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LANDSCAPES OF ATTACHMENT

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Smeuse is a Sussex dialect noun for 'the gap in the base of a hedge made by the regular passage of a small animal'; now I know the word smeuse, I will notice these signs of creaturely movement more often.

Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks*¹

In an attempt to connect further with the environment around me, I began reading a genre of non-fiction dubbed 'nature writing.' Writers on the subject may speak of alien wonders and stark landscapes, but they also write of places they have seen, places that are now storied by people. The tradition of nature writing in Britain has a long history, but to remain succinct I would gesture toward the new nature writing, which responds to the ecological anxieties and changes occurring societally, in particular the writings of Helen Macdonald and Robert Macfarlane. These texts have informed how I approach my own surroundings in New Zealand. I share the concerns of these writers about the disconnection of people from nature. These writings also show how language helps us to attach value to nature.

I began with a quote from Macfarlane's *Landmarks*. The word 'smeuse' is one example amongst many of fading nomenclature for nature that Macfarlane has collected. I found particular affection for smeuse because I had already noticed little tunnels in the hedges of my parents' garden in Dunedin. Those tunnels had always marked the movement of creatures unseen in the landscape, but never before have I had a way of describing them. Sadly, I could point and cry "smeuse!" and have nobody, except perhaps Macfarlane himself, understand what I am talking about.

Macfarlane's writing re-animates the landscape through bringing our attention to the language that describes it. Of course, this is old news for anyone who has an understanding of semiotics: "Words – defined by Peirce as 'symbolic' – are far more arbitrary in their sound and shape, and are only by convention related to their referent. They refer to what they name, operating by way of description, depending on a shared lexical storehouse for mutual comprehension."² By populating nature with words and memories that we have attachment to, Macfarlane makes the landscape more important, understandable and fascinating. Being attached to the landscape around us at this moment in history is an urgent and necessary thing.

Nature writing is not always celebrated. As Richard Smyth writes:

[T]oo much modern nature writing bears the smudges of the writers' desperate groping for the mot juste. Page after page is dotted with too-carefully chosen 'lyrical' words: sluice, knapped, sintering, root-nooks, moiling, fust – perfectly fine words in themselves, of course, but their cumulative effect is to make the writing reek overpoweringly of the lamp. In parallel with this comes a clatter of namedropping, not of VIPs but of plant names and place names ... They have an evocative sound, but they are also, looked at squarely, jargon.³

Smyth's observations are not unfounded. Much modern nature writing has an emphasis on the descriptive, obscure and dramatic, and much of it comes from a white, British perspective, and might be accused of problematic nostalgia.

While nostalgia is potentially present – but not intentionally so – in the two writers that I focus on, Macfarlane and Macdonald, that is not what I chose to take from their work. Rather, I found a blend of memoir, travel diary and scientific journal. I found two writers who show how even in our modern, increasingly urban world, our stories are still interwoven with the natural world. Nature for them, and for me, may be an isolated mountain pass, a farm, a garden or the permeable way nature enters into the urban. For the sake of clarity, when I write of nature I mean the environment outside the confines of a dwelling – unless that dwelling is infused with the outside world. Nature as I define it does not have to exclude humanity, but it can exist outside of the influence of human culture – rare as that may be today.

I write about Macdonald and Macfarlane because in the reading of their books I have found myself observing my own attachment to landscape. Purely scientific writings can remove the humour and emotion from encounters with the world around us. But writers who love words as much as they love nature, as is the case with Macdonald and Macfarlane, highlight the humanity present in nature, even as they describe its sometimes alien essence. My attachment to landscape, and to the people who are part of those landscapes, is an essential feature of my paintings and illustrations. It is difficult to comprehend large landscapes. It is also difficult to comprehend global environmental collapse. However, a “common thread that unites the new nature writing is its exploration of the potential for human meaning-making not in the rare or exotic but in our everyday connections with the non-human natural world.”⁴ Observing, through the eyes of Macdonald and Macfarlane, the small moments in their home gardens, and in the parks near their homes, as well as their familiar landscapes to walk in, I came to realise that reconnecting to nature on a smaller scale makes nature more personal and intimate. Observing the ecosystems I can walk to, or take an easy drive to, means that the environment, the challenges that it faces, and my own attachment to it, is more approachable.

Macdonald's book, *H is for Hawk* (2014), is both a memoir depicting the author's grief after the death of her father and a love letter to her goshawk, Mabel. In one passage, Macdonald writes about her childhood garden, and we as readers can see how the natural world, sometimes characterised as unfamiliar, now becomes a map of memory and attachment:

It's a child's world, full of separate places. Give me a paper and pencil now and ask me to draw a map of the fields I roamed about when I was small, and I cannot do it. But change the question, and ask me to list what was there and I can fill pages. The wood ants' nest. The newt pond. The oak covered in marble galls. The birches by the motorway fence with fly agarics at their feet. These things were the waypoints of my world.⁵

The balance Macdonald strikes throughout most of her book is one I hope is present in my paintings and illustrations. I portray the natural world frequently, but it is never painted without a sense of narrative or human story attached to it. My painting, *The fences you make...* (2023) (Figure 2), portrays a friend tending to her hive alongside her classmates, and draws attention to the reliance bees now have on people. Honeybees are unable to survive in the wild without intervention if they are infected by varroa mites.

Much of the outdoor imagery in the picture-book *The Collector*, that I made as a part of my Masters, is based on memories of a park I frequented as a child and the valley suburb that I grew up in. For instance, much of the imagery in *Page twenty-four* (2022) (Figure 1) comes from a walk around Chingford Park, near where I grew up.

Macdonald's writing helps me to understand my attachment to and interconnectedness with landscape. She writes in *Vesper Flights* (2020) that “[l]iterature can teach us the qualitative texture of the world,” and “[w]e need to communicate the value of things, so that more of us might fight to save them.”⁶ As we come to know the natural world around us more intimately, so we attach value to it.

In the search for a connection to the world around me, the natural environment was not the only place where moments of attachment could be found. The everyday and the domestic is a space from which we can learn to see more clearly. The poet Billy Collins brings attention to quiet moments in his poem “Aimless Love” (2013).⁷

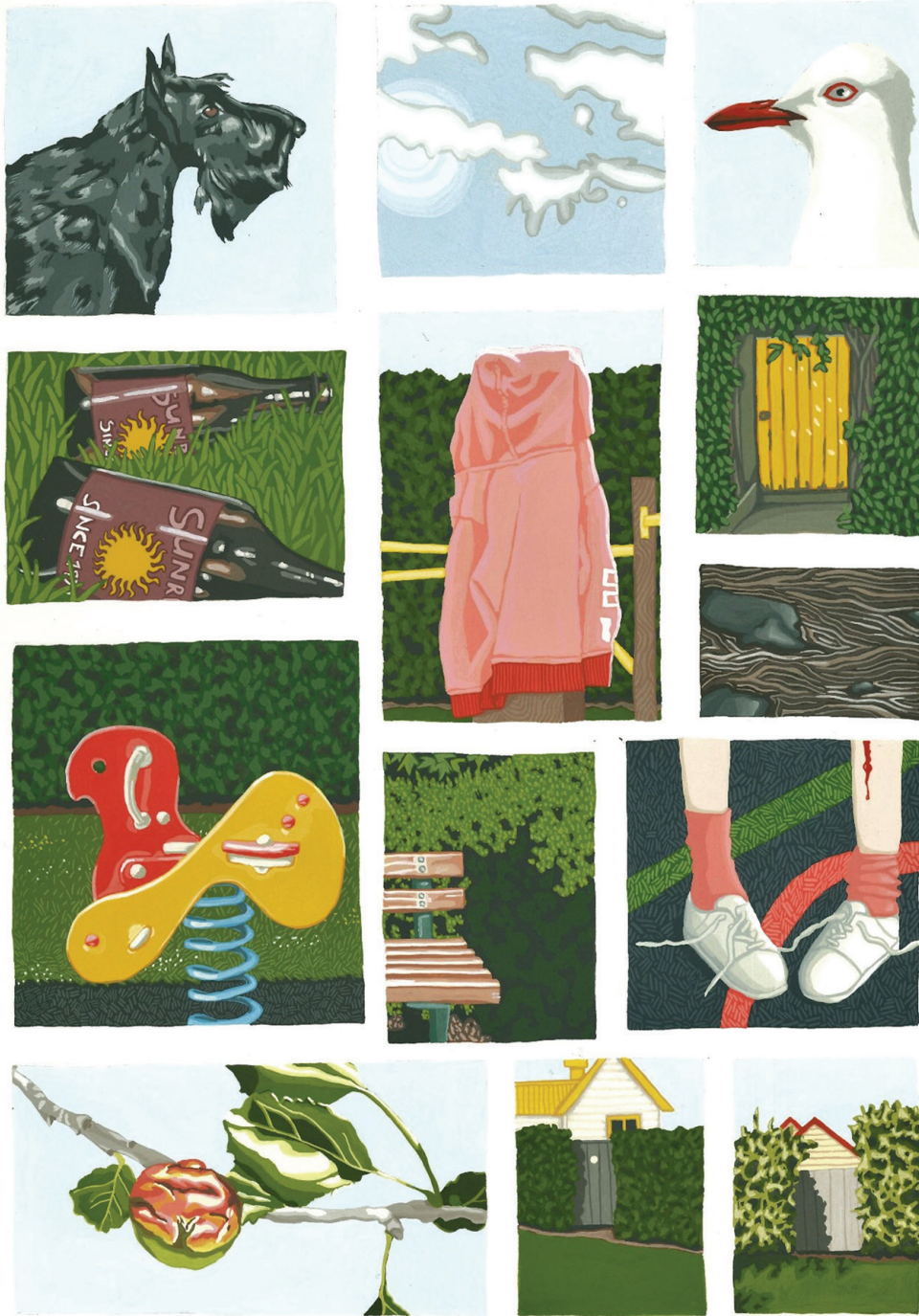


Figure 1. Pippi Miller; *Page twenty-four*, 2022, gouache on paper; 210x310mm. Collection of the artist.

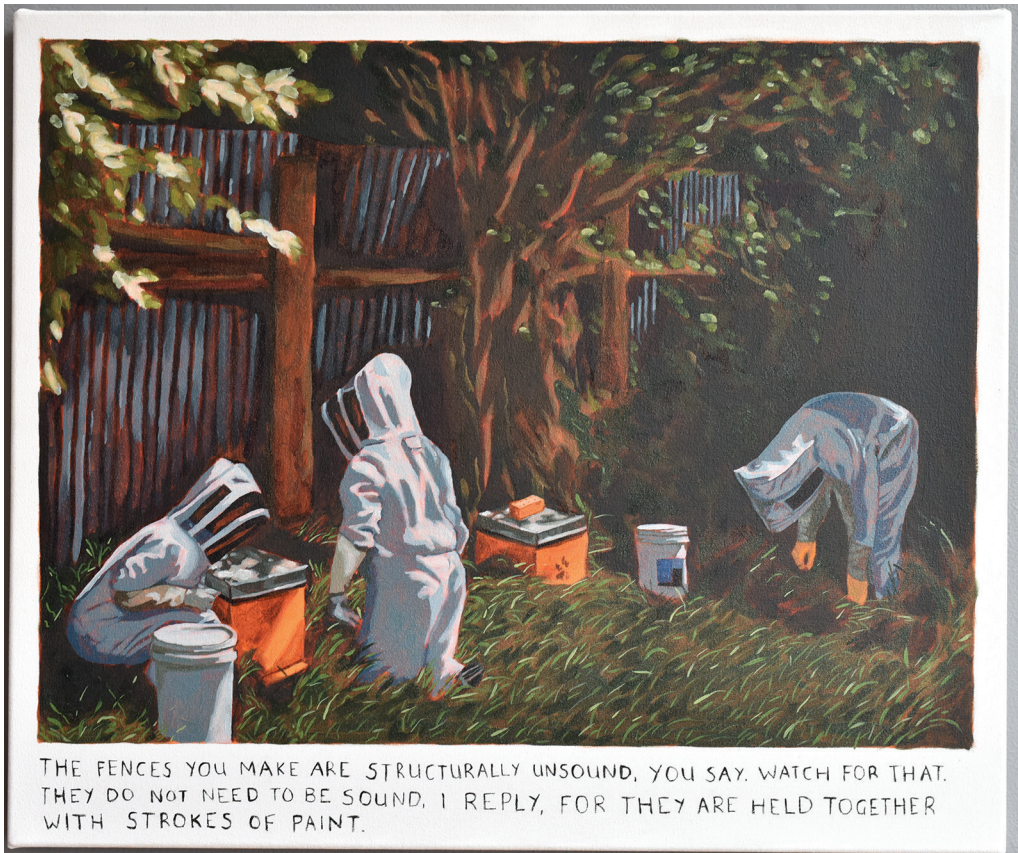


Figure 2. Pippi Miller; *The fences you make...*, 2023, oil on canvas, 700x585mm. Private collection.

When he speaks of noticing that wren by the lakeshore, he conveys the mindset that one must be in to notice such a bird. Collins makes me remember what it is like to look as you walk, to see the leaves on the trees, the rocks at the lakeshore, the lapping water and the wren. When he writes of the mouse the cat has dropped under the dining room table, Collins' language conveys the melancholy and regret felt after the moment of discovery. He does exclude the shock sometimes experienced when finding a cat's gory treasures (one, a dying mouse, I only discovered when putting on my shoe – the cat had dropped it inside, like the game we often played, dropping a ball of paper in a boot for him to fish out). In the final stanza, Collins evokes not only the visual moments of reverie to be found throughout the day, but also the sensations of touch and smell. He writes of feeling the soap turning in his wet hands, and catching from it the scent of "lavender and stone."⁸

While the poem is superficially about the love found in random happenstance, Collins contrasts it against the jagged love of human relationships. Just as personal attachment and memory can be found in the natural environment, so can the coincidental remind us of those we love. Collins bemoans the unkind words, suspicion and "silence on the telephone" to be found in romantic love.⁹ But I cannot help but feel that Collins' heart is not in his dismissal of human affection. He writes of the dead mouse, and the delicate wren, and the turbulent lover, but then goes on to say that his "heart is ... always propped up/ in a field on its tripod/ ready for the next arrow."¹⁰

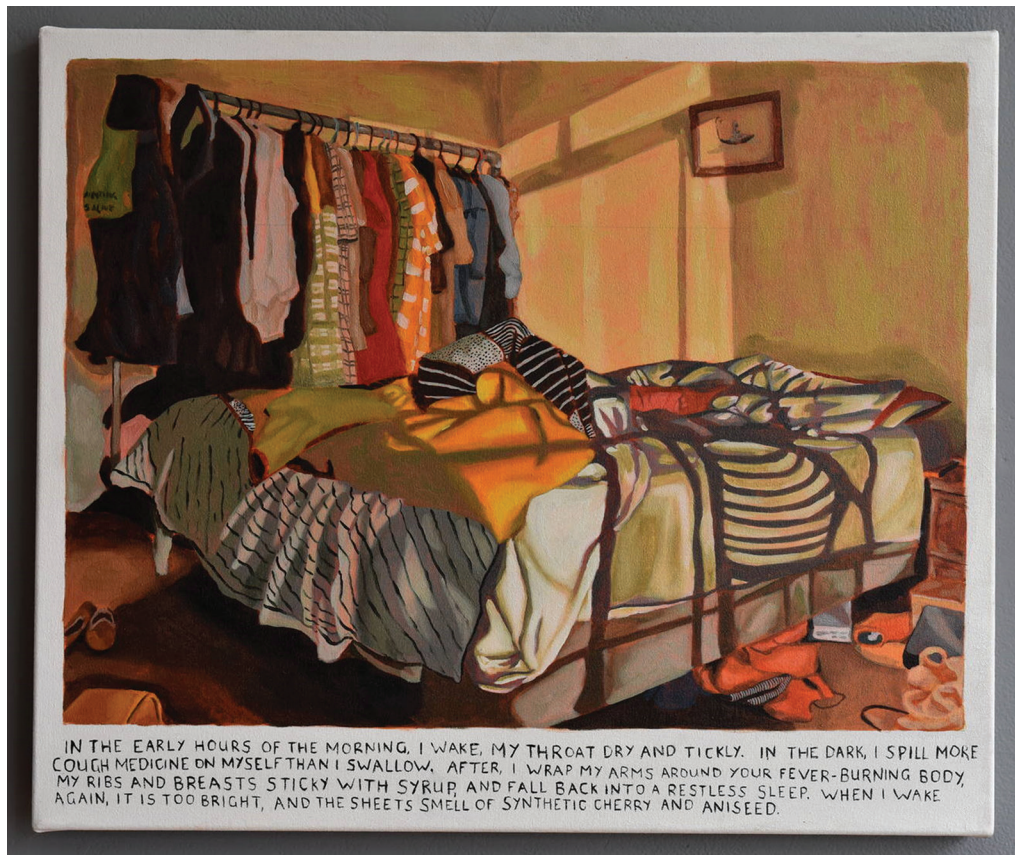


Figure 3. Pippi Miller, *In the early hours of the morning...*, 2023, oil on canvas, 700x585mm. Collection of the artist.

As I walked through Joanna Margaret Paul's recent exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, "Imagined in the Context of a Room," I couldn't help but feel some of the same energy present in her work that I find in Collins' poetry. Paul's paintings capture the light falling in a room, a chair, some dishes, a horizon line, inventories of rooms, her pencil or brush outlining the small shrine she has seen in her world. Even if being present in our own domestic environments does not necessarily help us to address climate change, it guides us to find the beauty in the everyday, a habit which helps to combat ecological anxiety. After reading "Aimless Love," the smell of soap hits my nose more sharply and, after walking amongst Paul's works, the chair in the corner of the room next to the window draws my pencil down to the page, and the bright colours of my clothes hanging on the rail in my room catch my eye.

The work above, *In the early hours of the morning...* (Figure 3), was painted with my newfound observations of the domestic. The claustrophobia of the small room and the bright patterns of the clothes are both things that go unnoticed in the everyday, but which become precious through paint. The accompanying text brings absent people into the room, and makes the empty bed into a sickbed. Paul's work, too, is interspersed with the jagged (and loving) outlines and impressions of the important people in her life. Jeffrey Harris leans toward the viewer from the paper; moments from a young marriage collect on another sheet. A room sits apart from the rest of the exhibition, a shrine to a daughter who died young. Faces fade from her work as loves break down, but people remain present, if not clearly drawn. They are captured in the shirts of a wardrobe, or the empty space in the arms of a chair.

In particular, Paul's work *Untitled* (c1971), a pencil sketch of an armchair in the bay window of a villa, captures the absence and presence of people in a domestic space. The work is detailed in places that have drawn Paul's attention, and left blank in other spaces. The throw over the back of the armchair is resplendent with its black and white pattern of flowers and leaves. The folds of the fabric are shaded, a bowl of fruit catches the eye. Paul captures the natural in the domestic with equal detail – the view out the window of the villa is fully rendered – showing that perhaps the domestic is less separate from the outdoors than we might assume. As Greg Donson observed in his essay "The Garden Suburb and Beyond," Paul's attention claims "equal value for both the interior and the world outside."¹¹ While the armchair remains empty, evoking questions about who it might ordinarily seat, the artist's hands sneak into frame as they capture the image. The viewer can stand and place themselves in the position of the artist, perhaps imagining it is their hands that hold the pencil.

The writers, poet and artist I have written about have all taught me about my own sense of attachment to the landscapes I live in; domestic and wild, intimate and unknown. Macdonald intersperses the natural with the personal, so demonstrating how our own memories become intertwined with landscapes, making them significant to us. Macfarlane populates the world with words to describe places we have forgotten, showing that language and people help to make landscapes seem more real, present and important – something we urgently need in these days of ecological collapse. Collins, through well-chosen words, and Paul, through simplicity of line and colour choice, capture small moments of the domestic and the coincidental that show us how the banality of the everyday is also a landscape of attachment.

All four of these voices demonstrate that it is not the environment, words, the domestic or happenstance alone that sustains us. As relationships, lost or present, haunt the lives and works of writers, poets and artists, so do they haunt all of our lives and small moments. The sea pinks in my front garden remind me of my mother; the toes of a dead fledgling on my doormat remind me of my childhood cat; and out walking the other day, I only noticed the mānuka rippling like the sea at the urging of my friend, who pointed it out as we stood on a hillside bathed in evening light.

Pippi Miller is an artist and illustrator based in Dunedin. After studying English for some years at Otago University, she turned to the Dunedin School of Art. Emerging in 2023 with an MFA, Pippi is now working toward becoming a full-time creative.

1 Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015).
2 Simon Morley, *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 2003, 9.
3 Richard Smyth, "Plashy Fens: The Limitations of Nature Writing," *Times Literary Supplement*, 5849 (2015), 15.
4 Joe Moran, "A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing," *Literature & History*, 23:1 (2014), 50.
5 Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (London: Vintage, 2014), 141.
6 Helen Macdonald, *Vesper Flights* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020), ix.
7 Billy Collins, *Aimless Love: New and Selected Poems* (London: Picador, 2013), 9.
8 *Ibid.*, 10.
9 *Ibid.*, 9.
10 *Ibid.*, 10.
11 Greg Donson, "The Garden Suburb and Beyond," in *Joanna Margaret Paul: Imagined in the Context of a Room*, eds Lauren Gutsell and Lucy Hammonds (Dunedin: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2021), 69-88.