

In the autumn of 2021, I was commissioned by Aberdeen Performing Arts to write a piece about Aberdeen's relationship with the sea, to be the foundation for a visual artist to create work to be exhibited in Aberdeen's Music Hall. This is the piece of writing and a short account of the collaboration between me and the artist Gill Russell.

A Narrow Glimpse of Sea

From one of the top windows, I can see the sea. It's only a narrow glimpse through the branches, densely leafed or stark and bare, of the beech tree in a next-door garden. On days of rain the small line of sea melts imperceptibly into water. But seen or unseen I know it's there, three miles ahead.

During the months of lockdown, I run upstairs often, day or night and stand by the window to look down through the long corridor of Aberdeen which connects me to that line of sea, over a landscape of trees and gardens, over the roofs of silent offices, over walls and windows and empty streets. Occasionally, a random glint of red or green blinks from a traffic-light at a

junction somewhere, still giving out its earnest warnings to nobody. The sky changes, glowing from dawn to morning, ebbing sapphire into blue-black dusk. In ways which once we could never have imagined, nothing is certain or fixed or where it should be. Every day, as news reaches us from elsewhere, heavy, static hours can swirl in a moment into sudden, fearful weightlessness. Beginnings have become as unclear as endings, if there will ever be an ending. Every human being everywhere on earth might be suspended, each in our own individual sac of lonely, resolute anxiety.

The city below me which I once thought familiar has become distant, hushed and immobile as if cast under an enchanter's secret spell. For years, I've been an inveterate city walker, a flâneuse, one of those idle wanderers who seeks out unexpected turnings, following unlikely routes just to see where they might lead but suddenly, all the landscapes I've known best are different. On some late afternoons, a clear amber light illuminates the flat roofs and white walls of the blocks of flats at the end of the lane behind the house, turning this into a southern city, Tunis perhaps, Djibouti, Alexandria. In my mind, it's always a maritime city. As I watch, I think of the ways cities change, not only with the light. I think of how mutable they are, the ways in which they flourish and they fall, how susceptible they are to weather or tides or markets or just the randomness of fate. Sometimes as I watch, I

could forget exactly where I am. What keeps me here in place, connected with the world is the small line of sea and the wide, high north east sky.

If light alters perception, quiet does too. There are isolated days which unfold unexpectedly, feeling almost as they did when we still understood how days and hours worked. On one, I hear an engine overhead and for a moment I'm bewildered until the timbre of journeys steals back with the fading engine hum. Then, I recall the sensation of travelling away from Aberdeen, how the plane will turn to slant low over a furrowed slab of copper sea, the city dissolving in summer light. I remember too how on coming back, the city will appear on winter afternoons, resolving in a moment from a grey billow spun from cold air like some ancient, mystic city transforming itself from mist to stone.

One Saturday afternoon early in lockdown, I watch a neighbour come out of her flat across the road. All afternoon, she sits on her steps in jeans and a wedding veil. From behind the blind in an upstairs room opposite, a bright yellow survival suit hangs in partial shadow on the back of a door.

My neighbour can't be the only one to have sat like this, alone in a time of crisis. Once a few years ago, I followed the plague through Aberdeen from

Footdee to the Green and Carmelite Street, through Shiprow and St Nicholas Kirkyard to Woolmanhill, tracing the legacy of death. Bubonic plague— ‘the Black Death’— ravaged Europe *seriatum* for centuries, striking Aberdeen a dozen times between the early years of the 15th century and one final, catastrophic episode in 1647. Over those years, the city became known for its swift, efficient handling of plague, the posting of guards at Pitfodels and the Bridge of Dee on first news of its approach, the imposition of restrictions—disinfections and distancing, lockdowns, quarantines, isolations. People covered their faces with vinegar-soaked cloths.

All during spring and summer, I keep the windows onto the back garden open. There’s no traffic noise, only the calling of jackdaws, magpies, crows, sparrows chattering in the ivy. I’m glad that this newly quiet realm belongs to them. A few times while I’m working in the garden, a sparrowhawk flies down and perches near me on the back of a garden chair, inexplicably completely unafraid. At night, the wind blows in gull-songs from the darkness in all their other-worldly transcendence. I think of them soaring above the night-time streets in drifts of silver light.

In spring and autumn, the geese pass overhead, leaving and returning, trailing their calls like scattered memories.

Sometime as I watch, I imagine their flight as lines across the skies, threads extending to encircle the earth, as if by some method we can't understand, these strands of flight might just be the twine that holds the world together.

Through the leaves of high summer, the building behind the house, the office of an oil industry organisation, looks like the deck of a ship sailing regally to nowhere. On some nights, the building's lit and on others it's in darkness.

Every day, a friend sends photos from her walks along the beach and coast near her home. Although it's only a few miles away, it feels as though we're communicating between distant continents. 'I'm grateful for the solace of the sea,' she writes. Her photos are of waves and clouds and birds: Great Northern divers, Arctic skuas, sanderlings and cormorants, oystercatchers, gulls, of dolphins too and once the fog-grey image of a minke whale. Some have been taken at Donmouth, the broad, aqueous expanse where the river Don enters the sea, a place of confluences, a meeting of waters. I think of still more words to place this city among waters; *source* and *flow*, *current*, *tide*, *riverine*, *estuarine* and I see the twin river traces of Dee and Don traversing the eighty miles eastwards from their meagre headwaters in the high mountain Wells of Dee and boggy peatland of the Well of Don, downwards and outwards in the intimate connectivity of land and water.

Estuaries are more than they seem. Most of the world's largest cities are estuarine. 60% of the world's population live near an estuary. Because of the unique circumstances of the merging of fresh and salty water, the ecosystems of estuaries are among the most productive of all for many species, including humans. A mingling of waters is dynamic, the flow itself seeming purposeful as it heads outwards, beyond, towards other oceans.

Often, this connected outside world seems both faraway and all too near. In the first months of lockdown, there's flooding in Indonesia, Kenya, Uganda. Record heat occurs in both Arctic and Antarctic as Australian megafires rage. Later in the year, a third of Bangladesh is underwater after the worst monsoons this century. The temperature in Death Valley climbs to the highest ever recorded—54.4° C. For the first time in years, I avoid checking the website of the Observatory at Mauna Loa in Hawaii which monitors levels of atmospheric gases, something I've done weekly since I began writing about the natural world.

The sea has become source of solace for many since the pandemic began, not only for my friend. I come across personal memoirs, videos, recordings, photos posted from everywhere on earth; named or unnamed oceans scrolling in molten gold or raging, white and high and wild.

Like winds gusting and passing, lockdowns lift and fall again, restrictions ease and return. By now, we seem almost a different species, newly wary in the face of fast, invisible predation. When I go out at last, I 'm watching, peering, scuttling. The streets are eerily quiet. *'The grass was in the streets,'* a contemporaneous account of plague in Aberdeen recorded, *'and not a smoake in both townes'*.

Walking near home, I feel the changes infiltrating all the layers of our known worlds. One was already underway but now it has accelerated. The 'To Let' and 'For Sale' signs which were here outside the premises of oil offices have proliferated. Nameplates and signs have gone, buildings are empty. I look through windows into abandoned rooms. The earnest assemblages of people I used to see when I was walking home at twilight have dispersed. Chairs and conference tables are gone. On a few walls, screens still hang, blank and staring. I'm momentarily disorientated, as if the pandemic has altered time. When did I see these places last? Was it a month, six months, a year? Words too have changed. The sign outside the oil industry organisation behind my house has been replaced. The logo is the same but the words 'oil' and 'gas' have gone.

On one of the cool mornings in summer after I read emails from friends, one in Canada and one in Spain, both complaining of the extraordinary heat, I sit in the garden and think about the nature of cold. This morning, cold seems precious, to be cherished as we cherish what we might be about to lose. I wonder, will cold become a rare and valuable commodity? What might be the price of cold? Suddenly, our indifferent summer has become a gift.

The first time I walk by the sea again, it's on yet another bright, cool morning. Wind turbines turn implacably over the calm, concealing sea. I think about how little we know of the life of the sea or of submarine species who are so radically *other*, their names, taxa, ecological niches and roles either unfamiliar or unknown and I wonder why. *Phytoplankton*, *zooplankton*, *micronekton*, *macrobenthos*, multitudinous inhabitants of unimagined places of bathymetry, gradients, seafloors, of *pelagic* and *benthic* in an inverse topography of depths: *supralittoral*, *littoral*, *sublittoral*, *bathyal*, *abyssal*, *hadal*. (*Hadal*, from the Greek, 'Hades', the underworld, the origin of 'Hadean', the geologic era of Earth's beginnings.)

The oceans are the origins of 50-80% of the oxygen on Earth, the majority of which is created by oceanic plankton, *phytoplankton*, photosynthetic

marine organisms which drift in the currents, the basis of the marine food chain. According to the High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, protecting marine ecosystems could contribute towards absorbing the equivalent of 1.4bn tons of emissions as year by 2050.

Despite the cold, I take off my shoes to paddle in the almost-freezing water. Nothing indicates that the seas are warming, absorbing large amounts of emissions of anthropogenic Co₂, that between 1901 and 2020, sea temperatures rose on average by 0.14° F each decade, that the increase has led, among other harms such as the melting of glaciers and sea-ice, to a drastic loss of oceanic species and the endangerment of many more. 5,652 sea creatures face extinction according to the last IUCN Red List of Threatened Marine Species, with 45,000 more under threat from the effects of anthropogenic activity. (If humanity has dealt viciously with terrestrial species, it has done far worse to marine ones by its rapacity and greed, in its failure to acknowledge or respect the finitude of the sea's resources.) Here, there isn't even any visible evidence, as there is in so many places, of our careless, vast and wanton habit to pollute.

Past the wind turbines, nothing hints at the once all-pervasive presence of the oil and gas industry. There's nothing to be seen, neither rig nor supply

vessel on the horizon, nothing to tell of the damage to marine ecosystems caused by the long-term, deep-water exploitation of hydrocarbons. There's no evidence of the effects of decades of seismic surveying, from oil and methane leaks, from flaring or from toxic chemicals in drilling mud, of the damage and displacement to seabed ecosystems inflicted by the installation of platforms and pipelines and anchors, the destruction of corals and sponges caused by the dragging of heavy equipment. Everything is hidden as it always was, sunk in the Hadean depths.

Over the next few years, some 600 North Sea oil wells and 45 platforms— 1.2 million tonnes of redundant equipment— are to be taken out of use and decommissioned but many have been in place for so long, they've become important habitat for cold-water corals and jellyfish, for sea-anemones and starfish, for comb jellies and scallops, for mussels and many species of fish, places of shelter for the multitude of marine creatures (including some of the most endangered) upon whom the seas and indeed the planet, depend for their health.. Many marine biologists and environmentalists believe it preferable to leave these installations undisturbed, a measure called 'Rigs to Reefs' but international legal requirements for decommissioning appear to prevent its implementation, despite the massive environmental damage and loss of marine life which is incurred by decommissioning.

Stepping through the clearness of this cold water, I'm aware again of my place in the scale of things, between earth and sky. This very minor act feels like an intrusion into the ebb of life rising and falling around my ankles, eddying out beyond where I'm standing to a vast, unseen universe of almost incomprehensible beauty, of *echinoderm, cnidarian and ctenophore*, to an entire universe of creatures glowing and brilliant, translucent or bioluminescent, radiant, the colours of jewels, creatures so unknown to us that I see their lives as clouds of drifting ink writing lines in an ancient hieratic script we'll never be able to read.

On the beach, the movement of the waves has carved the sand into a flowing bas relief like leaves or trees or veins or the bones of fossil birds.

When I'm at home again, I look at the jar I keep in the kitchen of stones and shells and sea glass I've gathered from beach walks over years and they seem to challenge me now as if in many acts of wanton greed, I've snatched them from the place where they belong.

For a while, the traffic-less tranquillity feels restorative but in time, it becomes unnerving. Behind the birdsong is knowledge of the speed of

avian declines, the unnerving early morning quiet when once there was singing, a silence too close to a warning, a reminder of what's already lost. On an afternoon in early winter, I overhear a woman in a shop choosing a brooch in the shape of a bird. 'I love birds now,' she says, 'during lockdown, they were my only companions.' Days later, a list is published of birds of conservation concern and on the 'red' list of the most seriously endangered, 70 species are named, among them nightingale, lapwing and curlew, kittiwake, herring gull and Arctic skua, skylark, puffin, greenfinch, sparrow, swift.

The first chill of winter seems to happen so quickly in this disordered scheme of time. Although we can't know it, the coming year will be no different from the last—in fact, it will be worse. In Spain, Storm Filomena will bring unprecedented blizzards. Storm Christoph will flood areas of England and Texas will freeze. The oceans will suffer too—areas of the Arctic Sea will experience extreme marine heatwaves in the early months of the year. By summer, north west Canada will be scorched as wildfires devastate the countries of the Mediterranean. Areas of Germany and Belgium will drown. For the first time, rain will fall at Summit Station, the highest point on the Greenland Ice Sheet. When these things happen, we'll all be shocked. I'll hear people say, 'It's so sudden'. Perhaps because our

lives are now so concentrated, we'll be unable to look away. It may be too that at last, the world will be scared.

But none of it is sudden. In 1767, the Swiss scientist, Horace Bénédict de Saussures put forward the theory that a 'greenhouse effect' might cause global warming. The French physicist Joseph Fourier, investigating how planetary temperatures are controlled, came to the same conclusion in 1824, as did as did Claude Pouillet, professor of physics at the Sorbonne in 1838. The American scientist Edith Foote demonstrated in 1856 that increasing levels of carbon dioxide would lead to increased planetary temperatures and five years later, the Irish physicist John Tyndall concluded the same. In 1895, the Swedish physical chemist Svante Arranhuus predicted that burning hydrocarbons would heat the atmosphere of Earth.

From the late 1950s, their own scientists were beginning to warn oil companies of the potential effects of their products. In 1979, the conclusions of a study undertaken by one major oil company made clear the enormous future environmental damage the continued burning of fossil fuels would cause. Despite this, the findings were suppressed. Together with other leading oil companies, they collaborated systematically to

undermine warnings about the possibility of devastating climate change and to encourage widespread doubt about the science upon which predictions were based. Nobody will ever know how much their deception cost.

I look at a book I bought many years ago. Compiled by a collective of French photographers, journalists and writers, it was dedicated to the task of documenting the consequences of the changing climate. The photographs are of climate refugees, their flight from ravaged land and melting ice, from rising seas and ruined livelihoods, the titles of chapters, 'Alaska, the Kigiqtaamiut in Jeopardy', 'Maldives, An Archipelago in Peril, 'Tuvalu, Polynesian Requiem'. The book was published in 2007. Appeals to the world to take action were stark and dire and urgent.

What happens when things are lost, birds or names or worlds? Which stories do we tell with the words that are left? Ones to lament only that once, these things existed? Ones which recount the nature of their ending?

In a glossary of oil industry terms, I find almost 5000 words. 219 begin with 'A', 160 with 'H', 555 with 'S'. They're arcane, precise and single-use. Unlike the ones we've become familiar with over years, 'drilling', 'pipeline',

'rig', or even the interim words of the moment, 'orphaned', decommissioned', 'abandoned', most will not be noticed when they disappear. (There are new words: 'renewables', 'net zero', 'transition' but we can't know yet exactly what they'll mean.) There are the names which surrounded us for so long, company names and oilfield names and the names of the vessels we passed as we walked by the harbour, weighted with vainglorious fantasies of the might of gods or self-aggrandising visions of supremacy in war. Someone in future time may reflect on them. They may be a reminder of the briefly glittering gifts of the moment, the single dazzling flare before the end. Then, no one may be able to remember how fiercely we blazed until the inescapable day when we knew that what had made us blaze had made us burn.

On a morning in the first days of November, I walk through the chilly, almost empty streets. It's bright, the trees dazzle in a singular late autumn colour-storm of brilliance. There's an early morning sense of being in a foreign city with all its unaccustomed newness. It's a feeling I've always loved for the charm of the almost unknown, the beguilement of a strange city in early morning carrying out its rituals of preparations for the day. The sense is there in the covered outdoor cafes, the bikes plying their way through the almost traffic-less streets, baskets full of provender to be

delivered, an urgency and bustle. I feel like the flâneuse I once was, that almost-lost, almost-forgotten stroller by chance and inclination.

I walk down towards the harbour through the once-gracious Georgian streets. The life of any maritime city is a reflection of terrestrial and marine, stone and water, of the visible and the invisible too perhaps. Here, the past's stamped in topography and stone, each incarnation eclipsing the last, port city, merchant city, whaling city, fishing city, oil city, a history in legends, stories, myths, the songs of the terrible dangers of the sea. It's there in more lost names, these ones too written in oil and blood and fire. As we do with so many elements of the past, we remember with nostalgia, sweeping away anachronism and ruin, romanticising the hardship we don't have to live any more. Stories change and myths stay but fade and one day, will be overtaken, the new overlaying the old. As I walk, I note the traces and reminders, signs on doors, old flakes of posters stuck to lampposts, still interiors of shops now closed, dry leaves and old paper sheltering in their unused doorways, the silences and spaces left behind. There's a sense of loss but of recognition too, as if what's gone was brief and temporary, here only for a single, too quick moment, past even regret. Once, I'd have been dismayed by the absences but now, they seem more part of an accelerated

process of what has always been, as if unbidden, we're living in a sudden, unanticipated future.

I turn onto Regent Quay and carry on across Trinity Quay to Market Street, past the ferry terminal, another moment of feeling that I might be in a foreign city, one where ferries sail out to mystic places which may or may not exist, like the line of sea I watch from my window.

Time too on this bright and quiet morning, is part of this city, continuing as cities do in the absence of disaster or of war. Our lives seem stamped lightly. I think of walking with my small children along the quays in those faraway days before high fences and intercoms and guards, the three of us clutching at a bollard in a gale. I think of the day when we might all sit again in summer evening dusks, watching ships moving out one by one beyond the lights and safety of the harbour into the power of the sea and the wind.

Notes on a Collaboration

Gill Russell and Esther Woolfson

In autumn 2021, I'm invited to write a piece about Aberdeen. It is to include 'issues surrounding the current crisis facing the oil industry, species loss, environmental pressures and 'the deeply embedded coastal narrative of the North East of Scotland' ...to look at the role of the sea in the lives and identity of the city and its inhabitants.' How I approach it will be my decision and the work is to be 'used by an artist/maker who will create an artwork in response.' There is to be an exhibition at the Music Hall in Aberdeen.

Like most writers, I'm accustomed to working alone but in the past couple of years, most of us may have been just a bit too alone. The prospect of a collaboration, which I've experienced in only very limited ways, is joyous.

I begin writing a piece as a baseline for our future work with the usual questions in my mind—what is important? Where, in time and place, do I stand? A decision about the pandemic is inescapable. Will writing about it be

clichéd, irrelevant or unavoidable? I decide the last. But central, will be the sea.

The artist with whom I'll be working is Gill Russell whose work I know from her delicate and beautiful mapping. I read of her interest in places and their significance, and of her work in many different forms and with many different, similarly accomplished artists and musicians and I hope only that I can match up.

Shortly before Christmas, Gill and I meet at the Music Hall on an achingly cold day. Gill has driven for more than an hour from her home to the west while I've walked the fifteen minutes from mine. We've met before, once, a few years ago at the house of mutual friends. We wander round the gallery space where I find the prospect of empty walls daunting, reminiscent of a blank page, the writer's bane. I suspect that for an artist, it might be different and later, Gill tells me that it's so. She finds the potential of blank walls exciting. As it would be on our first meeting, our talk is tentative, uncharted.

In the following days, we begin to exchange emails, sharing links, attachments, ideas, probably more than we'll ever be able to incorporate into this one work. Topics in our first ones include Virginia Woolf, urban and

country walking, birds and migration, lost villages, liturgical poetry, abandoned fishing gear, human fragility, oral history and sea lore. We share a view on harms to the environment. In one email, I mention the quilt I'm embroidering for my granddaughter, a lockdown project that now seems without foreseeable end, based on an illustration in the medieval Rohan Books of Hours of 'Animals looking at the Stars.' It is executed with more determination than skill. In addition to the animals in the original, it features bats, birds, Arctic and marine creatures and is a haphazard thing. Gill, with considerable generosity, asks if images of it might be included in the exhibition.

On a day towards the end of January, we walk together from the estuary of the Don to the estuary of the Dee. We meet in the High Street and stroll through Cruickshank Gardens to an outdoor exhibition about the artists of the Białystok ghetto. We talk about our own families and history as we walk down through Seaton Park, following the Don through the woods to where it meets the sea. The day is brilliant, sunlit after a season of storms. As we approach the Brig o' Balgownie, we're discussing the burning of witches, the cruelties and injustices of past and present.

Over lunch at an outdoor café by the beach, we're both charmed by the birds who surround us, Gill by the large herring gull who, standing on a table next to us, casually gobbles a foil wrapped chocolate in its entirety, I by the starling who nibbles from my plate, a happening all too familiar to me after living with birds for so long.

We walk on towards Footdee where Gill has arranged for us to visit Dales Engineering to see an oil supply vessel being repaired in dry dock. The experience is thrilling, the utter strangeness of an industrial environment, our host Richard Scaife's graciousness, descending the 6 metres to the floor of the dock down rusted metal stairs to stand under the huge metal hull, whale-shaped and whale sized, a tower of scarred and sturdy metal which must have made its way through the depths of Earth's every ocean. We are so small standing beside it and I wonder where, in relation to it, we might be placed on a scale of living things. Somewhere it's clear, between cetacean and krill. There's a vibrant air both contemporary and ancient at Dales, a sense of the confident continuation of the skills and traditions of this most venerable of occupations, the repair of ships.

After our visit, ships and whales sail and swim unbidden into my thoughts and dreams as I remember that during the 18th and part of the 19th centuries, the

centre for the rendering of whale blubber for oil lamps was a short walk from where Dales is now, as I see again the list I found of the names of North East whaling ships and their fates: 'wrecked', 'lost', 'crushed in ice'. I'll think of superstitions and traditions of the sea, the taboos, propitiations, the words which might never be mentioned, the rational and irrational, the inescapable, justified fears.

Gill and I continue to email—we discuss the courses of the Don and Dee and I'm impressed again by her deep knowledge of the area of the sources of both rivers. I'm occupied with the idea of estuaries. There are more gales during which Gill's electricity supply is cut for days for a second time. She contracts Covid but works on. I feel guilty, working unhindered.

In one email, Gill describes our collaboration as 'circular' which is a good word, complete. We don't yet know we're working in the shadow of war.

When we next meet, probably for the final time before our separate deadlines, Gill is measuring, planning in a way I don't have to. She has to prepare and install an exhibition, I have to press 'send'. At this meeting, we talk, as everyone else, of Ukraine, of our anger and despair, the shared feelings of one united part of humanity. Our work together has concentrated on the fragility

of life and now, talking about the role of writers and artists in a time of war, we know that using our voices in whatever way we can to express, describe and hope, is the only thing that we can do.