

“A weightless entanglement” — Kadie Salmon’s *Hunting Razorbills* By Rachel Segal Hamilton

The sea contains infinity. Its lunar ebb and flow, its ripples and roar speak of limitless possibilities. On a gentle day, its currents lull you in a womb-like embrace. When storms rage, it is ferocious, unforgiving. The sea is birth and death, abundance and abyss, adventure and tragedy. Familiar as a mother to those whose lives unspool on its shores, and yet mysterious still, alien. Its darkest depths are the closest thing we have on Earth to another planet.

No wonder that mythology swirls around in its surf. Every culture tells tales of ocean deities, monsters, spirits and shapeshifters. Many represent that society’s ambivalent views of femininity. The seductive sirens of ancient Greece are portents of danger, their enchanting melodies leading men off course, while nereides are nymphs, winsome goddesses with little power but benevolent intent. Mermaids emerged thousands of years ago and were later popularised by Hans Christian Anderson’s *The Little Mermaid* who, in order to dance with the prince, must relinquish her voice, exist and feel every step as though “treading upon knife blades.” Ultimately, she cannot win the prince’s heart, nor find the strength to kill him so she stabs herself. Needless to say, this bloody ending is omitted from the Disney version.

Hunting Razorbills, offers a new take on these legends in the threefold form of female figures who recur throughout. This trio – with legs, not fishtails – might be read as sisters, lovers, friends or three conflicting versions of the self. Their limbs overlap, converge and dissect – a foot here, fingers there – so that it is difficult to discern where one individual begins and the others end, nor for that matter what they are doing. Are they caring for each other? Is there a sinister undercurrent at play? Those soft hands that might pull you, gasping, out of the cold North Sea could just as easily plunge you down below and hold you there.

Many of the best known artistic depictions of female bodies in water come from the Victorian era. But whereas these works tend to be filtered through the objectifying gaze of male fantasy – John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia* (1851-2) or John William Waterhouse’s *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896), for example – Salmon’s are self-portraits. Throughout art history, self-portraiture has been adopted by women and other marginalised groups as a way of reclaiming their own image. In the 17th century, for Artemisa Gentileschi this meant portraying herself as a painter, asserting herself as an artist in a world that didn’t accept that women could be, while in the 1970s Francesca Woodman’s surreal, gothic slow exposures redrew the boundaries of photography.

There is an echo of Woodman in Salmon's similarly haunting forms, which she creates just off Hopeman, Nairn, using her antique 1920s medium format camera. Instead of winding it on manually, she moved through different postures, letting the characters she summoned layer onto one another as multiple exposures, a palimpsest of ghosts. Some of the prints she then hand coloured, a practice dating back to the earliest days of photography and filmmaking. Traditionally, this labour was carried out by women, viewed disparagingly as a mere decorative craft, compared to the important, creative work of the usually male photographer. Though it was employed in the 19th century to align images more closely with reality, Salmon appreciates how it does the opposite, conjuring something from a dream – or indeed a fairytale.

During the making of *Hunting Razorbills*, Salmon returned to the narratives of her childhood. *Folk Tales of Scotland*, collected by Phillipa Galloway, *The Seal Woman* recounts the story of a handsome man, immune to the local lasses' charms, who encounters a selkie – who appears as a grey seal in the sea but sheds its skin to take human form on the land. Entranced, he convinces her to marry him, stealing her hide so she can't return to her community. Years later, now mother to seven children, she finds it stashed away and rushes back to her selkie clan in the saltwater, notwithstanding a backward glance at the family whom she also loved.

If sirens warn of the sea's perils, selkies warn against its exploitation. Coastal communities thrive in symbiosis with marine ecosystems. *Hunting Razorbills* is imbued by the history of such communities in Scotland – particularly the Highlands, where Salmon grew up. In many ways, *Hunting Razorbills* is a homecoming. In 2019 when she filmed the work, Salmon was going back and forth to spend time with her mother, following the death of her stepfather. The work is awash with grief. The sharp specificity of Salmon's personal grief merges with something more diffuse, a grief borne of dislocation from Northern Scotland and a deep yearning to reconnect.

The outermost stretches of Scotland, where the mainland dissolves into the sea, a scattering of islands and archipelagos, bears the scars of collective traumas, of indigenous practices wiped out. Between 1750 and 1860, some 70,000 Highlanders forcibly emigrated from the region in an episode known as the Highland Clearances. Realising there were financial gains to be made by using land for rearing sheep, thanks to the then booming wool industry, landowners evicted tenants, relocating many to the Scottish coast or further still, to Australia and North America.

Another brutal dispossession occurred nearly a century later in 1930, with the evacuation of St Kilda. The inhabitants of this tiny remote island were compelled to leave by the authorities and rehomed in Argyll, some miles from each other. The

dwindling population and the difficulty of providing healthcare to the island were factors in St Kilda's evacuation – but for those leaving their homes behind forever they must have also felt like a cultural subsuming of their traditions. Salmon quotes a line from a St Kildan folk song in *Hunting Razorbills*' hauntingly poetic voiceover: "I'd make for you feathered slippers, my lover, the hunter of birds." Islanders were known as 'bird people' so closely entwined were they with the sea fowl. They scaled the vertiginous cliffs to harvested gannets, respectfully using everything – flesh, feathers, fat.

What we think of as landscape photography owes much to the Romantics. Caspar David Friedrich's lone male figure stares out at a wide-open vista of mountains and forests in *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, contemplating the sublime. The landscape, or rather seascape, in *Hunting Razorbills* is something far more intimate. The sensuous, bodily images of hair-like seaweed, aquatic plants slick like eyeballs, set to a rumbling, squelching score, invite identification with what ecologist and philosopher David Abram terms "the more than human." Instead of the anthropomorphic idea that nature is something to be appreciated, we see ourselves as nature, inseparable. That interconnection takes shape in a "thick present", as Donna Haraway describes it, where past and future meld into the materiality of the moment.

Today, shoreline enclaves face new risks through marine pollution, rising sea levels, coastal erosion and biodiversity loss. The bird population of St Kilda, like the human population before it, has diminished. A 2023 census by National Trust Scotland found that numbers are down 61% since 1999. Though the context is different, the causes still come down to a push for profit above all. *Hunting Razorbills* is an ode to kinship. Here we see borders begin to overlap, bringing multiple planes of reality into one. This is where memory meets myth, land meets water, sky meets sea, the surface meets the deep, species and spirits float knotted together in, as Salmon beautifully phrases it in her poetic voiceover, a "weightless entanglement" of being.