

Precipice

Georgina Aboud

A young biologist examines Cuckmere's history and speculative future under the shadow of climate change.

Did you find your way here with words? With the geolocator that creates a unique combination of three words, which is now the blueprint to navigate the Earth. Three words that are geographically fixed, but materially changeable: land drops into water, forests fall for pasture, towns drown in new flood plains. The words stay the same, but maps are the least permanent of everything we like to think of as fixed.

Or

are you listening at home? Are you making dinner? I think you are rinsing bright, home-grown vegetables or walking a neighbour's dog or trying to sleep in a neon fringed night. I am imagining your world, thinking of the textures, your houseplants.

I suspect you are thoughtful, I hope you are happy and if you aren't ... it will come.

What are the three words that allow me to locate you?

OK,

I'll show you mine, if you show me yours.

Type this into your computer:

/securing.picnic.perfectly

Today, I wake to the sight of my own breath. The Wolf Moon is still hanging about. Prowls a clay-coloured sky until late afternoon. It doesn't play kiss chase with the sun, it doesn't bother to break the ice on the two rivers.

One, natural, meanders and curves. Seen from space it looks like a sound wave on the earth, and another straight as bone dug by my great-great-great-grandfather. My mum would have appreciated me living here, confirmed what she always knew was true. In the Before Times, when she was young and I was small and both of us knew nothing of what was to come, she would bring me here and say everything is connected.

The men who cut the river were Irish. A feat of dazzling engineering in Victorian England – a river hand-dug in a year between Exceat Bridge and Foxhole Corner. This flat sheet of water, excavated to reduce flooding, was made from Nawies palms, the split of skin, the scraps of ruined DNA still held between rocks. On a 'good' day, one man could move twenty tonnes of earth. Count the days, count the earth.

Tá fáilte romhat.

'Securing. Picnic. Perfectly' seems to me, at least, the right spot to build this Observatory Station because the Victorians are the ghosts of this landscape. Victorians, in flamboyant striped swimming costumes, borrowing canoes from Drusilla's, and rowing up to lie on the grassy bank. Luncheon by a river knotted with Bream and Tench and Roach and Rudd and Perch and Eels and Pike, whilst the Euryhalines swim in, bringing their tightly embroidered scales, their salty gills from the sea. All the while, the waders dig in darkness for food, and love is found, and a marriage made over fishing and picnics by a sassy Londoner and a coast guard, who dreams he is a water baby.

And above, on land ambitious for sky – on Beachy Head, on chalk and green which is used much later in films to denote beginnings, or endings, or the hopes of either

– here a woman called Mary Ann Gilbert uses her land for the first allotments for those with nothing.

Wholesome Victorian Mary Ann, with tight brown curls and a lace-trimmed dress, making decent loans available, and introducing water butts, and keeping costs low by encouraging seaweed and liquid manure as fertilisers at a time of such change. This is a time of collecting, and the carnal pleasures of acquisition, wandering around the Crystal Palace admiring the artefacts of the Great Exhibition. This was the time when England produced four-fifths of the world's supply of coal: the difficult magic of the industrial revolution, and the brutality of Empire. The start.

I pull on many layers of clothes, topped with a fleece and a coat made from a caribou who walked this Earth a hundred years ago. Out of the Station, and the Haven is frozen. Cold enough for wolves or bears, bitter enough to snap off ungloved fingers. I take readings and record them on a spreadsheet: temperature, humidity, wind speed, snowfall. The snow is fresh again, deep as a bed, the clay sky has turned crystalline.

Maybe it was all the distraction of so many new specimens, or there were simply too many scattered data sets, or people thought they could reckon with nature rather than bend with it, but those Victorian scientists were inattentive to the early

signals. They completely missed the retreating glaciers, the melting ice; they created the wrong baseline. My mum liked to remind me, when we argued about my career choices, that art imagined the knowledge gap, when science was playing with its stolen toys. Ruskin, Eliot, Shelley (Mary, if you must know) they skipped to the end or close. They were the ones detailing soiled skies, biblical floods, a tropical England afoot, a Europe awash in a pandemic.

I walk on. Underfoot, on the pathway, under whiteness, is the remains of the tramline used for transporting the shingle from the beach. The Irish worked as shingle labourers as well, moving here in the 1930s, bringing families, leaving families, creating families, farming the materials to build these towns and cities.

My job, though, is to monitor and observe. I count birds, mammals, note species, condition. If I can capture them without harm, I will weigh, measure and tag them for further study. I will also, very unscientifically, feed and water them. I keep the animals and birds for a while, give them names, talk to them and wait for more warmth in winter, more cool in summer for release. You can blame my hippy mum for this sentimental unorthodoxy.

Last spring, there was a change, a calibration in temperature, the first in a good long time and Cuckmere rewilded itself. The flowers smudged the valley, bees arrived

after decades of apparent hibernation, pollen-sooted faces, crickets too, sawing legs together, a light forest green of the past landing on my hand. The Station became full of badgers, voles, field mice, and, in summer, the sky unzipped with birds. Starlings, swifts and house martins passed through, leaving with the swoop of flight, the brush of feathers.

I am now walking to the opening of the Haven, the beginning of the beach. Landmines once hid here amongst the pebbles, and Parliament, everyone, in fact, kept a perpetual eye on the horizon for The Invasion. This beach has always been a hinge for history. At one time, local people lived and died here rustling up livings from smuggling and looting: snatching gold from the bottom of the sea, rum and oranges from the top and dragging in Latin American cedar wood from shipwrecks to become beams for public houses, that later became Chinese restaurants, that later became part of abandoned, uninhabitable towns. At night, when the moon was just a scratch in the sky, did the looters and smugglers listen for the shuffle of Excise Officers, wait for blood or hear their own breath and feel the creep of the land's ancestors? Of the unruly summers over a thousand years before, where locals stooped under a sharp Medieval sun to make salt from water.

But, you know, here, a millennium, it's just petty time semantics. A fingertip in the body of history. The snow is falling again, shaken from the sky, and landing on chalk

which is 65 million years old, and on a still-freezing river, which only curls because of slow, constant, imperceptible movements over a length of time that is older than some stars.

My feet touch the frozen sea. To my right, were the cottages that served as homes and past beacons. Chalk continues to tumble, and the map of this coastline so finely drawn is now inadequate. It is only from photos hung up at the Station that it is possible to truly understand this ebbing – to see the disappearance of what we once thought was permanent.

Everything is connected, Mum would say. Remember fish came to the land, and wolves returned to the sea to become whales, and we share 25 per cent of our DNA with trees. That's just the start, because in this bloody mess, people and history are swallowed as sure as land.

Type /uncompleted.integrally.respective or elemental.fragments.shell. Go on now, type them into your computer. They are also reminders of our humanness, of who we were and what we could become, of our potential for brilliance and a warning against our propensity for savagery. Look, look at how they teeter on the land's edge and think about what we will lose when we don't know what we have come from.

Before I was born, many said 'We are on a precipice.' And, then again, twenty years later, 'We are on THE precipice.' Another decade scattered by, where the only action was undertaken by activists, and politicians flew to sinking islands talking about trying to solve this and that, the word *precipice* repeatedly blazed on news channels and the internet, tumbling from everybody's lips. Mum used to say it is hope that kills us, but last spring's magic tells me, even now with all our graceless acts, we still might not have reached the final precipice, the last one before we ultimately, irrevocably fall.

/Precipice. Precipice. Precipice

These three words will take us right to the very middle of the South Pacific Ocean, a vast and terrible blue that falls five kilometres down through absolute darkness to rest on an uninhabitable, at least for us, ocean floor.

I've shown you mine, show me yours.

Georgina Aboud

Georgina Aboud is a writer and creative practitioner from Eastbourne. She is the recipient of the Moth Short Story Prize and a New Writing South: 21 Fellowship. Her book *Cora Vincent* was published as part of the Spotlight Books series, and her work features in current and upcoming anthologies. Latest commissions include collaborative pieces for the Brighton Festival. She is an awardee of a Shifting the Gaze bursary with Writing Our Legacy, where she is also a Changing Chalk Associate Artist for the National Trust. Georgina is currently working on a novel and, with the assistance of a recent grant from Arts Council England, is developing her first poetry pamphlet.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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