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What the Water Kept

Julia Blackburn. *Time Song: Journeys in Search of a Submerged Land*. Enrique Brinkmann, Illustrator. Pantheon 2019.

The trawlers bring it up sometimes. A mammoth tooth. A section of antler. The jawbone of a rhinoceros that walked a landscape now sixty meters beneath the North Sea. The fishermen know what they have. They set it aside, or they don't. It surfaces and vanishes again, the way everything does in Julia Blackburn's *Time Song*—briefly, without announcement, asking to be held only for a moment before the water takes it back.

This is a book about Doggerland. It is also a book about grief. It is also—and this is the part that has been allowed to slip—a book about how to pay attention when the object of your attention has already disappeared.

Doggerland was a landmass. It connected Britain to continental Europe for thousands of years, an inhabited world of rivers and marshes and human lives, and then the sea rose and it was gone. Blackburn goes looking for it anyway—not to recover it, which is impossible, but to stand at its edge, which is not. She interviews archaeologists and fossil collectors and fishermen. She reads the literature. She travels to the shorelines where the land still trembles between presence and absence, where, at low tide, the bones of ancient forests appear in the mud and then go back under. She is doing, in other words, what no amount of academic expertise can replicate: she is being there.

Time Song was published in 2019, praised in the right places, shortlisted for two prizes, and then quietly allowed to subside. It did not enter syllabi. It did not accrue the apparatus that keeps books alive in discourse. It exists now mostly in library stacks and the memory of readers who have not quite found the language to describe what it did to them. This is not an accident. The book's disappearance is structural—a consequence of the same qualities that make it necessary.

It cannot be excerpted. It resists the mechanisms of circulation. Eighteen untitled lyric sections—"Time Songs"—interrupt the prose at intervals, asking the reader to stop advancing and simply dwell. They are not illustrative. They do not explain. Early in the book, one such Time Song attends to nothing more than the shoreline itself: land appearing with the tide, retreating again, a rain mark preserved for millennia in sediment, a human footprint that surfaces and is gone

before it can be photographed. The knowledge arrives not as argument but as proximity. You are not told what to think. You are put in a position where thinking of a certain kind becomes unavoidable.

This is both the book's ethic and its formal problem. We live in a reading culture that rewards extraction—the quotable sentence, the arguable thesis, the insight that can travel without its context. *Time Song* refuses all of this. Blackburn “potters,” as one reviewer put it—a description that sounds diminishing and is precisely accurate. She sifts rather than mines. She encounters evidence rather than marshaling it. When she writes about Tollund Man, the Iron Age body preserved for two thousand years in a Danish bog, she does not produce analysis. She produces presence. The man is there. He is not a metaphor. He is not a lesson. He is a person who died a long time ago and whose face is still a face, and the book asks you to remain with that for a moment before it moves on.

Scale-shifting is the book's primary technique, and it is also its primary gift. Blackburn lost her husband before she wrote this book, and grief moves through every page—but it is not grief as confession or resolution. It is grief set alongside the grief of geological time. You are not consoled. You are repositioned. The sea rose and the land went under. People lived there and then they didn't. This is the longest version of the story we are all in.

Why does this book deserve to be hunted down now, in particular? Not because it predicted our moment. Not because its subject—submerged land, erased evidence, the fragility of what was inhabited—has become newly urgent, though it has. Because *Time Song* shows a way of writing about loss and disappearance that does not perform urgency, does not prescribe response, does not extract meaning from its material the way a trawler lifts the rhinoceros jaw from the sea. It holds. It attends. It lets the tide go in and out and records what the water kept.

We have been living as if we already knew how to do this. We did not. The book has been waiting.