

We know so little of the worlds beneath our feet. Look up on a cloudless night and you might see the light from a star thousands of trillions of miles away, or pick out the craters left by asteroid strikes on the moon's face. Look down and your sight stops at topsoil, tar-mac, toe. I have rarely felt as far from the human realm as when only ten yards below it, caught in the shining jaws of a limestone bedding plane first formed on the floor of an ancient sea.

The underland keeps its secrets well. Only in the last twenty years have ecologists succeeded in tracing the fungal networks that lace woodland soil, joining individual trees into intercommunicating forests – as fungi have been doing for hundreds of millions of years. In China's Chongqing province, a cave network explored in 2013 was found to possess its own weather system: ladders of stacked mist that build in a huge central hall, cold fog that drifts in giant cloud chambers far from the reach of the sun. A thousand feet underground in northern Italy, I abseiled into an immense rotunda of stone, cut by a buried river and filled with dunes of black sand. Traversing those dunes on foot was like trudging through a windless desert on a lightless planet.

Why go low? It is a counter-intuitive action, running against the grain of sense and the gradient of the spirit. Deliberately to place something in the underland is almost always a strategy to shield it from easy view. Actively to retrieve something from the underland almost always requires effortful work. The underland's difficulty of access has long made it a means of symbolizing what cannot openly be said or seen: loss, grief, the mind's obscured depths, and what Elaine Scarry calls the 'deep subterranean fact' of physical pain.

A long cultural history of abhorrence exists around underground spaces, associating them with 'the awful darkness inside the world', in Cormac McCarthy's phrase. Fear and disgust are the usual responses to such environments; dirt, mortality and brutal labour the dominant connotations. Claustrophobia is surely the sharpest of all common phobias. I have often noticed how claustrophobia – much more so than vertigo – retains its disturbing power even when being experienced indirectly as narrative or description. Hearing stories of confinement below ground, people shift uneasily, step away, look to the light – as if words alone could wall them in.

I still remember as a ten-year-old reading the account, in Alan Garner's novel *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, of two children escaping danger by descending the mining tunnels that riddle the sandstone outcrop of Alderley Edge in Cheshire. Deep inside the Edge, the embrace of the stone becomes so tight that it threatens to trap them:

They lay full length, walls, floor and roof fitting them like a second skin. Their heads were turned to one side, for in any other position the roof pressed their mouths into the sand and they could not breathe. The only way to advance was to pull with the fingertips and to push with the toes, since it was impossible to flex their legs at all, and any bending of the elbows threatened to jam the arms helplessly under the body. [Then Colin's] heels jammed against the roof: he could move neither up nor down and the rock lip dug into his shins until he cried out with the pain. But he could not move . . .

Those passages took cold grip of my heart, emptied my lungs of air. Rereading them now, I feel the same sensations. But the situation also exerted a powerful narrative traction upon me – and still does. Colin could not move and I could not stop reading.

**This is an extract from *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* by Robert Macfarlane, published by Hamish Hamilton in hardback on May 2nd 2019.**