

Around Dark Water: On the Enchantment of Ancient Self
Shenhuan Lu

By the seaside, a person made of sand appeared. He asked me, “Child, have you ever seen my world?”

“Your world?”

“Yes, my world. It is a dark, warm world, wrapped in a kind of almost-melted substance. There is no air, no day or night, and from beginning to end, it always looks the same.”

“Why are you asking me? I am only a passerby. I can’t possibly know anything about your world.”

“I thought I saw the answer in your eyes.”

“What?”

“When you look at me, I follow the light into your eyes, and I see what the darkness in your eyes looks like. Have you ever seen dark water?”

“Dark water? Do you mean water in the dark?”

“Dark water is my world. It surrounds me every moment. Now I’ve lost it. I can’t find my way back.”

I felt absurd having a conversation with a pile of sand. I kept walking forward. The sea breeze blew, the sand drifted away.

Before this project began, I encountered such a dream. I no longer remember which day it happened, but the encounter lingers in my mind. On the site, I saw a lake of unusually dark color, and I felt a sense of *déjà vu*. It looked exactly like the dark water that person described in my dream—deeply black. But I thought, it must be a coincidence.

I am indeed deeply interested in water in darkness. This interest long predates the dream. In my hometown, I like going to the seaside at midnight to watch the sea. At that time, the water becomes indistinguishable from the sky. The excessive darkness makes it impossible for the eyes to see any boundary between the water and the environment. The edges of the water seem feathered. This is a very interesting sensation: you know that air, land, and water are three completely different substances—one is void, one is enveloping, one is solid—yet in the darkness they merge into one. But your rational mind tells you that what appears identical in front of you actually contains all three materials. And so the darkness gains layers: you know something is there but you just cannot see it—like staring into a black hole, or like looking at a person in the dark yet being unable to see them clearly, wondering whether they are also looking back at you. I love this feeling. It feels as though I have reached the edge of the world I am capable of perceiving—both the material boundary and the experiential boundary—and I long for its response.

I decided to take this as the object of my research. I focus on that lake, because at night, even at dusk, it offers me a similar feeling. I want to continue my exploration from this starting point.

My first thought was to experience the lake in the same way, so I went there one night. The darkness in front of me was not only visual void; it was auditory void as well: I could hear the distant train, the sound of leaves falling above me, the weeds beneath my feet, and laughter farther away—yet the large region in front of me was like a giant bubble, silent to the point of sorrow. This region had a strange quality: it was not just lake water, mud, weeds, and trees; it also contained a blackness as heavy as a black hole, and a silence as clean as a vacuum.

These materials and conditions produced the same sensation in me. From a phenomenological perspective, I wanted to wrap them together as one assemblage. I call this assemblage “dark water” for it reminds me of that dream.



Chapter One: Invisible Dream

“You seem to have fallen asleep, child.”

“Child, if you find my world, please go to that beach. I will be there waiting for you. Please tell me where it has gone.”

I had another dream. It was short, consisting only of two sentences, with no imagery. But I could tell the speaker was the same sand man. I found it strange—dreaming of the same figure twice in a few days is rare. In my hometown, there is a supernatural belief called “visitation through dreams”: the dead send messages to the living through dreams. My experience resembled this. Who is he? Why is he visiting me? I’m not a believer in mysticism, but for now, I decided to use it as an explanatory model.

The project timeline was short; I had to hurry with my research, though art research can never really be rushed. In any case, I returned to the lake.

This time, I noticed an interesting phenomenon: staring into the darkness long enough reveals faint flickering dots—“noise” in the dark. What are they? Out of curiosity, I studied the human eye and learned that in darkness, eyes switch from cone cells to rod cells, which capture detail in low light. Those “noise dots” are called phosphenes, random visual signals the brain adds in order to better interpret darkness. These signals come from memory; the brain attempts to fill in missing details through memory.

This helped me understand that I can observe dark water only through rod cells, and my observation will always be influenced by memory. To better understand my own observational bias and subjectivity, I continued studying rod cells—this rod-like structures already existed 530 million years ago in the eyes of ancient fish such as Haikouichthys, one of the earliest ancestors of all vertebrates, including humans. They lived in dim, underwater environments; the dark ocean was their daily world.

I had found an intriguing connection: one shared cell type linked me to ancient ancestors and to dark water itself. Perhaps Haikouichthys understood dark water better. In their worldview, having never left the ocean, water and air were not separate concepts. Additionally, they saw the world through the same type of cells.

I wondered: if I placed my rod-cell-based vision into the black water, what would I see? Would my ancient genes activate? Haha, I didn’t know—but I wanted to find out. I bought a periscope from Amazon and decided to observe the lake underwater from the shore.

Soon, I conducted the experiment. I found the closest point to the water, but still needed to cross the mud to reach the edge. I built a platform of three thick branches, crawled onto them, and reached the point closest to the water. Next, I had to bend my body so that my eyes could reach twenty centimeters above the surface. This was the most difficult step. I struggled to support my body, change posture, and bend downward. Finally, I managed to reach the required height. When I placed my face behind the periscope, my body was completely bent, and I had to support my weight through my chest. I had to hold my breath to stay still—an overwhelming sense of pressure. The hearing faded gradually. Within those twenty centimeters above the water, I felt as if I had entered the deep Earth, descended to the ocean floor: no sound, immense pressure. Through the periscope, I saw no light at all; the water consumed

everything. I smelled the rot of dead plants—a hellish place where shouting, life, and light all disappeared within that short space. Terrified, I immediately turned back and went home.



“You seem to have fallen asleep again, child. Did you find anything there?”

“I think I found the world you described. There was no air, no day or night, not even light or life. From beginning to end, it looked the same,” I replied. “I was afraid.”

Chapter Two: Nightmare

On October 24th, I had a dream. In the Forbidden City, my friend and I were walking on a bridge. A giant crab was on the riverbank; we watched it until it dove into the water. I couldn't see it dive, but I could hear an enormous sound—filled with anger, despair, pathétique, and sorrow. It surfaced on the opposite bank and began eating people. My Arab friend told me to kneel and pray to It. It did not stop. We ran toward the city gates. Only he and I escaped. He said he needed to row back to continue working. I worried about him but wished him safety.

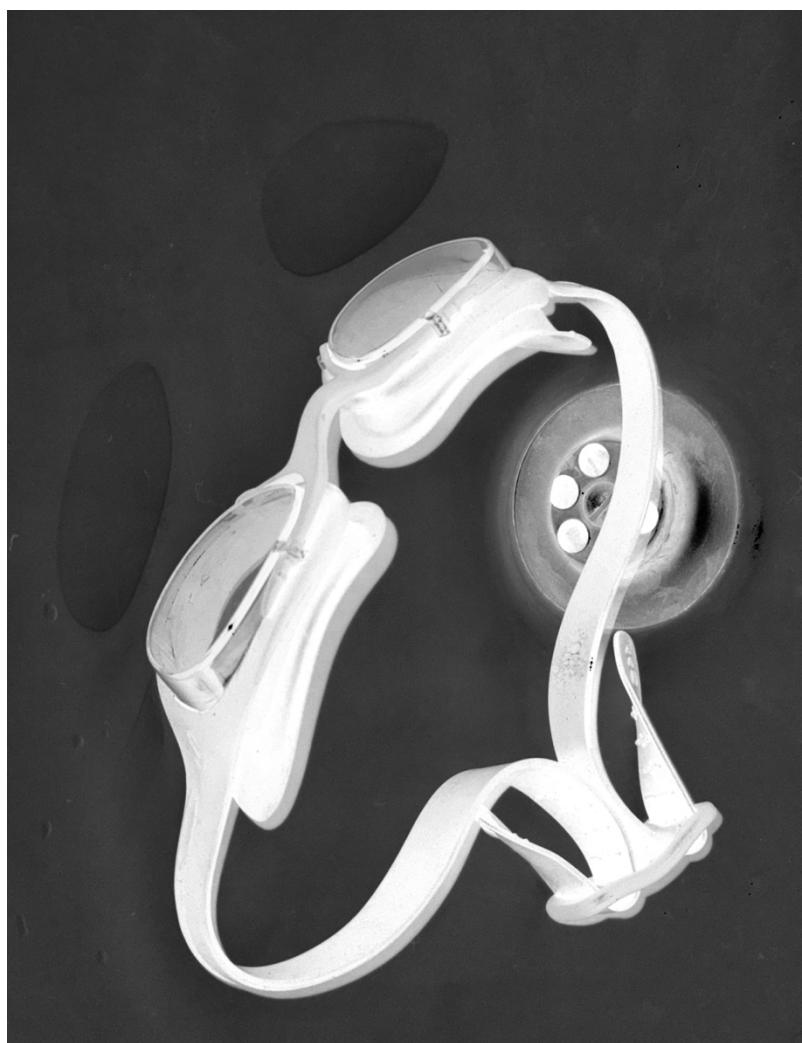
I left the Forbidden City but didn't dare approach the river. The rivers inside and outside were connected; It could always find me. I kept running and encountered a row of parked cars by the river, a man waiting for his friend in the trees, a prostitute, a Buddhist temple, and a black river devouring other rivers. I couldn't bear it anymore. At 8:10 AM, I woke up.

For days, I became afraid of the project, afraid of going to the lake at night. I kept recalling the underwater dead plants, the rotten smell, the collapsing mud. When awake, I grew obsessed with that hellscape—like the ‘Death Drive’ proposed by Sigmund Freud. I wanted to really put my head inside and see.

Desire could not overcome fear. I finally decided to experiment at home, in the bathroom sink. I put on goggles, closed the tap, let the basin fill, and turned off the light. Slowly and with my eyes open, I lowered my head. In the darkness, I could see nothing. The slow movement destroyed the sense of distance; I can never know how close I was to the water. I kept lowering myself.

The first thing to touch the water was not my nose, but my bangs. It felt helpless—my body had already formed countless subtle connections with the water before my skin even touched it. The sensation changed only when my skin finally met the surface. With gentle movement, I felt the surface tension acting upon my skin; each facial hair contacting the water one by one, being pulled downward by the tension. At the same time, the temperature softened; what began as a cold sting quickly warmed around me. Dark water wrapped around me like a powerless breeze. This process was not empty; on the contrary, the details made it a sensorially dissociating pleasure—being caressed by the invisible.

I think I overcame my fear of dark water. Dark water was not as terrifying as I imagined; it was gentle.



Chapter Three: Born from Dream

“Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye, to grandmother’s bridge we go…”

The new century began, and the world welcomed a new dawn. In the year China joined the WTO, my parents fell in love. After three years of happy romance, I was born at dawn in June.

Like Haikouichthys, I once lived in dark water. It pressed against me, preventing me from entering air or light. Dark water was my entire world. All my food and air came from my mother; I was parasitic within her, drawing everything from her body. This environment changed me. I learned to open my eyes in the darkness. At the 26th week, I saw the world for the first time—a faint reddish glow in the dark.

The darkness of amniotic fluid is crucial to the development of fetal vision. It ensures a sensory threshold that allows the newborn to distinguish light from darkness. One could say our eyes develop by looking through rod cells first. The earliest and most familiar neural pathways in our visual system are the rod-based ones—the same pathways we use to observe dark water. If dark water feels strangely intimate and calming, there may be physiological reasons.

To feel that intimacy again, I returned to the lake at night. The water was calm, almost monotonous. After wandering without result, I decided to bike home. I didn’t turn on my light, because I realized that once my eyes adapted to the complete darkness, I could see more without it. I wandered through the park guided only by my rod cells. It felt wonderful. I quickly grew familiar with this vision. I felt like Haikouichthys five hundred million years ago, swimming on the ocean floor; the trees around me became giant coral reefs. In this undersea world, there were no predators. I swam freely. In darkness, no one could discover me, and nothing could be altered by my presence. Overcoming the fear of dark water felt good. But even better was this: I, like water itself, gained infinite spatial freedom in darkness—hidden in the dark, flowing in the dark.

I fell in love with dark water, and with becoming dark water itself. The experience of early life allows me to sense the freedom of flowing as invisible water—dark water is not death; dark water is life. Life is everywhere.



“It seems you found your world.”

“Yes. I need to thank you, child. While you were cycling, I realized that my world can be created by myself.”

“Are you leaving? I… I want to go to the seaside to see you off.”

“Thank you. But I’m not going anywhere. You forget—I am your world.”

Final Chapter: Across the Dreams

Dark water—now that I can face the void, silence, and death, and become you—may I speak with you about time? About your past, your present, your cycles, your future. Tell me, what will the future you become, and what will the future me become?

…… (To be continued, 2025.12)

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