

Prologue: We Hear You Now

Alinah Azadeh

An encounter in 2053 between a young traveller and the chalk cliffs brings an unexpected change in the landscape.

The far edge of a cliff – Haven Brow – with its jagged patches of bright emerald grass amid balding chalkland, rises into view. Below, a creamy, slate-grey sea, meeting a beach of muted ochre, blue and pink pebbles. Above, across a crystal blue sky, families of torn up cloud forms pass over, casting light shadows across the mouth of the adjacent valley.

In recent decades, as the waters brought the saltmarsh to stretch itself more fully into this valley, reshaping the flow of river and meanders, the coastline here became increasingly elusive, and access grew more perilous. But still

many came, drawn to the crumbling beauty of the chalkland edge, watching it turn the sea milky at intervals, its outer crust melting back into its mother's watery womb, and finding relief and refuge in the wide, marine horizon beyond.

84 million years ago, when all the cliffs were simply part of the seabed, these delicately ageing chalk beasts remembered how comforting it had once been to just lie low in deep water and let the rhythm of the tides gently lull them to sleep. So much easier than the vulnerability of being battered at full force by wind, rain, and the intensifying cycles of expansion, contraction and release.

These cliffs also remembered how the ice had melted and a crack had appeared at their core, exposing a raw layer cake of chalk, sand, silt and flint. This had caused a disconcerting split within the cliffs themselves, birthing this small island and its few outliers. An island then left on the margins of the larger mainland, alone. Orphaned. But the Seven Sisters on this southern edge had each other, at least. They had long ago become eight and would multiply again as soon as the chalk fell, aligning with the inland imprint of the Sussex Downs' bows and bends.

Although these chalk cliffs were a ghost nation of minerals, they still hungrily absorbed the remains of shell and bone of insects, animals and – with the Anthropocene – of humans. Humans who had arrived on and populated this land over millennia. Humans who had drowned in the many shipwrecks and other misadventures along this coast, falling and sinking into the shifting, inky-blue waters. More recently, the cliffs had noticed those trying to reach the shore further east on fragile boats, when all other routes to seeking refuge on this island had closed. An undercurrent of pain swelled against the sides of the cliffs every time they felt the soft limbs of a body against them. It was around this time that they realised not since the era of war and attempted invasions had they been given an identity which was alien to them; they had become a hard border, a site of violence again. Their tears bled into the sea and its temperature rose. This continued for decades.

And then, one late spring afternoon, a lone traveller to Haven Brow lay down to rest, settling back far enough from the cliff edge to safely take in the panorama of ocean, chalk and sky. The traveller, a girl, had walked for several hours and taken a new route that day, determined to discover a part of the coast that was unknown to her as yet. Close to falling into sleep – with her long, jet-black hair let loose on the grass, walking boots encrusted with mud,

and the rosy afterglow of sunbeams on her olive skin – she drew a sharp breath in and sat up. No, it couldn't be. She looked around to see if anyone was approaching. She was definitely alone. And then it happened again: the echo of voices emanating from the ground below. A mixture of fear, disbelief and excitement surged through her body as she strained her ears for greater clarity.

The girl's right ear became a tender, curious funnel for the voices and sounds rising through the chalk and flint channels and how clear they were seemed to depend on where exactly she lay and how hard she listened. At certain points, she detected five or six distinct voices bubbling up towards her. Elsewhere, where the chalk was the most exposed, came a few hundred more cacophonous and intense voices in a whole spectrum of languages, merging at times with the wave song at low tide below. Some of them spoke, sang and lamented in her mother tongue! And some in the tongue she had learned growing up here. The voices told stories of journeys to this island. Of arrivals, departures, loss, longing and reunion.

The girl was sure she detected birdsong among them, birdsong which had long disappeared from these shores, and the unearthly, amplified sounds of other animal and insect life, but she couldn't be sure.

The girl lay there for hours, through sunset and darkness, transfixed, her initial fears transformed into fascination and a growing sense of kinship as she listened to the chalk. She didn't know if what she was hearing had been there all along, dormant, or if this had suddenly begun to happen, like a switch being flicked on by her presence.

In the years following the Great Pandemics, as the waves of grief at the loss of loved ones fostered the breaking of many hearts and the softening of others, the cliffs sensed the increased human need for connection with this coastal land and what lay beyond. And, knowing this girl was someone who had learned to listen deeply, it had chosen her first.

The vocal vibrations of its hive mind began to rise and hover above this fragile landmass. To hover with a specific intention, to try not just to reach this girl's ears but to go a step further.

And the girl, realising that something was being asked of her, responded. I hear you. I hear you now. The voices stilled, waiting. And then it became clear to her what they were waiting for. She turned on her belly, cupped her hands around her mouth, and began to tell her own story in response, its early parts learned from her mother, of arriving here, aged five, from a country thousands of miles away with just one small backpack. Her mother had told her it was a good thing she could not remember this journey herself, which had almost destroyed them both. She described the kindnesses of those who first took them in, as well as the cruelties of others as she grew up. She spoke of their gradual rebuilding of a life and community here, initially in a quiet coastal town with a sliver of a sea view out of the corner of the bathroom window.

The girl spoke of her fragility, of going right to her own edge, of facing uncertainty and finding ways to anchor herself and thrive as she grew up. So much of this – such as growing food, and community, making dishes from their home country, writing, painting, dancing and singing – had come through her mother. As she remembered how far she had come, through the grief and despair of losing her mother, which had prompted her walking journeys around the coast, she found the strength and desire to share her

hopes, visions and plans for a future she had once doubted was even possible. She ended with the song her mother had taught her for courage through difficult times, and to remind herself of why they had first come here, with the refrain *Baraye Azadi, azizam (For Freedom, my darling)*.

Because the voices below had stilled as soon as the girl began to speak, she knew that the cliffs had heard her. She stood up and opened her arms out wide to the horizon ahead, smiling. A little dizzy with hunger now, she decided to head back over the Downs towards home.

But just before she turned to leave, she heard a verbal flutter from below. *More. Thank you, but we ask you for more.* She understood and nodded, preparing to carefully share this appeal for more human company and exchange, not yet knowing why it was important to do so.

After just two cycles of the seasons, the girl, now a young woman who had become a quiet leader in her community, guiding those she most trusted to the clifftop for an encounter, noticed something was changing there. Birds, insects and species of flowers – which she knew were rarely sighted or even extinct – began to reappear over Haven Brow. Tiny bee orchids emerged in

the grasslands behind, and the long-disappeared choughs and sandeel joined the skylarks and the gulls. Chalk falls were becoming far less frequent than those further along the coast, it was also noted. The cliff itself seemed to be regaining solidity.

Beyond the girl's community, and the community of those who acted as guardians of this area, more and more people from a widening spectrum of society grew curious. Hearing the voices speaking in many languages, they began to join the collective journeys to the coastal lands. They set off high over the Downs with their crafted bodies of stories and food, sharing both as they walked, curious to find out if this was rural myth, or real. Those who could not travel, confided their stories in those who could, and so it grew. These journeys became a way to embrace and revel in the hope and wonder of the chalkland and also of the people's rich cultural hybridity, together, after so much fragmentation and separation through the pandemics and ensuing crises. As more people offered the gift and exchange of story with the chalk, witnessing the quiet regeneration of the land, they left changed and determined to live differently. This became known as 'The Time of Thriving'.

Word eventually spread around the entire island, as the chorus of voices began to surface, not just all along the Seven Sisters, but beyond in both directions.

When the scientists decided to test the temperature of the seawater, they discovered it had cooled significantly. This did not surprise the young woman. 'This land is remembering how connected it once was to the mainland through our journeys and stories. Perhaps this remembering is calming the waters.' And when she said this, she realised that this was how she felt after every encounter with the chalk, as well as among the community of people who had blossomed around it in their storying together.

If you lie on the coastal grassland now, like that first traveller at Haven Brow, and place your ears to the ground, listen in. Hear the land's chorus as it journeys up towards you in the languages of all our ancestors, those who have settled and lived on these shores since it was first formed. Amongst them you will hear Modern and Old English, Gaelic, Welsh, Latin, Swahili, Yoruba, Irish, Amharic, Germanic, Dutch, Dane, Norse, Friesian, Norman

French – as well as Patois, Spanish, Urdu, Bengali and Arabic bleeding into Farsi, Dari – and scores more.

These cliffs, with their vocal root stems travelling through the layers of chalk, are always open to human presence, story, fresh life and care in what is now a continual process of exchange. Listen to this land, and if you focus right in, you will hear one stronger, clearer voice:

*We hear you now,
Humans, from more than one shore
Bring us your stories of lineage, longing and loss
Of your transitions and arrivals here – or of those who came before you
Tell us of your edges met, of your resistances
And of your challenges faced
Speak to us of what it has taken to craft a life here
Tell us of your quiet hopes and new horizons
Come close and pour your words into us
So that we can become the place
Where both land and human
Can remember what it means
To be – whole – again.*

Alinah Azadeh

Alinah Azadeh is a writer, artist, performer and cultural activist of British Iranian heritage. She uses text, audio, and live practices to create poetic narratives that activate spaces, amplifying untold or overlooked stories. As well as commissions for major museums and galleries over the last 30 years, Azadeh has had stories, poetry and articles published, most recently in *Glimpse*, the first anthology of speculative fiction by Black British writers, published by Peepal Tree Press, edited by Leone Ross. She is inaugural writer-in-residence at Seven Sisters Country Park / Sussex Heritage Coast, commissioned by the South Downs National Park Authority, and led the *We See You Now* (2019–22), a decolonial landscape and literature programme which has produced *We Hear You Now*, a new body of work for audio tour across the landscape from June 2023–2028. Both are funded by Arts Council England. Alinah also presents for broadcast, and has a podcast *The Colour of Chalk*. She is writing her artist memoir, which was longlisted for the SI Leeds Literary Prize 2020.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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