

Phosphorescence

The boiling tide sweeps the beach down the plughole, sandgrains and stones, smears of ketchup and fire-blackened wood, colouring pencils forgotten on the varnished tables, shells down the drain and the bones picked clean. Long hours at the sink, working but achieving very little, another summer attempting unsuccessfully to escape from something I couldn't name. Last night I wrote a song in my owl-black tent, listening to the waves pounding relentlessly on the Llangennith tideline, thinking of the black wreck of the Helvetia, dark jagged ribs protruding from the sand, slowly falling apart for hundreds of years. This morning, my words are useless again in the face of all this washing up, the second-hand affairs of hundreds of strangers.

I try not to look at the clock, and eventually the sun's almost down. It gets late so early now. An orange glow hangs over the campsite in the windows of the empty cafe. The chairs are up on the tables. Ffion is sweeping up the detritus of the day - pennies, stray peas, empty sugar packets, coffee cup lids, ice cream tubs, tiny foothills of sand. I nod to her as I pass. She's not someone I've managed to get to know.

"There's a few of us going down for a swim in a bit if you want to come along" says Sam as I pass with a stack of teetering dishes. He's one of the teenagers that works front-of-house, camping with his family for the summer, from Somerset or Devon or somewhere. Restless and hyperactive, Sam would be irritating if his enthusiasm wasn't so endearing. "Apparently the phosphorescence has come again!" he yells after me as I trudge back to the sink and the endlessness of mugs and saucepans. Sometimes I'm not in the mood at the end of a long shift to go for a swim or a drink, or talk to my co-workers. Sometimes I'm filled with exhaustion and a shyness that could be mistaken for unfriendliness or arrogance. Today, though, the bank holiday heat, seared for hours into my muscles, fills me with the madness of the season as I slop a greasy, soapy mop across the kitchen, imagining the sparkling phosphorescence glinting on the damp floor or pouring out of the tap. Sometimes I am in the mood, sometimes there's a hunger I can hardly even conceal or express, a thirst to feel alive after staring at my submerged hands all day, running over the same old frustrated and hopeful thoughts, washed down the drain for better or for worse.

So I do go down the beach after that, after dusk, walking down with the boys, past the distant shouts from camper vans, smells of fag smoke and barbeques, flashing torches from tents and the boots of cars. Feeling the warm breeze coming around the peninsula as we walk through the dunes, seeing tiny points of light, bonfires in the distance. I'm glad I did, in the end, stepping into the freezing water, feeling the vast, deep darkness around me and seeing the blue-green phosphorescence encircling my hand like the sparklers I can vaguely remember holding at the rugby pitch years ago on bonfire night, like sparks from a lighter, an uncharted constellation in an alien sea. Feeling the fragility of this evening that's just one more unimaginably brief moment in a series of barely-remembered summers. Afterwards, I try to find my can of lager, half-buried somewhere on the black-after-dark beach, but it's gone.