

Common Shore Crab (*Carcinus maenas*)

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This is a piece of nature writing I published in 1991¹

Common

In the bucket was a mass of crabs. Their shells were green with dark streaks and splashes. The ones on top were trying to get out, and their sharp legs were scrabbling and slipping on the backs of the others. There was no water in the bucket. It was standing in the sun, and the crabs were drying.

"I've got thirty-two," the boy said. "I only keep the big 'uns."

At his feet was a white plastic bag smeared with blood. The boy took out a section of mackerel, forced it onto his three-pronged hook, and threw the line into the water. It went down near the fringe of seaweed hanging from the jetty: dark seaweed with light green swellings. Below the seaweed were the edges of large rocks. Sweet-papers, lolly-sticks and polystyrene cartons bobbed against the wall. Beneath them, weed swirled. After a few minutes, the boy pulled out his line with a crab on the fish. The bait swung against the wall, but the crab hung on.

"What are you going to do with them?" I asked him.

In answer he emptied out his bucket on the jetty. Crabs sidled in all directions, some stopping with their claws held high. A gull flapped in, and strutted up to take one. Out over the water the bird dropped the crab and cried out. Other gulls shrieked around us. On the floor of the jetty was a long crack filled with water. One crab slipped in. The crack was shallow, but under the water a shelf of iron emerged from the concrete. Under this, the crab inserted itself. The tips of two claws were just visible, but I would not have noticed them if I had not seen the crab go in. I thought of prising the creature out with my fingers, to throw it into the sea, but I might have broken it and was afraid to touch it.

All around us, crabs reached the edge and dropped back into the sea.

I looked down at the water. Floating pieces of wood and a bottle had collected in the jetty corner, where there was a film of dust on the water, wrinkling. Further out, the water was clear. A patch of sand began to move: it was a leopard-coloured flatfish, crossing a clearing in the weed. It stopped. The raised eyeballs were like marbles on the sand. I saw the sad sideways mouth. A ripple ran along each fin. By undulating its body, the fish swam just above the sand. It disappeared into dark cover, and following it I saw the silver glint of a dead fish, partly buried in the tangle, its body arched as if about to

¹ BBC Wildlife, July 1991

struggle free. Small fish were moving in groups above the weed, and when I leaned over they shot off in all directions, before turning to look for the others.

“Do you want to see a hermit?” the boy said. “Steve’s got a hermit.”

We gathered eagerly: six faces over a large blue bucket. The hermit crab had come out of its shell, revealing a pink, soft-looking body, half-coiled. “It won’t go back in,” the boy said. “What can I do?”

“It might go back in if you leave it.”

A short way from the jetty was a tiled pool, set into the promenade and guarded by a low wall. Beside it, a kiosk was selling crabs, lobsters, whelks and other shellfish. In the pool, big brown crabs, spider crabs and dark purple lobsters sat in the murky water, rubber bands on all their pincers. Someone had thrown in some peeled prawns. Bubbles fizzed from a tube on the bottom. The lobsters waved their long feelers. On several, a feeler was snapped and bent back. A man reached in and took a lobster from the water. It curved its tail and waved its tightly-bound claws.

On the counter the brown crabs were sitting in white plastic trays. No rubber bands now: the claws were fiercely open. Stalk-eyes protruded from empty carapaces, in front of which the white meat and brown meat was on display, separated and wrapped. In the background were red plastic lobsters.

It rained about an hour ago, and the air is full of smells newly released. Hot air blasts from the arcade, full of voices, music and the steady gunfire of electronic games. With all this mixes the crab-meat, with the other food smells: chips and chicken, hot candy. I think of forks, fingers, beaks going after that crab-meat, reaching into the joints and crevices, breaking the cartilage, clawing the meat from inside the tiniest legs, dispersing it. In this town, pieces of crab are scattered everywhere. Gulls fight over broken claws around the kiosk, while in the gutter by the arcade a shore crab lies with part of its back smashed in, among the bottles and cartons. On the beach, too, single claws and cleaned-out crabshells lie among the pebbles and weed. Under any reasonable pebble, it is damp enough for a crab to wait for the tide. On the mudflats I turn over an oil drum. Flies go up in a cloud, and tiny yellow crabs and pea-coloured crabs run frantically, some burying themselves quickly. One finds shelter under an armless doll. Some of these crabs run along the edge of the tide, where the water takes them, turns them over, throws them back or carries them out to sea.

On the ocean floor they must be moving, crabs like this, smaller than fingernails, and big lobsters in the seagrass, waving their claws upwards. They must be as common as insects in a field. Along the horizon, a ferry moves slowly, or a small tanker. Off to my right, swarms of small wading birds scuttle on the flat sand, like mice, or flies or crabs. Pigeons and starlings flock in the town. I go back to the jetty, and there, in that water-filled crack in the centre of the platform, the crab seems to have settled. Its claws are just visible. Its mouth will be at work, filtering the water. This strange rockpool is no bigger than the puddle of oil from an engine a few yards further down. A dog patters over it. A cigarette lands nearby. People are walking around it, fishing, eating, talking and looking out to sea.

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Common is about armour and vulnerability, hardness and softness. It is about tightly contained bodies and violent splintering and dispersal. It is about wildlife in our midst, in little places of shelter. It is about debris, circulation, and crowded space. The piece does not make a contrast between the commonplace experience of wild nature and the exalted or sublime experience, but brings the two together.

Discussion of the New Nature Writing has sometimes made me return to pieces like this and ask how I would write them now. Would they be very different? Was I already, in some ways, writing according to this new orientation? I want to look now at *Common*, and add something that emphasizes the 'New Nature Writing' elements (if there are any) and develops them further.

There are two main strands to the 'New Nature Writing' idea. One is the need to be different from the old. In some historical periods, British nature writing expressed nostalgia for pre-industrial cultures such as feudalism, including their social hierarchies. Wild nature has been sought as a space of refuge from modern industrial organization and consumerism. Sometimes this has also been a search for escape from the urban masses. In colonial nature writing, the presence of the people whose land had been seized was erased, minimised or subordinated, to make possible an elemental confrontation between the colonial protagonist and nonhuman nature. Descriptions celebrating the ruthless strength and precision of nonhuman predators such as hawks, wolves and tigers have sometimes involved fantasies of identification with these creatures.

It is not that the New Nature Writing can simply and cleanly extricate itself from these traditions and impulses. The New Nature Writing is not a matter of simple disavowal of the genre's traditions, but rather of facing and exploring what is dangerous about them, what is moving and what is valuable. Some writers dramatize the emergence of the new from the old. Helen Macdonald, in *H is for Hawk*, for example, contrasts her own work with that of T. H. White, who wrote about hawks in the 1930s. She also fictionalizes a process of recognition in White. In the story she tells, he comes to identify the bird of prey not only with a fantasized ruthless sureness of self, but also with bullied vulnerability.

The other strand in the 'New Nature Writing' idea is positive: it is the recognition of the genre's ability to combine the personal and cultural love of wild nature with new kinds of ecological understanding. Environmental crisis makes this combination an urgent need. The New Nature Writing will therefore not set up wild nature as space separate from the human social world. Or, it will not *only* do this, but also acknowledge the ecological relations between different spaces. Nature writing may still explore secret enclaves, but will also show recognition of the global reach of ecological cause and effect. The writing may still concern itself with personal stories and subjectivity, but it will also begin to show awareness of the larger material and semiotic networks that constitute self and world. These are the relationships revealed by ecological science, biosemiotics,

new materialism, hyperobjects and actor-network theory. Many of them are invisible to our senses and to conventional literary 'point of view'.

If I were writing *Common* now, what might I do differently? Perhaps not much, but one thing comes to mind. In my comparison of the crabs on the sea-floor with insects in a field, I wanted to suggest a teeming abundance that seems delightful but overwhelming: verging on the threatening. I set up a small version of the sublime. But even in 1991, this invocation of the insects in a field was anomalous and misleadingly nostalgic, at least in a Britain that had seen forty years of intensive use of pesticides and herbicides (I had in mind a French field I had recently seen on holiday). Now we have warnings about collapsing populations of bees. I was still clinging to the idea of wild nature as representing the infinitely intricate world around me, the outside world stretching endlessly. Now, I think, this idea is overshadowed by an anthropocene sense of the global ecosystem, and all the local ones, as finite and vulnerable totality rather than endless openness. I would keep my insects in a field, I think, but might add a glimpse of the empty and ripped-up ocean floor after the new industrial fishing technologies have done their work.

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Some of a crab's organs do not look as if they are parts of the animal. The eyes are like soft worms stretching themselves out of holes in a rock. Between these eyes are two tiny feelers, which look like torn shreds of something. Raggedly they flutter, as if snagged on the crab by the tide. These feelers are antennules, organs that react to chemicals carried by the water. They guide messages into the fortress.

Other parts of the crab look like machine components. When the mouth opens, a panel on each side springs out and slides back, reminding me of oven doors or the sliding door of a van. Inside, there appear to be more doors and busy feelers. No final soft mouth can be seen. Underwater sounds are mostly closed off from our hearing, but I imagine those outer doors opening with a 'cronk' of vibrating metal. There is also a triangular tail made of horizontally hinged pieces. It looks like the enlarged shell of a woodlouse. Normally this tail wraps around the body between the legs and up the abdomen, into which it is set like a door, but when a female is carrying eggs, the tail hinges away from the body like a curving car bonnet or the door of a car boot. This makes room for the eggs, yellow froth oozing out, forcing open a lid.

These doors, and other edges and sockets, are fringed with coarse light-brown hairs, in rows like stiff eyelashes. If the crabs are like machines, the hairs suggest sunken machines on the ocean floor, abandoned, furred, encrusted and barnacled. It is a surprise when they jerk into life. If a flying saucer were to crash into the ocean and lie forgotten there for years, furring up, until suddenly the doors began to open, it would look like a crab.

Cocks and hens are the names used for male and female crabs. It surprises me to hear these words. They make the crab change shape, somehow, and soften, and cluck and croon. The eggs increase in size. Imagine crabs in rows of nestboxes like hens. Think

of reaching a hand under their bodies for the eggs. It is accident that crabmeat did not become, like chickenmeat and prawnmeat, a great industrial multi-use substance, filling the world.

I loved catching crabs on our seaside holidays. The tiny yellow ones under the bladderwrack were too delicate to pick up. They might pop like the tiny balloons of seaweed under my feet. I looked for the deepest rockpools, and ran my net under fringes of rubbery weed. Often, when the net came out, there was a medium crab in the folds: sometimes a large one, legs scrabbling with their tips caught in the net-holes. Once I was wading in the sea on open sand, firm and ribbed under my feet. The water was up to my thighs. A huge crab skittered from me. Claw to claw it looked two feet across. It was brown—the lovely pinkish brown I knew from edible crabs in the fishmonger’s trays. On a fat claw, the brown seems to be a suffusion, a blush coming up in the cream colour beneath. The claw-tips are smart shiny black.

The huge crab sidled fast across the bottom. I splashed after, but too slowly, and what would I have done? Picked it up in my hands? That is hard to imagine. I could not keep up. The distance grew. Now I could see only an indistinct shape, shrinking quickly.

But I did take one back to London. I should not have done so. Normally we emptied them out of our big yellow bucket on the last day, and watched the crowd separate under the water. But one year I took one home. I don’t remember what I told myself. They needed salt water, I knew. The crab travelled on the floor of the car in a tall jar from a sweet shop. Water splashed and churned in the jar throughout the journey, and I heard scratching and scrabbling on the glass. It is surprising that the animal survived. When we got home, I did not want to look. I had to make myself. It was hard to tell whether the crab was alive, but next morning, in the jar on the shelf in our conservatory, the silt had settled in the water and the little antennules were fluttering away.

There it sat for a long time. I don’t know how long. Was it a whole year, from one holiday to the next? That seems impossible, but I remember the crab as an accusing face that I hardly dared look at. Always it seemed to be facing me. Perhaps the crab could not turn around. I did not dare put in food, for fear of fouling the water, which I could not replace. Silt lay like dust on the carapace, stirring occasionally in little puffs caused by some undetectable movement, but never flurrying up, since the water was never disturbed. The jagged line of the carapace edge above the mouth doors became more and more of a frown. Beneath those fluttering shreds, the face seemed to darken and redden with rage. At last I took the crab back to the sea. Perhaps I begged my parents for a day-trip for that purpose. Crabs in fish tanks still remind me of that stare.

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