TREADING WATER SAMANTHA CLARK

The numbers of the dead go on rising.

They are counted, but they are not named.

Time feels different this summer, like a stuck clock ticking the same second over and over. The calendar on our kitchen wall does not fill up with scribbled appointments, concert dates, dinners with friends. The usual stream of visitors that make our short, bright Orkney summers so convivial do not arrive in jovial carloads from the ferry, bearing bottles of wine, hugs, laughter.

We two go quietly along. The mild days of early summer pass pleasantly enough. Let the hens out, open the poly tunnel, water the seedlings, make the coffee, butter the toast, open the laptop, work till lunchtime, stop to lift a few beetroot or new potatoes, wash and prepare them, set out the lunch things with a jug of water. We sit at the table, each in our habitual chair, and exchange some quiet chat about the day. Then Andrew goes back to his desk and I wash the dishes and go back to mine. Work till evening. He cooks dinner. I wash up. Some television, a book maybe. Bed.

And so it goes. We count our blessings.

Most days I walk the mile or so up to the north shore to look at the sea, then turn back for home. Sun on my left cheek, then on my right.

Sometimes I go for a swim.

Sometimes, a spin on the bike.

Sometimes I drive to the Co-op. The green strip down the middle of our track grows so tall it tickles the sump on my van. I leave a trail of beheaded ox-eye daisies and red clover behind me.

The water is always there, all around us. Every day I watch it; the rushing burn beside the track, the spring that seeps out of the ground in our neighbour's field and gushes sweetly from the pipe nearby, the wide expanse of freshwater loch that fills the south-east facing windows of our sitting room with its movement, the wind-driven rain that batters the roof-lights, the surging sea I walk beside most days. There's a lot to keep an eye on. There's a lot to think about.

The earliest clocks used water to measure the flow of time. In ancient Babylon, Egypt and Rome a *clepsydra*, or 'water thief' marked time as water dripped through a small hole from

one earthen vessel into another, where it was measured. Time became substance and that substance was water.

Every day I watch the water, and then I try to draw it.

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The first real warm day of the summer makes time loop, bringing ‘this time last year’ bright in memory: my niece, Zoe, running on the beach, three years old, on her first visit to Orkney.

The sun is bright on the wet sand and she has pulled off her shoes and made straight for the water, casting off all her clothes as she runs, and now she is jumping and splashing in the shallows, naked, running, falling, laughing, clowning, prancing, rolling, dancing, her plump little bottom and chubby baby hands caked in sand, her soft hair falling in wet tangles. She waves her bedraggled mermaid doll in the air in jubilation and shouts “Happy! Happy! Fun! This is fun!” at the top of her voice. Her delight is infectious. She is incandescent with joy. Passers-by cannot help but smile at the sight of her. The water is cold and she shrieks with the sting of it, teeth chattering, but she doesn’t want to come out. My brother, trousers rolled to the knee, tries to hold her still long enough to smear on some sunscreen. He might as well try to catch hold of a live eel. She is more exuberantly alive in that moment than anything I have ever seen, running on the strand, aflame with delight. Her name means life. I am afraid to love her. I fear we will not be able to protect her.

They say the sea will cover this beach one day and not recede. Already the coastal archaeology of these islands is vanishing, eaten away by high tides and storm surges. I check the maps and the predictions to see how long we’ve got. It’s not long enough. For me, perhaps. But not for Zoe.

This summer my brother sends me photographs, so I can see how tall she’s growing.

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I watch the water. And then I try to draw it.

Yesterday I soaked some paper, stretched it over a board and taped it all around the edges. Now it has shrunk drum tight as it dried overnight. Today, I squeeze out a round pea of Payne’s Grey from an old tube of paint that’s gone a bit claggy, mix it with a smudge of Prussian Blue, some water and add a slosh of old tea, a good strong brew. The tannins in the tea will make the pigment clump into granules as it dries, and, if I’m lucky and it goes right,

it will leave tiny, reticulated marks behind the receding tide of evaporating water in fine sedimentary layers.

I mix and pour more colours onto the paper until it is dotted here and there with odd-shaped puddles and pools. The curved front surface of the liquid rolls forward carrying tiny grains of pigment as it creeps slowly across the dry paper. When it meets another pool of watery paint the two suddenly merge and the colours feather out into each other. Carefully, I add a little more ink and paint, some more water, little drips here and there, that will mix and separate out as the water trickles, puddles and evaporates.

Mix, pour, wait. I don't know how it will look when it has dried. When I go back later to see what's happened it's always a surprise. It's like the drawings have begun to make themselves. Sometimes delicate structures have formed, like the gills of a mushroom or a tidal estuary seen from a satellite. Sometimes I just get ugly blobs. Sometimes, if I haven't been careful to set the board level, I find the whole lot has dribbled off the paper and formed an island of colour on the floor.

But the softly blurred shapes and grainy textures the paint makes are just a starting point, a hunch, a hint. Now I have to take things in hand. It can take a while to work out what to do next. I pin the sheets up around the studio so I will come upon them unexpectedly, from different angles or in different corners. That way I hope I'll see what they need. Then the work really starts, drawing over them drop by drop, layer by layer, line by line. Gathering up time.

It's a chancy business, with many wrong turns and digressions. But I seldom give up on a drawing. I'll keep going back to it, like a dog chewing an old bone, over months, even years sometimes, until I find what it needs to finish it. There is always something to learn from it, no matter how unpromising the situation might look, no matter how many times I rework, scrape it off, work over it again.

I keep lots of them on the go, at different stages. Different bones to come in and chew on.

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A swim with Andrew in our nearest little cove, or *geo.* Clasped tight between two cliffs, it's a sheltered spot for a quick dip after work on a fine summer evening like this. We wobble unsteadily over the slippery stones of the beach and into the cold water to swim about in the little bay. We have it to ourselves this summer.

I hang face down, sucking and drooling on my snorkel, and watch the luxuriant seaweed swish back and forth in a slow swell, the red-brown and lime-green weeds, the feathery and

the leathery weeds, the crinkly and the scalloped weeds. Tiny moon jellyfish drift among them. Sunlight filters greenishly through the hazy water. Limpets trudge around their rock. Tiny winkles emerge from their shells and creep like snails. I get out when my head starts to hurt.

But still, I love this cold water. The bite of it. How it punches the breath out of me and locks me into this moment, all thoughts silenced. Afterwards, the glow. Chittering teeth. I gulp hot tea from my flask and feel it slide all the way down into my stomach. I am in my body, here and now, feeling my pulsing blood warm my skin, nerve endings still tingling.

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This morning I look up from my computer screen and just outside my office window I see that the pair of swans that nest on the point every year are now sheltering in the burn mouth with five tiny new cygnets. The adults are reaching down into the water to pull up long wet ropes of pondweed from the bottom and feeding it tenderly to the gathered chicks. A small fuzzy grey head pops up from between the wings of one parent. It looks cosy in there, held safe on its parent's broad back. They are so very small and always vulnerable to the great skuas, or *bonxies,* who have their own young to feed and are hunting daily over the loch and seashore.

I hope the bonxie that took last year's brood doesn't get these ones.

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My friend John died suddenly and young. It must be fifteen years ago now. He drowned. On holiday. I remember how, after the initial shock and grief was shared among those of us who had loved him, maybe a year after, I felt a new grief come upon me as it dawned on me just how long he was going to be dead for, just how long we would all be going on without his presence in the world alongside us.

I met up with a dear friend Anne last night to go for a walk together, our first face-to-face meeting with someone outside our own respective households for weeks. We stood in the car park and grinned at each other for a bit, waving, unsure quite how this goes now. Then we walked together a little way round the path that skirts the coast above the tall sandstone cliffs of Yesnaby. We didn't walk far in the end, just until we found a spot sheltered from the wind, and then we sat down at the requisite distance from each other, and talked and watched the sun sink towards the sea in a clear summer sky.

It was a simple joy just to be in each other's company again, to talk meanderingly about this and that as the light changed and the air cooled around us. Just the ordinariness of it, the easy dance of conversation between old friends, where one leans and the other carries for a bit, turns are taken, stories are continued on from last time, thoughtful pauses give way to sudden rants and non-sequiturs, little waves of humour or worry rise up and are ridden out until they settle. But it made me think of all those evenings gathered around our kitchen table sharing food and wine and stories, and I missed them more, not less.

We made our way back together along the coast towards our cars. There were a few other people, local folk, walking along the clifftops, tiny and far-off, in pairs or alone, also enjoying the summer evening light. One lone figure stood at the top of the cliffs, close to the edge, looking down. We paused to watch him, a little concerned, making dark jokes. There have been many suicides here, fatal accidents too. But he turned away from the edge, unaware of our misplaced concern, and carried on with his walk along the coast path. We returned to our cars and said our goodbyes.

To fall into water, or throw yourself in, or wade in with rocks in your pockets, is to vanish into time. Like John did the day he drowned, all those years ago. Still, every now and then, I catch sight of someone who reminds me of him and it's as if time collides with itself. There he is again for a moment, like an echo, laughing over coffee with a friend, hurrying down the street, lifting a tin of beans from a supermarket shelf.

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It wasn't promising when I set off on the same route I've taken each evening these past few weeks. A thick haar was lying across the loch, but I needed some fresh air and so I headed up the road towards the sea anyway. I was grumpy, out of sorts. The profusion of green that had been erupting all along the roadside verges throughout the spring and early summer had just been chopped back hard, an action motivated by some perverse idea of civic tidiness that finds a scalped verge more seemly than one that's a riot of flowers and insects. From among the withering flower stalks the damp back of a discarded cigarette pack leered up at me with blackened, cancerous gums.

As I stepped off the tarmac road and on to the track towards the sea the light became eerie. As the sun sank lower, the backlit mist made everything look slightly unreal, like a theatrical gauze had been drawn over everything. A dream-like sea was rolling gently towards the shore from a blurred horizon. Its surface caught the blank white of the sky and threw it back.

Close to the path, so close I almost trod on her, was a female eider duck, utterly motionless, nesting in a shallow dip in the ground near the edge of the low cliffs. She had gathered a frill of grey down about her body to warm her eggs. She was so very still, her half-closed eyes so

clouded and turned dully inward, that for a moment I thought she might be dead. But she was very much alive. Her whole focus was turned not to the world outside but the eggs warming beneath her. For the eider hen, the hard work of breeding goes on just as urgently this year as any other.

I didn't linger, not wanting to disturb her, or the terns nesting on the rocky outcrops just offshore. But as I turned away a bonxie cruised past and suddenly the air was all commotion. The terns lifted from their nests and dived at it, acrobats of the air, chittering frantically. A pair of oystercatchers darted in from nowhere, piping loudly, danger! danger! danger! Various gulls, small and large, joined the fray. The air was filled with alarm. But the bonxie ignored the furore and passed on, impassive, skirting the coastline. The terns settled and quietened as I too moved on and left them to the mist, the rocks, the wind, the sea, the predators, and the passing boots and dogs.

A few days later, heading out on the same beat, I met a neighbour I hadn't seen since the lockdown began. His uncut grey hair blew about his head like a silver halo. A pair of binoculars hung around his neck. We stopped and exchanged pleasantries, six careful feet apart. I know him to be an acute observer of this little stretch of coast and its birds, so I asked how the nesting terns were faring. Still there, but no chicks.

He told me that, the day before, he and his wife had spent an hour watching the same eider hen I had noticed earlier in the week. The chicks had just hatched, he said, and pointed to where they had watched the hen gently usher them all the way down the cliff, ledge by ledge, tumbling and clambering as she kept encouraging them away from the dangers of dry land onto the sea. But she had made a poor choice of place to make an entry. Within a minute two of her chicks were dashed to pieces against the rocks by the churning swell.

All these little deaths. They seem to be everywhere now, happening all the time. There's too many to count.

It doesn't mean this isn't all still beautiful.

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I dreamt last night I was in a flooded city. The water kept coming, fast and deep. The city was deserted. All the other people had left, heeding warnings of catastrophe, but for some reason I had lingered. And now I was trapped. The water was rising. It was coming from all directions at once, gushing down motorways, smashing between buildings, cascading off concrete flyovers to crash down on the streets below in a huge slow-motion cataract. There were many strange and exotic animals swimming away from the city, as if from a flooded zoo. A long row of elephants held their trunks high as their big legs beat the water. There were rhinoceroses too, zebras and hippos, all swimming hard. After these, other beasts began to

emerge, now strange and mythical. Krakens, unicorns and griffins, manticores and basilisks, creatures horned and tentacled and scaled, all came creeping silently from doorways and trapdoors and bunkers and swam away.

All the wild animals of the world and of the mind were swimming away from the city, leaving me stranded and frightened among the grey concrete and the swirling brown water.

Mist on the loch this morning and an eerie stillness.

Words have gummed up. They don't flow today. Everything's grey.

There was a man fishing the loch earlier. He sat alone in his boat, very still, casting into the haar.

He's gone now.

There is only white sky and a faint shiver of white water through white mist. Grey gulls dip and wade in the shallows. The whole world seems to float.

To be folded inside a mist out on a hill or on the open sea is to be disoriented and exposed to danger. But here, at home by this loch, I am hidden by the thick fog and the danger is elsewhere. It cannot find me here. Held between water that is half sky and sky that is half water, no-one can see me here. I am safe. I am safe.

Can I hide here until the danger has passed?

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The burn that flows out of the loch by our house runs through a series of sluices and concrete pools that allow brown trout to pass upstream. The lowest pool of this fish ladder is a concrete rectangle about six feet by eight, that forms a chest deep pool through which the water gushes. In winter it's a broiling brown churn that fills the garden with sound, but it's been dry the last few weeks and instead of the usual heavy gush, the stream bubbles and spirals through the pool gently, temptingly, sparkling in the sun. I climb down the steep bank and lower myself into the water.

As I sink myself in the cold pulls a loud whoop out of me. I squat, neck-deep, until the gasping stops then lift my feet and let myself float. The heaviness of the water offers me the gift of weightlessness as it fits itself around me like a hammock. I roll my head back and it sends cold fingers up my scalp. Little bubbles of trapped air tickle as they roll upwards between the roots of my hair. The water closes around my head, a cold hood, muffling my ears with water sounds, only my face and my pale toes breaking the surface. All thought is

gone. There is only the water and my body in it. Sound, light, movement. The fleeting *now*, sharply joyous and always new.

As my body acclimatises and I begin to relax it's like bathing in chilled champagne, bubbles fizzing around me. The water pushes between and around my legs and arms, tickling my skin as I float. Here I have a duck's eye-level view up the burn of the yellow flag irises and marsh marigolds and something blue like water forget-me-nots in flower along the banks. I flip over and swim a slow breaststroke against the current. The pool's not really big enough for swimming. I can just about touch both sides. But if I can swim at just exactly the right speed I can remain in the same spot while the water flows around me. Perhaps I can hold everything perfectly still like this, swimming steadily into the flow, swimming back against time, holding myself in place.

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I watch the water and then I try to draw it. I catch it in tiny circles, each one a single drop, a moment gathered, stilled and set down.

I hear the waves on the loch, the water in the burn, the rush of it through the fish ladder. Time as a sound, as a feeling, as a substance which buoys us along. We can swim hard, trying to resist the flow. But the effort will tire us out in the end.

I think I'm drawing water, but it turns out I'm drawing time. Each drawing becomes a receptacle of time that I fill up drop by drop, like the 'water thief' clocks, turning time into substance, so as to better see it. Sedimented here in these layers of little marks I see the drawing's own duration, gathered and measured.

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The spell of good weather is followed by wind and heavy rain.

On the radio, someone is performing sad songs by Schumann to an empty auditorium. There is no applause between the songs, just a pause full of resonant space and empty chairs.

I take photos and videos of the buttercup-filled field jostled by the wind through the rain-smeared windowpane. Fat raindrops hang off the glass. Close-up, inside each drop, the field and the loch beyond it are caught and inverted, in miniature but sharp focus, a tiny archipelago of upturned islands. The drops swell, slide down and run into each other, gathering momentum, leaving long vertical smears of water behind them that stretch the field outside into a blur of green and yellow.

It's Sunday. I won't go anywhere today. I'll just read and stare out of the window and nap. I've been reading Seneca but I'm not taking much in. Except his steady commitment to learning and self-improvement, even while alone in exile. Writing his letters. Studying his stoic philosophers. Diligent. Learning how to live a good life. How to not cling to things. How to value friends. Advice from a man who lived and died thousands of years ago: "The whole future lies in uncertainty: Live immediately"

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Big, stately clouds are sliding over the broad blue sky. The greylag geese that have nested in a field on the other side are crossing the loch together in one big flotilla. There must be two hundred of them at least, each adult pair accompanies a bunch of half-grown goslings not yet airborne but happily buoyant and paddling across the water. They reach the near bank and wade out to make their way into our neighbour's field and begin to graze the on the stubble.

People are on the move again too. Restrictions on the ferries have been eased. Cars pull up outside the holiday lets. Blinds are lifted at windows. Unfamiliar faces walk the shore path. My evening route was busy last night, groups of people with dogs out walking and taking photographs of this and that. The terns were jittery with the new disturbance. So was I, truth be told. I've grown used to the quiet.

Now big white motorhomes cruise the roads and pull up in the car park at the point for the night. Outside the still-closed public toilets near the beach little piles of human shit are daintily topped with folded toilet paper.

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"My skin is a shoreline" writes the feminist scholar Astrida Niemanis. I'm not sure what she means. But I was standing in the shower last night when it struck me that I was showering in the water from the same loch by the house that I watch every day. After all, it's our local reservoir and water supply. So I drink it and I cook with it. I water the vegetables that we eat with it. I wash with it, brush my teeth in it. I piss and shit in it.

I do a little reading and discover this means that 60% of my body must by now be made up of water from the loch. 73% of my brain and my heart. Of my lungs, 83%. Even my bones are soaked in this water: 31%. *My skin is a shoreline.* Maybe so. But am I the land or the water?

It's a heatwave in the south and the beaches are crammed with sunbathers and swimmers in spite of warnings and fears. Families sit in baking cars on gridlocked roads, parched for some kind of summer holiday. The news is full of pictures of beaches packed with bare human skin and festive umbrellas. The pull of sea-longing on a hot day.

Something primal calling us home. *The sea the sea the sea.*

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I can't find much to say about such an overcast, windless day, mid-morning. The loch is grey, its surface crimped and wrinkled. Two men in a small white boat sit quietly, casting side by side, again and again drawing their lines over the water.

A huff-puff of breath comes to push something out of me, some unease, a twitch of fidget that this is not *enough,* this ordinariness. This plain, grey day. These few words eked out. No events, no stories to tell of them, no opinions held or points to make with words that flow fast and carry you with their momentum.

It's harder to stay in the stillness and find words that can sink right down into it and hold you there.

There is so much dying. Unseen, but all around.

Every day, I watch the water. My world is small and yet big. The days circle and repeat, each one the same, each one different. Like waves. I stay here, afloat on the surface of things, while the sky goes on rolling over, the clouds go on with their slow churn.

Why do I watch the water? This water?

I love it. I love how its surface invites the soft bellies of resting geese and the pink mouths of trout sucking down a fly. I love how it gathers the sky down into itself, a veil of borrowed light that hides its blackness till you get close enough to look into it straight. How sometimes, on a still evening, swarms of insects rise from it like columns of smoke. How the rain, as it falls into it, hisses. I love it when fog rolls over and the whale-backed hill is gone. The grazing cattle gone. The road and the scattered houses gone. There is only the shallow water lapping at my feet, and the calligraphy of reeds like ink on silk.

And the silence. Close around me, and intimate.

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The humpback whale can produce the widest range of frequencies of any living creature. Some frequencies are so low they can transmit through water right across an ocean. When

humpback whales were numerous and ship engines few or non-existent, the seas must have rumbled and chirped with their songs.

In the mornings Andrew gets up first and puts the kettle on for tea, and while he waits for the water to boil he sits down at the piano to start his day with Bach. This morning, a fugue. The aria's tune sings out brightly, opening up the morning. In my fug of morning sleepiness I hear it unfold its form through the rooms of our house with the soft geometry of rose petals opening. From inside one arpeggio another one opens up and spreads itself out. The aria dives beneath its own reflection inverted in the left hand, then breaches the surface again as its notes ripple outwards, echo, turn and repeat. Call and response, point and counterpoint, sound and undersound. Swell and underswell. I hear his fingers running faster to keep up with the sparkling flow of notes, his delight in Bach's cleverness and the satisfying splash of chords that announces the end.

Beneath this bright moment there is another one, inverted. Surface chop and underswell. Images from the news light up my little screen, people being bundled off the streets of American cities into unmarked cars at gunpoint. And the fires. Fires again. Fires everywhere. Trees are burning. Grasslands burning. Peatland smouldering. Not here, no, but just out of sight. The weight of queasy dreams lingers, even as the morning sun lights up my breakfast jam like a jar of rubies.

In Shetland, sailors once learned to navigate by the feel of the 'mother wave' beneath their boat's hull, a deep, slow underswell beneath the surface chop that told them the direction home, no matter the weather and wind. Behind the commotion and squall and chop. The mother wave. The undersound. The low frequency song that travels the breadth of the ringing world.

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I spent Saturday picking, shelling and freezing beans and peas, setting out new seedlings, pinching out the tomatoes. Then as the rain came in, reading, dozing, staring out the window, trying not to read the news, reading the news, wishing I hadn't read the news. Dinner, bit of telly, shower, bed. Sunday coffee, breakfast, laundry, lunch, clean out the hens. A walk. Dinner, bit of telly, shower. Bed.

This Monday morning dress, brush teeth, wash face, coffee, toast, emails, lunch…round it goes. I walk the usual route from loch to sea and back again, past fields of grazing cattle, stubble, barley, wind on my left cheek, then on my right.

When does contentment slide into boredom?

And then here's the sheen on the barley coming, the green of it just beginning to slide towards gold, shimmering in the wind with that soft sea-sound, to wake me up to the moment and drop me back, as if startled, into life again.

When I look at the boredom I see it's really wanting, always wanting something else, something over there, something better, something other than *this*.

What if I ignored all that wanting and just looked at *this?* This ripening field and this shimmering loch and these swooping terns and hungry bonxies and downy cygnets and the numbers of the dead and the sick and the warming sea and the rising graphs and the plots and trajectories and timelines and the *here* that's somehow also *there*, because *this* always reaches beyond itself and out into the crazy, endless tangle of it all?

And I can say I'm *bored?*

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Two days of gales brought the smell of autumn near. The stillness this morning comes as a surprise. The green leaves of the mint along the burn are each rimmed with black, singed by the salt wind. The daises are ragged and tired-looking, all shoved over on a slant.

The loch draws the green down from the hill and spreads it flat. Silver ellipses roll and spread out from where trout rise lazily to nudge the surface.

The cows have been moved to the field right beside the house. We sit at the table and chew down our food and the cows stand gazing at us through the window, chewing down theirs. The calves stare at us, unblinking, then snort and gallop away in sudden fits of alarm, their tails held upright like flags. A big brown cow like an overstuffed sofa stops chewing to stare at us through the window, gazing mildly through her long pale lashes, a strand of grass hanging from her mouth. We observe each other like this for a long moment. I'm first to get distracted and look away.

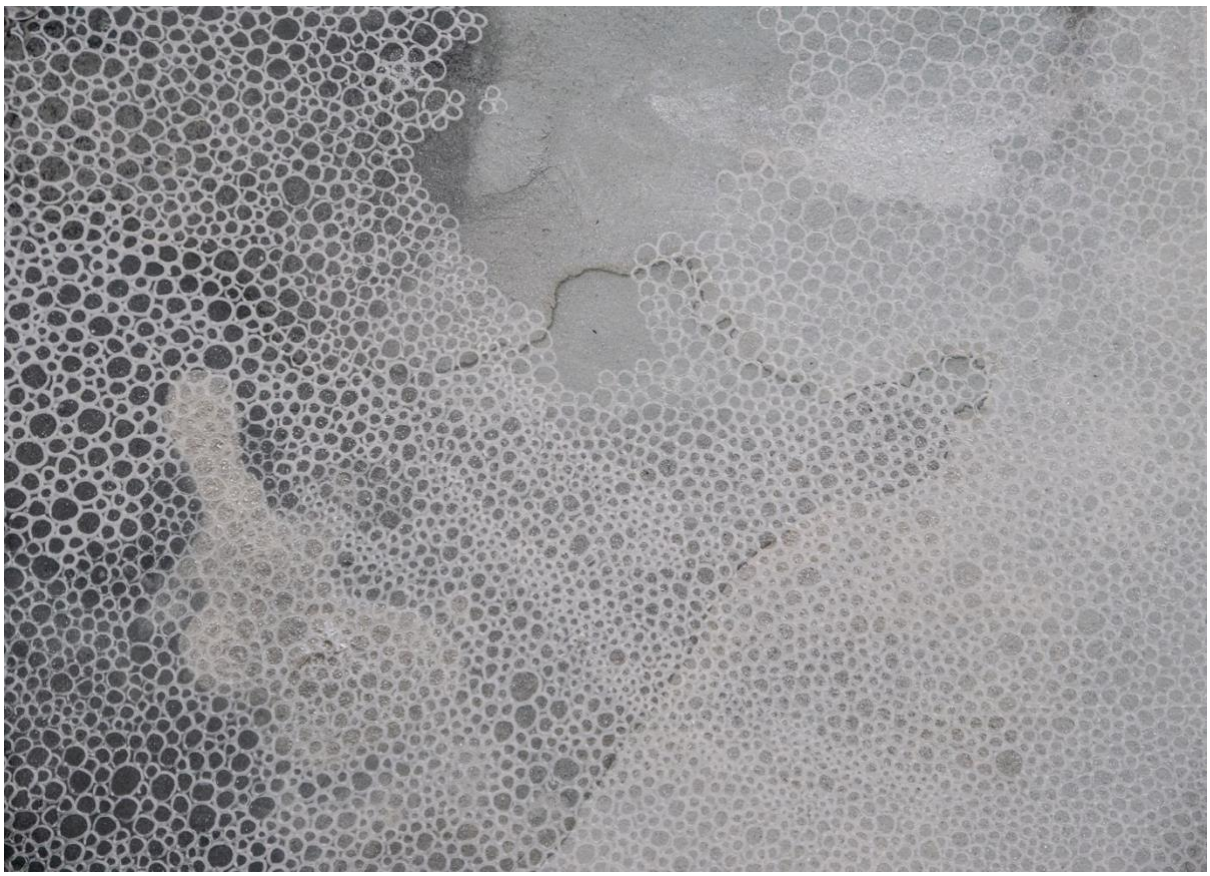
I stand at the sink as I do every day, twice a day, washing the same two plates and cups, the same two glasses, the same two knives and two forks and two spoons, and setting them on the rack to drain. Today the dishwater is cochineal pink. We've had beetroot salad for lunch. Humped islands of soap bubbles in a bright pink in the chipped white Belfast sink.

And outside on the loch, I see two white swans and all five cygnets, still alive. Growing. Sturdy little things.

‘North Shore’, Gesso, gouache, pigment ink, iridescent ink on paper, 15cm X 20 cm

‘Summer Cloud’, Gesso, gouache, pigment ink, iridescent ink on paper, 15cm x 20 cm

‘Rain Shower’, Gesso, gouache, pigment ink, silver ink on paper, 15cm x 20 cm



‘Water Glint’, Gesso, gouache, pigment ink, silver ink on paper, 15cm x 20 cm

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