Into the light: nature, culture, change

Kathleen Jamie’s lens on human and planetary crises bends time and illuminates place, finds Barbara Kiser.

What are nature and culture on a planet we have exhaustively mapped and immeasurably changed? How are we ourselves altered in that process? In Surfacing, the poet and writer Kathleen Jamie explores this liminal space. Through 12 essays, she charts the passage of time in the environment and in us, examining ancient artefacts, dreamscapes and memories as they emerge into the light, and what they tell us about being human in a rapidly shifting world.

Surfacing ranges over Jamie’s stints on archaeological digs on a Scottish archipelago and in the High Arctic; a sojourn in China; half-submerged familial memories. Seemingly disparate, the pieces are subtly entangled. There are echoes of Jamie’s previous essay collections, Findings (2005) and Sightlines (2012). These established her unclassifiability as a writer, able to capture with equal depth a peregrine falcon intent on its prey, a Bronze Age burial, the feel of a dissected lymph node.

As in those books, there are no rhapsodies of deep time (she has described her young self as a “teenage antiquarian, thrilled by standing stones”), she trawls museums on the east coast of Britain to view Arctic objects brought back by nineteenth-century whalers. Among narwhal tusks and taxidermied polar bears are beautifully worked Inuit relics, traded for guns.

One such visit leads her to archaeologist Rick Knecht, who runs a dig in a Yup’ik community in the Alaskan region of Beringia. There, fast-melting permafrost is exposing objects crafted from caribou antler, stone, wood and walrus ivory 600 years ago, before missionaries and hunters arrived from the south. ‘In Quinhagak’ records Jamie’s time on the dig. But the essay shape-shifts. It becomes a compelling portrait of a culture recovering its resilience at a climate front line, where iceless winters and burning tundra are the new normal. And where the colonial legacy, least addiction, is just a few villages away.

At Quinhagak, “light cascaded down from the whole sky. A ravishing, energising light.” Under it, Jamie mingles with villagers amid long moments looking for bears on the tundra, or shifting mud on the site. In unearthed knife hafts shaped like seals, in villagers’ stories of cranes and walruses, the human and natural coalesce.

Jamie is struck by the Yup’ik habit of attentiveness, and the cohesion it nurtures. She finds her own vision sharpening as she scans the land, and sees herself in some way as scanned by it. In the village, she “noticed that people notice”, surmising that the “whole place must be in constant conversation with itself, holding knowledge collectively”. When elders handle and name the long-buried artefacts — antler-scrappers, root-picks — she feels she is listening to the language of landscape, and to a people coming home.

Half a world away, she reflects on another dig. But this community, on Westray in the Orkney archipelago, moved on five 40,000 years old — a find like “reaching the memory of the hill itself”. An aficionado of deep time (she has described her young self as a “teenage antiquarian, thrilled by standing stones”), she trawls museums on the east coast of Britain to view Arctic objects brought back by nineteenth-century whalers. Among narwhal tusks and taxidermied polar bears are beautifully worked Inuit relics, traded for guns.

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Vaclav Smil’s latest book computes the cost of growth on a finite planet. Melanie Moses praises the result.

In 70,000 years, Homo sapiens has grown from thousands of hunter-gatherers teetering on the brink of extinction to a global population of 7.7 billion. In Growth, Vaclav Smil explains how we have peopled the planet through our growing capacity for harvesting energy from our environment: food from plants, labour from animals and energy from fossil fuels. Civilization has developed by dominating Earth’s resources. Smil, whose research spans energy, population and environmental change, drives home the cost of growth on a finite planet. It is high: polluted land, air and water, lost wilderness and rising levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide.

He argues that most economic projections predict growth by ignoring the biophysical reality of limited resources. Economists emphasize that efficient use enables growth without pumping up energy consumption. Smil does not deny that energy efficiency has increased. For example, he details how agriculture now extracts ten times as much food energy from each parcel of land as it did a century ago. But the 10-fold increase in yield has been driven by a 90-fold boost in energetic inputs — caused by fossil-fuelled farm machinery, and electricity for irrigation and fertilizer production. When this complexity is accounted for, the story of efficiency is turned on its head: we now put more fossil-fuel energy in for each unit of food we get out.

In the 1980s, Jamie travelled widely in remote regions of Asia: her 1992 book The Golden Peak recounts her time in northern Pakistan. A journey from that era — to Xiahe, a culturally Tibetan town in Chinese territory — unfolds in Surfacing. To reconstruct those weeks at a borderland fraught with uncertainty, Jamie turns domestic archaeologist, burrowing into piles of notebooks and photographs. Through them, she re-enters the “womb-like otherworld” of a temple at Labrang Monastery, meets Chinese students eager to build cultural bridges and joins a gaggle of fellow travellers escaping oppression in Europe. They have arrived, however, only to witness Tibetan culture besieged. The parallel with Yup’ik history is clear.

Surfacing is rich in such mirrorings and mergings. Spirals — carved into the Westray Stone, a magnificent tomb relic — crop up on a ceramic sherd in a newly ploughed field. The motif, she notes, symbolizes how unrelated events can “wheel back into proximity”. And so they do, in the life trajectories of Jamie, her daughter and her father, and in the rise and fall of human settlements. Blazing moments light the way: an eyeful of eagle over a Scottish road, sockeye salmon in an Arctic stream “like silk slashes in a Tudor sleeve”.

At one point, Jamie is midway through a forest somewhere in Scotland, grappling with how to frame the wars and environmental destruction that crowd our collective consciousness. She realizes she is lost. I found myself thinking of Dante Alighieri, coming to himself at life’s midpoint “in a dark wood” as The Divine Comedy opens. But this is a book shrugging off literary allusions.

Jamie comes to things openly, listening and looking. And as she shows throughout this astonishing work, it is in looking — attuning ourselves to nature and culture, past and present — that we find our compass.

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