

Black Rock

Caitlin Gardner

EACH EVENING that autumn, she would drag out her rickety easel and sit cross-legged before it on the pier as she waited for the sun to disappear behind the bend of Black Rock, leaving in its wake the darkening silhouette of trees and rooftops pressed against the cliff face. A soft, salty breeze hung about the air, stinging her eyes and sending a chill down her spine. She was at ease here, blissfully alone and away from the incandescent, artificial lighting of the clinic and the ophthalmometer screens. It was through the act of painting that she had learned what she had failed to learn through years of studying and then later practising optometry. It was through this medium alone that she had learned to expose the world in its rawest, uninhibited form as if through the eyes of a newborn infant; before the mind had superimposed structure, meaning, language and anything else we can conceptualise.

Inhaling deeply, she pulled out her acrylics and unravelled the knot of string binding the brushes; it was time. The sun had slipped from view, leaving an idiosyncratic haze of layers — translated into her individual palette of hues; the azure vastness of sky stretched before her, the deep lilac swathe above the opposite shore, the thin band of muted salmon beneath the golden burst of clouds — these infinite amalgamations of colours had imprinted themselves in their own unique way deep within the recesses of her memory. As always, she started with the horizon. The first stroke of the brush was crucial, the

balance of the entire painting depended upon it. Of course this line would be buried beneath a thick film of paint by the time she arrived at some semblance of a conclusion, but that was entirely irrelevant. Her task for now would be not to over-define the coastline — no, she must always hover on the cusp of obscurity. That was the essence of her art, revealing only what was absolutely necessary and not a brushstroke more, just enough information to allow for the subtle, subconscious, process of interpretation. For it was the mind that made the image; the light that reached the retina was an anarchic mess entirely dependent upon the brain for meaning. But what mattered to her now was how the anarchy on her retina metamorphosed itself onto art on the canvas.

She wasn't remotely interested in conveying truth per se, there were cameras for that. The retina wasn't symmetrically pixelated like a photograph, anyway. Her task would simply be to transmit the private phenomenon of her innermost unquantifiable *Istigkeit*¹ onto this scrap of canvas. Sighing, she stretched her legs, and slid them between the railings out above the sea. Between the slats, creamy shells were vaguely discernible underneath the rippling, glassy water. She attempted to emphasise the horizon again, which now appeared to be a deep sapphire, but would soon be settling into the haze of grey in the distance. She wished it were a clearer night. The colours blended together in her mind's eye, swirls of deep indigo, slate where the waves quietly came into shore. It frustrated her for a moment; it felt as if the blue wasn't trying very hard to maintain itself. Could it really be classified as blue anymore, with the pigmentation of the ocean deepening with each passing moment? Pinks were always much more difficult for her though, because of their transience, always dancing cherubically in between the clouds, never staying put quite long enough to be captured in paint. Despite this, she could never have allowed herself to bring along a torch; if she did she needn't have come at all.

Darkness was creeping in around her now, the road above illuminated by streetlights and houses. The steady hum of cars from the motorway above filled her ears and the night air was cold on her skin, but she willed herself to focus on the coalesced mass of fading colour sitting on the easel before her. It was increasingly difficult to resist the temptation of turning her head towards the slightly lighter side of the no longer quite cyaneous ocean, she only ever sat directly facing west for just that reason. Pausing, she noticed for the first time that the pier's wooden beam was no longer the chipped, fading paint she knew it to be. Keenly aware of her own mesopic range, she peered down at the palette balanced on her lap. A muted cyan, somewhere between green and blue. Orange wisps of clouds were just barely visible above the precipice, but by the time she found a brush delicate enough it would be gone. Evanescent. This was the part of the evening she liked least. She frantically tried to get some last, precise ambiguity out of the canvas but it was futile; she was done.

Easel tucked under her arm and painting in a trolley trailing behind, she walked back home under a blanket of stars. No one, not even her husband, who knew her better than anyone, understood why she bothered to paint; why she made her way down to the beach each day once the children were in bed to find what was so intangible, so ephemeral. She didn't maintain any pretensions from her evenings at the pier; she never claimed to have superior knowledge of the intricate workings of the visual cortex, or an elevated appreciation of art as an insight into perception at the very earliest stages. Her paintings were entirely lacking in any sort of coherency or traditional verisimilitude. When she took the canvas home that night and set it out against all the others from that autumn it was, as she had expected, in comparison nothing more than lines and colour. Although she thought she had given just enough information that if one really looked, provided of course, with their head

tilted and their eyes squinted, it perhaps vaguely resembled a sunset.

Endnote

- 1 Concept of *Istigkeit* taken from Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*.



Caitlin Gardner wrote this in 2013 when she was in Year 12 at Mentone Girls' Grammar School in Victoria.