

life support. A satellite dish on every roof, angled at the sky. The word ‘village’ didn’t seem appropriate, although it was no bigger than that. A village suggests permanence, somehow, but in the glowering heat of the desert these prefabricated dwellings were so unmistakably temporary, existing only because cheap electricity and fuel allowed them to forget, or ignore, the limits of the land around them. If those lines of connection were cut, even for a week or two, life would not be tenable here. The artificial cool of the air would become a furnace heat, the satellites would not be heard, the grass would shrivel up. Something about those bungalows – the trust and frailty they implied – made me strangely sad. And again I remember that dog in the desert, the night she slept at my feet beneath the stars, our two bodies huddled up together against the harshness.

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Proverbs of Water

Introduction

The region of Doverodde in Denmark is bordered by the North Sea on one side and the wide waters of the Limfjord on the other. Much of the ground in this remote community has been reclaimed from the water, and other areas are deliberately flooded, so the distinctions between land and water are blurred. The Limfjord flows along the deep scar left by a glacier during the last ice age; now that the glacier’s weight has melted away the bedrock is rising incrementally in relation to sea level. Of course, sea level is rising too, and fierce waves erode the dunes. Here there is so much water that most people travel across it in vessels instead of driving around it by the roads, which are often flooded. Some routes lead into the water and stop there, such as the pier at the Wave Dragon energy research station, now disused.

I was Writer in Residence at Doverodde Book Arts Centre during 2012. I presented my work in books bound using materials found on the shore such as shells and sea-worn bricks. Many of the following ‘proverbs’ were found too. Interviews with local people, together with folklore connected to water, generated the content. I tethered my work to the area using details residents would recognise, stories common to them but enigmatic to me, such as the obscure founding myth of the church built on the resting place of two oxen. The former practices of fishermen had an equally occult ring to them, but fishing was now a leisure activity. A traditional way of life was ending. Those who lived on the land as well as by the shore concerned me: I was surprised to see snails climbing trees, the tiny creatures gaining a height out of all proportion to the surrounding landscape. As the waters rose, still more creeping things would have to attain high ground. I was not the only observer. A scientist came to record the birds, taking photographs in his idle moments, until he grew dispirited by the colour of the persistent rain.

It's quiet here. Is it too quiet for you? The rain is soft as the conversations of coral.



We used to swim by the dam, and pull little fish out of our swimsuits. Then my friend started to get ill.



The thief of birdsong tries to capture the colour of rain. It's just grey, he complains.



A book bound in bricks, a scallop shell concertina. One is too heavy for this place, the other too light.



An empty bucket is always a bad omen. Turn back, if you see one at the outset of your journey.



It is kindest to measure depth in metres. A fathom is the span of a man's outstretched arms. The fjord, two fathoms deep, drowns his embrace.



Wave dragon, wave star, now the pier leads nowhere.



Wind blows waves across the road. We drive on a silver river. It takes an hour to reach the sun.



My lover is wary of water. *The car started to sink so quickly.*



The water is a loyal silence on all our heels. I'm lost. Give me the grey key again, the sea that tolls the truth.



It is easier to look at the stones than the sea, until salt spatters your spectacles.



We drank from blue china. The saucer did not match the teacup: two sets must have got mixed up years ago. We sipped, and consulted marine charts.



The coast is new as a foetus and old as a fossil. The bedrock rebounds from the glacier's weight. Sea bewilders it.



A colony of herons, of rare and timid animals can be mentioned, the birch mouse and otter.



Dunes are the most fickle of landforms, ever blowing inland from the sea, ever on the move.



Two blind oxen, bound together, once rested here. The church is dark but through one window water dances.



Find a fish to catch a fish. There's nothing worse than a bare hook. Mussels are thirsty for the sea.



Where have the eels gone? There's a hint of net in the water, a line of floats and a black flag.



A stone pulled up on a hook should be kept on land. A knot in a tangled line may not be undone.



To cure seasickness: eat seaweed. Smell rose root. Tickle your throat with a feather dipped in cod liver oil. Cut grass in a churchyard and place it in your shoes before sailing.



You will know when you come to the river.



After the funeral wood anemones were thrown upon the lake.



Who climbs highest, the skylark or the snail?



If you keep fossils in your study, will you grow wiser, or just older?



When you're tired, water makes a sound like sleep and nothing happens and nothing happens and water sounds like silence

