

Common Ground

ROB COWEN

 WINDMILL BOOKS

Prologue

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Maps transform us. They make birds of us all. They reveal the patterns of our existence and unlock our cages. If it wasn't for that map, a second-hand Ordnance Survey given as a Christmas present, maybe none of this would have happened. It was New Year's Eve and I lay on the bed with the town unfolded before me. I felt tired; constrained; racked with cabin fever. I needed to get out. From a circle of Biro drawn around my new house I flew up and over the unfamiliar rooftops and roads, past shops, schools, hair salons and bookmakers, seeking the nearest open ground. Below me suburbia slunk down a shallow hill towards an endless patchwork of delineated farmland. Hemmed in between the two, I saw it: a tract of white paper, tree symbols and the varicose vein of a river. It lured me down, eyes to paper, body to freezing earth.

Somewhere a bell struck five as I cut through the start-stop traffic of the ring road. Exhaust fumes swirled fog-like, landlocked by the plummeting temperature. Underfoot the afternoon rain was hardening into a slippery film; frost feathered lawns. That peculiar post-Christmas malaise, thick with burning coal, pressed down on the houses. As

the shrivelled sun disappeared into the mass of pitched roofs, chimney stacks and telegraph wires, I flowed on past a plastic Santa on a roof with no chimney and along a trench of emerging street lights. Either side of me, rows of Victorian terraces morphed into post-war semis before, finally, modern red-brick boxes whirled off the road in car-cluttered cul-de-sacs. Then, after a mile of walking, even their low walls and privet hedges began to thin. Through the gaps the dark, dank countryside of northern England rose like a great black wave.

At the bottom of the hill a rough track bisected the road suddenly and steadfastly, tracing a contour with nineteenth-century arrogance. It was a definitive border. Light and vegetation were in accord. Dimness shrouded the land beyond. Among the bare blackthorn, ash and spider-limbed elder, I spied relics: soot-blackened sandstone walls, riveted iron plates and the overgrown ditch and mound of a siding. It all uttered a single word: *railway*. A footstep and I had crossed from the bright lights and right angles of bulbs and bricks into black bushes and trees, whose infinitesimal branches overlapped the track like hair growing over a scar. Unwittingly the railway was fulfilling a different function now – this was the high water mark of the sprawl. Suburbia washed against its southern bank in a mass of rickety fences and scattered bin bags disembowelled by brambles. Down its northern side the town dissolved into something other: a kind of wildness. Winter-beaten meadows stretched into wood before the earth rose again as field and hill that met sky in an unbroken ridge.

I hunkered down by a fence and tried to take it all in. Nothing stirred. There were hints of shapes forming in the distance – stands of larch, pylons, barns – but they were impossible to distinguish. The road I'd followed narrowed

and wandered past a squat pub crouching in a hollow, then became lost in the rawness of fields. Tarmac turned to footpath, footpath into soil. Marking the border on opposite sides of the road were two vast oaks thirty metres high. Entwined above me their limbs created an arch, ancient sentinels guarding a forgotten world. I knew it, though. The urban fringe. The no man's land between town and country; this was the edge of things.

I can't say what imperceptible force drew me there, only that I needed to reach it. That frontier called me. Maybe a speck of its soil carried in a starling's foot had been drawn down deep into my respiratory system, circulating around my bloodstream and lodging on my temporal lobes, establishing itself as a point of reckoning. Whatever it was, I felt a sense of returning, like a bee to a hive. Weeks had passed since I'd left London with the weightlessness of new horizons in Yorkshire, the place I'd grown up, but far from being the liberating experience I'd imagined, moving house had proved to be an imprisonment. For too long I'd been stuck in an unending cycle of working, painting walls and unpacking boxes, sleeping fitfully in rooms that stank of gloss, acid in my throat, numbed by the cold of open windows. I'd find a whole day had slipped by as I sifted through collections of things that suddenly seemed to belong to a previous life. I'd hardly ventured into the world outside. Soon the shortening days and wintry gloom made familiarising myself with new surroundings even harder. All my routines were jumbled; every light switch was in the wrong place. In truth, the act of handing over the keys to my London flat had signified a greater shift: present to past. All the maps I had once navigated my life by – the routes

to work, streets, cafés, flats, parks and pubs – were redundant. They covered a region 220 miles to the south. I was stuck somewhere else, between tenses, between spaces, between lives.

Everything changes continuously, of course, nature is perpetual flux, but we are good at suppressing uncomfortable reminders of the greater cycles. We rope ourselves to imagined, controllable permanence. Clocks are wound to the rhythms of modern anthropocentric existence: the nine-to-five grind, career trajectories, the working week, Saturday nights out, summer holidays, twenty-five-year mortgages, pension plans, retirement. It's how the adverts metronome our lives. Yet staring out over that edge rendered such things irrelevant. Time was a different animal, *indifferent*, a deer running unseen through the trees. There was nothing by which I might measure the moments passing until the rise and fall of a siren shrieked through town, then silence again. With the cold, clear, descending dark came euphoria; it prickled my neck and released the atom-deep sensation of otherworldliness. It was the blur of joy and terror felt when facing something prior to and greater than the self. My pulse slowed as the adrenalin dispersed and for a second I imagined it was my cells recalibrating to the deeper rhythms of the dark, my body resetting to the land.

Resetting is the right word, for I have long loved the edges. As a boy I would jump the fences around my home town to walk and play in the scrubby penumbra between the urban and rural. I remember snapshots: watching badger setts at night above lagoons of amber-lit houses; seeing a grass snake slide past my single-buckle school sandal; catching the sapphire flash of kingfishers as cars droned over a road bridge above. Those seams were wide, exotic kingdoms possessing a kind of condensed wildness

precisely because of their proximity to the civilised. A feeling of being alive and in the moment used to fill me when watching the unfurling of leaves in spring or the dying back of bracken in autumn. For a boy growing up in 1980s Britain, such things provided a vital counterpoint to the increasingly fabricated reality of classrooms, kitchen tables and TV.

Not that I could have explained as much at the time. The fringes of towns were regarded as worthless, scrappy, litter-filled areas. The 1980s, hard-edged with modernity, eyes fixed on slick futures, were a triumph of ownership and boorish capitalism; the margins didn't just fall through the gaps, they were the gaps. At best they were work-shy and unrealised. At worst, dangerous. Parents warned of tetanus-carrying beer cans, used condoms and addicts' needles. If you believed what teachers told you, every pond teemed with Weil's disease and every wood held a resident paedophile. Perhaps because of the proliferation of these myths, mine was the last generation to lay claim to the edges in a meaningful sense. A great societal shift indoors was already in motion. When the first of my friends got a VHS player and TV in his bedroom, lines of us sat cross-legged in wordless rapture; it was as though God had materialised on his chest of drawers. Watching *Star Wars* for the first time was as altering and exciting to young minds as voyaging into space itself. The borders between town and country soon became even emptier, trembling in the periphery of our vision, rarely coming into focus. A seam of silver birch here, a shock of wildflowers there – dimly remembered dreams glimpsed from passing cars and trains.

Of course, edges by their very nature are always being drawn and redrawn but a relentless force shapes the urban fringe. Developers had done for the places I loved by the

last years of the 1980s – about the same time I began daily journeys into a city for school. Wood and bracken field crumpled and creased under bulldozers to be replaced by stacks of executive homes and double garages. Lawns were laid and the scrubland that had hidden dens tilled into river-rock flowerbeds. It was odd to watch the deconstruction of my childhood in such literal form. My connection to the fringes altered then too; the needle of my internal compass pointed to the exciting new worlds of adolescence. Once traced, however, these perimeters are never truly lost. They are only ever picked up and flexed. There are always edge-lands for those that seek them.

A dog barked somewhere. How long had I been sitting in darkness? I tried to get my bearings. I retrieved the map zipped into my jacket pocket and, using the light of my phone's screen, found my position. The meadow I was in ran along the old railway north-west for half a mile before meeting the snaking curve of a river twisting east. The topography of the railway and river formed two sides of a harp-shaped piece of ground perhaps only half a square mile in size. Ahead I could just about make out the entrance to a narrow lane. It was little more than a hole in the trees but by my reckoning it twisted up the eastern side of this region all the way to the river, creating the final side to what looked like an inverted triangle. Seeing the space laid out like this I was gripped by the urge to explore, to align myself with somewhere that, like me, was caught between states. I pushed myself up and jumped the fence again.

The lane was claustrophobic with darkness. The road crumbled into uneven track beneath my trainers. Thin trees, somehow blacker than the inky air, pressed inwards.

I fumbled across a beck as a wash of moon illuminated the earth. I had trespassed into the passageway of a house where nobody lived. Hazel and beech formed dilapidated walls and dog prints threadbare patches in a carpet of frost. Another hundred yards and I breached into open fields where cheek-numbing air testified to hard, anthracite land to the north. Pylons disappeared west into gloom, roped to one another. I thought of climbers crossing a glacier in a blizzard. The path was little more than a silver thread stitched along a frayed blackthorn hedge, running along the length of a field before linking with an opposite thicket of hawthorn. Together they encircled the unmistakable form of a holloway. This exuded the same mysterious gravitational pull of all ancient paths; I was drawn into its high-hedged heart, aware I must be tracing footsteps sculpted over millennia.

How does one know that a house is empty even before knocking at the door? A sensation? A mix of stimuli? We do, though. And it was the same in that tunnel of trees. Everything had the feeling of time-slipped abandonment and loss. Quarried stones running down the track spoke of centuries-old shoring up for hoofed beast and cart. My arm scraped a holly, stirring the whispers of men who first cut these paths when all England was forest. Ahead a different sound: a hiss like an unlit cooker ring leaking gas. Suddenly the banks around me grew higher as the path sunk, dropping me into a wooded ravine. I smelled the mercurial stench of river water and knew I'd reached the northernmost boundary.

Sure enough a sweep of river materialised. At the bottom of a gorge, through the silhouettes of trunks, its surface was a sheen of pewter stained with the patina of reflected trees. The hiss came from where it slid over a wide cobbled weir in

a sheet of foam. The break was brief; within a few feet it returned to reflection and I walked westward in a similar state, upstream, into the black wood. I saw only one other colour: a blue fertiliser bag bobbing around the roots of an alder. Even defiled by litter, the river seemed to possess an intractable power – a seam of continuousness cutting through deep, silent strata. Night rendered the trees both three-dimensional and completely flat, as if a cubist painting. Knuckled roots poking through rotting leaves became branches at chest height; distant trees suddenly scratched my face and hands. Then, behind me, a fox tore down the curtain of wildness with a scream. I felt my body shiver under my jacket, my breath blowing in quick, thick clouds. By the time I had scrambled back up a high, bramble bank and into open meadow again, I was lightheaded, ecstatic and bleeding. My mind flitted between disorientation and elation as I walked back over brittle grass in something like a state of bliss. Beyond the veil of singed-whiskered willowherb the geometry of the town encrusted the hill. Half-dim, half-bright pulses in the dark, orange-red, white and yellow, blurred by the cold night air. Sporadically, fireworks whined, plumed and burst over the roofs – and it all looked different, as if by walking through the edge-land I already had new eyes.

I was yet to know how powerfully this colloquial tract would come to affect me over the coming year, how intertwined with my existence and consciousness it would become; how profoundly it would alter me. The ground and its inhabitants were still to stir and take possession. But this encounter was my first experience of that patch of earth as a place of transformation. It had triggered within me a fascination that grew into obsession. Despite being in

the shadow of thousands of houses, this place felt different, unclaimed, hidden.

For many years I had sought and written about the wildness encountered in the more expected places: the rarefied national park, the desolate moor, the distant mountaintop, the sweeping coast, but I'd forgotten that there is something deeper about the blurry space surrounding us all where human and nature meet. One word stayed with me: *layers*. Even before I'd started the process of investigating it in any depth I was aware that this edge-land was a crossing point where countless histories lay buried. There were its human narratives, the records of our long tangling with land – colonisation, hunting, farming, war, industry and urbanisation – but these were only part of the story. Enmeshed in every urban edge is also the continuous narrative of the subsistence of nature, pragmatic and prosaic, the million things that survive and even thrive in the fringes. This little patch of common ground was precisely that: *common*. And all the richer for it.

I began to walk through it at different times of day and night and from different directions. Some days I'd stay until there was no light left; others I'd wake up in darkness, disoriented, unsure where I was, with the haunting calls of tawny owls thrilling my ears. Other voices from the fields, woods and meadows brushed up against my consciousness, catching on my skin like the threads of spider silk. There is a depth that comes from revisiting a place relentlessly. I would pass a fallen pine and suddenly see it as a sapling breaking through the mud; I would know the ranks of people who'd sat beside it and the innumerable dogs that had cocked their legs to spray its rough scales. I would see the river not as a man but as a mayfly. I'd approach hares with the tread of a medieval trapper. Tracing the screaming

arcs of swifts, I could feel thermals above as keenly as they did. I began to perceive the stories of everything that stepped, slid and swooped over my patch of common ground, to see through an increasing array of eyes and know myriad existences. And at the same time, the land, its layers and inhabitants seemed to be ever more bound up in things happening in my own life.

I started carrying a notebook with me everywhere, filling its pages with my experiences. Some days I'd drop off in the grass and dream of changing shape. It wasn't madness, it was a growing awareness born of watching and it brought with it relief and a flood of understanding: if I could dissolve myself from the human shackles of logic and reason, I thought, I might achieve an immersion, perhaps a written expression *in common* that goes beyond the sterility of the field guide, the dry social history or the overblown romantic eulogy, something drawn from observation, heightened awareness and sensitivity; something akin to a truer shape of the place I'd found.

Some years ago, by an arc of stone and another river, I stood outside the sealed entrance to the Chauvet cave, halfway up a cliff face in the Ardèche Gorges. Lost for millennia but rediscovered in the 1960s, it was found to contain over 400 representations dating from between 15,000 and 30,000 years ago. The mind can struggle to take in that reach of time, especially when you consider the pyramids are 'only' 5,000 years old. The handprints and multiple forms painted, scratched and worked within show the land outside the walls as it once was. *Life*, as it once was. To enter it now you need written permission from the French interior minister but its secrets can be seen and studied in the masses of high-definition photographs, film footage, interactive websites, even a full-scale, life-size and

painstakingly accurate reproduction of large sections of the cave being built in a hangar nearby. Beasts massing to cross the river are represented on a section where the buttery flank of wall narrows, giving the same sense of compressing, jostling and funnelling you see with animals congregating at a water's edge. Astoundingly beautifully rendered aurochs and rhinoceros dissolve into one another; lifelike horse heads merge perspectives. Owls, bears and panthers emerge and change shape in what is a dark, frightening and fascinating world. There are strange human forms too, all of which seem at a point of transformation. On one piece of rock is a half-human, half-animal couple: the man has the right leg and arm of a human and a buffalo head. The woman ends as lioness. They embody a now inconceivable engagement between animal, land and human, a sort of becoming-animal.

In a similar way, it didn't feel strange to cross between narratives in what I was writing. I felt myself moving with a sort of Chauvet cave-like focus and freedom through the creatures, characters and stories I encountered over the passage of that year. What I didn't realise until later is that in seeking to unlock, discover and make sense of a place, I was invariably doing the same to myself. The portrait was also of me.

Once upon a time the edges were the places we knew best. They were our common ground. Times were hard and spare but the margins around homesteads, villages and towns sustained us. People grazed livestock and collected deadfall for fuel. Access and usage became enshrined as rights and recognised in law. Pigs trotted through trees during 'pannage' – the acorn season from Michaelmas to

Martinmas – certain types of game were hunted for the table and heather and fern were cut for bedding. Mushrooms, fruits and berries would be foraged and dried for winter; honey taken from wild beehives; chestnuts hoarded, ground and stored as flour. The fringes provided playgrounds for kids and illicit bedrooms for lovers. Whether consciously or not, these spaces kept us in time and rooted to the rhythms of land and nature. Feet cloyed with clay, we oriented ourselves by rain and sun, day and night, seasons, the slow spinning of stars.

Humans are creatures of habit: we all still go to edges to get perspective, to be sustained and reborn. Recreation is still re-creation after a fashion, only now it occurs in largely virtual worlds. Clouds, hyper-real TV shows, 3D films, multiplayer games, online stores and social media networks – these are today's areas of common ground, the terrains where people meet, work, hunt, play, learn, fall in love even. Ours is a world growing yet shrinking, connected yet isolated, all-knowing but without knowledge. It is one of breadth, shallowness and the endless swimming through cyberspace. All is speed and surface. Digging down deeper into an overlooked patch of ground, one that (in a global sense, at least) few people will ever know about and even fewer visit, felt like the antithesis to all of this. And it felt vitally important. You see, I still believe in the importance of edges. Lying just beyond our doors and fences, the enmeshed borders where human and nature collide are microcosms of our world at large, an extraordinary, exquisite world that is growing closer to the edge every day. These spaces reassert a vital truth: nature isn't just some remote mountain or protected park. It is all around us. It is in us. *It is us.*