

One

Nowhere under the Rainbow

Lakeland Omens

*No one likes to be a fish
out of water, least of all
the fish. In a land not named
by my native tongue the words
are awkward; I reach
for the solace, the embrace,
of my life's very rock,
and hold on. And bolder
then the beauty
I need begins to seed in me,
to feed me, to read me
the runes of this southern airt
that calls itself "The North"
and then calls forth
a peregrine and flings a rainbow
between High Rigg and the rest
of the world, for they know
— the beauty, the land —
that these I understand.*

OMENS. SOMETIMES THEY CATCH in my throat. Take peregrines. It isn't always speed with peregrines. Sometimes it's guile and glide, the grace that allies rock-shaded plumage to a rock-thirled life, the shallow-angled entrance from

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crag-dark shadow into sunlight so that it's suddenly *there*, a presence that startles because you never saw it coming, never saw the shadowed release from the eyrie among the highest rocks (always the highest rocks, peregrines make more use of air than most). Now watch. The glide levels out and then tilts upwards on the command of three wingbeats, an equally shallow climb. All that is required for the moment is momentum, for the falcon has the all-seeing eyes of the gods, and the objective at the end of the manoeuvre is far off and beyond the grasp of your eyesight and mine. Bird brain: invariably we use the expression as a put-down, but this...this is the opening gambit of bird chess, and behold, it is a thing of beauty.

This is the peregrine falcon I carry with me in my head, this grand master of a bird; and 200 miles to the south of my comfort zone, just when I needed a reinforcing nod of recognition from nature, I was about to discover that it was waiting in the wings.

Omens. They drift across the face of the Earth like wind-blown spores. And I tend to incline towards those spores that only create something new when they fuse unexpectedly with another spore. There is no telling their landfall, science cannot plot their course, so what chance does a nature writer have, travelling more in hope than expectation? Yet when you work every day with two such mercurial life forces as nature and the creative arts, and if you live and breathe by the grace of your diplomatic skills' capacity to persuade them to align in common cause, then good omens are lifebelts. You reach out, you cling on, you try not to drown.

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All the way up High Rigg, then, I scanned the wind for omens, for ways of tuning in, for one fortuitous spore that might overwhelm the odds and fuse with a restless spore from over the border, and that these might make something new. That, after all, was why I was in Lakeland at all, to find a new way of seeing and writing about this most “seen” and written about of landscapes.

But why seek such an elusive fluke of happenstance on High Rigg of all places – unsung High Rigg, among so many more celebrated Lakeland set pieces that I must try and get used to calling “fells”? It is a good question. I needed a viewpoint that knows the Lakes from the outside edge looking in, for was that not exactly what I was attempting myself? And a viewpoint that has something of all the elements of Lakeland within itself, a self-contained Lakeland miniature but with wide sightlines to some of the famed set-pieces of England’s landscape superstars. In that regard at least, I was well qualified, for I have made something of a study of such eminences in my native land: small mountains that reveal the character of whole mountain ranges in ways that are hidden when you are in among those greater landscapes, simply because of their aloof stance. Besides, I live on the edge of a mountain land that is something of a northern kinsman to this Lakeland corner – the eastern half of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, the Highland part of Stirling. So I know the mountains, glens, rivers, burns, lochs, wetlands, woods and wildness of the land I call the Highland Edge among the first mountains of the Highlands, 200 miles to the north of High Rigg, and whence for the last forty-something years my instincts

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have been inclined to venture west and further north, and sometimes back east to my native shore around the Firth of Tay. But south? Hardly ever. My brother, Vic, lived in Lancaster for many years and we had walked often enough in Lakeland, but mostly in the southern fells and not in any purposeful fashion. So what was I doing on High Rigg, tentatively trying to pin down the names of summits from the unfamiliar map and compass in my hands?

It had begun with a visit to Ullswater. I warmed to an unexpected familiarity that stemmed from the way it lies in the Lakeland landscape as a slender curve, with one end almost in the lowlands and the other immersed deep in a cluster of mountains. Back where I have plied much of my nature writer's trade, along that southern edge of the Highlands of Scotland, I have fashioned a notional "nature writer's territory" where much of my day-to-day, season-by-season, year-on-year fieldwork happens. At its heart is a loch that lies in its landscape as a slender curve with one end almost in the lowlands and the other immersed deep in a cluster of mountains. Its name is Loch Lubnaig, and Ullswater is its Sasunnach kin, its sister-in-landscape. I happened to mention my visit in an email to my publisher, Sara Hunt, who is herself a native of this "The North" that lies so far in my south. Her response was not quite what I expected: might I like to write something set in Lakeland, where a mountain is a fell, a burn is a beck, a lochan is a tarn and – crucially – a loch is a lake? Would I like to write about Lakeland? I suppressed a creeping ambivalence while I assessed what I was up against, and weighed all that against the undeniable fact that Sara has very good instincts about

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such things. A timely book festival event in Carlisle was also an opportunity to spend a spare hour in a good independent bookshop called Book Case, and which has a Cumbria and Scotland Room. I never did get round to seeing what the Scotland section had to offer, because the Cumbria section was on the teeming side of what you might call comprehensive. If there was a gap in the market, I wasn't seeing it. Unless... unless two spores adrift on contrary winds should chance to coincide and their fusion give birth to a different species of Lakeland book, a book like this one.

So some little time later I was on the road south again to "The North". I had put the M80, the M73, the M74, the M6 and a few westbound miles of the A66 behind me, and with a truly startling suddenness, there lay a breathless tranquillity where a good-natured, sweet-watered burn shone in the sun, and I told myself at once that I must learn to call it a beck. I had studied my troublingly new map and I was on my way to High Rigg. And the land seemed to reach out a hand and bid me welcome to St John's in the Vale and the start of something new.

That view and its singularly un-Scottish name produced an instant response: "That could not be a Scottish valley, could it?" It was a simple assessment of a species of beauty that was unfamiliar to me, and its difference reassured me even before I had troubled to try and pin down what it was about the valley that was different. And then, beyond St John's in the Vale, looking across to what I now know to be Clough End and the Dodds (Great Dodd, Watson's Dodd, Stybarrow Dodd... *a land not named by my native tongue, the words are awkward*) a rainbow sprung into brilliant life, and

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the welcome seemed complete.

Ah yes, the rainbow. Omens. Peregrine, rainbow, shallow curves of flight and light, one of no colour at all and one of all the colours, yet as complementary as held hands. Does falcon see rainbow for what it is, and why it flares and fades? Does its bird brain grasp the essential principle of physics that go to work to make a rainbow? Yes, but it has different words for it: that's my guess. But now I am running ahead of myself.

There was, first of all, the church. I didn't come here to write about churches, at least not unless they honour nature, contribute to the landscape in some way: say, an owl nest in a belfry, or a particularly elegant, organic stance on the rock of the land, as if the God it serves had commanded it to stand there, and only there, and become landscape. Alas, the church in question was rather a darkly prosaic huddle of stones hard under the north-facing prow of High Rigg, with the dimensions and architectural cut of a Victorian peasant cottage and a bell-tower and a porch so out of proportion that all they added was ungainliness. The north of England is well populated with bonny kirks that serve their landscapes well. This is not one of these. And yet, that good-natured, sweet-watered beck down there is named for it: St John's Beck. And that valley, the one that could not be Scottish, is St John's in the Vale, and there was no denying that I would want to engage with such a landscape within these first few introductory hours. So I spared the church a second glance. The surprise is inside: the altar is gorgeous, with hints from the 1860s of the arts and crafts movement to come. Surely whoever designed that particular silk purse

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was not responsible for the sow's ear of the church? No architect lays claim to the church of 1848 (and why would they?), but the altar (removed from another church near Keswick twenty years later) was the work of George Gilbert Scott. Enter the third omen. Arguably the most handsome building in my hometown of Dundee is the museum and art gallery, the McManus. It is the work of George Gilbert Scott. So I am not the first to plough this furrow between the valleys of the River Tay and St John's Beck and to give that unlovely kirk a second glance, and that too was an omen that reassured.

And this is a north-tending land. The plug formed by High Rigg and Low Rigg (its joined-at-the-hip twin to the north) resisted the sculpting tug of a glacier, but now post-glacial Lakeland asks nothing more demanding of it than to thrust apart the valley's two gentle waters, so now St John's Beck to the east and Naddle Beck to the west are perpetual neighbours and strangers. If their waters comingle at all, it will happen in the west-making River Greta, into which they both flow but half a mile apart. In turn, the Greta defers at Keswick to the River Derwent, which flows north into Bassenthwaite Lake's south-east corner, and out again by its north-west corner whence it flows west to the sea at Cockermouth. It was there, more than 200 years ago, that the Derwent was immortalised as *a voice that flowed along my dreams*, which students and admirers of William Wordsworth will recognise as one of the opening lines of the blank-verse autobiography-in-nature that the world has since come to know as "The Prelude". I wrote this in the month of the 250th anniversary of Wordsworth's birth (and

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the 170th of his death). The fusion of poet and landscape is more lauded than ever, two more spores that between them made something new: the Lakeland that Wordsworth wrote down was like no one else's, and that is still the case today. If you ever wondered what immortality looks like, it looks like Wordsworth's take on Lakeland.

Meanwhile, these two becks that flowed along my own daydreams either side of High Rigg were whispering, muttering syllables of that same voice Wordsworth heard, nothing less than the last living kin of the valley's glacier. A lane curved west from the church of St John's in the Vale and between High Rigg and Low Rigg, then south above Naddle Beck until its path was crossed by a drystone wall. To follow the lane felt like keeping the Lakeland I sought at arm's length, the gentlest of tiptoeing preliminaries. It took a few moments before I understood that the wall was my way in. It took the slope at a gentle angle and a little above waist-height, rose and curved across and between contrary and complementary slopes, a path that rode the contours with the ease and style of a file of red deer, and so hand-in-glove with nature that it looked at once as if any other line would have seemed forced and unnatural. So sure was the eye, so accomplished the skill of the builder-of-walls that he first envisioned a work that would bind the landscape in a benevolent clasp, then stone-on-stone he gave physical, three-dimensional truth to his vision. So he built a beautiful wall which set down where he knew that, rather than intrude, rather than impose on the landscape, it would embellish and enhance. In time, the art of the builder-of-walls would become landscape itself.

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Built stone as landscape: I had never been struck by the idea before. But when it is this good, when it is fashioned from the raw stuff of the hillside, when it lies across the face of the land in such a way that when you think of that little corner of Lakeland you remember the hills and the way they fell towards each other *and* you remember the wall the way you might remember something the glacier left behind. There is no higher compliment.

And you remember the tree. The wall might have been laid that way to draw your eye to the tree, although there are chicken-and-egg connotations to the question of which came first. The tree stands at the very point in the landscape where the wall disappears from view and it is quite alone. It is tall and elegant, fully grown, and because I met it on an autumn-into-winter kind of day it was quite bare, which is the way I like a big deciduous tree best because it reveals its true shape, and this one forked low down, but then it reached tall with all its limbs but one, and stayed slender. In its between-the-seasons clothes, it rose out of a hillside clad in wintry bracken, which is the best kind if you must have bracken, for it had shrunk to knee-high and wore an agreeable shade of muted tawny fire.

So I climbed by the wall, pleased with its company, and at the tree I turned left and north onto High Rigg's main south ridge, and at once the land started to open. I said a silent thank you to the builder-of-walls, another to the maker-of-small-mountains, and a third to the benevolent guiding spirit that had urged me to start with High Rigg.

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