

Winter

by Juliet Robinson

A pier is a disappointed bridge yet stare at it for long enough and you can dream it on the other side of the channel. Something Eddie often did as she passed the pier on the way to work. She set it on the sandy coast of the Netherlands. Thronged with people enjoying the sea breeze, and lively attractions. They sipped black coffee and ate pickled herring, tossing pieces out for gulls who cries filled the air.

What had made Eddie pull her car over this morning she wondered. She passed the pier every day, but today was the first time she had stopped and walked across the shingle to its remains. From a distance it looked like the rotting carcass of a giant sea creature, tossed upon on the beach by a high tide, the waves slowly and steadily eating away it, reclaiming its parts for the ocean.

She picked at the broken rail in front of her peeling the heat blistered paint and stared off into the fog, wondering exactly what was on the other side of the grey washed ocean. Was there another pier out there, did another soul stand at its end imagining Eddie on her pier, where they fishing hopeful for a bite?

A seal barked rolled over the waves. She caught sight of the creature, lipid eyes and gaunt cheeks. When had she last seen one? They used to hang around the harbour when the fishing boats came back but the fleet was dry docked and gone, the fish having vanished.

What was it like to be that creature drifting in the empty currents? She felt its large lipid eyes watching her. And sensing its hunger she pulled her scarf tighter around her face and turned back towards the beach, picking her way carefully over the rotting and crumbling planks. She paused under the spokes of the Ferris wheel which thrummed like the strings of a harp as the wind whistled round them. Despite the ashen decay of the pier, and the barren waste of the waters there was a sense that life remained, that below the surface of this existence was an alternative one.

She was sure the seal watched her as she went, and she wondered what it made of her, did it link her to all that was lost. Or was she just a figure hunched against the cold, walking above its waters, as alone as it was. She reached her car, shed some layers, started the engine and shivered until the heater finally started to work, winter had the year firmly in her grip.

Lars cast his line. On a calm day he would have heard the weight as it hit the water and sunk, but the wind was working hard to ruin the sunny morning, and he could hear little over its shrieks. But there was a hollowness to the wind and the noise of the ocean, an absence, the calls of the seabirds, no longer part of the harmony. He stared at the horizon, and just for a moment was sure some was watching him. He shivered and the sensation passed. Around lunch time he abandoned his fishing, pushed his bike along the pier, its wheels rolling rhythmically over the boards, a noise so familiar it seemed to have been summoned from his childhood.

He reached the broad walk, clambered onto his bike and set off with the wind on his back. He passed hotels, beach bars and cafes most of them closed for the season and was glad when he turned inland, leaving the chill of the North Sea behind, though his hands continue to burn from the cold bite of winter.

He stopped at De Oude Tol to order coffee and a toastie. He liked this little café which was tucked into the fringes of the trees surrounding the old Portuguese – Israeli Cemetery, they served strong coffee and its customers, dog walkers and lawyers from the International Courts, were a strange mix which made for interesting people watching.

‘Good fishing?’ Beatrix asked as she handed Lars his coffee.

He shook his head, ‘I hardly bait my line anymore so few fish out there.’

Sipping his coffee, he navigated his bike through the busy streets of Den Haag. He imagined himself a fish, weaving and slipping through his schooling fellows. Scales gleaming, glinting in sunlight distilled through salt water. The car which pushed its way down the street, separating the cyclists was a shark, drifting on the current.

The tide was low, so far drawn out it was possible to imagine that the ocean had gone, sunk deep into the earth, slipping through the cracks in her crust. The pier stood high and dry, and something large lay upon the sands near it. Eddie slowed her car and squinted, shading her eyes against the low winter sun trying to make out what she was looking at. She parked up on the muddy verge and clambered out. It was a still morning, the world as empty of sound as the sand was of waves. She walked slowly towards the thing, which revealed itself to be the seal, granite grey, its body sunken, its ribs a hollow tent of stretched out skin.