I

ALKYONE

Alkyone throws herself into the sea and drowns. She is the daughter of Aeolus, god of the winds. Alkyone and her husband, Ceyx, have angered the gods with their love, and so Zeus casts a great storm to drown Ceyx. After a distraught Alkyone has killed herself, Zeus regrets what he's done, so he transforms Alkyone and Ceyx into kingfishers. For two weeks every January, Aeolus calms the winds and seas so that Alkyone can make her nest on the smooth water. These are called halcyon days.

THE NORTHERN STAR

THE SEA BEGINS WITH THE stars. I put my bare feet in a rockpool near Elgol beach on the Isle of Skye to look more closely at a starfish. The jagged black triangles of the Cuillin mountains rise in the distance, together with a horseshoe of islands making a natural amphitheatre of the stormy bay. We are on holiday here, the furthest north I've ever been, after visiting my mother's family in Fife. The sea is exotic to me, a girl usually to be found growing up in the hills of landlocked Hertfordshire, far from the shore. It's new.

The water is cold and my toes white. The ground is broken shells, drawing beads of blood from the soles of my feet. My parents are a little way away. All around limpets are stuck fast to the rocks and birds are circling. The breeze is hard, the clouds low. The sea around stretches into infinite mist. I feel completely alone.

While I've been looking to see where my parents have gone, the starfish has inched its way into a clump of shadows and out of sight. I remember reading in my Collins book of the seashore that starfish can have babies in different ways: either by mating with

other starfish, or by having one of their arms removed. A disembodied starfish arm can sprout its own new arms, and then grow into a whole new star. The original starfish will then grow its lost arm back, too, so there would be two new and whole creatures grown from something mutilated and broken. Does this starfish have any babies – other versions of itself crawling across another rockpool floor?

Nearby there is a piece of driftwood shining under the surface, dark and slick with seawater, alive-seeming, like a little beached monster. When it's time for us to go, I drag the chunk of wood back to the cottage with me. (The water that comes from the taps in the cottage is brown with peat. Why can't we bathe and cook in the sparkling clear salt water from the bay below? I am a sulky child, and refuse to help with the washing up.)

On the way back up the steep road to the house, the blackened water from the piece of wood soaks into my clothes, into my favourite T-shirt, the one that I'd wear every day if I could, green and black striped like how I imagine a pirate's shirt to be, and full of holes from too much wear and clambering. I am a tall and loud child with a temper. I bite my nails and never brush my hair. I devour books, especially books about horses and seaside boarding schools, though I have experience of neither. I never feel, really, like a little girl, or know what that is meant to feel like.

My grandmother has tried to remedy the situation by giving me a series of flouncy ruffled dresses and telling me to brush my hair – which is naturally curly and full of tangles – with one hundred strokes of the brush every night to make it soft. This practice hurts so much it makes my eyes water, and tests my patience to its limit,

so I avoid it. It didn't seem to improve my hair much when I did it, anyway, only succeeding in turning it into a static-buoyed bundle of reddish-brown hay. The dresses are itchy and too tight and so I take any opportunity to opt out. Always I want to get my feet good and cold and salty in the sea as much as possible.

On the windowsill in my grandmother's bathroom, with its avocado suite and cupboard full of painkillers and cancer medication for my grandfather, there has been, for as long as I can remember, a display of shells. These are shells my grandmother has collected from cruise holidays and trips around the world, some of them picked up from beaches, but most of them from gift shops, large and exotic and shining. There is an enormous conch that I have picked up and held to my ear in the bath so many times that it has a thin slick layer of old soap over the delicate curve of its pink opening, near to where the white ridges of the furled operculum twist round and up to the back of the shell. A particularly big scallop shell is perched on the edge of the bath, and used to keep soap in.

That afternoon I make a project of the dried-out driftwood. Somehow it has lost its slick magic back in the safety of the cottage, cracking and fading in the warmth. Using my art set and a thick brush, I paint it all over with the brightest red poster paint I have. I think I am trying to recapture its wet wildness, and the beguiling horror of when I first found it in the rockpool, shimmering and fat and soaked with brine. But no paint can make it again as bright and fierce as it was when I found it, when it glowed like moonlight among the starfish, as bright and fierce as I felt with my feet in the sea.

For years after that holiday, I collect glittering shells and sea glass from trips to beaches and take them home. I watch the magic

fade from them as the water evaporates and their shining surfaces dry to nothing, and wonder what it would take to be able to keep a real piece of the sea with me, to keep its mystery alive.

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Whenever it's late autumn and I'm by the sea, and the night is cold and the stars are stretching up into the dark, I go to stand on the edge of the shore, with the darkness so deep, and the sea so loud, that I can imagine I'm standing on the prow of a ship. If I'm far enough away from a city, the sky will be overwhelmed by stars, so many that the darkness seems to dip from their weight. Galaxies, planets and nebulae reveal themselves.

People have always projected poetry on to the light-shot night. Alnilam, we call the belt of the constellation of Orion. The string of pearls. Capella, little she-goat. Piscis Austrini, the mouth of the southern fish. Carinae, the prow of a ship. Eridani, the end of the river.

Sailors have used the positions of the stars to navigate for as long as there have been boats. The best way to determine where in the world you are, and how to get to the place you want to be, is by feeling everything around you. The wind, the seasons, the stars.

The Pleiades are the sailing stars. The word Pleiades, the name for the Seven Sisters constellation that, once you have identified it, will point you towards the Northern Star, and so to north, and so to your destination, comes from the Ancient Greek *plein*, meaning 'to sail'. Their heliacal rising begins in autumn in the Northern Hemisphere and, for the Greeks, it marked the start of the

Mediterranean navigational season. It is the star cluster that's easiest to see with the naked eye.

Journeys that follow the stars across the sea have inspired stories, songs, poems, paintings, myths, schools of religious thought and scientific breakthroughs. They've led to destruction and ruin. Say the stars of the Pleiades aloud and they sound like a spell: Alkyone, Elektre, Maia, Merope. Taygete, Kelaino, Asterope. And then there are their parents, the two extra stars that make up the visible cluster of nine: Atlas, Pleione.

The names of the Pleiades predate the Greek myths about the sisters that went by their names, their relationships, children and supernatural adventures. The stories the Greeks told about these sisters were first inspired by people seeing them in the night sky, and hearing the names given to them by men who navigated the seas, as the water moves all around, and the moon pulls the tides across the earth.

I'm not a maritime historian, and this isn't a history of tall ships. It's a story of women and water and love, with a birth and a death, songs and tall tales, and the wind blowing high on the waves.

OUTWARD BOUND

You smell it before you see it. That's mostly how you know you're near the sea in Scotland. The first of January, and we walk on the beach at Portobello, Sean and the dog and I. It's so cold that ice fringes the waves as they lessen on the sand, and there is a crunch to the air. The seaside promenade is full of people, mostly down from central Edinburgh for the day, breathing in the freshness of a whole new year. The dog crashes in and out of the water, too scared to go in deep enough to swim, and instead leaping and sneezing in the shallows as the water nips her heels, chasing balls and losing them as they slip beneath the foam and their scent dips out of reach of her nose. It's early afternoon and already the sun is sinking down and turning the light an eerie orange, bouncing off a clump of dark purple snow clouds.

We tramp along the sand, watching hardy children building freezing sandcastles, and still-tipsy students stripping down to their underwear to risk the chill of a New Year's paddle. The dog shoots into the distance and bounds happily back, her fat tongue lolling

out of the side of her mouth and a coating of sand all down her chest and paws. I absent-mindedly look for what I can forage on the beach floor. Bits of bladderwrack are disembodied fingers covered in blisters. There are some that look like tangles of hair, except for the barnacles knotting them together. And shells: the night-blue crescents of mussels with a gradient that fades to pure white, and perfect round cockles with their closely furled ridges on the outside, like little crimped pastries. Once, after a storm, thousands of starfish washed up on this beach and drowned in the open air. The mouth of the River Forth is parting its lips. The sea is somewhere further, somewhere beyond.

Everything I am reading, favourite stories from childhood revisited and new books discovered, is about water. I carry a copy of the *Odyssey* around in my bag like a talisman, and on steamy-windowed morning bus journeys to work on magazine shifts I open it up and am again pulled deep into all its sea-like currents of story and digression, moving always like waves against the hull of a ship. I discover Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, with its ill-fated sea voyage that becomes an overland adventure, and vast anthologies of sea shanties collected by a mysterious old sailor and storyteller called Stan Hugill, and I read Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*. I come across a quotation from Johnson in Boswell's biography that stays with me: 'Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier, or not having been to sea.'

I have not been to sea. I am in my mid-twenties now, a time that should be spent finding out who you are, travelling, and going on adventures. One friend has moved to Australia; another

to Canada. Facebook shows me university acquaintances who are now running marathons and securing dream jobs. I am doing none of these things. I don't have any fully-formed dreams to work towards. In late-night panics I research possible careers that would require a completely different set of skills. Would law, or medicine, or teaching be able to take me somewhere worthwhile? Initially excited by the idea of becoming someone new, each time I pull away. So I just read, and write, and work, and these don't feel like the sort of things you do when you're preparing to embark on something.

It seems as though it should be possible to live forever in a state of extended childhood, playing at life until adulthood gradually forms without me noticing. At what point does childhood end, or could it go on forever?

In the *Odyssey*, Athena sends Odysseus's son Telemachus on a sea voyage to Menelaus to find out what has happened to his father, a trip that she later explains is a gift. It will be an adventure that will define him and bring him into adulthood. Odysseus himself spends twenty years away, at war and then at sea. In *Kidnapped*, David Balfour's sea voyage and subsequent trek across the Highlands are what turn him from boy to man.

Is Johnson right? Is going to sea the ultimate challenge, the big and dangerous test, the coming-of-age experience that all men must face, or forever regret not facing? Going to sea is like going to war: something temporary, something overpoweringly physical, and a test that, if you survive it, changes you forever.

It's an experience that you know is going to be terrible, but you are shocked by it nonetheless when it actually happens. And

then, afterwards, you look other people in the eye who have been through it too and, though they might be a complete stranger to you, already you share something with them. You look at them deeply and you know them. They know what you know, and can never explain. The pain and helplessness of it. The giving over of yourself to something greater. The danger. The beauty, and the poetry.

It sounds so thrilling and essential, this sea. Does art need to go to sea, too? If you don't go to sea or to war, the writers of the past seem to be saying, what kind of man are you anyway?

Or what kind of woman? What about Penelope, left behind in Ithaca with a newborn child, to spend twenty years fending off angry men who want to marry her and steal her lost husband's treasure? Penelope is trapped on shore, weaving at her loom and weeping, and wondering what adventures or dangers her husband is facing at sea.

The sea surges over my brain through the winter. I've come back to live in Scotland, to be in Edinburgh near to my family, to be close to the sea after working in the heat and noise of a busy London newsroom and a long commute. I need more sea, I'd said to people, and wider sky. I'm looking for something new, and I am looking for home, and I have no idea what I'm looking for at all.

I step down from the promenade at Portobello, with its iron railings painted the happy light green colour of pistachio ice cream, down to the level of the sea, to look it dead in the eye. Today the sea is a mirror. It stretches smoothly away. In the distance, I think I can glimpse seals, distant grey pebble-ish curves bobbing

up out of the water to feel their backs against the sky. Looking out at the point where the river becomes the sea lets the mind flatten, and you can lay yourself out in its vastness, feeling as if you might, just for a moment, really be at the start of something. And you can pick up a cockle shell, and put it in your pocket.

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As well as reading about the sea with a new appetite, I've been writing about it too, making diaries of tide times and shells I've found, and the names of boats spotted in harbours. And always I come back to thinking about my grandmother. She loved being on the sea, on boats and on cruises, though she never romanticised it. Once she had been away with my grandfather on a cruise in the Caribbean, and sent me a postcard. Their postcards usually followed a formula: on the printed side of the card, there would be a collage of images of shimmering tropical beaches, jewel blues and clean white hotel resorts – impossibly glamorous all – and on the other, two sets of scrawling handwriting, both different, both strangely like my own. Grandpa would write the top half of the card, and then leave the bottom for Granny to fill in with her own message. This particular postcard said:

Thinking of you as we sail across the most beautiful blue ocean, under clear and sunny skies. Lots of love from Grandpa.

I banged my eye on the luggage rack and have a bruise. Granny.

I don't think it was meant to be funny. That was actually her most important news from the trip. I wondered what she had seen when she'd looked out to sea with her bruised eye, Cyclopsified.

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We haven't yet seen snow this winter, twenty years on from the rockpool in Elgol. Edinburgh has been sleeping through the season in a dim and grim torpor, without any sparkling snowflakes to cheer away the cold. So when another cold January day finds me bundled under the duvet in hibernation, with the dark days clouded around me and dampening all my senses, I need the freshness of the sea proper. I want to run away to it, to defy the cold and blankness of a month-long hangover from Christmas feasting. That feeling of wanting to run away is familiar. It means there's something to run from, even if I don't immediately know what it is. My thoughts have begun to nestle uncomfortably on top of an idea, a possibility at the back of my mind, always aware of its presence as they try to ignore it. I am like the princess detecting a pea under all her mattresses, and I can't sleep. Something is about to change.

I want to see sea, and Sean wants to see snow. Both of us are craving real, sharp coldness, and the tingle it brings to the senses. And an open expanse wider than the Forth, something that goes infinitely onwards around islands and away into nothing. On a whim one Saturday we get in the car, pack the dog and drive west, following a Google Maps-defined route towards Oban, a town

I've wanted to see for a long time. Some friends have been to visit, and told me it's beautiful. From the harbour, they said, you can stare across the 500-yard stretch of sea towards Kerrera, home to the tiny medieval Gylen Castle, sketched several times by Turner on his Scottish travels.

It's a popular tourist destination in the high season of summer but is unlikely to have much going on in the bleak midwinter. The three-hour drive takes us through the snowy Trossachs to skirt the long edge of Loch Lomond, with the white peaks of Ben Lomond and Ben Vorlich visible from the car window. We leave in the early morning and stop the car as soon as we get far enough north to hit snow, letting the dog out for a gleeful bound in the drifts that come up to her chin. Loch Lomond is still and slumbering on my shoulder during this, the scenic part of the drive.

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When we reach Oban, it's more of an industrial townscape than the pretty harbour that I had imagined, with large-hulled boats moored in the ferry terminal and vans navigating a busy central roundabout, and the whole town clustered around the blackish shingle of a dark beach lightly strewn with plastic bottles and cans. The dog poses on the jetty and sticks her nose into the wind. The town is mostly shut up for the winter, and the most warm and welcoming places seem to be the outdoor equipment shops. At lunchtime we stop in at a pub that allows dogs and serves fish and chips, and together we shelter from the cold. Afterwards, we

wander the streets and into one of the outdoorsy shops. I buy a pair of very thick woollen socks in their January sale as a memento of the trip. We spend some more time on the dark beach, looking over at Kerrera as a weak sun makes a brief appearance. The land you can see from the beach looks as reachable and tangible as all the islands Odysseus washes up on, hopping from one glorious disaster to the next.

Around twilight, we head home, a little underwhelmed. On the way back through the Trossachs, the mountains are looming in cut-out paper shapes. Though I know Loch Lomond is beside us, keeping us company on the way home, I feel its presence more than I see it, a blank expanse on the left-hand side of the car. The route is completely exposed to the sky, with the mountains in the distance, the loch beside, and the sea behind. The journey hasn't been the epic, distracting adventure I'd half-hoped it would be, though I know that would have been impossible – I'd romanticised it too much in advance – and anyway I am grateful for the socks and hot lunch. When we reach Edinburgh again there is a full moon and the snow has beaten us there, palm-sized flakes settling on the car roof as we park outside our tenement. It's already beginning to freeze the windscreen over as we walk away.

It isn't until a week later that I take the test. When I turn over the plastic stick on the bathroom windowsill, the word engraved on the little digital screen flows through me like electric current and I recognise the shiver across my shoulders as fear. A different kind of voyage to navigate, after all. A jolting shift into adulthood. A new kind of creature to understand.

Odysseus was blown off course on his way home from Troy. He wanted to get home.

I wanted to have an adventure. But I'm going to have a baby.

LIBATIONS

My grandmother liked a drink. Once, eating lunch out in a restaurant with us on holiday, she ordered a bottle of wine with her meal. It was soon finished. 'Gracious,' said a woman at the next table, wide-eyed and disapproving. 'I've never seen anyone drink a bottle of wine as fast as that.'

'Well, you can see it again,' said my grandmother. And she ordered another.

I didn't grow up in Scotland but in Hertfordshire, with a Scottish mother and an English father, and all the arty jobs I aimed for after university seemed to be in London. So, London was where I headed straight after graduating. And yet, in London in the dawn years of my twenties, just as I had done as a child, I read books about the sea and waited all year for a holiday by a crunchy beach, when I could spend all day collecting seashells and painting pictures and washing my paintbrush in the shallows. And best of all in those childhood seaside summers, on days that weren't Arctic-cold, there had been swimming, dipping my shoulders at the point where the sharp shingle underfoot dropped

away, and letting go, letting the waves move my body. And then sinking my head into the ice of it, opening my eyes underwater to the salt sting and the murk and looking out for the silvered flash of fishes, and all the while fighting the nervous thrill of getting swept out too far.

I had always thought I was drawn to the sea because I was British, and being British comes with a catalogue of sea-themed clichés: fish and chips on the beach, or in the car while the rain pelts down; 'Rule Britannia' at the BBC Proms; the shipping forecast playing out over and over every night, a warning for sailors, a lullaby for those of us safe in our beds and never at sea.

If I had grown up in a landlocked country, I wondered, would I still feel this saline connection, or would I feel drawn instead to a romance of the prairie or the mountain? Maybe it would only be a different way of feeling the same desire. Longing for the sea is the longing for adventure and the longing for home, all at once. The sea is delicate and powerful, shaping the planet, forming the weather, the place we evolve from, providing everything the planet needs for life. Even if we live hundreds of miles from saltwater, it's inside us. That's what I've always felt. A sense that, no matter how far I get from the sea, it will still be calling me back. I just didn't know why, or what I'd find if I went to sea, or if I should even go at all.

I kept reading and writing about the sea in the hope that I would understand why I felt so unable to escape from it. If I had nothing to do with the sea, why did it always seem to want to have something to do with me?

All through the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer refers to the Aegean as οἶνοψ πόντος, most often translated as 'the wine-dark

sea'. *Oinops* is a combination of the word *oin*, for wine, and *ops*, for eye or face. Translated closely it means something more like wine-eyed, wine-faced, or wine-looking.

It's an epithet used again and again in the *Odyssey*, balanced by the similarly frequent rosy-fingered dawn which rises on new adventures each morning. Homer's epithets are a persistent drum beat to the stories. They become anchor-point moments where the journey comes back to its structure and home, before launching again into the unfolding unknown.

Scholars can't agree on the most likely meaning of οἶνοψ, or *oinops*. Sea doesn't really ever look like wine. It isn't red, for one thing, though the former prime minister and critic William Gladstone did bravely argue that Greeks were somehow less highly evolved than modern humans, and could perceive fewer colours. That seems both very unlikely and too easy. Scientists have tried to find natural weather phenomena that could have turned the sea a wine-like red in Ancient Greece: maybe a particularly vibrant type of sunset, or vivid crimson algae blooms underwater, or high levels of dust in the atmosphere changing the quality of the light.

That all sounds too literal, though. There are things, other than colour, that sea and wine share. The sea isn't red, but then it isn't blue, either. It's green, and brown, and grey, and pink, and black and white. Sea is nothing like wine, and it's everything like wine. There's the quality of depth, the combination of opaqueness and clarity that means you can see through it for just a moment at the surface, before it quickly deepens into unknowable darkness. Wine has that same glassy translucence and sparkled surface just at

sipping depth, giving way to an opaque underlying richness of hues and shades deeper down. The colour of the liquid moves with the light, changing its character depending on whether the sun is shining overhead or a candle is burning nearby.

And then there's the way that it pulls on your senses. People were shocked by the sight of my grandmother drinking wine. Wine is beautiful, and powerful, and has driven people to ruin. It's seduction and romance, addiction and destruction, disintegrating the brain and body. It's the sea. To the Greeks, wine was used in religious ritual in libations poured on to the earth, in mourning and at the beginning of new things. The sea is ritual, too. And it gets you drunk.

MOUTH

I LOVED EDINBURGH AGAIN AS SOON as I saw it with fresh adult eyes. It was the place my sister and parents had lived before, though I'd only visited for holidays, and heard about it wistfully in stories, until my parents finally decided to move back when I turned eighteen. Then, when I carelessly betrayed it by studying in England, it became my refuge during university holidays.

In Edinburgh I fell in love with the heat that builds encouragingly in your calves when you find yourself walking breathlessly up the hills and over the bridges in the Old Town, late to meet a friend. My lungs love the sensation of Edinburgh's atmosphere, the biting freshness of it, never still but always thrilled with a shock of salted air, and sometimes the yeasty smell from the brewery on thick evenings. And the way the city is always almost entirely at the mercy of the spooky mystique of the haar, the rolling sea fog that comes on quick with its smoky white haze on a chilly evening and blinds you, if you don't see it coming first, as it rounds the corner and somersaults its way towards you through the Cowgate.

On a clear day, I love that you can see right the way over the bright blue water towards the green and mauve hills of Fife. You can see the islands nestling there. Inchcolm, with its twelfth-century monastery. Inchkeith, where in 1493, King James IV is said to have performed a strange and entirely unethical language experiment, leaving two babies on the island to be looked after by a deaf and mute nurse in order to determine which language they eventually learned to speak, and which he could therefore conclude was the natural language of mankind as given by God. According to sixteenth-century historian Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie's *The Historie and Cronicles of Scotland*, 'Some say they could speak Hebrew, but for my part I know not.' Walter Scott was unconvinced (in *The History of Scotland*): 'It is more likely they would scream like their dumb nurse, or bleat like the goats and sheep on the island.' Maybe, of course, it never happened at all, and is just a legend attributed to a king who was known to be a polyglot, an eager amateur scientist, and an oddball.

Then Fidra, another nature reserve with its own automated lighthouse, and the Isle of May, a boat trip away from Anstruther in the East Neuk on a boat called the *May Princess*, and St Baldred's Boat, the rock formation off Seacliff Beach in East Lothian, where the medieval monk and hermit St Baldred is said to have retreated for contemplation. Go up high enough and look past the islands and over to the right of the three broad, spiked bridges that bind Fife to the Lothians, the Forth Rail Bridge, the old Forth Road Bridge and the new Queensferry Crossing, one red, one silver, one white, with the water stretching across towards the little white dots of the coastal towns, winking in the sun as they bend right

around towards the East Neuk. The three bridges, each constructed in a different century, binding the land and the sea. The estuary is the only place we can do that, with the sea at its narrowest point that we can still just about build across, the last point at which it's not yet so inscrutably large.

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There is no easily exact difference between the river and the sea; no invisible line where the freshwater ends and saltwater begins. The sea is a gradual process of becoming, of widening and ageing and growing into more. There's a human scale to an estuary. Settlements cluster around them, growing into industrial heartlands over the centuries because they're so useful for transport and trade and connection to the world. Even before industry, though, people were drawn to them to build their homes. They are poised on the edge, but still connected to home, to land, and to life-giving fresh drinking water as it turns to the salt of the sea.

In salmon you see the difference that a saltwater environment makes to living creatures. Salmon are small mud-brown creatures when young and just-hatched in the freshwater. By the time they have made the journey from the river into the sea as adults they are transformed: big, shimmering rainbow-streaked blue dashes of light, ready to return home to their origins upstream to lay their eggs and begin the process of life over again. The river is where they begin, but the sea is where they become brightest and strongest.

Estuaries are where we can control the tide a little. At the Thames Barrier at Woolwich, London is kept safe from flood, the sea a little tamer because of a human presence. At Cramond, the village on the beach to the west of Edinburgh, there is a causeway path out to the tidal Cramond Island, the concrete on the route cracked into rockpools by thousands of days of tide washing in and out. In Cramond itself – where the River Almond drains into the Firth – there's a decent pub (which means that dogs are allowed in the bar, with biscuits provided for them), a café with a good line in Cullen skink and hot chocolate, and generally an ice cream van parked out beside the small harbour, hard by the sign warning about tide times and instructing walkers to make sure to time their journeys out to the island so as not to get cut off.

If the tide is far enough out to be safe, two hours either side of its lowest point, you can walk right out along the causeway towards the little grassy islet with a few stony ruins on the top. As you walk, you're flanked always to your right by a line of tall, imposing, triangular anti-boat pylons, put there during the Second World War. Once you get to the island you can look at the Firth from its middle, the water all around you and Edinburgh settled and finite before you, with Arthur's Seat and the southern hills in the far distance. You are standing in the middle of the estuary, the river behind you, and the wide sea beyond, out into the myth and unknown. As you hurry back to the mainland – which you will want to do, for the cold of the coast winds will have by this time stirred within you a violent appetite for soup from the café or a pint of beer in the warmth of the decent pub with the dogs – if you've timed your trip right, the water will only just be beginning

to fill in either side of the causeway, lapping around the bases of the anti-boat pylons, bringing more seaweed and fish to leave in the rockpools it cracked open on its last visit. If you feel the sea anywhere close to your feet, walk faster, because soon it will be several feet above your head, and you'll be left to swim with the seals, and the legends of others caught out by the tides before you.