

11. Wrecking Resources Jane Darke 2015

WHO WAS NICK?

Extract 1

Nick's Autobiographical writing

I found a tin of sherbet on the beach. It had washed up and was lying on the strandline. The sherbet was bone dry and was loose in the tin. It was pale yellow and tasted not too sweet, and coarse. There was no label on the tin, no indication as to its source, its destination, brand name, in fact nothing to say, apart from its taste, that the tin contained sherbet.

The beach where I found it lies on the north coast of Cornwall. My family lived in a slate house on the cliff, the garden extended onto the beach so I could open the front door, run down the path, descend a few steps and I was on the sand, yards from the Atlantic Ocean. Many times I had witnessed my father drive his tractor onto the beach to retrieve a baulk of timber which had washed in, to be later incorporated it into the barn or outbuilding on his farm, but this day's offering was meant for me.

This giant unruly, chaotic animal which lived on my doorstep came in, deposited its offerings and went out again.

Up until then I had playing in it, been chased by it, swam in it, fished in and on it, been warned of its dangers, marvelled as its fury, heard stories about visitors and local people who had drowned in it, but up until this day I had never been singled out by the sea to be given a gift. This was quite novel. This was exciting but also sinister. If I were to accept this present, would the ocean want something in return?

I wasn't aware of it then but our beach and the adjoining beaches up and down this coastline are amongst the best beaches for 'drift', (anything, natural or manmade, local or long haul), anywhere in Europe.

An obsessive streak helps, this wrecker* will think nothing of visiting 17 beaches 218 times in a month.

*Beachcomber

Extract 2

Where I Live and What I do There

by Nick Darke

I consider myself lucky on two counts. The first is that being a playwright, I can work from home without having to leave the parish too often, the second is that home is the house where I was born, which happens to be on a cliff with direct access to a beach on the North Cornish coast. On a high spring tide the Atlantic Ocean comes to within fifty yards of my front door. I like to put this proximity to good practical use, so in the winter time I go beachcombing, and in the summer I catch fish. This, for me, is the principal contrast between the two seasons. The switch from winter to summer has little bearing on the mood or content of my work, but in terms of the practicalities of when I actually get to sit at my desk, there are differences, and they have to do with the tides and distance travelled.

Beachcombing is an activity which occurs just after high water, and it takes me travelling longitudinally from beach to beach along a fifty mile stretch of coastline. Lobster fishing, on the other hand, is a low water job which is centred on the cove where I live, so I don't have to go anywhere except latitudinal down the beach. This is the best way round because Cornish roads in the summer months reach gridlock.

A beach, in any case, is at its most magical when you're the only person on it. To walk along the strandline of Perranporth or Watergate Bay in the teeth of a gale at 7 am in the middle of January is my idea of heaven. Beachcombing and lobster fishing overlap in the spring, I caught my first lobster on March 5th, St Piran's Day, and the stuff that's washed in by the winter storms, wood, drift seeds from the Central American rain forests, fishing gear thins out by the end of April. But there's one event which for me signifies the start of summer and that's the arrival of a flock of whimbrel, a moorland bird with a curved beak, almost identical to the curlew, migrants from the North of Europe. They turn up in mid-May, about a dozen every year and stay for six weeks, sitting on the foreshore early in the mornings before the dogs and people arrive to chase them off, and flying along the cliff tops. I greet them like old friends, and they're the only visitors I'm sorry to see leave.

Occasionally winter and summer swap over, we get gales and ground seas in August, or like this year, in July, so I revert back to winter mode and scavenge along the local beaches to see what's washed in, and sometimes in December month we get a big high pressure sitting over us which brings crisp frosty weather, blue skies, offshore winds and calm seas. This gives me the chance to stake out a small net at low water and catch bass, a welcome alternative to turkey and Christmas cake. It takes me onto the beach at night, when I'm often accompanied by a fox, or at least its footprints, picking its way across the sand on the prowl for something to eat.

As you can see, it's a busy life in Cornwall, whatever the season, and it's a mystery to me how I manage to get any writing done at all. The trick is to work whilst otherwise engaged. I think up all my best speeches when I'm beachcombing, often speaking them out loud to myself into the wind. Beachcombing is an activity which engages half the brain, leaving the other half to think up weird and wonderful plots for plays. Fishing is more complicated, as it involves boat work, which requires all of the brain to be functioning all of the time at full strength, so my work rate drops in the summer, but only slightly, as the fishing takes up less time.

I have to have a purpose when I leave the house, I'm not somebody who finds the sea and coastline inspiring, in the sense that I just sit on a cliff top amongst the sea pinks and contemplate a masterpiece whilst gazing at the view. My inspiration comes from Cornwall itself, the people I know, its history and culture, and it's another piece of good fortune that I happen to live in a country which is unique and rich enough in source material – hard rock mining, fishing, agriculture, free trading, wrecking, engineering and all things maritime, to keep me in work for long after I'm too old or infirm to go beachcombing or fishing.

Extract 3

PLAYWRIGHT AS LOBSTER FISHERMAN

BY NICK DARKE

On the face of it there's nothing to compare lobster fishing with play writing, but delve down and the similarities are there. Both are solitary activities, meticulously prepared then thrown to the whim of uncontrollable forces such as the Atlantic Ocean or theatre directors. One plunders humanity's detritus, the other baits with putrid meat. Both, when successful, are ludicrously over-paid and their practitioners wonder where the next one's coming from.

So how does lobster fishing *meld* with playwriting? Do they integrate on a day-to-day basis? Here's routine one: wake up at dawn. Spend five minutes watching sea through bedroom window. There's a swell fetching in and breaking onto the shore but it's not too big to launch. Switch on computer, go outside and check weather- wind force and direction are critical. Haul on 'skins (oil). Return to screen and click on current play. Sit at desk in fishing gear and read yesterday's work, taking care not to drop particles of sand and dried bait into keyboard. Absorb play whilst thinking of fish. (Zen moment.) Launch boat.

Haul, clear, bait and shoot pots. Talk to self. Discuss catch so far. Study swell condition round Turtle Rock and debate safety margin for far pot. Push thoughts of play to back of mind and head for Turtle. Swell is big. Realisation: wind strength underestimated. Play forgotten. Reach pot. Engine neutral. Haul in slack rope. Gigantic swell. Engine falters. Raise throttle one notch. Engine screams. Sea in turmoil round rock. Haul pot. Wind carries boat directly towards rock. Pot reaches gunwhale as boat nudges rock. *Massive lobster*. Wind drops, swells shrink, engine purrs. Offer short prayer to Poseidon. Clear pot, bait it, re-shoot. Steam home rehearsing Oscar acceptance speech, playwright and lobster fisherman in perfect harmony. Remove 'skins. Write play. Routine two: wake up, check sea. Too big. No fishing. Think of play. Sleep.

Seizure of moment is the key skill that a lobster fisherman shares with the playwright. Play writing involves accumulating diverse gobbets then judging the perfect time to feed them into the computer. Start to write too early with too few gobbets and you dry up, frustrated. If you leave it too late the material grows stale and the process becomes laboured. It's the same with lobsters. You shoot your pot, you leave it lie. The prey smells the bait, expresses interest, wanders over and takes a look with those stalky eyes. It crawls around the pot and probes for the bait but can't quite reach, so it swims in through the neck, dines and enters the parlour. Trapped. If you haul your pot too early you've lost your fish but if you leave it too late and the sea gets up, the pot shifts and in two days it's gone.

The playwright who is also a lobster fisherman works to a lobster fisherman's time frame. Life is governed by the moon. Writing becomes tidal, low water the deadline. In winter the boat is seldom launched due to adverse sea conditions. Fishing is reduced to a single pot attached to a ring bolt on an island, and the journey there includes a wade through bullock crushing cold water. On rare occasions it is possible to launch at Christmas when there's a high pressure sitting on us and the sea goes flat as a pea on a plate. The sun shines. The air is crisp. If the tide is neapish (not too high or too low) the playwright takes his boat and shoots a net across Trescore.

This is a magic, tranquil time. A moment stolen from the elements. He shouldn't be out there. Poseidon has blinked. The playwright hauls the net and alters his diet to bass, dover sole, turbot. He beaches the boat. There are no

people about. No dogs. The second- home-owners are tucked away in House One, Surbiton. He lies back on the crust of frosted sand, closes his eyes and dreams. The playwright becomes not lobster fisherman, but lobster – the lobster occupies a hole in the rock and emerges at night. It is a solitary, cautious beast with few predators. Fiercely combative when threatened, it has survived millions of years without a brain. All actions are programmed, instinctive, patterned, like a play. Plays are blueprints for three dimensions. The playwright's tools are language, actors, action, his habitat the stage, the black hole...he's woken from his reverie by the sound of a shore break. He surveys the sea. Dolphins swim around Turtle rock amongst a growing thunder swell which ten minutes ago wasn't there. Gannets dive. Guillemots and razorbills bob and duck and disappear into the troughs between Atlantic rollers. The sea, once more, is an alien place. Back to computer. Write play.

Nick Darke 12/01/99

791 words



This is a picture of Nick rowing near his home in Porthcothan aged 14.

My Autobiography

Name.....

A description of myself

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Some of the things I'm really good at

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My Personal Timeline

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One of my earliest memories

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My most exciting moment

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The silliest thing I have ever done

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What I wish to achieve in the future

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One of the most important things I have learnt

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