

Now...

BRIAN MORTON

The house has eight doors. It is the happy occupation of a school morning to work out the manifold permutations of ingress and egress. It is our homely equivalent of the Bridges of Königsberg – though there were only seven of them – a puzzle solved by our hero Leonhard Euler, who gazes down in benign sepia from the study wall. Actually, he doesn't. His slightly wall eye is on the next interesting problem. Our topology has complex and ever-shifting rules. Can one use each door in one direction only? Does the front door – not the original one – have a different status? Should the second door to the oratory be disallowed, since it would have been stoutly bolted during Sr Therese's time here as an anchoress? Does the attached sheep fank which serves as a greenhouse and can be approached from both sides count as part of the house? Given that we spend as much time in there as sitting down, it probably should. Does the tiny door above the kitchen count when only a hobbit could get through it without stooping low?

Eight doors sounds like grandeur. And oratories and anchoresses sound like the kind of bad Gothic Jane Austen was satirising in *Northanger Abbey*, though that impression is tempered a little by the non-detached sheep fank. The reality is simpler and more eccentric. Round a tiny seventeenth-century bothy grew a series of out-houses, byres and stone barns, which gradually became incorporated into a larger dwelling for ten generations of small farmers who battled with varying degrees of success and despair against red water, rampant juncus and thorny parabolas that root and spread each time the tip returns to earth. The Gaelic for the place is 'vale of brambles'.

The only grandeur comes from a time after the farmers left when an art historian made it his summer place, and installed a modest Charles Rennie Mackintosh window (stylised tulips) and two modernist Mackintosh pillars in the library, so called because it has even more books in it than any other room in the house. These incongruous artefacts were removed legitimately from a university building in Glasgow that was being demolished to build more university buildings, this at a time when Mackintosh wasn't yet much rated, let alone a brand.

After the art historian came the monks, or strictly a priest, monk and nun from a breakaway order that practised – or at least preached – an asceticism that made the Desert Fathers seem like sybarites. They were the only people we'd ever spoken to who used terms like 'Romanov martyrs' in casual conversation and went into rages about Queen Elizabeth I as if the old bitch was still burning co-religionists. Their other trigger point was Hindus, for whom they had a lethal contempt.

They had lived in several locations before coming here, always generating some friction with the local clergy. They sold us the house cheap, though, and moved on,

offering Parthian blessings. God had apparently called them to the Midlands, where they lived on houseboats for a while, enraged the community and eventually the police by barracking a gay vicar and posting homophobic leaflets through front doors. They went to Orkney after that, taking the cats with them, but swapping houseboats for caravans. Last year, after calling Pope Francis a heretic and announcing that the great Ship of Faith had run aground on error and secularism, they were excommunicated.

The house is on the high bank of a permanently murky braid of hill water that is too small to be designated a river and too large to be a mere burn. Its basin is high and steep and goes back miles into the hills, so it never runs dry, even in the longest droughts, when clouds feed it, but in the frequent wet spells, it turns into a snarling torrent. The lag time is an exact hour. In even the heaviest rain, it bibbles along quietly, a lithophone at the back of the orchestra. Sixty minutes later though, its mood turns. The water rises with frightening speed, and changes from a Guinnessy red-brown to the colour and consistency of boiling cocoa.

It's a killer. A spate took away the man who farmed a mile downstream. He had been standing on his footbridge, filming the water with his phone. No one knows whether a snag carried downstream knocked him over, or whether he slipped. His body was found a further mile downstream, caught among trees. A tiny fenced area, without inscription, marks where he came to rest. We've seen deer swept by us, almost always already dead, but once in the fading light of an autumn afternoon we watched a live buck fight the current, eyes wild, the legs unseen and maybe already broken but twice bringing him to within a yard of the bank. He passed us at running speed; impossible to help.

The footbridge is the only access to the house. When the water is high, we cross singly, eyes always upstream. On another day, we saw a girthy log, a good seven or eight feet long, torpedo towards us, strike a rock and stand upright for a long, slow second, like a malevolent, dripping river spirit before sinking back into the brown coils and racing away below. It's easy to believe in kelpies when the water is high. Lie awake at night and you can hear them neigh.

We often stand and listen. The spate agitates the pebbles and larger stones, knocking them together like damped piano keys. At its height, the water produce strange harmonics, chorused sounds that might be devil choirs or angels shouting defiance. Every now and then a sub-bass note hints at something more seismic. We do feel very occasional earth tremors here, tiny shudders as the peninsula cracks a knuckle or flexes a knee. Get up in the morning and find that the bathroom door is stuck and needs a shoulder, while another swings free.