

A WALK TO THE TARN

“When I was young” I was going to start, or “When I was a boy”, but even that is far from precise, and I realize that this one walk is a compilation of so many walks that I can no longer separate them out into their geological strata. So many people have come with us, they fade in and out of my memories, but when I walk this path they are still there, enduring in the enduring landscape. So this is a generic expedition, some unspecified day from my youth in what is now sufficiently far in the past to be considered historic by the young.

It is the natural walk for us, the path immediately outside our door. Whenever we reach boots down from their shelf my grandfather’s black Labrador, Tess, goes and sits anxiously by the door to be sure not to be forgotten. We step outside, where my grandmother will line us up for a photograph. She uses one of those cameras that you held at waist height and peered into the top of, and arranges us directly in the sunshine, so that when the photograph comes out, tiny and more grey than black and white, there will always be someone squinting or looking at the camera sideways.

This ceremony over, off we troop up the yard and past the disused stables, formerly an inn, this being an old packhorse route. Into the walled lonnin (green lane) between fields of different heights we process, and across Raypot Haws, known to us as ‘The Horse Field’ because of its former occupant. It’s a hilly, rocky piece of ground, enclosed from the fell in 1748 to help pay for the re-building of the chapel and schoolhouse.

At the stile in the far corner our straggling group (varying in number according to how many of our friends and relations have joined us) bunches up again like a caterpillar encountering a twig. Three stone steps up on this side, precipitous on the other, where even stepping off the fifth step down is to land on a steep slope of slippery grass. My brother and I run down into the meadow; others follow at their own pace, our father in his old blue shorts, and in cooler weather a primrose yellow jumper his sister knitted for him, a Tam o’ Shanter perched on the side of his head, mother in a wide tweed skirt and a cardigan, stick in hand, both of them in brown nailed climbing boots, socks rolled down over the tops. My brother and I are in sandals or gym shoes.

It is always, in my memory, a lovely day, but it must have rained sometimes, and I recall my parents’ beige anoraks, and the smell of the green ones my brother and I wore, with their red lining.

Along the side of the meadow and through a gate onto an old and substantial clapstone bridge that leads us safely over a cheery beck to a gently sloping farmyard, home to a decaying caravan and ageing farm machinery, a variegated flock of hens that peck unperturbed along the edge of the white-washed walls of the farmhouse, and a curious goose that hisses over her shoulder at us from amongst the yarrow and chickweed outside the slate porch. A collie darts with foul-mouthed ferocity from her kennel to the length of her chain, and Dorothy appears in the kitchen doorway to smile at us and pass the time of day, and soon her husband, in ancient wellingtons and a blue jacket, ambles round from the side of the barn where he has been tending sheep. The air is rich with the smell of sheep dung and lanolin.

Between the barn and the old smithy we go, and out onto the foot of the fell and left up the track. It’s a gentle rise, fell climbing to the sky on the right, fields dropping down beyond the wall to our left. The track is solid beneath our feet. I can hear the clinkers on my father’s boots crunch the pinnel (a hard subsoil of clay and gravel) and scrape the stone. In places where the rock has surfaced you can see how it has been worn smooth by such feet. There are

grooves in the stone where the iron shod wheels of carts have passed and re-passed for generations, and the centre of the track is hollowed out with the pony's hooves.

The track hugs the curve of the fell, gently gaining contour lines, until we reach Gibstey, and enter between walls into a lonnin that leads first to a triangle of grass, where a fork drops off to the left down to the old sheep wash. A hog-backed boulder heaves itself up out of the grass and bracken at the north apex of the triangle. Occasionally we leave patterns on it to signal our passing.

Beyond the fork the lane becomes stony and wet, so that it is like walking the bed of a shallow beck. The water seeps out of the wall of Gibstey, the intake that rises up steeply on the right, but not all of it finds its way through the wall on the opposite side and down to the real beck in the field below. This field is wooded. The beck rattles over the stones and birds echo it overhead. Daffodils grow under the oaks. The lonnin is a short stretch of cool on a hot day.

Emerging, the fields draw aside and we are in a marshy tussocky area of tall blonde grasses, gorse and bracken. The track, still wet but well-made, is slightly sunk below the moss, until it starts to rise more steeply. Old sycamores overhang the wall, and the path becomes narrower, grassy. It is here, one warm summer's day, when I am walking with my father at the head of a considerable family snake, that we come across an adder asleep on the path. It is the first I have seen, though warned against them as they are known to enjoy sunbathing on the rocks behind the house. The adder is curled like a pastry, and its zigzags seem to shimmer in the sun. My father has a hazel stick, but the sound of our feet must have disturbed the sleeper, and almost before I can see it, it has uncoiled and slides swiftly away into the bracken.

Up a rise the path runs straight and clear of the fields now. We start to penetrate the Common. Heather, peppered with bees, infiltrates the rocks and bracken. At the top of the rise the path narrows to a sheep trod between twisted stems and bushes, before it drops down to find the beck again. There are small boulders that serve for stepping-stones and we are soon over and crossing the bottom end of Jackie Turner's Moss. The scent of bog myrtle mingles with the ling, mud and peat merge. We are hopping from stone to stone to keep our feet dry, and up a narrow sunken gully of soft wet moss whose banks rise too high for my brother and I to see over.

At the top the path continues narrowly, wriggling along through the heather and over rocks and roots of small twisted trees, thorn and juniper. The beck, our constant but here unseen companion is lost between peaty banks winding through tussocks of grass and myrtle, but still chortles its presence on our right. We pick our way up spines of rock and over patches of boggy mud. The fell opens out on either side of us, and the beck swings round unexpectedly in front to curl in a figure S to find its source. We, however, re-cross, hopping lightly again onto the single small round stone that divides the stream, and onto the further bank. There is still the slightest of rises and it is not until we are almost upon it that we at last glimpse over the lip of turf and stone, the glittering water of the tarn.

Everyone reacts to arrival in their own way. Our father finds a rock to perch on from which he can peer up the tarn to the hulk of the Beacon and the distant prospect of mountains in the north. Mother sinks down on a heathery bank and fishes in her pocket for provisions. My brother and I scour the little shingly beach for bits of slate to skim over the water, and Tess gallops into the waves in pursuit. My cousin John takes himself off to a quiet nook where he can set up his fishing rod. His sister has a Brownie camera and snaps us all.

While the adults talk, my brother and I explore. Here is a look-out point from which the whole wet tongue of the tarn can be examined. At the south end, under the shadow of the

Knott, the ground is softer, and when you look across to the west you can see how the land almost merges with the water in a haze of rushes and mud. On that side the tarn is shallower, and your toes can sink luxuriously into feathery ooze. Further north is a floating archipelago of lily pads, and at the top end, where a path runs down from a grassy ridge like the hollow in a collar bone, the shallows become shingle again, the sun striping the small flat stones through the ripples.

When we go swimming we use the south end of the east shore, where there are rocks and the bed of the tarn shelves away more steeply. On hot summer days the top six inches of water is warm, but below is still cold and dark. You can stand in the middle though, and look back at the cliffs at the north end, with their brows of heather and the small trees clinging onto them like green macaws.

Swimming back in we clamber out over the rocks and accept our mother's offer of chocolate and an apple. Here is the place where one summer, while she is drying off after a swim (a rare event – it must have been an especially hot year), my brother and I see little wisps of smoke arising from the heather behind our temporary camp. When we investigate, we find that the sun, shining through the impromptu magnifying glass of a broken bottle, has set fire to the heather. We run and tell our mother – there's only the three of us there that day, and we are not equipped for firefighting. The only container we have to carry water is my mother's bathing cap, but this proves sufficient to enable us to douse the flames and avert disaster.

Eventually the moment comes to leave, and we gather up our belongings, rouse the slumbering dog, and set off back down the path. Every time I leave the tarn I think of how it remains there when I am gone, a calm persistent presence that I also, somehow, carry away with me.

But now my brother and I race ahead until we are out of sight, then wait in ambush hidden in the rocks and bracken for the others to come past us, when we rear up like savages and charge down on them yelling our fearsome war whoops, slip past and head off further down the track to repeat the game. Some attacks are more successful than others, and Tess is not always an ally, nosing out our hideouts, her black tail waving above the shorter bracken fronds in friendly excitement, her cold wet nose thrust into our hidden faces. But sometimes we can persuade her to take part, and she sits, dutifully quiet with us among the rocks listening to the little itchy sounds of insects, the distant bleat of a sheep, a far-away tractor, the scream of a buzzard, and then, as we hold our breath, the gradual approach of voices as our hapless victims round the corner into our trap.

And so back through farmyard and fields, until we reach the welcome of our own front door, and the table is laid, cups and glasses are filled, and we sit in the cool, smiling, relaxed, our minds still full of fresh air, blue sky, and sunlight, the innumerable greens of field and wood, the humps and troughs of fell and rock, the song of beck and birds, and Tess flops down on the slate flags, her pink tongue lolling out, and closes her eyes in content.

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