

## In Our Element - Episode 3: Water

### TRANSCRIPT

Linda France:

Yesterday, as sometimes happens up here in the open spaces of Northumberland, my water supply was cut off.

Joshua Green:

(singing) We come from fire. We come from snow.

Linda France:

And on a day when the Met Office issued their first ever extreme heat amber warning, as temperatures rose to over 30 degrees centigrade in the UK, I couldn't turn on the tap and pour myself a glass of water.

Joshua Green:

(singing) In our element

Linda France:

In Our Element, a poet's inquiry into climate change. Episode Three: Water.

Richard Dawson:

Around the world, we are seeing increased frequency and scale of extreme weather events, the recent floods in Europe, the heat wave in America and Canada, record-breaking weather again in the UK this year is all pointing towards a kind of rapidly accelerating change in our climate. We need to look across what the weather is actually doing, how the weather and the environment is changing, understanding the relationship between human activity and changing climate.

Linda France:

It used to be that the English were very good at talking about the weather as a way to avoid anything personal or controversial. These days, it's impossible to talk about the weather without straying into dangerous territory. Richard Dawson is Professor of Earth Systems Engineering and Director of Research and Innovation at Newcastle University.

Richard Dawson:

We're currently close to a one-degree world, about one degree warmer than we were several hundred years ago. The Paris agreement sought to try and keep global warming to two degrees. If we allow it to go far beyond that, then we will have to make some really difficult choices between which areas and which people we are able to actually

provide adequate protection to. And indeed, there's lots of evidence suggesting that parts of the world it might not be possible to grow food in anymore.

Linda France:

Talking about the weather was never as safe as we thought it was. And it still masks unplumable fathoms of uncomfortable facts and feelings.

Linda France:

*Talking about the Weather*

The gardener sat in the old wicker chair,  
hands wrapped round a mug of nettle tea –

and even though the room was warm, curtains  
drawn against the night, the way we hold  
our breath between winter and what might follow –

*snowmelt, rainfall, lambing storm*, the words  
she spoke flung open the door on water, a river  
in spate, rushing and roaring between us –

her worst fears of flood and disaster,  
an unstoppable lostness sweeping her away,  
tossed in the current of truth, lies, testing

the strength of this earth we cling to – as if our lives  
were leaves, whispering *North, North, North*.

Linda France:

The work of Nancy Campbell is informed by immersive writing residencies undertaken at various points North.

Nancy Campbell:

I grew up on the Northumbrian coast, and I've always been curious about fishing law and in my own community and what keeps you safe from the storm. And there's a universality about this, but it's also intriguing to find customs elsewhere. I was at Doverodde Arts Center, which is on the west coast of north Denmark, Jutland. And 'Proverbs of Water' was inspired by conversations I was having with local people.

Nancy Campbell:

*It's quiet here. Is it too quiet for you?* The rain is soft as the conversations of coral.

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*We used to swim by the dam, and pull little fish out of our swimsuits. Then my friend started to get ill.*

§

The thief of birdsong tries to capture the colour of rain. It's just grey, he complains.

§

A book bound in bricks, a scallop shell concertina. One is too heavy for this place, the other too light.

§

An empty bucket is always a bad omen. Turn back, if you see one at the outset of your journey.

Nancy Campbell:

Religions in Greenland and the far North are very often animist. So you really do see a spiritual presence in rocks and ice and the landscape and things can come to life. Certainly in Greenland, the ice, it's very dynamic. It's always moving. It's a creaking, ugly difficult thing to live alongside, on the ice edge. And I found that straightforwardness about that community. I was very glad and grateful to have encountered it. Even to the degree of on a Rocky island, you can't bury pipes in the ground. So everything was on show. You know how things work, even the toilets don't flush, there's no sewage. So you have to sort of look at all the elements of your own existence, straight in the eye and acknowledge what you are as a creature, which I think is very important in the world. I think we are now often in danger of forgetting, unless we're challenged by individual ill health or a pandemic to understand our vulnerability as human beings.

Linda France:

In North America, poet Jorie Graham encourages us to embrace that vulnerability and live our lives closer to the elements.

Jorie Graham:

We have allowed ourselves to become dopamine addicted to technology, that literally fractures our attention span. You don't need a cancer diagnosis or a COVID diagnosis to wake up and go, 'wait a minute, I wasn't living my life.' You don't need to lose your job or have a catastrophic flood come and take your town from you. All of the things that are happening to people all over the world - one can just decide, I'm going to go outside today and sit and look at something, anything out there, not human, growing. Whether

it's a weather system or a tree or a field or a river or rain, just rain. Just like, what is rain? It is an astonishing incomprehensible thing.

Jorie Graham:

So go and put yourself in the position, which involves opening yourself up to negative capability, as Keats would have it, into a state of unknowing, what the haiku poets called yugen. The sensation of the ineffable. Go sit outside in the rain. Just sit in it. Let it fall on your face. The times I've done that, and I just try to imagine the water cycle. You don't need to take LSD to go half mad with a big, unbelievable vision you will have. If you just try to track all the places in the earth, deep in the earth and up in the sky that water has come from and will return to.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

The water reawakens and makes a whole land and just everything feel nice and cleansed and fresh. There's a whole cycle of stuff.

Linda France:

Australian poet, Charmaine Papertalk Green, sees water from the perspective of the Yamaji Aboriginal Nation.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

When the rain comes, it fills up the water holes where our ancestors would camp around and where they'd get their precious water. It would bring us Bush foods. It would bring all the flowers. We're in our Bush food season now. It's a good season because we've had good rain, but there have been other years where the rain hasn't been there and the berries haven't been there to collect or the emu eggs. We have seen the seasons changing with rain coming late and our summers being hotter than you can remember them being.

Linda France:

Nancy Campbell.

Nancy Campbell:

For me, my way into the natural environment, the ice, the sea and the snow was through traditional means of survival. It was by going back to these brilliant interventions in the landscape by the Greenlanders, sort of listening to the legends that people had told when there was famine because the sea wasn't offering up enough sea mammals. And there was a legend about a hunter, Kuvu Vasuq. He lived through a time which was very opposite to our own in which there was too much ice. The whole ocean was covered and there was no way for any of the humans to find food to eat.

Nancy Campbell:

So it's a very old Arctic legend that deals directly with climate crisis, but there's an element of it where Kuvu Vasuq is sent down to the bottom of the ocean to talk to the queen of the sea Sedna, who is the one who controls the ice and also who can release the sea mammals, which the humans need. And it's a very perilous three day journey. And she's a very malevolent goddess, but the sea goddess says; "When you go back home, tell the people to stop emptying their dirty pots at my edges, and then I will release the sea creatures." So it's very directly seen even then the strange behavior of the ice and the dearth that people are suffering is their own fault for not looking after the land and for polluting the waters.

Nancy Campbell:

It is kindest to measure depth in metres. A fathom is the span of a man's outstretched arms. The fjord, two fathoms deep, drowns his embrace.

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Wave dragon, wave star, now the pier leads nowhere.

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Wind blows waves across the road. We drive on a silver river. It takes an hour to reach the sun.

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My lover is wary of water. *The car started to sink so quickly.*

§

The water is a loyal silence on all our heels. I'm lost. Give me the grey key again, the sea that tolls the truth.

§

It is easier to look at the stones than the sea, until salt spatters your spectacles.

§

We drank from blue china. The saucer did not match the teacup: two sets must have got mixed up years ago. We sipped, and consulted marine charts.

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The coast is new as a fetus and old as a fossil. The bedrock rebounds from the glacier's weight. Sea bewilders it.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

In regards to climate change, and when we're looking at sustainable lifestyles and we're looking at why all those Bush fires happen the way they do. And concern about fracking and the impact on water and the water levels in the groundwater, or sea level rises. Now, Aboriginal people have been living in Australia for thousands and thousands of years. So there's a lot of knowledge that's been handed down and we're a continuous culture. Anybody talking about climate change or the environment, land management, water management need to talk to Yamaji people to embed those cultural knowledges.

Suzanne Dhaliwal:

It's about understanding your positionality of power and privilege, of listening to those who have come before us, those who are on the front lines and at the center of it needs to be the land and at the center of it, decolonization.

Linda France:

Suzanne Dhaliwal: climate justice creative, campaigner and researcher.

Suzanne Dhaliwal:

This climate crisis bleeds through, into all areas of our life. And it is in personal consumption and the way we live our lives. But this climate illiteracy that we've gone into where we are like - oh, isn't it about straws and turtles and - yeah totally, but if we zoom out and we look at the Amazon, which is being protected by indigenous people, and just a few days ago, legislation passed in Brazil, which basically opens up the Amazon for even more destruction, for more violence against indigenous people. And for me personally I come from the Punjab in India and it's British rule, which divided up that territory, which still has implications now with desertification, with water shortages. So we have to look at the history of these landscapes and it's not to stain it, it's so that we can move forward.

Linda France:

How did invasion, domination and division become the central plot of the human narrative? When did we surrender our own capacity to know we have everything we need right here. If we trust the ground beneath our feet and the evidence of our own eyes and ears and hearts.

Jorie Graham:

We are on a thread between hundreds of generations on one side and the other of our small life. If we felt ourselves to be on that thread, a small bead on this long necklace, it would be much more automatic for us to feel that our small moment here would be an opportunity to take the bucket from the people before us and pass it on to the people

ahead of us. We would do it instinctively because we would feel we were part of that community, which of course, native Americans famously encoded the Iroquois as you know, the idea of the seventh generation ahead of one, where the elders would walk along a river with the imaginary seventh child of the seventh generation ahead of them and say 'how much fish should I take out of this river for there to be fish for you?' If you feel that you're in conversation with the past and the present, then it's easy to say, I'll save this for you.

Nancy Campbell:

*A colony of herons, of rare and timid animals can be mentioned, the birch mouse and otter.*

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Dunes are the most fickle of landforms, ever blowing inland from the sea, ever on the move.

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Two blind oxen, bound together, once rested here. The church is dark but through one window water dances.

§

Find a fish to catch a fish. There's nothing worse than a bare hook. Mussels are thirsty for the sea.

Linda France:

Time loops and spirals between past and future. But the only time we can act is in the present and the climate crisis is asking us to make changes now as one planet.

Suzanne Dhaliwal:

While we give space for the nuance and the complexity of how our cultures, our identities are impacted by this, it's really important that we do find that space to come back as humanity. How can I connect to you about this? If it's not the fact that we both drink water, that we both breathe air and that connects to Sikhism, because that is one of the basic premises of Sikhism. We give space for difference, but we're all essentially one. Can the pandemic awaken inner soul and international consciousness. Can we build that sort of interconnected awareness that no international situation is separated.

Nancy Campbell:

I think it's very dangerous to assume that climate change is happening somewhere else. Although certainly other places from the UK are maybe feeling some of the effects,

more intensively, rising sea levels and small island nations already having to leave their homes and become climate refugees. And I think as a writer, working in places like Greenland and Iceland, I've always been keen to look back at the place I'm from as well.

Nancy Campbell:

Where have the eels gone? There's a hint of net in the water, a line of floats and a black flag.

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A stone pulled up on a hook should be kept on land. A knot in a tangled line may not be undone.

§

To cure seasickness: eat seaweed. Smell rose root. Tickle your throat with a feather dipped in cod liver oil. Cut grass in a churchyard and place it in your shoes before sailing.

§

*You will know when you come to the river.*

§

After the funeral wood anemones were thrown upon the lake.

§

Who climbs highest, the skylark or the snail?

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If you keep fossils in your study, will you grow wiser, or just older?

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When you're tired, water makes a sound like sleep

and nothing happens and

nothing happens and water sounds



like silence

Linda France:

Nancy Campbell ending our Water episode. In Our Element is presented by me, Linda France. It's a Sonderbug Production with New Writing North in association with Newcastle University and is supported by the Audio Content Fund and Arts Council England. Thank you for listening.