

Extract from *How Did You Find Out You Were Northern?*, Clare Patterson, 2019.

Saint Cuthbert was supposed to have been a whole and perfect corpse, an “incorrupt body”, as Bede describes him. When they opened his tomb after eleven years he was the same as on the day he died, a sign of his holiness. Most villages in the North East of England have a church of Saint Cuthbert; they carried his remains from place to place after the attack on Lindisfarne by the Vikings. A fugitive body, the monks seeing oncoming invaders dug up his remains and carried them on the run, marking each town they stopped in with a church and a sacred name.

I always knew more about Cuthbert in death than in life, this strange transportation of his bones around the county, his monks treasuring the holy remains and keeping them safe from harm. My village has a St. Cuthbert’s well; a squat and unassuming thing, a little block of grey stone with lichen creeping over - but water is always flowing from its spigot, cold and sweet to drink from the palm of your hand.

He is a saint of sea birds - puffins, kittiwakes, seagulls, noisy and clamouring for space on rocky islands. We call Eider ducks, “cuddy ducks”, an affectionate nickname for the egg-shaped black-and-white birds bobbing gently in the sea water. The ducks were supposed to be under his protection; tamed, they nested in the chapel altar, slept and laid eggs where the monks prayed and lit candles. In one story, he goes out neck-deep in the ocean to pray; when he returns to the land, two sea otters come to dry his feet. Creatures of both land and water, permeable and half-of.



Neck-deep in the ocean off the coast of Northumberland, looking out at the Farnes and Holy Island, is where I do something like praying too. The sea can be a place of absorption, or more accurately suspension, like a particle of salt in solution in water. I become weightless and moved by something beyond myself, as small as a grain of sand in the whole ocean. It is cold, yes, but only for a moment; walking out, the water creeps slowly further up the body until I am out to the waist; the sensation is prickly, sharp, then numb, the cold parts both devoid and full of feeling. After a few breaths I work up the courage to plunge my whole body in, sit down at the knees; the gasp that comes with the shock of the water lets out all the air I'm holding.

The prickle in my arms holds me as my body adjusts. My skin becomes serene, goose-pimples receding and hairs lying flat and smooth like a water-mammal, learning to work with the water I'm suspended in. The body forgets the cold and learns to carry you and to be carried, to be buffeted gently from side to side by the current and tossed under by the waves. You learn the rhythm of what is coming, too, and adapt accordingly; on a calm, bright day the salt water floats you on your back, the sun warming your face and arms and the water rocking you gently. In choppy waves it becomes a game of when to crouch and when to jump – unbroken waves, pure and blue-grey, rise like mountains and lift you gently, off your feet and up to the sky, before plopping you back down. Once broken, the white foam roars and races towards you, pulls you under into a world of blue and puts the sound of your blood in your ears, the same pace as the current that surrounds you. The body loses all aesthetic purpose; from the shore you are only a head, bobbing, hair like seaweed clinging to the back of your neck. Your body is weightless and working just for you, and your mind works only on your body – keeping it steady, feeling the sensations, seeing the tumbling blues and greens and whites. You leave yourself an animal, a part of the landscape in which you function and are moved. No outer self looking back in at you, just a body feeling and moving and seeing. It is impossible to hate a body which is only working; the only thing you are is alive, as much an untroubled part of the system as the seaweed winding round a leg or the round white bird bobbing on the waters' surface.

After watching the Disney film, I asked to be read the original version of the Little Mermaid; the one where, her love unrequited, she throws herself back to the ocean and dissolves into sea foam. I cried when I first heard this, expecting the sanitised American ending of wealth and love everlasting. Walking back up the beach, wet and with the cold beginning to creep down to my bones, I now think that is the closest to haven I can imagine.