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For my mother, father and sister
Water Meadows

River as wind
as light
as final form
At Cuckmere

Down in the ditches reeds eat mud and, on the hills, cows turn to sniff at their calves as if they were strangers. This river’s a snake that opens its mouth and sings, looping and undulating, leaving a sloughed skin oxbow by its side, but neither ditch nor oxbow will take us back home. The real snake in the old river does that, swimming head up and jaunty across a ford, through muscled water, cold and treacherous, where we paddle, our luminous shins skinny-white as the peeled sticks we use as switches. “Christ!” he says, “look at that snake swimming”. Heifers stand in the shallows, snorting and shaking off flies before they drink.
The Drowner

Greate profitt may redound to the owners of this land upon a free ymprovement, by drowninge, wateringe or drayninge. To the Floating of our Meades and the drawing water off againe, as he shall think most fit, we shall appoint a Drowner.

— John Snow 1676

I make the land a moving pelt, I stretch it thin. I float the meadow in cold sun, keep ice from meddling with the roots of spring. I let the heavy rope of river fray its course, drop silt against marsh marigold and lady’s smock, on meadow fescue and on timothy. I open veins. I cut them with a knife. I draw the water in and drive it off. I am the equal of the shepherds of the hills who wrap the orphan lambs in skin to give them life.
Standlynch Mill, the gardener’s girl

Inquest of Dora Beesley, December 13th 1903

Dora was six years old and lying on the long bridge by the waterfall collecting icicles when she fell in.

The Miller got a grappler and shut down two boards to stop the flow. He found her in still water where the flood losing its downward force had let her rise. Her father came and took her in his arms but blood was trickling from her nose and mouth. Nothing he did could make her breathe again. Nothing he did could make her breathe.
The Eel House

Put your eye to the knot hole in the feather edge board of the small house adjacent to the bridge. Pinhole-slits and gaps let in, between the boarding and the brick, a suffocated grey. The floor’s a sloping grid for eels to fall on when the weir’s in flood. At night white water grinds over and over through this sieve, and in that loneliness the eels come quietly, one by one, driven by longing for a spawning place at sea. Slither an eye across the peep show floor. The risen dark pools where eels still hide trapped in a storage well, somersaulting, tumbling and unbalancing. Their tender fins caress each other, water, air; slip off a little luminosity.
View of a Water Mill and its Eel House

Mill on *River Avon*, now disused. English bond brick, stepped in vitrified headers, half-hipped tiled roof, brick stacks. L-plan with single-storey C18 wing and C19 extension. Stable door in chamfered case with initials MB 1698 on lintel, plank ed door to right. 2-light casements and louvred windows to left. Five hipped dormers to roof, one with 2-light ledged casements. Left return has several louvred windows. Right return, 2-light casements. Rear has semi-circular arch to mill race. Interior has chamfered beams with runout stops, cupboard with butterfly hinges in west room, 6-bay roof with C17 trusses, tie-beam with raking struts to collar and two tiers of butt purlins, the upper tier with straight wind bracing.

The initials MB, Bockland, Stand—
House

demol—
circa

circa

circa

This mill survives, complete with an ‘eel house’. Thus, large numbers of eels were caught each year during their migration, providing a secondary income for the miller. Brick, tile with feather-board.
Gifts for Lethe

the water bailiff thought I was a boy
the water bailiff who was
bitten by a grass snake

*beside the Avon, by the water meadows*

my mother slipped us past wild daffodils
to a gate marked ‘private’ where I said to her
this means we should stop   but we went on

*the deer pond in the field we called Horatio*
*was so overgrown with weeds, a child could run across it*

my skin was a nasturtium leaf
my stomach hollow under water
the bathroom bitter cold and lido blue

*above the Avon, in the farmhouse bath*

a film about Helen Keller
her first word       dropped on the back of her hand
water gushing from a cast iron pump

*in Salisbury (Avon, Nadder, Ebble, Wylye, Bourne)*
*the sweating weir gates holding back a flood*

and the standing pool he used in Mesopotamia
(he was Captain RAMC to General Marshall’s Headquarters)
seemed good to drink till the dead Turk resurfaced¹

*between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates*

after milking I scraped then hosed the parlour
the usual order   entrances   stands   corridors   yard
high pressure drove the shit in pretty deviations
a coiled pressure hose, kept where? – I have forgotten – somewhere above the Avon, above the water meadows

her granny said to me Thalassa meaning go to the sea and swim
I walked to the monastery I was alone

here the Vobinas river ran, at Poros, a natural crossing

I lay detached that first night in the bedsit on an old iron bedstead oiled cloud in spate outstripped the window

at Springfield where they found a Saxon boat

those nights we lay together foreheads tightly pressed all night awake and then all day awake our bodies languid

of South Millfields lammas lands and Hackney Marshes

his first word was “adai” “adai” “adai!” the gist of it “My God! That train is beautiful!” we watched it with him pulled the buggy backwards

the railway arch, the timber yards, the lost meanders

when you arrived at your mother’s house a mad apple-woman had barred the door of the house which was long since demolished

the River Lliedi which flows underneath the town

we skirted the reservoir having been dropped off by a Mallorcan taxi driver a slight climb to the ridge then zigzag paths through olive groves
the Cúber Reservoir and then the torrent of Biniaraix

it was morning so we washed her
flannel soap warm water skirting that dimple in her lower back
her last breath as we turned her

Alderbury, which has no river running by it

“You’ll be the death of me” he cried out to the doctor
when he was dying and his shit was black and foul
to us he hissed “Don’t be so bloody silly”

Alderbury, and the goldfish pond we dug together

at the empty crossroads
a very small grass snake lifted its head
poured itself across tarmac towards water

making for Pellbrook Cut and river Ouse

a three-line stave hung between telephone poles
on either side of the river
late august swallows a gathered song

hard by the Ouse, the water meadows

I ordered my horse for a short ride—indescribably
filthy, slippery and cold. I was glad to have seen Alexnitza
in its winter garb. Perhaps for the last time.²

below a broad plain thro’ which the Morava serpentin

a grass snake writhed
and thrashed around the beak
of a heron who was hunting by the river
the river Lethe and the goddess Lethe
water both nameless and invisible

Daubenton’s bats were skimming the river
the Serotine at tree height aping birds  bat conservers
aimed their lights  all of us listened to their calls

the blue enamelled throat, the water snake
at Wiley’s footbridge where we stopped to stare