

Observing Brighton

It was a window of sunshine nestled between days of heavy clouds and crisp white snow – an unexpected summer, arriving early, just in time. In my hand, the round, heavy pebbles felt smooth and warm. Sat, leaning against the thick, weathering sea wall, they felt noticeably uncomfortable underneath. Ahead, the insistent force of the sea repeatedly stormed the steep beach – an excited child: running, waving, welcoming us to its home. Behind, the spacious promenade was humming with life, energised by the potent sun: naive crocuses welcoming the spring for the first time; couples walking, staring intensely out toward the blanket of sea; families stooping to remove precarious coats, woollen hats, from warmly-wrapped offspring; people rollerblading, cycling, running.

It was my first visit to mischievous Brighton – a city I had painted in my mind time and again from my partner's, and others', stories of extremes - and I had already been drawn in by the energy of the sea. It seemed to pull people to it, *into* it: the whole focus of the city balancing on its waterfront. Walking aimlessly, without purpose from Hove, east toward Brighton – 'London's seafront suburb' – the beaten pier first grabs your attention. Resilient, the blackened shell of the jetty still stands, proudly reflecting the sunlight, and warning defiant surfers of its presence as the waves break repeatedly against its legs. Its stark skeleton is a contradiction, set against the seafront's affluent manors and impeccable hotels.

In its shadow, Brighton Pier stands, an enviable reflection of the smouldering West Pier. It reaches out toward the horizon, creating a gratifying perspective, bridging the gap between earth and sea and interrupting an otherwise flat horizon. Galleries and pubs spill onto the beach as we walk nearer. Squeezed under the eaves of the seafront's road, they are odd in shape, artistic, each one unique, each with its own draw. Some are boarded up, waiting only until night falls to open their doors and welcome the vibrant crowds, seeking exuberance in a laid back, careless city: it smells of hedonism, and of summer.

Leaving the beachfront, Brighton's heart is vivacious and flamboyant. Eclectic, alternative shops, cafes and restaurants with an Indy, Hippy undertone, fringe the mosaic of streets that make up North Laine. It's hard not to feel at home here, the sense of community obvious, and it's easy to make a coffee last for hours, as you're drawn in to watching the miscellaneous groups of people walking past. Amongst the more diverse, there's still room for recognisable chain stores, which sit effortlessly amongst the kitsch and the downright weird. It's not just styles and contents of buildings and shops that are juxtaposed; the people too represent an unlikely mix. I imagine dirty weekends, daytrips – like us – residents and tourists. People with a purpose, shopping for a new tattoo, and people indifferent to their surroundings. Regardless, the city is accepting.

The afternoon drawing in, our feet led us to the Pier; it is, after all, a national icon, and somewhere to enjoy anonymity in the crowds. It reaches out further than first appears, home to roosts of starlings, circling, territorially above, fortune tellers and thrill seekers. The rides, some closed fearing storms in the unexpected hazy evening sunshine, look illogical – defiant of gravity. People stand, nibbling candy floss; eagerly holding cameras to capture the fear on teenagers' faces as they wobble from the rides; others simply lean against the barriers, watching the effervescent sea below, waiting for the sun to set.

The sky turned to night prematurely – blackened by the weight of rain, which began as soon as we turned from the Pier, seeing the cloud. But even rain failed to dampen my spirits in this city – the pace of life, the extremes, and the smell of potential, of possibilities, make it an energetic and reviving destination. They always did say it was good for your health to spend time by the sea. Rain falling, we ran for shelter, still smiling.