Death and Destruction, Innocence and beauty: a day at the seaside – not what I was expecting…

I’ve been to Weybourne beach many times. I like it because it’s quieter than Sheringham, probably because it’s mostly pebbles, rather than sand and there are no ice-cream vans, shops or much in the way of tourist attractions of any kind (although there is a new Deep History mobile app station in the car park). It’s usually just me, the dog and some people fishing (there are occasionally other people walking their dogs too). When I first arrived in Norfolk, it was my Sunday evening place; I would go there to sing and watch the sun set before having a coffee at the local pub. It has always been a place of calm and relaxation, so I thought it would be an ideal place to spend an hour in the name of being embodied amongst creation. As usual, Avalon, the dog, came too; for me, part of what it means to embody creation is my relationship with animals that are not necessarily human. Avalon conveniently comes equipped with all the outdoor clothing he requires, as it was 6 degrees Celsius and the pebbles can prove an unusual challenge to walk on (good for the inner thighs), I donned my big coat, hat, gloves and wellies.

It’s a short drive down a quiet coastal road to Weybourne beach from my house. A quick peep in my car will tell you that Avalon sits on the back seat; increasingly there is more of him on the seat cover than on the dog. We sing along to pop songs as we drive, noticing on the satnav how close we are to the old steam railway, the golf course, the windmill… all human inventions that have somehow become part of the landscape.

After 6pm, the car park is free. It’s 3.30pm - £1.50 for an hour! For once, I actually have change (although the machine takes cards – sign of the times) because I bought a Big Issue from the lady in town earlier, who travels on the train all the way from Ipswich every day (she reckons it’s worth it).

We set off… I have taken a picture of our view as we arrive at the beach. As expected, just me, the dog and some people fishing, all evenly spaced along the shore; this is not a place where people come to interact with other humans. I decide to shoot a video of my feet trudging across the pebbles, so I can share the sound and perhaps capture something of the crunching sensation underfoot. You will hear the surprised tone in my voice when we suddenly come upon hundreds of starfish, marooned on the shoreline. I have been here many times and never seen this. They are everywhere! How long have they been washed up? Perhaps they are dying, or dead… As I continue to walk along, there are also a few flounder. I recall the story of the little boy who finds a similar scene and starts throwing them back into the sea. The adult with him points out that there are so many he can’t save them all, so what difference does it make? The boy’s response ‘it makes a difference to that one’. I pick up a couple that seem to still be showing signs of life and throw them back in. Just as I do, an uncharacteristically large wave comes back at me, splashing right up to my middle. I check to see that the starfish and flounder I rescued haven’t been washed up again. It almost felt like I was fighting the sea then, perhaps fighting against the destiny of those creatures. I reflect with curiosity upon the compassion I feel for these creatures, whilst idly accepting the fate of those caught on the hooks of those who are fishing just a few meters away and upon the fact that I have two ray wings in my freezer. But this is different; nobody is going to eat the starfish – they will be wasted (of course, they won’t – there are all sorts of little critters who will dine on them). I keep walking, trying not to step on their bodies. I come across the headless carcass of a seal pup.

In the midst of all of this, oblivious to the carcasses around him, Avalon has found a piece of driftwood and is proposing we play fetch. After stopping to listen to the sound of the waves washing the pebbles back and forth (louder than you might expect), we head inland to the cliffs. A Mammoth skeleton was found on Weybourne beach once. People still come here, looking for fossils. The cliffs are chalk, with bits of flint and crumble at the touch. Two million years old and full of history, yet so vulnerable, there is evidence of recent cliff-fall. Was this nature, or caused by human footfall, searching for (and perhaps gouging out) fossils? There are all sorts of nooks and crannies within the cliff-face. Upon one outcrop, I find a beautiful tiny cairn of stones. Inside another I find left behind junk.

I can’t help reflecting on the book about Gnosticism that I have read that morning, I can see why they thought the material world was evil, created by an evil demiurge. Yet, in the midst of all the carcasses, the ferocity of the sea, the pollution, there is beauty and creativity in the tiny pile of stones, innocence in a pet dog at play and love between one animal companion and another. I cannot lose my hold on hope. I think the Gnostics were wrong. I still think God is good.

As we leave, the sun is setting over the hills…

A boat on the beach

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A close up of a rock

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