This handout contains some selections from Amy Liptrot’s memoir, *The Outrun* (2016). Although we are unlikely to discuss all of them in the session, having them in front of us gives us flexibility to open up different dimensions of the book when we discuss it along with Nora Fingscheidt’s 2024 film of the book.

**The Outrun**

1. I grew up here next to these cliffs. I have never been afraid of heights. Dad would take us cliff-top walking as children. I’d shake free of Mum’s hand and look over the edge at the churning water below. Grey flagstone – sheer drops and massive slabs – fringes the farm, and this monumental material and unforgiving forces formed the limits of the island and my world.

We had a dog once that went over. The collie pup set off chasing rabbits in a gale, did not notice the drop and was never seen again.

It’s a windy day. I leave the shelter of the freezer and walk up to the Outrun for the first time in years, breathing deeply. There are no trees on the farm and in this open landscape there is an abundance of space.

All the rocks slope towards the sea. In my wellies, I walk along the cracks in the flagstones so I don’t slip. Wisps of hair have blown free of my ponytail and are getting into my eyes and mouth, sticking to my face with sea spray, like when I was a kid and followed the sheepdogs, under gates and over dykes.

I find my favourite place: a slab of rock balanced at a precarious angle at the top of a cliff. I’d come here as a teenager, headphones on, dressed up and frustrated, looking out to the horizon, wanting to escape. From my spot on the stone I would watch the breakers crash, the gulls and fighter jets flying out over the sea.

On a clear day, south across the Pentland Firth, I can see the tips of the mountains of mainland Scotland form here: Ben Hope, Ben Lyal, Cape Wrath. About the horizon’s distance due west of the Outrun lies Sule Skerry, once home to Britain’s most remote manned lighthouse. Out at sea, bobbing on the surface, I can make out wave-energy devices being tested by engineers. It’s low tide and below me, at the base of the cliff, the rocks are exposed where a fishing boat came aground when I was eleven. **[pp. 3-4]**

**Tremors**

1. ‘Did you feel anything up there? Dad asks, before beginning to tell me, although I’ve heard it before, about the tremors. This stretch of cliffs and beaches, where the mythical Mester Muckle Stoorworm is first said to have made himself known, where the people of Skara Brae eked out their lives and where HMS *Hampshire* was sunk, has mysteries.

Some people on the west coast of Orkney, including Dad, say they experience tremors or booms sometimes, low echoes that seem strong enough to vibrate the whole island while at the same time being quiet enough to make them wonder if they imagined it. ‘You hardly hear it, but feel it more,’ says Dad. ‘It’s a low-grade boom, like thunder at a distance. There are vibrations for one pulse and is often repeated a few times in a couple of hours.’ Locals say they have felt the booms over many years but are unable to identify a pattern to their occurrence. They wonder if it is geographical, man-made, even supernatural – or if it happens at all.

To understand the tremors I have to look deep within Okrney’s topography. The geology of the West Mainland coast, with high cliffs at Marwick, Yesnaby and Hoy, strewn with the sea stacks, sloping rocks and treacherous currents responsible for many shipwrecks, is the first place to look. It is possible that the booms and tremors are caused by wave action within caves deep below the fields. As a large wave travels into a dead-end cave, it traps and compresses air at high pressure. When the wave retreats, the air bubble explodes, causing a boom.

Others blame the tremors on the military, and sonic booms produced by jet aircraft. Around sixty miles from Orkney, on mainland Scotland, the Cape Wrath Ministry of Defence range is where the military train on and offshore. This sparsely populated area is one of the few places in the UK where the ‘big stuff’ can be detonated. … I wonder if other, harder to grasp, even ghostly, island forces could be at play. The legend of Assipattle and the Mester Muckle Stoorworm tells of a huge sea monster, so large it could wrap its body around the world and destroy cities with a flick of its tongue. A layabout called Assipattle dreamed of saving the world and got his chance when he killed the Stoorworm by stuffing a burning peat in its liver, cooking it slowly from the inside. Writhing in agony, the Stoorworm thrashed its head, knocking out hundreds of its teeth, which formed the islands of Orkney, Shetland and the Faroes. Dragging itself to the edge of the earth, it curled up and died, its smouldering body becoming Iceland – a country full of hot springs, geysers and volcanoes. That fire is still burning so maybe the Stoorworm isn’t dead at all. A tentacle may still be twitching around these shores and the tremors may be the aftershocks of the monster’s death-throes. **[pp. 10-12]**

**London and Orkney**

1. I got an interview in the tallest building in the UK and was pleased that I’d never had vertigo. I bought a beer after the interview and looked up at the tower block: it reminded me of a cliff face and in particular St John’s Head on Hoy – the tallest cliffs in the UK, which I used to see from the ferry to Scotland. It was always windy at Canary Wharf, the breeze off the Thames funnelled between the tall buildings, which made me feel at home. Peregrine falcons nest on cliffs and tower blocks, and as night came, the aircraft warning lights on tower tops were like lighthouses on the islands.

Although I’d left, and had wanted to leave, Orkney and the cliffs held me, and when I was away I always had, somewhere inside, a quietly vibrating sense of loss and disturbance. I carried within myself the furious seas, limitless skies and confidence with heights. I remembered sitting on my favourite stone, looking out to the Stack o’ Roo, watching seabirds from above. The colony of Arctic terns on the Outrun had dwindled and disappeared but more gannets were appearing out to sea. Hardy sea pinks grew at the cliff edge and I used to see white tails disappearing down rabbit holes where puffins nested. The ledge felt solid but, looking from another direction, you could see that it was overhanging. Unsettled in London, I felt as if I was dangerously suspended high above crashing waves. **[pp. 49-50]**

**Seals and selkies**

1. Seals pop up their heads close by when we swim, interested in our human presence, looking at us with familiar eyes. We are mirror images, both at the edge of our worlds, only able to share a small proportion of our territory. On my walks, I’m sure it is the same pair following me around the island. One watches me so intently that it seems the sea takes it by surprise and I watch, through the clear water, its body flail, suspended in a breaking wave.

I’m not the first person to think a seal is my friend. ‘Selkie’ is the Orcadian word for ‘seal’ but it also has links to the tales of seals shifting into human form. Selkies, it is said, slip from their seal skins as beautiful naked people, who dance on beaches under the moon, as described by George Mackay Brown in *Beside the Ocean of Time*: ‘And there on the sand, glimmering, were men and women – strangers – dancing! And the rocks were strewn with seal skins!’ If the seal skin was lost or stolen, the selkies would be unable to transform back. There are stories of men hiding skins and taking a seal-maiden as a wife, but she would always belong in the sea.

Some say the selkie idea was invented by lonely sailors as an excuse for falling for the mournful song of a seal but there were many who believed. In the 1890s a mermaid was seen in Deerness in the East Mainland ‘with hundreds of eyewitnesses swearing to the validity of their encounters’.

By swimming in the sea I cross the normal boundaries. I’m no longer of the land but part of the body of water making up all the oceans of the world, which moves, ebbing and flowing under and around me. Naked on the beach, I am a selkie slipped from its skin. **[pp. 198-99]**

1. I cross the tidal causeway to Corn Holm and suddenly the cold farmhouse feels relatively civilised. I am the first human here in weeks and my arrival flushes gulls and greylag geese into the sky. Big, threatening black-backed gulls circle above; fulmars shift and squawk in their nests, some expelling foul vomit in my direction. Turning onto Ward Holm, I hear a noise like a sound effect for a B-movie haunted house – echoing moans and ghoulish howls – and it takes me a moment or two to realise I have come across a colony of grey seals basking on the rocks. At the sight of me, the huge mottled grey mammals slide into the water but don’t swim away. They turn around and every pair of eyes is on me.

I start to worry that the tidal window for crossing the causeway will close and I’ll be stranded. I cut my route short and don’t venture to the ominously named Black Holm. Although I haven’t met the Brownie, I feel spooked. When the people left, Copinsay became the birds’ island. I am on their territory and won’t stay too long. **[pp. 108-09]**

**Islands and the imagination**

1. Hamish Haswell Smith’s *Scottish Islands*, a hefty book with detailed maps, careful illustrations, and information on access and anchorages, is often regarded as the Bible for island lovers, or islomaniacs. I flick through it, cross-referencing with Wikipedia and Google Maps. I also keep going back to the ‘Lonely Isles’ website, a catalogue of uninhabited and sparsely populated Scottish islands, and dream of visiting these places, wondering what life there used to be like.

Like Hether Blether, the abandoned islands are imaginary in a way, so seldom visited that they exist more in books, stories and memories than in daily life, when they are often just a blur out to sea. They have a powerful hold on the imagination.

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On the smaller Orkney islands, you are limited not just by the coastline but in ways to earn a living, leisure pursuits, the weather and choice of friends. Lives are much more comfortable than in the early twentieth century, when Copinsay and Faray were abandoned, and islanders have plenty of goods, services and communications at their disposal, but many island communities are still teetering on the brink of sustainability.

I had a great drive to leave and experience more elsewhere but, like many Orcadians, I’ve returned. Now I’m back I’m seeing my home anew and wondering if I should join the effort to keep the isles alive. When I am in London, Orkney itself seems imaginary. I find it hard to believe that this life is real when I’m down there. And imagination is important here. These islands could be bleak, unpromising places if it weren’t for enchantments such as the porpoise, rising like Hether Blether in the offing, always just beyond our reach. **[pp. 111-12]**

**New perspectives on the natural world**

1. Every day on Papay, there’s a moment, looking back, facing into the northerly wind, at the coastline I’ve just walked, for instance, when my heart soars. I see starlings flocking, hundreds of individual birds forming and re-forming shapes in liquid geometry, outwitting predators and following each other to find a place to roost for the night. The wind blows me from behind so strongly that I’m running and laughing. Calm yet alert, after a few weeks on Papay I notice that I am always pretty much aware of the height of the tide, the direction of the wind, the time of sunrise and sunset, and the phase of the moon.

I start noticing that low tides – when the rocks reaching over to the Holm are most exposed – come later twice a day, as the moon appears earlier, and I think about how they are connected. The tide is influenced not just by the earth’s rotation and the positions of the moon and the sun, but also the moon’s altitude above the equator and the topography of the seabed – or bathymetry – and the complicated way water moves between islands. I think about the earth’s rotation, and realise that it’s not the tide that is going out or the moon rising: rather, I am moving away from them. **[p. 149]**

**The edge**

1. A friend tells me that the cairn [on the Holm] is – like the tomb of Maeshowe on the Orkney Mainland – aligned with the midwinter sun. At Maeshowe, on the solstice and a few days on either side, on rare cloudless days at that time of year, the setting sun will shine directly down the entrance corridor. …

I had a reckless idea to get farmer Neil or fisherman Douglas to take me out to the Holm one day around midwinter and leave me overnight – for both sunset and sunrise – so I could investigate and find out if there is any sun alignment. I thought I was brave and had no superstitions to stop me spending a night in the tomb, but now, after just a few minutes down there, I want to get out: it is cold, damp, dark and scary. There is no way I’m going to spend a night there.

I climb out of the cairn and walk to the south-east corner of the Holm, the part that is not on Google maps, and feel I have escaped. I am beyond the internet.

I am attracted to these places at the edge. I crave either life in the inner city or to go to islands beyond islands, islands of the dead.

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Extremes are normal for me. I grew up with mental illness: unpredictable flurries of unusual and wild behaviour, followed by withdrawn lows. I remember in glimpses looking up at Dad and Mum fighting and pushing at the top of the stairs, a neighbour taking me out of the house, and when I came back Dad being gone for weeks or months. I was born into dramatic scenes, lived in the landscape of shipwrecks and howling storms, with animal birth and death, religious visions, on the edge of chaos, with the possibility of something exciting happening at the same time as the threat of something going wrong. A part of me thinks that these wildly swinging fluctuations are, if not normal, at least desirable, and I grew to expect and even seek the edge. The alternative, of balance, seems pale and limited. I seek sensation and want to be more alive. **[pp. 204-05]**

**Personal geology**

1. Walking around the island, it is hard to not start thinking about how the land itself was formed. Even a short stretch of coast has a variety of interesting rock formations: precarious piles of parallelograms where rockpools gather, parts that look like ‘crazy paving’, undulating ripples like waves. Layers of rock are clearly visible on the cliffs, like the pages of a book. These layers on different islands once met up when the archipelago was one continuous landmass but have been worn away by the action of sea and ice over millennia. Sea arches, sea stacks and caves are evidence of the continuing erosion.

Most of Orkney is formed from Caithness flagstone, grey sedimentary rock, locally called slate, dating back to the Devonian period 400 million years ago. It breaks in flat segments good for dyke-building. Some areas – in Hoy and Eday – are Orkney sandstone, the red stone that built St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall.

When sea levels stabilised after the last ice age, the islands of Orkney looked much as they do today but lacked detail. Over thousands of years, the sea has sculpted the coastline. On the more sheltered shorelines there is a gentle landscape but the exposed westerly coasts take the full force of waves that have travelled across the Atlantic, creating sea stacks and towering cliffs such as those at St John’s Head on Hoy, standing straight up 365 metres above the sea.

This pattern is shown in miniature on Papay, with slanted rock formations and severe geos on the Atlantic side (like those on the west-facing Outrun) and gentler bays on the east. It alarms me to realise that each of the islands is getting gradually smaller, eaten away by the sea.

On geological maps of Orkney, a division runs through Papay, through the area of Rose Cottage, splitting the North Hill, and during my time on the island I search for the fault line although I am not sure what it will look like.

I am questionining why I became an alcoholic. Perhaps I was born that way, physically. …

Alternatively, although as far as I know there have been no other alcoholics in my family, I could have a genetic tendency. I could blame mental illness: I’ve read that all types of anxiety disorder are more common in children of manic depressives. … I could blame distressing experiences – my parents’ divorce or adolescent heartbreaks. But I was irritated when pressed by counsellors to look at my childhood. … I generally thought it was simply a habit that had got out of control: over years of systemic drinking I had worn my brakes down, like the action of waves on rock, so much that they could never be repaired.

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On the hill, I found something that I thought could be the fault line, a faint rocky ridge – but in many ways it doesn’t matter what the cause was or where the fault line started.

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Reluctantly, I think about the forces that I have experienced living on the islands: the wind and the sea. I think of erosion and corrosion. The power of corrosion is a huge problem in Orkney and on tiny Papay even more so, due to the sea salt, which blows across the island and can be scraped from windows after storms. Anything metal, such as cars and bikes, will quickly rust.

I think of the power of animal instinct, guiding the corncrakes to Africa and me to my lover’s house, dead drunk, late at night. I think about entropy, the concept behind the inevitable decline from order to disorder. On the beach I find fragments of glassware, an ashtray perhaps, that have been in the sea so long they’ve become half pebble.

Despite my discomfort that the question might push me into the dubious areas of spirtuality that I find hard to grasp, I decide that I can accept the existence of some ‘powers greater than myself’ – not God, just the things I’ve always known, the forces I’ve grown up with, strong enough to smash up ships and carve islands.

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In grandiose moments, high on fresh air and freedom on the hill, I study my personal geology. My body is a continent. Forces are at work in the night. A bruxist, I grind my teeth in my sleep, like tectonic plates. When I blink the sun flickers, my breath pushes the clouds across the sky and the waves roll into the shore in time with my beating heart. **[pp. 210-19]**