

BEING a BEAST

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PROFILE BOOKS

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EARTH 1

Badger

When you put a worm into your mouth, it senses the heat as something sinister. You'd have thought it might make a bid for freedom by going down, into the deeper darkness that usually means home and safety, and head for your oesophagus. But it doesn't. It goes for the gaps between your teeth. There are plenty in mine. No one had braces in Sheffield in the 1970s. It narrows its body to a thread and urges itself through. If it is frustrated, as it would be by expensive bridgework, it goes into a frenzy: it thrashes, whirling one end like a centrifuge around the middle of its body; it lashes your gums. Eventually, frustrated, it curls up in the moist space next to the frenulum and considers its position. If you open your mouth again it'll be off, pressing its tail against the floor of your mouth like a sprinter pushing off from the blocks.

This is all disgusting. It is a good argument for cremation.

When you bite into a worm for the first time, you expect the sort of performance that every angler knows and I hope every angler hates: twisting, questing against the hook. But it doesn't happen. Even if, like me, you can't bring yourself to mash the

worm with your molars and instead nip it genteelly with your incisors, the main action is crushing, and that seems to be different. Crushed animals just lie. It doesn't seem to hurt. When a large piece of Scotland fell off and landed on my arm, it didn't hurt a bit. In my case there was the woozy, beatific opiate high as the endorphins pumped round, and the sheer diversion of seeing splintered bone and divided nerves. Perhaps annelid worms have some crude opiate-mediated system. But I doubt it: that would be absurd evolutionary extravagance. Anyway, both ends of the worm capitulate. And then I can move the worm back and chew it.

Earthworms taste of slime and the land. They are the ultimate local food, and as the wine people would say, have a very distinct *terroir*. Worms from Chablis have a long, mineral finish. Worms from Picardy are musty; they taste of decay and splintered wood. Worms from the high Kent Weald are fresh and uncomplicated; they'd appear in the list recommended with a grilled sole. Worms from the Somerset Levels have a stolid, unfashionable taste of leather and stout. But the worms of the Welsh Black Mountains are hard to place: they would be a serious challenge on a blind tasting. I'm not quite pretentious enough to have a go at describing them.

The taste of the body predominates. The slime is different from the body, and its taste is mysteriously variable. It doesn't relate in any obvious way to the *terroir* of the body. You can suck off the slime, and you'll find that Chablis slime, at least in the spring, is lemon grass and pig shit. The slime of the Weald is burning flex and halitosis.

The tastes vary with the seasons, but not as much as you'd expect. The seasons bring out one element rather than another in the taste: they change the tone. You get more nappy liner than paraffin in Norfolk in August than in January, but they are both there all the time.

About 85 per cent of an average badger's diet is earthworms.

This fact both drains badgers of some of their charisma and makes them excitingly inaccessible.

Badgers are both the best and the worst place to start. The worst because we think we know them. Our childhood badger anthropomorphisms are among our most cherished, and even when we're big and unsentimental, continue to seem plausible. A pipe of herb tobacco would sit comfortably in those massive, undislocatable jaws. Those hams, smoked and lauded by gypsies and designed to lumber thousands of nocturnal miles in search of worms and roots, really would look good in mole-skin breeches. The front paws, which are powerful digging and slashing machines, look as if they could undo a brass waistcoat button after a big Sunday roast. Their citadels are often centuries old, implying solidity and wisdom. Their grave striped heads would shake authoritatively when disapproving of the plans of flightier animals.

But they are the best place to start because iconoclasm's easier with a badger than (say) a heron, in which I've invested much less. Going after badgers is the best way to scorch your sentiment. They are great tutors. In the darkening woods they look you shrewdly in the eye, finger their corduroy braces thoughtfully and then slash open your face.

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For me, badgers meant Burt and the Black Mountains. Not because badgers are obviously linked with Mid Wales: they're not. Somerset, Gloucestershire or Devon would make more sense. But because Burt has a JCB.

Burt and I go back a long way. We have bled, suffered, cursed and caroused together in some of the most unpleasant places on the planet. And now he farms, lispes and ambles on some of the steepest and least productive land in Britain. Stones and gradient stop money from sprouting in the open fields;

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ancient, dripping broadleaved woodland stops it in the valleys. Burt doesn't care. You don't need money for home-made cider, home-made sex or the view.

He met us at Abergavenny station. I had my own cub with me: Tom, aged eight. Badgers are highly sociable, familial creatures. A lone badger is unthinkable. And Tom, who is profoundly dyslexic and therefore gifted with a dazzlingly holistic, intimately relational view of the world, is, I'd guess, far closer to being a badger than I am. He doesn't have my disability: the tragic pathology of seeing something as meaningful only if and insofar as I can stuff it into a proposition.

Badgers communicate effectively and copiously but, everyone supposes, without the burden of abstraction. For that you need the disaster of written language, which makes things something other than they are: turns a root into the word 'root' and smothers it with layers of nuance so thick that the thing itself suffocates. Tom still knows what a root is, and always will. So does a badger, which likes eating roots and dislikes eating abstractions. Tom defines 'Tom' ecologically, in terms of the nexus of relationships (with other humans and with the whole natural world) in which he exists and of which he consists. This is more accurate than my picture of myself, as well as being healthier, more interesting and more badgerlike. I doubt there's a lot of morbid atomism in a badger sett. Also, Tom is four and half feet tall. I'm six foot three. His view is quite literally closer to that of a badger than mine. Ferns brush his face as they brush a badger's; his nose is nearer the leaf mould of which he, I and all badgers will eventually be a part, and which is the staple of earthworms.

We piled into Burt's Land Rover, drove off, drove back to pick up and tie on the rear bumper, went to a pie shop to fill ourselves up with meat from condemned cows (since we weren't looking forward to earthworms) and went to the farm.

It was in Burt's kitchen, years before, that I had first started to reflect seriously on the possibility of being another animal.

This was not because he lives as an amphibian, slopping happily between humanness and animality: I have long known that to be the case. It's a lot of his charm. Nor because his kitchen is a continually shifting border between wilderness and Peppa Pig. It is because his wife, Meg, is a witch.

In the nicest possible way. She sticks pins into people to help them, rather than into wax models of people to harm them. But she has the same notions of the interconnectedness of things that in Merrie England would have sent her up in flames.

Burt is a familiar rather than a husband; a companion from across one of those arbitrary species boundaries; shaggy, lolloping and happy enough with his leg in a gin trap.

Burt and I met fifteen years ago in the Sahara, on the Marathon des Sables, which he was running in Green Flash tennis shoes. I rubbed iodine into what was left of his feet, and he invited me to his farm.

He was born in this valley and then lispied his way out to diamond mines in Namibia, to Cambridge, to veterinary clinics in Ethiopia, Afghanistan and Gaza and then into Meg's magnificent knickers and the shearing shed.

Their kitchen is a crossing place. The hill bleeds into the carpet. There's a Bronze Age axe head next to the PC. The Tibetan Book of the Dead leans against Jamie Oliver. There's a cauldron of hallucinogenic herbs by the chicken nuggets.

Meg took it for granted that I, or anyone, could be an animal.

'In all civilised cultures, people are doing it all the time. The shamans shuttle to and fro between their bodies and the bodies of bears, crows or whatever. You want to fly? There are dozens of cocktails that will give you wings. There are some recipes there.' She gestured to the bookshelf.

'You want to be a fox? It just takes a bit of practice in a darkened room with a candle and a chicken. These creatures are, after all, just a few evolutionary years upstream of us. There are

boats that can go fast against the stream; I know some of the boatmen. Or, if you're smart, you can reverse the flow.'

I didn't doubt it then, and I certainly don't now. Though I wanted it, I feared it. But I didn't fear physiology books or the business of empathy. I wanted to see how far into a badger's skin they could take me.

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I planned to burrow into the side of a flat-topped mountain. On the top of the mountain, men used to kill their children. Badgers don't do that; they know that dogs, trucks, TB and starvation will harvest whatever the gods need.

Scree falls from the infanticidal sanctuary, and then, when the land curves out, grass starts to cling to the stone, and then the grass gives way to desperate clumps of bracken and finally, near the river, to oak, ash, beech and elder. The elders come for the water, and the badgers come for the elders: they eat the berries like kids eat crisps, their shit is knobbly with the seeds, and so the elders and the badgers travel together. You often find badger setts near water, but that's because of the elders; I've never seen badgers drink at a river (although they must), and they've never learned to scoop out fish with those hook-feet of theirs. They seem to get most of their water from the earthworms.

This river rises in a sullen swamp of cotton grass and sphagnum, which doesn't deserve the bubbling enthusiasm of its curlews. It takes the water five miles to start to stutter out the curlews' bubbles. By the time it hits the badger valley the river has learned a lot and has many voices and much conversation. Many living things, with very different ears, come to listen and to talk. The badgers wouldn't be there otherwise. Conversational and dietary monoculture are as deadly for them as for us. Badgers can't live on curlews; they eat ecosystems.

There's every reason to suppose that they were in this valley long before the Bronze Age child killers. There are some great badger fortresses here; tangled labyrinths which hollow out the hill so that it would ring like a bodhrán if one of the dark gods stamped in disgust at the taste of a child.

The population is ancient and isolated; they won't have had the chatty commerce of lowland badgers. Travelling boards, frustrated in their search for a mate back home, can't have reached this redoubt very often. The DNA went round and round, getting sick and dizzy over the centuries. One of the skulls in a heap of spoil had a weirdly undershot jaw; another a sagittal crest like a cockatoo. Some of the footprints along the badger paths had six or seven toe marks.

The skulls are in the spoil because badgers often die underground, in the midst of their families, and are buried there. Their bodies often cause a new kink in the tunnel. Grandma's body determines the geography of the next few generations. We dump our dead beyond the outer ring road, where they won't interfere with the way we live.

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I cheated. I'd thought of enlarging a disused badger sett, but I wasn't confident of persuading the police that I wasn't badger digging, and I didn't like the idea of inhaling, along with the good earth of Mid Wales, a huge dose of TB bacilli. And then there was my wife, who rightly expected any hole I dug to collapse in on Tom, which would have created lots of paperwork. The JCB couldn't give us a tunnel – just a deep trench scored into the hill. But it worked very well. We covered the roof with branches and bracken, sealed it with earth and had our sett. Burt chugged off down the valley for fishcakes and *Sesame Street* and left us to it. We wriggled inside and tried to be a bit more authentic.

Although many setts are echoing labyrinths, coiling like a bundle of earthworms deep around rocks and roots, some are not. The simplest sort, dug as temporary shelters, are single tunnels. Like the medieval gates which turn through right angles to prevent a rush of invaders getting any momentum, they turn, a metre or so from the entrance, push on for a bit and then bell out at the far end, where there's a sleeping chamber. That's what ours was like. We shaped it with our paws and with a child's beach spade (ideal for working in small spaces). We tried to scuffle out the earth with our hind legs but couldn't, because the ceiling was authentically low (most setts are roughly semicircular in profile, being wider than they're high). Tom could pull the bracken bedding in backwards, like proper badgers always do, but it was too much for me. And we sneezed: constantly, mightily and unbadgerishly. Badgers seem to have some sort of muscular sphincter just before the entrance to the nostrils that they can close up when they're digging to stop the earth getting in. But we haven't, and in that dry July, at least at the top of the tunnel, it was terrible. When they're hunting snufflingly through the world, nose to the ground, badgers of course can't use that merciful sphincter: they need the scent to reach their nostrils. And then they blast out the dust in heavy snorts. That, between sneezes, is what we did as we excavated. Tom was filling tissues with silica and blood for a week.

We used head torches. Badgers have more photoreceptive rods in their retinas than we do and have a reflective layer in their eyes, called a tapetum, which makes their eyes shine in car headlights and which bounces uncollected photons back into the retina. Badgers squeeze more light from their world into their brains than we do. The world gives them the same; they do more with it. The near dark of our midday tunnel would have been dazzling to them.

It was hard work, but eventually we were done. We crawled down to the river, lapped from a pool where leeches waved at

our lips, and crawled back to our chamber, where we fell asleep, side by side and head to toe, as all good badgers do. It makes the best use of the space. Tom always moved in the night. ‘Feet in the face aren’t friendly’, he said.

I dreamt: the florid, in-your-face dreams that lie just beneath consciousness. The sort of dreams you get in the tropics, when things in green and gold dance to the beat of the ceiling fan. Here, though, the beat was Tom’s heart against my head, and the tune was the low hum of the hill and the girl’s voice of the river.

I don’t doubt for a moment that badgers have some sort of consciousness. One of the reasons is that I’ve seen them sleeping. There’s plainly something going on in their heads when they’re asleep. They paddle, yip and snarl; the full repertoire of expressions plays out on their faces. There is some sort of story being enacted. And what can the central character be but the badger’s *self*? The misty land of sleep is where our own selves, so often suppressed, denied and violated, walk proud and have an uninterrupted voice.

It’s no doubt true that the dreaming badger is processing data from the day or night just gone; is trying out, for evolutionarily obvious reasons, the way in which it might, in the light of the new data, respond to future challenges. But this dry formulation doesn’t elbow out the self: far from it. The self is the substrate of the concerns that are being addressed.

I’ve often thought that sleep must be doing something like a defragmentation program on a computer. Files are being shifted from where the day has dumped them to the cabinets from which they can be more easily extracted. When I self-hypnotise, my eyelids flicker in hypnotism’s emulation of rapid eye movement sleep, and the flickering is just like the flickering of the little red light when the defrag program is running. Indeed, I can feel the defrag. But the analogy is not complete. A defrag program doesn’t need a story. Sleeping badgers have stories, and stories need subjects.

What might it mean for an unconscious creature to dream? Indeed to sleep at all? What's being lost when 'consciousness' is lost? What accompanies the creature into the world beyond the veil? If badgers aren't conscious in a sense comparable to us, their sleeping smiles and winces are more inscrutable than consciousness itself. I prefer the lesser mystery.

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We awoke in stages (or became more evenly awake, since the wild won't usually abandon you utterly to unconsciousness: there's too much happening), to the rattling of a jay and, more fully, to the growling of an engine. It was Burt, with fish pie.

'Bogus, I know, but I won't tell anyone.'

In fact, it wasn't bogus at all. Badgers are the ultimate opportunistic omnivores. No badger would turn up its nose at fish pie.

'I'll tell you what, though,' he went on. 'To compensate, I'll come down later and set the dogs on you. And then we'll go up to the road and I'll try to run you over.'

Yes, very amusing. Yet the point was serious. I'd tended to think that a badger's life was painted in the colours of the wood. These colours I could hope to see too. But there was a darker colour there – the colour of fear. You see that colour – a pale electric blue in my mind's eye – on the edges of bristling fur when a badger stops on its path through the fern, having got a nose full of human stench, and around the tips of straining ears as it hears a dog that's slightly nearer than the usual farm dog.

By killing all the wolves, we have appointed ourselves as the badger's prime tormentor. If badgers do dream, we appear in their worst nightmares – unless they revert in sleep to the distant times when wolves hunted badgers down to a final snarling stand against the bole of an oak. Memories live a long time in wild heads. Red deer panic wildly if you let them

sniff lion dung, although it's been millennia since lions were a worry.

In fact, I doubt that badgers dream of wolves. Badgers have altered their lives significantly to take account of their wolflessness, and I'd expect their psyches to follow their behaviour. Where there are wolves (in the more howling parts of eastern Europe, for instance), badgers aren't the bustlingly communal animals they are here. There aren't the big ancestral palaces in well-drained hillsides. Instead, badgers live in smaller, more intimate, less playful units. If there are wolves out there, badgers tend to take nervous, prudent, straight-line journeys, which reduces the amount of foraging and so reduces the number of badgers an area can hold. True, big setts are convenient for psychopaths with pit bulls, but psychopaths are less efficient predators than wolves, and they don't like to stray too far from roads. Wales can be vile to badgers, but it's a happier place than Belarus.

If something as fundamental as community structure can change with a change of prime predator, I'd have thought that dreams would change too. The dream life of a badger must reflect the emotional colour of the wood, and a wood with wolves is all red and black.

Professional biologists don't like talking about animal *emotion*. Mention the word, and there's a collective indrawing of breath over those mellifluous academic tongues, a Mexican wave of raised eyebrows and an exchange of pitying glances as they acknowledge that the benighted speaker isn't one of the club. It's fine to talk about animal cognition, because that sort of talk is comfortably grounded in the sole and tyrannous metaphor used by mainstream behaviourists – and *by* which they are used: the computer. Chat about an animal as a piece of hardware running (or even being) a bit of software, and you'll meet only smiles. It's fine to talk about indices of welfare: about the rising of corticosteroid levels in unhappy (sorry, stressed) cows. But emotion: no.

There was one biologist who didn't share this distaste. He was a fine naturalist; a sympathetic and unsentimental observer who wasn't marinated in Darwinist reductionism at university. His name was Charles Darwin, and he wrote a splendid and almost unread book called *The Expression of Emotions in Animals*. Here he is in a gently swashbuckling mood:

Sir C. Bell evidently wished to draw as broad a distinction as possible between man and the lower animals; and he consequently asserts that with 'the lower creatures there is no expression but what may be referred, more or less plainly, to their acts of volition or necessary instincts.' He further maintains that their faces 'seem chiefly capable of expressing rage and fear.' But man himself cannot express love and humility by external signs so plainly as does a dog, when with drooping ears, hanging lips, flexuous body, and wagging tail, he meets his beloved master. Nor can these movements in the dog be explained by acts of volition or necessary instincts, any more than the beaming eyes and smiling cheeks of a man when he meets an old friend. If Sir C. Bell had been questioned about the expression of affection in the dog, he would no doubt have answered that this animal had been created with special instincts, adapting him for association with man, and that all further enquiry on the subject was superfluous.

That's near the beginning of Darwin's quite long book. He thought further enquiry about true emotion in animals far from superfluous. That's what happens when you do your biology in the real, growling, aching, joyous world rather than being locked up in a paradigm.

When I experience a pleasurable stimulus, my facial muscles contract in a particular way. When a dog experiences a stimulus that indicates a benefit to the dog that is comparable to the

benefit of which my pleasure is an index, its facial muscles contract in a more or less identical way. Just listen to how careful I'm being to speak the language of the Academy. Isn't it absurd? Shouldn't we whip out Occam's razor, and the editorial blue pencil, and talk about animal pleasure?

And if pleasure, why not other emotions too?

Anyone who has ever watched dogs playing or cats smooching or swifts doing thermodynamically fatuous things just for the screaming, exulting, rapturous hell of it will have read this discussion with baffled disbelief. They won't need my cautious reasoning to conclude that when animal faces do something identical to ours in response to a stimulus that we can recognise as noxious, there's probably something going on at an 'emotional' level which is comparable to that which we'd experience. It would be odd beyond belief if natural selection had conferred on us alone the emotional corollaries of the ways our worlds are.

But this is not a mandate for anthropomorphism. To say that something is comparable is not to say that it's the same. That is perhaps particularly the case for fear. The colour of my fear is not recognisably the same as even the colour of the fear of other humans.

Although the colour of badger fear is that shrill, strident, unforgettable blue, it is not the predominant colour of their world. It may be a penumbra around the edges of their tumbling, their lust and their hunger, as the spiky grey knowledge of my own eventual annihilation is round mine.

Do they too fear personal extinction? They certainly don't want to die, as the mangled face of many a terrier will tell. But what is it that doesn't want to stop? Is there an elaborate magical dialogue between the badger and its genes, along the lines of: 'You're our bearer: if you're taken out, it's all up for us. So put up a good show, won't you, for our sakes?' 'Oh, all right, then: you're the boss?' That's the sort of conversation that much of biology tends tacitly to assume.

I prefer a simpler and less fashionable version, which admits that a badger has a real sense of self and real pleasures which it judges as outweighing its pains. Badgers are philosophers. They have an idea of the Good Life, which presumes that there is a self that can lead that life. This is a self that doesn't want to lose the neurological joys of nuzzling cubs or the smell of wild garlic or the smack of earthworms against the tongue. Insist if you like that all these things are the payment given by the genes for the mercenary services in their defence of the strong-jawed phenotype. That's fine. Your insistence doesn't dispose of the self, or the Goodness of the Life that self leads.

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We put the fish pie in a plastic box and put it in the river to keep cool. The box wasn't terribly badgerish, but then again, badgers, although they're enthusiastic scavengers, seem to prefer their carrion fresh – even though carcasses that are further gone have the added garnish of maggots, which you'd have thought badgers would think of as children think of chocolate drops sprinkled on pudding. I doubt it's the risk of infection that inhibits them. Badgers lose their immunological naivety very quickly and don't spend their lives throwing up into the ferns. All thoughtful human parents should mix pureed earthworms with the milk: it'd abolish asthma and eczema and exorcise later fears of a bad curry. But badgers, like many animals and some people, can vomit, where necessary, without much distress: they hardly break stride. I'd like to be like that.

Having stowed the pie, we stumbled up the bank and followed out a nest in the bracken. The stems soared above us like the fluted columns of a devastated cathedral. Green light slid algally over Tom's face and neck, decomposing him. Less poetically, a sheep tick scuttled under his shirt. Ticks are always in a hurry. I pulled up the shirt and watched, interested to see

what site it would choose. They tend to go for my groin or my armpit, which seems logical, but our children tend to get them somewhere obvious on their torsos, which doesn't seem to be. Though perhaps the poorer innervation there means that they're less likely to be detected, and there's no abrasion from a moving joint or a swinging scrotum. Sure enough, this one, though it could have had the discreet dampness of an armpit, began to get settled over a rib. I crushed it between my nails.

Having Tom next to me made me pretty immune to ticks. They go for him every time. It's presumably a scent thing: they head for him rather than me long before they can know that his skin is thinner and that they won't have to fight through a noxious jungle of oily hair.

Many badgers carry ticks – typically hedgehog, dog and sheep ticks – although the incidence isn't as high as one might think. The leathery skin must be a challenge, and ticks tend to concentrate around the thin skin of the anus and perineum rather than, as in dogs, on the head, the neck and the thin skin of the underbelly and the inner thighs.

Lying up outside the sett during the day isn't unbadgerish, although it's far from the rule. Badgers sometimes, just like we did, crawl into dense vegetation and lie there until dusk comes and it's time for the next round of shuffle-hunting. We don't know why that is. Perhaps there's tension at home and they can't bear the thought of a day close to wretched, cantankerous, odious X. And sometimes, no doubt, they've been caught short a long way from home as dawn breaks and don't want to run the gauntlet of the early morning dog walkers. Cubs in particular play outside during the day. It's their version of teenage rebellion, like adolescent humans staying out inconsiderately late at night. I don't imagine, though, that those days in the open are very relaxing ones. Although dangers hover round the sett, they are dangers faced in community, using old and practised strategies. Aloneness, novelty and sunlight are

the badger's unholy trinity. Badgers are social to the core, and conservative, and creatures of shadow. Sunlight freezes them. It seems to switch off their senses. You can often walk right up to a daytime badger. It'll seem stunned. They are two-mode animals: on and off. They live in the no-man's-land between day and night, and that's such a demanding place that there's no room for half-heartedness.

Tom needed to sleep, and so he did, curled fetally on old bracken, his paws, earth-brown from digging, clasped under his chin. I too needed to sleep, and so I didn't. Instead, like one of those sun-stunned day badgers, I watched nothing in particular; I was a lump of idling software in a box made of meat.

We often did this when we were in the wood. We had to change our rhythm to that of the badgers, which meant sleeping in the day, but, at least at first, I found the sett a threatening place. Was this an old fear of burial? If so, it was a strange fear. Live burial has never been a common method of execution, and my human ancestors lived in and took refuge in caves for millennia. Burial's associated with death, and most of us are afraid not of death but of dying. The idea of physical dissolution is more interesting than terrifying. Although we're conservative animals, for whom the novel thought of being eaten and assimilated demands a bit of psychological adjustment, it's not the stuff of lasting, soul-shaping horror. It was more likely to be a fear of losing that long view that our long legs give us – the view that makes us creatures of the big horizon and hence of infinite options. To be is to see is to stride is to be able to choose. Even the panic of claustrophobia, which I've known when squeezing through a tight rock tunnel somewhere under Derbyshire, is really an unhappiness that one's options are limited.

The walls of our sett writhed around me, as active as a uterus but not so comforting. The earth twisted and fumbled and scrabbled and sprouted and spurted. A worm fell into my mouth. A badger would have welcomed it as a pasha on his

couch welcomes a grape dropped by a slave, even though the worm is probably made of the badger's dead grandmother, entombed in the sett wall. I gagged quietly and went back to sleep with my face buried in the bracken bedding.

Those first few days and nights underground taught me a lot. They taught me that, despite my shaggy, anarchic pretensions, I was dismally suburban: I preferred a whitewashed wall to the endless change and fascination of a real earth wall, and regimented ranks of floral wallpaper patterns to the Real Thing. In fact, and this was the main worry, I preferred almost any confection to the Real Thing. I preferred my ideas of badgers and the wild to real badgers and real wilderness. They demanded much less. They were more obedient and less complex. And they didn't broadcast my inadequacies so deafeningly.

These were all symptoms of a nasty condition from which I'd thought I was immune: colonialism. 'You shall have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth', we're assured. Taken on its own, as it has been, this is a catastrophic formulation. You can go straight from Genesis 1 to the Monsanto boardroom, pausing for sightseeing picnics at the annihilation of the world's herd game, at some select dust bowls full of cucumbers grown in nitrate powder, at the *Torrey Canyon*, at factory farms, at the edge of a retreating glacier and at many other uplifting destinations. And you could take in, while on the road, the sport hunting of native peoples everywhere, since they're not made in the image of God, are they?

I'd sanctimoniously seen myself as a bandana-clad fighter against this sort of perverted Biblicism. And yet here I was, lying resentfully in my burrow, thinking exactly the thoughts that I theoretically despised. I'd thought that I was better than the wild: more advanced; an improvement on it; evolution's zenith.

I learned some other things too. One was that all humans, at some level, know the absurdity of the human pretension; know that there's a better way than colonialism. Here's the proof: Take a sleek, besuited banker, ideally fresh from Stuttgart or Zurich. Put him in a wood. Drop into his polished palm, with an explanation, a nice, dry otter spraint or a handful of fox droppings. He'll examine them and sniff them respectfully. Now do the same with a domestic dog turd. He'll throw down the turd and throw up his expensive lunch. This shows that he's not irredeemably far from acknowledging the generic nobility of savagery, or hopelessly out of touch with his indwelling noble savage. The dog shit draws out his inchoate distaste for the domestic.

I learned too that real, lasting change is possible – to our appetites, our fears and our views. And that change has to happen in that order. First I learned to like that burrow. Habit is tremendously powerful. It can do almost anything. Merely going regularly into the sett and having a place at the end pressed to the shape of my body was enough to change my appetite for underground living. From that low platform I could jump to more complex forms of appreciation: liking the shape of the window on the sunlit world that was the tunnel's end; liking the exuberant spectrum of smells that met my nose as I crawled from a dusty bracken bed through a stretch of hay, up through a cervix of earth and leaf mould and out, panting from the effort of the crawl, into elder and oak and, very often (since Tom's a pyromaniac), wood smoke. And then, since it is hard to fear what one likes, all that swirling atavistic panic slowly cleared. I didn't hyperventilate if I wasn't on my actual and metaphorical hind legs, manfully scanning distant vistas and making sense of and plans for the big picture. It was OK to lie in the dark, surrounded by the scratching and humming and thrashing of animals that would one day eat me. From there it was a small enough step not to mind being eaten, and not

to mind being in, or getting towards, the state in which one is eaten. And once you're there, you're at last a proper ecologist, knowing your place, all eco-colonialism gone. Only then, at the end of a weary and distressing metaphysical road, can you really begin the business of being a badger.

Quite a lot of being a badger consisted simply in allowing the wood to do to us what it did to a badger; being there when it rained; keeping badgers' hours; being cramped underground (there's no possibility of thinking that the world is at your sovereign feet when in fact it's over your head, squashing your legs and dropping into your eyes); letting the bluebells brush your face instead of your boots. But there were some high physiological fences keeping us out of the badger's world. The main one was scent.

My landscape is a visual one. I have big eyes and a correspondingly big visual processing area in my brain. The version of the world that my brain constructs has a high proportion of visual elements. These are supplemented importantly by the results of my cognitive processing – so that when I say I see a hill, it's a very different hill from that which anyone else would describe. I 'see' the hill through a set of 'higher' cortical filters: myths, presumptions, recollections, cross references, allusions. There are ways of stripping out those filters. Many of the ways come from the East, and I've used some of them over the years. It's possible, though hard, to learn to see a flower. But when you do, it's still *seeing*.

A badger's landscape is primarily a scent landscape. The main bricks that its brain uses to build its world are made in its nose. The physical boundaries of its life are set by scent. Its territories are marked by defaecation, and the faeces of each badger carry a unique scent. We're all, all the time, bacterial substrates, and bacteria do slightly, or dramatically (everyone's been in a hot compartment with an unwashed, undeodorised teenager), different things with each of us. It's the same with badgers. Each

has its own olfactory hallmark – a cocktail of the musky caudal gland secretion and the work of bacteria.

But it's not only perimeters that matter. Noses don't just map perimeters: they sneeze form, colour and personality into the badger's life. For a badger, with its relatively poor eyesight, wood sorrel is mainly the scent of wood sorrel; a soaring hornbeam has, on a hot day, the helical shape of the scent vortex that pulls dust up into the canopy, and is, on a cool day, a low hump of tart lichen with an indistinct chimney. A dead hedgehog is the shape of hedgehog, then the shape of green scent, then the shape of tripe, then the shape of sweet, then the shape of pork scratchings, then the shape of beetle.

The literary way into this should be the autobiographical reflections of synaesthetes – those who smell colours or taste numbers, or whose letters each have a colour of their own. But that literature (and I don't exclude Nabokov, who wrote exhaustingly about synaesthesia) is strangely unpoetic and unreflective. It's as if the gift of perceiving the world in several dimensions disables the ability to describe it. Or perhaps their world is beyond words, which doesn't bode well for this book, or for any other attempt to grope at extreme otherness. The most audacious and hence the least unsuccessful artistic effort was by Olivier Messiaen, who devised a new musical mode to demonstrate what it's like to live in two overlapping sensory zones.

Compared to a badger, humans are almost entirely olfactorily blind. We perceive scent landscapes in terms not even of outlines but of vague assemblies of blocks with wholly indistinct margins. Imagine walking down a city street and seeing, instead of faces and figures, a swaying tartan rug. That's what our scent perception is like.

But I didn't quite despair. I remembered that humans are very plastic creatures and that blind people can learn to echolocate. Not well enough to make a chapter on bats credible,

but well enough to avoid banging into walls. That's what the 'tap, tap, tap' of the white stick does: it bounces off obstacles and back to the brain, which crudely assembles the information into a picture of the world ahead. And I remembered Jack Schwartz, who said that he could see auras round each of us and whose ability to detect light frequencies extended from 335 to 1,700 nanometres, which is 1,000 nanometres beyond the spectrum normally regarded as visible by humans. But I remembered in particular John Adams, the physiologist who tested Schwartz. Astonished at the results, he re-examined his own vision without the conventional presumptions about what humans could do, and found that much of the theoretically invisible infrared spectrum was in fact visible to him.

I tried strenuously to turn myself into a more olfactory creature. I joined a blind-tasting wine society and aahed and imaginatively adjectivised with the rest. I burned a different brand of incense in each room of the house, trying to supplement my visual picture of each room with an olfactory one, and trying to learn how the air currents in the house crept and surged. I held blind smellings of my children's clothes. I put a different type of cheese in each corner of a room, moved all the furniture so that there were no other clues, blindfolded and disoriented myself and then tried to find out where I was by reference only to the cheese. When engaged in middle-class cheek kissing, I tried to get a good sniff. I snipped off different types of leaves each day and put them on the pillow at night. But most of all I lay outside with my nose on and at various levels above the ground, learning how scent changes through the day and through the seasons and over the immense distance between the ground and the normal elevation of my nose.

Water unlocks scent. After a rainstorm in limestone country you get nosefuls of long-dead shrimp. And it's water that makes the rest of the world breathe too – a botanical truism, yes, but also a sensory fact. By the early morning the summer ground

is relatively cold, and the water that condenses on it makes the ground truly smell of itself. Dry ground is just waiting to be realised. As the day heats up, the ground rises, sometimes very fast, until you've got the huntsman's celebrated 'breast-high scent' – the scent that gets hounds charging, often too drunk with the scent to speak. This pure scent doesn't rise much further than a hound's shoulder or a badger's head. By the time the sun has lifted the land that high, it's also made the air eddy and tumble and slide around, so that everything higher than a couple of feet above the ground isn't so local. By seven o'clock in June, a badger, caught out after a hard night's worming, will have the treetops and the pondweed from across the valley.

It's different in winter. Then there's not that exhilarating gradient down which the earth can slip up into the air. Scent takes refuge in the soil, like everything else that can burrow. And even there, scent is sluggish. When we hacked our way back to the sett through the mid-December tinsel, the chill choked the scent. Or perhaps it just anaesthetised our noses. Neurones don't work so well at low temperatures. The manufacturers of lager that tastes of nothing insist, very wisely, that it should be drunk ice cold: it's the only way they'll not be found out.

When the temperature fell in the evening, the ground, which had been soaking up calories all day, retained its heat for longer than the air, and indeed the cold air above the ground seemed to act as a blanket, pressing scent tightly to the earth. That's very good for badgers, who are mainly interested in things on and slightly below the ground. And it's one of the main reasons why badgers come out when the sun goes down.

My attempt to enter the scent world was partially successful. But there were obvious and frustrating limits. I could, and did, learn to pay more attention to scent, and I knew glimmeringly, for full, fat fragments of a moment, what a landscape painted in scent might look like. But these glimmerings were imaginative extrapolations from what I actually sensed. The limiting factor

was the magnitude of the inputs. I couldn't multiply the number or the sensitivity of my sense receptors to anything approximating those of a badger. All I could do was to say: 'Well, if inputs totalling x do that, what would inputs totalling $1000x$ do?'

Relating all this is hard. It would be pointless to reel off the adjectives and metaphors I used to describe to myself the scent of shepherd's purse on the pillow or dog's mercury in the wood. That might say something about me, but nothing about badgers or woods.

Do badgers use adjectives? I expect that they describe the world to themselves, and so they must. Their world isn't just a huge, damp noun; a big blob of 'is-ness'. Adjectives are a corollary of fine shades of perception.

Metaphors are a different matter. They demand a lot of central processing power. Badgers have a fair amount, but they've got other, and probably better, things to do with theirs than the industry of metaphor – the forging of connections between disparate things in the world, and the use of those connections. Metaphors are useful for big-leap strategy, and hence for coping with traumatic novelty. But normally badgers are creatures of routine: sleep, wake, stretch, defaecate in one of the sett's prescribed lavatories or on the boundaries of the territory, eat earthworms, sleep, repeat. It wouldn't add anything to this process to say, en route, that a tree was a mother.

All of which is to say that the ways in which, inevitably, I perceive and describe a badger's scent world involve things that have no representative at all in the badger's own world. They are purely human artifice. This is the main source of inauthenticity.

But perhaps it's not really so bad. For, like most organisms, a badger isn't particularly interested in dog's mercury per se. The smell of dog's mercury is immediately and dramatically translated into something very different – to something like: 'When I got to this point last night, about twenty steps further on and a bit to the right was an old log, and underneath that there

were some fat earthworms. I had some, but there may well be more.' I can't know what the immediate burst of dog's mercury scent does in a badger's brain, but does it really matter? I can arrive at a pretty decent approximation to what it *means*. I can't do much to educate my senses (although I can do something to educate what my brain does with its inputs), but I can get better at translating external stimuli into the basic propositions of badgerese.

* *

A few days after dumping us, Burt roared back with chorizo and news. The news was about some figures on some national balance sheet and about an imminent storm. I couldn't have cared less about the figures, which was progress. But I did care about the storm.

'And remember', said Burt as he climbed back into the Land Rover and made off, 'you've got to be naked: butt naked.'

In Chapter 1 I sang the praises of nakedness and of Fraser Darling's bare feet. I don't take back a word, but Burt was wrong. Badgers have a thick outer coat of coarse hair lying over a softer inner layer. Both trap air very efficiently. The badger walks around in a halo of warm air. To strip off would take me a long way from the badger's sensory world. I was much closer to it in my old moleskins and tweed coat. In which, as soon as Burt had gone, I went to sleep, deep at the far end of the sett.

We'd not been in the wood long, but already it was ours. It was that sense of proprietorship, rather than any concern about physical dangers, that made us emerge cautiously from the sett at dusk, sniffing the air exactly as badgers do. Outraged proprietorship feels like danger.

Our beds were now in the ground. We came out of the ground every day, and we wanted to stay close to it all the time. I'd thought that it would seem an absurd pretension to go on

hands and knees through the wood. Now it would have seemed an insufferable arrogance to do otherwise. And not just that: we had begun to know how much we'd be missing. To go hind-legged would have been like watching the wood on TV when we'd been offered the best seats in the stalls.

Our heads swayed from side to side as we came out of the sett – exactly the questing swing of a badger, but forced by our clumsy anatomy. Those long legs and arms felt as disabling as amputations. We were going through bracken, reeds and rough grass. I'd dropped six feet and several million years into the badger's world. My versions of the senses that were most useful down here – scent and hearing – were dismal compared to a badger's. I was handling the badger's world with thick mittens. But even so, this world was objectively more interesting than my own. A lot more happens at six inches and below than at six feet and above.

It was obvious why natural selection had made the choices it had. Eyes were pretty pointless down here. I couldn't see more than a few inches ahead. The space inside the cranium is prime real estate. It would have been foolish to hand more of it over to visual processing. My eyes, even in the fast-fading light, were better than a badger's. When I raised my head I could see bats flickering in and out of the lacework of the oaks, and a barn owl ghosting over the walls in the field across the river, and wood pigeons settling fussily in for the night. These had no place in the badger's night. Badgers trade these airy pleasures for darker, stickier, mucousy, damper, rougher pleasures. Dropping my head was like going from Schubert in the conservatoire to a candle-lit bordello where you wade through beer to the bed. If I had to pick one word for the badger's experience, it would be *intimate*. Grass and bracken stems brush your face. When you're forcing a new path, every step is like a birth. Water shudders off grass into your eyes. Things slide away. Slide; hop; rush. You don't just absorb the world; you make it. You make the fear that rustles away on every side.

When a badger goes out, its object is to bump into food. This system of incontinent collision with the wood makes it more a creature of the wood than any other inhabitant. We bustled and grunted and elbowed and pushed and pressed our noses into the ground. And even *we* smelt something: the citrusy piss of the voles in their runs within the grass; the distantly marine tang of a slug trail, like a winter rock pool; the crushed laurel of a frog; the dustiness of a toad; the sharp musk of a weasel; the blunter musk of an otter; and the fox, whose smell is red to the least synaesthetic man alive. But most of all we had what we clumsily called the earth: leaves and dung and corpses and houses and rain and eggs and horrors.

We got these things usually as single words; occasionally as short sentences. If we had noses like badgers' they would have been intricate stories, weaving in and out of each other, punctuated by possibility and frustration.

When Tom and I snuffled through the wood on our first few nights, I began to feel trapped by my visualness. As I got occasional nose glimpses of the wood and became able to guess at some of what I was missing, this became the full-blown panic, regret and bereavement of the prisoner. I made ludicrous, mystical plans for escape. They failed. The sensory claustrophobia has never abated. When, now, I pray for redemption, a redeemed nose is high up on the list of petitions.

* *

Making something of the badger's auditory world wasn't quite so hopeless. Badgers have much better sensitivity to high frequencies than we do. They probably hear sounds up to around 60,000 hertz, whereas even the most acute human children won't go much beyond around 25,000 hertz, and many humans of sixty-plus will stop at about 8,000 hertz. Badgers will pick up many of the squeaks of a bank vole, inaudible to us. But a

squeak isn't unimaginable. I live in a house full of them. And squeaks aren't all that badgers hear. We share most, but not all, of the badger's bandwidth. The badger notes the pheasants exploding from the edge of the field, the thump of the generator up at the house, the mewing of the wood warblers, the panic of a sheep caught in the wire and the grumble of distant thunder. At least, their ears register these things, and there is electrical activity in the auditory parts of their brain cortices shortly afterwards. What does the individual badger 'hear' as a result of the changing pressures on its tympanum that we choose to call a sound? Strictly speaking, I have no idea. I have no idea what Mozart sounds like to anyone apart from me (and even that sound changes massively with my state of digestion). This isn't a problem of physiology; it's the problem of otherness, which we inadequately physiologise as a difficulty in enquiring into the nature of complex central processing. We can't know that we're not alone. It is an act of pure faith for me to declare that there are some things I share with my children and my best friends. And I choose similarly to believe that a badger *hears* those pheasants instead of merely noting them. In the case of my children and friends, my choice is supported to some degree by EEGs and auditory stem potentials and functional MRI scans (although there are no such data, so far as I know, for badgers). But the support is very limited, and I can't blame anyone for not joining me in my act of faith.

We're probably safe in saying, though, that the badgers weren't very interested in the generator. They habituate very quickly to sounds, especially distant ones, that they know aren't threatening. The thump inevitably caused the eardrum to vibrate: that's immutable physics. But the brain ignored it; that's excitingly mutable biology. The brain chose not to use that block in building its world. The plaintive wood warblers had a place but not, normally, at the level of 'conscious' hearing. Theirs was the mew of a normal wood. A change in their tone

might indicate something relevant, and hence it was change, rather than the wood warbler per se, to which the badger paid attention. I, not knowing the significance of the changed tone and lacking context generally, paid attention to more than the badger did. In this sense my wood was bigger and more complex than the badger's. A badger focuses fairly hard on its career of survival, and focus is rarely a friend of aesthetics. A badger's aesthetics, I would guess, are mainly relational and fairly crudely sensual. They like rolling around with the kids and scratching their bellies in the sun.

That's not to say that they can't branch out. If I can expand my suite of sensory accomplishments and appreciations, why shouldn't a badger? Music is the obvious thought. Pan piped more than he spoke. If Bach encodes (and surely he does) some of the most basic formulae of this dazzling world, wouldn't you expect him to do exciting things in a Welsh wood? If he makes my DNA quiver, shouldn't he set the DNA of a badger – so, so similar to mine – a-trembling?

I've tried this, half-heartedly and inconclusively. My speakers have always been rained on or the batteries too flat for a proper broadcast. But most classical-music-loving dog owners are on my side. That cliché Jack Russell listening to His Master's Voice would learn to love the B-minor Mass just as much as the voice, even if the mass didn't come with a pat and a handful of dog biscuits. In the film *The Weeping Camel*, the mother camel, which had refused to allow its calf to suckle, is entranced by an old Mongolian song and becomes immediately happy and compliant. The calf suckles and lives. The mother permits suckling and so lives as a mother. The music represents the way that things should be, and the world, including the camel, hums along. The music acts like a defibrillator, gently shocking the world back into rhythm. Great music, great literature and great anything are great because they are built of the most basic elements; because they are fundamental. They can therefore speak

to kings, commoners, badgers and wood warblers. Hence this next and most extravagant act of faith: play the B-minor Mass to a badger, and the badger would hear the B-minor Mass.

Badgers don't just have broader bandwidth than us; their sensitivity to sounds within the audible bandwidth is also greater. They're more acute. It's thought that they may be able to hear, as many birds do, the rasp of the earthworms' bristles as they scratch through the earth.

Just think what the obscene tsunami of a nearby motor vehicle does to an animal that can do that. It's easy to get a faint idea. Sit outdoors one night in an isolated place. Leave the iPod at home for once. Then walk quietly to a road. The first car will seem like a regiment of tanks. You'll feel violated and feel that the land is violated. You'll note in yourself, perhaps with surprise, that since both you and the land are violated, there must be a previously unrecognised solidarity between you and the land. Or even, since nights outside tend to make you romantic, perhaps you'll think that you and the land share an *identity*. You'll hate and resent the driver. But most of all you'll pity him, cocooned in his air conditioning, listening to canned banality on the radio. You'll know, and have, what he's lost. And you'll know something of the outrage of the badger feeling the bellow of the engine in its ears, the trembling of the road in its feet and the whole bloody bombardment in all of it, deep down and throughout – rape, offence, invasion, totalitarianism. Badgers feel low-frequency sounds in their feet. A distant footfall in a darkening wood shudders into their pads. They freeze, which isn't a great strategy in front of a bus, until reassured (easily done in the wood by scratching: they love the sounds of normality). In the road there's no reassurance for any of us.

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A big black bale, full of the worst that Nova Scotia could find, bundled towards us. It shuddered over Snowdon, spilling some salty Atlantic shavings, and then spun on, up and up until the sharp green air over the wood slashed through its electric sheet. Down it rolled, angry and old, bundling up rain, dust, feathers and swathes of insects like a big baler and sealing them all in an electric sheet instead of a piece of plastic. Tom and I, nose to ground, felt its approach in the back of our necks. The sun fell through a tense and sickly sky.

There was a businesslike urgency in the wood – a hurry to feed off the usual before the unusual arrived. It was a good crammer for the olfactorily remedial student. As the light went, we found ourselves in intimate tunnels of touch and scent. The world outside the tunnel was made of sound, but as we crawled and sniffed, it seemed increasingly distant and irrelevant, and when the rain came, the shocking reports on the leaves all round our heads were a fusillade which dismissed all of that bigger context. There was no way of hearing the scrambling of the wood pigeons in the next-door field. There were just our heads and, around them, a halo, with a radius of about six inches, of hiss, crack, mumble and scent. The fusillade split open the ground. Scent came spinning out so fast that it reached even our noses. It was as if the ground were bursting to tell the story of that summer. A badger's nose can detect the tales of each of the actors in the drama of the wood; we got a muddled medley, new and thrilling to us. Yes, I know that there is no such thing as a play without players; that if you cut away the particular you're left not with the generic but with nothing; that the generic is a monstrous abstraction from which I'd come to the wood to escape. Yet I couldn't help thinking that what was rising into my nose *was* the summer, or that that conclusion was better than no conclusion at all.

The rat-a-tat of the rain had summoned the earthworms as a military parade drummer draws the crowds. The earth opened

up and out they oozed, dripping from the hill like mucus candles from a snotty-nosed child.

These rain-time worm bonanzas must create an agonising dilemma in the badger's mind. The wood becomes a groaning smorgasbord, but you have to get wet to feast. Badgers are cosy creatures. Their default setting is curled up with the others, dry and asleep in a bed of old bracken, deep inside a well-drained hillside. That setting can be overridden, but it takes a lot of doing. The worms were safe that night. We followed the badgers into our piece of hill.

* *

I lay at the mouth of the sett. It had a curtain of water, like those curtains of bead strands that fill the doors leading to the toilets in small Chinese restaurants. It was almost completely dark – at least to my collection of rods – except when lightning bled through the fault lines in the sky. Yet each water droplet seemed to act like a retina, sucking light efficiently from the wood and reflecting it on to my own grateful retinas, buried in my head, buried in the hill.

Our sett was cradled in the interlocking fingers of tree roots: beech on either side, oak from above. The whole wood bent to the wind. There was no overground or underground: it was all just ground. We rocked in our cradle, the roots around us straining and creaking like the timbers of a rolling ship. A wood mouse, displaced from a flooded or crumbling tunnel, scrambled in and hunched, shivering, in the crook of Tom's knee.

Without that wood mouse I wouldn't have slept. But it reassured me. We were in the best place – a sanctuary accredited by the wild – and so I snatched bits of queasy maritime sleep, which, laid end to end, were enough. Tom slept, which is what I expect badgers do in storms.

The storm didn't devastate: it culled. Some branches that

had brazenly reached too high were wrenched hubristically down. Some trees that had imprudently spent their sun sugar on leaves rather than roots were weighed in the wind's balance and found wanting. The river snarled brown, and a dead crow circled the pool, as if looking for carrion on the gravel. But Nova Scotia's worst wasn't so bad.

Our sett wasn't damaged at all, but, out of gratitude to it and with a new proprietorial pride in having survived the worst of the summer, we set to that morning to make it even better. We excavated a new chamber, complete with shelves, reinforced the roof and built an imposing earth arch at the entrance. Then, as Tom was happily making his own purely recreational earth-works, I slipped into unbroken sleep.

I'd thought that this pattern (sleeping in the day, being out and about at night) would be hard to establish. I knew, of course, that I could slowly reset my own clock. That was a simple enough matter of cortisol levels. But I'd thought that the change would be psychologically strenuous – that I'd resent the loss of the sun so much that simply to exist as a nocturnal animal would be an act of exhausting protest against all my instincts.

It wasn't so. The cortisol took about four days to fall fully into line, but after a mere two I was willing it to obedience. There was nothing very profound about this: it was the simple lust of the curious tourist. That first night of nosiness, frustrating though it was, had shown me (no, that's a visual word; had 'indicated'? Too generic. We need an olfactory version of 'shown,' and there isn't one) – had *demonstrated* (weak, but the best I can do) that within that wood there was a vertiginously strange and urgently desirable universe, untrodden and untreadable by man in his normal sensorineural boots. I wanted it badly.

This wasn't part of the poignant true-love quest for otherness, which wants to know in the desperate hope of being

known. It was an Elizabethan desire to discover a new world. When I slid out of the sett each night, I was setting sail from Plymouth Hoe and heading west into the sunset in the hope of fame, spices and, importantly, somewhere new to live.

* *

Burt trundled back, not looking as solicitous as he should have been after leaving his supposed friend and a cub in a wood in an historic storm. This time it was lasagne.

Food worried me. Worried me because it didn't worry me: I couldn't duplicate the precariousness of the badger's life. We did our best: we ate earthworms, both raw and cooked, and any other flotsam tossed up by the valley that we could keep down. We scraped a squirrel off the road and had it with wood sorrel and wild garlic. But there were Meg's regular gifts, which we had neither the discipline nor the churlishness to refuse, and lying guiltily at the bottom of the backpack were sardines, tuna and beans.

Some later reading helped. Badgers really aren't, usually, neurotically urgent hunters. Starvation is an important cause of death, but mostly among cubs. The choice of earthworms as the staple is a good one. Earthworms are resilient – even to drought. In most English woodlands most of the time, a significant proportion of the earth's weight is worms. When the topsoil turns to dust, the worms dive and the badgers dig. Dry nights are longer and busier, but although drought affects breeding success (which no doubt makes for an unquiet psyche), it is rarely deadly for individuals. We could have eaten that lasagne less guiltily.

* *

'It's ridiculous to think that you can know this wood like a

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badger', said Burt a week or so later. 'You can't even know it like me, and a badger knows it like me, but far, far better. We've only been here five hundred years or so, but even so, you'll never catch me up. A man whose DNA has been sloshing round the wood for half a millennium knows more about a badger's world than someone who sniffs and slithers around for a few weeks.'

I was annoyed. I was determined to take one part of the wood – the badger's part – from Burt. It shouldn't be hard, I thought. He's just a man. I'm halfway to being a badger.

The first step in any campaign is to know where you are. You need a map. And you need to know what's possible and what's not. That second step was easy. Burt's nose has been devastated by years of roll-ups, and his brain by generations of agricultural reductionism. We'd been in hard olfactory training with lumps of cheese, our noses were a badger's height from the mulch, and we were humble: O so humble. We could quickly overtake his ancestral, generic understanding of the land with our specific olfactory wisdom.

So, over several squirming, scraping, scratching weeks, we made our own map of the wood. It was a scent map, and its contours were very different from the physical ones. When you walk through a town, you see piles of bricks with holes in, topped with slanting tile and penetrated by pipes. You do a bit of processing and call these things 'houses'. You do a bit more processing and call them, on account of the shape of the holes or the angle of the tiles, houses of a particular type. From a pile, via an eye, to some sort of Platonic abstraction in a millisecond. After a while our noses began to brew abstractions too, but using the metaphors encoded deep in our brains by the processing of visual information.

The bracken formed big, emphatic, monolithic blocks – the olfactory equivalent of a grand but grey and uniform housing development. It was too strongly and monotonously aromatic to be satisfying. Better noses than ours would make

something of the sparse vegetation around the bracken roots, and even we began, slowly, to be able to see slight differences in the window fittings, the roof angles and the decorations around the doors.

The oaks – even the small ones – were all determinedly different from each other. They followed the unpatterned pattern of a house I once knew on a plain in east Africa: built with a systematic ramshackleness of grass, mirrors, surfboards and copies of the *Proceedings of the Linnean Society*, all cemented with elephant dung and garnished with human bones, nappies and fragments of Catullus on cork boards.

You'd have thought that trees close to each other would smell alike – or at least more alike than trees far apart. But it wasn't, or wasn't necessarily, so. We could mark our blindfolded crawls from the sett fairly well using just the nearby oaks: 'Out of the tunnel, turn right. Fifteen yards; raw tobacco, mostly Turkish; straight on. After half a minute, wall of limes and sick in front. Resolves into oranges rubbed on leather to your left and mushroom risotto with too much parmesan to your right. Head gently downhill. Flaking saddles, with neat's-foot oil somewhere on the shelf. Bear on down for cobwebs and garlic paste.'

Individual ashes were similarly distinct, but less emphatically: Arts and Crafts houses somewhere in the Sussex Downs. We couldn't distinguish between individual beeches (mansion blocks off the Brompton Road), elders (yellow brick, plastic windows, red tarmac drive for the company car) or alders (terraces in Bradford). ('For God's sake,' said Burt. 'I used to like metaphors until I met you.')

The more monolithic the blocks, the more fiercely and successfully they fought with other blocks for domination of the valley. The oaks didn't stand a chance: they didn't exist as a block at all. In high summer the bracken generally had the upper hand. When we returned in the autumn the beeches

ruled the wood, and were themselves edged out by the elders by the time of the first frost.

But to these crude rules there were many exceptions. We were in a seething bottle. Scent sometimes rocketed up from a particular tree and came down in a strange pattern, reaching distant ground before it hit the tree's own shadow. The edges of the wood, and particularly the hedges, seemed olfactorily sterile – or at least hopelessly confusing to scent-hunting predators. They were relatively safe corridors, along which tender, timorous, succulent things crept, invisible to black noses above sharp teeth.

There were tides in the wood, as powerful and predictable as on any beach. As the sun rose, air, and thus scent, was sucked up the side of the valley. The elders moved, like Birnam Wood, through the stands of beech and bracken and by midday could be found on the lip. They stayed there until nightfall and then slowly retreated back to the river. They were fully back home by three in the morning.

So we made some progress with that scent map. But after a few weeks on my belly in the wood, I despaired. I had an unchangeably visual world. I painted it in shapes and colours, and then added in smell and hearing as extras. Sometimes smell could be powerfully evocative: a smell would pick me up and dump me back in the past with a speed and force that the wraiths of visual memory could never manage. Smell, buried deep in the most ancient part of the brainstem, could petulantly remind me of the sovereignty it had when my ancestors were fish and lizards. Sometimes a voice came first out of my memory. But smell and hearing were always and only the assistants of vision, the great conjuror who brings our worlds out of the hat. No parlour games with cheese and joss sticks could change that. The problem wasn't mainly to do with the sensitivity of my nose; it was about the architecture of my universe. Badgers lived in a universe that wasn't even parallel to mine; it

was aligned at an angle to mine that no geometry I knew could coherently describe. So I'll settle for incoherent description.

Consider two examples, both from Ernest Neal's classic book, *The Badger*.

In the first example, a man placed his palm on a badger path for one minute at 11 AM. At 10 PM a boar came along the path. He stopped where the palm had been applied, sniffed and made a detour. A sow who came along at the same time simply wouldn't pass: she took her cubs back to the sett.

And here is my reworking, using the language I learned in the wood:

Along the path there was a wall, built of scent particles sticking to the veins of dead leaves and the squashed casts of long-dead worms. To the boar, that wall had definite dimensions: he could skirt round the edge and go into the world beyond. For the sow, made conservative and fearful by maternal responsibility, the wall was indefinitely high and long and the world beyond it unthinkable.

In the second of Neal's examples, a badger path went across a grassy field. The field was ploughed up and sown with corn. Badgers took precisely the same route across it.

My reworking: This second path lay between two high but transparent and permeable walls. They each had two dimensions: a physical and a mental. The scent particles that made up the physical part of the walls were tumbled and deep underground, yet they generated a psychic field that rose high into the air above the corn and cut a swathe through the badger's brain. The path wove around obstacles that had long since ceased to exist save in the nose-brain memory.

* *

An eight-year-old has a plastic nose and can recover quickly the old knowledge of how to use it. After the first week, as we were

watching ladybirds mash aphids, Tom had said, 'I can smell mice', and he'd set off along a new path, swimming breaststroke through the grass, his nose grazing the ground. He was very nearly right. He'd smelt and uncovered a network of bank vole runs, marked by droppings, fine chopped stems and urine. But what was more interesting was how he hunted. He sniffed very fast – several snuffles a second. This, I later learned, is precisely what scent-reliant mammals do. It's called 'odour sampling', and it increases the percentage of air that's diverted to the nasal epithelium. Normal efficient breathing sends air direct to the lungs. I tried it; it works dramatically. I now make a different and very unrefined noise at wine tastings.

There's little point in being able to climb neuronally down the evolutionary tree (terrible and terribly constricting vertical language, that) if you're too fastidious to leave the top branches. Tom had mercifully few of my inhibitions. He licked slugs ('The big black ones are a bit bitter, and the bigger they are, the bitterer they are: I prefer the browner ones; they're sort of nutty'), crunched up a grasshopper ('Like prawns that taste of nothing'), had his tongue bitten by a centipede and his nose invaded by ants, and sucked up earthworms like spaghetti ('The big ones are hairy, and I don't like that so much').

It wasn't just his nose that was plastic. All of him inched smoothly towards badgerhood. His Achilles tendons stretched and his wrists and neck tightened so that he could frolic four-footed through the fern arcades. He swore he could hear a woodpecker's tongue being thrust through holes in tree bark. 'I can, you know. Imagine a nail file whispering.' (I'm imagining, Tom, and how the hell can we make you go to school to unlearn it?) When the night congealed around the base of the trees, he'd go over and stir the clots of dark with his finger, saying that they swirled and stuck to his hand. His body in the sett or on one of our midday couches seemed to flow round the stones. The wood never stuck into him, as it did into me.

* *

Most mammals spend a lot of time sleeping. Badgers certainly do, and so did we – much more than usual. We became more tired the more multimodal we became. We should have expected it. We were paying attention to so much more. It's exhausting trying to make sense of lots of voices clamouring for a hearing. Normally when we're in the countryside, our sight works overtime. Every step on a walk is a completely new and cognitively challenging view. We have never seen before the arrangement of stones upon which our left foot is about to descend, nor that completely different one upon which our right one is about to descend; and so on. To say nothing of the orientation of those leaves on that branch of that tree in that gust, which have never been that way before in the entire history of the universe and never will be that way again.

Our 'normal' views are in fact deeply abnormal and crushingly dull: Those chairs, in that corner of that room. That picture over the mantelpiece – perhaps an ossified version of one tiny fraction of one outdoor second, which nonetheless (it's better than the chairs) eases the retinas designed to catch the millions of utterly different fractions that in fact followed it. The only moment-by-moment visual differences in the lives of most of us are the changing characters on a computer screen, and we don't see those as visual at all: we see straight through them to the abstractions they represent. No wonder our poor starved brains will drink down any change they can get – even if it's the flashing of Simon Cowell's dentistry. Take any of us for the mildest of country walks, and we're immediately in thrilling – but exhausting – sensory overload. We're bombarded with change. Everything demands a response. We have to pay unaccustomed attention. And this, I presume, is why people say that they sleep better after a bit of fresh air.

Now imagine what a wood is like if you're paying attention

to what enters not just through your eyes but also through your ears, your nose and your skin. And imagine that through each of these portals barges a different world, which maps only mystically on to the others. It's tiring even to think about it. It's exhausting to experience. It takes a lot of processing. So badgers and yogis sleep, and so did we.

Badgers aren't blind: they just don't open their sensory batting with their eyes. Their eyes seem to build a version of the wood composed mostly of shapes. They are silhouette-generators, and their visual memory seems to be concerned mostly with comparing the presently visible silhouette with previous versions. In other words, they're on the lookout mostly for change in the gross structure of the wood. Put the Empire State Building on the ridge, and they'd be spooked on Wednesday night and, so long as it didn't change or belch out threatening smells, cautious on Thursday and blasé on Friday.

We can do better than badgers in the day, of course, and even in the gathering dusk we can pick out visual nuances for rather longer than they can. Yet for most of the time that matters to badgers, we're visually on a level playing field: we're silhouetters. To make use of this skill, we need their capacity for the recollection and comparison of successive images. Most of us have this in embryo already. If a very minor change has been made to a familiar room, we'll say: 'Something's different.' That itself, without more, is useful if you're living in a potentially hostile wood. Even if the change can't be identified, the fact of the change will be enough to keep you underground, away from teeth and claws. But actually badgers seem able, often, to be more specific. They'll note a change, then they'll identify its location by reference to their library of previous images, and then they'll swing their noses and ears on to the target to collect further information.

This demands an intense *localness* – a knowledge of the exact relationship of the individual badger's body in both space and

time to the wood. It was this localness, above all, that I wondered if I could acquire. I hoped most desperately that I could.

Alan Garner simply and wonderfully wrote: 'On a hill in Cheshire the Garners *are*'. From that fact flowed all his books, all his worlds, all his power. The resonance of that hill is the timbre of Fundindelve, its evenings the fading light of Elidor. I envy Garner enormously his ability to write this sentence. There has never been anywhere that the Fosters *are*.

We have had two strategies to deal with this. The first (my own) is to try to pretend that we are at home everywhere. This has failed predictably and dramatically. It has resulted in pretension, superficiality and neurosis. The second (that of most of the rest of my family) is to insist that it doesn't matter that we're not at home wherever we happen to be. This has generated a sort of hereditary lantern-jawed stoicism: we're islands in a wicked sea. But we've never really had any shared characteristics other than the name, and the strategy has not made us thrive. In practice it mainly meant that we watched too much television.

Badgers *belong* to a place and hence (terribly important, that *hence*) own it, like few or no other animals do. Their hillside dynasties outlive our own most hoarily heraldic, begartered families. Their bodies are built from the recycled earth of a few acres. They burrow deep and know whatever roams our underworld. They have the connection with a body of land that one can get with any body only by penetration. Their hold on this local life is viciously strong: they're terribly hard to kill or displace. Their skulls are thick. Spades bounce off their sagittal crest. Once they've locked their teeth in the throat of an invading terrier, you have to break the jaw to prise them off.

Badgers, for me, are the embodiment of the *genius loci*.

We don't know of many badger gods from old Europe, but one, Moritasgus ('Great Badger') is commemorated in some Gaulish inscriptions from the Côte d'Or. He seems to have been syncretised with Apollo and thus regarded mainly as a

healing deity. The theology of this association is uncertain but not hard to guess. When a badger disappears into the earth, it is on a shamanic journey. It can, if the ritual is right, carry on its broad shoulders the petitions of the people. It will take them to the Great One, of which it is an acolyte, and if the Great One is pleased to do so, it will send the badger back to the upper world with the transforming blessing.

But, as usual, there are many layers. The root of 'tasgus' in 'Moritasgus' probably came from the Old Irish *tadg* – one of several words for a poet. (*Tadg* may be preserved in our own modern word 'badger'.) Such was the knowledge of the power of words in that world that the functions of poet and shaman, and the meaning of the words for them, tended to merge. Yet the fact that the badger was seen specifically as a word bearer, a logos-smith, an incantator, is significant. Here's my fancy: the badger carried between the world above and the world below the words that interpreted each side to the other. It enabled each side to make sense of its context and hence of itself. It shuttled like a sewing machine, stitching the world together, making it whole, giving it an integrity it would otherwise have lacked. And it still does.

If this is possible for a badger, perhaps it is possible for us. Perhaps even for me. Perhaps if we all shuttle enough across frontiers the world won't fall apart.

A few weeks in a wood doesn't make you local. Localness means that you weave round your mouldering ancestors. Yet our human lives are so long, and our capacity for skin shedding so great, that we can become our own ancestors. The ground in which the ancestors moulder has to be real, not figurative. But we can settle in a place and by living sufficiently completely to each moment, die completely to each moment too, so that the place becomes littered with our own corpses, and we can fix our landscapes by reference to their graves. I'm trying to live, and thus to die, on a piece of moorland in Devon and, partly thanks to the badgers' lessons, making some progress.

Of course we never began to know the wood as Burt did. Over a few centuries you can't help sharing some of your collective unconscious with the dwarf oaks next door. We merge with our neighbours. Every shared breath is an act of copulation in which our DNA gets mingled. ('You, my friend, are one seriously disturbed freak,' said Burt.) Yet even in our short time there, we started to seep into the wood, and it into us. We noticed that our first slitherings had found, with uncanny canniness, the easiest ways across the landscape from and to our sett. Our prone bodies felt the land, moulded it and were increasingly moulded by it. We got callouses where it was good to get them; our legs learned to stretch to slide easily over a fallen beech. We followed these paths religiously and increasingly automatically. Badgers are the same: they have firmly established paths, from which they are very, very reluctant to deviate. They are marked with the scent of badgers who died during the Civil War, and it would take a landslide or a bulldozer to change them.

For all my wilderness fetishism, I found that I wanted the land to bear my mark. Badgers obsessively mark all sorts of objects in their territories with the secretions from their musk glands, and defaecate diligently on the borders. I have a less healthy relationship with my own dung, but found that I put my hand repeatedly on the same parts of the same rocks, just to see a reassuring polish. This was my musking. I had to know that *I* had been there. This wasn't a thirst for possession, but a need to confirm that I belonged to the place – that we had shared some continuity. The 'I' part was strong. If you take a badger cub and put it in a pen, it'll frantically, incontinently musk. Then it calms down, as if reassured by the smell of itself and the knowledge that it and the pen share some history. It was like that for me.

Karen Blixen, when she was about to leave Kenya, asked: 'Will the flowers on the plains of Africa reflect a colour that

I have worn?’ The answer, for her, was no, and there was some sort of self-ablatory salvation in the answer. Andrew Harvey was explicit: ‘It is the things that ignore us that save us in the end.’ Blixen’s conclusion was wrong. The Ngong Hills were immutably different because she had breathed and worn a red dress among them. And even if she was right, I have to believe that Harvey was wrong. If he got it right, there is no possibility of relationship with anything, and thus no possibility of any sort of salvation. You can’t live or die like that. It’s that sort of salvation that I was seeking as my hand stretched out to the rock by the beech bole.

* *

The winter broods over the summer, finding its way into the sunniest August badger. There’s a new urgency in the snuffing and rooting. Cereals and fruits are added to the worms and slugs; they’re good at fat building.

We too know that winters are coming. For many of us it is the ruling fact: the whole year is surrendered to the cold. The thoughts and itineraries of the summer are the lackeys of the dark.

I fight hard against this demonic capitulation, but it is hard to enjoy an August day qua August day. The stronger the fight, the greater the acknowledgement of the eventual defeat. I race round, like the badgers, manically soaking up the heat. The greater the mania, the greater the depression that follows. It shouldn’t be like this: I should be able to live in January as a smug, torpid parasite on the body of July. That’s what the badgers do. They don’t hibernate, but there’s not much in the diary from November to March apart from sleep, the occasional sortie for worms, stretching and a change of air, and gestation.

There’s a week in early May, after the Green Man has been piped and carolled back, when the world seems all right; when

resurrection rules and it's possible to believe that resurrection is the rule. But this faith fades fast. By mid-June, when we were first in the sett, the liquid sun of the blackcap's call starts to sound like a taunt ('It'll soon be gone, soon be gone, it will') and its name ominous.

* *

I chewed, licked, gagged, sniffed and waddled my way towards the badger's world. Sometimes I felt that I came near, only to find that the conceit of that feeling meant that I was further away than ever. We heard the real badgers every night as they crashed through the bracken, and occasionally got a Belisha flash of head stripes in the dusk or a darkening of a shadow as a badger lumbered into it. We'd often try to approach them and got good at hearing them pause, then putting their fears to rest by loudly scratching ourselves. We put our front paws on trees and stretched as soon as we came out of our hole. We defaecated on mounds chosen for their view of the hill. We acquired a thick patina of scent that even Burt, his nose full of lanolin and diesel, could know and resent. When Tom was ahead of me in warm, damp weather, I could pick up his vapour trail for twenty minutes.

Burt's jibes and meals became less frequent. We were left on our own to be encrusted by the valley. We saw strange lights in a long-abandoned house. Our hackles rose when we heard farm dogs. Distant figures in nylon were as far away as the moon and a good deal less relevant. We cared about the weight of the clouds, the colour of the leaves and the hunger of the midges. We put a badger's skull on a stick outside the sett for no reason I can identify clearly. We washed very occasionally, and even then patchily. Our mouths tasted of mud and smoke. A wren speared a caterpillar on Tom's leg as he lay snoring in a clump of dead bluebells. My watch seemed offensive: I took it off, put it

in a plastic bag and ceremonially buried it. We stood to attention. I played the Last Post on my tin whistle.

And, for that summer, we had to be content with that: had to be satisfied with knowing that in some ways, perhaps for a few minutes, we had lived in the same place as some badgers.

That's all we thought we'd done.

* *

I dug up the watch. We went back to Abergavenny station, thinking that we'd failed – that the Puck of otherness had dodged away, as usual, away into the murmuring greenwood.

The town blared, belched, leered and cackled. There was more variegation on one leaf outside our sett than there was in the whole place. It fed itself by oriental airfreight, and everyone was the same colour. They talked about the adulteries of footballers and tone-deaf singers. The scent blocks were huge and crass; they lurched and swung and bellowed. I felt sick from shock and boredom and the heaving floors of deafening smell. Someone asked me the way to the cash point. It seemed as if he was shouting at the top of his voice, nose to mine. I jumped through the roof and nearly knocked him down. And yet, as an example of a human settlement, this is one of the very best. I've always been happy there.

I was desperate to get back to the valley. On the train I put in earplugs and looked out at the fields sliding past – the distances hideously shortened by the engine. Then I took out the earplugs and put on the calls of the woodland birds. I was missing something that I very urgently needed – something I had recently had.

So here is the first proposition: to thrive *as a human being* I needed to be more of a badger.

* *

Back home I forgot a lot very quickly. But, though my nose returned to its usual inertia and I became used again to the tinnitus that we call normal living, it wasn't all lost. I had the dreamy tetchiness of the exile. I knew that it was possible, as a matter of sensory routine rather than yogic contortion, to pay attention to the world in many planes at once rather than just our usual one or two, and something of what there is to be perceived when you do.

Tom and I went back to the sett in midwinter. There were cobwebs over the mouth, which was rather hurtful. I'd hoped that it would have been adopted, at least by foxes. The badger skull was still on the stick, but its position had shifted, so that instead of staring at the ground it looked up the hill, through the cracking old man's fingers of the oaks, past the silent rookery, to the house that Burt had built that summer, where Meg was mulling cider, reading the *Mabinogion* and calmly ignoring the epidemic of diarrhoea and vomiting that had felled all the children.

Our paths were still there, just about. They'd be gone by the spring, but they would still be the best way through the wood if you were crawling. When you lay on the ground, an aching cold, the colour of mourning, cascaded in, starting with the ribs, filling the chest and streaming down to the legs. The ground seemed hungry for us: it sucked and nibbled.

Outside the brown thickets of dripping bracken, the wood was bigger to the eyes, and sight much more relevant than it had been in the summer. There were sometimes clear horizons and often distinct trees. Winter gives badgers distance. But it takes away that succulent marriage with the earth which is brokered by noses and summer heat. The thin winter sun worked hard, but for us vainly, to smash the ground into grains we could smell. There was leaf mould and inchoate decay, and that was all. The winter wood was flat; much more like ours than the summer wood had been.

Ears came into their own. The longer sight lines meant that our ears could focus on sounds from distant objects, and since there wasn't so much going on, they could give a much fuller report on each sound now than they could in the humming summer.

The real badgers of the wood were quiet but about. There was fresh dung in their lavatories, grey and white hairs on the barbed wire, and pad marks in the mud on their highways. We heard them puffing along in the night like old shunters in a marshalling yard, out of condition. They should have felt close: their snorting was un baffled by the thick green of June; the clear air had only to carry the call of a tentative tawny owl rather than the thrum and thrust and shrill of the summer. But they seemed further away than ever: we shared less; it seemed they had less to share, or that they were less willing than in generous June.

The sett closed coldly round us. This time its walls were jaws. The worms liked the heat that leached and was leached out of us. They came, like hairy tongues from the jaws, and slimed over us.

'I don't like this,' whimpered Tom, shivering in a sleeping bag that was far too thin.

'Neither do I,' said I. 'Let's go.' So we gathered up our stuff and went across the river, up a track that was straighter in the moonlight than in the noonlight, and back to the farm.

No badgers came out to salute us. They were warm. Their sett was much deeper in the wood than ours; far deeper than we could safely go.