudging up the track, we passed a pine plantation and gunshots exploded through the trees. I glanced over at Harriet, startled. We kept walking.

When we reached the car, we collapsed inside, groaning. Harriet opened a bag of salted cashews and we ate them in silence. I sucked my fingers for every last trace of salt. The mountains were hard to see from here—beyond the forest, their bulk rose shadowy and indistinct. I thought again of Nan, if she had ever stood on top of the mountain when a storm rolled in. I thought, as we drove away, she would have done so, many times.

Harriet departed the next day, and it left me feeling morose. I fell a little bit in love with each friend I made when I travelled. It was a pang, to see them go. It had been an unlooked-for joy, spending a day climbing into the mountains with Harriet. I sat on the bench under the old pine tree that I found on my first night, and thought about the nature of experiences. How do experiences become enough for us? Why do we so urgently need to share them, and why do we feel like they are validated when we share them with someone else? Why is it not enough to know, just for ourselves, what we have experienced? It was a strange question, when I tried to unravel it. I had been writing almost constantly in the weeks I’d been travelling, a raw kind of journaling that tried to capture a sense of these places I travelled through. Descriptions poured out of me, insistent and questioning and never quite enough. Was I afraid that I would forget the details, or would the experience of it all only feel

complete once I shared it? The process of writing simultaneously immortalised and destroyed what I had experienced, and somehow, also recreated it. In seeking to make a record of an experience's integrity I was altering it, changing the course of my memory, writing over the top of it.

"The act of remembering is not retrieving some original fact stored in the brain's 'hard drive'," writes Siri Hustvedt; "What we recall is the last version of a given memory." Every time we recall a memory, voluntarily or involuntarily, we say that we are remembering it. Yet what we are really doing is imagining it. Recreating it. The next time we recall this memory, what we are remembering is the last time we imagined that memory. And so the memory changes, the more often we return to it. It changes over time, and the manner of these changes are imperceptible and utterly beyond our control. In remembering, we think we are conjuring up incontrovertible parts of the narratives that make us ourselves. We think that, in retaining memories, we possess something we know to be true of ourselves.

If, every time we think we are returning to ourselves, we create ourselves—because that is what we are doing, in imagining our last imaginings—what does this mean for the elusive, nebulous, unconscious state of being?

And how is *being* different from *being in*? Partly, I wished that there had been time on the hike with Harriet to absorb the mountain and the forest. To *be in*, rather than just *pass through.* To sit quietly. To simply look, and take in. To know the place's scent. During the hike, the sensory immersion was exhilarating, at times verging on what the Romantics had meant when they wrote about the sublime: something that approached the divine, that was beauty and fear and awe, that unsettled existential stability. How might my experience have been different if I had been able to soak into it, settle into it all?

Passing through a place on foot felt like a different thing altogether to settling into a place to observe. I hadn't spent much time until now considering it. Both, I thought, came back to the body: I relied on my senses to absorb knowledge. But I was beginning to feel that my experience of my

body—and thus my broader, more complex sense of self—changed, depending on if I was walking, or being.

"Walking," Nan Shepherd writes, "hour after hour, the senses keyed, one walks the flesh transparent. But no metaphor, *transparent*, or *light as air*, is adequate. The body is not made negligible, but paramount . . . One is not bodiless, but essential body." Quite apart from the heady delight I experienced at the lyricism of her words, these few lines came to seem like something Shepherd wrote specifically for me. She put into words something that I was discovering for myself, day by revelatory day; that walking changes you. That even the experience of walking changes by the half hour. And with it, so does one's own self-perception. You walk into the mountain and you walk into your body—but at the same time, as Shepherd put it, you walk the flesh transparent.

The apparent contradiction of a transparent body engaged in the bodily, sensory act of walking resonated for me in an electrifying way. The simultaneity of feeling like I was nothing more than the rhythm of my boots, breath, and muscle—but also that my body was transparent, that I was only a string of thoughts released from corporeal existence . . . The thought of an essential body consumed me. I sensed that I didn't fully understand it, but it was dizzying, as the knowing began to happen.

THE GARDEN

Jacob worked in landscape conservation, and his day started early. After a couple of months, our mornings were routine. When his alarm went off, he rolled awake. I never woke as quickly as he did, and liked to surface into the day slowly, hovering in those moments between sleep and wakefulness, everything tuned to the warmth of his skin. Jacob would yawn and extricate himself from me with a firm gentleness that came to feel like a reprimand.

We slept under his orange blanket, the one we called his lucky one. It was rolled up in the swag on the night we met a few months ago, and when we went camping or stayed over at friends' parties, he brought the orange blanket. I knew it was special to him, but it became special to me too, something I thought of as ours, though I didn't tell him that.

When Jacob sighed, and sat for a moment on the edge of the bed facing away from me, as he often did, uncertainty crept into my stomach. There was something impatient about his sigh.

"Do you not like it when I'm here in the morning?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

He turned. "What do you mean? I like it when you're here," he replied, his eyebrows tilting upward in the centre like they did when he was concerned.

I sat up too. "It's just that you—you always seem to want to get up quickly and not stay in bed with me, or . . . I just wondered," I trailed off.

He was already shaking his head. "No, you goose, it's not like that," he replied. Something lifted off my chest. "No, it's just that I get restless when I know I need to get up. It's not because I don't want to be in bed with you." A rush of understanding seemed to come over him. "You didn't think that, did you?" He leaned down and kissed my forehead, looking worried. I smoothed one of the curls that fell around his eyes. Sometimes in the evenings he read aloud to me, lying with his head in my lap, and I traced the waves in his hair, my fingers learning the fine planes of his temples,

the downy curve of his eyebrow. His eyes were a deep, rich brown, his eyelashes longer than I'd ever seen on a man.

I held him tightly, pulling him down to me briefly, before he padded to the shower. I listened as the water stuttered on and he went about getting ready for work. The flood of relief was dizzying. Too often this happened; anxiety, then reassurance. The jubilation afterward was disproportionate. Every time, it felt like a Band-Aid had been applied, but I knew there would be new leaks, new breaches between us that I would try to hold together.

We ate breakfast on his verandah, throwing small bits of fried egg to the magpies that perched on the back fence. While Jacob packed his lunch, I cleaned up the kitchen from the night before; we'd made pizzas and played music late into the night, me on my cello, him on his electric bass, sometimes swapping instruments and trying to teach each other, but mostly just content to lose ourselves in the long passages of eerie, discordant soundscapes we made between us.

As Jacob zipped up his bag, he said, "If you want to, you can stick around here when I'm at work. I made you some lunch—it's in the fridge." He kissed me. "I'd like you to stay."

This had never happened before. I waved from the doorway as he drove off, with something in my stomach that felt like spring unfurling. I stuck around.

In the middle of summer, in the middle of the Fringe festival, Adelaide was lit and swollen, heaving with festivity. Jacob and I had tickets for the circus. It was almost a year since we'd met. I had met his family at an extended family gathering, and had been hugged by them in a way that made me think that for Jacob, this was new. That they were glad to have me around.

Even though we only lived half an hour apart, we wrote each other letters, posted books, and every time I saw his cramped, sloping handwriting on an envelope, wings took flight in my belly. We played Scrabble by the fire, drank port, played music together. He took me to my first heavy metal gig, I brought him to literary events. Our worlds mixed and it made me happy, happier than I

had ever been. We made love, again and again and again. His hands, with their tapering fingers and pale, square fingernails, touched me with a reverence that brought tears to my eyes at times.

And yet. Once, when I clutched at his hand in excitement over something trivial, he pulled away, and told me, afterward, that sometimes he didn't want to be touched. "I find it easier being sad," he said another time. "When I'm happy it feels strange and it scares me." When he curled up on the bed and laid his head in my lap, I held him through the deep sighs that wracked his frame, held him without understanding, held him in every way I could, knowing that I was pouring myself into a breach. Helpless to hold myself back.

We found a park, and headed to the Garden of Unearthly Delights, the centre of the Fringe festival that was teeming with circus tents, sideshow alleys, a Ferris wheel, food stalls and bars. As I walked I chafed at the neckline of my dress and tried to loosen it. It was slightly too tight, but the dress was beautiful, with a high collar and plunging décolletage, folds of cotton wrapping around my middle like I was an origami bow.

"You look lovely," Jacob said, turning to look at me. I paused, surprised. He didn't often say things like that. The nature of our relationship was unclear, even to us. When I made him a Valentine's card I wrote *thank you for being my companion* and a friend laughed when she saw it, but I couldn't explain to her that we, he and I, knew what it meant. Knew that whatever we were was good but it was something uncertain. The word *lovers* was old-fashioned. *A couple* made him uneasy. Some words were off limits: commitment, polyamory. I longed for the first, he longed for the second. It was easier not to talk about it.

He looked good that night, despite the fact that he'd put on a bit of weight since we met. Enough that his dress shirt strained across his belly. Not that I would have told him that. When we met he told me that he needed glasses. He used to wear them, and he had the prescription, he just couldn't bring himself to go get them. I badgered him on and off through the months until we went to the optometrist together.

I liked the frames that were long and rectangular, but he hated them.

"They're the kind I used to wear when I was a kid. They make me look so young," he said. "Definitely not getting them. I like these ones. What do you think?"

The glasses he wore had large aviator frames and gold rims. I thought they looked like an old man's glasses. I didn't like them, but I tried not to show it. He was hurt, but he tried not to show it either.

I learned to be careful. I would rather he feel happy, I told myself. Don't scare him, I reminded myself the few times we veered toward discussing our relationship. Don't ask for too much, I ordered myself when he said he thought people in couples should still keep secrets from each other. Of course, I didn't know I was telling myself that, then. But there is a way women tell themselves to be small without using words.

When we reached the circus tent, Jacob ordered us both gin and tonics in tall glasses, and I sucked on the ice-cubes in mine, trying to get rid of a headache. It was hot, and I fanned myself with the program. When we took our seats, the lights dimmed, and Jacob squeezed my hand, whispered, "*Thank you*." I smiled back at him, feeling that we were like any other couple.

After the circus finished we walked through the Garden. Bats flickered like shadows overhead, and tides of people swelled beneath trees strung with hanging lights.

"Hey look! Want some fairy floss?" Jacob asked, tugging at my arm.

I laughed. "Yes!"

I hadn't had fairy floss since I was a child. We watched the vendor make it, her pink lipstick the same shade of the sugar she spun around the wheel, her hands guiding the billowing shape of it onto a stick. We sat under a tree to eat it beside a cart selling corn on the cob. The vendor, who wore striped pantaloons and hair tied in a top knot, winked at us as we sat down. I held the ball of floss between us, and we tried, laughing, to eat it, licking and tearing small tufts of floss, letting the sugar dissolve to nothing on our tongues and dry stickily around our mouths.

I thought of the scene in the film *Lady and the Tramp* where Lady and her beloved both eat either ends of the same piece of spaghetti, and when I told this to Jacob he laughed, and planted a

sticky kiss on my cheek. His eyelashes brushed my face. The fairy lights glinted off his glasses and there was something wide open and happy in his expression, and I didn't know why the ache in me felt like joy and sadness at the same time.

THE HIGHLANDS

After a week at the Lazy Duck, I hitched into Inverness, hired a car, and drove straight back to the mountains. I had a rudimentary map, and a plan to roam through the Highlands and head slowly west to the Isle of Skye, which had always retained a mythical air to me. I could trace this back to stories I read as a child. In particular, *The King of Ireland's Son,* the 1916 novel by Padraic Colum. While the book was a retelling of Irish myth—the adventures of the King of Ireland's eldest son and Fedelma, the Enchanter's daughter—I had learned of the Isle of Skye at the same time as reading the novel. With a child's vague understanding of folklore and geography, I had affixed them together in my mind, attributing to this Scottish isle the feeling of mystery and myth that *The King of Ireland's Son* imparted to me. A lifetime later, the island seemed still to shiver with magical history.

I had many days ahead in which to meander to Skye. The word meander comes from the Latin *maeander*, from the Greek *Maíandros*, the name of a river. A river will move through a place, fitting itself around pre-existing features in the landscape, changing the course of itself to continue onwards. In the same way, the land adapts, its climate, ecology, and the very shape of its banks changing to accommodate the water. Both river and place shape each other.

The days I spent in the Highlands blurred together, golden and happy. I bought packets of oatcakes, a bag of apples, and tuned the radio to a local station that read radio plays every morning, played Gaelic music in the afternoon. I turned down any road that looked like it led somewhere beautiful, followed any signpost that had an interesting name. In a small town I perused a bookshop, and bought a postcard with a witch on the front of it, flying a broomstick across the face of a large golden moon. A cat perched behind her, and her face was thrown back in a wild, happy laugh. I tacked the card onto the dashboard of my car where I could look at it every day. I ordered "neeps

and tatties" one night at a pub, curious as to what the meal was. It was steaming when it arrived—"Haggis, for yeself," the bartender said, before he nodded and departed—and I steadily ate my way through the bowl of roasted potatoes and turnips, sliced and covered with chives and a creamy white sauce. The haggis, richly spiced, was delicious. The food in Scotland was heavy, usually involving potatoes and meat, both of which I ate rarely at home. And yet when I ordered food now it was often beef with gravy, mushrooms, and potatoes. I was ravenous, constantly.

Having a car brought a new sense of mobility, and it was exhilarating. No longer needing to rely on catching buses and plan ahead, my days unfurled, inviting spontaneity, allowing for periods of idle contemplation with minimal activity. I felt that I could disappear off the map, vanish completely, and no-one would notice, because I had nowhere I needed to be. I could go wherever I wanted to, as long as there was a road.

There is a passage in Tim Winton's memoir *Island Home* where he recalls a holiday he went on as a child when his family drove across the Nullabor Plain in an old station wagon. He found that travelling by car meant that the landscape was held away from him; the "steel cocoon," as Winton puts it, was a barrier that prevented him from grasping a sense of distance and from forming sensory impressions of the places the family passed through. A car, Winton felt, desensitized him to landscape.

Yet as the family drove across the plain, despite Winton's father taping up the window seals, dust filtered into the car. The dust struck me as a metaphor for the inevitable way in which nature will make itself known; it creeps up on us, despite any attempt of ours to contain, cordon off, hold at bay. As they forged across the Nullabor, the dust was the only part of the landscape Winton felt he engaged with. But then, when at the end of the day he stepped out of the car, the landscape rushed in on him. "It was exciting, and a little frightening," Winton writes. "What had seemed empty and desolate was actually alive, twitching, chattering, sighing and questing high and low. It had been all day, of course. The difference was we'd stopped moving long enough to hear."

Winton points out that a car's speed means that while the passenger sees a great deal more of a place than they would have while walking, the novelty of these sights will quickly fade. The first spectacular landmark might astonish; the second dims in lustre; the third is just another sight viewed through the smooth onward motion of a car's glass window.

My experience of travelling in a steel cocoon was not like this. The car offered the freedom of distance that was not available to me as a foot traveller. If I sacrificed some of the sensory immersion that, as Winton observes, cars remove us from, I gained a wide sweep of the Highlands. I gained speed and spontaneity and also a kind of safety; I had a small, moving, secure space that was mine alone. I drove often with my windows down. The winding nature of many of the roads I followed meant that I drove slowly, and I pulled over often, to have morning tea, or just so I could sit and look at the mountains. My journeying through my landscape was a different thing altogether to Winton speeding across the Nullabor; my car, and the freedom of great distances, was the means of achieving a new kind of interaction with place.

One afternoon I followed a winding road out of a village on a whim and pulled up by an empty picnic area overgrown with billows of weeds and apple trees still bearing fruit. I picked up an apple and bit it; it was sour, pocked with sunspots. The taste reminded me of childhood, of rummaging through gardens in an empty school ground with my sister, picking everything that we thought was edible and devouring it. Later, our stomachs cramping and Mum's remonstrations echoing in our ears, we lay on a bed and laughed until we were nearly sick. I smiled, remembering it. I missed my sister. I wasn't lonely, exactly, but at odd moments, when I was least expecting at, I would long for company, for someone with whom to simply share experiences.

I read for hours under the apple trees in the picnic spot, growing steadily sleepier in the sun and the somnolent sounds of bees. As was the case every afternoon, I wondered where I would sleep that night. I usually drove until I found a hostel or a Bed and Breakfast, but there was always part of me that hoped I wouldn't find anywhere, and would have no other choice than to sleep in my

car. It was heady and a little frightening, travelling this way, knowing that I didn't need much at all to survive.

As I drove, I tried to understand why I was so preoccupied by trying to put into words the colours and texture of the mountains. I felt like I was grasping after a language because I understood now how a language equalled a way of seeing. In Nan Shepherd's writing I had come across the idea that there is a marked difference between *looking* and *seeing*. That we could, and should, differentiate between the two resounded ringingly with me. I had been writing pages and pages in my journal of descriptions of the pinewoods, the ferns and toadstools and heather underfoot, searching for ways to describe the dips and slopes and undulations of the mountains I walked through. I spent a few hours one day in a stretch of forest identifying different greens: the green of moss that is auburn at heart and gold at its tips; the glowing green of the underside of a leaf held up to the sun; the undefinable green of the space between distant pines; the brackish green of shadows that trees cast on a still loch; the green lowlight found beneath hedges; the green of the mountains that is also maroon and earth-gold, all dependent on cloud and sun from moment to moment.

I was driven by a need to capture something of this landscape that so consumed me—but not to capture in the sense of owning. It was more than that. It was a need to bear witness to the wild, austere, untamed, awesome, *old* spirit of the geography of this place. I could describe how things looked; but it wasn't enough. I wanted to know not just how something looked but what its essence was. What it did to me. I needed to know why the greenish light of the dense forests was something mystical. I needed to know why I stopped the car, again and again, to stand in the cold wind and gaze at the mountains rolling out before me with the beginnings of tears in my eyes. I needed to know why the thought of leaving their immense, beloved, cloud-swept, heather-patched slopes was impossible to contemplate.

I stopped, late one afternoon, in a small village called Tomintoul, the highest village in the Cairngorms National Park. I drove slowly along the narrow road; even a pace of forty miles per

hour had come to feel like I was driving too quickly. There were often sheep and squirrels on the road, and I slowed for them, almost crawling into Tomintoul. I parked in the town square, which was almost empty this time of day. A string of flags hung between the trees in the square, limp in the still air. I bought an ice-cream and sat on a bench beneath the flags, and ate it slowly, savouring the flavour. I wiped my sticky fingers on my pants and sat in the last of the sun, breathing deeply, feeling my chest expand.

It was very simple. My space and my time were my own. The knowledge was staggering. I mostly kept my phone switched off. I had stopped checking my emails, sending messages, or posting photos. I used the internet for maps and little more. Away from contact, from obligation and accountability, removed even from the ties that bound me to the people I loved, it was peaceful. On my own, I had space. Space to be curious. Interested. Time to notice the patterns on small lichens. Time to sit in a tree in the rain and slowly eat my sandwich, my knees tucked into my raincoat, watching leafy debris swill in the churning river below me.

Everything in me had slowed, stilled. Come to feel so much more intact. I thought a lot about tenderness, there on that bench in Tomintoul as the air cooled and the village lights began to flicker on around me. How hard and how important it is to be tender to yourself. For the first time in my experience, my meniscus felt untouched. Un-tugged-at. I was whole, and wholly content.

BUACHAILLE ETIVE BEAG

Glencoe has a violent history, riven deeply by conflict between the MacDonald and Campbell clans. What happened there is called, in Gaelic, *Mort Ghlinne Comhann*: the murder of Glen Coe. There is a category in Scottish law called "murder under trust." In the early hours of the thirteenth of February 1692, thirty-eight men from the Clan MacDonald of Glencoe were murdered by Campbell guests they had taken in because the MacDonalds had refused to pledge allegiance to the new monarchs, William and Mary. Throughout the glen, MacDonald men were hunted down and killed. Trying to escape the massacre, forty women and children died of exposure after their homes were torched.

As I made my way slowly down through the Highlands of Scotland, looking west toward Skye, I knew little of Glencoe. All I knew was that it was a wild and strange place, and I was going to veer south and go there before I continued on to Skye.

Weeks after I had been there, I learnt of Glencoe's terrible history, and I wondered at my memory. I wondered what land feels like when it has been the site of massacre. I wondered what it means to know something about a place before you go there: I hadn't known anything of its past, and still, Glencoe left me with a strange feeling on the back of my neck. I wondered, as time passed, if my knowledge of the place was affecting my memory of it. That cold feeling that crept over me when I thought of the hills' craggy silhouette—was I imagining that, later?

There was a wildness to Glencoe. The sheer size and steepness of its hills was astonishing. They were very different to my beloved Cairngorms, which rose and swelled like a huge sea. Those mountains were a patchwork of shadow and heather and sudden piercing pools of gold where the sun came through, embroidered with white specks of sheep, swathed, in the early morning, with bands of low-hanging mist that would blow away before my eyes.

Coming into the hills of Glencoe was not like coming into the Cairngorms. These hills were stark and demanding, rising violently from the flat earth. In the late morning when I drove in, they were a deep blue-green, patches of their slopes darkened where the clouds raced quickly overhead. Glencoe's peaks crowed down at me, where it felt like the Cairngorms sung me in. I drove slowly on the sharply twisting road, looking for the cairn by the side of the road that signalled the beginning of the walk up Buachaille Etive Beag, a craggy behemoth that stood between Glen Coe and Glen Etive.

I was going to bag a munro. While I was fitter than I had perhaps ever been, I considered what I had been doing in Scotland thus far as walking. Buachaille Etive Beag involved mountain-climbing. It wasn't snowing, so I didn't need the walking poles that were advised in the hiking guides I pored over, but I didn't have a map or compass which was recommended. Instead, I copied the walking directions into my journal, and took extra water. I would follow the trail and hope for the best.

To my dismay, when I drove out to the area, I couldn't find the cairn that signalled the start of the walk. I drove further, frustration mounting within me. There were occasional bays by the side of the road where cars were parked and people stood photographing the view; I pulled into one near where I thought the track should start, and decided to follow whatever trail I found instead, and see where it led me.

The path I was looking for was meant to be signed "Follow the Right to Roam towards Glen Etive." The right to roam law still disconcerted me. Aside from the act of deliberately crossing fences, my reluctance to plunge off into the distance derived from something deeper: a kind of awe, so extreme it verged on apprehension, at the audacity to exist in the wilderness. Wilderness, I had always thought, was really wildness; it described equally a place, and an experience of selfhood in that place. I suspected I would encounter a kind of not-knowing of who I was, out there. For the Welsh author Owen Sheers, in wild places, the line between threat and beauty is incredibly fine. In my experience so far, the line between the two had often been a blurry one, and it was only by gut

instinct, and in hindsight, that my perception of a place was cemented. In reading the works of both Nan Shepherd and Robert Macfarlane, I had come across the idea that some places in the land—the truly wild places that bear no marks of human history—exhilarate you in small doses. But on a large scale, they annihilate. I had experienced the suggestion of this annihilation walking through the unsettling silver hills in Hoy. In *The Wild Places,* his exploration of the remaining areas of wilderness in Britain, Macfarlane offers the idea that a wild place is sometimes not necessarily hostile toward the presence of humans; it is simply indifferent to us. That a place might be indifferent to my existence—that nothing about me mattered there—was somehow more crushing, more diminishing, than outright hostility.

As I followed the trail that climbed steadily into the hills, sweating in the sun and breathing hard, I thought about how this trip to Scotland had not been what I had expected. In Orkney, I was so eager to be immersed in the mysticism of the ancient places I'd read about. I came to the islands with my head full of the stories I wanted to write. I wanted to touch the standing stones, to sit at the edges of islands and feel another world flickering around me. I travelled there because the islands seemed to hover in the liminal space between solid ground and sea, where, I thought, the way of life, of memory and thinking, still might hold traces of a time I wished might have been real.

When I did not find this other world, everything came to a crumbling halt. I felt acutely isolated at what felt like the far reaches of the world, grappling with doubt. It was easier to recognise the despairing lethargy that I sank into, now. To acknowledge that at times in Orkney, I was lonely, rather than joyfully, thrillingly alone. There on the beach at Rackwick, feeling the weight of a history I couldn't connect with, I realised that I wasn't in the right place. The days afterwards had been light with relief: I was gripped the prospect of mountains and forests, compelled by the accounts of wild places in the books by Shepherd and Macfarlane I was reading. I kept reading and kept walking. I let go of what I had spent the last half a year dreaming about and planning. I read and walked and climbed and thought, deep to the bone, about the ways in which my body was changing.

Trying to know what my body looks like feels, at times, like trying to remember a song that eludes me as soon as I attempt to recall it. This corporeal thing, this pattern of flesh maps, marks me to myself in a way that only I see, only I recognise. The maps are made in many ways. Some are scars. Some scars stand out. Some represent moments of my history that I wish had not happened. Some marks I find ugly—though that word is painful in my mouth—and some I find secretly, wondrously beautiful. The freckle beneath my left eye that is perfectly placed; a distinct detail in the delicate, smooth skin there. The inside of my upper arms, when my arms are outstretched; the skin is silky, so pale it looks almost translucent at times, a suggestion of veins so subtle I could be imagining them. There is a pearlescent sheen to these planes of skin, something like nacre to the glimmer along the rise of my bicep. Sometimes I sit and look at my body, touching these places that are beautiful to me.

And then my perspective changes. The mornings before the mirror, hands anxiously clasping across my belly, trying to smooth away the evidence that I have eaten. Trying to press, desperately and grieving and with loathing, back into me the billow—what seems like a billow—of my stomach protruding out beyond flatness. The tightness of my chest, full of inhaled panic, at the sight of myself.

As little as a few days later, after a long run, struggling and perspiring—the body in the mirror will have changed, the tightness eased.

It is difficult, at times, to see my own body because I never know when the mirror, any mirror, and my own shifting perspective will align.

Since I had been in Scotland I stopped shaving my legs. I hadn't worn makeup since I'd been here, and either there were fewer mirrors than I was accustomed to or I'd stopped noticing them as much. I tied my hair back in a braid every day but the wisps that fell out had turned a wheaten gold in the sun; when I shook it out, the heavy mass of my hair felt dry, bleached by exposure to sun and wind, and the rough, weathered texture of it pleased me.

The clothing I prized here was my waterproof pants, thick socks, thermal long-sleeved t-shirt and above all, my hiking boots. I valued what I could move easily and comfortably in, and I valued my body when it was moving. I took fierce pleasure in the push and spring of thigh muscle as I climbed. I regarded my feet with a new kind of respect, and tended to any blisters with a single-minded care. The skin on my forearms had, I noticed, turned darker; the faint tan made the line of muscle connecting elbow to wrist stand out in a way that made me tilt my head, looking down at myself from different angles.

Without realising when, I had begun to turn a new lens to my body; to seeing it, to being in it, to perceiving its functions, its strengths. What it looked like from the outside—and maintaining the private, obsessive rituals of valuing and presenting it—had ceased, somewhere, to be of such pressing importance to me. It had not disappeared, but it had retreated. What mattered now was what my body *felt* like, and the strange and sudden moments of pride when I realised it was starting to reflect the stamina and strength that had become mine.

As time crept by, my thighs tired, and the mountainside around me changed. I looked down, far down, at the grey thread of the road winding through the valley of the glen. I was high up now, and the air was piercingly cold, chilling the patches of sweat on my shirt when I paused for breaks.

I kept climbing, kept resting to catch my breath. As I followed the increasingly rocky track up and across the body of the mountain, it felt like I had been ascending for hours. The slope I climbed was a golden-brown green, its grass, mossy and wiry, mowed short by the wind. The occasional fall of water gurgled down a rocky burn. Opposite my track, blank mountain faces rose alongside me. It was hard to judge their size. I felt minute.

The top of the ridge came achingly closer and closer. I was high enough to feel nervous now. I scrambled up through some rocks, clearing the ridge, and found myself on a bealach, the lowest point of the mountain pass. To my left, the ridge rose steeply and came to a sharp peak. I

observed it with some trepidation and wondered how people didn't simply fall off while climbing it. To my right, another peak rose, slightly longer and flatter. I would go in that direction.

I rested briefly and began this final ascent. To my surprise, with a rattle of shale, a man came scrambling down from above me. He was the first person I had seen in hours. I asked him, feeling foolish, what we were climbing.

"Stob Dubh," he replied, and a spark of surprise and triumph jolted through me. This was the munro I had wanted to climb, and thought I couldn't find! Buachaille Etive Beag splits into two munros: Stob Coire Raneach, the monster to my left, and Stob Dubh, where I was headed.

"Where are you from?" the man asked, resting on his walking poles. "Edinburgh? Aberdeen?"

"Australia, actually," I said, feeling absurdly pleased at his mistake. He laughed, wished me luck, and continued down. I took a breath and headed upwards.

I was afraid of heights. Fear lent me a buzz of new energy, and I scurried up through the rocky outcrops scattered across the increasingly narrow ridge. Once, I looked down behind me and froze. Nothing but cold, clear, dizzying air surrounded me. I crouched against the peak, holding my breath against a wave of panic. I forced myself to exhale; it was a long, shaky breath. I lodged my boot in the dirt, then kept climbing. I climbed deliberately, talking quietly, explaining to myself that my fear of heights was just a fear of falling from this height. If I placed my feet carefully, I wasn't going to fall, so there was nothing to be afraid of.

Alight with tightly-held panic and determination, I sped up the rest of the peak to its small, rock-strewn top. The top was perhaps forty feet wide, and a large stone cairn sat in its centre. I tossed my bag down and sat at the base of the cairn. This was not quite the true top of Stob Dubh; from the cairn extended a narrow spine of ridge that rose about another hundred feet to the very tip of Stob Dubh. I squinted at its silhouette. The small figures climbing it looked like ants walking up a knife blade. No part of me was interested in going further than where I was sitting now.

I looked around me, breathing slowly, the cold air aching in my throat. The air bit deep now, chilling my sweat-soaked clothing. I pulled my jacket back on. I was looking down on the tops of mountain ranges. I had never been at this altitude before. They stretched out toward the horizon, turning smoky in the distance. It was almost too much, perching this high above the world. I swallowed tendrils of panic or excitement, I couldn't tell which. Were humans meant to be here? To be this high? To be forced to confront, so unforgivingly, their smallness? But I had made it here.

When I was in high school, I had dreaded the hiking camps we went on, walking for up to two weeks through the Blue Mountains in New South Wales and the Flinders Ranges in South Australia, carrying our food and tents, refilling our water skins every few days. I dreaded the point that I thought was inevitable, when I was exhausted and my feet blistered, but I was required to go on, to keep walking. I was terrified I would fall short of everyone else. Terrified that maybe I was stronger than I had thought.

On the whistling, blue cairn of Stob Dubh, where the world curved, circular, far below me, I thought of my younger self. Here, where the tops of mountains, rippling like great mounds of elephant skin, seemed more real than the rest of the world, I wished for that younger self to know who I was now. I wanted her to know that my feet had rubbed in their boots, but the pain was something I could manage. I wanted her to know that I climbed up here, that I had *wanted* to climb up here. I wished she could know that I was frightened, really frightened, at the end, but I did it.

At last I grew cold, stretched, put my pack back on. Descending the mountain was much harder than I had expected. Partway down my halting descent, I paused to rest, and my legs began to shake so much my belly vibrated. I laughed helplessly, thinking of the downward hours that still lay ahead. I slipped sometimes and my body jerked, catching itself, using up what felt like precious amounts of energy each time.

At the base of the hills, when the ground flattened out, I tottered with wobbling legs to the car and fell into the driver's seat, where I sat for half an hour, overwhelmed. My face stung with wind-burn and sun-burn. I ate the sandwich I'd left on the seat, chewing it with pleasure. The

chicken and lettuce were a bit warm from the sun, and the bread had dried out. It tasted magnificent. I smiled so much I could barely chew.

MOOR

breunloch	dangerous sinking bog that may be bright green and grassy **Gaelic**
brochan	miry soft ground (literally 'porridge') **Gaelic**
carr	boggy or ferny copse **northern English**
clachan sìnteag	stepping stones across boggy areas of moor **Gaelic**
corrach	bog, march **Irish**
curhagh-craaee	quagmire **Manx**

From *Landmarks* by Robert Macfarlane

Robert Macfarlane writes, as he puts it, about landscape and the human heart. A few days before I left Australia, browsing in a bookshop, I spotted a book behind the counter: *Landmarks,* by Robert Macfarlane. My eye caught on the blue and white cover that looked like a wood cut. I asked the assistant if I could look at it. When I opened the book, it fell open to a glossary of words under the title "Lights, Hazes, Mists and Fogs." I mouthed the words: *brim'skud*, from Shetland, was the smoke-like haze which rises from the breaking waves. *Maril'd,* also from Shetland, described the sparkling luminous substance seen in the sea on autumn nights, and on fish in the dark. The contents page of the book was divided into regions like "Flatlands," "Uplands," "Waterlands and "Coastlands," and each section was followed by a Glossary of place-terms for weather, landscape, and nature gathered from Norn and Old English, Anglo-Romani and Cornish, Welsh, Irish, Gaelic, and the Orcadian, Shetlandic and Doric dialects of Scots. Flicking through the introduction, I paused when Macfarlane wrote of the chapters, that "all are fascinated by the same questions

concerning the mutual relations of place, language and spirit —how we landmark, and how we are landmarked."

I clasped *Landmarks* to me. This was a dictionary of vanishing words stemming from the landscapes to which I was about to depart. I bought the book and took it with me to Scotland.

I read it on the train from London to Inverness. I read it over hot chips in the Flattie Bar in Stromness as rain lashed at the window. I read it on the ferry back to the mainland of Scotland, squinting at the bright sunlit page. *Landmarks* set new words under my tongue that I tested out over the next few weeks sitting in silent, drizzling forests watching red deer, or staring upward at unfamiliar star formations at night. I drew on these words as I scribbled descriptions of places in my journal, trying to capture the way colour and light shifted in the landscape. I took Macfarlane's lists of words to heart, determined to incorporate what I could of them into the language I used. I shared what I thought of as his urgency, his grief at their diminishing in our current lexicon. Was it presumptuous that I called it grief, the thing that drove him to write this book? I was gripped by my own urgency toward the wild, toward the solitudinous, toward what is found in the lesser known places, and I thought I understood some of his urgency. When place-words die, a specific way of seeing vanishes from the world.

If the word "blinter" is forgotten, will we still notice the icy glitter of distant stars, and the particular sense of beauty and trepidation that accompanies this sight?

To the east of Glencoe lies about fifty square miles of bog. The Rannoch Moor is a wilderness of moorland and lochans through which Macfarlane walked when he was writing *The Wild Places*. When I recognised the moor's name on the map as I drove away from Buachaille Etive Beag, something thrummed in my stomach at the knowledge that I would soon encounter this place that Macfarlane had walked through and written about.

That I could follow Macfarlane and Shepherd across Scotland thrilled me profoundly. I was mapping tracks in the wake of their writing, and it felt like an unprecedented gift that I could follow

in their footsteps—perhaps even literally, though I would never know if I did—but make my own at the same time. I had been reading avidly as I travelled, devouring books about people spending time in wild places in nature. I was enthralled by each author's experience. I was leaning into the pages, lured irresistibly, desperate to see the landscapes through their eyes, to feel what they felt in each place. To understand what it meant to each writer to be there. Macfarlane and Shepherd had come to feel like companions with whom I shared my last waking thoughts each day. Their words gave shape to another kind of map that lead me forward geographically: a kind of terrain of the psyche in which I was also discovering myself.

There were a number of areas Macfarlane writes about in *The Wild Places* to which I could travel. Some, I had little interest in visiting. I had no desire anymore for the sandy flatlands the likes of which Macfarlane sought out and some, like the heights of Ben Nevis, the seasoned mountain climber's ultimate challenge in northern Scotland, I was completely unequipped to venture to. Some places, like the Lake District in England, spoke of a different kind of wildness to that which I was drawn to: rather than the wildness occurring on a minute scale—the ecosystems that Macfarlane found to be astonishingly diverse—I wanted the rugged, mountainous, isolated places that overwhelmed me immediately.

As I followed the road that wove through the flat, empty lands beyond Glencoe's hills, heading southeast to the Rannoch Moor, I saw through a kind of double vision. I was seeking out what someone, whose writing had permeated me to the core, had seen, as well as looking at the landscape for myself. Alongside my own impressions, I was seeking the small, ordinary signs that someone else had noted, that, in their noticing, had become extraordinary to me because they were extraordinary to someone I admired.

The ecocritic Ian Marshall calls this kind of immersion "a kind of research, involving a different kind of 'foot notes' than most literary scholars are used to." This sense of putting into practice an interconnectedness, or a sense of reciprocity, between written word, lived experience, and geographic place, drew me. While I was not interested in checking the accuracy of how

Macfarlane described Rannoch Moor, I wanted to get as close as I could to the places from which Macfarlane wrote: the geographic place through which he travelled, and also the psychological place that comes about when geography seeps into the thought-scapes of the walker. To achieve this particular closeness to Macfarlane's thought-scape, I could do little more than avidly read his words.

But as far as tracing his footsteps went, and immersing myself in Macfarlane's moor, I could do this to a degree. I passed by the moor in a car, rather than walking through it, and experienced visually in a few hours what took Macfarlane a few days to walk. It was a strange, ephemeral experience to know that he had been there. To know that this flat and, at times, bleak expanse might have dismayed him at first as it did me. From the moving car, the colours of the moor blurred into a dark, coppery brown; I could not see the boggy expanses of water that Macfarlane would have crossed, or make out the individual clusters of heather, and their small bells that would change colour with the seasons.

Whose trail was I following across the moor? Whose footsteps had I followed already, without even realising? At some point, I had stopped trying to rationalise the various threads of logic, coincidence, gut feeling and impulse that propelled me from one location to the next through Scotland. It was less important, now, why it was that I had initially set out to come here. The shapeshifting woman in the water was still there in my thoughts, but it was not her seascape that gripped me now: it was the vast, mountainous presence of land places. The feeling of my toiling, sweating, walking body. The deep, at times ragged, but always constant rhythm of breath. What was imperative to me now was no longer the sea myths I had dreamed of for months before coming to Scotland, but the tracks and paths I was finding for myself; the passageways that Macfarlane traced across Britain in *The Wild Places* and *The Old Ways*, and the new ways of seeing that Shepherd showed me.

It could have been a contradiction, the feeling that I was discovering for myself ways of being and walking and seeing through the words of others. But it was one of the most personal

things I had ever known, the phenomenon of recognising, in someone else's words, like a sudden, electrifying flare, the same urgent tug of wild places, and the need to understand why in them we felt the most real.

I traced the footsteps of these people who thought like I did. Who I suspected dedicated, in their own, private ways, much of their lives to pursuing, seeking to understand, the lure of the wild. In finding them, this community of people I had never met and likely never would, I was discovering my place in it. Solnit, with her exquisite articulation of the interwoven nature of discovery of self while walking; Macfarlane, whose passions and longing came back, always, to the old places, the old ways; and Shepherd, whose craving for mountains and remarkable, philosophical contemplation of being in the body in place was only recognised half a century after her writing it. How many other women, in the 1900s and earlier, had their gazes fixed on mountains but never had the means to follow this wild call? It left me with a lingering melancholy but also a small, fierce kernel of gratitude and kinship to think on it. These women I would never know, but who had existed, and who had maybe, without knowing my name, dreamed of women like me who could do what they could not.

It was overwhelming, the thrill of being able to track these writers, these companions in thought, whose thinking affected my own so profoundly, across the landscapes in which the genesis of their ideas—those first, visceral, joy-filled, provoking sparks of experience—had come into being.

Places were always storied. And going into them can be an action that is simultaneously embodied and imagined and remembered. The landscapes into which I went were more than just the geography of the plateau, the valley, the ridge. As I wove slowly through the moor, my window down, breathing the cool, boggy air, the world seemed to shift, revealing at once the place I saw and the place I imagined Macfarlane saw. This moor that swept out around me—I could barely see it for how it had been storied before me.

LOCH

Late afternoon light stretched across the water, white and hazy, rendering the outline of Skye a milky blue as I approached the island. I was struggling to remember the words:

Speed, bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
Onward! the sailors cry;
Carry the lad that's born to be King
Over the sea to Skye.

I dredged the Skye Boat Song up from my memory with difficulty. I had learnt it when I was young, first learning to play the cello. I thought, then, that the name was the Sky Boat Song, and I would hum the tune to myself in bed at night, picturing a kayak moving slowly through the clouds.

Driving along the shore of a loch, heading down toward the bridge in Kyle of Lochalsh that spanned the stretch of water between mainland Scotland and Skye, I sang to myself, mumbling through the missing words and letting memories steal over me with the music. The tune was part of the tapestry of my childhood, but it was years before I discovered the political undertones to the song: it was Flora MacDonald with whom my thoughts dwelled when I heard the song now. The daughter of the chief of the MacDonalds of Clanranald, living on the island of Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides, she was twenty-four when she helped Prince Charles Edward Stuart—also known as Bonnie Prince Charlie—evade capture after the last failed Jacobite rising in 1746. She disguised the prince as Betty Burke, her Irish spinning maid, and along with six men to crew the small boat, fled the Outer Hebrides to Skye, where the prince escaped to the moors of Scotland. After some of the boatmen were overheard talking about the ruse, Flora was imprisoned for a period in the Tower

of London for helping the young prince escape. It is said that the prince gave her a locket containing a snippet of his hair in thanks, but they never met again.

At twenty-four years old, she was only a few years younger than I was now, and I thought about her as Skye rose up through the white afternoon light, the silhouette of the Cuillins, the island's formidable mountains, sharp against the sky. While I knew I wanted to go to Skye because it had always occupied a place in my imagination and in the Celtic myths I read as a child, my feelings were mixed as I prepared to spend a week on another island. I had fled Orkney, feeling too exposed, too isolated. In the Cairngorm mountains, in the roots, rocks, mosses, heather and patches of sunlight that tangled the forests and slopes of the Highlands, I walked for hours. Sat in stillness and let deer approach me, climbed trees in the rain, ate my way through plates of haggis and creamy potato, ravenous, sated, whittled and weathered in the sun and wind. And something in me uncoiled.

The sense of peace I had found in the mountains had not left me. Now not far off from Skye, following the loch glinting in the sun, I pulled over. Near the verge, I could see a gap in the undergrowth, almost like a path. I dug my towel out of my pack, picked my way down through the forested bank, and found myself in a tiny cove. It was right on the shoreline, completely hidden from view from the road, hemmed in by outcrops of rocks and willows. Far across its bright expanse, the other side of the loch was densely forested, with small islands rising from the water. Wisps of breeze scuffed the brilliant sapphire surface.

The stones were baking under my bare feet. Elated, I stripped off, giddy at the thrill of the air's warm fingers on my body. The loch water was bitingly cold, but not icy. I edged in, so slowly I was barely moving. Up close, the water was a deep teak, so clear my feet were pale and perfectly detailed when I looked down at the smooth pebbly floor.

I urged myself further in, hoping there were no leeches. I waded in up to my chest, squeaking at each new ripple of cold. The world was silent, bright. Around me the water stretched to the horizon to disappear into the sun's white burn. I moved slowly, watching as the golden water

blurred around me. Gritting my teeth, I dived under. Long seconds in the amber murk; visceral shock at the cold. I shot up again, gasping, and let out a quick shout of laughter. Paddling furiously in circles, I tried to acclimatise myself to the cold, my breaths coming quick and shallow as the water churned beneath me. After a few minutes, my vigorous swimming calmed; I let myself sink until only my head was above the surface. Below, my body felt weightless, barely there, dissolving in the icy loch. When I moved my arms to keep myself afloat, my outline suddenly stung with cold, every part of me tender and shocked, until I was motionless, again part of the water. I stayed like this until I could no longer feel my edges.

When the cold penetrated me and did not fade, and my head began to feel tight, I scurried to shore. I dried quickly, lying back against a smooth rock, idly moving my feet in the shallows. Swimming in a loch was something I had wanted to do since I arrived in Scotland. The joy of being stark naked in broad daylight left me languid. I let my limbs loll in the sun. It felt resplendent, having nothing between my skin and the natural world.

As I dried, a fine layer of loch silt remained on my body. It had not escaped my notice that, as the hair under my arms grew longer over the weeks, my body's scent changed. Almost disappeared. I could sweat profusely labouring up hills, but at the end of the day, I didn't smell. Under the sun, my body was white, lit with fine hair, corded with muscle. I felt feminine with hair under my arms. It wasn't something I had considered before, that I could feel feminine in a way that had nothing to do with sexual allure. Feeling feminine was starting to become synonymous with feeling strong. My calves were growing wiry, my thighs beefy. Even the language with which I was coming to think of my body was different: the words *beefy* and *chunky* had once felt rough and unappealing but there were few other words now, I thought, with which I would describe my changing body, and the responses those words elicited from me had changed. I gazed at the hairs on my legs glinting in the sun, sticking out from my skin at different angles. The sight laid me open. Like this, my legs looked very much like my mother's.

Had I ever seen what I looked like before? That there could be another language altogether with which to speak my body was electrifying.

Once, standing naked before a mirror, I bounced on the balls of my feet. As slowly as I could. I watched my chest: the flesh, shifting as I moved, revealed sternum bones. I gazed, entranced. This, finally, was what I looked like as a woman. Flesh rounded like a cupped hand, pared back into runnels of muscle lining the stomach. Hints of hip bones and a shadow of muscle down the back but mostly it was this chest that drew my attention. The synchronicity of flesh that hung and swelled, that was both worn and ripe, that revealed the bone beneath and held itself calm, with assurance. This body knew itself—not completely, not even near—but it had begun to know.

Skin touches and is touched. The canvas of my skin had been written with other people, and the small pinpricks of light that fell from their kisses changed me a little bit, each time. Was this what my woman-body felt like, too? Like I was star-speckled, like I was a nebula rising from my own skin? Opening and taking and wanting and giving. The pinpricks of light were what I remembered, long after each lover. My sacred skin in the dark.

I wondered sometimes what motherhood would look like on me. Who I would become. My bones would open out, my organs would move to make way for someone else. I would never be myself again, not like this, after I was a mother. I couldn't imagine my breasts swollen and heavy but I'd had dreams in which I had a baby. The dreams were not like other dreams. I would wake in the morning grappling with a grief I didn't understand. I hardly knew what I had lost in waking but I knew I was without. As the day moved on the feeling faded: I lost my child bit by bit as I remembered myself.

There was a mole on Mum's right hand between her index finger and thumb. I had one in the same place and it was years before I really saw it: I didn't notice it because it was part of my mother's body so it was part of mine. Sometimes I looked down at my hands and I saw hers playing the piano, making bread, pushing the lawnmower. The outlines of my hands blurred.

I was thirteen when Mum let me pierce my ears. I fainted. Felt proud of my throbbing ears for days. One night I called out to her in panic, having rolled on my ear and pulled the earring out. We looked for the earring in my bed but it remained lost, so she took an earring from her own ear and slid the slim hook into mine. I winced in anticipation, but I didn't feel it go through. I lay back down, fingering my hot ear with its cool jewel. The weight was strange. Something that belonged to someone older than me. Mum lay down beside me, and in the weak light I looked at her, touched her waves of shadowy hair on the pillow, inhaled her smell. The faint sweetness of her skin made me think of gum leaves, cumin, essential oils. With a slight shock, I saw that she shaved under her arms: I hadn't known she did that. I forgot to ask her about it in the morning. When I started to grow hair under my arms, it wasn't red like hers, and I wondered why we didn't look the same.

When I was twelve I asked Mum to buy me a razor so I could shave under my arms. The first stroke through the soap was tentative. The slight resistance of the hairs; the alarm as one snagged in the blade. The smooth, alien skin that the soap revealed made me stare. The first time I waxed my legs I couldn't stop touching my skin; surely the world had noticed I was different now?

Years later, I watched as my brother began to shave the fine golden hairs that appeared along his jaw-line, and wondered who I would be if I had let my body grow, uninterrupted.

But the interruptions, the breaks and scars, are how I map myself. How I track the places of joining, of divergence. There is a scar on the tip of my thumb like a white caterpillar. I was five years old, perhaps six. I was lying on my back, waving my legs in the air, brandishing scissors. Somehow, as I flailed, I snipped off the top of my thumb. Mum covered it with a cloth, not a Band-Aid, it was bleeding so much. When I fell asleep, tearstained and exhausted, Mum tore away the cloth. It was hardened with blood and I woke, shrieking. The scar it left is something that makes me think of home, and it is not a place but a feeling. Not a painful one, despite the blood. Home-memory-feeling: I carry my home in my body, on my skin.

The bones of my memories are dusted with blood and dirt and eucalyptus. I spent most of my life growing up in a place far from where I was born. And that is my home now. The house my

parents built. The place is imprinted with them. I think of the gums, the tall, silvery giants that stretched over the house, and I think of my father. How we used to look for possums at night. I remember stumbling as I accidentally stepped on the back of Dad's heels as I stuck close to him in the dark. I remember the moving circle of his torchlight that hovered and lurched from tree to tree. I craned my head backwards, looking for the gleam of unblinking eyes. Dad was silent, patient. I didn't look for the dot of Mars those nights, or Orion's belt. I stood beside him as he moved the beam of light from one tree to another, folds of leaves appearing and disappearing as the light found and forgot them.

But it's not really the possums that I remember. It's the warm lean of him. It's the sandals I imagine that he wore back then; their Velcro straps curling and thick with dust, the soles pressed to bear the weight and shape of his dry foot. It's the gravel-shuffle and dry twig-snap of his feet in the hot, still night. It's the way he held the torch—the heavy yellow one he kept by the front door for when he needed to go shut the dog up at night—in his gentle hands, like it was part of him. I remember his walk in the night; the way he moved like he knew he belonged there. Like he grew up knowing this.

I know his walk, because it is like mine.

There is a photograph from when I was young, not framed, curling with age. It sits propped up in the kitchen in the house where I grew up. I was four, perhaps five, standing barefoot on a wet beach, turning away from the camera and laughing, my small hands pink with cold and splayed to the wind. My hair streams up in the breeze like strands of light.

My fingers and toes are still pink-tipped like they were then, and one of my eyes is still occasionally unfocussed, and my back still slumps in a hunch when I am tired. I see where I am the same but also where I am different. My body has been fractured and vined with white scars, sanded and sunlit and embroidered with secrets, stung by ants and oiled by eucalyptus leaves.

There is little left in my skin of the child I was. But I recognise myself out of the corner of my eye. Hear myself in the timbre of my father's voice. I see myself in the shape of my hands that look so much like my mother's, but touch a world that is entirely my own.

THE ISLE OF SKYE

I am constantly astounded by the sheer, immense, wild mass of this land. Today the hills are cloud-tangled and dappled with gold-white. The light seems to seep out of the earth rather than fall from above.

I followed the coastal ring route around Skye with rainclouds heavy on the horizon. The day marked an abrupt change from the last few weeks of golden sun, bright forests and lochs. At first glance, Skye was similar to Mainland Orkney: treeless, brown-green slopes; clusters of white cottages every now and then that comprised its small towns. Both islands shared an undeniable sense of reclusiveness, but somehow, already, Skye felt more rugged. At its southern end, the island was roughly hewn and mountainous, like great mounds of earth had been shoved together. As I drove, eying the heavy skies and trying to ignore the wind picking up outside, I thought again of Robert Macfarlane, and his suggestion that wild places annihilate us. I felt small, inching my way through the folds of this landscape. But unlike in the crags of Glencoe, I did not feel dwarfed in a frightened way. I felt small, peaceful. Content with being small. In Orkney, I *wanted.* I wanted a sense of history, mysticism, blessing, clarity. I wanted to know that I was meant to be there. But here, I imagined I could feel the indifference of this place toward me, and it did not make me feel lonely or disappointed. Perhaps this was a more natural relationship between the island and me? It felt good. I was content with seeing whatever I saw, with discovering whatever it was that I came across.

Portree, one of Skye's main towns, sits halfway up its east coast. I parked in the small town square and ordered lunch in the first café I came across, glad to be out of the wind. The bowl of

oysters cooked in cream and chives left me full and sleepy, but I still wanted to explore. I had £100 sitting in my bank account that Mum had sent with a note: *This is for a special treat.*

I wanted something made of wool. Something special. I was travelling light, and the only purchases I had made were books I had shipped home, and yarn that I carried with me. In Kirkwall, on the day I had met with Tom Muir, I had bought a sweater. I spent a long time in the shop handling the garments first. I rubbed them between my palms, feeling the texture of the wool; I held them up to my cheek, smelling them, hoping that the scent of lanolin still clung. I settled on a sweater whose colours were of autumn, knitted in dense patterned rows. The sweater had a hood, and when I lifted it over my head, I imagined I could hear a whisper of sea against shores.

Now, in a shop filled with neatly folded Fair Isle sweaters, Shetland Island knits and clan tartans, I saw a lamb's wool tartan wrap hanging in the corner of the room. It was almost the length of me. I took it down. The wrap fell over me easily, the fine, handwoven wool settling in folds around my body. The crosshatch of its muted colours was uncommon in the tartans I had seen previously and, to my eyes, it held the colour of the mountains I so loved: the green and russet of aging heather, the gold of lichen, the shadowy blue of quiet places in forests.

I paid for it at the counter, and the woman folded the wrap into a paper bag.

"This will last you forever," she said, and I nodded, feeling that there was something solemn in the way she handed it to me.

I followed the coastal route around Skye for the rest of the day. I had booked a night in a caravan in a small town called Kilmuir on the north-west coast of the island. I planned to arrive in the late afternoon, but I drove through Kilmuir before I realised. I turned around. The town, if it could be called that, was comprised of a small cluster of houses set back off the road. I pulled into a driveway when I spotted caravans, and hailed the owner who was watering her garden. My caravan was squat, cosy, equipped with a small kitchenette and a couch bed on which I laid out my sleeping bag.

That night, I boiled rice, chopped fresh tomatoes and pepper through it, then took my dinner out to a seat in the garden, where I could look out towards the edge of Skye. Sheets on the clothesline behind me snapped in the breeze, and a rooster called intermittently, his cry lonely in the quiet. Batting away midges, I waved at a woman and her daughter who were staying in a nearby caravan, then turned back to the view of the ocean. I missed my mother. I missed my friends. A quiet sadness had been creeping over me during the day, and I couldn't shake it.

I returned my bowl to the caravan. Settling on the couch to read, I arose a few minutes later, restless, impatient to shake the moroseness that tugged at me. I threw on my wool wrap and headed down the driveway, turning onto the road, hoping it would lead down to the edge of the island.

The road wandered through fields filled with grasses, clover, and the occasional pony. I passed groups of white cottages, the smoke from their chimneys hanging in the air. My feet scuffing against the gravel sounded unbearably loud. In the front yard of one house, a man and two young girls gathered wood from around their yard and tossed it onto a small fire, the girls scampering around it, chattering happily. The sound of a lawnmower shuddered into life somewhere behind the house and I walked on, aching with loneliness.

Where the road petered out into rocks and grass, there was a gate set into a stone fence. I hoisted myself up onto it and perched on its highest bar. I started at a commotion in the grass behind me, almost losing my balance when a pair of rabbits shot off across the field.

Beyond the end of the road, rows of grass heads clattered in the gusts of breeze, nodding towards the ocean, where the sun was setting behind smudges of watercolour pink. A craggy outline of land was just discernible on the horizon, only shades darker than the sky; the land mass seemed to float in the pink light, emerging from the mist that hovered on the sea line. I was looking at the Outer Hebrides, I realised, the western-most islands of Scotland, beyond which lay Iceland. Midges danced in frantic tangles before me. As the breeze picked up, they blew off into the field. A chill dragged down my back. I pulled my woollen wrap tighter, trying to enfold, wanting to be held.

It had been a while since I had felt like this. It was unpredictable, when the isolation, the loneliness, would set in. A feeling of dreadful grief hovered. It had been there, waiting, dark and unwanted and frightening, on the periphery of my life since I had last seen Jacob. I didn't want to think about it, this wave poised at its crest, gathering intensity, for fear of what the acknowledgement of grief would loosen in me.

As I looked out to the Hebrides, my head full of thoughts of enchantment that even still, I yearned to stumble into, I struggled to reconcile the worlds I was travelling through. The myths and goddesses, songs, sacred stones and shapeshifting seals that had lured me here, that filled me with reverence: I had walked through the very landscapes, windswept and salty and deserted, in which they breathed, but they remained beyond my reach. Then there was the purpose I had found that I had not anticipated, this raw experience of getting to know myself, my body, falling heedlessly in love with the pinewoods and mountains, walking, resting, thinking in solitude. And then there was what I had hoped to leave behind, the tendrils of a life that had been mine on the other side of the globe, that still grasped at me, that I could barely bring myself to acknowledge; the aching loss of Jacob from my life, and the future that might have been ours. The person I might have been, loved by him and loving him. I missed my mother suddenly and piercingly. Missed familiarity. Mum went to Ireland every year, seeking out the sacred places she read about. She taught me that I would hear the stones if I listened, and I *had* listened, but still I was unsure of everything. My throat closed. Sitting there on the gate, it overwhelmed me, the distance between worlds—the one under my feet, and the ones in my head—that I walked through.

After the sun set, I dried my eyes and slid down off the gate. In the grass at my feet, clover heads were pushed into the mud, heather sprigs and grasses trampled by the small ponies that huddled in the fields. The purple in the landscape here was something I never tired of and never grew accustomed to. It astonished me every time, how tiny and perfect each bell of heather was. As I walked back to my caravan, I collected five kinds of flowers, sinking my hands into the grasses, tugging, plucking, needing to touch something that held me here, to touch something that I loved.

I plucked a long, lavender-like clover; a thistle; a mauve, round-headed clover; a sprig of common ling heather; and the darker bell heather. That night, folded in my woollen wrap, I laid out the sprigs by my pillow, thinking of talismans. If they did hold some kind of enchantment, I couldn't think of anything I'd want to carry with me more than these small purple blooms. They were something that marked me as part of this place. Something that demanded that I notice, that I see. Something that, in my taking it, changed me. That said, look: this is what you carry with you now.

*

Every night, before they sleep, she asks him where her skin is. Every time, he says: you don't need it anymore.

Then he reaches for her. Grips her between his legs. As his body starts to move, the dark water-rumble thunders in her memory. His tongue in her mouth is like a fish; his lips shape her name but she hears only a seabird scream, sees it wheel and dive beyond the breakers. Her head dents the pillow rhythmically. When his breaths come faster she imagines her flippers arcing her weight through the waves, taking her down deep, and in the deep she is safe.

That night she dreams of death, the crunch and tearing teeth of the swift shadow, her flippers torn, her coat leaching flesh and screams. She wakes, a cold sweat on the skin of this body that was not her choice.

She lies with her eyes wide open. The rush and thump of water sounds through the window. Something splashes in the shallows. She feels in the air the briny hag's shriek coming up from the south; the seasons are changing without her. Outside the cottage, the sand edges ever further up the beach, reaching for the ones the sea lost.

Reaching for the men who stole them.

Whatever skin she wears, it is her body.

It is not for the taking.

THE SHORE

I peeled an orange for my breakfast and ate it slowly. I needed to get myself together. I had been driving aimlessly for the last few days, tracing the circumference of the island. Skye had remained veiled to me.

It was early morning, and long stretches of mist hovered low on the loch I looked out over. I was about to set off for the Fairy Pools, which I had read were famous for their unusual, turquoise waters. They lay inland from the west coast, and the Cuillens lay not too far from the area. Heading in the direction of mountains, I thought, could only be a good thing.

After piling my pack into the back of my car, I tuned the radio to a local music station and pulled out of the carpark. As I rounded a bend and caught sight of a tiny archipelago of islands scattered through the loch, glinting in the early morning sun, I felt that familiar, dizzying sense of freedom, where fear waited in the wings, and being lost was a likely outcome of the adventure, but the adventure was mine and entirely unknown. Having a destination, even for the day, cheered me.

It didn't take long for the day to turn miserable. I liked the rain usually, but this rain was a persistent, soggy wash that leached the colour from the hills and lochs. After a few hours, I left the coast and headed inland, following a road that looked like every other road on this island. Around me, the hills were interrupted only by intermittent clusters of wet sheep and the changing colours of wildflowers.

The carpark at the Fairy Pool was crammed, with cars jammed and reversing, everyone's windscreen wipers beating madly. I idled the car, squinting through the rain. There was a park squeezed perilously close to the edge of the bank that dropped down toward the road, and I inched into it, then stepped outside into the drizzle, pulling on my jacket.

I had finally bought myself a proper raincoat. The one I'd brought with me from home I had discarded in Orkney, as the rain soaked immediately through its zips and seams. From the little store in Stromness that sold fishing gear, I had purchased a pink, twenty-pound raincoat that, contrary to the shopkeeper's assurances, was completely rain-permeable, but I continued to carry it around in the following weeks with a sort of dispirited determination to keep as dry as I could. Finally, in the Highlands, I had purchased a proper raincoat, and I donned it now. I didn't mind overly much being cold, but it was hard to dry wet garments while travelling.

I followed the line of tourists across the road and up onto a hill. The air was clean and cold. It was good to be outside again. I overtook walkers, catching snippets of conversations and complaints about the weather, pausing as elderly tourists helped each other across the sections of mud and creek that I leapt across.

The Fairy Pools, when I reached them, were not what I had expected. Falling in concentric circles down the hillside, not unlike a giant, crudely-hewn flow-form, they had the look of something that could be magnificent at times, but was tired now. The levels of the pools were low and the water still. I climbed down through the jagged rocks to the edge of one of the pools, and cupped my hands in the distinctive green water. The water was freezing, with a faint tang of rock to it. Behind me, people stood near the top of the pools, taking photos. A few looked at me askance. I stared baldly back at them, feeling that they were just as odd as they thought I was. Why come to a place if you don't want to climb down into it, run your hands over its roughness, dip your fingers into its wet? I would have liked to swim in this water.

After exploring a few more of the pools, I walked back to the car, feeling again a sense of dissatisfaction. A vague sense of waiting. Of wanting something, but not knowing what.

The Fairy Pools were near the tiny town of Carbost, whose significant attraction was the Talisker distillery, so I booked a night's accommodation in a small hostel there. When I reached Carbost that evening, I discovered that I would be sharing a room in the hostel with three middle-aged men who,

as one of them informed me, were on their annual hiking vacation that included visiting their favourite distilleries. I sat on my bunk as he talked, my knees drawn up under my chin, trying to quell the clenches of anxiety in my belly. He was a pleasant man. They all seemed friendly, respectful. They thought it was unusual that I was travelling around by myself, and were curious as to why I had come to Carbost.

I don't know, I wanted to tell them. I don't know what I'm doing here either.

I joked with them, reminding myself privately as I did that each man must be someone's father, workmate, favourite uncle. But I was not at ease. They bid me cheery farewells as they headed off to the pub, and I dreaded their return.

I lay in my bed that night, willing myself to fall asleep so morning would come more quickly. I fell into a light sleep, but awoke, suddenly, to the door thudding open, and a dark figure stumbling into the middle of the room. He paused, swaying. I watched him, my heart thudding painfully. He laboriously removed his shirt, then his trousers, almost losing his balance, his shadowy gut heaving. He lurched toward my bunk, above which he was sleeping. It took him several tries to climb the ladder to his bed, and I pressed myself against the wall each time he slipped back to the floor, mumbling curses. When eventually he heaved himself into his bunk, and the slats groaned above me, and his breathing changed to long snores, I lay with my eyes open, anxiety churning through me. What was the point in travelling alone if I was constantly aware, each time I looked for somewhere to sleep, that I was made vulnerable by my aloneness? Something was pressing down onto me, tightening in me. My time in the Highlands, walking through the forests and mountains, the days of sunlight and reading as I drove toward Skye, the hour I spent on a bench in Tomintoul, eating an ice cream and unable to stop smiling I felt so at peace: the memory of that person felt alien now. Insubstantial. Impossibly removed from the clenching anxiety that I fought to hold at bay now.

In my memory, the page in the book swam before me:

Symptoms of a panic disorder: trembling, tingling, light-headedness. Clamminess, chills. Urinary frequency, sweating, chest pain. Difficulty falling asleep. Fear of dying, or going mad.

The page was a checklist and I had marked with a pen every symptom that meant I wasn't going mad. Anxiety, not insanity: the realisation marked the midpoint between a before and an after. The word became something I could clutch in my palm, something to hold onto when I stopped being able to feel anything.

I could monitor panic attacks better now than I could then. The *before* was a blur interrupted only by the nights I sat wide awake, pressing myself against my bedroom wall, hugging my knees to my chest to stop the spasming. The world by daylight looked the same, but I could no longer seem to touch it. My memories became strange to me, events that had happened to someone else. Numbs months passed. Then a year. One afternoon, when I was driving, a panic attack set in; I started to hyperventilate behind the wheel, pulled off the road as I began to faint, passed from sobbing to the lethargy of shock, and then to lucidity again. Hours after, I walked along the beach, pressing my feet into the cold grit of sand, knowing that this couldn't go on.

I saw counsellors and began treatment for anxiety. The *after* was tremulous. Slow, unsteady. Nights didn't change for a while, but the fear that I was going mad did. Every night, as I tried to go to sleep, the thundering of adrenaline and the shaking and sweating didn't stop, but the knowledge that panic attacks were a thing that happened to me—but were not a part of me—was something to cling onto, something to try and understand. I knew what I needed to do to help myself, now. I knew how to deal with this feeling. I knew how to distract my body from full-blown, mindless, uncontrollable panic.

As the men's snores rent the darkness in a laboured rhythm, I lay in bed and whispered to myself.

"What's one thing you can hear? One thing you can feel? One thing you can see? Now, what are two things you can hear? Two things you can feel? Two things you can see?" The music from the pub next door was a muted thump. The blanket's edge was rough against my legs where I pulled it around me, wrapping myself tightly. I took deep breaths against the unfamiliar pillow, my eyes clenched shut.

The next day I thought about islands. There was something adrift and uncertain about an island. The land seemed less permanent than the waters surrounding it. Water overwhelms easily: land is dissolvable. To someone who is drawn to the sea, who yearns for the sound of salt water, this fear of being surrounded by ocean was difficult to reconcile.

I had slept, on and off during the night, trying to bury myself away from the sound of drunken snoring. I slipped out of the room early before the men woke up, stowed my bag in the car and left Carbost, tired but contemplative. There was something about being on an island that unnerved me. That deeply, profoundly, unsettled me. This small, lost, fearful person I had sunk into over the last half a week was puzzling.

I wondered if it was because Australia, while still an island, held expanses that took weeks to cross—a sense of limit, of boundary, was almost non-existent for me. Had I never considered before the effect of endless space? I had never realised, until I left the country of my home, that I took for granted the security that comes with space, and the vast body of earth under my feet. I had read in passing that there is a thought in Australian Gothic studies that the country's endless spaces are a site of horror. The unknown, abject, other, that we call the Gothic—the deserted house, the dark forest—is found, in Australian landscapes, in the opposite of dark, cloistered spaces. In an endless, blazing land, there is no-one to bear witness, no-one to hear you.

I could understand this fear. But it wasn't true for me. What I knew, in the endless, blazing land of my home, was safety, and wildness, and a sense of freedom. A dissolving of my body and my sense of self into countless bodies and could-be selves.

I had spent time in many coastal areas in Australia, and the shoreline always felt like it was a landmark; an anomaly in the broader context of the geography. Facing the ocean, I could feel the solid weight of country behind me. I was used to a hugeness of place, and the certainty that what I was standing on was greater and more solid than the water which crept at its edges. I had grown up with the knowledge that the landscape was and always would be more significant, more permanent than I was: I was used to being dwarfed in scale.

The impossibly huge red land made me think of my father, and of standing with him on a mountain peak in the centre of the country in which I had been born, but barely knew. The expanse of silent land stretched from horizon to horizon beneath us, and turned from deep gold to coral to dark purple as the sun slowly set. There had been a grass seed in my sock as we stood there together, and I felt it as a tiny prick when I shifted from leg to leg. The small point of pain was demanding, as impossible to ignore as the landscape around me.

I could not be in my body without knowing the place it was in. I could not be in place without being aware of my body.

I had been trying to recognise, to articulate this inextricable knowing for a very long time.

Making my way slowly around Skye, I tried to understand why this island was drawing out the hurts that I thought I could carry unseen. The past felt inexorable, overwhelming. The grief over my relationship with Jacob that I had for a long time held at an arm's length devastated me now. Here, far from home, I let myself feel it.

There was a day with him in spring, early on, after months of something tender unfurling. We had just emerged from a wrenchingly difficult conversation about how we could make it work between us. I knew from the beginning with Jacob that there were problems. We wanted different things from each other and we both knew it. We made the decision to make it work as long as we could, because to both of us, working through our difficulties together was far preferable to being apart. In the ensuing relationship, we would dip and soar, and I would lurch between dread and euphoric contentment, between wariness and hope, as a few months became six months then twelve

months with him and at all times I tried not to think beyond the moment. It would exhaust me, but I didn't know it then. That day in spring, when we acknowledged it would hard but we would give it our best attempt, sitting together beneath acacias thick with new blossom, my breath felt like spun gold in my belly. I couldn't believe this was happening, that this person was saying *I choose you* to me. That day stopped my breathing now. Clamped down on my chest and made air come out in winded groans. I drove on, not seeing, then pulled over.

On a rock on a grey beach, the air thick with the cries of seabirds and the smell of seaweed, something unravelled inside me, wild and keening. It had all changed. Everything. The reason I was here was no longer the same as it had been when I set out from Australia. What I had set out to find had changed somewhere in the mountains. It was not the myths that mingled with this landscape that occupied me now: it was not the thought of bodies that shifted between the two worlds of land and sea. It was my own changing body, rooted in this world.

The swells of a fierce feeling that was at once wild happiness and a deep calm, rolled over me, again and again. Alone, I was myself in a way I had never been before. This body, walking in this place, made me a new self. I felt different. I looked different. I never wanted to stop being this person, this raw content peaceful person I had never known before. I had not anticipated the way this place would make me come loose from myself, how it would unwind me, and how this would be exhilarating—and how the terror and beauty in all of it could come to feel like the same thing.

There is joy and grief in release. Even when the strong, new, body inside is who you want to be, there is grief in sloughing off the skin of the person you have been before. The skin, peeling open, is both an illumination and a leaving behind.

THE SKIN THAT GRIEF LEAVES BEHIND

It came when I wasn't expecting it. The words were the worst kind of shock.

"I don't think I can do this anymore," Jacob said.

There was agony in his eyes. It didn't matter.

He said, as he sobbed, "Oh god, you look so sad." He sounded like he would vomit he was crying so much. I shook and shook and shook.

No. Please. I think I said the words. Shadows darkened my bedroom walls as evening crept into the room. His words were disjointed. I love you. This hurts, I wish I didn't feel like this. Wish I could explain. Need to explore. Need you. Need more. Need to explore with other people. Don't want to hurt you. Love you. Sorry. So sorry.

When he left, there was a cut on the back of my hand. He said, "When this is healed you will be healed as well."

At least, that is how I remember it. It might have been me that made the cut. They might have been my words.

Time became strange. Hours were inhaled, exhaled. I picked at the scab, pulling a dried crystal of flesh away.

It hurt.

I cried for ten days. Hardly ate. The inside of my lip turned dark with wine stains. I slept ten hours every night, surfacing each morning with dread.

I watched the scar grow. It was rhubarb and shiny, white skin like crumpled lace at its edges.

I shrank away from seeing my friends. When I did, one assured me that I was a strong and magnificent woman and I would get through this. I left her house afterwards, taking away my bewilderment and devastation that she refused to hear.

Another friend said, “Were you two that serious anyway?” I could see in her face as we talked that she was dismissing it, dismissing us, and it was too much to bear that no-one could know how this thunderclap had annihilated me. That no-one could know the crushing weight of my grief, the unspeakable loss of his beauty.

I moved around the house feeling but not feeling.

I went to work.

I went to the post office to get passport photos taken. I was going to Scotland soon. I applied enough makeup that my face looked pale and smooth with no sign of tear tracks, but when I received the photos weeks later, the look in my eyes made me blanch.

One evening, packing my groceries into my car at the shops, I ran into an old friend. He asked me how I’d been. I began to shiver in the warm air. I picked at the pink rims of the sunglasses I wore out in case I started crying. I tried to talk like I would normally talk, like there wasn’t a cavernous gape where my chest used to be. He chatted and laughed. I watched him, comprehending what he did not; that he was not talking to the person he thought he was talking to.

We spoke for half an hour. The air cooled as the sun dropped behind the clouds. I shivered in earnest then and it was almost a relief to release, even minutely, some of the tension in my body. I wrapped my arms around my torso.

“Jacob broke up with me,” I said.

He replied immediately: “I’ve got you through this before and I’ll do it again.”

I didn’t respond.

“Chin up,” he told me, again and again. And then he grabbed my chin in his hand, forced my head up to the evening sky, and the physical contact was such a violation that I froze, and

maybe he felt my rigidity because after a few seconds he released my face but slung an arm around my shoulder.

"You'll be right, kiddo," he blustered, shaking me like he was trying to shake me out of this grief that he did not understand. Like he wanted to shake me back to the person he was familiar with. When he released me, I stood still, shivering, looking away into the night. After a moment he looked away too, said he'd better get going.

It was a long time before I looked at the photos from the night on the train tracks with Jacob. I was thinner then than I had ever been, my thighs long and gaping above the camera, my hip shadowing my stomach's hollow. My hair was short, curly in the wind, rain-speckled. Muscle indents ran down my back like a map, the structure of my bones barely concealed. The railway tracks curved into the blackness.

I had a year's worth of photographs with him and I didn't know what to do with them. In one of the photos, Jacob sits on the kerb by the road, jacaranda flowers at his feet and mottling the branches above him. He is squinting, worried, or self-conscious: it is hard to tell. There were photos in a box in my desk: he is naked, reclining on the bed, his face vulnerable and suffused with pleasure. There's a photo from the night we went to the circus. My sister took it with my Polaroid camera. My hair is a pale billow in the evening sun and the light glances off the planes of his cheek, paints a warm beam across the red brick wall behind our entwined figures.

It is the only photo I didn't pack away. The night we broke up I scrambled swollen-eyed around my room, hunting down all the Polaroids—we are playing Scrabble in the garden, patting a stray cat, drinking gin at a bar—and tossed them into a box, trying not to look at them. I bundled the letters and drawings from him into the box as well, storing it under a pile of old scarves. But for a reason I couldn't explain, I left the photo from the night at the circus tacked to my wardrobe, determinedly looking away every time I passed it.

There are other photographs that I have collected on the wardrobe. Black and white, wrinkled at the edges, my parents when they were my age. These photos give me definition. Mark moments I return to. I collect photos without understanding why. Only knowing that I need them.

Six months after we broke up, I could look at the photo of Jacob and I on the night of the circus without a sick swoop in my stomach. Standing cautiously before the photo, I realised that it didn't look like him; didn't match up to who I remembered. Looking at the photo, the memory of Jacob did not gut-punch me.

But I still didn't pack the photo away. I would stand before it, sometimes frowning in concentration, sometimes blinking back tears.

A photo is a remnant and it asks three questions.

What relics do you bury?

What relics do you keep?

Whom is it, really, that you grieve?

When I was nine I came home from school one day to find a small puppy cowering under the steps of the house. Mum and Dad watched on as my siblings Izzy, Elliot and I squealed with delight and marvelled over this new addition to the family. Over the next few weeks we shrieked when Jacky nipped at us with his needle-sharp teeth, and we fought over who got to lie in the sun with him and rub his fat puppy belly. As years passed, Jacky was always there with a stick clamped between his jaws when we raced our bikes, and when one of us was sick, he would creep into the bedroom with us, and Mum and Dad would make an exception, and he would hop up beside us and spend the night curled into our bodies, huffing in our ears and spreading out across the bed, turning to lick our faces occasionally, his dark eyes searching ours.

Long after we all grew up and moved out, Dad made a bed for Jacky in the kitchen. Overnight, it seemed, Jacky turned mostly grey. He grew incontinent. When I visited, I carried him up and down stairs and his legs stuck out to the side like twigs you could snap with one hand.

Then Izzy phoned me: “You need to come home now.” I sped up the freeway, my eyes blurred, my heart beating so quickly I felt light-headed. Pulling up in the driveway, the gravel crunched under my tyres and my feet made quick sounds down the railway sleeper steps to the front door. The familiar sounds of my home stood out in sharp relief as I tried not to think about what was coming to an end inside it.

Jacky was heavier in death than I expected him to be. In those last moments that felt like they could never be long enough, I found that I could not stop my hands from running over his body. I fingered the soft flap of skin between his leg and his chest. I used to play with this piece of skin when I was young. No hair grew there; it was like a small secret his body guarded and I found it and because it was gentle and precious I guarded it too. I stroked it then, gently, trying to touch what was familiar, trying to hold on.

Izzy kept the fire stoked. Jacky’s face was sinking into his skull. I ran my fingers over its ridges. His eyes were sunken in their cavities and almost unresponsive. Everywhere, he was disappearing into himself. The rapid atrophy was shocking at first; I pushed water into his slack mouth, fearing that he was dehydrated. His body juddered with every heartbeat. I could barely bring myself to rest my hand on his chest. It was almost too much, acknowledging this frantic clinging to life.

The vet was brusque but not uncaring. He brought with him a student who was about my age; she looked at me a few times with eyes wide and sympathetic. She held Jacky’s leg straight as the needle sank into his skin. When he began to spasm, as the vet had warned us he would, I couldn’t hold back my sobs and cradled Jacky’s head in my lap, smoothing his forehead and warm, silky ears under my hands. Distantly, I heard Izzy speaking with the vet as he gathered up his things, her voice low and measured. Briefly, I thought I felt her hand on my shoulder. The front door closed and I lowered my face to Jacky’s body, warm and heavy and still.

When Izzy held the back door open for me, for a moment I thought I couldn't carry him: he was leaden in my arms, sagging, utterly unfamiliar. Long after, that moment: grief wild within; me, poised to collapse under the weight of it. The disbelief of it, the unbearable loss.

After we buried him, Izzy threw his soiled blankets in the garbage bin, boiled the kettle, brewed up some herbal tea. She brought it to me where I sat curled on the couch, exhausted, my eyes swollen. The faint smell of Jacky's urine still hung in the air. Izzy found a tub of Nutella somewhere and two spoons and I dipped my spoon in, again and again, sucking at the sweetness. My arms ached. But Izzy's spoon clinked against mine and there was something in her face I hadn't seen for years, and I never wanted her to stop looking at me like that, like she was the older sister, like she would look after me.

When we left, when we drove up the gravel hill away from him, it started to rain and it felt like a betrayal to leave him in the cold, under the dirt and crushed flowers. We left more flowers on the mound above that the wind would probably sweep away. I found myself searching for yellow flowers when we picked them for him: golden banksia blooms, spiny wattles, anything that would hold the light. It's the last thing you can do for someone who dies: it's what we've been doing for thousands of years. Warding and blessing and sending small things from our lives with the one who is no longer alive, hoping our relics will be enough to keep them warm, keep them safe. Perhaps we hope they will keep this small piece of us with them.

We hope that whatever we do will help assuage our grief, because, after all, we do not grieve that they have left life. We grieve that they have left us.

Weeks after Jacob and I broke up, my head nodded against the greasy glass window of the bus. It was a long trip to Melbourne, eleven hours, and I twisted my legs sideways to try and stretch them out, wondering who fit in these seats. I turned the volume on my iPod up. I wanted something orchestral, loud enough that I didn't have to think.

Jacob and I had planned to go on this trip to Melbourne together and then he broke up with me and I didn't want to go to Melbourne anymore. The city that was almost sacred to me, that had become a home when I needed it, that had stripped and nurtured and shaped me—I couldn't work out how to go back now that I felt not-me. Decimated, undone. When a place makes you, and then you lose that shape of you: how do you go back? The memory of the person I was then terrified me. If I couldn't be that person again, who would I be when I was there?

Until then, I had not understood what happens when you lose someone. You don't, really, because you are left with the knowing of them. And I didn't know what to do with this knowledge, these deep body-memories. These small parts of Jacob that no-one else had ever known, and might not ever know, at least not in the same way as I did.

I didn't want the things that I was left with. I wanted the shape of my life back, before it was coloured and indented by his shape, before I was left winded by a waft of his pine-scented cologne as a stranger passed me. I stared out the window, unseeing. I was exhausted by the way that something inside me collapsed at the briefest flash of him. Grief works in a strange way. Sometimes the griefs are sudden. Sudden holes that the world blasts through. No-one talks about the first time you masturbate after someone breaks up with you. There were fat hot tears on my cheeks as I lay there, reviling myself. Jacob had marked every place on me: I never wanted to touch, to be touched again.

The small griefs were star-bursts of wet. They surprised me every time. There, with my eyes closed against the bus window, the flare of his face, his glasses askew, alight with happiness as he leapt into bed beside me. The tangle of limbs. Safe under. Warm in. The memory of his face gut-punched me. Outside the window, the wheat fields raced by.

I had arranged to stay with Meiki and Naomi, my old housemates from when I lived in Melbourne. I couldn't stop thinking about seeing my old house, walking down the hallway that was faded and dim and dusty, teeming with memory.

Meiki texted me: *meet me at the boathouse by the yarra. cant wait to see your face xx.*

When I lived there, we would ride down to the Yarra River in the evening and walk as the light turned gold then dark blue and the smell of the river turned everything eucalypt. When Meiki appeared, a smile stretching almost off her face, her long strides eating up the distance between us, and folded me in her arms, I was engulfed by her. By the memory of her bright, knee-high socks, of the eggs she fried in coconut oil, of guitars and piano music in the evening. I couldn't tell if I loved her because of who she was or because of who I was when I was around her.

We dipped through shadow and light, picking our way in single file along the path that wound along the riverbank through the white gums. My skin cooled when the track sloped downhill and, without speaking, we left the path and climbed out along the lower branches of a gum stretching across the river.

"What's been happening in your life?" Meiki asked.

And there, with the eucalypts whispering, the water's lap and rustle and the sky fading above us, there I could put into words how I had been torn. The words felt like a glassy shatter in my mouth but I found that I could speak about Jacob. I could speak about what was still there, beating painfully for him: the worry that he had isolated himself, and the terrible beauty in the wrenching apart, when two people break each other's hearts and continue to love each other helplessly. The river murmured beneath us as I cried over the peculiar, wordless thing that is love in spite of grief.

When Meiki and I walked in the front door a few hours later, the night was spitting with rain and my old home still felt like home. I walked down the hallway, and when I paused at the door to the lounge my hand went straight to the light switch by the piano that I used to play. I used to sit there in the dark in Nana's nightie. It was a bit too short for me; I'd tuck one foot under the other to try and keep warm. I would close my eyes when I played because even though it was almost completely dark I didn't want to see my fingers on the keys, I didn't want to be reminded that I was someone sitting at the piano in her nightgown, pressing pedals and keys in remembered sequences. I

wanted to be the music itself and in the darkness in this house it was easy to be that. To be something complete.

When my hand found the switch, light flared, and it rushed over me, the life I once had there. Meiki, Naomi and I made tea and sat at the table talking, all together, like we used to, our hot mugs sticking to the kitchen table's terrible varnish, with the pot plants under the window and the lid of the kitchen bin that still wouldn't close properly, that I remembered to poke with my foot so the lid un-stuck. The heater was blasting and Frankie the grey cat wandered in and out of the kitchen, finding laps to knead, leaving behind a cloud of hair every time. I felt my throat thicken and my eyes well and it surprised me, how the ache was almost sweet. Meiki and Naomi reached toward to and held me and I felt in their embrace that I couldn't leave that place; couldn't go back, or was it forward?

As the rain sheeted down outside and trams creaked past with the particular whistle I loved, I sat there, thinking about what happens when you leave something behind. Going back to my old life in Melbourne as a visitor, a traveller, I no longer existed there in the way that I used to. If I were to walk again along the Yarra, along Smith Street and Brunswick Street, following those routes I haunted and loved when I lived there, the bodies I used to be would shimmer around me. I would almost feel them. Almost be them. Tracing my routes, I would be a ghost trailing fingers through the city, taking memories but not leaving a trace, leaving nothing changed but myself.

My life in Melbourne was now a different life.

Maybe, in the same way, Jacob might come to belong to a different life. One that was left behind. One, when I thought of it, when I thought of him, that would shimmer around me momentarily but remain a ghost I could never go back to.

When Jacob asked to see me before I went to Scotland, part of me knew it was a bad idea, but I also knew I'd see him anyway. We had stayed in close contact after we broke up, talking and sometimes crying on the phone at first daily, then weekly. We could be friends, we thought. We loved each

other enough to make this work as friends. Surely half a year was enough time for this to work? I was doing well. I was letting him go. I had mostly let him go. That's what I told myself.

The morning was a drizzly one. I sat in the car for a moment, peering through the rain, trying to see if he was already waiting in the Japanese gardens where we had agreed to meet. I closed the car door behind me. He walked toward me holding out an umbrella. The space between us took forever to cross. Without thinking, he was in my arms, or I was in his, and we stayed like that, clutched together in the rain.

Without thinking, our hands reached for each other. It felt right, walking like this. It was easy to talk as we pointed out to each other the orange blurs of goldfish moving slowly between the lily pads. The rain increased. It was easy to sit under the wooden shelter, hemmed in by thickets of bamboo, and lean on each other, heads nestled into necks. It was easy, how we fit together.

We ate lunch and walked through the city. The rain cleared up. In the grass by the river I lay flat on my back and looked up at the steely sky. Jacob lay beside me, and somehow our bodies turned, and his knees fit behind my knees, and I closed my eyes. He had rarely held me like this when we were together, like I was the small, delicate one, like I was the one who was protected.

Something began to well up inside, leaden, inevitable. I pushed myself upright. He sat up too, wrapped his arms around me. I leaned back into the circle of him, and asked:

"Is there—can you just tell me—do you think, is there any chance of us getting back together?"

He didn't say anything. I forced myself to continue, feeling the slow leak of tears rising.

"I can't move on. I just can't. Because I'm holding onto a tiny bit of hope and you need to tell me if I shouldn't. I just need to hear you say it, if there's . . . no hope."

It began to rain again, very lightly. I couldn't look at him.

"*Please*, Jacob. Just say it."

With a sound like a groan or a sob, he pressed himself tightly around me, held me painfully close, and said, "I don't know. I just don't know."

And it was worse than not asking now.

I had dreaded him saying no, and I had longed for him to say no.

Weeks after, the deep rage that he would not even give me the wound, that I might try and heal it.

When the cold of evening set in and streetlamps lit the pavement in pools of light, we stood in an embrace, knowing this for the goodbye it was. It was me, in the end, who let my arms fall first. Jacob went to hand me my gloves that were in his pack. He held them out to me, then drew one of his hands back.

"Can I keep one?" he asked, looking at me, his face wide open and vulnerable. "I just want to . . . keep part of you."

More tears came then, that only at the end did he tell me this. That he asked for me still, when I had given him everything I could.

I let him keep the glove. For my sake or his, I couldn't tell. I let him keep it for a while.

I didn't recognise then the full weight of what was in my decision to take the glove back. A refusal, faint and grief-scrambled as it was, to part with something of myself. A certainty, deep inside, that I could not, would not, hand him this possession, for this thread binding us would unspool into my future, and wrap and snare me as I tried to move forward.

But I recognised it now.

Sitting on a rock on a grey beach, with the cries of seabirds and the smell of seaweed thick in the air, I recognised in me the tidal rush of self that had even then thundered in the deep. Even then it knew the seabed, knew the way forward.

The rock on which I sat was near the edge of the water. The sea was clouded and sandy before me but beyond, waves raced in the wind, flinging white and steely over each other with abandon.

There is grief and joy in release.

I cried for what felt like hours.

WOMEN OF THE ISLANDS

That afternoon, calm, wrung out, I was driving aimlessly along the northern coast of Skye when I passed a sign that announced: "Island at the Edge—Hebridean Isles Trading Company *(Eilean Oir).*" There was a ball of yarn on the sign.

I felt a sudden leap of excitement. Throughout my travels, I had been gathering yarn to knit. I was halfway through the sock made from the dappled blue yarn I had bought in Orkney. In a roadside café that was part bookshop, whose cakes and array of wares were handmade by the owners, I had eaten a pumpkin scone and eyed a basket of creamy, hand-spun wool on the counter. Learning that its spinner was a local woman, I purchased a ball, and tucked it into my pack. I was gathering with me things I could make something with, although I didn't know, yet, what they would be.

But I liked having them with me. I liked carrying them on my back. I liked carrying them, because with them I carried millennia of women who made things, who went places, who didn't know where they were going. The women who made themselves: I could be one of them too. I used to tell myself that my mother's friends were a coven of witches. *My women's circle,* my mother called them. They sang together. I didn't mind that part; the songs wrapped themselves into my memories and even then thrummed with some kind of women's power, though I was a long way from thinking about it in those words then. It embarrassed me, as I grew up, that my mother and her friends talked about homebirth and rituals and gifted each other pictures of hand-drawn women with long hair, cradling the moon in their arms. After I had my first period, Mum took me to a park, and we ate cheese studded with apricots, caramel biscuits, and chocolate and grapes that popped between my teeth. I ate with contentment, scuffing my bare toes in the dirt, basking in this unexpected treat. But then Mum began to talk, telling me things mothers tell daughters when their

bodies start to change, and I sat in dismay, seeing no way to escape this conversation I had been dreading. I scratched at the hole I'd made with my toe, again and again, as she spoke. I did not want to hear this. I did not want to be like my mother. I did not want to belong to this tribe of women, and women's bodies.

But I wanted to belong now.

I turned down the driveway and followed the sign down a short, steep hill overlooking a grey loch, and pulled up next to a small wooden building. When I opened the car door, an enormous dog thrust its head into my lap, startling me. I patted it and looked around, the dog gazing up at me, panting. I wondered if I was in the right place. This looked like someone's home.

Boots sounded on gravel and a voice said, "Hi there."

I looked up. A man I guessed to be in his early forties strode toward me. He wore green gumboots, a fraying sweater that looked hand-knit, and a squashed cap on his head.

"Hello there, I'm Trevor," he said, extending his hand toward me. I closed the car door and stepped forward to shake his hand. His grip was firm, his hand calloused.

"Hi! Is this—uhhh—I'm looking for the yarn shop?" I was taller than him, and I smiled, looking down at him. His face was crinkled and his eyes looked like dark berries.

"Yes yes, you've found us!" Trevor said. "Yasmin's not here at the moment, she'll be home soon. It's her shop. Well, it belongs to both of us, really, but she's the one who does most of the work!"

He laughed, and gestured me to follow him into the shop.

While we waited for Yasmin, Trevor showed me around, handing me skein upon skein of dark, coarse, but finely spun yarn that came from their sheep. He showed me the tartan he and Yasmin made, and the bundles of soft sheepskin and thick knitted gloves and hats. The shop smelled like lanolin, wool, and freshly cut wood. I looked around, touching everything within my reach, trying to hide my delight.

There were a number of knitted sweaters, like the one Trevor wore, hanging on the walls, cabled with intricate patterns on their fronts.

"Does Yasmin sell these?" I asked Trevor, gesturing toward one that looked about my size.

"Yes, yes, she makes the garnseys. Takes her months! She doesn't use patterns, you know, just makes them. Do you want to know what that one says?"

And Trevor explained to me the grim, beautiful history of the garnseys, the fishermen's sweaters that told their life stories. The wives and sisters of fishermen knitted the garnseys, designing for each sweater patterns that represented places of births, marriage, and other significant events. The fishermen wore their family story so if they should drown at sea, their body could be identified. Rendered unrecognisable by the water, or washed up on an unfamiliar shore, a deliberate error in the pattern of his garnsey would identify the fisherman, marking him as a member of a particular family, but telling him apart from his father, his brothers. It was common, Trevor said, for a fisherman to wear a gold earring in his left ear to pay for his funeral if he washed up on a shore far from home.

What must it have felt like for these women, knitting a garment for protection, preparing for death? So many stories from the sea held terrible sacrifices. Sea hags who demanded human voices in payment for their magic. Women who knitted with needles made from finger bones. Girls whose feet were cut with invisible blades, who ended up as sea foam. Inexorable and beautiful, the tidal nature of the ocean seemed remorseless when I thought of the women who stood on empty beaches, looking out to sea for the boat they would spend the rest of their lives searching for.

I was shaken from my thoughts when the gravel crunched outside and the door flung open. Yasmin strode in, bringing with her the tang of briny air and what seemed to me a sudden rush of warmth. She was tall, with a mane of white-blond hair piled over one shoulder in a flyaway plait. She stamped mud from her boots, dropped her jacket on a chair and turned to me with a smile like I was an old friend, and I fell in love with her on the spot.

I laughed often that afternoon, drinking tea with Yasmin. Trevor disappeared to work on his boat so I passed the next few hours in the shop, where Yasmin told me she held knitting classes.

"We've got one tomorrow, too. You'll come, won't you? You'll love it. It's really just an excuse to drink tea and eat cake and laugh! Come round early, actually, and we'll get you set up. What would you like to learn? How about I teach you Fair Isle?" she asked, digging through a pile of wool and handing me patterns and needles.

I nodded vigorously as she spoke. I had always wanted to learn Fair Isle knitting, and I couldn't believe my luck now in finding this beautiful wooden shop filled with wool and spinning wheels and so many things I loved. Knowledge seemed to hang in the air here, just waiting for me. But mostly the magic of this place was Yasmin, this tall, kind, sharp-witted woman with calloused hands, her face finely etched with age and sun and hard work, who felt, instantly and irrevocably, like an old friend, like a mother.

Since I can remember, my mother has had a circle of women around her. Women who held me when I was born, and when I grew a little older, remembered the weight of me. They held my mother when she bore me, held her up by the arms as her body drooped and heaved, white and groaning and damp with sweat, as she thought me out and pushed me into the world.

"I can't remember what time you were born," Mum told me. "It was either two in the morning, or two in the afternoon. I think it was the afternoon."

I said to her, "How could you have forgotten that, Mum?"

But maybe it's me who has forgotten, because it seems strange that someone would forget when they gave birth. What I remember is the women, singing. My mother sang to me for years:

Who were the witches, where did they come from?

Maybe your great-great-grandmother was one.

Witches were wise, wise, women they say.

There's a little witch in every woman today.

For a long time, I thought there was a little witch girl inside me, small enough to fit in my stomach. I used to worry about her pointed hat. Would it crumple, in there? Would it poke my insides?

The women taught me things. One showed me how to hold onto the sleeve of my shirt when I pulled on a jumper so the sleeve didn't roll up and bunch around my elbow. Another showed me how to press the top of a milk carton into a beak so the milk would pour out smoothly. My mother taught me how to place a pad in my underwear, and told me to always buy the ones with wings. Sometimes when I see people buying pads with no wings I feel sorry for them that their mother mustn't have told them which ones to get.

Sometimes I imagine my birth. I imagine the mothers making a circle, holding my mother in the middle of them, holding me. There is something that happens when women come together and I was only being born so I couldn't know then, but I do now: something happens when women know they are women. Something of my mother and her circle came into my skin when I came out of her, and it has clung my entire life. Sometimes I can't tell how much of my mother I am, and how much of me. Between our bodies, telling woman apart from mother is hard.

The next day at *Eilean Oir* I met the group of women who gathered there every fortnight. They came to learn from Yasmin, and to talk. By the time everyone was settled in a circle, with yarn and half-knitted projects nestled at feet, and Yasmin had returned from the house with the first of the magnificent cakes she had baked the night before, and someone poured cups of tea and we balanced them on whatever surface was available, there were seven of us settled in the shop. There wasn't much space for manoeuvring.

In the way that often happens when women gather, that day I heard stories of ordinary things, and stories that were not ordinary, either. One woman spoke with a slur and told me that because of her brain cancer she had difficulty holding her knitting needles. The woman who sat

next to me had a new haircut which had been a treat to herself after the car crash that left her in hospital for gruelling months of recovery.

"Honey, you're pretty quiet over there," Yasmin said, looking at me enquiringly.

"Oh, I'm fine. It's hard enough concentrating on this, let alone keeping up with conversation!" I laughed. It was difficult knitting with two balls of wool in the style that Yasmin had just taught me; it required the left as well as right hand to be dextrous, which I was unused to. The other women laughed, and it was an understanding laugh, one of easy kinship even though we had just met. I ate cake until my stomach groaned. The enormous dog that had greeted me when I first arrived lay by my feet the whole afternoon, dozing in the warmth, snuffling at cake crumbs on the floor.

When I was living in Melbourne, for the first time in my life I was living near my maternal grandparents. The first time I drove down to Korumburra to visit Nana and Poppa, there were knitting needles and wool on the back seat of my car. I was knitting arm-warmers for Nana. Years ago, she lost a finger when she reached under the lawnmower to pull out some bark stuck in the blade. She put the severed finger in a jar and drove herself to hospital where they sewed it back on. Her finger has an extra knuckle now, and points strangely to the side. She made jumpers and socks and jelly and cold meat sandwiches when we were little; sewed quilts and embroidered bears for us. She measures out wine for Poppa now, a carton for every day of the week, and labels each one in her looping handwriting. The week's cartons are stacked neatly in the garage, a short walk away from the house. I doubt Poppa remembers how to unlock the garage door anymore. He can hardly walk from the toilet to the lounge without forgetting where he is.

I shut down my GPS as I rounded the hill and pulled into Korumburra. I hadn't been there for so long and wanted to find my way from memory.

Before I turned down the lane that led to the carport, I drove by the front of the property, looking up the tiered gardens to the front of the house. The gardens were less colourful than I

remembered. They seemed quiet. My siblings and I used to race up and down the tiers, sprint around the lavender beds, bat the cricket ball high but not so high that it went over the fence into the neighbour's yard. This stretch of road in front of the house was where my aunt once rode her new bike, flying down the hill, grinning proudly at her family watching from up at the house. She was smiling for them with such concentration that she didn't see the car parked by the kerb, and crashed into it head-on, ruining her bike and her front teeth. In the photos, she and Mum were two small red-haired girls, their teeth large and straight, hair pulled back neatly in ribbons. Their freckles were dark in the old black and white print. My siblings and I have pale hair, light blue eyes, freckles almost too faint to see.

Nana didn't hear my car pull up. I knocked on the screen door and waited. Her footsteps were heavy across the kitchen, then the door opened: she looked at me for a moment, her face ghostly in the doorway's dimness. Then she cackled with disbelief, her head tipping back with her laughter. I wrapped her in a tight hug, closing my eyes at the softness of her cool skin, the sweet sting of her perfume. As always, her hair was set perfectly in curls. She strode back into the kitchen as I put my bags down.

"Are ya hungry? Here, sit down, I'll make you a sandwich." She was already at the cupboards, bending down at the fridge for mayonnaise. I sat at the kitchen bench.

"What are you doing down here then? How's Melbourne?" A plate of food banged down in front of me. "Do you want a drink? Here, we've got cordial—or d'ya want a proper drink?" She started laughing again, her chin tucking down into its folds.

I shook my head at her, laughing too. I ate the sandwich, picking out the ham rind, my eyes watering at the mustard pickles. As we talked, I could hear my voice changing. Jokes came quickly. Swearing did too, and it made Nana laugh, which delighted me. It was easy to sink back into the place where I saw my mother out of the corner of my eye in every doorway, smelled fragments of my childhood in the brown hallway carpet.

After I washed my plate—"Leave that, I'll do it later," Nana said, but I ignored her—she showed me to the spare room. It used to be their bedroom, but Poppa slept up the hall now, and Nana slept in the single bed in what was once her sewing room. The dresser was still piled high with dress patterns and plush boxes of pincushions, buttons, bunches of knitting needles, bottles of perfume, small glass jewellery boxes with rings, brooches, delicate silver chains. A bookcase by the bed was stacked with spare blankets and Mills and Boon.

Nana laid out a nightie for me, a towel, a flannel face washer. I wandered down the passage to see Poppa. He spent his time now in the lounge room watching television, his face turning occasionally to the hills outside. Sometimes he would watch out the window for hours, his wineglass by his side, until Nana made an impatient comment as she passed and he would turn back to the room, mumbling something unkind at her back. He'd turn the TV on again, settle back into his chair. Nana confided to me that she turns her hearing-aids off so she doesn't have to hear his insults.

That night we had lentil soup for dinner. "It's a real nice recipe," Nana said. "Your mother gave it to me, actually."

I made her sit back down and brought the bowls to the table, buttered some bread. Nana narrowed her eyes as I passed her, and grabbed at the shorts I was wearing. "Here, what ya got those silly things on for? You didn't buy them looking like that, did you?"

She snatched up a pair of scissors from a pile of newspapers and tried to snip at the bottom of my shorts that were artfully torn, loose threads dangling off the hem. I fended her off, protesting that they were meant to look like that.

"You're just like your mother, you are! You shoulda heard her, carrying on like a pork chop after I told her those boots she wears look silly. I don't know why you lot wear some of the things you wear."

She shook her head as she finished speaking, raising the spoon to her lips and blowing on the soup to cool it. I grinned at her.

"The soup's delicious, Nana," I said, and she nodded happily.

As we ate, Nana told me that she bought a ukulele because she had always wanted to play one, but it was tricky to learn because she's left-handed. She wanted to climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge but her knees couldn't cope with the training she was doing. She showed me pictures of the morning she went on a hot air balloon ride over the Yarra Valley. I poured us both another small serve of soup and when we'd finished, we leaned back in our chairs, both loosening the top of our pants and laughing at each other.

For the first time I could remember, she let me clean up and do the dishes. She let me talk, mostly uninterrupted. Every time she squawked with laughter I glowed. The woman before me was someone I did not know well. It felt strange to be taller than her, to know things she didn't know. She asked my opinion on something and I felt, suddenly, that I was my mother, that this was my mother before me, that I was her mother. I was part of this woman, my bone her bone, my skin warm from her warmth.

In the following days, I weeded the garden for Nana, tearing my way through swathes of neglect, clearing space for the words I couldn't say to her. As I dug and pulled and the earth began to breathe again, it felt like I was making my hands my love. Grit built up under my nails, smudges of blood disappeared into the soil. I tried to smooth the earth as she has paved my way for me.

After the other women had left *Eilean Oir,* Yasmin took me down to the shore. The evening light was deepening, cold and inky, and a breeze was picking up. We walked arm in arm along the waterline. I clung to her warmth, trying not to shiver. Yasmin measured out in her giant strides the outlines of the rooms of the house that she and Trevor were planning to build, telling me, as she paced, about the fire that had razed their old home on the island where they used to live. With their livelihoods destroyed, they left, carrying nothing with them but Trevor's half-burnt jacket, and moved to Skye to start anew.

I was silent as she spoke. She turned to face me once she'd finished her story, and there was nothing in her face that sought sympathy.

"This is a special place," she said, looking directly at me. "We need to find you a stone so you have something to hold when you need to remember. You can take the stone with you. You can look after it for a while, but you'll need to bring it back. I think you'll be coming back here. I'm quite sure of it, but don't ask me how I know."

I nodded, blinking back sudden tears at her words. Together, we searched the shoreline. I fumbled at the edge of the water, sifting through washes of weed, my hands stinging in the cold. Yasmin called me over to her, holding out a small chunk of dark red stone. She offered it to me, nodding, her hair blowing toward me in the breeze. The stone was roughly the shape of a heart.

"Yasmin . . ." I began. It was hard to speak. Twenty-four hours ago, I hadn't known this woman, but now, as she moved forward and wrapped her arms around me, I leaned into her shoulder and didn't want her to let me go. We stood for a long time by the darkening shore as the wind whistled around us. I felt like I could fall asleep in her arms.

One time, before she set off on one of her trips to Ireland, I went with Mum to the local timber yard to stock up on wood for the winter. The days were getting shorter and my breath came in smoky puffs in the cold. I climbed up the wood pile and tossed logs down over my shoulder to Mum, who heaved them into the car. When the boot was neatly stacked, we headed off, and it took me a few minutes to realise she wasn't driving the usual way home. I looked over at her.

"Where are we going, Mum?"

"I thought we could have a treat," she replied, smiling at me.

We found a park by a shopping centre, found a coffee shop. Mum accidentally ordered the extra-large coffee. It was almost as big as her face. Laughing, she could hardly drink it, and looked around a few times with embarrassment. Her delight and incredulity at the coffee touched me, and out of nowhere, I felt a hot swell of love for her that was almost painful. As her head turned to

profile, it struck me suddenly how much she looked like my grandmother. It was there in her high cheekbones, and the way her eyelids disappeared into creases at the corner. I didn't often see the similarity between them but I did then, and it was arresting.

I am so like my mother it scares me. It's scared me since I was old enough to know it. I hold her away from me but when everything collapses it's her lap I fall into, it's with her that I let myself cry the wrenching, ugly tears that leave me with a headache. It's she who tucks me into bed when I have cried myself to exhaustion.

My mother didn't often cry around me but she did when we had the worst fight I could remember. I was angry at her because I was afraid of her dying. When I am angry at my mother she becomes a bird. Her head tilts infinitesimally to the side, her eyes blink quickly in fear, just once. She is frightened of angering me. She knows I get frustrated when she forgets things, and when I see that she fears my response, my frustration flares.

But even in that moment, when I snapped at her for forgetting something trivial, and something went up between us, and I saw her pull away from me, away from the hurt I caused her, even then I knew that my anger was fear and I could feel something unravel in front of her.

"I'm scared you won't be all right if I'm not here," she told me, and the thing streaming down her face is what no daughter should ever see, is what no daughter should ever force from her mother. I fear losing her more than anything. It seizes me each time she forgets one of my friends' names, each time she repeats something she has already told me. When she starts up a conversation with no context, I could guess what she's talking about, but I interrupt her, force her to start from the beginning. I watch from afar as her father declines, borne away by the quicksand of dementia. I cannot bring myself to tell my mother that I fear, constantly, with exhausting panic, that she will slide away from me in this way too. The fear thunders inside, bursting out as anger, because I'm too afraid of what it means to beg her to stay with me, always.

Over her coffee, Mum was watching me watch her with a look on her face I hadn't seen in a long time. Her gaze made something inside me feel warm and weightless. Did my face mirror hers?

People tell me I look more like my father but I think on the inside I am the same as my mother. Sometimes she compares herself to me in conversation, saying, “I wish I had been like you are when I was your age. Brave and wise like you.”

It’s because I have you as a mother, I want to tell her. I want to say, it’s because of you.

With Yasmin’s arms around me, and my eyes closed, my thoughts drifted. Before I had come to Scotland I had talked about the impending trip with a woman who read tarot cards. I wasn’t sure I believed in psychics, but the kind of guidance she offered me felt too close to a sense of the sacred to put into words. Even for myself. I wasn’t a sceptic, but I didn’t wholly believe in the world the woman represented. Not quite. I hovered somewhere between hers and mine, yearning to trust in the unseen.

When we spoke, she told me that there were people in Scotland waiting to meet me. That they were older than me. Wise. There was a small circle of them, she said. I had almost forgotten her words. But they came back to me now, my eyes still closed, the press of Yasmin’s arms holding me steady. Both Yasmin and Trevor could have stepped right out of an old myth. The Tuatha Dé Danann, an ancient mythological race, and the Fir Bolg, with whom the Tuatha Dé fought, came from Ireland. The Tuatha Dé were thought to be tall and fair, and very different to the small, swarthy people of Ireland at the time. I thought of Trevor, with his weathered skin, his deep, twinkling eyes, and patched tweed jacket, and smiled into Yasmin’s shoulder. While these were figures from Irish rather than Scottish myth, it didn’t seem to matter. Bodies from myths seemed to wander between stories, I had come to think. And stories leaked into life.

As we walked back up the hill to my car, the lights of the caravan they lived in twinkling against the dark and the sound of Trevor’s off-key whistling just audible, I held onto Yasmin’s arm, clutching the bag she had gifted me with my other hand. It was filled with wool I had bought from here, that she had grown and spun. I didn’t know what I would make with it yet, but it would need to be special.

When I drove away, Yasmin stood in the driveway, the great woolly dog standing beside her. Her hair glowed faintly in the dark, and then I rounded a corner, and she was gone. I pulled onto the main road, a mix of tenderness, wonder, and sadness welling up inside me. When I rubbed my fingers together, I could feel the slick of lanolin that had sunk into my skin.

As night fell, I turned off the road and drove down a winding, bumpy track, coming to a halt where the road turned into a track. I looked out across a small mouth to the ocean. The sun had almost set now, and it lit the horizon briefly to a glowing white band. Clouds hung heavy and close, with clusters of mist moving quickly between small islands in the water. I'd never seen the sky move like this before, like it was whisking the last of the light from the land. It was beautiful and eerie, and it suited my mood.

I slept in my car that night by the side of the road. I ate handfuls of dry cereal and a tomato for dinner, finishing it off with the last of the oatcakes I had come to carry with me everywhere. Leaning the passenger seat back, I wriggled into my sleeping bag and tucked my woollen wrap over the top of me. My feet were very warm. From out of nowhere, I remembered when I had last housesat for my mother when she went to Ireland. I had lit the potbelly stove with the wood we had collected together, but it was a chilly night. I had gone looking for socks in Mum's drawers. Instead, by her bed, I found the slippers that my grandmother made her. When I pulled them on, my feet slid perfectly into the space my mother's feet had made.

As the sky outside turn to ink, white stars emerged. The sound of cars from the distant main road gave me a sleepy thrill, reminding me that this was an adventure. That I was adventurous. I drifted into sleep, warm under my wool, my mind full of the thousands of adventuring women who came before me.

CONON BRIDGE

A Sitka spruce grows at approximately the same rate as a human being. It needs between forty to sixty years to reach its full potential. Do we grow in the same way as trees? Do we, too, take root in an environment, learn to know its seasons, learn to see how we are shaped by where we are?

Lesley said that these trees are grown commercially and harvested for timber, but the forest feels as old to me as any other forest. Even if these trees were never meant to be permanent, secrets still grow in the spaces between them. The forest light seeps into my lungs as I walk through the trunks. It fills me. Tastes like the leafy ground matter, twigged and needled and loamy, mossy and cobwebbed. It sings, whispery with fallen and forgotten things that now comprise the forest floor. The light in the forest is always fractured, its beams momentarily illuminating but never wholly revealing.

I walked through the forest slowly today, looking at moss, sitting on logs, thinking about what you find when you aren't looking.

Reaching down to pull a potato off one of my pitchfork's tines, I realised that I only had one week left in Scotland. I'd been digging in the garden for hours now, unearthing the potatoes, tossing the old plants in the wheelbarrow. The gloves Lesley gave me were too big but they were better than the stinging nettles that hid amongst the potatoes.

I had been staying with Lesley since I left Skye, sleeping in the spare room at the top of the spindly stairs in her small whitewashed cottage. Her house was in the heart of the forest beyond the town of Conon Bridge just north of Inverness. I had walked here from the town, following a track through fields of wheat being mown by slow-moving harvesters, dust rising in clouds and hovering

above the wheat. The stretches of gold were interrupted only by the sudden clatter of crows rising from hedgerows. The brambles edging the track were gleaming with fruit, and I picked raspberries and blackberries in handfuls, sitting on the bank by the road to eat them one by one.

The track crossed a wide, busy road, then began to rise into the forest. The steady gradient was enough to make me sweat. I walked into the trees, feeling with each one that I was coming closer to the heart of something, somewhere, important. The forest was silent, with sunlight lying in thick gold pools along the track. My attention was tuned to the rhythmic scrape of my boots, the tap of my walking stick. I recalled the time I sat cross-legged in the heather on Hoy, counting the grasses, the colours, the species of plants I could identify. Noticing each insect and leaf shape. The language of the grasses engrossed me there; here it was the language of the forest. The voice of the rough pine bark, the honey sun, the reds and golds of the mosses, the angled shadows.

I thought, as I walked, about the word *landscape.* Robert Macfarlane wrote that he secretly regards the word as a noun that contains a verb: "scape." Landscape *scapes.* "It sculpts and shapes us not only over the course of our lives but also instant by instant, incident by incident," he writes in *The Old Ways.* The word, for him, rather than describing something we merely observe from afar, encapsulates the "transitory phenomena and atmospheres" of a particular place at a particular moment. My understanding of the word "landscape" had long ago begun to blur. It was difficult for me to think about landscape as only a vista now. As much as it was about seeing, landscape was just as much to me about feeling; or as Macfarlane puts is, *participating*. I had abandoned trying to pinpoint the boundary between my awareness of my body, my awareness of my own self, and my perception of place; of the various and specific geological formations, intensities of light, scents, and sounds of wildlife. I participated in landscape through my body and it was almost impossible, now, to tell these modes of knowing self and surrounds apart. I thought often of the woman who had become my companion in these wild, peaceful travels. Nan Shepherd was the first writer I knew to reject the idea that mountains were made of summits to be conquered; that this was their ultimate value. The idea seemed hollow to me now. Reaching a peak was of course an immensely

rewarding thing, but what of the rest of the mountain? The "whole" mountain, as Shepherd put it? For her, like for me, going into the mountain was going into herself. I comprehended, now, what people lost when they searched only for the peak, the destination.

In words that imprinted themselves somewhere deep within, that resounded in me like the slow sunlight of a bone-deep truth, she wrote: "As I penetrate more deeply into the mountain's life, I penetrate also into my own . . . I am not out of myself, but in myself." I did not have the accumulation of years that Shepherd had spent in the Cairngorms, but I had my own islands and mountains. Like she did, I had discovered how the "going into" blurred body and place.

I paused, planting the pitchfork and stretching my back, twisting slowly from side to side. I had almost filled the crate with potatoes. Foxy, Lesley's oldest dog, lay with his head on his paws, occasionally nudging the chewed tennis ball he carried everywhere, watching me hopefully. My days here had settled into a slow rhythm. I threw the ball for the dogs, played the old piano, helped Lesley in the garden, went for walks, or read my book across from her at the table as we shared a pot of tea. Lesley's cottage, with its drooping clothesline and extensive vegetable garden, sat in a clearing in the forest. I liked being ringed on all sides with the wall of dark spruce. I liked to wander in the trees and sit in their silence, heaping together pads of the springy moss that grew around their bases for a comfortable seat. The changing lights and the textures and intersections of the forest occupied me for hours. I settled into the solitude. Days passed by gently here.

When the mosquitos started to bite and the trees' long shadow lengthened across the clearing, I staggered back to the cottage carrying the box of potatoes I'd dug up. They were small, knobbly things, but boiled and covered in butter they were delicious. Lesley and I had been eating them the last few nights with other vegetables from her garden. I hadn't brought much food with me when I arrived, having planned to visit Conon Bridge for supplies, but as the days slipped by, I found myself reluctant to leave this quiet place in the forest, and my food dwindled. Lesley, realising this, told me to treat her house as my own and help myself to whatever I needed.

I liked Lesley very much. She was perhaps twenty years older than me, and possessed the air of someone accustomed to living self-sufficiently, at home in the solitude in a way that, generally speaking, women are not encouraged to be. She grew most of her own food, kept company with her dogs, and swam regularly in the nearby dam that I thought must be icy this time of year. In the days that I'd been staying with her, we had settled into an easy companionship, sharing conversations about books and her travels in Africa, touching on personal stories, drawing on the kind of intimacy that arises in these transient connections. When I had first ventured into the room where Lesley's piano lived, I made my way carefully through the piles of books, music, and stacks of paper that teetered on couches and rose like tiny islands from the floor. Clearing space to sit on the music stool, I shifted some books to the top of the piano and noticed a framed photo of a young woman. Lesley had mentioned that she had a daughter but said nothing more about her. I looked at the figure behind the dusty glass, wondering about this unnamed daughter of the intrepid woman who had invited me into her home. Do the daughters of such women always follow in their mother's footsteps? I closed my eyes, placing my hands on the old piano keys. As I began to play, my feet curled together under the stool like they remembered the soft fall of my grandmother's nightgown, like they recalled the warm fit of my mother's slippers.

That night I cooked dinner for us; rice, broad beans, and boiled potatoes topped with chutney and grated cheese. I liked shelling the beans. Each one was pale green, astonishingly silky, and I weighed them like coins in my hand before dropping them in the pot. I had never really liked beans before but it changes the taste of something when you harvest it yourself. Travelling alone, I had grown used to eating simple meals. Rice flavoured with pepper and a piece of butter melted through it—a trick that Rosalie, the archaeologist in Stromness, had taught me—with some smoked fish on the side. It felt remarkably intimate, to be invited into someone else's kitchen, handling implements worn by the shape of another woman's hand. For the first time, there were threads of longing in me as I thought of my own house, the turmeric and ginger smell of my spice rack in the kitchen.

After we finished dinner, and I rinsed the dishes, Lesley poured two drams of Jura, a smoky whisky distilled in an island in the Hebrides. The glasses were small and squat, and, held up to the light, distorted the deep amber of the liquid. We had discovered on my first night that we shared a love of whisky, and it had become something of an evening tradition to turn the lamps down after dinner and share a drink before we went to bed. We often stayed up late into the night talking, me perched at the heavy oak table, Lesley reclined in a comfy chair with the dogs, sighing occasionally in contentment, stretched out at her feet.

I was finishing the last of my whisky when Lesley said, "The dogs want to go for a walk, I think. Would you like to come?"

I grabbed my jacket and followed her outside. The nights were getting cold now as the year slipped into autumn and there wasn't much of a moon. The dogs sped off and disappeared into the forest, and I walked beside Lesley along the silvery road, stumbling occasionally in potholes. I could sense the darkness of trees pressing in on us from either side. The forest made soft noises in the night; the stray warble of birdsong, the intermittent rush of small things in the undergrowth.

On the top of a rise we paused. The trees were thin by the road here, and wheat fields fell away in the dim light to either side of us. Lights of a town winked in the distance. We stood together in silence. I tilted my head back. The night sky was murky, pink smears of clouds stretching like strands of fleece above the horizon.

"Look," Lesley said quietly, following my gaze to what I had thought were pink clouds. "The Northern Lights are out tonight."

At her words the ground seemed to shift under me. It was a visceral thing, realising how far I was from home. The Northern Lights were something from stories I had read as a child, a phenomenon from the far edges of the world. As they moved above me now, I breathed slowly in, slowly out. I loved this land of mountain and heather. Of cloudbank, rainy forest, red deer. This place was sunlit peace. I had been found in the mountains, washed in a loch, dried in the sun and lit

with the hundred colours of grasses. Travelling, moving onwards, the residue of the journeying gathering on my skin.

I breathed in. The cool air in my lungs was the cool of water.

The water was why I had come.

But the woman in the water: her story had changed. She was no longer a question for me: was the water or the land her true home, and could she truly be at home in either of these worlds? What I knew now was that it was not the question of home that was important, but the matter of choice. The selkie can choose which skin to shed and which to embrace. It is having the choice itself, not the body we choose, that matters.

I stood beneath the lights, my hat pulled low over my forehead, breathing in the cool spruce and the wheat in the fields waiting for harvest, listening to the forest sounds, feeling the scuff of gravel under my feet on a road I had not set out to follow. And beneath it all, something faint and murmurous, both a sound and feeling on my skin. She was there still, the selkie, the woman in the water. Her whispering in my mind was a constant presence I had grown accustomed to, and her body, moving between worlds, shadowing mine.

EPILOGUE

After everything, the seals remained with me. Slick, the colour of dark water. When Sedna's fingertips fell into the sea, I imagine that she wailed. I can see her: she shrieks at the sky and her scream is fury and grief. It is beyond anguish, when a body is no longer what we have known it to be.

Below her, the water moves. In the wet, her drops of flesh expand, pulse. The skin changes shape. Bodies are growing from her severed fingers; sleek-black, warm in the wet, curious. Under the water, these new parts of her breathe. The seals are graceful and dive down deep to where the eye cannot follow.

After everything, the seals remained with me. After I walked out from the forest at Conon Bridge and boarded a train that travelled down through Scotland, down through England and pulled up in Kings Cross Station, London, the seals lingered on the islands I left behind me. After my tube hissed swift and hot through underground tunnels, and I boarded an aeroplane and flew back to Australia, the seals remained. Motionless on the rocks, the edges of seas lapping at their flippers, they nodded at the edges of my memory. When I was in Stromness in Orkney I had bought a postcard of a seal, and at home, I pinned it beside the other postcard above my desk. The man o' war hovers on the waterline. The seal twists underwater, winding through weed, spinning up through shafts of light. High above the creatures in the water, islands rise from shores, beyond which lie mountains.

Slick, the colour of dark water, the seals dive down as Sedna's body sinks. She bleeds from her fingers, but the blood does not stay near her—it winds away in tendrils, dissolving in the salt. I

imagine that in the beginning she is afraid, knowing that her body is no longer as it was. Her hands that could have kept her above the water will no longer do so. She sinks deeper, encircled by the seals that are her multitudinous bodies, her ears pressed in by the deep silence. As she sinks she passes the wrecks of old vessels grown over with weed. She passes through glimmers of fish, scintillating in the light. She sinks through a curtain of silver tendrils, and looks upward. For a moment, a piercing moment, she remembers the surface. A sudden light distracts her; a lampfish looms close and vivid and then it is gone. The creatures that have grown from her body surround her.

When I returned home, the year slid into summer and I taught myself to swim. To swim properly. I hadn't lost the fitness I had gained hiking in Scotland; my leg muscles were now a different shape and I had a feeling my body would not forget this new form. When I went running I could breathe in a way that I hadn't been able to before, like my lungs had expanded to take in as much of the world as they could, and welcomed the burgeoning, the expanding. I was confident in the water because I was strong and buoyant but I had never learned to swim in a way I could continue for hours. I wanted to be able to, now. Wanted the weightlessness, the silence that my land-body, triumphant and raucous in the sun, could not know.

One evening, riding my bike through the suburbs, I came across an outdoor swimming pool. I peddled home, changed into my bathers, and hurried back. I paid the entrance fee and stood at the lip of the pool. The air smelled of eucalyptus, and sounded with birds calling and the rattle and squeal of a train that passed nearby. I slipped into the water. It was warm. Outstretched before me, on my hands every wrinkle and scar was raised and glowing in the water I swam through. There was nothing but silent slow blue light, and nothing in it but me. Coming up for air I was thrust into the world again, two seconds of noise and then blue silence.

I returned to the pool again and again. I swam metres and then laps, no longer pausing to catch my breath.

Now, there is a golden hour of each day when I swim. Splinters of diamonds as the sun cuts through the water. I move slowly through sunbursts of rainbows, swimming with a mouth wide open with happiness. I can't hold it in me, the joyburst. I implode underwater, again and again, twisting in the gold. Coming up for air impatiently and only so I can go under again, be submerged in the shifting lights. I dive through glitters of bubbles rising from a vent at the pool floor, a seal twisting through weed, laughing noiselessly.

The seals that were her body twist in circles around her, wend through her hair that billows in dark streams above her head. Sedna opens her arms wide in the deep. From far above, she hears singing.

When I was a child I collected sea glass. I filled my pockets with the smooth, faded pieces. Piled them in jars of water and placed them where they'd be shot through with sun. What I didn't know was that when you take sea glass from the beach it is like any sea thing and fades on land. It loses its colour, its water, its brilliance. But beaches are made from things that lose their place in the world. Things that find themselves under waves, tumbled until their edges are ground and their bodies worn down and they are so small they could have come from anywhere. To walk on a beach is to walk on the ground-up forgotten. And then the forgotten finds its way into hair and into pockets. What was in the water, unsure of itself, maybe lost, finds it has a place. I have carried them for years, the forgotten, the lost, the drifting, the memory of the bodies that find me. Some cling, some fall away unseen.

Sometimes, as the sun is going down, and I am sitting on rocks stained with orange lichen as old as dinosaurs, my feet numb and eyes trained on the churn of wave against rock, I think it would be easy. To slip in. Slip between. Slip under and down into story, to touch the sand that edges ever further up the beach, reaching for the ones the sea lost.

I would like to sink and have the other life rush over me. To relinquish my place in this world; to forget the heat of dry grass, the rustle and crack of summer gums, even the trail of pine

roots across a forest path. To forget mountains, and wind my body instead through ribbons of weed. To forsake the call of kookaburras and crows and listen only for the north wind.

But I don't think I can.

And I don't think I want to.

While my skin longs for water, my feet turn to the mountains. In the selkie's story, what mattered was that she could choose which body to inhabit, which world to call home. I knew this now and held it close to me. I could slip between skins.

So, those evenings when I sit on the rocks, sometimes I let myself slip in, just for a moment, just for the tang of salt and muscle burst as I pull myself though the water.

And something happens as I dip down and then surface. I float, suspended between worlds. I move between. In the broken beam of light that traces from shore to sinking sun, I let the cold wavelets shock across my face and think, I remember. Hear the muffled suck and boom of the deep in my ears and think, remember me. I move between.

INTRODUCTION

Stories are told not just about the body but through it.

—Arthur W. Frank

While writing this thesis, I met with a colleague for a coffee to discuss my work. I was troubled by what my research indicated; that there persists a resistance against women's writing about being in the wilderness, which, I thought, was essentially the same thing as a resistance to *women* being in the wilderness. My colleague was momentarily silent and then said, "It is powerfully transgressive for a woman to not only be in the wild, but to be *at home* in the wild." This observation draws together the concepts underpinning this project: belonging and identity in relation to landscape, and how these experiences are narrated dependent on the cultural narratives attached to bodies in the wild.

The research in this exegesis looks at links between the body, gender, and embodiment as discussed by autobiography scholars, to question how we think about being in wild places—who is allowed there, and in what manner—and explore how correlations between writing and bodily movement bear out as methodology in creative writing. According to life narrative scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge" (49). Life narrative, Smith and Watson reason, is consequently "a site of embodied knowledge . . . because autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects" (49). But embodiment, or the narration of the body, is dependent on cultural discourses that "determine which aspects of bodies become meaningful—what parts of the body are there for people to see. They determine when the body becomes visible, how it becomes visible, and what that visibility means" (Smith and Watson 50). Being inscribed with cultural narratives means that different bodies become visible, and in different ways—as do the stories these bodies can tell (Smith and Watson 50-51). The purpose of this exegesis is to explore the ways in which bodies are visible in memoirs about nature, and thus

highlight gendered conventions in genres that merge life writing and nature writing that exclude the body in the narrative.

The creative component of this thesis, entitled "Salt Marks," is a memoir of walking in Scotland woven through with myths about shapeshifting. The narrator sets out for the Orkney Islands to pursue a fascination with the myth of selkies—seals that could shed their skin and become women, who could live both in water and on land—and from there spends two months in the various islands and Highlands of Scotland travelling alone. As she explores these remote landscapes, hiking in the mountains and occasionally swimming, the selkie myth becomes a way for the narrator to reflect on her identity as a woman, and provides a way for her to redefine her relationship with her body after a recent heartbreak. Weaving travel writing, folklore, and an essayistic reflection on how we interact with landscape, "Salt Marks" maps an experience of self-discovery in an unfamiliar landscape that comes to feel like home.

Both the memoir and the critical exegesis that accompanies it draw on and present theory about embodiment and the idea of a self shaped by landscape, in different but interlinked ways. The primary focus of the exegesis is embodiment in contemporary memoir about being in nature, and gender as a crucial concept in relation to how we read these accounts.[1] In the first chapter of this exegesis, I offer a discussion of methodology in "Salt Marks," in which the embodied act of walking is critical, and I discuss the work of the essayist and historian Rebecca Solnit and the anthropologist Katrín Lund that offer different approaches to walking and interacting with landscape. I also discuss working between the three modes of thinking I deploy in this exegesis: creative; scholarly; and the reflective voice that connects the two.

In chapter two I discuss *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail,* Cheryl Strayed's memoir about hiking the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), and use the concept of

[1] Thinking about gender in the context of literary traditions is difficult because there is a danger of reinforcing the idea of gender as a binary, which fundamentally misrepresents the diversity of gender. However, in this work I identify characteristics that allow me to loosely group women's and men's writing. My purpose in doing so is to think through what I believe are problematic standards around how we read female and male experiences of being in nature, and how cultural and literary perceptions of the body are key to this.

autobiographical embodiment to explore walking as a methodology for narrating women's experiences of solitude, belonging, and wildness. As a female writer, this is the genre I am writing in; and as a writer looking at this scholarship, methodology is of critical interest to me. In both "Salt Marks" and *Wild,* I discuss walking as a key methodological act.[2] In both memoirs, the visibility of the narrator's gendered body is of central importance. My discussion of *Wild* explores how this foregrounding of the body reveals genre conventions at work within autobiographical nature writing traditions, that, I argue, have historically worked to exclude women's bodies within accounts of environment and nature—or at least, reinforce the cultural inscriptions that determine "when the body becomes visible, how it becomes visible, and what that visibility means" (Smith and Watson 50), that are skewed toward privileging the masculine. I discuss how the relationship between subject and body is gendered in *Wild* through narrative technique and closely linked to the text's genre classification, and how *Wild* subverts what Tanya Y. Kam describes as the trope of the male explorer who sets out to conquer "rugged, natural terrain" (353). I propose that the discrepancy between the kind of narrator Strayed presents, and Kam's conquering male explorer, accounts for the way we attribute literary value to some memoirs about nature but not others.

In chapter three I discuss *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* by Tim Winton*,* which is also an intimate account of nature, but in which the relationship between the narrator and his body is presented in a noticeably different way to *Wild.* In *Island Home,* the body is not a feature of the text. Along with an environmental agenda and the use of scientific language (neither of which are present in *Wild*), I explore how Winton's bypassing of the body might account for the elevation of his memoir to a literary, ecocritical status that Strayed's memoir fails to reach.

The different ways that embodiment is presented in these two memoirs is deeply significant for what this says about whose bodies, and whose voices, we privilege and listen to in

[2] Both "Salt Marks" and *Wild* are women's stories of travelling in an unfamiliar place, and as such could be read as travel memoirs as much as nature memoirs. The genre of travel writing shares many themes and tropes with the writing that I focus on in the context of "Salt Marks" and *Wild.* What is of particularly interest to me, however, is reading these texts as ones in which a methodology and the experience of the body is inextricably linked, so this is the focus in my discussion of these texts.

environmental writing. Using *Island Home* as a case study, I think through the genre of eco-autobiography, a relatively unexplored mode of writing that bridges life writing and nature writing. I seek to identify why it might be a relevant mode of contemporary life narrative and think about how embodiment might be narrated in this mode. I also explore it as a mode with the potential to effect change in how we view ourselves and/in nature. Eco-autobiography describes a mode of writing in which the author discovers a "new self" in nature (Perreten 1). Eco-autobiography has as strong association with ecocriticism, a critical perspective that emerged in the 1990s, that studies "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). In my discussion of eco-autobiography, I consider the issues of voice and privilege in relation to genre. Traditionally, writing about nature seems to privilege a male writing position, and a narrative stance whereby the body is kept at a distance. Looking at connections between gender and embodiment, I suggest that there are problematic expectations in ecocritical writing traditions that limit how we read women's writing about being in nature. In examining bodies interacting with landscape, this work questions how we think about being in the wild: who is permitted and expected to venture into and exist in wild places, and in what manner. The aim of this work is to explore how gendered bodies in nature memoirs are culturally inscribed with different narratives, and to highlight paradigmatic ideas around nature as a masculine terrain both literally and generically.

While both *Wild* and *Island Home* are narratives of the self in landscape, Strayed's memoir is viewed largely as "popular" literature; Winton's as "literary." Observing the difference in reception between these memoirs raises the question of whether the foregrounding of Strayed's female bodily experiences make her memoir less prestigious than other environmental memoirs. Are women's memoirs about nature, that foreground the body like Strayed does in *Wild*, seen as less prestigious because of this focus on embodiment? In what seems to be a broad, inclusive genre, why might it be easier to read narrators like Winton's in *Island Home* as eco-autobiographical? The critical work in this thesis raises these questions to examine notions of prestige and literary value in memoir traditions, and autobiographical embodiment as key to this. In presenting a discussion of

eco-autobiography, I think through why we read some people's writing about being in nature as ecocritical and not others, and what problems and limits of eco-autobiography as a form of ecocriticism might be revealed when we look at the relationship between women, bodies, and wildness. My intention is to highlight the way in which we value eco-writing geared towards the kind of subject, identity, and body, that Winton presents, that examples of women's memoir about being in nature, like *Wild,* do not.

What draws me to wild places in nature, and what does it mean to feel like I belong there? This question emerged for me early on in writing this thesis, and engendered various threads of investigation that I have sought to understand though both critical enquiry and creative exploration. This joint investigation also raised questions for me around the nature of practice-led research. Moving between three modes of thinking—creative, scholarly, and reflective—required that I attempt to draw distinctions between what comprised creative or critical endeavour. It became apparent to me that in my writing practice these modes are ultimately interconnected, as I discuss in the first chapter.

In mapping creative and scholarly investigations of writing practices that are informed by the body in place, I explore connections between experiences of embodiment and what Mark Tredinnick calls "placeness"; what he describes as the "hereness" of place ("Catching the Lyric"). What initially drew me to the kinds of memoirs that I discuss in this exegesis, that explore the relationship between subject and landscape, has not waned throughout the progression of the research; the writing that compelled me then and still does is the kind that seems to well up from the ground, up through the feet, into the body.

And so it became the body that occupied me. Part-way through my candidature, I went on a two-month research trip to Scotland. In this place, a long way from my home, my creative practice developed in the long walks I undertook, engendering new directions and points of focus for my research. When I read *Wild,* what struck me was how this story was one of a woman navigating her

way toward newness. New strength, a new sense of peace, a new way of living with and as herself—and this changed experience of selfhood arose because of the solitary time she spent on the PCT. Tanya Y. Kam argues that the trope of the male explorer in nature can be characterised by the act of conquering (353); we might read, in Strayed's writing about landscape, an act of *witnessing*. Witnessing the self in place. There are parallels between Strayed's experience on the PCT and my own walking in Scotland. Her response to solitude resonated for me, strengthening my conviction that women's experiences of solitude in wild places have the potential to radically change how we read not only women's agency and embodiment, but also eco-writing genres more broadly—which largely prioritise the scientific rather than the personal—to include a narrative position that foregrounds lived, corporeal, experience.

I firmly believe that a living relationship with landscape is important. I mean "living," here, in the sense that the Scottish writer Nan Shepherd did in her paean to the Cairngorms massif in the Scottish Highlands, *The Living Mountain*; that every seemingly separate part of how we experience a place—through the different senses, our varying moods, and different weathers—is in fact a connected experience. Shepherd wrote of the Cairngorms that her best experiences were when she visited them like she would an old friend; rather than seeking something from the mountains, her intention was only to "be with" them (15). For Shepherd, like for the naturalist John Muir, going into place was going into self. "It is a journey into Being," Shepherd writes, "for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain's life, I penetrate also into my own . . . I am not out of myself, but in myself" (108). The phenomenon wherein being in place affords a particular experience of being in self is at the heart of the work in this thesis. Like for Strayed on the PCT, when I was in Scotland, the place was unknown to me, so the experience of self—and, as this work focusses on, the embodied aspects of this—was entirely new.

The impulse to look to nature for transformative experiences is not a new one. As Scott Hess observes, nature is often "a form of refuge" in both culture and environmental writing today (85). We turn to nature "both imaginatively and physically" seeking respite for our "endangered forms of

sensual, aesthetic, and spiritual life" (Hess 85). This impulse characterises the work of the Romantic writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, whose writing on the sublime sought to give voice to the awe, terror, and reverence that the natural world inspired. Nature writing has since evolved throughout the ensuing centuries. It is now a vast field of literature, intersecting with natural history, ecocriticism, memoir, travel writing, science writing, field guides, and other forms in which we write about the environment.

The label "nature writing," as the British writer Robert Macfarlane argues, is a term almost too broad to be useful ("Why"). Defining the genre, he suggests, is perhaps not helpful other than that it "animate[s] a broader shared interest in cultural practice concerning landscape, nature, place, imagination, memory and ethics" (Stenning 77). While the field is extensive, however, there are two mains schools of writing that comprise it, originating in Britain and North America.[3] Seminal writers in the British nature writing canon include J. A. Baker, Gilbert White, Mary Oliver, and Roger Deakin, with a contemporary cohort of writers including Robert Macfarlane, Kathleen Jamie, and Mark Cocker.[4] North American nature writing is populated by writers like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez—the majority of which are men. Collectively, canonical nature writing texts reveal dominant ways of writing about the natural world that have perhaps had repercussions in genre classification—for instance, what might be classed as literary ecocritical writing about nature, and what might not—and which has prompted for me questions pertaining to expectations around gender. Canonical nature writing has for a long time largely been comprised of men's accounts of exploring unknown terrains, whereas women's writing about nature is perhaps more intimate; for instance, Annie Dillard, in her personal essay "Total

[3] In an interview with Anna Stenning in the ecocriticism journal *Green Letters,* Macfarlane makes the useful observation that what separates these literary traditions is *affect*. American nature writing tends to galvanise and result in change—Macfarlane cites the naturalist John Muir, with his essays on the Yosemite National Park, and Rachel Carson, who, in *Silent Spring,* wrote about the devastating effect pesticides have on ecosystems—whereas texts emerging from Britain, Macfarlane thinks, seek to be persuasive rather than rousing (Stenning 79).

[4] Macfarlane, Jamie, and Cocker are regarded increasingly as key writers in the contemporary tradition of "new nature writing," which distinguishes itself from older traditions of British nature writing by extending an understanding of nature to include the ordinary, everyday aspects of the natural world, and deploying a personal address by foregrounding the narrating "I." I return to new nature writing in the third chapter of the exegesis when I discuss emerging traditions of nature writing that seek to address the divide between the human and nonhuman in literature.

Eclipse," reflects on the experience of watching a solar eclipse, and brings into view her disintegrating relationship with her husband through the metaphor of the sliver of the eclipse as an old wedding band.

As Thoreau made famous in *Walden,* solitary encounters with the wilderness is a classic trope in nature writing. Another such trope is walking; consider, for instance, W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. Much work exists on histories of walking, and flânerie is one the first to come to mind. A walking tradition that emerged in nineteenth century France, flânerie was popularised in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and scholarly work of Walter Benjamin. A flâneur is an "aimless urban rambler who loves to walk slowly through a cityscape, poking into its most obscure corners, observing crowds and events, then passing on without ever becoming involved with them" (Lappin "Pilgrims" 18). The flâneur, however, was typically a male figure; women were excluded from this practice semantically—"flâneur" is a male term; "flâneuse" is the female—and because, as Rachel Bowlby has noted, women were considered to be a spectacle; that which was to be observed, rather than those who could take part in the observing (209). Roughly one hundred years after, the French theorist Guy Debord cofounded the avant-garde organisation *Situationist Internationale* in Paris in 1957, and coined the term "psychogeography." These walkers undertook a kind of walking called the "derive"—literally, "drifting"—and wandered through the terrain, content to be directed by the "psychogeographical contours" of the place (Debord).

But the psychogeographer and the flâneur are found in urban settings like the city, motorways, and other public spaces. This thesis explores walking in wild places as a technology of embodiment, a writerly methodology with a particular resonance to forms of life writing and nature writing. Exploring walking as a trope in a contemporary context, rather than the rural setting in which the Romantics' perambulations took place, enables an examination of the ways in which contemporary environmental writing and gender interact to perpetuate ideals around "literary" ways of writing about place—that work to exclude, I argue, a foregrounding of the narrator's body and corporeal ways of experiencing and knowing. In questioning the way that gender and embodiment interact in this

context, I take up what Smith and Watson describe as the task of the life writer, who, in studying the body as a site of knowledge production, works to "reproduce, mix, or interrogate cultural discourses defining and distinguishing the cultural norms of embodiment" (54).

Thinking about the "posthuman turn" within Western post-Enlightenment thought, that challenges the elevation of the human over the non-human, David Carlin writes: "In situating the human within the bigger context of the more-than-human we are called upon to change the ways we think and act; and moreover the stories that we tell and how we tell them" (5). In this time of the Anthropocene, the "new human-dominated geological epoch" (Lewis and Maslin 171) that can be characterised by human impact on the environment, in eco-genres and in the world our definitions of nature, the environment, and the wilderness are shifting; being disrupted and redefined. Women not only being in the wild, but being at home in solitude in wild places, is a counter narrative to nature writing traditions that see this as masculine terrain. Linking concepts of belonging, embodiment, and wildness in women's writing challenges normative ideas around women's autonomy and desires, and highlights the importance of seeing generic boundaries here as flexible and inclusive. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the body interacting with nature from a creative writing practice-led research perspective, and also to examine how gender is inextricably bound up in concepts of belonging and being in wild places in nature. Place is an essential aspect of identity. Landscapes, as Catherine Allerton writes, "are cumulative, historical matrixes of places and pathways. They are always in process, full of memory, and are entangled in complex, ever-changing ways with human lives" (236). In exploring these pathways, processes, and entanglements, we return to ourselves as embodied subjects, located in place, producing cultural narratives around ways of being in nature, which shapes both life writing scholarship and our actions and discourses in the real world.

CHAPTER ONE

BLURRING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN BODY AND LANDSCAPE: METHODOLOGY IN "SALT MARKS"

This chapter discusses the central themes in my memoir "Salt Marks." These themes are walking and water, and in observing the tensions and connections between them, I reflect on how they function both as theme and methodology in the memoir. A central question of my writing practice is how, as writers, we make the narrative, thematic, and stylistic choices that, in giving written shape to innate, intuitive moments of being, will ultimately represent, and even write over, the lived experience. In exploring this question, this chapter acknowledges the three modes of writing in this thesis: the voice of the creative writer; the scholarly voice that deploys a theoretical perspective to contextualise this creative work; and, present in this chapter, the reflective voice that observes both modes of writing and the connections between them.

Tracing experiences of self-realisation, embodiment, exploration, reflection, and solitude that emerged in Scotland, where "Salt Marks" is set, my creative work explores a deeply embodied experience of self that emerged only in an unfamiliar setting. What this newfound selfhood grew from was the act of walking.

"Entangled, entwined, fluid and shaping": walking as creating

The anthropologist Katrín Lund describes walking as that which "puts at the foreground the constant fluidity of the landscape and the walker as they entwine and shape each other" ("Landscapes" 227). In her essay "Landscapes and Narratives: Compositions and Walking Body," Lund explores how landscape can be narrated by suggesting that the point at which the walker's

foot meets the ground is what determines the walker's experience of landscape. She calls this process of narration a "composition," whereby landscape is composed as a narrative through the act of walking. Suggesting that the walking body and landscape are entwined and mutually shape each other at this point of contact, she writes

> this meeting does not separate the foot and the ground as two entities, rather the nature of the meeting is an entanglement in which any assumed boundaries between the body and the landscape blur. Thus, the materiality of the landscape is shaped through the movement of walking, not prior to it (225).

The walker's body is crucial to this experience and narration of place. Lund describes that from the walker's viewpoint, "the surroundings emerge as feature and forms during the course of a walk. The landscape takes on different shapes and forms according to movement and perspective" (226). The key, then, to experiencing—and writing about—the sense of place that Lund frames, is the corporeality of the body. This suggests a synergy between body and landscape; yet by calling it an "entanglement" (225) Lund indicates that the two factors—the body and the physical place—remain independent factors of the experience of place, not to be conflated as a merged narrative.

What Lund proposes here is an understanding of walking as an act of creation, not just traversal.[5] This framing of walking as an interaction with place is one that resonates closely with the kind of walking in "Salt Marks" and how this physical movement was closely connected to a transformation within the narrated self. Lund cites the anthropologist Tim Ingold's argument that "people make their way *through* a world-in-formation rather than *across* its pre-formed surface" (2007 S32 qtd. in Lund "Landscapes" 227), presenting a relationship between the landscape and the walker that is entangled, entwined, fluid and shaping (Lund 227). Illustrating instances of the entangled nature of this relationship, Lund describes three experiences of walking: one in which she navigates on foot an icy carpark during a stormy evening in Iceland; Albert the "Mad Traveler" in

[5] Lund has argued elsewhere how physical surroundings are sensed through the moving body; specifically, that the walker's gaze shifts between ground and distance, meaning that contact with the ground beneath the walker's feet is essential for the walker's sensing of their environment. See her essay "Seeing in Motion and the Touching Eye: Walking over Scotland's Mountains."

nineteenth century France who was diagnosed with "ambulatory automatism" (229) and could not remember his long walks; and one of urban walkers in Belfast.

Lund's walking compositions raise questions of visibility and invisibility (and awareness or forgetting) of the walker's body. In discussing the case of Albert, who could not remember significant periods of his 70km-long walks but experienced a constant longing to walk and the way that this cleared his mind, Lund proposes that for Albert, landscape is experienced, or created by the way that he connects—but also disconnects from (and forgets) the places through which he walks (231). In this case, it is a *lack* of embodied awareness that enables a connection with the walker's physical surroundings. Embodiment, even in its absence, is still an essential aspect of Albert's self-narration.

In what ways can walking bodies be embodied and disembodied? This question is an important one when thinking about how corporeal awareness affects the walker's sense of self. Why and when do we remember periods of a walk? What of the walker in nature who does not attend to their surroundings? The phenomenon whereby a subject is so immersed in their environment that it is not a focus in the narration is one that Tanya Y. Kam identifies in Jon Krakauer's biography of Christopher McCandless, *Into the Wild.* Kam observes that Krakauer writes about McCandless' relationship with nature in a way that suggests McCandless was so immersed in his environment that his physical surroundings rarely featured in his writing; that his awareness of nature was not separate from his awareness of self (Kam 365). From this perspective, McCandless was so absorbed by his everyday interaction with his environment as survival that it would be redundant to view nature as a thing separate from him that warranted describing. Where, for Lund, a person interacts tactilely with their surroundings by walking and in this way *creates* their environment, in Krakauer's representation of McCandless, nature is so integrated into his everyday experience that it goes unremarked. In Lund's last case study, for which she interviews urban walkers in Belfast, she notes the importance of a sense of rhythm, and that a particular way of seeing—or not seeing—one's surroundings that arises because of this. One walker, she writes, "is absorbed in his own

thoughts as he passes through surroundings that are familiar to him. His apparent absence from the surroundings does not mean that he is unconscious about his surroundings, but rather it indicates how he is a part of them and they are a part of him" (234). Perhaps this is how Krakauer hoped to portray McCandless' relationship with his environment, and perhaps what McCandless himself hoped for; existing in a communion-like state with nature, where the boundaries of this experience were intimately blurred.

Walking plays strangely with the relationship between embodiment and disembodiment, and offers multiple ways of being in one's self. Albert the "Mad Traveler" is occupied by the extreme, laborious, bodily endeavour of his walking, but forgets periods later when he tries to recall them. Lund's walker in Belfast, traversing familiar routes, does not notice his surroundings. Both Albert and the Belfast walker forgo an awareness of their bodies—an awareness that in this work I explore as synonymous with a sense of self—in the process of *being in* the landscape. Here, paradoxically, "feeling" the body is neglected in order to be fully present in the act of walking.

This "forgetting" of the body is in direct contrast to what I focus on in this thesis: embodied awareness as key to being in landscape. Yet, both the embodied walker and the disembodied walker, in interacting with landscape through the process of walking step after step, illustrate Lund's entangled, entwined, shaping relationship—just with different experiences of corporeality.

My experience of place in Scotland, that stemmed from the act of walking—that so directly shaped the relationship between body, surroundings, and internal self for the narrator in "Salt Marks," and to which I will return shortly—aligns with Lund's argument that "the way the landscape materialises happens through the way the walking body is located within its surroundings" (236). And yet, there was a key aspect of the relationship between the body, moving, and the movements of the mind that enabled moments of realisation and development for the narrator in "Salt Marks." This key aspect is rhythm.

The unwilled rhythm of the body: walking as thinking

In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking,* the essayist Rebecca Solnit likens the internal landscape of the walker to the external landscape through which the walker passes, and thinks about the particular rhythm of thought that walking enables. "Walking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body," she writes; "to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing" (5). She suggests that when we walk, ideally, "the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though . . . three notes suddenly making a chord" (5). For Solnit, walking is a means by which to access a particular state of mind, or way of thinking, where the body is engaged in a simple physical rhythm, which frees the mind to work in an unselfconscious way. She holds that walking enables us to inhabit our bodies—and, critically, inhabit our bodies *in the world*—without being "made busy" (5) by them. In short, "[walking] leaves us to be free to think without being wholly lost in our thoughts" (5).

I came to this kind of walking unintentionally. As noted earlier, part way through my candidature I went on a two-month research trip to the Orkney Islands, Scotland. At that time, my research project looked toward the far edges of the creative nonfiction genre, exploring how human and non-human shapeshifting myths could be deployed to frame contemporary experiences of embodiment and changing identities. I went to Orkney to research the myth of selkies: seals that could shed their skins and become women. As the myth went, sometimes a fisherman would steal a selkie's skin and she would be forced to retain her human form and marry him. Only if she found the hidden seal skin could she return to the sea.[6] I had long been fascinated with the figure of the selkie—the woman who possessed two skins, who could move between two worlds but belonged wholly to neither—because she seemed to me an allegory of selfhood, place, and body: all of which were themes recurring in my creative work. In *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, the Jungian analyst and writer Clarissa Pinkola Estés uses the myth

[6] The selkie is a mythological figure that appears in various guises throughout Scottish, Irish, and Icelandic folklore. My interpretation of the selkie figure is not intended to reflect any specific version of the myth; rather, I have relied on an understanding of the story gathered from versions I have read and grown up with. The selkie myth has seen a recent resurgence in contemporary novels and films, including Margo Lanagan's novel *Sea Hearts*; Lisa Jacobson's verse novel *The Sunlit Zone*; and the animated film *Song of the Sea*.

of the selkie to frame an understanding of an initiation quest the archetypal "wild woman" must undergo: in order to come home to her sacred self, she needs to reclaim her seal skin. For Estés, the seal pelt represents this woman's "wildish self," and the loss of it represents the loss of soul, or of a wild and knowing state of being (263-267). While I have not taken a Jungian approach to myth, symbolism, and the sacred feminine in my work, Estés' concept of the "wildish self" and the transformation between the human and non-human marked my entrée into theoretical work pertaining to what I had previously intuitively felt but had yet to articulate: that the experience of moving between known and unknown environments tapped into a profound aspect of my sense of identity.

The research trip to Orkney was vital because I knew instinctively that it would not be enough for me to interweave a version of the selkie myth with an autobiographical work using only other texts as references. As Emily Sutherland has argued, travel and "in situ" writing is a serious research tool for creative writers (Sutherland). Like in Sutherland's experience, prior to travelling I had researched and begun writing my creative project, but I knew that going to the place in which the selkie myth was rooted was critical to the authenticity of my creative work. The history of the standing stones, and burial mounds, and an archaeological dig called "The Ness of Brodgar"—the recently discovered remains of what was thought to be a Neolithic temple complex in Orkney—were deeply important aspects of my research into the landscapes of this myth.

This instinct for sensory immersion as a means of engagement with place would come to direct the course of my research entirely, as the lure of wild places grew stronger. How wildness was experienced by women in particular compelled me: from Nan Shepherd in *The Living Mountain*, to Robyn Davidson in *Tracks*, to Cheryl Strayed in *Wild,* these women who ventured into geographic and literary terrain in ways that were bold, unexpected, and empowering, complicated for me notions and representations of wildness. In various ways, these texts uncovered and challenged dominant ideas around genre conventions and gendered constraints in literary texts. I read Helen Macdonald's memoir *H is for Hawk*, and Lidia Yuknavitch's memoir *The Chronology*

of Water, in which she writes "Yell corporeal prayer. This is writing" (178). What Quinn Eades wrote about bodies and language gripped me: "Writing the body is the inventing of the body. It is the refusal of all of the ways we are taught not to speak about what lies beneath this boundary made from skin" ("Écriture"). In *all the beginnings: a queer autobiography of the body,* Eades uses personal narrative, and feminist and queer theories to explore what écriture matière might look like: writing in which the body tells the story of itself. These traditions of writing, from Shepherd to Eades, echo on from Hélène Cixous, who, in an essay that engendered critical second wave feminist thinking "The Laugh of the Medusa," writes; "Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (876).

Tracing these themes through memoir, nature writing, writing about travel and place, being, and bodies, I turned toward radical, genre-blending traditions of contemporary writing for which writers like Maggie Nelson, Rebecca Solnit, and Lidia Yuknavitch are being recognised.[7] At the heart of my interest in the texts and writers I gravitated to, and that was emerging in my own creative practice, was an interest in writing methodologies about the self that drew deeply on and were intimately linked to where the body was. As my project settled firmly into working with memoir, establishing a methodology for writing simultaneously about place and self was born for me through walking, which I began to do in Scotland.

A few weeks into my field trip to research the selkie myth I became moored in writer's block. In an attempt to alleviate this, I set out on longer and longer hikes in the Orkney Islands, and then in the mountains of mainland Scotland. I had not foregone my interest in shapeshifting bodies, but the expression of it changed: my attention turned from myth to my own body. I noted with interest how my skin began to darken, become sun-burned and wind-burned as I spent hours outside. I registered my increased appetite. As I walked in Scotland, walking changed from something with which to occupy time to something I prioritised above everything else. To

[7] Though I could not articulate it at the time, my gravitation toward this work had to do with what Michelle Dicinoski calls the "wildness" in the fragmentation, association, and juxtaposition that both Solnit and Nelson deploy in their writing; the essaying of both authors, Dicinoski argues, becomes the framework for understanding the writing itself. See Dicinoski's essay "Wild Associations: Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson and the Lyric Essay."

something that shaped my experience of time, my experience of my body, my perspective on and engagement with my surroundings, and, in ways less easy to articulate, my broader sense of identity. Walking no longer felt like an unconscious act, a means of travelling between origin and destination—but at the same time it *was* still an unconscious act: it was an act in which, as Solnit articulates, several things should align.

The key to this was rhythm. When I walked, Solnit's walking-as-thinking rhythm—in which a consonance occurs between internal and external passage—became recognisable to me in the stages of sweat and frustration, fear, uncertainty, and peacefulness that my walking body underwent. At different stages of a long walk, particular features in the internal landscape of my mind became familiar. At the start of a walk, usually occurring within the first hour, I would pass through small discomforts: worries about the hours of walking that still lay ahead; small bodily irritations like a wrinkle in my sock, or being too warm or cold. My body felt rusty and my manner of thinking self-conscious, akin to something that had not yet warmed up. There is a section in "Salt Marks" in which the narrator hikes through the hills of Hoy in Orkney. In the first stage of the walk the narrator is focussed on how the road is heading uphill, on the sound of her boots on the road, on the absence of other walkers nearby and the apparent solitude of the place through which she is walking. It is not until she moves through this stage of being occupied by her surroundings that her thinking begins to change, and disengages from her preoccupations with the immediacy of her body. She is not so aware, anymore, of her body "doing"; it starts to relax into "being."

This point in the walking causes a particular kind of palimpsest of place and self. Here, Solnit's internal and external passages of thought conflate. Solnit notes that "[a] new thought often seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though thinking were traveling rather than making" (6). Lund proposes that we create the landscape as we walk through it; contrary to this is Solnit's perspective, where the walker experiences new thoughts like they were already formed, as if they were already features in the landscape. Are Lund and Solnit suggesting the same thing here, or not? Do we discover thoughts like they were already laid out along the road, as Solnit

implies—or is it what Lund theorises, that we experience and thus create our impression of the landscape as we walk through it? From the latter perspective, the thoughts the walker will encounter can't already be there, waiting, because the landscape has not been experienced—that is, created—by the walker.

The point of difference between Lund and Solnit's perspectives on walking hinges on Lund's argument that landscape is created around the walker by the walker. Yet perhaps walking through landscape can be simultaneously as Lund and Solnit describe. Rather than Solnit's "thought-features" waiting in the physical landscape to be discovered, perhaps we might understand the new thought that seems like a feature of the landscape to occur in that moment of contact between foot and ground that Lund holds is pivotal to the walker's experience of place.[8]

Solnit's suggestion that one travels toward thoughts rather than creates thoughts—"as though thinking were traveling rather than making" (6)—resonates with the intersection of, or relationship between walking, thinking, moving, and story-making. Investigating conceptual and corporeal experiences of the self located in place offer rich and fascinating methodologies for life writing as experiences of home and belonging, nature and place, and relations between human and non-human life are continually being redefined and shifting.

While the two ways in which walking can be an interactive, narrative-shaping act that I have looked at here centre on different points of focus—walking as creating (Lund), and walking as thinking (Solnit)—both show how walking is, in Solnit's words, a way of "knowing the world through the body and body through the world" (29). This sense of reciprocity and symbiosis aligns with what I discovered in Scotland: that my body, walking, distinctly shaped my self-narration, and this self-narration became indistinguishable from a narration of the physical landscape through which I walked.

[8] Lund's argument sees the corporeality of the walker as essential to this. A question this raises, that would prove a fascinating research endeavour, is how we then perceive landscape, or a sense of place, that lies beyond the immediate reach of our feet.

Water as wild body

One of the core elements in "Salt Marks" is the exploration of the ways place shapes us, and the lure of landscapes that compel us beyond our understanding. At the heart of the memoir is the watery myth of the selkie. The image of this woman who moves between two worlds allowed me to explore the idea that we inhabit different bodies. It provided a way to evoke the metaphor of skin as both a site of embodied experience and that which acts as a barrier between the world we inhabit and the worlds we long for—and also between old selves and the discovery of a new self. The motif of skin allowed me to explore the ending of a relationship and the grieving and rediscovering that happened in the aftermath, and how the body was central to these experiences.

The image of a body in water—my body, and/or that of the selkie woman—is an ambiguous one. In water, we experience ourselves as weightless; we are suspended, disembodied. There is no solid ground under our feet, which, for Lund, is key to connecting with and experiencing one's surroundings. Yet, paradoxically, the experience of being in water is also a deeply embodied one: the swimmer is reliant entirely on the movement of her body to propel her; her body surges forward in a movement that begins in the reach of her forearm, and travels through the powerful pull of her shoulders, to finish in the beating of her legs. Her embodiment is in isolation in water, as she makes no contact with a solid environment, and yet her environment surrounds her completely, touching every part of her body. This image, in representing simultaneously immersion and disembodiment, is significant because it represents the paradoxical nature of my traveling to a place I had never been, and feeling like I belonged there.

I wanted a way to write about the experience of being in the landscapes of Scotland that drew on more than just my visual and tactile impressions of place. The figure of the selkie woman who could move between bodies and environments, and the histories entrenched in the landscapes of the Orkney Islands, were an integral element in my perception of place. In *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place,* Kent C. Ryden uses the phrase "the invisible landscape" to describe an understanding of place from a folkloric perspective (211). Stemming

from an understanding of folklore as that which "derives or is constructed directly from the materials available in the local landscape," Ryden uses the concept of the invisible landscape to describe "the symbiosis between lore and landscape" (55).

How do life writers negotiate the elements and nuances of landscape in expressing and crafting a representation of personal experience that is also rooted in a particular location, to which they may not "belong?" This methodological question is central to this thesis. Ryden's concept of the "invisible landscape" has been useful to me in my endeavour to translate into the theoretical, exegetical space those intuitive, immediate experiences of the narrator that emerge through the process of crafting recollections, that appear as imagistic and thematic elements in the produced text. I pictured the "invisible landscape"—this private, imagined, layered landscape of mythical histories that I experienced in Orkney—as superimposed over the physical landscape. From the seals that populate the Orkney Islands, to the sites like Warbeth Beach and Sule Skerry that were known locally as places to which the selkies came, mentions of these stories were woven into everyday life in the town of Stromness in a way that made them almost ordinary.

Navigating how to write this invisible landscape into a book that was otherwise a nonfictional account was a methodological issue during the writing process, and preoccupies me even now, after completing the writing. Throughout this thesis, concerns pertaining to genre have been central in my thinking. In the context of memoir, for me these genre anxieties translate, ultimately, to questions about how we tell the truth, and what we expect from the truth. The nonfiction writer Sean Prentiss uses German philosopher Immanuel Kant's notion of the noumenal and phenomenal worlds to describe two different kinds of truths: according to Kant, the noumenal world is the actual, existing world, and the phenomenal world is the world of appearances that we access through our senses. We can never truly know the noumenal world, and we can never experience something in precisely the same way as another. Prentiss deduces that "the noumenal truth + our senses = an individual's phenomenal truths" (112).[9] While I didn't pursue this strand of

[9] Prentiss contends that creative nonfiction would be better known as a genre for "the art of crafting shifting memories" rather than a form that tells, and should tell, the unachievable, noumenal truth (113). He calls for creative nonfiction to

research beyond the beginning stages of my project, something of the notion of two worlds, and two different kind of truths, persisted for me. The selkie myth, this woman of water and land, represented to me my experiences as I moved between two environments; home and overseas, old selves and new selves, grieving and transforming. It mattered less to me that I drew on a mythical story than it did that I found a way to frame experiences that had multiple interpretations. This links to what the autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin discusses in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*: we do not simply transcribe experiences of ourselves onto the page; it is through the act of narrating these experiences of ourselves that we *become* ourselves.

"Salt Marks" explores experiences of becoming, being in place, and being in my body. The metaphor of water evokes immersion, and functions in this way as both theme and methodology in "Salt Marks," drawing on the image of the body in water, enabling me to write, in different ways, about experiences of embodiment. In narrating my embodied subjectivity, my body becomes Smith and Watson's "site of autobiographical knowledge" (49), bringing different aspects of the body into view; the imagined as well as the corporeal.

Immersion, however, was not just an experience, but a question in my work pertaining to how we might belong, or not belong, in a place.

A sense of place

I travelled to Scotland with no immediate family connections there, and the question of whether I could, and if so *how* I could claim to experience a sense of belonging in this place, was a negotiation that my critical work has sought to navigate.[10] When we talk about belonging, or a sense of place, we imply a complex web of experiences. As Smith and Watson point out, experience

become "the sharing [of] our own personal myths rather than a sharing of our truths" (113). As such, Phillipe Lejeune's autobiographical contract will become clearer, he thinks, whereby the reader will understand that while the writer is striving for the truth through memory and research, "this is impossible because of . . . the imaginative nature of remembering" (114).

[10] While I have no immediate family connections to Scotland, I acknowledge that as a European Australian my heritage has a strong affinity with the British Isles by way of cultural imaginings, particularly in terms of colonial longings. The conversation of belonging, then, could be had in more depth here, but I want to focus only on the aspect of my immediate, lived experience.

itself not a simple notion. It is never wholly our own. "The intimacy and immediacy and palpability of our memories tell us [this is] so. But . . . [m]ediated through memory and language, 'experience' is already an interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific present" (Smith and Watson 31). Belonging, then, can be read in multiple ways, and mean multiple things.

The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan asserts that part of knowing a place is bound up in knowing its past, and one's past in that place (164). "To know a place well requires long residence and deep involvement" (164) he writes; we must "be aware of it in the bones as well as with the head" (165). From Tuan's perspective, prolonged exposure to a place, and the deep familiarity that arises through this, is how we experience its authentic nature. But what of the person who comes to a place that is entirely new to her- or himself, and experiences a profound connection with it? How do we navigate these experiences of selfhood in a place that we have never been before?

I wrote about landscapes in Scotland without the deep familiarity that Tuan holds is key to knowing a place. I came to feel at home in the Cairngorm Mountains in the weeks that I spent there. But *could* I belong to a place to which I was a traveller? Tuan would suggest not. The lack of knowing or familiarity that Tuan observes, that the traveler must inevitably feel, made itself known to me. This was not, ultimately, my home. Again, the image of the swimmer is evoked, suspended in water; immersed by, belonging in, yet distinct from her watery environment.

Thinking about models for creative writing practices that explore the connection between a sense of place and personal identity, the writer Linda Lappin suggests these questions as guiding ones: "Who am I in this place? What is my/my community's connection to it? Do I/we belong here?" ("Mapping"). "Who am I in this place?" resonated for me, and became the central question my writing explored. "Do I belong here?" became "*How* do I belong here?" Notions of belonging arose in my work that were deeply entwined with notions of home, which in turn were rooted deeply in place. In "Salt Marks," I use analepses in the travel narrative to return to these significant places. Some of these sections are located in a single place. Sometimes these significant places are

more tenuous evocations, emerging only as sensory, recalled details. Details like the groan of the rusty swing-set, the grass heads nodding in the breeze, the screech of the white cockatoos in the chapter "Warbeth Beach" emerged in my work as essential to the narrator's experience of self in that moment. My memory, now, of being on the beach from which I crafted that scene in the narrative, is pinned to those details—the swing-set, the grass heads, the birdcalls. When my thoughts turn to the memory of the actual event about which I write, it is the image I have created in the narrative, rather than a memory of the lived event, that I remember now. In this way, for me, the "narrated memory" endures as an "interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered" (Smith and Watson 22).

Navigating the landscape of the self

Writing an exegesis for a creative work presents a fundamental difficulty. In setting out to reflect on the themes and methodology of "Salt Marks," I have found that this discussion inevitably turns to the lived experience from which the memoir sprang. The boundary between my memories of the events, and the artefact I created that retells these events, is increasingly blurred. Reflecting on the experience of the self who lived the events that became the memoir has engendered a mode of writing that in part seems to me like it has no place in a scholarly, exegetical work. Yet this required multiplicity of voices demonstrates the nature of my practice-led research, and the way in which the research and creative work produced for this project are interlinked. A creative writing thesis, as I have approached it, seeks to address the same set of questions but from a creative and a scholarly perspective.

As I navigate multiple modes of writing in this exegesis, I navigate the connections between themes in my creative work and how they bear out in my critical work. An enduring theme I have sought to write into, to question, and about which to speculate, is that of wildness. The word "wild," for Henry David Thoreau, was "the past participle of to will, self-willed" (Turner 111). Carol Black elaborates on this idea, describing Thoreau's wild as "that which lives out of its own intrinsic nature

rather than bowing to some extrinsic force" (Black). Wildness as a concept deeply appeals to me, as does the notion that to be wild is ultimately to be contained in the essence of yourself: the embodiment of your intrinsic essence, which is contrary to a colloquial understanding of wildness as chaotic.

Ryden writes that "[w]ith map in hand, we find that the world is no longer wild" (54): but what happens when the map *is* our hand, our feet, our bodies? This is a different kind of wildness altogether that traces experiences across geographic sites and across the body. Wildness can have frightening connotations, evoking the strange, the beyond-control—in other words, that which is beyond the known. I am interested in how wildness can manifest in a multitude of ways; in places, in experiences, and in bodies—and how we interpret these accounts in narrative.

As Tuan points out, "place" is a human construct, shaped by emotional response and imbued with the accumulated history we attain through long experience with a place (165). Landscape, as I approach it in this work, is the physical formation of a place. And yet, as I experienced in Scotland, and as Katrín Lund, Rebecca Solnit, Cheryl Strayed, and Tim Winton all think about in different ways, we create these landscape inside ourselves. When we walk through place, an invisible process of palimpsest occurs: the intangible landscapes of self—the thought-scapes that are comprised of perception, emotion, and memory—slide across the plane of the physical landscape. How and where do we separate the landscape of self and the landscape of place? There are a multitude of ways to explore this, and my work is just one of them.

CHAPTER TWO

BEING WILD: BODIES AND WALKING IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING

When she divorced, Cheryl Strayed chose for herself an entirely new surname. In *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, the memoir she wrote about hiking 1,100 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail from the Mojave Desert to the Oregon-Washington border, she recalls looking up the definition of the word "strayed," and how its meaning resonated for her. "I had diverged, digressed, wandered and become wild," Strayed writes. "Even in my darkest days—those very days in which I was naming myself—I saw the power of the darkness. Saw that, in fact, I *had* strayed and that I *was* a stray and that from the wild places my straying had brought me, I knew things I couldn't have known before" (97). From the outset of her memoir, Strayed links the notion of wildness with movement, suggesting that "becom[ing] wild" only came about for her when she moved away from—and I would suggest here deliberately rejected—a sedentary role in her life. In this chapter I think about how Strayed complicates assumptions around women, walking, and adventures in the wild in the context of contemporary memoir.

Wild follows a trope common to nature writing: a solitary experience in nature. Landscape is a central part of Strayed's experience in the memoir, and facilitates what Tanya Y. Kam calls "transformative introspection" (369); the kind of self-examination and experience of empowerment and healing that can arise from solitary encounters with the natural world. The focus of the memoir is introspective, and does not present a sophisticated knowledge of natural history or ecology to describe the narrator's surroundings as is often the case in nature writing. It seems easy to read *Wild* as a memoir in which nature is the backdrop to the central drama of the narrator processing and

coming to terms with grief and self-realisation. Yet *Wild* is, at its heart, the story of a person's experience in nature—and as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle point out, when someone thinks and writes about their relationship with nature, this makes them an ecocritic (141). Can we read *Wild* then as a work of ecocriticism? It was initially difficult for me to do so, and the fact that I found it so raised questions for me around expectations pertaining to the conventions of ecocritical narratives. How did I think an ecocritical narrator should present themselves? How did this narrator describe the natural world? How did she describe herself? The language Strayed uses in *Wild,* that I will return to later in this chapter, is not the sophisticated kind usually associated with high-brow literature: is there then an expected language, style, and aspect of elitism that is associated with ecocriticism and as I will later discuss, eco-autobiography? I offer these questions now as ones that arose for me after studying *Wild,* and through thinking about how, as readers, we receive women's stories about being in nature.[11]

My focus in this chapter is how *Wild,* a female-authored memoir about a profound experience in nature, foregrounds experiences of female embodiment. Gender becomes a major consideration, both on behalf of the narrator, who is self-conscious and intimately aware of her female body as she walks alone through a dangerous wilderness almost entirely populated by male hikers, and also for reviewers and readers of the memoir, who inevitably never fail to comment on Strayed's femaleness in this context. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty asks whether men and women write about nature in different ways (xix). My discussion explores autobiographical embodiment as one of these key differences. My point of focus in this discussion is on walking as a crucial act for the narrator's experiences of solitude, wildness, and belonging; all of which are experiences that women are not, generally speaking, encouraged to seek out in the wilderness. After looking briefly at some of the criticism of *Wild,* I will look closely at the text itself. Considering both context and content of the memoir allows me to examine the body, moving through landscape, as methodology, through a focus on connections

[11] In the next chapter I will return to these questions when I look at the issues of gender and embodiment in the context of eco-autobiography, and explore these issues as critical to how we read autobiographical nature narratives.

between gender and embodiment. In this way, in the context of contemporary landscape memoir, such an enquiry allows me to "engage, contest, and revise laws and norms determining the relationship of bodies to specific sites, behaviours and destinies" by focussing on "the body and embodiment as sites of knowledge and knowledge production" (Smith and Watson 54). My aim here, in short, is to explore perceptions around who is allowed in the wild, and in what manner—and embodiment in relation to this.

Wild: a brief history

When it was published in 2012, *Wild* saw varied responses. Positive reception responded to Strayed's adventurousness and her vulnerability in retelling a harrowing period of her life. The negative criticism, which is particularly telling for what it focusses on, took aim at a number of points. Strayed's lack of preparation before embarking on a serious hike—and, implicitly, her daring to hike anyway—was a common point of complaint for some critics.[12] Strayed's writing about her surroundings was criticized for being unsophisticated—in one reviewer's words, "It [a fox Strayed sees] exists, like everything else in what might otherwise have been a striking landscape, only as a subdivision of her own concerns" (Saunders). Some critics questioned the veracity of the memoir, and the fact that it was published seventeen years after the events occurred. "How do we know that the thoughts [Strayed] says she had on the trail occurred then and not years later as she shaped her story for publication?" the journalist Janice Harayda asks in a review ("Why I'm Not Wild"). Does Harayda fundamentally misunderstand memoir as a mode of writing, or is it something about Strayed as a narrator that she objects to? An online blog wonders if Strayed was "a brave and strong adventurer, or a pathetic and irresponsible wanderer" ("A 'Wild' Hike"). Some critics and readers fixated on the fact that Strayed used drugs, was unfaithful in her marriage and was overly emotional, and felt that Strayed should have been apologetic for this (Sally). As a whole,

[12] In the text, however, Strayed makes no attempt to portray herself as anything other than inexperienced in camping and hiking.

these criticisms that pertain to Strayed's manner of writing about nature, her characteristics as a persona in the text, and the real-world occasion of her hiking the PCT, seem to lead back to a root issue: the fact that Strayed is a woman.

Wild often appears in online searches alongside Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* and other memoirs grouped as narratives about self-discovery.[13] Though *Wild* is about a physically arduous adventure in nature, akin—in subject, at least—to mountaineering memoirs like *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer, *Wild* is regarded primarily as a memoir of grief and healing rather than adventure in nature. Is this because the narrator is a woman?

While there is more than one way to approach reading *Wild,* my focus is how Strayed subverts the trope of the male explorer adventuring in a male-dominated environment—the literal one of the PCT, and the generic one that comprises memoirs about journeys in nature. Allison Gallagher has argued recently that the trope of the adventuring male protagonist in the contemporary "road novel" is that of a subject free to wander where he will, not questioning his privilege as a cis man to perform this expression of masculinity. Gallagher posits that when marginalised characters, like trans and queer people—and I would include women here—traverse the narrative of the "road novel," the traditional experience of the denouement at the end of the road is disrupted. The journey as an ongoing process, rather than the goal of a geographical destination, is a more accurate reflection of these non-traditional characters' stories, Gallagher feels, and asks, "Does it not speak more honestly if, by the end of the road, these characters are still unsure of their place in a threatening world?" (Gallagher.) *Wild* is not a "road novel," but the journey narrative that Gallagher critiques is central to *Wild*, as is the narrator's experience of being a minority in the terrain by way of her gender. While the narrative of *Wild* does lead to the end of the hike, to a site named the Bridge of the Gods, when Strayed reaches it she experiences a poignant moment of reflection and then walks on. This moment is highly symbolic and reflects what Gallagher suggests is a narrative that transgresses the traditional sense of journeying and arrival: *Wild* resists a sense of

[13] For example, see the "What to read" list compiled by *The Telegraph* called "Eat, Pray, Love 10 years on: Six other bestselling tales of self-discovery" (Fox-Leonard).

denouement, portraying instead a more complex picture of how the self changes, and continues to change.

Strayed's memoir asks us to think about what we make of women walking in the wild. When considering what "wildness" can mean, notions of the unfamiliar are evoked in this question; the uncomfortable, the frightening, and the physically arduous—but also the empowering. Given that women's bodies are such complex sites of tension between cultural notions of beauty, sexuality, and agency in connection to femininity, examining how women's bodies can be wild fascinates me. Thinking about this in the context of women in the wilderness, notions of solitude and belonging are particularly significant to explore in relation to the idea of wildness, and I am deeply interested in the connection between these experiences and the body; and in particular, how the embodied act of walking can be a means for women to frame their experiences of wildness. In the following, I offer a reading of *Wild* that sees the narrator subverting gendered expectations by foregrounding her female body, and examines walking as a key trope by which to read women's experiences of selfhood and wildness.

Landscape and walking in *Wild*

When Strayed sets out to hike the Pacific Crest Trail, she is twenty-six years old and has never hiked before. In the first stretch of her walk, which crosses through the Mojave Desert, Strayed finds her physical surroundings adversarial. She thinks constantly about the danger of wild animals: coyotes, snakes and mountain lions. Within hours, she is in pain from her too-small boots and her oversized, overweight pack that she will come to nickname "Monster"—both symbols of her inexperience and apparent recklessness.

Strayed reflects on her relationship to the landscape only to a limited degree, seeing her surroundings as a reflection of her often-exhausted inner state: "I was a pebble. I was a leaf. I was the jagged branch of a tree. I was nothing to them and they were everything to me" (83). For Strayed, her inner life takes primacy over her surroundings. At times, this personification of

landscape works to provide Strayed's narrator with a sense of clarity: "As I scrutinized the land, I realized that I'd come far enough by now that the terrain had begun to change . . . The grass and the reasonably large trees were a comfort to me. They suggested water and life. They intimated that I could do this" (68). At this early stage in her journey, Strayed is preoccupied with the physical challenges of hiking; she has not yet discovered a sense of rhythm, or familiarity, that will eventuate later on in her walking. Her body is demanding in its discomfort, such that her engagement with her surroundings is minimal: her focus is only on whether and how she can continue walking.

Embodiment is an urgent and consistent theme, and walking is key to her engagement with the landscape. Strayed articulates her female body vividly, highlighting the fact that her gender marks her as an anomaly on the PCT.[14] "Monster" is a constant struggle for Strayed's smaller physique; she pushes herself physically so male hikers don't overtake her; she lists the condoms and natural sea sponge she packs, anticipating occasions of physical intimacy and attending to the practicality of menstruating while on the trail. Strayed notes, as the weeks pass, the way her hair grows straw-like from exposure to the weather, the developing muscles in her legs "rippling beneath [her] thinning flesh in ways they never had," and the patches of skin on her hips and tailbone that bleed and scab over from her pack chafing (190). Hiking the PCT is an experience that changes the narrator deeply, and comes to powerfully affect how she experiences reality:

> Foot speed was a profoundly different way of moving through the world than my normal modes of travel. Miles . . . were long, intimate straggles of weeds and clumps of dirt, blades of grass and flowers that bent in the wind, trees that lumbered and screeched. They were the sound of my breath and my feet hitting the trail one step at a time and the click of my ski pole. The PCT had taught me what a mile was (191).

Later in the memoir, longer passages of self-reflection interrupt the immediacy of the narrator being occupied by walking. Strayed uses analepses to disrupt the reader's temporal experience of the trail, compressing and elongating time throughout the long periods the narrator is alone, suggesting that a

[14] Of the nineteen people who successfully hiked the entire length of the PCT in 1995, the year that Strayed walked 1,100 miles of it, only three hikers were women. However, the website which provides this statistic, *The Pacific Crest Trail Association*, states that this data is accumulated from an honour system that depends on people reporting completions of their own volition, so this number can't be verified.

transformation of her character is occurring with the rhythm and passage of time passed on foot. We might surmise that walking is becoming a familiar, integrated aspect of her day-to-day life such that it ceases to be of pressing immediacy in the narrative.

Women walking: contemporary practices

Strayed's walking, and how she foregrounds the femininity of her body, disrupts the idea that the wilderness is not a place for women, or for women to feel at home in. The concept of home, as Sidonie Smith argues in *Moving Lives: Twentieth Century Women's Travel Writing*, is one that has historically been associated with the feminine. Noting that figures like Odysseus, the knights of the Round Table, Columbus, even Jack Kerouac, cannot be imagined without their travels, Smith holds that in the process of becoming men, travels "affirm their masculinity through purposes, activities, behaviours, dispositions, perspectives, and bodily movements displayed on the road" (ix). The opposite of travel—immobility, rootedness, being "home"—is equated with femininity, she observes. The "home" that is equated with women "becomes that which must be left behind in the pursuit of agency" (Smith x). Smith asks: "If traveling, being on the road, makes a man a man—and makes masculinity and its power visible—what does it makes of a woman, who is at once a subject as home and a subject at home?" (x). Smith shows how walking, as an act which leads away from the home space—both literally and symbolically—has great potential to disrupt gendered roles and expectations. While the focus of her work does not look to women walking in the wild, the questions Smith poses are just as apt in this context as on the road.

When thinking about histories of walking, the figure of the flâneur, or the psychogeographer, spring immediately to mind. As discussed in the Introduction, however, both these kinds of walking were conducted in primarily urban spaces, and flânerie, in particular, excluded women both linguistically and culturally. This is not to say, though, that the female flâneur—the "flâneuse"—did not exist: texts like Virginia Woolf's essay "Street Haunting," and the recent publication of Lauren Elkin's cultural history memoir *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in*

Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London, are evidence that women were and are very active walkers of city streets. This recent work is noteworthy as it indicates a feminist reclamation of walking, and decentres the idea that women do not belong as active subjects in these spaces.

But what of women who walk in the wild? Neither the flâneur nor the psychogeographer apply here.[15] Tanya Y. Kam argues that women who hike alone are more likely to be asked what compelled them to do so, whereas this legitimisation is not required when a man does the same thing (365). She suggests that adventures in the wild are often perceived in Western society as a "rite of masculinity" (365) where the male explorer sets out to conquer "rugged, natural terrain" (353). For Kam, this stems from the concept of "frontier masculinity," which, she writes, "depends on romanticised conceptions of the wilderness, rugged self-sufficiency, courage, masculine physical strength, autonomous individualism, and the active subordination of nature" (353).

Taking a similar perspective that critiques the trope of the male explorer, in a review of *The Wild Places* by Robert Macfarlane, the Scottish nature writer Kathleen Jamie wryly wonders; "What's that coming over the hill? A white, middle-class Englishman! A Lone Enraptured Male! From Cambridge! Here to boldly go, 'discovering', then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilised lyrical words" (Jamie). The figure of this lone enraptured male, she argues, represents a persistent and uninterrogated tradition of "the association of literature, remoteness, wildness and spiritually uplifted men," that, she thinks, can be linked to the "elevated tone" that characterises nature writing (Jamie). Both Kam and Jamie are, I think, referring to the same kind of male figure in nature narratives. While neither Kam nor Jamie specify that this male adventurer travels by foot, in this work I think about male explorers in nature doing so to

[15] A third kind of walker we might think of is the pilgrim. Traditionally, being a pilgrim suggests that the act of walking is a religious undertaking. For the pilgrim, a sense of sacredness is bound up in their walking, as is a focus on their interior life, as Linda Lappin explores in her essay "Pilgrims and Seekers." Lappin's work has been useful to me for thinking about how sacredness might manifest in relation to space and place. She suggests that sacred spaces do not necessarily have to be understood as the traditional destination of the pilgrimage: a sacred space can be an interior space, arising from the act of travelling, and the internal state of the traveller. Yet pilgrimage connotes a sense of the religious in relation to walking that doesn't apply to Strayed's memoir, so I dwell no further on it here.

consider how walking offers different possibilities for women and men who write about experiences in the wild.

The criteria by which Kam defines this masculine explorer are evident, in most instances, in Strayed's narrator in *Wild.* During the three months she spends hiking the PCT, she is forced to become self-sufficient; she finds courage in the face of extreme hardship; her physical strength develops, and she becomes comfortable in her autonomy; but the memoir does not engage with romanticised conceptions of the wilderness, nor suggest that the narrator seeks to subordinate nature, and the latter two elements are key aspects of Kam's frontier masculinity. Embodying some, but not all, of the masculine explorer's traits, as a female narrator-protagonist Strayed engages with but ultimately resists conforming to this tradition, subverting the dominant picture of the masculine explorer in wild places.[16]

If the need to assert himself over nature drives the male adventurer, we might read in *Wild*'s female adventurer an antithesis to this impulse: the act of witness. In a moment of revelation, the narrator realises what it is that drove her, and others before her, to hike the PCT:

> It had only to do with how it felt to be in the wild. With what it was like to walk for miles for no reason other than to witness the accumulation of trees and meadows, mountains and deserts, streams and rocks, rivers and grasses, sunrises and sunsets. The experience was powerful and fundamental. It seemed to me that it had always felt like this to be a human in the wild, and as long as the wild existed it would always feel this way (207).

Strayed's language choices are significant here. In walking through the landscape features that she names in the above passage, she is witnessing place. Witnessing connotes viewing, but not actively engaging with. We might also surmise, however, that she is witnessing herself located in these places. Strayed uses the phrase "how it felt to be" to describe the essence of her experience in the

[16] Strayed's gender is key here: Strayed claims her place as a woman in masculine territory. The narrator is more concerned with reflecting on her inner life than in asserting herself over the land that she traverses, in the way that, for example, a mountaineer might when ascending a peak. This is not to say that Strayed's narrator refrains from engaging in adversarial encounters with nature; she feels triumphant after successfully navigating snow-covered parts of the trail, and loudly blows her whistle to scare away wildlife. What I am trying to illustrate, in looking at how Strayed as a narrator engages with landscape, and observing the broader context of women's writing about nature in relation to men's, is how Strayed engages with nature writing tropes in *Wild,* yet doesn't conform to them. She writes about being in nature, but is ultimately more occupied with being in herself.

wild—again, "felt" could refer to tactile experience in the landscape, or a sense of wildness in her identity that manifested through being in that landscape.

Women in the wild: a feminist perspective

The functions, rhythms, and changes in the body of Strayed's narrator in *Wild* as she navigates the PCT are deliberately articulated in the narrative. Not only does she write about the physical changes to her body that walking and weather bring about, the narrator is frank about menstruation, masturbation, and the possibility of sexual encounters she might have on the trail. This foregrounding of female embodiment marks a distinct departure from the narrator's relationship with their body in memoirs like *Island Home* by Tim Winton, which I will look at in the next chapter, or *The Wild Places* by Robert Macfarlane, both of which are about explorations in the natural world. Might embodied writing, then, be an element that differentiates between women's and men's writing about being in nature? Scholarship on traditions of women's nature writing suggests that it has historically deployed different perspectives to men's, both in the interpretations of what constitutes nature, and in how the narrator is positioned as an observer of their surroundings.

Cheryll Glotfelty's question of whether men and women write about nature in different ways (xix) remains topical. The ecocritic Astrid Bracke asks a slight derivation of this question—"do male and female experiences of nature in new British nature writing differ?" ("Macho Nature")—and reflects on a debate that is central to ecocriticism that critiques correlations between women and men, and nature and culture. Correlations for men, she thinks, can be fluid: "[Male] can be seen as both culture, and nature: culture, when 'wild', 'natural' women have to be civilized, nature when it comes to drawing a contrast to the domestic sphere of the home, the place of women and children" ("Macho Nature"). The connection implied here between wild or natural, and primitive, is troubling, and is one that ecofeminism, a critical stance that sees in the domination of

men over the environment the same oppression and domination over women, argues is deeply problematic.

Barbara J. Cook addresses Glotfelty's question with her anthology *Women Writing Nature: A Feminist View*, that includes essays that reflect "recent and current feminist and ecofeminist theory" (7). As Cook observes, the essays in the anthology *do* argue that women write differently about nature than men, yet not in a singular way, instead adopting a feminist perspective that highlights "the importance of the plurality of voices" (7). The plurality of voice that Cook encourages is detectable in form as well as voice. In the anthology *At Home on This Earth: Two Centuries of U.S. Women's Nature Writing*, the editor Lorraine Anderson advocates for an expansion of the definition of nature writing, noting that in this volume the editors have included "other forms that women have used to establish connections with their world and with each other: short stories, journal entries, regional sketches, and memoirs" (2).[17] Anderson observes that women's nature writing has been criticized for its lack of reliance on scientific acumen; for "writing too personally, for being too sentimental, for anthropomorphizing their subjects" (6).[18] She proposes that women's nature writing models "ways of knowing the world that are centred in relationship, in the body, in intuition, mysticism, the emotions, the heart, as much as in the relational and logical mind" (6), which, as she sees it, better captures a sense of humanity's being a part of the earth, rather than separate from it. As writing by women has historically occupied a tenuous position in nature writing, Anderson suggests that thinking about women's nature writing

[17] Published ten years after Anderson's 2002 anthology, Kathleen Jamie's book *Sightlines: A Conversation with the Natural World* is an often-cited example of female-authored new nature writing. The collection of essays, in its fragmented form, resists a singular, cohesive narration, and Jamie writes about nature in places as diverse as icebergs and dissected organs. Deborah Lilley observes that Jamie's nature writing "capture[s] a sense of nature as the interweaving of human and non-human relationships. In so doing, she actively reconsiders the criteria for and the means of identification of that 'nature'" (17). While I do not suggest that a comparison should be drawn between Jamie and Strayed's writing—Jamie is associated with the contemporary tradition of British new nature writing and Strayed is not—I do, however, see parallels between both writers' work in that both require us to think beyond common definitions of nature, and challenge us to find new ways to write about our place in it.

[18] However, it should be noted that Glotfelty, Anderson, Bracke, and Cook look mainly at female nature writers in a North American context, as does a large part of the body of the scholarship on this topic. In a discussion about women's nature writing, Annie Dillard, Rachel Carson, Willa Cather, Terry Tempest Williams, and Gretel Ehrlich are regularly cited names. In an Australian context, Kim Mahood, Robyn Davidson, Kate Grenville, and Sally Morgan are known for their writing about landscape, yet as a suite of writers they lack a sense of cohesiveness that exist in North American literature written by women.

as separate from men's acknowledges that women wrote "under a different set of cultural constraints from men" (5), citing domestic duties as the reason women's writing centred on encounters with nature that were closer to home. Women simply didn't have the means to pursue experiences like that of Thoreau in *Walden* (Anderson 3).

What might be surmised from Cook, Bracke, and Anderson, is that a multiplicity of perspective, voice, and form is deployed in women's nature writing in a way that is not the case in men's writing traditions. We can locate Strayed's memoir here: *Wild* sits firmly within a tradition of women's writing that is intimately connected to landscape, but that is also about ways of positioning and knowing the self in the world in the way that Anderson describes, that stems from the body and the heart *but also* the "relational and logical mind."

Dark peripatetic walking as a "return to self"

In the intimate, autobiographical voice with which she writes about herself in the wild; in foregrounding experiences of a female body; and in hiking the PCT alone, Strayed subverts the figure of the adventuring explorer in nature with her walking.

Paul C. Adams describes two kinds of walking that Western society practices: "light peripatetic" and "dark peripatetic." Light peripatetic is associated with solitude, simplicity, and idyll; in short, it connotes a Romantic strolling (193-194). Adams cites Thoreau's essay "Walking" as an example of light peripatetic, in which, for Thoreau, walking is an essential, routine part of each day. Dark peripatetic is a more ominous form of walking. Adams writes that "the dark peripatetic motif signals that the bonds of society have been torn, or a character's identity is beginning to dissolve, or both" (196). The dark peripatetic walker is seen to walk "out of doors, out of society, out of community, out of normal reality, and perhaps even out of life itself" (196). Adams associates dark peripatetic with walking in urban spaces, driven by a sense of leaving, or being forced to leave, society.

Extending Adams' concept of the dark peripatetic, we might follow the dark peripatetic walker away from an urban setting and into the wilderness. Here we might find Strayed. By the time she sets out to embark on the PCT, she has transgressed a number of social norms that have taken her to the edge of society and her existence: she has been unfaithful in her marriage, which has now fallen apart; she regularly takes drugs (though does not consider herself an addict); she is struggling with depression after the death of her mother; she is emotionally isolated as significant relationships with her family and wider networks have collapsed, and she has almost no money and no plans for the immediate future. We can see in Strayed a figure poised at the edge of what could be conceived as the limit of what is bearable.[19]

The impulse of dark peripatetic is *away from;* the dark peripatetic walker transgresses by going against, or existing outside of society's norms, walking "perhaps out of life itself (Adams 196). However, while Strayed's sense of identity, and her connections with society, have come to feel tenuous, I do not insinuate that she sees hiking the PCT as an act that leads her away from life and into death. While her reasoning for embarking on the hike comes from a place of desperation, it is not a desperate act; while Strayed is unprepared for the rigours of the hike, her inexperience does not equal failure. While Adams interprets dark peripatetic walking as dire, it is possible also to interpret this impulse to walk *away from* as radical and empowering.

On the trail, Strayed discovers that she is comfortable alone. There is a passage in *Wild* that, while being deceptively short, is remarkable for how it comments on solitude as a transgressive and transformative state for a woman to seek out and ultimately feel at home in:

> Alone had always felt like an actual place to me, as if it weren't a state of being, but rather a room where I could retreat to be who I really was. The *radical aloneness* [emphasis mine] of the PCT had altered that sense. Alone wasn't a room anymore, but the whole wide world, and now I was alone in that world, occupying it in a way I never had before (119).

There are two important points in this passage; the first is that Strayed feels most herself when she is alone, and the second that her understanding of aloneness has shifted. Reading Strayed's walking

[19] Another figure that comes to mind when thinking about dark peripatetic walking is Christopher McCandless in *Into the Wild*, who rejects contemporary society and walks into the wilderness, although the same set of personal circumstances does not apply to McCandless.

as dark peripatetic allows us to see the act of walking as a radical "return to the self." John Barbour, from whom I have borrowed this phrase, explains that "[s]olitude . . . is not oriented toward escaping the world, but toward a different kind of participation in it, as made possible by the disengagement from ordinary social interactions. Solitude is a return to the self" (201-202).[20] Hiking alone, Strayed finds that her participation in the world has changed—and it is through her solitudinous experience that this occurs. There is a safety, a self-containment, in Strayed's solitude—which counters the narrative that for women in particular, the wilderness contains danger and threat. As Kam points out, it is not wild animals that present the greatest threat to Strayed; it is a pair of hunters who encounter her campsite (Kam 363).

Reading Strayed's walking in *Wild* as dark peripatetic suggests a framework for understanding women's walking in the wild; how, in seeking solitude and relying on no-one else, the female walker rejects what society expects of women. Women are not, culturally speaking, encouraged to seek out either solitude or wild places. As nature writing has historically suggested, wild terrain is male terrain. Claiming autonomy and seeking out solitude, as Strayed does in *Wild,* suggests a particular experience of wildness that resonates with Thoreau's understanding of it as "self-willedness" (Turner 111). When I was hiking in Scotland, I often found myself thinking of the word "meniscus" as one that encapsulated this sense of feeling whole and un-tugged-at in a way I hadn't before; long after, thinking of that time, the phrase "radical self-containment" seemed to me to describe this phenomenon in more critical, scholarly language.[21] It seems to me that Strayed and I both experienced the same kind of wildness in our respective landscapes, in the autonomy found in solitude, in existing beyond the reach of extrinsic forces. In this experience of wildness, walking, the natural world, and solitude are entwined and essential to the other: wildness is both an embodied and internal experience.

[20] Kam discusses how Barbour's "return to the self" occurs when the subject is freed from the various social and domestic responsibilities they would normally be bound by. She speculates that isolation, or solitude, is generally discouraged in the individual as it endangers the functionality of society. This criticism seems particularly relevant in relation to women, as it highlights their roles as home-makers in a patriarchal society.

[21] To the best of my knowledge this phrase is my own.

This interpretation is just one way of thinking about what Sarah E. McFarland calls "the reconstruction of the concept of nature itself" (45) that she argues women's nature writing can bring about, that will "integrat[e] the interests of actual women into an actual wilderness" (45). As Anderson and Cook discuss, women's writing about nature can broaden how we think of nature writing by foregrounding a focus on the personal, evincing Cook's "plurality of voices," and deploying other forms like memoir, short stories, and journal entries to write about our relationship with the environment. McFarland thinks that by disrupting the notion of the solitary male "questing hero" (37), women-authored texts about being in nature refute "the myth of a womanless wilderness" (38).[22] Strayed, with *Wild,* joins the lineage of women writers who do this.

Strayed deliberately narrates her female embodiment in *Wild*. *Island Home* by Tim Winton, the memoir I will discuss in the next chapter, is also an account of an intimate connection with nature but is situated in a different memoir context to *Wild.* In *Island Home,* Winton does not make his body visible in the way that Strayed does. Is Winton's bypassing his body the reason that a literary, environmental edge is attributed to *Island Home* but not *Wild*? In the next chapter, I look at autobiographical embodiment in a different literary context to think through why female-authored memoirs about nature, like *Wild,* aren't read as ecocritical in the way that similar memoirs, but written by men, are.

[22] McFarland references the work of Susan Zwinger and Terry Tempest Williams here, but her thinking can be extended to the broader scope of women's nature writing as well.

CHAPTER THREE

ECO-AUTOBIOGRAPHY: GENDER, BODIES, AND TIM WINTON'S *ISLAND HOME*

In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii) and holds that "as a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman" (xix). While ecocriticism is not in itself a specific methodological approach, drawing instead on multiple theoretical perspectives (Bennett and Royle 162), a primary aim of the ecocritic is to question how the language with which we describe the environment affects our treatment and conceptualisation of it (Glotfelty xix). An ecocritical perspective can be applied to any kind of writing, from literature to environmental policy, that addresses, in some way, the relationship between people and the natural world, to discern our relationship with and perception of nature. However, as this chapter explores, it is vitally important to question whether there is a particular way we expect this relationship to appear and to be narrated, and what kinds of voices are privileged in this endeavour.

This chapter discusses Tim Winton's memoir *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir*, in which the narrator presents an intimate relationship with place. Both *Wild* and *Island Home* present an autobiographical narrator in an intimate relationship to the natural environment, and deal with the themes of embodiment and wildness. Yet these texts are situated in different contexts in the contemporary memoir genre. What is it about *Island Home* that makes the narrative more than a straightforward memoir about being in nature? Why is it easier to read *Wild* as memoir rather than ecocriticism? What would a genre of writing look like that addresses the particular ways the natural

world shapes our experience of self? This chapter uses these questions as a starting point from which to explore eco-autobiography as a mode of writing that is geared toward writing about landscape and simultaneously exploring the self.[23] Investigating autobiographical embodiment and the body in nature—the central concerns of this thesis—in a context other than *Wild,* allows me to think about the theme of how bodies are read and written in landscapes in a literary context in which there currently exists little scholarship, presenting a broader understanding of how people write about themselves in place.

Often in nature writing, the inner life of the narrator is not typically a feature of the writing: but eco-autobiography foregrounds this element of the narrative. In foregrounding this personal perspective, eco-autobiography is poised as a mode of writing to change how we think about our relationship with place. The topic of our relationship with the environment in literature mobilises some of the current critical concerns in the world; global environmental crises, and the topics of identity, belonging, displacement, and sustainability. Examining how we write about our place in the natural world also implicates a key concern in nature writing: the anthropocentric divide between humans and the environment, and our responsibilities in navigating this.

In the previous chapter, I raised these questions: how do we expect an ecocritical narrator to present themselves? How does this narrator describe the natural world? How do they describe themselves? What kind of language do ecocritical texts deploy? These questions point to the fact that as readers, we hold different expectations for the narrator, language, voice, and style of a text depending on kind of book we expect we are reading. Ecocriticism draws from numerous scholarly areas like environmental sciences, anthropology, and landscape and cultural studies. It is less a theory and rather a critical perspective applied to literature that comments, in some way, on environmental concerns—and that, however subtly, narrates a relationship between humans and the natural world (Glotfelty xix; Bennett and Royle 162). In this chapter I question if there is a degree of prestige associated with ecocriticism. Are there assumptions about what constitutes ecocritical

[23] In discussing eco-autobiography, I look closely to the scholar Peter F. Perreten, whose essay "Eco-Autobiography: Portrait of Self/Self Portrait" is the only available scholarship on eco-autobiography at the time of writing.

ways to write? I propose that this largely has to do with how the narrator positions themselves in their environment.[24]

When I was reading *Wild,* a text about a woman's experience in wild places, I resisted thinking of the memoir as one that did ecocritical work. This suggested to me that the kind of embodied narrator Strayed presents is not one we value and trust when it comes to writing about the environment. Working closely with *Wild* made me think that the gender, and the gendered body of the narrator, is critical to how we read ecocritical texts. Looking at modes of life writing that engage with nature writing themes, this chapter explores *Island Home* as an example of an eco-autobiography that, like "Salt Marks" and *Wild,* is an account of a personal connection to landscape. Interaction with nature is a central theme in *Island Home*, yet the language, voice, and presence of the body appear very differently than in "Salt Marks" and *Wild*. This chapter unpacks the questions I offered in the beginning of this section, and explores assumptions, questions around language, and notions of prestige attached to ecocriticism in the context of eco-autobiography.

Eco-autobiography

Theorising a way to read narratives that exist at the nexus of life writing and landscape, Peter F. Perreten uses the term "eco-autobiography" to describe a text in which "the autobiographical self and the natural setting form a symbiotic relationship" (4), allowing the writer to find "a new self in nature" (1). Perreten maintains that the eco-autobiography is not so much a genre as "a class of landscape/life writing where the two elements work together to form a richly textured, nuanced text" (21). In his essay, in which he refers to works by Lisa Dale Norton, Annie Dillard, and N. Scott Momoday, Perreten identifies that "the autobiographical voice in each text is shaped by the

[24] As an example, Kathleen Jamie argues in "A Lone Enraptured Male" that there is danger in the kind of "honeyed" prose employed by writers like Robert Macfarlane when describing interactions with landscape—particularly ones that the author describes as wild. For Jamie, the danger is that the "I" will dominate what is ostensibly writing about the wild place itself. The land—the true subject of the writing—will be appropriated by the mediator (the writer). While Jamie's criticism doesn't apply in the case of eco-autobiography, in which the "I" is a central element of the narrative, her criticism points to how the potential for the narrating "I" to occlude and mediate is a contentious issue in much nature writing.

natural setting" (2), and that the structure of the text also reflects this close relationship between writer and setting.[25]

My interest is in Perreten's conception of eco-autobiography as a form distinct from ecobiography, a term Cecilia Konchar Farr and Phillip A. Syder coined, meaning "nonfiction autobiographical narratives centered on place" (Farr 94). Smith and Watson suggest that "[e]coautobiography can be . . . a textual place from which to call for an ethic of care for the environment" (161). The etymological differences between the terms "ecobiography" and "eco-autobiography" indicates the significantly different aims and ways we might read these respective modes of writing. Ella Soper-Jones draws attention to the fact that the term "ecobiography," in omitting "auto" from its title, becomes "ecosystem-life-writing" (40): the story of the ecological system rather the autobiographical self. Noting that *eco* derives from *oïkos,* meaning "home," Soper-Jones suggests that

> the term "ecobiography," through its elision of the autobiographical subject and through its substitution of that subject for the ecosystem of which the individual is but a part, denotes a new type of thinking about the relationship between the self and its "home" in nature (40-41).

Soper-Jones' reasoning allows that we might think of "ecobiography" as a narrative overtly and insistently geared toward ecological concerns, and "eco-autobiography" as one in which the *autos,* or self, is the ultimate concern.

"Eco-autobiography" is a relatively new term, and, with the exception of Perreten's essay, there is currently a lack of scholarship that discusses it—particularly in an Australian context, which offers exciting possibilities for autobiographical place writing, as I have argued elsewhere.[26] This is not to say, however, that there is a lack of scholarship on literature that has as its subject the

[25] Perreten also suggests that the eco-autobiography should include the narrator's earliest childhood memories, reasoning that our impressions of the environment are often influenced by experiences at that age. While there *are* passages in *Island Home* dwelling on Winton's childhood memories, I treat this criterion loosely in my discussion of eco-autobiographical writing, as I argue that a narrator can have formative experiences in the environment post-childhood that still create enduring impressions.

[26] I discuss this in my essay "Eco-Autobiography: Writing Self through Place" in the journal *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*.

relationship between people and the natural world. What it indicates, rather, is that there are a multitude of different ways to describe writing that is about self in place.

As I noted in the introduction to this exegesis, fields like nature writing, landscape studies, cultural studies, and anthropology, among others, study relations between humans and the environment. In the field of life writing, books like *Ecology and Life Writing* by Alfred Hornung and Zhao Baisheng, and in an Australian context, *Strangers at Home: Place, Belonging, and Australian Life Writing* by Jack Bowers explore our relationship with nature and place. The Australian poet Mark Tredinnick's anthology of essays *A Place of Earth: An Anthology of Nature Writing from Australia and North America* gathers place-writing from across two continents, merging what is an established tradition of nature writing in North America with what Tredinnick argues is still an emerging one in Australia.[27]

I encountered the term "eco-autobiography" searching for theoretical perspectives that described writing that foregrounds both autobiographical self-exploration and a way of writing about nature that sees the tangible, geographical characteristics of natural landscapes as having a formative effect on the narrator. I discovered that talking about nature, and wild places, and the wilderness, is complex. What do we mean by nature, exactly? Does nature refer to landscapes, and their various geological and ecological features? Does nature mean the wilderness, or the small-scale wildlife found in the shrubbery of a suburban garden? Are humans part of nature? This conversation is also fraught with the danger of perpetuating an anthropocentric worldview, risking reinforcing a conceptual divide between the non-human natural world, and the (also natural) human species. As Scott Hess observes, the environment ultimately suffers as a result of this divide (85). The term "nature" can also be problematic when it is utilised in binary thinking that sees femininity aligned with primitive nature, and masculinity with superior culture, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Ecocriticism, ecofeminism, feminist geography, and deep ecology are all ways of thinking and critiquing that emerged as responses to the difficult endeavour of defining and representing

[27] In this chapter I concentrate predominantly on ecocriticism and nature writing in an Australian context as Tim Winton is an Australian writer.

nature in literature and contemporary thinking. The ecocritic Lawrence Buell, for example, uses the word "environment" to describe "the world outside the observer regardless of how it is perceived," and uses "place" for "environment as subjectively located and defined" (508). In this work I interchangeably use the terms "nature," "the environment," and "the natural world" in acknowledgement of the shifting terrain of this terminology.

Environmental concerns—how we define nature; how we position our relationship with it; and how the language we use can privilege particular narratives and perceptions—is a core concern of ecocriticism. The questions that Glotfelty raises for ecocriticism to ask—"How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?" and "In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?" (xix)—are ones that popular writing increasingly addresses, for instances the work of climate change activist Tim Flannery, the "cli-fi" novelist James Bradley, and Tim Winton. Winton's memoir *Island Home* is both an exploration of how landscape has shaped Winton, and what one reviewer calls "a cultural call to arms" to protect the environment (Hanson). It deploys a personal perspective to impart the message that the landscapes of Australia are endangered and we urgently need to shift our attitude towards the country. This message situates Winton alongside other contemporary Australian writers like Flannery and Bradley. Yet the fact that *Island Home* is a memoir is significant. It is not a scientific essay, as Flannery writes, or a novel set in a future climate change disaster, like *Clade*, by Bradley. This suggests that a nonfiction address serves Winton's message in a way that fiction would fail to do.

In the following, in exploring how we might read *Island Home* as an eco-autobiography, I examine how a personal perspective changes and adds urgency to Winton's agenda of protecting the environment. But personal accounts of nature, as I have explored in the previous chapter, are not necessarily read on the same playing field. My aim in this chapter is to explore what kind of voice and language characterize eco-autobiography. The following discussion centers primarily on the lyrical yet scientific language Winton uses, and the manner in which he writes about his body in the

text, to question if there are elements of prestige and notions of "literariness" at work in eco-autobiographical narratives that privilege a disembodied, (male) intellectual voice and exclude other modes of writing.

Island Home

During a period of three years, using underwater lures and cameras, a team of marine biologists discovered twenty new species of fish in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The team named most of the fish after Aboriginal place names—and they also named one species after Winton, in recognition for the author's conservationist work. Upon learning of this, Winton remarked: "When I first heard about this little fish, you know, the greenie in me thought, 'Well, I wonder what kind of fish it is and I wonder what its habits are and what its habitat is.' Then the redneck in me thought, 'Well, I wonder what it tastes like?'" (Tan).

Winton occupies a curious place in the Australian literary scene as he is acclaimed in both the literary and popular cultural spheres.[28] Wry humour and an ambivalent environmentalist leaning is characteristic of Winton's writing, and is indicative of Winton as a narrator in *Island Home.* Winton cares deeply about the preservation of the environment about which he writes, yet does not position himself as an environmental activist. However, as the marine biologists recognised, Winton *is* known for his environmental work; most notably in the campaign to save the Ningaloo Reef in 2003, to which he donated $25,000 of prize money. Place and landscape are recurring themes in his work—particularly the people and places on the western coast of Australia where he grew up.[29] "Landscape has exerted a kind of force upon me that is every bit as geological as family" (10), he writes in *Island Home.* "Space was my primary inheritance. I was formed by gaps, nurtured in the long pauses between people" (18). Arranged thematically rather than chronologically, the narrative of *Island*

[28] In *The Environmental Imagination,* Lawrence Buell claims the same thing was true of Thoreau, which suggests an interesting parallel between the prestige and popularity associated with both writers and their respective literary cultures.

[29] While *Island Home* is a memoir, Winton is best known for his fiction, which is nationally and internationally acclaimed; he has won the Miles Franklin Award four times, The Australian/Vogel Literary Award, and been shortlisted twice for The Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

Home dwells on Australia's political, cultural, Indigenous and ecological history, and moves between Winton's early childhood years growing up in suburban Perth and the whaling port of Albany, his years as a student at WA Institute of Technology (now Curtin University), and his later adult life and forays into environmental activism. The memoir is comprised of ten main chapters, each preceded by a short chapter titled simply with a place name and a year. Breaking from the retrospective narrative of the main chapters, these shorter sections are written in present tense, and recount immersive experiences in different landscapes that the following chapter loosely centres on, evoking for the reader formative, sensory experiences that occurred in these places.

Winton writes from both an ecological and personal perspective about a connection to Australian landscapes; the language he uses at times displays a sophisticated, scientific knowledge of the places he is so familiar with, and at other times, his language draws deeply on the colloquial. Through both modes, he explores how his interactions with landscape has shaped him, and in turn, given shape to his understanding of place. *Island Home* has been called both "a lovesong to Australia" (Norbury) and "a cultural call to arms" (Hanson); this memoir is an intimate place-paean with a strong ecological message.

Sensation as knowledge

In the chapter "Settlers at the Edge," which occurs in the second section of *Island Home,* Winton recounts playing as a child in a patch of scrub and swamp in Karrinyup, an outer suburb of Perth. He writes:

> Through swathes of reeds and sedges the steely surface of the lake appeared like the suddenly opened eye of God. Waterbirds rose from it in clouds. At the peaty shore *everything hissed and trembled* [emphasis mine]. We searched for lost toddlers down there, went out in phalanxes to recover dogs or bikes. We lit fires and fought them, *felt the land heat and cool underfoot* [emphasis mine]. Even the meekest of us went a little wild down there and we only came home when darkness fell and mothers began to bellow from every back step on the street (43).

Physical sensation resonates in this passage: the temperature of the land underfoot; the shudder and sound of the shore in constant motion. The narrative slips into plural first-person "we," suggesting a

universality to the experience of these children as they immerse themselves in this volatile, enthralling environment. Landscape is something to be plumbed and tested here, something against which one is pitted: there is a sense of constant physical engagement with the environment, alongside the child's deep curiosity to know how the world around them works.

In a short, pre-chapter section entitled "Trigg Island, 1966," six-year-old Winton climbs down into a pile of rocks at the beach.[30] "Inside the rock it's another world," he writes. "The beach noise, that white roar, is muted. There's no wind, no voices, no gulls. It's so quiet the intermittent subsea gurgles and burps sound impossibly loud and close" (54). When he presses his ear to the sand, the ground hisses. The rocks hang low, forcing the narrator to crawl on his belly to avoid gouging his back. Deep in the rock, an incoming wave takes him by surprise: "[I]t rifles through the chambers, spitting, gurgling. The wind of it ruffles my hair like the approach of a train in a tunnel and instantly I'm scrambling for escape. By the time I make it to the vertical shaft the cave is awash. As whitewater wrenches at my shorts I get a handhold and scuttle up into the sun like a startled crab" (56). The language Winton uses is vivid, attentive, and sensory. He notes the scent of the air, and how "the atmosphere is wet and heavy. You can feel the weight of the rock hanging over you, pressing without quite touching" (55). A young couple are secluded in the rocks and the narrator passes by them, unnoticed—he becomes part of the landscape, wholly immersed in it. "It's the secret place, the private space I'm seeking" (56), Winton writes. This passage speaks of boyhood, of exploration, of challenging his fear of the elements, of isolation and throughout all, the narrator's connection through physical sensation. The texture of the sand and the jagged rock are details on which the narrator focusses; he knows himself, grounds himself, through embodied experience.

[30] Perreten suggests that "place portraits" are core components of eco-autobiography, an element of the narrative akin to a portrait of the character of place. The short, present-tense sections in *Island Home* like "Trigg Island, 1966" can easily be read as place portraits that contextualise the coming chapter.

Following the short section "Trigg Island 1966," in the chapter "Barefoot and Unhurried" Winton reflects on childhood, watching his grandchild play, "taking the world in through their skin" (57). Thinking about how children interact with their environment, he continues:

> On hands and knees, on their naked bellies, they feel it with an immediacy we can scarcely recall as adults. Remember all that wandering and dithering as you crossed the same ground again and again? It wouldn't have seemed so at the time but with all that apparently aimless mooching you were weaving a tapestry of arcane lore . . . I had a feel for the blossom time of the wattle, the up-close leafiness of lichen. I knew the pong of kelp and seagrass signified the arrival of the afternoon breeze (58).

Like Winton's memories of the swamp in Karrinyup, which were comprised of smell, sound, and touch, he explores here how the child learns of their surroundings through the senses, through information registered on the skin. In this passage, the naked skin, the "apparently aimless mooching," and the scent and sight of the plant life are three ways in which the child learns their environment. In thinking about how children learn—how *he* learnt as a child—Winton sets up an understanding of the environment that is dependent on the body as the site by which information is registered. Winton recalls: "And now when I think of the sense memory of bindies and doublegees underfoot, and all those stubbed toes and sand-scorched soles, the splinters in the meat of the thumb, the ticks in the back of the neck and the shrivelling sting of sunburn, I grant these sensations the status of knowledge" (59). The child absorbs and learns unconsciously: learning is *felt* before it is known.

The idea of sensation as knowledge is a central element of Winton's autobiographical voice*;* physical sensation is what links the dual gaze that eco-autobiography applies to both person and place.

The invisible body

While we can read physical sensation as a key aspect of the narrator's connection to place, there is an intriguing tension in the narrative around the body itself. The ambiguity I referred to earlier in reference to Winton's narrative stance manifests in what I came to think of as the invisibility of Winton's body. Winton is notoriously private about his personal life, and even in the text his wife

and child, who appear occasionally, remain unnamed. The memoir rarely dwells on other characters. However, in a chapter toward the middle of the book entitled "Waychinicup, 1987," the focus of the narrative shifts to incorporate another person in the landscape alongside Winton. As a youth, Winton was intrigued by Frank Cooper, a hermit he encountered when frequenting a hidden inlet on the south coast. The hermit remains a strangely poignant figure for Winton. When the narrator visits the site years later just before going overseas with his family, he finds that the hut in which Cooper lived is gone, and most signs of his inhabitancy have disappeared. For the narrator, the place is still an enigmatic one, "unsettling and unknowable" (122); he experiences a metaphoric shifting of the ground beneath his feet, evoking a palimpsest perspective of place made of these shifting and existing layers:

> It'll always be precious to me, but it's odd, standing here, beginning to see the place in retrospect already. I'm right on site, feet on the ground and fully present, but it all feels as if it's begun to slip from my grasp. A twinge of foreboding passes through me. Will it be like this a few years hence, when we eventually fly home, the whole country suddenly faint and strange? (122).

This passage is one of the rare times in the text when Winton articulates rather than implies his embodiment with the mention of his "feet on the ground." While he often describes physical experiences like walking, swimming, and exploring, using vivid, sensory language, he makes almost no mention of his actual physical body; it remains out of sight, existing as a site for absorbing knowledge, not as a thing to be written about itself. Even in the above quoted passage, the articulation of the narrator's feet serves a metaphoric representation of his body, recalling the expression of the ground moving beneath one's feet, rather than describing the narrator's immediate, embodied state as a point of focus itself.

The image Winton creates here of the narrator standing in a shifting landscape—in both a physical and remembered sense—is one that is at once embodied and disembodied. He stands at a site that was once familiar, that is now rendered different by temporal change. When he reflects "It'll always be precious to me, but it's odd, standing here, beginning to see the place is retrospect already" (122), traces of what the autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin describes as the

"dynamic, changing, and plural self" (98) are palpable. The narrator can almost connect with the younger version of himself. Yet the physical place is not the same, and because of these changes, the narrator's connection to a past self, or selves, is imperilled, shaken loose. The narrator sees his succession of selves diminishing, moving away beyond the point where he can connect with them in his memory. He wonders if, by the time he returns, the country will have become "faint and strange" (122)—and perhaps he wonders if his memories of the place will become the same. This portrayal suggests a sense of inextricability between place and self that renders the geographic site as the nexus between present and old selves and bodies. The narrator is locating and reading himself in this particular landscape, recalling Eakin's idea that in narrating our lives, we create ourselves.[31]

Embodiment needs to be unpacked in this example and throughout *Island Home,* because the disembodied voice of the narrator ultimately originates in a body (Smith and Watson 71); embodiment is narrated deliberately. In this memoir, Winton does not make his body visible in the way that, for example, Strayed does in *Wild.* Is this because he doesn't "need" to, in order to tell this particular story? Or that he deliberately chooses not to? Is Winton's bypassing his body what gives *Island Home* its literary, environmental edge as a memoir about nature? The absence of it suggests that writing about the body is seen as out of place in this literary mode. It is not an object of focus, which suggest that in this context, the body is not noteworthy in the way that the "true" subject of the narrative is: the landscape.[32]

In raising these questions I seek to draw attention to "cultural discourses defining and distinguishing the cultural norms of embodiment" (Smith and Watson 54) in the context of memoirs about intimate connections with nature, and how these discourses differ depending on assumptions about whether a woman or man is the memoir's author. In observing how *Wild* and *Island Home* are

[31] See *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* by Paul John Eakin.

[32] For some readers, the lack of a body in the narrative might distance them from the narrator. The autobiography scholar Phillipe Lejeune uses the term "the autobiographical pact" to describe the contract that occurs between the reader and author of the text, whereby the reader trusts that the author whose name appears on the book cover is the person to whom the autobiographical "I" refers. See Smith and Watson (*Reading Autobiography*) for further discussion on the various "I"s that exist in autobiography. Nonfiction narratives are an effective vehicle to relaying messages because a reader may be more drawn to and trust a personal account. However, if an aspect of the author's personas is withheld this may lessen, even minutely, a sense of intimacy, and the reader may become less invested in the narrative.

perceived as different "kinds" of memoirs while both being narratives exploring a connection with nature, we can see how some bodies, voices, and narratives are valued above others, like the trope of the male explorer, rather than the solo female adventurer.

Lyricism, language, landscape

Paying attention to the language Winton uses to describe landscape lets us see connections between eco-autobiography and genres of nature writing that are valued for their literary associations with scientific acumen. These connections suggest that there is a degree at elitism at work in eco-autobiography whereby a particular language is used to describe the environment—and I propose that this a significant factor in why texts like *Wild,* that do not present this sophisticated, environmental knowledge, might fail to be read as ecocritical. I have focussed my discussion on the presentation of the body in the narrative thus far, but language is how embodiment is narrated, and as such, is vitally important. Winton's language is by turns lyrical, colloquial, and scientific. In discussing it now, I seek to show how in *Island Home*, the sophisticated, literary language that characterises much of nature writing is characteristic of this eco-autobiography as well.

There is a deeply Australian colloquial element to Winton's writing. He uses words like "dunnies" (130), "undies" (107), and "bloke" (120), and for readers for whom these are often-used words, this language might create a sense of familiarity, and therefore increased trust in Winton as a mediator between places that feel, and sound, familiar to an Australian readership.

Yet Winton's language is not limited to an "Aussie" vernacular. He uses scientific language to convey his expertise and authority, meticulously naming the plants and wildlife in the landscapes he explores. Where Strayed writes about "grass," "flowers," and "trees" (191), as Rebecca Giggs notes, for Winton, "[a] tree is never simply a tree — it's a karri, a tinglewood, a peppermint" (Gibbs). Using language that appeals to a reader's sense of familiarity, and is simultaneously knowledgeable about natural habitat, reinforces the authority of this memoir to impart a specific environmental agenda. As I noted earlier, Winton's narrator presents as an ambiguous activist. The

mode of eco-autobiographical writing may allow for this ambiguity. The narrator is appealing without being polemical, and the focus of the text is dispersed across environmental concerns and Winton's more personal stories.

Considering the lyricism of Winton's language is significant because of what this connotes in relation to genre. Robert Macfarlane maintains that a mark of the most commendable nature writing is the use of precise, lyrical language, and suggests that lyricism is about precision, rather than writing that "epiphanise[es] for its own sake" (Stenning 81). Tredinnick too thinks that lyricism is an important characteristic of writing about place: it is "a way of being in the world and registering the world," he maintains, and an apt way of writing about country because places are made of fragments and layers; they "don't run along narrative lines" ("The Lyric Stance"). Winton's language in *Island Home* is poetic and highly detailed; yet it is precise and attentive rather than overly reliant on metaphor. He uses language to imbue landscape with a sense of aliveness. Describing Australia, he writes:

> Even out in the shimmering distance where the horizon slips and crawls implausibly in the heat, the land twitches and ticks, forever threatening to foreground itself and take over the show. The island insists, it continues to confound, enchant and appal. It fizzes, groans, creaks and roars at the perpetual edge of consciousness (27).

In three sentences, the land is doing many things here. Twitching, ticking, fizzing, groaning, creaking and roaring are sounds and movements occurring in the land itself, but it also confounds, enchants, and appals, which are effects experienced by, presumably, the people who inhabit the land. "Out in the farthest distance, as if suspended in an ether of melaleuca breath, an intense blue-green haze softens the demarcation between land and sky" (197), he writes later, using a metaphor specific to native Australian flora.

The choice of language in this metaphor feels deliberate, and might provide an answer to what Tredinnick thinks is a problem for Australian writing about nature: that it lacks a distinctive voice. He posits: "Nature writing asks the writer to listen to the world beyond the merely human. This literature, at its best, is a kind of landscape witness. It engages—lyrically, intellectually, reflectively . . . It speaks not only about but from the landscape itself. It is nature, writing"

("Catching"). Noting that Australian literature lacks the kind of lineage of nature writing that North American and British literature has, he thinks that thus far, Australian places "remain pretty silent" in the majority of nature writing ("Catching"), and asks why Australia has not produced the volume of essayists "in whose writing the land itself seems to speak" (*A Place on Earth* 38) that exists in the works of American nature writers. He makes an appeal for a "post-pastoral" Australian literature of place:

> We need a literature that sees and expresses the placeness—if you like, the hereness—of places; engages with their nature, ecologically imagined, regardless of how paved and built upon they are, how farmed or gardened, how forested or cleared. This is what nature writing at its best—though it has leaned, admittedly, toward the charismatic wild places, the mountains and the trees—has always attempted ("Catching").

For Tredinnick, the issue of a landscape "speaking" is one of central importance. Yet how *might* a landscape speak? The eco-autobiography, with its dual gaze on person and place, complicates the idea of a sole autobiographical voice in the narrative. Should the voice "belong" to the narrator or the landscape? It could, perhaps, speak for both. Thinking about how writers give nature a voice, Nancy Simmons observes that speaking "for" nature can mean both advocating for the environment—which aligns with ecocritical aims—or speaking on behalf of nature, which is altogether different, and a far more complex ethical dilemma (223).[33] While Winton speaks *for* landscape in the sense that he advocates for it from an environmental position, he does not attempt to speak *as* the landscape.

The personification of nature—and anthropocentricism more broadly—is a contentious issue that writing about the environment must navigate. Andrew Croome thinks that while places can be characterised in writing, they cannot be characters themselves, as they do not possess agency. "They hold sway on us, they affect us, they change us, they define us and haunt us," he writes, but notes that these things are ultimately "self-inflicted; to do with us and how we perceive the places we inhabit, and not something innate to the places themselves" (Croome). What is a place, he asks, but your perception, experience, history, and stories of it?

[33] This is a core concern for environmental writing. For further reading see work by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm; Lawrence Buell; and Scott Hess among others.

Place, in Winton's writing, mostly reflects Croome's thinking. In the chapter "The Power of Place," which occurs toward the end of the memoir, Winton questions what he calls "the presence of the past" (146), and what, exactly, this might be:

> Sometimes your senses are distorted by 'mere' geology . . . Walking through old mine diggings where the land has been laid waste forever, I feel a queasiness, a sense of reproach so direct it seems to come from the place itself. And I don't believe my sorrow and agitation are only projection, for these feelings are not so different to the creeping shame and awe you're subject to at the scene of any violent crime. You feel the dead, the afterglow of experience (146).

What Winton describes here is the experience of a sense of place, or what Linda Lappin might call the *genius loci*: the indwelling spirit of a place. When we speak about the *genius loci*, according to Lappin, we are referring to "the atmosphere or ambience of a place, or the qualities of its environment" ("Mapping"). In registering a disturbing sensation for which he cannot account, Winton's narrator speaks directly to a connection with landscape, a sense of interaction rather than observation. Winton reflects: "You ask yourself: Did something terrible happen here? Or is this resonance just a signal of the life force in the country? In spots like these it can be a relief to find evidence of ancient culture because it makes some sense of the uncanny sensation" (147).

This point, where Winton thinks about a pre-existing culture's relationship to place—and I am returning here to the issue of how a landscape might speak and who gives voice to this speaking—raises issues around indigeneity and inhabitation. Winton wonders if the distinction between the power of a place, and the echo of the people who have been there, may not be something that for an Aboriginal Australian "credits a distinction" (147). For some people, a connection to place may not be distinct from their sense of self. Winton is a non-Indigenous man writing about a personal connection to a country that has been colonised. Jack Bowers observes, "as soon as we try to give shape to [place], even to name it, we begin the process of viewing, selecting, framing and inscribing ourselves within it from our own point of view" (10). Here, the eco-autobiography stumbles into uncertain territory.

Issues that pertain to how belonging is articulated, and whose voices a non-Indigenous person's narrative might erase, need careful negotiation. As Bowers argues, navigating notions of

belonging for non-Indigenous Australians is a fraught process (14). Similarly, Peter Read asks: "How can we non-Indigenous Australians justify our continuous presence and our love for this country while the Indigenous people remain dispossessed and their history unacknowledged?" (Read 1 qtd. in Bowers 14). For Tom Lynch also, this is a problematic aspect of the genre that he calls the "eco-memoir." He argues:

> the degree that the genre works to generate a 'becoming native to this place' sense of belonging among members of settler-colonial societies . . . can be seen to at least unintentionally supplant, replace, or efface Indigenous claims to prior and, more importantly, to continuing belonging. It could be seen, if not physically, then at least discursively, to eliminate the native (Lynch).

Gillian Whitlock makes a similar observation: "Australian eco biography and nature writing more generally struggle to escape the sinews of settler memory in nation and narration" (568). A central tenet of eco-autobiography is that the narrator explores a formative connection with landscape, that in some way, has an effect on their experience of selfhood. The issue of Indigenous perspectives to country, and cultural understandings of what comprises belonging, indicates a limit to eco-autobiography's usefulness as a mode of autobiographical place writing.

Eco-autobiographical limits

In thinking about *Island Home* in relation to eco-autobiography, I have sought to identify what characterises eco-autobiography as a mode of writing, and consider why it might be a useful and relevant mode of contemporary life narrative. Issues of voice, language, and the ethics of representation are at stake in the eco-autobiography, an area that is fresh terrain. In a time when global attention is turned increasingly to human-inflicted damage to the environment, the eco-autobiography is positioned as a crucially important mode of telling stories of human life deeply entwined with place. This is a mode that offers possibility for finding ways to speak for nature. The memoir boom, from the 1990s on, that scholars like Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, G. Thomas Couser, Mary Karr, and Julie Rak have named and discussed, speaks to the crucial role that memoir plays as a mode whereby the reader is privy to "the story of the self" (Eakin 58). Eco-autobiography

is a mode in which it is not only the traditional, human subject at the centre of the story, but also the land itself.

Thinking about nonfiction in response to the Anthropocene—the "new human-dominated geological epoch" (Lewis and Maslin 171)—David Carlin describes as the "posthuman" a turn of thinking that addresses "the normative privileging of the human over the nonhuman in our thinking, and the consequences of ascribing qualities such as agency, memory and affect only to the human" (5). For Carlin, a critical question that the posthuman raises is: "What is it about the way we humans conceive of ourselves as having a special and separate status within the world of things that reinforces the lack of care within our actions as to their effects on others, human and nonhuman?" (4).

Hybrid forms of personal nature writing are emerging that suggest this question will be a critical one in the twenty-first century. We might look, for instance, to the tradition of new nature writing—a contentious term describing the work of what is largely a British cohort of writers including Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane, and Richard Mabey. New nature writing marks a shift away from "the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer," as Jason Cowley writes in a special issue of *Granta* called "The New Nature Writing" (Cowley), and works to "redefine" nature (Bracke "Seeing"). Joe Moran holds that new nature writing addresses "the complexities of the ecological crisis [that] need to be met by open-ended and polymorphic forms of writing which combine ecopolitical engagement with a personal voice" (59). Moran posits that this "personal witness" (59) characterises new nature writing, which takes an intimate approach to "everyday connections" (50) with the non-human natural world—a stance that departs from traditions of nature writing that see "nature" as the exotic and the far-away.

Eco-autobiography is in many ways poised as an ideal mode of writing to navigate the human/nonhuman divide that posthuman thinking addresses. The exploration in this chapter, however, has revealed that there are some limitations to the scope of eco-autobiography that remain unresolved, and that would benefit from further study in this area. The anecdote concerning

Winton's response to a fish species being named after him illustrates a tension between activism and restraint in *Island Home.* Winton is an ambivalent activist. His unwillingness to commit to a singular mode of writing in *Island Home*—a memoirist's personal address, or an environmental perspective that aligns with nature writing—might prove provocative or problematic for some readers, for whom this ambiguity in genre might be frustrating rather than intriguing. Winton wants his readers to care about landscape in the way that he does, and turns to his own life to persuade the reader—yet he is unwilling to be a focus of the text in the way that landscape is. One way to think of *Island Home*, then, might be as ecobiography rather than eco-autobiography, with the former term gesturing, as Soper-Jones points out, to the etymologically implicit elision of the self; in this case, the corporeality of the subject. But, ultimately, eco-autobiography is valuable as a mode of life writing because it is not just the individual, human subject that is the topic of the narrative.

Winton's descriptive language, and a focus in his writing that avoids narrating his embodied presence in the places he writes about so intimately, raises questions of literariness. Is there an elitist, literary mode of writing associated with eco-autobiographies that might exclude some kinds of writers? For instance, those whose writing foregrounds the body, and whose language does *not* deploy scientific, ecological knowledge? Traditionally, nature writing has a masculine, scientific association; in nature writing genres, women's voices have often been excluded. If, in the context of eco-autobiography, the same value is placed on this masculine voice that, as Lorraine Anderson notes, prioritises the intellectual above the emotional, women's experiences risk being elided.

The body is key to this. In *Island Home*, the disconnect that exists between the theme of sensation as knowledge—that is, the paramount importance of a sensory interaction with landscape—and the way Winton fails to bring his body into view, suggests that the topic of gendered bodies, like the issues of voice, language, and representation, is at stake in eco-autobiography. This reflects another aspect of privilege that eco-autobiography potentially perpetuates—a masculine one—that is intrinsically linked to real-world experience, for either a solitary explorer of remote coastal landscapes in Western Australia, or a solitary female hiker on the

predominantly male-dominated PCT. Are female and male writers able to choose in the same way when to make visible their bodies and when to leave them out of the picture? Looking at *Wild* and *Island Home* as examples, I argue that this is not the case. If the body is to remain out of sight for an ecocritical status to be attributed to the text, memoirs like *Wild* that foreground intimate bodily experiences that are often women's, are excluded from being recognised as both ecocritical and eco-autobiographical.

CONCLUSION

Miriam Lancewood is a striking woman. Her smile is wide and generous, her teeth white and straight; her long, thick hair tumbles over her shoulder; her eyes are an arresting blue. In many of the photos, she is wearing tank tops. Her tanned stomach shows clearly defined abdominal muscles; her shoulders and arms are muscled too and her large hands grip either an axe, a rifle, a walking staff, or draw back an arrow on a bow. In most of the photos her eyes look to a point beyond the camera and her wide smile is fixed in place.

I am looking online at pictures of Lancewood, aged thirty-four, the author of the memoir *Woman in the Wilderness: A Story of Survival, Love and Self-Discovery in New Zealand*. Some of the photos are of Lancewood in natural settings—forests, waterfalls, and rivers, going about tasks like hunting, bushwalking, and setting up camp; activities that we are to presume comprise her daily life. Some of the photos are of her in interviews, on her book cover, in stills from YouTube videos. Occasionally, some of the photos are intimate ones—or posed to appear so—between Lancewood and her partner Peter, who is thirty years her senior. Peter's shoulder-length grey hair is thick and wavy, his skin weathered. In comparison, Lancewood looks even more glowing; her face tilts up to him, her wide smile almost adoring. They make a striking couple.

I scroll further through the photos, an uncomfortable feeling growing more and more persistent. If Lancewood was thirty years older, and less conventionally attractive, what would her marketed image be? Surely not this almost-Amazonian woman: young, strong, capable, and beautiful. The perfect "wild" woman.

Lancewood's memoir was published in 2017, when I was nearing the end of this thesis. I was curious to read this account of a woman learning to hunt and skin wildlife to survive. Yet after I finished reading *Woman in the Wilderness* I felt deeply uncomfortable. Unpacking the source of

my misgivings, I share here what Lancewood made me think about, because she embodies but also rejects some of the enduring ideas around women in the wilderness—which ultimately became a key theme in my research on bodies in landscapes.

Lancewood proselytizes about nature as a wild paradise—for instance, she describes the South Island of New Zealand as "the truly pristine wilderness" (852)—with language that conjures a romantic idea of "the wild" and perpetuates a deeply uncomfortable settler-colonial obliviousness.[34] This was my initial issue with the memoir. This criticism could be unpacked further but I want to focus here on Lancewood herself as a subject and how she can be read. Because, after noting the issues I felt were problematic in the text, I realised that it is how Lancewood presents herself—or, perhaps more accurately, how she is presented—in terms of her public image that was the true source of my discomfort.

I am deeply wary of the idea of a "wild woman," who, in the wild, embraces her "savage self."[35] Lest this sound contradictory to what I have focussed on in this thesis: I am resistant to the above kind of wording—which is a language often utilized to describe women's experiences in nature—because it implies that a woman existing in the wilderness is something rare and deviant. The wording says: look at this woman being tough. She is in an environment away from what she knows—and where we usually see her. Look at her rejecting the role of the conventional woman.[36] The image of a wild woman that this language suggests reinforces the dichotomy that Astrid Bracke names: women as passive, domestic, and valued; or women as "wild," primitive, and inferior. The

[34] The way Lancewood writes about the wilderness, and the deeply spiritual nature of existence that she professed to experience there raised numerous questions for me. How truly wild is the area where she and Peter lived? On a map, the Southern Alps are mountainous, snowed in, populated with glaciers—in short, suitably wild. Perhaps it was less the geographic area that bothered me, and more how Lancewood writes about living in the wild. She mentions how she occasionally ventures into a town, busks as a musician, and uses the money she earns to buy food essentials like flour and sugar. This idea of moving in and out of the wild made me wonder. Does this transition not somehow affect the authenticity of the experience of living in the wilderness if you know you will be venturing back into civilisation at some point soon? I experienced a persistent resistance to the way that Lancewood wrote about the landscape and her place in it, but this is a different discussion to what I focus on here.

[35] Lancewood appears in an episode of Richard Fidler's ABC radio podcast *Conversations,* in an episode entitled "My savage self: how Miriam Lancewood survived six years in the New Zealand wilderness." The description "savage self" struck me immediately for its association with the notion of the primitive, which is an ongoing and problematic connection made to women who thrive outside of spaces culturally allocated to them.

[36] This line of thinking of course necessitates a discussion of what a "conventional woman" means, and the acknowledgement that this varies immensely across different cultures. I am speaking here only of how women are regarded in a contemporary, Western, literary context.

tension between the self-sufficiency, skill, and strength that Lancewood possesses, and the impression her photos give of a beautiful woman treading barefoot through forests, seems pivotal to me, and indicative of how we struggle to accept the idea of women thriving in nature. It seems to make a caricature of the idea of women being at home in the wild; she can be, so long as she is pleasing to look at while being so. (I am reminded here of how flânerie was critiqued as exclusive because women were seen as passive spectacles rather than active, autonomous participants). Thinking about Lancewood, I am perturbed at how her physical attributes seem to be a strong factor of her appeal to an audience. In the cover image on her book, Lancewood stares into the distance, hair blown back in a breeze, a smile pinned in place as she clutches a walking stick and knife at her belt. Do all women who publish similar stories need to conform to this kind of image of alluring wildness to be successful? It is a troubling thought. Yet, while Lancewood's appearance—and the suggestion of sexual appeal in the photographs—is one that immediately caught my attention as a significant element of her intended appeal, from a different angle, there is another way to read the significance of this woman and this memoir.

Lancewood presents a refreshingly new take on the narrative of women in the wilderness. As far as the reader of her memoir is aware, no emotional or physical trauma drove her to seek out the wild as a way to recover. Lancewood leads this lifestyle purely out of curiosity and a desire to see how she—albeit in the company of her partner—will cope with solitude. Early on whilst writing this thesis, when I first started thinking about differences between *Wild* and *Island Home*, a key difference I noted was that Strayed intentionally sets out on a journey, whereas Winton doesn't follow a plot-driven narrative. Is it the case that when women set out to explore the world we assume this is for therapeutic purposes—like in Elizabeth Gilbert's travel memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*—whereas we assume men do the same but to explore the wilderness, not themselves? This suggests that for a woman to embark on a journey—to seek out terrain that is challenging in both a psychological and geographic sense—she does so because she is grieving, or wounded, seeking to recover from something. Such a generalisation is problematic as it categorises texts by relying on a

theory of biological essentialism, and risks relegating female-authored adventure narratives to the category of "self-help" books—which is both reductive and fundamentally misrepresentative. In a similar vein, a book list on the popular reading site *Goodreads,* titled "Woman Travel Memoirs," notes that "Women provide a different aspect of travelling . . . they tap into their emotions differently, and provide an insight specific to women" ("Woman Travel Memoirs"). This "different aspect" that women's travel writing provides is contrasted, implicitly, to that of men.[37] Thinking about gender throughout this thesis has been difficult because I want to avoid perpetuating a binary view of gender. But it *is* possible to identify common characteristics and themes that divide nature memoirs by the gender of the author. When women set out to explore the world an element of witness (in relation to trauma as much as to identity) often characterises these memoirs, whereas when men write of similar experiences the narrative focusses on exploring—or conquering—the wilderness, not themselves. Lancewood's memoir is an example in which the narrator's motives diverge from what is often expected of women adventurers.

I look to Lancewood and *Woman in the Wilderness* because as a recently-published example of a memoir that speaks to the themes in this thesis, Lancewood highlights what I have hoped to show are some of the complexities and difficulties surrounding how we think about autobiographical narratives of being in the wild: and in particular, those of women, which I am especially interested in as a female writer working in this genre. Lancewood is an example that, in my eyes at least, mobilises both what is troubling but also what is galvanising about this oeuvre of writing. Lancewood's story is an example of the literary moment that the topic of women in the wilderness is currently having, evident in recent publications such as Blair Braverman's memoir *Welcome to the Goddamn Ice Cube: Chasing Fear and Finding Home in the Great White North* (2016); *Into the Mountain* (2017), Charlotte Peacock's biography of Nan Shepherd, the Scottish hill-walker; and *The Word for Woman in Wilderness* (2018), Abi Andrews' coming-of-age novel set in Alaska. The popularity of Lancewood's memoir and the interest in Lancewood herself show that

[37] It is worth noting that *Goodreads* doesn't offer a corresponding list of men's travel writing, which suggests that one dedicated to women's travel writing exists as an alternative to the status quo.

stories like hers are the kind of stories we want to read; accounts of women's experiences in nature that narrate resilience and deep self-reflection. Much of the way Lancewood is marketed discomforts me, but as a public figure she prompts us to think about some of the critically important issues pertaining to how we write about ourselves in the natural world. Thinking about embodiment as a focus in life writing, Smith and Watson ask "Precisely when and where does the body become visible in the narrative? . . . How does it become visible? What does that visibility mean?" (240). In the context of memoirs about nature, these questions are vital ones because they generate a broader conversation about what kind of bodies we think belong in wild places in nature; what "wildness" means; how we are "supposed" to interact with nature, and authenticity and authority in relation to this.

Stories of being in the wilderness have always attracted a kind of cult interest, from Thoreau's *Walden,* to W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn,* to Chris McCandless in *Into the Wild,* or even Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man.* But definitions of wilderness and nature differ across scholarly and temporal contexts, which is why it is so important to consider how ways of writing about nature evolves. These ways impact what voices we listen to, and what ways of being in our bodies in different environments are normalised—and they have direct consequences on our relationship with the environment in day to day life. Stories of how women write about themselves in nature are deeply important for what they reveal about existing prejudicial associations—for instance, the associations between women and wildness that recall either notions of the primitive, or see women as being out of place in nature literally and generically. But these stories of women embarking on difficult treks like Robyn Davidson in *Tracks*, or driving dogsleds in Alaska like Blair Braverman in *Welcome to the Goddam Ice Cube*, or simply choosing to hike in solitude like Nan Shepherd in *The Living Mountain,* are also empowering and galvanising. These stories resonate with and in turn inform my own work. Through immersing myself in Solnit, Lund, and Adams' interpretations of walking, the act simultaneously became crucial to my scholarly work and my everyday life. It highlights the way that as a woman, walking, I encounter particular dangers, but

walking also offers me new ways of experiencing agency and framing my relationship with my body. Walking became something that transformed the way I experience or, as Paul John Eakin would explain it, how I narrate and become myself.

Methodological and scholarly. Reflective, critical, and creative. It has been a challenge throughout this work to navigate seemingly separate voices and ways of thinking. But the navigation itself became telling, indicating the nature of what a creative writing thesis—or at least this particular one—is. The challenge of navigating modes of thinking was matched by the ongoing challenge of moving between the genres of life writing and nature writing. Ostensibly, life writing describes writing about the self; nature writing about nature. But take one step beyond that statement and the lines blur immediately. My own creative practice is testament to the entwined nature of writing about self and place. I cannot write about myself without also writing about the physical place in which I am located. My body is key to this writing, as it connects me to the world. It registers and filters and remembers my impressions, which, inevitably, come to form what I think of as *me*. Bodies and landscapes. Bodies *in* landscapes. Thinking of these words I think of salt: the residue the sea leaves behind; the essential component of the liquid in our bodies. Salt is dissolved by water, and salt is made in water. Salt is what the water leaves behind, is what is left behind on the skin. The connections between my body and the earth—the warm-dirt, water-spray, forest-smell, rock-scrape *earthiness* of it all—is a fundamentally important element of my being and of my self-interpretation; and it is from these connections that my writing practice and my scholarly thinking stem.

In mapping my own practice—in contextualising my writing methodology and attempting to place it in a broader literary context—genre has been a central concern in this thesis. It is clear to me—has become clear to me—as I conclude this work that seeking to establish genre boundaries is less useful than accepting their porousness and instead thinking about how genres are political: why we draw the generic lines where we do, and what this says about how we allocate worth; which is to

say, whose stories we value and whose perspectives we privilege. Thus, as G. Thomas Couser puts it, we can understand "genre as function rather than form (or form *as* function)" (141).

In thinking about the lived experience of bodies in nature, and exploring how this thinking translates into modes of nature-based life writing, eco-autobiography has provided an intriguing angle to investigate. Even now, that Perreten demarcates a space for a "new self" that the writer gives voice to in conjunction with her deep connection to a landscape, that is distinct from the previous selves that each of us possess, grips me. As a mode of writing that has relatively little scholarship attached to it, eco-autobiography holds exciting potential for new ways of writing about ourselves in relation to place. But my investigation of eco-autobiography reveals that there is work to be done to address ideas around how we should write about nature, and to what degree the body—the presence of the self—needs to be visible in this literary tradition. Men's experiences of interacting with wild landscapes are, largely speaking, more highly valued and seen as more prestigious, or more literary, than women's in a cultural context—which nature writing traditions and the emerging "canon" of eco-autobiography suggest. But, as global discussion increasingly turns to women's experiences and how they are overlooked, silenced, or subjected to scrutiny in a way that men's aren't, the way that women's stories of wilderness are read will hopefully change. The stories that shape our understanding of the natural world are critically important. Our interaction with the environment is also the subject of global attention as climate change debates grow rife and human-inflicted environmental damage escalates. It is here that eco-autobiography is poised to effect change. This is a mode of writing in which personal experience is a vehicle to raise awareness and feeling and, hopefully, action in relation to the landscapes we live in. As such, it is a powerful one—so the inclusivity of diverse voices is critical.

I have found that so much of what I have discussed in this thesis returns to the root issue of belonging. Belonging in my body; belonging in the wild, belonging in my own life. My research has shown me that men are culturally seen to be at home in the wild in a way that women are not. Memoirs written by women about experiences of daring, adventure, solitude, or belonging in the

wilderness seem to be scrutinised through a gendered filter and evaluated subsequently. I paused at the subtitle of Lancewood's memoir: "A story of survival, love and self-discovery in New Zealand." I do not know of, nor can I imagine, a similar story written by a man having the same kind of signpost attached to his memoir of the wild.

I want this work that I have undertaken, and future research that may come about in response to this thesis, to continue, alongside the long history of feminist criticism—namely Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigary, and the theory of *l'ecriture femimine*, and more recently the scholarship of Sidonie Smith (*A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*) and Leigh Gilmore (*Autobiographics*)—to negate the idea that writing explicitly about bodies, and women's bodies in particular, is not literary in the ways that other kinds of autobiographies are. I want the idea to be abolished that writing deeply about the self is indulgent and narcissistic. It is not a coincidence, the memoirist Melissa Febos thinks, that personal, intimate writing about "the body, the emotional interior, the domestic, the sexual, [and] the relational" (Febos), is associated with women's writing—and, implicitly, is important to women but not to men. "[T]his bias against 'personal writing' is a sexist mechanism," she argues, "founded on the false binary between the emotional (female) and the intellectual (male), and intended to subordinate the former" (Febos). *All* accounts of living in the world—not just those that adhere to the cultural value placed on narratives that prioritise the intellectual over the emotional and, I would add, the bodily—are significant.

The idea of "radical self-containment" that came to me when I was hiking in Scotland, and that I use to describe Cheryl Strayed's dark peripatetic walking in *Wild,* remains one of crucial importance to me. One of the central questions "Salt Marks" explores is what I would find—who I would be—in the wild. ("The wild" referring, of course, to more than just the physical landscape.) What I found was radical self-containment, and having named it, and term continues to resonate and pulse insistently for me. The writer Kristina Olsson, after walking 320km across England, wrote in her journal the phrase "radical freedom" and reflected on one of the biggest lessons she took from her walking: "I carried my own wilderness with me. It was there, I could turn to it any time, or into

it. For me that is the radical freedom of walking and writing. They turn us towards the untamed. Within us, outside us. Both are physical, couched deep in the body, but also emotional and psychological. And wild" (Olsson). I read Olsson as I was finishing writing this thesis, and felt a familiar, fizzing surge of recognition at her words. Freedom and self-containment resonate together in a fascinating way, in a sense at odds with each other but also, to my reading at least, the very same thing.

As a woman, and as a writer deeply interested in articulating the effect that nature has on me, drawing attention to and raising questions around how we experience and write about landscape is immensely important to me. Robert Macfarlane, in his various writings, explores the idea that perhaps long familiarity with a place leads not to a fuller understanding of it, but only to more questions. It is my hope that the work in this thesis does the same. I do not disagree with Yi-Fu Tuan's hypothesis that we come to know a place through long inhabitation—but what interests me are the ways of knowing and being in place that have less to do with the time spent there, and everything to do with what is felt and known through the body and how this affects how we experience ourselves. In *The Old Ways*, his exploration of the ancient routes that cross land and water, Macfarlane writes: "Touch is a reciprocal action, a gesture of exchange with the world. To make an impression is also to receive one, and the soles of our feet, shaped by the surfaces they press upon, are landscapes themselves with their own worn channels and roving lines" (161). Macfarlane looks to the soles of our feet as the site that absorbs our impressions of the world; my work extends this surface to encompass the skin of the whole body, and the landscapes I have sought to map are neither geological nor psychological but ones that are both.

Teasing apart the entwined nature of the relationship between experiences of self and experiences of place helps us understand the value of writing methodologies that take root in lived, embodied experience. In investigating connections between the body, gender, and landscape, this work engages with what is a fundamental human experience: being drawn to a particular place, seeking to understand why, knowing that in this place, you are different.

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