



CCQ

a creative conversation

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Crudely Plucking the Strings

It had been raining for 3 days straight.

I punctuated my journey down the A38 with a too-hot cup of coffee and a limp triangle of buttered toast that left a fine film of grease on my hands. Working for Lockheed Martin, which operated throughout the country and overseas, meant my company car acted as an itinerant office and the chapters of my life frequently found themselves arranged around such in-betweens; motorway cafes, inner-city budget hotels and airport lounges.

I edged the nose of my vehicle back onto the road. Successive sets of headlights exploded out of the increasingly dense downpour. I accelerated. The rain lashed at my windscreen. My wipers, ineffective against the onslaught, flailed from side to side like the trees that lined the road. The rhythmic drag of rubber on glass made my stomach turn.

A swollen body of water entered my periphery. The Bristol Channel, so furiously pummelled by rain that its surface appeared to boil. As a young girl, my grandmother had told me stories of how giants had formed The Channel. Mocked by humans, called unclean and foul, the giants had waded into the ocean to bathe. Their vast bodies displaced so much water that the villages, whose inhabitants had tormented them, were flooded, permanently cleaving Wales from Cornwall, Devon and Somerset.

I pulled up to the entrance of Hinkley Point C. A security guard struggled towards me, shrouded in a flimsy, Hazchem-yellow poncho. His shouted instructions were torn from his lips by the escalating gale. I flashed an ID card and he gratefully retreated to the adjacent booth, raised the barrier and waved me through. The power station throbbed. Cooling towers belched steam skywards, trying in vain to compel the rising waters to return whence they came.

Entering the brightly lit lobby, I shed my coat and disposed of my umbrella. The latter had been reduced to a knot of buckled metal and shredded textile in the seconds it had taken me to cross the car park. Wiping myself down with a stale tissue, I hurried towards meeting room 3B.

Navigating the cavernous corridors, my stout heels played out a staccato beat. Unclasping my bag, I fished around for the relevant documents. Amongst the litter of paperwork, I grasped the latest iteration of my resignation letter. Unsent, of course, it was the progeny of countless drafts. A lifejacket, primed for deployment if the current became too strong. A feeble excuse for my complicity. Truly, I deserved to drown.

I took my seat. Arranged papers at right angles. Nodded and made notes. We were here to discuss the innumerable failings of Hinkley Point C. Output. Delays. Efficiency. Safety. Contamination. I indulged in the malaise, whilst my feckless colleagues brewed coffee, spewed jargon and expectorated economic forecasts, wilfully blind to anything that might impact their bottom line. *"Who knows? A meltdown might even be good for business,"* smirked one disciple. *"Supply and demand, you know?"* *"Either way, PR will handle it."* The congregation murmured in agreement. The clock ticked towards 12. A siren began to wail.

An incoming wave, of mountainous scale, shattered the brittle boundary that delineated land from sea. That night, the earth soaked in a soup of nuclear fission. By morning, the downpour had begun to ebb, giving way to drizzle, which in turn was replaced by steadily dissipating cloud formations. Particle-refracted light crept through the growing gaps, bathing the deceptively tranquil scene in an orange glow.

I sat atop a once-hill, now-island, sole inhabitant of the fortuitous protrusion. Others basked; bloated bodies floating in the swill of shattered atomic matter. I shuddered, placed my head between my knees and held back the vomit.

Foraging in my bag, I withdrew my resignation letter. An emblem of my own failure to act. Despite great intelligence and intellect, we had been incapable of curtailing our excesses to avoid annihilation. Such poverty of the imagination would have been laughable, if I hadn't been staring down at a toxic swamp of consequence. How had we been unable to think of and implement an alternative? So enamoured with our own genius, we'd failed to recognise the limitations of our knowledge; nor had we learnt to value the knowledge we couldn't quantify. The cold breeze cut through my damp, dishevelled suit.

I folded my letter into a simple, origami boat and floated it on the water. My own pathetic ark. I thought of Genesis and Gilgamesh; stories that had sought to moralise otherwise senseless disasters. However, even after all life had been wiped out, each simply reproduced what had come before. So, what might my vessel bear? I took out a pen and began to write. *'We thought we were playing God. We were crudely plucking the strings...'*

Chris Alton's Billboard Commission for Spit & Sawdust, Cardiff, re-imagines the 1607 flood of the Bristol Channel, which some believe to have been caused by a tsunami. Over 2,000 people lost their lives; houses, villages, towns were swept away, and local economies destroyed – Cardiff suffered the most. Alton has used a woodcut print – one of the only surviving visual representations of the disastrous event – as inspiration for his own, speculative reworking of the image. Cardiff's St. Mary's Church, the original woodcut's focal point, has been replaced by Hinkley Point C, the massive nuclear power station being constructed on a near precipice edge on the south bank of the Channel. Alton's work makes wry commentary on the fixation with nuclear power as an answer to climate change.

Spit & Sawdust is an artist-led space in Cardiff, comprising of a skatepark, café and artist studios, with a public programme of events, projects and residencies.

The Billboard Commission is currently curated by Freya Dooley and supported by the Arts Council of Wales. Chris Alton: Crudely Plucking the Strings is at Spit & Sawdust until 12 November 2018

spitandsawdust.co.uk
chrisalton.com

