Land Beneath the Waves

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LAND BENEATH THE WAVES

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An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

Summersdale Publishers
Part of Octopus Publishing Group Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
LONDON
EC4Y 0DZ
UK

This FSC® label means that materials and other controlled sources used for the product have been responsibly sourced



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The authorized representative in the EEA is Hachette Ireland, 8 Castlecourt Centre, Dublin 15, D15 XTP3, Ireland (email: info@hbgi.ie)

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Suffolk, NR35 1ED

ISBN: 978-1-83799-622-3
eISBN: 978-1-83799-623-0

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How the natural world helped one woman navigate chronic illness, self-acceptance and belonging

Nic Wilson



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Author's Note

I've told my story as honestly as I can based on what I remember. I'm extremely grateful that friends and family have been willing to share their recollections with me during the process of writing. I also used many documents including diaries, journals, scrapbooks, school reports, medical records, stories and poetry I wrote as a child, family photographs and hundreds of letters. On occasion, identifying details have been changed to protect people's privacy.

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For my bairns, with all my love

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There's rosemary, that's for
remembrance; pray, love, remember.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

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Bombweed

I am not a memoirist. I may as well lay my cards on the table. They make a nine by five grid: one card for every year of my life. Starting at the very beginning, I turn card after card (feel the expectation, the watching eyes, the silence). Draw a line of blanks, a sequence of absence. The negative space is overwhelming. My life is viscous; more often than not it seals itself behind me. Other people offer me their memories, but it feels like make-believe. Fragments of an ordinary life. Perhaps it is mine, perhaps not.

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They tell me I lived in a suburban semi set back from the B4114.
They tell me I went to a Catholic primary school.
They tell me I was good at tap and ballet.
They tell me I was happy.

All I remember is the bombweed.

Perhaps it's unsurprising that rosebay willowherb is the only survivor around the edges of my amnesic crater given the plant's infamous reputation for colonising bombsites in the Second World War. Looking back through the smoke, I can

see the curling puff of windborne seeds above a thicket of vegetation, the rigid, serried stems, those red-tinged leaves. Bombweed memories so dense they colonise my childhood garden with their rhizomatous roots; they undercut the apple trees, supplant my dad's veg patch, even infiltrate the house, drifting as seed-memories through each room, filling the gaps with a lick of pink flowers.

Seven blank cards in a row. Turning a bright, slow pink.

Mum tells me about a family holiday near Clovelly in Devon. She brings out old photos of me riding a donkey. I try to remember the cottage we stayed in, try to visualise walking down the steep main street to the beach and building castles in the sand with my brother, but it has all gone. Only the smell of Shasta daisies lingers round the cottage door, a pervasive odour of sweaty feet that gripped me by the throat that week and refused to let go.

Even after I've turned those seven blank cards – the childhood years swallowed by my subconscious – my later recollections are still hazy. My husband reminds me of our walks in Provence: the gorges, the metal walkways, the water. I've lost sight of the vistas, but something persists underfoot in the crush of garrigue scrub: a warm, resinous rising of thyme, rosemary, sage. And there was that visit to the Isles of Scilly, he recalls. We took a walk along the cliffs and explored some of the islands by boat. I search for these memories in vain, but I do remember the tall fuchsia hedges lining the narrow roads, my astonishment at their overt floriferousness, like a jeweller's counter of scarlet and purple drop earrings stretching across St Mary's Island. Shake me and the past is erased, we joke. Etch A Sketch me. But not the

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plants. I remember their scents and flowers, their colours and companionship. I cherish our shared history; it returns to me a little of my forgotten past.

Birdsong evokes memories too. I sat in the garden one sunny May afternoon, a few years ago, with a light wind blowing, listening to distant children playing, an ice cream van sliding up and down its scales and the collared doves calling. Closing my eyes, I was back in Coventry in the 1980s, looking out of the bedroom window in Grandma's small semi-detached house in Tile Hill. The summer stretched before me in its warm laziness and the narrow garden was filled with deckchairs and nattering relatives. The tall conifers at the end of the lawn created an impenetrable wall within whose secure boundaries my memories played out. I remember Grandma's garden for its unforgiving concrete paving slabs, an echoing garage full of cold smells, and the honesty seed heads, each a translucent coin, chocolate-coloured seeds within. When the collared doves lulled me into a trance, I awoke in the little front bedroom and traced the leaves on the wallpaper with my eyes, each with the same toothed edges and green veins scored across the raised leaf blade.

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John Lewis-Stempel writes in *Meadowland* that 'birds have a Proustian capacity for making remembrance'. So collared doves pull me to awakenings in that soft-leaved room in Coventry with the summer garden beneath. When herring gulls descant above the slap of the sea, I'm in Granny and Grandpa's loft bedroom in Conwy, watching from beneath a mountain of woollen blankets as birds circle outside the dormer window. These sights, scents and sounds are nature's treasures, ready to enhance the present with layers of wild remembrance. Even the most elusive cue can provoke ripples of recollections, adding emotional depth to

a blackbird's song or a flash of buttercups. The memories are papery and thin, and like honesty seed heads some will blow away, but I can see through the layers to the kernels within. When I watch my children gathering cow parsley posies on the way to school or running their hands through the dead-nettle leaves, thrilled, waiting for the half-anticipated sting that never comes, I hope they're collecting their own wild memories for the future.



I don't know how or when I lost the first seven and a half years of my life. And I don't need to know.

This is a lie, of course, but one I've told myself so often it feels like a truth. Those seven blank cards secretly trouble me. My memory has always been poor, but those early years feel different, as if something vital has been erased and I've forgotten what it is. My childhood is hollow and confusing; thinking about it makes my head ache. I prefer to write about the lives of birds, trees and poets, or the histories of landscapes and their inhabitants. Narratives that stay put and don't try to change me. I'm fascinated by the natural history of my local area, and the more I learn about the streets, gardens and marginal spaces around me – even the sky outside my window, which is sometimes all I can see for days on end – the more these ordinary settings reveal to me the extraordinary power of the local, the familiar, the quotidian. At times it feels like the past is seeping into the present-day landscape: squeezing

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through pavement cracks, sprouting in the verges, sending up vegetative reminders on the peripheries of modernised gardens, submerging our 'now' beneath layers of *natural* history. As I walk down my road, the turned earth of the old field strips and noise of the chalk quarry sometimes seem more real than the houses and traffic that surround me. It's not that I don't belong in the present, more that I sense an affinity with the past and begin to see its role in shaping the land. The future, however, remains obscure. I can't sense it in the landscape and perhaps that's just as well.

I've been making notes on the area around my house for several years now – writing about my walks, visiting the North Hertfordshire Museum and Herbarium, researching naturalists who lived here, reading natural history journals and field notebooks from centuries past, all with the intention of writing a book on wildlife and landscape. But my words fall flat on the page. Though I give a voice to the natural history of the nearby wild, I remain tight-lipped about my own history. I want to argue that it is vital to unearth the past in order to understand how we have arrived in the present. I want to ask how, without an awareness of local landscape history, without some sense of what once existed – those plants, animals, habitats that we have disregarded, forgotten and destroyed – we can ever truly assess the legacy we're leaving for future generations. I want to explore what the land means to me and why. And what it could, or possibly should, mean to every one of us.

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But the writing recoils, striking back with personal questions. "Why so much walking into the past and your imagination?" it demands. "What are you trying to escape? Without knowledge of *your* lost years – all those things *you've* ignored and forgotten for

so long – how can you understand the legacy *you* are leaving for future generations?"

I cannot sidestep the questions – they interrogate me from the top of every blank page. Why am I so afraid to write about myself? I know the answer really, even if I pretend not to. Before I can write honestly about the wildlife and the local landscape, I must enter my own past. I must face up to my relationship with chronic illness and explore parts of my childhood that I've excised from my memory. And I need to go further back to explore my mother's story and the impact her illness had on me and the family. But these are experiences and feelings I'd far rather leave behind, so I dither in the margins and my writing stagnates. Signing up for this particular expedition seems too high a price to pay for writing a book.

I wonder if I could simply mention my health in passing, noting the way it affects my relationships and confidence, and then move on; but every narrative path leads back to my childhood. I try to follow them dispassionately, as any objective researcher would, but it's no good. I'm a little kid again and I'm falling apart. The speed of my unravelling takes me completely by surprise. The day I embark upon the journey I've been avoiding for months, my journal reads:

Can open; worms everywhere.

I follow the advice of a friend and contact a counsellor. Without the narrative driving me forwards, I fear I'll never find the courage to talk to someone. I don't believe I deserve counselling for my own sake, but I know I'm going to need help if I'm to tell this story.

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I begin by tracing my love of the natural world back to my early childhood in Nuneaton. Though I have no memories of our garden, I do have photographs and a letter from my grandma to six-year-old me, mentioning the 'little patch of ground' in which I encountered, first-hand, the magic of plants. I'd imagine my dad was somewhere nearby, perhaps showing me how to mark out my bed or sow my first seeds. Were my parents hoping I'd inherit the green fingers of my forebears? We have gardeners on both sides of the family reaching back for generations. Dad recalls his father's enthusiasm for summer bedding plants and greenhouse tomatoes. He can still remember the smell of fertilisers stored in his father's garage: hoof and horn, superphosphate, sulphate of potash, nitrate of soda, Tonks's rose formula and chalk, all listed in my grandfather's *Fred Streeter Gardeners' Record Book* of 1970 in notes he took the year before he died. My dad attributes his horticultural exploits to his father's love of gardening all those years ago that was then passed down to me, from a grandfather who died four years before I was born.

In my first garden in Nuneaton, I learned early on that wildlife was as important as the crops. Perhaps more so. Photographs show me as a cheerful toddler in red wellingtons playing with sticks and mud, pushing an absurdly big wheelbarrow, sitting in a buggy in a shiny yellow anorak, my face entirely obscured by heavy black binoculars. As I peer at my smaller self down the wrong end of the binoculars, I wonder what the younger me was seeing at that moment. Could I make out the blurry image of my dad to my right, distorted, monstrous, looking back at

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me through his Praktica L camera? He would have removed the Vivitar 200mm telephoto lens so he could photograph me rather than a bird, but we were still separated by a series of ocular lenses, symbols of this observation of an observation.

I'm holding the binoculars skew-whiff with my chubby two-year-old hands, no doubt mimicking the adults with no clue what I'm doing. I wonder if the photograph was staged for the family album, but I don't think it matters if it was. Only a few years later I'd be using the same binoculars to observe birds in the garden, Dad's reassuring hands clasping mine to steady the image, a shared closeness I felt from the other side this morning as I placed my hands over my son's so he could watch redwings feeding in the cotoneaster.

Staged or not, I love the way the image makes physical my childhood interest in birds. I often write facing those binoculars, the photograph pinned to my noticeboard along with others of me between the ages of two and eight – in the vegetable beds; on Conwy Mountain with Granny's rucksack and a walking stick as tall as my head; embraced by a snug life jacket on Grandpa's boat. These are my talismans against the negative spaces in my memory. I did exist back then. The images are physical proof of my childhood.

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Though I rely on photographs and other people's recollections up to the age of seven and a half when we moved from Warwickshire to Cheshire, I still have the rosebay willowherb memories from that first garden. It wasn't until recently that Dad told me this

vigorous perennial grew in an uncultivated area at the bottom of our veg plot. Willowherb and other wildflowers thrived there, providing shelter and food for birds, small mammals and invertebrates like moth larvae, including elephant hawk-moth and setaceous Hebrew character, two species that regularly appear on Dad's wildlife lists from the 1970s.

In the summer of 1977, Dad taught himself bricklaying. He ordered a set of precast concrete blocks, 2,000 bricks, 17 tons of scalpings and built a garage next to the house. Photographs from before he began construction show Mum, heavily pregnant with my brother, wielding a spade on top of a huge pile of hardcore. When the garage turned out to be almost too small to fit the car inside (due in Dad's words to a "geometrical misunderstanding"), he transformed the redundant space into a natural history lab filled with bird and mammal skulls, dissected owl pellets, and moths at every stage of life – tiny eggs stuck to leaves, hanging pupae and newly hatched adults ready to be released.

Within a couple of months, Dad had embarked upon a lifelong obsession with lepidoptera that has recently developed a perilous coda. In an idle moment at Birdfair a couple of years ago, I watched with horror as his resolve faltered when faced with a multicoloured array of specialist identification guides. Before I could stop him, he'd bought the *Field Guide to the Micro-moths of Great Britain and Ireland*. I knew there'd be trouble. He'd agreed with Mum long before that micro-moths were a compulsion too far. Not only are there around 1,600 species of micro-moth in the UK, many with a wingspan of less than 20 millimetres, but for a definitive identification it is often necessary to examine the dissected genitalia. Life was too short to peel mushrooms or study micro-moths, Mum reasoned.

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But back in 1978 when I was only three, my mum's health was at its lowest ebb and the moth trap was still a shiny new purchase. Dad was enchanted by the moths he discovered upon emptying the trap each morning. Occasionally, he would find eggs laid by gravid females on the underside of the egg boxes placed in the trap to provide shelter. Once he'd begun rearing moths and studying the different instars, or stages of development, there was no going back. Puss moth caterpillars were his favourite. He emails me some of the pictures he took with his Praktica L camera and talks me through them on the phone, the excitement from 40 years ago still evident in his voice:

> The puss moth has the most phenomenal caterpillar – a large lime-green larva with a dark brown saddle over the middle and a hump on its back. It's got a red-and-yellow rim around the head, and there are white spiracles, part of the respiratory system, ringed in black along the caterpillar's abdomen. It rears its forked black-and-red tail when threatened and produces a red filament from inside each tail twin that it waves menacingly at you.

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I study the caterpillar in the photograph. It is, indeed, a marvel. Dad's second image shows the puss moth at the adult stage, which gives the species its common name. It is clothed in soft ermine with creamy white and black swirls that remind me of the patterns on top of a latte. With its feathered antennae, fluffy face and black-and-white striped legs, it is the embodiment of cuteness in a moth-kitten.

When Dad took me into the garage to see these beauties – the fantastical caterpillar and its fuzzy future – how could I not

have shared his fascination? As I watched the puss moth larvae chew willow and poplar bark, combining it with silk to weave tough cocoons from which they would emerge as adult moths in spring, was I ensnared in the warp and weft of their magical lives? Whatever my feelings as a three-year-old, these tiny creatures held the key to my future happiness, because moths saved my parents' marriage.

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