

A Broadcast
Ed Atkins

Dear [...],

By way of an introduction: I am an explorer sitting cross-legged in the centre of a raft, drifting slowly, quietly down a river. Above me, the sky is bone-coloured and depthless. Under me the water turns over a browner shade of the same. Behind, countless miles of water perpetually slice through the green earth. In front is wherever, which is what makes this exploring. It's exciting. And it's exciting to be borne along by this river imagining that this water – like the stream of light from a star – gurgled out of some wound in a rock on a mountain a thousand million years ago, just to make it here – just to bare me on its shifting back towards wherever.

*

The body of this raft is made of twenty-four blue plastic chemical drums lashed together with hosepipes and inner tubes. Forming the deck on top are six large sheets of closely corrugated metal, made comfortable with a few scatter-cushions, a yellow throw and a wing-backed armchair. In the centre is a hut made from collapsed cardboard boxes made rigid with gardening canes and long black cable ties that remain untrimmed and look like porcupine quills. The roof is the bonnet of a Ford Anglia; the door my old bedroom door, marked in places with the circular gluey residue of old 'Lady and The Tramp' stickers. 'Consider our partnership dissolved', said one, once, in a font of melting ice. The window to the hut is a square of cloudy Perspex riveted lazily to the cardboard. I can see nothing useful through it save the pale glow of morning. When it rains, all of the above cloaked in blue tarpaulins.

*

I am sitting cross-legged in the centre of the raft on a large brown cushion. My back is resting against the wall of the hut and I'm staring downriver into thick fog. Nothing is forthcoming, I think. Overhanging trees emerge out of the murk one twig, then one branch at a time. Their true shape withheld till the last minute when they finally seep into focus alongside the raft. Sounds as exquisite as the compensatory hearing of the blind burn through, deadened: a sudden scuffle and clap as something dashes into the brush; the distant cough of a pheasant; a fish flipping like a coin near the surface of the water. The unannounced appearance of a vast blue raft looming out of the fume is a shock for the inhabitants of the river. The fat, whiskered head of a water rat stares blankly and obliviously out of a chink in the bank, lost in deep thought. He notices me too late, lets out a squeak of shame and slips into the water.

*

Occasionally, I swim alongside the raft in a pair of black swimming shorts lined with that uncomfortable scrotal netting. The river water is terminally opaque, so despite the goggles I wear I see nothing but floating white specs on a ground of varying browns. Choked with the shit of a trillion fish, I suppose; heavy with mud and silt churned up in the current, I suppose. Those rare swims are for essential exercise and some mild pleasure – never for hygiene. More often I trail a limb or scoop a cupped hand of water on to my face. Out of the main body of the river, the water seems cleaner. I don't know. For drinking purposes, I filter it through a tee shirt stretched over a basin. The huge brown shadows left on the tee once the water's been passed through are reassuring.

*

I eat fish, naturally. Along both sides of the raft hang jam jars to catch minnows, tied to the drums with string and filled with scraps of previously caught and eaten minnow as bait. In the evening, I pull in the jars and tip their contents on to the deck – flashes of silver thrashing about in the dwindling sunlight. I pick them up, one by one, and dash their heads against an edge of corrugated metal. I have to catch a lot to make a decent meal, but if you fry them in a glug of oil and a divot of butter they're wonderful. Crunching on thousands of toy plastic bones amongst the scant flesh.

*

Last night as every night, I sat in the wingback, supping on fried minnows, peering into the black. Once finished, I rinse off my plate and cutlery, and retreat to the hut.

Minnows being one of the first things I discovered on my exploration.

*

Inside the hut the floor is raised slightly, built up on pallets and covered with a thick, stiffened rug. In one corner is an Ikea sofa bed, single. I seldom take the bedclothes off, so when folded-up as a sofa, it resembles a bland and overfilled sandwich. The underside – the seat of the sofa – is decorated with cigarette burns and anonymous stains; the products of a blitheness I cultivated for a while in the beginning – believing my circumstance to somehow demand such disregard – but that I've come to regret subsequently. My life hasn't changed. And that's the point, I suppose. I must look after these things. When the last wad of stuffing has eked its way out of the mattress, or the must of a thousand oily minnow, mead and other stains have eaten through the cheap fabric, where will I sleep? Another trip to Ikea is certainly out of the question.

Beside the sofa bed, affixed to the wall, is a shelf that, like the wall, is made of cardboard, and is bracketed on with a rib of red plastic and some rivets. This shelf is one of the parts of the raft I like the most. It's perfectly formed – just deep enough to fully support a paperback lengthways, and just wide enough to have room for the pot of a spider plant that trails familiarly down to the floor of the hut. A perfectly formed shelf: the weight of the plant as glorious testament to the strength of both the plastic brackets and the cardboard shelf itself. I've always gotten great satisfaction from utilitarian, modest design. One of my most prized possessions is an unassuming paring knife. The handle is a dark, non-descript wood around a rather unremarkable but gently curving tang. Three smoothed rivet heads describe its fixings like ellipses. At the tip of the blade there is what one might call a Hunter's Notch, or something similar; something removed, like the enigmatically missing corners of a green Rizla. This notch, with its quiet suggestion of The Frontier, coupled with the handle's effortless ergonomic, conjures a contentment in me whenever I hold it. Distance and intimacy: analogous of this whole thing.

Sitting on the sofa bed – as either sofa or bed – I forget the wider context of the raft. I can dismiss the slight movement of the river as if it were an inadvertent pacing, or rocking in a chair – something so incredibly still that it rocks, that it paces. I can sit there and allow an illusory serenity to wash over me, eroding me, regressing me to a previous and long forgotten state. Of course, I don't really remember anything specific of the past in those moments – it's more a sensation; a feeling of pressure being released, a pulling into focus without the want for anything to actually focus on. In these moments I can put distance between me and my life aboard the raft. A rift yawns, across which I can survey the weather of what it is I do, as if spying through a telescope, the image muted by remoteness. For example, I might think about today: a day when I attempted to signal a helicopter.

*

Certainly not to make contact. And definitely not to be 'rescued'. I don't want to *see* anyone, to *talk* to anyone, to *hear* another person or be close to them in any way. This is an exercise in remoteness – an exercise in affect, perhaps. The helicopter hanging there for a while, completely and utterly alien, as I wave slowly, conveying what I imagine as something like a welcoming rebuff.

*

In the end, the distance between you and I might be thousands of miles. In the extreme it's 3,963 miles – the largest possible measurement of the earth's erratic radius. There is, I suppose, a slim chance that you're reading this aboard the International Space Station. In which case we might be as much as 4,248 miles apart; an immense distance that doesn't feel quite as immense as all that; 4,248 miles still seems pretty much practicable. A few days travel, that's all. This as a consequence of globalisation, of course – like everything else, distance has contracted. The Global Village, etc. We are neighbours, you and I, and our equivalence is founded upon our baffling distant intimacy.

This Text was written by Ed atkins for Field Broadcast a project by **PROJEKT**

www.fieldbroadcast.org