

The Old Man

He knew I was there.

The old man.

Stand-offish.

Looking out to sea.

Tall and silent and,

on this day,

mere shadow.

My entire world was fading from view, indeed, and at my throat cold fingers of fog laid claim to my breath: to make me, and the ground on which I sat, their own.

Lost.

I closed my eyes and listened for my heart: for the familiar pendulum, the reassuring thrum playing above the swash and backwash of the surf. I counted down.

Ten: it's going to be fine. Nine: keep it together. Eight: think, and you'll be okay...

And finally, just breathe.

Somewhere-it was impossible to say where-the cry of seabirds speared the mist: their muffled skirls confirming that I was still alive; but mocking too, as they cartwheeled freely, now above, and now below me. I was lost, white-knuckle-anchored to the turf, lashed to the earth which dropped away to nothing but the angry dog of a sea. The edge of infinity was somewhere, close.

I hear a sound, a voice? A siren that looms, then melts into the shiftings of the air. It is an illusion, an echo of seal or foghorn perhaps, but not the voice of man. My eyelids flicker and I succumb slowly, drifting like the fog, into uneasy slumber.

When I awoke, the sky above me was the blue of eyes, and I saw the edge, a mere pace away, and the shiver running through my bones was not on account of the cold alone. I stopped and turned, glancing over my shoulder just once, to catch The Old Man still looking out to sea, to the thin grey line of the distant mainland - then walked the mile to hot, sweet, tea and sugared shortbread on dollied plates.