

Sea Story by AS Byatt

AS Byatt launches an exclusive series of new stories inspired by water with Sea Story, a tale of love and environmental disaster



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'The sweep of sand, the black protuberance of the Brigg with the waves licking it or crashing over it ... the huge curve of the horizon' ...

Filey Brigg in Yorkshire.

He was born beside the sea – almost literally, for his mother's birth pangs began when she was walking along the shoreline under a pale sun gathering butterfly shells. He was born in Filey, on the east Yorkshire coast, a fishing town with a perfect sweep of pale golden beach, crumbling grassy cliffs, and the unique Filey Brigg, a mixture of many rocks, beginning at Carr Naze, and stretching out in a long peninsula into the North Sea, full of rock pools and rivulets, harsh and tempting at once. His father was an oceanographer, the son of an oceanographer who studied the deep currents of the North Sea. His mother taught English at a high school and wrote fierce little poems about waves and weather. They took him walking along the beach, and scrambling on the Brigg and fishing from rocks and with lines over the side of rowing boats. The family had almost a collection of bottles picked up by sailing vessels and along coastlines. Several of these were numbered bottles, sealed and weighted to bob along the seabed, designed by the Marine Science project to map the movement of currents around the coast. One – a rather sinister-looking early 20th-century medicine bottle – contained a lined sheet of paper. This read "Dear Mary" and was followed by the phrase "I love you, I love you, I love you ... " repeated until it filled both sides. It was meticulously signed Robert Fisher, with an address in Hull; the house turned out to have been demolished by bombs in 1944.

His mother recited poems to him. They would emerge from under the tunnel-like underpass which led from the town to the beach. The wind would blast them or wrap itself round them, and his mother would quote Masfield. "I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky."

"I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife ..."

It was something set in motion by that poem, more than any other, which led him to follow his mother, to study English literature, and to teach. His days in Oxford were the first he had spent away from the sea and its absence was peculiarly painful. He could not quite imagine how it might feel to have been born inland. The space inside his skull was composed of an almost abstract form – the sweep of sand, the black protuberance of the Brigg with the waves licking it or crashing over it, and most of all the huge curve of the horizon. It was an empty line, and it signified the inhuman. That is, it was the limit of human vision. Beyond and beneath it were spaces and moving things unknown to men, unseen and unimaginable. In Oxford the stone colleges, the perfectly composed gardens and trimmed lawns were human and had been so for centuries. The river was a place for punts and rowing boats. The Filey horizon was inordinate and its menace delighted him. He needed this danger. He understood the Filey fishermen, who would not learn to swim and sank quickly in their boots if their boats capsized. They acknowledged that the sea was too much for them.

From his Oxford days he kept a kind of anthology of the sea. There was a moment of pure glee when he read for the first time chapter 58 of *Moby Dick*. This is the chapter about Brit, "the minute yellow substance upon which the Right Whale largely feeds". The chapter describes the peaceable whales like mowers in a golden meadow. It ends with a rhetorical comparison of the land and the sea. The land is "this green, gentle and most docile earth." The sea is violent, dangerous, inimical. "Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe."

When he fell in love it was an immediate shock which was at once absorbed into his inner landscape. He was fishing from his boat, beyond the end of the Brigg when she rose up beside him, a pale woman in a sleek black wetsuit, like a seal, her long, lovely face streaming with sea water. She trod water and smiled mildly at him and stayed to speak about the weather, the beauty of the bay. Her name was Laura and she had just sat her final exams in marine biology in Aberdeen. She was on a holiday with a group of fellow students staying in the Three Tuns pub. He could see that under her cap her hair was long and white-gold. She was mild, she was sunny. Love at first sight was not something he had believed in until it happened. His own side of their conversation was shocked and hesitant. He feared to say anything that would break the spell or cause her to frown. He drew in his line, so as not to entangle her when she dived again. He went of course to the Three Tuns that evening, although this demanded an effort of courage. There they were, the students, drinking in a bay window. More courage was required to greet her, but she smiled, and room was made for him at their table. She spoke less than the others, mostly to agree with what they were saying. They were a mixture of men and women. He watched anxiously to see if she was attached in any way to any of the men, and concluded she was not. He thought she would never know how witty he was, how eloquent, in the classroom and out of it, unless he broke his charmed silence, but he could not. Everything she did was delightful, the way she tossed her hair, the aquamarine brooch at her throat, the way she listened calmly to what was said.

He became part of their group, in the pub at least. He was full of desire and yet hardly dared to imagine making love to her. He felt, unlike Marvell's lover, that he had world enough and time to take her in slowly. It was somehow not possible to ask her out separately from the group. He stalked the pub decorously and in the end was rewarded by seeing her leave, alone, an unposted letter in her hand. He fell in step with her, easily. She smiled. She said

"I've just been offered my dream job. I'm going to be part of a team studying the life-cycle of eels. This letter is my acceptance. I'm off to the Caribbean next week."

"But" – he said. "But."

"But?"

"I've only just got to know you."

"I'll be back, some time."

"Can I write?" he said.

She looked startled and then smiled. "Of course." She took out a notebook and scribbled an address. She added an email address. Then she said good bye and walked away.

He wrote her loveletters in his mind, studded with quotations. He wrote a painfully ordinary letter, posted it, and had no reply, which was unsurprising, for the address she had given him was Scottish and she was in the Caribbean. The emails he sent were returned to him as undeliverable. He dreamed obsessively of her, kind, unkind, naked, wetsuited, inviting, frowning, vanishing. One day he remembered the loveletter in the drift bottle on his mantelpiece: I love you, I love you, I love you. On an impulse he put pen to paper, writing her name at the top, and adding

Laura
I love you.

As fair art thou my bonnie lass,
So deep in luvè am I;
And I will luvè thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry –

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
I will luvè thee still, my dear,
While the sands of life shall run.

He signed the letter and added his address. Then he rolled the message and put it into a Perrier bottle. The green plastic was lovely and Perrier had been Laura's preferred drink in the Three Tuns. He did not know whether casting his love away into the sea was an attempt to drive his love from his life, or a hope for some improbable luck. In order to show himself that the gesture was serious he added his great grandfather's carnelian signet ring and some threads of his own hair. Then he closed the bottle tightly, and rowed out in his boat to where he knew, from his grandfather's work, that the currents could possibly take the message as far as the Sargasso Sea. He held it up to the light, solemnly, and then dropped it into the water where it moved, apparently purposefully, away.

It travelled far. It rode south to North Anglia, and was then carried north past Holland to head round Denmark, past Norway to the Arctic Ocean. It survived the wet and the cold and lost some of its brilliant greenness, becoming smeared with a thick brown algal slime. In the Arctic it was arrested for a time, and moved in circling swirls before being blown again back onto the current which took it south and then round the coast of Greenland. It bobbed and slopped across the Atlantic Ocean, past Newfoundland and Nova Scotia; it was snapped at by seabirds off the coast of Massachusetts, where a stream of cold water took it south into the Caribbean. Here it was arrested at the fringe of a slowly swirling carpet of floating fragments. They were all shapes and sizes and some of them were in jewelled colours, emerald, opal, crimson, cobalt, ultramarine. But the overall colour was a colourless all-colour of stained whiteness, deathly pale. This was the Atlantic Gyre or the Caribbean Trash Vortex. It is said to be the size of Texas and moves slowly in the ocean. It is composed of human plastic waste, and beneath it, hidden under the movement of the sea surface, vast curtains of tiny particles hang fathoms deep. It is like a pop painting, containing white plastic forks and beakers, shoals of toothbrushes, phantom threads of ghostly ropes and lines, bottles and jars. It contains also a silt of threads and fragments from the sumps of the world's washing-machines. It could be likened to Melville's sea of golden brit where the whales fed – but the crustaceans, copepods and fingerling fish that composed the brit are being replaced, little by little, by nurdles, the tiny plastic spheres made by manufactured microbeads of polyethylene thermoplastic, or by rubbed fragments of plastic debris, poetically known as mermaids' tears.

The bottle sidled between an ethereal shopping bag and a cracked shoehorn, was sucked down and spat up, its green sides glittering in the sun. A mollymawk snapped at it. It was beginning to disintegrate, its walls furring and feathering. The mollymawk tore at it, and carried away a smeared strip to feed to its chicks, who would die with bellies distended by this stuff. The cap detached itself, and was swallowed by a green turtle which mistook it for a glass eel. When this turtle choked and died, the cap was picked from its remains by another turtle, which also choked. The signet ring was heavy enough to plummet down to the ocean floor, where a hagfish lunged at it, swallowed it and choked. A fat eel took the letter with its weeping words, and excreted it. Paper decays, the letter decomposed itself. The body of the bottle separated into shreds of green-grey floaters. Some of these were mistaken for small squid by hungry fish and swooping gannets, whose guts were already swollen with waste. What remained was washed and rubbed into nurdles which joined the mass of other pale beads.

Parts of this mess did in fact reach their intended destination. Many of the nurdles were caught in vast trailing micronets, attached to boats, once designed to study plankton, now part of a long and painstaking experiment to examine the bulk of nurdles and the diminishing bulk of the plankton. There she was, Laura, sleekly blackclad, bright-haired like some marine goddess gathering in the tears, the beads, the microscopic living things. She looked at them in a glass dish under a strong microscope. The message she read was the human occupation and corruption of the masterless ocean.

Harold married a fellow poet, had three daughters whom he loved, strode along Filey Beach collecting plastic bags and debris, retired and died. Laura had died long ago, caught in the micromeshes of her netting when her boat capsized. Fires raged and floods drove through streets and houses as the planet became more and more inimical to human life. The sempiternal nurdles, indestructible, swayed on and under the surface of the sea.

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