

The Memory of Water by Emma Newrick

(sound of the burn)

Emma Newrick speaking

Have you ever listened to the murmuring of water, and thought you could hear a voice within it? In this place, that voice is mine. I've had many names: spirit, goddess, lady of the living waters. I am the Tipalt Burn. Would you like to hear my story?

Come closer, then. But not too close. You should never trust a river.

Many have called this land home, but I was here before them all. In the beginning, I was only water, flowing through the landscape, carving my own path to the sea. In the distant hills I rise, winding through the rough grass. Curlews call, high on the fell, and sheep graze my narrow banks. I cascade down through waterfalls to curve around the place where the castle now stands, and rush on to meet my sister the South Tyne. Together we flow out into the ocean and dissolve in salt spray.

At first, I was content just to watch those who walked along my banks. They'd drink from my waters or catch a fish, and the smaller ones liked to play in my shallows. Animals or people, they were all the same to me.

It was long ago; the first time someone saw me. You'd have called his people the Celts, though that's not what they called themselves. He was just a boy, searching for a lost sheep. He slid down my muddy bank and splashed into my waters. I wound around his calves, and watched him. The sheep was long gone – floating upstream in one of my deeper pools, all sodden wool and limp limbs. I felt it drown, but a river has no use for sympathy. My waters were rising, swollen by rain. Should I take the boy too? (I told you, never trust a river). I surged up, undecided, and he saw me. His eyes widened, and he dropped to one knee in the flood. *Goddess*, he said. I smiled, and let him go.

He told his people what he had seen, and gradually they came to me. Some brought jewels. Others left me bones. Both pleased me. They gave me other things too, things that did not lie on my sandy bed, but echoed through my dreams at night: their memories, their hopes, their fears.

Many of them feared an approaching army. *The Romans*, my people called them. I imagined marching columns, crimson capes and gleaming armour. In the end, they were just men, weary and footsore, glad to rest. I think of them even now, every time someone drops a heavy pack on my bank or cools their tired feet in my waters.

The Romans had no need to fight – by the time they reached my river they had already conquered. Instead, they came to carve up the land and build a wall, to keep my people in and others out.

The wall stretched from one side of the country to the other. For years my valley rang to the sound of metal on stone. The soldiers sat on my banks and complained about the work and the weather. One leaned over to cup some water to his mouth, and as our eyes met I laughed to see him stumble back before I dissolved in bubbles. After that, they brought me offerings too. Coventina, they called me – the goddess of disappearing memory. They were wrong: I kept all the memories they gave me safe.

But nothing lasts forever, not even their great Empire. In time, moss grew over the stones of the Wall, and Rome called its soldiers back. Some stayed – they'd made a home here and my land was now their land too. They threw gifts into my pools and hoped for peace. But peace did not come. When the Romans left, others fought to rule this land. Kings rose and fell, one after another. My people told me tales of Edwin, and of Oswald, the King in the North.

I longed to see a king for myself. I surfaced one morning to find men building a wooden hall on the hill above me. Later, after it was finished, the lord of that hall came down to kneel on my bank. 'Goddess,' he said, 'Will you give me a fine trout for the king?'

How could I refuse? I lay back in my pool and watched all that day, until at last the king himself rode by. He was tall, and he wore a crown upon his head. At dusk, he walked beside my waters, and though men such as him no longer believed in the old ways, he paused, and wished for victory in battle. Well, fish I could grant him. But some things are beyond a river's powers.

I remember when they tore down the wooden hall and raised another in its place, its walls made of Roman stone. Those stones had once stood against the tribes beyond the Wall, but now they kept out the Reivers. This land has always been fought over, but never quite so fiercely as when the Reivers feuded. Men came a-reiving from both sides of the border, with fire and sword. One night I woke as they waded my ford. I surged up, my waters closing over their heads. They sank silently.

Other nights, the castle was not so lucky. Perhaps you've heard the tale of how a servant hid a golden table, decorated with jewels, to keep it safe from Reivers? Some say it lies hidden in a well, others believe it is on the bottom of a deep pool. If you'd like to know the truth, tell me: can you keep a secret? Come closer, then. Let me whisper to you. *So can I.*

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