

**How many times do you have to see something before you don't see it anymore? The world seeps in through repeated exposure. So many times I've blinked on this beach, a snapshot taken every time in my mind. The album in my head, too full. This is something i know too well. We have no need to describe it, it has become a part of us.**

Aw the hings ye mind... Ma whole life is pressed in the pages of this place like a wean's petals. Sometimes I cannae quite believe thit I'm as auld as they say I um, they ask me aw about how it feels tae huv lived through the industrial revolution and aw thae inventions and chainge and ah say, 'well ye dinnae think these things are going to last and then they do'. Then there's things you think will last and they dinnae, like the Marine Gardens oan yir left on the wey oot tae Seafield. I met my husband there at the water mill, ah kin picture us watchin' thae giant balloons in the park, the model railway, and dancin in the ballroom. It didnae survive the first world war, neither did the grand pier doon past Bath Street. I love porty and I'll never leave, they'll have to cairry me oot ay here in a box. 'Granny Isa, they say, bit ye dinnae live here any mair, it's 1947!' And oh ay, I mind that's right. they tell me that mind, ma husband's deid and ah say 'oh aye, aye that's right, a long time ago noo'. Ah wis only twenty and he wis forty years older, but he was a good man. He looked efter me and the bairns. Ah mind takin' ma Edith tae see Queen Victoria at the palace. She wis only about two, says noo aw she kin mind is folks feet! It's uncanny, There she is noo, a granny hersel', sittin' doon on the deckchairs wi wee Edie, who's feedin her own wean.. ah cannae.. ah cannae mind her name... Irene ye say? Irene, that's right. Aw there's nothing like the feelin' of feedin' yer own wee wean, a courrie in, gei'n it yer life.

**Today you're here and we're in the present. Bottom of King's Road, portobello prom. A pure clear blue sky above us, centre of a colour range of infinite blue. Default sky. Default sea in front of us, an official two shades deeper than above. No wave. The tide is at it's highest, a weight of stationary water, caught and confused by direction. To keep going forward or turn around? Water so close to spilling over, held by water tension, like an accidentally too full glass.**

**This beach, a ribbon that can be slack or tight, constantly widening and narrowing. A promenade performance beginning every minute with a primary cast of tide, time and weather. Light through cloud onto islands and shore, fingers to Fife, hand spans to East Lothian. Lean on the railings and watch some serious playtime between yellow and blue. The queen and king of warm and cool, testing their abilities to complement each other on an hourly basis.**

**Sometimes the present catches us and keeps us still. Today this beach is an expanse made cosy by the height of tide. The sand moulds to you like your mother's lap. a place for voices and stories.**

**Describing this beach is like describing a woman. She's a person that can change daily with the weather. I can tell you her colouring, but I'll be denying you the chance to see it change. I could tell you the height she grew to, but then you'd miss her childish proportions, when the waves that lap ankles could kick her off her little legs.**

I am suspended in time, five years old in a faded family photo on this beach. A line of birth to birth, four generations of women ending in the youngest. I, Irene my mother named me, after the first woman to lead the Byzantine empire. A name fit for a warrior, which I would become, when my childhood disappeared too soon. This beach, on this beach...

We all took our holidays at the same time, packed on the train to Edinburgh to and then the bus out to the seaside to where **Granny Isa used to stay on Promenade terrace.**

I waited all day for a shot on the deckchairs. It was sixpence a hire and granny and granddad had them all day until they went home, then mum and dad got them and if I was lucky I'd get five minutes! My own shore was right over there over the water to Fife, we lived by the sea, but not allowed to go off and play on my own. For now, the sea was a far away place of wonder, as my own little legs wandered no further than the square of grass outside my parents front window. I was warned about bad men all the same. My aunties would back up the words my parents had drilled into me, and though I never asked I wondered who the bad man were. I have a blurred memory of my auntie Agnes, in tears in our kitchen, I realize now, probably drunk on a few too many afternoon sherries, telling my mum how Uncle Dod was a bad man, she knew from the first time she met him but she couldn't help herself and that's why she married him.

It's safe to say that made as little sense to me as why if as they told us at church on Sunday, that God loved us and could do anything, why one day was I going to die?

'Because everyone has to go back to god's love, darling. It's a nice place, you go to heaven where you will live forever and I will be waiting for you when you get there.'

'Because you're going to die soon, Granny?'

'Well... not *soon*, but long before you, my darling. You've got a long life to live before you die'

'How long?'

'A long time... imagine Granny being a little girl, before I was a granny, I was a mummy, before I was a mummy I was a beautiful young woman, before that...'

'Can I go swimming Granny?'

The sea was full of bodies, some children in swimsuits like mine, some in their pants and some with nothing on at all, little white bodies bobbing on the waves with little paper boats and tiny fishing nets. She held my hand and we weaved through the throng of family picnics, passing donkey rides and prams with babies sleeping in the sun. Mum is at the shore line now with great granny Isa, holding my little brother's hand as he squealed with delight at the cold surf lapping his chubby toes.

Uncle Dod must have taken a photograph of us there, four generations of women descended from each other but named after our men, the last picture of us all together, squinting into the sunlight.

**Now back to the hard smooth prom you feel the difference through your feet first. This is the netherworld between barefoot and not barefoot, naked and not naked. Child to adult. Today the thruppance shops, cinemas and deckchairs are away and Party's all grown up now.**

**So now we're leaning, looking, on lines of painted iron railings, a line of pea green metal sentinels standing arms out, linked together. And we're sitting, wondering on rows of pale green benches. How many seasons does salt air take to change seaside to shabby? When is it decided that the last coat of paint should be applied?**

**Turn right, cross regular punctuations of street ends, dodging cyclists and school kids, passing houses. The homes that hug the prom once had views that rattled in the wind. A conservation area now, they have a carefully chosen affluent palette of muted front doors. When does this process of conservation start, when is it noticed**

**there is something to conserve?**

**Families fill the comb's teeth of the prom; wooden groynes stretching out into the tides, holding the beach tightly into regular plots. Like the different photographs in a strip of negatives. So keep moving on this strip, this timeline. Downdrift.**

'Irene! Goan jist stey around here and ah'll be back in eh... a while, eh?'

Cousin Kenny wasn't the most attentive chaperone, to my great advantage. Courting two separate young ladies who were staying for Glasgow fair, it's fair to say he had his hands somewhat, 'full'. At first, Gordon just watched me. I first noticed him when I was swimming at the open air pool, the pool was hot in those days, it was amazing. They say the heat came from the power station up the road, and waves too, astonishing hot waves! Certainly beats the memories of my younger days, running out of the freezing sea into my mother's arms and a big towel for a brisk rubbing all over and finally a sweet 'chittery bite' to boost the belly and the spirits. I spent most of my days in the open air pool, practicing my diving, one day I was going to be in the Olympics and maybe even a movie star, just like Esther Williams. I was in the queue waiting for the top board, when I saw him sitting in the viewing area, watching me intently. I stared back, daring him to look away, but he kept up his inscrutable gaze. Climbing up onto the board, I drew my attention back to my dive, concentrating on pulling a somersault and limbs TIGHT to enter the water clean as can be, no splash, tight, straight, poised. I couldn't resist casting a glance over at him again, still staring he smiled out of the corner of his mouth, and my heart raced, a flush rushing up my head and straight down into my nether regions. A dizziness started to come over me and I fought hard to breathe and regain my focus, I am NOT going to lose the dive. Focus focus on the end of the board, on my toes on my poise, breathe in, fold down tight coil muscles spring tense swing arms with breath released and FLY....

Anger, intensity, desire, aggression... tight and fast as a swallow I pulled off a magnificent piked somersault, unzipping to an arrow I razored into the water. Under the water I spent what felt like years making my way to the surface, such a contrast to the noise above, the sweltering colour and pressure pushed in on me with a sensation that is at once calming and suffocating. Freedom and danger pulsed through my veins as I powered as a mermaid to the surface. Wiping the water from my eyes I looked to the terrace, but he was gone. Waiting for me as it turns out, smoking a cigarette on the prom wall, he flips open his tin and offers one to me as I walk down the steps from the pool.

I can't say what possessed me to take one... yes, I do. A dare, fear rising, I don't let anything beat me, come ahead, show me everything you've got.

Show me everything, I wanted the world in my hand. A curious hunger, a charge of my own destiny, I was going to have it and take it and figure everything out on my own. No chaperones, no husbands, no babies for me. I was going to be Lawrence of Arabia, Amelia Earhardt, Queen Cleopatra. I loved him because he made me feel powerful, older than my fifteen years. He was, it turns out, twice my age and I always loved a challenge, to challenge myself... not to feel small.

Later, I made myself so small I almost disappeared. Almost, but not quite. I'm still here, if you listen for me hard enough. If I listen quiet enough. There's still a whisper of a heartbeat, a warrior queen.

**The shouts and calls of our children dart across the parallel ribbons of beach and prom, tangling themselves up in the summer. We have become a camera, our eyes flooded with the gloriousness of this wide horizon. Blink.**

**Our shutter clicks, and splashes saturated hues across hearts and memories.**

**We are here now and we are in love. No deserted beach this, it's everyone's golden back green. This prom a meeting place. Together we're topping towering**

**sandcastles of invincibility with shells and feathers! Digging and damning, holding back the tide! Blinking ourselves into every snapshot. This is our time.**

**and later, no horizon, just us and this night and the forth coast where other people are and we are not. The necklace of lights that drape along this promenade cast soft yellow across our faces. So beautiful. This beautiful bay where the Figgate runs out. We could stand here forever, skin warm and salty, post coital from all our days of sunshine.**

I don't quite know how I managed to bring myself here again; it's now 1985, so many years since I was lost. My mum insisted she wanted a visit to her beach and I've not the strength to resist her. Away looking for a sweetshop, she's left us in front of the demolition site that was the funfair. As I look around that summer feels so vivid it's impossible to accept how much things have changed. No more *Canoeing at the end of bath st*, borthwicks sweetie shop and winkles and the fish on the shore for tea – it's desolate. A negative layered over a picture, the summer of 1967 is the real image full of people and ice cream stalls and laughter spilling from the rollercoaster in front of us. This promenade is the unreal one, a ghosting of blues and greens, closed shop fronts, police vans stationed outside the public toilets and leaves tumbling down the prom on an autumn wind. They say Portobello has died. They say that its time is over.

Elizabeth runs down the cobbled slipway and towards the surf.

'Wait! Wait for mummy!'

The little red anorak stops, turns around and waves at me, gloves swinging on strings from the sleeves.

'Put your hat on at least, please. It's colder than you think here'

She loves the sea, it's like a magnet for her. Ever since she was a toddler she would just head straight into the waves, fully dressed and everything. She's found an empty bottle.

'Can we send a message to someone from the pirates?'

'Of course, who do you want to send it to?'

'I'm going to send it to mummy, not big mummy, little girl mummy. She's somewhere on this beach, in the black and white beach with Granny, Agnes and uncle David'

Lizzie loves stories about the past. As I ruffle in my bag for my notebook and a pen, I come across every piece of detritus that I'll never need, everything except the bloody pen. When I finally find it I look up and the small red anorak has gone from my side. I try to rise above the panic that shears through my body, I swivel around and around looking again and again up the beach, but there is no small red thing to be seen, only lone walkers and a few dogs. Where, Where, WHERE!

'LIZZIEEEEE!!!' A strangled voice that is not mine comes from my throat, as I run first in a circle and then down and into the sea, searching frantically, looking down into the waves, dreading seeing that little red coat. Seaweed, stones, whitewash, froth, nothing.

'Lizzieeeeeeeeeeee!!!' I howl, an animal, tortured, bereft, screaming towards the silent prom.

'She's here!' My mum shouts as she wobbles down the lane beside the playpark.

Oh dear god. Sobs rack my body as I run up the beach leaving my bag to drown in the sea.

'I saw Granny!' Lizzie shouts to me, proudly.

'NEVER, EVER, EVER LEAVE MUMMY'S SIDE AGAIN!' 'NEVER LIZZIE! NEVER DO THAT TO MUMMY AGAIN' I hoist her up into my arms and hold her as the grief washes, pulsing around my body. Lizzie, alive, and perfect, bursts into hysterical tears, fear, confusion, fear again, anger.

'Jesus, Irene, she's alright, she just ran to cuddle her granny'

I can't explain the pit of my grief, my fear of loss, the recollection of it. Mum puts her palm on my back, shaking with the illness that was soon to take her, her hand so small and fragile as if she could save us from whatever it was that I could not say.

'Irene, she's ok. Come on Lizzie, love, mummy just got a fright, she thought she'd lost you and that made her frightened. She's not angry, she's just sad. We don't like to lose things we love and we all want to keep them safe. Noo, it's winter, pit yer hat oan, it's cauld!'

Oh how I want her to be fearless as I was, I want her to be strong and curious, but now the sharp edge of that cuts through my heart in a way I never realized possible.

How easy it is to let go of her hand without realizing. How easy to fall from this world into the next, it's so close, like simply stepping through a door and then we're in the negative instead of the photo.

As I feared I might, I meet him again.

**It can be hard to believe that it's not always summer.**

**Not today.**

**Surprised by the ferocity of sudden space, the beach is an unexpectedly burgled room. Shock. Low tide, the telescope turned round. A desert to cross before any water. A hard horizon running away as if chased. We become so small.**

**And then the afternoon when we couldn't believe that this Promenade could ever be loved, when the rage came from all angles. When the sea took to the sky and filled it with noise and splashes of grey, steel blades and trash crashing into froth? A dirty beach.**

**Oh and remember that morning when there was no horizon, fog over the high tide line, waves appearing from the mist? No escape to be found. A deadening of sound, a muting of colour. Lost.**

**And then where was the water?**

**The dark slab and gun metal of it. Over there, over the low wall, across the sand.**

Twenty years is not long enough to suffocate the unanswered.

**And then nothing. Buried.**

It grows still in my belly.

**It's a heavy presence, liquid coal,**

He lunges, yet I am fast.

**This is not the neon milk of waves frilled in like the doilies under granny's ornaments.**

A flurry, a cinefilm of movement and colour forces its way out of my subconscious,

his hands, he smudges me out,

**The waves slid out like the sheets on her bed.**

all colours swell and drain to negative and I am under, a calm, the pressure of the present swells above.

**Water pulled back and back and back with the light until they reflected no light, reinforcing the night.**

I fight my way to the surface, he watches poolside.

**I cannot see the water, Revealed only by sound as it hits and pulls,**

Fast forward, I fight, rewind, I dive, I unfold like a knife I cut through the water, the swiss army blade is in my pocket, I unfold it... I turn, I cut, I am an arrow, he is small now. I have lost the surface,

**thrown again against the beach over and over. The consistent contestant to the constant rhythm of the heart.**

**Listen, you can hear it. You can call it romance or you can call it fear.**

I rewind...

***Fast forward.* Today we find some ghosts disappearing. These once dilapidated sites, dismantled shows and open air pool, are starting to shed their histories. A lone amusement arcade stands proud, singing of summer's past, singular in it's significance. Now new ice cream shops and cafes, of the fancy type and not, offer us their time.**

**School bell. Children are fleeing away, along the wooden groynes that reach out into the sea like evenly spaced fingers of the land. Low slanted sunlight draws shadows on the fissures, healing old wounds. There's a continuing beauty born in resilience, like the teenage glittery wiggle in the eye of the old lady.**

**This place possesses a grubby magic, worth preserving. Potency that rubs off on the feet of anyone who's ever raced across the red tarmac of this wide mile long prom and jumped into the sand. Somewhere in the cycle of fading and flourish Portobello feels like it's burgeoning again.**

**There are new homes promised, new lovers, families, children here who know nothing of the past. Who didn't sneak into the shows, sail on the skylark, dive off the top board. They didn't walk past the police van parked at the public toilets for years. But they are the fresh coat of paint on these railings.**

'Mum, it's your 70th and it would mean a lot to me if you would come and see where I live.' Bath Street. It's almost like it never happened. The place is buzzing again, Lizzie's people, friends and

neighbours pour out of the Espy bar holding plastic pint glasses frosted with high summer. The sausages sizzle on the tiny barbeque and music spills not from a radio, but from her mobile phone on the picnic blanket. I keep my eye down at Lizzie, paddling with her own wee daughter. After all the after, some other wee girl and what was done to me, I have my peace. Another shore another sea, I made my life and I never told. And never will he tell. No matter. Those ghosts have no mouths. This is another place now. Restrung, a new weave, hers, theirs. The lovers, the families, the walkers drifting through the photograph. My own granny flickers in my memory, for the moment she lives in me, I am become her. It is my turn for the deckchair now. No waiting till the end of the day, it comes too soon. My little wisp now grown, so tall, like a pine, grafted from this family's women. On and on and on and on it goes, to her beautiful little wonder, splashing in the sea. The wind blows and we all unfurl where we began. Too hard to walk to the shore, I don't fight it now, Let wash over me the senses, the warmth, the voices. Down at the sea, small feet conquer and the water slips through her tiny fingers, my minds eye, my wee one, my ain wee hands...

**All I can see is peoples' feet, Mummy. Splash, splash, stamp! Splash, splash, stamp!**

**Whisked from the water, rubbed warm, and carried up the beach like a precious parcel.**

**Blink, blink, blink.**

**Blink, orange. Blink, blue...yes! Blink! Yes! Blink!**

**The inside of my head is as bright as an orange. I am excited by the fastness of my eyelids, how well they transform the beach's glare into this sweet spot. Blink. The orange dims to black and I peek out to see why. My mother's sandy knee at eyeline between me and the sun as she stands waving to my grandma in the deckchair. I'm lost momentarily in the imperfections of her leg before moving my head out of her shadow. The beach is windy, the sea is far away now. Blink. Eyes closed again, back to my orange.**

**Listen. Ears open, bobbing along as an orange buoyed on the sound of the water.**

**Blink. How deep can I push my toe into this sand before the next roll? Blink. How exciting the difference between hot and dry and hard and wet. The laughter of the seagulls all the while, appreciating the genius of my games.**

**Caw Caw! Caw Caw!**

**Blink, blue, Blink orange, Blink blue , Blink orange, yes yes!**

**Mum, yes! Blink! Yes! Mum Yes! Mummy!**

And today it's always summer and our soundtrack is Porty's accordion player, the timeless chimes floating through the laughter of the gulls. The music flies over our shoulders, across the swing park and over the busy bucket and spade beach. Portobello always looks like herself but she's never the same.

This is for you, barbequers, paddlers, rowers and runners, We salute you the stick throwers, the castle builders, kite flyers and chip eaters, for you are tomorrow's nostalgia. Paint your railings now, and just you keep on painting them!