This chapter offers seven propositions – a manifesto in seven parts, if you will – for working with the contemporary medieval. Our seven propositions offer co-ordinates for an ‘epic’ conversation of the kind we identified in Chapter 3. This time around, however, our conversation has only one subject: water. We first explored the subject of water in Chapter 2 and, because of that, artist Roni Horn’s practice of working with and through water. In this chapter, we put Horn’s work alongside that of Caroline Bergvall (particularly her multimedia performance and book, Drift, of 2014) and the sculptures of Inuvialuit artist Abraham Anghik Ruben. Horn (b. 1955), Ruben (b. 1951) and Bergvall (b. 1962) open up pathways of connection to medieval cultural and literary practice from North American, Inuvialuit and European perspectives. Each artist makes their own distinctive connection with the deep past, which has inspired us, indeed demanded of us new modes of performative, creative scholarship to best elucidate them.¹

We are inspired by the artwork of Bergvall, Horn and Ruben to suggest a different kind of research about or conversation with the past: one where we can hold medieval and modern in flux and reciprocity, where the past and present source each other, where the medieval and the modern interact, flow, cross and pass. Accordingly, we examine the rivers, oceans and libraries of, for example, the Iceland and England of Roni Horn, the Mediterranean and North Sea of Caroline Bergvall, and the Atlantic passage of Ruben’s sculptures about Inuit and Viking memories of travel on the sea. Examining how contemporary creative practices might relate to medieval studies, we use the concept of ‘proposition’ creatively, rather than formally.

Indeed, exploring water and its environs offers us an instance and mode of practice where we can engage the contemporary medieval
creatively and imaginatively. We offer wonder, a process of affective engagement with the past, as an important dimension of our ‘epic’ conversation across time and space. Where does water belong, we wonder? To what discipline? In this chapter we follow water as it enters Horn’s work (Proposition One), as it flows into the past and into the sea and shifts into ice in Exeter Book Riddle 69 (Proposition Two), as it conjures a riddle of the self (Proposition Three), as it morphs into journey, weather and stormy-minded men in Beowulf (Proposition Four), as it creates a passage between the past and the present in Ruben’s sculpting of voyage, travel and migration between Viking and Inuit cultures (Proposition Five), and as the ‘drift’ between words and peoples in Caroline Bergvall’s multimedia performance and book of the same title, reworking accounts of early medieval journeys such as that imagined in the Old English poem, The Seafarer (Propositions Six and Seven). Water and wonder propose a methodology and a practice; water brings with it, inevitably, weather and voyage, and these too merit our critical attention.

**Proposition one: Water is a master verb, or, Still Water, Roni Horn**

And so we return to water, and to Roni Horn and the modern moment in contemporary arts production, to begin our conversation across periods and disciplines, creative and scholarly practices. How might water be said to be a master verb, as our first proposition suggests? And what does the artwork, Still Water, by Roni Horn (1999), have to do with it (see Figure 4.1)? After all, Roni Horn is not interested in the medieval period, though she takes water as her subject regularly. She is not at all interested in periodization or chronology, but her practice as sculptor and visual artist profoundly engages with ideas about the fluidity of time and temporality.

And so our first proposition borrows from the title of Still Water (The Thames, for Example) of 1999 by Horn, now in the Tate Modern in London. The work is a series of large-scale photographs of the River Thames, each annotated with footnotes that offer points of connection between the artist, the viewer and the image, summoning a range of affective associations, fear and awe included. The flow of the Thames is stilled by the photographs, perhaps, but these images still capture the undulation, depths and texture of this rapidly changing tidal river, conduit for history and culture, and equally well known for its suicides. Still
water. The photographs in the series point to the many meanings that this phrase might hold. Water can be still, can be stilled, literally and metaphorically, and can still be our subject, our ‘master’ verb, as Horn herself notes. Characteristically, Horn’s phrase provokes. It poses the question of whether or not water can be gendered and so challenges us to think about mastery as a practice that might move beyond its conventional associations with masculinity and domination – and indeed the human – to something more fluid, transitional and relational. Expertise and expert knowledge come into play here too, as practices never quite mastered and always in flux: there is, after all, always more to be learned.

Whether in whole or in part, Horn has used her self-coined aphorism ‘Water is the master verb; an act of perpetual relation’, in a number of contexts. It annotates, by way of one footnote among many, her photographic studies in Still Water (The Thames, for Example), for example. It reappears in another installation of this work, the punningly titled Some Thames, a permanent installation at the University of Akureyri, Iceland (2000), revisited for the Art Institute of Chicago (2004) (Figures 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4).
Figure 4.2  Roni Horn, *Some Thames*, 2000 (detail). Eighty photographs printed on paper. 25 × 38” / 63.5 × 96.5 cm each. Photo by Roni Horn.

Figure 4.3  Roni Horn, *Some Thames*, 2000 (detail). Eighty photographs printed on paper. 25 × 38” / 63.5 × 96.5 cm each. Photo by Roni Horn.
Horn quotes herself in her monologue, *Saying Water.* And she offers the same thought as an opportunity for ‘annotation’ (the word is Horn’s) or gloss (this is our annotation) to create a textual conversation, or set of dialogues, in her four-volume artist’s book, *Wonderwater (Alice Offshore)* of 2004. As we might expect from this artist who has so often taken water as her subject, Alice in this iteration is not in wonderland, she is offshore, wondering about water.

The four volumes of *Wonderwater* collect responses to Horn’s work from artist Louise Bourgeois, poet and classicist Anne Carson, philosopher and gender theorist Hélène Cixous, and, inevitably given his surname, director and film-maker John Waters. Each volume offers responses (or refusals to respond) to Horn’s own postulates, descriptions, aphorisms and musings about water. Cixous, for example, starts her response to Horn’s ‘Water is the master verb’ with a single French noun, ‘eau’, and continues, punningly, ‘eau / o au haut en oh’ (which we can barely say!). John Waters offers his own, characteristic, spin on the same statement: ‘Ethel Waters’s relentless struggle to claw her way to the top of all forms of show business’ – Ethel Waters, the woman who sang *Stormy Weather* for the first time in the Cotton Club, New York, in 1933. From John

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**Figure 4.4** Roni Horn, *Some Thames*, 2000 (detail). Eighty photographs printed on paper. 25 × 38" / 63.5 × 96.5 cm each. Installation view: University of Akureyri, Iceland. Photo by Stefan Altenburger.
Waters to Ethel Waters to *Stormy Weather*, puns in and across languages, humour (pointed or not), cultural knowledge not necessarily shared by all (who was Ethel Waters, again?), the language play in *Wonderwater* crosses over with, flows into, the kinds of language play enjoyed by early medieval poets, riddle-makers in especial. In these ways, Horn’s work offers us a contemporary gloss on medieval practices and a pathway into interpretation.

Indeed, Horn’s making and remaking of work in a variety of media, whether on her own or collaboratively, invites us to think – slowly – about rumination, process, repetition, expansion, self-examination and the relation between self and the world. As we pointed out in Chapter 2, we first became interested in Horn because of her interest in Iceland and its watery environment, most notably in the ten-volume series of artist’s books *Ísland: To Place*, and in the celebrated installations and books *You Are the Weather, Parts 1 and 2* (1994–7, 2010–11) and *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (2007) at Stykkishólmur. In ‘Women and Water: Icelandic Tales and Anglo-Saxon Moorings’ we explored landscape, place and gender as fruitful categories of analysis in relation to some of Horn’s work. Here we are now, still engaging with water and with the proposition that water offers us a ‘master’ verb. And still thinking about the time of water – its relation to temporality and to disciplinarity. Horn’s practice makes us wonder about water, and so it challenges us to wonder about it as medie-valists. Each encounter with her work has opened up a passage from the modern to the medieval that has expanded and developed our understanding of the riddle of early medieval encounters with water, with self-hood and with being in the world.

**Proposition Two: Practising wonder, or, Exeter Book Riddle 69**

Early medieval riddles were open to wonder, to wondering about the world, and to engaging with water as one of their subjects. Take this example:

> Wundor wearð on wege; wæter wearð to bane.

In Modern English, we might put it this way:

> A wonder was on its way – water was as bone
Poet and translator Kevin Crossley-Holland, known for his long-standing engagement with Anglo-Saxon poetry, puts it another:

On the way a miracle: water become bone.9

And so this one-line riddle, Exeter Book Riddle 69, with its solution of ‘ice’ or ‘iceberg’, becomes a good way to capture the wonder of water. Water is both liquid and solid, place and substance and, as the translations indicate, medieval and modern; this riddle is about a body of water, a metaphor as resonant now as in the early medieval period. The riddle’s alliteration (‘wundor’, ‘wege’, ‘wæter’, ‘wearð’) and repetition (‘wearð’) draw sonic and visual attention to that isolated noun ‘ban’, ‘bone’; the boniness of water. Ice. Iceberg. Stilled water. Water, still.

Riddle 69 is one of the great single-line riddles of the vernacular, Old English, corpus of riddles – if, that is, it is a one-liner. Riddle 69 is preceded in the Exeter Book by another couple of lines, identified as Riddle 68 by editors Krapp and Dobbie, and apparently incomplete or unfinished:

Ic þa wiht geseah on weg feran;
heo wæs wrætlice wundrum gegierwed

We might put it this way:

I saw a creature travelling on her way; she was artful, marvellously adorned

Some interpreters, such as Craig Williamson, read Riddles 68 and 69 as one:

Ic þa wiht geseah on weg feran;
heo wæs wrætlice wundrum gegierwed.
Wundor wearð on wege;  waetær wearð to bane.10

And so we might respond:

I saw a creature travelling on her way;
She was artful, wonderfully adorned.
A wonder was on its way –
water was as bone
In this riddle water now has the shape of a woman. Contemporary American poet Jennifer Grotz, commissioned by *The Word Exchange*, has this:

I saw that creature wander on the way,
Wonderfully adorned. A wonder floating on a wave:
She was water turned to bone\textsuperscript{11}

As we work through these possible relations, we realize that this interpretive flexibility is entirely to our point. One riddle or two (Riddle 68 or Riddle 69); singular or multiple, both of form and of forms of translation; human or non-human; a creature wonderfully adorned, dressed appropriately as only elite Anglo-Saxon women are in Old English poetry, ornate, ornamented; artfully adorned; a wonder-woman, perhaps, fluid, like water, still water, icy, like bone, ice, a water-woman.

To which Roni Horn might reply, helpfully, ‘Water is the master verb; an act of perpetual relation’ (Horn, *Saying Water*).

### Proposition Three: The self is a riddle and the riddle is a self

What is a riddle ‘about’? Literary interpretation of the Old English riddles points out that they are less ‘about’ their solutions than about the process of deciphering, imagining or answering the questions they pose.\textsuperscript{12} This idea of a conversation in process engages the audience, the listener or the reader in a complicated internalized dialogue in order to puzzle out the riddle: it’s me, myself and my shadow, my speaking self, my hearing self, my literate self, my obdurate stupid self who does not get it, my funny self, my gendered self, the self that wonders about Old English and wants to know. Early medieval riddles are creations of artifice and highly self-conscious artefacts. Such self-consciousness cuts both ways, however, as the riddles demand our equally self-conscious creative participation, as we have just seen in our reading of Exeter Book Riddles 68 and 69. When we talk about riddles and the self, then, and about self-consciousness in early medieval England, what is it that we are really talking about? Are we riddling the self? Roni Horn poses a similar question: ‘When you talk about water, aren’t you really talking about yourself? Isn’t water like the weather that way?’ (Horn, *Saying Water*).

‘Wundor’ and its compound adjective ‘wundorlic’ (‘wonder-like’) appear in twenty-one of the Old English Exeter Book riddles, though most if not all of the roughly one hundred riddles elicit ‘wondering’, which is
an underlying necessity and touchstone for the riddling mentality. How does one think in, or respond to, the presence of a wonder, a marvel? Who wants to know, how, and how much? Wonder and wondering are closely related to another well-known concept of riddling, invoked by the adjective ‘wrætlic’, with its meanings of ‘splendidly, wondrously, highly wrought’, a declaration, if you will, of the wonder embedded in self-conscious artifice. In his examination of wondering as a perceptual frame for the Riddles, Peter Ramey lists a total of fifty instances of these ‘wonder words’, a high concentration when compared with the Old English corpus. The combined riddle that is Exeter Book Riddles 68 and 69 intertwines the processes of wonder and of artifice, creation and perception, describing a watery creature who ‘wæs wrætlice wundrum gegier-wed’ (‘wrought of, or splendidly adorned with, wonders’), as we saw in Proposition Two.

‘Wundor’, ‘wonder’ and, again, water. The relation of water to wonder became itself a riddle when we tried to ask how frequent or how pervasive the idea of water is in the Exeter Book riddles. Some things are easier to count than others, and there are maybe twenty riddles that declare, conjure or are at play with water. In addition to the more obvious riddles that include water or ice as their solutions, such as Riddles 33, 68/69 and 84, what counts? Should we also count Riddle 51, with its solution of ‘pen and three fingers’, where the ‘wrætlic’ creature flies high in the air and then plunges down into the waves (‘fleag on lyfte, / deaf under yþe’)? This riddle creature is a compound image for the physical and material process of writing, as the feathered bird-pen dips and dives into a sea of ink. Should we also count the many other references to weather, wind, storm, anchor, various birds, ships or reed-pens, all of which are related to water in one way or another? Our answer is yes. In the riddles, water is connected to the miraculous, to transformation, to process, to generation and, as we have already seen in the case of Riddle 69, to gender and identity formation. Water is itself wondrous and elicits our sense of wonder, all wonderfully and succinctly expressed in Riddle 69, with its solution of ‘ice’ or ‘iceberg’. In this riddle, ice is described as both ‘wundor’ and ‘wrætlic’: the riddle invites us to observe and engage with water’s process of becoming ice, but also to engage with the conscious experience of its becoming, entailing cognition (wondering) and aesthetic realization (wonder): ‘Wundor wearð on wege; wæter wearð to bane’.

There is a clear general case to be made for the wonder of water in the Old English riddles, then, and so too throughout the literary corpus, as we will see further in the next chapter when we consider a wide range of water words. The connection of wonder and water to the process of
identity formation and the riddle of the self is perhaps more opaque. How might we follow the process of a self, or a mind at work, engaging in a multifaceted internalized dialogue with that self in order to puzzle out a riddle? Let’s consider briefly Riddle 60, ‘reed-pen’, which we read as a revolving, circular conversation among a number of possible speaking and hearing selves. The many dimensions of this riddle are all born(e) out of and along by water: reeds, pens, messengers, messages, sender, receiver and, last but not least, the audience, reader or listener. Here is the complete riddle:

Ic wæs be sonde, sæwealle neah, 
æt merefarōpe, minum gewunade
frumstāpole fæst; fea ænig wæs
monna cynnes, þæt minne þær
on anæde eard beheolde,
ac mec uhtna gehwam yð sio brune
lagufæðme beleolc. Lyt ic wende
þæt ic ær oþþe sið æfre sceolde
ofer meodubence muðleas sprecan,
wordum wrixlan. Þæt is wundres dæl
on sefan searolic þam þe swylc ne conn,
hu mec seaxes ord ond seo swiþre hond,
eorles ingepont ond ord somod
þingum geþydan, þæt ic wiþ þe sceolde
for unc anum twam ærendspræce
abeodan bealdlice, swa hit beorna ma
uncre wordcwidas widdor ne mænden.

A literal translation might put it this way:

I was by the shore, near the sea wall, at the water’s edge I dwelled in my original foundation there were few of mankind who there, in that solitude, could see my home, but each hour before dawn the dark wave, surrounded me with a watery embrace. Little did I expect ever before or after, I, across the mead-bench should speak mouthless, exchange words. It is a share of wonder to one who does not know such things, how, with a cunning mind, the point of a knife, the right hand and the intent of a man together in a point, join for this reason, that I with you should, for us two alone a message-speech boldly declare, so that no men should spread our word-speeches more widely.
What is this riddle about? It is spoken in the voice of a reed-pen, which as a reed was once firmly anchored in water, ‘frumstapole fæst’ (line 3, ‘fast in its original foundation’ or ‘fast-rooted in my first life’, as contemporary poet Jane Hirshfield, also commissioned by The Word Exchange, has it). The voice of the reed is not heard, however, at least in the conceit of the riddle itself. Nor is it observed by the race or kin of men (‘monna cynnes’), save for those of us who comprise the riddle’s audience – its auditors or readers, watchers or wonderers. The only presence other than the reed at the beginning of this riddle is the water that surrounds, embraces and observes it at that very Wanderer time of day: ‘ac mec uhtna gehwam / yð sio brune lagufæðme beleolc’ (‘but every hour before dawn the dark wave surrounded me with a watery embrace’, 6–7). The transformation of the riddle creature as reed into a pen and then voice, utterance, mouthless (‘muðleas’) speech and written language, is, unsurprisingly, a bit of a wonder (‘is wundres dæl’, 9). But it is one available to those who wonder, who understand the mystery of the coming together of inanimate objects, the points of a knife and a quill, and animate thought, the ‘intent of a man’ (‘eorles ingeþonc’, 12). Although the communicability of language and its ability to travel, its portability, can extend to communal conversation in the form of an exchange of words between two men in the mead hall (this riddle argues), what is at stake here, finally, is a message about an internalized conversation to which no-one else is privy. This mouthless, silent, private inter-subjectivity is not shared in the form of a message whose contents we can decipher, even though there may be many literate listeners and readers who share the ‘wonder’ of the riddling language that can describe this kind of silent communication.

Indeed, the riddle circles back on itself, to its beginning, to the silence and solitude that water and reed and speaker and listener, and only these, now share: ‘that I with you should for us two alone a message-speech boldly declare, so that no men should spread our word-speeches more widely’. Our inelegant translation emphasizes the idea of conversation, then, but an internal, stilled one. But whether the exchange is internal or communally directed, we can see that this ‘exchange of words’ (‘wordum wrixlan’), the same phrase with which we concluded our discussion of audience and/in conversation in Chapter 3, is still part of our larger conversation with the past. To hear the water-born(e) voice of the reed-as-pen is also to see oneself as reader, and to speak silently to oneself, interpreting its message of silent speech as known only to those for whom it is intended. Figuring out the movement and process of the riddle, and not necessarily its answer, is a conversation with and revelation of self and its relation to language. As the riddle ends, the doubled
perspectives of speaker and listener are bound, coalesced, in a silent shared understanding of the power and paradox that is written language. And this paradox redoubles, if we assume that it was shared, read aloud, performed.

We cannot finally untangle this paradox, even if we satisfactorily nail down the ‘answer’ to the riddle. We continue to wonder about it. Indeed, in the process of translating it, and trying to grapple as closely as we could with the asymmetries and vagaries of Old English grammatical structure, we had many discussions about how, and not what, it means. We also wondered whether to include any other less literal and more user-friendly translations, of which there are many, and settled on this one by Craig Williamson:

Rooted near water, raised by the shore,
I was earth-fast, bound in a bed,
My native land. Few men walked
In this wilderness, watched as the wave
Played round my body with its dark arms
At dusk and dawn. I did not dream
That someday I should speak, slip words
Over benches, mouthless in the mead-hall.
That is a miracle to men who do not know
This craft – how the point of a knife,
A skilled right hand and a man’s intent
Tooling together should shape me so
That boldly I bring you my message,
Singing in silence so no man in the wider
World may share our words and understand.\textsuperscript{19}

Discussing the nuanced differences between these two, or any two, translations will in some measure continue the riddling process, and keep us wondering, keep us in conversation with the past. We leave you, as readers and interpreters yourselves, to ponder our version and Williamson’s, and note for good measure a third translation by Jane Hirshfield.\textsuperscript{20}

In doing so, we anticipate the broader arguments of our final chapter, where we take up the idea of translation, of being in translation in its broadest sense, as both transformation and communication.

It turns out therefore that Riddle 60 is about the many ways we may talk among our selves, and listen to one another. When we talk about riddles of the self and of self-consciousness in early medieval England, aren’t we really talking about the relation of the self to the world, written
or spoken? And so we return also to Roni Horn’s question, ‘When you talk about water, aren’t you really talking about yourself? Isn’t water like the weather that way?’ (Horn, Saying Water).

**Proposition Four: Water is like the weather is like the self**

The Old English riddles demonstrate that the semantic world of water is gloriously complicated; it is a perpetual act of relation that is always multiple, plural, in Horn’s words. Water is in an act of relation to ice in Riddle 69, for example, while the watery environment of a reed is in relation to a pen and a meditation on writing and communication in Riddle 60. We saw something similar in Chapter 2 in our discussion of the phrase ‘cup of the waves’ in *Beowulf* (‘ӯða ȳȳ’, line 1208), with its fluid mix of metaphors evoking the feminine, the heroic, the ideas of both motion and containment, and the connective and disjunctive presence of water. A cup can be carried by a queen, it can travel across the sea, and it can be an image of travel, motion, itself. Motion or commotion. Another pathway into or across water is offered by a compound adjective, again from *Beowulf*, ‘hrēoh-mōd’ (lines 2132, 2581), which we mentioned briefly in Chapter 2 and return to here. To puzzle out the meaning of this adjective is something of an iceberg of research that takes us into the weather and the environment, weather as environment, environment and affect, and the self. It seems that everyone is talking about emotions these days, or affect, or feeling or the weather, whether in scholarship or in everyday life. In England, we often assume that the polite way to avoid talking about anything remotely personal is to talk about the weather, but, to come back to American Roni Horn and her refrain that resonates throughout this chapter, ‘Isn’t talking about the weather talking about yourself? When you talk about water, aren’t you really talking about yourself? Isn’t water like the weather that way?’ (Horn, Saying Water).

So, what does an adjective like ‘hrēoh-mōd’ and the warrior men who suffer from it in Old English poetry say about the weather, water and the self in the early medieval period? The first part of the compound, ‘hrēoh’, refers to weather; it means storm, harsh rough elemental forces of all kinds, not necessarily just wet or cold. For every dictionary entry for ‘hrēoh’ and its compounds, however, there are parallel evocations of emotional states. A storm is a troubled time for warriors on many fronts, where it is connected to physical and emotional pain, upheaval and disturbance. ‘Hrēoh’ is connected to, or crosses over with, the adjective ‘(h)
reow’, ‘fierce, turbulent, cruel, distraught, wild, savage’; it is also connected to the noun ‘hreow’, ‘sorrow, grief, regret, remorse, repentance’, and to the verb ‘hreowan’, ‘to rue or regret, excite compassion or pity’. And so it goes with the language of Old English – semantic worlds intersect and merge, creating contours of similarity and difference. The other half of the compound, ‘mod’, is one of the most familiar and widespread terms in Old English, and also, to our thinking, one of the most mysterious in that its semantic field crosses over a variety of affective and abstract categories. It can evoke and pertain to mood, mind, heart, spirit, courage, imagination, and then can become further complicated by its appearance in many compounds. In the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, for example, defeat of the Anglo-Saxons at the hands of the Vikings is put down in part to the ‘ofermod’ of Byrhtnoth.23 Having too much ‘mod’ is problematic, therefore, especially for men, but so is not having enough. Like ‘the right stuff’, ‘mod’ can evade precise definition, though ‘ego’ has proven a useful working translation. Our present point about the compound ‘hreoh-mod’, and there are many similar ones in Old English, which we look at in the next chapter, is that it suggests a vital relation between self and the world.

Following the intersecting semantic pathways of words like ‘hreoh-mod’ in Old English poetry causes us to wonder a bit more about warrior men and their world of water, storms, waves and the weather. It also prompts us to wonder more generally about other contours of meaning, and to imagine a relation between self and world in which processes of cross-identification might be imagined as the curving lines of both dissolution and separation on weather maps, those isobars and isotherms that swirl across zones of atmospheric pressure and temperature, showing a temporary – and fictional – static map of the weather of our world. Using weather maps as our image, we wonder about a parallel comprehension of affect, via mind, in connection with body, and in dynamic relation with cultural and physical worlds. In this case, the contours on our map mediate embodiment in relation to environment and fully engage the world as weather, as the Old English word ‘hreoh-mod’ suggests. Warriors and storms. If *You Are the Weather*, as the title of Horn’s series of photographs of the same woman emerging from, or immersed in, various hot springs and pools in Iceland suggests, then *Weather Reports You*, as Horn’s title for the community narratives about the weather installed at the *Library of Water* indicates. The contoured lines on our weather maps of the body and the world hold and dissolve, demarcate but do not define. They are always going both ways.
Proposition Five: Time is travel, or, seafaring

Storms and the voyages of men, inner and outer, lead us to introduce into our epic conversation about the medieval and the modern the work of Inuvialuit sculptor Abraham Anghik Ruben. His work is deeply engaged with water, because he takes on contemporary and medieval themes of seafaring, migration, displacement and the environment, and also because he directly and self-consciously addresses continuities of Viking, Norse and Inuit cultures. Ruben sees his mission as that of both artist and storyteller: ‘As a storyteller, I have sought to bring life to these ancient voices from a time when these two northern people held a reverence for the land and for all living things therein that provided sustenance and survival.’

He has produced thousands of sculptures in a variety of media, including bronze, gold, soapstone, whalebone and narwhal tusks. In this multitude of forms and materials, Ruben’s work imagines the untold stories of possible contact between Norse and Inuit peoples, his images evoking mythic and shamanistic common ground often catalysed by water as well as the overarching metaphor of voyage. His interest in the Norse and Inuit relation to their land coincides with his pressing concern for the modern environment and issues of climate change, which are similarly major preoccupations of his work. Describing one of many sculptures depicting the sea goddess Sedna, ‘Sedna: Life Out of Balance’ (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6), for example, he writes:

This sculpture represents a time of great climatic change which took place in the arctic in the 12th and 13th centuries that led to the decline of Norse settlements and eventually total collapse. This collapse is represented by Sedna, the sea goddess, holding up the world in the form of an iceberg. The few remaining Inuit and Norse people stand and look outwards. This is a mirror to what is happening today.

Ruben’s visual storytelling is both a means of remembering and a refusal to forget. His work also chronicles the contemporary migrations and forced displacement of the Inuit, both in the late nineteenth century and in his own experience. In the mid-1950s, the Canadian government removed Inuit children from their families and forced them into residential boarding schools. At age seven Ruben was sent to such a school. In an interview for the Washington Post he talks about the experience: ‘The best description would be a feeling of being shell-shocked. When they
Figure 4.5  Abraham Anghik Ruben, ‘Sedna: Life out of Balance’. Photo courtesy of the Kipling Gallery, Vancouver.

Figure 4.6  Abraham Anghik Ruben, ‘Sedna: Life out of Balance’ (reverse). Photo courtesy of the Kipling Gallery, Vancouver.
brought us in, we were stripped of clothing, showered and changed into new garments and went to roll call. By the time that was done, I had forgotten my parents’ names. The pain of displacement is a theme he returns to frequently and imagines across Norse and Inuit cultures. Given this vital body of work, we were hard-pressed to choose out of thousands of sculptures, but out of the many pieces imaging journeys and boats by Ruben, we settled on this one (Figure 4.7), called ‘Into the Storm: Ragnarok, End of Days’.

Here the two-prowed boat faces in two directions, asking the question of where this journey begins or ends – the end of days or the final cataclysm that is Ragnarok in Norse mythology. The boat contains a variety of souls, human and otherwise, at sea, lost or confused, huddling together, seafarers of all stripes on a voyage ‘ofer wapuma gebind’ (‘over the binding of the waves’), as that resonant phrase from The Wanderer (line 24) discussed in Chapter 2 has it.

Like Horn’s artworks, Ruben’s also transform the kinds of conversations we can have with the past. His configurations of the medieval and the modern take the critical practice of the contemporary medieval in another direction, across the Atlantic. His sculptures are passionate, personal, spiritual, political and anchored in history while also redrawing our parameters of space and time. They are simultaneously recognizably and unrecognizably medieval. They imagine momentous cultural passages, and the moments we live now. They too open an epic conversation, figured not as water but as travel on or over the sea: seafaring.
Proposition Six: Seafaring, or being at sea

Seafaring offers another passage – or journey – into our conversation through time and across space. Caroline Bergvall’s *Drift* (2014) opens with a looping, slightly baroque re-versioning of the first line of the Old English poem *The Seafarer* (‘Mæg ic be me sylfum soð-gied wrecan, / sîpas secgan’, ‘I can tell a true story about myself, speak of my journeys’): ‘Let me speak my true journeys own true songs’. These lines open the first ‘Song’ from *Drift*, a multimedia performance combining voice, sound, music, image and digital film. We described this installation as a ‘sonic illumination’ when we worked with Bergvall for an event at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in 2015, because of how the modern work illuminates and resonates with earlier medieval works. Premiering in 2013 at ‘Shorelines: Literature Festival of the Sea’ in Southend, Essex, curated by the arts agency Metal, *Drift* asks its audience to think about being at sea, past and present.

The many allusions of Bergvall’s first ‘Song’ about the sea initiate a conversation with its early medieval relation, the Old English poem *The Seafarer*. We particularly like its ‘right soggy truth’ for Old English ‘soð-gied’, ‘true-telling’, or, to pick a later example from the same ‘Song’, ‘caught between whats gone ok whats coming on crossing too close to the cliffs’ for Old English ‘be clifum cnossað’ (*The Seafarer*, line 8). Caught between what’s gone, what’s coming and what’s crossing, to paraphrase this song, are those many passages between past and present explored in *Drift* and *The Seafarer*, but also in Ruben’s sculptures of migration and seafaring, as we have seen. After all, the Old English noun ‘sîpas’ in the second line of *The Seafarer*, with its primary meaning of ‘journeys’, can also be translated as ‘experiences’.

Bergvall is increasingly well known to medievalists. Her *Meddle English* of 2011 is a multi-dialectal piece of language poetry excavating, along the way, Chaucerian English, but she is better known as an established, award-winning performance poet, celebrated for her brilliant inventions, to paraphrase Charles Bernstein. *Drift* reworks accounts of early medieval sea travel, such as *The Seafarer* and the journeys of Ohthere and Wulfstan in the Old English version of Orosius’s *History*, into a broader repertoire of songs and stories from more recent literary periods. In these ways, the work explores sailing, travelling, drifting, going north and getting lost at sea. *Drift’s* language effects are deliberately estranging and yet strangely familiar. The work moves in and out of modern and historic forms of English, Norwegian and French, crossing the familiar with the unknown, the partially recognized with the historically
distant. The first section of Drift, entitled ‘Seafarer’, re-versions the Old English Seafarer into sixteen short lyrical ‘Songs’, drifting between past and present. The sixteen ‘Songs’ are interspersed with two other groups of poems: ‘North’, which uses the early medieval narrative of the voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan as its basis for poetic exploration of what it means to go north, and ‘Hafville’, loose reworkings from the Icelandic sagas that draw on accounts of seafaring or being ‘all at sea’, as the Old Icelandic term ‘hafvilla’ suggests. The second section of Drift, ‘Report’, offers another kind of drifting from the twenty-first century. This time Drift opens up a much-expanded perspective on seafaring, and seafarers. It focuses not on those individual, solitary and male travellers on the sea, whose voices and experiences form the basis of ‘Seafarer’, but on the many modern and diverse travellers at risk because of their seafaring.

‘Report’ takes up accounts of the so-called ‘left-to-die boat’ – or, rather, inflated dinghy – of seventy-two refugees forced by the fighting in Tripoli in Libya to attempt the sea crossing to Lampedusa in 2011. This was a journey that presaged the many similarly tragic ones taken across the Mediterranean from North Africa since then. ‘Report’ intercuts eyewitness statements from survivors of this horrific journey with a verbal and spatio-temporal map showing how a number of authorities (British, American and Italian included) used the complex jurisdiction of the Central Mediterranean to evade their responsibility to rescue those in distress. Bergvall’s material for this section was sourced from the Forensic Architecture group at Goldsmiths College, London. Their evidence about the ‘left-to-die boat’ has been presented to NATO, and used in a number of legal challenges by NGOs; it formed part of a portfolio of work shortlisted for the prestigious award for contemporary art, the Turner Prize, in 2018.

Sixty-three refugees died in the ‘left-to-die boat’ that drifted for ten days or so in some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. Drift takes up their story to offer a stark reminder of the dangers of being lost at sea and relates it to the poignant hope for a home and to the ethical and aesthetic importance of speaking, finding new forms of bearing witness and telling tales about the sea. At the same time, Drift speaks back to the Old English poem, The Seafarer, whose final lines exhort the audience, reader or listener to consider where home might be, albeit encouraging an explicitly Christian resolution (lines 117–19) rather than the secular, poetic and political one of Drift.

‘Report’ also talks back to ‘Seafarer’, the second section of Drift is in conversation with the first, and both encourage us to think harder about being at sea, being lost at sea, and, indeed, being all at sea. The first two
lines of *The Seafarer*, the true tale (‘soð-gied’) of the lyric voice or ‘I’ of the poem, offer us experience as journey (‘siþ’), as spoken utterance and as song or poem or ‘gied’: ‘Let me speak my true journeys own true songs’. The lyric voice or ‘I’ of Bergvall’s contemporary, modern ‘Song’ is similarly rhetorical as well as performative; it expects to be attended to and heard. The parallels with what we know of the performance and audience for early medieval English poetry – communal, social, oral and aural – are worth noting. So too are the concluding lines of this ‘Song’: ‘Blow wind / blow, anon am I’. The first half of this broken line, ‘Blow wind blow’, sounds as if it ought to come from *King Lear* or *Moby Dick* or maybe a folk or blues song (‘Blow wind blow’ by Muddy Waters, perhaps, playing on Waters’s name), or the refrain of a Middle English lyric such as ‘Blow northerne wynd, blow, blow, blow’. The full line, including its second half, the powerful and alliteratively resonant ‘anon am I’, is repeated at the end of each of the sixteen ‘Songs’ in *Drift*. The repetition draws sonic attention to the paradox of the self who speaks (the ‘I’ of the songs and of the Old English *Seafarer*) and the full force of her chorus-like anonymity: ‘anon am I’. Who are or were the selves who speak anonymously, ‘anon’? And what are the risks of anonymity in the world, whether historic or modern? ‘Blow wind blow, anon am I’ invites us simultaneously to consider the repetitive motion of a sea voyage – the self at sea, going somewhere – and the self alone, anon, unidentified and, hence, at sea, out of place, going … where? We wonder as well about that other meaning of ‘anon’, an adverb of time, meaning ‘at once’, ‘soon’, ‘presently’, or even ‘here’. Being at sea, in this sense, is being here.

**Proposition Seven: Getting the drift, or, towards a conclusion**

Whether we are at sea, or here, or both, Caroline Bergvall’s *Drift* argues that mobility, motion and emotion, are central to our experiences of being in the world, together with its languages, histories, communities and places. The sea, a place of crossing and connecting, is also a cultural resource and a set of ethical practices for remembering peoples, their languages and their histories. Migration is an ethical issue in this poem, as Joshua Davies reminds us. Travel on the sea can be quite literally a matter of life or death, and a reminder of the limits of scholarly and creative interventions in the world. Drifting is risky business. As we have seen, Roni Horn’s work also insists on the dangers of watery worlds, which lure the desperate (*Still Water*) and challenge our sense of its resourcefulness.
(The Library of Water). And the boat in Ruben’s Ragnarok, End of Days points both ways. Crossing the sea is no easy business.

To catch a wave, to get the drift and to practise drifting are not therefore simply ways to get to the point or to identify a conclusion. Rather, as Proposition One suggests, water is a way of following relationships between the self and the world, bodies and environments, practices and disciplines. So water leads us in Proposition Two to resituate wonder, the practice of wondering, within our knowledge systems, and to examine how wonder has long been a poetic, creative resource. Propositions Three and Four take up the riddling relationship of the self to the world, suggesting how those perpetual relationships, to paraphrase Horn, contour bodies and weather, emotions and worlds. Our pathways into the contemporary medieval take up travel on the sea, seafaring, in Propositions Five and Six. Seafaring in modern and medieval works takes us beyond the metaphorical, or rather to an understanding of how metaphor and literal sense are always mutually implicated; the direction of travel is always going both ways.

So where, then, will the contemporary medieval take us, we wonder? Does our ‘epic’ conversation hold water? Does it hold out the promise of reorienting our sense of ourselves, our communities, histories

Figure 4.8 Caroline Bergvall, Together, 2015, graphic print. © Caroline Bergvall.
and polities? If working across time enables what we take of and from the past to come into a different focus, then we will be getting somewhere. Together. Concluding this chapter with this image (Figure 4.8) by Bergvall from her Whitechapel Art Gallery residency of 2014 seems apt.

Notes


14. Kevin Crossley-Holland gave an overview of the sometimes competing scholarly views of the solutions in *The Exeter Book Riddles*, 103–39. For more recent reviews, see Patrick Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*, and Megan Cavell, ed., *The Riddle Ages: An Anglo-Saxon Riddle Blog*, [https://theriddleages.wordpress.com](https://theriddleages.wordpress.com). Accessed 30 January 2019. We follow here Crossley-Holland’s suggestions for possible solutions and variants: Riddles 1–3, wind, storm; Riddle 7, swan; Riddle 10, barnacle goose; Riddle 16, anchor; Riddle 22, the circling stars, or the month of December; Riddle 29, moon and sun, or cloud and wind; Riddle 32, ship; Riddle 33, iceberg; Riddle 36, ship; Riddle 41, wisdom, earth, fire, water; Riddle 51, pen and three fingers; Riddle 57, hailstones, raindrops, birds; Riddle 58, well-sweep; Riddle 60, reed-pen; Riddle 66, creation; Riddle(s) 68/69, ice; Riddle 74, cuttlefish, siren, water, swan; Riddle 77, oyster; Riddle 84, water; Riddle 85, fish and river.
15. In his analysis of Riddle 60, *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Material Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), James Paz emphasizes the separate materiality of the reed and pen as objects, whereas we envision a dialogue, but he also points to the transformative effect on the self: ‘The role of the human in this riddle is to serve as witness to the life and story of a thing, which talks to us, moves among us and organises or reorganises us’, 91.


17. We have translated the Old English noun ‘mon’ (‘man’ or ‘person’) as masculine here, and also in our discussion of *Maxims I* in Chapter 5. Often, the context makes clear a masculine referent; we assume the voices of the protagonists of the poems *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, for example, are male – women do not often go to sea in Old English poetry. There is, however, continuing debate about whether, and when, in the Anglo-Saxon period and thereafter, this is a generic term, inclusive of masculine and feminine. For an overview see Anne Curzan, *Gender Shifts in the History of English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

18. ‘Uht’ (‘dawn’ or ‘the time before daybreak’) is the time at which the exiled wanderer must regularly lament his solitary situation; see *The Wanderer*, lines 8–9. All references to *The Wanderer* are from *Old English Shorter Poems*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Robert E. Bjork, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 32 (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2.


21. All references to *Beowulf* are to R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds, *Klaeber’s *Beowulf* and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Translations are our own, unless otherwise indicated.


25. See, for example, ‘North Atlantic Saga’, described on Ruben’s website: ‘Using the ivory tusk of the narwhal, Ruben recounts the history of Norse settlement in Iceland and Greenland. The stone base depicts the stylized images of walrus, falcon, and polar bear banded together by an intricate overlay of Norse design elements. Following the natural spiral motion of the tusk, carved figures illustrate men carrying swords; their wives holding agricultural tools; a woman working in the field; a blacksmith at his forge; and figures harvesting the animals of land and sea. The top portion of the tusk envisions a time of contact, trade, and collaborative hunting between Norse settlers and the Thule people, ancestors of Inuit.’ http://www.abrahamruben.com/artwork/north-atlantic-saga/. Accessed 26 January 2019.


29. As in Bjork’s translation of *The Seafarer* in *Old English Shorter Poems*, 28–9, line 1.

Including such well-known medieval lyrics as ‘Sumer is icumen in’. Bergvall’s ‘Log’ in Drift, 127–66, offers an account of the processes of composition integral to the work itself.


Davies, Visions and Ruins, 200–1.