

## ISABEL WAIDNER

### Rauschenberg and Brexit are Braving the Surf

We have fighter planes rockets explosions on our sweaters, this is not Top Gun, this is not an haute couture fashion show. This is the Isle of Wight off the south coast of England, the beach outside Ryde. Shae is wearing their military green parka over their sweater, it's parka weather in June. Black oversize joggers, white Reebok classic trainers. The Isle of Wight is home to the British space rocket industry and Her Majesty's high security prison complex (HMP Parkhurst). British beaches. Shae is looking for their parent, apparently. Their mother, their father, it's all relative. As far as Shae can tell, their parent is not on the beach. They think that their parent is more likely in HMP Parkhurst than on the beach. Unless there's an Aldi in Ryde? (Aldi alcohol is Shae's parent's food, apparently.) (Affordable bubbly—.)

Robert Rauschenberg's *Mud Muse* (1968-71) is a 12ft by 9ft glass and aluminium tank with bubbling bentonite clay inside. The tank is equipped with microphones and a tape machine recording the bubbling, which in turn (in play mode) triggers a system of pumps inciting new bentonite (benny) activity. Rauschenberg's piece is in a museum in London, what's it got to do with Isle of Wight beach life. The tide is low, the ground is wet, the terrain is launching bentonite missiles, that's what.

The local MP is delighted with the EU referendum result. The Isle of Wight voted 62% in favour of leaving the European Union. ("We have done it—voted to Leave—, and that is all we can do.") Bullet rain from the terrain upwards, is this a natural event or a case of national politics? WHAM! BAM! A projectile hits Shae on the shoulder. We retaliate, FIGHTER PLANES ROCKETS EXPLOSIONS ARE GOING OFF, THEY REALLY ARE GOING OFF NOW, WE ARE NOT WEARING

OUR SWEATERS FOR NO REASON. As if connected via a hidden tape machine, benny activity on the ground is increasing proportionally.

Over there, I say. Is it your parent? Stuck in a black and white car tyre, Rauschenberg's taxidermy merino sheep (*Monogram*, 1955-59), like us, is dodging bentonite bullets. Shae isn't sure about this one, they are going to have to take a closer look. On inspection, *Monogram* (Money) is reminding Shae not of their parent, but the Isle of Wight's Brexit-done, Brexit-doing MP. The way it's stuck in its black and white tyre—. But Shae, I say. It's got rainbow colored acrylics all over its face. Money is gay (flying the rainbow face). Still, Shae says. Rainbow or not, they aren't convinced of Money's pro-European orientation. They think we might be dealing with a representative of the UKIP or English Defence League LGBTQI+ divisions. The rise of the UKIP or English Defence League LGBTQI+ divisions is not a joke, it is very serious. Shae thinks we should leave Money on the beach where we found it on the grounds of its potential links to right wing LGBTQI+ organisations.

Benny missiles are flying, they are airborne like starlings, I've hated the intimation of paintballing from the beginning. WHAMBAM! Another hit, echoing Shae's t-shirt with the pink-mouthed shark, black and white stripy flashes and blood dripping from the hem upwards. WHAMBAM! it says on said t-shirt which Shae isn't wearing, not under their sweater, and never with their black oversize joggers. The pink-mouthed shark rises from the sea surfing a tidal wave. What if this part of the beach were about to get flooded. (This isn't an haute couture fashion show and this isn't a surfer's paradise.) Already the water is rising, Shae's Reeboks are drenched. Let's go, I say. Hang on—. Shae just wants to make sure their parent isn't over there. Where? There—! The pink-mouthed shark releases a black and white stripy lightning bolt from its eye. The lightning bolt travels across the left-hand side of the t-shirt including the sleeve, creating a zebraesque dreamworld. It's raining, I complain. But Shae will not be slowed down by the rain, this is England, Shae is British (second gen).

In the 1950s and '60s, the British space rocket programme saw the Isle of Wight's Needles Headland transformed into a real-life double-o seven film. British space rockets were assembled in underground workshops, apparently, then launched into the atmosphere from the Needles rocket testing site (like fireworks). I want an astronaut who is not Tim Peake (Mae Jemison, or Helen Sharman). What's that over there? I ask. (Shae's parent? No.)

On the Esplanade, a demonstration is building momentum. Local party activists are flying the rainbow flag. Some are carrying placards: "Some gays vote UKIP. Get over it." "Don't let bigots enter our country." "Britain First!" The party activists are young working-class gays, twenty-somethings. They look just like Justin Bieber, only paler (white British). They own Staffies named Judo, or Karate. They are good gays, community-orientated gays. Like me, they advocate PrEP. Unlike me, they blame Muslims for anti-gay sentiment on the island. They think Muslim culture is inherently homophobic hence incompatible with Western ideas. They're not racist (they say), they're progressive. They're caught up in the same eternal shitshow ('discourse') as the rest of us, positioning the 'liberal' West against the 'primitive' East (what Edward Said said, and later, Jasbir Puar). This view originates in the upper spheres of British imperial society (NOT the white working classes), and it is currently peddled by the ultra-posh Tory government (and Peter Tatchell) with renewed vigor.

Shae doesn't smile, I don't smile, we are migrants from North West London. We roll out the tanks on our sweaters and make straight for the Esplanade.

What if the earth were riddled with microphones. What if a tape machine were recording the tracks of our tanks, what if (on playback) a hole opened up under the Esplanade and swallowed the demonstration. What if a pink-mouthed shark rode in on a tidal wave, what if a b&w lightning bolt from its eye turned the scene into a zebraesque fantasy.

This isn't an art installation, this isn't just a motif on a t-shirt. This is the Isle of Wight off the south coast of England, this is what we are faced with.

—from *We Are Made Of Diamond Stuff*. Manchester: Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2019.