



The Self-playing Instrument of Water

An embedded text artwork for Kew Bridge West



The Self-playing Instrument of Water is the first in a series of artworks commissioned by St James for Kew Bridge West. Written by award-winning poet Alice Oswald this embedded poem creates a new typographic landmark in the landscape, transforming the very place that inspired it.



Introduction

Kew Bridge is a significant location in the history of Britain's water supply. In 1838, the Grand Junction Waterworks Company built extensive facilities here, pumping water from the Thames to households in north London. By 1942, when the Kew Bridge Waterworks were mothballed, they covered 25 acres, including eight filter beds and two covered reservoirs with a variety of steam engines and pumps in purpose-built buildings.

Thirty years on, the Kew Bridge Engines Trust and Water Supply Museum was formed to restore the engines in the Grade I and II* listed buildings to the south east corner of the site. The Kew Bridge Steam Museum – the oldest waterworks in the world containing its original steam pumping engines – was subsequently opened to the public in 1975. The wider area, once characterised by large areas of raised open water, was developed, leaving two rectangular plots and the brick embankment of Filter Bed No.8 the sole reminders of the filter bed system.

When St James purchased the land from Thames Water, it inherited a brownfield site off-limits to the public for nearly 200 years. Establishing Kew Bridge West as a successful new place has involved transforming perceptions of this forgotten industrial area to suit the aspirations of new residents and existing local communities, reconnecting it to its surroundings.

One of St James' innovations has been a coordinated approach to cultural placemaking. Since 2002 St James has invested in more than forty projects, working with artists, curators and cultural partners to deliver artworks and cultural amenities. St James has commissioned a series of embedded artworks for Kew Bridge West that celebrate the history of the site as part of an overarching cultural strategy. The artworks interpret, commemorate and enhance the heritage context whilst creating an authentic contemporary identity for the scheme.

The series brings together a multidisciplinary group of creative practitioners including artists, designers and poets, to develop collaborative artworks. The commissions complement the design of the new landscape and provide sculptural markers, meeting places and imaginative route-ways through the development. This innovative, embedded approach animates the public spaces of Kew Bridge West proposing new ways for passersby and residents to explore and experience this historic place.

The Self-playing Instrument of Water is the first in the series. This collaborative artwork by award-winning poet Alice Oswald, renowned designer Harry Pearce of Pentagram and specialist fabricators Millimetre offers a place specific poem, woven into the landscape as a ribbon of steel.

The Self-playing Instrument

Written by Seb Emina

Kew Bridge West has extraordinary neighbours. On one side, the Musical Museum offers a chance to discover what they describe as ‘one of the world’s foremost collections of automatic instruments’. On the other, beneath the grand brick chimney of one of London’s oldest pumping stations, is the Kew Bridge Steam Museum. With the Thames flowing past to the south, it’s a place bordered by water, machinery and music.

The poet Alice Oswald, who received the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2002 for her book-length homage to the River Dart, has walked the area, considered these thematic boundaries and used them as the kernel for a newly commissioned poem called *The Self-playing Instrument of Water*. It has been embedded into a steel ribbon following a new path running alongside the edge of an old water filter bed that also connects the two museums. Designed by Pentagram and woven into hardy corten steel by innovative fabricators Millimetre, it’s a brand new landmark, a work of poetry that aims to transform the very place that it was inspired by.

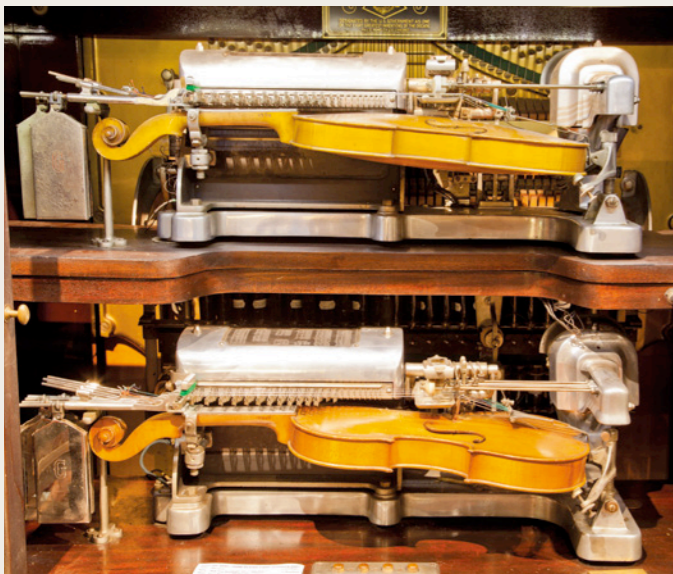


It started with a commitment, on the part of St James, to commission a new piece of writing that would reflect the site's manifold layers of history. As a poet who is not only interested in many of the themes that hover in the air to the west of Kew Bridge but whose work is also often imbued with a powerful sense of place, Alice Oswald seemed like the ideal collaborator.

“She was always in my mind,” said Nicky Petto, Project Manager at Futurecity, the placemaking organisation behind the cultural strategy for Kew Bridge West.

“During the interview, she recited from memory a poem that she'd only just written; it was an incredible moment when we all felt honoured to be in the same room as her. We knew she was the right person to work with.”

“I was drawn to the commission,” agreed Oswald, “partly because it was connected with water, which I've done a lot of thinking about, but I was also very interested in poems that approach something concrete rather than something in paper. I've always been interested in poetry becoming an object.”



When she visited the site, walking the path from one highly specialised museum to another, Oswald was struck by a notion that the museums had more in common than mere proximity. “At one end there are self-playing violins and musical boxes and at the other there are pumps, and they all seemed, when I thought about it, to be almost the same, with their cyclical structure.”

Steam-powered machines and musical instruments move in cycles and so, Oswald noted, does all of water, spinning through a perpetual loop that powers life itself. We learn this at school; it's one of the most awe-inspiring natural phenomena we will ever hear about, one that continues to fascinate and beguile us throughout our adult lives as we look out at a river or enjoy the sound of the rain.



As we tread the path at Kew Bridge West, Oswald's poem takes us on a parallel journey inspired by this sense of awe, making us reflect on the story of transforming water as it moves through rain, leaf and seed, or lurks in man-made tanks, or quenches our thirst. It's as simultaneously simple and complex as the water cycle itself, and is, fittingly, circular as well.

The poem begins with the following words:

**It is the story of the falling rain
To turn into a leaf and fall again**

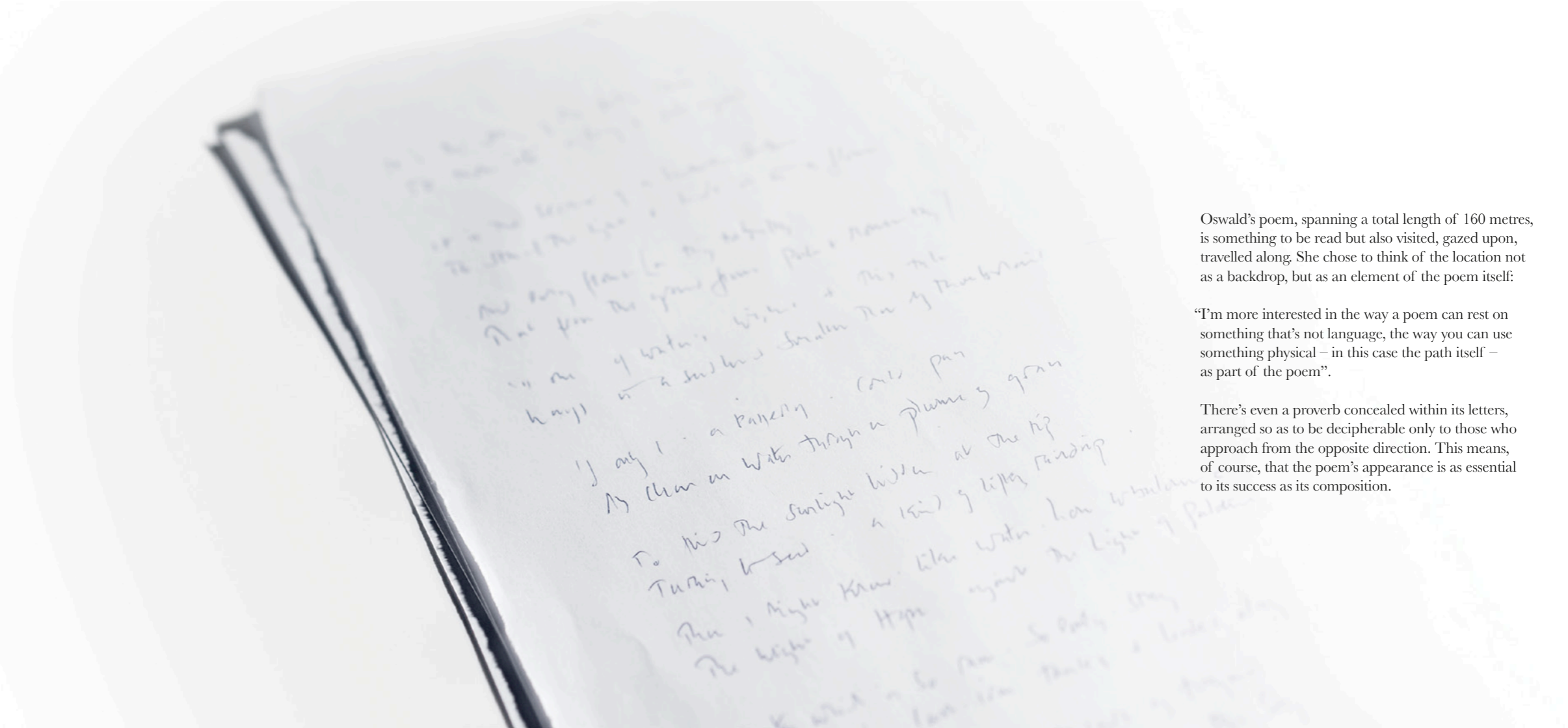
And, having taken us on its watery voyage, it ends:

**Which is the story of the falling rain
That rises to the light and falls again**

Two couplets that are the same but different, like rainstorms.

There are twenty lines in *The Self-playing Instrument of Water* and they form ten rhyming couplets. Each line works with ten syllables in iambic pentameter, a rhythm familiar to anyone who has read classic English poetry and one that is, appropriately for a path-side, known as a 'walking rhythm'.

"I thought if I used a conventional form there would be a resonance and a timelessness," Oswald reflected. "Although I've spent time experimenting and inventing my own forms, in this piece I wanted to go back to iambic pentameter, as for me it is almost inherent in the English language. I like the anonymity of that."



Oswald's poem, spanning a total length of 160 metres, is something to be read but also visited, gazed upon, travelled along. She chose to think of the location not as a backdrop, but as an element of the poem itself:

"I'm more interested in the way a poem can rest on something that's not language, the way you can use something physical – in this case the path itself – as part of the poem".

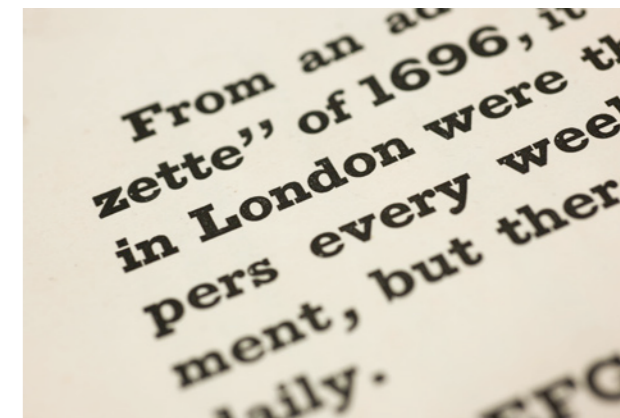
There's even a proverb concealed within its letters, arranged so as to be decipherable only to those who approach from the opposite direction. This means, of course, that the poem's appearance is as essential to its success as its composition.



Design agency Pentagram are behind the project's visual execution. They delved into the history of industrial typography to seek a set of characters pertinent to the beginnings of nineteenth-century industry, of which Kew Bridge Pumping Station is a part. "We went to St Brides Type Museum and Library," said Harry Pearce, a partner at Pentagram, "and found the first ever slab serif face, which is called Double Pica Antique. It suits steel so well and has this slight grittiness. It was probably created for billboard posters but it hasn't been used for well over a century. We needed to get it turned into an alphabet again."

The layout they devised for the poem is deceptively sophisticated, and the ribbon of text subtly choreographed so as to respond to setting. The intention is that the walker is inspired to read, and yet the trail also feels subtle, like a seamless part of the setting (you could compare it to the remnants of the filter beds: with age they have come to feel as if they are as much part of nature as they are something created by people).

"The layout relates to changes in the environment around it, whether it is beside a tree, whether it hits a point where people would slow down or hesitate for a second," said Pearce. "We deliberately started it where people tend to dwell for a moment. It's far more sensitive than just a long strip of text on a piece of steel – it wants the act of reading it as you walk along beside it to feel natural."



Specimen of Vincent Figgins' Double Pica Antique typeface, 1863, held at St Brides typographic library archive, London.

Millimetre, who specialise in the construction of bespoke and often unusual three-dimensional structures, were anxious that the artwork would itself seem part of the natural world. “It looks like it’s been underground before, like it’s been around for many years,” said Millimetre’s founder and director, Matt Ridsdale.

But to achieve this effect they had to invent an entirely new method of setting letters into metal, which involved spraying molten copper onto steel:

“Usually this kind of treatment is done to the whole surface, not in patterns of letters, so we had to work out a new method using magnetic holds and stencil sets to keep the letters in place. Essentially it’s like spray-painting with molten copper. You get a surface that looks slightly cast. You wouldn’t even know it was copper necessarily. The oxide on the upper surface looks quite stone-like.”



Welding studs to the rear of the Corten ribbon.



Warming the Corten to speed the patination process.



Above: Removing the stencil and counters prior to burnishing the copper.

Left: Application of the acetic acid and mineral salt patination.



The final installation is intended to last for at least twenty-five years, possibly a lot longer. As a work of – to use an oft-unloved term – public art, it strikes an unusual balance between the public and the personal. On some level it demonstrates how the emotional meaning of a place is not something intrinsic to that place, but something that people themselves must provide: indeed, this can be one of art’s most pleasing effects. The Self-playing Instrument of Water takes a universal theme and a universal form, runs them through the water-filter of one individual (albeit one of our finest poets), and in doing so aims to speak to a boundless string of individual walkers, rather than a faceless and ill-defined crowd. It is one of the ways in which Alice Oswald – and Futurecity, Pentagram and Millimetre – hope to do justice to the longevity that St James intend for the project.

“There are lots of definitions of public art,” says Oswald. “If someone in an intensely private way does something authentic enough then it can mean something to everyone, so every passerby can get it into their head and it belongs to them as well.”

“There’s a sense of responsibility on the part of the poet,” reflects Nicky Petto, “and all of those involved that they are committing words not just to a contemporary audience but to a future audience, that those words need to have a certain clarity, a certain weight, a certain beauty that endures.”

Project team

Alice Oswald

Alice Oswald read Classics at Oxford before she trained as a gardener – affecting the way in which she would go on to write about the natural world. She went on to win the 1996 Forward Prize with *The Thing in the Gap*, the T S Eliot Award with *Dart*, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize 2006 with *Woods, Etc.*, the inaugural Ted Hughes Award with *Weeds and Wild Flowers* and a Cholmondeley Award in 2009 for her contribution to poetry. She lives in Devon with her husband and two children where she works as a gardener when she is not writing her poetry.

Harry Pearce

Harry Pearce has been a Pentagram partner since 2006, having co-founded Lippa Pearce to become one of the UK’s most respected design agencies. His work touches many disciplines, from spatial design and identity to print, packaging and posters. His clients include John Lewis Partnership, The Co-operative, The Net-a-Porter Group, Royal Academy of Arts, the Science Museum, Saks Fifth Avenue, Pen International and the UN. In 2009 Harper Collins published his first book, a collection of typographic nonsense, *Conundrums*.

www.pentagram.com

Millimetre

Millimetre Ltd is dedicated to the design, development, fabrication and installation of three-dimensional objects and structures. Their portfolio spans public art, architecture, product, furniture and lighting design. Millimetre has delivered a number of award-winning projects for the public realm including *A Room for London* by David Kohn Architects and *Fiona Banner and The Longest Bench* by Studio Weave in Littlehampton. Their clients include Channel 4, London Festival of Architecture and London Design Festival.

www.millimetre.uk.net

Futurecity

Futurecity is the UK’s leading culture and placemaking consultancy and is currently involved in delivering two of the UK’s largest public art projects: *Richard Wilson’s Slipstream* for Heathrow Terminal 2 and *A Cloud Index* by Spencer Finch for the new Paddington Crossrail Station. Futurecity has a long history of working with St James to develop and deliver innovative, embedded artworks that are site responsive and that contribute to creating a coherent sense of place for new residents and communities.

www.futurecity.co.uk

St James

Backed by the experience and expertise of the Berkeley Group, St James is a multi award-winning developer in its own right. Working across a wide range of diverse projects, St James has gained an enviable reputation as a dynamic and innovative company with a passion to provide high quality urban living environments in excellent locations across London and the South East.

www.stjames.co.uk

Commissions at Kew Bridge West

From 2014, two further arts commissions will be unveiled at Kew Bridge West.



The Big Table

St James has commissioned sculptor and furniture maker Alison Crowther to create a sculptural table that will provide a meeting place at the heart of Kew Bridge West.

Snaking through the cherry trees of the inner courtyard, Alison's beautifully crafted, playful artwork will be composed of nine solid pieces of unseasoned English oak, offering bench style seating and table surfaces at a range of different heights.

Alison will hand carve each piece with an undulating texture, echoing the ripples of the site's historic reservoirs and the River Thames nearby. The tactile surface will introduce quality craftsmanship and create ongoing interest as light plays across the ridges and the wood cracks and weathers.



Crafted Text Trail

St James has commissioned artist Alec Peever and poet Alyson Hallett to create a series of six text fragments that will be integrated within the Kew Bridge West landscape.

Alyson's texts will create an intriguing set of clues that hint at the way water has influenced and continues to inform the identity of Kew Bridge. Each text will be hand carved by Alec Peever in flat Green Slate slabs and rough-hewn York Stone boulders, using a range of traditional techniques.

They will be located throughout the public realm – in dips and shady glades, alongside paths and at points of arrival – complementing the landscape design and suggesting places for play, relaxation and contemplation.

Cover

Nick Turner

Photography

Nick Turner

Damon Cleary

The Big Table and Crafted Text Trail – Courtesy of Alison Crowther, Alec Peever & Alyson Hallett

Special thanks

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Design

Pentagram

Print

Gavin Martin Colournet

The Self-playing Instrument of Water

Alice Oswald

**It is the story of the falling rain
To turn into a leaf and fall again**

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**It is the secret of a summer shower
To steal the light and hide it in a flower**

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**And every flower a tiny tributary
That from the ground flows pale and momentary**

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**Is one of water's wishes and this tale
Hangs in a seed head smaller than my thumbnail**

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**If only I a passerby could pass
As clear as water through a plume of grass**

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**To find the sunlight hidden at the tip
Turning to seed a kind of lifting rain drip**

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**Then I might know like water how to balance
The weight of hope against the light of patience**

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**Water which is so raw so earthy-strong
And lurks in cast iron tanks and leaks along**

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**Drawn under gravity towards my tongue
To cool and fill the pipe-work of this song**

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**Which is the story of the falling rain
That rises to the light and falls again**