

The Guardians of the Hill

Wind like a wall, rain like razor blades; they care not. They are invincible, appearing on the hill only under cover of darkness. But it cannot completely hide their laughter, their whoops and screams. For those accustomed to the silence, they pierce the night air like daggers.

Frolicking amongst the rocks and hillocks, they pay little attention to the safety barriers clinging to the edge of the cliff top. They will not fall. They cannot die.

Small flames leap from their fingers; instantly quashed by the gale that sweeps the hill top. They curse and stamp their feet, seeking shelter from the elements in fissures between the great boulders crowning the hill.

Pushing more deeply into the crevices, their shaking hands attempt once more to coax the tiny flames to their faces and light the cigarettes dangling from their lips.

In their youth, their arrogance, they do not see who watches from still deeper in the rock face. Who takes note of every discarded butt stamped carelessly into the grass, every piece of chewing gum spat into the bushes, every drained bottle tossed from the highest edge to smash on the ground below, amid screams of laughter. Each letter carved into the surface of the folly, proclaiming undying love for their spotty-faced lover of a fortnight.

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They watch. They listen. They remember. They have long observed the damage being done to their beloved home and have seethed silently. They know not how these idiots can have such scant regard for this place. True, it has little standing in the everyday lives of millions. But there are some that come by day, bedecked in stout boots and warm clothes to admire the beauty that is Mow Cop Folly. On a clear day, they come to admire the view across seven counties in wide-eyed wonder.

On dull days they still come, such is lure of this wondrous place. Those who have never been can never truly understand its power.

Some return frequently, whatever the weather, and continue to explore. They take in the marvellous views, scouring the vistas for places they recognise. Cloud End; Beeston Castle; even the foothills of Lancashire if the weather permits. They skip and skitter amongst the stones, still full of fascination. They note the litter, the canine faeces, broken glass. Shake their heads in disbelief; move on to seek the next stunning view around the boulders. They take care, stepping carefully, respecting their precarious position, so high up. So different to those that come in darkness.

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They swig from their cans and bottles, seemingly louder and more crass with every swallow. They dance on the precipice to silent music. They believe they can fly, leaning into the wind, relying on its force to keep them on their feet. Their bravery giving in just before the gust of wind, every time. Leaving them intact, and able to continue their barbaric behaviour at this site. Destroying the landscape, the beauty of which should rightfully be preserved for generations to come.

They have behaved this way for so long without reprimand that they decide no-one cares, and step up their mindless attack on the folly. This time, accompanying the cans, bottles, cigarettes and sweets, is newspaper. Alas, they are embarking on a new mischief, one that will be reported upon in future editions of the very newspaper they hold in their hands. "Fire at local beauty spot," the headlines will say.

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Not any more. They have stood idle for too long. They will not allow their home to be destroyed any longer, devastated for them, ruined for appreciative visitors. Why should they let them get away with it?

They advance stealthily across the rock faces, down the gullies until they can clearly see the demons that vandalise and wreck without a care in the world.

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They are lighting bundles of newspaper, laughing manically. Swigging, always swigging from their bottles and cans. As if their lives depend upon it. Spitting now – flavourless chewing gum out of their sneering mouths to the ground. Soon they all hold a sheaf of flaming paper.

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There has been no rain for weeks. The scrub will go up in no time. The dancing flames will be seen for miles from this vantage point – a beacon in the darkness.

Closer now. Their backs are turned. They peer over the cliff edge to the bushes below, and count. One... two... three... go! Down go the flames of destruction, gravity simply doing its job, an innocent bystander.

They stand inches away from their fidgeting forms, now craning their necks to see the fruits of their labour, hundreds of feet below. The flames have already taken hold, and even at this height the light dances across their faces – inane grins and hollow eyes clearly visible to those observing them.

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This is the last time they will ever destroy anything precious to someone else, The Guardians think. No-one will ever know what happened. Their bodies will be incinerated in the very fires they have started. It will be a mystery. The newspapers, of course, will make it up. Just report on what they believe may have happened. "Mass teenage suicide at Mow Cop. Bodies destroyed by mysterious inferno."

No-one will ever discover the truth, they think. We have lived here for centuries. We do not leave footprints, or any trace of our presence. We have resided here in secret for so long that nobody knows we exist. There is no reason to suspect.

Let this be a lesson to others, they reason. They must know they cannot get away with ruining our beautiful country and robbing future generations of its beauty. They have gone too far this time. Agreed, they nod.

Still closer. They push. The youngsters' screams are completely lost in the almighty rush of the wind across the landscape. To the untrained ear, there is no evidence of them having ever been emitted.

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They didn't bet on me though, did they? Watching from my hiding place in the folly, or the Castle, as the more ignorant call it. Still, it's only me, and I'm not going to tell anyone... are you?