

Wilderness

In Search of Belonging

Sanjida O'Connell



Wilderness: In Search of Belonging

Text copyright © Sanjida O'Connell 2027.

First published in Great Britain in 2027 by Hummingbird Books.

The right of Sanjida O'Connell to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except as permitted by law or for brief quotations used in reviews.

This is a work of memoir and reflects the author's recollections and interpretation of events. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect privacy. Some dialogue has been reconstructed from memory.

ISBN 978-1-0369-7992-8

Cover design © Edward Bettison.

Cover photograph © Jana Rumley.

Typeset by Ken Preston.

Printed using Baskerville font.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.



Wildness is a necessity.
John Muir

To Jaimie and Jasmine

Praise for Wilderness: In Search of Belonging

‘Moving and beautifully written.’

Isabella Tree, author of *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm*

‘Wilderness is a brave and lyrical exploration of land, loss, and identity. Sanjida O’Connell’s search for belonging is intimate and unflinching. A beautiful, necessary book.’

Wilfred Emmanuel-Jones, ‘The Black Farmer’, author of *Jeopardy: The Danger of Playing It Safe on the Path to Success*

‘A tale of adventure and great bravery. Nature becomes a sanctuary of intrigue and wonder. Enchanting.’

Derek Gow, author of *Bringing Back the Beaver: The Story of One Man’s Quest to Rewild Britain’s Waterways*

Praise for Sanjida O’Connell

‘Gripping, entertaining and entirely on the side of the angels.’

The Times

Also by Sanjida O'Connell

Fiction:

Theory of Mind

Angel Bird

The Naked Name of Love; republished as *The Priest and the Lily*

Sugar Island

Non-fiction:

Mindreading: How We Learn to Love and Lie

Sugar: The Grass that Changed the World

*Nature's Calendar: A Month-by-Month Guide to the Best Wildlife
Locations in the British Isles*

Animal Life ed. Charlotte Uhlenbroek

Chimpanzee: The Making of the Movie with Christophe Boesche

As Sanjida Kay:

Bone by Bone

The Stolen Child

My Mother's Secret

One Year Later

'The Beautiful Game' in *The Perfect Crime* ed. Vaseem Khan
and Maxim Jakubowski

‘The Divide’ in *The Book of Bristol* ed. Heather Marks and
Joe Melia

‘Grace’s Cave’ BBC Radio 4

‘Meat’ in *The Monster Capital* ed. Ra Page and David Sue

‘A Dark Star Calling’, forthcoming in *Firmament—Stories from
the New Bounds of Space* ed. ed. Ra Page and David Sue

‘The Coral Keeper’, in *Extinction Level—Stories from the
Anthropocene* ed. Ra Page and David Sue

Dark Nature, an anthology of short stories, forthcoming 2027

Prologue

Into the forest I go, to lose my mind and find my soul.

John Muir

THROUGH THE SKYLIGHT I can see the stars: Ursa Minor, Ursa Major, the North Star, the smudged lilac blur of the Milky Way. It's so bright I can just about make out the outline of the wood pressing against the house: yew and oak, hazel and spindle, illuminated by an unearthly stellar glow. Two tawny owls converse. They don't sound like the owls in books—*too-wit too-woo*—they're guttural, raw. A tremulous *wooo*, answered by a wavering, *woo-hooo*.

We're glamping: camping out in the one room in the house that won't be decimated by the builders. Downstairs, in what was the kitchen, our folding chairs and table, a one-ring camping stove, a bowl of foraged raspberries, are bathed in the thin light of a sickle moon.

In the morning, I'm woken early by the dawn light. I sit up gently, trying not to wake Jaimie and Jasmine. My husband is snoring gently; my daughter's a pink pyjama-clad starfish, snuffling like a small badger. A bird alights on the balcony rail and tips its head to one side. It has a neat black quiff and buff, mushroom-coloured feathers. A blackcap. It tilts its

head to the other side and regards me, as if trying to work out what I am. It taps once on the glass and then flies swiftly away. Outside a doe is wading across the steep-sided field, grass and ferns cresting against her chest. Behind her I can just make out the little face of her fawn, huge black eyes and nose, bobbing in her wake. They look like antelope in the Okavango Delta.

It's a world away from inner-city Bristol where we live, a stone's throw from the motorway, even though we've only travelled fifteen miles south, to the raw edge of Somerset. This is just a short visit. We've made a nest in the centre of the room out of sofa cushions. The house build is likely to take a year and we've piled all of our possessions around us, or the ones, at least, that we won't need on a daily basis while we rent in Bristol. For me, that's a rail of dresses and shoes that I only ever wear to book events and book launches, a stack of spare copies of the books I've had published, and a box of photographs.

I don't have many from my childhood—pre-digital, of course. But there are other reasons for the paucity of pictures. My most treasured possession is an old spiral-bound scrapbook from Woolworths in which I've stuck the earliest pictures. I feel slightly reluctant to leave it, but there's no space for sentimental objects in the three-roomed house we're currently living in. I'd like to look at my photos one last time, but I know I don't need to: my favourite pictures are indelibly printed in my mind. They were

Wilderness

both taken when I lived in Nigeria and I was two years old.

In one I'm wearing a dress only just long enough to cover my bottom, my baby hair neat and straight in two tiny bunches, no sign of the frizz and the curl that would later frustrate my mother. I'm next to a row of African marigolds with my arm around my dog, Timmy, who is almost the same height as me. Every time I smell the spiced, green-wood smell of marigolds, I'm cast back to my childhood in Africa or to Northern Ireland, where my mother grew a dense border of them in the garden, to mimic the ones in Nigeria.

The other picture is of me and two men. The man holding me is dark-skinned, with a large nose and kind eyes. He's wearing a white, sleeveless shirt. His hair is cut short to his scalp, but you can still see the Afro kink.

The other man: solid, white, beaming, his hair as black as boot polish, is in a cassock with a collar.

A Catholic priest and a Muslim mathematician.

My two fathers. I look rather cross in the photo.

When I was growing up, a brown child raised by a white family, the only non-white person everywhere I lived, every school I went to, my ceaseless question was: *Where do I belong?* I didn't have a place I could point to and say, *There! That's where I'm from.*

My Irish stepfather quoted Virginia Woolf to me:

Sanjida O'Connell

‘As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.’

He spoke eloquently and passionately of Irish writers like James Joyce and William Butler Yeats who felt disenfranchised, standing apart from their own land and peoples and, as a result of their perceived outsider status, became better writers.

But being a citizen of the world, whilst possibly helping one become a better writer, does not make one happy or settled or feel like one is fitting in.

Instead, I’ve spent my entire life searching for the place I belong and the people I belong to. But as I looked for my original family and my true roots, I uncovered a secret. It was a secret that had been hidden at the heart of my family for years. And when I found out what it was and who had hidden it from me, it called into question everything I had known about my origins.

It shattered everything I believed about myself.

It broke me.

Years later, my husband and I bought and planned to renovate this house in the heart of the Mendip Hills in Somerset. Once the build was finished, our idea was to move here with our daughter. What we hadn’t realised then was that the house came with a great deal of land—land once scarred by industry, land with long-forgotten links to slavery.

Wilderness

This is the story of what it was like to become immersed in that landscape, and how we gently coaxed the wilderness back. In helping nature recover, I hoped that I too might heal. This is my story—our journey into the wild. It's also a quest to understand belonging: to discover where I truly belong and what it really means to belong.

I hope that my story might become yours too, especially if you've ever felt you don't quite fit in or aren't fully sure where you belong, because, to paraphrase the poet Mary Oliver, whoever you are, no matter how lonely or cast adrift you might feel, the world will always be here, offering itself to your imagination. A place where we can all belong.

1

Somerset July

WE STAND TOGETHER in a row in the field—my husband, Jaimie, our daughter, Jasmine, and I, like some kind of sad and truncated von Trapp family, and look down at the house we've bought. It's sunk into the bottom of the valley, long and low and ugly, engulfed by a sinuous wisteria and a vigorous kiwi. It's all tiny rooms, narrow windows, dark shadows. Jasmine and the local children, bonding in that instantaneous way only children can, have already found a secret passage from the back of a cupboard in the kitchen which leads into the hall. The kiwi is muscular—you can almost sense it squeezing into our new home—with thick boughs and twisted tendrils wrapping themselves around the empty house like a fairy-tale briar, suffocating the life out of it.

We think we might have to hack our way in like a prince in a story book—and indeed, later on, this is exactly what we will do, carrying our sleeping daughter in her pyjamas as we slash our way through the greenery engulfing the house, scale the rocky hillside and cross a decaying wooden bridge so we can clamber in via a second-floor window.

Wilderness

But that's not what we're looking at right now. We've been so focused on buying this house and our ideas for renovating it—transforming it into a modern, light-filled, glass-walled and cedar-clad box—our plans outlined on a napkin in the local pub over a pint with an architect friend—that we'd forgotten something. We'd dreamt of fresh air away from inner-city Bristol, of space and peace, of community and kindness, long walks and wilderness. Now, standing in an overrun field in our waterproofs in the rain, we realise our error.

The house has come with added extras. The valley is steep sided and we now own the land on either side. It's bisected by a bridlepath—the West Mendip Way—and a stream. On one side we have a large, wide garden stretching along the valley bottom, followed by a small field and tumble-down stables. Opposite is another, larger field, with two woods at each end. The field and the trees form an island, completely encircled by a footpath. The plans had confused our mortgage brokers because they showed not one property—the one we were intent on buying—but ten.

We're surrounded by a ghost village. There are the remnants of another nine houses on our land, some little more than rocky outcrops in the field, others, two storeys high, with parts of the walls, doors and fireplaces remaining. There's a lime kiln at one end. It's as if the history of the place is running so

Sanjida O'Connell

close to the surface, it feels like raised veins beneath skin.

The previous owners had ponies. Now, without the horses, but enriched by years of manure, the field has bolted. The grass is thick and lush, rank and choked with nettles and covered with ferns a metre high. Water drips from their fronds and our hoods. Our wellies are submerged in dock leaves that lap across our feet like a green wave. We've gone back in time: we expect giant dragonflies to helicopter past, pterosaurs to swoop overhead. The woods are darkly claustrophobic: a rotten fence separates them from the field but, in any case, like the century-old briar in *Sleeping Beauty*, they're so overgrown they're impenetrable.

Jaimie and I look at each other.

What have we done?

One of the main reasons for moving out of the city was to give our daughter an idyllic life in the countryside—and to get her into a good school. We've deliberately come to this particular part of Somerset because Professor James O'Connell, my stepfather and Jasmine's grandfather, founded a department of Peace Studies at the local school. It's housed in two yurts in a field, which is named after him—*The James O'Connell Peace Field*. I don't think it's what he expected. He died just before it opened.

I gave the keynote speech wearing a pink dress

Wilderness

and gold converse in a tent in a field and my mum cut the ribbon strung across the muddy track leading to the yurts, looking cross and confused. Jasmine, then four, picked clover and buttercups and stuck them on a cardboard crown. I imagine Dad would have raised his eyebrows and smiled. But where better for Jasmine to be educated (although maybe not in the field itself).

She doesn't quite see it that way. Worse, she tells us how unhappy she is. She doesn't want to leave her friends, her primary school, the house she was born in, and, she says, there are way too many bugs.



Nigeria

I dreamed of being a novelist and a zoologist when I was five years old. We were living in Nigeria. I remember standing at the bottom of the garden where it had been left untended and was quickly reverting to bush.

The grass is taller than me. It is whirring and thrumming, chirping and rustling, alive with the chitinous rasp of mandibles and wings, pincers and piercers and probes. I shut my eyes and tell myself to walk in, to force my way through the thicket to be amongst the insects.

I need to do it.

We live in Nigeria and at night I sleep under a

Sanjida O'Connell

mosquito net. I have nightmares about giant spiders crawling across the net, trying to get in. I already know that I want to be a novelist and a zoologist. But I can't. I can't cross into that alien insect world.

I'm not brave enough.

Somerset July

We spend the summer visiting the house every weekend before the builders are due to start work in the autumn. There's no road. Instead, we have to bump along a stony bridlepath designed for horses. The verges, a froth of cow parsley and red campion, brush against the sides of the car, and the hedge is so high we're enveloped on all sides. We cross a bridge over the stream and push past the kiwi to get inside.

Jaimie and I do our best to keep on top of the vegetation threatening to swamp the place. Our inner-city garden is the size of a large dinner table, covered in pale grey shale with beautiful plants in strategic places and the tiniest of ponds in an old tin bathtub. Jaimie calls it his gin and tonic garden: you can hold a glass with one hand and snip stray fronds with the other.

Now we own three acres of land. There is nothing gin-and-tonic-like about our new place.

I forage for raspberries and red currants in the overgrown garden and it reminds me of my childhood

Wilderness

in Nigeria—a dense wall of canes popping with crickets and ants and green shield bugs. Wild strawberries creep across the ground and crab spiders and snails, their translucent shells the colour of mint granita, hide beneath the leaves. Jasmine refuses to help me.

We put up camping chairs in the kitchen and cook on a one-ringed burner. We coppice hazel and lay fires in a grand stone fireplace before selling it on eBay to help fund the build. We celebrate my birthday with coffee cake at the camping table, the room wreathed in white smoke, drinking prosecco out of plastic mugs. We watch the sun sink behind the small-leaved lime: the valley is so steep sided that at a certain point in the evening the light is funnelled straight through, as if a huge studio light has been turned on and beamed into the garden. We sleep on the floor in one room in the house, the only one that will not be renovated, glamping amongst stacks of cardboard boxes containing our possessions.

Jasmine is seven years old. She refuses to leave this room and spends her time colouring. She's bemused by the idea of playing outside. *What is there to do?* I'm frustrated. Jaimie needs me to help him, but I can't leave her on her own all the time. I thought she'd love spending her weekends in the countryside, splashing in the stream and making up stories set in the wilderness as I used to do.

But, of course, she's spent her entire life living in the city. The wildest place she has known until now is

the urban nature reserve behind our old house: a scrap of land bisected by train tracks, littered with beer cans, fringed with crabbed hawthorns. She's never learnt to play outside.

What's worse is that I have made her fear of the great outdoors more acute. At the start of the summer, when we were exploring the garden together, Jasmine and I pushed our way through a thorny thicket and found a hidden path cut into the hillside behind the house. When we emerged, we were covered in ticks. I'd never seen them before and started screaming. We didn't know how to remove them and I still have scars from where Jaimie gouged them out with the tweezers on his penknife.

Back in Bristol I googled ticks, my zoological interest vying with my disgust. I discovered that they're a type of parasitic spider that suck blood, wandering round the host to find the softest skin, before cutting a hole and inserting their mouthparts. Their saliva contains anticoagulants that stop the blood clotting. They have to be carefully removed with special tick tweezers; on no account tear the body in half and leave the mouth parts behind as we did. Using a lit cigarette or petroleum jelly to remove them makes them stressed and then they vomit their stomach contents—which are full of bacteria—into your bloodstream.

One of the types of bacteria they can carry is *Lyme borreliosis*, responsible for Lyme disease. It can cause swelling of the joints, nerve problems, difficulty

Wilderness

with concentration and memory loss, and end up producing symptoms similar to chronic fatigue syndrome. In this part of Somerset, one in twenty-five ticks carry the bacteria for Lyme disease. Our three closest neighbours have had it and spent months dragging themselves through everyday life, zombie-tired, their bones aching.

Over the next few weeks we watch *The Walking Dead* and I'm so anxious I have recurring nightmares of a post-apocalyptic world where we encounter monstrous, blood-sucking ticks as big as Alsations in the woods behind our new house. In my dreams, I try and fight them off with a pine branch, but they're impossible to kill. I don't want to tell my sister about the ticks in case she refuses to bring her family to visit.

I start to think we've made a terrible mistake.

But then something happens that makes me reconsider.

Just before the builders move in, Jaimie empties the house of our camping equipment and locks up the room where our things are being stored. It's late by the time he finishes. I'm in London, meeting my publisher. While I'm on the train home, he calls me, his voice filled with strain. The stream has flooded the bridlepath and he and Jasmine are stranded. He's left Jasmine in the car outside the house, parked just above the waterline. There's no mobile signal so he's had to climb the nearest hill to call me. He gets cut off and I can't get through to him again.

Sanjida O'Connell

I do the only thing I can think of: I call one of our new neighbours, Jacqui James. She's not pleased to hear from me. At a recent parish council meeting she gave an emotional and impassioned speech against our proposed renovations. She's abrupt on the phone and hangs up without saying goodbye. Half an hour later she drives her Range Rover through the flood and rescues my husband and daughter. I add 'four-wheel drive' to the list of items we're going to need when we move out of the city centre. And make a mental note to send Jacqui a thank-you card

I'm unused to people—particularly people I've had a disagreement with—dropping everything to help simply because we'll be their neighbours.

And I think that perhaps, just perhaps, we have not made such a monumental mistake after all.