

Chalk

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I always saw the chalk cliffs as a miraculous phenomenon, something that was not quite possible, yet there they stood, protruding from the English Channel. I knew from my arts-and-crafts-turned-science experiments that chalk plus water equals the dissolution of solid into fizzy milk. How did the Isle of Wight stand firm, not melting into the sea?

Those bright cliffs that make up the Isle of Wight faced the view from my beach house on the South coast of England. They have looked over West and East Wittering since Pangaea ruptured and spat the United Kingdom away from Europe. On my favourite side of the diamond-shaped Isle, a peak trails off into ragged stumps, which centuries of erosion separated from the mainland. The beach with the view of the white cliffs was my nine-year-old imagination's kingdom. Simply envisioning their sturdy presence in my periphery is enough to transform me into that girl again.

Stormy weather necessitates beach walks, sometimes with my Labrador—black as an oil slick—but most often alone. I drape myself in my father's Barbour jacket that always smells of the cold and the rain. It swishes past my knees as I climb through the back door of the conservatory that leads to the circular stone passage that gave our house its name: Moongate.

With their roots in ancient Chinese architecture, moongates are supposed to represent transition as you walk through the gate from one side to the other. I assume a primal state of solitude as I leave my backyard and my family watching Sunday Premier League football by a roaring fire. Maybe it is simply the shift in barometric pressure, but storms change me, just like the moongate does. My imagination roams as I crawl out from under the hibernating blackberry bushes and bound along the dunes. As soon as I pass through the grand arch, I am an explorer, a native, a hunter and a tiger all at once.

The dog races ahead into the wind, her sheeny ears flying backwards like windsocks. I wink at my favourite house on The Strand. Its eyebrow dormers settle pleasantly over panes of glass that reflect the sea, their colour dark green and somber. I have many friends on the beach. On lovely days, the sun on the sea sparkles in house's windows like the eyes of a Disney princess, but not today. Sometimes my eyes sparkle like that too, but not today.

I have always been an emotional person. Even as a child, I experienced overwhelming claustrophobia within the confines of myself, unable to change and unable to be content with it. No matter the weather, these were and remain stormy days. I would probably title my memoir, "The Perils of a Girl Who Grew Up Too Fast For Herself." I remember picking up Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* at twelve, and being furious when my mother would not let me read it "because it talks about bad things." "What kind of bad things?" "Murder, rape, violence against women. Trust me on this, Helen, you will read it one day, but not yet." "Why wait? I already know about those things. I think about them all the time."

The purple bags under my eyes carried the remnants of sleep dust and chronic night terrors. Overexposure to London's grotesque *Breaking News* channels fueled my constant fear of the dark. When the sun set and the shutters groaned under gusts of wind and torrents of rain, I could barely glance at Moongate's black windows without terror seizing my spine. I spasmed into hysterics with the nauseating thought that I would see a pair of eyes glowing in the night, watching me.

Eventually I stopped being scared of the dark because I secretly wished for the monsters under my bed to eat me alive. That fate seemed better than enduring the terrors, but the lighthouse on the chalk cliffs was my own night light. The Isle of Wight would stand soft and strong through the nightmarish playground of my overactive imagination.

My dog and I follow rabbit droppings under brambles and peer into a burrow, peeling our eyes for a puff of cottontail. The trudge down the rising dunes lead to the best part of low tide, second only to the miles of sand stretching between the dunes and the water's edge.

Tide pools create microcosms I can only imagine on the ocean floor. Scissor clams shuffle in and out, breaking the sand's surface as crabs cower under shells, snipping at my looming shadow. Have you ever popped a mermaid's purse? Crunched its slippery black shell to reveal the biological filaments netting its interior? I have no doubts that these pouches of air hold fetal mermaids as they develop their form, the species of human beings whose tailbones sprouted instead of legs.

When the wind sprays granules against my face and shifts the dry sand westward, piling up in lopsided pyramids on the groynes, I am free to sing and scream as loud as my lungs can muster. I cannot hear myself over the hammering of the air currents and the roaring ocean; much less anyone else as I dance and my coat billows like a sail and the wind carries my song out to sea. The gray beach is my stage; the breakers are my audience. The Isle provides its symphonic accompaniment of gritty erosion and black pebbles rolling in the shallows. Perhaps we will lure some sailors to shore.

The few other storm adventurers acknowledge each other from behind popped collars of tweed parkas and woolen scarfs. My dog returns from her own adventure into solitude and energetic release. Brave kite surfers whip up froth as their bright half-moon sails crest the rising waves.

Sometimes, I perch in the dimples of the sand dunes supported by grass patches. Cradled between two banks of the dunes, I let wind pummel my face, allowing sand to collect on my brows as I squeeze my eyelids together. I stay outside for an hour at most, but in that time I traverse the end of the earth and back again, singing the whole way. The sky darkens as navy clouds bloom towards the white cliffs I love for their mighty softness.