

Part One



September

Chapter One

A Child of Autumn

I WAS BORN IN MIDSUMMER, but I am a child of autumn. One September day in the fourth or fifth autumn of my life there occurred the event that provided my earliest memory, and – it is not too extravagant a claim – set my life on a path that it follows still. I was standing in the garden of my parents' prefab in what was then the last street in town on the western edge of Dundee. An undulating wave of farmland that sprawled southwards towards Dundee from the Sidlaw Hills was turned aside when it washed up against the far side of the road from the prefab, whence it slithered away south-west on a steepening downhill course until it was finally stopped in its tracks by the two-miles-wide, sun-silvered girth of the Firth of Tay at Invergowrie Bay. Then as now, the bay was an autumn-and-winter roost for migrating pink-footed geese from Iceland; then as now, one of their routes to and from the feeding grounds amid the fields of Angus lay directly over the prefab roof.

I can remember what I was wearing: a grey coat with a dark blue collar and buttons and a dark blue cap. So we were probably going out somewhere.

Why am I so sure it was September and not any other month of autumn or winter or early spring? Because it was the first time, and because for the rest of that autumn and winter and early spring, and ever since, the sound of geese over the house – any house – has sent me running to the window or the garden. So was established my first and most enduring ritual of obeisance in thrall to nature's cause. And so I am as sure as I can be that the very first time was also the first flight of geese over the house after their return from Iceland that September; that September when I looked up at the sound of wild geese overhead and – also for the first time – made sense of the orderly vee-shapes of their flight as they rose above the slope of the fields, the slope of our street, up into the morning sunshine; vee-shapes that evolved subtly into new vee-shapes, wider or longer and narrower, or splintered into smaller vee-shapes or miraculously reassembled their casual choreography into one huge vee-shape the whole width of childhood's sky.

But then there were other voices behind me and I turned towards them to discover that all the way back down the sky towards the river and as far as I could see, there were more and more and more geese, and they kept on coming and coming and coming. The sound of them grew and grew and grew and became tidal, waves of birds like a sea (I knew about the sea by then, for it lived in Arbroath like my Auntie Mary), but a sea where the sky should be, and some geese came so low overhead that their wingbeats were as a rhythmic undertow to their waves of voices, and that too was like the sea.

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When they had gone, when the last of them had arrowed away north-east and left the dying embers of their voices trailing behind them on the air, a wavering diminuendo that fell into an eerie quiet, I felt the first tug of a life-force that I now know to be the pull of the northern places of the earth. And in that silence I stepped beyond the reach of my first few summers and I became a child of autumn.

Now, in the autumn of my life myself, every overhead skein of wild geese – *every* one – harks me back to that old September, and I effortlessly reinhabit the body and mind-set of that moment of childhood wonder. Nothing else, nothing at all, has that effect. I had a blessed childhood, the legacy of which is replete with good memories, but not one of them can still reach so deep within me as the first of all of them, and now, its potency only strengthens.

It would have been about thirty years ago that I first became aware of the Angus poet Violet Jacob, and in particular of her poem, *The Wild Geese*. It acquired a wider audience through the singing of folksinger Jim Reid, who set it to music, retitled it *Norlan' Wind*, and included it on an album called *I Saw the Wild Geese Flee*. I used to do a wee bit of folk singing and I thought that if ever a song was made for someone like me to sing it was that one, but I had trouble with it from the start. My voice would crack by the time I was in the third verse, and the lyrics of the last verse would prick my eyes from the inside. The last time I sang it was the time I couldn't finish it.

Years later, I heard the godfather of Scottish folk singing, Archie Fisher, talking about a song he often sang called *The Wounded Whale*, and how he had to teach himself to

sing it “on automatic pilot”, otherwise it got the better of him, but I never learned that trick. Even copying out the words now with Violet Jacob’s own idiosyncratic spelling, I took a deep breath before the start of the last verse, which is the point where the North Wind turns the tables on the Poet in their two-way conversation:

The Wild Geese

*“Oh tell me what was on your road, ye roarin’ norlan’ Wind,
As ye cam’ blawin’ frae the land that’s niver frae my mind?
My feet they traivel England, but I’m deein’ for the north.”
“My man, I heard the siller tides rin up the Firth o’ Forth.”*

*“Aye, Wind, I ken them weel eneuch, and fine they fa’ and
rise,
And fain I’d feel the creepin’ mist on yonder shore that lies,
But tell me, as ye passed them by, what saw ye on the way?”
“My man, I rocked the rovin’ gulls that sail abune the Tay.”*

*“But saw ye naethin’, leein’ Wind, afore ye cam’ to Fife?
There’s muckle lyin’ ’yont the Tay that’s dear to me nor life.”
“My man, I swept the Angus braes ye hae’na trod for years.”
“O Wind, forgi’e a hameless loon that canna see for tears!”*

*“And far abune the Angus straths, I saw the wild geese flee,
A lang, lang skein o’ beatin’ wings wi’ their heids towards
the sea,
And aye their cryin’ voices trailed ahint them on the air—”
“O Wind, hae maircy, hud yer whisht, for I daurna listen
mair!”*

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It is the 31st of August, 2015, and the weatherman on the BBC News Channel has just said:

“Tomorrow is the beginning of Meteorological Autumn.”

I am unprepared for this news. I have never heard of Meteorological Autumn. I was unaware until this moment that it occurs in the calendar every year, like Lent or National Chip Week. I am wondering whether or not to believe the weatherman. After all, he is often wrong about the weather. I consult the window without moving. There *are* yellow leaves on the one birch tree I can see, and is it my imagination or are there more of them than there were at this time last year? It has been a rubbish summer and maybe that encourages the leaves to do their autumn thing early? Or maybe he’s right, and maybe I should begin my autumn tomorrow just as he is obviously beginning his?

A book about autumn has been photosynthesising in my brain for a few years, painstakingly metamorphosing at its own speed, changing shape, changing colour, drinking in moisture from the air around itself, the way it has always seemed to me that a book about autumn should. Why autumn? Because it is my preferred season of the year, my preferred portion of nature’s scheme of things, nature’s state of grace. Because autumn, in my mind, is a tapped kaleidoscope, a shifting sorcery of shapes and shades, a revitalising of the wild year after the too-long dirge of late summer, a maker of daring moods. Because if a human life can be represented by the poets and the songwriters

as a year, and I am in the autumn of that year myself (it is undeniable), then what better time? And because now I have the BBC weatherman poking me in the ribs, and I had better not be late if autumn shows up tomorrow, the first of September, 2015.

Besides, autumn is a magic trick. Science will scoff at such a notion and confront you with the vocabulary of photosynthesis (the synthesis of organic chemical compounds from carbon dioxide using radiant energy, *especially* light; *specifically* the formation of carbohydrates in the chlorophyll-containing tissues of plants exposed to light – or, at least, so says my *Penguin English Dictionary*), which will include super-efficient evaporation, carotenoids, anthocyanins, decomposition of carbohydrates, oxidised tannins, soluble sugars, starches, cellulose, lignum and a complex exchange of gases. But science doesn't know what I know, and what I know is that autumn is a magic trick we call "leaf".

Chapter Two

Autumn Leaves

LEAVES MUST PRODUCE FOOD out of thin air, or else there is no tree. Luckily for nature and all of us, they are extraordinarily good at it. There is, for example, a stupendously beautiful oak tree at Ariundle, within the Sunart Oakwoods of coastal Argyll, that is perhaps eighty feet tall and of a still mightier girth of limbs. It is also an old acquaintance of mine. Consider first that the whole edifice is the work of its leaves, and that no leaf lives longer than six months. Then marvel at nature. Then believe in magic.

Leaves begin life tight-packed in a bud. In spring, they start to expand, then they start to draw the sap up through the tree.

How do they do that?

That is absolutely my favourite tree question. Because the answer is that no one knows. We can split the atom and fly to the moon and find water on Mars but we don't know how a leaf drags a tree up into the air. I find that profoundly reassuring.

The containing scales of the bud respond to the pressure from within and hinge backwards allowing the leaves within to open, at which point they go to work, which is food-shopping. Look again at the eighty-feet-high oak tree

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and take a wild guess at how many tons of timber it holds aloft in a crazy fan shape of idolatrous sun-worship. Almost all of it, perhaps as much as ninety-five per cent – the fabulous girth of the trunk and almost every bough, limb, branch, twig and twiglet – is nothing more than carbohydrates ensnared from the air by leaves. Before any one leaf is even half-grown, it has stored up more sustenance than it will need for the rest of its life, but it goes on food-shopping because that is what leaves are born to do, and it donates everything else throughout its life to the tree.

Photosynthesis insists that the action of sunlight on the leaf impregnates its water-filled vessels with chlorophyll (which, incidentally, is why leaves are green), a process that in turn exchanges hydrogen from the water with carbon and oxygen from the air. Photosynthesis needs a certain amount of evaporation to take place, but leaves are so super-efficient at evaporation that they deliver infinitely more than photosynthesis needs. As they lose water to the air they also draw it up through the tree, up through that trunk, through those boughs, limbs, branches, twigs and twiglets; they circulate sap all through the tree, they even draw water through the roots and out of the soil (dissolved soil minerals are the tree's other source of food). Trees consume unimaginable quantities of carbon dioxide. This is why planting unimaginable quantities of trees will save the planet. Carbon is the tree's primary food source, as well as the source of soluble sugars and starches that can be stored or converted to cellulose strengthened with lignin, which makes the thing we call wood, adding a ring to the girth of the trunk every year. This is why we can tell the age of a felled tree.

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Then autumn kicks in, and all that stops. It stops because the leaf stops producing chlorophyll, with the immediate result that the green starts to fade. If you make a study of turning leaves on an autumn tree, you will see that the green survives longest in the veins. Green is replaced by a yellow pigment called carotenoid, or a red one called anthocyanin, or both, (and often it is noticeable how the sunniest parts of the tree change colour first and those in deeper shade linger greener for longer). When the yellows and the reds and the indeterminate pinks and oranges have had their fling, decomposed carbohydrates and oxidised tannins turn autumn leaves brown. In a tranquil and all-but-windless early autumn like 2015, huge clusters of leaves turned brown on the tree, and they would come away in your hand in their dozens and flutter uselessly at your feet, their show over, their race run. Or so you might think.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The TV weatherman has told me that tomorrow is the first day of Meteorological Autumn, and I, with a book about autumn to write, don't want to miss it, just in case he's right. So I went out into one of my friendly neighbourhood oakwoods (there are two a few miles apart), and although it was still as green as it was on the last day of summer, there on the ground were my first two brown leaves, except that one still had a single green lobe and the other one was still half yellow. I picked them up and took them home, where I write on an oak table. Both were a lighter shade of brown than the table. It took seven weeks for the yellow half to fade to brown completely, although it is still paler brown than the rest of the leaf, and there is still the faintest green

discolouration on the other leaf. Both are beside me as I write and both are now darker than the table. They have curled up at the edges, but rather than become friable, as I had imagined they would, they are waxy and tough. They were joined a couple of weeks later by a tiny vee-shaped twig, two inches long with one green acorn still lodged in its cup and two empty acorn cups; and on the table the acorn soon fell out and also turned brown. And these have become emblematic of the endeavour, emblematic of the magic trick. The acorn is the length of my thumbnail and half as wide, yet it has an eighty-foot oak tree inside it. When this book is written, I will plant it somewhere it can fulfil its potential.

There is a second magic trick to the Ariundle oak. As its leaves thin at the height of autumn and dance to boisterous, salty onshore winds, the inner tracery of branches and twigs hidden away since early spring begins to reappear, and the sky beyond the tree begins to re-emerge as fragments wedged between the branches and twigs, as thousands of shards a dozen shades of blue, grey, white, sunrise red and sunset purple. Here, in such a tree was surely the genesis of stained glass, and the teeming tracery, black against the sky, became the black lead of stained glass windows. The oak tree in question stands on a hillside so that you can look up into it from below the level of its roots, a viewpoint from which the analogy of great cathedral east windows is irresistible.

The forest is like a cathedral. How often have nature poets reached for that too-ready metaphor, too-ready and wrong? Wrong because the reality is the other way round

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– the cathedral nave is like the forest. How long ago did a stonemason with a visionary cast to his trade walk home with his tools on his shoulder through a grove of tall, straight trunks, and, looking up, see in his mind’s eye not trees but columns of stone?

And how long thereafter did he, or another in another town or another land, stop before an oak tree like this giant of Ariundle with late autumn tints among the thinning leaves, a thousand patches of sky ensnared among the branches, and shafts of sunlight prodding apart the canopy, so that he fell to his knees and dared to give voice to his vision: “Stained glass!”

It was an idea that would travel the world. Chartres, Cologne, Kirkwall, Washington, Amsterdam, Salisbury, Edinburgh, Durham, York. And in 1960s Coventry the whole idea was spectacularly reinvented by Basil Spence and Graham Sutherland as tapestry.

With all this swilling in the nature writer’s mind as I wrote it down at my oak table with the leaves and acorn and the three empty acorn cups, the miracle – the magic – of the whole improbably, blindingly astounding process lit up the whole room. “I believe in God but I spell it Nature,” said Frank Lloyd Wright. So do I. So did the stonemason who turned trees into columns of stone, so did the stained glass artist. The cathedral is like the autumn forest.



The first day of autumn exhales with a berry-breath and all nature catches the scent. It is always the air that announces the change. It sharpens, cools and gently startles. It smells

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of hedgehogs. The light yellows, a pale yellow that will deepen as the season settles into its stride. Yesterday was not like this. Yesterday was the last rites of summer – old, done, defeated, frayed-at-the-edges, sleepwalking-towards-the-abyss, hollow-in-the-middle, holed below the waterline summer. Good riddance.

And the first day of autumn is the beginning of everything, the first stirrings of rebirth. The forest fall (it is better named in America than here) thickens the land with limitless tons of bits and pieces of trees. The earth is hungry for these, for they break down into food: all spring, all summer, it has been thrusting life upwards and outwards, and by the last day of summer, it is tired. Autumn is the earth's reviver and replenisher, the first day of autumn is the new beginning of everything and the last day of autumn is the beginning of next spring. Autumn is the indispensable fulcrum of nature's year.

So I was summoned by the oakwoods, for oakwoods are the first theatre of autumn. The oaks at Woodland Trust Scotland's Glen Finglas reserve in the Trossachs are steeply clustered along the lower slopes of hills that reach 2,000 feet. It was there that I chose to go to test the weatherman's theory, my first destination on what would become a long and more or less non-stop journey through autumn.

Infant trees were all around me, their gestures anything but grand: ankle-high rowans (new-minted greens and cracked rust and every photosynthetic shade in between – autumn is a madcap, haphazard season in the undergrowth), knee-high hollies (friend of wren and ladybird) rooted in fat, lime-green blancmanges of moss that

clustered around shady oak roots, birch saplings (thousands and thousands of these – a birchwood is nature’s default position hereabouts) whose crowns narrowed the path and rubbed my shoulders and whose leaves were as golden as they were green. In the midst of so much burgeoning infant life, an eight-feet-high, limbless, headless and all-but-dead-on-its-feet sycamore torso still stood, still summoned the paltry life force that thrusts spindly twigs directly sideways without the intervention of branches; these twitched right in front of my eyes in a hidden and shadowed bend in the path and they wore a thin coat of leaves – washed-out and yellow, and freckled with black and brown, and fragile, the last gesture of a last gesture. The wind shivered among them for a moment and they danced fitfully to its soft, sad song. However long autumn allowed them (and it would not be many days now), theirs had been a dance in a beautiful coat.

A tree fifty yards ahead, and partially obscured by a dozen others and their networks and clusters of branches and leaves, just moved in an eye-catching, instinct-rousing way. Eye and instinct fused to form my one indispensable life-support system, my all-season-all-weather shadow. I never go out without it and it is forever muttering in my ear. What it had just told me was that the movement in question was not the tree itself, but rather something *of* the tree. It had come to rest and it was hidden, and it would have to move again – or I would – to reveal its meaning. But stillness is the most useful tool of my trade, and I knew that whatever just moved was on the move in a way that I was not, so I told myself, “It *will* move first” and that in

moving it would justify my strategy and answer – or fail to answer – the unarticulated question in my head.

Wait.

Watch.

Listen.

Learn.



I had seen nothing arrive, nothing that flew in or ran up the trunk, but that does not mean that nothing flew in or that nothing ran up the trunk, it just means that I didn't see it arrive. And there is always the possibility, of course, that it was there all the time and there had been no arrival for me to see. But it was there now, however it may have arrived, and its movement had an effect on the tree and *that* was what caught my eye and roused my instinct.

A stand-off like this, if it is not resolved quickly, creates a kind of tension that stems from simultaneously knowing and not knowing. I know that something moved and that oak leaves rippled outwards and downwards in response. I do not know what moved and I do not know if whatever-it-was knows I am here and, if so, whether it is troubled by my presence. Instinct says no, it does not know and is not troubled, and therefore its subsequent stillness is relaxed, rather than a stillness that is terrified to move.

And then it moved.

And then it laughed.

It appeared from behind the tree's trunk no more than a yard off the ground and in that tree's shade, but almost at once it burst into sunlight. Precisely at that moment

something odd occurred, time stalled, and I began to see it with a quite startling clarity and apparently in slow motion. It was as if the perceptive resources of all my senses were simultaneously heightened and I had acquired the power to control the pace of events as they unfolded. I cannot explain the circumstances any better than that, although, occasionally, I have been the subject of such a visitation before, or at least of something similar. Each time I have been alone, each time I have been prompted by instinct into an awareness of something about to happen, and each time (I have used the analogy before and have found no better way of expressing it) I have felt as if nature was tapping me on the shoulder with an implicit instruction: "Watch this."

So I had stilled myself in response to the rippling oak leaves and waited, and waited, and then it moved and then laughed and then it appeared much lower than I had expected, and then it flew from shadow into sunlight, and then it inexplicably slowed down. In this new state of heightened awareness I saw its head crane sideways with a twist of its neck and almost at right angles so that it looked directly down the line of the path in my direction. I saw one wing-tip dip, the other rise then the whole sun-glittered body of the creature fell into line—astern behind the new course of the head and neck and every vivid and clearly defined colour swayed into place – raven black, maple-leaf scarlet, snow-bunting white, larch green, aspen yellow, oak-bark brown. The green woodpecker is a living emblem of early autumn, a fusion of all the shades of photosynthesis with added black and white details, a pop-art, yah-boo,

guffawing mocker of the oakwood canopy and the air-spaces between the trees.

It began to fly down the path towards me and no more than a yard above the ground, but because I was downhill a bit, it flew exactly at my eye level, even as the path fell away below it. It also flew with that jaunty, bouncing gait of all the woodpecker tribe, from the sparrow-sized lesser-spotted to the crow-sized black woodpecker of Norwegian pinewoods, and I became conscious of my own head nodding in time to the rhythmic fluctuations of altitude and attitude as it rose and fell a few inches with every flap and glide. The overall effect was one of level flight but, in truth, not a single yard of it was level.

At that stage in its flight, there was nothing to indicate that the woodpecker had distinguished my tree-coloured shape from among the many trees massed at my back and to my left and right. Then the head craned left again, that same twist of the neck, the same realignment of body to neck as the bird turned again at right angles, a sudden down-thrust of wings and the bird tilted abruptly backwards and in an attitude more vertical than horizontal, rose into tree shadows again, wings working like a giant, ungainly hummingbird. It perched vertically against the trunk of a rowan well laden with berries. I might have assumed that this was simply a speculative kind of perch from which to re-evaluate the day and the wood and the possibilities of the next meal, which in the green woodpecker's world usually means ants. I *might* have made that assumption were it not for the fact that suddenly I was aware of recent history repeating itself, because ten months

before and no more than a quarter of a mile away, something happened that introduced me to this jazzy bird's taste for improvisation.



That old November day from last autumn had been playing at volcanoes up on the mountain, lathering its flanks with mist that lolled and rolled and tumbled unpredictably at the whim of a lazy wind. The sun was lazier still, and by mid-afternoon the day was going headlong downhill and sunless and ever deeper into the greyest grasp of deepest November. Meanwhile, as befits volcanic inconvenience, all air traffic was grounded. I had seen one robin in a bramble bush and a hunched pair of bullfinches with their backs to me, which is not a lot to show for two hours of walking in country this wild.

So I crossed the glen's lower-lying and more open side, climbed a short slope through oak trees cluttered with clusters of old foliage the colour of cold tea, much of which will cling on right through the winter. (Why do oaks do that? And why do only some of them do that?) The mist was thinner beyond the trees from where, on any day when views are possible, there is a wide prospect of Trossachs hills. Holes appeared in this thinning veil, through which I could see back across the glen to the mountain mist, so the view was of thin mist and thick mist.

Near the edge of the wood – and this is the point of this historical diversion – there is a fine rowan just where the trees give way to open ground of undulating rough pasture, so I stopped to look at it as I have done many,

many times. Something of the day's lethargy had infiltrated my bones and spirit by this time, so I sat on a rock and decided to drink coffee while I looked at the rowan, and then I would go back. The rowan held a few old leaves, pale-yellow-gold-mottled-with-brown by now, and also a surprising amount of berries, although these were dark and far past what a rowan-jelly-maker might call their best. But without them, what happened next simply would not have happened.

I scoured the tree and what little I could see of the open ground beyond with the binoculars, searching for something to focus on, some vagrant scrap of life to thwart the evil twins of cold and lethargy, which had taken the day by the throat. I was reconciling myself to the essential truth of an old John Denver lyric that had just insinuated itself into the forefront of my mind from its resting place in one of the stoorier nooks where I let such things lie: something about how some days are diamonds and there are others that are just stones. The relentless, lifeless greyness of the day had "stone" written all over it.

But then I became aware in a vague sort of way that something seemed to have changed out on the grass a dozen yards or so beyond the rowan. Something small and low-down and, as yet, shapeless, and not obviously different in texture and tone from the rough pasture hillside, except that it seemed to be moving, furtively and head-down (much of the movement of the whatever-it-was was obscured by grass in clumps and tussocks and humps; I was rather assuming at this point that the thing would have a head). Then all discernible movement ceased, and I

suspected a trick of the half-light. Then something galvanised, there was a flash of fire that seared through the lowest airspace just above the grass, then came straight towards me at eye level, then veered abruptly upwards and left into the rowan tree, where it perched vertically and metamorphosed into a green woodpecker.

“Flash of fire” is a better description by far than “green woodpecker”, and I wish I could claim that I and I alone had invented it. In fact, all I have done is to translate it – from Gaelic. *Lasair-choille* is the Gaelic name. *Coille* is simply a wood. *Lasair* is fire, flame, flash; in any combination that fits the context. In the context of that moment on that stone-grey hillside, a “flash of fire” was exactly what had just illuminated my stone-grey day. Besides, as I now know, if your green woodpecker arrows up from obscurity on the ground and comes at you at eye level, it is not a green bird at all that you see but a red and white one – red skull cap (and cheeks in the male) and white chest. In much the same way a head-on kingfisher is a brown bird, and only the water beneath it and the way it is flying suggests that it might be what it obviously is if you see it from any other angle at all. And if there was any justice in the nomenclature of the world’s birds at all, the green woodpecker would have a kingfisher-ish name, something worthier of its fire-flashing potential.

Meanwhile, up in the rowan tree, something stirred. Almost every bird book you ever saw will inform you with absolute certainty that all green woodpeckers eat is ants, that ants control every facet of their wellbeing or otherwise, especially ants like the ones that throng the top few

inches of the earth beneath the grass of old, unimproved pasture, like that one beyond the rowan tree. If the ants prosper, so do the green woodpeckers. A dearth of ants is likewise a dearth of green woodpeckers. It's one of nature's fundamental principles; the wellbeing of predators is determined by the wellbeing of prey species. Bird books will also tell you that the green woodpecker is purpose-built to eat nothing but ants: a stabbing beak to open the earth in cone-shaped grooves; and a secret weapon, a cunningly stowed-away, four-inches-long tongue designed to unearth the ants in improbable numbers. The same technique also works in rotten trees where the woodpecker's huge feet allow it to perch vertically, and again, ants are the essential quarry. If the bird book happens to specialise in Scottish birds, it may add that the green woodpecker is open to occasional forays into the Speyside pinewoods, where catching ants around the waist-high anthills is its equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel. The book may not use those words, but that will be the gist. I have yet to see a field guide acknowledge the possibility of a non-ant diet. Yet this one at the far end of my binoculars was eating rowan berries. It also proved remarkably adept at the berry-picking, which suggested to me that it had done it before. Even out-on-a-limb, even out on the outermost edges of out-on-a-limb, the woodpecker negotiated the slenderest of twigs in a slow, sideways glissade to reach the berries at the end, perfectly poised, sure of itself and its technique, and clearly relishing the non-ants that clustered there, the fruits of its labours.

So as I watched I thought about this, about the why and the wherefore, and it took about half a minute of thinking

to come to the following conclusion. The green woodpecker is accustomed to ground-feeding – for ants – but in the course of ground-feeding for ants all it has to do is to stray somewhere near a rowan tree in summer or autumn to find windblown bunches of downcast, eye-catching rowan berries in its path. One speculative stab of that expert beak yields the delightful taste of rowan berries, so it eats all the berries on the ground. It then turns its head sideways to look up (it is a great sideways-and-upwards turner of its head, and this, remember, is a bird that nests in trees, and therefore understands perfectly that berries and nuts and leaves lying on the ground mostly come from above, from trees). And there was the rowan tree, one grey, misted November day when the ants were few and far between, and there were enough berries to keep body and soul together, and it stands to reason that if the bird scavenged that fretwork of branches often enough, it would get very adept at it.

It is equally possible, I suppose, that the green woodpecker has watched its spotted cousins gather autumn stashes of pine cones by carrying them individually to an “anvil” rock where it thrashes them open, plucks the seeds and chucks away the cones. This the spotted woodpeckers do in the lean months when the oak trees are not as replete with ants as they are in the spring and summer. Might not the greens resort to the same food source for the same reason? I don’t know because I have never seen it, and if the compilers of my bird books know, they’re not saying.

But here’s a thing: the Gaels distinguish between green and spotted woodpeckers not by their utterly different colour schemes but by their characteristic behaviour, the flash of

flame for the green, but the great spotted woodpecker is *snagan-daraich*, the knocker on wood, and specifically on oak. They were good, were they not, the old Gaels, when it came to naming the creatures that shared their world? My favourite is the jay – *sgreuchag-choille*, the screamer of the woods, and I know from the luminous writing of my friend Jim Perrin that it has its mirror image in Welsh – *sgrech coed*. In that spirit the Gaels might just have come up with something like the giggler of the woods in honour of the green woodpecker, for its far-carrying, manic guffaw that sounds as if it might have escaped from a 1950s recording of *The Goon Show*. But luckily for me, the bird-namers came up with *lasair-choille*, and the flash of flame that briefly turned my day of stones into a day of diamonds.



So that was the history lesson I brought to bear on the green woodpecker as it angled up from the woodland path to a vertical clasp on the trunk of a shadowed rowan, where its cramponed feet bit into the bark and its rigid tail angled in to the trunk too, so that the stance was well belayed. Then nothing at all happened. The moment bound bird and me together in our two stillnesses about twenty yards apart. The bird's stillness amid tree shadows was ill-suited to that heightened, mercurially slow-motion vision I had somehow contrived out of that brief flight from shadow into sunlight and back into shadow by way of two right-angled turns. Then my own stillness began to feel awkward itself, and that was more troubling. So often in my nature-writing years, a gift for stillness has been my saving grace and it had just handed

me that small insight into the nuances of woodpecker flight, but without moving at all I felt the mood splinter and the woodland resumed its natural way of moving in normal time. I am aware that sometimes I try and immerse too deeply into nature's scheme of things and come up short. There are moments, especially in familiar landscapes, when I can see with the clarity of mountain spring water, moments of rarefied access to nature at work. It is tempting to contrive imaginary constructs to explain it away, but the only explanation I believe in is that because I have watched so much for so long, once in a while the quality of the watching rises above the norm on a buoyancy of accumulated experiences, and briefly achieves a kind of perfection. And because it is inevitably a momentary phenomenon, what follows immediately afterwards is – also inevitably – something of a letdown.

And yet almost nothing had changed. The light – the sacred light that graces autumn from its first stirring until prime October – had not changed from those few seconds when it chanced on the luminosity and the palette of the flier. No cloud troubled the sky, no alarm troubled the denizens of the woodland, no breeze nudged the oaks into silence-scarring whispers. But the flight's denouement was in shadows and that ended the privilege of the encounter, and I noticed at once that when the woodpecker's landing induced two slender rowan branches to quiver so that they discarded a dozen pale yellow ready-to-go leaves, these fell at the regular free-fall speed of all downcast autumn leaves.