



-4°C

in March. In the north of England spring conceals winter like a knife.

Ascending

slowly, vapours rise from the high ground ahead. The storm they are calling the

BEAST FROM THE EAST

has rolled chaotically in, snow is baked onto the mountainside in crystalline swirls. Everything is wracked in ice.

Clough

is the dialect word for steep valley or ravine. From Old English *clōh*, itself thought to stem from the Proto-Germanic *klanhaz* ('cleft', 'sluice', 'abyss'). Many slice this scrunchy, sprawling mountain: one between each named protrusion of its southerly faces. We're climbing the western edge of one graduated panhandle called Saddle Fell. Wolf Fell threatens directly to the west, separated craggily from our outcrop by White Stone Clough. The gentler slopes of Burnslack protrude benignly to the east, their roundness belying the twist of a steep ravine below.

Desperation

is knowing I am red. With this morning's coffee the climb has made me embarrassingly ruddy. I half-hope the man I'm with – let's call him Keir – won't look back to catch my eye. He doesn't.

Farm

specifically 'sheep farm', which is how Keir dismisses our surroundings. He hates sheep, not as individuals but for what they represent en masse: you might call it the ovine-industrial complex. He is frowning at the convincingly rugged landscape, one aggressively shaped by agro-industry and then cunningly re-packaged as wilderness. Still, it was first carved by a deep and glacial memory. Shallow-rooted flora are peppered over it like cress.

Fell

means 'mountain', cognate to the Scandinavian *fjall*. The word is present in many northern dialects, including my own. It brings to mind Sheila Fell, the miner's daughter who painted the fells of her native Cumberland¹ with bruise-like intensity. She fell to her death in 1979 – not down the mountainside but her own stairs. I chew this over as I climb.

Floods

come in many forms including flash floods, tidal surges and floods of tears. At the moment there's no sign of them but it's dormancy rather than absence. There's a feeling of bated breath while everything's frozen. The earth underfoot has clenched up completely, holding the hard water inside itself.

1) An historic county which since 1974 has formed part Cumbria. The name Cumberland is more relevant to Fell's lifetime.

Fog

is a point where sound and light immediately deaden. The path peters out. We've found ourselves inside the low-lying cloud that had been hanging overhead as a featureless, occlusive veil. We're on the summit but it's large and flat – nothing like a peak – marked on the map as 'Brown Berry Plain'. Even without this murk it's big enough to get lost on.

Grouse

are present as laughter in the dark. A sudden turkey-trill followed by a slow, knowing *go-bak go-bak go-bak*. The sound is unbelievably menacing and we joke nervously that we're about to be mugged.

Histosol

The summit is an inhospitable expanse of moorland and bog. Peat erosion is dramatic here: massive craters of many meters with edges taller than me. The peaks are called hags and the troughs are groughs. They punctuate the plateau, breaking up the shallow carpet of asphodels and clustering tussocks of reedy, acidic grasses. Black peat oozes inside them: a potent, oily soil resulting from the slow decay of bog plants in the absence of oxygen. As these decompose they emit no carbon, which remains trapped inside the peat. An odour of scorched earth permeates, interrupted in slices by the tin-like smell of snow.

Ignis fatuus,

jack-o'-lantern, hinkypunk, and ghostlight are all names for the inexplicable lights seen winking in marshy areas. Peat often forms the bottom layer of the complex ecologies of living wetlands, and its spontaneous combustion has been floated as an explanation for ghostlights. Water cannot penetrate peat: its high carbon content makes it potently flammable, and it has been used as a heat source for centuries. Like all fossil fuels it is made up of the slow-compressing past. When this is set alight the energy of a thousand lives are expelled in one second: a true phantom. I could believe in anything watching vapour rise from the ice-crusting craters to join the cloud around us. There are no ghostlights but there's a sense that reality flickers. The path has long since disappeared. In soggy seasons we'd be long-smothered but the ice permeating the ground keeps things semi-solid underfoot. We struggle and fall often while the grouse continue to laugh.

Killing me

my legs, back, arms are screaming in protest at the unaccustomed backpack and hours of scramble. It's an anchoring feeling.

Leaving

Keir goes away next week; this trip is a kind of goodbye-for-now. His long-planned departure has been looming since we met. Best stick to the present.

Marker

The fence we've been aiming for appears miraculously in the murk. A human object on this pock-marked moonscape; we hop over the stile.

Medea

Like many women she was compelled to give up everything for love, and lived to regret it when her man proved unworthy. Like many early stories hers has been retold in shifting forms over the centuries. Our surroundings bring to mind Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, in which the lead character Hester treads the ancient narrative groove of Medea's betrayal and infanticide on an Irish bog. Ghosts come and go freely in the story: bogs are known as places where the world is thin. This may be something to do with their unsettling habit of belching forth objects, manuscripts and cadavers from the distant past, perfectly preserved by the unique physical and biochemical composition of this type of wetland. It's mainly thanks to peat: as old peat is replaced by new, the rotting older material underneath releases humic acid, which acts as a kind of pickling vinegar. Appearing like messages from the bog's strange alchemy, the preserved items give these places an oracular quality.

Nothing too ancient has ever been released by the peat bogs of Saddle Fell, which are receding as we walk towards the remote valley-interior. Only the three-week corpse of 75-year-old Bill Smith, a legendary and well-loved pioneer of fell running, claimed by the terraqueous summit in 2011 on one final lonely excursion. I wonder if it's how he'd like to go: to be killed by what he loved and was powerless against – like Hester-Medea and her children.

Melbourne

is an imaginary place to me. I picture the Australian summer petering out as a strange fiction, one that's about to engulf and smother whatever's been burgeoning in my chest. I imagine Keir's arrival there, slipping back into the currents of a former life. These seem to swirl around one person, although maybe that's a convenient fiction too. His feeling for her is of the doomed variety: it was but can never be again, which I suppose makes it all the more compelling.

Name

Hers is the kind that gleams in the dark. I swirl it round my mouth like a smooth glass pebble.

Omen

is a sign or happening with prophetic significance: an advent of change. A ghostlight could fall into this category, or any unusual natural phenomena. Medea's omens were a fish on fire and a leopard at the market. Hester's was a black swan frozen in a boghole.

Ophelia

was the storm that preceded THE BEAST. For days in October the whole of London glowed eerie red, as dust from the Sahara obscured the sun.

Planting

vegetation high on fells can hold large amounts of water in upland areas, dramatically reducing the impact of floods. When mountains are bare from sheep grazing, the floodwaters run dark with unanchored soil dragged from high crags. As the global climate changes floods are becoming increasingly common, devastating populated areas and low-lying towns by the rivers. Many northern counties

who rely on the tourism generated by the bare fells' 'rugged' and 'sublime' beauty – constructed by the 19th century poets and so present in the paintings of Sheila Fell – are resistant to upland planting, and instead subsidise the farming of sheep.² Given that these animals are unapologetic wellsprings of greenhouse gas, the logic of this seems questionable. Still, if it's a painful endeavour to preserve the fading image of what was, it is doubly so to mutilate it in the name of disaster prevention.

Questions

I have many that I won't ask. I refuse to dilute what has been and instead stopper it at chest height. The grassy hummocks underfoot are mottled with snow-fringed puddles of acidic green-blue, their milky opacity reminiscent of glacial lagoons on the weeping Greenland ice sheet. The voices of the grouse are still with us, urging: *go-bak, go-bak*.

Rig-weltd

Another northern word, descriptive of a sheep stranded by being laid on its back. From the Norwegian *rygggrad* ('spine', 'backbone') and *velte* ('overthrow', 'overturn'); Icelandic *hryggur* ('back', 'spine', 'ridge') and *velta* ('tumble', 'roll', 'fall'). Not an uncommon sight on the steep fellsides where they are grazed, the animals flail foolishly until someone rights them.

Rill

is a small stream running down a shallow channel, cut into the surface of soil or rocks by the trickling water. Also rille: a fissure or narrow channel on the moon's surface. We search the humps and ravines of the mountain interior for a way down into the main valley. Rough maroon heath-plants beg us to remain still, their fingers making tears in our clothes. This goes on for hours or maybe minutes. The path becomes visible as a faint line etched into the scratchy vegetation on a neighbouring knap – two deep cloughs away. Once reached, the comforting solidity of the path terminates with its descent – not a gentle slope but a sudden stair, over which a smooth ribbon of water has frozen. It's transformed into an impossible ice ladder, which we descend by wedging our hands and feet into the plants on each side and roughly dancing around it. Contemplating every possible fall I think of *Wedding in Aspatria I* and *II*. These two inexplicably romantic works appeared in 1958, amidst the strange, dark paintings of Sheila Fell's early period. They are two tiny trickles: small rills of emotion on a burgeoning body of work otherwise solemnly occupied with Cumberland's landscape and the agricultural labour that constructed it. *Wedding in Aspatria I* has an odd, vertical composition that's characteristic of Fell's early paintings: landscape stacked impossibly over landscape, as though one were viewing the scene onstage from a cheap upper theatre seat, looking down a flattened foreground with the painted distance slotted in above. The faceless actors stand low amongst the gravestones, which they resemble: impassive, it is only apparent that the marrying couple are utterly subject to the towering ground in the distance.

2) For an acerbic and succinct write-up of this policy see Lemmey, H. (2005). 'In Cumbria.' *LRB Blog*. Available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2015/12/30/huw-lemmey/in-cumbria/>

Ripples

are dynamic marks left after the initial moment of impact has passed. They flow outwards in an ever-expanding ring, until everything is inside the event's circle of influence.

Snow, drifted

into small craters. It dapples the carmine mountainside. Where the snow had covered the summit's peat hags they resembled the crushingly stunted tree specimens of the Arctic treeline, where forest transitions to plain. It is so cold there that a seedling can take 100 years to grow into an undersized shrub. These underdeveloped trees resemble crouched, hooded beggar women: hags abandoned on the edge of the tundra.

Thoil

to be willing to give, to afford; or secondarily to endure, to bear, to put up with. Cognate to the Scottish 'thole', and related to the standard English 'tolerate'. Origin uncertain – possibly from Middle English *tholen*, *tholien*, itself from Old English *þolian* ('to bear, to endure'). Alternatively Icelandic *þola* ('withstand'), Swedish *tåla* ('to put up with'), Norwegian *tåle* ('to tolerate'). In Yorkshire: 'I can't thoil it' ('I would like to have it but can't justify the expense').³

Jason abandons Medea and their children to marry a princess – for wealth and status. Carthage (Jason's counterpart in *By the Bog of Cats*, his theatrical cognate) leaves Hester and their daughter for an heiress in order to inherit her family's farm. Land has always seemed the more fundamental, inviolable pledge. But actions and bodies are binding too: 'There's things about me and Carthage no wan knows except the two of us. And I'm not talkin' about love,' says Hester. 'Love is for fools and children. Our bond is harder, like two rocks we are, grindin' off of wan another and maybe all the closer for that.'⁴ Death binds Hester and Carthage as much as their shared life in their daughter. It haunts them like a periodically re-emerging bog body.

Turbary

is the ancient right to cut peat for fuel. Usually associated with commonage, the late Middle English word 'turbary' can refer to the right itself, the area of peatland on which it is granted, or the extracted material. Traditionally the peat was extricated by hand, chipped away in cubes from the bog's edge using specially shaped spades, the resulting turves then dried for use as fuel in cooking and heating. In comparison to newer, commercial methods – which tend to mechanically skim all vegetation from the surface, drying the bog out completely until it belches masses of carbon into the atmosphere – these traditional methods of extraction left the bog relatively intact: a functioning hydrological structure.

Entitlement to turbary has been particularly important to those living in mountainous regions or on treeless plains, where wood can be scarce. The right to collect firewood was similarly protected and regulated by a right known as 'estovers' – deriving from the French *estover*, *estovoir*: 'that which is necessary'. This etymology is disputed: some would have the true root of estovers as the Latin *studere*, 'to desire'.⁵

3) 'Yorkshire Dialect Words of Old Norse Origin.' *Viking.no*. Available at: http://www.viking.no/e/england/yorkshire_norse.htm

4) All Hester/Carthage quotes from Carr, M. (2005) 'By the Bog of Cats'. London: Faber and Faber.

5) Chisholm, H., ed. (1911). 'Estovers.' *Encyclopædia Britannica*. (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press. p. 801.

Underneath

Medea's expendability hinges on her low societal status: 'barbarian', immigrant, outlaw. Hester is similarly derided by her immediate community as a traveller, an alcoholic, a single mother. Hester lacks the status of a wife, or (as she insists on living in a caravan on the bog) that of a cohabiting partner. 'The turf-smoke stink of her'. Hester is distinctly second-class, embodying the wetland's ambiguity and reflecting its marginal status. She lacks the breadbasket potential of stable agricultural land. She is primed for abandonment.

Carthage's fixation on sole custody of their daughter almost makes a beggarwoman – a peat-hag – of Hester:

'Anythin', Carthage, anythin', and I'll do it if it's in me power.'

'It's not in your power – Look, I'm up to me neck in another life that can't include ya any more.'

Union

The flora of money and socially approbated romance decorates the marriage of Carthage and the heiress, but it lacks a gritstone bond. Like those in *Aspatria* it has the air of a wedding on the edge of the world and time, bathed in the cold, grey light of the after-days of history. Amidst the roaring of the floods, agricultural land is no longer an immovable basis for promise.

Valley

We're well below the nimbostratus cloud still blanketing the peak, which hangs now curiously bright overhead. Mizzle coats the plants and rocks, which in their wetness become vivid splotches of green and slate-purple. All sensory signifiers of season and condition are confused. Despite the freezing temperature, the smell is one of almost obscene fertility: warm wet vegetation, like that preceding peat.

Veil,

a thing that conceals, disguises, or obscures. From the twelfth century Modern French *voile*, 'head-covering', also 'curtain', 'sail'. This from Latin *velum* ('sail', 'curtain', 'covering'), itself from the Proto-Indo-European root **weg-*, 'to weave a web'.⁶

Bogs are significant as a space between many things. They are a land-water nexus, both carbon sink and fossil fuel, a soft, permeable barrier between up here and 'underneath'. Layers of subterranean peat ripple with the yet-to-be-known. The acidic, low-oxygen environment preserves not only bodies and objects but tiny particles of matter: pollen and atmospheric particles are preserved in a terrestrial archive of past climates, sea levels, and plant life.

Votive,

a devotional object offered in fulfilment of a vow. The majority of bog bodies discovered in Europe date from the Iron Age, when peatlands would have covered a much larger area of the continent. Despite their wide geographical spread, bodies from this time bear a number of similarities, particularly in the manner of their killing. Many show signs of being subjected to stabbing, bludgeoning, strangling and

6) Etymonline. 'Veil'. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/veil>

hanging, some with the rope still preserved around their necks. Often the use of several of these methods is evident, more indeed than would be necessary to subdue and kill a person. These similarities indicate a widespread cultural tradition across Europe, of killing and depositing people in a particular manner. Precious objects from this time are also routinely extracted from peat bogs, including neck-lets, bracelets and ankle-rings made of bronze and gold. Archaeologists have long-since concluded that these objects were devotional in nature, and so speculate that the bog bodies are in there for similar reasons, as ‘offerings to the gods of fertility and good fortune.’⁷

That the bog people of Northern Europe seem consistently to have been members of the upper class, with manicured fingernails and the keratin of their hair in good condition, seems to have been particularly remarkable to many archaeologists. The initial assumption that the bog killings were punitive executions of criminals led to the subsequent assumption that the victims would be lower class. Only the strange arrangement of twigs on the bodies and a strange flax paste in the belly indicated something more devotional, ritualistic; the offering of something cherished to ensure the conditions for agricultural success.

Volte-face

We seek a glistening rumour. We try a slender path chipped into the valley’s eastern edge, which gives vertiginous views of the whole green cleft. We are perched 200ft from the ground when we spot it winking on the western side. There’s no easy route. We begin to double back to the shallower end of the valley, until Keir turns around to look at me with an impatient, wordless question, and we drop exhilaratingly down the side to the beck below. I look ridiculous skidding down with my huge backpack and so does he in his habitual ill-fitting joggers. At the bottom of the valley there is no trail, just fast-moving water. By moving slowly we pick out a path along the clammy edge, treading as though on top of a skirting board by hanging off the wall. Sometimes we grasp small-leaved trailing plants, crushing them with our hands as we cling to the valley’s face.

Time passes. We come across a lone tree, sticking out with spindly significance. I have no idea of the species but its lonely austerity is peculiar. I think of olives and abandoned villa-gardens.

Vuln (archaic):

to wound. Has the same Latin root as ‘vulnerable’.

Medea’s motives for murdering her children have been speculated on as extensively as the mystery of the bog bodies. Euripides’ play, first produced in 431 BC, is widely considered to be the first to show Medea plotting the murder of her sons from the beginning, in order to both revenge herself on Jason and (by also murdering his new wife) to cut off his family line. She grapples with her grief over causing the death of her children, and yet the murder is both premeditated and successfully carried out. She’s pictured as deranged by a woman’s mad passion and a barbarian’s⁸ ‘irrational’ excess of sexual jealousy. She enacts revenge by robbing her children of the chance to grow up and live their lives.

7) Glob, P.V. (1969). *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved*. London: Faber and Faber. p. 136.

8) Jason: ‘How wrong I was to bring a barbarian home to Greece, already a dangerous betrayer of family and country.’ Euripides; trans. Collier, M., Macheimer, G. (2006) *Medea*. University of Oxford Press.

And yet in the context of classical Greek culture things are not so simple. Medea's desperation may stem from the fear of a 'worse' death – Jason insists on retaining custody and his new wife would be certain to ensure the primacy of her own line. In the folklore on which Euripides based his play, angry Corinthians murdered Medea's children after she murdered the new wife. Had Medea taken the children with her into exile, they would face destitution, or the potentially dangerous distrust of a stepfather. Medea is a woman with few options, seeking to preserve the honour and the image of her sons.⁹

In *By the Bog of Cats*, Hester's motive is less complex than the original Medea's, and the murder of her child is not premeditated. In the final act Hester resolves to take her own life rather than be separated from her daughter and exiled from her beloved bog, where she has been waiting in pain for her own mother to return since she abandoned Hester aged seven. The idea of her mother's return has grown and distorted over time: Hester seeks it as a kind of prophetic occurrence, a divine return still fuelled by the wounded child's longing for a parent's love. Hester's climacteric occurs when she sees this trauma's potential to periodically resurface down her family line:

'Ya won't see me again because I'm goin' away too [...] Somewhere ya can never return from,' she tells her daughter.

'Mam, I'd be watchin' for ya all the time 'long the Bog of Cats. I'd be hopin' and waitin' and prayin' for ya to return.'

Hester's filicide is a passionate impulse, the work of a moment. 'I know what it's like to wait for someone who's never walkin' through the door again.'

Water, falling

The memory of it hangs like a shimmering obelisk. We have reached the small hollow where chaotic sheets of silver water crash into a clear, shallow pool. The water-curtain is diffused by a thick undercoat of mosses, which hang off the rocks in impossible, spongy cones of dark viridian. Thick icicles surround it, and the grasses underfoot crunch with crystals. We peel off our damp clothes. Supporting my left ankle is a stretchy flesh-coloured tube, and we laugh at how utterly abject it appears curled wet on the grass. We pick our way over the slimy-smooth rocks and experience the crushing coldness of our prize. Pleasure and exhilaration are visible in Keir's illuminated face, which along with his posture hangs pickled in this memory. He's a dark space outlined against a backdrop of glowing silver-white, suspended as if in some clear acidic liquid. In response my own flicker of terrible joy is a cold, lifting, rushing sensation underneath the ribcage. I watch him and count the minutes. I think of the unnameable drive towards preservation, and the localised vernacular of bilateral desire. This kind of eastern freeze invariably precedes a punishingly hot summer. August floods are inevitable after, a great levelling that comes with the unclenching of the ground.

9) Medea: 'I shall bury them with my own hands. I'll take them to the sacred precinct of the goddess Hera on her headland where it overlooks the sea, and there, where none who hate them may dishonour them, I'll build their tomb. And for all future time in Corinth, in this land, I shall ordain a solemn festival and rites, an expiation for their death and for my sacrilege.' See also Holland, L. (2008). 'Last Act in Corinth: The Burial of Medea's Children' (E. Med. 1378-83) *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (Apr-May, 2008), pp. 407-430. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30038003>

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