**Storm**

*29th February 2020.*

Into the sand I scrawl the words *I Miss You*, follow them up with three kisses. I am thinking about you as I walk across the beach, the quiet expanse, a blue-sky canopy of crisp air. Leaving Whitby behind.

Earlier. Students gripped in the pleasure of a writing retreat. Free time. It was a cold but glorious day, so I decided to go for a walk and explore the town. Nestled in the ruins of the gothic abbey, I left the youth hostel, taking the one-hundred-and-ninety-nine steps down the cliffside, through the graveyard, to the cobbled streets of the Old Town. From my vantage point on the steps, I looked across the bay. The glowing expanse of sand, inviting me to explore. A destination worth ambling to. I decided to cross over the harbour bridge to investigate.

Feet padding on pebbles. The enticement of sweet shops and the distraction of the bookstore and its cast-iron, spiral staircase. Imagining Goths and Steampunks roaming the streets, fantastical spectres from another world. My mind buzzed with creativity and the faint remembrance of last night’s revelries. The brisk breeze on the harbour revitalised my senses. Slowly I walked around the water to Whitby beach, passed moored ships, kamikaze seagulls, took in the bombastic pleasures and the sights of the English Seaside. Amusements. Fish and Chips. Candyfloss. Fishing boats. Dracula.

They all disappear now, as my feet leave impressions in the sand - not shunned or forgotten, just replaced with serenity and calm, a sense of openness. It seems that one could walk forever, past the nestled cottages of Sandsend, enticing in the distance, beyond even Kettleness and around the headland into the unknown. The desire to see what lies around the corner is too great and I move on, picking up my pace. My scarf flutters in the sea-wind and I bury my hands into the warmness of my jacket pockets. Still near the town, just as the beach opens out beyond the harbour walls, I find a piece of driftwood and write my declaration in the sand. I take my time, memorise the movements of my hand as I think of you, picture what you are doing at this moment, an image of you curled up on the couch, safe beneath a blanket.

The beach is a highway into the distance, leading on brave adventurers and lonely souls. The sea is rough and angry but remains withdrawn, as if waiting for permission to advance. Rock, sand, wave, wind; this is nature’s liminal space, a strip of temporary sanctuary, an offering of hope and new horizons. *Follow Me. I will lead you to a new place.* A wonderful thought, considering the nature of the day. That magical day appearing out of the shadows, recovered time coalescing around you, opportunity manifest.

I see a couple standing in the mouth of a cave, woolly hats and chunky scarves, the woman’s limbs outstretched, starfish-shaped, a smile on her face. He is taking her picture. For a moment I believe that I have never seen such happiness. Now, I wonder how time has passed for them. What storms have they faced together in the time since that moment?

The light changes, but it is subtle. If you’re not paying attention you would blunder on. Shadows deepen from inland, yet the sky remains blue over the sea. Black cloud builds and begins to roll in from the Moors, a visible wall of dark. Turmoil is approaching. The changing weather marks the arrival of something. Recollections of the Demeter slipping into the harbour. An ominous premonition of things to come.

Within moments we are reminded it is winter.

The cloud lingers and the wind crescendos, the sea boiling up around the brickwork of the harbour gate. I seek higher ground, leaving the beach, my feet purchasing concrete as I follow the path that climbs up and towards the esplanade. From above I see the patterns left by small rivulets of water in the sand. They remind me of maps of the brain, arbor vitae, the trees of life. The beach is littered with them.

As I reach the esplanade snow begins to fall. The change in weather has been dramatic, blues replaced with black. The sea is reclaiming the beach, an invasion that cannot be defeated or denied. I move on, retracing my steps towards Whitby town, turning my back on the enveloping clouds.

In the distance I see a statue and head for it, nestled by the Whalebone Arch. I shelter within its shadow, hoping the frame of the figure will protect me from the gathering storm. It is Captain Cook, standing proud, overlooking the harbour and the open sea with a sense of remembrance. Or is it regret? The Whalebone Arch frames the abbey in picture-postcard perfection. The urge to snap a shot cannot be resisted so I reach for my phone. The sight is one to behold, the town nestling around the harbour, the abbey dominating the horizon across the water, shrouded in blue-sky, the contrast breath-taking.

All the while, behind me, the battle lines are drawn on the beach between cloud and sky.

The temptation to observe this proves too much. I find peace looking at the abbey and the bright sky, but I want to witness the gathering storm, face it full-on in defiance and resilience. My gaze is turned away from the picturesque and I back-track to the beach to observe the onslaught of nature. For a few minutes the wind picks up, cold sleet peppers my face. The shadows creep over the water, mist shrouding the coastline. Sandsend becomes lost to time, Kettleness nothing more than a subtle hue amongst the grey. I am in awe, standing on the cliff-edge, feeling privileged to witness this endless war.

In that moment I could not have predicted that soon another storm would rise on the horizon, blot out the sun and test our resilience. I don’t realise it at the time, but this defiance of the elements on this reclaimed day will soon become a significant remembrance. A hopeful memory when days get tough. *You can make it! The storm will always end.*

So, I mirror the woman from before, spread my limbs in defiance of the storm and scream into the wind, the elements blasting my cheeks. I am alone, no one watching, a moment of pure exhilaration and emotional release. There, on the clifftop at Whitby, amongst the enveloping wind and fog, everything becomes remarkably clear. *You are here! You. Are. Here.*

It ends as quickly as it started. Not even long enough to soak me to the skin. I am left with cold cheeks and a chilled, thin film which clings to my face and my fingers. The mist lifts, as if burnt away by the victorious sun. The shadows shift again, the sand changing colour from muddy brown to glorious amber. It is as if the brewing storm had realised that it could not contain its own majesty. Now, writing this, I recall the swiftness of that moment, the return to what had been before. Storms ending and replaced with the strength of a new sun.

After a while of watching the retreating elements, I return to the beach as if I am reviewing the remnants of a battlefield. There is a strange calm settling. A few strides down the powdery sand, far from my own initial moniker, my own declaration, I discover another scrawling. A heart-shaped proclamation of love. J + C. The previous couple are nowhere to be seen but have still left their mark. It makes me smile. It has survived the storm, and even though you are not with me, I press on down the beach to find my own words still visible in the sand.

*Rob O’Connor*