HOPE TALES

Chapbook III: Water

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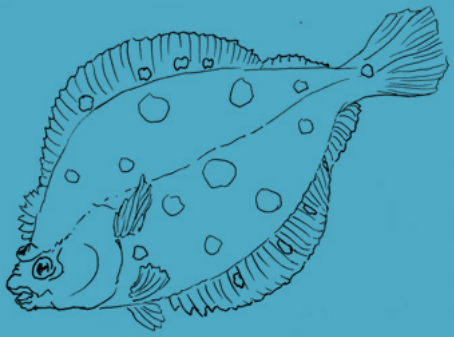


Chapbook III: Water

Contributors

James Canton is director of the Wild Writing programme in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex. His books include the Radio 4 Book of the Week, *The Oak Papers*, and the recent, *Grounded*.

John Jackson is a former biochemical toxicologist, designer, and musician.

Emma Kittle-Pey loves writing vignettes and stories for performance and is about to submit a novel for her PhD at the University of Essex. She teaches at the university, at ACL Essex and a primary school, works for Essex Book Festival and is the founder of local writing community, Colchester WriteNight.

Jonathan Lichtenstein is a playwright in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex. His plays have been performed in London, Edinburgh, New York, Berlin, Chicago, Sydney, Dresden, Cardiff; and his most recent book is *The Berlin Shadow*.

Roger Morris is Bishop of Colchester.

Jules Pretty is author of *Sea Sagas of the North* (2022) and *The Low-Carbon Good Life* (2023), and is at the University of Essex.

Known to cycling fans as an author and TV commentator, **Matt Rendell** is living life in reverse, having started as a teenaged survivor of a potentially fatal illness (Hodgkin's Disease), with the acute awareness of mortality which such an experience leaves behind. Now in his fifties, he is in more of a hurry than ever.

Nick Robins is a sustainable investor and historian who works as Professor in Practice at the London School of Economics. He is author of *The Corporation that Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational* (2012).

Nicky Saunter is a writer of poems and stories, and a creator of diverse things, from artwork to businesses. She is a director of the New Weather Institute and Wellington Mills CIC.

Andrew Simms is an author, political economist, campaigner. He is co-director of the New Weather Institute, coordinator of the Rapid Transition Alliance and assistant director of Scientists for Global Responsibility. He co-authored the original Green New Deal, came up with Earth Overshoot Day and jointly proposed (with Peter Newell) the Fossil Fuel Non Proliferation Treaty. His books include *Cancel the Apocalypse*, *Ecological Debt*, and the heterodox guide, *Economics: A Crash Course*.

Michael Steinke is a marine scientist in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Essex. His expertise is in monitoring oyster behaviour and in volatile and trace marine gases.

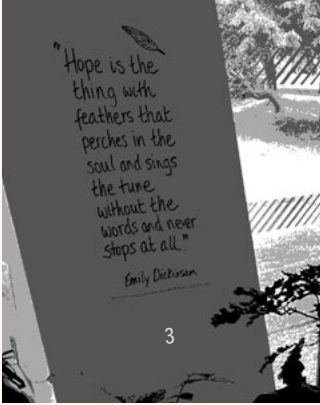
Anna Sturrock is a Senior Lecturer in Marine Ecology and Public Voice Scholar at the University of Essex, and a UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellow. Her research focuses on understanding the factors driving fish movement and health, and using this information to inform fisheries management, and promote healthier, more resilient ecosystems.

Contents

The Plague Poets

Three friends - Andrew, Nicky and Nick - each wrote a poem a week in response to a suggested word or theme during the pandemic (and continue to do so).

THE WATER CEREMONY



ONCE, OUR ANCESTORS WALKED THE WORLD. Then came domestication of animals, the wheel, and now the car. Today walking can be hard, as settlements and transport have become rearranged beyond our control. By being in places, we put nature back at the centre of human affairs. Once I walked 400 miles along the coasts and seashores of the eastern counties, on the inside was freshwater, on the right side the salty sea. Some days the land was scorched by sun, others battered by wind and snow. Some days the fog and mist closed the landscape, on others the air was clear and the vault of the sky so vast you could see to another age. The places were wet and cold, all dust and sweat, sad and welcoming.

The light was almost always ahead or off to starboard. It left an imbalance, and a sense that the whole world was luminous on one side. When dark clouds raced over the water, it was slate grey and menacing. But when the sun shone, the water became a shimmering mix of silver and mercury, and all was lit from below as well as above.

Yet it was climate change that created this North Sea. It drowned what we now call Doggerland, the sea rose, and the steppe became an isle. It was a shock for the nomadic people who lived on the plains, for one day the sun rose from the water, set too in waves.

We held a water ceremony at the Colchester Hope Tales event in the heat of June. The piece of wood was bog-oak,

fished up from the seabed. It is 6000 years or more old, once a tree of Doggerland. Its neighbour was an oak seedling. An oak can live for 1000 years. There could have been only six generations between the Dogger oak and its young descendant.

We brought water to anoint this oak that had been wet for millennia, and then dry for sixty years. There was water from rivers in Essex and Kent, Somerset and Suffolk; there was salty tidal water from Wivenhoe creeks and the water cleaned by oysters in the Blackwater estuary.

Jules Pretty

Author of *This Luminous Coast* (2011) and *Sea Sagas of the North* (2022).

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La Mer, November 2020

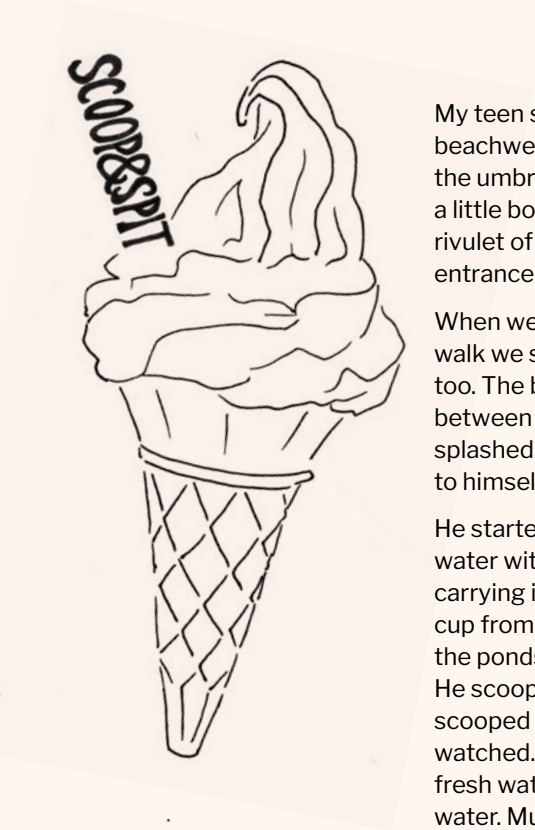
When that jaunty frenchie phrase
slid over the dawn's air waves
La Mer by Charles Trenet
I was transported to a distant bay

And we were on the Zennor cliffs
and I did swim with the seals below
And we did eat of England's fish
fried as our hearts did sizzle so

And in the theatre kissed by the sky
You were Diana, my huntress bride
You were Radha, my milkmaid fair
calling me from across La Mer

To the Sweet River Mole

Unruly river, fond friend from Box Hill's cliffs
chuckling the chalk into pools of milk,
bursting your banks with a silky flood
and encircling willows with ecstasy's riff.
You juice the grass for our sweet cow's cud
and wash the Diggers clean of mud.
Cry 'Freedom' when you meet with the Thames:
we'll dive underground when we're together again



My teen son forgot his beachwear, he sat under the umbrella, and watched a little boy playing in a rivulet of water at the beach entrance.

When we got back from our walk we sat and watched too. The boy jumped between sand hoops and splashed and dived, talking to himself, building forts.

He started to scoop the water with his mouth, carrying it in this small cup from the stream to the ponds he'd created. He scooped and spat and scooped and spat. We watched. I said, must be fresh water, can't be sea water. Must be fresh water coming from the mountains. It's so clean here. He scooped and spat, scooped and spat. His mum sat upright and turned her head from time to time.

We went to climb over the rocks, to look for rock-pools. When we got back there were three towels in a line, three pairs of shoes at the end of the towels, next to the little boy, who was still playing in the stream.

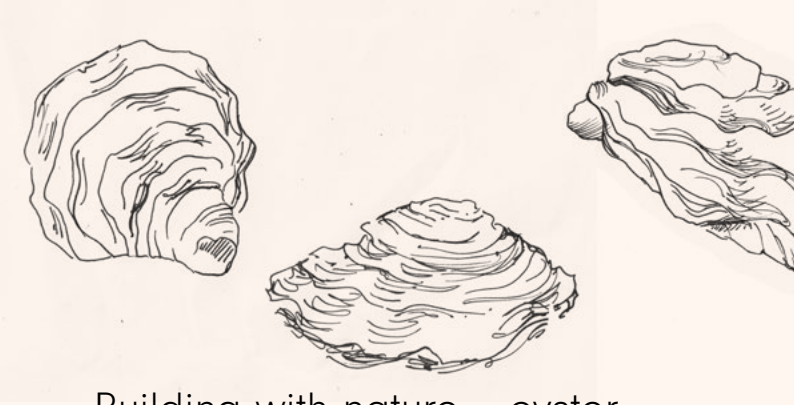
The family were all the same shape - the shape of ice cream. They were lying in a row on the towels, but when he ran and jumped on her, the mum took the boy to the sea and pulled him slowly on a board; he stood and fell off and got on again.

When they came back he played in his stream, this time picking up rocks and splashing them into the water.

A tiny delicate girl led by her tiny delicate grandma paused on the edge. The grandma said, Stop! And watched the boy with caution, undue caution we thought, but he did throw another rock into his pond. She looked at the ice-cream-mum and the mum called his name, Dylan! Stop that! But he threw another rock into the water with a splash anyway. The tiny delicate grandma took her little girl's hand and led her away with a snarl, picking her up and carrying her over the stream. Don't touch the water, she said, it's the waste from the café.

Dylan dived into the sand. He started to scoop and spit the water again. This time we watched in alarm. Least he's enjoying himself, my son said.

Emma Kittle-Pey



Building with nature – oyster reefs for coastal defence

Shells from archaeological digs in Rome are said to originate from the Colne estuary – our native oysters were a prized delicacy that was packed into nets and strapped onto roman galleons for shipment to the Empire's capital. But they were overfished to provide cheap protein that fuelled growth in many coastal towns and cities during the industrial revolution. Now, the 'Colchester Oyster' still has its internationally renowned unique taste, but the once abundant oyster reefs along the shores of East Anglia have long disappeared leaving behind gently sloping, sloshy mudflats.

The introduction of the fast-growing non-native Pacific rock oyster regenerated the vanishing oyster fishery along our coast from the 1960s. While bitterly cold winters prevented its successful reproduction and spread in the past, the effects of climate change are making this possible and new oyster reefs are appearing around the shorelines of the North Sea

and Scandinavia. With melting glaciers adding water to the ocean, increasing temperatures expanding the immense volume of water on our planet, East Anglia sinking into the sea since the end of the last ice age, and hard-engineered seawalls crumbling and washed away, today's generation of children living in coastal communities are going to suffer storm waves and flooding during unprecedented sea-level rise.

But there is hope. Oyster reefs provide a nature-based opportunity for coastal defence. Once established, a reef weakens the waves' energy, it grows naturally with increasing sea levels, repairs itself, provides nursery grounds for other shell- and finfish, and can be harvested if managed carefully. Can we embrace this non-native immigrant? Let it make its home on our shores to assist us with our efforts.

Michael Steinke, University of Essex

Extract from *The Berlin Shadow* (pub. Scribner 2020)

That night we stay late talking on the Stena Britannica's Lounge restaurant and as the ship leaves the Hook of Holland my father's spirits lift further. Later he sleeps soundly in our cabin as we cross the North Sea, the sound of the engines below us humming quietly. I see him with his white duvet up around his neck, his mouth relaxed, his breathing regular, his skin pink.

We get up early to watch the Stena Britannica's arrival at Parkeston Quay, standing on the rear deck of the ship as it sails past the container ships docked at Felixstowe, the row of blackbird cranes patiently loading and unloading containers in what amounts to a ceaseless operation . As our ship towers above Harwich we notice the detail of the town, how it is laid out on this eastern edve of Britain , how it was the perfect location for the old Royal Navy Dockyard with the deep water on two sides of its small headland, how it was my father's first view of freedom, We were all quiet, he says.

The estuaries of the Stour and Orwell wrinkle in the dawn's air as they join, their currents stirring the water. I want to walk from the ship to the railway station in private, actually. I want to carry my case too.

And so after the ropes of the shop have been coiled and thrown onto the quay, and after the ship has been moored by its chains and pulled to the edge of the docks with its winches I walk to the train platform to wait for the train to London. My father arrives from the ship after me. I see him emerge onto Platform One through the white doors of the station's building. There is a lightness to his step and he is standing upright. I watch him walk to the station wall. I see him place both hands upon it. I watch him bend his head to it.

We take the train to Liverpool Street together, sitting on the moss-green prickly train seats while it ambles nonchalantly along the small coastal branch line. On the right is the Stour estuary and in the distance on the other side of the water, meadows dip into it, their banks autumn-green and often covered in trees. The train passes through Wrabness and as the estuary is tidal, and as the tide is out, dark acres of estuarine mud are revealed, patterned in the shape of rippled water, darkly shining.Here small red Roman ampoules are occasionally found on the surface.The fields on our left have been ploughed , the brown earth turned over in regular lines, the tyres from the tractor have indented the ground. We pass gulls and waders with their long beaks.

From Harwich to Bethnal Green the track, which was built in the mid-1800s is almost level. The Victorian engineers minimised its gradient by making cuttings into higher ground and raising the tracks over lower ground by building viaducts. The consequence of this is that some of the town's stations are at ground level while others are raised above it. When we pass Bethnal Green we look down onto its park, watching children play and

dogs run below us. Then the track descends imperceptibly. Liverpool Street is 30 feet below ground level and on the site of the old Bethlam Royal Hospital, or Bedlam as it was known. As the tracks deepen, arched Victorian embankments made from brick keep back the weight of the surrounding city's earth. The tracks cut into the land. They pass under iron bridges and pavements and gardens and even at times through the foundations of buildings.

We leave the train, push our tickets through the stainless-steel barrier and walk to the station's concourse. We walk up two flights of stairs to the station's entrance on Liverpool Street itself to the Frank Meisler statue that commemorates the Kindertransport called 'Kindertransport – the arrival'. A plaque next to it bears the statement from the Talmud: 'Whosoever rescues a single soul is credited as though they have saved the whole world'. I turn to my father, "You stood here when you got off the train?" We all assembled here. This is where it all started.

Jonathan Lichtenstein

Extract from: *Grounded: A Journey into the Landscapes of Our Ancestors* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2023)

Down by the sacred stream, the willow trees shook and shuddered around me. My mind was still embedded in the deep past. The storm had shown what was most vital to living. One essential element was water. Each day, we needed clean, fresh water. That was another basic part to knowing any local sacred landscape: find the sources of water, the places where it flows across the land. Those who came before would have sought out the streams and springs on the landscape. They would have known where water rose, where it flowed. The rivers offered ways of passing through the landscapes, especially when they were so much more densely wooded. Was it any wonder all those ancient offerings – those Bronze Age swords, the Garboldisham macehead – ended up in the water?

Then, when you have found that sacred source of water, make your own offering.

I stepped onto the simple wooden bridge, dropped a fragment of flint found a few moments before in the spoil of a mole hill. It had caught my eye and might once have been used by some distant hand as a stone scraper, a tool. I made a plea for my family, my loved ones. Then I crossed the water.

James Canton

Rainfall

a fairy string of trembling pearls
necklace the pitch black thorn
each drop a shivering world alone
waiting for the decisive moment
the landing weight of a tiny bird
a baby's breath of wind, cold and clear
fills its singleness to sudden bursting
gone in a shudder from the branch
part of the mingled multitude below
the stream scoots on, leaves whirling
as the rain falls still

Dragonfly

The span of a hand but weightless
Tissue gossamer wings of steel
Kingfisher blue twisting to turquoise
Shifting emerald on this breeze
We built a pond and you came
Signal flag for an abundant future
Just like that, you arrived.

Shelter

Nicky Saunter,
Plague Poet

The storm broke and I took shelter
Beneath a shimmering lime
Jackdaw on a branch overhead
Shifted uneasy from foot to foot
Sapphire eyes on me and the rain
War memorial slate darkened to
Mourning black in wet streaks
Plastic poppy wreaths fluttering
Granite skies wheeling with sea birds
We float in the green translucence
Bird and I bobbing gently to keep warm

Pouring

It's pouring down the windows
It's gurgling down the drains
It's streaming past the gateway
Oh I love it when it rains.

It's raging down in torrents
It's lapping at the door
It's going to sweep the bridge away
This weather now's a bore.

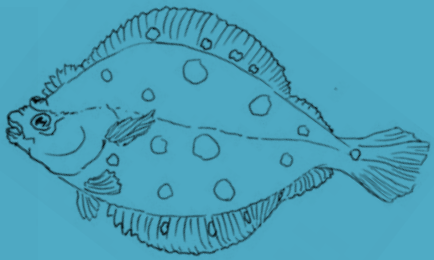
But inside by the fire
The dog lies on my feet
A bowl of pie and custard
Is making life complete.

Star-Crossed Lovers

This is a story about a pair of plaice I call my star crossed lovers. This male and female had only just hit sexual maturity when they were tagged just off Lowestoft in 2004. They had a wonderful year together, migrating up to Scotland for the summer then swimming all the way down to Calais to make love in the winter. But on their journey back north a few months later, tragedy struck when they were both caught by fishermen off East Anglia just weeks apart! Their tags were returned and their beautiful pair of tracks reconstructed.

There are three things I love about this story.

First, they both swam about 800 miles in one year. When you look at their body shape they don't exactly look like they'd be long distance swimmers. Not like a tuna, which are torpedo shaped, streamlined and muscly, the Michael Phelps of the fish world. No, it turns out plaice are cunning. They use "tidal streams" to surf the currents when they want to go a particular way. And when the tidal streams reverse direction at the next tide they quickly bury themselves in the sand to avoid going the wrong way. They keep doing this repeatedly to travel vast distances without using much energy at all. After they've hit that perfect



spawning location and had their wintery full moon parties, they then use the opposite tidal streams to move back to their favourite feeding spot.

The second thing I love about this story is that these two fish apparently stayed together for an entire year. Of course we don't have the resolution from these tags to know exactly how close they were to each other, whether it was metres or miles, but it's not out of the question that they had remained together, as many marine species exhibit "collective navigation" behaviour, schooling and migrating together, attracted to their friends via sight and smell.

And finally, the third thing I love about our star crossed lovers is that they were tagged and then caught in basically the same place, one year later. Imagine if they had used traditional tags and not electronic ones. I would have taken this tagging data, looked at their un-muscly physique and assumed that they had stayed in the same spot for that entire year. How wrong I would have been! These new technologies are providing fascinating new insights into the animal kingdom and reminding us how amazing they are and how much we still have to learn.

Anna M. Sturrock

Planet Water

By Roger Morris

What I want to do in the next 5 or so minutes is answer the question: why is water so amazing?

Now before I go on I perhaps need to say that being a Bishop was never part of the plan in fact, being a vicar wasn't even on the cards. Growing up – I wanted to be a research chemist so forgive me if over the next few minutes I get carried away by the details about this most extraordinary substance.

About 13.8 billion years ago there was a bang – a big bang and the whole universe, infinitesimally small then, began to expand and expand till in the fraction of a second it was bigger than a galaxy (the Big Bang event is a widely accepted theory - but still not a known fact). And it has gone on growing and growing, right up the to present day.

Now this universe was incredibly hot but as it got bigger – it cooled down, and after about 300,000 years, atoms formed and the universe was filled with hydrogen and helium. So there's the hydrogen part of water. But you had to wait about another 100 million years before the first stars were formed.

Just over 4 billion years ago, the temperature on earth had fallen far enough for water to condense, and for clouds to form. Now two thirds of the surface of the earth is covered by liquid water, and a twentieth by ice.

We call this planet Earth, but Water would be a more fitting name.

Like most things, when water gets warmer - it expands. The same mass of water takes up more space, which is the key reason why our sea levels are rising. Warm water takes up more space.

Sea levels will go on and rise rapidly if ice on land melts, such as from Greenland and the Antarctic.

That means when water cools down it gets more dense. The same mass of water takes up less space, right down to about 4°C, when water starts expanding again. it goes on expanding, with the result that ice is less dense than liquid water. Ice floats.

We all know that water is two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen. So if your hands are the hydrogen atoms, your torso is the oxygen, and the arms are the bonds, then water looks like this [I am holding my arms outstretched]. Hydrogen – oxygen – hydrogen, but actually – it is bent [hold hands higher].

Do have a go if you like.

Now – imagine that you are floating free and there are lots of other water molecules floating around, and your hands can grab hold of someone else's feet.

When you do that, you make what is called a hydrogen bond. And those hydrogen bonds stick water to itself in an amazing way that is why water is wet.

So these hydrogen bonds bind water to itself. They give ice crystals a special symmetry, which we see in the extraordinary patterns of snowflakes.

And it is because of these hydrogen bonds sticking water to itself that small insects like pond skaters can literally walk on water.

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, who discovered Vitamin C, called water "life's matter and matrix, mother and medium". There is, he said, no life without water.

Maybe then, for me, in the whole of creation, water is God’s greatest gift to us.

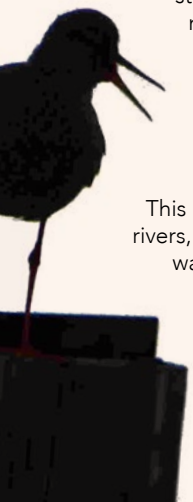
AQUA VITAE (ET FORTUITI)

Many of the atoms that make up the world around us were probably made inside stars (and although this happens towards the end of a star's life it's not just when they die). It is thought that when the universe was old enough to have stars old enough and big enough to have exploded as super novae, molecules formed.

These assemblies of atoms released by stars happened by chance (because atomic structure happened to allow them) and had distinct shapes and distinct properties.

Water seems to be the *sin qua non* for life as we understand it. The way the density of water changes with temperature is key. The maximum density of water is reached at a fraction over 4°C. Below this, water gets less dense which is dictated by the molecular structure.

Water molecules form a particular type of bond between molecules called hydrogen bonds. They are quite strong and, importantly, quite long - and they are most stable at temperatures below 4°C (which is why density decreases below this temperature – the water molecules are pushed further apart). This gives the solid form of water – ice – the unusual property of being less dense than its liquid form. Consequently, ice floats on water.



This is vital for life. When the temperatures fall – puddles, rivers, seas even – freeze from the top down. The denser, warmer water sinks. The ice at the surface traps air which insulates the water below and there is liquid water underneath the ice in which life can thrive. Arguably, were it not for the hydrogen bond it is unlikely that I would be writing this. You could say that life on Earth is a necessary outcome of the chemistry of chance.

John Jackson

Drowning of Doggerland

It is said the Sky People, once were numerous,
But they had drowned, and every dark hide,
Of land and fire pit, each vale and fell had been seized,
By the rising flood, the swell of sea had beaten down defence,
So they launched their boats, lashed and loaded auroch-skin,
And flexed the oars, among the furs and flutes,
Were sobbing infants, fastened tight to strakes of birch,
At last ahead appeared a strip of land, they saw a hall upon the cliff.

It seemed no spell they cast, no cry to gods,
By these blue-eyed people, who could beat the wind,
And slip with bow inside the range, of creatures on the hunt,
It seemed they could not counter, how a poison had been cast,
That sunk their world, their land that fell,
Before the ceaseless tide, as does the oak before the axe,
The brine now bore them on, toward a beach where figures stood,
In shadows under sighing pines, the squadron now drew near.

The forest people watched, this ragged fleet approach,
They drew ash bows, for this had been a year,
Of shore attacks and sorrow, so took the strain,
Herne the king called to arms, “aweigh the anchors,
Sail around the flanks,” yet Queen Erce was renowned,
Her long sight best in tribe, and she now observed,
“There are babies in those boats, I see no shields arrayed,
We should pause and help, these people come ashore.”

After countless battles, Herne the fabled hunter,
Now could see these folk, were people fleeing demons,
And to elite platoon he ordered, “Stow your bows and lance,
But be on guard, send reserves to ride and help,”
A tall woman stepped ashore, from the leading vessel,
Others staggered at the land, hands pulled the boats through breakers,
An infant fell and Erce shouted, to the rescue party,

“Watch those children,” one was face down in the wash.

The boat people scattered, over sand and dunes,
Gazed up at mottled sky, muttered thanks to gods of solid land,
And drank from skins of water, that the forest people proffered,
Who now could see, this was the hour,
For a rescue, not an echo of the days,
When flames were lit, on seaward ridge and summit,
To wreck on rocks, such passing ships,
Nor would they need to darken skies, firing arrows at marauders.

“Sit with us,” hailed the green king of wood and swidden,
From his splendorous hall, “here is roasted meat and honey,
Our trees are dense with fruit, here is draught for all to drink,”
And the dark-skinned woman, her one eye crimped,
Stood tall before her people, bowed to king and queen,
Thanked them for their kindness, said quietly “we have come far,
Our homes have drowned,” and the king motioned,
“Lay your goods on polished floor, you are safe to rest with us.”

The king paused by his sergeant, “send a party to the pines,
And dig the pits, for those bodies lying on the shore,”
And said to leader, her name was Sky-Ryder of the shore,
“Our people live in marvelled woods, we will tell,
How our children run with deer and elk, how this to us is paradise,”
And Erce smiled “when you’ve fully rested, you must voice the story,
Of your people and this soak, but first we all will walk,
And give our prayers together, for those babies laid in tiny graves.”

~*~

Sky-Ryder stood with staff, that fit so well her grip,
A shield of four-fold hide, slung upon her back,
The birds of shore had flown, yet above them larks were singing,
Herne cried to servants, “fetch more logs,
Stoke the blaze, come forward out of shadows,”
Sky saw the hunting dogs, were wagging tails,
Running through the crowd, she saw the sea had calmed,
It seemed they now were safe, even as the waters lapped at cliff.

Her tale commenced:

“Gulls seethed about the shore, sooty petrel plunged,
Cold-cried the cormorant, I knew it was another sign,
We could not tame this tempest, all our shamans tried,
Had we eaten fish forbidden, had a snake,
Whispered in the grass, no one could recall,
It seemed we had been fastened, inside a frightful spell,
And one sharp dawn, came a shocking sight,
The sun-star rose from water, later slipped into the western waves.”

~*~

Silence followed her story, Sky’s tale was near complete,
Gripped by spell of words, the forest people then applauded,
Tapping hilts of knife, on hollow blocks of wood,
She had filled their sinews, with every kind of sorrow,
So the people on the cliff top, passed from hand to hand,
More horns of mead, and turned the spits of meat,
That soon would fully roast, and reclined in humming meadow,
Building back the tales, about the flooded people of the plain.

Well Herne declared his plan, “We will take you,
To the land of cloud, to meadows blooming to horizon,
The time for grief is gone, you can mark each place,
Mend the moon and heal the land,” and perhaps one day,
They would sleep, without a troubling dream,
For that sea did stop, even as it had been deaf to cries,
Can you imagine, herring now have followed,
And they will swim, far across that novel northern sea.

~*~

Jules PRETTY
[Excerpt from *Sea Sagas of the North*, 2022]

Lifeboat captain

She slid into the crystal harbour
whisky in a glass, looked on waves
folding over a thousand souls
more, all she could not save

Silver blankets, shoulders shiver
bright sea hallucinating
her the gull who lifted these refugees to shore
against the storm fulminating

Unbiddable ocean always calls
wreck mementos on a fireside shelf
again the lifeboat captain braces
a world to rescue from itself

Swim

Letting go at the pool's edge
chlorine nails up my nose
I swim like a piano
those fears founded
why leave ground you know
unless the past is a burning house
warmth more likely to kill than comfort
flights, cars, dreaming of so many 'things'
lay them down, like water wings
on white tiles, push out without
you can swim

River

There will be days longing for winter cold
before my eyebrows age to morning frost
seasons lost, civilisations not yet old
snow leopard, arctic fox all count the cost

Now, though, chill enough to make rivers moan
in tin-on-skin air forgotten people forego food
they pay so water will not nightly turn to stone
as bleak hearts profit and secretly collude

Numbed by money, clinging onto power
while in twisting weather other bodies suffer
but see the snowflakes falling up, lifting every hour
uncover first one wrong, then another, then another

When I was ten

we were left outside
found flints in summer-baked Essex clay
yelped, hero-hurled lumps head wards
shatter-crack happy earth bombs
building site for play we rolled in weeds
took cover, were ants mud-crawling
at war till sweat stuck our tee shirts
smelling sour-sweet of vandalised cow parsley
humid, dusty children, nostrils itching
skin smarts from weaponised nettles

Nature nowhere and all around
grass grazed knees
trees invisible like old people
raised dirt rashes, daddy long-legs
torpor drift like dead spirits rising

Over the ragged fence my school field
daytime prison yard for escaping
after hours grotto to invade
  there was a pond, half hidden
where water boatmen, newts
and bigger boys hunted, trapped
made trade, my proud fishing net
for something useless, I sulked home

Feral suburbia. By night the bats
that now have left, fought
world wars outside the window
caught in streetlamp searchlight beams
swooped like plastic fighter planes
hung on thread above my bed

Wallpaper where patterns crawled
primordial awakening, there
at horror's edge I sought sleep
as if sinking in the first living sea
floating down tentacles
on this unbroken helix
and I was like the rest of life
fish with no concept of water
part of it all, ferociously
without knowing

Andrew Simms
Plague poet

Re-enchantment

by Matt Rendell

The Kringilsárrani valley in central Iceland was once a place of glaciers and meltwater rapids. The reindeer used to go there to calve. In 2006, Kringilsárrani was flooded for a hydroelectric scheme. Before its destruction, the Icelandic author, Andri Snaer Magnasan, visited its magical world.

In his beautiful memoir, On Time and Water, he describes his contributions to the public debate that preceded the valley's destruction. "I talked about the area's importance for Iceland's image, its potential tourist income, its research value, how the highlands were a magnet for foreign currency as a filming location for movies or commercial. Privately, Andri told me, "I felt it was holy. It is obvious walking there, but I would not have dared to say so."

"The possibility that nature could be something higher, something more exalted, something beyond definition and even "'holy" - in our time, that isn't considered a valid argument." It violates the norms of reasonable, responsible debate – whatever we mean by that.

The idea that it might be inappropriate, even irrelevant, to speak of nature's sanctity is preposterous. Far from being mystical or enigmatic, the sacred has substance and a rugged usefulness. Imagine how different the modern world would

be if it considered water sacred: we would see rain, or the glaciers, differently. Yet we self-censor this line of argument.

We are wrong to do so. No human society, however primitive, has lacked the sacred. Most of humanity, in most of the world, for most of history, has cohabited with not just gods and the ancestors but the indwelling spirits rivers, waterfalls, ice, mountains, thunder, plants, animals, winds, spears, fishing nets, the poison curare, even some stones.

There is talk of extending human-style rights to those members of the animal kingdom whose problem solving skills most resemble our own: primates, whales, dolphins, octopuses, some of the cleverer birds, as if a creature with a human style of reasoning was more valuable than one with a non-human style of processing.

But you can see how, by extending personhood universally as described, enchanted reason goes at natural rights from the other end. Just as all life on Earth originally evolved in the sea, all human culture has roots in the sacred. We were born enchanted and ensouled into inspirited societies, and ours is the first culture in human history that could even have formulated the question, "Does the sacred exist?" Not that we have ever completely forgotten our former thought-world. Gaze at flowing water, or cave paintings or the Northern Lights, fall in love, see the eyes of a mother and her new-born glisten. Mourn the loss of a loved one or pet animal. The sense of flow – of connection with something greater, the feeling of reverence, gratitude or cosmic loss – is overwhelming.

Even today, as our sense of the sacred fades cataclysmically, it continues to grant us access, as it always has, to most, perhaps all of what makes existence worthwhile. Excluding the sacred from our deliberations means ruling out love, empathy, intuition, inspiration, the cherishing of people and things, sensuous (and sensual) pleasure, the whole notion of identity and values. And perceiving the sacred may be the background awareness that drives us to take action over the world's crises.

Life on land, without water to support your bodyweight, is hard. In the same way, the construction of reason from the buoyancy of pre-modern enchantment was an arduous affair. It taught us to think of the natural world as something to be exploited. This could be said to be our civilisation's single, overwhelming achievement. It allowed our forebears to master agriculture, and, much later, science and industry. Since the brilliant inventions of the early industrial revolution, we have written a magnificent, epoch-making story. But it is only partly true. It turns out that the creative intelligence behind all those brilliant inventions had a fatal lack of peripheral vision. As modern, mechanical man applied his ingenuity, his wondrous powers led to the near-destruction of the ecosystems on which our lives depend. The pursuit of reason has led us to the very height of unreason. So how rational is this thing we call rationality?

Knowing that there are people, indigenous people, who see connectedness everywhere, we can ask how they would

approach the issues or activities before us. Regarding the natural world, their answer is invariably, "Revere and protect."

We can then ask, "Supposing I saw the sacred in all things: what would I do?" The answer will invariably be the same. We can allow these reflections to percolate outwards from the deliberative part of our intellects to the imagination, the emotions, the body, the whole of our being.

Enchanted thought offers an alternative viewpoint on every aspect of our lives. Any Charter for Re-enchantment threatens to be infinite, but we can feel our way towards some of the most important policy areas. These will include looking for low-tech, low power solutions and lifestyles, using natural fibres and building materials, eating natural foods, rewilding, returning to the body and the landscape - using our hands, walking, being alive to nature, respecting and protecting animal, plant, insect, even cellular life – and pursuing Small is Beautiful-type thinking.

The anthropologist Hugh Brody describes a ritual among the Inuit who, after landing a shark or small whale, hold a ceremony in which fresh water was poured into the mouth of their dead prey. What function does this ritual perform? It seems to tell the spirit of the dead animal that the hunters will care for it in death. It reveals hunting and killing not as a form of violence but as a form of sociality involving respect, reciprocity, propitiation, sympathy and compassion. It also exposes the hidden violence of our abattoirs and our broader, instrumental stance towards nature.

To quote the neuroscientist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist:

> *"The Greeks, the Inuit, the Penan, the Chinese, the Indians, the intellects of the Western Middle Ages and of the Renaissance, the Australian Aboriginals, the Romantics, the Navajo, the Romans, the Blackfoot and the modern Japanese – and countless others – all thought, or think, that there is something speaking to us in nature. If we alone suddenly can't hear it, in the West in the twenty-first century, how do we know it's we who are right?"*

Suppose we managed to dodge the climate and oceanic pollution crises through last-minute technological fixes, head off the extinction crisis thanks to a sudden agreement of habitat conservation, and come to some humane concord over water, air and rare earth minerals. If what remained was a world lacking the sacred, our efforts would have been pointless.

The sacred is as vital to our survival as water.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHAPBOOKS

Chapbooks first emerged in the 1600s, and grew in popularity the 1700s and 1800s to become widespread forms of urban and rural street literature. A chapbook was small, typically short in length, published on flimsy paper, and illustrated with woodcuts and drawings. Chapbooks covered a wide range of material: from fairy stories and folk tales to heroic journeys, from ghost stories to songs and ballads, from fortune telling to political manifestos, from almanac to religious tract, from news of crime and disaster to dreams of hope.

Chapbooks were sold by shopkeepers and booksellers, but achieved great popularity through itinerant vendors and peddlers. These men and women came to be known as chapmen, who also carried to rural villages other items for trade: bootlaces, ribbons, needles, seeds and spice, gloves and fans. The term "chap" originates from the Old English *cēap*, meaning to barter or exchange. In France, chapbooks were known as blue books (*bibliothèque bleu*), and in Germany as people's books (*Volksbuch*). "Chapman" became a common surname.

Many well-known fairy tales were first published in chapbooks: Jack and the Beanstalk, Jack the Giant Killer, Cinderella, Bluebeard, Little Red Riding Hood. Samuel Pepys collected and published chapbooks; John Clare heard chapbook tales as a child; and Robert Louis Stevenson and Charles Dickens both used the form. Traditional folk songs and ballads were recorded in chapbooks, and chapbook tales and poetry was read aloud in pubs and salons. It is said that tens of millions of chapbooks were sold annually on the streets by the mid-19th century.

Chapbooks are for sharing, passing on and discussing. Please leave a comment on this page and pass it on to someone you think will enjoy it.

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