

PART I

TRACKING

(England)

1

TRACK





All things are engaged in writing their history . . . Not a foot steps into the snow, or along the ground, but prints in characters more or less lasting, a map of its march. The ground is all memoranda and signatures; and every object covered over with hints. In nature, this self-registration is incessant, and the narrative is the print of the seal.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1850)

Two days short of the winter solstice; the turn of the year's tide. All that cold day, the city and the countryside around felt halted, paused. Five degrees below freezing and the earth battened down. Clouds held snow that would not fall. Out in the suburbs the schools were closed, people homebound, the pavements rinky and the roads black-iced. The sun ran a shallow arc across the sky. Then just before dusk the snow came – dropping straight for five hours and settling at a steady inch an hour.

I was at my desk that evening, trying to work but distracted by the weather. I kept stopping, standing, looking out of the window. The snow was sinking through the orange cone cast by a street light, the fat flakes showing like furnace sparks.

Around eight o'clock the snow ceased. An hour later I went for

a walk with a flask of whisky to keep me warm. I walked for half a mile along dark back roads where the snow lay clean and unmarked. The houses began to thin out. A few undrawn curtains: family evenings underway, the flicker and burble of television sets. The cold like a wire in the nose. A slew of stars, the moon flooding everything with silver.

At the southerly fringe of the suburb, a last lamp post stands by a hawthorn hedge, and next to it is a hole in the hedge which leads down to a modest field path.

I followed the field path east-south-east towards a long chalk hill-top, visible as a whaleback in the darkness. Northwards was the glow of the city, and the red blip of aircraft warning lights from towers and cranes. Dry snow squeaked underfoot. A fox crossed the field to my west at a trot. The moonlight was so bright that everything cast a crisp moon-shadow: black on white, stark as woodcut. Wands of dogwood made zebra-hide of the path; hawthorn threw a lattice. The trees were frilled with snow, which lay to the depth of an inch or more on branches and twigs. The snow caused everything to exceed itself and the moonlight caused everything to double itself.

This is the path I've probably walked more often than any other in my life. It's a young way; maybe fifty years old, no more. Its easterly hedge is mostly hawthorn and around eight feet high; its westerly hedge is a younger mix of blackthorn, hawthorn, hazel and dogwood. It is not normally a beautiful place, but there's a feeling of secrecy to it that I appreciate, hedged in as it is on both sides, and running discreetly as it does between field and road. In summer I've seen small rolling clouds of goldfinches rising from teasel-heads and then curling ahead to settle again, retreating in the measure that I approach them.

That evening the path was a grey snow alley, and I followed it

up to the hanger of beech trees that tops the whaleback hill, passing off the clay and onto the chalk proper. At the back brink of the beech wood I ducked through an ivy-trailed gap, and was into the forty-acre field that lies beyond.

At first sight the field seemed flawless; floe country. Then I set out across it and started to see the signs. The snow was densely printed with the tracks of birds and animals – archives of the hundreds of journeys made since the snow had stopped. There were neat deer slots, partridge prints like arrowheads pointing the way, and the pads of rabbits. Lines of tracks curved away from me across the field, disappearing into shadow or hedge. The moonlight, falling at a slant, deepened the dark in the nearer tracks so that they appeared full as inkwells. To all these marks I added my own.

The snow was overwhelmingly legible. Each print-trail seemed like a plot that could be read backwards in time; a series of allusions to events since ended. I found a line of fox pugs, which here and there had been swept across by the fox's brush, as if it had been trying to erase evidence of its own passage. I discovered what I supposed were the traces of a pheasant taking off: trenched footprints where it had pushed up, then spaced feather-presses either side of the tracks, becoming progressively lighter and then vanishing altogether.

I chose to follow a deer's trail, which angled tightly across a corner of the field. The slots led through a blackthorn hedge: I snagged my way after them, and emerged into a surreal landscape.

To my north, the land swooped smoothly away downhill for 300 yards or so. South and uphill of where I stood, big white humps surrounded what appeared to be a small neat lake with a flagstick in its centre. There were copses of beech and stands of pine, sudden drops and draws in the land, rounded hills and swathed valleys.

The Old Ways

I walked over to the lake, stepped out onto its surface, and by its flagstick I sat down and took a drink of whisky. Edited of its golfers by the darkness, transformed by snowfall and moonlight, the county's most exclusive golf course had become a strange realm of open country. Murmuring insincere apologies to the club's members, I left the first green and set off to explore the course. I walked straight down the middle of fairway after fairway, my shadow falling undistorted by my side. In the bunkers snow lay calf-deep and sifted. On the fifth green I lay on my back and watched the stars' slow wheel.

Most of the animal tracks on the course had been left by rabbits. If you've seen rabbit prints in snow, you will know they resemble a Halloween ghost mask, or the face of Edvard Munch's screamer: the two rear feet are placed laterally to make elongated eyes, and between and behind them fall the forefeet in a slightly offset paired line, forming nose and oval mouth. Thousands of these faces peered at me from the snow.

Occasionally the headlights of cars on the road to the west showed as long yellow tunnels of light. On the twelfth fairway something large and dark ran from tree to scrub cover: it looked like a wolf, but must have been a deer or fox, and set needles of silly fear pricking in the backs of my hands.

At the far end of the course, I followed rabbit tracks through another blackthorn hedge and onto the Roman road that runs for miles over low chalk hills. The road looked magnificent in the snow – the white line of its route leading the eye far in either direction – and I walked it south-east. Vast fields were visible through the hedges to either side, throwing the moonlight back up in hard pale sheets. A bird moving in a tall ash tree sent snow dropping across the path ahead of me, falling like speckles on early film.

Track

Distance stretched oddly, or perhaps time compressed, for it seemed that I had been moving for many miles or hours before I reached the point where the Roman road passed the end of a wide avenue of beeches that I recognized. I walked up the avenue, skirted the earthworks of a large Iron Age ring-fort, crossed a road and then entered a wide meadow that rises to the top of a chalk down, whose summit floats 250 feet above sea level. Charcoal trees, a taste of pewter in the mouth.

At the down's top, under the moon, near the outline of a Bronze Age burial barrow, I sat in the snow and drank whisky again. I looked back along the line of my own tracks leading up to the hilltop. Away to the north-west were dozens of other print-trails, spreading far and then further downhill. I picked a trail and set out along it, following those tracks to see where they might lead.