

Included in *Interland, Six Steps Underwater*, published by Smith/Doorstep Books, 2006.

A room underground

*There are berries on a hill
and in glades strawberries too
for you, luckless one, to pick...*

Water

Their neighbours told them. Once, their cellar was boarded up. Under a house piled high with newspapers, it was stacked with wine bottles: sweet dandelion, tart rhubarb, others brewed from berries on the hills, all gone to vinegar years before. Their cellar dripped like a limestone cave.

When they first viewed the house and came down the stone stairs, they saw the cellar without this knowledge. The long table was inviting and the smell of a freshly baked sponge egged the air. Black cartoons of a lady, a warrior and a dragon lovingly and badly decorated one wall. They did not notice the holes drilled through the flags for the water to seep away. They did not see the gills of fungi winking in the gap between the skirting board and the floor.

Their cellar spoke to them in firestone red and sun yellow. Its Yorkshire origins were thickly disguised by its Mexican accent. They did not hear the underground stream gurgling and bubbling beneath the floor. Philip did not know how much he would like to lie down, put his ear to the flags and feel the rush of water.

Fire

Their cellar has a log burning fire, black cast iron, with two crusted spanners to stop logs falling through to the ash pan. When it is unlit, they can look inside and see The Three Billy Goats Gruff cavort in relief. When it blazes, 'soldiers' flicker on the back wall before they die. For tinder, Philip takes out the Pace Egg basket and collects fallen twigs from beneath the ash trees. The smell of wood smoke gets into everything on the floor above, even the flute music.

Fire chases water out; the cellar is drier in winter than summer.

Philip had forgotten how a fire allows us to remember other fires.

He had forgotten how a fire is a place for music and stories.

Water

This is a summer story: the fire is out. Listen to the water.