

PART I

VINTAGE



PUBLISHING

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I

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, dented, 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, roulng 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, dragged, 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 blood-orange 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

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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.