

We read the signs in the sky, feel them in our St Swithin's bones. The water is rising.



2012: the Olympic torch and the “worst floods in 30 years”, following Government cuts to 294 flood protection schemes. 2011, 2009, 2007, 2006, 2000 and onward, back into the centuries with water never rising high in the cellars but draining back out. Signs in our gardens and cellars of owners, neighbours, working together to direct the water back to the river with gullies, culverts, grates. The water flows, over and under, from higher ground to lower-lying land, filling the sunken gardens which become swimming pools of silt.

Eva visits at Christmas 2015. From low likelihood of flooding on the 23rd, come Boxing Day the valley is in full spate, the roads gone, the fire station under water. Mountain Rescue boats skim along on the road, cars drift by, elderly neighbours lifted and helped to safety, bridges bend and break as the water does its will. A one in decades event, we're told, as the darkened waters rise. The siren song stills as the power cuts, as we whisper incantations in shadowed rooms, to moonlight and candles.



As the sky falls, we hold up our hands.



Come daybreak, destruction. Counting cost, counting heads. The community comes together. Food is left on doorsteps newly sluiced down, shared. Local hubs form, the Council in concert with volunteers, with supplies, food, clean water. Neighbours newly met share war stories of loss, trauma becoming collective. Contaminated flood waters cause a communal cough. New crises are averted by community, by solidarity, by kindness. And in so doing we count ourselves lucky, to only have lost all we own through two floors of our homes, as homes subside and are condemned to demolition.

The concrete flood wall, that which appeared to be solid, has crumbled under its weight; its sense of itself as a barrier, a dam, its atoms no longer fettered, at the mercy of the water.

A slogan emerges: despite the rain, the village will rise again.

£25m in infrastructure repairs, £60m initial government spend on flood works, £7m in local flood grants to business and home owners.

It is said the Haudenosaunee follow a philosophy that the decisions we make today should bear in mind those seven generations hence, stewarding the land to last. To do so requires decisions both long-sighted and hard-headed.

For the United Kingdom's Environment Agency, it means hard infrastructure, large earthworks with attendant pollution and noise, and concrete, concrete and more concrete. In trying to contain the waters, direct where they flow, it merely displaces the water ever onwards, funnelling money into shareholders' pockets while the lower communities struggle.

We forget to breathe with the land.



Those can afford relocate to higher ground, up the hill, from where the water runs off down to the valley bottom instead of being handled where it falls, absorbed and reused by nature. Those of us who need local services, buses trains bikes Shanks' pony, those of us trapped by negative equity as the flood defence works start, we are marooned.

Downstream, the playing fields become wetlands – once the water is past the built-up human worlds, their ever-expanding presence setting rootless branches into the earth, its shifting sands. The roots and tangles of the trees intertwine with our concrete, our metal, our plastic, our glass, moves round and through, buried alive under our detritus.

What is the basic truth? We cannot ignore the land, the water. It will flow as it wants to.



November 2016. The Environment Agency holds inception meetings for those who will be affected by their earthworks to build new flood defences to protect our homes. They seek buy-in from their community stakeholders, asking for input into planning.

By now, those still stranded in wrecked houses, dealing with insurers cutting costs and limiting their risk, we are all apprentices seeking to read the lines, the lay of the land, the graphs, the portents in the undulations of the clouds. Flood wardens become weather witches, posting updates, giving warnings in good time. Seeking wards, we become adepts; install flood resilience measures, pumps gates airbricks, read up on natural flood prevention, hard and soft flood approaches; what has worked, who has tried what.

The Planning documents offer percentages and returns, likelihoods, chances. Another astrological almanac for us apprentices.

The watercourse needs to hold more water, we are told. It cannot be deepened in case of subsidence to flood-prone houses, to the road. It must be widened. Two houses will be demolished. The two end-terrace houses closest to the old flood wall, now subsided into the river, will be demolished, their destruction bringing the river even closer to our home. There will be areas to act as pounds for water in the event of overtopping, to hold the water, away from homes, property, business, until it can drain back into the river; natural flood plains such as the playing fields downstream. There will be new walls, more concrete, fake brick, higher, with flood flaps set at a level to allow the water to drain from low-lying areas back into the river, holding the water away from the cost to insurers, because as and when – not 'if' – the river overtops the new flood wall, the key will be to get the water back into the river as soon there is capacity; sending more water downstream, someone else's problem. The road is too weak for the heavy plant machinery, its surface in poor repair, the pipes too close to the surface, so an access road will be built through the gardens of the demolished houses despite the shared shallow foundations of the terrace. Losing the two buttressing houses, the terrace will get new gable ends and new downpipes. The low-lying gardens will have drainage.

We count ourselves lucky, everything is relative.



Buried in the footnotes: when the rainfall is such as it was at Christmas 2015, into a water table already saturated, the river will overtop; the new flood wall will not hold it. Our homes are, somewhat poetically, referred to as sacrificial.

The Mayans made sacrifices to Chaac, the rain god, to save their civilisation from drought. Native Americans of the mid-west tracked and followed weather patterns, trading the knowledge to settlers. While the United Arab Emirates seed clouds to bring rain, Indonesian rain masters seek to keep the skies clear. A butterfly effect of unintended consequences: in trying to control the weather over time, one place's attempts to get the water it needs takes the water from other places who desperately need it. We have more than we need. In conflicts caused by droughts, warring over water, people forcibly displaced by changing climates seek sanctuary and are rebuffed. Like flash floods on hot baked soil, warm air holding more water, we are hard, hardened, and the humanity washes away.

Adityat Jayati Vrishti says the Brihat Samhita. The sun gives birth to rain.



The demolition of the two end-terraces will create new brownfield sites adjacent to the flood wall, sites which the Environment Agency will need to retain an interest in due to their responsibility for the flood wall and the drainage through it back to the river. We are consulted, our opinions valued as they are Considerate Contractors. At our meeting, we have consensus. One part of the site, where everyone's pumps let out the water from the cellars, is to be car parking allocated to those properties whose land is adjacent to it, although these cars will need to be moved when the siren sounds.

The remainder of the site is adjacent to the low-lying gardens.

In our apprenticeships, there are those of us who have read about Pickering, the place where the community rejected the Environment Agency's costly hard infrastructure plans in favour of restoring a natural flood management system which works with, rather than against, the natural water catchment. Although Pickering itself has continued to flood, the flood risk has been reduced by working to slow the flow of the water so the water table does not become overloaded, using upstream trees to store potential flood water upstream. We talk of living in harmony, rather than in uneasy coexistence with the water; a buffer of trees, plants, greenery, which will absorb excess water and flourish, preventing the gardens from becoming waterlogged.

Hedgerows of hawthorn, we invoke thee. Rushes, reeds and water lilies. Willow and bamboo. A shrubbery of Ni, we conjure thee.



The earthworks go on, bone-shaking, wearying those of us living in no peace while we watch the skies. The rain becomes a threat, assessed each time the wind rises, the clouds float over. How much moisture in the air? Each time a darkened cloud passes, our noses are to the glass, scrying.

Layers of shale, gravel, aggregate, raise the Environment Agency's access road as their plant machinery hammers the end-terrace houses down. The flood wall is removed, piece by piece, and in its place, temporary metal fencing, plastic barriers, rubble sacks, constantly moved, their territory expanding and enclosing the commons and the private gardens. Higher land is given open drainage which lets out onto the lower land of the gardens, their risk mitigated by displacing it onto us. External doors let out onto metal fence, malignant giant beasts of plant machinery brought down the road and left squatting, within touching distance of home. The walls crack, shift. We are told it will all be worth it – five years of pollution, destruction and damage – to protect our homes from future floods.

The plans, developed in concert and collaboration, are shelved, each new project manager further and further from knowledge of the local water flows. Collective forgetting of the promises made to the community, the reason why. The new gable-ends fail; houses by the earthworks subside; downpours overwhelm downpipes, water pooling and waterlogging even in days of hot sun; the proposed pounds for water are raised. And so it goes, all while the contractors ask the Government for more and more money.

Barred by the Environment Agency from our own garden, our boundary fence knocked over, it rewilds, flourishes, takes over.



Ciara visits in February 2020.

We flood again, another one in decades event four years after the last. The siren song still stilled, does not ring out.

As we clear our home again, as the volunteers swing into weary solidarity, the flood hubs open, the Council in concert with volunteers, the Army are placing sandbags and rubble sacks to hold the waters back, Canute after the flood.