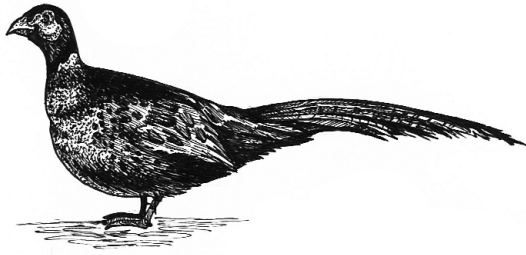


NOVEMBER



Pheasant

THE RIVER IS so low I can step across its spindly width. A nuthatch scuttles down the elder, tapping for insects behind the Jew's ear mushrooms. At the back of Grove hedge, the crab apples have fallen into the ditch and gather slugs.

In medieval times it was believed that parent hedgehogs rolled on fruits and transported them home to their young. The hedgepiglets who lived under the pile of logs in the promontory will have no need of food. They are dead. Perfect scale miniatures of their parents, and grotesquely colourless in death. Only one has been eaten, scooped out of its spiny back; the other three seem to be unmarked. Presumably these died of cold. And a fox or badger is the perpetrator of the crime.



November is one of my favourite months, with its faded afternoons of cemetery eeriness, and its churchy smell of damp musting leaves. November suited perfectly poor crazed poet John Clare, who limned it so:

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*Sybil of months, and worshipper of winds!
I love thee, rude and boisterous as thou art;
And scraps of joy my wandering ever finds
'Mid thy uproarious madness.*

Although some do feel, with Thomas Hood:

*No warmth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease,
No comfortable feel in any member –
No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees,
No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds –
November!*

Flint winds from the east cut us irrevocably from summer.



Hunger makes the hunter. From the house I see two male pheasants in the field, perambulating across with the dignity of Ming emperors. Even at hundreds of yards the low weak winter sun burnishes them into coppery magnificence. They are past the moult, they are in their feathered prime. Occasionally they stoop to peck at some flower or grass seed.

I get my shotgun from the gunsafe. By the time I reach the field, they have disappeared. I catch sight of

their quick shadows in the copse but they slide away before I can get a clear shot. In the copse they are in their natural habitat, for what are pheasants but ornate jungle fowl? The first pheasants were brought here by the Romans, but probably did not go feral; *Phasianus colchicus torquatus*, the pheasant with the white ring collar, is an eleventh-century introduction. And after nine hundred years and annual releases of 30 million or so for shooting, the pheasant still looks gaudily out of place.

On a hunch I wait in the field, just under the overhang from the copse alder which bulges over the wire stock fence, loitering against it, the barrels of the gun nuzzled between neck and shoulder, more reassuring than a father's hand. With my left ear pressed hard to the trunk of the alder, I can hear every internal stress and strain as it shifts about.

The doleful day ticks down. The wren, cock-tailed capo of the copse, tells me off for loitering. When American poet Robert Lowell wrote 'For the Union Dead' and needed an image to explain the righteous Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, killed leading a regiment of black soldiers, he settled on 'an angry wrenlike vigilance'. I know precisely what Lowell meant; the wren continues its scolding staccato as I watch out over Lower Meadow while it prepares for bed. A tawny owl ker-wicks up the wooded stream, a robin warbles a few wistful bars from the Grove

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hedge, the sheep edge up the field to where it is highest, from where they have the best view of any approaching predators. The ancient Escley gurgles contentedly. The leaves of the hazel glow, the chill aches my face.

Then I hear the pheasants. A brief, proud 'cok-cok-cok'. They have left the copse and slinked next door to the Grove.

The light has gone to ashes. There are only seconds left in the day. I slip back the safety catch.

Up flies a pheasant from the Grove field, up, up, its tail streaming like the wake of a comet. I step forward and take the poacher's shot, the shot that is not for sport but for the kill. I shoot the silhouette just as it spreads its wings to break its speed before landing in the tree.

The bird falls thump into the field. Dead. As dead as though it had never lived.

The graffito blast of the shot is still echoing in the green valley, the blackbirds still squirting their alarm calls as I slip a length of bailer twine around its neck to carry it home. The sheep, momentarily disturbed from their eating, put their heads to the field once more and carry on mowing.

The smell of gunpowder is thick around me, and masks out even the rotting incense of the autumn leaves. A child's full moon is struggling to break through the gloom.

How did I know the pheasant would roost there, on that bare branch in the alder? It is where I would have chosen to sleep if I were a pheasant, a place too high for foxes but not so dense with leaves that I could not see into it.

Rationally it seems fair, even appropriate, that if one farms for wildlife one can eat the wildlife. The justification does not stop me suffering the agonies of sentient killers and those unforgiving lines from Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence' start to spool:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

*A Robin Redbreast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.
A Dove house fill'd with Doves & Pigeons
Shudders Hell thro' all its regions.
A Dog starv'd at his Master's Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State.
A Horse misus'd upon the Road
Calls to Heaven for Human blood.
Each outcry of the hunted Hare
A fibre from the Brain does tear.
A Skylark wounded in the wing,
A Cherubim does cease to sing.*

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*The Game Cock clipt & arm'd for fight
Does the Rising Sun affright.*

And on, on until:

*Kill not the Moth nor Butterfly,
For the Last Judgment draweth nigh.*



6 NOVEMBER A squirrel walks towards me through the grass of the meadow. The dogs bark on the yard at the arriving postman, which alerts the squirrel; then he sees me and disappears in a mercury rush. A flight of ducks (their dart-shape issues a squeak – mandarins) comes up off the river. I am checking the rickety troublesome riverside stock fence, to stop the ram escaping. The badgers have pushed under the fence to eat the acorns.



The cattle are back in the field, taking a last 'bite' of the grass growth brought on by a sequence of muggy days. Then it rains, and quickly the ground becomes too soft to support their weight; in the jargon of farming they will 'poach' the ground, turn it into a sea of mud. In a squinting downpour I herd them to their winter quarters.

But the remains of the autumn sun set November alight again. The days brighten up from elements of sun snagged in the spiders' webs in the hedges and tussocks. The ash has been denuded by the down-pours, but the alder and oaks are still holding on to their greenery.



I like the Braille of bark, the way that – with eyes closed – one can identify a tree by touch. Oak trunks have rectangular mosaic tiles; the old ash has a latticework for skin; the slumped elder by the brook gnarled longitudinal fissures in polystyrene; silver birch the smoothness of silk stockings. Then there is the last hazel in the Bank boundary, gone from shrub to tree in the hedge that is no longer a hedge but a plodding parade of bowed single sentinels; it is worn smooth and polished by cows' rubbing over ancient summers. They have done the same to the two oak-trunk gateposts, as they have barged and passed by, so that the bleached-out wooden pillars are glossy to sight and feel.

Margot will no longer be adding her polishing. The great beast is dead. I suppose, as this is a death announcement, she should be titled properly: 'Worlingworth Margot, daughter of Woldsman King Harry and Woldsman Ember'. She was a Red Poll cow

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with pedigree. She has been arthritic for two years, and has fallen over from time to time, always to be hauled upright by many hands or the jeep, to plod on happily behind the rest of the herd.

This morning there is no Lazarus moment, there is no miracle. She has fallen into the paddock ditch, and it takes the tractor – fumes volcanically powering out of the bonnet exhaust – and a chain, the industrial one with links the size of fists, to get her out of the sucking mud. But hauled and beached in the field, even my words of love will not make her rise. She is lying on her side: her eye, white and marble and veiny, stares up. She is dressed embarrassingly, a grim mud shawl over her gorgeous coat. Her struggling front hooves cut small crescents in the sward, so there is no grass, there is only more mud.

Her daughter, Mirabelle, moseys over, and noses at her mother. She can smell death on the mist.

I begin to walk to the house to call the vet to administer death by injection, then stop. Margot hates vets, with their personal deodorant of ointments and ailments. She is an old lady expiring naturally, and I let her go from the world this way. All the wan morning long her daughter stands next to her, but never again looks at her. The other cows one by one pay their curious, sniffing respects. I am there at the last, when shit and life leave her. She dies in an afternoon sky painted in heavy purple oils. I cover her face with a

plastic sugar-beet sack so the crows won't peck her eyes out.

Margot. My lovely, cantankerous old cow, a true beast of the field.



All cattle are descended from as few as eighty animals that were domesticated from wild ox or aurochs in Iran some 10,500 years ago, according to recent genetic studies. This is not long after the invention of farming. The history of farmed cattle in England is more recent, with the first domestic cattle arriving here about six thousand years ago. They made an immediate impact on the earth of Albion; the dung beetle population increased exponentially.

Sheep were the main domestic grazer, especially outside fertile lowland valleys, providing wool, meat and milk. Cattle, however, had one great advantage over sheep; they could be used for locomotion. There are cattle bones in Neolithic sites showing the stress-induced damage that comes from hauling and ploughing. A cow, of course, is also an 'ox'. Poor nutrition or selective breeding made domestic cattle smaller (some in Scotland were only a metre high at the shoulder), and easier to handle than their wild counterparts.

The laws of the Saxon King Ine of Wessex

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(688–95) show cattle farming to have reached a stage not unlike today, with the beasts contained within fields.

40. The landed property of a ceorl shall be fenced both winter and summer. If it is not, and if his neighbour's cattle come through an opening that he has left, he shall have no claim to such cattle, he must drive them out and suffer the damage . . .

42. If free peasants have the task of fencing a common meadow or other land that is divided into strips, and if some have built their portions of the fence while others have not, and if their common acres or grasslands are eaten [by straying animals], then those responsible for the opening must go and pay compensation to the others, who have done their share of the fencing, for any damage that may have been suffered.

Breeding cattle for beef was a later but wholly English invention, one in which the meadows of Herefordshire played a leading role. Until the eighteenth century, the cattle of southern England were wholly red with a white switch, similar to the modern Red Poll. During the eighteenth century other cattle (mainly Shorthorns) were used to create a new type of beef cattle with a characteristic white face, the Hereford,

which from 1817 sold to the world, from America to Australia. Nothing – not St George, rugby, cucumber sandwiches, cricket on the green – is as English as beef. It has been a national symbol for centuries, and for the French we are *les rosbifs*. The song ‘The Roast Beef of Old England’, penned in 1731, was once a national anthem, sung by the audience in theatres.

*When mighty Roast Beef was the Englishman's
 food,
 It ennobled our brains and enriched our blood.
 Our soldiers were brave and our courtiers were
 good
 Oh! the Roast Beef of old England,
 And old English Roast Beef!*

By far the most important factor in the taste of beef is the animal's diet. Unlike in America, English cattle are still largely fed on what they would naturally eat – grass and fodder made from it, like silage and hay. Grass-fed meat always proves tastier in comparison tests and it's certainly healthier, with more vitamins, less unhealthy fat and beneficial Omega-3 fatty acids.

But it doesn't taste as good as it did. How could it? Animals are what they eat. The varied, rich herbage of yore gave flavours.

The very last aurochs died in Poland in 1627.

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(Mankind's destruction of other species by hunting is nothing new.) An auroch was the size of one of the big cows of today, like the Belgian Blue. So, after ten thousand years we have only succeeded in producing cows as big as the wild ones.



Walking disconsolately around the meadow the evidence of Margot is all around. (I pay attention to livestock shit the way Roman augurs inspected owl innards. An awful lot about the state of an animal can be determined by its excrement. Inky-black 'crotties' that break down into pellets are a good sign in sheep; green goo is bad, and probably betrays too high a burden of intestinal worms.) Where there's muck there's a wealth of invertebrate life. Cow dung contains up to 250 insect species. Of the 56 British Red Data Book species of beetle associated with dung, 16 live in cattle excrement; 15 in horse, 13 in sheep. The excrement from one cow can produce food for 0.1 ton of insect larvae per annum.

Dung is such a popular food source that insects may be laying their eggs in it before it has even hit the ground. Grazing only extracts about 10 per cent of the energy from grass, leaving the comminuted waste enriched. All of these invertebrates help to break down and recycle the dung, as well as providing a bonanza of

food for other predatory animals. Dung manures the earth, and feeds a whole long chain of life.

The oddity is that some of the most beautiful of all insects live in this dung. The afternoon is hot enough for sultana-brown dungflies to loiter. I poke about with a stick in some of the cow pats. There are rove beetles and dor beetles, including *Geotrupes stercorarius*, black on top with a fetching purple rain-sheen underneath.

Unseen and unhonoured labour the bacteria, about a billion of them per gram, the land's hidden farmers, breaking down the faecal matter into humus, into soil.



11 NOVEMBER Martinmas. The day the livestock was slaughtered and salted. Remembrance Day, the day when the French light the darkness with lanterns. The Feast of St Martin, Martinmas was a time for celebrations with great feasts and hiring fairs, at which farm labourers would seek new posts:

If they seek a new place the men and boys stand in the street of the town, often with a straw in the mouth, but when engaged they join the merry throng amongst the booths and shows of the fairground. The women and girls have

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generally a hall provided for them by the ladies of the district, and suitable refreshments are supplied. In the evening there is a dance and often other entertainments. This year in most centres the difficulty was to get a servant of any value, as masters were so fearful of losing their capable men or women, that they hired them on. Under these circumstances second-class servants got a better wage than they had expected. In the average of cases, taking a number of the chief fairs, head men at £19 for the half year got an advance of a pound on the wage of a year ago. Experienced dairy-maids at £15 also secured an advance.

Manchester Guardian, 22 November 1913

The traditional food eaten on Martinmas was beef. Martlemass beef, dried in the chimney, was the staple winter diet in the grass parts of Herefordshire. It was claimed:

*Marlemass beef do bear goode tack
When country folk do dainties lack.*

Since 1918 the 11th has been commemorated as Armistice Day, and all remnants of the old Martinmas celebrations have disappeared.

On this Remembrance Day Margot is taken away, her stiffened body winched into the back of a

cavernous lorry by the slaughterman, to play her role in a vision of Hell by Goya on downers, to lie among the bloated sheep, wood-legged cows, a yellow pig.

I would like to bury her where she belongs, in the field, so her flesh nurtures the flesh that is soil. Instead, by government order, she has to be incinerated in an abattoir.

I could weep.



18 NOVEMBER The fieldfares and redwings have been drifting through for weeks, but now they arrive in Viking hordes. They are the sound of winter.

I heard them come in the night, 'chakka-chakk'-ing. Sure enough, in the morning they are in the orchard scrumping through the windfalls, fifty or more of them. Down in the field, there is another party of the Norse thrushes, all mixed together, stripping the haws by the gate.

The fieldfare takes its name from the Anglo-Saxon *felde-fare*, 'the traveller over the fields'. For Chaucer, *Turdus pilaris* was the 'frosty feldefare' and harsh weather does indeed drive them south from the Scandinavian homeland. A million redwings and fieldfares come down from the north. Most of them seem to have arrived with us. Tippi Hedren would not like it.

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20 NOVEMBER Note on paper: 'Alder has lost leaves but bees [catkins] still there. Oak leaves [look] burnt, the younger oak in the Marsh Field a funeral sail in wind.'



21 NOVEMBER Picking rose hips from the straggling dog rose by the thicket I come across one of those extraordinary abnormal growths that is a Robin's pincushion, which is caused by the tiny gall wasp called *Diplolepis rosae*. The female wasp lays her eggs in the bud of the rose, and in so doing re-codes the normal process of flower growth to produce a round moss-like ball. Inside is a honeycomb of chambers, in each of which is the grub of the wasp. Also in residence is a motley community of opportunists, including other gall wasps, plus parasitic wasps. There is even a species of chalcid wasp that parasitizes parasitic wasps that parasitize parasitic wasps – in total, a chain of four parasitic wasps feeding on each other.

This pincushion is past its prime; yet broken open in the depth of November it is still housing minute wasp maggots.

Some long-tailed tits are busy in the oak. There

must be about twenty of them, and they may well all be related. They constantly call to each other, 'tsi, tsi'. They are a bird whose habit of cooperation would shock Darwin.



24 NOVEMBER A dead badger on the lane; I am certain it is the old boar. The victim of a car. Badgers are not cute to look at: the pig snout and pied facial stripes are weirder still up close.

I drive on, leaving the badger on the verge of the lane. There is nothing as lonely as death.

The next morning I go back with a plastic feed sack (from the inevitable beet pellets) to collect the badger and bury him in the field.

The body has already been removed, probably by the Council, who have someone who collects badger corpses. But I like to think, in a wave of sentiment, that the badger's family took his body and buried it. The naturalist Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald once saw a badger funeral. It was 1941, the middle of World War Two, and the badger family dug a grave, dragged and shoved the deceased into it, then covered it with earth. Dust to dust. The sow wailed throughout the moonless night.



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27 NOVEMBER Tonight I see something I have never seen before, something I never even knew of. It's late, and I have gone for a moon-time walk around the fields, because I love the solitude of the dark. While I am looking to the west and the unbroken night of mid-Wales, an arch of white light suddenly appears in the sky and spans the earth before me. I feel afraid, as though I have been singled out for some almighty moment of revelation, that I have been entrusted with some Damascene vision, and several seconds pass before I understand what it is I am looking at.

I am looking at a rainbow at night. A moonbow.



28 NOVEMBER Note: 'Morning in the field: jackdaws at 6.45am in great squadrons, wheeling. More join in. Lots of noise. Then fly off en masse, aside from a few persistent individualists who go their own way.' Two hours later there is mother-of-pearl sunshine.

There are birds calling greetings and alarms, but in the field only the robin *sings*; even in winter the robin will defend its smallholding. For all its charm as the pin-up of the Christmas card industry, the robin is a vicious little thrush. A dead robin lies on the grass beside the thicket, its head battered from pecking, one eye burst by a torturing, puncturing beak.



This is a dying world. A nearby farm is diversifying into holiday accommodation. Their field of the beautiful aspect will grow tipis. Which is like a dog shitting on a white Berber carpet.

The wind rakes the valley, searching into every fold of earth and unbuttoned flap of coat. There is Reynard the dog fox digging excitedly. His fur is in bloom and the rust-red hue of a fallen leaf. But so strong is the wind that it is ruffling his hair; a cartoon fox plugged into the mains would look sleeker. He does not hear or see me as I walk up behind him. The soft ground absorbs the vibrations from my feet. Childishly I cannot resist giving him a fright, and when I am almost within touching distance of his white-tipped brush I cough loudly.

Foxes can run.



30 NOVEMBER Warm, orange glow in the afternoon. The sigh of my feet in the frosted night grass. Wrap my coat closer, wrap myself into the ground, fold myself into the earth. As night descends I can hear the shiftless hunting of voles, shrews and mice in the hedge. Shrews do not hibernate, as they are too small to store

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fat reserves sufficient to see them through the winter.
And spangled is the only word for this starry night of
seeping cold.