

Wild Body
Wild
Nature

THIRD EDITION

by
Tom Wallace

WILD BODY WILD NATURE

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'Capitalism plunders the sensuality of the body.'
Terry Eagleton

Preface

The stories in this volume are something of an eclectic mix. The common themes that run through them though are bodies, nature, identity and acceptance. Through our bodies we meet the world and through our bodies we meet each other. These two are related but not the same. One thing they have in common is how visceral our responses are — both to the world and to other people. Think for a moment about how some people respond to creatures such as spiders, snakes and mice. Then think how just the appearance of some other people can make us instantly love or hate them! In both cases, the body is very much leading us in how we behave, although of course we are usually quick in covering up our feelings about other people! We can add here that we often have very strong reactions to our own bodies — both positive and negative — and these reactions can dominate our lives and colour everything we do.

All of the above leads me to wonder how our feelings about our own bodies and the physicality of other people relate to our responses to nature. It would be a very neat solution to say that if we love our own bodies — our own naked bodies — then we could be more accepting of other people's bodies and of all the differences between people and also more accepting and loving towards nature. And by the same token, if we feel awkward and embarrassed about our bodies then we'll be less accepting of others and have less concern for nature. I have no evidence to back this up, I just want it to be true! Many of the stories in this book address these notions, either directly or indirectly.

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I hope readers will be interested in the stories just for those reasons that I have given above. But there is a wider reason for exploring these ideas and this relates to our current climate emergency. A variety of 'solutions' to this emergency are put forward by society — reducing consumption, renewable energy, regenerative agriculture, geo-engineering. The reader may favour one or more of these over others, or the reader might just not believe there is a climate emergency. One thing though that I think is more important than any of these solutions (or debates over whether they are needed or not) is our attitude to nature. So all of us can think back to times spent on the beach or in a forest or on a mountain and realise that for whatever reason things are not the same. Those encounters with nature are changing and often the opportunities to be in nature are diminishing. I think we can set aside all our different opinions by acknowledging this. And then perhaps we can find common ground by seeking to protect and enhance nature wherever we can. So I hope these quirky tales will point the way towards this.

All the stories were initially published individually on the websites www.booksie.com. and on www.storywrite.com.

This third edition of the book includes two new stories whilst one story is moved to another book.

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Polar Bare

Wild body meets wild nature in this tale of swimming from the author's past.

There was a strong breeze, flurries of snow or hail, and dark clouds hanging ominously over the horizon. I was sixteen, visiting my brother, who was lucky enough to live in a very beautiful small town nestled between two magnificent stretches of coastline. To the East of the town stretched a narrow sandy beach with little coves and bays. To the West, some seven miles of broad sands and crashing waves. It was to the West beach that I was heading on that windswept and freezing day.

There was no-one around. I had a purpose in mind. I was going to swim in the sea. I was going to swim in the nude. I got undressed quickly amongst the sand dunes and then ran down the long stretch of beach towards the water. Energy and exhilaration took away any sense of cold. The water was very shallow. I had to splash through it for several minutes before reaching sufficient depth to be able to properly plunge in. But at last my feet left the sand and the freezing water took my weight. Nothing between my naked skin and wild

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nature. Waves break over my body until I have swum out far enough to be clear of them. My breath came in sharp gasps, both from cold and excitement. I swam back to shore with waves pushing me in towards the sand. Then a long run back up the beach to my clothes.

There is something very special about climbing into your clothes after a swim in cold water. A kind of all-over warm glow in your body. I felt it then as I was fully dressed and walking back towards my brother's house. I had a deep sense of satisfaction. I had had the courage to get naked and the courage to brave the elements. Mission accomplished.

Many years later I learn that there are groups called the 'Polar Bare Club', whose members take to the water in cold weather, just like my own teenage swim. (Unfortunately, Polar Bare Club has recently become a horrible computer game, so cold water swimming groups have started to use 'Bear' instead of 'Bare'. But I will stay with 'Bare', as it captures what we are about.) These cold dips have the advantage that there is usually no-one around as well as all the excitement of being nude in situations where most people would be firmly wrapped up in clothes. More generally, 'skinny dipping' has become a thing and the term 'wild swimming' has been invented. I like 'wild swimming' as a phrase, as it links nicely to ideas of wild body, wild mind and wild soul. But of course, to be a proper wild swim, it must be a nude swim!

Many years later I returned to that same beach of my teenage swim. It was very much unchanged. The weather was considerably warmer and there were a few dog-walkers in the far distance. I had a swim, much like my teenage adventure so long ago. This time

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though, I am able to sit on my towel for a while and dry off in the sun. There is another nude around but they keep a respectful distance.

Several beaches I remember as a child have not done so well. They are either no longer there or greatly changed for the worse. Even a modest rise in sea levels has washed sand and small pebbles away, leaving only rocks. When we think about these changes it is often in an abstract sense. But when it is a place you have known and loved as a child — either for swimming or sport or some happy times with family and friends — then it takes on a sense of personal loss. New lonely beaches, or hidden valleys or mysterious forests are unlikely to show up any time soon. Meanwhile, human 'development' continues apace, making the world bland, boring, disenchanting, polluted, sick and ugly. My heart and soul feel this loss like a wound. Do we travel further afield to seek out the beautiful places that still survive? But that just adds to the problem.

Few of us have the power or influence to do much about this loss — we can only do our best in our own small corner of the world. The most important thing for me is to live as simply as possible — a very, very simple life. This, it seems to me, captures the spirit of what my teenage self was seeking all those years ago. This is the spirit of Polar Bare.

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The Streak

Youthful antics take on a serious turn in this memoir from the author's past. The story challenges our thoughts about ourselves as we face an uncertain future.

I was just a teenager when 'streaking' became a thing. It seems to have started with American college students. After a party and a few drinks, they would strip off their clothes and run naked around their college campus, or the streets of the town or city where they lived.

I remember that summer my parents and I were taking a holiday in a trailer. My Dad offered me the equivalent of several weeks' pocket money if I would run in the nude from our trailer to a signpost several hundred yards away and back. I guess he thought that no-one is likely to be too bothered by a fourteen year-old boy running about in the nude. But I was not so sure! So I declined. On returning to school after the holidays I was surprised to learn of streaking incidents amongst my classmates during the summer. Perhaps I should have taken up my Dad's offer after all, so I would have had a story to tell!

Whilst shyness had prevented me from any public streaks, I nonetheless took to doing some

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private streaks in woods near my home. I found it enormous fun and later would take to secret nude swims as well, when the opportunity arose. I guess you could say these were not 'streaks' in the official sense — where the intent seems to be that you are seen — but at least I'd thrown off a bit of shyness by getting naked. Perhaps I could be called a closet nudist!

My most treasured streaking memory was in a similar style — that is, the more private kind of streak. It happened some years later at the home of a friend, Cheryl. Cheryl was lucky enough to live in a remote house surrounded by woods. She had invited me and some other friends to a party one particular summer evening. Whilst the weather was warm there were storm clouds brewing on the horizon all day and low rumbles of thunder. Soon after arriving at Cheryl's house, the storm finally broke and a torrential downpour set in. Cheryl and her friend Samantha were delighted! They took everything off and then both put on some heavy boots. Then they set off from the house out of the gate that led to the woods. This was no quick dash down to the bottom of the garden and back! Cheryl and Samantha must have been gone for some fifteen or twenty minutes. Who knows where they had got to! But at last their bare rain-soaked bodies appeared in the light cast from the house windows. Their faces were lit up with delight and they were giggling uncontrollably! They were ecstatic! Someone met them at the door with big fluffy towels and they went away to get dressed.

No-one seemed the least bit concerned or shocked by Cheryl and her friend's nude run through the woods. I guess we all just accepted it as typical of the wild care-free character

whom we all loved.

Streaking went through a phase of being something that would happen at sporting events, but that has mostly died away. There is however a growing use of nudity for slightly more serious ends, such as the nude bike rides that take place yearly in cities across the world. These events are often held to draw attention to climate change, and at first take this might seem kind of arbitrary. But think about it. To be nude in traffic may be a bit of a thrill when you are with a group of like-minded people. But if we were alone in this situation then for most of us it would be a nightmare. That ultimate symbol of capitalism and climate destruction — the private car — is just a noisy, polluting and frightening hunk of metal travelling at speed amongst thousands of other vehicles. We may feel safe inside our cars, but that safety is bought at the price of creating chaos in the surrounding world. So what better way to demonstrate the real state of affairs — the real vulnerability of the human animal — than by being a fragile nude body in amongst all that mechanical carnage.

It was nude bodies that conceived each one of us and a nude female body that gave us birth and nursed us. It is only through the care of all this humble flesh that the human world keeps going. We might not like to think of ourselves as having this kind of vulnerability. We may not wish to think about our own bodies — shrouded so often in clothing — hiding our physical presence in the world, for which we only feel shame. Or perhaps we were once proud of our younger body, but have now been shamed by the attitudes of society. And add to this our emotional vulnerability, the vulnerability of

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children, the elderly, the disabled and the poor. Even that soul that nestles inside you is a wild naked soul! Perhaps she has not been fed properly for many a year. Perhaps society is just not geared up for coping with wild naked souls!

So, yes, the nude bike ride is more than just a silly prank. It speaks about who we really are. It asks us to consider why our towns and cities are not built as places where our true naked selves are genuinely nurtured and protected. Where children and the elderly are kept safe and cared for. Where people feel secure in their own flesh and in the wild nature that surrounds us.

Well, you may be thinking, we've come a long way from Cheryl and Samantha and their nude romp through the woods! And perhaps you are not convinced? Perhaps you see no link between these stories of 'foolish' youngsters getting naked and the seriousness of our plight as we destroy nature to feed our ever more demanding technologies. It may be that you are a shy person and all this talk of nudity just makes you cringe. And fair enough! I'm not saying we all need to be nudists to understand the message I'm trying to get across here. Of course not!

But it may be that you have a certain scorn or contempt for the idea of human vulnerability? If you are such a person then fear not because if we continue on our present course then you will have won! There will be no more girls to disturb you, running naked through the woods, because there will be no more woods. And that fragile creature that lives inside you — remember her? She will not trouble you any more. She will be dead.

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