

ISSUE TWENTY : WINTER 2022  
OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# RIVERS AND MEANING

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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Diamond on Unsplash.

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## INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE TWENTY

By Laurie Moberg, Editor

Over two years ago, before the global pandemic upended our lives, *Open Rivers* started talking with Professor Mary Modeen, an artist, academic, and convener based at the University of Dundee in Scotland whose work, creativity, and generosity have created an international network of collaborators doing place-based work. For this issue of *Open Rivers*, Modeen stretches the journal toward international perspectives on the meaning of rivers. This collection of artwork and reflections, place-based engagements and community-driven actions demonstrates exactly that—the meaning of rivers to so many people in so many different places—through stunning

exhibits and galleries, lyrical prose, and reflections on waters in place.

In her introduction, Modeen begins by welcoming us, drawing us together from our scattered places in watersheds around the world to share with us the river that shapes her place. She gathers us as readers just as she gathered the many contributions to this issue, connecting artists, scholars, writers, and practitioners from across the globe to bring their stories together in this striking issue of *Open Rivers*. The international community of authors Modeen assembles in this issue is even more impressive and even more critical given

the challenges of the past two years. Relying on digital communications and overcoming time differences, this issue of *Open Rivers* creates a space for these authors to share their places and for readers to find connection in the commonalities and differences of our waterways.

Modeen also suggests that we all have our own storied places to share. In that spirit, allow me to introduce my place and the home of *Open Rivers*. I come to this issue from Minnesota, with snow falling outside as the Mississippi River courses through the gorge just a short walk to the west; I come to this issue from Mni Sota Makočhe,

Dakota land. From this place, I encounter the Tay and the rivers of Ilhabela, the Bow and Elbow, the Tweed and the Yangdeng and so many other locations in this issue as these stories draw me into a space for contemplation and beauty. Together, the articles in this issue provoke us to consider not only how humans make meaning with rivers, but how rivers themselves might make their own meanings. These global authors and rivers demonstrate that by understanding other places we might better understand our own. Enjoy.

## Recommended Citation

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## About the Author

Laurie Moberg serves as editor for *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community* and as the project manager for the Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community Initiative at the University of Minnesota. She earned her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Minnesota in 2018. Her doctoral research investigates recurrent episodes of flooding on rivers in Thailand and queries how the ecological, social, and cosmological entanglements between people and the material world are reimagined and reconfigured in the aftermath of disasters. In her current work, she approaches public scholarship as a critical strategy for expanding whose stories are heard, for shaping our public conversations, and for forming solutions for our shared ecological challenges.



*Low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK.  
Image by Jill Dimond on Unsplash.*

INTRODUCTION

# GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE TWENTY: RIVERS AND MEANING

By Mary Modeen, Guest Editor

Firstly, a welcome to you readers, traditional style. Just because we are many, sitting in many places gathered in “internet land” does not mean that I cannot welcome you as a virtual visitor to my place and to what we may imagine as our campfire. Here, 200 meters from the banks, I share with you the River Ericht and speak to you with the sounds of water flowing across rocks and swirling in the currents.

I welcome you to the hills and forests, the local berry fields of Scotland, perched on the divide between the Lowlands and the Highlands and the

farmlands growing potatoes, beans, brassicas, and barley. You too, in my imagination, have your places to share—your rivers and lakes, your coastal beaches and mountains. We are first and ever in the world by the time we come to know where we are. As we come together, what we share here are stories from places and people across the world showing and telling and singing songs that reveal more than one place, more than one story. These are sharings that resonate with with *how* we are in our places and what these places mean to us.



*Fig 1: Detail. The River Ericht, Blairgowrie, Perthshire, Scotland, 2020. Image courtesy of Mary Modeen.*

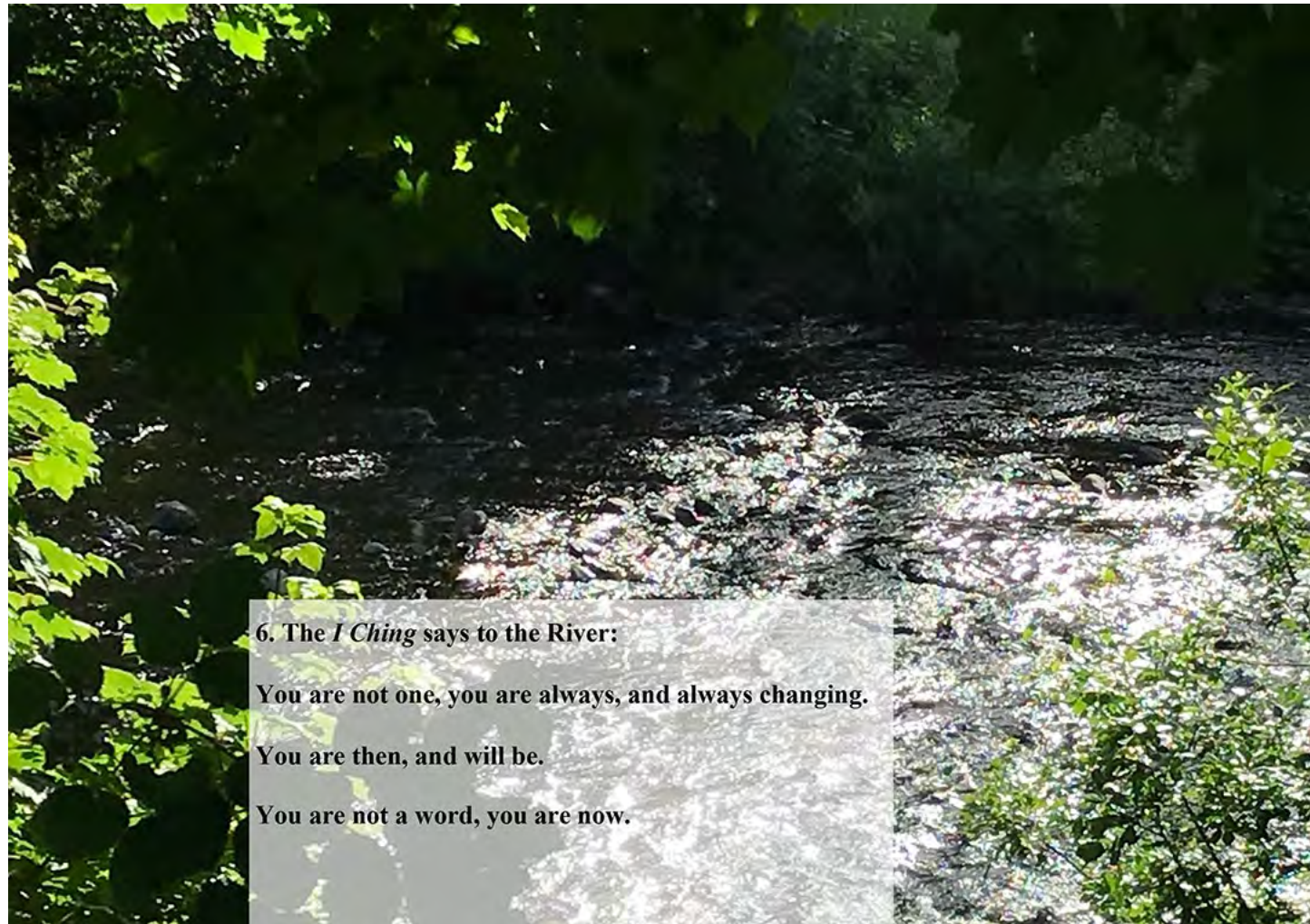


*Fig 1: The River Ericht, Blairgowrie, Perthshire, Scotland, 2020. Image courtesy of Mary Modeen.*

## An International Perspective of Rivers

This issue of the *Open Rivers* is dedicated to an international perspective of rivers, particularly in an overview of the current place-based research conducted by artists, writers, and socially engaged practitioners who lead fieldwork studies, regeneration schemes, and collaborative community projects. From rivers as far afield as China, Brazil, Canada, Scotland, Ireland, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, rivers as rivers and as “waters of life” will be considered, along with the importance of what rivers mean to human and nonhuman inhabitants and how they come to these meanings.

A river as a metaphor so easily functions symbolically that we take in, all at once, an understanding that what we are seeing is simultaneously water flowing by, but also, from a distance of history, geographical changes, and epochs, how rivers have agency. They are the barometers of environmental health, or they may separate us from the other side; they may divide as political separations and borders, and yes, they may even conjoin creatures, human and nonhuman. They are the forces of erosion as well as of life, carrying away soil, plants, and even more in spate. Rivers are component parts in complex watersheds, separating into two streams that flow in different



6. The *I Ching* says to the River:

You are not one, you are always, and always changing.

You are then, and will be.

You are not a word, you are now.

Fig. 2: ‘What the I Ching Says to the River Ericht,’ from the Nexus project. Mary Modeen, digital print on archival paper, 2020. Image courtesy of Mary Modeen.

directions; they can be dammed to provide energy, can be tapped for irrigation, and can even be forced to change the direction of their flow!<sup>[1]</sup> Rivers can disappear underground, flowing unseen in cavernous depths. They can even disappear entirely, as the water tables are depleted,

## Rivers are Precious to All Life on this Planet

What we know universally—and has finally (belatedly) reached a consensus in world understanding—is that rivers are precious to all life on this planet. We learn from Indigenous and traditional peoples across the world that rivers have agency in themselves and teach us the deep interconnectedness of all living things; that they are crucial to the function of the entire world ecosystem; and that human actions have damaged most rivers and completely destroyed several.<sup>[3]</sup> And through news, education, and community

redirected (as in the case of the Chicago River), or lost entirely in a process of climate change.<sup>[2]</sup> The slower lessons show us even more, as time passing, as constant change, as stages of life and mortality, with hints of well-being and joy.

issues, we know the immediacy of necessary action cannot be underestimated. As the world’s attention was focused on COP26, which was just held an hour and a half drive from here, we join the movement, inherent to most Indigenous belief systems, to observe carefully and to act mindfully to redress imbalances. As is shared here in this issue, many of the contributions point to the right of rivers to have clean water, to flow freely, and to exist in themselves entirely apart from human needs or uses.

## Interlude: A True Story from My Youth

When I was a college student in Michigan, the next small town over was St. Louis, Michigan, home to the Michigan Chemical Corporation (now known as Velsico). It was a small-ish company, in a small town, that produced several items in its product line. One among them was cattle feed supplement, which added nutrients to livestock feed as they were fattened up for market. One night in the bagging area, workers accidentally used different bags to seal up the product. Of course, no one knew this at the time. What farmers did notice, increasingly, was that instead of thriving, their cows developed strange sores and lesions, started staggering and grew increasingly dizzy, and then they started dying. Outreach agricultural experts from Michigan State University were called in and tried their best to figure out what was wrong. Then the farmers themselves grew ill and their wives had

hair falling out. Their pigs stopped eating and grew sores before they too died. No one could figure out what sort of pestilence this might be, and so it went for almost two years with accelerated testing.

This was in 1973. What finally emerged was that fire retardant had been accidentally placed in the livestock nutrient supplement bags. There had been no reason prior to this for any feed or materials to be tested for polybrominated biphenyls, or PBB. But indeed, these fire retardant chemicals are exactly what had gotten into the nutrient supply. In a case of one of the most extensive mass poisonings in the United States, PBBs had moved from the cows to the cows’ milk to agricultural runoff and then into the rivers, into the fish, and into the general population of inhabitants, human and nonhuman. People were advised not to eat more than one fish per week; breastfeeding

mothers were told to use formula instead. To this day it has not yet been established if there is intergenerational harm that lingers in the children and grandchildren of inadvertent PBB consumers. The Pine River, which runs through St. Louis and that part of Michigan, is still the subject of ongoing efforts 48 years later to clean what might still be removed from the river.[4] The accident of minutes nearly half a century ago lingers invisibly across the beautiful landscape and scenic rivers.

## Ruminations on Rivers Around the World

What follows here in this collection of essays, artworks, photographs, videos, and songs are ruminations on rivers around the world. These waters have been the source of inspiration, the site of social projects, the documentation of

If lessons are to be learned—that hollow phrase often repeated in political circles—it must be first the truth of interconnectedness. We are all affected by each other’s actions—humans, nonhumans, rivers, air, and earth. The Pine River still flows, but harmed, injured, and yearning as much for the clean water it once carried as the fish, birds, and human inhabitants are. So here is another river, one whose presence is not the joy of others, but one who typifies sorrow, shame, and loss.

geographical characteristics, and the celebration of historical markers of understanding. Several of these contributions are linked to Indigenous perspectives and their underpinning belief systems, some of which have been taken up by Western



Fig. 3: An abandoned barn on the banks of the Pine River in Michigan, 2015.  
Image courtesy of Mary Modeen.

academic environmental scientists aiming at an integration of social systems and natural systems and recognizing the importance of worldviews in environmental actions.[5] The photographic essay by Francisco and Lau Pereira Da Silva and Lau’s wife Helena Beutel uses imagery to do this without the need for text, showing aspects of the high mountain streams in a tropical Atlantic rainforest in Ilhabela, Brazil flowing to the sea. These images tacitly remind us of the physical realities that play out a metaphysical and actual journey simultaneously. Robert Snikkar’s videos do something similar, but differently, as they also include his voice as a settler and that of his Métis friends, Patsea and Carmel, from whom he learns on the Ottawa River, which divides the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, Canada.

Katie Potapoff’s contribution is focused on the other side of Canada, mostly on the Bow and Elbow rivers of Alberta. She experimentally overlays poetry, prose, and artworks with the river configured as body and lived experience. That same aspect of lived experience, but placed in an historic context, is sung by Arthur Watson’s two ballads located both in Scotland’s geography of the northeast of the country between the Dee and Don rivers, as well as in historic time specific to the seventeenth century.

The contributions by Louise Ritchie and Miriam Mallalieu also focus on a lived experience. In Louise’s case, she reflects on the brackish water of the Dichty Burn (“burn” meaning “stream” in Scots). In text, photos, and artworks, she discovers a space for transitions: in time, in salinity, in characteristics that flow undetectably from one quality to another. Miriam’s piece weaves past with present, history as preserved in museum artefacts with family history, and muses along the way about Scotland’s largest river system—the River Tay—in imagining what *it* wants, and how it might be altered from its contact with humans and their trappings.

Tania Kovats is another distinctive artist whose works are profoundly shaped by water.[6] In

her text, she states that “all rivers have their own voice.” In this piece, entitled “TWEED” after the River Tweed in the borders between Scotland and England, she “expressed the narrative of the river as a tortured love story between he/she, north/south, that ultimately ends in separation.” Referencing the tradition of both ballads (such as those sung by Arthur Watson in this issue), she likens the sung genre to her own drawings and writings in border ballads, the text of which is embedded in these works.[7]

A major feature by Margaret Cogswell documents art and research in a body of work that spans more than 35 years. In *River Fugues*, Margaret details a personal journey of investigation that crosses over geography, history, politics, environmental studies, and current events. Beginning in 2003, she researched the musical genre of fugues and instinctively realized that not only the alignment between musical form and movements in rivers made sense, but also decided to construct her meticulously planned art installations in the manner of “writing a musical score for a chamber music ensemble.” Through many images and text and her eponymous book, her intriguing installations work as visual poetry in consolidating her *River Fugues*. [8]

Another major feature in this issue is the work of Jiao Xingtao, a sculptor and socially engaged artist who has led a collaborative art project in Yangdeng, a small rural community in mountainous terrain on the Yangdeng River in Tongzi County of Guizhou Province. Since 2012, Jiao—who is also a professor and vice principal at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, China—has led a group of students and colleagues each year to work in this community with local residents, collaborating on many projects that include murals, sculptures, videos, drawings, benches, and other installations and light projections. His collective understanding is both poetic and practical, material in its expression and immaterial in his intuitive grasp of layered meanings and mythology, highly attuned to the nuances and spirit of the place. His photographs

and video complement the wisdom revealed in his answers in the textual interview.

Two final contributors here must be also be mentioned. Ciara Healy Musson has provided a review of an art exhibition in the Lismore Castle Arts and grounds, the River Blackwater, in County Waterford, Ireland. She not only situates the work for the exhibition, entitled *Light and Language*, within the tradition of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, but she weaves this work together in a tapestry of the history of the eighteenth-century castle (the initial construction of which began in the twelfth century), and the grounds that abut the Blackwater. Her evocative text brings to life the qualities of the Blackwater's protected species, its glinting sunlight on the water, and inevitably the confluences of time it conjures.

And finally, though certainly not least, Laura Donkers writes of Māori tradition and belief as it has shaped contemporary community actions in attending to the regeneration of rivers. She has collaborated with Charmaine Baillie in doing this. In "Māori and non-Māori collaboration on the restoration of an urban stream [Awataha] in Aotearoa New Zealand," Laura outlines traditional Māori belief for us readers, and thereby constructs for us a narrative and video documentation of this important restorative work done by local people. In doing so, she explains the recent actions of individuals who have presented and defended the fact that rivers have the status of "personhood."<sup>[9]</sup> This means that the river's right to exist in itself, without harm, must be granted. Her conclusion is an appeal to change

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Berkes, Fikret. 2018. *Sacred Ecology*, 4th ed. London: Routledge.

Cogswell, Margaret. 2018. *River Fugues*. Brooklyn, New York: Rolling Press.

the dominant Western perspective that we humans live as somehow separate from nature, understanding that it is only through profound shifts in thinking, valuing, and actions that real change can occur.

In the unique ways that the internet and worldwide web facilitate digital photos, sounds, videos, podcasts, performances, poetry, and artwork, the richness of this issue will be in the many voices, images, creativity, and thoughts of its contributors from around the world speaking to us, showing us the ubiquitous importance of rivers. Just as the ability of digital communications allows us to be separate but together, so too the various aspects of water parallels this way that we are in many places across the world but together in the sense of being touched by rivers, by being connected and interconnected in truly powerful ways. As I welcomed you here to "my" Ericht River and my place at the beginning of this introduction, I welcome you now to this confluence of many rivers with all of these contributors, to the sharing of global *River Fugues*, to the personhood of the Awataha, to the River Tay who has tasted a museum, to the historic Dee and the Don of Aberdeenshire, to the tropical Atlantic rainforest rivers of Ilhabela, to the Ottawa River that divides two Canadian provinces, to the Bow and Elbow rivers of Alberta, to the Tweed which flows between two nations, and to the poor damaged Pine River of Michigan. I welcome you to the Blackwater of Ireland, the Dichty Burn which flows into the Tay, and the fast-moving Yangdeng of Tongzi County, China. We all have stories to share and meanings to ponder. We are all connected.

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## Footnotes

[1] Elizabeth Kolbert, *Under A White Sky: The Nature of the Future* (Dublin: The Bodley Head, Penguin Random House, 2021).

[2] Lourdes Medrano, "The Colorado River Runs Again," *Yes! Magazine*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2021/08/24/colorado-river-runs-again>.

[3] Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[4] Brett Walton, "Remembering Michigan's PBB Crisis," *The Circle of Blue*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.circleofblue.org/2018/world/remembering-michigans-pbb-crisis/>. In a further note, when Michigan Chemical Corporation had no possible hope of meeting the fines and ongoing legislation arising from this mistake, it moved to Louisiana where the environmental protection laws were much less strict. See also Joyce Eggington, *Poisoning of Michigan* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009).

[5] Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 75.

[6] Tania Kovats, *Drawing Water: Drawing as a Mechanism for Exploration* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2014).

[7] A “bothy” is a crude dwelling place for the workers on an estate. As the place where these laborers had long nights together in cramped quarters, singing ballads—songs with a story unfolding—was a frequent way to spend the evenings. In the “border ballads” presented by Tania Kovats, the stories are about the tensions, conflicts, and attractions taking place in contested lands between Scotland and England.

[8] Margaret Cogswell, *River Fugues* (Brooklyn, New York: Rolling Press, 2018).

[9] Isaac Davison, “Whanganui River given legal status of a person under unique Treaty of Waitangi settlement,” *New Zealand Herald*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/whanganui-river-given-legal-status-of-a-person-under-unique-treaty-of-waitangi-settlement/JL3QKSWVZPA7X-W6EN33GKU4JJ4/>.

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## About the Author

Professor Mary Modeen, as an artist/academic, lectures in fine art and more broadly across the humanities in relation to creative practices. Her research has several threads: perception as a cognitive and interpretive process, and especially place-based research, which connects many of these concerns with attention to cultural values, history, and embodied experience. As such, this research is usually interdisciplinary. Part of this work appears as creative art, and part as writing and presentations. Modeen addresses aspects of seeing that go beyond the visible, questioning what we know as sentient humans, and valuing the cultural and individual differences inherent in these perceptions.

Her most recent publications include a co-authored book with Iain Biggs, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* (Routledge, 2021), and “Traditional Knowledge of the Sea in a Time of Change: Stories of the Caiçaras,” in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* (November 2020). Her edited book and essay just published is titled *Decolonising Place-Based Arts Research* (Dundee, 2021). She is chair of Interdisciplinary Art Practice and associate dean international for Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee, in Scotland and visiting fellow with the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota.



FEATURE

# RIVER FUGUES

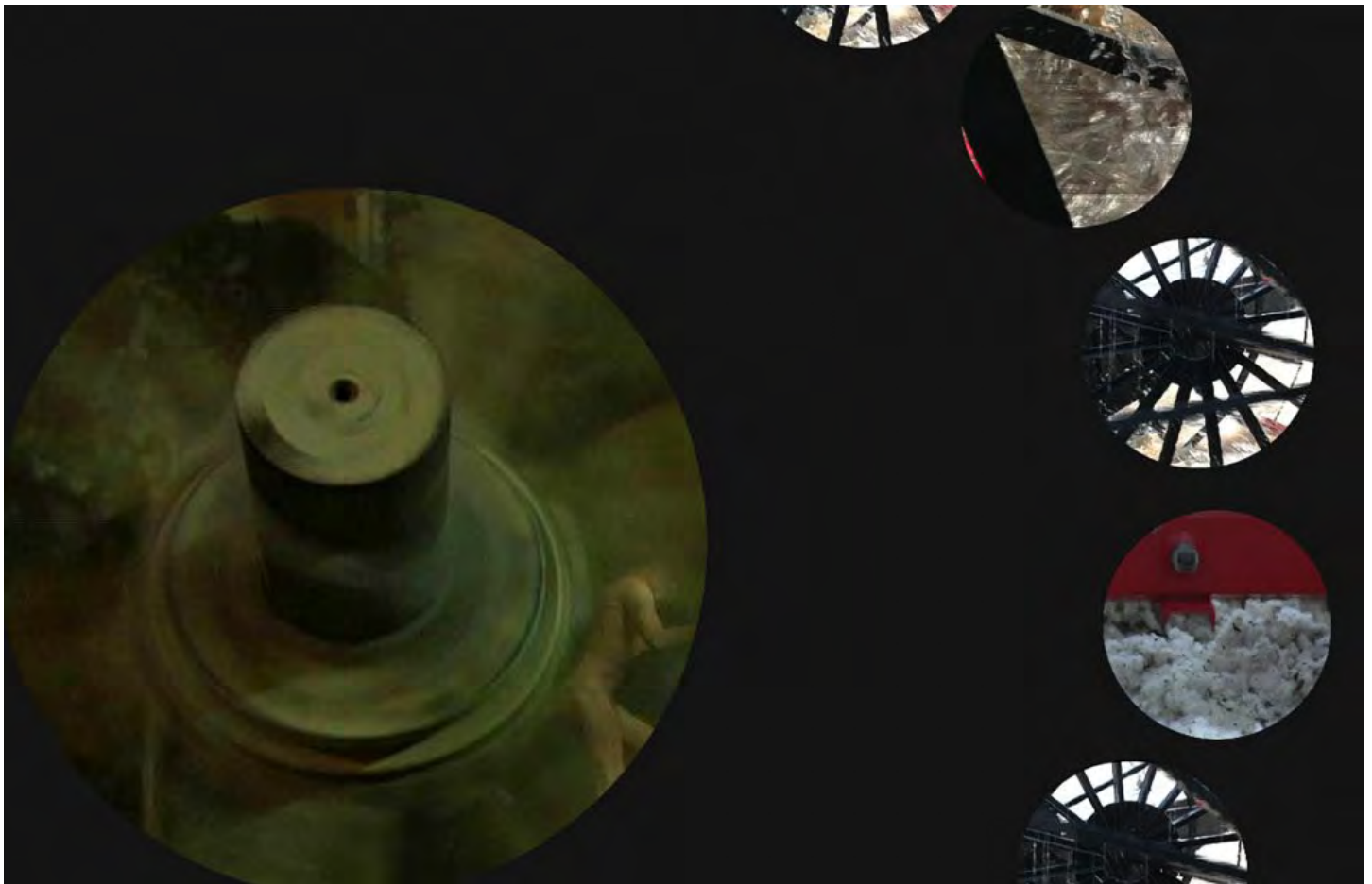
By Margaret Cogswell

*I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world  
and older than the flow of human blood in  
human veins.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

Langston Hughes  
"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"<sup>[1]</sup>

What is it to “know” rivers? As an artist I have been asking myself this question for over twenty years. Ever since an artist residency in Cleveland, Ohio led to my encountering the burning river history of the Cuyahoga River, I realized that all rivers have stories, and to learn of their histories was to explore and listen. Simon Schama, in the introduction to his book, *Landscape and Memory*, describes this kind of exploration beautifully:



*'Mississippi River Fugues,' collage of video stills, Margaret Cogswell, 2008.  
Image courtesy of Ed West.*

*Landscape and Memory* has been built around such moments of recognition as this, when a place suddenly exposes its connections to an ancient and peculiar vision of the forest, the mountain, or the river. A curious excavator of traditions stumbles over something protruding above the surface of the commonplaces of contemporary life. He scratches away, discovering bits and pieces of a cultural design that seems to elude coherent reconstitution but which leads him deeper into the past. [2]

In this essay, I will focus on my research on different rivers, sharing the meandering paths

which have led me to explore these rivers and my creative responses to them in the form of mixed-media art installations that seek to reflect the complex relationships between land, water, and peoples. To contextualize the impetus for what developed into an ongoing series of *River Fugues* projects, I will offer some personal history. Although I was born in the United States (in Memphis, Tennessee along the Mississippi River), I went to Japan with my parents when I was 18 months old and lived there until I was 13 years old. Coming back to the United States at age 13 was like moving to a foreign country. Although I was bilingual and spoke English as well as Japanese, I did not know this country's



Fig. 1, 'A Bend in the River,' installation view 1. 1984, Margaret Cogswell. University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Mixed-media installation includes: steel, glass, fluorescent light bulbs, concrete, bamboo, and straw. Installation dimensions includes in and outside gallery space: 12' h x 60' l x 60' w. Image courtesy of Ed West.

history, or understand its culture. My early efforts to better understand this country were through the study of literature. This led to my efforts to explore the intervals between words and what cannot be translated, and eventually to my work as a visual artist.

My feeling of being "displaced" eventually led me to study and teach art at the University of Hawaii—thinking that in this landscape, between the mainland USA and Japan, I would find a familiar and comfortable fusion of cultures. I, of course, found something else—another world entirely. But it was through my parallel explorations in literature that I eventually began to realize how

much history was in a landscape and how much I could learn by exploring a landscape.

In 1984, in response to my experience of living in Hawaii for three and a half years where colonialism's impact was still strongly felt, I made a brief foray into the investigation of rivers, more as a place where different peoples and cultures met—often colliding—than a focus on its waters. The resulting work was a mixed-media installation at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Art Gallery, titled *A Bend in the River*, after V.S. Naipaul's book.



Fig. 2, 'A Bend in the River,' installation view 2. University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Mixed-media installation includes: steel, glass, fluorescent light bulbs, concrete, bamboo, and straw, Margaret Cogswell. Installation dimensions includes in and outside gallery space: 12' h x 60' l x 60' w. Image courtesy of Ed West.

Although I would continue my search to understand people and places through landscapes and memory[3] it would not be until my discovery of W.B. Yeats' play, *At the Hawk's Well* (one of Yeats' *Four Plays for Dancers* written in the style of the Noh drama of Japan, 1921) that I would begin to explore creating work focusing on water. Since I grew up in Japan, I was excited

by the discovery of these plays, which draw on the cultural traditions of both Ireland and Japan. I was also intrigued with Yeats' exploration of the peculiar human longing for immortality—a universal longing which becomes the focus of Yeats' play and revolves around the search for water from the fountain of youth.



Fig. 3, 'A Bend in the River,' installation view detail: bamboo, steel, wire mesh, concrete and straw, Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Ed West.

## THIRST (1999 & 2001)

Installed in an abandoned syrup factory, Kansas City, MO—1999

### THIRST (Elegy for Esther), 2001

Carriage House Installations  
Islip Art Museum  
East Islip, NY

It is this peculiar human longing and search for immortality that I latched on to and began to work with in a series of pieces called *Thirst* (1999 and 2001). These works explore the idea of immortality being found in the waters of a particular place and/or through particular rituals involving water, including the Japanese tea ceremony, as well as the art of dowsing for water using divining



Fig. 4, 'Thirst,' installation view. Mixed-media installation. Media & dimensions: 3 steel discs at 3' H x 3' D, 5' H x 7' D, and 7' H x 10' D; 7 heating element structures; 15 cast ice buckets; 3 wood and steel "fishing poles" with video monitors; video loop; one light bulb and one 5" x 4" steel ladle with 6' handle, Margaret Cogswell. Installation site dimensions: 10' h x 15' x 20' x 4'. Image courtesy of Kansas City Art Institute.



Fig. 5, 'Thirst,' installation detail. 15 cast ice buckets suspended from ceiling over steel discs with heating elements, Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Kansas City Art Institute.

rods. In my *Thirst* projects, water was present, but turned to steam as it hit heated steel discs; thus, like the fountain of youth, the waters are never accessible for drinking and immortality remains elusive.

## *CUYAHOGA FUGUES (2003)*

SPACES World Artists' Program  
SPACES  
Cleveland, Ohio  
Curated by director Susan Channing  
<https://www.spacescle.org/>

During my artist's residency in 2003 at SPACES in Cleveland, Ohio, this exploration of the meaning of water in our lives expanded to an exploration of rivers and culminated in my first *River Fugues* project which was *Cuyahoga Fugues*. There, at the mouth of Lake Erie, I was confronted with the presence of large bodies of water that had been polluted to such a degree that the Cuyahoga River had burned three times. Finally in 1969 the last burning river precipitated the creation of the Clean Water Act and served to save other rivers as well.

At the beginning of my residency in Cleveland, I had no idea what to do with this information. Nonetheless, lured by fire, water, and the imposing presence of volcanic steel mills at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River, I set out to explore and listen to generations of stories reflecting the life and dreams embodied by the Cuyahoga. I interviewed steel workers, environmentalists, fishermen, and river enthusiasts. I visited and filmed inside the steel mills. I traced the Cuyahoga River with a regional historian, filming its path from source to mouth in Lake Erie. I collected stories about water from four-year-olds at a Cleveland pre-school, stories told to me while they made drawings about water which then became posters advertising the exhibition in the community.

These oral histories became beams of light in a large and complex historical landscape. They were invaluable contributions to the kaleidoscope of interpretations of the realities surrounding the history of a place, of people to their river and to their source of water necessary for sustaining life. The realization of the complexity of all these different voices, both literally and metaphorically, combined with video footage from my journeys along riverbanks and in the steel mills, created both a conceptual and practical challenge to me as an artist. How was I to honor these different voices in an installation with multiple video and audio components, without creating complete chaos? I needed a structure. Linking sound to music, I began to explore the musical structure of the *fugue* as a way to think about how to organize these different components.

In music, by definition, *a fugue is a contrapuntal composition in two or more voices, built on a subject (theme) that is introduced at the beginning and recurs frequently in the course of the composition.*

*In its most general aspect, counterpoint or contrapuntal music involves the writing of musical lines that sound very different and move independently from each other, but sound harmonious when played simultaneously.*[4]

My reason for using the fugue is because of its flexibility as a conceptual framework, which can be applied to any set of components one is trying to integrate, whether it is musical, ambient sounds, voices, narratives, or images. Editing each of my video and audio pieces as "fugues" enabled me to "play" multiple components together in the same space. Ultimately, it has become very much like writing a musical score for a chamber music ensemble.

Although my initial process for gathering materials parallels that of a documentary filmmaker, the work upon completion does not follow a linear descriptive narrative. Instead, my primary mentors are found in composers and poets. Of particular significance have been Glenn Gould and Anne Carson.[5]

I have long been an avid listener to Glenn Gould's interpretation of Bach; it was not, however, until after I decided to edit my videos and narratives using the musical structure of the fugue that a composer friend of mine introduced me to Gould's narrative fugue, *The Idea of the North*. [6] In this radio play, Gould uses the musical



Fig. 6, 'Cuyahoga Fugues,' installation view, 2003. Mixed-media installation. Media: 24" diameter spiral steel pipe, sheet metal window plenums, electrical conduit and fixtures, poly pipe, portable TV, ice cooler, transistor radio, ice-fishing pole, video projectors, rear-projected video in both "river" and steel pipes, CD players and venting pipes installed in walls, electric light bulbs, multiple audio and video components, Margaret Cogswell. Site dimensions: 14' x 40' x 40'. Video stills by Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Jerry Mann.

structure of the fugue to weave together stories told by passengers on a train while riding through the Canadian North. The stories reveal what each passenger sought in the idealized landscape of the north country—a landscape to which they were retreating for various individual reasons. The ambient railroad track sounds became the contrapuntal element for the fugue, while the timbre of each voice and different pacing in each passenger's telling of their story transformed the voice into a musical instrument. Harnessing each of these elements, Gould created a narrative fugue; when I discovered this, it encouraged me that I was on the right track in using the fugue as a structure for my own work!

While Gould's *The Idea of the North* would bolster the trajectory of my use of the fugue as a conceptual structure for my videos and narratives, it was Anne Carson and other poets (including Seamus Heaney) who were to inspire how I edited my images. Thinking of visual images as a language, my interest has been to explore the unexpected juxtaposition of images in the way a poet might use words in an effort to lead the reader/viewer to see something in a different way.

Anne Carson's prose poem, "The Anthropology of Water," [7] uses the form of a journal to take the reader along on a pilgrimage to Compostela. Each entry is introduced by another poet's haiku which, juxtaposed with Carson's prose poem, expands the search for meaning in her journal of the pilgrimage itself. With her brilliant use of language, Carson packs each short entry with unexpected and often jarring juxtapositions of philosophical reflections with those addressing social, political, and cultural histories embedded in the landscape along the pilgrims' path. Together with Simon Schama's investigations in *Landscape and Memory*, [8] Carson's pilgrimage in *The Anthropology of Water* inspired and challenged my thinking and, subsequently, the editing of my *River Fugues* videos and installations.

## HUDSON WEATHER FUGUES (2005)

for

### *Meteorologic Phenomena*

Curated by Jennifer McGregor  
Glyndor Gallery, Wave Hill, Bronx, New York  
<https://www.wavehill.org/discover/arts>

&



Fig. 7, 'Hudson Weather Fugues,' installation view. Dimensions: 3 windows with video projections on two panes of two windows with each pane @ 17" x 12"; video image size = 17" x 24"; 3 benches = 28" H x 20" W x 30" L; 6 window shutters = 81" H x 24" W x 6" D. Media: custom-made wood window sills & shutters with audio speakers inside; benches; video projectors; DVD players; plexiglass video screen inserted over window panes, Margaret Cogswell. Video link: <https://margaretcogswell.net/hudson-river-fugues>. Image courtesy of Wave Hill.

## HUDSON RIVER FUGUES (2009-10)

for

### *Lives of the Hudson*

Curated by Ian Berry and Tom Lewis  
The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery  
Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York  
<https://tang.skidmore.edu/>

In 2005, I was invited to create a project for *Meteorologic Phenomena*, an exhibition at Wave Hill, a public garden and cultural center that sits on cliffs along the Hudson River in the Bronx, New York. In developing this work



Fig. 8, 'Hudson Weather Fugues,' video still by Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.

and gathering stories for what became *Hudson Weather Fugues*, I took a schooner down the Hudson River from Albany to the Chelsea piers in New York City; I interviewed climate and regional historians, ice-boat sailors, shad fishermen, lighthouse keepers and river guides.

I also came upon the *Hudson River Almanac*,<sup>[9]</sup> which is compiled by Tom Lake, a naturalist at the Hudson River Estuary Program and published through the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. This weekly e-newsletter is comprised of observations along the river by local people from all walks of life. In *Hudson Weather Fugues*, readings from the *Hudson River Almanac* by a Hudson valley librarian were woven together to become the musical equivalent of the contrapuntal element of the fugue in contrast to the more melodic rhythm and voices of the storytellers. Memorable storytellers included Frank Parslow, an 87-year local shad fisherman whose observations helped the *Hudson Riverkeeper*, an environmental advocacy organization, win a case against Exxon.

Noting that “to check the weather” one usually goes to the window, I installed *Hudson Weather Fugues* in the gallery’s windows overlooking the Hudson River and layered the view from the window with video shot from the Saugerties lighthouse and my schooner trip down the Hudson. These videos were projected onto the glass panes in two of the three sets of windows. Shutters, custom-made for each set of the windows, housed speakers from which the narratives accompanying each video emerged. Benches placed in front of each window lured the viewer to linger, look out at the layered landscape, and “eavesdrop” on the river’s weather stories emerging from the shutters. The third window, though treated visually the same (with bench and shutters), had no video or audio intervention. The viewer, in anticipation of someone else’s

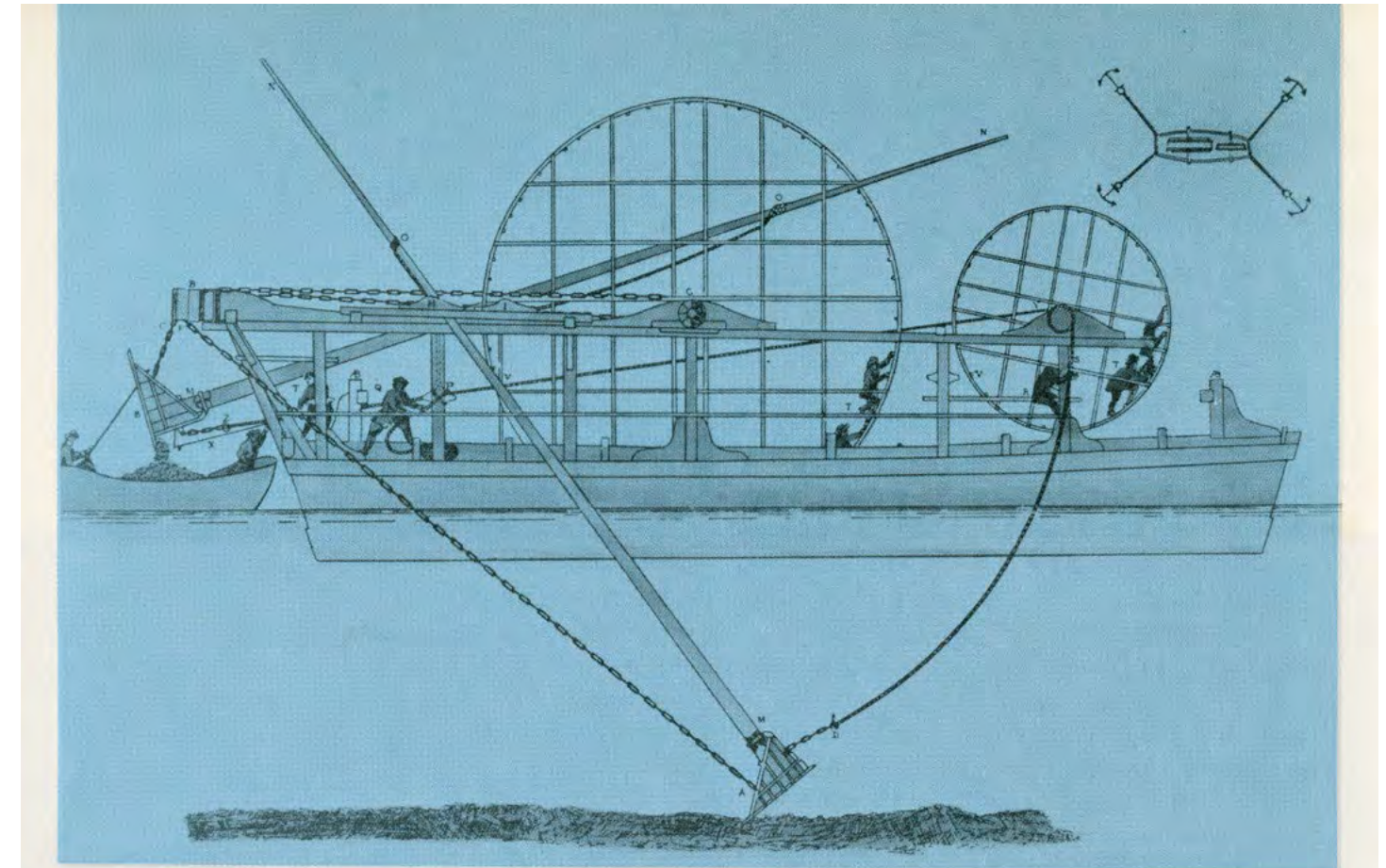
narratives, instead filled the silence with his/her own stories while visually exploring the landscape and river beyond.

This installation, which began at Wave Hill, was later developed into *Hudson River Fugues* for the exhibition, *Lives of the Hudson*, at the Tang Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York (2009–10). *Hudson River Fugues* juxtaposed contemporary stories from people along the Hudson River with the story of Henry Hudson’s disillusionment in not finding a short passage to China. It also contrasted Henry Hudson’s journey with the tragedy of the Algonquians whose ancient prophecy promised that their nomadic journeys would end in peace and prosperity when they found a great stream whose waters flow two ways.<sup>[10]</sup> As *The Hudson Estuary* describes it, “Of course native tribes had named the river long before Hudson’s arrival. One of their names—*Mahicantuck*—means “great waters in constant motion” or, more loosely, “river that flows two ways.” It highlights the fact that this waterway is more than a river—it is a tidal estuary, an arm of the sea where salty sea water meets fresh water running off the land.”<sup>[11]</sup> Collectively, these stories explore parallel narratives, contrasting expectations with disillusionment and loss in relation to the Hudson River.

## MISSISSIPPI RIVER FUGUES – 2008

Solo Exhibition curated by museum director, Leslie Luebbbers  
Art Museum of the University of Memphis  
Memphis, Tennessee  
<https://www.memphis.edu/amum/>

Since I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, when I was invited to create a new piece for a solo exhibition at the Art Museum of the University of Memphis, it seemed significant that I create a project focusing on the Mississippi River. The resulting *Mississippi River Fugues* emerged as an exploration of the complex history of the



A drawing of an early concept in “machine” dredging. Pre-dating the era of the Steam Engine, this machine was designed to dredge the harbor at the Port of Tulon, France, in the 18th century. Note that the scoops were powered by men in squirrel cages.

Fig. 9, eighteenth-century French drawing of a river dredger on pg. 4 of ‘A Century on the Mississippi: A History of the Memphis District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 1876–1976,’ by Floyd M. Clay, Ph.D. Published by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Memphis District, June 1986.

Mississippi River as it runs through the Deep South, including the history of the rise of the cotton industry on the backs of slaves out of the fertile flood plains of the Mississippi River. Of course, now the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers attempts to control the river's flooding, along with the actual course that the Mississippi River

takes, as well as its depth for navigational purposes. This is particularly important when river levels are low because of severe droughts in the southwest.

*View video here: 'MISSISSIPPI RIVER FUGUES' (2008) – Art Museum, University of Memphis.*

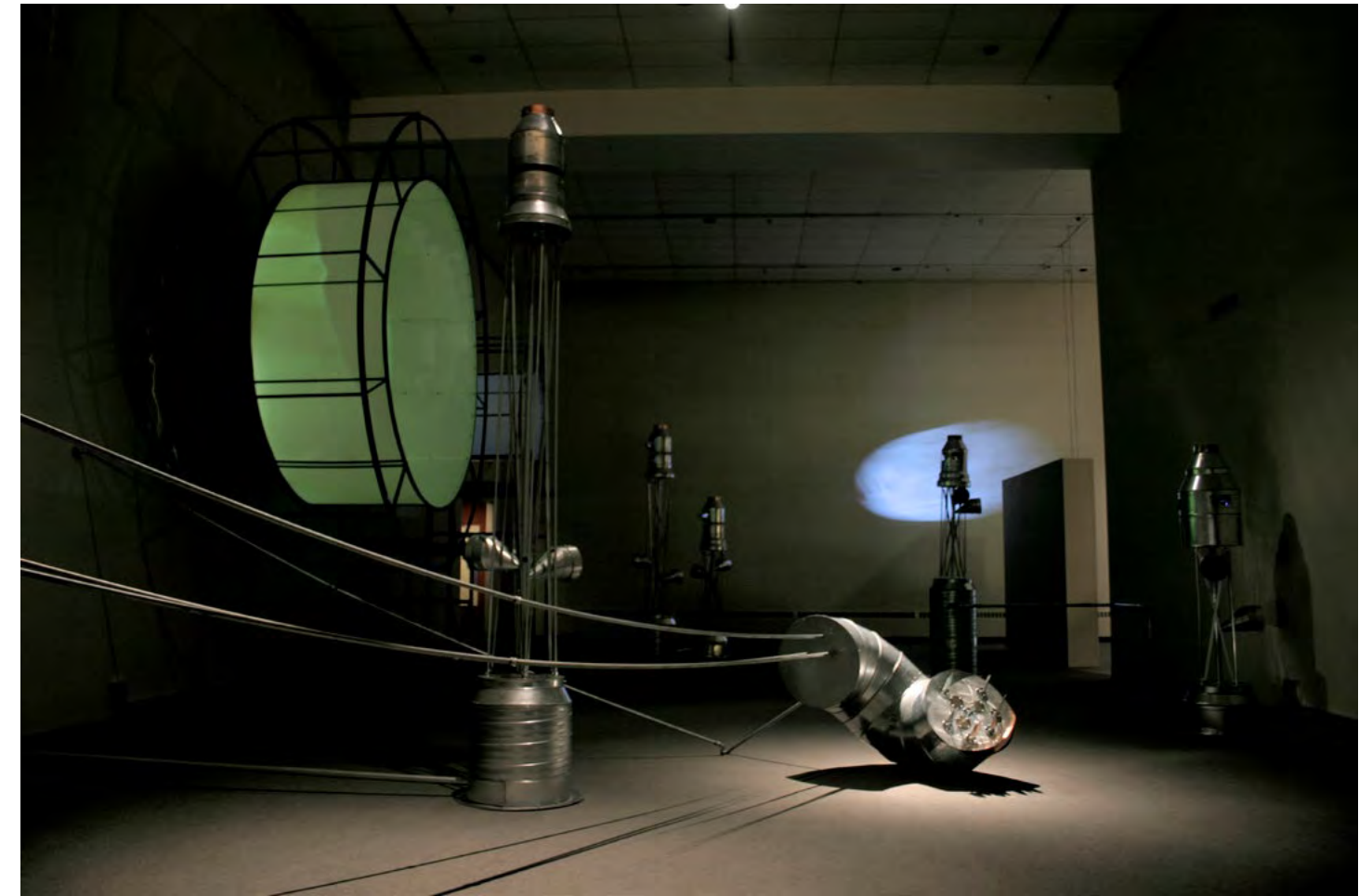


*Fig. 10, 'Mississippi River Fugues,' Installation view. Museum entrance: 9 lanterns with portable DVD players; galvanized pipe sections, and copper; Video & audio: playing narrative fugues composed from stories from people who live and work along the Mississippi River, Margaret Cogswell. Dimensions: 18" H x 12" diameter. Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.*

In the midst of my research in a book titled, *A Century on the Mississippi*,<sup>[12]</sup> published by the Army Corps of Engineers, I came across a reproduction of an eighteenth-century French drawing, which is what I call a "proposal drawing" for a dredger powered by men in squirrel wheel cages. This image seemed to depict the absurdity of

humanity's efforts to control nature. Because it was so bizarre, it became my point of departure for my *Mississippi River Fugues* installation.<sup>[13]</sup>

Entering the museum lobby, the viewer walked through a series of hurricane lanterns from which the narrative fugues created from people's stories emerged. Telephone recordings made



*Fig. 11, 'Mississippi River Fugues,' installation view, main gallery. Mixed-media installation of sculpture, audio and video projections. Installation Dimension = 20' H x 66' L x 33' W. Two Wheels with Dredger: steel, translucent plastic video screen, video projections with audio, Margaret Cogswell. Large Wheel: 20' H x 14' diameter x 4' deep. Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.*



from the daily readings of the Mississippi River's water level emerged from the center lantern and were heard between stories emerging from the surrounding lanterns. These stories were from people along the river, including cotton farmers, the Yazoo Mississippi levee board, Army Corps of Engineers, cotton field workers, and people at a cotton gin. This recitation of numbers reflecting

the river's water level formed the contrapuntal element in these narrative fugues.

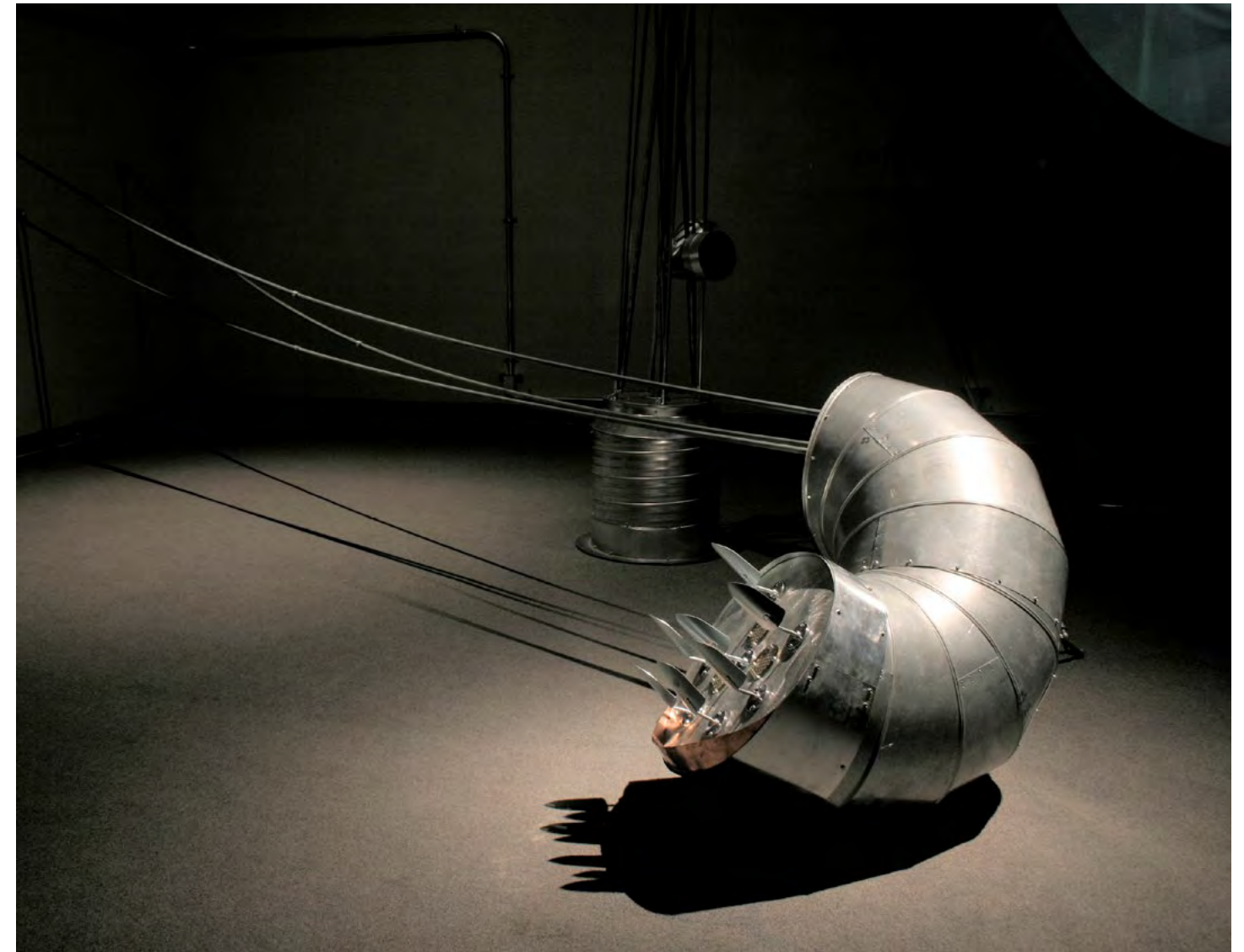
In the main part of this installation, the viewer enters a darkened space lit only by the light from the video projections sweeping the walls and videos seen in the middle of two giant 20-foot-high wheels. As though standing in the middle



*Fig. 12, 'Mississippi River Fugues.' Video still by Margaret Cogswell. Video projection on screen inside large dredger wheel 10' diameter, Margaret Cogswell. Large Wheel Dredger: 20' H x 14' diameter x 4' deep. Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.*

of the river, the viewer gazes upon a man in the middle of each of the two squirrel wheel cage-like structures—a man who appears to be propelling the wheels linked to an absurd dredger. Alongside there are five buoy structures. Instead of blinking lights, these buoys house video projectors, and their projections appear to light an otherwise darkened landscape.

I chose to project the video in circular images because, for me, this shape alludes to so many aspects of seeing. It is about discovering an image as though through the lens of a telescope, a portal, or a beam of light which, when raking a landscape in the night, illuminates only that which it is focused on. In each of these cases, the revelation is intentional and only partial. One is



*Fig. 13, 'Mississippi River Fugues.' Dredger Detail: 24" diameter X 6' L; 24" diameter spiral steel pipes, copper, steel spades. Installation, Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.*

aware that there is more outside the frame of the lens or the parameters of the beam of light than what is within, so one must work to imagine or attempt to recall from memory the surrounding context of what is only partially revealed.

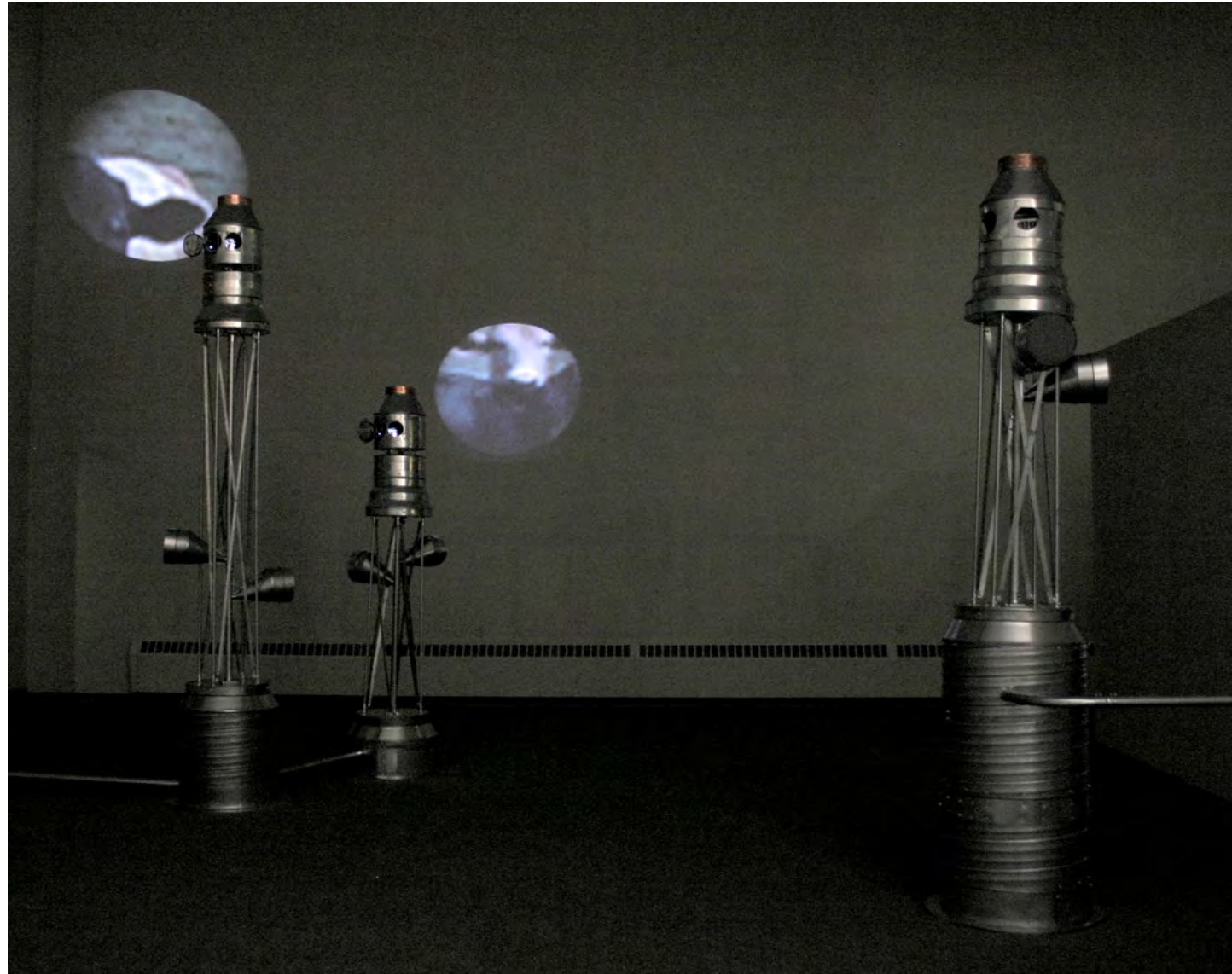


Fig. 14, 'Mississippi River Fugues,' Installation view: 5 Buoy structures. Mixed-media: spiral steel HVAC pipes, electrical conduits, copper, mirrors, electrical motor which oscillates top of buoy 90 degrees; video projector housed in top of each of five buoys, audio speakers, DVD players, Margaret Cogswell. Buoy Dimensions range from 6' H x 24" diameter to 14' H x 24" diameter. Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.

## WYOMING RIVER FUGUES (2012)

Solo Exhibition

Curated by museum director, *Susan Moldenhauer*

Art Museum of the University of Wyoming  
Laramie, Wyoming

<http://www.uwyo.edu/artmuseum/>

Research for *Wyoming River Fugues* revealed to me a startlingly new landscape, filling me with awe at the majesty of the wide-open spaces and a raw, exposed landscape whose ancient geological history entices even this novice explorer. Again, my research led me to talk with people from all walks of life and academic disciplines.

Visits with Mark Soldier Wolf and other Arapaho and Shoshone elders introduced me to the life, history, and struggles of Native Americans on the Wind River Reservation, in particular, in relation to water rights. Conversations with an archaeologist led me to ask more questions in wonder as I looked more closely at the earth and rock formations.. Perhaps it was these conversations that led to the subsequent series of drawings of dirt and the erosion of embankments, which I also showed in the exhibition.

In summer 2011, while participating in a residency for artists at *Ucross*, I was introduced to Jill Morrison, an organizer for the Powder River Basin Resource Council, who led me on an eight-hour tour of the Powder River Basin. Jill introduced me to the conflicted histories and struggles in relation to the river and water quality issues particularly as a result of coalbed methane development (i.e., fracking) within that area. Also while in the area, I visited some of the land reclamation sites of Cloud Peak open pit coal mining industries in and around the area of Gillette, Wyoming.

There was also a fortuitous meeting with Mike Latham who lives and works in *Ucross*. In the midst of a casual chat, Mike suddenly apologized

and said that he had to go and “move the water,” a turn of phrase I had never heard before. This led to an introduction to flood irrigation, ditch riders, and the use of the ubiquitous orange tarp, which became a focal point of my video. My readings in *Cadillac Desert*[14] and *Rivers of Empire*[15] had laid the groundwork for an overall history of the diversion of water, particularly in the southwest. However, it was through Mike’s introduction to flood irrigation and all that it entails in terms of water rights and access to water that I found a way to pull all these disparate, but related, ideas, histories, uses of water, and the role of rivers in Wyoming together.

The orange tarp was quite magical, basic but effective. It “moved the water”—concealed and revealed—much like the cape of a magician. Thus, with the entrance of a magician into the video, his role serves to reference other “magical” diversions of waters, whether through dams, irrigation, mining, or other efforts. All of these constitute another kind of sleight-of-hand efforts, that is, “now you see it,” or have access to the river’s waters, and “now you don’t,” because it has been diverted elsewhere.

Realizing that in the end, access to water was determined by how the land was surveyed, I created three surveyor’s transits which housed video projectors and threw images across the walls as they seemingly raked the landscape. Again, I used the circular image for each video projection because it could convey the act of discovering an image as though through the lens of a telescope, or in this case, a surveyor’s transit.

As for the moving bucket of light, while exploring the open pit coal mines in the huge Wyoming landscape, I remembered the image of a bucket of coal I caught on video one night in Cleveland’s steel yards. As it moved in and out of a fog of smoke and steam, the wet sides of the steel bucket glowed under the steel mills’ bright



*Fig. 15, 'Wyoming River Fugues, August: Dry Embankment,' watercolor and color pencil on paper, Margaret Cogswell. 30" X 22". Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.*



*Fig. 16, 'Wyoming River Fugues,' Moving the Water: Orange Tarp, Set Number 3, watercolor and color pencil on paper. 30" X 22". Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.*

yellow lights, appearing like a ball of fire in the black night sky. The starkness of this mysterious glowing object moving back and forth along a cable through the fog had a haunting impact on me because, at the time, I didn't know its real function and meaning.

I realized then the evocative power of an object that had movement, but whose purpose/meaning was indecipherable. So I reintroduced this bucket of light in *Wyoming River Fugues*, to slowly and mysteriously traverse 50 feet across the museum's gallery space. While it served as

a physical link between the two main walls of video projections, by not defining exactly what the bucket was carrying, I hoped to provoke the viewer into questioning, imagining, and possibly even beginning to explore the relationship between light, energy, and the waters of Wyoming rivers—ideas subtly nuanced and woven together in the fugal visual poems/video projections.

*View video here: 'WYOMING RIVER FUGUES – 2012.' Art Museum, University of Wyoming, Laramie.*



*Fig. 17, 'Wyoming River Fugues,' video still by Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.*



*Fig. 18, 'Wyoming River Fugues,' installation view. Mixed-media installation. Dimensions: 16' H X 64' L X 37' W. 3 surveyor's transits: wood, steel, plumb bob, video projector, mirror, copper, duct pipes, electrical conduits, chain, 90-degree oscillating motor, audio speakers, computers. Dimensions: 6, 9 & 11' H, 2 steel stock tanks= 5' and 8' diameters. 1 bucket of light: translucent polyurethane sheets, steel bars, cable, LED lights. Motor for bucket movement and light controlled by computer program, Margaret Cogswell. Dimensions: 40" x 30" x 50". Image courtesy of Susan Moldenhauer.*

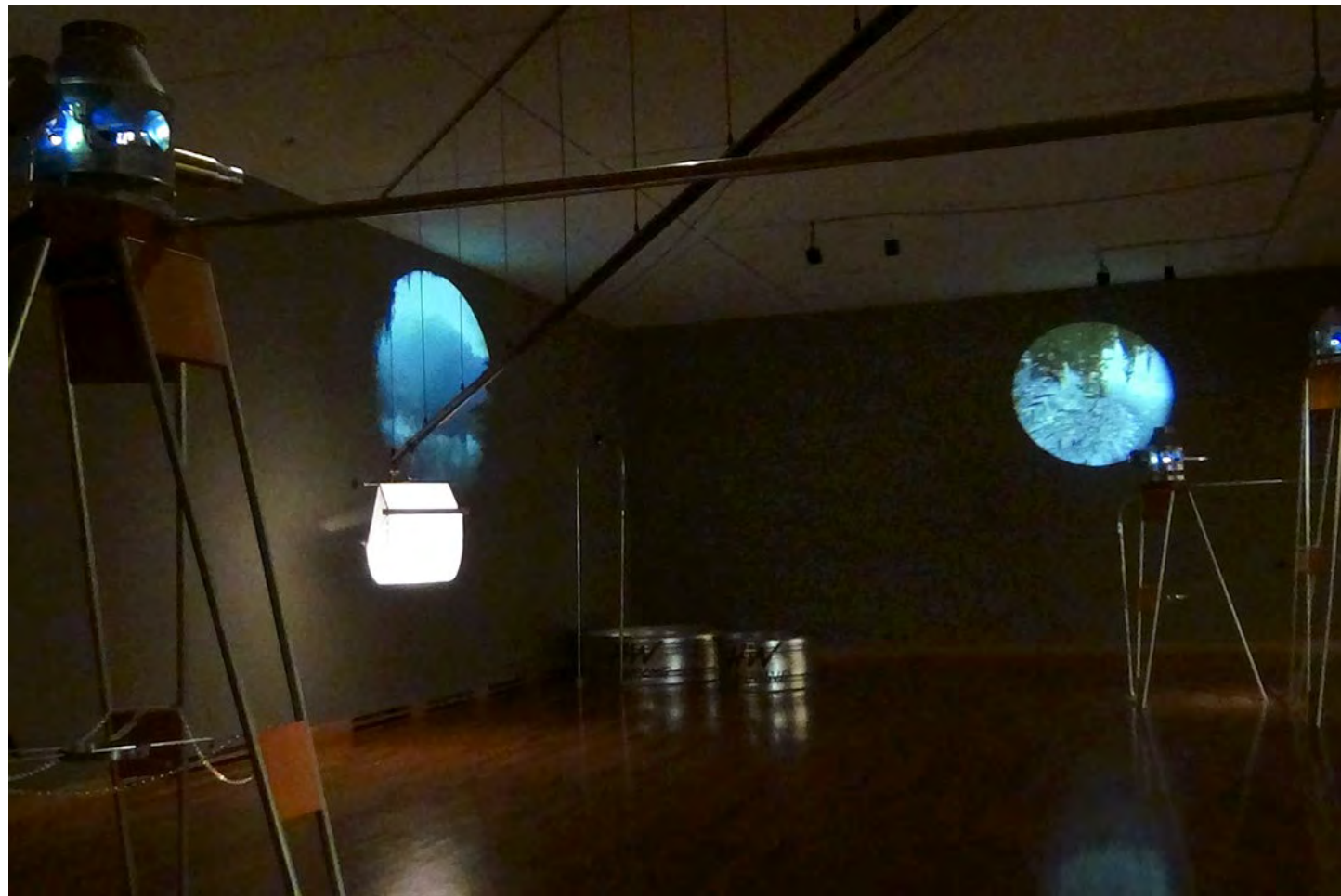


Fig. 19, 'Wyoming River Fugues,' installation view 2, details as above, Margaret Cogswell.  
Image courtesy of Susan Moldenhauer.

## ZHUJIAJIAO RIVER POEMS – 2014

Solo Exhibition curated by Wang Nanming  
Zendai Zhujiajiao Art Museum  
Zhujiajiao, China

In 2014, I was invited by curator Wang Nanming to create new work for a solo exhibition while in residence at the Zendai Zhujiajiao Art Museum in Zhujiajiao, a 1,700-year-old water town in China. Living and working in the museum's Ming Dynasty building located along the Cao Gong River with all the overlays of both ancient history and contemporary life, offered a unique experience for a newcomer to China and a rare opportunity to observe its relationship to its water and its rivers.

In Zhujiajiao, the rivers and canals are public waterways. Not only beautiful to look at, they also serve as arteries in the life of the surrounding communities and towns. These rivers are used for everything including fishing, boating, hauling construction materials, washing clothes, mops, and food, and more. Teahouses, restaurants, and parks, as well as private homes, line these waterways, and are always filled with people whose lives are dependent on different uses of the water for survival as well as for pleasure.

View video here: [Zhujiajiao River Poems – 2014](#).

Watching the river while working in my studio or taking long walks through the town, I looked for links to China's history and culture through the details of objects, food, music, and movements in daily life or rituals. I began to notice the reoccurring movements in different activities—like the rowing of the boats, the movement of a Taiji master's hands, the motions of harvesting snails with long bamboo poles, the movement of the water after a passing boat. I would catch fragments of traditional songs, whiffs of smoke from the cooking of food, and smells of fish frying on open flames. These observations formed a point of departure for both the drawings and videos I

created as I strove to capture the essence of my experience along the Cao Gong River. Aware that I was seeing the world through the personal lens of an outsider framed by the Ming Dynasty windows of my studio, I chose to emphasize this perspective by masking the videos that would form *Zhujiajiao River Poems* in oval and rectangular formats.

*Zhujiajiao River Poems* was installed as a video installation and part of my solo exhibition at the Zendai Zhujiajiao Art Museum. It consisted of four video projections—two projections each of two different videos.<sup>[16]</sup> The main video, exploring life on the Cao Gong River, was in color and projected in an oval format. In contrast, the second video, which was recorded during a rain-storm, was a very tightly cropped detail shot of raindrops collecting in puddles on the museum's roof. The rain video was in black and white and projected in a vertical rectangular format.

Juxtaposing the projections of these two videos to each other visually linked the waters of the rain to that of the river. Together these two videos (four projections) formed a fugue, with the sound of each raindrop splashing in the puddles forming the contrapuntal element for this fugue.

Throughout this essay, I have focused on my mixed-media installation responses to research on the different rivers I have explored. All the while, I have also been developing a parallel body of [drawings on paper](#). These works are the result of many months of walking, exploring, photographing, and filming the landscape of an area I was researching for the development of each of my *River Fugues* projects. Much like an archaeologist or geologist, I have searched for clues to the history of a river, a people, or a place in the enigmatic remnants of their past.

In 2015, I was invited to create new work for *SOUNDINGS*, a two-person exhibition with



Fig. 20, 'Zhujiajiao River Poems,' exhibition poster, 2014. Image courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.



Fig. 21 (above) and Fig. 22 (below), 'Zhujiajiao River Poems,' 2014. Video stills: Margaret Cogswell. Images courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.



Fig. 23, 'Zhujiajiao River Poems,' 2014. Video still: Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.



Fig. 24, 'Zhujiajiao Soundings #1,' 2014. Collaged watercolor, colored pencil, Chinese red ink and stamps on handmade paper, 13" x 48", Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.

Ellen Driscoll, at Kentler International Drawing Space in Red Hook, Brooklyn.[17] Red Hook is a peninsula section of Brooklyn that juts into the East River at its confluence with the Hudson River, thereby historically serving as a major harbor for New York City. While researching for what became a series of drawings titled *Red Hook Harbor Soundings*, I became intrigued with the fragmented remains of infrastructure and industry emerging from the Red Hook harbor where the tidal waters of both the Hudson and East Rivers alternately reveal and then conceal the histories of these ruins.

Similarly, walks along the Ashokan Reservoir evoked wonderings of the submerged towns, their memories now held silently in the surrounding mountains. Hikes through desert landscapes in New Mexico and Wyoming, wanderings along the Cao Gong River in the ancient water town of Zhujiajiao, China, and hushed ventures through abandoned steel mills in Cleveland all led to drawings that often acknowledge loss, paying homage to the defiant traces of a people, their lives embedded in a place—in a landscape—literally, metaphorically, or metaphysically.



Fig. 25, 'Red Hook Harbor Soundings #26,' 2015. Watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 15" x 22." Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.

Following meandering rivers, I am learning that, although my research always begins with a river, its life is not just about its waters. Instead, it is about our relationships to each other, to the land and to all of our natural resources. Nor are these relationships strictly physical. They are also very spiritual and ultimately reflect our relationship with all aspects of life.

Reflecting on Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*,<sup>[18]</sup> I was particularly struck by his defining a memorable photograph as one having the quality of "punctum," that is, the ability to pierce. Taking Barthes' challenge, I strive to create work that pierces, is memorable, and is intellectually and visually provocative. Often poignant elegies, these works reflect the complex and changing



Fig. 26, 'Red Hook Harbor Soundings #20,' 2015. Watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 15" x 44." Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.



Fig. 27: 'Red Hook Harbor Soundings #19,' 2015. Margaret Cogswell. Watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 15" x 30." Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.

relationship of a society to the land, its industries, and rivers. I strive to be a contributing artistic voice in a larger conversation exploring how we live along our rivers and use their waters in complex and ever-shifting inter-relationships.

are by Margaret Cogswell. All permissions by photographers have been granted. Most of these images appear either online with URLs provided, or in *River Fugues*, by Margaret Cogswell (Brooklyn, NY: Rolling Press, 2018).

Permissions: Unless otherwise specifically listed, all photographs, videos, video stills, and artworks

## Footnotes

[1] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," *Crisis*, vol. 71 (New York: NAACP, Crisis Publishing, 1921): 26.

[2] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 16.

[3] See *Inside Yoknapataphaw*—1992, <https://margaretcogswell.net/inside-yoknapataphaw>; *Memento Mori*—1993 & 1995, <https://margaretcogswell.net/memento-mori>.

[4] Anonymous source.

[5] Glen Gould, *The Idea of the North*, radio play (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1967), and Anne Carson, *Plainwater Essays and Poetry* (London: Vintage Books, 1996).

[6] *The Idea of the North*, a radio piece by pianist Glenn Gould, debuted on the CBC, December 28, 1967. Subsequently, this was made into a documentary film (Judith Pearlman, Dir., 58 min. 1970).

[7] Carson, *Plainwater Essays and Poetry*.

[8] Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

[9] Tom Lake, ed., *Hudson River Almanac*, A Project of the Hudson River Estuary Program (The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, n.d.), <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/25608.html>.

[10] John Mylod, *Biography of a River, The People and Legends of the Hudson Valley* (Pineville, Oregon: Bonanza Books, 1969), 2.

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FEATURE

# (RE)CONNECTING COMMUNITY TO THE AWATAHA STREAM

By Laura Donkers and Charmaine Bailie

Our modern ways of living have created an environmental crisis that threatens the very survival of humans and many other species. Yet awareness of this situation, though it may create an urgent sense of responsibility and even guilt, does not necessarily translate into action

to change our ways. A narrative of “ecological disaster” can alert the public to the need for action,<sup>[1]</sup> but the scale of the crisis and lack of wisdom to act can be overwhelming.<sup>[2]</sup> So how can communities become motivated to respond?



*Fig. 1, The Kākā Reserve reflected in the Awataha Stream. Video still from ‘Re-Generation’ 2019. Image courtesy of Laura Donkers.*

We need approaches that make these urgent matters more tangible and accessible.[3] We can gain new perspectives when learning about other ways of knowing the world, making sense of the world, and by feeling part of the world. This could lead to us to develop more sustainable lifestyles and end support for ecology-damaging behaviours. This will involve accepting that we are culturally disconnected from the environment; finding ways to resolve the environmental damage; and reconnecting our cultural bonds to nature. One way to succeed in this is to seek guidance from Indigenous peoples who have followed nature's laws for generations and know how to work collaboratively to balance human needs with the wider networks of ecological actors/participants/relations.

In Western thinking, nature is divested of its original functions and status, and is seen as a resource to be subjugated and developed.[4] This anthropocentric perspective has resided in the industrialized exploitation of nature that is now widely acknowledged as having accelerated the contemporary crises of climatic change, species extinction, and environmental pollution.[5] By contrast, Indigenous systems of thought are guided by the values and laws written in nature.[6] Native peoples have known for thousands of years how to align their needs with the plural natures of other beings by valuing and upholding ecology as kin. Over recent decades, observers have drawn attention to widespread ecological damage and the need for redress through regenerative ecology, rewilding, and socio-ecological action as a way to increase biodiversity, restore environments, and mitigate climate change.[7] Reports identify that the more successful of these approaches step outside of Western

scientific frameworks and enter the world of Indigenous peoples.[8] McElwee et al. consider that Indigenous peoples' capacity to comprehend the inextricable links between humanity and ecosystem can help bridge opposing perspectives, re-educate non-Indigenous practitioners, and restore the status of nonhuman actors (such as waterways).[9]

This article and accompanying [video](#) present an approach to Māori and non-Māori collaboration on the restoration of an urban stream in Aotearoa New Zealand.[10] Together they introduce the collaborative approach taken by the Auckland-based Kaipātiki Project,[11] a community regeneration organization which is evolving its members' Western science approach to forest, stream, and estuary restoration by engaging with the principles of *Te Ao Māori* (the Māori world view).[12] *Te Ao Māori* provides an alternative to the Western Enlightenment view of a nature/culture divide[13] by connecting daily living and the need for energy, food, and water supply, with care for the environment. Through its community and ecological work, the Kaipātiki Project is weaving *mātauranga* (traditional knowledge concepts) and *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship practices) into the predominant Western mindset to help transform societal behaviours into more ecologically connected ones. We demonstrate how, with guidance and support, non-Indigenous communities can develop new perspectives on nature and culture, learn to value these more dearly, and begin to help repair some of the ecological damage our ways of living have caused.

*View video here: 'RE-GENERATION,' 2019. Laura Donkers.*

## (Re)connecting community to ecology via the Māori worldview

In *Te Ao Māori*, the Māori worldview perceives the interconnectedness of all things as integral to spiritual, social, and environmental relationships (Fig 2). Māori knowledge, *mātauranga*, is the application of knowledge and understanding based on “evidence, cultural values, and world view.”[14] It follows traditional, place-based knowledges developed in ongoing processes of observation and interpretation, guided by the inherited traditional values established by *mana whenua*—the people with customary authority

in a particular area.[15] Life sustaining practices are guided by *kaitiakitanga* (the management of environmental resources) that include harvesting and fishing protocols, as well as protecting certain areas at different times of the season that may involve banning practices such as recreational fishing and birding.[16]

A *Te Ao Māori* approach is helping to address the declining state of many Aotearoa waterways in projects that focus on remedial practices to



Fig. 2, Traditional Māori blessing of the Kākā Reserve (aka Jessie Tonar Reserve) prior to restoration work beginning. Image courtesy of Eke Panuku.

address pollution and flooding through stream “daylighting.” Stream daylighting is a strategy to uncover restricted watercourses by removing pipes and pavements,[17] thereby enabling the stream to flow in a more “ecologically natural” and healthy state that can support the creation of wildlife corridors.[18] To be effectual, this work also involves remedial horticultural activities that require specialized, technically complex, and labor-intensive work, where stream ecology, and plant/species knowledge and selection are essential components.

One approach that used traditional knowledge concepts to foster a duty of care aligned with Māori beliefs, presented a river-focused perspective that considered what the river would have

## Restoring an urban stream

The community-based Kaipātiki Project began in 1998, led by local resident, Jenny Christianson, who worked with other volunteers to redress the invasion of weeds and non-native animal pests that were displacing the native biota. Due to infrastructure development, the tree-felling program had exposed the fragile riparian zone to an influx of exotic species from surrounding gardens, and the resulting dense weed mat inhibited native tree seedlings from germinating naturally. With assistance from Auckland North Shore Council, the volunteers initiated a weeding and planting regime. More than 20 years on, the informal project is now a Trust with its own native species nursery and continues to look after the environment, care for people, and share knowledge.

Under the leadership of Charmaine Bailie (Ngāti Whātua/Te Uri O Hau), Chair of Kaipātiki Project Board of Trustees, this work now extends to teaching regenerative environmental practices. This ethos has moved from a Western science foundation toward *Te Ao Māori* ways of working,

to say about its unhealthy, polluted state. Daniel Hikuroa (Ngāti Manipoto, Waikato-Tainui), Māori scholar and earth systems scientist, was principal investigator on the project *Listening for the Voice of the River*. [19] In this project, he devised a strategy that used *mātauranga* to include the river and all its creatures as stakeholders in a process of thinking with the *personhood of the river* [20] rather than just anthropocentrically. To empower and articulate the voice of the river, the project worked with local *iwi* (Māori communities) to reverse practices that had previously left waterways damaged. Yet water quality affects everyone, so this concern is not exclusively a Māori one: non-Indigenous populations also need to consider their values, regardless of race, indigeneity, or belief.

but the thinking has not always aligned. In recent years though, it has evolved into a stronger collaboration in an ongoing journey of learning alongside *iwi*. By introducing Māori guardianship practices to the non-Indigenous community, the Kaipātiki Project builds understanding that humans are connected—and not superior—to the natural world. This strategy underpins their teaching on ecological restoration and is exemplified in the initiative Te Ara Awataha (the way of Awataha), an Auckland Council urban renewal development [21] currently being co-delivered by the Kaipātiki Project to daylight the Awataha Stream in the Auckland suburb of Northcote.

High monetary value placed on built-upon land reduces capacity for natural floodplains or soakaways to exist. In recent years, the tendency for urban waterways to overflow after heavy rain has frequently resulted in flooded homes and streets that have left Northcote residents occasionally resorting to “kayaking down the road.” [22] Since the 1950s, the Awataha Stream had been channeled through an underground

stormwater pipe, but in 2019 the Te Ara Awataha Project began to uncover the stream to form a “green corridor” for wildlife (Fig 3).

As the headwaters of the Awataha Stream begin at the Kākā Reserve (aka Jessie Tonar Scout Reserve), part of the key restoration activities involved weeding out the exotic species that had come to dominate the area and replacing them

with native trees instead. These plantings aimed to re-establish biodiversity through the regeneration of healthy habitats for fish, birds, and other wildlife. Restorative work also involved trapping activities to remove introduced pests such as rats, possums, and stoats (Eurasian ermine) that have caused the decline of native tree species and destroyed the habitats of native birds and mammals.



Fig. 3, Awataha Greenway Reference Plan ©Isthmus Group. Image courtesy of the Isthmus Group. Available at <https://isthmus.co.nz/project/te-ara-awataha-greenway/>.

## Sharing mātauranga wisdom

When *mana whenua kaitiaki* (guardians, trustees) became partners in the urban regeneration project they challenged key stakeholders to engage with *mātauranga* wisdom. The specific *mana whenua kaitiaki* who contributed to the project are: *Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Te Patukirikiri, Ngaati Whanaunga, Ngāti Whātua Rūnanga, Ngāti Maru, Ngā Maunga Whakahī o Kaipara, Ngāti Paoa Trust Board, Te Ākitai Waiohūa.*

They facilitated by engaging their own *Taiao* (environment) specialists to work alongside the design partners Isthmus[23] on behalf of Eke Panuku (the commissioning urban regeneration organization) and Kāinga Ora,[24] Crown agency for homes and communities. Charmaine

Bailie was one of these specialists designing cultural and biodiverse planting, and Richelle Kahui-McConnell designed Take Hono Take Mauri, a “*mauri* (life force) indicator framework” establishing social and environmental baselines to evaluate the condition of the stream and then apply its principles to revitalise both the ecology and the local community. *Mana whenua* then enabled the Kaipātiki Project to utilise the framework to guide the delivery of restoration work on Awataha Stream and use the indicators to track the progress of the project (Fig 4).

The key principles and purpose underpinning this framework are:

| Key Principles  | Purpose   | Indicators   |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Aho Toi:</b> working collaboratively                     | The community is empowered through the work                     | Seeing our faces in our places<br>Community pride and ownership  |
| <b>Aho Tangata:</b> sharing communal space and feeling safe | The work supports a connected, healthy, and inclusive community | <i>Hononga:</i> coming together<br><i>E Tipu e rea:</i> growing with nature<br><i>Ara Hikoi:</i> navigating through the land |
| <b>Aho Taiao:</b> Living with nature                        | Nature is visible, green, resilient, and ecologically healthy   | <i>Kia kōrero te whenua:</i> the land speaks<br><i>Ngā Karekare o te wai:</i> the water speaks<br>Healthy habitat            |

Information sourced from “*Awataha Greenway Design Guide,*” 2017. ©Isthmus Group. Available at <https://isthmus.co.nz/project/te-ara-awataha-greenway/>.



Fig. 4, *Mana whenua* visit site using the Take Mauri Take Hono tool to assess progress. Image courtesy of Eke Panuku.



Fig. 5, Kaipātiki Project in action with the community at one of the restoration days. Image courtesy of Eke Panuku.

Much of the physical restoration work has been carried out by volunteers drawn from local communities. Individuals might be attracted to the project for many reasons. They often begin their journey towards stewardship by attending regular Community Restoration Days run by the Kaipātiki Project that are designed to be accessible, productive, and enjoyable.

*Te Ao Māori* provides a collaborative approach to re-establishing the *mauri* of the stream by

## A pedagogical approach

Kaipātiki Project’s pedagogical approach to inspiring and educating volunteers is demonstrated in *Re-Generation* (2019). The video tracks the journey of volunteers as they engage with the Kākā Reserve for the first time. Charmaine Bailie undertakes much of the teaching around restoration and regenerative practices.

improving the water quality and its potential as a habitat for particular and more diverse animal and insect species and plant life to flourish. It also reconnects people to water (Fig 5) by developing relationships and understanding around its status at a time when more than 10 km of Tāmaki Makaurau’s waterways are being lost annually due to the increase in housebuilding and infrastructure developments.[25]

We first meet her giving a briefing about safely navigating through the reserve so as not to destroy the native seedlings that are present, and that without this presence of mind the volunteers can do more damage than good. She advises a process of stepping through the bush as though wearing ballet shoes to avoid “grinding weeds in



Fig. 6, Charmaine Bailie teaching plant identification. Video still from ‘Re-Generation’ 2019. Image courtesy of Laura Donkers.

and wiping native plants out” as a form of presence-based action.[26] She then moves onto native plant identification and highlights how their local Māori names might be different or have alternative pronunciations in other locations. Several species are rapidly identified, while others are given more time with references made to their traditional uses. This leads on to the purpose of the day’s activities with a discussion around the process of weeding out non-natives in the “exotic-dominated habitat” and the importance of identifying them at all stages—from a fully grown specimen to a seedling of 3–4 centimeters (Fig 6). The manner of removing those exotic species is a process of “pulling up” and “cutting down” rather than the use of chemicals. This approach takes time, but Charmaine believes it to be a preferable one: “You can instantly spray it, kill it, and paint it, or long term reduce it, and some people are in a hurry, but I personally am not.”

From the initial flurry of information overload, the tone of the session then becomes calmer. A plan to identify just one weed type rather than the need to recognize many empowers volunteers with a strategy for weeding that they will be able to manage: “You need to focus on one weed because if you start doing what I just did to you, piling a whole plate at you in one moment, [you will get confused].” The weeding process then

## Summary

To begin to address the ecological crises we first must accept that industrialised ways of living have caused many of the problems we associate with climate change and biodiversity loss. We also must accept that culturally we live as though we are separate from nature. We need help to change this perspective, and one way could be with guidance from Indigenous peoples who live in ways that are much more connected and balanced against the needs of nature. To this end, the Kaipātiki Project offers a tangible and accessible route where non-Māori can engage with *Te Ao Māori* in ecological regeneration activities to

begins, and volunteers can be seen working in small groups to clear out patches of exotic species. In the background, a shredding machine can be heard starting up where the woody materials are processed to be returned to the site later as a mulch to suppress weed regrowth. The volunteers move slowly and talk quietly to each other, discussing which tree to cut down or which plant to pull up.

As the video progresses, we start to see more of the reserve and hear birds calling. Charmaine draws attention to its value as a feeding station for different bird groups on their way to other locations. She also highlights the value in taking time to be self-reflective, explaining that working like this supports exercise and rejuvenation but also provides some downtime to attend to one’s own emotional and spiritual needs, inviting those who wish to take time for *karakia*[27] or prayer. This pause for reflection coincides with the point in the video where we finally meet the entity at the centre of the restoration work: Awataha Stream (Fig 1). As we view the reserve from its perspective now, through the reflections in the water, we can see that the volunteers’ labor is helping to regenerate it and, in their journey to restore nature, they in turn are being (re)connected to the stream.

develop a sense of connectedness to the natural world.

In the video, Charmaine Bailie presents an informed and painstaking method of habitat restoration, encompassing holistic and mindful practices, to guard against creating more ecological damage in the effort to restore environmental balance. Charmaine shares her concept of “mindfulness and ballerina shoes” to promote methods that employ reflective consciousness and presence-based action. This approach helps volunteers to consider the impact of their

presence in the place and connect mindful action with care for the environment. With the support from mana whenua, the Kaipātiki Project has woven traditional Māori concepts and principles into science-based ecological practices “acknowledge[ing] indigenous indicators and understandings alongside western ecology and science.”<sup>[28]</sup> By introducing non-Indigenous community members to experience

## Acknowledgements

We thank Professor Daniel Hikuroa (University of Auckland) for his valuable guidance around the initial framing of this article; Sara Zwart (Principal Regenerative Design Lead at Panuku Development Auckland) for her

ecological restoration from a Māori perspective, they raise awareness of an alternative world view. Additionally, by using guided Māori principles to link collaborative, situated knowledge with beneficial ecological practices and customs, their approach also develops routes for non-Indigenous communities to begin to value and uphold ecology as kin.

guidance and contribution of images; and the Isthmus Group for their image and data contributions. We also thank the anonymous reviewers and editor for their helpful comments in the development of this article.

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Charmaine Bailie (Ngati Whatua Kaipara) has been involved with the Kaipātiki Project, innovative eco-hub, since 1998. A Director of Uru Whakaaro for eight years, she leads the development of traditional and experimental ecological restoration. She is a founding member of Waitōtara Sustainable and Resilient Living, working to restore the Waiwera catchment. She is a facilitator of the Iwi-Hapu and Community Native Plant Nursery Network, evolving a space for community to grow local biodiversity.



FEATURE

# TWEED

By Tania Kovats and Mary Modeen

The River Tweed speaks instantly of borders, of unity and division, but also of warp and weft, telling us much about its shapeshifting character. This living marker of national meanings and historical boundaries flows eastwards 97 miles from the Lowther Hills to Berwick-upon-Tweed, descending 1,440 feet over that length. Its source rises 40 miles north of Scotland's westernmost border with England. The river enters the sea two miles south of the border's easternmost point. There is a ring of geological predestination to this bordering identity. It's as if the Tweed exists as a

sturdy trace of the ocean that separated Scotland and England 520 million years ago.

The hills in which it rises, and along whose northern margin it meanders, are the deposits of that ocean, thrown skyward by the collision of the two continents, Laurentia and Gondwana, in the Ordovician era, 450 million years ago. The English Lake District and the entirety of the Southern Uplands are the remnants of that collision. In spite of centuries of cross border strife between their respective peoples, there is

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*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

much that is shared, including ancestry. It is very telling that on the map of Scotland's 2014 independence referendum results, a striking bulwark of "No" (to independence) voting constituencies form a thick line north of the border, coinciding with the Ordovician geology. The warp and weft of cross-border communities is strong, and the Tweed unifies as much as it divides.

Kovats says of the work:

"*TWEED* started by me following the river. Tweeds Well is a lonely place in the Lowther Hills, where the river rises, traveling for just under one hundred miles before entering the sea at Tweedmouth. I believe all rivers have their own voice. Some rivers run through you, your conscious and beyond-conscious mind. Tweed is a bilingual river that travels along a border, a historic, geopolitical, psychological and metaphoric boundary. For *TWEED*, I brought together a set of writings and drawings in the form of a unique newspaper publication that were part of an exhibition in the summer of 2019 at Berwick Gymnasium in the exhibition *Head to Mouth*.

Border ballads are a discrete song form of the landscape that the river Tweed runs through and lent *TWEED* its form. In *TWEED* I expressed the narrative of the river as a tortured love story between he/she, north/south, that ultimately ends in separation. The shapeshifter Tam Lin lent his liquid identity to the narrative. This 'border ballad' of drawings and writing addressed the fragile state of the 'Union' as a metaphysical love story and a test of internal and external boundaries."

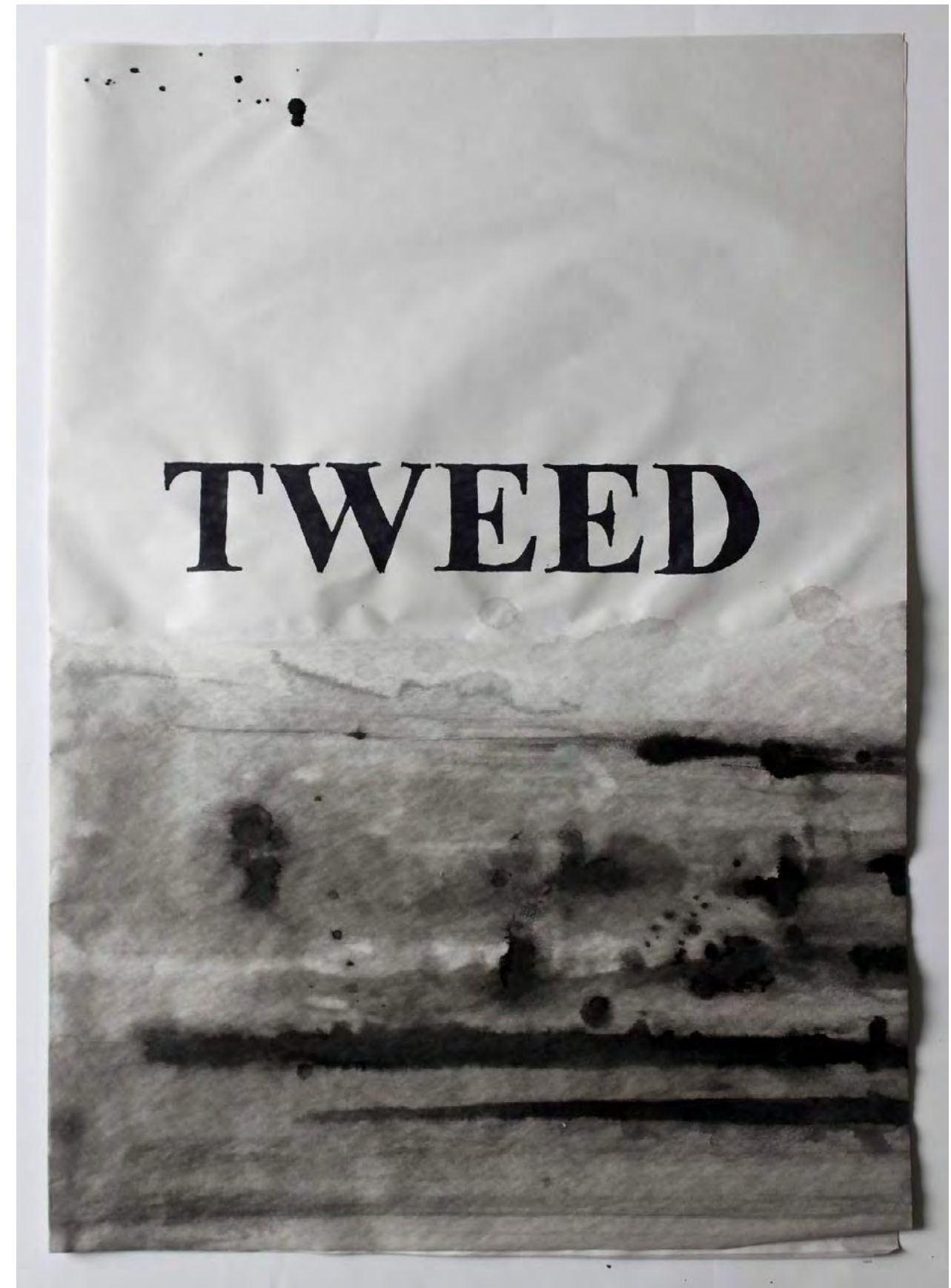
Tania Kovats comes to the River Tweed with that deep sense of time, able to unite its geological agency with its geopolitical resonance. Her work, *TWEED*, addresses the specificity of this national river and the fluidity of identity that it prompts in its communities. The work also

takes its place within the broader arc of her work with, and about, water. Her 2014 exhibition *Oceans*, held at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery, foregrounded the significance of water on a planetary scale. A scan of the Earth's surface reminds us of what we as land creatures too easily forget; the ocean's waters cover 71% of the planet and underpin the freshwater systems on land that enable all life. *Rivers*, her permanent installation at the Jupiter Artland's boathouse, shifts to a national scale, housing samples of water that the artist collected from 100 rivers across the UK. *TWEED* zooms in further, and expresses Kovats' immersion in the geography, mythology, social history and of course balladry of this nationally significant river.

The work that follows here is a set of Tania's inkwash drawings with the text of the border ballads that accompany the artworks. Her focus on water, fluidity, atmosphere, and the character of the river come to the fore in this work.

*All images courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

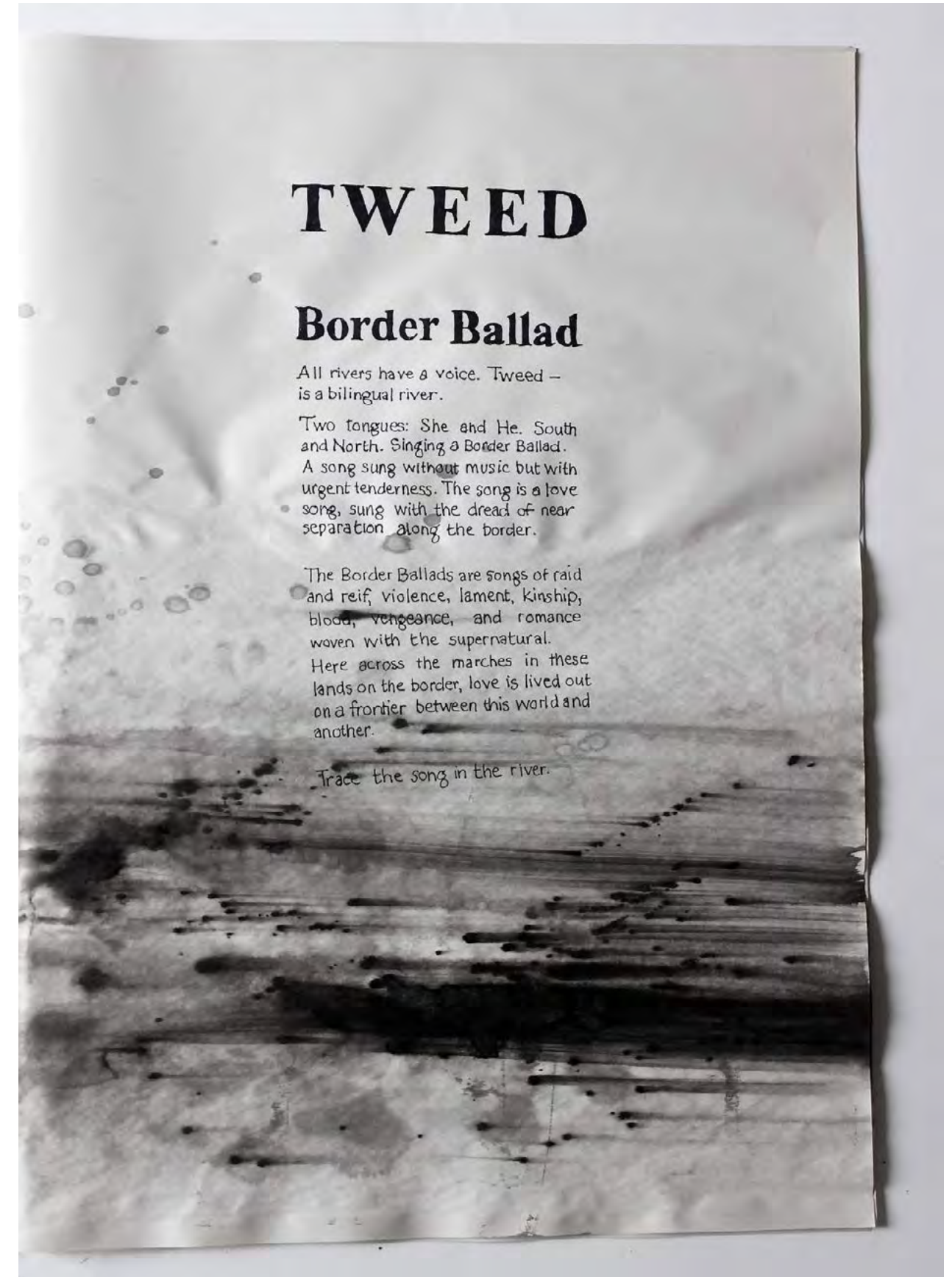
*View TWEED on [Issuu](#).*



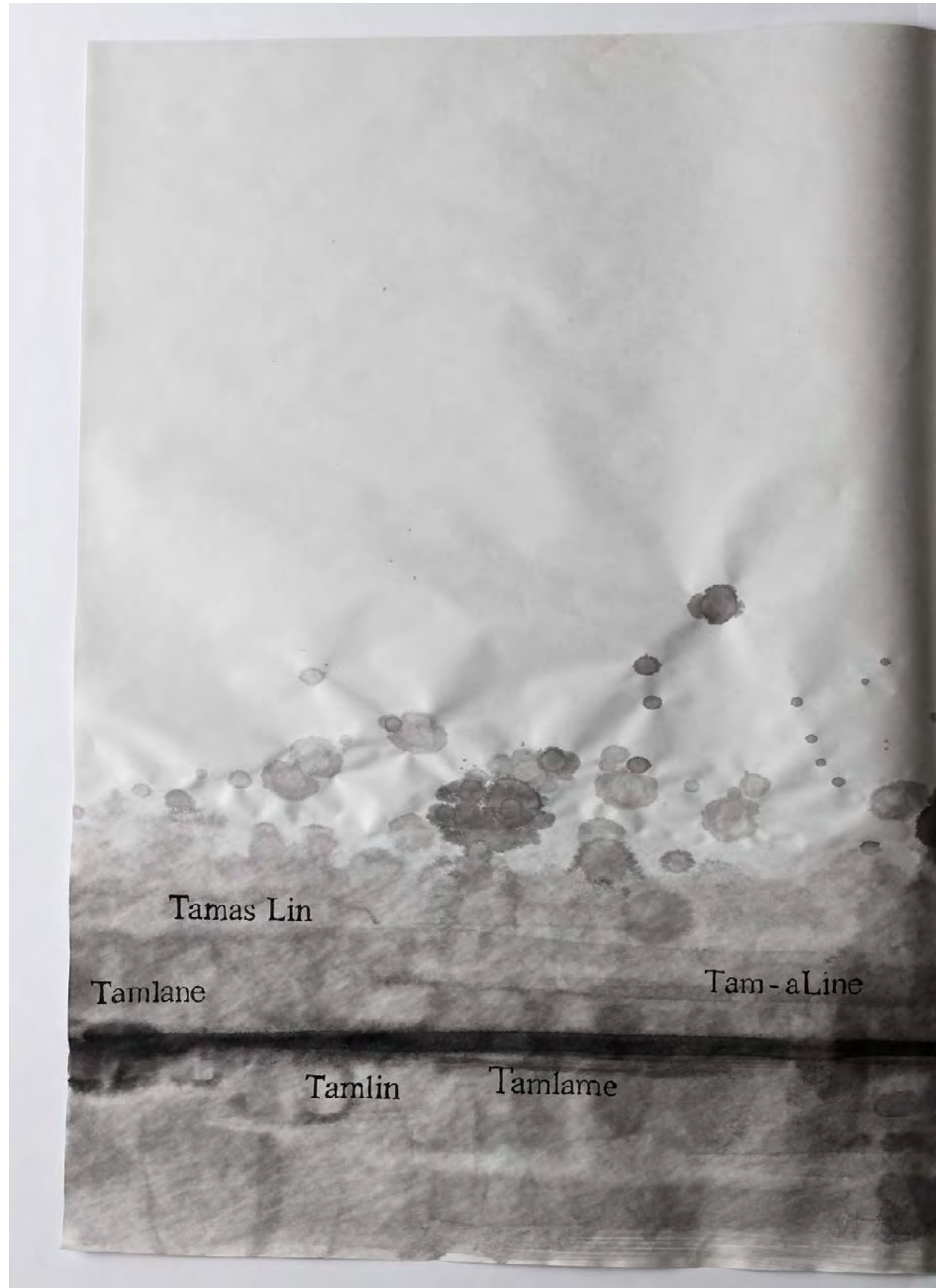
*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



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Tamas Lin

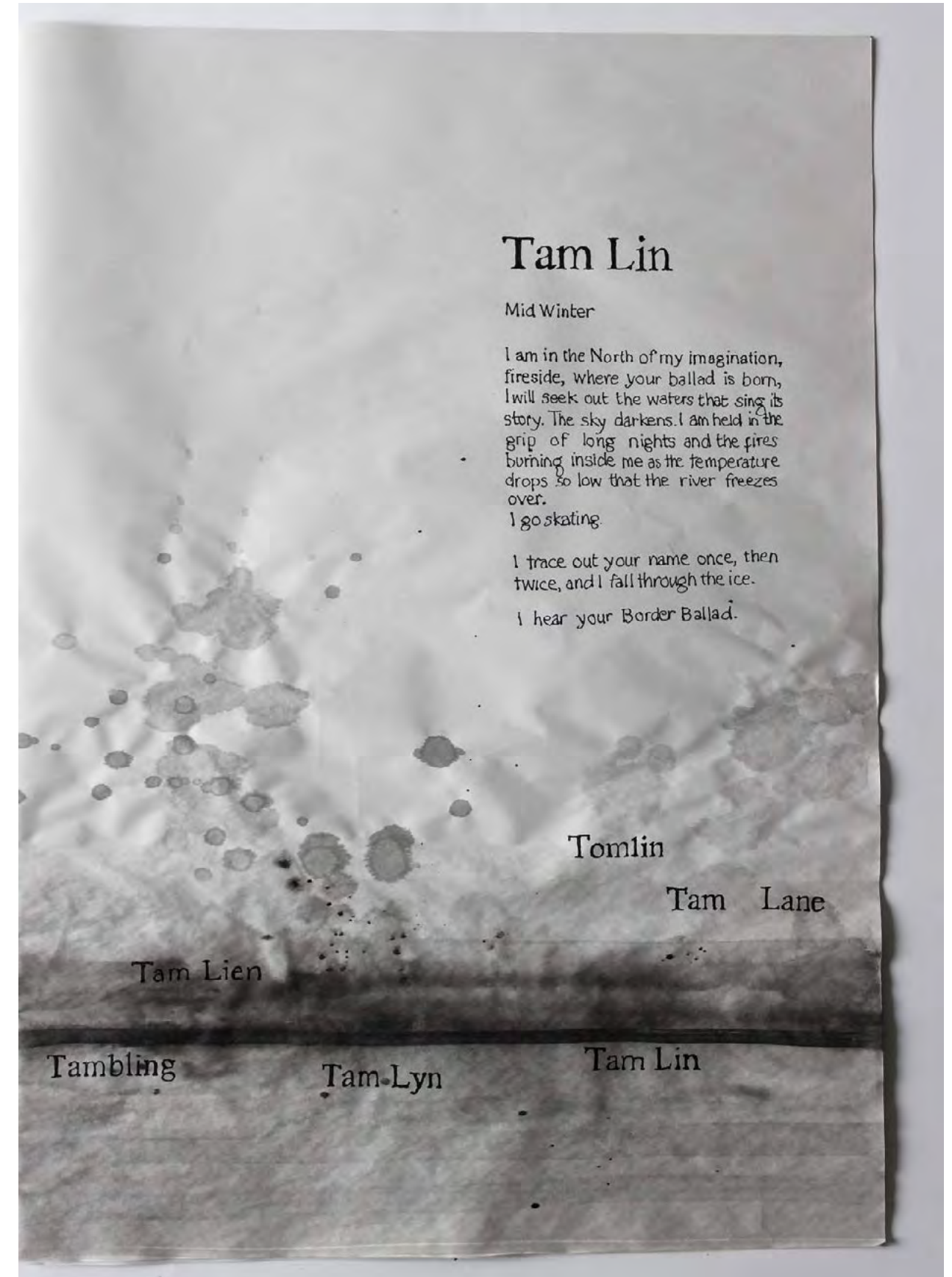
Tamlane

Tam - aLine

Tamlin

Tamlame

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



## Tam Lin

Mid Winter

I am in the North of my imagination,  
fireside, where your ballad is born,  
I will seek out the waters that sing its  
story. The sky darkens. I am held in the  
grip of long nights and the fires  
burning inside me as the temperature  
drops so low that the river freezes  
over.

I go skating.

I trace out your name once, then  
twice, and I fall through the ice.

I hear your Border Ballad.

Tomlin

Tam Lane

Tam Lien

Tambling

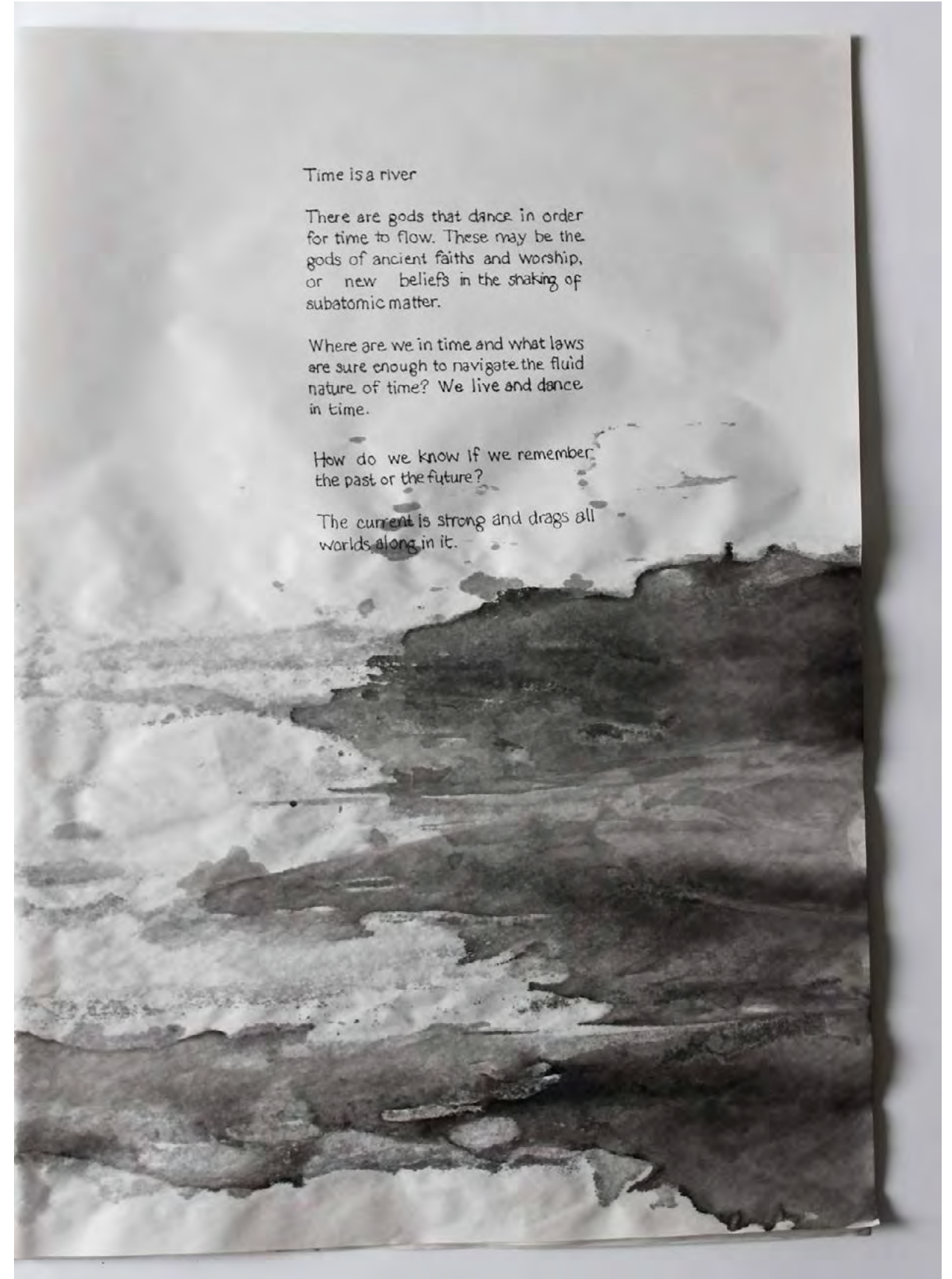
Tam-Lyn

Tam Lin

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

## Tam Lin

In the woods of Carterhaugh near the confluence of the Yarrow Water and Ettrick Water, He waits. He will have Her if She comes near enough. She is at the well where She plucks a double rose. He appears to Her. She He are close and they are moved to each other.

The voice in Her ear a tongue from the North, it laughs, questions and wants Her. She replies in a tongue laughing, that questions back from the South. The two tongues find each other. Liquid selves touch and dissolve. She to Him. He to Her. Along the water, along the boundary until the line between them is washed away. He is all over Her and She opens to Him.

He is the river and calls to Her. He has drawn Her into these waters, running fast and strong through the lonely hills to meet Her here.

She slips into water. Even in the shallows the current is strong. The river at Her thighs, She is gasping with cold. She laughs, shivers, and She continues electrified by the burning cold water. Out of Her mouth, already impossible to swim against it. She passes into a place where She opens and receives an energy that is

new to Her. She is vibrating. She finds Him in the water. They are together in their liquid selves. In this moment of confluence She conceives.

They are carried along in shimmering waters spreading shining spiralling selves silver. They swim together.

His heart opens. He feels a pain. He doesn't understand and He is afraid. He finds the current too strong for Him. He wants back across the border. Her eyes closed Her back arched She has passed into a dream. She is the river now.

His fear gives Him strength. He crawls up the bank out of the water, slithering wet in along the track and back, finding his feet and running. He runs all the way back to the queen that dragged Him from His horse as a boy.

She dreams on and sees Him in a dream. He lays down and the queen cuts his throat. Bloodletting. There has to be blood and vengeance in the Border Ballad and there it is, spilt on the floor.

She comes out of Her dream and is howling that He is no longer there. She shakes and cannot stop shaking. Nothing can stop She. She cannot stop the flow of Herself. She cannot get to the bank. The river is too wide. She is both sides, deep and strong.

She is the river now. She cannot climb out of Herself. She is pulled towards the sea, to the tides that connect Her to all waters.

He remains as a secret pregnant inside Her. She cannot speak of her loss. She can only howl and swallow water. She holds the idea of Him in Her arms, dancing with a ghost, with the shadow of Him in the water. She is drowning with the weight of carrying the thought of Him. They separate and He separates Her from everything that She has loved or lived before. He shape shifts, a snake, an adder a burning coal, an eel, a dove, a swan, turning in Her arms but She holds on. She holds Him fast in every slippery shape. She drowns. She floats. She surfaces. She sinks. She dreams. She drowns again, but She holds on until He is born back into Her world and becomes real again.

She is at the mouth of the river. The sea is roaring as it pounds the coast, so loud it drowns out Her screaming. She is part of all waters now, salty and magnificent.

On the high tide She moves back into the river up stream, seeking Him out. He is always out of reach. She waits for the storm that will force Her inland to find Him. He is still running, compelled to run paths along the coast to try to find Her. He waits for the flood that will force His upstream world out to sea. Their waters will touch again.

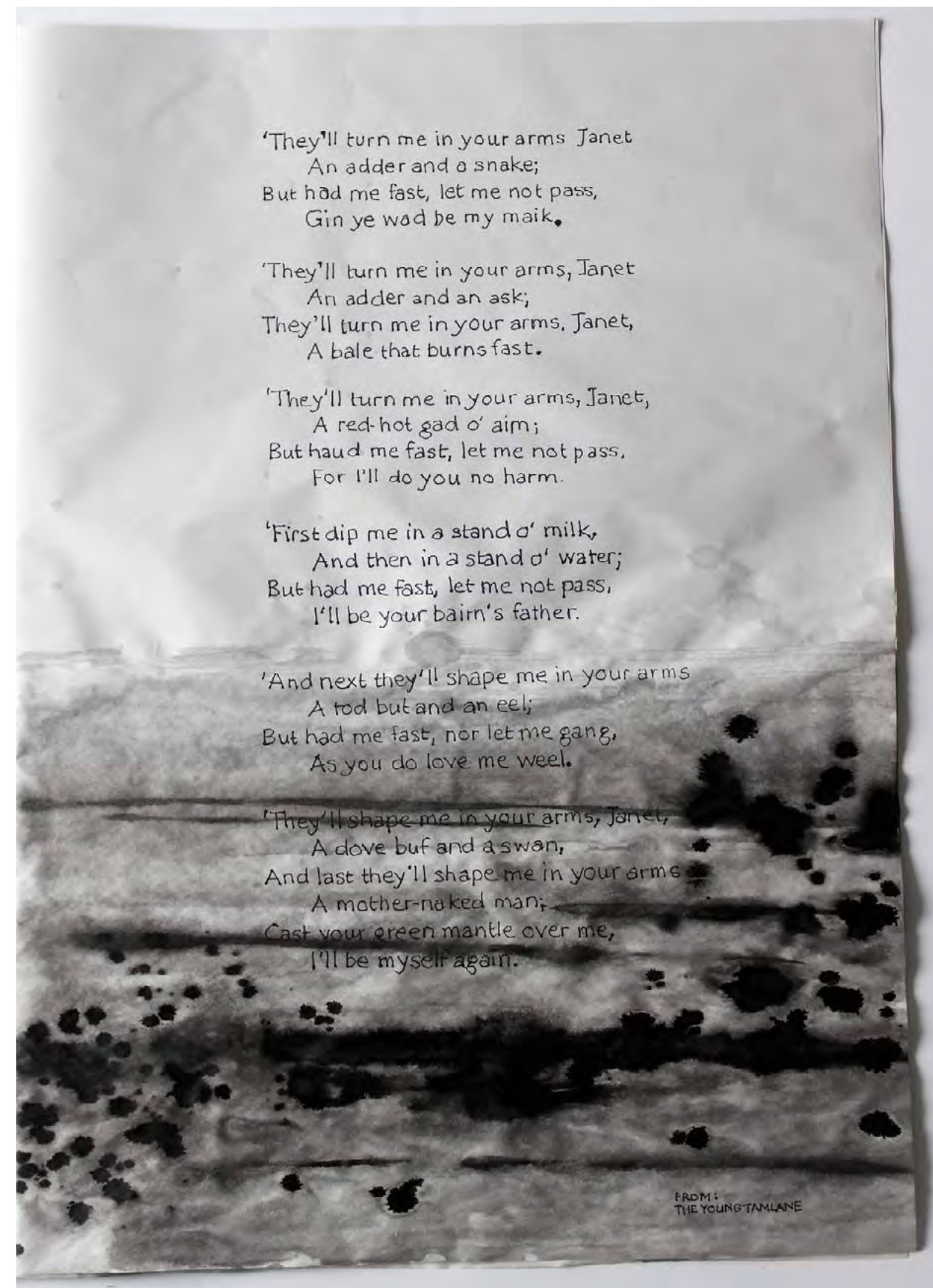
What are the boundaries you cannot cross?

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

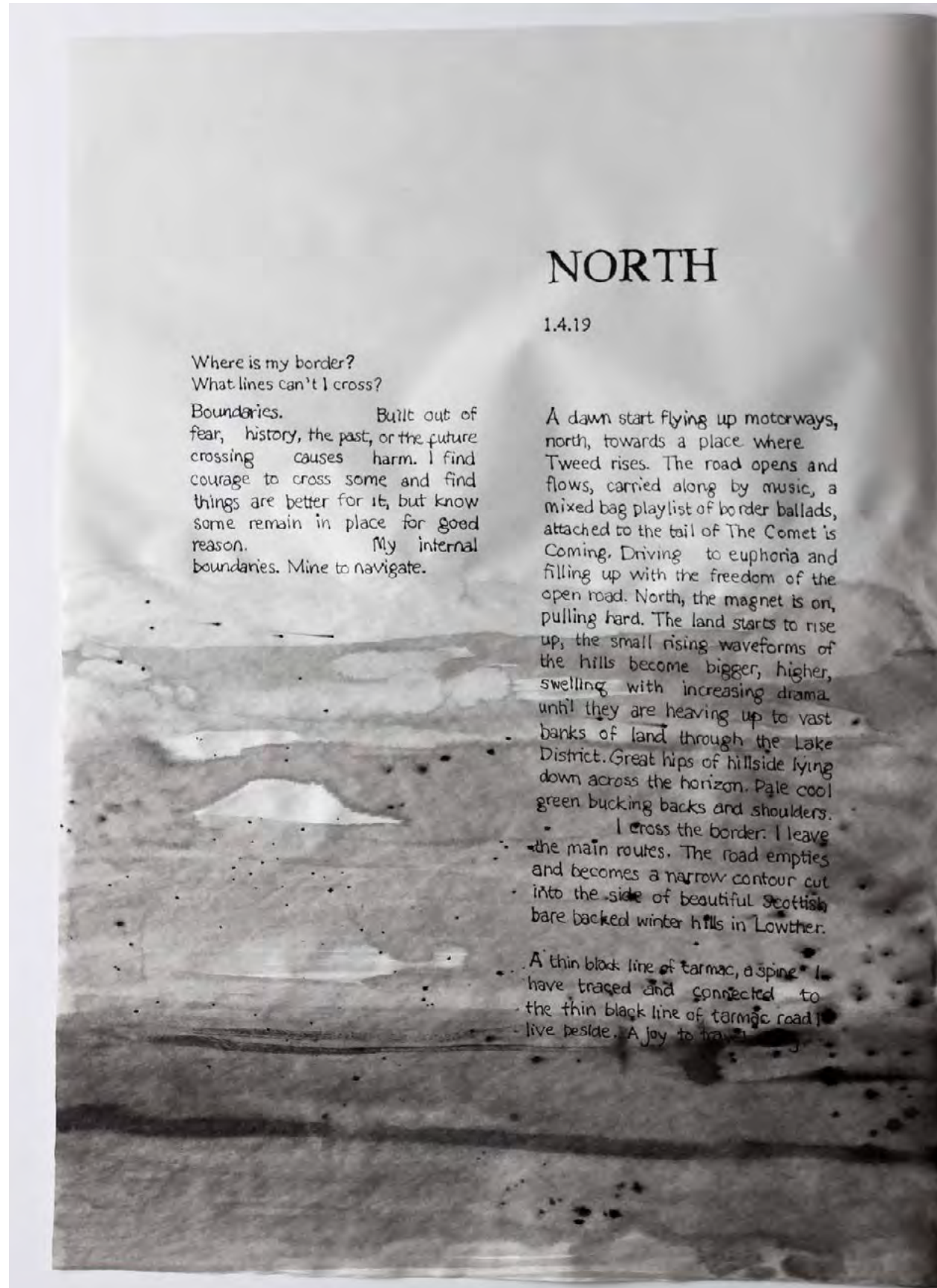
*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



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## NORTH

1.4.19

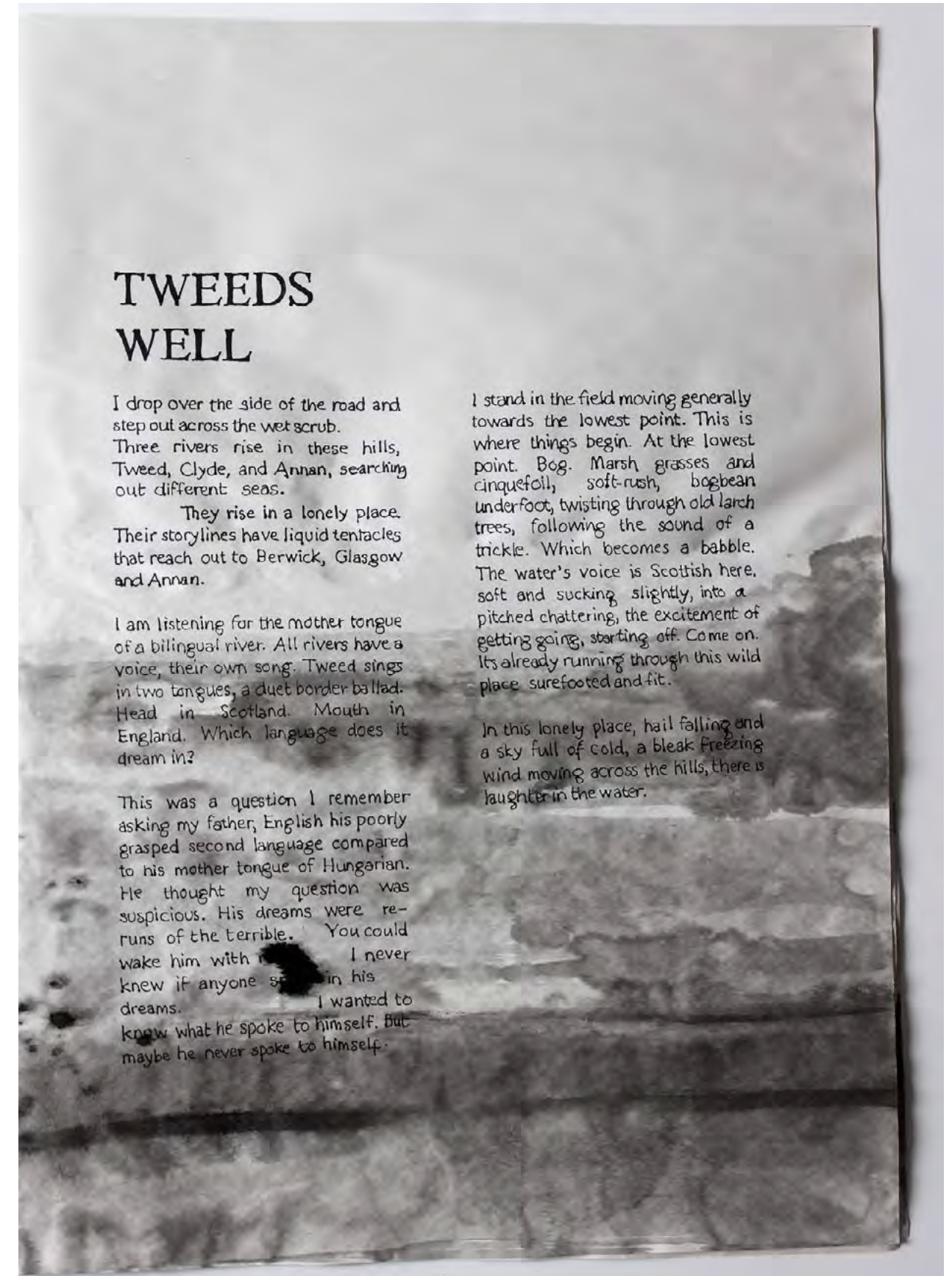
Where is my border?  
What lines can't I cross?

Boundaries. Built out of fear, history, the past, or the future crossing causes harm. I find courage to cross some and find things are better for it, but know some remain in place for good reason. My internal boundaries. Mine to navigate.

A dawn start flying up motorways, north, towards a place where Tweed rises. The road opens and flows, carried along by music, a mixed bag playlist of border ballads, attached to the tail of The Comet is Coming. Driving to euphoria and filling up with the freedom of the open road. North, the magnet is on, pulling hard. The land starts to rise up, the small rising waveforms of the hills become bigger, higher, swelling with increasing drama until they are heaving up to vast banks of land through the Lake District. Great hips of hillside lying down across the horizon. Pale cool green bucking backs and shoulders.

I cross the border. I leave the main routes. The road empties and becomes a narrow contour cut into the side of beautiful Scottish bare backed winter hills in Lowther.

A thin black line of tarmac, a spine I have traced and connected to the thin black line of tarmac road I live beside. A joy to travel.



## TWEEDS WELL

I drop over the side of the road and step out across the wet scrub. Three rivers rise in these hills, Tweed, Clyde, and Annan, searching out different seas.

They rise in a lonely place. Their storylines have liquid tentacles that reach out to Berwick, Glasgow and Annan.

I am listening for the mother tongue of a bilingual river. All rivers have a voice, their own song. Tweed sings in two tongues, a duet border ballad. Head in Scotland. Mouth in England. Which language does it dream in?

This was a question I remember asking my father, English his poorly grasped second language compared to his mother tongue of Hungarian. He thought my question was suspicious. His dreams were reruns of the terrible. You could wake him with it. I never knew if anyone spoke in his dreams. I wanted to know what he spoke to himself. But maybe he never spoke to himself.

I stand in the field moving generally towards the lowest point. This is where things begin. At the lowest point. Bog. Marsh grasses and cinquefoil, soft-rush, bogbean underfoot, twisting through old larch trees, following the sound of a trickle. Which becomes a babble. The water's voice is Scottish here. Soft and sucking slightly, into a pitched chattering, the excitement of getting going, starting off. Come on. Its already running through this wild place surefooted and fit.

In this lonely place, hail falling and a sky full of cold, a bleak freezing wind moving across the hills, there is laughter in the water.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

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## Lady Kirk Bridge

I stand on this beautiful sandstone structure that spans the wide silver sparkling river.  
Meet me at the bridge.  
One side in England.  
One side in Scotland.  
Meet me at the central curved cutwater of the bridge. Here in the middle of the crossing is a circle.  
Beneath me the pink arches form half circles over the water; these circles complete themselves in their reflection in the silver Tweed.

Complete me

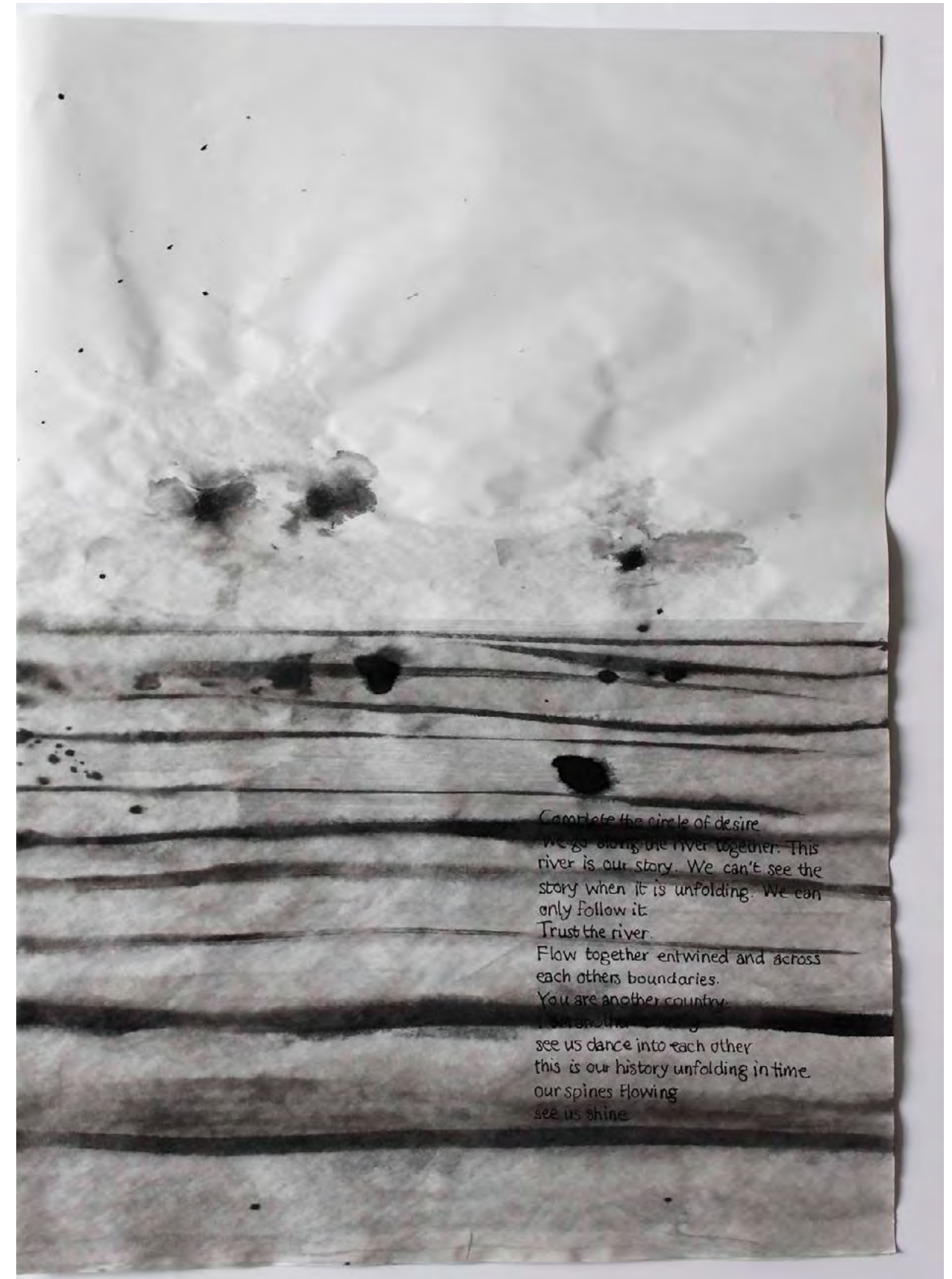
Meet me here

You can overhear what they are murmuring quietly to each other. They are enchanting each other. They speak with animation but they don't always hear what the other says. They don't know each other's story but they know each other. Their desire is to know everything as soon as possible. Talking singing laughing running dancing at the same time. See them dance and sing along the valley. The valley formed by an ice age but warm, lush and gushing with spring now. The air is thick and sticky with the smell of wild garlic.

They are together now  
They bask in each other's energy and joy.  
Let's go. Let's go. Let's go together.  
Let go

There is so much to say – so much to find out and know about each other. They are new. But they have a history to share, stories to retell to each other. Laughing. Everything is so funny, even their difficulties and struggles. They are delighted with each other's energy. They embrace each other's arms and song. Relaxed by the space and travelling together but urgent in their need to entwine. Flow. Shine into each other.

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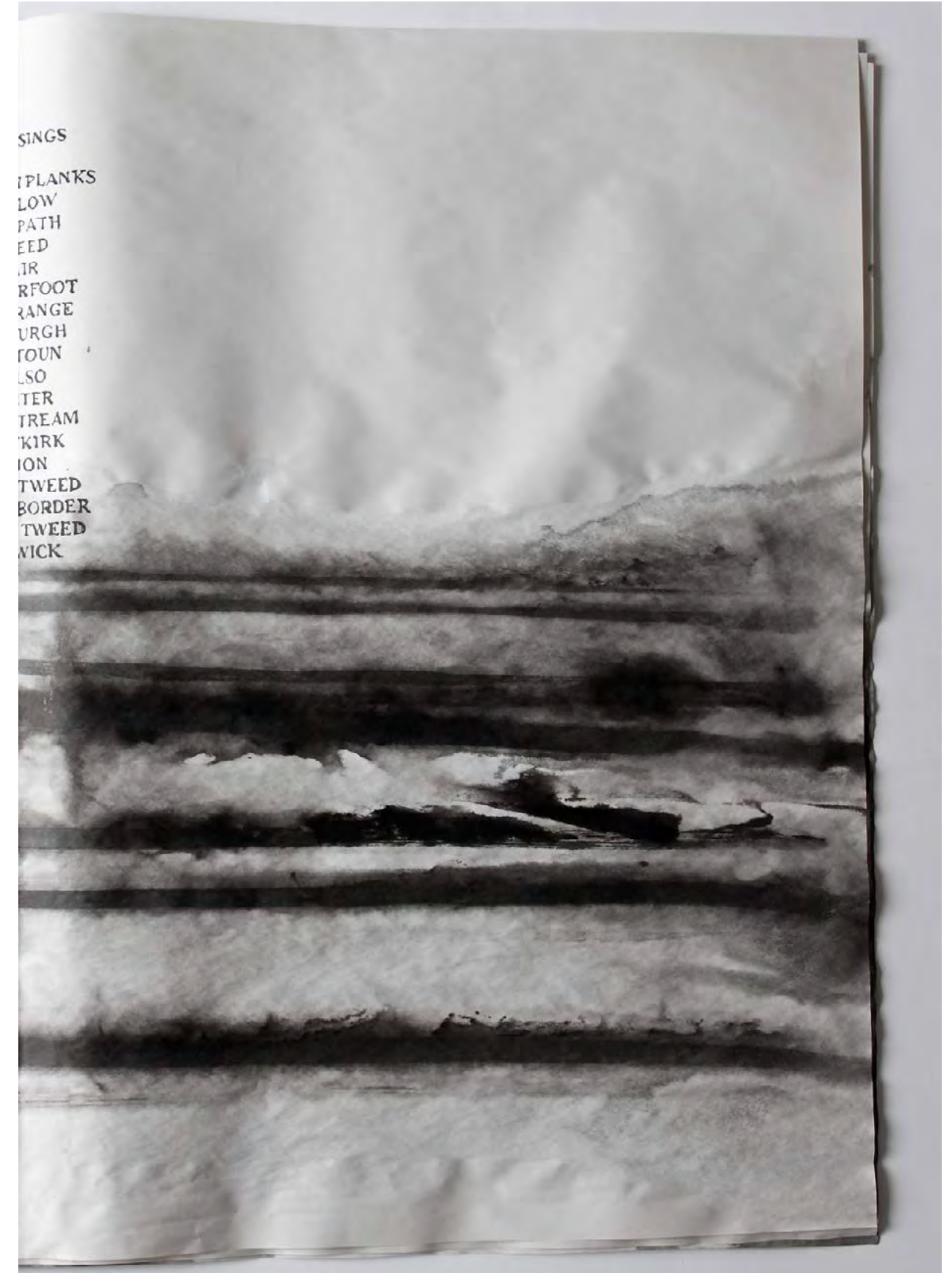
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Complete the circle of desire  
We go along the river together. This river is our story. We can't see the story when it is unfolding. We can only follow it.  
Trust the river.  
Flow together entwined and across each others boundaries.  
You are another country.  
I am another country.  
see us dance into each other  
this is our history unfolding in time  
our spines flowing  
see us shine

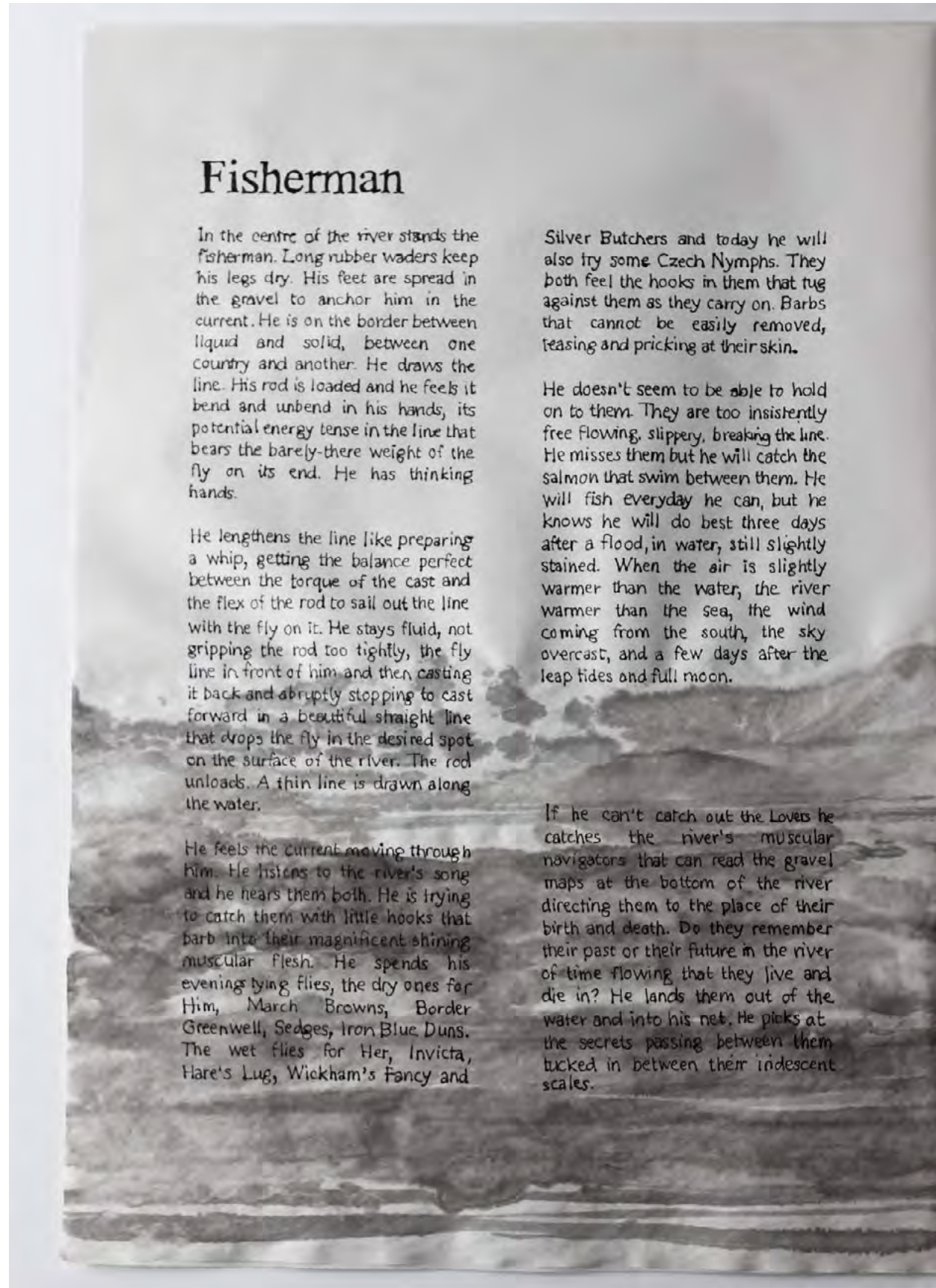
*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



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## Fisherman

In the centre of the river stands the fisherman. Long rubber waders keep his legs dry. His feet are spread in the gravel to anchor him in the current. He is on the border between liquid and solid, between one country and another. He draws the line. His rod is loaded and he feels it bend and unbend in his hands, its potential energy tense in the line that bears the barely-there weight of the fly on its end. He has thinking hands.

He lengthens the line like preparing a whip, getting the balance perfect between the torque of the cast and the flex of the rod to sail out the line with the fly on it. He stays fluid, not gripping the rod too tightly, the fly line in front of him and then casting it back and abruptly stopping to cast forward in a beautiful straight line that drops the fly in the desired spot on the surface of the river. The rod unloads. A thin line is drawn along the water.

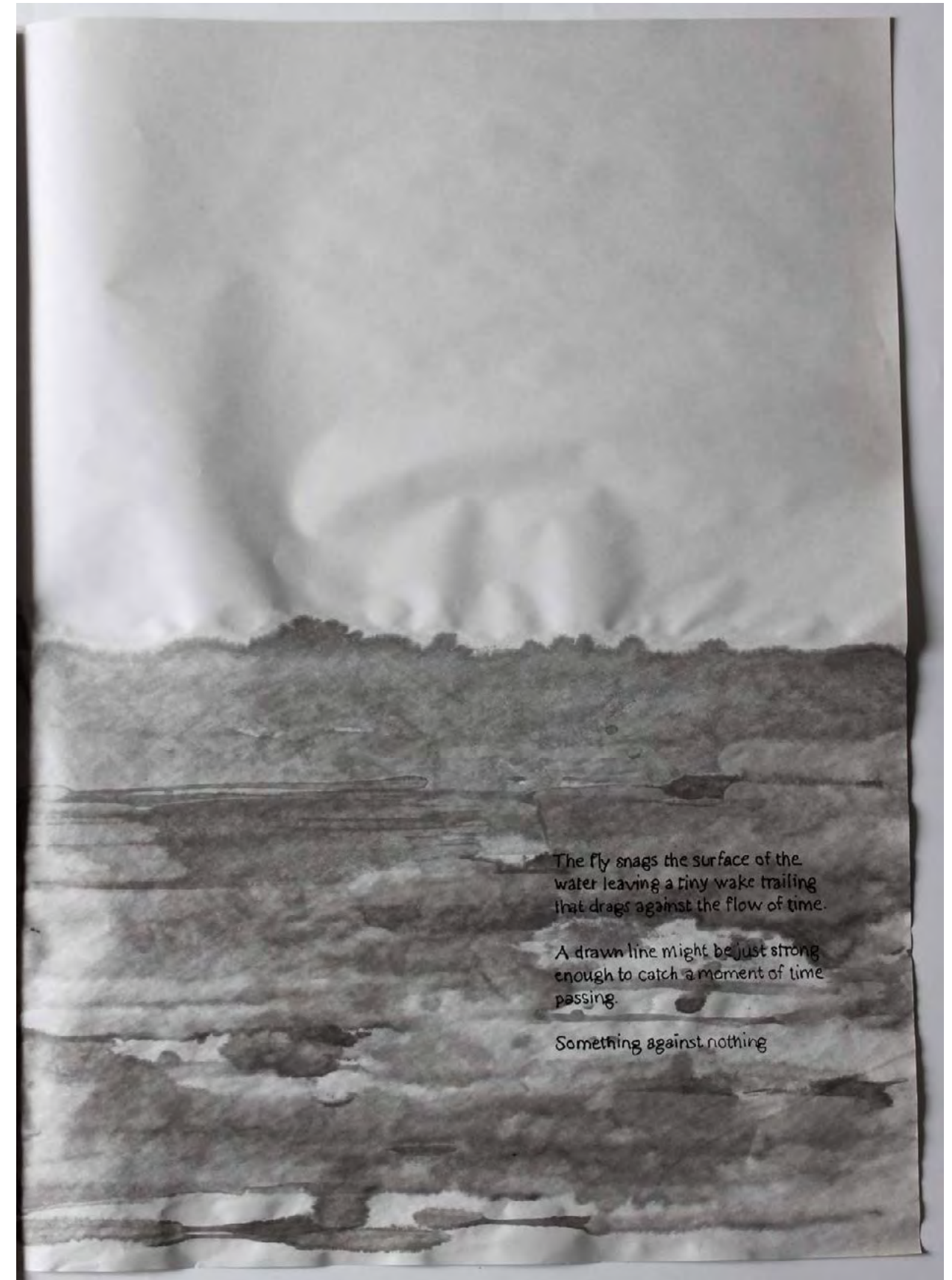
He feels the current moving through him. He listens to the river's song and he hears them both. He is trying to catch them with little hooks that barb into their magnificent shining muscular flesh. He spends his evening tying flies, the dry ones for Him, March Browns, Border Greenwell, Sedges, Iron Blue Duns. The wet flies for Her, Invicta, Hare's Lug, Wickham's Fancy and

Silver Butchers and today he will also try some Czech Nymphs. They both feel the hooks in them that tug against them as they carry on. Barbs that cannot be easily removed, teasing and pricking at their skin.

He doesn't seem to be able to hold on to them. They are too insistently free flowing, slippery, breaking the line. He misses them but he will catch the salmon that swim between them. He will fish everyday he can, but he knows he will do best three days after a flood, in water, still slightly stained. When the air is slightly warmer than the water, the river warmer than the sea, the wind coming from the south, the sky overcast, and a few days after the leap tides and full moon.

If he can't catch out the Loves he catches the river's muscular navigators that can read the gravel maps at the bottom of the river directing them to the place of their birth and death. Do they remember their past or their future in the river of time flowing that they live and die in? He lands them out of the water and into his net. He picks at the secrets passing between them tucked in between their indescent scales.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

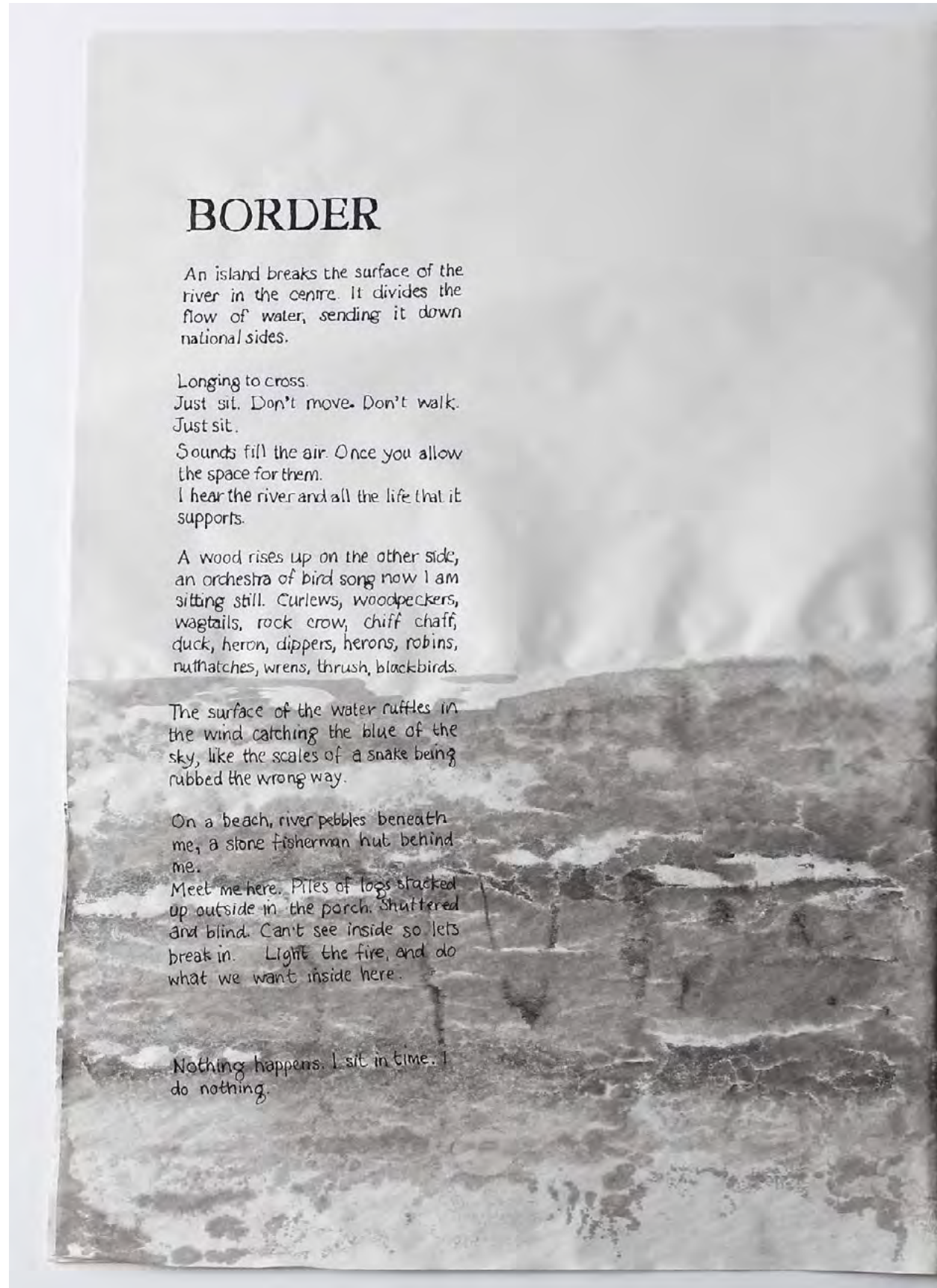


The fly snags the surface of the water leaving a tiny wake trailing that drags against the flow of time.

A drawn line might be just strong enough to catch a moment of time passing.

Something against nothing

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



## BORDER

An island breaks the surface of the river in the centre. It divides the flow of water, sending it down national sides.

Longing to cross.  
Just sit. Don't move. Don't walk.  
Just sit.

Sounds fill the air. Once you allow the space for them.  
I hear the river and all the life that it supports.

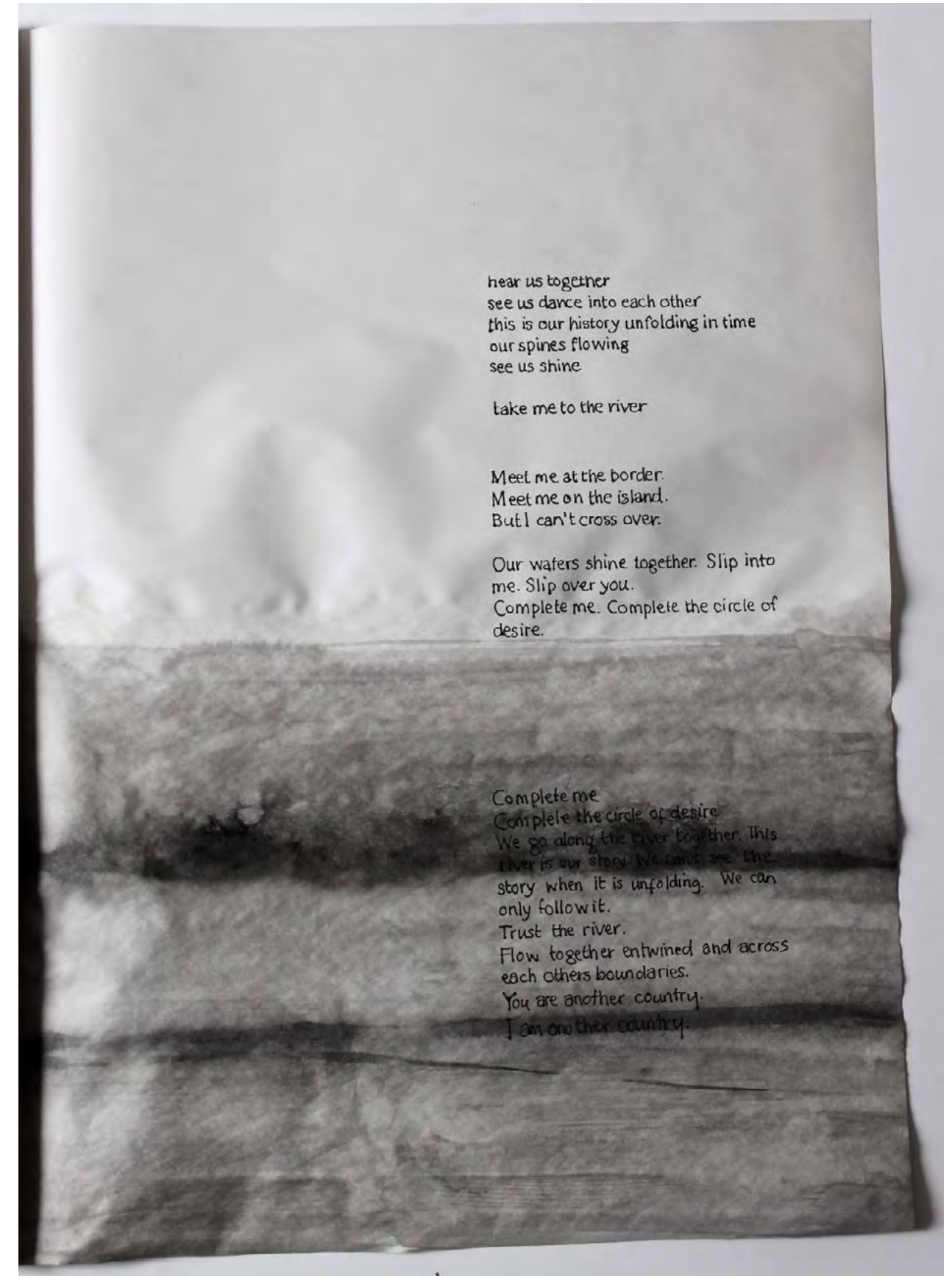
A wood rises up on the other side, an orchestra of bird song now I am sitting still. Curlews, woodpeckers, wagtails, rock crow, chaff chaff, duck, heron, dippers, herons, robins, nuthatches, wrens, thrush, blackbirds.

The surface of the water ruffles in the wind catching the blue of the sky, like the scales of a snake being rubbed the wrong way.

On a beach, river pebbles beneath me, a stone fisherman hut behind me.  
Meet me here. Piles of logs stacked up outside in the porch. Shattered and blind. Can't see inside so lets break in. Light the fire, and do what we want inside here.

Nothing happens. I sit in time. I do nothing.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



hear us together  
see us dance into each other  
this is our history unfolding in time  
our spines flowing  
see us shine

take me to the river

Meet me at the border.  
Meet me on the island.  
But I can't cross over.

Our waters shine together. Slip into me. Slip over you.  
Complete me. Complete the circle of desire.

Complete me  
Complete the circle of desire  
We go along the river together. This river is our story. We can't see the story when it is unfolding. We can only follow it.  
Trust the river.  
Flow together entwined and across each others boundaries.  
You are another country.  
I am another country.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

## Past Union Bridge English side

I walk along a river bank in sunshine on buoyant new grass. Sheep and lambs everywhere. The land divided into enclosures, ladder styles take you up and over the stone walls. Keep checking the map, orientating through the small stone fisherman huts and tracks that come off the river.

Heading for the place where the border slithers up out of the water, onto the bank, up a little track and away across the fields, on the other side.

I listen to the river now and only Her voice is left.

An escape, a desertion, a betrayal. Why aren't you here? Why aren't we together? Why have you left? We could make space for each other here in the flowing river.

See the small fisherman's hut. Red shutters shut. Red door bolted. A blind place that won't let me in. I want to be inside, human, naked, alive, against a stone wall with you pushed inside me.

I am trying to remember what brought me here. Making time to swim together. Drawing water. Liquefying. Instead all I feel is the ripping apart and the emptiness in the space desire filled. The madness of loss possesses me. Can we lie down in the water? I want to lie down in the water. I cannot stop myself flowing.

Can we flow? You are inside of me and you keep changing shape. I hold on but I am drowning. I am holding on to nothing. I can feel the wind coming in off the coast pushing on surface of my waters upstream. The currents underneath pulses downstream. My waters are pressing against themselves, confused waters, pushing against each other, trying to stay in this place where you left the river. Equal forces equal resistance. Just in this place for a moment it is as if my water is standing still.

He has left the river and taken the border with him, slithering out of the water and running out over the land again. Back in the world beyond the river.

She doesn't want to leave and go on, on Her own. No longer the border. No longer entwined. She can sense Her end will be as His beginning, a lonely place.

The river full and brown from last night's downpour.

You can't say no to the story. The song goes on. You can't resist its pull and direction.

Clinging on to nothing She has to go on. She goes on.

Here is your border, the line you could not cross. It is a pain threshold of separation.

Clouds push over the river's mirror. Shadowing the water.

She aches  
Churns  
Bulges  
Chills  
Widens  
Spreads

Gives Herself over to the water in Her. The weeping is easiest of all here in this lonely place.

Dissolve

I do not cross the border again.

'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.

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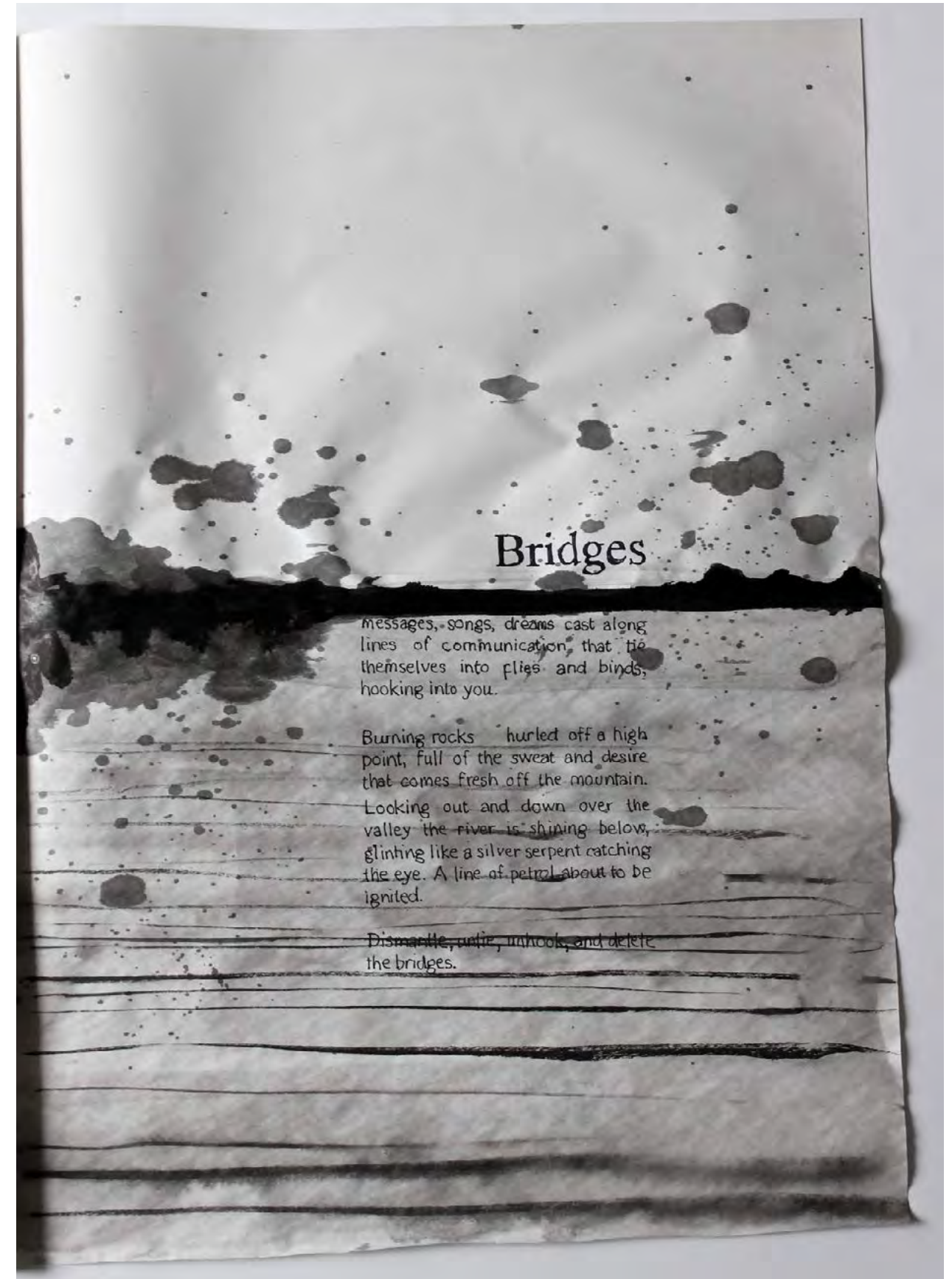


## Broken

The water is crossed by bridges.  
 The land is peppered by incomplete  
 bridges, broken leftovers from a  
 decommissioned railway line that  
 once followed the river along the  
 valley. A set of arches in the middle  
 of a field rise up empty and  
 sculptural. The arches could support  
 a bridge but nothing caps and  
 connects them. Nothing passes over  
 them anymore.

Nothing is connected anymore.  
 There is only a separation, which  
 pushes everything away  
 from everything else.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



## Bridges

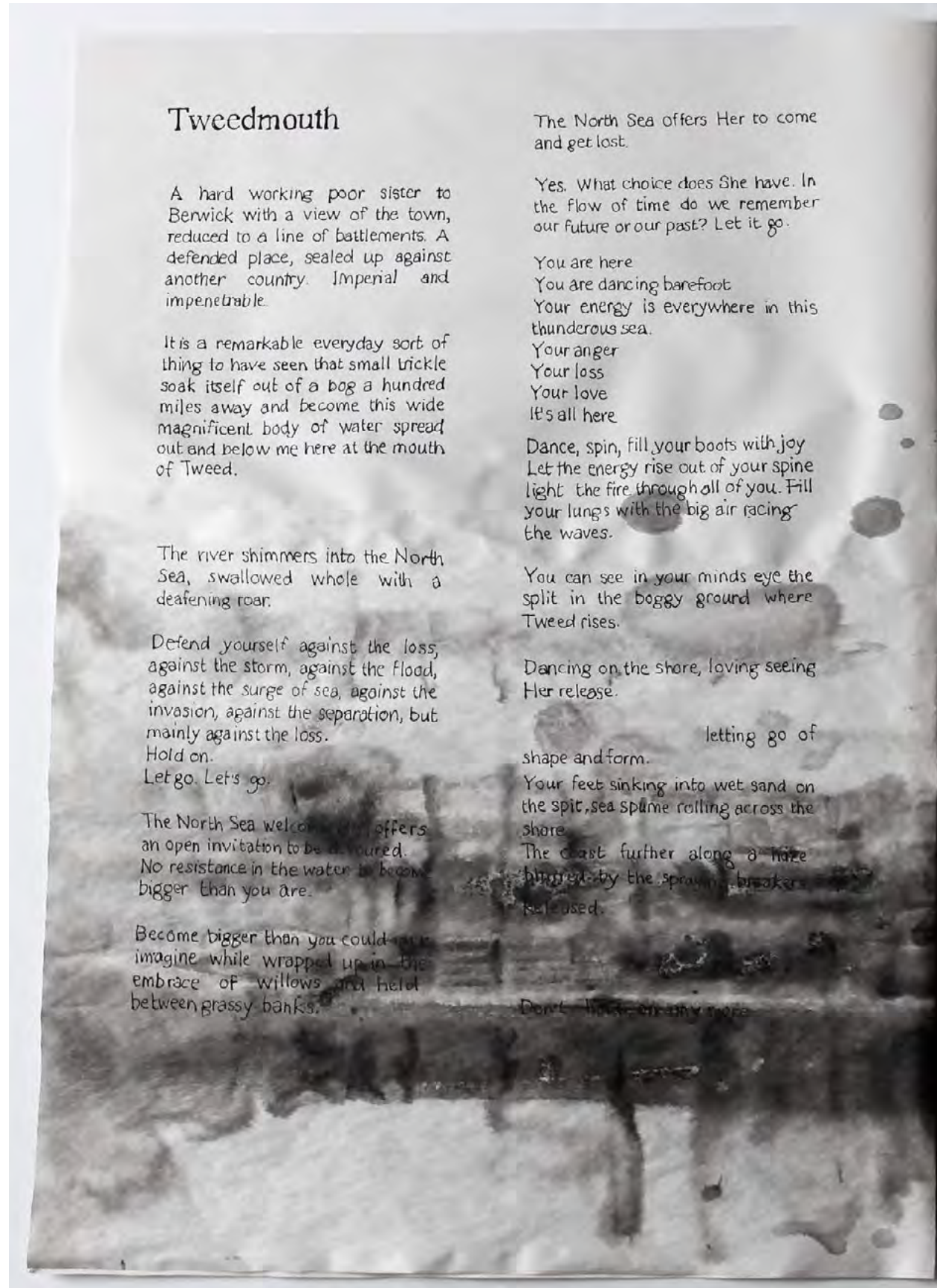
Messages, songs, dreams cast along  
 lines of communication, that tie  
 themselves into plies and binds,  
 hooking into you.

Burning rocks hurled off a high  
 point, full of the sweat and desire  
 that comes fresh off the mountain.  
 Looking out and down over the  
 valley the river is shining below,  
 glinting like a silver serpent catching  
 the eye. A line of petrol about to be  
 ignited.

Dismantle, unfix, unhook, and delete  
 the bridges.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





Tweedmouth

A hard working poor sister to Benwick with a view of the town, reduced to a line of battlements. A defended place, sealed up against another country. Impenial and impenetrable.

It is a remarkable everyday sort of thing to have seen that small trickle soak itself out of a bog a hundred miles away and become this wide magnificent body of water spread out and below me here at the mouth of Tweed.

The river shimmers into the North Sea, swallowed whole with a deafening roar.

Defend yourself against the loss, against the storm, against the flood, against the surge of sea, against the invasion, against the separation, but mainly against the loss.

Hold on.  
Let go. Let's go.

The North Sea welcomes you offers an open invitation to be assured. No resistance in the water to become bigger than you are.

Become bigger than you could ever imagine while wrapped up in the embrace of willows and held between grassy banks.

The North Sea offers Her to come and get lost.

Yes. What choice does She have. In the flow of time do we remember our future or our past? Let it go.

You are here  
You are dancing barefoot  
Your energy is everywhere in this thunderous sea.

Your anger  
Your loss  
Your love  
It's all here

Dance, spin, fill your boots with joy  
Let the energy rise out of your spine  
light the fire through all of you. Fill your lungs with the big air racing the waves.

You can see in your minds eye the split in the boggy ground where Tweed rises.

Dancing on the shore, loving seeing Her release.

letting go of  
shape and form.

Your feet sinking into wet sand on the spit, sea spume rolling across the shore.

The coast further along a haze  
blurred by the spray, breakers  
released.

Don't look any more

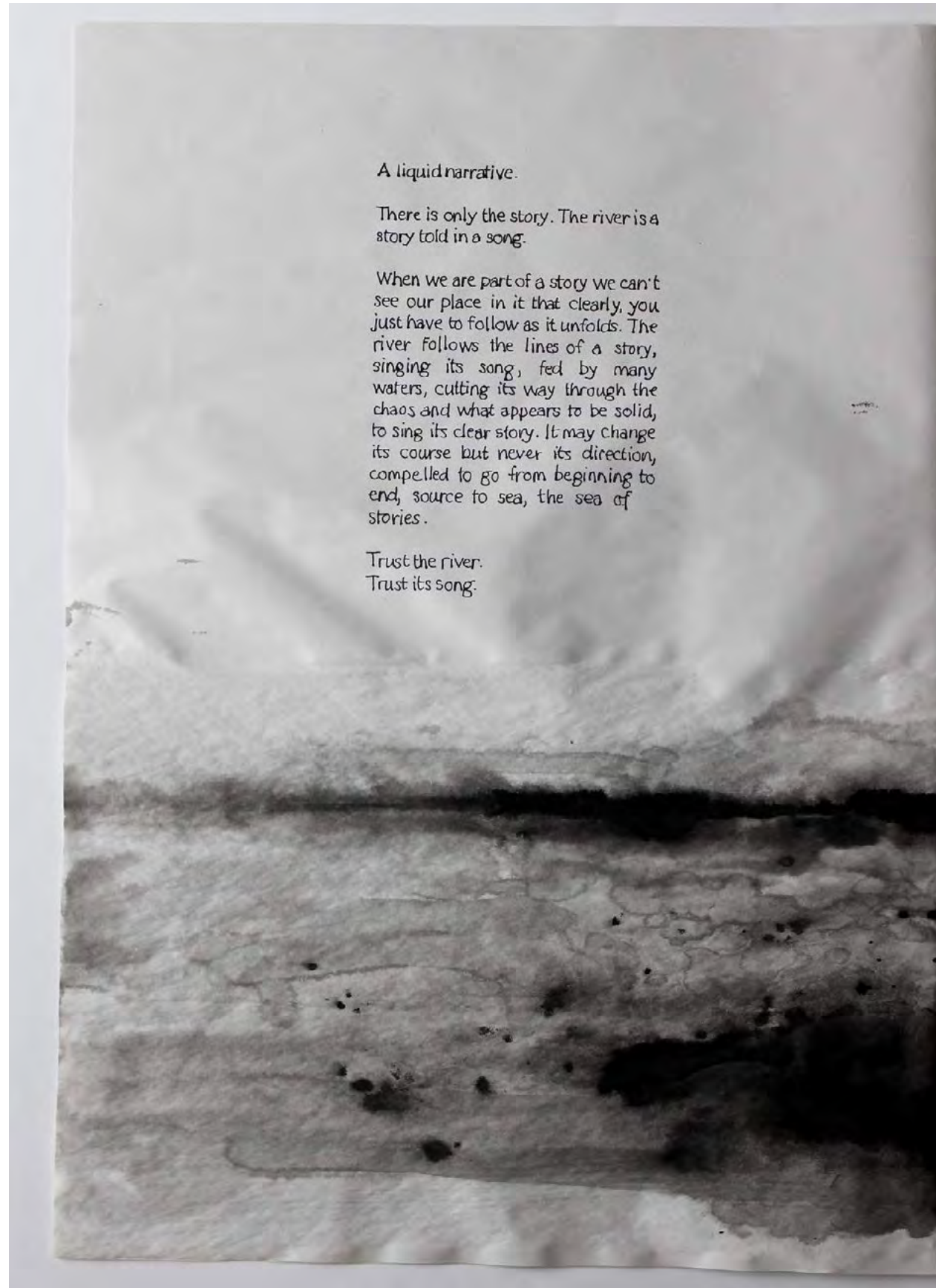


Head in mouth

How does a river prepare itself for this moment where it meets the sea?

'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.

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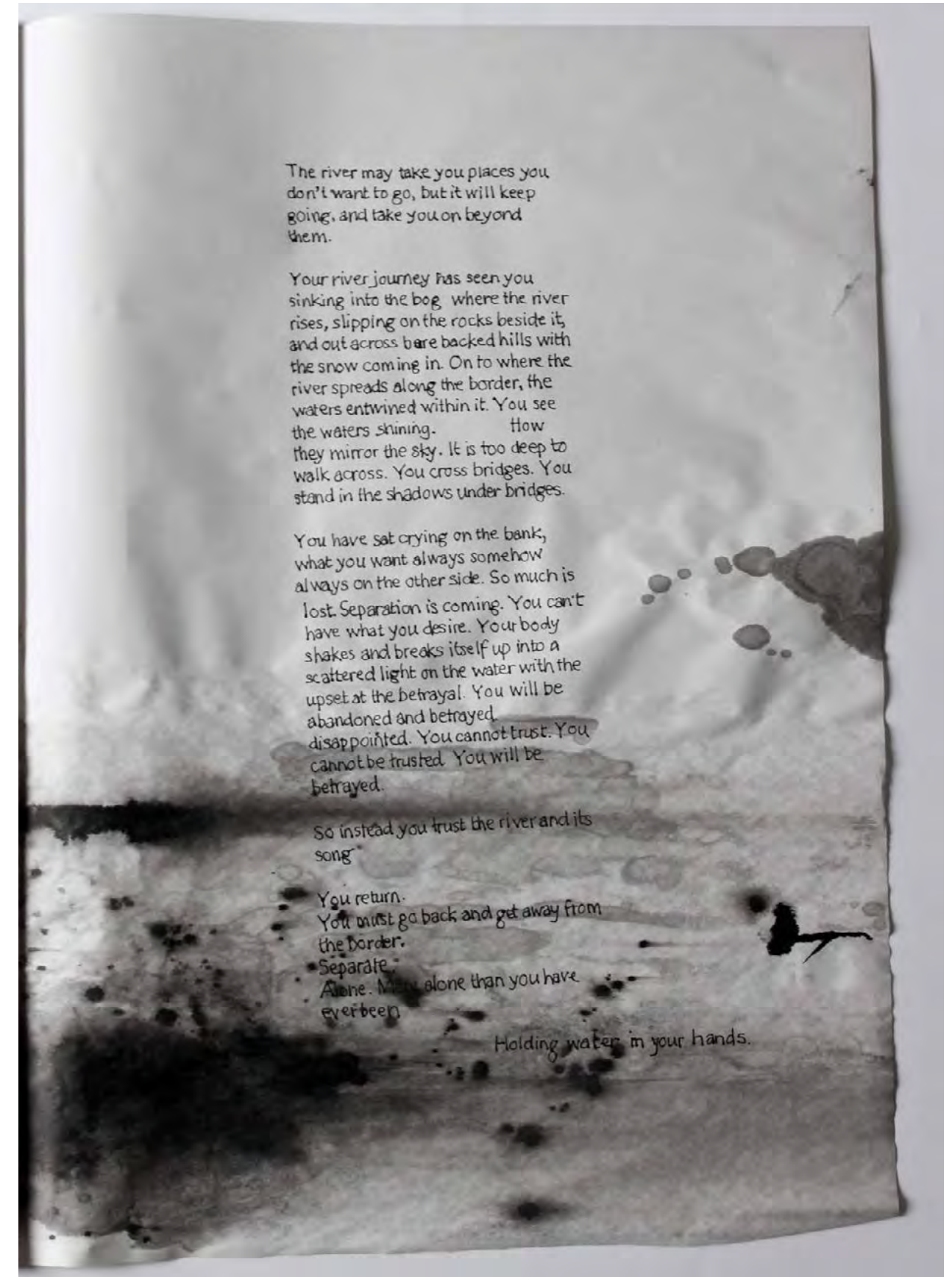
A liquid narrative.

There is only the story. The river is a story told in a song.

When we are part of a story we can't see our place in it that clearly, you just have to follow as it unfolds. The river follows the lines of a story, singing its song, fed by many waters, cutting its way through the chaos and what appears to be solid, to sing its clear story. It may change its course but never its direction, compelled to go from beginning to end, source to sea, the sea of stories.

Trust the river.  
Trust its song.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



The river may take you places you don't want to go, but it will keep going, and take you on beyond them.

Your river journey has seen you sinking into the bog where the river rises, slipping on the rocks beside it, and out across bare backed hills with the snow coming in. On to where the river spreads along the border, the waters entwined within it. You see the waters shining. How they mirror the sky. It is too deep to walk across. You cross bridges. You stand in the shadows under bridges.

You have sat crying on the bank, what you want always somehow always on the other side. So much is lost. Separation is coming. You can't have what you desire. Your body shakes and breaks itself up into a scattered light on the water with the upset at the betrayal. You will be abandoned and betrayed. disappointed. You cannot trust. You cannot be trusted. You will be betrayed.

So instead you trust the river and its song.

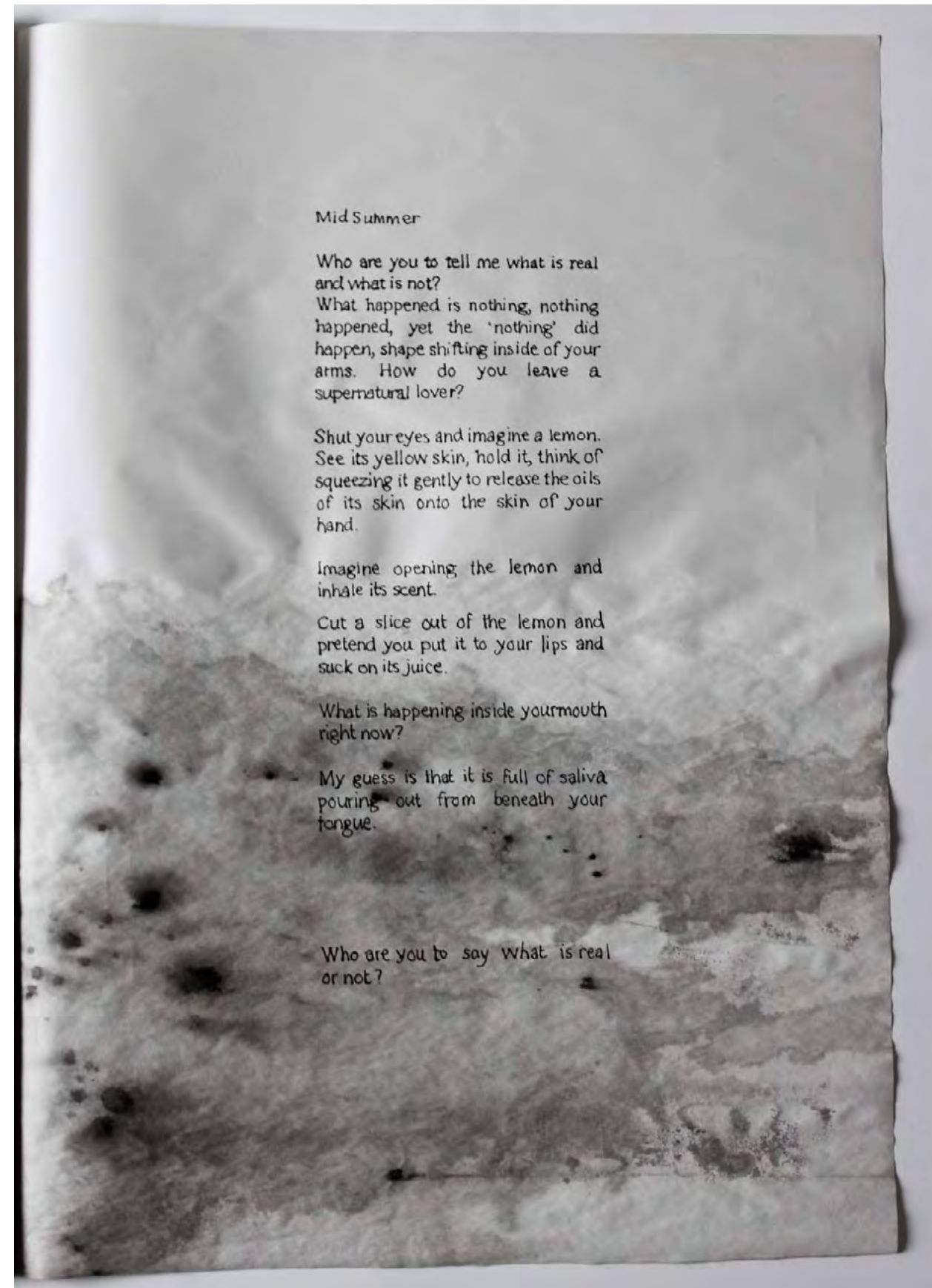
You return.  
You must go back and get away from the border.  
Separate.  
Alone. More alone than you have ever been.

Holding water in your hands.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



Mid Summer

Who are you to tell me what is real  
and what is not?  
What happened is nothing, nothing  
happened, yet the 'nothing' did  
happen, shape shifting inside of your  
arms. How do you leave a  
supernatural lover?

Shut your eyes and imagine a lemon.  
See its yellow skin, hold it, think of  
squeezing it gently to release the oils  
of its skin onto the skin of your  
hand.

Imagine opening the lemon and  
inhale its scent.

Cut a slice out of the lemon and  
pretend you put it to your lips and  
suck on its juice.

What is happening inside your mouth  
right now?

My guess is that it is full of saliva  
pouring out from beneath your  
tongue.

Who are you to say what is real  
or not?

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

### Further reading:

Holt, Ysanne. 2019. "On Watery Borders, Borderlands, and Tania Kovats' *Head to Mouth*." *Arts* 8 (3): 104. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8030104>.

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### About the Authors

Tania Kovats' practice and research as an artist is an exploration of our experience of landscape, increasingly with an environmental focus. Her work includes temporary and permanent sculptural works often in the public realm, drawing, and writing, that currently consider her preoccupation with water, rivers, seas, and oceans. She works at the confluence of environmental, psychological, political, and the personal. Kovats is an advocate for drawing in its expanded field, as a highly significant tool of thinking and expression that provides an infinite and varied means of communication that continues to be expanded and enriched by practitioners. She regularly seeks out engagement and impact with audiences beyond the gallery. Her works are in both public and private collections in the UK and abroad, including Arts Council, Jupiter Artland, The British Council, Government Art Collection, the National Maritime Museum Greenwich, and the V&A.

Her research and advocacy for drawing has resulted in two publications: *The Drawing Book. A Survey of Drawing: The Primary Means of Expression* compiling a cross-disciplinary survey of drawing as a primary generative form of visual communication; and *Drawing Water: Drawing as a Mechanism of Exploration* which consisted of drawings thematically linked by the sea.

Professor Mary Modeen, as an artist/academic, lectures in fine art and more broadly across the humanities in relation to creative practices. Her research has several threads: perception as a cognitive and interpretive process, and especially place-based research, which connects many of these concerns with attention to cultural values, history, and embodied experience. As such, this research is usually interdisciplinary. Part of this work appears as creative art, and part as writing and presentations. Modeen addresses aspects of seeing that go beyond the visible, questioning what we know as sentient humans, and valuing the cultural and individual differences inherent in these perceptions.

Her most recent publications include a co-authored book with Iain Biggs, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* (Routledge, 2021), and "Traditional Knowledge of the Sea in a Time of Change: Stories of the Caiçaras," in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* (November 2020). Her edited book and essay just published is titled *Decolonising Place-Based Arts Research* (Dundee, 2021). She is chair of Interdisciplinary Art Practice and associate dean international for Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee, in Scotland and visiting fellow with the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota.

## FEATURE

# PROFESSOR JIAO XINGTAO AND THE YANGDENG ART COOPERATIVE PROJECT

By Jiao Xingtao and Mary Modeen

The following interview was conducted remotely, with the aid of “Iris” Jingwen Zhang who translated for us here. The project and eponymous book referred to below is entitled: *Socially Engaged Art in Southwest China: Yang Deng Art*

*Cooperative Project 2012–2017*.<sup>[1]</sup> It is bilingual, in both Mandarin and English, and, at 422 pages, provides rich textual, critical, and aesthetic documentation of the community and various art projects undertaken over six years.



*The Twelve Jing Xiakou, a real scene, Taishan Shigandang. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.*

The Yangdeng Art Cooperatives, with a cumulative total of more than 37 artists and students, worked each year in collaboration with local villagers in the small rural village of the same name as the river, Yangdeng, in a remote rural area of Tongzi County in Guizhou Province. Organized and led by Professor Jiao Xingtao, this project, over many years, was begun to “reconstruct the continuity between art and life” through an emphasis on “artistic negotiation.” As such, it constitutes a socially engaged art initiative, locating this remote rural village sited on a river as the experimental art locus for approaching an independent but profoundly collaborative working method. The project is established in this specific location to ground its work in a life space that is lived in everyday experiences, without pretense or allowing of imposed orders or artificial hierarchies. The Yangdeng Art Cooperative attempts to avoid political art or overly simplified sociological types of intervention, and instead attempts to work with the position of “value neutrality,” as they call it, without stereotyped intentions or condescending cultural elitism, in order to allow the artistic collaborations to “grow naturally.” It is precisely the ordinary quality of everyday life in a remote location that enables the daily observations and engagement with locals to happen simply.

What follows is a long-distance translated interview, with my questions put to Professor Jiao and translated by our mutual former student, Iris Jingwen Zhang, who studied both in Chongqing and in Dundee, Scotland. The interview is slightly edited for clarity.

[MM] In the years of the Yangdeng Art Cooperative Project since 2014, Professor Jiao, how would you summarize the local peoples’ understanding of “their” river? Have you seen any change in these attitudes during the years that you have been working there with the community members?

[JX] In my conversations with them, I can feel the dependence of ordinary residents on this river. This kind of dependence is manifested in several aspects. First, the river was the reason for the development of this small town and its existence in the past for a long time. Various folklore and historical stories surrounding the river have become an important part of the residents’ cultural traditions. Second, the river is the place where residents live and gather together; the small shops and roads built around the banks of the river and the three bridges crossing over the river are places for transactions and gatherings of small-town residents. In the past, it was also the site of ordinary people washing vegetables and clothes and dumping domestic garbage. Third, the river is the provider of living resources, especially food. In the past decade, there were many fishers, and some fishing methods were even illegal. In recent years, with the implementation of government legislation and the increase in various policies intended as effective steps toward stewardship, ordinary residents have gradually established a new attitude toward the river. And they have become awed, and have a more protective consciousness, rather than blindly relying on practices of the past.

[MM] In local understanding, are there stories, or a special character, or a “personality,” that are attributed to the river?

[JX] There are many local legends and folk tales related to the river, such as the legend of the snake monster, which lives in the karst caves in the canyon upstream of the river that have been haunted with seasonal rising waters. And the rocks on both sides have been given names and various legends. Contemporary people always tend to talk about how magical and special this river is, how many celebrities and soldiers it has bred, and they are proud of it. They also like to compare the differences in personality, income, and various special products of the residents in

the upper, middle, and lower reaches of the river. They believe that the hospitable and outspoken personality of local people was formed from the historic prevalence of visitors who arrived because they were aided by boat docks in the past on the river, and today, they are proud of this shared characteristic of warmly welcoming visitors.



*Use a whole piece of wood as a stool, and according to the height difference of the site, cut off one side of the stool leg, so that it can be laid flat. Image by the Yangdeng Art Cooperative. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.*

[MM] How does the bridge function in the local imagination? Is it only a means of crossing from one side to the other? Or does the addition of benches that have been made during the project, for example, change their thinking about the river and their own experiences? Does the bridge also work as a symbol of some kind, and if so, how might that be described?

[JX] There are three bridges in Yangdeng town: two cement bridges—one is at the east end of the town, one is at the west end of the town—and the other is a wooden suspension bridge in the middle of the town. The cement bridge at the east end of the town was built in the 1970s. It was the only road bridge connecting the two sides of the river at that time. The cement bridge at the west end

of the town was built five years ago. It is the only way to connect the old town and the new town. These two concrete bridges connect the Yangdeng town on both sides of the river into a whole, making it extremely convenient for residents to travel to and from both sides of the river.

In contrast to the two cement bridges that were funded by the government, the other suspension bridge was built 20 years ago with private donations made by the residents of the town. The suspension bridge is made up of multiple steel cables connecting the two banks and laying wooden boards on them. It has experienced many summer floods and has been destroyed several times, and each time it has been repaired through private fundraising.



*几-shaped bench on the suspension bridge by the Yangdeng Art Cooperative. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.*

This bridge can only be used for people to walk on. In summer, it is a place for the residents to relax and enjoy the cool air. In winter, it is a place for the elderly and children to bask in the sun. Compared with the other two bridges, its gathering, social, and entertainment functions far outweigh its transportation functions. It has become the most popular place for residents to go.

In the Yangdeng Art Project, there are many creations and works carried out around this bridge, such as the setting of benches, making rest and

leisure become an interesting event worth talking about. In an art project in 2017, the residents of the town were invited to eat 50 catties of melon seeds for free on the bridge.[2] At the same time, a folk ritual activity of “begging for rain” was carried out on the river beach under the bridge. In 2018, we installed a projector by the river and directly projected the long scroll paintings created with the residents onto the river, making such a suspension bridge a cultural symbol in the town and a carrier of new stories. Compared with the square in front of the town government, this place has become a folk and public place.



Residents collectively created a picture of Yangdeng River 2, once again. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.

First, to explain a term: *Shigandang* are collectively the traditional heritage of worshipping spiritual stones now commonly practiced in Tai'an, Shandong province, and elsewhere. The *Shigandang* custom of worshipping spiritual stones has long been a common belief for Chinese people. According to legend, Shigandang was a brave and strong man from Mount Tai who was renowned for warding off evil spirits. His spirit lives on today through an ornamental stone tablet engraved with the Chinese characters of *Shigandang*, which is often found erected at certain points on bridges and roads across China.



A picture of Yangdeng River exhibited by the riverside. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.



*The police are reminding drifters to pay attention to safety. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.*

[MM] How does the “shigandang” to exorcise evil spirits actually work in local imagination?[3] Do any other “spirits” inhabit the river area in local imagination?

[JX] “Shigandang” has the function of “shielding evil spirits” in local folklore and daily concepts, and it is often spontaneously set up on the side of roads where accidents frequently occur to residents. This Fibre Reinforced Plastic (FRP) “policeman,” purchased online, is placed by the river in the name of “Shi Gan Dang,” so that the locals can easily accept and recognize its existence and continue to spontaneously endow it with functions and meanings in their lives.

For example, in a leap of imagination, they think it can quell the Dragon King to avoid flooding again, or it can guard both sides of the riverbank to prevent children from drowning when swimming in summer, and they can also give appropriate tips to the boats that are drifting in the Yangdeng River. There is even a local legend that a child hit the “policeman” by throwing a stone and fell ill that night and died. Even if there is nothing to it, everyone seems to be happy to tell such a “magical” story.



[MM] In many ways, the idea of a river is a ready-made metaphor, and can stand for change, for a physical reality that is always dynamic, etc. In your interactions with this Yangdeng town community, has this possibility for change inspired any new actions or projects by the townspeople themselves?

[JX] Nowadays, the flow of the Yangdeng River is slow, and the riverbed is shallow. It is impossible to imagine the situation of the boats passing by in the past. Water transportation was once the most important mode of transportation for

people and materials in Yangdeng. The materials for the rural community and the mountain goods of Yangdeng are all transported by boats. In the 1970s and 1980s, rivers were dredged every year. In many river sections with rapids, people on the boat needed to disembark when going downriver. Only one person was left at the helm, and the others were pressed against the hull on the side of the riverbank to avoid being pushed against the rocks. Ten people pulled the rope at the stern to let the boat descend and move slowly, until reaching a place where the current was stable. When going upriver, one person would get off into the



*Xie Xiaochun's work. A picture of Yangdeng River. Image by Xie Xiaochun. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.*

water to push the boat and the others would pull the rope. Boatmen were often naked and roared all the way. Now, all of this has disappeared.

Yes, the endless river itself is a place full of infinite vitality and hope. In the past, because the river was connected with the transportation of materials, the river always had a natural connection with the outside world. Along the river, you can enter a broader and more attractive new world. This kind of imagination still remains today; it exists in the ideas and conversations of the locals. In the summer of 2018, the artist and the residents drew a painting about the river on

a ten-meter-long scroll. They each drew as they wished. Then the artist made the painting into an animation. In the summer night, the animation was projected onto the river with a projector. The sparkling and vivid images attracted a large number of audiences and became an unforgettable festival in the local area, quite literally seeing the projected dreams of its inhabitants upon the surface of the river! This has made a lasting impression upon the residents of this village; they are keen to share their ideas and willingly collaborate with the artists who come to visit them and stay with them alongside this river who connects them all.



*Li Anwei posed for a photo with his grandson and family portrait. The person in the second row of the mural picture behind him, with his hand in his trouser pocket, is Li Anwei 40 years ago.*

[MM] In an environmental sense, has the Yangdeng Art Cooperative Project had a positive effect on the state of the river and its riverbanks? Are there things you could offer as specific examples? And has this been taken up as points of attention and action by the local people?

[JX] In successive years of projects, we have done wall paintings for several houses along the river after obtaining the owner's consent. Of course, this is not the usual decorative and beautifying painting, but adds outlines and shapes based on the traces of the house's various flowing water, and then creates drawings of it. The past historical traces of the house are used as the pattern for the painting, and finally an interesting painting effect is formed. One owner was very satisfied and took his utility room by the river and transformed it into a small gallery with us, dedicated to showing his own paintings. He cleaned the riverbank well, and often invited his neighbors to come to the exhibition. Later, streetlights were installed on the riverbank, which gradually became a place for residents to take a walk and enjoy the coolness.

[MM] In thinking now in retrospect about the choice of Yangdeng town and river as the site for his project, is it still the case that "sometimes being meaningless can be the greatest meaning" (as quoted on p. 420 of your book)?

[JX] For people's choice and life, contingency plays a big role. Respect for this contingency and randomness is probably the most important quality in art, I think. At first, I decided to do this project just because of an idea, a local student and a temporary cooperation, and then I worked here on and off for eight years. People always tend to seek the "meaning" of work and life, but only by recognizing the "meaningless" can we abandon the specific purpose and focus on the work itself, to obtain the so-called happiness and "meaning." [4]

*View video here: [Animation of a picture of the Yangdeng River by the Yangdeng Art Collective](#).  
Video courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.*

[MM] In popular stories, the poet Li Po—also known as Li Bai [5]—wrote poems on paper, folded them into boat shapes, and sent them down the river. In thinking about the Yangdeng project, are there similar messages for the future?

[JX] The legend of Li Bai happened in another place tens of kilometers away from this town. The Taibai Academy that was built in memory of his work is very famous. [6] In fact, the artists in the Yangdeng Art Cooperative have already done such a project as you have mentioned with the local residents of Yangdeng village. The artists and the carpenters in the village made more than ten triangular wooden wedges and painted their surfaces in red. Then the artists and the carpenters signed their names together and put them into the river from the suspension bridge, hoping that these red wooden wedges would flow into the Yangtze River and sea, like fishes.

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The actions of the Yangdeng Art Cooperative have benefited many people. The residents of Yangdeng village have enjoyed the repeated return of their creative visitors, sharing their stories and lives with them, and collaborating in exciting projects. They cross the bridge over their river more slowly and enjoy sitting on benches that the artists made, reflecting on their creative encounters. For the artists who visited this remote village, they too were shaped by the projects, learning what the lives were like lived in a remote river valley, hearing the stories of generations of inhabitants. They walked the shores and planned projects with people who gladly shared their thoughts, experiences, and dreams. They worked with local carpenters. They painted and drew and made artifacts. And the river? It

took on several shapes under the eyes and hands of the Cooperative. Its rocky banks held statues of policemen; its shores were cleaned; and its bridge became a viewing platform for night-time

projections. It flowed, as rivers do, fostering those thoughts of time and connections, and carried the red wooden wedges...perhaps all the way to the Yangtze.

## Footnotes

[1] Jiao Xingtao, Wang Ziyun, and Hai Ren, eds., *Socially Engaged Art in Southwest China: Yang Deng Art Cooperative Project 2012-2017* (Chongqing, China: Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, 2017). ISBN: 978-7-229-14092-2.

[2] A *kati* (or "cattie") is equivalent to 1.36 pounds. Therefore 50 catties = 68 pounds of melon seeds, hence the "rain!"

[3] See Xingtao, Ziyun, and Ren, eds., *Socially Engaged Art in Southwest China*, 64.

[4] Note from the guest editor: I have reflected many times upon the wisdom in this phrase and find it compelling. Jiao's desire to work with contingency and randomness—rather than to impose a pre-conceived idea upon a project—is similar to the work of many contemporary artists. But his distinctive addition of the phrase, "only by recognizing the 'meaningless' can we abandon the specific purpose and focus of the work itself, to obtain the so-called happiness and 'meaning,'" suggests that it is his reflection after the fact that allows for a kind of retrospective knowledge that can be derived from his actions.

[5] Li Bai (b.701–d.762), "(also known as Li Po, Li Pai, Li T'ai-po, and Li T'ai-pai) was probably born in central Asia and grew up in Sichuan Province. He left home in 725 A.D. to wander through the Yangtze River valley and write poetry. In 742, he was appointed to the Hanlin Academy by Emperor Xuanzong, though he was eventually expelled from court. He then served the Prince of Yun, who led a revolt after the An Lushan Rebellion of 755. Li Bai was arrested for treason; after he was pardoned, he again wandered the Yangtze valley. He was married four times and was friends with the poet, Du Fu." ("Li Bai," *The Poetry Foundation*, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/li-po>.)

[6] Li Bai travelled through the Jiuhua Mountains where he left many poems. The people of the Jiuhua Mountains area have memorialized him, first with a memorial built in the Song Dynasty, which was later destroyed. Following this, the Taibai Academy was built; it remains today, located in Qingyang County, Chizhou City.

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## About the Authors

Jiao Xingtao is a widely exhibited Chinese sculptor. Some of his most recent work is conceptual, a comment on the consumerist excesses of today's society. He transforms objects—often packaging, such as a discarded Hermès box—with scale and fiberglass to make pieces of art that make a statement about contemporary materialist cultures. He is also a socially engaged sculptor, working with community projects, such as the Yangdeng Arts Cooperative which he founded in 2012 and which is detailed in his contribution here. With this cooperative he aimed to “reconstruct the continuity between art and life” through an emphasis on “artistic negotiation”. He is also the Vice Principal and Academic Provost of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, China.

Professor Mary Modeen, as an artist/academic, lectures in fine art and more broadly across the humanities in relation to creative practices. Her research has several threads: perception as a cognitive and interpretive process, and especially place-based research, which connects many of these concerns with attention to cultural values, history, and embodied experience. As such, this research is usually interdisciplinary. Part of this work appears as creative art, and part as writing and presentations. Modeen addresses aspects of seeing that go beyond the visible, questioning what we know as sentient humans, and valuing the cultural and individual differences inherent in these perceptions.

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IN REVIEW

# *LIGHT AND LANGUAGE AT LISMORE CASTLE ARTS*

By Ciara Healy Musson

The Victorian artist Samuel Palmer (1805–1881) believed that certain points in the day—usually twilight—were the times when visionary and spiritual aspects of light in a landscape could be felt most intensely. Allegorical in many ways, his work was often regarded as a lament for things still present, but so clearly on the edge of disappearance that they might almost

as well be gone. Through paint, printmaking, and drawing, Palmer channeled the filigree light and energy of these liminal moments in time on to canvas and paper.

Almost one hundred years later, in the Great Basin Desert of northwestern Utah, Nancy Holt's (1938–2014) *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) continued



*Lismore Castle from the Blackwater.  
Image courtesy of Paul McAree, Curator Lismore Castle Arts.*



Nancy Holt 'Electrical System' (1982) installation at Lismore Castle Arts.  
Image courtesy of Paul McAree, Curator Lismore Castle Arts.

that meticulous attentiveness to the passing of time, to the encroaching night. Composed of four concrete cylinders arranged in an open cross format and aligned to frame the sun on the horizon during the summer and winter solstices, Holt's work has always been part metaphysical, part practical. Like Europe's Neolithic ancestors, it has a deep respect for—and knowledge of—the universe and the lessons found within it. Their lives' works and hers were predicated on an active interest in connecting all that is poetic and esoteric in the land with the mathematics of construction and engineering.

*Light and Language* at Lismore Castle Arts in Ireland presents a selection of Holt's work from 1966 to 1982, all of which relate to her *Sun Tunnels* earthworks. The five contemporary artists joining her in this exhibition share her infallible curiosity and desire to connect materials to time, light, space, movement, water, flow, and energy.

Like the alchemist Paracelsus (1493–1591), who once marveled that starlight could be glimpsed in the twinkling eyes of those we love, all artists in this exhibition see the echoes of one thing mirrored in another. Katie Paterson's delicate haiku-like poems in their restrained forms, titled *Ideas* (2015–), for example, surround Holt's large, electrified light bulb installation *Electrical System* (1982). Cut from silver, the poems shimmer elusive and lyrical on the walls, each small constellation of words illuminated by the yellow glow of lightbulbs on Holt's large work, transporting the reader to a new way of thinking with each reading.

Not all the work in this exhibition is ethereal and transcendental, as Holt's and Paterson's are, however. Produced using a Beckman & Whitley high-speed rotating mirror framing camera operated by engineer and scientist Tim Samaras (1957–2013), Matthew Day Jackson's *Commissioned Family Photo* (2013) is

a series of 82 photographs of the artist with his family. The "nuclear family" portrait was taken using technology developed in the 1950s for military weapons testing. It was used to analyze the efficacy of explosions and shockwaves from nuclear detonations. The camera can capture over a million frames per second. The resulting image is created by 97,500 exposures. The artist and his family are the only human beings ever to have been photographed by this camera. The resulting images are blurry and unsettling, reminiscent of Victorian spirit photographs, but within the frame there is something more sinister: layers of burnt umber and orange hues obfuscate the small child in the woman's arms in a way that feels almost radioactive.

Curated by Lisa Le Feuvre, the exhibition invites us to be enthralled by the awe and magnitude of the galaxies and stars, of the earth and the planets, of time and energy. Yet this vast expanse also induces a kind of horror. With a shock, we see ourselves: tiny on this planet. Our fragility and frailties come to the fore in the face of such immensity. We are not alone and yet we are so, so alone in this unfolding dark universe.

Spilling out of the gallery space and into the gardens is work by Charlotte Moth, whose *Blue reflecting the greens* (2021)—a glass circular blue mirror secured to the castle walls—reflects an otherworldly version of the garden back on itself.

On the lawn is A. K. Burns' sculpture *The Dispossessed* (2021) made from mangled chain link fences once used to separate or control a crowd. The fences, now deformed and displaced from their original function, take on a figurative quality of dancers.

The poetry of the everyday, of structures, limitations, and ways of defining space continues with Dennis McNulty's *Boundary Conditions* (2021), which maps a network of streets around his home in Dublin.



*Charlotte Moth 'Blue reflecting the greens' (2021) at Lismore Castle Arts.  
Image courtesy of Paul McAree, Curator Lismore Castle Arts.*



*A. K. Burns 'The Dispossessed' (2021) at Lismore Castle Arts.  
Image courtesy of Paul McAree, Curator Lismore Castle Arts.*

The textures of light and time, of energy, flow, and movement are made all the more relevant when one considers the location in which this work is situated. Lismore Castle dominates a bank of the River Blackwater in Co. Waterford, Ireland, and since 1753, it has belonged to the Duke of Devonshire's family. River Blackwater is one of the largest rivers in Ireland, draining five ranges of mountains—the Boggeragh, Nagle, Ballyhoura, Galtee, and Knockmellowns—as well as thousands of acres of land in Co. Cork. It enters the Celtic Sea in the small seaside town of Youghal and is designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) because of the protected habitats and species it nurtures. Tidal mudflats and sandflats, old oak woodlands, freshwater pearl mussel, white clawed crayfish, lamprey,

Atlantic salmon, European Kingfisher, and otter are all sustained because of this river. In Herman Hesse's (2008, 83–84) iconic book *Siddhartha*, the river is described as everywhere at the same time:

at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the current, in the ocean and in the mountains, everywhere, and that the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past nor the shadow of the future... Nothing was, nothing will be, everything has reality and presence.

These sentiments are echoed most profoundly in *Light and Language*, in Holt's intimate connection to nature and the stars. Like *Siddhartha*,



*Lismore Castle from the Blackwater.*  
Image courtesy of Paul McAree, Curator Lismore Castle Arts.

her quest as an artist was to listen to the voice of nature, to give back what was already within. The five artists in this exhibition continue her legacy, but with an ever increasing and sometimes elegiac urgency. Our planet—and our relationship with it—is changing rapidly. Evening soon will come.

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### About the Author

Dr. Ciara Healy Musson is a writer, book artist, curator, and lecturer in Art, Culture & Heritage at IT Carlow, Ireland. She is the 2021 recipient of a Scottish/Irish Bilateral Network Award from the Royal Irish Academy, an IMPACT Research Award from University of Reading (2016), a Large Grant Award from Arts Council Wales for a curatorial research project titled *Thin Place* (2015) and she was one of the 2011 recipients of the Wales Arts International Critical Writing Award. Her research interests involve developing strategies in writing, curating, and education for philosophy, poetry, literature, science, agriculture, and the visual arts to converge. This is to explore new ways of "making room" for other ontologies especially in a time of climate change.

GEOGRAPHIES

# IN THE CROOK OF MY ELBOW

By Katie Hart Potapoff

The word “meander” has several meanings: it can mean “to walk slowly without any clear direction,” or it can mean “to move forward without any clear purpose.” Geographers use it to mean “a bend in the river.” The word comes from the Menderes River, located in present-day Turkey, and known by ancient peoples as a

winding and twisting river with slow-moving curves, bends, and backwaters.[1] I think about this as I note that for nearly four decades, various rivers—and the large bodies of water they feed—have shaped my life. A few of these rivers have flowed in and through my life story, washing up and against my forbearers, and others have



*‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.*

meandered through the background, setting the flowing pace of change and continuations in my narrative. In the following piece, I combine my various forms of writing—prose and poetry—and artwork, to evoke, separately and together, the way that rivers shape my life.[2]

a shiver begins at the top of my head  
running down into the shoulder  
past the bend of the elbow  
towards the tips of my fingers



*‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.*



Winding, flowing, moving from the confluence of the Rivière des Rocher and Peace River, the Slave River in the Northwest Territories of Canada is anything but “directionless.” Featuring four sets of whitewater rapids—Cassette, Pelican, Mountain Portage, and Rapids of the Drowned—the Slave River is famous for challenging kayakers and canoeists. But I am tumbling and racing ahead of myself, river-like.

My own story begins with the rapids on the Slave River, with my parents meeting because of a proposed dam project that would have ruined the bird breeding grounds. My mum had just moved

to a small town near the river and was making an eight-foot pelican costume to wear at the Jam the Dam protest; my dad was the only one in town with a hot glue gun to put together the headpiece. It was also his 1975 red and white quarter-ton Ford pickup that drove my mum, in all eight feet of her pelican glory, down to the protest site.

marking the vast distance

bearing witness to the passage of time

my hands roll gobbets into spheres



*‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.*



*‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.*

At a young age, I moved with my family to the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. For the next sixteen years we lived by water: first next to the Arrow Lakes, then Carpenter Creek which feeds into Slocan Lake, and finally at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers. These waters are linked to my childhood and family memories. They saw me through learning to swim, developing the art of skipping stones, practicing my J-stroke while canoeing to campsites, sketching by the water, beachcombing for hours, feeling a summer full of first love and healing the eventual heartbreak that follows.

fist over heart

holding tight too

a tightening in my chest

When I moved away to attend university, I landed on the shores of Okanagan Lake. With much of my time spent indoors, the water was never really a consideration other than an antidote to scorching hot summer days. Maybe because the lake is wide and long, I never felt embraced in the same way I had by smaller and colder bodies of water.

the crevice made in the crook of my elbow is a place of rest

resting, breathing, waiting

a long wait

longing for this wait to be over

‘When I followed my family to the confluence of the Bow and Elbow Rivers in Alberta, I never expected to stay for long, let alone a whole decade. Much of that time was spent next to the low and slow meanderings of the Elbow River, so shallow in places it would barely reach your ankle bone. Midway through my time living at this confluence we experienced the aftermath of a torrential downpour: the rivers rose and flooded

a large portion of the downtown area. I, alongside many other residents, had to evacuate for higher ground. It was weeks before I was able to return. Although the flood missed my home by a mere 20 feet—while the houses on the other side of the street had to drain their basements—I still remember how traumatic it felt to watch those waters rise and then wait as they eventually sank back down. The greys and browns of the swirling, swollen river water churned and swept mud away, along with any sense of security the walls of a home offered.

way markers

bearing the marks of my skin

wearing the impression of intensifying pressure

Four of the five Indigenous languages spoken in this region name this place using a word that refers to the major bend in the path of the river, the Elbow.[3] When I looked up the word “elbow” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I found that it is not only used to refer to the “outer part of the joint between the fore and the upper arm,” but that elbow can also be used to refer to any major jag in a river or pathway.[4] This had me considering the different ways we name places of significance: sometimes by geographical indicators, but more often by the names of explorers or their patrons.

the word rolls and eddies over my tongue like the river it names

subtle imprints of the human form

traces of motion

repetition bruises both the body and soul

The settler name for the area at confluence of the Bow and Elbow Rivers shares both a reference to water and a link to Scotland, where I am currently



‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.

writing this meandering narrative. When the settlement situated at the confluence was still only a fort, Col. Macleod of the North-West Mounted Police suggested a Gaelic word that he proposed meant “clear running water.”[5] While this word held personal significance from his recent visit to a familial farm of the same name on the Isle of Mull, it was later pointed out by language specialists that it would have translated as “preserved pasture at the harbor,” or “bay farm.”[6] This is a curious coincidence, as I wonder about the possibility that my great grandfather MacDonald, who moved from his post in India to farm next to the Elbow River, might have made the Gaelic connection and considered it a piece of home.

This link to Scotland brings me much closer to where I am currently sitting, writing these words in a sunny studio looking out on the River Tay as it flows into the largest body of water I have ever lived near: the North Sea. I hadn’t really considered how implicitly my life has been linked to these creeks, rivers, and lakes; while I don’t know if I could ever live so far from the sea again, there is something unique about the freshwater of a river.

form which is dictated by the topography, and yet

continues to shift geography

cutting through otherwise immovable rock

creating links between bodies of water

rivers have shaped my life and continue to shift my future

*View video here: ‘A Life Lived by Rivers’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.*

the lump that turned into a sphere is now an impression

cast with the traces of the crook in the elbow

a stone to be cast into water where the two

rivers meet

a place I call home

the place that is waiting for me

## Footnotes

[1] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “meander, n.,” Oxford University Press, last modified December 2021, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/115444](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115444); *Britannica*, s.v. “Menderes River,” last modified November 13, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Menderes-River>. The ancient name for the river was Maeander.

[2] Through interweaving threads of prose and poetry with images of visual practice, this experimental work offers a performative and reflexive response to this issue’s theme of rivers as meaning. The form of the writing gestures to the Haibun, a combination of prose and haiku originating in Japan, that is often used in describing travels through a landscape. Through the numerous iterations of the artist/author’s engagement with this material, she hopes to offer the reader multiple points of entry into an embodied experience.

[3] Meg Wilcox, “7 Names for Calgary Before it Became Calgary,” *CBC News*, December 3, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-names-elbow-1.3345967>.

[4] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “elbow, n.,” Oxford University Press, last modified June 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/60163>.

[5] City of Calgary Archives, “Planting the Seed to Name Calgary,” *The City of Calgary Newsroom*, February 25, 2019, <https://newsroom.calgary.ca/planting-the-seed-to-name-calgary/>.

[6] The Glenbow Museum, “How Calgary Got its Name,” *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*, September 27, 1999, <https://www2.smo.uhi.ac.uk/gaidhlig/aite/Canada/calgary.html>.

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## About the Author

Katie Hart Potapoff (she/her) is a multidisciplinary artist and writer based at DJCAD, University of Dundee, completing her practice-led Ph.D., titled “With an Attentiveness Towards Intimacy and Texture: Exploring a Sense of Land and Place Through Creative Practices.” Her research takes a non-hierarchical approach, attempting to interweave multiple perspectives, materials, and theories. At the center of her practice is a desire to create work which invites humans to reconsider relationships with their more-than-human kin. Katie was recently awarded an Explore and Create grant from the Canada Council for the Arts to fund her place-based residency on the Isle of Iona and she is currently the AHRI Research Fellow for the Centre for Scotland’s Land Futures. Her website is [www.katiehartpotapoff.com](http://www.katiehartpotapoff.com).

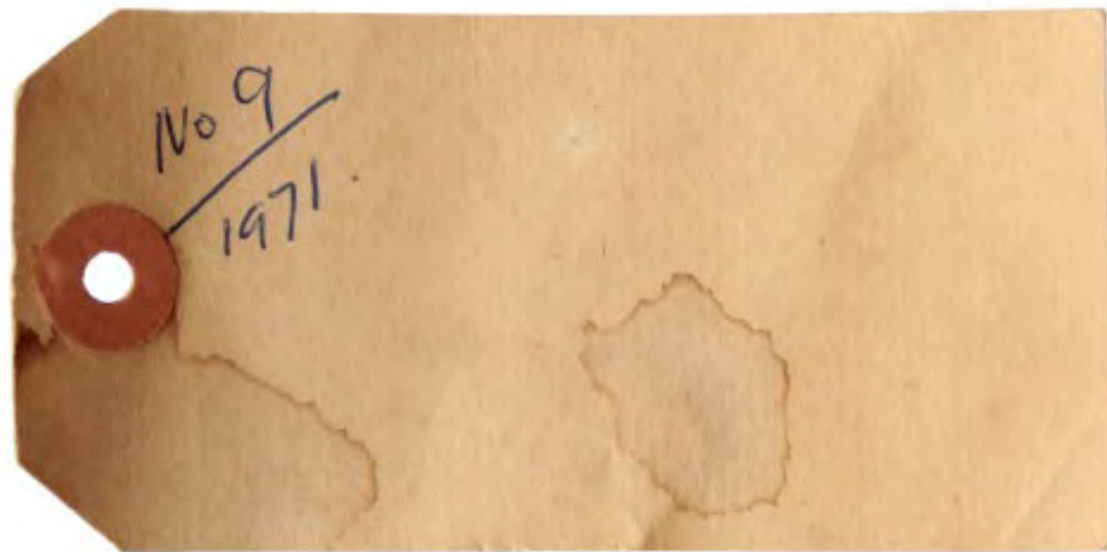
PERSPECTIVES

# RIVER / MUSEUM

By Miriam Mallalieu

The River Tay and Perth Museum sit fifteen meters apart (or nineteen paces, with a pause at the traffic lights to cross the road). Sometimes the river sits low in its bed, with the banks adding another six paces; at other times the river is swollen and turbulent, risen to the edge of the edge of the wall. Sometimes you can walk along the promenade and let your fingertips skim the water's top.

There was a point at which they mixed, the museum and the river.<sup>[1]</sup> The river swelled into the basement and rinsed the objects clean from their interpretation: labels were lost, organization was disassembled, and centuries of cleaning, conservation, and acid-free packing were soaked and muddied. The fire brigade was called, tasked with pulling objects from the brown water and laying them in the galleries above the water line.



*Loose labels from Perth Museum. Image courtesy of Miriam Mallalieu.*

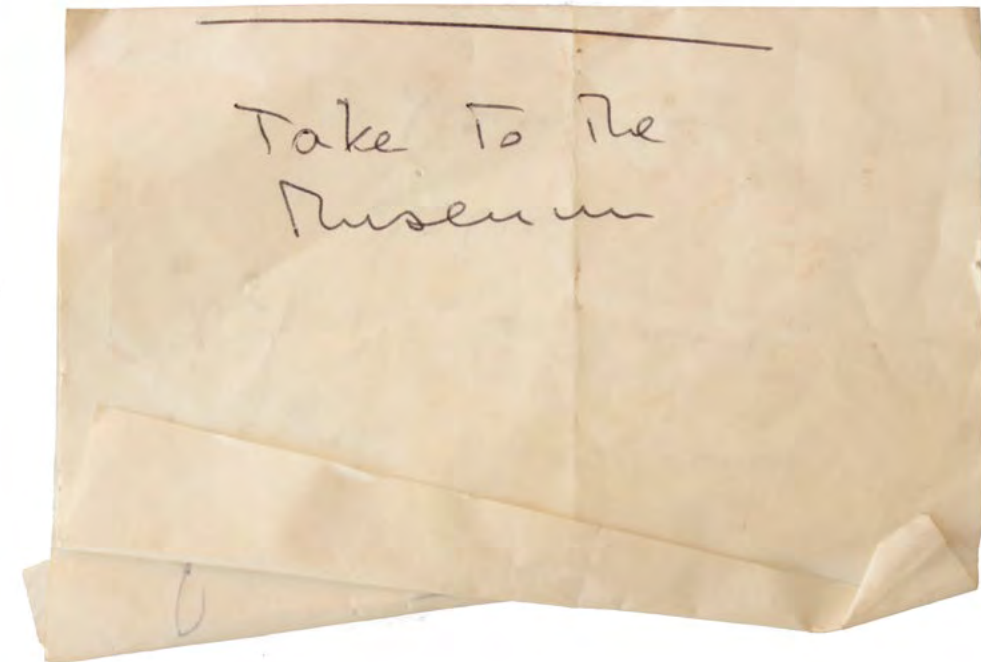
From the water, they pulled the Gavial Head, later nicknamed “the Monster of the Flood.”

*It is joked that it emerged cleaner and better looking than before the flood, but this is probably not true.*

Over time, this meeting of water and artifact was erased from visible history: cleaning, repair, and other conservation efforts removed the event

from the surface of the objects and the walls of the basement.

I like to think, however, that there was a change nonetheless in both the river and the museum, that it would be possible to detect traces of river water and silt between the delicate layers of oil on canvas that form Millais’ *Waking*, that this painting holds a record, still, of its dip in the



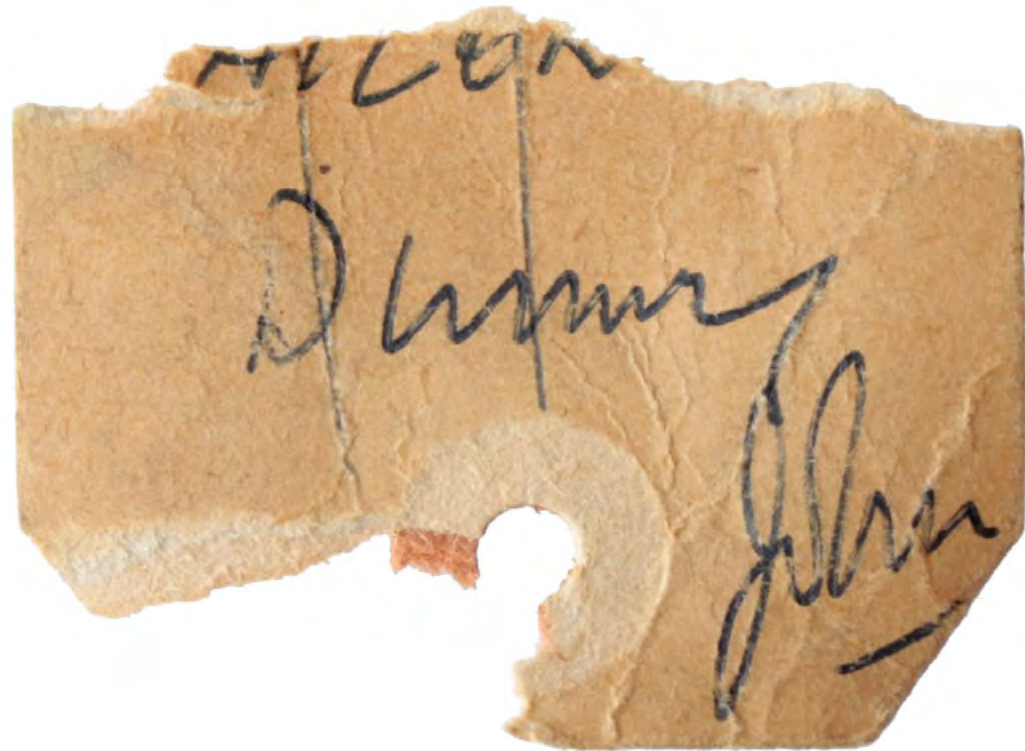
*Loose labels from Perth Museum. Image courtesy of Miriam Mallalieu.*

river. Perhaps in the churning mêlée of artifact and river water, there was a Flann O’Brien-esque exchange of molecules, and the river receded with new qualities drawn from the sacred, historical, mundane, and accidental that make up the collection.[2] The collection, in turn, gained some quality of the distant hills, the farms, and the woodlands through which the water filters, and the nature of the river itself as it churns and pools and drifts towards the sea. Perhaps, if measured, we would find that those objects plucked from the flood have a tendency to lean eastwards towards the sea, rolling slowly on their shelves. The water

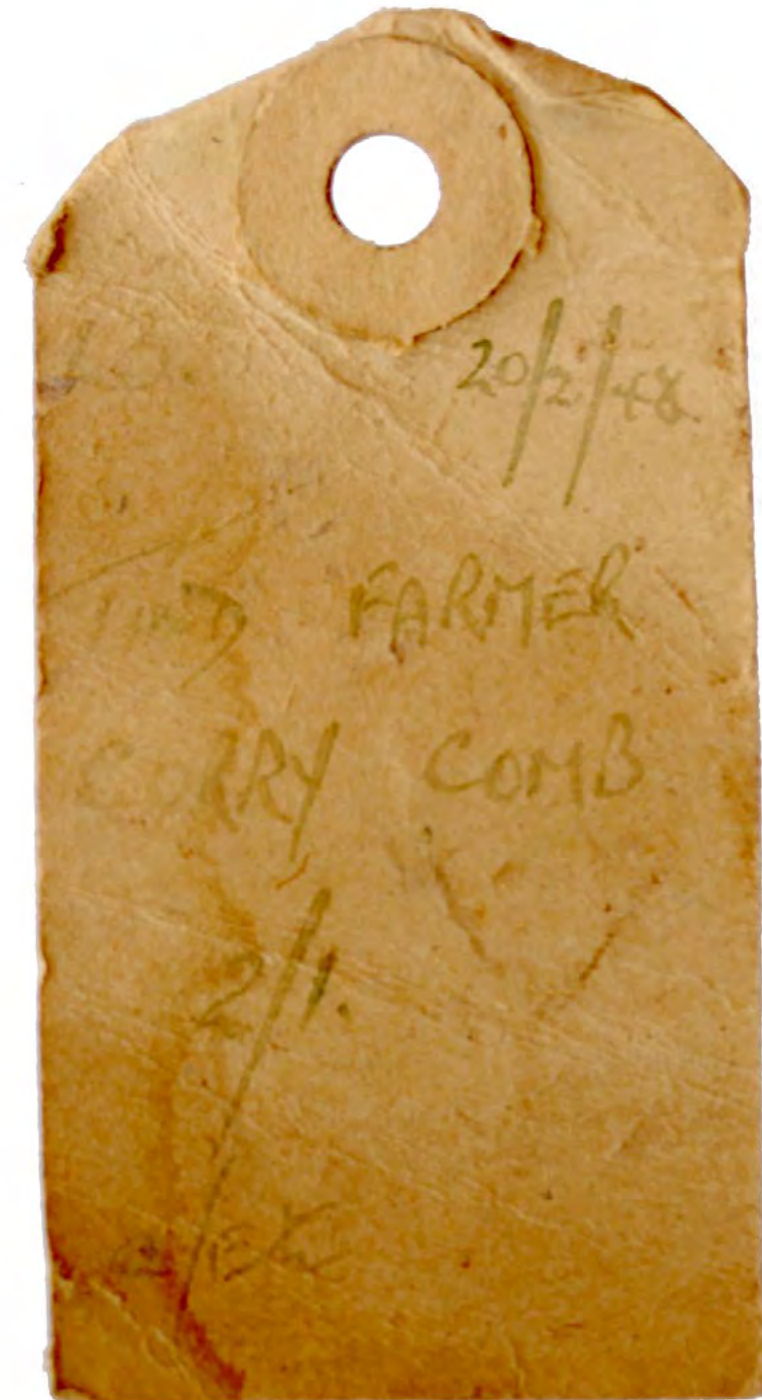
holding the nature of the collection would by now be dispersed across the North Sea and wider, possibly cycled through cloud and rain.

*It is raining the water that washed away the names from the gods.[3]*

Perhaps there were moments of recognition: archaeology pulled from the riverbed would at once recognize the cold submersion; Miss Ballantyne’s prize-winning salmon knew water once again, 75 years after it was hooked and pulled from the river depths.[4] Immersed, too, were pearls from



*Loose labels from Perth Museum. Image courtesy of Miriam Mallalieu.*



*Loose labels from Perth Museum. Image courtesy of Miriam Mallalieu.*

the freshwater oysters, spades and tools that shaped the earth around the river, and objects that knew not this river, but rivers elsewhere. All were reminded for an instant of their purpose or use or existence beyond that of artifact.

The museum, in an attempt to chart (and contain) the history of the area, holds relics of the river: items of revolt over taxation and bridges; Celtic carvings from what may have been sacred pits at the river's edge. Perhaps the river wanted to reach these items, ensure its continued connection with the records and the gods and the events.

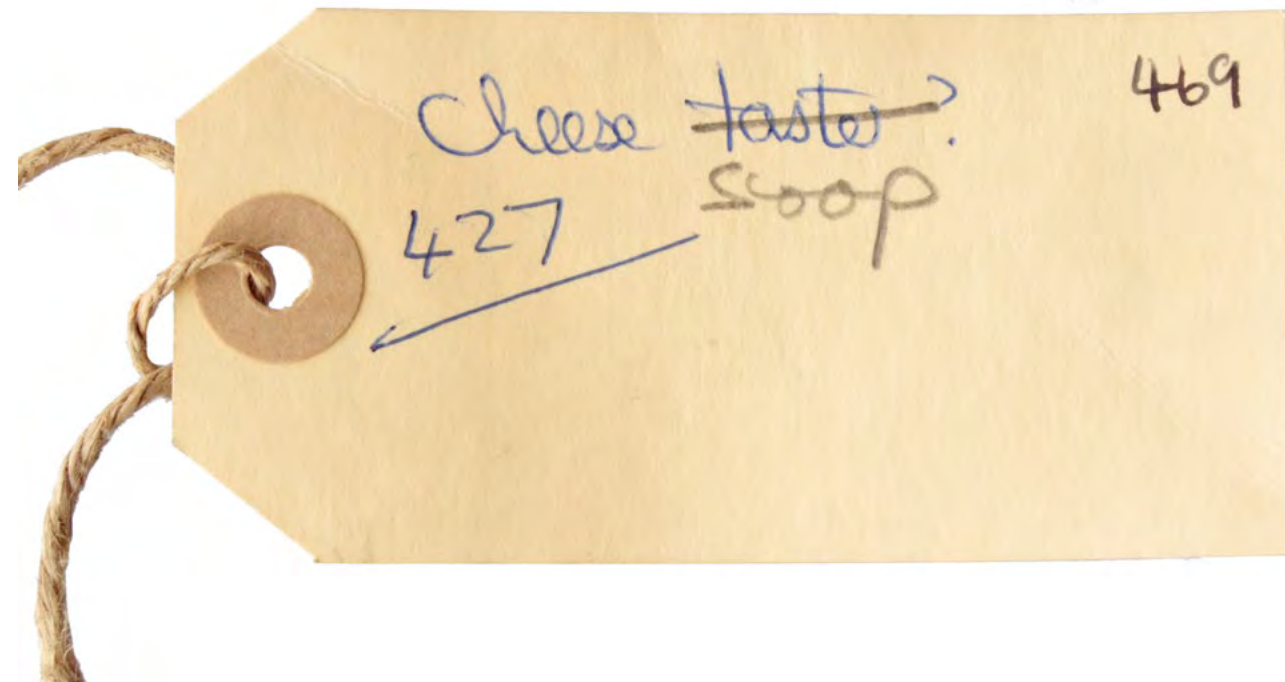
This meeting of forces (the river and the museum) was destructive, too. It momentarily broke down the rigid organizations of the museum collection, mixing Fine Art with Decorative Art with World Cultures. Distinctions were lost, and with them, determinations of value, cultural interpretations, and contexts. This was a moment of liberation as well as chaos. Some things have remained lost: there is a bag of loose labels in a cabinet in the basement—which, 25 years on,

are yet to be reunited with artifact—kept as a record of objects that may also have been lost (or more likely, re-labelled). They are a record of uncertain existence—objects that were, before this meeting of water and collection, tethered to their interpretation (they existed with certainty) but now remain as record only (suggesting only the possibility of existence elsewhere).

*Twelve of these labels refer to different types of cheese scoops. Perhaps the river favored this selection of objects to wash onwards to the sea.*

More troubling for the museum are the objects left without label, too obscure to reconnect with history. There is a wooden beam in the collection for which all history and context dissolved in the river water. Now recorded only as “wooden beam,” its significance is diminished to that it was once considered important enough to accession.

*Perhaps it wasn't even accessioned. Perhaps the water brought it.*



*Loose labels from Perth Museum. Image courtesy of Miriam Mallalieu.*

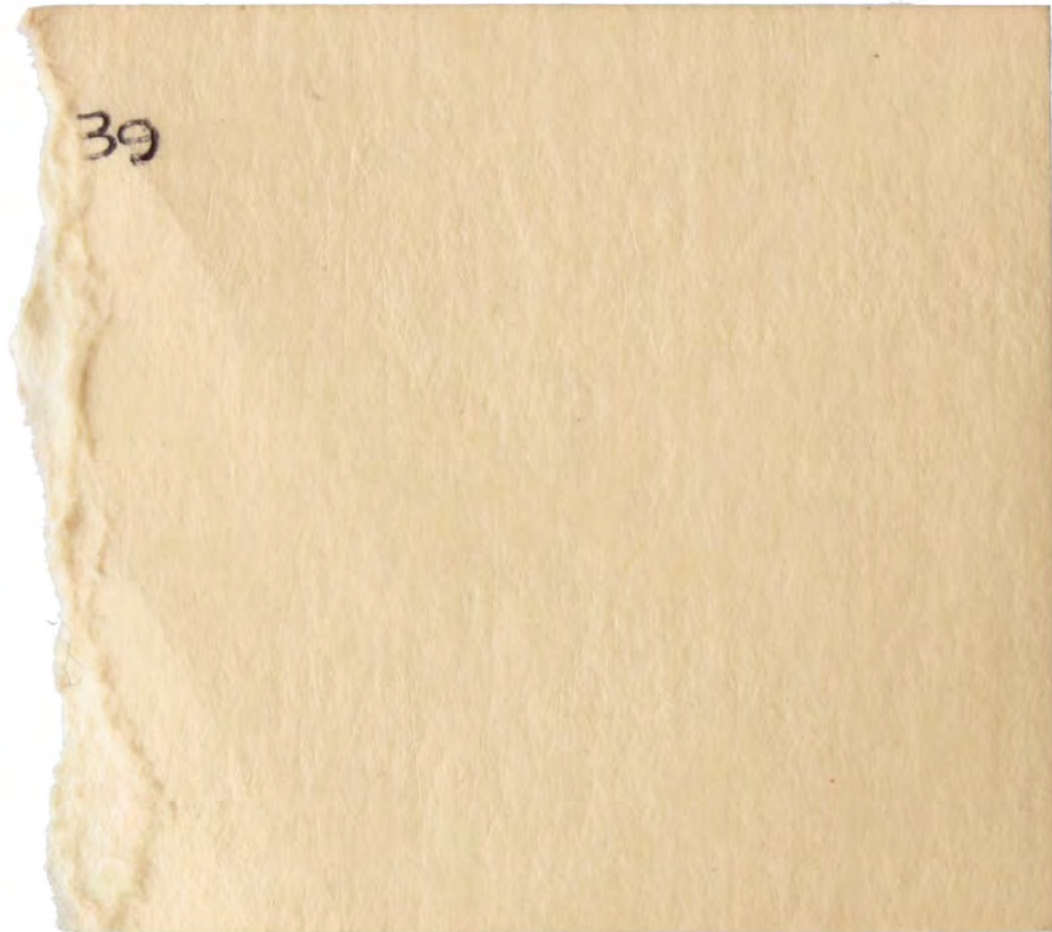


*Loose labels from Perth Museum. Image courtesy of Miriam Mallalieu.*

In the period following this disruptive mixing of movement and history, precautions were taken to ensure that it cannot happen again. Seals were placed over the doors of the museums; plans drawn up for a new store (uphill). Water levels are watched closely and there is a Grab List compiled for emergencies. Before evacuating for

your own safety, objects of highest significance are snatched first from the basement, including a cloak of woven Kakapo feathers (nearly extinct) and an eight-foot Pictish stone carving.

*I feel like I have written this before (but one cannot step into the same river twice).*



*Loose labels from Perth Museum. Image courtesy of Miriam Mallalieu.*

## Footnotes

[1] A contemporary account of the Tay 1993 flood was published by A. R. Black and J. L. Anderson, “The Great Tay Flood of 1993,” in *Hydrological Data UK: 1993 Yearbook* (Wallingford, UK: Institute of Hydrology, 1994), 25–34. [http://nrfa.ceh.ac.uk/sites/default/files/The\\_Great\\_Tay\\_Flood\\_of\\_January\\_1993.pdf](http://nrfa.ceh.ac.uk/sites/default/files/The_Great_Tay_Flood_of_January_1993.pdf).

[2] Flann O’Brien, the pen name for Brian O’Nolan (1911-1966), was—in addition to being a civil servant—an Irish novelist, playwright, and satirist regarded as a major figure in twentieth-century modernism. He combines humor with wildly overlaid plots, deploying characters that stray far from the author’s commands.

[3] This refers (at least in part) to the gods listed on spiritual artifacts with the museum labels blurred by the water.

[4] Indeed, it was Miss Ballantyne who held the record for the largest salmon ever to be caught in the Tay, the fish weighing a hefty 64 lbs.

## Recommended Citation

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## About the Author

Miriam Mallalieu’s research explores the idea of “making sense.” Interested in what knowledge is and how things are understood, she looks specifically at methods of catalogue, organization, archiving and curation, and significantly, the structures of power that this knowledge creates and upholds. Miriam is a current Ph.D. candidate at the University of Dundee, Scotland, in the final stages of completing her doctoral degree. She is a recipient of the Queens College Scholarship. Her thesis is titled *What Does A Museum Think It Is? Research and practice at the intersection of knowledge, interpretation and organization*. With a practice that extends across curation, writing, printmaking, and sculpture, Miriam has exhibited both across Scotland and internationally. She has won several prizes for her work, notably the Royal Scottish Academy prize and Watters Maclane Medal (2013), and the John Kinross Scholarship (2017) from the Royal Scottish Academy. [www.cargocollective.com/miriammallalieu](http://www.cargocollective.com/miriammallalieu).

PRIMARY SOURCES

# PHOTO ESSAY OF ILHABELA RIVERS

By Francisco Pereira Da Silva, Laelcio Pereira Da Silva, and Helena Beutel

## *Note from the Guest Editor*

**F**rancisco and Laelcio Pereira Da Silva are two brothers living on the island of Ilhabela in São Paulo state, just across the channel from São Sebastião, Brazil. Fran and Lau, as they are

known, and Lau's wife, Helena Beutel, have been assisting my research since 2018 on the island's culture, history, and ecology.<sup>[1]</sup> The brothers identify as Caiçara, a group of Indigenous



*Castelhanos from above. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*

peoples who are ethnically a mix of native Tupis, descendants of escaped African slaves from colonial days, and descendants of some of the colonial European settlers, largely Portuguese, Germans, and the Dutch. As with most of the islanders, Fran and Lau are Portuguese speaking, with their island's distinctive accent. Helena is a translator from French and English, and is trained as a chef.

The Caiçaras are proudly identified as artisanal fishermen. They and their families live on the east coasts and islands of Brazil in tropical rainforest conditions, in an island range extending from above Rio de Janeiro to the edge of Rio Grande do Sul state, and most of them

live a traditional lifestyle. Fishing has been the mainstay of their lives for the last three hundred years, but with great changes, especially over the last five years.

Fran and Lau are no exception to the Caiçara way of life; there is scarcely a day that they are not out on the water, whether in the rivers weaving through the mangroves, or out on the sea, fishing and—in Fran's case—guiding eco-tourists in scuba diving, fishing, and exploring the protected state park that occupies the majority of the mountainous land on the island. The Caiçara families generally prefer to live quiet lives in the less populated side of the island. Fish are the daily diet, augmented with vegetables from the



*Boneta Village from above. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*gardens and fruit from the trees. The fish are not only their main food, but also their means to earn an income, as the men take their daily catch around to the populated side of the island where they can sell at the fish markets. And now, tourism plays an additional role in the economy of these people.*

*Living lives so closely attuned to the island's ecosystem, with seasonal changes and close*

*observation of every detail of the natural environment, the Caiçara have the deep traditional knowledge upon which stewardship depends. As keen observers, they share in this photo essay some of the rivers, waterways, riverbanks, and wildlife of their island home.*

*—Mary Modeen, Guest Editor*



*The river meets the sea. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Sun at the river's mouth. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*River and sea coming together. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Queroquero by the river. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Egret close-up. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Egret in the mangroves. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Urubos above the river. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Urubos closeup. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Blue crabs by the river's edge. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira da Silva.*



*Roseate spoonbill and offspring. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Underwater view. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Watching you. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*The river from a high viewpoint. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Ilhabela River in town. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Mangroves from the river. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Mirror-like reflections on the river. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*





*Moss trailing on the river. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*The river as a waterway. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*The river from a high viewpoint. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Living by the river. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*High mountain dam. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Rubbish in the mangroves. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*The sorrows of pollution. Image courtesy of Fran and Lau Pereira Da Silva.*



*Fran and Lau Pereria da Silva. Image courtesy of Mary Modeen.*

## Footnote

[1] Mary Modeen, “Traditional Knowledge of the Sea in a Time of Change: the Caiçara of Ilhabela, Brazil,” *The Journal of Cultural Geography*, 38, no. 1 (Nov. 14, 2020): 50–80.

## Recommended Citation

Pereira Da Silva, Francisco, Laelcio Pereira Da Silva, Helena Beutel. 2021. “Photo Essay of Ilhabela Rivers.” *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 20. <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/photo-essay-of-ilhabela-rivers/>.

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## About the Authors

Francisco “Fran” Pereira Da Silva, born in 1985, is a Caiçara fisherman, scuba-diving instructor, and eco-guide living on Ilhabela Island, São Paulo, Brazil. He is also a naturally gifted photographer and translates his passion for his beloved island and waters in compelling photographic imagery. He also captures the immense biodiversity of these waters in the island archipelago in underwater views. Both Fran and his brother Lau have been indispensable research assistants, providing expert knowledge and access to remote communities.

Laelcio “Lau” Pereira Da Silva, born in 1987 and brother to Fran, is also a Caiçara fisherman. Like the other island fishermen, he has extensive specialist knowledge of the marine environment and artisanal fishing practices. He is a dedicated conservationist in all aspects and has deep knowledge of the mountainous tropical rainforest on this Atlantic island. He feels deeply the ravages of climate change and pollution, and to the best of his ability, quietly protects the land, the marine environment, and his family to the best of his abilities. He, too, is an inspired photographer.

Helena Beutel, born in 1984, is partner to Lau, and mother to their young daughter. Helena was originally from São Paulo, and has four languages: Spanish, French, English, and her native Portuguese. She studied culinary arts and has travelled widely, working in Uruguay, Buenos Aires, and France, specializing in vegetarian cuisine. She found in Ilhabela a paradise to create, and it includes a family within the Praia de Castelhanos community of Caiçara on the eastern side of the island. Helena has been a key translator and research assistant for much of the work with Mary Modeen since 2018.

Professor Mary Modeen, as an artist/academic, lectures in fine art and more broadly across the humanities in relation to creative practices. Her research has several threads: perception as a cognitive and interpretive process, and especially place-based research, which connects many of these concerns with attention to cultural values, history, and embodied experience. As such, this research is usually interdisciplinary. Part of this work appears as creative art, and part as writing and presentations. Modeen addresses aspects of seeing that go beyond the visible, questioning what we know as sentient humans, and valuing the cultural and individual differences inherent in these perceptions.

Her most recent publications include a co-authored book with Iain Biggs, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* (Routledge, 2021), and “Traditional Knowledge of the Sea in a Time of Change: Stories of the Caiçaras,” in the *Journal of*

*Cultural Geography* (November 2020). Her edited book and essay just published is titled *Decolonising Place-Based Arts Research* (Dundee, 2021). She is chair of Interdisciplinary Art Practice and associate dean international for Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee, in Scotland and visiting fellow with the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota.

PRIMARY SOURCES

# REFLECTING ON BRACKISH WATERS

By Louise Ritchie

Deep luminous greens and murky ochre hues colour the brackish threshold that fluctuates and pools between the mouth of the Dichty, where it tacitly and without fanfare joins the River Tay in Monifeith. The Dichty Water<sup>[1]</sup> was used historically as a source of power for the mill buildings at Claverhouse Bleachworks near Dundee,<sup>[2]</sup> where its banks also provided the site for bleaching newly woven cloth. Brackish water is neither salt nor fresh, but sits in the

loose boundaries between estuaries and their conjoining waters. Where is that moment when fresh turns to salt and salt to fresh?

I arrive at my favorite Dichty-from-the-bridge viewpoint to gaze down at the water. The waters flow steadily across the rocks toward the mouth of the Dichty, opening out gently from the last angle bend of the river as it slides under Bridge ECN3 090/208-Underbridge. Named, poetically,



*Detail from Louise Ritchie, 'Litmus 6-9 Green.' 2021; brackish litmus paper strips.  
Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.*



*Fig. 1, Louise Ritchie, 'Litmus 6-9 Green.' 2021; brackish litmus paper strips.  
Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.*

after the space under the bridge. There it widens, and catches on the stones and rocks, picking up a little speed before skimming into the Tay. It has come a long way. Here it transforms from fresh to brackish to salt, the threshold that sits in the *not-fresh*, but *not-salt* state between here and the sea.

This place is shy. No triumphant roar of raging spume from a waterfall or crashing of waves. Just a trickle over the stones on its way. As the waters glide under the bridge carrying the footpath, I peer down at it from above. I watch its shape continually alter, gazing deeply, Narcissus-like, into the deep greens and custardy ochres under

its glossy mirror sheen that undulates under the surface tension as the current carries it along.

I think of the word “carrying.” It suggests weight or moving something that is immobile, but really, tidal currents are combined forces that move water from location to location, regular in pattern, and strongest near the coastal shores and estuaries. The waters are driven by winds near the surface, internal temperature, and salt densities, and from high above, by the moon. Powerful effects from afar, from near, and from within that move these immense bodies of liquid in a constant state of flux. Maybe not carries then; maybe the waters are ushered, firmly,



Fig. 2, ‘Underbridge.’ Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.

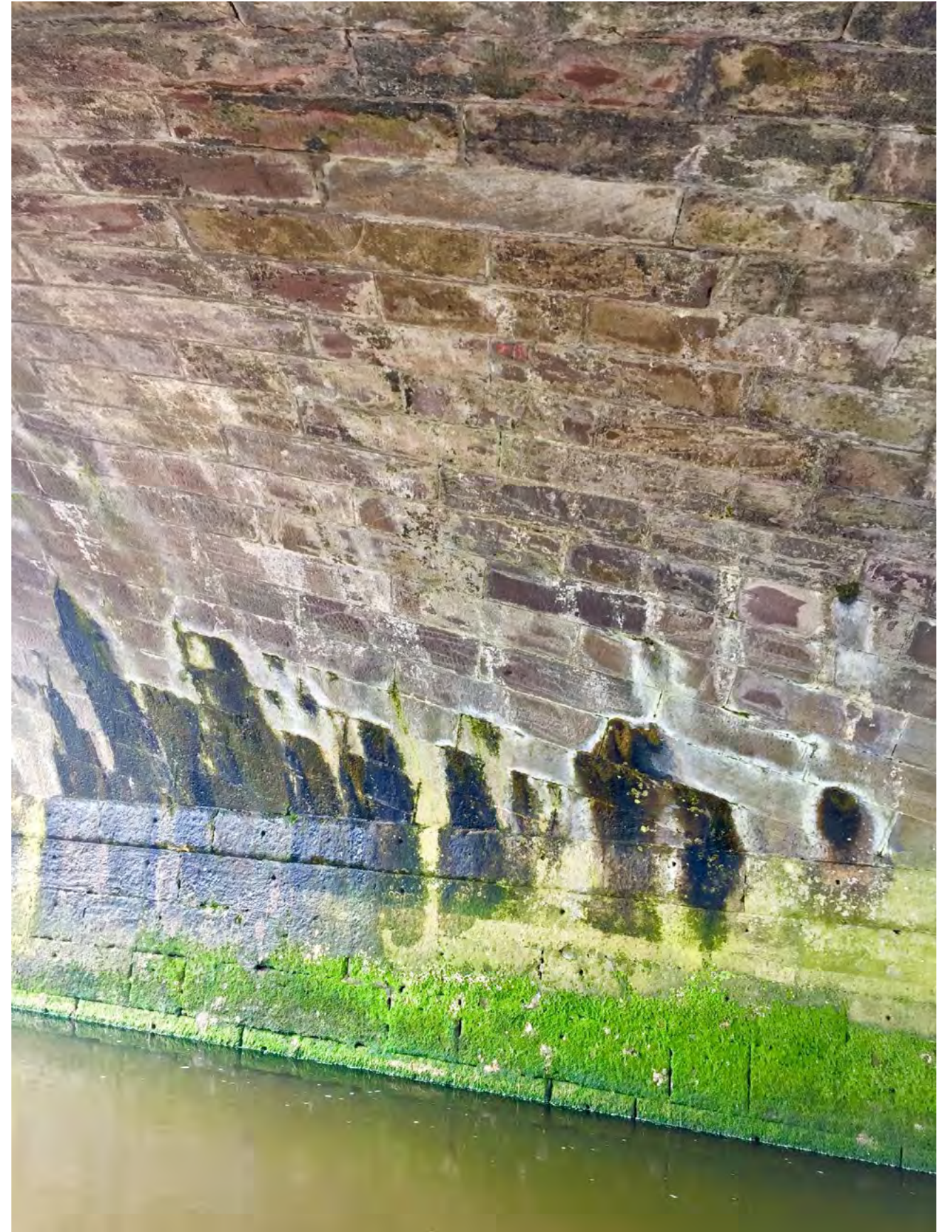


Fig. 3, ‘Underbridge Slanty Bricks.’ Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.

elementally but reverentially throughout their journey. Continuous flow, shape-shifting pockets of almost stillness and fluctuating water, skipping to greet the sea like a child let loose on a beach trip. What did it see, I wonder, on its journey?

The water bears a temporal witness to the riverbanks, the wildlife and human-life, activities reflected fleetingly in its moving mirror. I also wonder, as I look down, if I dropped a twig at the Dichty's source 20 miles away in the Sidlaw Hills in Dundee, how long would it take to journey to this point?

I daydream about being the twig basking on the water, being carried along, whipping around the bends and up and over dips in the river's course, like a surface water sightseeing trip, drifting for days, or weeks, or even months.

I move down the sandy steps to the shore. I am level with the water now. I taste it. It tastes strange, as if it doesn't have an actual taste, but the sense of a taste. A taste that has no other description. Yet. To the right, fresh; to the left, salt; in the middle, brackish. Right, left, middle. Placing of taste in position. Brackish, a litmus test of 6-9: green. Not a precisely defined condition: liminal. I hear Derek Jarman reminding me of Kandinsky's assertion that "absolute green is represented by the placid middle notes of a violin."<sup>[3]</sup> Placing of sound and colour in position. Sometimes brackish is used to describe a person. Harsh or unpleasant. Unpalatable. But this brackish water is velvety to touch, and it has power. I can feel it.

I hear the water's voice echo in the underbridge with its slanted bricks, patinated with neon-green moss and algae and rusty residues bleeding from the old metal. The water is shadowy today. Storms and heavy rains have disturbed the slumbering silt, clouding the water and modulating its colour from emerald to gloomier green.

I wonder what it would feel like to submerge myself. Cold, probably; wet, absolutely. I imagine moving through the flow with watery veils caressing me as we inch toward the Tay, beyond to the North Sea, and beyond again to Scandinavia, weaving our way further to the Baltic, the largest brackish inland sea in our world.

This indeterminate place, where fresh becomes salt, feels electric. Is it possible that a change in its salty density also alters the air above it? I decide that it must and make a mental note to check. I probably won't, though, preferring to leave that to my own imagination rather than spoil it with facts. My experience—my facts.<sup>[4]</sup>

In this reverie-state, I fantasize mixing jewel-like watercolours to match the green I see, adding a little Hooker's green, a tiny touch of sap green. Green, the colour metaphor for envy, sickness but also youthfulness, verdancy; green has many connotations. As a pigment, green is difficult to make. Historically, prepared from organic substances, green is hard to keep stable; green hues can be more fleeting than the metaphors they inspire. As a paint, green is challenging, hard to orchestrate tonally, and pictorially dominant. It oscillates between the yellow and blue primaries.

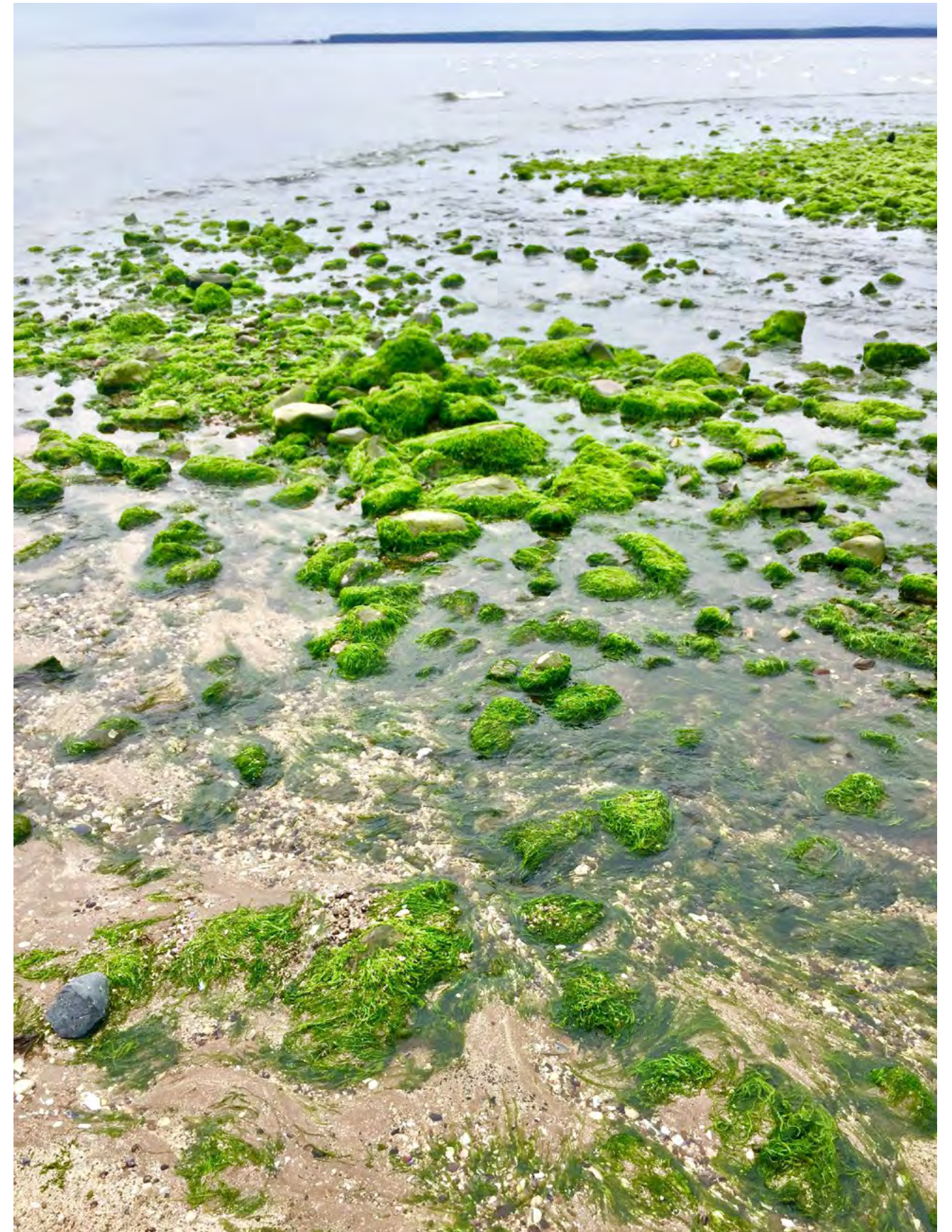


Fig. 4, 'Where Dichty Meets the Sea.' Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.



A threshold-colour. My mind drifts into a fabulous tonal realm gifted with more than three oscillating primary colours and also considers what a greenless world would look like.

The Hooker's green I push around on my imaginary palette and watch swirl off the brush in my glass water beaker was formed in the early nineteenth century by illustrator William Hooker. Hooker mixed the intense Prussian blue with the luxurious gamboge made from resin from Asian evergreens. A threshold-colour, named after its maker like the bridge named after its place.

My dream-green needs a little yellow ochre, a tiny drop of earthy raw umber, deepened with

Payne's grey—that beguiling blue-grey-black—to transpose the hue into today's murkier tone. I contemplate the delicious blue-green of verdigris which forms when copper, brass, or bronze is exposed to air or seawater through time. I think about that for some time, visualizing the dream-water dressed in it. The flow of the dream-water dilutes the paint, echoing the flow of the Dichty waters as they dilute the salty sea. As I scoop up the actual water in my hands, I imagine holding the dream-water. My vessel hands cannot hold the water; it escapes leaving a silky trace. My dream-vessel is able to hold the green for a moment longer, no more than a blink, but it leaves behind a silky verdigris touch.



Fig. 5, 'Dichty Algae and Rust.' Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.

Returning from my reverie, the sea seems urgent now as it moves upriver. The water dances and spins around the rocks and seaweed as it trickles, sloshes, bubbles, gurgles—words that sound of their action. A flock of swans has settled on the edge of the shore and watches expectantly. So, too, does a melodic song thrush, a watchful crow, and a small dog, one of many dogs in fact that seem to agree with me that this unassuming place and its humble aesthetic is special in some felt, but unseen way.

We—the swans, the birds, the dogs and I—watch as the salty tide inundates the fresh waters and

sense a tangible change in the air. Is this also where the brackish threshold exists? In the water's air when salt urges fresh upstream to linger until the tide slackens before retreating to opposite shores?

The moment has passed. The swans and friends depart and I make my way back up the sandy steps to the footpath and stare down at the green water, reflecting on this material shift. Reflecting: a water term aptly describing the ebb and flow between my dream-states, my threshold-states. [5] Not fresh, not salt; brackish.



Fig. 6, Louise Ritchie, 'Of Dreams,' 2021; raw silk, brackish water, verdigris patina, copper powder, acrylic and thread, Image courtesy of Louise Ritchie.

## Footnotes

[1] Also recorded as the Dighty Burn.

[2] Dundee is a coastal city on the Firth of Tay estuary on the east coast of Scotland.

[3] Derek Jarman, *Chroma: A Book of Colour—June '93* (London: Vintage Classics, 2019), 50.

[4] “My” experience, a claim I make not in selfish disregard of others, but of the artists’ empirical claim of knowing through one’s own embodied sensations. It is the first knowledge, come through the body, before it can be expressed and shared with others, through language, artwork, dance and poetry.

[5] Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas, TX: The Pegasus Foundation, 1999), 9.

## Recommended Citation

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.8709>

## About the Author

Louise Ritchie explores the hybridity and materiality of objects, the complex making processes and concepts employed by artists in the production of artworks within contemporary art practice. Louise researches the artistic compulsion to exploit materialities through reflexive making to bring attention to the fundamental nature of the artistic-compulsion; the itch that must be scratched when working with materials to signify, examine, and record the world we experience. Louise is a B.A. (Honours) fine art and M.F.A. in art and humanities graduate of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design (DJCAD), University of Dundee. She is a Lecturer on the B.A. (Honours) Contemporary Art Practice Degree Programme at City of Glasgow College/University of the West of Scotland. Louise is also a past president of the Society of Scottish Artists, and is currently undertaking a practice-led Ph.D. at DJCAD. Website: [www.louiseritchie.com](http://www.louiseritchie.com), Instagram: [@louiseritchiegram](https://www.instagram.com/louiseritchiegram).

PRIMARY SOURCES

# BETWEEN TWO RIVERS: TWO BALLADS FROM A SCOTS TRAVELLER FAMILY

By Arthur Watson

A generational migration by both sides of my family from upper Donside in Scotland brought them to Aberdeen long before I was born. The city is bounded by two rivers: the River Don to the north and the River Dee to the south. Although both rise in the Cairngorm massif, their journeys to the sea are marked by divergent characteristics, with the Don taking the more benign path:

Ae mile o Don is worth three o Dee,  
Except for mountain, moor and tree.[1]

In pre-Christian times the rivers were cast as twin deities—the Don, male and the Dee, female. This is echoed in Simon Fraser’s drawing where they are cast as witch and warlock.

In Aberdeen, I was unknowingly brought up in a street of tenement-dwelling travellers where I absorbed words of their cant into my native dialect. By the 1950s, most travellers were in various stages of integration into an often-hostile settled community, prized apart from their peripatetic way of life, a life that had been sustained by seasonal farm work and horse-trading, along



*Detail from Fig. 2, Singing in the Gallery (2011) with the last of the great traveller singers: Sheila Stewart (center in black) and Elizabeth Stewart (right in purple), and the author (left).  
Photographer Andy McGregor, courtesy of Steven Anderson.*

with hawking, tinsmithing, and fishing for river pearls. At this time, pioneering work by the poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson had begun to reveal the rich oral culture of the travellers. Henderson refers to the oral traditions of the travellers as “the carrying stream.” In the north-east of Scotland, his principal informant was that doyen of ballad singers, Jeannie Robertson, and her family of singers, storytellers, and pipers. I first heard her sing when a schoolboy interested in folk song. I began to focus on a deeper engagement with the traveller repertory, its content and context, the particulars of singing style, and the primacy of oral transmission.

Here I will reference and sing two ballads from the Robertson family. Although settled in the city, they continued to take the road every summer until the 1950s on their established route: “up the Dee and down the Don.” My growing friendship with Jeannie’s nephew, Stanley, gave further insights into the traveller mindset, its spirituality, and its superstition. In turn, I introduced Stanley to the artist Simon Fraser, already an experienced illustrator and nascent publisher. The resultant book, *Exodus to Alford*,<sup>[2]</sup> was the first of five with Simon and Balnain Books. As a boy, Stanley had joined his family on their annual migration, and this provided both the content and structure

of his first book. It could be seen as sharing aspects of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Each is the work of an individual author who speaks in the multiple voices of invented characters to tell invented stories. It has, however, been suggested that many of the pilgrims’ tales were in circulation long before Chaucer re-presented them. This was also the case with many of the stories in *Exodus to Alford*. Both books use the journey as a device to link the tales and their tellers, but here place is given more importance as a progression through specific landscapes from the author’s lived experience, gained on his annual summer walk.

In the early twentieth century, the Aberdeenshire folk song collector Gavin Greig charted the demise of social singing with the rise of the village hall and its stage dividing communities into active performers and a larger, passive audience. This was in my thoughts when invited to participate in a performance event: “to challenge institutional representations of national identity, by giving voice to non-institutional values” as part of the celebrations for the reopening of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.<sup>[3]</sup> In addition to Greig’s hierarchy within song, I wished to address the hierarchal context implicit within the venue. The quality of major art collections is established

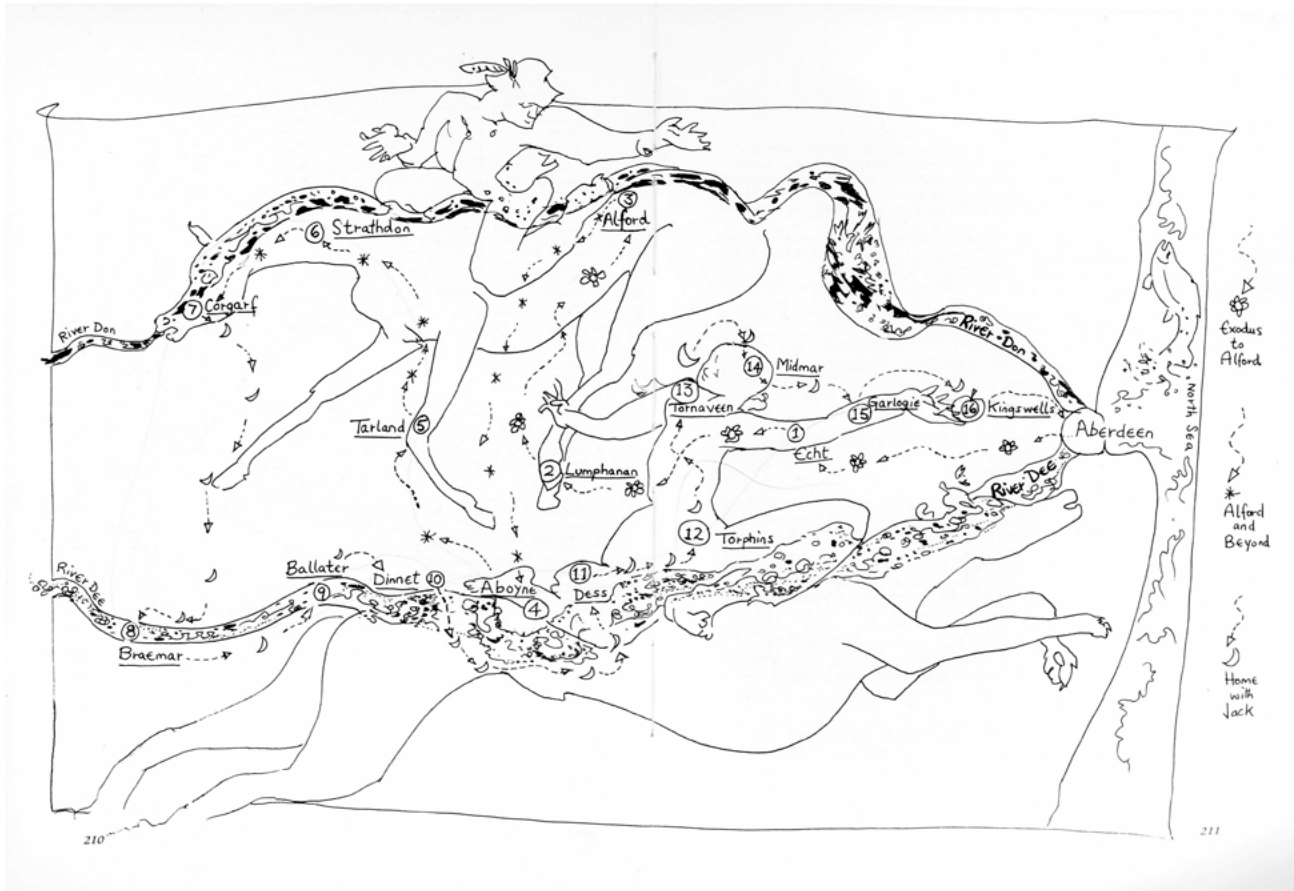


Fig. 1, Simon Fraser’s imaginative drawing of the route used in ‘Exodus to Alford’ (pp. 210–11), including the witch and the warlock. This is more complex than their traditional path up one river and down the other. Here there are multiple crossings between the valleys. Image courtesy of Simon Fraser.



Fig. 2, Singing in the Portrait Gallery (2011) with the last of the great traveller singers: Sheila Stewart (center in black) and Elizabeth Stewart (right in purple), and the author (left). Photographer Andy McGregor, courtesy of Steven Anderson.

through connoisseurship underpinned by informed critique. If, as here, the collection is of portraits, then hierarchies are further expanded by the status of those portrayed.

My response was to deliver a triptych of ballads in which conventions of love and marriage across class divides were broken. One of these is used here: *The Laird of Drum*, from Jeannie Robertson. The laird first courts, and then marries, a shepherd's daughter very much against the will of his family.[4] However, the final verse takes the long view:

Fan he is deid an I am deid  
An baith in ae grave laid, o;  
Fan seven lang years they are past and gone,  
Fa's tae ken hes dust fae mine, o.[5]

The Castle of Drum still stands close to the River Dee, some 13 miles west of Aberdeen, at the outset of the Robertsons' annual journey.

*Listen to 'The Laird of Drum' sung by Arthur Watson. Recording courtesy of Arthur Watson.*

The second ballad instanced here is located close to the end of the trip, at Monymusk on the Don, two days walk from Aberdeen. The tune I use is from a recording of Stanley's father, Willie Robertson, Jeannie's brother.

Although at the time *The Laird of Drum* would have been thought to be transgressive, *Johnnie the Brine* remained transgressive throughout its history. Johnnie sets out, against his mother's advice, to poach deer. After gorging themselves on the venison, Johnnie and his hunting dogs fall asleep. They are discovered by an old man, who

## Footnotes

[1] This illustrates the productivity of the Don valley, which for much of its course flows through prime agricultural land. A further saying defines the turbulent Dee as "drowning three to the Don's one."

reports their transgression to the seven foresters. Two of them shoot arrows at the sleeping poacher, waking him from his sleep. He looses a volley of arrows, killing all but one, then:

He's broken fower o that man's ribs,  
Hes airm an hes collarbane;  
He has tied him fast tae hes high horse back,  
An wi the tidings sent him hame.[6]

*Listen to 'Johnny the Brine' sung by Arthur Watson. Recording courtesy of Arthur Watson.*

As my relationship with Stanley Robertson grew, he shared more of his family history and his reflections on his own life. He spoke eloquently of the importance of his "summer walks" with his extended family through Deeside and Donside. Of all the points on this annual journey, the Old Road of Lumphanan had the greatest spiritual resonance for him. He was conscious that this was the land of Macbeth but it was also the point equidistant from the Dee and Don—the turning point on the road back to Aberdeen and the twentieth century. I visited this location with Stanley and returned there with his friends and family following his funeral at the Church of the Latter Day Saints in Aberdeen. After Lumphanan, the journey back to Aberdeen signaled a return to school yard bullying, to the constraints of tenement life, and to cultural values that were far from his own. But as previously stated, Stanley Robertson was an intensely spiritual man, so even with the problems and practicalities of daily life in the city, in his head he was still living the stories and walking by Aberdeenshire's two great rivers.

[2] S. Robertson with S. Fraser, *Exodus to Alford* (Nairn: Balnain Books, 1988).

[3] S. Anderson, *Your Leaning Neck—Song as Portrait* (Aberdeen: Peacock Visual Arts, 2012). This documents the performances at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG) (December 2, 2011) and a further performance at St. Andrew's Cathedral, Aberdeen, with twin projections from the Edinburgh performances at SNPG, at Peacock Visual Arts. Both programs were devised and presented by artist Steven Anderson.

[4] Unusual for a ballad of this age, the narrative is historically accurate. Following the death of his aristocratic wife, Alexander Irvine, the 11th Laird of Drum married the shepherd's daughter, Margaret Coutts. She was 16 and he, 63. He died six years later in 1687.

[5] *Fan* (when), *deid* (dead), *baith* (both), *ae* (one), *lang* (long), *gane* (gone), *fa's* (who is), *tae* (to), *ken* (know), *hes* (his), *fae* (from).

P. Shouldham-Shaw, E. B. Lyle, and A. R. Hunter, *The Greig-Duncan Folksong Collection*, vol. 4 (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1990).

This source includes 25 substantive entries for *the Laird of Drum*, which cite 12 texts and 17 tunes (pp. 249–65). *The Greig-Duncan Folksong Collection* was made by Gavin Greig, a schoolmaster, and James B. Duncan, a minister of the Free Church of Scotland. In the early twentieth century, they amassed some 3,500 texts and 3,300 tunes from sources in a relatively small area of northeast Scotland. Their handwritten manuscripts, with tuned in sol-fa or transcribed in staff notation, were lodged in the special collections of Kings College, Aberdeen. The initiative to publish the bulk of the collection cited here came from Patrick Shouldham-Shaw of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. The 8 volumes were issued incrementally between 1981 and 2002, initially by Aberdeen University Press, and on their demise, by Mercat Press.

*The Laird of Drum* is represented by ten full texts, the longest running to 29 verses, 3 of which have tunes, 12 tunes with no texts, and 5 fragmentary texts.

[6] *Fower* (four), *hes* (his), *airm* (arm), *collarbane* (collarbone), *tae* (to), *wi* (with), *hame* (home).

B. H. Bronson, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*, vol. 3 of 4 (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1996).

Francis James Child brought together narrative ballads from printed and manuscript sources for his collection *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Fellow American Bertrand Harris Bronson undertook an ambitious project to gather versions of those ballads which had survived in the oral tradition since the publication of the Child collection.

*Johnny the Brine* was listed by Child, and subsequently by Bronson, as "Johnnie Cock" (Child no.114) and within the fifteen Bronson variants the hero is referred to as "Johnnie O'Braidisleys," "Johnny Cox," and "Jocky O'Bridiesland," amongst others. Only in Jeannie Robertson's version is the protagonist identified as "Johnny the Brine." 10 examples in Bronson are from the northeast of Scotland, 8 being from Greig and Duncan. Of the other two, one is from John Strachan (recorded by Alan Lomax and Hamish Henderson), and the other is from a recording of Jeannie Robertson made by Henderson for the School of Scottish Studies.

## Recommended Citation

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## About the Author

Arthur Watson was born in 1951 and educated in Aberdeen where he established an artists' print workshop, gallery, and publisher. At an early age, he spent every summer on a hill farm on upper Donside. At this time, he became fascinated by Aberdeenshire's rich Indigenous culture of folksong, superstition, and history. In 1990, he represented Scotland at the Venice Biennale, going on to exhibit widely in Europe, the United States, and Japan. In 1996, he joined Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee, as a senior lecturer. As a member of the Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture, he served as secretary, and then as the twenty-first president.

TEACHING AND PRACTICE

# THE RIVER AND THE BRIDGE

By Robert Snikkar

I am a white man, settler, second-generation Finnish Canadian.

I stand on a bridge. It spans a river that has flowed longer than our imagination can picture. The river is life on this planet.

My bridge connects me to others' beliefs and understanding, to the world's living and non-living inhabitants, to the past and to the future.

My bridge is learning—learning about oneself, others, and one's place in this world. This learning requires listening, questioning, and self-reflection to see one's privilege and to investigate one's biases and perspective. It involves taking the steps to put oneself into discussions and collaborations with others, to see oneself through the mirror of others' perceptions.

That will require many bridges to be built.



*Chaudière Falls in Ottawa in June, as seen during a hot air balloon ride.  
Image via Flickr user Shanta. (CC-BY-2.0)*

# The Settler Paradigm

I stand now on an actual physical bridge over the Ottawa River.

It connects one colonial province, Ontario, to another, Quebec, spanning a Canadian federal waterway. An imaginary border divides the river and forms the basis for ownership rights in settler

property law. These laws supersede Indigenous peoples' rights, customs, justice systems, and sovereignty.

This bridge sits on contested and unsundered Anishinaabe land.



*Morris Island Train Bridge.*

# The Land

This bridge over the Ottawa River was built to transport iron ore from the Bristol Mines to the railway system.[1]

Mining displaced Indigenous people, polluted the land and waters, and disrupted complex ecosystems. The railway accelerated the extractive and destructive practices of settlement across this country leading to the decimation of the buffalo, and the forced displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples.

Our first prime minister, Sir John A. MacDonal (b. 1815 in Glasgow, Scotland–d. 1910, Ottawa, Canada) was known as the “Father of Canada” for uniting the country by rail—and simultaneously

establishing residential schools and the Indian reserve system to remove the “Indian.”

It is by no mistake that John A. Macdonald chose to call the Canadian state a “dominion” (as per Christian biblical scripture).[2] This belief in domination was a component of the colonial “discovery doctrine,” and it was imposed in many ways on the Indigenous peoples and onto the land. Although this region was contested between the Indigenous and the settler populations, settler property law principles were imposed. Other Indigenous peoples signed legal treaties with the Crown, but these agreements were eventually ignored or invalidated.[3]



*Bristol Mines.*



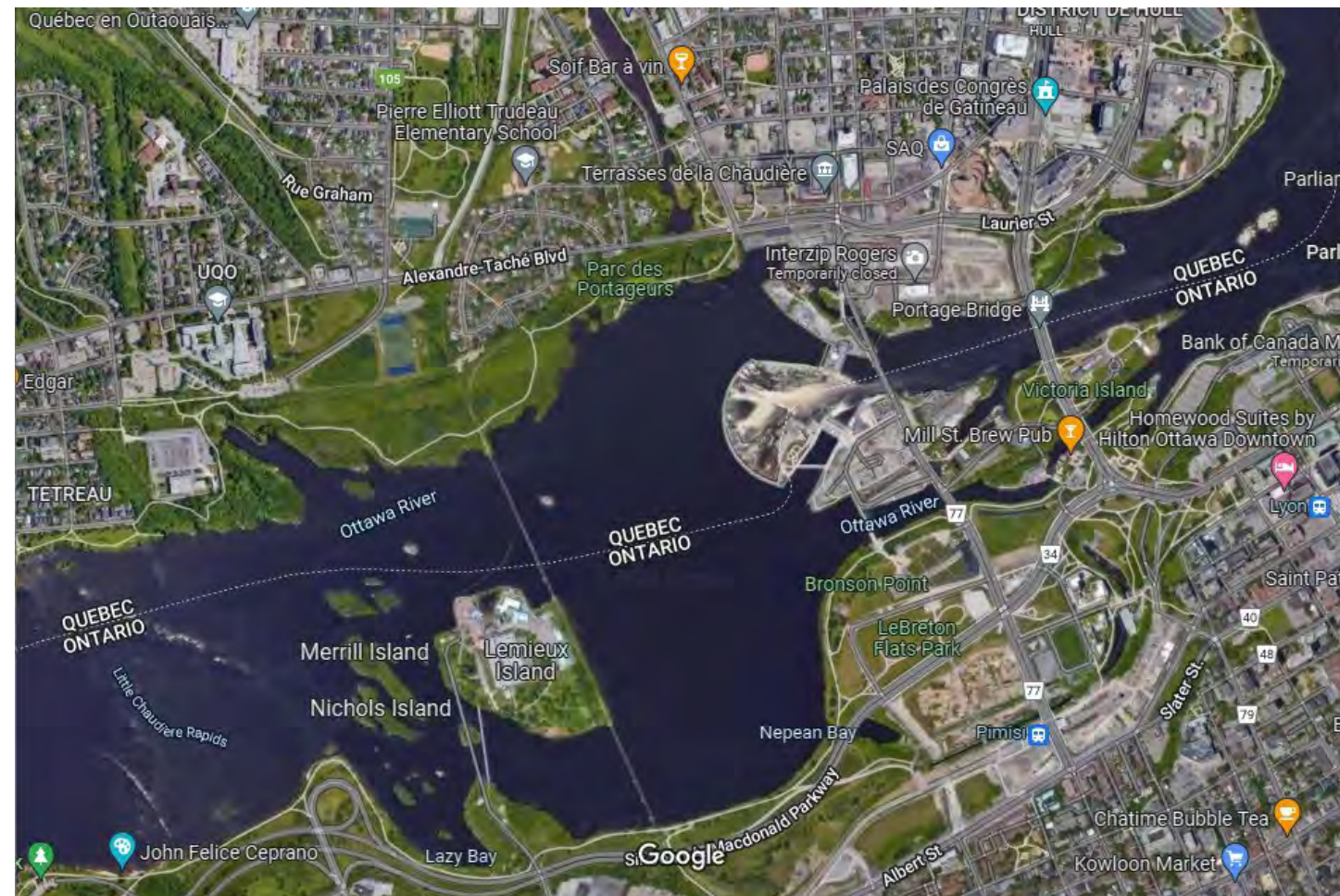
Eventually the forestry industry cleared this area of land that borders what is now two Canadian provinces, clearing trees (and of the majority of the Indigenous inhabitants as well) and creating devastating effects on the environment. Settler agricultural practices demanded ever-expanding

## The River

The River was used to transport logs from the cutting of mature forests with destruction to woodland and water habitats for many living systems. Much of that timber ended up downstream at the E. B. Eddy lumber mill at Chaudière Falls. Ezra Butler Eddy, who became its first president, founded this lumber mill, incorporated in 1886 as the E. B. Eddy Manufacturing Company.[4] The dam at Chaudière Falls was placed in an unusual position to account for the irregular topography

area. This had the effect of displacing and disrupting natural ecosystems; later, chemical effluents were spilled, and large-scale production and transportation systems added to the imbalance of natural patterns.

and contours of the land and water.[5] The river was also used to transport beaver pelts that ended up in Europe at a time when overhunting had already eliminated the European beaver. Damming rivers for hydropower accelerated the progress of extraction, settlements and incomers, displacement and destruction of Indigenous cultures, and devastation of the ecosystems, including the *pimisi* (American eel).[6]



Chaudière Falls.

## The Indigenous Knowledge—We are a small part of nature

This is contested land of the Algonquin/ Anishinaabe peoples, where three rivers meet at Chaudière Falls, and is “sacred” to many of these Indigenous peoples in the sense that traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) contains a knowledge-practice-belief complex. Inherent within TEK is a worldview—a belief system—that aligns the observation of the environment with a religious, ethical and philosophical order of understanding.[7] The Indigenous names of the three rivers in English and *Anishinaabemowin* are:

- the Ottawa, Kitche Zibi/Sibi, or “Great River”
- the Gatineau, Te-nagàdino-zibi, “The River that Stops One’s Journey”
- the Rideau, Pasapkedjinawong, “The river that passes between the rocks”[8]

## My Learning Bridge

My bridge to learning Indigenous and traditional history and knowledge was built with the help of two friends—Carmel Whittle and Patsea Griffin. Whittle, who is Mi’kmaq and Irish, and Griffin, who is Métis, invited me to collaborate on art projects. Bridge-building and sharing of cultures and Indigenous knowledge is their approach to teaching avid learners such as me. Carmel has land at Quyon, Quebec, near the railway bridge. Here, she and Patsea have organized gatherings and art projects including the erection of a tipi. That tipi was featured in Carmel’s projects *On The Land* and *Bringing The Land to The City*.

Nearby is a most sacred site for the Anishinaabe. Called Chaudière Falls by the French, it is known as “The Sacred Pipe” and other variations in English. In the *Anishinaabemowin*, the name for the sacred site is *Akikodjiwan*, and the falls there are known as Asinabka.[9]

It is both an insult and an irony that the E. B. Eddy Company produced tiny wooden matches from mature felled trees in the area of “The Sacred Pipe.” From “Sacred Pipe” as the river, to pipe as a ceremonial artifact, these Eddy matches were often casually used to light cigarettes by the settlers, whereas by contrast, the Anishinaabe and Algonquin peoples use tobacco as a religious offering. They believe tobacco was one of the four medicines from the great Creator.[10] In either case, the trees that were felled for matches and other uses were strategically floated downriver to the lumber mills, effectively transforming the river into a transport system as well.

These projects created videos, gatherings, and workshops on Indigenous beading and artwork.

Patsea’s program, the *Thunderbird Sisters Collective’s Youth Artists Council*, will teach Indigenous youth about their culture, language, and wisdom.[11] Together, Patsea and Carmel have established the *No Borders Arts Festival* and *podcast #83*, and many more examples of their works can be found in the Media Appendix. I am grateful to them for inviting me to work with and learn from them and their network of friends.

## For Further Exploration

### *Note from the Guest Editor*

*As an artist, Robert Snikkar practices engagement with the environment, its histories, its inhabitants, and its wildlife. He seeks to learn as much as possible, and in doing so, relies upon his creative practice to ask questions about history, privilege, politics, and social relations, especially as they are in balance with the natural environment. The following videos and poem reflect this quest for understanding, and the media appendix offers links for further reading and listening.*

—Mary Modeen, Guest Editor

### Video

The River and The Bridge, <https://youtu.be/gt1cMt0OGwM>

### Field Journals

Walking the White Way—with The Unknown Settler

The Unknown Settler Goes to the Bridge, <https://youtu.be/gJyRaRoN1WM>

The Unknown Settler on the Bridge, <https://youtu.be/yA9EdLPcM8A>

The Unknown Settler Meets Other Settlers, <https://youtu.be/wuk5KX8EHiw>

The Unknown Settler Comes Across Deer, <https://youtu.be/rtha1KCVeJo>

### Poetry

“Whose Blood? Whose Soil?” A poem investigating white privilege, <https://youtu.be/FDalrHnxXoo>

### Other Artworks and Projects

[Indigenous Artists Coalition](#)

[Bringing Land to the City—Digital Arts Resource Centre](#)

[Music On Our Land—The Thunderbird Sisters Circle](#)

[1 Contrary 5 Agokwe-Nini \(Documentary Film Screening\)—Canadian Art](#)

[RedCircle podcast#83](#)

## Panels & Discussions

[Ria Links: Salon in the Clouds #2](#)

### Footnotes

[1] Ore from this mine helped build rail lines and was exported as far away as Belgium, England, and Pennsylvania. “Bristol Mine,” Capital Gems, accessed February 4, 2022, <http://www.capitalgems.ca/bristol-mine.html>.

[2] “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” Gen 1:26–28.

[3] The American War for Independence and the official recognition of the United States in 1783 began a long process of land surrenders and treaties, not only between Great Britain and its former allies, the Indigenous populations, who fought against the French, but also between incoming European settlers and Aboriginals. Between 1783–1812, fifteen separate land surrenders were negotiated in the Upper Canadian region. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Chippewa (Anisihinaabe) of the Lake Simcoe region and the Mississauga of the north shore of Lake Ontario had complained that some of the treaties concluded during the colonial period were highly problematic, with faulty descriptions, incomplete documents, and failed payments. In 1923, the Williams Treaties marked the conclusion to the continuous claims made by people in the Aboriginal lands and, with the exception of two small parcels of land, facilitated the cession of lands to the Crown. “Upper Canada Land Surrenders and the Williams Treaties 1764–1862/1923,” Government of Canada, updated February 15, 2013, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1360941656761/1544619778887>.

[4] “Eddy had begun business in 1854 making and selling wooden matches out of his home in Hull, Canada East (now Quebec). The company expanded into pulp and paper.” Wikipedia, s.v. “E. B. Eddy Company,” last modified September 2, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E.\\_B.\\_Eddy\\_Company](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._B._Eddy_Company).

[5] “The dam was built in 1908 and put into operation in 1910 with the aim of controlling and standardizing the water level and distributing the waterpower. This structure, which mirrors the eccentric geomorphic shape of the falls, was a rare example of a dam with stoplogs.” “The Chaudière Dam,” Canadian Museum of History, accessed February 1, 2022, [https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/hull/rw\\_28\\_ie.html](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/hull/rw_28_ie.html).

[6] “Kichissippi Pimisi, the American Eel, is sacred to the Algonquin people and has been an essential part of Algonquin culture for thousands of years. Algonquins have a deep connection to Kichissippi Pimisi as a provider of nourishment, medicine and spiritual inspiration.” “Returning Kichissippi Pimisi, the American Eel, to the Ottawa River,” Algonquins of Ontario, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.tanakiwin.com/current-initiatives/returning-kichissippi-pimisi-the-american-eel-to-the-ottawa-river/>.

[7] Firket Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 14–21.

[8] Wikipedia, s.v. “Ottawa River,” last modified February 4, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottawa\\_River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottawa_River); Wikipedia, s.v. “Gatineau River,” last modified February 6, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gatineau\\_River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gatineau_River); Wikipedia, s.v. “Rideau River,” last modified September 20, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rideau\\_River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rideau_River).

[9] Lynn Gehl, “Chaudière Falls: Creator’s Sacred Pipe,” *Black Face Blogging*, June 8, 2016, <https://www.lynngehl.com/black-face-blogging/chaudiere-falls-creators-sacred-pipe>. See also Lindsay Lambert, “Chaudière Falls is an Indigenous Cathedral,” *Anishinabek News.ca*, October 1, 2016, <http://anishinabeknews.ca/2016/10/01/chaudiere-falls-is-an-indigenous-cathedral/>.

[10] Harold Flett, “Offering Tobacco,” *Customs and Beliefs*, accessed Feb. 1, 2022, <http://en.copian.ca/library/learning/chikiken/page30.htm>. The tobacco symbolized honesty, as honesty between two people talking, or talking to the spirit world. Smoke from the tobacco went ahead as a wish or a prayer.

[11] Bruce Deachman, “Ontario Announces \$13M Funding for Youth Projects,” *Ottawa Citizen*, July 13, 2021, <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/ontario-announces-13m-funding-for-youth-projects>.

## Correction

In an earlier version of this text, Carmel Whittle was incorrectly identified as Métis; the text now correctly reflects that she is Mi’kmaq and Irish.

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## About the Author

Formerly a computer programmer and educator, Robert Snikkar is now a full-time artist. His art examines white privilege and decolonization and he collaborates with Indigenous and other artists on these themes. Learn more about his art at [www.snikkar.com](http://www.snikkar.com).