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From the Marrow of the Mountain

Susanna Knittel

This article focuses on the experience of finding a new source of water since the fountain fed by the neighbor's source dried up in the middle of an alpine summer of farming in the Swiss Alps. This new water source is on ancestral land owned by three cousins of different viewpoints. Central to the story is the developing friendship between the local dowser and one of the owners, a Swiss-Californian woman determined to move the management of this jeweled terrain, with structures and customs, out of patriarchal ways into stewardship. The pristine land is highlighted, as is the vanishing knowledge of the old ways.

A few summers ago, I was alone at our family cabin on a mountain in the Swiss Alps when our fountain went dry in the heat of August. Seventeen mooing cattle hung around the empty trough, swarms of flies pestering their eyes—and not a drop!

I called the owner of the cattle, farmer Franz. He had no clue what to do. But Rudi the shepherd had an idea: He had just returned from Canada with a firefighter's pump that had a generator attached. He managed to clear the pipe of air and debris and reestablish the flow in the shadow of the mountain.

This tongue of alpine land sprawls on top of a three-tiered cliff, hidden behind old pines skirting along the precipice. At the foot of the mountain above, the *Wandelhorn*, the Horn of Change, this terrain is some of the most species-rich in Western Europe. Ancient maple trees give it a southern flavor. The forest ranger estimates the oldest ones to have 400 rings in their trunks with a growth perspective of another 400 years. They like to grow as pairs, two trunks forming one crown. There is a grandmother with spiraling bark and mossy arms curving up, making room for children spinning on the swing. Where trunk meets ground, she grew a padded green vulva for intimate encounter with an occasional visitor.

My grandfather had the foresight to purchase three homesteads above his hometown in the valley below. Today, my brother, my cousin and I are the alp's owners and caretakers. There is an ancient barn, a small cabin, and the main cabin, sleeping six, in which we all stay. Prime examples of regional architecture from a couple of centuries ago, they are well equipped and beautified with hand-woven cadmium-red and bone-colored bedspreads in the traditional patterns of these lands. Only the ceilings have been lifted for the tall men in our family. The deeply charred kitchen walls are a testament to the many fires my grandmother lit under a large copper cauldron to heat the milk for making cheese. The main cabin is perfectly placed on a mound. Where it levels off near the barn sits a fountain. It is also the drinking trough for the young cows that



Margaret Nielsen, *Oversoul*, oil on panel, 4 × 5 in., 1986.

come up from the valley to spend the summer grazing in these alpine meadows. We click no switches; candles or petroleum lamps brighten deep dark skies splashed with stars that shimmer like polished crystal in candlelight. We carry our water to the cabin in milk buckets. Down a silver curved aluminum faucet, the water bubbles into the trough, turning into a herd of bubbles racing outward—until the day it did not.

Who knew how to bring the water back?

Now farmer Franz spoke to me of a much-coveted man, a dowser, who did not want to be bothered, unless he himself deemed it necessary.

“Why should I show you?” Franz said, half mockingly, when I asked to go to the source. I thought, “Aha.” The source of water, of life, is not revealed voluntarily.

We followed a small path across the meadow, a rare alpine thistle along the way where the cattle hooves had left deep, dried grooves. As we approached the spring, my rubber boots sank, as the boggy ground slurped with each step. We passed a huddle of white angel hair marsh flowers stroked by the breeze. Over the barbed wire fence, some 150 feet beyond the border to the neighbor’s land, below the pine forest, past the cattails and near the ferns, we lifted a weighty concrete shaft cover. In the cistern, a bleached-out mouse was clutching the filter. My drinking water! The inflow was little more than a trickle. The pipe coming off the captured source was clogged. I poked around and pulled out a bit of plant matter, but Franz shook his head: This is a dowser’s job.

“If the water does not like it, it will go elsewhere,” he warned.

I was leaning into the lizard-looking rock, lounging near the cabin, my nose in David Abram’s *Becoming Animal*, when I felt his presence. A man with sparkling eyes—Martin, the dowser. We sat together and sipped elderberry sirup with fresh mint and traded notes on the particulars of this water line with very little grading, enchanted with each other.

Later in the afternoon, I heard the comforting sound of the cows slurping; Martin had restored peace for our four-leggeds. He returned the next day with a hose coupling to easily separate the pipes leading to the fountain for cleaning. I wanted to establish easy maintenance routines. A unique challenge in this remote place, open only five months of the year, with no road leading directly to it, with two generations of city-dwelling owners, local farmers, wildly varied ways of communicating, and shared times on the mountain a rare occurrence.

“Did you bewitch me?” he asked.

“Me, what?” Hm!

Martin wanted to gift me with a pair of dowsing rods but left them somewhere on the walk up the front of the mountain. I puzzled for a while before *I got it*. Did he attribute witches’ power to me?

Martin’s bushy, lunar-silver eyebrows hinted at his original dark hair. His big, red-skinned face with soft lips has eyes that notice. In the days when deals were made with a handshake over a glass of wine, he traveled to surrounding cantons and was a trusted carrier between parties before bank transfers were common. He admits, a little embarrassed, that he and his wife had six children. As a farmer, he developed a fine,

professional nose for cheese making, an artisanal undertaking in these valleys. He was able to tell me the defining characteristics of a piece of cheese with one inhale. “Storage during maturation was not optimal,” he said, sniffing the hunk Franz had given me.

His wife does not take his dowsing very seriously.

“She is in her feelings often,” he adds. Martin has the old knowledge I am eager for; he soaks up my interest in the ways of the past.

“When I was a child, the air at dusk was filled with the sound of *dängele*” (scythe sharpening), I reminisced, as we sat on the bench alongside the cabin and watched the light soften. In those days it was not the cattle shaving the pastures, it was the farmer’s family cutting the grass in rhythm and rows, *shwush, shwush*. Before sundown, the scent of dry hay wafted in the air. We children would squeal in the hay, tickling each other.

The following year, Martin surprised me with all accoutrements to peen a scythe, including a large rectangular wooden block with a place for the anvil in the front. That is where the outer edge of the blade gets placed. “*Doc, doc doc,*” sounds the heavy iron mallet as it hits the metal until it is thin, razor sharp, and nicks are hammered out. Many young farmers do not bother learning this skill any more.

Martin bought me a woman’s scythe, customized, and signed it. The angle at which the scythe touches the grass has to be right for the size of the owner and the terrain. If the angle is off, the blade can easily get stuck in the ground. After using the scythe from my grandfather, two sizes too large, it is satisfying to let the sharp blade glide through the grass falling in an arc, knees bent, arms swinging from right to left. With the sharpening stone in its wooden case belted to my hip, I have to stop every few minutes, set the scythe on its handle with the blade up in the air, and slide the stone at a slight angle rapidly down the blade, front and back. This sound is embedded in my tissue, *swit, swit, swit*—it sings of children in paradise, adults working in the womb of the land, held between earth and sky.

Before snow blanketed the region that year, Martin and my nephew Peter replaced the old water pipe. Peter was inspired by the elder’s capacity to sense what was invisible to the eye. They pulled out roots, like a strand of matted hair, long enough for the prince to climb up the tower to meet his princess.

On this elevation of some 3,600 feet, deep snow covers the area for seven months; humans are present but a few weeks during the summer. By the time I returned ten months later, a wild garden had grown and microcosms of mosses, succulents, and ferns coexisted, highlighting rocks in the pasture. On my first exploratory round across the land, at the bottom of the slope behind the cabin, near the edge of the cliff, oh shock! Empty! The hand-carved trough under the ancient fountain shelter with its moss-covered shingled roof was gone! Out of the natural wall of stones, a lone metal pipe stuck. The year 1876 was still carved in the beam overhead. A wooden trough needs to be wet all the time if it is not to rot. But the water coming from the river board had stopped flowing years before.

This fountain was history! Memories became alive. I heard the water stutter, sputter, trickle, splash in the hands of my godson Ariel, who turned eighteen that year. For many summers, he visited me on the mountain. It was the place he and his mother loved to come before her passing. One morning, we looked at a book of photographs of frozen water crystals. Waters from many different origins had been photographed after

intense emotions such as love and hate, distress and joy had been directed at it. The projection of feelings seemed to dramatically change the shape of the crystals, forming complex beautiful star shapes or distorted ones. Ariel immediately put into practice what we had discovered. Sitting at the edge of the trough, he covered the opening of the pipe with his thumb and entered into silent conversation with the water. When he released his finger, it stuttered, sputtered, splashed. The waters responded!

In the recesses of my image bank, I see a narrow wooden bridge leading across our stream in the vicinity of the waterfall shooting eight hundred meters down. The eighty-year-old shingle maker had his tale of the fountain: “We came up the trail on a school excursion—I must have been ten years old—from the village below. I was thirsty and ran ahead over the bridge to the fountain.”

The teacher made him write: *Ich darf vom Brunnen nicht Wasser trinken.* (I am not *allowed to drink water from the fountain.*) Fifty times in the lined notebook. Order and obey! The mantra of the stern Swiss of olden days, echoing among the cracks of peaks.

“Never let the fountain go dry,” my uncle used to tell my cousin, his daughter.

Once or twice my father had taken me to the spring box, inaccessible to the wanderer passing on the way to the mountaintop. It was a risky descent, down an overgrown steep riverbank with roots to hold onto and a pine trunk to fall against. It felt eerie as a child, entering this feral river terrain on the heels of my father’s imposing figure. The slope was treacherous, the roaring of the river engulfing, the smells unique to this raw untamed environment. We came to a wooden box with lid, tucked under a pine. My father was in his usual stoic silence, and I asked no questions. Hence the water’s origin remained veiled for decades, a part of a weighty family mystery.

There came the day in September six years ago when I took matters into my own hands, compelled to understand all aspects of this alpine operation. Armed only with boots and bare hands, I swung myself over the barbed wire fence along the edge of the riverbank and slid down the moist, forested earth, hands reaching for the pine trunk to land on a narrow flat spot wide enough for one person. Surrounded by gloriously chaotic forest—thriving, braking, rotting, leaning, dying, sprouting—I lifted the wooden lid and looked into a water-filled sunken box, an inlet on the right and a small outlet on the left. I scooped out sediment, a clumsy cleaning effort. In the process, in my ignorance, the swirling sediment settled in the rubber hose carrying the water to the fountain. It clogged the hose, which was hanging across a precariously steep unstable gravel hill, a hundred feet above the roaring mountain stream, held in place only with a string attached to an old root some forty feet above. Each winter, snow altered its position or tore it loose. With the location of the spring as it was, there was barely enough gradient to reach the fountain. As my brother got tired of tending to the waterline, the water receded.

Our land lies in the region known as the water castle of Europe, with abundant waterfalls, rivers, gorges, dams, and a large electrical power plant inside the Grimsel Pass. While my brother and I raised our children, five in all, it was our go-to place for summer vacation. Traditionally, maintenance of antiquated dwellings was considered

man's work. My brother and his two boys chopped wood, built a new outhouse, cleaned the chimney, and kept old equipment running with forefather's tools.

Over time—after our young ones had gone through their rites of passage with friends from France and California—my attention shifted from hosting to the grazing lands, the forested slopes and ancient structures. With longer stays, sometimes by myself, embedded in nature, she was undoing the habitual me.

Once, on a break from working on my film, I was standing in a meadow with globeflowers, gold pippau, wild roses, and blueberry bushes, air prickling with spew of tumultuously tossing waters bordering our land. I kept seeing my small computer screen superimposed over the expanse of this exquisite wild garden. My eye muscles, my very seeing, was locked into this addictive rectangle and its delusions.

I live in California. It's a long trek, and experience shows that landing is a shedding process paired with sighs and groans, fatigue, and dark states of mind. In the first days, as my system comes to accept the vastness of all that space and silence, breath slows down. Big skies, four-hundred-year-old trees, pastures, and cattle, my young Angeleno friend Liz called it *nothing*; she had no cultural reference to wild nature, in which senses come to register no need to shield or defend; armor evaporates. Finally, after about five days, maybe on a stroll, as a flood of gratitude for this magnificence washes over me, it signals: syncing up completed. I sigh into a delicious state of openness, now a part of nature's breeding ground.

Raised by a mother with a heart of stone
 This biosphere extends a thousand arms
 I feel her chthonic powers rising up my legs
 My naked soles moistening on moss
 Orchids, blooming thyme and thistles.
 Desert colored beetles mating
 Upon arrival on cabin's threshold

One morning, days into my annual stay, the shepherd stopped by for coffee and conversation. He was hungry for exchange with the traveler from California, a dream destination for many Swiss. We sat outside; he was distraught. An old cow with glassy eyes had chased him last night, and he'd had to jump the fence. She dug her horn into his shoulder.

A tiny bird, a wren, came out from under the barn gable across, flew straight toward me, sat by my head on the wall, and stayed there long enough for a sense of communion to arise. Ah! Sweetness.

Hearing the land's call happened in increments—like great love, I imagine, grows gradual, gets broader and deeper. A kind of reciprocity took hold. I noticed the spread of the *Blacken*, an unruly plant cows leave standing. The next season I woke up to the leaning barn in need of urgent structural support before the winter. And the following August, the rot in the beam in the *Gänterli* where the food is stored called out to me.

A teacher with a trained eye from the nearby agricultural school came to walk the land with me. He pointed out the Jacob groundsel, with white flowers growing near the cave. Toxic for the cattle, he recommended cutting and removing them from the grazing land. The farmers say that the cattle know not to eat it, but without cutting it twice a year, it spreads quickly.

My action list became long. Consent from my cousin and my brother was needed for many of the pending tasks. One annual meeting was barely enough for my aspirations. I wanted to build collaboration; my brother wanted to do what he had done for the last few years: whatever work he deemed necessary the way he saw fit. Our sense of time is so different. For him and my cousin this *Alp* is a couple of hours away. It has existed in their backyard forever. This year is just another summer, and what's the urgency anyway? I operate from a Zen mind of now, acutely aware of the limited weeks I have before a huge carbon output and days of travel separate me once again from this beloved place, *my mountain*.

My mountain—an inward recognition
 Outside, the last rays of light
 Lick its green animal pelt
 Witnessing celestial love play,
anima mundi, everything is alive
 The tip turns to gold
 The constant chorus of the river forever wet

Three years ago, at the end of summer, a twenty-year storm tore across the region. Hail, rain, floods, and tornado-like winds ejected root systems in fractions of seconds. One of the four-hundred-year-old mountain maples fell prey. Martin and I inspected the damage. What an ache to see this gigantic creature dead on its side! My hands slid over the smooth bark; I leaned into this life, from which the sap had stopped flowing, drawing its scent into me, holding its trunk between my legs. Ahead of us, uphill, the mountainous realm spread. Cattle bells filled the air. The hour of the golden light was approaching. Fall was tiptoeing in with hazy light and blurred contours, making room for gnomes and goblins to appear.

We are in the minority here,
 In felt relation with all that has breath,
 Held by the weather's rapid shifts
 Eros, like mycelia emitting
 Its incessant pulse.
 Earth's sensuous body
 Heat rising up my neck

Martin was on his way home. "I will find you water," he said, standing next to me. "It is my personal challenge. I want to find water in this moraine." Securing a water

source anywhere else was no sweat for him, but a moraine, that was different. What is a *moraine*?

1. A ridge, mound, or irregular mass of uncertified glacial drift, chiefly boulders, gravel, sand, and clay.
2. A deposit of such material left on the ground by a glacier.

“Now it would not be good to look for it, there is so much water everywhere; it has been a wet summer,” Martin remarked. “In this moraine, I will only work within the phases of the moon. When the moon is empty, life forces go into the ground. It is like that in nature, with the trees and all life.”

“And women’s bleeding,” I added. He nodded.

He wants to search next year, in a water sign, Cancer or Pisces (fish). He promises to find it higher up to facilitate maintenance. Springs require checking and cleaning when nature bursts forth after a long rest. An alp without its own water? We agree: It is not wise to be dependent on water from the adjacent community. I am curious to hear how the next generation sees it. My nephew Peter would go to the river, if there were no water.

“How do we know that the water coming out of the moraine is not the same as the river?” my daughter Sophia wondered.

The Alps are open for everyone to hike, gather mushrooms, hunt or dip into the icy river water. The land does belong to different parties, but in these alpine regions we have fences only for animals. Essential wildness has existed for millennia before there were humans insisting on personal property, me and mine. We act as caretakers and Sophia, Julia, Simone, Peter and David are learning to steward this archetypal wild, the vibrating stream imprinted in cellular memory.

It took Martin a long time to understand that I had another life in California. “You are not going to be here when the maples turn golden? When the hills are covered with millions of white snowbells after the snowmelt?”

How could he understand my dual-continent existence? He has lived in this valley all his life—the most beautiful valley in the world! Then one day I heard him say: “Aha! You will return when the birds come back.”

And so it happened.

He was the small dot moving upward across the face of the mountain as I walked the path along the ridge through a little pine forest, a synchronous meeting of two devoted water workers, not prone to fuss.

At the cabin, I tossed my bags and groceries onto the bench, turned the big iron key counterclockwise twice, entered through the divided door, and pulled on rubber boots. We headed out immediately, across the grazing land and up the moraine. Over the fence, down the slippery board, we immersed ourselves in earth’s watery veins. The wet spots I remembered from my childhood were still there, covered with large-leaved plants that once served as plates for imaginary play. The ground was soggy in places; the dank soil scenting the air, the scenery a study of nature’s tender and robust qualities. A fallen trunk jammed between gray river rocks would jerk loose with the next swelling. Standing on this precipitous board with Martin, who knew to bring water forth with his own hands, my upper torso stretched skyward, arms reached to embrace it all. A shout escaped my lungs.

It takes a fine intuition, exquisite observational skills, patience, and an understanding of the lay and history of the land to get started with dowsing. Martin had come to survey the slope during my absence. He zeroed in on a spot that fit our needs. Dark earth glistened below the leaf cover; water the color of clay was oozing out, seeping downhill. He pulled out his pendulum. It indicated that there was likely a six- to eight-liter flow per minute expected.

“How can you tell?” I asked.

“I talk to it,” he said. His spade cut into the wet earth.

We observed this delicate flow for the next month. Martin visited it during full moon and new moon and in between. Was the flow steady when the lunar forces were drawing it out, the moon rounding? Or was there substantial change as the disk thinned to a sliver and life energy retracted? At last measure it registered a flow of eight to nine liters a minute. Barely half a liter difference between cycles indicated a constant supply and a steady temperature of ten degrees. Plenty for all water needs ...

Beauty mercilessly attempting
to tease this human project out beyond its ego state
What if the need to drink
Was beckoning connection
To form an integrated circuit
Flowing from earth to humans to the planets?

Today was Blue Moon in August. Martin and I left the cabin with a shovel and a pick. I felt an ongoing, acute aliveness between our bodies and the earth.

No cultural clutter, no solidified forms to slow it down; earth’s inherent sensual desire to grow toward other has its way with flesh without hindrance up here.

“Did you ask your family?”

“I did not,” I said, as I watched him disappear downhill. The roaring of the waters below swallowed his reply. My rubber boots stepped on dense forest soil; I hauled myself down. He waited by the trickles; we stood side by side, surrounded by lush growth. Two rivulets were flowing, gravel and soil held on. Our eyes met. He lifted the shovel and dug into the little trickle on the right with a firm, determined touch. It answered to the shovel, to the man, and came forth. I saw it! The shovel moved to the other trickle, and he emptied its heavy content downhill.

“When you ask it to come out, you have to free it, so it can flow easily. If the path is blocked, it may change course,” Martin said while shoveling, his temple pores feverishly producing pearls.

Now, what was happening? He dug in the middle, making rapid intuitive choices, sliding the shovel over the mud. A large rock shielded the earth cavity; he peeled it from the birth cave. All of a sudden the left one, no longer the steady trickle, swelled, now clear-colored, liberated—freed to run, tumble, sparkle, wetting

pebbles and rocks. The right side of the two water arms receded. He handed me the shovel. We let it be.



Photo 1.

This virgin wet! We both felt elated when we set it free. It happened without a drill, without noise, without electricity, without any monetary investment. The whole project, when completed, would cost a tenth of what the engineer down the hill had paid for the restoration of his source by the road.

A water that people's connection brought about. It's been like this with the mountain and me: Whatever is needed, by the time it is defined, the right people with the right personality and know-how appear.

A night or two after the liberation of the waters, as I was lying under my grandmother's red- and white-checkered duvet, I felt fear rising. This water, it was out! Could I plug it back in? Put a lid on it? Surely my family would discover! This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity was Martin's gift to me for the future of these lands.



Photo 2.

Recently born, these waters wild with joy, now flow downhill, into the stream below, cascade over the cliff, tumble into the river traversing the valley to move swollen and full past my daughter's home in the city of Bern, in the summer a source of pleasure for thousands of bathers before they continue toward the merger with the Rhine in Basel to join the North Sea in the Netherlands!

Next year we will lay the water line. We selected the pine from which Martin will carve the new trough. The new fountain is to become a gathering place for communal washing of dishes, clothes, and bodies, with a little curtain for the women, Martin smiles, to wash away from curious eyes. In nature's nakedness in the shelter of the mountain's hulky body, these waters, the blood of the ancestors, the ancients would say, the core and heart of life will whisper to the children to come.

Water, in the writing of C. G. Jung, is *prima materia*, a base element in the works of the alchemists.

Silbermünteli, *Alchemidia*
 It grows on our rocks
 My father gathered it for tea
 For the alchemists
 Mixed with heaven's dew drops
 a dab on the forehead, is an essential ingredient,
 In the making of
 The philosopher's stone.
 Time is painting her picture on me.

Susanna Knittel is a filmmaker and a Continuum Movement teacher, writer, and mentor, steeped in the individuation process since she worked at the Jung Clinic in Zurich many decades ago. Her film Falling for the Mountain, a love story between people and the land, explores all aspects of the move from patriarchal management to stewardship. A resident of Santa Monica, she travels every summer to fulfill her commitment to the ancestral land in the Swiss Alps.