

The Drift

2013



IT IS SPRING and the herring gulls have staked their claim on the roof opposite. There are six pairs evenly spaced along the length of the block, and I know there are more pairs that I can't see on my own roof. They start calling at first light, from a conversational quickfire cackling to a full-on heads-back beaks-wide yodelling that used to wake me every morning when I first moved here. Now I hardly notice it.

From my window I can just make out a little sliver of grey ocean between the buildings. You could hardly warrant calling it a sea view, though an estate agent probably would. I did much of my growing up in sight of the sea so it is nice to know it is there. Walking to the beach takes about five minutes. At first I walked down to the sea almost every day, and imagined that I always would, but of course in time I began to take it more and more for granted, until I had almost forgotten it was

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there, at least when it was not obvious beach weather. It's not going anywhere, after all. Sometimes though I still surprise myself and take a solitary walk along the tideline. I walk away from the tinkling and chuntering of the fairground rides and arcades, away from the perfume of vinegar and candyfloss. Perhaps I will see something unexpected, a storm-blown gannet or a phalarope bobbing in the waves. I comb the flotsam of the latest storm, and the shingle makes a satisfying crunch beneath my feet, and the surf smells clean and bright, and I think to myself: Why don't I do this more often? If I rise early I may even have the beach to myself, and stroll absentmindedly along picking up things that catch my eye – fairy stones and mermaids' purses, shards of driftwood smoothed by waves and garish tangles of fishing twine or shreds of lost nets. And when I get home I unload my pockets, wondering why I have all these things, and add them to the drift that has accumulated on my kitchen windowsill, alongside the fragments of coral and exotic seashells that I have brought back from tropical shores.

Now that the herring gulls have paired up they don't wander far. A lot of the time they seem to spend on the

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grassy bank at the edge of the estate, doing their gull dance. With a look of apparent concentration, they drum their big flappy webbed feet on the ground as rapidly as they can, and this seems to be remarkably effective at bringing up worms and bugs that they can gobble down. They also have a habit of ripping open any bin bags left out overnight and picking through the contents. A lot of people complain about them, but not everyone dislikes them; some people persist in putting out food for them in spite of, or perhaps because of, the letters from the council asking them to desist. Personally I don't mind the gulls. This is the seaside, and our rooftops are just cliffs to them. They probably belong here more than I do.

I find it hard to believe that I have been in Brighton for so long. It was not really my intention; I never thought I would stay anywhere for long. It feels as though I just washed up here by accident, stranded, like driftwood. When I tell people that I have travelled in the best part of a hundred countries they sometimes ask me to name a favourite place. It is an impossible choice – how do you compare beach with mountaintop, rainforest with desert? But if pushed I

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will often surprise people by saying somewhere closer to home: the Isle of Jura.

It is a place that I cannot forget, because I have left a little piece of myself there, a fragment of who I am. In particular I think of a little storm-lashed promontory on the uninhabited west coast of the island. I always thought that I would go back there again, and perhaps I still will. Yet somehow over twenty years have passed since the last time I was there.

It was morning as I walked along the rocks. I had been walking this coast alone for days, sleeping under the stars or in empty bothies, building driftwood fires each night. It was spotting with rain; I could see the rain clouds moving in from the western horizon. As I looked out beyond the small islands of Colonsay and Oronsay I could see just open ocean; there was nothing else between here and Canada. I sat down behind a pile of rocks, the only shelter from the gusting wind. I began to wonder whether this was an ancient cairn built in memory of the long-ago dead, or if it had simply been accumulated here by passing walkers, rock by rock.

I decided that this would be the place. Remote,

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isolated. I can still picture the spot perfectly, a place where the otters play. I began to dismantle the little cairn; to find its heart, and then to rebuild it with my talisman at its core. I could not have explained quite why I was doing what I was doing, not to myself let alone to others. But sometimes a symbolic gesture is all that we have to give.

