Where is the Wild?: A Conversation on Writing, Landscape, and Place

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Pippa Marland: Hello and welcome everyone to Where is the Wild a conversation on writing landscape and place. I'm Pippa Marland I'm a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow at the University of Bristol. And my research specialty is nature writing, that's also my passion in life, and I'm delighted to have with me today Harriet Fraser and Testament as my guests on the panel, Harriet Fraser writes about environment and rural cultures, combining interviews and community gatherings with solitary walks to get a feel for the lands, ecologies and stories, her work embraces poetry and prose as well as open fell poetics with the release of words into the landscape. Cumbria based, she works collaboratively with her husband photographer, Rob Fraser in their arts and research practice Somewhere Nowhere. Their work explores the natural world and the way humans shape the environment. It offers inspiration and wonder as well as an invitation to engage in debate about value systems and about practices and policies that affect land use and changing landscape. Testament is a West Yorkshire based writer, rapper and world record breaking human beatboxer.

He's received praise from a diverse range of voices from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, graphic novelist Alan Moore, DJ Lauren Laverne, and the originator of hip hop himself DJ Kool Herc. Testament continually returns to the theme of human connectivity and trying to find the spiritual in the everyday in his writing.

And his work includes the celebrated hip hop album Home Cut - No Freedom Without Sacrifice and his play Black Men Walking, which was nominated for best new play at the Writers Guild Awards and best new play at the UK Theatre Awards in 2018. He's currently filming his play Orpheus in the Record Shop for BBC Four. And Harriet and Testament and I've been working together closely over the past year, although, because of the circumstances we've actually never met in person. But they've been working with me on a project called Tipping Points, which is based at the Universities of Leeds and Bristol. And it's funded by the arts and humanities research council and it comes under the umbrella of a program called Landscape Decisions. We're working with three brilliant partner organisations in the North of England, Castle Howard, Wild Ennerdale and Stirley Community Farm to draw attention to the work they're already doing, or in the process of planning to increase biodiversity on their land.

We're interested in people's relationship with landscape and how they can be included more in decisions about landscape change. And we've been exploring this through a series of nature writing and visual art workshops based on those three locations, Harriet and Testament led two absolutely fantastic inspirational workshops, which I was lucky enough to attend on nature writing and landscape based on Wild Ennerdale in Harriet's case and Stirley Community Farm in Testament's. So I'm delighted to have them with me today albeit not in person. And I wanted to start off by asking you a question about people's relationship with landscape through the whole COVID crisis.

It's really brought to everyone's attention, how much we crave nature when we need nature. But that in itself has actually led to kind of pressure on the green spaces to which we have access. And so I wanted to ask both of you, you know, how do we form a relationship with landscape and what do we need to learn in order to have a kind of mutually beneficial relationship with a place?

So I'll come to you first, Harriet.

Harriet Fraser: Thanks. It's great to be here. That's quite a big question or those are quite big questions there. And yeah, I think there's been a lot of very open sharing from people about how much being in nature and in green spaces has meant to them over this last year when we've all been really challenged.

There's no doubt at all that it's essential to our well-being. You know, I think you ask about connecting and we all co-exist, you know, we have this language where nature somehow seems to be put somewhere separate from human, but there isn't a separation. So kind of we're dealing with that issue all the time in our language.

And you say how do people connect to landscape? And that's quite interesting because we have so many different landscapes don't we? And I think the Tipping Points project has shown that you've got community farm and an estate and then Wild Ennerdale, which is this massive valley, that's seven miles long with mountains, you know, nearly 3000 feet high.

So they're like apples and oranges, but they're all landscapes for us to place ourselves in, find ourselves in, be among other people in and observe really closely. And I think that idea of connecting for me, it kind of largely comes down to time and finding the time or being invited in to spend time in a way that works for you.

And we're all different, aren't we? You know, we're creatives. So it's really nice to think let's bring some creativity to this, you know, looking closely, writing, playwriting, visual art, but equally you might connect by planting up a window box. Or maybe you've got somewhere to put a tomato plant, or I'm really lucky I can put potatoes in my garden.

Most other stuff gets eaten, but not by humans. But I think, you know, there are barriers as well. And I think it's really important to acknowledge that because however much we think it's great for everybody to connect. Maybe not even everybody wants to. So there are different ways in but I do think it's fundamental for our wellbeing.

That probably doesn't answer your question, but...

Pippa Marland: Well, I mean, I think it answers it beautifully and it opens up a whole lot of other questions and themes, but I'm going to go to Testament just to pick up on the idea of connection and connectivity, because I know that's something that's really kind of close to your heart and something that you try to bring into all of your creative work. So I just wondered, you know, what that kind of connectivity with the landscape might mean for you?

Testament: Yeah. It can mean multiple different things, I think for different people, but even multiple things, just to me on my jones, you know, like I was really interested by what Harriet said about the sort of language and the way we talk about there's like a separation between nature and humans and actually that's not true.

I always feel like nature's always trying to connect to us, nature is going to connect to us, whether we want it to or not. Whether that's stepping out into the rain on the way to the primary school this morning, dropping my kids off or going for a walk and really feeling connected.

And then the whole thing around sustainability and responsibility, like nature is going to connect to us as a people, as humanity. And hopefully that will be in a good way rather than through calamity and through, you know, erosion and all that stuff. So I feel like nature's always available and is trying to a bit like you know, those cracks in the pavement or the subsidence or the flowers growing in the brick wall, nature's always bursting in on us. And we're so preoccupied with stuff well I am, that I have to tell myself to take a breath and time, just like Harriet said it the thing. And it's actually quite an intersectional thing isn't it? The whole, "Oh, I'm out in nature now" that thought, normally it takes time to arrive at that thought and it takes energy, it takes resources to get, "Oh, I want to be out in nature" or "I want to stop and consider this plant or this creature", and then those sort of really meditative and sort of transcendent cheeky, little moments in the day whether it's smelling a mint leaf or whatever I feel, and that's a beautiful moment of connectivity and they're really essential.

It's really well-documented the effects of green spaces on mental health and that sort of stuff. But even actually there's been points in my life when I've been at a really low point in my life and it hasn't been out in a field it's been around the back of a library sat on some concrete and feeling textures on my fingers, you know, that concrete against skin as well as, you know, sitting in a field and feeling tree bark on your back and digging into your back and all that lovely stuff.

But it's such a fundamental part of what I think it takes to help us through our lives or it can be, that it's a shame that so often those intersectional sort of barriers of class and money and racism, or, you know my wife went for a run yesterday, which she hasn't really done, but even in the wake of last week's news in London of a woman being kidnapped and murdered, et cetera, and all that, and where's the safe space to go out and enjoy and contact and get out of the house and get out of the mundanity of it all.

So there's loads of intersectional barriers for that. So I feel like the connectivity's mega important. Both in conserving things that are really immediate and tangible, but also engaging with something bigger and more transcendent at the same time. Yeah, so I feel like it's really important. And I think what I like about places like Stirley Farm is that they give opportunity for a variety of people to connect, but even that takes effort.

Harriet Fraser: Mm. Yeah. I like what you said about sitting around the back of the library and just feeling the dirt on your hands. And I think we're sensual beings aren't we? And we're asked too often to just live in our heads and whether that's through fear or through education or peer pressure, just being outside and feeling the dust or seeing the sun or smelling a leaf helps to just bring us back into this kind of state of wholeness, because we are very sensual, we operate on lots of different levels. So I think the more we can help that happen for people the better I know it helps.

Pippa Marland: That's such an important point about access and kind of intersectional range of experience of landscape and so on. And that's something I definitely would like to come back to in a little in terms of thinking about kind of access to nature and nature writing itself.

But I was really struck by that idea as you've both been saying of the kind of connection with the immediate and the idea that maybe nature is kind of connecting with us. And I think that the year we've just been through has been a collective trauma, no doubt about it. And some

people have suffered enormously, but there've been kind of little, small blessings among that year.

And I think one of them has been the way that we've had a bit more time to be out in the very nearby wild you know, for me, it's my back garden, which is not even really a garden, it's a patch of paved ground, but I went wild with the pot plants and the veggies in pots. And I had a couple of leafcutter bees who started nesting.

I had a little bee hotel, but also they were kind of nesting a bit randomly. And I became really fixated on them and grew in affection for them and so on. And I think that one of the things that might've happened in the last year is that understanding that nature is right there. It's when you're sitting behind the library, you know, it's in your potatoes in your garden and so on. I just wondered if you could say a bit more about the idea of what we might now think that nature is, it's not a wilderness, although obviously, as you said, Harriet places like Wild Ennerdale are marvelous kind of sweeps of grand landscape, although, you know, there are human activities going on in them and it's important to remember that, but you know, just the idea of the immediacy of nature and that the past year has been like a crack in the pavement where suddenly we've seen things or we've heard birds, we've paid attention in ways that perhaps hasn't happened previously. Has that been your experience Harriet or, you know, with who you've spoken to in communities?

Harriet Fraser: Yeah, I think it's been a very widespread experience. For me personally, I'm a bit of a roamer. I like to go for loads of long walks and stuff. So not being able to do that meant that I had to roam around my much smaller patch. And I live in a very rural community. And I was asked by a farmer to look out for curlews' nests and Eurasian curlews are birds that are really, really threatened with extinction at the moment.

And there are certain things you can do to try and help the chicks because they are not successful. It's really, it's quite emotional for me because the species is on the brink of collapse, really. So my world became the curlews' world or what was going on in their lives really shaped every day.

I was getting up early to find out what they were doing. And when we found eggs, we would see what we could do, electric fencing and working with local farmers. And then we lost the eggs. We didn't lose them, but the crows took them. And then finally, to witness two chicks, actually successfully fledging when I know that there's 50 or 60 pairs that didn't make it. That didn't have any chicks. That was a really emotional journey. And I think rightly so, there's a lot of attention on the benefit to being outside and connecting with nature in some way on our own wellbeing as humans. But I think another thing that's happened with noticing what's around us, like for you Pippa, you see there's a world that the bees have, and they have their own perspective on life and it's not yours, but we all live alongside one another.

You know, there's this kind of empathy that is necessary now, as we see all different species inhabiting this space. And perhaps I hope that this greater sense of being aware of what's around us is going to feed forward into conversations about how we look forward, how we look after what isn't doing so well, you know, so there's a lot of different levels here.

It's not always about putting humans at the centre of how nice it is to be outside. You know, we have a responsibility. So yeah, without getting too heavy, that for me actually is part of the picture. And I think it's important to keep sight of it.

Pippa Marland: That's a really nice way of looking at it, actually, because there's been a lot of criticism of people going out into wild spaces and kind of trashing them and not really knowing how to be in those places.

And I think there's a whole history of reasons why that might be the case, but that idea that if we become invested in the narratives of the non-human world, that can be a really powerful way of starting to care and possibly to kind of behave more cautiously or differently or more caringly in relationship to it.

I mean, Testament, I know that you've always really championed the kind of local nature haven't you? The nearby nature.

Testament: Yeah. And sometimes very unconsciously to be honest, I mean, I come from hip hop, so which is usually an urban pursuit, whether that's the dancing, the rapping, DJing all that kind of stuff, but there is something, it's really interesting listening to rappers that come from the countryside as opposed to in a city, but even just the lyrical content is different.

It's more reflective there, yeah, it's often more lyrical. The beats tend to be more jazzy actually. There's more... it's lusher music. Usually, whereas urban music can be and is often more percussive. So that's interesting. But in terms of the content of what we're talking about yeah, for me, when I write for some reason, you know, perhaps it's being a sensory writer or trying to incorporate the senses, which is what my mum told me when I very started at the beginning of my journey as a creative "poetry should always incorporate the senses". Okay, mum. And yeah so if it is sensory, then nature's going to be part of that.

Yeah. I think I've always been very human centric in my writing which I know is part of nature but like for me in terms of connecting with an audience, which is what I'm trying to do with, or whatever great thing I get up to. There needs to be a way into the conversation for the stranger, for the reader who hasn't got a clue what I'm going to talk about.

And often that is through empathy and hopefully putting the reader, the consumer in your shoes for that second and to feel what you're feeling. And yeah, nature and the senses is a huge part of that. So I'll often do that and actually the workshop that I did the other day was very much keying in using the human experience as a way into talking about nature writing and stuff like that.

Pippa Marland: Thank you. There's some really rich ideas there. And I do like this idea that the kind of nature, the kind of environment that surrounds you, kind of infiltrates your creativity and shapes it so that, you know, it's forging a slightly different kind of music if it's coming out of a rural setting.

That's a really lovely idea actually. And I'm also really interested in the idea of bringing nature and nature writing into those other forms or seeing them as participating in the same kind of universe of appreciation of nature. So, I mean, maybe we could come back to this idea about access to landscapes for different people, people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and so on.

And also access to nature writing, because my experience as a researcher, I've just helped to write a big history of modern, British nature writing. And on the whole, over the centuries, it's very white, it's very male. And it's very, middle-class, it tends to be the preserve of people

of leisure, or at least who are able to kind of be walking through the landscape rather than working in the landscape.

And I just wondered what you felt about, you know, how we might open up nature writing or how might we attract more people of all different backgrounds into nature writing? I don't know if you want to comment. I don't mind who would like to comment on that first.

Harriet Fraser: I was going to ask Testament because having written your play and I'm interested to hear your experience on bringing different people in too, maybe as readers or listeners rather than doers in nature writing and which parts of nature writing which books, which plays, which bits of music, you know, there's all that to it as well, what we choose to share.

Testament: Yeah, I think that's really interesting. So I'm kinda new here.

I'm new to the the world of writing about nature. Like it's crept into my work, but it's never been conscious up until Pippa got in touch really. Black Men Walking is like very much about landscape and its relationship with identity. Yeah, so that's really interesting for me.

So I've been learning quite frankly a lot yeah. And I still feel like a toddler in this new sort of arena.

Harriet Fraser: I feel like that every day, so I'm with you there.

Testament: Well, I'm on nappies anyway. But there we go. So let me think about that. So in terms of thinking, I mean, the play that I wrote, Black Men Walking is very much about Britishness and for me like the landscape and England and Britishness, and the fact that it's a really managed landscape we're a smaller little bunch of islands, you know, and it's so dense and we've had so many waves of immigration and so much history that we're not just looking at nature.

We're walking on history. All the time you were walking past the, you know, who would have walked this path, who put that path there in fact? This isn't the Outback or the Sahara where you can walk for hours and hours and not see a human soul, you know, even in Scotland I'm going to run into someone probably after a bit.

And in England, definitely. Yeah, it doesn't take long to hit a road or pathway. So I think the people's imprint is very clearly on the earth here in Britain, whether that's a stone wall going up or a housing block or a giant city, which has been plonked somewhere. So it's very much because the environment has been so curated.

It speaks volumes as to who those people are, why those things were there, who had the power. So there's a whole thing about, you know, that sort of really dense sort of relationships and networks of power on what we're walking all the time, you know and sort of liminality.

I don't normally use the word liminal, but anyway, those kind of academic words and those words that yeah, those boundaries that we're crossing all the time and for working class people which isn't me. I don't think, my dad maybe, but not me. I put the M you know, for me, MCs middle class, that's my sort of hip hop thing.

My mom's a social worker. My dad was a teacher. So, they managed to, they had that upward sort of mobility thing. And that meant that they dragged me and my brother out onto the landscape. So they did go on the odd church walk or that sort of stuff. And they took me to the theatre a few times as well, which is like, you know, really appreciate that.

Didn't enjoy it at the time, but years later I do. So that's sort of to do with power as well. Like them getting me and my brother out into the landscape is to do with money and access and power and permission. And even the fact that my dad's white, we're not an entirely black family.

I've got friends that are you know, you know, my mum's African, my dad's English. Whereas my friends who have got two black parents, like we might get some little funny looks, but my friends who are darker skinned get more, can feel more like they're being treated slightly differently or that, or even sometimes people get shocked like five white men with backpacks climbing up a hill, get a different reaction from five black men walking up.

Why does five black guys in a field, you know, as opposed to why those walkers in a field, you know, walkers the default is white. So that was really interesting. And Black Men Walking really mined into that. And I went walking with a black men's walking group which by the time I joined it actually had women on as well.

And it was lovely, brilliant, wise, clever people who are mostly middle-class. That experience and talking to them about their experiences of what they got from being part of a group, what they got from being part of a landscape and also how quickly conversation turned to race was really interesting.

I don't know if that's just cause I was there because I was the writer guy and they wanted to talk about interesting sort of political things. You know, they were quoting like Dubois at me or Dubois, I don't know how to pronounce it, and James Baldwin at me while they were walking around, you know and talking about ecology as well, you know, so I don't know if that would naturally have been their conversation or if it would have been mostly about football which we also did talk about and kids and things like that.

So that was really interesting. I think I might've gone on my own little ramble talk right now, in fact. But I'm trying to remember what the original question was. It was about permission. It was sort of who's allowed into the landscape and that sort of stuff wasn't it?

So, yeah, that's a really long way around sort of a few touches on my experiences. Starting to think about that and not just remembering what my childhood experience was, but now engaging with what's happening right now. And now, since that play, walking, which was a tiny part of my life, is now something that I regularly do with my family. I was really inspired by those people in that group. And now I'm dragging my kids out onto you know, through the pathways.

Harriet Fraser: That's really cool. It's nice to hear that about that journey. And I think you describe really well, how these open landscapes more than the kind of any inner-city green spaces is open landscapes. The nature writing that's come from those places or about those places haven't been like the preserve of white people and many men, not all, but you know, majority of historically, it just tells such a partial story and it kind of sets up these expectations of how you're meant to understand a place or even access it in the first place.

So it's exciting to feel that those barriers are beginning to disappear. As more voices are coming out and all of these historied landscapes, so much history in them. So many diverse voices from whatever that might be, from your lifestyle, the way you make your livelihood, your race, your gender, your ability and the more they can come out the better because the landscape will be more, not selectively described or appreciated, you know, it would be great to see more people thinking "yeah, we can go there. Definitely. Why not?" You don't even have to ask the question. I think writing has a real big part to play in that, but also acknowledging that not everybody reads.

It's also about how we connect to those natural spaces or feel that it's all right to go there. And you know, some of the policy aspirations at the moment, like let's get all the children out under the stars for one night. Fantastic. But is there funding, you know, is there skills within the schools? Is there competence among the teachers to do that?

Where are the residential centres? There's a lot of structural stuff that can facilitate these relationships right from early on. And then if you can twin that with stories that come from a diverse set of voices and allow different ways into looking more closely at the landscape, or just allowing those kind of wonderful moments. Yeah. It's about that access innit as well.

Testament: Yeah. You've just reminded me about something that was a part of Pippa's question, which is about a getting those voices in, encouraging people essentially to write from different backgrounds. And it would probably be quite easy to get some middle class, upper middle class, black person, person of color to scribble something.

You just ask them, easy. Cause they've got the time. "Oh yeah I'll go and do that. That sounds, Oh, I've never done that. Oh yeah. That sounds really good". You know I was aware with Black Men Walking in terms of generating an audience for that play which were really diverse the audiences that would turn up.

Yes, it's a theatre play, and it was on in theatres, so mostly middle-class people of color. But then, the theatre company Eclipse Theatre got to give them a massive shout out because they had literally a community officer in every city that we went to, someone that they'd assigned as a sort of outreach person to talk to communities, diverse communities and it was about people out there having a conversation.

"Hi, I've come to your group, organisation school, I'm physically putting this flyer into your hand. Let me tell you about it." And it's conversations actually that reach certain people, which simply putting a leaflet in the foyer of the theatre is not going to do. That's the same old, same old in terms of not only getting people into a theatre space, which I think I'm really up for getting more people to experience art, generally, that's a whole conversation, but then to get into the theatre, they can have a conversation about the countryside. And so for me, like, if we want to reach people with a message or encourage them into certain practices like writing or whatever, mindfulness, whatever the thing that we want to share, or I want to share, then actually it takes that extra mile of outreach and giving people experiences.

Harriet Fraser: Yeah. I do quite a lot of walking out with people of all different ages and then reading stuff, and it might be somebody who's like, "God, I hate poetry", but they hear a poem out in the landscape where there's a context for it. And they're like, "Oh, well, that wasn't so bad", you know? And yeah, I wonder if you're gonna have your play performed outside?

Could it be so that people walk with it or experience outside? Sometimes I think again, if we're performing and sharing stuff and writing included, always inside in inside spaces, there's possibility isn't there for more things to happen outside?

Testament: The play is written as a route. You can walk the route of the play in South Yorkshire. It's a long old walk I don't know if it would take, the play normally takes about one hour, 20 minutes, so I don't know if we'd be able to quite get to all of it.

Harriet Fraser: You'd have to run in between.

Testament: Exactly! We could stop for lunch. We can have lunch for the interval, but I would be really excited about that, about it being a promenade you know, extreme promenade play. Yeah, you literally have to get your backpack and you bring your packed lunch with you. That'd be great. And walking boots, probably.

Pippa Marland: I think that would be absolutely amazing. Actually. I was going to say that I saw Black Men Walking in a theatre in Bristol in 2018 in the Arnolfini and I was completely blown away by it.

And it was what introduced me to your writing. And I really felt that it was a kind of nature writing in itself because of that relationship with landscape, because it was beautifully staged in a really imaginative way. And it really made you feel like you were accompanying this group of people walking.

The other thing that I really loved about it, there was this kind of almost mystical mythical imaginative dimension, where it was conjuring up the black people who had been in that landscape. And I know that you kind of looked into this historically to find that there were black characters who'd walked, you were kind of following their footsteps through that landscape.

And so it was that idea of kind of that restitution of those people into the history, which has kind of been possibly erased since then. But I think, you know, the idea of taking that outdoors into that landscape as Harriet says, it would add another really wonderful dimension. You could kind of feel the ancestors yourself in the environment.

Testament: After this conversation, I'm going to pop Eclipse Theatre an email.

Pippa Marland: Excellent. I want to kind of move on to maybe a more personal question now, which is what writing about nature, what writing really means to both of you? And I'm hoping that you might also share a bit of your writing as you share your thoughts about this with us. So I'm going to ask Harriet first. If you could kind of say, what is the experience of nature writing? What kinds of attention do you bring to it and how does that make you feel?

Harriet Fraser: I think I've always used writing as the way that I personally express my thoughts, I'm a bit easier with the pen than I am with speaking historically.

And I haven't always kind of written totally about the environment. Of course, I've written about all kinds of stuff, but I think it's part of my act of noticing and being there, you know, I could go for a walk or be outside, but if I stop and just kind of chill out and tune in, I get out my phone and I write notes on it.

I just use that as my device, probably more often than a notebook. And I've no idea sometimes what comes out and it's often got loads of typos in it, but what it is is this immediacy of what I'm seeing and what I'm feeling or hearing or smelling, what's going on. And then I can look back at that. And it's just kind of renewing that connection.

And then I'll use that as material for whatever I write afterwards. So for me, it really makes the experience of being outside just deeper. And I just feel it more strongly and, you know, even two minutes of writing, it can feel like time has just expanded for two hours. It does something, I don't know if you find that Testament, but you can do a lot writing in a very little time and it opens up a different kind of sensory experience for me because it makes me notice things.

So yeah, and it's really important for me. It's part of my wellbeing as well, because it helps me to slow down. And just notice what's around me. So I've always really kind of needed it, I think. And I always feel like I'm new to this every day when I wake up, but I write a lot of poetry and I didn't always do that.

But that for me is quite nice. Cause I kind of, I start off with loads and loads of notes and then I gradually cross bits out and cross bits out. And I come out with this kind of skeletal framework of the kind of overall feeling of what it was to be outside or to notice something. So yeah, it's sometimes hard to describe isn't it?

What's something you do all the time, what it makes you feel, but so yeah, you asked if we'd share something, so I've got something here. I quite like to do long walks, at least when we're not in lockdown, long walks over a period of days and camping along the way, if possible. And so, last summer when we weren't in lockdown Rob and I went for a walk for 16 days and it's kind of like this experience of day after day, just letting that sink in to body and mind. And I've written a poem called Resilience. So I'll read this: Resilience, this small skin held society my body feels it's way over grass and stone leans into wind an ecology of muscles, sinews, joints, eyes, feet knees, find consciousness, pain rises, then eases like a river after rain. Day by day, body takes over mind, shows what it knows, learns as it goes, when weariness sets in the mind compels those final necessary movements to set up home, to make food, to eat, then lying flat, let's go, muscle by muscle, tendon and nerve relaxes into healing, over time like land weathered, the body finds its strongest form to be upright and certain in the face of a storm

Testament: Oh my goodness, is that published?

Harriet Fraser: Not really. I kind of get behind myself on things like that but thank you.

Testament: I would like to after this this discussion, I'd very much like to talk to you about where I can get hold of your words.

Harriet Fraser: Well, I think we could go for a walk together, cause that would be really good.

Pippa Marland: Thank you, Harriet. That was fantastic. And I really like the way you talked about condensing language as part of your process, and I know that's something you worked on with your workshop participants of which I was one. That way of kind of

intensifying it, but I also really love this idea of being a kind of embodied presence in the landscape.

That's obviously at the absolute heart of your response to the landscape, you know, even when it's not a very pleasant bodily experience. But it's kind of, it's being there in that landscape. But I also quickly wanted to ask you, because I know that you work with your husband Rob who's an amazing photographer.

If you go on your website, the images are absolutely stunning, and that must be another dimension of that kind of using the senses but combining your words or working together to create a kind of composite with text and image. And I just wondered if you could say a little bit about that?

Harriet Fraser: Yeah. Well, different people find different ways in don't they? Or we're touched by different things. And it's true. The picture can tell a thousand words just like a poem can paint a picture. And it's lovely working alongside Rob, I mean, I can just sit back and look at his pictures and just go, wow, that's it.

You don't need any words at all, but something happens or people tell us that something happens when the two are put together. It's a bit more multisensory. And I think, again, it gives context. Cause I think if we only have the written word there's pros and cons in this, because sometimes when you read a book, you create your own world.

You make up all your own visualisations and that's exactly what you need. And you don't want their picture, depends who you are, but if you've got their picture, you've got another context and it makes it real rather than abstract. And it is the place that we relate to that we live in. You know?

So I think that that brings the reality. I think it also adds a bit to the wonder. I mean, sometimes Rob has a knack of, he doesn't like taking blue sky pictures, Testament, you know, if there's a storm, that's it, we're out there, you know. And then you get a bit of drama and it's like you say, nature comes to you, but not always easily.

And so I think that maybe that's there somewhere, you know, this idea again, that natural world outside of our own heads is always there.

Pippa Marland: I like that idea of things being multidimensional and something I was going to ask Testament about your writing Testament is that you are able to bring a whole lot of different forms into your writing because you work in so many different forms.

You work in music and rap and you work in theatre. And one of the things that we've worked on together this year is you've contributed to a new book of nature writing, a new collection called Gifts of Gravity and Light, which I'm so excited about is coming out in July. And I asked you to write something for that, partly because I was really excited by this idea that you might actually push a little bit at the boundaries of what we think of as nature writing, which is very often, you know, quite solid prose, the essay form and so on.

And that was the kind of broad framework for your piece, but actually in your piece, you experimented quite a lot. So I wanted to ask you just to say a bit more about how you approach writing about nature and then maybe to share a bit of that essay with us.

Testament: Yeah. I was so excited to do it and intimidated as well. When you mentioned initially it was an essay, like my mind went to, you know, formal, my limited scope of reading means that essay immediately means like boring academic papers. But actually an essay is not that, which I should have known, cause like I wrote a play and I read some Rebecca Solnit essays and that was like really exciting.

And like, you know, you're reading a Rebecca Solnit essay and I'm there in the room that she's talking about, in the conversation she's having with that bloke and, and they're talking and discussing politics or issues or social stuff. And I'm like, Oh wow. You know, getting my mind blown. Yeah, as opposed to some of the essays that I've read.

So I think I sort of called you up cautiously because I didn't really know you at that point. I'm still getting to know which I'm really excited about. I was like, is it alright if I really like mash it up? Like okay some of it is rap, is it okay if some of it is poetry? Cause I think what excites me as a reader is when the author is really playful with form. Perhaps I've got a short attention span, but I get excited when yeah, when I'm eating salmon and then someone suggests marshmallows halfway through, you know, I'm like okay. I wanna try that. I'm may not try it ever again, but I want to try it. I'm excited about these different flavours combining. And I think there's always been... a friend of mine she said that I'm polaristic is the word she used. And I'm always grabbing the two polar opposite ends of things and trying to hold onto both at the same time.

Which I think she meant as a compliment. She said as she pushed me down the stairs, no, she didn't. She's a really good friend and a very wise person and that actually resonated with me. And I was like, yeah, you're right. I do try to take two different cultures, two different ideas.

And it very much is like what I love about hip hop is that you can, I can listen to a Beastie Boys record and they've got Rachmaninoff and then they've put a beat from the 1970s and putting two things together. Or De La Soul, which was my way in. One of my favorite De La Soul songs, not only samples funk and soul, but then the Grease soundtrack and then something else.

And they'll be making a joke on top of it and putting sound effects on and I love that collision of ideas and sounds. So that generally is my approach to most of my art. And maybe it's also because I'm scared if I sit too long I'll be found out in one style or medium. If I sit too long in just poetry, I'll get found out.

But yeah, so the approach to the essay, it's funny because the essay is sort of focused on different seasons. So a set of essays, different authors do spring, different authors do summer, winter. And mine was spring and I was writing in the middle of winter, which was you know, it was a bit of a hurdle.

I was like, Oh, how am I going to do that? I want to go out and experience it. And, you know just like you were saying Harriet I'm similar to you in that. When I want to be out experiencing something, I'll tap a load of ideas into my phone, come back. For me, cause I'm not able to sit with my laptop usually in a natural environment in the elements.

Certainly not in winter when it's rainy and the snow's going on, not for very long. So I would want to do that. So I ended up sat on my sofa. And I pulled out my phone and I started

flicking through my phone and I found the photos that I'd taken in spring. And I found them from years before that, and I found them from years before that, and that became a jumping off point for my essay. A photo of my son in the front room, he was like three or four at the time crawling over some sort of chair. And then you can see outside the nature is kind of, it's trying to get in, the tree outside was in blossom.

And then I thought about the photos that I took on some of the walks during lockdown with the kids in spring, just in the very first lockdown. Gosh, people talking about lockdown one, two and three now, it's weird the language has changed so quickly. But so that was my sort of jumping off point.

And then I just liked the phone, I was just jumping, I was time hopping by looking through what's on my smartphone and that became the form of the essay. It was jumping between paragraphs, the paragraphs, the chapters sort of go between these different memory points that speak to our relationship between my personal interaction with spring, with nature, and then thinking more broadly about human interaction with nature and the responsibility, and also how climate change has affected spring and affected Yorkshire and also death. Spring, because of some things, events that have happened in my life. March for me, can be associated with losing a friend. And also I thought of how we have these cold snaps more and more often in March now. So some creatures can be caught out in nature.

Butterflies awaken too early and end up dying because the environment isn't sustaining them because they've come, you know, the sun, the warmth, it got warm too quickly. So there's a evolution going on there which I think humanity played a part in our interaction with the environment and destroying some parts of our ecology.

So that's what the essay was about. And it flits between prose and poetry. And I'm going to read a moment from April in 2020. So this was the first lockdown. And when we started as a family to venture out and actually it was beautiful because it meant I got to spend more time with my kids.

Which was great. And we're definitely more bonded. We're very lucky that we have you know, I felt like the lockdowns in the COVID crisis has exacerbated what's already there in the world. So be that inequality, be that racial issues or in the environment as well. But then also what's good as well.

So neighbours being kind to one another, the kindness of certain people of colour has come out and luckily I feel very blessed that as a family, it brought out the best in us actually, you know, we didn't tear each other to shreds. In fact, we bonded more and more. There was more love through going through this sort of little imprisonment, internment.

So here's from Calderdale from April, 2020 is a poem about that first sort of foray: Finishing my tea and putting my shoes on, telling three kids to get a move on. Even round here it is odd, we've got four supermarkets and a train station, primary school next door access to motorways. And it's okay. What we forget is the amount of green sequestered between all of these.

We don't have to drive for hours, just stumble around the corner to the places, recommended a number of times, by the retired couple next door, no big mission. Now we

find what was on our doorstep long before the packages the delivery men bring. Lockdown means we have a new routine. So for a few months we have new routes to see.

It's a habit and it's fun become part of life. So we start up the road, past cars, parked on the side, nod at a few neighbors, half attempt at a wave and turn left past the corner shop. We're rocking pavements. Our six-year-old tries to read a sign pointing off between semi-detached houses and we stop the boy squints public footpath. And that's that.

Pippa Marland: Fantastic. Thank you.

Testament: I stumbled my way through it sorry about that.

Pippa Marland: No, no, I loved it. I'm going to ask you one last question, because we're running short on time now, and I'm really excited to say that the workshop materials and elements of the workshops you delivered, we're going to be making them all freely, publicly available, probably in, excuse me, in early April. And so I wanted, before we finished to ask both of you, cause you, you were both wonderful workshop leaders.

What advice would you give members of the public who are going to access these materials on the Landlines website? They might be coming to nature writing for the first time. What are some of those sorts of gems of wisdom that you can give them or just advice for starting out in nature writing? Harriet, do you want to go on this one first?

Harriet Fraser: Yeah. The thing about leading workshops and that is I never think it's about telling people how to do something. It's just about providing a space. And Rob and me came up with a word yesterday untuitive, which I think is the opposite of intuitive we were absolutely thinking about politics, but it's like you just allow your intuition to come out, see what's in there.

That makes you feel Oh! Or, Oh, you know, curious to have a play. If you get a reaction, it's like, well, what is that reaction? And how might I put that into words? Or if there's something in those resources that feels new to try it, to just try and go out or stay in and reproduce it in your own way, because everybody has their own way of doing things.

Everyone has their own voice. And I think just knowing that that's okay, do whatever feels right. And the resources that Rob and I put together were really about trying to offer the experience of being in Ennerdale as much as possible because these workshops were originally meant to take place there.

And then we would have had loads of conversations there. So it's almost like bringing Ennerdale into somebody's room and, and using that as a jumping off point to conversations. So that's what I'd say go in there, have a root round and just see what makes you curious? What makes you excited and respond?

Pippa Marland: Thank you. That's very wise words. Testament. How about you?

Testament: My thing I'd say small steps. Like if you feel really confident, go for it. If you don't feel confident, go for it. But small steps, you know, like if you feel like you want to do, you know, the nature writing version of War and Peace straight off the bat great, but often it's just putting something down on a page, just get something down written somewhere, and once you get it out that's when you can look at it and go, I like that.

Just like saying, I like that. I don't like that. Oh, this interests me. That doesn't interest me, or I'll show it to my friend or partner or whatever. Oh, they liked that bit. Okay. I never thought of that. That's interesting. But until you get it till you get your ideas out for the first time, or you respond to whatever, the writing prompt in the exercises, you just don't know what it is, that's all the diamond I always use the word diamonds.

When someone comes up with something amazing and you don't know all the diamonds that you've got in you and pretty much every workshop I've ever done, no every workshop I've ever done every writer has come up with some sort of diamond. Some have come up with like massive crown jewels that's a political thing.

Anyway, you know, a massive thing and someone comes up with these beautiful little engagement ring diamonds or whatever, a really bad metaphor, sorry about that. But you get my point. There's big glorious things that people bring out and they don't even realise it. And it could be a turn of phrase or an image, or a really dense bit of writing.

It's all sort of different. But just take the risk and trust yourself, trust that all the cool stuff that you've been imbibing all your life and all the experiences is going to produce some beauty.

Harriet Fraser: That is so lovely. And you know what you said there about show your friends or your partner or your child or your mum or whatever.

Cause god the amount of years I had writing that I just didn't dare to show to anybody, but the minute that you share something, you realise that it's got its own life and it's not the end of the world if it doesn't work because at least it's learning, and it might work for somebody else when you didn't think it did.

So I think that's like one of the number one tips is dare to write something down and then dare to share it.

Pippa Marland: Thank you. Well, I hope that people will delve into those resources and be inspired by you too. And by the resources that you've produced it's been an absolute pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much to Harriet Fraser and Testament.

I really do hope that we get to have a walk together in person before the end of this year but thank you so much for joining me and thank you to Ilkley Literature Festival for hosting us. And thank you very much to the audience today. Thank you for joining us for this discussion. Thank you very much.

Goodbye now. Thank you.

Please be aware that we use a captioning program to transcribe the audio from our talks. Although we check them, there are occasionally mistakes made.