H Is for Hawk

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PART I

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Patience

Forty-five minutes north-east of Cambridge is a landscape I've come to love very much indeed. It's where wet fen gives way to parched sand. It's a land of twisted pine trees, burned-out cars, shotgun-peppered road signs and US Air Force bases. There are ghosts here: houses crumble inside numbered blocks of pine forestry. There are spaces built for air-delivered nukes inside grassy tumuli behind twelve-foot fences, tattoo parlours and US Air Force golf courses. In spring it's a riot of noise: constant plane traffic, gas-guns over pea fields, woodlarks and jet engines. It's called the Brecklands – the broken lands – and it's where I ended up that morning, seven years ago, in early spring, on a trip I hadn't planned at all. At five in the morning I'd been staring at a square of streetlight on the ceiling, listening to a couple of late party-leavers chatting on the pavement outside. I felt odd: overtired, overwrought, unpleasantly like my brain had been removed and my skull stuffed with something like microwaved aluminium foil, dinted, charred and shorting with sparks. *Nnngh. Must get out*, I thought, throwing back the covers. *Out!* I pulled on jeans, boots and a jumper, scalded my mouth with burned coffee, and it was only when my frozen, ancient Volkswagen and I were halfway down the A14 that I worked out where I was going, and why. Out there, beyond the foggy windscreen and white lines, was the forest. The broken forest. That's where I was headed. To see goshawks.

I knew it would be hard. Goshawks *are* hard. Have you ever seen a hawk catch a bird in your back garden? I've not, but I know it's happened. I've found evidence. Out on the patio flagstones, sometimes, tiny fragments: a little, insect-like songbird leg, with a foot clenched tight where the sinews have pulled it; or – even more gruesomely – a disarticulated beak, a house-sparrow beak top, or bottom, a little conical bead of blushed gunmetal, slightly translucent, with a few faint

maxillary feathers adhering to it. But maybe you have: maybe you've glanced out of the window and seen there, on the lawn, a bloody great hawk murdering a pigeon, or a blackbird, or a magpie, and it looks the hugest, most impressive piece of wildness you've ever seen, like someone's tipped a snow leopard into your kitchen and you find it eating the cat. I've had people rush up to me in the supermarket, or in the library, and say, eyes huge, *I saw a hawk catch a bird in my back garden this morning!* And I'm just about to open my mouth and say, *Sparrowhawk!* and they say, 'I looked in the bird book. It was a *goshawk*.' But it never is; the books don't work. When it's fighting a pigeon on your lawn a hawk becomes much larger than life, and bird-book illustrations never match the memory. Here's the sparrowhawk. It's grey, with a black and white barred front, yellow eyes and a long tail. Next to it is the goshawk. This one is also grey, with a black and white barred front, yellow eyes and a long tail. You think, *Hmm*. You read the description. Sparrowhawk: twelve to sixteen inches long. Goshawk: nineteen to twenty-four inches. There. It was huge. It must be a goshawk. They look identical. Goshawks are bigger, that's all. Just bigger.

No. In real life, goshawks resemble sparrowhawks the way leopards resemble housecats. Bigger, yes. But bulkier, bloodier, deadlier, scarier and much, much harder to see. Birds of deep woodland, not gardens, they're the birdwatchers' dark grail. You might spend a week in a forest full of gosses and never see one, just traces of their presence. A sudden hush, followed by the calls of terrified woodland birds, and a sense of something moving just beyond vision. Perhaps you'll find a half-eaten pigeon sprawled in a burst of white feathers on the forest floor. Or you might be lucky: walking in a foggy ride at dawn you'll turn your head and catch a split-second glimpse of a bird hurtling past and away, huge taloned feet held loosely clenched, eyes set on a distant target. A split second that stamps the image indelibly on your brain and leaves you hungry for more. Looking for goshawks is like looking for grace: it comes, but not often, and you don't get to say when or how. But you have a slightly better chance on still, clear mornings in early spring, because that's when goshawks eschew their world under the trees to

court each other in the open sky. That was what I was hoping to see.

I slammed the rusting door, and set off with my binoculars through a forest washed pewter with frost. Pieces of this place had disappeared since I was last here. I found squares of wrecked ground; clear-cut, broken acres with torn roots and drying needles strewn in the sand. Clearings. That's what I needed. Slowly my brain righted itself into spaces unused for months. For so long I'd been living in libraries and college rooms, frowning at screens, marking essays, chasing down academic references. This was a different kind of hunt. Here I was a different animal. Have you ever watched a deer walking out from cover? They step, stop, and stay, motionless, nose to the air, looking and smelling. A nervous twitch might run down their flanks. And then, reassured that all is safe, they ankle their way out of the brush to graze. That morning, I felt like the deer. Not that I was sniffing the air, or standing in fear – but like the deer, I was in the grip of very old and emotional ways of moving through a landscape, experiencing forms of attention and deportment beyond conscious control. Something inside me ordered me how and where to step without me knowing much about it. It might be a million years of evolution, it might be intuition, but on my goshawk hunt I feel tense when I'm walking or standing in sunlight, find myself unconsciously edging towards broken light, or slipping into the narrow, cold shadows along the wide breaks between pine stands. I flinch if I hear a jay calling, or a crow's rolling, angry alarum. Both of these things could mean either *Warning, human!* or *Warning, goshawk!* And that morning I was trying to find one by hiding the other. Those old ghostly intuitions that have tied sinew and soul together for millennia had taken over, were doing their thing, making me feel uncomfortable in bright sunlight, uneasy on the wrong side of a ridge, somehow required to walk over the back of a bleached rise of grasses to get to something on the other side: which turned out to be a pond. Small birds rose up in clouds from the pond's edge: chaffinches, bramblings, a flock of long-tailed tits that caught in willow branches like animated cotton buds.

The pond was a bomb crater, one of a line dropped by a German

bomber over Lakenheath in the war. It was a watery anomaly, a pond in dunes, surrounded by thick tussocks of sand sedge many, many miles from the sea. I shook my head. It was odd. But then, it's very odd indeed here, and walking the forest you come across all sorts of things you don't expect. Great tracts of reindeer moss, for example: tiny stars and florets and inklings of an ancient flora growing on exhausted land. Crisp underfoot in summer, the stuff is like a patch of the arctic fallen into the world in the wrong place. Everywhere, there are bony shoulders and blades of flint. On wet mornings you can pick up shards knocked from flint cores by Neolithic craftsmen, tiny flakes of stone glowing in thin coats of cold water. This region was the centre of the flint industry in Neolithic times. And later, it became famous for rabbits farmed for meat and felt. Giant, enclosed warrens hedged by thornbanks once ranged right across the sandy landscape, giving their names to places here – Wangford Warren, Lakenheath Warren – and eventually, the rabbits brought disaster. Their close grazing, in concert with that of sheep, reduced the short sward to a thin crust of roots over sand. Where the grazing was worst, sand blew into drifts and moved across the land. In 1688 strong south-westerly winds raised the broken ground to the sky. A vast yellow cloud obscured the sun. Tonnes of land shifted, moved, dropped. Brandon was encircled by sand; Santon Downham was engulfed, its river choked entirely. When the winds stopped, dunes stretched for miles between Brandon and Barton Mills. The area became famed for its atrociously bad travel: soft dunes, scorching in summer and infested with highwaymen at night. Our very own *Arabia deserta*. John Evelyn described them as the 'Travelling Sands' that 'so damag'd the country, rouling from place to place, like the Sands in the Deserts of Lybia, quite overwhelmed some gentlemen's whole estates'.

Here I was, standing in Evelyn's Travelling Sands. Most of the dunes are hidden by pines – the forest was planted here in the 1920s to give us timber for future wars – and the highwaymen long gone. But it still feels dangerous, half-buried, damaged. I love it because of all the places I know in England, it feels to me the wildest. It's not an untouched wilderness like a mountaintop, but a ramshackle wildness in which

people and the land have conspired to strangeness. It's rich with the sense of an alternative countryside history; not just the grand, leisured dreams of landed estates, but a history of industry, forestry, disaster, commerce and work. I couldn't think of a more perfect place to find goshawks. They fit this strange Breckland landscape to perfection, because their history is just as human.

It's a fascinating story. Goshawks once bred across the British Isles. 'There are divers Sorts and Sizes of *Goshawks*,' wrote Richard Blome in 1618, 'which are different in Goodness, force and hardiness according to the several *Countries* where they are Bred; but no place affords so good as those of *Moscovy*, *Norway*, and the North of *Ireland*, especially in the County of *Tyrone*.' But the qualities of goshawks were forgotten with the advent of Land Enclosure, which limited the ability of ordinary folk to fly hawks, and the advent of accurate firearms that made shooting, rather than falconry, high fashion. Goshawks became vermin, not hunting companions. Their persecution by gamekeepers was the final straw for a goshawk population already struggling from habitat loss. By the late nineteenth century British goshawks were extinct. I have a photograph of the stuffed remains of one of the last birds to be shot; a black-and-white snapshot of a bird from a Scottish estate, draggled, stuffed and glassy-eyed. They were gone.

But in the 1960s and 1970s, falconers started a quiet, unofficial scheme to bring them back. The British Falconers' Club worked out that for the cost of importing a goshawk from the Continent for falconry, you could afford to bring in a second bird and release it. Buy one, set one free. It wasn't a hard thing to do with a bird as self-reliant and predatory as a gos. You just found a forest and opened the box. Like-minded falconers started doing this all over Britain. The hawks came from Sweden, Germany and Finland: most were huge, pale, taiga forest gosses. Some were released on purpose. Some were simply lost. They survived, found each other and bred, secretly and successfully. Today their descendants number around four hundred and fifty pairs. Elusive, spectacular, utterly at home, the fact of these British goshawks makes me happy. Their existence gives the lie to the thought that the wild is

always something untouched by human hearts and hands. The wild can be human work.

It was eight thirty exactly. I was looking down at a little sprig of mahonia growing out of the turf, its oxblood leaves like buffed pigskin. I glanced up. And then I saw my goshawks. There they were. A pair, soaring above the canopy in the rapidly warming air. There was a flat, hot hand of sun on the back of my neck, but I smelt ice in my nose, seeing those goshawks soaring. I smelt ice and bracken stems and pine resin. Goshawk cocktail. They were on the soar. Goshawks in the air are a complicated grey colour. Not slate grey, nor pigeon grey. But a kind of raincloud grey, and despite their distance, I could see the big powder-puff of white undertail feathers, fanned out, with the thick, blunt tail behind it, and that superb bend and curve of the secondaries of a soaring goshawk that makes them utterly unlike sparrowhawks. And they were being mobbed by crows, and they just didn't care, like, *whatever*. A crow barrelled down on the male and he sort of raised one wing to let the crow past. Crow was not stupid, and didn't dip below the hawk for long. These goshawks weren't fully displaying: there was none of the skydiving I'd read about in books. But they were loving the space between each other, and carving it into all sorts of beautiful concentric chords and distances. A couple of flaps, and the male, the tiercel, would be above the female, and then he'd drift north of her, and then slip down, fast, like a knife-cut, a smooth calligraphic scrawl underneath her, and she'd dip a wing, and then they'd soar up again. They were above a stand of pines, right there. And then they were gone. One minute my pair of goshawks was describing lines from physics textbooks in the sky, and then nothing at all. I don't remember looking down, or away. Perhaps I blinked. Perhaps it was as simple as that. And in that tiny black gap which the brain disguises they'd dived into the wood.

I sat down, tired and content. The goshawks were gone, the sky blank. Time passed. The wavelength of the light around me shortened. The day built itself. A sparrowhawk, light as a toy of balsa-wood and doped tissue-paper, zipped past at knee-level, kiting up over a bank of

brambles and away into the trees. I watched it go, lost in recollection. This memory was candescent, irresistible. The air reeked of pine resin and the pitchy vinegar of wood ants. I felt my small-girl fingers hooked through plastic chain-link and the weight of a pair of East German binoculars around my neck. I was bored. I was nine. Dad was standing next to me. We were looking for sparrowhawks. They nested nearby, and that July afternoon we were hoping for the kind of sighting they'd sometimes give us: a submarine ripple through the tops of the pines as one swept in and away; a glimpse of a yellow eye; a barred chest against moving needles, or a quick silhouette stamped black against the Surrey sky. For a while it had been exciting to stare into the darkness between the trees and the bloodorange and black where the sun slapped crazy-paving shadows across pines. But when you are nine, waiting is hard. I kicked at the base of the fence with my wellingtoned feet. Squirmed and fidgeted. Let out a sigh. Hung off the fence with my fingers. And then my dad looked at me, half exasperated, half amused, and explained something. He explained *patience*. He said it was the most important thing of all to remember, this: that when you wanted to see something very badly, sometimes you had to stay still, stay in the same place, remember how much you wanted to see it, and be patient. 'When I'm at work, taking photographs for the paper,' he said, 'sometimes I've got to sit in the car for hours to get the picture I want. I can't get up to get a cup of tea or even go to the loo. I just have to be patient. If you want to see hawks you have to be patient too.' He was grave and serious, not annoyed; what he was doing was communicating a grown-up Truth, but I nodded sulkily and stared at the ground. It sounded like a lecture, not advice, and I didn't understand the point of what he was trying to say.

You learn. *Today*, I thought, not nine years old and not bored, *I was patient and the hawks came*. I got up slowly, legs a little numb from so long motionless, and found I was holding a small clump of reindeer moss in one hand, a little piece of that branching, pale green-grey lichen that can survive just about anything the world throws at it. It is patience made manifest. Keep reindeer moss in the dark, freeze it, dry it to a crisp, it won't die. It goes dormant and waits for things to improve.

Impressive stuff. I weighed the little twiggy sphere in my hand. Hardly there at all. And on a sudden impulse, I stowed this little stolen memento of the time I saw the hawks in my inside jacket pocket and went home. I put it on a shelf near the phone. Three weeks later, it was the reindeer moss I was looking at when my mother called and told me my father was dead.

2

Lost

I was about to leave the house when the phone rang. I picked it up. Hop-skippity, door keys in my hand. 'Hello?' A pause. My mother. She only had to say one sentence. It was this: 'I had a phone call from St Thomas' Hospital.' Then I knew. I knew that my father had died. I knew he was dead because that was the sentence she said after the pause and she used a voice I'd never heard before to say it. Dead. I was on the floor. My legs broke, buckled, and I was sitting on the carpet, phone pressed against my right ear, listening to my mother and staring at that little ball of reindeer moss on the bookshelf, impossibly light, a buoyant tangle of hard grey stems with sharp, dusty tips and quiet spaces that were air in between them and Mum was saying there was nothing they could do at the hospital, it was his heart, I think, nothing could be done, you don't have to come back tonight, don't come back, it's a long way, and it's late, and it's such a long drive and you don't need to come back – and of course this was nonsense; neither of us knew what the hell could or should be done or what this was except both of us and my brother, too, all of us were clinging to a world already gone.

I put down the phone. The keys were still in my hand. In that world already gone I was going for dinner with Christina, my Australian philosopher friend, who'd been there all along, sitting on the sofa when the phone rang. Her white face stared at me. I told her what had happened. And insisted we still go to the restaurant because we'd booked a table, of course we should go, and we did go, and we ordered, and the food came and I didn't eat it. The waiter was upset, wanted to know if anything was wrong. Well.

I think Christina told him. I can't remember her doing so, but he did something quite extraordinary. He disappeared, then reappeared at the table with an expression of anxious concern, and a double chocolate

brownie with ice-cream and a sprig of mint stuck in the top, on the house, dusted with cocoa powder and icing sugar. On a black plate. I stared at it. *That is ridiculous*, I thought. Then, *What is it?* I pulled the mint out of the ice-cream, held it up, looked at its two small leaves and its tiny cut stem smeared with chocolate, and thought, *This isn't going to grow again.* Touched and bewildered that a waiter had thought that free cake and ice-cream would comfort me, I looked at the cut end of the mint. It reminded me of something. I groped for what it could be. And then I was back three days ago, back in Hampshire, out in the garden on a bright March weekend, wincing because I saw Dad had a nasty cut on his forearm. *You hurt yourself!* I said. *Oh, that*, he said, threading another spring onto the trampoline we were building for my niece. *Did that the other day. Can't remember how. On something or other. It'll be all right though. It'll be healed soon, it's healing fine.* That was when the old world leaned in, whispered farewells and was gone. I ran into the night. I had to drive back to Hampshire. I had to go *now*. Because the cut would not. It would not heal.

Here's a word. *Bereavement*. Or, *Bereaved*. *Bereft*. It's from the Old English *bereafian*, meaning 'to deprive of, take away, seize, rob'. Robbed. Seized. It happens to everyone. But you feel it alone. Shocking loss isn't to be shared, no matter how hard you try. 'Imagine,' I said, back then, to some friends, in an earnest attempt to explain, 'imagine your whole family is in a room. Yes, all of them. All the people you love. So then what happens is someone comes into the room and punches you all in the stomach. Each one of you. Really hard. So you're all on the floor. Right? So the thing is, you all share the same kind of pain, exactly the same, but you're too busy experiencing total agony to feel anything other than completely alone. *That's* what it's like!' I finished my little speech in triumph, convinced that I'd hit upon the *perfect* way to explain how it felt. I was puzzled by the pitying, horrified faces, because it didn't strike me at all that an example that put my friends' families in rooms and had them beaten might carry the tang of total lunacy.

I can't, even now, arrange it in the right order. The memories are like heavy blocks of glass. I can put them down in different places but they

don't make a story. One day we were walking from Waterloo to the hospital under clouds. Breathing seemed an act of discipline. Mum turned to me, her face tight, and said, 'There'll be a time when all this seems like a bad dream.' His glasses, carefully folded, placed in my mum's outstretched hand. His coat. An envelope. His watch. His shoes. And when we left, clutching a plastic bag with his belongings, the clouds were still there, a frieze of motionless cumulus over the Thames flat as a matte painting on glass. At Waterloo Bridge we leant over Portland stone and looked at the water below. I smiled for the first time, then, I think, since the phone call. Partly because the water was sliding down to the sea and this simple physics still made sense when the rest of the world didn't. And partly because a decade before, Dad had invented a gloriously eccentric weekend side-project. He'd decided to photograph every single bridge over the Thames. I went with him, sometimes, on Saturday mornings, driving up into the Cotswolds. My dad had been my dad, but also my friend, and a partner in crime when it came to quests like this. From the grassy source near Cirencester we walked and explored, followed a wormy, muddy stream, trespassed to take photos of planks over it, got shouted at by farmers, menaced by cattle, pored over maps in fierce concentration. It took a year. He did it, in the end. Every single bridge. Somewhere in the files of slides back at my mum's house is a complete photographic record of ways to cross the Thames from source to sea.

On another day, the panic was that we might not find his car. He'd parked it somewhere near Battersea Bridge and, of course, had never returned. We looked for it for hours, increasingly desperate, searching back streets and side streets and cul-de-sacs to no avail, widening our search to streets miles from anywhere we knew the car could possibly be. As the day drew on, we understood that even if we found it, Dad's blue Peugeot with his press pass tucked in the sun-visor and his cameras in the boot, our search would still have been hopeless. Of course it had been towed away. I found the number, called the compound and said to the man on the phone that the owner of the vehicle couldn't collect it because he was dead. He was my father. That he didn't mean to leave the

car there but he died. That he really didn't mean to leave it. Lunatic sentences, deadpan, cut from rock. I didn't understand his embarrassed silence. He said, 'Sorry, oh God. I'm so sorry', but he could have said anything at all and it would have signified nothing. We had to take Dad's death certificate to the compound to avoid the towing fee. This also signified nothing.

After the funeral I went back to Cambridge. I didn't sleep. I drove around a lot. I stared at the sun going down and the sun coming up, and the sun in between. I watched the pigeons spreading their tails and courting each other in stately pavanes on the lawn outside my house. Planes still landed, cars still drove, people still shopped and talked and worked. None of these things made any sense at all. For weeks I felt I was made of dully burning metal. That's what it was like; so much so that I was convinced, despite all evidence to the contrary, that if you'd put me on a bed or a chair I would have burned right through.

It was about this time a kind of madness drifted in. Looking back, I think I was never truly mad. More mad north-north-west. I could tell a hawk from a handsaw always, but sometimes it was striking to me how similar they were. I knew I wasn't *mad* mad because I'd seen people in the grip of psychosis before, and that was madness as obvious as the taste of blood in the mouth. The kind of madness I had was different. It was quiet, and very, very dangerous. It was a madness designed to keep me sane. My mind struggled to build across the gap, make a new and inhabitable world. The problem was that it had nothing to work with. There was no partner, no children, no home. No nine-to-five job either. So it grabbed anything it could. It was desperate, and it read off the world wrong. I began to notice curious connections between things. Things of no import burst into extraordinary significance. I read my horoscope and believed it. Auguries. Huge bouts of déjà vu. Coincidences. Memories of things that hadn't happened yet. Time didn't run forwards any more. It was a solid thing you could press yourself against and feel it push back; a thick fluid, half-air, half-glass, that flowed both ways and sent ripples of recollection forwards and new events backwards so that new things I

encountered, then, seemed souvenirs from the distant past. Sometimes, a few times, I felt my father must be sitting near me as I sat on a train or in a café. This was comforting. It all was. Because these were the normal madnesses of grief. I learned this from books. I bought books on grieving, on loss and bereavement. They spilled over my desk in tottering piles. Like a good academic, I thought books were for answers. Was it reassuring to be told that everyone sees ghosts? That everyone stops eating? Or can't stop eating? Or that grief comes in stages that can be numbered and pinned like beetles in boxes? I read that after denial comes grief. Or anger. Or guilt. I remember worrying about which stage I was at. I wanted to taxonomise the process, order it, make it sensible. But there was no sense, and I didn't recognise any of these emotions at all.

Weeks passed. The season changed. The leaves came, the mornings filled with light, the swifts returned, screaming past my Cambridge house through the skies of early summer and I began to think I was doing fine. *Normal grief*, they call it. That's what this was. An uneventful, slow climb back into life after loss. *It'll be healed soon*. I still break into a wry smile thinking of how blithely I believed this, because I was so terribly wrong. Unseen need was motoring out through me. I was ravenous for material, for love, for anything to stop the loss, and my mind had no compunction in attempting to recruit anyone, anything, to assist. In June I fell in love, predictably and devastatingly, with a man who ran a mile when he worked out how broken I was. His disappearance rendered me practically insensible. Though I can't even bring his face to mind now, and though I know not only why he ran, but know that in principle he could have been anyone, I still have a red dress that I will never wear again. That's how it goes.

Then the world itself started to grieve. The skies broke and it rained and rained. The news was full of inundations and drowned cities; lost villages at the bottom of lakes; flash floods spilling over the M4 motorway to strand holiday traffic; kayaks on town streets in Berkshire; rising sea levels; the discovery that the English Channel was carved out by the bursting of a giant superlake millions of years ago. And the rain

continued, burying the streets in half an inch of bubbling water, breaking shop canopies, making the River Cam a *café-au-lait* surge, thick with broken branches and sodden undergrowth. My city was apocalyptic. 'I don't see the weather as odd at all,' I remember saying to a friend under a café awning while the rain struck the pavement behind our chairs with such violence that we sipped coffee in cold mist.

As the rain fell and the waters rose and I struggled to keep my head above them, something new began. I'd wake up frowning. I'd dreamed of hawks, again. I started dreaming of hawks all the time. Here's another word: *raptor*, meaning 'bird of prey'. From the Latin *raptor*, meaning 'robber,' from *rapere*, meaning 'seize'. Rob. Seize. The hawks were goshawks, and one in particular. A few years earlier, I'd worked at a bird-of-prey centre right at the edge of England before it tips into Wales; a land of red earth, coal-workings, wet forest and wild goshawks. This one, an adult female, had hit a fence while hunting and knocked herself out. Someone had picked her up, unconscious, put her in a cardboard box and brought her to us. Was anything broken? Was she damaged? We congregated in a darkened room with the box on the table and the boss reached her gloved left hand inside. A short scuffle, and then out into the gloom, her grey crest raised and her barred chest feathers puffed up into a meringue of aggression and fear, came a huge old female goshawk. Old because her feet were gnarled and dusty, her eyes a deep, fiery orange, and she was *beautiful*. Beautiful like a granite cliff or a thunder-cloud. She completely filled the room. She had a massive back of sun-bleached grey feathers, was as muscled as a pit bull, and intimidating as hell, even to staff who spent their days tending eagles. So wild and spooky and reptilian. Carefully, we fanned her great, broad wings as she snaked her neck round to stare at us, unblinking. We ran our fingers along the narrow bones of her wings and shoulders to check nothing was broken, along bones light as pipes, hollow, each with cantilevered internal struts of bone like the inside of an aeroplane wing. We checked her collarbone, her thick, scaled legs and toes and inch-long black talons. Her vision seemed fine too: we held a finger in front of each hot eye in turn. *Snap, snap*, her beak went. Then she turned her head to stare

right at me. Locked her eyes on mine down her curved black beak, black pupils fixed. Then, right then, it occurred to me that this goshawk was bigger than me and more important. And much, much older: a dinosaur pulled from the Forest of Dean. There was a distinct, prehistoric scent to her feathers; it caught in my nose, peppery, rusty as storm-rain.

Nothing was wrong with her at all. We took her outside and let her go. She opened her wings and in a second was gone. She disappeared over a hedge slant-wise into nothing. It was as if she'd found a rent in the damp Gloucestershire air and slipped through it. That was the moment I kept replaying, over and over. That was the recurring dream. From then on, the hawk was inevitable.

3

Small worlds

I was twelve years old when I first saw a trained goshawk. *Please, please, PLEASE!* I'd begged my parents. They let me go. Drove me there, even. *We'll look after her*, the men said. They carried hawks on their fists: orange-eyed goshawks as remote and composed as statuary, with barred grey tails and breast feathers of vermiculated snow. I couldn't speak. I wanted my parents to leave. But when their car pulled away I wanted to run after it. I was terrified. Not of the hawks: of the falconers. I'd never met men like these. They wore tweed and offered me snuff. They were clubbable men with battered Range Rovers and vowels that bespoke Eton and Oxford, and I was having the first uncomfortable inklings that while I wanted to be a falconer more than anything, it was possible I might not be *entirely* like these men; that they might view me as a curiosity rather than a kindred spirit. But I pushed my fears aside in favour of silence, because it was the first time I'd ever seen falconry in the field. *I'll remember this day for ever*, I thought. *One day this will be me.*

We walked in dark winter light over fields furred with new wheat. Vast flocks of fieldfares netted the sky, turning it to something strangely like a sixteenth-century sleeve sewn with pearls. It was cold. My feet grew heavy with clay. And twenty minutes after we'd set out, it happened – the thing I expected, but for which I was entirely unprepared. A goshawk killed a pheasant. It was a short, brutal dive from an oak into a mess of wet hedge; a brief, muffled crash, sticks breaking, wings flapping, men running, and a dead bird placed reverently in a hawking bag. I stood some way off. Bit my lip. Felt emotions I hadn't names for. For a while I didn't want to look at the men and their hawks any more and my eyes slipped to the white panels of cut light in the branches behind them. Then I walked to the hedge where the hawk had made her kill. Peered inside. Deep in the muddled darkness six

copper pheasant feathers glowed in a cradle of blackthorn. Reaching through the thorns I picked them free, one by one, tucked the hand that held them into my pocket, and cupped the feathers in my closed fist as if I were holding a moment tight inside itself. It was death I had seen. I wasn't sure what it had made me feel.

But there was more to that day than my first sight of death. There was something else, and it also gave me pause. As the afternoon wore on, men started disappearing from our party. One by one their hawks had decided they wanted no more of proceedings, saw no good reason to return to their handlers, and instead sat in trees staring out over acres of fading pasture and wood, fluffed and implacable. At the end of the day we left with three fewer men and three fewer hawks, the former still waiting beneath their hawks' respective branches. I knew goshawks were prone to sulk in trees: all the books had told me so. 'No matter how tame and loveable,' I'd read in Frank Illingworth's *Falcons and Falconry*, 'there are days when a goshawk displays a peculiar disposition. She is jumpy, fractious, unsociable. She may develop these symptoms of passing madness during an afternoon's sport, and then the falconer is in for hours of annoyance.'

These men didn't seem annoyed; fatalistic merely. They shrugged their waxed cotton shoulders, filled and lit pipes, waved the rest of us farewell. We trudged on into the gloom. There was something of the doomed polar expedition about it all, a kind of chivalric Edwardian vibe. *No, no, you go on. I'll only slow you down.* The disposition of their hawks was peculiar. But it wasn't unsociable. It was something much stranger. It seemed that the hawks couldn't see us at all, that they'd slipped out of our world entirely and moved into another, wilder world from which humans had been utterly erased. These men knew they had vanished. Nothing could be done except wait. So we left them behind: three solitary figures staring up into trees in the winter dusk, mist thickening in the fields around them, each trusting that the world would later right itself and their hawk would return. And like the feathers in my pocket, their waiting also tugged at my faintly baffled heart.

I never forgot those silent, wayward goshawks. But when I became a falconer I never wanted to fly one. They unnerved me. They were things of death and difficulty: spooky, pale-eyed psychopaths that lived and killed in woodland thickets. Falcons were the raptors I loved: sharp-winged, bullet-heavy birds with dark eyes and an extraordinary ease in the air. I rejoiced in their aerial verve, their friendliness, their breathtaking stoops from a thousand feet, wind tearing through their wings with the sound of ripping canvas. They were as different from hawks as dogs are from cats. What's more, they seemed *better* than hawks: my books all assured me that the peregrine falcon was the finest bird on earth. 'She is noble in her nature' wrote Captain Gilbert Blaine in 1936. 'Of all living creatures she is the most perfect embodiment of power, speed and grace.' It took me years to work out that this glorification of falcons was partly down to who got to fly them. You can fly a goshawk almost anywhere, because their hunting style is a quick dash from the fist after prey at close range, but to fly falcons properly you need space: grouse moors, partridge manors, huge expanses of open farmland, things not easy to come by unless you're wealthy or well connected. 'Among the cultured peoples,' Blaine wrote, 'the use and possession of the noble falcons were confined to the aristocracy, as an exclusive right and privilege.'

Compared to those aristocratic falconers, the *austringer*, the solitary trainer of goshawks and sparrowhawks, has had a pretty terrible press. 'Do not house your graceless austringers in the falconers' room,' sniped the fourteenth-century Norman writer Gace de la Bigne. 'They are cursed in scripture, for they hate company and go alone about their sport. When one sees an ill-formed man, with great big feet and long shapeless shanks, built like a trestle, hump-shouldered and skew-backed, and one wants to mock him, one says, "Look, what an austringer!"' And as the austringer, so the hawk, even in books written six centuries later. 'One cannot feel for a goshawk the same respect and admiration that one does for a peregrine,' Blaine explained. 'The names usually bestowed upon her are a sufficient index to her character. Such names as "Vampire", "Jezebel", "Swastika" or even "Mrs Glasse" aptly fit her, but

would ill become a peregrine.' Goshawks were ruffians murderous, difficult to tame, sulky, fractious and foreign. *Bloodthirsty*, wrote nineteenth-century falconer Major Charles Hawkins Fisher, with patent disapproval. *Vile.* For years I was inclined to agree, because I kept having conversations that made me more certain than ever that I'd never train one. 'You fly falcons?' a falconer enquired of me once. 'I prefer goshawks. You know where you are with a gos.'

'Aren't they a pain in the arse?' I said, remembering all those hunched forms lodged high in wintry trees.

'Not if you know the secret,' he countered, leaning closer. There was a slight Jack Nicholson vibe to all this. I drew back, faintly alarmed.'It's simple. If you want a well-behaved goshawk, you just have to do one thing. Give 'em the opportunity to kill things. Kill as much as possible. *Murder* sorts them out.' And he grinned.

'Right,' I said. There was a pause, as if it wasn't quite the right response. I tried again. 'Thanks.' And I was all, *Bloody hell! I'm sticking with falcons, thank you very much.* I'd never thought I'd train a goshawk. Ever. I'd never seen anything of myself reflected in their solitudinous, murderous eyes. *Not for me*, I'd thought, many times. *Nothing like me.* But the world had changed, and so had I.

It was the end of July and I'd convinced myself that I was pretty much back to normal. But the world around me was growing very strange indeed. The light that filled my house was deep and livid, half magnolia, half rainwater. Things sat in it, dark and very still. Sometimes I felt I was living in a house at the bottom of the sea. There were imperceptible pressures. Tapping water-pipes. I'd hear myself breathing and jump at the sound. Something else was there, something standing next to me that I couldn't touch or see, a thing a fraction of a millimetre from my skin, something vastly *wrong*, making infinite the distance between me and all the familiar objects in my house. I ignored it. *I'm fine*, I told myself. *Fine*. And I walked and worked and made tea and cleaned the house and cooked and ate and wrote. But at night, as rain pricked points of orange light against the windows, I dreamed of the hawk slipping

through wet air to somewhere else. I wanted to follow it.

I sat at my computer in my rain-lit study. I telephoned friends. I wrote emails. I found a hawk-breeder in Northern Ireland with one young goshawk left from that year's brood. She was ten weeks old, half Czech, one-quarter Finnish, one-quarter German, and she was, for a goshawk, small. We arranged that I should drive to Scotland to pick her up. I thought that I would like to have a small goshawk. 'Small' was the only decision I made. I didn't think for a second there was any choice in the matter of the hawk itself. The hawk had caught me. It was never the other way around.

When the rain stopped the heat began. Dogs panted flat in the black shade under the limes, and the lawns in front of the house paled and burned to hay. A damp, hot wind pushed leaves about but failed to cool anything; it was a wind that made things worse, like stirring a hot bath with your hand. Walking in it was like wading neck-deep through thick liquid. I struggled into the furnace of my car and drove to a friend's house in a village just outside the city. I wanted to talk goshawks, and there was no one better than Stuart to do it with. He is my goshawk guru. Years ago I'd hawked with him on late winter afternoons, crunched across long shadow and sugarbeet in search of wild fenland pheasants, his big old female gos sitting on his fist like a figurehead leaning into the gilded wind. He is a splendid chap; a carpenter and ex-biker, solid and serene as a mid-ocean wave, and his partner Mandy is brilliantly generous and funny, and seeing them both was such a shot in the arm. I'd halfway forgotten how kind and warm the world could be. Stuart fired up the barbecue, and the garden filled with kids and teenagers and cigarette smoke and pointers nosing around, and ferrets rattling in their hutches, and the sky grew whiter as the afternoon went on, and the sun turned gauzy behind a spreading mat of fibrous cloud. A Spitfire banked overhead. We mopped our brows. The dogs panted, the ferrets drank from their water bottles, and Stuart slaved over his barbecue, coming back around the side of the house wiping his forehead on his arm. 'It's getting cooler!' he said, surprised. 'No, you've walked

away from the barbecue!' we chorused.

I plonked myself down with a burger on a white plastic chair. And there, on a perch on the lawn, shaded by the hedge and ignoring the melee, was a perfect little peregrine, carefully preening the long, flippy barred feathers of his undercarriage. 'Half-Czech?' Stuart was saying. 'The most bloody-minded gos I ever trained was Czech. It was a *nightmare*. Are you *sure* you want to do this?' He tipped his head towards the bird on the lawn. 'You can fly that if you like,' he said. 'Want a peregrine?'

My heart skipped a beat. The falcon. There he was, an impossibly beautiful creature the colour of split flint and chalk, wings crossed sharp over his back, his dark, hooded face turned up to the sky. He was watching the Spitfire overhead with professional curiosity. I looked up at the plane. Its engine note had changed; it was throttling back, slowly descending through white air to the aviation museum where it lived. The peregrine bobbed his head, watching it too. Our gazes were exactly aligned. For a long, sinking moment, I wondered if I was making a terrible mistake.

'I'd love to,' I said stiffly, formally, the half-burger in my hand suddenly unappetising. One deep breath, then, and the words came. 'I mean, *normally* I would, I'd leap at the chance; that's an amazing offer, Stu. But I really do want this gos.' He nodded. Manfully, I finished the burger. Ketchup dripped down my arm like a wound.

There would be a goshawk. And what happened next was this: my eyes started avoiding a book that lived on the shelf by my desk. At first it was just a visual blind-spot, a tic of a blink; then something like a grain of sleep in the corner of my eye. I'd look past the place where the book was with a little flicker of discomfort I couldn't quite place. Soon I couldn't sit at my desk without knowing it was there. Second shelf down. Red cloth cover. Silver-lettered spine. *The Goshawk. By T. H. White.* I didn't want the book to be there, and I didn't want to think about why, and soon it got to the point that the bloody book was all I could see when I sat at my desk, even if it was the one thing in the room I wouldn't look

at. One morning, sitting there, sun on the table, coffee to hand, computer open, unable to concentrate, I snapped: this was ridiculous. I leaned down, drew out the book and put it on the desk in front of me. It was just a book. There was nothing especially malevolent about it. It was old and stained with water, and the ends of the spine were bumped and scuffed as if it had been in many bags and boxes over the years. *Hmm*, I thought. I was interested in my emotions now. I thought about the book cautiously, ran my feelings over it the way you feel for a hurting tooth with your tongue. The dislike was palpable, but bound up with a strange kind of apprehension that needed pulling into parts, because I wasn't sure exactly what it was made of. I opened the book and began to read. *Chapter One*, it said. *Tuesday*. And then: *When I first saw him he was a round thing like a clothes basket covered in sacking*. It was a sentence from a long time ago, and it carried with it the apprehension of another self. Not the man who wrote it: me. Me, when I was eight years old.

I was a scrawny, too-tall child with ink on my fingers, binoculars around my neck, and legs covered in plasters. I was shy, pigeon-toed, knock-kneed, fantastically clumsy, hopeless at sport, and allergic to dogs and horses. But I had an obsession. Birds. Birds of prey most of all. I was sure they were the best things that had *ever* existed. My parents thought this obsession would go the way of the others: dinosaurs, ponies, volcanoes. It didn't. It worsened. When I was six I tried to sleep every night with my arms folded behind my back like wings. This didn't last long, because it is very hard to sleep with your arms folded behind your back like wings. Later, when I saw pictures of the ancient Egyptian falcon-headed god Horus, all faience and turquoise and with a perfect moustachial stripe below his wide, haunting eyes, I was stricken with a strange religious awe. *This* was my god, not the one we prayed to at school: he was an old man with a white beard and drapes. For weeks, in secret heresy, I whispered *Dear Horus* instead of *Our Father* when we recited the Lord's Prayer at school assemblies. It was a suitably formal address, I thought, having learned it from writing birthday thank-you notes. Hawk habits, hawk species, hawk scientific names; I learned them all, stuck pictures of raptors on my bedroom walls, and drew them, over

and over again, on the edges of newspapers, on scraps of notepaper, on the margins of my school exercise books, as if by so doing I could conjure them into existence. I remember a teacher showing us photographs of the cave paintings at Lascaux and explaining that no one knew why prehistoric people drew these animals. I was indignant. I knew *exactly* why, but at that age was at a loss to put my intuition into words that made sense even to me.

When I discovered there was still such a thing as falconry things became less amorphously religious. I told my long-suffering parents that I was going to be a falconer when I grew up and set about learning as much as I could about this miraculous art. Dad and I hunted for falconry books on family days out, and one by one the great works came home with us, second-hand trophies in paper bags from bookshops long since gone: *Falconry* by Gilbert Blaine; *Falconry* by Freeman and Salvin; *Falcons and Falconry* by Frank Illingworth; the gloriously titled *Harting's Hints on Hawks*. All the boys' books. I read them over and over, committed great swathes of nineteenth-century prose to memory. Being in the company of these authors was like being dropped into an exclusive public school, for they were almost entirely written a long time ago by bluff, aristocratic sportsmen who dressed in tweed, shot Big Game in Africa, and had Strong Opinions. What I was doing wasn't just educating myself in the nuts and bolts of hawk-training: I was unconsciously soaking up the assumptions of an imperial elite. I lived in a world where English peregrines always outflew foreign hawks, whose landscapes were grouse moors and manor houses, where women didn't exist. These men were kindred spirits. I felt I was one of them, one of the elect.

I became the most appalling falconry bore. On wet afternoons after school my mum'd be writing up news stories for the local paper – court reports, local fêtes, planning committees – fingers hammering away on her typewriter in the dining room. There'd be a pack of Benson & Hedges on the table, a cup of tea, a shorthand notebook, and a daughter standing next to her reeling off imperfectly remembered sentences from nineteenth-century falconry books. It seemed crucial to explain to my mother that *while dog leather was the best leather for hawk-leashes, it was*

almost impossible to get these days. That the problem with merlins was that they're *prone to carry their quarry*; and also did she know that *saker falcons, hailing from desert areas, are unreliable performers in English climatic conditions?* Lining up another yellow piece of copy paper, fiddling with the carbons so they didn't slip, she'd nod and agree, drag on her cigarette, and tell me how interesting it all was in tones that avoided dismissiveness with extraordinary facility. Soon I was an expert on falconry the way the carpet salesman who used to come into the bookshop where I once worked was an expert on the Greco-Persian Wars. Shy, crumpled, middle-aged, and carrying with him the air of some unspoken defeat, he rubbed his face anxiously when he ordered books at the till. He wouldn't have lasted long, I think, on a battlefield. But he knew everything about the wars, knew each battle intimately, knew exactly where the detachments of Phocian troops were stationed on high mountain paths. I knew falconry like this. When I got my first hawk, years later, I was astounded by the reality of the thing. I was the carpet salesman at the battle of Thermopylae.

It is summer 1979 and I am an eight-year-old girl in a bookshop. I'm standing under a skylight with a paperback in my hand and I am extremely puzzled. *What is an eighteenth-century story of seduction?* I had no idea. I read the words on the back cover again:

> *The Goshawk* is the story of a concerted duel between Mr White and a great beautiful hawk during the training of the latter – the record of an intense clash of wills in which the pride and endurance of the wild raptor are worn down and broken by the almost insane willpower of the schoolmaster falconer. It is comic; it is tragic; it is all absorbing. It is strangely like some of the eighteenth-century stories of seduction.

No, still no idea. But I needed the book all the same because on the cover was a goshawk. She looked up from under her brows in truculent fury, her plumage scalloped and scaled in a riot of saffron and bronze. Her talons gripped the painted glove so tightly my fingers prickled in numb sympathy. She was beautiful; taut with antipathy; everything a child feels when angry and silenced. As soon as we were home I raced upstairs to my room, jumped onto the bed, lay on my tummy and opened the

book. And I remember lying there, propped on my elbows with my feet in the air, reading the opening lines of *The Goshawk* for the very first time.

> When I first saw him he was a round thing like a clothes basket covered in sacking. But he was tumultuous and frightening, repulsive in the same way as snakes are frightening to people who do not know them.

It was unusual. It didn't sound like my other falconry books at all. The eight-year-old girl that was me read on with a frown. It wasn't *anything* like them. This was a book about falconry by a man who seemed to know nothing about it. He talked about the bird as if it were a monster and he wasn't training it properly. I was bewildered. Grown-ups were experts. They wrote books to tell you about things you didn't know; books on how to do things. Why would a grown-up write about *not* being able to do something? What's more, the book was full of things that were completely beside the point. It talked, disappointingly, of things like foxhunting and war and history. I didn't understand its references to the Holy Roman Empire and Strindberg and Mussolini and I didn't know what a pickelhaube was, and I didn't know what *any* of this was doing in a book that was supposed to be about a hawk.

Later I found a review of the book in an old British Falconers' Club journal. It was superbly terse. 'For those with an interest in the dull introspective business of manning and training a hawk, *The Goshawk* will be a well-written catalogue of most of the things one should not do,' it said. The men in tweed had spoken. I was on the right side, was allowed to dislike this grown-up and consider him a fool. It's painful to recall my relief on reading this, founded as it was on a desperate misunderstanding about the size of the world. I took comfort in the blithe superiority that is the refuge of the small. But for all that, my eight-year-old self revered the hawk in the book. Gos. Gos was real to me. Gos had steely pinions and a mad marigold eye, and hopped and flew and mantled his great wings over a fist of raw liver. He cheeped like a songbird and was terrified of cars. I liked Gos. Gos was comprehensible, even if the writer was utterly beyond understanding.

A few years ago I met a retired U2 pilot. He was tall, flinty and handsome and had just the right kind of deadly stillness you'd expect from a man who'd spent years flying at the edge of space in a dusty-black American spy plane. The geopolitical aspects of his role were truly disconcerting. But as a day job it was absurdly cool. At eighty thousand feet the world curves deep below you and the sky above is wet black ink. You're wearing a spacesuit, confined to a cockpit the size of a bathtub, piloting a machine that first flew the year James Dean died. You cannot touch the world, just record it. You have no weapons; your only defence is height. But as I talked with this man what impressed me the most weren't his deadpan tales of high adventure, the 'incidents' with Russian MiGs and so on, but his battle against boredom. The nine-hour solo missions. The twelve-hour solo missions. 'Wasn't that horrendous?' I asked. 'It could get a little lonely up there,' he replied. But there was something about how he said it that made it sound a state still longed-for. And then he said something else. 'I used to read,' he said, unexpectedly, and with that his face changed, and his voice too: his deadpan Yeager drawl slipped, was replaced with a shy, childlike enthusiasm. '*The Once and Future King*. By T. H. White,' he said. 'Have you heard of him? He's an English writer. It's a great book. I used to take that up, read it on the way out and the way back.'

'Wow,' I said. 'Yes.' Because this story struck me as extraordinary, and it still does. Once upon a time there was a man in a spacesuit in a secret reconnaissance plane reading *The Once and Future King*, that great historical epic, that comic, tragic, romantic retelling of the Arthurian legend that tussles with questions of war and aggression, and might, and right, and the matter of what a nation is or might be.

White is not a fashionable writer. When I read English at university his name wasn't mentioned at all. But once upon a time White was very famous indeed. In 1938 he published a children's book about the boyhood of King Arthur called *The Sword in the Stone* and it made his name and his fortune. Disney snapped up the rights and turned it into an animated cartoon. White went on to write *The Once and Future King*, which covered the rest of the Arthurian story, and that in turn inspired

the stage-musical and film *Camelot.* White's reworking of Arthurian legend was hugely influential: when you hear Kennedy's White House described as Camelot, that is White – Jackie Kennedy quoted lines from the musical after her husband's assassination. When you think of the wizard Merlin wearing a tall, peaked hat embroidered with stars, that is White too. And when I think of the U2 pilot up there reading a book about King Arthur, a book that had been wrenched strangely into a fairytale about American political life, I can't help but think of a line written by the poet Marianne Moore: *The cure for loneliness is solitude*. And the solitude of the pilot in the spy-plane, seeing everything, touching nothing, reading *The Once and Future King* fifty thousand feet above the clouds – that makes my heart break, just a little, because of how lonely that is, and because of some things that have happened to me, and because T. H. White was one of the loneliest men alive.

The Goshawk is the book of a young man. It was written before White's better-known works, and before he was famous. It 'would be about the efforts of a second-rate philosopher', he explained sadly, 'who lived alone in a wood, being tired of most humans in any case, to train a person who was not human, but a bird'. When I read it again, years after that first childhood encounter, I saw more in it than bad falconry. I understood why people considered it a masterpiece. For White made falconry a metaphysical battle. Like *Moby-Dick* or *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Goshawk* was a literary encounter between animal and man that reached back to Puritan traditions of spiritual contest: salvation as a stake to be won in a contest against God. That older, wiser me decided that White's admissions of ignorance were brave rather than stupid. But I was still angry with him. First, because his hawk had suffered terribly as he tried to train it. And second, because his portrayal of falconry as a pitched battle between man and bird had hugely influenced our notions of what goshawks are and falconry is. Frankly, I hated what he had made of them. I didn't think falconry was a war, and I knew hawks weren't monsters. That small girl lying crossly on her bed was still cross.

That is what I thought as I sat there staring at the open book on my desk, four months after my father died. I read on, and as I did, there was