

Isle of Dogs - I

What I wanted to tell him was that all dogs, every dog, are descended from three dogs in China. Some genetic historian has traced the markers back, and Eastwards, away from Africa, followed this blood path until they discovered three common ancestors. Three wild females, feral and savage, like a multiple-headed fecund Cerberus. I can imagine them there, pregnant and wailing, ready to give birth to an entire race. A full-up creature with fangs. Beasts that would walk beside us, that would hide in woods, be both monster and saviour, master and warm body.

Instead, we don't speak; just continue climbing, the slope bending closer towards the sky with every step. There was no music in our breath, just the wind-silence of mid-evening. Scotland's sky like a chain-linked fence, dropping heavy as if the grey of the clouds were actually steel, lead, metal. We should not have been heading to the top while it was getting dark, getting quickly cold, not now the clouds had doubled over to smother us: a wounded creature fallen, and woolly.

He walks on, through the fog, and I've dropped back, my pack getting damper and water-logged. We walk, knowing that it was foolish, all of it. Our past was much better left underneath the tree where we discussed it – we had sat and sprouted a sudden passion for words, flowered out language with reasons and excuses, buds to attach old arguments, resentments fixed themselves to the branches, blooms that went on and on and on. If we do not talk now, walking in this foggy crag, it is because we spoke too much then. Our words all used up and now we must replenish them by going to the top of this mountain. And even though I want to tell him about the dogs, I do not. Instead, I stare at the wet lumps that emerge from the fog – boulders, trees, large rocks, areas of the mountain that hide in shadows, even when there is no sun to cast them. They all become darker shades in the mist. Even he, his feet now level with my face as we climb steeper, one after the other, are now taking on a foggy hue, his distance directly related to his appearance, his colour. I look at my hand and confirm it is still a freckled brown. We continue as we have done, continue up, continue.

They come out of the fog like the rest of the stones, just bigger, wider and denser. But they are not stones and move towards us when they hear our muted steps, their voices sudden and urgent. The girls - wet stringing hair, their blondness now a flat brown - run towards us, waving hands as if wafting away the cloud, as if it was smoke from a large, damp fire. They seem like sisters, each one's eyes are wide with far too much white circling the blue, the cloud's condensation hiding frustrated tears. They are wearing black garbage bags as raincoats, with cut holes for their heads and arms, pulled tightly over their wet wool uniforms: something blue and plaid sticks out from below the plastic, something heavy and damp, heavier with the wetness.

They are lost, the path eaten by the falling cloud, they drifted from their school group, the mist sudden and disorienting. I cannot see each one individually, their movements are too quick and fluid, and it is nearly dark so their black-bag raincoats pull their bodies into the night. They speak at the same time, excited to be rescued, pointing and releasing their pent up panic in a roar of three voices with descriptions of what they had seen in the fog, what they had heard and what they had planned.

He turns to me, and then up towards the path. He knows that I am as lost on this mountain as the girls are; he knows that only he speaks the grammar of this landform; can see his way through the weather to the summit; and I understand that there are times when logic cannot break down into its component parts: when we have to leap from one summary to the next

because the gap between is too damaged: this is when the flowers we bloomed in our recent past (beneath that bare-branched tree) can turn to fruit, become something productive, useful to both of us. At least I know the way down.

The girls cut quick along the path, flow down like the rainwater that has now begun to carve out channels in the mud, pointing us away from the top. They are laughing now, eager: three multiple laughs that mix with the rain hitting their ersatz raincoats, making a loud rustle. The silence of the mid-evening has been replaced by the girls ahead of me and their repeated hopeful exclams. They turn to check I am still there, and I catch them in the torchlight: wide-eyed beauties, dangerous against the dark; their lank hair is pasted to their faces and the plastic of the black-bags shines back, sickly, my flashlight reflecting back jagedly, like the whiteness of their teeth.