

HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

Five Dials



NUMBER 36

Landmarkings

ROBERT MACFARLANE *On The Peregrine*

RACHEL LICHTENSTEIN *Approaching London via estuary*

W.G. SEBALD *From the archive*

STANLEY DONWOOD *New artwork*

PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED WRITING FROM:

ROGER DEAKIN, J.A. BAKER, NAN SHEPHERD

*Plus: 'Relics' from Autumn Richardson & Richard Skelton,
photography by David Quentin and Jay Griffiths*

GUEST EDITED BY ROBERT MACFARLANE & SIMON PROSSER





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A RADIO TALK

Flight South

Roger Deakin follows the swallows

I wonder if the swallows that nest in the chimney of my Suffolk farmhouse have the faintest idea how profoundly they affect my emotions. When they first arrive from the south in Spring, and I hear the thrumming of their wingbeats amplified to a boom by the hollow brickwork, my heart leaps. They seem to bless the house with the spirit of the south; the promise of summer. Swallows have such a strong homing instinct that it is quite possible this same family of birds, by now an ancient dynasty, has been returning here to nest for the four hundred and fifty summers since the chimney was built.

Everything about swallows says 'South'. They are a shiny, metallic, gregarious, nomadic tribe, decked in magenta and ravishing deep blues like the Tuareg, Bedouin and Berber people, whose deserts they must soon cross as they set out in September to fly due south all the way to Cape Town on their winter migration. As they gather talkatively on the telegraph wires, they seem no more afraid of the great distances they must travel and the hardships they will encounter on the way, than you or I picking up the telephone to make a long-distance call. They speak a glittering desert tongue, calling to each other incessantly across the chimney tops as I have heard Berber women call like birds across the evening air to one another as they roam the quiet stony desert south of the Moroccan Anti-Atlas mountains, cutting dried scrub as fodder for their donkeys.

When the household swallows fly away to Africa, I get restless. I suppose I envy them. I certainly miss standing by the fireplace at night, eavesdropping on their dormitory conversations in the mud nests above. Swallows never fail to stir the nomad in me too.

I belong to the generation whose migrations south began at Victoria Station. It was E.M. Forster who said, in *Howard's End*, that everyone who has lived in a great capital has strong feelings about its various railway termini. 'They are,' he says, 'the gates to the glorious and the unknown. Through them we pass out into adventure and sunshine, to them, alas! we return.' Architecturally, Victoria had less character than some of the other great London stations, but it had by far the most romantic trains: The all-Pullman Golden Arrow (which connected in Paris with the Orient Express) and the Blue Train, which I rode each year of my early teens to the south of France to visit my pen-friend, Jean-Francois, in Menton. I suppose both of us must already have had travelling in our blood because our fathers worked for the railways and our exchange had been arranged through the British and French rail unions.

The Channel crossing on the ferry, sometimes rough, slip-streamed by seagulls, not swallows, and the sight of the mailbags being hoisted ashore in huge nets by the Calais cranes, the dockside alive with blue dungarees and stevedores, already conferred the status of rite of passage on that first journey. For an English adolescent, the Train Bleu provided the full range of initiation rites: the customs, the crossing of Paris by Metro from the Gare du Nord to the Gare du Lyon, the need to utter the first halting words of classroom French. At the Gare du Lyon I walked up the platform admiring

the high blue carriages of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits and the enthralling roster of the Blue Train's itinerary: Paris - Dijon - Lyons - Valence - Avignon - Marseille - Toulon - St Tropez - St Raphael - Cannes - Nice - Monte Carlo - Menton - Ventimiglia. I travelled almost to the end of the line. Sometime in the night I drifted out of sleep to hear the insistent ghostly voices of the station announcers 'Dijon! Dijon!' and later still 'Lyons!' At breakfast time, I was woken by stewards clattering along the corridors. I peeped under the blind and saw the Mediterranean on fire as we steamed along the coast past the empty beaches of Frejus and St Raphael. Everything was so much brighter and clearer than in my cool native suburb near the Kodak factory north of Harrow, and the sky was a deep bold blue I had never seen before: much more like Kodachrome, in fact. Shadows were inky black and had sharp edges. Suddenly, in Menton, the French of my textbooks came vividly, even deliciously alive. *Café, croissant, pain chocolat, la mer, le soleil, la table*: all took on a vivid brilliance like a revelation. Along the rocks towards Cap Martin, men in bright blue denim trousers twitched silver-backed olive leaves bound on sticks to lure the wily octopi from their lairs. When we bathed in Menton, shoals of small fish skidding across the harbour's clear water like shadows, I felt I was being baptized into a new life.

I was not the first Englishman to feel that way. Entering Italy for the first time through the birth canal of the Mont Cenis tunnel, the Bloomsbury painter and writer Adrian Stokes felt born into a new world and ever after experienced a new vitality in the south, both emotionally and in his work. His contemporary, the composer William Walton, reacted to his first sight of Italy in an almost identical way. His train went into a tunnel and when it came out on the Italian side he found the most marvelous sun, and the brilliance illuminated the rest of his life like 'Belshazzar's Feast'.

I had lucked out, of course, in landing a pen-friend with a place in Menton. The Villa L'Hermine was on a steep hillside behind the town, surrounded by orange orchards, olives and prickly pears. At night, geckos strolled upside down across the ceiling as we dined, serenaded by choirs of crickets and tree frogs. Jean-Francois and I would creep up in the dark to the concrete irrigation tanks that served as the frogs' echo-chambers and catch in our torch beam rows of vivid green males with their bubble-gum larynxes comically inflated. We glimpsed others in the shadows apparently in flagrante, still singing lustily in their passion. In the mornings, the cicadas took up the song in the Corsican pines, cranking up like old gramophones as the sun rose higher.

It was these raucous creatures who lent their name to Cyril Connolly's Cicada Club at Oxford in the early 1920s. The half-dozen members dedicating themselves to flaunting the English convention of visiting the Cote D'Azur in winter, choosing instead to roast themselves on the beaches of Villeneuve or Menton at the height of summer, when the rasping song of the cicadas hits the top notes in its frenzy.

Never mind magnetic north, it was the south that drew us like iron filings. My appetite for the sun now fully aroused, and my French somewhat improved, my later migrations as a

teenager and a university student were as a hitchhiker. I was a Cicada Club member by nature, willing to venture south regardless of season or convention whenever I had money in my purse and time to spare. The French have the perfect phrase for this 'I will arise and go now' impulse to drop everything, walk out one midsummer morning, and head south. It is *a la derive*, adrift.

In the late fifties and in the sixties, hitchhiking was an entirely dependable means of transport. It was an age of considerable trust and hitchhiking, for me and my friends, was above all an education in human kindness. At the time, however, we saw it in more practical terms: getting a foot in the car door, getting your bottom on a seat. In those pre-Thatcher days, a surprising number of people actually thought it was pretty selfish to go bowling along alone with empty seats in your car when there were bums aplenty waiting beside the road to occupy them. After several days hitchhiking south and sleeping rough, most of us soon transmogrified into the other kind of bums: bums with thumbs. Hence the expression bumming a lift, I suppose. Quite why one *thumbs* a lift I'm not sure. Perhaps because the thumb is the least aggressive, or suggestive of the digits, the other four being reserved for varying degrees of sexual innuendo.

The favourite gateway for the southbound hitchhiker was the Newhaven-Dieppe ferry because you could then follow a route through Rouen, Chartres and Orleans that took you to the Route Nationale Vingt – the N20 – and bypassed the hitchhiker's graveyard, Paris. There were no lifts to be had there. At Dieppe, your thumb would join the forest of others raised aloft at the roadside in a mass demonstration of faith in the essential goodness of human nature and its willingness to chauffeur every last one of us south. Right from the start you would have to face the eternal hitchhiker's dilemma: whether to choose a good spot, beside a lay-by for example, stay put, and risk appearing lazy, or whether to plod on southwards, as if preparing to walk the seven- or eight-hundred miles to the Mediterranean, in the hope of inspiring sympathy and approval. The latter course had two disadvantages. Either it meant having your back to the oncoming traffic, depriving motorists of the opportunity to study in advance your eager, open, honest features, or you turned to face them, with the consequent risk of walking backwards into a milestone, pothole, or parked car.

Like angling, hitchhiking required patience and cunning. We were fishers of cars, and we were all connoisseurs of the varied species of our quarry. Most of them are now long-extinct: the Simca, the Panhard Tiger, the slender Renault Dauphine, the hilarious Fiat Topolino, the stylish Citroën Flat Fifteen – as driven by Inspector Maigret. The only survivors seem to have been the two real eccentrics: the ubiquitous 2CV and the car you most hoped to ride in, the Citroën DS, known colloquially on the road as 'Le Crapeau' – the toad – with its wide-mouthed bonnet and all its sleek, invisible power somehow concentrated in the car's slender haunches.

But this astonishingly advanced and beautiful car was also known by the punning pronunciation of the initials DS

in French as 'La Deesse' – the goddess. The philosopher Roland Barthes, who was later killed in a car crash, compared the genius of the design of the Deesse to the building of the great French medieval cathedrals as a supreme expression of the spirit of the age. He mentions the many-spired cathedral of Chartres, an ever-fixed mark to which we steered across the yellow oceans of maize and sunflowers from Rouen, and in which I once spent the night hidden between pews in a sleeping bag. Modern France's new religion of mobility was all there in the Deesse.

And Roland Barthes was right. The Deesse was a kind of miracle, and a lift in one after a long, dusty vigil in the sun could feel like divine providence. Perched on the Deesse's sighing white leather seats hugging our rucksacks, we marvelled at the way the steering wheel appeared to float like a halo, magically suspended by an almost invisible stalk. Shakespeare wrote 'My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.' You'd never say that about the Deesse. The car floated, gliding forward effortlessly, having levitated itself with unhurried dignity from its parked stance, slumped on all fours. You wouldn't choose a DS for a bank robbery. And there was so much glass. No car had ever been this transparent. Even the headlights swivelled about like two eyes, mysteriously coordinated with the steering, so the Deesse had the uncanny, almost supernatural ability to see round corners at night. Even now, the ineffable design remains outside time, more modern, more confident, than anything that has come since.

The main roads south, the Routes Nationales, were wildly dangerous then. Traffic hurtled along in both directions either side of a common central overtaking lane. Saying a prayer out loud, our hitchhiking chauffeurs pulled into the face of the oncoming traffic, willing it into submission, hoping to dive back in again to their side with a nanosecond in hand. We prayed too, and held our breath. August 1st, the opening of the holidays, was a gigantic national game of chicken.

But however dangerous, those pre-motorway roads were beautiful. The endless avenues of overarching plane trees dappled the tarmac with shadow as you bounced along in the back of a 2CV or sped comfortably in a DS. Cyril Connolly wrote in *The Unquiet Grave* of 'Peeling off the kilometers to the tune of 'Blue Skies', sizzling down the long black liquid reaches of the National Sept, the plane trees going sha-sha-sha through the open window, the windscreen yellowing with crushed midges.'

Songs on car radios figure prominently in my recollections of these journeys. French idols like Johnny Halliday and Françoise Hardy:

*'Tous les garçons et les filles de mon âge
Se promènent dans la rue deux pas deux'*

And the exhilaration of The Who's 'I Can See For Miles' in an old Peugeot as we drove full tilt out of Blois towards a first bathe off the sandbanks of the sparkling Loire. The Beatles' 'Baby You Can Drive My Car' booming out of a Morgan Plus Four along the coast road from Narbonne to

Perpignan one July night, with the moon reflected in the salt pans beside the Mediterranean. ‘Good Vibrations’ trailing from the open windows of a Citroen Safari driving through the hill villages of the Corbieres one hot evening towards Limoux from Carcassonne, families sitting out on kitchen chairs before their shadowy front doors, girls in espadrilles and cotton housecoats and the clink of boules beneath the village trees.

It was Cyril Connolly who drew a magic circle on the map of France around the river valleys of the Dordogne, the Lot, the Aveyron, the Tarn and the Garonne, from Tulle to Toulouse, from Bergerac to Rodez. Connolly daydreamed of a house there, ‘A golden classical house, three stories high, with *oeil de boeuf* attic windows and a view over water. A great tree for summer and a lawn for games; behind it a wooded hill and in front a river, then a sheltered garden, indulgent to fig and nectarine, and in the corner a belvedere, book-lined like that of Montaigne, the wizard of this magic circle.’ Connolly dedicated his circle to Montaigne’s own two ruling passions: liberty and laziness.

This is the circle to which I returned again and again on my journeys south, often with Connolly, Orwell, Kerouac or Montaigne stuffed in my rucksack. Reading seemed much the same thing as travelling, journeying down the sentences, new landscapes unfolding, two hundred miles or two hundred pages at a time. I sat drinking Bergerac wine under Montaigne’s statue in Perigeux, bathed for the first time in the Dordogne near Souillac, helped a friend fix a ruined stone house perched above a trout river that dashed down to St. Cere through steep chestnut woods. Every other stone on our pile concealed an adder, and on our first fungus-foray we misinterpreted the pictorial guide we’d borrowed from the chemist’s and poisoned ourselves.

Everywhere we discovered, half-ruined and half-strangled by their own vines, the golden houses of Cyril Connolly’s dreams. In an abandoned mill-house by a steeply flowing tributary of the Lot, we found the miller’s cobwebbed coats still hanging on the nails where they hung them when they left, or died. Eel traps and bee skeps littered the baking loft. In a channel cut in the stone kitchen floor a small, clear leet still danced. Outside, cowbells clanked like a prison riot and in a lean-to shed was enough kindling to keep the damp out of the place for another winter. Here in this chestnut valley we Cicadas honoured Montaigne, the presiding genius of Connolly’s magic circle, by idling on the sandy riverbank for days, observing metallic green shield beetles browsing on the big white flowers of umbellifers, and regularly submerging ourselves in a small swimming pool we had constructed by damming the torrent with stones. We used to sit about on the rocks there reading, as Shelley did in a Tuscan woodland pool where he reports bathing in the summer of 1818 in a letter to his friend Thomas Love Peacock:

‘The water of this pool ... is as transparent as the air, so that the stones and sand at the bottom seem, as it were, trembling in the light of noonday. It is exceedingly cold also. My custom is to undress and sit on the rocks, reading Herodotus, until the perspiration has subsided, and then to leap from

the edge of the rock into this fountain – a practice in the hot weather exceedingly refreshing.’

On another occasion two of us found an abandoned fishing punt somewhere upstream of Beaulieu on the Dordogne, recaulked and tarred it by the riverside, improvised some rough-hewn paddles and set off downstream on a voyage that lasted several days with our damp belongings lashed with baling twine into a plastic fertilizer bag. Returning south the following year, we raised the sunken boat from the river bottom, baled it out with a baked bean can, and continued the voyage downstream, eventually abandoning it to subside again into the riverbed.

Like any serious addiction, my need to go south kept on deepening over the years. I had to go further. I followed the swallows across the Pyrenees into Spain, then on into Morocco, past the Atlas mountains, to the beginnings of the Sahara. Here I experienced the local Berber techniques of hitchhiking from the motorist’s point of view. Driving a Renault Four towards the little town of Tafraoute in the Anti-Atlas mountains, my ten-year-old son and I were halted by a tortoise in the road. Springing out to rescue it, we discovered it was attached by a string around one hind leg to two small boys hidden behind a rock. They demanded a lift and as we drove towards their village they slyly smacked their lips and explained how very much they were looking forward to enjoying the little reptile for dinner. My son duly expressed a desire to rescue it, and having paid over a hefty ransom in Polo mints and fruit gums, we eventually settled into room eleven at the Hotel Redouane in Tafraoute with our new companion. We fed it on lettuce and tomato, and eventually released it in the remotest desert place we could find, far away from boys or roads.

Travelling thousands of miles on such serial migrations, one builds up a cumulative debt of gratitude to one’s hosts, and it is always good to find the opportunity to pay some of it off now and again. One Easter in the mid-sixties, I travelled south with a friend to the Camargue and the great festival of nomads at Les Sainte Maries de la Mer. Thousands of gypsies had gathered from every corner of Europe for the annual celebration of the miraculous landing on the shore near the little town of the three Saint Marys on their storm-tossed voyage from the Holy Land. On the first evening, after enthusiastically joining in the festivities I went for a stroll under the stars and fell into the Rhone, fully clothed and wearing an overcoat. The current was strong and the water deep and muddy. I clambered out somehow and made my way back to the hotel, where my companion had already sensibly retired for the night. I stood fully clothed in the shower to wash off the mud, then crept up to the flat roof above, undressed, and laid out my clothes to dry in the next morning’s sun. I also solemnly laid out all the ten-franc notes from my pockets in the stillness of the night and retired to bed. Early next morning, a sea breeze arose, swirling my francs into the air above the streets, distributing them from the heavens amongst the gypsies, who must have thought it another miracle, as banknotes and swallows wheeled above them. ◊



POEM

Death of the Birch-tree

By J.A. Baker

Lean is the dull steel flashed white in the sun
Like a sudden lifting of the white-leaved abele,
Flushed from the raw thongs of the birch-tree
The white wood flies through the mists of morning.

The ringing singing of the axe-blade widens,
The keen cold frost edge flashing with dew,
The smell of the bruised sap darkens the air,
Raw and lithe is the air that shivers.

Sheer from the cruel north of my cleaving arms
Fierce falls the arctic fang of the axe-blade
And the light is shed from the heart of the birch-tree.





FROM THE ARCHIVE

To the Brothel by way of Switzerland

W.G. Sebald Kafka's travel diaries

▲

A Dutch acquaintance recently told me how she travelled last winter from Prague to Nuremberg. During the journey she was reading Kafka's travel diaries, and sometimes spent a long time looking out at the snowflakes driven past the window of the old-fashioned dining car, which with its ruffled curtains and little table lamp spreading reddish light reminded her of the windows of a small Bohemian brothel. All that she remembered from her reading was the passage where Kafka describes one of his fellow travellers cleaning his teeth with the corner of a visiting card, and she remembered that not because the description was particularly remarkable, but because no sooner had she turned a few pages than a strikingly stout man sitting at the table next to hers also, and not a little to her alarm, began probing between his own teeth with a visiting card, apparently without any inhibitions at all. This story made me return, after I had not looked at them for a long time, to the notes that Kafka made when he and Max Brod travelled from Prague to Paris by way of Switzerland and Northern Italy in August and September, 1911. Much of that account is as real to me as if I myself had been there, and not just because 'Max' is so frequently mentioned, for instance when a lady's hat falls on him in the train compartment, or Franz leaves him alone 'sitting over a grenadine by himself in the darkness on the outskirts of a half-empty open-air cafe'; no, in a curious way the stages of that summer trip of the past taken by the two bachelors are more familiar to me than any other place at a later date. Even the car drive in the rain through Munich by night – 'The tyres make a rushing noise on the asphalt, like the whirr of a cinema projector' – bring back great tracts of the memory of my first real journey taken in 1948, when I and my father, who had just returned from a POW camp, went from W. to visit my grandparents in Plattling. My mother had made me a green jacket, and a little rucksack of check fabric. I think we travelled in a third-class compartment. On Munich station, where you could see huge mounds of rubble and ruins as you stood in the forecourt, I felt unwell and had to throw up in one of those 'cabins' of which Kafka writes that he and Max washed their hands and faces in them before boarding the night train which passed through the dark foothills of the Alps by way of Kaufering, Buchloe, Kaufbeuren, Kempten and Immenstadt to Lindau, where there was a great deal of singing on the platform long after midnight, a situation I know very well, since there are always a number of drunks on Lindau station who have been out on excursions. Similarly, the 'impression of separate buildings standing very upright in St Gall, without being part of a street', but running along the slopes of the valley like one of Schiele's Krumau pictures, accurately corresponds to the scenery of a place where I lived for a year. In general, Kafka's comments on the Swiss landscape, the 'dark, hilly, wooded banks of Lake Zug' (and how often he writes of such things) remind me of my own childhood expeditions to Switzerland, for instance on a day trip we made by bus in 1952 from S. to Bregenz, St Gall and Zurich, along the Walensee, through the valley of the Rhine and home again. At the time

there were comparatively few cars around in Switzerland, and because many of those were American limousines – Chevrolets, Pontiacs and Oldsmobiles – I really thought we were in some entirely foreign, quasi-utopian country, rather as Kafka found himself thinking of Captain Nemo and *A Journey Through Planetary Space* when he saw a revenue cutter on Lago Maggiore.

In Milan, where I had some strange adventures fifteen years ago, Max and Franz (one almost envisages them as a couple invented by Franz himself) decided to go on to Paris, since cholera had broken out in Italy. At a coffee-house table in the cathedral square, they discuss apparent death and shooting pains in the region of the heart – obviously a particular obsession in the now sclerotic Habsburg Empire which had been suspended in a kind of afterlife for decades. Mahler, notes Kafka, had expected those pains in the heart too. He had died only a few months earlier at the Löw Sanatorium on 18 May as a thunderstorm broke over the town, just as there was a thunderstorm on the day of Beethoven's death.

Open in front of me now I have a recently published album containing photographs of Mahler. He is sitting on the deck of an ocean-going liner, walking in the countryside near his house in Toblach, on the beach in Zandvoort, asking a passer-by the way in Rome. He looks to me very small, rather like the impresario of a touring theatrical company down on its luck. In fact the passages of his music I like best are those where you can still hear the Jewish village musicians playing in the distance. Not so long ago I was listening to some Lithuanian buskers in the pedestrian zone of a North German town, and their music sounded exactly the same. One had an accordion, another a battered tuba, the third a double bass. As I listened, hardly able to tear myself away, I understood why Wiesengrund once wrote of Mahler that his music was the cardiogram of a breaking heart.

The friends spend their few days in Paris in rather melancholy mood, going on several sight-seeing expeditions and searching for the joys of love in a 'rationally furnished' brothel with 'an electric bell', where the business was conducted so swiftly that you were out in the street again before you knew it. 'It is difficult,' writes Kafka, 'to see the girls there very closely . . . I really remember only the one who was standing straight in front of me. She had gaps in her teeth, stood very upright, held her dress together with her clenched fist over her pudenda, and rapidly opened and closed her large eyes and her large mouth. Her blonde hair was untidy. She was thin. Felt afraid of forgetting to keep my hat on. You positively have to wrench your hand away from the brim.' Even the brothel has its own social standards. 'A long, lonely, pointless way home,' the note concludes. Max returns to Prague on 14 September. Kafka spends another week in the sanatorium at the natural spa of Erlenbach in Zurich. 'Travelled with a Jewish goldsmith from Krakau,' he writes after arriving. Kafka must have met this young man, who had already travelled widely, on the



way back from Paris to Zurich. He mentions that getting out of the train the goldsmith carries his small suitcase like a heavy burden. 'He has,' writes Kafka, 'long, curly hair through which he occasionally runs his fingers, a bright gleam in his eyes, a slightly hooked nose, hollow cheeks, a suit of American cut, a frayed shirt, socks falling down over his shoes.' A travelling journeyman – what had he been doing in Switzerland? Kafka, we are told, took another walk that first evening in the dark little garden of the sanatorium, and next day there were 'morning gymnastic exercises to the sound of a song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* played by someone on the cornet'. ◊

Translated by Anthea Bell



A LIST

Wind, Storm and Cloud

Denoting the land and nature and weather, one definition at a time.

Gathered by Robert Macfarlane

aigrish

of wind: sharp, cutting

Essex

black-east, black-easter

cold, dry east wind

Galloway

blackthorn winter

winter that turns very cold late in the season

Herefordshire

blae

of wind: cold, cutting, harsh

Galloway

boff

to blow back: used only of wind blowing smoke back down a chimney

Staffordshire

bright-borough

area of the night sky thickly strewn with stars (Gerard Manley Hopkins)

poetic

bruach

ring or halo around the moon, presaging unsettled weather

Irish

carry

drift or movement of clouds

English

cherribim

sky

Anglo-Romani

ciabhar

slight breeze, just enough to stir the hair

Gaelic

dim-wood

area of the night sky where few stars can be seen (Gerard Manley Hopkins)

poetic

dintless

of a sky: cloudless

poetic

duvla's pani

rainbow

Anglo-Romani

eeroch

pains thought to be caused by the east wind in winter

Northern Ireland

fell

sudden drop in wind

Galloway

flam

sudden light breeze

North Sea coast

flan

sudden gust of wind

Shetland

flinchin

deceitful promise of better weather

Scots

fuaradh-froise

cool breeze preceding a rain-shower

Gaelic

garbhshion

unseasonably cold and windy weather

Irish

greann-gaoth

piercing wind

Gaelic

gurl

howl of the wind

Scots

gurley

cold, threatening wind

Galloway

gussock

strong and sudden gust of wind

East Anglia

hefty

of weather: rough, boisterous, wild

Ireland

hot-spong

sudden power of heat felt when the sun comes from under a wind-shifted cloud

East Anglia

huffling

wind blowing up in sudden gusts

Exmoor

hulder

the roar in the air after a great noise

(e.g. thunder)

Exmoor

katabatic

wind that blows from high ground to low ground, its force being aided by gravity; sometimes known as a 'fall wind'

meteorological

lambin' storm

gale which usually happens in mid March

North Sea coast

lythe

calm or absence of wind

Fenland

mackerel-sky

sky mottled with light, striped cirrus clouds

Exmoor

meal-drift

high, wispy clouds

poetic

moor-gallop

wind and rain moving across high ground

Cornwall, Cumbria

Noah's ark

cloud that widens upwards from the horizon, in the shape of an ark, and signals an approaching storm

Essex

noctilucent cloud

high and rare cloud type (literally 'night-shining') that drifts in the upper atmosphere, is made of ice crystals and is so high as to be invisible except when, after sunset around midsummer, 'the tilt of the earth allows it to catch the last light of the sun' (Amy Liptrot)

meteorological

oiteag

wisp of wind

Gaelic

osag

gust of wind

Gaelic

piner

penetrating, cold south-easterly wind

North Sea coast

roarie-bumblers

fast-moving storm clouds (literally ‘noisy blunderers’)

Scots

shepherd’s flock

white fleecy clouds indicating fine weather

Suffolk

skub

hazy clouds driven by the wind

Shetland

thraw

of sky, sea or wind: threatening

Galloway

twitchy

of wind: blowing unsteadily

East Anglia

ultaichean

strong, rolling gusts of wind

Hebridean Gaelic

up’ tak

rising of the wind, usually signalling a fresh outbreak of bad weather

Shetland

urp

cloud; ‘urpy’ means cloudy with very large clouds

Kent

wadder-head

clouds standing in columns or streaks from the horizon upwards

Shetland

water-carts

small clouds

Suffolk

whiffle

of a wind: to come in unpredictable gusts

Kent

wimpling

rippling motion induced in a bird's wing feathers by the passage of wind (Gerard Manley Hopkins)

poetic

windin'

rooks circling in the air and thereby indicating stormy weather

Suffolk



A LIST

Seven Degrees of Homing

Jay Griffiths finds and defines the meaning of home



I am not here.

I am sorry, I can explain.

This event is titled Stay Where You Are, and I'm taking that literally. I am at home.

I've used this series to explore ideas of home, the hearth, homelessness and homesickness. And in this piece, I want to look at the variety of ways in which home manifests itself.



Home. The grounding note of the scale.

These are the seven degrees of homing I'll talk about:

Home is one's body, the body which in the gritty imagery of Anglo-Saxon was called the 'bone-house'.

Home is one's deep self, vulnerable when someone says something which really 'hits home'.

Home is one's homeland: the land, I stress, not the nation state.

Home can be understood in terms of time.

Home can be understood in terms of language.

There is a sense of home in music, the home-note of the tonic.

And there is the home of the world, the earth, which contains – which *houses* – all the other homes.

Seven degrees of home, seven notes in the scale of Western music before the melody comes home to the tonic, or the octave which repeats it. Seven colours, we agree to say, in the rainbow, which houses every hue, from the violet, the lowest of the colours in the arc of rainbows, to red, the highest.

The second note in the scale. The violet shade in the rainbow. The kind of home: the body.

I am at home, where now wild violets are in bloom. They flower low, just one step up from the earth, as the colour violet is just one step up from the ground in the rainbow.

It is my birthday, you see, and my bone-house has marked another year, this body, this first home from infancy, when we were closest to the earth. Another person's physical body can seem like home: one's tell-first, the person who you tell your news and thoughts to, the person whose physical nearness makes you feel complete at the end of the day, psychologically at home.

Boethius considered that there were three branches of music: the actual music of singers and players, and then the famous 'music of the spheres', and a third kind: 'musica humana', the internal music of the human body, in tune with itself. We speak of someone being 'at home in their own skin', comfortably at ease in themselves, evincing a kind of inner harmony.

The third note in the scale. Its colour is indigo. The kind of home: the self.

'This really brought it home to me,' we say. To be affected, intimately so. Speaking home.

To penetrate, strike close. The self exists on a cusp of vulnerability and defendedness; these phrases imply. They suggest a relationship between home and honesty: 'telling some home-truths'. 'To come home to oneself', we say, meaning a regaining of prior – and *true* – selfhood after an intermission.

The fourth note on the scale. Its colour is blue. Kind of home: homeland.

'Occupy' is the theme-word of this project. The word 'occupy', by the way, is from the Latin to seize, possess, and was also used, from the early fifteenth century, to mean sexual intercourse which fact, my dictionary says coyly, 'caused the word to fall from polite usage.'

In the Occupied territories, 1948 was the Nakba, 'the Catastrophe' when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians lost their homes and today their access to their own homeland



is tightly constrained. There is a phrase revolting on the lips of racists: Go Home. This is one kind of racism which Israeli settlers cannot use against Palestinians.

Occupied is also the word on a toilet door and in horrible mimicry, there are documented cases of settlers deliberately spraying raw human sewage over Palestinian homes in Abu



Dis, a suburb of Jerusalem. Sewage from other Settler communities is regularly siphoned through Palestinian villages.

Since 1967, the Israeli authorities have uprooted over 700,000 olive trees, about the same number of Palestinians uprooted from their homes in 1948.

When I say homeland, I am not referring to the nasty categories of political territory or nation state but to the actuality of earth, the flora and fauna, the kith, the landscape of your home, the love of which is rooted in the human heart like an ancient olive tree. In damaging the land itself, Israeli settlers are in effect providing emotional evidence that they themselves are not treating it as their home.



First the Palestinian population was evicted in the Nakba, the Catastrophe, now they are imprisoned, as the infamous wall has put a whole nation indoors in a detention centre.

Let me read you something:

‘The walls of the ghetto will be fixed. The walls would be the final, fixed form of the catastrophe.’ ‘Enclosure in the ghetto would be compulsory for all ... but those with the proper labour card could travel from the ghetto to work, returning in the evening.’

So wrote Thomas Keneally in *Schindler’s Ark*, describing the Krakow ghetto being built for Jews but it is a mirror for the Palestinian experience now.

The fifth note on the scale. Its colour is green. The type of home: time. ‘But those with the proper labour card could travel from the ghetto to work, returning in the evening.’ If home is one time of day, it is evening. The sun has done its travels, its journeying of the *jour*, of the day. The end of the *jour*-ney is evening. Hometime for kids at school.

The Maariv in Judaism is the evening prayer. It was written by Jacob, and written at evening, and because of evening. He was in exile, in a strange land, and as the sun set, he encountered the place where the Temple would later be built. He felt spiritually at home. Times of prayer can be ‘homes’ in the hours of the day, a habitual prayer is a kind of home for the soul.

Habits themselves create a sense of home: people say they feel at home when they are in their daily routine. Habits can house your hours, your life. A habit is both time (as in rhythm tapped out) and also a home, as in to inhabit, having a habitat.

A happy rabbit has a habit of habitat tapping.

The sixth note on the scale. Its colour is yellow. The kind of home: language.

Some years ago, I was returning home after being abroad for many months. I can’t say I missed England, or Britain, but I missed *English*. And, on my homeward journey, I heard English spoken – as a mothertongue – with relief and gratitude. I was home in words. Sometimes I find that if I say – or hear – the precise word for something, my psyche feels as if it has been welcomed: the word is offering my mind hospitality. I can feel at home. At other times, a particular word comes into view, unsought-for, but glowing like embers, inviting me in, to stay a while, have a drink with it. In the course of any day, words can be fitting-tents on a desert journey, quick shelters on a stumblepath.

Mother tongue. Native language. Word world. Language and land combined, Langland peerlessly plowing the earth for a harvest of eloquence.

Rose Auslander was a Jewish poet whose name became her destiny. Auslander means outlander; foreigner or alien, and she became a foreigner in her own land, a fugitive to escape the Holocaust. She hid in cellars fleeing from place to place: ‘And while we waited for death, some of us lived in dream-words, our traumatized home in the homelessness.’ After the Holocaust, she refused for some eight years to write in German, and instead wrote in English. Here is one of her poems, ‘Mutterland’, published in 1978.

My Fatherland is dead.
They buried it
in fire.



I live
in my Motherland –
Word.

Language is home. Words make shelters, they fluff out nests for themselves. They dig into the earth of their derivations, find their roots, at home in the families of language, at



ease in their connotations with neighbours. Cognates snuggle up together, genealogies of related words nestle together, they fall asleep on each other's shoulders: they have spent so long in each other's company that they smell of each other. Some words don't get on with their relations, and quarrel with their etymologies and take a different path. Other words accept they've made the same journeys, walked the same routes, their feet have trod the same ways, their iambic pentametres limp at the same moment and stride out a little further at the same time-rhyme, the little neologisms skittering around their heels like puppies yapping for the attention they need if they are to survive.

I give you one such: Chillax. A word that should have been strangled at birth.



The seventh note on the scale. Its colour is orange. The kind of home: music.

The tonic is the note which is the 'home' tone of the key. From this, it sets out on an exploratory beginning, a stepping forth.

The melody journeys, and wanders, but it has a homing instinct, it strains, like a horse near its stable, it is pulling at the reins to get there, the tension is clear – either on the seventh or on the second, and if the melody stays on either too long, even the least musical person tries to hum it home. Back to the stable. The stable, the secure note of the octave or tonic, back to where all is harmonious, the home tone in harmony with itself, well fitted, well joined. The word harmony is related to both art and also joining things together, a door fastening, and also the joinery of a ship's plank: Schindler's ARK, and Noah's ARK.

The eighth note on the scale. Its colour is red. The kind of home: the whole world. In the arc of the rainbow, we have reached the red at the top. In the arch of the scale, we have reached the eighth, the home tone.

The octave reflects the tonic and if we began on the ground with the muddy earth, then the octave suggests the world, the planet Earth. The word for 'home' in ancient Greek was *Oikos* which gives us ECOLOGY, the study of this world-home, this planet Earth which is the home of all the other homes, holding music, language, time, homeland, mind and body.

But the earth is not feeling at home in her own skin. She is too hot, itchy, restless, irritable, climate-changeable. And the world-home, the Earth, the one world which could welcome life, earth the beckoning miracle, is now unhousing us: Noah's ark will be called for countless times over as sea levels rise, and no rainbow's promise will cover the damage. The people of the Pacific Island of Kiribati are jetsam on the waters of the future. By 2030, some say, Kiribati will be underwater. This is the homelessness to come, people on the move within nations and between them as a result of climate change.

It is hard not to hear the harm of disharmony in the *oikos*, the world-home. Degrees of unnatural temperature are degrees of dissonance, until a kind of cosmic tunelessness creeps up on us on the waters. It is quite a feat to unharmonise a world, to dis-temper the well-tempered Bach, to unwaltz Strauss, to de-music this sphere.

And we are in the hands of thugs, a tone-deaf cabal who have seized the conductor's baton and occupied the dais, and the world is being occupied – fucked – by a philosophy which is a menace to humanity and mocks the music of the spheres into disharmony, all proportions broken.

Pythagoras considered that the sun, moon and planets all emitted a unique hum – orbital resonance – and that the quality of life on earth reflects the tenor of celestial sounds. The proportions, in the movements of the sun and moon and earth and other planets, are a form of music. This is the ancient idea of the music of the spheres: this music which is literally inaudible but a harmony nonetheless. A harmony of maths. A harmony of spirit. Listen very carefully and you won't hear it.

Boethius, as we've heard, thought that the music of the spheres had two corollaries, not just the music of singers and players but the music of the body. Listen very carefully and you might just perhaps hear the gentle hum of your animal body, the human purring-home in the bone-house. ♦



OUR TOWN

Estuary

Rachel Lichtenstein on that place where London's brackish water merges with the salt of the sea



On the night of the summer solstice I made my way to Hermitage Moorings just east of London's Tower Bridge. There were about a dozen other vessels in the harbour when I arrived, tugs and Thames Barges mainly, which had all been lovingly restored by a community of passionate enthusiasts. The historic boats made an impressive sight with the dark wooden masts of the barges and their folded heavy red sails silhouetted against the great Royal Palace behind.

I found IDEEAL moored alongside an immaculately refurbished Thames Sailing Barge, which now served as a permanent residence for a young couple and their dog. Skipping over the artfully arranged nets and ropes on the deck of the boat I hopped onto the 50-tonne Dutch barge which had originally been built in the 1920s as a sailing vessel to carry freight and had since been converted into a live-work studio by owner Ben Eastop.

As the light slowly faded on the longest day of the year I sat on deck with the rest of the crew drinking bottled beers, sharing stories and watching the cityscape transform. By dusk a low mist had begun to obscure most of the buildings. The iconic dome of St Paul's temporarily disappeared before re-emerging, floodlit, against the London skyline. Red-flashing beacons began to appear sporadically through the fog, marking the tops of tall cranes and skyscrapers. The skeletal frame of the Shard came suddenly into focus as every floor of the tall skyscraper lit up simultaneously. At the same time the beautiful gothic structure of Tower Bridge behind us was illuminated from above and below, throwing a sparkling reflection into the black waters of the Lower Pool of London – a place where so many of the world's most important ships must have anchored at different points in time. As night fell the lights inside all the flats, hotels and offices along the riverside came on. We floated in the dark void of the river, suspended in time.

On the water the sounds of the city seemed altered. I could hear the distant hum of traffic on the bridge, the clatter of trains rumbling past, the intermittent backdrop of sirens wailing, but it was as if these sounds were coming from another place altogether, not from the great throbbing metropolis around us. I sat and watched the vast twin bascules of Tower Bridge being slowly raised. A Thames Barge sailed silently past and drifted beneath the bridge before quickly disappearing into the shadows on the other side. On the remains of a wooden jetty nearby, I could just make out the shape of a large black cormorant standing perfectly still with its great wings outstretched.

Eventually we all went below deck into the former hold of the boat, which now served as the living quarters for the male members of the crew, with a small galley kitchen at one end and a large wooden table and chairs in the centre of the open plan space. Ben asked us to gather around the table to examine a nautical chart of the Thames Estuary. We spent the next hour or so deliberating over the definition

of that place; all we could agree on was that the estuary encompasses the stretch of water between the River Thames and the North Sea. Defining its outer and inner limits seemed almost impossible, as the fluid boundary lines shifted constantly throughout our discussion.

We argued for some time about where the royal river ended and the estuary began. I told the group I had been looking at eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Admiralty charts in the British Library's map room; beautiful hand-drawn documents, covered in a mystifying array of complex lines, which had been difficult for me to decipher but at the top of a chart dated 1871 the Thames Estuary was described as being: '18 nautical miles long from Gravesend to the Nore'. Some members of the crew thought it was much longer than this, starting as far upriver as Tower Bridge – the ancient control centre of the Estuary. Others felt the Thames Barrier or even the QE2 Bridge were obvious beginnings. But most agreed that before these structures were erected the historic gateway into the Thames for centuries had always been the ancient shipping port of Gravesend, which sits at Lower Hope, the narrowest point in the river, a place of strong tidal currents where the brackish dirty water from London merges with the salt water from the North Sea.

Leaving London the inner estuary is generally believed to end somewhere around the forbidden military zone of Foulness Island, which sits opposite the site of the former Nore light ship. However a Hydrological Survey, dated 1882, states that the eastern boundary of the outer reaches of the Thames Estuary stretches much further out into the North Sea, from North Foreland near Margate across to the Kentish Knock Lighthouse in Harwich. The sailors in the group agreed with this definition although the contemporary chart we were looking at showed the outer limits of the Estuary extending all the way up to Orfordness on the Suffolk coast.

The boundary line for the beginning of the inner estuary was thought to be somewhere near the head of *Sea Reach*, south of Canvey Island, although I felt it could originate as far along the Essex coast as the Crowstone, which sits just off the foreshore of Chalkwell Beach. The first of the ancient stone obelisks to be placed there in 1197 was referred to in official records as the city stone of Leigh. The base of this medieval stone may still rest under the mud but the original marker has long since disappeared. The monument that exists there today is made of granite and looks similar in shape to Cleopatra's needle on the Embankment. It was erected there in 1836 but an older version sits amongst the rose beds in Priory Park in Southend.

You can walk out to the Crowstone easily when the tide goes out. Inscribed on the north, east and west faces are the names of the lord mayors of London who used to visit every seven years for the water pageants that once took place around this local landmark. In Southend Library I had read eighteenth-century descriptions of these ceremonies,

which told of great processions from London by steamboat, with the Lord Mayor being accompanied by water bailiffs, sheriffs and the aldermen of the city. The ceremonies were performed to huge crowds of people and would begin with the city sword being placed against the stone, 'an act which signified the official maintenance of the claim of the city of London of the jurisdiction of the Thames at this limit mark.' At high tide city officials would row around the Crowstone three times before drinking the toast 'God Preserve the City of London.' At low tide entertainment was provided for the spectators with the local sheriff being 'respectfully bumped' against the stone by watermen, after which he obtained the Freedom of the Water. The proceedings would continue with a huge amount of drinking and merriment followed by 'a scramble in the mud for coins, usually one hundred newly coined sixpences, thrown to the crowd by the mayor.' The same ceremony would then be repeated on the other side of the river, at the London Stone, which sits directly opposite the Crowstone at the entrance to Yantlet Creek on the Isle of Grain. The imaginary line between the Crowstone and the London Stone is called the *Yantlet Line* and denotes the final end of the Thames. As a child I was told the *Yantlet Line* is the place where London ends and Essex begins.

The London Stone has become a mythical pilgrimage site for a number of artists and writers recently who have risked their lives to touch it at low tide. In fact I had been listening to the writer Iain Sinclair tell a story about such an adventure the night when I had first met Ben Eastop, the owner of IDEEAL. In the former drawing room of the old manor house of Chalkwell Hall, which overlooks the Thames Estuary in Essex, Iain spoke to a crowded room of people about his recent explorations around the marshland territory off the North Kent coast, where he reached the London Stone on a swan pedalo with the artist Andrew Kötting:

'In *Ghost Milk*, a book I wrote as a charm against monolithic Olympic enclosures in the Lower Lea Valley, I decided that I needed to actually touch the London Stone, as a physical marker for the start of the tidal Thames. I was going to walk the river, from mouth to source, as a way of taking the temperature of the softest part of Middle England. But you can't reach it! The Stone is on unmapped military land. I spent four days trying to get in and being turned back by razor wire and the wives of policemen. I finally managed it with the photographer Stephen Gill. We carried a kayak to the mouth of the Yantlet Creek. But we didn't need it, the tide was out. We walked across. So the return on the swan pedalo from Hastings, with Andrew Kötting, was like a final gesture against those Olympic enclosures. We rode the tide, saluted the Stone, and read from my earlier book, *Downriver*.'

After Iain's event Ben approached me and asked if I would be willing to be the writer-in-residence for a multi disciplinary arts project he was organising, responding to place. The idea was to take a five-day experiential cruise on IDEEAL along the Thames Estuary with a mixed crew of visual artists, an archaeologist of the recent past, a musician, a

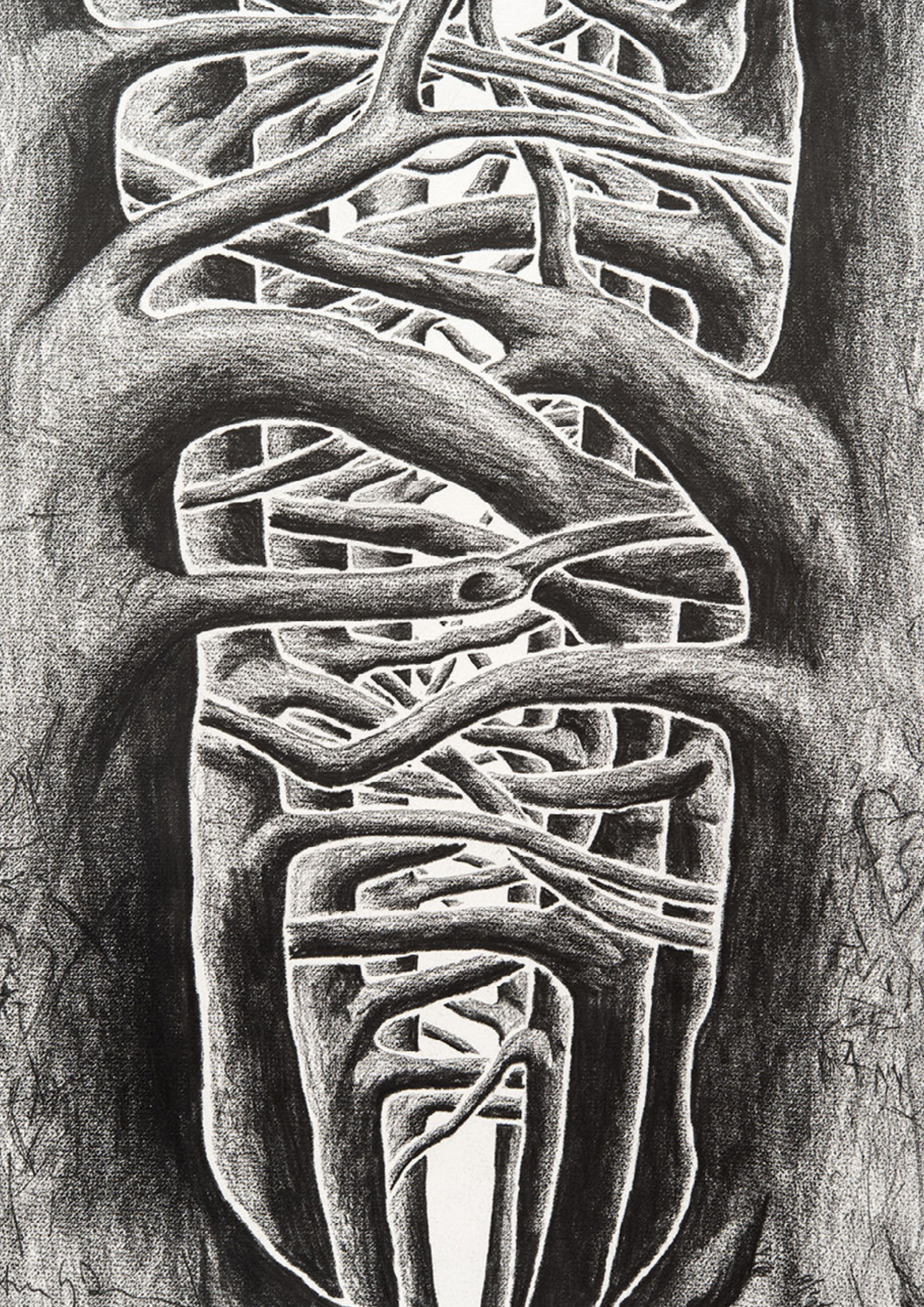
filmmaker, a writer and an ornithologist. 'The journey will be deliberately slow paced,' he said, 'allowing those on board a direct and immersive experience of this ancient waterway during a crucial period of change.' We aimed to amble downriver, to drift on the tides, to meditate on the unique seascape of that place.

The idea appealed to me immediately as the estuary and the mud flats of the Thames had been the landscapes of my childhood. I had grown up in Southend-on-Sea on the Essex coast and spent my school holidays paddling, swimming and playing in the Estuary waters. When the tide went out, I walked out on the mud for miles, catching crabs and shrimp in the little pools of water left behind by the receding sea. I knew the dangers of the incoming tide and also knew something of the military history of the place, having visited the remnants of crumbling forts along the coastline. I knew the stories of the ship filled with bombs sitting on the riverbed, but before my trip on IDEEAL I had never actually spent any time on the water itself. Most Estuary dwellers haven't either. For the majority of people who live in the many towns and communities dotted along the Essex and Kent coastlines the Estuary is little more than a much loved scenic backdrop to their lives. It remains, for most, an unknown landscape.

It was late on that first night when I finally settled into my cabin in the stern of the boat, which I was sharing with the only other woman on the crew, the archaeologist Sefryn Penrose. I lay awake, feeling the weight of IDEEAL in the dark water, listening attentively to the creak of old wood and the sound of water lapping against the hull, whilst inhaling the strange odours inside – a mix of paraffin, old rope, wood and dust. In truth I was nervous about the journey ahead; before that night I had never spent more than an hour or two on a boat.

Eventually I must have fallen asleep, as the vibration of the diesel engine above woke me at six am. Crawling out of my bed I made my way into the former cargo hold next door. Abandoned sleeping bags and mattresses lay scattered around the floor; the rest of the crew were up already. I helped myself to the remains of the still warm coffee in the pot and sat for a while in the belly of the boat, thinking about the merchandise that once filled that space: potassium, tea, spices, bricks, hay, anything that needed moving from one place to another. Ben had told me that when the vessel was used as a privately owned taxi service for shifting goods around the Dutch canals the great curved solid steel beams on the ceiling could be removed to throw large loads into the hold.

Tentatively I climbed the almost vertical wooden ladder up onto the deck. The sun was shining brightly and London looked magnificent. Ben was standing in the wheelhouse next to the musician John Eacott, the only other experienced sailor on the crew. Everybody was in good spirits and we were ready to begin our first day cruising along the Estuary; the start of what would become for me a deep exploration of that place. ◊







Hunting Life

How one short-sighted man showed us what the peregrine sees. By Robert Macfarlane



What did I see that morning? Hot winter sun on the face's brink, felt as red but seen as gold.

Air, still, blue. Tremors at the edge of vision: quick dark curve and slow straight line over green, old in the eye. Intersection, shrapnel of down, grey drop to crop, flail and clatter, four chops and the black star away with quick wing flicks.

Let me tell that again, clearer now, if clearer is right. What did I see that morning? A green field dropping citywards. The narrow track at the bronze wood's border. The sun low but strong in the cold. Then odd forms glimpsed in the eye's selvedge. The straight line (grey) the flight-path of a wood pigeon passing over the field. The fast curve (dark) the kill-path of a peregrine cutting south from the height of the beech tops. The pigeon is half struck but not clutched, chest-

feathers blossom, it falls to the low cover of the crop and flails for safety to a hedge. The falcon rises to strike down again, misses, rises, misses again, two more rises and two more misses, the pigeon makes the hedge and as I rush the wood-edge to close the gap the falcon, tired, lifts and turns and flies off east and fast over the summits of the hilltop trees, with quick sculling wing flicks.

And let me tell it one last time, clearer still perhaps. What did I see that morning? It was windless and late autumn. The sky was milky blue, and rich leaves drifted in the path verges, thrown from the trees by a night frost and a gale not long since dropped away. That afternoon I was due to drive to Essex to see the archive of a man called John Alec Baker, author of *The Peregrine*, and among the contents of the archive were Baker's binoculars and telescopes, with which he had spent a

decade (1955–65) watching and tracking the falcons that wintered each year in the fields and coastal margins of Essex. Before leaving, I decided to go for a run up to the beech woods that stand on a low hill of chalk, a mile or so from my home in south Cambridge. A thin path leads to the woods; a path that I have walked or run every few days for the last ten years, and thereby come to know its usual creatures, colours and weathers. I reached the fringe of the beech wood, where the trees meet a big sloping field of rapeseed, when my eye was caught by strange shapes and vectors: the low slow flight of a pigeon over the dangerous open of the field, and the quick striking curve of a sparrowhawk – no, a peregrine, somehow a peregrine, unmistakably a peregrine – closing to it from height. The falcon slashed at the pigeon, half hit it, sent up a puff of down; the bird dropped into the rape and pan-

‘His fingers are invisible to the viewer, curled tightly into his palm like talons.’

—

icked towards the cover of the hawthorn hedge. The falcon rose and fell upon it as it showed above the surface of the crop, striking four more times but missing each time. I ran to get closer, along the fringe of the wood, but the falcon saw me coming, had known I was an agent in the drama since before it had first struck, and so it lifted and flew off east over the beech tops, black against the blue sky, its crossbow profile – what Baker calls its ‘cloud-biting anchor shape’ – unmistakable in silhouette, as my blood thudded.

I had followed the path to the beech woods a thousand times, and I had seen kestrels, sparrowhawks, buzzards, once a tawny owl, twice a red kite – but never a peregrine. That one had appeared there on that morning seemed so unlikely a coincidence as to resemble contrivance or magical thinking. But no, it had happened, and though it felt like blessing or fabrication it was nothing other than chance, and a few hours later, still high from the luck of it, I left for Essex to look through Baker’s eyes.

~

J. A. Baker made an unlikely bird-watcher. He was so short-sighted that he wore thick glasses from an early age, and he was excused National Service during the Second World War on grounds of his vision. But this myopic man would write one of the greatest bird books ever, the fierce stylistic clarity of which must be understood in part as a compensation for the curtailed optics of its author’s eyes. As an elegy-in-waiting for a landscape, *The Peregrine* is comparable with Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams* (1986). In its dredging of melancholy, guilt and beauty from the English countryside, it anticipates W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1995). Along with *The Living Mountain* – with which it shares a compressive intensity, a generic disobedience, a flaring prose-poetry and an obsession (ocular, oracular) with the eyeball – it is one of the two most remarkable twentieth-century accounts

of a landscape that I know.

If Baker’s book can be said to possess anything so conventional as a plot, it is that one autumn, two pairs of peregrines come to hunt over a broad area of unspecified English coastline and hinterland – a mixed terrain of marshland, woods, fields, river valleys, mudflats, estuaries and sea. Baker becomes increasingly obsessed with the birds. From October to April he tracks them almost daily, and watches



as they bathe, fly, kill, eat and roost. ‘Autumn,’ he writes, ‘begins my season of hawk-hunting, spring ends it, and winter glitters between like the arch of Orion.’ The book records these months of chase in all their agitated repetitiveness. Everything that occurs in *The Peregrine* takes place within the borders of the falcons’ hunting grounds, and with respect to them. No cause is specified for the quest itself, no triggering detail. No other human character of significance besides Baker is admitted. His own presence in the book is discreet, tending to paranoid. We are told nothing of his life outside the hunt: we do not know where he sleeps at night, or to what family – if any – he returns. The falcons are his focus.

~

I reached the University of Essex soon after noon. I was shown into a room with a large table, in the centre of which had been placed two big clear plastic packing crates with snap-lock lids: a life reduced to 100 litres. The table was otherwise empty, so I unpacked the boxes and laid out their contents.

There were several maps: half-inch Ordnance Surveys of the Essex coast near Maldon, a road atlas, a large-scale map of northern Europe. There were rubber-banded bundles of letters by Baker, and other bundles of letters to him from readers and friends. There was a folder containing yellowed newspaper clippings of review coverage of *The Peregrine*. There was a curious collection of glossy cut-out images of peregrines and other raptors, scissored from magazines, bird-guides, calendars and cards. There was a list of the contents of his library. There were drafts – in manuscript and typescript – of *The Peregrine* and his second book, *The Hill of Summer*. There were proof copies in red covers of both books, every paragraph of which, I saw as I flicked through them, had been arcanelly annotated by Baker using a system of ticks, numbers and symbols. There were the field journals he had kept during his years of ‘hawk-hunting’. There was a sheaf of early poems. And there were his optics. A pair of Miranda 10x50 binoculars in a black case with a red velvet interior. A brass telescope, heavy in the hand, which collapsed to ten inches, extended to a foot and a half, and was carried in a double-capped brown leather tube. A feather-weight spotter-scope, light and quick to lift, from J. H. Steward’s in London. And a pair of stubby Mirakel 8x40s, German-made, in a carry-case of stiff brown leather lined with purple velvet, the base of which had at some point come loose, and which had been carefully repaired with pink strips of sticking plaster that still held it together.

‘What began as a distraction became first a passion and then an obsession for Baker.’

There were also dozens of photographs, some of them still in the branded envelopes of their developers (‘Instamatic – Magnify Your Memories!’). Among them I found a black-and-white shot of Baker taken in 1967, the year *The Peregrine* was published. He was forty-one at the time. I had not seen it before, though it was the photograph he chose as his author image on the jacket flap of the first edition. He is seated in an armchair and dressed in a collared white shirt and a dark woollen tank-top. He has wavy brown hair and an owlish gaze. He is resting his chin upon his hand, and looking away from the camera, over the left shoulder of the viewer, towards a sunlit six-paned window – we know this because there is a curved reflection of the window visible in each of the thick lenses of the spectacles he is wearing.

There was something unusual about the image, though, and it took me time to realize what it was. Baker’s right hand, the hand on which his chin rests, is distorted. The knuckles of the first and second finger appear to have fused together, and the back of his hand has swollen and stiffened into a pale spatulate shape, so all that can be seen is the plain white paddle of the hand’s back. His fingers are invisible to the viewer, curled tightly into his palm like talons.

~

Baker was born on 6 August 1926 in Chelmsford, Essex, the only child of an unhappy marriage. His parents were Congregationalists: his father, who worked as an electrical designer, suffered prolonged mental ill health due to a bony growth that pressed onto his brain (his treatment was, brutally, a lobotomy).

At the age of eight, Baker contracted rheumatic fever, the after-effects of which would be lifelong. It induced arthritis that spread and worsened as Baker aged, and at seventeen he was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, an inflammatory form of acute arthritis that fuses muscle, bone and ligament in the spine. Codeine

managed but did not eliminate the chronic pain, and Baker underwent agonizing long-needle ‘gold’ injections into his joints, hoping to slow the progression of his disease. But his body nevertheless succumbed: his knees and hips first, and then his hands, which were thoroughly stricken by the 1960s. Thus the fused knuckles, the curled fingers, the stiffened shield of his right hand – so bravely on show in his author photograph.

Despite the pain, photographs from Baker’s youth show him as a cheerful and sociable young man. Golden hair, hands in pockets, always the thick spectacles. Arms round his friends, drunken embraces in wartime pubs, walks along the sea wall. He was six feet tall, deep-voiced and strongly built, though the spondylitis diminished his stature. He was an eager reader and a prolific correspondent: his letters from the war years speak of an intellectually adventurous teenager – passionate above all about landscapes and literature. He would often spend weeks writing single letters, and because of this tended to double-date his letters ‘Comm:’ and ‘Conc:’. A letter to his friend Don Samuel was ‘Comm: Sept 19th 1945’ and ‘Conc: Oct 4th 1945’, and ran to sixty-four pages of blue notepaper. ‘Dear Sam,’ it opened. ‘Here beginneth what promises to be indeed a “weird” if not a “wonderful” letter. Many subjects will drift leisurely across the pages – vague substances phantasmal, trailing clouds of unwieldy imagery . . .’ It ended with loving descriptions of the ‘delicately balanced’ Essex landscape: ‘green undulating fields, rugged, furrowed earth, luscious orchards, pine clumps, rows of stately elms’. ‘In things beautiful there is an eternity of peace, and an infinity of sight,’ concluded the myopic Baker, longingly.

In the early 1950s, while working for the Automobile Association in Chelmsford, he met his wife, Doreen, a wages clerk at the company. They married in October 1956: the marriage would be durable,

childless and loving, although – one suspects – difficult at times for Doreen. Also in the early 1950s Baker was introduced to birdwatching by a friend from work, Sid Harman. What began as a distraction became first a passion and then an obsession for Baker. Soon he was birding alone. Whenever possible, he would cycle – on his Raleigh bike, with khaki canvas saddlebags – in search of birds, out into the 200 square miles of coastal Essex that comprised his hunting ground. He would pass London’s overspill factories and car dumps, heading for the inland fields and woods, or to the lonely sea wall and saltings of the shore. He would wear his standard birdwatching clobber: grey flannel trousers, an open-necked shirt, a jumper knitted by his mother, a Harris tweed jacket, a flat cloth cap, and a gaberdine mac to keep the weather off. He would take a packet of sandwiches (made by Doreen), and a flask (filled with tea by Doreen). He would also carry a pair of binoculars or a telescope. He took a map on which he marked the locations of his sightings, and a Boots spiral-bound notebook in which he kept his field records. At the end of each birthday he would return to a big meal (cooked by Doreen) and then retreat up to his den, the spare bedroom, to transpose and refine his notes. He was, Doreen remembered after his death, ‘a prickly customer’, who became a ‘loner’ as an adult. Limited in sight and mobility, and suffering near-constant pain, he was prone to bursts of anger.

Birdwatching helped Baker thwart his short sight, and offered him a form of relation. ‘Binoculars and a hawk-like vigilance,’ he wrote, ‘reduce the disadvantage of myopic human vision.’ Aided by optics and instincts, a new world became visible to him: the beyond-world of wildness that proceeds around and within the human domain. He recorded his discoveries in his notebooks and journals, in total more than 1,600 pages of field notes taken over the course of ten years, made in black and blue ink and his looping hand-

'These were the circumstances he needed to convert the sprawling journals into a crystalline prose-poem.'

writing, the legibility of which deteriorated as his illness advanced.

~

The journals are coal to *The Peregrine's* diamond. Crushed, they became his book. The first journal entry is dated 21 March 1954: it is functional and unadorned: a partridge is seen in the meadows opposite a church on 'Patching Hall Lane', in 'long', 'rich' grass. Thirteen species are seen in the day; a wren is heard 'singing lustily'. Habits of annotation that will last are established: each date is underlined; each bird name is double-underlined and capitalized (lending a Germanic feel to the prose); weather and wind direction are recorded.

Within weeks of that first entry, Baker had begun to experiment with his language, sensing that the field note might be a miniature literary form of its own. He soon employed metaphor and simile to evoke details and aspects that conventional field notes would have eschewed as irrelevant. Such comparative tropes, often elaborate, served to sharpen rather than blur observation:

Sunday May 9th. Wood Hall Wood – Nightingale singing well, and perched amongst brambles and white may.

Throat working convulsively as it sang, like an Adam's Apple, or bobbing, like a pea in a whistle, tremendous sound to come from such a narrow place as a bird's throat.

As I read the journals that afternoon, Baker's well-hidden personality became more visible to me: a private and pained man, in flight himself, who discovered a dignity and purpose in the work of watching – and whose encounters with birds supplied him with kinds of happiness that were otherwise unavailable. On 16 June 1954, five days before midsummer, he went out with Sid late in the evening in search of nightjars, undeterred by the heavy rain. Suddenly, unexpectedly,

they heard the song of a wood lark and, inspired, they impetuously 'plunged into the wet wood' to find its source:

I had a handkerchief over my head, like a puddingcloth, and followed the sound – at first along the footpath, then through the bracken, the ditches, and the bushes, until . . . we stood under that wonderful sound, coming down to us in the thick darkness and the pouring



rain. And a feeling of great exhilaration possessed me, like a sudden lungful of purer air. The great pointlessness of it, the nonsense of nature, was beautiful, and no one else would know it again, exactly as we knew it at that moment. Only a bird would circle high in the darkness, endlessly singing for pure, untainted, instinctive joy, and only a bird-watcher would stand and gorp up at something he could never hope to see, sharing that joy.

A feeling of exhilaration possessed me as I read that entry, smiling at the detail of the handkerchief, sharing something of Baker's joy. But I was aware of the reflexivity, too: that I had become a watcher

myself, a second-order spotter, trying to see Baker through the darkness of six decades – 'gorping' after something I could never really hope to perceive.

Half a year or so into his journal-keeping, Baker started to produce more intense entries: brief prose-poem paragraphs, modernist and spiky, that anticipate the dense energies of *The Peregrine*:

Saturday November 20th 1954 Great SE/SW gales each night, Rooks were swept from home to roost on immense waves of wind, thrown like burnt paper, very high, revellers in the wind.

Tuesday November 1st 1955 50 degrees. Edney Wood was quiet, but frighteningly beautiful. The sodden glow of the millions of leaves burnt my eyes. But after sunset it was just a desolate, deserted autumn slum of trees.

Light fascinated him, as he worked at how to represent its volatilities in language. He tried out phrase after phrase, remaining hostile to cliché: 'clear varnish of yellow, fading sunlight'; 'that quality of sunlight, which is like the dusty golden varnish on some old Rembrandt oil-painting'. Occasionally he relinquished simile in favour of common adjectives, uncommonly combined: 'Wednesday April 23rd 1958. Light was tricky and strange.'

The early years of Baker's journals reveal him to be a good writer but a rather bad birdwatcher. Partly because of his myopia, he did not develop what birders call 'the jizz': the gestalt of body shape, flight-style, song or call, context, behaviour and location within a landscape that allows an experienced birder to make an instantaneous identification. The jizz is the knowledge-without-reflection that the bird glimpsed at the edge of vision is a *kestrel*, a *firecrest*, a *curlew*. Baker, though, was often uncertain as to what he had seen. Early one January he watched a bird in 'glorious light':

moving very fast, with wing's [*sic*] beating quickly, rolling slightly from side to side. Its tail looked longish and tapering. The instant I saw it I thought it was a Hawk, a Kestrel or a Sparrowhawk, or even a Peregrine [...] or a Wood Pigeon or Stock Dove. . . . No markings could be seen in the glasses, so it wasn't a Wood Pigeon. Either a Stock Dove, or a falcon, presumably.

Another day he spots what he supposes to be a wood pigeon but 'the possibility of it's [*sic*] being an immature male Peregrine flashed across my mind'. 'Presumably', 'possibility': wish fulfilment is at work here: the beginnings of a longing for the peregrine so keen that it caused – in the blurry distance of Baker's far-sight – dove to morph into falcon, pigeon to pass into peregrine. From the start, the predatory nature of the falcons, their decisive speed, their awesome vision and their subtle killings all thrilled him. Baker was enraptured.

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After two hours with the journals, I set them aside and turned to Baker's maps. The Essex maps, inch-to-a-mile Ordnance Surveys, had obviously been heavily used. At the corners where the panels met, the paper had worn through from folding, and threads of cloth were visible. The maps were also heavily annotated in ink and pencil. There were territories marked out with ruled biro-line perimeters, which presumably represented the area of a single day's exploration. Pocking the maps, too, were hundreds of inked circles, each containing a capital letter or pair of letters: LO, M, K.

It took me longer than it should have done to realize that each of the circles recorded a raptor sighting. P = peregrine. SH = sparrowhawk. M = merlin. LO = little owl. BO = barn owl. HH = hen harrier. K = kestrel. Only raptors – birds that hunt and feed on other animals – were recorded in this way by Baker. Our word *raptor* comes from the Latin *rapere*, meaning 'to seize or take by force'. I felt a sudden surge of unease at seeing Baker's obsession with raptors recorded in this way: as if I had stumbled into the room of someone fixated with serial-killers, note-boards and walls papered with yellowing news-clippings of past crimes . . .

The Peregrine is a book of bloodiness,

strewn with corpses whose lacerations and dismemberments Baker records with the diligent attention of a crime-scene investigator. Indeed it is, in many ways, a detective story: there is the same procedural care, the gathering of clues as to the nature of the killer, the bagging of evidence, and the following of hunches when evidence falls short and deduction will not suffice. And as with so many crime dramas, the killer comes to fascinate the pursuer.

After he first saw (or believed himself to have seen) a peregrine, Baker quickly elected the bird – which he often, inaccurately, calls a 'hawk' rather than a 'falcon' – as his totem creature, rife with dark voodoo. In the late 1950s, peregrines become the chief object of his searchings, and his language from this period begins to invest the birds with disturbing powers and qualities: a northern purity, a shattering capacity for violence – and the ability to vanish.

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The winter of 1962–3 was the fiercest since the mid eighteenth century. The sea froze for two miles out into the North Sea. Spear-length icicles hung from eaves and gutters, and snow drifted to twenty feet deep in places. The estuaries of Essex iced up, and the wading birds that depended upon access to the mudflats for their food supply died in their thousands. Not a day in England dawned above freezing from 26 December to 6 March.

Soon after the snow at last left the land, Baker resigned from his job at the Automobile Association in order to commit to his pursuit of the falcons and work on the book he was starting to compress out of the field journals. By day he watched, and by night he wrote. It was a frugal, focused life. He and Doreen lived off savings, a tiny pension and National Assistance. The house had no telephone, and Baker seems to have communicated little with friends. These were the circumstances he needed to convert the sprawling journals into a crystalline prose-poem.

Waiting for Godot was once described as a play in which nothing happens, twice. *The Peregrine* is a book in which little happens, hundreds of times. Dawn. Baker watches, the bird hunts, the bird kills, the bird feeds. Dusk. Thus again, over seven months. What Baker understood was that to dramatize such reiteration he had

to forge a new style of description. The style he created, up in his Chelmsford spare room, was as sudden and swift as the bird to which it was devoted, and one that – like the peregrine – could startle even as it repeated itself.

Baker gained his effect by a curious combination of surplus (the proliferation of verb, adjective, metaphor and simile), deletion (the removal of articles, conjunctions, proper nouns) and compression (the decision to crush ten years of 'hawk-hunting' down to a single symbolic 'season', its year unspecified). This mixture of flaring out and paring away results in the book's shocking energies and its hyperkinetic prose. Neologisms and coinages abound. There are the adjectives Baker torques into verbs ('The north wind brittled icily in the pleached lattice of the hedges'), and the verbs he incites to misbehaviour ('Four short-eared owls soothed out of the gorse'). Adverbs act as bugle notes, conferring bright ritualism upon scenes ('Savagely he lashed himself free, and came superbly to the south, rising on the rim of the black cloud'). There are the audacious comparisons: the yellow-billed cock blackbird 'like a small mad puritan with a banana in his mouth', the wood pigeon on a winter field that 'glowed purple and grey like broccoli' – like broccoli! – or the 'five thousand dunlin' that 'rained away inland, like a horde of beetles gleamed with golden chitin'. Such flourishes have the appearance of surplus to them, but in fact they aspire to maximum efficiency. A baroque simile is offered because it seems to Baker the most precise way to evoke the thing to which it is being compared. These comparisons are 'far-fetched' in two senses: elaborate in their analogies, but also serving to fetch-from-far – to bring near the distant world of the birds.

I had known before coming to the archive that Baker had rewritten the book five times after its first draft. But until I opened the red-jacketed proof copy of *The Peregrine* I had no idea of the unique method of analysis he had devised for his own prose. Almost every page of the proof was rife with annotations. Ticks indicated phrases with which Baker was especially pleased. Here and there he had re-lined his prose as verse. He had subjected his sentences to prosodic analysis, with stress and accent marks hovering above each syllable, as if scanning poetic meter (echoes of

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‘One of the many exhilarations of reading *The Peregrine* is that we acquire
some version of the vision of a peregrine.’

Gerard Manley Hopkins).

On every page, he had also tallied and totalled the number of verbs, adjectives, metaphors and similes. Above each metaphor was a tiny inked ‘M’, above each simile an ‘S’, above each adjective an ‘A’ and above each verb a ‘V’. Written neatly in the bottom margin of each page was a running total for each category of word-type, and at the end of each chapter were final totals of usage. ‘Beginnings’, the first chapter of *The Peregrine*, though only six pages long, contained 136 metaphors and 23 similes, while the one-and-a-half-page entry for the month of March used 97 verbs and 56 adjectives.

There, laid bare, was the technical basis of Baker’s style: an extreme density of verbs, qualifiers and images, resulting in a book in which – as the writer and ornithologist Kenneth Allsop put it in a fine early review – ‘the pages dance with image after marvellous image, leaping forward direct to the retina from that marshland drama’. That quality of ‘leaping forward’ is distinctive of Baker’s writing: distinctive, too, of course, of what the world does when binoculars are raised to it. Thus the stunning set-pieces of hunt and kill, close to imagist poems, describing chase and ‘stoop’ – that ‘sabring fall from the sky’ when the peregrine drops onto prey from a height of up to 3,000 feet, at a speed of up to 240 mph, slaying with the crash of impact as well as the slash of talons:

A falcon peregrine, sable on a white shield of sky, circled over from the sea. She slowed, and drifted aimlessly, as though the air above the land was thick and heavy. She dropped. The beaches flared and roared with salvos of white wings. The sky shredded up, was torn by whirling birds. The falcon rose and fell, like a black billhook in splinters of white wood.

‘What does a falcon see?’ asked Anaximander in the sixth century BC. Accord-

ing to Baker, it sees like a Cubist painter gazing from the cockpit of a jet aircraft. It perceives in surface and plane, a tilt-vision of flow and slant. It remembers form and the interrelation of form:

The peregrine lives in a pouring-away world of no attachment, a world of wakes and tilting, of sinking planes of land and water. The peregrine sees and remembers patterns we do not



know exist; the neat squares of orchard and woodland, the endlessly varying quadrilateral shapes of fields. He finds his way across the land by a succession of remembered symmetries . . . he sees maps of black and white.

One of the many exhilarations of reading *The Peregrine* is that we acquire some version of the vision of a peregrine. We look upon the southern English landscape from above and perceive it as almost pure form: partridge coveys are ‘rings of small black stones’ on the fields, an orchard shrinks ‘into dark twiggy lines and green strips’, the horizon is ‘stained with distant towns’, an estuary ‘lift[s] up its blue and silver mouth’. These are

things imperceptible at ground level. We become the *catascopos*, the ‘looker-down’: a role usually reserved for gods, pilots and mountaineers. This falcon-sight, this *catascopy*, makes Essex – a county that never rises higher than 140 metres above sea level, a county that one sees often across, but rarely down onto – new again. Baker gained this perspective for his prose by studying RAF and Luftwaffe aerial photographs of the south-east of England. To see like a peregrine, he had first to see like a helmeted airman. Short sight led to bomb-sight led to hawk-sight.

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The Peregrine is not a book about watching a falcon but a book about becoming a falcon. In the opening pages, Baker sets out his manifesto of pursuit:

Wherever he goes, this winter, I will follow him. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom, of the hunting life. I will follow him till my predatory human shape no longer darkens in terror the shaken kaleidoscope of colour that stains the deep fovea of his brilliant eye. My pagan head shall sink into the winter land, and there be purified.

There, in four eldritch sentences, is the book’s chill heart. Baker hopes that, through a prolonged and ‘purified’ concentration upon the peregrine, he might be able to escape his ‘human shape’ and abscond into the ‘brilliant’ wildness of the bird.

He begins his ‘hunting life’ by learning to track his predatory prey. Peregrines can often fly so fast, and at such altitude, that to the human eye – especially the myopic human eye – they are invisible from the ground. But Baker discovers that they can be located by the disturbance they create among other birds, almost as the position of an invisible plane can be told from its contrail: ‘Evanescence as flame,’ he writes on 7 October, ‘peregrines sear across the cold sky and are gone, leaving no sign in

'Why might a man want to become a bird?'

the blue haze above. But in the lower air a wake of birds trails back, and rises upward through the white helix of the gulls.'

As he improves his tracking skills, so Baker draws closer to the bird, and he begins to seek contact with it, through ritual mimicry of its behaviour and habits (a method that has affinities with those of revolutionary mid-twentieth-century ethologists such as Frank Fraser Darling and Konrad Lorenz). One November day he rests his hand on the grass where a peregrine has recently come to ground, and experiences 'a strong feeling of proximity, identification'. By December he has gone fully feral. Crossing a field one afternoon, he sees feathers blowing in the wind:

The body of a woodpigeon lay breast upward on a mass of soft white feathers. The head had been eaten . . . The bones were still dark red, the blood still wet.

I found myself crouching over the kill, like a mantling hawk. My eyes turned quickly about, alert for the walking heads of men. Unconsciously I was imitating the movements of a hawk, as in some primitive ritual; the hunter becoming the thing he hunts . . . We live, in these days in the open, the same ecstatic fearful life. We shun men.

The pronouns tell the story – 'I' turns into 'we'; repetition becomes ritual; human dissolves into falcon. Allsop understood this drive for transformation to be the book's central psychodrama: 'The [book's] strange and awful grip,' he wrote, 'is in the author's wrestling to be rid of his humanness, to enter the hawk's feathers, skin and spirit.'

Why might a man want to become a bird? Baker's illness, and the pained discomfort of his daily life, bear upon this question. The peregrines – in their speed and freedom of manoeuvre, with their fabulous vision – idealized the physical abilities of which the

earth-bound, joint-crabbed, eye-dimmed Baker had been deprived. One can hear a hint of envy when, one November, Baker notes seeing a peregrine moving with 'his usual loose-limbed panache'. The falcons embody all that is unavailable to him, and so they become first his prosthesis and then his totem: 'the hunter becoming the thing he hunts'.

Baker was also suffering from intense species shame. The peregrines of Europe and North America were, at the time he wrote, suffering severe population decline. In 1962 Rachel Carson had alerted the world to the calamitous effects of pesticides on bird populations in *Silent Spring*. A year later a British raptor specialist called Derek Ratcliffe had published a landmark paper revealing the terrible impact of agrichemicals upon peregrine numbers in Britain. Pesticide use, notably DDT, was leading to an aggregation of toxins in raptor prey species, which in turn was causing eggshell thinning and nesting failure in the falcons. Their breeding success rate plummeted, with chicks typically dying in the egg. In 1939, Ratcliffe noted, there were 700 pairs of peregrines in Britain. A 1962 survey showed a decline to under half of this number, with only 68 pairs appearing to have reared chicks successfully. Baker was aware of both Ratcliffe and Carson's work; as was J. G. Ballard, whose work Baker admired, and whose story 'Storm-bird, Storm-dreamer' (1966) imagines a future in which pesticide overuse has caused massive growth in the bird species of the country, who then begin coordinated attacks on the English crop-fields in an attempt to feed their vast hungers. The south-east English coastline becomes a militarized zone, with anti-aircraft guns mounted on barges, there to resist aerial attacks not by Heinkels but by hawks.

In the mid 1960s, as he laboured over his drafts of *The Peregrine*, it must have seemed likely to Baker that the peregrine would vanish from southern England,

extinguished by what he called 'the filthy, insidious pollen of farm chemicals'. Over a decade he had watched the dwindling of peregrine numbers: 'Few winter in England now, fewer nest here . . . the ancient eyries are dying.' Thus the atmosphere of requiem that prevails in *The Peregrine*: a sadness that things should be this way, mixed with a disbelief that they might be changed. Occasionally, the elegiac tone flares into anger. Out walking on 24 December, a day of cusps and little light, Baker finds a near-dead heron lying in a stubble field. Its wings are frozen to the ground, but in a ghastly thwarted escape, it tries to fly off:

As I approached I could see its whole body craving into flight. But it could not fly. I gave it peace, and saw the agonised sunlight of its eyes slowly heal with cloud.

No pain, no death, is more terrible to a wild creature than its fear of man . . . A poisoned crow, gaping and helplessly floundering in the grass, bright yellow foam bubbling from its throat, will dash itself up again and again on to the descending wall of air, if you try to catch it. A rabbit, inflated and foul with myxomatosis . . . will feel the vibration of your footstep and will look for you with bulging, sightless eyes.

We are the killers. We stink of death. We carry it with us. It sticks to us like frost. We cannot tear it away.

'We stink of death. We carry it with us.' By this point in *The Peregrine*, we understand these to be the words of a man who feels himself stricken with disease – and of a man appalled to belong to his own kind. He wants to resign his humanity, and to partake of both the far-sight and the guiltless murders of the falcon.

Towards the end of the afternoon in the archive, I took Baker's telescopes and

'I am another of those obsessives, differently stricken, unable to free myself from The Peregrine's grip.'

—

binoculars one by one to the window. There was a view of beech trees, concrete buildings, and a lecture hall with a curved zinc roof. I tried out each instrument in turn. When I extended the Steward scope, there was an ominous rattle from its interior. I held it to my eye and stared into milk. The eyepiece was misty, glaucous. I tried the other telescope, brass and heavy. But it was missing its front lens, and there was only blackness to be seen, with a tiny circle of light at its centre.

Both pairs of binoculars, though, were scratched but functioning. Through the Mirakels I tracked wood pigeons on their *clap-clap-glide* crossings of the campus sky, passing over the green-gold of late-season oaks. Through the Mirandas I watched a wagtail figure-eighting for flies above the zinc of the lecture hall.

Binocular vision is a peculiarly exclusive form of looking. It draws a circle around the focused-on object and shuts out the world's generous remainder. What binoculars grant you in focus and reach, they deny you in periphery. To view an object through them is to see it in crisp isolation, encircled by blackness – as though at the end of a tunnel. They permit a lucidity of view but enforce a denial of context, and as such they seemed to me then the perfect emblem of Baker's own intense, and intensely limited, vision. I thought of him out in the field towards the end of his decade of hedge-haunting and hawk-hunting; how difficult it must have become to hold the binoculars, as his finger joints thickened and fused, and his tendons tightened.

The Peregrine, a record of obsession, has itself in turn provoked obsessions. It is a book which sets the mind aloft and holds it there. In the archive I found scores of admiring letters written to Baker by readers. Some wished to acquire his supernatural abilities as a tracker: 'I hope to have the good fortune to see Peregrine somewhere in the [Blackwater] estuary on Thursday Feb 9th or Friday Feb 10th,' wrote one – as

if Baker the magus might magic these wild birds up to order. A student of mine was so inspired by *The Peregrine's* vision of human irresponsibility that she became an eco-activist, paddling kayaks up rivers to gain illegal access to coal-fired power stations. Several years ago I came to know a young musician living a marginal life in a south London squat and performing as the front man for a hardcore punk-rock band. He was a talented and troubled person, for whom 'nature' as conventionally experienced was irrelevant, tending to incomprehensible. But he had found his way to *The Peregrine*, and the book's dark fury spoke to him. He read it repeatedly, and began to mimic Baker's mimicry of the falcons: once, on a London street outside a club, he demonstrated the action of 'mantling' – when a peregrine spreads its wings, fans its tail and arches over its prey to hide it from other predators. He and I collaborated on a project one summer and made plans to work together again. Then that December he died of a heroin overdose, aged twenty-three. He was lowered into the cold hard earth of a Cornish field a few days before Christmas, with the cars of his friends pulled up around the grave, their stereos blasting out his music in tribute. Buried with him was a copy of the book he revered above all others.

I am another of those obsessives, differently stricken, unable to free myself from *The Peregrine's* grip. As Nan changed the way I see mountains, so Baker changed the way I see coasts and skies. I have written often about the book, and followed Baker's own wanderings through Essex as best I have been able to reconstruct them: hunting the hunter's huntings. The opening sentences of a book of mine called *The Wild Places* knowingly invoke the opening sentences of *The Peregrine*; Baker is present through the whole work, his style stooped into its prose.

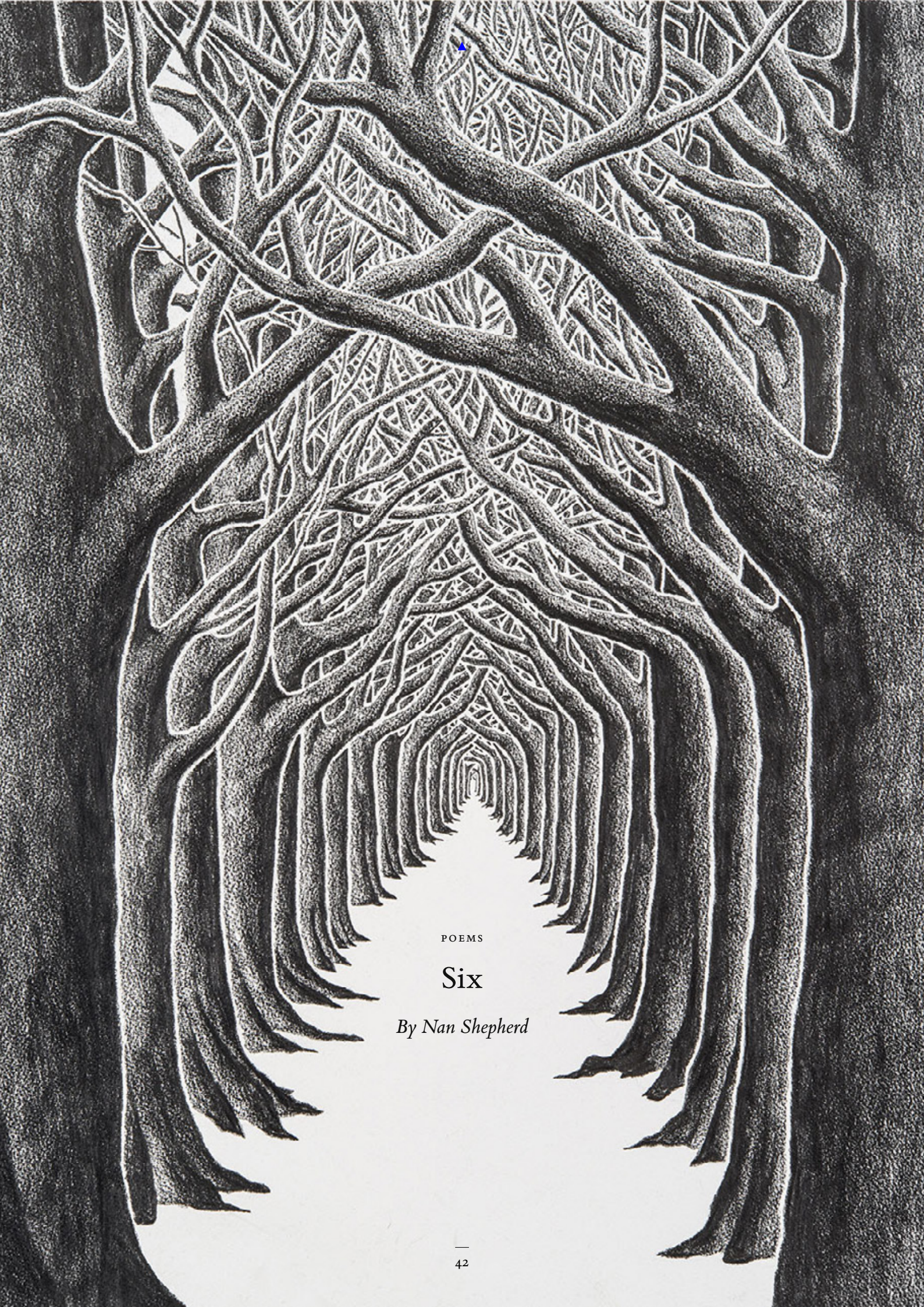
When I have seen peregrines I have seen them, or I remember them, at least partly in Baker's language. A falcon up at

the Mare's Tail waterfall in the Scottish Borders, *riding along the rim of the sky in a tremendous serration of rebounding dives and ascensions*, then dipping down in hooping dive to its nest on the cliffs of the cataract. A breeding pair high above a crag in misty sunlight on the side of long Loch Ericht in the Central Highlands, heard first, giving *high, husky muffled calls, keerk, keerk, keerk, keerk, keerk, sharp-edged and barbarous*, then appearing as *dark crossbow shapes*. And then the peregrine that morning, before leaving for the archive, first *a tremor at the edge of vision*, then at last *sculling away with quick wing flicks*.

The month I finished writing this chapter, eight months after I had been to the archive, a pair of peregrines took up residence on the great brown brick tower of the university library in Cambridge. They made their nest on a ledge high on the tower's south side, in front of one of the small windows that let light into the dim miles of book-stacks. A friend told me one afternoon that they had arrived, and gave me directions to the window: South Front Floor 6, Case Number 42. I went the next morning, rising up the tower in a cranky lift, and approaching the window cautiously. I could see feather fluff and guano; then, tucked in tight to the retaining tiles, a clutch of three eggs, brick-red and black-flecked. And suddenly I stepped back, because she was there also, *scything in and up* to the edge of the ledge and perching, the feathers of her piebald breast *rippled by the wind*, her yellow feet gripping the ledge, *the ridged knuckles tense, and big with muscle*, and her great *black eyes looking into mine*, or rather through me, *as though they see something beyond me from which they cannot look away.* ◊

—

The photographs of J.A. Baker's 'optics' and map were taken by Robert Macfarlane.



POEMS

Six

By Nan Shepherd

I. LOCH AVON

Loch A'an, Loch A'an, hoo deep ye lie!
Tell nane yer depth and nane shall I.
Bricht though yer deepmaist pit may be,
Ye'll haunt me till the day I dee.
Bricht, an' bricht, an' bricht as air,
Ye'll haunt me noo for evermair.

2. THE HILL BURNS

So without sediment
Run the clear burns of my country,
Fiercely pure,
Transparent as light
Gathered into its own unity,
Lucent and without colour;
Or green,
Like clear deeps of air,
Light massed upon itself,
Like the green pinions,
Cleaving the trouble of approaching night,
Shining in their own lucency,
Of the great angels that guarded the Mountain;
Or amber so clear
It might have oozed from the crystal trunk
Of the tree Paradisal,
Symbol of life,
That grows in the presence of God eternally.
And these pure waters
Leap from the adamantine rocks,
The granites and schists
Of my dark and stubborn country.
From gaunt heights they tumble,
Harsh and desolate lands,
The plateau of Braeriach
Where even in July
The cataracts of wind
Crash in the corries with the boom of seas in anger;
And Corrie Etchachan
Down whose precipitous
Narrow defile
Thunder the fragments of rock
Broken by winter storms
From their aboriginal place;
And Muich Dhui's summit,
Rock defiant against frost and the old grinding of ice,
Wet with the cold fury of blinding cloud,
Through which the snow-fields loom up, like ghosts
from
a world of eternal annihilation,
And far below, where the dark waters of Etchachan are
wont to glint,
An unfathomable void.
Out of these mountains,
Out of the defiant torment of Plutonic rock,
Out of fire, terror, blackness and upheaval,
Leap the clear burns,
Living water,
Like some pure essence of being,
Invisible in itself,
Seen only by its movement.

—
3.

Caul', caul' as the wall
That rins frae under the snaw
On Ben a' Bhuid,
And fierce, and bricht,
This water's nae for ilka mou',
But him that's had a waucht or noo,
Nae wersh auld waters o' the plain
Can sloke again,
But aye he clim's the weary heicht
To fin' the wall that louns like licht,
Caulder than mou' can thole, and aye
The warld cries oot on him for fey.

Wall, well.

Waucht, draught.

Wersh, tasteless.

Thole, endure.

—
4. REST

Where the outline of the hills
Reclines upon the azure west,
There comes a blur that a blue mist fills,
And there I know cool water spills,
And there is rest.
A quiet hollow dim and deep —
How quiet, my very pulses know! —
Where all desire is lulled asleep,
And the lone crying of the peeweeep
Will hardly go.
And there is nothing, nothing at all,
To bear the blood from the earth's own face —
Only her bosom's rhythmic fall —
The moving of world's processional —
The heave of space.

23rd February 1918

5. UNDERGROUND

What passionate tumult tore this black disturbance
Out of the rugged heart of the obstinate rock,
Fixing secure a thousand-age-old shock
Beneath the quiet country's inerturbance,
I have no wit to utter, no what breath
Blew like a bubble that flees through water this
Chasm in the bowels of earth where dark streams kiss
In guilty dark slant shores they will kiss till death
And I never look on: but I give my thanks
Tonight to that antique destructive whim,
That so the risen and torrential flood
That else had burst all measure and drowned the banks
And swamped my life, may pour along those grim
And secret caves, and none discern its thud.

May, 1918

6. DAFFIDOWNDILLY

Daffidowndilly, O daffidowndilly
How do you come to be green and gold?
The bulb that you grew from was brown like a walnut,
And we planted you deep in the dark brown mould.
Daffidowndilly, all shining and yellow,
Are you a bit of the golden sun,
Caught by the wind as it tumbled from heaven,
And stuck on the daffodil bulb for fun?

Written for 'Brownie's' class – 7th May, 1919



A Singing of Minutiae

Autumn Richardson and Richard Skelton explain the visual poems, Relics

In late 2008, en route to Scotland, we took a detour along some of the Lake District's lonelier roads; through the backcountry between the Irish Sea and the high peaks of Great Gable and Scafell. This region of crags and scars, heather and bracken, grassland and bogs, scattered with the remnants of prehistoric settlements, made a great impression upon us both, and we later moved to live in the area, to commence what would become several years' work, comprising publications, music CDs, prints and artefacts. This material was gathered together as *Memorious Earth* and exhibited at Abbot Hall and Blackwell, Cumbria, in early 2015.

As the work progressed, our focus became increasingly centred upon the tarn known as Devoke Water, which we visited in different seasons and weathers, walking its perimeter and traversing the fells which cluster around it. Along with our field notes we gathered phials of water and alluvium, wind-blown filaments of sedge and bracken, fragments of bone and cotton grass. These *thing-poems* are a vital testimony of the land itself; they are voices in an infinite polyphony – a *singing of minutiae*. During this time we also began to research the history and ecology of the region. Many toponyms for water have great antiquity and 'Devoke' is thought to derive from among the oldest strata of Celtic languages in Britain. It means 'the black one'. In the written record the name has undergone centuries of attrition – Duuok, Duffok, Dudock, Denok, Dovic, Devock, Duvvock – to rhyme them off is to participate in a summoning; the recital of an incantatory place-poem.

During our research we discovered that others had pre-empted our study – among them the archaeologist J. Cherry and the limnologist Winifred Pennington. In the 1960s Cherry identified hundreds of cairns scattered throughout the uplands surrounding Devoke Water, many of which were hidden beneath a thin veil of vegetation. Due to the non-intrusive nature of his methods, his survey was ultimately inconclusive as to the cairns' purpose and antiquity – but his work contributed to our understanding of this remote location as a landscape of absence – a place of departure and loss. The cartographic record bears this out, as the hills, crags and scars are littered with names, among them wolf (Ulpha Fell), deer (Harter Fell), pine marten (Mart Crag) and red kite (Kitt How). These and many more lost, or declining, animal species are now little more than ghost-presences; glimpses of a vanished epoch.

Pennington, also in the 1960s, visited Devoke Water to take soil core samples from the tarn, the results of which

provided a vivid material record of the environment reaching far back into prehistory. The embedded pollen grains were analysed, uncovering a fascinating narrative of plant succession over several millennia. This was once a landscape covered with trees, rather than thin soil, sedge and moor-grass. Eleven tree genera were identified: *Alnus*, *Betula*, *Coryloid*, *Fagus*, *Fraxinus*, *Juniperus*, *Pinus*, *Quercus*, *Salix*, *Tilia* & *Ulmus*.

Pennington's work became the basis for our own series of visual poems, *Relics*, which holds in stark relief the contemporary and prehistoric landscape. The material presented in *Relics* is a form of salvage; a dredging of the linguistic record for traces of the lost tree genera found in Pennington's survey. Each of the eleven trees is visually represented by a trunk cross-section, the innermost ring comprising its earliest linguistic form and the outermost its modern-day equivalent. But unlike the physical certainty of the soil core, the linguistic record is imperfect: the earliest Indo-European word-forms ultimately stem from an extinct 'proto-language' – a hypothetical parent tongue reconstructed from subsequent languages that survived into the written age. By comparison, the landscape itself has an immense capacity to 'remember'; to record its own history.

We should note here that the analogy between language evolution and tree-growth is imperfect. Many closely related languages (such as Old English and Old Norse) developed concurrently, rather than sequentially. Old Norse has been included in *Relics* as it exerted a great influence on the toponymy and dialect of Cumbria. The English dialect is also incorporated, but only those word-forms that are variations on the English common name for each tree. As with any such survey, it is incomplete – but it is perhaps in the nature of salvage that it should be so.

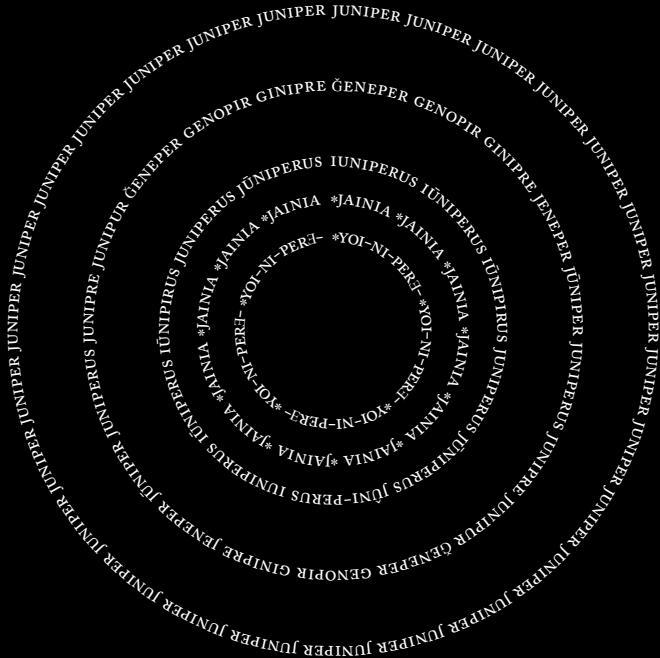
If Cherry's work alerted us to the remains of a significant prehistoric human presence in these Cumbrian uplands (including the nearby earthworks of Barnscar), Pennington's research showed us a coinciding decline in the wooded environment. Forest clearances resulting from human activity are likely to have played a key part. Analysis of sediment layers beneath tarns such as Devoke Water show how the landscape recorded our effect upon it, even if we did not have the means to document it ourselves. It could be said, therefore, that our first writing implement was the axe. Today – somewhat ironically – remains such as Barnscar are now listed by English Heritage as 'at risk' from 'plant growth' (<http://bit.ly/1bAVnpL>). Nature, it seems, is always keen to redress the balance. ◇



HAZEL

Corylus

- 1. Proto-Indo-European 2. Proto-Germanic 3. Old English 4. Old Norse
- 5. Middle English 6. English Dialect 7. Modern English



JUNIPER

Juniperus

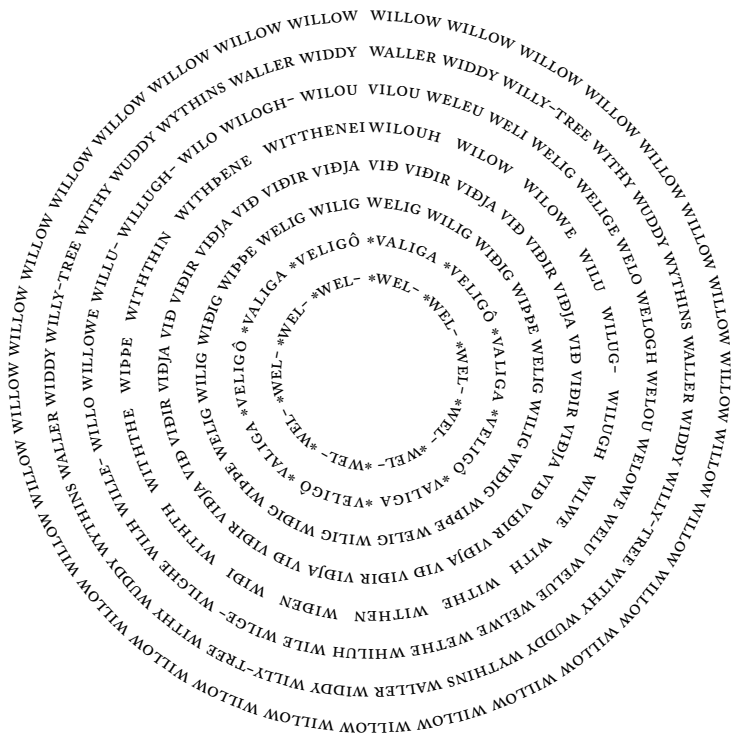
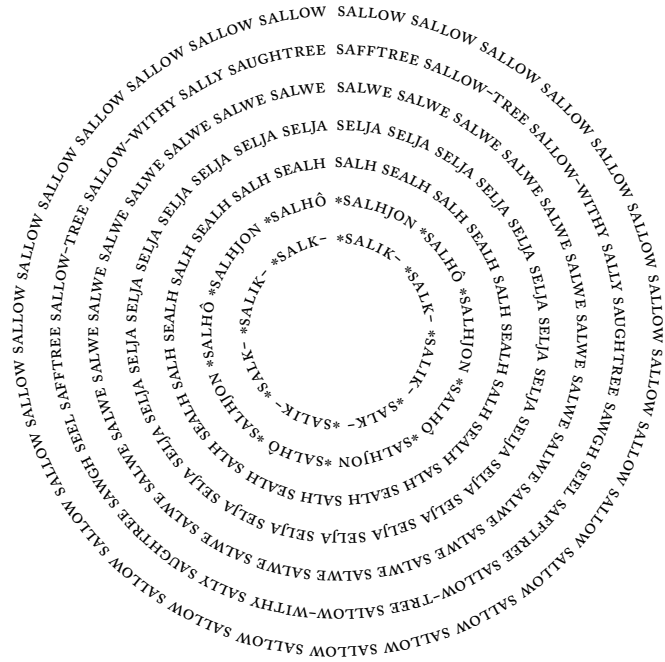
- 1. Proto-Indo-European 2. Proto-Germanic 3. Latin
- 4. Middle English 5. Modern English



SALLOW

Salix

- 1. Proto-Indo-European 2. Proto-Germanic 3. Old English 4. Old Norse
- 5. Middle English 6. English Dialect 7. Modern English



WILLOW

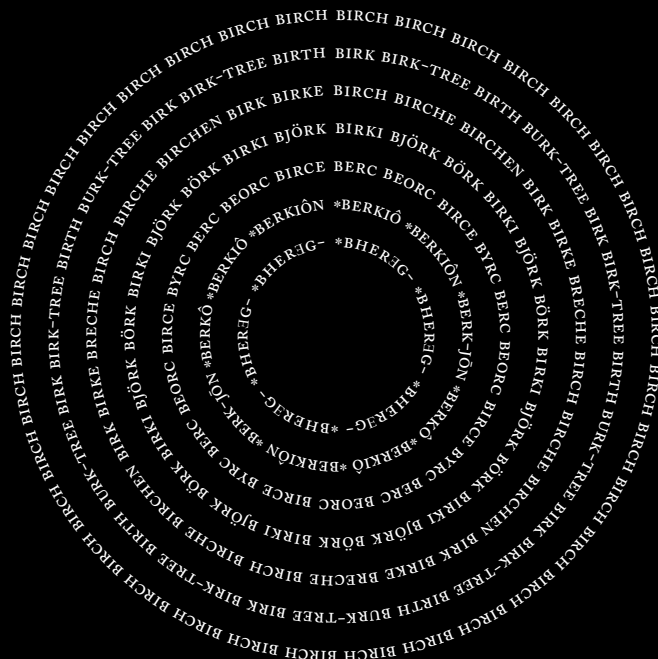
Salix

- 1. Proto-Indo-European 2. Proto-Germanic 3. Old English 4. Old Norse
- 5 & 6. Middle English 7. English Dialect 8. Modern English

BEECH

Fagus

- 1. Proto-Indo-European 2. Proto-Germanic 3. Old English 4. Old Norse
- 5. Middle English 6. English Dialect 7. Modern English



BIRCH

Betula

- 1. Proto-Indo-European 2. Proto-Germanic 3. Old English 4. Old Norse
- 5. Middle English 6. English Dialect 7. Modern English



W. W. W. W. W.

Rocks in the Sky

Photographs by David Quentin

The first photograph I ever took of a rock in the sky was rubbish, but it could not have turned out otherwise given my inexperience at the task and the technical limitations of the kit I had with me. I now know that you need to be using exceptionally fast film, so that you can stop down, and crank up the shutter speed: you don't want the landscape blurred out by selective focus on your rock and you certainly don't want the rock blurred by any hint of motion. You want it to be just hanging there above the landscape 'in much the same way that bricks don't'. You also need to be using a wide angle lens so that you can be close to the rock and move around it as it moves; so that you can physically compose the shot in the always vanishing sliver of time when the rock is attractively positioned in the sky and catching the light favourably.

Visually I think they are quite derivative. The Sugar Loaf one is a clear rip-off of Magritte's *Le château des Pyrénées*, and the slanted slab over Watendlath Fell only seems so portentous because it reminds you of the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *Ambassadors*. But to my mind the kitschiness of these reference points adds to the fun. They are not meant to be serious pictures, even though it's sometimes hard work to get them right.

But while they are not serious, they do nonetheless represent a kind of geology. When I started the project I was already inclined to recognise geology as investigating what is (owing to the disproportionate brevity of recorded human thought) an unnaturally static moment in a (however ungraspably slow) dynamic. Likewise as my understanding of geology increases I find that one of the most important and truly interesting properties of rocks in motion is the role played, in the formation of the landscapes we humans love, by their relative buoyancy ∅.



NEAR CALLANISH, ISLE OF LEWIS





BRENT CRATER, ONTARIO





CHARLEVOIX CRATER, QUEBEC





NINE BARROW DOWN, ISLE OF PURBECK





SEILEBOST BEACH, ISLE OF HARRIS





SUGAR LOAF, MONMOUTHSHIRE





WATENDLATH FELL, CUMBRIA



Stay Where You Are

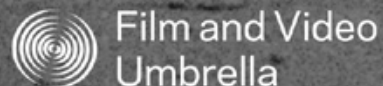
JEM FINER | LAVINIA GREENLAW | JAY GRIFFITHS | BEN RIVERS

Last year, four artists and writers known for their wide-ranging travels paused to consider what lay close at hand. The resultant works, including Ben Rivers' award-winning *Things*, can be viewed online.

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Image: Ben Rivers

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