

Island river breath I¹²³

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“Our era of human destruction has trained our eyes only on the immediate promises of power and profits. This refusal of the past, and even the present, will condemn us to continue fouling our own nests. How can we get back to the pasts we need to see the present more clearly? We call this return to multiple pasts, human and not human, ‘ghosts.’ Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life. We see this clearly in the presence of plants whose animal seed-dispersers are no longer with us. Some plants have seeds so big that only big animals can carry them to new places to germinate. When these animals became extinct, their plants could continue without them, but they have been able to disperse their seeds very well. Their distribution is curtailed; their population dwindles. This is an example of what we are calling haunting” (Tsing et al. G2).

¹ I would like to thank Buitenplaats Van Brienoord, and particularly Ipek and Urvee, for opening up their rehearsal space for the future to a group of interested people including myself for a day of workshops, community and creation on 13 September 2025. It was a wonderful day which proved very helpful in writing this piece.

² All photographs included are by the author.

³ Some parts of this text are intended to be read upwards from left to right. This applies to pages 5–8. Page 10 is intended to be read downwards, and then up (so the last word read is “swimmer”).



I. Flow

Rotterdam, nineteenth century. In summer, the North Sea churns, boils with fishes.⁴ Society of salmon swims into the delta, upstream into the river Meuse. The tides flow in and out of meandering waterways. When the sea rises, bodies dance up the water, dazzling silvery, brown-red scales, the river crawling into the city. Up and on, through the harbours, past the quaysides.

In the curve of the river, sand accumulates, slowly. Water-heavy sand sinking as it sticks and emerges again. A sandflat forms. The first seeds arrive by water and passing birds. Reeds, club-rush, willow. Osier bed, watery island outside surrounding dykes, marsh on the fringes of river. Birds and insects make a home, weeds and fungi are crushed by beetle jaws. Beetle wings crumble in beaks, salmon glide into seagull throats.

A fishing base is formed on the island, which is named the island Van Brienoord, after the baron who buys it. Little steamboat buzzes upstream, lays out a large net. Seine-haul fishing with a surrounding net of hundreds of meters. Embrace of river, filtering. Small pulsing breathing algae make it through. Salmon bodies get stuck, gasp for breath, mesh carving skin, cutting scale. Blood rushes up to fish-face, heart pumping faster, beat beat beat and then, a slow smothering. The pressure as watery world-skin breaks and there, the cool caress of breeze.

What is this atmosphere so little resistance but gills stick together, slime dries up, no oxygen reaches, gill-bleeds all over neck so fish-like shimmering skin and tail suddenly so crisp these fins the tear of dryness there is nothing paperlike about watery life and around this body so limp and red ready for release take me out of my universe, we said there was no life beyond it. Air-world, outer space, must she die an alien not understanding not understanding the scaleless skin the gripping and squeezing limbs strangely finless I am one of her fish we are fishes a stock a multitude this means nothing in our words as fin flutters a sorry wing floating sticky feeling of eye rolling one more time the dead weight of her eggs so futile to him now and heart beats for hours longer slow bleeding extinguishing fish-mind this is not calm not quietness there is a squeaking screaming in her eye and quivering gillflap pulling on your fish body we keep on coming year after year call of birthwaters us fishes pile up in the best year 1885 a hundred thousand of us suffocate the seagulls circling above there is no colour in eye without water o water I see our birth pebbles so bright and shiny we smell the black brown white green grey beautiful fish hallucination yet this river becomes quiet and forms a new identity as if it had always been dead this is our world and here a shadow falls on sandy riverbed salmon society dies in piles of dead fish bodies to be sold and traded we persist in river's inviting bed ready to be dug and harbour eggs in shiny pebbles and fast-flowing rivulets as ghosts we swim.⁵

⁴ My choice to use "fishes" instead of "fish" for the plural is to emphasise the individuality of each fish and to work against the prevalent representation of fishes as a nameless mass.

⁵ The information included on the salmon fishery is based on the following article: Quak, Jaap. "Historie van een koningsvis." *Visionair*, no. 16, 2010, pp. 32–35. Further information on the island's history is

Rotterdam, 2025. The river's surface is quiet, rising and falling with the tides. The North sea boils. The water is grey, brown, murky. This is not a salmon river. No gleaming red fishes dance upstream. It is a waterway, constantly dredged for shipping, connecting to the ever-growing port of the city. It is the home of container ships that glide through the water, heavy drone of engines stirring the mud. One by one, global shipping society moves through the river, in an orderly procession. Sleek and torpedo-shaped, ships flow through waterways with concrete banks, almost naturally, timelessly. Toxic sludge accumulates, is sucked out of the river and stored in out-of-sight reservoirs surrounded by fences and warning signs. This is a global city, connected, expanding. Salmon legacies can be found in archives, blogs of interested citizens, but they are not common knowledge.

This is not a catastrophe, no sudden destructive event that enthrals us with its totality. It is a slow process, deliberate, and profit-driven. It is appetite, trade, expansion, oil. It is imperialism of island, river, sea, world, and people. The disappearance of the pink-hued fishes is not spectacular, not easily represented in one image, one story. The fishes were plenty, an exhaustible resource that was exploited over time. Yet nobody saw the last fish. Nobody wrote their legacy into these murky waves and city pages, even as painstaking efforts to bring the fishes back continue. This river resonates with many voices that were never acknowledged in these planning documents that now reimagine the island Van Brienenoord as a place for rewilding.

Fishy, shelly, insect, rodent voices, displaced human voices, have always known the gradual and deliberate nature of exploitation. As critical ocean studies scholar Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues, apocalyptic narratives of environmental destruction take away attention from the fact that ecological violence builds up slowly over time and is fuelled by systematic exploitation. Building on Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, DeLoughrey advocates attention to nonspectacular ecological violence. This requires

engaging different modes of temporality, such as more-than-human models of history and deep time. Importantly, this would demand different hermeneutics—that is, new modes of reading and interpreting signs. The spectacularity of apocalyptic narratives may be less of an issue than the ways in which apocalyptic thought presumes a fall from nature, perpetuating a human-nature binary in which their encounter is inevitably rendered in ways that are both exceptional and catastrophic. (DeLoughrey 149)

Salmon scent-memories of colourful birth pebbles, sunken river mind breathing with the tides. During flow, the water rises, the sea streams into the city, floods the edges of these island-pages. A small sandflat, so valuable, so disputed in its many iterations existing in planning documents and bird, human, fish and tree ruminations, lichen patterns. How does a fishy hermeneutics read the old industrial machinery sticking out of the island's sand? How does the river become aware of the

based on: Streekarchief Eiland IJsselmonde. "6. Eiland van Brienenoord." *Streekarchief IJsselmonde*, <https://streekarchiefiijsselmonde.nl/het-eiland-van-brienenoord/>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2026.

new machines arriving, shifting enormous quantities of soil to begin rewilding the island? The reeds, birds, fishes and insects will come. The mussels and marsh flowers. The beavers. Even otters, seals and salmon. The people. With dogs, binoculars, cameras, bikes. The one hundred and fifty thousand vehicles a day rushing over the traffic bridge above the east point of the island. There is a voice that tries to wrap up centuries of metamorphosis neatly in this post-stamp green and sandy island. Nature is back, shrouding its mysteries, here for people to discover (Gemeente Rotterdam).

Butterfly beaver bee
Marsh marigolds
Mother is the mud the mussels
By mastery of sand-shape
She is made by bulldozer, steel wall, bridges
In organized plots
We put her to work
O Mother Nature

To look
A place to run, walk, garden, bird, craft, play
For nature
We will make it, shape it, plant the seeds
We will call this place an island full of discoveries

seafloor rising

fresh salt
meandering seeping
discovery 1: flow

pulsing vibrating sighing bridge

Some boulders are permitted
Out with bramble and knotweed
Beware the north bank overflowing
Making natural sand-island
Irregular patchy muddy
Machines moulding edges
Documents, design
Mussel rope
Plans models maps
And here we come

come sleep in this tree this tree this tree

crunching drone of hedge trimmer and

chew chew chew little jaw crushing leaves
hear creeping beetle crackle of the

rolling over the tarmac of the bridge
contract contract contract on rubber wheels
shadows on these paper-walls of egg-skin
cradling bird's nest in my elbow
brambleskin thick and thorny

of grasshopper on
creeping thorny arm reaches flexing legs
O nitrogen lovers!
and now this unnatural sour bramble branch that must be removed

collective dream on island wind
a hundred little toes grip these branches surrendering to
claim this willow in grassy greens!
discordant screeching of sleepy parakeets
hear a coughing crashing rumbling
no one island river fishy voice
discovery 2: polyphony

jaw grips grinds devours
swim me on the smell of water flea and
launch me into these opaque waters
you are her delta in my rolling roaring run
discovery 4: passing bream

strengthen hold the delta hold this island
unmoving seize the sand keep this place
heron foot scrapes rugged skin strong
presses down on fungi algae lichen growth
exposed surface angular cube wind
of the rising tide saturating algae-skin
sticky molecules the rushing crushing
riverbed sand-protector solid mind of
stony feeling heavy sinking pull of
discovery 3: boulder

to give us space and leave us be
scattered thorn felled
we shall be ploughed soil

snip

“The ecological constraints waterscapes face today have become so serious that it is clear how important new stories will be in the cultural imaginary if we want to have any positive change in our relations with the water worlds. I suggest that the new stories should reflect the cognitive vibrancy of the nonhuman in the storied waters, no matter how digressive or incoherent these narrative potentials may appear at first sight. Mainly, such stories can foreground the idea that, like solid matter, wet matter can be quite expressive, telling cautionary tales about the deteriorating water conditions and the slow demise of many species all caught up in the Anthropocene’s rising waves” (Oppermann 13).



II. Ebb

How can this island's stories be told, as this granite boulder slowly rises from the riverbed with the ebbing tide, exposing sandy drawings on its sides? Flowing river thoughts written in sand on stone, the sea greeting the island, hello, here are our waves! How, even as this island-snippet which hides sand grain molecule and so many other scale-worlds, this one snippet so layered and storied and expressive of so much that was and is no longer and a salty sandy crust right now. When just the slow rustle of a fly's legs, front legs washing face, washing face, and the reflections of this sea in compound eye, what sees you, tells more than this text can ever grasp in these words. Yet the slowing of collective pulse, the water retreating with the ebbing tide, allows a moment of reflection as things emerge from silt and island-ponds, as human-built wooden huts gently sigh on island-wind, as a little less traffic rushes over the bridge long after rush hour rush rush rush hour. Perhaps not a new story that dwelled for many years in shifting sand and island willows, but has it been told in this manner, as a cautionary tale, and is that all it will be? Here comes an expression of the island's ebb-sense, emergences of twigs logs and plastic chair. Of a human body, pulse pulse pulse on island rhythm, the feeling of an ebbing river-mind and fishy sense of never-solid island world.

And there, tentative human writer, find your spot shrouded by bramble bush and willow trees, the place to which the river artists drew you, where the river ran through you as they gave you a cup of water to hold and whispered river ruminations in your ear.⁶ A spot by the river, exposed wet sand on ebbing tide. Careful now, mud mud mud must not sink you. Mud is a word that does not convey this sticky bouncy feeling and these clumps of air-filled puffy sand disguised as stone and foot plummets, oh yes, the becoming of a sandy tidal animal. This island does not invite you in without swallowing part of you, she writes. But was not always this water-sand what nurtured this body, what does this dead tree say as I rest on them. Hey! Come please my swarm of flies. You are here, sitting on a dead tree who is breathing, rocking back and forth with each wave of river-breath. Lungs suck air inside, so fresh and crisp now, rain is coming, swing swing swing with the river. My boulders are sponges, island is saturation. Tree bark and moss squishy with riverrain and so round this body crawling up a branch with dazzling eight-limbed elegance and spider confidence.

This island swallows you, island creatures. Fly, alga, shelly being, hear us think on river wind, muttering thoughts onto dead tree paper. The breathing of a water mind, do not resist. Haha! Boulder is no rock, nothing holds here, all to be sunk, drunk by the tides. Squishiness of a human body, soggy sinking feeling and watch dead tree bark like scaly fishy skin.

⁶ The performance mentioned here was part of the 'Alle Ruimte' programme, a festival of artistic performances that took place on 28 and 29 August 2025 at Buitenplaats Van Brieneoord. I listened to the performance 'A River Ran through Me' by Anne Kloosterhuis and Carlota Garcia, and later returned to the site of the performance to write.

I swallow feet, small ebbing puddles. Island-swallows breathe. Old plastic chair emerges as a foot goes under. Discovery is intra-balancing, hold me tree, entangled limbs. Swallowing is embracing. Suck me in, drink my toes in small sand imprints. Please, swarm flies. Here you go, suck suck sucky muck! Trunk is swing, sand is water, wind is wild orchid bob bob bob. And here, human voice, sing into this island's rustle song.

Being here is being metabolised. Ebbing grants reflection, thinking, slowing. How can this island hold us, sand human insect bird and fish, amongst other bodies beings boulders?

discovery 5:

circle-hunts!

my nasal mouth is a

spoon

spoon

uuh ooh

beware the

scoop scoop

dig dig soft smelly sand and

crunch

crunch your body pulp

white breeze on feather

black clenching toes gripping

my circle widens

ah, oystercatcher terrain

such peeping pinning of

prey

with unspoonlike precision

she is just a passing bird

yet this accusing straight and uninventive orange beak

punctures circles

pretentious little creature

off with you off

hardly a mussel, no oysters here!

I am a visitor

resident heron glides over exposed muddy bed of the pond

lands on the edge, willow camouflage

and still so

still

how long he waits

this circle is finished!

open wings, trembling crest rising

metabolise the noise of the wheels on tarmac traffic bridge

in my head, my tiny little head head head

numbed on car car breath

blow me away from the sea



discovery 6: slippery algae-trees

club-shaped, barrel-shaped
cylindrical cell amalgamation
stick, hold
grow, branch out

algae-trees grab curl reach
on rock

mud

sand
tree bark
branch on branch
grow grow grow weedy blanket!

come to me red scaly swimmer
your fish-eye in my river mind
particular to salmon-noses
her birth smell colourful pebble
and now, even today
grow and usurp

small twig-hairs tickle
island
in green green mania
gulp this river's phosphorous

you hungry rumbling tummies
halting nitrogen-lovers
cows are vegetation managers

nitrogen

you hungry autotrophs
carbon-rush and
push push push
oxygen-release and
river
bubbles

lick slurp crush chew island
and there
horns, make way to tasty trees
algae mats smeared on the path
trampling sapling searching slipping on
brown-furred hooves
and there the clink clank crush crush of

the icky gassy branch-squeezing!
ooooh squish between bobbly toes

little animal foot presses oh heavily
green slippery mats for ebb-play

we are island river skin



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