

# The Deluge Ark(ive) a small atlas of voyages



*Nigel Helyer*

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Illustrated by Öykü Özer

*This is the old Hessel road  
The home of Bear Island Cod  
Where the Hudsons speak only to the Helyers  
And the Helyers speak only to God.*

Anon.

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# Casting off



**T**hirteen thousand years ago our ancestors were witness to a catastrophic event. The ice began to melt; the oceans began to rise and the land to flood<sup>1</sup>, an environmental apocalypse irrigating the myth-memory of human consciousness.

*And God said, Let the waters vnder the heauen  
be gathered together vnto one place  
and let the dry land appeare: and it was so.  
And God called the drie land, Earth,  
and the gathering together of the waters called hee,  
Seas: and God saw that it was good.<sup>2</sup>*

Our blood and our tears have the same salinity as the ocean. It is a reminder of the origin of all life on the planet and a warning that we share our well-being with our vast and indifferent mother. As land dwellers, it is easy to overlook the fact that we inhabit an essentially two-dimensional space which has surface area but scant depth.

By contrast, the marine world is three dimensional, its depths account for ninety-nine percent of the biosphere



and its area seventy percent of the planet's surface. The ocean forms the principal interface for chemical exchange with the atmosphere, absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. It is the pump that drives the climate and regulates the air we breathe.

What follows are the navigational directions, a rutter,<sup>3</sup> to Ultima Thule. A small atlas of voyages that charts the raging tempests and placid waters of myth and history. In these narratives land is never far from sight, almost within earshot; it can be sensed on the breeze, appear as a haze above the meniscus of the horizon, or glimpsed sliding under the keel during landfall at a temporary safe haven. ☞

1 Meltwater Pulse 1A, the result of global thawing of the last ice age.

2 Genesis 1:9, King James Bible.

3 An antique sailing chart or pilot.





# Molecule No. 51



I want you to cast your minds back for a moment, to the first moment, when time, space, matter and energy came into being. Imagine darkness and emptiness immediately followed by a fullness and a luminosity. An infinite cosmos of swirling clouds of hot gasses, of new-born elements and molecules in flux.

The schoolmaster, a tall laconic man, stands in his brown suit in front of a class of nine year old village children. He continues by telling the class that before the war he had studied mathematics but was conscripted into the Royal Navy to serve on an anti-submarine frigate. In a matter of fact way, he recounts how his arm was broken as he struggled to free a depth charge jammed on the frigate's afterdeck. The children conjure up the scene: a terrified sailor struggling with the deadly cylinder. They hear the crack of his bones, see the barrel-shaped charge slide down the trackway and topple over the stern. They imagine the muffled explosion alongside a U-boat and see the plume of oily foam on the surface of the green ocean.

The teacher continues with a lesson on statistics.

The class listens wide-eyed as the teacher launches into an exposition on molecules. He begins by drawing a statistical comparison between the number of water molecules in a litre of water and number of litres in the global ocean, and explains that the ratios are roughly equal. Next the children learn that a human will pass approximately forty-five thousand litres of urine in one lifetime. The teacher smiles, *hey presto*, his calculations show that in every glass of water we drink, at least ten thousand water molecules would have passed through the urinary tract of Julius Caesar.

After a predictably noisy reaction ripples across the class, the facts slowly sink in. The minds of the sharper children have already reached the conclusion that these statistics would apply equally to every living person, *ipso facto* we are all drinking pure piss!

Enzymes flow from the fly's gut onto the food scrap and are siphoned back into the digestive tract. Water Molecule No. 51 created during the birth of the cosmos now forms part of this miniature ocean of semi-dissolved nutrients that will power this humming winged engine.

The fly retracts its proboscis and gets airborne, gracefully circumnavigating the giant hand that is slowly describing an arc of serial freeze-frames. Each staccato image is illuminated by the pulse of a bare incandescent bulb which hangs in the centre of the kitchen, flickering out artificial sunrises and sunsets fifty times a second. The fly has responded to this danger in under one hundred milliseconds and takes advantage of the pressure wave pushed ahead of the fleshy statue. Fixing it with the four thousand lenses of its compound eyes, the fly navigates the strobing room to safety.

For the fly, the hand appears to move in excruciatingly slow motion but, for the human eye guiding the hand, the fly simply vanishes from its meal to reappear somewhere else in the room. The slow mammalian eye hardly registers the escape act.

We live in the moment, straining to see the present, unable to read the past nor to imagine the future. The owner of the hand is as incapable of seeing the movements of geology or the transformations of evolution as he is of capturing the detail of the fly's aerial course.

Somewhere out there, far beyond the event horizon, a planet forms, cools and gradually accumulates a

mantle of liquid water, warm and full of reactive chemicals. Counting has to commence somewhere although the starting point is frequently arbitrary. Molecule No. 51 is statistically part of the first billion water molecules formed during the birth of the star cloud.

Eons pass, molecules eventually become bigger and more complex and finally form long chains of protein that begin to twist around one another, knotting, pulling apart and reconnecting until by some magic they begin to self-replicate.

Then it is all over, a change in orbit caused by a near miss with a passing asteroid instantly cools the awakening planet, rendering it a sphere of ice encasing a still-molten core.

Once again, eons pass until the massive asteroid returns on its long elliptical orbit. This time it cleaves the ice planet into fragments, huge jagged blocks of frozen ocean spin into deep space.

The blue ice asteroid has been travelling through inter-stellar space since well before the Earth condensed from a dusty gaseous cloud. No-one witnesses its arrival, there are no eyes as yet, nor for that matter






anything that could develop an eye. Earth is a barren globe of rock and lava. As the asteroid passes near the sun, it begins to lose some of its surface material and forms a long, incandescent tail arcing across the sky. The impact with barren Earth transfuses water across the planet's surface, releasing primitive lifeforms from their deep cryostasis.

Cushioned in a sac of amniotic fluid, a foetus re-enacts evolution, developing and then reabsorbing the proto-gills and proto-tail in a reprise of all chordate development. Recapitulation Theory<sup>1</sup> was first conceptualised in the seventh century BCE, not in biological but in linguistic terms when the Egyptian Pharaoh Psamtik experimented with young children to discover the origins of language (the so called Ur-tongue) raising them without conversation to determine their first pure utterances. According to legend, one of the children uttered the word 'bekos', Phrygian for bread. This led to the conclusion that the Phrygian race preceded the Egyptians.

Perhaps somewhere deep in our brain stem, in the primitive reptilian derived R-Complex which controls instinctive behaviour, territoriality and ritual display, we hold traces of our original Mesozoic environment<sup>2</sup>: Pangaea, the vast swampy island continent surrounded by a warm global sea, long before the single landmass broke up into separate continents.

Our voyage takes us somewhere between then and now. 

- 1 Recapitulation Theory or Biogenetic Theory, associated with Ernst Haeckel's "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," now largely discredited, postulates that embryos rehearse the evolutionary history of their ancestors.
- 2 According to Censorinus (a third century Roman scholar) Anaximander of Miletus considered that fish and fish-like creatures were generated from warm water and earth. Inside these primitive living forms the embryos of men were held captive until at puberty they burst forth capable of fending for themselves.



# The Virtual Bell



*All sounds are simultaneously real and virtual, simultaneously a phenomenon and a sign. Reality is a very noisy place, both acoustically and cognitively<sup>1</sup>* so Raknar might have mused, had he been given the opportunity to be reincarnated as a designer of speaker enclosures for Bang and Olufsen, here in his home town of Struer, in what is now called Denmark. Raknar however had made a fatal acoustic error much earlier in his career. Involving the sweet sound of an imaginary bell, he had fallen in love with a subjective tone<sup>2</sup> and this was to be his undoing.

**I**t is Spring 894. The helmsman sweeps the steering loar across the ship's stern. The bow describes a slow arc bringing the village<sup>3</sup> squarely into the wooden gaze of the Drakehodt<sup>4</sup>. The hull glides between the dwarf oaks that line the salt marsh as the crew trim the sail for landfall. At one nautical mile from shore the gaze of the figurehead is acknowledged by a clamour of bells, sounding the alarm from the octagonal tower of the church. This is all that will happen today,

a fierce prow staring at ringing bells. Beyond, dark silent forests stretch over the coastal hills to nowhere.

*Bell, bellum, bellow.* English resounds with memories of havoc. Every bell-rope straining in chaotic peal, every inhabitant scrambling for the protection of the underground crypt hollowed out in the sixth century by Irish monks. But, out on the marsh, Raknar the Norse leader is hearing something new, a sweet harmony singing above the normal tones of the church tower, he will have this phantom bell as his prize<sup>5</sup>.

This southern littoral is poor pickings. The raiders work it every four years, leaving sufficient on each occasion to allow the peasants to re-establish their livelihood. Normally the church is passed by, acknowledged as a refuge in this cycle of brutality, but this time the Norse storm the tower to take the new, sweet singing bell.

They manhandle it out of the belfry, and haul it across the water meadow and down to the hardstanding where the ship is beached. They heave its mass over the gunwhale and secure it amidships behind the spruce mast.

When havoc subsides, the crew return, pigs, sheep, chattels, and captives in tow. The ship is cast off and the prow shouldered from the hardstanding. The oars are

unshipped and the vessel is turned into the southwesterly breeze blowing from the channel. Quietly now, the Drakkar<sup>6</sup> eases away from shore into deep water, and the commander gazes happily at his bronze prize.

But as the vessel reaches the dwarf oak forest, the captive bell sounds out a single tone and melts through the hull of the ship. They say that the raiders never visited again.

Many years later the villagers attempted to retrieve the bell, from its resting place: the Bell-Hole. They employed a white witch who insisted on working with a team of pure white oxen, hauling a snow-white hair rope. The bell was located by a diver, the rope attached and the bell mostly surfaced before the rope snapped, revealing a single strand of black hair<sup>7</sup> in its weave. The bell remains in its bell hole to this day.

*His dragon with her sails of blue,  
All bright and brilliant to the view,  
High hoisted on the yard arms wide,  
Carries great Canute o'er the tide.  
Brave is the royal progress — fast  
The proud ship's keel obeys the mast,  
Dashes through foam, and gains the land,  
Raising a surge on Limfjord's strand.<sup>8</sup>*

Two hundred years after the Norse raiders first listened to the harmonics of this virtual bell, King Cnut laid his eight year old daughter to rest in the crypt which had sheltered the villagers. He was ruler over the short-lived Northern Empire and regarded by his chiefs as omnipotent.

Cnut, a pragmatist, found this acclaim irksome and so arranged a spectacle for his chiefs to demonstrate his fallibility. Setting a wooden throne on the very hardstanding so frequently scored by Norse keels, Cnut calmly sat eyeing the flooding tide and commanding it, in full earnestness, to ebb. The brackish waters, however, would have none of it and so Cnut was eventually obliged to wade from his throne. Cnut re-established his position within the hierarchy of nature, as a mere king of men. Cnut's empire was to survive for some eighty years on Northern Europe's icy fringes.

But what of Raknar and his ship *Drakken* with or without that prize bell? On the benches sixty-eight men bend their backs in unison, eager to quit this bewitched place. Pulling hard into the main channel of the harbour that the Romans once called Magnus Portus<sup>9</sup>, they ride the surf breaking across the bar and into the open sea. To the southwest the green island,

*Vectis Insula*<sup>10</sup> and the prevailing wind. Helm to starboard and the *Drakken* heads due east with a stiff following wind. The oars are shipped and the square sail set as she runs down the white horses towards the North Sea. The crew hunker down to eat, joke, sleep and manhandle the women captives.

*Drakken* is sailing free into an alternative future, into an oblivion so deep that it has vanished from history.

The stories begin to spin, to weave a rhythmic web of poetry entwined with the surge of the keel over the swell. In the northlands it has been an endless winter for as long as any on board can recall, after all, is this not why they are raiding these southern lands! Some say it is the start of Fimbulvetr, the winter of winters, the end of all summers, when everything goes astray, when people will be in perpetual conflict, food will be scarce, morality and tradition will vanish and the law will break down.

Old one-eye tells them of inexplicable happenings with Mother Earth; Skoll the Wolf will devour the sun and the days shall grow dark and his green-eyed brother, the wolf Hati will likewise eat the Moon, making the nights darker still. The wiser on board are telling that next will come earth-shudders breaking all



the bonds in heaven, releasing the wolf Fenrir to range the land and that the serpent Jormungand who lives in Midgard<sup>11</sup> will thrash and writhe in the sea, causing terrible storms and floods as it makes its way landward. Such huge waves, such breakers, that the ship of the giants commanded by Naglfar will be set free and they will set sail, battle-ready and blood-thirsty. Moreover, the old warrior with one eye tells the spellbound crew, the storm will rage so hard that it will even reach the land of the dead and water will flow once more under the keel of the ship of dead souls. It will set sail with crazy Loki<sup>12</sup> ranting at the steering oar.

Then all will go to hell in a cataclysmic battle, scorching the earth until it sinks into the sea and quenches all life.

The crew huddle against the pine planks are mesmerised, jaws agape, their battle-hardened hands white-knuckled. The lookout cries *Ahoy* as two ships on the horizon bear down, cleaving a vast green-grey wave! 𐌆𐌿𐌸

- 1 Seth Horowitz in *The Universal Sense*.
- 2 A subjective, or difference tone is the 'virtual' product of two or more tones combined.
- 3 Bosham, Sussex a few miles south of the old Roman garrison city of Noviomagus Reginorum. In 445 AElia an Anglo Saxon raider renamed it Cisseceastyer after his son, leaving not one Briton alive, Latin ceased to be spoken. During the Roman era the Emperor Vespasian was reputed to have maintained a summer lodge by the harbour in Bosham.
- 4 A carved dragon's head on a Norse ship.
- 5 The narrative presumes the tone to be an harmonic artefact.
- 6 Norse Dragon-ship (in this case of 34 rooms, or rowing benches).
- 7 A Devils Tail, or Rogue's Yarn as it is known in rope making.
- 8 The Song of Canute, Saga of St. Olav.
- 9 Chichester Harbour in Sussex.
- 10 Vectis Insvla the Isle of Wight.
- 11 Midgard, or Middle Earth, the realm of humans, midway between the northern land of frost and the southern land of fire.
- 12 Loki the Norse trickster God.



## The present overwhelms the future



Abbe and Yugi, lay back in the sunshine on the second floor terrace of the whaling company's age-care complex, chatting to one another from their beds about the good old days, of firing harpoons and flensing blubber, well before those Western eco-hypercrits ruined everything—yes, those were the glory days. Their wrinkled faces, animated by happy memories, slowly soften into the contented sleep of old men with mythic pasts.

Some say the wave was twenty-five metres high as it hit the rock armoured sea defence wall. Recently built by the Tōhoku prefectural government and opened with typical fanfare, the massive concrete and stone structure disassembled itself instantaneously. The wave gathered up the whale chasers, with their towering bows, the sleek white long-line tuna boats and the ink-smattered squid boats, with their rows of giant incandescent lamps, and sent them all into the commercial centre of the city to find new moorings next

to banks and office blocks. There they lay, stacked alongside trucks, small houses and harbour cranes like the giant toy box of some ill-disciplined supernatural child.

Up on the second floor terrace Abe and Yugi doze in the sunlight until once more they become seafarers. The wall of water funnels through the town and races uphill to the age-care centre, slamming through the lower story to surge out of the upper floor. All souls below are instantly crushed or drowned but Abe and Yugi are sluiced from the terrace in the backwash, gripping their waterproofed hospital mattresses, and hurtling like whitewater canoeists through a slalom course marked by floating Suzuki vans and signs from Karaoke bars.

Abe and Yugi are assumed dead, until, to the amazement of his family, Yugi is identified in one of the temporary refuges for displaced persons three days after the tsunami. He had clung to his mattress for dear life and finally drifted into a tree top where he remained until the floodwaters subsided. Yugi, still tough and wiry from all his years at sea, wandered around in a daze for a day and was then picked up by a rescue crew. Now warm and full of miso soup, he is reunited with his kin.

No-one ever heard of Abe again. He rode the torrent back out to sea, drifting rapidly South-East. Despite his age, he too was as tough as nails, scooping fragments of seaweed from the ocean and lying back with his hands cupped around his mouth to catch raindrops. This is what it feels like to die Abe decides, craning skyward during a brief shower, mouth agape, droplets falling into the darkness of his throat. He lasts a couple of weeks but he knows his luck is out. All the rescue teams in Japan are on the devastated coast, not way out in the Pacific. His plasticised mattress eventually joins the millions of pieces of synthetic flotsam slowly orbiting in the North Pacific Gyre. ☸



# Leviathan



*There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!<sup>1</sup>*

**A**be, like Ahab died at sea, both dreaming of the Leviathan: Abe drifting on the outer arm of a synthetic spiral-nebulae, surrounded by a vast horizon of man-made debris; Ahab snatched by the snaking harpoon rope to be coiled and lashed fast to the scarred flanks of the white whale, twisting and winding through the ocean like the whirls of Queenqueg's indigo moko.<sup>2</sup>

For many in this final image, it is of course not Ahab but Gregory Peck who rides the beast down to



Neptune's depths, fulfilling the Faustian contract between man and nature. Although Gregory Peck is more capable of playing Gregory Peck than the metaphysical depths of Ahab, the rest of John Houston's 1956 *Moby Dick* is, however, true to Melville's masterpiece. It is not simply the ill-starred Captain who meets his fate but indeed all of civilisation and society, symbolised by the ship *Pequod* which, after being rammed by the enraged whale, slips beneath the waves, and leaves nothing except the primeval chaos that is our Mother, the ocean.

*There is no life in thee.* Only Ishmael survives, clinging to Queequeg's coffin, a vessel which should have sunk into the earth carrying a corpse, but instead it floats on the ocean to save a live man.

Ishmael is delivered from his buoyant coffin and laid out upon the deck of the *Rachael*, water burbling from his sodden lungs, his spittle merging with the teak.

Ishmael is flotsam to Jonah's jetsam. Those with messages to tell are granted a reprieve; call me Ishmael. ❧

*So also was Jonah among those sent by Us.  
When he ran away like a slave from captivity  
to the fully laden ship,  
He agreed to cast lots, and he was condemned:*

*Then the big Fish did swallow him, and  
he had done acts worthy of blame.  
Had it not been that he repented and glorified Allah  
He would certainly have remained inside the Fish  
till the Day of Resurrection.*

*But We cast him forth on the naked shore  
in a state of sickness,  
And We caused to grow, over him,  
a spreading plant of the gourd kind.*

*And We sent him on a mission  
to a hundred thousand men or more.  
And they believed; so We permitted them  
to enjoy their life for a while.*

—Qur'an, Surah 37

1 Moby Dick, Herman Melville.

2 The facial tattoo of Queequeg, the chief harpooner on Ahab's ship Pequod, *ibid.*



# Relativity



*But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.<sup>1</sup>*

Einstein lies back, sprawled across the cockpit benches of his mahogany sailing boat *Tümmler*<sup>2</sup> in the delicious embrace of a *dérive*<sup>3</sup> drifting on the Templiner See<sup>4</sup> the sails loosely sheeted, filling now and then with the zephyrs. The tiller is unattended swinging now to port, now to starboard as the whim takes it. Einstein gazes up at the small summer clouds and tucks his well-used violin under his chin. Fragments of Mozart carry away across the lake.

$$K = \frac{1}{2}(mv^2)$$

The *Tümmler* lies in the summer doldrums and Einstein chuckles to himself, thinking of the simple equation that describes kinetic energy. Poor *Tümmler* has just about stopped dead in the water, which presents

a perfect opportunity for lunch. He takes the small clasp knife with a rosewood handle from his pocket and slices apple and gruyère onto the old chipped willow pattern plate given to him by Frau Markwalden, his landlady from his student days in Zürich many years ago.

He sailed there too, on the Zürichsee with her daughter Fraülein Markwalden and the pair remain avid correspondents, she ever reminding him of his passion for sailing linked to his inability to swim and his stubborn refusal to wear a life jacket. He smiles to himself, and stares into the cobalt blue image of the oriental lake, on the calm waters of which drifts yet another small vessel, with who knows who on board, maybe a Chinese physicist from a mirror universe?

He continues to slice absentmindedly, gently gripping the polished rosewood, slowly squeezing the blade upwards towards his thumb through the flesh of the fruit. Motes of reflected light play across his brow and for an instant he imagines himself aboard the cobalt blue vessel dancing across the vitrified lake.

Then as the slice falls to the plate he imagines a polished red apple falling towards him, straight as an arrow, gravity sped through Newton's Universe, through the linear voids of Descartes to strike him on

the forehead. At the moment of impact he imagines the Popish god who is desperately manipulating the orbits of the planets into the likeness of a brass astrolabe accompanied further off-stage by the soft chuckles of the Buddha who, resting on one elbow, beams the smile of an all-knowing and bemused parent.

*And truly a trip on this Lake is a much more charming recreation than can be enjoyed on land. For on the one side lies the city in its entire length, so that the spectators in the barges, from the distance at which they stand, take in the whole prospect in its full beauty and grandeur, with its numberless palaces, temples, monasteries, and gardens, full of lofty trees, sloping to the shore.*

*And the Lake is never without a number of other such boats, laden with pleasure parties; for it is the great delight of the citizens here, after they have disposed of the day's business, to pass the afternoon in enjoyment with the ladies of their families, or perhaps with others less reputable, either in these barges or in driving about the city in carriages.<sup>5</sup>*

Einstein's *Tümmler* was a gift from his friends on the occasion of his 50th birthday in 1929. He sailed her for the next four years until in June 1933 the craft was confiscated by the Prussian state and subsequently by the Gestapo which, curiously, listed her as a speed

boat. As the little vessel is driven away from the lake in the National Socialist's truck, a trail of bilge water spills onto the dusty tarmac. The bilge water will soon turn to vapour in the midday sun, evaporating into the sky over Berlin, as will democracy. Despite post-war enquiries, little *Tümmeler* was never found again.

*Einstein's speed motor boat confiscated.*

*The speed motor boat of professor Einstein which was moored at a shipyard in Caputh near Potsdam was confiscated and seized for the Reich. Einstein is said to have planned to smuggle the sailing boat into a foreign country. The sailing boat is worth RM (Reichsmark) 25,000.<sup>6</sup>*

The small ripples of National Socialism slowly began to build into a giant tide of racism, even on this placid lake.

Thirty years later my mother packed me off, a lad of twelve, to Whale Island, the Royal Navy sail training establishment in Portsmouth Harbour. There we were marched at the double each dawn to physical training, were shouted at, cajoled and then we doubled back for eggs and bacon and our day's sail training. Thrown in at the deep end, we learnt small boat handling, keel boat work and then we were sent on ocean racing trials, which terrified me.

The lee rail constantly submerged, we hung on for dear life as the *Kormoran*, our huge ketch rigged racer, ploughed through the Solent chop. *Kormoran*, a 100 square metre boat impeccably crafted by Abeking and Rasmussen in 1936, was confiscated from the Germans at the conclusion of World War Two as a windfall<sup>7</sup> yacht, to sail with *Tümmeler* through a doppelgänger world.

The physicist never really thought deeply about the plate that Frau Markwalden had given him, nor the stories that lay behind it, the ironic product of two empires in conflict. Britannia and Cathay<sup>8</sup> both regarded themselves as the hub of the universe but eurocentrism demanded that the Orient play a secondary role in the arts and sciences, obscuring the real source of much Occidental *Ars et Inventio* by relegating the Orient to the source of exotica, myth and superstition.

Underpinned by a long history of trade routes and sea lanes, the two imperial centres engaged in a curious but problematic dialogue which ended ultimately in the Opium Wars and semi-colonisation by European powers in the mid-nineteenth century, establishing an axis of power which we are only now seeing reversed.

European commercial interests were matched at every turn by a fascination with Eastern arts and



culture, the complexity and historical depth of which predated and overshadowed that of Europe. Textile and ceramic wares in particular formed the basis for a huge trade, carrying with it a range of iconography which shuffled across the cultural divide, to eventually hybridise in both the Occident and the Orient.

The Blue Willow, or willow pattern ceramic design, is a perfect example of this process. Blue Willow was designed by Minton, an Englishman in 1790 and was initially produced by the Spode Pottery in Staffordshire. The design is based upon the longstanding tradition of Ming porcelain blue-ware, with specific imagery drawn from the lakes and gardens in HangZhou, notably the West Lake, which has a deep-rooted and popular place in Chinese cultural history, well documented in the *Travels of Marco Polo*.

The European image proposes a narrative, reputed to be based upon a traditional Chinese tale of unrequited love but is in fact essentially a European fiction, very much in the vein of Romeo and Juliet which only loosely follows a much more interesting Chinese mythic tale relating a love story between white and blue snake deities.

The vagaries of orientalism aside, to judge from its ubiquity, the Blue Willow design is possibly the most widespread example of chinoiserie ever produced, with production quickly being taken up in China and Japan as exports to Europe reversed the original orientalist trend. Even today Wedgwood's Blue Willow plates are manufactured in China by workers for whom the pattern is apparently without cultural meaning.

Without releasing her habitual grip on my arm, Yan Ping steers me into the lacquered pagoda that rises from a small promontory on the shore of the West Lake in HangZhou. The young couple sitting on the polished bench, a thermos and dried squid snack between them, look up in mild alarm as Yan Ping produces a Wedgwood Willow Pattern dinner plate from her bag and unceremoniously begins to quiz them as to its provenance and cultural meaning. The couple, transfixed like a pair of rabbits caught in the headlights, shift their eyes from a nodding attention to Yan Ping's monologue, to a quizzical regard of the cobalt blue ceramic image, alternating with undisguised suspicious glances at myself, a mute and smiling Loawai<sup>9</sup> casually pointing a microphone at the scene.

‘Orioles singing in the Willows’ is one of the ten principal poetic scenes on the West Lake and is probably the template for Minton's 1790's ersatz Ming Dynasty image. Yan Ping is persistent and encouraging but try as she may the couple simply shake their heads in incomprehension, the glazed and idealised image of the lake and the sparkling reality lapping at our feet simply do not correspond for them.

Yan Ping makes a perfunctory bow and her grip on my arm tightens as she wheels me out of the pagoda.

*Two Birds a-flying high  
A Chinese vessel sailing by  
A Bridge with three men, maybe four  
A Willow tree hanging o'er  
A Chinese temple there it stands  
Built upon the river sands  
An Apple tree with apples on  
A Crooked fence to end my song.*  
—Anon.

Einstein was not aware of the pathos of the European story hidden in the cobalt blue image. A story of a rich mandarin with a beautiful daughter Koong-Se who is promised to one of her father's old but rich merchant friends. As one would expect of a tragic romance,

Koong-Se falls in love with a young and handsome (but poor) servant and they elope just before the wedding, stealing the dowry.

The young lovers commandeer the merchant's boat and hide out on the island that appears in the upper left of the image. Search parties fail to find them and the couple live in bliss for several years. However, the young man is both ambitious and talented and gradually builds a reputation as a poet, such that the whereabouts of the couple finally comes to light.

The merchant, still furious and filled with a lust for vengeance, sends out a posse of henchmen, who burn the island house to the ground with Koong-Se inside. In desperation and despair the poet throws himself into the lake and drowns. But look toward the top of the image and you will see the two doves, who are the souls of the lovers reunited in heaven. 鴿鴿

1 Ahab in Moby Dick, Herman Melville.

2 Porpoise.

3 A *dérive* is a form of drifting, but also refers the centerboard of a sailing boat. The term was also used by the Situationist International to describe unplanned adventures in Paris.

4 Near his summer house in Caputh close to Potsdam, Germany.

5 Marco Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian*.

6 *Vossische Zeitung* June, 12th 1933.

7 Hundreds of German sailing craft were confiscated at the conclusion of WWII and employed in youth sail training programmes around the British Isles.

8 China.

9 Mandarin for European foreigner.



# Treasure Fleets



**D**id the imposing figure of ZengHe ever promenade the causeway across the West Lake? An admiral of the biggest fleet in the world, a eunuch and a Muslim, ZengHe oversaw an extraordinary flourishing of Chinese maritime exploration in the early fifteenth century. It was all the more extraordinary for its almost total effacement from global maritime history. It is hard to imagine he had either the time or the inclination for dalliances with courtesans on the pleasure boats of HangZhou.

Standing on the quarter deck of his eleven-masted ocean-going vessel, the admiral signals to the one hundred other junks in his armada, each with a crew of a thousand men and women. These are not simply ships, they are China buoyant: yellow men on floating islands; deck hands with topknots, wiry bodies tattooed with prayers; officers with embroidered insignia; librarians and scribes; concubines and pleasure girls; interpreters and Arabic navigators with their astrolabes and rutters. China buoyant!

On this, the fated last of seven voyages, ZengHe orders two of his admirals to sail their squadrons south, deep into the sub-Antarctic waters of the Southern Ocean to chart the position of the star Canopus, a vital element of the nearly complete Chinese celestial navigation system.

Simultaneously, astronomers of the stargazing cultures, the Mayans and the Chinese record a giant blue comet in the sky near Canis Minor which remains visible for 26 days in June 1430. The comet disappears below the southern horizon at the same time as the two exploration squadrons of Admirals Zhou Man and Hong Bao are making their way home across the Southern Ocean.

Zhou Man and Hong Bao's mahogany fleets are tracking north after charting the coast of Campbell Island<sup>1</sup> in the sub Antarctic. The sky glows an electric ice-blue and the intensity increases throughout the wintery night. The Islamic navigators do their best to subdue a growing panic. On 27th June, almost a week after the winter solstice, the massive ice comet screams into the ocean midway between Campbell Island and the South Island of Aotearoa.

*The power of the Goddess, having indeed been manifest in previous times, has been abundantly revealed in the present generation. In the midst of the rushing waters it*

*happened that, when there was a hurricane, suddenly a divine lantern was seen shining at the masthead, and as soon as that miraculous light appeared the danger was appeased, so that even in the peril of capsizing one felt reassured and that there was no cause for fear.*<sup>2</sup>

The Arabic navigator presses the holy book to his chest and meditates on the words of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and the image of *Alfa Alfi 'Awwalim* who imagined a thousand, thousand worlds, extending into *khala' la nihayata laha*, the limitless space beyond this Earth.<sup>3</sup> Behold, one of these approaches fast!

Admiral Zhou Man experiences six portents before he perishes and enters the afterlife. He and his crew stare in amazement as the blue comet that has hung over them for the past month transforms into a scorching fireball of light arcing due south across the leaden sky. Minutes later the massive mahogany ship thrums like a giant temple drum. Now follows a long ominous stillness finally broken by the sound of huge thunder, rolling and rolling, so loud the bamboo-battened sails begin to vibrate against the masts. Again a stillness which gradually transforms into din and chaos. The lookouts lose control of their voices as they alternately scream and choke, pointing south to a massive,



fast-moving wall of green water four times the height of the mainmasts, and spanning the horizon.

No ships return to China, and no new fleets are to be built. Fragments of mahogany vessels lay scattered from Aotearoa across Australasia. China became a nation with its back turned towards the sea.

## 未知的

Thousands of scrolls with detailed maps and delicate ink drawings recording coastlines and astronomical observations hang suspended in the cool southern waters. Slowly dissolving, the calligraphic script diffuses like squid ink, returning knowledge to its source, to wash up bleached on the shores of the illiterate. The carbon atoms that form the ideogram 'Unknown' begin other journeys, diffusing into the salty currents. The vivid cobalts of Ming ware bowls and platters, flutter and glide like stingrays to the bottom to form a sediment of dragons, carp and phoenix, founding fringing reefs and banks of shiny sea-washed pebbles inscribed with a mythic bestiary. 𪚩

- 1 A sub-Antarctic Island south of Aotearoa (New Zealand).
- 2 Admiral Zheng. He and his associates—inscription carved in Changle, Fujian province, China.
- 3 It is established by evidence that there exists beyond the world a void without a terminal limit (*khala' la nihayata laha*), and it is established by evidence that God Most High has power over all contingent beings (*al-mumkinat*). Therefore He the Most High has the power (*qadir*) to create a thousand thousand worlds (*alfa alfi 'awalim*) beyond this world such that each one of those worlds be bigger and more massive than this world as well as having the like of what this world has of the throne (*al-arsh*), the chair (*al-kursiyy*), the heavens (*al-samawat*) and the earth (*al-ard*), and the sun (*al-shams*) and the moon (*al-qamar*). The arguments of the philosophers (*dala'il al-falasifah*) for establishing that the world is one are weak, flimsy arguments founded upon feeble premises. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi.



# The Black Sea



*All day long the South wind blew rapidly and the water overwhelmed the people like an attack. No one could see his fellows. They could not recognise each other in the torrent. The Gods were frightened by the flood and retreated up to the Anu heaven. They cowered like dogs lying by the outer wall. Ishtar shrieked like a woman in childbirth.*

*The Mistress of the Gods wailed that the old days had turned to clay because she said evil things in the Assembly of the Gods, ordering a catastrophe to destroy the people who fill the sea like fish. The other Gods were weeping with her and sat sobbing with grief, their lips burning, parched with thirst.*

*The flood and wind lasted six days and seven nights, flattening the land. On the seventh day, the storm was pounding like a woman in labor. The sea calmed and the whirlwind and flood stopped. All day long there was quiet. All humans had turned to clay. The terrain was as flat as a roof top. Utnapishtim opened a window and felt fresh air on his face. He fell to his knees and sat weeping,*

*tears streaming down his face. He looked for coastlines at the horizon and saw a region of land. The boat lodged firmly on Mount Nimush which held the boat for several days, allowing no swaying.*

*On the seventh day he released a dove which flew away, but came back to him. He released a swallow, but it also came back to him. He released a raven which was able to eat and scratch, and did not circle back to the boat. He then sent his livestock out in various directions.<sup>1</sup>*

The sheep and the goats of the nomadic herders swim, heads thrust skyward in panic, bleating. After a while they drown and slip to the bottom. Days later, they bloat with methane gas and float to the surface where they are eventually blown to the edge of the lake to decompose. After several months, all that is left of them is a felted mat, greasy with lanolin and flecked with salt-encrusted crickets. It is springy to walk upon this spongy edging.

The villagers stay put too long, against the warnings of nomadic herders who are fleeing, wild-eyed, for upland pasture. Those villagers who can, strike out, a few strokes at least. Those who can't, and that is the majority, flail wide-eyed, and then with an unintentional gracefulness wave a silent farewell and breathe

deeply of brine. They sink slowly, gyrating into the darkness, in a few days they too will bloat and once again return to the air, and have their eyes picked out by seagulls and small fish.

Further to the east, the level of the lake has suddenly changed, lapping closer to the settlement, even floating free a couple of fishing boats from the strand. Offshore, the water is marked by a channel of ochre red fanning across the horizon. This has never been seen before, not even by the village elders. Looking to the north, the stain moves slowly across the horizon from left to right from west to east, towards the rising sun.

Five men from the village row out, they spend an entire day, drifting eastwards in the red swirl, a swirl of mud with the tang of salt. An oarsman dips his finger and brine vibrates on his lips.

To the west, entire communities watch on as the high pasture that stretches between the narrow salt sea and the sweet water lake down in the valley is riven by a torrent that is rapidly cutting a chasm through the rich soil, devouring the land. Every day it widens, tearing away trees, huts and occasionally people, cutting off all movement to kinsfolk stranded on the far side of what is now a violent river in full spate—a river of

salt that throws a dark stain into the lake below and snakes to the horizon.

*Fifteene cubits upward, did the waters preuaile;  
and the mountaines were couered.*

*And all flesh died, that mooued vpon the earth,  
both of fowle, & of cattell, and of beast,  
and of euery creeping thing that creepeth  
vpon the earth, and euery man.*

*All in whose nosethrils was the breath of life,  
of all that was in the dry land, died.*

*And euery liuing substance was destroyed,  
which was vpon the face of the ground,  
both man and cattell, and the creeping things,  
and the foule of the heauen;  
and they were destroyed from the earth:  
and Noah onely remained aliue,  
and they that were with him in the Arke.<sup>2</sup>*

I visited years ago and recall the walk up from the steamer jetty, past a few rundown fish restaurants, to a mountainside wild and deserted. The road defeated, surrenders itself to a rocky footpath which winds to the summit and the ruins of a Genovese Castle.

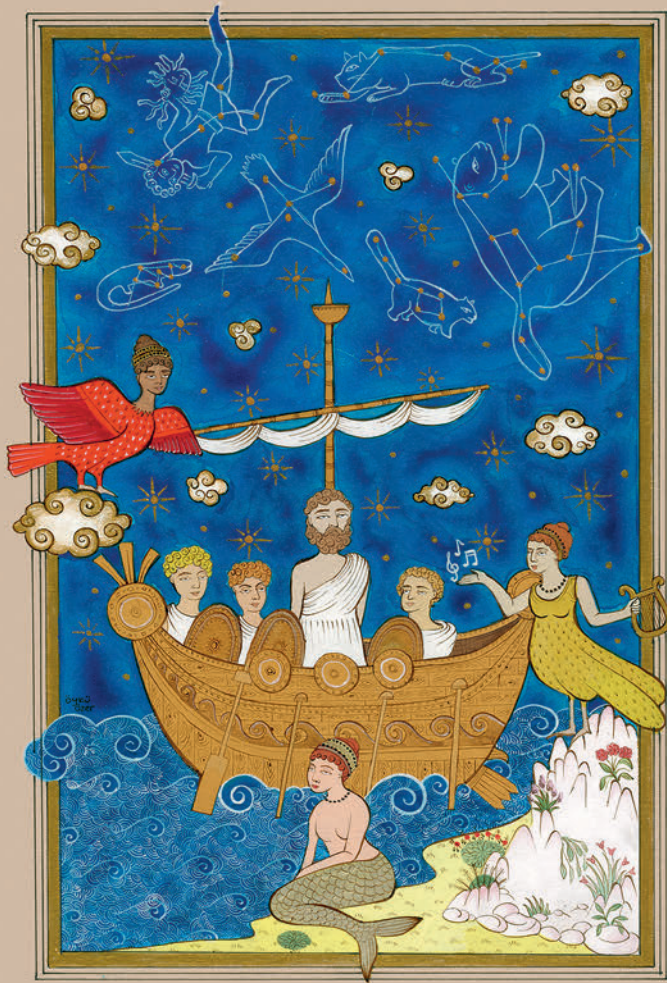
A crows-nest of a place, looking to the west the channel shimmering back to the minarets of Istanbul, to the east the sparkling expanse of the Black Sea. Far below, a fleet of sardine boats inscribe vast circles of net on the surface.

Nowadays the ferry dock is crowded with tourists. The fish places have reimagined themselves with encrustations of glass and marble but have lost their charm and their good value in the process. The Genovese castle remains but it is now reached by a concrete path lined with cafes, all the way to the summit, which now has a festival air, the view devoured by digital cameras. Down below, the sea glitters where the *Argo* first sailed out of the Bosphorus and into the Black Sea. 𐎶𐎵

1 Gilgamesh Tablet XI.

2 Noah—Genesis 7:20 King James Bible.





# Heroes and Villains



*These heavy sands are language tide  
and wind have since silted here.*

—James Joyce *Ulysses*

The land is our sure footing, our *Terra Firma*, our groundedness but my story is somewhat different, fluid and nomadic. Alike to Odysseus, who after all that hard travel and the ugly episode with the suitors, was bidden shoulder a ship's oar and walk inland until he found a place where no-one could recognise his burden, to become at last becalmed and landlocked, finally at anchor.

*Please allow me to introduce myself  
I'm a man of wealth and taste  
I've been around for a long long year  
Stole many a man's soul and faith.<sup>1</sup>*

Odysseus, the *Man of Pain*, sets out on his final journey knowing that, as prophesied, he will return home peacefully this time to live out his days in quiet retirement, surrounded by his loving family. He will come to resemble his father Laertes, a kind old man living a simple life in the company of his shepherds and farmhands.

Now preparing for his final voyage, his wife Penelope dresses him in homespun. Girt with a leather twine and carrying simple provisions, Odysseus once more climbs aboard a blue-prowed ship, leaving Ithaca for the mainland, travelling this time in anonymity not as a bold commander. As he is carrying his own polished oar he makes himself useful and rows with the crew. Like every other man on the benches, he wipes his brow with the back of his hand, smearing sweat into his hair.

With each stroke he leaves behind the complexity and the duplicity of his role as hero. Ahead there is nothing but plain sailing and his dotage. Each stroke fading the deception, dissimulation, violence and self-pity that have been his stock in trade for decades. He struggles to reconcile with the fact that he has spent the past twenty years attempting to get home—but has he?

Our hero recalls being cast ashore on Calypso's isle. Day upon day he was perched on a cliff-top staring at the azure horizon, dreaming of his wife and home, sobbing and feeling sorry for himself. But each dusk did he not succumb to an evening feast followed by a night of lusty embraces in the arms of the goddess Calypso, only to return the next day to the same

routine of self-pity, the same self-loathing? Did this not steal away seven years of his life? He has no answer.

*Suddenly wind hit full and the canvas bellied out  
And a dark blue wave, foaming up at the bow  
Sang out loud and strong as the ship made way,  
Skimming the whitecaps, cutting towards her goal.<sup>2</sup>*

Ironically, the archetype and the man are destined to drift apart, the heroic role is hollowed out like a discarded helmet, the exploits forgotten, or forgiven, leaving a man with nothing to do, no future except domestic harmony and a gentle and painless death in his ripe old age.

When young dawn with her rose-red fingers appeared once more, the black ship makes landfall. The oarsmen ship their blades and sit quietly on their benches as the cable is slipped around the drilled stone post.

Gathering up his few possessions, Odysseus straps on stout leather sandals and takes leave of the ship, shouldering the brightly polished oar. He walks through the town and away from the coast up into the foothills. He walks for several uneventful days, sleeping in small villages and, once or twice, beds down in the forest, heaping dry leaves over himself to keep out the chill.

For once he is alone, unguided by immortal Athena and without the challenges of conflict or the tempests of the seas to weigh upon his brow. Finally, as professed, he falls in with a fellow traveller who enquires why and whence he is carrying such a fine looking winnowing fan.

Odysseus responds:

*And the prophets said that I must rove through towns on towns of men, that I must carry a well planed oar until I come to people who know nothing of the sea, whose food is never never seasoned with salt, strangers all to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars, wings that make the ships fly. And here is my sign, he told me, clear, so clear I cannot miss it, and I will share it with you now. When another traveller falls in with me and asks of that weight across my shoulder a fan to winnow grain, then, he told me, I must plant my oar in the Earth and sacrifice fine beasts to the Lord God of the sea, Poseidon, a ram, a bull and a rampling wild boar, then journey home and render noble offerings up to the deathless goddesses and gods who rule the vaulting skies, and to all the gods in order. And then at last my own death will steal upon me, a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes to take me down, borne down with the years in ripe old age with*

*all my people here in blessed peace around me. All this, the prophet said will come to pass.*<sup>3</sup>

As the key fits the lock Odysseus recognises the time and place. He plants the oar upright in the ground, securing it with a tight cairn of limestone rocks, the final sea-marker on this last voyage. He secures the ram, the bull and the rampling boar, the sacrificial victims, from a nearby farm with a generous exchange of gold which, coming from such a plainly-dressed traveller, raises the eyebrows of the patron.

Odysseus prepares his rites to the deathless gods and goddesses. The man of pain is finally released from the perpetual cycle of voyaging. Like a young sapling, the oar is planted, the gods appeased, his life is now without external challenge but full of unfamiliar accord.

The churning chaos of Poseidon as he rammed the clouds together and the whipping gales of the wind gods shrouding over earth and sea with thunderheads, Aeolus, Boreas, Zephyr, Notus and Eurus<sup>4</sup> are now without meaning for Odysseus. The sea is nothing but a dead calm, a permanent glittering backdrop to the island of Ithaca, protecting its rocky slopes, its goats and its vineyards.

His epic, sung in dactylic hexameter through centuries under shady trees, in small fishing villages, in the polished marble courts of palaces and intoned at the ink-stained desks of English public schools, pronounce the attributes of heroism, of arbitrary power, of privilege and violence legitimised by divine authority, are centuries later to be reborn as an anti-hero.

It is eight o'clock in the morning on 16th June, 1904 and Leopold Bloom is about to cast-off on his epic twenty four hour dérive across Dublin in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Well, that is after bringing in breakfast and the morning's mail to his wife Molly. Henceforth, heroes will not be the same.

*Think you're escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home.*<sup>5</sup>

To all intents and purposes, the show is over; a gentle country walk back to the coast, another short sail as a passenger and home for good. The good citizen steps aboard the hollow ship with all the clumsiness of a farmer and sits scanning the crew as they pull against the oars of their galley, their blades tossing up the spray. An irresistible sleep descends upon his eyes, the sweetest, soundest oblivion, still as the sleep of death itself, Odysseus dreams of the past.

*We were just offshore as far as a man's shout can carry, scudding close when the Sirens sensed that once the ship was racing past and burst into their high, thrilling song.*<sup>6</sup>

Forewarned by tales of Jason's voyage in the *Argo*, when Orpheus saved the day, Odysseus took his sharp short sword and sliced an ample wheel of beeswax, moulding it in his two strong hands under Helios' burning rays, making it pliable. One by one he stopped the ears of his crew with the moulded wax.

The job done, two crewmen lash him tightly to the mast then return to their benches to row in silence, their waxen plugs reproducing the labyrinth of their pinnae, harbingers of the spirals of Edison's phonography inscribed into wax cylinders. In the silence, each man replays the rhythms of his pulse, syncopated with oar strokes, to evade the deadly intoxication of the Siren's song.

Entranced, Odysseus yells roughly at his men, demanding that they untie him and row ashore to the Sirens but the crew row on, oblivious to his rant. Danger past, Odysseus scowls at his men who have steadfastly refused to release him to follow the Siren's hypnotic call.



*The swift ship races onward...like a four course team careering down the plain, all breaking as one with the whiplash cracking smartly, leaping with hooves high to run the course in no time, so the stern hove high and plunged with the seething rollers crashing dark in her wake as on she surged, unwavering, never flagging, no, not even a darting hawk, the swiftest things on wings could keep her pace as she ran, cutting the swells at top speed.*

Landfall: it will now only be in his dreams that he slaughters unarmed suitors or disobedient serving girls, or rolls in the arms of a goddess and cries out to harmonise with the Sirens. No-one will listen to his loquacious tales of misfortune for they are no longer an advantage to this man of strategy and manipulation. Trojan horses make playthings for his grandchildren now. ❧

1 "Sympathy for the Devil," M. Jagger and K. Richards.

2 Homer *The Odyssey*.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Aeolus, the King of the wind Gods; Boreas, God of the North Wind; Zephyros God of the West Wind; Notus God of the South Wind and Eurus God of the East Wind.

5 James Joyce *Ulysses*.

6 Homer *The Odyssey*.





# Drift



My response to the curator's logistics enquiry prompted a startled reply:

*No—impossible; finding a ship for your sound-sculpture is beyond the Festival's capacity.*<sup>1</sup>

I was quietly persistent, pointing out that Hull was, after all a major port, or more accurately had once been a major port and surely there were a few idle vessels moored in the once bustling harbour.

Persistence is a useful quality. Eventually I was offered the *Arctic Corsair* (H320) the last sidewinder trawler to operate out of Hull; de-commissioned but still in her original condition and waiting to be converted into a museum ship, dedicated to the North Sea fishing industry. The cavernous fish-hold of the *Arctic Corsair* would be the perfect environment to install my multi-channel sound-work, *Drift*.

Drift is what the arks of Gilgamesh and Noah did—aimlessly and noiselessly, that is, if one disregards the vocalisations of the menagerie. To drift is also to embark upon a *dérive*, the higher-order pastime

of the *Situationist Internationale* who embraced this free-fall into fate, a process which required at least four days and which was fuelled by large quantities of high-octane alcohol—the protagonists eventually wash up somewhere, tired, damp but still alive.

The part of God's creation that Gilgamesh and Noah neglected to load aboard their respective arks were the fish and the many forms of marine Crustacea, Medusae and other invertebrates which possibly places them in a special theological category, aqueous beings and therefore free from the taint of original sin and moreover, oblivious and impervious to the effects of the flood. Perhaps this is the reason that eating fish is so good for us?

In a Jonahesque trope, the installation on the *Arctic Corsair* included a wooden ark sculpture, replete with an array of acoustic horns. As if trawled from the deep the ark was netted and suspended in the centre of the fish-hold intoning the names of all the species of fish that never swam under the keel of the *Arctic Corsair*—all the vernacular names of fish from the warm waters of my adopted Antipodean homeland.

All around the little ark gyred a massive acoustic swirl of oceanic forces and aqueous textures, crashing here,

breaking there and quite literally shaking the fifty-seven metre steel vessel. The festival had provided me with truck full of stadium-sized sound equipment and there were certainly no neighbours to disturb.

Serendipity: On my first day working aboard the *Arctic Corsair* I came upon a poem, posted onto a bulkhead:

*This is the old Hessel Road  
The home of Bear Island Cod  
Where the Hudson's speak only to the Helyer's  
And the Helyer's speak only to God!*

It was as if an angel passed, turned and smiled at me. Salt is in the blood; and blood is saturated with messages and memories.

Nearly a thousand years ago, my father's ancestors sailed the short distance from Normandie to England with William the Conqueror, to beat the heads of their English cousins. In return for their services they were given a family seat in the south-west of England. Centuries later, many Helyer's set off as early emigrants to the new-world colonies, while others branched off to the north-east coastline of England and established a small fleet of North Sea vessels and worked as fisherfolk.

*The land of darkness flamed  
but no light and no repose.  
The land of snows of trembling,  
and iron hail incessant.  
The land of earthquakes,  
and the land of woven labyrinths.  
The land of snares and traps  
and wheels and pitfalls and dire mills.  
The voids, The solids, and the land of clouds  
and regions of waters.*  
—William Blake, *Jerusalem*

My father was a *hard man* by any standard, toughened in the steel-mills and shipyards of northern England and by long years behind the lines in the North African war, fighting with the infamous Long Range Desert Group. He taught me to box before I was five and died when I was ten, leaving mother with three kids and scant resources. Very sensibly, she bought me a small sailing boat to keep me occupied and for this I am eternally grateful.

My father's back: a palimpsest of shipyard labour. His skin was punctuated with small lunar-white scars, a Tyneside riveter's coat-of-arms. My father's voice: a soft Gordie croon with a lull-a-bye about shrimp-boats

sailing home, was guaranteed to put me to sleep in the cot. It seems my fate is co-mingled with salt water, as it is professionally with sound. Both are liquid mediums, both immerse us and envelop us and, naturally, we can drown in both.

We are in a dense embrace, drawn forward on a flow of molten lead. The air clings to every surface penetrating the woven fibres of the sail and simultaneously the recesses of our lungs; there is no position of distance here, we are consubstantial. The air is opaque, embalming the chalk cliffs ahead in a milky cloud that suffocates vision and muffles the ears. Somewhere the ocean voices an argument with the cliff-face and somewhere a bell is drowning upon slow glutenous undulations.

Ahead, hidden in this universe of milk, is a place called the horizon. We are slowly but inexorably moving towards it. Upon the horizon, I imagine I see the broken form of the cliff—my eyes slide horizontally and print a luminescent trail of after-images; an infinite series across this dimensionless firmament. My task is to locate the indolent tolling of the drowned bell in order to choose which of these virtual cliffs represent physical danger. ❧





# Heaven



*Mais les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là seuls qui partent  
pour partir; coeurs légers, semblables aux ballons,  
de leur fatalité jamais ils ne s'écartent,  
et, sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons!*<sup>1</sup>

Father died four years ago, I am now fourteen; I am immortal and as reckless as they come. The Commodore has anointed me, given me sole charge of a duck-egg green sailing boat in which to teach his red-haired daughter the rudiments of seamanship, in return I have the run of it for the summer.

Today I have a quest, to sail single-handed as far as I dare over the horizon, something I cannot discuss with my Mother as it would terrify her; as of course it should me but I must learn to eat fear. By now I have learned to accommodate her mild, ultimately futile injunctions, to take care and keep out of trouble, on the assumption that they do not extend to serious categories such as shipwreck and drowning.

The name of the little vessel evades me as does the face of the Commodore's daughter, a result of concussion

probably, all I recall is setting off through the beach surf and heading out into the Channel.

The coast gradually melts into a meniscus of haze that forms the horizon, until at last I am, for the first time in my life, completely alone; around me, a disc of blue ocean in every direction. There is no compass, just the set of the swell and the prevailing wind to orientate me. Above, a hemisphere of blue, held aloft by a blue shimmer.

As the big swells roll under the hull, the mast arcs across the sky, in a trance rhythm; one moment I am deep in sunlit reverie and the next, bang, the lights go out. Time stops, everything stops. I am suspended in total darkness, no sound, no movement. I should have taken heed of my Mother before entering the afterlife. In this new world do I breath air, or drink down lungfuls of seawater? It is impossible to tell in this darkness of dreaming. There is nothing to see, nothing to feel, nothing, apart from a throbbing white light inside my head.

I drift but gradually sense a gentle rocking motion and hear the plash of water, my eyes begin to probe the murk, and finally I understand that the shadowy forms emerging below me are my legs fading into the abyss. Slowly, very slowly, it dawns on me; I am floating in a bubble of dark air trapped under the hull of the

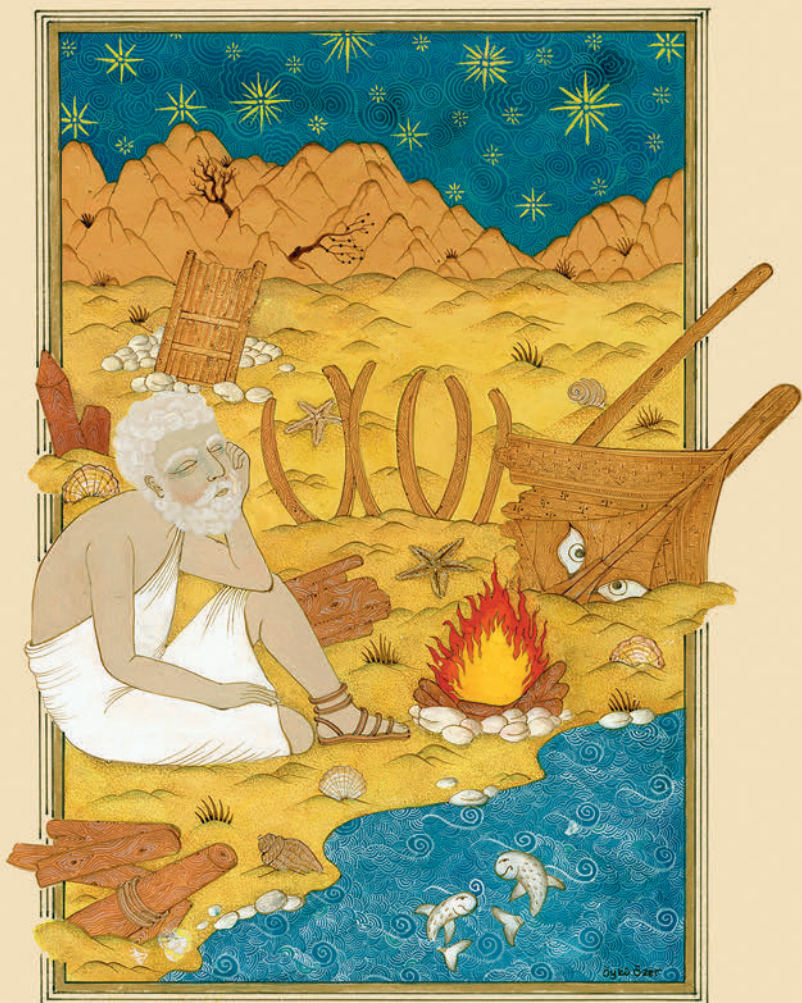
upturned vessel. My bruised skull is cushioned by the semi-inflated RAF Mae West lifejacket that holds my mouth and nose just above water, a good investment it would appear!

Move the hands, flex the fingers, touch the face, reach out to feel around the inside of the cockpit, a strange sensation, performing an underwater inverted handstand. There is of course only one thing to do, untangle the mess of lines and push out of the air pocket into the glare and dance of the surface.

There she wallows, centreboard skyward like a shark fin, the pale green hull glistening in the sunshine and the ghostly sail disappearing vertically below into the gloom. My toes grip the gunwhale and my arms heave on the slippery fin, a slow struggle, a head-throbbing, body-heaving struggle to right the craft. Finally, a slither onboard and lots of water to bail, wary, ever wary of that skull-cracking boom.

Home to tell the tale? No, simply home, with a nod and a smile. Today for the first time, I have seen the world without land and I have had a preview of another world which will one day embrace me, but that is exactly the kind of thing that would terrify Mother. ❧

1 Charles Baudlaire, *Le Voyage*, *Fleurs du Mal*, 1875.



# Argo Navis



*Pleased to meet you  
hope you guess my name.  
And what's bothering you  
is the nature of my game.<sup>1</sup>*

For all his worldly fame Odysseus is but a latter-day hero and one with a happy ending at that. His epic stands on the shoulders of another, the proto-hero Jason. The blue-prowed ship of Odysseus sails in the wake of the first ship, the *Argo*, and rehearses the first voyage of discovery in search of the golden fleece, an epic adventure that stands metaphorically for the three thousand year colonisation of the Black Sea coast by the Pontic Greeks.

Through the telling and retelling they have merged to become doppelgängers. Jason, a raw adventurer with no special charms, becomes the prototype and armature upon which to sculpt the complex character of Odysseus.

Jason's was no ordinary crew either, heroes and gallants all, and quite unlike the disposable oarsmen

under the command of Odysseus. One amongst them was Orpheus, whose sweet song saved the day when the *Argo* sailed past *Sirenum scopuli*, the island of the Sirens. As soon as Orpheus had heard their enticing song he plucked up his lyre and played music so beautiful and so vibrant that the crew paid no heed to the bewitched chanting—a handy tip to pass down to Odysseus.

The *Argo* was like all sailing vessels, animate, but this one was extra special: it was the first ship built under the watchful eye of Athena, with a figurehead carved from the oak timbers of the oracle at Dodona, which endowed the *Argo* with the powers of speech and prophecy.

*In their mind's eye they see the promised fleece of Phrixus, and Argo returning triumphant with gilded figure-heads. Lights are seen dotted here and there along the winding coast, but as yet there are no sailors to observe the land whereof they give warning.*<sup>2</sup>

Coming from the Sea of Marmara towards the Black Sea, the *Argo* noses against the current into the mouth of the Bosphorus Strait. Jason instructs the Argonauts to prepare a large wicker basket and fill it with ballast stones then lower it over the bow on fifteen fathoms

of cable. The crew, as crews are apt, jostle each other, roll their eyes and look on bemused. Jason grins back at his crew of heroes resting on their oars. 'Not only does our hero leader seek a sheep with a golden fleece but he now goes fishing with stones for bait,' comes the jest, causing general mirth.

But he who laughs last, laughs the longest and the crew look in amazement as deep in the clear water the basket can be seen to pull ahead of the vessel, tugging her eastward against the current towards the Pontus Axeinos.<sup>3</sup> Jason finally relents to let out the secret that he has learnt from old fishermen. This strait has two currents, a brackish surface water current that runs westwards from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara and onto the Mediterranean, which overlays a sub-surface counter-current of salt water that flows eastwards from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea.

The crew whistle and cheer and they ship their oars, time to rest crackling sinews, time to break out the wine skins and relax for a while.

But eventually a danger to tackle, the entrance to the Black Sea, the Pontus Axeinos, as the old blind prophet Phineus warned, is guarded by the Clashing



Rocks that rush together to crush any passing vessel. The old man suggested releasing a dove. If the bird could make it through, he declared, then so too the *Argo*.

Orpheus, brings a wicker cage to the prow of the splendid *Argo*, and eyes Jason who gives the nod. The bird takes to the air with a clatter of flight feathers and heads directly east toward the vast expanse of water. Immediately, the rocks that bound the strait close to crush the speeding dove, just catching a couple of its tail feathers that twirl to the water's surface. As the rocks rebound, the crew bend to the oars with all their might, the *Argo* fairly leaps through the water and enters the maw of the rocks that hurtle inward to destroy them. The *Argo* is a lucky ship and she loses only a few splinters of her stern post and a banner; the spell broken, the Clashing Rocks part for the last time to remain, to this day, inanimate.

I am back on the southern promontory, with its ruined Genovese castle and rows of tourist restaurants. Will these clashing rocks that once guarded the entrance to the Black Sea locking away riches and mysteries ever deign to move again?

*It is said that in their country gold is carried down by the mountain torrents, and that the barbarians obtain it*

*by means of perforated troughs and fleecy skins, and that this is the origin of the myth of the golden fleece—unless they call them Iberians, by the same name as the western Iberians, from the gold mines in both countries.*<sup>4</sup>

Under the guidance of the prophetic figurehead, the *Argo* sails into the mouth of the River Phasis, where Aea, the capital of Colchis ruled over by King Aetes lay. The poets will sing of Jason's meeting with Aetes to demand the golden fleece, of his alliance with the witch Medea, Aetes' daughter, who, bewitched by Eros, falls madly in love with him, and of the many trials set by Aetes to dissuade and prevent him fulfilling his quest. That is the official version passed down since well before Homer.

Jason walks the spine of the *Argo* between the polished benches and takes his position at the bow next to the oracular timber. Better than compass, radar and echosounder the Dodonic timber quietly advises Jason on the coastal position of the Colchian mines, the best course to a secure landfall and the best approach for an anchorage. The Argonauts check their weapons, hone shining bronze blades and javelins. They test the buckles and straps of their helms and cuirasses and polish the heavy shield bosses. They are ready for mayhem.

The *Argo* glides forward across the wine-dark sea, as if guided by a supernatural force and as dusk begins to fall the ship comes to rest in a craggy inlet, hidden well out of sight. The mooring cables are run out to gnarled olive trees on either side and the ship is made ready. Leaving behind a small ship's guard, the main troop mounts the summit above the inlet to take in a landscape pock-marked with diggings, small fires, wooden ore stampers and sluices; they creep forward in silence.

At one hundred paces they let out a mighty roar and charge the mining camp, beating their blades against their shields. A sound worse than thunder splits the air, drowning out the screams of the unarmed miners, who are mown down like the magical warriors who, in the myth, spring from the dragon's teeth that Jason is bade by Aetes to sow. No-one is spared, the entire camp is slaughtered, with the exception of a young lad who races off in panic towards the capital—'Let him go,' they laugh.

The bodies are thrown into an eroded gully, piled high and a brush fire set around them. The crew of heroes repairs to the miners' camp and make themselves at home as night has fallen; there is plenty of

time to labour tomorrow—a pity about the boy, he would have provided some sport this long night.

When young dawn, with her rose-red fingers shines once more, the heroes take in the lay of the land. There are more than fifty ore sluices, each fitted with the fleece of a ram, heavily encrusted with alluvial gold, theirs for the taking. The crew set to work, lifting the heavy matted wool filters from the wooden sluice races, carefully packing them into bales, sewn from fabric torn from the miners' tents and shade cloths. Tent poles are pulled down and lashed together to form travois and the morose donkeys tethered under the shade-trees are harnessed to haul the booty back to the *Argo*.

By evening the *Argo* has her hold packed with golden fleeces, a king's ransom indeed. The crew make merry and sleep deeply. As Helios' golden rays flicker across the inlet, the *Argo* is made ready for the journey home. The mooring cables are slipped from the mooring trees and the crew bend their backs in unison to ease the *Argo* out into the azure waters. Once clear of the rocky coast the sail is set and the *Argo* sails lazily westward towards the clashing rocks and the Bosphorus.

There is plain sailing for a while but as the *Argo* draws abreast of the River Phasis<sup>5</sup> other sails appear on the

horizon. The young lad who fled the camp had run all night to pant and splutter out his tale to King Aetes of the wild Greek pirates with blood lust, with gold lust.

Aetes had summoned his son Apsyrus and daughter Medea<sup>6</sup> and commanded them to assemble a powerful fleet and to set out and hunt down the Greek pirates. One squadron was to blockade the mouth of the Bosphorus and the other to patrol the mouth of the Danube.

Jason is at the prow again with his arm around the stem-post deep in conversation with the figurehead. 'Steer her northwest,' he cries back to the steersmen, who deftly lean on their huge sweeps to bring her up to the new heading that will take them to the mouth of the Danube. The sail is trimmed in harder and the *Argo* lists to port as she hisses through the glittering sea.

The wind is fair and constant; flying fish scatter and skip from the *Argo* and braces of dolphin zig-zag across the bow-wave, somersaulting in endless loops. All is going well until the coast heaves into sight. The Danube delta is ringed by Colchian masts—Jason is back chatting to the figurehead again.

With their Danube escape route blocked and discretion being the better part of valour, the oracular timber whispers a subterfuge into Jason's ear.

The *Argo* should sail towards a nearby island, sacred to the Goddess Artemis and take refuge, in the knowledge that the Colchians will be too respectful and too nervous to mount an offensive. The *Argo* wheels around, gybing her sail, hoping that she has passed unnoticed by the blockade, but en route they encounter and engage a straggling Colchian ship, not even a Man of War, rather a pleasure vessel, bedecked for nobles.

The Argonauts make short shrift of them and slaughter the entire crew, save for a beautiful woman who entrances them. Smiling to herself, she seems almost pleased at the bloodshed of her fellows. The men edge back from her as she steps aboard the *Argo* and walks directly to Jason, then sinks to the ground and clasps his knees. There is something electric about her, an aura that draws in the light. Jason feels giddy and for once quite unprepared.

Eros and the prophetic timber from Dodona are conspiring to form a dark bond between Jason and this mysterious woman. The men look on quizzically but Jason has been at sea for quite a time and he

knows how to conduct himself, especially with beautiful women.

The *Argo* moors in a small stone harbour on the island, her sleek hull dwarfing the local fishing boats and Jason is once again consulting the oracular timber which now extends the subterfuge by announcing that his new companion is none other than King Aetes' daughter, and a sorceress at that. The darts of Eros are so powerful that Medea is in a blood rage to denounce her family and flee with the Argonauts.

This is the plan they arrive at: Medea will entrance one of the old local fishermen, promising him a night of love and the rejuvenation of his youth. In return, he must sail to the Colchian fleet and find the commander and relay the story that she has been abducted by Greek pirates and that her brother must come unarmed to the island to parlay with Jason and offer a ransom.

Medea walks down to the fishing harbour that evening and finds the old man in his cabin, eating olives, bread and sardines. She is charming, joins in the meal and then blows out the candle, hitches her gown and mounts the old fellow like a cat in heat. The next morning a young man wakes, as if from a dream and

like narcissus marvels at his smooth skinned features, reflected in the harbour—he smiles to himself as certainly he has the better end of the bargain.

So today no fishing but a little sail across to the coast. As he goes he inspects himself, all muscle and sinew, no scabs or scars and certainly no arthritic knuckles or creaking knee joints, praise to Zeus let this last forever. He hails the Colchian fleet and is directed to the admiral's ship. His small fishing vessel is grappled alongside and he is welcomed on board and taken to sit with Apsyrus who offers him ruby red wine with fresh bread and meats.

The young fisherman faithfully repeats the plea for rescue from Medea and hands over the ring he has been given as a token of authenticity. Apsyrus sinks his head into his strong hands and groans in despair but regains his composure, places his hand on the fisherman's shoulder and thanks him for his efforts and lays a splendid short sword on his knees as a gift. Well pleased, the fisherman bids his farewell and sails home wondering what other riches his new life will bring.

Apsyrus orders a small supply boat to be equipped for the journey to the island and loads aboard sufficient supplies and a chest full of Colchian gold ingots for



the ransom of the princess, his sister. He takes a small crew of capable men, all unarmed, or at least not conspicuously armed, and sets sail for the Island of Artemis, following the very detailed instructions of the young fisherman. As directed, they moor alongside the stone harbour wall and send a messenger to the *Argo* which is anchored in a cove beyond the village. Word returns that Apsyrus and two sidemen should meet Jason and Medea that evening on the threshing ground between the village and the *Argo*.

Apsyrus loads the ransom chest onto a borrowed donkey cart and sets out in the late afternoon to meet and parlay the terms of his sister's release, calculating the odds as he walks. He has a large and swift fleet at his disposal and after all and there is plenty of time to recover the ransom after his sister is safe with her kin.

The siblings are pierced through: Medea, struck by the darts of Eros, and unlucky Apsyrus a victim of the arrows of Artemis, Goddess of the hunt. Not even a word of parlay offered, not even a chance to catch the eye of his sister. She bent the bow, she released the first shaft to fly through her brother's throat. The rest fall instantly, the gold is hauled off on the cart straight away to the *Argo* where it nestles alongside the cargo

of gold-drenched fleece, the body of Medea's brother dragging in the dust behind the cart.

At the same time in the early evening, the small Colchian vessel is overrun by a group of heavily-armed men, the crew are dispatched and the craft rowed quietly around to the bay where the *Argo* rides at anchor.

The following day, a following wind. The course from the island to the Danube delta is a perfect track. The *Argo* is backed off the mooring and carefully turned seaward by the expert oarsmen. The Colchian vessel is now laden with bodies and brushwood and casks of olive oil and towed astern with one crewman aboard, clutching his tinderbox.

The *Argo* surges ahead, aiming directly at the Colchian fleet who are riding at anchor on a lee shore in a smart breeze. As the *Argo* approaches they can see a scramble to run out the oars and pull up the stone anchors, but then, astern a plume of oily black smoke, an offering to the Gods of the underworld, billows out. The crewman has set the small vessel piled with corpses aflame and lunges for the tow rope cutting the fireship free of the *Argo*, then leaps from the bow, rope in hand into her wake to be hauled onboard.

Unfettered by the tow, the *Argo* leaps like a hare in billowing grass and as she comes abreast of the still-anchored Colchian fleet, over the side go the dismembered body parts of prince Apsyrus, with a great cry of 'Save him if you can.'

What dishonour to the fleet, to have lost its prince and princess, and now to be left wallowing to literally pick up the pieces.

The *Argo* sails unimpeded into the mouth of the Danube and on into the future.

The rest, one might say, is history. Jason soon discovers that the short term benefits of wedding a sorceress are heavily outweighed by her outrages, as she moves from fratricide to infanticide, slaughtering Jason's beloved children in a jilted lover's act of revenge.

And so the doppelgänger begins to unravel, just as Odysseus sheds his heroic past to move towards a centre of family and comfortable old age, so Jason is propelled to the margins, condemned to wander alone.

The worn-down fellow, dressed in soiled homespun, girt with a leather thong, pulls on his dusty sandals and shoulders the cotton sack containing his scant provisions: a few silver pieces and a short sword with a dull blade.

He is down on his luck, estranged from whatever family remains and with mythic friends and heroes long gone. He carries with him more tales than any man alive, but no-one will pay them any heed, so he keeps them to himself, a silent testament to the past. Jason is broken; heartbroken, not for the homicidal dark Medea, nor even for his subsequent wives. Neither does he mourn the souls of his murdered children, he longs instead for his first true love, the *Argo*.

Jason squeezes a silver coin into the leathery hand of an ancient fisherman and commissions him to sail out to a small rocky island just visible on the shimmering horizon. The old man smiles as Jason clammers aboard and the two set off over the breathless waters, swallows skimming around them in the late afternoon sun. The old man has made a month's earnings in one afternoon.

The painted fishing boat noses its wide-eyed bows into a narrow sandy bay hugged by jagged rocks and Jason slides into the water to steady the craft. The old man asks if he should wait but Jason smiles and tells the old fellow to head home before dark and that he may be some time on this island. Waiting until the fishing boat diminishes to a speck in the deepening blue, Jason then shoulders his sack and climbs the

rocky outcrop at the southern end of the beach and follows a goat track through the low cliff-top scrub. As he walks he scans the crenellated rocks looking for a place lodged deep in his memory.

It was long ago that she was beached here, long and sad ago but at last Jason glimpses a broken spar wedged in a heather-sprouted crevice. He clammers down the rock-strewn cliff face and there she lies, her back broken and timbers scattered willy nilly, but still recognisable as the *Argo*.

Jason runs his hand along the sun-bleached planks shedding the tears of an old man, two broken souls reunited. He lays down his sack and searches the undergrowth for kindling for his fire, avoiding anything that resembles timber from the *Argo*. He sets a neat circle of stones close by the cage of her ribs, now canted at forty-five degrees and partly buried in the sand and settles down for the night, supping on his meagre rations of dry bread, olives and hard goat cheese.

He knows that he should perform a libation to Athena, to sacrifice a lamb, singe the carcass and cut strips of flesh from each limb and wrap them in sleek fat, sprinkle barley over them and surrender them to the fire, sending the sweet aroma heavenward. But all

Jason can offer is the sizzle of his white goat round and the aroma of burning bread, it will have to suffice.

Before sleep overtakes him Jason rises and walks silently in the moonlight through the broken ribs and sprung planking of the once supernatural vessel. He raises his arms up to the stem post with its weathered, disfigured carving, caressing it as oft times before when he would take advice and learn of the future.

'Are you still with me?' Jason asks in a cracked voice, 'Are you still to be my guide?' Silence, profound silence, Jason reaches his arms around the oracular timber in a strong embrace and at last the *Argo* sounds, not with a word but with a brittle crack as the stem post shears from its fastenings and falls heavily onto Jason, crushing the breath of life from his body. ❧

1 M. Jagger and K. Richards, *Sympathy for the Devil*.

2 Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, 1.273-276.

3 Pontus Axeinos or Inhospitable Sea was the early Greek name for the Black Sea which gradually transformed into Euxeinus Pontus, the Welcoming Sea.

4 Strabo, *Geography*.

5 The Rioni River, whose headwaters rise in the Caucasian Mountains in Georgia, debouches into the Black Sea at present day Poti.

6 A priestess of the Underworld goddess Hecate.



# A storm in Utopia



*For foure and twenty houres the storme in a restlesse tumult, had blowne so exceedingly, as we could not apprehend in our imaginations any possibility of greater violence,*

*yet did wee still finde it, not onely more terrible, but more constant, fury added to fury, and one storme vrging a second more outragious then the former.<sup>1</sup>*

**O**n that night, the muse rode aboard the vessel *Sea Venture*, and learnt the wiles of Neptune. A phosphorescent light now at the beak, now the mast-head, now at the waist, sending panic to and fro.

And the lowly creature Caliban bunked deep below decks moaning and clutching at his matted hair as the ship rolled and yawed, dreaming of his release, or finding kinship.

There is even a fleeting apparition of the Magician himself, flickering into being, for a moment, wrenching the wheel from the steersman, who with teeth clenched is thrown to larboard, then to starboard as the vessel plunges like a corkscrew into the troughs,



spars cracking, canvas splitting and cables flailing, dancing to the song of the devil himself.

*Hast thou, spirit,  
perform'd to point the tempest that I bade thee?*  
—Prospero

*To every article.  
I boarded the king's ship; now on the beak,  
now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin,  
I flamed amazement: sometime I'd divide,  
and burn in many places; on the topmast<sup>2</sup>  
The yards and bowsprit, would I flame, distinctly,  
then meet and join. Jove's lightnings, the precursors  
o' the dreadful thunder-claps, more momentary  
and sight-outrunning were not; the fire and cracks  
of sulphurous roaring the most mighty Neptune  
seem to besiege and make his bold waves tremble.  
—Ariel<sup>3</sup>*

The spectral master vanishes leaving the beaten *Sea Venture* leaking and dismasted to flounder on towards the Bermudas where she will find respite. The exhausted crew repair broken planking, re-rig the spars and mend the sails. She is victualled with fresh water, fruit, dried fish, live hogs and chickens

and once again put to sea on a course for the Virginia colony, seven hundred miles to the northwest.

*On the three and twentieth of May we cast Anchor before James Towne, where we landed, and our much grieued Gouvernour first visiting the Church caused the Bell to be rung<sup>4</sup>.*

The James Town fort is a sorry sight, its palisades torn down, the portals open, the gates of houses abandoned after the death of their owners torn off their hinges and rent apart for firewood by the surviving colonists, rather than risk a trip into the woodlands where

*the Indian killed as fast without, if our men stirred but beyond the bounds of their Block-house as Famine and Pestilence did within<sup>5</sup>.*

Of the 600 original colonists only 70 souls remain, emaciated, diseased and terrified of the natives' arrows. The seasick console the landsick. The storm at sea is over but the storm on land has just begun.

The imperative remains, the narrative must continue, the future Colony of Virginia must, for the sake of Empire, succeed. It shall develop into a utopia of productivity, of escalating share prices and commodity

booms, paying fat dividends to the comfortable parlours of Liverpool, Edinburgh, Bath and London. It will become a vast agrarian engine powered by sugar, rum and human flesh, black human flesh, spitting out ship holds full of cotton and tobacco to the tune of Cockney cusses, African chants and the crack of bull-whips.

The Cambion Caliban<sup>6</sup> takes well to this new, much bigger island; at least he has companions here amongst the African sorcerers and the Indian shamans, who are treated with equal disdain by the white overlords, the ruffian horse-thieves and kleptomaniac house maids, transported here as indentured labour. Like his African counterparts, he has the capacity to internalise and hide his culture, biding time to break-out and build his own utopia<sup>7</sup>. In contrast, everything that belongs to the masters is solid, blunt and obvious, things of power and pain, things only of external value and trade.

*Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,  
sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices  
that, if I then had waked after long sleep,*

*will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,  
the clouds methought would open and show riches  
ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,  
I cried to dream again.*

—Caliban<sup>8</sup>

The Virginia Colony will spread westward across this land to spawn a future where everything has to be dug, pumped and burnt; everything must burn. At night crosses burn, flames reflected in the eye-whites of the blacks. Coal, oil and tar formed by a million years of swampy growth must be cindered in an instant of geologic time, boiling the atmosphere and too often the skin; without it there is no progress. And the dispossessed, what are the Indians of Virginia left with in the end but concessions to sell tax-free cigarettes and alcohol; maybe to operate a cheap casino here and there.

The world smoulders, slaves escape to form maroon colonies in the swamps and infested places where even their tyrannical masters care not to follow. Refugees continue to board leaking vessels and put to sea, parted from their homelands and their money, terrified of the elements, dreaming of a better life, without suicide bombers or State terror.

*Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an  
acre of barren ground, long heath, brown furze,  
anything.*

*The wills above be done! but I would fain  
die a dry death.*

—Gonzalo<sup>9</sup>

Other outposts of Empire congeal. Other vessels arrive to describe and chart entry points into the shrinking unknown. In 1606 Willem Janszoon sails the tiny Jacht *Duyfken*<sup>10</sup> to Cape York which is swampy and lethal; ten of his crew are speared. The *Duyfken* quits the continent that Janszoon names *Nieu Zeland*<sup>11</sup> after charting several hundred kilometres of low-lying coastline. Later, during a second southern voyage in 1618, Janszoon grazes the West Australian coast and correctly presumes he is charting a large island.

However, in 1616 immediately prior to Janszoon's latter voyage, Dirk Hartog sailing the V.o.C. ship<sup>12</sup> *Eendracht* en route to Batavia, accidentally encounters an archipelago of low islands off Shark Bay in Western Australia. Hartog's crew explore the bay for three days but, finding nothing of significance, they content themselves to name the region *Eendrachtsland*. They prepare to sail to Java but before they leave they



engrave a pewter plate recording their landfall and nail it to a post.

*1616 DEN 25 OCTOBER IS HIER AEN GEKOMEN  
HET SCHIP DEENDRAGHT VAN AMSTERDAM  
DE OPPERKOPMAN GILLIS MIBAIS VAN LVIK  
SCHIPPER DIRCK HATICHS VAN AMSTERDAM  
DE 27 DITO TE SEIL GEGHM NA BANTVM  
DE ONDERKOPMAN JAN STINS DE OPPERSTVIERMAN  
PIETER DOOKES VAN BIL ANNO 1616*

And so it is that after millennia a new category of objects colonise Terra Australis. At the far western edge of the continent two hundred and sixteen European letters glitter each evening in the brilliant orange sunsets and slowly begin to oxidise in the daily on-shore sea breeze. Their destiny, to be found by those who can read.

Once again the land slumbers in the European imaginary until 1699 when the former buccaneer Dampier sailing the *Roebuck* makes extensive botanical notes as the first English explorer of Australia. The *Roebuck* cruises the rocky shores of north western Australia, short of water, food and female company, but there is nothing to excite the English mercantile sensibility on these arid shores, only desolation and hostility.

Despised by the officer class of the Royal Navy, but a darling of the Royal Society, Dampier's unconventional career cost him his rightful place in history, ousted by Captain Cook<sup>13</sup> as the most suitable candidate for explorer statues in the new colony. Even Cook's childhood cottage has managed to find its way from Yorkshire to be re-erected in a Melbourne public park, an authentic bit of the old country.

The new land sleeps in a heat haze. For the time being no-one can imagine a use for this seemingly empty place, devoid of spices, decent timber, or minerals. The sand, flies and heat must wait another hundred years until other new-world colonists rebel against the imperium and deny it the right to ship riff-raff to the Virginia plantations. Finally *Terra Incognita* is transformed from a biological curiosity into a gulag. The cancer spreads and contamination is assured.

*Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.*

*Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron;  
thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.*

—Psalms Chapter 2



North of the Burrup Peninsula, a paint-flaked Indonesian fishing boat capsizes, spilling one hundred refugees into the salt water, many drown a stone's throw from the shore. A coastguard vessel stands by to video the event and haul the survivors off to a remote detention centre. Here the dispossessed wait under the fluorescent lights of a purgatory designed to trade human dignity for political advantage. They will wait a long time, a very long time, in this place conceived by the hard-hearted, the same breed that would crush the world's oldest rock-art for road-base.

*Full fathom five thy father lies;  
of his bones are coral made;  
those are pearls that were his eyes:  
Nothing of him that doth fade  
but doth suffer a sea-change  
into something rich and strange.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.  
Hark! now I hear them,—Ding-dong, bell.  
—Ariel<sup>14</sup>*

South of the disaster scene, well beyond the attention of the naval video cameras, the chaotically piled rock formations of the Burrup Peninsula are engraved with thousands of sacred images of kangaroo and emu.

They have been here for more than forty thousand years. The petroglyphs stare out at the flume from the gas refinery that squats heavily on their land. Everything must burn.

'We are social creatures,' the paleo-archeologist said, gazing down at the face, its eyes wide, staring fixedly at the heavens. We know we are social creatures because we devote seventy percent of our visual cortex to face recognition. I look down at the face that has searched the skies for the past forty-thousand years, engraved into the weathered surface of the rock.

By night the face of the moon and the creatures formed by the stars, slowly track across the field of vision of these archaic eyes. By day the sun scorches the boulder rubble hills, varnishing the surface to a deep glossy red oxide, a surface too hot to touch by midday.

The eyes peer back through the heat shimmer, two perfect circles enclosed by a series of concentric lines forming the face, the first face, the first and oldest known image of a face on earth; it looks at me, I look back.

I try to imagine someone perched up here on top of this boulder mountain for days on end, a stone in each hand, impact upon impact. Most of the world was

still frozen, the land is crushed under massive walls of ice, the rest is arid and windswept. Here, by chance, a small enclave of milder, moister climate offered a foothold, some hundred kilometres from the coast, with small gorges, running creeks and game, which provided a homeland and triggered the desire to converse with the world.

I lift my field-glasses and scan the rocks that form the other side of this small gorge. Almost every jagged boulder carries a petroglyph: kangaroos, snakes and fish, turtles, men, women and faces. In this small area, maybe seven thousand images; on this island, maybe one and a half million.

I can see the glitter of the Indian Ocean barely one kilometre away and it dawns upon me that these images probably continue underwater for tens of kilometres out to sea, toward the original prehistoric coastline, this is the tip of the iceberg.

Fade from black—the white paleo-archeologist from the city poses in front of the TV crew to explain the history of the ancient images to an Indigenous ranger, who quietly nods his head and makes occasional affirmative noises. The scientist explains that the older petroglyphs represent terrestrial animals, commonly

hunted when humans first walked across the land-bridge from South East Asia during the last Ice Age, sixty thousand years ago. At that time, this archipelago was a range of rocky hills far inland. The black ranger knows a different story about *Murujuga*<sup>15</sup> but nods for the camera all the same.

The cameras cut to a nearby location, this time showing some more recent images of exclusively marine species, carved, the archeologist explains, a mere seven to five thousand years ago. The climate was warming fast and after a big thaw the land bridge to Asia disappeared under the sea. Australia became an island continent. At the same time, Noah's Ark endured the storms on the newly formed Black Sea. The ranger smiles to himself, 'Black Sea,' wicked name he thinks.

Eons ago his ancestors walked here from what we now call Asia. They wrapped themselves in skins and walked across the frozen tundra. There were no trees then and not much game, just space, plenty of space and no people. Then the trees slowly marched south and covered the land and the sea surged into the valleys and swallowed the shorelines.

Since the *balanda*<sup>16</sup> came in ships, even these islands have begun to drown, as if these pale ghosts caused



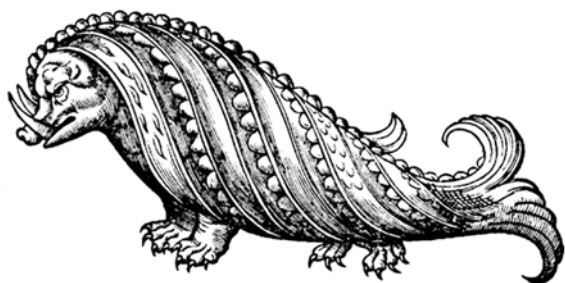
© 1964 G. G. G.

the Pacific to swell up and suck down whole islands into the belly of the ocean.

White men floating on wooden islands, explorers, sealers and pirates: they too were swallowed up by the waters, some in the fury of a maelstrom, others manacled to iron rings at London's Execution Dock. They say that those poor souls remained chained for three tides. Three tides to make sure they were drowned and gone and all the while Judge Jeffreys sitting in his private room in the *Angel Inn* across the river in Bermondsey, sipping ale with a twisted grin on his face. Everything must burn, burn and drown.

The scientist is drawing a mud-map with a stick. A sawtooth pattern in the sand: long slow diagonals descending from the left, followed by sharp upward strokes, representing gradual cooling followed by a rapid warming, the brief inter-glacial she calls it. That's the way it works and has done so for millions of years. Again she scratches in the sand, the slow warming rise has gone vertical in the past fifty years, it's a *hockey stick lying on its back*—everything must burn, burn and drown. ❧

- 1 A true repertory of the wracke, and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight; vpon, and from the Ilands of the Bermudas: his coming to Virginia, and the estate of that Colonie then, and after, vnder the gouernment of the Lord La Warre, July 15. 1610. written by William Strachey Esquire.
- 2 St. Elmo's fire, named after St. Erasmus of Formiae, the patron saint of sailors, is a weather phenomenon in which luminous plasma is created by a coronal discharge from a sharp or pointed object in a strong electric field in the atmosphere during thunderstorms or volcanic eruptions.
- 3 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, sc.2.
- 4 William Strachey op. cit.
- 5 William Strachey op. cit.
- 6 According to Prospero in *The Tempest*, Caliban is a Cambion, the half-human son of Sycorax by a devil. Moreover, to beget a child is the act of a living body, but devils cannot bestow life upon the bodies they assume; because life formally proceeds only from the soul, and the act of generation is the act of the physical organs which have bodily life. Therefore bodies which are assumed in this way cannot either beget or bear. *Malleus Maleficarum*.
- 7 A map of the world which does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias."—Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*.
- 8 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 3, sc.2.
- 9 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, sc.1.
- 10 Little Dove.
- 11 A title not adopted for Australia but later used by Abel Tasman to describe Aotearoa.
- 12 Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnieschip.
- 13 And we make such a fuss about Captain Cook who's life compared to that of Dampier's, is stolid.
- 14 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, sc.2.
- 15 The Jaburara name meaning *Hip bone sticking out*.
- 16 Indigenous name for Europeans.







Sybil  
2007

# Charon the Ferryman



On the mainland, the truck is standing outside, all but loaded for the journey to the coastal lagoons. He makes a final circuit of the control room to pick up the remaining vital items for the trip, the gun and the portable radio receiver, then quits the building. After three hours in which the cab radio has competed with the rattle of the diesel truck, he curses, stops the vehicle and checks the glove compartment without any apparent conviction, merely to confirm that the cartridges for his hunting rifle are still lying in the corner of the control room.

He returns, the truck pulls up outside. He cuts the motor. He is passing through the first of the steel blast doors. His ID card is scrutinised. He passes beyond the second door. He is positioned before a downward sloping corridor, which terminates in its own vanishing point, he is walking. He is standing at the head of a perforated steel spiral stairway. He descends. His ID is re-confirmed, this time by another who cannot or will not speak. He proceeds to the transmitter room.

He is seated before the device; he glances to the left in order to indicate his readiness to the other operator, who returns his gaze with a studied neutral acknowledgement calculated to dispel any emotional contact. The surrounding atmosphere is perfectly conditioned. They return their focus to the device, the dual keys are inserted simultaneously and locked to the right: a threshold is crossed, the transmission proceeds, its radiations emanating to fill every crevice of the known world. He walks diagonally across the room to the opposite corner and stoops to retrieve the two cases of cartridges and, as a secondary measure, picks up some spare power cells for the portable receiver unit. He is now free to leave, he is seated behind the wheel of the truck.

In between the land of the still living and that of the dead there is a cave.

The truck passes along a dry valley floor, moving over a pavement of rock slabs, which float in drifts of brilliant quartz sand, the fossil remains of some prehistoric beach. Gradually the vehicle descends into the dense scrub which lines the lower reaches of the gorge.

At the creek he slows to a halt and out of respect turns off the cab radio, this creek flows down from the silent

cave, a place that only the very old may visit. On the driver's side, to the north-east, the country eventually opens out to form the coastal plains with their lagoon systems, but to his left the massive jumble of dissected sandstone ridges continue unbroken, parallel to the distant shore.

The old lady sits only a metre from the brightness of the creek. From here her vacant gaze is filled with the movements of crayfish, creatures that promise such good eating. This country will be her larder, an old lady's privilege.

He lingers a while, his toes and the front tyres of the vehicle are immersed in the creek. Idly he considers how good the fishing would be here but that will doubtless be his privilege in many years to come. He is bound to continue his journey, out of respect for the old, from fear of the Keeper's censure, and propelled by his desire to bag geese on the salt-water lagoons to the northeast.

He imagines that he can already hear faint rifle reports drifting in on the coastal breeze, his brothers and sisters must be eating roast goose by now. He hoists himself into the cab, the truck fords the creek, the radio returns; goose and gun-sight eclipse in his mind's eye.

The old lady remains, sitting motionless in the shade of the cave entrance patiently waiting for the Keeper and his dogs. A day, two days and then she crawls into the darkness of the silent cave, carefully propping her spine against the smoothness of the rock surface. She lifts her gaze to the fading light that inhabits the cave entrance, closes her eyes and is gone.

Throughout that night and during the following day the transmission continues; the two keys remain locked into the central control panel of the device, a guarantee against equivocation. The room slumbers in a monochrome red light; the atmosphere is constantly re-circulated and monitored. Many metres deeper, the automatic power plant spins a thread of high voltage energy up through the device and onward to dissipate at the terminals of the antennae.

Around the shores of the lagoon the transmission rains down on the hunters camp, mixing with the smell of roast goose. It irradiates the cabinets of their portable radios and enters the cabs of their vehicles but is unable to penetrate the tuning circuits or manifest in the small amplifiers. Popular music, carried on different frequencies, grants the hunters immunity.

The transmission showers down on the Keeper, bathing his head and body with a foreign knowledge. But the Keeper is an old man; he doesn't have a radio, doesn't want one either. He too is a master of the silent gesture, his conversations are with the departed as he helps them on their way from this place to the next. He is the gatekeeper who ensures the living that this is a one-way traffic.

By now the dogs will have visited the old lady, she will be scattered. The Keeper must gather her up and install the bone pieces in a crevice high in the cave wall. From here the old lady will be able to continue her journey without cause to return. He sprinkles the floor with fresh water from the creek and very slowly sweeps the cave with a green branch. It is cool under the overhang, it is always cool; a good place to sit and watch the crayfish.

The light has been fading for some time now, for quite how long it is impossible to estimate, it is only possible to remark that a feeble red glow remains in the upper atmosphere. Apparently the transmission stopped abruptly a day ago, all the radios are silent. It is now possible to imagine the faint sound of distant gunfire somewhere far to the north. ☸



# The Curtain Call



*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
as I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
are melted into air, into thin air:  
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
the cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,  
the solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
and, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
as dreams are made on; and our little life  
is rounded with a sleep.*

—The Tempest<sup>1</sup>

Uncle stalks barefoot through the rough underbrush. With his grizzled chin and prolific curly grey hair I can't make out how old he is; he probably doesn't know either. The jungle floor is littered with abandoned ceremony sites, huge bleached wooden carvings set around earthen mounds, their significance fading at the conclusion of the ritual, to be slowly reclaimed by the verdure and the annual burn-offs.



Uncle points to a blackened tree, 'Over there,' he says, 'I speared 'im, that Jap fella, bugger's plane in the lagoon, see.' Uncle points again towards the shoreline and tells me of a couple of other airmen he speared after they bailed out of their Mitsubishi G4M heavy bomber during one of the raids on Darwin. Uncle must have barely been a teenager then, recruited into the North Australia Observer Unit, which patrolled the endless coastal stretches of these tropical islands.

It must have been a horrible way to go but these islanders have always been fierce and have never needed the imprimatur of a government to maintain their sovereignty. Even so it is hard to imagine this dignified and wise old man skewering a group of terrified boys from Tokyo.

Eventually, we clear the fringe of the jungle and walk back into the settlement. I politely decline an invitation to join a poker game being conducted under a massive fig tree by three old Aunties, on the grounds that they are playing with several decks of cards simultaneously and that the stakes are rising to two thousand dollars. They would have me for breakfast in a trice.

Uncle leaves me with the slightest of nods and the faintest smile and I head back to my bivouac perched

atop a clay bank adjacent to the straits. At night my torch lights up the glowing red eyes of saltwater crocodiles who lie grinning at the water's edge, willing me to come down for a dip. I will miss this place.

Later, my rucksack is hefted through the loading door into the cargo net and I climb the creaking aluminum steps into the plane. Airborne, the Dakota hums softly as it bobs like a cork on the humid thermals which rise through the haze from the warm shallow sea three thousand metres below. The seats are shabby leatherette and chipped grey steel tube, straight out of an old school-bus. The smiling Polynesian attendant serves tepid fruit juice in plastic cups. Through the scarred perspex porthole, sandbars slide below; so too the snaking blue water channels which will eventually merge with the mangrove deltas and swampland of the north coast.

Paradoxically, I feel comfortable in this beaten-up crate: even though it must be nearly seventy years old, there is a softness and openness about it, which is totally unlike the claustrophobic cabins I will endure on the final sector of my journey home, entombed in a 747. I remind myself that when I get to the terminal I must find a book for the trip, I have re-read my

dog-eared copy of *The Tempest* so many times that I virtually know it off by heart.

I wander around the half-empty cabin of the Dakota peering through the portholes when, through a parting in the low cloud, an ark comes into view floating on the milky swell. An ark hewn from Lebanon cedar and with classical proportions, three hundred cubits long, fifty wide and a deckhouse thirty cubits high<sup>2</sup>. But as I look closer I see that the deckhouse departs from the convention and is circular in form with an open central court and what appears to be an apron stage. And there moving about, not animals two by two but a troupe of players, perhaps even the original *Lord Chamberlain's Men* transported here from Shoreditch, they look skyward at the Dakota and together take a formal bow.

Certainly somehow old Prospero must conclude this play, close the book and gently wake the sleepers from the dream that he has spun. But how is the master-weaver, the one who beguiles and mystifies, who paints the virtual *mise-en-scène* within men's minds, to dispel the haze of illusion and gently bring us back to reality in a world that is ill at ease?

For indeed the Bard's is an art that deals in balance, where tragedy plays out an inexorable logic, but ultimately a just logic. Even when evil is present, when all is said and done, the world is painted as a moral place, and the drama is simply a drama, a storm in a tea-cup.

Down below on the deck of the ark they are concluding the play, with its happy and satisfying resolution.

*But this rough magic  
I here abjure, and, when I have required  
some heavenly music, which even now I do,  
to work mine end upon their senses that  
this airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,  
bury it certain fathoms in the earth,  
and deeper than did ever plummet sound  
I'll drown my book<sup>3</sup>.*

In a world that is ill at ease who is to play the music, solemn or heavenly on a stage that smoulders? ❧

1 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 4, sc.1.

2 One Cubit is approximately 20 inches or the length from the elbow to the fingertips.

3 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 5, sc.1.

This book is dedicated to my forbears; weavers of frail  
coracles; helmsmen of longships; fishers of the cold North Sea  
and riveters of iron ships.

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I would like to extend my gratitude to my Turkish colleague Öykü Özer for our collaboration that resulted in her beautiful illustrations. To Chris Mansell for her incisive and supportive editorial advice and to Suzanne Bocalatte for her crisp design work. My thanks to the Australia Council for the Arts for their financial support of the Deluge Ark(ive) publication and accompanying sound-sculpture exhibition and to Sean Kelly and his colleagues at the Moonah Arts Centre in Hobart, Tasmania where the project will debut. And last but certainly not least my heartfelt thanks to Cecelia Cmielewski for her encouragement, forbearance and capacity to keep me grounded whilst I gazed at the horizon.

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Nigel is an independent artist with an international reputation for large scale sound-sculpture installations, environmental public artworks, museum inter-actives and new media projects that focus on our relationship with the natural world.

He lives with his wife Cecelia Cmielewski in Sydney and Jervis Bay and they share a crew of four children and four grandchildren. ॐ

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Deluge Ark(ive) is a fairytale that starts thirteen thousand years ago when our ancestors were witness to a catastrophic event. Finally the ice began to melt; the oceans began to rise and the land to flood, an environmental apocalypse irrigating the myth-memory of human consciousness.

