

Withow Gap

'She is water, powerful enough to drown you, soft enough to cleanse you and deep enough to save you'.

I found a diary I had written probably about 20 years ago. I had taken a walk down to the sea front along the eroding East Coast cliffs from Skipsea to Withow Gap and beyond. There you can clamber down the slope to access the sands over the peat bed remains of a glacial mere. The cliffs change day by day as the rain and sea batter the alluvial deposits. There you will find remnants of concrete from caravan hard standing blocks, army pillbox prefabs and even roads. That particular walk is etched upon my mind. Its engrained and embedded into my sub-conscious like the fossils frozen in time.

I can still see the dwellings all along the edge of that cliff top. (The last time I went they had moved back from the cliff line). In my mind's eye I walk through a ribbon of ramshackle hotchpotch holiday shacks. Some of them have been caravans and some train carriages. There are also some quite elaborate chalets. There's evidence of the ones that have dropped off the edge into the North Sea. Abandoned gas cylinders, water pipes protruding through the clay, fence posts higgledy piggledy suspended on their way down to the waves. A transient temporary abode. In the winter light they all look empty and deserted, abandoned even. Except one.

There's one that appears tended carefully. The garden perimeter is defined by stone sculptures, driftwood structures and peat bog wood mortar creations. I don't know why I've assumed it's a woman living there. I've never seen her except in my imagination. The wooden hut is definitely lived in. Somehow the salt spray on the glass is cleaner and clearer. The faded pink blooms of the sea sprays are not so unruly.

Not much grows on the cliff. There's an easterly wind often howls across whipping sand like a file over the back of bare calves. What's this woman's story? The lady on the cliff top. Is she alone? Is she lonely? Or is she in splendid isolation? How and why did she come here? Does the wide open space nurture her creative spirit? Living on the edge of the cliff, the edge of life in her precarious existence.

The draw of the sea is powerful. Childhood half remembered, west coast memories flood back into the sub conscious. Pre-memories of holidays on the Steam Packet to the Isle of Man recalled with the first toddling picture on the beach. Train journeys from Liverpool to Colwyn Bay without our Dad because he couldn't afford to take the time off. Our Mam managing six children through Lime Street Station and beyond. St Ives on a twelve hour car journey with a travel sick sister. The five beaches, the glistening harbour, rows and

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rows of beach tents on Porthminster beach. Stopping at a proper posh Hotel, the Chy-an-Drea. Supping and slurping milk shake in the American diner thinking one was ever so sophisticated. Formby just around the corner from Merseyside, visiting Mr. Sayer with his polio leg, crutches and bent cucumbers. Picking new young tips of asparagus left behind from the crop. Trying to find the sea over the dunes as the tide rolled out and the sea was out of site.

So many moods of this island nation. This woman has chosen her patch or maybe it chose her. I see her as sharp, intelligent and talented; her childhood carefree taking in the wide open spaces of the North Yorkshire Moors overlooking bays further to the north. Friends do pass by Skipsea from time to time though there's no electricity or phones so she has no need of communication. In the days of instant access that feels very hard to believe. Even the tarmac of the road has disappeared over the edge. She's a recluse, a hermit, a mystery.

I'm minded of the American Indian legend told by a friend of the old lady that lived up the mountain alone with her dog. She was visited by newlyweds from the valley who brought her gifts. The gifts were woven painstakingly into a tapestry. During the night the dog destroyed the work done. The next day the old lady wove the tapestry again. It is said the work will never be completed for all eternity. However, if it is finished so will the world end.

Or maybe she is standing guard on the bridge to eternity. On that passageway all the animals a person has encountered in their lifetime stand side by side as souls approach. It depends on what those animals think of you whether you are allowed through.

Is this just fanciful? Why is there the compulsion to know what's going on? Happiness takes many forms. The 21st century me is envious and incredulous. Time and tide. The constant ebb and flow. She's content in her own minds eye; an immortal eternal scene. The mortar from the peat forms her bridge frozen in time from another millennia.