

Wells

JENNA BUTLER

THE NORTH SEA SPEAKS CAREFULLY around a mouthful of flints.

THE BEACH IS A BUZZARD FEAST, SALTED CARNAGE. Miles upon miles of razor clams, caught by the headland, butterfly open under a cacophony of gulls. This is not the image you had held of this place, but it is right, if ironic. Memory has pinioned this beach as a place of calm; a dimly-recalled mother in housedress and cardigan, pockets bulging with hoarded stones, walking through the surf. At home, a telegram she had not allowed you to see, detailing the loss of your father at Normandy. Sitting on the beach in wellies and bathing trunks, you had wondered if she might not walk out into the sea. She was already weighted down with stones; it wouldn't have been much of a stretch. And she might have done, with greater impact. As it is, you have no recollection of her disappearance from memory. Her image simply filmed over like a dimming eye; sank cleanly and without fuss.

Out from the shelter of the pine woods, the wind along the tide line scours the lungs with unceremonious brutality. Sandwiches and tabbouleh in the beach bag over your shoulder, the smell of mint leaking from the Tupperware. On an ideal day, you'd slip out of your sandals and test the water with false bravado, feet so slim and pale they hurt to look at. Today, though, to do so would be to risk excoriation; clams pock the sand like chipped teeth, fragments from a war we knew nothing about.

YOU CURL INTO THE SAND, your hands folded in front of your face. The veins stand haphazard and blue, scuttling crazed like Hadrian's Wall. Around us, the wind dips and chews; the dunes shift in protest.

Into the holes in your mind, I trail breadcrumbs, poke words like tongue in a smile gone gapped. The paucity of what's solid. The overgenerous space. *Tern. Tideline.* Watch you hold for a moment, your face twisted with naming, then slide slack. This, the way of doldrums: sudden, that theft, all forward momentum gone.

I watch you watching terns, lips groping after language.
Becalmed.

THERE WAS AN AUNT IN BATTERSEA who never came out of the war. How easy it was then to lose one woman amidst a whole country dredging itself from the Blitz. Everyone walking wounded. It was not her body but her words that failed, however; petering themselves out in the new Covent Garden Market over parsnips, Darjeeling, Ceylon. She found herself deconstructed word by word until housebound, where only muscle memory told her how to poach fish, and that she did, after all, take sugar with tea. In the back garden, the old Doyenne pear blossomed frantically, its crown alight with bees. She watched as the fruits came, blushing, thrusting their rotund bodies against the window glass.

We visited her only once before the Home, before the stroke that left body and mind wracked and gone. Early summer, the house rank with the scent of overripe fruit. A stilted lunch in the living room, the plaster peeling from age and damp, and how she ate pears with the tears running down her face.

YOU KNEW THAT THE WORDS WERE LEAVING YOU when your back was turned. They were getting out somehow—subterfuge, disguise, swimming the moat. Bed sheets strung together like semaphore flags from an outside wall. The tricky part was catching them in the act. Bemused rather than angry, you'd ask, *How can you miss something when you don't even realize it's gone? When you don't even remember its presence in the first place?*

I unearthed your notes in arcane places. *Take off parking brake*, in a careful hand. *Mozzarella, not good for fondue*. And once, on the bird table in faded Biro, *Cardinals prefer walnuts*.

When you could no longer remember that you kept a package of Post-its in your shirt pocket, the notes appeared in whatever was to hand. Our house became a litany of your absences. Indelible marker on the dryer, cribbed careful and small. *Bleach only with whites*.

On the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, once in desperation: *Sleeping pills. TWO only*.

As if it'd make any difference. As if you'd wake up one day and your mind would pick itself up again, put together all those myriad fragments. The Post-its, tidily recording every bit as it slipped. The markers, the Biros, the pencil jottings on Formica under the placemat on your side of the table. The list in thin black felt-tip on your wrist, kissing up to your skin like some bizarre tattoo. The words for half a dozen different vegetables. Under the cuff, faintly, and where you thought I might not see, my name.

One day, there will be more of those notes than you will have words.

One day, I will gather them together and reassemble you.

THAT? *TERN*. *It skips over the waves, airstrike, its cry angling behind it. Those plants. Sea lavender, that purple haze over the saltings. Samphire. Glasswort. Pine trees? Corsican. Holm oaks behind. What's this? The fork? Or do you mean—No, this. Tabbouleh. Bulgur and tomato. Parsley. Lemon. Mint. (A slow smile, eyes brightening, hanging on.) Mint, yes, from the garden. It got its roots in there and it never came out. Yards of the stuff.*

It got its roots in there and it never came out.

All the names I know, and the only one I don't want to:

this.

YOU USED TO BE ABLE TO TALK AROUND THE GAPS, find words that were right enough, with acrobatic deftness. Now your tongue trips, mind falls flat like marram grass in a sea gale. Your leaps of logic confound even you, leave your listeners coughing into their hands, frantic for distraction.

You loved this beach once. The wind, the way it rips off the sea on a blustery day, what it drives up onto the sand. Whelks, polished stones, gull feathers battered like spindles. Bottle glass, bright colours scarified, filmed over. The same look in your eyes now when you turn to me, unsure, not wanting to ask.