

Crab Walk

You end up some place where a sea breeze struggles beneath the city stench. The bag you've packed swings its awkward weight between your shoulders, occasionally bumping against your crutches, which in turn knocks you off balance and jars your gait to a stumble. As you filter through lazily-hostile summer crowds, you feel outcast, less than anonymous: the mob on the city streets can't name you, don't know you, but they know *your kind* and they want you out. You are too strange for their everyday rhythms.

#

You'd snuck out of your flat while he'd been asleep, a week's supply of meds – a stash you'd built over weeks so as not to arouse suspicion – enfolded in tin foil and tucked into your shoe.

#

After you left, the threats came in thick and fast: vibrations, flashes of blue and pixels, paper screwed up in packages with dismembered parts of your old life, angry flesh and shouts and pounding fists at the door. Suddenly, the childhood home you fled to felt devoid of protection.

He's said he'll get you.

The police said they've done all they can.

#

The police hadn't offered much besides a restraining order. Fear, and the distance he'd spent months levying between you and anyone that could have helped, prevent you from

reaching out. He can trace your iPhone, use your bank accounts. You've tried to protect what you can, and you've disconnected or closed what you can't but, in the end, you can't keep him out. He has all the power, and who are you?

#

You left without telling your parents where you were going. You didn't know where you were heading; you just knew you had to leave.

#

The pebbles shift under your crutches making you stumble, but you need to be near the waves – their endless motion, the endless renewal – as though through proximity you too can be refreshed, renewed, remade. But the wind brings tumbles of conversation amidst the gull-shrieked sky-sharp declarations –

'Spastic!'

– so you move on.

#

You'd planned to get more meds while staying with your family, but he'd caught up with you faster than your prescriptions came through, and now, without those pharmaceutical buffers, the pain creeps up into every fibre, those abnormal genes reclaiming control of your body.

#

You are too strange for everyday rhythms.

#

You walk through the evening hours until the crowds on the beach recede and the lights of the restaurants and amusement arcades retreat, leaving only you and sunlight dying on waves. You slink your bag from your shoulders and remove your shoes. Your arms hang stiffly in the cradles of your crutches. Your crutches are jammed into the ooze-wet shingle. You pause.

The water spins at your feet – it's a thousand tiny jaws of bright cold nipping at your goose-pimpled flesh. Each jolt grounds you in the present; each electric gnaw anchors you to the now. You watch the waves come and go, and notice how it doesn't bother the sea so much to have the waves there or gone or rolling, and you wonder about your future, and whether you might get one.

#

With staggered steps you head back to the concrete wall that separates shingle from tarmac, thinking to wedge yourself against its towering height until the dark fades out again. A Pink Floyd song wavers through a tinny speaker, the melody disrupted and distorted by the crests and lulls of people's voices.

'Alright, love?'

A small flame clings to a stove not far from you, its light barely daring to penetrate the darkness. Around it, three figures crouch, squat, sprawl.

'We got tea. Plenty to spare.'

In the quickening dark, with faces near invisible, they welcome you. A hot drink and a kind word – and an absence of judgement – break open something inside of you. There's a sense of safety you haven't had in a long while. You feel a knot begin to release and wonder if you should allow the hard place that houses it to unfurl.

#

Pain wakes you. The day is stark, the stones scorched. Clusters of people sit, smoke, shout and run in clumped intervals. You have nowhere to hide from the reproachful looks and there is no escaping your own seething flesh and sinews.

Please, you think, even now trying to hide the thought within the deep-creviced places of your face. Let me be seen, or let me be invisible.

To be half of each is hell.

#

Another night draws in, and when a new face joins the flickering shadows around the fire, you listen. His voice is deliberately light, the scent he brings is sweet and heady. It reminds you of giggling teenage days.

And it gets the pain to trickle away, for a little while, and at little cost.

#

The man promises more.

The man says you have to get into a van. Two rake-slim others with dirt-grubbed fingers sway in the back beside you, and stories and questions and a bottle of wine and a joint are passed around.

#

The man takes you home.

You don't care; you are wrapped up in warmth, and it's easy not to fight.

The pain dips below the horizon. You are too strange for everyday rhythms.

###