



The Writer and Nature

Alex Nye

LIKE MANY WRITERS I keep a journal, and I begin every entry with a description of the weather. Describing where I am helps to centre me. For example: ‘I’m sitting in a garden café writing this, listening to a church bell tolling the hour.’

Ivy creeps over a nearby wall, and although I can see the metal poles and girders of nearby scaffolding, satellite dishes and a cement-mixer, I also see nasturtiums and the back of an abandoned chapel where a buddleia flowers. An old bicycle rusts in one corner.

I note that the café has an atmosphere of carefully crafted urban decay, mostly accidental, with a few touches by the owners to utilise what is already there. Nature is everywhere. It’s ugly and visceral and full of decay. It’s in the rust on the bicycle and the weeds appearing uninvited between the cracks.

Cal Flynn’s wonderful book *Islands of Abandonment* confirms this notion for me: the idea that nature is not always sublime and should never be idealised. In fact, nature is flawed, dirty, and grotesque. It is how we perceive this beauty that counts.

As I write a woman in a bright pink scarf has just walked in, loud and colourful: her man is pleased to see her. She carries weight and presence. She says ‘I am here.’ A woman in a blue dress sitting at the next table is pregnant, and her belly pronounces ‘I am here.’ Seagulls talk overhead,



war cries, ululations that pronounce ‘We are here’. All of this too is Nature, as much as the boom of the sea or the descent of clouds and mist on a mountaintop. At the time of writing an ant crawls across the table, in search of crumbs, and in deference to the subject, I let it be.

There is no need to compartmentalise Nature as an idealised version or slice of life, separate from everything else. Nature is not picture-postcard perfect. It’s not about life as a shepherd, or living in a hut, or exploring the Arctic — although all of these are wonderful topics to write about. The point I am making is that when we stare at a baby in a glass jar in the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, at the distorted shape of its head or limbs caught in preserving fluid and folded in on itself like an over-sized shrimp, we are looking at Nature. There it is.

So, like a painter, a writer records nature, even if it’s only the fall of light through a window or the patina of rust on a bicycle. One simple reference and we are there in an instant, alongside the writer. For me, the natural surroundings, the place where I am now is where Nature happens, where Nature can be found and felt. Even if it’s only the cold embrace of the air, reminding me I’m alive.

Write one sentence.

‘The rain falls.’

And you’ve responded to Nature, to the world around you.