



THE BLOOMS OF EHUX

Finding shapes in the billowing clouds is the purview of the terrestrial daydreamer. Or is it? Masses of blooming phytoplankton (the oceanic equivalent of plants) produce similar hallucino-morphic effects across tens of thousands of square miles of sea. The most prolific by far is *Emiliana huxleyi* (or *Ehux* for short), responsible for secreting an armor plating of calcium carbonate around each single-celled organism. These microscopic platelets (800 would fit across the head of a pin) reflect incoming sunlight back onto the ocean's surface, creating fantastic patterns in the water — as if a fleet of tankers carrying glitter and sequins were to jettison their entire cargo. Satellite photographs have doc-

umented *Ehux* blooms the size of England. During such times, the quantity of *Ehux* outnumbers all other 5000 species of phytoplankton combined. The effect was long a mystery: herring fishermen and other trawlers of the deep spoke of “the queer impression of whiteness coming upwards, as if the light were below the sea instead of above it.” But the advent of the electron microscope brought the true culprits into focus. Most prevalent in the Norwegian fjords, *Ehux* resides in all but the polar oceans, making it one of our greatest (if unintentional) global artists.

GEOFFREY COFFEY

AQUATIC APE

Standard wisdom holds that early man left the African forests in favor of grassland savanna, where new challenges led our ancestors to evolve distinguishing human traits. However, dissenters now argue that humans experienced a formative habitat of water, not savanna. Among the proponents of the Aquatic Ape Theory (AAT), the most uproarious may be Elaine Morgan, Welsh autodidact in evolutionary theory and author of four books including *The Aquatic Ape Hypothesis* (1997). Morgan notes that many traits separating humans from other primates are rare or unique among land mammals but common among swimmers (whales and dolphins) and wallowers (hippos, elephants and tapirs). Our relatively hairless skin and uniform layer of subcutaneous fat are only the most obvious examples; no other terrestrial animal shares our

ability to breathe (and therefore vocalize) at will, a trait that lends itself to diving underwater, and may have given rise to our capacity for language. Morgan maintains that we began walking upright to hold our heads above water, rather than to perambulate the land more effectively. As for hard evidence, most early hominid fossils have been discovered in and around ancient streams, rivers, and other watery environments — but that may not say much since water is, after all, a life necessity. And many working scientists find AAT flawed. University of Indianapolis anthropologist John Langdon writes the “aquatic hypothesis is only one of several ideas rejected by orthodox science that have refused to go away.” Let’s not forget however, that the upholders of orthodoxy persecuted Darwin on similar grounds. GEOFFREY COFFEY

