

The Roar

The roar was in the treetops as we walked in, and gradually it filled the whole sky; a dense mass in the lowering light. We came over the dunes and looked out. The waves; hoards of them. Swelling, rising, reaching up; to surge soulless towards us. Mounting cold-grey and concave, tangled, ragged, hypnotising. And a broad band of light, fringing the shore, pulsing, illumined.

The thrill of a gift, here to en-trance and allure. The primitive deep constant roar moan rumble that invades our bellies and inhabits our watery guts. And the high note, the hiss and spit and crackle of surging and sifting; heady, giddying, wiping out thought.

Where on earth did this come from, so massive? I was here only three days ago and the sea was still; and the weather has been calm since then. A strange omnipotent giant has come to thrill and fill with awe.

We pitch our tent on a small shelf in the dunes, just above the detritus of the seaweed from the last tide. We make a fire from wood I have brought and heat food on a camping stove. How good this is. We are family, holding and nurturing our familiarity. The warmth of the fire, our stomachs full, the richness of chocolate. In the gloaming there is a shimmering ribbon of light, seemingly hoarded away from the day, moving slowly down the beach as the tide drops. There are no stars. We lounge as tiny specks of life, huddled around our fire, as the strange beast of the sea roars and crashes. We sleep as the waves recede, and in the darkness they advance again.

After breakfast it is cold and overcast, but the waves are calling. They mount and crash and call out to us to play. We are facing a shallow beach framed by jagged rocks on either side, that break the waves and throw them into the air. It is enticing. This is an arena to step into and do battle. Not battle; this can only be toying with, flirtation, bravado.

We need a fire to come back to and so go to scavenge for wood: and when it's lit and generous we strip and run into the arms of the flailing waves. They are dancing. We run and join the dance. This glorious stranger. The playmate who plays rough. Dive into her embrace, turn and let her lift us, carry us tumbling and confused. Bubbles everywhere, water full of air, air splattered with water. Strangely it doesn't feel very cold in its pummelling exuberance.

I soon tire and I'm feeling cautious, so after a short romp I run to the fire to dry and dress. But my sons play with it, fight it, stand against it, surrender to it, and whoop at its wonder. I'm happy when they eventually return, slapped red and bright eyed.

The world we live in is wonderful. I remember waking these young men when they were small boys, to see the myriad shoulder-to-shoulder stars in the perfectly clear sky of a Hebridean night, when we were out camping. The world approaches us and reveals itself. We are here to witness, and meet it in any way we can.

My daughter has been holding the place of steadiness and care; waiting by the fire as we three men were foolish and carefree and daring. She watched us, saw we kept standing, diving, surfing, standing again. She told me she was relieved we kept our feet planted. She kept the flames fed.

We're all back now. We build up the fire, toast bare bums, eat chocolate, cheese sandwiches, more and more to stuff in. Jump around to get warm. Gaze again and again at the sea.

And soon we see an orange RIB come around the headland to the right. A row of four, or is it eight uniformed and helmeted figures one behind the other; it is far away I cannot be sure. The boat looks like a toy with toy figures in a line. It appears and disappears in the swell, climbs waves, drops behind them. Back and forth it goes, up and down. It seems like an interloper, so orange and odd in the vast ragged grey. I can't make sense of it but imagine it's simply a Lifeboat on exercise. Up and down they go, crossing and recrossing a stretch of sea. I turn back to cutting bread, hunks of cheese, slices of my daughter's homegrown tomatoes. Somehow we are just being domestic, keeping warm, keeping the warmth amongst us. Savouring our time together.

We are in the shelter of a high outcrop rising from the beach, keeping us from the wind. The rocks to the left of our protected beach are a continuation of this outcrop as it shows itself again out to sea. On the other side of this barrier the beach stretches in an uninterrupted arc for about a mile. The RIB now appears on the far side of the rocks. It has come close in to shore on the main beach and is now fighting its way back out, climbing the near vertical waves, crashing down at the peak. This tiny boat with tiny people in it, climbing and crashing; like in a movie or even a cartoon.

Something turns in my stomach. But this is all far enough away to be distanced from me. My children are right here. When I look up again there are uniformed people on the rocks, looking out, looking into the grey confused waters. A large Lifeboat appears from around the headland.

What is this? I am a spectator, I am slow, seeing a drama acted out just far enough away to not fully touch me. But then out of the corner of my eye, just visible around the outcrop, a bright flash as the RIB flips over in the shallows and all the crew spill out into the water; quickly standing. The small boat upside down, the crew chest deep in the swirling whiteness. The figures on the rocks watching.

At last I must walk towards what is happening. I come out from the shelter of the dark obscuring mass of rock and the vast beach opens. I am walking forward and also holding back, moving slowly, feeling self conscious, that I may be intruding, stepping into something that is not my business. The crew from the RIB are in the shallows, huddled together in a group, buffeted by waves. I sense my refusal to believe.

Then, only then, it is shockingly clear: a uniformed man, sitting in the water, skidding backwards through the shallows, pulled through the water, a rope attached to him, pulled by a team up the beach, he looks big in his puffed up gear. And he holds a large pale object, his arms are wrapped around the dull sheen of a soft form, he cradles it in his arms, I see the swell of a belly, sodden limp shorts, pale legs dragging. God.

Three men are standing over there. They are about fifty yards from what is happening. They stand close to each other. Watching. I want to ask them. Ask them what? Is this true? As I near them the soft form is rolled onto a solid yellow stretcher. Six men run with it up the beach. The body is slippery and almost slides off and they have to pause to reposition the weight. And then there is kneeling, pushing down, compressing his chest. Why? What could be the help in that? Any human action is heartbreakingly puny next to the roaring. I am moving very slowly as I reach the three men.

I ask 'What is this?' I know but I don't know 'Is it an exercise?' One man turns to face me. He tells me that the man over there is their friend. I move closer and touch his arm. They were together, just chest deep, he was the strongest swimmer of them all, a strong swimmer, a member of the local year round swimming club, they were all in the water together. He falls

silent. My hand is on his arm; I feel the overwhelming weight of what these men have just been through, and I say 'There is nowhere to put this'. It seems impossible in this moment. 'I am so sorry for your loss'. He tells me his friend's name, he was fifty. I don't remember his name, it went from me as I heard it, but I was moved that this man spoke the name of his friend, he spoke his name as we watched people kneeling in a group around him, so he was now invisible to us.

I say that only an hour ago we were doing the same thing as them. That my sons and I were just over there, in the waves, the same as them. Here are three men dressed in warm clothes, as I am, standing close together, as the wind pushes against us, the vast sweep of the beach and the broad turmoil of crashing and returning water. I am aghast. It is unbearable. Their friend is hidden from their sight and gone from them. I reach out and touch the arms of the two men closest to me and say how deeply sorry I am for the loss of their friend. Perhaps more was said but I was stunned and can't remember. My eldest son has followed me and is waiting a hundred yards away and I want to be with him. I say 'Take care of each other. I am so sorry' and I turn and walk away from these stricken people.

My son puts his arm around my shoulders as we walk back to the fire, to his brother and sister to my son and daughter. We can barely speak. I feel so deeply shocked. Humbled somehow by the vastness of the world, the fragility of life. We are alive and a man we don't know is dead. I feel devastated for his friends standing there. It switches in a moment, now alive, now dead; my hand hanging by my side, palm facing up then turned to face the sand.

We gather around the fire. We need to be close. We stand holding hands in silence at first and then sometimes we speak. The man who is dead, we bless him on his way. The three men I met. His family, children, a partner, parents, friends? None of this we know, but we think of them, bring them to mind. My youngest son speaks of the people who tried to save him, how is it for them? We tidy up our camp and we want to walk together. As we walk I say that I am glad we are safe, that it didn't happen to us. I am grateful we are alive. I need to say that out loud.

I am very grateful we four are alive

A week has passed. I am on the West Coast where I used to live. I am writing while sitting on a bench in the cemetery where my first wife is buried. This bench is next to Freddie's grave; he drowned in the waters near here in a kayaking accident when he was seventeen. I'm also remembering making a gravestone for a young couple who died in the Boxing Day tsunami while they were on holiday. Where we were last week is a place I often go; to be in the beauty, the elemental majesty, of nature, and to come away uplifted and also settled into myself. But the juxtaposition of raw nature with our own smallness and vulnerability shows us to be deeply embedded within the world in a way that is profoundly poignant. Those waves took a life in a place I find to be healing. People die all the time I know; but that playfulness and engagement and challenge can switch into death so easily, so quickly, has deeply moved me. To be there and witness that. Climbers die on mountains while reaching for life enhancing experiences; I've made a memorial bench for such a man. Lightning strikes and kills. Trees fall and crush. Earthquakes. Volcanoes. Wildfires. Hurricanes.

I have a trust, an unfounded faith, but a faith, that we die when it is our time; it is entirely mysterious to me and I'm lost within it, but it is my sense. I hope it is so. This man launched off into something unknown. Doing what he loved to do. Did he decide to swim, lift his feet and swim? Meet the enormous challenge the sea showed to him? But the people who are left to stand on the shore and to watch? How are we to make sense? Or find a way to be alright with not making sense, We stand, aching, and overwhelmed.

I feel perhaps like a child who got away with it, while others played nearby and their game went horribly wrong. My compassion for the three men left to witness their friend being pulled from the sea was such that I could barely speak. Like a child.

Like a child; I am aware I did not want to see. I did not want to make sense and take on board the enormity of what was unfolding in front of us. I wanted to stay in our safe place, our warmth and security. To blot out the truth that is obvious; that terrifying things happen, are happening, whether I look or try to look away. I don't know whether that storm was an effect of climate change or not. But it's all one. The interrelatedness of all that happens in our world; the floods the fires the storms the heat the droughts, they are all here. All here with us. Sometimes I sit with my attention turned away from the world 'out there', and sometimes I choose to walk towards what I don't want to see. So many people have drowned in the floods a few weeks ago in Pakistan. That was distant and that was clearly a result of climate change. I balance an almost constant amorphous fear and grief, an inner roar that is sometimes quiet, sometimes all consuming. Last week a man drowned while having a good time with friends; and I saw it. Somehow this day, the 18th of September 2022, and this man, are resonating for me in a way that flows over into so much more of my life.

The roar has stayed with me. The grief and the alarm. I felt wary of the small waves, on the Pleasure Beach beside where I live, a few days after the drowning. They were tiny. When I was in the West the sea was so calm that I was able to float a limpet shell and it did not get swamped. There was comfort in this floating. It was a form of reassurance.

When I got home I asked my neighbour if she knew the name of the man who drowned. I felt a loss, even a disrespect, that I did not remember his name. She looked on her social media and texted me the link. His name was Douglas. I remember now his friend said 'Dougie'.

The man who drowned was called Dougie. The link told me that last weekend there was a mass swim off the beach here to commemorate Dougie and raise money for the Lifeboats. His community swam for him. Even though I don't know any of these people I find myself grateful that this happened. It lifts me.