Excerpt from Wilderness

To the West the sky is dark. The tree line is a wall of black yet barely a silhouette. But to the East, there is light. The horizon burns orange, a line marking the furthest reach of the Atlantic. It has just gone five thirty on a morning in late August and we are getting up to see the sunrise on Pigeon Hill, a nature preserve in Washington County that is owned and managed by the Downeast Coastal Conservancy.

At just over three hundred feet, it is neither a challenging nor long ascent, but the roots that twist and coil across the path require a degree of care, particularly in the pre-light of almost dawn. It is dark, the air cold and damp, so we are wrapped in fleeces and gripping flashlights. Underfoot the ground is springy, the effect of millions of fallen pine needles slowly decaying. Spiders' webs catch pearls of dew as they spread across yellow and green moss.

To the side of the path, ferns grow in bunches, the curled fronds of leaves bending under the weight of the damp air, brushing moss covered rocks below. Young, waist tall fir trees battle for the drops of dappled light on the forest floor, while in other clearings their older counterparts, tall, straight, stand dead, low dry branches jutting out like darts. Some have fallen and rest propped against their neighbours. The tangy smell of old pine mixes with the morning air.

We pass a group of old silver birch trees then, in an area of sparser growth, grey bark peels off their gnarled trunks.

As we near the peak, the path steepens and the spring of pine needles gives way to craggy rocks. As we pick our winding route up the rock face, my breath grows short with the effort.

And then, the trees stop, giving way to the granite summit that emerges beyond the treeline, grey and smooth, save for the patches of pale lichen that cling to its face. We reward ourselves with a handful of wild

blueberries that grow, ankle high, on the edges of the path. A lone deer raises its head as we approach, but, sensing we are not a significant threat, it recedes slowly into the woods on the far side of the hill.

It is nearing six now and sunrise is imminent. The first rays of morning are touching the tops of the trees on the islands in the bay and at the ends of the jagged peninsulas that reach like arthritic fingers into the frigid Atlantic.

This stretch of coastline is defined by its irregularity. Small islands cluster in bays that are bookended by those rough-edged peninsulas, upon one of which, Pigeon Hill stands. The forces that shaped this stretch of coast can be traced back to prehistoric Maine. Before humans were even the faintest glimmer on the horizon of the future, Maine was covered by an ancient sea. There was no dry land in this part of the world at all, and instead it was filled with many now long extinct forms of life, evidenced by the impressions of shells and remains of water plants that have been found in the rocks deep in Maine's interior landscape. Then began a process spanning millions of years of land rising above the water, the result of earthquakes and volcanoes forcing the sea aside, only to be levelled again by erosion from the heat of the sun, rain, ice and wind. Geologists who have studied the strata of Maine's bedrock claim that this process of rising and eroding happened at least twelve times during the millions of geologic years.

The most notable force on Maine's landscape, perhaps, and the one that has had the most lasting effects on its distinctive coastline, was the last great glacial movement, known as the Laurentide Ice Sheet, which spread over southern Quebec and New England around 35,000 years ago. It was, at its largest, several thousand feet thick, covering even the highest mountains in the area. Rock debris was eroded and became embedded into the base of the glacier, so as it began to melt and flow, it caused abrasion to the bedrock below. The combination of erosion and sediment deposited by the ice sheet combined to give the long, streamlined shape to many hills and rivers, the axes of which were parallel to the flow of melting ice. As the ice sheet receded, it cut what had previously been a relatively straight coast into the hundreds of bays, inlets and peninsulas and around two thousand islands that make up the Maine shoreline of today.

The ten or so islands in the bay in front of us jostle for position in the rising sun. Some small, clearly uninhabited, just a group of fir trees huddled together above a pink granite cliff face, like the last survivors of a shipwreck,

waiting for a lifeboat to pull them from the sea. Others are larger, with a sandy beach hugging the edge, marking a line between the ocean and the forest. One of these islands, Bois Bubert, has a few houses on its shore, and boats docked on the beach. The middle of that island too, however, is still a dense forest, not even delineated by so much as a single path. This mighty island is the last remaining solid form standing between us, on our Hill, and the warmth of that first ray of sun. The trees on the far side of the island already bask in its orange glow.

Wilderness is wild – it says so itself – it is untamed, inhospitable. As an English word, it has existed since the eleventh century, with origins in Teutonic and Norse. The term wild, used to refer to the condition of being lost, confused or out of control, was combined with deor to mean creatures that were not controlled by humans, so, etymologically, wilderness is a place of wild beasts. But, of course, the wilderness existed long before there was a way, or even a need, to say it. Maybe the need for a term to describe it was the result of the non-wilderness, the controlled, inhabited places of farmland or urban developments. Things are often defined by what they are not. Before human beings domesticated the land, all land was equal. Many of the earliest uses of the word, including in the first translation of the Latin Bible, refer to a place uninhabited by humans where a person was likely to become lost, both physically and spiritually, and therefore return to a wild, even primitive, condition.

There is another contradiction at the heart of the word too, as Roderick Nash outlines in his 1965 work Wilderness and the American Mind. For, though the word is a noun, it acts more like an adjective, thanks to the suffix -ness, which suggests that it is describing a quality, rather than a concrete object. It therefore also suggests subjectivity, and therefore a universal definition is elusive: as Nash says, 'one man's wilderness may be another's roadside picnic ground.'

Emerson prefers landscape, a relatively significantly younger word, derived from landschap, a sixteenth century Dutch word that referred specifically to painted representations of the outdoors. It was anglicised to become landscape in the mid-eighteenth century, and Emerson understood that its meaning was still relatively unsettled, caught somewhere between the natural world and a man-made representation of it. Throughout Nature Emerson uses landscape to refer to any area of the natural world, 'wild' or otherwise, turning away from the binary understanding of civilisation versus

the wild. In Emerson's understanding, the two are not so distinct but rather exist side by side in a relationship based on reciprocity.

On Petit Manan Point, on Bois Bubert Island, and, in fact, in much of Maine, this is a truer expression of how people and wilderness coexist. There is a single road that runs along the eastern shore of Petit Manan point, dotted with houses and camps and the occasional dirt track that leads into an unseen house built somewhere within the forest. There are small gardens and lawns and chairs looking out to the eastern sky, but just a few feet behind these houses the forest grows thick and tangled and dark. I can see, from my seat on the top of this Hill, just how little of this point is inhabited by man – untouched, no, for I would not be up here now were it not for the path that someone before me trod, the blue squares painted onto trunks of trees that guide the way, but untamed, unkempt. Bois Bubert is the same. At one time there was a little village with a school somewhere on that island, but now just a few camps remain, confined to the very edges of the shore, teetering just at the high tide line. Beyond that it is just the woods.