

To Look Inside Ourselves, We Must Venture Outdoors.

Standing barefoot between where dry twigs give way to sand too hot to stand on. A pink and delicious sky drips into the Pacific Ocean. An ocean that, bath hot, tiptoes up and down the shore.

Here, there is never silence, but noises that come together to create a welcoming quiet. Monkeys talk to one another in the background. Toucans and jays and tanagers disturb leaves and one another, rustling in the mangroves that line the Costa Rican coastline.

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My small hand on exposed rock. Rock weathered and made rough by centuries of spring tides and storms. Battered, yet strong and still standing. Glancing at the cliff face above, I see burrows, where the puffins have nested, and raised their young ones.

Between the gusts of strong winds that whistle through, it's quiet. But not the lonely kind of quiet, instead it is a reflective, meditative one that sparks contemplation. The air is filled with a salty wetness, it kisses my face and reminds me I am alive.

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Three ants follow one another in a line, ascending a long piece of grass that sways in the southerly breeze. The grass is the type you can pick, place between your thumbs, and blow on to make it sing.

I lie in this meadow searching for the creatures we don't normally stop to see, the aliveness we tend to ignore. Ants climb grass. Woodlice stalk the earth for warm darkness. Spiders spin webs to make tiny suspension bridges that will look glorious in the next morning's dew. Lying here watching, I feel part of something much grander, much more complex than the trivial human world.

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The hot excitement of counting the seconds between the thunder and the lighting. It's warm and static in a way that's only possible in a summer storm. All my windows are open, my blinds are drawn back. I rest my head on the thin carpet. Down here, I get the best view one can get of the sky whilst being indoors.

Four, five, six. Bang! Thunder rolls. It's long, drawn out and powerful. I wait again. Purple veins flash across a cloudy heart. There's something incredibly enticing about an electric sky.

I recall this collection of moments for a reason. It is in these places that I feel most at home, most myself. I am consumed so wholly by nature; I feel myself part of it. It is these moments, often described as the in-betweens, that I find focus, clarity and understanding.

As I sit at my desk watching the late December snow fall between the gaps in my blinds, I wonder whether this connection is true for the majority. Whether there is an innate sense of belonging when we are in the outside world, or whether the modern world has pounced, leaving people comfortable in the confines of their own homes?

For myself and for many of those I am surrounded by, when we step out of front doors, stuffy cars and five o'clock trains, it is an instinct to take a deep breath of outdoor air. Breath becomes liquid with which we shower our mind and wash away the pressure of the tight four walls.

I assume there are others, the more modern of us, who take this cleansing breath the moment they step inside their homes. Of course, houses are important. It is a privilege to have at least some space in a house that you call your own. But really, houses are just boxes we fill with our possessions and our loved ones and lock tight at night in order to feel safe. Does the

breath the others take as they pull off their coat and swap shoes for slippers cleanse the spirit?
Or could it instead just be a sigh? A sigh of gratefulness to be somewhere safe, rather than
somewhere you belong?

If everyone gave the outdoors a chance, would we all start to feel like we had more of a
position in the chain of existence?

I think we would.

What then would this achieve for wellbeing? For year-long waiting lists for mental health
support? For the thousands of us feeling lonely?

Now, with my window open and cold air lingering around my face, I am exploring what
happens to the human brain when we go outside. For thousands of years, scientists have been
researching the human mind, making something we each have mysterious and, as yet, not
fully discovered.

Ongoing research by the University of Cambridge is showing that when we are outside, the
frontal lobe (a part of the brain over occupied with our modern day, busy lives) deactivates
slightly. Instead, alpha waves, indicating a calm but aware state, grow stronger.

This got me thinking, if this sense of calm and belonging exists when we delve into nature, is
this because we have inherited the traits of our environment? By going outside, do we click
into place like the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle?

If we do truly belong in the ancient, natural world, does it not make sense that our emotional
experiences imitate the physical processes of the Earth?

Now, that is the relationship I would like to explore; the beautiful, long-standing connection
between human emotion and the way the world works.

With no scientific or anthropologic qualifications, I am just an outdoor obsessive, looking to find a deeper personal understanding.

All I know for certain is to look inside ourselves, we must venture outdoors.

Chapter 1: All Sea-ing

“But where, after all, would be the poetry of the sea were there no wild waves?”

-Joshua Slocum

It is one of those wet and windy days on the South West coastline. Grey skies, grey sea. The sand, a damp, muted orange.

It is the type of day where the glass serving panel of the ice cream truck is forced shut, yet still rattles in the wind.

A few brave tourists sit on the beach taking in North Devon's fresh air, determined to make the most of the Easter holidays. Local dog walkers look at them from hurried walks, scoffing at the staycationers' forced 'Must Have Fun' ritual.

I watch this from the rocks at the far end of the beach. Bits of shale stab at my feet through my wetsuit shoes. I adjust my position carefully, clutching at my surfboard with both hands. Then, deliberately, slowly, I turn my attention to the sea.

She is beautiful when she is angry.

The surfreport read four to six foot with a ten second wave period. This is the swell my dad and I had wanted, nothing like the mere two-to-three-foot waves we had up until this point.

I watch the great rush of white water as it pushes onto the shore and consumes the beach. I tune into the frequency of the sea, letting the sound of the waves devour me.

'Ready?' my dad asks. I don't reply, nervous energy and the promise of good waves propels me as I pick a path across the rocks, towards the sea. My dad launches into the water between waves.

I wait, then take my chance. My hands, enclosed in neoprene, trace underwater rock with each paddle. I suck my stomach in, hoping in some way this will bring my board with it, stopping the bottom from scraping.

Paddling hard and quickly running out of breath, I glide away from the rocks and struggle over the next wave. I watch Dad turtle roll his board and get dragged back a couple of yards. The same tower of white-water heaves towards me. I lurch off the edge of my board, forcing the nose of it down and immerse myself fully in the stinging cold of the Atlantic.

Coming up the other side, a strange and sinister calm grips the ocean. We are between sets.

I take advantage of the lull, pushing onwards away from the white-water, fighting against the ache of my already tired arms. I paddle parallel to my dad, the gap between us widening.

He lifts his hand, giving me a thumbs up.

I return it, too nervous to indicate that maybe these conditions are too hard for me to manage. Too embarrassed to admit defeat after the persuasion it had taken to get Dad to choose Croyde over Saunton.

I return my gaze to the horizon. A set is growing. Even from where I am, I can see great bits of spray being blown over the back of the moving humps of water. Foam bubbles and catches in the wind.

I watch as a figure further out the back swings round on their board. They began to paddle, picking up speed with each stroke. I watch as the wave catches them, propelling them down the face. The figure carves a path for themselves, cutting back before gaining speed again.

The wave hurls towards me, yet I keep watching. I don't move, instead I'm mesmerised by the goal of how good I want to be. Now only two meters from me, the surfer waves his arms, gestures for me to do something, to get out the way for God's sake.

Yet, I keep watching.

I don't move.

The wave begins to break over me. I am being absorbed by a force much greater than me.

The sharp point of an Al Merrick shortboard is inches from my face.

At once, panic hits and I release my board, ducking under the wave. Above me, I feel the watery thud of the surfer falling.

The wave catches my board in its rush to spill onto the shore. My leash, still attached to my foot, extends until it cannot anymore. I am tugged under water after it.

I fight hard, swinging at dark nothing with my arms. Eyes tight shut, I battle with terror and darkness and salt. Heavy water pushes down on me. I am devoured once again, not by the loudness of the waves, but by the internal thud of blood in my ears. From my lips comes my last bubble of air.

I feel a loss in the wave's power as it plunges towards the shore. I am being less dragged and more pulled. With my remaining strength, I smash the surface of the water and breath in too hard.

I swing round, searching for my dad, for my safety. Instead, I find the surfer.

'What the hell were you doing? I could've killed you.' He shouts, pushing himself up onto his board.

I am too tired to speak, too tired to pull in the leash of my board. All I can do is tread my feet, spit seawater and attempt to breath.

The next wave breaches overhead, and I let it hit me. Its smaller than the last and only manages to carry me a small way under water before I reach the surface again. With sore arms and a wave-bruised body, I haul my board in towards me.

My dad finds me amongst the white water, steadying my board with his hands as I pull my tired body up.

The surfer, still lingering, glares at us both.

'Get her out of the ocean.' With nothing more to say, he goes. Up and over the next wave.

'Come on,' my dad says. Too weak to argue, I take the next wave in. My eyes burn as saltwater mixes with my sea-salt tears. I lie on my board until my fins drag against the sand.

I am washed up and exhausted.

That much overused phrase 'drowning in emotion' comes to mind when I recall this nasty, albeit brief, encounter with drowning. Every part of the Atlantic stung with feeling. The front row seat I occupied offered me the unique insight to feel every fighting force.

Friction between wind and surface water formed waves. Waves fought with currents, and currents with sand, leaving me in the middle, tangled up in the ocean's messy relationships.

There, tugging battled resistance and the rising tide battled crashing wave crests. Each of these opposing forces were desperate for superiority, yet neither received it.

The next day.

We glide around the corner on the coastal road from Braunton to Croyde. I look over the bay and across to the water. The tide, now low, is pulled back tight with the horizon, exposing an expanse of orange carpet.

Gone is the great racing and heaving of an incoming tide. Replacing its pulsating push, is... nothing. It is as though someone has pulled one of those blue swimming pool covers over the sea.

It is still. It is quiet.

My dad looks from road, to steering wheel, to sea.

'It's flatter than a witch's-' he utters.

I cut him off by turning up the radio. Corinne Bailey Rae's cover of Editors 'Munich' plays:

"People are fragile things, you should know by now

Be careful what you put them through."

What I noticed from that day was it is not only people that are these fragile things. Can the ocean be seen as having the same delicate emotions, with the capacity to be a paradox of anger and peace?

That day at the beach, the sea felt so brutal, so out of control. Yet within such a short space of time it became velvety calm. When did this crossover take place?

From a scientific standpoint, there is plenty of information on how wind waves (created by winds of varying strength) travel at different speeds depending on their size. Larger waves

travelling quicker catch up with smaller, slower moving waves, either combining to produce one huge monstrous wave or cancelling each other out.

Wind waves occasionally overlap swell. When this happens certain characteristics of the swell and the waves, combined with the total sea size, have disastrous effects on those attempting to cross it. For example, yachts and even cargo ships.

Yet, when one element loses power and drops away, calm can return to the sea again. One slight change in the equation of destruction can bring tranquillity.

Others prefer to believe there is a higher being in control that can cause this snap from seething to still.

In the famous bible story, Jesus is told to have calmed the stormy Sea of Galilee. Awoken by his disciples from sleep on a boat being battered by the elements, Jesus used his faith to quiet the raging wind and waves. As Son of God and second person in the Holy Trinity, Jesus' unwavering faith and complete control kept himself and his disciples from being lost to the ocean's upset.

Whether you believe in science or religion or both, it seems to me we can agree on how the fragility of human emotion mirrors the ocean's own.

A series of factors, both linked and not, pile up on us.

A nasty comment, an unachievable expectation, the smashing of a favourite mug. We move on, shoving any feelings we may have had in the long, tunnelling cave where the 'Things We Don't Address' reside.

But soon, even the largest of caves get full.

My sea cave swills with repressed emotions from the weeks prior.

'It's Christmas,' I tell myself. 'You can't be sad during Christmas.' Again, during the odd few days between the 25th and the 1st, I continue to shove away pent-up sadness, worry and concern. Certain that the New Year will bring an internal reset.

Instead, 'I'm sorry,' the lady on the phone says, her welsh accent twinged with strained calm. She tells us our beloved family member has passed. I make no move to pack it away into my cave. I simply trudge around in my grief. Angry at those who can laugh, jealous of those still hopeful for the new year.

A few days later.

'Boris Johnson confirms third national lockdown to last until March.' The Telegraph reports and I read, lapping up news of restrictions, fines, and infections. I sit and I feel for a while before I heave open my cave of stored emotion. I try to stuff in 'no hugging your hurting family', 'not seeing your friends for another two months' and 'gym, the only place you've actually been going to, is closed again', in amongst the others.

But once open, a jet of sadness, self-loathing, jealousy, anger, and sickness shoots out like sea water through a blowhole.

Everything I had attempted to hide, comes up and blasts me, cold water to the face. It chokes me, forces its way down my throat. I can't catch my breath. From there, it enters the tiny cracks in my heart, freezing and thawing at top speeds. It weathers me. Old cracks become larger.

I find myself sitting at my dining room table in a state of tears and snot and panic. My forehead presses heavily down against uneven wood. My arms stretch across the width of the table, steadying myself as my body bobs up and down on a current of cries.

At the other side of the table, my mum rubs her thumbs across my bony hands. As I throw up words such as 'Grandad', 'uni', 'anorexia', 'hurting' and 'tired', she listens.

As every emotion I had suppressed crashes out of me, she sits, and she listens.

My breathing starts to return to its natural state. I look at my mum through the watery filter covering my eyes.

'You know what, Els?' she says. 'It is rubbish.'

'But other people-'

My mum cuts me off.

'Other people have their problems and yes, they might be huge. But that doesn't take away from yours. It doesn't make yours any less valid. It doesn't make yours any less worthy of being sorted.'

I sigh and blink. Tears dribble onto the table.

Mum links her fingers around mine.

'This is our third lockdown now. You know what that proves?' I shrug slightly and she continues. 'That we can get through this one. We kept going. Life threw a lot of shit at us and we carried on. We made it.'

The violent storm racking my emotional cave starts to retreat, to blow away on a westerly wind. I feel it take my unwanted storage with it. I wipe at my nose with the back of my hand. We carried on. I'm carrying on. Heavy feelings sweep away. The water weight pushing down on me lightens.

I release my jaw and with it some of my tension.

Mum smiles at me and asks, 'Board game?'

A game of chess and half an hour later.

All remnants of my previous breakdown have left. This emotional emptying out makes space which I stand in and take up. I step freely around my hollow cave, no longer shuffling and tripping over cluttered feelings.

I glance around. My cave spring-cleaned and airy. Only fragments of historic shells lie scattered at its entrance.

In rough seas, wind, swell, waves, and current snag on each other. In desperation to get away, they become more knotted. Together, they create an ugly yet impressive destruction on a surface level.

Similarly, when repressed emotions are given the chance to emerge, they surge. Memories, trauma, perfectionism, sadness and whatever else may have been in the depth's jumble. This matted emotion materialises as a breakdown.

Yet, just like the sea, as one or more storm-causing component loses the power or the hold it had, calm can return.

The first modern humans are estimated to have existed between 200,000 and 300,000 years ago. When, as a species we became that earliest form, did the nature surrounding us pass over what it knew?

What I mean to say is, could we have developed this ability to lose control, let wildness take over and create our own storm in direct response to what the oceans taught us all those years ago?

I like to think so.

Chapter Two- The Trees and Me.

“And into the forest I go to lose my mind and find my soul”

-John Muir

The world's oldest tree is a 9,550-year-old spruce that lives in the Dalarna province of Sweden. It is thin, straight, and strong, and not at all as tall as I expected. Branches start around halfway up. They point out of the trunk at right angles, adorned with hanging needles that stretch towards the ground.

Perched in the Swedish valleys, the spruce is surrounded by mountains, rocky outcrops and shrubs. Not far away are the famous Lake Siljan and Lake Runn as well as the Fulufjället Hamra National Parks. The space and conditions that come with this landscape provided the tree with perfect growing conditions and, in response, it grew, sustaining itself for 9,550 years and counting.

But what happens to trees planted in areas without these ideal growing conditions? Those that find themselves weaving between buildings, their roots pushing through cracks in the pavement, curling around drainage grates?

Alex L. Shigo states ‘starving trees in cities are nothing new’.

After all, how could a tree flourish amongst the concrete confines of conurbations? A place where pollution sits like a weighted blanket, draping itself over the tops of apartment blocks and offices. A place where shadows cast darkness where the sunlight should have reached.

It seems to me that cities are representative of modern-day life. So, when Shigo speaks of trees starving in cities, it could be seen that living under the weight of the present day is causing adverse, deadly effects.

A common cause of tree starvation is stress. Its internal systems are overloaded, working at the extremes for which it was designed. When trees are deprived of the full number of

essential substances they need, drawers of energy storage space are slowly removed. The more stress a tree is under, the less energy it has. Thus, the decline of the tree's wellbeing occurs.

Lifeless branches, devoid of any leaves, point into a dark sky. I reach out and touch the starving tree, stroking the thick trunk of something that was once strong and flourishing. Bark flakes off and becomes bits of brown dandruff sitting in my palm.

I look from my palm to the tree. What happened to you?

On the road close by, cars cough up dirty fumes into a dirty sky, as their hot wheels fly over tarmac.

'I'm sorry you have to live here.' I whisper to the tree, despite myself and despite not being alone.

Branches become angry, accusing fingers, stark and unguarded. They point at the sky, at the ground, at the road and at me in angry right angles.

'You. You did this,' They seem to say.

'I'm sorry,' I whisper, crumbling the bark in my hand and scattering it at the foot of the tree.

'I'm sorry.'

Both my whispers and the breadcrumbs of bark get carried away in the polluted breeze.

If cities are synonymous with modern day life and trees starve, riddled with stress, in cities, what happens when we broaden this concept out to people? Does the stress of living in the modern world leave humans emotionally and physically starved?

In a similar way to how trees are always seeking the best growing conditions to produce the most fruit or foliage, people are constantly searching to become the best version of themselves, or just to be better than others.

It's competitive.

Perfectionism manifests itself in many ways. Spiralling around the virtual void are pictures of fresh, smooth skin and bright, wide eyes overlaying thin faces. Past experiences made permanent by smile lines, deep furrows and growing-up scars are removed.

In almost every instance, we handpick moments to act as our showreel. Times presenting us exactly how we want to be seen are typed up on the 'This Really Is Me' portfolio, ready to be handed out to friends, family, and strangers on the internet. Listed under experiences, we write freely of the number of gym classes we attended in the last week, how well keto is going, what asana we can now hold at yoga. With every new item we list, we can hear our worth tick, tick, ticking up.

The modern world. A shoved-together series of best bits showing utter perfection to be attainable.

What happens in the in-between? The pockets of time stretching between our successes?

I bring up a picture of myself taken earlier in the day. I zoom in and out, in and out.

Why are my eyes always different sizes? Does my side fringe look greasy? How can my hands do something weird like that in every picture?

I click off it. Ultimately, it's the best picture I've gotten of myself in a while, so it'll do. I swipe twice and bring it up on my Instagram story. There I am, stuck still.

Next in line to join the millions of selfies that will be preserved in the virtual realm today.

Is this the artifact I want to leave?

I add the filter 'Amanda's Glow'. My lips inflate ever so slightly. My skin is no longer a strange mix of pink and pasty.

Much better.

I hit share and place my phone face up on the armrest of the sofa I am sat on. Between pretending to watch the 10 o'clock news, I spin it over and over in my hand. I periodically glance at it. My thumb finds the home button and it unlocks. Swipe, swipe, click. I'll just check if anyone's seen the photo yet.

Four people already.

Soon, emoji support comes in from friends. A heart eyes, a few flames, an 100%. The sweet hit of validation has me feeling light.

Half an hour later and I am in bed. Clicking and unclicking the picture of myself. Checking the views, checking myself. Distortion sets in. I stop seeing the distinction between my chin and my neck. My frizzy hair fades into the similarly coloured curtain behind it. I'll delete it in the morning.

As a distraction, I partake in my evening ritual. I head over to the tags section of Instagram and scroll through my history.

#fitspo -72.4m posts.

#thin -2.9m posts.

#diettips -652k posts.

#weightlosstips -1.7m posts.

What to bully myself with today? I tap #fitspo and scroll through picture after picture of tensing bodies, twisted mirror selfies and Transformation Tuesdays. I understand what they want me to; smiles are won through gym sessions, healthy eating, and weight loss.

I blink slowly, exhausted by my nightly revelation.

I click for the last time on the picture of myself, smiling my cheeky, happy grin.

Delete.

I put down my phone and roll over, face down on a pillow wet with the tears of my unworthiness.

I put forward an image of myself others would view and approve of. I smiled, modelled my fairly new haircut. Held the phone at such an angle that the house plant that so completely complimented my new, green jumper could be seen. A persona of warmth and happiness.

But what was the reality at the time of posting? Insecurity? Compulsive checking? An addiction to being authenticated by others? Most likely, it was a combination of all of the above.

The image I pushed was a desperate attempt to keep up with the standards of the modern world. It was then deleted when I realised I was unable to.

A large and ugly part of the modern world is this idea of having to constantly prove who you are, what you are doing and the effort you are going to in order to better yourself. For me, posting pictures of my face, books, walks, and time-lapses of yoga flows proves the work I am putting in to become my very best version.

The pressure to grind in both work and home life has created a competition and comparison culture where we believe nothing is ever good enough, until we are the best at it.

At first, we start it just for fun. We ride the upward trajectory of initial, fast improvement which draws us in. As we go on, we start to level out. The more stress we put on ourselves to achieve our goal, the harder it gets until we are just crawling towards being the best. It starts to feel like running on a treadmill in Wolverhampton and hoping to get to the Isle of Skye.

This desperation to win not only rips the joy from things we used to love but causes stress to suffocate the body. Consistently keeping up with modern life depletes our energy. The colour drains away from our faces. We go through the motions with our work and hobbies without rediscovering the light that once drew us to it.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama states in Ancient Wisdom, Modern World, 'In the same way that physical disease reflects its environment, so it is with psychological and emotional suffering.' Trees starve in cities. Humans starve in the modern world. Both crave the freedom to breathe freely, without the stress of these environments.

What would help us both to flourish again?

Could it be a return to the world that existed before humans replaced green with grey, and bright with brown? Rather than working our forms to the extremes, what if we abandoned the standards of the world we find ourselves in?

We could talk ourselves down from the ledge of burnout and find other conditions, other standards that enable us to grow.

To survive, trees need water, food, and light, as do humans. But to thrive, trees need extras. Space, nutrients, and the shedding of deadwood all adds to the creation of a thriving tree. To flourish, they need the right conditions.

As humans, we also need the right conditions to flourish. By stopping ourselves from grappling to reach unattainable standards, we would instead have time to turn inwards. What would we find there, written between the layers of our soul?

Our bodies are set to know the optimum circumstances we need. It is the social space that tells us otherwise. 'In urban industrial societies, illness manifests itself in ways that are consistent with the environment,' the Dalai Lama states in *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World*. 'Instead of water-borne diseases, we find stress-related illness.' By taking ourselves away from the environment our true selves know is damaging, we will see this spike in well-being and happiness.

The solution seems an easy one, albeit rather idealistic. It is naive to suggest that we can all up and leave our modern lives for a beautiful, but hermit-esque, hole somewhere in the Canadian Rockies. But turning our backs on societal pressure is something we can all do, just for five minutes a day, or through a conscious choice.

Of course, yoga and meditation are the obvious, proven ways to turn inwards and heal our emotional ailments. Other ways are more obscure. We could attempt to leave one little task out of our day and watch as nothing spirals out of control as we were told it would. We could limit self-sabotage, swapping out hours of scrolling down #fitspo, for #dogmemes say. Some conscious choices do not have to be spiritually profound.

It is in this turning inwards and slow rejection of a world that depletes us that we will find our perfect growing conditions.

Just like the 9,550-year-old spruce living in the Dalarna province of Sweden, we will not starve ourselves under the pressure of modern-day life. Instead, we will thrive, and we will flourish. Then we will pass down that wisdom to those who come next.

Chapter Three- The Gift of Presence

“And from the midst of cheerless gloom I passed to a bright unclouded day.”

-Emily Bronte

I slip between hot night and quiet. Jet lag keeps my mind and body awake. White, artificial light pours from market stalls where vendors sit silently, resting their feet on their countertops.

I edge closer to the base of Adam's peak, glancing at the trail of lights twisting their way up the mountain. A pathway to the sky.

Soon the gentle slope gives way to steep steps. I pass between locals making the trip as a pilgrimage. They hold their elders so tightly on either arm, guiding them up the steps. Their children, and their children's children, some not yet six years old, traipse in flip flops, unphased by their steep ascent.

The path and steps tighten, making way for stalls and shrines to line both edges. Woolly hats dangle like decorations in between cans of sugary drinks and above trays of traditional sweets. Rich, cinnamon incense comes from almost every stall, trickling over onto the path.

My legs ache with the joy of being alive, the joy of being physically and mentally able to climb the stairs up to the heavens. Around me, it feels as though others are having this internal epiphany. There's a quiet buzzing, a low hum of happiness.

Though the path is lit with a string of lights from top to bottom, I cannot see our surroundings other than the next five or so stairs ahead of me. It keeps me present and pressing on, determined to reach the top for dawn.

The last few stairs are the hardest of them all. I can see them unfolding onto the most beautiful, tiny temple glowing orange at the peak of the mountain. The temple is home to the shrine for the Sacred Footprint.

Resembling a footprint trodden into the summit of the mountain, this depression has been symbolised across different religions to be the footprint of Shiva, of Adam, of St Thomas. It is the reason so many pilgrims choose to make this difficult journey.

At the gate to the temple, I slip off my shoes. My hot feet breathe, pressing down into tingling cool slabs of ground. I join the queue, entering the shrine to pay my respects.

Out of the shrine and onto the dark courtyard, I am directed to indulge in the pilgrimage practice of ringing the temple bell. I hold the thick rope in my right hand and hit the bell just once. Its loud dong signifies this is my first ascent. I smile, turning to go back to the entrance and retrieve my shoes. Behind me, the bell rings out six times.

Dawn is no longer far off, so I find myself a seat. The loveliness of this spot keeps a smile sticking to my face. With each new person that reaches the summit, I soak in their reactions. Faces contort into a mix of awe, tiredness, excitement, and relief. Eyes widen, to grasp the full beauty of the little temple.

On the horizon, the first light peeps through. Way below the moon and far out in the distance, a tiny spread of pale orange appears. Dawn has begun.

It is as though someone is sliding a scale on the saturation of the sky. As the sun rises, the orange intensifies. Above, wispy pink clouds reach out to one another. More light starts to fill in the chunks of darkness.

I look out to my left and see the most beautiful lake nestled between the valleys. It stretches wide, moulding itself to fit the curvature of the land it surrounds. It seems to breath, releasing refreshing sighs as it welcomes in the new day. To my right, I see the same.

I am perched on a peak between two ocean-sized lakes.

Rising up inch by inch, the sun tows the day into place. Landscapes that before were great voids of night switch on like the electric lights on the vendor's stalls. Other peaks surround us, stretching up into fresh air.

I look down, over the edge of Adam's Peak and it becomes clear.

What I thought were lakes were in fact great wedges of stratus clouds. Below which, I assume, lie tiny villages, tuk tuks, tea plantations and waterfalls. A wedge of a world just waking up, eyes open, but body nestled under a duvet of cloud.

How separate I am from all that. This cloud line rules the living world from the heavens. It rules an earlier version of myself from who I am now.

This beautiful barrier of soft whiteness lingers, revealing only what is directly around me. It insulates me, holds me in this one community. A community of pilgrims perched above the clouds, watching the world from an outsider's perspective.

The stratus clouds I saw up Adam's Peak are often found lying low beside mountains. They form when large, warm parcels of air drift into a cooler region. For example, floating higher up, or into the shadow of, a mountain.

The warm parcels of air cool all at the same time, creating a layer of stratus clouds. This layer can go on to resemble the soft peaks of whipped cream in texture, seamlessly becoming stratocumulus clouds. One continuous sheet of perfect unevenness, like the clouds I mistook for lakes.

You might wonder, why this moment? Why the fascination with these clouds?

It was only after a period of serious reflection I understood why I kept coming back to this image.

I returned home from Sri Lanka soaked in happiness and a healthy glow, after a holiday of playfulness, discovery, and adventure. As I flicked through photo after photo on my phone, I relived it all, grateful to have experienced the 'Pearl of the Indian Ocean'.

But an English January is an English January. It's bland. It's wet. It's stubborn. It was such a dire contrast to the two weeks of overwhelming colour and culture I had over Christmas (of course, what an amazing position of privilege it is to be able to make this comparison).

Cold fingertips reached out to grab me. The more I resisted, the more university deadlines, work and reality pushed me towards them.

I shifted into a cooler region. Geographically, from Sri Lanka to England, but also mentally. I gave back into overworking, undereating and excessively stressing.

Everything around me cooled at once. As a result, a layer of cloud formed, sitting right between my eyes and my brain.

Here. I'm here. I'm in this classroom, in this chair, in this body. This back, my back, is pushing into the curved plastic dip of the green, spinning egg-cup chair. The tips of my muddy Doc Martens are brushing the grey carpet.

Pay attention to what's being said. You are here.

I listen to my lecturer's voice radiating across the classroom. 'Orwell', 'Personal essays', 'graded', 'published', 'meaning'. It hangs across the room like bunting.

Questions are projected onto the wall. We are asked to discuss. I tiptoe my chair around, creating a circle with my assigned group. I read the questions, then re-read them. Each individual word jars me, opening up a wormhole of further questions.

I sigh.

I understand the individual words. I understand them as whole sentences, as questions even. But I can't get them to spark anything for me. They can't seem to penetrate the thick cloud that separates the environment and my outer existence, from the inner me.

I'm trapped behind my own eyes.

Others in my group drift into conversation about Wetherspoons, gigs, nights in.

'What about you, Ellie?'

They're talking to me. We're friends. Why wouldn't they be? The outer me can respond with something meaningless, devoid of any personality. The inner me doesn't have the strength to break through with emotion. Time pulls away from the question, surpassing the allotted measure for a response.

You're here, Ellie. You're here and you're being rude.

'Nothing much. Just chilled really,' outer me says.

Inner me watches the words float around the surroundings I don't feel a part of. Spoken aloud, they become alien, taken from someone else's mouth, said in someone else's accent in a world I am not a part of. One the clouds keep me at a distance from. Behind which, the inner me, the real me, is trapped.

Trapped as towns are from the sky on overcast days.

I remained in this state for a few months. Detached, dull and slow. It wasn't until the following summer that I stumbled across an awareness post about derealization.

The post outlined a mental state where you feel separate from your surroundings, stuck behind something that keeps you at a distance. You know this state isn't normal, but you don't know how to open the door and leave.

Noises become too loud. Conversations become too hard. Time moves differently. You slip away, hiding behind a barrier only you can see.

There are a few different things that can bring on a bout of derealization, however one of the main causes is anxiety and stress.

In my case, the tumble back to normality, pressure and expectations had triggered my anxiety and caused my brain to scream 'retreat, retreat, retreat'. And there it hid behind a layer of cloud for around two months.

The dawn rose and the sun, hot and steady, douses the world in careful light. I stand from my step, leaning over the cool handrails.

Rather than look to the sky, I turn my attention downwards to where I had seen the great lakes of cloud. Where there had been white, there was now deep green. Mountainsides draped in shrubs and trees roll outwards. Between them, the roofs of guest and plantation houses poke through. I make out flat areas of farmyard, the bulky shapes of cattle grazing.

The sun had risen, warmed the earth and taken the barrier of cloud with it.

In its place is clarity.

When I returned home and found my existence had become a tale of two halves, I had accepted it. Although I knew it wasn't right how I was feeling, it wasn't going to go away.

That was it. I was stuck.

Of course, I was wrong. As humans, I would argue our first inheritance was the processes of the world we are in. Should I have believed in this concept earlier, I would've realised that my emotion was not born solely by myself, but from a stretched-out practice of mirroring the good or bad action nature had already shown me.

In Sri Lanka, the sun rose and dispersed the barrier of cloud. Back in the U.K., the sun rose for me in more abstract ways.

It rose from coffee dates, cycling and teasing. It rose from long-distance calls, dancing, and yoga. It rose from the desire to laugh again and mean it. It rose, most of all, from the love of friends and family who I knew would never give up on me.

It would not be the truth, if I did not mention that it also rose from my new anxiety medication that gave me the strength to breathe out.

As snippets of joy started to filter through sun-caused cracks in my mind's cloudy barrier, I had this strange, all-consuming feeling of coming back to myself. Gradually, I could stop telling myself over and over that I *was* somewhere and instead just *know*.

Occasionally, I'm afraid I'll slip back into derealisation, slip away into myself and watch the world carry on without me. But recently, I've been finding comfort in the idea that everything I've felt and continue to feel is a mirror of what the natural world has already discovered.

Where clouds warp, emotions change. Where they release rain, our tears fall. Where they crash and bang, we clash and swear.

And both, in different ways, disperse and evolve in an endless transition of states.

Chapter Four – On Staying Wild

[NOTE TO READER: This is an extract from a chapter that will be longer in the book's full manuscript. This extract is intended to provide a taste of how the next chapter will look.]

“Beautiful as a dandelion-blossom, golden in the green grass, this life can be... Noble because common, because free.”

-Edna St. Vincent Millay

A dust-dirt path cuts through the centre of a churned field.

‘Follow me,’ says the footpath sign, by pointing its arrow up and over the stile into the expanse of brown in front of me.

‘I will’, I think. My trainers leave the tarmac and find wood, before crunching down onto lumps of turned up soil. I plough on. Feet flying over uneven surface, more out of desperation to remain upwards than to push my running abilities.

Ahead, lies a chunk of glorious whiteness in a field of colours muted by the overcast sky.

Dandelions. They stand together in a patch, confidently. Their heads bobbing slightly in the cross wind.

I make to go past, to carry on with my run but something holds me still. I crouch down beside the dandelions, inspecting the thick green stalk that fades into the flower head. Hundreds of individual seeds cling on to the head, forming a soft white orb around the centre of their universe.

Examining the dandelions throws me back to childhood. I remember sitting underneath the trees, on grass damp from dew not yet dispersed by the July sunshine. A friend and I would lift dandelions to our mouths and blow on them, breath after breath, to tell the time.

Huff. Six o'clock. Huff. Seven o'clock. Huff. Eight o'clock.

We'd go on until all the seeds had dispersed and left the flower head bare. The number we got to told us the hour of the day. Each time we used the dandelion clock we were amazed at its power to predict.

I smile, lingering in this moment of nostalgia. Would it be strange to pick a dandelion now and tell the time this way again? I press pause on my phone, stopping my running playlist. I take the headphones out my ears.

I tell myself the path is busy, and I would be judged by the other ramblers, should they come along. The truth is I caught a glimpse of the time on my phone as I stopped my music. It would be disingenuous to use the dandelion clock now. It would not be the childhood experience it once was.

Instead, I glance around and stand. I push my foot, clad in chunky trainers, against the edge of one of the dandelions ever-so-gently. The light disturbance causes a couple of seeds to break free from the flower head. Helicopters take flight.

I reach my foot out again, with a bit more umph. I push two or three dandelions. Seeds rise into the air satisfyingly.

I brush my foot through the patch. Seeds come loose, shaking themselves away from what they have been clinging to. They let go. Hundreds and hundreds of seeds rise around me, catching in the wind. Spinning and free.

I watch them disperse. Some land nearby, others make it further across the mud. I am taken by the lack of routine. The seeds are free. They travel where they want. They land where they please. And one day, if the sun hits the soil well where they have landed, they will go on to grow and thrive wherever they can.

The seeds held on by what I now know to be called the pappus. The pappus gripped onto the flower head like the planets do with the sun, tightly and with a great need. However, when disturbed a little, whether by strong winds, a child's breath, or someone's foot, the pappus realise they can let go of what they have been holding onto to. They are free to fly away, to settle somewhere new, to become their own plant with established roots. By letting go, they give themselves the chance to blossom as a bright yellow flower.

For dandelions, something beautiful comes from this release.

I believe this is true for humans as well.

We cling onto our need for control, wrapping our arms and legs around it. We allow it to dictate the how, the why and the who of our existence. Many of us overthink and plan, come up with potential outcomes of every scenario we may find ourselves in.

What if we simply let go? Would we have more time to become a different kind of beautiful?

A version of ourselves released from the burden of quality controlling our lives could be remarkable.