

Maria Blake

Pebbles

*Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.
– “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold*

Each morning, after the storm subsides, I leave my house and walk down to Dover beach.

The misty stillness after a calamitous night seems strange and unnecessary. The cold breeze ruffles my tangled hair and brings back the distant murmur of waves. It has always been a special place for me, years before I decided to settle down on the south coast of England.

“I want to see the white cliffs,” I proceeded to add wistfully, when I told Fieke I was going to England for the first time in my life.

“Why?” she sounded rather surprised and amused by my reply. “How about visiting Stratford-upon-Avon instead? There are flowers everywhere in early spring!”

There must be, indeed. A passionate learner and an avid reader, she was fond of Shakespearean verse and wanted me to visit his birthplace, so that she could see it through my eyes.

“I’ve been dreaming of standing on the edge of a rock, gazing at the horizon beyond the boundless sea,” I declared humbly lest she should think me intolerably romantic.

Yet she never pushed me away, even though she was older, and hence more experienced, while I was young and starry-eyed, like most people are at their early twenties.

Fieke and I met in Munster, an inland nondescript German town. It belongs to a particular kind of city, those that are good for being raised in, and then, when a chance comes, for being left for good. Fieke never made it. Committed to her books, she was bound to the work in a local library, always poring over the manuscripts and writing restlessly, trying to discover something I had no idea of. I was brave enough to ask her once what it was, but Fieke merely replied: “Eternity.”

She was the one to take me under her wing after seeing me linger in the library till late, because I was scared of returning home. When my parents’ marriage was collapsing and the earth was crumbling under my feet, she let me take shelter in her home. Fieke winced painfully every time somebody addressed her by her full name. Few were able to pronounce it correctly for the first time. So that’s how her soft features and stern character, along with her silky voice, have been preserved in my memory – my dearest Fieke. I hoped I could be like her one day, strong and persistent in every intention.

I stoop and pick up a cold round pebble from under my feet. The sea has polished it cherishingly for hundreds of years before it acquired its smooth and glossy shape. I roll it over in my hand and almost let it slip through my fingers. Each pebble is the time we had together, every passage from the books we loved. They are the seconds of joy which seem everlasting before fading into a memory.

Fifteen years have elapsed since then. I have studied in America near the Great Lakes, written dozens of worthless articles, and spent three years working in Asia just to end up moving to Dover. I'm growing old, and as years fly by, and experience keeps building up along with grief and countless losses, I find myself at the point where the best change is making none. That is why I'm staying here, reading and pouring my heart out in ink, doing the same things day by day. It grants a feeling of stability: life is not going to take anything from me as there is nothing left to take, really.

I sit down on the shore and reach for another damp stone – slightly ragged, covered with brown freckles – and start to reenact our dialogues inside my head. “What matters most,” Fieke’s words are brought back to me by the rumbling of the waves and I can almost see her face framed by the black combings of hair, “is the mark in the world you leave. Even if you can’t see it, even if it seems utterly insignificant, it remains nonetheless. We may not have much, but our words do make a difference. It is the only known way to outlive your own self.”

Fieke passed away ten years ago. I still wish I could bring her here, to this shore; wish she had a chance to climb atop the cliffs and hear the gentle breeze crooning mariners’ lullabies; wish we could light a fire and read while storms roared outside. Perhaps here she would have finally found what she was so desperately looking for, but what all the books were unable to provide.

“Would it be possible,” I whisper helplessly under my breath, “to acquire Eternity in the memory of one person?”

I never got a chance to ask her this question, nor will she ever learn how deep her words have taken root in my heart, and now it is bleeding with unspoken sorrow, struggling to claw its way out. I toss the freckled stone far into the main for the waves to cradle it and bring it down to the depths below. “*Save that my soul’s imaginary sight presents thy shadow to my sightless view...*”^[i] The lines wash over the shores of reminiscence before receding into the imminent blackness.

The waves are becoming timid and gentle; the ravaging sea hound is an obedient cub once more. That means I have to get up and return to my personal battlefield, located between the lines of a story and a sequence of heartbeats – the only place my sightless self acquires vision and perceives two voices in every sentence, intertwining – those of mine and hers.

The place where to both of us Eternity is granted.

[i] Sonnet XXVII by Shakespeare

Maria Smirnova (penname: Maria Blake) – a young emerging translator, currently majoring in Linguistics in Russia. The presented short narrative follows the nostalgic feelings of reminiscence and longing for what we cannot have, unfolding beside the white cliffs of Dover.