

Lament

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Lament

Richard Ashrowan

nowhere arts

Foreword

Ileana Pintilie

For Richard Ashrowan, searching for the meanings of a place, beyond appearances, is part of his common artistic practice, which helps him relate to the surrounding world. The choice of the subject is not accidental: he looks for the natural places which have remained unaltered (or altered only to a little extent) by civilisation, places that preserve the pure force of a nature which has not been tamed yet.

In the Borderline project, the starting point is situated not so much in the unexplored Scottish location, as so far, but, on the contrary, in an area of political, social and cultural contact between England and Scotland, a territory with a special history.

The artistic journey, which is supposed to make the traveller familiar with the region and with a significant history, is in fact a research project on a series of perceptions triggered by the surrounding world. This set of successive, punctual “meetings” lead the artist to a knowledge and intimacy of the space which, growing more condensed, becomes time.

The relation between the artist and the place’s past – an old Roman wall, transformed into a border, a space of violent clashes and outlawed actions – is possible due to the perception of the topos per se, as it appears now, growing intimate with it after covering the distance on foot. The information and immediate impressions, materialized in photography, grow into a halo of subjective sensations surrounding these *lieux de mémoire*, triggering memories.



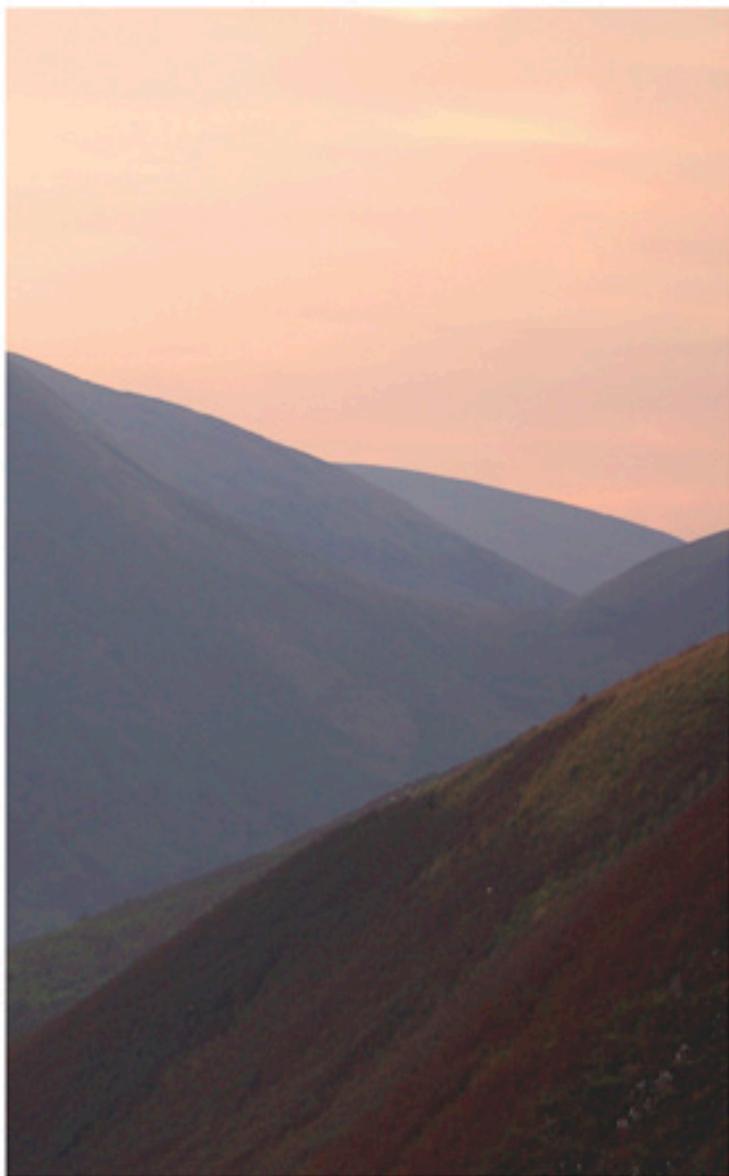
From the clash of the two images – the present one, received at a given moment, in a certain mood experienced by the artist, and the past one, rendered in period writings – stems a complex network of tensions between objectivity and subjectivity, a game played between the image as such and what it reflects as the subjective component of perception.

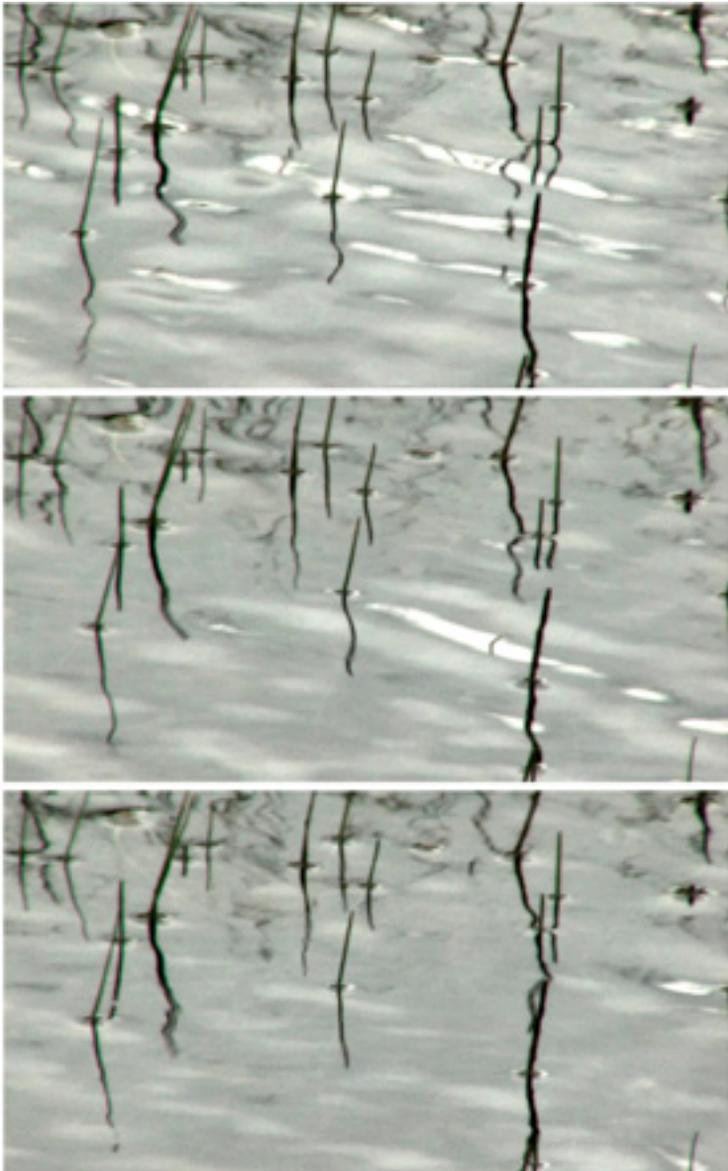
A testimony of this subjectivity of the artist's vision is available in the series of photos which are no longer fragments of a place, but details, bits of images which attract his attention and process his manner of deconstructing the landscape. With these images, we grow aware not of the vastness and complexity of the space, but of the existence of microspaces : water, with a layered material density, rendered in changing colours, "slices of grass", considered samples of landscape, a feather blowing in the wind. These microcosms are meant to raise our awareness of the frailty and relativity of this divided space, cut into fragments and delivered to us as "samples of view".

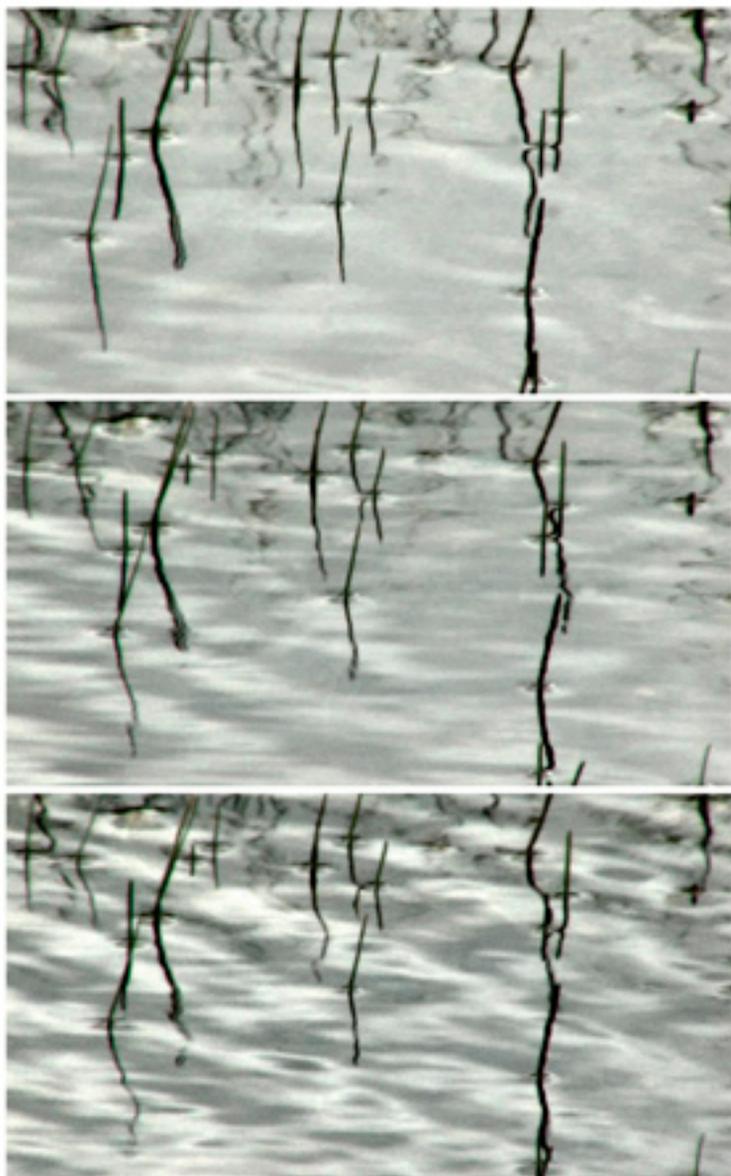
Thus, the sequencing, the deconstruction of the landscape lead to a new unity, that of a space-time, both material and symbolic.

Ileana Pintilie, Romania
November 2008

Border Hills in Evening,
Near Hermitage Castle, September







Richard Ashrowan

My journeys to and along the Scottish/English border began in my studio, a place where I sit looking out across empty hills, ancient history and endless forest. It is a few miles north of the borderline, just inside Scotland. The area is known as the Scottish Borders, a wide territory which spans the ancient Scottish/English border, one of the oldest existing borders in the world. The line of the border extends 96 miles from the tidal opening of the Solway Firth on the west coast, to just north of the mouth of the River Tweed on the east. Most of the landscape is characterised by steep undulating hills, a bleak, depopulated and inhospitable region of deep cleuchs, mist shrouded valleys and expansive skies. In William Camden's *Britannia*, written in 1695, he describes the border hills as "Lean, hungry and waste". The Romans are said to have christened it *Ad Fines* – "The end of the world." Contemporary writers have variously described the area as bleak, ominous, desolate and melancholy. I feel very much at home here, isolated and sheltered, yet completely smitten by my love for this landscape.

I have hanging here a collection of roots, each one a uniquely tangled and unruly strand, plucked from the underworld, each one resembling the lines of a meandering and lawless river course. Roots and rivers share a geography dictated by water. The borderline itself, looked at as a disembodied shape, also resembles both river and root. Its line begins and ends at river openings, while often following the centre-point of various river beds along its course between countries. That it does so is most probably a consequence of the fact that all of the early cartography of this area defined the geography through the marking of rivers. Early maps contained no roads or paths and only a very few mountains. Maps were mainly maps of rivers. In the year 1237, when most of the current borderline was agreed between



Henry III of England and Alexander II of Scotland, map making, and therefore border making, was a reflection of a commonly held mental geography of rivers and their valleys. This sense of mapping by river was one thing I could share with the border-makers. It came to inform many of the places I subsequently visited.

My first border destination was a place of marriages. Gretna Green is a small village just north of the west side of the border. Upon arrival, I was immediately struck speechless by a sign that instructed me to “Shop, Marry” in that order, a tragic order of priorities lived out with ruthless adherence in the atmosphere encountered. Gretna Green became famous as a destination for runaway weddings after an act of parliament was passed in England in 1753 preventing couples from getting married unless they were at least 21 years old and in the presence of a priest. In Scotland, the act of marriage had remained relatively free of the clutches of both priests and law-makers. All that was required for a Scottish marriage was for a declaration to be made before two witnesses. In turn, for over two hundred years, the blacksmith’s shop at Gretna Green became the unlikely destination

for thousands of young English couples, eloping across the border into Scotland to be married by a blacksmith over his anvil. Perhaps there is enduring romance in the triumph of forbidden love, and perhaps this very thing even is what subconsciously drew me to this spot. It is most certainly the heart-string it pulls to enable it to attract the hundreds of thousands of other poor souls who visit it each year. I stood eating a numbingly tasteless sandwich while watching a kilted bagpipe player, as one just married couple left the back door of the blacksmiths shop and stood looking quite completely bewildered and lost outside it, while another hopeful couple were shovelled in through the front. Any romance I might have had in my soul was killed quite dead.

Moving further west along the borderline, accompanied by a deeply misanthropic and quite desolate mood, I sought solitude. Arriving at the Solway Firth and stumbling out of my car at the edge of the estuary, the breath of the sea air delivered a welcome slap to my face. I was quite immediately lifted. Awoken. This is the spot at which the borderline departs dry land, crosses a stretch of mud and vanishes beneath the tidal waters of the Solway on its way out to sea. On the Scottish shore there is a single strand barbed wire fence, an ever widening expanse of marshland, mud and tidal water, extending across the mid-channel borderline and beyond. Looking across at England, an inescapable feeling came over me that it was somehow more civilised, more orderly and controlled. A far less appealing place. As someone originally born and brought up in England, though half Scottish by genes, it was somewhat unnerving. This feeling of discomfort about the English side of the border was to quietly and irrationally haunt me throughout my borderline experience.

Several hours were pleasingly lost to me in filming at this desolate spot. An expansive and stormy cloud-ridden sky always threatening to rain, gave to time an unpredictable urgency.

Landscape and Moving Clouds,
Solway Firth, August



A tiny salt water-pool in the mud in which the downward tip of a grass leaf had fallen, being blown by the wind, tracing an irregular circular pattern in the water surface. Profuse swathes of hardy sea-grass, as beautiful as anything I have ever seen, caught by the wind in the constantly changing light, set against the backdrop of a rising tide. The sorry and pointless looking fence, its barbed wire strands had collected all manner of debris; sheeps wool, grass, wrappers, feathers, all trapped in barbs, all moving softly in the wind. The tide was coming in, reclaiming the land it had abandoned only hours before, an unstoppable force, but rising so very gently, such a gentle lapping on the shore that one wondered it could be rising at all. This boundary, the one between land and sea, endlessly renegotiated with the lunar cycle as its hidden motive force, holds within it the primordial beginnings of our entire understanding of invasion and retreat. At least, this is how it felt at that moment, considering the great heaving movement of the oceans across the world. Across the grass-topped marshland there was a profusion of abandoned moulted feathers strewn everywhere. Captivated by a tiny and delicate white feather, caught in the grass, I became frustratingly invested in its apparent efforts at trying to break free, by its constant wind-agitated state of almost flight, almost freedom. Eventually, it did indeed escape, taking off on the wind, only to become trapped yet again but a few feet away. At this point I had to resist a temptation to rescue this feather. It had become a kind of tragedy unfolding solely in my own mind. I left that place.

Back in my studio, I traced the river and root-like borderline onto the surface of a borderless satellite map, drawing a line in red across our island. Adding 'Scotland' to the North of the line and 'England' to the South, I found just how easy it was to divide the country and place myself safely back in Scotland. This felt powerful in a way, as kings and politicians must frequently do, but I felt a simultaneous sense of unease at my own easy brutality, my own artificiality and

detachment. The more I looked upon the drawn line, the more nonsensical it became, the more dislikeable grew both the look of it and the person who felt compelled to draw it. I felt sure that my revulsion against the finality of lines, with their deadening sense of containment, could quite easily be enough in itself to encourage in me a spirit of incursion, invasion, war.

Several books on the turbulent history of the Scottish/English border arrived in the post, seductively masculine tales of war, conquest and counter conquest between two nations, histories of political and military power, domination, defeat, revenge and restitution, anarchy and control, heads being lopped off, hangings. These kind of histories seem to be common for many border zones. While beginning to immerse myself in this world of written history, the borderline over which they had all been fighting just seemed to be slipping further and further away, until I could no longer feel my way into it at all. It had become once again a line on a map, an intellectual plaything, a falsity in my own mind. At this time, a kind and timely message arrived from a friend, quite out of the blue, suggesting I look at some of the writings of Mary Louise Pratt and her concept of what she called 'the contact zone.' This was a kind of revelation. She defines the 'contact zone' as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish relations, usually involving coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." While this is only a partially accurate description of the nature of the Scottish/English border, I found myself captivated by this idea of the borderline as a 'contact zone', though perhaps not in the specific anthropological way that Pratt might mean us to use the term.

The contact zone as a place where people and cultures meet, as a place where forces, whether they be natural, unnatural or supernatural, meet. The borderline began to emerge from the mist once again,

Trapped White Feather in Wind,
Solway Firth, August

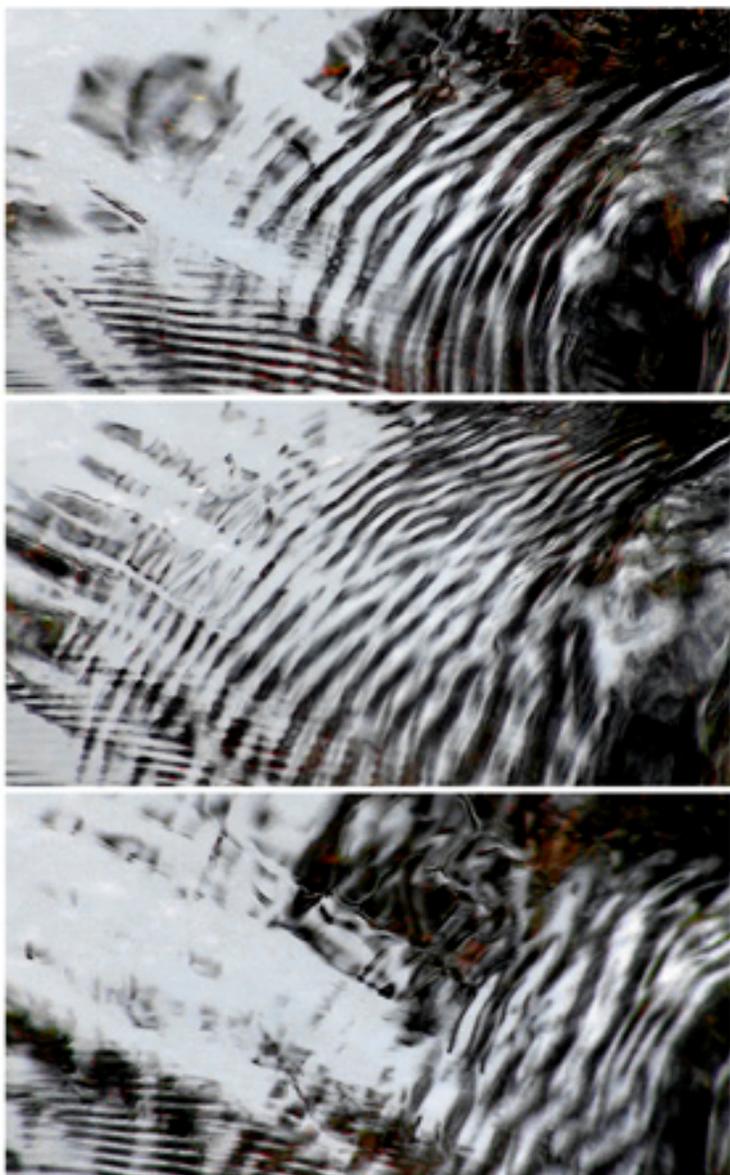


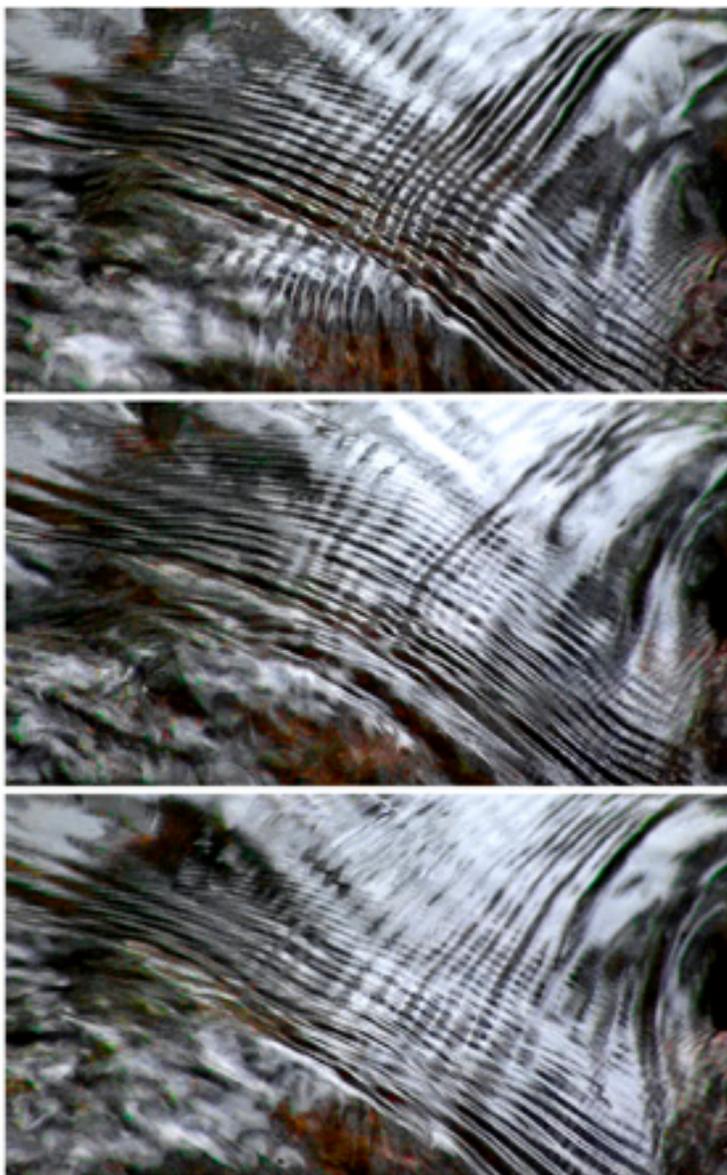
not so much as a territorial line, but as a place of negotiation, a kind of temporal happening between forces, between countries, between individual people, with all these dynamic qualities of unpredictability, uncertainty and possibility. I began to see my own life as a series of more or less successfully negotiated contact zones – physical, psychological, interpersonal – all played out as a kind of microcosm of the borderline. The contact zone becomes a flashpoint, (a word often used negatively to describe border conflicts) a place that certainly contains the potential for annihilation, but also for change, enrichment, augmentation. I was able to see the contact zone not only as a place of conflict, an acknowledged reality enshrined in the histories of borderlines, but as a central spark of change and vitality, dissipating it's force of action outward to the worlds either side of it. Realising quite distinctly that the borderline was not a remote periphery zone, not a line either, but a vital centre, I found it existed not just as something outside to be experienced, but also something inside to be felt.

For three hundred years, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, the Border region was destroyed by the Scottish Wars of Independence, trampled over by invading English forces, and trampled over by counter-invading Scottish forces. In the end, like many conflicts today, it was all fairly pointless, the borderline remained in virtually the same place as it began. Both groups burnt and pillaged their way across the border territory, laying waste to townships, farms, crops and livestock, making full use of 'scorched earth' as a policy to deny the enemy armies any use of resources. It became a no-man's land, a buffer zone between nation states. The nature of many border zones is that they are usually, by nature, the farthest places from the epicentres of power. In this case, the two centres of power were in London and Edinburgh. Economically, the Border region had no significance then, and it remains impoverished today - the border was only important to both sovereign powers as

a frontier, a kind of playground in which dominion was negotiated through footsoldiers and cavalry. As a place of distinct culture and as a human landscape, it was considered expendable in the tussle for power and control between England and Scotland.

The people living in the region responded by becoming increasingly lawless. The decimation of their farmsteads, the violent disregard from both sides, ultimately gave rise to the infamous Border Reivers. The Reivers emerged as powerful family groupings who engaged in sheep and cattle raiding across the borderlines and partook in violent feuds against each other, in part as a means of survival, but also as an opportunistic exploitation of their proximity to the borderline and their geographical remoteness from government control. For almost three centuries, the reiving families became increasingly powerful and maintained effective dominion over the border zone, with their very own brutal legal system. Anarchistic, with little loyalty to either Scottish or English governments, their way of life, identity and status became defined by their degrees of lawlessness, independence from government and primary loyalty to their family groups and their land. As I read my way through books on the unlovable Reivers, absorbing the seemingly endless tales of violence, feuding and bloodshed, I naturally began to feel a great affinity for their independence of mind. Perhaps most telling, this sense of affinity also spread into an appreciation for some of the special words they have gifted to the English language. To be 'reived' has given us bereaved, as also bereft, red-handed and blackmail. The 'grayne' is the word for a Reiver family grouping, which lends us one of my favourite phrases, "to go against the grayne", that is, to oppose conventional wisdom, accepted behaviours, conventionality. These are all Reiver words, the vital language of independence found at the borderline.





Travelling eastward to a place called Kershopefoot, more or less at the mid point between the east and west coasts, where the borderline travels up the centre of a small and insignificant stream, I found the Kershope burn. There are no border markings whatsoever, just a bridge over the tiny burn. No trace of a border. Along the burn, in a dull flat early afternoon light, under an oppressive cover of leafed trees, I at first walked and sat, walked and sat, staring this way and that, in state of uninspired blankness and disconnection. I even debated with myself whether I should not just go home. Finally, after quite some time of still and patient sitting, as I had learned to do when hunting birds as a child, a small confluence of water forces in the mid-flow of the burn absorbed my attention, a complex arrangement, revealed through reflected light, as the wide still flow was narrowed and intensified into the most beautiful and vital pattern of reflecting ripples, by its gently passing between two rocks. Being forced together, channelled by the rocks on either side, forced into increased intensity. It was the felt intensification of the flow that caught me, drew me in, snapping me out of my ennui and leading me to haul my camera gear some distance from the car. After being fully present for an hour, entirely absent from myself, filming this one little movement from different angles, exposures and apertures, some previously unseen red stones then appeared in my view, as if conjured by magic, beneath the water flow, like blood, or a disembodied heart, full of bleeding vitality, redness.

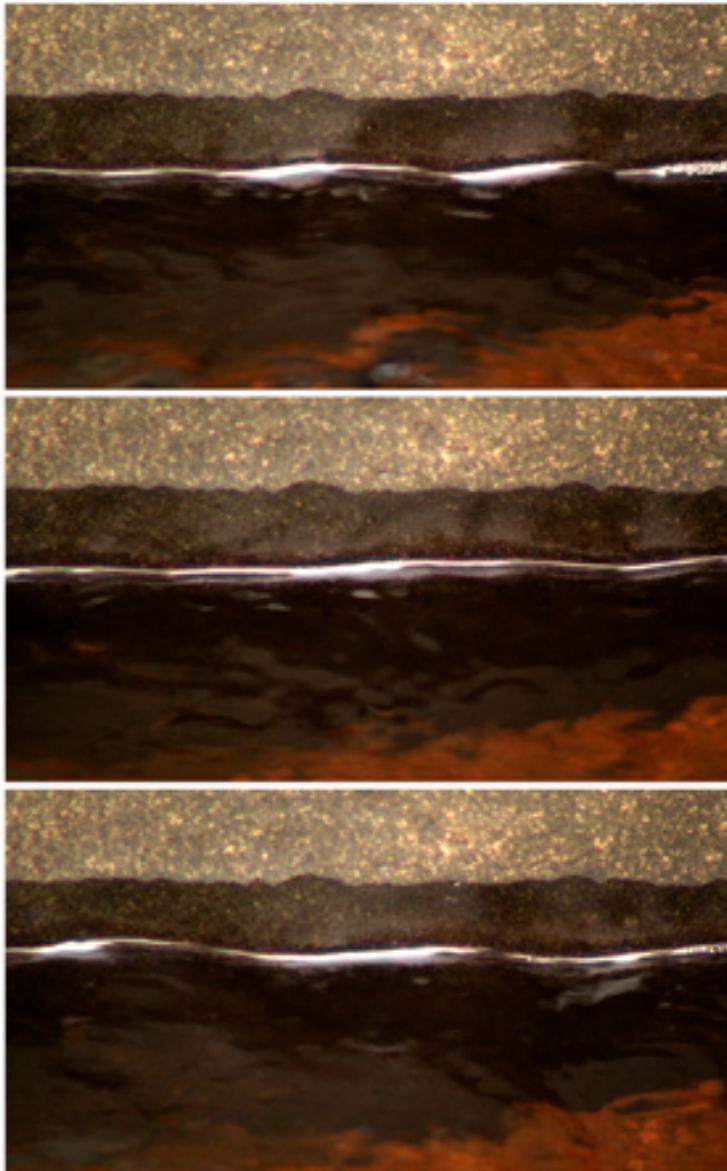
As the light began to fade, I travelled onward, to the massive lump of inhospitable stonework called Hermitage Castle, a place that even now seems to reek of violence, owned as it was by a succession of bloody keepers - beginning with William de Soulis, who was so unpopular his tenants are supposed to have boiled him alive in a pot of molten lead. The Douglasses, Hepburns, and the Scotts of Buccleuch, all violent reiving families, carried on the Hermitage cause and built upon its reputation. It is magnificent, sinister,



a huge impenetrable block of a thing, sitting exposed in a lonely Border valley, the ominous hills rising all around. I am not generally bewitched by the romanticism of castles, but this one, in all its stark, functional beauty, is quite something. The place was completely empty, silent, no-one was there at all and there seemed to be not a sound. I felt moved, transported into a story I had read about Mary Queen of Scots.

Near Kershopefoot, in a field close to the burn where I had been earlier, was one of the meeting places between the English and Scottish Wardens, where disputes were sometimes settled in hand to hand combat. In 1566, James Hepburn, the 4th Earl of Bothwell and a hardy reiver himself, owner of the Hermitage and also the lover of Mary Queen of Scots, attended one of these meetings and ended up fighting another vicious local reiver called Wee Jock Elliot. Hepburn shot Elliot off his horse, bent down to finish him off, but was stabbed three times as Elliot leapt back to his feet.





Returning to the Hermitage Castle in a cart, badly wounded, Hepburn found that his castle had been overrun by another band of Elliots whom he had earlier imprisoned, but he somehow managed to negotiate his way back into his own home. On hearing of her wounded lover, Queen Mary rode 25 miles from Jedburgh, across bleak open country, hostile Elliot territory, to be with him. She was prevented by protocol from staying overnight, so she stayed two hours, then rode 25 miles back again, falling off her horse on the way and subsequently suffering a dangerous, life threatening fever. They married nine years later, he was her third husband.

Locally, in current popular memory, it is interesting to discover that it is always Wee Jock Elliot, the lively, stabbing, never say die reiving trickster who is the unconventional hero of this story. Yet standing in the wild open country by the Hermitage Castle, held by a landscape of complete peace, with all its tales of violence swirling through me, I imagined the arrival of the shattered, fearful Mary, a powerful woman who had put herself at great danger, to see her strong but wounded and defeated lover, for what she perhaps thought was the last time. I must confess to being deeply touched by this rare and tender tale of human devotion.

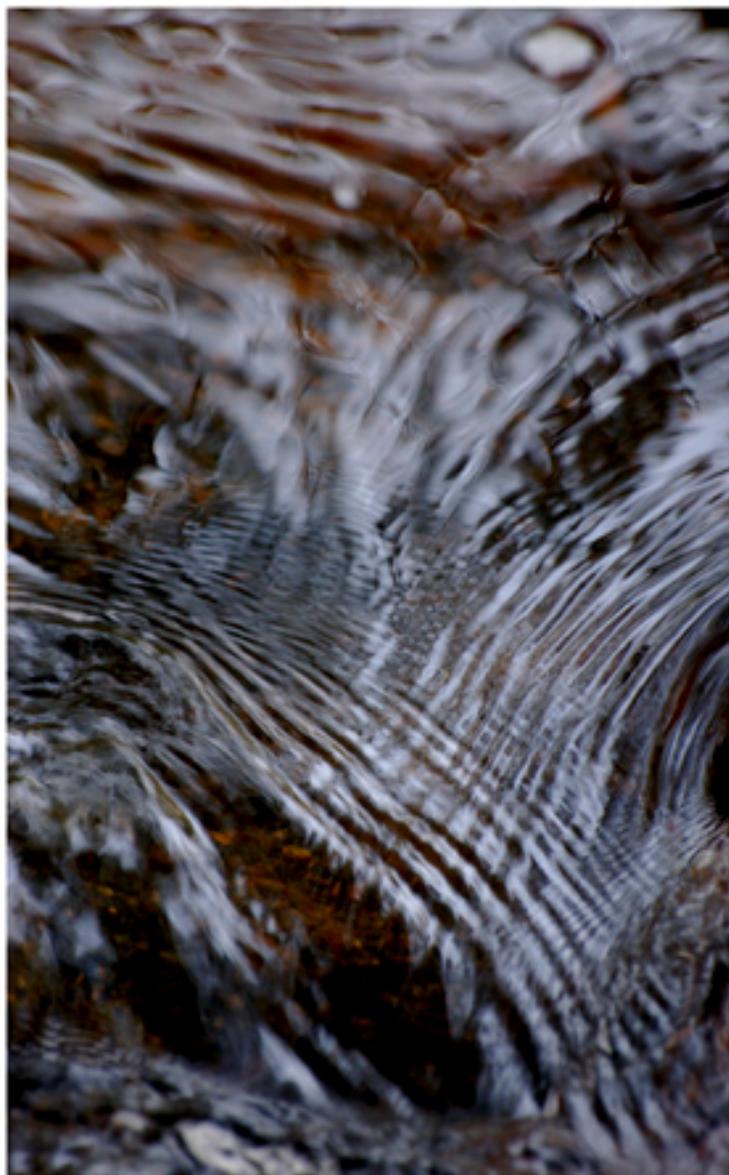
When having to describe the location where I live and work, a necessity that sometimes happens when I meet inquisitive strangers, I frequently find myself using the phrase “I live in the middle of nowhere”, as a kind of shorthand evasion, denoting rural emptiness and geographical remoteness. It was not until a Polish friend took the phrase at its most literal meaning that I realised what a peculiar and appropriate term this was. To dwell in the middle of nowhere, in a non-place. The border has always been a no-man’s land, a disputed territory, neither one place nor the other, a threshold space, a place of possibility. All the places I visited on the border, even today, seemed to retain this uneasy feeling of emptiness, of remoteness from life, modern day irrelevance even, while yet being haunted

by the vaporous ghostly forms of a violent and vital past. While thinking upon this, the concept of 'liminality' fell into my world.

Liminality is a term coined by Victor Turner, based on the latin word 'limen', meaning threshold (another boundary word, 'limit', also comes from the same latin root). Turner defines liminal people as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony." Here he is referring largely to the state of in-betweenness, characterising ritual transitions or rites of passage. Putting aside the ritual framework of Turner's idea, liminality is a powerfully accurate description of the psychology of the Borderer, who, from their reiving days through to the present day, have made "being betwixt and between" a central and celebrated part of their selfhood, identity and livelihood. It is perhaps important to note that the liminal individual is not in this in-between place because he has simply been marginalised or pushed out, he is there through an act of choice. The Borderer positioned himself in an in-between space, in the cracks, crevices and cleuchs of the Border hills and river valleys, exploiting the disputed zones of flux and uncertainty between nation states. He is permanently liminal, neither here nor there, a trickster and a threshold dweller.

Victor Turner also acknowledged that liminal individuals are dangerous, having nothing "no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows" and indeed, it has often been said of Borderers, when recruited for battle, that they "wore their badges lightly", meaning that they would readily swap a Scottish badge for an English one as it suited them. To be in a liminal space as a person is to be an outsider, a watcher, a person without fixed belonging, detached, amorphous and therefore deeply suspicious to others, unless, that is, one is liminal oneself. The Borderers lived in a territory of dangerous liminal spaces - crossroads, borders and meeting places.

Water Flowing Between Two Stones,
Kershopefoot, September



Of all the liminal spaces on the border, the places where the Wardens of the Scottish and English Marches met for 'Truce Days' were perhaps the most dangerous of flashpoints, places for the exchange of criminals, accusations and recriminations. The last borderline battle between Scotland and England, the Redeswire Fray, took place at such a meeting point. So it was that Sir John Forster, the well worn 74 year old reiving warden of the English March and a man of fearsome reputation, rode many miles over difficult terrain for the Truce Day, July 1575. He arrived to meet his much younger Scottish counterpart, Sir John Carmichael, at Redeswire. Trouble broke out and 6 English and 5 Scots were killed that day. Try as I did, I could find no trace of the names of the dead in the history books, but for one, Sir George Heron, and no more could I find out about him. The malignant border mist, the same mist which I observe here from my studio window, settling now quietly upon the fields of Nowhere, I sensed right now must also be descending on the Redeswire field, swallowing up so many border memories, so many tragedies, whole lives and deaths. This tiny battle, within its eleven stoically anonymous and pointedly silent dead, quietly shuffled out the era of armed border conflict between Scotland and England.

As I continued my journey along the lonely line from west to east, I travelled the road to the border at Carter Bar, on a dry but cool and hazy day. The journey unfolds over dramatic hills, far reaching views, bleak and inhospitable moorland, an archetypal and powerful Border landscape. There were no clouds, the sky was a whitish grey, the tops of all the hills at once hidden, then revealed, by a low lying and indecisive mist. The border point itself was quite an occasion. Two opposing lay-by's jostle for attention on either side of the busy A68, 'Scotland' and 'England' are inscribed in white on either side of a huge stone positioned in each lay-by. The dominant feature at this desolate spot is a white van, hooked up to a generator, which appeared to be doing a fine trade in bacon and



egg rolls, burgers, tea and coffee. Many people would stop for this kind of refreshment, but the border was, I fear, only an incidental feature for them. Nonetheless, once out of their cars, they would pose for photographs, coffee cup and bun in hand, standing either against the Scottish side of the rock, or the English one, presumably choosing a side appropriate to their own national allegiance, or to their sense of adventure.

Ducking down behind the burger van, and walking across a stretch of damp moorland, my feet plunging deep in thickly matted rushes, I descended the slope to a stone marking the site of the Redeswire Fray. Around me, the Scottish Tweed Valley and Eildon hills stretched out one way, the oppositional hills of Northumberland in England the other. Yet soon I could see no further than half a mile. A vaporous mist seemed to be enclosing me, diffusing the boundaries between treeline and sky, between light and dark, falling in upon the living. While filming the luminous mist of Redesdale that day, a world of unearthly landforms would emerge and disappear beneath the swirling and indistinct light, a hard territorial zone, made soft-edged, uncertain and supernatural. The hills eclipsed by opaqueness,

Treeline and Covering Mist,
Redesdale, September



then cloaked in misty whiteness. Wondering at my own response to this gathering indistinctness, how powerfully I was drawn to film not the valley nor the stone or rushes, not the blooded ground, but instead the effects of the dream-like, boundary-less and enshrouding mist, a kind of subconscious world. Held, by the mist, in a kind of yearning for the mystic in life.

Leaving the site, climbing back up to Carter Bar, I thought I might ask the brisk woman serving in her van about the border. She lived, she said, three miles into Scotland “on the right side” as she put it. “Does the border still matter?” I asked. “Well, it’s history isn’t it” to which I could only ask again whether it mattered. “Of course it still matters.” Another pause, but I waited. “But we’re not going to start killing you and looting your stuff again now are we?”. In fact, a slight shadow passed over her face as she said this, she herself looked a little shocked, disappointed even. I felt it too. I was shocked to feel a part of me, quite unromantically and with uncomplicated masculinity, longing to go back to killing and looting. At that moment, a powerful feeling, one I believe is shared by us all, if only fleetingly from the shelter of our armchairs, came upon me. I wanted anything but the interminable metalled road, with its endless stream of identical cars and sterile polystyrene cups, I wanted anything but the sanitised and over regulated safety of modern life. I wanted a return to vitality, danger, unpredictability, hunger.

The Redeswire Fray, as an event and a point in time, marked the end of pitched battle at the borderline. It also marked the beginning of the end for the Border reiver. It was a kind of last exhausted gasp, the last historically insignificant trial of a thousand year long initiation rite. From it the Borderer emerged blinking either into the gallows, the chopping block, or the daylight of a new, more peaceful, but sadly less interesting world. James I of England, or James VI of Scotland, for strangely he managed to be both people, was the catalyst.

The Union of the Crowns, as it is known, was the accession of James VI, King of Scots, to the throne of England in 1603, becoming James I of England. James was the son of Mary Queen of Scots, who was executed by Elizabeth I of England for plotting to gain the English crown. Ultimately, it was Elizabeth I's failure to have children that resulted in the English crown falling to James VI of Scotland. At 37 years old, as James I, he decided to unify his two kingdoms. He declared border law obsolete and the borderline itself void. He removed the Wardens of the Marches and attempted to rename the Border area "The Middle Shires". While all this was deeply unpopular, he nonetheless successfully killed off the Border reivers through a programme of savage justice in which many members of the leading reiving families were hung, or else deported to the bogs of Fermanagh and Roscommon in Ireland. Hundreds of reivers were executed without trial in Jedburgh and other border towns. Various political 'acts of union' followed, bringing Scotland and England together under The Kingdom of Great Britain. Some of the great reiving families survived the peace, came out of their liminal space and joined forces with government, while others held out for anarchy and perished.

The Union of the Crowns. This was the point at which the Scots began their loss of political independence, and the point at which the borderline began its slow death, its terminal loss of vitality. Certainly, independence had come and gone during the Scottish Wars of Independence, but it had always returned home, albeit at great cost in human life and at great cost to the Border people and their territory. But quite suddenly, with the Union of the Crowns, independence was lost without so much as a scuffle. Scotland was quietly absorbed into the Kingdom of Great Britain, the English got what they had always wanted, and the Scots felt cheated, duped into an unwelcome marriage with an old enemy. The Border zone was pacified, went quiet, became more or less civilised. The proud

Descending Mist on Hills,
Redesdale, September



Kingdom of Scotland had never been decisively or finally defeated by England, yet, with a quiet sleight of hand, it now no longer existed, with apparently no possibility of gaining back its state of true independence. I began to wonder, as a hybrid Englishman, my Scots genes invisibly at work within my body, why this should even bother me so. Should we not, after all, when we consider the great universe of human conflict and suffering going on all around us, really learn to cherish all and every moment of peace and union in our lives? But what was this feeling that was rising, burning and receding within my own blood, tide-like, feverish and quietly unrelenting?

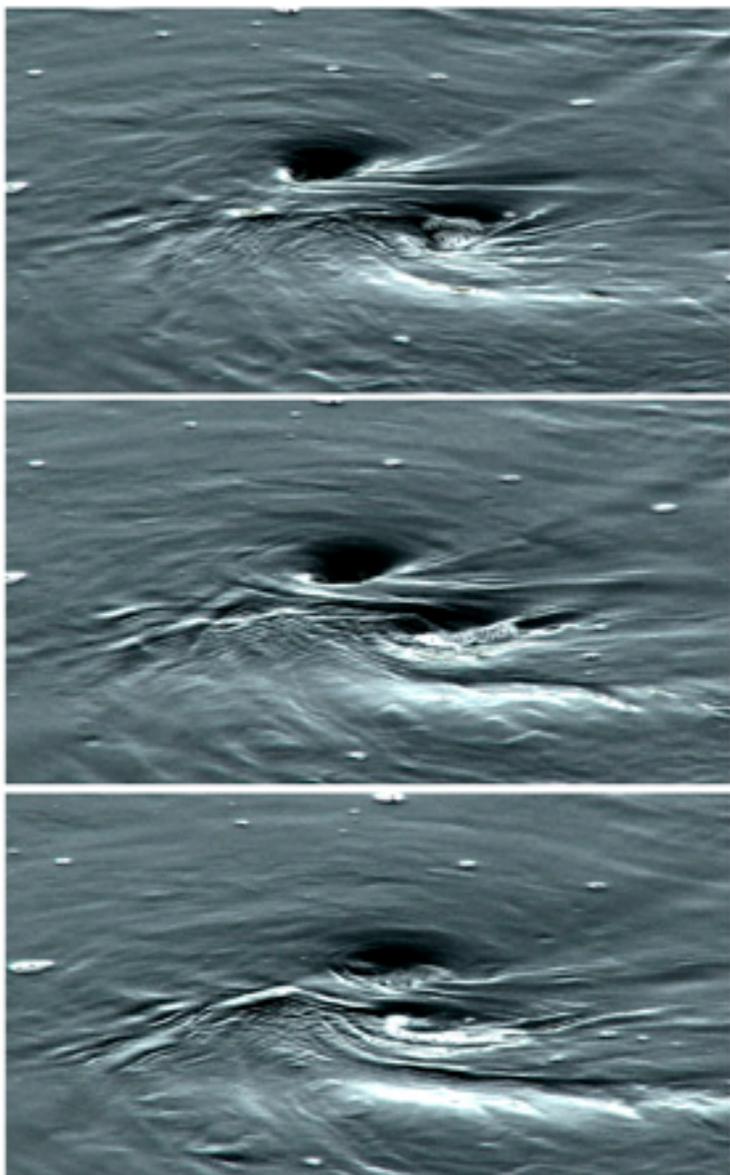
The Rankleburn and the Phenzhopehaugh burn, both of which flow across our land, meander their way from my home through the border hills, the wild territory of Buccleuch, into the River Ettrick, and from there through the ancient Ettrick Forest, along the beautiful Ettrick valley, into the River Tweed, through its fertile lowland valleys, eventually flowing out to the east coast at Berwick. A tear dropped here, a tiny white flower plucked from a wild strawberry, or a willowherb leaf dropped into the clean clear flowing water beneath our footbridge, might one day find its way to the Tweed, to the coast, the wild North sea and the endless oceans that make up the dominant and unifying fluid blue surface of our globe. The mapping of rivers, flowing with the water of life, the veins and arteries of the mountainous body, somehow only ever a female body, the lifeblood of a great mother or an adored lover. Rivers always seem to me the defining vitality of any landscape, indeed, they are the only natural way to traverse it.

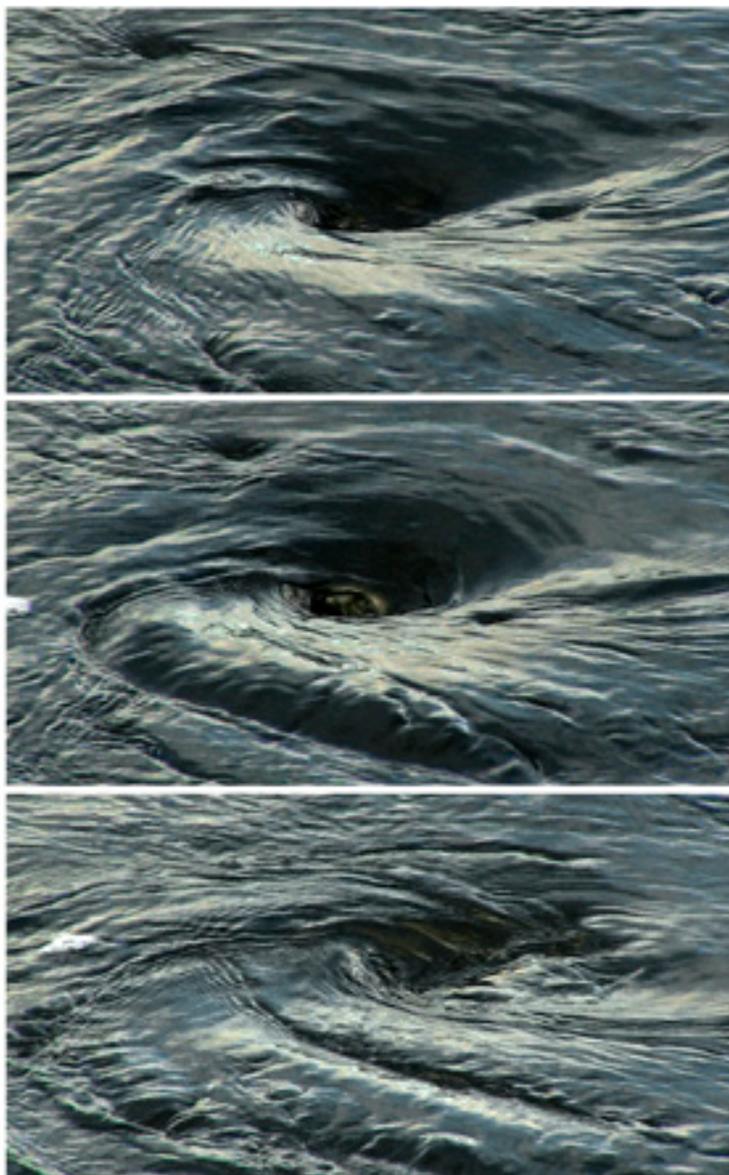
The farthest and most easterly borderpoint I travelled to was to the River Tweed at Norham, just a few miles from the coast. Having become overly pre-occupied with visions of misty indistinctness, and being greatly interested in the paintings of JMW Turner in

general, I had been studying the paintings he did from sketches he made close to Norham Castle. I felt sure Turner would lead me to the right place. So, in leaving my border hill country for the great river Tweed I at first felt a sense of great anticipation and excitement. It was in one sense a culmination, an ending also, but also it was to be a joyous reunion with the diffused waters of my home. I felt vital and connected, travelling along on a beautiful and unusually sunny October morning, passing out of the wild hill valleys and into the green open farmland of the Tweed valley, glimpses of the great river glistening tantalisingly out my window. The Tweed had become for me the river into which all rivers did flow, and the borderline followed its central channel for many miles.

I stopped at Norham, where a great and ancient castle looms over English side of the Tweed. Wandering around the ruins, trying to find something real to feel, or even just to grasp a real presence of the past at this place, I searched in vain for the gift of a tiny apparition even, or perhaps a fleeting glimpse of an owl. There was only my own







evasion of feeling, accompanied by the invading presence of several other tourists, various helpful signs instructing me to behave myself, all bathed in a sunny disposition. I felt I should really quite like to be invisible, or shrouded in darkness, or quite rubbed out. Somehow too close, I decided I had to see this place as Turner saw it, from way down below by the banks of the Tweed. Following a footpath to the great river, a footpath which had recently been politely mown for the many dog walkers who used it. The view Turner had painted is sadly gone, if ever it really existed, the trees around Norham quite obscuring its craggy ruin from the dramatic overshadowing presence it has in his paintings. But then, the great Tweed, bathed in sunlight, it was indeed majestic and beautiful in its wide and forceful arterial expanse. Yet, despite such a fine day, I was also unexpectedly struck by something ungainly and drab in its slow lumbering progress through the flat and well peopled farmlands.

Moving up river a way, crossing over the Tweed to the Scottish side, where for some reason, I expected better things, an un-mown path perhaps, a wild spot even, but the Scottish path along the Tweed bank had been mown too, there were even benches. There was something I wanted, expected, from this borderline space – I needed a degree of felt presence to push against me, but it was not there. Without that, without a sense of presence and otherness, the borderline seemed to be degenerating into only that, a meaningless and pacified line.

Two separate but equally charming people walked past me and commented, in kindly English, on the splendid weather we were having. Speech had deserted me. Already the feeling of oppression had started to gather pace, everywhere I looked the world seemed manicured, tamed, unified, lost and spiritually empty, therefore hostile. I filmed some swans, holding court like a bunch of smug aristocrats in the centre channel of the Tweed. An hour spent

Lament

filming eddies in the water surface was a little healing. Trying to catch them in my lens, with a sweep of my camera, tiny fleeting and ephemeral vortices, each one an individual, a unique untamed little personality of its own, they would appear and disappear in just a second or two, vanishing back into the great surging river, each one a perfect microcosm of a human life, endlessly being born, swirling, dying. Somehow, over the duration of this day, I was increasingly overwhelmed by an inexplicable sense of being slowly but completely and comprehensively crushed. Had I become afflicted with the spirits of the past, the spectral fears of the present? Whatever the mysterious cause, I shall not be able to forget the feeling I had that day, driving home, even finding myself quite unable to drive at one point, pulling off the road, taking my 21st century head in my hands, and surrendering.

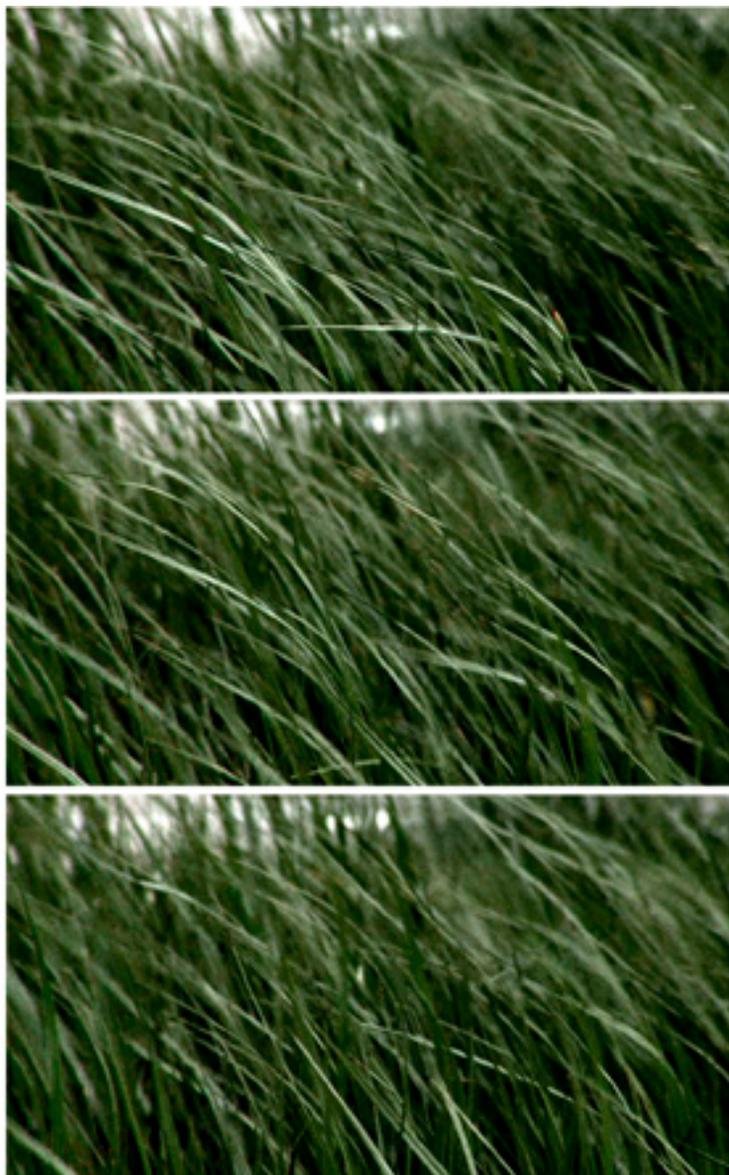
Richard Ashrowan, Phenzhopehaugh
November 2008

Incoming Tide,
Solway Firth, August



And gently she guides him through the vast landscape of Lament,
shows him the pillars of the temples, and the ruined walls
of those castles from which, long ago, the princes of Lament
wisely ruled the land, Shows him the tall
trees of tears and the fields of blossoming grief
(the living know it just as a mild green shrub);
shows him the herds of sorrow, grazing, - and sometimes
a startled bird, flying low through their upward gaze,
far away trace the image of its solitary cry

Rainer Maria Rilke
The Tenth Duino Elegy
Translated by Stephen Mitchell



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