

## Dear Esther Script

Dear Esther. I sometimes feel as if I've given birth to this island. Somewhere, between the longitude and latitude a split opened up and it beached remotely here. No matter how hard I correlate, it remains a singularity, an alpha point in my life that refuses all hypothesis. I return each time leaving fresh markers that I hope, in the full glare of my hopelessness, will have blossomed into fresh insight in the interim.

Dear Esther. The gulls do not land here anymore; I've noticed that this year they seem to have shunned this place. Perhaps it's the depletion of the fishing stock driving them away. Perhaps it's me. When he first landed here, Donnelly wrote that the herds were sickly and their shepherds the lowest of the miserable classes that populate these Hebridean islands. Three hundred years later, even they have departed.

Dear Esther. I have lost track of how long I have been here, and how many visits I have made overall. Certainly, the landmarks are now so familiar to me that I have to remind myself to actually see the forms and shapes in front of me. I could stumble blind across these rocks, the edges of these precipices, without fear of missing my step and plummeting down to sea. Besides, I have always considered that if one is to fall, it is critical to keep one's eyes firmly open.

Dear Esther. The morning after I was washed ashore, salt in my ears, sand in my mouth and the waves always at my ankles, I felt as though everything had conspired to this one last shipwreck. I remembered nothing but water, stones in my belly and my shoes threatening to drag me under to where only the most listless of creatures swim.

Donnelly reported the legend of the hermit; a holy man who sought solitude in its most pure form. Allegedly, he rowed here from the mainland in a boat without a bottom, so all the creatures of the sea could rise at night to converse with him. How disappointed he must have been with their chatter. Perhaps now, when all that haunts the ocean is the rubbish dumped from the tankers, he'd find more peace. They say he threw his arms wide in a valley on the south side and the cliff opened

up to provide him shelter; they say he died of fever one hundred and sixteen years later. The shepherds left gifts for him at the mouth of the cave, but Donnelly records they never claimed to have seen him. I have visited the cave and I have left my gifts, but like them, I appear to be an unworthy subject of his solitude.

At night you can see the lights sometimes from a passing tanker or trawler. From up on the cliffs they are mundane, but down here they fugue into ambiguity. For instance, I cannot readily tell if they belong above or below the waves. The distinction now seems mundane; why not everything and all at once! There's nothing better to do here than indulge in contradictions, whilst waiting for the fabric of life to unravel. There was once talk of a wind farm out here, away from the rage and the intolerance of the masses. The sea, they said, is too rough for the turbines to stand: they clearly never came here to experience the becalming for themselves. Personally, I would have supported it; turbines would be a fitting contemporary refuge for a hermit: the revolution and the permanence.

When you were born, your mother told me, a hush fell over the delivery room. A great red birthmark covered the left side of your face. No one knew what to say, so you cried to fill the vacuum. I always admired you for that; that you cried to fill whatever vacuum you found. I began to manufacture vacuums, just to enable you to deploy your talent. The birthmark faded by the time you were six, and had gone completely by the time we met, but your fascination with the empty, and its cure, remained.

Those islands in the distance, I am sure, are nothing more than relics of another time, sleeping giants, somnambulist gods laid down for a final dreaming. I wash the sand from my lips and grip my wrist ever more tightly, my shaking arms will not support my fading diaries. Reading Donnelly by the weak afternoon sunlight. He landed on the south side of the island, followed the path to bay and climbed the mount. He did not find the caves and he did not chart the north side. I think this is why his understanding of the island is flawed, incomplete. He stood on the mount and only wondered momentarily how to descend. But then, he didn't have my reasons.

Donnelly's book had not been taken out from the library since 1974. I decided it would never be missed as I slipped it under my coat and avoided the librarian's gaze on the way out. If the subject matter is obscure, the writer's literary style is

even more so, it is not the text of a stable or trustworthy reporter. Perhaps it is fitting that my only companion in these last days should be a stolen book written by a dying man.

The mount is clearly the focal point of this landscape; it almost appears so well placed as to be artificial. I find myself easily slipping into the delusional state of ascribing purpose, deliberate motive to everything here. Was this island formed during the moment of impact; when we were torn loose from our moorings and the seatbelts cut motorway lanes into our chests and shoulders, did it first break surface then? A wonderful sight. The moon cresting the junction between the cliff path and the stone circle. It cast a shadow of the ridge across the beach, all the world as if you had signed your name across the sand in untidy handwriting.

When someone had died or was dying or was so ill they gave up what little hope they could sacrifice, they cut parallel lines into the cliff, exposing the white chalk beneath. With the right eyes you could see them from the mainland or the fishing boats and know to send aid or impose a cordon of protection, and wait a generation until whatever pestilence stalked the cliff paths died along with its hosts. My lines are just for this: to keep any would-be rescuers at bay. The infection is not simply of the flesh.

They were godfearing people those shepherds. There was no love in the relationship. Donnelly tells me that they had one bible that was passed around in strict rotation. It was stolen by a visiting monk in 1776, two years before the island was abandoned altogether. In the interim, I wonder, did they assign chapter and verse to the stones and grasses, marking the geography with a superimposed significance; that they could actually walk the bible and inhabit its contradictions?

We are not like Lot's wife, you and I; we feel no particular need to turn back. There's nothing to be seen if we did. No tired old man parting the cliffs with his arms; no gifts or bibles laid out on the sand for the taking. No tides turning or the shrieking gulls overhead. The bones of the hermit are no longer laid out for the taking: I have stolen them away to the guts of this island where the passages all run to black and there we can light each others faces by their strange luminescence.

I quote directly: “A motley lot with little to recommend them. I have now spent three days in their company that is, I fear, enough for any man not born amongst them. Despite their tedious inclination to quote scripture, they seem to me the most godforsaken of all the inhabitants of the outer isles. Indeed, in this case, the very gravity of that term – forsaken by god – seems to find its very apex.” It appears to me that Donnelly too found those who wander this shoreline to be adrift from any chance of redemption. Did he include himself in that, I wonder?

Dear Esther. I met Paul. I made my own little pilgrimage. My Damascus a small semi-detached on the outskirts of Wolverhampton. We drank coffee in his kitchen and tried to connect to one another. Although he knew I hadn’t come in search of an apology, reason or retribution, he still spiralled in panic, thrown high and lucid by his own dented bonnet. Responsibility had made him old; like us, he had already passed beyond any conceivable boundary of life.

I threw my arms wide and the cliff opened out before me, making this rough home. I transferred my belongings from the bothy on the mount and tried to live here instead. It was cold at night and the sea lapped at the entrance at high tide. To climb the peak, I must first venture even deeper into veins of the island, where the signals are blocked altogether. Only then will I understand them, when I stand on the summit and they flow into me, uncorrupted.

I would leave you presents, outside your retreat, in this interim space between cliff and beach. I would leave you loaves and fishes, but the fish stocks have been depleted and I have run out of bread. I would row you back to your homeland in a bottomless boat but I fear we would both be driven mad by the chatter of the sea creatures.

I find myself increasingly unable to find that point where the hermit ends and Paul and I begin. We are woven into a sodden blanket, stuffed into the bottom of a boat to stop the leak and hold back the ocean. My neck aches from staring up at the aerial; it mirrors the dull throb in my gut where I am sure I have begun to form another stone. In my dreams, it forms into a perfect representation of Lot’s wife, head over her shoulder, staring along the motorway at the approaching traffic, in a vacuum of fatalistic calm.

This hermit, this seer, this distant historian of bones and old bread, where did he vanish to? Why, asked the farmers, why asked Jakobson, why bother with your visions at all, if you are just to throw your arms up at the cliff and let it close in behind you, seal you into the belly of the island, a museum shut to all but the most devoted.

He still maintains he wasn't drunk but tired. I can't make the judgement or the distinction anymore. I was drunk when I landed here, and tired too. I walked up the cliff path in near darkness and camped in the bay where the trawler lies beached. It was only at dawn that I saw the bothy and decided to make my temporary lodgings there. I was expecting just the aerial and a transmitter stashed in a weatherproof box somewhere on the mount. It had an air of uneasy permanence to it, like all the other buildings here; erosion seems to have evaded it completely.

The vegetation here has fossilized from the roots up. To think they once grazed animals here, the remnants of occupation being evidence to that. It is all sick to death: the water is too polluted for the fish, the sky is too thin for the birds and the soil is cut with the bones of hermits and shepherds. I have heard it said that human ashes make great fertilizer, that we could sow a great forest from all that is left of your hips and ribcage, with enough left over to thicken the air and repopulate the bay.

I dreamt I stood in the centre of the sun and the solar radiation cooked my heart from the inside. My teeth will curl and my fingernails fall off into my pockets like loose change. If I could stomach, I'd eat, but all I seem capable of is saltwater. Were the livestock still here, I could turn feral and gorge. I'm as emaciated as a body on a slab, opened up for a premature source of death. I've rowed to this island in a heart without a bottom; all the bacteria of my gut rising up to sing to me.

I have become convinced I am not alone here, even though I am equally sure it is simply a delusion brought upon by circumstance. I do not, for instance, remember where I found the candles, or why I took it upon myself to light such a strange pathway. Perhaps it is only for those who are bound to follow.

Dear Esther. I have now driven the stretch of the M5 between Exeter and Bristol over twenty-one times, but although I have all the reports and all the witnesses and have cross-referenced them within a millimetre using my ordnance survey maps, I

simply cannot find the location. You'd think there would be marks, to serve as some evidence. It's somewhere between the turn off for Sandford and the Welcome Break services. But although I can always see it in my rear view mirror, I have as yet been unable to pull ashore.

Dear Esther. This will be my last letter. Do they pile up even now on the doormat of our empty house? Why do I still post them home to you? Perhaps I can imagine myself picking them up on the return I will not make, to find you waiting with daytime television and all its comforts. They must form a pile four feet high now, my own little ziggurat; a megalith of foolscap and manila. They will fossilise over the centuries to follow; an uneasy time capsule from a lost island. Postmarked Oban: it must have been sent during the final ascent.

Dear Esther. I have found myself to be as featureless as this ocean, as shallow and unoccupied as this bay, a listless wreck without identification. My rocks are these bones and a careful fence to keep the precipice at bay. Shot through me caves, my forehead a mount, this aerial will transmit into me so. All over exposed, the nervous system, where Donnelly's boots and yours and mine still trample. I will carry a torch for you; I will leave it at the foot of my headstone. You will need it for the tunnels that carry me under.

Dear Esther. Whilst they catalogued the damage, I found myself afraid you'd suddenly sit up, stretch, and fail to recognise me, I orbited you like a sullen comet, our history trailing behind me in the solar wind from the fluorescent tubes. Your hair had not been brushed yet, your make-up not reapplied. You were all the world like a beach to me, laid out for investigation, your geography telling one story, but hinting at the geology hidden behind the cuts and bruises.

I have found the ship's manifest, crumpled and waterlogged, under a stash of paint cans. It tells me that along with this present cargo, there was a large quantity of antacid yoghurt, bound for the European market. It must have washed out to sea, God knows there are no longer gulls or goats here to eat it.

There must be a hole in the bottom of the boat. How else could new hermits have arrived?

It's only at night that this place makes any sluggish effort at life. You can see the buoy and the aerial. I've been taking to sleeping through the day in an attempt to resurrect myself. I can feel the last days drawing upon me – there's little point now in continuation. There must be something new to find here – some nook or some cranny that offers a perspective worth clinging to. I've burnt my bridges; I have sunk my boats and watched them go to water.

All night the buoy has kept me lucid. I sat, when I was at the very edge of despair, when I thought I would never unlock the secret of the island, I sat at the edge and I watched the idiot buoy blink through the night. He is mute and he is retarded and he has no thought in his metal head but to blink each wave and each minute aside until the morning comes and renders him blind as well as deaf-mute. In many ways, we have much in common.

I've begun to wonder if Donnelly's voyage here was as prosaic as it was presented. How disappointed not to have found the bones of the holy man! No wonder he hated the inhabitants so. To him, they must have seemed like barnacles mindlessly clinging to a mercy seat. Why cling so hard to the rock? Because it is the only thing that stops us from sliding into the ocean. Into oblivion.

An imagined answerphone message. The tires are flat, the wheel spins loosely, and the brake fluid has run like ink over this map, staining the landmarks and rendering the coastline mute, compromised. Where you saw galaxies, I saw only bruises, cut into the cliff by my lack of sobriety.

I don't know the name of the wreck in the bay; it seems to have been here for several years but has not yet subsided. I don't know if anyone was killed; if so, I certainly haven't seen them myself. Perhaps when the helicopter came to lift them home, their ascent scared the birds away. I shall search for eggs along the north shore, for any evidence that life is marking this place out as its own again. Perhaps it is me that keeps them at bay.

I remember running through the sands of Cromer; there was none of the shipwreck I find here. I have spent days cataloguing the garbage that washes ashore here and I have begun to assemble a collection in the deepest recess I could find. What a strange museum it would make. And what of the corpse of its curator? Shall I find a glass coffin and pretend to make snow white of us both?

Why is the sea so becalmed? It beckons you to walk upon its surface; but I know all too well how it would shatter under my feet and drag me under. The rocks here have withstood centuries of storms and now, robbed of the tides, they stand muted and lame, temples without cause. One day, I will attempt to climb them, hunt among their peaks for the eggs, the nests, that the gulls have clearly abandoned.

I had kidney stones, and you visited me in the hospital. After the operation, when I was still half submerged in anaesthetic, your outline and your speech both blurred. Now my stones have grown into an island and made their escape and you have been rendered opaque by the car of a drunk.

I have begun my ascent on the green slope of the western side. I have looked deep into the mountain from the shaft and understood that I must go up and then find a way under. I will stash the last vestiges of my civilisation in the stone walls and work deeper from there. I am drawn by the aerial and the cliff edge: there is some form of rebirth waiting for me there.

I have begun my ascent on the windless slope of the western side. The setting sun was an inflamed eye squeezing shut against the light shone in by the doctors. My neck is aching through constantly craning my head up to track the light of the aerial. I must look downwards, follow the path under the island to a new beginning.

I have begun to climb, away from the sea and towards the centre. It is a straight line to the summit, where the evening begins to coil around the aerial and squeeze the signals into early silence. The bothy squats against the mount to avoid the gaze of the aerial; I too will creep under the island like an animal and approach it from the northern shore.

When I first looked into the shaft, I swear I felt the stones in my stomach shift in recognition.

What charnel house lies at the foot of this abyss? How many dead shepherds could fill this hole?

Is this what Paul saw through his windscreen? Not Lot's wife, looking over her shoulder, but a scar in the hillside, falling away to black, forever.



When they graze their animals here, Donnelly writes, it is always raining. There's no evidence of that rain has been here recently. The foliage is all static, like a radio signal returning from another star.

In the hold of the wrecked trawler I have found what must amount to several tons of gloss paint. Perhaps they were importing it. Instead, I will put it to use, and decorate this island in the icons and symbols of our disaster.

Cromer in the rain; a school trip. We took shelter en masse in a bus stop, herded in like cattle, the teachers dull shepherds. The sand in my pocket becoming damper by the second.

The bothy was constructed originally in the early 1700s. By then, shepherding had formalised into a career. The first habitual shepherd was a man called Jakobson, from a lineage of migratory Scandinavians. He was not considered a man of breeding by the mainlanders. He came here every summer whilst building the bothy, hoping, eventually, that becoming a man of property would secure him a wife and a lineage. Donnelly records that it did not work: he caught some disease from his malcontented goats and died two years after completing it. There was no one to carve white lines into the cliff for him either.

Inventory: a trestle table we spread wallpaper on in our first home. A folding chair; I laughed at you for bringing camping in the lakes. I was uncomfortable later and you laughed then. This diary; the bed with the broken springs – once asleep, you have to remember not to dream. A change of clothes. Donnelly's book, stolen from Edinburgh library on the way here. I will burn them all on the last morning and make an aerial of my own.

When the oil lamps ran out I didn't pick up a torch but used the moonlight to read by. When I have pulled the last shreds of sense from it, I will throw Donnelly's book from the cliffs and perhaps myself with it. Maybe it will wash back up through the caves and erupt from the spring when the rain comes, making its return to the hermit's cave. Perhaps it will be back on the table when I wake. I think I may have thrown it into the sea several times before.

Three cormorants seen at dusk; they did not land. This house, built of stone, built by a long-dead shepherd. Contents: my campbed, a stove, a table, chairs. My clothes, my books. The caves that score out the belly of this island, leaving it famished. My limbs and belly, famished. This skin, these organs, this failing eyesight. When the battery runs out in my torch, I will descend into the caves and follow only the phosphorescence home.

My heart is landfill, these false dawns waking into whilst it is still never light. I sweat for you in the small hours and wrap my blankets into a mass. I have always heard the waves break on these lost shores, always the gulls forgotten. I can lift this bottle to my ear, and all there ever is for me is this hebridean music.

In a footnote, the editor comments that at this point, Donnelly was going insane as syphilis tore through his system like a drunk driver. He is not to be trusted – many of his claims are unsubstantiated and although he does paint a colourful picture, much of what he says may have been derived directly from his fever. But I have been here and I know, as Donnelly did, that this place is always half-imagined. Even the rocks and caves will shimmer and blur, with the right eyes.

He left his body to the medical school and was duly opened out for a crowd of students twenty-one days after his passing. The report is included in my edition of his book. The syphilis had torn through his guts like a drunk driver, scrambling his organs like eggs on a plate. But enough definition remained for a cursory examination and, as I suspected, they found clear evidence of kidney stones. He is likely to have spent the last years of his life in considerable pain: perhaps this is the root of his laudanum habit. Although its use makes him an unreliable witness, I find myself increasingly drawn into his orbit.

What to make of Donnelly? The laudanum and the syphilis? It is clearly not how he began, but I have been unable to discover if the former was a result of his visiting the island or the force that drove him here. For the syphilis, a drunk driver smashing his insides into a pulp as he stumbled these paths, I can only offer my empathy. We are all victims of our age. My disease is the internal combustion engine and the cheap fermentation of yeast.

Jakobson's ribcage, they told Donnelly, was deformed, the result of some birth defect or perhaps a traumatic injury as a child. Brittle and overblown it was, and desperately light. Perhaps it was this that finally did for him, unable to contain the shattering of his heart. In halfflight, his skeleton a discarded prop, a false and calcified seabird.

They found Jakobson in early spring, the thaw had only just come. Even though he'd been dead nearly seven months, his body had been frozen right down to the nerves and had not even begun to decompose. He'd struggled halfway down the cliff path, perhaps looking for some lost goat, or perhaps in a delirium and expired, curled into a claw, right under the winter moon. Even the animals shunned his corpse; the mainlanders thought to bring it home unlucky. Donnelly claims they dragged it to the caves to thaw out and rot, but he is proving an unreliable witness.

They found Jakobson in early spring, the thaw had only just come. Even though he'd been dead nearly seven months, his body had been frozen right down to the nerves and had not even begun to decompose. His fingernails were raw and bitten to the quick; they found the phosphorescent moss that grows in the caves deep under the nails. Whatever he'd been doing under the island when his strength began to fail is lost. He'd struggled halfway up the cliff again, perhaps in a delirium, perhaps trying to reach the bothy's fire, before curling into a stone and expiring.

They found Jakobson in early spring, the thaw had only just come. Even though he'd been dead nearly seven months, his body had been frozen right down to the nerves and had not even begun to decompose. All around him, small flowers were reaching for the weak sun, the goats had adjusted happily to life without a shepherd and were grazing freely about the valley. Donnelly reports they hurled the body in fear and disgust down the shaft, but I cannot corroborate this story.

I will become a torch for you, an aerial. I will fall from the sky like ancient radio waves of flawed concrete. Through underground springs and freezing subterranean rivers. Through the bacteria of my gut and heart. Through the bottomless boat and forgotten trawlers where nobody has died. Like the hermit and Lot's wife, I will fossilise and open a hole in the rock to admit me through.

To explore here is to become passive, to internalise the journey and not to attempt to break the confines. Since I burnt my boats and contracted my sickness, this has become easier for me. It will take a number of expeditions to traverse this microcontinent; it will take the death of a million neurons, a cornucopia of prime numbers, countless service stations and bypasses to arrive at the point of final departure.

This beach is no place to end a life. Jakobson understood that, so did Donnelly. Jakobson made it halfway back up the cliff. Donnelly lost faith and went home to die. I have the benefit of history, of progress. Someone has erected an aerial to guide me through these black waves, a beacon that shines through the rocks like phosphorescent moss.

Climbing down to the caves I slipped and fell and have injured my leg. I think the femur is broken. It is clearly infected: the skin has turned a bright, tight pink and the pain is crashing in on waves, winter tides against my shoreline, drowning out the ache of my stones. I struggled back to the bothy to rest, but it has become clear that there is only one way this is likely to end. The medical supplies I looted from the trawler have suddenly found their purpose: they will keep me lucid for my final ascent.

Did Jakobson crawl this far? Can I identify the scratches his nails ruined into the rocks? Am I following him cell for cell, inch for inch? Why did he turn back on himself and not carry through to the ascent?

From here, this last time, I have understood there is no turning back. The torch is failing along with my resolve. I can hear the singing of the sea creatures from the passages above me and they are promising the return of the gulls.

Donnelly did not pass through the caves. From here on in, his guidance, unreliable as it is, is gone from me. I understand now that it is between the two of us, and whatever correspondence can be drawn from the wet rocks.

Donnelly's addiction is my one true constant. Even though I wake in false dawns and find the landscape changed, flowing inconstantly through my tears, I know his reaching is always upon me.

It was as if someone had taken the car and shaken it like a cocktail. The glove compartment had been opened and emptied with the ashtrays and the boot; it made for a crumpled museum, a shattered exhibition. I first saw him sat by the side of the road. I was waiting for you to be cut out of the wreckage. The car looked like it had been dropped from a great height. The guts of the engine spilled over the tarmac. Like water underground.

They had stopped the traffic back as far as the Sandford junction and come up the hard shoulder like radio signals from another star. It took twenty-one minutes for them to arrive. I watched Paul time it, to the second, on his watch.

There is no other direction, no other exit from this motorway. Speeding past this junction, I saw you waiting at the roadside, a one last drink in your trembled hands.

I'm traversing my own death throes. The infection in my leg is an oilrig that dredges black muck up from deep inside my bones. I swallow fistfuls of diazepam and paracetamol to stay conscious. The pain flows through me like an underground sea.

If the caves are my guts, this must be the place where the stones are first formed. The bacteria phosphoresce and rise, singing, through the tunnels. Everything here is bound by the rise and fall like a tide. Perhaps, the whole island is actually underwater.

I am travelling through my own body, following the line of infection from the shattered femur towards the heart. I swallow fistfuls of painkillers to stay lucid. In my delirium, I see the twin lights of the moon and the aerial, shining to me through the rocks.

In my final dream, I sat at peace with Jakobson and watched the moon over the Sandford junction, goats grazing on the hard shoulder, a world gone to weed and redemption. He showed me his fever scars, and I mine, between each shoulder the nascency of flight.

When I was coming round from the operation, I remember the light they shone in my eyes to check for pupil contraction. It was like staring up at a moonlit sky from the bottom of well. People moved at the summit but I could not tell if you were one of them.

This cannot be the shaft they threw the goats into. It cannot be the landfill where the parts of your life that would not burn ended up. It cannot be the chimney that delivered you to the skies. It cannot be the place where you rained back down again to fertilise the soil and make small flowers in the rocks.

I will hold the hand you offer to me; from the summit down to this well, into the dark waters where the small flowers creep for the sun. Headlights are reflected in your retinas, moonlit in the shadow of the crematorium chimney.

This is a drowned man's face reflected in the moonlit waters. It can only be a dead shepherd who has come to drunk drive you home.

The moon over the Sandford junction, headlights in your retinas. Donnelly drove a grey hatchback without a bottom, all the creatures of the tarmac rose to sing to him. All manner of symbols crudely scrawled across the cliff face of my unrest. My life reduced to an electrical diagram. All my gulls have taken flight; they will no longer roost on these outcrops. The lure of the moon over the Sandford junction is too strong.

I wish I could have known Donnelly in this place – we would have had so much to debate. Did he paint these stones, or did I? Who left the pots in the hut by the jetty? Who formed the museum under the sea? Who fell silently to his death, into the frozen waters? Who erected this godforsaken aerial in the first place? Did this whole island rise to the surface of my stomach, forcing the gulls to take flight?

I sat here and watched two jets carve parallel white lines into the sky. They charted their course and I followed them for twenty-one minutes until they turned off near Sandford and were lost. If I were a gull, I would abandon my nest and join them. I would starve my brain of oxygen and suffer delusions of transcendence. I would tear the bottom from my boat and sail across the motorways until I reached this island once again.

Of fire and soil, I chose fire. It seemed the more contemporary of the options, the more sanitary. I could not bear the thought of the reassembly of such a ruins. Stitching arm to shoulder and femur to hip, charting a line of thread like traffic

stilled on a motorway. Making it all acceptable for tearful aunts and traumatised uncles flown in specially for the occasion. Reduce to ash, mix with water, make a phosphorescent paint for these rocks and ceilings.

We shall begin to assemble our own version of the north shore. We will scrawl in dead languages and electrical diagrams and hide them away for future theologians to muse and mumble over. We will send a letter to Esther Donnelly and demand her answer. We will mix the paint with ashes and tarmac and the glow from our infections. We paint a moon over the Sandford junction and blue lights falling like stars along the hard shoulder.

I returned home with a pocket full of stolen ash. Half of it fell out of my coat and vanished into the car's upholstery. But the rest I carefully stowed away in a box I kept in a drawer by the side of my bed. It was never intended as a meaningful act but over the years it became a kind of talisman. I'd sit still, quite still, for hours just holding the diminishing powder in my palm and noting its smoothness. In time, we will all be worn down into granules, washed into the sea and dispersed.

Dear Esther. I find each step harder and heavier. I drag Donnelly's corpse on my back across these rocks, and all I hear are his whispers of guilt, his reminders, his burnt letters, his neatly folded clothes. He tells me I was not drunk at all.

From here I can see my armada. I collected all the letters I'd ever meant to send to you, if I'd have ever made it to the mainland but had instead collected at the bottom of my rucksack, and I spread them out along the lost beach. Then I took each and every one and I folded them into boats. I folded you into the creases and then, as the sun was setting, I set the fleet to sail. Shattered into twenty-one pieces, I consigned you to the Atlantic, and I sat here until I'd watched all of you sink.

There were chemical diagrams on the mug he gave me coffee in; sticky at the handle where his hands shook. He worked for a pharmaceutical company with an office based on the outskirts of Wolverhampton. He'd been travelling back from a sales conference in Exeter: forming a strategic vision for the pedalling of antacid yoghurt to the European market. You could trace the connections with your finger, join the dots and whole new compounds would be summoned into activity.

There were chemical diagrams on the posters on the walls on the waiting room. It seemed appropriate at the time; still-life abstractions of the processes which had already begun to break down your nerves and your muscles in the next room. I cram diazepam as I once crammed for chemistry examinations. I am revising my options for a long and happy life.

There were chemical stains on the tarmac: the leak of air conditioning, brake fluid and petrol. He kept sniffing at his fingers as he sat by the roadside waiting as if he couldn't quite understand or recognise their smell. He said he'd been travelling back from a sales conference in Exeter; he'd stopped for farewell drinks earlier, but had kept a careful eye on his intake. You could hear the sirens above the idling traffic. Paul, by the roadside, by the exit for Damascus, all ticking and cooled, all feathers and remorse, all of these signals routed like traffic through the circuit diagrams of our guts, those badly written boats torn bottomless in the swells, washing us forever ashore.

When Paul keeled over dead on the road to Damascus, they resuscitated him by hitting him in the chest with stones gathered by the roadside. He was lifeless for twenty-one minutes, certainly long enough for the oxygen levels in his brain to have decreased and caused hallucinations and delusions of transcendence. I am running out of painkillers and the moon has become almost unbearably bright.

The pain in my leg sent me blind for a few minutes as I struggled up the cliff path: I swallowed another handful of painkillers and now I feel almost lucid. The island around me has retreated to a hazed distance, whilst the moon appears to have descended into my palm to guide me. I can see a thick black line of infection reaching for my heart from the waistband of my trousers. Through the fugue, it is all the world like the path I have cut from the lowlands towards the aerial.

I will drag my leg behind me; I will drag it like a crumpled hatchback, tyres blown and sparking across the dimming lights of my vision. I am running out of painkillers and am following the flicker of the moon home. When Paul keeled over dead on the road to Damascus, they restarted his heart with the jump leads from a crumpled hatchback; it took twenty-one attempts to convince it to wake up.



A sound of torn metal, teeth running over the edge of the rocks, a moon that casts a signal. As I lay pinned beside you, the ticking of the cooling engine, and the calling from a great height, all my mind as a bypass.

I've begun my voyage in a paper boat without a bottom; I will fly to the moon in it. I have been folded along a crease in time, a weakness in the sheet of life. Now, you've settled on the opposite side of the paper to me; I can see your traces in the ink that soaks through the fibre, the pulped vegetation. When we become waterlogged, and the cage disintegrates, we will intermingle. When this paper aeroplane leaves the cliff edge, and carves parallel vapour trails in the dark, we will come together.

If only Donnelly had experienced this, he would have realised he was his own shoreline, as am I. Just as I am becoming this island, so he became his syphilis, retreating into the burning synapses, the stones, the infection.

Returning to my car afterwards, hands still shaking and a head split open by the impact. Goodbye to tearful aunts and traumatised uncles, goodbye to the phenomenal, goodbye to the tangible, goodbye Wolverhampton, goodbye Sandford, goodbye Cromer, goodbye Damascus. This cliff path is slippery in the dew; it is hard to climb with such an infection. I must carve out the bad flesh and sling it from the aerial. I must become infused with the very air.

There are headlights reflected in these retinas, too long in the tunnels of my island without a bottom. The sea creatures have risen to the surface, but the gulls are not here to carry them back to their nests. I have become fixed: open and staring, an eye turned on itself. I have become an infected leg, whose tracking lines form a perfect map of the junctions of the M5. I will take the exit at mid-thigh and plummet to my Esther.

The stones in my stomach will weigh me down and ensure my descent is true and straight. I will break through the fog of these godforsaken pills and achieve clarity. All my functions are clogged, all my veins are choked. If my leg doesn't rot off before I reach the summit, it will be a miracle. There are twenty-one connections in the circuit diagram of the anti-lock brakes, there are twenty-one species of gull inhabiting these islands, it is twenty-one miles between the Sandford junction and the turn off for home. All these things cannot, will not, be a co-incidence.

Bent back like a nail, like a hangnail, like a drowning man clung onto the wheel, drunk and spiraled, washed onto the lost shore under a moon as fractured as a shattered wing. We cleave, we are flight and suspended, these wretched painkillers, this form inconstant. I will take flight. I will take flight!

He was not drunk Esther, he was not drunk at all. He had not drunk with Donnelly or spat Jakobson back at the sea; he had not careered across the lost shores and terminal beaches of this nascent archipelago. He did not intend his bonnet to be crumpled like a spent tissue by the impact. His windscreen was not star-studded all over like a map of the heavens. His paintwork etched with circuit diagrams, strange fish to call the gulls away. The phosphorescence of the skid marks lighting the M5 all the way from Exeter to Damascus.

Blind with panic, deaf with the roar of the caged traffic, heart stopped on the road to Damascus, Paul, sat at the roadside hunched up like a gull, like a bloody gull. As useless and as doomed as a syphilitic cartographer, a dying goatherd, an infected leg, a kidney stone blocking the traffic bound for Sandford and Exeter. He was not drunk Esther, he was not drunk at all; all his roads and his tunnels and his paths led inevitably to this moment of impact. This is not a recorded natural condition: he should not be sat there with his chemicals and his circuit diagrams, he should not be sat there at all.

I have dredged these waters for the bones of the hermit, for the traces of Donnelly, for any sign of Jakobson's flock, for the empty bottle that would incriminate him. I have scoured this stretch of motorway twenty-one times attempting to recreate his trajectory, the point when his heart stopped dead and all he saw was the moon over the Sandford junction. He was not drunk Esther, he was not drunk at all, and it was not his fault, it was the converging lines that doomed him. This is not a recorded natural condition, the gulls do not fly so low over the motorway and cause him to swerve. The paint scored away from his car in lines, like an infection, making directly for the heart.

A gull perched on a spent bonnet, sideways, whilst the sirens fell through the middle distance and the metal moaned in grief about us. I am about this night in walking, old bread and gull bones, old Donnelly at the bar gripping his drink, old Esther walking with our children, old Paul, as ever, old Paul he shakes and he shivers and he turns off his lights alone.

I have run out of places to climb. I will abandon this body and take to the air.

We will leave twin vapour trails in the air, white lines etched into these rocks.

I am the aerial. In my passing, I will send news to each and every star.

Dear Esther. I have burnt my belongings, my books, this death certificate. Mine will be written all across this island. Who was Jakobson, who remembers him? Donnelly has written of him, but who was Donnelly, who remembers him? I have painted, carved, hewn, scored into this space all that I could draw from him. There will be another to these shores to remember me. I will rise from the ocean like an island without bottom, come together like a stone, become an aerial, a beacon that they will not forget you. We have always been drawn here: one day the gulls will return and nest in our bones and our history. I will look to my left and see Esther Donnelly, flying beside me. I will look to my right and see Paul Jakobson, flying beside me. They will leave white lines carved into the air to reach the mainland, where help will be sent.

Dear Esther. I have burned the cliffs of Damascus, I have drunk deep of it. My heart is my leg and a black line etched on the paper all along this boat without a bottom. You are all the world like a nest to me, in which eggs unbroken form like fossils, come together, shatter and send small black flowers to the very air. From this infection, hope. From this island, flight. From this grief, love. Come back! Come back...