

# FACING THE PLANET



Above: Detail from GAIA

Reflections of place, discovery and  
recollection by Tessa Coe & Jane Coyle



# FACING THE PLANET

Paintings by Tessa Coe  
Written reflections by Jane Coyle

Opposite: From LET THERE BE LIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

Artist Tessa Coe and writer Jane Coyle were at school together in South Wales. Tessa studied science and mathematics; Jane specialised in languages and literature. Their lives and career paths led in different directions. Tessa attained a PhD in physics and embarked on a career in science and industry; Jane graduated in French and English and joined the editorial team at the London publishing house of Faber & Faber.

Some years later, Tessa left her science roles but never lost her interest in science. She moved to the Hampshire village of Nursling on the River Test, where she has been an abstract painter for the last 25 years. Her subject matter is the natural world around her and the effects that human beings, and our changing climate, have upon it. Jane moved to Belfast and made a second home in Brittany. For decades, she has worked between the two, as an arts journalist, performing arts critic, and playwright.

During the past few years an idea has grown. The friends wanted to draw upon their separate ways of seeing our planet, to collaborate in a new way of storytelling. They have put the paintings to work in leading a visual and lyrical conversation around memory, place and changing times. The title *Facing the Planet* is a signpost to the urgent need for collective scrutiny and protection of our threatened natural environment.

Jane selected ten of Tessa's paintings. Each one sparked a memory or a reflection on locations, literary references and personal experiences. Punctuated by references to the Celtic and Mediterranean worlds, they travel from the rural environment of childhood to the landscapes of Brittany and beyond.

Tessa's mosaic-like paintings are inspired by the water meadows, the river and estuary around her home. Each image is accompanied by a short account of the journey towards a resolution of the piece, as the artist seeks to blend her creative vision with her distinctive scientific rationale.

Tessa pays tribute to the many authors and scientists whose work has accompanied and inspired her working practice. Some recommended titles include: *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben; *Long Hops, Making Sense of Bird Migration* by Mark Denny; *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm* by Isabella Tree; *On the Marsh* by Simon Barnes; *Soil* by Matthew Evans; *Blue Machine* by Helen Czerski.

Opposite: From *LISTENING TO THE BIRDS*





## MOTHER TREE

Trees are enablers of biodiversity, providing shelter, food and refuge for so many creatures. They also have a huge influence over the wider landscape, nurturing surrounding plants, enriching the soil, stabilising the land and even helping prevent flooding. My totem tree was created quite unintentionally. I had produced a rich red, but somehow barren landscape. Instead of overpainting the whole thing as I usually would, I was lured by the red shades to paint on. I began randomly making some marks in cream and pale blue paint. When I sat back to look, a tree branch had appeared, and another was just beginning. I chose a strong contrasting violet and the tree continued to grow. Lines from the underpainting were working themselves into a network, tying the tree into the soil, but also spreading its influence far and wide. The image became stronger, the background enriched. The mother tree was growing into its own landscape.

## THE COLOUR OF FEAR

What colour is fear?  
Not, for this artist, brooding shades of decay and degradation.  
On her palette, fear clothes itself in carnival pigments -  
Permanent rose, French ultramarine, yellow ochre, sap green.  
All the rainbow colours and more,  
But all mixed up, all over the place, all wrong.  
On the brow of a high hill stands the Mother Tree,  
Solitary and stark,  
Its spindly branches silhouetted against a sky of turbulent red.  
Red?  
Despairingly grasping for light, they are deep purple and indigo.  
Indigo?  
What is going on?  
Our planet is erupting.  
Confusion reigns.  
Primroses in January,  
Magnolia buds mixed with autumn leaves,  
Lilacs in September,  
Catkins in December,  
Jonquils and camelias  
Bid welcome to ... Christmas.  
The tree's gnarled trunk is coated with grey-green lichen,  
Its lacy fronds pirouetting like dainty sea horses.  
Gold and russet leaves herald the year's end.  
But they began drifting down in high summer.  
Earth is at odds with itself.  
But, pause a moment, come closer.  
Lurking shyly at the outer edge is an intricate string of jewelled  
shoots,  
A precious necklace of jade and ruby.  
And, is that the glimmer of a tiny, turquoise butterfly?  
Do we spy a door into undiscovered secrets,  
Half open,  
Or half closed?  
Inside, might we glean signs of fresh, young growth,  
Hints of realignment, of hope, perhaps?  
For hope there must surely be.  
Perhaps, after all, our fears are ill-founded.  
Perhaps, if we shift ourselves,  
They can be averted and transformed.  
Perhaps, if we pledge to cherish our world,  
We can begin to heal it, remake it, good and whole,  
And see it anew, in its true colours.  
Perhaps.



## HEADING TOWARDS SPRING

I live on the water-meadows of the river Test. In spring and autumn the skies are loud with calling geese, setting out toward their seasonal feeding grounds. All over the planet creatures large and small engage in unimaginable feats of endurance and navigation, as they criss-cross the globe in search of the living conditions that they need. These are fragile journeys imprinted into their brains from ages past. This painting started life as the palest of sky blue washes. I had been hearing geese for weeks, and the canvas was filling with the pale airy colours of creams, violets and blues. As stronger colours began to appear on the canvas, a division between the warm and cool colours emerged. I was starting to see the painting not as a map of a migration, but as an imprint of forces that make these wonderful birds ride the wind and head towards a distant hope of survival.

## SPRING AWAKENING

Along the river bank and the water meadows, spring is awakening.  
The dark days of winter are giving way to new life, new beginnings.  
Bright foliage dots bare branches and pale buds are bursting through.  
It's a time for celebration,  
Pagan ritual, song and dancing.  
Another year is on its way.  
The wetlands are the life blood of our landscape,  
Pure and cool and lovely,  
Teeming with pops of neon colour and frantic movement.  
The flax dam comes alive in the weak, spring sunshine,  
Dragonflies, kingfishers and water boatmen  
Skim and skate across its surface,  
The fairy flax explodes into bloom,  
Its small, lace-white heads nodding in the breeze,  
Foaming in thick swathes along the mill path.  
Amongst the rushes and reeds  
Clumps of tiny tadpoles dart in the stream,  
Escaping the gloopy, jellied gobbets where they have lain all winter.  
Stringy fledglings stagger from their nests  
Out into a brave new world.  
Chevron skeins of honking geese take flight  
Across a sky without end,  
Wheeling over frost still lying on high ground,  
Returning to - or from - their faraway homes.  
Year after year, they get the urge for going,  
They know when it's time to go,  
We set our calendars by them.  
Weird aquatic creatures peep nervously  
From the darkness of their watery world,  
Rocks and pebbles emerge shining and freshly laundered,  
Washed clean of clinging mud and moss.  
"Awake!" the river commands.  
"Arise! Be about your your business.  
Shake off winter's drab greatcoat.  
Go, clothe yourself in blue and purple and pink,  
Welcome in primroses and violets,  
Tulips and grape hyacinths,  
Cowslips, celandines, snowdrops, anemones and hellebores.  
Let in the light to the pale, curled fronds of unsunned ferns".  
In the east, velvet skies fade into shot-silk dawn,  
Streaked with peach, coral and sheeny amber.  
And the river runs through it.



## BRINGING SKY TO EARTH

I started this piece thinking about the miracle of flight. The fast wing beats of tiny birds that rush to the garden feeders, then suddenly take fright, with a crazy dipping flight. The huge buzzards that roam so high above us, with their flap, flap, glide, eerily calling out their competition as they search for prey. I replayed in my head the shrill looping sound of green finches, the shouty sounds of tiny wrens and the virtuoso performances of blackbirds and thrushes. The air was full of feathers and song. And lastly I thought of the safe places, and the myriad creatures and plants that birds rely on for their lives to go well, for the songs to continue. This painting began with quickly drawn, random loops turning themselves into flight over the land. As the piece developed, its complexity grew and I became haunted by the dark shades of Rachel Carson's enduring book *Silent Spring*.

## COLOURS FLASHING

Dawn brings a dash of pink.  
 Dusk a spark of turquoise,  
 No sooner seen than gone.  
 Throughout the day,  
 Along the valley of the Blavet,  
 In meadows, forests, gardens and cornfields,  
 Out of the light they come and go,  
 In an endless surge of feathered flight.  
 Sometimes, they proudly announce their arrival,  
 Sometimes, they sneak in surreptitiously,  
 And all the more thrilling for that.  
 At sunrise and sunset, flights of swifts  
 Signal the turn of the seasons,  
 Ducking and diving in great, matt-black clouds,  
 Dazzling and dizzying with their daring aerobatics.  
 The lonesome buzzard is an awesome sight,  
 Plainly dressed but fleet of wing, he skims into view,  
 Swooping and gliding, dark against the cloud-streaked sky.  
 He takes up a solitary vigil,  
 Surveying the rich, newly ploughed soil  
 From a rotting tree stump or fence post.  
 There's rustle amongst the barley stalks and down he plunges.  
 Job done.  
 Our cackling jay is a loudmouth and a wicked mimic,  
 He's flashy and clever with it.  
 He visits us, not out of love,  
 But to feast on the carpet of acorns  
 Shed by our trio of towering oaks.  
 He's a handsome lad - and he knows it -  
 All fuss and feathers,  
 A right dandy, with his jester's coat of many colours,  
 Dusty pink, with streaks of black and white,  
 And that electric blue swash, just for show.  
 His sartorial rival, the kingfisher, is altogether a lower-key act,  
 Perched quietly among river reeds and low hanging branches,  
 Until his moment comes.  
 Then, voilà!  
 Lightning-fast and gloriously technicoloured,  
 Metallic aquamarine, shot with jade green,  
 Breast of copper, beak of black and crimson,  
 He's positively effervescent.  
 He takes aim and dives.  
 Tiny fish and dragonflies will not evade his piercing gaze  
 And unerring aim.



## WILD WOOD

In California, bristle cone pine trees can live to be nearly 5,000 years old. Many of our own UK trees can live well beyond 1,000 years. It is now known that forest trees live in community. How this works is still being researched. But trees do share resources in times of need and warn each other, if under attack. Tree communities use networks of fungi in the soil, to pass chemical messages and nutrients amongst their group. A mixed species woodland, with its natural spread of tree ages, including dead wood, is truly bountiful. It provides habitat for huge numbers of animal, plant, fungal and insect species. My painting was made during the pandemic, when being allowed to wander out of doors was an enormous treat. Every living thing seemed brighter, more vibrant, more necessary. The woods felt intense and alive with possibilities. They did not need us, we needed them. We still do.

## DEEP IN THE FOREST

They come dancing towards the water,  
 A family of roe deer - mum, dad, three perfect fawns.  
 Shyly breaking cover from the Forêt de Camors,  
 They linger to drink from the crystalline étang  
 And, like the hunter Narcissus,  
 Admire their pretty reflections in the still, violet water.  
 Suddenly, a horn sounds, shattering the silence,  
 Then the baying of dogs.  
 Startled, the deer raise their heads,  
 They sniff the air ... and they're off.  
 Their hasty retreat is balletic, heart-stopping,  
 Gliding over a cluster of purple foxgloves,  
 Leaving them trembling and shivering in the long grass.  
 At night, the forest is a cacophony of sound,  
 A community chorus of nocturnal birds and animals,  
 Whispering leaves and trickling streams.  
 Under the dazzling light of a full moon  
 Primeval rock formations, burial chambers  
 And standing stones take on sinister, unearthly shapes,  
 Like great, predatory creatures,  
 Casting eerie shadows  
 Onto tinder-dry heathlands and pine-covered slopes.  
 Shrouded in mist or dappled with sunlight,  
 The forest colours change with the seasons.  
 Songs and folk tales, herbal cures and traditional crafts  
 Have been handed down through generations of artisans -  
 Foresters, coopers, clog makers, farriers -  
 And resistance fighters.  
 Brocéliande, revered as the birthplace of the Arthurian Legends,  
 Resounds with tales of Lancelot and Guinevere,  
 Merlin and Vivienne, and the boy King.  
 The tumble of forges and stone dwellings in the Forêt de Paimpont  
 Bear witness to an industrial past.  
 And, at the centre of a maze of muddy tracks,  
 Lies Be er Sant, the saint's tomb,  
 A low amphitheatre of mossed stones,  
 A place of pilgrimage for sick children.  
 At sunrise and at the dimming of the day  
 Golden beams fall directly  
 Onto a clutter of small shoes and pebbles,  
 Floral wreaths, rosary beads and twiggly crosses.  
 Pagan ritual goes hand in hand with religious devotion.  
 These woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
 A sanctuary in troubled times.



## WILDING

This painting comes from a year of walking the lane near my home. I was conducting a bird survey, listening for bird calls and searching the hedges and trees for a glimpse of the songsters. I did this along a short stretch of lane between my house and the river, every few days throughout the year. I discovered that during that year more than 60 bird species regularly visited these meadows and woods. This fact filled me with joy. The wildness of this tiny stretch of lane can go completely unnoticed in our busy lives. The colour palette for this painting comes from studying the early work of the American painter Richard Diebenkorn. I love the muscular colourscape of his early paintings. It fitted the strength and resilience of the real life landscapes around my home. His colours called up for me the endless creativity of a humble patchwork of land that is so easily dismissed as scrub.

## CLOSING RANKS

The thud of hooves through the autumn mist.  
A shrill whinny answers my call,  
As she approaches at speed, heading for breakfast.  
Up over the dewy slope, she appears, at full tilt,  
In all her sturdy, blue-roan gorgeousness.  
I smile.  
She smiles.  
Happy to see each other.  
Suddenly, she judders to a halt and stands, stock still,  
Sniffing the grass, her breath coming fast in steamy gusts,  
Looking down, then up,  
Then down again and straight back at me.  
Fluttering between her hooves is a tiny fledgling blackbird,  
A helpless creature, fallen from the home nest deep in the thicket.  
The mother bird returns, screaming a warning  
In a barrage of short, panicky, high pitched notes.  
Natural instinct kicks in, to rescue this bundle of soft feathers.  
Gently lifting, peering into the fortress of the hedgerow,  
Hot air breathing down my neck,  
A beady, brown eye fixed upon me.  
The way is blocked by tangled ropes of bramble,  
By sturdy gorse bushes, smelling of coconut.  
The blackthorn is laden with sheeny, blue-black sloes,  
The hawthorn is ablaze with crimson hips and haw berries,  
A thorny briar rose spreads out, deceptively sweet and delicate,  
But impenetrable.  
A bit of a kerfuffle ensues,  
Starlings and crows, robins and sparrows close in,  
Threatening this well-intentioned human intervention.  
Here, at dawn, in the glebe field,  
Nature has turned red in tooth and claw.  
Then, behold, the nest!  
There is sound and movement inside, but so well guarded.  
Deep breath, careful hand parts prickly branches,  
Teeth gritted, bare skin under attack, blood drawn,  
The baby is reunited with its sibling chicks.  
Mother blackbird's song soars upwards, sweet and true.  
Her feathered companions take flight.  
Order is restored.  
Girl and horse walk slowly, shoulder to shoulder,  
Towards the wooden shelter and the manger,  
Newly filled with hay.  
The deed is done.  
There are no words.  
Nature closing ranks, protecting its own.



## MAGIC MARSH

As a river heads for the sea, it slows and splits, spreads and rejoins, in a maze of meadows and streams. The land is fractured and carved by the water flow, and the ground is heavy with its accumulated treasure. As the river flows on and mixes with the salt water tides, it brings with it the remnants of lives lived upstream. This silt and vegetation build in layers on the marsh, storing carbon safely in the depth of its soils. The marshland near my home is a wide expanse of ancient water meadow, a precious habitat offering both food and nesting opportunities for resident and overwintering birds. Throughout the year the bounty continues, as every tide reveals mudflats for a few hours enabling foraging birds to find food. The marsh is precious and magic. This painting began with a cool, pale green wash, but soon became flooded with light and life. It painted itself.

## A PLACE APART

Home place.  
 Two villages joined - or separated - by marshy flatlands.  
 Locals call this place, simply, 'the Moors'.  
 Downstream, beside a ruined Norman castle, is a crossing place.  
 Ancient stepping stones, embedded in the rushing water,  
 Allowed the castle's princess to visit her secret lover  
 In the distant village of small, thatched cottages.  
 Legends are told of King Arthur's nearby burial ground,  
 One of many in these western-facing, Celtic lands.  
 On grey days the Moors are gloomy, drained of colour,  
 A bitter chocolate sludge, peppered with bog cotton  
 And threaded by the deceptively lazy river,  
 Whose currents are perilous, whose banks are steep and scrubby,  
 No fences, no gateways, no boundaries.  
 Human habitation is hardscrabble,  
 Rusting corrugated shacks,  
 Small homesteads of block and brick.  
 A derelict farmhouse stands in an abandoned yard  
 Overlooking a dank mill stream.  
 A wooden caravan, pitched beside a peaty brook,  
 Is home to generations of one family.  
 Direct access is slowed by a cattle grid,  
 Keeping the community removed but protected.  
 Its people are watchful, wary of strangers.  
 A place apart.  
 Beyond their blurry confines, the marshes peter out  
 Into a patchwork of meadows, neat hedgerows and grazing land.  
 When the sun seeps through the surrounding trees,  
 Colour floods the land,  
 Like a darkened theatre when the stage lights go up  
 And the drama unfolds.  
 Great clumps of bullrushes whisper at the water's edge,  
 Families of wildfowl paddle out into the soft light,  
 Voles and water rats scamper in and out of their riverbank homes.  
 No longer sullen and grey, the tide is transformed  
 Into a torrent of sparkling, indigo ripples,  
 Teeming with small fish and wriggly newts,  
 Splashing over flat stones of mauve, violet and pink.  
 In the village smithy, the blacksmith's hammer rings out,  
 The church bell sounds the hour  
 And a new day begins.  
 The Moors come to life,  
 Mystical, mysterious, perennially tinged with rough magic.



## HIDDEN DEPTHS

There is a close relationship between the roots of plants and the myriad living things within the soil. Plants use sunlight to make sugars that power their growth, but they need minerals too, which are rare in most soils. So they have forged an alliance. Fungi live in and around the plant roots. They have tiny threads that, as they grow, spread far and wide throughout the soil. When a thread meets a mineral deposit it passes it back to the plant root to be absorbed. In return the plant donates some of its sugar supply to the fungi, to help them grow. I love this story, so I wanted this painting to be full of light and colour, to sparkle a little. The magic happens deep within the dark of the soil, but I wanted to catch the excitement I feel about this frankly unbelievable process of productive co-existence, which has come into being over millennia.

## DEEPER AND DOWN

There's life down here, you know.  
Ancient history slumbers, undisturbed, in these murky depths,  
An enduring reminder of human life since time began.  
Up above, the water meadows are lush and green,  
But soon they will be changed beyond recognition  
As nature and history are steamrollered - again -  
In the cause of that thing called 'progress'.  
But the old names will live on,  
In the pages of history books and archaeological surveys.  
Nutshalling, an ancient nut grove, now renamed Nursling,  
The Walls, thought to be an Iron Age enclosure,  
Armsea, as inscribed on the tithe map,  
Conager Bridge, where rabbits burrowed  
Into the loose rubble of the ramparts.  
And Onna, inserted by an industrious Italian monk  
Into his life's work, the Ravenna Cosmography,  
Listing place names and town lands,  
From India to Ireland,  
And, maybe, this small slice of England, too?  
Right here, beneath the soles of our shoes,  
Precious things have lain dormant for centuries.  
De profundis, they softly shimmer,  
Their call a sweet, distant song,  
Whispering up, through twisted green stems and thin shoots,  
To the entrances of meandering, subterranean channels.  
Early hunter gatherers came and left their mark,  
Then Bronze and Iron Age tribes,  
Before the arrival of the all-conquering Romans.  
Their traces are bold and enduring, if plundered, fractured,  
Upended by roadways and railways ... and all that stuff.  
The Saxons were here too, very much here, and busy.  
Down through the centuries,  
Under the clink and rattle of trowels and picks,  
And the rumble of motorised diggers and excavators,  
This gravelly subsoil has yielded up unimaginable treasures.  
Coins and pins, ornamental weights and brooches,  
Tools, weapons, pails, pitchers and jars,  
Their rough surfaces glowing russet and rose,  
Inky purple, terra cotta and bronze.  
Delve deep, separate the roots of the thorn bushes,  
Push through the woody coils of holly and gorse,  
Ease out the knotted fungal strands.  
Listen, look closely, down, down, down.  
In your mind's eye, do you see them?  
They haven't gone away.

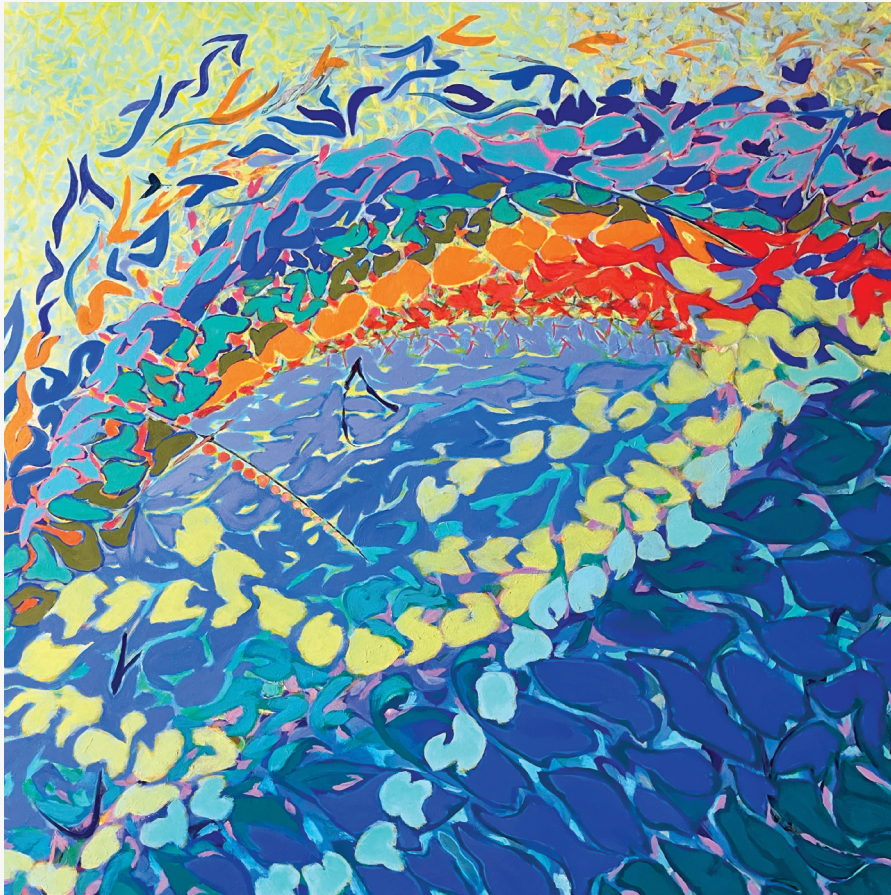


## GAIA

In the stories of Greek mythology, Gaia is the name of the ancestral mother of Earth. Scientist James Lovelock developed a more modern view of our planet but kept the name, the Gaia theory. This theory describes all living things and their surroundings as being so closely intertwined, one with another, that together they form a single, complex, self-healing system called Earth. My painting does not attempt to take on such an amazing panorama. Instead, it imagines a tiny revolving sliver of living landscape, a mosaic of creatures, vegetation, earth, sea and sky, that forms a working ecosystem. This is one thread in the fabric of our beautiful planet and it is surrounded and criss-crossed by multitudes of others. Spaces between shapes on the canvas exist to allow for change. Nothing is meant to be set in stone. Future change would bring a reordering, a remaking of patterns; changes would ripple out far and wide.

## MELTING POT

Gaia Rock, Gaia Sea,  
 Earth Mother, giver of life, Gaia.  
 Here on Corfu, she's everywhere.  
 Aphrodite-like, her spirit emerges from the waves  
 Lapping around her jagged, stencilled outline,  
 Shaped like a sea-horse - or, perhaps, a sickle?  
 That same spirit manifests itself in dark cypresses, lush greenery,  
 Craggy outcrops and secret sandy coves.  
 And even in the built heritage,  
 From tiny, island monasteries  
 To imperious stone forts.  
 Mythology has it that Gaia gave this place its original name -  
 'Drepane' - meaning a sickle, a bladed agricultural implement,  
 Said to be buried way down in the fathomless depths.  
 According to legend, that provenance is gruesome,  
 Involving revenge, patricide, emasculation,  
 The casting of body parts into the foaming sea,  
 And concealment of the bloody weapon.  
 So, let's not go there.  
 Crossing from the heel of Italy into endless blue,  
 Small white houses float into view,  
 Clinging perilously to wooded cliff faces  
 Above glassy waters  
 Whose colours morph from turquoise to sapphire  
 To rich, impenetrable cobalt.  
 As Durrell famously observed, at the opening of Prospero's Cell,  
 'Somewhere between Calabria and Corfu, the blue really begins'.  
 No wonder so many peoples set sail for 'this sceptred isle,  
 This precious stone in the silver sea' - to misquote John of Gaunt.  
 From gracious palaces and villas,  
 Sweetly planted gardens and flower-laden balconies  
 In the old town's maze of streets,  
 Where today's earth mothers hang their laundry,  
 The picture is ever-changing.  
 It's a cultural and architectural melting pot.  
 As evening falls, the lamps are lit along the arcaded Liston,  
 Casting mysterious shadows out onto the grassy Spianada  
 And rainbows of colour onto marble pavements.  
 The glowering, purple mountains of Albania rear up across the strait,  
 Where, in the darkness, a bright light gleams, then is gone.  
 Meanwhile, this enchanted island shimmers seductively,  
 A glistening jewel, gently rocked by the Ionian,  
 Sheltered and safe in the warm embrace  
 Of the Earth Mother.  
 Gaia.



## IT'S THE OCEAN

This painting came from a place of wonder about the way our oceans behave. It began its life with areas of pale blue paint against pinks, mimicking cold water currents brushing up alongside warmer layers - the ocean at work making our weather, regulating our climate. Somehow time passed without any resolution of this painting and I moved on to other work. I picked it up again recently to find darker blues and vibrant oranges starting to appear. The story of the oceans as maker of weather that enables our crops to grow, had gone. The ocean absorbing all the pollution, all the carbon dioxide we throw at it, had changed. Here instead is the creator of chaos and storm. No small, far off changes to our way of living will turn this tide. The game is up. We don't have time. Some 70% of the planet surface is ocean, beyond our control. The oceans are warning us.

## CHOPPY WATERS

The waters are angry  
And well they might be.  
In fact, they're seething,  
Clogged, drained of life, neglected,  
And taken for granted.  
The oceans are the big brother of creation,  
The senior partner in the functioning of this planet,  
Our life support system.  
And we're killing them.  
The colours are a clue.  
The blue of the Med is rapidly dissolving  
Into an unhealthy shade of dung.  
Nearer to home, the narrow Bristol Channel is,  
Even in sunshine, a funereal grey.  
The vast sands along our western shores have taken on  
A sickly, otherworldly pallor,  
As the waves retreat from, or encroach onto, the land.  
From their rock pools, creeks and muddy bayous  
To the battling currents at their entrances,  
Sea loughs, like the Breton Golfe du Morbihan  
And the Irish one named Strangfjord by the Vikings,  
Are bunged with goodness knows what horrors.  
Aquatic residents, starved by their dwindling habitats,  
Must go in search of fresh nourishment.  
Down in the twilight zone, weird, bog-eyed creatures  
Scuttle about nervously, in search of new hidey holes,  
Dodging great swathes of plastic and human detritus,  
Which choke and throttle them.  
Tune in to the clamour of the oceans and the rivers  
And read the telltale signs in the elements.  
Luminous reefs of coral are rapidly diminishing,  
Becoming shrunken and bleached.  
Slimy algae blooms stretch out sticky fingers,  
Toxic to humans, harmful to marine habitats.  
Shorelines are eroding and losing definition.  
On the icy edges of our planet, human existence is precarious,  
Crumbling away with the melting glaciers.  
Desperate animals prowl in confusion,  
Rare species cling onto life by a thread,  
Chaos invades the blue planet,  
And laps at its portal.  
The future is fragile.  
Survival is under threat,  
From the shallows to the murky sea bed,  
From beyondness to beneathness.



## THE CRADLE

There is a field used for grazing opposite the water meadows near my home. It is fronted and flanked by a famous chalk stream river, which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. On all sides are environmental riches: seasonally wet woods, salt marshes leading to an estuary, ancient woodland leading to a network of lakes. These treasures are remnants of a precious mosaic of habitats that have been squeezed and desecrated over the years, to the point of fragmentation and fragility - and are now destined to be squeezed further. I use a buzzard's eye view to see all this and grieve. 'Progress' has split responsibilities, so often making easy choices rather than proper plans, letting money rather than nature talk, doing irreparable harm. Unfettered progress shrinks these precious places, ruining the vital niches and corridors that wildlife needs to survive. We in the UK have already lost nearly 20% of our native wildlife. This is how it's done.

## MUSICAL MOSAIC

Our home field is a living patchwork,  
Linked, fed and nourished  
By the gentle flow of the river.  
There's haunting poetry in the very names of the nesting birds  
In fields, forest and water meadows -  
Duncock and hawfinch,  
Raven and siskin,  
Firecrest, wagtail, woodpecker.  
In late spring, the river's sun-warmed banks  
Billow with clumps of meadowsweet and bedstraw,  
Holy rope, water mint and hemlock.  
"There's rue for you," sang Ophelia, as she drifted away.  
"We call it herb of grace on Sundays.  
There's rosemary for remembrance,  
And pansies, that's for thoughts.  
There's fennel and columbines.  
And there's a daisy.  
I would give you some violets  
But they withered all".  
The sturdy hazel recharges its cargo with the changing seasons,  
In spring, heavy with fluffy catkins,  
In autumn, weighed down with creamy nuts.  
In the merry month of May,  
A horse chestnut forms an archway  
Into the home field.  
It's resplendent with Japanese foliage fans  
And soft, ballet-pink, candle blossoms.  
In September, prickly, neon-green cases  
Are bursting with burnished conkers,  
Lying snug and warm inside snowy blankets.  
Then come rowdy boys, armed with sticks,  
Hitting them to the ground for playground games.  
Amid the silent, dank gloom of the forest,  
Pastel-shaded fungi exude a sinister beauty,  
Their names another sonic symphony -  
Stagshorn, elf cup, charcoal burner,  
Penny bun, collared earthstar, ink cap,  
Puffball, jelly ear.  
Some are gathered by foragers  
And brought to the table.  
Others are toxic and freakish, best ignored.  
They magically appear out of dead or dying organisms,  
Joining Mother Nature's mosaic of life,  
Undulating slowly to the endless, throaty glug of the river.  
Cradled.  
Threatened.



L to R: Jane and Tessa in the studio  
Photograph: M.J. Coe, 2025

Thanks: David Allen, former Curator of Archaeology with Hampshire Museums Service; Professor Malcolm Coe; Corfu Literary Festival; Pádraig Coyle; Faber & Faber; Annabelle Louvros; New Road Artists; Treoes History Hub.

Opposite: From WHAT THE BUZZARD SAW



**Tessa Coe**  
[www.tessa-coe.work/](http://www.tessa-coe.work/)  
[instagram.com/tessalg](https://www.instagram.com/tessalg)

**Jane Coyle**  
[www.powerstonefilms.com](http://www.powerstonefilms.com)  
[www.theevenhand.com](http://www.theevenhand.com)

All images of paintings & accompanying text  
© Copyright Tessa Coe 2025

All prose poems text © Copyright Jane Coyle 2025

Design: Patrick Coyle Design | Print: PrintPlanet, Hollywood