

20th of June, 2024

Dear Diary,

I can't sleep so I'm going to practically vomit out all my feelings on paper. I was tossing and turning mulling over all my experiences while travelling, (yes I am still constantly thinking about it) and I can't help but feel my overall worldview has irrevocably altered since I came home. When I first left for my trip, I was an emotional wreck, incredibly intimidated by the formidable flights, and jarring journeys through unknown, arduous airports. I was eternally anxious about any unforeseen events, constantly consumed by the merciless, countless "what if?"'s. What if I forget to fill out a foreign visa and I'm suddenly stuck in Sweden? What if I find myself immersed within a suffocating, sweaty, stuffy crowd with no clear escape? I left my house bawling my eyes out, clutching onto my teddy and passport for dear life. After touching down in Dublin after a year of exploring, I view the world as a galvanic, electrifyingly exciting possibility, something to be discovered and inspected instead of a daunting and forbidding trap. It is also something that needs to be carefully preserved. I could not even imagine the future generations not getting the opportunity to casually cruise through Venice, or swim freely in crystal clear, unpolluted waters. My extensive travels have undoubtedly influenced my overall worldview and made me see the world in a beautiful, more careful and considerate light. Ok, I should probably go to sleep now, I have to be up for work at 7.

Goodnight!

Freya

Meeting that chipped pavement once again was almost surreal, its once pristine complexion now withered and diverging allowing short ridges of green to curl and spread. I shimmied along the cleft concrete, the ingrown elms curling and looming more menacingly than I remember, the wisps of wind threatening their integrity. Reaching those janky stairs, the grotesquely palpable scent of rot rose, infiltrating and consuming my senses, the sharp cry of the jutting panels as they bore the weight of my tread further prolonging my agitation.

Faced with his door, I gathered as many raspy breathes as I could before grasping the glacial knocker, its once gleaming coat now besmirched with the grubby paw prints of sales and mail men. My steady tempo was soon answered by a rushed stampede of clapping heels and the fumble of keys, the symphony's owner following shortly. As she cranked open the door, I recoiled as her dominating perfume wafted into my lungs, the succulent taste of lavender and cheap deodorant dancing across my tongue. As the door stood ajar, so did her own frame, the folds of her lilac laced dress draped gently from her prodding waist leading my gaze to her portly ankles and overfilled heels. Though more creased, her familiar smirk beckoned me in, barely able to conceal the apprehension in her eyes.

The sage lined hallway I'd grown so familiar with now felt alien, too devoid of its usual ruckus from Mike. I ran my fingers along the oak panelling that embraced the stairs as I ventured to the lounge, my stride guided by the unmistakable scent of Mike's mother's piney incense, a signature aroma that was always dawned on our visits. Though most couldn't make it, those who did bother were marking their usual positions, each hugging a different territory of the gloomy lounge.

Sarah's slender frame was slouched over the ottoman, her sleekly waxed arms pouring from the vessel like a ragdoll with as little bother as usual. Her head was nuzzled into Dave's chest like a freezing puppy, creasing his patent pressed blazer. His oriental cologne, a stark reminder of his "superior taste" as he calls it, was palpable and fighting for dominance over the incense. The pin stripes running down his suit emphasized his bulky frame and directed one's view to the glisten of his tapered point shoes, each impatient tap distilling a sharp glare that would blind any poor onlooker.

Stood like a troop patrolling the entrance, I could feel their eyes crawl up my figure like starved dogs. Surveying every inch, every unfurled button or untucked collar, I knew they were scavenging for some trace of change or new feature to ridicule. I could feel a lump wedging itself in my throat as I lunged towards an opposing lounge, offering a courteous grimace in an attempt to avoid any strife tonight.

Julia clopped back from the door and took her residence beneath the jeering pendulum, the only one of us to dare utter a sound with its obnoxious chirp. Regardless of the humid Spring transcending beyond the bounds of our gathering, our congregation might as well have transpired in the arctic with how glacial the atmosphere had turned.

"Well, this is a waste." Dave sprung to his feet, almost flinging Sarah onto the threadbare twill seeping beneath our seats.

"Leaving as usual" I scoffed, heaving my gaze to the photo clad mantel. Though barely visible through the posies of wilted flowers and glistening tealights, Mike stared back with his usual gleam.

Unfortunately, Dave's gargantuan ears caught my quip, his oafish form swivelling, now on route towards, well, me. I pranced from the solace of the lounge to meet his now feral gaze, his musk penetrating and consuming my nostrils like a scorching layer of bleach. His lensed eyes were bulbous, contorting with rage like a snarling hound, the same harrowing leer he had that night. Droplets began their siege against the glazed glass adorning each wall, joining the clocks chime as everyone stood agape.

"I'm just saying that you're the one who got us into this mess ten years ago. If you could have just controlled yourself for once, then maybe Mike-"

A metal embellished grip constricted around my sides before I could utter a further remark, his pungent cigar-laced breath now apparent and impinging on my senses.

"Watch it."

"What? Are you gonna take care of me like you did with him?"

His frame shrank after that comment. I could feel his clasp loosen, only fractionally, as a choir of hushes rose through the room. Julia's eyes motioned towards the kitchen where a blissful hum emanated as Mike's mother prepared dinner. The dinner for Mike's best friends, his friends who reunited to commemorate his mother's only son. His friends who...

Dave's hands retracted and we each returned to our positions. The room's aura grew sullen, and the rain pelted just as hard as it did that day.

As it did on Mike, as he lay there, at our feet.

'Twenty-three..twenty-four...twenty-five cows.'

I whipped my head away from the glacial grasp of the glossed window to the carpeted lining of the carriage compartment, the plush shag of the seat tickling the nape of my neck. The wheel's squeal stung as it transversed through my ears, shrill as a banshee's cry. The rickety trundle of the tram along the rigid steel was periodic, an unforgiving motion for my stomach as I felt the nausea creep up my throat like a blazing phoenix. If it wasn't for the dewy air seeping through the mail-slit-sized vent hugging the opposing corner, the tessellated seats would have been blessed with a beige accent. With a desperate swoop of the neck, I flung my gaze back to the viridescent sea of green and gold flurrying by, the resident cattle now just speckles of white and brown surfing among the verdant waves. I went for another exasperated inhale but was instead met with the pungent waft of manure.

Just as I feared my cow count would exceed the thirties, the blessed anaemic complexion of the station's insipid cement came forth. A relieved sigh escaped my lips as the tyranny of the cart's incessant sway was finally halted. I clamped my eyes shut as I began to relish in the tram's stability, though this respite was not long lasted. Just as I felt my lucidity drift away, a light patter grew closer, its tread increasing exponentially with each stride like a stampeding beast. Gently lifting one lid, I peered through the warped glass into the slender corridor, its usual traffic of trolleys and businessmen currently absent. This vacancy was soon filled by the boisterous bang of a boy slamming against the glass in a desperate attempt at deceleration. I jolted from my slump and repositioned my attention on the unexpected passenger, my thoughts hard to calibrate as my heart thumped viscously against my ribs.

Between the grubby mitts clinging to the glass, a lens-framed complexion stared back. Black tendrils cascaded down either temple leading to a fuzz of stubble adorning a steep jaw. A patch of breath on the pane gave way to the peaked collar of a beige trench, besmirched with countless miscellaneous stains of varying tone. Before I could further analyse, the door was slung open, and a barely tethered rucksack was tossed onto the opposite seat. Like a burrowing badger, head down, tail up, he scavenged through, flinging an assortment of trinkets and garments across the corridor.

Unable to sway my sight, I watched his rummage till he finally unveiled a cerulean flannel, threadbare and accompanied by the reek of mould like it had never been properly hung out. After a strenuous scramble, the flannel was now dawned and back to rummaging he went. After several concerning clinks and clangs, a stout pot of gel was pulled forth. A few quick swabs and the tendrils were now pinned behind his perked ears with little hope of motion. Just as I thought the performance ceased, my presence was finally acknowledged.

"Ya got a razor?"

His eyes were deep and persuasive, and I found myself unbuckling the front of my ruck sack. As soon as I held out the blade, it was swiped and pressed to his jaw. A few flicks and knicks of skin and he was finally settled, slumping onto the seat like a cumbersome load of produce.

Finally seeing him stationed, something about him seemed familiar. Before I could pester him for some sort of explanation, more banging commenced. This time the usual disturbance.

"Ugh. Again?" I sighed. They've checked us at every stop. After weeks of searching, I figured they'd have lost hope by now.

As I delved into my pocket, he reached our cabin. Supplied with the usual pressed-uniform, leashed-hound combo, it was hard to maintain eye contact as the officer glared down at us, his gaze barely visible beneath the visor rimming his brow.

"Come on. Tickets." A cigar drooped from his bulbous lips, tapping impatiently in time with his leathered boot, the thick smoke intruding my throat, inciting a myriad of coughs.

As I turned to hand over my ticket, I caught a glimpse of the boy again. Streams of sweat now drenched his flannel and his complexion grew pallid, a perturbed expression waxed across his face. It was then it hit me. That face, I had seen it everywhere. Everyone had. The fabled 'Vigilante' every guard in the state had been on searching for. His eyes were perked open like a headlight-lit deer as he took a strenuous gulp. Even with his little makeover, it was clear just who he was, and he realised it too. He was caught.

"Oh come on brother, you forgot your ticket again?"

They both stared at me with the same bewildered expression.

"Apologies officer, this one's not the brightest...haha.." I continued, trying to conceal the nervous tremors creeping along my spine. I whipped out my ticket along with whatever notes came with and prayed for some semblance of acceptance.

Him and his hound both shared the same suspecting snarl and thirst to rip me in two. After a deep puff of his obscenely large cigar, he begrudgingly took the money and swivelled onwards. Only his dog gave us one last piercing sneer before trotting in tow.

With the confirming clink of the door, we both decompressed into the seats with a communal sigh. As I cranked my neck away from the itching cushion, I was met with a bemused yet pleased grin. All I gave in return was a sly wink.

The natural world has always been primal within my life and is a sacred relationship which I hold close to my heart. For me, nature has become emblematic of freedom and liberty, a haven with no constrictions, no suffocating social norms and certainly no stern, restricting rules. The natural world has become a place where I can finally become whoever I truly want to be, whenever I want to be it. There is a certain grandeur in the simplicity and tranquility of perfect, peaceful parks accompanied by the harmonious melodies of wafting winds which sooth my soul and hush my thoughts. As I've gotten older, while others find solitude consumed in the endless, unyielding constraints of social media, I have found myself seeking serenity sheltered by stunning skies and sizable trees. Allow me to indulge myself and as I ponder and gush upon my principal relationship with mother nature.

As a child, my parents made it a monumental mission to litter and lace my life with the wonders of the natural world. My connection with nature started with my childhood secluded seaside town. I have always been a playful hop skip and a jump away from the blinding beauties of the beach and many of my other crucial connections, particularly my familial relationships, flourished surrounded by the sensational, sublime, striking scenery of the sea. My dad, who regularly resembled a tall child, would be fervent to drag me, a giggly rosy cheeked toddler to spend our afternoons by Seapoint beach. The poignant, heartwarming, and tranquilizing scent of fresh, salty sea air wafted through my dad's ostentatious convertible as we sped along the coastal roads, incredibly indolently seeing as it was a 15 minute walk from my childhood home. Those car rides would be filled with colorful conversations as the sound of my dad's voice seamlessly blended with the neighboring, echoing waves crashing in the distance. The beach was nothing extravagant, identical to most Irish beaches coated in a gamut of vivid, vibrant stones, but in my eyes, it was perfection. My dad created his own form of playful torture as he devised endless, idiotical, games which involved hurling and launching a 4-foot 9 dumbfounded child into the deep end, which always resulted in exhaustless, hysterical laughter. As we sat on my frazzled, tattered, magenta beach towel which was painted with a myriad of Disney princesses (which my mum recently forced me to throw out as it was irreversibly dilapidated), the striking, pitiless sun warmed both my skin and my soul. Although I became a regular victim of merciless sunburns as I was cursed with auburn hair and pale skin, I always found myself returning to the shorelines with the same avidity, even now. Standing at the edge of the water as the crisp, gritty, toasty sand nestled in between my toes, I find myself worrying about how I could possibly form a human connection half as strong as my steadfast bond with the ocean. Yet I have come to the realization that nature has been a fundamental catalyst in many of my relationships, going on a late-night walk with my friends in the piercing, glacial December air, playing frivolously in our local parks as kids, and most importantly to me, my beach days with my father.

Identical to any other human relationship within my life, my omnipresent friendship with the natural world has continuously evolved, especially as I traverse through my tumultuous teenage years. I have found my relationship with nature taking a back seat in my life, as I slowly lose the child-like aspects of my once charged imagination, due to the ravages of the tedious everyday treadmill. Being a grouchy, exasperated, burned-out teenager facing new unforeseen challenges daily, has changed my perspective and forced me to neglect one of the most mystical, marvelous and magical aspects of our world. The once wondrous walks home from the train station are stupidly spent scrolling through a multitude of snapchat stories about fallacious celebrities and their callous condemnations, instead of absorbing the vibrant, verdant valleys that surrounded me and counting how many brilliant birds belt past me. The stairs in the schoolyard have become a meeting point for text exchanges, selfies and inconsequential gossip instead of the epicenter for the trading of rocks, sticks and sundry things like it used to be. I watch tirelessly as my younger sister silently surfs the internet on her high tech iPad, instead of spending her time meticulously crafting fairy houses to home lavish ladybugs, out of the crunchy, auburn autumn leaves and the fallen seeds of horse chestnut trees. I constantly sport my bulky, swanky, new headphones, blasting “Hits of Today!” as I walk my dog down the radiant, aesthetical pier, instead of drinking in the harmonies created by the lapping nearby water, the cheerful chirping of small creatures and the gawking of seagulls begging for the salubrious sandwich in my hand. It seems as if, as we grow older, our minds tend to take the beauty of a blended orange and red sky melting to a dark, molton blue for granted. I felt I no longer yearned to inhale the redolent smell of the lavender that lines my glorious garden or hold my arm out to feel the small rustle of leaves scratching and swiping along the back of my hand. This lull in my relationship with nature made my appreciation for our world exponentially stronger as I found myself determined to repair it.

As I reflected melancholically on my unintentional disconnect, I felt between myself and nature, I decided to mend and resurrect the relationship I once had and longed for. Like every other Irish eighteen-year-old, I have been catapulted into the utter quagmire that is the leaving certificate and the infamous, merciless, CAO. Personally, I found myself constantly stuck in a state of all encompassing stress and utterly defeated by the perpetual, ceaseless, strenuous studying that is synonymous with these elephantine exams. In a desperate attempt to free my now exasperated, exhausted, ever-racing mind from my thousands of Sylvia Plath quotes, and the intricate ins and outs of the quotient rule, I found myself mindlessly meandering through my local park. My final year in school is when I felt my steadfast relationship with nature strengthen and solidify. I discovered a fresh sanctuary amongst nature, the tall, towering trees acting as a safe, secure, shelter from the mental turmoil and immense anxiety that coursed through me daily. I found my breath slowed as I finally could breathe in air that wasn't contaminated by the stench of my many opened bottles of rescue remedy and my embarrassingly, unenviable, cluttered bedroom. As I slowly strolled in my lackadaisical state, my mind finally slowed, and my shoulders finally left their newfound home beside my ears. The endlessly turning clogs finally rested, the thoughts that bounced about my brain stilled and silenced as crisp leaves crunched under my shoes. Nature became my closest companion while I battled the prolonged, interminable weeks before I sat down in this very exam hall today. One particular spot in the minuscule park beside my house, is forever imbedded in my mind. A standalone wooden swing nestled amidst the branches of a vibrant tree. The swing was not impressive, I suppose, but it exuded a rustic charm that instantly assuaged any negative feelings I had once possessed. The simple act of swinging transformed me into a state of a carefree bliss, as the pure air filled my lungs, and the cold wind cooled my nerves. This time spent, fully immersed in the natural world, allowed me to fully delve into my personal

connection with the environment, and truly taught me it's miraculous, marvelous ability to create refuge and offer respite from reality.

My relationship with the natural world has been turbulent, yet its ubiquitous influence can be found everywhere throughout my life. Nature surrounds us at all times, it is omnipresent, boundless, and limitless, all we have to do is simply remember it is there. However, as I sit here in this crowded, stuffy, suffocating exam hall, I notice I am surrounded by plastic covered tables, decorated with plastic water bottles, plastic watches, the plastic tissue wrappers, and the plastic pens that reside in its plastic rectangular home. I am hit with a pang of guilt and frustration as I realize, as nature consistently has a positive impact on me, we as humans consistently have a negative impact on our world. My relationship with nature is something I will passionately protect and protest for. I refuse to deny future generations one of the most meaningful connections I have ever experienced, one filled with greenery and love. My relationship with the natural world has molded me into the person I am today, and I will forever be grateful that I exist among the expansive, lush, green fields of Ireland.