

I Can Hear the Sea
Peter Dorey

7th Feb 1991

As the ferry approaches the island, you point to a clifftop. The house is a hazy apparition in the morning mist.
To be alone with each other, to hear our own thoughts mixed with the sea and write of the future.
It doesn't seem real.

The walk from Wrenfall is long and our bags are heavy. When we arrive, we can do nothing but sleep.

~

8th Feb 1991

Before the house, to hear you speak of it was like listening to someone recall a half-forgotten dream, the whispered promise of deceived senses. And yet, to stand here now with the windows thrown wide, recalling every detail you'd described: the smells are the same, the sounds are the same. I can hear the sea.

~

9th Feb 1991

50 metres behind the house, a wire fence runs along the clifftop, keeping wayward travellers from a 150 metre drop. We spend the day painting the house and speculating which of us would be clumsy enough to fall were the fence not there.

~

10th Feb 1991

The smell of drying paint mixes with that of the sea, and soon I can no longer tell one from the other. I look at the blank white walls and see foam on an ebbing tide. I lie in bed and stare up at the blue ceiling as if from the ocean floor.
When I close the windows and lock the doors, it is like I am shutting the sea in with us: its colour, its weight.

~

13th Feb 1991

The novel will write itself, of this you are certain. The sea will tell you a story in your dreams, delivering an endless stream of messages in bottles until you are done, or else the coast is lined with glass.

You spend most of your days indoors, head down and pen in hand.
From the clifftop, I watch cormorants dive.

~

15th Feb 1991

It is clear now that the drop beyond the fence is creeping closer. I inquire in town, but they claim that no significant erosion was recorded before our arrival.

~

17th Feb 1991

The sea has claimed 1 metre of land.

I convince you to put down the pen and leave the house. The pub landlord's wife, Sally, gives us a brief tour of the village. Wrenfall's narrow, cobbled streets seem to lead us by

Fiction

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the hand, and we spend hours just walking and talking. It's not until dusk falls that we notice we've been passing the same tiny handful of buildings in a loop.

20th Feb 1991

The sea has claimed 2 metres of land.

You are always secretive when it comes to your writing. A piece must be complete before anyone can even know the title. I ask you what the novel will be about. Your answer is vague. History and truth, you say. I ask if you can really have the one with the other and you pretend not to hear.

22nd Feb 1991

The sea has claimed 3 metres of land.

A stretch of the wire fence that runs along the clifftop behind the house is gone. I peer over the edge, a childish excitement washing away the gnawing sense of dread.

25th Feb 1991

The sea has claimed 5 metres of land.

If, on a clear day, you walk south from the house for ten minutes and stand with your back to the sea, you will have a full view of Wrenfall. It is the only village on the island, built into the side of a hill and stretching upwards in the shape of an elongated O. Sometimes, with the sound of the sea filling my ears, it seems to me like a hissing mouth.

28th Feb 1991

The sea has claimed 8 metres of land.

You say that you cannot write – that words are snatched away, as quick as they come, by crashing waves or the hammering of rain on roof tiles. Even in the silent hours, your pen makes no mark.

You stay up late with a bottle, but give up earlier and earlier, abandoning your work to walk along the clifftop, no matter the weather.

3rd March 1991

The sea has claimed 12 metres of land.

At the northern end of the island, the land is flat, save for one large barrow: the grave of a Viking ship. To think how much effort it must have taken to drag it from the water and commit it to the earth.

I can't help but wonder how long it will be until the sea takes it back.

7th March 1991

The sea has claimed 16 metres of land.

As if spurning the sea it depends upon, Wrenfall shrinks into its hill, away from the waves and the cawing of seagulls. The docks lie a mile to the west, and each morning fishermen set off, stony-faced, as if marching to war.

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During the day, Wrenfall feels deserted. I wander a while and talk with Sally before heading home, accompanied only by the sound of my footsteps, echoing down the streets I leave behind.

~

8th March 1991
The sea has claimed 17 metres of land.

I spend the day walking the hills. When I return home, the pages are still blank, the bottles are empty, and you are gone.

~

9th March 1991
The sea has claimed 18 metres of land.

I wait. You don't come home.

~

10th March 1991
The sea has claimed 19 metres of land.

They say that a search of the island has found no trace of you. All the boats at the docks are accounted for and the ferry is not due for another 2 days. They notice the empty bottles and exchange glances.

~

11th March 1991
The sea has claimed 20 metres of land.

I dream of reading your unfinished novel, searching for clues, only to find that it had been about a writer who walks into the sea. When I awake, I gather the papers and lock them in a drawer.

I kept your pen. You never liked me borrowing it. I'll use it to write this diary. Perhaps that's what it takes to bring you back.

~

13th March 1991
The sea has claimed 23 metres of land.

Sally comes by to offer support, but I can barely manage the formalities. There are no clean cups, and dishes lie unwashed in the sink. We sit in silence for what feels like an age before she makes her excuses and leaves. I spend the rest of the day at the cliff, trying to think of you, but my thoughts drift and return a jumble.

~

16th March 1991
The sea has claimed 25 metres of land.

I walk the western beach, seeking clarity in the crunch of shingle and seashell. I find a washed-up broken bottle and tell myself it isn't yours.

~

20th March 1991
The sea has claimed 27 metres of land.

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Time is saltwater, and I begin to question the calendar. It has been less than two months since we arrived at the island, yet I measure the distance from the house to the cliff each morning and the days disappear in sea spray.

~

23rd March 1991

The sea has claimed 29 metres of land.

To the southeast, the island tapers to a point, where an abandoned lighthouse stands. The spiralling stone steps come to a sudden halt halfway up, smashed from the wall and impassable. For the briefest of moments, the wind that blows in through broken windows sounds like your voice.

~

30th March 1991

The sea has claimed 35 metres of land.

They come by more frequently now. Something must be done, they say. The policeman talks of the likelihood of finding you. He talks of my options. The solicitor talks of moving, returning, going home.

But where is home if not with you?

~

2nd April 1991

The sea has claimed 38 metres of land.

The funeral is short and the coffin is empty. Their condolences are mixed with concerns for the house. Wrenfall's church bells ring in my ears long after it is over.

~

7th April 1991

The sea has claimed 41 metres of land.

I imagine myself sitting here until the last moment or longer, your pen still eroding the page, measuring those final seconds in ink.

~

8th April 1991

The sea has claimed 42 metres of land.

Bricks are loosening and a sea breeze finds its way through the walls. The situation is untenable, they say, and threaten to remove me if I insist on remaining.

~

10th April 1991

The sea has claimed 46 metres of land.

I leave before they can make me and take the room above the pub. It smells of people. The wait for the ferry will be long and quiet.

~

15th April 1991

The sea has claimed 53 metres of land.

As the ferry leaves the island behind, I look to the house. Half has slipped away already. Soon the rest will follow, and you will be home again.
I close my eyes and listen to the sea.

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