

Once More the Sea

The beach is bipartite, in process, divided. Half is brown-grey sludge, a packed-in powder. We walk on its springy surface, which feels like earth. Several inches high, this caked-up layer slumps on the limestone rocks beneath. Its dust, over a century's industry, clogs the cracks and hiding-places, pores, spaces between stones, till breathing is constricted.

The other half of the beach is loose. Our feet jangle pebbles in a clattering and jumble of many colours: red-speckled, praline, blue merle, yellow, a piece of inky coal. I pocket it. Water tumbles around all of them and the stones rattle freely, shifting from place to place a wrack of seaweed, fragments of shell, part of a crab, a fingerbone of wood.

Dissolving the soft clump stuck on this shore, the sea calmly erases what has gone on here. The job is only halfway done, half-started. Year on year and inch by inch, as the ocean inexorably shakes the dust free, the whiter stone finds itself again, ghostly and exposed.

In the beginning, there was the Earth, and it had been for four billion years.

At this time there was a forest. Drenched, and crackling with zigzag ferns and sunburst leaves. Metre-wide dragonflies ruled the air, while millipedes, several feet long, eased between mossy towers.

Over millions and millions of years, the trees died and fell into the swamp. Instead of decomposing, they slipped deeper underground, piling up in layers of peat. As the material gradually sank further down, nearer to the furnace of Earth's centre, heat and pressure combined in a marvellous trick. The plants were cooked, carbonised hard black.

The carbon inhaled repeatedly by unthinkable multitudes of generations of leaves and fronds, moss-tails, wasn't breathed out by bacteria in the gradual way, so it stayed locked-in, frozen in time or set like a diamond, a dark eye flash, liable to explode.

But I see the sea once more, wrote the poet from his guest room, eyeing the grey January tides as they rubbed the limbs of Seaham, in 1815.

When I visit the town, I notice Byron's Place, a harbour-facing retail complex with Betfred, Greggs and Wilko. In the paved zone outside stands a wooden sculpture of Byron and his Seaham wife, Annabella. Their torsos are hard and stretched-looking, legs stiffly raised, apparently dancing; carved eyes stare beyond each other. On the plinth, some choice quotations from B's best-loved works: *she walks in beauty*... lines not meant for her.

Lizzie put *Byron* on her Tinder profile and got a message back which said I love the burger chain too! There isn't one in Seaham, just a clean-eating café with vegan options, recently opened. Lizzie studied Maths; so did Annabella.

“Never liked a prude – dowdy – knows Statistics! – bad figure – long & a high dress – still, she gains by inspection – the lower part of her face is bad – knows Greek & Latin.” Her calmness, self-command, while he bullied her made him prickle, but

“ha! She is like a child, quite caressable, I had her on the sofa. One animal is as good as another, provided she is young. Took her out of Seaham (shudder) to Augusta's, proved I could do without her. Still, I worked them both well, and left her for Geneva.”

Leslie shows me her driftwood sculptures. Cupboards of them, under the bed and piled up in the garage. Village scenes and abstract arrangements; model boats with sails; a little bird. She uses the sea-shaped contours as she finds them, emphasising with a rusty lock nailed in, for example, or a stretch of net or wire. On the workbench is a jar of sea glass like blue opals, ready to fill in skies or windows, dot a creature's eye. I'm not allowed to collect any more! she says, not till I've got through this – heaps of scavenged pieces stowed in sacks, ready to be worked. Haven't got space for it all. But I can't stop!

Bob and Michael let me share their Thursday walk. The meadow's full of purple clover

Funny, walking for pleasure on
the ground we used to work under.
I liked the small spaces, close around me body.

Not me. I'm glad they closed the pits.
Those of us who saw it coming made a plan.
I retrained, became a teacher, Geography and SEN.

Miners know all sorts of useful things.
Some young person doesn't know what to do,
I'll teach them how to hang a door.

When I go to decorate a house, sometimes it's haunted.
You got it in the mines too, spots where folk had died.
Close by you felt a funny feeling, a coldness.

Are you a spiritual person? Bob asks. Me, I've been meditating for years and reached nirvana a few times. Only thing is after you die, what's it called, recycl- reincarnation. I'm not sure about that. That's a grey area for me.

Bob's Leave, Michael's Remain. As soon as this is said I feel a wedge occur in our trio that wasn't there before. Normally this isn't discussed on their regular walks; friends-since-primary-school talk cars and tools. But it'll be all right though, insists Bob. He recommends Pink Himalayan salt for cooking; it's purer, you can look it up online.

I wake to coal-dark skies, rain thrown against the lighthouse windows. A sudden summer storm, tropical typhoon. I force myself to leave the cottage and catch the bus to Sunderland, where I change for another. I get off beside a grey block with a sign in small letters: COMMUNITY CENTRE.

Inside, kettle's on and there's movement, warmth: Friday's Get Online group. They'd like to video-call relatives, order online products, but it's a social group really.

The trouble with us, says Iris, is it goes in one – and out –! And next week we've forgotten everything.

Patient Jacob demonstrates how to save a picture as. Not save link! Right or left? someone asks. The students sit up straight at their PCs, and give each other hints. At 11.00 it's time for another cup of tea.

Will's cross because some bikers have just lobbed stones and left dents above the windscreen of his Land Rover. They're not allowed to run their motorbikes along his coastal paths.

I'll take you to the village I grew up in, he says.

We go to one of the access points to the land he manages, a route down to the beach. It's popular with flytippers and today the Council are there with a crane, removing a dilapidated sofa from a mess of papers and wrappers. An aged interpretation sign declares IT WAS FUN AT THE BEACH AT HORDEN! alongside photos of 20s bathers, striped and smiling.

From the clifftop we observe a luminescent, cobalt-violet pool, elongated on the beach below. It contrasts mysteriously with the sky's azure and the muted grassland that we're walking on, a toxic mirror leached from machinery abandoned underground. The high iron content has dyed similar pools further up the coast a poisonous shade of orange. But no one seems to know exactly what it is. Will says they had a pH test done and got a score of +1, like battery acid. I used to drive my push-bike through those pools, he says, everyone did.

It's going to come back to bite us, he continues, what's down there. When I bought my house they said have you considered subsidence. No one's sure. They're going to build the station at Horden; in a few years the cliff could erode right up to the main line. Remember the 'Beast from the East'? The sea foam rose and filled this whole area; afterwards nothing looked the same. Another one of those, and who knows where we'll be.

We drive through streets. The best tattooist in the north-east is based here, he tells me.

As soon as I am folded in, I breathe out and relax. The forest suits dull weather, damp tinted green-and-grey, ringing my eyes with wakefulness.

At the base runs the burn, tucked beside wide, palm-shaped leaves. They might be wild rhubarb, but I don't always know the names. I just cross the dene-mouth briefly, following the coastal path.

On my way out, I pass a chorus of hello! orange flowers like strings of dripped jewels, their colour a deep lit eye. I will find their name later and they turn out to be *Montbretia*, an African species brought to English gardens in 1880. They'd escape to wildlands by 1911. And through

the arch of the towering
red-brick Viaduct,
I am back at sea. Brown butterflies
frisk my hair

We are making a banner for the parade. Grace has drawn it all out in black marker pen: the stripes of the rainbow, outlines of the boy and girl holding hands, and the name of the village in block capitals. Keep in the lines! she begs the others. The adults and helpers cut out squares of coloured felt with the big scissors, then the children take the pieces and coat them with PVA to stick on the banner. Ruby takes pleasure in painting the back of her hand with a thick layer, letting it dry then peeling off the rubbery shape, holding it like a ghost before scrunching it away. Don't use up all the glue doing that, says Jodie. She's got two tattoos on her forearms. The goddess Isis and her daughter's name in sign language.

Are you coming to my den after this? asks Evie. It's got a working tap.

Will you come home with me I don't like walking in the numbered streets, says Grace.

I like reading, says Mark, with bright, fast eyes, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Goosebumps*. And I've got the Lion Witch and Wardrobe book. What do you want to do when you grow up? Play out. Kids these days, they're always on their phones. His dad takes him on long walks down the dene. Do you know the way to the beach? *We* do. Some mums don't bring the bairns on the trips, they don't actually like nature themselves, they find it boring.

Miss Mop, Miss Mop! Kian and Evie stand opposite each other, and clap:

x x
Miss Mop.
x x
Miss Mop.
x
Miss
x x x x x x
Mop from California,
x x x x x
Sitting on a bench, learning French

As the rhythm accelerates Kian wiggles his body with delight and Mark beside him, older brother not joining in directly, can't help his face from laughing too

x x x x
Watching the clock go Tick, tock
x x X
Tick tock Ban-a-na

Denise provides us each with a fluorescent jacket like builders wear, and a picker, complete with claw. Snap snap: children love them. Connor tells me he's sharing the grabber with his brother.

Ian's semi-retired and looking for opportunities
to meet people

Staff from a health food chain are fundraising
for a dog charity

Julie loves to paint the sea
but it's so difficult

It already looks clean: most of the bits are small, scraps tucked between stones or tied into seaweed, torn like driftwood. Wire, glass, metal, lots of discoloured seawashed plastic of all types, the colours of the pebbles. You don't see it till you look.

creatures
potter about
with a fifth limb

for her birthday she asked
for a crocodile claw

grab-sticks
pick
black
bits pale
in
between
shreds

grey darker tarpaulin
speckled blue
cream

turquoise
weeds net
sleeve winds knot

pebble
dark

binds rubber
kelp
strip

plastic
anemone
scrunch nest

sea heaves
it all and spreads

it rattles

sea glass round
sweetie
or sharp?

we

move

gently

it's kind of zen

like the warehouse

putting stuff

where it's supposed to go

who are these birds
so delicate and courteous

giant insects

patiently sorting

lumo high-vis reptile skin

rinsing

spaces

making

room

to breathe

I used to live in the mountains, says the owner of the cafe,
das war meine Heimat
aber ich mag die Küste...

I continue along the beach, which is gradually changing colour: from dark-brown to tan, then golden. I wade through piles of light, fine sand springing tufts of grass, and the wind passes over its hand and leaves an uneven, wrinkled pattern.

I stand in the sea. Wellbeing spreads from my toes to my sacrum. Then a sharp wind flings back the grains at my bare legs, so it's like the burn of a cloud of tiny knives.

A runner lopes over, an Irishman but he lives in Durham. See, I was born on a cliff, he tells me. You know,

I come here and it's like I can feel
all of my gills opening!

Durham Coast, August 2019

Notes and Acknowledgements

The characters in this text are based on actual encounters, but they have been fictionalised, and should not be assumed to represent real people. In most cases I have altered names to preserve anonymity.

das war... ‘that was my home, but I like the coast’.

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