

**Rich Pickings – words, beyond words and words for well being.  
Kate Pawsey.**

How many writers recognise this: while out for a walk, words begin to come – really enticing and juicy phrases, seemingly – but there is nothing to write with? It is great for stretching the memory, making us learn the lines as they are writing themselves and keeping our focus dancing on the dual points of process and product. I have often limped home carrying phrases as if in a colander, my fingers covering the holes, till I can pour the words down onto absorbent paper.

This happened to me recently when I found myself stunned by the sight of a frozen view in the valley beneath me. Phrases like 'shadows shredded through the trees' and 'the colours bleached out by the cold, leaving only highlights' were muscling in to my writing-less state. I was also trying to capture the way colours washed back into things where the sun had thawed them. I can't even now find the piece of 'blotting paper' that soaked these up once I got home, although at the time its charge seemed so precious. This feeling is its own reward for me, prompted, usually, when I am in nature. Here, not only is its beauty often so striking, but I am given the space to receive things not accessible in other task-dominated situations.

I say it is its own reward but, darn it, I was piqued by an undeniable stab of word-envy when I opened the book I was reading, and found a similar scene described in one ravishing sentence. Helen Macdonald can really write about nature, poetically and in *H is for Hawk* such writing is woven effortlessly through her subjects. Chagrin was quickly replaced by the pleasure of having been furnished with words that so precisely fitted my experience: *'Everything not fringed with silver and limned lamp-black is white or Prussian blue'*.

What was pointed out to me by a friend and which then stunned me more deeply on second reading is that in Macdonald's nature writing her descriptions do not just float as backdrops to her personal drama; they are an integral part of the process of her self-awareness. Bearing in mind the book is an account of two intertwined experiences - grief following her father's sudden death and taming a goshawk – it communicates a wealth of layered material, far beyond these two events, and is very rich reading.

Wordless states in nature appeal to me too though. A friend who regularly walks parts of the Pembrokeshire coastline, alone, told me of a syndrome which occurs to him on day three or four. He says that he walks himself into a state where he stops thinking 'peregrine' when he sees a peregrine, or 'chough', or 'thriff' or 'Ramsay Island'. I have to work at this – consciously un-coupling myself from ticking off some internal reference book, and allowing myself to continue to drink the sight, sound or smell in. If I remember in time, this allows some of what I feel R.S. Thomas may be alluding to in *Bright Field* – to let my senses feast upon the sight before me, before it passes, naturally.

Very occasionally though, I have been visited by something for which I have, at the time, no words. It is a 'something' just about feeling. One evening in mid-winter, when we lived on the Somerset levels, I walked out after a day of writing for a breather. The air was watery and punctuated by bird sound. Starlings were gathering overhead on their way to the roosting sites about ten miles away, sometimes forming mini-murmurations, playing with their moves and shapes. As I turned around to look in a new direction, it was the sight of one of these, combined with the most subtle shift of luminosity, which suddenly just caught me. I found

myself in a state of silent awe, gratitude and reverie, rooted to the ground till it was almost dark. Tears oozed and my full heart ached. I seemed to glow enough to light my way back over the muddy footbridges, across the clay-clagged fields and swivel through the kissing gate, off the moor, into the twinkling lights of Langport. Such can be the gifts of *not* writing, in nature.

Such experiences however, can connect us to the words used by some masterful writers such as Rose Flint, whose poem, *The Field*, is a hymn to the beingness of nature, and a metaphor for self-acceptance. Such poems are bread, butter, jam and cream to the practising facilitator of creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP). I have used it over and over again in my taster sessions, and never tire of writing in response to it myself, tapping in to a different slant or aspect of it each time. Mary Oliver's poem, *Gratitude*, asks consecutively 'what did you notice?', 'what did you hear?', 'what did you admire?', 'what astonished you?', 'what would you like to see again?', 'what was most tender?' and finally 'what was most wonderful?'. With its direct nature references, this poem serves as a very flexible writing prompt to connect me to the feelings I experience in nature. And, like all good poems, it will elicit unique responses in anyone who writes in response to it. It was offered to us at the end of our first year of CWTP training and I used it in the final session of an eight week long group writing series. We asked ourselves these same questions about our time of writing together.

But what about the times when we find ourselves separated from nature and in need of its nourishment? I have felt inspired this year to learn poems by heart. When my head is racing and keeping me from restful sleep, I now reach for Wendell Berry's deceptively simple *The Peace of Wild Things* and recite it to myself, slowly and deliberately. As Paula Byrne rightly says, it slows my heart rate and my breathing and I feel calmer. (Paula, Fellow in Creativity at Warwick Business School, co-presents the Futurelearn MOOC, *Literature and Mental Health; Reading for Wellbeing*). But more than that, I feel connected to the place that I know heals me every time I step out into it and allow myself to be receptive to. And if I did not step out into it, with or without pencil and paper, I would not have this profound well of references to draw on. And there is nothing like committing a poem to memory for appreciating the weight and value of each component, as well as, of course, the order and pattern in which they are laid down. So for me, writing in nature reaps deep rewards, whether grasping for my own words or responding to borrowed words, or being in a state beyond words or making use of words as portals to the things they (apparently) represent, all subjectively mutable. Rich pickings, I'd say.