

What Difference Does Writing Make?

Leading Writers on Writing

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A Natural Beauty

By Lucy Threlfall

The music burned one moment, then its prism tones fused into silence
— 'The Old Wife's Tale', Gwen Harwood.

Wind whipped the surface of the sea, sending it into a churning, wild frenzy. It lashed at the shores, a rolling and booming mass of noise. The sand swirled furiously along the beach, small hurricanes of stinging granules that flogged and flayed anything in their path. With surprising ease they ripped up the dune grasses, their roots already sabotaged, and enveloped them into the whirling flurry of motion. Having exposed even more sand, the wind eagerly pounced on the now unprotected dunes, a sandstorm brewing. Amongst all the turbulence, perched on the beach front the high-rises loomed, encroaching, detached and icy. Their windows glinted maliciously, throwing spotlights on to the destruction happening at their feet.

Looking into the mirror, the woman was quietly surprised at what she saw. Age and change had crept up on her, she realised now. It was this realisation that had startled her, not what she saw reflected in the glass. It was just that she had never imagined to be affected, she supposed. The assumption that she would remain, an impassive, solid landscape to the changing seasons and eddying tides, had always been absolute in her mind. Gospel. Not so, it seemed now.

She had never been feeble in any case, that was for certain. Rain and sorrow and terror and anguish had come to her as they come, eventually, to everyone. Storms that hurled such projections of despair and hatred as to make her wish for

nothing more than to succumb had pounded at her shores. The death of her mother, the loss of her home, the betrayal of her friends; waves that broke and crashed down upon her, unrelenting in quick succession, their stinging, salty sharpness melting into the briny taste of her own tears. She had stared back the eye of many of these storms and come out victor.

They had left scars, of course. Strewn debris, dark flecks and bruises in the sand, swellings of seaweed, each an obvious marker of the turmoil and chaos that had struck. But they never stayed. With quiet determination and a sense of resigned acceptance, they were always gradually assimilated until no-one other than her would ever know that the storm passed through. In the past she had fought. And she had won. On occasions, she herself was even the inciter of torment in others. In her youth large numbers of young men had fallen at her feet. Sailors shipwrecked on her rocky shores, hearts broken and bleeding on the sand, their wooden ships and hopes smashed on the hidden crags of her beauty and capriciousness.

Yet, now, for the first time in her life, she appeared to be losing. Perhaps she did indeed contain some degree of fragility, not apparent from the outset. Age and change were very different enemies to any she had ever encountered. They were devious and underhand, innocent in their countenance, they bombarded her with guerrilla warfare she wasn't trained to deal with. They were not bold or ostentatious acts of harm, she couldn't run at them, bellowing her battle cry, fuelled with passion and desperate fervour. There was no decisive moment when all was won or lost and the frustration of it all but swallowed her. They were her Vietnam; they had the persistence, the home-ground advantage, the tactics, the unfailing numbers and she was powerless. She was no longer in control of her own defence and that frightened her.

The mirror made that clear. Her dynamic blue eyes, once outlined by one smooth edge, now pooled in a cluster of creases. The furrows ran in a series of inlets and tributaries, carved by time and age that surrounded her eyes and formed collections for her dried tears. The once soft dips and curves of her face and body, endless runs of dunes in the sun-browned

landscape of her skin, were eradicated by harsh lines running long and deep. Softly and slowly she ran her fingertips over her skin, soaking up all she felt like a young lover, discovering every new ruin, captivated by the foreign war-torn country that lay before her. Roughness met her hands; her cheeks were coarse and unrefined. Harsh sand-grained surfaces grazed and scraped her skin, no longer a soft, white beach that cushioned and enveloped, this now brusque unwelcoming rocky cove was anaesthetic and aggravating to touch.

Age had made her old. It had degraded her body so that she was no longer a precious commodity but a common and modest regularity without a market. Her natural beauty, that had previously instilled such wonder and awe, had no place any more. It was replaced by the towering excess and overt sexiness of the next generation of youth, camped at her door, eager for her to move out.

The beach lay stripped bare, for kilometres on end it laid itself out, fatigued and exhausted, one span of flat plainness. The sky rested heavy on the horizon, weighed down by a vast sheet of thin, foggy cloud, shrouding the slender morning sun. The air was crisp in stillness, a moment framed and captured. A lone, distant figure, all brimmed hat and canvas bag, walked surely along the boardwalk and down on to the rain-pocked sand. The figure paused, then crouched, searching in the bag. It shuffled to the base of the ever-diminishing dunes and knelt, bending forward every few minutes. Lean forward, sit back, lean forward, sit back, lean forward, sit back. For hours the figure did this, its shabby red hat bobbing up and down. Patiently it replanted the grasses and plants once at home in the dunes, its hands deft and skilled, rebuilding the coast with respect and sensitivity. Opportunity and the chance to amend were seized by the figure with every firm pat of sand, before they disappeared and one more natural beauty was lost to a measure blatantly more reversible than age.



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