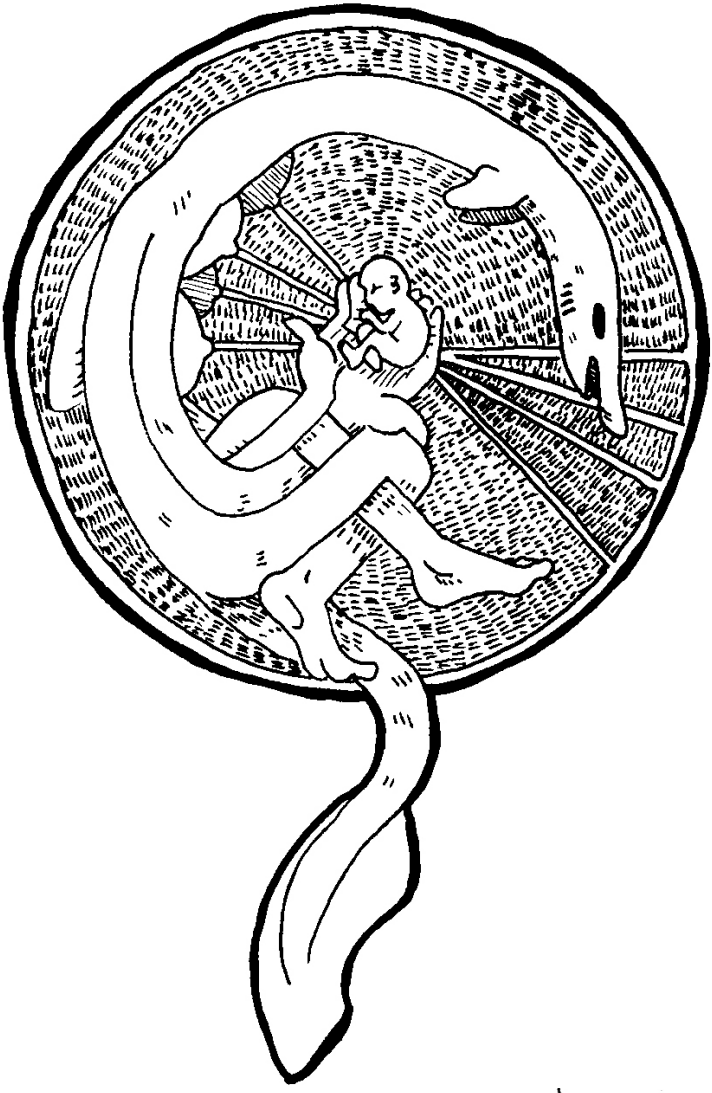
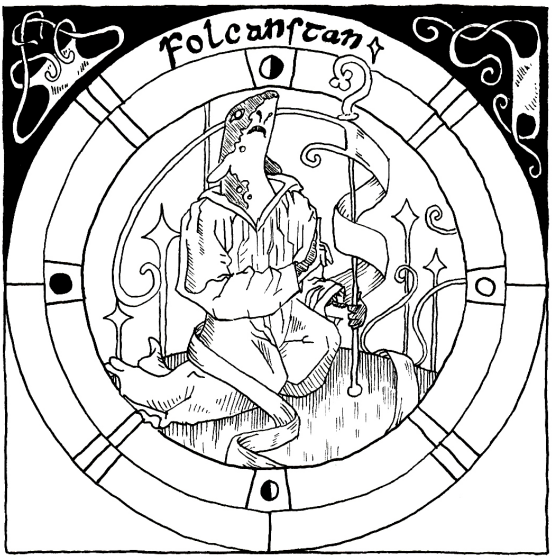


In Search Of The Dogfish-Woman

In Search Of The Dogfish-Woman

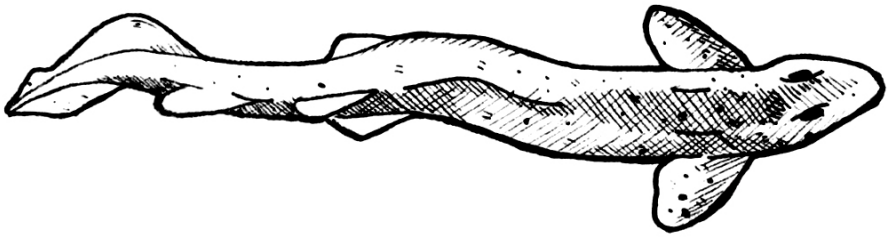
An artist's book by Jim Lockey in a first edition of 30.
Being a discussion of local folklore



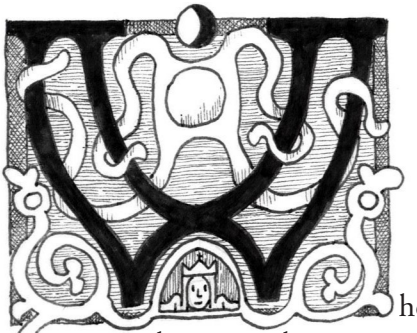
Dedication

For Folkestone, for things lost and for things uncovered

Contents



Part 1



When the world overwhelms and everything that surrounds seems to be moving so fast that its impossible to keep up, that's when I most want to spend aimless evenings down amongst rockpools. I'll head there tonight. I'll bring you with me, I'll describe an aimless evening to you.

The shore teems with innumerable creatures. I watch the little fish, the shrimp, the sea roach, whelks, crabs, and hermits. I turn a few stones to see what – if anything – is hiding. The fish will stay a matter of days, till they are big enough to leave for the surf. The darting shrimp's life is spent within a year or two. Life in the rockpool moves quickly, its delicate ecosystem is precarious. There are no aimless evenings for these creatures.

I walk the shore, I wade, swim a little, I soak in every sense experience the sea's edge can offer. When night draws closer, I sit to watch the moon raise up its silent tug on the tide. There on the beach I arrange an assortment of stones I've collected into a small cairn as a marker of my presence. The pile includes a smooth pebble that is pleasing to hold, a broken section of a black ammonite fossil, a hag stone, and a piece of smoky quartz with mellowed edges. Each stone was wrought by the pressures of the sea itself over the course of millennia and deposited on this beach. They were collected and arranged in a pile by me over the course of a couple of hours. It is a collaboration between the scales of geologic and human time. I top my little sculpture with another of my beach finds, an empty mermaid's purse that once contained an embryonic shark – I wonder if there is a way to tell what species this purse carried?

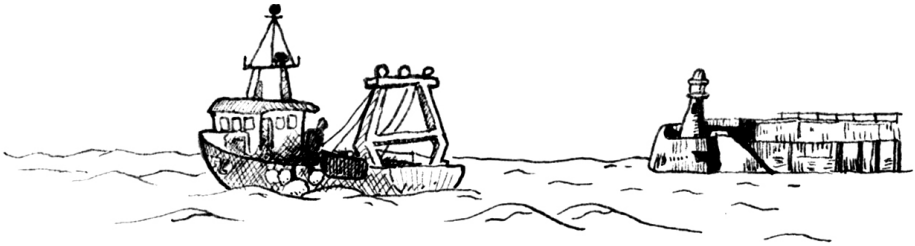
The evening boats are headed out. I am not familiar with their schedules, but my guess is that they'll not return till the next tide. My curiosity for the human aspect of shore life lags behind my interest in nature's aspect. But this shore is as much the edge of a town as it is the edge of the wild sea. This is Folkestone's shore. The settlement's earliest importance was as a trading post to the continent and whilst there has likely always been fishing here, it was a very long time before the little industry was established. Today, newcomers and locals alike imagine fishing as the eternal backbone of Folkestone's heritage. Yet scientists studying the teeth of Folkestone's forebears recovered from Anglo-Saxon gravesites, tell us that their diet was absent of fish. It's a reminder of just how quickly and drastically things change on a human scale.

That's just the kind of unexpected thought that can bubble up unbidden on an aimless evening. As the clutter of the day ebbs away on the current, the subconscious mind gets to serving up strange curiosities: Such as random facts about the dietary habits of people living well over a thousand years ago. I let the thought linger and imagine the old inhabitants of my town as waves lap the shore. It is in this place that my situation is most like theirs. Human culture and the built environment is in a constant state of change, transformed over and again by each subsequent generation, but we all share the same sea.

There has been a settlement at Folkestone for as long as there have been people here to settle it. Yet, it was Anglo-Saxon's that gave the place its name. Folkestone (or Folcanstan) is a name that has lasted since the Early Middle Ages, a time once evocatively labelled as the Dark Ages. The period is shrouded in a certain mystery. There are many things known about that time, there are just as many things unknown.

Unknowing creates intrigue. Intrigue invites speculation. Speculation generates stories to make sense of an age that may appear dark. In popular culture the shadows of the Dark Ages have been populated by dragons, knights, wizards and mythical creatures. The past lives in our imagination more vividly than it is remembered as history. A magical time and place is not difficult to imagine here on this beach, the waves lap its shore too. The sea has a power that stretches through eras. It sustains the quick lives of the rockpool and forms the ancient stones.

I'll take the mermaid's purse home and display it. It reminds me of a story.



This is a story with some magic in it. It travelled from the lips of Anglo-Saxon storytellers to the feather of a scribe scratching on parchment, and on through time within the leaves of a book till the present day where it has been translated to modern English and is now told to you.

For a malnourished spirit, blight of apathy, for sea sickness, Listen to me, I will help you.

The Folkestonelings speak of the sight
of a dogfish-woman, fish-nurse on wet rocks.
The dogfish-woman neither folk nor fish entirely,
did once nurse two shipwrecked foundlings.
Held to the breast, kept from the storm,
at daybreak the storm passed and the abbess came.
The dogfish-woman relinquished the children departed to the waves foam.
The children grew and were not sick from their brackish milk,
the creature is still seen on shore-rocks when clouds churn.

The sight of her or her sign collected, heralds good fortune: Good treatment for your ailment.

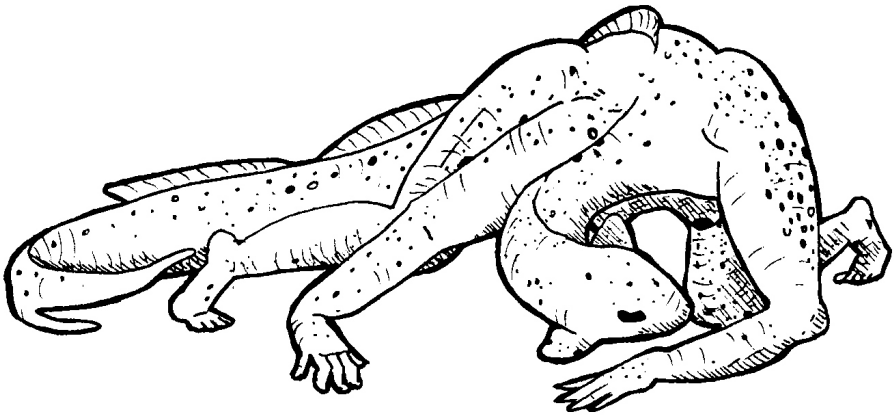
Translated from Leechdoms and charms, circa 10th century.
Acknowledgement to Rev. Oswald Cockayne whose earlier translation provided a firm foundation for my own.

The story is short, as folk tales often are when recorded in their purest form. I hope that the story carries a little magic for you, as it has carried it for me.

Even when translated it is hard to parse quite what is meant by each line of the story of the Dogfish-Woman. It comes from a manuscript titled *Leechdoms and Charms*, which is an example of an Early-Medieval book of healing known as a 'leechbook'. The writer of the text is recommending that those suffering from a range of maladies can remedy their problem by collecting the 'sign' of a 'dogfish-woman'. 'Sign' is speculated to refer to a mermaid's purse.

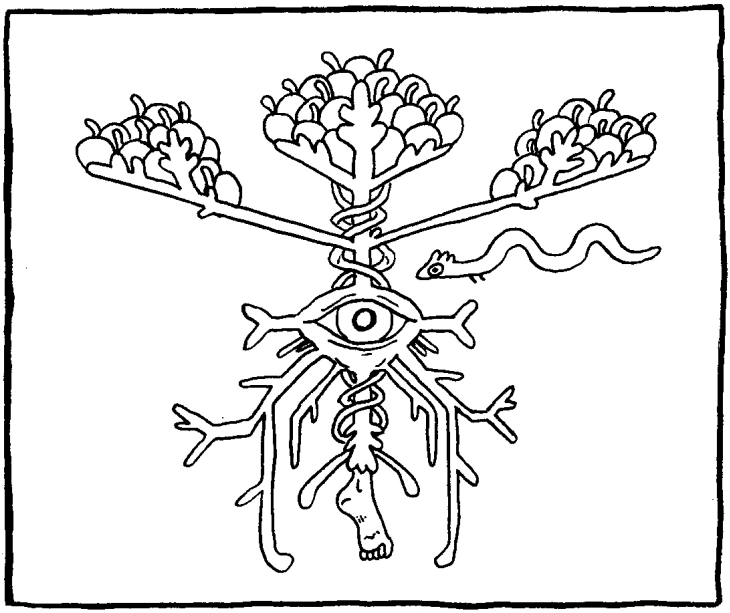
To evidence the providential nature of the proposed treatment, the writer gives us a brief narrative about a mysterious creature. Though her appearance is not described the names given to it, 'dogfish-woman' and 'fish-nurse' suggest a mermaid-like form.

The narrative of the Dogfish-Woman speaks of an occasion when this creature apparently rescued two babies from a wrecked ship, protected them from a storm, and even nursed them. Returning them to a human caretaker after the storm passed. The human is an abbess, presumably the abbess of Folkestone priory and therefore likely a successor of St. Eanswythe, a figure from history surrounded by several miraculous stories herself. The account of the event is claimed to be documentation of local knowledge and may have existed as a folk tale in Folkestone for generations before being recorded.



Along with other Old English medical texts such as *Bald's leechbook* and *Lacnunga*; *Leechdoms and Charms* discusses treatments for a wide range of ailments. The entries in these books encompass practical treatments like the use of medicinal plants and advice around diet. But, they also make liberal use of magic spells, talismans, Christian prayer, the evocation of old gods, and countless mentions of health problems attributed to the interference of elves and dwarfs.

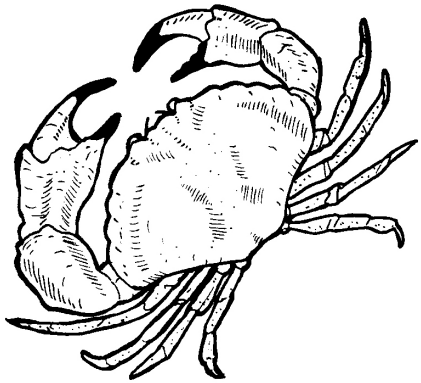
To modern readers a methodical, medicinal approach to healing may seem to be at odds with recommendations for a maiden to draw water from a stream by moonlight, to cast a spell with runes, or for the recitation of scripture. Yet, to the writers of these texts and their audience no such conflict existed. Different healing traditions and philosophies overlap and combine in the recommendation of treatments. A single prescription may involve chanting to a deity from the old world, then administering a salve made from the roots of various plants before rounding off the course of treatment with the Lord's Prayer. These were practical volumes. They spoke of magic and fey creatures, but they were not intended to be exotic or arcane. They were written from a pragmatic perspective and intended as handbooks for everyday use.



More well-known texts in Old English are chronicles of political history, the great poems, riddles, and religious tracts. Many of these texts are written in some part to uphold the ruling order. But, leechbooks weren't so concerned with politics. A remedy's lone qualification for inclusion in was the belief that it worked: The ideological source of the remedy was not of concern. This wasn't the church promoting an ethical perspective, or a king asserting the courts will. Instead, these texts reflect what the people believed and practiced when it really came down to it, when health was at stake. The image of the culture presented in these books holds a particular kind of authenticity as a result.

Leechbooks are evidence of an interlaced worldview that was able to assimilate 'pagan' magical ideas, with Christian orthodoxy and a scientific perspective. The separate and mutually exclusive containers that magic, science, and religion reside in today did not exist.

Of the surviving leechbooks, some are laid out in a systematic fashion with remedies split into related groups almost like an encyclopaedia. Others are written in a way that resembles the half-mad rambling of some woodland shaman reciting healing rituals in an endless stream with no organising principle. *Leechdoms and Charms* is the latter form, though it occasionally breaks into sections of arhythmic poetry, as if the writer wanted to put their remedies into verse but wasn't sure how. Other times it runs into digressions that only seem tangentially related to the condition being discussed. There is a similar problem in my own writing, I'd like to transition back to talking about sitting watching the sea on a quiet evening, if I digress much longer it may get dark before I head home.



Part 2

The tide swells and clouds begin to roll in obscuring the stars before they have a chance to get bright. I pick myself up and head for home, the mermaid's purse in my breast pocket. Back in my cluttered flat I deposit my prize on the table and go over to the bookcase. I pluck out a tattered guide to shore-life. A catalogue of animals, each one accompanied by a happy illustration. My favourite pages are the full spreads depicting ecosystems populated by animals living out their lives as if unobserved. An anemone fans out her fingers in search of morsels, a crab nestles beneath the bladderwrack to shelter from a gull and a sea roach has just been surprised by a hidden flounder. Every inch of the frozen moment contains a detail, hides a secret waiting to be spotted by the attentive eye.

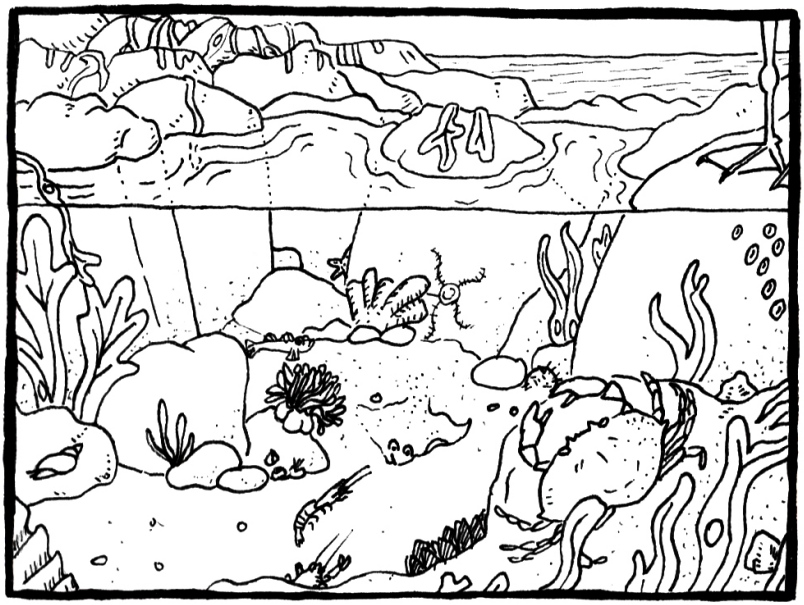
Today however, I flick to the pages about sharks and study the illustrations of mermaid's purses. It looks like the one I'd found contained a catshark. The catshark is more commonly known by its colloquial name - 'dogfish'. The title of Dogfish was given by fishermen noting the abundance and behaviour of the animal, likening them to a pack of hunting dogs. The name of Catshark was given by naturalists looking at the anatomy of the creature and its cat-like eye shape. Despite the apparent relationship between the two names, they were arrived at independently.

I return the book to its place amongst a row of reference books on mixed subjects. The shelf below heaves with editions of Old English and medieval texts that I've collected. Like the illustrations of rockpools in my shore-life book, each of these texts is a frozen window into another world. Naturally I think of the Dogfish-Woman and reach for the book that contains her story. A pamphlet edition of *Leechdoms and Charms* was printed along with translation and commentary in the mid 1800s by philologist Rev. Oswald Cockayne. I don't have a physical copy; I believe

there are only a few in existence. But I did find a scan of it online that I printed, stapled, and placed on my shelf next to the real books.

My *Leechdoms and Charms* is heavy with annotations and taped in notes. The paper is beginning to tear around the corner staple and threatens to throw pages loose as I turn them. I remember the moment I first read the account of the Dogfish-Woman, back when the pages were neat and crisp. In scholarly editions the original Old English is reproduced on the left page with the translated version facing it on the right. This way readers can get a sense of the original language and assess the translator's new rendering. Being intrigued by what I read in Cockayne's translation, I immediately went to the left-hand page and began the work of making my own translation. Slowly. Word by word. Line by line.

Translation is a complex discipline, and one I am no master of. Each translator must make their own decisions on how to convey the meaning of a text to a reader that is distant from the culture that produced it. Is it better to translate the words directly, or to use anachronistic surrogate phrases to evoke the same idea from the new audience? Is it better to strictly preserve the idea of a clause, or the flow and rhythm of a line? All these considerations mean that no two translations of a sufficiently long text will ever be identical.



Even a single word can by the distance of centuries, turn into a riddle that needs to be carefully picked apart to be understood. For instance, the origin of the place name 'Folkestone' (relevant to this story) is a source of some debate. It is a translation riddle. We know that Folkestone derives from the Old English name 'Folcanstan'. But what does the name mean?

It could come from 'folc', meaning a people group, the root of our modern word 'folk', and 'stan' meaning stone. So, 'Folcanstan', could mean 'People's Stone'. Another popular translation is to imagine that 'Folca' refered to an individual, some leader, and his meeting stone. There is little evidence to attest to the existence of this Folca, he may have been conjured by philologists looking for a neat etymology.

Needless to say, translation is never simple.

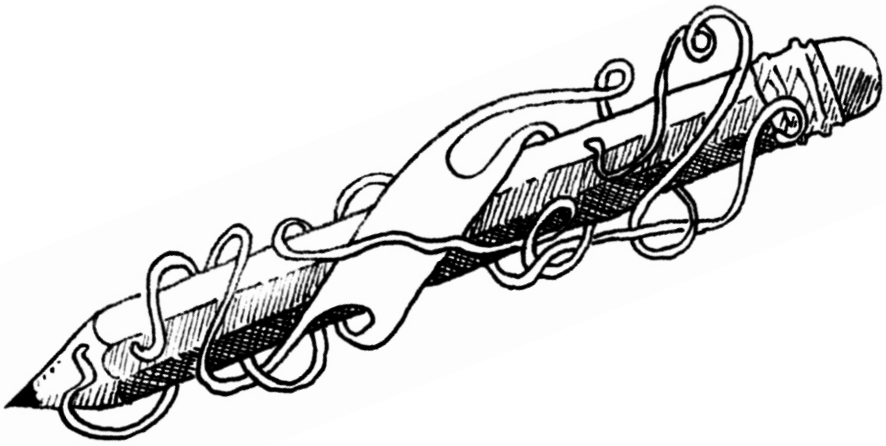
The word translate derives from Latin origin. It means to carry across:

'Trans', over-across / 'Latus', borne or carried.

When you examine its origins, the word 'translate' has a striking resemblance to the word 'metaphor', from the Greek 'metaphora':

'Meta', over-across / 'pherin', to bear or carry.

When I translate, slow and stumbling as I may be, I feel as if I am looking for something carried across the centuries, and a compelling story like the Dogfish-Woman begs to be interpreted, as if there is some metaphor in it that might apply and change the way I perceive my own circumstances.



One word that interested me in the Dogfish-Woman story is that which I translate as 'Folkestonelings'. The Old English word is 'Folcanstaningas', and it appears to be a conjoining of 'Folcanstan' (Folkestone), and 'Inga', a suffix used to denote familial connection, particularly offspring. So, the 'Folcanstaningas' are the descendants of Folkestone.

Cockayne rendered the word as, 'children of the shore people'. He either did not make, or for some reason dismissed the connection with the place name. So, all he had to work with was the idea that this word was something to do with *folk*, and *stones*, and *offspring*. He must have coupled this with the context clue of rocks on the shore in the story to arrive at his translation. Unfortunately, Cockayne is no longer around for us to ask, his translation having been made over a century ago. Despite my comparably amateur status, the thing that convinces me of my translation is the employment of the suffix 'ingas'. 'Inga' only ever augments a proper noun, therefore I cannot conceive that it should mean something so general as 'shore people'.

Maybe Cockayne's intention was to generalise, maybe he felt the specificity of Folkestone would be distracting if his readers were to imagine the miraculous tale happening in the same place they knew as a newly established holiday resort. His translation allowed him to focus on the parts of the story he felt were more relevant. But how does one determine what's relevant?

Can anything certain be said about the meaning of the creature in the story? The idea of merfolk being generally benign fantasy creatures is itself a fairly modern idea popularised through Hans Christian Anderson and Disney. Yet, historical sources often portray them as monstrous. British folklore describes a creature called the Grindylow, a lake-dwelling scaly humanoid renowned for stealing children. The exact origins of the Grindylow myth are unclear but its name appears strongly linked with Grendel, the first monster faced in the Old English long poem Beowulf. Grendel himself is a creature that resides with its mother under a lake. The Grindylow is a typical example of historical merfolk: A monstrous creature committing monstrous acts. Most stories of merfolk function as simple warnings to children not to play around the water's edge.

In the context of its time The Dogfish-Woman is an atypical story. She is presented as a monstrous creature, but she's engaged in an act of altruism. This break from typical behaviour seems significant to me. If we assume that the Dogfish Woman is a relic of older pagan beliefs, then her peaceful interaction with an abbess (a figure of religious orthodoxy) might be symbolic of that reconciled spiritual imagination, able to make room for both superstition and orthodoxy.

In another leechbook, sandwiched between medical remedies is the following entry:

'Against one possessed by a devil: put in holy water and ale bishopwort, water-agrimony, and cockle; and give him to drink.'
Translated from Bald's Leechbook, tenth century

Again, there is an overlapping of categories, as plant lore is used to treat an ailment that is religious in nature. In a jaded and cynical age, I am encouraged by these mixed-up illnesses and treatments: When sickness wasn't borne by germs and viruses but delivered on the tips of invisible elven arrows (every leechbook has entries for the treatment of 'elf-shot'). The world is a little more vivid when room is made for things that are unseen, and for ribbons of connection to flow between what is mundane and observable and the realms of imagination.

After looking at the Dogfish-Woman herself, I turned my attention to what meaning might be in her sign. Do mermaid's purses appear elsewhere in folk medicine and magic? There are no examples from sources contemporary to *Leechdoms and Charms* but a google-search of the spiritual meaning of the mermaid's purse yields many results from modern-day practitioners of folk magic who see a significance in the object. Here is a description of its meaning from a self-proclaimed Sea Witch:

'For the Sea Witch a Mermaid's Purse is the marine version of the chicken's egg that can be used in magic for its symbolism of fertility, birth, rebirth, growth and development. While Mermaid's Purses can and do wash up on the shore at any time, I've noticed where I live that there are two big influxes each year, one in late October and the largest in March – around the time of the Spring Equinox / Ostara / Eostre which further connects these egg sacks to the fertile energies of Spring.'
WyseWitchUK

The leathery egg-sack could easily function as a symbol of fertility in the Dogfish-Woman story too. The theme is reinforced in the image of the dogfish-woman nursing. But it's also notable that the ailments of 'malnourished spirit', 'blight of apathy,' and 'seasickness' are not related to fertility or femininity. They are vague and general maladies, perhaps there was more to its meaning in the Anglo-Saxon mind? Perhaps the healing power is found in nurturing aspects of the feminine? Lack of evidence leaves us with only speculation.
Speculation made without evidence should be treated cautiously, especially when it comes to speculating as to the beliefs and practices of a culture so far removed from our own.

For instance, the quote above mentions Eostre, a Germanic Goddess whose only historical mention comes from a single source. The Venerable Bede mentions her in his account of the English months. He writes that Eosturmonath (Eostre's month) is equivalent to the Latin month April, and a festival to Eostre was adopted and adapted by Christians to become Easter. There are no other references to her in other contemporary texts. The entirety of the lore surrounding Eostre (sometimes called Ostara) is a later invention dating back only as far as the 19th century.

Whilst modern Celtic and pagan-styled practices can tell us a lot about contemporary folk traditions and they are meaningful to the spirituality their practitioners, they are of limited utility when it comes to understanding ancient beliefs. Beyond a vague idea of there being power in objects from the natural world, I do not believe we can say with any certainty what the significance of the mermaid's purse is in the Dogfish-Woman text and what power it held for its original readers in the symbolic domain.

Maybe it's a mistake to assume meaning is in residence at all within this tale. Maybe all these scattered thoughts aren't headed anywhere and the notes in the margins of my stapled copy of *Leechdoms and Charms* serve no purpose other than to occupy trivial curiosity. Maybe this truly was an aimless evening. Or perhaps curiosity is its own kind of meaning. I may not be able to say for certain what world the writer knew and what deeper meanings the tale held for them, but I can explore what meaning it generates for me. I am a Folkestoneling too after all, it is my story.

The Folkestonelings of the 10th century text 'speak of the sight of a dogfish-woman'. They speak of her but they're speaking to us. So, I'll listen. I'll spend aimless evenings on the shore expectant that I may see her yet. And if I am to wander the shore and if I never see the Dogfish-Woman but instead meet the abbess, I hope I will recognise her too. I do not know the shape of that I am searching for, only that - like the sea - it is older, greater and more unknowable than any human thing.