



I like stony beaches.
— Zarina Muhammad

In 2050 I will be 56 years old, the same age that my mother is now. I think I will look like her. I will move through the sun bleached walkway of the shopping centre. The terrazzo tiles will be bone white. Out through the glass fronted arch, I will meet the ghost of my dear friend. Karl Marx will be waiting for me at the new coastline: the brand new stony beach. He will be wearing a long black trench coat, and I will look at him as he holds a chippy dinner wrapped in newspaper, grease stains translucent in patches. It will be cold, crisp; the sun will be shining and I will blink at him from behind dark sunglasses.

‘All of this used to be pavement,’
he will say.

He will stand still; like a stoic, like an anguished hero. The wind will blow back his hair.

I will look silently out at the waves as they roll in over the stones, fizzing out into heavy foam at our feet.

‘There used to be an explosives factory there. And the Peasants Revolt started over where that bay is.’ He will point out across the water, to where the coastline will retreat back into itself.

Maybe we will be able to see the fine details of the luxury waterfront properties. Their glass balconies, the folds of parasols, wine glasses strewn across tables, the al fresco dining areas.

‘You have never been nostalgic,’ he will say to me, ‘you have never looked back with sadness.’

A tear will roll down my cheek, fat and turgid. I will look into his eyes, dark creases squinting into the white sun. We will cry together on the stony beach. Burning tears from our black eyes, red and bloodshot.

I will take a chip from the packet in his hands.

I will accuse him with it.

‘You are an economist, Karl. You know nothing about nostalgia.’

His look will turn cold now, ‘I wrote fiction! I studied art history! I could have been a poet!’

Poet, a poet, a poet; the stony beach will echo with his cry. The rocks will absorb the words, hold them tight within themselves.

I do not know if art will exist here on this beach, down this coastline, on this sinking island. But bubbles will rise up, collecting across the wet stones at our feet.

‘Tell me about alienation, Karl.’

The waves will drown out my whisper.

Maybe one day when the sea reclaims the pavement, we will understand the way art came apart at its hinges. The waves will bring in the dead bodies of fish, swollen and split open by the micro-plastics that built up in their guts. Coastline will crumble into the sea; all that will be left will be luxury holiday homes and the mythology of an English Riveria. One day and all of a sudden, the abstract theoretical context of our little decorative commodities will feel very very small.

Karl will still be looking at me while I think about the dead fish, how they were strangled by the red netting of a satsuma bag.

‘I think you doubt the value and purpose of contemporary art,’ he will say to me.

‘Of course I do,’ I will throw my head back and laugh. ‘OF COURSE I DO!’

‘Don’t be facetious,’ Karl will point at me, furious. ‘Art begins where theory and language end, where they cease to articulate themselves coherently.’

‘You are being sentimental,’ I will be furious too, I will spit. ‘You are forgetting about the State.’

‘I am a Taurus, I move slowly with a stubborn fury. I never forget about the State. It is you, YOU are being sentimental. You’re forgetting about the things that existed away from the State. You’re forgetting that it wasn’t just about the State itself.’

The roar of the sea will rise up to fill the space widening between us. As I stand staring at Karl, the high points of my cheeks will burn where they catch the sun.

He will continue. ‘Not everything is governed by the logic of capital and institution. And you always did fetishise the periphery. When the state shrank, its void was filled by smaller, more nimble replicas. Just because something is small, doesn’t mean it is good. You forget about the parts away from that, the parts that moved to a different rhythm.’

‘I think that is spiteful,’ I will turn away from him, with tears in my eyes.

He will soften, relent. He will sigh and stare back out at the waves.

He will say, ‘in a perfect world, there would be a perfect government, or maybe even no government at all. Sometimes it’s all there, just below your line of sight.’

Karl Marx will make me cry again on the stony beach, but this time it will be a less abstract sadness. I will cry because I have remembered the ways the pace of deterioration outstripped me, how powerless we all were to stop it. He will crumple up the greasy newspaper, ball it tight and throw it out into the sea. Through tears and grief, we will both watch it move back and forth on a cresting wave.

‘Revolution is more than just a buzzword, my dear dear friend,’ Karl will now lay his hand gently on my shoulder. It will be wide and heavy, I will feel myself slowed and steadied by the constancy of its weight.

I will continue to weep. This time it will be for nostalgia and regret rather than sadness. This time the tears will feel like acid, like tumbling rocks.

‘Oh Karl,’ I will cry, ‘the world has changed so much, it is almost incoherent to me now. I don’t recognise the most of it, I don’t know where its pressure points are. It is so distant and hazy and alien. I have spent too much time away from it, and now it has left me behind.’

He will nod with understanding, silent in the face of my large and expanding sadness.

Karl will open his long black trench coat, he will silently pull out a 20 pack of blue Sterling Superkings. He will pass me one, careful not to touch the filter as he slides it out the pack. We will sink to the ground on folded legs, sighing.

As I light my cigarette, Karl will tap his against the first knuckle on his left hand. He will look out to the roaring sea and say, ‘the relations of production are the

same, despite the fact that the surface of society is unrecognisable to you right now. It has always been a rumbling constant, it has never changed fundamentally.'

'I sounds like it's the only thing I can rely on.'

'You know that isn't true at all.'

I will hang my head, resting my forehead against my bony knees. I will sigh.

'We all could have been poets. Any one of us.' I will raise my head, raise my voice to a shout, 'Everyone, everyone, EVERYONE! ANYONE COULD HAVE BEEN A POET!'

The tide will rise through. Waves will meet us where we sit.

Karl will pause a second, and say, 'a burnt out space isn't a wasteland, it is a container. They burn the fields so they can sow seeds. It is all waiting for us.'

There will come a time when everything I know and love will be swallowed by the sea and its heaving surface. I do not know if I will stand on that stony beach with Karl as a person, or as a ghost.

I don't know how to write about a speculative future when the present is still so unstable.

Tell me, tell me about alienation, Karl.

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