

BY THE WATER INITIATIVE IHEID
AND QINTHEORY STUDIO

**BETWEEN
CLOUDS
AND
OCEANS**

**SEEING THE UNSEEN:
THE VALUE OF WATER**

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Between Clouds and Oceans is a collaborative series initiated by the students at the Geneva Graduate Institute Water Initiative in collaboration with Charlotte Qin of the [QinTheory Studio](#).

Each painting created by Qin carries a message from the water. Water is the origin of all lives but is also indispensable to the identity and cosmology of our ancestors. Following where water flows *between clouds and oceans*, we illustrate a currently disrupted hydro-cycle and the solutions that we seek through water governance, diplomacy, and management.

This artistic initiative aims to restore our intrinsic connection with water as humans and unlock our long-sought answers to creating peace and living in harmony with one another through learning from water.

Inner Oceans

Human-Nature Complex through Water

by Charlotte Qin



I imagine that in the beginning, the Creator of the Universe had to make a soup and put too much salt by accident. Maybe he or she tried to save the mistake but only managed with 1% of the water.

W**hy is the ocean salty?** This question came to me one day when I was backpacking through Malaysia in 2017. The rivers that flow into the ocean are not salty; the rain and snow that falls from the sky aren't either. Why only the ocean, where 99% of water on Earth is held, is salty? Or, let me rephrase my question: ***why is only 1% of the water on Earth consumable?***

I don't know why. I invited others to think about it with me. Some said that the rainfalls carry the minerals from rocks to the hydro-cycle. Some hypothesised that terrestrial banks release the salts and minerals into the ocean. But they never answered my question. My question was a design question, I emphasised: the universe's grand design. It is satisfying for our logical mind to grasp the knowledge of 'how' by externalising, reasoning, and observing, but we forget how to ask the deep questions of 'why'. I imagine that in the beginning, the Creator of the Universe had to make a soup and put too much salt by accident. Maybe he or she tried to save the mistake but only managed with 1% of

the water. Otherwise, why would the Creator put terrestrial lives through the serious challenges of seeking, storing, sharing and fighting for fresh water?

In most conversations about environment, climate, and sustainability, nature always plays a muted role in the background of human conversations. It seems that the only job of plants, animals, landscapes, and natural capitals is to "be in the way, to be overcome, to be the road, the conduit, but not the traveller, not the begetter" (Haraway 2016). Anthropocentrism, defined as "regarding humankind as the central or most important element of existence" becomes the foundation of our society in the moment when our values and procedures presume everything that exists has a direct or indirect purpose in serving human beings. No wonder that with this vision of the world, we question why the planet is structured in a way that makes us struggle to get fresh water. Salt water is undesirable because it is inconsumable. But is the planet created just for us?

But what if humans are just an element of the universe and not the main actor?

Four years later today, I found myself pondering the same thoughts. I realised that in our effort to understand the design of the world, we have to step back from our human centred view. Most of our discussions about the environment put human lives at the centre of the conversation. But what if humans are just an element of the universe and not the main actor? One day, I stumbled upon Ursula K. Le Guin's essay "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986), where she gives some insights about giving voice to the nonhuman world. She takes us to the beginning of human civilization, where anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher suggests that the first cultural device should be a recipient for holding gathered food, rather than the spear used to kill as the more commonly known story goes (Fisher 1975). Le Guin argues that stories of hunting and killing have long held the centre stage of our imagination, leading us to believe that the individual hero's journey is the point of the story. "The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer

story, and so we may get finished along with it." Le Guin calls the Mammoth Hunt the dominant human-centred story of our time, the Killer Story, and instead suggests that we start telling the Life Story. Life stories are non-linear; conflict is not the centre of the narrative but an agent of continual transformation. And the hero is just one of the many characters in the carrier bag - "you put him in a bag, and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato."

Hydrofeminist writer Astrida Neimanis pushed Le Guin's 'Carrier Bags Theory' further by describing ourselves as evolutionary carrier bags of water. Our bodies are approximately three-quarters water by volume and 99% by number of molecules - as water molecules are incredibly tiny compared to others. As water gives us life, we also become its carrier bags, "facilitating the proliferation of the new by holding water and becoming literal gestational milieu for the other" (Neimanis 2017, p122). Neimanis also mentioned Hypersea, a concept coined by evolutionary scientists Mark and Dianna McMennamin (1996). The Hypersea concept considers land as an extension of the sea where the evolutionary emergence of terrestrial life had taken water along from the ocean to the barren land surfaces of the Earth more than 400 million years ago. Thus, by seeing ourselves as carriers of water, we can relearn about our relations with non-humans and our position in nature.

***The oceans are where life was born, and
the salty fluid that courses through our veins
is a reminder of our aqueous origins***

- David Suzuki

We are carrier-bags of the ocean on land trying to maintain equilibrium within us. While aquatic animals are constantly immersed in water and the appropriate amounts of salinity diffuses into their bodies through their membranes, we terrestrial animals have to actively seek out the two substances, water and salts, separately. The harsher conditions outside the ocean urges terrestrial lives to develop biological technologies that can guarantee sufficient quantities of both substances. In our carrier-bags, we have collected the elements of the Earth through our entanglement with the nonhuman worlds that are simultaneously shaping our human lives. In this sense, we are a fractal of the planet: a drop of ocean on land. Instead of questioning why the ocean is salty and why it is not in favour of humans who live on freshwater, we can shift our dialogue to a new human-nature relationship through which to see each other, our lives, and our planet through water. We ourselves are an integration of the 1% and 99%. We are all a part of this one grand design and water is a way to perceive this unity of life on earth that eventually allows us to let go of the "othering" of nature as opposed to humans.

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— About the Author



CHARLOTTE QIN

Charlotte Qin is a Chinese-Canadian artist based in Geneva. Her journey has been meandering like Water, the personal mythology that evoked her curiosity since childhood. She has a bachelor's degree in physics and a double master's degree in Innovation Design Engineering. The opportunity to work with the Water Initiative IHEID and to learn from the experts working in water policy has strengthened her mission to transform our modern perception and relationship with water through art.