

1. incubation {1977~2017}

fall between two stools Brit. fail to be or take one of two satisfactory alternatives. *the work fell between two stools, being neither genuinely popular nor truly scholarly.*

Who do i think i am? It's hard to say; I think it's a question i've avoided asking too much, because it troubles me. I evade classification, apparently.



My mother always said, 'the trouble is, you fall between two stools'. It always made me think of the stool in the kitchen when i was growing up, between the leaking twin tub & the bin.

She meant, i think, that i could 'do' art and i could 'do' science [school subject choices was usually the context of this remark of hers] but perhaps not either of them *really* well.

jack of all trades (and master of none) a person who can do many different types of work but who is not necessarily very competent at any of them.

i think, closer to the truth is that i was an artist who was scared of the emotional investment doing/making/thinking art seemed to require. Science was easier (more-or-less); though even that gets 'creative' past a certain point...

I've also been called a free spirit. 'I always knew you'd be hard to hold', an ex-boyfriend concluded, at the end of a long-drawn out break-up.

Falling between two stools sounds messy & painful, clumsy & drunken: tripping up in a pub & banging your chin on the bar; biting your tongue...

In the last four decades i've been falling-between binary categorisations:

art & science
academe & real world
practice & theory
artist & scholar
single & married
nomadic & settled
moving & resting

i read somewhere, back in biology student days, that 'man is a taxonomic animal': we *like* order, hierarchy, categories, names, labels, boxes, alphabetising, systematising, pinning things down like beautiful butterflies.

so/and yet, I love categories too... they can also be helpful, identity-shaping, empowering, inspiring; like handholds on a climbing wall, something to reach towards and hold onto, for safety...

you are what you eat
you are what you do
you are what you choose?

But, yes: a jack-of-all-trades-fallen-between-two-stools is historically where and who i thought i was. Somewhere between the fluff & detritus & leaking washing water & old towels...

2. metamorphosis {November 2017}

invitation | *invɪ'teɪʃ(ə)n* | noun. a written or verbal request inviting someone to go somewhere or to do something:

Fern phones. I'm out walking Cai. I can hardly believe my ears – I am so eager to do this. A week-long rite of passage residency; it feels like an amazing gift – and a timely one. I've passed my PhD viva, but with (what feels like depressingly onerous) corrections. Mired in the misery of writing my thesis over the past couple of years, i've been grappling with the art/academe, practice/theory split; feeling neither fully part of one world of the other: a bad academic not taken seriously as an artist. So here i am at a crossroads. (Literally, at a fork in the path in the park when Fern phones). I don't know what will come next. I want to make and pass through/across a threshold to whatever *is* next. I don't think – though the clue was right there in the title all along – i had considered that it would be about *who i was*... i have, after all, mostly defined myself by what i *do*...

group |gru:p| noun. a number of people or things that are located, gathered, or classed together: a number of people that work together or share certain beliefs

We 7 women & Fern meet daily for 7 hours. We will do this for 7 days all told. (I like the numbers.) We sit on the floor. We talk & listen, listen & talk. We move & make sounds. We smudge & dedicate. We invoke allies, guardians, spirits. We share, laugh, cry. We offer & are offered tissues. We learn the Way of Council. We visit the Nanteos Cup (the Holy Grail) at the Llyf. Gen. We visit Coed Penglais (the Woods Where i Usually Walk my Dog). We visit Ynyslas (the Beach Where i Usually Walk my Dog) & Capel y Graig. We are in ceremony.

Three days we meet.

Something is happening here, but i don't know what, at the time...

Now I know we are learning about ritual through participating in one. It is deep and subliminal.

solo | 'səʊləʊ | noun (pl.**solos**) a thing done by one person unaccompanied

The fourth day we are solo, alone, on our own quest of our own devising. Over our explorations of the past three days, we have each arrived at an intention, a mantra of 'who we think we are' to journey with & make sense of.

I've decided to drive up to Capel Soar-y-Mynydd & walk the remote Doethie valley: my favourite place on Earth. i have visited twice in my life. The first time riding age 19 with my horse Sophie, on a 6 day solo ride round Mid-Wales. The last time, driving from my then home in Herefordshire to Rhandirmwyn via Llanymddyfri and walking up the Doethie to meet my mother, who was driving from Aberystwyth straight to the Capel. There was no mobile phone signal. Looking for places to swim along the walk, i found myself running late, literally: i ran the last 3 miles, arriving to find there was no-one there. I thought, deflated, that she had been & gone. But then, drying my wet feet in the church yard, i heard the distant noise of a car; & it was her. Sudden delight. We ate olives & took a selfie in the Capel then went our separate ways again. It is a golden memory; it was a rarely shared adventure. All the more precious now since her death in 2016.

There is a mural on the Capel wall:

Duw cariad yw.

[God is love.]

Neither of us believe/d in God but we believe/d in Love.

That scroll, painted with such seeming tenderness onto a remote chapel wall – & the congregation walking, riding, driving over the hills to sit & see it every week as they sang & listened – always moved us.



dénouement | der'numõ | noun. the final part of a play, film, or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved; the outcome of a situation, when something is decided or made clear. ORIGIN mid 18th cent.: French **dénouement**, from **dénouer** ‘*unknot*’.

if you go down to the woods today...

Before i go up into the hills, i have some domestic duties to discharge. I live in Aberystwyth, where the residency is taking place. So i'm in my domestic routine at the same time as in this shared ceremony, responsible for my dog who needs a lot of exercise either end of the day.

We go to the woods. It is sunny.

Some backstory. Since having a dog, i've become aware of a whole hidden layer of politics: the politics of dog-guardianship. For all the many times i get stopped by strangers to have a lovely conversation about my dog or reminisce about their dog, I have also had more unpleasant interactions with human strangers since having a dog. Dog owners who don't like your dog being off the lead, being on the lead, sniffing, barking, playing or behaving like a normal dog.

In the past 2 years, i've started walking at dusk or delighted at walking in deluges to avoid anything/anyone but the most hardcore dog walkers. (Strange fact: owners who walk their dogs in the rain always seem to be lovely and laid back and properly doggy.)

I worry every time i go to the woods, especially when it's sunny. But in particular i worry about meeting one particular man, a dog owner, who i have only met twice in 5 years, but either he or his dog have been particularly aggressive. I have not seen him for a year now.

It is November. It is squirrel season; they are out in number preparing for winter. Cai can't catch them, but he follows them, zipping between the trees. He barks up the wrong tree, not noticing they have already swung off through the canopy. He runs further away from me than usual in his chasing frenzy. I run after him, listening for the falconry bell he wears on his harness.

He has just accelerated away from me. I run to catch up...

... you're in for a big surprise

I am running through the centre of the woods – where the group, we 7 women & Fern – sat just two days before. The light is golden from the reflected fallen coppery beach leaves.

And suddenly, against this backdrop, like my worst nightmare, *he* is there. The man. *That* man. The man i worry about every goddamn fucking day i come to the woods.

Of ALL the days, I think. That he is here. *Now*. SHIT.

And he is shouting at me. 'Is that your dog? Just... GALLIVANTING? [defensive note: everyone's dog gallivants in the woods, this is why we take them there] My dog nearly ripped her apart! [everyone thinks Cai is a girl]. You should keep that dog on a lead [the woods is a firmly off-lead place, but anyway...]'

As usual when strangers think to speak like this, I am stunned into silence by their audacity & aggression. (Later I will be amused by his use of the beautifully exuberant word *gallivanting*.) His message delivered, he walks past; I say nothing. Cai is trotting up to me, smiling, looking happy & unscathed, ignoring them, oblivious. My heart is hammering. I feel guilt & indignation. I feel admonished. I feel defensive. Cai is a saluki; he *needs* to run. This is the safest place for that. And we are here, in these woods, every fucking day!

Whatever. I clip Cai onto the lead. It's time to head home.

I take a different path from him, but one that runs parallel to it, in the same direction.

Of ALL the days, I think, again. Of all the days! Then suddenly, I remember Fern's advice to go with whatever the day of our solo journey quest brings. Realisation dawns. Of course. I start to run along the path. I need to catch up with him where they converge ahead. I need to speak to him... I have literally no idea what I'm going to say.

Where the paths converge, Cai & i double-back on ourselves a little way & they are there. He indicates that he will get out of our way, off the path, but i call out, asking him to wait. He pauses, warily. I can feel my heart hammering in my chest. I tell him I just want to introduce myself, and my dog. But even before I can say much more, he's blurting out thanks to me for stopping. 'I'm sorry I shouted', he says, 'I just get so worried about my dog. He just doesn't get on with other dogs. Your dog was as good as gold! I just thought he was on his own...'. Our shared relief is palpable. We babble away excitedly. We agree enthusiastically that we both love our dogs. But they have such different needs. Cai's to run, his dog to not be around other dogs. It turns out he lives away, he only gets to see his dog once a week or so; he's in someone else's care here. I feel for him: this is the only time they get together. We exchange names, our dogs' and our own. He thanks me again and again for stopping; 'it really means so much'. Then we head our separate ways.

Whatever happens next today, it feels like a coda: my work feels done. I feel the adrenalin dissipate, leaving me shaky-limbed, clear-headed but also a bit giddy-high.



coda | 'kəʊdə | noun. the concluding passage of a piece or movement, typically forming an addition to the basic structure.

Driving up into the hills, it is hard to find words for what I am feeling; what I always feel here.

Hiraeth, falle? Hiraeth, perhaps?

There is a pull and a push. Desire and... revulsion? That's too strong a word... All I know is that I want to run towards – to rush up into the hills, can barely contain the urge to get there – at the same time as I want to turn around and run back into the warmth and light of civilisation. I am between sensations again. Always betwixt and between.

I am inextricably drawn to this place, to this wildness at the same time as I also fear it. I yearn for the isolation of this place, the rawness, the landscape, the close-to-the-sourceness at the same time as I know I'm not hardy enough for the sheer difficulty, or ruthlessness, the ingenuity of the generations who have eked out a living from this land.

Just thinking about it makes my hands ache. Raynauds. Hours of painful misery riding (horses) in the winter rain and cold.

What am i here for? Who do i think i am? I don't feel like I'm in ceremony, this feels like a chance to reflect on this morning; a luxury to be out alone in the hills. Perhaps ceremony *is* this conscious making-time-for-things.

I don't believe in writing walking logs. So much happens. I slip & nearly fall, lose the path, find the path (thanks to GPS on my phone, which feels like a guilty thing to be using; i should be able to do this without technology)

The overwhelming sense is of wetness. **Water. Dŵr**

It is oozing, seeping, squelching, drizzling, pouring, cascading, running, runneling, dripping, standing, rushing, mizzling...

Lines come to me over and again:

**"What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;**

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet."

Gerard Manley Hopkins *Inversnaid* 1918



"Water, that strong white stuff, one of the four elemental mysteries, can here be seen at its origins. Like all profound mysteries, it is so simple that it frightens me. It wells from the rock, and flows away. For unnumbered years it has welled from the rock, and flowed away" wrote Nan Shepherd in the Cairngorms.

Except here in the Cambrians, it seems to come from the sky.

I return, wet-footed, to the Capel, & sing Calon Lân – all 3 verses – from the pews, and again from the pulpit into the fading light. Then i return to the car & drive home, relieved (& a little bit ashamed of my relief) to see the twinkling lights of Tregaron as the lanes wind down from the bristling back of the hills, like following the muscle contours on the thigh of a sleeping hound.

3. emergence {2017~}

alchemy | 'alkɪmi | noun [mass noun] the medieval forerunner of chemistry, concerned with the transmutation of matter; a seemingly magical process of transformation, creation, or combination:

Days 5 and 6 we come back together to share our stories. We have 20 uninterrupted minutes each to speak. Every woman's story is so rich & textured; so much has happened; as i listen it feels like holding a satisfyingly heavy book, feeling its heft & running listening fingers over the pages. It's as if their words were braille.

Or it's like peeling back a dimension to unfold a whole other universe that was happening while my own intense journey was taking place in this one.

At the end of each of our stories (I share a version of what i have written above) Fern speaks to us for another uninterrupted 20 minutes. It is an echo, a teaching, a learning... she speaks the things she has heard, and we can hear them back differently, in another voice. Then each other woman offers her words & voice too.

I had not anticipated this. Or rather, I had not anticipated the power of this, of the gift of it.

What I take from what Fern offers about my story is simple – so clear and bell-like that it seems suddenly obvious. If i could ‘do’ maths, i imagine this is what it’s like for a mathematician when a formula, or an answer swims suddenly and incontrovertibly into focus.

She talks about the alchemist, who mediates between heaven and earth, between elements. The trickster god of the crossroads, the messenger...

Later, I go to the Arts Centre bookshop & find *The Alchemist’s Kitchen* (Guy Ogilvy 2006).

“Mankind is a paradoxical creature, full of contradictions and warring passions. The spirit wants to rule the world, the soul just wants to be happy. Their conflict is often symbolised in alchemy by a man with a drawn sword and a woman with an eagle or by two fighting animals such as a dog and bitch” ...

The reconciliation of opposites; the masculine & feminine; fire & water; sun & moon...

“Appearing between at the meeting point between history, legend & myth, Hermes Trismegistus is a tricky character to pin down. He shifts roles & identities from one moment to the next. As the archetypal trickster he is the inner and outer teacher, the balancing point between all polarities, often referred to as Hermes or Mercurius...” p. 14).

Suddenly it makes sense. This place i dwell, this uncomfortable in-betweenness, this perpetual sense of not-belonging is precisely about being in *that* space... about being the something or someone that fills the inevitable gap, restless perhaps, but necessary.

So the gap is a place too, and it can be home. My emergence will be a lifelong learning to live in it...