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the living mountain
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a part of:

THE LIVING MOUNTAIN

NAN SHEPHERD

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CANONGATE
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SIX

Air and Light

In the rarefied air of the plateau, and indeed anywhere in the mountain, for the air is clear everywhere, shadows are sharp and intense. Watch the shadow of a plane glide along the plateau like a solid thing, and then slither deformed over the edge. Or pluck a feathery grass, brownish-pink and inconspicuous; hold a sheet of white paper behind it and see how the shadow stands out like an etching, distinct and black, a miracle of exact detail. Even the delicate fringe inside the small cup of the field gentian throws its shadow on the petals and enhances their beauty.

The air is part of the mountain, which does not come to an end with its rock and its soil. It has its own air; and it is to the quality of its air that is due the endless diversity of its colourings. Brown for the most part in themselves, as soon as we see them clothed in air the hills become blue. Every shade of blue, from opalescent milky-white to indigo, is there. They are most opulently blue when rain is in the air. Then the gullies are violet. Gentian and delphinium hues, with fire in them, lurk in the folds.

These sultry blues have more emotional effect than a dry

air can produce. One is not moved by china blue. But the violet range of colours can trouble the mind like music. Moisture in the air is also the cause of those shifts in the apparent size, remoteness, and height in the sky of familiar hills. This is part of the horror of walking in mist on the plateau, for suddenly through a gap one sees solid ground that seems three steps away, but lies in sober fact beyond a 2000 foot chasm. I stood once on a hill staring at an opposite hill that had thrust its face into mine. I stared until, dropping my eyes, I saw with astonishment between me and it a loch that I knew perfectly well was there. But it couldn't be. There wasn't room. I looked up again at that out-thrust brow – it was so near I could have touched it. And when I looked down, the loch was still there. And once in the Monadhliaths, on a soft spring day when the distances were hazed, valley, hills and sky all being a faintly luminous grey-blue, with no detail, I was suddenly aware of a pattern of definite white lines high above me in the sky. The pattern defined itself more clearly; it was familiar; I realised it was the pattern of the plateau edge and corries of the Cairngorms, where the unmelted snow still lay. There it hung, a snow skeleton, attached to nothing, much higher than I should have expected it to be. Perhaps the lack of detail in the intervening valley had something to do with this effect.

Rain in the air has also the odd power of letting one see things in the round, as though stereoscopically. The rays of light, refracted through the moisture in the air, bend round the back of what I am seeing. I have looked at a croft half a mile away lying into the hill, with a steading and a cow, and

felt as though I were walking round the stacks and slapping the cow's hind quarters.

Haze, which hides, can also reveal. Dips and ravines are discerned in what had appeared a single hill: new depth is given to the vista. And in a long line of crags, such as the great southern rampart of Loch Einich, each buttress is picked out like Vandyke lace. Veils of thin mist drifting along the same great loch-face look iridescent as they float between the sun and the red rock.

For the rock of this granite boss is red, its felspar is the pink variety. Crags, boulders and scree alike are weathered to a cold grey, but find the rock where it is newly slashed, or under water, and there is the glow of the red. After a winter of very severe frost, the river sides of the Lairig have a fresh redness. Here and there one can see a bright gash where a lump of rock the size of a house has fallen; and a very little searching beneath reveals the fallen mass, with one side fresh, or broken into bright red fragments; while nearby is a dark boulder that has lain there for long enough, but from which a red chip has now been struck by the impact of the falling rock.

Or under water: the Beinnie Coire of Braeriach is the least imposing of all the corries – a mere huddle of grey scree. But through it runs a burn that has the effect of sunshine, so red are the stones it hurries over. Farther along the same mountain face, through the deep clear water of Loch Coire an Lochain, even when a thin mist quite covers it, the stones at the bottom are still intense and bright, as though the water itself held radiance. All round the margin of this exquisite

loch is a rim of red stones, where the lapping of the water has prevented the growth of lichen.

Thin mist, through which the sun is suffused, gives the mountain a tenuous and ghost-like beauty; but when the mist thickens, one walks in a blind world. And that is bad: though there is a thrill in its eeriness, and a sound satisfaction in not getting lost. For not getting lost is a matter of the mind – of keeping one's head, of having map and compass to hand and knowing how to use them, of staying steady, even when one of the party panics and wants to go in the wrong direction. Walking in mist tests not only individual self-discipline, but the best sort of interplay between persons.

When the mist turns to rain, there may be beauty there too. Like shifting mists, driving rain has a beauty of shape and movement. But there is a kind of rain without beauty, when air and ground are sodden, sullen black rain that invades body and soul alike. It gets down the neck and up the arms and into the boots. One is wet to the skin, and everything one carries has twice its weight. Then the desolation of these empty stretches of land strikes at one's heart. The mountain becomes a monstrous place.

I think the plateau is never quite so desolate as in some days of early spring, when the snow is rather dirty, perished in places like a worn dress; and where it has disappeared, bleached grass, bleached and rotted berries and grey fringe-moss and lichen appear, the moss lifeless, as though its elasticity had gone. The foot sinks in and the impression remains. One can see in it the slot of deer that have passed earlier. This seems to me chiller than unbroken snow.

But even in this scene of grey desolation, if the sun comes

out and the wind rises, the eye may suddenly perceive a miracle of beauty. For on the ground the down of a ptarmigan's breast feather has caught the sun. Light blows through it, so transparent the fugitive spindrift feather has become. It blows away and vanishes.

Or in a drab season, and feeling as drab as the weather, I stand on a bridge above a swollen stream. And suddenly the world is made new. Submerged but erect in the margin of the stream I see a tree hung with light – a minimal tree, but exquisite, its branches delicate with globes of light that sparkle under the water. I clamber down and thrust a sacrilegious hand into the stream: I am holding a sodden and shapeless thing. I slip it again under the water and instantly again it is a tree of light. I take it out and examine it: it is a spring of square-stalked St John's Wort, a plant whose leaves are covered with minute pores that can exude a film of oil, protecting it against the water that has engulfed it, in like manner as the dipper plunging into the stream has a film of light between him and the water. I think of the Silver Bough of Celtic mythology and marvel that an enchantment can be made from so small a matter.

Storm in the air wakes the hidden fires – lightning, the electric flickers we call *fire flauchs*, and the Aurora Borealis. Under these alien lights the mountains are remote. They withdraw in the darkness. For even in a night that has neither moon nor stars the mountains can still be seen. The sky cannot be wholly dark. In the most overcast night it is much lighter than the earth; and even the highest hills seem low against the immense night sky. A flash of lightning will draw them close for a brief moment out of this remoteness.

In the darkness one may touch fires from the earth itself. Sparks fly round one's feet as the nails strike rock, and sometimes, if one disturbs black ooze in passing, there leap in it minute pricks of phosphorescent light.

Walking in the dark, oddly enough, can reveal new knowledge about a familiar place. In a moonless week, with overcast skies and wartime blackout, I walked night after night over the moory path from Whitewell to Upper Tullochgrue to hear the news broadcast. I carried a torch but used it only once, when I completely failed to find the gate to the Tullochgrue field. Two pine trees that stood out against the sky were my signposts, and no matter how dark the night the sky was always appreciably lighter than the trees. The heather through which the path runs was very black, the path perceptibly paler, clumps and ridges of heather between the ruts showing dark against the stone and beaten earth. But it amazed me to find how unfamiliar I was with that path. I had followed it times without number, yet now, when my eyes were in my feet, I did not know its bumps and holes, nor where the trickles of water crossed it, nor where it rose and fell. It astonished me that my memory was so much in the eye and so little in the feet, for I am not awkward in the dark and walk easily and happily in it. Yet here I am stumbling because the rock has made a hump in the ground. To be a blind man, I see, needs application.

As I reach the highest part of my dark moor, the world seems to fall away all round, as though I have come to its edge, and were about to walk over. And far off, on a low horizon, the high mountains, the great Cairgorm group, look small as a drystone dyke between two fields.

Apparent size is not only a matter of humidity. It may be relative to something else in the field of vision. Thus I have seen a newly-risen moon (a harvest moon and still horned), low in the sky, upright, enormous, dwarfing the hills.

SEVEN

Life: The Plants

I have written of inanimate things, rock and water, frost and sun; and it might seem as though this were not a living world. But I have wanted to come to the living things through the forces that create them, for the mountain is one and indivisible, and rock, soil, water and air are no more integral to it than what grows from the soil and breathes the air. All are aspects of one entity, the living mountain. The disintegrating rock, the nurturing rain, the quickening sun, the seed, the root, the bird – all are one. Eagle and alpine veronica are part of the mountain's wholeness. Saxifrage – the 'rock-breaker' – in some of its loveliest forms, *Stelloris*, that stars with its single blossoms the high rocky corrie burns, and *Azoides*, that clusters like soft sunshine in their lower reaches, cannot live apart from the mountain. As well expect the eyelid to function if cut from the eye.

Yet in the terrible blasting winds on the plateau one marvels that life can exist at all. It is not high, as height goes. Plants live far above 4000 feet. But here there is no shelter – or only such shelter as is afforded where the threads of water run in their wide sloping channels towards the edge of the cliffs. Whatever grows, grows in exposure to the whole vast reach

of the air. From Iceland, from Norway, from America, from the Pyrenees, the winds tear over it. And on its own undulating surface no rocks, or deep ravines, provide a quiet place for growth. Yet the botanist with whom I sometimes walk tells me that well over twenty species of plant grow there – many more, if each variety of moss, lichen and algae is counted. He has made me a list of them, and I can count them. Life, it seems, won't be warned off.

The tenacity of life can be seen not only on the tops but on lower shoulders where the heather has been burnt. Long before the heather itself (whose power to survive fire as well as frost, wind, and all natural inclemencies is well known) shows the least sign of life from the roots beneath its charred sticks, or has sprouted anew from seed hidden in the ground, birdsfoot trefoil, tormentil, blaeberry, the tiny genista, alpine lady's mantle, are thrusting up vigorous shoots. These mountain flowers look inexpressibly delicate; their stems are slender, their blossoms fragile; but burrow a little in the soil, and roots of a timeless endurance are found. Squat or stringy, like lumps of dead wood or bits of sinew, they conserve beneath the soil the vital energy of the plant. Even when all the upper growth is stripped – burned or frosted or withered away – these knots of life are everywhere. There is no time nor season when the mountain is not alive with them. Or if the root has perished, living seeds are in the soil, ready to begin the cycle of life afresh. Nowhere more than here is life proved invincible. Everything is against it, but it pays no heed.

The plants of the plateau are low in stature, sitting tight to the ground with no loose ends for the wind to catch. They creep, either along the surface, or under it; or they anchor

themselves by a heavy root massive out of all proportion to their external growth. I have said that they have no shelter, but for the individual flower there is the shelter of its group. Thus the moss campion, *Silene*, the most startling of all the plateau flowers, that in June and early July amazes the eye by its cushions of brilliant pink scattered in the barest and most stony places, has a habit of growth as close-set as a Victorian posy. Its root too is strong and deep, anchoring it against the hurricane, and keeping its vital essence safe against frost and fiery drought, the extremes and unpredictable shifts of weather on the exposed plateau. In these ways this most characteristic of the plateau flowers is seen to be quite simply a part of the mountain. Its way of life lies in the mountain's way of life as water lies in a channel.

Even its flamboyant flowers are integral to the mountain's way of life. I do not know how old the individual clumps may be, but judging from the size to which these close-knit cushions grow, some must have endured the commotion of many winters. Most of the mountain flowers are long livers. The plant that races through its cycle in a single season could never be sure, up here, of fruition – there might be no successors. Death would dog, not only the individual, but the species. Yet even the long livers must renew themselves at times, and it is on only some of the summer days that insects can fly to the mountain top. So the *Silene* throws this ardent colour into its petals to entice the flies.

Lower on the mountain, on all the slopes and shoulders and ridges and on the moors below, the characteristic growth is heather. And this too is integral to the mountain. For heather grows in its most profuse luxuriance on granite, so

that the very substance of the mountain is in its life. Of the three varieties that grow on these hills – two *Ericas* and the ling – the July-blooming bell heather is the least beautiful, though its clumps of hot red are like sun-bursts when the rest of the hills are still brown. The pale cross-leaved heath, that grows in small patches, often only single heads, in moist places, is an exquisite, almost waxen-still, with a honey perfume. But it is the August-blooming ling that covers the hills with amethyst. Now they look gracious and benign. For many many miles there is nothing but this soft radiance. Walk over it in a hot sun, preferably not on a path ('I like the unpath best,' one of my small friends said when her father had called her to heel), and the scent rises in a heady cloud. Just as one walks on a hot day surrounded by one's own aura of flies, so one walks surrounded by one's own aura of heather scent. For as the feet brush the bloom, the pollen rises in a perfumed cloud. It settles on one's boots, or if one is walking barefoot, on feet and legs, yellowy-fawn in colour, silky to the touch, yet leaving a perceptible grit between the fingers. Miles of this, however, stupefies the body. Like too much incense in church, it blunts the sharp edge of adoration, which, at its finest, demands clarity of the intellect as well as the surge of emotion.

To one who loves the hills at every season, the blossoming is not the best of the heather. The best of it is simply its being there – is the feel of it under the feet. To feel heather under the feet after long abstinence is one of the dearest joys I know.

Scent – fragrance, perfume – is very much pertinent to the theme of life, for it is largely a by-product of the process of living. It may also be a by-product of fire, but then fire feeds

on what lives or what has lived. Or of chemical action, but if there are obscure chemical processes at work in the dead stuff of the mountain, they give little indication to my nose. The smells I smell are of life, plant and animal. Even the good smell of earth, one of the best smells in the world, is a smell of life, because it is the activity of bacteria in it that sets up this smell.

Plants then, as they go through the business of living, emit odours. Some, like the honey scents of flowers, are an added allurements to the insects; and if, as with heather, the scent is poured out most recklessly in the heat of the sun, that is because it is then that the insects are out in strength. But in other cases – as the fir trees – the fragrance is the sap, is the very life itself. When the aromatic savour of the pine goes searching into the deepest recesses of my lungs, I know it is life that is entering. I draw life in through the delicate hairs of my nostrils. Pines, like heather, yield their fragrance to the sun's heat. Or when the foresters come, and they are cut, then their scent is strong. Of all the kinds that grow on the low reaches of these mountains, spruce throws the strongest perfume on the air when the saw goes through it. In hot sun it is almost like a ferment – like strawberry jam on the boil, but with a tang that tautens the membranes of nose and throat.

Of plants that carry their fragrance in their leaves, bog myrtle is the mountain exemplar. This grey-green shrub fills the boggy hollows, neighboured by cotton grass and sundew, bog asphodel and the spotted orchis, and the minute scarlet cups of the lichens. Its fragrance is cool and clean, and like the wild thyme it gives it most strongly when crushed.

The other shrub, juniper, is secretive with its scent. It has

an odd habit of dying in patches, and when a dead branch is snapped, a spicy odour comes from it. I have carried a piece of juniper wood for months, breaking it afresh now and then to renew the spice. This dead wood has a grey silk skin, impervious to rain. In the wettest season, when every fir branch in the woods is sodden, the juniper is crackling dry and burns with a clear heat. There's nothing better under the girdle when scones are baking – unless perhaps small larch twigs, fed into a fire already banked. Once, striking thick loose snow from low juniper bushes before walking through them, I surprised myself by striking from them also a delectable fragrance, that floated on the wintry air.

Birch, the other tree that grows on the lower mountain slopes, needs rain to release its odour. It is a scent with body to it, fruity like old brandy, and on a wet warm day, one can be as good as drunk with it. Acting through the sensory nerves, it confuses the higher centres; one is excited, with no cause that the wit can define.

Birch trees are least beautiful when fully clothed. Exquisite when the opening leaves just fleck them with points of green flame, or the thinning leaves turn them to a golden lace, they are loveliest of all when naked. In a low sun, the spun silk floss of their twigs seems to be created out of light. Without transfiguration, they are seen to be purple – when the sap is rising, a purple so glowing that I have caught sight of a birch-wood on a hillside and for one incredulous moment thought the heather was in bloom.

Among drifts of these purple glowing birches, an occasional rowan looks dead; its naked boughs are a smooth white-grey, almost ghastly as the winter light runs over them. The rowan's

moment is in October, when even the warmth of its clustering berries is surpassed by the blood-red brilliance of its leaves. This is the 'blessed quicken wood', that has power against the spirits of evil. It grows here and there among birches and firs, as a rule singly, and sometimes higher than either, a solitary bush by the rivulet in a ravine.

October is the coloured month here, far more brilliant than June, blazing more sharply than August. From the gold of the birches and bracken on the low slopes, the colour spurts upwards through all the creeping and inconspicuous growths that live among the heather roots – mosses that are lush green, or oak-brown, or scarlet, and the berried plants, blaeberry, cranberry, crowberry and the rest. Blaeberry leaves are a flaming crimson, and they are loveliest of all in the Rothiemurchus Forest, where the fir trees were felled in the 1914 War, and round and out of each stump blaeberry grows in upright sprigs: so that in October a multitude of pointed flames seem to burn upwards all over the moor.

This forest blazed with real fire in the early summer of 1920. One of the gamekeepers told me that forty of them were on the watch for ten days and nights, to keep the fire from spreading. And by night, he said, the tree trunks glowed like pillars of fire.

Not much is left now of this great pine forest. Yet in the glens that run up into the mountain, there are still a few of the very old firs that may have been the original Caledonian forest. Old trees still stand in Glen Einich, as they do at Ballochbuie on the other side of the mountain; and by the shores of Loch an Eilein are a scatter of enormous venerable Scots firs, their girth two and a half times the span of my

(quite long) arms, the flakes of their bark a foot and a half in length and thick as books, their roots, exposed where the soil has been washed away above the path, twisted and intertwined like a cage of snakes. Here and there also, notably by the sluice gates at the exit of Loch Einich, can be seen, half-sunk in the bog, numbers of the roots of trees long perished.

This sluice dates, like those on other of the lochs, to the late eighteenth century, when the ancient wood rang with the activity of the fellers. The trunks ready, the sluices were opened, and the trees guided down on the rush of water to the Spey. There is a vivid description of it, as a child remembered it, in Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus's *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*. When the timber was first realised to be a source of wealth, and felled, small sawmills were erected on the various burns – tiny clearings, with the saw, a but and a ben and a patch of corn; but soon it was found more profitable to float all the timber downstream to the Spey, where it was made into rough rafts and so carried to Fochabers and Garmouth. The very sites of these ancient sawmills are forgotten. Today come the motor lorries, the sawmill and all its machinery making a compact township for the time that it is required; and outsiders, not the men of the place, fell and lop and cut. Only the old ways still linger here and there as where a native horse, tended by a man deep-rooted in the place, drags the chained trunks down from inaccessible corners, and is led back for the night to one of the ancient farms on the edge of the moor.

The first great cutting of the forest took place during the Napoleonic wars, when home-grown timber was urgently required. A century later we have seen the same thing happen.

In 1914 and again, and more drastically, in 1940, the later wood has gone the way of the former. It will grow again, but for a while the land will be scarred and the living things – the crested tits, the shy roe deer – will flee. I tremble especially for the crested tit, whose rarity is a proud distinction of these woods.

I have heard people say that they have watched in vain for these exquisite tits, but, if you know their haunts (I shall not give them away), they can be conjured easily from a tree by simply standing still against its trunk. You have heard the stir and small sound of tits, but at your approach they are gone, there is not a bird to see. But stand quite still, and in a minute or two they forget you, and flit from branch to branch close to your head. I have seen a crested tit turn itself around not a foot from my eye. In the nesting season, however, they will scold like fishwives. I have been scolded at by a pair of them with such vehemence that in pure shame for them I have left their tree.

How fierce was the rush of water when the ancient sluices on the lochs were opened an eighty-year-old woman made plain to me when she told me how it was once used to outwit the gauger. For a drop of the mountain dew was made on the far side of the Beinnie, in a thick place beneath Carn Elrig where I once lost my path; and when the man who made it had the word passed to him that the gauger was on the way, he had no time to hide the stuff. Indeed, then, when the word came to him, he was nearer the sluice than the still, and to the sluice he went – I can see him *spangin'* on, heel to the ground, with the loping stride of the Highlander bent on business. So when the exciseman came, turbulent water raced

between him and the drop whisky. And no crossing it that day at the least. Nor perhaps the next.

Gaunt remnants of pine trees high on the mountain sides show that the earlier forest went further up than the present forest does. Yet here and there a single seed, wind borne or dropped by a bird, has grown far above the main body of the trees. Some of these out-liers show the amazing adaptability of this tree. They can change their form at need, like any wizard. I know one, rooted a few paces from a 2900 feet summit, a sturdy plant but splayed to the mountains and almost roseate in structure, three feet across and not more than five inches in height. There it clings, plastered against the arid ground. I shall watch with much interest to see how much larger it will grow, and in what direction.

Dead fir roots, left in the soil long after the tree is gone, make the best kindling in the world. I know old women who look with the utmost contempt on paper as a fire-lighter and scorn to use more than one match to set a fire going. I know two such old women, both well over eighty, both living alone, one on the Spey side of the mountains and one on the Dee, who howk their fir roots from the moor, drag them home and splinter them. Then you may watch them, if you visit their frugal homes when the fire is out, build the *rossity reets* (we call them that on the Aberdeenshire side) into a pyramid with their brown hard wrinkled fingers, fill the kettle with a cup from the pail of well water, hang it on the *swye* and swing it over the blazing sticks. And before you have well settled to your *newse* the tea is made, and if the brown earthenware teapot has a broken spout ('my teapot has lost a tooth'), and tea splutters from it on to the open hearth and raises spurts

of ash and steam, you can call it a soss or a libation to the gods as you feel inclined, but it will not make the tea less good nor the talk less racy.

Of the inconspicuous things that creep in heather, I have a special affection for stagmoss – not the hard braided kind but the fuzzy kind we called ‘toadstails’. I was taught the art of picking these by my father when I was a small child. We lay on the heather and my fingers learned to feel their way along each separate trail and side branch, carefully detaching each tiny root, until we had thick bunchy pieces many yards long. It was a good art to teach a child. Though I did not know it then, I was learning my way in, through my own fingers, to the secret of growth.

That secret the mountain never quite gives away. Man is slowly learning to read it. He watches, he ponders, patiently he adds fact to fact. He finds a hint of it in the ‘formidable’ roots of the moss campion and in the fine roots that the tiny eyebright sends into the substance of the grass to ease its own search for food. It is in the glaucous and fleshy leaves of the sedums and the saxifrages, through which they store the bounty of the earth against the times when the earth is not bountiful. It is in the miniature size of the smallest willow, whose woolly fluff blows about the plateau as the silky hairs of the cotton grass blow about the bogs. And in the miniature azalea that grows splayed against the mountain for protection, and lures the rare insects by its rosy hue, and flourishes, like the heather, on granite; whereas granite cannot meet the needs of many of the rare mountain flowers, that crave the streaks of limestone, or the rich humus of the micaschist – like that rarest of all, found in only one spot in the Cairngorms, the alpine

milk-vetch, its delicate pale bloom edged with lavender, haunted by its red-and-black familiar the Burnet moth: why so haunted no one knows, but no milk-vetch, no Burnet moth. On a wet windy sunless day, when moths would hardly be expected to be visible at all, we have found numbers of these tart little creatures on the milk-vetch clumps.

The more one learns of this intricate interplay of soil, altitude, weather, and the living tissues of plant and insect (an intricacy that has its astonishing moments, as when sundew and butterwort eat the insects), the more the mystery deepens. Knowledge does not dispel mystery. Scientists tell me that the alpine flora of the Scottish mountains is Arctic in origin – that these small scattered plants have outlived the Glacial period and are the only vegetable life in our country that is older than the Ice Age. But that doesn't explain them. It only adds time to the equation and gives it a new dimension. I find I have a naive faith in my scientist friends – they are such jolly people, they wouldn't fib to me unnecessarily, and their stories make the world so interesting. But my imagination boggles at this. I can imagine the antiquity of rock, but the antiquity of a living flower – that is harder. It means that these toughs of the mountain top, with their angelic inflorescence and the devil in their roots, have had the cunning and the effrontery to cheat, not only a winter, but an Ice Age. The scientists have the humility to acknowledge that they don't know how it has been done.

EIGHT

Life: Birds, Animals, Insects

The first time I found summer on the plateau – for although my earliest expeditions were all made in June or July, I experienced cloud, mist, howling wind, hailstones, rain and even a blizzard – the first time the sun blazed and the air was balmy, we were standing on the edge of an outward facing precipice, when I was startled by a whizzing sound behind me. Something dark swished past the side of my head at a speed that made me giddy. Hardly had I got back my balance when it came again, whistling through the windless air, which eddied round me with the motion. This time my eyes were ready, and I realised that a swift was sweeping in mighty curves over the edge of the plateau, plunging down the face of the rock and rising again like a jet of water. No one had told me I should find swifts on the mountain. Eagles and ptarmigan, yes: but that first sight of the mad, joyous abandon of the swift over and over the very edge of the precipice shocked me with a thrill of elation. All that volley of speed, those convolutions of delight, to catch a few flies! The discrepancy between purpose and performance made me laugh aloud – a laugh that gave the same feeling of release as though I had been dancing for a long time.

It seems odd that merely to watch the motion of flight should give the body not only vicarious exhilaration but release. So urgent is the rhythm that it invades the blood. This power of flight to take us in to itself through the eyes as though we had actually shared in the motion, I have never felt so strongly as when watching swifts on the mountain top. Their headlong rush, each curve of which is at the same time a miracle of grace, the swishing sound of their cleavage of the air and the occasional high pitched cry that is hardly like the note of an earthly bird, seem to make visible and audible some essence of the free, wild spirit of the mountain.

The flight of the eagle, if less immediately exciting than that of the swifts, is more profoundly satisfying. The great spiral of his ascent, rising coil over coil in slow symmetry, has in its movement all the amplitude of space. And when he has soared to the top of his bent, there comes the level flight as far as the eye can follow, straight, clean and effortless as breathing. The wings hardly move, now and then perhaps a lazy flap as though a cyclist, free-wheeling on a gentle slope, turned the crank a time or two. The bird seems to float, but to float with a direct and undeviating force. It is only when one remarks that he is floating up-wind that the magnitude of that force becomes apparent. I stood once about the 2500 feet level, in January when the world was quite white, and watched an eagle well below me following up the river valley in search of food. He flew right into the wind. The wings were slightly tilted, but so far as I could judge from above he held them steady. And he came on with a purposeful urgency behind which must have been the very terror of strength.

It was this strong undeviating flight on steady wings that

made a member of the Observer Corps (my friend James McGregor reports – the Observation Post was in his highest field and his croft, I believe, is the highest in Scotland) cry out in excitement, ‘Here’s a plane I can’t identify! What’s this one, do you think?’ McGregor looked and said, without a glimmer, ‘That’s the one they call the Golden Eagle.’ ‘Didn’t know there was such a one,’ said the other; and he could hardly be convinced that he was looking at a bird and not a plane. And just this morning, in my own garden on Lower Deeside, fifty miles from the eagle country, I caught sight of three planes very high against white clouds, wheeling in circles round one another, and my first amazed reaction was ‘Eagles!’

Mr Seton Gordon claims that the Golden Eagle rises from her eyrie clumsily, especially when the air is calm. I have never had, I was going to say the luck, but I should say rather the assiduity and patience to see an eagle rising from the eyrie, but I have watched one fly out from the vicinity of an eyrie, alight in heather some distance away, rise again and again alight, and there was nothing noteworthy in its movement. It is the power in the flight that enthralled the eye. And when one has realised, as probably one does not do at first, that it is a power which binds the strength of the wind to its own purpose, so that the more powerful the wind the more powerful is the flight of the bird, then one sees how intimately the eagle, like the moss campion, is integral to the mountain. Only here, where the wind tears across these desolate marches, can it prove the utmost of its own strength.

To see the Golden Eagle at close quarters requires knowledge and patience – though sometimes it may be a gift, as when once, just as I reached a summit cairn, an eagle rose from the

far side of it and swept up in majestic circles above my head: I have never been nearer to the king of birds. And once, on the edge of the Braeriach side of the Lairig crags, I saw an eagle soar out below me, glinting golden in the sun. And I have seen one near on a hillside, intent on something at his feet. But getting close to him is a slow art. One spring afternoon, while I was idling among the last trees on the Speyside end of the Lairig path, watching the movement of tits, a voice by my side asked: 'Is this the way to Ben MacDhui?' and looking down I saw what at first glance I took to be a street gamin of eleven. I said, 'Are you going up alone?' and he said, 'I'm with him.' So turning I saw behind me a second youth, lanky, pasty and pimply, hung round with gadgets. They were both, perhaps, even the undergrown one, nineteen years of age, and they were railway workers who had come all the way from Manchester to spend their one week's leave in photographing the Golden Eagle. And please, where would they find one? I told them of some of my encounters. 'And could you have photographed that one?' they asked. They knew, I found, the books. Those two weedy boys had read everything they could find on their subject, and though they had never been in Scotland before, they had walked in the Lakes. 'The distances,' I said, 'are different. Don't try Ben MacDhui till tomorrow, and take the whole day to it.' And I remembered an old shepherd in Galloway, whom I had asked which spur of the hill I should take to go up Merrick. When he had told me, he looked at me, and said, 'You've not been up before? Do you know what you're undertaking?' 'I've not been up before, but I've been all over the Cairngorms.' 'The Cairngorms, have you?' His gesture dismissed me – it was like a

drawbridge thrown forward. So I said to the boys, 'Don't go up Ben MacDhui today – it'll be dark in another four or five hours. Go on by the path you're on and see the Pools of Dee and perhaps look around the corner into the great Garbh Coire.' 'Will there be ledges there?' they asked; and repeated that what they had come for was to photograph the Golden Eagle. I never saw them again – I hope I dissuaded them from going up Ben MacDhui that day – I didn't even attempt to dissuade them from photographing the Golden Eagle. The eagle itself probably did that quite effectively. But I liked those boys. I hope they saw an eagle. Their informed enthusiasm – even if only half informed – was the right way in.

Imagination is haunted by the swiftness of the creatures that live on the mountain – eagle and peregrine falcon, red deer and mountain hare. The reason for their swiftness is severely practical: food is so scarce up there that only those who can move swiftly over vast stretches of ground may hope to survive. The speed, the whorls and torrents of movement, are in plain fact the mountain's own necessity. But their grace is not necessity. Or if it is – if the swoop, the parabola, the arrow-flight of hooves and wings achieve their beauty by strict adherence to the needs of function – so much the more is the mountain's integrity vindicated. Beauty is not adventitious but essential.

Strong flight is a characteristic also of another bird that haunts not the precipice but the plateau itself – the small unassuming dotterel. You are wandering one summer day on a plateau slope when your ear catches its plover-like cry. You pause and watch – no bird is there. Then you move softly towards the sound, and in a moment one bird, then another,

rises in short low flight, comes to earth again and runs, crouched to the ground like a small grey mouse. Shape, movement, colour, are all so mouse-like that the illusion almost might deceive you, were it not for the vivid black and white of the head, the glowing breast, and the white tail feathers. You wait, and soon the birds forget you. On one slope, off the recognised route to any particular destination, a nesting place or perhaps a gathering place for flight, of these small birds, I have seen them by the score, running a little way, and pausing, and running on again, almost domestic in their simple movements. Yet in autumn this humble bird flies straight to Africa.

The other bird that nests on the high plateau, the ptarmigan, is a home-keeper. No flights to Africa for him. Through the most ferocious winter, he stays where he was born, perhaps a little lower on the slopes, and dressed for winter by changing to the colour of the snow.

The creatures that dress like the snow to be inconspicuous against it – the ptarmigan, the snow bunting, the mountain hare – are sometimes cheated. They are white before the mountain is. When blue milkwort is still in blossom on the last day of the year, it is not surprising to see a white stoat blaze against a dull grey dyke. Few things are more ludicrous in Nature than a white hare ‘concealing’ itself, erect and patient beside a boulder, while all round it stretches a grey-brown world against which it stands vividly out. A white hare running over snow can be comical too, if it is running between you and the sun – a shadowed shape, with an odd ludicrous leggy shadow-skeleton, comical because the shadows alter the creature’s shape. But if the sun is behind you and strikes full on the running hare, only the ears show, and a dark thin

outline to the back. If the snow lies in fields, the running hare may not be noticed at all, till it flakes off at the edge of the snow patch, gleaming white. Breaking suddenly into a hollow, I have counted twenty white hares at a time streaking up a brown hillside like rising smoke.

Deer on the other hand are conspicuous in snow. In a completely white world, one can see from a high shoulder a herd feeding a thousand feet beneath, vivid black specks on the whiteness. But then they do not need to hide themselves from peregrine and eagle. Actually in winter and early spring, their coats are greyish, the colour of dead snow, bleached heather and juniper and rocks.

Stay-at-home though he be, the ptarmigan has power in his wings. In startled flight, his wing-beats are so rapid that the white wings lose all appearance of solidity, they are like an aura of light around the body.

Like all the game birds, ptarmigan play the broken wing trick when an intruder approaches their young family, to lure the enemy away. I have had the trick played on me so many times that now I hardly notice the parent birds, but always and eagerly I watch the behaviour of the young. Once near the summit of Braeriach, I halted dead at the rise of one, then the other parent, seeking with my eyes for the youngsters. There was one, three feet away, another nearer, and another. My eyes came closer and closer to myself – one ptarmigan chick was not two inches from my boot. Seven of them crouched within a radius of a foot or two, and they might have been birds carved from wood for all the life they showed. I stood for a long time and as long as I remained motionless, so did they. But at last I yielded to the mounting temptation

(which I try always to resist) to touch and fondle one of these morsels. So I stooped to the one nearest my boot. And instantly the whole seven, cackling, were off. A noisy undignified scramble, contrasting strangely with their carved immobility.

Very near the summits, on the most stony braes nest the snow buntings. Both in song and in person these small creatures have a delicate perfection that is enhanced by the savagery of their home. Sit quietly for a while in some of the loneliest and most desolate crannies of the mountain, where the imagination is overpowered by grim bastions of the rock, and a single snow bunting will sing with incredible sweetness beside you. To have sat on one of the high stony fields around seven of a clear summer morning, when the sun has just drawn up the morning mists from the corries, and seen the stones come alive with small forms like flakes of the stone blown eddying upon the air, is to have tasted a pleasure of the epicure. Watching carefully, one sees that two of the dozen or so birds are males, the rest are the members of their two young families. The females are already about the business of bringing out a second brood.

Ranging the whole mountain mass are the hoodies, black and grey, the mountain scavengers. Wheatears bob and chuckle on the boulders, or flash their cheeky rumps as they fly to another stone. And in the burns of the highest corries the white-dickied dipper plunges beneath the water. A lonely song by a solitary burn reveals the golden plover. But why should I make a list? It serves no purpose, and they are all in the books. But they are not in the books for me – they are in living encounters, moments of their life that have crossed moments of mine. They are in the cry of the curlew sounding

over the distances, and in the thin silver singing among the last trees that tell me the tits are there. They are in an April morning when I follow a burn to its sources, further and further into a fold of the hills, and a pair of long-tailed tits flash and are gone and come again. Or in a December afternoon of bitter frost when a dozen of these tiny tufts, disproportionate and exquisite, tumble from a tree beside a frozen stream. Or a July day when one small tree holds thirteen crested tits. Or in a March day (the only time I have found anything attractive in the grouse) when against the snowy hillside a pair of these birds pursued each other in lovely patterns of flight. Or in the mating ecstasy of the kestrel, or the fighting blackcock suddenly discovered one morning in a clear place among juniper. Or in the two woodcock that follow each other night after night low over the trees just beyond where I lie still awake outside the tent.

And so many that I have omitted. Just as I have omitted so many exquisite flowers – dryas, timeless as white jade, bog asphodel like candle flame, the purple-black hearts of cornel. I have missed the wagtails, yellow and pied, and the reed bunting precise as a dignitary in his bands, the seagulls and oyster catchers come up from the sea, the crossbills and the finches, and the wrens. But I cannot miss the wrens. So tiny, so vital, with such volume of voice. It may not be fact, but in my experience the wrens are more numerous on the Dee side of the range than on the Spey side. In the high tributary valleys, Glen Quoich, Glen Slugain, among the last of the trees, they are common as eyebright. There's a skeleton of a fallen tree in Glen Quoich, a vast leggy thing, all the legs to the ground and the trunk a ridge of spine above them, a

magnificent example of prevailing wind – twinkling through its bony ribs I have watched a family of nine young wrens. And once in Glen Slugain a pair of golden bumble bees (as it seemed) sped past me in a whorl of joyful speed. But it couldn't be – they were too large. I stalked them. They were young wrens.

It was near the leggy tree that I saw rise some way off down the stream, a bird so huge that I could only stare. It wheeled and vanished. Two enormous wings, with a span that I couldn't believe. Yet I had seen it. And there it was coming back, upstream now, the same vast span of wing: no body that I could see; two great wings joined by nothing, as though some bird had at last discovered how to be all flight and no body. And then I saw. The two great wings were a duck and a drake, following one another in perfect formation, wheeling and dipping and rising again with an unchanging interval of space between them, each following every modulation of the other; two halves of one organism.

Wild geese are only passers here. One blustering October day I watched an arrow-head of them, twenty-seven birds in perfect symmetry, flying south down the valley in which I stood. I was near the head of a deep glen, the watershed rose steep above me. Up there the wind must be ferocious. The geese were there now. They broke formation. Birds flew from one arm of the wedge to the other, the leader hesitated, another bird attempted to lead, their lovely symmetry became confused. It seemed as though the wind were beating them back, for the whole line, blunt-headed now, edged round, one bird leading and then another, till they gradually rounded the top of the glen and were flying back the way they came. As I

watched, they flew into a cinder-grey cloud, in an undulating line like the movement of a fish under water. The dark line melted into the darkness of the cloud, and I could not tell where or when they resumed formation and direction.

It is tantalising to see something unusual, but not its ending. One January afternoon, in a frozen silent world, I saw two stags with antlers interlaced dragging each other backwards and forwards across the ringing frozen floor of a hollow. Their dark forms stood out against the snow. I watched till dusk came on and I could barely see but could still hear the noise of the scuffle. It is the only time I have seen this phenomenon of interlocked antlers, and as I have always been told that stags so caught cannot extricate themselves and fight on till one or both die, I wanted badly to see what happened. I went back next day but found no stags, dead or alive. The crofter-ghillie in whose house I was staying said that they probably saved themselves by the breaking of an antler.

The roaring of the stags set me another problem to which I have not found a definitive answer. On one of those potent days of mid-October, golden as whisky, I was wandering on the slopes of Ben Avon above Loch Builg. Suddenly I was startled by a musical call that resounded across the hill, and was answered by a like call from another direction. Yodelling, I thought. There was such gaiety in the sound that I looked eagerly about, thinking: these are students, they are hailing one another from sheer exuberance of spirit. But I saw no one. The yodelling went on. The yodelling went on all day, clear, bell-like and musical; and it was not long till I realised that there was no other human being on the mountain and that the stags were the yodellers. The clear bell notes were

new to me. I had heard stags roar often enough, in deep raucous tones. Bellowing. The dictionary would have me believe that belling is merely a variant of bellowing. For me belling will always mean the music of that golden day. All the time I listened, there was not a single harsh note.

But why? That is what I don't understand. Why sometimes raucous and sometimes like a bell? Hillmen whom I have asked give different suggestions. That the bell notes are from young stags and the raucous from old. But against that, one gamekeeper sets the tale of a gruff-voiced bellower that the shooting-party to a man declared would be an old beast and that turned out when they got him to be comparatively young. That the note changes to express different needs. But that theory does not seem to be borne out by the way in which two stags kept up an antiphon one day in my hearing, the raucous answering the bell across a ravine with absolute consistency. That stags are like human beings and some have tenor voices, some bass. Then were they all tenor stags on that morning when the hill broke into a cantata? All young? or all tenor? or all in love with the morning?

Normally deer are silent creatures, but when alarmed they bark like an angry dog. I have heard the warning bark far off on a distant slope and only then been aware of the presence of a herd. Then they are off, flowing up the hill and over the horizon. Their patterns against the sky are endless – a quiet frieze of doe and fawn and doe and fawn. Or a tossing forest of massed antlers. Or with long necks to the ground, feeding, like hens pecking. Those mobile necks are a thought uncanny at times. I have seen five necks rise like swaying snakes, a small snake-like head on each, the bodies hidden. Five hinds.

And I have seen a hind turn her head to look at me, twisting her neck round until the face seemed to hang suspended in air alongside the rump and some atavistic fear awoke in me. Bird, animal and reptile – there is something of them all in the deer. Its flight is fluid as a bird's. Especially the roes, the very young ones, dappled, with limbs like the stalks of flowers, move over the heather with an incredible lightness. They seem to float; yet their motion is in a way more wonderful even than flight, for each of these gleaming hooves does touch the ground. The lovely pattern of the limbs is fixed to the earth and cannot be detached from it.

Indeed there are times when the earth seems to re-absorb this creature of air and light. Roes melt into the wood – I have stared a long time into birches where I knew a doe was standing and saw her only when at last she flicked an ear. In December on open heather I have found myself close upon a feeding red doe so like her background that I had thought the white scut another patch of snow. She becomes aware of me, her ears lift, her head goes sharply up, the neck elongated. I stand very still, the head drops, she becomes again part of the earth. Further up on the slopes one can watch a fawn learning his hillcraft from his mother, pausing in exactly her attitude, turning a wary head as she turns hers.

But find a fawn alone in a hidden hollow, he will not endure with his mother's patience. It is not easy to make a doe move before you do, but when the fawn, after his first startled jump to the far side of the hollow, stands to gaze at you on the other side, if you keep perfectly still he grows restive, moves his head now side on to you, now front, an ear twitches, a nostril, finally he turns and walks away, like

a reluctant but inquisitive child, pausing at every third step to look back.

I have never had the incredible fortune, as a young doctor I know once had, of seeing a hind give birth; but I have found very young fawns, left by their mothers beside a stone on heather. Once I had gone off the track to visit a small tarn. Something impelled me to walk round the back of the tarn, scrambling between the rock and the water, and then to continue downwards over a heathery slope that is not very often crossed. From the corner of my eye I noticed two or three hinds making off; and a moment later I came on a tiny fawn lying crouched into the heather near a stone. It lay in an oddly rigid way, the limbs contorted in unnatural positions. Could it be dead? I bent over it – very gently touched it. It was warm. The contorted limbs were fluid as water in my hands. The little creature gave no sign of life. The neck was stretched, stiff and ungainly, the head almost hidden; the eyes stared, undeviating. Only the flanks pulsed. Nothing moved but the pulsing flanks. There was no voluntary movement whatsoever, no smallest twitch or flicker. I had never before seen a fawn shamming dead, as young birds do.

A young squirrel, caught upon his own occasions, will behave like the young fawn you have surprised walking out alone: both are a little reckless about humanity. I have come upon a small squirrel the size of a well-grown mouse, on the ground under fir trees, scampering from cone to cone, picking up each in turn, scrutinising, sampling, tossing it away, with a sort of wilful petulance in his movements such as I have seen in small children who have too many toys. He becomes aware of me, pauses, eyes me, eyes his cone. Cupidity and

caution struggle within him, I am quite still, caution loses, he goes on with his game among the goodies. When he stops to crunch, I move forward. At last I move so near that he is suddenly alarmed. He makes for a huge old pine tree whose bark hangs in scales so thick and solid that his small limbs can hardly compass them. He can't get up; and now, like his red-gold parents, he wallops his thin long ribbon-like tail, not yet grown bushy, in a small futile way, and scrabbles against the mountainous humps of bark. At last he is up, he runs out on a side branch and jeers down at me in triumph.

Other young things – leverets in the form wrapped in silky hair – fox cubs playing in the sun in a distant fold of the hill – the fox himself with his fat red brush – the red-brown squirrel in the woods below, whacking his tail against the tree-trunk and chattering through closed lips (I think) against the intruder – gold-brown lizards and the gold-brown floss of cocoons in the heather – small golden bees and small blue butterflies – green dragon flies and emerald beetles – moths like oiled paper and moths like burnt paper – water-beetles skimming the highest tarns – small mice so rarely seen but leaving a thousand tracks upon the snow – ant-heaps of birch-twigs or pine-needles (*preens*, in the northern word) flickering with activity when the sun shines – midges, mosquitoes, flies by the hundred thousand, adders and a rare strange slowworm – small frogs jumping like tiddly-winks – rich brown hairy caterpillars by the handful and fat green ones with blobs of amethyst, a perfect camouflage on heather – life in so many guises.

It is not just now sheep country. The sheep were cleared to make room for deer; today in one district the deer are giving

place to Highland cattle, those placid and abstemious beasts to whom thin fare is a necessity and whose shaggy winter mats protect them from the bitter winds. They look ferocious and are very gentle -- in this resembling some of the blackface ewes, hags as ugly as sin that are found in every mountain flock, grim old malignants whose cankered horns above a black physiognomy must, I feel sure, be the origin of the Scots conception of the Devil.

TEN

Sleep

Well, I have discovered my mountain – its weathers, its airs and lights, its singing burns, its haunted dells, its pinnacles and tarns, its birds and flowers, its snows, its long blue distances. Year by year, I have grown in familiarity with them all. But if the whole truth of them is to be told as I have found it, I too am involved. I have been the instrument of my own discovering; and to govern the stops of the instrument needs learning too. Thus the senses must be trained and disciplined, the eye to look, the ear to listen, the body must be trained to move with the right harmonies. I can teach my body many skills by which to learn the nature of the mountain. One of the most compelling is quiescence.

No one knows the mountain completely who has not slept on it. As one slips over into sleep, the mind grows limpid; the body melts; perception alone remains. One neither thinks, nor desires, nor remembers, but dwells in pure intimacy with the tangible world.

These moments of quiescent perceptiveness before sleep are among the most rewarding of the day. I am emptied of preoccupation, there is nothing between me and the earth and sky. In midsummer the north glows with light long after

midnight is past. As I watch, the light comes pouring round the edges of the shapes that stand against the sky, sharpening them till the more slender have a sort of glowing insubstantiality, as though they were themselves nothing but light. Up on the plateau, light lingers incredibly far into the night, long after it has left the rest of the earth. Watching it, the mind grows incandescent and its glow burns down into deep and tranquil sleep.

Daytime sleep, too, is good. In the heat of the day, after an early start, to lie in full daylight on the summits and slip in and out of sleep is one of the sweetest luxuries in life. For falling asleep on the mountain has the delicious corollary of awaking. To come up out of the blank of sleep and open one's eyes on scaur and gully, wondering, because one had forgotten where one was, is to recapture some pristine amazement not often savoured. I do not know if it is a common experience (certainly it is unusual in my normal sleep), but when I fall asleep out of doors, perhaps because outdoor sleep is deeper than normal, I awake with an empty mind. Consciousness of where I am comes back quite soon, but for one startled moment I have looked at a familiar place as though I had never seen it before.

Such sleep may last for only a few minutes, yet even a single minute serves this end of uncoupling the mind. It would be merely fanciful to suppose that some spirit or emanation of the mountain had intention in thus absorbing my consciousness, so as to reveal itself to a naked apprehension difficult otherwise to obtain. I do not ascribe sentience to the mountain; yet at no other moment am I sunk quite so deep into its life. I have let go my self. The experience is peculiarly precious because it is impossible to coerce.

A 4 am start leaves plenty of time for these hours of quiescence, and perhaps of sleep, on the summits. One's body is limber with the sustained rhythm of mounting, and relaxed in the ease that follows the eating of food. One is as tranquil as the stones, rooted far down in their immobility. The soil is no more a part of the earth. If sleep comes at such a moment, its coming is a movement as natural as day. And after – ceasing to be a stone, to be the soil of the earth, opening eyes that have human cognisance behind them upon what one has been so profoundly a part of. That is all. One has been in.

Once, however, I fell asleep where I would not have chosen to do so. We were on Braeriach. It was a day with hazed horizons and a flat view that had little life or interest; so we lay on our faces just beyond the summit, as near to the edge as we dared, our bodies safe to the earth, and looked down into Coire Brochain. The burns were full and everywhere there was the noise of waterfalls. We watched them drop, pouring on and on over the rock faces. Far below us on the floor of the hollow, deer were feeding, small moving specks. We watched them move. Then the sun came out and warmed us, and the pattern of movement and sound made us drowsy. Then abruptly I awoke and found myself staring down black walls of rock to a bottom incredibly remote. It is actually, I believe, some 2000 feet from the summit to the bed of the burn below; to the bottom of the inner corrie, where the deer were still feeding, is not much over a thousand; but to that first horrified stare, dissociated from all thought and all memory, sensation purely, the drop seemed inordinate. With a gasp of relief I said 'Coire Brochain,' turned round on my

back, eased myself from the edge, and sat up. I had looked into the abyss.

If the depth of its insensibility is the boon of daytime sleep on the mountain, nights under the sky are most delectable when the sleep is light. I like it to be so light that I am continually coming to the surface of awareness and sinking back again, just seeing, not bedevilled with thought, but living in the clear simplicity of the senses. I have slept in the open as early as May and as late as the first week in October, a time when, in our odd and unbalanced climate, there is usually a splash of radiant weather.

My one October night without a roof was bland as silk, with a late moon rising in the small hours and the mountains fluid as loch water under a silken dawn: a night of the purest witchery, to make one credit all the tales of *glamourie* that Scotland tries so hard to refute and cannot. I don't wonder. Anyone caught out of doors at four or five on such a morning would start spelling wrong. *Faerie* and *glamourie* and *witcherie* are not for men who lie in bed till eight. Find an October night warm enough to sleep out, and a dawn all mixed up with moonshine, and you will see that I am right. You too will be mis-spelled.

I do not like *glamourie*. It interposes something artificial between the world, which is one reality, and the self, which is another reality, though overlaid with a good many crusts of falseness and convention. And it is the fusion of these two realities that keeps life from corruption. So let us have done with spells.

Most of my nights out of doors have been simple summer nights, and I like waking often in them because the world is

so beautiful then, and also because wild creatures, and birds, come close to a sleeper without suspicion. But there is an art in waking. I must come fully awake, and open my eyes without having moved. Once, sleeping in the daytime, I jerked awake, to find that a young blackbird, accustomed to feed from the hand, had been walking along my leg. He had asked for his alms in the odd throaty chuckle he affected, too deep in pitch to penetrate my sleep. And once a chaffinch touched my breast. In both these cases I was so lightly asleep that I felt the contact and was awake in time to catch the startled flight of my visitor. If only I had not been such a fool as to jump! But then my sleep had been broken. No, it must be a natural awakening: my eyes were closed, and now they are open, nothing more than that; and ten yards away from me a red deer is feeding in the dawn light. He moves without a sound. The world is entirely still. I too am still. Or am I? Did I move? He lifts his head, his nostrils twitch, we look at each other. Why did I let him meet my eyes? He is off. But not for far. He checks in his flight and eyes me again. This time I do not look at him. After a while he drops his head, reassured, and goes on feeding.

Sometimes I have floated up from sleep at dawn, and seen a roe, and sunk back into sleep again before my conscious mind had registered the thing. The glimpse remains a vision, wholly true, although I could not swear to it in court. When I wake for good that morning I have forgotten it. Later in the day the thought teases at the edges of my brain – *But did I dream that roe?* – and because I can't be sure it haunts me for a long time.

Or the paling below my sleeping place may be alive with

finches. I have counted twenty of them when I opened my eyes. Or tits, turning themselves about in the engaging way these morsels have. Of all the tit family the one who does this to perfection is the rarest of them, the tiny crested tit, whom I have seen more than once showing himself about, now back, now front, now side, keeping each pose for a moment before flirting to a new one on a higher or a lower twig. A finished mannequin.

At other times the ear awakens first. Snipe are drumming. Then I sit up in the bag and search the sky to see the lovely downward swoop. Sometimes it is still too dark (even in a Scots midsummer) to see the pattern of movement, only the zooming fall hangs on the ear.

Out of sleep too I have heard the roaring of stags; but these are no longer outdoor nights. The nights then are cold and dark, and the roaring is fearsome as it comes from the hills that are usually so silent. The silence may be broken by another roaring. When the snows melt, cataracts sound in my ears all night, pouring through my sleep; and after many days of rain I have waked to hear the burns come down in spate, with a duller and more persistent roar than that of the stags, but in its own way as fearsome.

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notes:

ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

the first copy of *ily cere- cahier 44* was printed in september 2026

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