

Adrian Markle

That Same Sea

We sat on the first-floor balcony of the holiday let¹ that looked down over the village from the hill on the east. I looked south, to the sea, and sometimes back east, towards home. She looked west, over the village, maybe hunting among the rooftops for the house she'd grown up in.

5 She had tea and I had coffee. Neither of us ate. I still felt delicate², and it was too late now for breakfast anyway. I didn't think the coffee was that great, but I was still mossy-tongued from the night before. I squinted against the sun splashing off the water, still distant but coming in, she'd assured me. She always talked about how suddenly the tide came in here. But for the moment, the boats in the little harbour all lay awkwardly on their sides in the sand, frayed³ green ropes trailing off limply to wherever. I picked up the paper to shield my eyes.

10 The front page of the newspaper showed a picture of Brighton⁴ Beach, packed shoulder to shoulder with pale, British beachgoers. "Millions Flock to Brighton to Escape Summer Heatwave," it said.

"They should just come here," I said. The little village, the one she'd grown up in, Gorran Haven⁵, was busy with tourists – like myself, I suppose – but not "millions" busy.

15 "They don't know," she said.

"What don't they know?"

"About this. Not really. God's own country. But people don't understand the difference. This is a nice place. A really nice place. But they just see a beach."

20 I was surprised by how much she seemed to care for this village, how quickly her old accent was reasserting itself. She never talked about home much, but as soon as we'd booked this weekend she seemed to grow more impassioned about it with each passing week.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because they're incomers."

"Like me?"

25 "Like you." She winked.

"You're enjoying this."

"I am. I've had years of you teasing me about not knowing this or that about the city, not knowing the best route on the tube⁶. Now it's your turn to be a little out of place. But it's okay. You're with me."

30 "You're not exactly a local yourself any more."

"Shush. It doesn't leave you. And I'm local enough to know where the good beach is." [...]

The path was uneven and hard, like concrete, and I struggled at first, but she was sure-footed, and soon I was hurrying to catch up.

35 "Good to be back?" I called, hoping to slow her. It worked. We'd got in the night before and then immediately drank too much. Today was her first real day here in years. [...]

¹ lejlighed

² (her) medtaget (af tømmermænd)

³ flossede

⁴ kendt badeby i det sydøstlige England

⁵ *Gorran Haven*: landsby på den sydlige kyst af Cornwall, England

⁶ *the tube*: undergrundsbanen i London

“That’s cow parsley⁷,” she said. It grew tall, taller than her in some cases, and its stalks held up little umbrellas of white flowers. “Sheep go crazy for it.”

“Sheep?”

“Yeah, sheep. Look, they’ve grazed down the field on the other side of us.”

40 “Can I see one?”

“I don’t know.” She laughed. “Can you?”

“I mean, I’ve never actually seen one before, up close.”

She shook her head. “City folk.”

“Last week you drank a latte out of an avocado, and you’ve taken your cat to yoga.”

45 She shrugged. “Got to do something to make city life bearable.”

I leaned over and reached out for a burst of the flowers of the cow parsley, to get it for her, to pin it in her hair, but she followed my gaze and slapped the back of my hand.

“Don’t,” she said. “It’ll only die if you pick it. Besides, don’t lean off the path like that. Dangerous.”

50 We continued on around the head⁸, with her [...] naming things occasionally – foxglove⁹, blackberry brambles¹⁰, ivy¹¹ – until the path split, and we took the one that angled down to a long, fat curve of pebbled beach, dramatically walled in on either side by two spits of rocky headland, and populated by only a few other couples. Good to be an insider. Fuck Brighton.

“Vault Beach,” she said.

55 The path we did not take continued up along the edge of the hill, eventually passing, I now saw, a field that had sheep in it, and a part of me wished we’d gone that way.

We dropped our things and kicked off our sandals way, way back on the beach. When the tide comes in, it comes in like a flash, she’d said. Our things would be washed away before we even knew we were in danger of losing them.

60 By the time our toes touched the sand, the air was hot. I was already sweating and probably starting to burn. Had to be well over twenty degrees. We walked out, but not straight out, instead tracing the headland in and over and around the rocks, to which our access was granted¹² by the still-absent tide. It had come in only so much as to wet our feet and ankles.

“It’s the same.” She beamed. “It’s all the same as I remember.”

65 “What’s the sound?” I asked. I loved to see her smile like that, but there was something echoing down the little cliff, a deep growl and a lighter, grinding, metallic rattle that made me nervous.

She cocked her head.

“Chain harrow¹³”

I nodded. I had no idea what she was talking about, but I nodded.

70 “A farmer’s driving round somewhere on a quad bike¹⁴, towing a net of chain that turns over the soil.”

I nodded again.

“Now hurry up. I’m going to show you something, if you’ll move your lazy ass!”

⁷ *cow parsley*: vild kørvel

⁸ næs

⁹ fingerbølplante

¹⁰ *blackberry brambles*: brombærranker

¹¹ efeu

¹² (her) muliggjort

¹³ harve

¹⁴ *quad bike*: firehjulet motorcykel

She ran off and I chased after and we clambered about in the shade cast by the headland, tracing, down there on the sand, roughly the same path that continued along the cliff above us.

75 The water was knee high now, and I splashed seawater at her as she forged ahead¹⁵, the droplets falling and disappearing in her wake without her ever knowing they'd been there.

"Look," she said, and I hurried to catch up. "The grotto!" I could hear the memories coming back to her. She pointed to a cleft in the cliff face and turned into it. I followed her. We walked through the rock where it parted like tied-back curtains. The base of the grotto was higher than the beach we'd come from, and we were soon less than ankle deep again, spraying cloudy, silty water about us with each step.

In the recess¹⁶ stood a sheep, a young one, white wool and white face. It was near motionless and didn't react to us at all.

85 We sidled up to the sheep, not wanting to spook it. Though it must have been able to hear the splash of our steps, it didn't run. Didn't even so much as look, just stood, waiting.

"Is this...?" I started to ask.

"No, not normal at all," she said, and she moved toward it, then reached back and grabbed my hand and we approached together. It was cold in there.

I felt nervous as I approached, like I was imposing¹⁷.

90 I reached out. Its fleece was much softer than I'd imagined, not coarse or oily as I'd expected, though dirty and caked with sand. The animal was small, mostly leg. Maybe still a lamb, yet. It turned its head ever so slightly in to my hand, I thought, when I scratched between its ears, but otherwise gave little response.

Its eyes were glassy. I took my hand away, and it didn't seem to notice.

95 "Come and look," she said.

She brushed some of the red-tinged wool away from its rear haunch¹⁸. The sheep flinched a little, but otherwise didn't move. There was blood in its fleece, and skin carved smoothly from its hip, all the way down its leg, as if it had been peeled back by a cleaver¹⁹. The muscle, deep red and glistening, was dirty and sandy as well. [...]

100 She stooped, wrapped her arms around all four of its young legs, hesitated, and then stood. The sheep, which had been still this whole time, came alive the second the exposed flesh of its leg, made cold by the sea breeze, pressed against her lightly-freckled shoulder and painted it a dark red.

I was stunned by her boldness, and if the young sheep's sudden struggling, the kicking of its legs to break free, hadn't caused it to start slipping from her grasp, I might have just stood, witnessing, until she was gone.

105 But instead I stepped forward and took the animal from her, its kicking easier for me to manage, even as it began to bleed again with each frantic pump of its leg, the blood sliding slow down the inside of my arm, the side of my chest. It screamed at first too, a plaintive²⁰, cracking *baa* that sounded both completely alien and far too human.

110 With the water now suddenly up past our knees, and then almost to our hips, it was a lot harder to walk in to the shore than it had been to walk out.

¹⁵ *forged ahead*: kæmpede sig frem

¹⁶ indhak

¹⁷ *was imposing*: (her) trængte mig på

¹⁸ *rear haunch*: bagparti

¹⁹ køddøkse

²⁰ klagende

Then the lamb began to calm, and quieten, and by the time we rounded the corner to set eyes on the beach, it had ceased most of its protests save for the occasional, weakening kick, and moved no more than it had when we'd first seen it.

115 "Do you think it'll be okay?" she asked. I kept walking. [...]

But she pressed on, forging through the rising tide, and I followed, easier, in her wake.

Eventually, the water began to fall lower and lower on our legs, and then we were on what remained of the beach. We stood there not knowing what to do next for maybe seconds or maybe minutes. Nothing seemed to move. And then someone was walking across the beach out to meet us.
120 Very young. Still a boy. He had a black, Cornish²¹ flag T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off, dirty jeans, and work boots with worn tongues that hung away from them like from the mouths of dying animals. His hair was the colour of hay, sun-bleached and coarsened by the salt wind, and his cheeks were crimson, chapped.

125 "Ere²²," he said, and held out his arms. He was Cornish, at least, which I felt made him an authority. "Give 'e 'ere²³."

So I surrendered the sheep, and the boy held it with a practised ease, and then he placed it gently on the back of his quad bike and fastened it firmly down with some straps and rode off the beach and away up the hill. We stood and watched until the bike crested²⁴ the hill and passed out of view.

130 We packed up our things and held them at arm's length, so as not to bloody them, and headed back up the path. It was still sunny out. Still twenty-five degrees. Still a beautiful day.

We showered for a long time back at the holiday let, and sat out on the balcony. I looked over the quiet village – the white buildings, ashy streets and ruddy brown stone walls occasionally disturbed by a flash of colour, the orange of a child's inflatable boat, the yellow of a snorkel, or the sky blue of a beach towel some other tourist was carrying back contentedly from the main beach.

135 "Anywhere else you wanted to take me today?" I asked.

She shook her head. She got up, and leaned over the balcony a while, and shook her head again. She walked back inside, and the door closed behind her.

(2018)

²¹ fra landsdelen Cornwall i det sydvestlige England

²² Here

²³ Give 'e 'ere: Give her here

²⁴ nåede toppen af