

It's a beautiful, silent secret, this 'Loch of the Corrie of the Loch': 3000 feet up on the open plateau. I'm looking at the water, and daring my fingers into its cold body. *'A second time I let my eyes travel over the surface, slowly, from shore to shore, beginning at my feet and ending at the precipice; savouring the extent of the water surface.'*

'I knew when I had looked for a long time ... that I had hardly begun to see.'

When I'm 'out on the tramp' I get a perspective on my place in the universe far more clearly than I ever feel it at home. It is a religion of sorts, you could say. A worshipful devotion to nature that brings a myriad of joyous surprises: physically real and spiritually enlightening. It's no longer getting to the summit that counts, but rather what I can be and be with on the mountain.

'Here may be lived a life of the senses so pure that the body may be said to think.'

I imagine I grow from the rock surface, defenceless, naked, a something of the mountain; as are its clefts and mounds, the flowers, the tarns. I lie down and I disappear into it as if I had never been. The clouds wrap me in their mysteries and reveal me like a spectre to myself.

This is my Peace.

It was not always so.

After the first world war, with its cruel deaths and griefs, I craved something bigger to believe in than anything human kind could construct. I needed to know love, but I now see that I had no idea of what love could mean. The countless revelations that are indescribable. Left wordless, they are vast, untouched and pure. Truly silent secrets.

'We have an open marriage,' he'd said. So *avant garde*. I was no prude but I was unsure. Although his wife was my best friend, I knew that I would only ever love him: a person whose young mind and spirit shared everything with my own. I thought I could manage it but I was wrong. I felt guilty, wounded.

I needed to walk away, wade carefully, easing my feet through the deep water. I was standing on the edge of a shelf in the dark loch of my heart and knew what another step would mean. I looked down and saw myself turning me back to the shore.

My damaged peace buried itself deep within me.

Another world war has ripped through us all since then. It is unbearable. I realise with each day that the landscape can teach us far more than we can ever teach each other about what it means to live; to love.

As I daily tramp and befriend the mountain, I am in turn befriended. It has become my source of life and sustenance with all its glorious hues and textures. It is my breath now.

They think by writing plays and poems and biographies that they can reveal me; spill me; put words in my heart that I never gave place to. Nor did I write my stories and poems so that you could use them as codes for my feelings; my actions; my relationships.

You sum me up as a spinster hill-walker, a singular poet, with only the Cairngorms as companion. But what can you ever really know of me?

My silent secrets are there in my breath, in my footsteps, moving and resting on the mountain. As close to the truth of what life is as I can be, sensing the ecstasy it might unleash. I knew it in the flesh and I know it on the mountain. It is bottomless and unfathomable. A great and miraculous union of our small being with the rock, the air, the water and all the other living creatures that teem about it. It is an acquiescence; a place of beyond knowing.

Now, I urge you to go to the mountain; Be there!

'Up on the plateau nothing has moved for a long time.'

You don't need to know me; you need to know yourself.

Nan Shepherd 1893 – 1981

Alexandra Mathie

Acknowledgements:

Sections in italics: from *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd

Research sources: *Into the Mountain* by Charlotte Peacock (biography)

Woman. Walking by Sylvia Dow (play: work in progress)