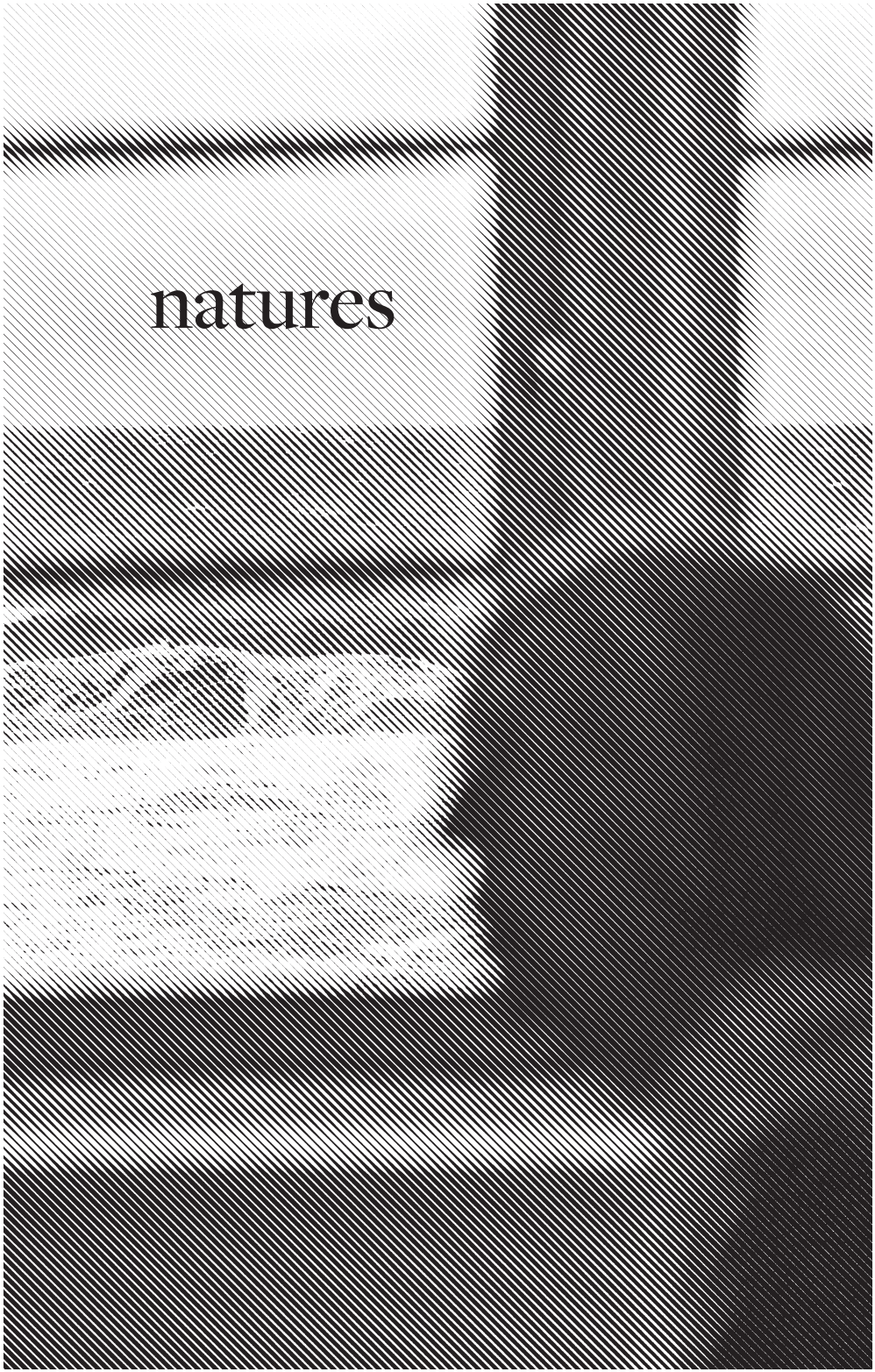
natures

It all started with me just going out. My first port of call was the beach – in the eyes of most Danes, the very epitome of "good" nature. Nothing quite beats being buffeted by the wind, gazing out at the horizon, walking on the sand and bathing in the light.

I am one of the indoor people. I grew up in an ordinary house and hung out in schools, shopping centres and gyms. Once a year, when the family went hunting for mushrooms in the woods or skiing in the mountains, we were "doing nature". In summer, we'd drive past fields, unsure whether they were rye or wheat, and marvelling every year at how yellow rapeseed is. A walk in the woods never lasted long. We'd be back in the house pretty sharpish. A couple of hours of nature, perhaps in a boat on the fjord, was fine as a quick break from real life, but not strictly speaking necessary. Not like going to school.

Later on, I doubted whether I had ever actually been *out in nature*. Virtually all Danish forests are managed. How natural is it, really, to keep felling trees and planting new ones in straight rows? Or to follow the trail left by a snowmobile in a national park? Maybe that's why, when I looked out the window, I could only tell big birds from small ones. When I ventured outdoors, I found it all a bit disorienting. Often, I'd worry it would bore me, that I might miss out on something. For me, home has always been indoors, so I've never felt entirely at ease in the big outdoors. I don't know enough about other species and how they live. I've no idea where clean tap water comes from. Or the material in my t-shirt or the components in my mobile phone, not to mention how electricity makes it into plugs and devices. I know even less about how any of these are connected with other creatures, including other people, who might also need them.

That's what growing up in the modern world was like. And was supposed to be. Never worrying about where tap water or petrol came from was great for the consumer and a rational goal

for utility companies. It was the principle behind every shop of any size. You didn't need to know where things came from. All of the steps between source and commodity were invisible. This is how much of nature disappeared from our consciousness. This is how much of nature disappeared into the goods we consume.

At the height of my indoor life, I decided I would go in search of nature.

return of the natures

Nature has all but disappeared from the life of the indoor person. If you divide a day into 100 × 15 minutes (it's 96, but let's keep the mental arithmetic simple), how many of them do you spend indoors? If every quarter of an hour equals 1%, on how many winter days does the time you spend outdoors creep above 10%? The question is based on my own experience. Spending so much time indoors is something new in human history. And it's not just down to the weather in northern Europe. How much time do you spend outdoors in the summer? And in which outdoors?

We spend so little time living in nature and know so little about it that we refer to all sorts of indoor things as "natural". The advertising industry uses the word for everything – from milk cartons and anoraks to potted plants and cruise ships. They're all great for nature lovers, apparently. For the indoor person, nature seems to have vanished but still be everywhere. It gets so complicated when a word describes so many things. Should we stop using it? Some scientists have given that serious consideration, but the idea has never really caught on. I think it's a response borne of frustration, a bit like smashing a plate in a tantrum. We can't blame the word for everything. We have to work with it.

One day, after I had begun to wonder where nature really was and noticed how often it popped up in conversations, on TV, and in scientific reports about its state, it struck me the subject was ripe for an anthropological study.

But where should I go to find it? To keep things manageable, I had to narrow my focus. I decided to start by looking for what the Danes consider the epitome of nature – the best nature, the version least likely to be described as culture. The idea was to establish a baseline for the study before moving on to more complex settings.

I work in the centre of Copenhagen, by the Lakes. In some places, they look a bit like a river, but they are in fact five basins supplied with water by a river excavated and thoroughly regulated by humans. I moved into the office many moons ago and used to take a photo of the view every day. When I finally made a collage with them, I realised how much this urban space changed colour and character with the seasons and time of day. In the summer, big chestnut trees filled almost the whole picture. In winter, wisps of snow swept across black ice. At night, the neon signs on the north side drew my attention to the depth of the darkness. A constant stream of cars passes below the window. When I'm sitting in one of them, I always like to observe and ponder the square spaces around the Lakes. These are carefully designed and constructed spaces, with wide expanses, full of life and colour. Humans settle and set up home here. So do ants and birds. Humans have created their own landscapes and transformed them beyond recognition.

When I take my bike to work, I don't have to stray from paved cycle paths. When I take the train, I have to walk less than a mile in total. Our entire infrastructure is based on not spending much time outside. I often imagine what the Lakes looked like centuries ago, before somebody dug up Ladegårdsåen to supply

fresh water to the city, and what this space would have looked like had the long-since-abandoned plans for a 12-lane motorway come to fruition. I was born in the mid-1960s when dreams like that were common. For my parents, modern life was there for the taking – a house, kids, two incomes. The national and local infrastructure facilitated a childhood spent in kindergarten, school, sports halls, cinemas and the sweet shop on the corner. Kids had their own rooms. The most modern homes had a garage – the car, too, spent most of its time indoors. In the modern world, nature is a kind of pastime. A place "you don't belong".[1]

As mentioned, the beach was my first port of call. A strange choice for a scientific study, perhaps, but as a scientist and indoor person, I had a bit of an "in" here. Admittedly, I'd never been a great fan of the beach in summer and had always found the combination of sand, salt, sun and wind tiresome, even on brief visits. However, I started to change my mind about beaches during a research project in the Pacific. I was particularly taken with one on a lagoon – possibly one of the best beaches in the world from a tourist's point of view. Screaming turquoise meets chalk-white, not overcrowded, set on a lush and accessible coast, but also increasingly vulnerable to pollution and erosion. The threats seemed to come from near (inadequate sewers and lack of coastal protection) and far (acidification of the oceans, rising sea temperatures and increasingly ferocious cyclones).

The people who lived around and off the lagoon saw fish stocks diminish, sand turn brown, reefs disintegrate and thick algae explode in the warm season. I learned about coastal sand budgets, fish species, rising sea levels, storms, nitrates, sea gods, fish traps and how to channel grief over a devastated beach into collective action. The locals couldn't save the lagoon overnight, but they began studying its condition to learn more about its creatures, stories and biological processes, as well as their own

potential to influence them. The endeavour ended up changing themselves. They learned how closely their lives were interwoven with the lagoon, and how it was affected by what they did on land. At the time, they couldn't always figure out what caused what – but today, I would say that they "ecologised" their relationship to the lagoon because they no longer thought of nature purely as something else, something out there.

in the field

In terms of distance, the fieldwork didn't take me very far from my desk, my view of the Lakes, and the lecture theatres and classrooms. Anthropologists used to spend months sailing overseas to carry out fieldwork. Back then, people thought the more far-flung the destination, the stranger the local habits would be – an idea dropped when it became clear everybody has their own culture, and it's impossible to rank them in terms of "strangeness". What yardstick would we use – theirs or ours? Instead, the job of the anthropologist became to elaborate on the idea of what it means to be human.

And so it was, on a chilly day in March, that I set off to do fieldwork on the north coast of Zealand, where I met some of the winter beach people. At the time, the government was advocating a small number of projects to develop the coastal zone. One involved extending the beach west of the harbour in Gilleleje by removing an industrial site, building a hotel partially embedded in new dunes, a long pier with winter bathing facilities and what the planners called a "nature room".

It piqued my interest that the project would be an exception to the rules for the coastal zone – an attempt to *optimise* the beach by adding "more" nature. The project described the nature room as having floor-to-ceiling windows that would provide an

"unrestricted panoramic view", represented by an illustration of a woman and child – wearing what I would call an overdressed indoor outfit– gazing out across a calm blue sea towards the cliffs of the rugged Kullen promontory on the coast of Sweden.[2]

It was a fascinating image. Was this the perfect way for the modern indoor person to experience nature? They were inside, behind thick glass, but had the ultimate open view of the water, sky and distant horizon. A single sailing boat suggested a recreational environment. No container ships, fishing boats or ferries.

In the end, the New Nordic Coast project floundered on local protests – particularly by fishermen, whose livelihood it threatened. But the vision of experiencing nature from indoors was fascinating. Had the public-private partnership managed to provide the envisaged "knowledge, experimentarium and information about the sea – fishing, nature below the surface",[3] it might even have been good for democracy given that all the good indoor sea views have long since been snapped up on this stretch of coast.

I started the fieldwork on the west beach at Gilleleje, but when the New Nordic Coast project floundered – and I had suspected that the local consultation would reveal fault lines in the form of different ideas about what constitutes good coastal nature – I turned my attention to other parts of the coast. Eventually, I concentrated on the beaches in another coastal town, Tisvildeleje. West of it are the heathlands of Tisvilde Hegn and the protected Melby Overdrev towards Liseleje. To the east is an area densely populated with holiday homes. In the middle, just off the pier, is Lejet. In the 1800s, this cluster of dwellings formed a small fishing village. Now, the area is a magnet for a demographic variously dubbed "Copenhageners", "the elite" or, somewhat sneeringly, "hipsters". Still, everyone agrees it's a beauty spot. The beaches are long, white and ideal for walking

and swimming. According to the Danish Nature Agency, the forest and heath comprise a mixture of habitats – green and white sandy landscapes, dunes, oak thickets, tall beech trees, lakes and plantations of Scots pine amid rolling hills.

The journey from the University of Copenhagen to North Zealand is neither long nor spectacular. People often think of the anthropologist as a man in the tropics, dressed in linens, wearing a pith helmet and carrying a notebook, imperiously seeking out natives to describe their strange habits and customs. It's a far cry from what I was doing. For one thing, it's cold. And what's strange about going to the beach?

I conducted my first interview on Gilleleje Beach in March 2017. It was with a retired gentleman, a former civil servant, who told me he went for a walk on the beach every day. The whole situation, approaching a stranger on the beach, felt awkward. I don't like phoning strangers, either. Being apprehensive about speaking to people is a bit of a drawback for an anthropologist – and occasionally turn out not to be a totally unfounded fear. I left it to chance and just approached the first person I saw. I didn't get the man's name, nor those of the other beachgoers I chanced upon. The plan was that these partially improvised interviews would broaden my horizons before I started to identify the people who would make particularly interesting subjects *and* might be willing to have longer conversations about questions I didn't yet know I would want to ask.

The man told me that the most fascinating thing on the beach was the "shwooshing" sound of the pebbles rolling in the waves. The way he said it, emphasised by an outward sweeping gesture with one of his hands, made me listen for the pebbles moving underfoot. Collectively, thousands of them create an almost impenetrably dense sound, which is then interrupted by the next wave. "But it's better when the stones are bigger, like