

# Mountain Writing Competition 2022

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize

### When the Mountains Disappear

By Isla Blackley

**Isla Blackley is from Glasgow and her interests include writing fiction- from short stories to novels - reading, camping, hillwalking in Scotland and painting the places she visits.**

When the mountains disappear, there will be rain.

Periodically, the mountains flash into John's mind. In the beginning this was with such infrequency he hardly noticed. Now, they arrive more regularly.

He used to liken his innermost self to the mountains. How he could sense when there would be a shift in his mood which made him want to retreat. When there would be a gap in those clouds, to take advantage of the times he wanted to shine outwards. The mountains themselves glistened at times like these, the greens of the grass and purples of the heather heightened in hue. They knew each and every mood possible, from the darkest skies to the lightest sunlight, they shifted between these two states almost seamlessly, unexpectedly, without warning. We must learn to keep up, to abide by the skies. To not question the fact that one moment we are seemingly in winter, the next basking in the summer sun. To look upwards from sea-level at the peaks grazing the clouds, to see the white mist swirling around, it would appear an impossible feat to imagine oneself up there. They called it the sublime in the Romantic era, the dichotomy between the beauty and the imposing, the awe-inspiring and the intimidation of the landscape. When ground is covered, we turn around, amazed at how quickly we have risen, as though looking out the window while on an aeroplane. Any houses below appear like little toy houses, rather than the living abodes of fully grown humans.

There was a period of time, when climbing up the hill, where John would wonder whether or not he would make it. Gazing upwards, at the height of the peak still left to climb, he would see the bodies of other people with the same idea as him, small figures from this distance. Staring at the rocks and boulders he too would have to scramble over, the holes in between he'd need to avoid, the exertion and energy he'd have to expend, the breathlessness he'd need to endure. It was in these moments he knew he would have to overcome the cloud cover within, to understand all inner states can be overcome.

Existing within the city became a different sort of battle. Instead of the snow and ice, of wondering what mood the mountains were in, John battled the roads, the traffic. Being alert to the drones and screeches of cars, rather than to the distance between two rocks. Shielding his ears from sirens, watching as the blue flashing lights become closer and closer in the night. In the city, the laws of the wild became lost to concrete, to newbuilds, to daily challenges, etched in the faces of the commuters like the lichen is etched on the trees in the forests. He found himself peering upwards, to the sky, understanding that while the surroundings may be different, it was the same sky that wrapped itself around the hills, the same sky that rained and snowed through the valleys of his home.

John listens to the noises outside the window, although he is only aware of this on an unconscious level. There is a bus lined up, getting ready to depart, and the engine revs every now and then, then there is silence.

The driver gets out, to smoke a cigarette. His wife is visiting today. She does fairly often, although in recent times, her visits have become sparser. Their frequency ebbing, drifting away, like the tide, moving farther away. All the while, the images in his mind of the mountains increase.

She comes into the room as she always does, a little hesitant. "Hi, love. It's me again. I've brought some fresh flowers. Those ones were wilting and looked a little sad."

She replaces the flowers, the pot thuds as she places it back down.

"I'll tell you what they look like. They're daffodils, actually, because it's springtime. Remember how you always say you're like a wild animal waking up from hibernation in the spring?"

If he could, he would smile at her words.

"Remember the mountains?" Somewhere, he can sense a gentle smile lifting up the corners of her mouth. Again, he wants to do the same. He fights to give his own lips the tiniest movement. As usual, there is nothing.

"How you love them. Just think, soon enough you'll be there again, if you find it in yourself to wake up from this long sleep you're having. They're waiting for you, the same as always. They haven't changed at all."

The soft touch of her skin brushes against his hand. If only he could grasp onto her fingers, to move his own in the slightest way to let her know he is still here, that he, in this moment at least, hears her and he wants more than anything to go back to the hills and be free to roam once more.

"We never should have moved to the city," she continues.

It's as if she says it to herself. In the deeper parts of John's mind, he imagines she has turned her face away slightly. A gentle sigh fills the room, adding itself to the other sounds which are omnipresent. The cars outside, the voices of people, the footsteps on the linoleum outside the ward. She shifts her weight, and the sheets make a tiny rustle.

"I don't even know if you'll remember the car accident when you wake up. Sorry, I know I'm not supposed to talk about it."

All he can recall is a vague haze. His head hurts.

"If we'd stayed at your home, none of this would have ever happened. You'd still be free, climbing up those hills you love so much, with the fresh air around you instead of this stuffy hospital air."

With that, her weight leaves the mattress, the window clicks, and the scent of the outside air drifts through the room, caressing the skin on John's face. What must his skin look like? Is it grey, without the natural circulation he was so used to before?

"They tell me I should only say positive things to you, but it's hard. We were never like that, were we? We'd always tell the truth to each other, or, failing that, we'd do our best to come as close to the truth as we could, or just say nothing at all."

She makes a sniffing sound, and a tissue is removed from beside the bed.

“Oh, look at the state of me,” she says in a quiet voice. She blows her nose. “Anyway. I don’t think bluffing over the truth is what’s going to get you to wake up. I’ve tried that, and still you lie there, just the same as three years ago. Can you believe it’s been three whole years? We’ve been through a world pandemic in that time, and you’ve slept through the whole thing. Maybe it’s me who should be envying you, when I think about it. Then again, you’d have probably hated it, being forced to be as cooped up as that.” She pauses. “Oh, don’t give me that look, you know what I mean.”

Having banter, the easy ebb and flow of a conversation, is something he misses almost as much as the mountains. He’s disappeared, and yet, he hasn’t. He’s still here, yet to the outside world, he’s gone. To himself, he has gone, too. All they can do, is keep hoping that one day he’ll rouse himself, that once again he’ll be free.

Because the truth is, the mountains never disappear. But how can we know they are there, if we never saw them before the rain?

With all his might, John forces himself to move his index finger. She continues to talk. Try again. He’s climbed the highest mountains in the deepest winters, clung onto icy rockfaces with nothing more than a pickaxe and crampons on his boots, yet this effort to make the slightest movement feels gigantic in comparison. Try again. Again!

All of a sudden, her conversation stops, and she rushes over. “John? Can you hear me?”

With every ounce of effort, he does it again, what must be an almost imperceptible movement but takes every ounce of effort to achieve.

“Oh, my...you’re waking up. Come, quick!” She shouts. “Do that again, John,” she says more quietly, “you can do it.”

John can’t smile, but inwardly, somewhere deep within his mind which is slowly rousing itself, he does. She squeals in delight, and while she can’t see it, nor is he fully aware of it yet himself, his biggest smile shines out into the ward, into the whole world, through the glens and valleys and rivers and streams, like the brightest sunlight breaking through the thickest cloud, when the land becomes alive with colour again as the mountains reappear.

The mist has risen and he, too, will rise once more.