

In Ballard's novel The Concrete Island, a man called Robert Maitland loses control of his car and plunges down into a large area of waste ground at an intersection between elevated highways. Nobody notices the accident and Maitland's cries for help are not heard because of the noise of the traffic. The novel then moves to his acceptance of the island as his new habitation, a familiar yet unknown territory he must try to dominate and transform. In his imagining of the novel as an improbable tale of modern survival, Ballard acknowledges his debt to Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. But while Crusoe builds a bourgeois model of society on his desert island, Maitland uses the experience to escape bourgeois modernity. He also encounters two people on the island and has a complicated relationship with them. By the end of the novel Maitland is suspended between two worlds, delaying any decision to go back to his old life and taking pleasure in merely planning his escape.

Maitland explores the strange island. He is wounded. He walks slowly taking in what's around him. The environment looks like an uninhabited city, with buildings from different times. There are concrete structures, technological remains, a desolate landscape where concrete and steel represent nature. While he explores this incomprehensible place, he decides to become part of it, as if his body were torn to pieces and spread throughout the island.

Almost carried by the grass, Maitland climbed on to the roof of an abandoned air-raid shelter. Resting here, he inspected the island more carefully. Comparing it with the motorway system, he saw that it was far older than the surrounding terrain, as if this triangular patch¹ of waste ground had survived by the exercise of a unique guile² and persistence, and would continue to survive, unknown and disregarded, long after the motorways had collapsed into dust. Parts of the island dated from well before World War II. The eastern end, below the overpass, was its oldest section, with the churchyard and the ground-courses³ of Edwardian terraced houses. The breaker's yard⁴ and its wrecked cars had been superimposed on the still identifiable streets and alleyways. In the centre of the island were the air-raid shelters among which he was sitting. Attached to these was a later addition, the remains of a Civil Defence post little more than fifteen years old. Maitland climbed down from the shelter. Supported by the grass blades swirling⁵ around him like a flock⁶ of eager attendants, he hobbled⁷ westwards down the centre of the island. He crossed a succession of low walls, partly buried under piles of discarded⁸ tyres and worn steel cable. Around the ruin of a former pay-box,⁹ Maitland identified the ground-plan of a post-war cinema, a narrow single-storey¹⁰ flea-pit¹¹ built from cement blocks and galvanized iron. Ten feet away, partly screened by a bank of nettles,¹² steps ran down to a basement. Looking at the shuttered¹³ pay-box, Maitland thought unclearly of his own childhood visits to the local cinema, with its endless programmes of vampire and horror movies. More and more, the island was becoming an exact model of his head. His movement across this forgotten terrain was a journey not merely through the island's past but through his own. His infantile anger as he shouted aloud for Catherine reminded him of how, as a child, he had once bellowed unwearyingly¹⁴ for his mother while she nursed his younger sister in the next room. For some reason, which he had always resented, she had never come to pacify him, but had let him climb from the empty bath himself, hoarse¹⁵ with anger and surprise. Too exhausted to press on, Maitland sat on a stone wall. Around him the high nettles rose into the sunlight, their tiered and serrated¹⁶ leaves like the towers of Gothic cathedrals, or the porous¹⁷ rocks of a mineral forest on an alien planet. Hunger contracted his stomach in a sudden spasm, forcing him to vomit on to his knees. He wiped away the phlegm and hobbled across the brick courses to the southern embankment. Losing consciousness for short intervals, he wandered to and fro, his eyes unfocused, following the blunted end of the crutch. As he tottered about, Maitland found himself losing interest in his own body, and in the pain that

1. **patch:** area.

2. **guile:** deceit.

3. **ground-courses:** foundations.

4. **breaker's yard:** rubbish dump for destroyed or abandoned cars.

5. **swirling:** spiralling.

6. **flock:** large group.

7. **hobbled:** walked with a limp.

8. **discarded:** abandoned.

9. **pay-box:** ticket counter.

10. **single-storey:** one-floor.

11. **flea-pit:** name given to a small, dilapidated cinema.

12. **nettles:** stinging plants.

13. **shuttered:** closed behind shutters.

14. **bellowed unwearyingly:** cried desperately without stopping.

15. **hoarse:** rough-voiced.

16. **tiered and serrated:** jaggedly stratified in layers.

17. **porous:** full of holes.

inflamed¹⁸ his leg. He began to shuck off¹⁹ sections of his body, forgetting first his injured hip, then both his legs, erasing all awareness of his bruised chest and diaphragm.²⁰ Sustained by the cold air, he moved through the grass, looking round calmly at those features of the island he had come to know so well during the past days. Identifying the island with himself, he gazed at the cars in the breaker's yard, at the wire-mesh fence, and the concrete caisson²¹ behind him. These places of pain and ordeal were now confused with pieces of his body. He gestured towards them, trying to make a circuit of the island so that he could leave these sections of himself where they belonged. He would leave his right leg at the point of his crash, his bruised hands impaled upon the steel fence. He would place his chest where he had sat against the concrete wall. At each point a small ritual would signify the transfer of obligation from himself to the island.

18. inflamed: made swell.

19. shuck off: mentally remove.

20. diaphragm: muscle which helps one to breathe.

21. caisson: structure used in the construction of bridges.

Other suggestions:

- The research of a relationship with nature: William Wordsworth, *Lines Written in Early Spring* (1798)
- Celebration of Nature as a powerful force: Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ode to the West Wind* (1820)
- Struggle between individual and nature: Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851), chapter 41
- Nature as celebration of beauty: Walt Whitman, *On the Beach at Night Alone* (1892)
- The struggle to survive in a hostile environment: Jack London, *The Call of the Wild* (1903), chapter 1
- Nature as research of a pure life: Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (1996), The Stampede Trail