

The memory of water

Ian Hill

*And from where they sat they tipped libations out
to the happy gods who rule the vaulting skies.*

Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book XIII



In a land of water, I am searching for lost rivers.

It has rained for days, a rhythmic deluge which comes and goes, pulsing like waves on an infinite sea. The ground is sodden, heavy with the burden of water. Upwellings bubble from the fields and paths; spontaneous risings of water, as though the earth can take no more and is expelling the excess rain.

I am walking across the fields around the village simply to feel the aftermath of the rain, to see the tracks and paths which have become streams, to hear the normally mute springs roaring with it, an endless white noise of running water; a reminder of how much we need it, how nearly out-of-control it can become. I note the ways in which the land changes after rain: the mud-filled hollows in the path; the flotsam of rushes and sedge which rim the sodden fields. In the lower meadow, I see a heron unfurl itself from a waterlogged pool and gust into flight, grey against the greyer sky.

In this, the wettest of my thirty winters in this place, I note the gathering and passing of storms with a weary resignation. The lanes and paths seem wetter than ever; over the past couple of years, trees and hedges have been cut down, and the delicate balance of soil, water and plants seems out of kilter. I can no longer tell how the land will respond to a period of rain, as though I am relearning the habits and humours of an old friend who has changed.

At times of heavy rain like these, rivers take on the quality of stories, bringing tales of other lands told in hissing tones, the susurrus of heresy and whispered spells. They also bring tales of destruction and chaos, fallen trees carried on bank-full brown water, boulders moved in the night by the power of the flood waters. Walking these fields at the end of winter, I see debris scattered across fences, wedged beneath gates; the roads are littered with pebbles, twigs and grit, scatterings of debris marking the run-off from fields and overflowing becks, the random graffiti of weather which is beyond control, unbidden.



I live in a land of limestone, where streams disappear and re-appear, an intricate geography of sinkholes and springs, rumours of underground rivers like the promise of secrets withheld beneath the earth. Water echoes beneath rocks like dark wine poured from a flask in a dimly-lit room. A stream rising from the spring in the centre of the village disappears under tarmac and grass; its hollow thrumming is heard like a bird in the night beneath slabs of limestone. Springs trace the borders between limestone and sandstone, the places where the water can no longer pass underground but must emerge, a fugitive gift from the earth. There is a world beneath our feet which comes to the surface in wet winters; a system of dark waterways switching and dodging between the fractured joint systems of the limestone, seeping along bedding planes of rock, emerging from under strata as though flushed clean of their subterranean existence, carrying only a hint of darkness at their first exposure to the light. New-born water, filtered and fresh, earthy and mysterious.

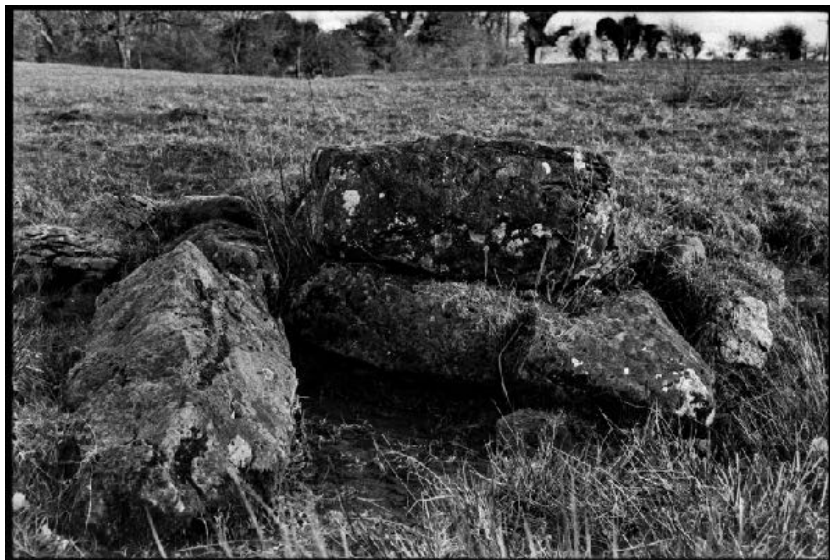


I trace the patterns of springs and becks on maps, trying to understand where the rivers go, how they reappear. I think of the drainage patterns I learned in my school geography lessons: dendritic, radial, linear; streams meeting other streams to become rivers, tendrils of water on a featureless landscape. I think of the branchings and braidings of human nerves and blood vessels; the fractal perfection of our bodies, as though we are ourselves part-river, floodwaters coursing in our veins. On the maps I study, streams, lakes and rivers are coloured in a familiar blue; it is a code for water, although water itself is not blue; it takes on the colour of the sky, sometimes the colour of the rocks beneath. In flood, it takes on the colour of peat or silt. It is a shape-shifter, a mirror for the elements of earth and sky.



A week later, I walk the same path across the fields. The rain has eased, and an uneasy truce exists between sky, land and water. The water and the slow warming of the weather seem to have flushed spring from the patient land; wild garlic emerges from the dark hollows beneath the crags; the hedge is dusted by the first blossom of blackthorn, as though touched by late snow. A buzzard is circling the sedge-filled field, calling for a mate.

At the top of the field, in the hollow below the ash tree, a small spring rises from the ground. Only in these ragged relict days of late winter will the water be flowing; in summer it dries completely to a rush-filled pool. It is rimmed by boulders, as though to give some form of protection; perhaps to keep animals out, perhaps to push back the encroaching grasses and moss.



On the surface of one of the boulders is a fossil; a dimpled trace as long as a child's arm, pressed into the rock like the tread of a bicycle tyre through wet mud. It is a *Stigmaria*; the fossil of the root stem of a clubmoss, perhaps 250 or 300 million years old. This dun-coloured sandstone is the residue of a tropical river delta, forested with huge ferns and clubmosses; immense plants the size of this ash tree branching above my head, from an age before trees existed. I run my fingers across its surface, feel the pock-marks where root hairs would have branched from the stem, marvelling at the vertiginous compression of time represented by my fingers here, now, resting in this place.

The clubmosses of the Upper Carboniferous are the matter from which coal was formed: millennia of accumulated organic material, compressed into almost pure carbon. They became the reason for the

growth of towns and villages here in west Cumbria: coal stoked the limekilns, heated the blast furnaces, powered the railways. It seems oddly appropriate that I cannot see the root of the plant itself; only its indentation in the rock, a ghost of its absence, like the coal which is no longer found here, having been dug, transported, burned. Its presence is everywhere but nowhere, invisible in the air.

And I realise the eddies that circle back through this place, the way that everything is connected: the disappearing and reappearing streams, the limekilns over my shoulder on the brow of the hill, the coal mines to my west, the carbon spooling into the atmosphere, the weather fronts barreling across this tiny island of ours; all is in flux, all is tainted by our touch. I stroke again the trace of the *Stigmaria*, the unwitting midwife to a season of storms.



With a shard of branch I scrape at the years of accumulated silt at the base of the spring. The water swirls into clouds, darkens to the colour of the sky. Beneath, clean water bubbles to the surface, marbling the pool until it is almost clear. I shake the last few drops of earthen water, gilded with the late sun, onto the grass, a libation of sorts, to the absent gods of the land.

Ian Hill is a writer, photographer and artist living and working in Cumbria. An environmental scientist by training, his work explores the connections between landscape and people, the historic and mythic associations of place. The photographs accompanying this essay have been taken on film and developed using Caffanol; a more sustainable form of developer made from washing soda and coffee.