COMMENTARY

The View from Dunwich

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There are parts of the Suffolk coastline, a few miles from where I grew up, which are crumbling into the sea, possibly faster than anywhere else in Europe. It still shocks me to read that some clifftops are eroding by as many as five meters (approx. five yards) every year, taking farms, roads, habitats, and properties with them.[1] It wasn't a feature of the landscape that I thought or felt much about, as a child. My fondest memories are in and around Shingle Street, the long stretches of sloping shingle just south of Aldeburgh. Long walks trudging through pebbles, too buffeted by the North Sea wind to stay still for long. Running into the sea only to run straight back out, shrieking with cold. Coasts are magical, energetic places, full of the sound and feeling of forces that are beyond our control. Being at the boundary, looking out to sea, gives us the impression of having the measure of ourselves and of where we belong. But I have come to see such impressions are deceptive. Coastlines are also the least static places of all. They are dynamic ecosystems, constantly in flux. Currents drag the beach outward toward the sea, deposit new material inland, uncover buried pasts.

Now, as an outsider, but also as someone who researches the beliefs and cultures around climate change, it feels strange to link such things with this part of the world that has mostly signified, for me, a kind of permanence. Coastal erosion is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it straightforward due to human activity. A combination of storms and soft cliffs have made this coastline particularly susceptible. But rising sea levels, flooding, and increased storms due to anthropogenic climate change mean that it will continue, and worsen, forcing the existential crises for coastal communities to the fore. Suffolk and Norfolk towns now appear in national news or scientific research articles. One example is Happisburgh, with the startling image of its Beach Road cut off abruptly

1. Barnett, "Little Time Left."

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Figure 1. Dunwich Beach.

in the middle, now jutting out to sea. I'm always struck by how, spelling out the human interest, reporters always frame these stories as a standoff between humans and nature: heroic latter-day King Cnuts who are building their own cliff reinforcements in defiance of the waves and local planning law; residents who see leaving doomed properties as some kind of surrender (Easton Bavents resident: "We fought off invasions forever and now we're rolling over saying, 'OK sea, you can just take us'");[2] the political wrangling over which areas count as "economically viable" to warrant artificial defenses.[3]

Such existential choices have been a feature of this landscape for centuries. Dunwich, once the capital of this Anglo-Saxon kingdom (the East Angles) and now all but under the sea, is our still-living reminder. It has become something of a pilgrimage site for melancholy poets, medieval historians and researchers of coastal climatic change. Earlier this year I revisited Dunwich with my partner while our two-year-old stayed overnight with his grandparents for the first time. With a freedom we had all but forgotten, we walked all day, along the beach to Southwold and back through the trails inland that take in the marshes and the heath. All along the way you can trace the jagged line of the coast to the north, revealing the land's retreat. At the time of writing there are fewer than one hundred people living in Dunwich, the village itself comprised of no

2. Barkham, "This Sinking Isle."
3. Sandalls, "Suffolk's Beaches."

more than a couple of streets, the Ship Inn where we stayed, the parish church, and, further along, the ruins of the priory, with its outer edge just out of reach of the cliff.

The story of the fall of Dunwich holds a unique kind of fascination, most likely for its resonance with our own contemporary relationship with the encroaching sea. In the Middle Ages this was one of the foremost ports of Europe. By the eleventh century it was the tenth largest town in England, hosting a major Franciscan priory and several churches. Then in the thirteenth century three storm surges in the space of two years (1286–87) swept away the harbor, buildings, and farms and precipitated a series of declines and migrations westward. There is a museum in the village where you can see a model of the populated medieval town. A yellow dotted line cuts through it, imagining the space that is no longer there—a stretch of one mile out to the east. A woodland path winds out of the village and takes you right along the edge, opening out onto a spectacular viewing spot. It is hard to imagine what a mile out to sea looks like, without reference points, but there is something compelling about the attempt. The German writer W. G. Sebald, whose novel about walking the East Anglian coast *The Rings of Saturn* I reread for the occasion, is often quoted for his attempt to describe it, sensing in that place out to sea "the immense power of emptiness."[4]

Emptiness, but also a haunting presence. Along that coastal path, as it joins the outer edge of the priory ruins, there is a solitary gravestone, with a sign explaining that here is the last remaining grave of All Saints Church (the church was the last major monument to fall into the sea, in 1911). But now to look down at that gravestone, "In Memory of Jacob Forster who departed this life March 12th 1796 aged 38 years," is like looking at the last of a species. The sea has taken all but the last resting places of those Dunwich residents bar one. I learned that every year, as it falls away by a meter or so, the cliff exposes the bones of these Dunwich faithful to the elements, and for us to see.

Perhaps there is something sacrilegious about this exposure. As if the last thing the ocean reclaims is the right to a resting place. It struck me that there is something apposite about this act of unearthing in light of our contemporary obsession with the Anthropocene. The impact of certain humans on the planet, we are told—our transformation of the soil, the mass extinctions we have precipitated, our nuclear waste burial—will be forever traceable in the geological record. The Dunwich skeletons come to haunt us from a different era, and yet I can't help but feel their announcement is some reminder of how we too, and the trace of our actions on the earth, will be exposed and examined in such a way.

Coastal change has always acted as agent of both erasure and memory, destruction and revelation.[5] Alongside crumbling cliffs, the other East Anglian story attracting global attention is what its erosion is revealing in the underlying sedimentary layers.

4. Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, 159.

5. Irvine, "Happisburgh Footprints in Time," 3. There is also a fascinating parallel between the exposure of human remains by coastal erosion and that by glacial melt, commented on in another work of fiction by Sebald, *The Emigrants.* I am grateful to Dominic O'Key for pointing this out.

Discoveries during the past two decades have been made in Pakefield in Suffolk, and Happisburgh in Norfolk, of tools and fossilized footprints thought to belong to our ancestors of up to one million years ago—the earliest human footprints outside of Africa.[6] The popular fascination with these discoveries is the same as that which is accompanying new discoveries of the settlements on Doggerland, the landmass that once connected Britain to the rest of Europe. It is appealing to think about how far back human settlement in these places goes. We like to feel connected to the land by imagining the abundance of life that supported our Neanderthal ancestors, as in Julia Blackburn's poetic homage to East Anglia, *Time Song*, which explores the fossil record of the men and women, not to mention wolves and mammoths, that lived in this region. Perhaps there is some deep time consolation here for us—to know that our island is not so isolated from the continent after all.

But I wonder also whether the fascination is really about how such revelations connect us not so much to our prehistoric pasts as to unknown futures. The settlers of Doggerland also met their fate from a warming planet. Melting ice sheets and rising seas flooded the land six thousand years ago and forced a migration to higher land. And imagining the retreat of Dunwich farmers, friars, and sailors in the thirteenth century also makes us think of present-day residents making their decisions now. At what point did those earlier people choose to pack up and leave? Did some refuse to move on or disbelieve that disaster would befall them too?

The histories of coastal destruction are an interplay between climatic change, the economic and cultural factors that drive humans to settle there in the first place, and the boundedness of our imaginations. Richard D. Irvine suggests that there is a *temporal lock-in* that affects coastal communities. This means that the things that bind us to that land, our economic dependence on it or our cultural attachment to it, are what make thinking about ecological disasters of the future unimaginable.[7] As Amitav Ghosh notes in *The Great Derangement*, sea level rise and extreme weather events link the fates of disparate coastal regions across the globe, from Florida to Mumbai. The thought of leaving the place that gives us our identity, memory, and meaning can seem unthinkable.[8] But that imagination is also tied to a society's means and willingness to adapt to radical change. The ghosts of Dunwich, after all, ask us a universal question: In the face of change, what do we hold on to, and what do we let go?

The language of coastal management epitomizes the contemporary response to such questions. Choices that Suffolk and Norfolk councils are now setting forth range between *managed retreat* of communities on the one hand and heavy engineering interventions on the other. Communities that have economic or cultural value are eligible for becoming *holding the line* sites—the term for constructing artificial barriers such as

6. Irvine, "Happisburgh Footprints in Time," 1.
7. Irvine, "Happisburgh Footprints in Time," 5.
8. Ghosh, *Great Derangement.*

sea walls or groynes, which interrupt wave action and protect beaches in one particular area from longshore drift. But as residents in places like Covehithe and Easton Bavents have found, interventions like this only push the problem farther down the coast, leaving unprotected beaches elsewhere at risk. Then there are proposals for *managed realignment*, where the coast will be managed to realign or restore "its natural profile."[9]

Like the news stories of coastal residents going head-to-head with the waves, these quintessentially modern expressions of management, realignment, and intervention belie a much deeper, and perhaps ancient, anxiety about our sense of belonging to vulnerable landscapes in a climate-changed world. These ought to be recognized as problems for the imagination as well as economics. But then a question remains: What sort of imagination is needed? Is it a somber, haunting sense of loss? Or what other modes of engagement are available? There are artists who are looking to East Anglia as a test of our collective storying of the future. Julian Perry's series of oil paintings, *An Extraordinary Prospect*, depicts Happisburgh and other coastal scenes as holiday homes sitting surreally on grassy banks that jut out to sea, the cliff beneath them disappeared. There are wry, comedic references to what attachment to place really means for the types of residences that populate the Suffolk coast. There is much affluence here, with second homes and holiday residences of city dwellers, and hence a question about in what sense these places are "settlements" and what it means to have the ground vanish from beneath them.[10] The Californian artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, in *Greenhouse Britain* (2007–9), constructed beautiful 3D maps of Britain under successive futures of sea level rise to prompt the question of what a "graceful retreat" and resettlement of humans might look like in a warming world.

When I saw these maps of a future Britain in which my homeland was soonest under the sea, I thought I would experience a kind of anticipatory mourning for the many places that will be lost to climate change. In fact I found myself wondering, What am I looking at? Where, or what, is the place I called home? Where, indeed, does my sense of permanence of place come from? David Matless, coining the term *Anthroposcenic*, singles out British coastal loss as most aptly demonstrating this sense of human cultures transforming and being transformed by environmental change—a very different discourse from that of the loss of "natural" wilderness. The relationship between the natural and artificial is complex with our coasts, to say the least.[11] Encountering Dunwich in *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald reminds us that this is not simply a story of bad weather and soft soil. It also becomes a meditation on the world that has been continually reshaped to fit the needs of settlers, for instance the deforestation of oaks and elms that once covered the region, and the (economic) compulsion, with the dawn of globalization, to clear land and settle near the coasts.

9. Natural England, "NCA Profile."

10. For a similar discussion, see Matless, "Anthroposcenic."

11. Matless, "Anthroposcenic."

I return to the question of imagination. Perhaps we sense ourselves now as a transient, migrant species of our own making, and that is what has given the landscape a certain melancholy focus. And it has become de rigueur in the environmental humanities to emphasize this tragic sense of *placelessness*, a loss of home, above all others, in the Anthropocene epoch. The narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* can seem at first to epitomize this sort of fixation, haunted as he is by the legacies of human destruction and the delusions of the modern world as he meanders among abandoned mansions, derelict seaside towns, and ruins of military equipment. On coming across the remains of the military research facility at Orford Ness, he notes, "The closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe."[12] Dunwich is also remembered as a story of humanity coming to terms with itself. "Little by little," the narrator writes, the people of Dunwich "abandoned their hopeless struggle, turned their backs on the sea, and, whenever their declining means allowed it, built to the westward in a protracted flight that went on for generations."[13] So too it is for animal and plant life. Natural and human-made disasters alike, from the hurricane of 1987, which flattened much of the Suffolk landscape, to the collapse of marine ecologies, are still accompanied by the persistence of life—"reduced" or "disturbance" ecologies—after catastrophe.[14]

For all that I can relate to Sebald's picture of the loss and vulnerability that pervades the Suffolk coastline—the remnants of its military pasts (and present), the threat of rising seas, the nuclear danger—I instinctively resist the association. Those beaches and marshes are not depressive places for me. My memories are also of a quality of timelessness and repetition that keep thoughts of decay and loss at bay. Or rather, they reassure me that life will seek a way to persist, even when we fail to protect it. The calm that still comes over me hearing oyster catchers congregate on the Deben, or the memory of rising early to watch for marsh harriers at Minsmere. The long runs I have taken across woodland and heath trails without encountering a soul. The sound of crashing waves on shingle, a sound that feels like it will go on forever. I think of this place as one of continuing life, as slow adaptation.

It is important to recognize that the two sentiments are not incompatible, and that at times the fixation on narratives of loss can hide other modes of engagement that are just as present. Perhaps pilgrims have come here to seek out the kind of melancholy that we all need from time to time to cherish what we have. It was on Shingle Street, with the waves roaring in our ears, that I last spoke intimately with my mother before the cancer took over. And it was there that we all went as a family, almost instinctively, the day after she died. I thought at the time that we all looked and felt scattered

12. Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, 237.

13. Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, 158.

14. For "reduced" or "disturbance" ecologies, see Groves, "Writing after Nature."

across the beach, like pieces of driftwood from some old wreckage brought back to land. There is something about such experiences for which only these ecologies of constant change, in places where the remainders and reminders of our origins wash up from time to time, provide healing.

Perhaps then we ought to resist the temptation to think of such retreating and reshaping ecologies solely in terms of being haunted by loss, but also as lively, vital exchanges with land and landscape. Though it always feels like a homecoming, the coast more recently prompts the thought that we must change our ideas of what it means to be at home, to have roots. Heidegger had a way of describing what it means to be in the world—to "dwell"—that seems fitting. Our sense of belonging—*heimat*—is certainly a reflection of the place that gives us our sustenance and our ground, and hence we have a connection to the place in which we are born and raised. But he says that there is something else about our natural environment, which has a history preceding us and will outlive us, that makes us feel uncanny—*unheimlich*—a feeling of being not at home. We need to embrace that too, and dwell in the land not by mastering it but in caring for it, by allowing it to be and to change.[15]

Such reflections become all the more pressing for me as I return to visit the coast with a young family of my own, with life to protect and a love of this landscape to pass on as it was passed on to me. Since his retirement my dad has been volunteering on that stretch of eroding coast for Natural England. One of the projects he has been involved in is protecting the ground nests of little terns around the cliffs of Covehithe—some of the fastest eroding—in the spaces between shingle and heath vegetation. Modern life on the coasts—in this area particularly the proliferation of pig farms—has brought new threats to little terns, in the form of rodents, seagulls, and crows. We can do something about those threats, he said, but, like the dilemma facing human residents, there is no protection from the encroaching sea. Nesting birds along the Suffolk coast are also vulnerable to high tides and storm surges. My dad's reflections on the relationship between these birds and their changing environments evoked the tragic story of the people of Dunwich. He imagines the birds belligerently keeping to their breeding habitat, only moving on if forced to: "Theirs is the prime example of impermanence and upheaval." Something about this imagination helps me to realize how interconnected are the different lifeways that typify life at the edges of our lands, each in their own way embodying the fragility of refuge. I imagine him working there and it gives me reassurance, somehow, amid all of these other thoughts that the landscape triggers: of transience, of the vulnerability of life, of an uncertain future. It comforts me that he is there, quietly caring for the life that continues.

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15. Rigby, "Ecstatic Dwelling."

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