

They appear, unannounced, immediately identifiable against the contrast of sun-baked earth, common aggregate and desiccated root. Initially I thought they might be bones, these ubiquitous thin cylindrical bleached white barrels with their capillary void running through their centre. But unlike bones they are dense and contain no vermiculous structure beneath their surface. And they are straight, some with a thin ridge running down their tubular length, some decorated elaborately. They vary in width, but are uniformly within a range of five to ten millimetres. The longest I have found is around seventy millimetres and the shortest just a stubby fifteen millimetres. Most are the length of a cigarette butt. They appear after rain, gleaming like sticks of blackboard chalk after the sun dries their surface. Worms help to juggle them up from the shallow depths where they have lain for as long as two-hundred years. Once a part of a whole structure, a comfort for a worker, a gardener, a labourer, a judge, a parson, an old woman with leather hands. Whole, and then so easily fragmented, by chance just a little separation at the end, no impediment to their function. But more often a central fracture, a rent dividing the two functional structures, the remains a pitiful and lost thing. Perhaps a moment of defiance, a wisp of smoke, a spark, a burn resulting from fumbled attempts at cradling the falling parts, and for what purpose, to prevent further breakage? No sorrowful loss, for this is an object easily replaced. No attempt at repair need be sought. Instead, the fragmented remains may fall to the ground, as if their partially fired particulates might once again become clay. For an hour, a day, a month, a year, the sizable pieces lie on the ground. Or a child happens upon the object with its two or three inches of intact pipework and repurposes as something for amusement, filling the bowl with soap and water rather than dried tobacco, blowing bubbles instead of smoke. A brief renewal and purpose and innocence until boredom or progress or adulthood. Adulthood. Perhaps in some feverish dream evoked some sense of future, a life spent at full growth and superannuated performance. Chinks of light skewed and refocused by the oscillating aperture of the drapes, dancing like the magic lantern animations, miraculous, akin to the camera obscura or Plato's cave. No, this reality was generated by the mind, heated and skewed by the body's war waged upon the virus that altered every cell of the child's body, part recalled, part novel and entirely affected. No adulthood beyond the febrile projections and shadows that danced upon the wall. All softness gone, the hollow bones encounter the soil and recoil against the cold. Worms help to juggle them up to the surface and sun bleaches them white. But unlike the pipes, they have the honeycombed core. They have the gentle undulations, the organic engineering, the lacuna, the osteocyte. Through their structure we may navigate the canals and walkways, a meander through the unmapped and semi-derelict shortcuts of Triora. These bones lie on the ground next to flint and brick and vegetation and clay pipe. They too chip and crumble, so long after the fever let them go. With rain they darken, soften, yearn. And with sun they retreat, curtains pulled. From elaborate chemical structures, crowns, whips, conglomerates and teeming populations, to dust and silence. But what of rain? Life-giving timpani from condensed breath below the stratosphere. At its primacy a bond of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. Pure and structured like Seurat's mist, yet likely containing infiltrations of discordant matter: metals, noble gases, ignoble plastics, life forces. Purity we imagine in rain and stream and tap, but within the crystal-clear are delivered the pathogenic jewels; spherical, helical, prolate, envelope, deadly crowns and complex structures that we anthropomorphise as ghoulish talking squirming arrogant oddly human-like sentient beings, ninety-nine point nine percent of which we can conquer. Our substrate, our living suspension, haunted and vexed by errors and missed heart beats. Our beings, warmed by the sun and caressed by strangeness and charm. Our bones bleached and buried.