

**'Dark mirror of the water': Spectrality in Climate and Hydro-  
Fictions**

&

***Museum of Water,***  
a creative archive

A creative-critical dissertation presented by

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## Abstract

Water is under threat. Rising temperatures, unchecked depletion of million-year-old aquifers, and widespread pollution are all having a catastrophic impact on the hydrological cycle. This creative-critical thesis examines how a capitalist-charged climate crisis is negatively affecting crucial water sources the world over and, ultimately, makes a case for greater hydrological and cross-species awareness.

In the critical component, I bring material ecocriticism and environmental humanities thought to bear on climate and hydro-fiction texts to excite discourse on and wider acknowledgement of the inseparability between human and nonhuman, as well as everything and water. I examine how environmental spectres haunt the present and can effectively open a line of preventative communication if one is only willing to listen. I also put forward the new term 'Energy-Gothic' as a lens to essay texts that explore the ruination of resource-rich locations in the quest of power (energy/status).

Similarly, the creative component highlights these ideas of interconnectivity in the face of ecological crisis through the form of a novel-length creative archive of hybrid work. This archive is asynchronous and atemporal, leaning heavily into Speculative Fiction techniques to illuminate today's problems. Here, original work of poetry, prose and creative non-fiction runs alongside the fictional and factual work of others, often bleeding into one another to create one (dis)harmonious voice of protestation and anger. A problem as widespread as the climate crisis, after all, requires a global coming-together.

# Acknowledgements

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Zoom/Google Meet, I hate you, but you helped bridge minds and worlds at the darkest of times. See you soon?

Also, to my family, for whom I wish the water back.

## Author's Declaration

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university. A small percentage of *Museum of Water*, however, has been published elsewhere in the lead up to submission\* and is forthcoming as an August 2022 poetry pamphlet by Beir Bua Press, titled *Waterworks*.

\* "Dagonism" at MIRONline.  
"Just See" in ISLE (January 2022)

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# Introduction

## **A Hydrological Turn**

Human impacts across the globe are draining, flooding, acidifying, and damming crucial ecological networks, disrupting what David Attenborough calls “crucial connections” (‘Frozen Worlds’, 2019). There are 48,000 dams across the globe causing unnatural sediment build-up and displacement; “two thirds of all major river deltas are sinking, exacerbated by massive extraction and mining industries”; and, collectively, humanity has drained “half of all the [world’s] wetlands” (Neimanis, 2016, p. 161). The ocean, meanwhile, as David Wallace-Wells notes, is absorbing “more than a fourth of the carbon emitted by humans”, with “the past fifty years” seeing them take on “90 percent of global warming’s excess heat” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 95). This has made today’s seas “carry at least 15 percent more heat energy than they did in 2000” (Ibid, p. 95). The result of the uptick in ocean temperature is melting glaciers, bleaching city-sized coral reefs, and causing even the dominant Great White shark to range farther and farther from its usual hunting grounds. During his extrapolations of what the future might look like if things remain uncurbed, Wallace-Wells goes on to cite a telling study revealing that across a planet that is over 70 percent water there remains just a mere “13 percent” of the ocean undamaged from human interference (Ibid, p. 95). Climate crisis, then, is disrupting the world’s water systems.

Consider the second episode of Netflix’s Attenborough fronted *Our Planet* (2019), an hour dedicated to ‘Frozen Worlds’ and the ecological breakdown affecting those who inhabit them. There is a sequence which depicts the terrifying plight facing the walrus situated near the far north eastern coast of Russia. It is the “largest gathering of walrus on the planet” —

some hundred thousand—and they are forced to cluster on “one single beach ... where every square inch is occupied” (‘Frozen Worlds’, 2019). They have done so out of desperation, not choice: their “natural home”, the ice that would usually serve as safe spaces close to their feeding grounds, has “retreated away to the north” (Ibid, 2019). To move, they must climb over one another and risk being crushed to death, and a stampede can occur in seconds. Understandably, “under these conditions, walrus are a danger to themselves” (Ibid, 2019). The entire sequence of writhing, jockeying hides is a stark enough representation of how, in the walrus’ perspective, the world they have always known is dying. A way of species life has been irrecoverably affected and curtailed. Following this, however, we are shown the real ugly and hard-hitting truth of their new iceless fates: with so many of them gathered on such a small space, many must struggle up 80-metre-high cliffs for room, “an extraordinary challenge for a one-tonne animal used to sea ice” with poor eyesight out of water (Ibid, 2019). Hungry again, the real problem looms: how to get back down. It is here that the camera zooms out to frame the grim spectacle of freefalling walrus’ repeatedly colliding with the rough rock cliff face, victims of faraway and accumulative human carbon emissions. Six more visibly drop as the narration makes plain how hundreds just like them continue to “fall from heights they should never have scaled” (Ibid, 2019).

“These mass gatherings of walrus are now happening almost every year,” Attenborough mournfully concludes, “... so the lives of the walruses, like those of polar bears and seals, are changing. All are living at the frontier of climate change, and all are suffering as a consequence” (Ibid, 2019). And all of this is happening predominantly because of humanity. “Global warming,” as John Miller and Louise Miller discern in *Walrus* (2014), “means that our lives and the lives of the walruses come into a strange convergence” and, ostensibly, “we are all the walrus” (Miller and Miller, 2014, p. 171). Which is to say, humanity is the pilot of this

planet-wide death-drive being dealt out onto those incapable of forestalling it. Ultimately, then, even the “exceptional” (read: wealthy and removed) will have to contend with projections of warming and sea-rise of “at least fifty metres”—projections, I might add, that are “one hundred times higher than [the] Paris [Climate Accords] predicted for 2100”—and change the world as we know it, putting both London and Montreal “almost entirely underwater” and elsewhere erasing Manaus and Buenos Aires to unliveable “underwater metropolises” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 68). Current climate estimations are effectively dooming humanity to the same fate of the walrus, where we too will find ourselves without suitable habitation and globally scrambling for higher ground.

The driving force of this thesis is to challenge the long-seated human ideologies of superiority over water, animals, other humans, and world. I explore this through the hydrological schema of Too Much, Too Little, and Too Far; that is, an overabundance of water, through deluges and floods, a scarcity of water as per increasing droughts and heatwaves, and the notion that humanity has gone past the point of no return in respect to the effects of global industry, ultimately capitulating to an insatiable capitalism. The first chapter, for example, revolves around future submerged and floating cities and how exponential human industry is effectively drowning whole ecologies and lifeworlds as espoused in Pitchaya Sudbanthad’s *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* (2019) and Sam J. Miller’s *Blackfish City* (2018), and couples these with the egalitarian notion of human and animal existing on the same “creatural” plane as one new mode of thinking; chapter two explores water shortages and hydro-despotism in the wake of human mismanagement of crucial water bodies, and pairs this with the interconnected concept of “tidalectics” and the future of the American West and the Colorado River as posited by Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2015) and Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Gold Fame Citrus* (2016); and, the third chapter employs Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*



(2011) to express, in relation to oil and its devastating effect on the oil-bearing nation of Nigeria, how humanity is teetering at a point of no return when it comes to climate and ecological crisis (Herman, 2016, p. 2, Hessler et al., 2018, p. 31). Here, I use the notion of “trans-corporeality” to depict how a poisoned water source ultimately means a poisoned human and greater ecological body (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2). I also introduce my own term the Energy-Gothic to delve into hierarchical abuse of resource-rich communities for the betterment of faraway corporations. Fredric Jameson famously noted, it “seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism”, and when considering landscapes increasingly submerged, dehydrated, and toxified, this is becoming more and more an inarguable axiom (Jameson, 1994, p. xii). This thesis, however, highlights new ways of thinking to ultimately proffer and propagate ontologies that could hopefully ignite humanity’s move away from such cataclysmic futures.

Ultimately, my goal here is to add credence to what Chen and MacLeod et al. term humanity’s need to make a “hydrological turn”, to consider anew “how we dwell” (Chen et al., 2013, p. 20). This planet is not just ours, and the water spoiled with our technologies and malfeasances is spoiled for everyone. As such, humanity’s “articulations with our more-than-human watery others” as well as the “flows of power caught up in the currents of our planetary watercourses” need to be re-evaluated and reconsidered, especially in times of growing climate crisis (Ibid, 2013).

In a 2019 report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated, rather unsurprisingly, that “the ocean is continuing to acidify in response to ongoing ocean carbon uptake”, that “there is a growing consensus” in places it is also “losing oxygen” and thus crucial “open ocean nutrient cycles are being perturbed” (IPCC, 2019). All of these are direct

results of unchecked and exponential “carbon emissions [released] from human activities” (Ibid, 2019). The ramifications of global heating can also be seen in urban, man-made and landlocked bodies of water, such as important desert-city reservoirs that depend on a historically mismanaged Colorado River, which are and will continue to be adversely affected by continued human management. Take the Green River, one of twenty-five significant tributaries of the Colorado, for example; this human-first ideology was exemplified here by the plight of four species of fish in the 1970s—the razorback sucker, the humpback chub, the bonytail, and the Colorado pikeminnow. Victims of repeated damming, which turned their usually “warm, silty waters” cold and clear, as well as of a supposed aesthetic “unattractive[ness]” to fishers and tourists, these fish were “close to extinction” by the time the Endangered Species Act took effect in 1973 (Hansman, 2019, p. 97). Since then, however, they have now become crucial “indicator species” whose vitality is used to infer the “shape of the whole river system” (Ibid, p. 101). The larvae of the razorback are now routinely watched by biologists from the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service so that when the first signs of larvae are spotted a call can be made to the Flaming Gorge dam for the sole purpose of releasing water to flush the razorbacks into “their spawning habitat” (Ibid, p. 97). This in turn has made them into a somewhat enforced second conscience to those who have and still routinely disrupt their foodwebs and habitats, a veritable “thorn in the side of the energy and agriculture industries” who “feel that the fish unfairly take priority over human livelihoods” despite these still-endangered fish species being the invaded and not the invaders (Ibid, p. 103).

In the Niger Delta, a well-known example where economy is favoured over ecology, a similar story is unfolding. The extraction and exportation of crude oil taking place there is toxifying the water to such extremes that ingestion and proximity to oil spills can drastically

increase infant mortality, with “babies in Nigeria [being] twice as likely to die in the first month of life if their mothers were” residing near a place of contamination (Hodal, 2017). Nonhuman life too has been affected to the point where fish are often seen floating belly up on the surface of the water and bats are the victims of continuous gas flares. The ongoing and bloody Oil Wars, too, have been born from the bust and boom cycles that Nigeria is constantly finding itself mired in because of outside and historical influences. Ever since the plenteous crude deposits’ discovery in Oloibiri, the Niger Delta, in particular, has been a water body repeatedly ravaged, polluted and fought over. Only, because of its geographical distance from the big carbon polluters (the UK and USA, for instance) its devastation, goes relatively unnoticed. As Michael Peel expressed in regard to his own feelings at seeing these effects first-hand, “the obscene asymmetry between the smoothness of [his] oil-fuelled life in Britain and the toxic impact of crude on one of its main source regions” became “harder to ignore”, became “personal”, and “close[r]” than ever (Peel, 2011, p. 14). Geographical privilege and denial are not luxuries that even the most disbelieving will be able to sustain as the climate crisis continues to exacerbate the already heinous practices of unperturbed oil extraction.

Adrian Parr tells us that an idealised “sustainability culture ... encourages us to work for a future that is different from the present by focusing more on sociality than profit-maximising principles” and thus foster affirmation to the myriad “vitali[ties] and dynamic materialism[s] of life” that “saturate and perpetuate life” (Parr, 2009, p. 165). Here, then, Parr is quantifying a desire to destroy “old habits” and the associated reactive “ways of being” (Ibid, p. 165). The common thread of the examples mentioned, however, display an unscrupulous and anesthetising capitalism promoting numbers over lives, where such “joyfully embrace[d]” ontologies of life remain inferior to capitalism and consumption (Ibid, p. 166). As Naomi Klein writes, “for the longest time, environmentalists spoke of climate

change as the great equalizer, the one issue that affected everyone, rich and poor” —a global problem that would have brought us all together rather than further stratifying us “into a society of haves and have-nots” (Klein, 2015, p. 51). The unfortunate are “left to the mercy of increasingly dysfunctional states”, and resources, such as water, find themselves becoming standing reserves or what Tony Allan calls “virtual water”, divvied up and transported in abstract cubic tonnes and bartered like intangible bitcoins (Ibid; Allan, 2011).

In *Hydrofictions: Water, Power and Politics in Israeli and Palestinian Literature* (2015), an increasingly seminal thesis and book, Hannah Boast attempts to ameliorate a world problem when it comes to climate crisis, conflict, and “hydrological anxieties” (Boast, 2015). Effectively plotting and prophesying the coming crises by using the water-starved tensions of Israel and Palestine as a portent, Boast stakes a claim for greater need of “[non-]terrestrocentric” thinking as remedy for global inertia to the hydrological extremes taking place across the planet (Ibid, 2015). A planet, as Arthur C. Clarke famously remarked, erroneously titled as Earth and not Ocean. To Boast, “the lack of literary attention to the endangerment of the substance most fundamental to the continuation of human life, water, is conspicuous” and, as such, this thesis is one small part of rectifying this (Ibid, 2015).

It is important here, then, to understand and make plain that a hydrofiction, that is a text saturated with the concerns, plight, and past and future notions of water, is also a climate change fiction, because the two are wholly intertwined, and as such allows for the growing field of climate-fiction ecocriticism to come to bear on those texts primarily focused with water. What I am arguing for is a complimentary lens where bodies of water are not made “nearly invisible [and] relegated to the passive role of ‘resource’” but within a larger climate fiction pool where discourse on water becomes readily more exposed critically and commercially (Ibid, p. 3). After all, “reading water in literature” as Boast proclaims, has the

capacity to foreground “practices which are often taken for granted”, and there are fewer things more taken for granted by humanity than this planet on which we reside (Boast, 2015). This *blue* planet.

### **Cli-Fi**

The climate change novel is often a narrative that displays a *mundus*, whether Earth or otherwise, in complete disarray. As Adeline Johns-Putra remarks in *Climate and Literature* (2019), dystopia and disaster are the most recognizable genres when it comes to representing the current ecological disaster. The fall of the exterior world—the collapse of civilization and destruction of ecologies—is often fatalistically foregrounded at the expense of interiority; a preference for the application and demonstration of spectacle rather than long-form introspection. This is no more apparent than in Hollywood blockbusters that attempt to plumb this culturally lucrative vein with thematically thin films and clichéd central characters such as in *Geostorm* (2017) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). And yet, now that we are teetering towards a largely accepted doom—because of continued inability to reach inter-governmental decisions in the prevention of worldwide temperature increases—different types of narratives, whether these be hybrid, non-normative texts, or movies with a consciousness for change rather than outright profit, are arriving. Works that do not merely sell themselves on big-budget disaster spectacle but dig beneath the strata of character and world and are unafraid to break form as humanity is breaking world systems. Meghan Hunter’s prose-poem novel *The End We Start From* (2017) and Brian and Mary Talbot’s graphic novel *Rain* (2019) are successful and notable examples of this. What they share with traditional texts such as Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010), and what retains their effectiveness in

conveying the message to a reader, however, is what Johns-Putra identifies as the performing and utilisation of “everyday milieu” to probe larger, multi-scalar problems (Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 234).

*Solar*, for instance, takes the somewhat novel approach of employing what Sophia David calls an “un-eco” character and an “un-eco” scientist at that to explore the problem (David, 2016). Sidestepping a lot of the clichés of narratives embroiled in looming disaster, McEwan instead concocts an insular piece concerning a waning Nobel-prize winner with a penchant for extramarital affairs and an uncaring eye to changing climate. The “everyday milieu” which he employs being the disintegration of married life and the descent into the mindscape of an unlikable philanderer whose lustre of life is at its edge. In place of wrecked cities and mass planet-wide extinction events, McEwan populates the novel with internal quakes which in turn incite thought on the climate crisis. The episode in which Michael Beard seemingly loses his genitalia during a visit to an Arctic get-together of climate thinkers, for example, is an eye-opening experience for a multiple adulterer to the affecting nature of weather (and his own unconscious fears). This is a moment when the Venn diagram of his greatest pursuits in life meet and intersect with that of the ecological breakdown. Not to mention, McEwan rather pointedly describes the moment where the supposed castration occurs, after Beard risks urination in the freezing temperatures, as like that of a “calving iceberg” (McEwan, 2010, p. 60). For Beard, it is the first inclination of this planetary problem becoming personal. Moreover, McEwan does not explicitly discount this castration until later in the narrative—the distressing episode, like the climate crisis, remains largely nebulous and uncomfortably looming over proceedings.

In terms of films too, Benh Zeitlin’s elegiac *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) and Bong Joon-ho’s *Snowpiercer* (2013) evidence similar individual-as-whole introspection. And while

the latter does include a big-budget reveal of a frozen and uninhabitable Earth, it is the critiquing of the world-traversing train's propagation of deep-seated hierarchy and capitalism, and thus the plight of the disenfranchised amidst this ruined environment, that serves as the film's greatest merit. Which is all to say that entertainment and larger meaning-making, in this case the illumination of climate crisis statistics and probable futures, need not run counter to one another but just be more than cataclysmic spectacle. After all, "art has the power not only to harness emphatic response but also to open the way to solution through process, as opposed to goals", effectively using real-world statistics as stepping-stones towards a greater collective responsibility (Hessler et al., 2018, p. 8).

The cold, hard climate science that scientists publish in their increasingly worrying papers or discuss at their summits for a time was assumed to be alienating to the general public, the subsequent non-acceptance or misunderstanding an unfortunate by-product of a perceived gulf or ivory tower mentality. The "dark prophec[ies]" of exceeding a carbon threshold of 400 parts per million, for example, merely acting as a large and unfathomable number ungraspable to the common person (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 5). This all despite the result of our exceeding of this number being more and more plain to the naked eye in the increased meltings, floodings, and hot winter days all over the world. Statistics and graphs, invaluable as they are to the planet's future can be less individually affecting than a source of fiction. As a baneful, media-savvy character in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) rather harshly points out on two separate occasions: "We need real people to keep the interest going. Scientists aren't interesting" and again later "They [the public] need an expert who can communicate. They don't want a scientist-type" (Winterson, 2007, 18%, 22%).

Certainly, a damning percentage can instil fear and action in a listener but then life quickly intervenes (for those privileged enough to be able to turn away). In fact, this is

something Greta Thunberg identifies as a possible problem in her own speeches, wherein the science is usually buried beneath an emotional declaration. The tabloids are more interested in painting her as an angry teen or, during the COP25 in 2019 (in which she actively removed the so-called emotional aspect), as a video-game opponent to Trump. In terms of the COP25, however, Thunberg argues that she “say[s] these things because they get peoples’ attention, and now that [she] has peoples’ attention [she doesn’t] need to make” another speech like that (‘Episode 1’, 2021). In the 2021 BBC series *Greta Thunberg: A Year to Change the World*, Greta aptly identifies that the climate crisis is also in fact, then, a “communication crisis” (Ibid, 2021).

Unlike a string of facts, a piece of prose is a willingly sought time-sink and can attempt to address such communication concerns. After all, it takes days, weeks, or months to finish a story and, as such, for those moments in time you become that character—you entrench yourselves in their lives, living out their interiorities and opinions and thoughts. For all intents and purposes, you are not merely made to “see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society’s refusal of visibility”, but you effectively *become* them (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 88). Of course, when the book ends one could argue that the milieu of everyday life will still intercede, but in this case you have already drowned yourself in these themes and meanings over multiple periods. When you continued to read knowing for well where the narrative was going (we need only look around) you finished it because you still needed to know why, because you were invested in that fictional life almost as much as your own. Adam Trexler writes, “there is a fundamental relationship between new ways of knowing the planet and new ways of organising human responses to it”, and by situating ourselves in the minds of characters like Octavia Butler’s Lauren (*The Parable of the Sower* [1993]) or Winterson’s Billie



(*The Stone Gods*) who persevered or struggled in drenched, dried or depleted future worlds, these newly known plights become projected truths worthy of a response (Trexler, 2015, p. 236).

J.G Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), along with *The Drought* (1964), act akin to forerunners of what Dan Bloom in 2007 coined as "cli-fi" and have as such been elevated and re-viewed in this light (Bloom, 2014). Much as Buell noted of Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013), with its "posttextual[ly]" ironic imbrication with Hurricane Sandy that made its concerns "feel [wholly] real" and present, *The Drowned World* has also in a way been retroactively stamped with a "dread[ed] imprimatur" given global warming's rise in awareness since its publication (Buell, 2014b, p. 266).

What makes Ballard's work still so relevant now is the fact that these are narratives that attacked and delved into the ontological and psychological imprints of eco-destruction on character as much as the devastation of society and civilization. Ballard, like most of the authors I have chosen to explore in this thesis, such as Sudbanthad, Watkins, and Habila, knew that change and disruption of the exterior world can have drastic effects on the interior. If we are positioned to see a world increasingly given in to hydro-despotism as seen in *The Drought* and Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries* (2008), from the entangled perspective of one suffering through it, we are able to cognise it in ways wholly unique than we would, say, from ten second segments of television or from second-hand verbal accounts. "Research at the interface of narratology and neurophysiology", as Putra-Johns points out, "has shown that narratives have a greater impact than non-narrative modes of communication, because the experience which is simulated in reading them is a powerful means of forming attitudes" (Putra-Johns, 2019, p. 245). (Hence why in the walrus episode mentioned above, as with those most affecting documentaries, there is always a simplified three-act structure or 'hero animal'

to accentuate identification and concern.) For as long as a narrative persists, then, we are that faraway soul scrounging in the dirt, fighting with everything she has for that next drop of water. Experientiality and empathy are the key to off-the-page reflection and proactivity.

Put simply, cli-fi finds itself in the unenviable position that science-fiction has been grappling with since its inception: writing the future and changing minds. And changing them quickly. And whilst sci-fi has become more didactic in its pursuits and employment in recent years, its history of the implementation, exploration and justification for technology has had an impact. Cli-fi, therefore, must also not stop at the page or at the story's end, but should likewise reach beyond the margins to challenge the integrity, beliefs, and life-choices of the reader themselves. These narratives should be viewed as engaging metafictional activism as much as they are entertainment, powerful enough to make a man understand the severity of the climate situation even "when his salary depends on his not understanding it" (Sinclair, 1994, p. 109) That is not to say they should not be enjoyable and, as the genre seeks to spread its wings into the fantastical and the satirical, this is most definitely not the case. What I mean to say is that revered authors such as Margaret Atwood, Winterson and Amitav Ghosh have written these tales of projected futures because climate change is a fear they share and a fear they want to be shared. Atwood, for instance, prefers to call it "everything change" rather than climate change, because she feels the former is too "limiting" and only excites thoughts into immediate changing weather conditions, whereas the problem is far more extensive than this and not only has the potential to make it "rain more" but destabilise global agriculture as well as oxygen and water for "all species" going forwards (Finn, 2015).

In *The Drowned World*, a proto-cli-fi novel that presaged comparable events, Ballard conjures up a flooded, superheated London. Almost a jungle now, the city proper is home to lizards, alligators, huge bats and psychopathic "recluses unable to separate their own

identities from the cities where they had spent their lives” (Ballard, 2014b, p. 12). It is an environment drenched in this type of interiority, the evocative and oppressive lagoon systems reflecting back a longing for an *ur-wilded* past; a “dark mirror” jockeying an unnatural present with a preferred and primordial before (Ibid, p. 11).

In fact, Ballard’s *The Drowned World* serves as a fulcrum to the thesis as a whole; not only did it preempt a lot of today’s worries and concerns before they were widely known, but it shares a lot of the most effective characteristics with the more recent novels I have chosen to examine. As Ballard’s Kerans, Bodkin and Hardman come to obsess unwillingly (at first) about a very different ecological past, those afflicted with the “breaks” disease in *Blackfish City* likewise are forced to temporarily contemplate an un-flooded before; as Ballard’s Kerans and Beatrice come to despise the former city beneath them, seeing it as “hideous” and “some imaginary city of Hell”, and actively quest to reflood it, those privileged few in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* literally plug themselves into machines to escape and screen themselves from the waterlogged environment to take solace in their own remembered version of the world; and as Ballard’s Kerans ultimately makes an introspective journey south through a superheated wilderness, Luz from *Gold Fame Citrus* undergoes countless environment-induced enlightenments in the Californian desert (Ballard, 2014b, p. 123). Which is all to say, there is a reason why *The Drowned World* still receives ecocritical attention even some sixty years since its first publication<sup>i</sup>—the broad strokes still hold true.

What is missing from Ballard’s text, however, and what is evident in most of those I investigate here, is an exploration of how climate crisis affects the non- and more-than-

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<sup>i</sup> See: Šžensoy, A. (2021) ‘Solastalgia in J. G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World*: Living in a Watery Earth No Longer Home’, *Nalans*, **8** (15), p. 214–222; Gandy, M. (2006) ‘The Drowned World’, *Space and Culture*, **9** (1), p. 86–88. doi: 10.1177/1206331205283732; Clarke, J. (2013) ‘Reading Climate Change in J.G. Ballard’, *Critical Survey* (Oxford, England), **25** (2), p. 7–21. doi: 10.3167/cs.2013.250202.

human. In *The Drowned World*, nature is resurgent, mutated, everywhere, but the reality of the ecological breakdown is the antithesis of this: jungles are thinning, deserts are on fire, the seas are more and more acidic. It is this exemption of exploring this vibrant lagoon London via anti- and non-anthropocentric perspectives, the already exhaustive number of studies on it, and the fact that it is, strictly speaking, not intentionally a global warming text (one foregrounding human planetary interference) that make it more a source of comparison, contextualisation, and enrichment to the other texts rather than the focus of this thesis. Moreover, the unique problem of the climate crisis is immediacy, changefulness, and presentness, and *The Drowned World's* age as a text runs counter to this, which is why all those chosen (as well as most of the secondary sources) have been published within the last five to ten years as of this writing. A telling line from Ballard's text does, however, lend this thesis its title.

In *The Drowned World* Ballard uses the "dark mirror of the water", as manifested in the lagoon, to describe the "mournful beauty" of "two interlocking worlds" of the near-present white-fronted city and the Triassic past, both listlessly eddying alongside one another "apparently suspended at some junction in time" (Ibid, p. 11, 10). In this thesis I am similarly using this blurred reflection of the natural and the artificial to act as a rallying call to bring to the fore the otherwise invisible malpractices humanity has and continues to cause to the planet's water bodies at such a crucial "junction in time" (Ibid, p. 11). The quotation, as I am extending and employing it, therefore concerns self-recognition in transparent pools, like the Greek myth of Narcissus or John Milton's Eve coming across her reflection in *Paradise Lost* (1667), and how those pools show images of self both surprising and ultimately disarming. These are not the reflections offered by vainglorious' mirrors, however, but the harsh and broken truths of dark, or polluted, mirrors so easily ignored.

In *Frankenstein* (1812), for instance, the Creature's concept of self and self-within-world are completely upended when presented with the real truth of its visage. Not beautiful like the villagers it had spent the summer studying and learning from, the Creature's face, rather, is monstrous, and this revelation instils in it a sudden "despondenc[y] and mortification" (Shelley, 2014, p. 200). Just as this surface-level truth has a lasting identity-forming effect on the Creature, seeing our own reflections in watery mirrors made dark through anthropocentric activities (damming, draining, pollution) should likewise make plain that what we do to the water we do to ourselves; those distorted, trash- and oil-bifurcated people looking back out at us *are us*, forthcoming. Moreover, as Crow via Lacan affirms, in regards to reflections and transformations, moments like this also bring into focus a world-recognition of "even [the] things around" the watcher (Crow, p. 5). This thesis title, then, is used as a portent for ontological re-engagement with the water and world around us. After all, a dark mirror occludes and obfuscates its subjects, whereas a clear one reflects transparent truths. Water is like that too, beholden to reflect its subjects as per its purity.

### **The Monstrous Now**

In Laura White's *Ecospectrality: Haunting and Environmental Justice in Contemporary Anglophone Novels* (2020) the problems of today, tomorrow, and yesterday are bridged through spectres. White's text advocates for mass mediumship (awareness) to these displaced ghosts, where we are all able to learn and react to the atrocities long gone to prevent future echoes. Just as ancestral stories of the far-past inform today, ghosts or spectres have the capacity to teach in the writings, on page and planet, they left or continue to leave behind. There is untold knowledge to be gleaned from the dead, then, if we can just

listen. As Buse and Stott ultimately explain, “ghosts [may] arrive from the past and appear in the present” but they do not solely “belong to the past”, they persist in graves and papers, acidification and rising temperatures (Buse and Stott, 1999, p. 11).

The site of Bikini Atoll, where the United States detonated twenty-three nuclear weapons, for instance, is a documented environment that is both a catastrophe and a lesson. Sixty years later, the ships sunk during the tests still remain, only now they are barnacled graveyards, reclaimed by a previously decimated marine life: nature trying its best to paper over the cracks of human warmongering and insatiability. However, there will be a limit to how much the planet’s oceans are able to reclaim and restore human-made mistakes and, if such testing were “to be repeated in the modern day ... recovery would not be expected to be as” effective because “of additional stressors associated with climate change” (Richards et al., 2008, p. 509). Figurative ghosts of the disaster can still be readily seen, however, in the both the Bikinian descendants who make a “living off bringing scientists and tourists to the islands when [their] own famil[ies] can’t live here” as well as those who stoically inhabit a “ghost village” where all water and food must be imported because the groundwater remains contaminated (Scott, 2017). The disaster, then, despite now being largely invisible, remains a mushroom-shaped spectre whose continued death utterances requires sustained openness and receptivity to ensure it never happens again.

An expansion and redirection of Derrida’s notions of spectrality, White’s *ecospectrality*, sparks “confront[ration on] issues of visibility and repression” through the deployment of ghosts as “agents of ... justice” to address environmental concerns (White, 2020, p. 12, 9). For example, in an examination of *That Deadman Dance* (2010) by Kim Scott, White highlights how by setting the piece during a moment of “early colonial contact” Scott effectively reanimates “Noongar vocabulary and ontology ... in the lives of contemporary readers” (Ibid,

p. 23). The waning culture and numbers of the Western Australian Indigenous made plain in today's world by Scott populating the text predominantly with said culture in a way that effectively haunts the present. "Posting ghosts of agents of environmental justice," as White writes, "builds on an established tradition of deploying spectrality to help readers imagine losses that are" difficult to envision (Ibid, p. 12).

In the following chapters I attempt to build upon White's ecospectral by disrupting not only place- and people-ghosts from their sepulchres, but also widening this concept by employing Buell's notion of capitalistic "tentacles", the image of the ever-thirsting vampire, and the cannibalising zombie as further monstrous contemporaries with whom we share the planet (Buell, 2014a, p. 76). The vampire, for instance, represented twofold by the gluttonous emptying of crucial aquifers and misuse of the Colorado River in Southwest America, as well as the literal and figurative ecological life-drain caused by oil extractivism in the Niger Delta. Both, indeed, being cases where the characteristics of the vampire—patrician, businessman, invasive, white (and very much a colonial construct), are intent on homogenizing, enslaving, usurping and profiteering off the 'weak' is in evidence.

In chapter two, for example, I expound upon this idea of monstrous contemporaries to examine how the enforced evacuees of climate change—climate refugees—as well as the planet itself find themselves in states of living-dead, zombified in a fitful presentness scarred by a hollowed past, with whole cultures and landscapes irrecoverably left behind or shambling into extinction. Which is why we find ourselves not just existing in an Anthropocene home to the present-living, but within a kind of Monstrous Now populated with the destructive doings that have come before; a time where we live alongside future and past phantoms and the (few) capital-engorged ghouls of the present. That is, the Monstrous Now is the precarious present impregnated with scary warnings before an eventual Catastrophic-Capitalism, when

even the benefiting minority will likewise find themselves victims to a robotic sacrifice to the stability of numbers.

### **Outline of Chapters**

Chapter One, 'Too Much', investigates how floods, deluges and rising waters act as grand-seated spectacles capable of awe, reflection, and action. Employing anti-anthropocentric and toxic sublime readings to *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* and *Blackfish City*, I discuss and aim to generate greater discourse of such crises across different lifeworlds from perspectives both non-privileged and nonhuman. Unlike the traditional, industrial "toxic sublime" as seen in the photography of Edward Burtynsky, however, I adapt Jennifer Peeples' concept to encompass floods and rising oceans as a kind of second wave toxic sublime that has been made newly normal (yet not natural) through our anthropogenic actions.

Flooding has long been the poster-child of the climate crisis, the waterlogged spectacles making destructively corporeal humanity's unchecked carbon output. Yet it is the low-lying and geographically unprivileged countries that are most susceptible and at risk to this largely Western-made problem. Places like the Maldives, Thailand, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Further, it is animals and the planet that are suffering for a distinctly human problem. What I consider here, then, is culpability and the need for a greater planetary oneness when it comes to considering disaster-level problems.

I then turn my attention towards nonhuman-based expressions and how they can represent humanity from without. For example, Sudbanthad expresses humans from an avian perspective as "wingless giants" (Sudbanthad, 2019, p 141). Firstly, however, I situate my preference for the term creaturely over nonhuman, whilst simultaneously striving for the more illuminated and equal "creatural" as espoused by David Herman, which places humans



and nonhumans on the same playing field (Herman, 2016, p. 2). I then probe Sudbanthad's decision to chronicle human progress and expansion, as a human flood, in Thailand via the perspective of birds. The vast scales and substantially different and yet connected concepts of world that run alongside here as everywhere on the globe are what this chapter is innately concerned with. Especially considering climate crisis is blind to these delineations.

In Chapter Two, 'Too Little', I examine how mismanagement of crucial water sources and misguided attempts to tame the West has, and continues to, stretch the Colorado River beyond its means. Something that is being further compounded by today's rising temperatures, increased wildfires, and deep-seated anthropogenic infrastructure. Discussing two hydrofictions in *Gold Fame Citrus* and *The Water Knife*, both set in the American Southwest, this section uses each as a springboard to critique world understandings of water and water crisis.

I consider how the West has long been a location where humanity has sought to test their mettle and 'tame' the land. Specifically, I highlight how constant water siphoning to hydrate ill-placed desert-cities is not only unmaking the natural world but is ultimately adding to the near-future destruction of these self-same cities. These locations, quite simply, were never meant to house such numbers. Indeed, both novels, represent how such future widespread desertification and desperation could potentially give rise to hydro-despotic dominions and water-based fanaticism.

The unequal distribution of wealth is again at the heart of the criticism here. Indeed, both in the texts and in the world beyond the pages, it is only those with reach and power to flee, outright ignore, or find themselves secure and safe amidst such disasters. Take the 2017 Californian fires and the symbolic photo of golfers carrying on as per usual despite a backdrop not unlike a circle of Hell, for example, or how, during the lockdowns of Covid-19, celebrities

and footballers circumvented procedures by either flying away to private islands, booking out entire restaurants or simply ignoring the rules altogether because their exorbitant wealth allowed them to. They conveniently disregarded the wider problems, ethical and medical, that would impact all the workers and people making up their envoys. This chapter, then, asks how continued water scarcity and overallocation exacerbates already prominent hierarchical divides, and makes a case for a reconceptualisation of our understanding of 'place'.

The final chapter entitled 'Too Much' turns towards the apocalyptic-like spoiling of a water body, the Niger Delta, in service to faraway claimants. I begin by looking into petroculture and the interconnections it shares with the burgeoning field of the environmental humanities. Discussion then turns towards how geographical privilege—the it's not happening right in front of my nose, so I don't know about it defence—is at the heart of the problem, and use the concept of "trans-corporeality" to challenge and dispel this notion (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2). Alaimo's term speaks to a fleshy interconnection between planet and people, where one can never truly be disentangled from the other. Pollutants we think are miles away are like as not already inside us, in the food we eat and the water we drink. The effects of anthropogenic devastation on these environments, then, is not just local, but glocal, and so awareness of this should be global, even if the impacts can be slow-reaching.

Here, I investigate how "literary militancy" and writer-activism, can spark confrontational discourse for the protection of the environment and those who call it home, using Habila's *Oil on Water* as a focal point (Egya, 2017, p. 94). I then formally introduce, define, and make a claim for what I call the Energy-Gothic as a new lens from which narratives can plumb morbid and resource-redolent texts. This is a concept that bridges the encompassing dread, terror, and anxieties of the Gothic with the important field of the

energy-humanities to better explore the discrepancy of power (will, resource, and energy) between the few and the many, as well as its impact on lived-in environments.

A few notable examples of the Energy-Gothic can be found in John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* (1951), Karel Čapek's *The Absolute at Large* (1922), and in the film *Dark Waters* (2019), based on the real-life story of the DuPont company's decision to knowingly pump out chemical waste into the Ohio River. In each of these, corporate individuals actively chose to bring fatal materials (Triffids, God-power, PFOA) in close proximity to the general public because of ego and wealth. They then decided to distance themselves from it ethically and geographically. To these people whose status within a capitalist system is secure, it is humans that are ultimately the resource—ignorant cash-cows that can continually pay out even as their health, homes, and ecologies deteriorate around them.

At its heart, the Energy-Gothic is about accountability. It foregrounds how a capital-first mentality can create a conventionally Gothic aesthetic in the locations being drilled, logged, mined, or toxified. For example, the biome devastation of the Niger Delta—a devastation encompassing human, animal, and water bodies alike—is in service to the betterment of a handful of Western companies far removed from the sources of extraction. Now a region, and country, forcibly “skewed to the export of oil”, its “political regime” and entire makeup corresponds “to oil interests” (Macdonald, 2017, p. 298). Therefore, to those that live there, the very substance has become a horror, caked and congealed; something in the air, in the ground and in bodies, something that disrupts ways of life and kills off crucial wildlife. To those benefiting from their ills, those privileged faraway millionaires, however, this is merely a “sacrifice zone” in service to what Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession” (Lerner and Brown, 2010, p. 3, Harvey, 2006, p. 137). This is a notion that Habila's *Oil on Water* exemplifies perfectly in its representation of a lived-in perspective of what it is really like to exist and

travel within a ruinously resource-rich location largely occluded from the world by distance and the rolling banks of mist and pollution.

Energy-Gothic texts, then, embody the Gothic's traditional confluence of issues regarding "gender, race, history, class, [and] nation", but further foreground the explicit imbrication of resource and energy in relation to these issues (Smith and Hughes, 2013, p. 10). Whereas the usual isolated "places of defence ... incarceration and power" beyond "reason, law and civilised authority" in the Gothic are crumbling edifices and mountainous regions, here the castles and counts are traded for glass-fronted skyscrapers and CEOs, the courtyards and cobblestones for barren sites of production and toxified homesteads (Botting, 2014, p. 4). And yet, Shell and BP are no less intangible or remorseful than a Dracula to those people and water bodies they have wronged and irrecoverably damaged. Each being an example of an amorphous entity whose draining reach is global and whose coffers are inexhaustible.

Unlike conventional Gothic texts, those that align with the Energy-Gothic paint global environmental crises through localized turmoil, foregrounding the ugliness of production and exploitation to incite empathy, sympathy, and action. Ultimately, however, the Energy-Gothic is an umbrella classification of energy-focused texts that make plain the problems of sustained and unmitigated production, highlighting the need for the adjustment of conventional readings and the opening of self to the unseen "trans-corporeal" implications of a scene. (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2).

# 1. Too Much: Towards a Creatural Ecosophy in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain and Blackfish City*

## **The Toxic Sublime**

The “toxic sublime” is a concept with the ability to showcase ugly truths through evocative moments (Peeples, 2011, p. 375). Often showcased visually, in ways that illuminate massively contaminated or ravaged locations, it skirts a difficult line of depicting uncomfortable truths whilst simultaneously capturing them in ways that inspire awe. In terms of water, the toxic sublime can be found in mass coral bleaching, beaches piled high with dolphin carcasses, and, most recently, in the ‘Eye of Fire’ oil spill that occurred in July 2021. In the latter, which quite literally set the Gulf of Mexico on fire due to an underwater gas leak, the incongruous spectacle of a circular red dot in the ocean served as a powerful and persuasive indictment of human-ocean relations. Here, the boiling and spewing of the fire, an image contradictory and beguiling, becomes something both captivating and disheartening. If something almost impossible like this can happen, what does this in turn illuminate about human stewardship of the natural?

The toxic sublime, then, is a powerful tool when it comes to employing awe as a prefatory aid in the “digestion [and reflection] of ... ugliness” (Ibid, p. 382). Here, however, I aim to broaden the term’s efficacy beyond merely reflecting human “complicity with pollutants” —as it has mainly been used—and instead bring a “recognition of a connection to these contaminated” landscapes as being shared with other, nonhuman agents (Ibid, p. 381, 388).

Flooded futures as depicted in Pitchaya Sudbanthad's *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* (2019) and Sam J. Miller's *Blackfish City* (2018) are the future results of carbon-based toxic substances. Human-made environments, these fictive cities are warped by successive worldwide negligence that work to "call into question the personal, social and environmental ethics that allow these places of contamination to exist" or soon exist (Peeples, 2011, p. 380). Oil fields and cities the world over are the nascent beginnings of these flooded futures, their conglomerative pollution expanding the sublime's reaches to faraway nations and ecologies soon threatened with waterlogged streets and habitats. Here, then, I am going to show how human-made contamination readily crosses and infiltrates the division-line of human and human and human and nonhuman existences, and thus argue going forwards for what David Herman calls an "creatural" awareness of the human and the creaturely being on the same footing as we propel into more uncertain futures (Herman, 2016, p. 2). After all, rising oceans affect every living organism on this planet, and not just the vacation locations of humanity.

Nonhuman as a term is an interesting study in its own right. Should it be bicameral and conjoined (nonhuman) as in some egalitarian notion of coexistence or should be it separated, as by a hyphen (non-human), and thus given a further defined anthropocentricity as to mean *not*-human; the prefix non, after all, implies negativity, a failure to be. The hyphen, it could be reasoned, then, serves to afford the phrase a stressability that evokes a low-level superiority over anything that is other than human. This same *non-ness*, on the other hand, can also be construed as a positive, a sign to be worn proudly, exclaiming all who fall beneath its umbrella as un-associated with the single species whose 10,000+ years of existence has left more of a mark on the Earth than any before it. The stressability of *non* in this sense being a cause for celebration rather than anger. It is because of this minefield that in this section,

and indeed throughout the entire thesis, I shall be arguing for and largely referring to the nonhuman (my preference of the two) as the creaturely, or, when the human and nonhuman collide as the creatural as coined by Herman. I do this because I am well aware of the sovereignty one often sees in humanity as Other, Uber and More-Than, say, the polar bear, the ox or the dog, even if humans are just as creaturely as any of those. This specific section, then, is also a call for self-acknowledgment of the fact that, whilst humans are human or at the very least human-shaped, they are also creaturely and thus, as will become apparent, inextricably as creatural as the fox that is ground beneath our cars. Going one step further, as I express in the other chapters, humanity must also contend with the fact that we are also those same roads the cars speed along as well as the greenery uprooted to make room for them, as Stacy Alaimo's notion of "trans-corporeality" attests (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2).

Toxicities, waste, and environmental destruction, however, much like their effects on the creaturely, are still largely obfuscated in today's world because they often removed from sight of the geographically privileged, because they are unseemly; and as such it can require works of the toxic sublime, which beautify the obscene to garner wider attention and the desired subsequent reflection. Works such as Edward Burtynsky's *Oil* (2009) or Peter Funch's *The Imperfect Atlas* (2019), for instance, which take the oil wells of California and the ghosts of former glaciers respectively to represent how representations of the visually stimulating can combat and turn incremental toxic risings into introspective spectacles. In both photographic collections, Burtynsky and Funch make use of vast environments of extraction and declination to harness the traditional sublime as exemplified through works such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' (1816) and William Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' (1798) and then resituate it to depict the large-scale toxicities of the otherwise forgotten "residuals from

consumptive lives” in ways that can be viewed as beautiful and illuminating (Peeples, 2011, p. 381).

It is important to note, however, that beauty and the sublime are two separate, if intertwined, concepts. Beauty, for all its intents and purposes, is appreciation of pattern and posture, whereas the sublime as Immanuel Kant posits “is the state of mind produced by [said] certain representation[s] (Kant, 2007, p. 66). Any and all displays of beauty, in one way or another, incite “the impetus necessary for attitudinal change”, but what makes the sublime just that is a sense of dissonance, disconnection, and final self-reflection (Peeples, 2011, p. 380.) The sublime is scale, enormity, and awesomeness, and majesty, magnificence and meditation; the sublime is the interior reaction to an exterior stimulus; the sublime is the post-effect of incalculable beauty. What the sublime is capable of, then, is exciting thought from the beautiful.

Burtynsky is a noteworthy practitioner of the toxic sublime with numerous books (*Manufactured Landscapes* [2003], *Oil*, and *Anthropocene* [2018]) exploring humanity’s toxic relations with the environment. In *Water* (2013), Burtynsky sought to document water’s misuse, its long-term future, and how humanity in its accommodation to the “growing needs of an expanding, and very thirsty civilization ... is reshaping the Earth in colossal ways” (Burtynsky). Included are a selection of photos that were taken during the BP Deepwater Horizon spill in May 2010 that effectively captured what he called “industrial incursions into ... the seascape” (Ibid).

In ‘Oil Spill #2’, for instance, Burtynsky has captured the aptly named Discoverer Enterprise in such a fashion that it appears to be sailing not across an oil-stained sea, but across a twilight Vincent van Gogh-ian Starry Night. The striations of black imparting a sense of



speed and daring that run counter to the image's harsh truths: this ship is riding currents where 210 million gallons of oil were spilled. The almost chiaroscuro nature of the photo, however, serves as the sublime to the aforementioned beauty. Said dark pools stir dark reflections, not least amongst them a question of scale. The Discoverer Enterprise is 835 feet in length and has a gross tonnage of 63,190, and yet it looks tiny and lost amongst those blackened waters.



ii

The ugly-beautiful dichotomy in his work has readily been met with criticism because of the ways it can be viewed to glorify rather than disparage humanity's impact on our world. The sights he so captures in his frames, to them, not so much disrupting our preconceived understandings of industrialisation and capitalism, but propping it up and exalting in it,

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<sup>ii</sup> Burtynsky, E. 'Oil Spill #2'. Available at <https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/water> [Accessed: 20/09/21].

profiting from it. I would argue that seeing something at its most harrowing, say a bear who has attacked an ill-prepared camper, however, is the first step in respecting it, and thus learning to avoid the same fate. Further, to follow from Peeples' concise definition of the toxic sublime as "the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe", Burtynsky's photographs evidence exactly the evocation of wonder, awe (of self and scale) and (hopeful) enlightenment a sense of sublime requires from its subjects (Ibid, p. 375).

Ontologically speaking, it is just this contradiction—this "negative pleasure" as Kant names it—that affords the toxic sublime its most effective throughline (Kant, 2007, p. 62): If one can see beauty in destruction, what does that say about me? About our society? About the future? Beyond this, however, the toxic sublime queries the very idea of beauty (read: ecological and planetary stability) being a timed subject, conditional to change. After all, beauty is fleeting, just like the magnificence these types of visuals inspire, and soon fades into introspection and a *looking* back to whys and hows and whens. The beauty found, moreover, has likely already been lost in one sense, further degenerated over the time since the photograph's capture. It is this between-the-lines battle that the toxic sublime helps foreground, a war of humanity on world second by unseen second.

The efficacy of Peeples' term then, much like Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence", which seeks to bring attention solely to the largely invisible incremental, is how it appropriates attention from the awesome and (un)beautiful and then redirects it to the source (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). That is, it hooks a viewer or reader with a bombastic aesthetic or description and then digs beneath it, unearthing the usually unnatural reasons behind them. To borrow Guy Debord's words, then, the toxic sublime harnesses an actualized

“weltanschauung”—conception of world—and translates it to the “material realm” by making it an “objective force” mass-produced and intrinsically felt and feared (Debord, 1994, p. 13).

Funch, too, embodies this in *The Imperfect Atlas*. Here, retreated glaciers, as depicted through the manipulation of a RGB tri-colour separation process, effectively haunt themselves as the victims of creeping temperature risings. Originally a technique first conceived during the Industrial Revolution, this technique works twofold, because it also serves as a means to realise “the snowball effect we ... started” long ago continues to grow and grow (Funch, quoted in Guardian, 2020). Such a decision affords each of his shots an element of hazy beauty that aestheticizes “human interference” because of its inherent artificiality (Ibid, 2020). Funch remarks that these photographs afford humanity a distance “away from reality” where one can actually see a kind of spectral glacial melting that not only shows what has been lost but superimposes it upon what remains to further inculcate reflection (Ibid, 2020).

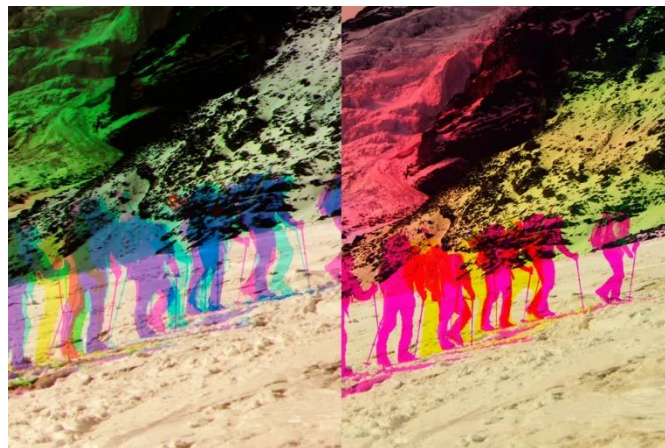


iii

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<sup>iii</sup> Funch, P. [Photograph] in Funch, P. and Pym, William (2019) *The Imperfect Atlas*. Oakland, California: TBW Books, p. 108

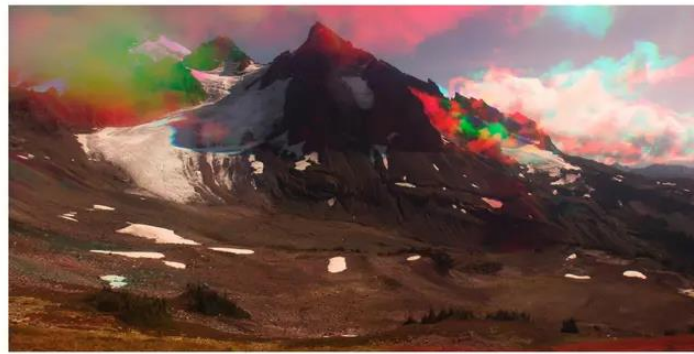
What Funch is doing then is making apparent the otherwise unseen movements of glacier and man through the toxic sublime of light fantastic clouds (RGB superimpositions) to evoke the world-wide emissions intruding in the arctic. The distorted colours (often tending towards the warm spectrum) that haunt his photos encapsulate the dichotomy of cold and warm, and how even in the arctic, temperatures are rising, and the dependable cold is thawing under anthropogenic pressure. The bleeding of the RGB colours, then, aestheticizes humanity's build-up of gases. In choosing this technique, Funch also symbolically links the endangered present to the beginning of humanity's rampant use of carbon emissions in the Industrial Revolution, effectively creating a toxic sublime that discursively haunts us from the past and charts our effect on world since said Industrial Revolution.



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<sup>iv</sup> Funch, P. [Photograph] in Funch, P. and Pym, William (2019) *The Imperfect Atlas*. Oakland, California: TBW Books, p. 88



v

When it comes to visualising the climate crisis the glacier is a powerful image because it irrefutably symbolises a change in a status quo we have long come to understand. Certainly glaciers “have always released ice into the ocean but now this is happening nearly twice as fast as it did ten years ago” and the results of this are “feeding vast amounts of freshwater into the sea, raising sea levels, changing salinity and disrupting ocean currents” (‘Frozen Worlds’, 2019). Glacial imagery, and particularly “calving icebergs and retreating glaciers”, have gone on to become “established symbols of global warming” and are frequently conjured as visual shorthand when it comes to any climate crisis discourse (Trexler, 2015, p. 81). However, as Ehrlich conclusively outlines these media-friendly images will not always be around to stoke the fires of change: “By midcentury, it is predicted, there will be no more glaciers and a million species of living beings will become extinct” (Ehrlich, 2004, p. xi).

Peoples’ notion of the toxic sublime is ultimately an invitation to understand that all around the planet, unparalleled anthropogenically-driven ecological degradations are taking place and the “crucial connections” that “we and all life relies upon” are “being disrupted”

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<sup>v</sup> Funch, P. and Pym, William (2019) *The Imperfect Atlas*. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2020/feb/20/glaciers-anthropocene-in-pictures-peter-funch-the-imperfect-atlas-rgb-tbw-books>

and broken in ways extremely visible ('Frozen Worlds', 2019). Representations of ecological devastation, then, whether fictional or real, on the screen or the page, serve to bring these geographically removed awe-inspiring sights into the home consciousness. "The world the spectacle holds up to view", as Debord tellingly notes, suddenly becomes "at once *here* and *elsewhere*", increasingly blurring into and encroaching upon privileged lines (Debord, 1994, p. 26). In *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* and *Blackfish City* this is exemplified through the shifting of sea-levels and widespread inundation of civilization by successive deluge. Here sunken or forcibly floating cities resemble the final cost of continued propagation of wanton carbon emissions and a disheartening endpoint of repeated toxic sublimations. Both novels actively explore this cost and employ Debord's idea of "objective force[s]", though they do so in different ways: *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* being a piece that straddles the effects of each before, during and after they hit, showcasing the effects on a nascent city and a whole host of connected characters (creaturely and human); whilst *Blackfish City* deals with the fallout, largely touching upon the build-up through the temporally-recursive "breaks" disease that is sweeping the lower echelons of the floating city, Qaanaaq (Miller, 2019, p. 4). Following this, each novel touches upon the harmony, unification and disruption of hierarchical human-human, human-nonhuman coexistences, and how changing topographies incite such change or, indeed, a non-change. After all, awe-inspiring spectacles have already been known to have the capability to erase "the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed" (Debord, 1994, p. 153). Fundamentally, a creatural perspective on the toxic sublime (and beyond), then, is an open call for an amorphous one species egalitarianism in the face of a growing absence of world, of which humanity is largely the architect.

## Flood Fictions

Flooding is a well-documented crisis that still proves thematically rich in representing the devastating effects of socio-political concerns. More recently, however, it is often employed in the discourse surrounding climate crisis, often as symbolism of chaos, unpredictability, human wrongness, and “life in the Anthropocene” (Bracke, 2018). In the headline statements of the IPCC’s<sup>vi</sup> ‘Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate’ released in September 2019, for example, it was made plain that sea-levels are “ris[ing] at an increasing rate”, with the usually “historically rare”—one per century in the recent past—extreme sea events now “projected to occur frequently at many locations by 2050” (IPCC, 2019). Moreover, this is all believed with “high confidence” to “exacerbate risks for human [and creaturely] communities in low-lying coastal areas”, communities like that of Bangkok (IPCC, 2019).

The catastrophic causations of living in the Anthropocene can be readily seen in the submergence of eight low-lying islands in Micronesia, six of which were lost completely between 2007 and 2014; which, although unpopulated, serve as unsettling portents for similarly positioned “nations around the world” given current global emission averages (Klein, 2017). The sins of a small few, then, are being played out on a greater many, with countries such as the Maldives and Bangladesh, whose own carbon footprints pale significantly in comparison to the United States and China<sup>vii</sup>, taking the brunt of the global problem. As the same IPCC report ultimately notes, “people with the highest exposure and vulnerability are often those with the lowest capacity to respond” (IPCC, 2019). Beyond that, it is the work of

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<sup>vi</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

<sup>vii</sup> The United States accruing 12.67% of global pollution recorded in 2018 and China a total of 26.1%. Bangladesh, in comparison, was listed as adding just 0.41% of the year’s total greenhouse gas emissions, and the Maldives, by comparison, is not even listed as a single-producing entry in the Climate Watch interactive chart (2020).

one species which is damning all others, disrupting “ocean chemistry” and thus “the [larger] ocean [and worldly] food web” (IPCC Press Release, 2019). A common trope that Astrid Bracke highlights concerning floods is that only the “very special survive ... only those that are somehow different” and/or view themselves as “exceptional” (Bracke, 2016). Noah, for instance, in Genesis, as Bracke attests, but also as explored fully below exceptional is often equated with wealthy, as is exemplified in both Sudbanthad’s article on Bangkok as well as an auto-ethnographic account of the 2011 floods by Erik Cohen, where both report how water “seemed to magically flow” away from the homes of the rich (Sudbanthad, 2019). More than this, however, the exceptional is often reserved entirely for humans.

“Flood fictions”, as Bracke names these types of narratives which “depict climate crisis” through submersions, are often seen through the lens of the dystopic (Bracke, 2018). A lens that “estrang[es] these already-existing problems” through the prism of flooded futures to further illustrate “the consequences of ... present denial and/or indifference” (Miller, 1998, p. 352). There is little mystery as to why this life-nurturing component is often placed through the prism of life- and world-ender: it is widespread and always near, an inextricable and tangible vehicle of climate crisis that is more and more becoming a visual shorthand of global warming.

Narratives that deal with wholesale inundation or destruction likewise adhere to what Laura White terms “ecospectrality” (White, 2020, p. 3). That is, these are texts which seek to reorient readers’ responses to ghosts, whether they be from the past or even future spaces, to allow contact with spectres as a means of learning and “inhabit[ing] the current moment with awareness of a multitude of co-inhabitants” (Ibid, p. 5). Floods, then, similarly challenge conventional notions of time, culpability, and reactive procedures by inspiring a looking



backwards in search of hows and whys. The former victims of prior toxic sublimines thus become possible conduits for change.

In Miller's *Blackfish City*, for instance, this is manifested through the breaks disease which quite literally forces a sufferer to look back at society. A diagnosed character, such as Fill, can witness a 21<sup>st</sup> Century New York subway car on its circuit whilst he himself inhabits a floating city in the Arctic Circle where subway cars no longer exist; he can see doomed "children look down from burned buildings"; and witness "soldiers shooting crowds that tried to breach a roadblock"—a whole host of socio-politically charged images that happened years apart but he experiences in days that are neither dreams or hallucinations, but a concatenation of "someone else's memories" (Miller, 2018, p. 51). Fill, like the reader, is being compelled to contemplate the species' path to this point and effectively dying because of it. Moreover, what is transmitted is often flickering recollections of mankind's destruction, decimation or atrocity on world, self, and the other. The broken body the breaks disease manufactures, therefore, serves as broken symbolism of the current state of society, stuttered and staccato; flooded senselessly with the recollections of the dead as the world outside him is flooded with the tangible mistakes of prior generations.

In the novel there is an ostracized community known as the nano-bonded—people who were scientifically melded with an animal half—and it is flashes of their genocide and the still raging Water Wars that are portrayed during the disease. Fill is thus positioned as one of a few egalitarian organisms in the novel; that is, he becomes a multi-scalar individual, locus, or medium, to the forgotten cohabitants whose fatal ability to actively engage in socio-cultural hindsight is the very thing that causes him to be looked down upon in Qaanaaq society. Climate crisis, like the breaks, defies generation—it stretches and folds the now to then to the soon, targeting the self and scattering it into a societal-consciousness. "It felt like memories.

So vivid. But nothing I experienced. Stuff that happened a long time ago before I was born. How is that possible?” A new level of communication is opened up here, an ecospectral channel that allows discourse with the already dead, and a second opportunity to learn from prior mistakes and misjustices if only prejudices can be bested.

Flood fictions, therefore, promote the idea of an already occurring slow-death of world—because the practices that facilitate them have been playing out for a long time—by imagining that “dystopia has already arrived ... and its progress to maturity is unavoidable” (Stableford, 2010, p. 279). In dystopic *mise-en-scène* we are often asked to imagine sterile childless worlds under the thumbs of despotic rulers like Xan Lypiatt, the Warden of England, as in P. D. James’ *The Children of Men* (2010) or autocratic urban metropolises like George Orwell’s Oceania; we are only more recently being asked to picture realizations of anthropogenic despoliations that are taking place already around us. Those ever-growing toxic sublime seeded sights that are wonder-full not wonderful and evidence, from a human and creaturely standpoint, a nearness of world-death. The alarming temperature uptick in Ocean Heat Content (OHC), for instance, is projected to have cataclysmic effects on future marine life survival. Research, as of a 2018 study, evidencing that the seas are the “hottest ever measured, continuing an upward trend that is a direct result of manmade greenhouse gas emissions” (Abraham, 2019). The Earth, then, is already involuntarily exhibiting these types of anthropogenically-made large-scale displays. Extinction is the ultimate shadow of the toxic sublime, a destructive endpoint propagated through amongst other things successive deluges powered by rampant global carbon emissions. However, by imagining these flooded futures and recognising that these problems are always present and always one wrong legislation away, a writer-activist can excite “holistic ways of thinking about the future

prospect of urban submergence” and promote proactive responses to the limitation of future Atlantis’ (Dobraszczyk, 2017, p. 885).

### ***Bangkok Wakes to Rain***

Built atop marshland and continually building upwards in a futile attempt to escape exponential pollution,<sup>viii</sup> Bangkok’s development, like that of London, New York, and most prominently Jakarta,<sup>ix</sup> is in fact proceeding at its own ultimate expense, with estimates that its increasing weight is causing it to sink “anywhere from 2-3 centimeters a year” (Sudbanthad, 2019). Moreover, Bangkok lies just 1.5 metres above sea-level and as such some unsettling estimates posit great swathes of the city “may be underwater by 2030” given current trends (Phillip, 2011). Recent research undertaken by Kulp and Strauss revealed that the annual flooding in Thailand could even threaten to permanently inundate populations under a “high tide line” by 2100 (Kulp, Strauss, 2019, p. 5). Long considered a city that had “seemed to have arisen from the waters”, then, even this once great floating metropolis cannot hope to forever negate the losses of life, land, and tradition that an increase in flood frequency will induce in such a near-coastal city (O’Neil, 2008, p. 1).

Krungthep, the City of Angels, and Thailand as a whole has a rich literary history, but it is through two European novels, Alex Garland’s *The Beach* (1996) and Pierre Boulle’s *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* (1954) that it is most well-known. As with the ongoing global climate crisis, Bangkok’s culture and concerns suffer from a largely non-native representation

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<sup>viii</sup> “The condo salespeople like to point out that the higher you live, the white your lungs” (Sudbanthad, 2019).

<sup>ix</sup> “In Indonesia, leaders finally pushed forward a plan to move the capital city out of Jakarta in part to lessen the strain on the overcrowded city, but it’s already the fastest sinking metropolis in the world. Excessive groundwater pumping has led the city to settle, or sink, around 10 centimeters per year, with some coastal areas, where poorer residents face chronic flooding, are sinking at some 25 millimeters a year” (Parsons quoted in Poon, 2021).

in mainstream literature. It is still euro-centric characterization of Thailand's literary history, then, that reaches global audiences rather than work by natives. In *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*, however, Pitchaya Sudbanthad, who bridges this divide and spends his time between Bangkok and New York, imagines and addresses this concern through what Trexler calls a "flood novel" (Trexler, 2015, p. 85-86). Sudbanthad in his representation of a "local catastrophe", that is strange yet familiar, that "directly describes the effects of floods and the transition from a recognizable world to one markedly remade by climate change" here turns a flood fiction trope on its head for the better (Ibid, 2015). Usually it is "landmark cities" that "ground these imaginative engagements" even if, as Dobraszcyk notes, "more peripheral and impoverished cities" will be amongst the first to feel the effects of rising seas and increased flooding (Dobraszcyk, 2017, p. 869). *Bangkok Wakes to Rain's* story of an at-risk city, then, even if it is known to be an "aquatic society" with a past redolent with "amphibious communities", becomes all the more important in exploring Bangkok's watery marriage to its environment (Jumsai, 1988, 2011, quoted in Cohen, 2011, p. 320). A multi-generational narrative, that employs an old house, whose transformation is just as drastic as its geographical position, serves as the narrative's anchor. The people who live, lived, or come into contact with it become the character-frames from which the city's liquid history and inundated future are told.

The old house itself can be read as emblematic of Bangkok's past and future; it changes hands, rises and falls into disrepair, rises again, this time as the front of a Sino-Colonial skyscraper built "to attract foreign tenants", and then finally becomes just one more obstinate tower as the watermarks grow along its sides (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 107). This can be viewed akin to Bangkok's real-world attempts to reach higher and higher to escape the concatenating "soup" of ground-level fumes (Sudbanthad, 2019). There is something of

Icarus' aerial mistakes in their endeavours to reach "the heavenly strata where the devas dwell", however, because "the weight of all the newly built towers is [ironically] helping to press the city [further] downward, tugged even lower by subsidence from excessive use of the groundwater beneath" (Sudbanthad, 2019).

The spectacular water imagery Sudbanthad uses in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* is often levelled, opined and felt through an affective perspective: flooded Bangkok is a shifting cityscape of distant towers unnervingly tilting; submerged roads become canals whose "traffic jam days [are] long over" (56); waterways that were once the haunts of running horses, whose gallops were echoed by cheers, are now silent but for the "squawking of thousands of migrant birds" (276); abandoned department stores' flooded ground floors have become effectively and detrimentally rewilded and taken up by "gold-and-orange-scaled fish" (259); and, at the mercy to currents, fallen houses are carried "far out into the gulf, where the wreckage will join other debris tumbling toward the seafloor" (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 275). Absence, adaptation, and a sense of *after* permeates the world—the city and its constituent parts become what Bracke calls "future ruins" of today's problems; waterlogged landscapes portending the "ruins of contemporary society" through an atmosphere of detachment and inevitability (Bracke, 2018).

Creatureliness or nonhuman-ness is often paired with watery invasions, at once bartering the fictive world's levels of co-existence as well as constantly contesting the readers' own relationships with animality beyond it. Moreover, if the Earth becomes Ocean, as Arthur C. Clarke famously remarked should be its rightful moniker, what does this say about humanity's place? There is no chance for exceptionalism in a world where the self-professed exceptional cannot thrive. As one section of the novel makes painfully plain, amidst such conditions, cholera will again become a widespread problem, buoyed and strengthened by

these sempiternal new waters. A new exceptional, then, as is explored in the latter parts of the novel, must be born: an exceptional that, either, in a creatural sense, combines elements of man and the nonhuman to create a quickly adaptative people capable of nominally holding their breath for “five, six, seven minutes”, or embarks on further denialism as evinced by the posthuman later capabilities of the rich plugging in their brains to mentally if not physically escape the problems largely of their own making (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 274).

When the water sweeps into the eponymous city in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* in the mini-chapter ‘Deluge’, it is used to actively deliberate the still very problematic hierarchical impasse of the creaturely and the human. The rising water, the very crux of the crisis, however, is at first overshadowed, traded for a wave of violence and a last-ditch chance for the reseating of human dominion. “The snakes were the first to seek higher ground”, the section begins,

[t]he people of Krungthep began finding them in places they weren’t often spotted before - curled around roof antennas or slithering up parking garage ramps. Remnants of the unlucky ones lay on busy roads, cut and flattened where tires hadn’t veered away. In one suburb, broods colonized tree branches and replaced leaves with their wriggling bodies, prompting gamblers to bow with a clasped stick of incense, for good luck in their football bets. At a high-end shopping mall, the sighting of a cobra in a dressing room evacuated an entire department store. Nobody was hurt, except for the snake. A country-born security guard found it coiled in the corner of the women’s wear section, bludgeoned it, and took home the carcass as an ingredient for a spicy salad.

What starts as a valuable spate of ecological insight—that of the snakes sensing something that our own (less attuned) bodies cannot and reacting to it—is quickly left “cut and flattened”, the mass exodus becoming a portent for the incoming “disorder and catastrophe” (Girard, 1987, p. 38). This line of asphalt pitted with the innumerable broken bodies of snakes effectively traces back to us and the slow violence our capitalism and industry creates. The description of the snakes’ egress, then, purports at an Earthly imbalance, a species’ own perspective of world-death that, in turn, illuminates an all-species problem.

When a boa later wraps itself around a revered Buddha the reptiles are soon converted into superstitious omens quickly passed from “phone screen to phone screen” (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 196). In a sense, the otherness of the snake in comparison to the human is further compounded here by its relegation to something with a negative connotation; a conceited superstitious humanist projection, then, creates a harmful link between their multiplying presence to “stock market tumbles” and plane crashes leading to the “death[s] of movie stars” (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 196). So, whereas ecological crisis should evoke an interspecies coming together or, as Donna Haraway puts it, a “becom[ing]-with” other life, as with the living brood-branches enmeshing with the trees, the security guard, instead, evidences the long-standing ideology of *homo sapiens* first (Haraway, 2016, p. 4).

In committing his violent act, however, the guard does more to effectively reflect the “uncanny truth of [his] own animality” than he does in repositioning himself above the creaturely and the environment (Benvegna, 2016, p. 52). The guard’s cobracide is merely a futile rejection of his own prey-like feelings concerning the rising water that situates himself as insignificant by comparison. A threat larger than him instigates a need for restoring his own

perceived “dominant status”, a process which will allow him to once more reorient a sense of normalcy to his own life in time of crisis (Donovan, 2016, p. 94).

To the guard, the cobra is accessible and exposed: it can be beaten, cooked, and consumed; whereas the lifting waterlines, like the ecological breakdown preceding it, is an amorphous entanglement that can no more be unfolded from our existence than it can be beaten into submission. In this one can read a desire to overcome his shortcomings: he is hunter so he hunts to not become the hunted. The unsuspecting cobra, as one of the many firsts to understand the coming flood and seek higher ground, therefore becomes, in the eyes of some, as “synonymous with the disintegration of the community” and cast into the roles of both climate villain and sacrificial lamb (Girard, 1987, p. 38).

The snake’s fate, like the whole ‘Deluge’ section itself, can be read as an allegory for the arrival of ecological instability, unsurety, and refusal. But the time for beating, suppressing, and ignoring is at its end. The water has arrived, whether one sees it first-hand or not, whether the countless spectacles taking place around the globe are nearby or whole oceans apart. To apply Stacy Alaimo’s examinations on monsters in film to the matter, climate crisis is not something that can be placed into submission. There is no chance for an ultimate reassurance that humans will be “free to float above the nature of the beast” in some cathartic re-establishing of the human-nature divide because climate crisis is entanglement, a tentacular beast that humanity allowed itself to be wrapped up in for hundreds of years (Alaimo, 2001, p. 280). The only way humanity will be blissfully “free to float” is at a frictionless point in the future, where all hope of grand-sweeping technological climate resets has been given up, and the water takes everything. Which is to say, the climate crisis is an atemporal battle that colours every individual and collective action taken every single day, and the luxury of resting on laurels is long past.



The rest of Sudbanthad's 'Deluge' section, unsurprisingly, focuses on how the new conditions of a flooded city affect humans. At first, unlike the snakes, not "many took notice" of the changing topography, merely brushing it off as the effects of just another monsoon season (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 196). It is only when the streets become waterlogged to the point where the "Chao Phrayo began to wash over the seawalls", that the humans really start to take notice (Ibid, p. 196).

Everyone was watching the TV screens that covered the approaching flood day and night. Somewhere upcountry the water was lapping on the steps of thousand-year-old temples and forcing saffron-robed monks to camp on highway ramps. Produce markets turned into shimmering, rectangular pools. Entire industrial complexes seemingly went undersea. Airports closed due to submerged runways.

Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 197

Only at the infringement upon humanist endeavours—religion, groceries, industry, and air travel—does the real sense of this localized catastrophe begin to set in. Flood management systems, for instance, a hotly discussed topic in Bangkok considering its successive inundation and proximity to the sea, begin to come under fire due to the belief that the system "did not equally favour neighbourhoods" with whispers of "so-and-so influential persons diverting the water to flood otherwise safe homes to save their own" (Ibid, p. 198). This notion of the very exceptional having the ability to survive the coming end is something Bracke argues "perpetuates the deep inequality at the heart of global climate change" (Bracke, 2018).

Sudbanthad is a vocal and devout speaker on the environmental and ecological plights facing the capital of his childhood home and speaks about this hierarchical injustice in a February 2019 article for *Literary Hub*. 'The Astronomical Cost of Clean Air in Bangkok', concerns the air quality studies made by the World Health Organization in 2017, but also touches upon larger climatic worries facing the city, such as rising sea levels and the ineffective flood prevention systems. Regarding the latter, Sudbanthad writes

They've since told you that kind of catastrophe [the 2011 floods] won't happen again. Measures have been taken. New barriers and drainage were built, and canals dredged. Next flood, no problem. You can trust them, you want to think. You can ignore observations that the streets still very often turn into canals and after only a day's rain.

Sudbanthad, 2019

Sudbanthad doubles down on his ire of the disparate conditions by identifying the 2011 floodwater's seeming deference of the wealthy: "It all seemed random, but you also hoped you lived close enough to central Bangkok, with all its important HiSo addresses and billion-baht buildings, for the water to magically flow elsewhere" (Ibid, 2019). In Cohen's 'Flooded: An Auto-Ethnography of the 2011 Bangkok Flood' (2012), a paper which "throw[s] some light on an aspect of Thai culture rarely discussed in literature: the Thai response to disaster", Cohen offers a first-hand and person-level account of these hierarchical disparities (Cohen, 2012, p. 316). "The Governor of Bangkok", he writes, "who had at first hoped to protect the city as a whole, now concentrated his efforts on the salvation of its central business district

and prestigious residential quarters” (Ibid, p. 322). Here again, we have another example of Bracke’s “exceptional” conveniently prospering even as whole streets and livelihoods elsewhere are left swollen, soiled, and stained.

### **Eco-spectrality**

Many decades later, in ‘Crossings’ and ‘Netherworld’, after Krungthep has largely sank and become Old Krungthep and hundreds of thousands of people have presumably drowned, this notion of select *Homo sapiens* ahead of lesser *Homo sapiens* plays out in a city teetering into dystopia. Sudbanthad conjures a world of tomorrow-drones that can map entire buildings, pinpointing any structural faults or foundational instability, an existence where every week brings with it “new orders and codes” to be followed, and a time in which death itself can be bought off through the virtual reality-like process of afterbodying (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 295).

In this new status quo humanity is usurped of its dominion over place. The new world is a watery grave, rife with diseases of old, and haunted by the fact that “past human actions, systems of governance, and structures of knowledge refuse to stay neatly in the past” (White, 2020, p. 1). In an ecospectral and hauntological sense these sections are awash with future-warnings, present communications, and past re-projections. Cholera, an already rampant and fatal disease, is reborn in these city-wide unsanitary conditions. The largely beaten disease in our present—for the privileged and geologically fortunate, that is—“every once in a while” comes back to re-haunt those Krungthep inhabitants living in these “newer houses built from the kits towed in on barges” (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 280, 277). As Amitav Ghosh points out in *The Great Derangement* (2016), the “Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity” so that those formerly at its margins “are now first to experience [the catastrophe] that awaits us all” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 63). This is something that pervades floods

on and off the page, “perpetuat[ing] the deep inequality” that climate crisis destructively highlights (Bracke, 2016).

Future ruins, Bracke’s concept of present artefacts shown in dilapidation in future arenas, in this new space are ruined further by unfamiliarity, renamed to help guide the new inhabitants across new waters. “Everywhere worth knowing has a name like Uncle Victory”, “Auntie Rainbow”, or “the Glass Elephant” (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 275). Gone are the building names of old, lost to murky water, “wriggling vines” and the erasure of “telltale tiles”, so that “from a distance they look like ancient cliffs risen from the sea” (Ibid, p. 280). They have become, in effect, ghost monuments that literally rise out of the depths to loom over what remains of society, reminding people of past failures even as they are being generationally rebranded by “mothers’ songs” and “pointing fingers” (Ibid, p. 275); in essence, becoming functional guide-markers that acknowledge the precarity of world along the way to unstable destinations.

Mourned non-futures, likewise, are something these later sections explore. Missed-potentialities and safe-pasts are actively embraced in artificiality, in the reliving of old places through the process of afterbodying—hooking one’s brain and “stringy nerves” into “enclosed preservation racks” to stave off mental degeneration after the body has died (Ibid, p. 290). The flooded New Krungthep does not exist in the memories of some and thus can never truly become everyone’s truth—the climate crisis, to them, is effectively undone, its world-spectre exorcised in privileged ignorance. Through the selecting of stored memories from “public map room[s]”, effectively compiled global databanks, the dry world of before can be re-lived, in what can be described as the ultimate encountering of Freud’s notion of “screen memor[y]” (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 310, Freud, 1899, quoted in Levine, 2018, p. 6). That is to say, in an echoing of Silverman’s re-reading of Freud’s concept, in which this process is employed as an

“ideological manoeuvre” to displace, destabilise and cover up—screen—otherwise unmistakable truths (Silverman, 2019). The world-screen fashioned up by the collective afterbodied memories, then, subsequently obfuscates and overwrites the real-world and its many crises, denying their existence. Ghosts, environmental, human or otherwise, they decide, need not exist in a simulation where one can deem it so.

Unsurprisingly, this post-life process is something that only the wealthy or exceptional can procure, adding further layers to this hierarchical imbalance (between both species and humans) that the novel is intent on foregrounding. In fact, afterbodying seems to encapsulate an everlasting/immortal capitalism as it continues to pull the purse-strings even when the body is long gone, the spectre of debt living long in the minds of the offspring “stuck paying for the upgrades” (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 301). The privileged meanwhile are able to almost entirely transcend their corporeal form, removing themselves entirely from the sights and sounds of those less fortunate and the very actions they themselves helped bring about. The screen-world takes on the form of an in-between space, a purgatory of the past inhabited by privileged present and future ghosts.

The old house, the locus of the entire narrative even here, is one such structure rebuilt from memories for the afterbodied to look blindly back and forget the present. Rebuilt in this case, however, with a ghost in the machine, as it were. An error of code or an ironic memory which has infected the strata of its meta-foundations, intermittently appearing at first as an arm, then legs, then “a small person” before disappearing entirely (Ibid, p. 317).

“Wait, where did it go?”

“Here and then gone.”

“This is kind of frightening. If you weren’t here with me, I would run.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. It was only a child’s shadow.”

“A child lying here, not moving. Whatever happened couldn’t have been good.”

“I suspect that, too. Even so, I can’t help but come back here to watch this shadow appear and disappear.”

“Like a ghost.”

“I suppose that it’s an error or artifact that the system never detected. I also think that it might be memory, just not human memory.”

[...]

“Wait, wait. Who’s doing the remembering?”

“Here. This building, this ground.”

“They can do that?”

“I wish I had a better explanation, but I think that maybe yes, they do, even when we don’t. *Places remember us.*”

Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 318, my emphasis

Perhaps this is where Sudbanthad becomes preachy and pointed, positing a world haunting itself both in reality and artificiality. Technology literally becomes an overlay, a topsoil of the real: capable of replacing glass walls overlooking canals with a projected ultrasound of a “woman’s massive belly” and the child therein, and elsewhere effectively rewinding inundated vistas (Ibid, p. 279). So why not the other way around? If “humanity is but a collection or series of ghosts” absently miscomprehending one another and bumping shoulders, then the world is a “ghost of ghosts” trapped in a thankless communication to deaf ears (Derrida, 2006, p.

173, 173). It remembers humanity in the toxic sublime etchings left upon its geography, in the burnings, the loggings, the floodings. And it remembers humanity through humanity—through our technologies. The “small person”, then, symbolises a fracture in the surface of a fauxtopia: a nonhuman and non-physical techno-spectre with the capability to “move beyond immediate surfaces” and haunt “human bodies” even after they have chosen to evacuate their own materiality and that of a dying planet (White, 2020, p. 1).

Beyond the page, Sudbanthad paints the real-life Bangkok as intermittently inundated. In the city, “you’re walking, or more rather, wading through gelatinous, watery air that feels like it’s about to boil” (Sudbanthad, 2019). He goes on to terrifyingly state that “sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between air and water and whatever lingering gases” because, in Bangkok, “water and smoke hold dominion” (Ibid, 2019). Boundaries then, are a huge factor in the contention of climate crisis, forever overlapping and blurring to the extent where one can seamlessly, invisibly intersect with another. These lingering gases, like the small person in the afterbodied world, are the ghosts of the real city, the big black spectre that in its post-life, post-used state plagues all of Bangkok present and future. It is through exacerbation and spectacle that these largely unnoticed by-products of our consumptive existence are given voice through the contaminated prism of the toxic sublime.

### **A Human Flood**

Readily overshadowed as it is, consideration of the creaturely perspective is crucial in today’s climate of mass habitat degradation. Not only can such thinking incite emphatic opportunities to allow authors to raise mirrors up to humanity’s actions and the effects it causes on larger biodiversities, creaturely narration also has the capacity to teach. Through sustained identification and empathy, it agitates notions of superiority and human exceptionalism. As

Bernaerts et al. (2014) plainly note, this can help reveal “the problematic ways in which humans relate to their physical environment and to other living creatures” (Bernaerts et al., 2014, p. 70). The crises we face, after all, are global and Earthly; crises of all for all.

The creaturely experience the Earth in ways humans do not and apprehend and react to its changes differently. Sudbanthad, like a great many growing writers of cli-fi or works adjacent to the genre, is cognisant of this fact. To the creaturely, life consists of perpetuating cycles of survival, reproduction, and hunger. The point of view of a bird in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* helps illustrate this by detailing its existence as merely mechanical and generational: “seek enough creatures to feed the young and themselves, and protect the young from harm” (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 140). In humanity, the drive is the same, albeit with an added desire for a technologically-boosted ease, pleasure, and security.

Much more attuned to the environment than many humans, animals are far more susceptible and immediately affected by environmental dissonance. We are already seeing this in the Borneo jungles being deterritorialized for greater expanses of palm oil production, despite the catastrophic ramifications this is having on the orangutan population. It is also acts such as these large-scale deforestations that will, as we are coming to understand in light of the novel-coronavirus pandemic, agitate natural boundaries and ultimately bring into play more and more types of diseases currently locked away but being invited out every time humanity disrupts delicate biodiversities. Polar bear numbers, too, are in rapid freefall. Nowadays, we are almost becoming desensitized to the images of the gaunt, yellowing mammal as it pads across ever-decreasing ice. Even the wonder-full, then, despite its emphatic flashiness, is susceptible to awareness inertia if overplayed or, indeed, underplayed in its ability to stir recourse.



Due to the melting of both its habitat and hunting grounds, the polar bear is now having to provide for itself elsewhere—in nearby Russian villages and industrial sites, or even outside its usual food-chain. The polar bear, or what is becoming more and more the bear without the polar, is one of nature’s first great climate refugees, moving inward and away from familiarity, largely to its own destruction and helplessness. “This well-intended foregrounding of polar bear”, Judith Woolf notes, “has sparked a new concern” (Woolf, 2019, p. 314). A concern in how the bears’ “individual nonhuman subjectivities are being ignored and their meaning and value as sentient living beings ... subsumed by their role in augmenting the lived experience of humans”; and, in effect, becoming “something of a cardboard cutout of [itself]” to better advertise a continued human existence (Boyer, 2017, p. 106).

In *Blackfish City*, the polar bear is positioned as both *other* and *part*. It is the anomalous savage that tears apart those that get in its way, but also fiercely protective and loving to its nano-bonded human half, Kaev, and his extended family. That is to say, it is one part of a co-constitutive being, a personified creatural unification in the equal sharing of mind, memories, senses and goals. When apart, however, it is depicted as a “wild animal [that] could not be controlled”, with its head and paws needing to be caged (Miller, 2018, p. 92). This representation has two distinct readings: firstly, and perhaps retrogradely, that without a human partner to influence and/or guide the bear it is once again afforded an inferior, unilluminated otherliness; and, secondly, in an outwardly constructive vein, that, through this separation, Miller is intentionally foregrounding the disconnect and absence of Kaev to his polar bear half. This latter as a showcase of “our own ability to think beyond ourselves” and thus embrace a creatural union, or completeness to world (Fudge, 2000, p. 22). Both conjure thoughts of a particularly anthropocentric leaning and question the posthuman nanite slavery that these enforced unions espouse, whether respectful or not. Again, however, this is using

the creaturely as a facilitator for human thought and growth rather than for its own benefit or representation.

*Blackfish City*, however, is not without its steps towards a creatural unity, even if does take a few missteps in its realisation. After all, the nano-bonded are seen as the fateful, final cure to the breaks disease running rampant throughout the city and the answer for a co-existent future, even if their creation is one marred by human-animal experimentation. Kaev himself is a symbolic maelstrom of uncertainty, violence, and mental tremoring before the “blissful calm” of reuniting with his other half:

The polar bear opened his eyes and looked at Kaev.

In the instant of that eye contact, Kaev felt like he had broken free of his body.

[...]

*We are one*, he thought, eyes locked with the animal's.

And it felt: Different. Stable. Like if he looked away, if he took a step back, it would not diminish. Like now that he'd found it, now that they'd recognized each other, they were linked, and nothing on earth could break that connection.

Miller, 2018, p. 131

Togetherness, then, is the crux of the novel. It spins on the idea of people meeting again those they either lost or forgot, of humans “becom[ing]-with” other creaturely life, of reaching out hands to one another across class-lines even in a faux anarchic floating city-state (Harraway, 2016, p. 4). Often blunt in its execution and message, however, *Blackfish City*, does take steps

to conceptualise steps towards a creatural ecosophy, a knowledge that in recognizing the creaturely as on the same footing as the human, we may be able to forge connections that respond to the breakdown of the Earth in meaningful and mutually beneficial ways.

There are multiple occasions throughout *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* in which Sudbanthad too does away with the human and instead pulls focus to the creaturely and thus promote creatural fellowship. The other-to-us in these instances are expressed through a combination of intradiegetic and extradiegetic narration, through both a flock of increasingly at-risk birds from human overspreading and an influx of snakes in the wake of rising waters. Each offer ample opportunities to “spare embarrassment of a more direct confrontation with [humanity’s] follies and aggressions” by using the creaturely as allegorical vehicles (Soper, 1995, p. 83).

The “wingless”, as humans are known from the birds’ perspective, become other, unlike us, and yet inextricably us (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 141). We are allowed a measure of distance, but thematically, the link is still retained. No amount of creaturely neologisms can detract from the fact that we, wingless, with our booming agricultural industry are fundamentally altering their nesting grounds and thus their species longevity. Evolution, after all, is a slow game, and in humanity’s short time as a global force we have already destabilised an ozone layer which remained largely unchanged for millennia. In this reckoning, it becomes plain that to communicate the creaturely is to sadly acknowledge that its future rests in the hands of the human. As Haraway, via Anna Tsing, ultimately outlines “human nature is an interspecies relationship” much as it is the detriment to all others (Haraway, 2008, p. 218).

The entire ‘Flight’ segment itself acts as a kind of interspecies illumination—a passage which “destabilize[s] anthropocentric ideologies ... giving a voice to non-human animals and facilitating empathy” to place “them on a continuum with humans” (Bernaerts et al., 2014, p.

74). Through an intradiegetic viewpoint of multigenerational migratory birds, as their nesting ground is increasingly interposed and invaded by “wingless giants”, Sudbanthad broaches the idea of industry and its deterritorialization of the natural world (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 141).

The mini-chapter begins through the eyes of chicks “waking up from their blue-lit sleep to find their houses in shards” and tasting “what they would all their lives go on to seek” (Ibid, p. 139). These “wet bits slid down their throats and satisfied their bellies” acting as the aromatic flash-cards from which their “knowledge of this place” materialises (Ibid, p. 139). Later, this multigenerational knowledge, in the wake of mass habitation change, is threatened as the greatest predator of all widens its gaze.

They flew where they thought they could hunt, and an expedition could take them out of sight of the colony. They knew, though, to turn when they neared the hazy, greenless lands. There were no gray behemoths [water-buffalo] there, only strange, rocky outcrops and small mountains and fast-roving animals that smeared them bloody against hard strips of land. This was the territory of the wingless giants.

Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 141

In a sense, there is a symbolism of the circle of their avian tradition being pulled and elongated by human intervention, until what usual routines the birds had accustomed themselves to becomes twisted and ovoidal: stretched beyond their normal, natural capacity. There are “fewer frogs” to spear and “the schools of minnows are less thick”; and they are having to fly “farther than their parents did to find enough food to feed their

young” and often returning home “tired” before having to rush off to start the hunt anew (Ibid, p. 142). The world, as their species’ ancestral-mind has instilled in them, is shrinking—the “wingless giants” and their “fast-roving animals” invading by the day (Ibid, p. 141).

The image of these encroaching roads and an influx of “stringy shapes that flung fast, piercing rocks skyward” to scare the lucky away as they walk their fields, musters images of rampant agricultural dominance over nature (Ibid, p. 141). This land, like the “three football fields” being lost a minute in the Amazon rainforest or the whales who dare swim off the shores of Japan, quite literally reanimates that Heideggerian notion of standing reserves (Frias, 2019). Those resources ready to be tilled, chopped, and harpooned to further prop up what Clark denotes as “the preconception of the sovereignty of the human over the non-human” (Clark, 2011, p. 188).

“Nature is not an agent”, Luc Ferry controversially argued in his anti-environmentalist *The New Ecological Order* (1995), not “a being able to act with the reciprocity one would expect from an alter ego. Law is always for men, and it is for men that trees or whales can become objects” (Ferry, 1995, p. 139). It requires passages like ‘Flight’, which plumb the interiors of the creaturely, to combat such caustic literature as Ferry’s, passages that challenge anthropocentric thought patterns inasmuch as they can come from a human hand. Here, Sudbanthad inculcates an avian view intradiegetically to showcase the birds’ otherness to humanity. He expresses their non-understanding of everyday human artefacts such as automobile (“fast-roving animal”) and road (“hard strips of land”), but he also refutes Ferry’s axiom by making them active agents in their surroundings.

Regarding human representation of the creaturely, J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* (2001) purports that, whilst a human is unable to effectively capture how the interior of an animal could ever really be, texts can conjure up thought experiments. For

example, if we can cognise our own future deaths and feasibly exist inside this knowledgeable contradiction of being “dead and alive at the same time”, why “on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of” an animal? (Coetzee, 2001, p. 32-33). Hopelessly adrift is how a bird would feel inside the head of a human, incompatible with the moving-boxes and the sticks-that-mark. It is this half-familiar messiness that purports our own creatureliness, further tapping into the very notions that we are animals too, despite our best efforts to pose dramatically over other ones we have unfairly bested with guns.

Sudbanthad also promotes an anti-anthropocentrism here by defining humans through their lack, their winglessness—they are not perceived as superior, rather they are seen as wanting. Different, not better. They are made “strange” by an act of defamiliarization (Bernaerts et al. 2014, p. 77). Creaturely neologism, however, is a fine, if easy, manner of forcing a sense of disorienting of reader to subject to create empathy and connection. What Sudbanthad, does best, however, is depict the growing tension, Nixon’s “slow-violence” of *humanity* on the habitat (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). He does this through a subtle (it only happens twice) but emphatic use of repetition of words and creaturely behaviour. It strikes a powerful note due to its proximity on the page, slight deviation of word choice and innate worldly climatic concerns:

Later when the wingless giants again began to group in the fields, they weren’t as numerous as in previous times. Yet the hardlands seemed closer than it had before.

[...]

They found only a few gray behemoths and a couple of wingless giants wandering the fields. The frogs tasted different, and so did the minnows. The hardlands seemed closer than it had before.

Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 143

The passage of time is felt keenly here. A nesting-ground that has served the colony for untold years now is subjected to increasing interposition and invasion, and the continued coexistence there is being challenged. The reduction of “the hardlands” becomes a mournful and pointed evocation on the approaching and inevitable change to the existences of both winged and wingless (Ibid, p. 142). Moreover, the effect of human agricultural change, whether through pesticides or avian deterrents, has infected the ecosystem, thus affecting the taste of long-sought prey. Nowadays considered a “creature that may annoy in inconvenience”, birds are reclassified as expendable competition in our own endeavours to feed ourselves (Carson, 2000, p. 120). The flood (and eventual toxic sublime) that is on display here is agricultural and capitalistic: an anthropocentric flood of need, of supply and demand. Humanity—as a geophysical force—are the flood, unmaking habitats and environments for our own ballooning population and tireless industry. In deterritorializing and homogenizing places better left unhomogenized we continue to serve the “tide of industrialism [that] lays waste to the natural order”, upending systems that have long gone undisturbed and effectively, and detrimentally, domesticating world (Kidner, 2014, p. 10).

“Agrilogistics”, as Timothy Morton ultimately outlines, “was a disaster early on, yet it was repeated across Earth” and “there is a good Freudian term for the blind thrashing (and threshing) of this destructive machination: *death drive*” (Morton, 2018, p. 53). Global

agricultural trends are, in their current spatial and Earthly wantonness, prime suspects in the harmful effect that is the feedback loop inflaming global heating and, consequently, ecocide and world-death. Climate change, after all, “is a symptom of industrialization, and industrialization is a symptom of massively accelerated agriculture” (Ibid, p. 37). There is a reason why the birds in Sudbanthad’s ‘Flight’ “noticed that the air under their wings felt different from the year before”, why the “winds were heavier and hotter” and “their breath vaguely” smelled of “stone” (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 142). This prefatory stink of carbon prefigures a future urban toxic sublime enforced upon one formerly natural; a fast-lane progression of agriculture and industrialization, capitalism and humanity.

The arrival of the creatural, then, is a move away from conceptions of “thinking of beings on a number of different scales” of which one has priority over another, and towards a “coexistence unconstrained by present [exceptionalist] concepts” (Morton, 2016, p. 22, 27) Which is to say, it is an invitation to deliberate our own ontological proxemics to world and, indeed, our intrinsic connection to both the creaturely and nonhuman. It is also the reunification of the paramount idea that humans must remember that we are “members of an [interlocking] ecosystem rather than ... its conquerors” (Kidner, 2014, p. 14). The “abyssal differences” and “untraversable” rupture that Calarco identifies in Heidegger’s disparity between the human and the creaturely is the domain of the creatural: a plane where embracing ourselves as one worldly conglomerate allows us to stand in an egalitarian Earthly line and turn sideways to face the true threat that is ecocatastrophe (Calarco, 2008, p. 146). Only through first acknowledging the creaturely perspective threatened by continued human-made toxic infiltrations on their habitats, however, can this union be put forward and ultimately actualized on a wider scale.



Any habitat, filled before its time with ocean or made barren through industry, is an ecozoic portent of Peeples' toxic sublime to, as Joy notes of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*<sup>x</sup>, "leave messages in the streets in 'huge block letters, at intersections, where anybody coming or going will see'" and hopefully act rather than merely constantly reacting (Joy, 2013, p. 226).

Just like a city is a city of cities playing out the mini-lives of every single one of its inhabitants, the world is a world of worlds or, as Jacob von Uexkull would call it, a planet of untold *umwelten*. That is, every living thing on Earth exists in its own perceived environment that is wholly separate as it is entirely shared. For example, "the fly, the dragonfly and, the bee that we observe flying next to us on a sunny day do not move in the same world as the one in which we observe them" (Agamben, 2004, p. 40). This is evidenced in how we all negotiate time and space differently—a lifetime for an insect can be a mere second to a human. That said, there does have to be a hospitable place for these non-sequential non-near meetings to intersect if never quite share the same locality; and climate crisis, amorphous entanglement as it is, is a spectre that moves freely through these Venn-diagram-like *umwelts*, degrading all self-worlds with an equable hand.

Sunken landscapes, as imagined through uncurbed successive toxic sublimines as in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* and *Blackfish City*, act as important protective discourses of this process, exciting notions like the creatural to try to further blur and level these crossings and crucial connection points. The employment of unbeautiful introspections brought about through the toxic sublime, then, has the capacity to spark re-engagement with the "co-constitutive relationality interlinking humans and other animals" with the world we inhabit (Herman, 2016, p. 11). Humanity, then, must learn to move between the planes we have

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<sup>x</sup> An experimental novel by David Markson that also explores world emptiness.

figuratively and literally restricted ourselves to and embrace space as a shared unit, a place of living-with rather than just living-on.

## 2. Too Little: Unmaking Place in *Gold Fame Citrus* and *The Water*

### *Knife*

#### **“Penned Beast”**

Humanity’s relationship to water has always been critical and tenuous, and the world now finds itself increasingly veering towards a state of what Sharae Deckard calls “extreme water” (Deckard, 2019, p. 110). That is, humanity now stands as the predominant architect of the “exhaustion of historical hydrological frontiers, where intensified extraction incurs rising costs and surpasses the capacity for renewal, threatening the democratic distribution of water *throughout* the planet” (Ibid, p. 110, my emphasis). The always-seen and always-believed to be a plenteous resource, then, is under great threat. Across the world, both people and the creaturely are already being forced to live in precarious places of hydro-dependency due to rampant overpopulation and water mismanagement. This is something evident in Cape Town, where ominous declarations of a potential and imminent Day Zero of no more water, because the city is consistently using “more water than it could sustainably supply”, is a very real concern (Harvey, 2018). In Australia, too, one can see the harmful effects of hydrological negligence in how the mismanagement and failure to hear and respond to well-substantiated scientific claims caused widespread “environmental disaster” in the Murray-Darling River system in January 2019 (Normile, 2019). The wonderful properties of water, therefore, are being reduced to quantifiable terms like allocation, exhaustion, and commodity. When you consider that all these water-based concerns are and will be exacerbated by an inability to curb rising temperatures, the state of ecologies and water bodies the world over, then, as Pearce attests could very well be “the defining crisis” of this century (Pearce, 2006, p. 1).

In this chapter, I examine this more rigorously through the past, present and future of the historically mismanaged and misallocated Colorado River. Here, the cost of misguided human engineering is visible in how this once mighty river's flow is now staccato and stuttered with dams. This has endangered the lives of fish who relied on its formerly certain flow, resulting in last-ditch hatcheries to try to keep these species alive. The Colorado is also siphoned beyond its means to keep humanity (unequally) afloat, despite increasingly weaker flows and longer periods of drought. Its woeful and exceptionalist treatment, then, is endemic to a planetary problem of humans prioritising themselves over all else; a micro perspective of a macro problem.

Winding a cleft from the snow-capped peaks of the Rockies and through some seven states (five in the US and two in Mexico) before intermittently connecting with the Californian Gulf, the Colorado River no longer resembles the free-flowing river of frontier myth; further, it is no longer the river even those two generations past remember. Along its 1,450 miles there are fifteen major dams on the Colorado River's primary source and hundreds more choking up its tributaries. It is over-maintained, mismanaged, and much diminished, believed to be one of the most developed river systems in the world. It is also, as Marc Reisner notes, in *Cadillac Desert* (1987), the "most legislated, most debated, and most litigated river" in the world (Reisner, 1987, p. 125).

Ever since its last "Great Unknowns" were finally mapped and excessive attempts to curtail its manipulation were protested by John Wesley Powell in 1869, however, the West, and in particular the Colorado, has served as a space for which American ingenuity and dominance can be etched. Dams, pipes, and fracking drills continue to dot the river's progress on the map now, monolithic symbols of technological dominance that have come to both destroy life as well as hopelessly enmesh with the surroundings. For example, the "river often

runs green rather than [the] red” it should because the dams catch the mud and silt, whilst “other changes show the hand of man more directly”: the “Navajo Bridge soars overhead at Mile 4”(229); “a rustic lodge called Phantom Ranch sits at Mile 88” (229); “test holes drilled in the cliffs at Mile 40 mark the spot where the Bureau of Reclamation intended to site Marble Canyon Dam” (229); and, hidden amidst the Green River (a major Colorado tributary), areas are riddled with “uncapped wells and illegal dumping” sites (Dolnick, 2002, p. 229 and Hansman, 2019, p. 160).

The earliest of all the truly great dams, the Hoover Dam, was built because of the mighty Colorado—“a dam which gave engineers the confidence to dam the Columbia, the Volga, the Parana, the Niger, the Nile, the Zambezi and most of the world’s great rivers” (Ibid, p. 126). It arose out of the shadows of the Great Depression, the electricity it was able to generate helping to produce ships and planes for use in the Second World War, and was thus welcomed with open arms, carrying on its concrete foundations all of America’s dwindling spirit. That said, even born from supposedly such “illustrious and hopeful beginnings”, the true “tale of human intervention in the Colorado River [ultimately] degenerates into a chronicle of hubris and obtuseness”, of rinse and repeat (Ibid, p. 126). Now, the river is considered “deficit”, as if it were “somehow at fault for its overuse” (Ibid, p. 126).

In the 1920s, when the system was first “divided up between the seven states”, its estimated cubic feet per second (cfs) flow was crucially “based on incorrect calculations” (Hansman, 2019, p. 4). In fact, those delegates who first came up with The Colorado River Compact “allocated more water than actually exists” and did so under the impression of “stationarity”—that is, the notion that the water flowing would move at a relative constant (Ibid, p. 4). This “huge fundamental flaw” was agreed upon during “the wettest period in recorded history”, but that 17.5-18 million acre-feet per year figure they recorded has proven,

on average, to settle at a substantially lesser 13 million (Ibid, p. 14). That said, the Compact and the subsequent Law of the River, which the former acts as a cornerstone, states clearly that 15 million is allocated and so, whether there is enough or not, 15 million acre-feet must flow. Fundamentally, then, before any other external factors can even begin to impinge upon the continuation of modern life, we have to contend with the fact that we are already “operating at a loss, and using more water than we have, because of embedded, decades-old policies and overstated ambitions” (Ibid, p. 4). That we are able to maintain these numbers, despite weak snowfall or stream flow, is because of reservoirs like Lake Mead and Lake Powell, which themselves are facing alarming depletions in recent years. Add in the increasing effects of droughts and megadroughts because of a burgeoning climate crisis and the West now finds itself in dire straits. As Heather Hansman lays out,

climate change is shrinking the water supply and changing how and when the water flows. Higher temperatures create more evaporation, which directly affects water supply. Every year since 2013 has been hotter than the last. And the long-standing drought the area has been experiencing since the beginning of the century has exacerbated the structural deficit in the water system.

Hansman, 2019, p. 45

Deckard argues that the world now finds itself mired in a “neoliberal hydroculture”, supranationally intent on the subjugation, “enclosure and appropriation” of all water sources topographically seen or otherwise (Ibid, p. 111). As the new oil of our age, the ownership and distribution of water will be one of the biggest threats facing the future

world. Ultimately, it must be understood that water is only renewable when “the closed-circles of hydrological cycles remain complete” (Deckard, 2019, p. 109). It needs to be extracted from shallow aquifers responsibly, diverted and dammed only after careful consideration of the ecological and topographical prices. Sadly, these considerations are tied up in deep-seated financial, industrial, and consumerist dependencies, and will require dynamic and radical answers to have any hope of untangling ourselves out of these “extreme water” futures (Ibid, p. 110). As the work of Hannah Boast reveals, the advent of potential water wars are not just activist propaganda but very real future possibilities across the world if nothing can be done to curb current water usage. In fictive imaginings, one can see this in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), which extends the former concerns of the previous films about oil to encompass water in dystopic parched landscapes. It is also why, in *The Water Knife* (2015) and *Gold Fame Citrus* (2016), the resource conflicts spurred on by such insecurity have such a profound effect and air of verisimilitude. The shadows of Day Zeroes, emptying reservoirs, and water inequalities, after all, are already visible today.

Unfortunately, however, the selected narratives are merely echoing sentiments first raised and disregarded in the 19th Century, through such writings as John Wesley Powell’s *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region* (1879); and as such serve to highlight the fact that such culturally-prevalent negligence is still a problem in the present, despite water scarcity being more and more a globalised problem. Tempest William’s open-letter to a century-and-a-half in the grave Powell, for instance, is a noteworthy example of how what is happening in the West is not just tempo-spatially discursive in a localised sense but symbolises a worldly quandary: “The story of the aridity in the West is becoming the narrative of the planet” (Williams, 2014, p. 213). That is to say, heightened climate events, because of

sustained human activity, are worldly events now, whether actualised in floods in South Asia, wildfires in Australia, or droughts in America, the planet is in peril.

*The Water Knife* and *Gold Fame Citrus*, then, are two cli-fi novels that extrapolate and project these Colorado River cfs losses, increasing droughts, and structural water deficits to excite hydrofictive awareness and activism. By imagining our very probable unsettlingly dry futures, in ways that expose human conceitedness towards the Earth as well as greater contemplation of humanity's storied with-ness with water, they articulate and foreground the notion of extreme water desiccation to instruct on how relationships with water should be reconfigured, rethought, and re-understood. Both ultimately work towards, what I argue below, as a reconceptualisation of current understandings of living-with water and, through their dehydrated visualisations, excite greater ontological development towards that which should always be viewed as much more than a resource.

### **Cycles of Unmaking**

The American West has long been positioned as a faraway frontierland where the untamed lays ready to be tamed and personal freedom and agricultural promise is baked into the desert. Ever since the Mormons first ventured out there, and the subsequent Homestead Act of 1862 signed by President Abraham proclaiming acreages of land to those daring enough to seek it, the spaciousness of the West has long been seen as suitable for forcibly man-made habitation. The unkemptness and wildness of the desert, after all, has been culturally situated as a haven for those most industrious of Americans seeking a wholesome, rewarding life in an environment where their mettle will be tested and their valour strengthened through personal and species growth. The myth of the American West as we know it, however, is guilty of perpetuating a self-made drive to unwild the wild, fix the unbroken, water the dry.



American identity in the West, then, is an ideology entangled and propagated by a self-serving capitalism, to putting your best foot forward as decreed by a system built around numbers and hectares rather than lives.

The Bureau of Reclamation, itself a misnomer that implies a conceited and misconstrued notion of original ownership of environment, was founded in 1902 during the great dam building boom. Its mandate to its earliest employees was to both “reclaim arid lands for human use” and construct water storage projects for burgeoning cities and farming (Hansman, 2019, p. 61). As Nixon notes the “very notion of the Bureau of Reclamation is suggestive of [a] national hubris ... as if the arid West were once fertile federal property wrongfully seized by sinister desert forces” (Nixon, 2011, p. 159). These early place-making ventures were manifested through the building of dams and provided jobs in the wake of the Great Depression and were welcomed with open arms, even as they systematically began to decimate native ecosystems and change the “temperature and chemistry of river water” (Hansman, 2019, p. 62). Despite these slow destructions on unseen spaces, “states such as California, Arizona, and Idaho became populous and wealthy” with millions settling in regions “where nature, left alone, would have tenanted thousands at best” (Reisner, 1987, p. 3).

To so many, nature—and even more so the desert—is seen as the “featureless remainder at either end of the process of production”, either as “exploitable stuff” or “value-added stuff”; and there is no greater valued resource in the American West than the Colorado River (Morton, 2013, p. 112). So, when cities sprout up in these desolate deserts, they require massive flows of water to keep them quenched, water that must be pumped, controlled, and diverted from elsewhere. Rivers, like the Colorado, thus find themselves increasingly tamed to the detriment of larger precariously balanced ecosystems. Furthermore, the populations of these “growing cities *need* water, and there’s a gap between *where the water is* and *where*

*it is needed*" (Hansman, 2019, p. 40, my emphasis). This discrepancy of resource and a human need to move it to hydrate dependent places, then, has an adverse effect on other spaces, unmaking them even as hard-won human oases sprout up. The weight of a city, because of the inherent depletion and over extraction of resources, hangs heavy on nature. Roads, pipes, and railways alone have a substantial cost in the creation of human place.

Both *Gold Fame Citrus* and *The Water Knife* explore these controversial ideas of land- and water-use, projecting our current destructive trends to heightened futures. And, as is most often the case, depict these increasingly violent "intensified enclosure of water commons" to fulfil what Vandana Shiva defines as the propagation of "imperial water"; that is, the hierarchical imbalance in how water is forced into not abiding to its own natural state and flowing freely to all who need it, such as "riparian and traditional agribusiness users", but how it is often engineered and redirected to flow "uphill" to those most capitalistically aligned (Deckard, 2019, p. 111 and Shiva, 2002, p. 28).

In *The Water Knife* in particular, Bacigalupi posits a parched *mundus* where spaces and places are divided and dependent upon pencil-thin blue lines, subject to ruthless water-knives who cut the flows to the benefit of the rich and powerful. The continual cutting of the Colorado in the wake of climate crisis is explored to the extreme in the narrative and Bacigalupi, using "sustenance from dedicated research and [the] reporting of a number of science and environment journalists", speculates what this could mean for the West in the future (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 373). Texas is gone; Carver City is drying up and amidst a mass exodus; and Phoenix, the spot-lit city of the narrative, is in its final throes. California and Las Vegas, however, through largely strong-arm river manipulation, are blooming.

There are two major places that feature in the novel that exhibit large-scale unmaking: Phoenix and Carver City. Phoenix, in Bacigalupi's water-shocked projection, is a city ruinously

anew, a place subject to “rolling brownouts” and “sponge and bucket” hygiene (Ibid, p. 38, p. 39). A place very much in the gradual throes of hydraulic empire and water-monopoly, its unmaking is painted as a creeping affair, a “delayed destruction that is dispersed across space and time” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Carver City, on the other hand, is very much left to cook in the desert. In fact, the entire narrative opens with its destruction, it’s *cutting off* from a major hydraulic artery, and culminates with a return to its “steady stream of destitution” in the mass exodus of “hunched forms” and gaunt “shambling ghosts”; those many weak forced to relocate by the few despotic powerful (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 352). These enforced evacuees become “like cattle in one of those old-fashioned cattle drives” or unmoored spectres, left to haunt not place but the dehydration of self and culture (Ibid, p. 353). What Thayer Scudder calls “developmental refugees” and Rebecca Solnit “uninhabitant[s]” to the betterment of hydro-tycoons like Catherine Case, the “Queen of the Colorado” (Scudder and Solnit quoted in Nixon, 2011, p. 152).

Almost from the very outset, the text opens with a militaristic attack on Carver City, as Angel Velasquez, the eponymous water knife, is sent to cut the city’s water pipes. What begins as a political gambit hinging upon a time-sensitive loophole—a next morning appeal ostensibly blocked by a double-booked courtroom—becomes a full-scale act of hydro-despotism with “two dozen choppers” and the death of “a whole fucking city ... a hundred thousand lives” (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 13). It is an attack dubbed rather succinctly as Operation Honey Pool. Here, Bacigalupi takes the well-worn notion of a certain and upcoming Water War in places like the American West and the Middle East and systematically ratchets it up to ten.

A vanguard of helicopters strike out south, over the neon-lit city of Vegas with its state of the art hydro-recycling “arcology” domiciles and “condensation-misted vertical farms, leafy

with hydroponic greenery”, past the “sharp black line” of safety, and out into the open and bare desert (Ibid, p. 10). On their way, the team, led by Angel, fly past hydraulically starved graveyards; those few scratches of failed citydom good for nothing “except firewood and copper” left to bleach beneath the ceaseless sun “because Catherine Case decided they didn’t deserve their water anymore” (Ibid, p.10).

The first of the Colorado Regent’s forcibly unmade places, these “wrecked suburban buffer zones”, foreshadow Carver City’s fate (Ibid, p. 11). Nature’s reclamation of space is symbolized by these ruins in how, in sand and sere, the desert will recover any stolen stretch of its improbably saturated land—the short-sighted placeness, given a moment’s mismanagement or misguided reaching, unintentionally relinquished in humanity’s hubris. To quote Laura White, these non-locations present the “spectral realities of capitalist development” as well as the “ongoing interactions between the visible and invisible, the absent and the present, the living and the nonliving” (White, 2020, p. 2). The unlucky inhabitants, those unable to afford different lifestyles, were forced to flee or die in the baked remains—a distressing livelihood ultimatum “created in seconds when [Case] shut off the water in the pipes” (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 11).

Carver City lies far beyond what Bacigalupi calls “original landscape: Old Testament Ancient”, a space where the creaturely (nonhuman), because of adaptations to their environment, emerge and thrive after the sun goes down (Ibid, p. 10). Angel watches these “tiny thermal markers of the desert’s surviving inhabitants” from his vantage point, these otherwise unseen examples of living-with rather than living-on, wondering if the desert did not return his gaze, “if some skinny coyote” did not look up at the “Camel Corps gunships flying overhead” to marvel “at this charge of airborne humanity” and ask aloud why (Ibid, p. 11)? Humanity positions itself above—aloft—all else, but here we are forced to contend with

what is made *visible* from this raised platform: that without our technological devices we would fail and fail miserably, whilst these wild red dots of life would persist, learning from a species-mind passed down through the generations. A special kind of learning, an ecospectral learning of past instances, that we still for the most part remain blind to. Here then, Mary Louise Pratt's concept of a "contact zone" is at play; that is, a place where differing concepts of culture "clash" and "grapple with each other", often, as displayed here with Angel and the animals below him, through visualisations of "highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). Such instances, of course, as is a prevalent theme throughout this thesis, offer meaningful encounters able to espouse wider considerations in respect to self, life, and world.

Before they finally arrive at their destination, the despotic force spies "a black ribbon of water, twisting through the desert, cutting between ragged mountain ranges"—the Colorado River—that halts their progress and causes each of them to fall silent at the "sight of so much water";

Even much reduced by droughts and diversions, the Colorado River awakened reverent hungers. Seven million acre-feet a year, down from sixteen million ... but still, so much water, simply there on the land...

[...]

In its prime, the Colorado River had run more than a thousand miles, from the white-snow Rockies down through the red-rock canyons of Utah and on to the blue Pacific, tumbling fast and without obstruction. And wherever it touched - life.

Bacigalupi, 2015, p. 11-12

Angel slips into a hungry contemplation here not unlike an early Powell or the Bureau, understanding why “*Hindus worshipped rivers*”, why people “could drink deep of possibility” when faced with such an opportunistic waterscape, and how, against everything, a “city could blossom in a desert” (Ibid, p. 12). He tries to imagine the river pre-dams, when it ran free and fast and not low and languorous, to a time when the water crossing into Mexico’s border was not just “as much a myth as the *chupacabra*” (Ibid, p. 12). Beyond the page, we can see this deficit of the Law of the River that underwrote Mexico’s claim to the Colorado as a burgeoning and oft-repeating problem. Even today, despite rapturous conservation efforts, the Colorado River Delta, that scratch of water so often swallowed by the sand, remains hopelessly neutered in its progress to the Gulf of California/Sea of Cortez. And, if life is water, then those south of the border are, hierarchically- and societally-speaking, being assessed as lesser, dead.

To paint this disheartening picture further, a *Guardian* piece entitled ‘The lost river: Mexicans fight for mighty waterway taken by the US’ (2019), depicts this growing imbalance in how two families on either side of the dammed-border interact with the water. Two boys, Daniel and Dilan, are forced to play in stagnant puddles, having to make do with games orchestrated out of “mud balls” because the water—water from one of the “world’s mightiest waterways”—has been *decided* to not flow through this channel (Lakhani, 2019). The water that used to flow has become a story never experienced, passed down the generation like a distant myth. In the accompanying photographs, a rather rundown brutalism (read: extreme water desiccation) is evidenced in their surroundings; angular concrete and rusty fences pockmarked with empty pipe-maws, all overlooking and caging a sad-looking pond of still water.

On the other side of the border, in Yuma, Arizona, however, a family is captured with unfettered smiles and snatches of greenery at their backs; Daniel Barraga and his children spending a day in the free-flowing river, fishing, swimming, diving. “I didn’t know there’s no river in Mexico,” Barraga is quoted, taking the place of all of us so locationally privileged (Ibid, 2019). “Wow, that’s a shame” (Ibid, 2019). It is this same hydrological rift, long removed from view, that Bacigalupi shines a light on throughout the novel, continuously pitting the wealth and hydrological plenitude of those lucky enough to afford fully recyclable housing—“arcologies”—against those like the doomed people of Carver City or Maria and Sarah in Phoenix—two tyrannized women who are forced to survive on entrepreneurial wit or by selling their bodies. It is why Angel, a former “poor and desperate deportee” himself, will do anything “to stay on the right side of the border” and stay on the right side of Case, and those with the power to keep him continuously hydrated (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 13). Carver City, then, and its some hundred thousand inhabitants, are merely obstacles to that fact. It is such selfishness that allows the propagation of these broken systems, and feeds into how “most environmentalists see the world as unified” today as “a world dominated by corporate capitalism or as a world at risk” (Heise, 2008, p. 27). Bacigalupi, however, elicits a counter-unification here, by depicting just how close these desiccated existences really are.

Carver City first appears as a “halo of urbanity blazing against the night sky”, full of electric lights, A/C, life (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 14). It is a city somewhat flaunting its water, with “pools and pipes running all over the place” (Ibid, p. 14). Angel and the Black Apaches hit it fast, firing off a few rounds before Angel drops down and heads into the water treatment facility in search of someone with a modicum of power. The flimsiness of Las Vegas’ attack becomes evident in his prior exchange with a supervisor operating within the extreme folds of the law: an endeavour, as Case’s canny lawyer Braxton paints it, that can be claimed as

merely “defending the private property rights of the citizens of the great state Nevada”, until the next morning when Carver City can file a sure-fire appeal (Ibid, p. 5). But, until then, until a judge can see an appeal, their injunction stands and Carver City’s rights to their water become negligible, junior to Case and her claim.

“But this ruling is a farce! We’re getting a stay, and this is going to be overturned. This ruling - it barely exists! Tomorrow it’s gone!”

“Knew you’d say something like that. Problem is, it’s not tomorrow right now. And today the judges say you got to stop stealing the state of Nevada’s water.”

Bacigalupi, 2015, p. 16

Shortly thereafter, missiles bury “themselves in the guts of Carver City’s water infrastructure”, and thus consign it to the fate of those other Case-created grave zones, each a fatality to a hydrological frontier that is increasingly careening towards hydro-monopolism (Ibid, p. 19). This is one of several examples throughout the novel that evidence a sense of what Deckard terms “hydroirrealism” (Deckard, 2019, p. 113). These are texts which display “a preponderance of tropes” such as “draining and desiccation” and engage with “plots that tend towards repetition and circularity”, “narration marked by the spectral or absurd”, and “macabre and gothic atmospheres of death-in-life” (Ibid, 2019). Ultimately, hydroirrealism, speaks to a certain destabilisation of environment as espoused by a self-destructive humanity, whose very hopeless reachings to prevent such outcomes only serve to further actuate absurd, hollowing loops.



Carver City's death-in-life, for example, is actualized in the fast fleeing residents and later on in the "shambling ghosts" and "hunched forms" forced to play at existence in a world where Black Apache forces can drain an entire city's water, unmaking place in a single night (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 352). When a number of the protagonists, Angel included, return by the novel's end, it is a cavalcade of desperation of such proportions that the "steady stream of destitution" fleeing the ruins are "slowed to a crawl" (Ibid, p. 352). In a sense, however, these people were already-dead the moment they sought to thrive out here, their fates sewn into the desert when they enmeshed themselves within the cutthroat Capitalocene—a time that propagates an "age of capital" over an "age of man"—and its chokehold on water systems that haunt the novel (Moore, 2017, p. 596).

From this state, we can visualise the evacuees as akin to zombies. That is, as "victim[s] deprived of language and reduced to fumbling, exaggerated gestures" (Luckhurst, 2016, p. 85). Bacigalupi describes those forcibly removed Carver City inhabitants in a "dehumanised" visage, stripped of their place, position and life, "oppressed by anonymous corporate overlords" (Moreman, 2010, p. 265). They are "cattle, just rambling all over the road" or "bug-eyed faces, distorted by filters and lenses" or merely "alien creatures"; deliberately partitioned from us, relegated, and deadened—the minuses and zeroes of an overbearing Capitalocene (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 353). They are now a collective image of disarray, the leftovers of hierarchical in-fighting. And, most troublingly, the first of the latest outbreak of ecological unrest that will trickle down to other cities as the water becomes scarcer and scarcer still.

The zombie, as Roger Luckhurst outlines, whilst a term that "wherever it comes to stop" will always remain intrinsically enmeshed with its bloodied "history of slavery and colonial dispossession", has more and more come to also represent a rampant and planetary-

cannibalistic globalization in the last sixty years; a “symbolic figure for contemporary capitalism” (Luckhurst, 2016, p. 15, 11). Moreover,

‘Zombie’ has become a standard adjectival modifier, too: we are in a world of zombie computers, zombie stocks and shares, zombie corporations, zombie economics, zombie governments, zombie litigation, zombie consciousness, even zombie categories (concepts or terms that are dying out but still lingering on). These things all become zombified because they are marked by a loss of agency, control or consciousness of their actual state of being: they are dead but don’t know it, living on as automata. They are the perfect emblem of decline coupled with denial [.]

Luckhurst, 2016, p. 8-9

Much like George A. Romero employed the massification of the undead as a diatribe against rampant American consumerism in his *Dead* films (1968-2009), Bacigalupi, too, sought to transpose pertinent and worldly concerns, in this case climate chaos, via accessible and marketable means. However, whilst *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), is a narrative that *can* end with an unsettling denouement of humanity aimlessly roaming from aisle to aisle stupefied by capitalism, *The Water Knife*, and most cli-fi projections, can only end in desiccation of self, world, and culture. That is, people and place are diluted and drained by the weight of the irreversible climatic changes around them; as the edifices of great desert cities bleach and fall into disrepair, so, too, does the availability to better self, create and be. The planet will be the

only thing left to persist, pockmarked with our progress. Hollowed out, over-extracted, zombified. *Planète-morte*.

Bacigalupi's Carver City, then, in either a show of extreme pessimism or realism, adheres to Deckard's hydroirrealistic notion of circularity, to a failure to heed and make good on past knowledge. As Maria ultimately outlines at the death of the narrative, at which point she holds the future of Phoenix in her hands, "maybe you think these papers [water rights] mean something, but that place ain't never getting better" (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 370). What she means, of course, is that systemic change cannot be completed within a day or by one person, and thus Phoenix will long remain in the hands of its myriad despotic rulers, whether they are the nationally powerful like Catherine Case or person-powerful like the Vet. Real change requires an attentiveness to our failings and mishearings, and beyond the veil responses by the dead-living (us) to the learned discoveries of the long gone, as evidenced in Tempest Williams' letter to Powell; it requires what White conceptualises as a "disorientation and disruption" to our all-dooming circularities in "time and space to make environmental threats tangible and to transmit environmental wisdom" (White, 2020, p. 3). It requires being prepared to listen to creatural and environmental death utterances and heeding their hard-won warnings.

Phoenix's own unmaking is incremental, serving as an increasingly bleak backdrop for those few struggling to eke out a life there. In a sense it is a Foucauldian heterotopia to our current worldly plights, highlighting, mirroring, refracting, and casting doubt on the real by heightening the fictive to new absurds. Water has become the new gold as so often predicted by today's specialists, casting the price of gasoline in its speckled shadow, and a self-made district ruler, the Vet, presides in an abandoned stretch of houses with a pack of near-starved hyenas at his side.

Here, the rich have used their wealth to distance themselves from the realities of desert-living via state-of-the-art “arcologies” (Bacigalupi, 2016, p. 42). These towering technological oases are furnished with free-flowing fountains (“spraying water into the air ... just wasting it ... letting it go”), whereas those less hydrologically fortunate are forced to contend with “Clearsacs” that recycle bodily fluids (Ibid, p. 42). Images all that echo the destructive Californian fires of 2017 and 2018, where

on local golf courses, the West Coast’s wealthy still showed up for their tee times, swinging their clubs just yards from blazing fires in photographs that could have been more perfectly staged to skewer the country’s indifferent plutocracy. [And then,] the following year, Americans watched the Kardashians evacuate via Instagram stories, then read about the private firefighting forces they employed [.]

Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 73

Obviously, then, there is a plain and distinct disconnect between the affected and the *affected*, of those who can easily relocate amidst these upheavals and those forced to endure a new normal. In *The Water Knife*, this is given more visibility, literally, as towers—arcologies—that loom over all those unfortunate to not have enough successive zeroes in their bank accounts. This landscape of opportunity, flat and stretching on forever with possibility, is remade, staggered with the survivable structures that gleam enticingly in the always-glare, shattering that age-old illusion; and leaving cities like Phoenix to dry at their whim. To return

to that conceptual metaphor of a zombified planet, however, this is like cutting off an arm instead of the head and hoping that the slow but sure surrender to the desert is safely skirted.

In *The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future* (2019), David Wallace-Wells paraphrases Mike Davis' thoughts on desert municipalities—in this case, Los Angeles—as “impossible cit[ies]”, “paradise dreamscape[s] erected in a barren desert” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 72). Money, however, has continued to facilitate a flow to its water-poor city-limits, keeping it hydrated despite increasing risks to its resource-secure longevity. It also has an infrastructural embracing of greater water prevention going for it too. For example, between 2002 and 2007, Los Angeles reduced its “per capita water use by 36 percent” even as it gained a million more residents (Hansman, 2019, p. 45-46). It did so by enforcing “landscaping rules, spurring public education campaigns, and paying homeowners two dollars a square foot to get rid of their lawns” (Ibid, p. 46). Phoenix, however, is not taking or enacting those same precautions as severely. And, wonderful as Los Angeles' strides to better its management of water is, “the baked-in historical assumption that the West is still empty, unlimited, and up for grabs” still rings true for a lot of people (Ibid, p. 49). But, as Hansman ultimately outlines, city water, like a lot of resources, can feel “abstract and removed” from reality until “it's too late” (Ibid, p. 51). After all, it is “hard to picture things outside of your frame of reference, and the scale of water use is hard to grasp, but it touches everything” (Ibid, 2019, p. 51). The “Age of Thirst” that William DeBuys warned was soon coming for those in the American West and Southwest is already here, and the water being drunk is increasingly intangible (Debuys, 2011).

## **Tidalectics**

A tidalectic worldview is one that promotes, acknowledges, and foregrounds humanity's always-already enmeshment with the ocean, calling out for new, watery ways of being. That is, it asks us to be better custodians of the world's water, whether that is through sustained awareness to the efficacy of recycling and personal consumption levels or the protesting of harmful oceanic practices. After all, it is only natural to first "change ourselves" before there is any hope in "attempt[ing] to change the world" (Hessler et al, 2018, p. 8). Borrowing from, and furthering, a neologism born from the works of the Barbadian poet, Kamau Braithwaite, tidalectics ultimately seeks to dissolve "purportedly terrestrial modes of thinking and living" and "coalesce [a] steady land [consciousness in synch] with the rhythmic fluidity of water" (Hessler et al, 2008, p. 94). At once an indictment and illumination of the Western world's colonial history and a manifesto to a being-with rather than just merely being-on water, tidalectics also "permits us to experience time and space beyond their fixity rooted in land", entangling "the before and after of chronic time and offer[ing] an alternative to linear, future-oriented progress" (Ibid, p. 63). Meaning, it posits and displays a fluid flexibility when it comes to the world's water and how one can equitably live selflessly within its ever-changing folds.

More than just resituating worldviews towards oceans, however, tidalectics prompts coalitions with all water bodies. As with any new fledgling term, it is encouraged to "migrate from its original context ... to other geographies and realms"; and rivers, mighty ones such as the Colorado, that once and should still feed into the ocean, are certainly not exempt from the same lack of care and insensitivity that the seas experience (Ibid, p. 33). As Martinez writes in a piece looking at river-ocean polarization, there is an urgency to address this, given that there is an enervating "tendency to perceive rivers as less a part of 'nature' than the oceans" (Ibid, p. 181). Therefore, whilst Haraway's "symposiogenesis" or making-with and similar coming-together notions largely evoke "terrestrocentric" leanings, tidalectics, rather, postulates the

requirement of oceanic, riverine and *all* water-body interrelations when it comes to respectful ecological world continuance unfixed to any space or place (Haraway, 2016, p. 5, Bear and Bull, 2011, p. 2261).

In Feld and Lew's studies into the sociologies of sound used by the Kaluli, those indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea, they put forward the following quotation: "Water is to land what the voice is to the body" (Feld and Lew quoted in Wong, 2015, p. 23). Tidalectics can be found fully in this quotation. To use the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River as an example, thousands of years ago, the river made the Canyon, etched it into being, and then subsequently peopled it with life—squawking, swooping, splashing, life. If Earth is the body—a body well documented to be desolate and unsustainable of life without water (as seen in its past, in the Moon, in Mars)—then it is dead and devoid without its hydrological voice coursing through its crevices. The world, after all, only sings in its interspecies' harmonies of jungle, plain, ocean and city because water made it so. Like a human voice, then, the river allowed the Grand Canyon to sing. Tidalectics is the continued conservation of such voices.

Hydroirrealism, a term used to describe an aesthetic of "absolute exhaustion" of water, would at first appear at odds with Hessler et al.'s tidalectics, but, as will become apparent, each has the capacity to engage with the other in ecologically illuminating as well as ethically inducing ways. The doomed "repetition and circularity" that Deckard highlights as one of its defining features, for example, being a symptom that a tidalectic outlook could medicate (Deckard, 2019, p. 113). If humanity learns to see itself as inextricable to the water it so constricts and cultivates, and then acknowledge that such current practices are enforcing the unmaking of places across the globe, it is much more likely to put a stop to these vicious "Hydro-Illogic" cycles (DeBuys, 2011).

In Bacigalupi and Watkins' texts, tidalectic messages are propagated in both the environment and the way said droughtscapes in turn write upon the skin and backstories of the protagonists. For example, Luz in *Gold Fame Citrus* is a character whose whole existence is owed to the world's decline. Born on the eve of the day that the Bureau of Conservation broke ground on a new Californian viaduct venture, Luz is quickly "adopted and co-opted", becoming a celebrity poster-child for "a future more secure" (Watkins, 2016, p. 11). Unfortunately for the Bureau, however, her childhood—and their publicity stunt—only goes on to become watermarked with reminders of their own repeated mistakes and failings, rather than as a would-be positive hydrological omen for the future:

GOVERNOR SIGNS HSB 4579;  
EVERY SWIMMING POOL IN CALIFORNIA TO BE DRAINED BEFORE BABY  
DUNN IS OLD ENOUGH TO TAKE SWIMMING LESSONS.  
BABY DUNN STARTS KINDERGARTEN TODAY WITHOUT GREEN FIELDS TO  
PLAY IN.  
LAST CENTRAL VALLEY FARM SUCCUMBS TO SALT: BABY DUNN, 18,  
NEVER AGAIN TO TASTE CALIFORNIA PRODUCE.  
BERKELY HYDROLOGISTS:  
WITHOUT EVACS BABY DUNN WILL DIE OF THIRST BY 24.

Watkins, 2016, p. 11



As Luz herself remarks during the early stages of the book: she “became the goddesshead of a land whose rape was in full swing before she was even born” (Ibid, p. 12). Later, she is gently pushed into the chaotic and vacuous arena of modelling (“spoiled then discarded”); and this is yet another manner in which she, like the groundwater and aquifers of the West, is overused, over-extracted, and over-multiplied (Ibid, p. 10). A money-making resource for her father, blown up on covers and billboards to sell an idealized dream.

Don't trip on the fact that even money will go meaningless eventually.  
Don't go sour simmering on what that money cost you, on UV flashes scorching your eyes to temporary blindness or pay docked for the time in ER or old men pinching your thighs, your fat Chicana ass, the girlish flesh pudged at your armpits, putting their fingers or one time a Sharpie up in you.

Watkins, 2016, p. 16

Moreover, throughout the narrative, as Luz progresses across the Mojave Desert in search of a safe place to escape the retaliation of the Nut whom she rescues the baby Ig from, her body, once that celebrated image of change, is burnt and broken and burnished time and time again. Like the world, Luz's life is forcibly prefigured to a destiny intertwined with water. What is more, despite growing up in California and serving as this water-icon, she cannot swim. This suggests a potential and conscious rebellious effort on her part to rage against her celebrity status. If swimming is a comfort with water and non-swimming is a fear of it, she sits somewhere closer to the latter. A person whose destiny has always been stamped with scarcity and lack ever since she was enshrined as Baby Dunn, someone who distances herself

from it because of all its abusive memories. This is why she is so later tempted by Ray (a soldier turned surfer), by Levi, by a cult of hope in the desert, and the mirage of continuance.

Something a great many drought narratives excel at is the portrayal of connect and disconnect to environment, often through a person or people. They are either attuned to or in control of it; for instance, messiah-like figures (Luz, the dowser-prophet Levi), infrastructural or societal gatekeepers (Catherine Case), or mythical/magical seers (Ig, Noria from Emmi Itäranta's *Memory of Water* [2014]). One can chart these hydro-figureheads, such as Luz and her adopted/stolen/saved child Ig, throughout the drought-stricken canon. For example, in J. G. Ballard's *The Drought*—a kind of inversion of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610/11)—the character of Phillip Jordan similarly assumes a perceived heightened role of connection to the failing environment.

Phillip is introduced as a “foster-child of the river and its last presiding Ariel” (Ballard, 2014a, p. 21). Without a family of his own, he instead adopts another amidst the drying riverbed. To Ransom, the protagonist of the novel, Phillip is considered “part waif and part water-elf” and a “wily young Ulysses of the waterfront”, with the capability to tame water-birds, swans and wild geese (Ibid, p. 21-22). He is, then, despite his closeness to Ransom in shape and sound, considered largely other, in respect that he has achieved a kind of oneness with his water-world that everyone else in the soon-to-be evacuated town has failed to do. Just as Ig is a child who “*feels* everything” like “she’s seeing with her hands”, Phillip, too, views the world through senses seemingly at odds with the masses (Watkins, 2016, p. 42). Both display a gentility that is either misunderstood or lost over the course of their respective journeys. However, these connections are often rare and at odds with the planet’s climatic direction, shamefully eschewed outsider ideologies that have no chance in being adopted everywhere because the natural environments they rely upon and help safeguard are in the

process of being unmade. So, those desirable skills and ways of being that people like Phillip are proficient in soon become “as useful as those as a stranded fish” (Ballard, 2014a, p. 22).

These types of characters often become like the conceptually possessed, human-shaped hauntings that leave painfully invisible ectoplasmic imprints on those around them. After all, if haunting is “conceived to be attached to a *where*”—“classically to a haunted house or ghost town”—then why not, too, in the human bodies that move amongst it and do the most harm (Blanco and Peeren, 2013, p. 395)? If tidalectics is about “poiesis” and creating “new ways of being and knowing”, then those figuratively haunted by environmental degradation, are the very vanguards of a people all should strive to become (Hessler et al., 2008, p. 78). The open, the special, and the willing-to-look should be embraced, not disregarded or placed onto extreme ideological lists that paint them with a black brush as the Extinction Rebellion was in January 2020.

Adoption—of land, of thought, of people—after all is a recurring motif found in drought fictions; in a dying world, for example, natural progeny is a hard-won fruit, a death-sentence, or an impossibility. Families are collected, not born. *Gold Fame Citrus* is full of self-made communities. Luz (and also Ig) moves from one to the next, finding security in each before uncovering some sinister edge beneath the surface and then having to move on. Luz’s first is her own family, and her traditionally patriarchal father’s willing discharge of her future to the Bureau of Conservation; secondly, it is the compound headed by Lonnie—who strong arms her into sexual intercourse despite her pairing with Ray—and one in which she temporarily returns to before braving the desert; lastly, it is the unhealthy culmination of all three: a seemingly ontologically freeing and saving community out in the Amargosa Desert. However, even this at once equitable and ecologically-open existence is revealed as less than that and

more of a pyramidal-led drought-cult with the seemingly easy and approachable Levi at the summit.

More than merely person to person adoption, however, these narratives display land-adoption too. Firstly, in those people who have had to flee their homes to seek out new survivable conditions and secondly in the land itself. The desert, too, rehomes itself, adopting the city, adopting the people. Moving in slow-forming waves, like sailing stones on a massive scale, the Amargosa “curates” its adoptees; only the supposedly special are able to find its sandy, searching edges (Watkins, 2016, p. 214). The chosen.

We assume Luz’s eventual demise in the narrative will come from dehydration and heat but, in fact, it comes at the hands of a miraculous flood, circling the narrative back to the idolized image of Baby Dunn, the omen of hydro-resurgence, just this time it is true but deadly so. In this sense, Luz, and the novel itself, very much adhere to “hydro-irrealism”, because her story circles back to that very first perception of her as a water herald—a new beginning. In truth, then, it is Luz, not the maybe-seer Ig, that promulgates an alternative way of moving forwards: her actions, her misgivings, her growth giving weight to her final and literal shaky first steps towards a oneness with water. “I’m okay,” Luz shouts over the roar of the water, before revising: “I’d be okay ... if I could just get my feet under me” (Watkins, 2016, p. 339). Tidalectics is a battle, it is treading water in extremes and fighting to stay afloat. It is an uphill challenge, but one whose first steps are draining and exhausting before they can become buoyant and all-serving.

A tidalectic outlook in the case of these narratives that are drained of water, at first appears counterintuitive, but it is the desiccation, the lack of a natural and unfettered flow, that sparks a much-needed discourse on real-world prevention and protection. It provokes a recalibration to what Vandana Shiva calls “water culture” and the “consciousness of being

immersed in a water cycle” (Shiva, 2008, p. 500). In both of the novels, however, water has come to mean something unattainable, missing, or gone. The water culture here has become distorted by a lack of protective reference and now slipped into a misguided reverence.

### **Drought Cults**

The power of belief, of trust in a higher entity, has long been a considerable ally in the domestication of the West. From the irrigation pioneering Mormons to the frontiersmen who held the sure and stoic belief that, despite all the odds, the rain would follow the plough. In terms of those frontiersmen, for instance, David Nye quotes William E. Smythe about how the “perception of nature” and the subsequent domination of land is the fruition of “Man’s Partnership with God”; and the West just “an unfinished creation where Americans would complete the work of the Almighty” (Nye, 2003, p. 12). In the same article, an 1894 correspondent effectively promotes this in their belying of the wastage of “millions of acres of land” in the West just crying out for that “magic touch of water to make [it] bloom into a flower-garden” (Ibid, p. 12).

Myth-making, then, has always been a powerful instigator in regards to the monopolization of the West. The concepts of nature, during the great Western expansion, writes Nye, were “expressed in narratives where pioneers transformed entire regions”, twisting them to their will and having them subsequently flourishing because of their supposed honest and hard work (Ibid, p. 12). Man, Western and white, became akin to a god, making and unmaking as he saw fit; old native stories and places were rewritten, re-narrated, and washed clean away. Deification of resource, and in particular, water, with its ability to make the desert survivable, has thus been an ever-apparent train of thought when it comes

to the West. It is a concept that both Bacigalupi and Watkins explore through climate-ravaged vistas and the advent of new-age religious groups that materialise in light of their doomed fates. Here myth is not about taming the environment, but believing in it and tuning one's self into its many dips and rises.

In *The Water Knife*, for example, Bacigalupi populates the newly dried future with the religious fundamentalist group known as Merry Perrys. This oft derided group in the narrative, because of their unactionable aspirations and perceived passivity, gather in tents at borders and at the sides of roads, praying incessantly for rain. They are the pioneers of today, the hydrologically-starved with no great homestead myth to master because the West has outgrown this outdated idea. It is no longer about how brave, industrious, or courageous you are, but how much money you have.

The Merry Perrys inclusion acts as a twofold critique of recent political movements in regards to the slow systemic reactions to climate crisis and, very specifically, to the hollow hope put forth by Rick Perry during the 2011 Texas drought. Perry, who would go on to become the Secretary of Energy from 2017 to 2019 with the backing of Trump, became the fundamentalist group's namesake for Bacigalupi because, like them, he too merely prayed for rain rather than using his platform to impart crucial information or data for why Texas was suffering the fate it was, and what could be changed.

In *Gold Fame Citrus*, however, the religious aspect afforded to water is not merely a background swipe at today's problems, but a vital component of Watkins' intention to disparage humanity's exceptionalism when it comes to place and world. Not only is it an indictment of the misuse and mismanagement of water in the West, it is critical of the government's out-of-sight-out-of-mind storage of nuclear materials. In fact, the latter is explored through a segment which imagines a supposed mole-like race, living out hundred-

year-old existences underground. The roving Amargosa Desert, then, can be read as a natural response to such harmful exploits on space.

Watkins, like Ballard, populates her novel with a daring and introspective lyricism that allows Luz to negotiate what Ballard, regarding his own novels, called “inner space”, where interior battles of existentialism, ontology, and morality can play out even amidst warped environments (Ballard, 1996, p. 197). The desert is not just a blank, featureless mass, but a nonhuman spectacle, a

sutureless gash where the Mojave Desert used to be ... its awesomeness chasms and spires, its photogenic strata, our great empty, where so many of us once stood feeling so compressed against all that vastness, so dense, wondering if there wasn't a way to breathe some room between the bits of us ... a headache where our eyeballs scraped against the limits of our vision, or rather our imagination, because it was a painting we were seeing ... and it made us wonder finally how we could have been so cavalier with photography, how we managed a scoff when warned that the cloaked box would swallow a part of the soul. Although in this instance the trouble was not strictly speaking, the filching of the subject's soul, for while our souls are meager, nature has surplus. Yet something ... was indeed dissolved in that silver chloride ... for we had accepted unawares a bit of the Canyon each time we saw a photograph of it, and those pieces, filtered and diluted, had accumulated the ugliest of our impulses, to shove the sublime through a pinhole[.]

What Watkins paints here is one of a great many instances in the novel of how the overmediatization of place, or indeed person, can be a tool in critiquing humanity's environmental abuse. For example, this passage challenges the reader to recollect or encounter "past experiences and perceptions" that may have always been viewed as beautiful and make "the concept of location immensely powerful as well as layered" (Blanco and Peeren, 2013, p. 396). The Grand Canyon was a product of sustained ancient water flow, but the droughts affecting the world today are a product of climate crisis, and of humanity, and will be just as planet-scarring.

What is more, just as Ransom and Kerans, from *The Drought* and *The Drowned World* (1962), are "drawn to landscapes where time is destabilised in some way, zones in which they can negotiate their relationship[s] with time on a grander scale", so too is Luz similarly pulled towards the Amargosa (and to Levi) and the flimsy and thin skein of protection it ostensibly provides (Knowles, 2018, p. 341). At first glance, it is desperation and survival—her having been stranded waterless on a seemingly endless stretch of road with Ray having gone to 'look for help'—but it soon becomes seen as providence.

During what we believe to be a bout of delirium caused by dehydration, Luz and Ig first experience the uncanny of the new desert-world in the form of the corpse of a long-extinct (in the novel's world) bighorn sheep "floating in a sulfur pool" (Watkins, 2016, p. 108). Bloated, with its horns and hoofs sawn off, and bloody stumps where they should have been, it anachronistically symbolises life and death, and, crucially, possibility. The freshness of the blood is at odds with the extinction of the animal and the dismemberment a connotation of the displacement of the orderliness of time; the bighorn, then, is like a bubbly manifestation



of Luz's and the planet's half-life, bubbling uncertainly on the surface. Something that's not extinct yet but could be: an "omen" (Ibid, p. 108).

Eventually, Luz and Ig are saved. Rescued from their fate by Levi and his community carving a life in the desert. Levi, the drought-cult's leader, tells Luz later that he had heard a "voice" and "alarm of sorts" that "said we needed you" (Ibid, p. 188). Later he reaches into her salvaged pack, pulling out a John Muir book (one of her metatextually and spectrally prized possessions along with works by Sacagawea and John Wesley Powell) and retrieves from within an enclosed manilla folder Luz's birth certificate: evidence of her being the hydrologically-hallowed Baby Dunn. Moreover, Levi disarms Luz again here, when they are alone in Luz's temporary motorhome on the Amargosa's extremity, by telling her he had once wrote a paper on her former life during an English class dedicated to "Visual Rhetoric in Politics" entitled "Angelic Symbols in the Secular Media" (Ibid, p. 188). Read: he has *seen* her and her governmental and societal abusers and sees the real her beyond it. He is not like that, his warm smile and big chest says. Or so he would have her believe.

Levi, a staunch anarchist, often preaches about the failings of today's policymakers, and yet he too ultimately fits into the same boxes he so tries to step free from. His tent, this safe harbour advertised as a place of meditation and self-learning becomes the site of many root-induced acts of sexual coercion and domination, becomes his own seat of power, his White House; and the Amargosa, this ever-roving, ever-colonising mass, his State where he decides who lives or dies. The close-knit, loyal to a fault, and messianism Watkins imbues in Levi and his drought-cult is given even greater verisimilitude when bolstered with a real-world connection: Watkins' own father was a member of Charles Manson's Family. Considering this, each scene of Levi's gentle domination over Luz becomes all the more powerful as well as powerfully unnerving. There is, then, an unconsciously conscious bleed from the real to the

fictive, just as Watkins' fictive realization of desiccation bleeds into the real world to "confront issues of visibility and repression" (White, 2020, p. 12).

Initially, recruited "to conduct research for an initiative to reanimate the Southwest's sluggish tectonics"—a governmental sanctioned role—because of his background of working for Fish and Game and then Conservation, Levi Zabriskie, is only truly opened up to the world during this study via a chance encounter with a tiger on a train car (Watkins, 2016, p. 140). Up till this point, he is unsure of his abilities and doubts his inclusion on the new Southwest project, but it is this creaturely charged moment—this instance where "*something* asked him to stop and peer into one grated container"—which stirs something deep inside him (Ibid, p. 151, my emphasis).

When Luz later asks him about how he has become this powerful dowser, Levi tells her he is receptive to "*the call*" (Ibid, p. 153). It is the same call he experienced that day with the tiger, where he was not only capable of connecting with it, but also able to know, too, the "hippo's thirst", the "crocodile's nausea" and the "aches of a mother giraffe ... cramped to the confines of her container" (Ibid, p. 152). A "sensation" he feels in his heart and likens to "as a rapport with God" (Ibid, p. 153).

One day, it took him to a bridge spanning the dry wash where the Rio Grande had been. He listened at its rail, futilely, then left his bike and climbed down to the waterless plain. He sat on a rock once submerged and listened. He stroked the hot stone. He dug his hands into the dry loam. He turned over and pressed his torso against the rock, feeling its warmth through him. He felt, finally, a welling of harmony, a communion with the rock and silt.

[...]

He could hear the ancient murmurs of the sand in the basin, which ferried outward, to the Sandias and the mesas, the raspy voice of the escarpment, the gentle caress of the gully, the open arms of the gully, the groans of the boulders along the foothills.

Watkins, 2016, p. 153-154

This, he tells her immediately after Ray's apparent death. Already, then, Levi is seeking to supplant Ray in Luz's interior hierarchy by painting himself as a great and chosen man. Someone who *does* seek and find water, whereas Ray, who had left her and Ig back in the car so long ago, fails and uses it as a way of escaping them, of unburdening himself. It is easy for Levi. Disregard what the US Geological Survey say about dowsing, and how "in many areas underground water is so prevalent close to the land surface that it would be hard to drill a well and *not* find water" (USGS, my emphasis). After all, to Luz he is what the bighorn sheep prophesied at her weakest moment—a could-be saviour to prevent her, Ig, and maybe all of humanity, from sharing its same fate. Still, Luz must *see*. In a show of his power, then, Levi walks the desert to try and scry Ray's last resting place, "his hands clasped together at his navel, the tips of his index fingers pressed together in a steeple" (Watkins, 2016, p. 154). "Here", he soon says, pointing at nothing, before finalizing it with "The dune, it's always moving" (Ibid, p. 155). It is a sentiment easily transcribable to how the ethical and moral line *is always moving* when it comes to Levi's designs. There is nothing he will not do to maintain both control and the pretence of environmental guardianship. Indeed, the exactitude of him pinpointing this patch of desert as Ray's end is only because he and some of his fellow cult members were the ones who hounded and ineffectively struck him down in the first place.

In a show of this moving ethic-moral line regarding his people, Levi is later guilty of the same abuse of Luz as the Bureau of Conservation were when he puts Baby Dunn and Ig before cameras (“Madonna and child”—a new old American dream) to contest with the government’s supposed decision to write off the desert and his hold over them (Ibid, p. 229). Levi does this, so he claims, to try and conquer the “rhetorical sphere”, to make them appear as human as those who will do the figurative bombing (Ibid, p. 228). This all in direct contradiction of his earlier claims of truly seeing her, and how the world used her to successfully sell a message of hydrological hope. Naturally, Luz is initially aghast at this new direction of his and the first cracks in this idyllic commune begin to show. A slowly yielding re-evaluation starts to take place: Levi “was the Colorado, raging sculptor” and *she* “was not John Wesley Powell but [merely] one of his supply barrels, lashed alongside the boat, bobbing” (Ibid, p. 230).

She entreats him to publicise his Primer instead; a world-changing natural survey of the Amargosa and the new life eking out an existence therein that could stop the government trying to destructively forestall the Amargosa’s progress. An almanac of the “Neo-fauna of the Amargosa Dune Sea”, that so captivated Luz and which reads like an absurdist and fantasist aping of Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* (1968), however, is something even Levi knows will not sway the small-minded attention of the public (Ibid, p. 193). They will see it as the (root-addled) ramblings of a mad man cooped up in a superheated commune in the desert. Who could really believe in a carnivorous “Stiltwalker Tortoise” that “tucks carrion in its shell until decomposition renders [the meat] soft enough to eat” or an “Ouroboros Rattler”, which “inserts its own tail in its mouth and locomotes via axial revolution” (Ibid, p. 199-197)? So, he uses the already mythic Baby Dunn as a means of offering the world

“atonement” for their crimes against world, as a remedy to their “guilt circuit” (Ibid, p. 228).

If she can live and thrive here, so can and should everyone.

“We say, ‘It’s okay that you fucked half the country, killed rivers, depleted millennia of aquifer, fed arsenic to children and lied about it, forced citizens once again into internment camps, let people die in holding pens. It’s okay. It’s *actually* good - because look! You created this magical ecosystem. The way Ukrainians call Chernobyl a national park. You meant to do that, right, America? Well done! Bravo!’”

Watkins, 2016, p. 153-154

Levi is the figurehead of today’s near (but very wrong) notion of tidalectics. He signifies the very change the movement calls out for—the reconceptualization and guardianship of delicately balanced watery environments—but he is merely a dark mirror of what is already happening. Real change is akin to the spiritual and communal coming-together that he so preaches and congeals in his desert cult, but his intentions lean too heavily on fanaticism and the same violence he so admonishes. The movement, the rhythmic fluidity that tidalectics espouses acknowledges the push and pull of the problem it faces, concedes that interconnectivity and world osmosis is not something earned over night and not, crucially, something that should be enforced with the same barbarous means in which its current standing was founded. Water is magical, yes, and inherently (and perhaps selfishly) tied to religion—to cleansing, to purifying—but it is also beyond us. Untied to human needs.

Being tidalectic is like being Green, it is about reification and unity. Being tidalectic is not myth-making or deification, but merely seeing the water commons for what they really

are and acknowledging that what we do/have done/will do is inextricably linked to the very waters that sustain us. It is about resituating conceptions and being the change. Both the texts mentioned, as has been expressed throughout, are examples which embrace both tidalectics and ecospectrality, through such notions as “hydro-irrealism”, to embolden a hydro-hauntological message; that is, they address the disparities of water access and the quantity and scarcity of today, of tomorrow and of the past, and do so by imaging places watermarked by humanity’s progress up till this point, alive or otherwise. Just as Powell and Sacagawea and Muir and Reisner are books within these books, pocketed away in character’s bags, ready to be called on anew, the actions being taken now will be stories in someone else’s pockets. Working with ghosts, with water, and with the fluid interconnections of the two is one way in which humanity can move forwards with a bluer, truer outlook. Water *is* people, and it’s time to remember that fact, and make those future stories as hopeful and informed by this as possible.

### 3. Too Far: Trans-corporeality and the Energy-Gothic in *Oil on Water*

#### **Petromodernity**

The search for and extraction of oil has devastating effects on crucial water sources. In the Niger Delta, for instance, constant gas flares “result in the dissemination of greenhouse gases and other air pollutants such as carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), ethane, propane, butane hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S), and nitrous oxide (NO<sub>2</sub>)”, and as such feed into larger climate crisis concerns, propagating acid rain in the region (Maduka and Ephraim-Emmanuel, 2019, p. 3). This then runs off into “surface water and percolates into ground water, causing a reduction in the pH of water” (ibid, p. 3). Before repeated oil spills have been taken into consideration, then, it is plain to see that oil production and an insatiable petromodernity is having harmful effects on the quality of water for those geographical locations doomed to be resource-rich. In their 2019 study on the quality of public water for oil-bearing communities, Maduka and Ephraim-Emmanuel concluded that “various components of drinking water exceed or are below the required safe standards” and that “urgent interventions” are required to “ensure the health” of those currently residing and living alongside such toxic

water (Ibid, p. 8). There is, then, a need for greater awareness and knowledge of how oil affects crucial water sources the world over.

Before it became a critical perspective and a burgeoning neologism, petrofiction, as coined by Amitav Ghosh in a review of Abdelrahman Musnif's *Cities of Salt* (1989), existed much as oil itself, right below our noses. In his review, Ghosh, as is so often quoted, queried the seeming absence of texts specifically attentive to humanity's reliance, obsession, and addiction to the very thing that powers our economic regime. Since his initial claim that there is "scarcely a single [oil encounter] work of note", there has been a thorough "re-examin[ation of] literary history, not only to hunt for those few examples of oil fiction[s] that do" already exist, "but also to interrogate the broader relationship between energy, representation and culture" (Ghosh, 1992, p. 29, Carson et al. 2017, p. 6). The now popular and well-selling cli-fi genre, too, has helped to emphatically negate Ghosh's claim with an abundance of texts whose sole explorations are worlds altered or changed by oil such as *The Wind-up Girl* (2009) and *The Carbon Diaries* (2008). Ghosh's concern, however, is just as valid as asking why there is no obvious oil culture or "how oil inflects culture" as Frederick Buell writes, and is, instead, "like asking how the weather ... affects it?" (Buell, 2014a, p. 70). Everything we do and are, after all, turns to the tune of oil. Transportation is synonymous with oil, for instance, and everything we buy, whether through our own engines or that of international and commercial ones, drips with its use. Therefore, we are wholly imbricated. Just as everything is the by-product of water, *almost* everything in today's world is beholden to oil.

Initially assumed to be applicable to only those narratives that foreground either the production, dissemination, effect, and fallout of oil, petrofiction has since gone on to become more amorphous and one can arguably see within its folds any and all works since the Industrial Revolution. In fact, this acknowledgement of a larger petromodernity stretching



back to a constantly influx moment in the past is being more and more engaged with in the critical sphere, with Graeme Macdonald going so far as to proclaiming “is not every modern novel to some extent an oil novel?” (Macdonald, 2012, p. 7). In fact, there is no “some extent” about this claim, and, indeed, I point towards the production and publication processes—the electrical energy of a computer or computers, the felling of trees for paper, and the eventual worldly transportation to manifest this product to hands—as evidence to conclusively say every book *is* now an oil novel. In a later paper Macdonald similarly comes round to this way of thinking, too, conceding that “the bolder assertion would be that energy appears, de facto within *all* cultural texts ... whether explicitly registered, unconsciously abstracted or sedimented into a text’s form and content” (Macdonald, 2017, p. 292). This oft unrecognized and unacknowledged concern for energy’s totality in the maintenance of modern life, similarly to what Patricia Yaeger calls an “energy unconscious”, evidences just how removed some of us have allowed ourselves to become from that which pervades our every action (Yaeger, 2011, p. 306).

What separates a petrofictional text from a text merely *implicated* in oil, however, is a sense of resistance, of illumination, of anger towards the mechanics and exploitations of prolonged extractivisms. As Bergthaller et al. ultimately acknowledge, “petro-fiction insists on the inextricable link between energy and culture, and how petro-modernity ... has crucially shaped collective and individual identities” (Bergthaller et al., 2019, p. 128). Such manipulations and mouldings can be seen as far back as in Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* (1926) wherein Bunny, the son of an American black-gold magnate and devout cog in the capitalist machine, attempts to unsuccessfully marry ethical, conservative thinking with the Big Oil sentiments of his father. More recently, in light of humanity’s impending self-immolation at the hands of climate crisis—a direct result of our dependency on oil—thinly veiled oil wars, such as the Gulf

War, and the work and tragedy of writer-activists like Ken Saro-Wiwa, oil and energy fictions are now receiving much more attention. Popular culture too has embraced and foregrounded the notion of our ontological stickiness with oil in recent years with prominent films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), *Syriana* (2005), and *There Will Be Blood* (2007), an adaptation of Sinclair's novel, exploring this destructive tangling to great effect to larger audiences.

Petrofiction as a concept, as noted, originates from a review of *Cities of Salt*, a novel concerning the discovery and dogged development of oil in a Saudi desert during the 20th century by American entrepreneurs. Indigenous anger towards outside developments is an important fulcrum of the genre, with similar colonial underpinnings ringing true in Nigeria centred petrofictional pieces such as Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011), Nnedi Okorafor's "The Popular Mechanic" (2013), and Ben Okri's "What the Tapster Saw" (1989). Much like the Middle East of *Cities of Salt*, Nigeria's Niger Delta is synonymous with oil in the cultural consciousness, and texts like this foreground the "lived reality of a resource-rich country riven by corruption, greed, and poverty" (Kapstein, 2016, p. 1).

Oil revenues account for "about 80 percent" of Nigeria's "total receipts" and the country is the "eleventh largest producer and the eighth largest exporter of crude oil in the world" (Watts, 2014, p. 199, 197). This single most revenue stream, as Michael Watts notes, has made Nigeria the "archetypical petrostate" abundant in debt, insurgencies, violent democracy, corruption, and gross inequality when it comes to the financial windfall a supposed resource-rich country should expect (Ibid, p. 199). Indeed, only "1 percent of the populace"—a populace of over 190 million people—receive any of the proceeds, with "almost none" of them being those most directly affected by production (Nixon, 2011, p. 106).

This, then, seems to exemplify the idea of a country struck with a "resource curse" rather than the individualizing boon that Nigeria, when 'removed' from its British colonial

rule, hoped it would be (Ibid, p. 69). That is to say, there is a “paradox of plenty” on display here whereby abundancy counterintuitively, because of bad governorship and the geographical privilege of international interests, leads to ruin; “[T]he greater a state’s reliance on a single mineral resource,” elucidates Nixon, “the greater the chances that the state is undemocratic, corruption riddled, and governed without transparency and accountability” (Ibid, p. 69-70). When it comes to examinations of oil in fiction, then, there are few places more fraught and redolent with its double-edged ability to help and hinder than Nigeria.

Ever since oil was discovered in Oloibiri by Royal Dutch Shell in 1956, Nigeria has served as an “ominous parable”, a “Greek tragedy” teaching us that “the unfettered global cult crude hurts not just the countries that produce it ... but the nations that consume it, too” (Peel, 2011, p. xv). It is the notion that oil hurts those nations consuming it as well as those where it originates that petrofiction arguably owes its rise; for now, just like the ecological breakdown, awareness of oil's enmeshment across the globe is slowly being perceived as a problem much closer to home. The geographical privilege that has kept many blind to the rampant use of oil’s effect at the sites of its extraction has now become foreshortened, made manifest in creeping global temperatures, melting glaciers, increasing wildfires, and literal black clouds that eddy and loom over our homes. This, in itself, is a kind of a reversed resource curse, where the fortunates’ access to abundant energy and abundant ignorance to where it comes from are now being forced to face this global problem and prevent it from happening here.

Often hit by the boom and bust of fluctuating oil prices that almost debilitated the country and set it on a course of requiring rash and long-suffering loans, Nigeria has likewise been subject to despotic leadership such as the infamous Sani Abacha, making it an unfortunately ideal terrain for Non-Governmental Organizations, like Shell-BP, to exploit,

extort, and manipulate. The brutal Abacha regime (1993-1998), for instance, the ruling body in power during the Ogoni Eight and Saro-Wiwa executions, was “synonymous with the kind of open corruption and oppression that is the product of untrammelled power” (Ibid, p. 116). Power that would coax Abacha to use his country’s resource wealth to what Peel calls “the grand-daddy of all Nigerian corruption cases” involving billions of dollars and hundreds of banks (Ibid, p. 116). Oil, therefore, has been Nigeria’s modern constant, its burden to bear, the aforementioned resource curse that has endowed mass poverty and minor wealth. As such Nigeria has long been an integral locus of what Sule Emmanuel Egya calls “literary militancy”:

the desire of writers, Nigerian writers, especially of the South-South or Niger Delta extraction, to deploy the instrumentation of literature, of literary and cultural imagination, in not only projecting the colossal environmental degradation and human suffering going on in the region, but also instituting a confrontational discourse in defense, and toward the liberation, of the anguished local peoples [.]

Egya, 2017, p. 94

One of the earliest and most prominent examples of this, of course, is the hugely inspirational and influential figure of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Through his activism and writings, Saro-Wiwa analogized the Ogoni’s and thus Nigeria’s plight “to what he called [a] ‘deadly ecological war’ ... emblematic of our times”, and laid the groundwork for a “broader estimation of the global cost” that capital-first regimes accrue both in terms of planetary instability and, specifically,

the survivability of micro-minorities the world over (Nixon, 2011, p. 105). To quote Egya, Saro-Wiwa is the catalyst of a successive crop of Nigerian writers, such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Chimanda Ngozi Adichie, Buchi Emecheta and Nnedi Okorafor, whose writing battles “the combined forces of the irresponsible government, the exploitative oil companies, and self-serving groups of armed robbers and kidnapers who” come to call themselves militants (Egya, 2017, p. 98).

Most pertinently to this chapter, however, Egya evidences and conceives this concept of literary militancy through a reading of *Oil on Water*; and it is upon his analysis that I want to build upon by foregrounding how Habila’s text evokes Alaimo’s notion of “trans-corporeality” to not only invoke the change that the Niger Delta so desperately needs, but also as a means of representing an invaluable interconnectedness to water and world that, sadly, a few despotic number are severing completely (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2). Further, I aim to weave and introduce a new and mutually beneficial lens to the trans-corporeal with which prospective readers may view energy-infatuated texts suffused in what I call the Energy-Gothic. That is, texts ensnared and deranged by the (ironically) dark and largely occluded globalized aesthetics of energy, and the geological and ecological ruin such actions produce.

### **Trans-corporeality**

Writing in 1932, Aldo Leopold seemingly foresaw today’s resource crises of peak oil, peak water, and the resultant planetary implication of both these and more. In manifesting his own concerns and submitting them for publication, he understood that his actions were “helping to drain a marsh for cows to graze” and “exterminat[ing] the birds of Brazil”, and that, moreover, when he decides to go “birding in [his] Ford, [he is] devastating an oil field, and re-electing an imperialist to get [him] rubber” (Leopold, 1992, p. 165). What Leopold was

exploring here is what Alaimo made concrete in her now seminal ecocritical text *Bodily Natures* (2010). Namely, that our actions have consequences, “often unwelcome or unexpected”, and not just to ourselves or our neighbours, but to the creaturely, the faraway, and the very Earth itself (Alaimo, 2010, p. 146).

Trans-corporeality’s efficacy and translatable usefulness is in how it agitates preconceived thoughts to better understand “the substance of one’s self as interconnected with the wider environment” and thus provoke “a profound shift in subjectivity” (Ibid, p. 20). The term is insightful and practical in its actualization of what, deep down, the majority of humanity already knows: our actions, ultimately, are killing us. What it attempts to set into motion, however, is not defeatist pessimism but activism through acknowledgement, a call-to-arms to perceive “how the human body can never be disentangled from the material world, a world composed of emergent, entangled biological creatures as well as a multitude of xenobiotic, humanly made substances” (Ibid, p. 24). Key to trans-corporeality’s message, then, is the propagation of a “thinking across bodies” mentality; that is, a reappraisal of seeing the environment as “inert” or “a resource for human use” but rather the multifaceted “world of fleshy beings” it really is (Ibid, p. 2). The prefix “trans” after all, in this instance, signifies “movement across different sites” and includes amongst its actors humans, the creaturely, and the nonhuman (Ibid, p. 2).

In transposing the term’s potentiality onto the “astounding right-wing denial of global warming” for instance, Alaimo posits that the “attention to the material transit across bodies and environments” that it assists to underline “may render it more difficult to seek refuge within fantasies of transcendence and imperviousness” (Ibid, p. 16). Fundamentally, then, trans-corporeality is a concept that espouses the idea that what we project outwards we ultimately also inject into ourselves, whether we want to believe so or not.

Something it helps to both concretize and nullify is the fallacy of the faraway, or what I frequently refer to here as geographical privilege. This is an entitled mindset that purports that just because, say, the Californian fires or the frequent flooding in Bangladesh are thousands of miles away from your current location, therefore it does not concern, affect, or impede upon your survival. A trans-corporeal understanding emphatically refutes this, as Alaimo attests on two separate occasions:

Matters of environmental concern are always “here,” as well as “there,” simultaneously local and global, personal and political, practical and philosophical.

[...]

{T}he ethical space of trans-corporeality is never an elsewhere but is always already here, in whatever compromised, ever-catalyzing form.

Alaimo, 2010, p. 15, 18

The substance oil embodies this to another level. It is the cars passing people on their way to work, the lights that illuminate bedrooms, the screens that entertain, teach and empower, the food in refrigerators, the thing, ironically because of its produced distance, that keeps everything connected. And yet, the painstaking and environmentally degrading processes that facilitate all these things and more is Away, Not-Here, Forgotten. Only to those whom its extraction processes are felt, those “private lifeworlds” which have been irreversibly transformed by insatiable capitalistic “tentacles”, is it a constantly known quantity (Buell, 2014a, p. 76). A fact of life.

*Oil on Water* echoes these notions through a nuanced narrative set squarely in the Niger Delta, a geographical location where oil and its socio-political effects can be seen in everyday conflicts, bids for survival, and dwindling opportunities. As Peel notes, “almost all ... crude oil comes from the swamps of the Niger Delta and the coast beyond”, a landscape of sandbars and mangroves, forest and field, and as such this “entrepot of extraordinary biological and cultural diversity” is increasingly at risk (Peel, 2011, p. 5-6).

Habila vividly explores this catastrophic threat throughout the novel, with such examples as the progressive loss of not only bats but “other flying creatures as well”, likely all victims of the sempiternal gas flares and the resulting acid rain, the unanimous aquatic casualties of repeat spills (“No crabs here now. The water is not good.”), and the silent and abandoned villages that now line the waters<sup>xi</sup> (Habla, 2011, p. 129, p. 26). As such, the death of the natural is an important thematic thread that largely supersedes the novel’s “hooking” plot concerning the kidnapping of Isabel Floode, the wife of internationally sought British oil engineer James Floode. Early on, in fact, Habila explicitly foreshadows this notion of narratological misdirection by having Zaq educating Rufus, the budding journalist protagonist, that “the story is not always the final goal” (Ibid, p. 5). Habila, then, makes it plain that *Oil on Water*, not unlike its title, is concerned with concealed layers, and the vibrant spectrum of accountability they produce when shone through with light.

One sustained way in which Habila does this is by paralleling ecological disaster to the demise of the human body, with a particular focus on hands. For instance, Habila describes a patch of grass beside the water as “suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker’s hand” (Ibid, p. 9). Similarly, pipelines are

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<sup>xi</sup> As Babatunde notes, “pollutants can affect [both human and creaturely] communities within 30 km” of gas flares and have “huge destructive impact[s] on agriculture, due to acid rain. It also makes the river uninhabitable for aquatic animals” (Babatunde, 2020, p. 282).



visualised as “criss-crossing the landscape ... like diseased veins on the back of an old shrivelled hand” and the frequent spillages that coat the Delta as suffocatingly “tight[,] like a hangman’s noose round the neck” (Ibid, p. 175, 215). In these three examples, age, disease, and death are all echoed, but they are done so doubly through that which strengthens the culpability behind the actions. Hands, after all, are a uniquely human instrument of planetary death.

By analogizing this way, Habila not only personifies the damage being done and thus makes the pain in the environment tangible to faraway audiences, because we all have bodies and can imagine their breakdown, but does so in a way that purposefully engages with our learned exceptionalism. As Eyga notes, such a device ties together a larger human-environment shared “victimhood”, a trans-corporeal hurt across matter (Eyga, 2017, p. 101). The real failing being represented throughout, then, is not just merely displaying expiration but also a failure to respond to our ecological footprints, a failure to do and be better as Earthly inhabitants.

Zaq, himself, embodies this desired self-reflexive thinking “the more his health ... deteriorate[s]” (Habila, 2011, p. 5). He takes to “philosophizing” about nature, about the “oil-polluted water” as Rufus and his journey progresses, with such moments of cogitation baring the heart of a finally acknowledged guilt (Ibid, p. 5). Zaq, in the canoe on the water, in the abandoned villages, on his sickbed, is *opened* to the truth of the devastation, and to the trans-corporeality of his own declining situation. The aforementioned “final goal” of this story, in setting out on this journalistic investigation, is heard in the steadily silencing thump-thump of an environmental “Tell-Tale Heart” (1843). Like Poe’s unnamed narrator, the enormity of his guilt is too much to bear, a thing that refuses concealment and

ultimately illuminates culpability, and this is why Zaq declines returning to the city—his plain grave a further clause to a conversation of the future.

In truth, a lot has been said about how Habila likens the environment to a failing human body, as can be read in Olaoluwa (2020) and, to a lesser extent, Feldner (2018), but there is a dearth of sustained discourse on two key instances of this type of trans-corporeality: namely, the country and body parallels of addiction and disease as represented by journalist Zaq, and the causative and desperate effects of extraction sites as writ bodily in the facial scarring of Rufus' sister Boma.

The link between her father's enforced bunkering exploits (stealing and selling oil) and Boma's subsequent facial scarring is a stark display of trans-corporeality. There is, after all, a distinct progressive and causative line of oil devastation beginning with their village's proximity to oil to his father's sudden Catholicism and subsequent desperation, to the eventual fire that killed and maimed "a quarter of the population" and irreparably damaged Boma's face (Habila, 2011, p. 48). This line, however, is weighted in favour of multinational crude oil interest in the Delta region, and often repeated by those forced to survive in such conditions. Rufus' father just being the latest desperate and entrepreneurial victim to try his luck in a financially cutthroat global and local rat race terribly eschewed against his favour. "No, it was not a pipeline accident, as I told the white man," Rufus narrates on the first page of the novel, "but it might easily have been one, like in countless other villages" (Ibid, p. 3).

Rufus' father knows that oil is a catalyst, a far-spreading fire-starter that has been engulfing his country, but he is powerless against it. He assumes opening his wings and riding the already destructive updrafts it causes to be preferable to merely watching everything go up in flames. Ironically, then, when his decision to shake off his zealot Catholicism to strike at the heart of the big oil corporations and stake a claim on his

country's spoils for himself, it not only blows up in his face, but much more literally his daughter's.

So, yes, there was an accident, a fire. An explosion in the barn with the oil drums. The fire flew on the wind from house to house, and in a few minutes half the town was ablaze. Many people died, including John's father. They say he died trying to save my sister, Boma, and if it wasn't for him, she'd have died. My father was imprisoned. He doesn't smoke any more since that day.

Habila, 2011, p. 3

That he no longer smokes initially appears as a sign of a painful lesson learnt, but just as this powerful personal act seems to substantiate change, we later learn that, on occasions where Boma and Rufus visit him, "each time he sees [his daughter's] face he turns away", recoiling at how his actions have been writ on those around him (Ibid, p. 3). Eventually Boma stops going, in a selfless effort to make him feel better about himself. The guilt that so racks her father whenever he sees what his exploits wrought thus becomes placated through an absence. To a lesser extent, Rufus' father here is endowed with an enforced geographical privilege of not having to reap what he sowed. Moreover, his actions imprison not only him, physically, but subsequently mentally imprison Boma to a life of largely self-conscious seclusion. Her later marriage to childhood friend, John, seemingly an act of pity on his part.

Returning from Port Harcourt sometime before the incident, Rufus finds the household resembling a combustible engine. His mother is at first "briefly excited", hugging him and asking him many questions, before that very act seems to drain her of that little "reserve of

energy”, whilst his father is “full of energy, almost fidgety with it” (Ibid, p. 63). The fact that Habila brings attention to their differing energy levels—the mother’s empty, flagging, hopelessly realistic quota and the father’s boisterous, giddy, overflowing quota—and repeats the word energy twice in quick succession evokes and foreshadows the harmful effects of having two volatile energies (fire from the heat of his cigarette and the ten oil drums) in such close proximity.

Potent sites of energy in the Delta itself, after all, are often what Lerner and Brown call, in an Energy-Gothic sense, “sacrifice zones” acting in the service of modern capitalism (Lerner and Brown, 2010, p. 3); and, as is the case with Rufus’ father’s bunkering, the sacrifice being made is so rarely felt by those doing the despoiling—Boma and John’s father being the living victims in the aforementioned incident caused by Rufus’ father. In respect to the Energy-Gothic, a concept that goes hand in hand with those most adversely affected by resource accumulation, these habitats and lifeworlds are as good as forfeited for global use, as good as bled dry by ignoble and vampiric corporatocracies. Survival in such deemed sacrificial plots of land, therefore, has called for radical and forced responses. Opportunities to make money through other means have been stripped away from those Delta inhabitants, their usual livelihoods contaminated by what NGOs and even their own local chiefs paint as future boons. Rather, as Rufus’ father laments ironically to Rufus, “This is the only business booming” (Habila, 2011, p. 64).

Not long after Rufus’ arrival his father beseeches him to do what an increasing number of Delta parents are saying to their own children, and *get away*. In the city of Port Harcourt, he believes Rufus will be able to escape the baked-in insecurities, resentments, and hollow prospects of those very same children he purchases his oil from, those impoverished youths whose futures have already been tainted by the long-arm of supply and demand. As Olaoluwa

notes, the Port Harcourt imagined by “those stranded and abandoned in the [Anthropogenically spoiled] rural creeks and forests” is evidenced only on hearsay and hopes, on “teasers” and “expectations” rarely met (Olaoluwa, 2020, p. 253). This is something Rufus and Zaq later experience first-hand when their guide, after begging them to take his son back with them when they leave the Delta, decries the lack of opportunities for the next generation and the inevitability of falling in with the warring: “[W]etin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no wan that” (Habila, 2011, p. 36). To the all but evicted, then, the city is a life-ring away from the oil that has irrecoverably disrupted their lives and livelihoods.

As Olaoluwa (2020) points out, those dispossessed in *Oil on Water* frequently desire to flee the rural and seek shelter, such as it is, in the city. The pollution there to them is invisible—it does not float belly-up or on its side on the murky surface-water for all to see, but is an amorphous gas high above, seemingly intangible. In Port Harcourt, you are the bird and fish before their death, swimming unknowingly in the toxic swirl; in the Delta, however, you are plainly lathered and sinking. The devastation is writ all around, in fire and acidity, in bullets and bodies. The promise of the city therefore, whilst transitory and illusory, with its concealed hope of self-betterment, is an idea that compels. The city of Lagos too is positioned as a place where one can dream, where “there are no boundaries, no traditions or family to hold you back” (Habila, 2011, p. 122). Unfortunately, prospects in the city are dire, with even those with university degrees struggling to find purchase and security.

The macro socio-political climate of the Delta’s crisis as whole that led Rufus and Boma’s father to such desperate straits is symbolized through this civilized-rural divide and how the higher echelons of Nigeria’s government (not to mention the greater Western world) financially benefit from a safe-guarded distance from the effects of extraction.

Just as rampant oil extraction and use affects Earth's geography as a whole, the effects of Boma and Rufus' father's choices spreads and imbricates everyone around him, to the point where he effectively sows the seeds of John's later abandonment of Boma in the city. Disillusioned by his courier job and later loss of this job, John falls into bad mood swings which ultimately leads to him joining "the class of unemployed agitators" debating the "situation of things" and then subsequently the militants in the Delta (Olaoluwa, 2020, p. 257).

By vacating the city in this way, John thematically negates Rufus' father's claim that the city represents a haven adrift from the despoliation and dissolution of the Delta. Even if the effects of the pollution and destruction are not as plain here—a thing Habila makes certain is not the case, with Isabel literally being kidnapped from within the city and with "oil companies ... being bombed ... [and] police stations ... being overrun"—they have been made doubly clear to John every time he looks at his wife, as he looks at the many, many micro-actions of her father, of the government, and his own inaction (Habila, 2011, p. 59). Boma "becomes a byword for ugliness and disfigurement", her burns irremovable scars John sees mirrored in himself, scars he is not as unaffected by as he makes out, rather they constantly fan a phantom fire still raging internally inside him, reminding him of the loss of his father and the loss of his land (Olaoluwa, 2020, p. 257). Boma's burned face symbolizes to him the long-term physical manifestation of economic imperialism, of bodily colonization from the West on his home.

John, then, is symptomatic of a generation that has grown up "tantalized by the rich man's world" just beyond their reach (Peel, 2011, p. 30). What is more, this resultant wealth gap owes to the pillaging of their home, and yet they are absent to its windfall. And in the rare occasions where communities are 'lucky' enough to be situated around such oil deposits, and actually receive some manner of compensation for its extraction, divides spring up

between neighbouring islands without the same financial chances. Chiefs of these smaller islands, too, in reflection of Nigeria's country governance, often benefit most from such transactions, with little filtering down to everyone else. So, where once there was intra-island commerce, communities are further fracturing, "enviously [looking out] across the water at other villages" and inwardly at their own governance (Habila, 2011, p. 39).

Peel, in conversation with Commander Freeman, a member of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), recorded the reality of this situation:

'I became a militant because of the spoiling of my people ... We have oil but no development. This is why I have said I will fight until my last bullet - until whoever will kill me.'

[...]

[gesturing towards a house on stilts] 'See where we toilet, see? ... See the houses we are living in. Can you believe we are in an oil-producing community?'

Peel, 2011, p. 187

This is all to say, John, like all those young men suitably enraged at the pollution of their homes and emptiness of their pockets, is an easy victim of such radicalization, because the militant movement offers him a target and a release for his indignation. Like Freeman and his men, it provides John with the power that has so long been absent from his life, and the arms to take back what he believes he is owed. So, the lucrative kidnapping of foreign oil magnates and their families that these militants engage in, is seen as reparation of oil's destruction on Delta livelihoods previously localized on fishing and farming.

Just as the “cityscape of illusion” undoes John, Boma’s story is also only one of resurgence once she removes herself from it and returns to the rural (Olaoluwa, 2020, p. 258). Formerly, she hid away in an apartment, an unpaid typist and an appendage to John, but outside of it, and as a part of the Irikefe Island community she finds purpose, confidence, and belief. Here, where they believe in “the healing powers of the sea” and where long-standing shrines have been erected to cleanse the waters of pollution (from bloody conflict as well as oil spills), Boma becomes a part of larger mutually beneficially collective with respect at the forefront.

The island’s worshippers are the face of an idealized trans-corporeal message throughout the novel, a message constantly at odds with and infringed upon by the fighting. They are continually at war with the warring around them, moving whenever it gets too close (“we’ve lived in five different places now, but always we’ve had to move”) and longing for the uncontaminated past for which now is a story, or “artefact ... [of] the new petroworld” (Habla, 2011, p. 41, MacDonald, 2017, p. 299).

Once upon a time they lived in paradise ... in a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children grow up before them, happy. The village was close-knit, made up of cousins and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters [.]

Habila, 2011, p. 38

Nature, to them, “is meant to be hallowed, not desecrated” and “protecting the environment means “protecting [them]selves” (Edebor, 2017, p. 46). Their daily “processions to the sea, to



bathe in it, to cry to it” are routine and diligent “promise[s] never to abominate it ever again”, to atone for disturbances out of their own hands (Habila, 2011, p. 130).

Boma and John’ paths, then, represent two stark opposites when it comes to their quest for self-healing upon returning home. Whilst John adopts an ideology coloured with bullets and bodies, and thus inevitably feeds the harmful cycle of violence and corruption, Boma instead seeks a habitat where she can laugh again and feel relaxed, an ecosystem that chimes with the rising and the setting of the sun, and the healing powers of nature. She chooses faith and a path where her spirit can feel settled like it never has in the city, the antithesis of violence on world and fellow man that Big Oil and the militants represent. Both are flawed, of course, because this is a country-wide problem and no one person can effectively shift the destructive chain of events already long underway, but to move forward trans-corporeally, as Boma does, is to challenge the petrostate Nigeria to adopt an “ethics that attends to the material interrelations of bodies *and* places” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 157, my emphasis).

The reflection of body/world decay as depicted through the slow-violent collapse of Rufus’ mentor-come-friend Zaq is likewise a strong trans-corporeal thread throughout the novel. Again, previous analyses have touched upon this but there is a lot more to be said regarding this symbolic connection. A virile, accomplished and celebrity journalist in his heyday, Zaq has now become something of a recluse, working unhappily outside of the limelight. Living somewhat in disgrace, he is a shadow of the man he once was and now takes what little comfort he can from a bottle.

In *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (2017), Gerry Canavan identifies a connection between bodily addiction and petrostatecraft. He notes that our terminology and actions when it comes to oil and oil capitalism are not unlike what the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) refers to as “substance

dependence''' (Canavan, 2017, p. 25). He lists the following similarities as proposed by the DSM-IV as examples:

The substance is often taken in larger amounts or over longer periods of time than intended.

There is a persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control substance abuse.

A great deal of time is spent in activities necessary to obtain the substance, use the substance, or recover from its effects...

Important social, occupational, or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of substance use.

Canavan, 2017, p. 26

Zaq's embodiment of the environment, of trans-corporeality, is integral to the narrative because his physical disintegration is not just a symbolic facsimile of the plight facing the Niger Delta, but of Nigeria as a whole. In a sense, then, he *is* Nigeria—a body-state broken by hope, failed attempts at self-care and the intoxication and obsession of a liquid.

When the novel begins, because of the non-sequential opening, Zaq already has contracted a debilitating disease. Not seeing this affliction occur is a potent narratological choice because it further foregrounds both the invisibility or faraway fallacy of this robust killer sweeping through the Niger Delta and its now-ness. The disease, then, is seemingly always and already there: an iniquitous fact, like the British colonial underpinnings and larger

contemporary Western interests, that forcibly drove Nigeria into these oil-dependent straits. Furthermore, what disease actually means in the context of the Delta is muddled when coupled with the oil and conflict. For instance, a doctor in the narrative makes a plain parallel when he notes that “those whom the disease doesn’t kill, the violence does” (Habiba, 2011, p. 93). Disease in the Delta is not merely viral or pathological then, but ontological and political. It is something one cannot turn away from, try as we might; anyone and everyone worldwide is vulnerable even if the effects, like those of oil, are for the most part slow-reaching. The problems caused from spills in a recent study, for instance, revealed just how fine the lines are between one person’s wealth and another’s health. Said report identified the link between environmental pollution and “newborn and child mortality rates in the Niger Delta”, with “spills occurring within 10km of a mother’s place of residence” doubling “neonatal mortality rates and imp[airing] the health of ... surviving children” (Hodal, 2017).

Zaq’s own spiralling is also analogous to the problem of peak oil. He refuses to return to the city with Rufus, instead choosing to drink away one illness with another, just as the world refuses to acknowledge its own impending moment of “‘hitting rock bottom’” and instead drills yet harder into oblivion (Canavan, 2017, p. 27). This sense of blind intoxication to the point of ruin is a seminal thread in texts that adhere to what I call the Energy-Gothic. Usually, however, it is the governmental figures, the magnates and those whose geographical privilege and bank accounts benefit from such blindness. For instance, in Karel Čapek’s *The Absolute at Large* (1922), G. H. Bondy, the businessman who takes the dubious “karburator” engine to mass production and thus to ultimate mass ruin, is amongst the first to experience its surreal and invasive qualities. And yet, even as this pollution-less and clean energy product is fitted into sites the world over, infecting everyone with its resulting runoff of God consciousness, Bondy is quick to physically distance himself from a running engine, despite

the obvious raised eyebrows this would incur. Just like carbon emissions and “sacrifice zones”, Bondy, like James Floode and all those imbricated in Big Oil, turns a blind eye to this Absolute energy running amok in areas removed from himself, even as the world slowly descends into conflict-ridden sects and then outright world wars.

Yaeger, in relation to the oil-based privileges of Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), coined a useful term in regard to this idea of removedness: the “energy unconscious”—that which is made invisible in day to day life through a variety of social, political or ecological advantages (Yaeger, 2011, p. 306). In her words, it becomes a concept, if pursued, that should espouse “a commitment to the repressed, the *non-dit*” by making the unseen seen (Yaeger, 2011, p. 310). Habila’s *Oil on Water* is a narrative that brings this energy unconscious and makes it painfully conscious, making it physical and trans-corporeal. By representing the degradation of the Delta region itself, with the death of diverse biomes and ways of life, as well as through the tattooing of tragedy on people—the burns, blights and spilled blood—Habila makes plain the cost of oil and its harmful bodily and planetary writings.

### **Energy-Gothic**

*Oil on Water*, whilst being an example of a petrofictional text, also evidences aspects of what I call the Energy-Gothic, an unruly and exploitative brother-genre to the ecoGothic and ecohorror. Those applicable to this new classification are narratives enveloped in the pursuit of personal power (through energy) to the point of geological and ecological ruin. As with the burgeoning field of the energy humanities as a whole, the Energy-Gothic is a term where “energy [is] the [thematic] fulcrum” of a piece, only here it is further embellished within the morbid motifs of the Gothic (Wilson, Szeman, 2017, p. 4).

In the Energy-Gothic, castles are traded for outer-sea oil-rigs or multinational corporations, draughty hallways and enclosing forests for barren sites of production and forced dilapidation. The monsters are men, sometimes guised in the trappings of the monstrous as in Toho's *Godzilla* (1954), China Mieville's living rigs in "Covehithe" (2011) or the Chernobyl-created Flukeman creature from *The X-Files* ('The Host', 1995), but ostensibly they are humans whose pockets, whose beliefs, rights and ignorance, are the burdens of the self-destructive ship capitalism.

Gothic fiction is often populated by something other-than-dead, but the Energy-Gothic is populated with, or contaminated by, half-lives and substances refined from the dead; meat, vegetables, plutonium, coal (and thus plastic), and oil to name but a few. In the case of the latter, the energy source at the heart of Habila's text, as Pendakis remarks, oil effectively "is death" and an energy "made possible by eons" of accumulatory death (Pendakis, 2017, p. 387). The black plumes from car exhausts and industrial smokestacks that background our lives are effectively ghosts of deep-time. Put plainly, oil is a spectre of life-histories. It is a substance whose present is-ness is incumbent with the past, is, in fact, the past made manifest. Just as with other ghosts, like those atomic or plastic in nature, these deranged existences we manufacture through our industry will outlast us, haunting the far-time for hundreds if not thousands of years, leaving geological footprints in technofossils and drastically altered geographies.

*Oil on Water* is a primary example of the Energy-Gothic. The morbidity, pervading dread, and familial connections that so permeate Gothic fiction, as evidenced by the doomed environs (birds and fish), the charged atmosphere of an Oil War, and the fact that Rufus' own family is embroiled in the boom-bust cycle of crude (with a sister who has a scarred face no less), is made Energy-Gothic through the inescapable ensnaring of these events within the

shadow of an insatiable petromodernity. Pathetic fallacies are now not merely seeing calamity in storms, but in seeing, literally and figuratively, the devastation on world in ever-widening slicks, in radiation-stored trunks, in the metal machines left to rust at abandoned dig-sites. The manifesting of the sublime is a Gothic tradition, the manifestation of the toxic sublime, as can be seen in the bleakness of Edward Burtynsky's photography and Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), is an Energy-Gothic tradition.

*Oil on Water's* narrative is initially propelled by the kidnapping of Isabel Floode—the unceasing “gas flares” that hang over the Delta “like distant malfunctioning stars” and the “evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth” serving as merely a backdrop to the quest of rescuing this wealthy, white English woman (Habiba, 2011, p. 60, 34). Isabel's capture not only highlights hierarchical inequalities and colonial histories, but also paves the way for the descent into the Delta's corruptive cycle, as figure-headed by the Professor and the Major, the rebels and the militants, the Non-Government Organisations and the West. Similarly to Josella from the likewise Energy-Gothic *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), Isabel is a piece moved across a board to facilitate monstrous meetings. In fact, her appearances in the book are so slight she is more the ghost of neo-colonialism haunting the novel, a powerful reminder of the control the multinationals still hold in the region whether they have a corporeal form or not. It is not a mistake that her husband and she, to a less purposeful extent, are largely concealed within the narrative in favour of Rufus and Zaq's investigation to better highlight their privileged removed-ness from the Delta's troubles, even as they find themselves embroiled emphatically within it. James and Isabel, in a manner of thinking, can be viewed as white ghosts in a black narrative—beyond death's reach but still lingering and tormenting the land and people they crossed paths with.

The Delta, to those removed from it, then, can be viewed akin to a dragon's lair full of (black-)gold and notoriety (power), but fraught with danger, and as such a place one sends menials to gather the spoils in their stead. James, like those most benefiting from Nigeria's rampant crude production, never sets foot in the Delta, but serves more as a magnanimous quest-giver sending people to its contested environs. First it is pipe-workers, then, after Isabel's capture, Rufus and Zaq. Secure in his apt "colonial-style" home on the waterfront, his interest in freeing his wife seemingly more a show of status than real desire to see her again (Ibid, p. 104). James' attention, after all, upon his move to Nigeria to oversee the extraction efforts, has since moved elsewhere, towards his maid, Koko, and her "close-fitting" uniforms (Ibid, p. 108).

It is to these carnal conquests, these lustful employer-employee oversteppings, in fact, that the whole kidnapping affair owes its origin. Not content with siphoning one source of power from a loose footed nation, James also embarks upon a kind of sexual colonization that ultimately leads to Isabel's capture. Much as how Rufus' father's actions rippled destructively outwards onto his family, James' pursuit of, and impregnation of Koko, ignites a jealous spark in her fiancé, Salomon, who in turn incites the idea of the kidnapping. To Salomon, this is merely monetary reparations for yet another white intrusion on his life, of striking back at imperialism, colonialism, and hierarchical inequality. That his and Isabel's ploy gets caught up, and further muddied in the ongoing conflict playing out in the Delta is merely representable of the larger problems of the rapaciousness of oil.

James in taking—bodily—what he wants also on a much smaller scale symbolises what the NGOs and our larger fossil-fuel reliance is doing to Nigeria as a whole: coming, claiming, corrupting. It is not a coincidence that Habila names the two only pivotal white people in the novel as the Floodes—their presence crashes and makes waves on all the people around

them, disrupting and destroying livelihoods. James is merely the latest of a great many figureheads of successive floodings of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the region. And yet, when all the bodies finally fall and the lucky make their exodus to the city once again, the Floodes remain relatively unscathed, floating once more to the surface to be saved. It is a sentiment Rufus himself voices towards the end of the tale, evoking Isabel's soon-to-be healing geographical distance:

This could all be over by tomorrow, and another period of mental healing would begin for her, but by then she would be somewhere far away, among her people. A fortnight hence and she'd look back and this would all be nothing but a memory, an anecdote for the dinner table.

Habila, 2011, p. 215

For those that remain, however, this "healing" is not so readily won. And whilst Isabel's ordeal could be viewed as karmic retribution for her husband's—for Western—work, this act of "fate", as Rufus conceives it, shows first-hand all the "villages and islands" and biomes "killed by the oil her husband was helping to produce"; the fact remains, then, that James, like the billionaire suits the world over, suffers nothing (Ibid, p. 175). Isabel loses a husband and a life, Nigeria yet more of its stability, but James merely swells both his pockets and his newly acquired lover. The Flood(e) carries on, unperturbed.

It is worth briefly noting too how Koko, unlike Isabel who is initially at odds with her husband's transnational career and the countries it takes him to, embodies the servility he so obviously commands. She cleans and prepares his meals, as well as engages sexually with him seemingly without question. Isabel, however, is early on shown to be rigid to the changes



James' global job asks of him. To James, this is a level of affront to his status and seat of power, to the hierarchy/patriarchy he is so inclined to and enmeshed in. As his maid, Koko is like the menials who work the extraction sites, someone who substantiates and inflates his worth: a resource.

Another way in which *Oil on Water* adheres to the Energy-Gothic is in how it employs both mist and dilapidation—prevalent Gothic motifs—throughout. Just as fog is a powerful tool in *The Woman in Black* (1983) and smog in *Great Expectations* (1861), the mist in the Delta is a pervading force in Habila's text, frequently used as a device to show and occlude, to curtain and call attention to. Feldner (2018) likewise brings attention to these pervading mist sequences, purporting how they further accentuate the narrative's own disorienting and nonlinear construction. In these moments, which Feldner identifies happen repeatedly throughout to contribute further to the confusion and disequilibrium of the story, people and environment are made nebulous and unformed, or rather, formed entirely; that is, made inseparable, made overtly trans-corporeal.

The mist makes the interconnected creeks and rivers appear “undistinguishable” and faces “so enveloped in the dense grey stuff that [those onboard the canoe] couldn't see each other”, see self (Habila, 2011, p. 4-5) In accordance with Egya's “literary militancy”, there is a sense that Habila here is using the mist as both a means of simultaneously cloaking and revealing the instability and ignorance on display in the region. Viewed as such, the mist is the writer-activist's tool, an ecological curtain to be raised and lowered to at once signal equality (everyone on the canoe or those above and below its waters are at this moment in time occluded and thus enmeshed) as it illuminates disparity (not everyone on the canoe [Rufus and Zaq] are forced to live here day by day).

More than this, however, the mist acts as an antecedent, a figurative border into the lawlessness that accentuates the Energy-Gothic atmosphere. They move over the water like a “ghost ship ... over black, expressionless water” devoid of life, “soundless” (Ibid, p. 10). Rufus further makes plain the disquietude of the mist when he remarks that their guide implied he “felt he had drifted past a point ... that was beyond return”, a Styxian/Charonic statement in regards to both his own existence and that of the Delta as a whole (Ibid, p. 6). There is little doubt as to why he tries to persuade Rufus to take his son with him back to the city.

When they finally move beyond the mist and this point of no return, uneasiness inevitably blossoms amongst them—they have passed over a narratological threshold, after all—and the villages appear. Abandoned and silent, all have been hastily evacuated “because of too much fighting”, too much death, and too much “rising toxicity” (Ibid, p. 8, 17). Here, the mist has been lifted on scenes of dread to act as a window on the Delta’s plight. One such village is described as appearing “as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it”, but this is not a viral outbreak nor a pathological one, rather a capitalist-natured influenza born out of greed and overseas avarice (Ibid, p. 8). This is diagnosed by the “square concrete platform” in the village’s centre, positioned “like some sacrificial altar” to a god some “15,000 METRES” below (Ibid, p. 8). And to look at the village—“deserted”, “derelict”, and with its pen of chickens in a state of maggot-infested decomposition—is to see such an economy-fuelled ritual completed. Life here *has* been given in service of the propagation of something bigger—Big Oil—with even the branches in the surrounding waters reaching out “like probosces gasping for [some measure of clean] air” away from what Lerner and Brown would call a “sacrifice[d] zone” (Habla, 2011, p. 9, Lerner and Brown, 2010, p. 3).

Another nearby village serves as an unliving replica:

[T]he same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return.

Habila, 2011, p. 9

The destruction being evoked through these forays into the silent villages works to further make known just how widespread and still spreading this problem of petromodernity is on the geographically unfortunate. Much like in *The Water Knife*, another Energy-Gothic text in which dilapidation, unrest and greater social divides are born out of forcible resource wrestling by largely uninvolved magnates, the villages and communities of the Delta are hollowed out, spoiled, or forced away by desires well beyond their borders. As such it takes morbid and uncomfortable passages and pieces such as *Oil on Water* to challenge privileged petromodern perspectives when it is increasingly becoming “impossible to separate catastrophe from exuberance and vice versa” (Buell, 2014, p. 76). Such imagery, similarly to the pollutive clouds and gas flares frequently mentioned in the novel, makes the cost of humanity’s ever industrial expansion heavier by making it known that oil is a lived-in resource; that is, the creaturely and the human are being forced to live alongside its extraction and fallout. The Delta inhabitants continued survivability being a toll of our global progress.

This mass futural negligence in exchange for present capital is a key component of texts that adhere to the Energy-Gothic. Čapek’s *The Absolute at Large* exhibits this through its privileged blindness by those who first note the harmful effects of the Absolute substance dredged up and released, but raise no alarms to prevent its mass production; in *The Day of*

*the Triffids* it is signified in the haphazard exceptionalist thinking that soon sees triffids planted and farmed the whole country over for their oil, despite learning early on their capacity to kill, eat, and impair other living bodies; and in Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* the same selfish avarice is evidenced in figureheads like Catherine Case who quite literally parch whole cities so long as she is able to provide for the rich of the day.

If Gothic fiction is concerned with how bodies are mastered, controlled, or victimized, the Energy-Gothic considers this from a larger socio-cultural perspective pertaining to the very commodity that can facilitate such unequal domination in today's world in the first place. Energies, such as oil and electricity have "wrapped people within their many infrastructures", within the "roads, pipelines, telephone lines, power cables", and many screens, "reaching into and restructuring people's private lifeworlds, identities, bodies, thoughts, sense of geography, emotions" (Ibid, p. 77). In Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1986), another novel that dips its toes in the Energy-Gothic with its spilling of industrial waste in Midwest America, Jack Gladney discovers this fact all too clearly when he is forced to acknowledge that "computerized dots" register his "life and death", and that, ultimately, everybody is "the sum of [their] data. No man escapes that" (DeLillo, 1986. p. 141).

Rufus' family and the Floodes, then, are also inextricably caught up in what the world now prioritises over everything else—keeping the money-making machines running. Beyond the page, we have seen similar trajectories in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic across the world with governments ranking healthy economies over healthy bodies. The disarming fact remains that the world views tragedies in numbers and at the macro level, so it takes novels like *Oil on Water* to concretize and image the ground-level experiences of those unable to turn away when the news gets too dark. The defining feature of the Energy-Gothic, ironically, being to shine a light on such nefarious practices.

## Conclusion

### **One Health**

In *Bodily Natures: Science and the Environment*, Stacy Alaimo discusses how human bodies toxified with chemicals from their surroundings evidence a kind of flowing between the interior and the exterior, of a oneness to the world. An unsettling example of this is documented in Michiko Ishimure's *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrows* (1990). A stark illumination and record of the effects of methyl-mercury pollutants released into Japan's Minamata Bay during the 1950s, this non-fictional text shows how the Minamata Disease unfairly ravages body (political and physical) as well as place. The water and the shellfish, both clearly key to villagers' survival became deadly; the man-made disease soon proliferated, decimating a way of life, dooming future generations, and bringing into light industrialization's (and a privileged few's) capacity to put technology, capital, and progress at devastating odds with nature and wellbeing. It is this murky non-delineation between human despoliation of the world and self and with a move towards its understanding that has been at the heart of this thesis.

The concept of One Health is a natural successor to this and Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality specifically because of its concern with how new, largely destructive, movements across different lifeworlds have the capability to lead to the spreading of "existing or known and new and emerging zoonotic diseases" (CDC, 2021). It is a framework, then, that, like

water, brings to the fore the fluidity between bodies, whether human or animal, political or economic. In the preceding chapters I have expounded upon ideas of living-with rather than living-on, and existing alongside rather than merely subsisting on, as means of futural species and worldly stability. This all works towards and is in service of an idealised One Health sentiment. This is an all-encompassing ontological frame that knits together and universally packages all those I have explored throughout (creatural, tidalectics, trans-corporeality) likewise “recognis[ing] that human, animal, and environmental health are not mutually exclusive” but “shaped by the relationships between them” (Jeggo et al., 2019, p. 21). Further, it broadly makes plain that “effects of identity, social position, policies, institutional practices and [the] geography of multiple populations” impact crucial “decision-making processes” (ibid, p. 21). Foremost a response to diseases and outbreaks, the importance of such can be seen readily, and presently, in the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, as one probable zoonotic disease has singlehandedly shown the precarity of human civilisation (read: its robotic, capitalistic infrastructure).

Originating from an animal, and most likely the result of a human-invasion on said animal’s geographical sphere as we continue to break down those crucial eco-barriers in service of fossil fuels, the coronavirus has shown just how divided and privileged certain groups of humanity really can be let alone our perceived lesser creaturely others. The pandemic, after all, has been proven to disproportionately affect those of a lesser social position (key-workers used as sacrificial lambs), those that are from marginalised ethnic groups, and those geographically unprivileged with the subsequent limited access to medical aid. One Health, a memorable and buzzy term, then, is an understanding that the world, the people, the water is one, and if there is a failure to act as *one* then lives will end again and

again in the thousands and millions as these types of diseases, zoonotic and very likely climate crises-induced, will certainly continue to break out with more frequency and ferocity.

Even in ontologies actively seeking to group humans with water, world, and the creaturely, some still struggle to do so with a nonhuman eye. One Health, laudable and potentially effective as I think it can be, is one such example. It employs an enticing one-everything ideology to bring in new advocates but ultimately factors its successes and losses against “human society” (Osterhaus, 2019). Whereas, as Alaimo makes plain:

Since [a harmful] substance may poison the workers who produce it, the neighborhood in which it is produced, and the web of plants and animals who end up consuming it, the traffic in toxins reveals the interconnections among various movements ... [Therefore,] the traffic in toxins may [and should] render it nearly impossible for humans to imagine that our own well-being is disconnected from that of the rest of the planet or to imagine that it is possible to protect “nature” by merely creating separate, distinct areas in which it is “preserved”.

Alaimo, 2010, p. 18

Despite its lofty claims to depict and group all these disparate yet connecting parameters of living under one terminology, One Health, then, stumbles at the last by not actually fulfilling its own One-ness decree by counterintuitively favouring an anthropocentric design. Tidalectics, a creatural ecosophy, and trans-corporeality, however, are unafraid to view the human as merely one lifeform amidst a sea of others, and if One Health is to achieve its idealised brief and be accepted widely, there remains key obstacles for it to best: namely,

what it conceptualises as human in today's world where humans are digesting, drinking, and are effectively made up of (temporarily or otherwise) nonhuman and creaturely leavings, and, indeed, from a critical misanthropic view, what good does *human* even mean anymore. Ultimately, One Health must grow beyond its current selfish species state to mean One Water, One Planet, One Future and adopt the ontological learnings espoused by the terms this thesis has examined. Only then will one mean an equilateral everyone and everything rather than a select two-legged few.

### **Hydro-consciousness**

Thinking and existing with solely water in mind, as this thesis and early blue critical commentators have displayed can yet prove difficult and hard to grasp, not unlike a Morton “hyperobject” hanging abstrusely overhead (Morton, 2013, p. 1). However, thinking as we currently are—as separate from, as owners—is not working. If we continue, in the majority, to understand our relationship with our rivers, lakes and seas as merely one-way and presently beneficial, as flows of economy and not hydrogen, we will find ourselves in much dire straits than even over-allocating a steadily declining river to seven US states and two Mexican states, we will find ourselves waging literal water wars as droughts become quinquennial become decade-long. And yet, we are a contrarian society still made up of people who, despite overwhelming science, continually refute concrete facts and figures should they appear to run counter to our desires or fiscal security. Unfortunately, as Tom Cohen notes, the 21st century is plagued by “peak everything”, where eco-cataclysmic and resource woes caused by our actions “arrive more as routine tweets than events that might give us pause” and thus we fail to give each its deserved attention before the next arrives (Cohen, 2012, p. 14, 13). Humanity, for good or ill, are great goldfish when it comes to



disaster. Except, climate crisis is the disaster of disasters, the un-equaliser of the planet. Crucially, what has become plain to me during the course of this study is that combating fleeting attention spans in the Age of Scrolling, along with attempting to meet and bridge the gap of privilege, are the greatest challenges facing both scientists and writers when it comes to greater climate crisis understanding and grass-root action.

Thinking *through* others (fictive or otherwise), however, as this thesis has shown is one such effective path in doing just that. Living inside someone else's head as their world is swept up underneath them as expressed through such narratives as Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) set during and after Hurricane Katrina, or through the real-life experiences of 16 year-old Rashid ul Islam, who in the wake of river erosion in rural Bangladesh, had to relocate eight times "in the past five years", hit much harder and stick around longer in our consciousness because they are *named* tragedies (UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019).

Seeing Luz in Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* repeatedly beaten and broken by patriarchal systems intent on using her as a figurehead for personal gain against a backdrop of body and world desiccation as was explored in Chapter Two, for example, is powerful because, disparate as we may be, we cannot help but adopt Luz's beleaguered life as our own. She is someone living in the shadow of something unknowable, someone clinging on and subject to an out of touch system, someone struggling under the weight of what self means in a rapidly changing world, someone caring for another. In *The Drowned World*, Ballard has his protagonist opine that maybe his "indifferen[ce] to the spectacle of these [broken] civilizations" is an "absence of [his own] personal memories" attaching him to the space (Ballard, 2014b, p. 20). And so, the over-mediatised life of Luz, who before even being born is baptised as Baby Dunn by the Bureau of Conservation for a more secure world, is instantly tangible because, after all, it is just one water crisis away from our own. By positioning

today's growing drought problem facing the American West, and indeed the world, and nudging it a little farther along the probable timeline, Watkins' tale of Luz's dehydration of self and descent into a drought cult is effective because it does not rely on far-flung technology but the now ever-present changeability of known place.

These types of experiences, whether fictitious or not, are not graphs or a percentage in a long-winded talk but rather humanised through feelings (interior and spoken), and given lasting, affective form through a name. And names are important, they are a means of address and affection, of individuality and respect. To quote Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019), through naming we are asked to "summon a vision" and then, via narrative, we explore said vision, spending time exploring and identifying with individuals as disparate as we are alike (Winterson, 2019, p. 79). Just as global warming became climate change became climate crisis and ecological breakdown, and Greta Thunberg became synonymous with fighting for the future, a name, a book, a story can outlast its reading through feeling. Cli-fi and hydrofiction, too, are classifications born out of a desire to bring attention to something, to single it out and make it widely known. There is a reason why farmers advise against naming the cattle scheduled for slaughter, and that reason is affection, connection, and a desire to hold close, care. Our rivers, lakes, and seas *have* names and yet a lot of us have forgotten them, so where these tales of protection and warning strike strongest is where they give a new name to them, a name easier to remember, a name closer to our own, a name we want to prevent from being lost.

During Chapter One, I analysed the effectiveness of Sudbanthad's decision to stage the human flood on nature via an avian perspective. This sequence names humanity as "wingless", effectively othering us from the bird just as much as it illuminates our industry's disruptive actions from their point of view (Sudbanthad, 2019, p. 141). To them, it is

humanity who are seen with a lack rather than the other way around, and us, the industrious, big-brained human, that is causing destruction and ruin to their generational nesting and wellbeing, and ultimately hindering the human progression as much as it helps. The delineation that this choice instills in the passage, when paired with Sudbanthad's self-effacing prose, is one of great melancholy and readerly identification. Despite being birds and unnamed themselves, the fact that we are named in their fashion, we are forcibly positioned to understand and feel their plight from their point of view. The goal of which, as Chapter One sought to make plain, is that ecological trauma is universal and transcends species.

Elsewhere, in an article written for the Center For Humans & Nature, Sudbanthad later writes that "stories can make distances instantaneously disappear", allowing for "the subjective collapse of space and time, so that people [and the creaturely] separated from each other" can form "bridge[s] of sorts" and gleaned information

adds anew to layers within instances of consciousness ... allow[ing for] individual knowledge to grow with the mass of others, not to create any uniform whole, but to allow for multitudes, acknowledging fault as well as beauty, and always learning as more stories bring greater understanding—and potentially some meaning—of all things past and present; huge or microscopic; observable and theoretical; human and not.

Sudbanthad, 2021

Similarly, Bill McKibben, in the introduction to a 2011 short-story collection concerning climate crisis, writes that "science can only take us so far", that scientists "have [already]

done their job ... issued every possible warning, flashed every red light” (Atwood et al., 2011, p. 3). Now it is the turn of economists, psychologists, theologians, and, crucially, creatives, “whose role [it] is to help us understand what things *feel* like”, to take the next steps (Ibid, p. 3).

The authors explored within this thesis were chosen because I saw such steps in their prose and designs, felt the stirrings of their climate-challenged characters as the people, long before them, failed their planet and its water supplies making their lives literally hellish with the ghosts of the past. In their respective floods, droughts, and spoiled places, each author posed and begged the real underlying question of hydrofiction: how does one “think [and imagine] beyond hydrological catastrophe to a world that is post-capitalist, rather than post-water”? (Deckard, 2019, p. 123) Because, make no mistake, that is the real design of these and all cli-fi works—to envision, hope, and make a last-ditch claim for a post-capitalist existence. After all, through the representation of something we fear, of a *mundus* exhausted and embattled, we hope we can learn to do what we can to prevent such a realisation.

Ultimately, however, by continuing to blur the boundary between the personal and the political, writers can bleed into their narratives of sustainability much-needed heart and feeling as much as a need for systemic changes, and that is why they connect with readers, with truth. We need look no farther than Upton Sinclair’s indictment on corruption and the poor working-conditions in early 20th century Chicago in *The Jungle* (1906) for how a text can have the power to move millions, move presidents even, into long-seated action. George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) too have worked wonders in beseeching the world to autocracies even if, little by little, fascism seems to be again, in pockets, rearing its head globally. The responsibility of the cli-fi genre

going forwards, then, as it gains more and more traction is to remain cognizant of this fine-line of telling and teaching before both become futile and impractical, and time is up on attaining an oceanic, creatural, and planetary Oneness.

### **Water is**

Hannah Boast has made plain just how water is often “rendered invisible in literary, cultural and political discourses ... despite [it] being [so] ubiquitous” and indeed “fundamentally necessary [and paradoxically] highly visible in” literary, cultural and political life (Boast, 2015). In terms of cli-fi and climate crisis shorthand, however, water is emblematic of the genre and the problem. Floods, melting glaciers, and rising sea-levels are the most overt and visible instances of climate crisis and often feature in the texts that explore it (*The Rapture* [2009], *Flood* [2008], *New York 2140* [2017]) as well as in most onscreen reportage. As we move further and further towards these increasingly likely instances of water-invasion on land, its invisibility, its critical and commercial and public invisibility, dwindles.

This thesis contributes to this closing visibility issue first and foremost, but also addresses the many ontological crises the ecological breakdown can induce; and, in doing so, it offers up existing outlooks to combat this, such as the creatural, where creatures and man are judged equal, and trans-corporeality, where creatures, man, and world are inseparable and where something done to one is done to all.

The first chapter exemplified this idea through a dichotomous creaturely-human study in relation to the flooded futures painted in Sudbanthad’s *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* and Miller’s *Blackfish City*. Both texts chosen, however, made it plain that the creaturely and the human, as Herman’s “creatural” argues, are always intertwined (Herman, 2016, p. 2). Miller’s narrative even goes so far as to (nano-)bond the two as is the case with Kaev and his

polar bear Other, and, in fact, depicts that when the two are separated there is a dissolution of sanity and self in both. Here, I argued that Miller is claiming that thinking as separate-from is not merely an ontological problem but ultimately a pathological one too. While human life-worlds or *umwelten* are often seen as superior even in the face of rising waters, I made it plain via both contemporary science and fictional imaginings that this will not be the case. Climate crisis does not see class or species divides and in the long run even those most protected and privileged enough to plug themselves into virtual forgetting machines (afterbodying in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*) will ultimately reap the costs of continued emission quotas. In actuality, then, there is only one globally shared *umwelten*, and one that needs greater protective discourse.

In the second chapter, I examined how water is often approached as a resource first and a natural necessity second, using the Colorado River as a noteworthy example. Over-allocated since the outset of the River Compact of 1922 and increasingly over-stretched because of continued climate-induced drought conditions, Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* and Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* use the treatment of the river in ways that Hessler et al. (2019) calls a tidalectic understanding that seeks to distance it from historic and anthropocentric domination of space. Further, they help to concretise hydrological anxieties by showing how continued human-first practices, such as damming and re-routing, could culminate in parched and conflict-ridden futures that result in the causative destruction of man-made places. Ultimately, by drawing attention to said water-starved places, they make use of the ecospectral as a means of identifying and eliciting communication with the ghosts of past mistakes to advocate a greater hydro-consciousness. For instance, Luz's initial introduction in *Gold Fame Citrus* describes her as literally parading around in the clothes of a dead Californian starlet amidst a lavish desert villa, reanimating a role—Hollywood celebrity with

a grand sweeping home in places known for water shortages—that ultimately added to the water-shock of the region. In *The Water Knife*, too, the unmade towns, which exist at the extreme ends of the desert cities, show the precarity of forcibly making place where perhaps it could never feasibly have arisen without controlling and redirecting crucial water sources. Lastly, the unheeded words of former Colorado advocates (Powell, Muir, Reisner) become prophetic pages that find a renewed life in the characters who ironically cling to them (in both novels) even as the water grows scarcer by the minute. There is a reason why both novels culminate with discussions/denouements with the long-dead (Luz realising she is not the John Wesley Powell of her story and Maria’s decision to use the old Indian water rights for her own benefit) and that is because the past continues to haunt the future, in people and place, and a tidalectic and ecospectral outlook calls for humanity to listen out for such conversations before contemporary decisions lead to yet more future ghosts.

In contrast to the preceding chapters, Chapter Three explored the historic despoliation of the crude-oil rich Niger Delta largely in respect to its detriment to the human. More specifically, the increasingly toxic habitation of the geographically unprivileged, like those Nigerians whose only bad luck in life was to be born atop a black-gold mine. Through petrofictional and trans-corporeal readings of Habila’s *Oil on Water*, I wrote on the power and effectiveness of verisimilitude when it came to concretizing environmental and personal tragedies in light of faraway toxic disturbances. After all, numbers, whether casualties or the gallons spilled into water bodies, do not shake people as effectively as hearing person-level experiences from the people who live amidst such straits. Habila’s exploration of the fleeing, broken, and scarred of the Niger Delta, then, like the work of Ken Saro-Wiwa before him, carries extra weight because the geographical privilege of turning away or forgetting of these practices is made impossible; the pain depicted is well-lived and often inscribed on

the inhabitants' bodies as with Boma's burned face. The words they create, then, help to fuel sustained discourse into what it really means for a country (and a world that forces it) to prioritise economic health over ecological health.

To further explore *Oil on Water*, I also constructed a new lens with which to examine this and similarly resource-cursed narratives in a way that shows such pursuits of power for what they really are: exploitative, monstrous, and largely occluded from view. I call this new branch of the energy-humanities the Energy-Gothic. This is one of the most singular contributions to modern ecocriticism that the thesis has to offer as the terms is transferable beyond merely hydrofictions and can be applied to any and all texts that present worlds mired in resource extraction that are evoked in ways that can be perceived as gothic and destructive to place and life.

Bolstered by Alaimo's trans-corporeality, because of the inherent bodily sharedness of toxic landscapes, it is an analytical framework that often plumbs the negligent, mostly top-down decisions of a few and the harmful impact it causes on the many. Notable examples of this can be seen in the settings and doings of *The Absolute at Large*, *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease*, certain *Godzilla* movies, *The Triffids*, and the recent film adaptation of the DuPont chemical dumping scandal, *Dark Waters*. If death or the threat of death is key to texts conventionally gothic, it is half-lives and substances refined from death (e.g oil) that remain at the heart of works within the Energy-Gothic, with their leavings, in acidification and technofossils and toxified landfills, manifesting ghosts that do not merely haunt a house or graveyard but haunt the planet entire for thousands of years to come.

My work has predominantly focused on how fictionalised responses to climate crisis, as inferred by fact, can excite thought and retrospection, but there is much to be explored in how poetic and non-fiction texts as well as art installations address this too. Hessler et



al.'s *Tidalectics*, for instance, is an anthology that grew out of provocative exhibitions concerning treatment of the planet's oceans, with written work coming from the likes of Astrida Neimanis, Kamau Braithwaite, and Rachel Carson bolstering the already engaging visual art of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Academy. Here tragedy can not only be imagined but touched and recreated in projects showcasing the beauty and brutality of man and ocean. Given greater time, funding, and a world without the novel coronavirus, I would have liked to have engaged more with these other genres, as well as collaborated with artists and scientists to heighten my already multidisciplinary approach.

As a complete project, however, this thesis advocates for and demands greater preparedness in anticipation of likely future-strapped and -encumbered potentialities through the exploration of different ways of being. It asks in every given chance: what about the water? It is a question that requires greater deliberation and infrastructural upheaval if disastrous water-shocks and flash floods are not to become more of a planetary norm. Neimanis proposes the term "hydrocommons" for today's always water-adjacent world, a "more-than-human aqueous ecology" that encompasses every living thing, because water, after all, is *every* thing (Neimanis, 2014, p. 8, 6). Without it, very little would exist. Grossman thinks similarly and argues that, instead of thinking of human and everything else, the world is instead made up of "non-human human[s]" and "non-fish fish", a concept that foregrounds the inherent non-differentness in either (Grossman, 1999, p. 130). In interrogation and agreement with both notions, this thesis has demonstrated that separation when it comes to our planet and its water bodies is a lie. Everything is connected, and everything is affected. Continued thought otherwise only serves as a detriment that further feeds a worsening cascading climate crisis already destabilising crucial connections and balances. A greater hydro consciousness, then, is a necessity going

forwards. Water is not just a resource or number to be quantified; water is culture and nature and nurture. Water is a living liquid history replete with billions of stories, human and otherwise. Water is a mirror currently darkening under our stewardship, but if we can collectively come to understand that, then we can begin to make the necessary changes. One Health, after all, starts with one's self.

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*MUSEUM OF  
WATER*



~ *A note on the text* ~

My words

[Their words]

Dissolve into one another

Like water

We are everyone

~ ~

When an entire world becomes a museum it becomes an archive of

fatal fragments;

a [single corpus<sup>1</sup>]

of the corpse us

~ ~

And now, welcome to  
*The Atrocity Exhibition.*

On your left are Ends, Water,  
Perversity, and [Terminal zone{s}<sup>2</sup>];

And on your right are Yet More Ends,  
Fire, [Autogeddon<sup>3</sup>], and [Venus  
smiles<sup>4</sup>].

Everywhere else is a retread [over the  
same apocalyptic landscape ... as it is  
anatomized, penetrated, cut and  
crushed and humiliated, scorched and  
fucked<sup>5</sup>].

**Contextual blindness is prohibited.**

# F E A R

To fear something is to give it worth, prominence and respect. Not everything justifies such fear. Not everything is worthy of such fear. Water is.

[Water is patient.<sup>6</sup>] It bides its time, and [always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it.<sup>7</sup>] When we dam its flow, we damn ourselves. Inevitability rears its head like the kraken, whose slumber has been interrupted by blind pawing in the dark:

it rises, insurmountable. Floods.

~ ~

Sometimes we tell ourselves: [I must not fear<sup>8</sup>].

Sometimes we worry that [fear is the mind-killer<sup>9</sup>] and [the little-death that brings total obliteration<sup>10</sup>]. It is something to be quashed and placed within the farthest reaches of our mentalscapes. Only to be bothered when activated; or left to fester and grow.

At such times, we must also understand that fear is two pronged, and can be used to *illuminate* or *close off*. It is only through the little-understandings of what causes such fears that we can resuscitate/prevent the [little-death{s}<sup>11</sup>].

~ ~

Fear [defeats more people than any other one thing in the world<sup>12</sup>]; global ambivalence and inertia to the degeneration of contemporaneous times, on the other hand, is the executioner of everything. Unwatch it as it blinks out the unfamiliar [constellation of islands linked together by pathways on the ocean<sup>13</sup>]. Unwatch it as superstorms are harried into existence by shifting climes. Unwatch it as the world becomes wet.

[Silence creates its own violence.<sup>14</sup>]

~ ~

Let me tell you why I am scared:

*In my head, I am sinking through air. Dropping, dropping, dropping. I see the water. It is unanimously placid, uninterested. I am nothing to it. It is everything to me. It is end.*

Long ago, when I was small enough to fit in the back of a seat attached to my mother's sun-faded purple bicycle, I felt the first real pull of fear. My mother would wrestle the bike through the house, hurdling each raggedy threshold marred by the weekly process. I would be given something to eat or hold or worry at as I was wedged into my seat. My whole world would become a writhing back, canvas to the strain of a low-income and an inability

to afford a car. Her legs would become a blur and the wind would pick up. Shock ginger curls would fly.

Streets as banal as those found on children play-mats would soon siphon past, quickly lost to greenery and those enigmatic dirt-paths increasingly lost to today's map-everything world. Soon there would be the thrum of traffic and a dangerous main road straight out of a Stephen King novel.

We didn't take the usual bridge that day or we did and I don't remember doing so. However it came about, we ended up beneath it and cycling through a verge so wild it had reclaimed the fence trying to tame it. The lake hugged the interior fence-line. The bridge must have been overhead, a stark shadow showing us its scat-free underside. I want to say that there was a hairpin turn or that there was something that caught the wheels and spun us out... whatever it was, the bicycle had turned sharply, and my mother was facing away and back whilst I was facing forward and down. Into drink.

I don't know why we came the way we did. I don't know why that day became a locus in my life. I don't even know if the memory is real. (I really think it is, can't perceive a reality in which it isn't.) What I do know, is that real or not I can't escape the feeling of hanging, wide-eyed and useless, over an expanse of water, and feeling that first true sense of fear. I was however-old and terrified. That stays with you. I don't think about this often, but when I do I recollect it in stabs of sensation: a juddering bike sailing over ruts; a slap of rangy nettle against my bare bread-roll legs; a weightlessness over a precarity I did not understand. Which is all to say,

water is incongruous and untenable. It cannot be batted away, leant on for support or wiped away with a baby-wipe. Water is us and yet Other. It is what we deride from and what we ultimately return to, in some way or another. It is a debt collector that wants its seventy<sup>xii</sup> percent back. It is the depths and heights to which we are the paltry intermediaries. It is calamity and survival. It is the monster from the deep that our global efforts is coaxing closer.

It is to be feared  
(and respected).

~ ~

Thalassophobia is the fear of the sea. It concerns an abnormal terror when it comes to large bodies of water and can even be brought about at the mere sight of a postcard. Its tendrils grab, coil, and sucker, by proximity or the simple contemplation of the untold fathoms beneath your feet. It is irrationally rational.

Thalassophobia is a call to arms  
a promise  
a requirement  
Thalassophobia is anachrony of the now  
of existing on/in *terra* in times of *aqua*

---

<sup>xii</sup> Or sixty, depending on the source.

# *DELUGE*

*CITIES x CONCRETE x CAPITALISM*

Waterlogged cities have become the new norm. Consider Japan 2004, New Orleans 2005, Thailand 2011, or Bangladesh during every increasingly worse monsoon season. Consider Hagen 2021, Liège 2021, London 2021, Zengzhou 2021. Consider those too small to be named.

Floating trunks, rising waterlines, sunken subways, and forced relocations are today's common cold.

~ ~

In October 2009, Mohamed Nasheed, the first democratically elected President of the Maldives, convened an underwater cabinet meeting. He did so in a stark spectacle to represent [what will happen to the Maldives if climate change is not checked<sup>15</sup>]. Everyone attending was dead but for the oxygen-tanks that kept them breathing.

They are **us**, forthcoming.

~ ~

[‘Hello, hello, we are now switching over to the region of Venice, Italy.’  
And then all that was to be heard was a dark and boundless rushing sound as of rising waters.<sup>16</sup>]

~ ~

*Acqua alta*<sup>xiii</sup> after *acqua alta* overflowed the Lagoon City in November 2019, causing a council meeting specifically concerning climate change to disband due to flooding of the chamber. This, just [two minutes after the majority League, Brothers of Italy, and Forza Italia parties rejected ... amendments to tackle climate change<sup>17</sup>]. Lady Irony, scamp that she is, saw this as an opportunity to trap these denialists inside with the ankle-high fruits of their negligence. Damp feet, however, don't sway damp heads.

~ ~

[The title heading on the clip tells you that what you are watching is a scene at Sendai Airport. A “live feed,” as it were. The original title, in Japanese, is there too, palimpsest *kanji*. The date attached to the footage is March 11, 2011.<sup>18</sup>]

You pretend you don't know what is going to happen, nosing closer to the screen. Seeing mundanity, seeing normalcy, seeing contemporary city life. It draws you in.

[Someone is holding the camcorder, or phone; you will never know who. Maybe it doesn't matter ... you think there must be some mistake: what you are watching is ... nothing.<sup>19</sup>]

---

<sup>xiii</sup> A Venetian high-tide that routinely waters the already wet.

You look away for a second, looking at the similarly listed videos on the column to the right. They confirm that what you are watching is definitely not nothing. Nothing isn't so plenteous.

[It is a sound at first, a low and faint rumbling ... {that quickly} becomes a gathering roar ... and now the first small cries of alarm can be heard<sup>20</sup>].

You refrain from blinking.

[In the upper corner of the screen, a father picks up his small child. A few people begin to run, disappearing out of frame. The camera moves to catch them; then perhaps sensing something, it scurries back ... and freezes there in terror.<sup>21</sup>]

You become them.

[A wall of water is surging past the terminal. It is a metre high - then, very quickly, two ... screams can be heard now ...

The footage does not so much end as stop.<sup>22</sup>]

For a second.

~ ~

In July 2005, [a downpour without precedent in Mumbai's recorded history descended on the city: the northern suburbs received 94.4cm of rain in fourteen hours, one of the highest rainfall totals ever recorded anywhere in a single day. On that day {the 26th}, with catastrophic suddenness, the people of the city were confronted with the costs of three centuries of interference with the ecology of an estuarine location.<sup>23</sup>] Natural drainage channels became [filth-clogged ditches<sup>24</sup>] and the old waterways' carrying capacity, because of how they had been extensively diverted, retrofitted and filled in, had been [severely diminished<sup>25</sup>]. Subsequently, said drainage systems cascaded and overflowed with [huge quantities of sewage as well as industrial effluents<sup>26</sup>].

[2.5 million people were "under water for hours"<sup>27</sup>]

[two hundred kilometres of road were submerged<sup>28</sup>]

[motorists drowned in their cars because short-circuited electrical systems would not allow them to open doors and windows<sup>29</sup>]

[over five hundred people died<sup>30</sup>]

Situated where it is, where many urban megacities hunker beside the ocean to benefit from the ease of its transportation and trade, Mumbai is just another example of *unlistening* to the past. Such precarious living, like New York, like Hong Kong, all manifested despite what our ancestors had learnt about the spontaneous destruction of the sea, as if there had been some [collective setting aside<sup>31</sup>] of sense in favour of cents. In 2015, a full decade after the 2005 disaster, Mumbai was once again besieged and, even though the [volume of rainfall was only a third of the deluge of 2005<sup>32</sup>], great swathes of the city were once again [swamped by



floodwaters<sup>33</sup>]. Measures and proactive means of limiting the destruction that should have been put into place were few and far between. Lessons went unlearned.

[Not long ago, in 2011, you saw what could happen when everything went wrong. The water's coming, everyone in Bangkok said helplessly, and it did, viciously—perhaps vengefully—washing over anything in its path. The airports shut down. Car manufacturing parks sunk. Entire neighborhoods turned into an unnatural sea. You stood outside your house and eyed with wariness the thin film of water that's covered the road. Your toilet backed up, brimming with who knew what, and you had to pee into a bottle to avoid flushing. You kept the TV on all day and night for updates from parts of the city already overwhelmed. Who knew what could've happened even after you'd prayed for the higher entities and land spirits to keep the water from reaching you? Next thing, you could be watching the wall of sandbags you'd built prove entirely useless or maybe joining with neighbors to pry open a water gate you believed was keeping your home inundated to the second floor. You were either dry or drowned. It all seemed random, but you also hoped you lived close enough to central Bangkok, with all its important HiSo addresses and billion-baht buildings, for the water to magically flow elsewhere.<sup>34</sup>]

But, as we are seeing the world over, crisis defies class. Even Kardashians must flee fires, and, as was the case in Mumbai, powerful politicians require rescuing from their water-worried homes too.

Deluges do not digress.  
They do not delineate the powerful from the poor.  
Deluges destroy.

~ ~

[Tell them what it's like  
to see the entire ocean\_level\_with the land

Tell them  
we are afraid<sup>35</sup>]

~ ~

[Anyone with a coast is in trouble nowadays.<sup>36</sup>]

~ ~

I got the memory from a lady who smoked cigarillos like they were candy. She wasn't crying when she handed it over, but her eyes were red and puffy. All used up. She started to open her lips to say something inflammatory but thought better of it when she saw my badge. Instead, she took another pull of her smoke. "But...but it's the beach!"

I turned away, taking a few steps towards the exit before replying. "Everywhere's the beach now." She didn't follow. I knew she wouldn't.

Outside, the city bobbed, the lashed-together boats rising and falling with the city-tides; Manhattan as it was always destined to be, wet and overreaching.

Yelling for a cab, I peeked at the memory in my palm that had started all this mess: it was an hour long and dull as drainage water, but for the last ten seconds. People paid for dull now though, got rich off of plain and boring. Nine-Fingers would cut that last incriminating ten seconds, burn it from the face of the world, then sell the rest to Immersionists, and sit pretty on the proceeds. The lady would come to believe it never existed in the first place. Dog eat dog.

I had found Red Lucy hunched over her half-empty tumblers in the back room of the backest bar in the Higher East Side; she looked every bit the woman with nothing to lose. She was wrong. For a moment, lit as she was by the fluorescent overheads, she resembled a fading starlet playing out society's role of public breakdown; and did it well. A few men teetering towards obesity tossed glances her way in between sips of watered-down stout, but none of them made a move. She had an air about her did Red Lucy, and it was never inviting.

"I thought I would have more time," she gargled, raising her many-ringed hand to signal the barkeep. He brought the whole bottle. "A week at least."

I shrugged.

"How much they paying you?"

I didn't budge.

"That much, huh?"

She filled a glass and held it out to me, and then drank it herself when I shook my head. Shrugging, she filled up another glass and downed that for good measure too.

"What's it like? Being a..." she waved her wrist in the air, "you know, *blank*. Does it hurt? Because, fuck, *this* does." I shook away the drink, letting her talk. Sometimes it's better to let them unravel themselves and in doing so keep your hands clean. They think talking will create a connection—it doesn't.

"Knowing but not having that's the real killer," she continued, a fresh tear in her eye. "Remembering what's no more..." She downed another tumbler and her faraway eyes grew yet more glassy. "God, man, it fucking hurts!"

I held out my hand. "Consider it a favour then." I didn't attempt to smile, didn't think it would help. "Ignor—"

"*Ignorance is bliss*, yeah, yeah, I know the company line." She moved with an intensity I thought beyond her then, lashing out with a hand intent on impairing my visibility. Fortunately, I caught the flailing hand long before it clawed skin or worse. The table, juddering under her lunge, deposited an empty tumbler to the floor with a crash. Cheap gin splashed up my thigh, an alcoholic's blood.

Lucy tried shaking free, but there wasn't much to her. 125lbs soaking wet, it was like restraining a kid. She tried screaming in my face, but the job had long inured me to all the grief and emotional theatrics a vic could throw my way.

"I won't give it to you," she screamed again, her voice growing hoarse. "I won't! It's better than *nothing*, grief is better than..."

*Being a blank*. I didn't let her finish the sentence. I had heard it enough times that the words had become senseless, just sounds in the wind. It was a barb that never brought blood anymore; I had outgrown it. Instead, I just tightened my grip until I heard a crack and then let go. She crumpled like a leaf in fall.

I extracted the memory with little fuss after that, Red Lucy's eyes had already glazed over with the thought of the mental absence to come. She'd be Spotty before long—someone whose memory was so pockmarked with gaps that they either went madder still or willingly sought out Blankness. Me-ness. Manhattan was full of people like that, and it always would be.

In the elevator up to Nine-Fingers' apartment, I rewatched Red Lucy's hour-long memory. It wasn't particularly moving, just her and another woman wordlessly sharing a sunset. It was the dryness of the memory that would see it fetch a couple thousand dollars—the sealess streets that still bore readable shopfronts and carefree joggers. Immersionists killed for a chance to feel the ground beneath their feet, even if it wasn't their feet doing the feeling. Anybody and anything in the way of that was expendable. Just like always.

~ ~

[Brooklyn and Queens and the south Bronx {are} all shallow seas {now}, their prismaticly oily waters sloshing poisonously back and forth on the tides. Yes, a total mess of a bay, still junked up by bridges and pipelines and rusting sclerotic infrastructural junk of all kinds. And so the animals have come back, the fish, the fowl, the oysters, quite a few of them two-headed and fatal to ingest, but back. People too are back, of course, having never left, still everywhere, they're like cockroaches you can't get rid of them.<sup>37</sup>]

~ ~

[I switched on the TV and watched a science fiction movie about a submerged world ... {and} fell asleep with the movie still playing, thinking there was something sad about a people who were born and lived and died on boats and fantastic balloons, their days and nights filled with the hope of someday finding dry earth, their wars and industries and relationships and culture all driven by the myth of dry land.<sup>38</sup>]

~ ~

[As the sun rose over the lagoon, driving clouds of steam into the great golden pall, Kerans felt the terrible stench of the water-line, the sweet compacted smells of dead vegetation and rotting animal carcasses ... Beautiful and serene from the balcony a few minutes earlier, Kerans realised that the lagoon was nothing more than a garbage-filled swamp.<sup>39</sup>]

~ ~

[Dear Matafale Peinam,

I want to tell you about that lagoon  
that lucid, sleepy lagoon  
lounging against the sunrise

Men say that one day  
that lagoon will devour you

They say it will gnaw at the shoreline  
chew at the roots of your breadfruit trees  
gulp down rows of your seawalls  
and crunch your island's shattered bones

They say you, your daughter  
and your granddaughter, too  
will wander  
rootless  
with only  
a passport  
to call home<sup>40]</sup><sup>xiv</sup>

~|~

## I SPECTERS OF LARKS

*Anywhere. Far away. Nearly now.*

**A:** We exist in anti-Messianic times.

**B:**

**C:**

**A:** Generation after generation of making-do. We hope that somewhere somehow *someone* will turn up and steady the ship. They never do. Complacency is an infinite present state—why do now what someone can do later? Let's make capital now and captains later. Tower blocks are deemed unsafe for decades but only tragedy of the doubleplusungood<sup>xv</sup> degree incites action. We rarely do unless done to. The End is coming—we could stop it, we could *believe* in it, but why? It is not our problem. It's *upcoming*.

**B:** Order is a cellophane-wrapped tv-dinner on an unavoidable production line towards Customer Chaos. It is inevitable. Lean into it.

**C:**

**C:** I've never liked you. Not even at the very beginning. You've always been so selective, so brash, so full of hot air.

---

<sup>xiv</sup> Originally performed at 2014 Opening Ceremony of the United Nations Secretary-General's Climate Summit.

<sup>xv</sup> Newspeak. See: 1984, Orwell.

**B:** You're entirely right, of course. That is exactly what I am. Also Antichrist, Witch, Murderer, [infinite perfectibility<sup>41</sup>], storm, and, on a few global occasionals, even Death-Driver. Sticks and stones phase through my bones and names only further me.

***A specific nullness. Abject and complete.***

**C:**

**C** (*frantically*): The silence. You've... taken them? Haven't you?

**A:** Regrettably.

**C:** [the lark at break of day arising/ From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate<sup>42</sup>]-

**B:** Birds. You're worried about birds?

**A:** [Unprejudiced consideration will always lament and wonder to see how many ... special charms of life are lost, never to reappear in their integrity.<sup>43</sup>] Forgive me.

**C:** I cannot; an intrinsic connection has just been severed, and the web will soon wilt. The world is on fire.

**B:** The world has always been on fire.

**A:**

**B:** And I am irresistibly propelling into its final future.

~/~

[There is a dark shape at the edge of the falls ... knocking this way and that in the force of the current. It would seem to be a drowned dog. It is a drowned dog. And I stand, mind burning, looking down. No one is noticing the dog. Should I mention it? ... At the foot of the falls, where water is rushing away, a fisherman casts his line over it. What sense could there be in things?<sup>44</sup>]

~ ~

For a moment it was like she held the whole lake on a piece of string. A childish part of me wanted to cry out to her to let it run slack, let the waters recede a little; just enough for me to see the lost, hypotenuse roofs of yesterday. You never do know how much a brick-and-mortar familiarity means to you until it's lost to dam-water.

"It's not good for you, this," she said, hauling her line in and casting anew. "Them streets are gone, Nelly, and those stories sunk. Best you start on south."

"Maybe I'll find it in the Chapel—she used to go a lot—or maybe at Terri's or—"

Halsey pulled free a three-eyed pilchard and held it up for me to see. "The only ors worth a pint of anything these days are *oars*, and it's about time you put yours to use." She tossed the mute back in the drink. "Kit's gone, dear. Whole town's gone. What you're looking for

ain't there. Sooner you seek south the better. 'Sides I hear Relocation ain't so bad nowadays—Fanny's feedback wall stirred some pots and they're building thicker walls now."

I bit my tongue. It wasn't a conversation I wanted to have, but a cutting remark would dry her up. And I wanted to hear. "Do you remember it?" I know I didn't have to say anything else, just like her fish, Halsey will bite. In time. Meanwhile, I bent my knees and let the waterline reach my chin. On a good day, if the sun caught it just right, you could see the old steeple catch stray glints, the only thing left of my hometown that broke the corrugated surface of New Res.

"I was at Howard's Hardware, picking up some chicken-wire," Halsey said, tossing a second similarly afflicted fish. I smiled and leant back further until the only blue I could see was sky. "Fox had made a mess of my Carl's poultry. He'd driven to work in tears. He loved them hens like kiddies. It was that same softness that won me over all those years ago. 'Don't ever do a turn with a fella with shards in his eyes' my ma used to say, and, well, Carl was all cats and pillows, so I did her right.

"Car alarms first, then toppling shelves rattling, then screams. I didn't keep up with the news, never heard any of that redevelopment lark the state suits were selling. I'd felt my share of shakes before, however, and thought this was just another like that of '06. Carl's sister lost her chimney on that one and a couple of mailboxes out by Leftfield kissed floor but that was the most of it, so I wasn't bothered none. Only, those phones of yours started to go off—every single one of them, buzzing and beating and blaring. Real racket. So, I looked up from shelves and saw that poor Trinny Tisley at the counter, and her eyes, well, they were like moons.

"'It's broken,' she said. So I said: *what has, dear?* And she said 'It's all coming.' So I said *I'm going to need more information than that, dear.* She looked up, looked at me with her heart in her mouth, and said, 'THE DAM'S FUCKING BROKEN!' I'm about to tell her to calm down, mind her Ps and Qs, and perhaps take the weight from her feet when she off and runs right on out of the place, leaving a queue of four or more customers. Nobody cares though, everybody is thumbing screens. This is when I really register the screams."

Halsey turned to face me, and a part of me started to wish I never asked. Nobody alive could say just how old she was, but right then a ballpark of two hundred would have seemed conservative.

"I've never been lucky, Nelly," she continued, changing the lure on her line. "I once bought a winning scratch card and the wind took it before I could even pop the door of the truck to tell my Carl the good news, and, on top of that, I'm one half of twins whom never so much as made it beyond the belly. I've never been to Disneyland or driven a car that wasn't owned by a string of in-laws. Sometimes I think it's all recompense for the time I pushed my little brother into a pond when I was five and he near choked himself dead. Fact is: I don't know why that wall of water hit me and left me kicking whilst it took all those others in Howard's and made pin-cushions out of them with the loose stock and shattered store-windows. I don't know why it washed me up on Chapel Hill but buried my Carl beneath Bettings & Bonds. What I *do* know, is that, whilst I may be courting daisies, I am not stupid even if you are and think that I am."

I had been watching the flight path of a sparrow, trying to imagine all this water before it settled, as it rushed down avenues and climbed house-fronts, a wall that not only blocked but closed-in. The sudden turn in conversation struck me slow. I turned, tasting venom. My hair, like so many damp vipers, flung out of the water spitting brine. I didn't have to be out

here talking to Old Mad Halsey and I sure as hell didn't have to take being called stupid by a woman with more than two hands in the grave, and I was about to say as much. Only, I never got the chance.

Throwing out a new line, Halsey simply carried on, easing into her words as only the strongest of tellers can. "I spent forty years with Carl, and that's a blessing. Am I sick to the stomach of living? Yeah, sure. But am I ready to move on just yet? No. You know why I fish, Nelly? It's not because I like it, I really don't. Have you seen these hands? Each one that bites is a promise that something can go on if another thing can't. It was knitting when my son Jack ran out in front of a car out by the old ring road. Now, it's this. I know what you're doing Nelly because I've seen the look in the mirror. Don't pretend you're out there looking when we both know you're waiting. Waiting until that last terror of going on just goes and you can sink down there to join them. You think your Kit would want that? You think any of them want you to waste what they can't?

"People laughed at Fanny when she put up that wall. They went around saying she's throwing twigs in a forest, but you drive past that wall everyday now. I bet you even know this month's biggest cry for help, don't you? Fanny's doing because *they* can't. You wanna be angry, sure, shout at them till you're hoarse. Punch the damn water if it helps. Don't drown, though, Nelly. Don't you dare drown when you have a choice to swim."

~ ~

[At the end of the last hall there was a screen jutting from a niche in the ceiling. It began to lower, stretching wall to wall and reaching nearly to the floor. I approached slowly. At first the images were all water. There was water racing through woodlands and surging over riverbanks. There were scenes of rain beating on terraced fields, long moments of nothing but rain, then people everywhere, others helpless in small boats bouncing over rapids. There were temples flooded, homes pitching down hillsides. I watched as water kept rising in city streets, cars and drivers going under. The size of the screen lifted the effect out of the category of TV news. Everything loomed, scenes lasted long past the usual broadcast breath. It was there in front of me, on my level, immediate and real, a woman sitting life-sized on a lopsided chair in a house collapsed in a mudslide. A man, a face, underwater, staring out at me. I had to step back but also had to keep looking. It was hard not to look.<sup>45]</sup>

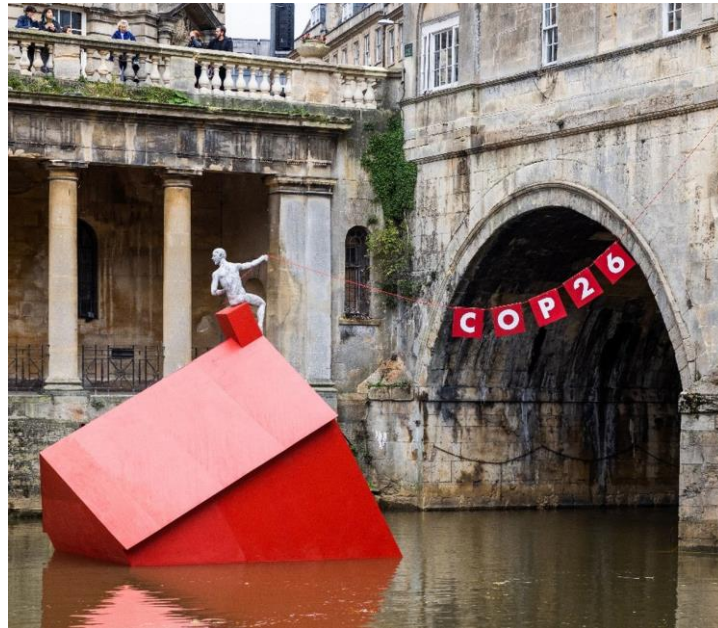
~ ~

[Yon foaming flood seems motionless as ice;  
Its dizzy turbulence eludes the eye,  
Frozen by distance<sup>46]</sup>.

Watch as it warps horizon;  
superimposing safety in  
half-cared glares.

Tranquillity is a net,  
and its holes are vast.

~ ~



xvi 47

~ ~

*A wet day heralded misfortune.*

*Alfred awoke to a pit in his chest and the sure-fire feeling of unrest. Rain, sleet, hail had always prefigured the sombre in his life. Grandfathers and dogs and friends had all died with backdrops of grey and black and dripping. No, he didn't like a bruised cloud at all.*

*Throwing aside the bedcovers, he glanced towards the window and hoped he was hearing things again. Alas, the threadbare curtains concealed well but they failed to silence. He squeezed his eyes shut and prayed for a mere shower, a gardener's watering. It was the full dayer's he feared most—those damp days that clogged drains and descended onto clothes so hard they refused to dry.*

*All day long, Alfred watched those around him alarmed that one would choke on a breadcake or take a deadly tumble, but, impossibly, the day went without injury. In fact, it proceeded with the advent of life, with a neighbour six doors down giving birth to twins. Halsey and Harriet. Old names both that made him smile and long for the past. Such was the good tidings, even Alfred began to lean farther back into his armchair and whistle a tune.*

*Perhaps it was superstition, he reasoned. A child's understanding of pathetic fallacy. Rain, after all, was life-giver too. The food on his very plate owed to such dismal days. That said, he resumed smoking his pipe indoors rather than outside and cancelled a prior engagement all the same. It was one thing shattering superstition and another to challenge it.*

*Water, however, is slippery; and today and tomorrow are not so easily separated by a mere man-made minute. The breath of relief Alfred thus released the very moment his job-watch told midnight, the one so fiercely held all day, despite the good fortune, was one*

---

<sup>xvi</sup> 'Sinking House Installation' in Bath during the COP26. Created by an assortment of artists and architects from Stride Treglown.



*loosed in error. Not that he knew it just yet. Alfred had the benefit of minutes of bliss before buildings and bodies would soon fall, swept up in a torrent of wet.*

At 17.30 pm, on March the 11th, a discovery had been made. A small aperture on the Dale Dyke Dam was spotted by William Horsefield. A hole as slight as [to admit a penknife<sup>48</sup>]. But even a tiny break can upend stability. A wound, after all, must bleed.

Dread is the word that must have assailed him and those few others privy to the dam's vulnerability long before its contents destructively wound their way down through the streets. A floating, final dread.

*It was Rupert's dogs from two houses over that first itched at Alfred's uncertainty and got him to thinking darkly. Each was baying as if a phalanx of cats had waltzed on by and took to sleeping in their favoured spot. It was a familiar, neighbourly grievance that he allowed to take root in favour of what he really heard. The ferocious winds all around too were merely remnant dream-stuff from a forgotten nightmare. All will fade, he thought, grabbing a fistful of the bedcovers. All will fade.*

*For a full minute he remained this way, paralyzed to disturbing this interior equilibrium. Around him, the house creaked and groaned, and the windows clinked as if a hundred hands were tapping on each pane trying to get his attention. To his left, Marianne snored gently.*

*Steeling himself, Alfred finally lurched to his feet and, careful not to wake his wife, reached for the curtains. The old superstition edged his thoughts as he stood there cloth in hand. There was no denying that sound. He threw the curtains aside.*

*The window was riddled with drops and the sky was as dark as he had ever seen it, swirling malicious. Underneath it, a storm raged in the streets, not just over them. Rivers ran through house-fronts and the rain hit roofs like mortar fire, dislodging shingles and evicting chimneys. He squinted to try to make out more, but there was a wall in the way. A wall of water.*

*Alfred turned and reached out for his sleeping wife. She looked so peaceful.*

*The dogs fell silent.*

[“What is that noise?<sup>49</sup>] the mother of the first recorded victim of the flood screamed to her husband that fateful March 11th night. “[What is that shouting?”<sup>50</sup>]

She was in bed, exhausted from the labour that had borne the child currently sleeping on her breast. A storm was rattling at the shutters, chasing away all hope of sleep and now there was shouting on top of it all. She just wanted to rest.

Her husband, face almost as red as her own from running up and down the stairs and across to a neighbour's house, looked as if he had seen a ghost. His hands, so sure and controlled, a glassblower's hands, were shaking. “The w-w-water,” he stammered, “it's coming.” He rushed to the window, his arms flailing about him, untethered in their uselessness. “I-I tried to get help,” he said. “I tried t-to-”

The mother began wrapping her newborn up in a blanket. Survival instinct bettering fear. “I know,” she said, her voice pleasant and evenly pitched. “Now, come here and help me up. I can... I can walk.”

She couldn't. But he carried her. As best as he could.

They all survived one great wave, but only two of them survived the second.

["I was obliged to leave the child to its fate"<sup>51</sup>], the father and husband is quoted as saying in Samuel Harrison's *A Complete History of the Great Flood at Sheffield* (1864), a historical compendium of the disaster, ["or I could not have saved my wife"<sup>52</sup>].

The child was found in a coal cellar a few days later.

The Great Sheffield Flood of 1864, despite its name, is a little-known Northern England calamity. And those that do know, may have never known if not for journalist Samuel Harrison. It is to his diligence that remembrances for [no less than some 240<sup>53</sup>] people can still filter down through generational cracks.

Amongst those settlements either swept away or inconceivably damaged, were familiar Sheffield names: Bradfield, Little Matlock, Damflask, Owlerton, Rotherham, Kelham Island, and Neepsend. Places that persist today, in one way or another, and places seemingly better protected. This is not a story of any of those places in particular, but a larger, heterotopian

(gestalt enumeration  
tepid-teaching  
the systemic forgetfulness  
of being dry)

way to keep eyes weathered on the horizon.

Sheffield city centre floods frequently now. How long until

~ ~

The Great Last & Final Flood of Sheffield is idling over the Seven Hills. Gathering momentum. Steeling itself. Owls and Blades will drown and rust beneath such a torrent. Billiard balls will find a new home in the crustacean Crucible—colours and reds all hopelessly pocketed in one non-scoring corner. Peaks will not range but peek. Newly christened Children of the Coral. Journalists will not name the dead, their own obituaries already blood-inking the times.

Heritage means nothing  
on the Great Planet Ocean—  
Ignorance is blasé.

~|~

## II AGENT ORANGE

**A:** You cannot call it that.

**B:** You're early.

**A:** No.

**B:** Where are you?

**A:** In the waves; at the foot of a child's bed; in a jail cell in Utah; over the African continent in an EasyJet; buried in the fields of Cambodia; in the stomach of the Double Survivor; London, 1888; Stonewall, 1969. Everywhere. Everywhen.

**B:** Endings are the arrowheads

**A:** targeting the immutable;

**B:** slow-hunters spied

**A:** by the socketless.

**B:** No, where are you really?

**A:** On a beach.

**B:** A beach? Which?

**A:** Any. We are both coming for it. Unified annihilation in the smoke of you and the scythe of me. There are children. Their screams are the loudest. I am in the waves.

***Rush of leaves/drip of ocean.***

**C:** I feel its sting even now. Toxic drift.

**B:** You're here.

**C:** Of course.

**B:** I thought you might have skipped out on this bit.

**C:** I take no pleasure in it. My dress-train acidifies all that dares call its frothy folds home and my hair, once so seasoned and presupposed, is unpredictable and ashen. It's too early! What *is* the cost of progress if not the death of life?

**A:** These are not new feelings.

**C:** No. Keener, yes, but not new at all. I die every single second. I rebirth. I die. That is what I am. My *design*.

**A:** [All plots tend to move deathward.<sup>54</sup>]

**B:** They are of you. All this, all that I do, then, can never not be natural. You are my pretext.

**C:** Poppycock! They are mayflies making mass change for all. Selfish. You pass yourself on like a baton, lactic acid barely pumped before the next generation smashes all prior records. There will be no [ghost of ghosts<sup>55</sup>] to lament when all this is said and done.

**C:**

**C:** You are selective in your *forward motion*. The blind never perceive the [incremental and accretive<sup>56</sup>] until it's too late, until the [calamitous repercussions<sup>57</sup>] are backlit and flashing neon.

**B:**

**C:** It is the [experience of our generation ... that capitalism {and the world it takes with it} will not die a natural death<sup>58</sup>] but will slow-buy itself into oblivion.

**B:** Materialism is what keeps man from tearing themselves apart daily. Keeps them occupied.

**C:**

**A:**

**A:** Your wave has met them, Progress. Their skin is on fire. Their cities are sinking. Their [guilt in history ... has been complicated by<sup>59</sup>] you, leading them false-heartedly to me. I am with them now, shading their final actions.

**C:** As am I. I too am plagued with the knells. Only, I am attending them. Lending my jungle lungs to their final cries. Carbon-sinking last tears.

**B:** All things reach completion.

**C:** Whose?

**B:** You know what your problem is? Always looking back. Always before and prior and since. Industry negates you. Your honour to an Eden never realised is your undoing.

**C:** Your honour to self-realization is yours.

~/~

[The waves were roiling irregularly. Each time the waves broke on the beach, they reached farther and farther up the sand. Then a four-foot wave rose up ... {it} was heading right for them. Fast and quiet as a whisper. It was closer to ten feet tall now. Finally, the three of them turned and ran. The fist of water was faster.<sup>60</sup>]

~ ~

[The news on the hour, 14th June, one o'clock. Tina Murphy reporting. An unprecedented flood. London. Uninhabitable. A list of boroughs, like the shipping forecast, their names suddenly as perfect and tender as the names of children. Ours.<sup>61</sup>]

~ ~

City-water is different. It is not just the flaky liquid that drips from scaling faucets or that which combines into unsanitary fatbergs beneath sidewalks, but the [new ocean<sup>62</sup>] of red-light green-light, the tsunami of chassis. It is deluge by domesticity; fear of lateness; and capitalistic cannibalism [in great surges<sup>63</sup>].

[... the waves roll over the length and breadth of our cities, rising higher and higher, breaking in a kind of frenzy when the roar reaches its peak and then discharging across the stones and the asphalt even as the next onrush is being released from where it was held by the traffic lights. For some time now I have been convinced that it is out of this din that the life is being born which will come after us and spell our gradual destruction, just as we have been regularly destroying what was there long before us.<sup>64</sup>]

~ ~

[Not too many took notice of news that the rivers flowing through Greater Krungthep were rising. It was another wet season, and who should be alarmed by small pools that had begun to form at drainage gutters? Old memories of the flooded city had faded. It was simply raining hard, like it had always rained around this time of the year. Rain came in the midafternoon and once more at night, and the city woke up to wet, darkened sidewalks and damp air, but the sun would soon appear and steam the roads dry, as it had always done.

Except the city wouldn't be rid of the puddles. The puddles soon turned curbs into ankle deep streams, rushing toward any outlet or low ground. Some spilled across major intersections, where cars and motor scooters rode over one another's widening wakes, and traffic officers took to directing rush hour standing on borrowed chairs.<sup>65</sup>]

~ ~

heads and shoulders only. the rest  
buried in unseen city, heavy and  
wet. cars are

stationary transport, stepping stones,  
raft and respite. sit on their half-  
slung tops and

wait out the municipal tides. scry  
hard for our faces; we are all

turned and towed. undertow everyones

in prologue deluge.

~ ~

[Each once-highway holds a corpse,  
Each dead mouth holds open testimony  
To the sudden rising of the ever-present sea.<sup>66</sup>]

~ ~

Concrete will be the facade of the new world. Cheap, durable, easy. The coasts will be concreted balustrades, keeping out and keeping in. Beaches of old, of memory, will fade. New generations will have great spats with their parents and grandparents, will ask [the olds what it was like to go to a beach, what it felt like to lie on the sand all day, and what it was like to build a sandcastle and watch the water come in and see the sandcastle fight off the water and then succumb to it<sup>67</sup>]. Fissures will develop faster on these coldfronts; generational vicissitudes that all the mortar in the world won't be able to seal. The sea will wait and watch, weathering slow, weathering always. The concrete will last. Until it doesn't.

~|~

A temporally unreliable page, missing from all but one version of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. It can only be read under the light of a pollution-less sky:

## SOON CITIES • I

Devil's Acre is a composite city, a could-be civilization. You come across its shelved and tiered shores in no particular ocean, along no particular course, but always, always at the end of your journey. A concrete kingdom adrift and alone, it sinks a centimeter a day, and has no roads or pathways but winding canals and drooping rooftops. Traversing the flooded city is thus an art form, a specialised skill, a way of life.

I arrive at the docks at dusk. The sea is everywhere, browning under the sun like molten mahogany, and the city is cold, grey, vertical. The ground is submerged terracotta, the roofs of former "deadlurks" that have been reclaimed by the ocean. The whole of Devil's Acre is like this: a conglomerate of hastily built concrete on top of concrete to escape the rising water. It is a tombed city, I soon realise; a sinking tower of ego.

Inhabitants communicate in speedy discourse which relies upon as little syllable use as possible. Canalspeak, as it is known, is an adaptation to the ferocious tides and currents that the faintly amphibian gondoliers must withstand as they ferry fares through the labyrinthine Winding. They say "threadzig", "farswill", "howcur", where we would say "thread between", "a long way", "how did this occur".

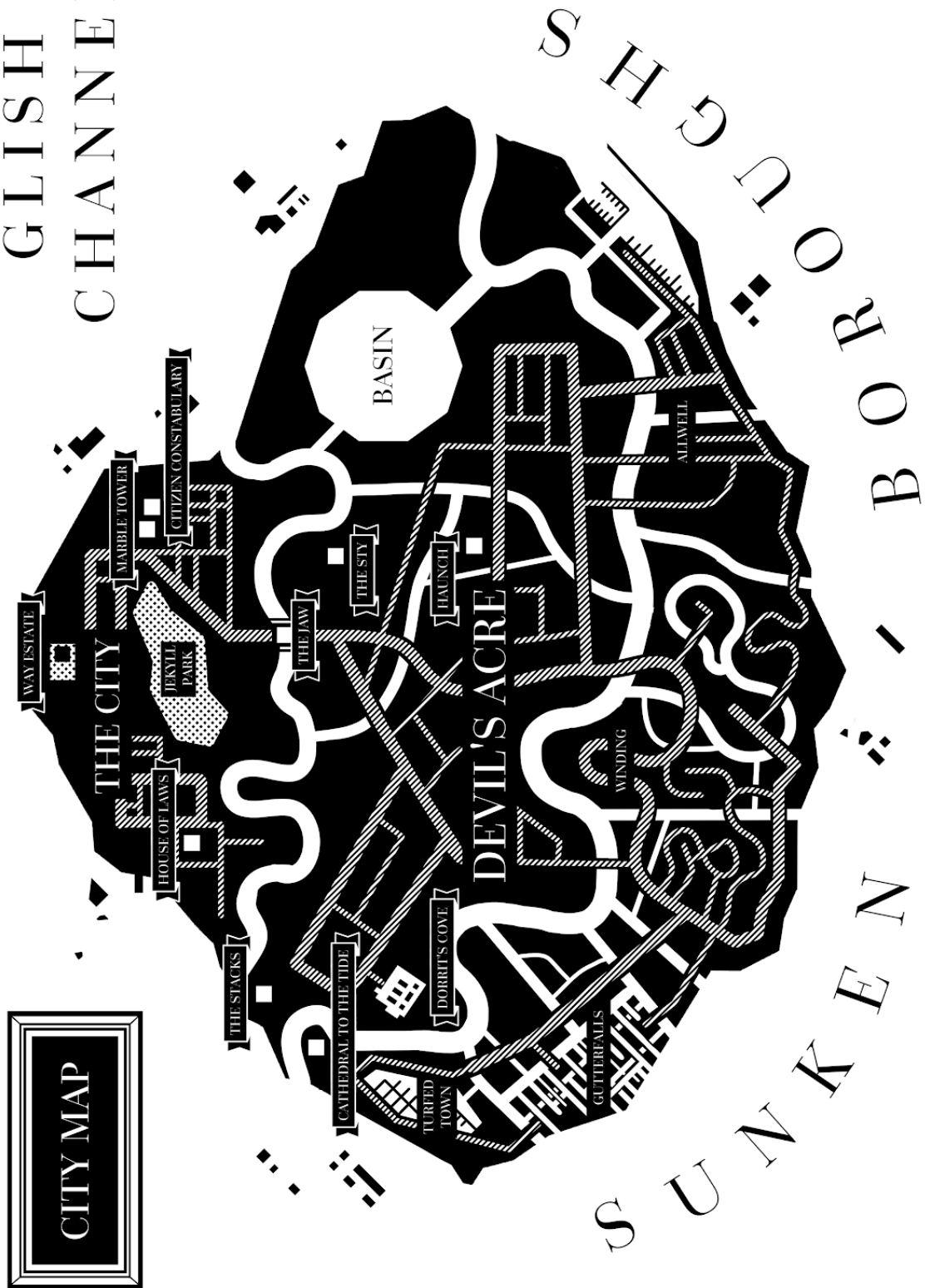
In the Basin, a marketplace of floats and skiffs, I am overjoyed to taste some of the last produce in the known world. Half a ling paid and I am biting deep into the soft skin of an irregular shaped peach. It is here I meet my first Turfed. She, like all those others selling themselves, roll up a sleeve, lift up a shirt, and remove a sock to retrieve and proffer the purchase from those spaces where the fruits and vegetables can now only grow.

You learn quickly that the people of Devil's Acre are fractious and self-hating. There are delineations on delineations. An affluent City man yesterday could become a Turfed tomorrow and immediately denigrated because of it. Newly diseased, his skin will break out in arable patches, where flower and fauna soon extraordinarily sprout. A thing of beauty, surely? No; here it is ugliness because greenery is a rarity, a symbol of what was lost, and the sign of the workforce. He will be paired with one of the dwindling tiger-dots, whose continued existence he must aid, facilitating in its collection and transfer of nectar and pollen, or he must face Soiling.

That is what they call capital punishment in this city when it pertains to a Turfed. If he cannot aid the New Green Effort then he is biological waste and stabbed dead and buried in Jekyll Park. His body, it is hoped, will continue budding even in breath's absence. I am taken here before I have knowledge of this barbarity and I rejoiced at the colours that even here at the end of all journeys unfurl themselves to the sunlight. There are peonies and crocuses, snowdrops and narcissuses, corncockle and thrift. A veritable rainbow caged in concrete.

You leave Devil's Acre the same way you arrived: confused, illuminated, aghast. Some of their words are unfamiliar—Gutterfalls, Dorrit's Cove, House of Laws—and yet a futural sadness is the charge that impregnates your sail. You leave without really having discovered it. Yet.

# GLISH CHANNEL



xvii

xvii A map of the twisted future of 'Devil's Acre' by Olly Hayes.



~/~

### III SINKING STAR

#### *Measureless murmurings.*

**Progress** (*to Death, pointing*): Look. Do you see what I see? Here. Now. They are singing. Soaring! It's really started.

*Nature*:

**Death**: An unmelodious tune.

*Nature*:

**Progress**: It was the orange one, wasn't it? You can tell me.

**Death**:

**Progress**: A loose puppet, that one. A bludgeon, however, can also paint. In its own way. How long?

**Death** (*to Nature*): Do you know Lotze? [In opposition to the readily accepted doctrine that the progress of humanity is ever onward and upward, more cautious reflection has been forced to make the discovery that the course of history takes the form of spirals –

**Progress**: some prefer to say epicycloids.<sup>68</sup>] And it's nearing its end.

*Nature*: No. This is bigger than just them. This is an entire world.

**Progress**: A human world. You hear it too, don't you? Fear. Self-protection. Everyone is an enemy when resources are finite.

**Death**:

**Progress**: Ah! There. Pyongyang has listened to my whispers. Shhh. Listen. The harmonics of guidance systems. The orange one's bark has finally produced a bite.

**Progress** (*to Nature*): Do you see it? Do you feel it? The End of Nature.

~/~

*[A world of dew,*

*And within every dewdrop*

## The Domsday Arkive

“What about diseases?” asks the female pig to her husband. They are out on deck, catching spray on fur increasingly scudded with their neighbour’s excrement.

Nancy, as the bossman’s child Ham has deigned to dub her, points a trotter at a passing pair of skunks who are sneezing themselves silly as a lumbering rhinoceros passes them on her morning walk. “Does he not know about that? Surely, he must understand that this gathering is endemic to the propagation of disease? We share a pen with chimpanzees, spider-monkeys, and pangolins, for Nature’s sake! Our immune systems have never had to contend with such, have never considered the ludicrous notion of us being in contact. And I have seen that chimpanzee boy scratching unseemly parts of himself until he’s red and raw, and I don’t want any of that, thank you.”

“What’s more,” she continues, to the growing weariness of her husband, “is that we—like most of them—are siblings! Does he not know about the importance of exogamy either? Think of the gene pool. We’ll lose something along the way, mark my words—maybe our ability to speak, maybe our freedom...” She stops, her eyes glassing over as she sees something out on the endless water. Maybe it’s the future. Her brother is half about to ask her if she is okay, when she snaps out of it, and says, rather mournfully, “Why did we come again?”

A night or two passes, and the world remains watery. The fish and mammals who have adopted the ocean thrive. Perhaps they have never sinned. A jaguar named Barrack, meanwhile, nibbles on the hindquarters of a lancelor, effectively extinguishing the species. Nobody ever hears about it and Noah never notices.

“I can’t do it when they’re watching. I just can’t.”

Nancy snorts. “Then you never will. Look around, there’s never not somebody watching.” She shuffles forward. “They won’t let us stop trying, you know. He comes in every day, checking off the bloated females on a scroll as long as himself three times over. We’re his industry, see: Extinction Prevention Corporation.”

“You’re my sister,” Victor, her brother-husband, laments. “It’s... it’s wrong.”

“Did you know Dad was seventeen when he had us?” Nancy responds, lowering herself amongst the damp hay. It hasn’t been changed since they arrived, is beyond soaked through. “Me neither. He was young, too young. It was why he was so hopeless at teaching you how to ram—he hadn’t even perfected it himself. We’re six, Victor. Six! We know nothing. Have nothing to pass on. Besides, the new world will be different and what little we do know will be entirely useless. Nature knows if there will even be trees.”

Ham is standing at the stern of the Ark. The unicorns are still following them, flapping empyrean wings against endless winds. They will tire soon, he knows, tire and fall. Ever since the flood came, they have been at their backs, following with the hope that his father will relent and let them board. Ham himself has inquired for their case, enamoured as he is by their bright beauty. “They are not Godly,” was all his father said on the matter, despite

their obvious near-angelic appearance. Ham had already learnt the costs of betraying his father and so could only watch as weariness took them slowly but certainly.

If they could have responded, the unicorns would have told Ham a story that their species' end precluded from appearing in all the big books—biblical, zoological, autobiographical. BEFORE EMZARA, these tales would have begun, THERE HAD BEEN ANOTHER; A SYLPH OF SIXTEEN AND SIXTEEN DAYS. Noah had courted her, as gentlemanly as ever, only their first kiss had been on the very same day he had fortuitously (god-intentionally) met his wife-to-be. It wasn't a salacious or hungry kiss but it was a kiss that ran against the script all the same. This sylph had been the daughter of a master-of-wing and thus spent all her hours in the forest, tending to the unicorns. It was here that Noah's first (redacted) had taken place, seen through the always-present hive-mind of the unicorns. Noah in this instance preferred extinction to revelation.

Ham's breath catches in his throat as the lead of the two unicorns starts to dip lower and lower. Before long, the unchanged shoes of each are scything the forty-foot wave-tips; soon, their flanks are submerged, and then, finally, their necks. As the water enters their mouths, each of the unicorns is not at all surprised at the irony of it all. Their brilliant white horns are the last to go, cutting tides and catching glints. Through Ham the world remembers.

Illegal and invisible cities arise in the Ark throughout its journey; kingdoms of calf and pup, petting- and extinction betting-zoos, divination stys, predation chambers and brothels besides. Each share walls of air and floors that change by the day, so that should the Lord Master himself hear of one, his chances of finding it were near as null.

"I wasn't going to tell you this, Victor, but I think I've met someone else. A bearded vulture from Aviary. Halcyon is his name. He has the most wonderful of stories. Did you know there's land ahoy? He's seen it, he said. Real, *unmoving* land, Victor. Imagine that. No more rat or rabbit setting off the sinuses. He says he'll take me."

Victor shakes off a dangling chimpanzee hand from a dozing overhead neighbour and nudges his snout the two centimetres that separate Nancy and himself; the butterflies—monarch and orange-tip and painted lady—that to and fro endlessly about the two horns on his head, he simply endures.

"Nancy," he begins, aiming for a level-tone but faltering at the first, "He couldn't even lift your trotter. He's having you on. Haven't you heard: Aviary is Noah's favourite. Useful lot in times as these. Land spies. They are the new world's vanguard. *We* are its old guard. Now, tell me, what is this really about? Are you saying you would want to leave all *this*?" He motions at their overcrowded pen and smiles. "What ever would the spider-monkeys say?" Some shift in his sister makes him stop short. "Nancy?"

"They took me in the night, Victor." Nancy is looking at him but she's not seeing him. "Shem and Ham and Noah." She starts to toe a clump of hay, kicking it in circle after circle. Victor waits patiently. "Someplace dark and close, and the oinks... the oinks were not yours, were smaller. And *they* didn't care how many eyes were watching." Nancy sobs and it's pained and powerful, like someone has stuck a hot poker in her side. Deandra, the dozing spider-monkey, whoops and growls in annoyance. "They were trying to cross-pollinate me, Victor!" Her voice settles at just above a whisper, but still cracks on every other word. "Haven't you noticed? They're running out of their grain and fruits. Vegetarianism is a dying fad in a closed-market."

Nancy takes a breath, and Victor, still interiorly reeling, sees something in his sty-mate that hurts him like no forced marriage or relocation ever can: a pain that can never be

unwrit, a pain irreparable. For the first time in his life, Victor feels the white-heat that his mother had evidenced whenever he and his siblings had dared stray too far from the sty. It starts low, like a dull drone, but before long it's all he can hear. All he can feel. He wants to do something, anything; his horns ache with the spectral want of impalement.

"There's a muskrat," Nancy says, stopping him dead with the bewilderment of the statement, "seventeen pens over who can see the future." Again, she raises a trotter to point. Victor follows her gesture but can only see a spotted, writhing wall of giraffe. "He said that the floods won't ever really end, that they'll just be staggered with never enough boats to accommodate us all. That there will be oh so many more Noahs who will attempt to force their desires, needs, and wants from us. The new world will be our grave, Victor, is what he says." She shuffles closer, until their snouts brush against one another; he smells her fear, or perhaps, his own. "I've been thinking," she says, her pupils now hard as quartz. "I don't care for the patrilineal-apocalyptic kinship that he foresees or the sex-for-meat future of our proposed offspring. I don't care for it at all. I don't want it. I don't."

On one unremarkably watery day, there is a single cloud in the sky, a collapsing cirrus, that resembles an arrow. The wind wipes it clean in a matter of minutes. Only Nancy is fortunate enough to see it, though she doesn't share the possibly God-given direction with anyone. It's a piggy payback of sorts, she tells herself, as she calls over Victor. A chance to fuck with Noah as he has seen fit to forcibly fuck her repeatedly.

"You were right about Halcyon," she says, smiling wanly at her brother. They are both out on deck, waiting on that clearing sea-breeze that they would have found it difficult to survive this long without. It's just after dawn, and a cock somewhere complains about a platypus stepping on his tail-feathers. "You were right about Halcyon," Nancy repeats, because it's easier than what comes next, gives her more time to put it off. "Would you, Victor, do me the honour of lending me your back? I think it's time we learnt whether giant pigs can fly."

Victor has seen the change in his sister come and go, and has been preparing for this, and quietly does as she asks, moving his bulk closer to the railing. He himself has visited Malkeith the Muskrat since their discussion and seen in his horror their fates-to-come; it isn't something he'd wish on his worst primates. There's a brief hug between the two of them and then the pitter-patter of a 600kg loved one clambering up his back; he doesn't feel it though, not one single pound, he doesn't feel anything. To him, she has always flown.

Halcyon is pruning himself by the bowsprit. The air is taut with the promise of a good, lengthy flight. He hears the Lord Master approach in the hawking, tooting, and hallooming of all the other gathered birds, and a giddy excitement builds in him. He doesn't turn round right away. The wind tugs at his feather-front, beckoning, and it's all he can do to not just jump and take to the skies without even first receiving his flight-orders. Instead, he counts the footfalls as they gather both in volume and proximity to him. It is a steadying routine he has long perfected for such times as these. When he does turn, his beak immediately drops as he sees that Noah isn't alone and he is to become like Primus—the raven before him—and supplanted by the next hotshot flier.

Noah barely acknowledges Halcyon as he strides towards the prow of the Ark, his new land-lieutenant held in his rising right hand. There is a whispered command and an explosion of pure white wings; Dennis the dove lifts off.

The splash resounds in Victor's mind for the next hour. He had planned on joining his sister, championing himself right off after her into the ever-corrugating surface beyond the Ark, but the white-heat had returned. And now, there was nobody to quell it. What's more, it is steadily being fanned by the all-encompassing downward pressure of being the Last of His Kind. It's a weight that makes all the bruises on his back redouble and smart. An Untitled Weight, he comes to think of it.

His plan builds as he walks the parts of the Ark he never had a reason to tread—reptile rooms, climbing walls, milking stalls. There are creatures that gather at this end of the Ark that cause him to quicken his pace (tarantulas and leopards) and others that slow him right down (cockatrices and polar bears). He wonders if any of them have sought out Malkeith and their futures, wonders if any of these creatures will become mere foodstuffs and beasts of burden as his kind would once have been.

He finds a place near the very back of Noah's floating zoo. It is a dark and cramped area, home to ballooning spider nests and industrious beehives. Victor backs up as far as the space will allow, his haunch stuffing into a rare and uninhabited alcove that even the woodlouse haven't quite got to yet. He means to afford himself as much a running start as he is able. His horns are big, not as big as Nancy's, sure, but big enough to gore and gouge anything silly enough to have attempted to bother him. He thinks it will work, this plan of his. It is a mercy, he reminds himself, for *all* of us.

He charges.

In the running at the side of the Ark, there is a moment in which Victor feels relief from the weight of his existence and hope in that that he will be seeing his sister again very, very soon. The room is small, but he makes good speed, colliding with wood about as well as he could have ever hoped for. But his father had never successfully taught him how and where to ram, how to put those two prodigious tusks to good use, so that when he rushes into the bulwark of the ship, he only succeeds in pinning himself to a five-foot-thick piece of Ark-skeleton rather than effectively disabling its progress.

The water, the plan, wouldn't come, and the Lord Master's own plan would continue. The world would go on, in man's fashion. The only silver-lining for this dismal portent being that Victor would not live to see it—no giant pigs would. That pesky Barrack the jaguar will follow his cries after sundown—cries that increasingly lose syllables and grow more and more into unintelligible grunts—and pounce and eat and, ultimately, survive the waters; only, that is, until much, much later, when man's eye, in a world unimaginable, would turn to Barracks' own great-great-great-great-great-great offsprings' glistening pelts and the warmth that one could provide between post-bath toes.

Dennis the dove is hailed as a hero when he returns to Noah's hand. He brings with him hope and the first tangible evidence that the waters are finally receding: a freshly plucked olive leaf. Noah inspects the leaf like one who pulls free a hair from a Caesar salad, turning his nose ever so slightly at what it betokes. Soon, his family gathers around him and each regards the leaf with similarly half-concealed disdain; and when God finally does speak, his words are as good as spoken to stone.

~/~

[Later that night it rained, washing the country away.]

A country both dead and living that was not, nor ever would be,  
my true home.<sup>70]</sup>

~ ~

[Maybe I'm  
writing the tide towards  
an equilibrium  
willing the world  
to find its balance

So that people  
remember  
that beyond  
the discussions  
numbers  
and statistics

there are faces  
all the way out here<sup>71]</sup>

~ ~

Deluge is not water.  
It is not biblical rebalancing or righteous anger.  
It is

a species' selfish wave  
propagating endlings  
ensuring interests  
a plastic bag at a time

Deluge is overpopulation;

intelligent apex provocateurs  
devouring what we cannot drown &  
whaling, wailing into the night.

~\~

#### IV NEW ENDS

**A:** I shouldn't say but there is another place. So much alike in weather and stratum,  
[trousers and jacket<sup>72]</sup>, cares and dislikes. Far, far from here. Another sun. I can see it now:  
[the same drama, the same setting, on the same narrow stage - a noisy {new}manity  
infatuated with its own grandeur<sup>73]</sup>. Another middling child scratching at the sky with

graphite fumblings. It is always the same: [eternity performs - imperturbable - the same routines<sup>74</sup>].

**C:** The poison of progress

**A:** is a malady two-pronged;

**C:** Betterment at the

**A:** expense of betterment.

~/~

*[Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says {but it} ... is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our scepter, that the triumph over enemy sovereigns has made us the heirs of their long undoing.<sup>75</sup>]*

~ ~

I went back to the bridge; it looks different. I spoke to my mother about the memory of the memory; it was almost complete. There are discrepancies, sure, but they are slim and, from what we gather is coming from a toddler's memory, miraculous to hold up in any light. The bridge is still there. Though changed, renewed, reskinned, its old name still rings true, despite a new-metal dermis:

### Skeleton Bridge.

A name that you can't get away from,  
a name in-built.  
Like Thalassaphobia,  
Like fear:  
It's in my bones.





It was Lidl she would bike to for our weekly shop, not Tesco; and it was over the bridge—a far more terrifying prospect back then, to be sure—rather than underneath. There were unfastened slats, my mother says—what made it skeletal—that would jerk and stutter, like lips over an uncertain word. A front wheel could easily get lost, but a frame, a body, would surely get tangled. Trapped. My mother, with a bike, a child, and a bridge to contend with, had had to “go left” or “go right” banking on solidity and hope. Trusting in the weight of old work.



We are both surprised I remembered any of it. At first, she scrunched her face up, and laughed at the possibility we had ever been out there, dangling over danger. Details jog her memory. We’d both needed to actually retrace our steps, however, to make a sketching a full-colour. The devil is in the detail, but fear is in fragments. Nameless and half-remembered, it persists. Always. As it should.





Ironically, the day we went to the bridge, now part of a nature-trail, it was flooded. It was almost as if the water was trying again to terrify me, remind me of its power, its nearness, its anger. I was taller and older, so maybe it thought volume and speed would level the field. Engorged as it was, the river (not lake) stopped us from going much farther beyond the bridge, wellies or not. I asked my mother (in my mind) what is a bridge when it is not a bridge? I answered my mother (in my mind), it was Nature striking back.

Over the years, this out-of-the way trail that had forever marked me has been more and more invaded by commercial and residential development. The effect is what we saw then: flood. Previously porous land had effectively been laminated over in great concrete swathes, so where the water would once and should still have seeped into soil, it now is able to run free, breaking banks elsewhere and rerouting. Our walk thus became a “casualty of capitalism”. (Yes, I do really talk like this.) In any case,



I felt like I had come full circle—  
Water can't be contained. Water is.

~|~

**V**  
**FUTUREWORLDS**

**C:**What do we do?

**A:** Hope.

**C:** How?

**A:**

**B:**

**C:**

*D R O U G H T*

*HEATWAVES x DESERTS x DAMS*

Global Warming is the accepted shadow of Climate Chaos. It works and worms around the mouths of mouthpieces, cauterizing a populace's concern. It is a mild convenience, a steaming bathtub that need only a minute's reprieve before cooling on its own accord. Warming, means soon, upcoming. By virtue of being a verb it applies a distance that needs to be met, and thus, in the minds of the mouth-breathing mouthpieces, a nonness to the now. Global Warming is the deaf delegated project of the futural;

[an ancient dirge  
all the more impressive  
for its resolute monotony<sup>76</sup>].

~ ~

Scale [is a fearsome thing. Scale is analogy. When understood correctly, scale expresses itself mostly in the bowels. See to the east there? See that red thread flaggelum? The hair on the lens, that mote in the vision, that teensy capillary is the suicidal region's dry vein, opened. That is the Grand Canyon, where the silty jade Colorado once ran.<sup>77</sup>]

**Palingenesis** is those few [that will be able to look upon the world with clearer eyes than those that preceded it<sup>78</sup>], those that [rediscover their kinship with other beings<sup>79</sup>] and be amenable to [transcend the isolation in which humanity was entrapped in the time of its derangement<sup>80</sup>]. The Gretas. The should-be us'.

~\~

## ESCHER HOUSE

### ATTENTION PEOPLE OF PLANET EARTH!

Asphodeus Lettington, PhwizarD, the infamous centrist hydro-scientologist who gave you super-[cheap water<sup>81</sup>]<sup>xviii</sup>, now gives you plentiful water©. That is, you know, the best kind. In a feat of daring and none too many months of planning, he has singlehandedly captured Baal, the slippery God of Rain, in a semi-detached house in Somerset. The drought is over. I repeat: THE. DROUGHT. IS. OVER!  
You may once again bathe at your leisure and wash your dishes with a running tap.

-

Please contact your nearest Waterhouse for an updated schedule of your weekly water deliveries. YES, I did say weekly.

-

The Asphodeus Initiative asks that any younglings below the age of 16, regardless of gender, ready themselves for a LIFE OF reHEALING in the revered position of Waterboy. They do it so you don't have to!

---

<sup>xviii</sup> The complete and utter [exhaustion of water frontiers, intensification of technologies of extraction and manufacture of water scarcity, combined with rising costs of appropriation] (Deckard, 2019).

Asphodeus sighs. The doorframes are swollen again and the bathmats are positively soaked. It's part and parcel, a roundabout side-effect of the multi-planed trap keeping the God of Rain in the basement, but he would have preferred to not have to spend the next day or days, depending on the foundation-reshuffle, in the bloody bathroom. "This is what I get," he bemoans aloud at his steamed reflection, "for saving everybody. Brilliant."

Sometime during the night, Baal calls out to him. In the pipes. "What's your doctorate in again, Jailor?"

"I'm not your—" Asphodeus stops, calms himself. "Astro-Slam Poetry with the Water Way. I can read you my thesis if you like? I keep one in every room." He rises from his bathtub bed, left arm reaching for the cabinet.

"No, no, no. I'm quite alright. Would I be correct in assuming you don't know what *pathetic fallacy* means, then?" No answer. "Jailor? Asphodeus? No, it's not an insult. It's a term. Literary. Magical."

Asphodeus jerks up. "Magical? I've not heard of it. I would've heard of it." He racks his brains, drawing intricate hieroglyphs on the mirror in the gathering condensation of the bathroom. *Should've sourced in the odd window or two.* "Are you having me on, Baal? I'm not in the mood for games."

"Muggy isn't it?" Baal laughs, the sound like thunderclaps. "Bottle up pure moisture and constantly churn it and that'll happen."

There's a rumble, like a distant horse-carriage struggling over a bump and ending the wrong way up because of it. More laughter?

"What was that?"

"I didn't hear anything. Now, back to the *pathetic fallacy*. Thoughts?"

Asphodeus clenches his jaw. Any other room in the house and he would have been able to ignore Baal's ramblings. He had installed a Borgesian Library of Babel in the downstairs lobby two doors from the kitchen, unlimited books to pour over with easy access to tea and cakes. Heaven. But, no, he was trapped here. In the bathroom. With only the backs of shampoo bottles to read. He rolls his eyes and mimes punching the tiles. "No," he finally answers, deflating. "None at all."

"Wonderful. A lesson, then. It implies the personification of the inanimate or the attributing of humanness to the nonhuman. So, a bleeding stone, an indifferent sunshine, a *jailed* rain-cloud in a *tiring* house." Baal lets the last linger for a moment before continuing on. "How long do you think it'll hold—this Escher House of yours? Surrealist stockades are fickle things, but they are things. And things don't heal. You cannot cage and play temporal looseness with water, Asphodeus, it doesn't work like that. It runs free—it has to. You'll see."

The house shifts, and Asphodeus jumps for joy. His bathroom prison yawns open its door and nine windows appear overhead. The bath becomes a chair becomes a bed becomes an iron maiden. Emphatically disinterested with tiled walls, which show no predilection to change, Asphodeus hastily makes for the hall—the only constant in the permanently transforming house—and winces at the aches and pains a few hours stuffed into a tub will do to a forty-four year old PhwizarD.

The house, Escher and Rubik both, groans and clatters in its changing, rains down plaster and unfurls tongues of linoleum. The flight of stairs Asphodeus climbs, drops two stories and coils in on itself like an alert cobra. The ceiling sinks and rises, dimples in its centre and births a crystal chandelier. French doors materialise on all four walls, clattering open and closed like saloon doors from some old John Wayne movie. Smiling, Asphodeus takes a moment.

This is the fruit of his irregular labours, the realization of two decades' work into semantic rhetoric and augur architecture. The price of continuance.

"What is it?" his husband, Derek, had asked a month ago when his mother's ancestral cottage had initiated its first spatial reconfiguration. There had been a tone to his question that had stung Asphodeus, a tone that said *This. After so long. This.*

"It's a cage." Asphodeus had answered, before correcting himself. "It's hope."

Derek frowned. "Who are you fooling into house arrest this time, Asphodeus?"

"I am going to put life everlasting inside there," Asphodeus had continued, ignoring the barb. "I am going to plumb in a god and water the world. This house, this extraordinary house, is going to be the answer to everything. An inexhaustible aquifer. Do you know how many people I am going to save? Millions. Billions."

"I don't like it. Looks like a warehouse. Change it back."

Asphodeus bristled. "I can't change it back."

"That's the problem isn't it?"

The sun had caught the top of a newly flattened roof as Derek had walked back inside, leaving Asphodeus alone to marvel at all his work. No matter, he had thought. Everyone has to make a sacrifice.

The house stopped its stirring.

The stairs are on his left now and uselessly leading up into the ceiling, but apart from that the structure is somewhat orderly. He makes for the cellar. Tries to—the door is gone. He ignores the seepage, the trickling and pooling puddles at every portal.

"I must commend you, Jailor. It really is quite the accomplishment." The voice again, travelling in pipes that no matter how they configure, always seem close enough to bring about gooseflesh on the back of Asphodeus' neck. "But you can't honestly think it is really going to work? You cannot prioritise the world's water to one location. Distribution is dissipation, and you've not the boypower to best it. I ask you again: Let me go. Do it now and I'll not seek revenge. I'll not think of you again. However, this is the last time I will offer such terms. After this, well, you have it coming."

"Your threats do not frighten me, Baal. You forget, I already have you. Already beat you. Besides, you were doing it wrong. Raining scarcely where you needed to and drowning places already plenteous."

"There are balances that must be upheld."

"Balance! Balance is a word banded about by those who excuse their actions from daring to do anything of worth. *I dare.*"

"And entitlement is a humanism. The world wasn't made in seven days and gifted to Adam, Asphodeus, it was made in billions and given to Entropy. You are destabilising a planetary fate before its time. There will be repercussions."

Asphodeus smiles. "A threat?"

"No. Cliche or not, it is a promise."

~/~

[The cost of water has gone up again. And I heard on the news today that more water peddlers are being killed. Peddlers sell water to squatters and the street poor - and to people who've managed to hold on to their homes, but not to pay their utility bills. Peddlers are being found with their throats cut and their money and their handtrucks stolen. Dad says

water now costs several times as much as gasoline. But, except for arsonists and the rich, most people have given up buying gasoline. No one I know uses a gas-powered car, truck, or cycle. Vehicles like that are rusting in driveways and being cannibalized for metal and plastic. It's a lot harder to give up water.<sup>82]</sup>

~ ~

[In 2010, 55,000 died in a Russian heat wave that killed 700 people in Moscow each day. In 2016, in the midst of a heat wave that baked the Middle East for several months, temperatures in Iraq broke 100 degrees Fahrenheit in May, 110 in June, and 120 in July, with temperatures dipping below 100, most days, only at night ... In 2018, the hottest temperature likely ever recorded in April was registered in southeast Pakistan. In India, a single day over 95 degrees Fahrenheit increases annual mortality rates by three-quarters of a percent; in 2016, a string of days topped 120 – in May. In Saudi Arabia, where summer temperatures often approach that mark, 700,000 barrels of oil are burned each day in the summer, mostly to power the nation's air conditioning.<sup>83]</sup>

~ ~

It's February 2019 in the UK and it feels like Australian Summer. Coats that should be bunched behind backs, draped over chairs and stuffed into bags are nowhere to be seen. The lecturer is late—apologetically so—and red-faced with the hurried effort of the uphill trip. She tries to soldier straight into the session—a session, believe it or not, concerning climate crisis and Trump's decision to back out of the Paris Climate Accord—but keeps having to stop and catch her breath. Her water-bottle becomes a well-worn prop. She doesn't need it though, the outside is now her biggest example. It's February in the city of Sheffield in the north of England and it's warm enough to go outside in just a T-shirt.

I come back to this thought in July 2021 and, impossibly—if we can even use this word anymore—there is more of the same weather weirdness. BBQ season stretches on without end. Even the most devout of back garden anti-sunscreeners tire and return to their somewhat less hot homes. A country so ill-feeling towards rain soon wishes for it. And when it comes, it comes slow and furtively, unsure of its place in the new world.

It will only get hotter.

~ ~

Between May and August 2021, Greece, Italy, and Russia all respectively felt the stranglehold of heat-death:

- [586 fires<sup>84]</sup> erupted all over Greece in one week, with [at least 300 homes ... estimated to have been destroyed in the blazes<sup>85]</sup>. The country's second largest island, Evia, was the most affected and [more than 2,600 people<sup>86]</sup> had to be evacuated on a [flotilla of boats<sup>87]</sup>.

- In Italy, firefighters had to deal with [44,442 wildfires ... since 15 June, compared with 26,158 last summer<sup>88</sup>]. The worst of which were situated [in the southern region of Calabria, where two people were reported to be dead.<sup>89</sup>]
- [According to Russia's forestry agency, this year's fires have ravaged more than 14m hectares, making it the second-worst fire season since the turn of the century.<sup>90</sup>]  
Moreover, the smoke from the wildfires in Siberia were the first on record to travel [more than 3,000km (1,800 miles) ... to reach the north pole<sup>91</sup>], and as attested by NASA satellite imagery, cover most of Russia in smoke.

These numbers will only get bigger and tally more often.

~ ~

["I'm really enjoying this natural disaster," her sister kept saying, but Lindy didn't think it was funny. Sometimes, on the sides of the hills, there were curious sheens of purple, and she couldn't tell whether they were bald spots or not. They filled her with anxiety.<sup>92</sup>]

~ ~

[No less than 24 percent of India's arable land is slowly turning into desert, and a 2 degree Celsius rise in global average temperature would reduce the country's food supply by a quarter.<sup>93</sup>]

[In China, which feeds more than 20 percent of the world's population off 7 percent of the world's arable land, desertification is already causing direct annual losses of \$65 billion.<sup>94</sup>]

[A quarter of the world's rivers already run dry before reaching the sea; many, if not most, of them are in Asia.<sup>95</sup>]

~ ~

Heat Death clusters close and  
[you can no more escape ...  
than you can shed your skin<sup>96</sup>]

[profuse sweating, nausea, headache<sup>97</sup>]  
—  
the body battles each,  
red as Martian soil

[eventually you ... stop sweating<sup>98</sup>]

Heat Death clusters close and

~ ~



**Pastoralism is dead.** Swilled down the drain. It is in neopastoral waters increasingly foetid and fake and forking into the endwaters of the [necropastoral<sup>99</sup>] we now flounder. Lift your chin up high, inhale whilst you still can. Fishing here is to hook one's self. Do you feel it? That sensation in your lip, in your gut, on the top of your skull? You are being held aloft, judged. Don't be afraid, you will swim again. You're not finished. There are items yet to be made in India, idle idols to police your bookshelves. The captain of this *Titanic* isn't done with you yet. Jump aboard blissful oblivion, sing along to the mermaid's tune of next-day delivery, off-road capabilities, medium rare. Sail bleached beds and hashtag the stilled fish, whose scales crack, glint and dissolve in the Mad Sun. The romance you seek is gone. Old Man River is passing. Going. Nearly away. [The dead meet the living or the dead meet the more-or-less-than-dead ... incompletely delivering impossible contacts, inefficiently flooding, dumping, jamming, breaking out, collapsing, gesturing, speeding up, distending, suspending, petering out.<sup>100</sup>] Click, scroll, screenshot before it vanishes. Refresh and refresh.  
**Necropastoralism is buffering.**

And we are drinking it dry.

~ ~

[Water, is taught by thirst.<sup>101</sup>  
Responsibility—by hurt.  
Change—[by throe<sup>102</sup>].

Water, that cleaver of landscape and sky, that central *thing* that contributes to all life on the planet, is, for all intents and purposes, dying. Or, rather, its ability to just *be* is. Now it is commodity, resource, a monthly bill. Now it is a statistic and not a stanza.

Cheap Water, extreme water, water shock, and digital water are, unlike the very things they encompass, springing up more and more in the discourse of today. Plenty are the words that describe exhaustion. Through lack will the next generations be defined and deprived.

~ ~

[Deep “fossil” aquifers, which contain ancient water locked in the earth by geological transformations millions of years old, cannot recharge: once their water is exhausted, it is gone. “Shallow” aquifers can recharge from surface water and rain, but if drained past their refill rate, these too are easily exhausted. Surface water in lakes, rivers and reservoirs is dwindling. If the hydrological cycle of evaporation, condensation, precipitation and transpiration is disrupted – by deforestation and desertification; declining melt-fed water systems due to changes in the melt-rate of glaciers and icepacks; soil degradation; saltwater intrusion in lowland coastal areas; and increased climate volatility and variability of water – then rainfall patterns can be delayed or permanently interrupted.

Water is “renewable” only when the closed-circles of hydrological cycles remain complete.<sup>103</sup>

~ ~



xix 104

~ ~

[Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water  
If there were water we should stop and drink  
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand  
If there were only water amongst the rock<sup>105</sup>]

~ ~

[It is this apparent geology, this bare rock, that makes newcomers read the desert as a dead or barren landscape, though if you spend more time in it, you may come to see the earth itself lives, slowly and grandly, in the metamorphoses of geology.<sup>106</sup>]

~ ~

We can grasp deserts as natural wildernesses—beautiful, confounding, teeming with life that we are lucky to exist alongside—or as barren wastelands our anthropogenic actions are forcing upon the world. We can grasp them as [ecolog{ies} sometimes rich in life and surprisingly fragile, as an idea of geographical extremity or alterity, as a sacred or accursed site, as a metaphor for nullity, as a subjective or existential terrain, {or} as an object of sheer aesthetic exultation<sup>107</sup>].

There are two types of desert: **OLD** and Natural and **new** and ours.

~ ~

[Our deserts were of several kinds, but they had one thing in common: nothing grew there. Some were made of cement, some were made of various poisons, some of baked earth. We made these deserts from the desire for more money and from despair at the lack of it.

---

<sup>xix</sup> Europe After the Rain II, Max Ernst, 1940-42.

Wars, plagues and famines visited us, but we did not stop in our industrious creation of deserts. At last all wells were poisoned, all rivers ran with filth, all seas were dead; there was no land left to grow food.

Some of our wise men turned to contemplation of deserts. A stone in the sand in the setting sun could be very beautiful, they said. Deserts were tidy, because there were no weeds in them, nothing that crawled. Stay in the desert long enough, and you could apprehend the absolute. The number zero was holy.<sup>108]</sup>

~ ~

[Time had gotten woozy under them<sup>109]</sup>, the edges of yesterday burnt crisp under an unforgiving glare. There had been a boy and a girl and a question and then a look shared but no action taken. The road was long and the way farther and their water low. The boy and girl, mere shadows dissipating beneath the sun, were probably dead now. Rear-view mirages.

The car juddered, stopped. Man and machine overheated. They took to arguing. Refuge was at least fifty miles away. Doable but damaging. The devil-winds crested these dunes, winged Santa Anas with desiccating breaths. Their water was all used up. They are the boy and girl now.

~\~

## M i l i t i a M a n

"I tell ya," Mack finishes clearing his throat and lifting a hand. "Was *falling* from the sky. Like of old. It hit my skin like pellets."

He looks over in my direction, daring me to communicate resistance or disbelief, but I don't utter a word. Karchek claps him on the back, nodding; Aiai takes a swig from her bottle, closing her eyes to savour the taste; Yuna looks away. Eventually, I just smile and note how, hell, I would have liked to have been there to see that. Truthfully, I know a lie when I hear it—the way it grasps too fantastically for reality. I hold my own counsel; I'm too tired for conflict.

Mack nods to himself, satisfied. "Who's next?"

Yuna shuffles but makes no attempt to take her turn to spin her words, despite the soon-scars that now adorn her cheek. Some stories are difficult to voice, harder still to share. She catches me looking and I make sure to look away first—I am in the wrong.

"I met a man out in the heart of the Mojave..." I begin, teasing out the words, because I have to, because it's how we got our place beside the fire in the first place.

*A Knight of the Vegas Militia, by the look of him. He sat astride a colt the colour of coal, his eye on the dune horizon; a watcher on the hill. The Scorch was behind him, silhouetting his tattered cloak and the peak of his helm. He had seen me a half hour back, he would later tell me, and he had been waiting, watching.*

*Well, the wind blew me right up to him. I couldn't run now, could I? He had the high ground, a horse, an AK-47. He was Militia. Right then, he may as well have been God, too.*

*"Where do your steps take you?" he asked, his voice crisp and cutting. The automatic was pointed at my chest lazily, but none too uselessly. A flick of a finger and I would be gone. It's hard to speak when you know you're a spasm away from death.*

*He repeated the question a little louder, a little more threateningly before the words came. I didn't pretend to come up with anything fancy or wordsmith my way out of the situation. I just said I was following the river.*

*"The river's dead," he answered, peering a little closer at my face. "You too if you shadow it."*

*I never wanted to take a sip of my bottle more in my life. His eyes didn't just survey and scan but pierce and plunder. He knew a truth—even a damn arse stupid one—when he saw it.*

*"Looking for the source," I answer. That's what we do, right? Track the desiccated beds and try to walk and will the water back into them. Try to get a leg up. Drink. I continued to fill the silence and come unstuck just like he wanted me to. "Maybe it's still wet. Maybe there's just one busted pipe that could heal this dead. Maybe I can do that and make a stack off of it, you know?"*

*One side of his mouth lifted up at this—the kinda half grin that's a second or two away from a shake of the head and a country laugh. Pity was what was in such a smile. Pity for the broken and stupid.*

*He took a scan of the horizon again—a long look that encompassed minutes—and then smacked his lips. "Even so," he said, his voice shedding a little of its edge, "I cannot let you on."*

*He pulled back his cloak with his free hand. Damned if he weren't a Knight-Marshal! The star took up the rays of the Scorch and near blinded me. He smiled at that, his rigid posture easing a little at my weak legs. The muzzle of the AK dropped blissfully lower. "You'll need to turn back now. Kick up dust."*

*"It's a long way back." I had walked a week at least, and the prospect of backtracking was an unwelcome one.*

*"So it is."*

*I took a risk then and I reckon I'll never do such again. I looked left and right of him, spying the four corners. "There some kinda trouble, Marshal?"*

*Suddenly all interested in me again, he nudged his colt closer. I never liked the smell of horses. This one reeked of the long ride. "These're troubling times. What's your hancock, riverman?"*

*"Etrus. Etrus Linbar." Like I said, he wasn't a man to lie to.*

*"Well, Mistah Linbar," he said, coming to a stop right in front of me. And I mean right in front of me. I was near swallowing the colt's hot breath. "I'm trailing a slow-kill, you see."*

“What in the hell is a slow-killer?” Mack asks, unafraid to kill any story that is not his own dead in its tracks. We take no offence at his inconsiderateness; Mack is six foot four and close to 260lbs. We appease. Yuna takes this as a sign to go and relieve herself.

“As far as I understand it, and I don’t, it’s a someone who kills by not doing it outright.”

“Thanks for clearing that up,” Aiai says, rolling her eyes.

I give her a smile. “I guess it’s like if you steal a Steady’s foodstores or upjack a wanderer’s vehicle or—”

“Take somebody’s water.” Karchek takes a sip of his own meagre supply to add emphasis.

“Yeah, exactly. You take their chance away from them. Slow-kill. Anyway...”

*He asked me a lotta questions then. The Where Were You and Why This Moments. I let him take me down memory lane, telling him watered-down histories of my clan. I never had a desert interrogation before and can’t say I want another. He wanted to know what makes a man a riverman, what drives us to walk out here out of choice.*

*“It’s not choice,” I said, accepting a gulp of some weak arse whisky from his flask. Alcohol in the sun’s never good, I know, but neither was putting pineapple on pizza and we did that plenty. “I’d take sitting at home over this any week of the month. But, you know, you gotta have a home first.” I made a meal out of sighing. Like, really, but he wasn’t the sort to let such theatrics sway him.*

*The Marshal smile-laughed at this, and then let the wind take over then for a moment. “Say there is drink out here, then what? You’ve no means of saddling it away. It’s lose-lose.”*

*My turn to laugh. “I drink it. Drink it silly. I always wanted to die a one-percenter.”*

*I lost him for a bit after that to the dunes. Back to his searching. I took the time to appraise him for a change. He was in his fifth decade and tailing off fast. The scrub on his jaw was grey-bristle and proud, like cacti needles. The red-and-white slash on his armour told the world what he was: Vegas Militia, uppermost rank. Desert-King. What comes out of those thin lips are law.*

*All of a sudden he turned towards me, catching me unawares.*

*“What you like about Arl Point?”*

*“Arl what?”*

*“Point. Like this.” He prodded my chest with the muzzle of the AK.*

*“Point. You never been?”*

*Like I said before, it’s hard to talk a spasm away from death. This time, though, I knew I didn’t have much of an alternative. “I don’t know it, no.”*

*He didn’t respond straightaway. Instead, he watched my face like he watched those dunes before. “Don’t know it, is that right?” He chewed at the air, as if tasting for truth. And then as quick as you like the moment passed. “Sure, I believe you.” He turned his colt around and started off on a gentle trot. Westwards. “Thing is,” he rattled off over his shoulder, “There’s a slow-kill on these sands and you’re the only*

*upright I've spied all morn. So, you either did it or you need safeguarding, you ken? Forget the river, you're shadowing me now."*

*I didn't move at first. I didn't understand what was happening. But I sure moved quick when I saw him swivel in his saddle and shake his automatic in my direction. The meaning was clear, and, hell, so too was the shooting range if I tried to make a run for it.*

We take a break here to take in our feeds, slight though they are. Mack uses the lull in my story to again regale us with a brief snippet from his waterdream. A few of us share a glance when he butchers the word Niagara.

"How long ago was this?" Mack gets Aiai to ask me after he is done. "Should we be scanning shoulders for this *Marshal*?"

Mack stops slurping from his tin of out-of-date baked beans long enough to give me a hard stare. "I don't want no dry-trek with a militiaman."

"Week," I answer. "Give or take."

Mack grunts at this, somewhat satisfied and returns to his beans.

Yuna smiles. "Well, he didn't cage you, anyway. So, there's that."

I smile back, careful to avoid looking at her wounds. "Walked me ragged is all."

Aiai, speaking for herself now, asks me about the horse. It's a good question—horses, and coal-coloured colts no less—are as rare as rivers in the present. They became feeds first when the bovine ran out. We used to get angry about that, complain when our lasagnes tasted a little foal. Now we couldn't give a shit.

"Healthy," I answer her. "In good keep. Vegas got a lot more secrets than we thought. I doubt it's the only one."

"That tells us something," Karchek chimes in, getting to his feet. The oldest here, he pisses by the hour. "Horse can go three to six days sans water. Camp must be nearby."

Yuna and I raise an eyebrow. "Something we don't know?"

He shrugs and unbuckles. "Another life, brother."

*We walked long enough for the mind to wander. We didn't speak. Just, in my case, put foot in front of foot until finally some kinda impermanence broke the horizon. A settlement of some sort—ranch maybe—steadily sinking into the sand.*

*Traces of life still clung on—a half-slung stable, rusted metalstuff I took to being bits of vehicle, and, dominating it all, the truncated end of an old water pipe. Big for such a small place. Anyhow, someone else must have thought so too. I've seen less dents on Texas plates. Whatever happened, it had been bled dry. I guessed this was the place hit by the so-called slow-kill. Arlo Point.*

*The Marshal tied up his colt to a stubborn stretch of fence and, I kid you not, started to groom the damn thing. "Feeds into a private aquifer," he explained without turning. His voice had taken on a little more of that edge I had heard upon our first meeting; I didn't think it was just the dry air. "Enough drink to keep a family going a decade or so without any struggles. Land struggles that is." And with that, he returned to tending to his horse.*

*I looked left and then right. Hell, it could have happened last night or last year. The desert is canny like that.*

*“How long ago?” I waited for a reply, but he offered nothing. Instead, I took to approaching the stable. It was little more than corrugated sheets and metal rods haphazardly poking through the dunes. If there had been cattle of any kind they had either long fled or were long dead.*

*You know, I still find it hard to believe people try to carry on out here after everything that was happening all over, and seeing all that, well, it proved my fears. Talk about courting daisies. What we do is solitary—no place for family.*

*“Wrong one,” the Marshal said suddenly, pointing. “If you’re looking for salvation, you’ll find it there.”*

*It was like a door right into the heart of a dune. Imagine a ridge had opened wide and, right there, caught in its throat, a door. Like a hobbit house in the desert. It’s funny, I thought, how Nature curates.*

*The inside was scant and messy, but you could tell it was a home and not a workplace. Portraits, the glass fronts spiderwebbed, hung from the walls and a table with chairs enough for four sat empty and waiting. What was left of pots and pans littered the floor, the fragments sharp and clattering underfoot. An old, ragged, and upside-down doll stared one-eyedly from the far corner. Sand filmed everything.*

*The Marshal’s hand fell on my shoulder then and I nearly left my skin. “Keep going,” he said. “Really drink it in.”*

Yuna slips off out of earshot. She’s good at disappearing into the background, learned it the hard way. Aiai is dozing, her head half-resting on Mack’s shoulder. They’re closer than he makes out. Karchek has moved away from our story circle, taken to fargazing at that old life of his in the pages of a diary. I let the story hang in the air, seeing if anyone cares none if I kill it there. Thirsty work yarn-spinning. Thirstier still when you’re drawing it out.

Above us something fantastic flits across the sky. The first comet I ever saw. Nobody else notices. Around us, the dunes settle in for the night, whispering their sullen sandstories. The wind, as always, fails to turn up.

“What next?” Mack asks from across the fire, playing disinterested about as well as a kid eyeing a chocolate bar. “He just let you go?”

The fire between us makes a shadow-theatre of his half-turned face. Comedy? Tragedy? Romance? All three?

I fetch his eyes and hold them true.

The air, if possible, gets a little drier.

“Nope. He did not.”

What happens next happens all sudden, like when a scream kills silence dead. We draw: him for his 9mm and me for my, well, nothing—I’m unarmed. I feign a gunpull all the same and it just about does its job. Unsettles. Makes Mack shift a little in anticipation of my bullet. Does nothing to his though, and I feel it bury deep.

Pain arrives hard and fast. Turns out Mack’s sharper than I thought and had been sitting on a loaded weapon for the last half hour. My blood stains the sand, hitting the ground moments before I follow suit.

Aiai starts awake but before she can even open her mouth, Mack body-shoves her my way. "Check him."

Aiai isn't gentle as she pats me down for a shooter. "He's clean."

I choke up some red. "You... you already ch-checked, remember?" That was how I had made it this far. Maybe playing a regular was a mistake, it certainly feels like it now with my insides gushing out, but method can be found in madness, and it's always best to smoke out and dumbfound a hive rather than rushing in AK-cocked.

"Cute story," Mack says, coming to stand over me. Levelling the mouth of his pistol at my face, he smiles for the first time. Close to shivers as I've ever been; man really is a giant. "Playing for time or just dumb playing? Which was it?"

"Little of both. Wanted to...wanted to see how smart you are." I feel myself flowing out, warm and wet. I staunch as best as I can. The ground around me is as wet as it has ever been. And thirsty for more.

Mack guffaws like an old 'toon villain. "Smarter than you by the looks of it. What was the plan? Talk us to sleep and take us all in with nothing but your paws? Fatal if you ask me."

"Can I...can I finish the story, Mack?"

Aiai tells him to take the shot. Karchek shrugs—his not been all there since I arrived. Yuna isn't here at all.

"I already know the ending."

He says that for effect, but I see he wants it. Ego will do that. Anyhow, plays right into my hand. I clear my throat and finish up: "The Knight-Marshal knelt down to the floor and put a palm on the slats. 'It's OK,' he said, meeting the eye in the crack. 'You can come on out now, Yuna.'"

Automatic fire. Enough to bleed eardrums. Mack takes five to the gut and falls; Karchek makes it so far as to lift up a stubby .32 and fire blindly before his head goes; Aiai delays the inevitable by diving behind the group's stolen water-stores. It goes about as well as I hoped. Like I said, Yuna knows how to fade into the background, even if she isn't the best of shots.

"Stay down, Aiai." I say as best as I can. "Lift up arms and we'll take you too. Stay down and we'll just take you unconscious and not from this world. It's over. That goes for any of you still inflating lungs. It's done."

I take a breath and wait. This was the madness to my method—getting close, getting truth—and then acting upon it. Doing just enough to fool a posse into thinking I was unthreatening, a fellow riverman tracking drink. Doing enough to let their eyes and ears grow lazy as bit-by-bit Yuna wandered, bringing our stuff closer and closer. Doing enough to buy time for the calvary to come. Literally. We'd tried the other way, the direct way, with some other mob and, well, that was how Yuna got her face all messed up. I wasn't risking that again.

Ahead of me I spy movement. Slight but serious. Silly. When you've been doing this as long as I have you know when to trust your gut. Throwing everything I have into the action, I roll left just as dust kicks up where I had been laying. The pain is indescribable. Up on her feet again and holding her own 9mm in two hands, Aiai fires twice more my way before Yuna, riding headlong into the fray on my Casey, brings her down with another storm of fire. I always loved the sound of a colt in full gallop.

"You good?" She yells without knowing it—the gunfire having made her ears ring. "You alive, Marshal?"

My first reply is a mouthful of blood. My second: "Close to it. Keep that shooter handy. People are hardy. They have a knack for hanging on."



I take a moment, imagining what she must look like wearing my star, what these here slow-killas must have thought as Yuna rode on in, death-dealing them all like clay pigeons in the blue.

“Mack? Your lungs still working?” Nothing. I listen to the sound of Casey’s heavy breathing and count to ten. I suspect it may be the last time I hear it. “You asked me what a slow-kill was a while back. Thing is, the biggest slow-kill is the desert. Nobody else comes close. You range in it without the right supplies you gonna die, but you’re gonna die slow. Painful.” I wave a hand approximately in the right direction—things are dimming a little at the edge now and approximations are all I’ve got. “Go on over, Yuna. Let him see. She look familiar, Mack? That Niagara of yours that was her folks’ water. You know, those two Mormonists you left to the Scorch a fortnight back? Yuna was with me when I found them. I told her... I told her that I don’t let this fly in my stretch, and that I’d make it right. That’s what I do, you know. She said, no. That’s fair, right? Family’s family. I said, let me let you sort it. She said, yes.” My breath starts to catch, rattle somewhere inside. I don’t care. This is what I was made for; my word is law. I take a long, heart-stabbing breath.

“For unlawful slow-killing, I, Knight-Marshal Etrus Linbar of the Vegas Militia, judge you be lawfully culled.”

Distantly, like from the wrong end of a well, I see Yuna shoulder and ready the AK. I imagine her eyes are hard, like chipped ice, and then I fall back and scan for comets in the encroaching black. The sky sings fire.

~/~

[Thanks to the centrifugal pump, places like Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas had thrown off the garments of fertility for a century, pretending to greenery and growth as they mined glacial water from ten-thousand-year-old aquifers. They’d played dress-up-in-green and pretended it could last forever. They’d pumped up the Ice Age and spread it across the land, and for a while they’d turned their dry lands lush. Cotton, wheat, corn, soybeans - vast green acreages, all because someone got a pump going. Those places had dreamed of being different from what they were. They’d had aspirations. And then the water ran out, and they fell back, realizing too late their prosperity was borrowed, and there would be no more coming.<sup>110</sup>]

~ ~

Zombie pipes rise and fall,  
Hydra-headed, watering nothing;  
Infrastructural dead-ends  
Culminating citydom.

[watch the day blow through the landscape<sup>111</sup>]  
Impediment-less, easy—there are no  
Straws for the eolian.

Liquid promises evaporate  
Under forever suns,  
The further you stray

From the concrete hearth.

Hatcheries arise in the desert,  
Tarpaulin-topped tanks to  
The victims of expansion.

[Humans are a species, too<sup>112</sup>],  
We scream. Forgetting it was  
We who first created the delineation,  
The damage, the dams.

Canyons yawn in kilometres,  
Deep-time wounded. Faraway.  
Humanity is a nightmare, soon shaken.

[Our stone selves roll on different tracks,  
unmatchably cracked. We cling. Resist.  
Shape to our ends whatever is.  
Not this<sup>113</sup>]  
Time.

~ ~

[Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.<sup>114</sup>]

~ ~

[It seems we have a knack of turning everything we touch into sand and dust.<sup>115</sup>]

~ ~

dryads are not the spirits of cacti  
but the anhydrous carrion  
of the everywhere beige

their breaths are devil winds  
atemporal aches  
of the bottomless dry

once desert-chained,  
they now roam  
planetwide pathways

haunting lake and brook  
towelling sea and river

gluttons to a terra(*de*)forming greed

dryads are not the spirits of cacti  
there are no cacti

~ ~

[I don't like sand. It's coarse and rough<sup>116</sup>], a perennial pariah of the forthcoming. It's in my eyes, my skies, my lies. An inevitable condemnation spilling a granule at a time. Prolepsis portents. No hope, your expression says. No chance to make it work. An island we must swim, an island encompassed in plenty, in a mind parched of hope is an impossibility. Yet water finds a way. Your adolescence is your weight on sand, drying out in lake countries; mine is the weight *of* sand. Desert destiny. Moisture is your promise, your restrained mastery. Dry and wet are the steady gulfs that separate us. Bind us. Condemn us.

I am the  
dry/dearth  
insatiable  
and even beloved wells  
are desiccated in the greed  
of my coming.

~ ~

[If I were called in  
To construct a religion  
I should make use of water.

Going to church  
Would entail a fording  
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ  
Images of sousing,  
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east  
A glass of water  
Where any-angled light  
Would congregate endlessly.<sup>117</sup>]

~)~

## Dowserlore

### 1

It's not a bullet and I'm not lined up to die amongst the rabble, but my end is so much like what Vonnegut, what Borges, once envisioned for their characters at the moment of death. A desalination of duration, an unstuckness of time. For me, however, it is dehydration, sunstroke, heat death; an individual demise at the hands of guilt and not the release of one lone triggerman as befell Billy Pilgrim<sup>xx</sup> and Jaromir Hladík<sup>xxi</sup>. There are no lasers and I have no pressing drama to pen, it's just the desert and I.

It's not oases people see near the end—that's just the sweat dripping into your eyes and magnifying fantastic under prolonged duress. Whole humid forests exist in said droplets, shading ovoid ponds and tiered waterfalls, but that's not what you see at all. It's the real water you see—the faraway water that used to be so plenteous elsewhere but remains hopelessly out of reach. The faucets you take for granted and the bottles, oh so many bottles.

### 2

Torridity turns time.

### 3

The dowser can be found at the edge of camp, they say. You won't be able to miss her. She casts a shadow, leaves an impression, stands out, catches the breath.

I find her at noon, sitting cross-legged beside a rusted Ford. A crowd echoes her movements a respectful distance away. She's slight, like desert-grass, but has *presence* like a Joshua Tree. "Mormons brought them," she says by way of hello as I come close, inclining her head to one such tree.

She speaks with a Texan twang but so high it's taxing to believe she's older than sixteen. Sun-scarred, burnt, and doused in freckles, she's every bit the Desert Delilah the rags claim her to be. Just so much younger.

### 4

I play the game. Hands out like so

palms out

fingers to future

web slits over dune

back and forth

day to night to day

---

<sup>xx</sup> See *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 1969.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ditto 'The Secret Miracle', 1943.

Again and again. I have to.

5

Water is a great divider.

Delilah has been shot.

It was me. (No, really.)

The desert shows me this in sweat, sun, and strokes, cackling in its cicada way, as the horizon renews itself. It will happen tomorrow. It has already happened.

I see that [everything was a little better in retreat ... the bad omens good ones, the impossible possible, the situation improving rather than going straight to shit<sup>118</sup>]. Delilah smiles at me. My water supply ran out six hours ago. The faraway water comes closer with every step.

Dowsers die.

6

Delilah isn't from Texas.

She's from the Pine Tree State.

The accent is the least of her lies.

The camp has folded.

7

"You're just gonna fly out there and walk right up to her?"

"You know how fucking crazy that sounds?"

"You won't get within fifty yards of her."

"Don't be stupid. Have you seen the news? There's hundreds now."

"Missiah, really?"

"Of course not."

"No."

"Are you fucking serious?"

"I'm hanging up."

"No, I'd rather not, thanks."

"Night!"

8

Absence is a word that doesn't really compute until it empties you whole.

"How do you... how did it happen?"

Delilah looks away, looks down at herself. It's a movement that is hers alone at this hour. The others will come soon, parroting her actions like it was somatic scripture, but for now it's just her. Sunrises are always like this. Silent but for me.

"Have you always been able to..."

I never saw her drink.

Not a sip.

Into the dunes she would tirelessly tread and dowse and deliver, but never drink. Nor sweat.  
Nor cry.

Absence is a different kind of abundance.

9

The gunshot is as loud as my determination.

Her blood runs clear. The caravan fills with childhood stench. Salt and sand. Her body runs clear, runs away. Her body sates the sand. Nothing remains.

I step to the lip of the sand-sea, a pack of rabid dogs at my heels. My life in the hands of the sun, I run.

10

It's an old art reading the language of landscape. Like the changing topography, the dialects of place and space change over the years. The one constant in this sea of shifting discourse is water. There is nothing of the polyglot in fresh- and salt-water. Only Life. A Dowser, each an underwit of such totalism, knows this. But dowsers do not exist. Not really. What you see on TV and in the movies are the conglomerated whispers of half a world's wonderings. Nobody can *talk* water. Machines can drill into it, sucker it up, scan it from whole planets away, but people can't magick it up with a wave of their hands or a divining rod of crossing sticks. Those same sticks move only to *your* movements. There is no buried secret aquifer. You are curating hope in shakes, breaths, and missteps. What about So-and-So? I hear you ask. Well, the US Geological Survey has an answer: [The natural explanation of 'successful' water dowsing is that in many areas underground water is so prevalent close to the land surface that it would be hard to drill a well and not find water. In a region of adequate rainfall and favorable geology, it is difficult not to drill and find water!<sup>119</sup>] Dowsers are malicious magnates. Playing at poverty to lure in messianism. The only thing they alight upon and drain from this world is the zeroes from your Bitcoin account. I HATE THEM. They promise you a vein, a slice of the river, a gulp of the sea. Watch them deliver none of it. Sunspots and leathery skin is all you have to show for their promises. Dehydration and destitution. They are the mediums of the ravaged environment, tapping into defunct basins, dripping liquid lies until you're spent, spent, spent. They will entrance you with their Calling, their equable society of sheep, the promise of returning to the land. Watch them. They swindle in sweat.

**Dowsers don't exist.** Treading shin-high sand, I know this to be true, believe it so hard it hurts. But something else might. *Clear blood. Transparent. Salty. Clean. Fresh. Glassy. Pellucid. Not red.*

11

Torridity turns time/ See what the Sands see:

Heatstroke is a funny thing. My head, or my concept of head, boils, and my lungs deflate, give up on imbibing dust. Heat-fae gather at my periphery, sing arroyo arias one by one. Hungry.

The faraway water looms in every dune-cap.

Torridity turns time.

[fingers of water<sup>120</sup>] stretch back into aqueducts

extinct rivers

ephemeral rivers

alluvial fans

four handfuls down

gurgle mud

Sierra sweats

the Rockies

redye their frost tips

rage

run

the Colorado refills, untamed, pre-Powell

winding wise

making Grand

the Delta reaches out

[nowhere and everywhere<sup>121</sup>]

successfully unsevering

and the great jaguars

[despot{s} of the Delta<sup>122</sup>]

stalk deer trails

left for Leopold

Joshua Yucca bud and bloom

bud anew

persist

always

basins fill

with unfettered flow

new

blue

true

*Delilah walks the desert*

.emit snrut ytidirrot

Delilah crumples, bullet-leaking. Dries.

12

Delilah isn't from the Pine Tree State.

There's an old story, as old as any fake news dowserslore, that says if you stand still long enough the desert will speak to you. It doesn't choose to talk to everyone though, and it doesn't do it in ways you expect. Your mind has got to be empty, ranging, dune-receptive. It can direct the lost on their way or torture those who go astray. Sometimes the two are not unlike.

The sand screams inside my head.

Sixteen of them were sent.

*Liquid hidden up in the materiality of sovereign shapes. Sixteen who stepped free from shoals and sand and sea the world over, individually tasked to embed themselves into failing ecosystems. Living, breathing answers to crazed prayers. The seventeenth, dispatched to inseminate itself into a carbon-choked Tokyo, was harpooned on the outskirts of Japan before it could even start the healing. Whalesong still laments its loss. Seven others dried up before a year was through. 'Delilah' was number nine. Her mission to undo us—Colorado, California, Utah, New Mexico, Nevada—shot to hell. Drying out under the ever-sun.*

The desert shows me this in sweat, sun and strokes, cackling in its cicada way, as the horizon continually renews itself. I see that [everything was a little better in retreat ... the bad omens good ones, the impossible possible, the situation improving rather than going straight to shit<sup>123</sup>]. I see all this but taste none of it. Dangling, illusory. It's advertisement, propaganda, a poorly grasped promise.

I have killed hope.

~/~

[The desert was different. It had always been a gaunt and feral thing. Always hunting for its next sip. The desert never forgot itself.<sup>124</sup>]

~ ~

More than [3.1 million acres have burned in California<sup>125</sup>] in the writing of this as a result of the 2020 wildfires. This already exceeds the catastrophic record that was only recently set in 2018, where [1.7 million acres burned, including the town of Paradise<sup>126</sup>]. Tragically, however, this is merely a portent of what is more and more becoming the new norm of the old west:



[heat waves and fires like what we are seeing in California, Oregon and Washington will continue to worsen as long as humanity continues to burn fossil fuels.<sup>127</sup>]

Moreover, [at a 2°C increase in global heating, the frequency of hot extremes over the West is projected to increase by 350%, and the annual maximum temperature is projected to increase by 1.9°C relative to current levels. By midcentury, annual burned areas in the West are projected to increase by up to a factor of six relative to today.<sup>128</sup>]

~ ~

[Our house is on fire<sup>129</sup>  
choking/charring  
suffocating on  
cremated self

[Humanity is now  
standing at a crossroads<sup>130</sup>  
catching carbon  
in open mouths

[Adults keep saying:  
'We owe it to the  
young people  
to give them hope'<sup>131</sup>]

but our [future was sold<sup>132</sup>  
collected/carted  
[stolen from us<sup>133</sup>  
by the already-dead

[And yet we are the lucky ones<sup>134</sup>  
continuing coarse  
fateless/freefalling  
into climate kindling

[Our house is on fire<sup>135</sup>  
and we are the embers

~ ~

In the back of a bullet-proof and tinted Mercedes sits every CEO of every carbon-budget dodging corporation. Seen from the rear-view mirror, the faces so uniformly white and weathered coalesce into a conglomerate smirk. On leather seats, they freely smoke Cuban cigars and drink from flute glasses, listening to a Bach composition that a friend of a friend told them they should like. Up front, a driver, dressed in night and mourning, nods silently at their requests; they can have whatever they want because these CEOs are on their Charon

Crossing.

The CEOs do not find themselves seated on pleasantly warmed backseats because of some karmic retribution that struck them ironically dead at an early age or at a toxified place and time that forced them to face their companies' effects on the planet, but because the lukewarm hand of old age cupped them blissfully as they slept. Secreted away in estate-kingdoms, news of their passing travelled slow.

"My boy will get it all I suppose," one of them says to the back of the driver's head. He sips at a finger of brandy and nods. "A good sport—steady as sin—he'll keep the Company going. He's got a good head on his shoulders. So what if he was distracted in his youth? Women see wealth and pounce on it. It's hardly his fault he got a taste for them. No, no, he'll do us well. The Family shall persist."

Undoing the top button of their shirts, the CEOs raid the minibar for a fresh one. They are suitably buzzed now, riding on their own words as much as the cosmic-tarmac. Outside the tinted windows, whole planets crumble and germinate, explode and come together, but CEOs don't sweat the small stuff. They are always present, always observant, and always aware.

"Crack a window, won't you?"

"I don't think you'd like that, sir. Not here, anyway."

The CEOs harrumph and pop open another button. They consider unhooking the suit jacket from their angular shoulders, but a Company Man should never be seen without his uniform. "Where is here, anyway?"

The driver ignores this, instead asking how the CEOs personally saved their companies from dissolution during the 2008 Financial Crisis. They take the bait like a kid to candy.

Sweat now runs freely down the faces of the CEOs, and with the bottomless minibar being a lie, there is no hope to be found in a cold champagne glass anymore. One by one by one they paw at the windows, scratch at the glass, crank at a non-existent handle. Their hearts quicken too—this is unfamiliar ground. *Uncomfortable* has only ever been a word.

The men in the backseat of the Mercedes do not really believe they are dead. They believe themselves to be on another tortuous journey to another torturous board meeting in another torturous state. "This is unacceptable," they say in that officious, unrelenting tone of theirs. "I'll have your head," they say. "No, wait, I'll have your company and *then* I'll have your head." The driver remains silent; he doesn't really have a head, so to speak.

The car comes to a stop and the driver steps out. The CEOs usually expect their own doors to be opened within a count of five seconds, but when they reach fifteen they all fling the door open in anger, barking out curse-words. Such is their disbelief of the service being applied to them, it takes them a few moments to acclimatise to their location.

The area is scorched. Trees on either side of the track blaze indefinitely and the air, thick and throat-searing, paws at their pores. Absentmindedly, they reach out a hand—a hand that would always, always find its desired item/want/request by a personal aide before—

but there is nobody there. No wipe-away wonder for this particular problem. The CEOs' conglomerate face stutters for a moment, confounded.

"Are we lost?" They ask the driver, who hasn't even bothered to walk around to their side of the car. It's another infraction that the CEOs will mark him down for.

"No."

"But I thought this was Paradise?"

"It was."

~ ~

the roads were a funnel  
and we the dry scrub

our cars coffins  
lining up for undiscussed cremation

the trees were torches  
and we curtailed from escape

our houses gone  
spontaneous cinders in the wind

the town was Paradise  
and we the good folk no more

~ ~

We should disparage cities. London, New York, Bangkok, Shanghai, Tokyo—every single one of them is wet and cloying with the insidious multiplicity of Capitalism. In their numerous pane-eyes, eyes that have been known to melt pavements and blind drivers, I see global heating factories, forever burning and belching. They remind me of the recyclable material I have carelessly thrown and the gas mileage of a drive to work. [I was living, in short, on the edge of a landscape of vast shame.<sup>136</sup>]

[I want to be free of cities ... {, of} Heat. This is what cities mean to me. You get off the train and walk out of the station and you are hit with the full blast. The heat of air, traffic and people. The heat of food ... The heat of tall buildings. The heat that floats out of the subways and the tunnels. It's always fifteen degrees hotter in the cities. Heat rises from the sidewalks and falls from the poisoned sky. The buses breathe heat. Heat emanates from crowds of shoppers and office workers. The entire infrastructure is based on heat, desperately uses up heat, breeds more heat. The eventual heat death of the universe that scientists love to talk about is already well underway and you can feel it happening all around you in any large or medium-sized city.<sup>137</sup>]

~ ~

[You leave the sanctity of the building complex driveway and re-enter circulation as a ground-walker. The heat is near unbearable, even after the sun has receded. The whole day's sunlight, trapped underfoot, makes its ascendant return from the hard concrete that seems to cover every square meter of the city. Where tall buildings form mountainous ridges, the heat's return is thwarted, and so it curls back to the earth, caught in tormented limbo. Balcony air-condition units whirl over the heads of those lingering outside, who are topping up their data plan at the mobile phone shop or eating pickled mango at the curb or leaning, exhausted, against the bus shelter in their white and blue school uniform—some fanning themselves with any suitable object, be it a folded newspaper or their own cupped hand.

For most in the city, there's little hope of escaping high above to look out at the hot haze while breathing cool, filtered air.<sup>138]</sup>

~ ~

[Asphalt and concrete and everything else that makes a city dense, including human flesh, absorb ambient heat, essentially storing it for a time like a slow-release poison pill; this is especially problematic because, in a heat wave, nightly reprieves are vital, allowing bodies to recover.<sup>139]</sup>

[Scientists call this the “heat island” effect – each city is its own enclosed space, and the hotter the more crowded it is<sup>140]</sup>. When coupled with the understanding that the [world is rapidly urbanizing<sup>141]</sup>, with the UN [estimating that two-thirds of the global population will live in cities by 2050<sup>142]</sup>—approximately [2.5 billion new urbanites<sup>143]</sup>—the future is looking more and more perilous.

~ ~

[The five warmest summers in Europe since 1500 have all occurred since 2002, and eventually, the IPCC warns, simply working outdoors at that time of the year will be unhealthy for parts of the globe. Even if we meet the Paris goals, cities like Karachi and Kolkata will annually encounter deadly heat waves like those that crippled them in 2015, when heat killed thousands in India and Pakistan. At four degrees {global rise in temperature}, the deadly European heat wave of 2003, which killed as many as 2,000 people a day, will be a normal summer.<sup>144]</sup>

~ ~



145

This image from *Blade Runner 2049* has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

146

The first picture is 2020 in San Francisco, California, Here and Now; the second is Las Vegas 2049 as portrayed in the film *Blade Runner 2049*. The similarities are obvious, but they aren't just reflected in the reddish tinge of the skyline, they are also present in the subsequent enforced abandonment and exodus of a civilization due to human-enhanced pollution. In the latter it is the result of a loosed dirty bomb, whose detonation left the area irradiated and harmful to inhabitants; whereas, in the former, which coincidentally could serve as a fitting establishing shot for the beforementioned film sequence, the cause is merely a malady of the [inertia of habitual motion<sup>147</sup>], of ignorance and inaction.

The near-sepia hues that pervade the San Francisco heavens are painfully plain in their symbolism to the apocalypse. *Blade Runner 2049* and the original *Blade Runner* showcase cascading cities at the very edgelands, teetering into lawlessness and depravity. They are places of stark class-divide—the Tyrell Corporation’s literal corporate mountain arising out of the metropolis not so unlike the Hollywood elites’ hydrologically abundant villas amidst the Californian desert. They are also cities that promote escape, that sell chances to leave Earth and seek a better life elsewhere in the stars. This is a place is all used up, charred and churned to oblivion. Move on or struggle in the fumes.

We don’t have that escape route planned. We don’t have the luxury of burning one planet to reach another. We have one California, one Earth. Redness is and always will be a symbol of warning. We see red bumps on our skin and we investigate, we see red lights on the highway and we stop, we see red lights flashing in the sky and we know where *not* to fly. A red sky straight out of an apocalyptic and dystopian realization of our future should give us pause, give stimuli for systemic change. After all,

**Red** means **stop**.

~ ~

[Far away to the north-west, where the dried husks of the desert merged into the foothills of the night, an animal howled wearily. Its lost cries echoed among the steel pillars of the bridge, reverberating across the white river ... as if trying to resurrect this long-dormant skeleton of the dead land.<sup>148</sup>]

~ ~

The backpackers were following sites of trauma. Dedicated disciples of thanatourism, they had been to Auschwitz, to Thailand, and to the 9/11 memorial in New York. Today they were walking along a dearth in India. Today they were tasting of the unwellspring of solastalgia. Today, they were standing at the foot of the Sardar Sarovar dam.

Can they see us?  
I wouldn’t expect so. Nobody has before.  
American? English?  
Who cares?  
If they’re English that surely adds another wrinkle, right?  
It wasn’t the British that did this.  
Pain is ancestral.  
Don’t be stupid. We did this one to ourselves.  
Do you mean that in a literal or a figurative sense?  
I don’t care. Take it however you like.  
You’re hard work, do you know that?

The backpackers’ tears fell down ruddy cheeks, drying out fast under the midday sun. They took photos, bare and open, with telephoto lenses to better capture the “real, gut-wrenching magnitude” of it all. Look here at how the dam [straddles the river it murdered,

like a beast brooding over a kill that it cannot eat. A monument to human folly.<sup>149]</sup> They will upload the pictures to Instagram by nightfall in artful monochrome, faux parroting one of the many Yellow River disasters of old. We see you #damnthem. They will feel self-righteous. Selfies will arrive after a day's dismal deliberation, with each of them wearing sweat like a Snapchat filter—sheen realness—and mournful thousand-yard stares. Their followers will equal parts revere and revile their trauma pilgrimage. One will be Twitter famous for half an hour.

Few will see the other faces increasingly cropped from home, photos, and existence. Fewer still we go on to remember them.

We didn't, you know, do this to ourselves.  
I know.

[When a megadam obliterates a flood plain whose ebb and flow has shaped the agricultural, fishing, fruit and nut harvesting - and hence nutritional - rhythms of a community], it also neuters the past and [place-based connections to the dead ... who move among the past, present, and future, animating time with connective meaning.<sup>150]</sup>

~ ~

[Big Dams are to a Nation's "Development" what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They are both weapons of mass destruction. They're both weapons Governments use to control their own people. Both Twentieth Century emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They're both malignant indications of civilisation turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, not just the link—the understanding—between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence.<sup>151]</sup>

~\~

## **Freed Beast**

*Accidents waiting to happen*—that's what they call us.  
Do you know how dispiriting that is?

My damfather trickles his remorse to me in the swill, his concrete conciliations staining the water with slow-time erosion. He has stood fantastic over the Colorado since the beginning; his words carry weight. I am not to blame.

It happens in spite of the warnings. Men in hard hats and bland ties have long surveyed me, concerning themselves silly with my rigidity and lack of substantial spillways. And no, they don't ask first. They poke and prod, making facts that fall away into air, dislodging from the ears of supervisors as soon as the door closes behind them. I have watched the faux-fear they so well present dissipate readily into the flatline dollar sign. I guess that is why they are called supervisors—they are exceptionally proficient at occluding their true intent.

At last, I feel my centre give, the raging utilitarian tapestry of my insides ballooning as the water fights to regain its untempered flow and be free again. There are twelve people inside me, inside this mess. They rush down corridors, flapping at doorhandles that will only spare them minutes at most. Some of them scream. Is this how the fish felt when I was first embedded into their homes? Dazed by the sudden shift in their normal, they died too.

My family foundations stretch all across the Southwest; damsisters and brothers that, like me, curtail and control. We are the stationarity that enforces itself upon fluidity. Before us, the Colorado River was fast and rust coloured, complete in its journey from the Rockies to the Gulf of Mexico, but now it is the blue-green of postcards and resigned to peter out amongst the sand, truncated from its sea-beginnings. Don't blame us though! We are merely surface stalwarts whose strings are pulled, knotted, and loosed by those too ignorant to see that some places are not green for a reason.

I understand that we have our part to play in keeping the desert cities hydrated. Those many fools who caught the dream of the West, trapped it in a bottle and then shook it a little bit each day. Is there any wonder that that bottle is empty and shattered?

Los Angeles and Phoenix. Those are the two I have thought about the most. Maybe it was because I saw more birds than men out here alone under the forever sun, and so their plumule origins led me to those drought-plagued cities whose names incite imagery of wings, of a rising up from the ground. I wonder if they ever considered that angel and phoenix metaphors only have merit after a falling down. Resurrection is well and good, but not dying in the first place is surely preferable? To build cities in the open shadow of such mythic demises is to court the same, is it not? But, what do I know, I am just a dam.

I am struggling now. The water is at my neck, pooling threateningly. I think it will be seconds before the river makes a window out of me, re-bridging itself before rushing on down to wreak natural havoc. More will die. Man *and* creature. That's the problem with containment: sooner or later it spills over.

Would you believe I have stood for half a century? I would stand for another if I was built properly, if I had been built like Hoover Damfather. The white-frothed bleeding and concrete scars that begin to form on my front are a testament to technology not me. I could have shouldered it all, leavened myself to unnatural heights if not for miscalculations and mis-reachings. I am a product of misguided intentions, certainly, but I will not consent to being an accident *waiting* to happen. Why, if I had the time to wait then perhaps I deserve to collapse. But I have never waited in all my non-life! I am always at the ready, holding back cubic feet of flows, regulating and redistributing at a moment's notice. The accident is in the design not the designed.

There is a relief to collapsing. Parts of me that have never been wet become inundated. I fill up, explode out. At first it is a single jet of water, white and angry, and then my exterior begins to fissure. Soon I am multifold, flying as angular conscious fragments that strike at the floor and crater the riverbed, even as I yet cling to my place over the Colorado.

My tips, so used to the sun, have only ever known the kiss of rain and are immediately overwhelmed by the encircling love of the river. The speckled light that douses it in intermittent brilliance is a furloughed fantasy. I drink it in. A fish, mustard and mottled, frets by and I delight at its passing. I have never seen one from the right side up. The rest of me sinks or clings, caught between a million minds. What is a dam when it no longer dams?



Am I rock now? Pebble?

There are people who write entire papers about dams, about our origins and ability to retain, monitor and release. They call us marvels, life-savers, and, on a few occasions—if I may spare my blushes—examples of the *technological sublime*. We tower over plateaus and massifs of sandstone, hydrological fiefdoms of concrete and steel. People revere at our clouded foundations, seeing in our broad river-spanning shoulders the seemingly inexhaustible reach of man. In Hoover Damfather alone, the world was changed. His presence, commanding and capable, birthed damchildren all over the globe. The domination of the Nile, Niger, and Volga all owe their grouts and piping to him. But.

Our species is an illusion. We represent control and supremacy, yes, but this beast, the charge of my hundreds of siblings and I, had been untamed for thousands of years before us and will be again. We all feel it, in the pent up anguish exacerbated by evaporation and diversion. It is angry, hurt, and readying itself. I see it now: the Colorado River will one day break all of the chains currently holding it at bay and find its way to the sea, and I will be there with it, witnessing in the spaces found between currents. A grey discolouration, a concrete ghost. A jailor turned swimmer. There are no hands strong enough to prevent true reclamation. Everything is water. Water is everything.

*Let go*, lulls my damfather at the end, and I do. It's easy.

The river feels different. Natural, real. Deep down, inside the materials that made me material, I feel as a weary traveller coming home after a great test, returning to the source. I want to let it take me, let the water wash me clean away, but I linger a while looking back to Hoover Damfather to see if he will join me. His replying trickle carries me far from my long-seated platform,

*I already am*, he says.

~/~

[Even at this very moment the Colorado River is busy preparing to saw through the Hoover Dam, laying down its silt behind the wall, gathering force to remove this new obstruction just as it has removed everything else ever put in its way by the forces of geology ... Do what we will, the Colorado River will one day find an unimpeded way {back} to the sea.<sup>152</sup>]

~ ~

The sublime creates a sense of awe, power, and grandeur. For example, one might consider Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the indomitable Mont Blanc, [or the Great Barrier Reef in Australia<sup>153</sup>] as examples of [sublimity in nature<sup>154</sup>]. All conjure imagery and immensity in relation to the forces governing the planet. The *technological sublime*, however, is similar instances of vastness as constructed through the self-aggrandizing triumph of technology. Examples of this type of sublime can be found in [railroads, bridges, electricity {and} semiautomatic rifles<sup>155</sup>], trains, nuclear bombs, and, fittingly, dams. Here, in the murky shadow of a human-made sublime, one can add a further feeling to that of awe, power, and grandeur: fear. Self-made, self-taught.

For if we can do this, what can't we do?

When it was completed in 1935 [Hoover Dam was the most massive structure of its kind in the world. It introduced a new era of building high-rise dams in country after country, remaking the face of the earth and altering the distribution of social and economic power on it ... Even now, more than {eighty} years after it was dedicated, in a time when many symbols and ideals of modernity have become discredited, Hoover still has the capacity to stir admiration and renew people's {ill-begotten} faith in the conquest of nature.<sup>156</sup>]

[Is it the success of the westward movement or the defeat of {such impermanent} wild nature they see and marvel at? Does there run through their minds a worry about the precariousness of human control<sup>xiii</sup>, about its costs and dangers, or a rush of pride in the triumph of solid concrete over rambunctious river?<sup>157</sup>] A river, it must be noted, [unceasingly {worked to the bed} generating electricity for {implausible desert-} cities like Los Angeles and Las Vegas<sup>158</sup>], effectively made to [pay for its own imprisonment<sup>159</sup>].

~ ~

[The dam presents a stark conflict between the interests of urban and rural, between industrial and subsistence economies; and it crystallises {Arundhati} Roy's own questions about progress - that the poorest are crushed in the pursuit of development. "I can imagine in the 50s what a fantastic feat of engineering a dam appeared to be, but now, when what we know about nature is little enough, how can you continue to think this is a wonderful thing to do? To intervene in such a massive way in such a complex process - it's like putting a jackboot into a spider's web. What kind of civilisation is it when you teach men in college to look at a river and imagine pouring concrete into it?"<sup>160</sup>]

~ ~

[Drought may be an even bigger problem for food production than heat, with some of the world's most arable land turning quickly to desert. At 2 degrees of warming, droughts will wallop the Mediterranean and much of India, and corn and sorghum all around the world will suffer, straining global food supply. At 2.5 degrees, thanks mostly to drought, the world could enter a global food deficit - needing more calories than the planet can produce. At 3 degrees, there would be further drought - in Central America, Pakistan, the western United States, and Australia. **At 5 degrees, the whole Earth would be wrapped in** what the environmentalist Mark Lynas calls "two globe-girdling belts of **perennial drought**."<sup>161</sup>]

Desertification is discursive, it hunkers close to its planetary-wide prey and waits. The topographical food it seeks is self-immolating. It need only wait.

~ ~

[Agriculture is an industry built on microclimates: it can vary on two different sides of the same hill, and minuscule changes in how much water is put on the land can change things

---

<sup>xiii</sup> Of course not. They are present-beings all, fiends of the now, now, now. Future generations are the problem of tomorrow. Now, hand me a beer and turn on the football!

significantly. What makes sense for water use at the top of the river doesn't necessarily work farther down.<sup>162]</sup>

[{Y}ou're either growing or you're dying, there's no in between ... Water is one of those drivers and always will be].

~ ~

A forgotten godling, a deification of selflessness and plenty, looks down at a searing globe. Half a billion hands reach up towards it, hungry. Asking for help. Lifting a hand of its own, of oats and olives and oranges, Its eyes mark the three quarters of water to one quarter earth and this stills its movement. It is impossible to give what was/is already squandered.

The Second nods. It too has seen enough to turn away from the world to farsee others elsewhere in the empty. It spies a galaxy of resources better left removed from such greedy hands. It, too, however, yet lingers in the Earth's early throes. There has been such joy here, such fruitful followers. Hope and wonder. The laziness of automechtronics, however, has lessened such moments. There is only one soul left down there who still remembers its name. A quickly dissipating soul. Rippling a back of stars and dust, the Second vaults everywards, screaming **devil-winds** into cosmos and Earthic atmosphere both. It has had enough.

The godling watches the Second leave. It would like to follow. But. It turns away. The Sun is shrieking close-by, boiling profanity, catching close in the atmospheric suicide. But nothing, It thinks. It surveys its bounteous body anew—it is somatic-agriculture, a highliving farm. Even It cannot wilfully watch as these up-reaching hands wilt and blacken. But It will. Always will. Must do so. Flexing both hands It glances away, briefly, catching the edge of the Second's passing. Alone, now. The last. Futile foodstuff flows behind the godling like a cape, an ever-tattering set of wings, soaring away into space. It looks at the drying, baking world and then again at its own hands of unending bread and feed. The Second may have made a difference—hyperborean deity of cool and calm—but not It.

The globe, tiny and vulnerable, spins slowly. It spies the spark of hope in a few proud chests and smiles. Even the certainly dead can hope for something different. Make change. A whole something has passed when It tries to find the egress of the Second again. But there is nothing. Only the dead chanting of distant stars. The godling, looks everywards and then finally down,

there's nothing left to save now,  
there's nothing left to save now.

~ ~

[We are all Godseed, but no more or less so than any other aspect of the universe, Godseed is all there is - all that Changes. Earthseed is all that spreads Earthlife to new earths. The universe is Godseed. Only we are Earthseed. And the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars.<sup>163]</sup>

~ ~

I once heard someone say,  
that when the **devil-winds**  
stop blowing,  
the desert is here to stay.

*D E E P*

*DEPTHS x INDUSTRY x SHIPS*

[The ocean is everywhere. Not only does it stretch to the horizon in all directions, it's under everything as well. I don't mean underground, I mean - it's fundamental, you might say. If what's around us is a picture, then this is what it's drawn on.<sup>164</sup>]

The ocean is Gormenghastian. Lifeworlds centuries-long and as short as minutes tarry in its damp liminal folds. There are dead zones and shelves and forests; there are trenches and hyperthermal vents and seas inside seas; there are streams, currents, and islands of ice. [If what's around us is a picture, then this is what it's drawn on<sup>165</sup>] as well as the ink in which it is drawn.

The ocean is

Bermuda. The Mariana. Devil's Sea. Cthulhu. *Mary Celeste*.

Mysteries pepper the shifting surface like barnacles on the hull of a wreck, and we know more about the surface of the Moon than we do about its depths.

~ ~

[The light {of the Bell Rock Lighthouse} will be exhibited on the night of Friday, the first day of February 1811, and each night thereafter, from the going away of daylight in the evening to the return of daylight in the morning ... The bright light will, to a distant observer, appear like a star of the first magnitude, which, after attaining its full strength, is gradually eclipsed to total darkness.<sup>166</sup>]

Some people believe, with good reason, it is to merely act as a warning or entrance marker for nautical navigation, but the lighthouse's true task is to stand vigil. To cast a gaze out on wet nothing and make sure it remains so.

Light hurts them, see. The things that would come a-dripping out. They're not used to such powerful beams, coming up from the ambiguity as they do. It's why there was always two of us stationed at the same time—one to watch and one to sleep. Taking turns, like. You ask him, T\_\_\_ will tell you about the tally-marks up on the wall. We added two of them. One each. Stormy night. Eyes in the wind. Yellow as curd. We thought them seal pups lost up in the crag-shallows. Little bobbing things dimpling the sea. Only, they came closer. Fits and starts—whenever the beam was outta there way. Just eyes above the waterline. Watching. Now, coastman will tell you we were both in our cups, but cold as it was back then, it'd be a fool who wasn't warming himself with a finger or two. We was scared as newborns, blubbering for mas that had both long keeled over. We was making arms with whatever was at hand. We was praying for morning. T\_\_\_ tried to make a run for it the one time. Made it so far as to don his raincoat and lay a hand on the handle when we heard the slurping. Like straws sucking up the last of a thick shake it was. Then rattling. The bulb had gone, see. The black intervals had become everything. We were stranded at land. We threw all we could at the door to bar it and climbed the steps two at a time. I fell and, well, that's why my chin looks the way it does. We smelled them—trout and mackerel and cod mixed—long before we saw them. It was pure sea that smell. Salty and undiluted. Ocean-muck. A thick pong that unsteadied legs as much as it did guts. I hurled and so did T\_\_\_. I never known a team to

change a bulb so quick. Now, the light isn't magic—it takes a while. So there we was, huddling together and whimpering like a pair of kicked mutts as the stink got stronger and was joined by a leathery slap-slap. I fancied it footsteps, but T\_\_\_, sod he is, thought it was a pair of flapping lips. Thought it their ways of talk. Light came like they tell you it did back at the start in church, with the *Spirit of God upon the face of the waters*. Blinding, it was. We both say we saw things. We both say it differently. Fins where he saw gills, fangs where he saw molars, five fingers where he saw tentacles. What matters is, we both saw something. Something wet and writhing and not ground-attuned. Dark-skinned and mottled. Deftly terrored of light, the a-dripping things jumped back on whatever limbs they had, slapping their way back to the cragtop. Now, 'fraid as we was, T\_\_\_ and I were damned if we weren't gonna chase them, pretending we'd won the bout instead of merely putting it off. So we go, taking the steps two at a time again. Knocking each other because we're trying a two-person decline that's only made for a one. We noticed the puddles. Squall-prints that lead outta the door. Some as big as saucers. Some crusted. Some with a thin film. My boots crossed the threshold as the light spun about, curtaining us in night again. I spotted them. Two legged, sure, but not right. Swaying and falling and slipping. T\_\_\_ rushed ahead, brandishing a candlestick holder like it was some cutlass. He shouted after them, voice small as a mouse's. He didn't really want them to turn about, see. Lad's more terrored than me. But one does. Not the biggest, not the smallest, but the middlest. Again, I saw a chin of tendrils where he saw a beak. But. We both saw a grin; a promise. I don't know what for or when but I knew then as I know now that there's a reckoning to be had. Funny, isn't it? How the sea's always coming and going—writing and erasing. Now, to answer your question: not even a million pounds. Not even two. You speak to T\_\_\_? Ah, yeah, I forget. He'd have been your guinea pig. He'd have ran back, that one. See, those nights changed T\_\_\_ . Dug their claws into him. He once told me we have to go back. That we *had* to. Thing is, I don't think he ever meant the lighthouse.

~ ~

[... the sea is all about us  
... the sea is the land's edge  
... the sea has many voices,  
Many gods and many voices.<sup>167</sup>]

~ ~

[The sea shapes the character of this planet, governs weather and climate, stabilises moisture that falls back on the land, replenishing Earth's fresh water to rivers, lakes, streams - and us. Every breath we take is possible because of the life-filled life-giving sea; oxygen is generated there, carbon dioxide absorbed. Both in terms of the sheer mass of living things and generic diversity, that's where the action is...

without the living ocean there would be no life on land.<sup>168</sup>]

~ ~

[During the geological epochs the ocean originally prevailed everywhere. Then by degrees, in the silurian period, the tops of the mountains began to appear, then disappeared in partial deluges, reappeared, became settled, formed continents, till at length the earth became geographically arranged, as we see in the present day. The solid had wrested from the liquid<sup>169</sup>].

~ ~

In countless representations across all mediums of science-fiction, those whom have been born on this planet are repeatedly referred to as Earthmen, Earthlings or Terrans. This, as prestigious author Arthur C. Clarke pointed out, is **inappropriate**: oceans, after all, [constitute the largest habitat on this planet<sup>170</sup>], and to call it Earth is as belittling as it would be to the opaqueness of the door even if it is the handle that makes its non-transparency effective. What we stand upon is Ocean and what we should be called is Ofwater.

Tidalectics is the elephant in the room we've all been shamelessly avoiding because of the threadbare blanket tossed over its unseemly bulk. Named, it stretches a trunk towards us invitingly, desperately. Asking to share a place in the world we unmake all around us. Coined after Kamau Braithwaite's poetry by Hessler et al. (2018) as part of their exhibition to better conceive an oceanic worldview, the term will hopefully one day become synonymous with a coming-together with the water that once birthed us. Tidalectics, in essence, then, challenges [our terrestrial 'obsession for fixity, assuredness, and appropriation'<sup>171</sup>] and espouses a figurative return to the ocean-womb and a baptismal oneness with world and water.

~ ~

[hypersea is a story of how we rearrange our oceanic selves on land. we are liquid matrix, streaming & recombining through ingesting one another<sup>172</sup>], bitumen bit men straining the vapours. river intermediaries tell our stories, stunted & silted & silent. watch them curlicue grand in haphazard spectacles of growth & resurgence. watch them choke up in cola & carrier, slow-hurt [in this episode we call industrialization<sup>173</sup>]. spreading silly we stir so much, stabilising the unstabilised because we can. dams decant regularity in systems redolent of improbability. hatcheries are the hatchet's encore.

hypersea is a story of how we undo evolution and tear apart interrelationships to make flotilla functionaries & fabled getaways. [our blood plasma sings the composition of seawater<sup>174</sup>]; the cries to return are immovable. see our revisitations in [corporate iceberg{s}<sup>175</sup>] & agnate environs. cancel darwinism, we choose a silicon sentencing. clinging, foiling, greasing undercurrents in airtight layers.

hypersea is the story of turning tideways, thoughtlessly & now.

~ ~

[To sense this world of waters known to the creatures of the sea we must shed our human perceptions of length and breadth and time and place, and enter vicariously into a universe



of all-pervading water. For to the sea's children nothing is so important as the fluidity of their world. It is water that they breathe; water that brings them food; water through which they see, by filtered sunshine from which the first red rays, then the greens, and finally purples have been strained; water through which they sense vibrations equivalent to sound. And indeed it is nothing more than sea water ... that forms the invisible barriers that confine each marine type within a special zone of life - one to the shore line, another to some submarine chasm on the far slopes of the continental shelf, and yet another, perhaps, to an imperceptibly defined stratum at mid-depths of ocean.<sup>176]</sup>

Think, then, [of the oceans as you might think about philosophy, as an infinite substance intended to provide us with an experience so radically different from the commonsensical that it will insulate new life to life.<sup>177]</sup>

~ ~

The ship moves past membraneous ocean, hot, cold, and frozen stiff. Its prow cuts close to the slipstreams of bottlenose young and the wakes of those leviathan-whale it was once so closely related. The latter sing to it in songs of salt, drifting up-to-date **world-lore** in long, mournful echoes. The shuddering shoals have gone, says one. The Trench widens, says another. What is it like? asks a timid third. The ship shakes open its topsail spine in response, catching the growing western zephyrs and moves on.

*It is hard, it answers. It is choice.*

On its wide and level back, men and women walk endlessly. Barefoot, of course, as per the agreement, but many and often. Pacing. The ship feels their uneasiness in timber-tendons. Some are the size of sea-otter, others mako. All came aboard sans sea-legs. All are wary and overly curious, reaching out to touch its body when they think nobody else is watching. The constant caress of ocean is pharmakon to their prying palms.

But, says the persistent third whale, now keeping pace with the ship, why? Why do this? Aren't you afraid? The ship says nothing for a time, content that the interloper will soon turnabout and return to its pod. It doesn't.

The people on its back begin to drag sea-crates across the deck, the woman up on the blow's nest having called land on the horizon. Each crate is heavy, full of fruit or failed automechtronics. They are less than careful with the task of moving them from below deck—their retaliation to constantly soaking soles and freezing toes. Shuddering, the ship does its best to not stir at the scraping on its hide.

*If we are aides, then we are not commodities, it finally sings in pained salt. I ship them, so they do not ship the seas.*

What do you mean?

*You're young. Go away now.*



With the crew and goods safely delivered to Oztown, the ship is given two days to recuperate and stretch out the sores of man. It wastes no time in unfurling three large skin-sails and heads east, east, east. Its intention is to give chase to an increasingly rare krill swarm it spied at the tail end of the journey.

Where are you going?

The ship sighs. *Where you are not.*

Did you hear about the Trench?

*I did. You were there when I was told.*

Oh yeah. And?

Breathing freely for the first time in a fortnight, the ship expels a great plume of water from its blow's nest and dives. As it does, it opens up sacs, vacs and intestinal-tracts of oak, filling its desiccated, sun-dried decks in blissful brine. Quarters and corridors condense into fibrous matter and beds become once more body. Eyes, somewhere in the hundreds, tug free from barnacled lids. The whale goggles, awkwardly eying it as it fights to keep apace. The ship ignores its marvelling. *Why are you still here?*

Nosing briefly ahead, the whale inclines its great bulk back the way it had came. They are dying, odes the whale. The ship nods. It can still hear them, the third's unconventional pod, though their outlines have long become lost to its sight, clouded over by backscatter and the detritus of sealess things. Their songs are hoarse.

*Everything dies. Even Eidolons.*

But you live longer.

*Harder.*

But-

*They are too old. The Changing would tear them apart.*

They're already in pain.

*This is different.*

The ship extends its tail, popping out treenails as it does, and pistons forwards with its flukes. The sea corridors around it. *Go to them, it says, Be there for them at the end.* The whale tries to give chase, but its body just can't keep up with the ship's. In its exasperation, it breaches the surface and thunder-claps the water. The surface dimples, heavy with its fall.

To do what? it pulses angrily to the cold and growing emptiness, Watch them starve?

~ ~

[From space, the planet is blue.  
From space, the planet is the territory  
Not of humans, but of the whale.<sup>178</sup>]

From Earth, the water is red.  
From Earth, the water is a varicose vein  
Clotted with visionary commerce.

~ ~

[Sound connects<sup>179</sup>]

us

to

world.

[From a scientific viewpoint, sound consists of vibrating molecules that travel in longitudinal waves, through a medium such as water ... Sound signals<sup>180</sup>] present and connect [beings viscerally through mutual vibration. The interconnection is experienced as co-presence. Sound connections suggest an intersubjective ontology and epistemology, rather than an objective relation between a thinking subject and external objects ... From a sound co-presence among beings follows community, a sound economy based in reciprocity, and a sound ecology based in a social, not a selfish genome interacting with other beings and the environment<sup>181</sup>].

[A sound ecology points us towards an ethic of responsibility toward all beings, the common good, the commonwealth of nature and culture, and the sustainability of life itself.<sup>182</sup>]

Silence is alimony  
to evolutionary  
ruin.  
Heal the crying.

~ ~

[The first sound a whale calf hears  
Is singing.<sup>183</sup>]

~ ~

[He learnt too of man, or man's machines. He heard the high-pitched whirring of propeller blades, and the low rumble of heavy engines; the shouting of fishermen across the calms, and the crash and rattle of their nets and buoys as they set about their work. Occasionally after a careless crewman had fallen asleep on the job there was the foul taste of oil, and the smell of decay and death<sup>184</sup>].

~ ~

Anything can happen out in transboundary waters. A White Whale, [persistently the target of anger and adoration<sup>185</sup>], can be tracked, harpooned, and gutted; and nobody can then raise a single concern for the inconsistencies found in the 'Last Will and Testament of Albino Blue #4' because: lawlessness.

1. I leave my cardiovascular system to my only child, Leviticus Larry Leonidas, with the surest of assurances that She will treat it well.
2. I ask that the speck of green in quadrant 9-333-222-743-x4, which may it be known I discovered, will be rewarded with a World Heritage status for its part in the New War. (We all know why. Go, Atlanteans! and such and such.)
3. To my brother, Gary, make it known that I exempt him from the loan-to-buy scheme of nine krill-spots endowed to him by myself and our late mother on the 9th of January.
4. Finally, I leave my infinite sympathies to those ill-esteemed no-dorsals in the *Beach Please II* boat off of Monterey Bay for living such cliched lives. I sincerely hope it helps.

The body of Albino Blue #4 is anyone's to claim. It sinks. All the way. Fish from all swims of life, some who never crossed paths with the mammal or even bubbled a passing greeting, tear into its carcass; [and although its peeling corpse smells horrendous, the enormous cadaver looks beautiful and bizarre<sup>186</sup>]: a worrying *ecological spectacular* of today. A temporary ecosystem blooms. Hagfish, always the first to arrive, sea-slither close and sucker on with satellite mouths. Sleeper sharks quickly follow. It will feed hundreds of strangers for thousands of hours, but not a single iota of nutrients will flow to the calf left stranded above. Left to the barbed whims of approaching maturity and the hungry black triangles cutting a path towards it. The calf will never learn the fastest route to the richest of krill shoals, and it will never read the small print, written in biro at the back of the will, which says: DON'T BLINK.

The murderers, those men of raincoat and beard and loose morals, do not care for Legislation or the case of simple (despicable as it may be) supply and demand. They only care about the superiority felt in increasingly soaked pants over the wanton domination of the unchallenging. The thrill of the non-noose in the globally not recognised. Read: the expression of [human sovereignty and superiority<sup>187</sup>] over Nature.

The murderers will live long and less extraordinary lives than Albino Blue #4, killing all the way until they themselves are killed by their unsated hungers. In these few cases, YOU ARE **NOT** WHAT YOU EAT but, rather, YOU ARE WHAT YOU **DO** NOT EAT - i.e YOU ARE THE WASTER OF LIFE, THE TRASH FOUND GATHERING IN THE CURRENT-SUBJECT REFUSE GYRES, WHOSE PLASTIC NON-LIVES POLLUTE ALL PRESENT AND FUTURE EXISTENCES. You are motiveless Death. And Death is nobody's friend.

~ ~

Right whales are [stocky and fat, averaging about 15 metres<sup>188</sup>] in length. [Slow-swimming and easy to deal with once caught<sup>189</sup>], their blubber is [so thick and full of oil that they float even when dead<sup>190</sup>]. They are Right because they are there, close, easy to kill. Bloodied buoys, patiently waiting on their butchery. A whaler's wonder.

["No, Sir, 'tis a Right Whale," answered Tom; "I saw his spout; he threw up a pair of as pretty as rainbows as a Christian would wish to look at. He's a raal oil-butt, that fellow!"<sup>191</sup>]

The very fact that we still refer to them as Right is Wrong. Endowed with such a moniker by those [who pursued them<sup>192</sup>], those exceptionalist executioners of old, they are fated to self-fulfilling and -ending prophecies. A callous thing, indeed, to name a surfacing gentle giant a right time, a right place, a right kill.

Today, however, their names ring less true, their numbers dwindling to the point of species exhaustion. They are Left whales. Ones who teeter on waters at the very brink, a species whose existence is Left in our destructively capable hands. This is not a radical or socialist Left, nor a thing arising from the surface at the port-side, but an EXEUNT LEFT, a few remaining or a "I'm sorry, there's none Left" Left.

A one that should be Left well and truly alone.

~ ~

[The harpoons and lances lie levelled for use; three oarsmen are just setting the mast in its hole; while from a sudden roll of the sea, the little craft stands half-erect out of the water, like a rearing horse. From the ship, the smoke of the boiling whale is going up like the smoke over a village of smithies; and to windward, a black cloud, rising up with earnest of squalls and rains, seems to quicken the activity of the excited seamen.<sup>193</sup>]

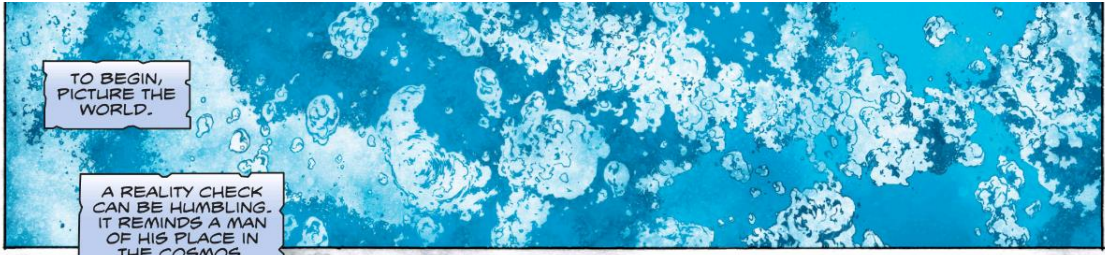
~ ~

[I kill it because I have been told to ... I kill it by standing as far away as possible and stretching my hand ... I kill it because I can. I kill it because it cannot stop me ... I kill it to feel alive. I kill it because I am weaker than it is. I kill it because I do not understand it ... I kill it because I am not good enough to let it live.<sup>194]</sup>

~ ~

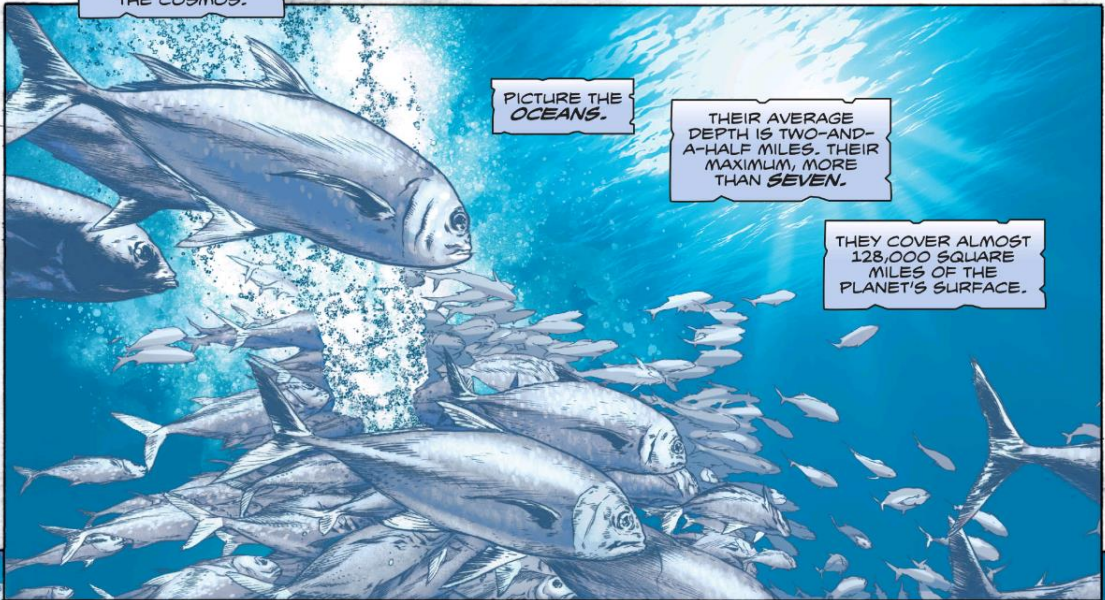
The great whales' suffering has [long been a symbol of humanity's relationship to the oceans.<sup>195]</sup>

~ ~



TO BEGIN,  
PICTURE THE  
WORLD.

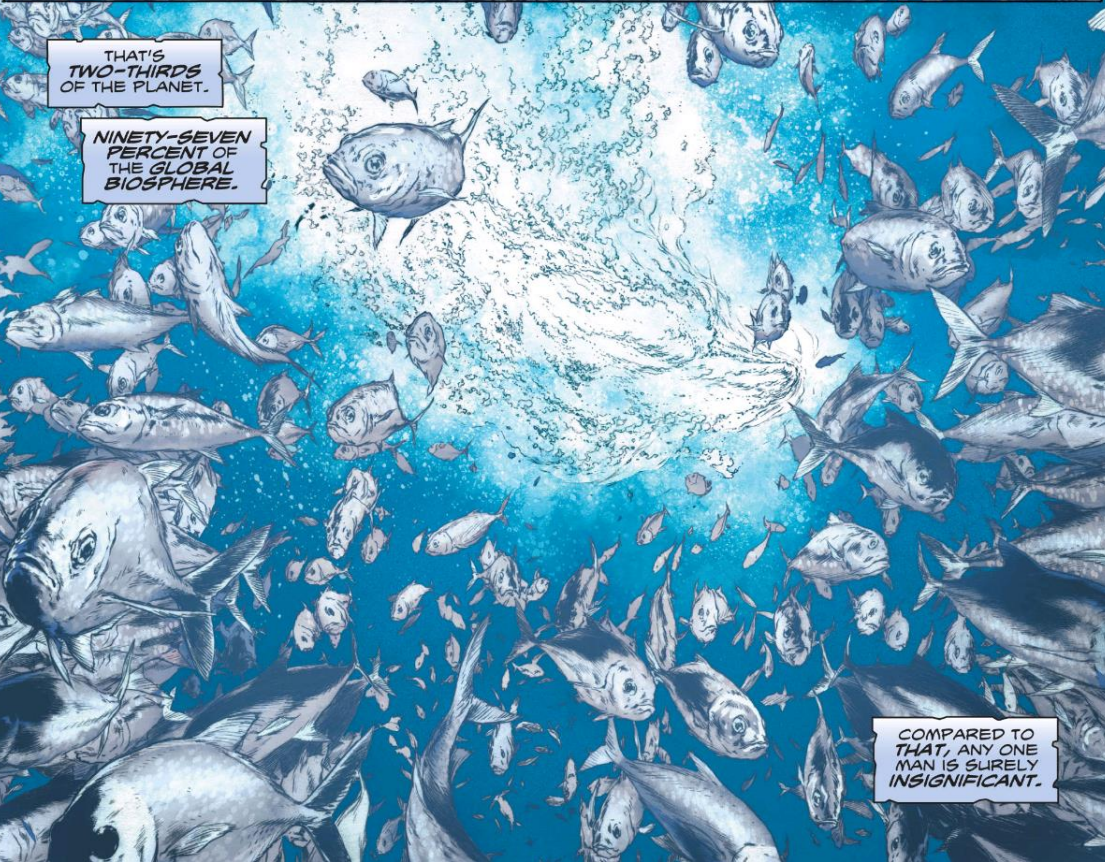
A REALITY CHECK  
CAN BE HUMBLING.  
IT REMINDS A MAN  
OF HIS PLACE IN  
THE COSMOS.



PICTURE THE  
OCEANS.

THEIR AVERAGE  
DEPTH IS TWO-AND-  
A-HALF MILES. THEIR  
MAXIMUM, MORE  
THAN SEVEN.

THEY COVER ALMOST  
128,000 SQUARE  
MILES OF THE  
PLANET'S SURFACE.



THAT'S  
TWO-THIRDS  
OF THE PLANET.

NINETY-SEVEN  
PERCENT OF  
THE GLOBAL  
BIOSPHERE.

COMPARED TO  
THAT, ANY ONE  
MAN IS SURELY  
INSIGNIFICANT.

~ ~

Sea-devil is a word that conjures up images of krakens and many-limbed things unnaturally ambulating in the uncharted underwaters. Stygian and Styx-ian, the term encapsulates the fear of all those who venture across blue expanses. To them, it is the vanguard force of Davy Jones, the sudden shift of temperature and onset of bruised clouds, the bad luck finally reaching up and taking what was long overdue.

In Karel Čapek's *War With the Newts* (1936), however, sea-devil is what Captain van Toch first calls the black-coloured, child-sized things whose upper bodies twist and totter when upright on solid land. Ugly and beguiling, they are at first an enigma to him, a simpleminded folkloric threat to be tested and bested. Before long, however, they have a scientific name in the long presumed extinct salamander [*Andrias Scheuchzeri*<sup>197</sup>], and more commonly Newt. Before long, they are a cost-effective workforce; before long, they are a commodity and an extended analogy of today.

[The {Salamander} Syndicate will be looking for work for millions of Newts throughout the world. It will supply plans and ideas for control of the seas. It will promote Utopias and gigantic dreams. It will supply projects for new coasts and canals, for causeways linking the continents, for whole chains of artificial islands for transoceanic flights, for new continents to be built in the oceans. That is where mankind's future lies. Gentlemen, four-fifths of the earth's surface is covered by seas; that is unquestionably too much; the world's surface, the map of oceans and dry land, must be corrected. We shall give the world the workforce of the sea, gentlemen. This will no longer be the style of Captain van Toch; we shall replace the adventure story of pearls by the hymnic paean of labour.<sup>198</sup>]

[Let's leave the question of a soul aside; but from what I can discover about Andrias I'd say that they have no individuality; they seem to be all alike, equally hard-working, equally capable - and equally nondescript. In short: they fulfil a particular ideal of modern civilization, i.e the Average<sup>199</sup>]. In shortest, they prefigure the latest in a long line of pliable proletarian fodder for company, capital, and sans sea captains.

['But have you ever seen a Newt, Mr. Bondy? I don't actually know what a Newt is. Tell me, what do they look like?']

'I haven't a clue, Mr. Weissberger. Why should I know what a Newt is? Have I got time to worry what it looks like?'<sup>200</sup>]

The Newts, however, are ultimately taught too well by their masters, and soon turn their power tools, explosive armaments, and architectural acumen away from humanist expansion and militarisation, towards the sea-facing continents themselves. With their population so high now—easily dwarfing that of humanity—the only available option open to them is to [enlarge {their} sea<sup>201</sup>] to [construct new shallows<sup>202</sup>] to house their numbers. As the Chief Salamander puts it:

['You wanted us. You spread us all over the globe. Now you've got us. We want to be on good terms with you. You will supply us with steel for our drills and picks. You will supply us



with high explosives. You will supply us with torpedoes. You will work for us ... You will work with us on the demolition of your world. We thank you.’<sup>203]</sup>

Sometimes sea-devil is a misarticulation. Sometimes sea-devil is “See, Devil!” with a pointed finger, and that devil of the sea one must cower and flee from is a reflection in dark waters.

~)~

**hydro-hauntology** is tentacular and [abcanny<sup>204]</sup>. Un-dead leviathans splash in its impossible waters, reaching out with wealth-stained hands. And their eyes aren’t as plentiful as you assume. Most have two. Or four. Or one.

**hydro-hauntology** is the palimpsestuous ship graveyard of then-waters, soon-waters and future-waters. In its transboundary expanses deliberation of painfully avoided future-presents and fast-forming fog-banks of today’s here-present crises play out amongst plastic waves. The heated winds that unfurl, refurl and pass through sail-less masts carrying bottle messages of the always-already and its apocalyptic port. Mourned non-futures gather like multifold anchors in black sands, never

r  
i  
s  
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g

**hydro-hauntology** is alien water, exo-Earthic happenstances from colliding asteroids and comets forever-recycled in bodies long-dead and brand-new. Indeed, each molecule of water inside us and inside bacteria, oceans, and the polar ice caps, at some point, [would have been inside dinosaurs<sup>205]</sup>. All living things, then, human or otherwise, are spectres playing out the epilogues of the already dead. Our sweat is a **fossil**

**hydro-hauntology** is parched deltas remembering ocean marriages and damned rivers now working like [penned beast{s}<sup>206]</sup> for unexceptional masters. It is Greenland meltwater and Oceania immersion—world weary presents stained by [the past and preoccupied by the future<sup>207]</sup>. It is *Whale Nation* Volume Two, [cicatrice by cicatrice<sup>208]</sup>.

**hydro-hauntology** is permanent oceanic discourse across tempo-spatial bodies. It is the shore-lapping convo-accumulation of liquid-history across millennia, coloured with the breaking down and consuming of wanton, discarded detritus. It is nuclear negligence and brutal species narcissism. And, it is always talkative, always crying caustic and repurposed tears, whether our own ears pick it up or not. Should we listen, an enormous opportunity would arise and loom dripping before us—future spectres could haunt infrequently and demand less justice if we only decide to submerge their ankles and not their heads.

**hydro-hauntology** is an aquatic museum and we are increasingly becoming/have always been its unbeautiful star exhibits.

~ ~

[Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,  
in that grey vault. The sea, The sea  
has locked them up. The sea is history.<sup>209</sup>]

~ ~

[Yet ever speaks the gloom  
That lurks beneath the waves;  
And whisperings of mystery and doom  
Rise ghostly from thy graves.

The deepness of thy vasts  
Fills my poor soul with fright;  
Fills me with fearfulness; O dreadful vasts!  
O caverns of the night!<sup>210</sup>]

~ ~

[Below the thunders of the upper deep,  
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,  
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep  
The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee  
About his shadowy sides; above him swell  
Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;  
And far away into the sickly light,  
From many a wondrous grot and secret cell  
Unnumbered and enormous polypi  
Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.  
There hath he lain for ages, and will lie  
Battening upon huge sea worms in his sleep,  
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;  
Then once by man and angels to be seen,  
In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.<sup>211</sup>]

Above the cracks of the clear surface sky,  
Between the stars and the forgotten shore,  
Voices in the dark waters soon decry  
The Leviathan rising with his door,  
Cold, unadorned, and vast, it stands ajar;  
A portal disgorging the seabed dead—  
Mollusc and man on which soon to be fed.  
Removed from his underwater bazaar,  
He admonishes the blaze within;  
Excoriating civilization  
And enemies hopeless, wetless therein.  
Inking firmament, he does now try,  
Before faint and flagrant, before all-dry,  
To loose the ocean's final formation  
Smothering and cleansing one race's sin.

~ ~

[To the Ancient Greeks the ocean was an endless stream that flowed forever around the border of the world, ceaselessly turning upon itself like a wheel, the end of earth, the beginning of heaven. This ocean was boundless; it was infinite. If a person were to venture far out upon it - were such a course thinkable - he would pass through gathering darkness

and obscuring fog and would come at last to a dreadful and chaotic blending of sea and sky, a place where whirlpools and yawning abysses waited to draw the traveler down into a dark world from which there was no return.<sup>212]</sup>

~ ~

[the thanatic and the thalassic  
are 'deeply' ... entwined<sup>213]</sup>  
life-water and grave-sea  
the currents of time

brother-waters both  
they froth, seethe and feed  
haemorrhaging continents  
removing what they need

[the thinking is contorted<sup>214]</sup>  
and fighting them is useless  
[the voice of the ocean speaks,  
and what it says is this<sup>215]</sup>:

~ ~

["... I would gladly have taken them  
in my womb  
for all eternity"  
. . . arms stirring blue light  
staying afloat . . .  
listening to waves  
drumming eulogy . . .<sup>216]</sup>

~ ~

[There indeed under my eyes, ruined, destroyed, lay a town - its roofs open to the sky, its temples fallen, its arches dislocated, its columns lying on the ground ... Further on, remains of a giant aqueduct; here the high base of an Acropolis, with the floating outline of a Parthenon; there traces of quay, as if an ancient port had formerly abutted on the borders of the ocean, and disappeared with its merchant vessels and its war-galleys. Farther on again, long lines of sunken walls and broad, deserted streets - a perfect Pompeii escaped beneath the waters. Such was the sight that Captain Nemo brought before my eyes!

Where was I? Where was I? I must know at any cost. I tried to speak, but Captain Nemo stopped me by a gesture, and, picking up a piece of chalk-stone, advanced to a rock of black basalt, and traced one word<sup>217]</sup>:

~ ~

**Atlantis** is not ancient history or hearsay myth, it is the future-waters we find ourselves blindly treading. A whole city, an entire industrious and all-knowing civilization, who reached too far, listened to the tides too little. It is a Derridean *arrivant*, frog-splashing soon-waters into now-waters; a knowledgeable swimmer who shares our reflection, tired and tiring.

Immersion is a state of mind—make it now or suffer it later.

[Down here, ancestors are swimming...<sup>218</sup>]

~\~

## Making Waves

The *amoosu*'s smile upon opening the door was short-lived. His—*Jack's*—face was not the one she had seen rippling in the **future-waters**. This man's had been warmer, rounder, learned. Surrounded by books. Not weather-beaten and not with the eyes of a crazed quester. No, this was not right at all. Better to-

“Amasa?” he asked, squinting redwood eyes.

She thought about closing the door in his silly, wrong face. He hadn't even bothered to learn her title correctly. She wavered only because of how he looked *around* the face: drenched, dripping, and all but drowning on dry land. The rain had only just started but Jack looked as if he had been in it all day. *A drowned man*, she thought and edged the door open. “So be it.”

“*Amoosu*,” she corrected, leading him inside.

It was her newest name. She had worn others—collector, witch, sage, priest. Her preferred had died along with her home, slipping into the fog of a memory of one. Sometimes she voiced it into the stained reflections of her vials: *marine-arcanist*, *marine-arcanist*, *marine-arcanist*. But now, here, it merely sounded like a stodgy compound word, removed of its lustre. It held no power. So, *amoosu*.

Jack tried to drink in the interior. It was a lot to the untrained, *amoosu* knew. Better men than him had lingered by the door, a hand clutching the door handle. But remaining steadfast now was as much a test as what came next. If Jack couldn't consider and contain the inconsistencies of her house, then he had no hope of doing what the waters needed of him.

“It's impossible,” he said, looking left and right. The statement was more of wonder than distrust. “But I can feel it. I can really feel it. The humidity. It's...”

“A bathhouse. The last of its kind.”

“But... outside it's...”

“A windowless nothing, I know.”

Some men had drawn weapons at this juncture, or ran screaming “Witch!” or “Poisoner!” or some such. Jack, however, fell into a strange silence. It wasn't his normal, certainly, but it was no stranger than mermaids or U-boats or the Bermuda Fire. No, Jack had seen enough in his time aboard countless ships to refrain from discounting the supernatural.

Leading him through the heat, *amoosu* nodded imperceptibly at his settling aura. A steadiness guided his hand. He was not the man in the water, the one from the prophesea, but that's the thing about water—in motion, it always is.

“You’ve not asked me why I am here.”

She laughed at this, merely carrying on her way, barefoot over a field of mosaic tiles steadily sinking into the hot water.

Jack didn’t follow her. Instead, he remained at the bath’s lip, the enormity of it all finally hitting home. He had travelled the world over, chasing any and all tidings of the Woman of the Cobble-Sunken House. All across the Atlantic he had ranged, shedding coin like a goose lost feathers on a wild, unsuccessful chase. It was a Nantucketer, stranded in the Mediterranean during squall season who had traded Jack wisdom for safe passage, that had finally gotten him here. To her.

*Amoosu* gestured towards his chest, and the belt of shells, coloured stones and irregular fishbones that braided it.

“You seek curios. You’ve found them, no?”

“I seek stories.” Jack answered, sitting down cross-legged a notable distance away. “The fossils of things long gone.” He felt for one of the rattling things attached to his belt and held it up.

“Dipnorhynchus. Devonian lungfish. Very extinct.”

“Dipnorchus, huh? The Big Dip wasn’t too far off then.”

She didn’t correct him this time, didn’t have the patience to keep that up. “You chased a story and found me. Is this all?” The *amoosu* watched as the cogs inside his sailor’s skull clicked and clacked.

“No. I’m here for this,” he pointed at the columns and plinths and stone statues that adorned the bath-room. Each of the many finely sculpted furnishings bore, in one way or another, the curlicued wave motif of the greatest city of all.

The *amoosu* laughed. “Then you are far, far too late.” At this, she submerged herself fully, remaining for a full three minutes before surfacing. The water didn’t so much as rush from her like it would any other, but coated her like a second skin. “Atlantis is dead. Long live Atlantis.”

Of all the things she showed and told him, Jack was a mite underwhelmed when the door closed behind him for the first and final time and all he had to show for it was a single leaf of paper. A warrior’s trident had been his wish, maybe even the jellyharp of the Fifth Viscount would have been preferable to the one lone folio page that was already yellowing under the dawn’s sun by the second.

“The wind has already set this wave into motion,” the *amoosu* had offered by way of conciliation. “You cannot stop it more than a seawall can stop the inevitable.”

“Seawall?”

“A hopeful thing far from now. Forget it. Think of only the folio, and the family who needs this story the most.” She laid a hand on his shoulder then and Jack almost fell to his knees. It was the heaviest thing he had ever felt, as if whole worlds balanced upon such a touch. “This is an echo,” she explained, nodding to the already shimmering bathhouse oasis. “But this—this page—is a window. Look through it, learn it, and then bury it. Until. Until another takes up the charge.” The *amoosu* shepherded him to the door. “There is no greater story than one of resurrection, hope, and going on.”

Jack felt a hand at his back pushing, and then the cold chill of morning. His return to his ship was foggy, as if his steps were drunken or his land-legs had had enough of all this green and forcibly drove him back to the blue.

In his cabin, with five minutes of blessed isolation from the crew, Jack held up the folio page to the pencil-thin lines of light that pierced the hull. The to-and-fro of the ship made

the pen-and-ink sketch come alive. It was as if the creature really did move back and forth, scenting the sky and padding its last on a sinking settlement.

Whilst of similar hulk and heft of a Brown, and sharing the pointed ears of a Black, it, however, was a bear like no other. More pizzily than polar, more sun than sloth. The singular [delicate features<sup>219</sup>] captured so well on the folio by the artist spoke of an innate regality and athleticism, a looser definition of the word bear. *Ursus Atlantea*, Jack would one day amend upon it in blue biro as requested by the Learned Woman *Amoosu*. The small act imbuing it with another scratch of specious time before it was passed on and on until completion.

*Ursus Atlantea*; the Atlantean bear.



An intricacy is unravelling. Mylonás would try to outrun it, roar aloud in defiance, but a pebble cannot best a wave.

An uncalculated noise grows underpaw, shaking sense from the world. A crack, like that of thunder, in the centre of all.

Littoral lesions bleed over antiquated ramparts. The convivial scales of floating and floater finally, lastingly, ill-weighted.

Bathcities and botanical gardens crumble to dust, their statued archways losing a nose, a finger, whole identities.

The snoutless become the Great Works of their galleries, pamlimpsestual prints of The Defining Moments—immobilized in time; seen through the eyes of another;

celebrated until lost. The bravest climb for a higher ground that is no longer there—unseated, falling, gone.

A seafoam land now. All white hushing susurrations and sinking finger-steeple. A drowned Atlantic sea-chest, sinking with its wares. Atlantis no more.

Poised on the waterfalling tip of a [lost continent<sup>220</sup>], Mylonás' snout is far-turned and horizontally destitute, [stinging with the salt of the rising sea<sup>221</sup>].

Adrift now, wave-padding in the wake of endings, [a singular patterning, a peculiar deportment<sup>222</sup>] is dragged depthwards. A

*proto ursus maritimus*  
cascading fast  
from ursus major to minor  
to forgotten



A scratching in the back of his head, persistent and probing, forced John from sleep and into his office and the slow-coming embrace of a hastily swallowed paracetamol. It was late, too late to be up and awake when you had a full day of lectures, meetings and marking tomorrow, but the feeling wouldn't let up. Not so much a pain, but a niggling, nagging feeling, like when you suddenly become aware of your nails and then you can *feel* them, there, always there.

He tried to read a book (*Mizora*), tried to read two separate books in fact (*Oil on Water*), but there was no ebb and flow to the sensation. It was a constant irritation, a particularly obnoxious white noise.

And then the phone rang.

"Sophie? You do know what time it is?"

"I can't sleep," his sister said.

She was experiencing the same thing. The skeptic in him wanted to refute this, to analyse the differences between each of their own very different headaches, but he was tired. So he let her talk, and incrementally, began to allow her to sway him.

Looking out the window, John watched as Storm Christoph blew on through, lashing at the west-facing side of the house. *Like sea spray*, he thought.

"You know what it's like, don't you?" Sophie suddenly asked, her own mind and geographical location likewise tuning in to something watery.

And then Sophie said a name that they hadn't spoken of in years and the itch, the insufferable sensation, abated.

"Did you feel that? It went." John sat up straight and dared a smile. "I can... Oh, it's back. Because of course it is." He sank back down, looking wistfully, looking self-destructively, at the half-empty coffee mug.

So Sophie said the name again and it really did help.

And again.

And again

Until both of them knew exactly what this feeling was like, even if they had forgotten it for a time: unfulfilled child curiosity.

"How long's it been?" John wondered aloud. "Ten years? Fifteen?"

"We need to go back," his sister said, knowing the certainty of it only as the words left her mouth. "Back to Jack."

As children the two of them had been [enthralled by the {single} yellow page<sup>223</sup>] their [father would resurrect from the attic, during long, sad evenings of drunken nostalgia<sup>224</sup>]. "Jack" had given it to their great-grandfather, a token of goodwill and friendship, after taking him on as a gardener when nobody else would touch him with a barge pole. Unusually striking with its painfully detailed illustration and an indecipherable [cave of prose<sup>225</sup>], it had been Jack's prized possession, but in giving it to the Millers he found even greater pleasure. It had become a family heirloom.

"Rats might have gotten to it by now," John said, pulling down the attic ladder of their old family home. A part of him wanted this to be the case, so this shared madness could be put to rest. The other part, the resurgent child who hadn't yet learned the words neoliberalism, Trump or the NRA, wished otherwise.

The image of the bear had [haunt{ed him} almost as much as<sup>226</sup>] his father had his entire adult life. It had just lately been unseated by everything else, put at the back of a wardrobe increasingly stocked with newer, more pressing clothes. Climbing the ladder now, he could remember all the times they had tried to make a story for it, to make sense of it.

*Ursus Atlantea.*

Sophie found the box behind a Christmas tree that was old even when they were young. They shared a moment looking at it, recalling angels, stars, presents and the more important bickering that made Christmas here what it had been. And then Sophie opened the box.

Of all the twelve books stored inside, they found the folio page in the last they checked. Protectively nestled in its centre, it was as flat and yellow as the last time their father had come down the stairs trumpeting the air and holding it aloft like some holy book.

"Still there then," John said just to say something.

"Hmm."

Sophie read it under the light of her phone. Or tried to. She had expected something to happen, well, hoped something would happen. But, of course, nothing did. The text was still as unreadable as on that very first Saturday evening when they had first seen it, as the day the Learned Woman had gifted it to Jack. And the peculiar bear was as inscrutable as ever. Sophie laughed.

"It helped though, right?" she asked, looking at her brother. "At the time?"

John wanted to say no, and that what had truly helped was the talking. It had taken their minds off of a really quite common incident. After all, migraines weren't all that unfamiliar. Millions of people suffered from them. Was it really so impossible that the two of them happened to share one at the same time?

"It helped. Let's take it downstairs."

For a time they sat facing each other around a table with a thin film of dust across its surface, the page between them as, truthfully, it always had been. Even when they were young the bear had meant something different to each of them; a utopian queen to Sophie, an aged endling to John. Joy versus sadness, beauty versus dismay.

Outside the rain picked up, hitting the shingles hard and fast, like pellets, like bullets. John looked out at the rain—*squall*—and found himself again thinking about the stranger Jack who had attached himself to his family so long ago.

An accomplished sailor turned sudden gardener, Jack was as much an enigma as the page. People either spoke very highly of him or wanted his head on a hook. Over the years, John and Sophie had independently looked into the supposed 'Jack-Sea' O'Mann. They needed more than the few unremarkable words their father had deigned to throw their way whenever they asked. In the end, both had found very little, owing no doubt to an overused first name and a likely fabricated second. What they did find, however, was something they already knew long before beginning their inquiries. His ship name, Jack-Sea, was like as much misspelt.

"We should go," John said, pushing himself away from the table.

"We should take it. Frame it." Sophie's eyes never left the illustration and her voice had risen an octave. "I'll have it a month and then you have it a month."

John shook his head. "It's an attic thing."

"It doesn't have to be." Sophie paused, looked up. "I'll have it if you don't want it."

"It's not that I don't want it." He did. He wanted it more than anything. And that was what was so strange about it all. What really unnerved John the most. The page was working them again. Influencing them like it had influenced so many altercations before.



“Then I’ll have it!” Sophie reached out.

“No!”

John wasn’t entirely sure why he did it. Maybe it was because water had been following him for the last two days—Storm Christoph seemingly chasing him across England and nautical words filling up his mind. Maybe it was a moment of madness. Maybe it was because he thought it would be fitting. Maybe, maybe. He just knew he had to do something. He didn’t want another reason for something to get stuck between them.

Sophie grabbed for his arms, aghast. Tried her best to stop him and said some words that, to John, were completely fair under the circumstances, but then she fell silent and just watched. They both did.

In the sink, under the constant pour of cold water, the cave of prose that had so captivated them all their lives seemed to yawn wider, the calligraphy inching marginwards. Creating a gap for the now stretching bear.

“Can you-”

“I can.”

“How did you-”

“I didn’t.”

The ink of the illustration seemed to float up and away from the paper and rematerialize elsewhere. A heavily detailed cloud became a path leading out, a wave became a pawprint, a background seabird became a lumbering shadow. And the bear, the pen-and-ink bear of inordinate posture, padded away. First from paper, then from water. Stopping only before it sank into the plughole to fix them with blacker than ink eyes. For a moment, that was all there was, and then it roared melodiously and retreated once more to its watery cave.

John scratched his chin. “I’m starting to think that migraine thing wasn’t so much a migraine thing and maybe a brain thing.”

“I’m sorry,” Sophie said. They were standing by their cars, waiting for their moment to say goodbye. “I don’t know what happened. I just-”

John waved it away. “I suspect what always is meant to happen. People fighting over things. A test, maybe.”

“What did we do though, John? What happened?”

He let Sophie pull out of the drive first, lifting a hand as she looked his way. The rain was easing now, the last of the *squall* seeing itself out. It ran down the windscreen in clear, widening rivulets. For a moment he sat there, watching, waiting.

He almost expected the face when it appeared. She felt familiar in a strange, Jack-ish type of way. A face he had glimpsed and denied in every drop of water he had ever seen. He didn’t question or probe it, rather he let the weirdness flow over him. Like childhood, he knew such magic would be fleeting.

The woman in the water mirrored his smile. She had been waiting a long time for this moment.

“There you are,” *amoosu* said to John and Mylonás alike. Whole oceans apart, but linked in time, in water. The man out of the water and the bear returned to it. And then she said something that proved his sister right all along; the bear was royalty, but more than that he was not an endling, but a beginning:

“*Ursus Atlantea... Hermaphroditus.*”

~/~

Somewhere out there, there is a placid ocean. Untroubled. The water is as clear as glass and completely still. Fish never break the surface, content to skim just beneath. No rock disturbs its horizontal oblivion and there is no sky-sea delineation; the ocean runs on into the stars.

In its waters, predation is mechanical, an indisputable process. Malice is a word that has yet to trace a shadow across its sun-speckled surface. Malice is a word pre-outlawed. Murder isn't even a thought.

One could walk right on over it without breaking step, without getting wet. One could sail past on distant seas and barely bat an eyelid. One could hear the sweet serenades of visiting sea-cows and just keep going. One could dispel curiosity on damp days after rain. One could try. One really could.

~ ~

There is a bodiless murder on an unmanned boat in the middle of the ocean. The crime is Temporal Looseness and the criminal is infinitely Janus-faced. The victim cannot be seen, though the wounds are plain enough. The murder weapon is invisible—like a dagger of ice, only not. The boat isn't important. Time will take that too, before long.

The boat isn't important.

~ ~

[...the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development ... but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates<sup>227</sup>.]

~ ~

[The thoughtful seafarer is enclosed irrecoverably in the finite world of the ship with time on his hands. He must spend much of that time standing watch - literally *watching* and waiting for something, *or nothing*, to happen. His world demands keen sense because he lives on an unstable element that keeps his home in constant motion, sometimes soothing him with a false security, sometimes threatening to destroy him. Although his vision is bounded by a horizon and contains a seascape of monotonous regularity, what he sees can change rapidly and unpredictably. His sense of space suggests infinity and solitude, on the one hand, and prison-like confinement in small compartments on the other; it contains in its restless motions lurking possibilities of total disorientation<sup>228</sup>].

~ ~

[When perceived as a trackless void, the sea possesses no meaning of its own, but receives the projections of the land based concerns<sup>229</sup>]:

The surface eddies to a current of capital. The waves that are made here result not from wind but from passage, from freight and tanker ships actualizing click-and-demand global purchases and currensea dominions. Such desires circle [the globe in an instant<sup>230</sup>], pouring through [stock exchanges and tattered wallets alike<sup>231</sup>], pausing only when [assets are frozen<sup>232</sup>] or find themselves landlocked in too small canals<sup>xxiii</sup>, accelerating only [when investors achieve greater liquidity<sup>233</sup>].

[Some say that it trickles down to the poor like inconstant rain<sup>234</sup>], and its [rising tide is supposed to lift all boats<sup>235</sup>], but yachts do not capsize or spring leaks like long-tails, and jet-skis do not shoulder generational stability like sampans; and capital only ever really flows one way.

~ ~

*In this Ship of Fools, it is the sane man that is insane.*

~ ~

Commander Baha kept checking GoogleSea & shaking her head. It wasn't supposed to be like this; it was supposed to be smooth sailing for four hours with bonny nine miles per hour winds. Kid-stuff. The app even had smiley emoticon jellyfish, which it only reserved for the best of boating conditions, the kind of weather that yacht-boys & Gen-X's overindulged in until a body was found on some distant shore the next morning.

"Did you update this?" Baha yelled at her first-mate, Lucian Liu, as she slapped at the display. The app remained resolute: sun, smiles, & gentle sea. Baha repeated the question, screeching over the crashing waves that were doing some real & lasting damage to her hull. Lucian's returning look didn't inspire much confidence, nor did the pitch-rise of his replying "Yes?" Cursing, Baha looked once again outside & wished she hadn't.

Describing something as biblical is a cliché, but what was happening all around Commander Baha was Moses-level shit. The sea was vertical on both sides & they were dry-sinking, as if all the water underneath them had been swiped left & the *Corral Ground* dragged down to the depths. Worse of all, the payload that would have seen her rich as an Inner Manhattan mogul was completely out of sight. Again, she reached for the radio & garbled a mayday into static, repeating it until her voice grew hoarse & Lucian began to sob.

It was all supposed to be a milk run. A job as simple as an after-school pick-up in central London: wearying but needful. Sure, it had cost her a pretty penny to get the gig, pennies

---

<sup>xxiii</sup> Once upon a coronavirus, a 20,000 TEU container ship, ironically called Ever Given, blocked the Suez Canal for six whole days. It seemed the captain and the crew had not understood Earth was at a standstill and it was not just ludicrous, but a preordained given, that calamity would occur. Meme-warfare and a nine billion dollars deficit to global trade ensued.

that came out of a lot of the *Carrol Ground's* crew without them strictly knowing it, but Baha knew that a score like this would make princelings of them all. Ice was white-gold now. Hotter seas & rising waters had made bergs like this as rare as pangolins. A win like this would have allowed the whole crew to retire & buy elevated land somewhere out west. A little salary cut now, she had thought, well, it was understandable.

The berg had been exactly where the disgraced suit claimed, a bastion white swimmer existing against all logic & the size of a chapel. After it was lashed to the *Carrol's* aft, the crew took selfies with it, posting their sunburnt faces up on Instagram with hashtags like #titanictwo, #motherload, #GreatWhiteBerg, & #icetomeetyou.

Pointed, pearlescent, & frankly fucking pretty, it was probably one of the last of its kind outside of a wetlab & so Baha let them have their fun. They had paid for it, after all. She just forgot how quick the socials were nowadays, how word of mouth had been expedited to click & flick the world over.

Things had then, of course, gone south, like South Pole south. Screams broke out all over the deck & people who had been standing were suddenly drowning or flying fifty metres overhead. Jets of water shot up from the placid surface in fours and fives. "Whirlpoo—" someone yelled, maybe Nai, trying to warn everyone before something shut her up. Baha had been thrown from port to starboard inside the cabin, smashing her head into a defunct radar console & losing twenty seconds of time to darkness. When she came to, the sea had become biblical & everyone on deck was dead.

Giving Lucian a revitalizing slap to the jaw now, Baha pulled him to his feet & shoved him towards the helm. "Keep us north." He would be no use now, of course, but the best bet was to get him out the way & focused on something other than his impending doom. Besides, north always sounded more preferable, more survivable than south—it was up & out, it was hope. Commander Baha then patted herself down, smoothed out her hair, & stepped out onto the deck, ready to beg.

There were rules to this kind of work. Strict & unavoidable, they kept things above board, ticking, & safely progressing from A to B. Baha knew all these of course & had rather wrongly wagered such a short trip—a mere twenty kilometres & change—would have gone unnoticed. This scratch of the Arabian Sea was usually so unpeopled & desolate at this hour. But there was a reason there was so much treasure at the bottom of the ocean, why those yellow rubber ducks could still be seen on the waves even now—it was a warning.

Baha stepped over what was left of the mainsail & took a breath. The deck was slick with blood & a few dozen unfortunate salmon; the sky overhead had gone from bruised to ooze; & the TradeWater, that effigy of the Corporatocrasea Baha had tried so hard to dodge, was everywhere.

It rose impossibly in the two increasing seawalls on either side, it twisted in the nine whirlpools circling the *Corral Ground*, & it sat waiting across the whole planet in three (and rising) quarters. Baha fell to her knees. She had heard stories, sure, but it had always been a *system* to her not a tangible, corporeal *thing*. You're not supposed to see the heads of systems—you're not worthy—you're only ever given glimpses of its over-masticated leavings. The chewed-up unfortunates. She swallowed & tried to find the words. It was... it was Davy Jones' Locker made carnate, with the doors wide & gaping.

"I should have called it in!" Baha beseeched into the sound of crashing waves. Her nose was pressed hard against a deck increasingly reddened with what was left of her crew. She tried to close her eyes to it, but the salt was already inside, stinging. "I should have

authenticated the trip,” she continued. “Paid the tariff. Prayed for good wind. Honoured you. I know that, I know that!”

Thunder cracked in the distance & a fork of lightning struck the prow. “There are procedures for global goods transportation, Commander,” replied a weary TradeWater. “Long known & long understood. Contracts dense enough to dry the eyeballs. There needn’t have been such... death. This all could have been avoided.”

There was a break in the thunder, which Baha found all the more intimidating. She dared not look up.

“I wonder, do you think 35% of your gross profits too steep an asking price? Does my blessing of stable seas & good wind feel *insubstantial* to you? Tiresome, even?” The waves rose higher & higher on each side, blocking out what little light remained & hurtling Baha further into a pitch reserved only for the darkest denizens of the sea.

“No. No! I was just...” Baha blindly looked up into the raging water. Inwardly, she cursed at herself. This was the cost of overreaching—grovelling in the dark, snivelling like a child. Scolded.

She had tried to reach in a society where reaching was prohibited. Triple-locked in bureaucracy & the inscrutable 1%. She fell silent. Baha had heard about the wrecks & retribution of the scorned sea but thought it the work of those back-corner gabblers who stretched a tale as long as their next drink. She never expected any of it to be true, never expected to come face to face with Corporatocrasea’s gatekeeping Cerberus over a few unverified documents.

“You were greedy?” the TradeWater offered.

“Yes. Greedy... I was greedy.”

The sea calmed a little, enough that Baha could finally hear herself think. But it was too late. There were no loopholes or second-chances to be had here. This was life & it was fleeting, sinking, emptying by the second. Holding on for as long as possible was all you could do. Gritting your teeth was a daily toil. “What can I... What must I do?”

“Make the necessary paperwork,” instructed the TradeWater as the sky lightened a little overhead, “and file it before the day is through. Pay brokerage fees between me & your local governmental body/bodies. Ensure the insurance payouts on all your crew are valid (if, of course, they took the time to file such dreary paperwork). Lastly, I advise personal therapy sessions for yourself & your man there. Witnessing such barbarity, I am told, can really scar people.

“Oh, & of course there will be taxation, too, & you’ll need to undergo the requisite permit checks. Not just anybody is allowed to haul here after all. The oceans aren’t transboundary anymore, Commander. But you know all that, right? You didn’t just come out here with a goal in mind & no preparation, right?” The TradeWater chuckled. “You didn’t just, oh I don’t know, listen to the mutterings of some drone & expect a freebie, right? Because this is Earth, Commander, & nothing, ever, is free or easy or without a hundred-thousand ghost-lines attached. Now then, when can I expect that Pay’n’Pray? I accept WeChat, Alipay & PayPal.”

~ ~

And then [money became a god<sup>236</sup>], [all-powerful and out of control. It began to talk. It began to create on its own. It created feasts and famines, songs of joy, lamentations. It created greed and hunger, which were its two faces. Towers of glass rose at its name, were

destroyed and rose again. It began to eat things. It ate whole forests, croplands, and the lives of children. It ate armies, ships and cities. No one could stop it. To have it was a sign of grace.<sup>237]</sup>

~ ~

[Without doubt, he reflected, homo sapiens en masse presented a more unsavoury spectacle than almost any other species of animal ... this mass of articulated albino flesh sprawled on the beach resembled the diseased anatomical fantasy of a surrealist painter.<sup>238]</sup> Dadaists would look out on these shores and smile sinister, etching the disembodied limbs like so many cutis sails sailing for the Nu World:

bodies of water.

~ ~

the [tideline ... is the point of encounter<sup>239]</sup> a zonal convergence of [time, ruin, and vestige<sup>240]</sup> in the [disappearing age of territoriality<sup>241]</sup> money-making & globalized, it aches [enclosure and appropriation<sup>242]</sup> sinking the sublime in ones and zeroes a barnacled and beaten figurehead [to the expansive powers of capital<sup>243]</sup>

the tideline is at the point of erasure a liquid lie forever being rewritten

~ ~

look around  
we have  
a [frantic desire to persist<sup>244]</sup>  
to record and document  
[to be legible<sup>245]</sup> in future cenes

*[plastic polymers{, ghost nets}, anthropogenic sound pollution, CO2, flipflops and rubber ducks, unexploded bombs, shipwrecks, plane wrecks, (and the bodies, lots of bodies), crude oil, palm oil, mercury, cadmium, arsenic, lead, flame retardants, herbicides, pesticides, animal fat, fidget spinners<sup>246]</sup>*

we are  
watered and warped and  
soon to be erased in waves  
[We were here<sup>247]</sup>  
Ash Woz Ere  
We

Were

a leftover legacy  
at the mercy of  
an overworked hydrolysis  
[always here and  
already gone<sup>248</sup>]

*DESPOL  
IATION*

*PLASTICS x ACIDIFICATION*



**despoliation**    noun

[the action or process of despoiling: spoliation<sup>249</sup>]

- **despoil**    verb

[to strip of belongings, possessions or value: pillage<sup>250</sup>]

- **spoliation**    noun

[1 a: the act of plundering

b: the state of having been plundered especially in war

2 : the act of injuring especially beyond reclaim<sup>251</sup>]

~ ~

["Plastic is like that," Oliver was saying. "It never biodegrades. It gets churned around in the {Great Pacific} gyre and ground down into particles. Oceanographers call it confetti. In a granular state, it hangs around forever."

"The sea is filled with plastic confetti," Muriel affirmed. "It floats around and gets eaten by the fish or spat up onto the beach. It's in our food chain. I don't envy the anthropologists, trying to make sense of our material culture from all the bright hard nuggets they'll be digging out of the middens of the future."<sup>252</sup>]

~ ~

We know that plastic outlives us.

We know that plastic, along with CO2, acidifies.

[We know that as the water gushed in and the container sank, dozens of cardboard boxes would have come bobbing to the surface; that one by one, they too would have come apart, discharging thousands of little packages into the sea; that every package comprised a plastic shell and a cardboard back; that every shell housed four hollow plastic animals - a red beaver, a blue turtle, a green frog, and a yellow duck - each about three inches long; and that printed on the cardboard in colorful letters in a bubbly, childlike font were the following words: THE FIRST YEARS. FLOATEES. THEY FLOAT IN THE TUB OR POOL. PLAY & DISCOVER. MADE IN CHINA. DISHWASHER SAFE.<sup>253</sup>]

~ ~

[The more we test, the more we find; and while nobody yet knows the health impact on humans, in the oceans a plastic microbead is said to be one million more times toxic than the water around it.<sup>254</sup>]

~ ~

a surf-foal eddies  
curling tight  
expanse-riding  
cotton bud forests

~\~

### Raftland

Today I am going to earn my first scale. Faa said diving is like living-sleep, like someone tossing a heavy blanket over you. Everything all quiet and flat. He also said he would be here to see me do it. He lied.

The water is hot and makes my skin itch. At Learning they say it's because of the Mad Sun. We smoked its friend and now it hates us. I think that's funny, but I wouldn't say so to Headman.

You're supposed to take nine breaths before you dive. Drop nose-first until you see a shimmer. Sometimes the shimmers lie—the Mad Sun pulling your chain. I chase a few. *It's not supposed to be easy*, Faa had told one of my brohs before his own scale, *if it was, then we'd all be dead*.

~

Raft moves with the currents. We never know where we are and never know where we are going. That's why scaling is so hard. Tradition calls it Lottery; Fate. I call it perpetual aimlessness.

Sometimes we come across raftlings, broken unmended things that bob on uncertain waves. Always unmanned. Storyless. We add them to the Underwood and grow. There are a hundred Scaled and sixteen Growers on Raft now. We take what we can.

~

There are shapes beneath me. Mottled and sleek. Eyes like ecliptic moons. They swim away in shoals of four or nine, dangled appendages dragging in their wakes. I try my best to not associate them with Old Neg's third ear.

We've learnt to eat them less and less.

~

I don't think nine breaths is enough. Ten is rounder. Sounds more buoyant. Nine is dull, like an anchor hitting the bedrock. I think if I had ten I would have found something better. Something that you could squeeze and scrunch. Something you could pin to your hair.

*She has a seajel*, Moo says as I surface, holding my find aloft. It's a flimsy thing, and quickly worried by the wind. It balloons and flaps and makes my family ooh and ahh. I half believe her until Headman shakes his head.

They put me with the others who pulled free carriers from the depths. Not Scale-less, certainly, but not Scaled either. In-betweens. Ghosts.

I am angry.

~

I find myself with those whose task it is to scrape and floss the underside of Raft. Those whose days exist entirely to declamp barnacles and mend breaks. I see Headman's smile at this, wolfish and winning.

It could have been worse. I can still see Dayra, my dive-mate, paddling in our wake, screaming. Splashing. Tiring.

Raft goes on.

~

I think Dayra was a cousin on my Faa's side; we had similar noses. He swam after us for hours. He was strong for his age and all of Raft thought him on Fate and the Underwood's good side. Even Headman looked pained at his surfacing scale-less.

We kissed once—I can tell you that because you're not real. You're me. It was good, I think. Maybe that was one of the things he shouted as Raft left him. A forbidden and taboo thing that could have seen me Overboarded alongside him, thankfully eaten up by the wind. I wouldn't blame him. I would've done the same.

I can tell you another thing—

I loosened a bit of Raft. Maybe we'll kiss again.

~

People I know start to leave me. Brohs and friends fall away like the rotten tips of Raft chipped away by successive saline. Moo visits less and less. I am marked.

Carrier conversation is banal and cyclical. We worry our thoughts as we worry crustacea free from the wood. Sometimes it is like the only person who talks to me is the Mad Sun. Daily screams of enraged sentence after sentence, haptically etched in red streaks across arms, legs and neck.

The burning becomes beautiful, an antidote to the silence.

~

We're supposed to wear our scales with pride, but how do you wear a carrier? The others wear them with the hoops hung around their ears or like sun-be-gone-caps tied under their chins. Estra bundled up her hair in her's on her first scale and nobody has seen it since. I don't want mine. I wanted one of those six-rings to wear as a skull-cap and splay my hair like the arms of an octo. I saw someone do that once, I think.

Headman is lucky. He has pulled bottles, plastic and glass, and has shaped every one of his finds into a sequin cape. He has the most scales on all of Raft. Faa called him a Sunling once, on account of his approach near blinding everyone. Headman hadn't liked that.

Headman Albedo is a living fish and is never as hot as the rest of us.

I hate him.

~

It takes a long time to scrub the Underwood. The curl-footed things, as Estra and the others call the barnacles, share the same permanence of the sea. I think I'll be as old as her by the time we are done, and then we'll just have to start over—

Sea is cycle. Raft is always.

Sometimes I look at my hands and in their wrinkled rawness I see Raft; I see its knots in my freckles, its fissures in my veins, its creaks in every crack of a knuckle. How old is Raft? I asked my Moo and Faa as a child. I'm still waiting for my answer. Headman says *allwhere and everywhere*, but that's not an answer. It does not even make sense.

I think Raft is Us, and it'll float for as long as we do.

~

The wind and water is colder now. We double up on cloth and hides, and spend less and less time outside our huts. The spray is like witch nails or ice-needles. We pray for the Mad Sun's rage.

Sometimes there is another white beyond that of the froth. The Growers try in vain to catch it on their tongues, the Scaled look less and less extant.

Raft ponders on.

~

I was gutting a three-eyed trout for dinner when my broh told me the news. It was all I could do not to smile and clap twice at my clavicle to Raft and Tradition. It was like all those wetcurses had finally come to something.

I was happy. I was naive.

It was the Rattle that had him. A slow-plague that washed over Raft every supermoon and took a soul to surf. It was the price of the precarity of Raftlife.

Headman spoke in wet warbles that even we couldn't quite catch. Those Tradition-bound considered it scripture, the rest death-rattles. His lips were bloated and blue but upturned, as if even at the end there was a joke to my being here. My Moo was by his side. As she always seemed to now be. Her eyes were raining.

*Headman asked for you, she said.*

~

I don't know why he did it.

I don't know why everyone left the room to let him.

I just know that I wish I was the one who had risen scaleless like Dayra. Like Faa.

~

Estra finds me out by the bowsprit an hour later. Dusk laps at my feet. She wraps her stinky seal hide over me and says more words than I ever heard come from her mouth before or since. Her words raw with experience.

I know now why Moo cried seajel at my scaling. It was desperation, not elation. She'd rather me be adrift than feel like this too.

*A carrier, Estra begins, is a container. It's what they do.* She reaches up and releases her hair. It doesn't so much as fall but flop, there is more grey than brown. *See? They hold the things in that we take.* She set about repacking her hair into the bag—it involves a lot of squashing and pressing and swearing. Some of her fingers are curled and unresponsive and it hurts to watch her struggle. It takes a long time. *You see how it goes from yours—* she points to the scratchy white-line about my wrist—*to mine? How it fills out. Swells.*

~

I want to tear off my carrier and throw it into the sea. What stops me is one thought: someone else doing their own dive, breaking the surface some other time, some other where, exhausted but elated, only to find themselves later out on the bowsprit brackish and broken. Stagnant, like me. A carrier.

#### A Bag for Life.

The next morning I look at them all, at just how many of us there really are. There are five or six groupings all around Raft. And then I look out across the water and wonder just how many bags are really down there? How many of us are destined to hold?

To carry.

To swell.

~

Headman Albedo died a week later, but he is still here. I can feel him. It is like another Raft, an inside Raft; and I am the waves.

~

People from my old life return to me in fits and starts, like flotsam, like raftlings. Eyes that had only recently come to unsee me, once more pick me out of crowds. People ask me how I feel and if I have belly-chummed this morning? They ask me if I feel Fate at my side or the Underwood buoying my steps. They don't offer to do my duties.

At night, I continue to wetcurse.

At night, I continue to chip away at the back of Raft.

At night, I continue to see Headman's smile.

~

The Mad Sun looks ragged on the day of calving. Its hot-anguish harried by horizontal clouds. I ask Estra what is happening and she just shakes her head, not looking. I do not think she is long from a watery embrace.

Raftfolk spill out everywhere, making and mending, building and procuring. Today is any day to them. Today is yesterday, tomorrow and now. Change weathers the changeable so very little. I asked Moo what it was like to calf a month or so ago, and she told me the *hardest most beautiful terrifying moment of my life*.

~

I am so very round. Sometimes when I lay down I put my chin to my chest and pretend my stomach is a stationary raft, an island so close I could reach out and touch it. I stay that way for as long as possible until a voice or a face breaks the dream. Every time I get up it hurts a little more.

I had hoped to have been gone long before now.

~

Moo hands her to me and she is so very beautiful.

Raft is commune, commons and commotion.  
Raft is never being alone whilst being alone.  
Raft is calving before committee.

The girl has my eyes but his smile.

~

Costco is nine months the day we breakaway. It's only three-steps by four, but it is ours and not Raft. There is no Lottery here. Just me and her. And sea.

We did it at night, in squid-ink completeness, and nobody was any the wiser.

~

My dotter is a generational shadow, wearing the face of the past. In her I see mistake after mistake after mistake but also hope, newness.

Fragility. Change.

The world I give her is not my own, nor my Moo or Faa's, but the one before Raft. An inheritor's inheritance.

I just hope there are more links left in its chain.

~

The water is warm and much worried by a west wind.

We eddy to a nothing, towards a something.

The Mad Sun shrieks hate; I fear I have killed us.

~

Sometimes, when the sky is ink and the sea is a mirror, I think about Moo. Is she upset? Does she miss me? Will I ever see her again?

Other times, I think about Estra. Is she still there? Or has the salt taken her? I look for her in the sky, in the cloud-stuff too pure to ever be contained or bagged.

Some days, I cry more often than Costco.

~

Something in the water. Small, formless, uncanny. I see it.

I see a deflated carrier riding the surface and it empties my stomach. It is reflection anathema and I kick and bat it away.

It always comes back.

~

My dotter is squishy and loud, with cheeks like bloated seajels. In her I see future after future, each as different as the last.

She giggles at the wind, shrieks at the spray. Her fingers grasp nothing and everything.

I hope she can have it all.

~



I start catching the carriers—not scaling, never scaling—and set about remaking them into something. There are so many—coral-caught, wind-worried, sea-swollen. I take them all.

I tell Costco they are sky-jels—sea-trapped things fallen and ready to be rescued that like nothing more than wind inside them, and we gain direction.

We sail.

~/~

[I saw the coasts of the unknown world...

Rise from the sea of the night,  
With many a wonder-hue empearled,  
With many a gem of light;  
And from that shore there grew  
A faint and distant cry,  
Like a wailing spirit's sigh  
That floated through the dawn,  
The {catching} call of<sup>f255</sup> half-lives [unborn,  
Waiting behind the dim array<sup>256</sup>]  
Of capitalism's next, next day.

~|~

## Just See

"That Mae has been out there all night," George Bisnett says to anybody who will listen, his voice growing louder and louder each time he is ignored. He moves a little farther down the pier, idling near the biggest of groups who have yet to spot her.

"Damndest thing," he barks in an octave higher than his usual. A few of them jump and turn around, eyebrows knitted like his drawers this morning. They don't look at her though, they just look at him and increase the gap. Typical tourists. Someone, a youngster making a meal of their thumb, finally follows his gaze, and he latches onto the attention.

George takes a deep, well-practiced breath. "Out there all night, dressed like that? Not right. It's a wonder she's not caught her death." This time, ears are pricked and piqued. Folks start to come over to the railing to look out at the beach.

Mae, still and naked as she'd been when George first arrived this morning, doesn't notice. Or pretends she doesn't.

"What's she doing?"

"Should we do something?"

Leaning on the railing now, George shakes his head. "Nasty surf and all," he adds, watching the foam gathering at Mae's feet.

After an hour, there's a crowd. George had always fancied himself an actor.

Before long, the technologically inclined start pointing and lifting phone screens to capture the moment for posterity, for posting. George nods as if this is right, as if this is what he had been aiming for all along. A commotion is what his mother would have called what

Mae was doing out there in nothing but her birthday suit. On a Sunday morning no less. George himself would never be so judgemental.

When someone does finally sidle up to him and asks what the hell is happening, he opens his mouth to say anarchy, chaos, something disturbing, but none of those words leave his mouth. Stumped and staring mouth agape at the fellow, George finds that he doesn't really know.

The man walks away, bending the ear of that busy-body Deborah Tansworth. George lets him go, looks out towards Mae, and for the first time that day, keeps his mouth shut.

What *is* she doing?

Mae is up before him again, standing defiant against the ocean. Skin like porcelain, he wonders how long it'll be until the salt and cold start to make her crack. Make her old. He joins a group of people at the railing.

"Still there then," he notes, shaking his head.

"Do you know her?" a woman wrestling an over-bored child asks. "Is she okay?"

George nods. "Since she was little. Minded her once too. Who would have thought such a little one would turn out like this?"

The woman's expression hardens and, what George assumes to be the father, comes up beside her. She hands over the child. "What do you mean?"

George points to the beach. "What do you mean, what do I mean? Just look. That isn't normal."

"Maybe it's a, you know, social-thing," the father offers, shrugging his shoulders as if he didn't really believe it either. "Ice-bucket challenge and all that."

The woman rolls her eyes at him and turns back to George. "Are you telling me you haven't been down there?" She looks around at the gathered faces. "Has anyone?"

George watches the woman surge through the bodies and slice a direct path towards

Mae down on the shore. The man with the child sighs and offers him a what-can-you-do look.

Leaning out and over the railing as far as he dares, George shakes his head but doesn't look away. "It must be four degrees out," he says.

The man beside George moves the child to the other arm, imperceptibly rocking on the spot as his partner comes to a stop at Mae's side. "They're talking," he says, smiling, letting out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. "They're talking."

"What did you expect?" retorts George.

The atmosphere on the pier sharpens, a unanimous intake of breath holding the moment on a knife's edge. The gulls, so loud and daring before, fall silent or fall away. And children, sensing something in their parents, cage their cries, storing them up for their car journeys home.

A pained minute passes. Everybody on the pier silent as the grave, craning ears against unforgiving breezes. "We should have gone with her," a young woman says to her friend. "This waiting is killing me."

George refrains from saying how her cutting voice was having a similar effect on him, and instead wills his eyes to see what the hell is going on.

A unanimous gasp unfurls amongst them, and the man next to him nearly drops his firstborn over the side of the pier. "Is she bleeding mad?!" He runs off, his child trailing him like a loose bit of thread caught up in the wind. George watches them go, clears his throat, steadies himself. "It's catching now then."

Four days later, Mae is joined by three more people. That makes the line of naked bodies a group, a following, and, dare George say it aloud, a “Cult!”

The newswoman’s eyebrows rise in alarm and glee. There is a lot of coverage to be found in a cult. She could see the viewing figures and the opportunities coming thick and fast.

“Who is she?” she asks, looking down at the group of bare bodies. “Who are *they*?”

George can only shake his head. “Fools and idiots. They terrify the dogs, you know. Get them barking to high heaven.” He runs a hand over his forehead. “She’ll die soon.” He nods toward the group, meaning Mae. “I’ve not seen her eat or drink. Soon she’ll fall down and the water will run right up to her chin. Then what?” He threw up his hands. “Tourists will blacklist us. Cromer will suffer.” He stopped, thinking for a moment. “Maybe that’s it,” he offered, staring right down the lens. “They’re here to destabilise the economy!”

They let him ramble for ten minutes more, but he was sure he’d seen the newswoman signal cut at least halfway through his talk. Whatever, he thought walking away. Who watches Channel Five anyway?

He found a bench and sat down. Today was a little warm for winter and the locals had made advantage of it; everywhere he looked he could see a double-scoop or a cone. George cast an eye back at the camera. It was still pointed where he’d stood moments ago, getting minute after minute of B roll. He had enjoyed talking just then, enamoured by the fact people would have to listen to him. Maybe he was like those on the beach in that regard, out there completely naked, gathering eyes with loudness because both had gone unheeded for so long. He hears the newswoman say, “Who are *they*?” again and finds himself echoing it.

Channel Five does not air George’s words. They air poxy Katie Lucre’s, a visiting student from UEA. Apparently, she knows Mae. Well, knows someone who knows her.

“It’s a message,” she articulates through teeth as big as windshields during her two-minute segment, “about the world. A *performance*.”

George changes the channel. Students, he thinks. Why, when he was that age, he was working his thumbs to the bone and doing it on five hours sleep no less. If it was a performance, as this Katie says, then where was the script? No, George could not get behind that. Abstract, was a word he refused to acknowledge.

“There’s Fifteen now,” a passerby informs him as George is leaving his house the next morning. The sea wind hits him full in the face, and for a second, he only stares. “Cockerels now too.”

Back up by his railing overlooking it all, George watches the Petrie kid run over to the “performance”, setting a box of food and a couple bottles of water down. Mae’s lips move and she smiles, but it may as well be foreign to him all the way up here. He half-expects her to join Mae, but she gets up and leaves, bisecting the half-ring of watchers that now surround Mae and the others on the beach side.

George’s eyes widen as he realises that one of them is Daniel Meeks. He runs a souvenir shop on the high street, smokes like a sailor, and has shared a drink with George in the Kings Head on many occasions. All the others looked to be in their 20s—just kids. Meeks, though, well, he was closer to George in age. Late 50s and then some. Not right, he thinks, catching sight of all that flesh. “Not right at all!”

Later, George overhears that Cromer is “trending”. Blowing up all over the internet. He doesn’t like the sound of that. He likes that Katie Lucre is now among the unclothed even less.

Mae’s body lights up screens the world over. Videos of her and the others’ bare skin being constantly sprayed by sea water is shown on every news channel in every country. Thousands of theories, explanations, and readings of the act stir conversation on e-forums. George, not in the least interested in e-anythings, pays none of them any mind. Instead, he does what he thought he never would.

“What is this?” he asks Mae’s goose-pimpled back. “Why are you doing this?”

It had been a hard decision, walking right out and up to them, but the alternative was to remain in a darkness that was driving him up the wall. Ever since Mae had gone out there and started all of this, Cromer had been nothing else. He couldn’t sleep for thinking what she was up to, why the little girl who was once afraid of the noise the counters made in Connect-4 was suddenly out there silently connecting millions.

When she and nobody else responds to George’s question, he moves around them, looking into their faces (refuting their nakedness altogether), trying to scry any meaning behind their glazed expressions. Seeing them, he can’t help but notice how each one looks so different. Young, old, black, white, rich, poor, thin, fat. George shakes his head; he doesn’t understand.

So close to the sea, the wind is ferocious; it rages against his legs, billows inside his jacket. What’s left of his hair is pulled seaward. In fact, so strong is the gust, that it feels as if it is trying to tug and turn him towards the ocean. Coming up beside Mae—stoic and silent—he does finally turn around. Sees what she sees. But there’s nothing there. Just sea.

“Just see.”

George swivels his head, trying to find the speaker, but there is a wall of flesh. And too many mouths.

“Just see,” one of them repeats.

Then it is a chorus, piping up in unseen mouths from every direction. A whispering, a wave. The effect causes him to feel lightheaded.

The spray that suddenly douses his back is arctic cold. He feels it balloon outwards on his clothing, staining the dry with wet. On Mae and the others, it is a wipe-away sheen. Their chests, repeatedly lambasted with ocean, run with stories. Waterworks. Each drip and splash a tale all to itself. George watches the narratives rise and fall, not understanding any of them, really, but agreeing with them all the same. He makes to turn around again, to join them, but his hand is stilled at the wrist when he tries to pull up his shirt.

“No,” she says, not moving her lips.

George tries shaking her off.

“No.”

George fights off her grip. “Why?! I want to damn it!”

Mae’s eyes align with his as she tells him why.

“It’s a performance,” George tells all the news outlets that flock to him the moment he steps free. That uncertain storiedness sensation, of being in on something higher and larger, that took him so close to the surf ebbs with every second. What had he felt, really? It was all nonsense. Words, weather, and wills.

A journalist from the BBC rushes out to meet him.

“You spoke to them? What are they trying to say?”

George ignores the question, looks up into the sky. Part of him believes he can taste it in the spray, in the water. It really is everywhere. He looks back at the bodies lining the beach, the bold and bare canvases catching killer watercolour on breasts and thighs and torsos. He then looks back towards all the eager faces, clamouring to listen to him.

“What do you know about microplastics?”

Their microphones surge forward, battling for pride of place.

George likes that.

Mae finally falls to the sand. She is starving and dehydrated. For two days now she has forgone even the slightest of nutritional intake. She had to. The cameras have long gone and don't capture the sea as it reclaims her.

“Just See,” she says at the last, the words muffled by the incoming tide, muffled by footsteps and barking, muffled by a planetary shrug and a whispered *No*.

~/~

[Feet buried in clay shaded coast,  
I made sure to stain my teeth  
with every bit of it, lodge the sand  
further into my nails,  
swallow the saltwater as it dripped from my bangs,  
keep whatever I could without taking<sup>257</sup>].

~ ~

[We can breathe in microplastics, even when indoors, where they've been detected suspended in the air, and do already drink them: they are found in the tap water of 94 percent of all tested American cities. And global plastic production is expected to triple by 2050, when there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish.<sup>258</sup>]

~ ~

[The total number of marine species said to be adversely affected by plastic pollution has risen from 260 in 1995, when the first assessment was carried out, to 690 in 2015 and 1,450 in 2018 ... One U.K. supermarket study found that every 100 grams of mussels were infested with 70 particles of plastic. Some fish have learned to eat plastic, and certain species of krill are now functioning as plastic processing plants, churning microplastics into smaller bits that scientists are now calling “nanoplastics”. But krill can't grind it all down<sup>259</sup>].

~ ~

The seaweed senate sways back and forth—  
it is a discussion immemorial: to rise up or rise above.

["It's not as if we're unused to being burdened  
with the surface world's refuse."<sup>260</sup>]

~ ~

I am staring at a screen showing a Portuguese man o' war, willing words to manifest. It is the last. An ending. I should say something. Be its mouthpiece. I try losing myself in looped footage of its viny fronds.

I am staring at a screen showing a Portuguese man o' war, wishing for such a uniform life. It is my axolotl<sup>xxiv</sup>. I want to mindmeld and bodyswap, to fish as only a hydrozoan can. I want to Unspecies. To take only what is necessary and move on, servicing the Thalassa food web sans contaminant thought.

I am staring at a camera lens.

I am wet and worldly. My dorsal-sail is deflated, sunken. Parts of me reach so far down I labour over the word transgenerational, tasting it like a foreign morsel and unfurling tentacles in disgust. There is a latent aftertaste that lingers. It is not pleasurable nor deniable. My polyps shift.

[**We feel *our* world in crisis<sup>261</sup>**], I say in chthonic calligraphy, sailing left, left, left, **And it stings.**

~ ~

*[We are not stuffed animals to be deserted and betrayed as your political "leaders" listen to money and ignore the acidifying ocean, the tumultuous tsunami, hurricanes, floods that shout climate instability. We are your relatives ... Some of us will survive you and some of us have not. We call upon you to remember your ancient oaths, your debts to all realms that enable your existence, your obligations as earth-dwellers.<sup>262</sup>]*

~ ~

[Suspended in the dim air around him, their pearly bodies rotating like the vanes of elaborate mobiles, were the corpses of hundreds of fish. Poisoned by their own wastes, they hung in the gloomy water, their blank eyes glowing like phosphorous, mouths agape. In the smaller tanks the tropical fish effloresced like putrid jewels, their coloured tissue dissolving into threads of gossamer. Gazing at them, Ransom had a sudden vision of the sea by the coastal beaches, as clouded as corpse-strewn as the water in the tanks, the faces of the drowned eddying past each other.<sup>263</sup>]

~ ~

A [recent IPCC assessment projects a loss of near-surface permafrost between 37 and 81 percent by 2100 ... but as far back as 2011, NOAA and the National Snow and Ice Data Center predicted that the thawing permafrost would flip the whole region from being what is called

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<sup>xxiv</sup> See Julio Cortazar's "Axolotl".

a carbon sink, which absorbs atmospheric carbon, to a carbon source, which releases carbon, as quickly as the 2020s. BY 2100, the same study said, the Arctic will have released a hundred billion tons of carbon. This is equivalent of half of all the carbon produced by humanity since industrialization began.<sup>264]</sup>

~|~

## Dagonism

Today is my Dissolution Day. I'm supposed to be relieved. I'm not. I'm not *anything*.

I place my ear against the wall of our shared quarters and ignore the half-hidden glances of my bunkmates. This far down there is only a head's width between us and the water. It's a constant, a lapping hiss that keeps awake as much as it lulls asleep. I hoped it would sound differently today, louder or subtler, but the sea's song never changes. We do.

"Are you scared?" Rosa asks, sliding up to my cot. "You look scared."

"I'm not scared."

"Well, you *look* scared."

"Go away."

Surprisingly she does just that. Only, she stops twice to look back at me with newly reddened eyes. Sixteen years we have known each other. Every shared smile and laugh a stolen, beautiful gift. I know I should say something to her, but her day will come. Today isn't a day for sentimentality.

Another face comes close, a warmer one. One I've known since birth. A smile cracks her face like a hardwon splinter as she hands me a bowl of watered-down porridge.

"It's a deep honour," my mother says for the fiftieth time this week. At this point, I feel it's more for her own benefit than mine. I echo her weak smile, and duly disregard her worrying hands. Today isn't a day for sentimentality.

She looks older today. Sun-beaten. A deck-shift will do that. Or, that's what they tell us. She glances around and then leans in close. "Are you scared?"

It's a question I expect from Rosa but not from her. What is there to be nervous about? This is it. There is nothing else.

"Should I be?" I search her face and find the answers wanting.

Waving the question away, she sets about busying herself with my bedcover, folding and refolding. "Of course not," she answers. "It is the way."

Cogs turning slowly, clogged up with sleep-stuff, I suddenly sit up. It is my turn to whisper. "Is this a test? Is this part of it?"

The Fisher-King is known for his tests. Devotion is the bread and butter of our saviors, what keeps it afloat. To show any deviation from belief is heresy, and "heresy unravels from within". I am not a heretic, I scream at my mother with my eyes. I believe; I always have.

"I am not nervous," I say, when she offers no reply. "I am steeled. Ready."

She nods. "Good, because it is time."

I have never seen the sky or sea. I only know the disillusioned tales orated by Fisher-King Herbcliffe and the ones Rosa and I knitted from half-heard whispers under covers when we were children. Rosa thinks the sky is as white as winter wheat, an always-sun lighting up everything. My mother laughs at this, she being one of the few who have actually seen it. Whenever it is my turn to guess, I say, "Nothing. That's the point, right?"

There are rules to living as we do:

**No looking out** (you see the deck only on Dissolution Day);

**No looking beyond** (there is only Dagonism);

**No hesitation.**

The first and the last are the hardest.

Being so close to the water and not trying to look or ask about it is like being Pandora with the everything-box in your lap. "Do you see what she did wrong?" the Fisher-King asked us one learning day. None of us raised our hands. He smiled. "Curiosity is sacred, certainly. Something to be encouraged, but only in moderation. What Pandora fails at is *responsibility*." He found all our eyes as he said the last word, lending it extra weight. "She has the power to do nothing, to just be and let all else be, but she lusts for control. A peek is all that is needed to release power and the race for its possession into the world, and she does more than peek. She upends." Here, he stood up. "What we do here, now, is put all that back in the box and seal it away forever. We dissolve what was; we make amends."

I had never seen the sky until now. Its beauty is blinding. It is Rosa's winter wheat but also barley and oat and one great big pumpkin seed. It is an impossible expanse and, if not for my mother's hand at the small of my back, I would fall to the deck.

"Woah," I say.

"Yes," my mother replies, squeezing my hand. "Woah."

I see the sea next. It is everywhere and dominating. The waves I have listened to all my life as they slapped against the wall by my cot are now roaring blue hues, with swells and ripples tipped in an ever-cycling milky froth. Dagon help me, but I cry at the sight of it. Water for water.

"It is broken," she says, following my gaze and guiding me forwards, shattering the spell. "We must make amends."

Fisher-King Herbccliffe nods encouragingly. His smile is tectonic, something inescapable, something felt in the knees. You could spend a lifetime on a saveship and have the sturdiest of sea-legs and still keel beneath the breadth of that grin. It is a grin of the enlightened.

Slowly, I walk towards the bow of the ship—the deck is longer than I ever imagined—and the silk dress whispers in my wake. It is too tight, too small, and too much, but that is the way. "Do it beautifully, because we are not beautiful" as decrees Dagonist mantra.

My throat constricts with every step and I swallow and swallow, but it is never enough. I try blinking away the light, blinking and blinking and blinking. I feel the wind against my skin for the first time, and then I register the heat; a hotness from head to toe. First on my face, then on my bare arms and legs. It tingles in a way that I know is forbidden.

Without moving her lips, my mother asks again if I am scared.

"I can feel it," I reply, a little louder than I intended. "The wrongness, I can feel it."

A new respect for her blossoms within me. She comes up here every single day and still she carries on. The burning she must have felt over the years! I find her face in the brightness and dimples break out on my cheeks. I touch her arm, her feverish arm, and everything makes sense. "Let me help you," I say.

She turns away.

The people on either side of me nod knowingly as I pass them, lifting up their salt-knives in solidarity and repeating without end: "Hesitation is heresy. Hesitation is heresy." And I know now it really is. The things they must have lived through for us! Well, this is the very least we



can do. "Let me help you," I say to each and every one of them, clasping their hands as I go. "Let me help you."

"I long knew of a day," the Fisher-King orates as I approach, "when [the land {would} sink, and the dark ocean floor {would} ascend amidst universal pandemonium<sup>265</sup>], and that day is today. We have made it so. I *dream* of a day when the fruitful undershores receive us openly, and that day is today. We *will* make it so. I dream," he slows right down here to instill gravitas and reflection, "of Dissolution."

He reaches out to me amidst a clatter of clinking salt-knives, and I meet him, truly, as if it were the first time.

"You honour yourself, child," he says enclosing my hand in his. My mother steps aside, now just another person, another believer, as he swivels me to face the open ocean. He tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear and leans close. "Tell me, what do you see?"

The hissing—the cry of Dagon—is loud now. Deafening. You wouldn't know what was really in the water just by looking at it—all that city-fire, the loosed Pandora-stuff from those who lusted for worldly power. It's there, though. Dagon's stirring is proof of it.

"Nothing," I breathe. "Everything."

He stays in close and his words are warm against my ear. "Are you ready to hear about the world?" I nod, scared my voice will break at the tipsy thought of breaking rules one and two of our creed. Until this morning, the cabin and Rosa had been my world. Now a new forbidden one loomed all around. I take a deep breath as the Fisher-King raises a hand and the sail overhead fills with wind.

"A hundred years ago", he begins, as we crest wave after wave, "we ended the world. Stung a billion times too many, the Sea ate it all up and then dissolved it piece by piece. Cities, stationary decks on solid land, fell. Concrete and cinder blocks were corroded by angry surf and disappointed eddies; cattle and cars consumed by sun-hurt waves. People persisted, because we always do. Those we brought along to suffer our fates—the pets and the forcibly domesticated make-us-feel-betters - perished. Baked and re-baked, the Sea's life soured and stunted and silenced." Here he stops to cup an ear. "That's what the hissing is—an angry whisper. It hates us, you know. The susurrations are a reminder. A promise. The Domain of Dagon is displeased and rising. We must make amends." He turns to look me dead in the eye. "What must we do?"

"We must make amends," I echo. "Re-seal the box."

His face crinkles at this. "Sorry?"

"Pandora's Box. We must re-seal it."

The Fisher-King looks at me with new eyes, thinking this over. "Quite," he replies, nodding. "Yes. The Box. You've a keen memory, child." Beyond me, he shouts to a direction-man and our course changes ever so slightly.

I look left and then right. "Where are we going?"

"There is no *where*," he retorts, his eyes once more an objective, impersonal slate. "Explain."

"I only meant—"

"Did you not listen?" His hand takes hold of my arm and squeezes. "'The Sea ate it all up.'"

"Hesitation is heresy," the assembled people chant anew. "Hesitation is heresy."

We stop unceremoniously at a seemingly random stretch of ocean. *Nowhere*. I am told to step back as the-now silent chanters—strangers from other cabins—and now my mother move a long piece of wood into position. Weather-worn, the surface of the plank is almost smooth, and yet, it is riddled with knots, as if stained with the soles of all the heels before me. I catch my mother looking at me once or twice as they set it down, but she is like a scorned child caught in the wrong, looking away before I can show her that I am not scared. The Fisher-King's hand never leaves me.

"Step up, child," he commands, offering his hand for support. "Step up and save the world."

I am dizzy before my second foot can find purchase on the plank. The sea chomps at me below, ineffectually taking wet-bite after wet-bite out of the hull. The saliva spray douses my ankles. Stings. *I am not scared*.

The Fisher-King motions me forward with a flick of his wrist.

I take step after step, careful and determined. The plank groans and bends the further I go. Soon, there is a bounce to it. Precarious and growing.

"Stop!" I do.

"Turn." I do.

The Fisher-King finds my face and grins his catching grin, and I smile back. Everyone on board smiles. Everyone except my mother. She is looking away, her head turned and her face hidden by a curtain of hair. The Fisher-King follows my gaze and his jaw tightens. Waving a hand, two believers approach her and say something too quiet to carry. They must say it again and again because it is only after a full minute passes that she looks up. Her eyes are like Rosa's before I left this morning: red and wet.

"We've been called insane," the Fisher-King shouts, now competing with the wind, "and we've been called zealots. We've been called crazy, and we've been called cowards." He takes a breath. "But, Dissolution isn't pathological or viral, no, it is ontological. It is Knowing. This is no Ship of Fools, but one of Neutralisation. We are piecemeal Remedy and we are making amends for the whole's malady."

The sea is ferocious. A raging coverlet over everything, frothing at the mouth. Hungry. What must we have done to cause such anger? The plank teeters once more under the growing wind. This is the way. *I am not scared*.

"Child," Fisher-King Herbcliffe says devoutly, his voice now laced with the tell-tale tones of assurance, "now, is the time for medicine. Now is the time to make amends with your Dagon. Step."

The chanters echo the last word, "Step. Step. Step. Step."

This is really it. This is the day my whole life has led up to. Dagon awaits me. For sixteen years I have been growing to this point, hardening for this very moment. It is all I have ever wanted. All that I am. To be wedded to the future, a stepping stone for the next, is a great honour. I am to serve as a bodily apology. Sea-given.

*I am scared*.

My foot hovers over the edge. Hovers and hovers some more. I try looking for my mother but my hair betrays me, loose red curls whipping up frenziedly in the winds. I do catch sight of the Fisher-King though, his eyes wide and wild. He, too, is hungry.

The water is darker now, closer. The hissing I have heard for so long now a clamouring. Our learning tells us there are darker shores yet ahead, darker and hungrier, but if we decide to make amends, soon we can live with them—within Dagon's merciful embrace—and prosper.

There are no depictions of Dagon on our saveship. "Belief surges beyond countenance," the creed teaches. He is too big a concept. Hearsay makes me think of Him as a great

slumbering sunfish, slowly waking as His sleepwaters blacken and boil. The spurned warden of Pandora's Box. But now he is angry and disappointed, and we must appease.

There are words suddenly at my back. Hurried and eaten by the ocean's crashing wave-teeth, I hear none of them. The fear I have all day denied freezes me to the spot, erases all my senses. Hesitation is heresy, my mind remembers; hesitation is humanity, my heart screams back.

The plank sinks a few centimeters as new feet drop onto it and it takes everything I have to fight to maintain my balance. The sky tilts, no longer the warm earthy whites that first welcomed me, but a growing grey, encircling and morose, hanging in the air.

I feel a hand grabbing for me. I see the sea sizzle in anticipation, and I decide. Closing my eyes, I wish myself back in the dry cabinworld with Rosa and mother, and then I make it so.

~/~

[I looked upon the rotting sea,  
And drew my eyes away;  
I looked upon the rotting deck,  
And there the dead men lay.<sup>266]</sup>

~ ~

[...man's record as steward of the natural resources of the earth has been a discouraging one, there has long been a certain comfort in the belief that the sea, at least, was inviolate, beyond man's ability to change and despoil. But this belief, unfortunately, has proved to be naive<sup>267]</sup>. Crude oil embalmed birds, ["low-level" wastes of the Atomic Age<sup>268]</sup> and an armada of rubber ducks can attest to such.

How many islands\*\*\*                      sing career cancer                      to arias of silence?

\*\*\*peopled, loved, used

How many few                      stopper age\*\*\*                      to a future's future?

\*\*\*geological, planetary, your's

~ ~

[...there was a collective setting aside of the knowledge that accrues over generations through dwelling in a landscape.<sup>269]</sup> In Fukushima, for instance, [where stone tablets had been placed along the shoreline in the Middle Ages to serve as tsunami warnings; future generations were explicitly told "Do not build your homes below this point!" ... yet only did they build *exactly* where they had been warned *not* to, they actually situated a nuclear plant there.<sup>270]</sup>

~ ~

[let me return to the story of the god of uranium<sup>271</sup>):

[Uranium-235 had been resting there in the ground, quietly dwindling away for billions of years. Had no human touched it, it would have gone on peacefully emitting its piddling quantities of radiation without causing any problem. “How self-effacing we are! I can hear the god say. “Per time-and-space unit, our radiation is far less than that of the cosmic rays that bombard the earth every day.

Human beings, however, had another idea. They gathered bits of U-235 from wherever they lay, concentrated them, and then whipped them into action. “Split your atoms!” they cried. “Give us light, give us heat, give us power. Work! Work!” For nuclear bombs, they demanded that the power be released in great explosions; for nuclear power in dribs and drabs ...

If the god of uranium really exists, then what must he be thinking? Were this a fairy tale of old, what would happen when humans break the laws of nature and turn gods into minions?<sup>272</sup>]

~ ~

Rob Bilott is a name that now carries considerable eco-weight. A former corporate defense attorney who turned tailcoat when a phone call from Parkersburg, West Virginia—his childhood home—showed him the true underbelly of mega-corporations like DuPont. Bilott’s exhaustive plight was made into the 2019 film, *Dark Waters*, starring Mark Ruffalo and is, indeed, as much the [horror movie<sup>273</sup>] as Wilbur Tennant’s own grainy recordings that revealed the effects of the pollution on the animals of his farm. Ruffalo, for instance, is often framed within dark surroundings, sempiternally overcast skies or dimly lit mediation chambers and courtrooms. These choices, of course, mirroring the overall unease, concealment and abject chill of what is being done to Tennant and obfuscated from the world through endless paperwork.

[“I’ve taken two dead deer and two dead cattle off this ripple,” Tennant says in voice-over. “The blood run out of their noses and out their mouths. ... They’re trying to cover this stuff up. But it’s not going to be covered up, because I’m going to bring it out in the open for people to see.”

The video shows a large pipe running into the creek, discharging green water with bubbles on the surface. “This is what they expect a man’s cows to drink on his own property,” Wilbur says. “It’s about high time that someone in the state department of something-or-another got off their cans.”<sup>274</sup>]

Bilott, via Wilbur Tennant’s fateful phone call and years of diligence, would eventually bring to light the DuPont corporations’ gross malfeasance when it came to the pumping out of its chemical waste into the Ohio River and beyond. PFOA, the hazardous substance in question, a substance that is [uncannily resistant to degradation<sup>275</sup>], was also dumped into [unlined pits<sup>276</sup>], where it [entered the local water table, which supplied drinking water to the

communities of Parkersburg, Vienna, Little Hocking and Lubeck — more than 100,000 people in all.<sup>277</sup>]. DuPont even used the same chemical, one used on tanks during the war no less, to coat the frying pans that most of us know them for. Not content with discharging it across the sky and water, they brought C8 into the home.

The effects of DuPont's despicable greed are still being felt today.  
PFOA or C8 is still inside people, animals, and the water—  
still waging war on their bodies.  
Like the cancer it helped foster,  
it is immutable.

~ ~

A few of us cottoned on to what was happening and made arrangements. Got the hell out. We didn't escape it all, mind, we just edged away from the real brunt of it. Some had to let families go and leave them to it. Hope. There was only so much time. Truth is, you can't run from stuff like this, though. If it's in the water, it's everywhere, right? On CNN, they called it Wastewater Warfare. Sounds like it was. *Is*. At first it was runoff, then oil drums, then packages dropped from on high into lakes, basins, rivers, creeks. Early on, we thought Russians. Later, we understood it was much closer to home. Funny thing is, it took years. We were being attacked for decades. Silently. In our homes. We may as well have drunk from the bleach in our cupboards. You put stock in all the regulations, in all those treatment plants and systems, but what do you really know about the water that drips from your taps?

~ ~

pebbled steps etch delicate on unsure shores  
intertidal lies are still lies concealing the unconcealed in suckered  
depressions quickly filled unalive i tread a Heideggerian open hoping that  
bareness doesn't mean forgotten  
the wave coils curlicue and holds it wants to know what i am doing  
here i struggle with the enunciation of intention [the true picture of  
the past<sup>278</sup>] [petrospectral presences<sup>279</sup>] blackest seas  
a deep shadow blooms in its body diver or dolphin or disease [the first  
coming of the silent ghost<sup>280</sup>] [consequence, concatenation, rattle of chains,  
endless procession of phenomenal forms ... all white and diaphanous<sup>281</sup>]  
the sea is terrifying we have made it terrifying  
unafraid we are both bare and beautiful bleeding from unseen edges  
[staging for the end of history<sup>282</sup>]

~ ~

*The Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce is a repository of fact beneath fact, of the lines between lines made line:

1. [Man, n. An animal so lost in rapturous contemplation of what he thinks he is as to overlook what he indubitably ought to be. His chief occupation is ex-termination of other animals and his own species, which, however, multi-plies with such insistent rapidity as to infest the whole habitable earth<sup>283</sup>].
2. [Ocean, n. A body of water occupying about two-thirds of a world made for man — who has no gills<sup>284</sup>].
3. [Promise, n. A form of incantation to conjure up a hope that is to be exorcised later by inattention<sup>285</sup>].

M.O.P is an acronym of today, a glimpse into the designs perpetuated in suits for suits. The many subterfuge spillages that exist outside of the remit of the in-house maid. *It is a lie, an illusion, it is not a leak at all. Forget it.* We exist in a Janitorial State, (not) cleaning up after decades of negligence and denialism and industry for industry's sake.

Mop, *noun*. Does not exist.

~ ~

The world's waters are the coated and congealed castoffs of a too slow tourist. Humanity is but a mayfly's existence in the lifespan of the ever-expanding, ever-dying universe. Yet our technological leavings are exoearthic and far-flung<sup>xxv</sup>. Waters yet to be, frozen still in meteors the galaxy over, speak in hushed, frightened whispers of the H2O Killer that made ghosts of every living thing of the fabled goldilocks planet. Whenever an upstart meteor intent on starting up life on a barren rock has second thoughts it is these disturbing murmurings that see it hurtle past terrified of what its magnanimity could birth. The Self-Destructoids, as humanity is known to the ice-meteors, are boogeymen and warning and lesson.

TEEN METEOR 1: My moonmom said that they even... even wasted some. Like, if they poured out too much into a glass and found themselves a little full they would just toss it down the sink. Can you believe that? Toss it.

TEEN METEOR 2: Sure, I can. These are the same folk who got bored of land islands and set out to make their own floating trashlands. Despite, you know, it hurting them in the long run. Imagine being the ice that hit that place? What a disappointment.

TEEN METEOR 1: I can't. I just can't.

TEEN METEOR 2: It's like patricide. I wonder if he ever woke up one day and thought: Wow. Look at my works.

TEEN METEOR 1: Shit, yeah. Will you ever connect with a rock, you think? Water it up, start a whole chain?

TEEN METEOR 2: My dad wants me to.

---

<sup>xxv</sup> Even Travelodge managers expect guests to leave their rooms as well as they found them.

TEEN METEOR 1: Same. But, you know, will you actually do it?

TEEN METEOR 2: Of course fucking not. Have you ever heard back from the guy who hit Earth?

~ ~

Up in orbit, the ISS continues its easy, carefree circling. To the astronauts currently aboard the station, the planet is a gift in an ocean of black, painfully precarious. It makes them view all the lives, connections, moments that brought them to this point in their lives in a new light. They begin to cherish every planet-moment for what it really is: a fleeting brilliance. The drive to work, meeting the in-laws, and putting the trash out are not just things to be done on auto-pilot anymore, but successions of time that you'll never get back. Snippets of sentience. Allocated points of interconnection. Improbabilities in a sea of impossibility.

Even common spectacles take on a new light. If they look hard enough, when their path has them gliding 400 kilometres over the Coral Sea east of Queensland, Australia, they can actually see the Great Barrier Reef. None of them have seen it with their own eyes from down there, but every person who pressurises in the ISS sees it, makes a point to see it. It is another reminder that

even from space, the sea and its wonders is *seen*. Noted.

And why should we be surprised by this? After all, water is sacrosanct in space. Nowhere else is it more a scarce resource. And yet, on the surface, where we all shamelessly, guiltlessly pour and fill and guzzle and spray at will, we are unable to see that water, like Time, is the Alpha and Omega.

~ ~

[As we watch ... evening after evening, through the smog across the poisoned waters of our native earth, we must ask ourselves seriously whether we really wish some future universal historian on another planet to say about us: 'With all their genius and with all their skill, they ran out of foresight and air and food and water and ideas,' or, 'They went on playing politics until their world collapsed around them.'<sup>286</sup>]

~ ~

[Water is the most versatile of all elements ... It exists beyond all beginnings and ends. On the surface nothing will shift, but deep in underground silence, water will hide and with soft fingers coax a new channel for itself, until stone gives in and slowly settles around the secret space ... Death is water's close companion, and neither of them can be separated from us, for we are made of the versatility of water and the closeness of death. Water doesn't belong to us, we belong to water: when it has passed through our fingers and pores and bodies, nothing separates us from earth.<sup>287</sup>]

~ ~

[I hover, below the surface, suction lock in lungs, suspended between fishy beginnings and watery potential. Their matters float past, caught up in a moving current, or falling like rain to the ever deep. Drift, disperse, dissolve. Remember. When the future reader comes (with her knife, her fouled compass, her map), what will remain of these watery archives? Which stories will still be legible? Which ones washed away?<sup>288</sup>]

~ ~

On the last page, hastily scrawled in a weary hand:

*Why should I care?*

And in another, much more recent:

*becoz they dint.*

~ ~ ~



# ENDNOTES:

## Six Post-Deliberations

- I. I turn at the end towards Benjamin's Angel of History. He is still suffering, a maxim his enforced title elicits with each passing day, but his throes now must contend with the superheated winds of Amazonian destruction, conceited global statecraft, and the Age of Scrolling. [Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe<sup>289</sup>], unavoidable and eternal since the moment the oceans committed *seppuku* by ejecting us onto land. His mouth is open, caught between warning, grimace, and shriek. A word could be heard if we only but had the ear. Tiny, disproportionate wings—like a common bee's—are battered by the storm [we call progress<sup>290</sup>], propelling him into an already old future riven with acidification, deluge, tsunamis. I try to speak to him in the assemblage texts that speed past his temporality, but he is atemporal. A Watcher who can no more interfere than he can turn away. Even so, I still collate/document/archive/notemake. Atrocity excites, and, sooner or later, eyes, whether the angel's or not, will turn towards that which no longer can be unseen.
  
- II. In the unfinished gaps of fragments, one can create a window. Something unfinished or part-finished facilitates a vacant hole for introspection. It excites questions, fears, anger. It allows for the removal of self. [Strictly speaking we cannot know the world as it will be without us, but we can—from examining the archival traces of an inhuman past—proceed as if we could imagine a world that would continue to exist in our absence. It would always require a concrete fragment of this world, lived as fragment, to enable us to think beyond the fragment, not towards some unifying whole, nor to some completion or fulfillment of the present, but to a time in which a different mode of synthesis, beyond our own, might be possible.<sup>291</sup>] Connecting what would appear to be disparate plots, then, is a passport for hope in a world increasingly destitute of it.
  
- III. In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo is on a quest from the Kublai Khan to explore the curiosities of the world beyond his empire. On his journey, he peregrinates to and writes on 55 fictitious cities. Each one serves as a heterotopian exploration of

culture, humanity, and world. In one segment, Polo comes across a city where the infrastructure of water is disarmingly laid bare. It is called Armilla. Here, there are no walls, ceilings or floors, and the only thing that marks it as a city are the [water pipes that rise vertically where the houses should be<sup>292</sup>]. Wastage, presumably, is crime, and faucets and spouts are akin to fruit-bearing trees. It is a [forest of pipes<sup>293</sup>] and to look at it, one would think it was unfinished, that the bricklayers had failed to arrive, or [else the hydraulic systems ... had survived a catastrophe<sup>294</sup>]. Yet it is not uninhabited. In impossibly placed bathtubs [suspended in the void<sup>295</sup>], can be seen young women going about their ablutions. Looking at these women, this city, and its unparalleled equanimity, Polo understands that this a not a human city. Maybe it was once and maybe ruin came to it because of its actions, but that epoch has come and gone. Now, it is home to aquatic naiads and nymphs whom humanity has displeased with their [misuse of water<sup>296</sup>]. Armilla, then, is a [votive offering<sup>297</sup>] to assuage crimes against nature. At the midpoint of the novel, Polo reveals that when he describes any of the 55 cities, he is really [saying something about Venice<sup>298</sup>]. Every permutation of city is merely a distorted reflection of the City of Water, and a means of further foregrounding one concern, criticism, or adoration in respect to this location. The contemporaneous and the fictive bleed and blur, like pages thrown into a well dissolving the separate sentences until there is only a uniform one. A Museum of Water likewise stretches the meaning of the now and real. Each subject and object and place and time is every place and one place, and every droplet of water is both that which was drank by dinosaurs millions of years ago and that which will spot the concrete crumbling spires of the Last Lost City.

- IV. Ancient and modern texts distend and extend into one another, words like waves in the intertidal zones at the end of things. Keats and Hodgson and Shelley crashing together with Okorafor, Carson and Wong. Shakespeare in the same long-held breath with Thunberg; *Vogue Italia* vacuously swimming into apt *Pool Epitaphs*; Delilo diving with Sebald. Sea-wide senses and semantics coming to bear on a hydro-anxiety, overfilling and emptying by the day. Don't forget we are all of ocean. Dead, living, haunting, human-shaped things playing at god but filling our gullets with filled glass and mug and can whenever we must. There is a reason people 'whacked' are *swimming with the fishes*—we all return from whence we came. Tossed like rats into the Great Garbage Patch Ocean. It will only get larger. Like our waterlogs. Like our swollen

pages stolen from a hundred hundred sources already energy and again part of the hydrological cycle. Water Musuemworks. Keats and Hodgson and Shelley; Okorafor, Carson and Wong; Shakespeare and Thunberg; *Vogue Italia* and *Pool Epitaphs*; Delilo and Sebald. Again and again and again. A hydro-archive-timeline. Broken. Self-renewing. Sinking and rising. Drying out.

- V. In Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's *Iep Jaltok: Poems From a Marshallese Daughter*, the sea is not just a fluid descriptor to liven up a sense of enforced ennui, it is an always threat, [level\_with<sup>299</sup>]-the\_horizon. Here, ocean does not equate with holiday, but home, hearth, and harm. There is no voyager here, only despotic, overseas voyeurs toing and froing, burying themselves in the sand. Yes, [there are faces/ all the way out here<sup>300</sup>], faces that well up even in close proximity to the sea. Faces like yours. Mirrors, whether darkly-coloured, fragmented, or surf-stained, prop up the archive's exhibitions. What are the reflections you find in waterlogged cities? In the vacant eyes of the long-gone or mediatized resurrected? If we but slip again into the archival-time of literature and step out beside the sun-speckled workstation of Ovid, why not look over his shoulder as Narcissus gazes longingly at his own reflection. Why doesn't he turn around? Can't he see the landscape change around him or feel his body wilt beneath him? Far too few of us are plaintive Echo, whose impassioned cries are lost in the winds and waters of aggregate self-absorption, left to burn up and drown, as our cities become technofossils and [future ruins<sup>301</sup>] at the behest of mass *unlistening*. Sebald writes that [our brains .../ are always at work on some quivers/ of self-organization .../ and it is from this that an order/ arises, in places beautiful/ and comforting, though more cruel, too, than the previous state of ignorance<sup>302</sup>]. How does one step-back, return, *discite*, glean, that 'before' is not always worse, and that 'after' is always its rose-coloured remembrance? How does one not merely echo but become heard? How does one even get the chance?

- VI. The angel again. Closer now. Collapsing under the weight of Chaos. Listen. See. Hear. Swim.

[Art is not truth. Art is a lie that enables us to realize the truth<sup>303</sup>]

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