

Interlude Glimpsing a Goethean way of seeing

When I first heard mention of Goethean science, a science of qualities, in 2000, I became excited at the thought of a discipline or way of working that valued many different ways of knowing. I looked out for suitable opportunities to learn more. A few years later, at Schumacher College, I briefly met Margaret Colquhoun, a Goethean scientist who teaches the method, but no workshops were planned at the time. Knowing more about Goethean science might help my own students (and me) understand more about the metamorphosis of systems and develop a greater sense of awe and wonder for the more-than-human-world. It seemed to offer a route to ground out the idea of a deeper connection with our planet into some sort of action.

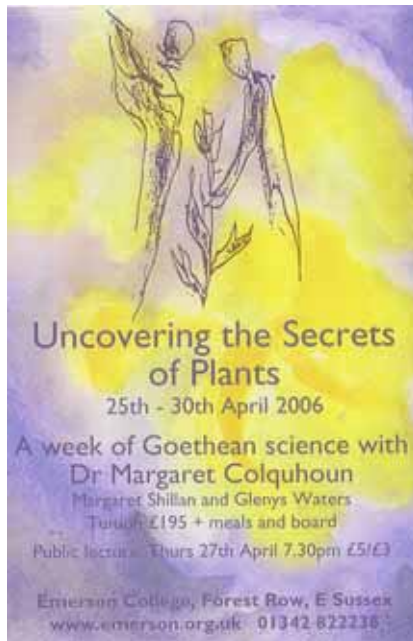
Typically, I bought Margaret Colquhoun's book, "New Eyes for Plants" (Colquhoun and Ewald, 1996), and equally typically, I read through it but did nothing. I wanted encounter, not words. This learning demanded knowing from the bottom up, from first principles, not second-hand-in-the-head gleaning from books alone.

In early 2006, I started to explore presentational knowing in more depth in my writing for this thesis on "Expressions of Energy" and once more, Goethean science became figural, seeming to offer a unifying potential between presentational knowing and other epistemologies. Again, I looked for a way in which I could learn more through experience and encounter, first hand, rather than through books. Goethean science intuitively demanded to be learned using a Goethean approach in itself. There was an eleven week course in New York State, through "The Nature Institute". Sounded lovely, but how could I justify the time away, neither earning nor attending to my other responsibilities? The Schumacher course was still there, and still a whole year long. Margaret Colquhoun hadn't appeared to offer anything since a series of workshops around the British Isles looking at four different landscapes in four different seasons. I drew a blank, and yet this interest had now persisted unfulfilled for years.

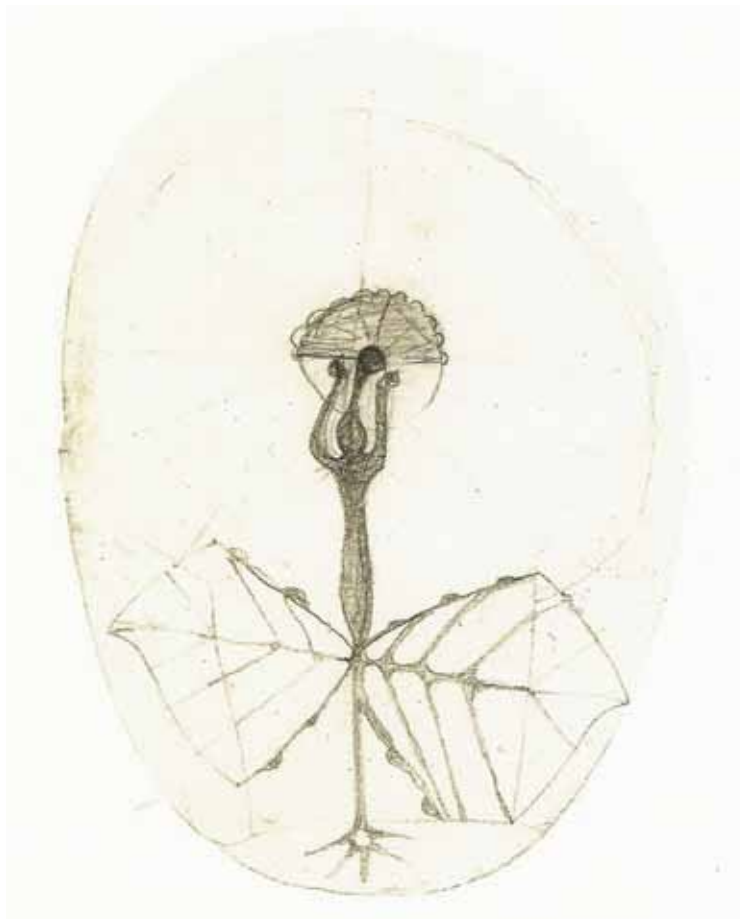
I broke off from my "Expressions of Energy" writing to go to one of my clowning workshops at Emerson College, a private educational establishment based on the anthroposophical ideas of the Austrian Rudolph Steiner, who had spent the first half of his working life cataloguing and comprehensively exploring the life works of Goethe^a. Steiner had been deeply influenced by Goethe before developing his own imaginative responses to living through the anthroposophy movement^b.

^a I would neither describe myself as an anthroposophist nor an adherent to Steiner's "teachings". I am intrigued that his body of work on Goethe has had such a profound influence on his subsequent ideas, some of which I find common sense, others a form of respite and recuperation from "ordinary" life and others still somewhat flaky and ungrounded for my liking.

^b On several occasions, I have found myself encouraging MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice participants with an interest in anthroposophy to dig around and explore these Goethean links.



I looked at the notice board as I arrived at Emerson. The poster shown on the left looked back at me, and I booked myself a place on “Uncovering the Secrets of Plants.” In April 2006, I experienced the introduction I’d been seeking. This interlude represents that experience and the glimpses I had of a Goethean way of seeing, augmented by my reading around this science, ranging from Goethe himself, through to Rudolph Steiner, Henri Bortoft and the work of the artist Joseph Beuys^c, who “[overcame and healed] his own postwar depression by drawing obsessively and working with nature in the manner of Goethe/Steiner” (Peter Stafford, 2000). Below is one of Beuys’ drawings from that era (Beuys, 1947):



^c In 2004, I’d met Shelley Sacks, who’d worked directly with Beuys and now runs the MA in Social Sculpture at Oxford Brookes University, which draws strongly on his influence. I told Shelley about Margaret Colquhoun’s course and she said she too had been waiting for one of these workshops to come up, but couldn’t attend at this time as she was recuperating from illness. I have Shelley in mind as a small audience as I show something here of the qualities of my processes of inquiry around the Goethean Science week.

When we venture into knowledge and science,
we do so only to return better equipped for living.

Goethe (in Naydler, 1996: frontispiece)

Here is a man, here is an animal, here is a plant, here is matter.
We are already talking about life, feeling, instinct, consciousness.

Beuys (Tisdall, 1998: 61)

Inquiry streams before the workshop

I had set myself Henri Bortoft's books, "Goethe's Scientific Consciousness" and "The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way of Science" as pre-reading for the course and had watched a film of him speaking at Schumacher College^d. In addition I read papers on aspects of Goethean epistemology by Holdrege, Shotter and Wahl, and had some communication with Isis Brook, a lecturer at the University of Lancaster's Centre for Professional Ethics who had also been on, and written about, one of Margaret's courses as part of her own PhD studies (comparing Goethe's method with Husserlian phenomenology).

Inquiry streams during the workshop

*During the week I kept a notebook and a sketchbook.
I read much of Naydler's "Goethe on Science" and Goethe's own "The Metamorphosis of Plants." I re-read Colquhoun's "New Eyes for Plants", Brooks' "Goethean Science as a Way to Read Landscape" and Holdrege's "Doing Goethean Science".*

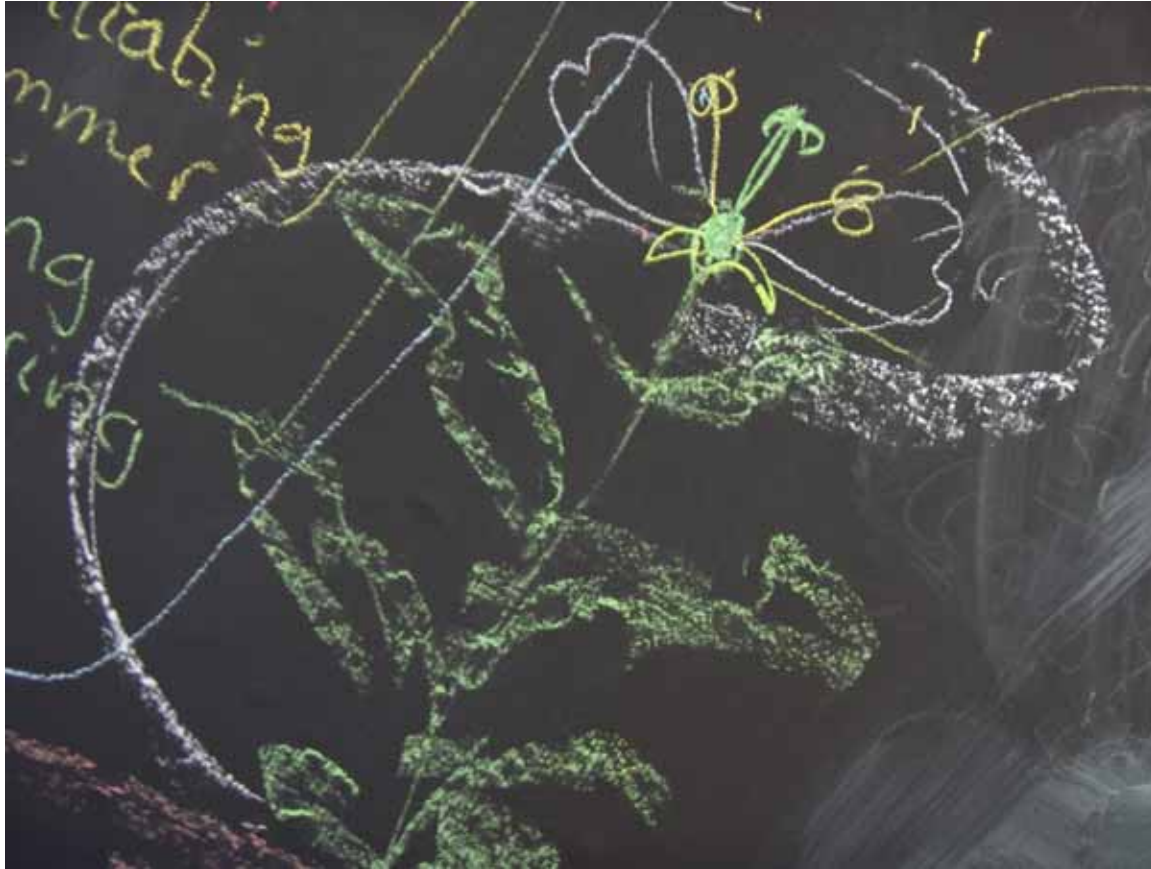
After the workshop

*I opened up conversations with others about my experience, and how it might link to consultancy work more generally^e.
I continued writing into my notes taken at the time.
I re-read sections of the literature sources I'd amassed, and read John Barnes' essay on participative science (in Nature's Open Secret).
I discussed the plant I'd researched with my neighbour and compared how it grew in East Sussex with how it was growing in her garden in Gloucestershire.*

^d Bortoft is a physicist and science philosopher who was a student of the physicist David Bohm.

^e For example, might the metamorphosis of organisational systems at least in part be known through learning histories? And, are organisations striving towards something that is inherently unhealthy (such as a one-dimensional aim to generate profit), and if so, what does this mean for the unfolding of their morphology?

12 May 2006
Blackboard drawings



Margaret Colquhoun used blackboard drawings during the workshop as she taught botany, metamorphosis and the processes of Goethean Science, in the tradition of Joseph Beuys and Rudolph Steiner before her. It seemed to me as a participant in the workshop that this immediate, unfolding, emergent and spontaneous means of presentation is a particularly appropriate form to suit this organic, changing content and thought processes: “I made drawings that developed as we went on, and you were able to see what I intended with every line I drew and were able to think along with me” (Steiner, in Kugler, 2003: p18).

In stark contrast with “sanitised” clipart and powerpoint slides, these lively drawings express the gesture of their content, as above with Margaret Colquhoun’s swirling line around the unfolding plant: “the blackboard drawings are free and ‘untrammelled’ in their lines; they follow a graphic logic arising not only from the content of the lecture but equally from the dynamic of the thoughts expressed in it, its language and its own poetic logic” (Zumdick, in Kugler, 2003: 31).



Are you going to be an earthy person,
practical down-to-earth and get to it?
Or are you going to be a dreamer,
a visionary?

We're going to be both
and we can't be,
we shouldn't be talked out of it.
We shouldn't be talked out of it.

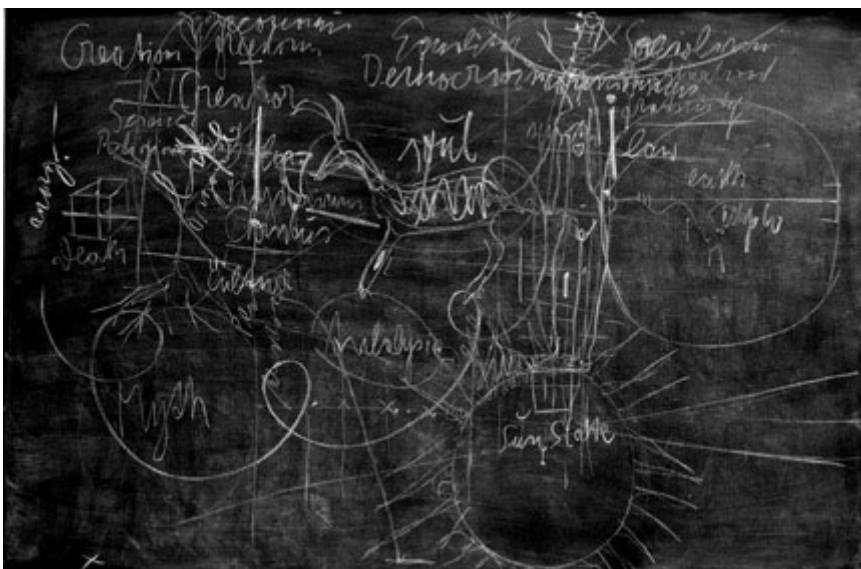
I'm both.
Don't tell me I have to choose.
I don't have to choose
I am both, and
I live in the crossing point

MC Richards

(in Kane, 2003)

In 2003, a travelling exhibition of some of Steiner's 1000+ blackboard drawings was staged and viewed as works of art in their own right (as on the previous page, a drawing which, plant-like, expresses a "split realm [where] one part tends upward into the heavens, the other down to Earth"). The blackboard drawings carry "the energy of his hand, [and] put us in direct contact with his perceptions... in their immediacy, they allow us to *participate* in the understanding ourselves... [they are] a form of living art, that enables us to connect more deeply with the world, that suffers our intellectual cleverness and distancing" (Sacks, 2003, blackboard drawings, opening speech to the exhibition).

For Beuys, blackboard drawings formed a parallel process with his discussion sessions, thereby simultaneously using two complementary forms of expression at the same time. The blackboard drawings do not merely illustrate the talking, they are a parallel, and qualitatively different expression of the concept at hand. Here, Beuys is creating a blackboard drawing as part of a discussion on the evolution of human beings, another version of which follows.



Particularly in the gestures of the stick figures, Margaret Colquhoun gradually built a picture of her interpretation of the Goethean Science process as the workshop progressed.



One **Exact sense perceiving**

The stick figure carries the scientist's pencil and paper for writing in one hand and the artist's brush and palette for drawing in the other.

Two **Exact sensorial imagining**

The stick figure swims in fluid motion.

Three **Seeing in beholding**

The stick figure starts to have insights.

Four **Becoming one with**

The stick figure, invisible now, merges with the being of the "other".

Five **Catching ideas**

The stick figure opens her arms wide to receive.

Six **Growing the idea into matter**

Seven **New product**

The stick figure responds with her own creations.

Uncovering the secrets of plants
25-30 March 2006

Day 1, Tuesday 25 April 2006

6.15am, notebook entry, Newick, East Sussex

My questions for the week:

- How do I recognise resonant parts, that carry the “spirit” or “gesture” of the whole?
- What do I notice about how the ways of seeing I learned in my visual education are similar to and different from Goethean ways of seeing? (And the way the clown, the designer and the sustainability practitioner in me sees. Oh, and the way the inquirer in me sees, too).
- What might a Goethean morphology of systems look like?
- How might this way of seeing transpose across to other parts of my life?

Tuesday morning, notes taken during activities

Guidance, thoughts and instructions from Margaret:

“If I want to enter into it or allow it to enter me, I need to ‘open my heart’ and enact the parts on nature’s stage.”

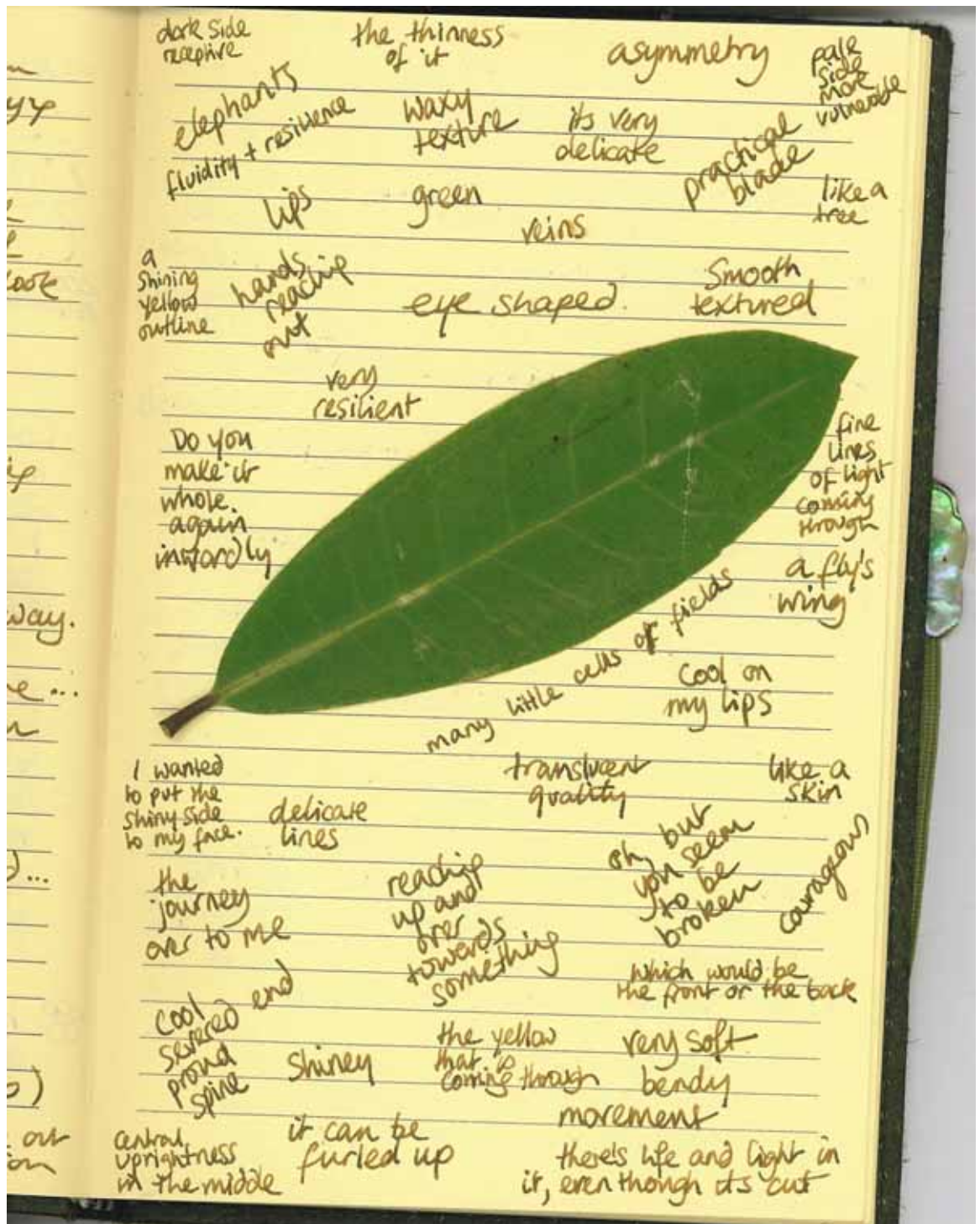
Here’s a leaf. You’ve never seen one of these before.
What’s your first impression when you meet it?
You’re allowed to do anything.
Just be completely naïve, like a child^f.

Describe the facts – the sense perceptible observation.
My response: It feels cool on my lips.

Offer life-related, contextual information – the tools for perceiving life.
My response: It’s wilted.

Express something of the gesture of the plant at a soul level – this can be anthropomorphic.
My response: It has a great strength of will.

^f I am interested in this as child-like naïveté is a quality particularly associated with the clown archetype. I found myself drawing on this as I encountered the leaf, both in terms of describing it, feeling its coolness with my lips and skin, imbuing it with personality, making it talk (all things which might well be off the conventional scientific agenda).



The leaf feels cool on my lips

It's wilted

It has a great strength of will

Tuesday afternoon, notes taken during activities

Guidance, thoughts and instructions from Margaret:

Perambulate through the woods.

Imagine you're a small child being taken.

Feel drawn to some places more than others.

Find your place from your inner reflection, your inside world, your inner mood.

Look inside.

You land gently.

Choose a place first, and then a plant in that place or context.

A soft landing.

This bit we had to do today had to do with love or interest.

If you felt a passion, a negative or a positive response, that's where to go.

If you felt antipathy, that's a place to pass over.

The first task is to do a dreamy inner picture from your memory.

It may be that your plant is in there as well.

Dreamy inner painting, 25 April 2006



Then go to the place, and do scientific drawings of the place, the context and the plant. Annotate your drawing.

Where is your place?

How is your place?

Emerson College
Gardens
25 April 2006

All the while
birds sing in
daytime
constellations





End of day one, notes - How did I feel at the end of day one?

My inner landscapes were more about enjoying the paint than feeling and expression. But, I loved sitting in the spitting rain, drawing the “context” I’d been drawn to through the process. I enjoyed exploring its textures with my pencil and held off from zooming into allow my plant to reveal itself to me, keeping my attention wide and on the (boundaried) whole. I stopped, got some tea, and drew that, too – as much a part of what’s going on as the plants.

Finally, I moved in closer and my attention was taken by one rather difficult-to-draw-looking plant which I do not want to know the name of. I won’t look it up, but seek to name it myself from my “standing in” that as yet “unworded” plant. Bortoft sees this as an act of “primary disclosure” (Bortoft, 1996: 314).

“Some years ago, when he was toying with Zen Buddhism, John Fowles suggested that ‘the name of a plant is a dirty pane of glass between you and it’. I’ve never been able to share that feeling, even though I understand what he was getting at. It seems to me that naming a plant, or for that matter any living thing, is a gesture of respect towards its individuality, a distinction from the generalised green blur. It is, in a way, exactly a gesture: as natural and clarifying as pointing. The kind of name – scientific, popular, fantastical, pet – scarcely matters, as long as someone can communicate it... ‘the naming of the beasts’ (Adam’s first piece of housekeeping) was of course the crucial groundbase of the modern world’s project of appropriating and taming

nature, of turning it into an object. But that was a consequence of what you might call the ecology of naming, of the culture and view of nature it emerges from. In itself, naming is no more colonial or 'capturing' than cave painting" (Mabey, 2006: 148-9).

Am I just enjoying the drawing and playing with the paint? Is that "good enough"? This is a discipline. It's about rigour. Thoroughness. Going one step at a time. Not rushing ahead to "the" answer. This is what I know from today.



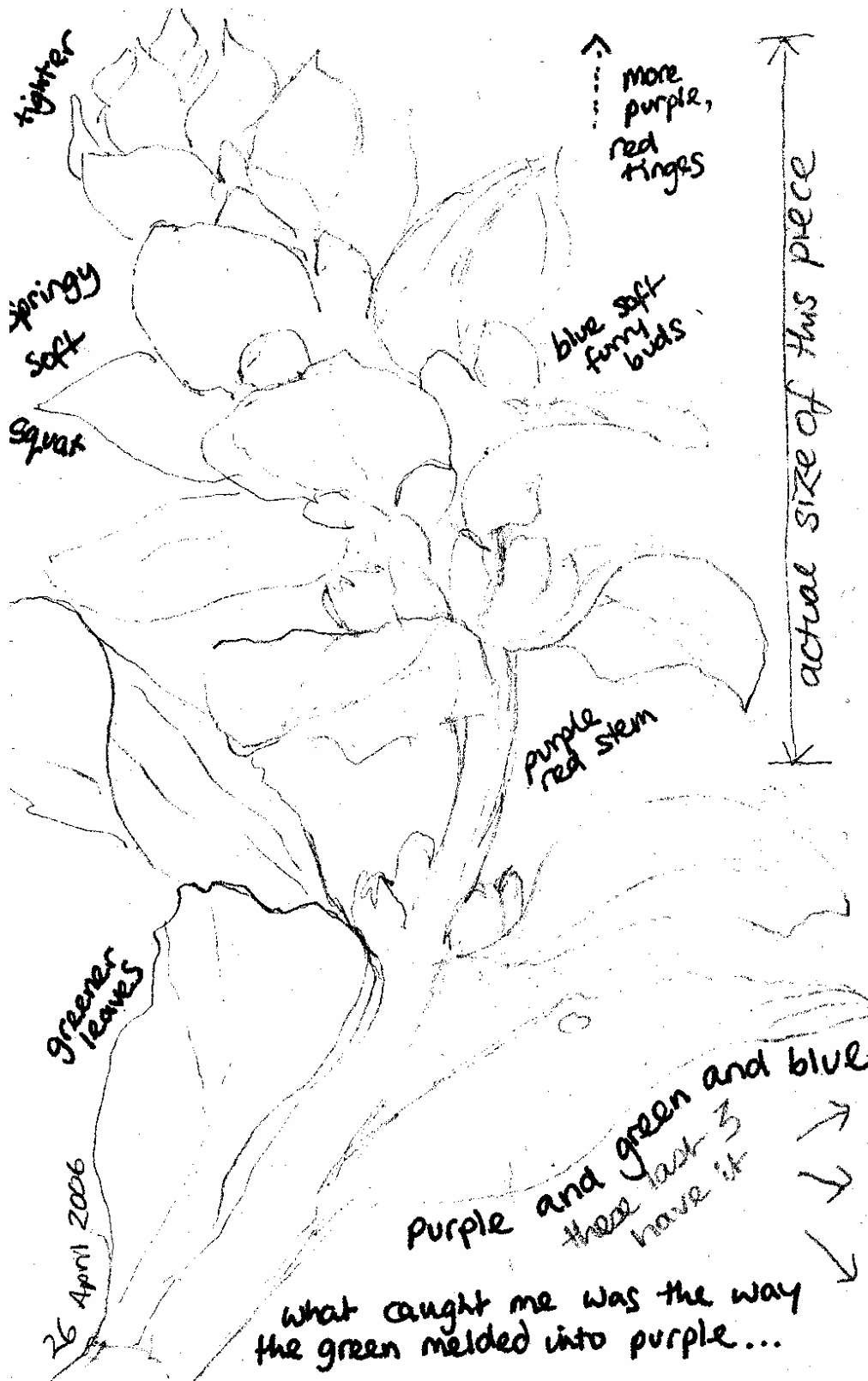
Throughout the history of scientific investigation we find observers leaping too quickly from phenomenon to theory; hence they fall short of the mark and become theoretical.

Knowledge, for Goethe, is not arrived at by imposing ideas on experiences, but by deepening experiences to the point at which their innate idea-content is made manifest.

(Naydler, 1996: 85, 89)

Day 2, Wednesday 26 April 2006

6.30am, sketchbook entries





Wednesday afternoon, notes taken during activities

Guidance, thoughts and instructions from Margaret:

Ask the question of your plant **WHAT ARE YOU?**

Earth seeing.

Clarity.

Collecting the facts.

How you collect them doesn't matter.

All your preconceptions disappear.

It's clean and clear and blue and cold and crystal clear solid bedrock.

Create a distance between you and what you are looking at.

Match exactly the colours.

Measurements are important.

The heart is driving this process.

Without interest or enthusiasm, you just give up.

I checked with Margaret: "I didn't feel that science/art split. I spent all afternoon engrossed in the sensory detail – the scientific, empirical bit – and it felt really... hearty."

"That's good," she says.

Wednesday afternoon, sketchbook entry

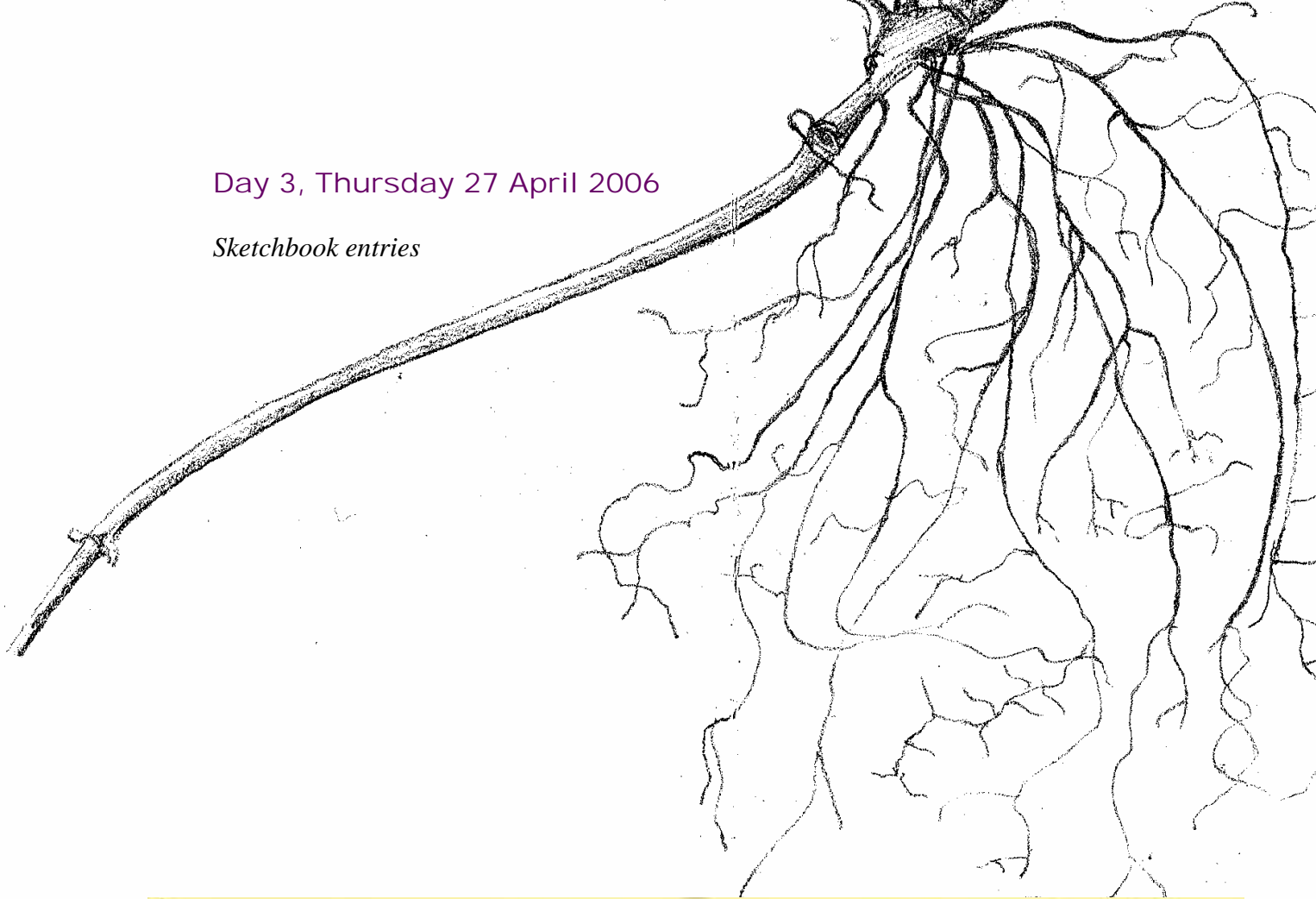
The stem stretches the leaf buds out and the flower buds, blue, brighter emerge at the base of each pair of leaves, circling the stem. The flower buds, tight and furry to start with, elongate before flowering.



*I still do not know what my plant is called
All I know of it is what I have taken in through my senses
and expressed through my drawings and writing.*

Day 3, Thursday 27 April 2006

Sketchbook entries



The naming of things...

OPEN • PERSISTENT • RESOURCEFUL
CHOICEFUL • STEADY • OPTIONS
REACHING + STRETCHING

"it's unfussy," the gardener
"this herb belongs to Dame Venus," Culpeper, the herbalist

LABIATE FAMILY
LABIATAE
BUGLE
AJUGA REPTANS

Low / short creeping
perennial; runners
rooting

My leaves come in pairs
arranged at right angles

we elongate & enlarge... we grow fatter... and rounder... we simplify... we slim down... a fine... get smaller

a protective cap
2 little petals
stamens inside

How might my flowers be?

runners. Any one of my buds could turn into a new plant. I have a growing tip and a spreading edge.

Thursday afternoon, notes taken during activities

Guidance, thoughts and instructions from Margaret:

Ask your plant how do you come to be?

How have you come to be where you are?

Doing this you start to feel a little bit swimmy.

You are dealing with a life process.

The process starts to become synthetic.

A bud closed – a bud opening – a bud fully open – a bud stretched.

You have to make the bridge between certain fixed points.

Like walking in water.

Putting it into flow.

What's the relationship between the leaves and the buds and the stamens?

This is the stage that Goethe brought to the world.

Once, it was forbidden to dissect a body. It was too sacred.

Today – ultimately, you can interfere with something without really knowing anything about it.

There must be a way of experiencing nature without dissecting it up.

You don't deny the analytical.

You go beyond it to see what's behind it.

Ah. Mine does it like this and yours does it like that.

My responses:

I need to understand how my plant is growing.

I need to be able to shut my eyes and imagine it growing... then see what are the missing bits... then go and check them out.

Until this afternoon, all I know of my plant is what I have taken in through my senses and expressed through my drawings and writing.

Only this afternoon, I let in the propositional, ask Margaret and find out what my plant is called...

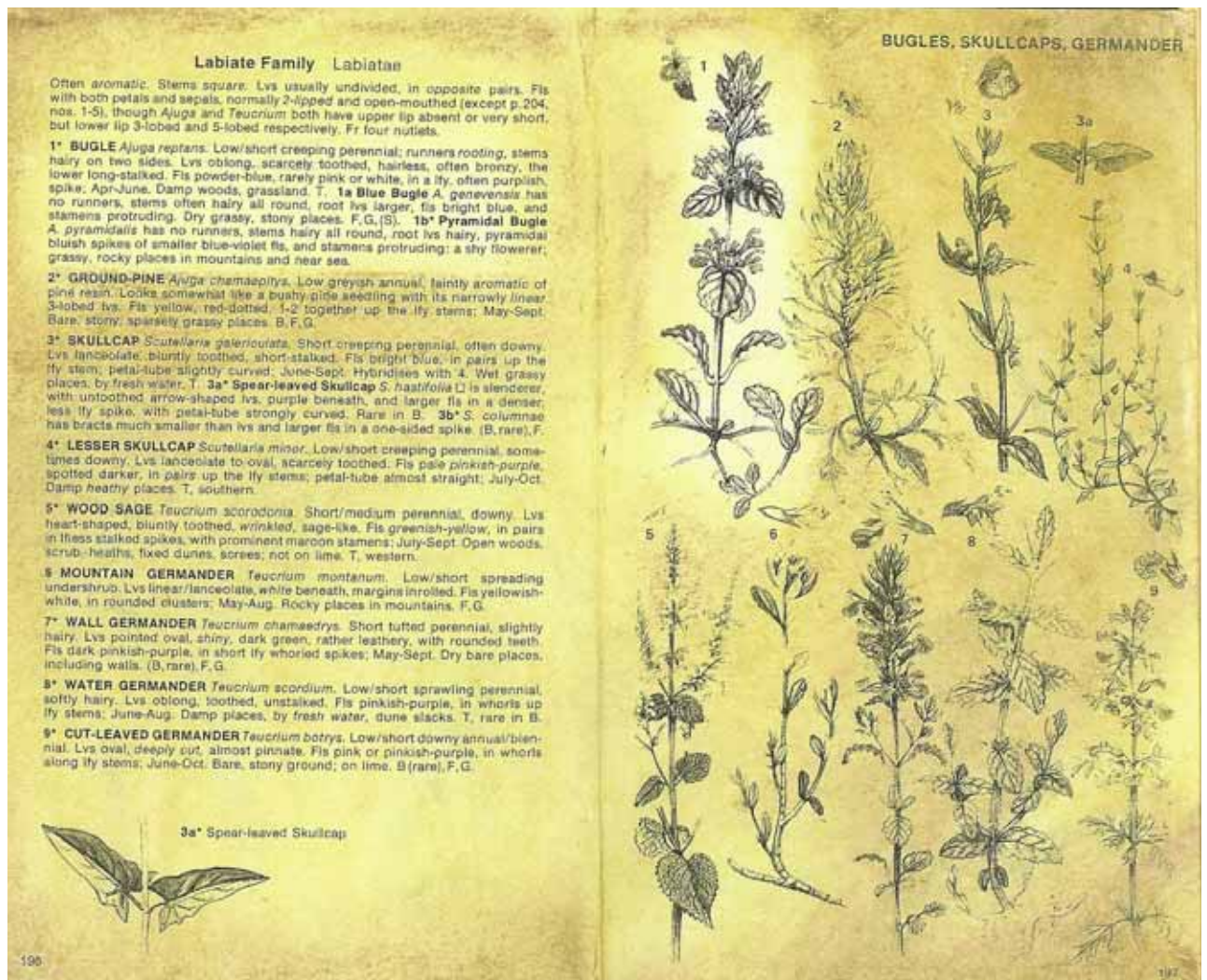
Bugle

ajuga reptans

... tomorrow, after four days of suspending my intellect, I will look it up in a book.

Day 4, Friday 28 April 2006

Friday morning, sketchbook entry, a painted photocopy from a book of British plants.

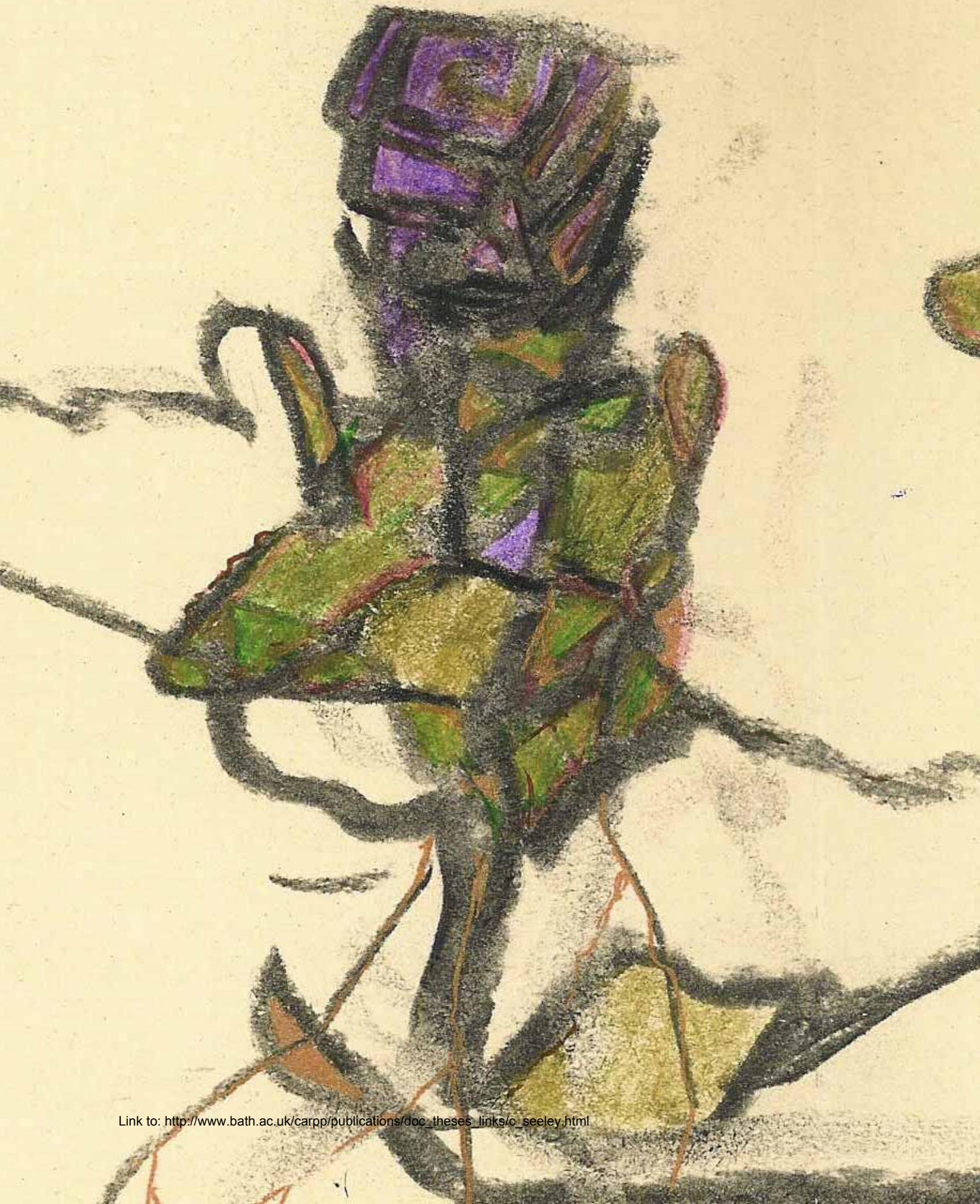


Friday morning, notebook entries

There's a deeply satisfying thoroughness to this process of Goethean science that gets behind or underneath that happysad feeling of life and death, of things living and dying. I imagine the plant growing, blossoming, dying, composting, giving new life. Contemplating this cycle feels like bottoming out, there's nowhere else to go. We can't unfold without rooting to the earth, we have to be grounded, literally and metaphorically. Margaret said as an aside to me: "I think this is a training for dying."

"Through confronting death, acknowledging and accepting our mortality, we are free to experience life deeply and in its full sensuality.' Sing, feast, dance, make music and love, all in my presence, for mine is the ecstasy of the spirit, and mine also is joy on earth'" (Starhawk, 1982: 215-6).

Friday afternoon, sketchbook entry
The essential gesture of the plant drawn with my eyes shut



Day 5, Saturday 29 April 2006

Saturday morning reflections, notebook entry

Goethean science offers a personal way of connecting through the self rather than some “other” ritual or method. It’s not received from other people, it is received from the plant itself – deepening my own relationship with the plant / more than human world, thoroughly, and in a relatively unmediated way. It keeps propositional knowledge “in its place.”

It does feel like “ordinary” drawing, with added permission to include more other ways of knowing, that is: mix the expressive work with propositional and extended experience “in the presence of” the plant (allows acquaintance). *Connaître* meets *savoir*.

What did I experience? A synthesis of visual imagery, mark making, gesture, embroidery, drawing, fabrics, folklore and fact, mud and rain, discussions and colours. A many-fold knowing, where the knowing spans across difference. All gestures and acts of connection, relationship with, appreciation of the other.

This is the building of bridges across irreducible difference where both “parties”, both “others” are somehow, subtly changed in the process. I perceive the plant differently.

The plant is now imbued with meaning for me. And me? I understand a tiny new facet of meaning through reading the plant for a week. There’s a reciprocity there. Ah. This is a taste of what David Abram meant when he wrote of reading the landscape. How underdeveloped that faculty. When ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak suggests we can learn ten names of plants and animals who share the landscape nearest home, I now see that the naming of things goes back to that original first disclosure, not just picking up new labels like learning a second language at school.

Reconciling the Cartesian divorce of subject from object through many-fold knowing. Bortoft calls this a two fold knowing. I call it many-fold... sensory perception plus the imaginative vision plus the intellect acting together at the same time. I would discern more finely that the expression of gesture through poetry, drawing or movement (for example) are different from each other as well, bringing forth a multiplicity of different facets of the experience, of the relationship. Different voices.

Saturday afternoon, notes taken during activities

Guidance, thoughts and instructions from Margaret:

Keep your ideas very light.

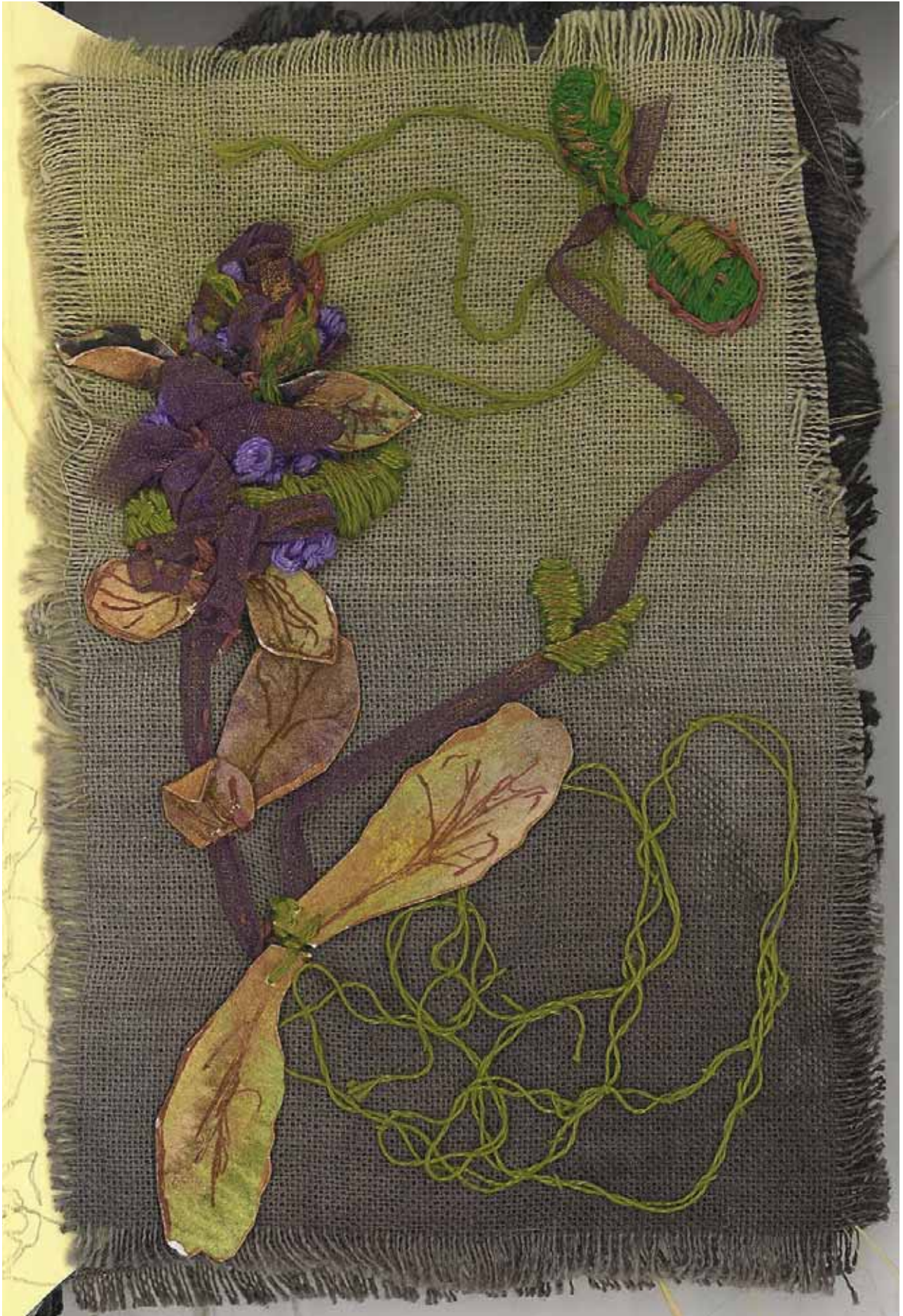
The gesture, the movement, a piece of art, or land art.

Express the journey of your plant in matter.

Always go back to the source – is this an adequate expression of your plant?

*Saturday morning
sketchbook entry
One continuous line*





Link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/c_seeley.html