

Essay Arita Baaijens

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TO FIND A SHINING PATH ACROSS STORMY WATER

*Man exploits the sea and nature like they belong to him or her.
But what does the sea most desire? And what does the ocean want?
A plea to listen to the voices of the world around us.*



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Arita Baaijens

“Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

T.S. Eliot

The Dutch owe the fact that they keep their feet dry in a wet river delta, to dike builders and polder pumping stations. The constant submission of the primeval forces of the land and sea has slowly but surely seeped into our genes. Manufacturability characterizes our existence. Soil management. Water governance. Spatial planning. The relationship between the Dutch and the outside world is as linear as a checked shirt. Parceling land, straightening out what’s crooked and scattering wind farms all over

North Sea; we manipulate the elements without ever seeming to ask or thank the land or the sea. Awe, it seems, respect or love for nature: that doesn't buy us anything.

And so, over the centuries, we have wiped the intimate relationship with the water, the plants, the animals and the soil life, from our hearts and from our vocabulary. We do want a fairer and safer world. But only for we humans. In such a measured way of thinking, the thought doesn't even occur to us that those other lifeforms also have their own unique way to perceive a sliver of a world without boundaries. We came to think of ourselves as the boss. Utility comes first, meaning comes second. The decolonizing of our relationship with nature asks for a strong dose of magic. The magic we may find in language.

'With your head held high', instructs Viktor Katynov as we walk around the stupa. The wind gently plays with my hair. It's September 21, 2013, a languid day, this day with a silver lining marks the end of summer, and the last day of my Altai-expedition. Today we celebrate the good ending in the sun speckled Uymon valley, together with Viktor and the mountains that have granted us passage. The encircling of the mountain range through the rocky heart of Central Asia, was conducted on horseback and lasted months. A thank-you to the Altai was appropriate, deemed Viktor, who invited us to come to the stupa. My eye glides along, taking in the jagged and white powdered ridge on the horizon. 'What do you see when you look at these mountains?', I asked, on a whim.

'Those mountains', he says without hesitation, 'they are me.'

"The stone giant in the middle", Viktor explains, is quite talkative. The giant comrades on each side, however, are silent. And the highest peak in the background catches signals from the cosmos. Viktor does not speak about the mountains: he speaks *with* the mountains, and he celebrates their existence monthly at crescent moon with offerings and flute music. In return, the unyielding mountains grant him his energy to live.

'You don't have to believe what I say to admire them anyway', he guesses my thoughts. But the admiration I experience is all about the exterior and it leaves me a bit cold, says Viktor. A few months ago I would have nodded politely, but my stay in the mountains has changed me. Sleeping outdoors, endless days on horseback, ancient rock carvings in outrageously beautiful fields of flowers flower fields and encounters with shepherds who can read the landscape: it taught me to listen without immediately passing judgement.

Man and nature understand each other in the Altai. And not only in the Altai but also on the West coast of Ireland. There I found farmers in constant conversation with the elements, the swampy peat and the pounding Atlantic. And in Papua New Guinea, residents live in an acoustic universe. In their dim rain forest, nature is not a noun, a thing, but a *being*, a living entity in word and deed that commands awe and must always be taken into account.

You can dismiss the above as nonsense, but replace the word 'nature' with 'art' and see what happens. A sculpture or paint on canvas also evokes a response. Physical matter *can* therefore resonate, and move you, or demand accountability. In the arts, no one is astonished by that fact. Other cultures

find it perfectly normal that mountains, curly peat, and Birds of paradise know about the world and do indeed speak to us.

Philosopher Hartmut Rosa calls the conversation between people and the outside world '*Weltbeziehung*'. The fact that we have difficulty with Viktor's polyphonic world, and feel comfortable with the idea that nature is an abstraction, a tool, is because a sea-that-speaks, thinks or acts does not fit into our idea or explanation of the world. Growth, realizing ambitions, the sea as an industrial zone, technological progress: unless you swallow the red pill that was offered to Neo, the protagonist in *The Matrix*, you are stuck in the narrative that humans are at the helm of spaceship Earth. We act as if we possess nature. Philosopher Koo van der Wal calls this blind spot "*nature oblivion*".

Without homo sapiens, we feel the ocean and our distant cousins of the family tree have no use or value. According to Van der Wal, nature deserves better. Immersing ourselves in the lives of plants, birds and fish would enable us to develop and cherish a deep connection between different forms of existence, including ourselves as humans. Viktor's comment about the mountains reveals his attentiveness to, and his deep engagement with those mountains. This does not mean that his relationship with the surrounding world is always harmonious or romantic in nature. Ask him about the wolves around his sheep shed, or about merciless winters that decimate livestock. In the Altai people cut down trees, shoot a deer, drink and sometimes fight in the street. The difference is that Viktor's culture understands the art of giving and receiving, including in relation to non-humans. The general rule in the Altai is that you only take what is necessary and say 'thank you', in word or gesture, to the generous giver.

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The ideal world does not exist, not in our society and neither in societies that regard the world as a lively, interwoven and communicative matrix of life forms and shared histories. Some languages, however, allow us to experience the world as a more coherent whole, of which man is a part and in which an ocean, rock or mosquito are also included and essential participants. For example: the Dutch language leaves no room for the grammatical determination of whether objects are animated or not. The grammatical structure of Persian and Aboriginal languages does include such a clarification. Gaelic place names in Ireland hint at events that have taken place there. In Iceland words are spatial. They have a North, South, West and East side, Dutch writer Laura Broekhuysen discovered after her emigration to Iceland. At first, she felt lost in the new language, until she came across a route map of declensions. The fjord, in the fjord, to the fjord, over the fjord: in Icelandic, directions stick to names like chewing gum

to a shoe sole. No fjord here or mountain there: objects and things in Iceland are rooted in time and place. Experimenting with these three-dimensional words and new language rules, Broekhuysen notices that her experience of the land shifts. The environment is given richer texture which seems to be able to fix her being in time and space. Compared to the spatial and relational Icelandic, she writes in *'Flessenpost from Reykjavik'*, the Dutch language resembles a diorama of flat pictures.

Language has a memory and a creative power. Words like 'enseaing' (Riffinian, Morocco), 'masalei' (acting forces of nature, Papua New Guinea), 'su' (breath of the wind, Altai, Siberia) and 'across-the-fjord' enable thought trails that, in our experience are not common. The words suggest a knowing from within, with sensory perception as point of departure. Beyond the body there is no world!

Botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer received from her ancestors, North American indigenous people, the Potawatomi, the knowledge that nature can be known on four levels of being: reason, body, emotion and spirit. Facts never tell the whole story; she tells her students. The question is whether we are willing to know nature at levels of being beyond the abstraction of reason. As an experiment, Kimmerer asks the students to stop the habit of objectifying anything non-human into an 'it' (in English one only uses the neuter form of address for nouns). The lichen that the sophomores' study in the cemetery are no more an 'it' in the Potawatomi world view than the dead lying under the mossy tombstones. Confusion. Protest. Is the wind an "it", or, well might you ask, a person? And dead branches on the ground, what, or who are they? After a day of struggling with the right form of address, a student notes with annoyance, that his teacher would be better off planting trees if she really wants to improve the world.

Yet the experiment with pronouns gets under everyone's skin because the obviousness with which we appropriate things is called into question. The new approach might be understood as a method to start noticing that life forms do have agency. 'I always thought *I* was making the campfire while gathering the wood,' reflects one student. 'But of course, it is the tree that provides wood.'

Such a way of being in and with the world is contrary to what we are used to. In 'Dying Words', linguist Nicholas Evans gives countless examples of cultures whose language beholds the natural world as alive, it is given a voice. There are languages that regard other life forms as family members, languages that give whales a voice, languages that speak of at least twenty words for different aspects of the soul. There are communities that let time go backwards and don't use the word 'I'. It is a hallucinatory thought that on this earth thousands of worldviews coexist, each a universe within itself. In one version time can be stretched, in the other the sea speaks, where the growth economy does not exist, or people communicate through their dreams. Parallel worlds and realities do exist, which means that we can choose, if we like, to live like Alice in Wonderland.

The moment that we do not put humans center stage and give up the thought that we are unique, we are treading on unknown territory. Our language chafes. It is the language of a society that is designed to

exploit and repress non-humans. Respect for all life forms is not self-evident in the Netherlands. Yes, we provide birds in the garden with suet balls, and we like to go for a walk in the woods. Nature does something to us, but the connection finds no firm home place. All attention is directed to our needs. We do have to keep our feet dry, and so our focus is to manipulate nature, which does not help to recognize that relationships are always reciprocal. The oxygen we breathe is linked to the trees who generously supply oxygen.

The trees that provide us with the breath of life are rooted in humus-rich soil where trillions of soil animals break down organic matter into tiny particles, which sooner or later may end up on our plates in the form of food. Our short existence takes place in a cohesive and sensuous world, even though we behave like separate 'I's' in a thinking human head. We enjoy the springtime, (thank you, sun), do not sink through the ground (thank you, soil) and, perhaps, we feel at home somewhere (thank you, landscape), but the intimate connection between us and other forms of existence, despite the busy little man in our heads remains distant from us.

It hasn't always been this way. The tattered copy of *Legenden langs de Noordzee* (Legends along the North Sea) falls open at the story of the mermaid of Westerschouwen. One day, fishermen pulled a churning and exhausted green-gloss mermaid from the mesh of their net. Moments later, a plea rang out from the water: 'Let her go. She can't live on dry land!' Ha, the fishermen taunted in return at the sight of the despairing husband of the mermaid with a baby in her arms. Enjoying themselves now with the thrashing mermaid, they set course for the harbor. The mermaid was never heard of again, but after the tragedy, sand gathered in front of the harbor, the threshold grew higher and higher, eventually putting an end to the trade and fishing. On a stormy night, the sea finished the job by swallowing up the once prideful town of Westerschouwen.

The story is, of course, made up, but the point is that coastal residents did speak of the sea as a living force, a being that can think and act purposefully. Not so long ago people were very well aware that one does not carelessly approach the sea. This attitude still applies today, although this is not apparent in the reports and memorandums about offshore wind farms and future scenarios that transform and elevate manufacturability into an art form. Nevertheless, the cheerful pride we felt fifty years ago at the completion of the Delta Works in Zeeland has been somewhat tempered by a sea level that does not do what the mathematical models once predicted. The sea level is rising, salt water seeps through and under dikes and salinizes the hinterland. Soon it will get even rougher. In less than fifty years, it is expected that high tidal waves will wash over the Oosterscheldekering. In such dramatic circumstances, sailors sometimes throw a golden earring into the sea as a peace offering. And what about us, city people? Do we hide behind even higher dam walls, or do we start a conversation with the goddesses of destiny and the mermaids of the sea?

"Of what secrets has the sea not spoken?" wrote Johan Palm a century ago in 'The book of the sea' (1930).

'We humans have sailed the sea for hundreds, thousands of years. We have admired her and fought her, we studied her, read her, calculated her, measured her, painted and photographed her. We felt her pulse and examined her, chemically and physically. We have sung and cursed her, loved and hated and feared her, entrusted our fate to her, accused her of treason and mistrusted her, but our knowledge is far from complete.' Palm suspected this to last forever, because the sea is a size too big, too deep and too mysterious for humans. And the latter, the mystery, is what we sorely miss in our technocratic way of thinking about the sea.

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The language in which we express our worries about the climate, and propose solutions for the future, is a legacy of the nineteenth century, an optimistic and exciting era that was dominated by western male scientists. The sacred belief in technology and progress is presently outdated. Just like the idea that modern man is as a rationally acting being. Technology is a practice which we hope to perfect, and yet, still, we are inseparably connected with nature. The latter also deserves a place in the stories we tell each other and the words we use.

You cannot separate language from thinking and acting, says language researcher Professor Leonie Cornips of NL-Lab/KNAW. Her research into cow language is also a political plea for a thorough revision of our relationship with animals. Wrapped in a question, Cornips argues that we should strive for a multifaceted society in which non-humans participate as well. Such a statement presupposes that we have conversations with other forms of existence, learn to listen, relate and respond to other ways of being. 'We can empathize with a fictional character, so why not with a landscape too?' encourages author Paul Kingsnorth.

How does this work in the case of the sea? How can you have a conversation with beings or entities that are so different from ourselves? Philosopher Eva Meijer researched it for the Embassy of the North Sea. In her essay 'In conversation with the sea' she argues for fluid thinking. Which begins with listening to the sea for the sake of the sea. Easier said than done. The sea does not speak in human language and is not an individual. Meijer proposes to first investigate which relationships form a sea; not to conquer the sea, but to explore and shape common worlds by listening, and letting our language follow our sensations.

Empirical research alone will not do, she believes. Scientific studies are valuable and do provide much in-depth knowledge about ecosystems, water movements and possible damage to fish caused by

shipping. Without thorough and well-designed research, part of the Netherlands would be covered by water and conservationists would be less able to do their job properly.

Nevertheless, humans are still central to researchers and conservationists. Viktor, who has never seen the sea, would describe our conversation with the sea as a one-way street. In his life philosophy, you do injustice to forms of existence if you study them only out of scientific curiosity or for economic gain. The sea wants to be known for who she is. To put it more formally: the sea deserves to be acknowledged as a dynamic, animated and yet unknowable being.

'Things are not separate from each other, they are not inert,' says philosopher René ten Bos in an interview with journalist and writer Sanne Bloemink. The view that nature is passive, and that technology can solve all climate problems and halt the loss of healthy, natural systems, leads us on a path to disaster. Ten Bos concludes that we are ready for a form of intelligence that reconnects both living and non-living entities. More data and complicated calculations cannot achieve this. What we need is poetic language that which introduces us again to all the peace and power of nature.

Language is alive and dynamic. Meanings and language rules are constantly changing. Language renewal cannot be controlled. Initially it seemed impossible to wild our frugal vocabulary in the short term, or so I thought, until I watched artist Tivon Rice's language learning machine in action.

Two years ago, Rice demonstrated his language algorithm during the ecology workshop *Cartographies of the Vanishing Now* that I attended. It still amazes me that no one was blinded by the giant flash of light that hit my brain. I had given Rice a landscape photo. The learning language machine interpreted the image and produced three ecologically tinted captions, each in its own style. Senders were a philosopher, a scientist, and a poet. Bingo!

Developing a new language takes a long time. Artificial intelligence can speed up the process and the learning language machine that we use to rewild the Dutch language has stretched our imagination with surprising finds of words and sentences that do not follow existing rules. With the blessing of Tivon Rice, artist Mark IJzerman performed some tests and, yes, the algorithm could handle the Dutch language and the project 'Language for the future' was a fact.

Oil drilling, offshore wind farms, fishing – we use the North Sea as an industrial area and rarely care about the sea itself and anything that lives in it. Such a bossy attitude is outdated. 'Language for the future' wants to illustrate that our exploitive relationship with the sea can be transformed into one which is broader in scope and sensibility. In the next six months decisionmakers, artists and the public will be invited to enter into a dialogue with the North Sea. We'll use a rich and eco-poetic language to express observations and experiences. This is an experiment to rewild the technocratic Dutch language which is intended to benefit our relationship with the sea.

But would the sea agree to the plan?

On a drizzly autumn day, I cycle along the coast of the island Terschelling, and stop at a fence where sheep are grazing. The smell of salty clay and mud blows towards me, raindrops tick the time away on

my poncho. On the tidal flats Black-tailed Godwits and Oyster-catchers with bright red legs scurry on. How do you request permission from the sea? I pose my question and simply wait. An opening appears in the cloud cover. A narrow beam of sunlight peeps through the hole, opening for me a shining path across turbulent water. I know enough. 'Thank you, sea!'

The project 'Language for the future. In conversation with the North Sea'

Writer and biologist Arita Baaijens argues for a richer, eco-poetic language that brings a polyphonic world closer, in which nature speaks and humans take a step back. Together with the North Sea, word artists, Dutch citizens and a learning language machine, she researches the impact of language on our relationship with the North sea. This essay is the start of the futuristic project 'Language for the future: In conversation with the North Sea'.

At the heart of the project are Q&A sessions with two learning language machines and a diverse audience. One algorithm uses the functional and technocratic vocabulary of policy makers. The voice of the North Sea sounds more enigmatic. Sounds and meanings run wild, words get entangled in language rules that do whatever they want. The reader plunges into an oceanic world that is unknown and at the same time strangely familiar. To what extent the performed texts really represent the voice of the North Sea, is not the question. 'Language for the future' is a speculative experiment. In co-creation with spoken word artists, writers, decision makers and coastal residents, it investigates how the voice of the North Sea *might* sound in rewilded language.

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